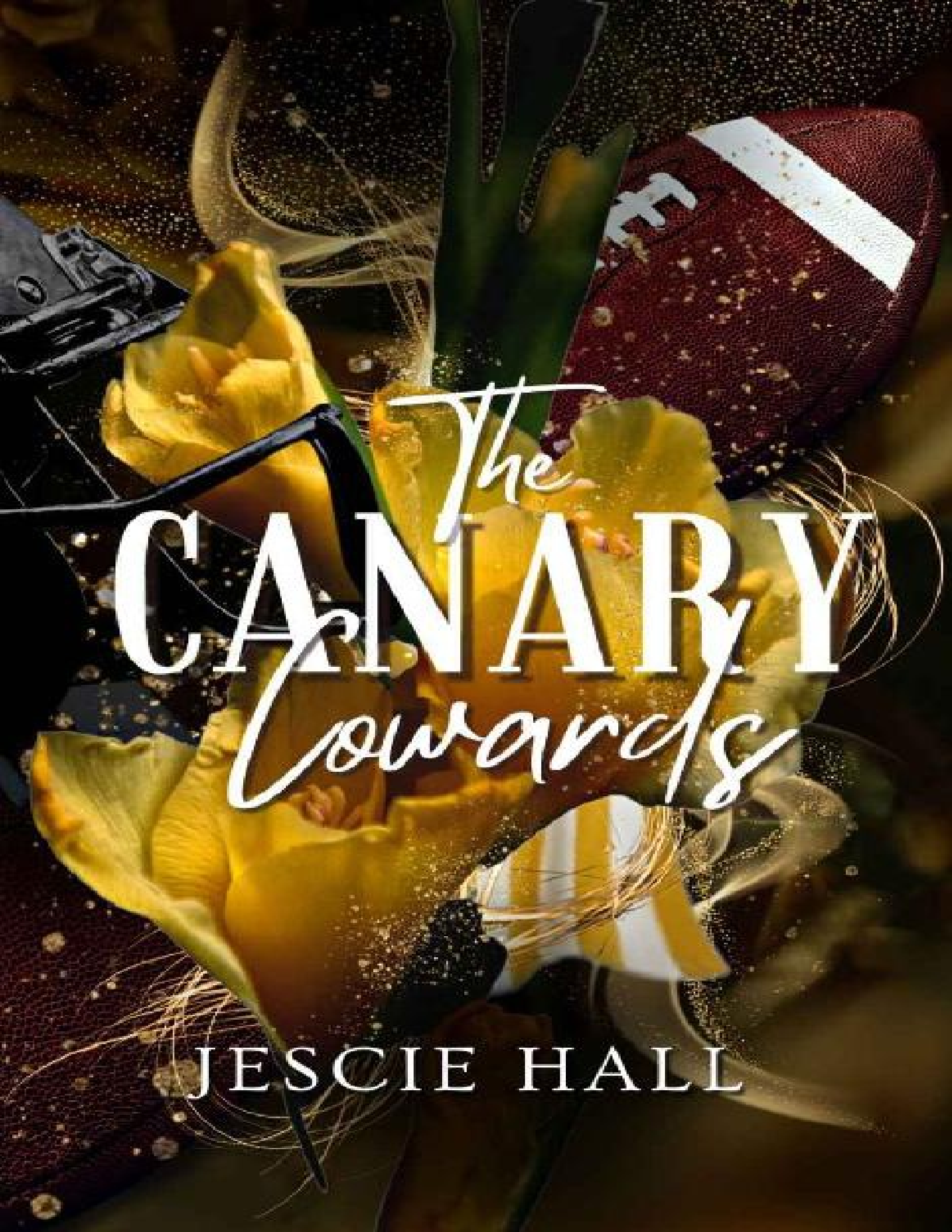
The
CANARY
Cowards
JESCIE HALL

The CANARY Cowards

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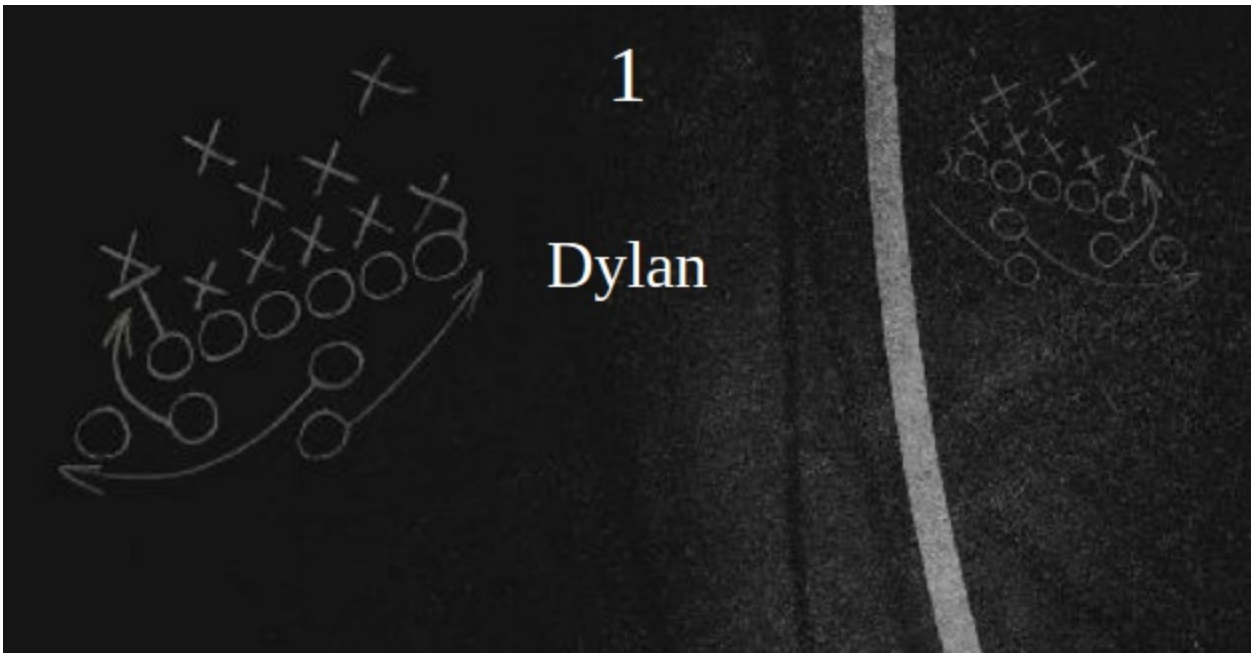
For those who are sunshine in physical form, who awaken us to how precious our time here is. May we find the courage to continue on by the warmth of your radiant rays long after your sun has set.

For Mama Sheila



He tucked my thong into the corner of my purse again.

Damn him and his hatred for the floss between my ass. I really wish he'd focus on his own laundry and stop trying to do mine. I spent a lot of money on this particular item of clothing, yet here it sits, crinkled up in a tightly wound ball of thread, shoved into the dark corners of my bag.

Is this a prelude to the irreverent song of my sex life? Dark, wrinkled, shriveled up in a corner, non-existent. After the chaos that was Eric two months ago, probably.

Eric couldn't handle my life. He made that well known in the text message break-up. Fucking tool. Couldn't even call? Let me just text you that my life is too much for you to handle as I sit back in the bed my mommy bought me, the flat sheets tucked in like a hotel. Who even uses flat sheets?! Just goes to show that my life doesn't pair well with dating. Like love and logical thinking.

Quickly clutching my purse to hide my red lace panties, I mentally curse out my reason for being late again before throwing my keys to the bottom

and heading into work.

The gym smells extra sour today, meaning only one thing.

Cedric Fantigo is here.

I could kill Greg for choosing me to be his physical therapist. He knows how difficult it is for me to rest between Cedric's mammoth thighs, holding his legs for stretches while he groans so loudly the other gym members stare suggestively. He's not even an athlete anymore, just an old friend my boss called in a favor for after his hip replacement surgery. He doesn't shower either, that much is clear. His hair is always stuck together in thick grey clumps, suggesting that his hair product of choice is grease from a hard day's work.

God, I sound like a total bitch, but it was the hard-on that sent me over the edge. At least, I'm pretty sure he had a hard-on last week, sprouting from those dingy blue sweats as he breathed hard down my neck, leaning a tad too close as I adjusted his weights. Not that I took the time to continue looking, but the assumption is where I draw the line.

Walking as fast as I can past him on the StairMaster, he gives me a sweaty head nod. I offer a quick thumbs up paired with a forced grin that doesn't even attempt to reach my eyes and head into the office.

“Dylan, there you are. I—”

“Greg, you're crazier than I thought if you think I'm going back to helping Cedric after he practically came in his pants while I was spotting him last Tuesday,” I say, interrupting his sentence, needing to vent.

His face contorts at my vulgar verbiage, but he drops it and places some documents on the desk before me.

“Well, I'm glad you told me that...now. A whole week later.” He twists his face in disgust. “But no, I've got some great news for you.”

I groan, slumping into the worn leather armchair across from him. “Please tell me you aren't trying to sell me Pampered Chef again.”

He shoots me a glare. “You loved that apple peeler! I think you called it revolutionary.”

“You!” I declare, my finger tracing his entire frame. “You called it revolutionary!”

He sighs, placing his hands on the desk before him. “It’s a well-known fact. Anyway, getting to the point. I'm taking you off Cedric and giving him to Jaden.”

“Really?!” I gasp, immediately sitting upright in the chair. So much so that Greg tilts his head. “Don't get me wrong, I love what I do, and I'm happy to help patients with therapy, it's just Cedric and I...we don't...I don't…” I stall, not knowing how to say this nicely. There is no nice way to say I'm disgusted by the strange sexual sounds he makes in a peculiar attempt to *woo me*.

“Lake Decker.” Greg leans back in his seat, folding his hands across his broad abdomen and crossing one knee over the other, excitement dancing behind his eyes.

My lips part, and my eyes open wide in terror. The name alone makes me shudder. *No, please no.*

“I'm assigning you to our newest client, Mr. Lake Decker,” he reiterates with a huge, money-hungry grin.

While Greg's eyes light up, growing as large as Pampered Chef pizza stones, I'm stuck, horrified at the thought of working with such a brute.

As soon as I heard about his injury that wrecked this season of the NFL for fans and gamblers everywhere, I thought to myself how horrible it would be for the unfortunate therapist who would have to work with him. Pretty sure I

heard he dented the entire Chicago Bears locker room with his fists when they confirmed the news. Talk about anger issues.

But why here? Why would he ever choose this place? It's not like he doesn't have access to the many amazing staff catering to that team. He could have a girl for massages, one for stretching, and one to feed him grapes while another one sucks him off beneath the table. He's an entitled prick, that one.

I can only assume the reason he's decided to come here isn't because he heard the staff suck great dick under the table. No, it's for one reason and one reason alone. Me.

“Greg, listen,” I begin, “Cedric really isn't all that bad. I can find a way to work with him. Maybe, if I just—”

“What's done is done, Dylan.” He stands with his hands raised before him, insinuating that I won’t talk my way out of this one. “Besides, you really think I'd let you work with him again after hearing he practically assaulted you? Say the word and I'll send him packing for good.”

I sit on that for a second, shrugging at the appealing thought of Cedric gone for good.

Greg would too. As a former linebacker himself, the old man still stands tall with shoulders that can roll boulders. But now, years after his debilitating injury, he's as soft as a teddy bear. He runs his own private gym with a staff of physical therapists who specialize in sports medicine and spends his free time cooking for his wife and her friends while he hosts parties selling kitchen utensils. An animal, he is.

“No, I can handle Cedric. And to be honest, he’s never technically crossed a line,” I offer with a shrug.

He gives me a disapproving scowl.

“Just breathed heavily on it,” I grumble, wrinkling my nose.

Greg’s eyes narrow further.

“Just please, please put Jaden on Lake,” I whine, bouncing my knee in the chair. “I'll buy you that new pocket-sized adjustable cheese grater you've been eyeing!” I bat my lashes, not above using bribery tactics.

“Nice try, Dyl.” He scoffs, leaning back in his squeaky seat behind the old metal desk. “I already own that.”

Of course he does.

I hang my head before peering across the gym again, worried he might already be here. Instead, I see Jaden walk in, heading towards us.

Perfect timing.

He drops his bags in the staff room next to Greg's office, and I admire his physique. He's toned, on the skinnier side, but he's tall and lengthy. He's every woman's dream, and every man's too. It's lucky for everyone he swings both ways. Whichever way the wind blows that day, as he says. I'm just happy to have him as a coworker and friend. We get along great, and he has a sense of humor, making work something I can look forward to and enjoy.

His dark caramel skin glows beneath the fluorescent lights, and I hate that he gets to look good at work in his designer gym fits. I have to resort to wearing baggy sweats with the hope that Cedric doesn't slip into cardiac arrest while we're stretching. He notices my curvy frame more than I'd like, even under the bulky material I'm hiding beneath.

“Jaden, my man. How are you?” I ask with more pep than I intended, popping onto the bench beside him.

I’m obvious. So fucking obvious.

He hangs his sweatshirt on the coat hanger behind me, his brows dropping as a little smirk pulls at the corner of his pouty lips. “What is it that has *the* Dylan Crawford needing a favor this time?” He leans back against the locker,

crossing his arms over his chest with a smug look about him, just knowing I'm in a sticky situation and loving it entirely. Dude reads me like a book.

“Lake Decker. Please, for the love of all things Pampered Chef, tell me you'll take him on.”

His brows lower. “Lake Decker? As in the top rookie running back in the NFL?”

“Former.” I wince. “ACL.”

“Ah, fuck...really? Shit, I don't keep up with football. NBA is my jam.”

“Take him?” I give him my best puppy dog eyes, fluttering my lashes until they nearly fall off my face.

“Yeah, I'll take him.” He nods, pulling his shoes out of the locker.

“Really?” My tone drops and I stare at him, making sure he’s not just messing with me.

He shrugs. “Sure.”

“Oh my God!” I wrap my arms around him, making him drop a shoe. “You're amazing, Jaden. I totally owe you for this.”

He smiles at the embrace, his arms circling my lower back before he scowls down at me.

“Wait.” He pulls back, separating us a few inches. “Why are you so desperate to pawn this guy off? What am I missing?”

I wrinkle my nose, twisting my mouth as the front doorbell rings with the knowledge of the hell unfolding.

Ten minutes later, Jaden barges back into the staff room. He grabs the towel off his shoulder, aggressively throwing it into the empty locker beside his.

“Fuck this shit,” he says, grabbing his gym bag off of the hook abruptly, packing his sweatshirt and protein powder into it.

I drop my pencil on my client schedule planner, chewing on my bottom lip.

“So...how'd it go?” I ask, my lips stretching into a pained smile.

I know exactly how it went. If the rumors are true, Lake is a depressed, egotistical nightmare. A gloomy, miserable, broken-down mess of a football star. One who's been the best of the best, only to be told to hang up his towel and live for the past. This kind of injury for a running back is discouraging. I've heard the sports reports. Reporters are brutal.

Jaden turns his glare on me.

I sigh. “I'm sorry J, I thought maybe he'd be better with you. You're a lovable guy, great P.T.” I shoot him another pained smile.

He scoffs. “Nice try, Dyl.”

“What is going on?!” Greg interrupts us, popping his head through the door.

Jaden looks at me and winces, not wanting to get me in trouble, before turning his gaze back to Greg. “Lake's being a little difficult to work with, is all.”

Greg's brows knit together before he focuses his glare on me. “You pawned him off on Jaden?”

Weak smiles and shrugs are my thing now.

“Oh, c'mon! Suck it up Dyl, you're a professional! Besides, I thought this opportunity would be great for you. Don't make me take away your other

clients to force you to focus on him.”

“You wouldn't.” I plead with my eyes.

He cocks a brow and folds his arms over his chest, leaning back against the wall.

He would. *Prick.*

“He didn't request the physical therapist who brought Ashton Connely back to the field in nine months for no reason. Now, get out there and work with him before you give my gym a bad name!”

Of course, that's why he's here.

I look at Jaden for some sort of support, but he only shakes his head and turns away from me, continuing to pack his bag.

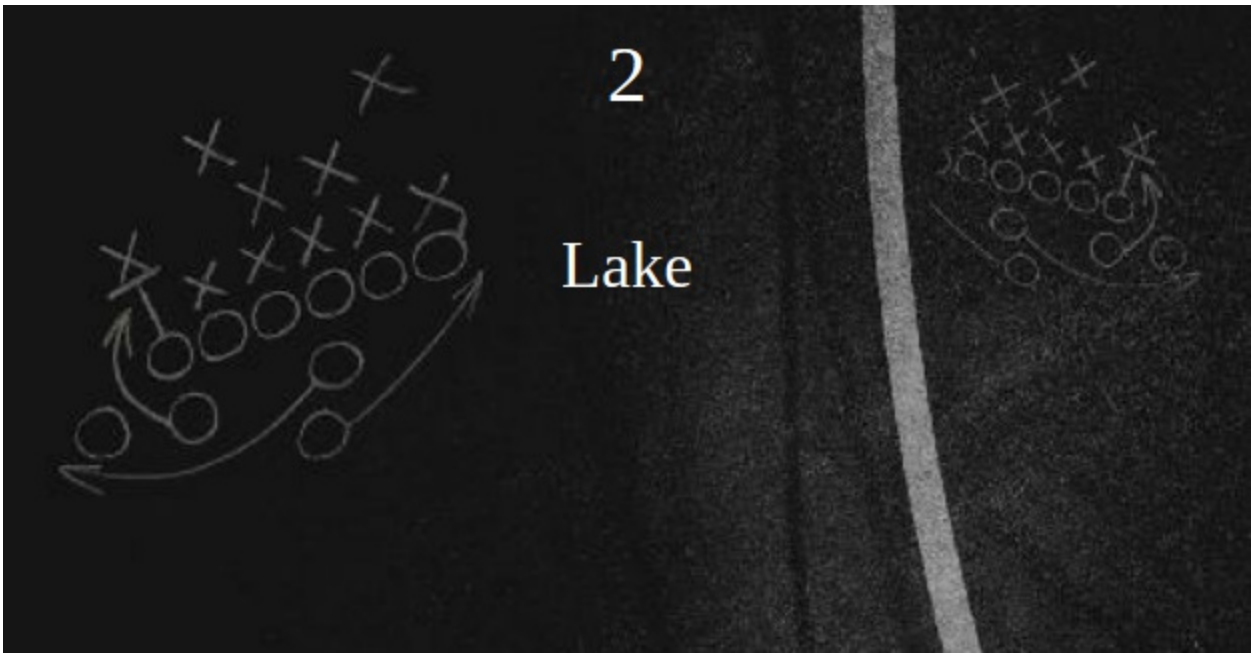
I turn back to Greg, giving him my hardest stare. “I'll remember this when the new Mix N' Chop drops onto the market this winter. You aren't getting shit for Christmas.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, yeah. We all know you turn into a little elf around the holidays. You'll forget in no time.”

There's just no getting out of this. I'm forced into it. I'd put up more of a fight if I didn't know for a fact I'd be getting paid extremely well to take on this little basket case. And money is what *we* need.

I take a deep breath, leave the staff locker room, and walk the four longest yards of my life over to the main gym area to greet the man of the hour.

Lake motherfucking Decker.



The worst part was the sound.

I heard it as it echoed throughout my skull, bouncing back and forth between my ears inside my already shattered mind. Helmet or not, I could literally hear my knee pop, breaking everything I'd built in one tiny fraction of a second. I knew in that moment, my ACL didn't tear, my fucking heart did.

I was on the run, just receiving the hand-off. With my versatility and speed, I made my way past two linemen, slipping through like water in a strainer. Nothing could stop me.

I was moving, like I do, giving a quick spin to throw off another one with the ball secured in the crook of my arm. At the 20-yard line, I saw the end zone right in front of me, only a small push to run it in. The crowd was roaring. They knew what I was capable of just as well as I did. *Lake Decker, best rookie running back in the league.* I was a fucking beast on my way to becoming a legend.

Key word—was.

How I let some punk safety surprise me with a tackle is beyond me. With my leg firmly planted, he took me out at the worst possible time, bending my knee inward as I heard the pop.

Was I slightly distracted during the game? Was my mind elsewhere? Perhaps. But when you find out twenty minutes before running out onto the field that the cancer is back, you tend to lose track of your defenders.

So here I lie, on my side, holding that knee with both hands, knowing it's all over. The dream, the goal, the endorsements. *Everything*.

I don't even feel the pain where I should. Even though it's excruciating, it's my soul that's torn in two.

As soon as they carted me off that field and checked me over, I did anything and everything to take my pain away. Fists in lockers, benches knocked over, equipment everywhere, until I collapsed onto the floor of the space I grew to love. My second home when things got too painful in the real world.

I could control this world. I could ensure I did what I needed to do to succeed, because it was all in my hands. I worked overtime, focusing on my speed and agility while maintaining awareness and improving my blocking ability. I studied plays all night in my bed while the others slept, and got to practice an hour before we started warm-ups to warm up for the warm-up. I controlled this world. It was home that I couldn't. And now, I've lost control of it all.

Nothing mattered anymore.

When I woke up in the hospital bed after surgery to see my extended room filled with gifts, flowers, and balloons from adoring fans who would most likely forget about me in a couple of games, an overwhelming pain not even

close to physical had torn its way through me. A pain that was still there, eating me alive.

I've failed her.

The season was over for me, and potentially my career along with it.

Yes, I had an extended contract with the Chicago Bears, but holding a player with such a debilitating injury was useless for an organization that needed me to win games. I only hope to get back out there as fast as I can before I become part of some shitty trade deal, sending me across the country, away from the only home I've ever known.

“How you feeling, baby?”

I look up at her from beneath my scowl. “How do you think I feel?”

She sighs, slowly approaching me from the door. I sit here in the hospital bed, feeling entirely useless as I watch her take longer than ever to reach me, wishing she’d never come.

“Are you in pain?” she asks, gently laying her hand on my injured leg.

“Yeah,” I answer honestly, pointing my fingers at my chest and doing a double tap.

Her face drops and her eyes squint, feeling the pain I'm referring to. She brushes some dark brown locks off my forehead, gently combing them back before kissing the space there. The mussed look is not helping my whole star athlete persona. I look as broken down as I feel inside.

“You really shouldn't be here,” I start. “You should be—”

“I'm gonna stop you right there, kiddo,” she snaps, interrupting me. “This was my home long before it became yours. I'm practically renting out this room to you right now.”

The joke was meant to land, but fell flat. She grins, raising her eyebrows and gaining my attention to make me smile, but it's useless. I grind my back

teeth, shaking my head back and forth, my nostrils flaring at the reminder.

“Where's Dale?” I ask, changing the subject immediately.

“He's waiting just outside. Wanted to give us a minute,” she says with a serene smile. “But I better save him before those reporters get to him. Some Lindsey Lou was all over him, asking him questions he didn't even understand. Something about yardage gains or rushing leads…”

“Lindsey Lane,” I correct her, groaning internally.

Never sleep with sports reporters. They'll think they have an immediate opening to your entire life. It's a shame it's so easy. On her knees before I can blink, then back up asking questions before I can enjoy the aftermath of the bust.

“Yeah, she can suck it,” I reply. “Literally and figuratively.”

“Lake Liam Decker, you watch that mouth, young man,” my mother scolds.

Chuckling, I reply, “Well, I'm happy to see the recent treatments haven't taken away from your ability to scold your only child.”

Her brows lower, and she shakes her head. She's withholding something from me. I can feel it in her unsure gaze.

I tip my head, eyes hard on her. “What's that look?”

She sighs. “I'm just figuring out what path works best for me this time.”

I glare at her. “No. What? Figuring out what path? Ma…”

She pauses, her eyes expressing nothing but concern for a son whom she's trying to protect. “Another time, dear.”

“No.” I shake my head, dismissing her dismissal. “Is it the insurance again? Are they giving you a hard time? You know you don't need to worry about the money. I told you I'm going to do whatever it takes—”

“Just rest, baby.” She runs her fingers through my hair. “You'll begin healing faster if you get your rest. And all I want is to see my boy out there

doing what he does best, inspiring the world around him, just as you inspire me.”

My eyes line with tears. I don't deserve such a kind, compassionate, selfless mother like her. She always sees the best in me, the light at the end of the tunnel, especially when I can't. She pushes me by simply loving me entirely. I've always wanted to make her happy, to take away the pain she's been given by doing whatever I can to make that happen. She doesn't deserve this life she was handed. She gave everything so I could have the world she ultimately deserves.

She plays with my hair like she used to when I was a little boy, humming a sweet tune as I slowly fall into a deep sleep. I'm not sure if it’s from her comforting touch or the pain meds kicking in, but what she said is right. Sleep is what I need, so healing is what I can do.

As soon as I wake, I call her to ensure she and Dale made it home safely, then plop the laptop on my lap, phone against my ear.

“Nine months? That's the fastest we've seen?”

“Yep. Ashton Connely got back on the field nine months post-injury with extensive therapy from a close classmate and friend of his. He busted his ass for it, but he made it out onto that turf,” Coach says through the receiver.

I grumble to myself. “I'll be back in eight.”

He lets a dry chuckle out through his nose. “Take it easy, son. I'll have the office give their office a call.”

“Nah, no time for all that. Get me the name,” I reply immediately. “I need his name.”

“Just remember to slow down and take care of yourself, kid. Re-injuring a knee can happen easily if we don't make sure you're healthy before hitting the

field again. We need to be careful and take it one step at a time. You're a tremendous asset to our offense, but you gotta slow down right now."

"Yeah, yeah. Gimme the name," I say, holding a pen to paper. "I'll call them myself right now."

He chuckles. "A persistent little shit like you might be back in eight."

A knock at the door steals my attention. "Alright Coach, I'll get back at ya once I set it up."

"Sounds good, son. Keep me posted."

He hangs up, and I drop my head back against the hospital bed at the sight of the man at the door.

"You look like your career just ended with a torn ACL or something," he says bluntly, like the dick that he is.

"Fuck off, Candy."

He laughs, strolling his tall ass closer to the bed. "What's up, man? You alright?"

I glare at him like I did at my mother when she asked the same questions.

"Stupid question, I know. But I feel forced to say it, forced to offer my condolences. It felt like something Joey would say to Chandler, so here we are."

Yes, he's nicknamed Candy. His real name is Kane, hence why Candy just stuck. He tries to convince the team that the plethora of women who've tasted his chocolate lollipop gave him the name. Sweet as candy, he says as we all groan. And, of course, his favorite show is Friends. He falls asleep to it every night on Netflix. One of a kind, this freak, but he's been with me since we both made waves at Notre Dame, him getting picked up a couple of years before me, and we've been quite the duo on and off the field ever since.

"I'm not gonna lie, it was kinda quiet without you today," he comments,

pulling up a chair next to my bed. He places his hand on his chest. “I felt the void. Right here. In my heart, for you.”

“Fuckin’ Christ,” I grumble. “And I can’t even run away from you? This is a setup.”

He laughs. “No, but for real, I hated it. Let's get you back, brother. I can't catch everything. I need my wheels alongside me.”

Kane was a second-round draft pick for the Chicago Bears three years ago, and solidified himself on the team as a crucial asset to the offense. His position as a wide receiver meant he was just as much of an animal as I was on that turf. He is the hands; I was the wheels.

“I'm workin' on it.”

He sighs and smiles with admiration. “Well, while you're working on that, I'ma work on this lil' honey outside the door.” He tips his head towards the door behind him, rubbing his hands together while licking his lips.

“Have her.” I scoff. “Just make sure to report your stats when you're done. She'll ask for them.”

He buckles over with laughter. “You lucky little bitch, you. Of course you've had her.”

“When they strip themselves naked before you can even talk, you do what needs to be done.”

“At least the endorsements are paying off,” he says, shrugging. “But hey, got a proper reason to make them ride that little pony now, don't ya?” He eyes my injured leg, slapping my upper arm with the back of his hand.

“Pony?” My brows arch. “Bro, you misspoke. You meant to say stallion.”

“Fuck outta here, white boy.” He stands from his seat. “You can have your little stallion. I'ma give her this Dragon.”

He does a lewd dance in the air just as the nurse knocks on the door,

entering the room with more flowers. Stalling mid-hump, he straightens and tips a fake hat.

“Ma'am.”

Smiling his signature crooked smile, I shake my head and rub the back of my neck, knowing she was lucky enough to witness the thrusts by the flush of her cheeks.

“Don't mind him,” I say to her. “The paid stripper was just leaving.”

He backs towards the door, his mouth forever flapping. “Tips are much appreciated. It’s hard out here in these streets.” He trails a finger down his chest as he completes another body roll, causing the nurse to do a double take.

This poor woman isn’t paid nearly enough to endure this.

“Oh wait, I need my hug,” he shrieks, jogging back to me as I cringe.

He drapes an arm over me, grinning with his head on my chest. I sink into the mattress, backing away from him as far as humanly possible.

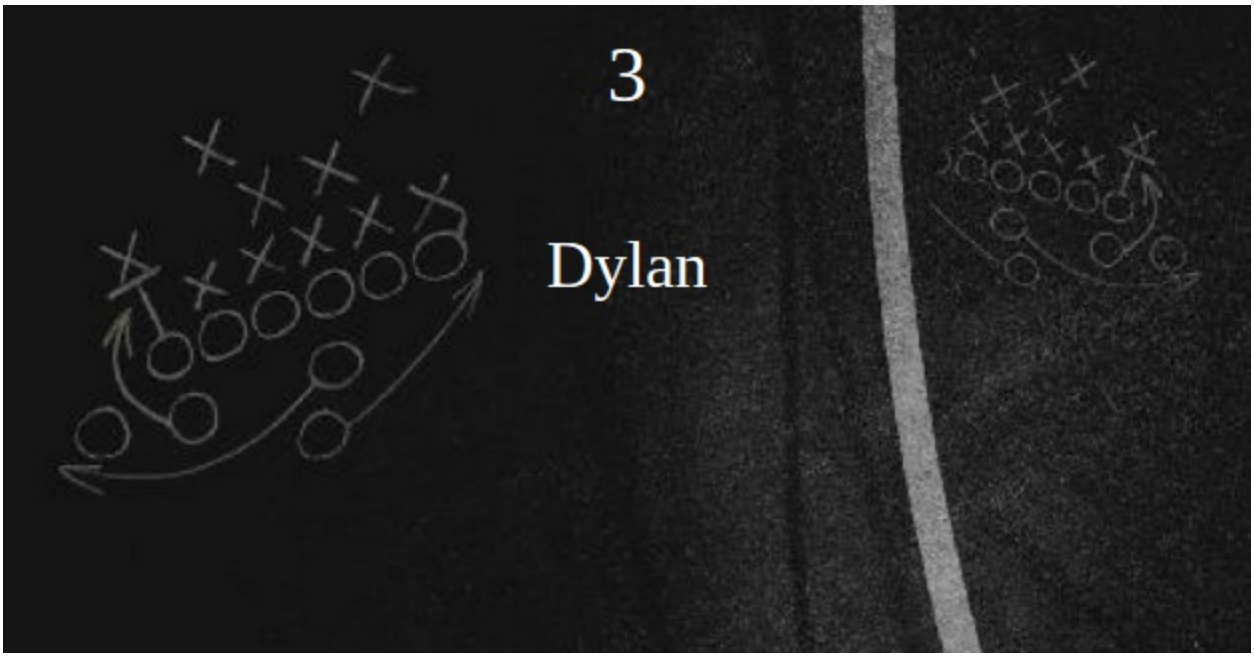
“Candy loves you, Lakey. Now don't you forget it,” he comments in a stupid tone before dropping something down against my side.

He backs away again, giving me a nod. “See you at the team meeting Thursday, my dude.”

I return the nod as he walks into the hallway, already hearing him call someone *baby girl*. Rolling my eyes, I dig into my side, finding a brown paper bag. Opening it, I unroll an old issue of Playboy wrapped around a super-sized bottle of lube, with a post-it note on the magazine that says, *Work out those aggressions, bro*.

“Fucking Candy.” I groan.

The only aggressions I'm about to be working out are in the gym with that new therapist who better be ready to get me back on that field in record time.



And there he sits.

Against the wall, ass on the floor, hoodie over his dark locks. His five o'clock shadow is in full gear, and it only adds to the whole depressed-fallen-athlete look he's going for. He's fit in Nike from head to toe, and even from his seated position, I can tell he's too tall for his position as a running back. His legs are long and extremely toned, like some sort of genetically engineered cheetah.

The earbuds in his ears and loud muffled sounds that blast into his head almost scream to everyone around him, "I'm an entitled ass." His elbow hangs from his good knee, hands dropped carelessly between the open space of his legs. He has an aura of self-importance oozing from his whole look that I fucking hate. I don't have time for people like him.

I brush it off and get into professional mode. Regardless of how I feel, this is my career, my well-being, my livelihood, and I'll be damned if anyone brings me down. I've come too far for someone like Lake Decker to get the best of me.

“Mr. Decker,” I say, standing over him and extending my hand. “Hi, I’m Dylan Crawfo—”

“Why did you send your friend out here?” he interrupts my introduction, looking down at his hanging hand.

He won't even look at me while I'm addressing him.

“Excuse me?”

“Why did you send your friend out here?” he asks again, enunciating every word slowly as if I’m an idiot.

I hate his arrogant ass already.

“My list of clients is quite long. Jaden is an excellent physiotherapist. I just assumed it didn’t—”

“I didn’t waste an hour of my time driving to some mom-and-pop business to hang with *Jaden*.”

Two things. First, this mom-and-pop business has created an actual sustainable life for me straight out of school, and second, his immediate attitude and disapproval towards Jaden leaves a sour taste on my tongue. I’m protective of my people.

“If this place isn’t to your liking, by all means, get the fuck out.”

His eyes finally pull away from his hands, looking up to find mine. I can’t be sure, but I’m guessing the blank look he’s giving me is one of shock. Has anyone ever talked to this “hero” in such vulgar language? The guys on the field, sure. But anyone else? Doubtful.

“I came here to meet with the therapist who got—”

“Ashton Connely back on the field in nine months.” I finish for him, bite in my tone. “I’m well aware.”

I stand there before him, all five-foot-seven of me in my oversized Northwestern sweatshirt and matching grey sweatpants, arms crossed over

my chest with a scowl etched onto my face.

With his dark, piercing gaze set on mine, I can almost see the chip right there on his shoulder. As little as the look he's giving is making me feel, I hold my head high while continuing to look down on him.

His eyes are even more radiant in person than the pictures and commercials advertise. A greyish-blue that feels cold as they sear through my physical form. He traces my frame with his gaze, going over every hidden curve, every inch of fabric, before settling on my hair. As much as I don't want it to bother me, it does. I feel him judging me, knowing I'm not at all what he was expecting when he heard Dylan Crawford was the one to come see.

"Yep, that's it," he finally says. "So do your job and get me there."

Just a quick roundhouse to the chiseled jaw, that's all. I could get away with it, couldn't I? This hostility is burning a hole inside of me. My rage needs out.

"But you see, Lake, it's not all about the therapist," I begin, sarcasm ringing through. "Ashton Connely is one hell of an athlete and an even better patient. Results may vary." I give a quick fake smile that instantly fades into a scowl.

He licks his lips, breaking out into a crooked smile. I hate how effortlessly sexy that look is for him. Looking to the left out of the gym window, he pushes up and off the floor with his palms. He braces himself with his good leg and, hobbling, stands before me. *This idiot is standing on his own without crutches after a major surgery. Is he crazy?!*

His length keeps growing on me. He's definitely taller than Ashton was, and I find it insane that he's able to hold the position that he does with his height. It's quite exceptional that he can be so tall and simultaneously quick.

"The league doesn't pay for variable results. They pay to get me back out on that field." He hobbles forward, attempting to intimidate me, but I don't

back down. I stand there and stare back up at him with a bored face. “So either you’ll help me do just that, or they find someone else who will.”

We stare at one another for a moment. I need his money. He doesn’t know how badly I need his money. A physical therapist with bills upon bills, working in a small privately-owned practice, isn’t making nearly the amount as the therapists he’s used to working with in the NFL. But it appears word-of-mouth travels far when you're a useful mechanic to such expensive equipment.

“Tomorrow,” he says firmly, taking one last belittling look before finding my face again. “Be ready to work.”

Without another word, he turns and begins hobbling towards the exit. I watch as he struggles with the door, finally swinging his bad leg around it and maneuvering himself out into the parking lot.

“Did he just walk out of surgery?” Jaden asks, coming up behind me, his eyebrow arched to the ceiling.

I cross my arms over my chest as we peer out of the gym’s window at him.

“Hell if I know,” I reply, staring in fascination. “He didn’t even have crutches. He drove himself here.” I shake my head. “This is going to be a nightmare.”

Just as I say the words, Lake turns to face us, touching the handle of the large black truck before him and shooting us a glance, as if he knew we were watching. Jaden waves back as I scowl, unmoving, as I chew on the tip of my thumb.

“At least he’s not bad to look at,” he comments.

I turn my head to shoot him a glare before facing Lake again.

“Ugh. Don’t feed into the hype.”

I’d normally feel bad watching a top-tier athlete hobble away the way he is,

attempting to get into his big-ass truck. It's heartbreaking for anyone to go through such a debilitating injury, knowing the ease with which he used to move. But, the way his attitude and self-importance still linger, it appears the injury did nothing to humble him. I don't feel sorry for arrogant, immodest individuals.

I sit on the edge of my seat, elbows against the wood beneath the heat of my cheap but effective desk lamp, sifting through files in my room. I find my ACL folder that I've held onto since university, and begin going through the many papers of exercises I've learned. Scouring the internet for more reliable sources, I search for new techniques and advances that have since come about and begin printing and collecting more data. I am putting together a brand new treatment plan for him that would require months of healing.

Just as I'm finishing up, my phone buzzes against the wood desk, slowly spinning the image of his handsome face in a half circle.

Jaden.

"What'd I forget?" I ask immediately upon answering.

"Nothing Dyl." He chuckles. "What are you doing right now?"

I can hear what sounds like a crowd of people in the background with the echo of a large space.

“Oh, you know me. Really letting my hair down,” I comment sarcastically, sighing. “Just at home, finishing up a new plan for *the* Lake Decker.”

“Oof. Yeah, sorry about that. Shouldn’t be so good at your job, babe.”

I scoff.

“You should finish up and head over to the sports pub. A couple of the guys are here, and you sound like you need a drink.”

I sigh, dropping my pen and sitting back in my chair with a grin. “Do I?”

“I think so,” he says flirtatiously.

I smile to myself, rolling my eyes. He’s an endless flirt. The problem is, it’s not just with me. It’s everyone. Once in my life, I’d imagined what it would be like to actually date Jaden. We have very similar interests. We get along better than anyone I’ve ever worked with, and he’s insanely attractive, with his cut body, melt-you brown eyes, and skin that literally glows when he sweats. Only problem is Jaden isn’t the traditional type. His dream is to get picked up by a rich, polygamous couple looking for a third lover to add to the roster, living out their days in a high-rise in the big city, getting low-fat caramel frappes from Starbucks every morning, attending Knicks games, and watching reruns of Family Matters while feeding each other grapes in a circle on the weekends.

“We need to loosen up those joints, Dyl. You’re too stiff.”

“Cute, with the therapy undertones. Love it.” I reply sarcastically.

“C’mon, have a drink with the guys,” he replies without the flirty edge, sounding more like the friend I need. “Besides, Ashton might swing by later.”

As tempting as it is to see Ashton again, I really need to finish this plan. As much as I miss him and our friendship, I've got my hands full.

We became good friends at Northwestern through the sports program there and eventually hung out outside of it often. He was like the brother I never

had. We knew each other’s history. His family somewhat became my own after what I’d been through, and he understood the difficulties of my life and was always a rock to lean on when shit got overwhelming or hard for me. Ashton leaned on me after his debilitating injury, and I had made a promise to get him back on that field doing what he loves in record time.

He's one of those guys you always want in your corner. Positive, hopeful, golden retriever energy.

My friend Katia always hoped we'd hook up, saying how perfect he was for me, but it's just never been like that between us. It's possible to have a friendship with someone of the opposite sex, just vibing off each other's energy. We've never crossed that friendship line, nor has there been an awkwardness surrounding that. He's my bro, and I'm his sis, and I'll always be in his corner as I know he'll always be in mine.

However, when it comes to going out on a weeknight, work always comes first for me. My obligations are too important. I have a sense of professionalism, and if I ever want to advance in my field, drinking with the boys will not help get me there. Plus, it’s not like Colin would allow it, anyway.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind, I hear him knocking on the door.

“Sorry, Jaden. Not tonight,” I blurt out.

I need to finish the conversation before he walks in and overhears. My heart is racing, and I really don't need any confrontations tonight.

“Damn. Well, I tried.” He sighs, sounding defeated. “Alright, I’ll see you in the morning, Dyl.”

The door cracks open. I hang up quickly, slapping the phone on the desk before turning to look up at him. I need to look innocent so questions aren't

asked. Questions about changes in our routine or the thought of me leaving are the last thing I need at the moment.

He stands there, dropping the doorknob as his hands clasp together again, eyes wandering the space.

“What’s that?” he asks, looking at the phone.

The next morning, I’m surprised to see Lake sitting on the bench by the lockers already.

He’s here before me, which is annoying by itself. I came in two hours earlier than our scheduled appointment to get organized and have everything together. Why is he here already?

He’s got all his gear out beside him, looking like he’s about to try to workout on his own.

I set my stuff down, marching over to him.

“You can’t do any extracurriculars while healing. You know that, right?”

He continues lacing up his shoes, bending awkwardly over his knee as he does it, ignoring me entirely. Finally finishing, he sits upright, and his hard, direct eyes do that thing again. He looks me up and down as his brow arches.

“Are you required to dress like a homeless person while you work?”

I peer down at my baggy attire. Yes, my old, stained college sweatshirt isn’t flattering by any means, but Jesus, the first words out of his mouth include degrading my entire look? I swallow my sadness, thinking of a younger

version of myself. A girl who wouldn't imagine being able to afford a pair of fresh Nikes for herself, aside from the ones I'd worn out from my time in residency. I imagine a young, entitled Lake, whining to get new Jordans because his old ones had a small scuff. I imagine him prancing into school in them, showing off to his buddies. The thought angers me.

"How one dresses has nothing to do with their abilities," I say, tipping my head to the side.

His icy stare finds me again. I feel shivers tingling down my spine at the coldness in his stormy gaze. He's a machine with no emotion. A shell of a vessel lacking any humanity. This is going to be so much fun.

He goes to stand again, balancing on one leg. He wobbles a bit, and I instantly reach for his arm to brace him before he falls. His eyes jet to the area where my hand is holding him and he abruptly shakes me off like I burnt him, glaring before pulling away.

Prideful asshole.

The move makes me irate. I have to let out a deep breath to keep from kicking the man in the injured knee like I want to. That would not be professional.

"Where are your crutches?" I ask harshly, arms crossing over my chest.

He hobbles along the lockers, using them as support.

"I don't need them."

I rub the back of my neck, trying to keep my cool. "I don't work with people who won't follow my instructions."

"And I don't work with people who think they can tell me what to do, as if I don't know my body best. Crutches will only give me something to rely on."

I laugh. I actually laugh, and it surprises him. He turns his body to face me,

eyes narrowing.

“Is this a joke? Like, is this an actual joke? Please tell me I’m being pranked.” I exclaim, my hands raised, looking around the gym, waiting for someone to jump out and tell me I’m on a TV show where famous assholes pretend to tell you how to do your job.

He crosses his arms over his chest. The chest I can clearly see beneath his tighter-than-tight, dri-fit, long-sleeve shirt. It suctions to his muscular frame, molding seamlessly over the curves of his pecs and the ripples of each abdominal muscle, hugging his shoulders tightly. I don’t think he has any body fat on his tight body. Anywhere.

I usually appraise athletes for their impeccable bodies, looking at them as works of science. Amazed by the abilities of the human body. But his body isn’t only science. It’s a work of fucking art. The lean, toned muscle highlighted by deep-edged cuts. Sculpted to perfection. The personality, however, is the black streak running through the middle, ruining the masterpiece entirely.

“Pretty sure I'm the furthest thing from a joke, *Dylan*...the girl.” He sneers. “Who would’ve thought?”

I narrow my eyes at his statement, the pompous aura oozing from his pores now making me nauseous. That he immediately assumed I was a guy based on my name alone is one thing, but to see I'm a woman and deduce that I can't do my job as well as a man? Worthy of a dick twist.

“I’m not doing this.” I throw my hands and turn, walking towards the office to tell Greg off as I call over my shoulder, “You can find someone else. Someone who will take your shit.”

“You will if you want that paycheck,” he comments smugly. “Besides, your boss lit up like a Christmas tree when I called. Doubt he'll let you drop his

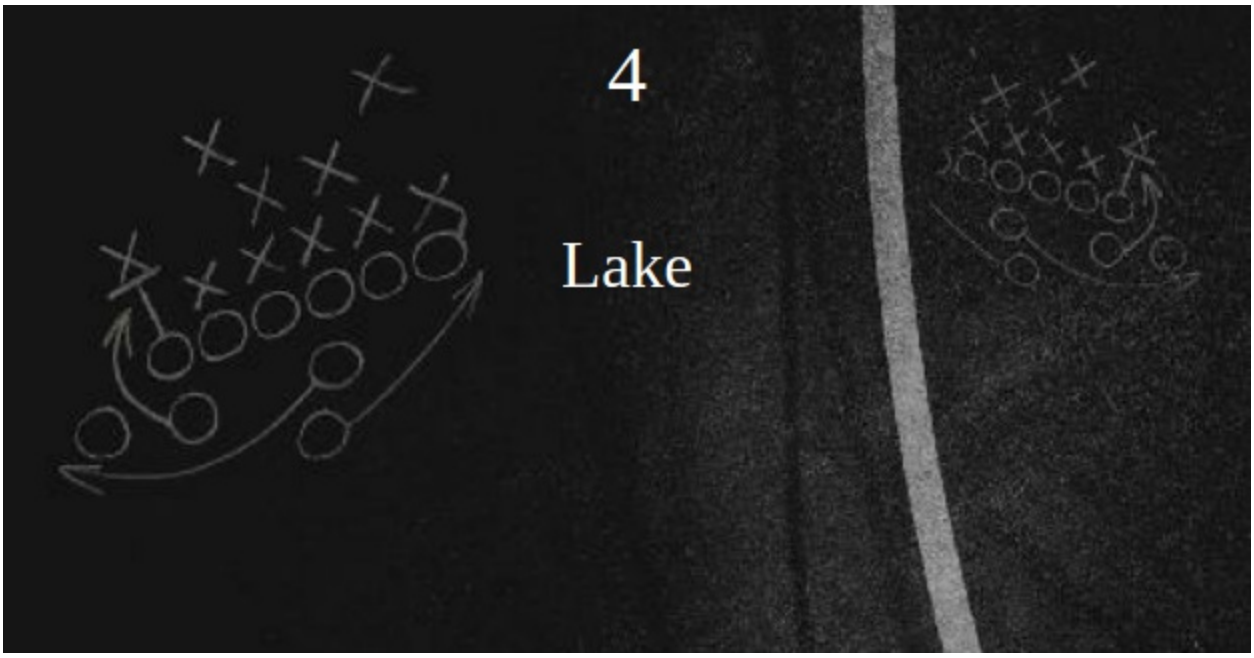
shiny new client.”

I turn to face him again, and there’s that sneer staining his full lips. It's like he knows my secrets and knows I need this more than I'd hoped. Knows Greg will do anything to keep him here. It's as if he's found how to get under my skin and has decided to camp there for his own personal amusement. His eyes scan me one more time, threatening me with defiance, before he hobbles over to the weight room.

Everything is about money to athletes like Lake. Entitlement and fame. Their contracts, endorsements, and popularity are all owned by a paycheck. The thing that angers me most is that it’s not about a paycheck to me. This is my passion. My livelihood. I, personally, wouldn’t give two shits about the money. I’d struggle to not have to work alongside someone like him. But it’s not about me.

It’s about Colin.

It’s always about Colin.



She's a saucy little shit. I'll give her that.

Women, especially in this industry, never talk to me the way she just did.

When Coach gave me the name, I assumed I'd be meeting some soft older man whose professionalism didn't include excessive use of the word *fuck*. Someone who's been doing this for years and has actual experience under his belt.

And yet, here I sit, staring back into the threatening brown eyes of some chick drowning in faded layers of clothing. She looks *stale*. If a person can look stale. Her skin is creamy white and free of makeup, her eyes set with deep circles beneath them. She piles her mess of dirty blonde hair on top of her head, almost as if she's trying to look this bad or something.

But if anyone in the league knows someone who can limit time off the field and get players back to their positions, you can guarantee the good word will spread. So, here I am.

Ashton Connely was the third best wide receiver in the league. Playing for the Denver Broncos, I'd been actively watching his records, and he was killing each and every one of them. It was a horrible day for their team when he fell to a torn ACL. Surprising everyone, he went out of the league to a privately owned sports physiotherapist for his healing.

Dylan Crawford became sort of a name in the game after his recovery became known. He was on the field in record time, looking better than ever after a horrific injury that should have dismantled his career. It was astonishing, to say the least. He seems like a good man. At least he did when I saw him at the recent home game. A happy guy, always smiling, even during dreaded interviews. I respect his professionalism. Definitely a hard worker for sure, as most men in our profession are.

Regardless of Ashton’s success, there's only one goal for me at the moment. One end in sight. Getting myself back onto the field in less time than it took him is the only thing that matters. To my knowledge, there's only one way to do that, and it’s through this stale, bitchy woman who basically told me to fuck off already.

When the young man approached me yesterday and introduced himself as Jaden, I just about threw my fist into his face for no other reason than because I could. I wasn't here to waste any time. The drive alone took an hour out of my schedule, which already pissed me off. I was crabby and in pain, and there for Dylan and Dylan alone.

My mom called my cell phone from home stating Dale was at the hospital waiting to give me a ride, but little did they know I’d already left the city to get started on my comeback. Waiting on the floor of the gym, I’d heard muffled arguments in the office space. My anger rose again. As soon as this chick approached me, drowning in ugly sweats, her hair in a messy nest on

top of her head, I about headed back to my truck to drive it through the place just to level it out for no other reason than I was frustrated as fuck. Until she introduced herself as Dylan. I had no idea Dylan was a girl.

What I didn't need was another chick drooling over me while I focused on healing and recovery. I rarely work with female trainers strictly because of this. I'm not in this for the plethora of women throwing themselves at the chance to fuck a football star. I'm here to smash records and become the best of the best, and of course, to play my heart out for *her*. Until my knee decided to fuck off on me.

I hate how badly I need this chick for recovery. But I'm pretty sure she's into women. She has to be, right? Surprisingly, she didn't immediately linger on my physique or get tongue-tied talking to me, which was new. Usually women get flustered in my presence, their necks and faces heating with the desire for what they know a man like me could do to them in bed. They've seen me move on the field, knowing my athleticism directly translates into the bedroom.

Maybe it could work. At least, that's what I thought, until she opened her pretty little mouth.

She's a total bitch. A control freak. A fucking dictator. I can feel it. I know the type. Fighting her attraction through curse words and nasty looks as if it’ll work. I bet she's the butch in her relationship, telling her woman how to act. Snapping on her in public. I can see it now. Arguing over leaving too high a tip for the service that wasn't up to her standards, just like a woman angry at the world would.

After a night of no sleep and uncomfortable pain, I drove to the gym earlier than my scheduled first appointment, just needing to get out of my condo. My mind kept sinking into dark places. Places I knew I might never return from if

I sat still and let the unbearable sadness drown me. I had to keep moving. The faster I got back on that field, the higher the chances she'd get better.

Standing in front of me again with her scuffed-up Nikes and faded black sweatpants, I slowly trail my gaze up as she crosses her arms over her chest, tilting her head to the side. Her mouth is flapping, but luckily I can't hear her annoying voice. I smile and point to my earbuds and continue stretching.

Assaulting my ear, she rips the earbud from it.

"The fuck?!"

"What are you still doing here?!" she asks loudly.

If she thought she was going to get rid of me that easily, she's an idiot. I look around the place, seeing only one other large, sweaty man on the stair-stepper who's unfortunately making the place reek of foul cheese. He eyes us closely.

"I'm stretching." I glare up at her.

Her hands are on her hips, one still holding my earbud, making her sweatshirt dip dramatically at the waist. She must have some sort of tight frame beneath all that homeless-looking material.

"Can I have that back?"

She sighs, looking away before back at me. "You can't stretch like that. You're swollen."

I look down at my knee, which does appear to be a tad puffy and warmer than usual.

Shaking her head disapprovingly, she says, "You need to protect your healing graft."

"My who?"

Rolling her eyes, she reluctantly holds out a hand for me. I can tell her kindness pains her. I love it.

I take the hand and she pulls me up with little effort as I simultaneously assist myself. I fly forward into her and she catches me. *Jesus, she's stronger than I thought.*

She gasps a little, her chest pressing against mine as I grab onto the backs of her arms to stabilize myself. Yeah, definitely something under there. Two nice, hefty round things.

“We need to work on your stability,” she says, huffing in frustration.

I look down at her, not realizing my lips have dropped open. But I can't stop staring at the color of her eyes from here. They're not just brown like I'd originally thought. They're more of a warm amber, with these gold and green flecks surrounding the dilated pupil. Why are her pupils dilated?

“Are you on drugs?”

“What?!” She tears away from me, glowering.

“Nevermind.”

With her hatred for me shooting from her golden eyes, I follow her into a separate room with a large massage table in the middle of it.

“Hop up if you can,” she says, turning to face a cooler in the corner.

I hop onto the table, pushing myself back with my palms until my leg is suspended outward, the other dangling over the edge. I lay back, tucking my hands behind my head.

“When was your surgery?” she asks, walking closer to me again with ice packs in her hands. She stalls when she meets me at the table, her jaw twitching as she looks me over, almost angry at the sight of me.

What’d I do now?

I see her head shake slightly before she finally closes the space between us to study my injured leg.

“Uh, Tuesday, which would be...yesterday.”

“We need to get you to a full extension quickly,” she says. “But you need to start following my instructions if you want that to happen. I have a fully detailed custom therapy plan I've constructed specifically for you and your needs.”

She's demanding, but I think I like it. She’s got the same energy I do when there’s a task before me I need to conquer. No daydreaming, just meeting goals. The flip has switched and I feel as if I'm now seen as a patient to her, an important one, high on her list. Her entire aura is strictly professional now. I'm not going to lie, I was worried she had no clue what she was doing and that Ashton’s recovery was a lucky fluke.

She's just standing there, holding the ice, waiting for me to agree. I prop up onto my elbows. Our eyes remain locked as I give her a slight nod, surrendering to her instruction. It appeases her. Her look softens as she gently places the packs around my knee.

“Twenty-minute increments, four times a day, and then the brace goes on and stays on. Crutches, a must.”

I must be scowling because she clears her throat, gaining my attention again.

“You may know your body, Mr. Decker, but I know your injury,” she breathes. “Let me do my job so you can have a chance at doing yours.”

Twisting my mouth, I sit back and admire her determination. And that she called me Mr. Decker. It's hard for me to put trust in anyone but myself to get me to my goals. I know how hard I can work and what I'm capable of. Unfortunately, she's right, though. She knows my injury, and she knows it well, it seems. I need to find a way to let go and trust her, as hard as that is for me.

Her hand is barely touching the side of my knee as she gently manipulates

the area. Standing over me, I smell a fragrance that reminds me of an expensive shampoo or hair product. Whatever it is, it doesn't smell homeless. It smells kind of good, actually.

Slowly, her hands slide down the back of my knee, cupping the injury as she assesses the swelling. I'm getting a real good look at her as she inspects me, noticing a tiny freckle on the left side of her slim, little nose and a small scar beneath her left eyebrow. A soft sigh leaves her lips as those hands gently move along my legs with such precision.

She's a therapist. Her touching you means nothing, Lake. It's what she does. Softly strokes legs.

Her hands continue sliding down my calf, stroking until she stops to wrap her soft fingers around my ankle. She does everything so precisely. Strong yet agile, as her hands control me.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, thinking of cacti. Anything but sex.

With her fingers on the top of my shoe, she gently manipulates my foot into a flex and then an extension.

"What's your pain level?"

"Um." I swallow. I wasn't thinking about pain at all at the moment. I was thinking of how to get my dick to deflate at the thought of her soft hands stroking my third leg and assessing the swelling there. I can't believe myself. "Good?"

"Good?" She shoots me a questionable glance. "Your pain level is good?"

"I mean, it's fine. Doesn't hurt. I'm fine."

"All you players are the same. Tough, untouched by pain." She narrows her eyes. "But I need you to not be a tough guy and be honest if this is going to work. I want to push you, but don't want to break you. Let me know your limits, and I'll make sure to meet them as we go."

I'm such a guy right now. Everything she just said, I pictured with a side of sex. Meet my limits? Break me? Girl, you wish you could. I'd rock your whole bland little homeless world.

“Got it, Chief,” I respond instead.

She continues the soft flex and extension before readjusting the ice pack a tad higher on my knee. The fingers, I notice right away, are without a ring. Her white, chippy nail polish makes my lips pull to a grin. Apparently she's the kind of girl who uses her hands for work, unlike these other chicks out here with their fake claws, too scared to touch anything and ruin the fresh paint. It’s surprisingly refreshing.

She's staring down at the large scar on my leg, making a face I can’t place.

“Nasty scar I'll have, huh?” I ask, gaining her attention.

Her eyes fix on mine quickly, as if I caught her doing something she shouldn't have been doing. *Is it that ugly?*

She shakes her head, pulling her hand away and looking down. “It's best not to be ashamed of a body that heals itself with such beauty.”

I stare at her as she glances back at me. Her words aren’t what I expected to hear. Our eyes lock together for a moment, and it's strange. There's a softness beneath her gaze, a slight shift in aura. A compassionate, nurturing side to her that's there, but hidden by her hardness. I should've expected it, considering her profession, but she hides it so well with her aggressive boss-bitch energy.

“That was very poetic,” I comment, taken aback by the statement.

She says nothing, but fidgets with a timer before setting it on the table near my leg. Her tongue darts out and licks her bottom lip as she sets it. They’re perfectly pink against her creamy skin. The top lip is slightly turned up, making it look like she's had some sort of filler, but she's not the kinda girl

that does that. Those are natural lips if I ever saw them. Totally natural, kissable, fuckable lips.

Pain level, good. Activate dick deflation, I beg of you.

I must be high. Faded sweats over here is looking fine as fuck with these painkiller goggles.

“We all have our passions,” she comments, looking down. “Some do it for more than just the dollar attached to it.”

Her gaze cuts up at mine, shooting bullets at me with that glare.

“And some people are just honest,” I retort, raising my chin.

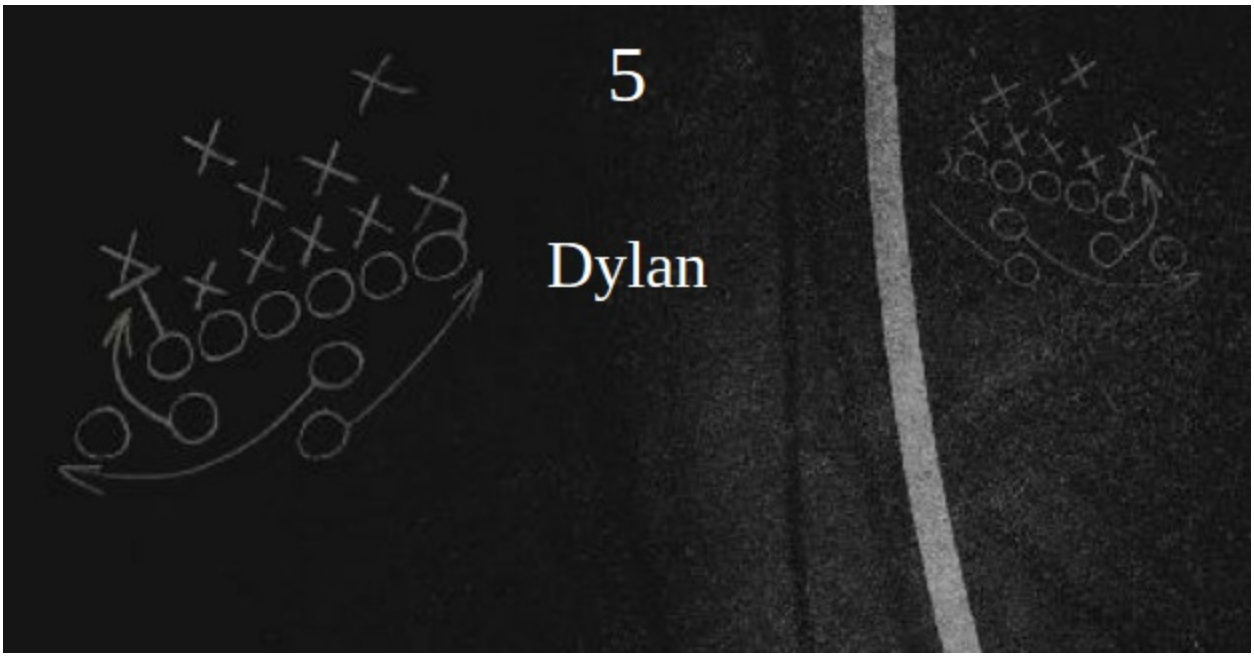
She wouldn't keep working with me if it wasn't for the money. That much I know already. Her distaste for everything I represent is written all over her squeaky clean face. She's not the type to fake it for a buck. So it's apparent she needs the money more than she's letting on. But why is the question?

She clears her throat, turning quickly to break the contact.

“Twenty minutes,” she says sternly, walking away.

My eyes follow her as she quickly exits the room, leaving me with a hint of a grin beneath the fluorescent lights, the buzz of the refrigerator nearby the only sound filling the tiny space.

As much as I shouldn't, I think I like this place beneath her skin.



5

Dylan

Getting into my car, I sigh, resting my head in my hands. This is going to be difficult. I can honestly say I've never once been attracted to a client sexually. That was before Lake brought his fine, broken ass into this gym. I've worked with many clients already, not just top-tier athletes like Ashton would have everyone believe. No, more of the Cedric's of the world, but no one needs to know that little secret. Even so, I've never gawked over their bodies like I did Lake Decker's.

It's annoying as fuck, the way my body responds to his. It likes Lake Decker. It likes him a lot. It comes alive in his presence, and that's appalling. Disgusting, really.

He's physical perfection. Tall, toned, manly, and everything is proportioned just as it should be. That's not even talking about his face. The strong jawline, the muscular neck, the dark, thick, shaggy hair that collects sweat and turns it into gorgeous wet locks. *Ugh.* Don't even get me started on the eyes. This asshole has the audacity to have gunmetal blue eyes. The kind that shoot you down, catching shrapnel to the chest with every gaze.

I can’t work with him.

He’s going to ruin me professionally, especially if he realizes how inexperienced I truly am. I'm new to this. Fresh out of school with bills to pay. And yes, Ashton has helped to boost my career with his non-stop adoration for the therapist that I am, but if I don't keep up this charade of confidence, Lake will never choose to continue working with me, and I'll never get compensation from the highest professional football league in America.

Not only am I still researching new techniques needed to get him back on the field, but he practically caught me staring at the massive bulge in his sweats that protruded the minute he laid back on that massage table. I couldn’t look away. He wasn’t even hard. Something in the pit of my stomach churned at the sight of him with his hands behind his head so casually, his sweats clinging to him in all the right places.

My vagina went straight to my head, and I’d imagined myself straddling his hips on that table, lowering myself onto him while explaining all the ways I wanted him to stretch me, yet still making sure he kept the ice pack on that knee for swelling because, therapy.

I’m losing my mind.

It’s been too long since sex. My body is just horny. Maybe my hormones are acting up because my period is on its way? It has to be. I don’t do this—think with my vagina. I think logically, with my brain. If I don’t, we’re screwed.

Lucky for me, nothing takes your mind off your sexual urges like discovering the spotless apartment you left this morning is now covered in piles of clothing strewn about the living room, food wrappers and trash

littering the tiny kitchen. Walking in, I immediately release a loud groan, pulling at the roots of my hair.

Collecting endless burger wrappers, Happy Meal boxes and little plastic baggies of opened toys from said Happy Meals, I head to the trash can to dispose of it all properly. Stepping on the foot press to open it, I stall, dropping all the trash in my hands onto the floor.

I scream out again. “What the fuck?!”

He shoved my entire underwear drawer into the trash can. All my brand new lace panties are now sitting at the bottom of the bag.

“Colin!” I scream out.

I hear racing sounds in the background on the TV in his room, aggravating me further.

“Colin!” I scream even louder.

“W-what does Pickle need?” he finally responds from behind the door.

“Get your ass out here, now!”

My nostrils are flaring, my breaths coming out in hot waves. I'm at my limit.

“No,” he says softly in the distance. “No.”

“Colin?!”

“No,” he says decidedly. “Pickle’s mad. I’m not going to bring myself out. Pickle’s mad.”

My patience with him is beyond tested. It’s hard for me to not strangle him the way I’d like. So instead of strangling him, I do him one better. I march into his bright ass room, kicking away another Happy Meal box as I do, and stand directly in front of his TV.

“If you’d move, I could see my races. If you’d move, Pickle.”

“Why are you touching my underwear again?” I seethe through clenched

teeth.

He refuses to look at me. Instead, he looks down at his favorite yellow-striped button-up shirt, straightening out the edges of it and patting them down as he leans back into his oversized reclining chair. The same one he sleeps in every night.

“Answer me, Colin, or I swear to God, I’ll pour Sprite all over your racing tapes!” I warn, my eyes wide in a crazed madness, holding up a half-empty McDonald’s cup from the stand near his old-fashioned television with the tape deck.

“Thongs aren’t healthy, Pickle,” he says, still looking down. “Thongs are a bad idea. You can get infections from spreading your feces into your vagina. It...it’s not healthy. I want you to be healthy.”

“First of all—” I begin, pointing my finger at him.

I stall, because how fucking disgusting is it to have your older brother say feces and vagina in the same sentence? “Clean this shit up, Colin!” I yell instead, tossing a packaged toy car at him. “And stop touching my underwear! Final warning!”

Frustrated, I march into the kitchen, pulling all my new underwear out of the trash and putting them into the washer immediately. I pull out a new bag and begin grabbing garbage from the counter, shoving it inside.

He walks towards me, twisting his fingers until they all cross and then uncross, showcasing just how stressed out I’m making him with my attitude.

“Y-you’re mad,” he says. “I made you mad.”

I take a deep breath and slowly blow it out. Sometimes I just need to take a minute and calm down with him.

“I’m upset, yes.” I wipe my hands down my face. “You spent more than your allowance, Colin. We have to be careful with money. I've told you this.”

He dips his head down, not wanting to look at me.

I sigh again. “You shouldn’t be eating this crap anyways. We’ve talked about this. It’s not good for your stomach, all this grease.”

“I-I just…It’s NASCAR at McDonald’s. They’re...it’s NASCAR, and I really like NASCAR, and I want, or what I mean to say is, I really need to collect the NASCAR from McDonald’s. It’s from McDonald’s.”

He twists and untwists his fingers again, finally looking up at me and making eye contact before dropping his gaze back to the floor. He peers back up at me sheepishly, and I give him a quick, reassuring grin.

“NASCAR, huh?” I drop my hand to my hip, pressing the other to my forehead. “They’re promoting the races this month?”

“Yes, NASCAR. I wanted to collect all the cars for my collection. NASCAR. I’ve got four of my five favorite stock cars already, but I’ll need another Happy Meal to get the 1987 Ford Thunderbird, the one *the* Bill Elliott drove on the Talladega Superspeedway that reached 202.198 miles per hour and is still the—”

“The qualifying record at the Daytona National Speedway.” I smile endearingly, letting out a breath and giving him an encouraging nod. “I remember, bud.”

Instantly, I feel like a piece of shit again. I have to reign in my anger at times. My shift in attitude changes his ability to function. He doesn’t deserve it. His life is challenging enough already.

“You’re still mad, Pickle,” he confirms in his signature controlled tone.

“Nah.” I smile, grabbing my purse before slinging my arm around him. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“Where are you taking me? I’ve got…I’ve got my races on. I have to pause my races or I won’t see the Kyle Busch crash that took out the challenges

behind Kevin Harvick in the 2007 Daytona 500, solidifying his place in NASCAR history."

My smile spreads. No matter how infuriating this life we've been dealt can be, I love him so much. I'm his Dyl Pickle, and he's my Collie. It's just us.

"Let's go get some McDonald's."

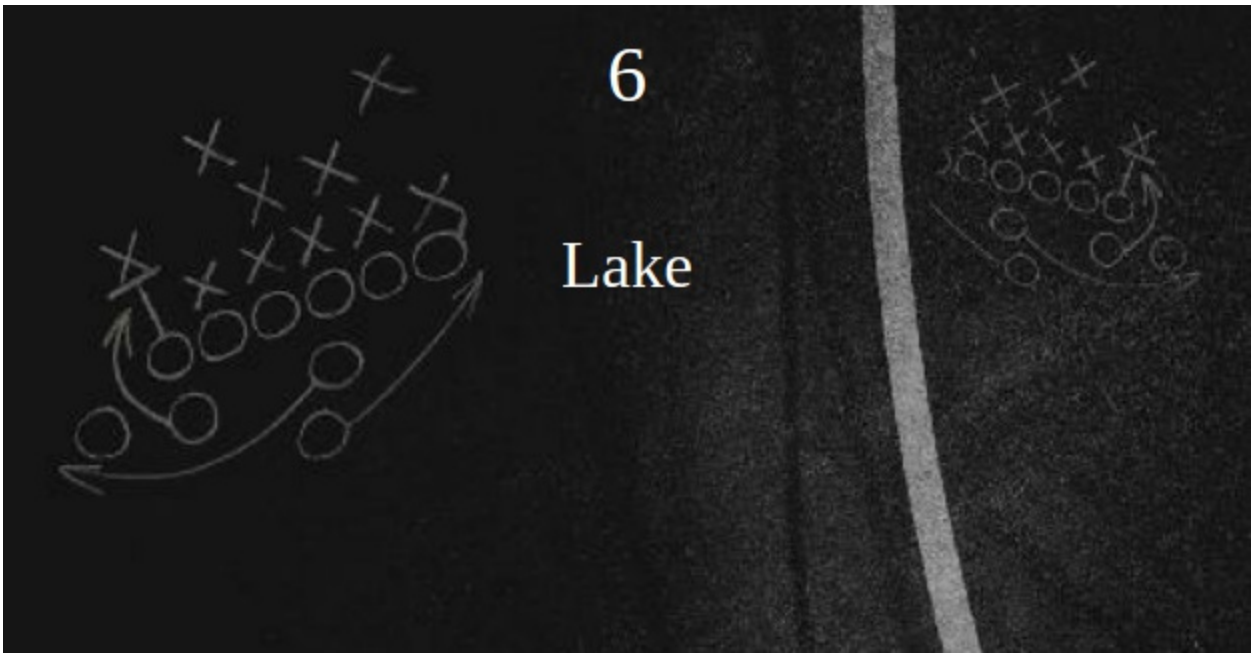
"But, I thought you said—"

"I'm gonna hound the lady behind the register until she gives us that 1987 Thunderbird, Col."

He squeezes his fists in front of him, the way he does when he's excited. When he releases them, his eyes grow wide with worry. "Just don't hit her in the face like Jimmy Spencer hit Kurt Busch in 2013. He got suspended for that, you know."

I laugh as he walks out with me in his yellow button-down shirt and grey sweatpants, his brown, rubber-bottom slippers completing the very put-together look.

"Promise I won't hit her." I slide my arm through the crook of his, guiding him towards the apartment complex stairs that lead to the street outside. "This time."



I've always been the guy to get to practice an hour or more before everyone else. Which is why I'm sitting here in this parking lot an hour before the gym opens.

The pain today is the worst it's been since walking my ass out of that hospital bed. I've been icing periodically as Dylan instructed, but it's clear the medication injected into my knee has worn off, and the movements yesterday have caused some additional pain and inflammation.

I'm trying to push through by going over the new playbooks Coach sent me. Candy told me team practice was lame as fuck without his *Wheels* there, and just hearing about the drills they ran makes me itch with a need to get back. I'm flipping through the playbook, imagining myself back on that field running these routes, when I hear a vehicle pull up in the back of the lot, diagonal from my truck.

It's a modest car. A white Ford Fusion that looks fairly new for a girl who projects a reusable lifestyle.

She left her hair down, a look I've never seen. I barely recognize her as the bird's-nest-wearing-wonder in the flesh. But what really catches my eye is the amount of junk I see piled in the car's back seat. From high up here in my truck, I peer down at what looks like thirty Happy Meal boxes and food wrappers galore. She's a damn packrat. A fast-food eating packrat. *And she wants to preach about health and wellness?*

Dylan doesn't know I'm watching her as she gets out of the car in only a sports bra and a pair of tiny matching spandex shorts. Her hair is in loose honey-blonde curls that wisp in the breeze of the cool Illinois fall morning. It's long, draping all the way down to the middle of her back. The back that dips out, showcasing her perfectly toned ass that's just slipping out beneath the edge of her shorts as she bends over.

She grabs something from the passenger seat of her car, and I have to close my mouth that's dropped to the floor of my truck.

She's kinda hot. I'd even go so far as to say she's sexy. There's just no denying it. With the body of an athlete but the curves of a goddess, she's a bit of vision, though you'd never know it. *Why does she dress like she's homeless?*

I clear my throat, feeling the need to adjust myself in my sweats, getting a tad excited over this strange exhibition I'm partaking in. The fact that she tries not to look attractive but looks like this when no one is watching is doing something strange to me. A hidden sex pot of honey.

She digs through her purse and throws something out of it abruptly, like it disgusts her. Grabbing a hair tie, she stands straight again, facing away from me, and ties her hair in that signature messy bun on top of her head that she always dons. Stepping into a pair of huge sweatpants, she puts her arms through that old college sweater over her bra.

What I'm doing is highly inappropriate and slightly creepy, but I won't stop. I want to see more. My curiosities are going into overdrive.

I lean over in my truck to see what looks like a defined line down her abdomen when her head pops out of her sweatshirt. I about shit myself when her eyes immediately find mine. She clutches her arms across her body, as if it wasn't already covered in an abundance of ridiculously oversized clothing. I turn away from her as quickly as I can, pretending to scratch the back of my head. *Busted.*

About ten awkward minutes later, I maneuver myself into the building, attempting to hold the door with my shoulder as I limp in with my crutch beneath my arm. She notices my struggle from the office right away and jogs towards me, holding the door while she attempts to take my gym bag from me.

“Let me help,” she says.

I clutch onto the strap on the bag tighter and scowl.

I don’t mean to scowl at her, I'm just not used to letting women do anything for me. She notices my face and backs up a step, lifting her hands in the air.

I've offended her.

I need to explain myself.

“Gentlemen never let women carry things in their presence, even if they're more than capable.”

She scoffs at the statement, and it surprises me.

“But secretly watching them change isn't off limits, I see,” she retorts.

I run my tongue along my teeth, attempting to hide the pained expression that's forming on my face. *Fuck, she's direct.*

Setting my bag down on the bench, I lean my crutch against the lockers in the makeshift dressing area. She's still standing there, like she doesn't know

what to say to me. Not nervous, but more anxious, almost frustrated now because I know what she looks like beneath her shield.

“I'm just trying to figure out why you wear what you're wearing when you have a body like that beneath it.” My gaze falls to her potato sack attire before reaching hers again. “Most girls would flaunt that all over the place, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok...It's just surprising, is all.” I shrug.

Her neck gets red, and she casts her eyes downward. Is she blushing? Did I make the dictator blush?! Oh, she's definitely blushing.

“I'm not here to show off my body. I'm here to work.” She crosses her arms over her chest, tipping her head at me. “What are you here to do?”

Not blushing, she's enraged.

Grabbing the hem of my sweatshirt, I pull it up and off with two hands, messing up my overgrown hair. Standing before her in only a pair of joggers, I tip my head lightly. “Both.”

She clears her throat, immediately looking out the window of the gym. She's refusing to look at me. It's hilarious. She looks at bodies all day, every day. Fit bodies. Bodies that are used to hard work. Bodies that are pristine works of science…until they aren't.

“Look at me,” I demand.

I'm agitated. Of all the athletes she's worked with, suddenly I'm the one that disgusts her, the one she can't stand the sight of. I want to push her and see what it is she's hiding. I want to see that discomfort on her face for my own sadistic reasons.

“Fuck off, Lake.” She turns her head towards the office and walks away.

“Dylan,” I say her name sharply, causing her to stop in her tracks.

Whether she wants it or not, I’m still her client. Her very shiny client whom she is required to appease. I’m using that to my advantage. She stands there,

paused, facing away from me. I see her chest inflate and expel all the air in it beneath the sweatshirt.

“Look at me,” I say again, softer this time.

She finally huffs and turns her attention to me again. Her eyes lock on mine, and I see pain beneath those light browns. It surprises me, as I was expecting anger. But there it is in that stare; agony. Agony for something out of her control.

We stare at one another for what feels like minutes before she finally pulls her eyes away from mine. They trail down my neck, and her lips just barely part. My skin is suddenly on fire. My chest becomes heated when I feel her eyes fall there next. She eyes each of the muscles on my abdomen, igniting them with a trail of heat, before her teeth press down on the corner of that lip.

I wonder what this is? I wanted to see her squirm by being forced to endure the sight of me for her own pleasure, but in a surprising turn of events, I'm the one who feels exposed beneath her gaze. It's that physical sensation inching up your skin, crawling its way across your nerve endings with something as simple as a certain someone's eyes upon you.

As if someone slaps her awake from her dream, those eyes fix on mine, the brief look of curiosity replaced with that fire again.

“Nothing I haven't seen before.”

I think I'm choking on air.

I can't seem to make my mouth form words.

“Let's get to work,” she calls over her shoulder.

I follow her to the back room where the massage table is and plant myself upon it.

“Take off your pants,” she says, studying the floor and toying with the loose strands of hair at the base of her neck.

“So soon? Here I thought you'd at least take me to dinner first.” I deadpan.

“Cute. Real cute, Lake.” She rolls her eyes. Again.

I think I like it when she says my name.

“Now drop 'em.”

Especially followed up by that.

I do as she says and drop my sweats to my ankles, bending over at the waist. I swear I hear her gasp a little as I stand back up, wearing only a pair of fitted Nike shorts, but she’d never broadcast that. Of course not. She's disgusted by me, right? Seen it all before, as she says.

Plopping myself back up on the table, she comes in closer and begins gently touching my knee and the surrounding area. *Here we go again*. Everything inside me comes to life, and all of my senses are suddenly on high alert as she leans over me. I can’t help but inhale subtly. She smells fruity today, like some sort of sweet kiwi or something.

“You've been icing at home?” she asks, her voice shaky, lashes fluttering when she peers up at me.

“Yeah,” I reply, sucking air between my teeth as she manipulates the tender incision site.

I generally just black out when trainers touch me, feeling like a car that’s getting work done. But with her, it's like the engine inside awakens. Everything is revving and ready to go.

She seems flustered. Clenching her jaw with her brows knit together, as if being close and touching me makes her upset. I begin to question if I’ll ever get back on that field again. Maybe this is the worst she’s seen. Does she know something she’s not telling me about the condition I’m in? Maybe this is the injury that does me in, dismantling my career. Maybe she’ll never get a chance to see me play.

No. Shut up, Lake. No self-deprecating bullshit allowed.

Extending my leg, Dylan holds my calf as she gently bends it. I groan, closing my eyes tightly. I can't help but feel my throat bob as I swallow down how tough this is today. Mentally and physically.

Her movements stall when I open my eyes to see what she's doing, and I see an expression I wasn't expecting. Her eyes are wide, almost panicked, and her lips are slightly parted. I can practically hear her heart pounding out of her chest.

“I'm fine, Dylan, chill out.” I groan again and grip the sides of the table, breathing through the pain as I rest my leg.

She clears her throat before asking, “Did you take your pain medicine today?”

I shake my head no.

That scowl is back on her face like it never left, so I narrow my eyes right back at her.

It looks like she's about to say something when the front door to the gym opens, snapping her out of it when the entry bell rings.

She drops her warm, soft hands from my leg before turning to the counter lined with cabinets nearby. Handing me a stapled clump of papers, she tells me everything we’ll be going over today is in there for me to take home, and then she grabs a brace from a cabinet nearby.

“I have—”

“I know,” she interrupts, her big colorful eyes soft when they find mine. “But I ordered this one instead. It's the best on the market. And you need the best.”

Her whisper barely reaches me and she casts her gaze down again, almost as if she’s embarrassed by her admission.

She does this for everyone, Lake. She’s a physiotherapist, it’s literally her job. Even so, the tiniest bit of kindness from her feels different.

We get started on our session for the day. Today she's showing me various stretches and light exercises that include balancing, stability, and toe raises.

As she's assisting me with a range-of-motion exercise, she crouches beneath me, her careful hands sliding up my hamstring, showing me where I should feel the exercise most. Her eyes are set on her hands, but mine lock on hers. Her working beneath me like this, softly stroking the back of my leg, has me picturing things I shouldn't. Things like those soft hands sliding up the front of my thighs until she reaches the base of my—

“You need to work on these at home or in your spare time when we aren’t together,” she interrupts my thoughts. “It’s all in the printout, the stretches I've assembled specifically for you.”

I hiss a bit during the final leg extension, gripping the fabric of my bunched up sweats with white knuckles as a painful stream shoots down my leg.

My hiss doesn't deter her or scare her in any way this time. She just gently loosens my leg before repeating the motion a tad gentler.

I continue my therapy with her in silence. Deafening silence. We pass each other; she shows me a move; I do it, and she walks away until I finish. She reappears, instructing me on the next, before vanishing again. It's more than clear she's limiting her time in my presence.

“Are you this engaging with all of your clients?” I ask after she reappears again to show me a hip abduction exercise.

She releases a breath of frustration as she's about to walk away. Instead, she stands there, awkwardly scratching the back of her hair, almost like she’s attempting to find a way out of the small talk.

“I'm just focused,” she retorts, agitated. “You should be able to understand

that.”

I arch my brow. I have no problem with focus. I live and breathe what I do for a living, but at least I have a personality. This chick tries to be ugly. Gives her best attempts at seeming bland and lifeless, even emotionless. She doesn't want to be seen; in return, it only makes me want to see more.

“Alright, I’ll start,” I say, completely ignoring her whole try-to-be-short-with-me vibe. “What do you do when you get off work? When you go home and unwind. What's your go-to vice?”

Her entire body stiffens. I've hit some sort of nerve. Maybe it's the vice. That’s it. Drugs. Maybe she *does* have a drug problem. She uses this career to proclaim health and wellness, but then heads home after a long day at work, kicks back on the couch, smokes a doobie, and plows cheeseburgers into her face while yelling at her wife to clean the kitchen. Something about the way she suddenly radiates tension has me questioning the worst. It’s definitely drugs.

“Drinking? Partying? Blissing out on Happy Meals in the comfort of your car?”

Her eyes widen and her face pales. She looks panicked, and I'm embracing the embarrassment. Without an answer, she shakes off my comment and walks toward the next machine with her notebook and pen in hand.

“So much for small talk,” I mutter beneath my breath.

She's a pretty, dirty, mean little woman.

The doorbell dings again, and I see the guy I now know to be Jaden walk in. Her face lights up in a smile as he mirrors hers. He glances at me and the smile fades.

Yeah, I may have been a little hard on him the first time we met, but fuck it. He shouldn’t have stepped in.

“Do two more sets of 20 reps, no weight,” she instructs before walking to the office.

She follows him, leaning against the door frame as they talk about something silently. I watch them from the corner of my eye as I continue my exercise. He laughs at whatever she says before walking towards her. He leans in close to her, and I swear it looks like he's going to kiss her, but she turns away, looking at me and then back.

It's clear as fucking day that he's into her. But has he seen what's beneath that ugly get-up of hers? Does he know she's a lesbian?

She finally comes back over after I'm finished with my reps.

“So, have you and your girlfriend ever eaten at that Chinese place in town?”

Her upper lip pulls up and her nose wrinkles.

“What did you just say to me?”

I roll my lips inward to hold back my devilish smirk. I’m getting my insight by pushing her buttons. Found my way under that skin again.

“Your girlfriend…”

“Ha!” she shrieks. “Unbelievable.”

I watch as she shakes her head, running a hand up her forehead and into her hair.

“I find it hilarious that because I refuse to fall for your look-at-my-body bullshit attempts, I must now be a lesbian. For your information, I happen to like dick,” she says aggressively. “A lot.”

Staring at her with a blank face, I blink slowly, awaiting the fallout from the comment.

I'm physically feeling the pain of her embarrassment as I visualize the heat traveling up her smooth neck and into her cheeks. She's mentally cursing

herself out for saying dick out loud. And for the fact that she has to follow up with *a lot* to make a point. This is entertainment at its finest.

Before she can even attempt to backtrack, Jaden pops his head out of the staff office as she inspects that brace on my knee that's shifted slightly with that last exercise.

"Dyl," he rushes.

He feels comfortable enough to call her Dyl?

Dyl?!

The dude totally wants her.

Playing nice guy until he can slide in. Maybe he has slid in? Maybe she's experimented with him. Maybe they're fucking on the low. In the back room with the massage table. I bet he puts her up there when no one's looking, locks the door, gets her down into nothing but her cute little sports bra and spreads those thighs.

"This must have really hurt you today," she whispers, breaking my imaginative thought process, looking up at me, not even hearing Jaden behind her. "You need to get those anti-inflammatories on board."

It's then I realize I've been grinding my teeth together because of my little daydream.

"Dyl!" Jaden leans out of the office, holding the door frame, looking frantic.

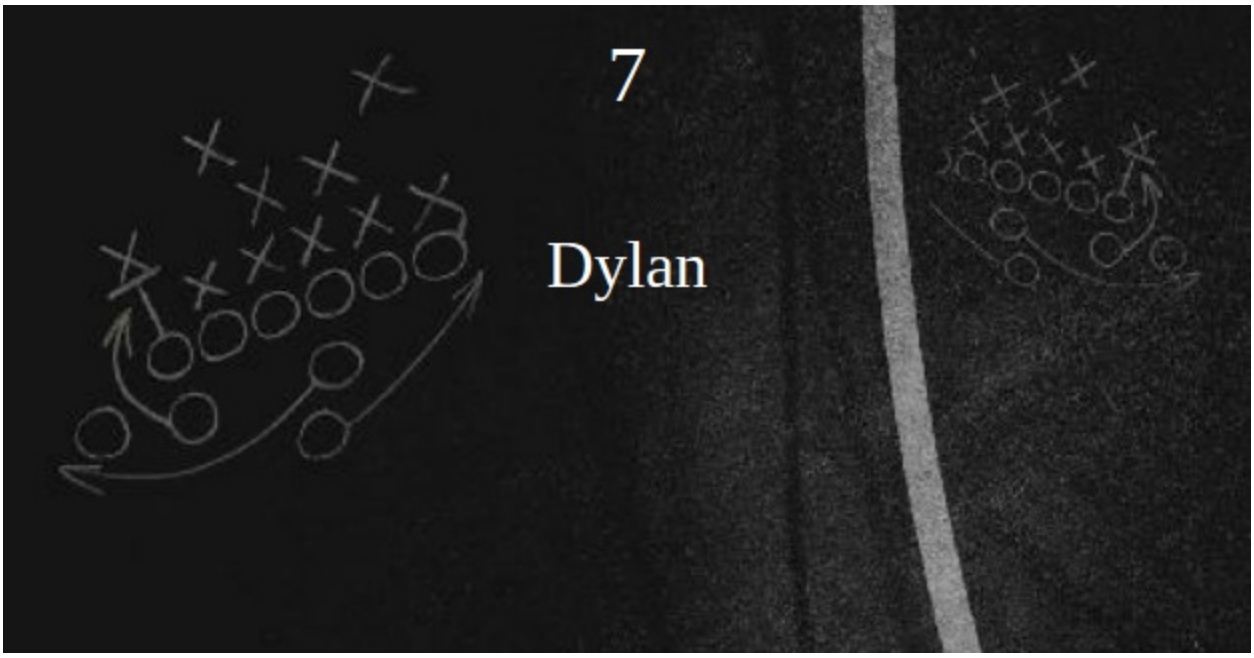
He's jealous of our closeness. Clearly trying to use the old phone call excuse to get her away from me. I see it and find it hilarious. Of course I'm threatening to a guy like him. I'm Lake Decker and he's Jaden, the runner-up physiotherapist.

"The phone's for you. It's urgent."

Urgent my ass. Who gets an urgent call at nine in the morning while

working with a football star? *Former* football star.

She rushes toward Jaden, looking panicked, and brushes past him abruptly. It's almost as if she knows what's on the other end of that call before she picks up the receiver.



7

Dylan

“Miss Crawford, he's doing it again.” Maureen's annoyed tone floods my ear, and the desire to dent her face is overwhelmingly high.

Shit. I knew what it was the minute I received a call at work. Sisterly instinct, perhaps?

“Well, where is he? Can I talk to him?!” I ask, feigning hysteria. “Try giving him the phone!”

“He's rocking in the corner of the staff room with his hands over his ears.”

God dammit. He's having a meltdown.

“Well, what happened?! What set him off?”

“Miss Crawford, I'm not a psychologist. Or a Doctor. I'm a sales clerk getting paid minimum wage at the local Piggly Wiggly. All I know is to call you.” Her agitated voice is setting me off.

I huff. “I'll be right there.”

I'm a professional. Yes. I am. But this is out of my control. No one else can or would handle this for me. This situation is precisely why I'm his primary caregiver. It's only us. He only has me.

I hang up the phone in the office and reluctantly peer at Jaden, who's still standing in the corner. He's tipping his head, his face sympathetic, insinuating he heard everything.

“Please Jaden. I'll give you my signed Giannis Antetokounmpo hat, or my 2013 Golden State Warriors Finals Championship signed basketball, whatever you want…”

He chuckles, pushing off the wall to approach me. “Stop. Go get him. I'll help Mr. Hotshit finish up.”

I sigh. “Thank you.” Wrapping my arms around his neck, I lean up on my toes, giving him a big hug before grabbing my bag from the locker. “Thank you so much. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.”

I feel guilty. I feel unprofessional. I feel shitty, leaving everyone at the drop of a hat. It's just not a good feeling. But Colin needs me, and I won't let them separate us ever again.

“Don't apologize, Dyl. Shit happens. Just please drive carefully. I know how you get when you're anxious.”

He's referring to the last time I burst out of here for my brother. The time Colin's bus dropped him off at the wrong stop. I was hysterical when he called me saying he was walking along the highway, lost, and didn't know his way to the apartment. So hysterical, I ended up rear-ending a car on the way there. Good times.

I swing my backpack over my shoulder, slipping into my street shoes as I hop out of the office. My eyes connect with Lake's immediately. He's just sitting there on the weightlifting bench, staring at me as if he already knows I’m copping out of the session.

It's not like that. It's not like that at all, but I can't explain that to him.

“Uh...I'm so sorry. I don't normally do this, but…” I nervously brush some

of my wild hair off my forehead as I approach him with my keys in hand. “I-I need to go. Jaden is going to finish up with you today.”

His face is blank, but his eyes are questioning me. I feel him mentally processing my sudden departure. I'm being cloaked in his disapproval and the feeling sucks.

He's not the type to put up with this shit. Top-tier athletes don't deal well with being brushed off. I'll just have to find a new way to make money. Maybe ask Greg if I can host a Pampered Chef party? I don't know. Fuck it. I'll figure out the specifics later.

I turn to leave, pushing through the glass door of the building, when I hear him call out my name behind me.

I don't have time for explanations.

I don't have answers I can give him.

I just need to get to Colin.

It's worse than I imagined.

Racing towards the back of the supermarket, I can already hear Colin's humming cry.

Customers are shopping, eyes wandering, and every brief look of disapproval I see emanating from each one of these shoppers is cutting me deeper and deeper. They don't understand. They never would. They judge and

assume. The words retard, crazy, psycho, run through their heads as they look on condescendingly.

My brother is none of those things. He's exceptional. Loving. Hopeful. Inspirational. Full of heart and an overabundance of NASCAR facts. He could recite the make and model of the car you drive after meeting you once. But handling changes or social settings? Well, that's difficult for him.

I race around towards the entrance to the staff room, bumping into Maureen at the door.

“He was playing with his hands again, not bagging for me while the customer was waiting, then he just took off running. He won't be quiet, broke some things, and now he's hitting his head on the wall.” She places her hands on her flared hips and continues flapping her thin lips at me as I push to get around her. “Stacy's mad. Her purse fell over and all of her medication dumped all over this nasty-ass carpet. She wants it replaced—”

“Fine, just…” I lift my hands, trying to process everything she just spit out at me without decking her. “Just give me a minute alone with him, please!”

She shakes her head, scratching her short, thinning grey hair as she finally wobbles her arthritis-ridden body around me. With her finally out of the way, I shut the door, turning on a light in the small coat closet nearby before turning off the bright fluorescents above.

“Col, it's Pickle,” I say calmly, approaching where he’s crouched in the corner beneath the desk.

He's doing the thing where he cries by humming as he hits himself on the top of the head. I quickly scan the room. He tossed the purse, the contents indeed splayed along the floor. I see his bag hanging up on the hangers nearby, the zipper pulled down as if he had been trying to get his fidget toy to calm himself.

The sight breaks me.

Something triggered him, and he began stimming, or fidgeting with his hands as Maureen said. When it became too much and crossing his fingers didn't help to ease his discomfort, he made his way to his backpack to find his fidget, another source of self-regulation. He knew he was on the verge of a meltdown and went through the process his advisor recommended, but it wasn't enough.

“M-my...make it stop. T-take off!”

He screams loudly, hitting his head against the wall and holding his hands over his ears. For some strange reason, I notice they have him wearing a new oversized Piggly Wiggly t-shirt that I've never seen before. The shirt I put him in this morning is lying wrinkled up on the floor under his jacket.

“Colin! Col! It's okay,” I say, crawling under the desk, grabbing his arm and pulling him away from the wall.

He begins aggressively hitting himself in the head before reaching back and hitting himself behind the neck.

I immediately move to remove his shirt. One thing this stupid staff doesn't know is that my brother has an extreme sensitivity to t-shirt tags, which is why every tag on all of his shirts back home have to be removed. To him, I can only imagine it feels like he's being stabbed in the back as his senses go into overdrive.

This used to be horrifying. His meltdowns used to scare me when I was a child. I watched on so many occasions as my mother and father locked him in his room alone until he “calmed down.” But only after sneaking into his room when my parents weren't looking, worried that my big brother would hurt himself, did I discover my own way of getting him out of his own head faster. *Kanye.*

I pull his shirt over his head, sending his overgrown hair falling onto his forehead, obstructing his vision. The skin on his back is blotchy and red.

I quickly pull him back into my chest, wrapping my arms around him in a tight embrace as he heaves. Holding his arms down to the best of my ability, I wrap my legs around his hips, giving him a bear hug from behind.

This is why I workout. He fights it, my embrace, but I flex down on him, tightening my grip as I plant my chin on his shoulder.

With my face in the crook of his neck, I begin calmly singing, “Work it, make it, do it, makes us harder, better, faster, stronger—”

He wiggles an arm free, swinging to hit his head, but hits mine instead. I flinch as the area below my eye burns, but I continue to hold him because I know how he operates, and I know the fastest way to calm him down.

Is this the correct way? Who knows? Lots of autistic people don’t want to be touched, but when Colin loses all sense of security, this just works for him. I’m his own personal weighted blanket.

He keeps struggling until he's panting so hard against my hold he has to stall his movements to breathe. I squeeze tighter, giving him a hard hug.

“N-now th-that that don't kill me...can only make me stronger…” I continue singing.

His chest heaves as all the air expels, and he eases up his fight.

“I need you to hurry up now…‘cause Pickle can't wait much longer.”

His hands curl around my forearms and he gently squeezes twice.

“I know I got to be right now…‘cause Pickle can't get much wronger. Man, I've been waiting all night now. That's how long I been on ya.”

He sucks in a breath and lets it out again. I feel his body finally sink against mine.

“I-I need you right now,” he recites in a cracked tone.

“That's it, Col,” I say reassuringly. “I'm here, bud. I'm right here.”

We sit like that for about five minutes, until I feel his heart rate slowing down. I loosen my hold, just hugging him from behind.

“Want to tell me what happened?” I finally ask, my chin still resting on his shoulder as I feel him swallow.

“T-Terry took the bag. Took the bag from Colin. Terry took the bag.”

“Terry,” I say to myself as I release him, turning his body to face me.

“I'm so sorry. I-I know I can't get in trouble. Colin will lose his job if he doesn't bag right. They said it. They said it and I heard them. Colin will lose his job. I'm so s-sorry, Pickle. I can't lose the job. I'm sorry, Pickle.”

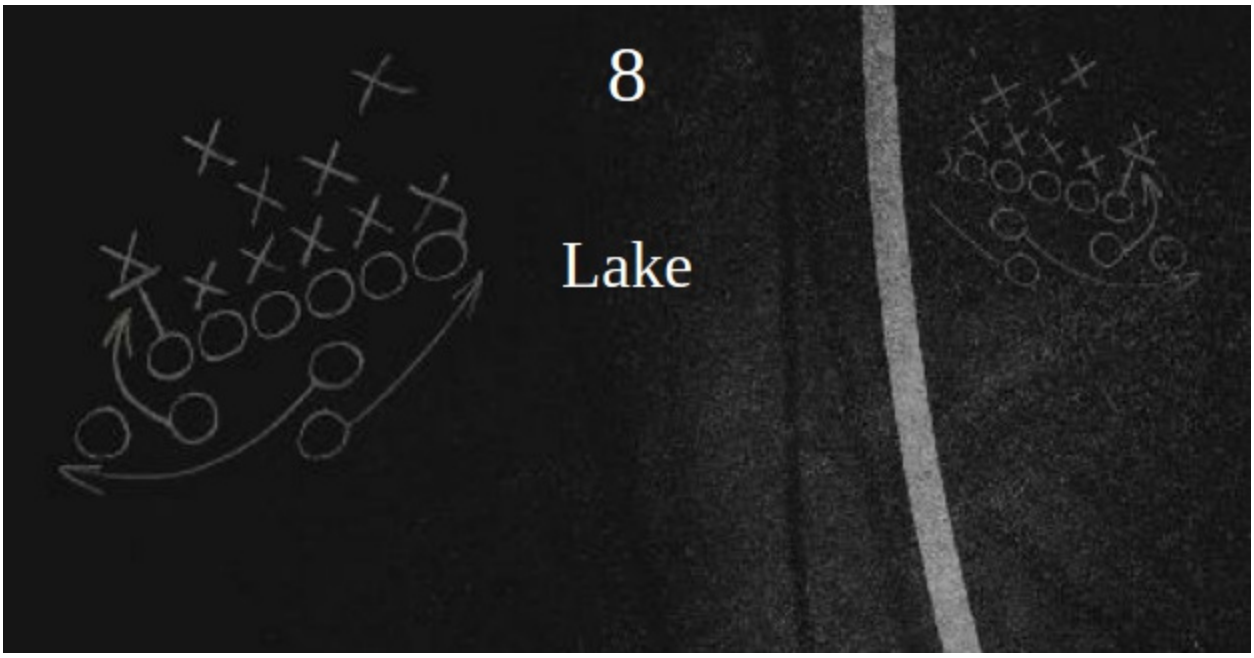
“Shh...no Colin. It's okay. Don't ever be sorry. Pickle is always here. Don't be sorry. It's not your fault, Colin. Things happen, and I'm just happy you're okay.” I pull him into me, bringing his face into my chest as I clutch onto his hair. “It's going to be okay.”

Tears well up in my eyes as he inhales a deep breath and slowly releases it against me, and I squeeze them back with a quick, hard squint. *I love you so much, Colin.*

Who the fuck is Terry, and why is he taking bags from the bagger?

After helping Colin up and getting him back into his old Piggly Wiggly t-shirt—without the tag—I grab the new one and head for the registers. My protective instinct comes into play, and I feel the anger rising inside me, heating me with defensive rage.

I'm about to find Maureen and get some fucking answers.



“So I told her, your boy Lake is out of commission for a while. Besides, what she really needed was a man who's good with his hands. A man who specializes in holding oblong things for a living.”

I contort my face against the phone, unfortunately still listening.

“And guess what she said?”

I groan internally at his need for me to respond.

“What, Candy?”

He stalls for an over-dramatic pause.

“She said she paid good money to make sure hers weren't oblong anymore,” he deadpans.

An unintended cough finds its way up my chest until I'm laughing.

“So we fucked, doggy-style if I might add, and she and her spherical silicone breasts left when we were done. Haven't heard from her since.”

I shake my head, pausing to give a quick nod to the woman behind the counter who’s holding out my bag for me. She says something in her Native tongue and I smile back appreciatively, grabbing the bag of food. I turn to

leave, hobbling on one crutch as I push through the glass door of the tiny restaurant with my shoulder.

“Can you believe they benched Jimmy for Cal?” he asks, switching the topic of conversation entirely.

“Yeah, I can.”

“I can't,” he counters. “Jimmy's a legend.”

“Jimmy's old,” I state factually. “His time has passed. It's time he accepts it, along with everyone else.”

“Damn, son.” Candy blows air through his lips. “You're ruthless with the facts today.”

“Nah, Candy. I'm a realist.”

Sure, maybe it sounds harsh, but it's a reality we all face in this profession. I know time is just a ticking clock that ends careers faster than the hearts of most of these men playing. But, as I said, I'm a realist. A realist who is questioning my own comeback more often than not. Especially after therapy sessions like the one today.

It hurt. I wasn't capable of the things I mentally saw myself doing, and I didn’t know how to cope with that. While Dylan had mentioned that it's more of a marathon than a sprint, I’m struggling with the idea. I'm a sprinter in all aspects of life outside of this. Patience in healing doesn't bode well for me.

As soon as my mind travels back to that mysterious, controlled-yet-chaotic woman who surprised me by bailing mid-session, I see Dylan frantically marching through the parking lot of the small shopping center I'm standing in. If it's even possible, her hair is seemingly more unkempt now than it was about an hour earlier.

“I...gotta call you back, Kane,” I say into the receiver, my eyes trained on her erratic movements.

Her hips swivel back and forth through the cars like a damn running back through a field of defenders. My brain is so trained in football mode, I can't think in any other form.

“Hey!” I yell out, hobbling towards her with my crutch beneath one arm. I drop my phone into the pocket of my joggers, my other hand awkwardly holding my Chinese takeout. “Dylan!”

She pauses in place, her eyes wide with panic as she looks off into the distance.

“Dylan!” I yell again.

As if contemplating how to juke me like I do players on the field, I see the wheels spin in her head until finally she huffs, turning to face me.

“Where are you going?” I ask, hobbling my ass over towards her. “What are you doing here?”

A car honks before slowly driving between us in the parking lot. I round the back end of it, closing the distance between us.

“Uh, just home…” she answers, gripping the bottom of her sweatshirt as she glances behind her. “Just needed to take care of something, is all.”

Upon closer inspection, I notice a red mark above her eye. It looks like someone hit her. Did someone hit her?! I know she’s a proud woman, but even the strongest can fall to abuse. Suddenly, I feel a strange sickness in my gut. That urge to protect. My eyes narrow as my mouth drops open. I'm about to ask her what happened, but she says something first.

“The Chinese place me and my *girlfriend* frequent…” Her eyes take in the bag in my hand, and a hint of a grin pulls at her lips. “Good choice.”

I bite my lip, cringing at my earlier comment. She chuckles slightly, so I know I must not have offended her. She's making a joke. *Phew.*

“They threw in a free egg roll because the cook in the back recognized me

as *the* fallen athlete of Chicago.” I wince.

“Damn, Junjie's a gangster.”

I tilt my head at the comment. Of course she knows the cook's name.

“You want to—” I point my thumb behind me towards the restaurant.

Maybe she needs some sort of escape right now. Her large, doe-like eyes are frantically looking around, almost insinuating something or someone's waiting for her. Someone she doesn’t want me to see.

“No, I-I have to go,” she interrupts, her eyes darting behind her again.

I study her movements. The anxiousness in her gaze, the worry etched onto the soft skin of her face, the red mark above her eye. It's all adding up now.

She walks backwards, continuing, “I'll, uh...see you tomorrow?”

Bumping into a parked car, she turns to look back at it before squinting her eyes in embarrassment. She finally peeks back at me through her lashes, her eyebrows raised, waiting for me to agree.

Her behavior is so strange right now. I can't figure this chick out, but I’m starting to question certain things because of it.

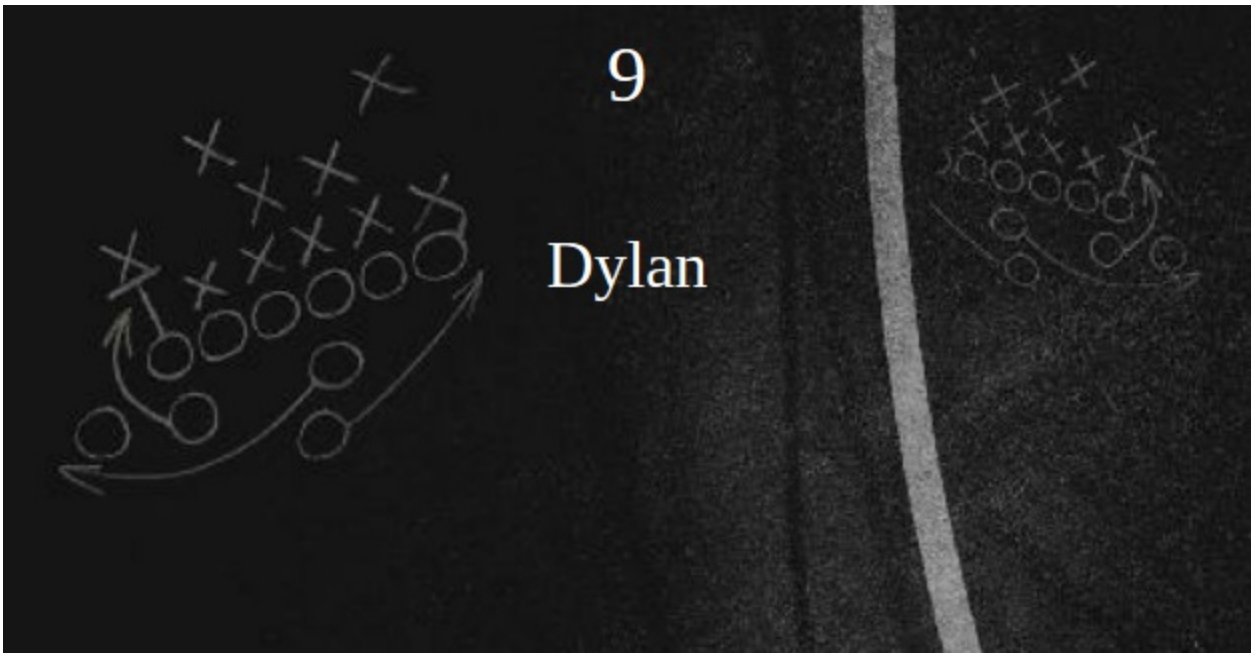
“Uh, yeah. Tomorrow,” I say, still staring at her like she's some sort of puzzle I can’t quite piece together.

She gives me a quick fake smile and a nod before the smile drops and she turns away from me.

I watch as she hustles through the lot, finally disappearing from my sight.

The more I see of her, the more questions I seem to collect.

The more I want to know.



9

Dylan

Colin sits back in his recliner, finally surrounded by the warm yellow tones of his canary-colored room. I pop in a racing tape and turn the volume down to a comfortable level as I help him into his yellow-striped button-up.

“I'm going to make you some chicken noodle soup, alright?”

He nods, not making eye contact as he twists and untwists his fingers.

“I love you, Col.” I bend down, kissing the top of his head. “Everything's going to be fine.”

He feels embarrassed. I know he does. He wouldn't stop apologizing behind me as I carved Maureen a new asshole at Piggly Wiggly. Yeah, I may have overdone it when I called her a crusty cunt, but hey, it's factual information.

I walked him to the car, realizing my aggressive behavior was doing nothing to help keep him calm. Then I marched back in there, said a few more choice words to Maureen and the rest of the staff before chucking the new shirt on the floor and dramatically exiting the building. Just my luck, as

I'm leaving, I see none other than Lake Decker exiting the Chinese restaurant in the strip mall right next to Piggly Wiggly.

I must seem like the strangest, most chaotic person to him, but I successfully dodged the situation and got out of there as quickly as humanly possible without needing to explain anything. I'm going to be forced to work with Cedric again, I just know it. Mammoth thighs to make ends meet.

As I'm stirring the chicken broth over the stove, I make a mental note to call the advisor at Easterseals to figure out a new plan moving forward with Colin and his future in the workforce. Maybe there's a better fit somewhere else out there, where he doesn't need to interact face to face with customers like at the grocery store. Those scenarios seem to be so unpredictable and challenge his ability to cope with changes. Plus, no one there seems to want to even attempt to understand or help him.

A knock at my door startles me, causing me to drop my soup spoon into the pot. I wipe my hands on the towel hanging on the stove before making my way to the peephole.

Carl.

I drop my head back, closing my eyes before letting out a deep breath, feeling an ache in the pit of my stomach. I let it out, then pop into peppy, put-together mode.

“Carl, hello,” I say upon opening the door. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Owe?” he asks in his gruff tone, his double chin jiggling beneath him as he talks. “Funny choice of words, Miss Crawford. You *owe* me last month's rent.”

A whiff of stale cigarettes and sweat floods my nostrils, and I try my best not to show the look of disgust my face so eagerly wants to slip into.

I absentmindedly itch the side of my face. “You...uh, you didn't get my check?”

I'm an amazing actress. Oscar-worthy.

His arms cross over his chest, just barely able to reach over his engorged stomach. Hairy eyebrows, thick as wooly caterpillars, raise as he waits for me to continue. I hang onto the doorknob, still peeking out at him with a face full of fake confusion.

“You know I didn't get your check. Pay me by the end of the week or I'll evict you for real this time. Lord knows I deal with enough noise complaints.”

I grind my back teeth. He's referring to the complaints from the old woman beneath me in 1C who, unfortunately, has the pleasure of listening to Colin's late-night pacing. Or maybe it's the retired garbage man in 2D who dons a permanent dent in his forehead from incessant scowling and has the pleasure of hearing Colin hitting his head against the wall of his bedroom when he's mid-meltdown. It's not my fault they made these walls with construction paper, or that rent prices have skyrocketed while the overall income has not.

“You got it, Carl.” I give him a quick grin and a wink, shutting the door in his face.

I hear the loud thumps of his shuffle down the hallway as I turn my back against the door, sliding down to the floor.

It's okay. I'm going to figure this out. I'm going to do it. We'll be fine.

I'm on the verge of a panic attack. Tears build and they try to leave me, justifying the emotions I've been pushing away. I can't become weak. I can't fall into this self-pity. Kick after kick and I'm still getting back up. I need to break through this and think logically.

My cell phone vibrates in my pocket. *Greg.*

I slap both hands on my head, holding them over my eyes before I drag them down my face. The amount of stress I can manage in one day has gone drastically over my limit.

“Hello?” I answer with a sigh.

“Hey, Dyl, it's Greg,” his boisterous tone pounds into my ear.

“No shit, Greg.”

“Ha, saucy…” he comments humorously as I roll my eyes. “I was just calling, hoping we could talk for a minute.”

My heart races in my chest, awaiting the ass-whooping I'm about to receive for bailing on Lake today. I'm sure he called him after the session, or perhaps after the awkward shopping center encounter, complaining about how unprofessional and fucking weird his therapist is. It makes sense now why he thought I was strung out on drugs.

“Lake is requesting you in Arizona next week.”

Shock hits me. “Uh, what?”

“The team is traveling to Arizona to play the Cardinals Monday night.”

“No...no, Greg, I can't—”

“He's offering a ride on the private jet, a hotel suite just for you, and paying a shit ton of money just to have you there to continue his therapy while on the road.”

Shit ton of money. He tells me how much a shit ton of money is, and yeah, it's more than I would imagine any trainer in the NFL would receive. But why?

I peer towards Colin's room. It's not like we don't need it. But I don't even know if Katia is available next week to watch over him.

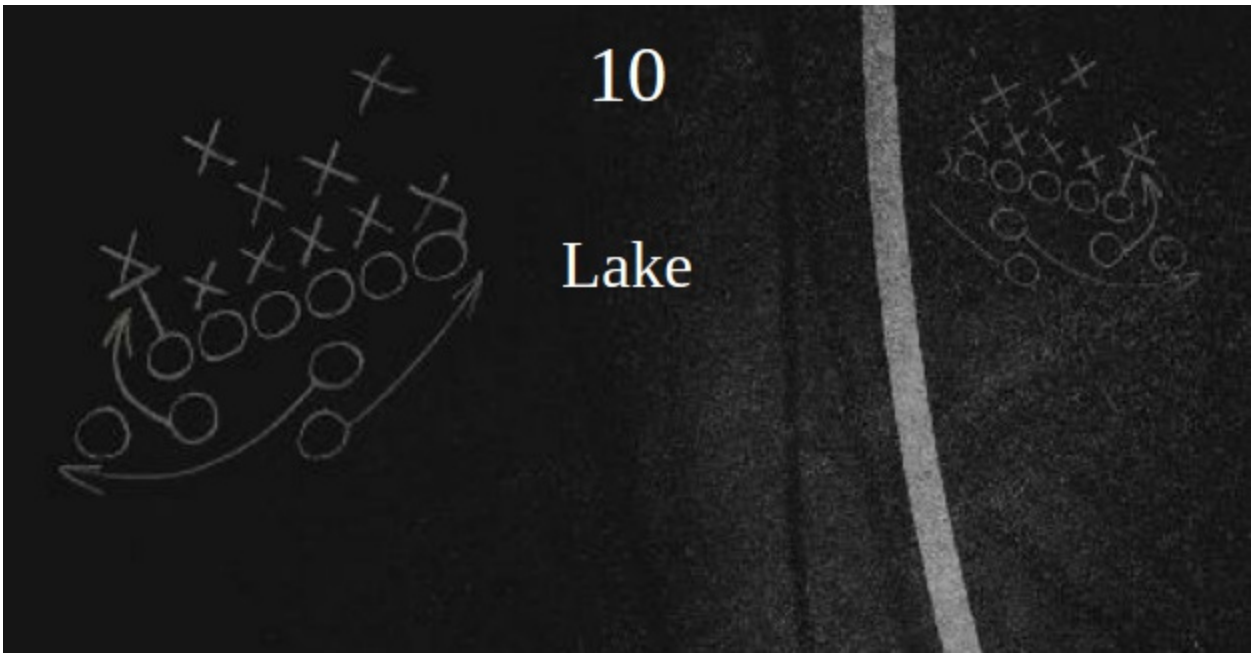
“Make arrangements if you can. This is a great opportunity to market yourself and get a foot in the door to the big leagues, Dyl.”

After telling Greg I need to work a few things out to see if that's even possible, we hang up. I stare at my legs extended before me on the dingy carpet of our apartment floor. My mismatched socks taunt me further, almost chastising my inabilities as a guardian. The bright smiley face on the left one, laughing at my many misfortunes.

But I promised him that night, when they found us alone together at home, that we'd be okay. They knocked on our door in their uniforms with their flashing lights behind them, changing everything with a simple sentence. Our parents died in that accident, leaving us to fend for ourselves in a broken system. A system in which a younger sister isn't old enough to be the legal guardian to the only person who ever understood her.

The horrific incident left me searching, endlessly swimming, towards what seemed like a mirage of hope, finding a way for us to be together again. I'd managed a mountain of debt from getting swindled into false promises from money-hungry lawyers.

And now, I found myself still tirelessly treading, needing to find a way to keep our heads above that same water that threatens to dismantle every stick from this dam I've been working to build.



Being back on the road with the team is breathing life into my crippled, broken form.

Hanging around the guys again, the inappropriate jokes, the locker room talk, the male camaraderie…it's everything I didn't know I was missing. I'm getting soft when I'm away from the team. Thinking about strange girls I don't need to think about, chasing them in parking lots, calling to ensure they join me on away games.

I didn't need to bring her. Shit, she gave me enough paperwork for exercises to last me a lifetime. Also, it's not like we don't have trainers in the NFL, here to attend to our every need. I don't need her here. I'm soft.

It's the healing I'm into.

Not Dylan.

No. She's quite weird, actually.

Healing and getting better is what I'm into, so I can return to what I do best.

My mother reiterated how excited she is to see my face on the TV again, even if I'm only on the sidelines. Just knowing she's looking forward to that

makes me want to do anything in my power to get back up on that screen.

As if she knows I'm thinking about her, I pick up the ringing phone on the hotel nightstand.

"Hey," I breathe into the receiver. "How are you feeling?"

I asked about her condition immediately, even though I just saw her yesterday, a few hours before I boarded my flight. The same flight that my physical therapist decided not to join me on. You better believe Greg got a call about that. I mean, seriously, who declines a private jet ride with some of the best, most legendary players from the Chicago Bears? A crazy person, clearly.

"Hey, sweetheart. I'm doing good," she responds, sounding a little winded. "H-how's Arizona?"

I sit back on one of the queen beds in my hotel room, getting comfortable as I answer, "Dry."

She laughs, and it's music to my ears.

"I bet. Especially compared to home in Florida," she comments, and my brows lower in confusion. "You always loved the warm, humid heat of back home, didn't you?"

She's confused. Dale. Dale is from Florida.

"Mom, we've never lived in Florida," I reply cautiously. "Born and raised in Indiana."

"Oh." There's a slight pause before she chuckles nervously.

There's a shuffling noise against the phone, and I hear soft voices in the background. Finally, the scratchy sound retreats.

"Hey Lake, it's Dale," my mother's partner says into the phone. "Sorry, Lydia's a little confused right now. It's the new pain medicine she's on."

"What?" I ask harshly.

“The doctor is trying to find the right dose while keeping the pain at bay, and it seems as if th—”

“I knew I shouldn’t have left.” I interrupt him. “Why are they switching her medicine up? She doesn’t even know where we lived?!”

I’m irate now, my stomach twisting into a knot.

“Lake, she’s just tired. Needs her rest,” he says calmly.

I sigh. There’s a huge part of me that wants to be here, on the road, for her, but the other part needs to be there for her. It’s hard being away, knowing her condition. Any day could be her last, and that thought pulls me into my dark place again.

“I’m right here with her. You know I’ll call you…”

I hate that sentence.

I hate that he left it open-ended, as if leaving room for the inevitable.

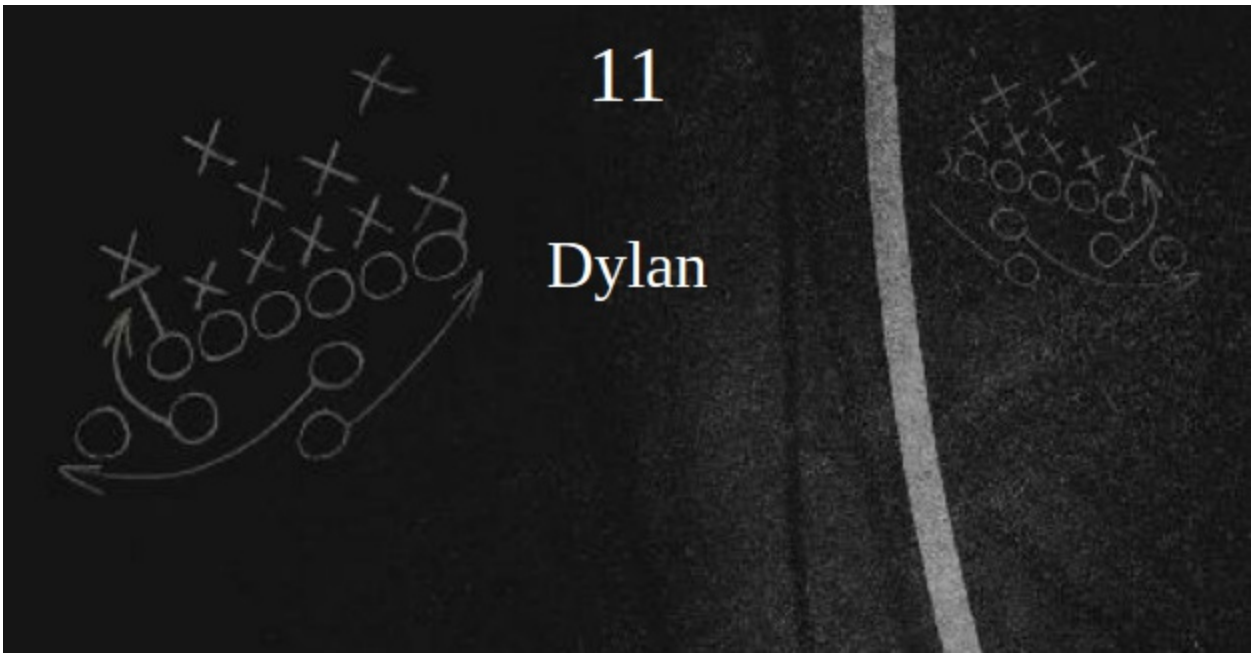
I don’t want the inevitable.

Time matters, and no matter how little I may have left with her, I need to hold it close. Speaking of time, I look at the electric clock on the nightstand near the bed and sit up straight.

“I have to go,” I rush. “Call me. Anytime. For anything.”

“You know I will,” Dale answers.

I hang up the phone, and my heart breaks.



I sit at the end of the king-sized bed with my hands in my lap. I'm almost afraid to touch anything in here. Never have I seen a room so big. So furnished. So expensive.

I know this bed beneath me has a flat sheet. Fucking Eric would be so jealous. The tool.

I'm exhausted from grabbing a connecting red-eye flight just to make it here for the start of my first therapy session. I couldn't leave my apartment until Katia finished her last shift of the weekend, causing me to miss the all too convenient private jet that would've brought me here last night. It also didn't help that I checked my bag late when I arrived at the airport because Colin had another meltdown before I left. Changes, especially in routine, they're hard for him.

Now, the late checked bag appears to be missing, and I'm sitting here in this gorgeous and enormous suite designed to hold at least three families, in my dingy black ripped jeans and old, oversized Nirvana shirt.

I suppose I could pull off the washed-up rocker look.

My hair looks like I’ve been on a bender after a night of partying with the groupies. And not only that, it appears as if my drummer and I got into a fight over some chick. This shiner I’m sportin’ from the grocery store incident is really completing this whole strung-out rockstar look.

The only thing that made it to Arizona with me is my carry-on backpack with my toiletries, exercise bands, and this stupid fold-up athletic table I’m glaring at. Thank God that made the flight, right?

I slap myself across the face to wake up, before standing and setting up the table to prepare for our morning session. About twenty minutes go by, and I finally hear a knock at the door.

It feels weird being in here like this room is mine. Especially knowing I’d never be able to afford anything like this in my lifetime. The only thing I can think about is how much Colin would love to watch his races on this monstrous flatscreen on the wall, or that he’d have already raided this mini-fridge and ample supply of candy and snacks within hand’s reach.

When I open the door to the room, I’m met with his hard eyes. If I thought the blue hue wasn’t assaulting enough, they’re even more striking when paired with a heated glare.

Even angry, he’s still hot. So much so, it’s damn near frustrating. Somehow, Arizona makes him even hotter. Arizona likes Lake because Arizona is a desert, and deserts love water. That's got to be it.

Realizing I'm lost thinking about geology, I shake my head to snap myself out of my crazed, sleep-deprived thoughts.

“Hello,” I say blandly, opening the door wider.

“Did you even look through the peephole before you opened the door?” he asks with a scowl. “I could’ve been anyone.”

His harsh tone and shit attitude are setting the day’s mood, I see.

I offer up my best fake smile, crossing my arms over my chest before moving out of the way to allow him inside.

“And yet, it's you,” I grumble.

I see him staring at my shiner. His eyes look wild, like he can't figure out if he should be shocked, sad, or angry, and it confuses me. I'm too tired to try to decipher it. He opens his mouth, and I know he's going to say something about it, but he surprises me.

“You’re wearing pants,” he states matter-of-factly, looking me up and down.

A harsh laugh leaves my chest at the random statement. “This may surprise you, but I always wear pants when I work.”

He makes a face at my snarky attitude and walks through the door, quiet as he heads towards the large living space. “Not what I meant,” he tosses over his shoulder.

“This room is ridiculous, by the way,” I comment, watching him take it in. “A single room would have sufficed…not this”—I wave my hand around —“massiveness.”

There’s a guest room in my suite. A guest room. As if I’d be needing space for a family of eight to come visit me while I’m working. The full-sized kitchen and expansive living room illuminated by the wall of windows are also unnecessary.

I can’t help but think how much a room like this costs a night, and how far the money for it could get Colin and I. Maybe I should run down to the front desk and see if I can get a refund, then get put in a normal room like a normal person.

He hobbles his large frame forward with his crutches, then stops to turn, looking at me over his shoulder. “Not grateful for nice things, I see.” He

raises his brows, making a face.

“It’s not that I’m not grateful,” I snap back, following closely behind him. “It’s just that it’s unnecessary for me. If you can’t tell, I’m a modest individual.” I wave my hand over my hair and attire.

He takes notice, using the opportunity to take me in again. I don’t miss the tightening of his jaw, and I want to know what made him do it. Disgust? Distaste?

“I know. I saw the sweats.”

I stare at him for a moment, a permanent glare set on the face belonging to the mind that’s screaming, *Be kind. Please, for the love of your brother, don’t say what you want to say.*

Fuck him. Old sweats are more comfortable. They’re nice and worn in. Perfect for work.

“Besides, it’s not for you,” he says coldly. “It’s for this.”

He points at the table I have set up in the cleared guest bedroom.

I look anywhere but at him, instantly feeling stupid. Of course it’s not for me. It’s a space for therapy.

“Alright,” I say, needing to brush away the awkwardness. “Well, let’s get started.”

Lake nods, then drops his crutch against the wall, pulling apart his tear-away pants to reveal his fitted Nike shorts with what looks like tight, black athletic shorts beneath. His muscular thighs, carved by deep cuts showcasing his quads with that light dusting of dark hair that thickens as it nears the apex, have me chewing my lip again. Fucking uncontrolled body responses.

He removes his Chicago Bears sweatshirt, revealing a tight Under Armour tank stretched across his broad chest beneath. Moving to sit on the black massage table I have set up, I see the bulging muscles of his biceps and

triceps flex as he lifts his lower half into a seated position. His knuckles grip the edge of the table, and for a moment, I imagine his hold is on me.

His eyes peer up at me, his forehead wrinkling as I quickly dart my gaze away. I'm now looking at the bare white wall. Why would I be looking there? Because I'm an idiot. I pretend to scratch an imaginary itch on the back of my neck, then clear my throat, approaching the table. I slip back into professional mode, assessing the knee with my hands and helping to reposition his brace correctly.

"So, did you at least sleep well? In your bed of massiveness?" he asks with sarcasm.

I touch along the knee, contemplating my answer. "I, uh…no. I didn't."

His brows knit together out of the corner of my eye, and I know the vague answer won't work for him.

"I just got in. Red-eye from Chicago."

"Red-eye?" he questions, tipping his head. "It's a three-hour flight?"

"It should be," I begin, softly manipulating his knee. "But when your discount flight takes you to Minneapolis for a four-hour unexpected layover, well, it turns into an all-night event."

He says nothing, and I'm totally okay with that. I'd rather not hear his opinions at the moment. I busted my ass to be here, and now he knows that.

"It's looking better." I'm still looking down, too nervous to look up.

I can feel his eyes on my face and it's a little unsettling, being that we're so close. Why can't he understand normal social cues? You don't stare at people when they're standing directly above you. It's considered quite rude.

"I have the exercise bands in my bag that we can get started on, but the other equipment is currently MIA at the moment." I back away from the table and grab my bag in the corner.

“Why? Where is it?”

“If I knew, I’d tell you.” I retort, sounding snarky again.

I grab the exercise bands and turn to face him. From this distance, I feel I can.

“Did they lose your bags?” he asks, connecting the dots.

His tone is one of legitimate concern, and it feels foreign to me. I hate that anyone’s legitimate concern for my well-being feels foreign, because it just solidifies how alone I truly am.

“It’ll be fine. I’ve already contacted the airline. It will be handled.” I walk towards him with the bands in hand, leaning against the edge of the table directly next to him. “They are tracing it, so I promise I’ll at least be dressed more appropriately at our next session. I apologize for the lack of professionalism.”

“No.” He swings his legs around so they are open and hanging off the side. His good knee brushes along my thigh, and I hate that I’m extremely aware of the simple contact. “Don't...apologize. I just…I-I feel awful.” He shakes his head, looking down until his cobalt blue eyes with those thick, black lashes blink up to meet mine again.

I suck in a deep breath, inadvertently inhaling his scent before slowly releasing it. *Fuck, he smells good.* Like smokey oak, if oaks can be smoked. He smells like a sexy forest fire, but I need the Lake to put it out.

“Why didn't you fly in with the team? This never would've happened. Greg never gave me a reason as to why you missed the flight.”

I look down at my hands, my mouth opening to say something, but words don’t come out. I can't explain the complexities of my guardianship over Colin, nor do I want to. I don't want him to judge my circumstances, nor do I want my circumstances to take away from this job. We need this money.

I look away from him. “I just needed to tie up a few things before I left town.”

He's silent at my statement, so I find his gaze again. It's so direct. His eye contact. Almost too direct. He swallows and nods lightly, as if understanding something. I watch his throat bob as his stare bores into me. His closeness and the lack of sound in this private space make the massiveness of the room seem stuffy and microscopic.

Those eyes assess my face again, a curiosity in his expression paired with a magnetism I’ve never felt before. I have no idea what he's thinking as he lifts his chin, his lips slowly parting.

No clue what's going through that head of his as he grabs the bands from my hand, slowly taking them from me without breaking eye contact, before dropping them to the floor.

No concept of anything anymore as his rough palms slide up my arms, gently gripping the backs and pulling me into the open space between his legs.

She seems nervous in my presence, which is new.

It's almost as if she can't breathe. Like she's holding her breath, in fear of becoming intoxicated by whatever this thing is that’s pulling us inward.

I know the feeling.

My response may be different from hers, though. Mine has something to do with the fact that this little spitfire has me curiously needing more. She's intelligent, clearly passionate, and completely dedicated to her job. I mean, shit, she flew all night just to make our morning therapy session? I honestly feel bad. But I’m selfish, and needed her here.

Her attitude and quick-witted responses are piquing my interest, and I'm finding that my time with her, as difficult as the therapy part is physically and mentally, is something I truly look forward to.

And not to mention, she's quite beautiful, even if she works so hard to hide it. She's got a tight little body with eyes that smolder through you. A vixen, hiding beneath the excessive clothing and casually thrown-up hair.

Now she stands before me, her chest rising and falling faster than before, but she's still refusing to look me in the eye.

I understand it.

I get it.

I barely know her, and she barely knows me.

And yet, I have her so close, standing between my legs in this seemingly intimate pose, our body heat blending together in this suddenly tiny, tight room. Her feminine scent floods my senses, all while her truths destroy her internally.

I can't help but feel a strange sense of protectiveness over the general attraction that's drowning me.

I've seen strong women deny their pain. I've seen them accept what's done to them in order to keep the peace. I know this scenario better than I wish I did, growing up in a home where the woman who loved me unconditionally did what she had to do until she could fight on her own. But the abuse stops here.

“You know you're safe here, right?” I whisper, my arms sliding up behind her elbows until they're cupping the backs of her arms.

I bring her in a little closer. As much as this is about me trying to open up a safe space for her to talk, I can't help but enjoy the feeling of her soft skin against my hands. *I shouldn't be doing this. Especially not if she's vulnerable.*

Her eyes narrow and she peers down at my chest. I see the wheels turning in her head as she works up a response. Maybe she's coming up with her reasons for staying. Maybe she wants to explain to me it's really not all that bad. It was a mistake. An accident. These things normally don’t happen. It’s just that work’s been stressful for him. He just had a bad night.

“You don't have to go back to that,” I continue.

Those amber eyes finally find mine, and the look in her eyes is not what I'd expected. She looks appalled.

She's still in denial.

“I'm not stupid, Dylan. I get it.” I slide my hands back down her arms, noting the rise of goosebumps on her cold skin. Her skin is cold.

She’s cold and I need to warm her.

No, Lake. No.

My hands slide further and find hers. They’re cold, too. I hold them in mine, giving a light, reassuring squeeze.

She still hasn’t said anything, so I continue, “I just don't want you to feel alone.”

Her appalled look melts into a humorous one. She chuckles, then pauses to swallow before laughing again. My brow cocks in confusion.

Taking a breath, she squeezes my hands in hers, almost comforting me like I was comforting her. Her eyes study me with what I can only describe as appreciation or empathy. Her tongue sweeps across her lips, wetting them with a glossy sheen, and I can't look away.

I want to know how she tastes.

“Lake,” she whispers, and my name rolls off her tongue like nothing I've heard before.

My lips twitch, and this strange sensation comes over me. I lean into her more, my hand reaching up to cup her face. My thumb trails over the yellowed bruise along her cheekbone, my eyes reaching hers, not sure if I want her to continue talking or if I should do what I want to make her stop. *I want to kiss her.*

Seconds feel short when she's looking at me like this. This girl. She's such a mystery to me, and yet, I feel like we're somehow entirely in tune. Her gaze

drops to my mouth before her eyelashes flutter abruptly, and I know she just thought about how it'd feel to kiss me. She wondered how I'd taste against her lips. I saw it.

But then she leans back. She's smiling now. Why is she smiling?

"Lake," she says again, but this time it's different. Almost sympathetic. "You've got the wrong—"

A hard knock on the door makes both of us jump. It's as if Dylan wakes up from whatever trance she is in. She backs away from me, far across the room, almost comically so. It's as if she were nearly caught doing something she shouldn't be.

"Yo, Wheels!" I hear Candy's voice from the other side of the door. "Bro, let me in!"

Dylan looks at the door, then peers nervously at me. Obviously I can't rush to the door, so she walks towards the incessant pounding.

"I swear, Decker, if you're in here getting your dick sucked by that stale therapist you've been telling me about, I'ma—"

Dylan opens the door, interrupting the sentence we all just heard.

I place my elbow on my good knee, dropping my face into the palm of my hand. *I can't watch.*

"Oh…" I hear him say, and I can only imagine the look on Dylan's face. "I-I didn't think you were h-here...I can...I can just—"

"Kane, get your ass in here, you dipshit," I command from the other room.

I peer up through my fingers as Kane walks in past her. He spots me, nods, then turns back, unabashedly looking Dylan up and down while she glares back at him. He licks his lips, tipping his head to the side and palming his chin, stroking his goatee. *I can't stand him.*

"It's nice to meet you…" he stalls, holding his other hand out for her.

“Dylan,” she responds, offering hers in return.

He takes her hand, bringing it up to his lips.

“Miss Dylan, the pleasure is all mine,” he oozes. “I'm Kane, but they call me Candy, because for some funny reason, everyone says I taste sweet.”

“Everyone?” Her eyes narrow before she makes a pained face. “Eesh…”

I stifle my laugh.

“Well, no...not everyone. But...I mean, some do, I-I guess…” Candy's face wrinkles in frustration. “I'm really not like *that*.”

Dylan's face eases into an easy smile, and she raises her brows at him. “Uh-huh.”

Kane looks over at me as if there's any chance I'll help him out of his own mess, but I just lift my hands and shake my head.

“C'mon,” he says, shrugging, suddenly feeling a strange need for her approval.

I get it, Candy; I do.

“You know how it is. The lights, the fame, the game.”

Her smile widens, and the sarcastic sass is oozing out of her at an adorable rate.

“Yep.”

He stares at her, frown lines making their divots, knowing she's fucking with him.

“Lake, tell this young woman I'm a stand-up man and not the manwhore she so incorrectly assumes.”

Dylan tips her head at him, and he reciprocates as they continue their playful tease.

I push off the table, grabbing my crutch from the wall, and hobble over to join them near the living room.

“This man has never had sex. Not even once,” I say, my expression entirely neutral at this catastrophic lie.

Candy's eyes grow wide. “He's kidding. I totally know what I'm doing.”

“So I've heard.” Dylan gives him a quick nod. “Now if you wouldn't mind, Kane, Lake needs to get back to his session. So, keep it quick.”

With that, she turns and heads towards the bathroom, giving us some time to talk.

Candy shakes his head. “Ooooh, Lakey. She's a pistol, huh?”

I blow air through my lips. I have no idea how to describe this chick anymore. “Something like that.”

“I was gonna head downstairs for some breakfast, see if you wanted to come, but I see you're busy,” he says.

“Yeah, I'm good. Gonna finish up here. I'll see ya at the meeting later.”

“Alright man,” he says, shaking up. “Nice room you got here, you lucky shit. Mine only has an ensuite, but you got like a whole ass apartment in here.” He peers down the hallway, taking in the living space.

“Actually, I'm a floor down,” I say cautiously, knowing he'll catch on immediately.

His eyes narrow as he takes a step inward, lowering his voice. “You mean...you're in a regular room?”

Dylan walks out of the bathroom, unintentionally looking our way, and our hushed conversation stalls as we silently gaze back. She clears her throat and apologizes, walking into the guest suite where the athletic table is set up.

Candy's wide eyes follow her and then snap back to mine as he connects the dots. “You gave her your room?!” he whisper-shouts.

“Shh!” I hush him, looking back to make sure she's out of sight. “It's for therapy purposes. Chill out.”

“Mhmm…” He backs away with a smirk on his face. “Never seen you so *kind*.”

He's really delicate with that word.

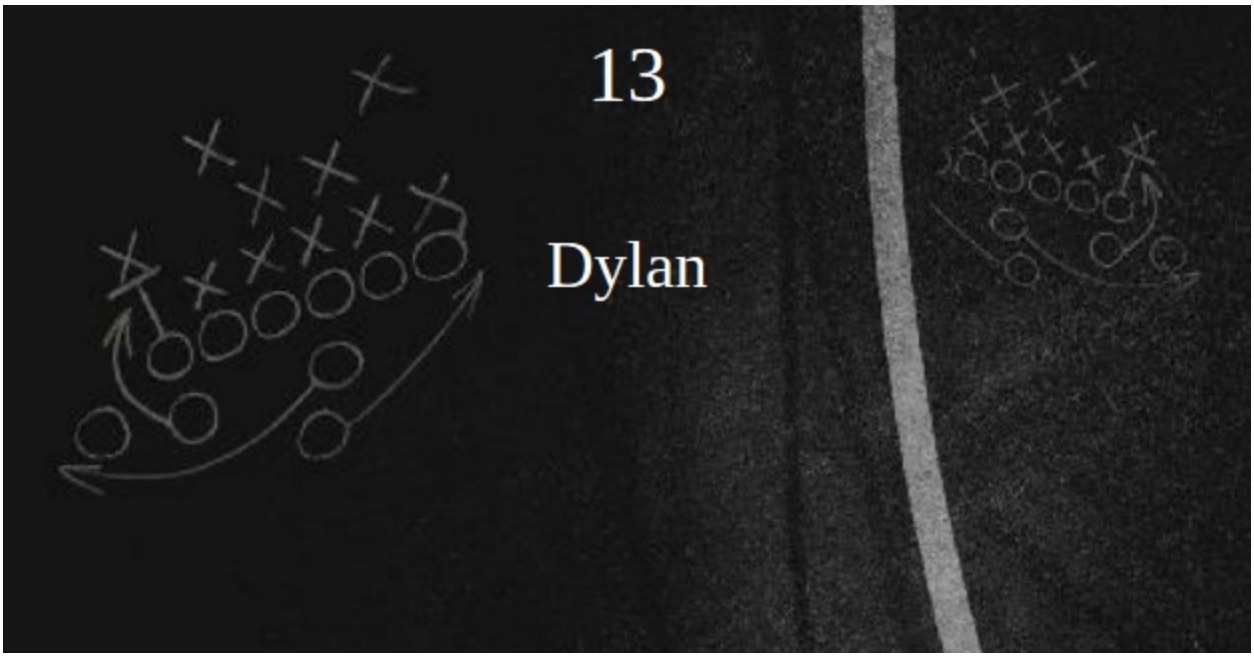
I roll my eyes, running my hand along the back of my neck. *I'm kind. I'm kind to everyone. This is no special occasion.*

He grabs the door handle, giving me a dismissive nod. “See you in a few hours.”

After Candy leaves, the weight of the room returns. I hobble back into the guest room as Dylan is laying out the bands in different corners, attempting to create some sort of makeshift gym with the four items that came along with her.

We don't bring up the elephants in the room, as many as there are. She doesn't bring up the fact that I've clearly talked about her to Kane or that she now knows I've given her my room, and I definitely don't bring up the intimate moment we shared on the table where she almost admitted all of her secrets to me.

We work in peace, both happy to push forward toward our own goals without addressing the uncomfortable, as impossible as that's becoming.



“He's totally fine, Dyl,” Katia attempts to comfort me. “Really, we're having fun. He just showed me his car collection, and I now know more facts about the history of Ford and Ferrari than I'll need to in this lifetime.”

I smile and chuckle into the receiver, missing him more than ever.

“Truly, we're having fun. I just put the frozen lasagna you made in the oven, and we're about to watch reruns of The Midwest Car Show on TV.”

“Pickle! Hi Pickle!” I hear Colin's voice in the background and my heart melts.

“Here, he wants to talk to you,” Katia says.

“Pickle!”

It’s ridiculous, really. It’s not been a full day since seeing him and I’m already feeling sad at the sound of his voice.

“Hey, Col!” I reply, holding back my emotions.

“Pickle, Kat didn't know that Carroll Shelby was only given months to whip the GT40 into fighting shape,” he says.

“She didn't?” I scoff. “I thought everyone knew that.”

“Nope! Nope!” he continues. “I'm having fun. Fun teaching her about the cars. Fun.”

God, I miss him.

“Well, good. I love you, Col. I'll be back soon,” I say, reassuring him. “You can call me anytime you want. You know that, right?”

I hear a knock at the door and check the clock near the nightstand. No one should be here yet. The boys are all at a team meeting. After the awkward silence of the training session I held with Lake, where we both declined to address the uncomfortable air around us, he told me they had a meeting before the team planned to reconvene later for dinner. Who could be here?

“I'll call. I'll call, so Pickle feels good,” Colin says, even though I know he hates communicating over the phone.

So Pickle feels good. My heart warms. I’m so happy he’s so comfortable with Katia. She’s been a lifesaver for me.

“Alright, talk soon buddy.”

After talking with Katia for a few more minutes, I hang up and make my way to the door. Remembering Lake's words from earlier, I check the peephole and see no one.

What the fuck?

I open the door, looking down the hall before a pile of boxes on the floor grabs my attention. Bringing them back into the room, I pull the note from the top.

> *You opened the door, seeing no one in the peephole. Not safe!*
> *For team dinner tonight. Be ready by 6, Chief.*

-Lake

I can't control the big stupid grin that creeps across my face. It's not even about the gifts I've unwrapped. The Nike sweatsuits in my size, the Calvin Klein underwear and bra sets, or even the two new pairs of Nike training kicks that weren't even necessary. It's not even the expensive salon-brand shampoo and conditioner set or the hairbrush and other toiletries he thought to include.

It's the note.

It's his strange, yet endearing, need to take care of me.

He knew my bags weren't here yet, so he sent someone to get me clothes and other essentials. I'm normally the type to be too proud to take gifts from people. Too proud to allow anyone to do nice things for me, especially knowing that he thinks he's being my knight in shining armor, saving me from some sort of abusive relationship. Yeah, we've yet to clear that up. But this shit here is nice as hell.

I squeal and do a little dance on the king-sized bed before face-planting on the massive plush mattress. I roll over and look up at the ceiling, holding the note up and reading it again.

I trace my finger over his handwriting, thinking of those large, powerful hands that wrote this. The hands that ran up the backs of my arms, making me imagine things I shouldn't. Like them holding my wrists above my head as those stupid, pink lips found my neck. His whole, huge, masculine heat was pulling me into him on that table, and for a moment, I fought the urge to jump onto his lap and kiss him hard. So hard he'd forget his name and need to look at the back of his jersey just to remember.

But thankfully, we were interrupted just as I'd found the strength to stop whatever mistake was about to happen. Any more of those eyes on me and I'd have torched whatever clothing I had on that hadn't already gone ablaze in his presence.

I need to keep my head on straight so they take me seriously in this field. In the big leagues of the NFL, I have a chance at a promising career…if I can keep my kitty in my pants.

Wait. Team dinner?

I sit up straight.

Staff members don't usually even go to these things.

Do they?

I'm not even technically a staff member. I'm basically a glorified, externally sourced personal assistant to the injured leg of the legend in the making.

I check the clock again, then fall back onto the bed. Seeing that I have enough time for a quick nap and a shower, I stretch out, then curl up under that massive down comforter, falling asleep with a funny feeling in my stomach.

One that's a bit terrifying, if I'm being honest with myself.

A feeling that suggests I might do something that's against the rules.

Something totally off-brand for me.

I think I have a crush on that stupid boy.

She's just a girl. A girl I'm helping during a rough period in her life. I'm being nice. I do nice things for people. I don't care what Candy fucking says. He's reading too far into it. I'm nice.

I donate to charities. Use my status to host events, raise money for fundraisers, and all that. I'm even volunteering my precious time at an event next weekend. I just signed on to help judge the Special Olympics, conveniently being hosted in Chicago this year. See? Nice.

Now that I'm riding the sidelines for a while, Coach thought it best I stay in the limelight with some positive moves. Showcasing my love for the community that I've become the face of.

Maybe I'm being too obvious in my physical attraction to my therapist? I should dial it back. I don't want Candy or anyone else thinking I'm soft or unfocused. Especially not now. Not while I'm literally so fucking weak.

I have an actual goal to reach, and nothing will get in the way of that. Especially not some girl who's clearly got her own ghosts back home. Nope. Never.

I'm ten minutes early.

I stand there in the hotel hallway, balancing on my crutch, contemplating if I should just wait a few more minutes or knock.

The door opens, taking away the decision for me.

“Hey,” she says somewhat breathlessly, peeking through the crack of the door.

The first thing I notice is the bruise is gone. Makeup looks amazing on her, but it's also covering those little freckles on her nose I've been counting.

Her radiant smile shines through me, threatening to melt my shield, before she straightens her face and bites the corner of her lip. She tucks her long, sandy hair behind her ear, as if not wanting me to know just how excited seeing me made her.

She looks eager to see me. Delighted. As if she's been waiting for me. Staring out through that peephole like I taught her, anxiously awaiting her Prince Charming.

Has she been doodling our names together in her sports notebook?

It's cute, but with Candy's comments in the back of my mind, it's making me itch with discomfort.

She shouldn't be into me. I mean, I get why she would be, but I don't want her to get the wrong idea about us. Yes, I enjoy her company, and I'm here to help with whatever she needs while she's working for me, but stage four clingers are everywhere, and I'm not interested in anything beyond a physical interaction. I don't have the time or energy to waste on emotions. Especially not with the therapist I'll be around more often than not.

Mixing business with pleasure has burnt me in the past, and my future is no exception.

“Thanks,” she whispers nervously, stepping out from behind the door. “My

bags are still misplaced, so I really appreciate the clothes. The airline appears to have really lost them."

I will not look at her.

I refuse to look at her.

That would make her assume more things. Women naturally fall for the men who save them from their disparities. If she's looking for a knight in shining armor, she won't find it here.

Fuck, I can't control my eyes. They trace her from head to toe in the new Nike fit she's chosen to wear tonight, drinking her in like a man past the point of dehydration.

The outfit of choice fits her tight little frame like a glove, just like I imagined it would when I ordered it and had my agent pick it up. Showcasing that curve of her hips that begs to be gripped. The zipper suctions her waist in, yet looks like it's about ready to burst open at the top where her cleavage is pushing out, begging to be freed. Her hair is down and straightened, looking smooth and slick, and the chocolate hues of the fit really bring out the gold in her eyes.

Christ, she's in sportswear, Lake. Chill your dick.

"Don't feel special. I'd do it for anyone," I blurt out, sounding colder than I intended.

Her eyes narrow as a light chuckle leaves her nose. She stares at me for a moment, almost trying to see through me. "Right."

Like a light switch, her happy, nervous energy shifts.

"I'll walk you down," I say, hobbling towards the elevator.

She's totally silent for the entire ride. My eyes peer over to her position on the far end of the elevator, but hers remain locked on the steel door in front of her.

I contemplate starting a conversation so I don’t come across like the cold dick I just appeared to be, but I have no idea how to do this. I don't know how to talk to her because I know nothing about her. I could talk about the weather? That's acceptable small talk, right?

“D-do you like...dry air?”

Fucking idiot.

Her head turns towards me, a scowl in place, brow cocked.

“Arizona air isn't like Chicago...air,” I swallow.

Loser. Moron. Dumbass.

I run my hand over my head then down my neck, watching the numbers drop on the elevator at a snail's pace.

She turns her body to face me as her arms cross over her chest. The move pushes her breasts together, and from my height, I can see down her shirt, visualizing the edges of the Calvin Klein bra she's wearing. I know exactly what's under that sweatsuit, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't dying to see how it fits.

“It's a bit *stale* for my liking,” she retorts, tipping her chin up and staring directly at me.

My eyes widen. *Yeah. I'm dying here.*

I clear my throat. “You know, I didn't—”

“Ah, would ya look at that,” she interrupts with a certain tone that I can't quite place, watching as the elevator doors open. “Finally made it.”

Her comment, dry as ever, makes it seem as if the ride was just as uncomfortable as I unintentionally made it. This is not the thankful praise I was expecting.

We walk to the dining hall, packed with players and coaches of all positions mingling around the circular tables set up for our dinner and presentation.

As much as I don't need her to be up my ass all night, I feel obligated to at least show her where to sit. Turning to face her to give her the run-down, I twist around to see no one behind me. I spin in the other direction, thinking she's on my other side, but no, she's gone.

The fuck?

“Decker!” Coach approaches me, slapping the side of my arm. “How are ya, son? Didn't get a chance to catch up after the meeting.”

We talk for a few minutes and I fill him in on my progress, all while my eager eyes continue to peer around him, searching the space for Dylan. He gets pulled away into another conversation right as I finally spot her sandy hair through a few players on the other side of the large room.

She's talking animatedly with some tall guy wearing dress pants and a button-up shirt. Everyone is in casual sportswear. *Who the fuck does this guy think he is?* He's not even on the team. I squint my eyes, trying to see who it is, but I don't recognize him.

I get pulled into conversation with some of my teammates, and before I know it, Coach is at the mic asking everyone to take their seats.

I sit by the offensive players, my man Candy to my right. Brandt, another wide receiver, approaches our table, making eyes with the chair to my left, but before he can take a seat, I prop my bum leg up on it.

“Sorry man, need to keep it elevated.” I give him a fake smile.

As everyone gets seated, I see Dylan taking a chair next to the man she was talking to. Not the chair next to me I’ve clearly saved for her. My eyes narrow as the guy, who I assume is on the training staff or possibly an agent, starts introducing her to some of the guys from our defensive line. I watch from afar as she stands, bending over the circular table, popping her tight ass out as she goes around, shaking their hands.

“Not looking so stale tonight, eh, Wheels?” Candy's annoying voice assaults my ear.

I scoff, then turn my gaze back to Dylan.

“Oh, so you're Gregor Dixon? The big black bull who sacks men like dominos?” Candy narrates the conversation Dylan's having with Dixon from afar.

“I sure am, sweetheart,” he continues in a deep, masculine tone as Dixon's mouth moves. “I have a stress fracture in my lower leg. You might need to take a look at it later.”

“Oh, no! A stress fracture?!” he says in a high-pitched, dramatic tone.

“Yeah,” the masculine tone is back. “Maybe you can swing by my room later? Show me how to fix this big bone, baby.”

“I'd do *anything* to make it better,” he oozes in a breathy, feminine moan. *“Anything.”*

“Better yet, I'll stop by your oversized suite tonight.” Deep voice returns. “Get that Icy-Hot nice and slick and be ready for my oversized—”

I smack him in the chest, bringing this gross role-playing scene to an abrupt end, then eye the table, making sure no one sitting near us heard him.

Candy tosses his head back in laughter, throwing an elbow into my side as my eyes find her again. She laughs at something one guy says, tucking her hair behind her ear again as she continues talking with a certain twinkle in her eye.

The table is enraptured by her. You'd think these guys had never met a woman in the business before. They're all over her. It's quite disgusting, actually. Unprofessional. These men are acting like animals.

Our defensive coach hops on the microphone and gains everyone's attention as he starts the brief presentation before dinner. My eyes dart to her as he

goes on about the most improved defensive player from our previous game.

She hasn't even looked for me.

The roasted chicken is dry and the steamed vegetables have never seen salt. The water doesn’t even taste right. I push the food around while Candy and Brandt’s annoying laughter rings through my ears as they chat about something that happened at practice last week. Everything is getting to me.

“I get the whole 'injury makes me a sad boy' stint, but this pouty shit is looking pretty pathetic on ya, Deck,” Brandt says, gaining my attention.

I sit back in my seat, crossing my arms over my chest, scowling at him across the table. I've had enough of this. She's been mingling with everyone and hasn't said a word to me since I brought her down here. It's just rude.

Getting up from my chair, I swing my crutch under my arm and head over to her table. A couple of defensive men look up and acknowledge my presence with a quick hello as I place my hand possessively on the back of her chair. She flips her hair back, and it brushes softly against my knuckles before she turns to face what the guys are now looking at.

My hard eyes glare down at her.

“You ready?”

She cocks her head to the side, questioning my presence.

“Ah, so there's the guy taking away this treasure of a woman from the rest of us,” Suit-man says.

He sits back in his seat, crossing one leg casually over the other as he smiles up at me.

“Excuse me?” I ask harshly. “What did you just say?”

Dylan glares at me, almost scolding me with her eyes.

“Yeah, this one here is something else,” Dixon says, pointing at her with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“You think I'm joking about that yoga, Gregor, but it'll change your whole game, I swear,” Dylan replies, smiling.

Why's she so fucking smiley?

“I'll walk you back up,” I say, interrupting the conversation.

Suit-man's brows furrow as he looks from me to Dylan and back.

“Aw, c'mon Deck,” Jakwon, our defensive lineman, interjects. “Dylan is hilarious and knows her shit. Why you been hiding this chick from us?”

“If you think buttering me up with compliments is going to make me forget you were once a Green Bay Packer, you're sadly mistaken, Jakwon. That's the kind of information I won't soon forget,” Dylan retorts, making the table erupt with laughter.

“Tell him, Dyl!” Dixon shouts, punching Jakwon in the shoulder.

Dyl? Oh fuck no. They are getting too comfortable.

“Honestly, Lake, you wouldn't mind if I steal her for a couple sessions next week, would you?” Dixon continues. “Dylan was explaining a few exercises that really might help my sciatica—”

“No,” I state firmly, interrupting whatever he was trying to pitch.

Her head snaps back to face me.

“I've hired her on exclusively until she does what she needs to do to get me back on the field. She provides therapy for me alone. After that, anyone can have her.”

Her mouth twitches, and those amber eyes drill holes into me with their angry heat.

Yeah, that kinda came out wrong, didn't it?

“Well Dylan, I'll be calling you as soon as that day comes,” Jakwon tells her with an easy smile. “Honestly, it’s been a pleasure. Can't wait to work together soon.”

No. No. And fuck no.

She smiles and finishes with sentiments before getting up from the table and standing alongside me. I hold my hand out, guiding the way. Her eyes fall to my hand, then return to my gaze. I almost chuckle at the fact that the enraged look she's giving me is usually one I only get the pleasure of seeing from defenders actively trying to destroy me on the field, not sweet little ladies whose job is to heal.

Just as we stride out of the dinner together, she hustles past me as I try to keep up, easily walking three steps in front of me and my crutch-ridden body until she reaches the elevators.

Lucky for me, the elevator door doesn't open until I get there. She huffs in frustration when I reach her, but whatever. Not my problem.

We both walk in, and she pushes the button for my floor first with a punch before pushing the one for hers. Silence is eating me alive in this small space while anger radiates off of her like a building volcano, ready to erupt.

She leans against the furthest corner of the small square with her arms over her chest, watching the doors as they open. I stay put, not getting off on my floor.

"What are you doing?" she asks with a bite to her tone, dropping her hands and turning to face me.

"I'm walking you to your door," I explain calmly.

"I don't need you to walk me to the door, Lake." She says my name like it disgusts her.

"Well, I'm going to." I snap back.

The doors open to her floor and she marches out, walking the ten feet to her door. She's flustered as her hands shuffle through items in her bag. Finally finding her room key, she throws the bag onto the floor between our feet.

“You know what? No.” She laughs to herself. “I don’t *need* anything from you.”

I watch in confusion as she aggressively unzips her top, pulling the jacket open and exposing her bra and stomach to me.

“I don't want to give you the wrong impression.” She continues pulling the sleeves down her bare arms. “I don't *need* you or your kindness, Lake. You're no hero to me.”

She removes the jacket and throws it at me. I catch it with one hand, pulling the material down my face just in time to see her taking her pants off.

Oh shit.

“Dylan, stop.”

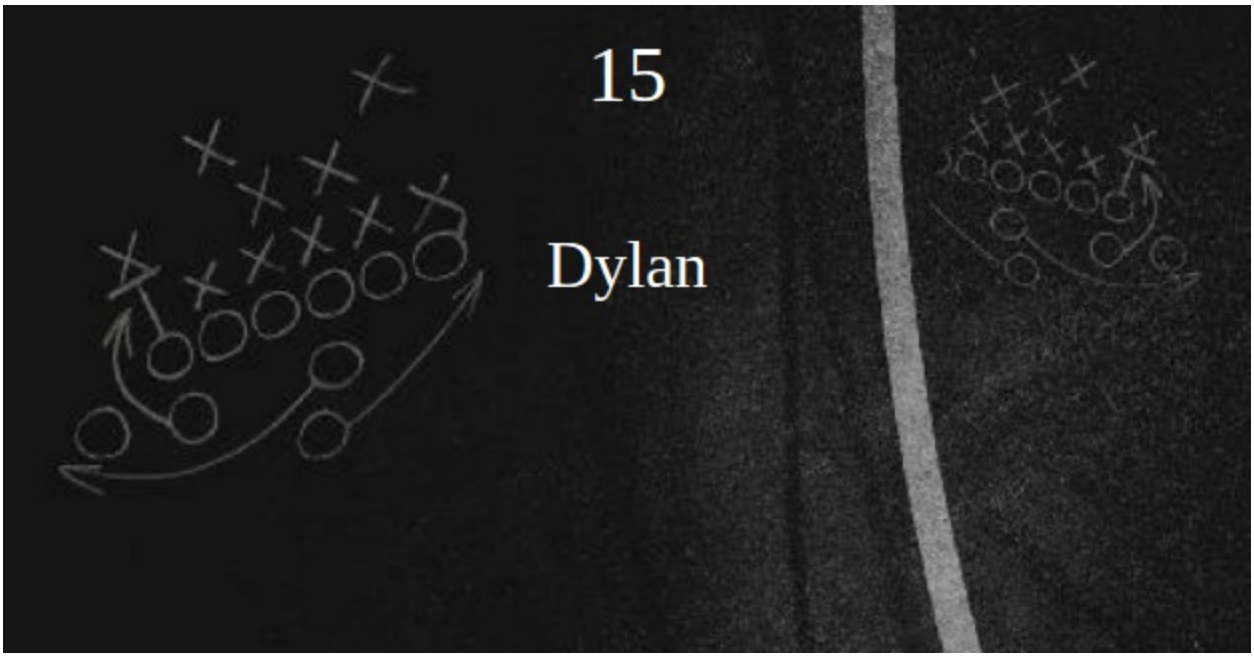
It’s too late. My jaw hits the floor as she stands before me in nothing but a white Calvin Klein bra and thong set. This isn’t the time to be ogling the goodies, but Jesus Christ, that stomach. Those breasts. Those fucking thighs. I'm suddenly starved, my mouth salivating at this saucy little vixen who's unleashing this heated rage while undressing before me in the hallway of this hotel.

Pants hit my face next, blocking the rest of my vision as she slips into the room, the door slamming behind her.

I stand there in total shock, staring at the door with a Nike jacket hanging over my shoulder and the pants hooked on my crutch.

My mouth is still open as the door cracks open, and I get hit in the face with the bra and thong.

And the last thing I see before the door slams shut for the night is her hand flipping me the bird.



Remember that five-minute crush I had on Lake Decker?

Yeah, that shit's dead and gone.

As soon as I opened that door to greet him, I caught a whiff of his whole standoffish energy. It surprised me, the sudden change in attitude. In the note, he seemed so sweet and playful, calling me Chief and scolding me about the peephole. But once that door swung open, he shelled up.

He wouldn't even look me in the eyes. As if looking at my face would make me finally realize he was the soulmate I had been searching for my entire 26 years of life. Fuck all that.

One thing he has yet to learn is I'm not the one. I don't play these stupid games, and I definitely don't fall for cocky jocks who expect it. My life is chaotic enough. Tossing in a complicated game of cat and mouse with the ultimate predator is not in my playbook.

I'm too much of an adult for that. I've had to grow up in a handful of years, dealing with real responsibilities and finishing school on my own. I'm a

board-certified PT with a goddamn master’s degree. You won't find me sitting here, twiddling my fingers and hoping Lake Decker likes me.

I had mistaken his kindness for more, yes it's true. But when he was touching me on that table, his firm hands sliding up my arms, creating warm waves of desire in their wake, looking me deep in my eyes with his gorgeous blues, the words of endearment leaving his lips...well, it felt different.

The concern, the need to understand me, the protectiveness, the care and attention to detail when it came to ordering the clothes, the undergarments, the shoes…

Shit! The shoes!

I sit back against the door in nothing but the white cashmere robe the hotel has so kindly provided, wishing I could run back out there and snatch those Nike trainers back up. They were so pretty and would've lasted far longer than any fling with that punk.

It was my mistake to have thought for even a second he could be a genuine person. The thing about people with money that you need to remember is that buying gifts is nothing for them. No skin off his back to have a couple of dollars thrown to a girl in the dumps. Lake said, *Don't feel special. I'd do it for anyone.*

And stale?! He called me stale. Stale? What does that even mean?!

The minute we walked into the dining hall, I almost collapsed with relief just to see Dr. Shelby standing at a nearby table.

Dr. Clark Shelby was the new director of sports medicine for the Chicago Bears. He also just so happened to be one of my professors in college. Apparently, he'd just accepted the job after Carey Mackenzie retired, leaving him in charge of all the trainers and therapists.

It thrilled me to see a familiar face I could embrace, leaving Lake searching

for his little lost pet. Yeah, I saw him looking from across the room. Eyes endlessly scouring the place for me as I hid out with the players from the defensive team. Guess he expected me to be up his ass.

What really got me was his disgusting display of territorial alpha male when he approached the table. As if he was laying some kind of claim to the woman he couldn't even look in the eyes.

But the thing that truly sealed the *fuck this dude* deal was the rude comment he made as I sat right there, directly in front of him. *After that, anyone can have her.*

What a shitty night, courtesy of a shitty guy. The only good thing that came from it was that I'd at least been able to market myself for a bit and make some new connections. Dr. Shelby had promised to introduce me to the entire therapy staff at the next practice, and I was eager to get my foot in that door.

But now, I sit here naked on the floor of this massive room after stripping myself in the hallway, with nothing but a robe around me and my cellphone in hand.

I half expected him to knock and perhaps apologize for his actions and statements after picking his jaw up off the floor. Yeah, the thong to the face was a tad extreme, even for me. But I'm forgetting he isn't the type to apologize. I'm mistaking him for a decent man.

I check the time on my phone, getting the itch to call Colin and get some much needed normalcy back into my life, but I realize with the time difference, he's probably asleep. Instead, I lay back on the bed, reading my smutty romance novel that was in my carry-on bag. Probably the most important object that made the trip, if I'm honest.

After about an hour of enjoying the fantasy of what a real man should be, my phone vibrates next to me. I set the book down, knee-deep in a spicy

scene, to see a message from an unknown number.

Just please keep the clothes, Dylan.

Ew. Hell no. How did he get my number?! Fucking Greg. It had to have been Greg.

I contemplate a few things.

I write a message back that says a simple *F U*, but then decide to erase it because, professionalism.

I write out another response along the lines of *I don't need you or anyone else to save me, dirtbag*, but erase that, too.

I sit there, glaring at those six little words, realizing there isn't one nice thing I can say back to him. Maybe that's for the best. He doesn't deserve my response. Silence. I'll give him silence.

I get up and make my way to the bathroom to wash off the rest of this makeup before bed when my phone vibrates again.

You're a liar…

I stare at the message in disbelief. Does this man have a death wish? Like honestly, is this some strange form of assisted suicide? Because I'm this close to ending him and his legendary career.

The phone vibrates again.

You said you always wear pants when you work.

As I'm reading, there's a knock at my door.

I throw my hair into a quick ponytail and tighten the robe around my waist. Looking through the peephole as the asshole suggested, I see none other than Lake Decker waiting for me with an arm bracing him on the doorframe, the clothes and shoes under his other arm, awkwardly holding the crutch.

I sigh, dropping my forehead against the door. “What do you want, Lake?”

“Therapy,” he responds from the other side. “Open up.”

Is he fucking serious right now? This is just another display of control over the situation. Guess because he gave me the room, he feels he can stop by anytime for therapy and use me at his will, even if it's after 10 o'clock.

Opening the door, I suck in a breath. He stands there, hovering over me with his freshly washed hair and godlike masculine frame. He smells so good again, and I mentally curse my stupid olfactory neurons.

I watch his eyes quickly scan my attire, dragging along the white cloth, making me feel as if he can see through it with his burning gaze. Crossing my arms and curling into myself, I glower when his eyes finally reach mine.

“Your clothes.” He holds out the stack of folded clothes with the shoes on top.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. “Do you not understand dramatic exits? The middle finger was my nice way of saying goodnight.”

He smirks, looking down the hallway as he licks his lips. “I'd hate to see the mean way.”

I scoff. “Cute.”

“I can be.” His smirk deepens and his tone lowers as he continues, “I've got something I need you to try on me.”

My eyes widen, replaying the words that sounded so sexual. *I'm still caught up in that novel.* I’m just frozen in time, waiting for him to continue.

He raises his brows, nodding at the inside of my room as if asking to come in. As much as I need to slam this door in his face, I take the stack of clothes and shoes from him and let him inside, placing the items on the bed in the master suite before I rejoin him back by the door.

He grabs a large duffle-like bag from the floor behind him and throws it over his shoulder as he enters with his crutch.

“I didn't know I signed up for round-the-clock care,” I murmur sarcastically as he shuts the door behind him.

He pauses, staring down at me with a confident smirk. “You signed on for whatever it takes to get me back, Dylan. Day, night, whatever works with my schedule. Whenever I need you.”

Arrogant prick.

“Do you know how important sleep is for healing?” I ask with a bite. “Maybe you should give that a go.”

He sighs, a smile easing across his handsome stubble. “Couldn't sleep. Some lady got naked in the hallway and caused a big scene, so here we are.”

I roll my eyes, not even trying to hide my distaste for his quick-witted mouth. He snickers, sounding very reminiscent of every villain ever, and I’m itching with irritation. Yep, he's back where he wants to be, beneath my skin.

We head to the guest suite, where the table is still up. He sets the large bag on it next to him.

“Alright, so I got this from Carey, our old PT.” He unzips the bag and I recognize it immediately. “He said post-op—”

“The NMES!” I shriek. “I've been telling Greg to order this for me!” I quickly slap the top of his hand away as I admire the machine.

A breath of a laugh leaves his lips, clearly amused by my excitement.

“This is the best NMES system they got out,” I continue, unpacking the unit

I'd been eyeing.

I see his smile stretch across his face as I geek out over it.

The Neuromuscular Electrical Stimulation unit is a tool used by physical therapists to combat post-quad inhibition after ACL reconstruction. I pull out all the wiring and connecting pieces to this specific unit, which costs no less than three grand. I'm like a kid in a candy shop.

“You can keep it,” he says.

My hands stall as I turn to face him.

His smile widens, and I see a small chip on his upper incisor I hadn't noticed before. But there it is. He's got a chipped tooth. More than likely from a nasty hit. Somehow, as much as I don't want to, I find it strangely endearing that this man of pure perfection has a minor imperfection. What I like more is that he never got around to getting it fixed.

“Seriously,” he continues, and I realize I'm still staring at him. “Keep it. I won't need it after this, and Carey's retired, so he doesn't need it.”

“Yeah fucking right.” I scoff. “I'm not taking anything else from you. Like I need you holding this over my head.”

I turn it on and begin playing with the settings.

He’s silent at my statement, and I hope he feels as guilty as he suddenly looks.

“Give me Carey's information and I'll pay him for it. Maybe I can work out some sort of payment plan.”

“Dylan…” he begins, then just shakes his head.

“Sit back,” I demand, looking up at him.

His eyes drop to my chest before quickly looking down.

I suddenly become aware that I'm wearing only a robe with nothing beneath it. This new toy has me forgetting everything. Forgetting my nakedness,

forgetting the man who's in my room late at night, the one sitting back on his palms on the table in only a sleeveless t-shirt and a pair of tight shorts that melt to his massive bulge.

It’s hard to keep things professional when situations like this just pop up in the middle of my smut-reading session.

I tape the electrodes to his exposed thigh, my hands unintentionally pushing his shorts up even further to clear the space. I lightly massage the area, finding the proper placement on his quadriceps. He looks to the ceiling as I secure the tape, gripping the edge of the table with white knuckles. His jaw twitches.

“Am I hurting you? You're not sore, are you?” I ask, confused by his response.

“No,” he answers through his teeth, still looking up.

“Alright. This shouldn't hurt, only tingle.” I check the electrodes, ensuring they are all along the quad and above the kneecap. “I'm going to up the amps, and I want you to contract for five seconds on, then relax for ten seconds off. We'll do this set for about twenty minutes and then we'll add it into our normal routine. Got it?”

He nods, facing the light overhead, and I see the roll of his throat as he swallows.

I kneel on the floor between his legs, my hands finding his thick thigh again. When I hear the machine click over, I tap on his quad, instructing him to contract. When he finally rests, I draw my eyes up.

Directly in front of my face is his massive erection going down the other leg of his shorts, lying along his thigh. I can literally see the outline of the ridges and the tip beneath the shorts. It’s thick and long, and pressing so

angrily against the dry-fit material, almost begging for some sort of intervention.

Now, I understand how sometimes a physical therapist or even a massage therapist’s touch can cause a patient to become aroused. They have trained us on how to handle these types of situations. Remain professional and don't draw attention to the potentially embarrassing situation. Steer the conversation back to healing. But at the moment, I can't seem to do anything but stare directly at it. I'm frozen.

This is too much for me to handle. Literally and figuratively. My eyes nervously dart away before I look back at it again. I feel my stomach churning with an innate desire deep within me, almost thirsting for it. My mouth is open and suddenly dry as that metaphorical desert I'd imagined.

The machine buzzes again, waking me up from my stare-down with the dick.

“I think that should do for tonight,” I say quickly, standing and turning it off.

He finally drops his gaze from the ceiling, those cobalt blue eyes suddenly dark and daring. That chest is rising and falling as he breathes heavily through his nose. His entire aura surrounds me like a fog I can't escape, closing in on me, making it impossible to see clearly.

His eyes fall to the neck of my robe that's slipped open, exposing the tops of my breasts as my erect nipples poke out through the material. *Jesus, this is so unprofessional.*

I clutch it shut, turning away from his gaze. With my eyes sealed shut, I ask, “What time tomorrow?”

He stands, and I hear the electrodes being ripped from that perfectly sculpted thigh. Feeling the heat of his body near mine as he stands above me,

I swallow. I don't even know how to act anymore. I'm being a child, squinting my eyes closed and refusing to look at him. But this is about survival.

If I look, I'll fall. And a fall into Lake is something I'll never come back from.

“Eight.” His deep voice rumbles through my chest.

After standing above me for far too long, he finally departs, walking with his crutch towards the door to leave. Only he passes the door, heading towards the master suite.

My eyes narrow as I watch him disappear into the darkness of the room. He better not for a second assume I'm going to take care of that little situation.

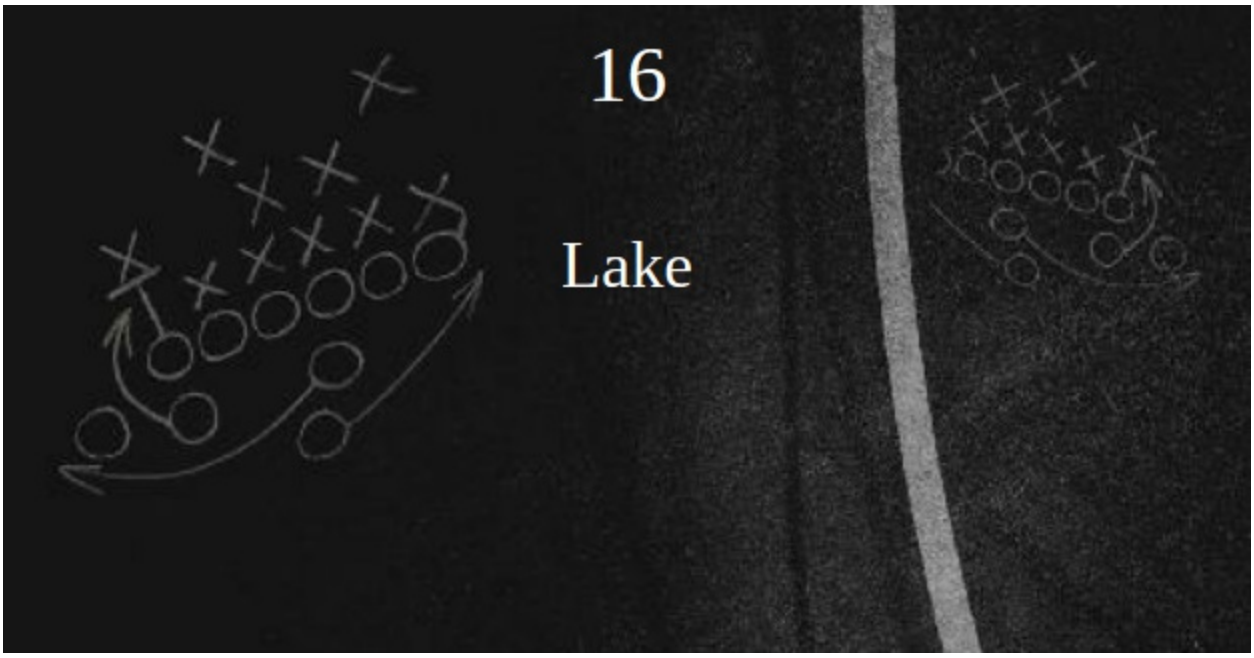
It's not that I don't want to. I'd love to use that mouthwatering rod to satisfy my own needs at the moment, but it's the expectations of the famous Lake Decker that send me back to reality.

He disappears into the room, only to return a few seconds later with his hands full of the clothes he gave me. He turns to face me with a flirtatious smirk pulling at his lips, his tongue skating across those plump pillows before he eyes my robe one more time, drinking me in before he leaves.

He’s using my wit against me, leaving me pantless.

The heavy door slams shut and I sink down on the guest bed, shaking my head as my own grin threatens to stretch across my lips.

Prick.



With my hand braced on the shower wall, I stroke the length of my cock, finally emptying myself and my frustrations down the drain with a throaty groan. I'm breathless as I fall forward, my forehead against my forearm, resting beneath the running water.

She's fucking you up, Lake.

It didn't take long for me to return to the room after she stripped down before me, leaving me standing in awe. She's got one of those bodies that needs worshiping. Unknowing of her sexual appeal. Just knowing she was on the other side of that door, all naked and exposed...it fucked with me. I knew I'd be getting back inside. I had to. Late-night therapy, it was.

I knew she'd be challenging, but I never expected her to be the feisty little smart-ass she is. I'm disgusted with myself for how much I enjoy her tearing me down. Her quick-witted comebacks, the sass that makes me clench my jaw. I've become some sort of masochist for her torture.

Watching her attempt to remain professional while naked beneath that robe as her hands slid up my thigh gave me a rock like I couldn't believe. There

wasn't a chance in hell thinking about anything else could have brought down that swelling.

And then the edge of her robe fell open when she crouched between my thighs, and the swell of her breasts came into view. The very edge of her pink nipple had me praying to God, begging him for some divine intervention to stop my pain. She had no idea it'd slipped open. Her focus was on her new toy that she actively needed to use on me. My eyes remained locked on the ceiling as she completed whatever she was doing, masking my desire to grip that ponytail and give her something to do with that smart mouth.

Without meaning to, I had imagined bending her over the table, her soft pink nipples pressing against the cool black surface, flipping that flimsy robe up and over her round plump ass and fucking her until she needed therapy.

It was well and clear she'd seen my hard-on when she stood abruptly and ended the session before the twenty minutes were up. I made my decision as soon as she stopped. She didn't want the clothes? Fine. I'd take them with me as I left. I needed her to be in nothing but this robe tomorrow morning. Needed it like some sort of perverted psycho.

A perverted psycho would've sniffed the underwear she'd thrown in my face before returning them. But I'm no psycho, even though I definitely balled that soft cotton into my fist and wished I was. I'd later accepted my fate as a pervert after breathing in her alluring scent.

My mind was racing, my urges all over the place. I needed something to break this strange spell she had over me so I could get back to myself again. To focus on what actually mattered. Not the overwhelming need to fuck *some girl*.

Knocking on the door at quarter to eight, I readjust my bag along my shoulder, peering down the quiet hallway.

After a few minutes with no response, I knock again.

“Dylan, it's Lake—”

The door opens, and her panicked face meets mine. Unfortunately, I'm met with a clothed woman. Black yoga pants with a cropped sweatshirt, and her hair tied up into a bun. With her phone to her ear, she puts a finger to her mouth, hushing me.

“Uh-huh...yeah, that's great!” she says into the receiver, sounding unusually upbeat.

She ushers me in with her hands, pointing to the room we've designated as the therapy room before she disappears into the master.

I head into the kitchen area instead, placing my bag on the counter. I pull out the bullet blender and get started on my specialty; protein shakes. As I pull out a cutting board from the drawer to slice up the fruit, I see a book out of the corner of my eye that immediately catches my attention. It's the four naked torsos on the cover that really pull me in.

Well, what do we have here?

Curiosity pulls at me as I grab it, looking to the bedroom to ensure she's still inside. The book is entitled *Break Me on Bearback Mountain,* and the name alone makes me snort. I see various corners of pages folded over and

decide to check one out. Sure as shit, I open the page to the middle of some sort of pornographic literature. Multiple cocks stuffing a woman, front and back, screaming out in uncontrolled pleasure, a pulsating pussy on the verge of release as the men coax out her climax—what the fuck is this?!

I go to the next cornered tab, opening the pages and skimming through yet another sex scene. This chick tabbed all the sex scenes! In this one, a woman is kissing a man, stroking his large, veiny cock while he toys with her pebbled nipples. His brother is conveniently busy beneath the sheets, his tongue encircling her aching clit.

Holy shit. I've hit the goddamn goldmine of embarrassment.

Little Miss Professional has a naughty side. Acting all prim and proper in the light of day, then sitting here all night in this big room with her oversized bed, fantasizing about living out in some secluded country house with a family of sexual deviants taking turns banging her into submission.

Immediately, images of her playing with herself while holding the book plague my mind. I touch the bent corner, imagining wet fingers folding it after she fucked them. The thought makes me drop the book abruptly and lean back against the opposing counter. I can't be in here with another hard-on so early in the morning.

I hear mumbled words through the other side of the door as she continues her conversation. She must approach the door because the last thing I hear is *I love you, too* before she hangs up.

I love you, too?

Before I can overthink it, she opens the door, making her appearance. I see her take a quick breath, almost resetting herself before walking towards me.

“Sorry about that,” she says, touching her chin to her shoulder. “Was just finishing up a phone call.”

“It's fine,” I reply simply.

She eyes the setup of fruits and protein powder on the counter.

“Are you making shakes?”

“I am indeed,” I say, starting the blender. “Hope you like strawberry!” I yell over the noise.

Her eyes light up, and she sits on a barstool on the opposite side of the counter. The excitement is immediately replaced with horror when she spots the book nearby. She glances at me, and the anxiety is written all over her face. I can't help the evil smile that stretches across my face as her palm smacks the cover of it, sliding it across the counter towards her. She stands, putting it behind her back as she backpedals towards the bedroom.

“I just gotta—” She points behind her with her other hand.

She chucks it into the corner of the room and slams the door shut behind her. Turning back to face me, her nose wrinkles, making this adorably pained expression before she finally lets go of the knob and walks back towards me.

I finish mixing up the shakes, my smirk firmly planted as I stare at her, pushing one towards her and leaning back against the edge of the counter to drink mine, enjoying every second of this uncomfortable moment.

“Thank you,” she begins softly. “That was very...thoughtful of you.”

I nod. “Kinda like the brothers of Bearback Mountain?”

She coughs into her drink, almost choking.

“Mason's such a romantic,” I continue, living for her embarrassment. “Sharing truly is caring, isn't it?”

“Fuck, I hate you,” she whispers beneath her breath, some of her shake dripping down her lip.

I burst into a deep, hearty laugh, my head falling back.

“Sorry.” I chuckle again. “I had to.”

She wipes the corner of her mouth with her thumb, then sucks on the tip. *She needs to not do that.*

“There is a plot...to the story,” she explains, trying to justify the literary porn.

“I'm sure there is.” I nod. “Maybe one of the tabs? Is that where the plot *thickens*?”

Her cheeks flush as she squints her eyes in embarrassment, smacking a hand to her forehead. I’m living for her discomfort.

“But I see your clothes came,” I say, changing the uncomfortable subject. “I enjoyed the robe. Thought maybe we should make that the new work uniform, but I see I don't get that option anymore, huh?”

I eye her cut-off sweatshirt that gives me the tiniest little peek of that toned abdomen she loves to hide. Her cheeks flush and she fidgets in her seat.

“Thankfully, yes. Front desk called me early this morning with my bags.”

I lean forward on the counter, my palms planted between us. “Well, that's a goddamn shame,” I say in complete seriousness.

We finish our protein shakes in silence as I stand across from her, sipping away with nothing but the fridge motor rumbling between us. She taps her delicate fingers on the counter. Our eyes connect before we both look away. My grin creeps back across my face. Her eyes flutter back up at me just as I look back at her again. We both try to hold back our smiles.

“What?” she asks, her smile cracking first.

I grin back, shaking my head. “Nothing”

Before I know it, we’re both attempting to hold back our laughter. I don't even know what we're laughing at, to be honest, and I don't think she does either. We're acting like a pair of dorky teenagers who don't know how to act around the opposite sex. *Are we flirting?*

“So, was that your boyfriend on the phone?” I blurt out, needing sudden clarification.

Idiot.

Her eyebrows raise at the question she was definitely not expecting.

“No,” she says warily.

“Mom? Dad?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

I don't know why, but I need to know who she said she loved. I want to know who matters to this girl. I want to know if she's still involved with whoever sent a fist to her face. This strange feeling of protectiveness is still beneath my skin, making me itch for retaliation against whoever thought it right to lay hands on her.

Her brows lower and her eyes fix on me.

“No, my parents died when I was almost fourteen.”

Small talk with women is not my forte.

“Shit. I'm...so sorry—”

“Don't,” she interrupts. “I'm better off. What about you?”

Better off? Without parents? What the fuck has she been through?

“What about me?” I ask, totally hung up on the fact that she just told me her parents died so blunt and void of emotion.

“Your parents?”

I swallow. “Uh, just my mom. My dad is an abusive drunk who's in and out of jail. Haven't seen him since I was probably twelve and I'm, what...28 now? So, sixteen years?”

Her mouth parts and those amber eyes hone in on me, looking somber.

“This conversation sucks, huh?” I ask, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Yeah,” she says softly.

“Childhood traumas.” I shake my head. “At least we have that in common,

right?” I say, grabbing her empty glass and putting it in the sink with mine.

“I guess so.” She smiles lightly. “I would never have guessed that about you. You're so incredibly put together and successful. I wouldn't have ever known.”

“Wasn’t always easy. Are you also an only child like me, too? Left to deal with the trauma alone? Or were you lucky enough to have brothers or sisters to lean on?” I ask with a grin as I wash, placing the cups upside down on a dry towel. “Because I’ll be honest, it'd be nice to have someone to share the emotional load with.”

Her spine straightens and the mood in the room shifts.

“We should probably just cancel the small talk for today,” she says, dismissing the conversation entirely.

I stare at her, trying to understand. I mean, I get it. We’re discussing our traumatic pasts. Not the most exciting. But at least we were discussing something. She acts as if a simple conversation with me is crossing the patient/therapist line. As if getting to know each other has always been off the table to her.

She slaps her hands on the table and stands. “Let's get to work so you can do the photo ops with the team before the game tonight.”

Monday night football.

Our last night here before we fly home in the morning. I'm not playing, obviously, but sidelining it with the team and making my appearance on screen for my mom watching back home.

We get busy with our session, Dylan showing me some new exercises to implement with the old. Working in silence, she helps me with the knee slides, then follows up with the passive knee stretch with a hotel pillow under my heel. I’m hardly feeling my strength returning as we continue our sessions

day by achingly slow day. It’s a tedious process and I don’t have the patience. It’s running thin already, and my therapist will hardly even touch me.

She's really cautious today. I noticed it right away when we started today's session, and I kind of hate it. She's a professional, right? She shouldn't be changing her methods, no matter who the client is. She should be touching me. Her hands on me. To ensure proper healing.

Hopping back onto the table after an hour of stealing glances at each other, accidentally brushing up against one another, and attempting to ignore the flirty grins back and forth, she's about to start the electrode strengthening session we tried out last night. I roll my shorts up my thigh, leaning back on my palms to prepare for the placement, but she surprises me by tossing the electrodes onto my lap.

“You remember where they went last time?” she asks, not making eye contact as she messes with the machine.

I know what she's doing, and I won't let her get away with it. Not anymore.

“Nope,” I reply.

She sighs, scratching the back of her head, her fingers sprawling through the sandy-colored messy bun that unintentionally makes her look sexy.

“I don't,” I continue, shrugging.

She rolls her eyes, her tongue dragging across her lips, and it makes me crack.

“You gotta touch me, Dylan,” I say huskily.

She blinks up at the tone of my voice, and the temperature in the room changes. The heat rises in her amber eyes, more than likely mirroring mine. I want us to deal with this sexual tension between us and put it to bed. Put us to

bed. Her chest expands and contracts, like breathing has become as difficult as she's making it look. She's killing me, this girl.

“Touch me,” I demand.

“Lake…” she whispers breathlessly, as if my name alone pains her.

I study her face as if my life depends on it. Those lips call to me. The urge to kiss her is becoming something I can't deny myself any longer. Maybe I just need to get this out of my system. Just once.

Grabbing the tips of her fingers, I pull her closer to me again. She falls into the space between my legs, the stance very reminiscent of our first encounter on this table.

“Lake, this isn't—”

I press my finger against her lips to quiet her, enjoying the feeling of those plush, pink pillows against the lucky digit. I slowly drag my finger down, making her bottom lip spring up as I trail it down her chin.

“If you can honestly tell me right now you want me to stop, then I'll stop,” I whisper, staring directly into her gorgeous, burning eyes.

I wait for her to respond, but she just stands there, breathing through those parted lips, her eyes afraid to leave mine, almost knowing if she looks away, whatever we're both feeling will end as abruptly as it started.

“We don't have to tell anyone.” I pull her deeper between my thighs again, so her hips meet the edge of the table I'm propped on. “If that’s what you’re worried about.”

Who am I? I don't do shit like this. We don’t have to tell anyone?

“No one will know.” I continue, taking her hands and placing both of them around me on the table behind my back. The move forces her to bend forward over me as I sit with my hands planted behind me, knees hanging from the table.

“No one?” she whispers.

“Never,” I reiterate, shaking my head.

She sighs. “It’s a bad idea, Lake.”

“But you want to,” I say, reaching for the answer in her head. “Don't you?”

Her sweet scent hits my nose and I become a madman, needing it all over me. I watch as her eyes trail from my nose to my lips, to my neck, and then to my chest. I can almost feel her touching me with her gaze. I’m aching for her touch.

“Let me ask you this,” I say, tipping my head back, looking at the curve of her mouth and back into her eyes. “If you knew you could have me all to yourself for one night, no strings attached, would you take it?”

She leans all the way forward on her palms, her chest just centimeters from pressing against mine. I feel her breath along my neck as her lips slowly move towards my ear. I'm ready for the sensation of those sweet lips on my skin, intoxicated by her proximity, loving the fact that she’s finally embracing the inevitable.

“One night with me would never be enough for you, Decker,” she breathes into my ear.

My brows raise at the statement, and I swallow hard.

She pulls back, a brow arching as a smirk that practically screams *Touché bitch* slides across her face, and the energy in the room shifts from lust-filled desire, to a man drowning in his own arrogance.

“Now put the fucking electrodes on and let's finish up,” she demands, straightening to toss them onto my lap.

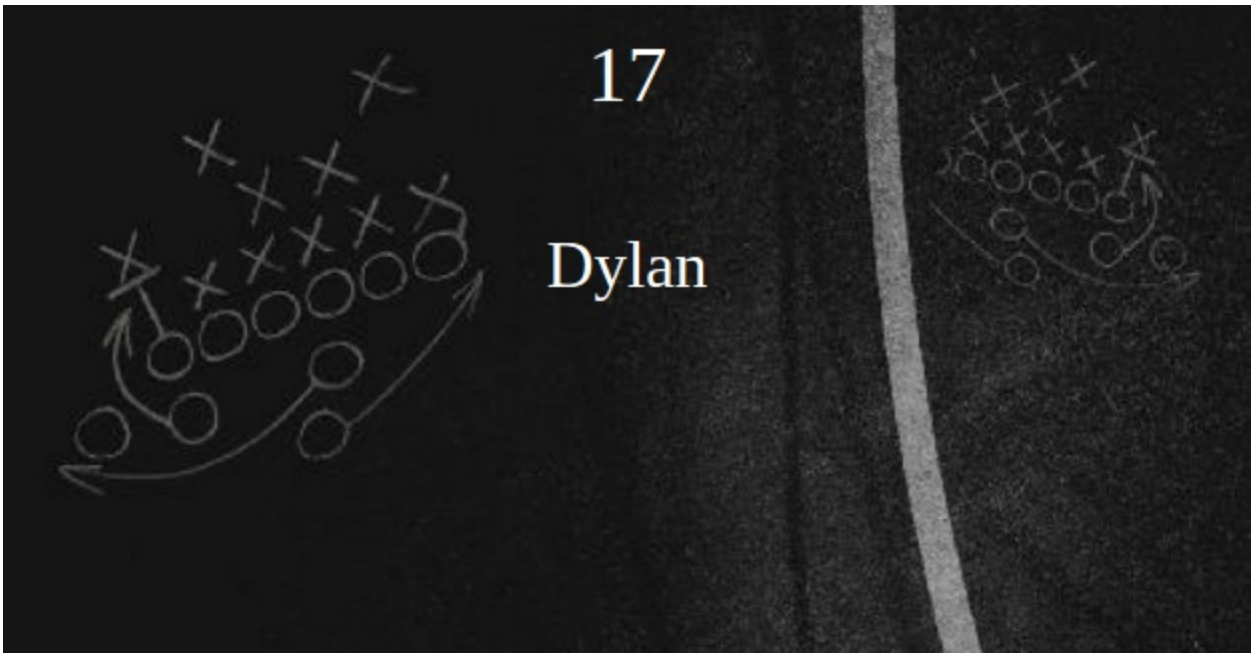
I’m frozen in place.

“Keep your focus on healing and not where you can stick your pricker next, and maybe you’ll hit that turf a little faster,” she says with a satisfied smile.

My world is shook.

I was so sure I was close to cracking her.

But apparently, I'm illiterate when it comes to reading rooms.



The way those eyes sear through to my gut, somehow sending a direct shock wave to the aching place between my legs, and the way his lips are parted, just waiting to accommodate my tongue—it's all pulling me under. Drowning me in this intoxicating desire to touch him again.

But I avoid it at all costs.

I have to.

He pauses directly in front of my face, our noses practically touching, his breath meeting mine between us. His eyes penetrate me with a calculated confidence I can only imagine he carries with him in other aspects of his life.

The field, on the turf, and the other field. The one where scoring really matters. The bedroom.

My heart beats wildly in my chest, my breaths short and clipped. My oxygen only comes from rooms not filled with Lake. I've decided rooms with Lake are like drowning.

Maybe that's the reason for the name. In his presence, there's an overwhelming feeling of suffocation from the increased pressure and lack of

air.

His sharp, assaulting blue eyes part from mine as he studies every inch of me. My eyelashes, the tip of my nose, the slightest curl of my lips. I can feel it all, even with the lack of contact. It blankets me, creating this heaviness, touching every part of me I can't escape.

Body. Mind. Body. Mind.

Who's going to win this epic battle?

Well, it's beyond clear my body is finding any way it can to shut off my pesky mind. I keep trying to rehash all the reasons this isn't okay, repeating phrases again and again, only to have my body siphon its own thoughts in.

Lake is my patient. *But no one needs to know. He said it himself.*

Lake's a playboy, fucking his way through women. *Commitment is nothing you need, anyway.*

Sex with Lake would be so fucking fun. Lake can make your body feel things you've been needing to feel. Let go, already. Lake is easy. Sex and no strings attached. A perfect set-up.

Fucking body is winning.

Colin. My career. Money. Standards.

That does it. Mind wins.

Enough to at least give me a second of strength and have me pulling away from his embrace, tossing the electrodes into his lap.

Immediately after stepping away from him, I'm able to peek through the surface of this body of water, sneaking in a breath of the oxygen I was depleting myself of.

I haven't felt this drawn to someone in a long time. He's gotten hold of my ankle, dragging me into his depths, while everything I know and love is on the surface. I can control things above water. In his world beneath the cool,

spine-tingling surface, I can't swim. I can't even fucking tread water. I need my legs beneath me. A hard surface to keep my machine moving.

After our session, he lingered for a while, almost as if leaving on this strange note would affect him more than it would me. I agreed to meet him and the team for their luncheon before the big show actually began. The photos, the pre-game interviews, the chaos that would surely sweep them all away for the rest of the day.

Getting to the luncheon before Lake, I sit by Kane, otherwise known as Candy, and he introduces me to the rest of the guys at the table. Marques Thomlinson, defensive end; Julian Cohen, tight end; DJ Brown, backup cornerback; and Beckham Brooks, a running back. Not only were they fucking humongous in real life, making me feel like a lowly hobbit in the world of Tolkien, they were ridiculously nice. I was captivated by their little world, laughing at their inside jokes as Candy explained them. Before I knew it, Mike Hensky, head coach, came over and introduced himself.

I have to admit I was a little nervous, but the guy had a fatherly vibe to him, one that I could tell was caring and protective. He loved his team and the guys here and took pride in talking to everyone. He’s a charismatic man. One with kind eyes, a heart of gold, and a determination and underlying strength about him. I could easily see how the guys would look up to him, and could tell he'd do everything in his power to bring out the best in them.

They have a certain magic here that I've completely fallen in love with. There is something so powerful about this camaraderie that they've formed, and I'm feeling the pulsating energy as it seeps off of them.

That energy shifts entirely when I feel Lake Decker enter the room. I don't even have to turn to see him to know he's here. Two guys at the table look up behind me immediately, and the respect I see reflecting off of them tells me all I need to know about who just put their hands on the back of my chair.

“Deeeeck!” Julian drags out. “About time you got your lazy butt outta that big-ass bed and joined us for breakfast.”

I can't control my eyes. I quickly glance over at Candy, who's already looking at me. He smirks, and I know the fact that Lake exchanged rooms isn't well known.

“Took me a while. I took the stairs.” His husky tone vibrates through my chest as he drops the crutches to the floor beside the chair.

The guys at the table all chuckle.

“Always doing the most, aren't ya Lakey.” Candy chimes in.

“He's working hard to reclaim the spot you took, Beck.” Marques elbows Beckham.

Beckham smiles then peers at Lake, and I immediately pick up on the unresolved tension between the two.

“Beck in for Deck,” Candy says slowly, staring down at the table. He glances up, and a look of over-dramatic shock hits his face. “Guys, it rhymes!”

I look up to face Lake above me, just in time to see his side-eyed glare at his friend's discovery. He sighs, seemingly brushing it off as he looks down at me, a light grin toying with his lips. His tousled hair lays perfectly on his

forehead, the strands near his scalp still damp, as if he just showered. It's a great look on him.

“Mornin' Chief,” he whispers, forearms flexing with his hold on the edge of my chair.

His voice is just low enough to where the greeting feels intimate. He's smiling with his eyes. The five-o'clock shadow lining the sharpness of his jaw and the muscular neck and powerful shoulders holding him above me are churning my insides again. He looks good on top of me.

Fuck me.

I suck in a breath, finding my voice.

“Morning,” I reply softly, attempting to sound like a strong woman, not the liquid form of myself I keep melting into in his presence.

Drowning. Need air.

“Dylan, I want you next to me on the sidelines,” DJ says, pulling my attention from Lake. “I need your commentary throughout the game.” His focus turns to Lake. “This chick's like an arsenal of NFL stats and facts.”

I can hear Lake's sweaty palms grip the metal of the chair tighter behind me, creating this screeching noise as he twists. For some strange reason, the sound makes my stomach churn, and I feel the echo of it seep beneath my skin.

Shaking off the feeling, I say, “I actually don't know that I'll be able to make the game.”

“What?!” Kane shrieks. “You’re not going to watch me? Unacceptable.”

“You'll be there. We need you,” Beckham says, leaning back in his chair with an adorable smile.

I smile at their sudden desire for me to cheer them on. They are doing a great job of making me feel included, and I appreciate that more than they

probably know.

“Why wouldn't you be able to make it?” Lake asks, his tone somewhat threatening.

I turn to look up at him again. “I, uh...just have some work to finish up on. Some important calls...with a few of my other clients.”

I don’t know what I'm talking about. Words are shooting out of my ass that don't even make sense. The truth is, it's the only time I can contact Colin today and I need to know how his first day back at work went.

Not being there for him is killing me. The idea of him returning to the job that had him bent into a corner, throwing his head into a wall, nearly has me renting a car and driving the many miles just to get back to him. The lady from Easterseals has yet to return my call about placing Colin in a better-fitting job, if she has one available.

Katia did her best to comfort me, informing me she'd be driving there and picking him up instead of worrying about the bussing situation. She also checked to ensure the crusty cunt wasn't working his shift. Luckily, it was Byron, a young kid I'd met there before, who had always been nothing but kind to Colin.

Lake's scowl burns into me.

“I'm the only client you need to be concerned with, and I'll be on that sideline next to you.”

I swallow, peeling my eyes away from him to find the other guys at the table totally enthralled by our conversation. They're watching us like some sort of movie scene playing out, waiting to see what I'm going to say back to him. I don't want them to be offended or think I'm not serious about my job or about rooting their team on.

“Uh, yeah,” I say nervously, chewing the corner of my lip. “I'll make other

arrangements. Won't miss it.”

I smile, masking the panic washing over me at my new dilemma, and the guys all look reassured.

“Good,” Julian comments, nodding. “I need to hear more about this injury Davidson Montgomery suffered last year so I can hit him where it hurts.”

“Uh, minor concussion,” I reply, remembering the stats. “So you'll have to get tricky and find a way to knock heads without a helmet-to-helmet charge.” I wink at him.

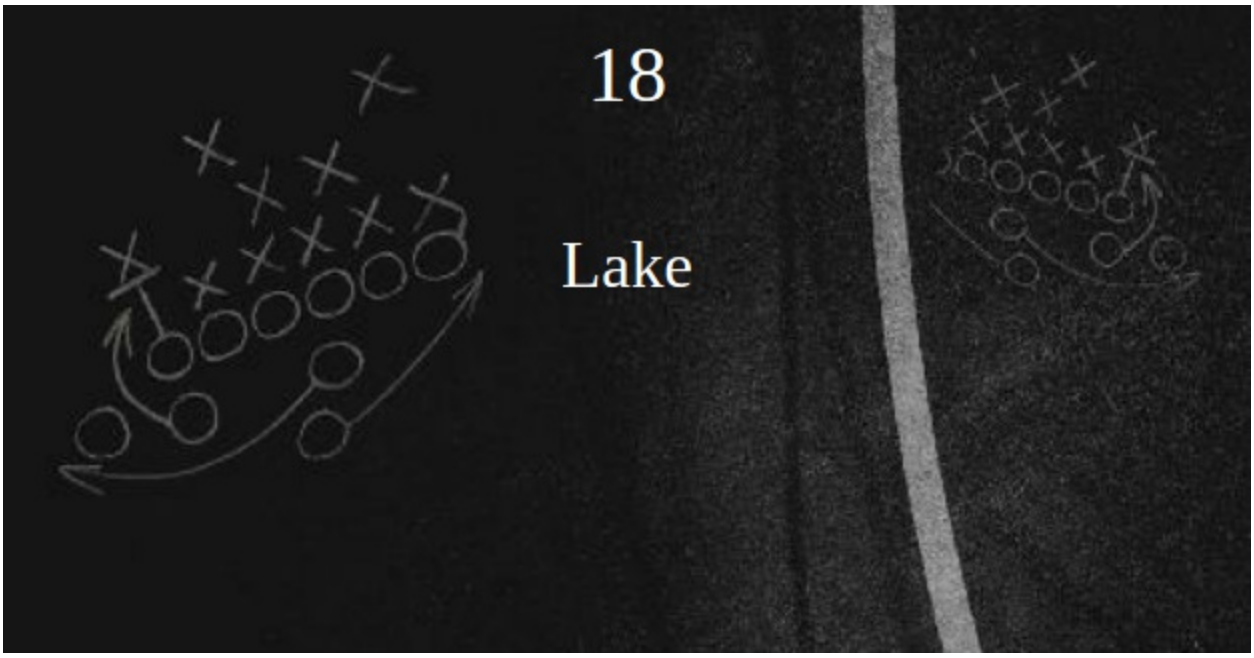
He squirms in his seat, face lighting up with the excitement of an intense athlete. “Brutal, Dyl. I love it.”

Metal screeches behind me again, and it sounds like the bar on the top of the chair is about to snap in half.

I hate that the twisted, screaming sound of metal about to break causes a certain feeling in the pit of my stomach.

A feeling that has severe consequences if acted upon.

A feeling that's slowly but surely rendering me weaker by the day.



I'm back.

Not really. No, I'm still on the island of misfit toys, but I'm finally back in the middle of the action, and it's never felt more like home.

Lights flashing, the crowd roaring, the excitement of an aggressive, manly sport in the air. It's Monday Night football in full blast, and men and women across the globe are drooling at the chance to see bodies crash into each other in the historic dance we call American Football.

The boys and I rush the field from the lockers after one hell of a pep talk from Coach. Alright, they rushed the field; I hobbled. Coming out dressed in casual Bears gear is a new look for me, and I'd be lying if I said I felt comfortable.

I was itching to suit up. Itching to get that ball in my hands. Itching to run through defenders like nothing was stopping me. But there was something stopping me, and my first game back after the injury truly reminded me of that.

Not going to lie, I'm feeling the weight of regret and failure. Maybe if I'd taken the other route, I'd still be out there, raking in the publicity, seeing my name in headlines praising my increasing legendary yardage instead of the constant talk about the fallen King. Lucky for me, Dylan ditched whatever stupid idea she'd tried to come up with to miss this and walked out onto this field by my side.

Does she realize how lucky she is to be here? Under the lights, amid the magic of the game? Nothing could or would matter more than this. She was crazy, talking about her other "clients" as if they meant more than the chance to sit on the sidelines with *the* Chicago Bears.

It made me pause, however, wondering if something or someone was still controlling her. The thought alone frustrated me. I stared at her under the bright lights of the stadium as she bit the corner of her lip, looking up and down the field, peeping cameras left, right, and behind her. She seemed anxious, and I hoped it was only the magnitude of the surroundings that made her feel indifferent to the experience.

"Hey," I call out to her, gaining her attention as we walk towards the sidelines where the players warm up.

She looks good in her new Chicago Bears zip-up jacket and matching sweatpants. Her navy blue hat is pulled down over her forehead so only the glow of her amber eyes shines through, while her ponytail fits through the back of it. I like this look on her. Effortless, yet somehow sexy.

It's the blue and orange. It looks good on everyone.

"You alright?" I ask humorously, watching her wild eyes take in the stadium around us.

"I'm great!" she responds over the roar of screaming fans. "This is...insane!" She chuckles softly as she continues to take it all in.

Her eyes light up like a child, and it's surprisingly endearing to see her like this. She's normally so hard and calculated. *See, it was only nerves. You're still her main priority, Lake.*

“Come here,” I demand, holding out my free hand.

She reaches out for it, but just before her soft hand hits mine, Clark Shelby, the new director of sports medicine, approaches her from the side.

“Clark! Hey!” she exclaims, her face glowing at the mere sight of him.

First name basis already? Fishy.

“Dylan! You made it!” He pulls her into a hug.

They’re hugging? Is that what we're doing now? Touching each other inappropriately. Not professional.

“Come on, I'll introduce you to everyone,” he says, holding out his hand to her.

She nods excitedly, then peers at me over her shoulder with her brows raised. I nod once, unable to control the smile she stirs out of me, and her shoulders bounce with excitement as she follows him.

She checked with me. I like that she checked with me first. Let him know who takes precedence here.

A breath of air slips through loose lips and my eyes narrow at the back of his head as he leads her away. Seconds later, DJ slides up next to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder.

“She's cool as shit,” he comments, watching with me as Dylan walks away.

She turns back around, giving a quick little excited smile, and it does something strange to me. My insides cramp, and I find myself reciprocating with an adoring grin. DJ immediately strips that smile with one sentence.

“How would you feel if Beckham asked her out?”

“Excuse me?” I turn to face him, pulling away from his hold, causing his

arm to drop between us.

“I don't know, man. Guess he mentioned it to Julian after lunch.” He shrugs casually. “Wants to see her after the game tonight. Guess they kinda hit it off talking sports or something,” he continues. “I'm not surprised, though. Everyone loves her. She's like the best kinda girl out there. Knowledgeable in sports, loves football, active, sexy as all—”

“Yeah, that's not gonna work for me,” I interrupt him, my tone sharp as a knife.

I feel my nostrils flare while the fire builds within me. I don't fucking care who she does or doesn’t hang out with, just as long as she focuses on the goal here. Me and my treatment.

“It may interfere with my therapy process, and I'm not willing to fuck that up so Beckham can get his little dick wet,” I mutter. “Tell him to back the fuck off and get ready to plant his overly proud ass on the sidelines again.”

DJ stares at me for a second. “Damn, Deck. Alright.” He laughs, looking me up and down. “If you got something going on there, then by all means...*heal*.”

I see where he's going with this, and I have to stop it.

“No, dude. It's not like that at all. I have no interest in her. It's just...this game.” I peer off into the field again. “I gotta get back.” I sigh. “And nothing is going to come between me and that turf.”

He nods, eyeing the field with me. “I feel ya.”

“I hate it over here,” I say honestly, staring out at the warm-ups. “It's out there.” I point with my free hand. “That's where I need to be.”

“Then that's exactly where you'll be, Deck.” He pats my shoulder with a reassuring smile before heading off towards some guys near the defensive bench.

I'm left alone in my thoughts for a second, and my heart instantly feels like there's a fist wrapping tightly around the muscle. Time is running out. My mom is at home, doped up on pain meds as she lets the cancer eat away at what's left of her fragile form. Maybe she'll never return to see me play. Her hopes of watching her baby boy inspire others by breaking records and shocking everyone are being taken away by an injury that I can't come back from in time for her to see it.

“Lake Decker. What a sight for sore eyes.”

I know the voice of the person behind me. I do my best to bury my emotions deep down where they belong before turning to face her.

“Lindsey Lane,” I reply with an exaggerated sigh. “What a surprise.”

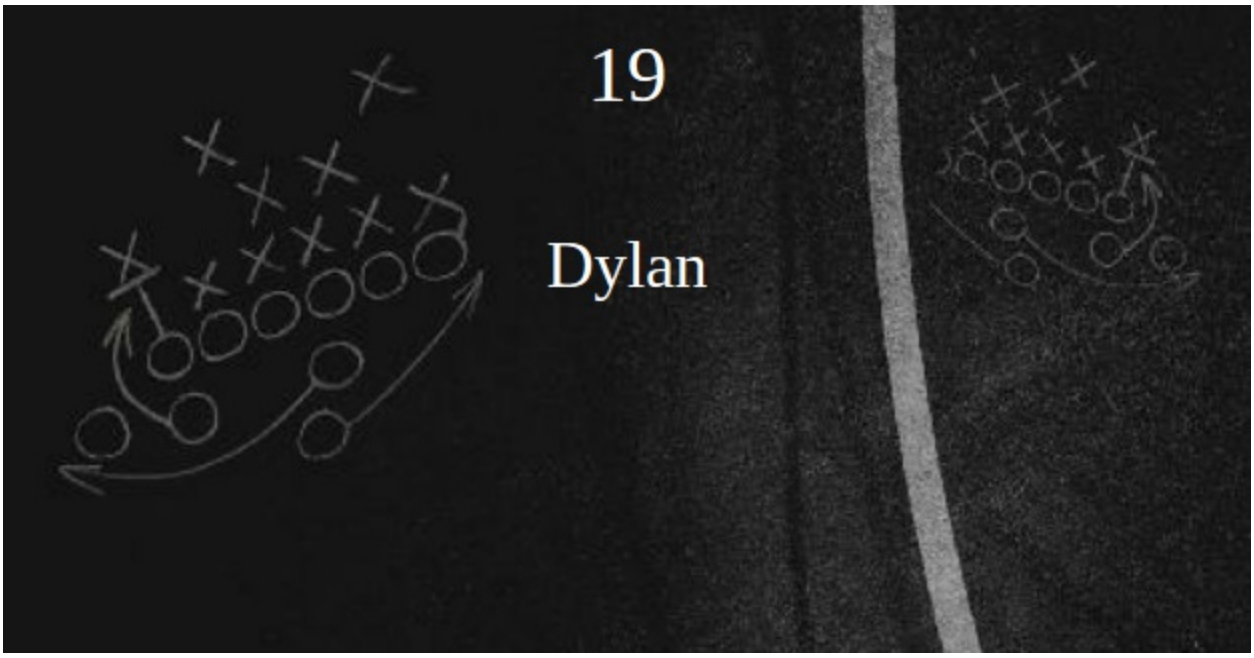
There she stands in her all-too-tight navy pantsuit, leaving hardly anything left to the imagination. Her bright blonde curled hair rests down her shoulders and her tanned cleavage is bursting from the top of her fitted jacket. She smells like vanilla cappuccino, a reminder of the many late nights she begged me to stay over.

“Time to talk?” she questions with an eager grin as her camera man walks around the backside of me, already setting up.

“Strictly business this time, Linds,” I warn.

Her lashes flutter as she shoots me a sultry smile. “Now, Lake, we both know business pairs well with pleasure.”

Before I can respond, she slips into professional mode. Like the flip of a switch, the plastic face covers her already plastic face, and the interview process begins.



19

Dylan

My cellphone is burning a hole in my pants.

My new pants. I'll admit, I love the new fit. I feel like I’m officially a part of this team when, in reality, I’m still just an outsider looking in.

As Clark introduced me to the working staff on the field, I felt overwhelmed with gratitude. It was a glimpse of a career and a future I'd once envisioned for myself. One I never thought I'd see. I'd made it so far on my own, but couldn't even finish school to get my doctorate the way I'd initially hoped. Funds run out fast when you're doing it all on your own. Loans upon student loans built up so high that if I didn't get the job with Greg when I did, I'd never have been able to afford to keep our apartment. I’m still barely holding on—the lawyer fees, the credit card debt, the mistakes with finances made at such a young age. My path is far from a straight one.

But here I am yet again, looking at a future that was always just out of reach.

After warm-ups are over, the team reconvenes on the sidelines, the players getting into the headspace they need to be in to crush the Arizona Cardinals

on live TV for Monday Night Football.

I don’t need to look for Lake. His ridiculously handsome face is plastered above me on the stadium’s big screen. They’re talking about how, with him being injured, the Cardinals had some sort of shot against the weakened team, but his faith in his team of brothers seemed to contradict that entirely.

His eyes seem lighter from a distance, his smile so easy and relaxed, but I know just how dark those eyes can smolder close up, how sexy that chipped tooth looks beneath that easy grin. I hate that these are my thoughts. I also hate how they don’t matter. I can’t focus on him or how he makes my stomach flip when he says my name. I shouldn't focus on the fact that no one has ever made my skin tingle with an unresolved desire to have his hands on me like he does, or that his smile reaches parts of me I didn't know existed.

That handsome grin is still stretched across his face as I walk back to an interview he is having with an eager reporter. I watch his lengthy form from a distance as he talks about the game, his injury, his recovery, and he even mentions his therapist and progression. He chuckles when she asks if he is receiving all the attention she thought he deserved, clearly flirting with the man of the hour. But he brushes it off with an inspirational message about getting up and fighting for what you want despite the setbacks.

I can understand the endorsements. He’s the guy that fits the role to a T. Handsome as all hell, young, hungry for the game, driven, and yet somehow seemingly approachable. I can see him slip into that role while he talks animatedly with the reporter, but there’s something beneath the facade that speaks to a deeper part of me.

There’s a bigger reason for this. His primary goal isn’t just to become a legend, is it? His heart is truly in this, but is it only for the love of the game?

After the interview, his face falls hard again as the beautiful reporter leans

in to whisper something into his ear. He grins and chews on his bottom lip. The interaction looks flirtatious, and I can only imagine all the many women who've fallen victim to his charms.

The thought is even more of a reason to nip my stupid little crush in the bud. He isn’t a one-woman man. No, women flock to men like him, hoping to be the one he'll choose forever. But men like that don't need to make choices in love. Sex is handed to them on a platter. What do they need love for? Relationships are a waste of energy to a Greek God like Lake.

His eyes somehow find mine in the crowd of players and coaches as the reporter grips onto his muscular shoulders, whispering something else along his neck. His mischievous smile returns as she pulls back to face him. He oozes sex, and it seems Little Miss Reporter is picking up on that recent development. I quickly glance away, feeling like I've been caught looking at something I shouldn't.

This is what Lake does. This is his life. Sports and women.

I duck off behind one of the medical tents along the sideline, peering up at the fans cheering in the stands nearby. I smile at a young boy waving down at me. He’s wearing a Bear’s t-shirt in the warm Arizona sunset, his arm linked through his father’s, who holds him proudly. The sight of something Colin and I both deserved to have had in our lives makes me wince. Parents who loved us for who we were, sharing experiences together, and making memories that would last a lifetime. But no, not us.

Slipping my phone out of my pocket, I try to call Colin immediately. Technically, he's still working, but I thought by some chance maybe I'd catch him. The machine picks up and I sigh, feeling a jumble of twisted-up nerves for my older brother.

I need to talk to him tonight, even if it means slipping out of here early.

“What are you doing back here?” Lake’s voice rumbles, startling me.

I quickly pull the phone from my ear and place it in my side pocket. I don't think he noticed.

“Ready to watch this game with me, or what?” he asks, his hard eyes fixed on me.

I suck in a breath, plastering on a smile. “Yeah, of course.”

My legs shift restlessly as I stand behind the players, watching as the game begins. My eyes focus on the field, but my mind is on Colin. Every time my phone buzzes with a notification, I turn and check it without being too suspicious. No, April, I don't care about your baby boy's weekly fucking photoshoot. I click to close the notification, sighing in frustration.

“You good?” Lake asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

“I'm great, Lake. Thanks for continuously checking.”

He's all up in my business.

“You seem preoccupied,” he says, sounding annoyed.

“I'm fine,” I snap back, feeling my phone buzz again.

I immediately pull it out, checking my notifications.

His jaw tightens, and he shakes his head next to me.

I don't understand what his problem is. I'm here, aren't I? This wasn't a requirement for my job. It's not like we're working on stretches or new strength training exercises out here on the sidelines. I'm not getting paid to be here. Don't get me wrong, I'm so honored and so appreciative to even be a part of this, the foot in the door thing, but for him to think he has control over any part of my real life, my life back home with Colin…well, he's got a surprise coming.

“If your plan is to fuck around with Beckham or any of the other players, just make sure to keep it quiet,” he grumbles, staring off at the field. “I don't

need my therapist getting fired because she couldn't keep her legs crossed."

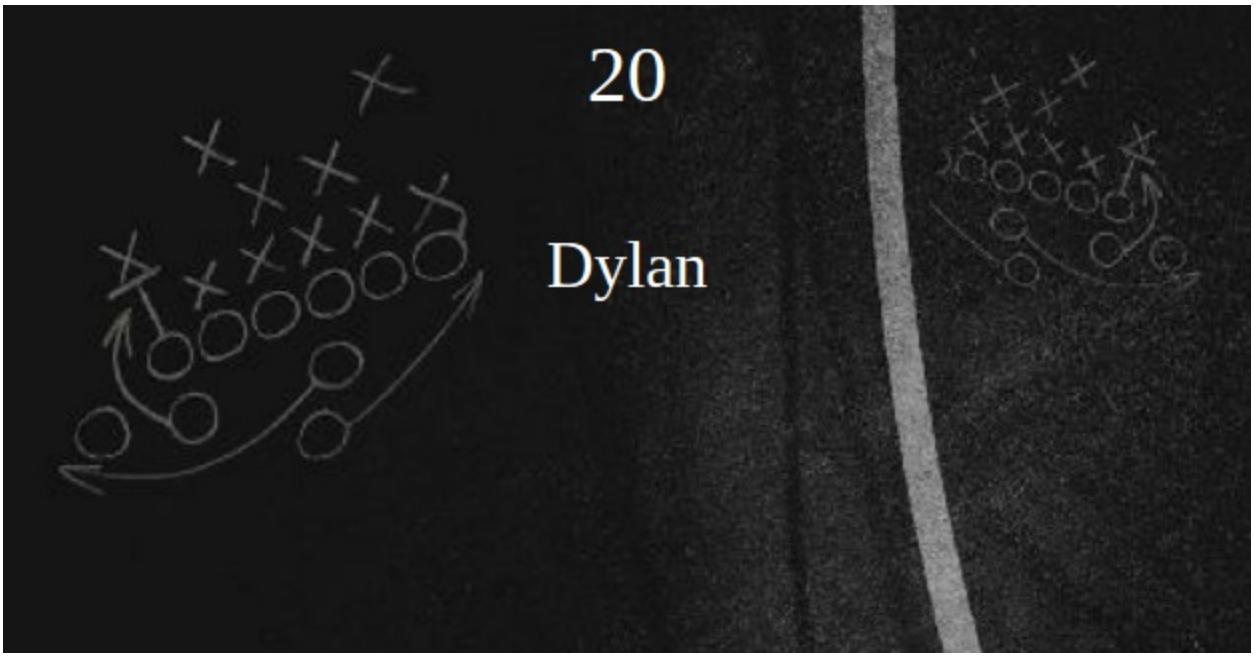
My eyes widen at his comment, and my mouth drops open at the mere suggestion that I'm here simply to sleep with the players. Is he crazy? Is that what they think of me? And Beckham?! Where the fuck did that come from? The comment pierces through my chest, affecting me more than I'd like.

I turn with a mouthful, ready to set him straight, only to see him already hobbling towards some of the other guys.

This disgusting urge to cry comes over me as I push air through my nose, glaring at the back of his head. He's already shaking up with someone, a smile on his face, but I grind my back teeth together and hold it all in. I've never wanted to be home more. I hate feeling small in the presence of him. It's not who I am. I'm doing my best. Trying my hardest to make it all work—the career, my finances, Colin's care. But comments like that really break me to my core.

I don't know what Lake's problem is, but there's one thing I know for sure.

He will have to get used to being second for once in his privileged life, or I'm fucking done.



Closing the door to the hotel room, I rip my ponytail out and toss my hat into the corner, resting my forehead against the smooth surface of the back of the door.

What a whirlwind of a day. From enjoying getting to know the team at lunch, feeling a genuine sense of belonging, to forcing myself to leave the game because my toxic-ass client loves to find any way he can to get under my skin.

I left the field at halftime, and I highly doubt Lake even knows I’m gone. After the rude comment about keeping my legs crossed, he went off and mingled with his teammates and friends, never once checking in with me or even sparing a look in my direction.

I didn't care. After that, I was done. Thoughts came together for me in my head. Pieces falling into place. I'd come this far on my own. Who's to say I couldn't do it without Lake? This job was just that. A job. It wasn't worth me missing calls from Colin or having to put some egotistical, misogynistic celebrity first before my family or myself. I could figure out another way.

So I left.

Now here I am, rolling my forehead along the hotel door until the back of my head rests on it. I slide the rest of the way down the door until my knees buckle and my legs shoot out onto the floor.

I called Colin immediately after leaving so I could talk to him about his first day back. According to him, I worry too much, and everything was really, really good. He and Byron talked about the new Tesla Model S during their downtime, and apparently there weren't any customers giving him a hard time over bagging. He was back home in his chair, surrounded by his happy color—his sunshine, as he always says—watching the 2003 Carolina Dodge Dealers 400, which I knew had one of the closest finishes in all of racing.

It gave me tremendous relief to know he was safe and happy and that Katia was taking such good care of him until I could get back home tomorrow. I felt like I could finally breathe a little since boarding that plane and leaving town.

Until I thought about the body of water drowning me. Lake.

I need to rid myself of his presence. Erase him from my mind. So I peel myself off of the floor, and to the shower I go to scrub away the day.

With the scalding water beating down on me, I take that hotel soap and white-squared towel and go to town on my skin as if it did me wrong.

I scrub as I think about his strange protective tendencies, exfoliate until it burns as I remember his hold on that chair behind me, tear into my arms and shoulders as I see that sweet, kind-hearted grin on his face as Clark walked me away.

I want to erase that feeling on my skin only he could produce. The awareness that my body has become used to in his presence. I want it gone. Because why should it be there? He’s a dick.

Red and overly clean, I hop into a light tank top and my silk nighty shorts. I’m ready for a night alone with just me and the brothers of Bearback Mountain. Fuck the real world. I'm getting lost in my fiction tonight.

The scene I'm coming up on is one of my favorites. The young, naïve main character, Mara, was finally finding her strength on that mountain, about to confront the eldest brother, Cagen, about his true feelings for her. She forces him to face his emotions, the scene, an epic, drama-filled moment that ends in the hottest, most passionate sex. There’s nothing like a seemingly weak girl finding her strength and putting an overly confident and cocky man in his place.

Funny how I can relate.

Enjoying the privacy of my alone time, I get lost in the novel. Totally captivated by the fire and passion in the words. So much so, the pounding on the main door makes me jump and gasp as I clutch my hand to the heart currently beating out of my chest.

Tossing the book, I stand, running my hand down my clammy, hot neck. I can’t deny what I’d just read had turned me on. Flustered and discombobulated, I quickly try to regroup and adjust the tank top that's slid up my abdomen. The startling sound of a fist pummeling through wood continues as I make my way towards the door.

I think about looking through the peephole like the asshole suggested, then decide against it. Why not welcome a random stranger into my bedroom? Maybe it'll be one of the brothers from the Mountain. You only live once, right?

I open the door and am met with rage personified.

There he stands, leaning forward, all six-foot-four of him, bracing himself with his palms on the door frame. The bulging muscles of his biceps flex

above me as the sharp edge of his jaw twitches. His head is dipped down, but those gun-metal eyes are glaring up at me with the heat of a raging volcano, bound to burst and melt every living thing in its path.

“Office is closed. Come back during business hours,” I say, pushing to shut the door in his chiseled, perfect, stupid face.

He sticks his foot in the door.

I sigh, rolling my eyes. Does he not realize how dangerous this is for his health? He’s one smart-ass comment away from getting his dick punched.

“You left.” The ache in his tone hits that part inside of me that I deny.

I fake a surprised face, placing my palm on my chest. “He's agile and perceptive? Oh, my.”

He shakes his head once, seemingly taking the hit, never taking his eyes off mine.

“You need to go,” I say, looking down at his Nike lodged in the door.

I peer up, raising my brows, but he just stands there, staring.

“Why did you leave, Dylan?” he asks sternly.

“That can’t be a serious question.” I laugh lightly.

He doesn’t move or say anything.

I give him my best scowl, running my hand through my damp hair. His stone-cold eyes finally leave mine and run the length of my body. His expression changes from rage to whatever more rage looks like. Nostrils flare, and his breathing intensifies. He's like a wild animal, out of control and restless, with his focus hard on me. If he had multiple personality disorder, I'd say I'm finally meeting his other identity.

Football Lake.

I'd call him Flake.

Like a snowflake. Only he’s not soft or fluffy like the beautiful side of

snow. No, he’s all the things wrong with it. Cold, miserable, causes painful prickling sensations on contact, resulting in loss of limbs.

He looks ready to break something, or someone.

I cross my arm over my chest to hold my opposing shoulder, realizing I'm only in my pajamas. I feel those things I don't want to feel again. My skin awakens, and even the sensation of my own hand upon my shoulder feels like too much. Goosebumps spring up and sizzle beneath his enraged gaze.

“I left because you're an asshole.” My voice comes out a breathy whisper, and I hate that I didn't clear my throat before uttering the words.

I sound weak.

His chest continues heaving as he repeats, “An asshole.”

He nods, pursing his lips, peering at my nighty shorts that expose entirely too much of my thighs.

I don't know what he wants from me right now. He's not saying anything, just standing there, almost unsure of the reasons he was even brought to my door.

“Open the door, Dylan,” he demands, his eyes now fixed on mine.

I shake my head. “No.”

“We need to talk.”

“Leave a note with my secretary. We’ll have to pencil you in.” I push the door against his foot, but the fucker won’t budge.

“Open the door before I fucking split it in half,” he grumbles through his clenched teeth.

My eyes narrow on his and we glare at one another. This feels like an epic faceoff. A battle he’s not prepared for. I don't think he realizes this is about to be another loss he can add to his list.

“Fine,” I say, swinging the door open wide. “But be warned, this may result

in the loss of a career."

"Yours?" he asks, cocking a brow, an arrogance to his tone.

"No," I smile sweetly, backing up. "Yours. When I kick in your other knee for breaking into my hotel room."

He walks into the room with his crutch beneath his arm, shutting the door behind him, his gaze never breaking contact with mine. It's direct. Too direct.

"It's unfortunate that the room is still under my name then, isn't it?" he taunts, a crease forming near his mouth.

I hate him. I scowl, and the slightest smirk tugs at his lips.

He stalks towards me as I walk backwards, heading me back towards the room I came from. *Why is he walking me towards the bedroom?*

I eye him suspiciously as he makes himself comfortable, walking directly through my hotel room and into the master. His eyes scour the space as if he's looking for something. He takes in everything, peering from my bag, now sitting in the closet, to some of my clothes balled up on the floor.

"What are you looking for?" I ask, feeling a sudden lack of privacy. "Honestly, Lake, what are you doing here?"

"You're distracted," he declares, looking around until his eyes fall upon my book on the disheveled mess of down comforters and sheets. "Your focus isn't where it should be."

I scoff at the ridiculousness. "For being so incredibly successful, you have got to be one of the dumbest people I've ever met."

He ignores my comment, tossing his crutch on the floor, and plops his ass on the edge of the bed. He goes to reach for the book, but I dive to grab it from him. I'm obviously not as fast as the elite athlete, so I lay on my stomach in a heap of embarrassment as he opens the book to the scene I'm reading.

“Give that back!” I yell.

I reach around him from behind, trying to snatch it from his grip. But I forget, this man literally gets paid to hang onto objects from defenders. He easily brushes off my attempts and begins reading.

“You'll never touch me again, Cagen! Not until you admit to me how badly you need me!” he reads loudly.

“Give me that!” I scream, pushing into him until he falls over onto an elbow.

He holds the book with one large hand, his arm extended as the other palms the top of my head, holding me back like a weak toddler. My hair splays across my forehead as I try my best to reach the book. His wingspan is just too long.

“I never needed you! Cagen replies. It was only that hot, tight little spot between your legs I needed!” Lake continues, then laughs.

I push back off of Lake, realizing I'm too weak to get this book away from him. I sit on my heels, diagonal to him, as he continues to torment and embarrass me.

Why he feels entitled to even be in here, teasing me like a fifth-grade boy, is beyond me.

“This has to be a joke.” He shakes his head. “How do women actually fall for this shit?”

I snatch the book out of his hands, but only because he actually let me this time. He sits on the end of the bed, his bad leg hanging off the side while the other lies stretched out across the king-size mattress. Somehow, he looks even bigger like this. Sexier. His elbow casually props his head in his hand, and his forehead wrinkles. A cocky grin lay across his perfectly sculpted face, waiting for me to answer him.

Lake is lying on my bed.

Breathe, Dylan.

Focus on anger.

I decide to embrace the embarrassment and return the favor, making this as awkward as possible for him. I lick my lips, tossing my hair over my shoulders, and allow the strap of my tank top to slip slightly down my shoulder.

His eyes are immediately drawn to it.

I position myself with my legs bent to the side, crossed at the ankles, as I lay all my weight on one palm. Curling my shoulders in, accentuating my collarbones, I lengthen my neck, arching it to the side, letting my hair fall over my shoulder. In full pin-up position, I page through to a particular scene.

“I find I like it when he chokes me,” I begin softly, and Lake's eyes harden on me.

It’s as if I sucked all the air out of the room with that one sentence.

“He thinks it's a control thing, as if he's the beast and I'm the prey submitting to his will. But what he doesn't realize is, I'm using it against him. I enjoy his strength. I siphon his power away from him with every moan of mine against his calloused palm.”

Lake's as still as windless water as he watches me. Pretty sure he isn’t breathing. My hand finds my neck, and I slowly trail my fingers down to my collarbone as I continue reading.

“With his tight grip on me, he stares into my passion-filled eyes. Spreading my legs with his own, he runs his swollen, hardened cock along my hot, wet slit. He knows he's losing by the way my body is open, dripping, and ready for him to submit. No part of this is his to own. It’s mine to take.”

Lake's throat bobs.

“He pushes into me with the rage of war behind his eyes. A war that's crumbling before him, loss on his horizon. I cry out, screaming in ecstasy as he fills the deepest part of me, stretching me like no one has before him, like no one after him ever will. He claims me as his into the night, fucking me ruthlessly as if tomorrow is a mirage that will never come to fruition.”

My eyes snap up to Lake's over the book. I shoot him a little smirk as I slap the book shut and drop it between us. He stares at me in complete spine-tingling silence, his lips slightly parted.

Check mate.

His eyes narrow as he closes his lips. Tightening his jaw, his nostrils flare again, and it appears the angry man I found at the door is back.

He snatches the book again. “See? Distracted. Living in fantasies. A girl like you should be focused on the opportunity at hand. Capitalizing on it. Not daydreaming of what some fictional man can do to you.”

He's a child. A delusional fucking man-child who, for some strange reason, feels as if he's not getting the attention he deserves. Why my full attention means anything to him is a question all its own. He has parades of people singing his praise. Throngs of eager women opening themself for him.

I laugh. “What's really bothering you, Lake? The fact that I enjoy my time with fictional men more than my time with you? Or is it the date with Beckham tonight that's on your mind?”

I don't have a date with Beckham tonight. But his suggestion at the game triggered me into manufacturing this little idea.

He glares in disbelief.

“Is that who you were searching for when you first came in here?” I question. “He's kinda hard to hide, being that he's so *big* and all—”

“He's not that big,” Lake interrupts. “And his only interest is fucking the

new toy in town, so don't get your little hopes up fantasizing about wedding bells.”

I run my tongue along my teeth, wishing I could taze him with my eyes. God, that’d be amazing. A crumpled pile of seizing Lake sounds fantastic right about now.

He shrugs with a smirk as if to say, *Sorry, it's true*. Going to stand, he tucks the book under his arm.

Oh, no you don't. Not this time, asshole.

I dive at him again, knowing he's unsteady on his feet, and go to steal the book out from under his arm. He stumbles as he grips the book tighter, fighting me. But I've secured my hands around it. Moving to pull it away from me, he ends up yanking me into him.

I'm enraged now, needing this confrontation with him more than I realized. I'm feeding off of it. Desperate for revenge. My tensions from the day are releasing against his fight for the smut.

We both struggle for it, but he quickly pushes forward, flipping me onto my back on the bed. He rips the book from me, and I gasp as he somehow grips both of my wrists and holds them above my head. He positions himself above me with one thigh between mine before pressing his hips into mine, pinning me to the bed beneath us. I thrash around, fighting his hold with everything I have, but it's just not enough.

I can't overpower his strength, even with a gimp leg.

“Get off of me,” I say breathlessly, my pulse throbbing in my ears.

I'm weakening with his warm, hard body sealed to mine. Intoxicating waves of heat pulsate from my core as I feel him harden beneath his sweats.

He’s hard. I’m angry, sexually frustrated, and these emotions are blending together to form this odd, maddening lust.

He stares down at me boldly, his dark brown locks hanging in a sexy mess above me, our breaths aligning.

“You fucked me up, Dylan.”

My brows knit, and I breathe through parted lips.

I worry for a second that I might have actually hurt him during our little squabble, but the look in his heated eyes says otherwise. The words had fallen from his tongue, carved with distress. The kind that can only be unearthed by the places we deny.

“I couldn't care less,” I reply, tipping my chin up towards him.

He flinches, then tightens his grip on my wrists.

“That's a lie,” he whispers.

I try to think of a comeback, but I can't. My mind is a mess and my oxygen is depleting as his weight lays upon me. You don't think while drowning. You just sink.

“Tell me that's a lie,” he begs, searching my eyes.

I don't respond. I don't even know how to. Everything is so wrong about this position we're in. And yet, I can't seem to find an ounce of strength to correct it. His softened tone and his direct stare unveil the raw man in need beneath the asshole he portrays so well.

“I need you to do something for me, Dylan.” He begs with his eyes, pleading with me.

His tone is shaky, and the confidence that was once there is replaced with a certain longing in his gaze. The seriousness, never more present.

My chest billows between us, my nipples erect through the simple cotton containing them. His focus rakes down my body in my restrained form beneath him, and a light groan leaves his throat. I lick my lips and he watches, his jaw hardening as if to restrain himself.

“Please. Just please tell me I can kiss you.” His hoarse tone emanates his pain as he peers from my lips and back.

With his hold still on my wrists, he leans forward, resting on his elbows around me. His hips settle between my thighs, his mouth inches from mine, as we study each other cautiously. I can feel his breath on my lips, both of us panting, and the need to taste him amplifies.

I’m lost in the moment's heaviness. The tension between us is so thick and overwhelmingly powerful. I can't fight because no part of my body wants me to. It reduces my mind to mush, and my hormones are running this ship. The roaring beat of my heart is drowning every part of my brain that says this is wrong. And the moment I feel his erection press into that space between my legs that craves him, I know I’ve lost before I’ve even begun.

I can’t make this easy for him, but I can’t make this so hard for myself anymore, either.

I swallow, surrendering to my body just this once, and give the lightest nod before he comes crashing down onto me.

As soon as my lips crash onto hers, we don't waste any time getting friendly.

I capture her sweet lips between mine, kissing those soft sweet pillows as she kisses me back. The kiss is fire, scouring through me. It's warm, and it's wet, and fuck if it doesn't make me mad with a need for more. It's insane, this feeling.

Dylan is kissing me.

Dylan, my moody therapist.

Dylan, this unsuspecting woman that drives me crazier than anyone else ever has.

Holy fuck. We're doing this.

My eager tongue gently sweeps across her bottom lip, needing the access she's so adamantly denied. She opens her mouth to me, allowing it.

Our tongues touch and she moans.

She moans, and I brick up.

I have no self-control.

I’m reduced to a schoolboy when it comes to her. I mean, Jesus, seconds ago she said cock with these lips I'm kissing. I heard her say cock, and I got hard, like a teenage boy. And wet slit?! I haven't heard a woman utter the nasty shit she just spewed in a long time. Not unless you count porn.

I was, unfortunately, mesmerized by the brief little reading session. She did that shit on purpose, too, using my teasing tactics against me, and it worked like a charm.

Fuckin' smartass.

My one hand holds her slender wrists above her head, the other finding the sliver of skin between her flimsy tank top and those silk shorts that melt to her ass. Fingers slide under her shirt, gently palming the smooth skin of her waist. My entire hand practically wraps around her fit little frame.

Her curves had caught my eye at the door, and the salivation began. I wasn't lying when I said I'd break the door if she didn't let me in. She'd never looked sexier to me, and it was because she wasn't even trying. Hair down, barely there tank with those toned, sexy legs just waiting for my hands.

She's beautiful. It's undeniable at this point, but her attitude is the catalyst. It's just too much for me to handle. It makes me crazy, needing to taunt and tease her, finding whatever way I can to one-up her. Dominate her. We're a set of alphas with our chests out, ready to fight. But when our mouths connect, our tongues moving together flawlessly, teasing, taunting with what we can do to each other, no one is winning. We're both losing this game, and I can't believe I'm even thinking this, but I've never loved losing more.

I release her wrists, sliding my palm down the goosebumps on her arm until I reach up behind my head and grip the shirt on my back between my shoulder blades. Breaking the kiss, I pull it off and lay myself on her again.

“Jesus, Dylan,” I mutter, feeling slightly lightheaded at the contact as I find

my way back to her lips again.

I can't believe it's happening.

One second we're fighting over this stupid book like a couple of idiots, and the next, I'm overpowering her against the bed, ready to fuck the attitude right out of her.

Her hands find the edge of my jaw as our kiss continues, and I can't help the movement of my hips. I flex into her hard, urging my stiff cock against her center, and her breathy moan makes me drop my head into the crook of her neck.

"Lake," she moans.

Her sweet sounds will be the death of me.

She rakes her fingers into my hair, bringing me back to her lips as our tongues continue rolling together seamlessly. Fisting my hair in her hand, a groan leaves my throat. My hand finds her thigh, pulling it up and around my back to anchor myself into her.

I've never felt so achingly hard in all of my life.

I need to kiss her everywhere I've been eyeing since our therapy started. That slender neck, that gorgeous jaw, her perfect, heavy breasts. I need to touch everything with my lips like a fucking explorer pioneering uncharted land. Everywhere I kiss, I'm claiming as mine.

I pull back from her lips, the need to taste her everywhere amplifying. My tongue finds the smooth skin of her neck, kissing and licking along the sensitive area, and she moans my name again.

She's moaning my fucking name. God, I can't wait to slide into her and hear her scream it.

"Lake," she says again.

"Mhmm," I murmur against her neck, kissing beneath her ear.

“Lake, stop.”

Oh, shit. That word.

I pause, pushing onto my elbows, worry etched into my face. She's breathless as she gazes up at me. Her half-lidded eyes tell me how intoxicating this is for her too, and I fucking love the view of her beneath me.

“We can't do this,” she says, her hand reaching up, her fingers grazing my chest.

Listening to her words, I lift myself into a plank, looking down as she stares at my body. She said stop. Biting the corner of her lip, that hand on my chest slowly trails down my abdomen, tracing over every ab as she does.

“This is breaking a professional code of conduct,” she continues, her breaths still clipped, eyes still on my body above her.

Her mouth drops open and her eyes widen slightly as she sees the massive strain in my sweats hanging between us.

“You…sure?” I ask, confused.

Her words and her actions don't seem to correlate. Her hand finds the edge of my sweats, passing over it before she palms my dick over my pants. I squint my eyes closed and exhale at the sensation. It feels fucking amazing already.

She hasn’t even touched you yet.

“Yeah. Plus, you're a dick.” She looks back up at me as I open my eyes again. “You don't deserve this.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“I'm only a dick because you drive me mad,” I explain, my voice shaky as she strokes me. “I want you and you couldn’t care less, remember? That infuriates me.”

“So you act like a child because you can't have what you want?”

“Yeah,” I moan like a weak bitch when she cups my balls in her palm, rolling her fingers along them. “I-I'm a fucking child.”

I can't focus on what I'm saying. I'm just going to agree with whatever she says while she's stroking me over my pants like this. It feels phenomenal.

“That's right,” she confirms. “You are.”

I can't hold back my grin as I figure out this little tease of hers.

Goddamnit, this girl.

“Say you're sorry,” she demands, her tongue tracing her lips as she continues to stroke my cock through the sweats. “For how you treated me today.”

I shake my head. “I'm so fucking sorry.”

I fall back onto her, my lips pressing softly against hers again.

I quickly roll over onto my back, carrying her with me until she's straddling me. It's easier on my knee, but honestly, I just want to see her from this point of view. My eager hands find her thighs, tracing up her soft flesh until they come to rest at her waist. She sits up on me, breathless.

“I don't really think you are,” she says. “I think you're saying whatever you can to keep this going.”

“Yes and no,” I reply, trailing my hands down her thighs and then back up to her waist again, obsessed with her curves. “I really am sorry for being a dick to you. It's honestly out of character for me. But I also want this to keep going, so I will literally do anything.”

With her hands now planted on my chest to hold her up, her lips curl into a grin. She fights it, though, so I need to explain myself.

“I…” I stall, trying to find the words. “I get possessive, I guess?”

She cocks her brow, rolling her hips on me, and I almost buckle.

“How can you be possessive of something that isn't yours?”

Because you will be mine. You just don't know it yet.

If she honestly thinks I'd be cool with her seeing any of the other guys, or even attempting to go on dates with Beckham for that matter, she's crazier than I thought. I won't allow it. Not now. Not ever.

“I'm not yours,” she answers, as if reading my mind.

My brows raise. “I know.”

“And you're not mine,” she declares softly, rolling her hips forward again.

I'm trying my best to remain focused, but I can't tell if that makes her sad or if she's just letting me down gently. I can't get a read on her at all. She’s the murkiest of all waters and I’m clear as, well, a Lake.

She's so unlike the women I usually surround myself with. She's incredibly guarded. To be honest, I get it. There's a lot at stake here, especially for her. She could lose her job, and I, the football star, would get a pat on the back.

“So, what do we do?” I ask, curious.

Her hands slide up my pecs and over my shoulders until they plant on the spaces beside my neck. She leans over me and I can imagine her riding me in this position, her full breasts hanging before me, her hair cascading around her. Fucking beautiful.

I can't hold serious conversations like this.

“We use each other,” she whispers down over me. “For one night. We use each other and just get it out of our systems.”

She grinds her hips into me again, gliding along the length of my cock, and my eyes roll back into my head.

“Then we go back to business. Never mention it again.”

Yeah, fucking right.

There's no way I'll be able to forget this. I've already memorized her every curve. Fallen for the taste of her lips. I'm in serious fucking trouble if she

thinks I won't be thinking about trying to do this again. But I can handle it. I've convinced many to let me in again.

"I mean it, Lake. It's the only thing that works for me," she says, stalling her motions.

My eyes narrow, fixing on her face. *The only thing that works for me?*

That sounds like something I'd say to some chick I wasn't interested in. I think I have used those exact words in the past. *This is all I can afford to do. Sorry, Tina. Now hit the road. I came. It's over with.*

"Same," I say instead.

She nods, thankful I agree, and I kind of hate it. What is it about me she doesn't like? But she's right. Anything more than this one night is going to complicate things. Shit, even tonight is complicating things, but maybe it'll break this tension between us so we can do what she assumes; focus again. I want nothing more than to focus again.

I can't be this possessive guy who pops off on her for no reason, bursting into her room searching for other dudes. A man who gets jealous over fictional characters in a book that more than likely has already made her cum. *You know what? Fuck the brothers of Bearback Mountain.* I'm getting heated just thinking about it.

"Fuck Cagen."

Shit.

"What?" she asks, her head tipping.

Come up with something, you fucking idiot.

"Huh?"

Oh, you fucking moron.

"What'd you just say?" she asks again.

"Fuck Cagen," I mutter, attempting to save myself. "Pretend I'm him. Fuck

me like you'd fuck that mountain man who disrespected you. Use me tonight."

She bites her bottom lip, but it pulls out into a sexy little grin before a light chuckle leaves her throat.

"I'd never pretend you were someone else," she declares, rolling those hips again, grinding those tiny shorts along my cock while her eyes bore into me.

Yeah, she has got to stop talking like that. Those words do strange things to a man like me.

She leans forward, trailing her face along my jawline until her lips brush my neck. I turn my head, giving her all the space she needs to do whatever she wants. She plants a few soft kisses beneath my ear, then sucks my earlobe between her warm lips. My hands slide their way down until they find her full ass. I squeeze while thrusting up, groaning again, imagining sliding into her.

Her breath meets my ears before she whispers, "I'm going to enjoy my night with you, Lake."

Oh, shit. Achingly hard.

"Yeah?" I ask as she grinds those hips into mine again.

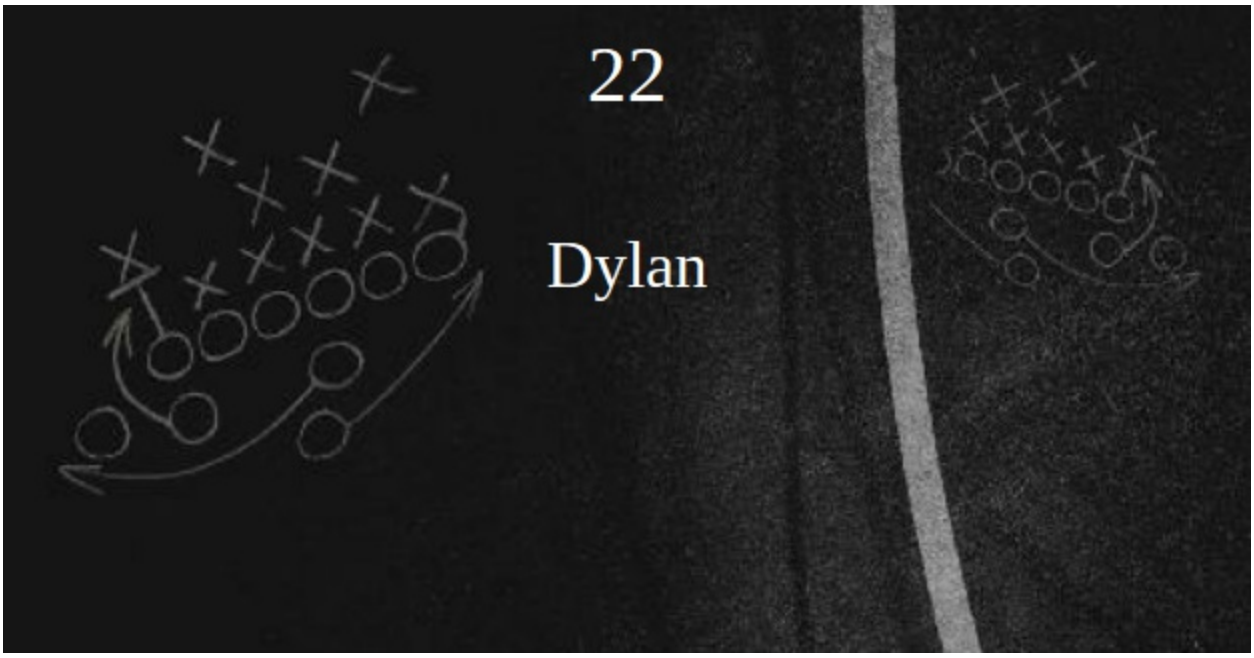
She shifts so her lips are now centimeters above mine, her breaths falling upon my lips.

"Like it's the last night we have." She kisses my lips softly and I tilt my jaw up for more, but she pulls away. "Because it is."

I still, staring up at her as my heart pounds in my chest. Something about her tone is definitive, and if I know anything about who Dylan is as a person, she generally sticks to her guns when she means it. Where others see her as Type A, I see her as Type D, for dictator. She may not realize how horrible of an idea this is until tomorrow, but at least I can have her for tonight.

I swallow, my hand sliding up and around her neck until my fingers fist into the back of her sandy-colored hair.

“Well then,” I begin, gazing from her lips to her eyes. “We better make it worth it.”



Oh sweet Jesus, he's kissing my neck.

Lake Decker is kissing my neck.

I'm straddling him. His hands are pulling me down onto him. And Lake Decker's mouth is on *my* neck.

Not fangirling because...gross. Like he needs that to inflate his already enlarged head. I'm just in disbelief as to how I got here. I was so strong a lifetime ago.

Responsibilities. Ethics. Codes… I can't fucking think while he's doing that thing with his tongue.

“You're sure about this?” he murmurs against my neck.

I push up off of him abruptly. *No, I'm not sure. How dare you ask me that preposterous question! Knowing damn well all I need is one excuse, one moment, one reason, to make all of this stop.*

He tightens his grip on my ass, thrusting against me with his stiff cock, and I'm reduced to my liquid form, melting into him.

“Stop talking, Lake. Mouth closed. No more words. Except, keep using it to do t-that thing you were doing.”

He chuckles, one of his massive hands snaking slowly up my spine until it finds the back of my neck. Pulling me down flush to his chest, he does that thing where he kisses a spot on my neck, opens his mouth and his tongue pulses on the area with such precision before his teeth graze the skin.

“Oh God,” I whimper, feeling his teeth dig into me.

“You're making me so hard,” he murmurs, his deep voice rumbling against the skin of my neck. “Those little sounds you keep making…”

I close my eyes tightly, running my fingers down the side of his chest again, never getting enough of the feel of his rock-hard body and rippling abdomen. I want my tongue to take a test drive down the wild terrain of those hills like one of those car commercials, but I'm locked in his hold as I grind down on him.

He flinches slightly and I go medical.

“Are you comfortable? This isn't painful, is it?” I ask, pulling back from him and looking down.

God, I'm an idiot. I can't help but to think in therapist. I don't want him re-injuring himself or falling back on his progress with me. Forever the therapist.

“Oh, it's painful.” He laughs me off.

My brows raise in worry, but before I can say or do anything, he roughly rolls us over so I'm on my back against the plush comforter again. My tits bounce beneath my flimsy tank as I lay back, and his eyes go right to them.

“Dylan, Dylan, Dylan…” He shakes his head. “Off.”

He grabs my tank top by the chest, pulling my upper half off the bed toward his face. Gasping at the sudden forcefulness, I try to clench my thighs

together but only squeeze myself against his hips, feeling it in all the right places.

I lift my arms and he lifts the tank top straight off, leaving me topless before him.

Naturally, I go to cover myself with my hands, but he’s quicker, swatting them away. My palms lay facing the ceiling, and I bite down on my lip.

“Jesus.” His fingers softly trail up my ribs before he cups me in his large palm, my chest heaving in nervousness beneath him.

It's been a while since I've actually been naked in front of a man like this. As if I had time to sleep around. Eric was unfortunately my last, and that was already a year ago. I'm not generally an insecure person. I just don't try hard to change my natural look.

But it's moments like these that make me rethink everything. I should be wearing more makeup. I should've done a few more crunches. I shouldn't have eaten all that McDonald's with Colin last week. My insecurities are screaming as I stare up at the ceiling, wishing someone with more confidence could occupy my body for the time being.

As if hearing my embarrassing thoughts, he grips my chin between his forefinger and thumb, pulling my head down to face him.

“Get out of your head,” he demands, looking down at me. His brows knit together as he licks his lips. “You have no idea.”

I swallow down my nerves, staring back into his eyes as he compliments me with his gaze. His movements are slower, and his thumb grazes my erect nipple, flicking it lightly before firmly pinching down. I close my eyes, embracing it. I writhe beneath him, feeling the direct line from my nipple to my clit that desperately needs more friction.

He studies me closely, watching his touch affect me. As if possessed by the

need to taste me, his mouth finds the sensitive bud and his lips surround it. Kissing, sucking, then gently nipping the tip, he continues toying with my breasts before his hand travels down my stomach to my shorts. Over the silk material, his fingers apply pressure, and I'm embarrassed by how damp the area is.

“Oh yes,” Lake groans, looking down at the material that's now slick against my skin, matted to me, showcasing my arousal. “That's so sexy, Dylan.”

Without another word, he kisses his way down my abdomen, taking his time to taste everything.

I swallow again, looking up at the ceiling, trying to control my breathing.

Keep calm, Dylan.

I sit up on my elbows with a shaky breath as he pulls my shorts down over my hips. He peels them off, throwing them across the room before his hands find my thighs again. I'm breathing so hard I feel I could pass out. He eyes every part of me like he can't take in enough before those dark, gunmetal blues find mine. He looks hungry for me like a starved man would, knowing that even after, he'll be left aching for more.

My heart pounds through my chest as I mentally take my vitals. *Blood pressure: 180/110. Pulse: 140 and rising. Temperature: Molten lava. Prognosis: Imminent death.*

Lake Decker is between my thighs!

His lips draw a line from the inside of my knee to the upper inside of my thigh, planting open-mouthed kisses along it. The build-up is so much that I squeeze my thighs around his head, rolling my hips upward towards his mouth.

He chuckles softly, looking up at me with his dark brown waves falling into

his eyes. “Patience, D.”

He wants to preach patience while calling me 'D'?! Lake fucking Decker is between my thighs!

Every thought ceases to exist when his tongue meets my clit. My world shifts on its axis and my thoughts are left in a different dimension.

“Lake,” I whisper breathlessly, my hands reaching up and gripping the pillow beneath my head.

His tongue runs the length of me gently before his lips surround me, making love to me with his mouth. Sounds that are unrecognizable to me leave my lips as he continues his sweet torture. I feel myself getting wetter by the second as his tongue alternates from a gentle sensation to a perfect pressure to all the places I need. Pure heat, uncontrollable lust, and need are building as he slowly stokes the fire between my legs with the tongue from heaven.

“Fucking beautiful,” he murmurs to himself as his finger joins the party, coating it with my excitement. He slowly eases it into me while his tongue continues to flick my clit, and my back arches off the bed.

He pumps the finger in a ‘come hither’ motion, and the flames are out of control. My hips rise to meet his tongue as I watch his expert mouth devour me whole. The man whose goal is to drown me with the way his presence creates the inability to breathe is now heating me past the point of recognition.

“Lake, I'm—”

He quickly removes his finger before I can even finish my sentence. His head snaps up and his forehead wrinkles, his lips coated with my arousal. The lack of contact makes me whimper, sounding entirely desperate for this orgasm that was on the brink of destroying me.

“I'm sorry.” He shakes his head, backing away from me. “I need to feel your first around me,” he says, standing and pulling his sweats down his chiseled form. “Have to.”

His need to feel my orgasm around him has me pooling even more in anticipation.

But fear quickly stamps that anticipation as I eye the school bus full of children he thinks he's driving into me.

“Holy fuck, Lake.” My eyes widen as I take in the image of his hand stroking himself from base to tip.

I felt it while grinding on him, but seeing it before me? I'm completely intimidated. He's got angry veins leading down his flawlessly sculpted V, sending all the blood in his body to the most perfect engorged dick I've ever come in contact with. He's easily the most attractive man I'll ever sleep with.

He's a God. The archetype of male beauty. Who is this mythical man of perfection, and from which fucking realm did he descend?! He doesn't need his injured leg. Fuck it. Cut it off. He could play on these two alone and still become the legend he's set out to be.

He grabs the discarded sweats and reaches for the pocket, grabbing a condom from his wallet. He tosses the leather square on the desk nearby, and for some reason, I feel a pinch in my chest.

I don't want to be another number, even if this was my idea. Seeing that he always comes packed and ready for a fuck makes me feel like I just pulled number 438.

“We'll ease into it.” He smirks, rolling the condom on as he slowly stalks toward me again.

My lips part and I suck in a breath as he carefully crawls over top of me, his large shoulders and biceps flexing like a prowling lion while those darkened

blues stare daringly into me.

I can't be his prey. I won't be his conquest. I need to channel my inner Mara from Break Me on Bearback and take his power from him like she did Cagen, the only way I can.

Sticking my forearm out, I firmly press on the inside of his stabilized arm, causing him to roll to his side. Using the momentum, I roll him onto his back. His eyes are wide with shock at the wrestling move I've just pulled from my back pocket.

"*I'll* ease into it," I say, holding his wrists above his head now as I straddle myself above him.

Control. I'm in control here, Lake.

He chuckles again, wearing this sexy smirk, showcasing that chipped tooth again that makes me buckle.

"Just as long as you kiss me while you do it," he whispers, his smile fading into something serious.

We stare at each other for a second that feels more significant than all the others. My heart is pounding. Thunderous beats flood my ears. I nod, finding myself succumbing and agreeing to his terms again. *Lake wants to kiss me while he enters me?* My stomach twists at the thought.

"Please, D," he begs with such need, tipping his chin up, his lips parted and waiting.

I'm weak around him, even if I try to reclaim my strength. I can't. I'm wilted. Melted liquid in his presence. I fall into him, becoming the cool, dark water that he is. Taking my last breath, I let go of whatever land I held onto before going under.

I lean over him, attempting to restrain him, but he pushes his arms out of my weak little hold, palming my face between his hands as he pulls my lips

to his. He devours me, his tongue slipping between my lips, kissing me with an uncontrolled nature. His taste is his own mix of sugar cookie. Sweet and heartwarming. Like a home away from home.

His hands slip under my arms, running down my ribs until they meet my hips. He grips my ass, slowly sliding my wetness all over him. He's still kissing me while he pushes me back onto the head of his swollen, aching cock, and he slips inside me.

It's overwhelming, this connection. All of it. The sensations. The sounds. The sights. The emotions. Everything.

I don't know who I am anymore.

He slowly stretches me as I inch my way back onto him, his mouth never leaving mine. We swallow each other's moans and groans, slowly adjusting to the feeling of each other until we set our pace.

Intoxication doesn't even cut it. I'm completely lost in him, and nothing is tethering me to land anymore. I'm sucked out to sea with every thrust of his hips. Pulled beneath the surface with every groan that escapes his throat. Held under without oxygen by eye contact that never ceases.

I sit back onto him as he forcefully thrusts up, and the faces he makes while his hands palm my breasts have me breathless, crying out in pleasure. So focused. So intense. Our bodies slap together as we connect, and our pleasured sounds echo throughout the enormous master suite.

With my hands on his chest, I rake my nails down his taut abdomen as I ride him. Leaning back, I find the angle that makes us both gasp. My breasts bounce in the air, and insecurities are a distant memory. I'm lost in the pleasure of him hitting some magical spot that makes me feel like I either need to pee or explode internally with a dynamite that could destroy shopping centers.

He stiffens beneath me, squinting as his hands grip my ass tightly.

“Shit, Dylan.” He groans, tossing his head back against the bed as he mutters phrases. “You're too much for me. It's been so long. It's so good.”

He grips my arms, pulling me chest to chest with him again, and holds me tight to him, kissing me as he continues to pummel into me. It burns, the pain of his size slamming into me. But it’s the best kind of pain.

“So.”

Kiss.

“Fucking.”

Kiss with tongue.

“Good,” he says in a raspy tone.

“Lake, oh God,” I cry out. “I’m coming.”

Wrapping an arm around my lower back, the other snakes its way up the back of my neck, ensuring my lips stay on his as I clamp down around him. I lose myself, whimpering my cries into his lips as I experience one of the most amazing, most mind-numbing orgasms I've ever had.

Fireworks explode behind my eyes, and I'm crippled with a spine-tingling pleasure that has my toes curling into themselves.

His eyes are focused on me when I finally find the strength to open mine again, a concentration set on me I've never felt before. He's panting, a deep guttural grunt leaving his lips as his head drops back against the bed, followed by the sexiest sounding groans with every thrust he gives me until I know he's emptied himself into the condom, finishing right after me.

As if the separation from my mouth is too much for him, he pulls me back to his lips so he can seemingly breathe again. He kisses me so passionately, so possessively in the aftermath, as if he's staking a claim to something he can't have while still inside me. I've never felt so wanted, so valued, so

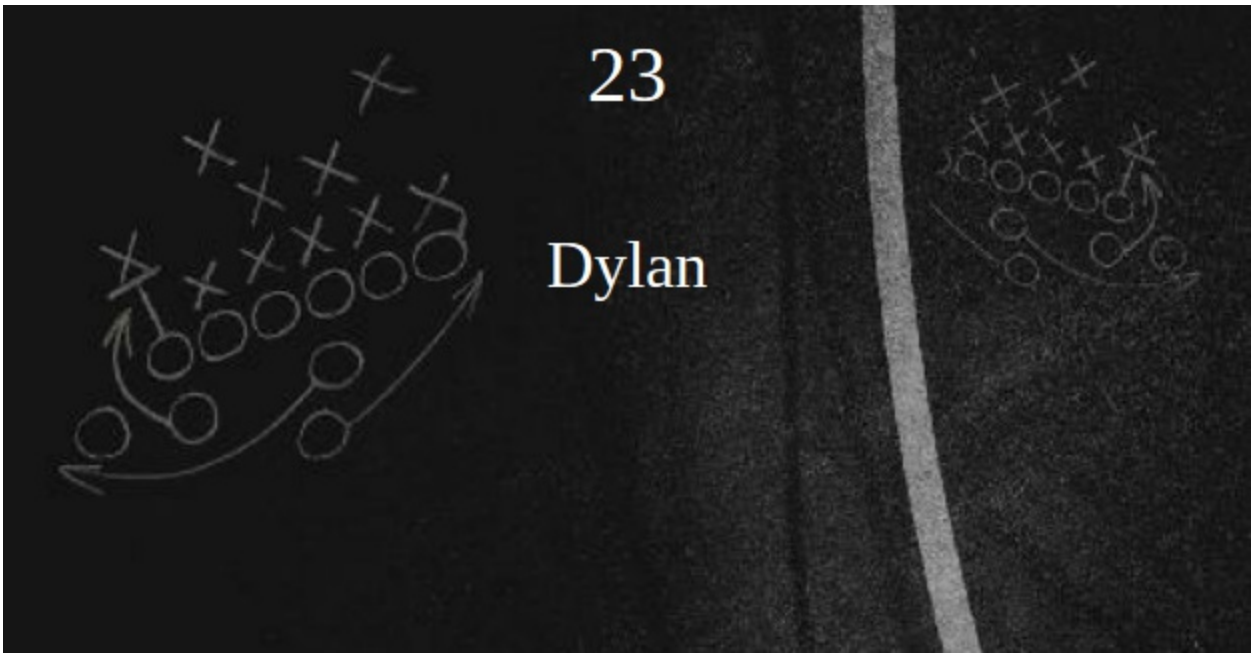
needed by someone before, especially not during sex. There's an unspeakable connection to whatever just happened here that terrifies me.

Our foreheads rest together as we both try to control our breathing. The slightest pull of a grin forms, but words are like putty, unable to be formed.

This was supposed to be a fuck. Both of us getting out whatever sexual tension we had built up and tossing it into the fire. But what's happening between us is only stoking the fire, adding more to the coals that burn beneath. Igniting something and strengthening it like gas to the flames we deny. Flames that need to be snuffed out immediately before the irreversible damage is done.

Lake Decker made love to me.

He doesn't need to fuck me. I've successfully found a way to fuck myself.



Even sitting on this cushioned seat, I can still feel him inside me.

Maybe that was the plan all along. To have me so used up, I'd remember our night all day today and the following day and the following day.

We spent the night doing things we'd never do again. Once was not enough. Testing our limits, pushing each other's buttons again and again until we were so spent I barely had the energy to wake up and make my flight back home.

I’d woken up to the earliest light filtering into the bedroom. Orienting myself, I found his heavy arm draped over me, my cheek against his chest, both of us still naked, with twisted legs beneath the sheets. I stared at him as he slept so peacefully. His lips, seemingly more pouty than before, any and all tension absent from his expression. His hair was still tossed across his forehead in the mess we'd left it.

My heart squeezed tightly in my chest, knowing this was the end. It had to be. I don't even know if he’ll still want me to be his therapist after exploring

each other the way we did. The way I just so carelessly tossed my career into the flames, it infuriates me.

I'm disappointed in myself for acting so reckless when I have real responsibilities back home waiting for me. Colin's future depends on my decisions, and I totally fucked them away by being a selfish, dick-hungry whore.

Sleeping with Lake would only cause me problems. Not him, though. It wouldn't affect his life in the least. He could go on, easily find a new therapist to finish the job, and replace me like I never happened.

I'd be back to spotting Cedric and asking Greg if I could host Pampered Chef parties for supplemental cash. This job, the money, the foot in the door to the career of my dreams, all of it, gone. Because, like Lake said, I couldn't keep my legs closed.

I'd scurried out of that hotel room while he was still sleeping, wondering where we stood going forward. I couldn't wait around and ask. I didn't want to feel the rejection I knew he'd give me. I didn’t think I could stomach the look in his eyes when he dismissed me as his therapist. The fog had lifted, the veil of lust pulled from my eyes, and I needed an escape.

Now I sit in coach on this cheap airline, nervously cracking my knuckles as people shuffle onto the plane and find their seats. I let out a vast sigh of relief, loving the fact that the seat next to me has yet to be filled. There's nothing worse than being forced to sit next to some stranger who smells.

My luck is shit on as an older woman checks the number above my row. She smiles at me, and I give her a forced grin back. Pushing her bag up into the overhead, she actually passes gas in front of my face. I drop my head into my hands, groaning as I pull my sweatshirt up and over my nose as inconspicuously as possible.

She takes her seat as another waft of flatulence hits me.

Must be nice to fly on a private jet in your own reclining seat, being served extravagant meals with champagne, and not have to breathe in random stranger's gas. I hate that I do it, but I find my mind wandering to Lake again.

After last night, I have a feeling I'll be remembering the evening often. Seeing his dark hanging locks between my thighs as he devoured me. My legs squeeze together, still feeling the ache between them from the man who drove through me relentlessly until just before dawn.

Peering down the aisle, I see a guy with hair just like the disheveled mop that was between my legs not even three hours ago, walking onto the plane in the line of people still filtering in.

I must be crazy.

I'm seeing things. Manifesting them.

I watch as he gets closer, and the resemblance is uncanny. I sit up higher in my seat, trying to see his face behind the man standing and putting his carry-on in the overhead, but every chance I get, someone else stands in front of my field of view.

The crowds part, and I see him clear as day.

Lake Decker.

Lake's on the plane. Lake's on the motherfuckin' plane. Oh, shit. Why is Lake on my commercial flight?! He should be back in Chicago already with the team.

With his bag slung over his broad shoulder, he patiently waits in line with an amiable smile on his sexy face while the people in front of him get into their seats. He's in a fitted black sweatshirt and sweatpants, his textured hair laying perfectly tousled as he ducks his tall frame in the small aircraft. I know

he smells like spiced cologne and aftershave. I can still taste him on my tongue.

My heart is beating a mile a minute. *Does he know I'm on here? Does he see me? Should I hide? I should hide.*

I cower down, pretending to shuffle through things in my purse on the floor, looking for my lip gloss, when I feel him standing next to my aisle.

“Excuse me, ma'am.” His deep, sexy voice floods my ears, finding its way inside me, running down into the pit of my gut as he speaks to the woman next to me. I want to disappear. “I was wondering if you'd be so kind as to switch seats with me.”

His voice is velvet, rubbing over and across this poor, unassuming older woman as he has his way with her. Poor old lady never saw it coming.

“You see, my stomach is upset from my breakfast this morning, and I'd rather be closer to the restrooms, just in case I get sick.”

Oh my God. Pathetic. She'll never buy it.

“Oh dear! Of course, Honey. I completely understand,” the old woman responds, going to stand. “My stomach hates mornings too.”

That much I already know.

I rub my lips together, shaking my head at the ridiculousness. The woman digs in her old leather purse, and I quickly find the strength to peer up at Lake from the corner of my eye. He's already staring down at me with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes that makes my stomach do that uncomfortable twisting thing again.

“Some Tums for you, dear,” she says, handing him a few round tablets.

“You are my lifesaver,” he replies, handing her his ticket. “Thank you so much for your kindness. Hope you enjoy the seat.”

Her eyes widen when she peers down at the ticket, and I assume she’s just

now realizing she's on her way to first class. I’m surprised this airline even has first class.

Lake tosses his bag and crutch in the overhead, reaching up above his head to help grab the woman's bag for her. I see a sliver of the skin just above the edge of his sweatpants when his black sweatshirt rises. The urge to grip his hips and suck him like a fucking lollipop comes over me, and I squint my eyes.

I suck in a huge breath, needing that oxygen again, when he dips his head down, still holding onto the carrier above me. His brows raise, wrinkling his forehead in the sexiest way as those eyes connect with mine. He whispers to me in that textured tone, “Hold my seat.”

He follows her, hobbling his way back up towards the front of the plane again, using the seats lining the aisle as his crutches. I watch as he helps her down into her seat; she holds his forearm for support, then places her bag in the overhead above. She grabs his hand with both of hers, thanking him immensely before he gracefully departs.

I wasn't expecting him to do that. I wasn't expecting to feel the flutter in my chest at witnessing his kindness to an old woman. But, here it is.

On his way back, he stops by a few people who finally recognize him as the famous athlete he is. He smiles and talks to them, signing something someone hands him before he waves and continues working his way towards the back of the plane.

A brunette woman's eyes follow him like a hawk, her head damn near swiveling 360 like the damn exorcist as he passes. But he doesn't notice. His gaze finds mine and stays locked there until he reaches the seat, plopping down next to me. He adjusts himself, kicking his bad leg out straight into the aisle before he sighs and tosses his head casually my way.

“Mornin' Chief.” He grins his stupid, sexy grin.

Fucking hell.

I turn to look out the window, unable to breathe and keep eye contact with him at the same time.

Sound normal. Please sound normal.

“Morning,” I squeak out.

His smile never fades, even as he faces forward, sitting in silence. He's all giddy and fucking happy. There's such an awkward tension here that apparently only I can feel. He acts as if this silence between us is normal. As if him getting a ticket on this plane is normal. As if him sitting in economy is normal. As if us sitting here together after a night of humping like wild gorillas in the jungle, is normal.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” he chirps, sounding too upbeat in the morning for my liking. “I got you something.”

He digs into the pocket of his large sweatshirt, pulling out a paperback book. My eyes snap to his with caution. He grins, holding out the book. I look down and see a copy of Markie Lawson's *Use Me in Yorkshire* in his hands.

It's one of my favorite books by her. One that has been in my Amazon shopping cart to buy and add to my collection after ensuring the bills are paid. I'm at the point where I couldn’t even afford to fill my stomach before boarding. My wants come last, and I've always been okay with that. I can handle it. But this is something he doesn’t know I've been aching to hold in my hands for the longest time. So small. So meaningless to most, but so meaningful to me.

I peer back at Lake, whose smile has now faded. His gorgeous blues, surrounded by those thick, black lashes, scorch through my body, making me

feel their cool, unrelenting strength spanning throughout every inch of me.

“Figured you'd want something new to read for the flight.” He gives a light shrug with a lopsided grin. “A young woman recommended it at the airport bookshop when I asked,” he mumbles.

He went to the airport bookshop and asked for a good romance novel for me? So he could sit with me on my commercial flight back home? I can't handle this. I don't understand what's happening. My chest feels heavy. I sit here, staring at him, just blinking like an idiot.

“Uh, thank you...Lake, that was really nice of you.” I stutter out, still confused as ever.

“It's nothin'.” He grins again before sitting back in his seat and pulling out his own sports magazine, casually flipping through it.

We take off and ride in silence for the first twenty minutes, both of us just reading next to one another. He adjusts his hips, spreading his legs further, and his knee rubs against mine. It's the tiniest touch, but it stems out from the small place where we connect. He must feel my anxiousness because he closes his magazine, drops it into his lap, and turns to look down at me.

“I'm sorry, is this okay?” he asks, looking from me to our connected knees and back.

No. No, it's not fucking okay.

“It's fine,” I say instead. “These seats really aren't made for a guy your size.”

I flush instantly, feeling my face redden at the use of the word size as memories of last night flood my mind again. My cheeks are as bright as Miss Frizzle's hair after my ride on the magic school bus. His massive, perfectly sculpted cock comes to mind, and my throat is drier than the Mojave Desert.

I see him staring at me from the corner of my eyes, like there's something

on the tip of his tongue. He leans in closer and I hold my breath, thinking he's coming in for a kiss. His lips brush against the edge of my ear as he whispers, “Are we good?”

I swallow and turn to face him. He leans back a little to allow me some space, but not much. Our noses are inches apart.

“Yeah,” I say breathlessly, quickly finding my voice again. “Because we have to be.”

I stare at him with wide eyes, almost warning him to keep to the agreement. He stares back, eyes going back and forth between mine. We’re trying to read each other’s minds. He's trying to gauge me, and I'm gauging him, but we're both coming up short.

He leans inward more, his lips parting slightly before he pulls back. I'm as still as concrete, watching him closely. The corner of his lips pull into a grin and his eyes twinkle with mischief again.

“It's the not being able to kiss you that makes me want to kiss you, you see?” he whispers before biting down on his bottom lip.

“Well, you can't,” I reply, clearing my throat and looking down at my lap to readjust my sweatshirt that doesn't need readjusting.

“But if I could, would you want me to?” he asks, leaning his shoulder into me, invading my airplane bubble.

The space is tight enough on this tiny airplane. Being enclosed in our own little section with someone who won't allow me oxygen is not helping. Deep waters, chest compressing, burning lungs.

“Lake,” I warn with a bite to my tone. “Don't even start.”

“Chill, D. You’re so tense right now,” he says humorously. “I'm just wondering if you'd actually want me to. Say we were just two people on a

plane. Not Lake and Dylan. Just two random strangers who've realized they’re attracted to each other. Would you want a guy like me to kiss you?”

His soft, cracked tone, his gorgeous juicy lips when he talks, the way his thigh is now sealed to mine, not only the knee—it’s too much.

“No,” I say, opening my book back up and shoving my face into it.

He grips the top of the pages with his massive hand. The hand that was gripped so tightly around the back of my neck, pulling me down into his kiss as he entered me. He pulls the book down to my lap.

“You're lying.” He chuckles. “I know when you're lying now. You do this thing with your nose. You scrunch it up all cute, like you can smell your lies as they pour out of your mouth.”

“I don't do that.” I scowl as my nose twitches.

He leans in toward my ear again. “Just tell me you'd like it, D. Hypothetically, just two people sitting here, feeling each other. Tell me you'd let me kiss you,” he whispers, the warmth of his breath making me shiver. “Please?”

He shouldn't be allowed to use the word please. It's not fair. It's crippling. He could end wars with that one word alone.

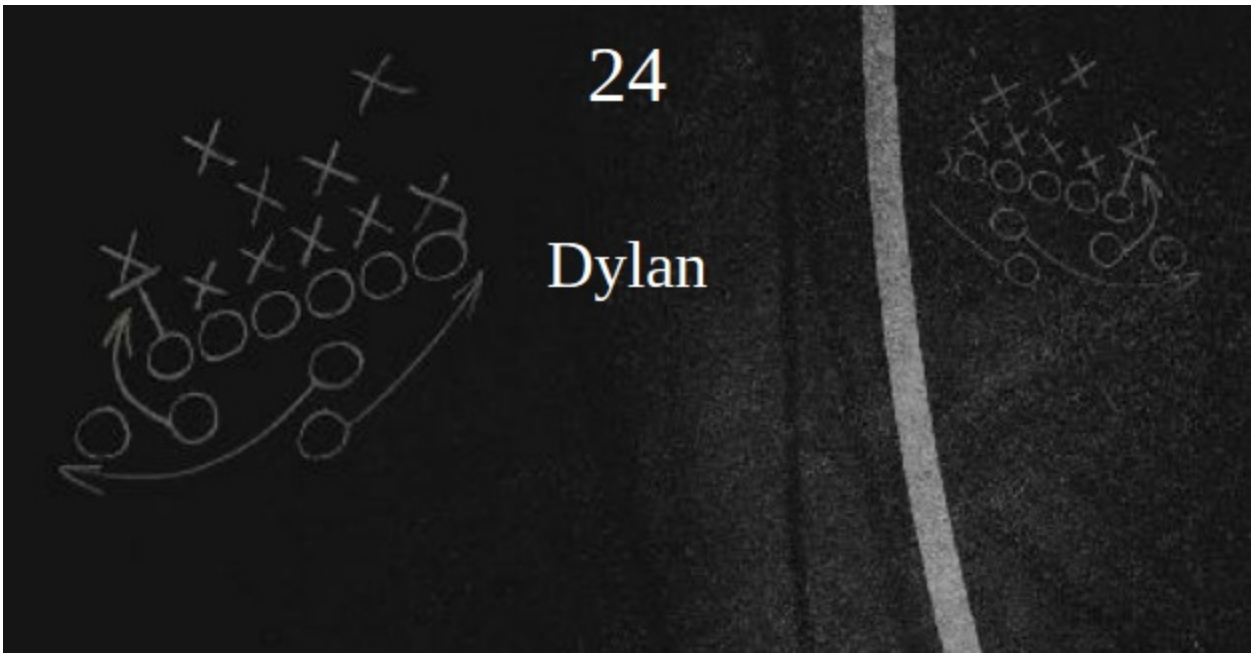
I turn my head slightly, meeting his waiting eyes. Sighing in frustration at his annoying behavior, I nod my head, hoping to end this stupid conversation. That's all he gets. I'm not giving him the satisfaction of vocalizing my answer.

His face changes. He looks at me like I just admitted the most unthinkable thing. I feel bile rising in my throat. Embarrassment floods my cheeks before his smile returns.

“Thank God,” he breathes. “That's all I needed.”

As I'm about to say something smart back to the jerk who so easily got me

to admit how weak I am, I'm surprised by the feel of his powerful hand on my jaw, followed by his soft, pillowy lips back on mine like they never left.



I stiffen as his minty taste floods me. His large hand covers our faces as his tongue dips out and glides along mine. I melt yet again, my mouth deceiving the rest of me when it moves to kiss him back. It's a soft kiss, not like the heated passion of last night. No, this kiss is wrapped in care. Soft, sweet, delicate care. His tongue gently pulses against mine and his hand slowly slides along my jaw until he's cupping the side of my neck.

This kiss is the kind you wish to never have. You feel it in places you didn't know existed. Stretching to parts that will forever remember this and the way it changed you. Knowing it will be one of those moments you look back on when you're older, cementing in time.

This kiss is that. It's definable. I feel it everywhere. And nothing hurts worse.

With his hand behind my neck, he shifts his body to turn towards me. He presses his tender lips against mine and a needy moan leaves me. He swallows it in his next kiss, then prompts another from me, tightening his

hand behind my neck until both hands are holding my head to his. He's doing that thing again. That thing where he devours me like I'm insatiable to him.

I'd never believed those books that described kisses that could make backgrounds fade, moments that make time cease to exist. But, I get it now. Everything around us somehow becomes blurry and unrecognizable, and it's just us in this little pocket of the airplane, connecting in this way that's all wrong for us.

The seatbelt sign comes on as the plane starts experiencing some turbulence. It's the alarm clock I need to wake me from this nightmare of self-destruction. I push back from his lips, leaving him hanging with his mouth dropped open and his eyes still closed. I turn to face the window, inhaling a deep breath to rid myself of the lightheadedness.

“You shouldn't have done that,” I whisper, shaking my head.

He can't toy with me like this. It's fucking with my feelings and I'm finding I'm not strong enough around him. I need to be in control, just as he needs to focus on other things that matter.

“I'm sorry,” he whispers solemnly, and I feel his stare on me.

“I wasn't saying yes to that by nodding.” I press my hand to my forehead, trying to alleviate the pressure that's building.

He swallows hard.

“I'm really sorry, Dylan,” he says again, panic painted onto his features. “I thought, I mean, I know I said hypothetically, but you kissed me back. I thought you—”

“I need this job, Lake.” I turn to face him, sternness in my tone. I've never been more serious. “You know I need this job.”

My nose isn't twitching this time. This is nothing but truth. I can't hide the pain I feel emanating from my eyes. Everything flashes before me—Colin,

our horrific past, endless nights of clutching onto my pillow, muffling my cries into it as softly as I could so he wouldn't worry something was wrong.

I have too much riding on this. I can't fold now.

He stares back at me as if trying to figure it out. Maybe he's piecing it all together—the black eye, my incessant need for control, the need to tie things up before I left town. But he swallows down his questions and simply nods.

We both shift back into our seats, letting the awkward silence fill the entire plane again. I hold up my book and read a line. I reread the same line. My chest is still heaving as I try to regulate my breathing, attempting to be normal. Whatever normal is. Again and again, I read the sentence, and I can't get into it. My head is a mess and I'm losing it. Staring at the book, I pretend to read for about ten minutes as my mind calculates the never-ending to-do list in my life.

Lake's knee is bouncing next to mine now, his long fingers tapping on his thighs to some invisible beat in his head. I glare at his drumming as his large thigh bumps into me again and again.

The guy can't sit still.

Which, I guess, makes sense. He has a literal need for speed, and the inability to move the way he so inherently wants to is probably messing with his psyche more than I realize.

He turns his chin to his shoulder again, looking at me.

“So I used to pretend I was Jeff Gordon's car as a kid,” he says casually.

My heart stops in my chest at his words. They hit too close to home. I continue staring down at my book as the story pours out of him.

“I used to be so obsessed with speed and racing that I totally bypassed being Jeff Gordon, the driver, and wanted to embody the Rainbow Warrior, his car.”

So much pressure on my chest. He has no idea how much I know about NASCAR. I close my book, setting it down on my lap, and turn to face him.

“Like, what kid pretends to be the car, right?” He scoffs at himself, running a hand through that perfect, thick hair. “But my mom knew my obsession with speed, even at a young age. She knew I wanted to be the fastest kid on the playground, zipping around everyone else. She always cradled my passions, no matter how stupid my ideas were.”

A grin melts across his face as memories take hold of him.

“S-she made me this jacket.” He pauses, shaking his head while his smile slowly fades from his beautiful face. “She tore apart a bunch of her fancy dresses, the only designer suits she ever owned, disassembled the only ones she had after he left, ensuring to match all the colors of the car. She spent hours on it at the kitchen table with her sewing machine, piecing together this jacket for me that looked exactly like that number 24 Chevy.”

I watch him as he talks, wondering why he's telling me all of this. It seems so personal, so close to the heart, so...private. Almost as if this is something no one else knows about him.

He's giving me his secrets.

“I was in heaven when I slipped into it. I ran like the wind in that thing.” He chuckles at the memory. “I could've sworn it made me faster. That the jacket had some sort of superpower to it that could bring the speed right out of my little twig legs.”

He turns to face me again, his smile dropping before he becomes focused on the tiny oval window behind me.

“But there was no superpower.” He peers back at me, a solemn expression now seated where his smile was. “The jacket was just a bunch of woven

fabric, made up of vibrant colors that did nothing more than look good. There was nothing special about it at all."

His jaw tightens as emotions rain over him. He scowls away whatever pain is attempting to release. My heart feels like it's cracking into shards, listening to him describe this part of his childhood.

"It didn't push me to get up every morning when I was a punk kid who wanted to sleep in. It didn't support me by working three jobs so I could go to the best schools in the state. It didn't cry by itself at the kitchen table late at night while writing out checks that couldn't be cashed. That jacket never made selfless sacrifices so I could become who I am today."

He turns to face me, eyes set on mine so hard. I stare back at his unrelenting gaze, continuing to listen as he pours out his soul to me.

"I-It wasn't the jacket." He turns to face the front of the plane as his words fall effortlessly from his lips. "It was her."

My mouth parts, and my focus is entirely on him. The beat of my racing heart, pounding in my ears.

"She was the superpower." He swallows the lump in his throat, his voice breaking ever so slightly.

The story has my eyes lining with tears. The dedication, the struggles, the devotion to her son—it's everything I can relate to in my life with Colin. His mother made selfless sacrifices for him to be who he is today, and what's best is that he appreciates that. He's aware of it.

Unbeknownst to him, this story reaches a part of me he doesn't know yet. He couldn't possibly know my 'whys'. Not one man I've ever met could handle the fact that I'm the primary caregiver to my older brother. Eric destroyed any chance of me bringing a man into our lives by putting the fear of losing me into Colin. He'd tried endlessly to search for a place to put him.

To separate us again in order for the relationship to work for him. As if Colin was a dog who needed boarding.

I'd accepted my role and my promise to him and would never let anyone try to separate us ever again. I rejected the idea of dating again after that. We're a pair, Pickle and Col, and that's not something that will ever change. Guys my age don't want that *baggage*, as they say. They want easy, and my life has been anything but.

But the thing about Lake is that he recognizes drive and dedication, whatever the reason behind it. He sees my efforts, and that means more than anything else. This glimpse of the real man behind the famous football star facade has made me trip. And tripping is the prelude to falling.

"I'd never jeopardize your job, Dylan," he continues. The pained tone in his voice doesn't go unnoticed. "I have nothing but respect for you."

I blink away the cloud of tears that beg to fall. I inhale whatever I can to breathe while eyes full of regret wash over me. He nods to himself as if finally dismissing his own urges and thoughts. As if knowing because of the things he's been through, he can't look at me the same way.

I feel the finality of it; the let go of our brief fling or whatever this tried to be. I'm kidding myself if I actually thought for a second that Lake Decker would ever want me for anything more than what this was; one night. It can't happen. Won't happen.

He's respecting my wishes for the agreement.

It's everything I need.

What I can't figure out is why it's nothing I want.

There's nothing I respect more than drive.

Determination. A goal to achieve. A mission to conquer. I know all about achieving goals. I'm the king of it. Give me a bar and I'll set that motherfucker higher than anyone can reach. It's who I am. It's what I do.

And when I see it materialized before me, I recognize it.

I've learned the trade from my mother. Telling Dylan the story on the plane wasn't something I had planned. I'd heard her words, and they tore through me. *I need this job. You know I need this job.*

It cut me to my core, slicing through to a piece of my past I'd held onto, causing a familiar ache I'd felt before to materialize. I could hear the echo of those words stemming from my past.

Shortly after she left my father, my mom missed a shift because I was too sick to go to school. She couldn't afford daycare, and I wasn't old enough to be home alone all day in her eyes. I remember it so vividly. She was pressed into the wall near her nightstand. The one with the gold lamp adorned with a ripped maroon lampshade. Her body was so small as it curled around the

phone, attempting to be quiet. But I heard. I heard her begging them to let this one slide, and to help her just this once. Her cries from the bedroom were muffled, but I knew.

She did what she always did, wiping away those tears and pushing through the pain. Returning to me with a bowl of soup and a big smile, she'd plopped down on the couch with me, ready to watch movies all day.

My mother knew leaving my father would be difficult. That being a single mom and finding ways to make ends meet could break her, but she never broke. Not once. Not for me. She bent. Molded herself into whatever she had to be for us to succeed. She wouldn't have it any other way.

Dylan is a strong, confident woman who's self-assured but subtle about it. She knows what she wants and goes and gets it, and I admire the hell out of that.

What I don't understand is a woman who knows what she wants but pushes it away.

My night with Dylan in the hotel room was unlike anything I'd expected. My jock brain that's been knocked around one too many times isn't even able to process the correct verbs to describe it. She's flipped my whole world. Spun me so much that I can't think about anything but her and the way she felt around me, the way she tastes. It's all still on the tip of my tongue, this need for more.

I don't see a future where that doesn't happen between us again.

She wasn't kidding me when she mentioned one night with her wouldn't be enough. It's not. Which is why I can't understand why she's single. Is she single? Exes must be lining the blocks, waiting to slide back into her life.

Inhibitions, insecurities, and self-doubt were ghosts of the past that night. Maybe that was part of it. The fact that we knew we only had one night. We

felt this need to prove something, to experience all we could in those few hours. And fuck—did we.

She gave me a taste, and now I need to swallow her whole.

What she doesn't realize is, I'm Lake Decker. If I want something, I'm going to go get it. Am I entitled? Maybe, but only because I work my ass off for what I want. And what I want is another night with Dylan.

I'll play along with her for the time being. She wants to be a professional. Sure, I get it. I'd never do anything to jeopardize her career, and I meant it when I said that. But that's not the only thing holding her back from me. She has her secrets. Dylan has something ugly in her past that keeps her there, and I'm curious enough to get to the bottom of that.

I knew she'd leave early that next morning. It wasn't just to catch the flight. I knew what time the flight was leaving. No one is that punctual. She wanted to get out of there and not have to deal with the awkwardness of facing me the next morning. Too bad I made sure she'd have to face the inevitable so soon. I love awkward. I relish it.

Seeing the shock on her face when I boarded that flight was worth the cramped leg room. That kiss was worth the cramped legroom. Fuck, that kiss. Those lips. I couldn't help myself. I was starved for her, and knowing I couldn't have it made me want it more. She has no clue what I'm willing to do to get those lips on mine again. What lengths I'll go to keep them on me. I'd say they were my new bad habit, but there's nothing bad about it. Kissing Dylan is nothing but good.

Now I'm back in Chicago in my highrise, looking out onto the vibrant lights of the city below with my coffee in hand, already missing that damn girl.

I pull out my phone, answering messages from my agent, before sitting back on my leather sofa to begin my internet search of the mystery woman

who’s got me fucked up. A knock on the door interrupts me.

“Open!” I yell from the couch.

Candy walks in with a bucket of chicken on his hip and a bag on his other hand, with what looks like bottles of Gatorade hanging from it. He sits down on the sofa next to me as I continue typing away on my phone. Grabbing the remote, he changes it from ESPN to Netflix, promptly finding *Friends* and picking an episode.

I glance up at him from my screen as he gets comfortable on my couch, picking the bucket off the coffee table, setting it in his lap, and bringing a piece of fried chicken to his mouth.

I glare at his ability to make himself at home. In my condo.

“So...where'd you go?” he asks with a mouthful, eyes still on the show.

“What?”

“You missed the flight. Where'd you go?” he asks again, before laughing at something Rachel says to Chandler.

I pause to think. “Just wanted to get in another session while I had the time, space, and therapist.”

His head finally rolls over to me, and the smirk on his face is already getting under my skin. He stares for a second before dropping his chicken into the bucket, placing it on the coffee table and turning to face me, one elbow on the back of the couch, brows wiggling.

“Tell me more,” he sing-songs.

I scowl.

“Oh, c'mon Deck,” he says. “I know better than anyone how dedicated you are to getting back on that field, but there ain't enough dedication in the world to make you miss a private jet. I saw from the headlines. You rode coach! Not even first class?”

Apparently, someone posted a picture they took of me while I was signing autographs on the flight. Someone also snapped one of me helping that old woman into her seat. I don't mind that publicity. It benefits me. Luckily, no one snapped a photo of my tongue down Dylan's throat.

“Hey, I'm humble enough to ride coach, Candy. We weren't all spoiled little rich brats like you and your sister.”

“Ha!” he laughs. “Leave Aniyah out of this. She's a ho.”

A cough leaves my chest that turns into a laugh. Candy and his sister are like oil and water. Polar opposites. I love when he talks shit about her, solely because I know deep down he really does love her. Makes me yearn for that kind of relationship in my life. That bond. He can call her a ho, but the second any of the teammates even think about talking about her? Well, he’d end them in a heartbeat. Doesn’t help that she's a six-foot-tall fashion model who’s insanely gorgeous. It’s his Achilles heel.

“I just wanna know if it was worth it. Was the sex fire or what?” he asks with excitement in his eyes, leaning in.

“It's not like that with her,” I retort, looking down at my phone again and seeing her name in my search tab with the cursor blinking behind it. “Not at all.”

He scoffs, rolling his head back against the couch.

“Then quit holdin’ her hostage from the rest of us, ya greedy fuck.”

His phone buzzes and his head snaps to his pants. Grabbing it from his pocket, he starts scrolling through it with his thumb, grinning like an idiot.

“But, if that's indeed the case,” he begins, still looking at his phone. “Then you won't mind if these lil’ honeys downstairs wanna come up?”

He leans over the couch, showing me a picture of two attractive women with their breasts sitting high, their long blonde and brown hair hanging

down, and their makeup that looks to be done for a goddamn wedding. Beneath the photo are the words, *We're downstairs! Let us up!*

“Seriously, Candy?” I groan.

He laughs. “What?! They're everywhere man, and I've been hungry for a little white meat,” he points to the bucket of chicken. “These thighs and breasts aren't cuttin' it. Yo man is starvin'.” He licks his lips and rubs his hands together.

I shake my head. “Fine, send them up.”

The girls arrive and it's just as I suspected. Beautiful. Fame-hungry. Eager as all hell. One latches onto Candy and the other sits too close to me. She talks to me about her viral TikTok video, showing me how many views it has. I nod, smiling at the weird dance she’s attempting in the video as her breasts bounce in her barely there clothing, but I'm not here.

I type her name into every available social media platform. No Instagram. No TikTok. No Snapchat. No Face—

Okay, there's a Facebook account.

Dylan Crawford; Northwestern. It's her. Has to be. I've seen the dingy sweatshirt.

Candy's got the girl taking a bite of chicken off the bone as he holds it above her. My face distorts as the greasy chicken slides across her face, her teeth gnawing at the hanging meat.

“Gotta clean that bone, girl,” he comments with a smirk, teeth pressed into his bottom lip as he watches her.

Fucking freak. The man has some weird kinks. Kinks that promise to stain my couch. I shake my head, sighing as I look back down at my phone screen.

Damn girl has her account marked as private, so I can't see anything other than the profile picture. But that's what freaks me out the most. I sit up on the

edge of the seat, my elbows on my knees, as I take a closer look. It's a silhouette shot of what I'm assuming to be the back of her head. She's with a guy. They have their arms wrapped around each other, looking off into the distant sunset off the edge of some cliff.

Not possible she has a boyfriend and did all that she did in that hotel room. Right?

Am I her dirty little secret?

Candy and his woman are starting to get friendly, and the girl next to me looks bored as fuck after taking all the selfies she needs around my lavish condo. I haven't entertained her in the least. I'm actually sitting here scouring the internet for another woman. Before I can kick them out, Candy asks the chicks to go back to his place. They leave together, eager to continue their night, and I'm stuck with Netflix and a half-eaten bucket of chicken.

I decide to click the friend request and wait until she accepts me.

I think about sending her a text, but I’m at a loss for what to say. It's strange, this circumstance. It's not normal. We shared something, and now we're expecting to pack it away and pretend it didn't happen?

I'm finding it's harder to do than I'd imagined.

Thank God my focus is therapy.

It doesn't even seem suspicious to my teammates or coach that I need to get back to it. Back to her.

Therapy has been decent this past week between my team meetings and practices. I've had a full decrease in my swelling and pain, and a full active and passive extension of the healing knee. We are really pushing forward with my rehabilitation, and I couldn't do it without this girl pushing me to be my best. The one who's been silently working with me the past week since the night that ruined me, not once mentioning it. The girl who's not once mentioned the fact that I friend requested her on Facebook and she's left me in pending.

Me, Lake Decker, in pending.

She's definitely been more distant. I had to reschedule an appointment for a press thing this past week, and another to help Dale with my mom, who seems to be doing much better at the moment, and Dylan simultaneously canceled on me for something she had going on. Our sessions, when we are

able to meet up, are quiet and serious. The banter that used to be there is gone. It's all business with her again. Back to being the dictator with a lack of personality.

But I'm a child, as she says, and my patience is nonexistent.

I'm done pretending like I don't see the genuine smile she tries to push back when she sees me first thing in the morning. Done ignoring the flush of her cheeks when I mention how pretty she looks with her sandy hair tied up in a high bun. Done faking like I don't feel her heart beating out of her chest when we're in close proximity during a new exercise. I'm done imagining her jealous stares, like when the flock of women circled me this morning for autographs and pictures outside the gym.

I saw her eyeing them up. Comparing herself. But it's you, D, that's got me hooked.

I've got my tricks. I'll find a way to get us in that space again. The place where she opens herself to me in every way possible.

"You got this Lake. C'mon, gimme two more. Really push through it," she says, standing on the edge of the leg press machine, facing me as I struggle with my last few reps.

"I'ma give you whatever you need, Chief," I groan, finally pushing out the last two. "Fuck!" I drop the weight and grab my leg, sucking in air through my teeth.

"You alright?" She rushes around the machine, bending down by my leg and looking up at me with those fuck me eyes she doesn't realize she's giving me. "Shit, what happened?!"

Her concern is everything I need.

"It's my hamstring, it's tight." I groan again, reaching for it, really milking it.

“Okay, okay.” She nods nervously. “Let's get you to the mat and I'll stretch you out.”

She heads towards the back room with the table and my grin spreads like a Cheshire cat.

“Sounds perfect,” I murmur to myself.

She flips on the lights to the room ahead as I limp past a man on the StairMaster. His scowl makes me smile even more. I know he hates seeing me working with Dylan. I think she used to work with him before I slid in and took her away. Now he's jealous, and I'm sending him soaring with a nod and a wink while walking into the back room with her.

Luckily, it's only the three of us here this early in the morning. Jaden and Greg don't come in until later, I've noticed. Now that I think about it, I don't like the idea of her here without a man she can trust. This greasy, overweight, smelly lard of groans and awkward moans should never be in a room alone with her. Guaranteed she's given him a woody he's been waiting to act on. I'll need to put in a call to Greg about that.

“Lay back,” she instructs, pointing to the blue mat. “You staying hydrated?”

I sit back on it as she crouches down in her cute little matching gray sweatshirt and pants, her hair up in a messy bun on top of her head, with little pieces hanging down all around her perfect little neck. That neck I can circle with one hand—

“Lake!” she yells my name, pulling me from my fun-filled fantasies. “Lay back!”

I shake my head, realizing I haven’t a clue what she just asked me, and lay back, raising my one leg to the ceiling. I swallow, closing my eyes as she

places my calf on her shoulder, enclosing her hands around my good knee. She slowly straightens the leg while leaning forward.

My quad isn't tight at all. I'm in no pain. I just wanted her hands on me in this back room again.

“How's it feel? Is this too hard?” she asks as she continues to lean forward in small increments.

I bite back my immature response, wanting so badly to scream, *You'd know if it was!*

“More,” I say, looking up at her directly above me.

I'm challenging her with my eyes. Begging to see some sign of need or want beneath the surface of those amber beauties. Her full lips part slightly as we keep eye contact. *You must want me.*

Pieces of her hair hang down, framing her heart-shaped face as she inches her way closer and closer to me. I drop my mouth open as she pushes forward more. This position is very reminiscent of our night together—her soft skin holding onto me, her honey scent flooding my senses, her beautiful face above mine as she took me deep.

“Oh, yeah.” I groan against the stretch, needing to close my eyes to ward off this erection.

She sighs, but it sounds more like a scoff. Releasing the stretch, she stands, putting her hands on her hips and glaring down at me.

“Please stop making this awkward,” she begs, closing her eyes and placing a hand on her forehead. “I'm really trying.”

I cock my brow. “I'm sorry, I thought we were just stretching? Where did *I* make this awkward?”

Her eyes narrow, and I feel her anger. *Yep, just threw that back in your face, Dictator Dylan.*

“Seriously Lake, knock it off,” she scolds, and I feel the fire in her start to smolder.

“Excuse me?! You're the one being awkward by bringing it up, Dylan.” I hop up off the mat, straightening my shorts with my palms. “I'd already forgotten about it.”

I'm such a brat. But I need something from her, even if all I get is anger. I need emotion from the emotionless workhorse before me.

She twists her lips to the side, pinching the bridge of her nose. “You're right. I'm sorry.”

No. No, that wasn't how you were supposed to respond.

“Ready to finish up?” she asks softly, looking down at the floor while pointing back out to the gym area with a thumb over her shoulder.

She won't even look at me. Unacceptable.

“No,” I snap. “I am going to need you to massage out the knot I've got in this hammy. It's killing me. Think I've been overexerting it trying to compensate.” I stare at her, brows raised.

I've got her right where I want her. She has to do these things as my therapist. Greg says so.

“Okay, hop on the table,” she says reluctantly. “I'll take a look.”

I hop on the black massage table face down in my gym shorts, hearing her inhale a shaky breath then let it out. *Yes, sweetheart, you're gonna put those hands on this thigh and rub me good.*

It's been too long. Too many nights of my hand wrapped around my cock, trying to remember the feel of her. She was so slick and wet, just begging for the feel of me inside her. I'm losing my patience and becoming desperate for her touch. A fake knot will do.

She stands behind me and I groan loudly the minute those firm little hands

find the meat of the back of my leg. Pressing her thumbs into my muscle, she works through the hamstring. Fuck, this feels good.

“I don't feel the knot,” she says softly, still pushing into me. “How does this feel?”

“You aren't getting in there deep enough,” I murmur into the table. “Think you need some more leverage. Your hands are weak. Hop up and push down harder.”

She dismisses the diss, and the need to prove her strength comes over her.

I bite back my smile as I feel her straddle me on the table. She puts her shoulders into it, really driving those hands into my leg while her thighs surround me.

“That's good. Ah, yeah, that's good,” I say, hissing.

Her hands pull back and I take the opportunity to turn beneath her, rolling over until she's straddling me on the table. She moves to hop off, but I grab her arms, keeping her in place.

“I need that on my quad too. Might as well stay here for it.” I bite down on my lip, my hands folding back beneath my head as I act casual.

“Lake…” she warns, staring down at me. “What are you doing?”

She frowns, but she doesn't go to move. Her eyelashes flutter, and I can almost hear her heart pumping vivaciously in her chest.

“Are you going to help me, or do I need to go get a professional like Jaden to finish the job?”

I can practically hear her grinding her teeth before her face changes and a laugh slips from her throat.

“Great idea,” she says, the sarcasm raging beneath her tone. “He'd love the chance to finish you off.”

My head cocks at her weird statement, and as she moves to get off me, her

knee slips off the edge of the table. Quick hands got me my job, and quick hands save her from falling. I grip her wrists, pulling her forward as her knee falls to the side. The move forces her to straddle my thigh, her top half falling on top of me. The wind is knocked from her chest as she falls into me hard.

She's right above me now, and the look on her face is one of pure terror. It feels long, this span of time since she's fallen onto me, but I'm sure it's only been a matter of seconds. Either way, I'm enjoying the hell out of it.

I lick the corner of my lip while staring at hers. Fuck, they're so close. I just want another taste. She eyes me cautiously before peering back to the closed door. I grab her face, turning her towards me.

“Just a quick one, please,” I beg, tipping my chin up slightly.

“What?!” she gasps.

“Kiss me,” I whisper.

“Lake, what happened to respecting me?! I thought you understood!” she yells at me in a hushed tone. “This can't happen!”

“D, I respect the shit out of you.” My brows pinch together, showcasing my seriousness before a little smirk makes its appearance. “That doesn't mean your accidental fall onto my lips while helping get this knot out is going to change that.”

Her chest is heaving like she just got off the treadmill, sealing her breasts to my firm chest as I keep hold of her waist. She keeps peering back and forth between my eyes and lips, and I know she's contemplating it. Remembering it.

She closes her eyes and the softest sigh leaves her lips.

“I'm going crazy, D,” I whisper. I cup the side of her face with one hand and lean up to close the space between us. “Don't make it complicated.”

A wrinkle forms between her brows, pinching the corners of her eyes

together. She hesitates above me, her body warring with her mind, but before we even get the chance to connect, her phone rings.

“Shit!” she curses, stiffening above me.

She hops off me like a damn kangaroo, running towards the tiny black bag to grab the phone.

The panic in her movements startles me, reminding me of that day Jaden called her into the office for an 'urgent' phone call. As she grabs it, I see something fall out of her purse onto the floor.

Turning to me, she holds up a finger as she answers the call. I give her a quick nod, but she’s already running out of the room, leaving abruptly. Moving to sit up, I shake out my head and my hands, realizing I may be a tad crazy for the way I've been acting.

I'm luring my therapist in to rub close to my aching dick? Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

Hopping off the table, I make my way across the room towards her purse and whatever dropped onto the floor. My curiosity with her never fails, and now I'm leaning down over it, needing to see what fell out.

Upon further inspection, I gasp when I see a curled up ball of material. *Is that what I think it is?*

Peering towards the door, I hear her voice near the office now, so I take the opportunity to pick it up. Stretching it out before me, my jaw drops to the ground.

Black lace panties?!

Dylan stuffed a black lace thong into her purse? Was she fucking some guy in the parking lot?! Her ex? Her current boyfriend? The guy from the picture? What is this?! Why are these in here?!

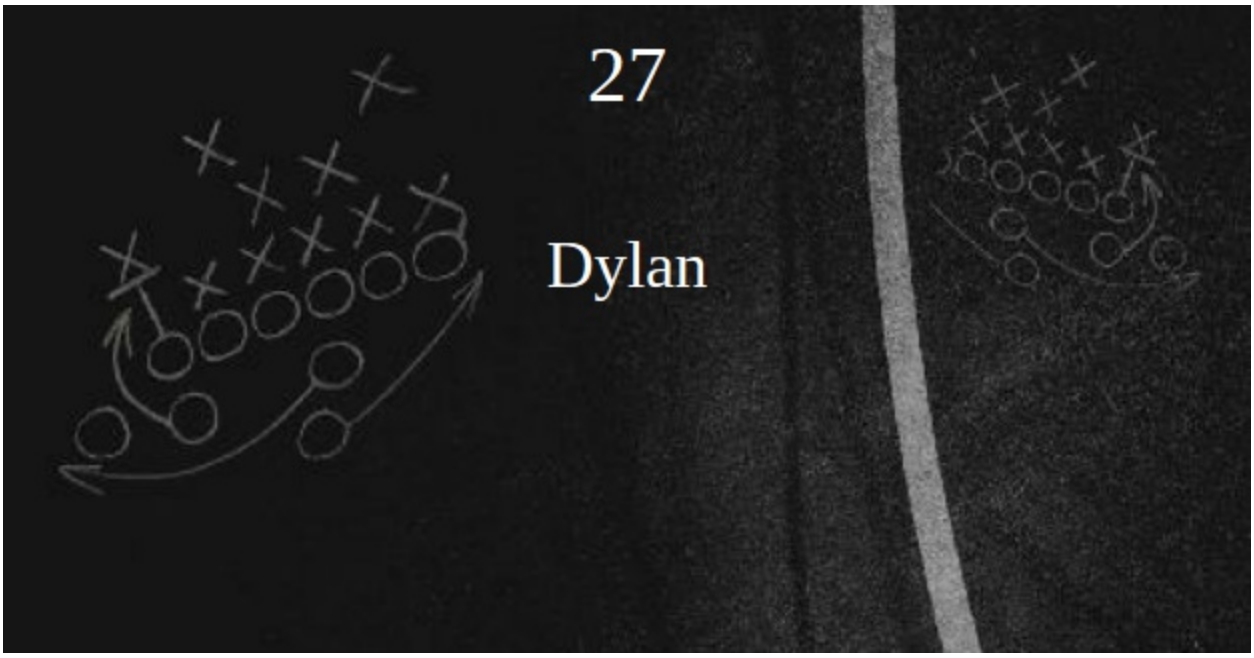
Getting heated at the crazed scenarios I'm now envisioning, I curl the

panties into my fist, grimacing towards the door. I rotate my jaw, then quickly tuck them into the pocket of my gym shorts.

The Facebook profile pic, the bruises, the panties?

This girl has her skeletons, alright.

The question is, are they worth digging up?



Land.

I need land. Lots of land.

Lots of land away from Lake.

He's slowly pulling me back down into his deep waters, making my ability to breathe nonexistent.

I wanted to kiss him. I've never had the urge, the disgusting need to kiss someone so badly in all my life, and that infuriates me.

His gorgeous, grayish-blue eyes with that firm jaw, lined with just enough stubble to rub your inner thighs in all the right ways. How he towers over me with his exquisite body, the one made by the likeness of the gods. He makes me come alive in his presence, overthinking every breath I take, making my mouth run dry under his gaze, needing him to wet my tongue. My body aches to be touched by him again. It practically begs me to rub up on him like some sort of needy feline.

I have to control my kitty.

Lake isn't the guy for me. He's a walking red flag.

He told me not to overthink kissing him. Flag. He said he'd already forgotten about our evening together as if it meant nothing. Flag. Some gorgeous Instagram model tagged him in photos on social media just last night, canoodling on the couch of some plush home, probably his. FLAG.

I wouldn't consider myself a stalker. Stalkers are crazed weirdos who search celebrities on social media platforms through made-up accounts under their older brother's name, who don't even know how to use them. Goddamnit, I'm a stalker.

Oh, well. I've accepted it. I needed to know what I was sticking my toes into with him. Now, back to the facts at hand. Lake is not interested in more than sex. Not that it matters. I'm his therapist. It's off limits. He's a possessive man who wants things and gets them. That's it. Right?

Whenever I come back to these thoughts, the story of his mother comes to mind, and it breaks down whatever stereotype I'd initially had of him. The man has a heart, that much is clear. But where and when he uses it is a whole other ballgame.

He doesn't understand my life. Nor will he ever. I'm very protective of Colin and our little situation, so much so I've closed off that part of my life entirely from people I don't trust. I don't let just anyone into our little circle.

Never again will I allow Colin to be left alone with someone who claims to care for him the way I do, especially not when that person has ulterior and selfish motives. Why would I let someone in just for them to leave, making waves for us that I’m responsible for steadying later?

My sweet brother luckily called me when I was inches away from falling into that damn Lake again. Thankfully, it was nothing serious. He simply asked if his friend Samson could come with us to watch some of their old classmates compete in the Special Olympics this week.

I was excited to get him around his friends again. It'd been a while since we'd seen most of them. Colin was part of an intramural basketball team while I was finishing up my master's degree, but since moving outside of the city, we'd yet to reconnect with them.

I needed something to look forward to. I needed a distraction. I needed a break...from Lake.

“But the green hurts, Pickle. I'll only wear canary.”

“But Colin…” I sigh, exasperated from explaining this three times now. “Your striped canary shirt is in the wash. You dripped barbecue sauce all down the front of it. Not wearing that, dude. Sorry.”

His fabric and material sensitivities are really cramping my style. It's the daily battle I suit up for with Colin. If he could wear his striped canary shirt every day, he would. I'm dreading the day the shirt unravels into nothing but a piece of string from the amount of times it's seen the washing machine.

“I can't go.” He turns and sits back down in his seat. “I-I won't go. I won't wear this.”

Throwing the shirt across his room, I grind my back teeth, trying my best to keep my cool and not flip his TV tray like I've already envisioned.

Why make more of a mess that I'll need to clean up?

After arguing for another ten minutes, I finally convince him to wear a tropical sunset Hawaiian-style shirt that has hints of canary in it.

Compromise.

We hit the road in my trusty white Ford Fusion, picking up Samson on the way. The two of them immediately start arguing over who's the better quarterback between Tom Brady and Patrick Mahomes.

I smile to myself, listening to them debate with some pretty impressive facts before we finally pull into the event parking lot on the outskirts of downtown Chicago.

It's a chilly day, and my leggings aren't doing much to ward off the winds from the lake. I tuck my mittens into the pockets of my large puffy jacket, curling into my sweatshirt as we make our way inside the practice stadium. They shouldn't be here today. This is a private event, so I'm thankful to know that the team is more than likely in meetings or practicing at Soldier Field today. The last thing I need is a run-in with my reason for becoming a psycho stalker.

Following the guys up the walkway, they both jump with excitement, clutching at each other's coats as we approach the main door. They point to a friend or someone in the distance and I hear Samson screech, "I can't believe he's here!"

I get their excitement. These events are so wonderfully comforting to me. When we come here, I feel at home. We're surrounded by people of varying degrees of exceptionality and there's a reassuring familiarity to it. It's our safe place. The place where Colin can truly be himself and no one will look at him twice. The place where we are celebrated for the differences that make up our lives.

The joyous relief I feel walking into the training facility evaporates like a cloud of dust once we’re inside. Passing through a crowd of eager and

excited athletes, I somehow immediately lock eyes with my ex near the check-in desk.

My stomach drops and bile rises in my throat as I'm assaulted by the smells of carnival-like food wafting through the air, along with the crippling anxiety of seeing Eric.

I'm overwhelmed with dread and the desire to run.

Colin and Samson are quickly approaching a group of friends, and I recognize a few of their faces immediately. Relieved to know Colin hasn't seen him, I turn to face Eric again and see he's still staring in my direction. I despise the hopeful look in his eyes.

His blonde hair is longer at the top, and slicked over into a wave. His maroon sweater fits his cut form, and he tucks his hands into the pockets of his jeans, standing tall in those brown Italian loafers he loves, all cracked and worn in.

I hate that I cared so much for him at one point, knowing now how he truly feels about Colin. There's no undoing that. He could apologize as many times as he liked, but the stain of what he did will forever haunt both of us.

Turning back towards Colin and his friends, I ignore Eric entirely, deciding not to let him ruin this day. So what if we're at the same event? We can remain adults, right?

Eventually, we find some seats on the indoor bleachers, getting ready to watch the flag football game. The first few games have my face stretched in a permanent smile. The adults, the kids, the people in the stands, everyone is laughing and enjoying themselves playfully. All I want to focus on is the energy of the entire event. The excitement, the joy, the laid-back feel to it...it's refreshing.

Colin turns back to me and places his hand on my knee. “Thanks for this,

Pickle.” He pats my knee continuously as he talks. “Thanks for taking Colin. I-I'm...I'm just so happy!” he shrieks before standing and raising his fist, cheering on the teams. “Football is my favorite. Favorite.”

I chuckle as Samson follows his moves, raising his hands into the air and screaming, before biting down on the inside of my cheek to ward off the tears. Life can be so hard for Colin. Moments like this I treasure. Moments where he's enjoying his life to the fullest. Where his smile is so wide, I fear his face will tear. This is what he deserves. To be embraced for who he is. Loved entirely. All the good, all the bad.

Samson points off in the distance as I place my purse in my lap and shuffle through my wallet for some cash, screaming about seeing someone he must know. Seeing as they're occupied and excited about whoever it is on the field, I inform them I'm going to get some snacks for us to watch the next set of games in the tournament.

Nervously approaching the food stand, I make it my mission to keep my gaze down to avoid any eyes that may follow me. I grab a few hot dogs and some chili-cheese fries with the only money I have left after paying my car note, and turn back towards the stands, still walking with my head down, when cracked Italian loafers appear directly in front of me.

It hits me like a jolt of electricity up my spine. The pain of needing to deal with this confrontation. I feel the tension in my shoulders as he stands there in the same stance, his hands in his pockets, shoulders shrugged as if he's sweet and innocent.

“Dylan,” he speaks softly before his brows raise and a light smile creeps across his face.

My hands are filled with hotdogs in floppy white trays, and unfortunately, a strand of my hair falls directly across my face. I go to blow it off my nose

when Eric reaches out to move it for me. Before he can touch me, I dodge his arm, leaning back and shaking it off to the side.

“What are you doing here, Eric?” I gripe. “This isn't exactly your scene, now is it?”

He licks his lips, looking off behind me before his deep brown eyes find mine again.

I can't believe I used to have sex with him, thinking we were making love. I shudder at the thought of his hands on me.

“I thought I might see you here,” he comments, shrugging.

“Why? Because my brother's retarded?” I stand taller, head cocking to the side as I glare through him. “Isn't that the word you used?”

He shakes his head. “I never said that.”

“The old me might've believed you had I not heard it drop from your fucking mouth.”

“Dyl, c'mon. Let's not do this,” he whispers, taking a step closer. “I'm here to make amends.”

My eyes travel down to where he's stepping closer to me, and I quickly take a step back, keeping the distance between us.

He sees what I'm doing, and it makes him sigh in frustration. Guess I'm supposed to just forgive him for tricking Colin into checking himself into a facility while I was at work. Not happening. Ever.

“Whatever it is you feel you have to say to me, Eric, just don't.”

“Please, Dyl.” He takes another step forward. “Just let me talk.”

“I don't need to hear you talk.” I take a step back. “You broke whatever trust I had, then dumped me with a text message.” I laugh, shaking my head. “Words don't matter anymore. Your actions spoke volumes.”

He runs a hand through his blonde hair, licking those lips again. I know he's

frustrated because he's not getting his way, but I don't care. It's not my problem. He should just go back to the country club and find his mother's tit. Guarantee, he's still breastfeeding, and she's on the brink of leaking.

“I-I miss...us—”

“I'm going to stop you before you say something stupid,” I interrupt him. “There is no us. There will never be an us again. I mean it, Eric. Whatever this is...you need to get over it, because it’s so far from the realm of ever happening.”

His face falls as he searches my eyes for something I'm not giving him.

“Now, if you'll excuse me,” I continue, raising my brows as if to tell him to get the fuck out of my way.

I attempt to skirt around him when he steps in front of me again, grabbing my upper arms to stop my movements.

“Dylan, stop. Please.”

“Eric. Get your hands off of me.” I seethe through gritted teeth, looking down at the food in my hands.

“I did what I needed to do. And whether you want to admit it or not, you needed it too. You can't care for him forever like this. You're selfless, and I get that, but it's affecting your personal life too much. It affected us,” he says, his hands now wrapped around my upper arms.

I'm heaving now, my chest billowing between us as I still refuse to look him in the eyes.

“Stop. Touching. Me.” I growl, my hard gaze finally trailing up to look at him.

I quickly peer behind him, seeing Colin and Samson in the stands, looking back at me now with confused expressions. If Colin sees Eric, he'll freak out, causing an epic meltdown.

Colin was shaking, practically convulsing in fear when I picked him up from the facility he unknowingly checked himself into. It took weeks to convince him we'd never separate again. Weeks of me sleeping on the floor in his room, just to ensure I wasn't leaving him for that scary place again.

My heart races as anger, panic, and anxiety swirl through me like a wild tsunami.

“Stop walking away from me then,” Eric snaps, tightening his grip.

I see Colin in the stands again. Samson is bouncing up and down next to him, clapping his hands before pointing at me. Colin's smile stretches across his face in excitement now, and I'm thoroughly confused about why they seem thrilled at the sight of this.

“Eric—”

Before I can finish the sentence, two hands slam into Eric's chest, throwing him backward. Like a heavy wave, Eric stumbles a few steps before dropping back against the concrete floor as a tall, dark-haired man lingers over the top of him, clutching his shirt in two white-knuckled fists.

“You don't listen, do you?”

That voice echoes through my chest, turning that tsunami in my stomach into a full-on storm surge. I stand there, still as a statue with my mouth set in an 'O', watching as he picks Eric up off the floor like a rag-doll, dragging his flailing body towards the doors to our left.

Lake.

Lips on the whistle and I blow, pointing at Gabriel.

"Down at the 50!"

"C'mon, Lake! I was on a break! That was about to be a touchdown!" he whines, his skinny arms raised in the air.

Chuckling, I drop the whistle against my chest. "I'm sorry, man! I know you were on a roll, but Teddy got you at the 50." I point to Teddy, who's just standing there, holding Gabriel's flag with the proudest grin on his chubby little face.

"Great grab, Teddy!" I give him a nod and his face lights up even more.

Gabriel looks down at his belt, his narrow shoulders sagging. He's disappointed.

Running up to him, I throw an arm around his shoulders, and we walk back towards Teddy to retrieve the flag. "You got the speed, man. Next time he comes at you, give him a quick side-step, then turn and take off on your toes," I say before showing him the move. "Trust me."

He looks unsure, but I grin and nod, encouraging him the best I can. His frown turns into a determined scowl and he nods back.

“Go get that TD, Gabe.” I pat him on the back, heading towards the sideline again.

Setting up the next play, Gabriel gets the handoff again and takes off. Another defender runs towards him when he jukes him, making a quick turn before sprinting for the end zone on his toes as fast as his body can take him. The team is jumping and screaming about as loud as me as he belly flops onto the turf, rolling onto his back and kicking his legs in the air as he celebrates.

Blowing the whistle, I throw up the touchdown signal just as the clock runs out.

The proudest smile plasters on my face as he runs over to me.

“Did you see that?!” he exclaims, still clutching onto the football.

“Of course I did! You killed it, man! Knew you would.” I put my fist out and he fist-bumps me.

“Thanks Lake.” He grins, tossing me the ball.

I catch it with one hand against my chest, then quickly toss it back to him. “It's yours, bud.” I wink, and his smile grows.

The teammates all circle him, pulling him away from me, and I lock eyes with April nearby. She smiles with such appreciation before approaching me.

“I can't thank you enough for coming out here to help ref these kids. They truly adore you.”

“Nah, it's nothing. I love these events,” I reply, looking around at all the smiling faces as the teams shake hands. There's nothing better than these kids enjoying the world of sports that I'm so passionate about. “I'm happy to be here.” I sigh, then shoot her an appreciative grin.

I was glad April got a hold of my agent to have me help ref the flag football this year. These are the moments that fill me when I'm empty. Seeing everyone forget about the problems of everyday life and enjoy this camaraderie that I've also found through sports is everything. This game has my heart.

After finishing up, I decide to grab some food at the stand before getting set up in the booth for autographs. Walking through the crowds, I stop every so often to sign a football here, take a picture there. I grin while handing an old college football picture back to a young kid and his dad with my signature on it. As I'm about to hand the marker back, it slips through my fingers and I drop it mid-air when I see *her*.

It's as if the world stalls its motions when she's in my vicinity. It stops its spin and I'm left falling from the sudden stillness. I feel my heart rate shoot up as if I'm practicing sprints again. My lungs can't take the pressure.

“S-sorry,” I say, bending down to pick it up, attempting to breathe through this strange reaction.

Why my body is feeling this nervousness is beyond me. I don't get nervous. *What is she even doing here?*

I haven't seen or heard from her since we almost kissed in my desperate attempt at attention at our last therapy session. I'm sure I'm the last person she wants to see right now.

Handing the marker back, I peer around the mess of people until there's an opening crowd, and I spot Dylan again. *Yep, it wasn't a mirage. Definitely her*.

Her thick, sandy hair is down, draping across the back of her bright blue sweatshirt. She's got a deep scowl etched onto her pretty face, but I can't see

why. I shuffle through more people, attempting to get near her, when I see that she's scowling at someone.

A man.

A man that's seemingly in her face.

Yeah, I don't like that at all.

I pause near a pillar, watching suspiciously at whatever this is that's unfolding before me. The last thing I need to do is interrupt her conversation with her secret boyfriend. She's looking down at something in her hands when I see her try to get around him. He blocks her movements as his mouth continues flapping. Her eyes peer up at him, and I know that look. If she could kill him with her gaze alone, she would.

I can feel the anger permeating off of her from here. She's hot with it. Enraged.

If it was directed at me, I'd probably enjoy it a little too much. I love that spicy little attitude. But it's not directed at me. It’s directed at this guy who's now grabbing her arms.

He's grabbing her arms.

Nope. No. Fuck no.

A wave of hot fire pumps through my veins at the sight. Immediately, memories of her bruises flash before my eyes. This is the guy. *I'll fucking kill him.*

Without thinking, I approach the situation, hearing him tell her to stop walking away from him. I don't need to hear any more to know that he's not listening to her. Pushing the fucker off her with my hands to his chest, he falls back onto the floor, causing a bit of a scene amid the crowd. I don't want to draw too much attention to the situation, but I'd deck him right here if I wasn't a special guest at this event.

I dodge the eyes of onlookers entering the building as I drag him through the glass doors, pulling him around to the side. Pressing him up against the rocky wall, he blabbers on about letting him go. I slam his back against it hard, gaining his silence.

“You stay the fuck away from her,” I spit out, my knuckles white from my hold on his sweater.

His eyes wince in anticipation of the blow I'm about to give, completely wordless and frozen in fear. But, I don't hit him. I drop his pathetic ass onto the dirt below us. Scoffing at the entire situation, I turn to get back to make sure she's alright.

“Good luck with that,” he comments from the ground, spitting from the side of his mouth into the dirt.

“What the fuck did you say to me?” I march back over and he curls into himself, his hands raised.

One thing is clear. This walking GAP ad is a pussy.

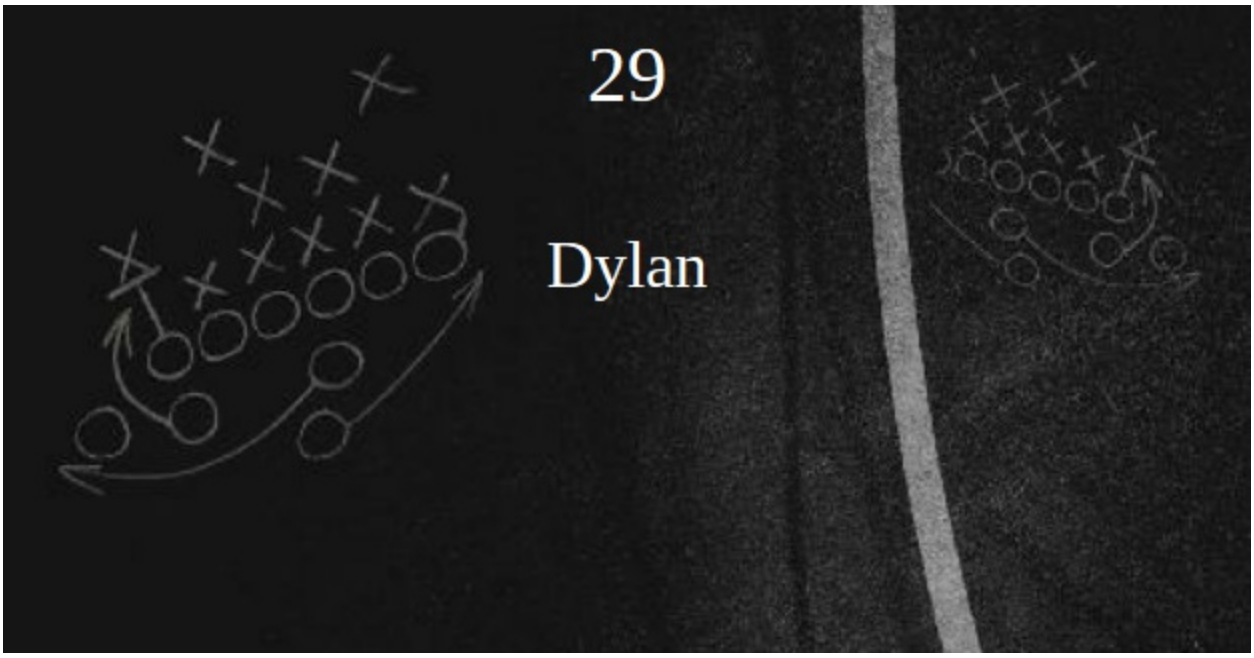
“I said good luck with that,” he repeats. “She'll never let him go. He ruins her. She'd be amazing if not for him.”

Confusion wrecks me as I glare down at him, hearing the words that make little sense. I repeat them to myself, but the only thing I get stuck on is the way he said she'd be amazing if not for *him*.

I’m not sure who *he* is, but I know that's where he's wrong. There's nothing that's not amazing about her, even with her secrets.

I fight the urge to get physical and split this guy's fucking skull open, swallowing down the anger with clenched fists. My jaw aches with the tension I'm holding in it.

Turning, I head back into the building to find her and whatever he thinks ruins her.



I'm stuck standing there with my mouth ajar, a familiar pinch in my chest, and two handfuls of food spilled beneath me.

“Shit!” I curse out, not even realizing I'd dropped everything in my hands.

I bend down to pick up the cheese fries now scattered in a large, bright splat along the gray concrete. People shuffle by me unknowingly, until an old man bends down and starts helping me, handing me a stack of napkins as I attempt to scrape it off the floor with shaking hands.

I'm shaking. Jesus, the fact that Eric can still bring out this kind of anger infuriates me even further. The loud thudding of my heart is making my head pound as Lake rejoins me. I can't imagine what he just did to him outside.

He thanks the old man for helping, dismissing him as he bends down to scrape up the remaining mess with me.

My mouth is dry, and words just aren't coming out. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I don't know what he heard. I'm just focused on the fucking fries, thankful I have something to do with my hands.

When we silently finish, Lake takes the pile of ketchup-soaked napkins and dirty hotdogs to the trash for me. I peer over at Colin again and see them out of the stands now, approaching us. My anxiety floods me and my eyes dart wildly around the facility, knowing if Eric comes back, I'll need to grab Colin and jet. Lake comes back from the garbage can with some new napkins, handing a few of them to me.

I take them with jittery hands, forcing a quick grin. “Thanks for helping. I'll see you—”

“Was that your boyfriend?” he interrupts my dismissal.

Of course he does. He's not going to let me run out of here without an explanation. That would be in a world too easy. My world is never easy.

“No. God, no.” I cringe, looking over my shoulder nervously and back. “My ex.” I frown at that. Even being my ex is a luxury Eric doesn’t deserve. “Seriously though, you didn't have to—”

“Is that the guy that gave you the black eye?” he asks with nostrils flaring, interrupting me yet again as he looks down at his hands to wipe the last of the ketchup off his fingers as if he's about to put them to use.

His tone is thick and gravelly. He's angry, I can tell. Eric is a tool. A piece of shit tool. But he never once hit me. I don't want Lake thinking I'd stand for that kind of abuse. I wouldn't. He's actually never touched me until today, and if my hands weren't full of the food I can barely afford, I'd have given him the bloody nose he deserves.

“Nope! That was me!” Colin chimes out behind me.

I close my eyes tightly, anxiety coursing through my body. From head to toe, I feel it buzz through my veins, swirling so much that I feel physically ill. My little worlds of work, home life, and sex that I've tried to keep separated are crashing in on themselves in the worst possible way.

“You gave Pickle a black eye?” Samson asks him.

Colin's pink lips twist into a frown as he looks at Samson, nodding. The last thing I need is Colin feeling bad about something he couldn’t control.

“What?” Lake takes a step forward, his eyes hardening on Colin behind me, and the need to clear the air has never been more present.

I take a step between them, placing my palms on Lake's heaving chest beneath his black-and-white striped shirt.

It's a referee's shirt.

He was reffing the games?

Peering up at him, I see his handsome face plastered on a large sign behind him, reading: *Special Guest Lake Decker!*

Of course. Had it not been for Eric and my need to keep my eyes on the floor, I would've known that he was here this whole time. Actually, now that I think about it, that's probably why the guys were so excited. They knew he was here. Saw him coming.

My fingers graze the whistle hanging from his powerful neck, resting in the deep-set groove that separates his muscular pecs. The urge to pull him to my lips with it comes over me until I realize he's currently contemplating knocking my brother out.

“Lake…” I sigh, and he turns his attention to me. His face immediately softens when he realizes my hands are on his chest. I swallow what feels like a golf ball. “Lake, this is...my brother, Colin.”

Lake's eyebrows lower even more, and his eyes travel from me to my brother behind me and back, confusion all over his handsome features.

“Your brother?” he asks softly.

I take a much needed breath and nod with my hands still on his chest as if he's the only thing keeping me standing right now. He stares at me for a

second before his brows pinch together again, the crease between them deepening as his eyes narrow even more.

“What about the thong?”

“What?!” I shriek in horror. “What thong?!”

“Thong?!” Colin says loudly behind me, and I cringe.

“In your purse...the black lace thong. It fell out onto the floor at the gym.” His face hardens before he whisper-yells, “Are you still sleeping with that prick?”

I drop my head forward, wanting to hide in these mountains of muscle and never return to see the light of day again. I'll happily die on my climb up the snow-covered hills, allowing the avalanche to bury my existence.

“I did that.” Colin's voice rings out proudly. “Thongs are disgusting. Bacteria trapping strips. Unhealthy. Really unhealthy.”

I turn my glare to Colin, my lips rolling in on themselves.

“Oh,” Samson says, finally understanding the conversation, tipping his head to the side. “Yeah, they are kind of gross now that I think about it. You wear those, Pickle?”

Where's my fucking avalanche?

“She does if I don't hide them first,” Colin answers. “I-I read that they’re unhealthy. Unhealthy. They smear feces into the vag—”

“Alright! Alright!” I interrupt him, yelling out. “Enough with the hatred of thongs!”

Lake's face is lighting up with humor, watching this play out.

He taps the back of my hands that I didn't realize were still on his chest before grabbing my wrists and pulling them down. I suddenly panic, realizing he probably didn’t want me touching him. But he surprises me by sliding his

fingers into one of my hands, weaving them through mine until he's holding it, as he turns me to face the guys.

I'm totally caught off-guard by the move. My ice is melting.

He reaches his hand out to Colin. “Hey man, I'm La—”

“Lake Decker!” Samson yells out next to him, holding onto Colin's shoulders behind him. “We know! Number 21!”

“Lake Decker, born December 3rd, 1993, in Fort Wayne, Indiana. College; Notre Dame. First-round draft pick. Height; 6'4". 40-yard dash time, 4.29 seconds. Best rookie running back in the league until tearing his ACL, sending him to the bench,” Colin recites unapologetically, like a damn Wikipedia page.

I had no idea he knew so much about him. I know Colin likes football. We watch every game. He's just never vocalized his appreciation for the sport like he does racing.

Lake's mouth drops open as he looks at Colin, then back at me. He chuckles. “Yeah, that's me.”

Colin stares at his extended hand, but clutches the bottom of his Hawaiian-style shirt instead. He's not a handshake guy. As I'm about to grab Lake's hand to not make this any more awkward, he points at Colin's shirt instead.

“I like that shirt, Colin.” His lips pull to a half-grin. “Might need to tell me where you got it so I can get one, too.”

My heart is pitter-patting like a busted-ass snowblower attempting to escape the hills.

“Here,” Colin says, unbuttoning the shirt. “Do you want it? Pickle says we need to be careful with our clothes because we can't afford many more, but Lake Decker wants it. Lake likes my shirt.”

I try to let go of Lake's hand to stop him as Colin exposes his skinny chest,

but he holds on tighter.

“Nah, man. It looks great on you.” He smiles. “You have to keep it. I'll find a similar one and we can wear them together.”

Colin shrugs, buttoning it back up again, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Are you guys hungry?” he asks us all. “I was about to order food and just so happen to know they have chili-cheese fries here.” His eyes fall to mine with a cute, knowing grin stretching across his lips. “My treat,” he whispers to me, his face apologetic for assisting in the spilling of the snacks.

I bite down on the corner of my lip, holding in the emotions that want to explode from my raging heart. I'd normally fight this, hating handouts, but I have zero cash on me after already buying food, and I know these boys are hungry.

“Thank you, Lake,” I whisper back, looking up at him with an appreciative grin.

We share a moment of silent communication as he gently squeezes my hand. Everything in a simple glance. One from me that says thank you for being so kind, all things considered, while his somehow says, I admire you even more than I thought possible.

“Is that okay, Pickle?” Colin asks.

I see Lake mouth Pickle to himself after hearing it for the third time now, before his eyes twinkle with understanding.

“Can we get a pretzel with cheese?”

So much is happening so fast. I can't think. Lake's still holding my hand, which means my ability to exist beyond that is practically impossible.

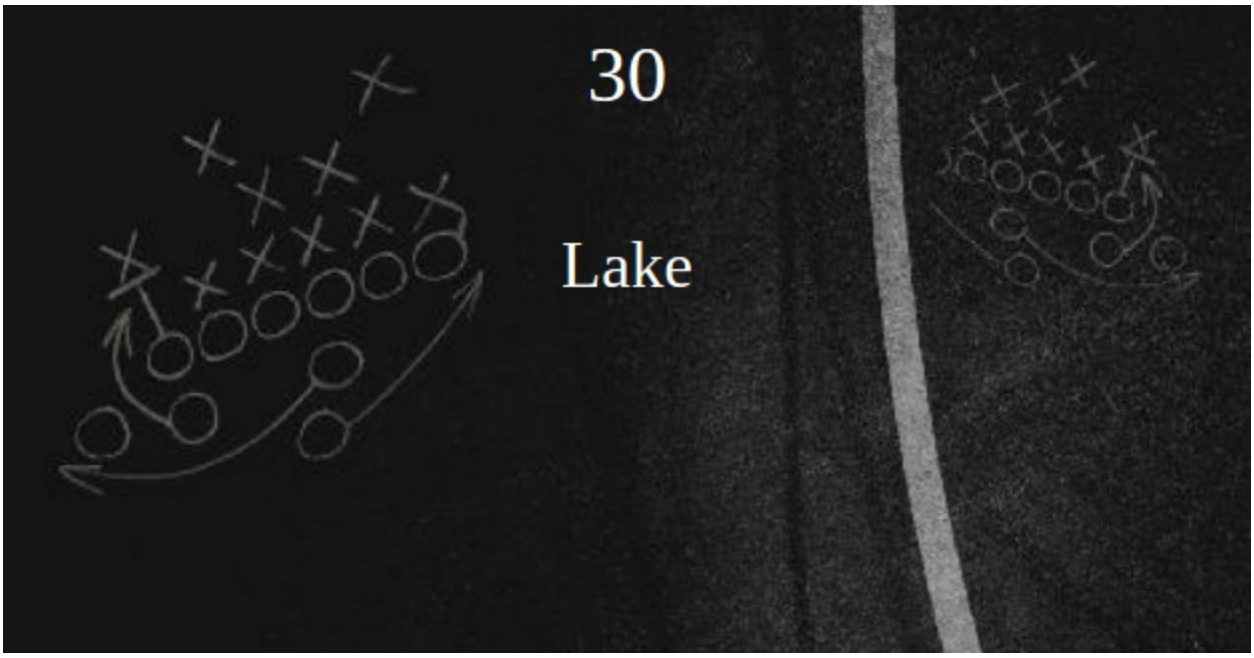
“Um…”

“Of course,” Lake answers. “I'll grab a whole assortment. How about you guys grab a seat at the tables over there and I'll bring it right over.”

Colin and Samson's eyes find the tables before they face each other daringly. In a swift motion, they rush the tables, racing each other to the seats before me. I follow them, attempting to drop Lake's hand, when he tightens his hold on my fingers. With our arms stretched between us, I arch my brow, looking back at him as his lips pull into that sexy half-grin again. His mischievous eyes warm me entirely, melting all the snow off my mountain into a puddle at my feet before he finally releases his hold.

Why my stomach is a mess of drunk butterflies is beyond me. I need to rein this in. To calm down. To not get these stupid expectations up. He's simply being a nice guy to a girl whose life is in complete disarray.

I throw a quick fist to my abdomen, telling those hos to sober up.



She's nervous as all hell.

Twisting that little white napkin in her hand, strangling it with her sweaty little palms. Poor thing is defenseless against her crippling anxiety.

I watch as she keeps her eyes on him as he eats, barely touching her own food. I bought everything on that damn menu. There's no way she can't like something. Variety is everywhere.

Colin and Samson are talking animatedly with me about some really neat racing event that the Special Olympics is hosting early next year while Dylan chews on her bottom lip, pretending to listen.

That poor, soft thing needs some sweet attention and aftercare from all its abuse.

Her mind is elsewhere. That much is clear. Maybe she's worried about what I think about him. Worried I'll judge. Maybe she's afraid I'd think differently of her.

She's right to think that, because I do. I can't sit here, knowing that the death of her parents had abandoned her, leaving her alone to care for herself

and her brother, and not see her differently already. She just became the most interesting person to me. One of the most respectable. Most admirable.

I'm completely blown away. From the moment I first met her, seeing her in those dingy sweats, the bags under her eyes, the McDonald's in her car...it's all coming together, and dammit if I wasn't so completely wrong about her. She was right to come off like a bitch. The world has pitted itself against her, and she fights back every day. For him.

But what I want to know is why. Why did she hide him from me? Why did she hide this whole side of her life?

April approaches the table, combing a hand through her salt and peppered hair before smiling down at us.

"Hey! Sorry to interrupt." She turns to look at me. "They're ready for you at the booth."

Dylan's spine straightens, and her eyes widen slightly.

"Sorry guys," I say to Colin and Samson, tapping my hand on the hard plastic table before us. "Duty calls at the signature booth."

"Thanks again for the food," Dylan rushes, her nervous hands running along her leggings as I stand.

"Yeah, thanks Lake!" Samson adds with a mouthful of hotdog, making me grin.

"Colin, say thank you," she scolds softly.

"Yes. Thank you. Thank you, Lake. Yes. Thank you for the food," Colin says as he rocks lightly in his chair, still staring at his half-eaten pretzel.

They're both autistic, but it's clear Colin struggles more than Samson, and I wonder how hard that's been on Dylan. The bruises, the urgent calls, the time off work, the need to ensure he's taking care of himself. It's a lot for anyone to deal with, especially a girl who put herself through school to become a

physiotherapist. I can't even begin to imagine what they've been through together.

I stand, turning back to April to let her know I'm on my way before leaning over Dylan’s back. My palms surround her on the table and I lean down to ask, “Are you guys sticking around for a while?”

Her throat bobs at the closeness, and I catch onto it right away. If she thought this was enough time for us to hang out, she was dead wrong. I need more.

Checking the time on her phone, she sucks in a breath. “Um, actually, we kind of have to head out soon. I still need to drop Samson off a town over.”

She finds the strength to turn and actually face me. Our noses are close enough to touch if we move the wrong way. I gaze at those lips up close again, remembering the feel of them grazing along my neck. Suddenly, I'm the flushed one, forgetting my words.

“Wh-what, um...will you be home later?” I flinch, stuttering out the words.

“Yeah,” she answers cautiously, her eyes darting to Colin and back. “We'll be home.”

I don't miss her placement of the word *we'll* to insinuate she won't be alone, but with her brother. I mean, I figured as much.

“Perfect. I'll swing by after.”

“W-what? No. Really, it's—”

“I'll text you when I get there.”

She licks her lips, trying to find an excuse before she pauses, and her face contorts.

“Wait. How do you know where we live?”

I blow air through my lips, looking away. I can't admit I'm a stalker and followed her car last week after one of our sessions. No, that would be

considered crazy. I'm not crazy, so I say, “Greg gave me the address just in case.”

Her eyes narrow as her head tilts. “In case what?”

“Uh…” I scratch the back of my neck with my free hand. “In case I needed to find you...for therapy, of course.”

“You're lying,” she says, staring through me.

Fucking Christ, girl, just stop being so inquisitive.

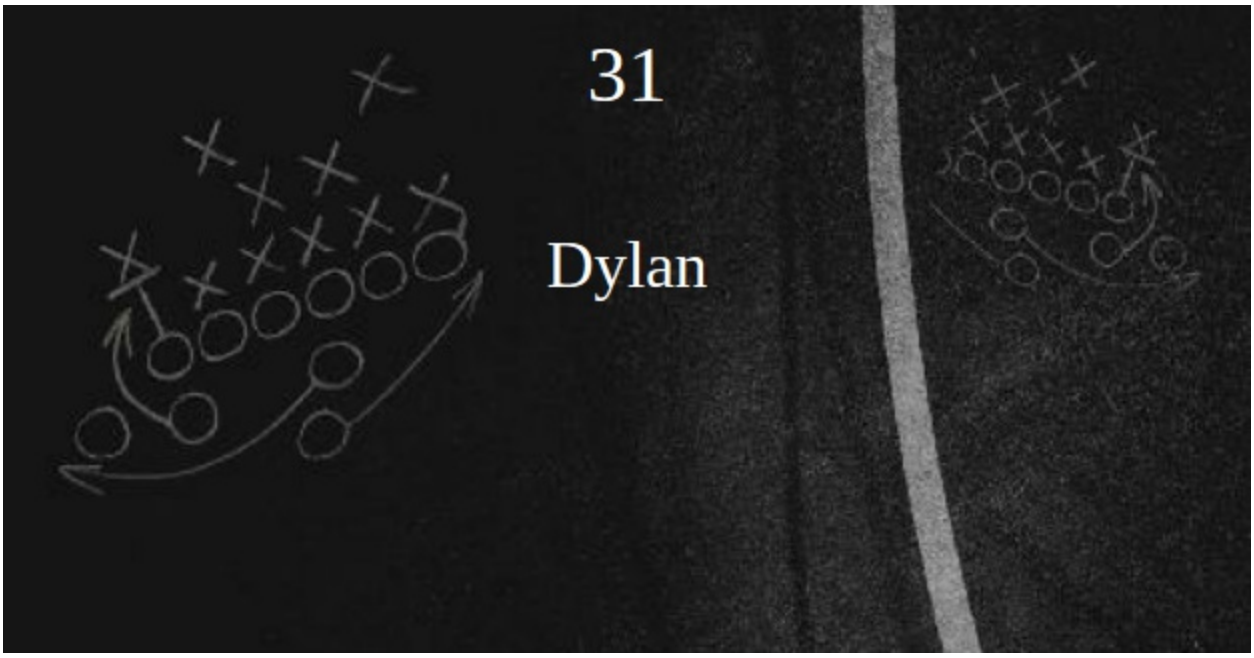
“Just…” My nostrils flare as I exhale through them. “Just let me in, alright?”

Her glare melts into a hint of panic as she eyes me. It's funny how sometimes I can't get a read on this woman at all, but then other times I can read her like a book. She's paranoid that a guy like me is going to see her place and judge her situation. I know the address and that side of town. I can feel it in the way her eyes dance around the facility, almost already overthinking everything in her home.

But I don't care that I found out she lives with her brother in a tiny apartment. I'd never judge her for that. Anyone who would can get their shit kicked in behind the Special Olympics. *Fuck, I should've kicked his teeth out.*

I bend down again, whispering in her ear, “I'll see you soon.”

She can deny it all she wants, but I know for a fact I make her world shift, too.



This place is a piece of shit.

“Colin! Pick up those wrappers in there and throw them in the trash can!” I yell from the kitchen, wiping cracker crumbs from the counter into the garbage.

Beads of perspiration line my forehead as I hustle around in full-blown panic mode. Lake is on his way over and I could die. I might actually. Maybe this tachycardia will take me out and I won't need to explain why our apartment is more than likely the size of his shoe closet. One can dream, right?

“Too tired,” he says in his monotone voice. “My races...my race is on and I can't miss it. Can't miss it.”

“Pretend they're thongs then, ya butthead!” I yell, contorting my face at an old banana peel I've discovered shoved into the back of the silverware drawer. “Besides, your races are taped, Col. But cute. Real cute.”

Losing the fight before I even start, I continue my massive clean sweep, shoving visible things into closets and drawers where they don't belong, when

my phone lights up on the counter with his text.

I let out a whiny groan, dealing with the inevitable, and let him up. I stand by the door, waiting until I see that gorgeous head of hair walking up the stairs to our second-floor apartment.

“You're lucky I just cleared you. This creaky stairwell would've made for a difficult climb with those crutches,” I call out.

His head pops up, surprised by the sound of my voice. Fucking nerves of fire spiral through me as those piercing blue eyes fix on me. His easy smile wards off some of my nerves, and he chuckles.

“I'd have found a way, regardless.”

The party is beginning in my stomach again. Alcoholics everywhere.

He meets me at the door, staring down at me with that little half-grin I hate to admit I love. I breathe in his woodsy scent, and I swear my nipples just hardened. *Fucking traitors.*

That's the one thing I hate about tits. They're like erections for women. Coming alive when they shouldn't, acting irresponsible and selfish, showcasing your needs to the world. It's incredibly embarrassing and uncalled for.

“How are ya, Chief?” he asks, and I attempt to remain solid and not melt into a puddle at his feet.

“Honestly?” I ask, turning to walk into my place, looking back for him to follow. He does, closing the door behind him.

I'm ready for him to scour the place with his eyes. Watch as his face twists in disgust, visualize the widening of his eyes at the audacity of a place built so small. But he places his hands in the pockets of his gray sweatpants, his form-fitting Under Armour shirt clinging to his broad chest, and his eyes stay on mine.

“Only honesty,” he replies.

I sigh, resting my palm on my kitchen counter and leaning over. I let it all out. “Honestly, I hate that you're here.”

His grin widens, and I see the chipped tooth that makes me swoon. He kicks off his shoes and starts walking towards me.

“No, you really don't need to do that. These floors…” I eye his shoes in the corner, but he ignores me entirely, continuing to approach me.

Leaning his elbow on the counter, he casually crosses his legs at the ankle, almost mimicking my stance directly in front of me. He's in my bubble again. He has no concept of what a client/patient bubble is. Shit, I guess the moment I sat on his cock I lost that concept, too.

“Why do you hate that I'm here?” he asks in that infamous gravelly tone, the seriousness in his voice almost making me sad I said it.

I sigh, peering around my place. “I mean…look around—”

“Don't,” he interrupts, shaking his head, already knowing where I'm at with this. “Don't do that, D.”

I blow out a breath, trying to release the nerves. He sears through me with a direct stare, and I sense the emotion behind it. His lips part as if he's about to say something, but the words get caught in his chest. Standing upright, he pulls my hand from the counter, causing me to straighten before him. He squeezes my hand gently between his as we just silently gaze at each other.

I love that he has this need to always grab my hand when he’s around me now. It's as if this simple touch somehow comforts him, even though he's attempting to comfort me. It reminds me of that night we shared, and how he couldn't keep his lips off mine. As if that connection was his lifeline to breathing.

I should hate it. I shouldn't allow it. But hell if I can stop it.

“You,” he whispers breathlessly, looking at my lips and back. “This…” He looks around, shaking his head. “You're so—”

“2023 Ram 1500, all black.”

Colin interrupts whatever Lake was about to say to me. My head snaps to where he stands in his doorframe, looking down at the floor.

He was critiquing his truck from the parking lot.

Lake drops my hand, leaning back on the counter to face him. I miss the contact immediately before the anxiety of them interacting washes over me again like a paralyzing wave.

“Indeed,” he says with a light grin. “Powerful engine. Smooth ride. What more could I ask for?”

Colin nods, still looking at the floor as he twists the bottom of his shirt with his palms.

“Decent,” he mumbles to himself. “Decent truck. Good features. Safe. Not the best for towing, but decent.”

My eyes widen at Colin's slight diss to Lake's nice-ass truck in the parking lot of our crumbling apartment, but Lake just laughs.

“I hear ya, Col.”

The tachycardia is back. *The way he said Col.* My insides are twisting into themselves.

“I might need you to come with me to the lot when I trade her in. Seems you know the specs pretty well. You like cars?”

Oh shit. Here we go. I might as well not even be here anymore.

Just as I imagined, Lake finds his way into Colin's world, and surprisingly, he allows it. Suddenly I'm the third wheel at this little get-together. I grab some water bottles from the fridge as Lake pulls a chair from the tiny dining

table into Colin's room, planting it right next to his rocker to watch his tiny television.

Colin has yet to even look at Lake, but he doesn't let that deter their connection. Lake just rides along with it, allowing Colin to steer everything, engaging when he can, quiet when needed.

I bring some snacks to the room, pausing at the door to watch as they sit side by side, silently watching Colin's tape of the 1997 Daytona 500. Because of my vast knowledge of the sport, I happen to know this is the year that Jeff Gordon won with none other than The Rainbow Warrior.

Smiling to myself, I feel a familiar pinch in my chest I've been denying. I feel myself becoming soft in the presence of seeing them together, and I don't want my vulnerability to break me. I can't base my life and future on hopes and feelings. I have to base my life on facts and stats.

Facts and stats melt away when Lake turns back to face me from his chair. He leans one arm over the tiny wooden chair, his head cocked back to take me in. His eyes are soft and caring and his genuine grin makes me sigh like a nerdy school-girl with a crush on the captain of the football team. My heart is alive and well, thumping proudly.

In a moment, I see a future I never thought I'd see. A world in which all of my dreams and aspirations find a way to coexist.

A while later, Colin finally falls asleep in his chair for the night.

Lake joins me on the tiny couch after using my tiny bathroom. I cringed the entire time he was in there, worrying I didn't use enough bleach to clean the grout on the tile floor before he came. But he said nothing as he sat down next to me, close enough to where our shoulders and knees grazed each other's. He looks massive with his legs sprawled out on the ground before the tiny loveseat.

“I can't believe you let me tell you my entire jacket story and not once told me you were a fan of NASCAR,” he blanches.

Chuckling, I run my palms down my leggings, staring at the little run that's forming in the thinning material from too many washes.

“Can I ask you something?” he asks softly, turning to face me. “And will you answer me honestly?”

I find the nerve to look him in the eyes and nod. “Only honesty.”

That earns me a heartwarming smile. Lake licks his lips, his face growing somber again.

“Why didn't you tell me about him?” he asks, his brows furrowing. “Why did you feel you had to hide Colin from me? I mean, I know you already know this, but he's exceptional.”

My heart tightens in my chest, so much so it's causing me to feel physically ill.

“I-I'm definitely not ashamed of Colin. I'd never be. He's more normal to me than most people I meet.”

Lake chuckles at that, grabbing my hand from my lap and running his fingers through the crevices of mine again. I stiffen and suck in a shallow breath, looking from our hands back to him again.

“He's my best friend. My older brother, who I've always looked up to.” I fight back the emotion. “It's always been us.”

“Then why, D? Did you not think I'd understand?”

I blow air through my lips, trying to find the words.

“It's complicated, Lake,” I whisper, looking down at our intertwined fingers, knowing we shouldn't be doing this—breaking walls and opening hearts.

We're building that fire again. The one we can't help but stoke. The one

with the ability to ruin us both.

He rubs his thumb along the side of mine, the sensation so comforting while simultaneously warming every part of me.

“I know it is,” he whispers even lower. “But I'm still here for it.”

My eyes find his, needing to see what that statement meant, wanting to know his truth. It’s apparent there's a deeper meaning by the way he's now turned toward me, studying every part of me with his eyes, like the answers to the meaning of life reside somewhere inside me.

“Tell me, D,” he whispers with such need. “Please.”

It's the same need I felt in his tone when he begged me to kiss him. I'm weak around him, that much is apparent, but the way he can get me to do anything with that one word terrifies me.

I find myself unable to say no to him once again.

And so I twist the handle, opening that door to our safe little world that I’ve spent my entire adult life protecting.

Sitting here, breathing in the scent of the lavender and vanilla candle she has burning, I face her in the dimly lit living room, our legs brushing up against one another as I hold her hand.

“This is hard for me, Lake,” she says, squeezing my fingers between hers.

I think I know what she's referring to, but I want her to tell me. Need her to tell me.

“Which part exactly?”

She shakes her head, licking her lips before saying, “Just opening up. Letting anyone into our little world.”

I nod in understanding. I see their bond and know they've been tested, but as to how far, well, I'm about to find out.

“You have to understand, I haven’t had anyone to depend on but me. The situation Colin and I are in now is something I hold really close. It's been…” She pauses, trying to find the words. “Well, I guess I don't admit this often, but it's been really difficult.”

She fixes her gaze on me, and a look of confusion and pain overtakes her, as if she can't understand why she's telling me.

My heart aches at the thought. She doesn't admit how hard things are to anyone? Being strong is something Dylan knows, but being weak and admitting to that pain and sacrifice is clearly something unknown in her world, where she always has to be alert and aware.

“I went through a period where I hated Colin for being the way he was.”

I stiffen next to her on the couch at the statement that sounds so harsh.

“It's not what you're thinking,” she says immediately, her eyes needing to find mine. “It's just how it affected what happened to us.”

She sighs, and I feel all the air expelling from her lungs. All I can think about is how I want to breathe the life and hope that she’s lost back into her.

“It was because of his disability that we got pulled apart. I was just shy of fourteen and he had just turned seventeen when our parents died. I went to a group home, waiting for a foster family, and Colin went to a home where they were better equipped to care for him. A family who had been accepting kids with varying degrees of health issues and whatnot into their home for years.”

She lets go of my hand, needing to take a drink of water before running a hand through her long, honey-hair.

“It was only then I hated it. The first time I really hated Colin's disability. Before that, I'd never seen it as an issue. It was never a problem for me like it was for my parents, accepting that he was different. I loved him entirely, looked up to him, appreciated the fact that he could teach me new things I'd never known, all while showing me a different side to life. But when they pulled us apart, leaving me in a bunker with other kids waiting for homes to

become available, I hated him for being different. It separated us.” Her jaw flexes, and I feel the tension and hatred she feels for herself.

“It's understandable to be upset—”

“No,” she interrupts, frowning. “It was horrible of me. I was childish and selfish, and hated him for something completely out of his control.” She runs her hands down her thighs again, a nervous tic perhaps.

“You were young, D,” I say, running my hands over hers, stopping her incessant movements. “You were a child yourself, going through something extremely traumatic. It's okay to have felt that hurt. That confusion.”

She stares at my hands over hers, calculating my words. I weave my fingers back into the one nearest to me, pulling it onto my thigh again. Where it should be.

She inhales a shaky breath, sitting in silence for a moment. Shaking her head, she says, “Years passed before I saw him again. Years, Lake.” Her lashes flutter before glancing back at me. The torture behind those eyes, something so gut-wrenching and agonizing, nearly destroys me. “A-all I wanted was to hug him. To know he was safe, to know he was being cared for, to know that his new family knew how to handle him the way I could. That they wouldn’t be like my parents. But I didn't. I didn't know.” Her voice cracks and tears reluctantly slip through her dark lashes, falling down her pink cheeks.

“Come here,” I whisper, pulling her hand further into my lap, effectively trying to pull her under my arm, but she stands her ground. She swallows, sitting up in her own seat and wiping away her own tears. The way she's done before. The way she's done for years.

“I knew if I didn't get my shit together and focus on getting him back to me, I'd succumb to my anger, letting it destroy me. I had to find a way.” She

clears her throat, wiping her face clean of any evidence of vulnerability. “So I did.”

She continues to tell me how her counselor came to her with the attorneys to discuss the fact that her parents left their entire will, as small as it was, solely to her and not her brother. She explains with anger in her tone, the details of that will and the fact that she wouldn't be able to receive any of it until she was eighteen, knowing that the days ahead would be nothing but scratches off her calendar, counting the seconds until she could even attempt to fight for guardianship.

“I had a little money, I was building my future, finishing school in the foster care system without a family, because, who wants a seventeen-year-old with a chip on her shoulder, am I right?” She attempts to laugh at the sad joke that sends another shard of glass into my already wounded heart. “I started working odd jobs whenever I wasn't in school, using all of that free time to work towards one goal, solidifying myself into a stable enough environment so I stood a chance at gaining guardianship.”

“Jesus, D,” I whisper, shaking my head in disbelief.

At that age, most kids aren’t focused on anything that substantial or important. When I was that young, we were just looking to hook up or get drunk off our parents’ liquor. Not thinking about maintaining a future for guardianship of an older brother who was the only family she had, and who, unfortunately, was already in a stable foster home.

“It was hard. Fighting at such a young age for him when he was already established in a family with routines and whatnot. I’d been sucked into a few scams, losing thousands to lawyers who made broken promises, racking up debt. But, eventually, the day finally came, and with help from a close friend and a lawyer I couldn't afford, they awarded me legal guardianship.” She

smiles to herself, her face suddenly mirroring that hope; remembering. “I felt like myself again for the first time in years. We slipped back into who we were, like we'd never been separated. Pickle and Collie were back.”

Pride pounds through my chest as if it had happened to me. Like I was just reunited with my family again. Just listening to her detail the events makes me feel like I was a part of it. She's so fucking incredible it almost hurts.

She continued to put herself through school with grants and loans that she's informed me she's still paying back to this day. She solidified a life and career while always making sure Colin was not only cared for but had the best life possible, filled with his own opportunities and interests.

Struggle upon struggle, she details their hardships while I listen intently, holding onto her the entire time. But she also tells me the good stuff. Stories of how Colin taught her how to draw when they were kids. He took apart and built tiny toy cars and taught her about all the parts, the names, and what their functions were. How they bonded over NASCAR. He loved his “Pickle” because she listened to him and understood him when no one else did.

She touches on how they have their own special way of connecting when he has his meltdowns, as she describes them. I'm understanding her story now—the bruises, the selfless dedication to someone she loves, endlessly supporting and caring for him, and not exactly receiving that in return. It reminds me of someone else I hold very close to my heart.

“Life hasn't been easy. College, working, and maintaining Colin's happiness has aged me fast,” she says with a light scoff.

“You never even had the chance to be a kid. You became an adult overnight,” I state.

Her shoulders shrug lightly, peering down at our intertwined hands. “Yeah, I've fought for our future, but it was only when I felt we were in a good place

that I let my overall goal slip. I acted like that irresponsible kid who never had the chance to be selfish, and it almost ruined us."

I have a feeling I know what's coming next, and I focus on calming the storm brewing within me, keeping it at bay as I continue listening.

"Everything was amazing, Lake," she says, shaking her head at the memory as my thumb runs over the back of her hand. "He really acted like he cared about us."

The tension in my shoulders is back already.

"Eric came into our lives and things felt like they were supposed to. We were a little unit, the three of us. He understood my situation and played right into it because he really loved me."

"What did he do, Dylan?" I say through gritted teeth, remembering the words that fucker muttered in the dirt.

"He did really love me, but not all of me. All of me included Colin, and he hated that side. Pretended it didn't exist. Negated the idea of him entirely." She shakes her head in disgust, remembering. "To keep it simple, he infiltrated our bond. He found his way in and made it his mission to separate us. He gained Colin's trust, and I allowed it, thinking it was genuine. I watched as he put in the effort to befriend him and work towards being able to spend time with him without me around. He said it was good for them and their relationship."

I hate where this is going.

She bites down on her bottom lip. "You have to know how hard of a decision that was for me. To ever really trust someone who wasn't already versed in his disability to spend time alone with him. But Eric pushed it. He wanted to be that person for us. He begged for it, and ultimately, he forced the issue. It was all a part of his sick and twisted plan."

My nostrils flare as I peer over at Colin's door. I've known him for all of a day and already own this strange form of protection over both of them. To see anyone take advantage of these two after what they've been through—well, let's just say Eric is lucky I'm only hearing of this now. Teeth would have been scattered all around the Special Olympics. Limbs too.

“Eric took him to a facility while I was at work,” she says, her brows knitting together and her eyes narrowing in on the floor again.

“What?” I snarl.

“I went to work and Eric convinced Colin to go with him to this psychiatric hospital. Tricked him into signing himself in, committing himself to a place without knowing he'd be left there. Alone.”

I could send a fist through the tiny window of this second-floor apartment. My grip tightens on her hands unintentionally. I try to remain calm and listen to her words, but the only thing flashing through my mind is how I need to find him and mutilate him.

“Colin was a mess when I finally got him out. It was the first time he didn't trust me. He was terrified of Eric. Thought I wanted this. Wanted him gone. Wouldn't sleep for weeks, thinking he'd show up and take him away again even though I promised he was out of our lives for good.”

I’m holding my breath while listening, trying to keep it together.

“I do not know what happened to Colin while he was there, but when I picked him up, they had him tied down to a gurney. He was physically depleted. I can only imagine the fight he fought until he gave up, and that right there fucking destroyed me. It was our horrifying past reliving itself before my eyes—him being locked in his room, panicking alone in all the wrong ways. It wrecked me.”

I will find him. I will torture and kill this man for what he did to Dylan and

Colin. He took the world they fought so hard to protect and fucking ripped it apart for his own selfish reasons. Because he couldn't stand to be second in their world.

“Dylan,” I swallow, my eyes wincing. “My God.” I rake a hand through my hair, feeling so much of her pain in her words. “I'm so sorry he did that to Colin. To you.”

She's silent for a second, just gazing off into the corner of the room. “It brought everything back again. All the pain of our childhood, our separation, everything. Eric tried to convince me I was crazy for trying to care for Colin myself, saying how I'd be better off without him. That he was baggage I couldn’t handle. That I could never be worthy of being someone's girlfriend or wife because I'd never give anyone enough attention, enough of me. That I was somehow stained because of him. Ruined.”

He ruins her. Eric’s words haunt me.

“He was wrong,” I say immediately, feeling heat rising in my neck.

Her gaze slowly peels away from the corner until she’s looking at me. There's a bit of self-deprecation I see behind the layers of tough skin she's grown. There's still a tiny part of her that feels the weight of not being good enough, even after all she’s accomplished. And that sick fuck planted it there.

“He was dead fucking wrong, Dylan,” I say it again.

“I know.” She swallows. “Colin's not bag—”

“No,” I interrupt. “No, you are worthy of so much more. Because of Colin. Because of what you do for him. Your selflessness, your sacrifice.”

Her lips part as she studies my eyes. I reach up to touch the hair hanging near her temple, pushing it back behind her ear to cup her face. She stiffens at first, then relaxes a little as her cheek melts to my palm, my heart thumping wildly through my chest at the contact.

“You deserve to have someone who realizes how amazing you are for your endless love and protection of him, not downgrade you because of that.”

She listens to my words, absorbing them without responding. I want to know what she's thinking, how she's feeling, but I can't get that read on her. She somehow looks even more depressed at my words. As if hearing them makes her realize how wrong she got it before. I hate that.

She turns her head from me, needing to grab her glass of water again. She takes a sip and sets it down, her lips glistening in the candlelight with a tiny drop that didn't want to leave. I can't stop staring at it.

“I think I've just realized over the years that we're better off in our little world together. I don't want to have to explain to anyone what Colin means to me or need to prove why I do it. I don't want to convince someone to understand.”

“You don't have to,” I say confidently, my hand finding hers again, forcing her to turn to face me. “Because I'm already here. I already understand.”

She searches my face for some kind of answer to what I'm admitting.

“I can't do this with you, Lake.” Her eyes wince and she looks away again. “My job is the only thing keeping us here, together. I'm already hanging on by a thread.”

“I get it, D. Truly, I do,” I say, gently touching the side of her chin.

She sucks her bottom lip into her mouth, chewing on the edge of it again. I see the conflicting thoughts racing through her. It's not that she doesn't want me; she feels she can't have me.

If word got out she was with me while working as my physiotherapist, her credibility would be tarnished. Her career in the NFL would be over before it began.

It's the last thing I want for her. For them.

But I'm selfish. And I want what I want.

“I can't stop being here,” I say unapologetically. “I won't stop seeing you.”

Her cheeks flush as her chest rises and falls.

“I'm your therapist, Lake. You literally can't stop seeing me,” she whispers.

I grab her face between my hands, forcing her eyes to focus on me. She stiffens in my hold, eyes emanating the fear of what I'll do next.

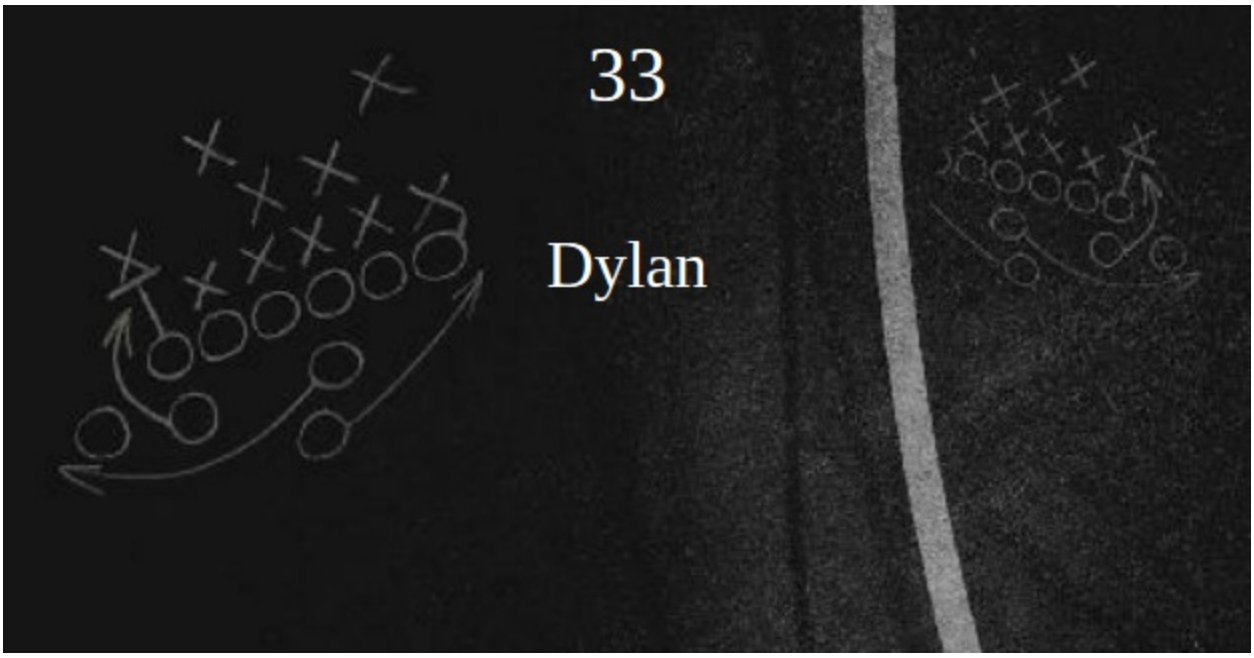
“I'll take you any way I can get you, Dylan, for however long it takes, even if that means we have to keep it discreet.” I run my fingers down the side of her face, pausing to run my thumb across her bottom lip, wanting so badly to kiss it again. Those amber beauties scorch their way through me at my proposition. “But what I won't do is let you go.” I lean forward, closing the space between us until our foreheads rest together, and my hands slide down to the sides of her neck. “And that’s on rainbow.”

She looks bewildered for a moment before the pieces connect, and she replies, “The jacket.”

I nod as her chest billows with the breaths falling from her parted lips, meeting mine between us.

She waits nervously for something to happen, but when nothing does, her eyes find mine again. I gaze into her, allowing her to trust me, giving her the reassurance she needs without crossing that line.

“Whenever you're ready,” I whisper against her lips.



Back to business as usual, with an emotional hangover I can't reverse.

I can't believe myself. I opened up to Lake, spilling all of my insides before him. I'm talking guts and gore, the meatiest parts of my past. Open and bleeding, I let myself fall apart before him, and surprisingly, he scooped me up and put me back together where I belonged, as if it never happened.

He knew how to fix me by doing nothing at all. He listened. Absorbing every wound of my past as they all opened and bled before him.

If I thought Lake was only playing the part of a listening ear simply to get laid again, I was dead wrong.

He didn't even kiss me.

He had the opportunity. Told me he'd take me any way he could get me. Does he know I have zero restraint when it comes to him? I nearly stripped myself of my clothing right then and there, bent over the couch, and screamed for him to take me now! But no, composure.

He absorbed it all. And for no other reason than to understand.

His emphatic and understanding qualities were not at all what I was expecting. Neither was my inability to keep the truth from him. And yet, watching him in that room with Colin, I felt the surrounding warmth. A strange familiarity of sorts. It almost felt normal having him there with us, and I can honestly admit that was a first.

Unfortunately, the comfort that was there in one moment was gone the next. After our talk, he acted as a gentleman, simply saying goodnight and leaving.

I haven't seen Lake in three days. A rescheduled session turned into another one moved, and now we are meeting after hours in order to squeeze in some much needed therapy.

So here I sit in the dimly lit gym, anxiously awaiting the man I haven't seen since he whispered those three little words against my lips. *Whenever you're ready.*

The doorbell rings, and my spine straightens immediately. Sucking in a nervous breath from the backroom, I quickly adjust my sweatpants and fix my sweatshirt, flinging my braids over my shoulders and trying to keep my cool.

“Back here!” I call out, then run my hands down my face because, fuck, here comes my crush.

I hear a bag drop to the cushioned mat floors before two large hands perch themselves on the doorframe.

“Are you trying to make a career out of getting brutally murdered?”

My eyes bulge at the statement as I turn to face the man of the hour. The man of every hour, who am I kidding?

“You just texted me saying you were two minutes away.” My brows lower at his angered tone.

Is he seriously mad right now?

He marches over to me with heat in his heavy steps. It's not the same soft man who was cradling my hand a few nights ago. Nope, this is the guy that was at my hotel room that night, telling me he'd split my door if I didn't open it. The one angry about peepholes. It’s Flake.

My eyes trail up his statuesque form as he approaches, taking in his cut-off shirt that accentuates his bulging biceps, the ripped part on the sides, low enough to expose the edge of his pecs and the slightest sliver of those rippling abs. My heart hiccups in my chest as he stands directly in front of me now, looking down with those darkened blue eyes hooded with a dangerous passion behind them.

“If I'm not here, leave the fucking door locked until I am,” he says coarsely.

I swallow at his words, staring up in confusion.

Looks like the alpha came back to play. It's the peephole freak, back in action. I hate that I feel my thighs tense up, my knees pressing together at the heat already pooling between my legs like some sort of weak female who likes to get told what to do. *Traitorous physical form.*

My words, some sort of smartass comeback, are caught in my throat as he abruptly turns away and walks back towards his bag, leaving me in a flurry of lustful drunkenness. Removing a bottle, he takes a quick sip of his Gatorade before wiping the edge of his mouth with his thumb.

Oh, to be that thumb.

He eyes me from a distance as he takes another drink, the roll of his throat mesmerizing as he pulls the bottle from his lips and a ghost of a grin forms.

I just stand there, leaning against the bench, glaring at him with my arms crossed over my chest. It's like he can hear the electricity jump across my internal spark plugs, igniting that power he seems to own.

He tosses his bottle back into his sports bag, then stands with his hands on

his slim hips, posing like the sculpted man of perfection he is, but with a playful glimmer in his eyes.

“Missed ya, Chief,” he says with that sexy smirk.

What is breathing?

I've never heard of it, nor do I know how to do it anymore.

“What's on the agenda for today?” he asks, not even pausing for me to respond to his comment.

I clear my throat, trying to find my legs beneath me as I walk towards the cabinets for the exercise bands.

“We are starting with some light squats, crab walks, and even a little stationary bike action if you're up for it.”

“Oh, I'm up for it, Dylan,” he says before dragging his tongue along his lips while those hooded eyes trace my form.

I can feel him trying to visualize what's under these clothes, and the need to remind him has my pulse racing through my weak veins and my nipples standing at attention. *Chill the kitty and get to work, you dick-obsessed whore.*

Somehow, by the grace of God, we are able to continue the session without too many further distractions. We make small talk about what we've been up to since last seeing each other. He tells me how he's been hanging with Candy and the other teammates. My anxiety creeps in like cracked frost on a windshield as I remember the picture from his Instagram. You know, the one I'd previously stalked, of the boys at his place with their girls.

He goes on, changing the subject, telling me about having to help his mom with some errands or something, keeping it short before he begins interrogating me. Asking me practically every detail of my life since seeing him last.

I tell him how I've spent the majority of my time with Jaden and Greg, practically living at work, and he scowls. I detail my existing list of clients that I've been assisting Jaden with on the side, and the scowl deepens. I also inform him I've just started watching a new Netflix documentary about Fungi, and he gives me a pity smile. *I live an extraordinary life.*

He asks about Colin between reps, and I warm all over. I tell him about this race he really wants to take part in next spring, that I need to sign him up for soon. It's expensive and kind of involved, and the money is needed upfront, so I need to punch through my finances tonight to see if I can even maneuver it. But I don't tell him any of that. I'd never want him to feel obligated to help me, nor would I accept it.

Now we're just finishing up our last exercise before stretching, and my nerves are on fire again.

I have to touch him now. This is my job. Don't overthink it. It's a machine. A machine that needs maintenance. A machine that can make you cum better than you ever have before. And he wasn't even in control. He could run through me, fuck me into oblivion if he was back to his healthy self. *Jesus, why am I this way?!*

Machine!

Attempting to tell my body to turn off its sex-crazed setting, I remember professionalism.

Turning to grab the foam roller from on top of the cabinets in the backroom, I stretch on my toes, my fingers grazing it. As I barely reach it, the roller slips away from me.

Hands find my hips, and I gasp as strong arms lift me onto the counter. My knees meet the laminate as I work to remember why I'm up here. All I feel are the firm hands on me, lightly brushing the skin beneath my sweatshirt.

They’re burning their scalding heat through me like a branding tool, marking me with his touch.

I squint, trying to ward off the moan that begs to slip from my lips at his hold on me. His massive hands nearly circle my entire waist. Refocusing, I grab the roller, turning around to sit on the counter before jumping off, but I bump into a firm chest.

He's pressed against the edge of the counter, making it impossible for me to get down.

“Lake,” I whisper cautiously.

He breathes hard through his nostrils, his shoulders rigid as his palms plant themselves on both sides of the counter where I'm now sitting, legs open around his hips.

This position is too much. I'm already flushed, and he isn't even pressed against me yet.

He moves inward, causing my inner thighs to rub against his hips. Fuck, I want to pull that flimsy scrap of a shirt he's wearing into me until that bulge beneath those sweats rubs me right where I need it, the place that's aching for him, but I don’t. I open my legs wider, leaving a sliver of space between us.

He doesn't move. Neither of us is touching the other. Just standing as close as possible, hearts racing, chests heaving, waiting for the other to cross that line.

Feeling lightheaded at the intoxicating lust coursing through me, I flutter my lashes and find the courage to look up at him.

He's already staring at me. Eyes wild and dilated. He's losing any sense of control, just as I am.

He drops his head forward, placing his forehead on the cabinets behind me, near my neck. I stiffen, holding my breath, waiting for his moment to strike.

His scent floods my senses, reeking of a rich masculine spice and natural salty sweat. The urge to taste him is forever present.

I unknowingly tip my head to the side, giving him whatever room he needs to strike, my breaths coming out all short and choppy now.

His lips part by my neck, and I feel his warm breath on my skin. My eyes close because there's no chance I can keep them open when I’m imagining the feathery touch of those two pouty silk pillows that are just barely grazing my skin, trailing up towards my ear.

“I can't touch you, can I?” he whispers slowly, knowing the answer before even asking the question.

I swallow, trying to find my voice that's suddenly taken a vacation down in the pit of my stomach.

“T-that would be considered…” I clear my throat, still not finding the strength to open my eyes. “That would be inappropriate, as you are my patient.”

I can feel his smirk against my jaw, as if expecting my answer, before he slowly pulls back.

He tilts his head, moving down along the other side of my jaw until those lips are in the vicinity of my other ear. I feel his breath against the lobe and the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Then I guess I have no choice but to wait for my therapist to break her own rules.” He retreats, leaving a cold rush of air in place of the warmth I was submitting myself to.

I stare at the floor, my mouth slightly ajar, as I see him push himself up and onto the table out of the corner of my eye.

The moment he backs away from me, even if by only two feet, I'm finally able to exhale and take in a quick, much needed breath to reset. The ease with

which I slip into this lustful, needy chick freaks me out.

“Will you finish me off?” Lake asks casually, laying back along the massage table, his hands folded behind his head as the imprint of his thick, long cock lies hard along his thigh.

Air. Where is it? I need air in the lungs that are currently being compressed with the weight of his water surrounding me. Suffocating me. So much so that I'm beginning to enjoy the sweet torture that is drowning.

His statement, while used to imply the stretching at the end of our session, has a double meaning, and that smirk facing the ceiling insinuates his game.

He's toying with me, with himself. Knowing he's pushing my limits because he can and testing those waters again. Trying to move that line to allow me the access and space to cross it.

What he doesn't realize is he's playing with a woman whose boundaries are on the verge of snapping like a twig.

And wiping that coy little smile off his pretty face is exactly where I'll start.

Fuck, I missed her.

Three days was three days too many, and that for me is new.

I had to reschedule a few sessions, one for a recent interview with Sports Illustrated and the other for my mom. Dale was out of town on business, and she'd needed a ride to the hospital for another consultation with her oncologist. She convinced me everything was fine, so I let it go and sat in the reception until she finished up.

When she came out, red eyes brimming with tears met me in that waiting room, but she still insisted they were on the right track with this new treatment, and she was eager as hell to get back to herself. I was eager to see it too.

So, after a few home sessions with the detailed instructions sent from my sexy as hell therapist, I was back in the gym, ready for a little late-night therapy with my girl.

I could've killed her for leaving the fucking door unlocked. Yes, I was only around the corner, but even so, the idea that someone could've come in here

and taken advantage of her drives me mad. Now, here I am, taking advantage of her without exactly taking advantage of her.

Jesus, those braids. Immediately upon seeing her in that cute earthy-colored sweatshirt, the matching biker shorts beneath, with her hair tied back in two French braids, I imagined the worst. I saw myself gripping them in my hands, wrapping them around my palms and controlling the fuck out of her mouth. But I've done my best to stay respectful and keep my distance throughout the workout.

Until I saw that sliver of skin as she reached for the rolling mat. Her lower back, right where those dimples sit and her tight ass arches out. Fuck, those back dimples do something strange to me.

I couldn't control myself any longer. My hands found her hips, and there I was, holding onto her, needing more. I tried to breathe through it, to remember her client/patient boundaries, and somehow found the strength to push myself off of her and over to the table.

I need a fucking ice bath for this raging hard-on that seems to always want to come out to play since knowing her. She's gotten beneath my skin, seeped her way into my head, and I can pretend all I want, but this girl is all I can think about. What I want is for her to be driven crazy with thoughts about me, too.

Pushing the limits and teasing is what I do best, but I need her to cross that line herself. I want to see her squirm with the same desire I feel, being forced to break her own code of conduct in a desperate attempt to give in to her wants and needs.

She's a tough cookie, this one. I knew it'd be a challenge. What I wasn't expecting is what happened next.

“You're waiting for your therapist to break her own rules?” she asks,

approaching the massage table with a cocked brow.

I sigh, facing the ceiling again with my hands behind my head. “Any way I can get you, D.” I quickly change positions, sitting up on my elbows to face her, the words pouring out in desperation. “I just can't stop.”

She lifts her chin, grabbing my leg and placing it over her shoulder to stretch me. “Stop what? Getting erections in my presence?” she deadpans.

I choke out a laugh, not expecting her bluntness as she pushes me until I'm flat on my back again, stretching the muscle I didn't realize was so tight.

“It happens all the time, Lake. With many of my clients,” she says through a soft sigh, pushing my knee towards my chest.

No, she didn't.

“It's fine. I'm used to it. Doesn't even phase me anymore.” She hops on the table to get better leverage, the smirk on her face killing me slowly. “I'm a snake charmer, Lake. It's my cross to bear.”

My brows pinch together as she leans over me now, her eyes connecting with mine.

“Nope,” I reply immediately, not even allowing the world in which that's true.

“Nope? What do you mean, nope?” She frowns.

“You're still seeing other clients?”

“Um, yes, Lake. I'm a physiotherapist. It's what I do. See patients,” she says, her tone teasing.

“Where's that planner you're always writing in? Is it in your purse?”

She straightens before folding my leg across my body, stretching my lower back as she holds my hip in place.

“Why would you need to know that?”

I don't answer, only scowl at the ceiling, thinking of a plan as she presses

her weight into me.

Dropping my chin to my chest, I find her face above me as she leans her full body onto my leg. I gaze at her up close again, studying her as she studies me. She has this air of confidence to her that wasn't there a minute ago. Her tongue brushes across her lower lip, wetting it, before a breathy moan leaves her throat.

A breathy moan.

I'm losing. I've lost. If this is a fucking game, I'm out. Done. Deceased. Take my medals, take my rings. I submit to you, Dylan.

“I can't stop thinking about you,” I blurt out in all seriousness, staring into her beautiful almond-shaped eyes, intoxicating me with their unyielding strength.

Her lashes flutter suddenly, but she continues the stretch, biting the corner of those perfectly shaped, upturned lips again.

“It's those lips,” I continue, eyeing them as they part ever so slightly. “And those eyes.” I look at hers, captivated. “You told me one night with you wouldn't be enough, and it's not. It's not even close to enough. I need more.”

She stares back at me, showing no emotion. “You know the deal, Lake. I can't mess this up.”

She looks down at the hold she has me in and I see a hint of a frown form.

“I know this,” I answer, groaning slightly at the stretch. “But I'm not asking for more.”

She scoffs. “Just what I need.” Rolling her eyes, she continues, “To be another playboy's dirty little secret.”

“That's not it at all. I'd take more if I could, but the circumstance stands.”

She stills at that, and I raise my brows, insinuating my truth.

“I don’t even want to try and process the seriousness of what you just said

to me.”

“Dylan,” I whisper, touching her hand, wanting her to say something, anything, to relieve my pain. “I-it's just...you. I need you in some capacity, and I get the feeling that back in that hotel room, well, you didn't mind a little me.”

I'm at my breaking point. I need her. I need her now. She stills for a moment, as if calculating all the scenarios in her pretty little head as I pull her hand onto my abdomen, holding it there.

“We can do this,” I whisper, convincing her to the best of my abilities.

Her timid eyes find mine again, and I see the need behind them. Will she accept my proposal again? Can we keep this casual for the time being?

“Lay back, Lake,” she instructs with a confidence that could kill any rookie on the field.

I do as she says and lie back on the table again, closing my eyes tightly for only a moment to attempt to rid myself of this teenage angst I've fallen victim to.

My cocky attitude that got her all riled up is now taking a back seat to the one owning this game. My pulse rages in my neck as she slowly slides off the table, and my eyes follow, awaiting her next move.

She must sense it because she abruptly instructs, “Face the ceiling.”

I shake my head no, being the stubborn fuck that I am.

That makes her roll her eyes again and purse her lips to contain her annoyance.

She stands beside me and I watch her scan over my body, eyes pausing at a certain area that’s tented just for her.

I grin, feeling a cocky sense of pride until I lose control when her hands find my quad and begin massaging the tight muscle.

I swallow, closing my eyes, enjoying the feeling more than I should, as her soft hands work through the meat of my muscle, rolling out the soreness. Slowly, they find their way up to the top of my quad near my pelvis. I hear her breaths change as those hands work their way higher and higher.

My cock is stiff near my other thigh, aching and ready, and I'm not even ashamed. Let her know what she does to me.

Just as I feel like her hands are about to graze my throbbing dick, she switches sides, massaging the other quad similarly. I release an annoyed sigh, running my fingers through my hair and dragging them down my face at the teasing, tortuous pain. *She's fucking with me.*

As she massages the other thigh in a similar fashion, her hands climb higher and higher until her own tease has her falling to the curiosities that break her.

One of her hands slides its way between my thighs until her warm little palm is finally cupping my dick.

“Ahh, D,” I groan, staring up at the ceiling as she softly strokes the length of me over my sweats. “I can't take it.”

I'm so hard and ready for her, it's painful. Feeling my shirt roll up over my abdomen, exposing my lower stomach, she slowly peels my sweats and underwear down just enough. I hear a light intake of air as she releases my cock into the cold air of the quiet, fluorescent-lit back room.

My breaths are hard and short as I lie victim to her tease, shirt up and pants down, anxiously awaiting her touch.

She says nothing as she bends over me on the table, before the feeling of her soft lips close around the head of my cock, and I fucking lose it.

My eyes roll to the back of my head when she slowly kisses the tip. Her tongue laps up the precum leaking out and my hands grip the edge of the massage table tightly.

Her soft, supple hands wrap around my base and I suck air in through my teeth.

“I'm your therapist, Lake,” she whispers against my shaft, her tongue licking around the crown. “So you can't touch me.” She closes her hand around me, stroking my length a few times. “But I can touch you anywhere I want.”

“Oh, fuck.” I groan, my back teeth grinding together as her sweet lips surround me. “I love this gym's policies.”

Warm, wet, and fucking amazing, she takes me in her mouth, as much of my length as she can. Her saliva coats me as her head slowly bobs up and down overtop of my swollen cock.

My fingers claw into the black cushioned table, and the urge to touch her comes over me. My hand slips between her thighs from behind, pressing against that sweet spot between her legs. She moans around my cock, arching her ass towards me as my middle finger slides along the damp spot on her shorts.

She's wet. Wet as fuck for me.

Goddammit.

Her lips come off my cock with a pop and I damn near whimper at the loss.

“Touch me again and I'll tie you up with the leg bands,” she scolds.

My brows raise at the comment that sounds like entirely too much fun, so I touch her again, running my fingers between her thighs until I'm cupping her sex over her shorts from behind.

She holds the base of my cock, arching back again to expose more of that wetness to me as an uncontrolled moan leaves her. With my other hand, I reach up and wrap her long braids around my palm, getting a tight grip.

“I'm going to touch you, Dylan.” My voice comes out hoarse and ruthless.

“Because I have to.” I gently tug on the braids, turning her face towards me. “And you're going to finish me off.” I pull the braids, turning her mouth to my cock again. “Because you want to.”

Her lips glisten, and her chest rises and falls beneath her sweatshirt. Her pink tongue dips out to lick the ridge of my crown before she nods.

The submission has me almost losing it entirely as I hold her head in place, my hips lifting off the table, meeting her mouth.

Her hands gently stroke my base as she leans over me, her ass propped up near my face. My fingers find their way up the side of her shorts, pulling the material away from her skin to provide the room I need to touch her.

Trailing her wet center with my middle finger, I find her entrance, slowly sliding it in until I meet the knuckle. She's so soft and warm and dripping with delicious goodness, and fuck life entirely if I can't get back in here again.

Clenching around my knuckle, a gasp escapes her and she pauses, holding my cock to her cheek. I want her to peel these shorts off so she can properly sit on my face and my fingers can fuck her the way they need to, but I feel myself losing the battle to pleasure, succumbing to it as she ruthlessly continues to suck me off, stroking the slippery length, not even allowing me a chance to come down.

It's the fact that she's sucking me off on a massage table.

In the back room.

At the gym where she works.

Everything about it feels so taboo, so lewd, so forbidden, and so completely fucking indecent. It's everything I never thought I’d enjoy.

“Shit.” I pant, removing my hand from beneath her shorts to grip her braids again. “I'm gonna come.”

The muscles of my abdomen flex as one of her hands slowly slides up my torso. Her fingers run over the ripples of my stomach while her mouth stays wrapped around me, my hips continuing to thrust off the table. Her throat vibrates around me, moaning as if the act is giving her as much pleasure as it's giving me.

It's all it takes for me to come undone. I drop my head back, clutching her head in my hands as I feel myself release straight down her warm throat. With my mouth dropped open and choppy breaths leaving my chest, I release a throaty groan, finishing into her mouth, and she allows it.

When it’s over, I catch my breath as the best feeling in the world cycles through my body, from the goosebumps on my neck all the way to my flexed toes. I sit up on an elbow to see some of my cum spill from her plump, used lips back onto me, and the sight nearly has me buckling over.

She gives me one last quick little kiss on the tip before her tongue darts out to lick the remaining drop off her lip. My heavy lids attempt to open, to stare at her in complete and utter admiration and awe.

I'm speechless. Cocky, confident, arrogant Lake Decker is in post-nut shock.

Truthfully, I didn't think any of this was going to happen, even with how much I teased and pushed. But holy fuck, Dylan just sucked me off on the massage table.

I'm getting hard again, just rehashing.

She flips her braids over her shoulders, smirking slightly as she adjusts my Calvin's for me, pulling the sweats back over my underwear and finishing with a light pat to the band.

“Maybe we can do this,” she whispers with a hint of a grin, her eyes flirtatious, before turning and leaving the room.

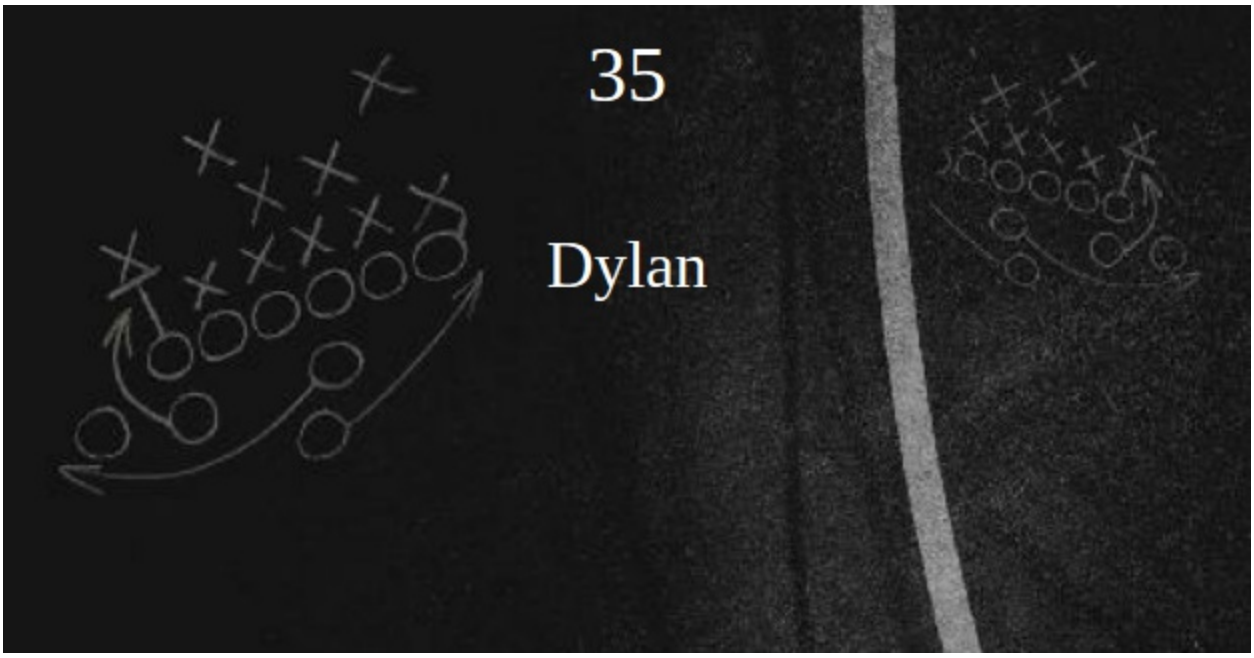
I watch her walk her perfect ass confidently through the door, heading to what I'm assuming is the bathroom. My head drops back against the black cushion, my arms dropping to hang from the sides of the table like a man who's used up, satiated, and yet somehow still completely unsatisfied.

More. I need more.

A thought comes to mind, and I sit up abruptly, looking around the room. Spotting her purse on the counter, I rush over. Inside is the planner she's always carrying around the gym, taking her notes and adjusting her schedule.

Opening it on the laminate counter where all of this started, I grab a pen.

A devilish smile slides across my face, and I fix a few things that need fixing.



“You don't want your sandwich, Col? Are you sure?” I ask, leaning against his door frame with a plate in hand.

“No.”

“No, you're not sure, or no—”

“No. I don't want it. No sandwich!” he yells back.

“But you haven't eaten much of anything, and we probably won't be able to get food once we're down on the field—”

“No. N-no food! I said no! I don't want it. I don't want it. I don't want it,” he repeats while crossing and uncrossing his fingers, rocking his body in his recliner.

Sighing, I drop my head back against the door, already knowing where this is going.

We've come this far. I've successfully gotten everything ready to go, with Colin in a sweatshirt and clean pants and underwear, despite his attempts to re-wear his khaki slacks for the third time this week. I've made food in an

attempt to get us fed and out the door at the appropriate time in order to be on the field for kick-off.

Tonight was a home game, and I had tickets waiting for Colin and me at the gate. How did I know this? Well, it was written in my planner.

My personal planner.

That Lake went through.

There it was—the date, the event, the time, with an *XO, Lake* after it. This guy had successfully gotten into my planner and rerouted my entire schedule. Crossing out names of other clients, noting that they were *losers*, he jotted brief notes in between Treyvon and Peter's slots, instructing me to talk to Greg about my “new” client schedule. Not only that, but he drew little hearts around his full name as if I had doodled it myself. *Weirdo.*

He was fucking with my money and my tight, pristine schedule, and Greg was sure to get an earful on Monday.

Either way, I was excited to get Colin out of the house to attend a football game. Knowing his love for the sport, I was hopeful we'd be able to enjoy ourselves, and Col would get to meet some of the players he watches on his television damn near every Sunday. Not only that, it was my opportunity to see Ashton in action again.

That's right. Ashton was in town. The Chicago Bears were playing the Denver Broncos, and I was more than excited to watch him play live. Every time he played in town, he texted to see if we could meet to catch up. He knew my life with Colin and knew that more often than not, I'd have to decline offers to get out of the house, but that never stopped him from trying, and he never once held it against me.

I couldn’t deny the nervousness in my gut over seeing Lake again. I was doing my best to keep it casual. Just sex and therapy. We could do this.

Casual. I deserved a little fun as long as we kept it under wraps. Right?

Fortunately, today was my chance to make it all happen. See friends, see my crush, bring Colin, enjoy a hint of normalcy again.

Unfortunately for me, today was not a good day.

It's hit or miss, and something as small as a change in schedule or a sensitivity to a new smell, like the Indian food my neighbor across the hall is attempting to perfect that's seeping beneath the gap in our run-down front door, can reroute our entire day. Whatever the reason may have been, Colin was not in a good place to handle the stress of an event as large as an NFL football game from the sidelines. As frustrating as it is, it's life, and I deal with it.

I just hope Lake will understand. Lake. The guy I'd sucked off at work. On the massage table. *God, I'm a whore.*

"You washed my shirt?" Colin asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Uh…" I stutter, refocusing.

"You washed my shirt. You washed. Washed. Washed." He breathes hard as he rocks. "You washed my s-shirt, right Pickle?"

We are on the brink of destruction. I watch as those fingers twist tightly, knuckles white as he clenches his fists. I see beads of sweat forming on his forehead, and he pulls at the collar of his sweatshirt. It's the build-up to a meltdown.

"Yep. I washed your favorite shirt, Col. It's in the dryer right now. Come here," I say softly, holding my hands out for him. "Let's take this off so you can breathe."

He rocks a few times in his seat before nodding and holding his arms out for me. I help pull his sweatshirt over his head as he sits back in the recliner.

I go to hang the sweatshirt back up in his closet when I hear a knock at the

door. Confusion hits me when I head towards it and undo the rusty locks, finding a face I wasn't expecting.

Katia.

“Let's celebrate, bitch!” she yells out, holding up two bottles of wine by the neck, one in each hand.

My expression etches with concern.

“Please tell me I didn't forget your birthday,” I reply with a hand to my forehead, worried I'm a shit friend to a woman who's been there for me more times than I can count.

“God, no!” she gasps. “I haven't aged since forty.” I laugh at her joke before she explains,“This is a welcome home party.”

My brows lower. “For who?”

“For me, silly! I finally got the keys to 103!” she exclaims, pushing past my stunned form into the apartment. *Katia’s my new neighbor?* “Hey, where's Col? I bought him a housewarming gift.”

She sets her bag down and pulls out a small vintage pickup truck, setting it on the counter with her wine.

“Kat,” I stall, shaking my head. “I think we're supposed to buy *you* a gift. This isn't—you're not doing this right.”

“Fuck it. I just so happen to have some of my favorite people as neighbors now.” She smiles, leaning against the counter. “C'mon now, pop that bottle!”

I chuckle at the complete randomness, turning to grab the wine glasses from the cabinet.

We watch the game from my tiny loveseat, practically snuggling together with our wine as I withhold the fact that we were supposed to be there. She asks about Colin and why he hasn't left his room since she got there. He loves

her, so to not say hello is normal, considering his state of mind at the moment. I explain his near meltdown, and she nods in understanding.

“You're an amazing young woman, you know that Dylan?” she says, finishing off her glass and setting it down on the wooden coffee table. “You never push him. You're patient when you need to be. You just accept and acknowledge, and honestly, that's all you can do sometimes.”

I look down at my half-empty glass, running my thumb along the brim. It's been my life for as long as I can remember. Even if it is difficult to accept at times, I wouldn't have it any other way. He's my brother, my best friend.

“Pickle and Collie were supposed to be there,” Colin's voice breaks through the room. He's walking toward us in his canary button-up he must’ve pulled from the dryer. “Pickle and Collie were supposed to be there, Kat, but Colin hates Indian food. I don’t like it. The smell. I don’t like it.”

Kat turns to face me with her head cocked.

“Lake gave us tickets. Colin's been struggling with this new Indian cuisine that someone in the complex has been attempting to cook. He had a moment. I made a decision.” I shrug, then finish off my glass.

“Damn,” Katia shakes her head. “You're so lucky to be working with all this fine-ass meat.” She sighs, turning to watch the screen. “The perks of the job.”

“Pickle and Colin were supposed to be there,” Colin repeats.

“I heard, Col.” she sighs sympathetically. “That's alright though. That's the best thing about football...there are so many games.” She smiles at him, then stands and walks toward the kitchen. “You hungry buddy? I can whip up some of that baked macaroni and cheese you love.”

She turns her face to find mine and shoots me a wink. My body fills with warmth.

When I met Kat as the divorced psychiatric nurse at the facility where Eric dropped Colin off, I'd never in a million years thought she'd become one of my closest friends and someone I could trust entirely. She was everything I didn’t realize I needed. Someone who just gets it.

I sit back against the couch as the Chicago Bears kick off the second half of the game. Katia finishes the mac and cheese for Colin, giving him his vintage truck gift before we pop open the second bottle of wine.

I've been staring at the TV screen, attempting to get into the game, but all I see is Lake. On the sidelines, in the half-time interview, he's all over that screen as they cut to him after a few plays. He stands there clapping on his teammates, looking handsome as all hell.

All I see is him, and all I can think about is the way those masculine hands wrapped around my braids, pushing my head towards his cock to finish him off. I feel a pulse in my clit at the thought of his firm aggressiveness that made me damn near whimper in delight, needing to clench my back teeth to ward off the memory.

While I’m trying to think of anything else, my phone vibrates on the wooden end table with a text.

Lake: Where's my girl?

The wine must've gotten to those butterflies because there is no other reason I'd feel a light flip in the compartment down below to words that aren't meant for me. Not in the way I hoped they could be. He probably calls everyone his girl.

“Is it him?!” Katia shrieks, looking from my hand to my eyes and back.

She settles herself on the other side of the couch, crossing her legs and facing me now. I look at the message, then at her, and then back at my phone again.

“Who's him?” I ask, curious who she thinks I'm talking to.

I haven't divulged in my intimate moments with Lake to anyone. I basically skirt around me being his therapist as best I can, keeping it super casual. Somehow, accidentally placing my mouth around his penis doesn't seem like good therapy practice for a professional.

“Ashton, silly!”

I laugh, watching as Ashton completes a play on the screen before us. “Pretty sure he isn't texting while catching.”

She never stops. Her obsession with me and Ashton hooking up is constant.

“Well, I know he'll be calling later to meet up. You said he always does when he's in town.”

“You need to chill your tits, woman. It's not like that.”

“Please! He's always understood your life better than anyone. He loves Colin, and Colin loves him. He's so fucking nice, has that sexy blonde buzz cut, and have you seen those arms? Tree trunks.”

I gasp, scolding her with my eyes. “Kat.”

All I can think about are the arms on the other team’s guy. The ones that feel so strong when they’re holding me down.

“The pickings aren't great when you hit my age. I don't care if he's damn near fifteen years my minor. I'd violate the fuck out of him and enjoy every second of that sentence I'd serve.”

“Kat!” I laugh.

“I don't want to hear it anymore. The excuses, the friendship bullshit. Cross that line. Be a ho for once in your life. It's liberating.” She shrugs, taking

another sip of wine.

Oh, if only you knew how much I understood that.

I look back down at my phone and respond to Lake.

> **Dylan:** Didn't work out. I'm sorry. Thanks again for thinking of Colin.

I hit send and expect that to be the end of it. He's watching the game on the sidelines with his coach and teammates, surrounded by chaos and a plethora of reporters, most as gorgeous as the one in Arizona, I'm sure. He'll have people all over him until dawn approaches, and then more after it. He has that freedom, the ability to screw whoever he wants whenever he wants, and I'm sure he takes advantage of it.

I feel the vibration of a new text against my leg.

> **Lake:** Everything alright?

I swallow. He's concerned. I hate how concern from Lake feels good.

> **Dylan:** All good. Have a great night.

I sit back against the seat, tossing my phone onto the coffee table. I don't want sympathy; I don't want concern. I don't want to be someone's something worth saving. I only found strength when saving myself. Besides, we agreed upon a line in the sand. Sex and silence.

After the game finishes up, I place a blanket over Colin in his chair, removing the empty bowl of macaroni and cheese he devoured. Drawing the bright curtains of his yellow room, I switch the lamp off and quietly slip through the door. I smile to myself as I close it and look to where Katia fell asleep on the couch. As I'm placing our empty wine bottles in the recycling, I hear what sounds like a super gentle knock on the door.

No. It couldn't have been. Must be the neighbor.

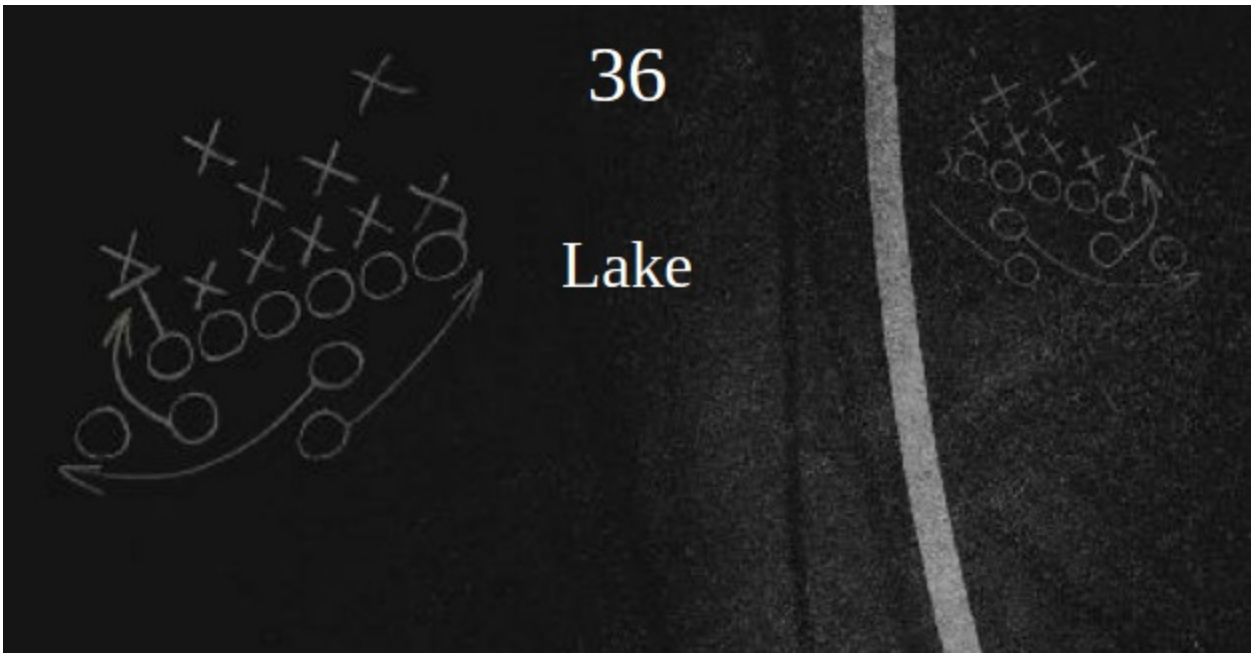
Then I hear it again.

Wiping my hands nervously down my black leggings, I look back to where Kat is sleeping, then back at the door.

Twisting the rusty knob, I pull it open just enough for the chain lock to tighten so I can peek out.

I see him standing in the hallway, hand perched on the door frame as he always does, leaning forward with his dark, thick locks of hair before me. But when his head snaps up and those gunmetal blues light up at the sight of me, I’m terrified to my bones.

“Lake?” I whisper through the cracked door, my heart racing at the sight of him, panic circling me. “What are you doing here?”



“The game's over,” I mutter, sounding like a total idiot.

Of course the game's over. That's why I'm here. At her door. Needing to see her and make sure everything is alright with her and Colin. Her entirely bland text left me confused and worried.

Call it protective; it's just how I am with women in my life. My mom included. After spending the morning making her breakfast and assisting her with her medications while Dale was out of town on business, I dodged questions about my recovery process like a man swerving defenders.

Questions came at me from left and right about therapy, and it was impossible to hold back the cheeky grin that stretched across my face as I explained with minimal detail how well it was going. She made a note to mention that I seemed different. While I was still more than eager to get back to business, she said I had a certain energy about me she couldn't place. I didn't even want to imagine she knew what she was talking about, but I couldn't deny it myself.

Dylan has changed me. Gotten in my head. I’m a man who’s falling for someone I can’t have, and realizing that is a torment all its own.

I made my way to the field an hour later, anxiously awaiting her and her brother. But as time ticked on, I'd realized something was wrong and they weren't coming. So now, here I am at their door.

“I watched it,” she whispers through the crack, her soft eyes finding mine.

I can't help but smile at that. At least I know she wasn't avoiding the game. If she was watching, then she had to have seen me and thought about me at some point throughout it. Something about that makes my stomach tighten. Feeling a little anxious about the need to explain myself, I tuck my hands into the pockets of my jeans.

“I had to see you. Had to make sure you were…” I struggle to find the word that fits. It's so much more than just alright, but it’s all I got. “Alright.”

Her mouth opens as if she’s about to say something, but she simply nods, waiting for me to continue.

I scratch the back of my head, blowing air through my lips as I look down the hallway and back. “Can I come in?”

“Um,” she stalls, looking towards where I know Colin's room is and back.

“Is he sleeping?”

She smiles lightly, nodding.

“He's good though, right?”

She stares at me, processing my sentence as if it’s hard to digest.

“Yeah.”

“Want to tell me what happened?”

Her eyes drop to the floor. “It's complicated.”

I stick my hand through the crack in the door, touching the tip of her chin and tipping her head up to face me. *That chin’s gotta stay up, babe.*

“I know. So, do you want to tell me what happened?” I reiterate.

Her eyes fix on mine, and it's almost as if it's as overwhelming for her as it is for me.

“What always happens.” She shrugs, shedding her steel facade. “Colin can't handle certain changes. He's hyper-sensitive to them. I knew bringing him to a loud, chaotic game just wouldn’t work with the way his day was going.”

“Okay,” I whisper, nodding. “I'm sorry he had a bad day.”

She simply shrugs it off again.

“But don't feel like you can't tell me that,” I state, leaning forward more, so our faces are both close to the crack in the door. “You can tell me these things. I want to learn more. I want to know more about you and him and what your life looks like from the inside.”

Her amber eyes harden on me.

“What are you doing here, Lake?” she asks suddenly, sounding frustrated.

I tip my forehead on the door, staring at her through my lashes, our faces close but still separated by this locked door. “I came to see my girl.”

She shakes her head once. “Don't say stuff you don't mean.”

My brows lower, and I frown.

“I mean it, D,” I whisper, my voice husky as I look at her lips and back before licking my own. “You're my girl.”

I see the walls behind her eyes. She doesn't want to let me in. Doesn't want me to cross that line we talked about. I'm making her entirely uncomfortable. *Simple. Keep this simple, Lake.*

“Well, anyway, the guys asked me to head down to the pub. They're all grabbing a few celebratory drinks tonight since we don't have practice until Tuesday. Guess I'll just head on over…”

I linger at the door for another second, wishing she'd stop me. Hoping she'd

tell me to stay here with her instead. To let me in. But she doesn't.

Someone else does.

“Lake Decker?!” I hear from behind the door.

Dylan's eyes round and she's barely able to remove her head before someone pushes the door shut in my face. The chain lock rattles violently against the door as it reopens, and an older woman appears beside her. She's probably in her early forties, with a short, curvy body. Her thick, dark hair is wrapped up in a large bun, and she wears a wide, toothy smile that lights up her entire face.

“Oh my God!” She looks back at Dylan, eyes illuminating with excitement, before peering back at me. “What are you doing here?!”

“He was just—”

“Just stopped by to confirm my session tomorrow,” I interrupt, trying to help. “Heading to meet some of the team at O'Leary's Pub just down the—”

“She's coming,” the woman interrupts.

“What?” Dylan and I both answer, hers sounding a little more perturbed.

The woman nods aggressively. “Oh, yeah.” She stares at me. “She's coming with you. Colin is sleeping. I'll stay here with him, and you…” she scoffs, eyeing Dylan from toe to head. “Well, you need a night out,” she says pointedly.

“No,” she begs, looking petrified. “No, Kat, I can't, I—”

“Yep!” she interrupts her as she eyes my body entirely, tipping her head to the side and peering at both my arms from shoulder to wrist.

I look down at my arms, wondering if I have massive sweat stains on my loose-fitting casual tee or something, before facing her Inspector Gadget eyes again.

“She'll be dressed and ready in ten.”

The door closes abruptly, and I stand there in complete confusion. I hear murmured yelling on the other side of the door, but decide to take a seat in the hallway and wait.

Eleven minutes later, Dylan gets pushed through the door. She stumbles into the hallway and my eyes trail up from the floor, taking her in. Black booties lead to black tights covering her toned, lean legs, leading up to a flowery black V-neck dress covered in red and pink roses that ends at her thighs, exposing those plump, round breasts I've come to obsess over. She wears a leather jacket over the dress with her long, honey hair flipped over one shoulder, exposing her slender neck. Lipstick. She's wearing red lipstick.

“Jesus, fuck,” I murmur, then remember I still need to get up off the floor.

She shrugs lightly, and I hate her modesty. She needs to own her fucking hot-ass body. Is she stupid?! No, blind. She must be partially blind. Maybe it's just in one eye? Either way, she can't see herself clearly like I can. Stunning is the only word that comes to mind.

We hop in my truck as I make the drive to O'Leary's. I keep glancing over at her in the dimly lit truck, listening to light country music in the background as she fiddles with a loose string at the end of her dress.

“You look...really nice,” I say, trying to ease whatever tension she's holding onto.

She laughs lightly. “It's old.” She looks down at her dress. “I don't get out a lot. Or ever.”

“Do you routinely deny compliments, or is it just with me?” I reply snarkily.

“When the compliments come from the guy who initially called me *stale*, they tend to be a tad harder to accept,” she deadpans.

Oof. Head shot.

I lick my teeth, gripping the wheel tighter. “To be fair, I enjoy a good stale chip,” I state, my eyes on the road. “The crunch surprises you. It’s different than it should be. Unexpected.”

She smiles. “In the worst possible way. But I admire the glass half-full attempt.”

I peer at her smile, letting it warm me entirely before I say, “To be honest, I was just angry at the world, and I didn't know you yet.”

Her smile fades as she gazes at me, thinking, contemplating her next words as if knowing they'll come off wrong.

“I still don't know you.”

Her words tear through the truck, suddenly making the space seem even smaller than before. My heart pinches in my chest at the truth.

“I still don't know me,” I reply, chuckling lightly before turning onto the highway. “But that's not stopping me from growing and learning more.”

That makes her pause. Guess there is no good comeback to self-growth. However, I have definitely been more stingy with the complexities of my life. My mother's illness, the fact that my father, who's a total deadbeat, did horrific things to us that have changed who we are, or the fact that my drive to get back to being the famed face of football isn't entirely for me. Yeah, I've been holding back, hanging onto my secrets, especially considering everything she's exposed to me about hers.

We ride in silence as the street lights pass overhead, allowing the orange light to illuminate her dress in quick waves. I steal another glance as she peers out of the window, noting the small pills that have collected on the fabric of her dress from multiple washes.

She has no idea that, to me, she's more beautiful in something worn and ratted than any other woman in designer clothes. But it's not even that. It

makes me sad because I want to give her the best of everything. She deserves it more than anyone. But accepting anything is difficult for a woman of her strength. She won't take anything from anyone, only finds ways to get it herself. Selfless women are my Achilles heel.

That I'm even thinking about how she aligns with the woman I love and admire most startles me. *What are you doing, Lake?*

We finally pull up to O'Leary's, noting a collection of fine sports cars, Jeeps, and expensive trucks already parked.

Opening her door, I hold out my hand to help her down from the heightened cab. She stumbles into me, and I quickly wrap my arms around her.

“Shit,” she murmurs, her face inches from mine. “I'm not used to heels.”

I hold her firmly to my chest, feeling her breasts press against me. My lips part, aching to kiss hers, and it takes my breath away. *Those gorgeous lips were just wrapped around your cock, Lake. Your cum dripping down them, sexy as ever.*

“I see that,” I whisper, unable to look away, feeling a certain warmth fill my chest.

“Close call!” I hear Candy call out across the parking lot, distracting me from nearly taking her in the back of my truck and doing all the nasty things I’ve imagined. “Good thing he's got quick hands!”

He jogs over to us as I set Dylan down. I turn toward the road to adjust the rock in my pants.

“But have you heard?” Candy slips an arm over Dylan's shoulders, guiding her causally into the bar as if they came together. “Mine are the best in the league.” He wiggles his eyebrows at her as I roll my eyes behind them.

He opens the door for her, and she stills in place, staring into the bar.

I almost run into her before I skid to a stop, peering around her to see what

she's looking at, when she screams a high-pitched scream, scaring the shit out of me.

In a flash, she sprints into the bar, running towards the back of it. She reaches her arms out, jumping into the arms of another man.

She jumps into the arms of another man.

Heat is building, and for some reason, my neck is suddenly hot.

“Ash!” she yells before he spins her in a circle, his hands beneath her thighs, her legs open and surrounding his torso.

She's in a dress.

Her legs are open.

Surrounding his torso as his hands hold the back of her thighs.

“Pickle!” the man's voice sings and my fist curls into itself.

One thing I know is anyone who calls her Pickle must know her well enough to know Colin. That little tidbit of information I hold close, and I know for a fact she doesn't vocalize it often. This guy is in with her deep, and I fucking hate it.

Tension grips my shoulders as I tuck my fists into the pockets of my jeans, trying to act casual and not punch this guy dead in the face for grabbing onto my girl so intimately. *Mine, buzz-cut.*

Candy claps his hand on my back, walking us toward some of our teammates already perched by the bar. The guys come and shake up with me, but I'm not even here. I'm over there. By her. I lean against the bar, gawking, as Candy orders us some drinks.

“Stale as a rainbow, eh Wheels?”

I glower at his comment, hating that he can read me so well, as a circle of women approach us. Candy entertains them with his endless swagger, and I continue watching Dylan and her little friend catch up near the jukebox. It

must be Ashton. Yep, it's definitely him. She called him Ash, and now that I’m looking, I recognize his build.

I wonder about his therapy with her. Feeling my pulse rage through my veins again, I find myself thinking about how the brothers of Bearback aren't really so bad after all.

One girl in a tight mini-skirt asks when she's going to be able to watch me in action again as she rubs her shoulder along my side. I don't answer, just grab the glass that's been placed before me, holding it up to my lips, about to down whatever it is.

I stall with the glass near my mouth, the potent scent of Bourbon just beneath my nose, when I see Dylan through the crowd of people again. Her smile is wide as ever as her hand comes up and gently touches his upper arm. My fingers tighten around the glass in my hand until it shatters, sending shards across the bar and onto the floor.

Surprising even myself, I look down at the mess before my eyes dart up to find hers locked on me across the room.

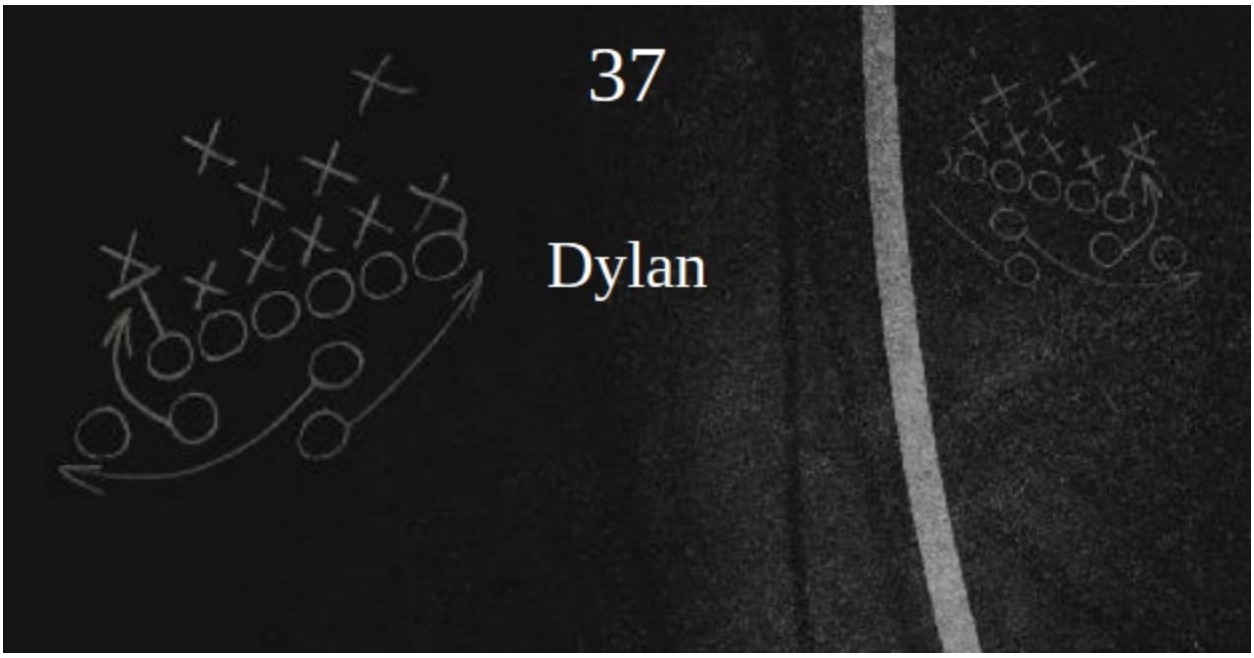
Worry pulls at the corners of her eyes as she sees the glass along the counter. It must've made a loud popping noise for her to even notice. I couldn't tell. The pounding in my head was deafening. Looking as if she is about to approach me, Ashton pulls her attention back to him and continues their conversation.

Candy laughs hysterically, grabbing his stomach and commenting about my vice grip as the women scurry away from the broken glass.

The bartender slides me another drink, Scotch this time, and I finish it with one roll of my throat, sliding the empty glass across the old wooden bartop to avoid another incident.

It appears your boy, Lake, doesn’t enjoy sharing your attention, Dylan.

Guess it's about time I make that clear.



“Oh my God, then my mom wouldn't shut up about how you told her driver to change his radio station, or you'd peel his toupee off and throw it in the gutter.” Ashton laughs, nudging me playfully.

I chuckle at the horrific memory, making a pained face. “Don't remind me. That was not my finest moment.”

He's referring to the situation when his mother's driver was taking us from the court hearing after she’d helped finalize my guardianship, and Colin had a meltdown because he was wearing a suit coat, and Colin hates suit coats.

“One of my favorites.” He smiles.

“Ash, I really want—”

“And I told her Pickle is a force to be reckoned with. If she wants you to put Kanye on, you better put Kanye on, especially if it's for her big bro,” he interrupts enthusiastically.

This is what he does. He's literally a Golden Retriever in human form. Excited, exuberant, all over the place. A man potentially suffering from severe ADHD that he self-medicates with football. Even so, he's one of my

favorite people. He and his family have always looked out for me and Colin, and I reciprocated that when he fell to his injury. It's been far too long since we've seen each other.

“Oh my God, I remember how stupid I sounded yelling at that poor man. I was in pure panic mode. He didn't deserve my wrath.” I chuckle, putting my hand to my forehead. “But seriously, Ash, I want you to meet—”

“Always looking out for your bro, aren't you? Literally the best sister a guy could ask for,” he says with a proud grin. “How is Colin? I miss him! So does my mom. How's work? It's so good to see you! I had no idea you'd be here!”

He rattles questions and statements off so fast I can't even focus on answering one.

“Wait, were you trying to tell me something?! What were you saying when I interrupted you? I'm sorry, I'm all over the place. I'm just geeking out to see you again!” he exclaims.

“I know,” I say, a smile stretching across my face at the thought of the person who got me out of the apartment. Having these two guys meet makes me feel all warm and gooey inside, even if Ash doesn’t know the depth of our little connection. “But I really want you to meet someone who's become rather important to me,” I say, gently touching his upper arm. “He's—”

I hear the pop of a glass breaking, startling me, and look over to find the hard eyes of a man from across the room. A man who has shattered glass around him and in his hand. A man who's simultaneously holding a red flag in the other.

He's jealous.

“He's about to get his ass whooped,” I mumble beneath my breath.

Fictional men anger him. I can only imagine what a real life one is doing to his psyche.

“Huh?” Ashton asks, looking towards the bar, clearly not hearing me.

“Nothing, sorry. Excuse me for a minute,” I say, walking around Ashton's tall form, “I'll be right back. I've got something to handle.”

Or someone.

Marching over towards Lake as he begins marching towards me, I see some of his teammates around him turn their heads to face me.

“You,” I say directly. “Outside.” I point to the door.

Candy's eyes round as he holds a hand to his lips, covering his expression the best he can before laughing through it.

“Ooooh! Teacher's mad, Lakey! You coulda cut those hands!” he hollers through cupped hands. “Spank him, Dyl. He's a bad boy.”

I ignore him entirely, trying not to draw any more attention to us, and begin walking outside, knowing he'll follow.

I march across the creaky wooden floor of the old pub, approaching the door as another familiar face appears behind it.

Beckham walks up just as I'm opening the door, wearing fitted jeans and a sweater that truly does his body justice. His face lights up with a handsome smile as he eyes me up and down, his hand running through his light-brown, disheveled hair.

“Damn, Dylan.”

My elbow gets yanked and I fall into Lake's side. Ripping my arm away from him, I send daggers with my eyes.

“Just getting some air. Be back in a jiffy, *Bencham*,” Lake grumbles.

I continue glaring at Lake as Beckham's eyes narrow at him before peering back at me with a worried expression.

“You good?” he directs his questions towards me.

“Great, she just needed a smoke,” Lake says like an idiot, as I'm trying to

digest the fact that he just called him *Bencham*.

Coming up with lies on a whim is not his forte. But it appears to have worked well for him because Beckham's nose wrinkles in disgust before he continues on his way.

We walk outside as I rip my elbow from his grasp again and march around to the back of the pub, out of sight of the people filtering into the bar from the parking lot.

“We need to talk,” I spit out, pulling him behind the brick building.

It's dark back here, only lit by one flickering street light that's seen better days. The cold air seeps through my tights, and my heated moment slowly filters out as I tighten my jacket around me, wisps of hair attempting to obstruct my view.

Lake shuffles along the gravel near the brick wall, leaning back against it with his arms crossed over his chest, his lack of a jacket not appearing to cool off the heat this man continuously projects.

“Talk to me, girl,” he sneers, tipping his head back against the wall and eyeing me through his lashes.

Swallowing down my unfortunate attraction for the man before me, I say, “What was that in there?”

“What in where?”

“Don't play stupid, Lake. I saw that look in your eyes.”

“What look?”

I sigh and run a hand through my hair, looking off into the distance. He wants to play childish games, but I'm not a child. I'm the furthest thing from it, and he better realize that.

“A look of jealousy?” he asks. “A look of a man who's frustrated because he can't have the only girl he seems to want? A man who aches to touch you

in public the way this man was effortlessly allowed?" he continues, pushing off the wall.

I see the smallest hint of pain behind his cool blues as he stares at me.

"Girls are all over me," he admits, coming to stand before me. "In my DMs, in my house with Candy, here at the bar...wanting me. Constantly." He shakes his head. "But it's like I have blinders on. I can't see them at all. All I see is you. All I can think about is you. All I want is to be let into your little world, to be close with you, with Colin. To know your secrets better than anyone else. Better than *him*."

Hope, anxiety, excitement, nervousness, and terror strike me all at once. To have him admit to wanting in on a part of my life I've routinely denied anyone access to terrifies me, while also making me feel things for him I shouldn't.

"I can't stand seeing you like that," he says in a raspy tone, slowly closing the space between us as he tries to explain. "Your hand...on his arm. His hands, holding onto what's supposed to be mine."

He leans forward as if he's about to kiss me, but I place a hand on his forehead, stopping him.

"First of all," I begin heatedly. "You don't own me. Nor are you allowed to get upset when I'm around someone I care about. That's ridiculous, Lake. Ash is like family to me, and this isn't a competition between the two of you. And while yes, maybe you didn't realize that because I hadn't had the opportunity to introduce you, you need to know it and respect it."

He flinches at the name and I can tell how much it truly bothers him. As much as this is a huge red flag for me, the crazed jealousy, I feel something spark between my legs. Too many damn erotic novels in the Finger Vault.

I love a jealous man in fiction. Teeth-baring, pulse-pounding rage from an

alpha male who needs to claim you. It's when it crosses over into reality that it becomes a problem. Shit ain't cute anymore.

“He wants you,” he states with a frown, continuing his prowl forward.

I shake my head, taking a step back. “No, he doesn't.”

“Yes, he does. Everyone does. Everyone wants you.”

I laugh at that. “Hardly, Lake.”

“Everyone wants you,” he repeats, knowing it didn't resonate. “But who do you want?” he directs his question at me like a weapon, spearing me with it into the wall behind me.

I don't want to answer that and give him the satisfaction he craves, but I also can't deny it.

His eyes soften on mine, and his lips part, emotion running through his veins. “I need to hear it.”

I swallow at the intensity of his stare, then suck in a breath, releasing it through my lips. He looks down at my lips as if he can see the nervousness leave me.

My body feels that familiar numbness again. That painful, humming, yet erotically charged moment where I realize my body is turning off my mind like the flip of a switch. My grip on the weapons I'd brought to this war is loosening. I'm losing the fight.

“You,” my pussy literally answers for me.

“Say it again,” he demands, gazing at my lips as if he can see the word on my tongue needing to be released again.

“It's you I want.” My lashes flutter before I register what I'm doing.

He can't get away with this. He doesn't get off that easily. Not with me.

“But you can't act like that in front of people.” I break through the intoxicated haze, pushing him away from me until there's at least a good three

feet between us again. “You broke a glass in your hand!”

“I wanted to break his face,” he growls, staring into me. “The glass was a suitable alternative, considering.”

“Lake,” I scold before I soften my tone. “I was trying to introduce him to someone who's become important to me.”

He stalks me back towards the wall again, placing a hand on the brick above my head and leaning over me as I bump into it. I feel the shift in energy, and his eyes are suddenly burning through me like they did that night in the hotel room.

“Important to you?” he asks, his tone cracked, lips inches from mine. “You were?”

I can smell the slightest hint of alcohol on his breath. His masculine scent of spice and woodsy nature floods me, and my insides come alive again. I'm drowning. Deep waters, pulling me down.

“Yeah.” I can barely form the word with the way my lungs feel, as if they are caving in on themselves.

He tilts his head so his nose is by my hair. He breathes me in, then runs his nose down until his face nuzzles along my neck. I swallow, feeling drunk off of this sensation when I feel his lips graze my skin. They draw a line from my neck to my ear, where he whispers, “I want you so bad it hurts.”

I feel how badly he wants me. I feel it against my hip as he towers over me.

“Lake,” I whisper breathlessly, forgetting why we were even back here. *What did I need to say to him?*

“I want you,” he says again, rolling his head along mine until our foreheads touch and the clouds of our breath in the cold fall night connect between us. “Why don't you want me?”

I can't answer that. It's not that I don't want him. I want this fantasy I've

played out in my head since that night in the hotel to become my reality. I want us to express ourselves the way we want, but how do I do that and somehow keep my career? I want him, but I need me.

As much as I don't want to admit it, Lake's kind of my meal ticket to get Colin and me into a better situation, better opportunities. There's a weird line between us we just need to balance on for the time being, and I wish he'd accept that.

“Tell everyone in there I'm yours and I'll give you the world,” he whispers against my lips.

I pull back from him, my brows lowering as a new emotion clears the fog he always surrounds me with.

“That's where you got me wrong, Lake. I don't want the world from you. I want the world for myself, and while I’m flattered by your interest, I’m definitely not going to feed into your toxic alpha-male energy, allowing you to claim me in front of all your teammates like a piece of meat.”

I go to move around him but he throws up an arm, blocking me from leaving before pushing me back against the wall.

“Lake,” I warn.

“Okay, okay…” He blinks, trying to get me to stay while looking flustered. “I'm sorry for acting so...possessive.”

“I need you to rein it in,” I tell him. “People are already getting suspicious.”

“I know, I know,” he says, running a hand down his face before placing it on the wall behind me again. He's still pressed against me, as if moving is something he has no intention of doing. “I'll rein it in. I promise. I'm a man of control who practices intense discipline, and yet, when it comes to you...I'm just...I can't…”

His eyes reflect just how out of control I seem to make him. As much as the

feeling makes me weak in the knees, I also know I have to be the one to keep this in check.

Professionalism.

Conduct.

Responsibilities.

But being the responsible one is tiring, and I'm sick of always keeping life in order, especially when he's looking at me like that, like if he can't have me, he has nothing.

So I do what I shouldn't and reach up, touching the light stubble around his jaw. I slide my hand to the back of his neck and pull him down to my lips. I kiss him with everything I have because I want to. Because I need to.

I'm being selfish again, just as I was in that hotel room, because it feels good to be.

Our lips crash together as he roughly presses me into the wall, losing the last bit of control he was grasping. His tongue sweeps across my bottom lip, and I open my mouth for him. The second his tongue touches mine, I can't help the moan that's released into his mouth. He grips the back of my thigh, pulling my legs open and picking me up, wrapping my legs around his back and anchoring me against the rough brick with his hips. I feel him hard and ready against my aching center as he flexes into me, rubbing my tights and underwear against my clit, driving me insane.

“Fuck, I needed this, D,” he whispers between kisses, running his other hand up to hold the back of my head, deepening our kiss, and it drives me past the point of reason.

I've lost myself in him again. My battles, my walls, my everything, crumble to nothing in his presence. I hate how right it feels to be with him. I want to

tear down everything I've worked for and let this man I’m effortlessly falling for fulfill his promise to me, giving me his world.

His lips litter my jaw with kisses until his hungry mouth finds my neck. He kisses me like he's consuming me. Starved for the affection I'm finally allowing. My chest heaves between us as he does that little thing I love. The trailing tongue, the soft nip to my flesh, the gentle kiss to the pulsating heat of his bite. I might orgasm from that alone.

“Deck!” Candy's voice calls out from around the corner into the parking lot, and I suck in a breath, my eyes bulging.

“Fuck,” he murmurs against my neck, hanging his head.

He reluctantly sets me back down until my booties hit the gravel beneath me again.

“Oh, shit,” I whisper, running my hands through my crazed hair, quickly straightening my dress as Candy walks around the corner.

He eyes us both, pausing before his brows knit and he continues walking forward. “I knew she didn't smoke!”

My heart is attempting to lunge from my chest, and I'm sure I'll pass out from pure panic alone. While we weren't exactly caught kissing, no part of this looks good. I don't know how much Lake trusts Candy, but it must be enough because he doesn't appear nervous at all, while I'm over here practically dry heaving into the dead grass.

“What do you want?” he asks with an edge, tipping his head in frustration at his friend.

“Shots. I need shots.” Candy answers, smiling with his big, infectious smile.

Approaching us, his lengthy legs clomp across the gravel in his boots until he finally reaches us.

“Well, I'm done drinking,” Lake retorts, and for some strange reason, it turns me on. “I'm driving tonight.”

Responsibility looks sexy on him. So does the image of him taking care of me, driving me home later in his enormous, expensive-ass truck as the evening winds down. I may need to show him what Midwest road head looks like.

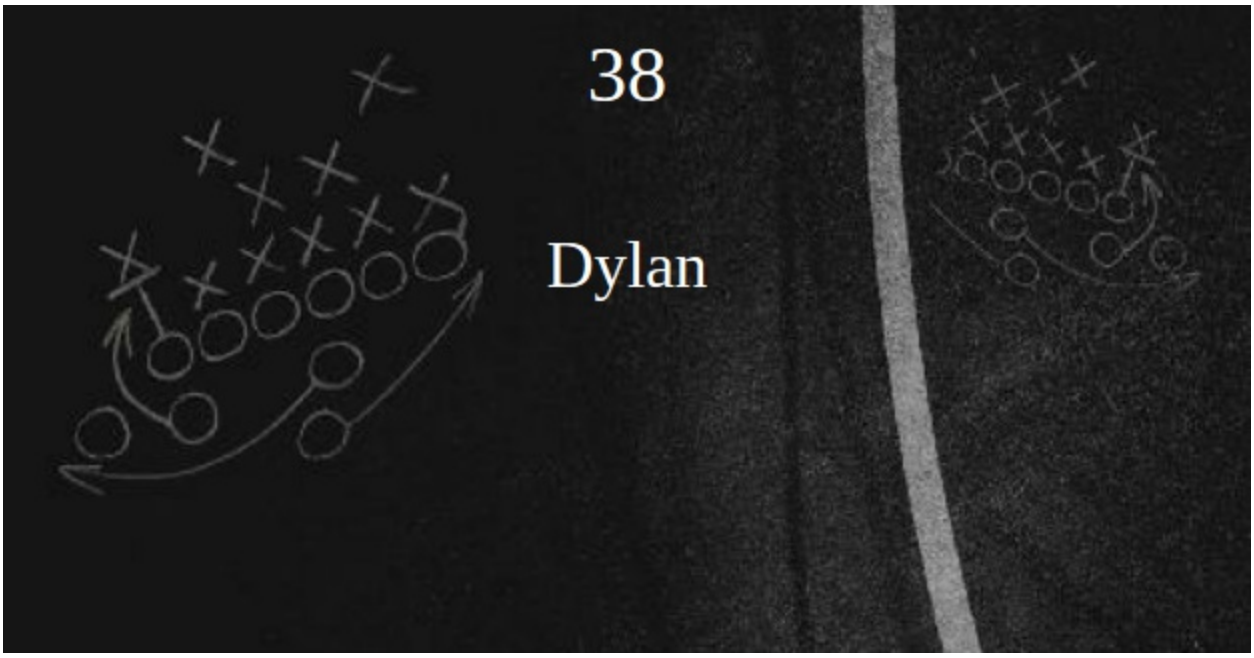
“Perfect,” Candy replies, then turns his gaze to me. “You're up.”

My brows lower as I look from him to Lake and back.

“Let's go lil' Cracker,” he says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and dragging me back around to the entry of the old pub. “And no, it's not because you're white.”

Cocking my head at the strange comment, I turn my gaze to Lake next to me, who drags his hands down his face at his friend, following a step behind us, before it clicks.

“It's because I'm stale,” I grumble, still glaring at the guy who's constantly digging his own grave.



The rest of the night went better than I ever could've imagined.

Lake finally met Ashton, and something strange inside of me felt complete. My heart warmed watching a person from my past meet someone from my potential future.

Introducing Lake as my new patient felt so bland, knowing that, unfortunately for my career, he's so much more. When he shook Ashton's hand, reconfirming he was indeed working with me as his new therapist, I felt that sting again. The sting of not embracing what I felt I deserved. It was obvious to us both that it was more than the labels of therapist and patient. But what did everyone else see? What did everyone else think?

Side glances with flirtatious winks met my sneaky grins and corner lip chews. Hands brushing together beneath pub tables while bodies swept past each other too closely. We were toying with temptation, and it was my only hope no one would get eaten alive.

Ashton can get along with anyone. I've never worried about him. But Lake was still hesitant in their conversations. I noted the tension in his shoulders,

the hardening of his eyes anytime Ashton brought up a memory or an inside joke that Lake looked pained not to be a part of.

Even so, he held it together, and before we knew it, everyone had taken enough shots, myself included, thanks to Candy and his exuberant display of affection for me.

This guy's goal was to recreate someone's twenty-first birthday. Lake watched humorously as Candy and I tapped shot glasses together and downed something that resembled expired Robitussin, assaulting my taste buds as it slid down my throat.

My visit to the restroom provided more frustrations. While using the bathroom, I overheard a slew of women near the sink discussing their plans for the famous Lake Decker later that night. Discussions of sex with the football star reached my ears as they detailed not only what they'd heard about him in the sack but also what they planned to do to one up that. I felt a different type of churning inside me, and while I was glad no one had suspected he was with anyone, I was also simultaneously angered by it.

My mood, which had been altered by the jealousy growing deep within me, was immediately lifted upon seeing the bright smile that met me when I exited the restrooms. I warmed all over, my heart pounding to a new beat at the sight of his eyes on me alone. Even if Lake had been the guy who'd normally taken up a woman's offer to seal the deal at bar time, I had hoped that what we had meant more to him. That I was more than just a challenge to a guy who could have anyone he wanted.

I had to be naïve to think I could be the one.

After Candy's horrible karaoke rendition of Whitney Houston, the lights came on, sparking the dark corners of the wooden bar to life, filtering out the bodies that had taken up those hidden spaces. The remaining players, who

were still stretching the most out of the evening alongside us, were slowly filtering out of the place.

People began leaving, getting safe rides home with each other as the cool, crisp evening honed in on us. Candy parted ways with his arms braced around the shoulders of two beautiful women, who I'm sure had plans to enjoy all the sweetness he had to offer. We said our goodbyes and the parking lot grew silent.

Lake slid his hand into mine, pulling me towards the driver's side of the truck, tucked away from the view of anyone else lingering.

“What are you doing?” I ask, a grin toying with my lips.

“That was practically unbearable for me,” he says, pushing me up against the door as if he's been waiting forever for the opportunity. “Tell me I can kiss you again.”

I study his face above me, his hands braced on the frame of the large truck behind me, eyes focused on my mouth, his pouty lips eager and waiting.

“No,” I reply quickly.

His shoulders slump slightly, and I deliver a devilish grin, turning around to get in the truck. He drops his head against the truck’s frame, letting out a whiny groan before I pop open the door, pushing him out of the way to climb across the driver's seat and slide into mine.

He remains there, sulking in the aftermath of being turned down, so I lean over the seat until his eyes lock onto mine.

“You think that just because we're out of sight, you get a free pass to do what you want with me?” I smirk as he cocks his head towards me. “Nah, I'm not that easy. You still gotta woo me, hotshot.”

He sighs for a moment outside the vehicle, attempting to get himself together before he hops in, giving me a quick, playful glare.

“You're even more sassy when you're tipsy.” He flashes that sexy smirk, the curve of his smile intoxicating. “It's unfortunate for you I like that.”

Tipsy, I was. Even more, I was lustful now. Horny and needy.

“Classic Lake Decker,” I reply cheekily. “Always up for a challenge, aren't you?”

He looks me up and down, licking his lips before peering back into my eyes, and I can't breathe.

“It's why I'm the best in the game, baby,” he coos, and I'm a puddle at his feet.

He called me baby.

Lake called me baby.

Butterflies need rehab.

Before I melt into a puddle of useless admiration at his feet, I summon the strength I need to fight for whatever weak woman lies buried beneath the alcohol and the word *baby*, remembering the words of the women in the restroom. My goal isn't to fuck Lake. I've done that. It was to somehow maintain this fling while keeping feelings in check and not allowing anyone to know about it. *What a mess this has become.*

“You won't win if you make me out to be a prize,” I retort.

“You say that now.” He grins, twisting his keys in the ignition. “But by Wednesday, you'll be on your knees, begging for some Lake in your life.”

My eyes narrow at the specific comment. I'm reminded of my need to check the planner. He must've penciled something in. *Little shit.*

Even so, I have a feeling it won't take till Wednesday for me to be on my knees for this man again.

The engine roars to life, and I watch the corded muscles in his forearms as he clutches the shift and throws it into reverse. His torso turns as he grabs the

back of my seat, looking behind us while his other massive hand grips the steering wheel, maneuvering us back out of our spot.

I'm staring at him like a psycho would, but I can't help it. The way he operates this massive truck with such ease is turning me on, and I can't understand why. Nothing about this is sexual at all, yet here I am, wishing he'd control me like he's controlling this metal on wheels beneath us. It's the alcohol.

He glances my way and I'm staring back like a needy hussy. His brows raise as if he missed something I said. But I've said nothing, and now I'm busted for staring at him for a ridiculous and unacceptable amount of time. I turn my head, faking a cough into my shoulder like a moron, and cower into myself.

"You alright?" he asks, worry in his tone.

"I'm fine," I answer quickly, then follow it up with, "Sore throat. Too many shots down the ol' hatch."

The ol' hatch?! What am I, eighty?!

I'm anxious. I'm nervous. I'm slightly drunk. I'm paranoid because Lake is driving me home, and we just kissed, and we are probably going to kiss again, and my stomach is in knots because I think I really like him, and I shouldn't, but I want to, and…

"The 'ol hatch?" he asks with a coy smile, interrupting my internal battle.

"I, uh...it hurts my throat. All that burning…"—I swallow down sand —"liquid."

He's staring at me. I see him from the corner of my eye before he says, "You sure you're alright? You seem a little...anxious."

Oh no. Lake knows I'm anxious around him.

He can't know he makes me anxious. That only insinuates I care what he

thinks, and if he knows I care what he thinks, then he knows I really like him as much as I do. He probably assumes I've chosen the colors for our wedding party. Pink blush dresses for the girls and a crisp navy blue for the guys. Rose gold accents everywhere.

“I'm not anxious,” I reply anxiously.

Why is it when someone says you're acting weird that you have to double over, acting normal to not appear weird? I hate alcohol. It's dulling my ability to be snarky and collected. It makes me want to jump his bones and do lots of dirty things girls like me shouldn’t even entertain. *This is exhausting*.

He turns his head towards me again as I face out through the windshield, focusing on the road ahead of us. Appearing normal.

“You know, they say consuming semen can reduce anxiety. So, if you need to suck me off again for your own comfort, by all means…” He takes a hand off the wheel, pointing a welcoming hand at his groin.

My eyes widen as I turn to face him. I’m appalled. Then I consider it for a moment. Then I’m appalled.

His serious face breaks into a half-grin, which ends up stretching across his entire face until he's finally laughing. *He's laughing at me.*

“I'm sorry, I had to. You look painfully nervous for some reason, and I wanted to push the panic button, see how you'd respond.” A deep chuckle leaves his throat. “It was as good as I imagined it'd be.”

I playfully smack his arm, making him laugh harder.

I love that sound.

Lake's laugh calms me.

Shaking my head at him and myself for my useless thoughts, I turn my head, facing the window again.

“But seriously,” his voice interrupts, stern and deliberate, as I turn to face

him again. “If you want to. Let me know. I can pull over.”

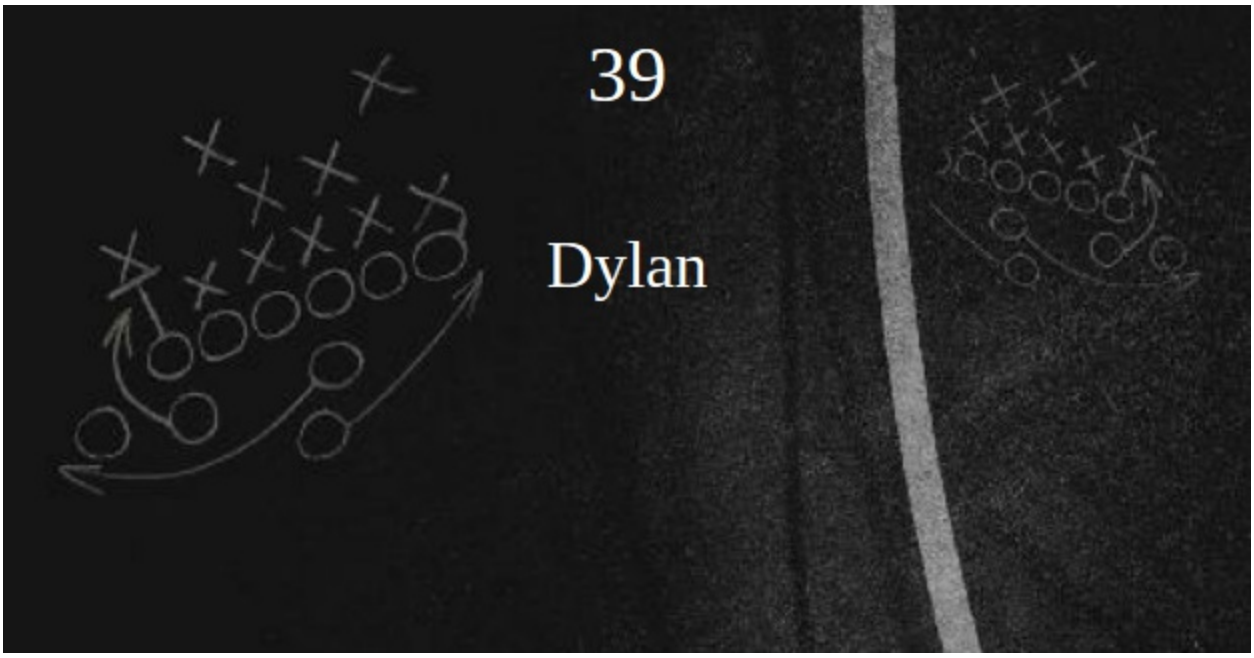
I stare at him, raising a brow, actually contemplating it before his face breaks again and he shakes his head, not even seriously entertaining it.

He’s not entertaining it because I'm tipsy.

I’m tipsy and I want him, but now he wants to be respectful.

Dammit, he's a decent guy.

Life would be so much easier if he wasn't.



We hit the road and begin our quiet ride back home. I find myself counting down the streetlights along the empty road, not wanting the night to end. Wanting to spend more time with Lake is ridiculous when all we do is spend time together. He's practically contracted to see me multiple times per week, and yet it's just not enough. It's never enough.

Arriving at the tiny apartment complex just after bar time, Lake pulls into a vacant parking spot off the side of the building. Putting the truck in park, I take a breath as he sits back in his seat, letting out a breath of his own.

“Thank you,” I say, just above a whisper. “For tonight.”

He arches back into his seat, getting more comfortable, and I love that he doesn't expect me to just get out and run back up to my place. He turns down the music a tad, turning to face me as I continue.

“It was everything I didn't know I needed.”

His temple rests against his headrest, his dark brow cocked slightly. “In what way?”

I toy with that loose string on my dress again, feeling my palms get sweaty as I look down at my hands. “I didn't realize how badly I needed a night to feel...young again,” I say, my brows knitting. “If that makes sense.”

“It does,” he whispers. “It makes a lot of sense.” He studies me for a moment, our eyes connecting as if he's reading my past through them. “You weren't given many opportunities to get dressed up, bar hop with friends, take shots for no reason, kiss a guy behind a bar…”

I feel myself get flushed, the heat traveling up my neck.

He's not wrong though. Those opportunities were there for everyone else. Learning through mistakes and wild experiences. I couldn't learn through them. Could never dream of it. They'd have broken me and what I'd fought so hard for.

I find the strength to pull my eyes off my lap and peer into his.

“Yeah,” I admit. “You picked up on that, huh?”

His gaze tears into my soul, and surprisingly, he avoids the statement. Reaching across the console, he grabs my hand from my lap and places it in his on the leather barrier separating us. He touches my hand so gently, and the air pushing through the vents does nothing to decrease the all too embarrassing clamminess of my palm. Running his pointer finger over each of my nails, he sighs.

“You painted your nails.”

I swallow, frowning lightly, not understanding why he looks like it brings him displeasure.

“I did,” I whisper, looking at the fresh black paint I applied yesterday.

The paint that is uneven as ever. The paint that covers the remaining white coat because I couldn't find any nail polish remover and didn't make the effort to chip it off. He touches the line where the old polish runs out, the extra

layer creating a bump in the smoothness, and he wears a sullen expression as if reminded of something that tears at him. It's as if it pains him to see my weak attempt to cover my misfortunes, even if it's simply declining to spend extra money on nail polish remover.

Just as I'm wishing I could read his mind, he speaks.

“You deserve to be selfish sometimes. Even if you find yourself hating the idea.”

My heart aches at his words.

“You deserve…” He pauses, playing with my fingers as he attempts to find the words. “You deserve to be looked after, too.”

My mouth runs dry, and breathing is hard again.

Silence fills the truck, and somehow, the cabin feels as small as a clown car. We sit there, his fingers sliding through mine as we both just stare down at them.

So much is happening while nothing is happening. Minds are understanding through the thick air between us. Souls are embracing through our simple touch, and yet, I can't find the words to articulate my reasons for selflessness.

I wish I could be selfish. But ultimately, it's not my life. I accepted that long ago, and his attempt to remind me has me frustrated by a past I can't control.

Silence lingers before his words tear through the tension surrounding us.

“Do you have plans for Thanksgiving?”

Totally not what I was expecting to hear. I look up at him, but he's still focused on our hands, his expression one of confusion.

“The only plans I have are to order in and wear loose pants.” I scoff through my nose, then answer, “But no. No plans. It's like three weeks away yet. Why do you ask?”

He stares down at my fingers in his, that brow still creased in the middle. “I

want you to meet someone.”

My stomach drops to the floor of his truck.

“What?” I ask breathlessly.

“Come with me to my mom’s.”

He runs his thumb the length of mine, sending a wave of heat that stems from the simple touch to the place between my thighs, before his eyes finally fix on mine.

“Come with me. For Thanksgiving. My mom hosts a small dinner every year.”

My throat is dry. Tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth. He's drunk. Wait, no. I'm drunk. He wasn't drinking.

“I...I mean, I can't…” I stutter, looking through the windshield up at the apartment complex, thinking of my brother. “I can't leave Colin on Thanksgi __”

“No,” he interrupts quickly. “My God, I know.” He smiles a big toothy grin, and a sexy little chuckle leaves his throat. “I meant both of you. I want you both there for Thanksgiving this year.”

Irregular beats flutter through my chest. My stomach picks up off the floor and twists into an uncomfortable knot. It's the feeling you get when you tip over that steep hill on a rollercoaster ride. Nauseous while simultaneously falling hard. When he includes Colin, I feel that weightlessness.

“Really?”

He licks his lips and leans his temple against the headrest again, his eyes gazing directly into mine.

“Yes, really. It would mean a lot to me...to introduce you both.” He pauses, looking at our hands before peering back at me again. “To her.”

This is big. It's big for any man to have a woman meet his mother, even if

she's only meeting me as his therapist. At least, that's what I'm assuming. But he runs through my assumptions as he continues.

“I want her to meet the woman that's got me all fucked up. The one training me to get back on that field in record time to slash records and fight for the woman who fought for me. The one that drives me crazy with her wit and smart-ass comebacks. The one that's got me feeling jealous and unhinged, breaking glasses and hating everyone who occupies her mind.” He shakes his head, chuckling in disbelief, then swallows. “The one that's selfless and protective.” His hand squeezes mine. “The one that loves hard.” He sighs, and it's shaky as those eyes look up, piercing through me. “The one that reminds me of *her*.”

Oh, sweet Jesus. This is heavy. So heavy I'm forced to use humor as a defense mechanism for my unguarded heart that is just waiting to be ripped to shreds by the man who's unknowingly holding it.

“Well, she sounds dope as hell,” I joke.

He reaches across the console, grabbing the side of my neck, startling me enough to cause me to suck in a breath.

“Don't do that,” he says huskily to my widened eyes. “Don't use humor right now. I'm being serious.”

I attempt to inhale some oxygen while being flooded by him, sensing his seriousness. It surprises me, to be honest, why this is such a big deal for him. Why he wants this. With me.

“Okay,” I whisper breathlessly. “If you're sure.”

I give him the opportunity to back out of this. Maybe it was a spur-of-the-moment invite, and he hasn't thought through what this means.

He nods, then pulls me closer, his fingers sliding into the hair at the back of my head, gripping me while the sound of creaking leather warms me as he

leans over the console, closing in.

I wait, staring into his eyes that are closer than close, wondering if he's going to kiss me. His eyes travel down my face, landing on my lips that are inching dangerously close to his. His lips part and I feel his soft breath meet mine.

“Tell me you'll be there,” he whispers against my lips.

I nod this time. No sarcasm or wit could save me now.

“I'll be there.”

He stills, almost like he’s absorbing my answer, before running his lips gently along mine.

“Tell me I can kiss you.”

The way he always asks for my consent by somehow demanding it makes me stir with this chaotic need I've stored away my entire life. Until him.

“Kiss me, Lake,” I whisper against his lips seconds before they seal to mine.

A satisfied groan leaves his throat as my hands slide up his smooth neck. My lips enclose around his bottom lip, gently sucking it. The moment becomes heated as the need to get closer overtakes me.

It happens so fast. One minute I'm in my seat, the next, his is fully reclined and I'm on his lap, straddling those muscular thighs I’ve studied for endless hours while training. Rough hands glide up my tights until they slip under my dress, finding my ass.

Our tongues meet in a forceful explosion, fireworks rippling throughout my body at the feel of his hungry mouth against mine. His lips move steady and quick. There's a demanding control in his motions. He owns me, taking what he needs, giving what I desire.

He pulls back from my lips to rest his forehead on mine as he roughly grips

my hips against the obvious strain beneath his jeans.

“Shit, D,” he groans between us, his face pained.

“I hate this,” I admit between a few light kisses.

“We just need to accept it.” He kisses me, understanding my statement entirely. Knowing how amazing this feels between us. “You need to accept it.” Another kiss.

I pull back, sitting on his thighs with my arms on the headrest behind him to brace myself, breathless as my chest heaves in passion. His words carry a weight to them that the heat of the moment can mask. I'm smart enough to understand that. Aware enough to hold it at bay.

“I—”

“I'll chase you,” he interrupts.

I direct my eyes up towards his. “What?”

“If you even for a second think you're gonna run, know I'll chase you. I'll chase until you're mine,” he whispers, grabbing my wrists and placing them on both sides of the headrest, making me fall forward into him again. “I'll catch you when you're slippin’.” He leans forward to capture my lips, pulling my bottom lip between his and sucking it tenderly before releasing it. “And you'll love every bit of getting caught.”

I grind my hips down onto him. “And what if I'm faster?”

His head drops back against the seat as he studies me through his lashes.

“It's a shame you're training me to be better than I was.” He smirks. “You're your own demise, Chief.”

My hands slide from the headrest down to his neck. I run my thumbs along his strong jawline, littered with the perfect amount of stubble to make my thighs quake with a silent reminder of the delightful chafe of his face between my legs.

But it's more than sex making my thighs squeeze together, keeping me from falling apart above him. He wants me. Me. Little ol' me. Grubby, grungy, old-stale-sweats-wearing, Dylan. Staring into his eyes beneath me, I feel the heaviness of our evening boiling down to this moment.

“Don't make me regret it,” I whisper, peering from his soft lips to his curious eyes.

“Training me?”

“No,” I reply simply. “Slipping.”

He inhales, then cups the side of my face, tucking the hanging hair behind my ear before both palms hold the sides of my neck and jaw.

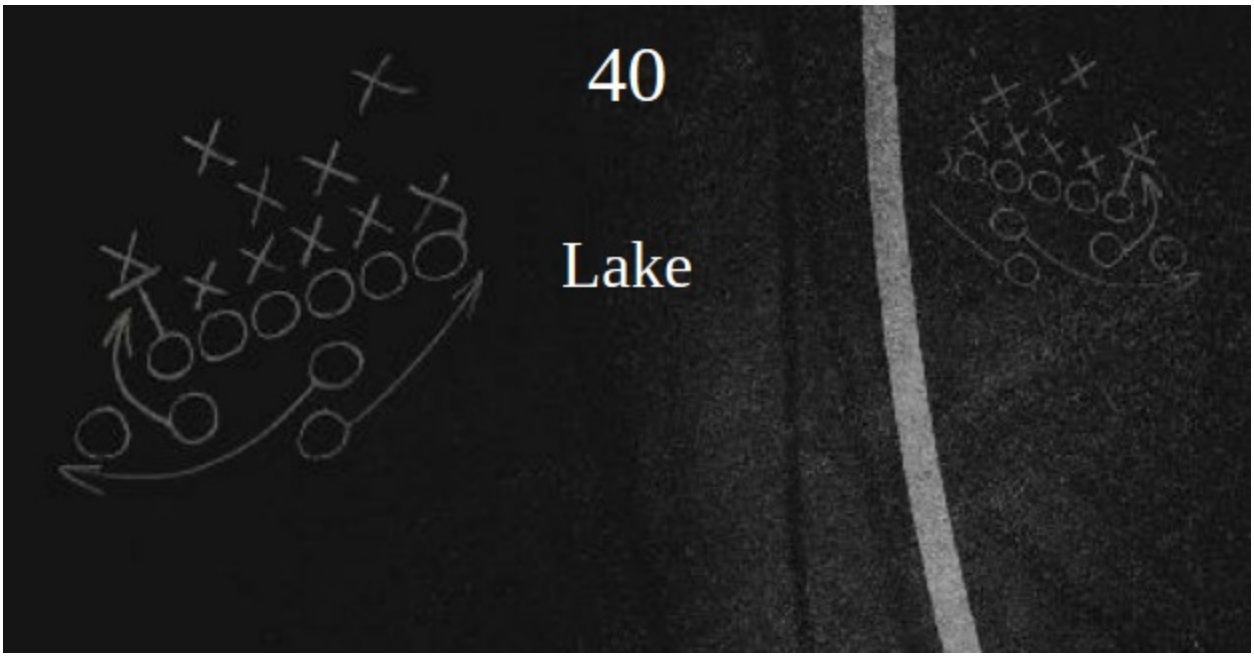
“Told you I'd catch you,” he whispers.

He'd catch me. Waiting for me to fall. But falling is scary because you have to let go. Letting go is what I'm trained not to do. My heart, while guarded by a wall of layered rock, is ultimately the most fragile part of me. He could break me in a day if given the access.

“Be careful with me,” I warn, peering back and forth between his eyes.

Heat builds in his gaze as his chest expands and contracts against mine. His hands fall slowly from my neck, trailing down around my breasts until they meet my ribs. They fall to the curve of my hips, where his firm grip creates divots in my flesh.

“I plan on being a lot of things with you,” he says hoarsely, his jaw flexing as he pauses before gazing up at me with that fire that penetrates me. “But careful is not one of them.”



I could pass out from the stir of emotions and untamed lust twisting in the pit of my stomach.

Fuck, I need her. Need her in more ways than I ever thought imaginable. Asking her to meet my mother was easy. I want it like nothing I've wanted before. Two women who are mirror images of each other in all the ways that matter. Selfless, loving, strong…

I can only hope that Dylan's strength will exude off of her and give my mother a reminder of the power she possesses deep beneath the surface to fight this illness. I hope Dylan will understand me better, knowing where and who I came from. Knowing that I’m not the guy everyone sees plastered on the billboards. The one that women everywhere pine over, thinking one-night-stands with no attachments, get me off. The Playboy Footballer.

It wasn't me.

I needed more.

I needed her.

Gripping the back of her neck with one hand, I pull Dylan forward again until her lips fall on mine. The kiss is chaotic. It's passionate, yet slow. Heated, yet leaving me with the chills of the late fall night surrounding the fire inside this truck.

There's such a rush to our connection, yet time feels irrelevant. Here with her at this moment, I imagine myself nowhere else. I'm not focused on getting back on the field, healing in record time, or football at all. She's masked my mind with only thoughts of her. It's reckless, and it's terrifying, and for some strange reason, I can't get enough.

All night I'd been eyeing her, wanting to touch her. Needing those perfect, lush lips on mine. I watched her smile. Heard her laugh. Now I need to make her feel.

My hand travels from her delicate neck to her chest, slowly trailing curious fingers until I'm cupping the side of her supple breast over her dress. She sighs against my lips and I swallow it down with a kiss.

She can feel how ready I am for her as she readjusts herself in my lap. I pull her against me, her tight little body flush with mine. I want her. Need her to make this pain go away. I crave the release that only she can give me. But I need to control myself.

“D,” I say, gently gripping her jaw and holding her back. “You've been—”

“Drinking,” she finishes for me. Pulling my hands down by my wrists, she places them on her hips as she rolls them forward on me again, causing a breathy groan to leave me.

“Yes, I've been drinking. Don't let that stop this. We need to accept this. You need to accept this.”

My head drops back against the headrest as I take in her words. *God, she's still cheeky when she's drunk, feeding me the same shit I just fed her.*

“I don't want to be that guy,” I reply with a sigh.

I'm battling my inner angel and demon. One says to leave this girl alone tonight. She's been drinking. The other says, wreck her until she's begging you to stop.

“I’m not giving you that choice,” she retorts, then continues softly, “I need this, Lake.”

Her plea reaches that sensitive part of me she always seems to connect with. I'm reminded of her truth. The inability to experience wild and uninhibited moments. Moments of stupidity that somehow result in some of the best memories when you're older and looking back at them. Mistakes that are made that build your past. A past she never knew because of her strength, her need for safety and security. She needs this night of recklessness, and I'm the man for the job.

I'll be the one to allow her to let go while making sure she remains who she is. A strong, intelligent, sexy woman. I'm catching her slippin'.

“You're sure?” I ask, needing to be absolute.

She nods. “So sure.”

Understanding those needs, I eye her breathlessly above me. Her lips are parted as she waits for me to decide what to do with her. Begging me with those glowing embers in the dim light of the moon surrounding us. She nods again, edging me on, and that's where I lose control.

Shoving off the jacket she's wearing, I toss it into the passenger seat before gripping the back of her neck as our lips crash together again. She wrestles to open mine, pushing it down my shoulders as I lean forward, slipping out of it.

“Oh, Lake,” she whimpers in that needy tone, and I really lose it.

I grip my shirt by the back of my neck, pulling it off quickly before my arms wrap around her lower back, needing her against my skin, her lips

sealing to me like I’m her lifeline to breathing.

Her kiss does things to me. Wild, crazy, unimaginable things. It sets me off. Whatever this heart inside me is made of, it demands that I claim her. Possessive, in a strange, uncontrolled way. I wouldn't want anyone else's lips on me ever again. And the thought of hers on anyone else's? Never. Not happening.

She's mine. She has to be.

“Don't stop kissing me,” I demand before her tongue slips into my mouth, listening like a good girl.

I grip her hips, pushing her back on my thighs while my tongue glides perfectly along hers. My hands slip under the edge of her dress, skimming up the tops of her warm thighs before needy and demanding fingers grip the tights from her skin. With her tongue still toying with mine, I roughly rip the tights in the center, separating them until I make a large enough space for myself.

She gasps against my lips, sending me into a lust-filled rage. If she needs me like she claims, she's going to get all of me. Until she can't take anymore.

Sliding one of my hands into the hair at the back of her head, I pull her back away from my lips, forcing her to face the ceiling. Giving me a full view of her neck, she swallows, surrendering to me. Her chest heaves before me, choppy breaths escaping her. I peel her panties to the side and slide my fingers along her wet heat.

My name falls from her lips as I push a finger inside her.

She leans back, her fingers gripping onto the jeans over my knees, nails piercing through to the skin as I slowly remove the finger, replacing it with two.

“Fuck, D,” I whisper, watching as my fingers retract, covered in her

arousal.

A strangled moan leaves her throat as I hold her head to the ceiling of the truck by a fist of hair, her breasts rising and falling before me. I hold her hostage while forcing her to ride my fingers. She's already dripping with the excitement of losing control.

My tongue meets her throat, licking then kissing along the side of her exposed skin. Rubbing small circles against her pretty little clit, she moves her hips faster to meet my hand. There's a tightening around my fingers and I sense her need to orgasm.

Knowing, I withdraw my fingers, easing my hold on her hair as my eyes await hers. Her head drops and her brows knit in frustration.

“You were close,” I state.

She nods, still breathless.

“I can tell.” I hiss. “You get so fucking tight.”

She rakes her hands down my chest, memorizing each ridge she passes before reaching for my belt buckle. I look down at her hands as I open the buckle. Her lustful eyes slowly rise, trailing my body as she studies my neck, my lips, my nose, and finally, my eyes.

Opening my pants, she leans forward, snaking her hand around the back of my neck and up into my hair.

“You ache to feel the first around you,” she whispers in understanding, her lips closing around my bottom lip, sucking it softly. “It's yours to take. Every time.”

My eyes roll to the back of my head as her kisses trail along my jaw, finding my neck. I fumble around, finding a condom in the console as she's leaning forward. With lips still sucking on my neck, I sheath myself beneath her.

“I won't keep you waiting,” I say, facing the ceiling of the truck.

“It won't take me long,” she hums against my neck. “I'm already there.”

I'm going to bust into my hand if she keeps talking like that. But I need her lips first.

“Kiss—”

“Kiss you,” she interrupts, facing me now. Her swollen lips glimmer in the moonlight. “I know.” Her sweet whisper melts into my ear as she continues, “I know what you like.”

My heart beats through my chest like a madman trapped behind a cage. She's figured me out, knows my weaknesses, and I’m forced to submit myself to her. I want her to be selfish. To take from me everything she could possibly need.

Our eyes stay open and focused on one another as she leans closer, placing her parted lips on mine. It's not until our tongues touch that our eyes fall shut and the feeling of her warm, wet walls closes in around me, gripping my throbbing cock tightly.

With the space I've ripped in the tights and her panties to the side, she slides down my shaft and I groan roughly into her mouth, my hands gripping the fabric of the dress still covering our connection from potential prying eyes, if anyone dared to catch us.

Shock waves of pleasure course down my limbs as she sinks down, taking in the thick length of me with a muffled cry. We sit connected for a second as I allow her to adjust to the sensation. Her lips pull from mine and a crease in her forehead forms as her eyes pinch in the corners.

“I'll start slow,” I whisper, gazing up at her.

She nods with her eyes sealed shut. A silent plea.

Feeling the need to ease her tension, I brush the hair away from her cheek,

cupping the soft, blushing skin. Her eyes flutter open and find mine waiting. I'm not even sure what expression I'm emitting at the moment, but whatever it is, it appears to fill her with some sort of comfort. Comfort, alleviation, solace in her release from the restraints that hold her back.

Mouths connect as I drive up and into her at a steady yet achingly slow pace. Each breath of hers that falls into my mouth meets every groan of mine that vibrates through my chest. The tightening of the surrounding warmth has me losing myself in this woman. Never has sex felt this good. This explosive. This tethering.

The heat from our bodies connecting fills the cab as her arms fall to the seat behind me, bracing herself while I wrap myself around her, the fire of our connection burning through us. I thrust into her again and again, feeling the truck rocking beneath us. Her gasps and throaty cries climb higher and higher as I continue building speed to the emotionally charged release I'm chasing.

Her eyes are closed, mouth gaped open, and I watch. I watch her take me deep repeatedly, bouncing on my thighs until the moment comes when her body tightens and her legs tense up around my lap.

“Lake, I'm falling,” she breathes above me.

Her words reach that part that's been untapped, trapped beneath me. *I'm falling too, Dylan.*

Wrapping an arm around her lower back, I seal her body to mine as I grip the back of her neck, pulling her towards my kiss. She spasms around me, her chest releasing short, quick breaths, humming softly against my mouth before our tongues intertwine, and I know she's about to come.

“It's you, D,” I groan between kisses. “It's us. It has to be.”

She cries out, resting her forehead against mine, losing herself around me as I continue my motions, allowing her to ride out her orgasm while I study her

like a servant does a goddess. Seeing her unfold before me, stealing this pleasure for herself, losing herself in it…

She's such a fucking masterpiece. A once in a lifetime woman. One I'm not sure I deserve.

Pulling her face to mine, my tongue grazes hers, and it's all it takes for me to lose myself in the condom with a deep, guttural groan and a few sloppy thrusts. Connected everywhere we can connect is my vice. Those sweet, succulent lips get me every time.

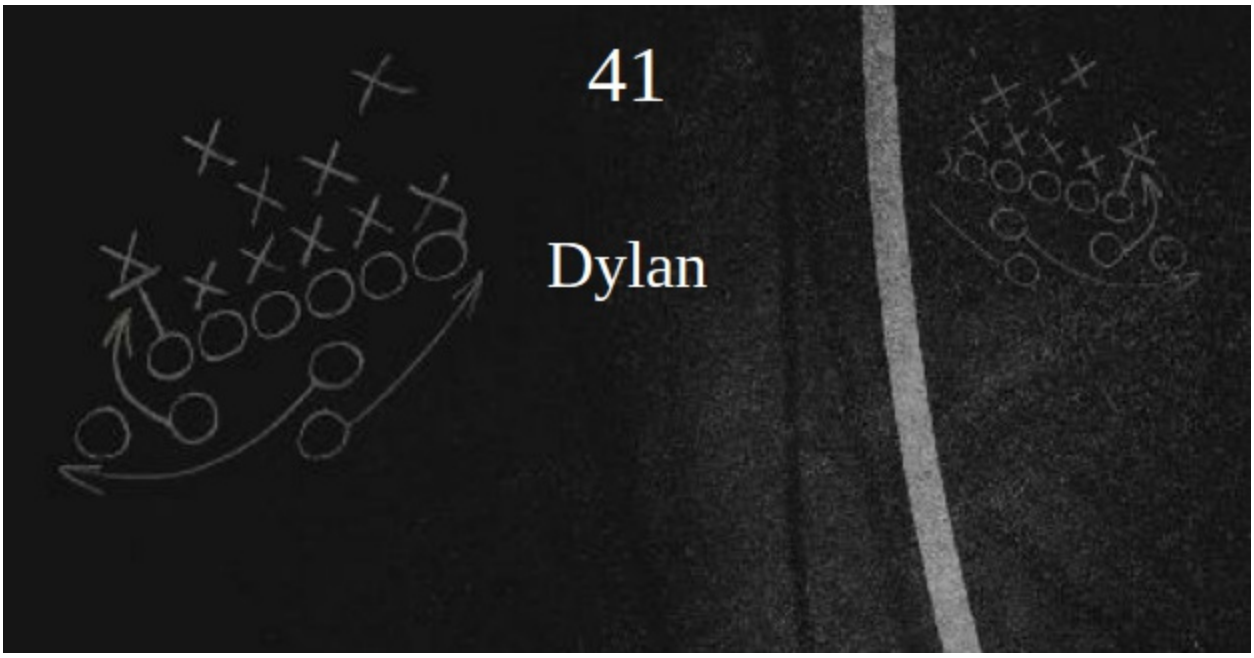
We ride out our high together, our breaths slowing, chests steadying, and her hands remain on my face. Leaving soft kisses all along my numb face, she cares for me in her own way. I lay back, half dead against the seat, absorbing her tenderness, knowing I'm in deep.

Too deep.

It's her.

It's us.

It has to be.



It's him.

It's us.

At least, that's how it's been for the last two and a half weeks.

Eyes always locked in on each other from across the room, bodies that brush too close, hands that scour in the night, kisses that change who you think you are against eager and inviting lips.

Behind closed doors, out of the view of the public eye, we've basically solidified this strange sort of secret relationship. One that's literally made me question if I have congenital heart failure with the way my palpitations have been acting up whenever I'm around him.

Even now, walking into the gym, my heart dances within the confines of my weak little chest as I see him in the distance. Then my stomach drops in disappointment. He's glistening with sweat. Even from this distance, I see the dark, thick hair I've come to love running my fingers through, wet with perspiration. He's already here. He's already exercising.

He's training.

With Jaden.

My eyes narrow in on them. Both of their heads snap towards the door when they hear the bell go off, knowing they're caught.

I approach them, tossing my gym bag onto the floor at my feet with a thud as I glare specifically at Jaden. Lake grins his mischievous, sexy grin, awaiting the excitement of the wrath I'm about to unleash.

“Jaden,” I say sternly. “A word.”

Lake rolls his lips inward, attempting to hold back his laugh as Jaden's eyes widen, his lips in a flat line. Following me to the office, I shut the door abruptly behind him, folding my arms and cocking my head.

“What the fuck is this?”

He sucks in a breath, looking panicked. “He told me you knew.”

“Knew what?”

“About practice.” He sighs. “He said he told you he needed his session pushed up so he could make practice. Said you couldn't leave Colin until after nine?”

A scowl washes over me. That asshole.

He infiltrated my schedule again and moved things around for his own benefit. It didn't help that this happened after Greg told me last week that Lake Decker was my only priority, meaning my other patients weren't my patients anymore. I could've killed him for even contacting Greg. He shouldn't have messed around with my money, my schedule.

I should've killed him then. That was, until he got down on his knees before me, begging me to forgive him. And boy, did I forgive him. I forgave him again and again while he remained kneeling before me.

“Why didn't you just call me?” I ask, dropping my arms in frustration.

“He told me not to bother you. That he had it handled.”

“Oh, so we listen to our clients' wishes now regarding scheduling. Cool,” I grumble.

He takes a step forward, his height closing in on me. “I'm sorry, Dyl, I seriously had no idea you didn't know. You know I feel awful about this now.”

I lick my lips, glaring off into the corner of the office.

“It's fine, Jaden.”

“I wasn't trying to steal your patient, Dyl,” he explains with guilt in his eyes. “You can keep the commission—”

“Stop,” I interrupt him. “It's fine, really. You did the work. You were here. You didn't know.”

The front bell rings and Jaden's slumped shoulders straighten.

“Shit,” he murmurs, looking behind me at the door that's still closed. “Cedric's here. I gotta take him. Can you finish stretching Lake before you guys leave?”

You guys leave? What plans did Decker have for us?

He walks past me, my face blank, with confusion swirling beneath. Opening the door, he waves once at Cedric. Cedric's round body walks towards the benches, his eyes hard on Jaden and me behind the door. *Chill out, big boy. It's the sweaty beast in the corner you need to worry about.*

Jaden heads out to start his session with Cedric as I head toward the room with the mats. Lake follows me in as I assumed he would, closing the door behind him. I rest my hands on the counter behind me, cocking my head with my lips pursed in frustration.

“Don't look so mad, babe,” Lake smirks as he approaches me. “I timed this perfectly.”

He tries to slip his arms around me, but I push off the counter, placing my

palm against his chest to keep him at a safe distance.

“Don't you *babe* me,” I snap. “You're fucking with my money, Decker.”

His smirk deepens as he eyes my hand set firmly on his chest. He looks back at me with a sultry darkness in his gaze. Before I know what’s happening, he grips my wrist, twisting it around until he turns me, my back against his firm chest as he holds me tightly against him. The anger that was boiling over is now settling into that familiar heat between my legs.

“Good thing I'm paying you both, huh, sweetheart?” he whispers gruffly against the shell of my ear.

I swallow, closing my eyes at the chill that sweeps over me.

He nips playfully at my earlobe, and I twist out of his hold, pushing him back.

“And the other two you've ever so kindly thrown from my schedule? Am I being compensated for that little decrease in my paycheck?”

His smirk drops, and seriousness finds me.

“You really think I wouldn't take care of my girl?”

Rage boils again. Most women would love to have a guy come into their lives and take care of them. But most women aren't me. Having someone infiltrate and rearrange my set schedule without notice only leaves me with an overwhelming sense of instability. I need to control my life. I need to control my money. I can't rely on anyone else who promises today and is gone tomorrow.

“That decision is not up to you, Decker.” I snap, emitting that boiling anger.

I dare him to say something back like, *now I understand it.* Now I get what Eric meant. This is how she is. A control freak who won’t let anyone else in. But he simply studies me for a moment before his eyes drop to the floor. I can almost hear him processing it. Understanding.

“My apologies,” he says softly, before his eyes wander back up to mine and his sorrowful grin softens me. “Won't happen again.”

I pause before sighing and feel myself calming. I give him a nod of truce before his mischievous grin stretches across his face again.

“C’mon. Stretch me, D,” he oozes as his tall, muscular figure casually walks backwards towards the large blue mat on the floor. “Payback for how I stretched you the other night.”

Back at it.

I close my eyes in embarrassment at the reminder. I can feel him smiling at me behind these lids, and damn him for knowing exactly how I operate.

Remembering the unplanned stretching incident, I think of my planner and the man who ambushed it. I recall Wednesday of last week. He'd scheduled me for an appointment at the Lotus Massage near the shopping center. A couple's massage. For himself and his therapist. His excuse was that his therapist was far too stiff to work on him properly and that everyone played a part in getting him back to the field. Keeping me relaxed was only helping his own agenda, selfish as it may be.

If I know anything about this man, it's that he isn't selfish at all. But dammit if he doesn’t play the part well enough to get people's minds off the curiosities that threaten to damage my job and reputation.

So we got our massages, me giggling every few touches until I could fully embrace the feeling of someone's hands on me that weren't his. Lake watched me the entire time from his massage table, a look of pure joy emitting from his soft eyes. It was my first massage, as if it wasn't obvious, and Lake got the treatment he deserved that night. With me on my knees again, like he'd said. Knees on the floor, knees on the bed, knees spread wide as he indeed

stretched me... Fucking knees. That's why we're here, right? *I'll never look at knees the same after this man.*

I waste no time instructing him to plant his heel on the floor, toe to the wall, large hands bracing the cold, white surface as he stretches his calves. He wastes no time grabbing my arm nearby and pulling me in front of him. Between the wall and his rippling muscles beneath that flimsy old cut-up t-shirt hanging from his glistening chest like a piece of floss, I remain trapped. He replaces his other foot against the wall, pushing close against me, getting the most out of the stretch.

“Lake,” I warn, peering up at him.

He groans as his damp hair hangs down around his forehead, tickling mine. “Don't you threaten me with my own name.”

Leaning down so our noses are touching, his eyes glimmer through me.

“Stop hitting on your therapist, Decker,” I retort.

He scoffs, “I'm far beyond hitting on her.”

Pressing his hips against mine, a breathy groan leaves his throat. “Baby,” he whines, his hands finding the sides of my neck as he runs his nose along my cheek. “You're killing me. Kiss me already.”

He always waits for me to break the barrier, to open the floodgates for him. And dammit if this rush of Lake doesn't break them all every time.

I grip the loose edge of his ripped t-shirt, rolling it in my fists as I pull his towering frame tighter to me. I breathe in his delicious scent of woods, rain, and salt. All things that are somehow entirely masculine. A flicker of a smile finds me, an indication that he's got the green light before his lips seal to mine.

With warm, soft lips, he kisses me so quickly, so passionately, knowing that we could be seconds away from getting caught. I taste the salt on his lips

before his tongue flicks at my mouth, demanding entry. Tongues touch and moans follow as he presses the erection sealed beneath his joggers into my abdomen. My hands slide up the back of his neck, into his hair, and I melt into his mouth.

Quickly, his hands find the back of my thighs and I'm lifted, being pressed into the cool plaster of the wall behind me. He rubs himself against my tingling center as he continues toying with my tongue, trying to alleviate his own pain. I can picture his deliciously thick, long cock, the crown red from the friction, leaking, aching to find its way back where it belongs.

Everything has me on fire. Burning with desire for the man who alone has the ability to douse my heat in the most pleasurable way.

“Fuck me against this wall, Lake.” The words slip from my pussy again. “Please.”

His forehead falls against the wall next to my neck as a frustrated groan leaves his chest, rumbling into mine. He knows as well as I do. We're pushing it.

“Trust me,” he says before kissing me again. A long, delicious stroke of his tongue against mine. “I'm ready to.” Another kiss.

With a sad sigh, he rests his forehead on mine as I sink, slowly placing me back on my feet.

A knock at the door has Lake dropping to the mat on the floor and me straightening my back like a metal rod was just shoved up my ass.

“Dyl!” Jaden calls from behind the door.

“Come in!” I call out a little too loud, before my bulging eyes drop to Lake's engorged dick.

He sits crouched over with his elbows on his knees, covering the massive erection I've caused him. Stifling a chuckle at my terrified demeanor, he

scolds me silently, telling me to chill. Jaden sneaks an arm into the door, holding my cell phone. My heart drops when I see the name on the screen as I approach where he's leaning in.

“Saw it light up on the desk. Figured you'd want it,” he says.

“Of course,” I say, snatching the phone from him. “Thanks, J.” Giving an appreciative gaze, he gives me a light, unknowing nod before gently shutting the door.

I answer the call, worry already circulating throughout my body.

“Hello?”

Lake watches me curiously from the mat.

“Col?”

I wait, hearing nothing but static in the background.

“Pickle,” his voice floods my ear, and I inhale a breath of relief.

“Col, what's going on? You good?”

“Yeah. Yeah, Pickle. Good. I'm-I'm good. Really good. I need to talk to you. I'm good. I need to t-talk to you. Good.”

He's nervous. I can literally hear him rocking and twisting his fingers as he speaks.

“What's up? What are you doing?” I ask calmly.

“I need a pit crew. Pit crew. I'm working on my car. The car. I'm working on my car, but the crew. I need a pit crew.”

My eyes find Lake's and his brow raises as he watches my expression change from nervous to calm to confused. I can tell he's trying to read me. His concern has him locked into my conversation.

“Pit crew?” I murmur into the receiver.

“Yeah. Pit crew. They need me to fill in my pit crew on the form.”

“Wh-what? What are you filling out, Colin? Where are you?”

“Home. I'm home. The races. I'm filling out the papers for the race. Samantha called and said I needed to bring my papers in to the center tomorrow if I'm to sign up for the races.”

“Oh, fuck!” I yell out, then slap my mouth to cover it with my palm.

I'd been so mesmerized by the dick lately, I'd completely forgotten about the race.

Lake's brows both raise humorously as he points to himself, and I flash him a rude hand gesture back. He stands from the blue mat, straightening his pants and shirt before lurking towards me.

Not now, sexy beast.

“I was going to take the bus and drop it off. Drop it off at the center before work. I have to do it before work. Drop it off. Drop it off at the center before tomorrow. Tomorrow at the center, Samantha said.”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Uh, just...leave the paperwork there. We can finish filling it out tonight, and I'll drop it over to her in the morning. You just get ready for work like normal. Okay?” I say, my forefinger and thumb resting on my pounding temples.

Looking down at the floor, I rack my mind for a way to move shit around in our accounts to pay for the entry to this race. We don't even have the funds for the entry, nor the money for the pedal kart needed for the race itself.

I can pick up a shift at a bar.

Maybe Katia can watch Colin a few nights a week since she's so close?

I can give plasma early before work.

Money. More money. How can I get it?

As I'm casually thinking about selling pictures of my feet to freaks online, the phone gets snatched from my face.

“Col?” Lake says into the receiver. “Hey buddy, it's Lake.”

I go to snatch it back from him when he puts a hand on my forehead, holding my head back like he's holding out a football in his grasp. I swing for him, but his wingspan…

“Yeah? I heard!” he says excitedly.

I twist in his grasp to the point where he can't turn his wrist any further and free myself from his hold. He backs up until he's near the massage table, where he hops up, planting a seat, his arm still out, holding me back.

“Don't worry, Col, we're gonna get you signed up for that race. Me and Pickle are on it.”

He swings his long legs around until his heels are on the table. Hearing Colin talking in the background, I see the joy in Lake's eyes, the joy in his smile. Not letting that deter me, I grip his bicep, reaching around his shoulder to grab the phone from him, to no avail.

He brushes me off again, so I pull on his ankle, but he places his heels beneath him, putting all of his weight on them. Standing on the table to get away from me, he chuckles at my attempts to claw for him, trying to jump and reach the phone.

“That's what I've been telling her,” he agrees with whatever Colin said. “O-okay, yep. We're just heading out now. Have a good day at work, bud. See you later tonight.”

He hangs up the phone, still holding it up in the sky. My nose wrinkles as I glare at him, panting from my weak attempt to overpower him.

See you later tonight? Now he's inviting himself over?

Taking in my anger, he has the audacity to smirk down at me. “You look like a little gremlin.”

I turn my head, glaring at the blank wall I wish to smash his face into.

“That was a nice spin move, though. You're quick on your feet, Crawford. Open tryouts are next spring if you're interested.”

I have nothing left I can say to insult this man. I can't overpower him physically, clearly, so I choose the childish route.

I grab for his pants and pull them down to his ankles, effectively de-pantsing him.

The second it happens, the door behind us creaks open.

Lake's standing on the massage table, my phone in his palm, raised to the ceiling, his pants to his ankles, and nothing but muscular thighs and boxer briefs before me.

My hands find his knee as I pretend to manipulate it before turning over my shoulder to peer at the guest who's walked in.

Greg.

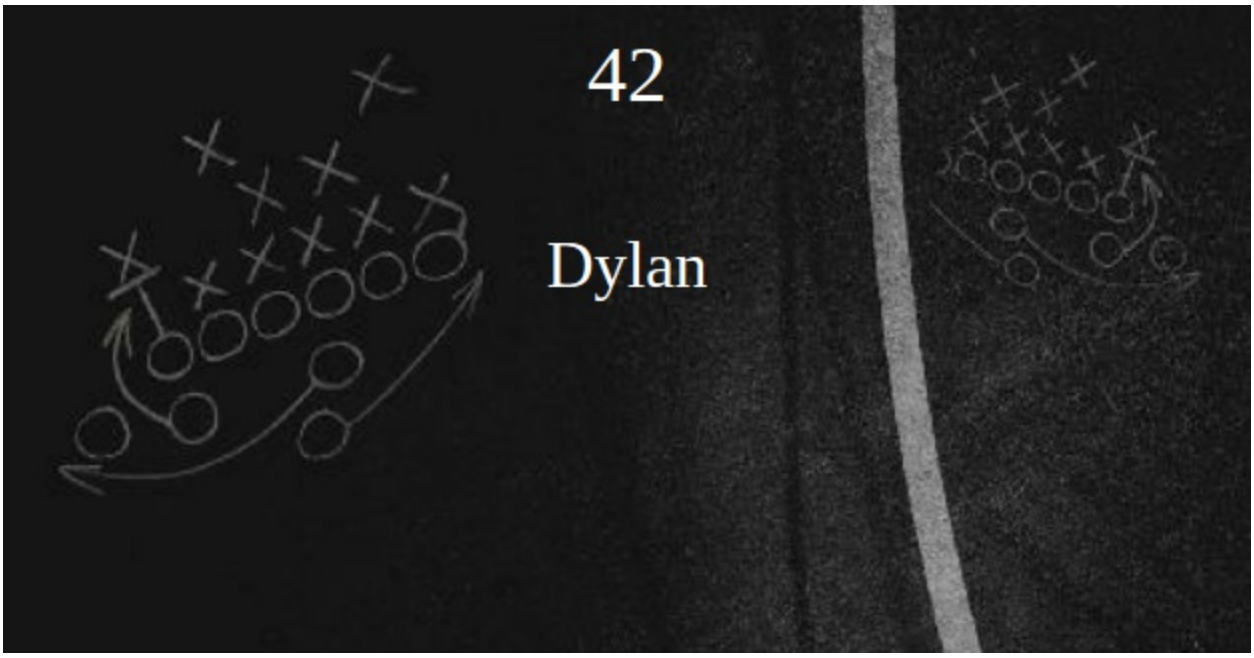
I arch a brow at him, appearing bored as ever while my heart is on the verge of exploding through my puny little chest. *My job. My career. Colin.*

He simply looks from me to Lake and back in confusion. Then his expression fades into a mocking grin.

“Gotta wear those tear-aways, kid,” he says with a dry laugh, easing my mind.

Thank God. He doesn't know.

He gives me an excited smile, telling me he needs me in the office for a word. Backing out the way he came in, he leaves the room and my forehead meets the table while mocking laughter echoes around me.



It's cold.

Too cold for November in Chicago.

I glance nervously over at Lake, who's sitting in the passenger seat of my tiny little compact car that feels like one of Colin's toy figurines at the moment, wondering why in the hell he insisted I drive us to his practice today.

In fact…

“Why am I even coming with you?” I ask suddenly, turning to glance at him before my eyes find the road again. “Since when are therapists essential for team practice?”

He sits there, relaxed as ever, in the seat that looks entirely too small for his long, muscular legs. After his quick shower at the gym, he changed into another matching black sweatsuit with a black Nike hat tossed casually on backwards, the tiniest hint of brown locks hanging through the snapback in front.

I try to hide the hearts in my eyes as I practically drool over the simple yet sexy look. *Fucking snapbacks.*

With his elbow on the edge of the panel beneath the window, he chews on his thumb as he peers at the road ahead of us. “Since you became part of my team.”

My brows lower in confusion at the sentiment. Before I can even process it, he points out the windshield, and in a deep, demanding tone, says, “There. Turn.”

I see a gas station I'm about to pass and turn quickly, breaking at the same time to not miss the entrance.

I'm aware I'm driving like an anxious freak because Lake's eyes widen as he grips the handle above his head while the car practically rides on two wheels. I swerve into the old, run-down Shell station that looks worse for wear. The stalls are all full, so he points towards the gas pumps.

I'm already anxiously grinding my back teeth, hoping he doesn't notice.

Please don't notice.

“I'm gonna run and grab a Gatorade. You want anything?” he asks, looking back as he opens the clown car door with his massive hand.

“Uh…” I swallow, scratching the side of my ponytail. “Nah, I'm good.”

I trail his gaze as it darts to my dash and wince.

Don't mention it. Please, don't mention it.

“Alright,” he says softly, pausing for a beat too long. “I'll be right back.”

He shuts the door, then taps on the window a few times, as if he literally can't just reopen the door and say what he needs to say. No, he needs me to roll the window down simply to pester me. His smirk awaits as he leans down, his annoyingly handsome face greeting me as I press the button to roll it down.

“Yes?” I ask, playful annoyance lingering in my tone.

“Don't miss me while I'm gone.” He flashes his cocky grin before tapping his hand on the top of the car, then jogs lightly towards the gas station.

I roll my eyes, dropping my head back against the seat. *So full of himself.*

I sneak a peek of him at the door through my lashes because he's Lake Decker, he’s got a great ass, and fuck me, I really like him. I quickly admire his fine ass in the sweatsuit one last time. The cocky bastard has the nerve to turn back, almost knowing I’m gazing at him longingly. He drops his head, chuckling lightly as he pushes into the glass door with his shoulder.

Seconds feel like hours as I wait, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, staring at that barely filled gas tank meter before me.

I shiver, clutching my jacket to myself to remain warm as the heat slowly leaves the space. Dusting off the dash, I'm thankful I cleaned my car of all the McDonald's and other trash before I was coerced into giving Lake a ride.

Suddenly, I hear my car's tank open. I look up at the convenience store with no Lake in sight, then turn back abruptly, seeing the back of his head facing the pump.

Opening my door a crack, I hear a voice from above, “Pump 7. Ready.”

No. No, he better not have.

“Lake, what are you—”

He pushes my door shut, closing me inside without so much as a word as he continues to put the pump in my tank, filling my car with gas.

I attempt to open the door again, but he leans back against it, folding his arms before him and effectively holding me hostage inside as the pump fills on its own. I roll down the window.

“Lake!”

“You need to keep your tank full in the winter, Dylan,” he says simply with

understanding in his tone. “It's not good for your car.”

I know it's not good for my car. I'm not an idiot. These midwestern winters can freeze your fuel line if your gas is low enough, making it impossible to start your vehicle. But sometimes you have to make choices. Choices like keeping your tank a quarter full versus half full in order to use the money for the increased heating bill until the next payday. Choices that don't include driving into the city for practice, knowing it's eating up that gas you've calculated for the week. Choices Lake has never had to make.

I huff in frustration, knowing I've already lost this battle before it began.

“I'm not coppin' a free ride. I asked you to drive, remember? Just returning the favor,” he continues.

Just returning the favor. Fuck that. This was a setup. The fact that he already paid at the counter cues me into that. He knew I'd need gas and made me drive and specifically stop here so he could fill my tank. Unlimited Gatorade at the training facility awaits him.

Making his way back to the other side of the car, he takes a seat, turning to face me with a serene smile and a bag full of Gatorade and some other snacks.

I start up the car, watching as the tiny orange meter on empty slowly rises past full. The little stick hasn't seen this side of the gas gauge in years. I'm surprised it even remembers how to get there.

It’s somehow almost reminiscent of me. Before Lake, I wasn’t full in any sense of the word. My life, as amazing as it is, has been difficult. I’ve ridden around on empty since before becoming an adult. Finding ways to make ends meet, climbing this mountain of debt, scrambling to stretch out one more mile before the metaphorical car died. But here he is, filling me with what I was missing all these years.

Love of my own.

It can’t be love.

I chew on my bottom lip, looking away from the dash to nervously face him again, needing some sort of clarification. *It can’t be love.* My heart is in my stomach, my stomach on the floor.

His cocky grin has dropped. There's a shift in energy as he slowly slides his hand to the steering wheel to peel mine off of it. He brings my hand to his mouth, kissing my knuckles gently as I mouth a silent 'thank you', the tears threatening to pool. The simple gesture somehow speaks to the deepest part of me.

The words he whispered to me in his truck find me again, ringing through my head. *You deserve to be looked after, too. Even if you find yourself hating the idea.*

He wants to. He wants to take care of me so badly it's killing him. Especially knowing what his net worth is and how much financially he has to offer. But Lake doesn't flaunt it. Nor would I want it. He’s never been the type to showcase that reality, especially not in my presence. It’s as if the money he makes is just a side-effect of the career he happens to be passionate about. But the truth of the matter is there.

It's hard for me to accept things from people. Motives, maliciousness, and selfish gains—words that slide into my head from a past that still haunts me. But Lake's making it so those words never held meaning. He's rewriting what it means to be a man in my book. The definition, becoming something worthy of this open heart.

We finally arrive at the indoor training facility, the same place they held the Special Olympics, the same place Greg told me I was headed before leaving work with Lake. He instructed me to feel out the place while I was there. His

excitement for that surprisingly overpowered the invite to his latest Pampered Chef party.

But I don’t understand why Greg told me to feel out the place. It's not as if this would become my workplace. Would it?

I try to push down the feeling of excitement that lingers in my stomach. The dream job. Right here before me. However exciting, I can't allow hopes and dreams to rule me. And a small part of me feels like I'm cheating at achieving the dream, knowing that Lake had something to do with getting my foot in this door.

Getting into the overwhelmingly spacious facility, I'm shocked to see no one inside. The cool, dark space becomes illuminated as Lake turns on the lights, returning from a backroom. I breathe in the smell of the turf, an overwhelming scent of plastic and rubber filling my nostrils. The cool cement of the surrounding walls sends a chill up my coat-covered back.

“Ready?” Lake asks, sneaking up behind me as I take in the indoor field that's becoming brighter by the second as the lights kick on around me.

I melt when I feel his body seal to mine, the sensation already so familiar and wanted. His hands slide around to the front of my hips while he nuzzles me from behind.

“For...what, exactly?” I ask as his five o'clock shadow gently brushes against my neck, causing my heart to thud loudly.

“Practice, Chief.” I feel his smirk against my ear.

“There’s no one here,” I comment, looking around.

He loosens his grip on my hips and jogs around me, turning so he's now lightly walking backwards with a football in hand. Without explaining himself, he watches me with amusement.

“C'mon Crawford.” He smiles with a simple nod. “I know you can juke,” he

says, cocking a brow, “but what can that arm do?”

Without warning, he tosses me the ball and I fumble to catch it. Dropping my keys, I grip the oblong end of it in one hand.

“Quick hands,” he says with surprise.

I slump my coat off, chucking it on the metal stands nearby. With determination in my movements, I head out on that turf.

I'll show him what this arm can do.

But I'll make it worthwhile in the process.

My wheels begin turning as an idea comes to mind.

“I got a game for you,” I taunt, tossing the ball in the air before me, watching as it spirals smoothly before I catch it again.

His brow arches, holding back that smile that wants to push through at the sight of me handling this ball with such ease.

“Let’s see what you got, Decker,” I tease.

“I make the rules,” she says, walking backwards across the field to distance herself from me. “And if you play by them, you'll be rewarded.”

My cock loves the sound of that.

“Alright, Chief,” I holler at her. “What's this gonna cost me?”

“Simply your honesty,” she smiles sweetly.

But I know that smile. And it's not sweet. She's got a motive.

“The rules are as follows,” she continues. “You, Lake Decker, must answer any question I throw at you, just so long as you can catch.” She winks, placing the ball against my abdomen, handing it to me.

“Unfair.” I scoff, even knowing I'm set up to win this entirely, then follow up with, “For you.”

I casually toss the ball back at her, and she fumbles to catch it.

“What kind of questions?” I ask.

“Whichever question the person prefers. It can be about life, work, sex…” She lingers there for a moment, eyeing me from head to toe. “Anything.”

My ears perk up. *Oh yeah, I'm ready for this game.*

“Shoot your shot, baby.” I grin smugly as she fingers the laces, finding her footing.

I'm already a little impressed by her ball-handling skills, to be honest, but seeing her out here on this field with that large pigskin in her tiny little hands has me practically biting my fist, my eyes rolling to the back of my head at the sight of my girl on the field.

Holding the ball up near her right ear, ready to throw, she sends it at me hard. A perfect spiral that shoots across these twenty yards separating us, landing right in the pit of my gut. I pretend to scramble to catch it with my left hand purely for dramatic effect, but succeed. Of course.

I toss a throw back at her with some heat to it, and surprisingly, she secures it against her chest.

Damn, D. Baby got hands.

But the idea of what's to come, her probing into my personal life, has me feeling a little anxious. New plan.

“Okay, I've got a better idea,” I say, walking to the side of the field. “We need to up the ante.”

I pull a machine out onto the 30-yard line, prepping it for use.

“What's that?” she asks.

“JUGS Machine.”

I explain that the machine can toss balls at a faster rate to any spot down the field. We agree to the terms that this will make the game more challenging for me. It's entirely unfair that I get to dive into everything that is Dylan, because there isn't a chance in hell she's about to get through my skin on this field. This is my home. My game. This is where I make the catch or lose the job.

I bet she'll catch one or two, if that. But to be honest, the idea of watching her bounce around this field has got me excited already. She's determined, with her tight ass in those leggings, that toned abdomen beneath her sweater, and those engorged breasts bouncing within the confines of that sports bra, and it's all got my cock swelling in excitement. I'm already imagining the turf burn.

We set up the machine, and she even allows me to go first.

I jog downfield, turning back as she feeds the machine. It shoots out a decent spiral around thirty yards out. My legs, while still not even close to one hundred percent, take me across the turf. With my arms outstretched, I finger the edge of the ball, effectively grasping the tip, completing the pass.

Chuckling to myself in satisfaction, I slowly jog back to her with a proud smile.

She stands with a hand on her hip, twisting her lips, clearly hoping I'll drop it.

“How often do you masturbate to book porn?” I ask with a slight pant.

Her eyes round in horror as I push out the question before I even reach her, and I see the tightening of her jaw as she realizes she has to answer it. It's the rules.

“That doesn't—”

“Don't you dare say that I can't ask that. My catch. My question,” I taunt. “Spill, D.”

She sighs. “It all depends.”

“On?”

“On many things,” she answers, then shrugs.

“Okay, give me an estimate,” I say, keeping it simple. “How many times a week?”

Her glare is making me want to laugh. I cock my brow, awaiting the answer.

“Estimate?”

I nod, keeping eye contact.

“Um...maybe around two or three,” she answers bashfully.

Two or three. My eyes widen. Two or three times a week. My girl fucks her fingers, needing pleasure two to three times a week? I'm not doing my job.

The redness is rising in her soft, pale neck as I gaze at her like a deer caught in the headlights. A drooling deer in the headlights.

“Two or three times a week,” I repeat out loud.

She looks like she could kill me for even voicing it.

“To Cagen or his brothers?” I ask with a cocked brow, pushing.

Her eyes narrow at me.

“That was one book,” she says with a glint in her eye. “There are many other men that get me there.”

She knows exactly how I operate. Knows I hate the idea. Something deep within me can't stand the thought of another man on her mind, making her cum. So, I throw it back at her.

“But only one who can get you to scream his name.”

Her chest heaves, and she glowers at me. I know she's remembering the way she mercilessly rode me in that hotel room, my name falling from those lips again and again as her head tipped back to the ceiling, praying to a god that couldn't save her. The glare sears through me once again.

“Okay, okay.” I raise my hands, surrendering with a chuckle. “Your turn, gremlin.”

With the setting on low and the angle high, I pop a ball out to her midfield. She eyes it, determination in her stare. Flicking her ponytail back over her

shoulder, she's light on her feet as she moves beneath it, catching it with ease.

A satisfied grin approaches me as she pauses in her new Nike sneakers, courtesy of her giving lover, tipping her chin with an adorable confidence.

“Ask away,” I mumble begrudgingly.

“Alright, I'll start simple,” she says with a smile. “Since I already know your biggest turnon is kissing while fucking,” she begins, and I swallow. “What I want to know is, what’s your biggest turnoff?”

I twist my lips, looking at the ceiling above her as I find my answer. “Weakness.”

Her forehead wrinkles as she attempts to process. But I'm not giving her time to process. I jog off, ready for my catch. My question.

She must have figured out how to toy with the settings because these balls keep coming at me faster and harder.

“Alright,” I breathe, pausing before her with the caught ball in hand. “I'm up.”

She purses her lips in disappointment, waiting.

“What's your favorite position?”

“Quarterback,” she answers too quickly.

I pause, stunned, as I hold a finger up. “Okay. First, I wasn't talking about football positions. And second,” I stall with my mouth open, shaking my head in disbelief, “you should've said running back because your boyfriend is a running back.”

“First,” she begins, circling around me like a hawk until she’s behind me, “you're not my boyfriend.” I shoot her a bratty glare over my shoulder.

“And second…” She walks around until she's directly in front of me again. Gripping the front of my shirt in her fists, she pulls me forward until our hips meet. Looking up at me, she says, “Any position that gets me to cum.”

Swallowing sand.

Can’t form words.

The statement makes my cock twitch in my pants as my mouth remains open, my eyes widening like she dropped me in the middle of the desert and her name is conveniently Lake.

She plants herself behind the machine again, waiting for me to make my move before muttering, “But if I'm being honest, I like the weight of you pinning me down.”

Visions of myself on top of her flood my brain. Her legs on my shoulders, her legs spread wide for me, her legs curled tightly around my lower back, pulling me deeper and deeper…

“You're up, Deck,” she says with a smirk, pulling me from my sex fantasies.

She knows how to play me. Fucking hot-ass, tart, little saucepot.

I make another tough catch to the chest and note how she admires my quick speed and agility. If I'd known better, I'd say seeing me in action is actually turning her on.

“Do you want kids someday?” I ask, breathing a little harder than before.

Her back straightens, tension in place as she stares at me.

“Haven't thought about it,” she says, wrinkling her nose.

Lie.

“Well, now that you've thought about it...do you want kids someday?” I push.

She releases an exacerbated sigh as her eyes dart nervously around me. “I don't know. Maybe.”

I cock my head, confused, as Dylan pushes past me to get back out onto the field for her catch.

It appears this little game is becoming more challenging than we thought. The questions are scraping the surface of the secrets we hold dear, and needless to say, it's getting uncomfortable.

I feed the football into the JUGS machine, tilting it a tad higher to make the catch more difficult. If she wants to play tough, I'll meet her game. It flies up and into the air with ease. She plants herself beneath the ball, clutching it firmly to her chest as it falls, like the chance to ask the next question is the key to eternal life.

“Not bad,” I admit with surprise as she approaches. “Practically better than Candy.”

“What's one part of your childhood you wish you could change?” she asks breathlessly.

Jesus. Going for the jugular.

“Wow. Okay, um…” I rub my forehead, wondering how deep to go.

There’s a lot to my childhood I wish I could change. I'd kill my father before he ever had the chance to lay hands on my mom. Before she had the chance to become strong and leave him. I'd focus more on helping make her life easier. I'd enjoy the simple things in life before abuse and illness took away the hope for our future. To pin it down to one point, one answer? Well, that's difficult.

Exhaling suddenly, I remember the first time it happened. I wouldn't eat my dinner. I was tired of sandwiches. Greasy peanut butter and expired crusted jelly on stale bread were getting old. Across the table from me he sat, a bottle of Jack in hand, glaring at me with a certain amusement to his contemptuous smile.

He was waiting for it. Wanting a reason to go off. He taunted me with his words, eliciting a response so he could strike. When he finally came around

the table to hit me, I cowered. She threw herself in front of me, taking the blow. The blood from her nose splattered across the stale bread I was too stubborn to eat.

“I would've stood up for her sooner.”

She stands there with her soft eyes, absorbing my change in demeanor. Confusing thoughts circle us and it's making the air around me thick. Too thick. She's connecting pieces I don't necessarily need her to connect.

“My turn.” I slide past her, handing her the ball as I lightly jog away from her. I feel every emotion in each step as I do. The deeper she dives into me, the farther I want to pull away. I'll redirect this back to her. Put her life in the spotlight as she's trying to illuminate mine.

She definitely upped the speed because the next one came at me like lightning. But the now completed catch has me jogging back with tension in my neck.

“If you had the right support growing up, what would you see yourself doing differently?”

She winces slightly, taken aback by the question.

“I'd be doing exactly what I'm doing now,” she says with an edge to her tone. One that wants to slice through me for being so perceptive.

“So nothing would change? You wouldn't see yourself being anywhere else? Striving to achieve different goals? Reaching for more? Focus set elsewhere?”

What do you want out of life for *you*, Dylan? I want to ask the question. Shake her until I get the answer.

She’s doing that thing again. Attempting to decipher through the words I’m saying to find a deeper message. She's trying to read through the question, but

I can tell by the way she folds her arms across her chest she's not opening that door.

“Nope.”

She's lying. She's lying because it hurts her to imagine anything else. A world in which Dylan thinks of herself and her own wants first. She can't even play along. Won't even allow herself to dream of what truly makes her happy.

Making the next catch, she jogs back to me with a scowl already set.

It's becoming heated, our little game of get-to-know-each-other. And the next question she asks lets me know.

“What's the actual need to get back on the field in record time?”

It sucks the air out of my lungs. The question that was meant to be simple. But it's anything but. She's testing me. Feeling me out. Pushing me the way I push her. Wanting me to expose the part of myself that hurts most, just as she so recently refused to in her previous answer.

My answer is buried in my need to heal my mom. My need to get that shell of a human back to the breathing, life-filled warrior who made me, because she deserves better. Better than this. And I won't let her go until she has that. Until *I* can give her that.

So I lie.

“To become the greatest of all time, of course,” I reply hastily, oozing with the confidence of the man they want me to be. The selfish, driven, playboy all-star. A man fighting for his mother's broken soul, trying to right the past traumas she's endured, isn’t what makes headlines.

Her face says it all. She knows I'm lying. I offer a quick shrug, as if to say, *This is the game you wanted to play, and now I'm playing it.*

Next one comes at me harder than any quarterback I've played with. Sweat

is dripping off my forehead as I approach her frowning face. My ammunition, my question.

“Are you really going to allow a prick like Eric to ruin your chance at happiness?”

The question comes out with more heat than I intended. Suddenly, Eric's words find me again. *He ruins her.* My stomach drops, but it's too late. The word is now floating between us like an atomic bomb, begging to go off.

She blinks at me, disbelief etched into her features.

“I-I just mean, are you really not going to open yourself to the possibility of anything great in life because of hi—”

“Open myself?!” she yells, interrupting me, and I straighten in surprise. “You can't even tell me what truly motivates you, as if it's some sort of secret, Lake. Don't give me lessons in opening myself. That's one class you've yet to take.”

She turns, walking towards the sidelines. I run after her, grabbing her by the upper arm to stall her.

“You're destroying yourself by thinking you're not allowed to be happy, Dylan. You push away what you want because you think you're supposed to. As if you're less of a protector if you find your own joy in life. It's pathetic. It's weak. And entirely unattractive.”

Wrong words. Wrong words again, Lake.

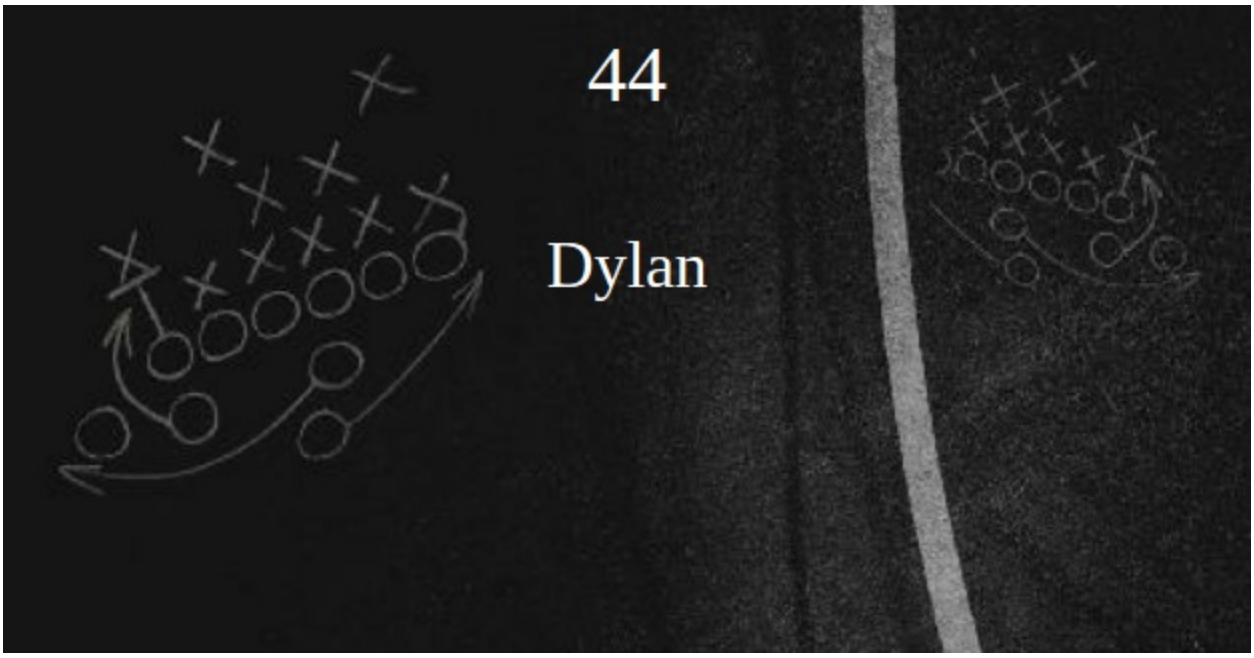
Her eyes set ablaze with fire from years of enduring a pain I've never known. Trauma that's created this controlled, calculated and careful person before me. She's not weak. She's entirely too strong. Her strength is all I see. It's blinding. It's a barrier. An army of soldiers set to mutilate me and anyone else who even thinks of attempting to storm the castle that encases her heart. It's how she conducts her life. With strict, premeditated order.

“Well then, it's a good thing that I don't care to be attractive to you.” She rips her arm out of my hand with a painful look of disgust in her eyes. “Remember? This only goes so deep, you and I. Surface level and secrets. It’s what we’re good at.” Storming past the stands, she grabs her jacket and keys, heading towards the doors.

Our game didn't go as planned. My hopes to open her heart while simultaneously denying her entry into my own ended with a head-to-head battle of players rejecting their truths.

I met her castle.

And now I've effectively sealed the gates myself.



After a long, silent, and agonizing drive back to the gym, I dropped Lake off without another word.

The tension in that car was alive and well, and I didn't know what to say. Our game started off fun and flirty and ended all too raw and real. He'd seen through me, and in attempting to draw me out of the cage in which I live, he'd lost it.

He went off, saying things that stung me in ways he'd never understand. I wanted to avoid him at all costs. Live in my controlled environment the way I'd adapted to so long ago. I was safe there. Secure. In control.

Did some of his words ring true? Maybe. The way he so accurately perceived my reluctance to dream of a future for myself that wasn't simply work and Colin hit me harder than I thought it would.

I lived, breathed, and practically existed for Colin. And while I had found the strength to accomplish a career I was passionate about, I had fulfilled none of my other goals. Never focusing on what makes me happy has made

me realize I don’t know what does. When life starts you at a disadvantage, finding normalcy in simply existing becomes your happiness.

I couldn't dream of how my life would be different if not for my responsibilities over Colin. How could I wish for a world without him? It pained me to even go down that road. Even knowing how hard our journey has been, I wouldn't change it. Couldn't fathom it.

Eric dumped me because I wouldn't choose between him and Colin. He wanted me and me alone. But I wasn't alone. I never would be. I accepted that a long time ago and embraced it. While I know Lake wasn't insinuating I had to make a choice between Colin and a future with him, his need for me to imagine my life differently struck me just as hard.

Lake was his own problem. Wanting to open me up without allowing himself to come apart with me. His own reluctance made me question his motives entirely.

Why be so willing to let me in only to keep me out? Who does he live for? It’s not for himself like he wants everyone to assume. It’s for her. His mother, it seems. And his reasons for holding himself responsible for whatever they've endured weigh him down.

As my mind continues to wander, I write checks with a burning pen, practically tearing through to the cheap laminate wood as I empty my account with quick strokes of ink. One for my student loans, one for our health insurance, heat, electricity, credit card bills that never ceased, my car payment, and, of course, rent that was already a month behind.

With my papers scattered around me, I grab the application for the races that Colin has started filling out. My heart sinks as I see the total cost to register. I calculate what we have left and come up short. It doesn’t stop me from writing that check, though. I'll find a way. I always do.

I hear the doorknob twist, and excitement encapsulates me. I missed Colin so much today, and needing his embrace has me scrambling up from my seat to feel my big brother’s hug.

Racing for the door, I unlock it before he needs to use his keys. But when I open it, my entire body tenses in shock.

There he stands before me, arms on the door frame above him, head hanging low between his shoulders. The door opening causes Lake to look up through his dark, messy locks, and his red and daunting eyes find me.

We stand there, just staring at one another for a minute too long. A minute more than he deserves for the painful words he spewed. My stomach knots up as I take him in, breathing in his scent that always seems to drown me. He shakes his head while his eyes crinkle in the corners. Opening his mouth, he just keeps shaking his head, the words trapped in his throat.

I wish this was easier. That our histories didn't hold us back. That our pasts didn't make us so reluctant to embrace what's so natural between us. But the reality is we are two different people, and sometimes our pasts just don't align to build stable, structured futures.

I wait for him to say something. Anything. But he just inhales deeply and closes his mouth again, looking evermore tortured. I go to close the door when he drops a hand and sticks it through the crack, grabbing the door in his large palm. Shaking my head once, I close my eyes.

“Please,” he begs, his tone broken and hoarse.

It catches me off guard, this vulnerability to his own emotions. I pause, my hand still lingering on the old rusted door knob.

“I'm sorry,” he says in a whisper of a breath.

He sounds like he can't breathe. Like the idea of taking in oxygen has become his greatest opponent.

I stand there, staring down at the knob. His hand slowly slides down the chipped door, lower and lower. I watch it. Study the careful motion until it cautiously reaches my hand.

“I'm so sorry,” he says, his voice breaking again.

His icy fingers brush my skin, and the torture he's endured from the afternoon of silence hits me like a spark. My eyes finally find his again and everything in his look pierces through me. His jaw flexes before his breaths escape his lips, choppy and pained.

It can't be this simple. I can't just forget. He can't just apologize. I’ve stacked my walls back up, brick by brick, but if I’m honest, I’m weary and worn from the constant building. The word *no* escapes me breathlessly as I back away from him.

Pushing through the door, he shuts it behind him, rushing me until those large fingers slide their way into my hair. He gazes down at me while holding my head in his hands, like he wasn't sure if he'd ever see me again after what he'd said.

Leaning over me, he rests his forehead against mine as we just stand together, breathing the same air between us.

I don't dare move. I can't. I'm frozen in this place where I want to be strong and showcase my backbone, but all I can do is melt. I can't for the life of me find a way to push him away when all I need is him close. It's confusing, it's frustrating, and it rips through my heart entirely.

“I'm sorry, D,” he whispers again in that gravelly, cracked tone. The tone that inadvertently forces you to feel the pain of the person emitting it.

He kisses my forehead, his tender lips lingering against my skin as I feel a tear escape my lashes.

I don't want to close up and be strong anymore. I want to let go and feel that

freedom of being lost in love. But I can let go on my own. I can't get lost without someone there willing to find me. Guide me home when the path disappears before me.

“Oh, God,” his broken voice utters, noticing my tears and wiping one away with his thumb. The words drop from his mouth as fast as his heart falls to the floor. “I'm so sorry.”

He kisses my cheek. “So sorry.” Kisses my other cheek, capturing my tears. “I'm so fucking sorry.” He nuzzles his face along mine, uttering the words again and again like he's supposed to. But it's not making me feel better. It hurts me to know how much I mean to him, because I feel just as tormented.

I couldn't stand it if he silenced me. I'd die if he didn't take my calls and ignored me as I did him all afternoon. I couldn't go a night without seeing him, just like he can't seem to finish this night without standing outside my door, apologizing endlessly with his words, with his pained eyes, with his broken heart.

Lips hover over mine, and I break. I give into temptation, silencing the powerful, independent woman in me as she screams. I press my mouth to his and a deep groan of relief escapes his throat. Calloused hands travel, one to the back of my neck and the other down along my side until it reaches my hip. He pulls me into him, cradling me in his arms.

This kiss, if I could define it, would be titled Tender Truths.

It's gentle, it's sympathetic, it's truth-telling in its own right. Everything our heated kisses normally aren't. This kiss is his apology. My heart is the paper he aches to carve himself into, his unabating tongue, the pen. He writes his remorse against my lips with every swirl of his tongue, every pained groan into my mouth.

Words that are voiced cease to exist. He's communicating solely with his

actions now.

Fingers grip the hair at the back of my head as he walks me backwards toward the table of bills and papers behind me, his mouth staying planted on mine. He picks me up with one arm wrapped around my lower back, setting me on the table. My legs open and he seals himself against me, holding me tightly in his arms.

I separate from his lips, needing a breath and some clarity amidst the raw passion that absorbs us whenever we're together. His hand slides around me until it reaches my hip. Fingers claw into the skin near my thigh as he winces, his forehead dropping against mine again.

“Forgive me, D,” his voice cracks. “I beg you, please.”

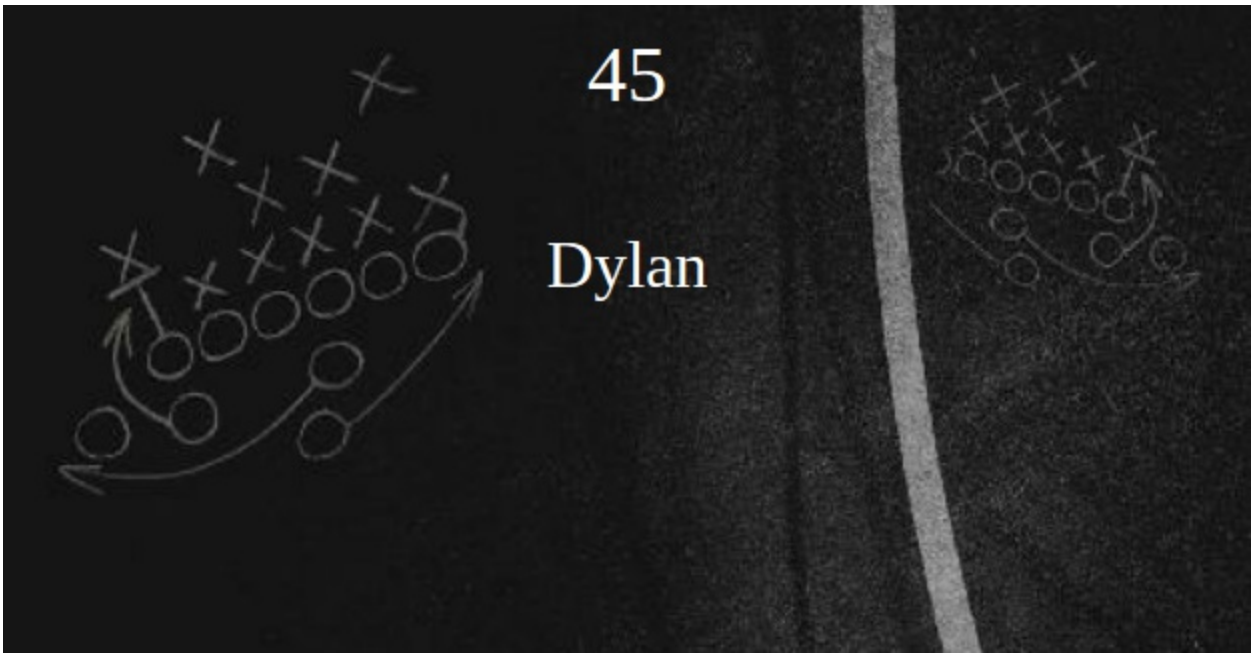
I sigh against him, contemplating kicking him out and closing off the part of me only he's ever opened, because I know just how to do it. I've done it before. Surely I can do it again.

But I know I can't.

My mind screams at me to wake up, but my heart forms a fist around it, sinking its claws in deep, choking it off, unrelenting in its mission to keep this dream alive.

These walls guarding that heart have crumbled with the force of his wave.

And I'm not strong enough to hold out anymore.



Documents, bills, checks, and paperwork lay sprawled on the wooden table, defenseless beneath us. The tenderness has molded into something more powerful. The passion that now builds between us screams for release. In record time, Lake's lips leave mine and the energy throughout the tiny apartment shifts.

Gripping my arms with determined hands, he helps me off the table, setting me on my feet and turning my back to him. I twist to face him as he curls his tall frame around me. His mouth seals to mine from behind and I gasp as his tongue seeks mine, noting the sweet taste of peppermint lingering on his lips.

Curious hands slide down my abdomen until they reach the aching place between my thighs. My body molds to his, the weight of his swollen cock pressing against my lower back.

His tongue swirls inside as he nips my upper lip before softly kissing the corners. My chest heaves as his fingers press firmly against my clit. The heaviness in my head clouds my vision, and I drop my head back against his chest as another breathy moan escapes me.

Large fingers graze and tease over my pants until he's gripping my chin, tilting my lips up to him. Kissing me madly, his hand slides up and into my sweatshirt, cupping my breast. This man can kiss, and dammit if it doesn't send me into another realm each time that tongue so eagerly flicks mine.

Sucking on my bottom lip, his hands slide to my waist, where his fingers claw down my sides, creating goosebumps in their wake. He finds the edge of my leggings, pulling them down over the curve of my ass. I arch my bare backside, pressing into him, feeling the strain in his sweats so close to where I long for it.

“I'm so fucking sorry,” he murmurs against my neck.

“I know,” I whisper breathlessly. “I know.”

“We need each other, D,” he whispers back between kisses to the skin beneath my ear. My hand slides up behind his head, pulling him back down to my lips. Licking my bottom lip, he plants another kiss before muttering, “I need you.”

A ripple of pleasure sweeps through me at the idea that I created that hardness that's now pressing into the crease of my ass. That simply kissing me in this passionate, possessive way gets him to the point of eruption.

He pulls back from another kiss, resting his forehead against my temple, and a crease forms between his brows as pain overcomes him.

“I can't do this alone.”

The sentence hits me like a brick to my stomach, sucking all the air from my lungs.

Alone?

What he's referring to, I'm not even sure, but the rawness in his tone has me straightening, proving my strength, making sure I do whatever it takes to hold him together until he knows he'll never be alone again.

All it takes is our eyes meeting and one simple shake of my head to let him know that truth before the floodgates open, releasing us to the lust that drives us.

Patience is an idea of the past. Lake grabs the lace of my thong, but in attempting to roll it down in a hurry, he gets frustrated and rips it apart. I wish I could say I didn’t care, but dammit, thongs are hard to keep around here.

Lake doesn't stop kissing me as he quickly fumbles behind me, the need to connect becoming a maddening race. Pulling his sweats down his toned core and hips with one hand, I feel the thick head of him at my throbbing entrance as he hisses through his teeth at the sensitive sensation.

Quickly and forcefully, he runs himself along my slit, coating himself in my arousal before pushing into me, sinking deeper and deeper. Breathy cries leave my throat as I stretch to accommodate him. My hands fall before me, fingers gripping the papers and bills, clutching anything and everything to keep me tethered to this earth.

I fall forward, my sweatshirt sliding up my abdomen as he rolls his hips against my backside, crashing into me while heavy breaths fall from his lips.

Our sex is everything our kiss wasn't. It's fast, it's forceful, it's rushed, it's relentless.

With palms flat against the surface, I stand on my tiptoes, angling myself for Lake as he drives into me uninhibited and wild, causing my lashes to flutter and tears to spill at the pure force and intensity. Waves of euphoric pleasure roll down my spine as his strong fingers claw into the flesh of my hips, his muscular thighs slamming into mine.

A strained growl escapes his throat, and I feel him harden even more inside me. His strokes come quicker, forcing the air from my lungs in gasps as I

cling to a fistful of the scattered papers beneath me.

Our sex is hurried. It's a scramble of need in the most erotic, primal connection. As if it's the only thing left to tame that insatiable lust smoldering between us.

“Say my name, Dylan,” he growls. “Scream it.”

“Lake,” I whimper, reaching back to touch his taut abdomen, attempting to stall his motions as my thighs tremble against him.

It's coming. I'm about to break.

He must feel me tightening because he grabs my arm by the wrist, twisting it behind my back as his other hand slides up my spine until it reaches the crook of my neck, anchoring himself.

“Fuck, you feel good,” he grunts, tightening his grip, clawing into my collarbone as he pins me down to the surface beneath me.

He thrusts into me with his thick, long cock like a savage, claiming me as his. Harder, deeper, chasing his own sweet release. Echoes of moans escape me as his thumb circles around, holding me down against this table by the neck and forcing me to take what he's giving me.

“Say it’s us,” he whispers through the gasps of air leaving his lungs.

I close my eyes tightly at the sentimental words during an act so vulgar, and I feel myself fall over that crest. My spine arches and I push back into him as I quiver and pulsate through my release. Noises leave my throat that I've never heard before, while my cheek roughly rubs against the wooden table beneath me as he continues to ride out my orgasm with unyielding thrusts.

Euphoric gratification overtakes me, and my body explodes with a crippling type of ecstasy I've never experienced. The raw, primal, inescapable pleasure of being taken by a man so crudely.

I feel him pull out, and warmth spills along the curve of my ass as his raspy

breaths expel in the sexiest echoes of his release. He drops his forehead to the middle of my back, still holding onto my shoulder as we both attempt to catch our breath and return to our bodies.

“Fuck,” he breathes, pausing for a moment to collect himself.

He grabs the edge of my sweatshirt, helping me to remove the now soiled article of clothing, leaving only my sports bra. Cleaning me off with it, he helps me upright. When I turn to face him, adjusting my pants back over my hips, half-lidded eyes find mine.

He pulls me against him, my chest to his, and leans down to kiss me. This time, it's gentle. Kissing every arch, every curve, every crease in and around my lips, he claims me all over again with his mouth.

Leaning back, he stares down at me.

A fresh wave of emotions crashes over us upon that one gaze of affection. The intensity of his stare practically cripples me. The heartfelt apologies, the tender kissing, the passionate sex…

It's all too real here before us.

Don't say it. Please don't say it.

Lake grabs my jaw in his hand, angling my face towards his. He's breathless, as if he's still inside me. Licking his lips, he peers at mine before his eyes tear through me again.

Don't say it.

Please don't say it.

I can't say it back.

Not yet.

I'm nowhere near ready. I can't love him until I know him. All of him.

The words lie there on his tongue, but the message is already being transmitted through the heartfelt ache in his gaze.

I beg him with my mind to silence his truth, but it's no use. His thumb sweeps across my cheek. He peers at my mouth, then my eyes again, as if he's imagining a world without me, the idea shattering him already.

Swallowing, he starts, “Dylan.”

My heart is in my throat. Can't breathe. Lightheaded. Drowning.

He runs his thumb softly across my bottom lip, the confusion and surprise at his recent discovery apparent in that creased brow.

“I—”

The sound of keys in the door straightens my spine.

“Shit!” I gasp, my eyes widening in terror.

I've totally lost track of time and space. Colin was on his way home from work. And now he's here. Outside the door. And Lake just fucked me on the table. Lake Decker fucked me from behind on the kitchen table. On top of my bills. *Who am I?!*

“It's Colin! Quick! Go...g-get under the bed!” I grab his arm, pushing him back towards my room.

He laughs lightly, easily brushing me off as he turns to face me, his sweatshirt hanging on his fit frame with his white t-shirt slipping out of the bottom all lopsided. It's the lazy, satisfied grin that sets it off. We look like we just fucked. It's so obvious.

“I'm a grown-ass man, Dylan. I'm not hiding under a bed,” he says with gravel in his tone.

Yes. Yes, you are, Lake. A big man, indeed.

I shake my head, snapping myself out of this intoxicating wave he always seems to send my way, still feeling that subtle yet sore ache between my legs to remind me.

The key clicks and the door opens as I pat at my ponytail, smoothing any

loose hairs, cocking my head with one of the fakest grins I've ever slapped on my face. I look like a saleswoman trying to sell the fact that I’m indeed not a sex fiend, but a professional. A true professional.

Lake's lip twitches and his brow raises as he watches me try to figure out which hip to place my hand on as I stand next to him, deciding on holding my neck and collarbone where a large handprint is more than likely imprinted.

“Pickle!” Colin calls out as he walks in, his arms carrying his backpack against his chest like it's been stuck there since his bus ride.

I'm not breathing. I'm holding my breath with this fake-ass smile, hoping I look way more natural than I feel. The room is still heated with the aftermath of sex. It's swirling around us and landing on my face like a giant billboard of truths.

Colin immediately stalls in place, looking from me to Lake.

“What's up, Col?” Lake says casually, moving to sit down at the chair near the table. He kicks back in his Nike sweats, his white socks crossing at the ankles. He took his shoes off? When did he remove his shoes? A gentleman even in raw passion.

“Hope you don't mind that I stopped by.”

Colin's brows knit together. “You here to see me or Dylan?”

A fist tightens around my heart at his assumption that Lake came to hang out with him.

Lake and I peer at each other. His lips pull into a grin, but he just sighs and replies, “Definitely here to hang out with you.”

I shoot him a quick scowl that gets mirrored with a subtle wink.

“Good,” Colin says with a nod. “Good. I have a race.”

“Perfect,” Lake says. “But, I'm hungry.”

Anxiety cripples me again as I recall the emptiness of my cupboard and

refrigerator.

“I'm gonna order a pizza,” he continues. “You like pepperoni?”

“Yeah. Yeah, pizza. You worked up an appetite. It smells like sweat.” Colin goes to set his bag on the floor against the kitchen cabinets as I practically shrivel into myself, imagining the chaos that would've unfolded had he come home ten minutes sooner and seen his little sister being plowed from behind on the dinner table by an NFL player.

I'm frozen in place as Lake smoothly says, “Yeah, just got back from practice.” He lifts his sweatshirt to his nose, sniffing it. “Sorry, man.”

“You can shower. Shower and we can watch a race. Pizza and we can watch a race. I have to fill out my forms.”

Lake's eyes fall to the forms on the table, and I swear I can hear him laughing internally as he licks his teeth. The race form is bent out of shape, sticking up awkwardly from being crinkled up in the heat of passion. I swallow as he grabs the paper, smoothing it out.

“I'm here to help.” He smiles up at him before his eyes find mine again. One look, the same one he gave me a moment ago when his hand held my jaw, and I’m reduced to Lake water.

I feel his statement in everything that he is. He's here to help in more ways than one. He’s here to help with the workload I carry alone. Here to help keep us together by making it his mission to include Colin in everything we do. And, subsequently, here to show me how to love again.

“You don't like them either,” Colin states, and both of our heads quickly snap back to him.

His eyes focus on something on the floor near the kitchen. Lake sits up in his seat to get a better look.

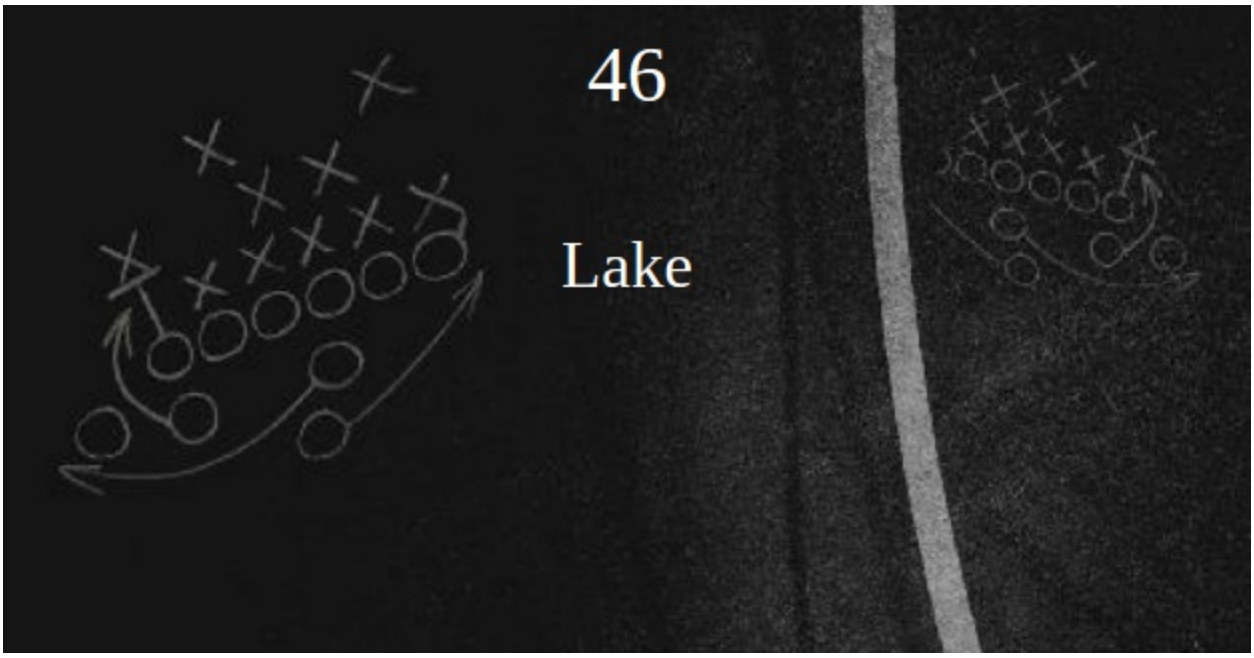
“Good. You don't like them either,” Colin repeats while nodding.

Pulse is rising. Death, approaching.

Lake stands and, with one long step, quickly swipes something off of the floor. With his foot on the garbage, he opens the container, and I see him drop my ripped lace thong into the garbage can.

He smirks at me from across the room through hooded eyes with that all too sexy grin, and if I had panties on, I'd drop them to the floor again.

"Can't stand 'em," he purrs.



I hate being on the other side of that wall.

Feeling cold, closed off to the warmth of that heart I've felt within.

I didn't expect to be here. With my dick tucked, begging a girl with endless apologies after pushing her until she broke. But here I am, ready to do whatever it takes to win her back.

I said some fucked up shit. Called her weak and unattractive after pressuring her to open up to me. I pushed and pushed her, needing her to give me something back. I wanted to hear that she envisioned a future with me in some capacity. A future where her love and devotion expanded to include me. The promise of something more. I needed to hear it.

And selfishly, I broke her down as I sat back with all my doors closed.

The acceptance and acknowledgment of the fact that cancer promised to take away my rock, the only person I've ever known to love me unconditionally, terrorized me. I didn't want this reality. I wasn't lying when I said I couldn't do this alone. My truth slipped from my lips like a scared little

boy. I need Dylan's strength more than I care to admit. And the craziest part is she still has no idea.

I order some pizzas from the kitchen table before going over the race form while Colin takes a shower and Dylan folds clothes in the living room. I kind of just made myself at home here and don't plan on leaving anytime soon. But since she hasn't kicked me out yet, I'm going to assume she wants me to stay. A girl like Dylan would let you know.

“Alright, so it says he needs a pedal car, a pit crew, a color choice, team name, and the option to have matching team shirts, either through the order form here or an outside source if you prefer,” I call over my shoulder, holding the crinkled form in my hands.

Silence comes from behind me, so I lean back further, looking over my shoulder at her.

She's chewing the corner of her lip, staring down at the floor as she continues folding.

“D,” I call out again.

Blinking quickly, she inhales a breath, letting it out as she turns to face me with brows raised.

“Where'd you go?” I ask softly.

She simply shakes her head with a heavy sigh as she folds another shirt. “I've always been here.”

I find myself a bit broken by the comment. It feels so much deeper than just words.

“Hot sauce,” I declare suddenly, pointing my finger to the sky. She cocks her head at me as I continue, “You got any hot sauce?”

I stand from the chair, walking around the kitchen table, and make my way to the fridge. She stands from where she's sitting, dropping the clothes from

her lap back into the laundry basket.

“No...no,” she says quickly. “I'm sorry, I—”

“I have this thing,” I begin, gripping the handle of the fridge. “I need some Frank's RedHot Sauce dripping from my pepperoni in order to eat it. Spice. I need spice, D.”

She throws her body before me, her back slamming against the fridge door with a loud thud, blocking me from opening it. My eyes widen, and I stare at her like the crazy little psycho she is.

“Tell me Eric's head is in a large pickle jar in this fridge and I'll feel better about what just happened here.”

Her mouth drops open at my comment before her lips pull into a grin and she laughs with a scoff.

“I fucking wish,” she deadpans. “No, it's just…” She shakes her head, shoulders tight to her neck as she holds the door shut with her body. “It's just, peering through a person's fridge is a very personal and private manner. It's…” She thinks for a moment, wrinkling her nose as she winces. “Invasive?”

A dry laugh leaves my throat. “Invasive?”

She shifts on her heels, looking behind me, then nods.

“Baby,” I begin in a cracked tone, leaning forward to whisper the words in her ear. “I just had you bent over the kitchen table. Legs spread. Taking you from behind. Raw.” The blush rises from her neck to her cheeks as I pull back to look her in the eyes. “This is hardly invasive in comparison.”

Her lashes flutter and I can practically hear her thighs slap together tightly, warding off her pleasure at the simple mention of the fun we had.

“But I will respect your privacy and step away.”

She eyes me warily as I move away, slowly creeping backwards with my

hands raised, my eyes focused on hers as if she's a wild animal I've come upon in her jungle. I grab my car keys from the table, turning to step into my shoes. Her eyes narrow and she absentmindedly fiddles with the end of her ponytail, watching me curiously as I stand up straight again.

I'm no fool.

"I'll be back."

"Pizzas are generally delivered, Lake," she says with an edge. "Where do you think you're going?"

She's no fool either.

I lean back against the door, biting my bottom lip. "They don't just throw in free cheese bread for anyone who calls. This face"—I draw an imaginary circle around it—"gets the cheese bread."

I give her my best overly-confident grin.

It's funny how I can practically hear her calling me a cocky prick in my head. Grinning sweetly and arrogantly, I turn, demanding she lock the door behind me, and head out to do what needs to be done.

About forty minutes later, I'm balancing two pizza boxes on my head while white grocery bags litter the length of my arms as I kick the bottom of her door. Luckily, some little old lady let me in the main entrance while I was walking in from the parking lot.

Colin opens the door, peering through the chained lock.

Would you look at that? My girl actually listened to me.

"Would you mind helping me, sir?" I ask as Colin quickly works to unlock the door, opening it just in time to catch the pizza sliding off my head.

He takes it to the table, quickly pulling out a slice and heading back to his room while I push in through the tiny opening, slinging bags as I walk. I reach the kitchen, dropping them off my arms and rolling up my sleeves,

noting the warped, red lines from the bags tearing into my flesh. *One trip, bitch.*

Dylan runs out from the bathroom in an oversized sweatshirt with what appears to be nothing beneath, and a towel pressed to her damp hair. Those fit little exposed thighs have me forgetting what my name is, who I am, and what I'm doing with my life.

“What did you do?” she asks with an edge, eyeing the thirty grocery bags of food in her kitchen.

“Don't get your hopes up, Chief. It ain't for you,” I snap back, scowling at her as I say it.

I unpack the groceries, placing them on the counter, and I can feel the hesitation as she watches me, curiosity screaming at her to get me to explain.

“You're dating an athlete,” I begin. She opens her mouth to deny the truth, but I put a finger up to stop her. “And athletes eat a lot. If I'm going to be over here as much as I plan to, I wanna be prepared.”

“You're such a shit.” She shakes her head, glaring at me as a reluctant grin creeps across her face.

I simply shrug with a smug smile. I love making it impossible for her to turn down my help. When I make it about me, she can't say shit. I win.

After putting away the food, Colin calls for me from his room.

“Lake! Lake in here! Lake.”

Dylan's forehead creases as a hand comes up over her mouth. For a moment, it looks like she bit her tongue, so I approach her. She's going to cry.

“What's wrong?” I ask, cocking my head and sliding my hand down the back of her arm gently.

She tightens her jaw, shaking her head as tears pool in her eyes.

Pointing to his room once, she says shakily, “He just never does this.”

“Does what, exactly?” I ask softly.

She swallows down the emotion as her eyes find mine. “Just openly invites people into his room.”

It's so small. So insignificant, but dammit if it doesn't move my entire world. As she explains, Colin isn't the type to allow people to freely enjoy his space. I somewhat forced my way in here the last time we watched races, but this time, he's calling for me. Wants me around. The way it's making my girl highly emotional has me bending down and kissing those impending tears away.

“I don't want to just leave you out here,” I say, cupping her cute little face in my hands. My insides want to become outsides and smother her. I want to smother her with these strange emotions I'm feeling again.

“No, go ahead. I've got a couple loads to finish up anyway,” she says with a heartwarming smile. “Please, go ahead.”

I love you. I love you. I love you, Dylan.

It lingers there, in the back of my throat, my mind screaming the words as I gaze into those glowing embers with the black wispy lashes that curl up perfectly, opening the beauty of her eyes. But I can't say it. I'm terrified of what it means.

She grabs my wrists, pulling my hands from her cheeks before she kisses my palm, the slight gesture running like a fiery lightning bolt from my hand to my heart.

“And thank you, Lake,” she whispers quickly before kissing the other palm. “I don't like what you did or the way you went about it, but I'm not going to not thank you.”

Her cute sentence earns her an admirable smile as I gaze longingly at her. Help from me makes her uncomfortable, that much is clear. But she's so

adorable when she's soft and accepting like this.

Turning away from me, she walks toward her spot on the couch, plops down, and begins folding laundry again as I stand there, just tonguing my teeth and trying to keep myself from smiling. A thank you is something I don't need from her. Not when I'm so willing to do everything and more for this girl. I'm finding more pleasure in buying groceries for them than anything I've ever bought for myself.

Taking the wooden chair from the table, I join Colin's side in his brighter than bright room. I take in the sunny curtains hanging from his window, the yellow-striped bedspread on his twin bed, complete with a wall of tiny vintage cars in perfectly organized rows, settling in to watch the races with our pizza.

“Want some hot sauce?” I ask, holding up the bottle after coating every inch of my slice.

He looks down at the pizza in his lap.

“Spice makes me have stomachaches. Stomachaches and gas. Lots of gas. Pickle says no to the spice. Spice gives me gas. Flatulence.”

I take a large bite out of my pepperoni slice, chewing as I talk. “That's a funny word, flatulence.”

Colin watches the race as he repeats the word. “Flatulence.”

“Flatulence,” I say louder, raising my pizza.

“Flatulence!” Colin screams, and my brows raise in amusement.

“Colin!” Dylan scolds from the living room, and I laugh.

“Flatulence,” he says again. “A funny word.”

My smile has never been wider as I go to take another bite.

“So, do you like your job, Colin?” I ask, grabbing for another slice.

He's spilled some sauce down his canary-colored striped shirt, but it doesn't

slow down his appetite. He’s on this third slice already and seems to enjoy pepperoni pizza more than I thought he would. I add it to the memory bank.

“Yeah. Yeah, I like my job. My job is important, Pickle says. Bagging is important. Yeah.”

“It is. It's very helpful.” I agree, before taking a drink out of my water bottle.

“Do you like your job? Football and women?”

I practically choke on my water, wiping my mouth of the mess I've made.

“What?!”

“Football and women. They say you play football and get women. Football and women. More women now that you can't play football.”

“What you see on the blogs is all lies.” I shake my head, scratching the back of it. “I'm not interested in women.”

“But you like Pickle? She's a woman.”

I sigh, wondering how to navigate this.

“I really like Pickle. Your sister is...well, she's amazing. And I really love spending time with her, and with you.”

“So you love her then.” He nods to himself.

It's not a question, it's a statement. A very gut-punching, truthful statement. I look around his room, noting all the varied shades of yellow that fill the space, from the color on the walls to the drapes, to his favorite striped shirt. It's his own source of sunshine, putting the spotlight directly on me now with his questions.

“I-I, well I don't know, Col.” I stutter.

“So I was right. About both of you. I was right. Right. I was right,” he repeats, rocking forward onto his toes in the chair as his fingers twist and untwist. “Both the same.”

I peer at him, wondering what he could possibly mean. Has he had this conversation with her as well? Did he ask Dylan if she loved me? What did she say? What would she say? Would she embrace her emotions, or would she push them away to focus on the responsibilities before her? Does he see she does that? I'm not always sure I understand Colin or the things he insinuates, but it doesn't mean I won't try to be patient until I do.

We watch the last lap of the gripping 2001 Cracker Barrel 500. This is a race I remember well. The rookie Kevin Harvick was racing as a replacement for the late great Dale Earnhardt, who had been killed in the tragic, historic race only a week before. I watch as Colin crosses and uncrosses his fingers while anxiously watching the screen. I know he knows what happens. This is an old tape. But the fact that he's still so invested makes me warm with affection.

Harvick and Gordon cross the line at practically the same time, and Colin nods once.

"Great race. Great race. Emotional race."

"Very emotional," I agree.

"Harvick filled in. Filled in. 0.006 seconds separating them. 0.006 seconds. Second closest race in NASCAR history. Harvick filled in for Earnhardt. History."

"It's insane how much you know about this," I comment, running my hands down my sweats as I sit back in the wooden chair, watching the racers finally slow.

"Y-you know what it takes? What it takes to make history?" Colin asks.

I pause, turning to face him. He's looking directly at me now. Colin is looking at me. He's never made eye contact for this long. Ever. If at all.

"What's that?"

He stares at me, and for a second, I wonder if he's forgotten what we were talking about. Until he speaks.

“Courage.”

I hold my breath as I gaze back at him. It's like he sees something in me. My hidden truth I've been covering for so long. He knows what I'm doing here. That I've fallen in love with his sister even if I haven't admitted it to her. He knows my weaknesses, my omission of painful truths. My reasons for playing football again. The hopeless boy beneath this shell of a man who still clings to the belief that miracles can happen, and that making *her* proud of me again will somehow make that deadly disease vanish without a trace.

It's like he sees it.

He sees me.

As the coward I am.

“Colin?” I hear Dylan's voice sneak up on us from the other side of the door.

But I can't keep my eyes off of Colin.

“You finished the form?” she asks with the paper in her hand.

His eyes shift to her hands behind me before peering down at the floor.

“You put me and Lake as your pit crew? We're the team?”

He nods once and my heart grips at the thought of him writing my name down. Me. He chose me for his pit crew. Wrote out my name.

“And what is this? What did you write?” She holds the paper closer to her nose as she tries to read something he wrote. “I can't read this, Col. The team name.”

Colin turns his gaze back to me again.

“The Canary Cowards.”

He nods once to himself, turning to kick back in his chair again, and I feel

my chest tighten as he repeats the name, the truth stirring up these impending emotions.

“The Canary Cowards,” he repeats.

It's early as I slip out of the warmth of her bed to answer a call.

"She's not up for cooking, but still wants you to come."

It's the tone that kills me. Not up for cooking. That's not like her. Not even close to her. A childhood of meals straight out of the pages of Taste of Home. Cooking was her happiness. Putting her heart and soul into the meals she made for the people she loved. Having her own money meant finally being able to fill my belly the way she never could when I was growing up. Loving the fact that, as a football player, I needed all the extra calories I could get. But this? This hurt.

The past few days have been busy. It's as if my mom and Dale don't want me around. Her excuse is that driving back and forth to help with her medicine is a waste of my time when I have therapy, team meetings, press meetings, photoshoots, gym sessions, more therapy, more Dylan. I'm always being tossed the casual, "Dale is here to help. Besides, I'm feeling good."

But she isn't good. She's dying. I can hear it in the weakness her voice carries. That same weakness I keep denying I hear. She isn't getting better.

She’s getting worse.

The drives to the city have been long, and staying at Dylan's means I have to wake up earlier than ever in order to make it through rush hour traffic, but every extra minute spent driving is worth it just to get that time with the one person I seem to need the most.

It's her confidence, her assertiveness, her complete control over her life that seems to make me feel like I can control mine. It's addicting to be around, and I crave the moments where I see it exhibited. I feed off it. It energizes me despite my lack of sleep.

Watching her sleep is my newfound heaven. She's so peaceful for being the little spitfire she is when she’s awake. She's become a welcome distraction from the pain I've been withholding.

Last night, she called out to me. Dylan said my name in her sleep, reached out for my arm and pulled it around her waist, snuggling into my bare chest as she dozed back off. Explosions were happening inside that chest, loud crashing waves of something bigger. Loud enough, I worried it'd wake her. But it didn't. If anything, it soothed her, my raging heart.

We've been respectful, being that we're in such close proximity to her brother in the room over. Excessive kissing that's given me a set of wrecking balls I could knock any wall down with are a welcome consequence to lips that seem to demand me. But Jesus, if I don't find myself continuously guiding my fingers into places they shouldn't be, wanting to feel that heat building between those thighs just for me.

I'm crazy about her. Studying her as she sleeps, counting her breaths, constantly touching her and trailing those fingers along the baby-soft skin of her bare stomach as I breathe in the smell of her mango-scented shampoo. And tomorrow, she's going to meet the only other woman that's been a staple

in my life. The one holding everything together until she fades and everything falls apart.

After the phone call, I ensure Dylan's still sleeping, tucking her in tighter before I throw on my sweatshirt, sweatpants, and earbuds, preparing for a light jog to get my mind right.

Halfway into it, my phone buzzes against my armband with a message.

> **Chief**: I got ghosted by Lake Decker. An NFL player. Best running back in the league. At least this will be a story for the grandkids one day.

She's cute even when she's trying to be upset. Not to mention the adorable way she mentioned grandkids, which meant one day she'll have kids. I like that she's thought about it.

I quickly send her a selfie with my tongue sticking out, showcasing the earbuds, with a message that says, *Getting a quick run in*.

> **Chief**: Your therapist warns against this excessive exercise.

> **Lake**: Not what said therapist was saying last night.

> **Chief**: Cute. Real cute. These lies.

I can feel her grimace through the phone.

She wanted me last night. The kissing on her full-sized bed turned into rubbing, the rubbing turning into a mess of sex organs trying to connect through clothing that wouldn't allow either of us to be satisfied the way we needed. Colin's incessant demand for late-night macaroni didn't help either. But today…today I had a plan.

> **Lake:** I'll be back in ten minutes. Taking you with me today and I don't wanna hear it. We can drop Colin off at work on the way. Now leave me alone, you obsessive stalker.

I put the phone back in my pocket with a satisfied grin and finish my run with a new bounce in my step that only that girl can provide.

Later that day, after we dropped an excited Colin off at the supermarket for work, Dylan and I drove to the private gym in my high-rise downtown condo in Chicago for our session and got right to work. Therapy, as of late, has been extremely productive. I'm gaining my strength, even though my mind is anxiously pushing to heal faster than my body. Dylan's been supportive and realistic, keeping me grounded as I struggle with the mental hurdles of impatience to the healing that’s keeping me bound.

One step at a time. Such a stupid statement that holds such relevance. Because it actually is one step at a time. Each one slowly providing more

strength for the next. But progress and regression are set on a line that keeps slowly stretching further and further apart. As I get better, she gets worse. I don't know how to deal with that fact, so I don't.

Dylan finishes up some of her paperwork and phone calls on a small desk in the corner of the gym, and I get in extra cardio on the stationary bike before completing a quick interview over the phone for a local radio station. Heading up the elevator to my condo, she gets word from Katia that she plans to meet Colin at the apartment when he gets off work later to ensure he’s safe, happy, and healthy. It's the only thing that brings her some sort of comfort, being this far from him. That, and the promise that if he calls for anything at all, we'll race back.

“Come on in,” I comment, holding the door for her.

Her eyes quickly scan the place, her face expressionless as she does it.

If I'm being honest, I'm really fucking anxious about this. She's seeing a glimpse of my lifestyle, one that's clearly a far cry from hers, and by the looks of it, she's turned into a robot again. That's the one thing I can't stand about this girl. There are times when I can hear her voice in my head, calling me names, teasing me, or knowing she wants me to touch her, but then there are times like this. Times when I need to read her but can't at all. I didn't bring her here to gloat or showcase my wealth due to fame. But this life is my reality now and I can't deny it.

I grab some glasses of water for us while she meanders into the large living room, the bright sun shining directly onto the floor-length wall of windows. She's careful as she moves around the large leather furniture with her glass, clutching onto it with both hands, almost afraid she'll trip over the large rug beneath and spill it. Walking up to the sleek, dark tile of the fireplace, she leans in, looking behind the round vases, and somehow spots it immediately.

No one's found it before. Not that I would expect anyone to. I don’t hide it. But no girl I've ever had over has done more than use the fireplace for a backdrop to a photography session. Dylan isn't the type to use me for anything superficial. No, she's perceptive. Especially with the pain I hide. She keeps finding it, keeps drawing it out of me, just as she is now. My chest clenches as I watch from afar.

“God, you were cute. Even when you were frowning,” she says through a smile. She grabs the tiny 3-by-5-inch frame that nearly breaks me every time I look at it. Especially these days.

Holding it up, she points at the picture. “Your mom?”

I nod, setting my glass of water on the island. A sigh leaves my chest. “That was taken the day we moved into our new apartment. She wanted”—I stall for a moment, running a hand along the back of my neck before correcting myself—“needed to document it. Said it was one of those moments.”

One of those moments you need to remember, especially because they hurt and they're hard, but I omit that part.

“She's beautiful, Lake,” she whispers, still holding the photo with such tenderness. “You have her smile.”

“Thank God for that,” I say with a little more heat than I intend.

What I wish is that I didn't have these blue eyes from the man who destroyed us.

“I'm really looking forward to meeting her tomorrow.” She tips her cheek to her shoulder, her lips pulling into an adoring grin.

I continue rubbing the back of my neck, trying not to think about the fact that the photo in her hand and the shell of the woman she's about to meet tomorrow are hardly the same person.

“I mean, if that’s still what you want?” she continues softly.

“Yeah, so you can make yourself at home,” I say, brushing off the comment entirely, needing an escape. “I'm just going to clean up for this shoot.”

Her smile fades as she holds one of my most tender moments in her hands before me. She drops her eyes to the floor as she nods, placing the photo gently back on the mantle.

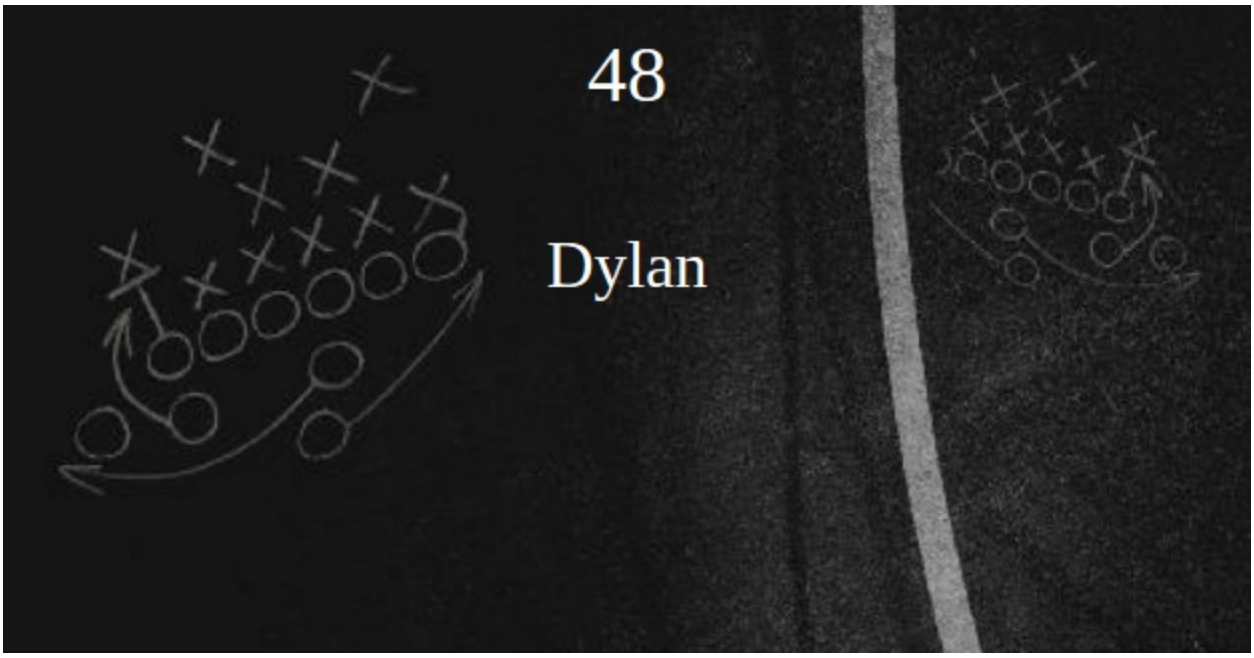
I grimace to myself as I get to the safe confines of the bathroom. Gripping the counter, I look up through the hair that desperately needs a trim and stare at *him*. Those eyes that remind me of her pain. How she could ever look at me growing up is beyond me. They’re his exact color.

Looking around at the bathroom’s gold fixtures and the massive clawfoot tub, I feel the anger rising in my chest again. Turning back to the mirror, I glare at the man who should be happy for all he has and for how far her selflessness has gotten me. I hate him for pretending for so long. I hate that somewhere deep beneath the meticulously sculpted body of an athlete, there’s still just a little boy inside.

A little boy who can't let go.

I'm a fucking mess, Dylan.

And you're about to see the worst of it.



I didn’t even see him before he left.

He basically ran out of the door after getting dressed, shooting me a quick, *I'll be back later*, before leaving me in his enormous condo. Alone.

I tried to not let it affect me, his need to change the subject when I mentioned meeting his mom, but I couldn't lie to myself. It worried me. The way his shoulders slumped with disappointment, the way his face practically winced in pain when I said she was beautiful—it haunted me.

Why is it that the closer I get, the further he seems to pull away from me? What part of his life makes him close up like this? What am I about to see?

Being that tomorrow is the big day we have planned to go over there together for Thanksgiving, I just assumed we'd talk about it. Discuss the arrangements. But his quick dismissal planted that fear in me again. The fear that as things become more real to him, me and Colin infiltrating into his life, he'll pull back. Leave us. Realizing the pieces of our puzzle just don't really fit, and I'll be back to square one with stupid hopes and a broken heart.

Instead of dwelling on it too much entirely, I do what any girl in a rich man's condo alone would—head for the food.

He told me to make myself at home. Shouldn't have told me that.

Opening the fridge doors, my eyes widen. It’s fully stocked. Ridiculously so. There's so much food in here I'm sure he could feed half the city. Most of it is healthy; vegetables, fruits, eggs, shredded chicken, turkey bacon, and more flavors of sports drinks than I ever knew existed. But my eyes zone in on the one thing that's not. Smiling to myself, I glance over my shoulder, and seeing as no one's watching or walking in anytime soon, I turn back to face it with my devilish grin deepening.

Halfway through the strawberry cheesecake tin that was once complete, I decide to continue my tour around the place, extending out from the large kitchen I've planted myself in. Slowly stalking through the expansive flat, I take in the decor and the entire mood of the condo with my pie tin in hand.

It's decorated very much like a man. Sleek, sporty, edgy, and very contemporary, with dark walls, expensive gold fixtures, and long, heavy drapes framing the large windows that dust the dark gray stained concrete floors beneath. They shine with a slick gloss from the rays of sunshine kissing them.

Aside from an enlarged mural of the city that hangs on the wall, bringing some sort of nostalgic vibe to the otherwise icy home, there’s a distinct lack of a personal touch to the space. The only thing of sentiment is the little hidden framed picture of him frowning and his mother looking proud as ever. The item that shifted his entire mood.

Encased footballs illuminated by a light beneath each of them line the wall of the hallway while a few jerseys from various teams hang in thick, heavy

frames, all with his last name stitched onto them. It's a sexy place. One that I'm sure has hosted many women in its day.

Remembering the Instagram model who took her selfies here, I pause mid-chew, the fork still in my mouth. The thought has me practically throwing the pie tin across the room in disgust. I hate the idea of other women, definitely women far finer than me, having walked up and down these halls in barely there lingerie or even naked after a romp in the sheets with the famous football star. Pain shoots through my chest and the feeling settles somewhere in my frown.

I'm heading down the hallway towards what seems to be the bathroom when I spot two large oval mirrors on the wall inside. Never have I seen myself as this shallow girl who cares about looks and beauty, but it's practically impossible not to when you're falling in love with a man who could, and probably has, bedded many of the best-looking women from around the globe.

Ugh. Since when did I become this insecure idiot who needs validation?!

I rub at the bags under my eyes, pinching my cheeks to give them a little color, then frown at the mess of a ponytail I'm rocking. I'm a joke. A sweaty, stale joke. Pulling the hair tie out, I drop it on the large black marble counter before me and turn my back against it, leaning back as I take in the luxurious room.

There's a massive clawfoot tub on the other side of the dual sinks I'm leaning against that sits just before another large floor-to-ceiling window, seemingly tinted in the private space. A space that easily costs a couple million. A space I'd never in my life imagine casually bathing in on a random Wednesday.

The idea that some people get to live their lives in places like this, enjoying

the perks of filling up a bath this big every day and not having to worry about how large the water bill will be at the end of the month, aggravates me.

I deserve a fucking bath. I deserve to eat cheesecake and not worry about finances while I casually read my book porn in a tub more than any other woman he's probably brought here and told to make themselves at home.

Again—shouldn't have told me that.

I'm a little angry now, feeling owed of the pleasure I've constantly pushed away for selfless reasons. It's spiteful tranquility, and well-deserved, if I have anything to say about it.

With determination, I walk towards the bath, stripping myself of my clothing and tossing them into the corner of the room. It filled up faster than I thought it would, the bubbles I'd found smelling of a rich and hearty vanilla.

This man has a slew of what looks like expensive handmade soaps sitting near the counter like a goddamn hotel. Soaps of all kinds; face cleansing soaps, body wash soaps, exfoliating soaps, herbal soaps, glycerine soaps, liquid soaps, a soap with a fucking flower inside of it. A real flower.

This man has a soap fetish. That's his kink. Cleanliness.

I grab three different soaps, placing them on the little wooden stand near the bath, deciding to run a test study on myself as I reach for the pie tin on the counter. Placing my book by the large golden clawfoot, I slowly sink into the soapy heat of the water beneath me.

A relaxing sigh escapes me as I adjust to the temperature, finally sitting back comfortably and letting my muscles relax into it. I shove another full bite of this delicious cheesecake into my mouth and moan around the fork. It's so disgustingly good, made with ingredients clearly above my pay grade. Things that don't include preservatives or trans fats.

I have no clue how long Lake will be gone, but I would imagine

photoshoots followed up by interviews take some time. It's only been a half hour since he left. I've got time. After finishing the majority of the cheesecake, I drop the rest of the tin, making a pained face at the destruction.

“I have no self-control.” I frown, then grab my book I conveniently set nearby.

Easing myself deeper into the warm water, I lean my neck against the smooth porcelain, letting the remaining bubbles embrace me, sliding up and around my shoulders.

Falling completely into my reread of Break Me on Bearback, I flip another page, eagerly getting into this spicy little scene that's building. With my nose in the book and my body beneath bubbles, I hear the front door open with a beep and a click.

It almost seems unreal. A beep and a click. So quiet while screaming wealth. Just like a rich man's condo to be technologically savvy. The closest thing you get to a beep and a click at my place is a buzz and a clunk.

Hearing the sad wailing buzz of the dying intercom system to alert a neighbor your key isn’t working in the main door again, before you attempt to open the old wooden door to your apartment that's swollen in size, forcing you to throw your body into the door with a clunk. Buzz and a clunk.

My eyes bulge at the book still in my hands as I hear the footsteps of a confident man approaching from down the hall. Chucking it behind me in the corner, the book's pages ruffle as it flaps like an idiot chicken attempting to fly. I slide beneath the remaining bubbles again, covering myself from the neck down to ensure my private parts are hidden. As if he's never seen them.

Peering up from the suds before me, my breath gets lodged in my throat as I see Lake leaning against the door frame, looking sexier than ever in a tight-fitting white button-up shirt and black slacks that fit those muscular thighs

better than if they were painted on. He looks like he just stepped off a magazine page. His hair, tousled to perfection, is slightly slicked back with product, a few pieces hanging free across his forehead.

He arches a thick brow as he takes in the scene before him.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asks huskily.

I swallow, running a hand over my hair and slicking it back over my shoulder.

“I made myself at home,” I squeak out, looking around nervously at the bubbles, then peering down at the pie tin beneath the bath with only a slice left.

His eyes follow mine and he tips his head, peering intently at the near-empty tin.

Oh God, what if his mom made him that cheesecake? It’s his favorite homemade cheesecake, and I just stuffed my fucking face with it like the homeless chick he once thought I was.

He waits for me to explain myself, but there is no explanation. I'm ashamed. It appears as if I was playing housewife and it's probably making him uncomfortable, considering most women more than likely want to sleep with him for his money and fame. He knows I'm broke from years of credit card debt, student loans, and legal fees. Surely he doesn't think I'm trying to come up off of him.

“I wasn't playing rich housewife, if that's what you're thinking,” I begin, suddenly feeling nervous under his direct gaze. He pushes off the door and places his hands in his pockets as he slowly moves towards me. “I've just never seen a tub so big and thought, how fun would it be to soak in while reading and shoveling cheesecake down my throat.” I chuckle nervously before my fake smile drops. “Ya know?”

No. No, he doesn't know. I sound crazy. I'm dying internally from embarrassment as my wild eyes dart all around the room, looking for a quick escape. I should run.

His brows knit together as he scowls, looking around the tub again.

“Where is it?” he asks sternly, and I get the feeling he's mad.

“In...my stomach,” I answer with a weak voice, cautiously.

Lake stares at me, tipping his head quizzically before his eyes pinch in the corner and he shakes his head.

“Not the fucking cheesecake. The book.”

My mouth drops open as I stare in confusion.

“Why?”

“Don't play stupid right now. Just tell me where the book is.”

He's confusing me with his tone as he slowly walks forward, unbuttoning the sleeves of his crisp white shirt. He rolls up the sleeves, unveiling the corded muscles of his tanned forearms as he does it. If I wasn't naked in this bath already feeling vulnerable, it might be hot. But at the moment, I feel like he's the professional doctor who's about to give me the Pap smear I accidentally orgasm through.

He's too calm. Entirely too calm and serious. Not flirty. Not even smirking or smiling. Just looking at me with his hard eyes as he prowls forward, rolling those sleeves before unbuttoning the top of his shirt only by a few buttons.

I swallow as my arms tighten across my chest, my thighs squeezing together beneath the water.

“I threw it,” I finally admit.

“Where?”

I nod my head behind me. “Back there somewhere.”

“Why did you throw it?” he asks calmly as he approaches.

He tucks his hands back into the pockets of his slacks and continues stalking around the tub, staring down into the water as he does.

“I don't know.”

He pauses in place at my answer, tipping his head to the side. His eyes trail the length of me beneath the bubbles, and I swear he can see through them.

“You don't know,” he mutters to himself.

He peers towards where I told him I threw the smut before looking back at me. My heart is racing in my chest. I'm nervous for some reason. Anxious. Out of place. Something strange is going on in his head and I can't figure it out. Is he mad? Upset from earlier and now this exhibition pushed him over the edge? I can't gauge him, and the longer I sit here in this water, the more I realize I don't really know him as well as I thought.

“Get out of the tub, Dylan,” he says harshly.

My body trembles at the demand. I feel like a child being scolded by a parent. My eyes look for a towel I never grabbed.

“I don't have a—”

“Stand up,” he interrupts.

I try my best to read through the tone of his voice, the direct eye contact, the way he's unknowingly tightening his hand into a fist next to his thigh. My heart rate increases as my chest heaves in nervousness. He waits for me to move.

I let out a nervous breath, looking down at the bubbles, then shake my head once. I have no need to be ashamed. If he wants to make me uncomfortable in his home, then I'll make sure he's just as uncomfortable, if not more.

Standing from the water, I let the warm bubbles slowly slide down my wet skin. I straighten before him, naked, with my head held high. My eyes narrow

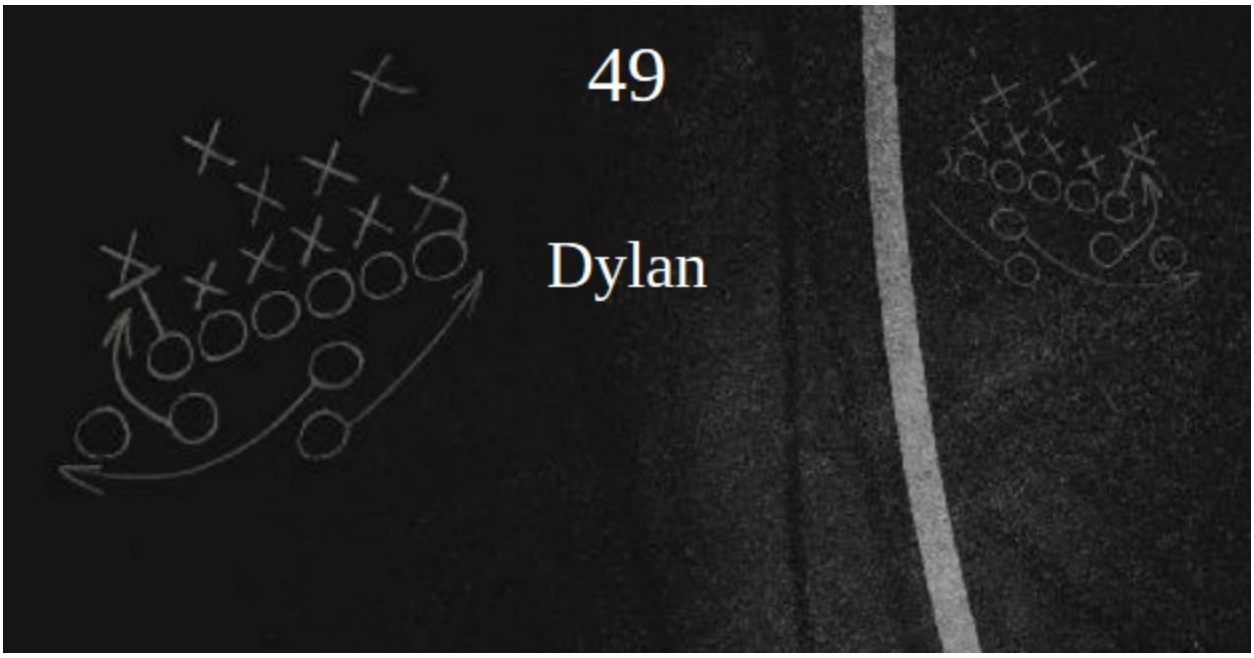
and my brow cocks in a silent fight for dominance.

He shamelessly eyes my bare body as I summon all the strength from female warriors everywhere. *Sacred goddesses, send me your strength. I beg you.*

His gaze pauses at my breasts before dangerous icy blues beneath hooded lashes meet mine. The slightest twitch of his jaw tells me all I need to know.

Pointing to the door, he says one word. One word that makes my insides clench, the tightening in my lower abdomen forcing my thighs to press together.

“Bedroom.”



He doesn't know it, but I can see him.

And I don't simply mean physically.

I see through him. I see the facade holding this man together.

He stalks towards me as I lay back on the dark gray comforter. Droplets of water cling to my body, my slick and heavy hair sticking to my back. Goosebumps rise across my arms and up my shoulders, making me shudder, awakening all of my sensations as the cool air creeps across my bare skin.

The feeling in my gut has me uneasy. I don't want to assume anything, but I can't control the idea that's already planted there about him, about this. He’s a great liar when he needs to be.

My chest heaves, my nipples hard and erect as I stare at him through calculated eyes. He doesn't break contact as he approaches the edge of the bed where I'm perched on my elbows, tipping my head up as he gains closeness.

The master bedroom is big enough to fit a family of thirty, but other than the expansive space, I haven't been able to part from his direct eye contact to

take it in, afraid of what it'll mean if I do. It's dim in here as hints of sandalwood and cedar hit my nose, and the soft plush hairs of a rug beneath me tickle my toes.

“I'm not sure why you feel the need to hide it from me,” he says in his gravelly tone. “Your pleasure. Your enjoyments.”

I feel my throat roll and he peers at it immediately.

“Even now, you look...scared. Embarrassed.” His eyes narrow before he shakes his head. “I won't have it. No girl of mine will need to fuck her fingers when she’s got me right here.”

Bringing the book before his face, he pages through some of it until he stalls, more than likely at one of my tabbed sections, and silently reads. I'm naked and dripping wet on his bed, and he's standing directly in front of me, completely clothed, reading my smut book. My body quivers in anticipation of his next move.

“Here,” he says with his nose still in the book, one large hand holding it open. “Start here.”

Handing it to me, I hold it near my chest, my brows knit in confusion.

He unbuttons the last few buttons on his shirt, peeling it down over his tanned, toned shoulders, shrugging it off as he carefully kneels before me at the edge of the bed. His hands find my ankles as I watch from an elbow, the other arm clutching my book to me. My lips part as his large, calloused hands begin slowly skimming up the back of my calves, his eyes still directly on mine with a concentrated focus.

“Begin,” he demands.

My lashes flutter as I study his face.

He pulls roughly on the back of my calves, causing my back to hit the mattress and the air to slip out of my lungs as I now lie spread open at the

edge of his bed.

“Start reading, Dylan. I want to hear the words slip from your mouth as you cum to them.”

Heat stirs in the pit of my core, and I try to bring my knees together. He doesn't allow it. His arms slip under my legs so my calves are on his shoulders and his firm grip holds the top of my thighs open. I stare up at the large square divot in the ceiling with a different shade of paint inside, wondering why he needs me to do this.

“Read!”

His voice startles me and I open the book, orienting myself to the scene he chose for me by reading a few lines. I close my eyes, making a pained face. I can't read this scene aloud. I'll literally die. Die.

“I can't read this out loud.”

A demonic grin forms on his lips. A knowing grin.

“You will. You've read it before. Now you'll read it with my tongue inside you.”

A weak moan reluctantly leaves my lips as my pained face finds his one more time.

I'm given a single nod before he disappears between my legs. Soft lips find my thighs as he kisses his way to my center. I can barely keep it together already. How the hell will I be able to keep my eyes open long enough to read?

He stalls with his lips paused by my inner thigh, about four inches from the place already aching for him. He's waiting for me to start.

Swallowing down any embarrassment, I dive in headfirst.

“My bare back slowly eases back against Siker's chest, feeling his hard body beneath. Anticipation swirls through me as firm hands wrap around and

grip the flesh of my thighs, parting my legs wide for him."

Lake kisses just beside my clit and I jerk suddenly, feeling a wetness between my thighs that's not from the bath. I find a way to continue reading.

"Exposed and open for his brother's approval, Cagen slowly lurks from the dark shadows of the fire-lit room, staring with dangerous intention as he approaches. Frustration causes his lip to curl as I see the war raging inside of him. Jealousy and desire interweave beneath his skin, crawling into the depth of his bones, seating itself deep within him."

Lake's tongue darts out of his mouth as he licks the length of me. I squirm against the bed, my heels pressing against the mattress in an attempt to scoot up and away from the overwhelming pleasure. His hold tightens, fingers squeezing then releasing, telling me with his touch to continue.

I blow out a quick breath.

"Cagen stands directly before me as his brother holds me open, my bare body exposed entirely. It's overwhelming, the emotions of the room; the heat, lust, and desire trapped inside all of us. The break, inevitable. I'm theirs now in this dark, desolate room. To do with what they please."

I gasp as Lake's lips surround my clit, sucking before gently kissing the swollen bud, but those hands on my thighs squeeze again, alerting me to keep going.

"With Siker's grip holding me open, his erection pressing against the curve of my ass, Cagen grips the back of my neck, forcing me to face him as he mutters the words, 'You're ours to take, little dove. Ours to play with. Ours to use up.'"

"I can't read this," I say breathlessly.

"Continue," he demands against my skin, the deep tone vibrating through me in its own pleasurable way.

“Cagen f-forces his way to the edge of the chair. He quickly drops his pants, holding his hardened erection in one hand.” I pause, feeling a flurry of excitement, embarrassment, lust, desire, everything the main character is feeling and more.

“Stroking the cock that's a deep and angry shade of red, my eyes widen and my breaths become choppy. I lean back against Siker, but am met with the reminder of what's behind me. There’s no escape. Cagen stares down at me, seemingly enjoying the fear I'm emitting. ‘Hold onto her tight,’ Cagen instructs Siker while staring at me, and with one long, powerful thrust, he enters me.”

As the words fall from my lips, I feel Lake's finger push into me, his tongue lapping at my clit with a steady tease.

“Oh, God,” I cry out, closing my eyes tightly as waves of pleasure roll through me.

I'm so close. Too close. This is sensory overload. His tongue pulls away at the same time his finger stalls. He's waiting for me to continue. I pant in frustration.

“I scream out as he stretches me, but Siker reaches up a hand, covering my mouth.” Lake continues moving his finger, and his tongue slowly begins flicking my clit again. A breathy moan leaves my chest as I try to blink through the cloudiness in my vision before continuing.

“He can't know his brothers have me upstairs like this. His own jealousy would have him forcing me to leave. Forcing me away from the boys who’ve stolen a piece of me. He captures a painful cry into his palm. Siker’s soft lips kiss the side of my head gently. The move, a far cry from the viciousness of Cagen's wild and unrelenting need.”

Two fingers push into me now as a moan rumbles through my chest, and

I'm forced to grip the hair at the top of his head to slow the tongue that's swirling against my clit, making my thighs tighten around his head. I cry out loudly again, muttering his name as my chest heaves.

“Come on baby, keep reading,” he whispers before his talented tongue strokes the length of me again.

Another breath falls from my parted lips as I try to form words.

“P-pinned between the two of them, defenseless and for the taking, Cagen grips the back of the chair, and with a feral forcefulness, he finds his release inside me. His growl tears through the stuffy room of the cabin as my eyes water and my body becomes limp against the hardness of Siker’s lap beneath me.” I tighten my grip on Lake's hair, breathing hard as I continue.

“Closing my eyes,” I moan. “I feel Cagen pull out of me, only to be replaced with the stiff cock beneath me. Siker’s thick, awaiting dick slides into me with his brother's cum still dripping—”

I drop the book as Lake sucks hard on my clit again, only to be replaced with quick flicks of his tongue, his long fingers curling up and massaging the place deep inside me that pushes me closer to the edge.

I tighten around the fingers that slowly pulse inside of me. My orgasm is on the brink and he knows it. With a quickness I’m unable to even follow, he pulls his fingers out, unbuckles his pants, and in a blur, he lines himself up with my entrance, burying himself deep inside me as if the idea of not being in me would be the end of him.

I cry out, dropping the book. Lake grabs me with an arm wrapped around my lower back, pulling us up to the middle of the bed, still connected. Sucking roughly on my neck, I scream his name as he fills me again and again, harder and faster, with the sexiest grunts escaping him as the sensation of being so full wrecks me.

It hits me like a wave I'll never outrun. My entire body stiffens as it washes over me, breaking into waves of pleasure that continue to pull me beneath the surface with every stroke. It's not a single sensation. It's a continuous cycle of orgasms that feels like it lasts forever.

I grip his muscular ass with one hand, puncturing my nails into his shoulder with the other as he pushes deeper and deeper, drowning me in pleasure as screams leave my throat.

I can't even orient myself when his lips find mine and his tongue slides into my mouth, touching my own. With a numb face, his mouth seals to mine as he fucks me harder than ever before. The thrusts stall when he quickly pulls out, spilling onto my abdomen with harsh breaths against my lips, his hand fisting his cock until it empties entirely.

He seems lost in his own pleasure above me, his eyes sealed shut while his breathing calms.

It's so sexy, the way this affected him almost more than me.

But it doesn't detract from the reality that still sits in the pit of my gut.

Eventually, after finally breaking away from the soft kisses to my lips he couldn't seem to pull away from, he returns from the bathroom with a warm wet cloth to clean me up. I sit at the edge of the bed, wrapping myself in the other large towel he handed me, and stare down at the floor.

Something feels off inside of me. The fog of the sexual tension has lifted, and it’s unfortunately all too clear to me now.

“Was that...are you…” he stutters before stalling to run a hand down his face. He’s still clearly in post-orgasmic bliss. Attempting to rationalize my sudden change in behavior. “What's wrong, D?”

He settles beside me on the bed, where I can't seem to ignore my racing thoughts.

“Is this a distraction for you?” I ask.

“A what?”

“A distraction.” I run my hand through my drying hair and sigh, turning my head to face him. “Am I a distraction?”

He drags a hand down his face, not wanting to look at me.

“You can't express yourself simply through sex, Lake. I need...more.”

“Express myself through sex,” he repeats with a scoff. “I was expressing how blue my balls have become from endless nights of rubbing against this perfect little body,” he finishes with a laugh, trailing his hand down my back and circling his arm around to my hip.

I pull away slightly to add some space between us and shift my body to face his. His brows lower at the separation.

This is important, and he needs to know how I operate because if I don't put my foot down now, this type of dismissive behavior might continue when things get too emotional.

“I thought you understood,” I begin softly. “I've opened up to you, but as soon as I get even the slightest glimpse of the deeper parts of you, you close up on me.”

He sighs, raking his fingers through his hair as his eyes find the floor.

“I need more from you, Lake. More than just this.” I look at the bed behind us. “Or it won't work.”

Licking his lips, he turns his head to look at me. “I'm sorry, D.”

I stare back at him as he stares at me. Seconds pass and nothing happens. He can't seriously be telling me there isn't more. Is he? I will walk.

He just continues looking at me with his mouth ajar, so I stand.

“No, no...sit. Sit down,” he says, grabbing for me. “Please.”

I lift my hands, but he grabs my wrists and pulls me into his lap.

“I'm sorry,” he says immediately, then kisses my shoulder.

But he can't simply apologize and continue to do nothing about it. I let it slide last time, the whole not confronting the situation thing, but I won’t leave it alone now. Peering at him, I arch a brow, waiting for him to continue. I need something. Anything.

“I was closed off earlier. You talked about my mother and asked about tomorrow, and I completely brushed you off. Shut down the conversation. I don't...I don't mean to do that to you. I-it's more me than anything,” he admits, shaking his head.

I take a breath, realizing he's trying right now, and wanting to nurture that, I lift my hand to his cheek. It's his mother. Something he, himself, hasn't addressed. He gazes at me as I stroke my thumb along his light stubble.

“I brush off the hard shit because I don't want to deal with it. I don't want to deal with it because then it's real. It's not right. It's not healthy what I'm doing. I just…” He stalls looking around the room, trying to find the words to convey his torture. “I just don't know how to deal with it yet. I can’t process it because I’m not ready to, alright?”

There's pain here. A real heart-breaking pain in his tone that wasn't there before. He hasn’t told me what *it* is, but I’m not pushing him to the point of breaking, only bending.

“I'm sorry I made it about sex. Well, I'm not sorry about the sex. That was amazing, and I’d do it all again in a heartbeat. Jesus, that was…fucking awesome,” he says bluntly, blinking his eyes wildly, and I chuckle lightly. “But I'm sorry for making you feel disregarded or used as a distraction in any way. You know you mean more to me than that.”

My heart pinches in my chest as his eyes emit that truth. His arms circle me tightly.

“That wasn’t my intention, Dylan.”

“I know, Lake,” I reply, rubbing my thumb along his cheek. “I know. I just wish you'd let me in. Let me be here.” I drop my hand from his face and press my palm against his bare chest, feeling his raging heart beneath. “Not just because I need it, necessarily...but because it seems you do, too.”

His eyes focus on my hand before his gaze shifts to me. He needs to learn how to lean on someone just as I need to. We all do. We need someone to share our struggles, our pains, and our stories with before they swallow us whole. We’re all cowards, as Colin so elegantly put it.

His forehead creases slightly between his brows, and his expression etched with agony practically screams of a broken boy within.

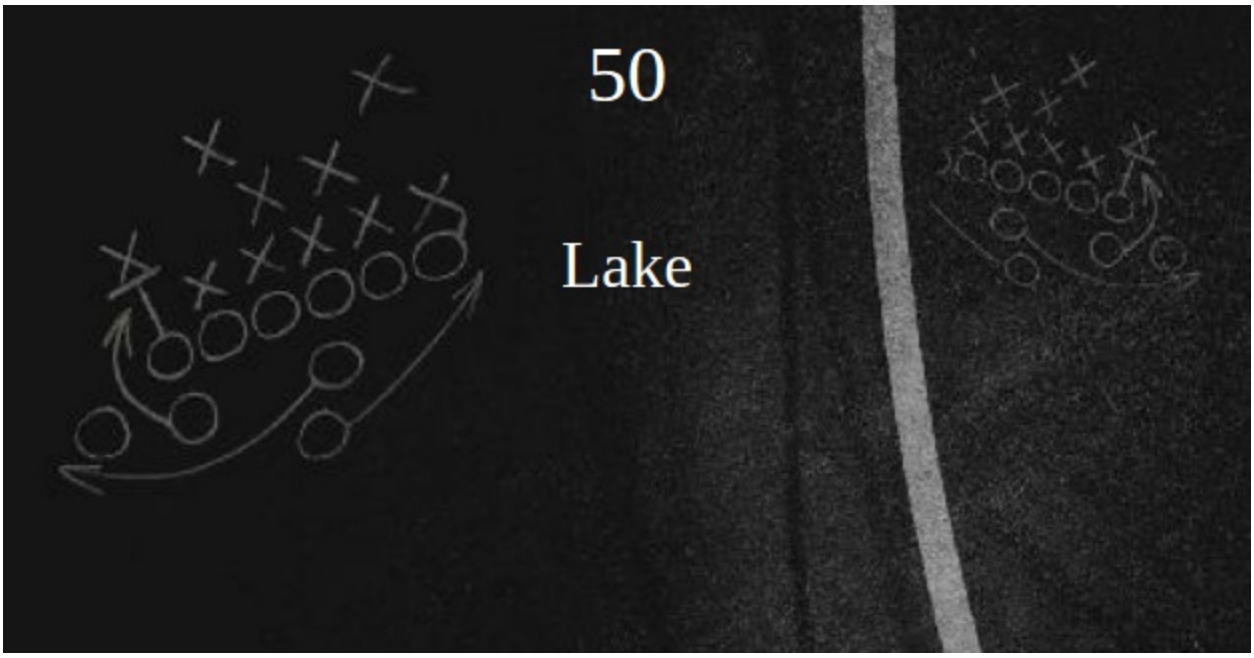
He nods silently. A painful admission for a man of his strength and success.

I pull him into my chest, weaving my fingers into his hair as I hold him against me, my chin resting on his head.

After a moment, he pulls back and grabs my face in his hands, resting his head against mine.

He kisses me softly and I feel his heart racing, his mind right behind it.

So I give him what he needs now, and I kiss him back.



I wake to a loud, spine tingling shriek.

Blinking and orienting myself, I quickly realize what we've done.

“Fuck, Dylan,” I murmur, running my hands down my face.

She's up, running around my room, frantically searching for her shirt and panicking, as she should.

She's not supposed to be waking up here. I was supposed to drive her home last night, but one orgasm turned into dinner and five more, and fuck my life. We fell asleep. We got caught up in the passion, the sex, the wild night we couldn't seem to end.

Colin.

“Did you call him?” I ask immediately, standing as she slips into her sweatpants. I help her search through the tangled sheets.

She lets out a huff. “He didn't answer.”

I feel the anger and tension radiating off her as she runs her hands through her hair, her nostrils flaring as she does it. She's fucking infuriated with herself, and that scares me.

Dylan mad at Dylan means the dictator comes out. She's about to retreat into her shell of safety, and the idea is terrifying.

“It's alright D, Katia checked on him after work. Everything was fine last night. Just try to call—”

“You don't get it!” she yells, interrupting me.

I pause in place, staring cautiously as she finds her sweatshirt.

“Sorry.” She takes a quick breath to calm herself. “You just don't get it, Lake.”

Slipping it over her bra, she heads out of the bedroom towards the living room.

“Fuck,” I grumble to myself, angrily tossing the comforter to the floor and scrambling to keep up with her.

I should've never put her in this situation. She told me to take her back. I kept telling her only a few more minutes. I could hold her a few more minutes, and my alarm would go off. I'd take her back to her apartment before Colin ever woke up. Now it's almost seven in the morning and she can't get a hold of him.

Control is the only thing that keeps her feeling safe and secure. And selfishly, I've taken that from her. Today of all days.

Racing to get clothed, I slip my arms through a sweatshirt, the hem of it rolled up and barely covering my abdomen, as I grab my keys and she slips into her shoes.

Her attention locks onto her phone as she texts and calls him repeatedly. I lead her by the elbow down the hallway to the elevator, sloppily slipping on the heel of my shoe, only to be met by the eyes of Dr. Clark Shelby, our new director of sports medicine, opening his door down the hall.

I stare for a second in disbelief as we make eye contact.

He catches a glimpse of me in all my glory, my torso hanging out of my sweatshirt, my sweats barely above my boxer briefs, slipping a shoe on in the frantic escape, but I don't address him. Practically shoving Dylan into the elevator, I immediately follow her inside, closing the door.

I don't think he saw. Fuck. I don't think he saw it was her. This day is turning into a disaster, and it's not even eight.

Beads of sweat lay upon my brow as we scurry through the parking garage to my truck, where she tries calling him again. She slumps into the side of the passenger door, her elbow propped on the armrest near the window with her head resting in her hand.

Words cycle through her thoughts. Names she calls herself. Idiot. Irresponsible. Careless. Reckless. I can practically hear them. Nothing I do or say will make her feel better at the moment, but I try anyway.

“I'm sorry, Dylan.”

“Yeah, I hear that a lot,” she says coldly.

She must realize how that hurt me because she squints her eyes and shakes her head right after saying it.

“I didn't mean that.” She sighs.

"It's fine," I say, turning out onto the street.

“It's just,” she begins, then stalls. “It's just structure and consistency are so essential to…” She rubs her temples and lets out another exacerbated sigh.

I reach over, placing my hand on her thigh and give her a light, reassuring squeeze.

“Just not today,” she murmurs. “Not today.”

Today.

The day they meet my mother.

As if I wasn't anxious enough for the both of us, now she's a total wreck.

We're setting ourselves up for failure today, clearly. I took her focus off Colin. I did everything wrong. I'm the one who’s supposed to let her freefall while catching her responsibilities for her. I pushed her out of her comfort zone, only to leave her hanging. I fucked up big time, and the thought of Dr. Shelby seeing me with Dylan leaving my condo so early in the morning half dressed has me ready to vomit. This could be catastrophic.

Dylan's phone rings in her lap and she practically drops it on the floor trying to pick it up.

“Col?! Col, I'm almost home,” she rushes. “You good?!”

The pure panic in her tone breaks me. It reminds me of when I was a complete dick to her about being in Arizona for the away game. The game I forced her to be at for her job, not even knowing she was frantically trying to keep contact with Colin the whole time, making sure he was alright while she was gone.

Jesus, I'm a fuckup.

“Oh, good. Just grab some cereal and milk. I'll be there soon, and we can make sure to have your favorite shirt ready for today, alright?”

My phone rings and Coach's name appears on the screen. I swallow, staring at it for a moment, feeling a lump in my throat before I pick it up from the console. My stomach drops as immediate anxiety washes over me. He wouldn't be calling me for anything else today.

I peer over at Dylan, who's staring back at me with the phone still at her ear.

I'd wondered if she saw my reaction, but the sudden crease between her brows and the slight tip of her head in my direction says she did.

I toss my phone into the cup holders as she ends her call with Colin.

Please don't ask me what that was about.

“What was that about?” she asks immediately.

Lie. Don't lie. Tell her the truth. Lie. Lie. Lie.

Apparently I chose destruction when I woke up this morning.

“Thanksgiving. It's game day. They just want me there for press.”

“The Bears aren't playing today,” she says bluntly.

My eyes meet hers, and by the annoyed glare she's throwing my way, she knows I'm lying.

“Alright, fuck it. I'm lying.”

“Obviously,” she sneers. “You suck at it.”

“Hey now, I'm a good liar,” I retort like a moron.

“That wasn't even a good lie! As if I don't know the team's schedule.” She looks out the windshield at the road with her fingers holding her forehead while muttering, “You're an idiot.”

“Idiot?! I'm an idiot?!” I scoff. “You're the one whose nose wrinkles when some bullshit comes outta your mouth, Chief. You suck at it. Besides, I'm a great liar when I need to be.” I wink.

“Comforting.” She rolls her eyes, then stares at me with raised brows, waiting for an answer.

I grip the steering wheel tighter before dropping another heavy sigh.

“I'm not sure why Coach called, to be honest.”

My eyes fall over every tree, every light, every obtainable object they can fall on before terrifyingly turning to her.

She stares at me like she's trying to piece something together.

“Then why are you so anxious? Why not just answer the phone?” She adjusts in her seat, turning to face me. “What's on your mind, Lake? What are you not telling me that's got you acting like this?”

I feel like she can see through me. How the hell can this chick pick up on

the fact that just dismissing a phone call can mean something so much deeper? These girls and their vibes.

“It's fine. Everything’s fine.”

Her glare eats away at me, and I rotate my jaw.

“Just don't panic, alright?”

Her brows practically meet her hairline as her eyes scream panic.

“Seriously, Lake? Who the hell says that? Don't panic. Of course I’m going to panic. Might as well have just told me to freak the fuck out because now that's exactly what I'm doing!”

I inhale deeply before letting it out, knowing that it's going to be really hard to breathe in here once I drop this tidbit of information.

“I saw Dr. Shelby in the hallway when we were leaving my place.”

Silence.

Dead silence.

It’s the kind of silence you get when you’re dealing with someone as smart as Dylan. She’s not freaking out because she’s a calculated person. She’s already playing this out in her head. Assessing the repercussions, the strategy to solve this mess of a situation.

I slowly peer towards her, ensuring she heard me, when I'm met with a face of pure pained disbelief.

“I don't think he saw you. Your head was down. I pushed you into the elevator so quick, I'm sure he didn't even have time to—”

“Oh my God,” she says breathlessly, falling forward until she's bent over onto her lap.

“I don't know if that’s why he's calling, but I get the feeling he's not calling to wish me a Happy Thanksgiving.”

“This is it,” she says into her lap. She pops up, shaking her head. “This is it.

My career. It's done. Oh my God, I've lost it all."

"Dylan, don't. It's not." Reaching over, I run my hand down her back. "I won't let that happen. I'll explain everything."

"Explain everything?!"

"We'll figure this out," I say confidently. "I won't let anything happen to you and Colin. I fucking promise you that, D. Nothing will change. On Rainbow."

She looks at me through her fingers, and it breaks my heart. She's broken. Tears form, and I watch as they spill down her cheeks. Awaiting more setbacks in a life that's seen enough of them. I won't let her fall.

"Fuck!" she yells out.

Kicking the dash with her foot, she bends over again, resting her head in her hands. Her fingers weaved through her hair, pulling at the roots with white knuckles.

"I'll call him back today and see what he has to say. It might be completely unrelated. Let's not even go there yet."

"It's not, Lake. You wouldn't feel what you're feeling right now if it wasn't. This is a big deal. The NFL doesn't take shit like this lightly. I'm done for."

We pull up to her apartment complex, the tension heavy between us. She goes to jump out before stalling with her hand on the door. She doesn't know what to say. How to feel. She's upset with me, but probably even more mad at herself.

"I'll get to the bottom of it. Go make sure Colin is alright, then call me when you guys are ready." I nod. "I'll be back."

She tightens her jaw while looking down. Her face is pale, as if holding back the contents of her stomach is currently a struggle.

I wave her back towards me and she wearily leans across the passenger seat. Wrapping my hands around her soft cheeks, I bring her forehead to mine.

She sighs softly, closing her eyes briefly before opening them. Her gorgeous golden eyes hold her worry as she whispers, “I'm scared, Lake.”

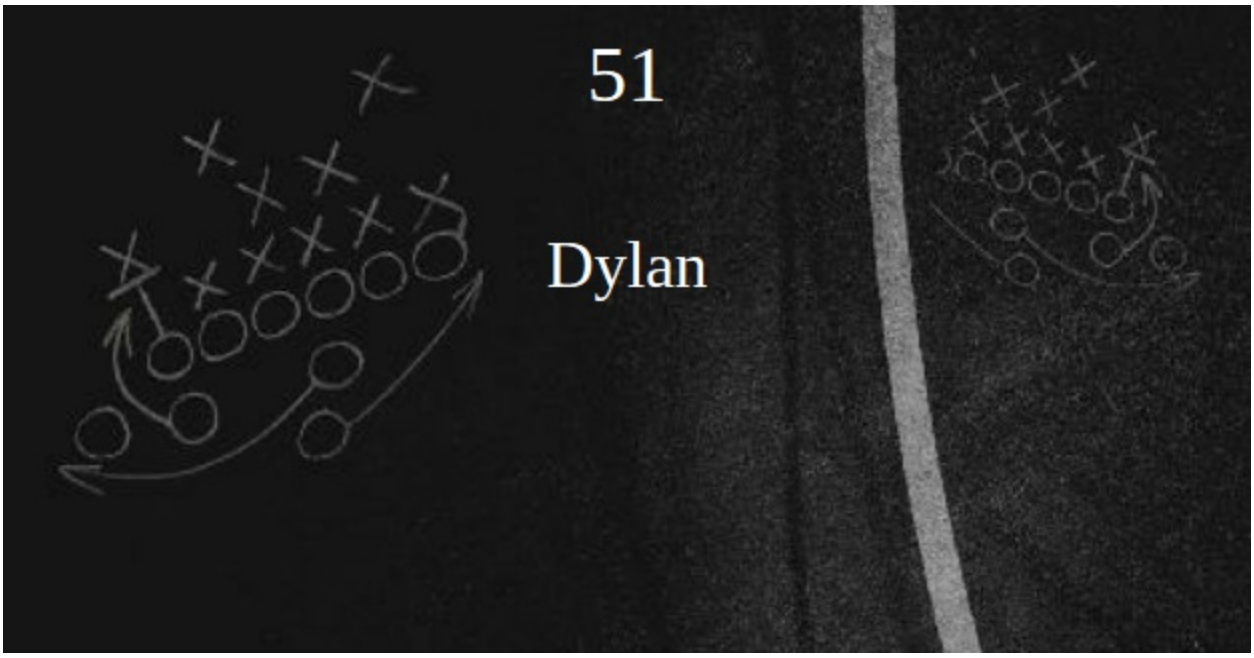
It nearly breaks me, hearing a woman so strong admit to something so real so easily.

“I got you, baby,” I whisper back. “You know this.”

Eyes filled with hesitation and uncertainty peer longingly into mine. She nods once, unconvincingly, before slowly pulling back and shutting the door.

I can take the heat. I'm Lake Decker. But the damage this girl will do to herself for making this choice will be irreparable.

I need to call Coach.



I'm just staring at him, lost in a trance, with my mouth parted and eyes glazed.

“My shirt, Pickle. I need my shirt. My shirt. Cleaned for today. I won't go. I-I need my shirt.”

I blink suddenly, shaking my head to clear my cloudy vision. I'm trying my best to remain calm, but internally, I'm screaming.

“Yes. Your shirt.”

I walk into his bright bedroom, searching the dirty laundry for his favorite canary-striped shirt. Finding it, I immediately toss it into the wash. I'm staring at the dial on the washer with my fingers dangling over it, my mind on the terror at hand.

If Dr. Clark Shelby saw me leaving Lake's condo that early in the morning, there's only one reason as to why Coach called Lake. And that reason will cost me my livelihood.

“Lake likes my shirt. I gotta have my shirt. My shirt to meet his mom,” Colin says in my ear, bringing me back to the real world. “Lake likes it.”

“You're right. He loves this one on you,” I say, adjusting the settings and starting a quick wash. “And I have a feeling she's going to love it just as much.”

I turn to face him with an easy smile, hopeful that the shift in schedule this morning doesn't alter his seemingly cheerful attitude.

“Is Pickle nervous? Scared? Is Pickle worried about Colin today? I don't want Pickle to worry about Colin. Colin will be good with my pop-it. No issues. Good. Colin will be good. Good,” he says, stimming as he paces from side to side.

My poor, sweet brother. I hate that even he can sense my nervousness. He operates on a wavelength above the surface where the rest of us stay perched. He can sense things, feel things differently. Always has. It's one thing I truly admire about him. Of course, I’m worried about how he'll handle today. Having a meltdown over Thanksgiving dinner would really be the icing on the cake, wouldn't it? But since this missed phone call situation, I haven't worried about it at all.

“I'm not nervous about you meeting them, Collie. I can't wait for you to tell them all you know about NASCAR,” I say, wrapping my arm around his shoulders. “You'll have to ask Lake about his Rainbow Warrior jacket.”

“Rainbow Warrior jacket?!” His eyes widen at the spot on the floor he’s fixated on.

I nod eagerly.

“I need to hear more about this Rainbow Warrior jacket. I need to know about the jacket. Jacket. Jeff Gordon Jacket. Born August 4th, 1971, in Pittsboro, Indiana. 93 wins, most second-place finishes. Brought popularity back to the sport. Won four Winston cups. 1995, 1997, 1998, and 2001—”

“Alright, Col,” I interrupt, walking him towards the bathroom. “Keep the

facts for later. Let's get you in the shower and wash this mop."

"It's not a mop, DD. It's my hair. Not a mop. I like my hair," he says, wiping it off his forehead after I lovingly messed it up. "Makes Colin feel like a man. A burly man."

I chuckle at his strange comment, then ask, "DD?"

He's never called me that before. I cock my head at him, but he slips behind the bathroom door before I get any answers.

Two hours later, I'm anxiously gazing at the black screen on my phone. I thought for sure I'd receive a call by now. Lake would've called Coach back after dropping me off, only to call back within minutes, reassuring me he only needed to talk with him about his timeline of return.

But no. No call. Just a blank black screen. Screaming obscenities at me. My regrets are burning a hole through the linoleum counter on which my phone lies.

Adding a finishing layer of lip gloss, I adjust my blue high-necked cable-knit sweater dress and flip my long hair over my shoulder. Hearing a loud commotion in the room over, I drop my gloss and run to Colin's room.

He's throwing cars from his shelves, clothes from the hangers in the closet, and fidgets fly from his drawer through the air. A toy car flies past my head and hits the wall behind me as I yell, "Colin! What are you doing?!"

"My yellow pocket pop-it. Pocket pop-it. Where's the pocket pop-it?"

Lucky for me, I see it on the edge of his dresser. Grabbing it, I help him up off the floor, where his feet are tangled in a pile of clothing from his closet.

"I'd say this was a lucky find," I say, placing the yellow pocket pop-it against his chest. The one he needs in case he gets extra stimulated today. "But we make our own luck around here, don't we?"

He holds the pocket fidget in his hand, staring down at the mess he made as

he nods and paces. A knock at the door has us both turning our heads.

He can’t be here already. Why didn’t he call?

I give Colin a quick rub on the back before walking towards the door. I tuck my hair behind my ear, pausing to take a quick breath before placing my hand on the door.

“Let him in, Pickle,” Colin says behind me, standing in the doorframe of his bedroom, staring at the door.

I let the air out of my lungs, feeling as if my balloon of anxiety is finally releasing some, before opening the door and letting it fill all over again.

There he stands.

I can hardly breathe as I fix on him. He's devastatingly handsome. My eyes trail from his stylish leather sneakers, making their way up the dark jeans that conform to his thick, muscular thighs to the slim waist that makes me swallow. His tight white V-neck t-shirt is a bright contrast to the tanned skin peeking out beneath. The black, brown, and blue sweater he wears over it somehow brings out all the colors of him. His rich coffee-colored hair, and we can't forget those eyes.

“S-stop staring. Say hi,” Colin says behind me.

I turn my head, throwing him a bratty look, before turning back to see a lopsided grin on Lake's face.

“You look...beautiful,” he whispers, eyes washing over me.

I've never been the type to want to be called beautiful. Never needed that. I wanted to be called strong, intelligent, caring. But Lake's already called me all of those things. He's already addressed that I'm more to him than just a physical appearance, more than a pretty face, so him calling me beautiful now feels better than ever. He makes me feel everything. So much. So hard.

My bottom lip feels the pain of my teeth digging into it, so I release it and

walk forward, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my chest against his.

He's a little taken aback by my forwardness in front of my brother but wraps his arms around my lower waist, holding me to him tightly, regardless. I lean up on my tiptoes, my lips just barely reaching his, and give him a quick, soft kiss. His lips curve into a smile and the feeling of those butterflies in my gut has me on the verge of passing out from the sudden dizziness.

My nerves are on fire, but I'm not sure if it's from our connection or the information he's about to tell me. I need to know before we start this day. I need answers before I can even feel the proper anxiety I'm supposed to feel meeting the mother of the man I've fallen for.

"News?" I ask softly.

"None," he whispers back, his smile fading.

My brows pinch together. "None?"

How is that possible?

"Didn't answer," he says simply, brushing it off before looking behind me. "Hey, Col!" His tone changes into something more upbeat. "How are you, bud?"

He walks past me, leaving me in a cloud of confusion. *He didn't answer? So we're still waiting. Anxiety balloon refill.*

Lake walks up to Colin, holding his hand out to shake. Colin takes his hand, looking down at the floor, and shakes it once before dropping it with his palm stretched wide. He grips the bottom of his shirt, rolling the edge in his palms like he does.

"You ready for some good food?" He wiggles his brows at Colin. "I'm talking catered takeout better than you've ever had."

"As long as there's no spice. I don't want to fart in front of your mom. No

farts in front of mom. No spice, Lake," he says with a warning to his tone.

"Flatulence." Lake laughs, his smile spreading across his face, warming me all over. "How could I forget?"

His genuine smile has my heart thumping again. He turns his smile towards me, and it's small, but I see it change ever so slightly. His eyes dart away from mine, and something pulls at my chest. The moment is so small, but it doesn't sit well with me.

Regardless of the look, he holds his hand out for me. I slide my fingers into his warm palm and he pulls me towards him, wrapping our linked hands behind my lower back and holding me to his side. He kisses my temple with soft lips, and my heart flutters.

"Ready, Chief?" he whispers into my hair.

It's then I notice his hand is shaking in mine. I give him a light squeeze before looking at Colin and back.

"Start your engines boys, we got a Thanksgiving to get to."

We arrive at the home, and naturally, my jaw drops. The driveway is long and circular, weaving us through rows of gorgeous pine trees directly to the front of the stunning blue-and-white craftsman-style home.

"Lake," I gasp. "This is beautiful."

He grins, putting the truck in park. "Believe it or not, I had nothing to do with this. Her dream. Her house."

The statement hits home. Of course, it's only natural to assume that this young man gifted his mother with a beautiful new home after he solidified his career in football, making millions. But the fact that he made it known he had nothing to do with it only insinuates that his mother is as badass as I already believe her to be.

I step out of the car with the help of Lake before he opens the door for Colin. Breathing in the scent of pine surrounding the tucked-away home, I draw my eyes to the large wooden door that practically radiates warmth in its rich tone. I feel the care and attention to detail as I walk along the brick pathway towards the front door, noting the orange and yellow mums surrounding it. There's an overabundance of love beneath this roof. It's practically palpable in the air surrounding us.

Colin throws his backpack over his left shoulder, walking up behind me as Lake leads us up the wooden stairs to the large porch stretched before the door.

With his arm reaching out before him, his fingers linger just above the doorbell. The door opens before he gets the chance to push it, and the sight knocks the wind from my chest.

There before me is the answer.

His reality.

His reason for withholding, for not accepting his truth.

Before me stands a tiny shred of a woman. Half of the person I saw in that picture on his fireplace mantel. By the yellow silk wrap covering her more than likely hairless head, I can only assume some sort of illness is controlling every bit of her life in the most torturous way. And yet, through the frail exterior, she somehow beams with a radiance reminiscent of that image of her from a time when things were different.

Lake's face says it all. He stills in place, eyes just staring at her. Shock is etched into his features as he fixes on her. Unmoving.

It makes sense now; the words that fell from his lips in a time that feels forever ago. *I can't do this alone.*

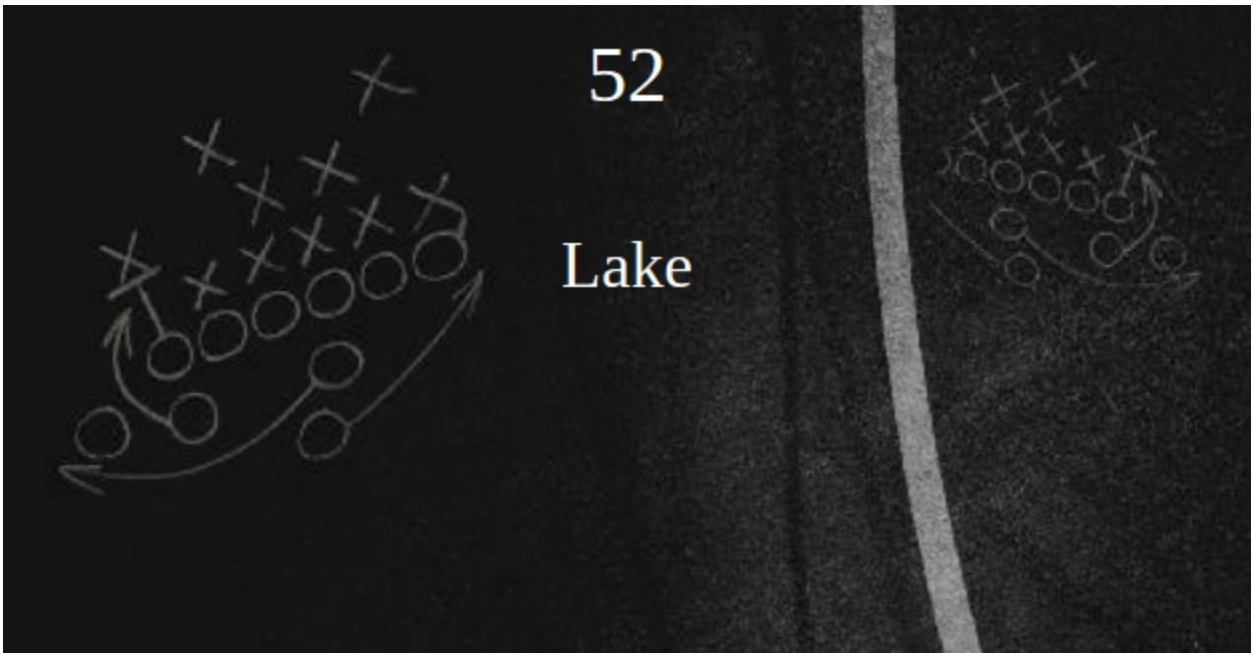
Sliding my fingers through the hand that's just hanging near his thigh, I grip my palm to his, giving a light squeeze. Telling him everything he needs in one simple touch. *You don't have to anymore.*

“Dylan,” Lydia exudes with a smile stretched across her face as if she’s seeing her best friend for the first time in a long time.

It's simple, really. She radiates love, kindness, and strength.

And with one hug from her, I feel it all.

Everything that Lake is set to lose.



So many things.

I'm feeling so many things.

Somewhere deep down, I knew my mom and Dale were lying to me. She wasn't doing well. The myth that she was just remaining stable was an illusion to keep me away. Keep me focused on my own healing and goals. But here she is, fading into nothing before my eyes. The strongest, most resilient person I've ever known is fading into nothing.

It hasn't even been that long since I saw her last, yet somehow, her weight has dropped significantly. She's nothing but bones and that bright, loving smile. Watching her wrap her brittle, slim arms around Dylan as they embrace has me remembering all the times those arms held me together. Countless nights of her picking me up, taking me to bed, rocking me to sleep… Those arms. Those fragile little arms, holding the one piece of hope I have no choice but to let go of next.

I can't take this.

“The horses still in the barn?” I ask, taking a step back.

Dylan turns to look at me with concern, but Dale simply rolls his lips inward and nods, understanding my need for a moment to catch my breath.

“The farrier was just here a bit ago. They're in the stalls. Due for some treats,” Dale adds.

“Colin, it's so wonderful to meet you as well,” my mom says, going to give him a hug.

She doesn't realize Colin doesn't give hugs, but tries anyway. He ducks a bit, folding into himself, then backs up a step by me.

“I want to see a horse.”

My mother's eyebrows raise with an amused smile as she looks at me for some sort of confirmation that I'll take him.

Somehow, the idea of Colin coming with me when I just need a minute to breathe isn't annoying at all. It's refreshing, actually. A different sort of energy I need right now to take away the pain of losing a mother I haven't lost yet.

“Let's go, Col,” I say, nodding my head in the barn's direction.

“Well, come inside and warm up, Dylan,” my mom comments, pulling a hesitant Dylan into the house. “This is a beautiful dress, by the way. Something I could definitely see myself in. I used to be quite the looker back in my day, believe it or not. A thick woman with curves for days. Curves this man could barely maneuver.” She wiggles her drawn-on eyebrows at Dale.

He tips his head back as a laugh escapes him. I should enjoy this, their happiness amidst the pain, but I can’t. The only thing I can think of when I see him laugh is the ticking clock set to end those smiles.

“Trust me, Dylan, it wasn't her curves that drew me to this gem. Not that they didn't help.”

My mother gasps in playful horror.

“In the palm of my hand, Dylan. Palm of my hand,” she brags.

Dylan chuckles at their banter, following her into the home with my mom's arm around her shoulders and her arm wrapped around my mother's lower back.

They hold each other like they're familiar. Like they've known each other forever. It's comforting, the ease of their embrace and connection, yet entirely too painful to see, especially with the knowledge of everything to come.

With a frustrated sigh, I get into the horse barn with Colin on my heels. I grab a few carrots from a bag hanging near the stalls.

“You ever fed a horse, Colin?” I ask, tossing him one.

“No,” he says, catching it against his chest. “Horses eat a lot. I could never keep a horse full. I can't keep Colin full. I couldn't feed a horse. Horses eat a lot.”

I walk along the stalls to Rosie, our older Quarter Horse, who my mother adopted from an overrun Sanctuary needing space. She's a beautiful, sweet old girl who's good with everyone. She comes right up to me, rubbing her muzzle into my hand.

“Hey, sweet girl,” I whisper, stroking her head.

I offer her a carrot and she grabs it from me, crunching it loudly in her rotating jaw. Colin continues walking along the stalls behind me, pausing in front of our other Quarter Horse, Magdalene, checking her out before walking down further and stopping in front of the last stall.

“Ah, be careful there, Colin,” I say, giving Rosie the last of the carrot and heading towards him.

Colin is staring at Tenor, our wild Arabian. My mother adopted him a few years back from another farm that didn't want him. He was a typical horror of a horse that anyone else would've put down already. Countless homes, with

countless threatening encounters. Too wild. Too reckless. A dangerous animal that shouldn't be around people, especially not kids. My mother heard none of that and made sure to let him live out his life with us on the farm, giving him his own stall and portion of the pasture. Dale's background with horses of this nature helped facilitate that.

I approach Colin from the side, staying out of Tenor's view.

“That's Tenor. He's another rescue horse,” I explain softly as he peers at him.

Tenor turns in his stall, hearing Colin. He doesn't approach the stall door but remains along the wall, watching.

“We aren't exactly sure what happened to him, but he doesn't trust people. We've had trainers out here, experts to try to work with him, but it just seems to cause him more stress.” I explain, leaning against the barn. “He seems to like his solitude.”

Colin continues gazing at him, and I'm immediately on alert. Tenor has been known to bite. He's not the horse you just go up to and feed treats by hand. Worried Colin's going to try to feed him his carrot, I take another step forward. But he doesn't lift his hand.

They just gaze at each other until Tenor steps forward, looking as if he's ready to make a move. Colin just stands there, still as ever, his eyes dropping to stare at the door before him. He's not making eye contact with Tenor now, just letting the horse be aware of his presence. Tenor shakes his head and puffs a breath out of his nostrils, vibrating his muzzle with a loud purring sound. Almost wanting Colin to move, enticing him to.

My face breaks into a smile. “Look at that,” I say beneath my breath. “He's waiting for you to do something.”

Colin gazes at him, unmoving.

“He's just never met anyone like me,” Colin says in his monotone voice. “He doesn't know how to react. I'm not normal people and he knows it. They always know.”

I swallow, registering his words.

“Animals are amazing creatures, aren't they?” I comment, stroking Magdalene's muzzle as she nods at me. I hand her another carrot and she readily gobbles it.

“Your mom is sick,” Colin says suddenly, still holding eye contact with Tenor.

His forwardness knocks the breath from my chest.

“She's dying,” he continues, sounding factual and not at all empathetic.

I tighten my jaw, withholding the tears that want to tear through. It's not his fault he doesn't sound sympathetic. It's just the tone of his voice he can't control that makes it feel disingenuous.

“She is,” I admit, turning away from him.

I walk back towards Rosie and give her the rest of my carrots, trying to ignore the bluntness. Colin just doesn't understand social norms, and I have to remind myself of that.

“We're all going to die,” he continues. “All going to die.”

I'm really trying not to get upset, but this conversation is striking a painful nerve with me. I came out here to not deal with this. Specifically, to get away from it. And here Colin is, immersing me in my torture.

“We are.” I agree blandly, grinding my jaw.

“It's better when you get to say goodbye.”

I pause, bracing my hands on the edge of the stall door, my head now dipped between my shoulders. This pain is unbearable. The forwardness, the direct words I've been avoiding for so long; death, goodbye. He throws them

out like they're nothing, forcing me to catch each of them, not knowing our goodbye is coming next. Tears fall from my eyes and I wipe them away with a quick hand, throwing them to the gravel beneath my feet as nausea hits my gut again.

None of this is fair.

“It's not any easier knowing what's coming, Colin,” I say to the dirt. The sentence holds a double meaning for all I'm about to lose.

“It's always coming. Death. It's always here. We're all going to die. Death is always here,” he says with a simple shrug. A shrug that shows his courage.

“You say that like it's nothing to be afraid of.”

“It's not. You can't be afraid. Not afraid. You can’t always be afraid. Every day there is death. Every day there is life. Give her your best goodbye. Best goodbye. She needs the best goodbye.”

Turning my head to face him, I see him staring at me again. Those brown eyes that resemble his sisters in their almond shape. The eyes that hold so much beneath their surface. Secrets of seeing things others don't. Understanding the world in a different light. A simplistic realization that resonates and reaches me better than anyone attempting to be sympathetic ever could.

“Best goodbye,” he says once more with a nod before approaching the edge of the stall.

“Colin, wait—”

He reaches his hand out, offering his carrot to Tenor in the stall. Tenor's ears flick forward as he straightens. I want to intervene, but Colin just seems so sure of himself. No fear in his proud stance.

You can't be afraid. Every day there is life. Every day there is death.

Confidently holding the carrot out, he waits until Tenor takes a step

forward. Tenor never approaches the door when people are in the barn. The simple visual of him this close to another person is mind-blowing to me.

I watch as they seem to speak without words. There's an understanding between the two of them I just can't intercept. Tenor gently takes the carrot and Colin removes his hand from the stall with a nod. No expectations for more. Just satisfied with the simple exchange.

“Time to eat,” he says in his signature robotic tone, turning to walk towards me. “I want to eat now.”

I stare in disbelief while he approaches me as I catalog this moment, being as significant as it is.

Such an amazing soul, trapped in this shell that society tells us to separate from the rest of us. Clumping him into a category of illness that is supposed to encompass him. Someone that people as simple-minded as Eric will never understand, nor should he be lucky enough to. He can't conform. He shouldn't. Colin is everything. He's needed. Needed to make the people around him open themselves to a new perspective. A childlike view of the world around him. Simple and to the point.

He has no idea how much this moment will change me. Shit, I have yet to understand it.

I swallow down my fears that seem a little easier to handle now. A few simple words from a man who's anything but simple.

“The best goodbye,” I reiterate.

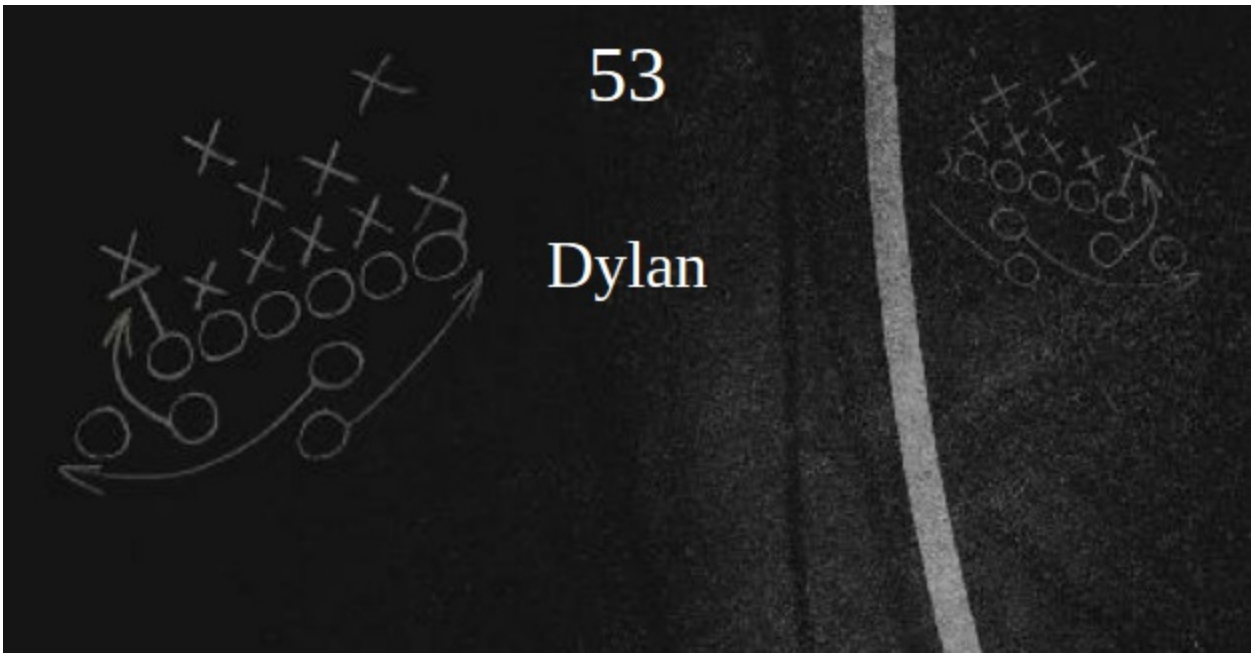
Wrapping my arm around Colin's shoulders, we walk back towards the house with a new attitude. Not one filled with sadness and sorrow, but a new appreciation for the time we have now.

Goodbyes are coming.

Death is around the corner.

But today, no one is looking.

Not today.



The illusion of typical family dinners is something I'm used to.

Watching cable television growing up helped me visualize the idea, and seeing it represented in comedic shows that always had some sort of underlying inspirational message about love and family and togetherness is what I became accustomed to. What I haven't seen was this exemplified in real life.

Everything about this family dinner, and this home in general, is idyllic. The earthy tones in the colors of the walls, paired with the family portraits, hung in warm-toned wooden frames. There is so much life within these walls, and the love that permeates them has never been more present.

The space opens up like a log cabin. The living room is centered around an enormous slate stone fireplace that reaches the ceiling, while windows everywhere give way to the view of the rolling fields behind us.

Dinner was already here. They had it catered by a local family restaurant instead of cooking. She wasn't happy about it. According to Lake, cooking

family meals for the three of them was Lydia's favorite part about the holidays. But that wasn't an option anymore.

Lydia was a complete gem of a woman, caring and nurturing in nature, and you could tell her illness limited her in ways that made her uncomfortable. I immediately stepped in and lent a helping hand to serve the dinner that was delivered in large tin foil wraps, much to her dismay.

She was sick. Really sick. It was clear her body was dying, but the life inside of her lived on.

Her humor, her love for her son, her smile...none of that has faded.

I watched them interact at the table as we enjoyed our meal over light conversation. She squeezed Lake's hand while he spoke about the prospect of him returning to the game sooner rather than later. Gazing lovingly at him, as proud of a mother as you could ever imagine, he told her about the first day we met. She scoffed as he explained his moody, nightmarish attitude and laughed when he told her how I put him in his place that first day. She sighed with an endearing smile as he described the Special Olympics, where he met Colin for the first time.

“Colin, do you love football as much as Lake?” she asks.

“More,” Colin says, finishing a bite of his mashed potatoes.

Lydia laughs as she leans back in her chair, and Lake grins at him from across the table.

“Racing is his forte, though,” Lake says, leaning back as well. “This guy is a bank of golden wisdom when it comes to NASCAR.”

“Really?” Lydia exclaims. She stands, and Dale and Lake immediately grab her arms on both sides, assisting her. “Well, you must come with me. I have something I think you'd really appreciate.”

She winks at me, and although it's simple, I feel the weight of it in the depth

of my heart.

I never had a mother like her. Someone that cared about me more than herself. Lydia's that type of mother, though. Selfless. And in one wink, I feel more for her than I ever felt for the one who birthed me.

Colin follows her and Dale down the hall towards what I'm assuming is Lake's old NASCAR memorabilia, leaving Lake and I alone.

I look up from my empty plate, catching his eyes from across the table. Lake's staring at me with a light grin and what looks like admiration in his narrowed eyes as his fingers toy with his spoon, spinning it on the hardwood table ever so slowly. His smile fades softly and his fingers stall, his stare changing into something of an appreciative yet remorseful look.

He's so tight with his feelings. Stingy with his emotions. And in moments like this, I really wish I could read every thought in his mind. Moments where he looks at me like I’m disappearing before him, too.

It makes me uncomfortable.

“Dry for me?” I ask suddenly, peering at my plate, then back at him, needing to break him of this spell.

His eyes cast downward at the plate, suddenly putting it together. His grin returns as he nods, and I’m able to breathe again. Finally, he gets up from his seat, grabbing a stack of plates as he does.

We wash dishes while Lydia and Dale listen to Colin in the living room around the corner, describing the 2015 Goody's Headache Relief Shot 500 race, in which a revenge crash from Matt Kenseth sent Jeff Gordon on to win his final victory race and punched a ticket for him to go to the Championships.

They are so good with him. Listening to him and treating him like an adult rather than a child. It truly makes me happy because sometimes people don't

know how to act around Colin, so they treat him like he's slow. They speak in careful words, talking to him like one would a toddler. It annoys me more than anything because he's not slow by any means. He just thinks differently, and not everyone understands that.

Lake and I are side by side at the sink, occasionally bumping into each other as we continue washing. A casual brush of an arm here, a soft trailing of a finger beneath the water there. The silent flirting is in full force as we spend more time than we need washing dishes that are already clean. He dries a pan I've handed him, setting it in the drying rack, before leaning over me, placing both arms on either side of my body around the sink.

He presses his body against mine, trapping me against the counter, and I still in place. I feel his lips trail along the side of my neck, and my eyes fall shut at the sensation that somehow sinks to my chest. He breathes me in, resting his forehead against the back of my head, almost as if he’s savoring me.

After everything today, the conversations with his mother, the care and attentiveness towards Colin, and the beautiful family dinner we shared, I realize I've slipped. Slipped and fallen so hard there's no getting up.

I turn my body around to where he's leaning over me, finding the nerve to look up into his eyes. They sweep mine, and that feeling overtakes me again. My heart literally beats for him alone. It awakens in his presence, wanting to escape my chest, to grip onto him and never let go. This pain he's holding? I want to take it on as my own. I want to be everything he needs, especially now, because I understand him. It's so complicated, yet so simple.

He drops the towel he was using to dry the dishes, and his hands find my shoulders, slowly sliding their way up the sides of my neck. I break out in chills as they move ever so softly against my skin. Pausing with his thumb

and forefinger on my jaw, his eyes peer from my eyes to my mouth. Tipping my head up higher for him, he drops his, brushing his lips against mine.

I feel it everywhere. The simple touch of his lips brushing against mine sends a warm electrical current down my neck to my chest, settling somewhere in the tightening of my stomach. We breathe against one another before his mouth surrounds my bottom lip, sucking it gently as his hands hold me in place.

He kisses me then, with a passionate hunger. It's wet and warm and makes my entire body tingle. The idea of pulling away is something I'd never do. I let him devour me in his rush for a connection, meeting every flick of his tongue with my own. This kiss is more than two people looking for some sort of physical pleasure. This kiss is binding in a way that so many kisses often aren't.

It makes me sad for all the wasted kisses out there that aren't this kind. So many wasted kisses.

But this kiss isn't wasted. It's monumental. It’s forgiveness, it’s thank you, it’s pain, need, and love, all wrapped in one.

Until he pulls away.

Taking a step back, I'm left breathless as those hands that we so delicately wrapped around my neck now plunge through his dark, thick locks. He stands tall and pulls at the roots of his hair, looking frustrated, and the idea that he just needs a minute to calm himself around his mother and Dale makes me blush.

I cross my arms, then trail my thumb along my bottom lip, holding back my smile at the power of our connection as he stares down at the floor.

But something changes in the air as the seconds pass.

He doesn't look me in the eyes again.

Grabbing the towel from the floor where he dropped it between us, he grabs the plate he set down and continues drying it before placing it back in the cupboard nearby.

He just kissed me with everything he had, and now he can't look at me.

I'm really trying to figure him out, but with the stress of seeing his mother like this, I can only imagine the guilt he feels for kissing me like that in her home. At least, I think that's what is going through his head. I honestly can't tell, and it's making me nervous. Just like the way he brushed me off after asking about the phone call from Coach. Is there something I don't know? Is he withholding the truth from me?

“I-I need to use the bathroom. I need to go,” I hear Colin say from the living room.

I open the drain to the sink, letting the warm, sudsy water out before I turn to leave the kitchen and the suddenly all too quiet Lake to go find Colin.

“I can show him where it is,” I say to Dale, who was getting up from his seat.

“Down the hall to the right, darling,” Lydia says with a sweet smile in place.

I thank her, taking Colin towards the bathroom. I glance up at Lake as I pass him and am met with an emotionless man staring off into the distance. Brushing it off, I find the bathroom, waiting outside the door until Colin finishes.

Lake's just battling his own emotions right now. I can't let that affect how I'm feeling. He's simply dealing with a lot. It's not personal. I keep reminding myself of these things as I hear Colin murmuring to himself in the bathroom.

“Col, you alright?” I say against the door.

“It's my...it's my pants. I got some on my pants.”

Shit.

I plant my hands on the door, whispering through the wood, “Open the door, I can help you.”

He's pacing the space in his boxers when I enter, his pants hanging over the edge of the bathtub.

“I got some on my pants. I-I got some...I got some on my pants,” he repeats, thumping his fists against his forehead. “I got some—”

“It's alright, Col,” I breathe. “I'll wash them up quick. It'll be fine.”

“I got some on my pants!” he yells this time, and I peer at the door behind me, knowing they heard that from the living room.

He's embarrassed, he's frustrated at himself, and now he's worried that he's ruining this day like he mentioned before. Upsetting me is something he consistently tries not to do. But what he can't help are the emotions that become too much for him.

I take his pants from the bathtub and begin washing out the urine that dribbled on them in the sink, trying my best to remain calm even though my heart is in full marathon mode.

“I-I messed up, Pickle,” he paces behind me. “My belt got stuck. I was holding it for so long because I didn't know where to go. I messed up. Colin messed up. Messed up! Messed up!”

It breaks me hearing that. I should've known. This happens with new people in new situations. He'll neglect himself to spare the embarrassment of asking anyone for help. He's probably had to go since he got here but has been holding it, being uncomfortable in this new environment.

“No, Col, it's fine. Really. I'll get this washed out and ask Lydia if I can dry them—”

“No!” he yells. “No! No! No! No, you can't. You can't ask them. No!”

A knock on the door makes us both jump.

“D? You guys good?” Lake asks from behind the door, zero judgment in his tone.

Colin sits on the floor in his polka-dotted boxers and canary-striped shirt, resting his elbows on his knees and hitting his head with his fists, his face pained.

I pull open the door a bit and see Lake's worried face.

“W-we just need a minute,” I say as calmly as possible.

I'm not calm though. I am freaking out internally now. Colin is on the verge of a meltdown, and I need to find some way to get through this without making a huge, embarrassing scene for him.

Successfully washing out the pants, I realize there's no way I can get these dry without some assistance. I scan the shelves for a hair dryer but see nothing. With a tremendous sigh, I bend down to Colin, informing him I need to ask Lake for some help.

He twists and untwists his fingers, his back rocking into the wall behind him, but finally nods his head, and I can tell it crushes him.

I inform Lake of what happened, and he rushes to his old room for some sweats for Colin. Everyone is being so nice while we figure out the situation, but I'm also internally dying of embarrassment. I don't want to be upset with Colin, and I'm not, but I'm just feeling overwhelmed at the moment, and unfortunately, the need to take him back home is upon me. He's reached his limit for the day, and it's just easier to get him back to his safe space, where he feels most comfortable.

The hardest part of life with Colin isn't dealing with him myself. I have no issues doing whatever I have to for my brother. I don't even think twice about

it. It's trying to get other people to understand how his life works that's the challenge.

After getting Colin fitted in some new pants, I bag up his old ones and shove them into my purse. Lydia tries to convince Colin to stay longer by bribing him with some dessert, but Colin respectfully declines, insisting he'd rather go back to the horse barn before we leave.

Dale walks out there with him, and Lake jogs off after them while Lydia and I watch from the porch.

She wraps up in a brightly colored wool blanket from inside and leans up against me.

“You're an amazing sister to him,” she whispers.

“I've only done what I'm supposed to.” I shrug. “What I needed to.”

“It's more than that. You love him fiercely. You protect him. You're as selfless as they come, Dylan, and that's not something anyone can teach you or something you can even learn on your own. It’s just who you are.”

I stiffen slightly, turning to face her as she continues.

“You've been through real battles. Real struggles. Struggles I worked to make sure Lake would never understand as he grew up,” she says, still staring at the barn where we see Lake just inside the door.

He removes a tarp from a pile and grips onto the ropes of a hay bale, making a stack.

“He appreciates all of your sacrifices more than you realize.”

She turns towards me, an appreciative smile spreading across her face at my comment. Recognition of the fact that I'm aware of her sacrifices, too.

“It's funny,” she says, watching as Lake turns in our direction. He stares at us for a second before appearing to swallow and then turns back around,

heading further into the barn with the hay. “I feel good about letting go now. I’ve made peace with it.”

I tighten my jaw at her words, fighting back the tears that come with these types of conversations.

“I had a hard time with it all, knowing he'd be alone. Feeling as if I’m leaving him. But after today, Dylan, after meeting you and Colin…” she pauses, her eyes filled with a hopefulness that makes my eyes water. “I know he's not. Nor will he ever be.”

A tear falls from my eye, and I wipe it away quickly, looking back at the barn and seeing his back as he works.

“He'll fight you, you know. Find reasons to assume he's not good enough to fit into your world. Not worthy of another woman who sacrifices herself for others. He's as stubborn as the asshole who made him.” She makes a face.

I snort a laugh at that before sniffling, appreciating her laying out the truth more than ever. She knows him best. Better than anyone. Better than me.

“But he's got my heart,” she continues, nodding softly. “And that heart never gives up. Not when we know what we love. And that boy knows what he loves, who he loves.”

Her words tear into me, making me feel weak at the knees.

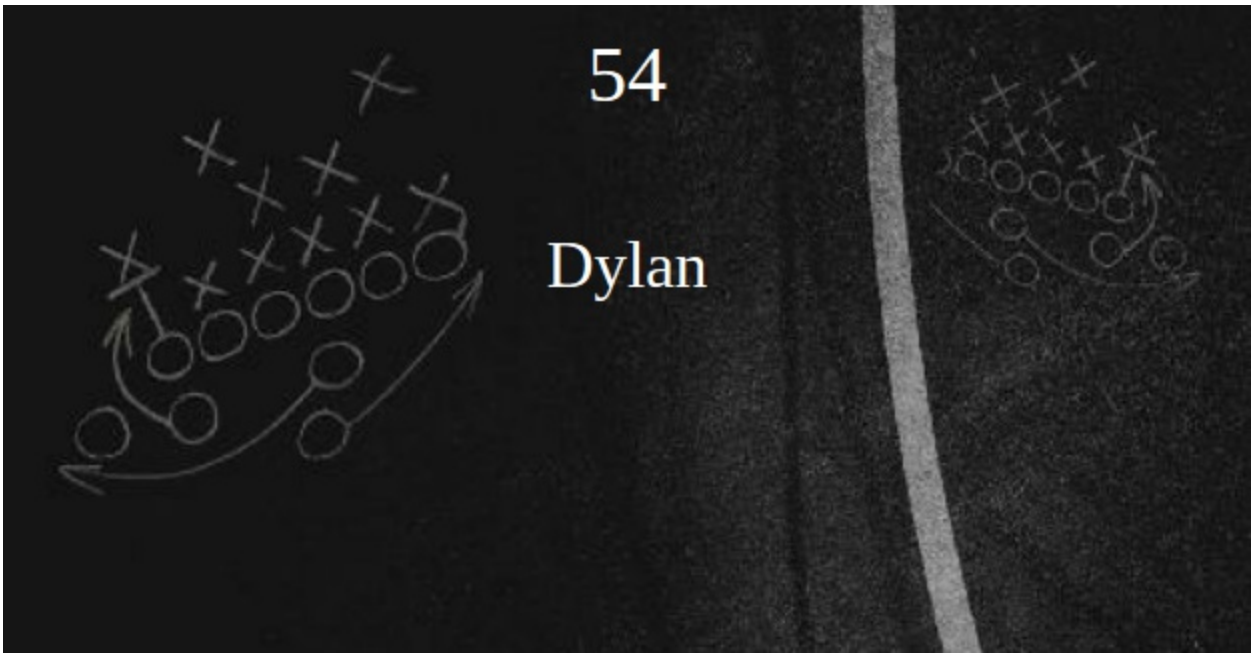
“Give him time. He'll need time,” she says in a cracked tone. It's all it takes to make the tears fall freely.

She drops her blanket, both of her hands finding my face as she wipes away my tears with her thumbs.

“He'll need time, but he'll find his way back. Back to what really matters,” she whispers knowingly. “We always do, you know?”

She puts an arm around my shoulder and I wrap my arm around her back, holding her tiny frame as she rests her head against mine. We stand side by

side, our battles stacked up behind us, connecting in our own unique way while watching the one we love from a distance.



You know how they say silence can be deafening?

Well, this silence isn't deafening, it's destroying.

He's keeping something from me. It's more than obvious by the way my stomach is twisting and turning with every mile we drive.

Women, we have an intuition about these things. We can sense changes in the air, the shift of energy when someone's feelings are changing. Even if it's as subtle as less direct eye contact. It's there and we know it.

He drives us home, walking up to help me carry in the leftover food that Lydia sent with us. Colin retreats to his room when we get back, the obvious strain from the day wearing on him. Lake lingers at the door, sure not to step foot inside. I don't want to believe that he's withheld the truth from me, but given the circumstances, I can actually empathize with it.

“Are you not coming inside?” I ask, already knowing his answer.

He rests his temple against the door, looking up at me through his lashes. His answer is in his silence. I wince because it hurts, the knowing without knowing.

“I should…” He nods down the hallway.

“Listen, Lake,” I start, walking towards him. He stiffens against the door, so I stop, staying in place. “I know today was”—I pause, searching for the words—“heavy and hard. But you must know, I'm here to—”

“I can't work with you anymore, Dylan,” he interrupts.

His words force me to suck in a breath, feeling the hit directly in my gut. I haven't even taken my purse off my shoulder from meeting his mother and he's already ending things.

I thought I knew what it was like to have your heart break. The pain of losing yourself to someone, only to have it thrown in your face. But nothing compares to the pain of the person you've reluctantly opened yourself to in the most intimate ways becoming the coldest version of themselves before you, especially when you know it's not really them.

“What do you mean?”

“Dr. Shelby talked to Coach. They are setting me up with a new therapist to finish up my therapy on Monday.”

I can barely hear anything amid the loud pounding of my heart echoing inside my head. This wasn’t just about his mom. No, he’d been sitting on this all day.

“I knew it. You lied to me earlier.” I choke out.

He runs a hand along the back of his neck.

“I didn't want to—”

“Ruin the day. I get it,” I say, rolling my lips into my mouth and biting down, attempting to take this pain away.

I take a deep breath, trying to make sense of this. I'm a fish out of water, and the inability to breathe on this side of the lake is nearly impossible.

“So I get fired, and you get a new therapist. That's that, huh?”

“I'm sorry, Dylan,” he says, shaking his head with what sounds like no sorrow whatsoever.

I simply stare at him.

There's no explanation. No, *let's figure this out together*. No, *we can still find a way to be together*. No, *however I can get you*. None of that. Just I'm sorry, and that's it.

He's not acting like himself, looking at me with that tortured, pained expression as if I’m the one who did him wrong.

“How can you do this?” I ask. “How can you just leave us like you don't care at all?” I fight the urge to yell, but lose it as I continue. “You're different, Lake! You said you'd take me any way you could get me! You told me what you wouldn't do was let me go! You made promises!”

He swallows, running his hand along his jawline as his forehead creases, unable to look at me.

“I have to step away, Dylan.” His voice cracks at that, and for a second, I think maybe he does have a heart in there. “My focus hasn't been where it should be. I need to keep my attention on getting back to what I do best, and you need to focus on your career and Colin. I think we can both agree, this just...got too messy.”

He’s saying things he doesn’t mean.

“Messy,” I breathe out in disbelief.

He turns and walks out into the hallway, where he paces for a second. I'm just stuck where I am. Stunned.

“I-I'm sorry,” he says one last time before he turns and walks away.

Standing there with nothing but confusion and hurt wrecking me, I fight the urge to cry. After everything we've fought through, how we've opened up—this is how it ends?

I make the decision without even thinking, tossing my purse from around my shoulders onto the couch, and run after him. He's just walked into the stairwell, so I catch the door before it closes and call out to him.

“Lake, wait!” I jog down the few cement stairs, my eyes already brimming with tears about to fall, and catch up to where he stills on the landing, his back to me. I grab him, twisting him around to face me. He's got red eyes that look as if tears were freshly wiped away.

“I know you're not doing this because you want to,” I choke out, tears falling freely down my cheeks. “There's more to it than that. There has to be. There's something you aren't telling me. I know what you're doing. You don't want to walk away. Tell me you don't want to walk away,” I sob.

The torment in his eyes says more than his words ever could. He closes them tightly, shaking his head before gently placing his hands on my wrists, pulling my hands off him and dropping them between us.

“Don't make this mistake,” I cry out. “Don't push me away to protect me.”

It's what he's doing. It has to be.

“It's us, Lake,” I whisper, reiterating his own words.

His lips part as he exhales a shaky breath. As if the words are physically paining him in the same way his actions are paining me. He runs his hands through his hair, blowing out all the air in his lungs.

“I have to go.” He turns from me then, jogging down the cement stairs and never looking back, leaving me in the stairwell alone.

I wait, listening until the steel door slams shut, feeling its hollow echo everywhere inside me, down to the center of my bones.

He just left.

Just like that.

Thunderous music blasts from above me, breaking my trance. I shake my

head, attempting to brush off Lake's departure and turn to run up the remaining stairs. I hear a plate shatter from my apartment before I even step inside.

Bursting through the old wooden door, I walk in to see Colin in a ball on the kitchen floor, rocking as he slaps his head while the television blasts some cable show.

“Col! Col, calm down!” I rush over to get him away from the broken shards of the plate he's fallen on. “What happened?!”

I see my purse on the couch, on top of the remote where it landed when I tossed it and ran after Lake.

The loud noises, the shock of the plate he must've dropped—it's too much. He's in full-fledged meltdown mode, and with everything he's just dealt with today, there's just no coming back.

He swings his arms at me as I approach him. I grab one, attempting to pull him away from the plate before he gets cut, but he draws his arms inward, causing me to fall into him.

He hits his head again, harder this time, with his fists curled tightly, so I get behind him to try to hold him still like we always do, singing Kanye until he sighs and relaxes. But his fight is more than it's ever been. He twists an arm back, trying to get me off of him and ends up sending an elbow into my side. All the air leaves my gut at the hit as I fold into myself.

His anxiety turns into rage as the show continues blasting through the television speakers. Another hand comes up to hit his head, but he hits my forehead instead. A shard from the plate must've been stuck to his palm because I feel the warmth of my eyebrow splitting and see the blood dripping onto the linoleum floor beneath us.

“Colin, stop!” I cry out, grabbing his forearms again as I roll with him on

the ground. I successfully wrestle with him until my legs are around his hips, my biceps wrapping around his upper arms in a secure hold. His frustrations get the better of him and his heels begin scooting back on the floor, pushing until my back meets the kitchen cabinet behind me.

He pushes back forcefully, and I'm trapped behind him.

“Col! Stop!” I gasp as his body continues pressing against me, his heels scooting him against me harder and harder. “I can’t breathe!”

My chest can't expand as his arms continue flailing against my hold, screaming out the way he does, trying to cover his ears. If I can just get him to calm down…

My strength is weakening as the seconds continue to pass.

“Col,” I whisper, the scene around me getting hazy.

There's a noise at the door, a shuffling of feet. Before I realize what's happening, I see the shadow of Lake running towards us.

“I got him,” I breathe as Colin forcefully shoves me back into the cabinets again. “I got this, Lake—”

But Lake doesn't listen. He’s in panic mode. He rips my arms from Colin and tries to pull him off me. Colin swings again and makes contact with Lake, punching him in the jaw as he claws out around him.

“No, no, no! Lake, don't—” I scream in terror before Colin's arm flies back and hits me in the face again.

In the scramble, arms fly as legs kick before Lake finally grips Colin's arm, getting him off me. Colin flies forward with the force, hitting his face on the retaining wall separating the kitchen from the small dining area. He slides along the wall, the blood already smearing.

“Colin!” I scramble to get up off the floor, kneeling next to him. Colin's nose starts bleeding immediately, the blood pouring down his canary-striped

shirt and onto the floor beneath him. He immediately curls into himself, holding his face as he rolls from side to side.

Lake steps back immediately, both his hands raised in the air. “Oh my God,” he whispers to himself, his hands now covering his mouth as he mutters, “What have I done?”

Colin's cry gets louder, and I pull his arms away from his head to inspect his face. His nose is crooked and there's blood everywhere.

“The hospital,” I say quickly, “We need to go!”

Lake nods, pulling his keys from his pocket as I hand Colin the towel hanging on the fridge door before we scurry out of the apartment.

Colin is talking with the doctor nearby on one of the rolling beds, a thin sheet of material separating us, while another nurse tends to my forehead wound.

“Not deep enough for stitches,” she says, placing a bandage over my wound. “You're lucky, though. Could've been much worse.”

It could've been much worse. I put myself in a dangerous situation tonight, thinking I could overpower Colin. Seconds away from passing out, I could've been seriously injured. I would have been, if not for Lake.

He's never going to let this go.

Lake is pacing in the waiting room as I approach, bandaged up. He stops when he sees me, his hands resting on his head, a look of pure defeat in his

reddened eyes.

“It's broken,” I say, “but they already reset it and he's going to be f—”

“I hurt him, Dylan,” he interrupts with a broken tone. A look of complete disgust is etched into his features. “I fucking hurt him.”

His pain is killing me. Literally breaking me. I know where this goes.

“You did what you had to do. I couldn't control him.”

“No. I'm no good for you,” he says suddenly, hitting me where it hurts most. “I'm worse than Eric. I laid hands on him, Dylan. He’ll never look at me the same again. He'll never feel safe around me.”

I look down at the floor as something like a sob leaves my throat.

“With time, he'll—”

“I can't keep dragging you both down, making life worse for you. I won't. I won’t do it.”

“Lake,” I say, wishing he wouldn't do exactly what he's doing right now. Beating himself up over this, using it as further proof to distance us.

But he was there when I needed him. He came back.

“But you came back. Why did you come back?”

There was a reason he was there. He couldn't have heard what happened. He came back for something, and I need to know why. “It doesn't matter,” he says, pacing in place as if being in his own shoes has never felt more uncomfortable. “Tell him I'm so sorry,” he chokes out, an obvious break in his voice. “I can't be here when he gets out. I have to go.”

And just like in the stairwell, he walks away from me again.

This time, his reasons are set in stone.

“So then I said, you lyin’ out your ass, ho. My mama makes the best greens this side of the Mississippi. You out your goddamn mind.”

I nod, lacing up my shoes.

“And he hit me with the ‘*your mama can’t cook*’. And I swear to God, Lake, I almost stuck the line marker up his punk ass.”

I nod again, pulling out my phone and scrolling through the old text messages, touching her words as if I could touch her through them.

“And then I told him I couldn’t wait to wife up Dylan now that she’s single again.”

My head snaps over to where he’s casually leaning with one leg perched on the bench. He removes his helmet from his head, his eyebrows raised and a smirk in place.

“Ah, so now you’re paying attention.”

I scowl, looking back down at my phone.

“Wheels,” he says with a heavy exhale, walking around the bench and taking a seat next to me. “If you're gonna let her go, then let her go.”

He snatches the phone away from me, looking at the empty inbox.

He scoffs. “See. Still empty. Hasn’t changed. Not gonna change. Especially with a woman like that. She cuts you off. It’s over with. Good luck—”

I hit him in the chest with a backhand, causing him to cough out a laugh.

“Talk to me, brother. Get it off your chest so I ain’t gotta get hit in mine,” he says, settling back onto the metal bench, resting his arms across the back.

I eye the rest of our teammates as they run practice drills, the blow of the whistle screaming through my already pounding head.

“Coach told me if I walked away from her, Dr. Shelby would still give her the position. He was going to bring her in as one of the main physiotherapists on his team. I told them I was to blame for seducing her. They said if I left her alone, they would be understanding and let this situation slide. Under the rug, as they often do in these circumstances.”

“Woah, woah, woah...” Candy says, waving his hands and sitting forward. “You were sleeping with her?!”

I rotate my jaw, cracking my fingers into my palm.

He laughs. “Chill, Deck. Clearly you were sleeping with her.”

I fix my glare on him.

He shrugs, pursing his lips. “Alright, so you can’t work together. You sacrificed your love for her advancement in her career. Got it,” he says dramatically.

“It was more than that. I...” I struggle to find the words. “I made the decision to walk away. I couldn’t have her miss out on the opportunity she’s been busting her ass for her whole life. On her own. Especially when it was me who pushed her to cross that line. That line that she had set in stone to protect them. I was cold as ice as I broke her heart, hoping her hatred for me would make it easier. Anger is better than pain.”

Candy's eyes narrow as he listens.

“Afterwards, I went to my truck, and I fucking lost it. I hated myself for how stupid I was being. Everything I said I wouldn’t do, I did. I promised her I’d be different, but I was no better than her dick of an ex, and I ended it with the only girl I’ve ever loved.”

Candy blows air through his lips at that. “Shit. That’s heavy, Deck.”

“I decided to take it all back, to head back up there and explain myself. Make things right. Find a way to work it out, regardless of Coach and Dr. Shelby. I’d tell them to screw off, and that there was nothing or no one who could keep me away from her.”

His brows raise.

“But then things got worse.”

Candy cocks his head. “Worse as in...”

“Colin was going through some sort of meltdown when I got back in there. There was glass on the floor. He had her pinned against the cupboards, unintentionally choking her out. She was bleeding...it was a mess. It was awful. I...I fucked up.”

“Oh Jesus, did you punch her brother? Tell me you didn’t punch her poor, sweet, disabled brother.”

I could kill him for rubbing salt in my already throbbing wound.

“I threw him off her. Into a wall. He broke his fucking nose, Kane.” I face him, watching as his mouth parts open and his eyes widen. “It’s over with. He’ll never come near me again. I broke his trust because I didn’t know how to handle it. In a matter of minutes, I turned into the one man I hate most and put my hands on him. I put my fucking hands on him.” I shake my head, disgusted with myself. “All I do is bring them down.”

“Ha!” Candy laughs, and my eyes send daggers at him. “Bring them down?

Boy, quit playin'."

"I promised them everything and fell fucking flat."

"Dude," he scoffs, his helmet dangling in his fingers by the facemask. "I can't handle this bitch shit."

"Bitch shit?" I take a step forward, standing above him on the bench now, getting heated. "I'm fucking wrecked right now and you wanna call it bitch shit?!"

He leans back into his seat again, eyeing my alpha-like pose before him, smirking as if it truly entertains him. As if he gets off on it.

"Yeah, Lake. Bitch shit," he reiterates while nodding. "You copped out. You folded," he says definitively. "You took away the one thing that woman had going for her."

The tension in my back has the muscles on fire. I breathe heavily through my nostrils as I try to put it together.

"The choice."

I soften my stance, slumping my shoulders as I run my hands down my face, letting out an exasperated sigh.

"You didn't let her choose, did you? You let her go before she could leave you. Because, God forbid, another amazing, selfless woman slips away from you."

I can't breathe.

His sentence is filled with so much honesty and truth that it hurts. It hurts in places I didn't know I could hurt. Places that have never felt such a void.

Candy knows my story. He knows the battles my mother has fought. He knows about my childhood and our difficult past. It rips through the heart I didn't know held so much in it. It's bleeding out, endlessly depleting me until

I’m drained and empty. I’m not okay without her. I need Dylan like I need air, but I chose to suffocate instead.

“But she wouldn’t have left you, Lake,” he whispers, leaning forward, his elbows on his knees. “She wouldn’t have left you, and Colin would have forgiven you.”

I slump back onto the bench beside him again, resting my hands on top of my head. The guys are giving their all as the offense runs another play.

“She’ll never forgive me now, though,” I choke out, admitting the inevitable.

Candy sighs. “She might not.”

The truth feels like bricks on my chest. The weight, practically unbearable. There’s so much I’ve destroyed. I hear the echo of her voice cracking as she yelled at me in that stairwell. See the pain in her eyes when she reminded me of what I’d promised her. What I’d promised them.

“So what do I do now?” I ask, exasperated.

“I mean, what would Ross do?” he says.

“Ross?” I contort my face.

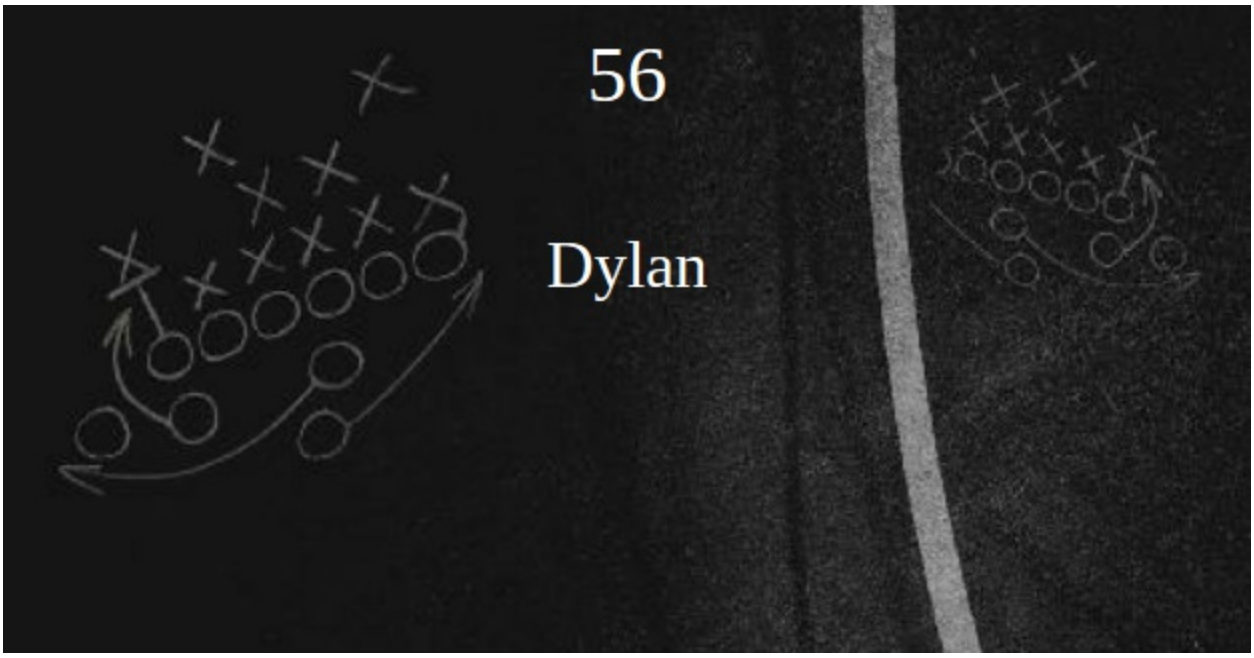
“Yeah, man. Ross. You know, he was obsessed with Rachel, always feeling as if he wasn’t good enough for a girl like her. But they were endgame, my dude. Endgame.”

Before I can even comprehend what the fuck he’s talking about, my phone rings in my hand, and my heart nearly beats out of my chest.

But the name on the screen isn’t the woman I love. It wouldn’t be.

The person on the phone is Dale.

And the feeling I get from a call from him at this time of day sends shivers down my spine.



I walk back into work after an extended weekend and see Jaden already here.

It’s not like him to be here as early as me, but I’m trying not to overthink things.

The door slams shut behind me, the ring of the bell circulating the gym. I feel sick to my stomach. I walk forward with my bag slung over my shoulder, approaching Jaden, who’s refusing to look at me.

Please tell me I haven’t lost what friends I have left over this, too.

I stop alongside him, where he’s cleaning a machine that doesn’t need to be cleaned, when I hear my name called from the office.

“Dylan! Come into the office!” Greg yells out.

I swallow what feels like a boulder as Jaden’s nervous eyes finally find mine. He gives me a sorrowful glance, and it’s all I need to see to understand the damage I’ve done.

I’m fucked. Royally fucked.

I walk into the office where Greg is turned in his chair behind the desk, his back facing me.

“Have a seat,” he instructs, filing through some papers.

Shrugging off my sports bag, I take the seat across from him, my pulse pounding so hard I could start a fucking band.

He turns to face me, dropping a stack of papers before him. His face stretches into a huge grin.

“Well, you did it, girl,” he says proudly. “They want you.”

He pushes the stack of papers over to me and I see the logo on top of the paperwork. My eyes immediately draw up to his.

Is this some sort of sick joke?

“Dr. Shelby was a good friend of mine back in school. He was more than excited for the opportunity to bring you aboard.”

I don’t think I can breathe. Dr. Shelby? Wants me? Lake took the hit. He took the heat for me, putting all the blame for our relations on himself. He saved my name. My credibility.

“A-are you serious? They want me?”

Here I thought I was going to get a lesson on how not to suck your clients’ dicks in the backroom, but now I’m being offered a job with the National Football League?!

A piece of my shattered heart glides against the rest of the broken mess in there, and I feel the pain of his sacrifice.

“As sad as I am to see you go, I’m beyond proud of you. You’ve really grown here, and I’m excited to see you spread your wings,” he says with a glimmer of a tear in his eye.

“Better wipe that shit away, Greg. You don’t want them thinking you’ve grown soft due to your love of handheld kitchen appliances.”

“Ha! That’s my girl. Give them that same attitude and you’ll kill it out there.” He smiles. “Come on, bring it in.”

He stands, walking around the desk to pull me in for a big bear hug before dropping me back down on my feet.

“And go check on your buddy out there,” he comments. “Soft ass thought you’d be mad at him for stealing your client.”

I stare at him in confusion. He hands me the stack of employment papers from the NFL, then points in Jaden’s direction.

Walking over to where he’s still cleaning equipment, I cross my arms over my chest and lean against the stationary bike, waiting for him to turn.

“Are you his therapist now?” I ask, pulling on his wrist until he finally spins and faces me.

“Yeah, Dyl.” He sighs heavily, dropping his cleaning towel. “I wanted to tell you the minute Greg called me, but I was worried you’d kill me.”

I chuckle softly, then shake my head at him, my smile fading.

“You know I’d never. You’re one of the only friends I’ve got.” My smile returns. “Can’t go killing them all off.”

He smiles back, a weight clearly lifted off his chest. “This is true.”

“But, honestly, why would Lake still drive all this way when he could utilize one of the new therapists on the team?”

“Why do you think, Dylan?” He smirks at me. “He’ll do whatever he can to stay close to you while you’re still here. Even if it means using me.”

Another cracked piece falls off my shattered heart, dropping to the pit of my stomach.

As frustrated as I’ve been at Lake, I can’t help but see how everything he’s done has been for me. He wanted me to be the best version of myself, giving

me all the opportunities I've ever wanted. But what he doesn't understand is that he's what makes me better.

I hate ignoring him how I have been, knowing inside he was fighting for me all along, even if he went about it the wrong way. He texted me, asking about Colin throughout the weekend after the incident, and I left it unread.

I was hurt. Fuck, I was heartbroken. Still am. And while Colin has seemingly forgotten about the entire situation, I can't seem to forget it. I'm not myself anymore. I feel the ache of my brick walls climbing back up, wanting me to close up and swear off love forever, but some deeper part of me that's awakened because of him screams to keep them away.

Maybe with time, I can find a way to trust him again while still holding myself accountable.

Maybe.

"And actually," Jaden says, looking at his Apple watch, then at the clock on the wall, "he's running late. Like really late."

I rub the back of my neck while looking out of the windows at the parking lot, nervous to come face to face with him again. I don't know how I'll react. I don't know how to act in his presence anymore. The tension and awkwardness will be practically unbearable.

"That's not like him. He's always early. Annoyingly so," I reply.

"Yeah," Jaden agrees, confusion warping his expression. "That's what I thought."

"Maybe practice ran late? Maybe he had a meeting run over? Who knows? He's getting closer to playing again. I'm sure life is about to get more hectic."

The idea of him going on the road again to all the games, leaving town and mingling with new fans and faces, makes my stomach ache with a strange jealousy I don't feel the right to own.

He chose to walk away and let you thrive. On your own.

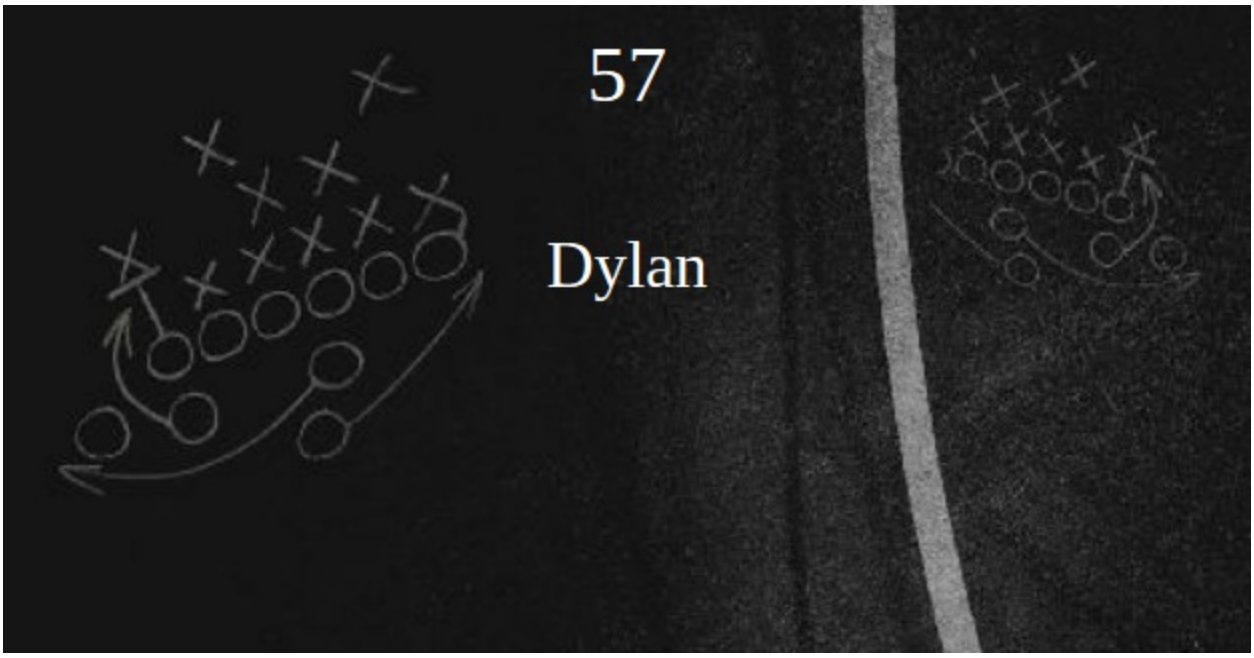
The torture sweeps through me again, as it does every time my mind goes back to him. The conflicting emotions of being mad yet missing him toys with me.

“Looking like he might be a no-show,” Jaden shrugs, placing his hands on his hips.

But Lake isn’t the no-show type.

My gut tells me there might be another reason for his disappearance.

And that reason is the worst of them all.



After leaving Greg’s office, I make my way back home to contemplate things.

Lake had allowed me to be in this position. To have everything I’ve ever wanted. To get my dream job of finally working in the NFL and solidifying the stable environment I’ve always worked to obtain for Colin.

I had it all.

And yet, nothing felt more wrong.

Lake never showed up for his therapy session. Maybe he had second thoughts about coming, knowing I’d be there. I couldn’t wrap my head around it being for any other reason. It could have been as hard for him to face me as it was for me to face him. The idea of seeing him sent my heart into overdrive. I knew I couldn’t hold back the emotions that were still there for him.

My heart still wants him.

The worry that it will never change is what haunts me.

I’m tempted to text him as I curl up on my couch the following night, an old rerun of Modern Family on the television in the background, drowning out the silence that’s filled my head since he left. Colin’s back home from work now, and after eating spaghetti, he’s back to doing what he does best—watching racing videos in the comfort of his room.

I’ve never been the type of girl to feel lonely. I’ve been on my own for long enough now to have experienced this loneliness. But now, after being touched by him in such a way, I’ve never felt such desperation for someone to hold me. The ache to simply be in his presence again is a pain I can’t seem to endure. The idea of him being somewhere without me, making memories with other people, sharing laughs with anyone who isn’t me, makes my stomach turn.

It’s a strange feeling to feel possessive over someone else’s happiness, but I’m finding that it’s an emotion of his I want to own. I want to be the one to provide all of those things for him. His good days. His smiles.

But as it stands, another night passes by without a word from Lake.

I don’t know why I expected anything different, but I did. I hoped that his determination wouldn’t win out. That he’d fall to his own selfish needs and call me, check on me, on us, keep that door open and contact between us a reality.

That door has closed, however. And with every minute that passes, I feel the pain of it more and more.

A phone call lights up my cellphone on the end table before me, and I lunge to answer it.

“Hello?” I say, sounding desperate. Too desperate.

“They offered you the job!” A familiar voice floods my ears with the upbeat positivity I’ve been lacking as of late.

My heart both sinks and soars.

“Can you believe it, Ash? Wait.” I pause. “How the hell did you find out?”

“Dr. Shelby called me for a reference since I was the first of your NFL rehabilitations,” he says with what I’m assuming is a proud smirk on the other side of this phone. “As if you really needed one. I hear Lake’s progress has been amazing. Even better than mine. Damn guy.”

His modesty makes me smile.

“Well...it’s been a journey, that’s for sure,” I say, twisting a nearby blanket between my fingers, thinking of memories that now make me sick with sadness. “But he’s an amazing athlete, as are you. Makes my job look easy.”

“Forever humble. But for real, own up to the fact that you’re officially going to be working in the NFL! My girl finally made it!”

Hearing him say my girl generally wouldn’t provide much of a reaction from me, but as it stands, I’m still someone else’s girl. Maybe I’ll always be. Anxiety finds me again, the cruel creature that seeps throughout my body, never leaving.

We talk for several minutes as I explain the expectations of the job from the paperwork and how I have an official meeting set up to tour the facility and meet the rest of the team in two days.

I feel a sickness in my gut even talking about it. This job is everything I’ve ever wanted, and yet my reasons for still getting it fell entirely on Lake taking the blame. It’s not like it would affect him in his career at all, but something about it just doesn’t sit well with me.

If Lake had described to me the conversation with his coach rather than just quit on me, would things be different? What if the ball would’ve been in my court? Would I have given him up just as easily? Is that why he made the decision for me? Yes, he chose to protect me, but was it deeper than that?

Was he worried I'd have dropped him like a bad habit upon realizing my dreams were about to be mine?

The thought sends my nausea into overdrive.

He left me before I could leave him.

"I'm insanely proud of you, Dyl. You accomplished so much, and with everything you do for Colin, I'm just blown away. Truly. Be proud of yourself and believe that you deserve this," Ashton continues.

"Jesus, what did I do to deserve you?" I shake my head. "You're too good to me."

"Nah." He scoffs. "It's all true. And if I was right, I'd say that Lakey boy of yours feels the same way," he comments, and I feel him fishing.

I inhale a deep breath, filling my lungs, then let it out with a sigh. "What do you know?"

"I know that man looked jealous as hell when we were at the bar. I know that when you went to the bathroom, he sat in that chair, staring at that door like a psycho until you reappeared. Didn't he break a glass?"

I chuckle lightly at the memory. He was insanely jealous and protective. Something I find myself actually missing, even though I swore I'd never allow such behavior. It's oddly endearing when it's him because I know his underlying truth.

"I know when a man is in love, Dylan, and that man has it bad."

I drop my head back against the couch. That's two people who have told me it was more than obvious Lake loves me. I feel it in my heart too, but he's never once voiced that. Maybe now he never will.

"He's not alone," I murmur, then groan, falling face-first into the couch.

But Ashton simply laughs at my answer. "Knew it."

"It's horrible, really. I could've lost my entire career, Ash."

The sound of him readjusting himself back in his bed hits my ears as he says, “Spill girl, you know your secrets are safe here.”

I explain in slight detail the entire past few months. The chaos, the sneaking around, the moments with Colin, even the confrontation with Eric. He listens intently as I spew my heart.

“So what are you going to do?” he asks after I finish.

“What do you mean? What is there to do?”

He sighs. “Listen, Dyl. You’re a smart girl. One who rarely lets obstacles get in the way of what she wants. How is this situation any different?”

“It’s different because it’s the NFL,” I retort.

“The Dylan I know wouldn’t let anyone tell her what to do. She makes her own rules, and everyone else falls in line.”

I smile at that.

“Just know that this doesn’t have to be the end of the road. You just have to find your way out of the maze using a different route.”

Tears well up in my eyes. “You’re my best friend for a reason, Ash. God, what would I do without you to pump me back up when I’m feeling overwhelmingly deflated?”

“The same thing you’d be doing without me. Kicking ass and finding ways to make shit right for yourself.”

He’s not wrong about that.

“But I’m about to head to bed. Two-a-days are back, and if I don’t get some rest, I’ll be useless as a concrete parachute.”

“Oof. Sounds dangerous.” I shudder.

“Oh, I can be,” he brags. “But let’s plan to meet up when I’m back in town. Maybe we can grab some ice cream at that old creamery we took Colin to?”

“That sounds perfect,” I say with a smile that’s more genuine than the ones

I've been wearing for days.

After hanging up with Ashton, I'm left feeling utterly torn.

How can one be so heartbroken yet still care so deeply about someone? I wish love was simple. Easy. Carefree and fun. But no, it has to be complicated, painful, and a constant fight to hold on to what you've found.

My love for Lake isn't like sand from the beach being slowly dragged back into his water. I often thought of myself drowning in the entity that is him. Suffocating beneath his pressure. But it wasn't that at all. I'm his shore. The place beneath his surface that surrounds him, tethering him to my earth. Holding him safe. Providing him with that comfort he's unknowingly sought.

He needs me more than I need him.

I decide to head into that meeting this week with guns blazing. If I want to be in this field, I'm going in headfirst with nothing swept beneath someone else's rug.

I wake to a sliver of light shooting onto the ceiling from my nightstand. It's still dark in my room. The only thing illuminating the space is my phone screen. I slap a hand over it, ready to flip it over, when I bring it closer to my face. I squint as I attempt to focus on the message before me.

Lake: You upstairs?

My chest feels like it practically caves into itself. My stomach swirls with nerves and sudden anxiety over the two simple words he sent me.

Two words that could mean only one thing.

I sit up straight, re-reading the message. He sent it less than a minute ago. Did he mean to send this to me? Surely something strange happened here, an old message he accidentally sent? Or perhaps it was meant for another girl? I check the time, seeing it's three in the morning. He can't seriously be here right now. Is he?

I don't want to go there, but the final thought in the back of my mind is that something terrible has happened. I have heard nothing about him since yesterday when he missed therapy, presumably because of me.

I text back that I am home and patiently watch my phone.

I see the three little dots appear, insinuating he's typing, only to see them vanish a few seconds later. I lay my head back against my pillow, staring up at the ceiling.

What I don't want is to be toyed with. He made it clear we couldn't work together. He wanted this. The separation. I don't want a back-and-forth game, if that's what this is. I'm so in my head. I need to chill.

Checking the screen again, I see those three dots reappear. I wait as they continue bouncing in their own torturous way, the anxiety of what's coming next making it hard to breathe properly. But before they come, they disappear entirely.

Confusion hits me at the same time as curiosity, and I lean over my bed to the window to take a peek down at the parking lot.

Sure enough, his truck is parked outside in one of the empty stalls. It's running, but his lights are off and it's too dark to see him inside of it in the dimly lit parking lot.

Throwing on a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt, I grab my apartment keys from the counter, quickly peeking in on Colin to ensure he's sleeping before I lock up and head out to the parking lot.

It's colder than I thought it would be, and I clutch my arms around myself as I breathe out a cloud of frigid air before me. As I approach the truck, I begin to see the outline of his form curled forward around the steering wheel. I can't see his face, only his arms clutching around the wheel as he remains hunched over awkwardly.

My heart pounds.

I walk around to the passenger door in the corner of the lot, the early morning air cutting me down to the bone with its chill. I knock on the window twice with my knuckles. Nothing happens. No movement.

My chest feels tight.

Knocking a little louder, I'm startled when I see him wind back and punch his dash. I gasp as he hits it hard enough to do some damage to the air vent. Getting some sort of satisfaction from the physical release, he hits the dashboard again, then again, before dragging his hands through his long dark locks and down his face in clawed fists.

I don't want to believe it's true. Not yet.

He turns his cheek enough for me to see what looks like wetness across his face reflecting in the streetlamp above.

He's crying.

My stomach sinks with the knowledge of what that pain is. A pain that nothing in this world can fix.

Opening the door, I rush in, throwing myself across the seat. I wrap my arms around him, his fists remaining near his temples. He's falling completely apart right now. Losing himself in pain. I can only assume the

worst as he begins sobbing against me, his body shaking violently as he releases his cries.

He leans forward into me as I crawl my way into his lap on the seat. His hands find my sides and I wrap my arms around his head, cradling him against my chest as he curls into me. His fingers claw into my back almost painfully as he releases his agony.

“I’m sorry,” he says, shaking against me. “I didn’t know where else to go,” he says through cracked, heartbreaking cries. “I have nowhere to go.”

Tears spring free from my eyes and I cry along with him at the pain of his admission. I hold him tightly to me, wishing I could take every bit of this heartbreaking agony away.

“She’s gone, D,” he cries out, his voice breaking as my body shakes in a sob at the undeniable truth. “She’s gone, and I didn’t get to say goodbye.”

I keep hold of him, wishing I could put this broken man back together, but losing a parent doesn’t allow fixing. It creates a forever hole that you somehow learn to live with. A piece of you is always going to be gone now. Every day will awaken you to this new reality, and it never gets easier. It’s a pain that constantly reminds you that this life we live is short and sometimes entirely unfair, especially to the good.

“It hurts so bad,” he whispers again, barely breathing on his own.

“I know,” I say, wiping away my own tears as my heart breaks for the little boy in that picture. The one that stuck by her side through it all. All the battles won and lost.

“I just...I’m sorry, I-I didn’t know where to go,” he sobs again.

I pull away from him, placing my hands around his face and wiping his tears with my thumbs. He looks up at me with his bloodshot eyes, his face wet with tears, his hands falling to my lower back. This amazing, record-

breaking athlete, looking entirely broken, is being held up by only the strength of my hands.

“You’re right where she wanted you,” I whisper.

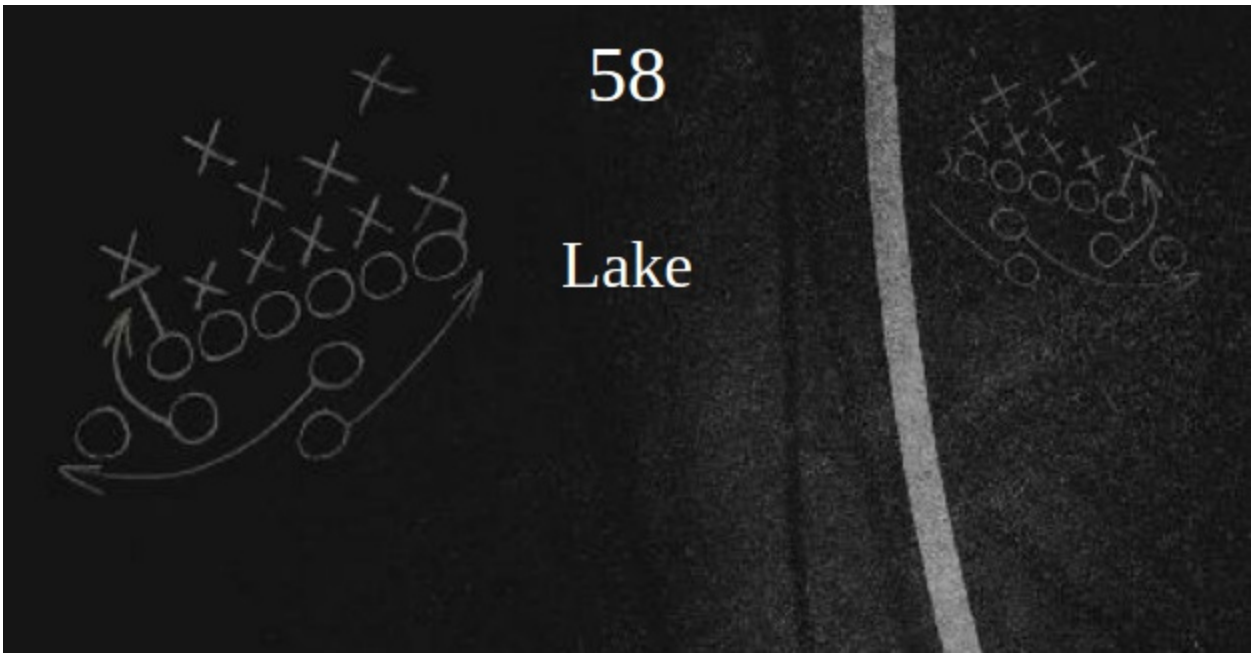
Tears stream down my face as he winces at the statement, closing his eyes tightly. He rests his forehead against mine, my hands gripping his neck while he fists the bottom of my sweatshirt, pulling me tightly to him.

We sit for what feels like forever, just holding each other, cries breaking through every so often, before we simply rest our heads together again.

No one would expect Lake Decker, famous football star, to be alone and in need during such a traumatic moment in his life. No one would expect him to be human. He’s a superhero to most. Impenetrable by pain. But here he is, as human as they come. He puts up his facade just as I have. The tough exterior, the walls, the front.

But who we are in dark parking lots late at night says more about us than anything.

And tonight, it’s just two shattered souls who’ve lost the fight to need someone.



She's too good for me.

After all I've done, here she is, holding my shattered little world together when all I did was obliterate hers.

I often wondered how I'd manage after losing my mom. I knew the day was coming, but held it so far from reality, almost as if it wouldn't come to be. But the truth is, it's far more heartbreaking than I ever could have imagined. Every day, everywhere I look, all I see is her ghost.

But my physical existence without her is the most debilitating torture. A painful reality I awaken to every minute of every day since she passed. My soul aches inside of my body. I feel restless. Anxious. Ruined.

That woman was my everything. She birthed me, fed me, clothed me, brought me into a life without abuse, and struggled so I could pave the path she always desired. She sacrificed herself for my happiness in every sense of the word, creating avenues for my future so I could excel and succeed at the price of her selflessness and dedication.

The thing that kills me most is I wasn't able to give her what I'd fought so hard to do. I needed to be back on that field for her, bringing back some of the hope her illness had taken away.

But I was too late.

She didn't get to see me soar again. After years of cheering for me on the sidelines, waiting to pick me up after practice, driving me to tournaments, making snacks for my teammates, all of it. She was gone, and I was empty.

Dylan's words tore through the empty heart of mine, tearing the last little bit in two. *You're right where she wanted you.*

I'd wondered about their last conversation on Thanksgiving before we left. They were holding one another, leaning in together as both of their eyes stayed locked on mine. Had she known the end was near? Was she holding out for me? Did seeing me with Dylan give her that last breath before she could finally let go and say goodbye?

Everything hurts as she holds her hands around the sides of my neck, her forehead to mine. I can't even look at her right now as we breathe the same air between us. Feeling too much and all at once, I'm aching, building up with an urge to obliterate something while feeling completely crippled in pain.

"Why don't you come inside?" she whispers, her tears mirroring my own.

Her thumbs wipe mine away from my cheeks, and she dries them on her sweatpants. They just keep running as I stare at her through them. I watch her do it again, then wonder how the hell she's been through this with both of her parents.

This woman, who has had so much adversity in her own life, is still here for me. Holding me together.

I don't deserve her.

“I can’t.” I shake my head, looking down at her lap on mine.

I can feel her eyes on me as she figures it out.

“He’s sleeping, Lake. He won’t even know you’re there.”

Remaining motionless, I still don’t answer.

“Come on,” she urges, her fingers sliding into the sides of my hair, holding my head to hers. She waits for me to open my eyes. “You can’t stay out here. You’re exhausted. You need to rest. I’m sure you haven’t slept in days.”

“I just need to go for a drive.” I lick my lips, tasting the salt from my tears.

“Lake—”

“I’m sorry, Dylan,” I say sympathetically. “I just can’t sit. I don’t want to think. I just...I just need to move.”

She nods, a silent understanding of my pain as she gazes down at me.

“You don’t have to go through this alone, Lake,” she whispers, running her thumbs along my cheeks. I tighten my jaw, attempting to rein in the flood.

I’ve never felt more alone in my life. My only actual family is gone. Yes, there’s Dale, but our relationship was never one with great depth. My mom and he got together much later in life when I was already away at college. He was an amazing support system for my mother, and I’ll be forever grateful to him for his love for her, but our connection may fade after this, as sad as it is.

I’m the last of my name.

The last of my family.

I just need to sit with that for a while. Drown in it. Submerge entirely before I can find my way back.

Sighing, I reach up, cupping Dylan’s face between my hands. Her lips part as I hold on to her, tucking her hair behind her ears so I can see her entire face. Studying it. Memorizing it. Remembering it.

“Take the job, Dylan,” I demand. Her forehead creases in confusion before

I repeat myself. “Do it. Take the job. Please don’t let that go.”

I know her type all too well. She’ll selflessly sacrifice this for me. Ruining her name just for the sake of me. It’s too much. I’ve already run one woman I love into the ground with my desire to be the best. I just wish her life would’ve been easier on her.

Before I break down in front of her again, I grip her head between my hands, needing her to listen, demanding an answer.

“Tell me you’ll take the job.”

Tears flood her face as her little nose wrinkles. “I’ll take the job.”

I nod once, hoping the nose thing was pure coincidence this time, before opening the door and standing with her in my arms. I place her down on the concrete, my arms still wrapped around her waist. We stand there in the cool night breeze, not once feeling the chill through the overwhelming pain already piercing me.

“Thank you.” I swallow, shaky with my words. “For being home.”

She sniffles against me. “I’ll always be your home, Lake.”

Her sentence obliterates me. There’s so much truth in that she doesn’t even understand. She’s forever got a piece of my home inside her. Words from the woman I love, held deep inside, locked away in the heart I’ve fallen for. Dylan is my home, and I love her with the only pieces I have left of me.

But our timing has never been right, and I won’t get in the way of her dreams.

“Goodbye, D,” I whisper against her forehead before kissing the spot softly, resting mine there again.

She fists the hem of my sweatshirt, not wanting to let me go.

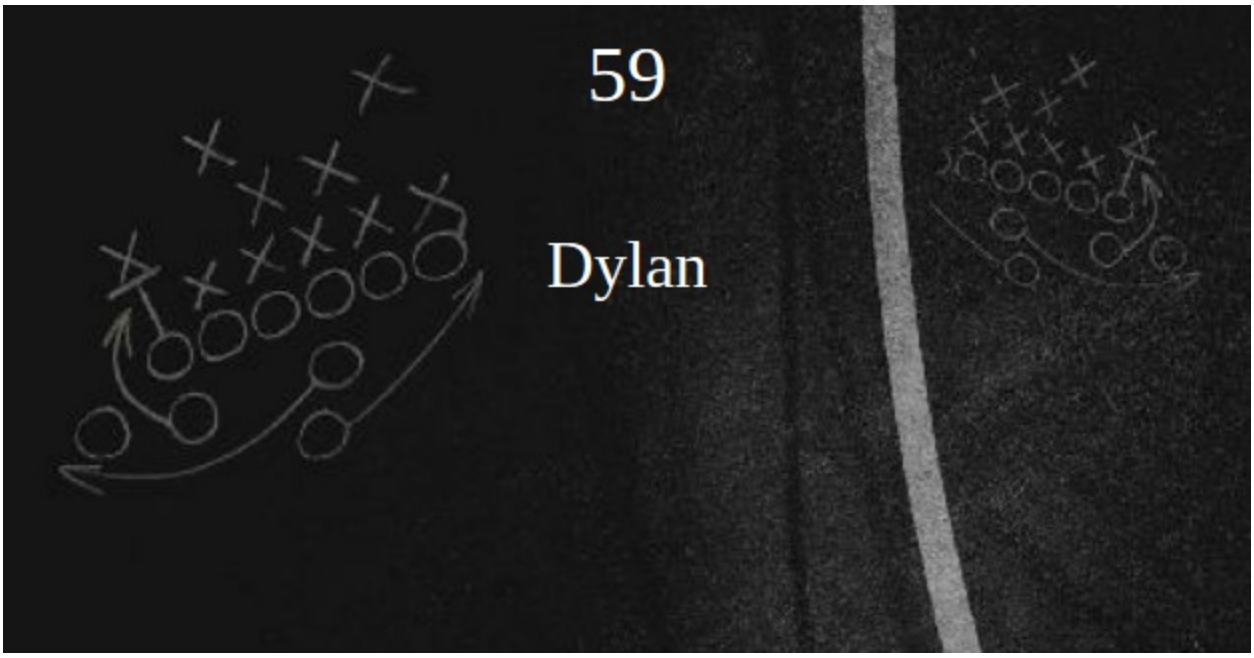
I didn’t want to have to do this to her again. Break her by walking away, but I need to find a way to mourn the loss of my mom without pulling her

deep into my darkness. Now isn't the time to bring down Dylan when her career is on the upswing. I need her to thrive and flourish. For me.

Understanding, she eases up her hold on me, and I drop my arms to my sides, our foreheads finally pulling apart when she turns to leave. Getting back into my truck, I start it up before I can watch her walk away from me.

I drive away, realizing my need to sit alone with this, immersing myself so deep until I'm able to wring out my pain without the remnants raining down on them.

I have to do this. For them.



It hurts just as badly the second time, but I understand it now. I know what he needs.

Time.

This is a life-changing moment for him, and how people handle loss is entirely theirs to own. Lydia knew how he'd handle it. She even warned me about it. Knowing that brings me some peace to our situation. Lake is pulling away in order to self-preserve. Only by doing that will he ever come back to what he knows. Who he loves.

I can only hope we'll both be ready when he is.

My face is still wet when I get back into the apartment as quietly as I can.

"What happened, DD?" Colin's voice comes from the kitchen, making me jump.

I clutch my hand to my chest, gasping as I feel the heart that's pounding in surprise.

"Colin, you scared me. What are you doing awake?"

He takes a step towards me, looking closely at my face.

“You’re crying. Why are you crying? You’re crying.”

All the air leaves my chest in a sigh as I slump down into the kitchen chair.

“Lydia, Lake’s mom, passed away,” I admit. “He just stopped by for a second to let me know.” I rake my hands down my face before realizing what I admitted. My eyes find his immediately. “He’s not here.”

He frowns, looking down at the carpet before approaching the table in his oversized NASCAR race shirt and checkered black-and-white pajama pants, twisting his fingers methodically.

“Is he scared of me?”

The sentence actually makes me laugh through the tears.

“He’s questioning the same thing about you.”

“I-I’m not mad at him, Pickle. I’m not mad. Colin is not angry with him. H-he helped you. He helped you when Colin lost it. He helped you.”

“You’re not scared?” I ask softly, cocking my head.

I thought for sure Colin would have some serious issues after the incident that could have had him spiraling in the presence of Lake. Months of fear stemmed from Eric’s situation and his broken trust in me. I imagined this would be similar, even though it wasn’t nearly as traumatic.

“I’m no coward, Pickle. And neither are you. W-we rise in disparity and a-adversity. We always have. We just have another flat. Another flat.”

I study him for a moment, blanketed by his words yet entirely confused by them. It’s true, historically. When faced with obstacles, we shift gears, redirecting and powering through until the next roadblock. Maybe we just have another flat.

“Flat tires happen to everyone,” he continues. “Cars always break down. Crash. Start fires. Break down. It’s the team that gets the racer back on track. The team. It’s the team. Team. Team.”

I bite back my tears. “What if the team tears apart, Colin? What if they don’t want to be a team right now? What if one of them decides to go off on their own, worried they’ll bring the team down when that’s not the case at all?”

I’m sure I’m confusing Colin more than ever with my ranting, but my heart aches for him in a way that won’t resolve. How can you be there for someone who just simply needs time? It’s a tug of war that cuts into your soul, and I don’t know how much more my soul can take.

“There’s a reason a team becomes a team, DD. They trust each other. They rely on each other. Trust. They trust each other to fall back when they need to, and someone else fills in. Everyone has their roles. Role on a team.”

My tears fall and I lose the fight with my emotions. Falling forward onto my forearms against the wooden table, I let it all out. I release everything my heart has been holding onto, crying for everyone. I cry for Lydia; I cry for Colin; I cry for Lake, and I cry for me.

I get out a rush of overwhelming emotions like a tidal wave finally breaking and feel Colin’s hand on my back.

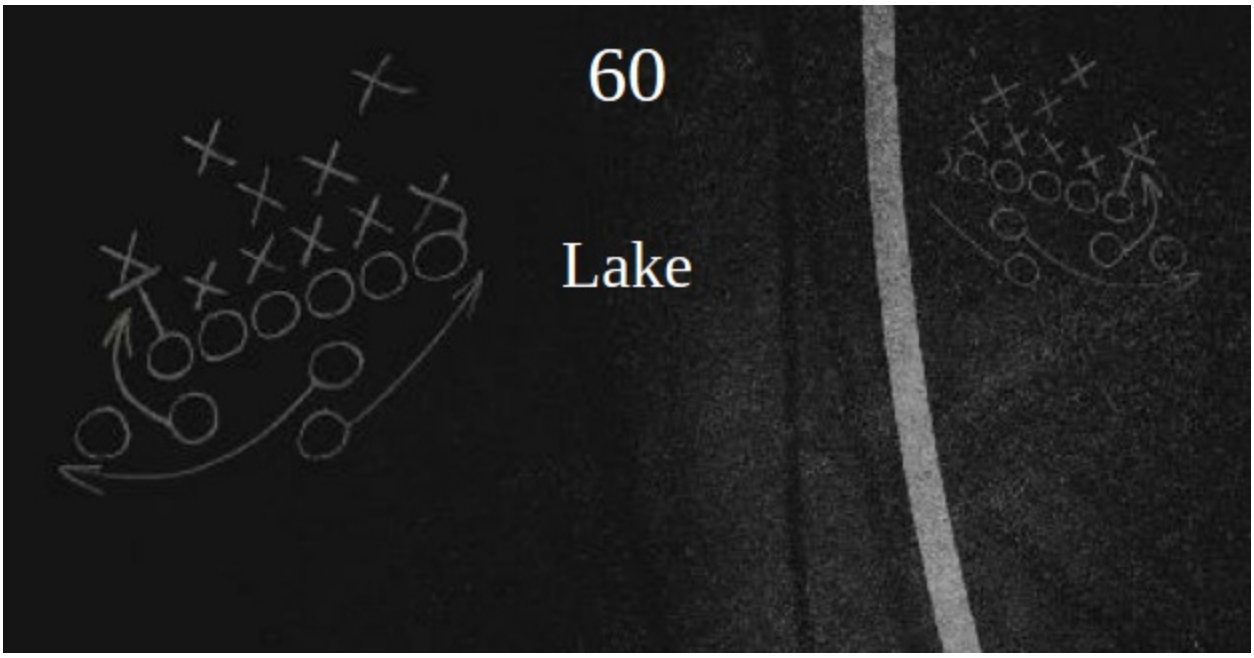
He doesn’t see me like this often and I don’t want to scare him or set him off with my lack of control over my emotions. I take a deep breath, attempting to rein in my agony, wiping my face off before standing and giving him a big hug.

He wraps his arms around me, patting my back with both hands before he whispers, “Just another flat. A flat. Trust the team.”

His words, while not entirely making sense, make me think. Colin rarely comforts me, and it’s my own fault for that. I hold in all of my struggles and pain, trying to shield him from all of it when, in reality, he’s been there through it all, silently watching. Knowing.

I take this hug, embracing it, holding onto his words. Colin is comforting me right now.

I can only hope he’s strong enough to handle my flat.



The play clock has three seconds left and counting. Hansen makes the snap, and the handoff is mine. I cradle the ball in the crook of my arm, running through the mess of men blocking. Swiveling through them, I take off in a sprint. Five yards becomes ten, and then ten becomes twenty. I see a defender coming at me from the corner of my eye. As he grabs for my ankle, I spin and step out of his hands, taking another three long strides before finally getting tackled by another player.

“Damn, Deck!” Candy yells, approaching me from across the field after the whistle blows. “I haven’t seen you move like that since...shit, ever! You’re killing it today, baby!”

He slaps the top of my helmet, screaming out his praise as I toss the ball to the referee, rushing back to the new line of scrimmage.

Sweat drips from my brow, my legs aching from the obvious overuse in my first game back since my injury. The screams from the crowd and the echoing of the roars from the fans are making it hard to hear the play call, but one look from Candy and I know exactly what to do.

For you, Mama.

We break from the line, and I dart out past my defender. Cutting into a slant, I turn just as the ball is approaching. With a quick catch, I grip the ball to the crook of my arm again. Everything happens in slow motion. I take three more steps, seeing a blocker come at me. Pushing off the ground, I hurdle the man, barely clearing him as he dives to tackle. My feet catch the ground and I take off. With the end zone in sight, I take those last few strides, hoping she's watching from heaven, proud of her baby boy.

Tears fill my eyes as I kneel in the end zone, completing the touchdown. The roar of the crowd vibrates around me, electrifying my veins in that all too powerful way. I say a silent prayer, my hands shaking as I touch my forehead, then make the sign of the cross over my chest. The boys charge me, lifting me up as they continue to celebrate.

I'm back.

But nothing is the same.

I head back over to the sidelines as the kicking team comes in. Coach slaps me on the top of the helmet.

"That's the way you do it!" he yells, congratulating me. "You did what they said you couldn't. You made it back in eight. Proud of you, son."

I plop down on the bench, catching my breath as I grab a water bottle from one of the staff members. I turn my head to look behind me, scanning the sidelines for her. But as usual, there's no sign of her. She told me she'd take the job; promised me she would.

It's been three weeks since the night I left her parking lot, feeling the lowest I've ever felt.

Three weeks since I've heard her sweet voice in my ears.

And three weeks since I declared myself the biggest coward in the history

of cowards. I'm here because of her. I began this journey back to the field for my love of one woman and have made it here because of the love of two.

Days turned into weeks after I left her, as I put my focus on myself and getting back to the game. Getting back into the swing of football has been overwhelming, to say the least. It's helped to keep my mind occupied and my body releasing that anger over circumstances out of my control. But those nights when I'm alone at home...it's those nights that eat me alive.

Thoughts of her plague my mind any chance I get a second to think. She's always present, setting up permanent camp in my continuous cycle of thoughts. During any achievement, any moment of excitement, and especially those dark times filled with unexplainable pain from the holes that will never fill again, I think of her. She's there like a disease that's seeped deep into the depth of my marrow. A part of me I can no longer remove. She's in my veins, the only thing still keeping me somewhat alive inside.

I've resorted to stalking on social media again. Kind of hard when she never actually accepted my friend request. She changed her picture a few times, though. One was a picture of them smiling as Colin leaned over his kettle car with a shocked face. They must've bought one together. The presence of a man's arms in the background, holding the edge of the car, had filled me with a rage I couldn't own. I pummeled a few men into the dirt during practice that week.

The new picture she changed to about a week and a half ago is one of her and Colin, facing the camera this time. They must've been at a birthday party because of the cone-shaped party hat Colin was wearing and the balloons in the background. They look so happy. She looks happy.

Maybe what we had wasn't meant to turn into anything more than a fling. Maybe sometimes, people come into our lives at the right time to teach us

lessons. To be there for an infinitesimal moment when you truly crave that companionship and those words that can get you through your darkest hours. Perhaps I need to just be thankful I had both of them there when I needed it most. They got me through the hardest, most heartbreaking moment in my life with words I still hold dear to me. I'll forever be grateful to both of them for that.

Life isn't the same for me. The things that used to matter just don't seem to matter the way they did before everything changed. I ache for those deep connections rather than the superficial shit I'm always surrounded with. The press, the fans, the awaiting women with hopes to score a night with a famous athlete. It's all a circus of fake nothingness. I just want to feel again. I've walked away from the only family that wasn't family. We might not have been blood, but we connected in ways that changed my outlook on life forever, and I let it all go.

The following week, my alarm goes off at the crack of dawn. I gather myself, getting everything ready for another big home game. I stop by the large window of my condo, gazing out into the surrounding city. Another day. Another dollar. More wasted time. Peering at the fireplace mantel, I make my way over to the picture of my mother and I. I don't want to disappoint her. I want nothing more than to live for her. For her to be proud of who I've become, who she's created. The man with nothing but love and dedication instilled into me through her selflessness.

But it wasn't just football and success she wanted for me. It was love. Real selfless love.

I had it. And by focusing on all the wrong things, I lost it. By thinking Dylan would walk away from me, I left her, telling myself it was for her own

good. Now it’s too late, and it tarnished the relationship I had with Colin beyond repair.

With a clouded head of emotions, I work towards channeling that energy into my game as I always do and head out of my condo to make it to the locker rooms before the press makes their appearance. It’s my second home game, and I’m back to being the talk of the town. Everyone clawing at me for a few words, a picture—anything. Getting into my truck, I push to start it up.

Only to hear it click over.

“What the fuck?” I murmur, trying it again.

But it doesn’t start.

“Fuck!” I hit my hands on the steering wheel.

With a heavy sigh, I get out of the truck, slamming the door in the process. Lifting the hood to look at the engine, I scour everything until my eyes fall upon a gaping hole.

My car battery.

It’s gone.

“This is a secure underground parking garage!” I yell out to no one at all.

“Shoulda got the Tundra.” I hear behind me.

Spinning my head, I turn to see the last person I ever suspected.

“Colin?” My jaw practically drops to the cement floor beneath me. “W-what are you doing here?! W-where’s Dylan?”

He doesn’t answer me as he continues to walk down the alley of parked cars towards me, gripping the straps of a backpack and shuffling in his shoes as he approaches.

“How did you get in here?” I ask.

He doesn’t make eye contact as he approaches, just stares at my truck with the hood up. “I told the lady you were my Special Olympics coach,” he says,

looking at my engine as his fingers twist and untwist before him. “Told her you were coach. Told her, and she believed me. People love people like me.”

A scoff of disbelief leaves me.

Well, I’ll be damned.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, my eyes looking past him in search of her.

“DD doesn’t know. DD doesn’t know,” he says, rocking on his toes and back. “DD doesn’t know.”

“Who’s DD? Is that your new advisor? Is she supposed to be here with you?” I look behind us again, waiting for someone to come out.

“No. No, I’m here because you need a ride. You need a ride because you don’t have a battery. A ride.”

I cock my brow. “How did you know I didn’t have a battery?”

“I know you didn’t have a battery because I took your battery. Colin took your battery. It’s my battery now. I needed it. Needed it.”

“Colin.” My mouth drops open as I stare at him in complete confusion. “I can give you a ride back, just give me the ba—”

“It’s not here. It’s not. The battery isn’t here.”

I stand straight with my hands on my hips, tipping my head in confusion. “Whereeee is it?”

“I used it to soup up my car. Soup up. Now c’mon. Soup up car. We have a race to get to,” he says, turning from me and walking toward the garage exit.

“Colin!” I call out, jogging after him.

He turns, holding onto the straps of his backpack, looking down at the ground as he blinks quickly.

“Your race,” I ask breathlessly. “It’s today?”

He nods once, then reaches for his backpack. Opening the zipper while

holding the bag against his chest, he pulls out what looks like a canary-colored shirt. He zips it back up, placing it on his back as he throws the rolled up cloth at me.

I catch it against my chest and watch in shock as he turns and continues down the alleyway. I open the shirt, seeing the team name printed across the chest in white. “The Canary Cowards.”

My heart drops into my stomach.

The team.

Our team.

“Team needs you!” he yells forward into the garage as he continues walking. “Team needs you.”

I swallow what feels like a brick, clutching the t-shirt to my chest, and my eyes begin to water. I tighten my jaw, attempting to hold back my emotions before running after him.

“Wait! Colin!” I reach him in a few steps, stopping directly in front of him and forcing him to stall his motions. “A-are you sure about this? About...me?”

I don’t know how else to ask if he’s still afraid of me, when clearly he’s here. In my parking garage. Throwing shirts at me and stealing my car battery.

“I called you a coward for a reason,” he says, looking me up and down.

I’ve never felt more hurt, more disrespected, more loved in all my life. This man sees through me entirely. I may not understand how he always does it, but I know that much is true.

“Wait,” I stutter, shaking my head. “Why are you doing this? Why give me a chance again after all I’ve done?”

He purses his lips and shrugs. “You love her. Love her. You love her. Don’t

waste it, Lake. Love her."

My face falls into a pained frown, and I literally feel my chest crack in half.

Colin takes a step forward, placing his arms on my shoulders. He gazes down at my shoes and says, "All we have is this time right now. Time is always ticking away from us."

I suck in a breath, absorbing his words. I nod my head, letting out a heavy sigh. Colin pats my shoulders before pulling them towards him. Before I know it, his head is resting on my shoulder and his arms are around my back, patting me. Colin is hugging me.

Never did I imagine today would begin like this. But here I am, receiving a hug from the man whose nose I broke, receiving an embrace from the guy who hates hugs, because he forgives me. Because he knows I still love his sister. And because he's not a coward like me.

He's the bravest man I know.

"I'm here to fix the flat. My team needed me. Now, let's go. Time to go. Uber is here," he says, pulling away from me. I have no clue what he's talking about.

"Wait," I say, raising my hands, trying to sort this out in my head. "You called an Uber?"

"How else do you think I got here?" He shrugs.

"Oh my God, Dylan is gonna kill you."

"No. No. DD will be happy. Happy. Very happy."

"What's DD? Why do you keep calling her DD? I thought she was Pickle?"

"She was. But she's been DD since she's been yours."

My heart clenches in my chest as my forehead creases, trying to work it out. "Dylan...Decker?"

A quick grin slides across his face before vanishing as fast as it appeared.

“You sly dude, you,” I comment beneath my breath, shaking my head in disbelief. “But honestly, Col, I don’t even know if she’ll have me. We’ve just never got it right, you know? Our timing has been off. I doubt she wants anything to do with me after what I put her through, put both of you through.”

“She’s sad, Lake. She misses you. DD misses you. S-she’s sad. I want her happy like she was with you. You make her happy. DD was happy. She needs to be happy, and she needs you to do that. We both do.”

My stomach drops. I’ve been hurting them both by not being there. Walking away from that girl was the biggest mistake of my life. I love her with all of me. Every fucking broken piece.

“I love her,” I spit out, not even thinking.

“I know,” he says nonchalantly. “I know. So go tell her already. Tell her. What are you waiting for? It’s go time. Race day,” he says, turning again to walk away.

“Okay, okay,” I say, scratching my head. “But I’ve got something I need to grab. Do I have a minute to run back up?”

“Hurry up, Lake.” Colin sighs. “The day waits for no one. Time is being wasted. So much wasted time to fix the flat. Time to get back on the track.”

A laugh escapes my chest, and I feel a warmth surrounding me that hasn’t been there for weeks. I recognize it immediately. A remembrance of home.

Fuck this game.

I’m leaving here with Colin.

I close the hood of my truck before tossing my bags in the driver’s seat. I slide my arms into the freshly made t-shirt that represents all that I am, popping my head through the hole and pulling it down my chest.

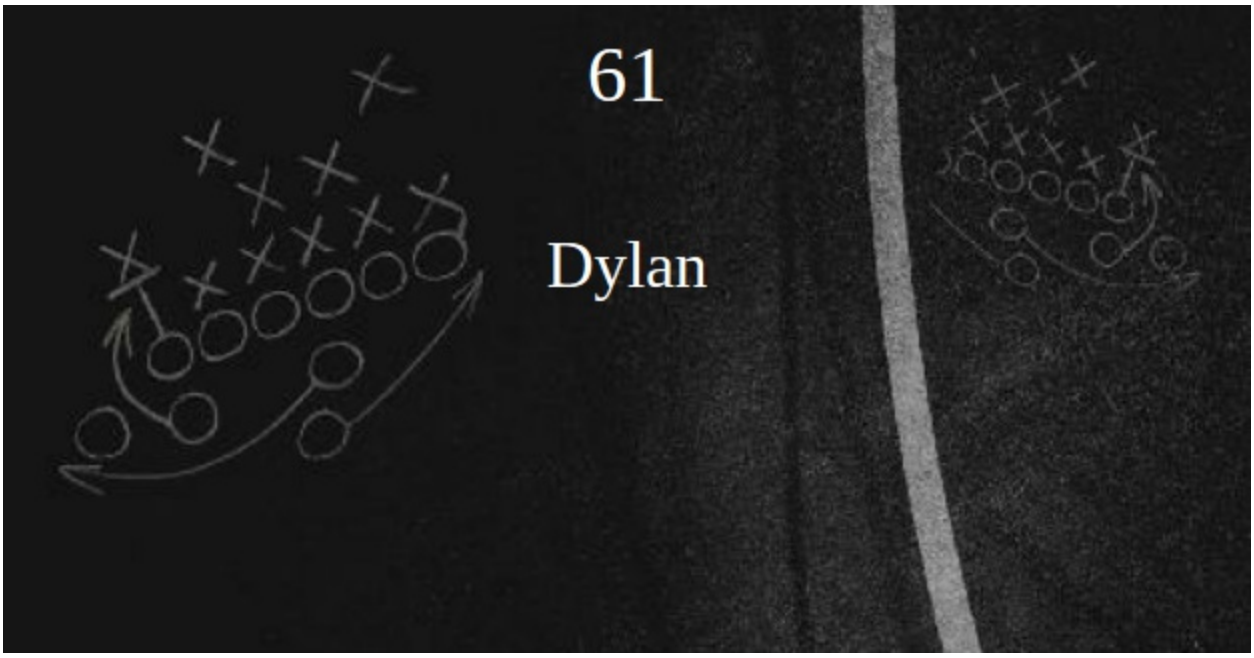
It’s time I go to this race to complete this team of cowards we’ve formed.

Owning our fears and facing them head on, as Colin has taught me.

I’m going to win my girl back.

The one that’s all she said she is.

My home.



I check the time on my phone again, gazing out across the crowd of people on the other side of the fence.

"Where the hell is he, Ash?" I groan, blocking the sun from my eyes.

We're lucky it's somewhat warmer than normal this morning. After weeks of bitter cold and a brutal Christmas, I was worried it would never clear up. But here we are with our lightweight coats, ready to start this race without our driver.

Tucking my phone into the back pocket of my ripped jeans, I grip the ends of my braids, tying them around my neck.

"Chill, girl, before you lose consciousness," he says, swatting at my hands. "I'm sure the bus was just running late."

Bullshit. Something's up. Colin was up early this morning. Way earlier than he'd like. I assumed it was just his nerves for the big day. The lack of sleep lately hasn't helped. Since starting the new business, we've both been working our tails off, endlessly pushing ourselves to the limit.

But it's never been more worth it.

I turned down the offer for the position under Dr. Shelby. The following week, I went to the office and put everything on the table. I refused to work in an environment where my mistakes could be swept away or put on someone else. I owned up to my faults, needing the truth to be known, and surprisingly, he respected me for it.

What Lake and I had wasn't a fling. It wasn't a situation where a famous football star tried taking advantage of a girl on the cusp of her own success. It also wasn't a situation where a gold-digging therapist looked to advance her career, sucking off one player at a time. No, what we had was so much more than that.

It was everything.

Until it was nothing.

"Why did he have to go into the grocery store anyway? I thought he quit? The whole crusty cunt thing?" Ashton asks, sidling up beside me along the metal fence, leaning over it with his forearms.

I smack a palm to my forehead, removing it slightly to look at him with one eye.

"He told you about that?"

"Yep," he says with a smug grin.

I had another incident at the grocery store. Colin was getting blamed for a new cashier whose drawer was off at the end of her shift. She tried to accuse him of stealing the cash, and I lost my shit. Again. It was even more of a reason for us to figure out the next step for our future. One that involved us both.

"Fuck," I murmur to myself, making him chuckle.

"Worth it?" he asks with a grin.

"Oh, most definitely," I blurt. "But apparently he went there to pick up his

last paycheck? I don't know. Feels off. He never leaves me a note like that before I'm even up."

"I'm sure it's fine. He wouldn't miss today for anything."

He pushes off the fence, turning to rest his back against it as he peers off towards the race car.

"Do you know why he removed the hood yesterday?" Ash asks, cocking a brow at the awaiting car sitting in our designated pit area. "I noticed he scuffed up the paint job we worked tirelessly on. What's that about?"

I turn my head back and inspect the hood from a distance.

"You're right." My brows lower in confusion.

"Aye, bitch!" I hear the voice I could pick out of any crowd calling out for me in the distance.

Ashton's eyes widen as he turns to face me.

"Kat!" I scold silently as she approaches me from the side, wrapping her arms around my neck and pushing me back into the fence. She molds her curvy body to mine, hooking a Thermos with two of her fingers and her keys with her pinky. I breathe her in and smell it immediately.

"Are you drinking?! Hold on." I grab the Thermos and smell it. "Is this a Margarita?!"

She purses her lips, tossing a hand at me. "Pre-game the race, baby!" She elbows me. "Besides, I heard some honeys were gonna be raining in today." Her eyes find Ashton, raking the entirety of his body. His eyes widen further, his chin practically hitting his neck as his eyes glance at me nervously. "Looks like the forecast was correct."

Ashton swallows, and his eyes dart around for safety. *None in the presence of this cougar. Sorry, kid.*

As I'm about to successfully strangle myself with these braids, I see a

canary-colored shirt making its way through the crowd.

“Oh, thank God,” I whisper. “C’mon, let’s head back to the car.”

We walk back over to our pit area. Well, Ashton and I walk, Kat stumbles, and I frown at the paint scrapes I see when I approach. I didn’t notice them when Ash unloaded the car from his truck. We worked really hard to make the plastic exterior look exactly like his yellow-striped button-up shirt, just for him to mess with it last night?

I need answers.

Colin makes his way across the track with his backpack slung over one shoulder, sauntering over to us.

“Where were you?!” I scold as he approaches me. “My nerves are shot, Colin. What did you do this morning? Where were you?!”

I’m exhausted, spent, as emotionally drained as they come, but dammit if I haven’t still been giving everything for him and us. It’s been a hard few weeks, but I threw my energy into the new business, one with real meaning. Who starts a new business, putting themselves into more debt while still lassoing old debts? A girl who was told by a man she loved that she could do anything, be anything, that’s who.

As crazy as I am for it, I know it’s right. It was a feeling in my gut that wouldn’t go away once Colin and I came up with it.

“DD, I had to fix the flat. The flat. Race is today. I had to fix the flat,” he comments, placing his hands on my slumped shoulders.

“What are you talking abouuuttt...”

My words trail off as the literal air gets sucked out of my lungs. Knees go weak as an intense feeling of butterflies reawaken within every part of me, a sensation that’s almost too big to handle. My mouth hangs slightly parted as

my eyes connect with another tall, dark-haired man in a canary-colored shirt, making his way through the crowd.

"No." I shake my head. "No, you didn't," I practically whisper, suddenly feeling the need to vomit. Or chug Kat's margarita.

"I did," Colin says in his robotic tone. "I did, and DD will smile again."

My throat dries up as if I've swallowed sand, and I turn to tip my head at Colin. "Why do you keep calling me that?"

Before he can answer, Lake's eyes find mine.

He looks even hotter than I remember, and it bothers me. I get homesick at the sight of him. My heart is suddenly alive and well after weeks of hibernation. Weeks of pretending I wasn't watching him on the screen when the games were on. Weeks of scrolling through social media, looking for any hint of a new woman in his life. Heartbreaking, lame shit women do to themselves for some odd reason. Rip into old wounds to see how fast they bleed.

His tall, fit form is standing there beneath a pair of casual jeans and a basic, plain, custom-made t-shirt that was never meant to look so good on a body. It's literally cut for a box, yet forms around his toned, tanned arms and broad chest, while a zip-up hoodie fits comfortably over it.

It's Sunday. He should be prepping for a game right now. Not be here. At the race.

Stalling at the fence about twenty yards away, he grips the metal with both hands, leaning forward, almost looking like he needs to catch his breath before he crosses the track. Colin shakes my shoulders.

"Do you or not?" he asks.

I realize the world around me is blurred in his presence. My ears numb, as if I'm drowning deep in that water again, sounds becoming vibrations. I

shake my head of it, pulling my eyes away from Lake to look at Colin.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Do you want him to come over here or not? He told me to ask first."

My lips pull into a lopsided grin and a scoff of a laugh leaves me.

"Seriously?"

I look back at Lake, who's still leaning forward, gripping the fence like if he lets go, he'll fall forward directly onto his face. His worried blue eyes lock on mine again, and I feel it everywhere.

"Yeah. Lake didn't want to ruin this. He didn't want to ruin my day. Your day. Ruin the day."

I take a deep breath, letting it out with a heavy sigh. I feel an arm slide around my shoulders, and the smell of margarita fills my nostrils.

"Them meteorologists never lie," Kat comments with a feisty tone, staring with me over at Lake.

I close my eyes tightly, shaking my head at her nonsense. Opening them, I catch Lake's head dropping between his shoulders, arms still bracing him. The reflection of a gold necklace bounces off his neck as he hangs. He drops his hands from the railing, each finger slower than the last, before he stands and turns, beginning to walk away.

My eyes narrow before they widen in a panic.

He thought I just said no.

I curse out loud, dropping Kat's arm from my shoulder as she stumbles slightly. She falls back into the arms of Ashton, who is there to scoop her up, stabilizing her on her feet again. Perfect.

Pushing through people coming to watch the race, I practically hurdle them like waves, walking deeper and deeper out into my water.

"Lake!" I call out, feeling the desperation filling my lungs.

The closer I get, the harder it is to breathe.

He stalls in place beneath the shade of a nearby tree, his hands resting on the top of his head. The muscles of his back stretch the fabric of the hoodie as his fingers interlock and find their way to the back of his neck.

I'm breathless now as I make the last few steps to reach him.

"You lied to me, Dylan," he says, still facing away from me.

My heart rate triples at the sound of his voice saying my name again. Fuck, I missed him. But he's not wrong. I did lie to him. I promised him I'd take the job. But he promised me things too, so screw that.

"You always said I was bad at it," I retort playfully.

Silence fills the space between us, and I know his mind is racing.

"Tell me you want me to be here before I turn around," he calls out.

My chest practically cracks in half at the comment. He can't face me if I were to walk away from him right now. I understand that pain. Know it intimately.

I slowly walk forward until I'm directly behind him. I grab onto a few of the fingers resting on his neck, pulling his hand down and turning him around.

He pivots slightly, looking down at our hands, staring at them as his chest heaves. His nervousness is so new to me. Lake Decker is nervous in the presence of his stale therapist. I'll never live that down.

"I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather have you be," I say softly, grabbing both of his hands in mine as I gaze up at him.

His eyes slowly trail up until he gains enough confidence to look at me. It's as if that one look breaks him, and his shoulders harden while his jaw tightens, his eyes wrinkling in the corners.

"She told you to be patient with me, didn't she?" he asks abruptly.

I suck in a breath at the mention of his mother. Tears fill my eyes and I wrinkle my nose at the pain of them forming.

“There’s no other reason a girl as amazing as you would wait for a guy like me,” he confesses.

The tension is thick and the emotions we both hold over the secrets we’ve held onto feel as if they are ready to bubble over.

“Who said I did?” I ask suddenly.

Idiot, Dylan. You are an idiot.

This is not the time for inappropriate humor, clearly. He looks like I just stabbed him in the side with a spear.

“I’m kidding!” I say abruptly, with a dry laugh. “I’m sorry, I’m just nervous and stupid shit comes out of my mouth at weird times, and I thought maybe you needed to feel a little anxious like I do. Payback for the whole semen-swallowing comment,” I continue rambling. “Remember?”

He pulls my hands forward until I fall into his chest, interrupting my rant.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, staring down at me. “I’m so sorry I took so long to get my head together, and I’m so sorry for saying sorry so much.”

I blink and realize we are pressed against one another, surrounded by a crowd of people walking past us. My eyes wander all around, checking to see who’s looking.

“I don’t care about them or anyone,” Lake says, as if reading my mind. His face hardens as he contemplates his words. “You lied to me about taking the job...and I lied to you, too.”

Our gazes connect again, his eyes piercing straight through to my soul, tearing me down. My forehead creases and I stare with uneasy eyes.

“I told you on rainbow, I’d never leave you. And I left you. Before you could leave me.” His hands drop mine between us and he grabs the sides of

my face, locking my eyes on his. “But I was wrong, wasn’t I? Because you were never going to walk away, were you?”

My lashes flutter as fresh tears form.

Nothing could keep me from this man. Trust me, I tried to tell myself that a code of ethics and professionalism mattered, but when it came down to us, nothing could hold us back. Not careers, not illnesses, not disabilities, not even death.

“I’m not a coward anymore, Dylan,” Lake continues. “Colin helped me conquer that. I came here today, leaving all the broken pieces of my heart on the table, ready and willing for you to crumble them into dust if you needed to.” He licks his lips, taking a breath before peering back into my eyes. “See, I’m not afraid of the potential heartbreak. That doesn’t scare me anymore. What I’m afraid of now is not trying before my time runs out.”

“Lake,” I whisper through my cracked tone.

“I haven’t been the same without you.” He runs his thumbs along my jaw, gazing down at my lips and back. “I think about you and about Colin...endlessly. I told myself even if she doesn’t want you back for breaking her heart, I’d at least try to be friends. To be anything, just to keep you guys in my life. I just…need you.”

My heart aches at his admission, and my tears continue to flow down my cold cheeks.

“We could never be friends,” I say, shaking my head, and his forehead wrinkles. “You would never make book club.”

He tips his head back in a laugh before staring at me again. His smile fades into an appreciative grin as he leans forward, resting his forehead against mine, our pained smiles mirroring each other’s.

But as I think about the past few weeks, I’m reminded of my heartache and

the complete feeling of emptiness at the loss of him. It hurt. There's just no denying it. I wanted to mourn with him, work through that together. My smile fades and he feels it.

"Tell me I can love you the way I need to in order to breathe," he whispers his demands like he does. "Tell me you'll let me back in."

My stomach churns in anxiousness. Of course I love him, and I've dreamed of this moment. But will he walk away when things get hard again? Will he lose himself to his own self-pity when he feels he doesn't deserve what he has before him?

I can't hold on to this fear of the what-ifs any longer. As if sensing my running thoughts, his grip tightens on my face and his eyes gloss over beneath those dark, full lashes.

"I love you, Dylan," he says with a heavy sigh, his pained eyes trained on mine. "Tell me I'm lucky enough for you to love me back."

I feel explosive and numb. Like I'm breathing too much and not enough. She was right about him. We always come back to who we love in the end. Life just isn't long enough to hold on to these needs when you've seen death before you. People become woke to the understanding that life is simply a series of events that occur until we meet our end. Days that bleed together, struggles that endlessly plague us, nights that ache with the pain of the uncontrolled.

But then there are moments of pure connection to another soul that scream from the depths of us to be explored. Moments that beg for our attention, like that never-ending itch that requires to be scratched. Demands to be touched.

Love fucking hurts. And occasionally, we all lack the courage to embrace the torture that it is. It's not easy, and doesn't always align the way you wish. It's a give and pull, a race that feels unfinished, a dizzying circle of highs and

lows. Some days you're in first place, and some days the flat sends you to the pit crew, disappointment racking through you. But if we don't have the courage to hop into the car and take the first lap, then what's the point? Sidelines are for the weak, and if there's one thing to know about me, it's that we don't do weak here.

"I'll love you every lap, Lake. When we're in the lead at the peak of our race, and when we crash into the fence, burning into nothing but shattered pieces and flames. I'll love you through it all because you've always been part of my team. Our team."

His eyes pinch in the corners, and he drops one of his hands, fisting the edge of my sweatshirt. Nostrils flare as his throat bobs, holding back his emotions.

"Tell me I can kiss you," he whispers, inches from my lips. "Please, Dylan, for the love of God, tell me I can—"

I stop his words, pulling him into my lips by the shirt on his chest.

Our lips meet, and everything melts away. Fears, sorrows, and worries wash away from us in our waves as his tongue brushes along mine ever so softly.

It's taken a lot of courage to get here. A lot of time to think about what it means to be in love and need someone when we constantly think we are strong enough to do it alone.

We continue kissing on our little island, miles away from the reality of people everywhere around us, and a feeling of utter bliss surrounds me. That is, until a familiar voice rings through.

"You done fixing it yet?" Colin calls out behind us.

Lake pulls away from my lips, looking almost as dazed and drunk from our kiss as Kat is from her margarita. His mouth pulls into the sexiest half-grin

before widening into a full smile, showcasing that little chip in his tooth I've missed so much.

He licks his lips, almost savoring our kiss as he peers at my lips again.

"I don't know," he calls out to Colin, keeping his eyes locked on mine. "Might need more fixing."

Pressing his lips back to mine, he kisses me again and I fold into his heat, my arms wrapping around his neck as he holds my lower back, pulling me tight to him.

"I...I don't understand. Colin doesn't understand. It looks fixed. I think we can race now. Race now. It's fixed. I fixed it."

Lake's lips leave mine, needing a breath from the overwhelming sensation of being back in this place again. As do I. My butterfly hos are wasted out of this world.

"You're right, Col," he says, still looking at me. He finally straightens, wrapping an arm around my shoulder to turn me. I look up at him as he opens his other arm out, waving the tips of his fingers at Colin. "You fixed it. You fixed the team."

Colin walks forward, gripping the straps of his backpack until he approaches us. He looks at Lake's arm, confused, before ducking beneath it. Lake wraps his arm around his shoulders, pulling him into me until we form a tiny little huddle. Colin's eyes find mine, and I give him the most appreciative smile. I mouth 'I love you' to him and he nods in return.

"It's time to get pumped up for this race!" Lake says, switching into football mode, his face set in a sexy, terrifying glare. "No more tears. Only the tears from our competitors!" He yells in drill sergeant mode.

I bite the corner of my lip as I look over at him, feeling every bit of that dominant tone of voice between my thighs. *Chill, bitch.*

“On the count of three, we scream cowards at the top of our lungs!” Lake says, and Colin’s eyes light up with excitement. “Then we go out there and we race. We race and we leave here with a win before the flag even flies.”

I squeeze Lake’s shoulder, feeling those tears forming again. His eyes find mine in the huddle and the softest smile creeps across his lips.

“Love you guys,” he says in a cracked tone, flexing his jaw as he stands, putting his extended hand out in the middle of our circle.

Colin follows suit, placing his hand on top of Lake’s. Both of them look up at me as my eyes drift to the clouds above us. I say a quick thank you to the amazingly selfless woman who did her part in keeping me strong enough to bring us here. My focus drifts back to the two of them, eyeing them both with a mischievous, confident grin, finally placing mine on top.

With the past now behind us and the promise of the unknown before us, we find our courage together.

And we scream.

I thought I got a glimpse of home when Colin surprised me in my parking garage, but I had no idea of the overwhelming euphoria I'd fall into with my lips against hers again.

Dylan is my safe space. She's my light, my energy, my sunny days. She's my teacher, my inspiration, my love. She's everything I've needed to feel whole when I didn't even know I was incomplete. She's what life, as short as it may be, is all about.

I'm back where I belong.

And more in love with her than I ever thought possible.

The race is about to start, so we rush back over to the race car on the inside of the track.

Immediately, I spot Kat, her neighbor who helped her get ready for our night out. Her face lights up when she sees us walking over hand in hand. Her expression changes almost instantly when she bumps into a golden-haired man I know all too well.

Bestie from the bar. Insert glass break.

I don’t know what their relationship has been like since I’ve been out of the picture. Obviously, she reached out to him for help with the car. The picture on Facebook comes to mind, and I’ve definitely located the infamous arm I studied for longer than I care to admit. Has he been pining for her, knowing I left them heartbroken and in pain? Did he slide in and become part of their team when I couldn’t commit? The thought makes me nauseous.

Dylan links her arm through mine even tighter as we approach, and my mind churns as I try to read the vibes. Is this a calming mechanism or anxiety on her part?

Golden Retriever eyes me suspiciously and mine narrow in response. Kat bounces excitedly, her fingers twiddling together as her eyes flash to me, then Golden Boy, and back, as if she’s waiting for the main event of the evening to begin.

“Look who I found skipping games,” Dylan says all cutesy, leaning back to smirk at me before wrapping her arm around my lower back and pressing up against my side.

See. My girl.

“Ah, yes. Look who finally made it,” Golden Boy says, tipping his head with a smirk.

I can’t read his energy. He’s either a huge dick or really just a naïve sugar bear. He’s entirely impossible to read, but it’s definitely one or the other.

“I don’t…need to beat your ass, do I?” I ask casually, legitimately confused.

His brows knit together before he looks at Dylan and back. Dylan rolls her eyes, looking away.

“Uh...no. No, I don’t think so?” he answers, sounding equally confused.

He looks to the ground, scratching his head, almost like he’s racking his

brain for any past faults that may be the reason for a guy like me to be mad at him. He shakes his head with finality, as if deciding there couldn't possibly be anything.

Yeah, this guy wouldn't hurt a gnat.

Dylan clicks her tongue, shaking her head at my nonsense, clearly understanding more than Retriever over here.

"Ash, you remember Lake. Lake, Ash," she says, reintroducing us.

If this is indeed her good friend, then I need to respect that like I respect her.

I gently remove her arm from my side, and she looks at me nervously. I approach Ashton, standing directly in front of him, before gripping him into a hug. He stills for a moment, until realizing I'm not attempting to beat his ass, and he returns the embrace as we pat each other on the back.

"Thank you, man. For being there when I couldn't," I whisper so only he can hear.

"I'm sorry about your mom, Lake," he begins in a low voice with a firm pat. "Dylan knew you needed time. But she needs you in a way her friend can't fill. They need you, and you need them."

My heart pinches in my chest, the emotions again, nearly impossible to handle.

"I need someone," Kat interrupts us with a slight slur to her tone that has me cocking my head. I pull apart from Ashton and he holds his hand out to shake up as Kat continues, "To get this bitch another refill! It's taco Tuesday, and after this drink, this senorita is getting me a big ol' burrito tonight!"

She wiggles her eyebrows at Ashton and his face flushes.

"Is she drunk?" I mouth to Ashton.

He nods with wide eyes.

“Kat, it’s Sunday. Not Tuesday,” Dylan says, clearly not catching the meaning behind the crude joke. “And speaking of which, why aren’t you at the game? This is a playoff game, Lake! You’re gonna get fined!”

Damn, I missed her scolding me.

Smirking, I grip her hips, pulling her into me. “I don’t care to be anywhere but here. I’ll pay the fucking fine.”

“But, Lake—”

I pause her thoughts by capturing her lips in a quick kiss. “The only *but* I’m worried about are these asses we are about to kick.”

We switch into race mode as Ashton and I side up along Colin’s car at the starting line.

“Alright, so when they wave the flag, you just have to pedal your heart out,” Dylan tells him from the front of the hood as he buckles himself in.

“I’d rather not,” Colin responds in his monotone voice, making Dylan frown and gaze at me questionably.

“Oh, shit!” I yell, standing abruptly. “Wait one sec!” I jog down the racetrack, weaving through the other racers with their families to the pit crew area.

“Lake, it’s about to start!” Dylan calls out after me.

Making it back to our initial station, I quickly grab the jacket from Colin’s backpack that I tucked in there before we left. Holding it against my chest, my eyes water again as I grit my back teeth together. An announcer on the loudspeaker lets the crowd know the race is about to begin, pulling me back to the present.

Approaching the race car that’s conveniently painted the same color as Colin’s favorite shirt, Dylan’s anxious eyes find mine. With a serene smile, I hold up the Rainbow Warrior jacket.

Her throat bobs and her eyes immediately fill with tears as she straightens. She mouths, *the jacket.*

“This should fit, yeah?” I say, holding it before Colin.

His eyes light up like fireworks as he touches the fabric, running his fingers across the different colors and textures.

“I want it on. Want it on. Heard it makes you faster. She said it makes you faster,” he says, unbuckling his belt and standing up out of the car. “She told me.”

Smiling at his mention of my mother, I help him into the jacket that runs up on his arms a little, but still fits around the back. Dylan’s got a hand over her mouth as tears spill down her cheeks. She knows the meaning behind this. The significance of such a moment.

“Racers to the starting line!” a loud booming voice announces over the speakers.

The team waits by our designated pit crew area, and I throw an arm around Dylan’s shoulder, awaiting the race with Colin in his yellow car, the Rainbow Warrior jacket getting its chance to shine again. She looks up at me with an appreciative smile. Mouthing *I love you* to me, I wipe her tear-stained cheek with my thumb.

“I love you,” I whisper back.

“She’d be so proud of the man you’ve become, Lake,” she continues, gazing longingly at me.

“The man I’m becoming,” I correct her. Her lashes flutter as she inhales a breath. “The man I’m becoming with you.”

Our lips meet again as the flag flies in the background. The crowd erupts in a roar as people jump and wave their hands around wildly in the blur

surrounding us. I see nothing but her and my first glimpse of what a future with us together could really mean.

Arriving back at my condo, we're both giggling like a couple of high-schoolers from the day's events.

Colin did, in fact, win the race. He won the race with the souped-up car he constructed secretly all on his own. His car flew past everyone else who was simply pedaling their cars around the track. Our team looked on in shock when Colin's car shifted into gear, zooming through everyone, lapping most of the racers multiple times as his car flew like the wind. We went crazy, Dylan, Ashton, Kat, and I, hollering like a group of wild animals as he finished the race in record time.

He was disqualified almost immediately upon stepping out of the car that had entirely broken the rules of the race, but it didn't stop Ashton and I from lifting him up on our shoulders and cheering like a bunch of crazed savages living in a world all their own. It didn't matter that he didn't technically win. He won in his eyes. He won in our eyes, and the smile it brought to his face was one I'd never seen before.

I'd ruin any race, break any rules, disrupt any event to see him smile like that again.

"He told me it was the jacket," she says, still smiling from our laughter. "That he never even really connected the battery like he said."

A deep rumble of laughter leaves my throat as Dylan slides up in front of me, gripping the zipper of my sweatshirt in her fists.

“I’m just glad to have my truck working again.”

After the race, Ashton drove Kat and Colin back to the apartment complex for the night so Dylan and I could spend some time together. Hopefully, he made it out alive.

My smile slowly fades into a grin as she flutters her bright amber eyes, gazing up at me with a new fiery look in them. We have so much to catch up on, but at the moment, all I want to do is reorient myself with the way she feels, the way she tastes.

“Thank you,” she whispers, gazing at my lips, then back at my eyes. “For being everything I’ve ever wanted and needed. For being everything I never thought existed.”

I know she’s referring to how I am with Colin. Showing her that a relationship with someone who chooses them both is really possible. He’s always going to hold a special place in her life, and that alone is one thing I admire most about her. I couldn’t be happier it didn’t work with anyone else.

“And thank you for showing me that a life without *her* isn’t an ending. Only a beginning.”

Her chest expands then contracts as the breath leaves her. Hands slowly rake up my neck, finding the hair at the back of my head. She toys with it between her fingers, the feeling so welcomed.

“Fuck, I’ve missed you,” I practically groan, pressing my body against hers.

Like gas to a flame, the fire between us takes off.

Clothes become a distant memory as we kiss. The need to connect, never more pressing. I strip her down to her bra and underwear in the living room. My shirt gets thrown on the coffee table, my pants pulled down by her eager

hands. I pick her up and her thighs find my waist as we fumble back towards the bedroom, our lips staying connected.

I toss her back onto the bed and she squeals. Smiling, she bites down on her bottom lip and I slowly stalk towards her, pulling my boxer briefs down before I kneel on the bed. She slides out of her underwear, letting the straps of her bra slide down her shoulders before she tosses it into a dark corner of the room. We're both naked on the bedspread as my thigh separates hers and I settle myself between them.

The quickness has faded as we lie here, skin against skin, studying each other, remembering, soaking it all in.

"I missed you so much, too," she whispers, her thumb brushing across my bottom lip.

She leans up, capturing the lip between hers, sucking on it softly. My heart races almost as fast as hers as we familiarize ourselves with each other again. The head of my hard and ready cock brushes against her soft, wet center, and we both release breathy sighs.

My hand runs over her perky breast, cupping the soft skin in my palm. Her eyes fall closed and I lean down, capturing her pebbled nipple into my mouth, sucking softly.

"Please, Lake, I can't wait any longer," she moans, dropping her head back against the pillow and arching her back, needing more contact.

"Okay, baby," I whisper, understanding. I can't wait any longer either. The five weeks without her were entirely too much.

Gripping the base of my shaft, I run the length of her, coating myself in her eager excitement. With our eyes on each other's, I angle myself, finally pushing into her tight, dripping heat.

"Fuck," I mumble, dropping my head against hers as my cock slides deep.

This feeling, the closeness, the connection, the love...it's shaking me to my core. Making me question how stupid I was for ever walking away from her, yet almost knowing it was a blessing in disguise. Now I know what I could never leave.

Her lips are parted, her lashes fluttering as she adjusts, gripping her fingers into the skin of my shoulders. I pull out slightly, then push myself even deeper, with more force. She cries out, nails piercing into my flesh.

I groan at the sensation, then continue upping my speed as I say, "I want this. Us. Every day."

She licks her lips, eyes wincing as I increase my thrusts. Her hands slide to my neck, holding my jaw as we gaze lovingly at one another. I roll us to the side, gripping her thigh with one hand, hitching it up and over my hip while I continue fucking her senseless.

Shock waves of immense pleasure stem from the base of my spine, and I know our first time back together won't be long. Everything feels heightened when the word love comes into play. This woman is my soulmate. My person, until my end of days.

"Lake—" she begins, and I already know where this is going.

"I know, I'm close too," I groan, licking her bottom lip until she opens her mouth for me again.

Our tongues touch gently as mine sweeps the length of hers.

"More," she moans.

Jesus, this woman.

She kisses me like she never thought she would again. Holding me against her like the thought of me being with her in this moment is still a dream to her. *I can't stand it.*

"No, Lake, I'm...not," she stammers, her brow wrinkling as she finds my

eyes. “Don’t finish...”

I thrust up hard, cutting off her words, causing her to cry out and arch her back, pushing her chest into mine.

This shouldn’t affect me the way it is, but the idea that she’s possibly off her birth control at the moment is really turning me into a madman. Visions of her round and swollen with my baby are consuming my mind, forcing me to fuck her harder than before. It’s everything I never thought I’d want.

But I want it. I want it with her.

“I won’t,” I say against her lips. My gaze finds hers as our chests heave together, panting in our chase for that good feeling we only get together. “Unless you want me to.”

Her eyes clue me in to her understanding, but before she can answer, they close tightly, her mouth dropping open as she grips the back of my neck, tightening around my length as she comes around me. Her beautiful cries ring out around me and I lose my fight to my own release. At the last second, I pull out, spilling all over her abdomen as I stroke myself empty, breathless at the pleasure.

We clean up, curling up naked beneath the sheets after our soothing shower. I wrap my arm around her waist, backing her flush against me.

“You didn’t do it,” she whispers, turning her chin to face me. “I thought you were going to—”

I prop myself on an elbow, my hand needing to hold that beautiful jaw, my thumb desperate to touch those lips as I explain what she’s hinting at.

“I didn’t,” I reply. “Not that I didn’t want to. I definitely wanted to. You will be carrying my baby at some point. I want you pregnant with my kid. I can see it already.”

“Lake.” She smiles at me with an astonished look about her.

“But I figure there’s a proper way to do this.”

Her lips curl into an unknowing grin as her forehead wrinkles, and it’s adorable, to say the least.

It may be too soon for this to all be happening, but one valuable lesson I’ve learned is that time is ticking, and I don’t want any more of it wasted.

“I love you,” I say again, feeling free with myself and my emotions as I do. “Tell me you’ll marry me, DD.”

Her eyes widen at my statement and she pulls away from me, looking at me all crazy-like.

“Why’d you say that?”

I chuckle, “Because it’s what I want.”

“No,” she shakes her head. “The other part. DD. Why’d you say that? What is that?”

I smile, withholding my laugh. He’s been calling her that, and she still has no idea why. I lean back in the bed, reaching over to open the drawer to one of my nightstands. In the drawer is the tiny black box. I hold it in my hands and she sits upright abruptly, backing herself into the headboard with the sheets clutched to her chest, looking almost fearful.

“Tell me you’ll marry me, and I’ll tell you what it means,” I tease, popping the box open.

Inside is the ring that was literally made for her. My mother’s ring. The one she bought for herself when she decided she could conquer and rise again with the weight of the world on her back. The fact that it’s a canary-colored diamond, pear-shaped for the tears that would fall no more, with a delicate band of diamonds, is even more of a sign that our story was written in the stars above.

Her shoulders slump as her mouth falls open.

“When did you...? How did you...?”

“I can’t take all the credit,” I smile, removing the ring from the box to admire its new look. “The original diamond is hers, but the band she had designed for you.”

Her face wrinkles up and those tears fall freely again. My mom gave me this ring in her will with a special message not to open it until the timing was right. The jewelers had contacted me after her passing, making sure to let me know what it stated in her will. Only open when the time is right.

I now see why. A small folded up letter resides in the box's top with Dylan’s name on it. I gently peel it out of the box, seeing her handwriting on the top of it. Touching it with a finger, my own tears form.

“It’s for you,” I say, handing it to her.

She looks at me with uncertainty before opening the tiny letter. Her face crumples into a sob after she reads it, and she holds the note against her heart. I don’t ask what’s on it. That’s between them. That’s their special relationship, as short as it was, that they get to keep together.

I do, however, grab her other hand, her left hand, pulling it out before me.

With the ring now in my hands, I demand again, “Tell me you’ll marry me.”

She sniffles adorably, her eyes wrinkling in the corners as she nods vigorously.

I slide the ring onto her finger and we both peer down at it.

“Dylan Decker,” I whisper before bringing the hand to my lips, kissing her fingers softly, one by one.

“DD? Meant Dylan Decker?!” she gasps, then laughs. “Lake, Colin’s been calling me that for months now!”

“I know.” I can’t hide my cheesy grin. “Guess they both knew long before

we did, huh?"

"Nah," she sniffs, gazing lovingly at her ring. "I knew the moment you called me stale."

I chuckle into the pillow before picking it up and throwing it at her, causing her to buckle over with laughter. I quickly hop alongside her at the top of the bed beneath the comforter, sitting back against the headboard with my arm wrapped tightly around her.

"Can we call Colin now? I really want to tell him already," I say, peering down at her perfect little hand, the ring shining in the dimly lit room.

"Tomorrow," she whispers, still gazing at it with her grin in place. "Tonight is ours."

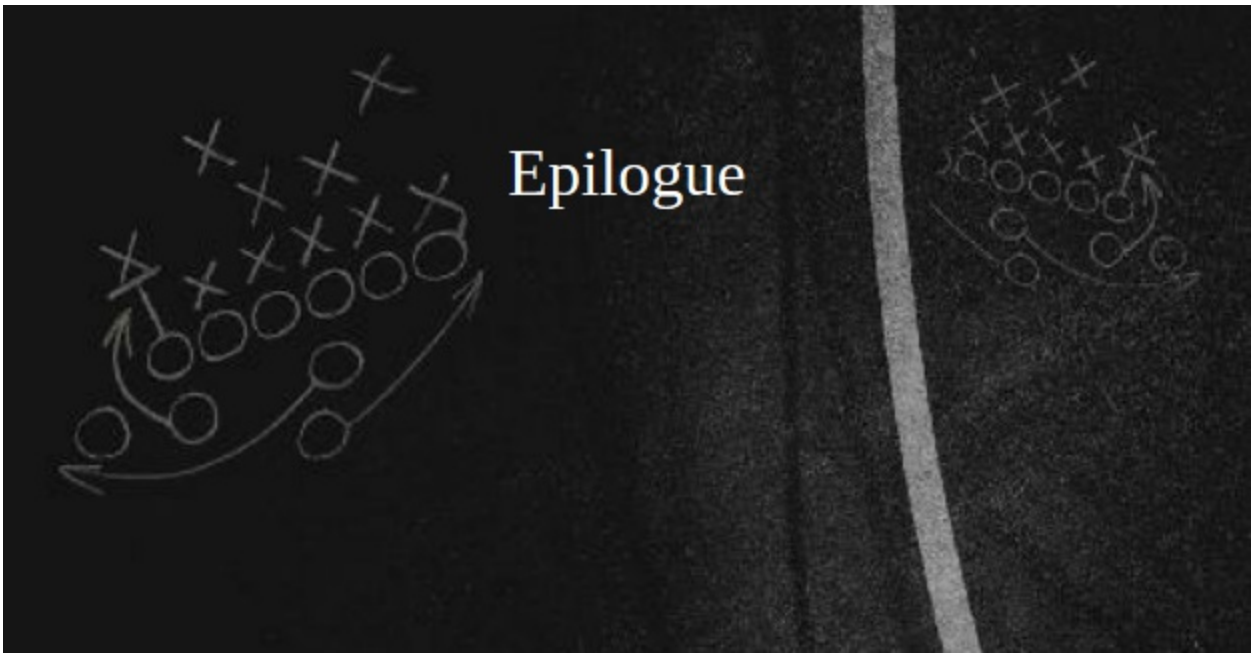
With that, our lips find each other again and the fire that's always there reignites.

Life circles around us as it always does. I'm thankful that I can now appreciate it the way I was meant to. Taking the time to embrace our faults while celebrating how we conquer them every day. Dylan and I were meant to be together, our story aligning just the way it needed to.

My knee, my downfall, was the key to opening my eyes to the fight that really mattered. The fight to own our setbacks, allowing love to guide us, and seeing life through someone else's lens. Someone who can appreciate the facts of the world around us, the pain and hardships, and still see the hope of that yellow sun breaking through.

Life and love are like that racetrack, as Dylan mentioned. The good days and bad days circle around as they always do.

But just like The Canary Cowards, this is one race we couldn't lose if we tried.



Epilogue

Being married to an elite athlete has its perks, but being married to Lake Decker has all the perks.

"He wants a hot dog. A hot dog. River wants a hot dog. With Ketchup."

I run my hands through my hair, gripping the ends of it as I stand at the window, blowing out an anxious breath.

"River wants a hot dog. Can Unckie give him one? Give him a hot dog. With ketchup?"

I turn back around in our reserved box, seeing River playing with his train track set on the floor, the toys all spread on a yellow blanket set out by Colin. It makes my heart melt. Every time. I thought Colin was the best big brother, but it turns out he's an even better uncle.

Three years since River was born, and he's been a doting figure in his life. I never thought Colin would connect with a young child how he has, but he takes such pride in taking care of our boy.

"Um...yeah. Yeah, he can have whatever he wants as long as it's cut up small, like I showed you. Just grab the food from the counter over there, Col.

It’s all for us. The bananas too.”

“Riv, Unckie found bananas!” he cheers excitedly, and River bounces on his butt. “Bananas!”

The whistle blows as I roll the bottom of my maternity shirt in my grasp, my palms sweaty with anxiety. I watch as Lake lines up near Candy on the line of scrimmage. The whistle blows, and it’s a hand-off to Lake, just as I assumed. He spins, ducking into the colossal mess of men directly on the end zone line, disappearing from my sight entirely. I stare at the large screen over the field before us, trying to see. The whistle blows again and I see a referee holding up the touchdown sign. The crowd erupts as my screams fill the tiny, enclosed boxed section.

“He did it! He did it!” I scream and attempt to jump, turning to look at Colin and River. “Ahh!”

The little dark-haired miniature version of Lake himself looks at me all cockeyed before looking up at Colin.

“She a crazy mama,” he says, making a face.

I continue jumping and slapping the glass of the window while the rest of the crowd roars and confetti spills from the ceiling.

“She’s a crazy sister, too. Crazy sister,” Colin adds, giving him a little plate of snacks as the world outside our private box continues to erupt in celebration.

Lake finally gets to us after the game and post-game press. River runs towards him, jumping up into his arms as he drops his bags to hold him.

"We did it, baby boy!" He kisses his chubby little cheek. "Daddy did it!"

"Congrats, Lake," Colin says, coming up to pat his shoulder, sounding all formal. "I won a race once," he adds.

Lake drops his head back in laughter. "That you did. Whooped their ass, too."

"Ass!" River repeats.

He makes a pained face at me before setting River down. He runs back over to Unckie Colin, jumping up on his back. Lake bites his lower lip and makes those eyes at me that get me pregnant while being pregnant, grabbing my hand and pulling me into him.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, running his hand along my belly.

"Well, I thought I was going to go into labor from the fucking stress you were putting me through. Jesus, that last play," I shake my head before punching his arm.

He laughs, grabbing the area and hisses, as if I could really hurt him. "I know. I almost went into premature labor myself."

He grips my hips, pulling me close to him. Candy comes out of the locker room just in time to give us a low whistle.

"Give her a break, Deck. She's already got one in there," he says, bumping shoulders with him. "Looking hot, Cracker! Pregnancy looks good on you."

Lake glares at him like he always does when Candy hits on me, and he raises his hands, backing away. Turning, he grabs River, placing him on his shoulders as he squeals, before playfully knocking shoulders with Colin as

they walk back towards the field and some of the other players that have basically become our extended family.

“I’m so proud of you, baby,” I whisper in all seriousness as his hands slide from my hips to my belly.

“Please, you’re the one carrying my baby. Football is easy, mommin’ ain’t.” He grabs the diaper bag from me, tossing it on his back along with his other bags.

“Lake, really, I can—”

He cuts off my words with a kiss. “C’mon babe. Let’s get you and baby girl home. Time to get those feet up.”

I roll my eyes, then smile lovingly. *I can’t stand how much I love this man.*

We pull into the newly renovated home, the whole family in tow.

“I’ll feed the horses!” Colin calls out, practically running from the truck as soon as we pull into the circular driveway.

“Can I Unckie?! Mom, River feed horsie?” River asks in his adorably sweet voice.

“Of course, sweetie,” I reply with a smile. “Let’s just get your coat on first.”

After feeding the horses and Lake getting settled and cleaned up post-game, I wash the old dishes in the sink before leaning back against the counter. I take a second to be thankful for everything around me and the immense love

that fills this home. Peering at the dining table that really brought us together, I smile to myself. Memories of that Thanksgiving flood me every time the holidays roll around, but instead of the overwhelming sadness that used to be there, we are now filled with nothing but joy and memories that flood our hearts.

We lost Lydia, but we truly gained a family. A growing one at that. The one she always wanted for him. The one he never saw coming. Lake will never be on his own, as much as he felt he was after her passing. We've created our own traditions. Started our own legacy. Together.

I sit at the table with my computer and paperwork in front of me as Lake walks in through the side door near the kitchen. He approaches me from behind, his hands finding my shoulders. He massages the sore muscles gently, and I lean my neck into it.

"You shouldn't be working so hard, baby. You need to take it—"

"If you came over here to tell me to take it easy, you can walk yourself back out that door and go shack up with Colin in his house."

"Yeah, right." He laughs. "He just kicked me out! He loves the privacy of his own space."

We splurged a little after renovations to the home we both loved. Selling Lake's mom's house wasn't even a question. We knew that the land and space would be perfect for our growing family, and the guest house we built for Colin was the perfect solution. That, and the horses are clearly obsessed with Colin and we couldn't imagine ever getting rid of them. He simply took over their care, never once being intimidated by their size or demeanor, with the help of Lake, and Dale, who often visits us. He has a genuine connection to them I find so beautiful and truly magical. Being in that barn is therapeutic for us all.

“Is River down?” Lake asks, peering down the hall.

“Yeah. Poor kiddo was so tired after eating four hot dogs tonight.”

Lake gasps. “Four?!”

“Kid is just like his damn daddy. Can’t keep these boys fed.”

He chuckles, continuing to rub my shoulders before leaning over me and asking, “What are you working on tonight?”

“Just trying to set the schedule for next month. We’ve got eight new patients I’m working into the program.”

That new side project I was working on? The new business? Well, it became a big deal. I opened up my own therapy center for kids and adults with special needs and disabilities. Who better to assist those with impairments or injuries from sports than a woman with all the experience?

I hired Colin immediately as my office assistant, working behind the scenes, filing and working the books in peace, away from the Karens of the world. Never again will I allow him to work in a grocery store. Nope. Never.

He’s had an amazing time alongside me when he actually decides to get away from the confines of the office, helping to work with some kids who can relate to him better than me. I think he might even have a girlfriend. He won’t admit to it, but every time Evelyn comes in for therapy, he suddenly appears near the equipment, finding a way to talk to her. She even blushes when their eyes connect. He’s so gifted, and I’m just so happy to find a place where he can really thrive. A job that truly fills him with a sense of pride and celebrates who he is.

Lake assisted us in building the new complex last year, adding in a gym with all the technological advances that a therapist like me could ever dream of. We even have a pool for therapy purposes. Yeah, things definitely happen for a reason.

“You’re so amazing,” he whispers, kissing my neck.

“Lake, you just won the Super Bowl! Can we please focus on how amazing you are tonight?”

He cocks a brow immediately. “What do you have in mind?”

“Calm down, big boy, I’m still a whale, remember?”

He helps me stand up, his hands forever all over me.

“If you’re a whale, then I’m the Lake you get to swim in,” he says, nuzzling his face into my neck.

I laugh because he’s killing me with the lame dad jokes lately. I moan because fuck, that feels good. *Goddamn pregnancy hormones.*

He gives me a quick kiss on the lips before handing me a gift from behind his back. My shoulders sag as I look at him in disbelief.

“Why?! This isn’t about me! Stop being so amazing. You’re making me feel bad.”

“Shut up, girl.” He smirks, then scowls. “Take the gift before I decide to take it away.”

I sigh, then grab what feels like a hardcover book wrapped in newspaper.

“Sorry, couldn’t find wrapping paper.”

I smile at him lovingly, shaking my head as I unwrap a new why-choose romance I’d gazed at a little too long at Target the other day.

“Lake!”

“I know, but I figured if there’s four of them, you’d have a harder time picking a favorite to crush on.”

Oh, little do you know, sir.

I laugh, then drop the book on the table, throwing my arms around his neck.

“You’re my favorite,” I whisper against his lips.

“Yeah, yeah...I’ll tell the Brothers on Bearback.”

He smiles, then kisses me softly before bending down to kiss my belly.

“Love you, Brook,” he whispers against my skin. “Daddy can’t wait to meet you.”

My heart flutters in my chest every time he does it. He rises again, kissing me gently as his hands cup my jaw. He gazes at me lovingly in the way that still makes my stomach churn.

“You’ve given me my reason, Dylan. This family.” He swallows, finding my eyes as he brushes my hair off my temple, tucking it behind my ear. “I’m forever grateful for you.”

“I love what we’ve built.” Kissing him back, I feel the love pouring over us again, drowning us in the happiness we’ve always deserved. “I’m thankful for this every day, Lake.”

He runs his thumbs along my cheeks, pulling back to smile sweetly as he does, before giving me a final kiss.

“I’ll add it to the bookshelf,” he says, grabbing the book from the table and rolling his eyes before his smile stretches across his face again.

I chuckle, then bite my bottom lip, watching his hot ass walk down the hall in his gray sweats. I sigh like a schoolgirl, gazing off at him, when I hear a knock at the door behind me.

I straighten, gripping the wooden chair in front of me. *Strange.*

Walking to the door, I fix my shirt over my belly before cracking it open. My eyes widen at a sight I was not expecting to see. There on the porch is a man with hair brighter than the sun itself, tattoos lining every visible part of his body. He’s wearing ripped black jeans with holes in the knees, showcasing even more tattoos. His eyes are crystal blue, a shade lighter than Lake’s, but somehow entirely too similar in their shape. Piercings litter his face. The face that holds a huge toothy smile.

Why is he smiling?

"Waddup girl!" he says with way too much energy for me to handle.

I'm sure he's lost. He must be lost.

Stunned by this peculiar visit, my mouth hangs open. Before I can even respond, he says something I never expected to hear in this lifetime.

"I'm here to meet my brother!"

THE END

For now…

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MOM

PASSIONATE

LIVES TO LAUGH

CREATES TO BREATHE

OFTEN LOST IN ANOTHER DIMENSION

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