A photograph of a muscular man with short dark hair and a light beard, shirtless and holding a brown football with white laces. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a textured, greyish-blue wall.

His life is about to take
an unexpected turn.

BLIND SIDED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHEY STAHL

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Acknowledgments

Meet the author

BLIND SIDED


Shey Stahl

DREAM. WRITE. LOVE.
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Editor: Becky Johnson, Hot Tree Editing

Proofreading & BETA Reading:

Cover Image: Furious Fotog

Cover Designer: Perfect Pear Creations, Sommer Stein

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Plagiarism checks carried out by Hot Tree Editing using
Grammarly, Plagiarisma, and by Shey Stahl using Plag Scan.

CONTACT INFORMATION

FACEBOOK

www.facebook.com/SheyStahlAuthor

EMAIL

shey@sheystahl.com

WEBSITE

www.sheystahl.com

PINTEREST

www.pinterest.com/authorsheystahl

INSTAGRAM

www.instagram.com/racergirl99

BOOKS BY SHEY STAHL

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Tiller

Untamed

How to Deal

Promise Not to Fall

Blindsided

CROSSING THE LINE

Delayed Penalty

Delayed Offsides

THE TORQUED TRILOGY

Unsteady

Unbearable

Unbound

she sees
in black and white
thinks in grays
but loves in color.

J.M. Storm

1ST QUARTER

1. LANDON BOOTLEG

Bootleg – When a quarterback runs out of the pocket with the ball looking to pass the ball as his first priority but instead runs with it if he can't find an open receiver.

Your life can change in the blink of an eye. Don't believe me?

Blink.

Okay, now open your eyes. Time changed, didn't it?

My point exactly. It's one second later and that second before, you'll never get it back. I know I won't. And one second, that's all the time it took for mine to change. Completely blindsided with reality. I could give you a white-washed version of how it happened, but that'd be boring. So I'm just going to go ahead and toss you out of the moving train we call life and land ya right on your ass beside me. We're in this together now.

My blink of an eye change starts with: *"In the event of the passing of Grant and Melanie Slade, the custody of the five*

children will be granted to Grant's brother, Landon Charles Slade of Seattle, Washington."

Welcome to hell. I know, dramatic much... but I'm there. I'm so fucking there. This was not what I was expecting. Not at all.

Ember, my assistant slash best friend slash FILF aka friend I'd like to fuck, side-eyes me, gauging my reaction. "Just stay calm."

It's only partially reassuring that she's here today. *Stay calm?*

I stare at her as if she's lost her mind. How can I stay calm at a time like this? My whole life is changing in one day. Stay calm isn't in my vocabulary.

You're probably confused—much like myself. In case you're wondering, I'm that guy at the large mahogany table with my initials and the words "I hate Oma" carved underneath it. I'm not the one with his head in his hands. I'm not that gray-haired son of a bitch with the beer belly and barbecue sauce staining the front of his white shirt. Sure, we're both presumably in the same seated position, but that's my Uncle Lou. He's holding his head because Adler, my nephew, threw a baseball at him. I think he was supposed to catch it, but Uncle Lou didn't get the message; or Adler just didn't tell him and just threw the motherfucker at his head. Can't say I blame the kid, either. Uncle Lou is a bit much when you're nine years old. Hell, he's a bit much when you're twenty-six.

Back to me. It's all about *me* because *my* dilemma, my problems, are clearly the ones that matter at this given

moment. As you look at me, you're probably thinking to yourself, fuck, he's one good-looking dude. I know. I am. There's no sense in denying it. But look closer. Do you notice the devastation? The confusion? And... wait for it... the denial? It's all there, if by chance you're paying close enough attention.

“Custody of the five Slade children is given to Landon Charles Slade.”

My heart beats erratically. I push back the panic. I'm good, in fact, excellent at controlling my emotions, until now. The word “custody” rattles around in my head as I attempt to find meaning in it. Okay, maybe not meaning, but the “what the fuck?” in it. This just... can't be happening to me.

“I can't believe this,” I mumble, raking my hands down my face. “What the fuck was Grant thinking?”

Ember stands from her place beside me. “I'll get you some water.”

What the fuck is water going to do? Drown me? I feel like I'm drowning now, barely able to catch a breath as wave after wave of emotions and denial crash over me.

“Clearly, he wasn't,” Adler pipes up, staring intently at Lou's face and the swollen purple lump under his eye. “You're not gonna tell Oma, are you?”

Lou snorts, watching Ember's ass as she walks away, but doesn't offer Adler reassurance. He wants to let him sweat a little. Sinking down into his chair, Adler's eyes teem with little-boy worry.

I can't offer him anything, either. Oma once whipped my ass with a belt, and I still have a mark to prove it. She'd hit us with anything she could get a hold of, too. Whatever was within her reach became a weapon of choice. Brooms, lamps, belts, she had no real preference. Sure, in today's world, she'd be considered abusive but back then, that was discipline, and I have to be honest here, we were good kids because of her. Aside from Revel. He's never been good.

Despite being good, for the most part, and raised right, how am I supposed to take over raising my brother's kids? How am I gonna be the one who has to whip them into shape? Not to sound like the selfish bastard that I can be but, I have enough to worry about with my own life.

I know, I jumped ahead a little bit there and just hit you with the news. Why? Because that's exactly how they hit me with the news. I'm still trying to process the information, so you might as well come along for the ride.

And in case you didn't know, he has five goddamn kids ranging from thirteen to two. It's fucking ridiculous. Was he trying to create an NFL team? Who needs that many kids?

"You look pale," Adler notes, staring me down.

Pale? I'm lucky I'm still upright at this point.

"He looks like he's going to throw up," Braylee, Adler's twin sister adds.

Throw up? Yeah, I might.

Kids. I have custody of kids. As in plural and, quite possibly, forever. I haven't felt this bad, this sick to my stomach, since the playoffs earlier this year where we lost the

divisional title to the Falcons and, for the first time in my NFL career, didn't make the playoffs. It didn't matter that I broke the record for the most touchdowns in the fourth quarter with eighteen. The previous was fifteen. It also didn't matter that I held the record for the most touchdown passes at thirty-four. What mattered was that for the first time in my professional career, my team hadn't made the playoffs. And as the quarterback of the team, I felt completely responsible for it.

This... this huge life-changing decision Grant made without thinking of me, this was me never making the playoffs again. How am I supposed to live my life now? Shit. How am I supposed to get laid with five fucking kids? Whoever said it's possible is fucking lying. I know it. If we're talking in terms I'm familiar with, this would be what I'd refer to as intentional grounding. I'm in the pocket, looking for an eligible receiver and to avoid being tackled, I throw it away. Preferably at Uncle Lou's face.

Of course, I don't intend to actually throw the kids away because while this certainly isn't ideal, I'm not a piece of shit and I know first-hand what it's like to lose your parents and have no other place to go.

Ember, my assistant slash best friend I've been trying to fuck for years, returns from the kitchen and hands me a glass of water. "Drink this."

I stare at the water. I want to splash the water in my face and then take the glass and throw it against the wall like a child throwing a tantrum. Maybe it'll make me feel better. Probably not. Also, I hate the sound of breaking glass. It's

worse than nails on a chalkboard for me. Not that any of that fucking matters either, just thought you should know.

“Why can’t Oma take us?” Braylee asks, looking at me like she’s worried I might faint. I still might. In case you’re wondering, Oma is my grandmother. Anyway, she is their great-grandmother and I’m sorry, but at ninety-one, she might be able to take care of this ranch and her home, but raising kids again, yeah right.

“Because you pussies wouldn’t survive her,” Lou tells them, removing the ice pack from his eye and leveling Adler a stone-cold glare. “Say you’re sorry, *Adi*.”

Adler’s glare is more vicious than Lou could ever pull off. “Take it back you...” I’ve only been around my nephew for a few days, but I’m gathering calling him *Adi* isn’t high on his list of things he enjoys. The pissed-off kid pauses and sweeps his eyes across the room to where Oma is pushing plates of food upon anyone standing in one place for too long, knowing that if a curse word passes his lips, he’ll be backhanded to next Tuesday. “You stinky potato.”

“Stinky potato?” I raise an eyebrow. “That’s the best you could do?”

He shrugs, his eyes still focused on Oma like she might skin him. “I guess so.”

They’ve been staying with Oma since the night their parents died. I suppose this little dude’s had some interactions with old Oma by now. Chuckling, I reach for my beer in front of me. I take a long pull, then set it back on the table. “Fuck, your dad was a pussy. Didn’t he teach you how to insult someone?”

The glare turns to me and Adler's eyes brim with tears. I realize immediately my playful remark wasn't playful at all and this kid just lost his dad a week ago. I might not have been close with Grant, but they obviously were.

Standing, Adler's chair screeches against the hardwood floor in the massive dining room we've been sitting in. "You're the pussy, asshole," Adler grits out, walking away, completely ignoring Braylee's attempt to reach for him.

A laugh bubbles in my chest but doesn't push past my lips because I know where I went wrong with my words. But I'm also wondering what the fuck I do now. Do I apologize? Do I leave him be? Do I run away and let them go to foster care? Douche move, but it crosses my mind because fuck, this shit's heavy.

Adler stomps upstairs, Braylee following him, and I'm left with Lou and Ember.

Lou laughs. "You're off to a great start, kid."

I look to Ember, waiting for her to offer some kind of useful advice. She shrugs. "You are kind of an asshole."

"Nice."

Oma finds me next, pushing a plate of food my way. It's barbecued ribs, corn on the cob, Texas toast, potato salad... pretty much everything else she has in the kitchen, too. Southern women and their ability to throw down a meal is ridiculous, and God forbid you deny it. You might as well have slapped them across the face. "Eat, Landon. Eat some food. You'll think better."

Oma's answer for everything is to eat. She must not take her own advice, though. She's five two and eighty pounds. I can cough and knock her over.

I don't take the plate, but she leaves it anyway. I stare at it and push it away. "I've lost my appetite."

Lou takes hold of the plate. "No sense in wasting good food."

I can't stand the noises people make while eating. It's disgusting.

Ember watches Lou, a look of disgust on her face. "Are you even chewing or just inhaling it?"

He doesn't respond. I suppose you can't respond with food in your mouth, or, at least, he has the manners not to. My phone rings and Ember reaches for it to check the number for me. Maybe it's my brother's attorney calling to tell me this is all some kind of sick joke.

Ember holds up the phone. Our eyes meet for the briefest moment, but I can't make out the expression in hers before she blinks it away and mumbles, "It's Alessa."

I groan. She's the last person I want to talk to. She's my on-again, mostly off-again girlfriend who, when I told her I had to fly home instead of following her to Brazil next week because my brother died, asked me who was more important.

I'll let you think about that for a moment.

You're wondering why I'm with her, aren't you?

Yeah, me too, but that's a story for another day.

"I don't want to talk to her," I tell Ember.

Ember picks up the phone and steps out the back door onto the back patio without question.

While chewing on a rib like it's his last meal, Lou gives a head nod to the space Ember occupied beside me. "She your girlfriend?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Ember?"

He nods.

"No. She's my assistant."

He stares at me, mouth open and I can see chewed food. My stomach rolls. So gross. "You're the quarterback of the Seahawks."

He points this out as if I don't know it, and it should change the fact that I'm not fucking my assistant. I, too, have wondered why we're not fucking, and it's certainly not my choice, but it doesn't have anything to do with me being the quarterback of the Seahawks. That in itself might be one of her reasons, but it's not mine.

"Why does that matter?"

"You can have all the pussy in the world. Why won't she give it up?"

I shrug. For the first time in years, that's not on my mind today. Okay, it is, but there are some bigger issues at hand.

Pushing away from the table since the food and sounds are making me nauseous, I stand, but then I don't move because I don't know what the fuck to do, let alone where to go in this house to process the information. "What the fuck am I going to do, Lou?"

With a mouthful of corn muffin, he says, while spitting chunks at me, “Not get laid for the next eighteen years.” And then he pauses, swallows the food in his mouth, wipes my arm off where I’m wearing chunks and smiles. The bile rises in my throat. “Actually, Lani’s two... so sixteen years.”

Lani? Who’s that? Oh... right. Another one of the ten kids he left me with.

Grant, you’re an inconsiderate bastard, you know that?

Finally, I surrender to my intense need to escape and flee. I head to the one place I remember ever being alone and at peace in this house as a kid. The attic.

Pulling on the rope, I climb up the stairs to the attic of Oma’s three-story Victorian-style Texas home. I haven’t been up here since before I left for college and I convinced my girlfriend at the time to blow me up here. Worked. It always works for me.

Ducking under low hanging beams, I’m careful not to step on the heaps of dusty boxes Oma hordes up here and insists are gems. The floor’s scattered with old memories. Out of sight, out of mind, it’s a place where their sentimental value has waned, but their lifespan lives on amongst cobwebs.

Finding a seat next to the window, I crouch down, my head in my hands, my elbows resting on my knees. In my pocket, a letter Grant wrote me as to why he left the kids to me. It’s short and to the point.

Landon, we couldn’t choose Revel. He’s a mess. And Bonner... he’s a fuckin’ kid. It’s you, man. You’ll understand

soon enough.

~ *Grant*

No, “love Grant,” or “sincerely, here’s to fuckin’ up your life.” Just... Grant. Like I’m supposed to be okay with that.

I think now’s about time I give you another piece to the puzzle of the Slade family. An ancient legend, if you will, that dates back, well, two generations now. Okay, so maybe it’s not *ancient*, or a legend, but whatever. Might as well be. It’s the curse of the Slade family. It started with our parents twenty years ago on their fourteenth wedding anniversary. Grant was thirteen. My twin sister, Jenna, and I were six, and I hated everything aside from football. God, I was such a pissed-off little fucker back then. Revel was four and Bonner... just a baby at the time. That’s when our parents died in a car accident. Together.

Now back to Grant Slade. Here’s where the curse part comes in. He died a week ago with his wife Melanie in a car accident. On their fourteenth wedding anniversary. I guess maybe if you’re a Slade, and married, it’s also a warning. Don’t travel together on your goddamn wedding anniversary, let alone on your fourteenth. In fact, maybe get a divorce about that time. Or better yet, *don’t* get married.

It’s some fucked-up shit, isn’t it?

To my left, I notice a framed photograph covered in dust. It’s of my parents and is kind of creepy that I’m sitting here thinking about them and their photo is next to me. Especially since everything else around me is in boxes.

Dusting it off, I stare at it. I don't remember them like I should. The memories I have are distant, like a dream you can't quite decipher the details of, but know you had. It's funny, I can remember every touchdown pass I threw from peewee all the way up to last season, but I can't remember what my mother's touch felt like or what it was like to have a dad teach me how to throw a spiral. And I was taught by the best.

My dad, Cam Slade, was the greatest NFL quarterback of our time. He played out his entire career right here in Texas with the Cowboys before he was killed. Two months later, he was inducted into the hall of fame.

He's been a substantial influence on my life even though he wasn't here. It's because of him I became a pro quarterback.

There's movement in the corner of the attic, and I jump, afraid there's a mouse or worse, a fucking snake again. I hate both. It takes a minute before I can see my nephew's face. I'm surprised to see Adler up here, tucked away in the corner, his mop of hair swept to the side and matted to his temple with sweat. There's no air-conditioning in the attic and sitting up here feels like you're in a sauna.

I'm not surprised to see that even in the darkness of the corner, his glossy eyes glare at me.

"Hey, kid." I stand and walk over to him, the floor beneath my feet creaking with each step. "You shouldn't be up here."

He lifts his head. "I can do whatever I want."

“Sure ya can.” Not wanting to deal with a bratty kid at the moment, I turn to walk away from him before I piss him off even more, but then I stop. I’m not sure why. Maybe because I’ve been where he is, and though he may not think it, the two of us have way more in common than he’ll ever understand. “Why don’t we take a walk.”

It’s not a question. It’s not meant to be, but he asks, “Why?”

“Because I think we should talk.”

“I don’t. You don’t want us, we get it.” It’s at the use of *we* that I realize he’s up here with the rest of his siblings. Five pairs of eyes find mine. Some curious, some angry, but every single one of them holds sadness I’m familiar with. Their world has been turned upside down. Irrevocably. It’ll never ever be the same again. But kids are incredibly resilient. They can adapt, grow, forgive, love... they’re powerful. Way more powerful than we give them credit for. And though I want to run away from the sudden responsibility, it’s not in my nature to do so. I don’t want any part of this fucking life. I didn’t want kids. Ever. But sometimes, the life you never had planned finds you anyway.

Clearing my throat, I take a seat across from them. I don’t even know their names or ages, other than Adler and Braylee. Only because they were very adamant to inform me that Adler is older by a whole minute. He came out first.

I look to the oldest girl, same auburn hair, wavy and tied back, tears streaming down her face as she holds a little one in her hands. Another girl. To her right, another younger girl, but

older than the one on her lap. Braylee and Adler are sitting next to one another.

Five kids. One boy, four girls. The complete opposite of my siblings. Jenna, my twin sister, had been the only girl. Yeah, it's past tense, but I'm not about to delve into that bullshit at the moment. Just know, the Slade family has a lot of fucking tragedy in its history and we're all a little fucked up because of it.

"How old are you guys?" I motion to the three I've yet to officially meet.

The oldest regards me with a look that screams you're a goddamn idiot and we know it. "I'm Marley. I'm thirteen." She kisses the top of the baby's hair. "This is Nalani, we call her Lani, and she just turned two."

"I'm Haisley. I five."

"I'm five. Not I five," Braylee corrects her grammar.

She stares up at her sister, her brow furrowed in annoyance. "That what I said."

Braylee rolls her eyes. "No, you didn't."

Anger flushes the five-year-old's cheeks. "Yes. I. *Did*."

Arguments break out between all of them, and I have to physically separate Braylee and Haisley. I'm gathering they don't get along. There's even hair pulling. Shit's unreal and exactly what I'd expect from girls.

I don't know how, but I get them all out of the attic with me and downstairs where we sit on the front porch. They all take off in different directions, aside from Adler, who stares at

me with curiosity. “You have no idea what you’re doing, do you?”

I snort, trying to make a plan in my head. “I know what I’m doing.” Lies. All Lies. Training camp starts next week for the NFL season. I have no idea how I’m going to make all this work.

“Sure you do. You’re a professional football player and live in a one-bedroom condo in Seattle,” he points out. “Be honest. The last thing you wanted was five kids.”

He certainly knows a hell of a lot more about me than I do about him, but I know a thing or two about kids, whether I like them or not. Never show weakness is the number one rule. They’ll tear you up.

“Are you scared?”

I tilt my head. “I am now, thanks, dude.”

Adler snorts, shaking his head. “Now who’s the pussy?”

“How old are you?”

“I’ll be ten in two months.”

I crack a smile. “Also known as nine.”

He shrugs and steps off the porch, his hands in the pockets of his khaki cargo shorts. “Age is relative.”

I’m not going to tell the others, but I think he might already be my favorite.

Now what the fuck do I do with them? Take them back to my one-bedroom condo in Seattle? They’ve lived in Dallas their entire life. But I can’t stay here with them. I have a job

and life to get back to. Well, at least a job; my lifestyle I'd become accustomed to is gone forever.

Ember finds me, her gaze sympathetic. She hands me my cell phone back. I pocket it. "Seriously, this is bullshit. Maybe I should call Revel and tell him he has five kids."

Ember shakes her head. "He's touring in Germany at the moment and, more than likely, doesn't even remember the day of the week."

She has a point. He didn't even show up for the funeral. So Revel's out, and Bonner, the youngest Slade brother... he's a fuckin' shitshow and newly married. "Bonner?"

"I think his wife is a porn star."

I raise an eyebrow. "Really?"

Ember shrugs. "Not sure."

That really does leave me being Grant's only option. "It's like I'm being punished for not being a fuck up."

"Or maybe you're the one he trusted with them. Maybe he saw more than an NFL superstar."

I glance over at Ember, her jet-black hair blowing in the late summer wind. Her cheeks are flushed from the humidity, her eyes blazing blue. "Do you? Do you honestly think I can do this? I can't even book a fucking plane ticket without you. How am I going to take care of four kids?"

"Five."

"What?"

"There are *five* kids."

Sighing, I throw my hands up. “See? I can’t even remember how many kids there are.”

Rolling her eyes, Ember turns her back on me and mumbles, “You’re being dramatic,” as she walks away. “I’m going to call the airlines and arrange our flights back home.”

I’ll admit, I have been known to be dramatic a time or two, but goddamn it, I think this calls for dramatics. Much like Lou did earlier, I watch Ember walk inside the house, my eyes focused on her ass. Even though it’s an amazing ass, sadly it doesn’t take away the knots in my stomach.

I step down off the last stair onto the cobblestone path leading to the well-maintained front yard of the Valkema Estate I grew up on. I can’t say I miss this place. I’ve found myself in the shady northwest and its gray sky.

“Are you taking us to Seattle with you?” a tiny voice asks. It’s the little one... the one who pulled her sister’s hair. I think her name is Haley... or wait... it’s Haisley, right?

I nod to her question, unsure how to reply.

Curiosity marks her eyes, but there’s sadness too. “Does it rain there?”

Again, I nod. “Yeah, most of the time.”

“Are you nice?”

“Not usually.”

Her shoulders slump. “Shit.”

My thoughts too, kid.

Now do you understand when I say your life can change in the blink of an eye? Go ahead, blink again, and I assure you,

nothing will ever be the same as it was a second ago.

2. EMBER OFFSIDE

Offside – A player is offside when any part of his body is in the neutral zone or beyond the free kick line before the ball is put in play, resulting in a five-yard penalty.

I used to be a tattoo artist.

Needles. Blood. Sweaty bodies... I hate it all. Give me a blank canvas, a set of oil paints, and I'm where I want to be in life. But none of that paid the bills.

I don't remember much before the age of ten, but I used to be a runaway. I lived in my friend Cat's closet for a year before her mom found me and my Twinkie wrappers. She decided I'd been staying long enough and let me sleep on the couch. I lived with her until I turned eighteen.

I used to have a family, but then family for me only meant lies, tragedy, broken promises, and an aunt who only wanted the money from a trust fund.

I used to sit beside a bed and hold my brother's hand while his entire body filled with cancer. I held him until his body couldn't take it and finally let go. Then, and only then, did I let

his hand go. There are some things you can't quite remember about your childhood, but then again, there are some you'll never forget.

I used to think being with a man meant you gave to them.

I used to think sex meant giving your body but not your heart. You can't give something that's not yours to give. My heart, it's saturated like a photo, the tones and shadows taken too far.

I used to give myself to everyone who didn't deserve me because I thought that's what you did. You give to others. Love is silly. It's for fairy tales and romantic comedy movies that take reality and distort its being.

And then I met Landon Slade one rainy fall night. He walked into my life and never left. Actually, he refused to because that night, I had just lost my brother and he told me nobody can be alone when they're sad.

I thought I knew what Landon wanted the moment I laid eyes on him. Guys came inside the tattoo shop I worked at in Seattle all the time, but Landon, he was different from the start. Of course I knew exactly who he was, but even though he was an NFL quarterback with a 6-0 record leading the league in passing yards just starting his rookie season, it had nothing to do with his clout in the city. Men have a thing for female tattoo artists. It's like they think because we're drawing stories on their body, we're gonna offer you some sort of happy ending at the end. As if I'm a BOGO. Buy one tattoo and get laid for free. News flash, it's not. I've never slept with a customer. Well, that's kind of a lie. What if they became a customer after I fucked them? It's not the same, right?

Never mind. Don't answer that. Anyway, men, they came in there looking for sex because every man loves a woman covered in tattoos. Okay, maybe not all of them, but the majority do, whether they want to admit it or not. They think I'm a freak in the bed because of the ink on my skin. Strangely, that's accurate, but whatever.

When Landon came in that night with his friends, I thought he was the same. Your typical professional athlete looking for a good time with the freak in the sheets while he diddles the model in public. Little did I know he'd change my life over the next few days and we would become inseparable. I can't even explain how it happened, but if you ever spent any amount of time around him, you'd understand how goddamn intoxicating he is to be around. He affects everyone around him. Harper, his PR, smokes because of him. Chad, his agent, drinks because of him, and his manager, Elliot, he's a ruthless fuck because of Landon's bullshit. And me? I don't sleep at night. Not only am I a night owl, Landon's an early riser so I get maybe four hours a night. So coupled with being sleep deprived, I have anxiety, no life outside him, and a coffee addiction.

And now, after five years, still sleep deprived, I find myself sitting next to him on a plane with five kids and no idea what's going to happen next. I mean, fucking look at him sitting there with a baby on his lap. Nalani fell asleep not long after we got through security and refuses to let go of him. I admit, seeing a man of his size holding a sleeping child is enough to make you want to scream "Put a baby in me!" Seriously, I think my ovaries are throbbing in anticipation. Though I had an extremely shitty childhood, I've always

wanted kids. Maybe to prove to the world parents didn't always leave. Some stick around and give a shit about their children.

Landon nudges my arm, our elbows bumping. I'm just about to grumble at him for taking the armrest again when he gives a nod to a man boarding the plane and adjusts Nalani in his arms to cradle her closer to his chest.

Fuck, don't look at the baby in his arms. Don't look at him! #ovaryexplosion “Did you ever do a tattoo like that on anyone?”

Trying to be discrete in my examination of him, I notice a man with his head shaved and a skull tattooed on his scalp. “Yeah.”

“That's bizarre.”

“That's boring compared to the shit I used to do.”

“What's the weirdest tattoo you ever gave someone?”

“I once did a turtle.”

He laughs, his eyes on Nalani as he adjusts the blanket he placed over her. “How is a turtle the most bizarre tattoo you've ever done?”

“It's *where* I did it.”

Landon raises his eyebrows, waiting.

“Give up?”

He nods.

“The turtle's back spanned across the dude's lower stomach and the legs on his hip and upper thigh. Now can you

guess where the head was?”

Landon's face turns white. “Jesus Christ,” he whispers. “Wouldn't that hurt?”

“Who cares if it hurt him. I had to sit there for six hours cradling a cock and added eyes to his mushroom. Wasn't exactly the highlight of my career.”

“The highlight was meeting *me*.”

And there's the cocky ass I know so well. I bat my eyelashes at him. “Oh, yes, it was truly a dream come true the day you came into my life.”

He pushes my face away with his hand, sighing heavily. “I'm going to go ahead and take your sarcasm as love.” *I do love you, more than you'll ever know.* His eyes drop and though his tone holds one meaning, his expression, the guarded way he finds interest in his phone, tells me what he doesn't want to see on my face when he says, “And at least I got you away from Percy.”

Got me away from Percy? Landon thinks he rescued me from a life I didn't want. I don't exactly see it that way. Percy owned the tattoo shop I worked at since I was sixteen. At first, Percy was nothing more than a man who gave me a job. And then, not long after I turned eighteen, he became more. A man who in many ways taught me how to use my art as a weapon and my body as a toy, but only for him. It certainly wasn't love, but he did teach me a lot about what I didn't want in life. We were a complicated chaos of blurred lines and, eventually, I had to walk out of his tattoo parlor and his life. Sometimes you have to walk away to become more than you were standing still.

Behind us, I can hear the kids arguing over what they want to eat and Adler poking Haisley in the arm and telling her repeatedly, “I’m not touching you.”

Landon twists in his seat, careful of Nalani still sleeping. I love the way he cradles her head in his hand to keep it from hitting the arm rest. “Dude, knock it off. You piss her off and I’m going to make her sit on your lap the entire flight back.”

“Sure ya are.” I can’t see Adler’s face, but his words hold amusement.

Landon’s eyes cut to mine. “They don’t respect me.” He’s had them two days and they’re already walking all over him. Turning around, he sighs, running his hand over his face with frustration. “This is such a fucking mess.”

Unsure what else to do, I dig out my sketchbook to add some shading to the drawing I’ve been working on. It’s the only thing I can think to do to distract myself from the fact that he’s holding a baby in his arms and my ovaries are bursting. It’s of a city skyline disintegrating into ash. I’ve always been an artist. Ever since I was old enough to grip a brush, I’ve been splashing color across a canvas in hopes it offers me relief from the chaos inside my head. It’s the only time I ever feel at peace. You’re probably wondering what I could be tossed about? Here I am flying first class, sitting next to the hottest player in the NFL. Not exactly a rough life.

There’s more to me than what you see, though. Mom died when I was seven... brother died of stomach cancer five years ago. And Dad... haven’t seen him since my mom died. He left us with my grandma two weeks after her funeral. Not exactly an aura of happiness. Maybe that’s why relaxation for me is

when I'm lost in my creations, free from the madness that consumes thoughts I don't understand.

Landon hits my elbow again and my pencil skips across the page. "How can you draw at a time like this?"

"Easy. It's not my life that's changing. It's yours." I'm partially joking because I know Landon well enough to know I will be dealing with the kids for the most part, not him. Setting my book in my bag, I think about how exactly his life is changing. This certainly wasn't what he needed in his life at the moment.

Needing a distraction, I pick up the magazine tucked inside the tray table in front of me. I wish I hadn't. Landon's on the cover.

"I hate that picture of me," he notes, rolling his eyes and shifting uncomfortably in the seat. He hates every photograph of himself because he doesn't like making eye contact with anyone, let alone himself.

My eyes drop to the magazine. He's even more disarming when he's photographed, and I can drink in the length of his amazing physique. The smirk, the eyes, the suggestive arrogance they hold, he's trouble. He's so *much* trouble it's ridiculous.

As an artist, I admire everything about this man. It's in my nature to appreciate beauty, and this guy, he radiates beauty. His sharp jawline... the eyes, the muscles bulging and flexing with his every movement... he's a masterpiece begging to be splashed across a blank canvas to capture his natural artistry.

My heart beats erratically with thoughts of him and the way it feels to have that deep commanding voice of his directed your way. My attention drags to that rugged jaw and the hint of a five-o'clock shadow on his golden skin. Goddamn. Why do men have to be so fucking gorgeous? Full lips, defined cheekbones; he's even sexier in person, if that's possible. It's then I capture his almond-shaped eyes sparkling beneath thick luscious lashes I wish I had. Underneath the looks, he has a heart, but he's still an asshole. Don't let the looks fool you. Unfortunately for me, I've always been attracted to assholes because like it or not, they fuck good. I don't want a nice guy with romance and flowers. I want the one who isn't afraid to fuck me against a wall or rough me up between the sheets. He has to be able to handle me. That theory must have because of my tattoos and general "fuck you" attitude that I'm a freak in bed is accurate.

"Excuse me, sir," the flight attendant asks, her hand on the back of his seat as she leans in. "I don't mean to bother you and your friend, but are you Landon Slade?"

"Yeah, I am." Landon is always polite to strangers and wildly interested in what they say to him. Probably why it had been so easy for me to feel comfortable around him. He may not remember the nameless forgotten face, but they'll always remember him.

The woman blushes. "I'm a huge fan of yours. We actually went to the same college."

Turning in his seat, he gives the woman his attention. "Oh, yeah?"

We're on a private flight back to Seattle, but it certainly doesn't seem to matter as far as the in-flight staff are concerned. I watch the two of them in conversation and though I don't have a right to be, I'm brimming with jealousy.

I hear her voice soften as she says, "I didn't know you had a daughter."

"Oh, uh." Landon pauses, his eyes on Nalani. "She's my... niece."

I hate that he's so polite to her. Why can't he just be rude and say, mind ya business, lady?

Because, that's not Landon.

He signs an autograph for her, gives her his number, which he won't actually answer, and my breathing changes, coming faster.

I know what you're thinking, girl, are you in love with your boss?

Sadly, and I fucking hate to admit it, but if there's any one person in this world who haunts my dreams, my very detailed *erotic* dreams, it's this guy. I'm sure he's every woman's fantasy, and if he's not, his brother Revel is. Whether I want to admit it or not, I know absolutely everything there is to know about Landon, also known to most of you who follow football as LC. He's twenty-six, first-round draft pick of the Seattle Seahawks and, as their starting quarterback, he's led them to the playoffs every season since 2011, aside from last year when they lost the divisional title to the Falcons. He's the highest paid player in the NFL and holds the record for the most touchdown passes thrown in a game.

Shit, it's like my mind just spat the stats from the NFL's website.

Told you I knew everything about him. I could run the guy's fan club, but I don't because I have enough to do being his assistant and maintaining that I don't have romantic feelings for him. Which is way easier to pull off than the I'm-secretly-in-love-with-you gig.

Shaking my head, I attempt to break the trance he always has on me. He's out of my league. League? We're not even playing the same game.

I hate that I'm even thinking about him like this with him right next to me, our bodies occupying the same space. I *shouldn't* think about him. I don't need that in my life. I dated a professional football player once. Justice Bailey. He's actually Landon's teammate and I know from experience, football players have a certain mentality in life. Most players, from what I've seen, live football. They believe in it. They would be nothing without it, and they're obviously psychotic if they believe that. One time I made the mistake of thinking it could work. Yeah, wanna guess how that ended?

Total disappointment.

You're probably wondering how exactly I went from working at a tattoo shop to this, sitting next to him on a plane and working for him. I'll tell you.

Having just graduated high school and mourning the loss of my brother, I was bitter, mean, and brooding. For a girl, those aren't remarkable traits to have. Guys want bubbly and blonde. Me being curvy, having jet-black hair, and tattooed from head to toe, never would I have thought Landon would

give me the time of day, but for some reason, the moment he laid down on that table and asked me to surprise him with a tattoo on his shoulder, I knew he wasn't like every other football player. Back then, I was barely making rent and sleeping with my boss. Wasn't exactly heading in the right direction. And my bank account looked something similar to the dollar menu at McDonald's.

But once that cocky son of a bitch with beautiful lips and pretty eyelashes sat down on the table, that motherfucker took one look at me and thought I needed saving. Long story short, he needed an assistant and I wanted out of the tattoo business. I didn't know a damn thing about being a professional athlete's assistant, but I knew how to take care of someone and organize. I mean, hello, I lived in a closet for a year. I knew how to keep shit organized... aside from the Twinkie wrappers that gave me away. I'm still not good at hiding my candy wrappers. But, as it turns out, all Landon needed was someone to take care of him and in turn, I fell head over heels in love with his cocky, needy ass over the course of five years.

Though Landon is rarely without women in his life, it doesn't stop him from trying to get me to have sex with him. It's like a game with him. Let's see how far we can push Ember before she cracks and fucks me. To date, there's been two occasions where this almost happened. First time I was drunk and he stopped us. The second was last week while we were in Hawaii with his teammates. What stopped us? Well, this time, me, drunk again and him, just horny I guess and then his grandmother calling him to tell him his brother died. And now... now I have no idea where we stand or what's going on. Other than I should give up wine around Landon.

The bottom line is—I *can't* fuck him. I can't date him. I can't even entertain the idea of it. Why? I don't want to lose him as a friend. You might look at him and see hotness, and while I do, too, I see the guy who stayed up all night with a girl he barely knew because he understood she needed someone to talk to. I see the guy who helped me move out of my boss's house in the middle of the night. I see the guy who gave me a job and a place to live. I see the guy who stayed with me and held my hand when my best friend was in the hospital and he was supposed to be playing in the Pro Bowl.

I hate that I find myself watching every game just to get a look at him without him knowing. I hate my shallowness, my foolishness, at loving the way his square, hard jaw tics when he fights a smile every time I turn him down. Like it's a game. To him, it probably is and only solidifies why I keep saying no. Aside from when I drink wine.

But even with all that, I hate that I love his witty remarks when I turn him down. I hate that he's funny and cute, even when he's not trying to be, when he's dead tired from a three-hour practice but still finds a way to offer a smile or a wink to the hopeless idealist inside me. It's torture.

And I really fucking hate that every week from September to February, my heart does crazy things in my chest when I see him on the field, sweaty, cold, and callous as he puts everything he has into the game that's sculpted him. I despise him, only because deep down, I crave his presence. But I don't, not even a little bit, hate him. Are you confused? Welcome to my head. Landon's the only thing, outside art, that can make me forget the panic inside my head.

Closing the magazine, I tuck it back inside the tray table and roll my eyes at my own ridiculousness.

Staring out the window, I focus on the smoggy, suffocating Dallas skyline. While I enjoy the south, the few times I've been here, I love the northwest. I can't see myself living anywhere else. My heart's intertwined in the old-growth trees, the droopy moss and the murky thickets of blackberry. I find peace in the scrubby alder that smothers your soul and cages you in. That... *that* soothes me. It's like a blanket to hide underneath.

Most of the time, Seattle is submerged in a constant drizzle from low-hanging clouds. Winters with their fleecy-vested, granola-eating hikers, can be brutally chilly with the marine air, and forget about wearing shorts until June. But the summers, those breathtaking pines, and mountainous views, my God, they're fucking beautiful.

Landon shifts in his seat, leaning into me and adjusts Nalani on his chest. She's still sound asleep. For someone who didn't ever want kids, he's certainly a natural around them. It's like he thinks they're a bubble and he's going to pop them. "Did you check on Cat today?"

I nod. "Yeah, she stayed with Kumonde and Kenya."

Cat is my best friend, aside from Landon, and in turn, his friend. Cat is who I stayed with when I ran away from my grandmother's house with my little brother at thirteen. Cat, she's bizarre. She's like, the weirdest person I know, and that's saying something. I grew up on the streets of Seattle. I've seen a lot of weird shit. Cat and I, we're complete opposites but bonded in the third grade over a juice box and our love for the

color purple. I'm curvy, she's supermodel thin. I have jet-black, thick hair down to my ass, and she's a ginger-blonde with dreads. I have blazing cobalt eyes the color of the sky and fire in them, hers are the color of canyon clay, and is always sweet. I have tattoos, she's pure and peppered with freckles. Not a single tattoo, but it doesn't stop her from wanting one.

Landon sighs. "How much you want to bet she's cleaning their house and reorganizing everything."

"I bet she's organizing their pantry as we speak."

"If only she remembered where she put everything." Landon laughs at the memory of her in his condo "organizing" his pantry. And by organizing, we mean rearranging for the hell of it. She gets bored easily.

Cat's memory isn't what it used to be, which is why she lives with me and has to have a babysitter when I'm out of town. She's vulnerable and naïve, but that's not her fault. Two years ago, she was in a car accident up on Bainbridge Island. Her and another girl hit another car head on. Her coworker was killed instantly, and Cat suffered a compressed skull fracture. She had to have brain surgery for a massive hematoma and a lateral skull fracture that resulted in damage to a good portion of her short-term memory. After spending three months in the ICU, it took her two months to remember anything about her life, and even then, it's fuzzy for her. Now she's like Dory from *Finding Nemo*, but not quite as bad as Drew Barrymore in *50 First Dates*. We don't have to remind her of the accident every day. You just can't leave her alone overnight because the likelihood of her cooking and burning the house down is a very real possibility.

Me, being the sarcastic friend, told her we were lesbian lovers after the accident. She believed me for a week, then politely told me she couldn't see herself liking to eat pussy, so it didn't make any sense to her. She also has absolutely no filter. Sometimes I like to tell her she liked certain things just to see her face when she doesn't. Like fish. She used to hate fish. We're from the Northwest. Fish is everywhere. Turns out, she still hates it.

“What if the plane crashes?” Haisley asks her brother.

I cringe, knowing he's going to say something mean to her. “Then we die.”

Landon and I both stare at one another. He gives me that look that screams annoyance, but also, what do I do now?

I shrug.

“Don't tell her that,” Landon whispers back at him through the seats. “You'll freak her out.”

“What?” Adler asks as if he's offended. “You want me to lie to her?”

“No, but she's five. Do you really think you should say that to her?”

“Like she doesn't know what death is by now.”

Twisting back around in his seat, I can't tell what Landon's thinking, but I see the little boy behind us, and though he's trying like hell to remain strong, his confidence wavers with the word “death” and we're both reminded of why we're on this potentially deadly plane with these kids.

The death of Landon's brother, Grant.

3. LANDON CADENCE

Cadence – The words or sounds a quarterback makes prior to receiving the ball from the center. One sound or word is usually the indication to the offense to begin the play.

I enjoy sleep. I don't get nearly enough of it, but if I could sleep fourteen hours a day, that'd be cool with me. And then, maybe fucking, the other ten. Sadly, since these kids showed up, I'm not doing much of either and probably won't be for a long damn time.

“What's he doing?” one of them asks. I don't have the energy to open my eyes to see which one. We flew from Texas to Washington two days ago on a private jet and it was a straight up shitshow. Adler spent the entire flight picking on Haisley. Marley and Braylee fought, and Nalani slept on me. All. Four. Hours. Who knew a baby would sleep that long? Then, about an hour before we landed, Adler took it upon himself to annoy his sisters further, and me, by dancing to “Watch Me” and perfecting his whip and nae nae, which also meant smacking me in the head every time he whipped. If it

had been a commercial flight, we would have been placed on the “Do Not Fly” list, for sure.

Yesterday, all their shit arrived, and my condo has been turned into something similar to one of those homeless shelters with cots and crap strung all over the place. For someone who strives on rules, regulation, and organization, it’s my worst nightmare.

But back to my sleep being interrupted, yet again.

“He’s sleeping by the looks of it,” another pipes up, poking my shoulder. It sounds like the little one, Haisley. The one who made me give her pigtails yesterday. Have you ever put a child’s hair in pigtails? It’s harder than it looks, and requires more coordination with your hands than I initially thought. I give credit to all the moms out there whose children have nice hair. That shit is hard, and she didn’t even ask for braids. I dread the day that happens and fear it’s coming too soon.

“Aww, cute!” the tiny one says. She says two things so far that I’ve heard. “No,” and “Aww, cute!” That’s a lie. Last night she punched my head and said, “Hi,” as if that was acceptable.

“He’s probably dead,” a third voice mumbles. It’s Adler. Can’t miss the annoyance for being here. When we landed in Seattle, he decided he hated it here and told me every single fact about Seattle I never cared to know. Like the fact that there are more dogs living in Seattle than children. I don’t like dogs. I don’t even like kids. Or that Seattle sits directly on top of the Cascadia fault line and we’re all going to die in a 9.0 earthquake. We won’t have to worry about the dog population anymore.

“No. His chest is moving,” another one says. “That means he’s breathing.” I give up. I don’t care whose voice that one is. I just want to fucking sleep.

“People can still be dead and their bodies move.”

“You’re so dumb. They can’t.”

Someone touches my face and then pries my damn eye open. And then a little auburn-haired kid is in my blurry eyesight. “See. He’s not *dead*. His eyes are still there.”

“Honestly, Braylee, sometimes I wonder about you. What do you think happens to someone’s eyes if they die?”

“They go into their skull and just roll around?”

Even I crack one eye open and look at the kid, wondering what she’s been learning in school for the last few years. Fuck, *school!* I’m gonna have to enroll them in school too, aren’t I? Where do I do that? Am I supposed to know all this? Shouldn’t there have been some kind of manual before they let me have these little bastards? Like an instruction playbook? How can you just hand custody to someone without at least making them pass a class? Seems ridiculous.

Jerking my head away from them, I cover it with my pillow. “I’m not dead. Stop touching me. I just need sleep.” I wave them off, intending on installing a lock on my bedroom door, and amazed I didn’t do that already. “Now leave.” Sighing, I curse Ember for not letting them sleep in her condo. Oh, believe me, I tried for hours to get her to take them. She absolutely refused. Completely ridiculous. I even threatened to fire her over it but then realized how stupid of me that would be.

“Are you like, supposed to be somewhere today?” a voice similar to Adler’s asks.

I jump up, alarmed, trying to recall where I’m supposed to be.

Shit! Training camp starts today. I’m late. And as I’m finding out, with five kids, being on time for anything is no longer possible. Ever again.

Stumbling out of my bed, I rush to the bathroom, and that’s when it hits me. I have four girls living with me. And if I didn’t know this, my bathroom is confirmation. Let me start by saying, I’m a very clean and organized person. I do not like anything messy. If I eat in my condo, which yes, I eat there, I’m not a total fucking weirdo. But let’s say I cook—on very rare occasions—I clean up right away, even before I enjoy the meal. Some might call me OCD, others say I’m a perfectionist, and some just say I have issues. All are probably right to some degree.

My bathroom that morning after four girls move in?

Fucking disaster.

There’s actually a bra hanging from the shower curtain. A goddamn bra. Given she’s twelve or thirteen, it’s not like it’s much more than a training cup, but the bottom line is, my place is entirely too small for six people to be living here.

“This is unreal,” I mumble to myself, running my hands over my face. “You must have been crazy to think I could do this, Grant.”

You’re probably thinking, wow, you’re not at all broken up about your brother dying, are you?

I'm not a heartless prick. I can be, but I did love my brother. I wasn't close with him like I am with Revel or Bonner, but still, it sucks that he's gone. Maybe it hasn't fully set in. Delayed onset maybe? I also haven't had the chance to really think about it. I got the call that he'd died when I was in Hawaii and left the next day for the funeral. Day after that, I found out I had custody of the kids. Wasn't a lot of time to process much of anything.

Leaning into the sink, I place my hands on either side and stare at my reflection. It's the first day of training camp today and I don't look like a man who's prepared to lead his team through a season. I don't even recognize myself. I look tired and way out of my league, pretending to know what I'm doing with kids. Speaking of league, I better get my ass moving because I have someplace to be.

Pushing aside the bra, and endless amounts of shampoo, because God forbid they all actually use the same kind, I get into the shower. Inside there's bath toys, towels, even clothes. It's crazy. It's like a tornado hit my condo and strung the contents of their lives all over my place.

It's been two days. What the hell is gonna happen in two weeks?

I'm usually a creature of habit once training camp starts. By this time of the year, I'm done with the late-night parties and the traveling all over the world to exotic vacations. It's time to work, and I take every aspect of that seriously. I start my mornings by taking a fifteen-minute shower, followed immediately by a double espresso, oatmeal, egg whites, and a protein shake. Then I head to training camp.

None of that happens this morning.

I take a five-minute shower, and I'm standing in the bathroom with a towel around my waist when the door opens and in walks pigtailed and sits on the toilet like it's no big deal to barge into the bathroom while someone else is in there.

What if I had been completely naked? There has to be laws against this kind of thing.

"I'm hungry," she announces, still wearing her pajamas and completely comfortable being in the bathroom with me half-naked, aside from the towel—which I have a death grip on.

"Then eat," I growl. "And can't you knock? I'm naked in here."

None of that matters to a hungry five-year-old. "You don't have any food."

I move closer to the door, trying to position myself out the door. "There are eggs in the fridge."

Haisley looks at me like I've grown another head. "I don't like eggs."


"That's not my problem. If you're hungry, you'll eat them."

And that earns me a scowl. "You're not very nice."

"I know."

She slides off the toilet and out of the bathroom. "This blows."

You're telling me, kid.



Ten minutes later, I'm ready to go, my bag in hand, car keys in the other, and I realize leaving five children alone in my condo might not be the smartest thing to do. I can't take them with me. It's not like there's a daycare camp for them to go to.

But the oldest, Marley, she's thirteen. I took care of Revel and Bonner when I was thirteen. Surely this kid could, right?

When I'm at the door, they're all staring at me. "Don't you have any food?"

Right. They're hungry. I still haven't eaten. "Um, I'll call down and have something brought up for you. What do you want?"

One yells, "Pizza."

Another says, "Pancakes."

Something strangely sounds similar to, "Cookies."

And finally, from Adler, "Krispy Kream!"

They deliver all that, right? I have people who can get all that here within thirty minutes, guaranteed. When you're the highest paid player in the NFL, you can have people to do anything you want. Believe me.

Marley sighs, her hands on her narrow hips. "You expect us to stay here all day long?"

"Yes." Can you sense the apprehension in my voice? They certainly do. "Don't leave the condo." That is a warning I'm almost certain they won't listen to.

Braylee sits up on the counter in her pink pajama bottoms and is wearing a Seahawks baseball hat backward. “What do we do all day? Sit here and be bored?”

I point at her. “First of all, get down. That’s not a chair.” She doesn’t listen. These kids have no manners. “You could start by cleaning up this mess. There’s a television too. Watch TV. Isn’t that what kids love to do?”

“I know what I’m doing!” Adler announces from the couch in front of my eighty-eight-inch television, game controller in hand.

I turn back to the girls who are still staring at me. “What?”

“This is so boring,” Marley mumbles. “I wanted to go to Pike Place or the art institute. Something. It’s our first time in Seattle!”

“Correction, you’re *living* in Seattle now. There’ll be plenty of time to explore later,” I tell her, digging out my phone from my pocket to text Ember. Surely she can deliver everything I forgot I needed here for them. “And besides,” I don’t look up as I continue typing. “Pike Place is crowded and overrated. You won’t like it.”

“How can you say that?” Haisley pipes up, trying to get on the counter beside Braylee. “You don’t know that we won’t like it.”

And before long, the little one is pulling out a drawer and using it as a stair to climb on the counter. That short one, Nalani, she’s a climber. I came in the kitchen yesterday, literally left her alone for a minute, and she was on the counter

trying to get on the fridge. It's like she's a damn cat and has to be at the highest possible point in the house.

They're giving me a headache already. While typing out a text message to Ember to have food delivered, I drop my bag and then one arm it as I pry the climbers off my counter. "Stop climbing on everything. You're not monkeys."

"We want to go explore!" Haisley yells in my ear when I set her down.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I stand there staring at four sets of really bored eyes. Adler couldn't give a shit about anything aside from the television. At least he's being reasonable. "All right, tomorrow. But I'm late. Just stay here for now and don't leave. Ember will bring food by. Don't kill her."

"You expect us to let a stranger in?"

"You literally spent all day with her the other day. And I was a stranger to you four days ago."

"Yeah, and that's going *so* well," Braylee jabs, walking away to flop herself on the couch next to Adler.

My phone's ringing now. It's Quinn probably wondering where the fuck I'm at. I point to Marley. "You have my cell phone number. Don't call it unless it's an emergency."

She rolls her eyes, reaching down to pick up Nalani. "Whatever."

You're thinking I'm an idiot, aren't you? How much trouble could a thirteen-year-old girl get into? She seems level-headed. I think I can trust her.

Those might possibly be my last words. Pray for me.

4. LANDON ALLIGATOR ARMS

Alligator Arms – A receiver who doesn't fully extend his arms to catch a pass because he's afraid that he will be hit hard immediately upon touching the ball. The receiver is protecting himself from the hit and doesn't catch the ball.

I'm sure it comes as no surprise, but I played college ball at Texas State. My career there was amazing. I can pop off with all kinds of facts for you that would probably bore you. Like that I threw for 4966 yards with 105 touchdowns. Or winning the Heisman Trophy.... But like I said, those are facts that will probably bore you. What I will tell you about is a guy named Rex Snider. He was a wide receiver my senior year and scared to take a pass. I'm not joking. There's a reason why he was third string, otherwise known as the backup's backup. But anyway, he'd do this thing where he was running for the ball, and he'd never fully extend his arms to catch the ball. We called him T-Rex, but you know why he was doing it?

T-Rex was afraid of the hit he didn't see coming. He feared being hit from behind by a defender, so he was constantly bracing himself. And now you're probably wondering where the fuck I'm going with this and what it has to do with me and these kids I just irresponsibly left alone for the day.

I totally get T-Rex now. I fear being hit from behind, by five hooligans who've taken over my life.

Just as I'm approaching the parking garage, my phone rings. Digging it out of my pocket, I slide my finger across the screen.

"What is your text message all about?" Ember doesn't bother with hellos. Which, you know, I appreciate. I don't have time for pleasantries usually, and I'm guessing neither does Ember.

I hate having to explain myself and my actions, but sometimes I suppose it's necessary. "The kids. They need food. Maybe throw in some iPads or something for entertainment. You can get those, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

I hate having to explain myself. "There are five hungry and bored kids at my condo. Take them food and entertainment. And start looking at a new car for me and probably a bigger place to live."

I know what you're thinking. You're being awfully rude, Landon. Well, technically, it's her job, and two, I don't have time for nice. Clearly. And, I'd also like to point out, as you'll find out soon—Ember is a bitch to me sometimes. Not only does she refuse to have sex with me, which I find completely unacceptable, she can be so mean. Just wait. Also, this may not be relative at all, but just before I got the phone call that Grant died, we were nearly having sex, and then it was ruined by that one call.

Maybe that's why I'm not sad about him dying?

No, no. That's a harsh thing to say, but convince my dick of that because he's holding some grudges right about now.

"Anything else?" Ember asks, sighing heavily into the phone.

"You could f—"

"I mean with the kids."

Apparently she knew where I was going with that.

I'm in the parking garage now, rushing toward my car, but something gnaws at me. It's like it's in my gut, pulling at my conscience. I just left five kids alone in my condo. Would you be

surprised to learn I'm anxious? Don't be. I'm an overthinker, until I'm on the field.

Before I hang up, I ask, "Thirteen-year-olds are old enough to babysit, right?"

There's a very audible gasp from the other end of the line. "You left them alone?"

"What else was I going to do?"

"Oh my God, Landon. This is crazy. You need to hire a nanny or an assistant."

"*You're* my assistant," I point out, laughing.

"Yeah, well you can forget it. I do not babysit children. You're enough to handle."

"Try working for Revel."

And she bursts out laughing. "No. Way." If you think I'm bad, wait until you meet that guy. I promise you will. He randomly shows up in town, drunk as fuck and looking for a good time. I just never know when that will be. Could be tomorrow for all I know.

"I gotta go. I'm late." I hang up. Again, I'm not being rude. I'm just not one for the pleasantries of goodbyes or small talk, and in case you forgot, Coach Bryant might love me, but being late is like his biggest pet peeve.

I hit the remote on my car and toss my bag on the passenger seat. Would you be surprised to know I drive a Bugatti Chiron? Before your eyes bug out, yes, I can afford a three-million-dollar car. And if we want to get technical, it was 3.26 million after upgrades, but whatever. Perks of that contract I signed last year and the hefty signing bonus. I love it. Best thing about it, it's not hauling around five kids, so it means this will remain all mine. Unlike my condo that's been taken over by vicious kids out to give me a heart attack before I turn thirty.

Next, I call my PR rep because funny thing about training camp, media is everywhere and if word gets out about the kids, which you know it will soon, I'm going to have to explain it.

"Do you have something you need to tell me?" Harper, my PR rep, asks.

"My brother died?" I ask, as if it's a game of guess what. I could have sworn she knew this, but then again, everything happened in a rush so I wouldn't blame Ember if she didn't tell Harper. Usually they talk daily.

"I'm not talking about your brother, though I'm incredibly sorry about that. I'm talking about the story that was leaked this morning about you being the guardian of five children."

"How the hell did that get out?"

"Flight attendant."

"That bitch. I even gave her a fucking autograph."

"LC..." And here's the pause, followed quickly by, "Why am I hearing about this now and not before the story broke? We've been over this before. I have to know certain things."

Do you sense the alarm? The hitch in her voice? The "what the fuck have you done now" LC? I do. I hear it multiple times a week from her.

Sighing, my jaw clenches. Normally I *shouldn't* have to explain myself to my PR rep, or maybe that's the point of paying her to issue statements for me, but then again, I haven't talked to anyone in four days. I've been in hiding for good reason. Apparently, I hadn't been hiding very well. "After Grant and Melanie died they named me the legal guardian of their five kids. Surprise!"

Just as I expect, there's silence on the other end. And then, "Is this another one of your sick jokes? Like the time you told me you cut off your arm?"

I fight back laughter. “Technically, I *did* cut off an arm that day.”

“Off a *mannequin*. Not at all the same thing.”

“I’m late. I don’t have time for this,” I cut her off. “But yeah, story’s true as shit. I’m a dad now.”

Even as I say the words, I don’t believe them. Or maybe it’s that I’m hoping it’s all a dream and it’s not true.



Not unexpectedly, the moment I’m out of my car, there’s a camera in my face. I’ll admit, I can’t go that many places in Seattle, or any other town for that matter, without the media following my every move. The only reason they didn’t follow me in Texas is that I have a damn good agent and a PR team, that includes Harper, that kept the media distracted with a scandalous story about me and a waitress from Santa Monica they told everyone I knocked up. Not true. The waitress is Harper’s sister and played along. I did, in fact, sleep with her, but no pregnancy occurred. Thank God.

“Sorry to hear about your brother, LC,” one reporter says, shoving a camera and microphone in my face, like I’m supposed to have some sort of sentimental response for him. “Is it true you’re the guardian of his five children?”

I give the reporter a look. I haven’t made any statement about my brother, or the kids.

“No comment,” I mumble, pushing through the doors of the training center. No way am I starting my day with their media circus. I’ll be sucked into it later today and that’s fine. I’m usually prepared to answer questions after practice but before, don’t fucking bother me.

I’m not even joking when I say training camp is the worst month of the year for most football players at the college and pro ranks. Sure, it’s great to play and compete in this sport, at this level, but training camp has a way of nullifying nearly everything enjoyable about being

in the NFL during August. Not only are we in front of the cameras and the prying eyes of the media, but the coaches are also closely watching our every move. Sure, to the outside world we're talking about how excited we are to be out here working and how much we *love* training camp. But it's all bullshit. Inside the locker room, the truth comes out.

I'm not even exaggerating when I say days in an NFL training camp seem infinite. They typically begin around 6:00 a.m., not long after the sun rises, and don't end until every last player on the field feels like they are going to collapse. Then we go home and pass out, only to get up the next day and do it all again. We're so tired during that first week even eating breakfast feels like a chore.

Inside the locker room that's the size of a warehouse, an endless circle of lockers similar to walk-in closets line the walls, and everywhere you look the team logo is plastered. You know, just in case you forgot what team you played for. Also, there are half-naked dudes bullshitting with each other about who did what on their break and who banged who.

Sitting on the bench in front of my locker, I'm trying to harness my thoughts and take in everything going on around me. That's when Quinn Harvey, one of our wide receivers and good friend, limps by. He catches my shoulder for support. "Dude, easy there, man. It's only day one," I tell him, trying to force a smile.

I love Quinn. He's my boy. He's just smart enough to make sense, but he doesn't actually know what the fuck he's talking about half the time. But Quinn's the star. One of the highest paid on the team. He's so talented we've built the offensive around the two of us. On the field, he's a motherfucking beast. Off the field, his dick gets him in more trouble than he cares to admit. No lie, as I speak, he's texting two girls at the same time. That's not even the worst he's done. He once dated five chicks at once. Take a guess as to how that ended. Yeah, awful.

"Keeping two girlfriends happy at the same time ain't easy," he notes, grinning like a fool.

“Why don’t you try having a relationship with the one having your kid?” another offensive lineman shouts from across the room, smiling a big pearly white and gold grin. Yep, he has gold teeth.

“I *do* have a relationship with her,” Quinn says. “Seventy-five thousand a year.” The room breaks out in laughter while Quinn props his foot up on my leg. It’s swollen and angry. He leans in, his voice dropping. “I don’t know why they’re laughing. I’m fuckin’ serious.”

Quinn’s been nursing an ankle injury since last season but refuses to let that keep him down. In fact, he’s been our starting wide receiver for the last two years and there’s not a chance in hell he’s going to let the rookie who came in last season beat him out of that starting spot. All of us are incredibly out of shape from the offseason, but we have to find a way to push through it. We’re highly paid athletes. Our ability to push through and be the best is why we’re here. There are no excuses. There’s only one goal at the beginning of the season. Super bowl. That means training injured. End of story.

Kumonde, our center, arrives next and sits on the other side of me. “LC, my man.” His large Hawaiian hand claps over my shoulder. “Hanging in there?” With enough ink on his arms to fill a comic book, Kumonde is an ethnic melting pot. Even he doesn’t know what he has swimming in his island veins. The massive bastard is one of my favorite people in the world. He’s six foot three, 320 pounds of muscle, and frequently brings his three-year-old daughter with him everywhere. If you’ve ever seen the two together, you’d think he was just a big teddy bear. Throw a pair of pads on him, and he’ll tear a hole in a defense without even thinking about it.

“Trying to,” I admit. I was with Kumonde and Quinn in Hawaii when I got the news Grant had died. They flew back with me but didn’t go to the funeral. I haven’t told any of them about the kids yet. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. My brother... left me his kids,” I whisper, like I’m telling a secret. It feels like a secret—one I don’t want getting out.

Do you notice the way their eyes all bug out? Like they're not sure whether to feel sorry for me or congratulate me? I can relate to their apprehension on so many levels. You'd think I would have told Kumonde at least, seeing how he's one of my best friends and let Cat stay with him, but I didn't.

"How old are they?" That question comes from Kumonde.

"Oldest is thirteen and youngest is two." The fear in my voice is unreal. Even these guys notice. I'm the fucking rock of this team and now look at me. All sorts of messed up.

"Are you serious?" Quinn asks, his eyes opening wide like he's been hit by a ray of light from above. I nod. "Why the hell would he give *you* custody?"

Laughing under my breath, my shoulders slump forward. "I'm still trying to figure that one out myself."

"Where are they now?" Kumonde asks, throwing on his jersey over his shoulders, forgoing the pads. When he realizes he's forgotten his armor, he laughs, takes the jersey off and redresses himself.

"At my condo."

Quinn and Kumonde exchange a look. "Wait, you mean *alone* at your place? Is Ember with them at least?"

I shrug, the guilt I felt earlier for leaving them alone creeps back in. "Why does everyone keep looking at me like that? The older one is thirteen. I'm sure they're fine. And Em's next door. I'm sure if anything goes wrong she'll know."

The laughter from both of them tells me I've done something wrong here. Quinn jumps up, waving his ebony hands around. "Ya so fucked, man. No more pussy for you."

The two turn to leave, laughing as if I'm the punch line of the funniest joke they've heard, and I'm supposed to follow them to the mandatory team meeting before we break apart and meet with special teams' coaches. But I don't. My mind isn't on the meeting or even

football training camp like it should be. Instead, it's on the kids and what Quinn said.

It's hard to focus on anything but them. Minute to minute, I'm finding out new things I need to know and take care of. School, daycare, diapers, car seats.... the list goes on. I've got to get my shit together and figure out how I'm gonna move forward before I find myself on the receiving end of the bench.

Reaching for my phone, I call Ember to make sure she got the food and entertainment delivered. She's really good at what she does for me and usually hates when I call to check up on her but the guys have me freaked out now that something is going to go wrong.

Ember answers on the second ring but sounds out of breath. "You owe me for this one."

That earns a laugh from me. "I pay you very generously to do *whatever* I need. Pretty sure I don't *owe* you anything. You owe me for what happened in the hotel room."

"How is the hotel room my fault?"

"You stopped us... again."

"You have a girlfriend."

I sigh into the phone and growl, "She's not my girlfriend." Allesa is not my girlfriend. Okay, maybe she is, or was, but whatever. That doesn't matter. It's not like I'm exclusive with anyone and Ember knows that.

"For now."

Told ya. "You're just being difficult."

"Landon, knock it off. This isn't the time to talk about that stuff."

"Where are you?"

"In the parking garage. I'm loading up the stuff and I'll take it upstairs."

“Cool.” And then I hang up.

Here’s a fact for you. I couldn’t keep assistants before I met Ember. They all piss me off or I sleep with them and then it’s over. Like Keri. Keri was great, but I fired her after she sucked my dick. She didn’t swallow. You can’t trust a girl who doesn’t swallow.

Oh relax, she’s working with Quinn now. It’s fine. She found a good job. Considering how long she’s been working for him, I’m pretty sure she must have learned to swallow.

After Keri there was Shelly. She wouldn’t call my ex and get my car from her condo, so I had to fire her. My ex was her sister, and she was pissed I slept with her so that might have had something to do with the lack of willingness but either way, she had to go. And I wanted that damn car back. I finally had to report it stolen and they found it three days later, on fire, with the words “cheating bastard” carved in the hood. I’d just like to point out here, never once did I tell that chick we were exclusive.

After Shelly, I tried having male assistants. Thought it’d be easier. And as it turns out, after Blake, Tom... and then Taylor, none of that was true. Men came with the same problems. Then I met Ember one night while Quinn and I were out getting tattoos and the rest is history. She runs errands, keeps up with my calendar, books private jets, and looks after my social media—I can’t be in charge of that. I told one pissed-off fan last season he could suck my nuts. I didn’t give a shit what he thought of the game against the Falcons and all my social media rights were taken away. Probably for good reason.

I have other people too. Like Harper. You met her. But there’s more. Chad, he’s my agent. He’s a bossy motherfucker who’s bald and has a jet-black goatee. He also has cold, dead eyes that freak me the fuck out, but he’s there when I need him to have my career back. I have a manager, Elliott. He deals with everything outside my career, hardest of all, me personally. I’m here to tell you now, I’m not exactly

the easiest or nicest guy to work for. To say they earn their keep is an understatement.

Setting my phone in my locker, I stand, shake off the anxiety gnawing at me and make my way to the meeting room. I can't have distractions today. I have to block this shit out somehow. Luckily I have Ember. I don't know what I'd do without her if she hadn't been there for me in Texas.



After the team meeting, which I struggled to focus in, our team is on the field and split by position, each of us working on specific plays and strategies. Thirteen practices are held here during training camp at the VMC (Virginia Mason Athletic Center) and televised by the media as well as open to the public. By the end of the week, we'll be in scrimmage games and heavy hitting, though I'm usually off-limits for hitting. Surprisingly, I love the roughness of football. Hard hits don't bother me one bit. Being sacked does, and before you say that's just being hit hard, you're wrong, it's *not*. Being sacked means someone is not doing their job and it's bullshit. Getting knocked around—just part of the game—getting sacked pisses me off.

I trust these guys, and we've played well together over the last three years. Who I don't trust is Justice, our left tackle. Probably because he fucked Ember and I haven't, but he's sloppy and unpredictable at times. Like today. When he leaves me open for a sack and I'm picking grass out of my face guard. Remember what I said? I. Hate. Being. Sacked.

The first lesson a rookie player learns is that pro football is so much more intense than college ball. Nothing is the same. Every hit is harder, and with every play, more is on the line. Like your goddamn career.

I lie on the ground for a moment, staring up at the blue sky trying to catch my breath. Everyone tries out for the team. I don't care if you were drafted and the team did everything in their power to get you, you still have to prove your worth every season. Football is a game of results, and if you're not producing for them, you don't play. It's the old saying, what have you done for me lately? And every coach and team owner will be looking at you with that in mind.

When you start training camp, there's something like ninety players. After cuts, the team is brought down to a fifty-three-man roster. That's reason enough to prove your worth.

Justice laughs, throwing out his hand to help me up. "Little rusty there, bro?"

I look to the offensive line coach, and then Bryant, our head coach. I'm not rusty, I'm distracted, and I think they know it.

Also, I hate that word "bro." It's fucking cliché.

"Fuck you," I mumble, picking myself up off the ground. I brush past him and get back into huddle so we can call the next play.

Welcome to training camp. Also known as hell. Few things in life will ever test one's strength like an August in the NFL. That is, of course, until you have five kids to look after and up until now, the most interaction you've had with kids is your teammates' offspring coming to practice on Saturdays. Lucky me with my alligator arms.

5. EMBER FRONT FOUR

Front Four – The four down defensive linemen in a 4-3 defense. The primary run stoppers.

I'm not a morning person. I like nights, late nights, and it's not unheard of for me to go to bed around three or four in the morning. Sometimes even later. And that's when I paint, too. Not only am I Landon's assistant and used to be tattooist, but I'm an artist, and my passion for life lies waiting on a blank canvas. Those hours just as the sun rises, it's the only time of day I can close my mind off. All the greats were night owls. Picasso? Night owl. He'd shut himself in his studio at 2:00 p.m. and work until dusk. Winston Churchill, Bob Dylan... both night owls, too.

I've mastered the art of going to bed just after sunrise. Because of this, I sleep with a fan on, to drown out the other city noises. True, I live in high-rise luxury condos overlooking Elliott Bay that are heavily insulated, so city noise isn't exactly something I have to worry about. I guess it's a habit from when I was younger and blocking out the yelling between my parents. But, since I met Landon, I'm usually

woken up by him calling and needing something. Much like this morning.

I knew he'd call and want me to take care of the kids. I even warned him yesterday I wouldn't be babysitting and he needed to hire someone. Turns out, I'm wrong. He did hire someone. Me.

I'm so blessed.

So, like every morning since I met Landon, I'm forced to do things I don't want to do, earlier than I care to do them.

"Who was calling you so early?" Cat stands in front of me, tying her dreads back with two strands from the front as she watches me organize the bags.

"Landon. Who else?"

"I can't believe he calls you this early every morning."

"It's because he only ever thinks about football." I went and got everything the kids would need today in a rush and just threw everything haphazardly into bags. I need to get organized before I enter his condo with the kids. I also take the time to scroll through Instagram to see if Allesha has posted anything. She hasn't yet. I don't know why I'm obsessed with his "sometimes" girlfriend. I'm just as obsessed with Instagram. I don't follow anyone, but I stalk. In real life, I hashtag the shit out of everything in my head. Get used to it. You've been warned now. I think hashtags just might be the best invention yet. Second only to the mocha. Whoever decided chocolate, coffee and milk would pair nicely together, they're my friend. #bestbuds #meant2be #destinedforsuccess

Told ya.

“What is all this stuff?” Cat asks, staring at the bags. You’re probably wondering who she is, aren’t you?

That’s Cat, my best friend. You remember her, right? Little red head who has a memory like Dory? She lives with me in a condo Landon pays for that’s conveniently located right next door to him. Just in case he needs something in the middle of the night. Sure, it’s a weird deal, but it’s worked for us for the last few years so we can keep an eye on Cat.

Traumatic brain injuries like Cat’s don’t work the way you think. You can thank movies for misinterpretation on that one. You don’t forget everything from your past. Those are actually easier to recall. After TBI (Traumatic brain injury), people have trouble remembering new information, recent events, or what’s happening on a daily basis. She forgets what you talked about hours ago. She forgets where she left her keys or what condo we live in. That’s why we live together.

Setting my phone on the counter, I stare up at Cat and her dreadlocks she rocks so well. I’m jealous she doesn’t have to use hair ties anymore and the fact that she only has to wash her hair once a week. “What did he want this time? Doesn’t training camp start today?”

I stare up at her, wishing I could have just a few more hours. It’s eight in the morning. Who gets up this early? Don’t get me wrong, I understand most people do. Doctors, teachers, normal people. Landon Slade. Although, let’s not make a mistake by thinking he’s normal, because he’s not. He’s a freak of nature who’s obsessed with working out early in the morning. Hell, even Cat has to get up this early for the days

she works but damn. “Yeah, training camp started today. He wants me to run and get the kids food and entertainment.”

Cat’s tips her head to the side. She looks confused, as usual. “What kids?”

“Landon’s nieces and nephew.”

I reach for my coffee and then hand Cat hers I picked up at Starbucks on the way back to the condo to check the time.

“Okay, so he has kids now? Did I miss all this yesterday when you picked me up?”

Digging through the cupboards, I find the travel cup I use and set it on the counter beside the coffee machine. “No, I didn’t tell you.”

“Because I wouldn’t have remembered,” Cat notes, sighing. “How the heck is he going to take care of kids?”

“Apparently that’s what he has me for.” Can you sense the sarcasm in my voice? It’s not that I don’t want to help him out with the kids, because I do. I love children. But remember that art I told you about? That’s my passion. For years my dream has been to get my paintings into the Westward Gallery in downtown Seattle. For years I’ve also been trying to get my shit together enough to enter into their fall expo. And this year, I honestly thought that it would be my chance. Until this. I can’t blame him for it because it’s not like he had a choice in this either.

“Where are the kids now?”

I look over at her. “In his condo.”

Smiling, she lifts her coffee to her lips. “When can I meet them? Do they look like him?”

I begin to picture what Landon’s kids might look like. #adorableAF Little brown-haired football players with his dark eyes and that adorable smirk.... #knockmeup

Fuck, girl, get your shit together. Don’t think about him like that.

There’s a knock on the door and before I can stop her, Cat’s opening the door. “We got locked out,” Marley explains. I examine her innocent face. While I can see a shred of resemblance to the Slade brothers, I wonder if Marley looks like her mom.

Cat pushes the door open wider with her foot and all five kids walk in like we’ve invited them. “Of where?”

“Our uncle’s place.”

Cat sips her coffee. “Where’s your key?”

“Duh, in there.” Adler points to the door behind them.

“We were told *not* to leave,” Haisley admits meekly.

It’s my turn to smile. “But you did?”

They all nod. Even the toddler. I can’t even tell you how cute she is. So freaking adorable. I want to pick her up and squeeze her, and every time I look at her I think of her sleeping on Landon the entire flight back.

Adler steps closer, examining my arms as I pull the iPads out of the bags. “Where do you get your ink? I’m thinking of getting a sleeve done.”

Marley shoves his shoulder. “Shut up, Adler. You are *not*.”

He stumbles, then straightens his posture, angry with his sister. “I can too if I want.”

Braylee stands next to Adler. “No, you have to be eighteen.”

“Not true,” he defends, trying to stand taller and next to me. “With a parent’s permission I could.”

“Actually, that’s incorrect,” I add, handing him a donut from the counter. I’m not one to give anyone false hope, but I also don’t want him running away looking to get ink. “Not in the state of Washington. You gotta be eighteen, dude.”

His shoulders slump. “Damn it.” He groans, licking the chocolate frosting from his donut. “Way to crush my dreams.”

I fight back laughter.

“What are your names?” Cat asks, reaching for her coffee again.

Marley speaks up first. “I’m Marley. I’m thirteen.” She slaps her hand on the back of Adler’s head. “That’s Adler, Braylee, Haisley...” She pauses, touching each one’s head as she calls out their names. “And this little one is Nalani. We call her Lani... sometimes.”

The moment she says Lani... Nalani growls at her.

“We don’t think she likes it,” Marley adds.

“Do you know Landon?” Adler asks, looking at Cat.

I fight the heat in my cheeks and the tug of my lips by hiding my face behind the coffee the moment his name is mentioned. I take a sip.

“I know him really well. I’ve been friends with him for years,” Cat tells them.

“Do you like him?” Braylee asks, her expression unreadable.

Cat is always honest. “When he’s not being a jerk, yeah.”

“Me either.” Haisley hops up on the counter and starts opening the bags. “He doesn’t have any food there, and his condo is like *so* small.”

“We have food in here.” Cat opens the cupboards. “What do you guys want?” And just like that, five hungry kids are looking through the cupboards and picking out anything remotely edible.

Adler, he takes his donut and sits down on the couch, pointing to the television. “Landon’s is huge, ya know.”

“I know.” Shit. Now I’m *not* thinking about his TV. I’m imagining just how big his cock is. It’s just kind of where my head is today, or always. Especially after that night in Hawaii and any other time we find ourselves in that position. I’ve felt it, a few times, and seen it twice. It’s beautiful and thick, long... and bound to get the friction on. Admit it, your head went there too. Thank you, Sir Mix-A-Lot, you musical genius.

Haisley starts reading the sticky notes I’m forced to leave Cat around the condo, things like, *Dude, lock the door*, or worse, *Did you remember to turn off the stove? You shouldn’t have had it on in the first place. Go turn it off!* You’re probably wondering why I leave notes like those, aren’t you? And if you are, remember... she has a brain injury. While her

long-term memory is there, her short term isn't great. Okay, it's awful. Most days she can't even remember if she showered let alone remember to turn off the lights. Which is why she lives with me now.

Looking around, I notice Marley's in the hall next to the door, staring at the paintings on the wall. My paintings.

"These are amazing," Marley notes, running her fingers over the canvas. "Where'd you find these?"

"They're Ember's," Cat tells her from beside Haisley and Nalani, who are fascinated with Cat's dreads. They're also sharing a bagel with cream cheese.

"No way!" Marley turns to face me. "Did you paint these yourself?"

I nod, pride swelling in my chest. I can tell by looking at Marley, she's artistic. Also, she carries around a sketch book so there's that. But there's appreciation in her eyes and if not there, the artful way she dresses herself in the bright red pants and purple T-shirt that's a few sizes too big. I stare at her beautiful blue eyes. Mine are cold and used, hers are hopeful, yet sad. "I notice you're drawing all the time. Do you paint?"

Tears well up, but she holds them back. "I used to, but I haven't in a while."

"How come?"

Her voice wavers with the words, "Haven't felt much inspiration these days."

I've loved art and color since the day I was born. After my mom died, color just didn't look the same, but after some time, I found healing in the escape creativity gave me. "When I

paint, I don't know what it will look like until the end. I begin with no direction, but a feeling. A way to escape. I can't even name the feeling, just what it provokes inside me. A smile, a tear, tension... whatever it is, I let the brush take me there."

Marley's eyes that were on the painting, drop with my words. "I'm not sure I want to paint what's provoking me." Her words shake, tears welling up.

Emotion lodges in my throat. I want to go so far as to say I don't know what she's going through, but I do. I lost my mom suddenly and my dad, might as well have lost him too. I do know what she's going through. I know what it's like to be so lost inside, you fear you'll never find a way out.

"So why are you guys staying at Landon's place?" Cat asks. My eyes snap to hers. Hadn't I told her about Landon's brother? Well, fuck. She probably forgot already. I should have written a note on the counter.

"He got us," Braylee says, her eyes on the floor.

Cat's eyebrows pull together. "Got you how?"

"Our parents died. In a car accident," Adler tells her, switching through channels on the television like he's looking for something in particular.

I turn to Marley. "Was he nice to you guys last night?"

She nods, then clears her throat. "I guess so. You can tell he doesn't know what he's doing."

"He really doesn't." She has no idea how clueless he really is in all this.

6. LANDON MAN TO MAN

Man to Man – (Coverage/defense) A defender is assigned a specific player to cover regardless of where the offensive player goes.

I like to think I stay in pretty good shape for the most part. I'm exhausted by the end of practice, just like I knew I would be. It's not even a "hey, I'm sore and want to go to bed." It's a "shit, I might not be able to move tomorrow."

So yeah, I'm really looking forward to some sleep. And then I remember that's not going to happen. My days of sleep are over now that there are five kids living with me. Damn it, I really need to get a bigger place. I mentally make a note that I need to call Harper and see if she found me, one, a bigger place and two, a bigger car. As it is, I can't take them anywhere and sooner or later they're going to want to get out of the condo.

Seattle traffic after five is insane. Doesn't matter where you go, it's a nightmare. For the first year I lived here, I refused to drive anywhere and called for a car whenever I went

anywhere. Then I discovered my love for cars. My problem now seems to be I have expensive taste. Not only does everyone stare at my car now, they know it and know who's inside. So while my drive home already sucked, it's even worse because people are gawking at my car and trying to get a glimpse of who's inside.

Road rage and stupidity gets the better of me. "What the fuck!" I yell at the fourth driver in the last mile to literally stop on the road to point at my car. Do they not realize they're the reason for all this traffic? People actually have somewhere to be.

It's the same fucking thing every day. I tell myself I'm going to start hiring a driver again. But fuck, man, I love this car. Not the attention, just the speed and power.

Once I'm in the parking garage, my blood pressure lowers, but only for a moment. Guess what happens when I'm at my condo and mentally preparing myself for five angry kids...? They're gone. As in, not there.

What the fuck? Okay, don't panic. I bet Harper took them somewhere, right? I check my phone to see if she left me a message. Nothing.

Tension rolls my stomach and Oma's words rattle in my head. "*Landon, if anything happens to these babies, I'll come to Seattle and kill you.*"

She might not have been serious, but it's Oma Valkema, you *never* question that woman. Hence why I wrote that I hated her on the underside of the dining room table when I was a kid. She used to make me so angry with all her rules, yet

I was too much of a chicken shit to write it on the wall like Revel did. She beat the shit out of him with a belt for that one.

Keeping her threat in mind, imagine my concern when I open the door and they're gone.

In what can only be described as "fear of Oma syndrome," I stand in the foyer, calling out their names, but none answer. Big surprise since this is a one-bedroom condo. Not a lot of places for them to be.

Next, I call Ember. She answers after the third or fourth ring. "No, I'm not bringing them dinner too. You're on your own."

"Please tell me you took them with you?" Can you sense the anxiety in my voice? The way it hitches around the words? "Because they're not here."

"What? No." She sounds disgusted. "They weren't home when I came by earlier, so I left the food and iPads on the counter and left."

She has to be joking.

Part of me wants to yell at her for not looking for them when she was here. What kind of person would deliver food to kids and not check to see if they're home? But then again, what kind of person would leave five kids home alone in the first place?

Fuck. I'm a piece of shit, aren't I? Swallowing back the lump rising in my throat, my heart continues to pound. "What time did you drop it off?"

"Right after we talked, Landon." And now she sounds irritated.

I hang up on Ember and remember I gave the oldest one my cell phone number this morning. Luckily enough, I called her to make sure I had hers. Scrolling through my contacts, I find her name and call. Thank God she answers.

“Are you *finally* home?”

I snort, gripping the counter for support. “Where the fuck are you?”

“Rude much?” she gasps. “We’re next door with Ember and Cat.”

This isn’t the first time Ember’s purposely lied to my face for the sheer fun of having me knock on her door.

Marching next door, I pound on the door only to have Ember open it and smile at me. “Did you really think I’d leave them home by themselves all day? I’m not you, ya jerk.”

Every time I see Ember my cock perks up with anticipation. I’m not even being dramatic here when I say I’d die to fuck this chick. I’ve been blessed in my adult life. I have everything I’ve ever wanted and shit, it’s a good life. The one thing I want but can’t have? Ember Jade.

Therefore, I’d die to fuck her. Seems logical enough for me. But that could be my brain post-practice when I’m too tired to think about much else other than food and fucking. Ember Jade. Even the name rolls off your tongue like you’re talking about a stripper or porn star. The legendary ones people write articles about as being the most prestigious of the industry. Who was that, Jenna Jameson? She wrote a book, she was that good at sucking cock. Only Ember’s not a porn star or a stripper. Fuck that shit. I’d never allow her to be in porn or

strip. No fucking way I'd let anyone stare at that gorgeous body of hers. She may not be "officially" mine, but she's completely off-limits to anyone but me.

With her jet-black hair tied up in a bun, Ember leans into the doorframe and get this, I can hear the kids in her condo, but she doesn't invite me in.

Instead, I get the evil eye. "You didn't bother to check on them all day?"

Naturally—because remember, my dick is in charge here—my eyes wander the length of her curvy body I've begged her to let me have for a night. I'm not disappointed, other than knowing she's only going to turn me down again, but she's wearing those hot gray cotton shorts she wears when she goes down to the gym. The ones that hug her thick hips and tiny waist and leave entirely too much to my dirty mind.

"I was at practice," I tell her, like it's a perfectly good excuse for not only leaving them alone but not even checking in on them all day. After the words leave my mouth, they leave me feeling like the biggest jerk of all time. And that includes the time I charged a guy for my autograph thinking he'd leave me alone. Dude paid me five hundred bucks for it. Don't worry, I'm not a complete shit. I gave it back to him. "What can I say? It's not like I can say, 'hey, sorry, gotta take a break and check on the kids.'"

"News flash, golden boy, that's exactly how it works when you have kids." And she practically spits those words at me, like I should know all this already.

Ember's beautiful blue eyes rage with anger, her cheeks flush, and you know, it only makes her hotter. I also can't

understand why she's so upset with me over this. "Why are you giving me shit? It's not like I know what the hell I'm doing. My fucking brother died and left them to me. I'm still trying to figure this shit out." An unfamiliar pain hits my chest out of the blue. Right in my heart. Oh, wow. There's a hurt to my tone I certainly hadn't anticipated. Was his death finally hitting me? Or maybe I'm just tired, and the stress of having no clue what I'm doing with my life now, or where it's taking me is giving me a heart attack. Can a twenty-six-year-old have a heart attack? Uncle Lou probably has.

"I know this is hard on you." Ember frowns, hidden memories taking her bright eyes to a dull, pain-stricken gloss. "And I'm sorry."

Shaking off the thoughts of a minute earlier, I know my opening when I see one. She's downfield, looking back at me and maybe she might catch this one. "Does that make you want to go have sex with me?"

That one earns me an eye roll and a shove. Nope. Failed pass attempt. "No."

I capture her hand in mine before she can pull it away. "What would?"

"Nothing."

I groan. "You're impossible."

"You're relentless."

And then I ask, "Is it because you're a lesbian?" It's the only justifiable answer I can come up with as to why she won't go out with me.

You can see anger settling in the set frown to the devastatingly beautiful lips I've been dying to have wrapped around my cock. Her hands clench, her fingers itching to slap me. Though I don't know this for sure, I can't say I blame her. It's most likely deserving at this point.

“*What* in the hell would make you think I'm a lesbian?”

I fight back a laugh. “Though I love your feistiness, it wasn't meant to be derogatory.” And then I pause, leaning into the wall beside her, to give her the full effect, or shall I say, for my own benefit because I know what my appearance does to women. I know what it does to Ember. But lately with her, I have to wonder what am I doing wrong? I'm trying to appear relaxed and unfazed by her constant denial and avoiding talking about Hawaii, but it's messing with my head and my game. Both on and off the field. I'm sorry if this comes across as me being an arrogant asshole, but nobody has ever denied me. Until I asked Ember last night if she'd continue where we left off in Hawaii and she said, wait for it... *no*.

To *me*.

I'm gonna pause here. Let it soak in. Process that for a moment because fuck if it didn't catch me off guard too. She told me, the highest paid, sexiest man alive—screw you *People Magazine*, you voted wrong—best NFL quarterback in the world, no. I won't go into my professional record here, but maybe I should so you can understand how bizarre it is that she told *me* no. I grew up in Texas, dominated Texas State University, Heisman trophy winner, first-round draft pick by the Seattle Seahawks and just signed a four-year contract with them to become the highest paid athlete in the league.

You probably already knew all that, but does that change your mind?

Thought so. Now help me convince Ember of this because fuck, her eyes, those devastatingly beautiful blue eyes and that jet-black hair, her thick hips and ass I'd die to grab a handful of, and have before, I have to have her. I'm not even joking when I say I sport wood the moment she comes into view. And she's nothing like the women I usually fuck. Actually, she's the complete opposite. At five-four, maybe, that's pushing it, she's probably a buck thirty, amazingly full tits, tiny waist, and again, *that ass*. It doesn't look fat, either. You know how sometimes a woman with a little meat on her has one of those dimply asses that sorta looks like cottage cheese? Not at all what Ember has. Hers is earned, like she works for it. And goddamn, it screams grab me, fuck me, stick your cock in me.

Trying my luck again, I smile and then wink at the woman who's immune to my advances. Immune might be a poor choice of word, but it's what I'm left with. "I'm just curious," I tell her, wondering why someone so beautiful can be so mean. Then I start to wonder if she's ever looked happy. She's like the art she paints, and art isn't supposed to be pleasant. She tells me it's supposed to be devastating and provoking. It's supposed to make you feel something and this girl, she makes me feel *everything*.

Ember's eyebrow rises, and the resting bitch face she constantly has around me hardens. "About?" The position of the exposed skin of her neck draws me in. I can see her pulse beneath the perfect skin. I remember that spot. My mouth has been there before and knows the hitch it causes in her

breathing. It makes me want to press my lips to the curve, taste her and feel her neck pulsing against my tongue.

I lean in further. I want to make her uncomfortable. It works. It always works with her. “Why are you avoiding talking about Hawaii? It doesn’t make any goddamn sense, unless, of course, you are *in fact* a lesbian. Then I’d understand.”

There’s a moment when our eyes catch, and I see the spark in hers when she lets them travel the length of my body. Anticipation presents itself. She may not be completely immune to my advances after all. “You’ve known me five goddamn years and now you’re questioning if I’m a lesbian?” She jabs a finger in my face. “And don’t give me those bedroom eyes.”

It’s my turn to act offended. “What bedroom eyes? I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about. And by the way, I got nothing against you being a lesbian. I’m an equal opportunity kind of guy, but mind if I watch?”

“You’re sick!” She pushes me away, but do you notice the smirk? I do. She’s struggling to hold her curtness.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Laughing, I tip my head to the door. “Where are the hooligans?”

“Inside with Cat. I’ll get them.” It’s then she motions me inside her condo. I don’t come in here very often. It’s usually me calling Ember over to my condo, which, by the way is right next door.

“Wanna keep them? Or maybe just one or two?” I’m teasing, but I gotta admit, part of me would probably take her

up on the offer should she accept it. Maybe split custody?

Ember side eyes me but keeps walking. “Nope.” She’s always had a calmness about her—a self-confidence I enjoy around me. You usually don’t see that with women. It’s usually them throwing themselves at me. Not Ember. The two times we’ve gotten close to having sex, it’s been me who initiated it. Which is why I’m beginning to question if she’s a lesbian. Or maybe turned into one after her and Justice broke up. Don’t even get me started about Justice. It will only piss me off.

Ember grabs Adler by his shoulder. “Your uncle is here. Time for you to stop controlling my television for the day.”

Adler rolls his eyes and hands her the remote. “Like I said, his is bigger.”

I can’t help but laugh. My eyes, my very much amused ones, move to Ember’s. And what do you know, there’s a pinkness to her cheeks. Great minds think alike after all. It’s fucking adorable, and my cock stirs to life, again.

Down boy. There are children present.

Ember clears her throat. “Well, not all of us make millions a year like your uncle.”

Adler shrugs. “Guess so.” And then he steps toward me. “You forgot to leave us a key.”

“I shouldn’t have to leave you a key because,” I look down at him, scowling, “I told you *not* to leave. And Ember has a key. She could have let you back inside.”

There’s absolutely no regard for what I said. None at all. “We were hungry.”

“That’s why I had Em get you food.”

Marley comes into view holding Nalani in her arms. “First of all, you didn’t leave us anything to eat, and by the time she got back, it was like, *so late*.” Notice the dramatic effect she puts on the words *so late*? Typical teenage girl. I had a twin sister, and I know how this teenage drama works. “If it hadn’t been for Ember and Cat, we were gonna have to start eating each other.”

I don’t know what’s wrong with me tonight, but as I’m listening to Marley complaining, all I can think of is how hungry I am for Ember and how eating her pussy would be a great appetizer. It’s so goddamn inappropriate given the kids are right here, but I can’t help it. I told you, she’s got some vagina voodoo over me. I rationalize that if she’d just give me what I’m asking for, I’ll never bother her again. And like I’ve explained to Ember—and after which she expressed to me numerous times to please not speak to her ever again—I only need a couple hours to make this happen.

And that’s probably *why* she hates me 80 percent of the time. I don’t listen when it’s not something I want to hear.

Sighing, I nod to Marley. “Where are the other ones? There are two missing.”

“I’m here!” Haisley adds, her high-pitched kid voice way too annoying. “Did you have a good day? I bet it was fun. I got to color, and Cat braided my hair. You really need to braid hair.” And then, she hugs my legs like I’m her favorite goddamn person. “I missed you.”

I’m not even sure how to process all that. I stare at the kid for close to a minute before Marley nudges me. “Tell her you

missed her too before you hurt her feelings!” she whispers in my ear.

Awkwardly, I pat her back. I can't remember the last time a kid hugged me aside from Kumonde's daughter, and she hugs everything, so I usually don't feel too special. But this hug, this all-in leg squeeze by a five-year-old who's lost the two most safe and secure people in her life, she fucking missed the one person who has been thrown into her life like I'm some sort of life preserver and gonna rescue her. “Missed you too, kid.”

Wanna know the crazy part?

I think I did.

Lifting my attention to the others in the room, I realize everyone is staring at me. I only focus on the kids this time. I can't believe I left them home alone after everything they've been through. What a dick move on my part, although, I already knew that. “You guys hungry? I can order in Chinese food.” Nothing says I'm sorry like egg rolls, fried rice, and orange chicken. I'm a firm believer if you're having a bad day, there are two meals that will fix this. Okay, three. Chinese food. Tacos. Pizza. And in that order for me. All right. That's all a lie in part. Sex. Sex cures everything. Too bad I can't have that, but I'll settle on some fried rice.

Ember orders dinner for us, all kids nodding eagerly and shouting off what they want, hopefully thinking she'll remember as they barrel out the door back over to my condo. That's when I'm left with Ember and Cat staring at me. Faintly, I can hear raised voices and the words, “Dude, these are brand new iPads.” Followed by, “This one is mine!”

A smile tugs at my lips. I did something right today. I wave my hand toward my door behind me. “Thanks for watching them.”

“It was our pleasure!” Cat beams. “I love kids.” And then she glances at Ember. “I do, right? Like before?”

Ember shrugs her off. “Yeah, hon. You loved them.” And then her annoyed expression shifts to mine. I say annoyed because I get the feeling that despite my moment with the child, she’s still mad at me. “You need to hire a nanny or something. You can’t leave them alone during the day and I’m not watching them either.”

I nod, unsure what else to say. I’m so tired I don’t have it in me to argue or make any more attempts to hit on her, so I turn and walk away back to my condo.

7. LANDON DOWN BY CONTACT

Down by contact – The carrier is ruled down when any part of his body is touching the ground (other than his feet or hands), and he's touched by a defender.

You know that saying it only takes a split second for your life to change? We've briefly talked about this before. Blink of an eye, remember? Not only can I attest to it, but the same also goes for leaving children alone. They literally just walked in here, didn't they? How have they had time to further destroy my condo? I wouldn't have believed it was possible, but here's the fucking proof.

I walk into utter chaos, and not the kind I've been met with so far. I'm pretty sure a pack of wild animals would be more restrained than these kids. I bet Grant and his wife had a drinking problem. My condo feels like one of those insane asylums with the walls closing in.

Crying fills the condo, and they're baby cries, which means Nalani has gotten onto something and she can't get down. This time it's the counter. I pick her up and hold her. "Stop climbing on everything."

“Hi!” she says, slapping her chubby, dimpled hands over my cheeks and then smiling. They stick to my cheeks like there’s something gooey on them.

Prying them off my face, I glance at them. It’s a dark substance. That better not be shit is all I have to say. Please for the love of God, don’t be shit. It’s bad enough she’s not potty trained, and I’ve changed something like a hundred diapers in the last couple days, but if she starts digging through her diaper is when I’m gonna have to draw the line. I’m a determined person. I will literally make this kid sit in the bathroom on that toilet until she realizes it’s time to learn how to be an adult. Or at least a normal person who wipes their own ass.

To my complete horror, Nalani licks her fingers. “Mmmmm.”

It’s gotta be chocolate. “Where’d you get that?”

“It’s the only food you have,” Braylee notes, then tips her head back and squeezes the bottle of Hershey syrup into her mouth. “For someone whose house looks like a health food store, why do you have this?” I don’t know much about Braylee. She’s the quiet side of Adler, who has an opinion about everything. I’m learning each one definitely has their own personality. This one, she might be quieter, but she’s still a smartass, much like her twin.

“It’s not for food,” I admit, taking the bottle from her and setting Nalani on the floor. I’m not sure why. She’s just going to climb up on the counter again. “Go read. Or do something.”

“There’s nothing to do here. Can we go out? Like to a bar or something fun? You’re super famous. Isn’t there some kind of premier we can attend?”

“A bar?” Let’s face it, you focused on that one too. “No, we’re not going out to a bar. We’re not going anywhere. Not tonight.” Or ever. I’m not sure I want to take these kids out in public.

It’s then I notice Adler on the couch, the iPad in one hand trying to figure out how to get it set up. He looks up at me. “What’s your Wi-Fi password?”

I don’t have time to answer him when I hear crying coming from the bathroom. And not just any crying, it’s hysterics. Following the cries, I spot Haisley on the floor outside the bathroom door and it’s closed. “What’s wrong?”

She rolls her eyes. “Marley went to her period.”

Went to her period? She acts like it’s an event. I guess in some ways it is. “Where? I didn’t see her leave? Who’s crying?” I look around, so confused, so clueless.

Haisley stands, yanking on her underwear that are apparently up her ass. “Her period. Mommy said it’s when blood comes out of her vagina and her uranus is super angry.”

Uranus? I stare at her for a moment trying to comprehend what’s happening. “You mean uterus?”

“Yeah, that thing.” And then she walks away, leaving me in the hallway with a crying teenage girl in the bathroom.

What the shit? How is this my problem? I’m fucked. Ember texts me back and says dinner is on the way but suddenly feeding them is the last of my worries.

While I’m standing there, Revel calls me back. I called that motherfucker two days ago, and he’s just now getting back to

me. “Hey,” I say, completely dejected with what my life has become.

On the other end of the line, I hear the sounds of freedom, girls laughing, music, you know, the fucking life I had before this bullshit. “What’d ya need?” Revel’s voice is slurred, which means he’s back to drinking. He’s a certified alcoholic. On one side, at least it’s not a cocaine addiction. Alcohol’s far more affordable, but it’s an addiction nonetheless, and for a kid that started young, I can’t imagine what Revel’s liver looks like.

“You gotta take some of these kids. Just like two or three.” Leaning against the wall, I slide to the floor. “I’ll keep the boy, he’s fine but these others... I’m in over my head.”

There’s a long pause, a draw of breath of what I assume is filled with smoke, and then a raspy cough followed with, “What kids?”

“Grant’s. He left them to me.”

Silence again. Another drag of the smoke and then a woman’s voice asking him something I can’t make out. “Give me a minute,” he mumbles, a shade above passing out. “Listen, man. I can’t help you out. I’m not even in the country yet. I’m... shit... I don’t know... fucking Brazil?”

He doesn’t even know, but that’s not a surprise. He was once in Paris and told the crowd, “It’s good to see you, Miami!”

They didn’t give a fuck because Revel’s like the Elvis Presley of pop rock. Sadly, I’m not the most famous person in our family. Not even close compared to him.

And then Revel hangs up on me. No surprise there.

Okay, so I'm on my own. Teenage girl drama to be dealt with. Adler approaches me. "What's she crying about?"

"Something about the lining of her uterus shedding."

He gags, his hands flying to his mouth. "Dude, yuck!"

The door opens, and Adler runs away, leaving me in the hallway with a red-faced Marley. "I need those things that go in my panties... like pads? I think they're pads. Or do I need tampons? I don't know. This is so awful!" she screams, and then storms into *my* bedroom like she owns it. My goddamn bedroom. To add to the effect, she slams my door in my face.

Admit it, you're thinking it's fine. Just go with it and get her what she needs. But I know nothing about what to buy for her. I had a sister. Still not ready to discuss that part of my life, but I do know she was like every other woman and did, in fact, have her period. I still remember the day she started and cried. Much like Marley.

And then it hits me. I can ask Ember what to do and all the more reason for her to see I'm actually handling this shit and being responsible.

"I'll be right back," I tell the other kids, but this time, I pick up the climbing chocolate licker and take her with me. She can't be trusted alone anymore. Placing my hand over her mouth, I give her the sternest look I can. She's two. It's not easy to give her a mean look. "Keep quiet."

Nalani giggles, squirming in my arms and then licks my hand, thinking I'm playing a game.

"You're such a weirdo." Pulling my hand back, I wipe it down the front of my shorts and then knock on Ember's door.

Cat answers, giving me that same look I got when I saw her five minutes ago. She takes a look at Nalani, then me. “Hi.”

“Hi!” Nalani gleams, reaching for her. She practically jumps into her arms. Thankfully Cat’s prepared and catches the daredevil.

“I need Ember.”

Cat nods, keeping a firm grip on Nalani. “Em!”

It’s a moment later and Ember comes to the door, rolling her eyes. “Why are you back? Did you lose the other ones?”

“Em!” Nalani says, grinning, chocolate still caked on her lips. She doesn’t even say my name, yet she knows Ember’s after only one day? What the fuck?

“Listen, I need help. The oldest one is having a girl issue.”

Ember frowns, lifting her eyes from the giggling girl to mine. She doesn’t look impressed, does she? “What kind of girl issue?”

And this is where the one thing I’ve trained my entire life to not do, I fumble. Here I went from football practice where nearly ninety men were roughing each other up, and now I’m talking about menstrual cycles. “She uh....” I pause, the words just not there. I’m fucking sweating. Running my hand through my hair, I sigh and finally say, “She started her period and it’s not like I’m prepared for that. Can you like, talk to her? She locked herself in my room.”

To my surprise, Ember bursts out laughing. “Yeah, sure.” And then she pushes past me and walks over to my condo.

Cat hands Nalani back to me. “Hold her. We have some sanitary napkins I think.”

I fight back a gag. Not that I'm disgusted by the whole period thing. I just hate the words they use for it. Quite possibly the worst name for anything is sanitary napkins. It just sounds disgusting if you ask me. Pads sounds better, but I'd prefer to not know what either are.

When Cat returns, she's nice enough to put them in a bag with a couple other things she tells me are needed for that time of the month. Carrying the kid back to my condo, I set Nalani down with Adler and Braylee, find Haisley giving her My Little Pony a bath in the kitchen sink, and Ember sitting on my bed comforting a crying Marley.

It's got me thinking, though. Not only about Ember staying on my bed and me having some fun, but seriously, what the hell am I going to do with these kids. Nanny. Right. That's what I need. Looking at the connection Ember has already, I can't help but think she'd be great for them. What if I make her a lucrative offer like I did to be my assistant and then maybe she will see I'm actually a good guy playing dad since she loves kids and finally let me fuck her.

It's a brilliant offer.

Before I can suggest this, dinner is delivered. I set the bag Cat gave me by the door to my bedroom and head back into the kitchen. Adler answers the door for me, flirts with the delivery driver who happens to be a young blonde. The same one who always delivers. She's barely eighteen, and no, I haven't slept with her. I like them young, but not that young.

"Easy there, bud." I pull him back into the condo and close the door, three bags of food in our hands. "You're nine. She's got ten years on you."

“I’ll be ten soon.”

“But still, you’re nine, and she’s eighteen.”

He rolls his eyes and reaches for the box of egg rolls. “Whatever. I bet I could still get her number.” He’s certainly got the Slade confidence.

Laughing, I ruffle his hair and realize I haven’t seen Nalani. Looking to the counter, I see her sitting beside the sink with Haisley, dunking ponies one by one in the water and saying, “Fishy.” And then she tosses the soaking wet thing on my marble floors followed by the word, “Bye!”

Well, at least she has some new words she knows.

At least they’re happy. Looking down the hall, my bedroom door is now closed. Maybe they’re having a heart-to-heart or maybe they’re talking about how much they hate the opposite sex for not having to deal with shit like periods and whatever else they hate the male race for.

Fuck, I’m starving. Sitting down at the table, I nod to Adler who has two egg rolls, one for each hand and dipping them in sweet and sour sauce. “Good?”

Eagerly, he nods. “It’s better than barbecue.”

I laugh. “Told you.”

“How’s the team this year? The offensive line strong?”

I knew he’d eventually ask about football. I gathered he was a football fan from the endless talking on the plane about how I needed to throw the ball more and my passing rate sucked last season. His words, certainly not mine. Last season I threw 3983 yards with a passing rate of 95.4. Sure, we didn’t make the Superbowl, but I don’t think those are terrible stats.

Taking the container of fried rice, I eat straight from the container with chopsticks and pick out all the chicken first.

Ember comes walking out with Marley. I eye the two of them, waiting for the explosion of hormones I assume is coming from Marley, or the hatred radiating from Ember.

I finish the rice in my mouth, swallow, then smile tentatively. “Everything all right?”

Marley shrugs, steps forward and digs through the bags. “Did you get orange chicken?”

I point one of my chopsticks to the larger container. “Yeah. In there.” And then I gesture to the chairs around me. It’s utterly amazing I have a dining room table. My eyes meet Ember’s. “There’s plenty of food. Unless Adler keeps eating this way.” He’s halfway through his third egg roll. It’s a good thing Ember ordered three times my usual order.

“No, thanks.” Ember’s eyes drop to the floor. Why is she acting like this? We eat dinner together all the time. Why is tonight different?

I stand, setting my chopsticks next to my fried rice. “I’ll walk you out.”

“You don’t have to.” After hugging Marley, she leans in and whispers something that makes Marley giggle and then she nods. They’re probably talking shit about me. Ember turns and begins to walk away like she can’t get away from me fast enough.

I catch up with her at the door and place my hand against it, refusing to let her escape so easily. “Why do you try so hard to avoid me?”

“Because you’re complicated.”

This time it’s my turn to frown. I’m complicated?

“Okay, well you might be trying hard to make me believe you don’t need me, but I need you. They need you.” Maybe that will get her. Baiting her with kids is always a good idea. Women dig that shit, don’t they? Isn’t it some kind of motherly instinct. “I suck at this. They like you.”

Ember whirls to face me, color in her cheeks and strands of jet-black curling around her temple. Her beautiful blue eyes rage with glory. “They like me because I paid attention to them today. I listened when they talked. How long have you had them?”

I shrug. Why is she asking me this? She knows how long I’ve had them. “Couple days. What does that matter?”

“In those couple days... have you learned anything about them? Or taken the time to ask them how they’re feeling after losing their parents? That’s heavy shit for a kid. Especially Marley. She’s at a fragile age and lost her mom at a point in her life where she needs her the most.”

I hadn’t considered any of that, and I admit, I’m pretty self-absorbed. “No, I haven’t. But it’s not like I’ve had much time. I have a job and it’s demanding. It’s not like I can just put football on hold.”

Ember shrugs and gives me that ‘you’re such a dick’ face I get weekly from her. “Then I guess you have your priorities straight then.”

Frustration forces a groan through my lips. “C’mon now. Don’t be like that. I’m trying. Can you like help for a little while? I’ll pay you extra to take care of them.”

“I already barely have time for everything you need.”

“I’ll pay you double, hell, triple what you make now.”

“Landon,” her words falter, like she’s almost considering it. When Ember agreed to be my assistant five years ago, it was temporary until I found someone better qualified. Only I refuse to hire anyone else because nobody can do it like Ember does. She’s the most efficient, organized person I know and I trust her. In my line of work, I have to be able to trust my assistant with everything. Hell, I have to trust her more than I trust my friends and girlfriends. She has access to my goddamn bank account, for Christ’s sake. No way I’d let just anyone into my life like that. And now with these kids, I’m certainly not going to let some stranger off the street take care of them. “You really should hire someone else. I have a life and it’s not babysitting.” Do you sense the ridicule in her words? The cold edge of irony? I do.

“Yeah.” I grind the word between my teeth, running my hand over my jaw and leaning back into the wall behind me. “I had a life before this, too.”

Silence envelopes us before Ember sighs, reaching for the door handle. This time I let her, but she pauses, refusing to look at me. “I’ll do it for now but we’re going to look into hiring someone for this.”

Maybe if I work fast, I can finally show her I’m not just after her pussy. I am, but she doesn’t need to know that. And I can’t even explain if I’m after more than that. I might be, but I’m so fucking lost I can’t decipher what it is I want.

Either way, it’s an opening in the defense and I’m taking it.

“Thank you.”

She still doesn't turn to me. "You owe me big time."

And then she closes the door in my face. Maybe she wants repayment in dick? Look at her. She's covered in tattoos and bad as fuck. You know a girl like that likes it hard and rough and all fucking night. You might not be surprised to know that before I met Ember she was into all that crazy shit, too. She'd been dating her boss, Percy, and he was a Dominant. I didn't know a whole hell of a lot about that lifestyle until she told me about it. I thought women didn't like that sort of thing, but not Ember. She was down with the handcuffs and being whipped with belts... the dark underground I'll submit to you, Master. Not that I'm against that kind of thing because I can get down with a woman who wants to be owned and told what to do in the bedroom, but she claims she left that lifestyle behind when she came to work for me.

Heat rushes through me at the thought of doing those things to Ember and the lucky son of a bitch who got to before I came into her life, and I have to mentally block the images of her naked form flooding my brain. I haven't seen her completely naked *yet*, but my mind can be pretty creative at times. I've seen her in a bikini before and that's close enough.

Crying inside the condo brings me out of my pornographic moment and deflates any hope I have for time alone tonight. Time to play Mr. Mom again because Nalani found her way onto the table and dumped my fried rice all over the floor. Damn it.

"Dude, cool it with the sauce." Marley's there at the table, picking through her chicken and rolling her eyes at Adler pouring sweet and sour sauce over everything on his plate. At least he's using a plate now.

“I like the sauce,” he tells her, then dunks a fortune cookie into it.

Reaching down, I pick Nalani up off the floor and set her on my lap. “I can’t believe you wasted my rice.” She’s squirming around and has a handful of rice in hand. I should be concerned about that, and I will be in about two minutes. For the time being, I’m worried about that hormonal teenager across from me. Looking at Marley, I smile at her. “You okay?”

She nods, a small smile tugging at her lips. “I’m fine. Thanks for getting Ember.”

A feeling hits my chest. It’s one of contentment, maybe even pride because I did something fucking right for once today with them. Now to get rice out of the baby’s diaper and guess what, my hair. Told you I should have been concerned about it.

Ever tried to get rice out of a baby girl’s parts? Yeah, well, try getting cooked rice out of your goddamn hair. I’m tempted to call Ember back over here, but then again, I can handle this, can’t I?

Football is a game of inches, and the margin for error is so small. One half a step too late, or too early, and you don’t make it. A half second too slow, too fast and you don’t catch it. Every minute, every second can make or break the game. Kids... they fight for that inch, and they want someone else fighting just as hard for them. Even if they stuck cooked rice up their ass.

8. EMBER BIT

Bit – When a defender falls for a fake.

As I head back to my place, I'm not even joking when I say my knees are wobbly. It's fucking pathetic. And disappointing. My heart's racing like I've run a marathon and there's electricity running through my veins. It's awful. It's like this every time I'm around him.

Stop smiling, you fool. Stop it!

I can't believe I'm smiling over him. Or am I smiling over the kids? I think it's a little of both, to be honest. I absolutely adore children and in the few days I've known the Slade children, I love them. Each one and their individual uniqueness.

For someone who is a night person, I'm really regretting agreeing to this. But did I agree?

Yeah, damn it, I did. #yourefucked #heownsyou

“You're all flushed, girl. Where'd you go?”

I give Cat a “what the fuck” expression. Had I been gone so long she forgot where I went? Sometimes it's hard to know what she'll remember and what she won't.

“Marley started her period.” Do you notice the way I’m looking at her? I’m hoping she didn’t just forget what happened fifteen minutes ago. Twenty tops.

“Oh, right.” Cat’s face flashes with familiarity. “How’s she taking it?”

“Scared and confused. It’s to be expected.”

When I sit down on the couch, Cat joins me and crosses her legs Indian style. “Man, remember when we started ours?”

“Yeah. I freaked out, and your mom had to show me how to use a tampon.” I’ve known Cat my entire life. Well, what I consider my entire life. I met her after my dad split and left me and my brother. Cat lived down the street from my aunt’s house with her mom. Apparently my dad just thought to himself, *shit, I can’t handle my kids so I’m just gonna leave them with my sister.* So he did. Two weeks later, he was in Vegas with some chick and I haven’t heard from him since.

After finding me living in her closet to escape my crazy aunt, Cat’s mom let me live there with her. I couldn’t stand my Aunt Heidi. She was awful to me but loved my brother. Cat’s mom let us do whatever we wanted, so naturally I wanted to be there. I mean, hello, I got a Twinkie whenever I wanted it. When you’re a kid, that’s a huge deal and my aunt was such a health freak we couldn’t have any of that.

Before Eldon, my brother, died, he was in and out of juvie and pretty much a troubled kid. I say that nicely because I loved him more than anything in the world, but his ability to make a good decision was pretty much non-existent.

At least Cat and I have only been arrested once, and I won't even go into that ordeal just yet.

"I remember when you started yours," Cat notes, remembering my first-period incident. "You were wearing that plaid skirt and fishnet pantyhose with combat boots." And then she busts up laughing.

I've always been fashion challenged, or as I like to put it, a trend-that-hasn't-happened-yet-setter. Mark my words, fishnet stockings will come back and not just in the porn industry.

It's amazing to me that Cat can remember something that happened eight years before the accident but the fucking enamel is coming off her teeth because she can't remember if she brushed them so she brushes them again. I wish she'd forget my awkward teen years when I didn't have style, but nope. She remembers that shit.

"So... did he convince you to watch the kids too?"

"What do you think?" I sigh, and it comes out way more breathy and dreamy than I intend for it to. "I don't know how he always talks me into everything I say I won't do."

"Well, that's not entirely true. You said you wouldn't have sex with him and that hasn't happened yet." She pauses and raises her eyebrows. "Or has it?"

"No, it hasn't."

She smiles, her eyes practically giddy with excitement. "I love those kids." I hate the gleam in her eyes because I know Cat took a liking to those kids today. Especially Haisley. Which means if she likes the kids, she'll want to be around them, and I'll feel even more like a dick when I find a nanny

and she's not around them all day. Cat works part time for Starbucks just so she can get out of the condo for a little while and be around society, but in no way can she not have supervision. I leave her for a few hours here and there, but between her and Landon, I have no time for myself, and now with the kids, that's even less time for my art.

It might sound selfish of me, but I'm twenty-three now and even further from my dreams of becoming an artist than I was when I met Landon. Now where will I end up?

"It's only for a day, or two. Or maybe a few weeks. Just until he finds someone."

Disappointment tugs a frown into place. "Why can't we do it all the time? How fun would it be to babysit the rich, famous, and smoking-hot's kids?"

"Hell. It'd be hell," I point out. I can't even imagine what nannies of the rich go through. Landon's nieces and nephew are great. Maybe they're just good at putting up a front. Like a kangaroo. They look cute and harmless, but the moment you approach one, they sucker punch you in the stomach.

2ND QUARTER

9. LANDON TRICK PLAY

Trick Play – Also known as a gadget play, gimmick play or simply trickeration. It's a play in American football that uses deception and unorthodox tactics to fool the opposing team.

Remember the days when you slept in and had nothing going and could pretty much lie there all morning? Yeah, me too. It was last week.

Now that life, the beautiful freedom to do what I want when I want, it's a vivid and depressing memory of the past. One I can honestly say I'm pretty fucking bitter about.

Do you ever get that feeling someone's staring at you? I am. Peeking one eye open, I'm met with little hazel eyes and a smile, which means it's Haisley. The other kids don't smile as much as she does.

The morning sun filtering through the room catches the flecks of gold in her auburn hair. Sighing, I ask, "What are you doing in here?"

Yawning, she rubs her back. "Can I sleep in your bed?"

Curling into my pillow, I peek at the clock. It's five in the goddamn morning and she wants in my bed? "No. Go back to

sleep.”

“My back hurts from your floor.” I stare at her, knowing where this is going. “Your bed looks comfy.”

“It’s not that comfortable.”

“Can I see?”

Fuck, she’s persistent. “No.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

Her hands take up residence on her hips. “You don’t like me, do you?”

“I don’t know you.” Her face crumples with the words and so do I. “Okay, fine. You can get in here but no moving around, ya little wiggle worm.”

With bright eyes, she hauls herself in my bed and then brings with her about fifty fucking stuffed animals. Where she’s been hiding them is a mystery to me, along with how she carried them in here without me noticing.

“I said you could come in bed with me, not your army of animals.” She sets a bear by my head. Naturally, I frown and side-eye the blue bear with huge freaky eyes, then Haisley. “What are you doing?”

“You’re not friendly. Maybe a cuddle might help you.”

I fight back the urge to roll my eyes. “I doubt that.”

“It makes me feel better when I miss my mom and dad.” Her expression falters, her eyes flooding with tears at the mention of them. Fidgeting with another stuffed unicorn in her

hand, she pauses for a beat, and then those sad eyes lift to mine. “They gave me all these. I have to sleep with them every night.”

My throat tightens. I bet you think I’m too much of a hardass to care, don’t you? These kids do too. I’m not. Well, I suppose I am in some ways, but I’m not a completely heartless prick. I understand they’ve gone through something tragic and to be pushed on to a man they’ve never met, aside from Marley and the twins when they were babies, that’s not easy. I get that. Patting the pillow, I get her to lie down with me, the two of us facing one another like we’re pillow talking.

“I know it’s hard. You miss them, don’t you?”

Stupid question, man. Of course she misses her parents.

“I’m scared,” she admits, her voice as small as she is. Worming herself against my chest, she wiggles in place.

Hesitantly, because I know nothing about comforting a child, I wrap my arms around her and whisper, “Don’t be scared.” And then I kiss the back of her head. Are you surprised? Shit, yeah you are. I am too. Who knew I was capable of this kind of heartwarming affection? And then I wonder if Ember were in here, would this change her perception of me? It might. Maybe I can text her and make something up about needing her to come into my bedroom and then she’d see the tender side of me. The one comforting a scared child. Surely all women fall for that shit, even the ones who hate me.

Maintaining I’m not a senseless asshole, let’s swing back to the kid, though. Just when I think she’s going to stay cuddled against me and I might get a few more hours of sleep

before I have to head to practice, she moves, shifts in the bed while kneeling me in the junk, and looks at me. She's facing me again like before, only this time she curls her hands under her left cheek. "You don't want us, do you?"

Never mind the fact that I'm seeing stars from the junk punch, do you notice the way her eyes are watching mine? The way they search for the admission she's fearing? I can't break her heart any more than it's already been, but I also can't lie to her. "It's not that I don't, it's that I don't know what I'm doing. Your dad and I weren't close. I didn't even know he had all of you, let alone that he would have chosen me to be your guardian. It's all a lot to handle, you know?"

"You're scared too, huh?"

I nod. She looks like she's going to cry. Fuck. I hope she doesn't. She cried in the airport the other day and I ended up spending forty dollars on a stuffed bear, the one near my head actually.

One hand frees from her cheek and she touches mine carefully. Her warmth radiates through me when she smiles and says, "You look like my daddy. You have his eyes."

"You know whose eyes you have?"

Her smile widens. "Whose?"

"Your Grandma Leslie's."

"Your mommy?"

I nod. I don't think about my mom that much anymore. It's a passing memory time has faded. When I do think of her, I remember her hazel eyes.

“She died too, huh?”

Again, I nod, a rush of unnamed emotion flooding through me.

“Did it make you sad?”

“It did. I was about the same age as you are now.”

Haisley searches my eyes and just when I have hope she'll let me go back to sleep, behind her head a tiny hand comes up on the edge of the bed, and then another, and fists the sheets. Chubby baby hands yank as hard as they can and an auburn-haired munchkin grins like I'm her favorite person ever.

“Hi!”

See? I'm her favorite fucking person ever. Haisley laughs as Nalani uses her to crawl on my bed and then sits on my face, with a soggy diaper. And then for good measure, she lifts up and then plops her butt down again. “Eat? We eat? I eat?”

She's certainly talking more than she did a few days ago, isn't she? Did you catch everything she said? It's like listening to someone read off a telegram.

Hopefully there's some leftover food from yesterday because we certainly established they don't like eggs or protein shakes. And Adler finished off the Chinese food last night.

Tickling Nalani's sides, I slide her off my face. “You smell.”

“I can help.” Haisley slides off the bed. “I'll go get the diaper.”

I'm left alone with Nalani, who takes the bear and hits me in the face with it. "Ouchy?"

Rubbing my eye, I scowl at her. "Yes, ouch. Don't hit."

She's like one of those weasel balls that hit the wall, then redirect themselves someplace else without missing a beat. Two-year-olds are the same. Look at her now. She's climbing onto my headboard. Still lying down, I shake my head and keep one hand on her pajamas. "What's with you and climbing?"

She looks down at me. "Wet. Yucky. Wet. Ewww." It's like she's talking in toddler slang and can only communicate with one word at a time. It reminds me of when I had a concussion and for three weeks, I couldn't hold a conversation with anyone. Frustrated as fuck, I resorted to handwritten notes and text messages because it was something similar to playing Charades and you're the only one playing. Naturally, I freaked the fuck out, but I can only imagine the frustration this kid has when she can't communicate what she needs.

Prying Nalani off the headboard, I sit up and lay her down on the bed. So far, she's been good about me changing her, but today, she has a look in her eyes I'm not too sure about. She looks like she's about to tell me off, doesn't she?

I used to be horrified at the idea of smelling a kid's diaper, but now I totally get it. It's like watching game highlights from another team in order to prepare for their defense. Smelling what I'm dealing with before I have to actually deal with it gives me an advantage. Also, while we're on the topic, aren't you proud I can change a diaper? If that doesn't scream "he's finally getting this" I don't know what will.

Stupidly, like she's going to have a conversation with me, I ask, "What are you up to?"

I'm given a smile. One that could be deciphered as, dude, you're about to go down.

Haisley bounces back into the room with a diaper in one hand and a box of wipes in the other. "I got the stuff." With a flying leap, she barrels onto the bed.

Drawing in a deep breath, I try to prepare myself for it. Given Nalani's disposition, and her climbing, do you think she stays still for diaper changes? Exactly. Not a goddamn chance.

Marley enters my room next. It's like my room has recently become the commons at a college campus. "Can I try Starbucks today?"

Sensing my opening, I pause, my hands on Nalani's pajamas and I look up at Marley. "I'll buy you Starbucks right now if you change her diaper for me?" Do you hear the begging in my tone? She does too and laughs. Actually fucking laughs.

"No way." Do you notice the smile? It's like she's testing me, waiting to see how much I'll give to have her do this. "You do it. You're the grown up."

With my own teenage attitude, which screams *screw you, I don't need your help*, I take the diaper, set it beside Nalani and then reach for the wipes to put them within reach. It's like a snap play and at a moment's notice, you have to be ready to either throw the ball, or hand it off. If that doesn't work, you gotta run with the ball and dodge the defense. The defense in this scenario being an acrobatic two-year-old.

Can you see the fear in my eyes? Do you notice the tense shoulders and shaky movements? That's a man who's scared of a child. So while I'm able to get her pajamas off with no problem, it's when I reach for the tabs on the diaper that her eyes lock on mine. I can't be sure, but I think I see the fear in mine reflecting back at me.

It happens in a split second and I blame Adler for this because he's the one who walks in and distracts me just as I undo the tabs. One moment I'm in control and the next the baby has flipped herself over, shit covering her ass and she's crawling away from me. I try to catch her before she gets it everywhere, but all that does is get it all over my hands and my bed and Haisley beside me who keeps yelling, "No, Lani! Stop."

Adler makes a gagging noise. "I'm going to be sick."

What a pussy. I have to admit, I'm there too though. The smell of baby shit is properly right up there with the smell of steamed broccoli for me. Both equally revolting.

The next few seconds are like the final play in a tied game and you've just thrown a Hail Mary and hoping your wide receiver catches it.

In my case, it'd be an interception because the dejection is the same when you see your three-thousand-dollar sheets covered in kid shit and she's cackling and laughing like it's the funniest thing she's ever done.

Adler covers his nose. "I hope you have a maid."

Nalani's at the end of the bed getting ready to plummet over the side, and I do not, under any circumstances, want this

kid running around my condo naked with shit covering her. So, without thinking, I lunge for her leg and catch her by the ankle. Can you guess where the problem lies in my lunge?

If you're paying attention, you noticed I didn't have time to move the soiled diaper. Take a shot in the dark here and guess what's on my chest now?

Yep. I can literally feel it soaking through my shirt. And you know, while we're at it, I've never understood the expression fuck my life—and up until now—I have never found a reason to say it. No matter how bad it gets, it'll always get better. Only now, I'm tempted to think, how can this get better?

It doesn't. Least not right away because that carpet I was trying to protect is now covered in puke. Thank you, Adler.

Have you seen that movie *Zoolander*? Okay, great. Now do you remember that scene where they're all running around and shit is insane and Will Ferrell stands up and he's like, "I feel like I'm taking crazy pills!"

That's me. I feel like I've ingested the entire goddamn bottle at what's happening in my bedroom.

I lift my eyes to his, then shake my head, scowling. I don't get up. I'm almost afraid to. "Jesus, dude, really?"

Adler shrugs. "I'm sorry," he whines, wiping his mouth. "I ate too much last night." And then his eyes widen like he can't believe he did that.

"He's in his bed," I hear Braylee tell someone.

Can you take a guess who enters the room next and sees me lying on my bed with shit everywhere and puke three feet

from the door?

Ember.

Awesome huh? Let's face it, she's caught me in worse situations. Like the time I had the stomach flu and shit myself. I won't even go into details on that one. It's not needed.

"Holy. Shit," Ember mumbles, then slaps her hand over her mouth when she notices the five sets of curious eyes staring at her. "Sorry."

Pulling Nalani back toward me, I sit the smelly girl up on my knees so she can't escape. "If you'll excuse us, we have some cleaning to do."

Laughter erupts behind me and then, "He has it in his hair."


I walk past everyone with the naked baby in my arms, step over the puke and into the bathroom across the hall with Nalani.

Once in the bathroom, I strip off my shirt, toss it in the garbage, but then I leave my shorts on and step into the shower.

"I can't believe you," I tell Nalani, squirting soap on us.

Soapy hands find my cheeks. "Bubbles!"

And though this isn't how I wanted to start my morning, her smile tugs at something deep inside I didn't know was there, but I can't accurately describe. I'm not mad at her. I'm not ever mad at Adler. And that tells me I clearly got shit up my nose and it's quickly infected my brain.



If you've never taken a shower with a two-year-old, you can't truly understand the difficulty of this. It's damn near fucking impossible. Slippery when wet is an understatement.

Turning off the shower, I set Nalani down, wrap a towel around her and yell for Marley to come and help me with her. The last thing I need this morning before 8:00 a.m. is another catastrophe and I fear if someone doesn't grab her, the moment I turn my back to wipe down the shower walls, she'll be up on the sink.

"Marley, help me out!"

"No!" she yells back. "You're naked."

I'm not though. There was no way in hell I was taking a shower with a child naked. Not only am I sure it's illegal, but Kumonde also had a very unfortunate experience with his daughter Kalana who was just over a year and they were showering together. She grabbed his fucking dick and yanked it. Awful, huh? Dude was in shock for a week like he'd been attacked by Freddie Krueger and couldn't sleep at night. I shit you not, he had to take anxiety medicine for like a month. Now he showers alone, with a lock on the door.

Knowing this, I kept my shorts on. Seemed logical and safe. "I'm not naked. Come get her!"

Finally—after a minute of Nalani and me staring at each other—the door cracks open. "You better not be lying." Marley warns, swinging it open.

“Why the hell would I lie?” I ask her as she cautiously steps into the room.

“Mar!” Nalani lunges for her, buck-ass naked.

And there I am, half-naked, a shower squeegee in hand and soaking fucking wet as Ember peeks her head in the door right behind Marley. “Landon, you have a—” And that’s where her words end. Falter actually. They stutter and fade away. Her eyes, they drift over bulging wet, defined muscles because yeah, I flexed. Do you notice the way her eyes linger on my cock? It’s probably because my shorts are clinging to the lower region rather snugly and yeah, bigger when wet is a thing.

Marley chases after Nalani—who apparently finds being naked and running, a goddamn game—leaving Ember in the doorway to the bathroom. If you don’t know me by now, I can spot a hole in the defense when I see one and it’s there, clear as the day and standing right in front of me.

Reacting quicker than she can, I grab her by the wrist, yank her into the bathroom and shut the door. I have her trapped and do you see the look in her eyes?

Can you feel the heat radiating from mine?

My breathing picks up when her eyes dip to my chest. Mine do the same, taking in her milky white skin and the beautiful plump mounds of her breasts visible through the fitting low-cut black tank top she’s wearing. Tentatively, knowing she might push me away, I back her up against the closed door. Now I have her where I want her. I’m not the kind of man who will force a woman into doing anything. It’s far more rewarding seeing passion than fear.

And though annoyance is usually what I see when Ember looks at me, there's also a distinct difference when a woman is pretending to not like you, and one who doesn't want anything to do with you.

“What are you doing, Landon?” Her voice drips with desire. Turns out, she's never been good at lying to me.

Actually, I'm the one dripping all over the marble floor, but that's beside the point. Right now, she's weak within my proximity to her.

I stare at her. “What does it look like I'm doing?”

“It looks like you're trying to seduce me. Again.”

Do you notice the way she lets out a breath like it's one she has to take to keep from sighing? I do. A smug smile of satisfaction tugs at my lips. “I don't think there's much seducing going on here. I think it's more willingness on both parts, wouldn't you agree?”

She shoves me back. Rather hard, too. She's never gentle and I dig that about her. “No, I wouldn't agree, asshole. Stop acting like a fool. We got a ton of shit to figure out today and you need to get to practice.”

I catch myself against the sink, still smiling, but then I slip on the water and land on my ass. I can't say I'm complaining about my view either, because Ember from the floor up is fucking gorgeous. I wink at her. “Wanna join me?”

As you can probably guess, she rolls her eyes. “Get up.”

Standing, I step closer. “Why are you so mean to me?”

“I’m not that mean.” Again, her words falter as she takes in my body, unashamed by her blatant pass over me. “But again, I have to ask myself every day I work for you, what’s in it for me?”

“Money.” I snort. “I pay you.”

“It’s not money that I want.”

My eyes light up. “Sex?”

Rolling her eyes, her shoulders slump. “No, not sex either.”

Ah, then it must be her art. I fully support Ember’s desire to have her art displayed in a gallery. In fact, all the paintings in my condo are ones I’ve bought from her. I can do whatever I want in this city—within reason. I did find out being drunk in public and doing a hundred and fifty on the Alaskan Way Viaduct earns you some hefty fines and a probation period. I was a bit reckless my rookie season. And don’t think this went without punishment from the league. I was fined something like fifty thousand for that stunt. Since then, I do the speed limit and hardly ever drink.

You might be wondering what the point of that story was. Well, I can’t always get what I want. If I did, there’d be no traffic or speed limits and Ember’d be on my dick by now. But she’s not, and me convincing Westward Gallery to showcase her art hasn’t happened yet. Turns out there are two people in this world who are immune to my advances. Well, three if you count Harper, my PR rep. She doesn’t fall for any of my shit either. But Elliott’s sister, Mabel Madison, who owns Westward Gallery, she fucking hates me, and getting her to consider anything I suggest is damn near impossible. I haven’t

exactly found my opening to pitch the idea of Ember's paintings to her. Probably because of the restraining order she has against me, but whatever.

Licking my lips, I search Ember's sky-blue eyes and step closer. "I tried talking to Mabel about getting your art in there, but she hates me. But since we're negotiating again, let's talk signing bonuses."

"You need to stop bothering her about it. All I have to do is enter into the expo and get them to look at it. Stop trying to help. And I've worked for you for years. Signing bonuses are for people you've just signed through a draft." Her eyes narrow, for good reason. "And who are we talking signing bonuses for, me or you?"

"Actually, you're wrong. Signing bonuses can happen when you're renegotiating a contract or extending one." My lips pull into a full-blown smile. "And I'd like to think what I have planned would benefit both of us."

"You're unbelievable." She shakes her head, but I don't miss the smirk on her beautiful lips. She likes the idea of helping me and more importantly, I think she enjoys the idea of a signing bonus. One with me between her legs showing her just how good I really am. But then she throws my game off when she asks, "What we need to be talking about is what your plan is with them? You can't keep them crammed in this condo with nothing to do. I mean, you don't have a car in your fleet of exotic vehicles that will fit everyone."

I shrug. "It's a big condo." I'm teasing as I know I need a bigger place.

“Not for girls in need of their own space. Get a freaking house.” She slaps at my shoulder. “Clearly you can afford it.”

I catch her hand and pull her closer so our chests are touching. “Are you going to help me?”

Her brow dips in disbelief. “Seriously, Landon. I swear to God, you can’t do anything for yourself.”

This is a constant argument between us. “I can do some things for myself, but it’s better when you do it. Find me a house and a car. Help me figure out what I need to do.”

“Just like that?”

“Yep. Use the card I gave you.” I gave Ember an American Express Black Card. The one with no limits. If that doesn’t proclaim trust in her, I don’t know what will. “Car needs to fit seven. Them and *us*.” Like how I add the *us* part? Sure, she rolls her eyes, but there’s that flush to her cheeks again. “And a good size back seat would be nice. And the house... at least eight bedrooms. Or nine. The little one might need a hazmat room for diaper changes. A guest house would be nice too, and a pool. That’s a must.”

Blowing out a breath, her shoulders slump forward. “This is crazy.”

I lean into her, my shoulder inches from her head. Dropping my head forward, I twist to the right. And wouldn’t you know it, my lips are mere inches from her beautifully marked neck. “I’m crazy about *you*,” I whisper, my breath blowing over her. “And at some point, we’re talking about Hawaii. I refuse to be friend-zoned.”

She's affected. Fuck yeah, she is. And if I had to guess, she's turned on. Or maybe it's just me. With her hands on my chest, she pushes back to create some space. It's just enough space that our eyes catch and lock. "Hawaii shouldn't have happened. It was the wine and I'm not going to fuck you if that's what this is all about."

I shake my head slowly, my tongue sweeping over my bottom lip. "Hawaii wasn't a mistake, and I bet I can convince you, too."

"You've been trying for years and my answer is the same. This is one game you're not going to win, LC."

Fuck, it's hot when she calls me by my nickname, but she's wrong. I will win eventually. I always do. I may be in overtime before it happens, but I can always deliver when needed.

10. EMBER BELLY

Belly – Running back runs the ball up the middle after taking the handoff from the quarterback with a reverse pivot.

Landon leaves for practice and I'm left alone with the kids. Not completely alone. Cat's with us in Landon's condo.

Drawing in a deep breath, I glance down at the card, then the kids. Last week, before Hawaii, I told myself I was going to quit. I meant it. I was going to and again, Landon pulled me in with his stupid adorable smirk and invited me to Hawaii with him and his friends. It's like I'm Sandra Bullock in *Two Weeks Notice* and Hugh Grant is sucking me in time after time. I love that movie by the way, and I can totally relate to her. Only with Landon, he's not only one of my best friends, there's some sentimental attraction there.

And that's exactly it. You're doing this because he's your friend. You're doing this because anytime you've ever needed anything, Landon has been there for you both financially and emotionally. You're doing this because you're helping out a friend who can't seem to even think for himself, let alone navigate life without you. You're doing this for Cat. You're doing it for these kids because like yourself, you know what

it's like to have nobody. I know Landon wouldn't just leave these kids, but I know he needs my help with them. My point? This isn't about Landon. Nope. It's not his insanely hot nearly irresistible body.

And then I repeat the last part again. For myself. For my dignity I feel I've lost every time I'm around him.

This isn't about him, goddamn it. It can't be. I won't let it. I'll hold my ground.

But fuck, it is. It's always been about him. I stare at the anodized titanium Amex Black Card with my name laser-etched into the metal like it's a goddamn Grammy. It might as well be. There's no version of my life I would ever have something like this if it wasn't for him.

"Holy shit." With a half-eaten donut from Nalani in her hand, Cat rips the card from my hand and stares at the credit card with my name on it. "Is that yours?"

"Not technically. It's Landon's. I use it when I need to buy things for him. Today is a car and a house. Feel like shopping?"

"This is a Black Card." She stares at me, blinking slowly. "You have to have a net worth of sixteen million just to get one of these."

"He's the highest paid player in the NFL. Of course his net worth is way more than that. And how do you know that and last week you forgot where we lived?"

She shrugs. "What kind of house is he looking for?"

"A big one."

“And does he have a budget?”

“Nope.”

Looking up, I stare at the kids. They’re bored out of their mind and I can’t blame the poor things. Reaching for the keys to the door, I smile at them. “We’re going out today.”

They all agree, and it takes an hour to get them all dressed and outside.

Seattle streets are busy. And teeming with bums so I keep a close eye on them, and Cat.

With a firm hold on the little one and holding Haisley’s hand, I glance at the kids. “Car first, right?” I have a car, a brand-new Mercedes Landon bought for me, but it’s not fitting five kids. Bus it is. Nothing like showing the kids the city by taking the bus and experiencing the ever-growing homeless population. It’ll be good culture for them.

Everyone nods. Everyone but Marley. She’s staring at the sign for Starbucks across the street. “I really want to try coffee now that I’m a woman.”

“I hardly classify you starting your period as becoming a woman,” Braylee says, air quoting the word woman.

Adler gags, holding his stomach and I wouldn’t put it past him to hurl again. “Don’t say period. It makes me nauseous.”

“I am too a woman.” Marley shoves Braylee off the edge of the sidewalk she’s balancing precariously on. “You’re nine. What do you know?”

“I know a lot. You don’t.” Braylee catches herself from falling into a car parked on the street. “You didn’t even know

blood comes out of your vagina until yesterday.”

Marley’s face flushes in anger. I’m finding out her and Braylee never get along. “I did too.”

Cat rubs Marley’s shoulder gently, maintaining pace with me as we dodge people heading to work and those damn bums who think we’re walking through their bedroom. “You started your period?”

Marley stares blankly at her. “Yes....”

“Brain injury,” I remind Marley. “She sometimes forgets what happened even five seconds ago.”

“That’s not completely true,” Cat defends in assurance. “I remember your name. And I just met you last night.” And then she pauses, because she’s not sure. “I think. I did, right?”

Marley laughs. “Yeah, we met yesterday.”

Haisley tugs on my hand. “Are you Uncle Landon’s wife?”

I snort, nearly disgusted. “No way.” I have to be honest, I’ve daydreamed about it before so I can’t say I’m completely disgusted by the idea. He has that look about him that makes you want to doodle his name on your binder and practice writing your married name a thousand times. It’d just be a damn disaster is what it’d be, but surely sexually satisfying.

“Why not?” Haisley prods. “He likes you.”

Have you ever looked at someone and then did a couple of double-takes like you’re giving yourself whiplash? That’s what I do with Haisley. “He only likes me because I’m his assistant.”

“Why not be his wife then?”

I force a tight smile, trying to keep my face from reacting. “Because I don’t really like him that much.” It’s a lie. But no way does this kid need to know I’m in love with him because guess what? Kids can’t keep a secret. None of them. The moment you tell them anything, their brains are calculating how to release the information.

I’m trying not to pay much attention to arguments beside me. Have you ever tried to hold on to a baby in a street full of buildings? Well, you’ve probably never held one like Nalani. Ordinarily, this wouldn’t be hard, but this is Nalani and she’s a climber. She’s probably looking at the skyscrapers the way I eye a set of oil paints

“I down? I walk?” she asks, pointing to the crowd, hanging out of my arms.

“No.” I hold on tighter. “It’s a busy street.”

“Do you have cramps?” Cat asks Marley as we cross the street to Starbucks.

Gagging sounds erupt behind me. It’s Adler. Again. That damn kid has the weakest stomach ever. Opening the door, I watch the troop enter Starbucks. “Stop, guys. Poor Adler is turning white.”

Standing in line, the kids stare at the menu like they’ve never seen a coffee shop before. I know they have them in Texas, but they’re not on every corner like they are in Seattle.

“I want a caramel Frappuccino,” Braylee tells me, her eyes on her DS in hand. I’m not sure who’s worse with that thing, her or Adler. Both are equally obsessed.

“I don’t like milk. Or coffee,” Adler adds. “Can I have something without that?”

As I’m staring at him, and the menu, Haisley rattles off her order. “I want hot chocolate with sprinklers. They have that, right?”

“You mean sprinkles,” Marley corrects, then points to the menu. “I want something sweet and chocolate. Lots of chocolate.”

Shifting Nalani to my other hip, I smile at Cat. “Did you get all that?”

Sweeping her dreads out of her face, Cat bursts out laughing. “Yeah, right....”

Approaching the cash register, I repeat the order in my head a few times before nodding and taking a deep breath. If I can order Landon’s weirdo health meals and get them right, I can get a Starbucks down, can’t I?

“Welcome to Starbucks, what can I get started for you?” the perky barista asks, holding a paper cup in hand ready to write my name on it.

“I have a big order. I need a tall caramel Frappuccino.”

“No whip cream!” Braylee shouts at me from behind.

“No whip on that one. Then I need a hot chocolate with sprinkles.”

The barista eyes me carefully. “We have sprinkles over there. You can put them on, if that’s okay with you?”

Nodding, I cringe that she’s interrupting me because I know I’m going to forget something now. Just when I’m about

to tell her I am, Haisley points to the display case beside us. “Can I have that?”

Glancing at the case, I shake my head. “No way. That’s loaded with sugar.”

“So is the hot chocolate, so what’s the difference?” Adler points out like the smartass he is.

Placing my hand over his mouth, I smile at Haisley. “Maybe next time, hon.” I turn back to the barista. “We’ll add our sprinkles. We also need an... uh...” *Shit*. I’m drawing a blank. Now I know how poor Cat feels.

Adler removes my hand from his mouth. “I’d like a Very Berry Hibiscus Refresher, *please*.”

At least he used his manners.

Cat stands beside him, eagerly looking at the menu herself. “Oh, those are delicious.”

Look at him adding please in there. It’s only because he doesn’t want me covering his mouth again. “Okay, yes, one of those too. A small one.”

“I’m ten. I think I need the big one.” Adler points to the largest cup they have. “I want that one.”

“You’re not ten,” Marley has to point out.

“Close enough.”

“But you’re not ten so stop saying it.”

Are you confused yet? Yeah, me too.

“Drink?” Nalani points to the board. “Cake? I have cake?”

That's how the entire Starbucks trip goes but you know what, I manage to get everyone's drinks ordered and we're hiking our way up to the bus station to head to the car dealerships. Landon has just about everything out there that's considered exotic or rare, but that's not what we're looking for today. He needs a car that seats an army.

I know he's not going to text me back until later, but I send him a quick one to see if he has any preference on what he wants.

Me: I know a van is out of the question, but what about an Expedition, Tahoe? Do you have a manufacture preference?

I'm surprised to see after ten minutes, and well before we're near the dealerships, he texts me back.

LC: I have a preference on thick thighs and a booty.

I roll my eyes. ***Me: Fine. Minivan it is.***

LC: Don't you dare. I'll make you return it.

Me: Then BE serious.

LC: I am being serious. I like thick thighs and a booty. Which is why you're perfect for me. But aside from that, what about a tank? Can I get a tank? They sell them, don't they?

A tank? Is he serious? Yes, he is actually.

Me: You can't buy a tank and drive it around with kids. Be realistic.

LC: Fine. I have to go. Check out Escalades. I like those. Black interior only.

Told you he'd care. There's one thing Landon is very particular on, besides his women, and it's his cars. I once had to pick up a rental car for him in Atlanta and he made me return it three times because of various things wrong with it. Although, he did admit the last time was purely for his enjoyment to see me arguing with the attendant. The Virgo in me is pretty damn good at arguing.

Whether I want to admit it or not, I'm good at shopping. I don't know any girl who isn't. Aside from Cat. Poor girl will go into a store, pick something up, forget why she's there and leave. She's also shoplifted a time or two by accident. But she's also a good shopping partner because she will tell you honestly if she doesn't like it or thinks you'll look hideous in it.

With my newly acquired credit card, Cat, and five kids amped up on caffeine and chocolate, we attempt to find Landon a car. We succeed, too. After an hour of hunting, we land on a brand-new black-on-black Cadillac Escalade. I negotiate the price down to them giving it to me for wholesale pricing and even throw in a set of snow tires. It might be surprising how I'm able to do this and get it in his name. I'm his power of attorney. He trusts me that much and unfortunately, the longer someone is famous, the less they remember how to do things for themselves. Landon falls into that category. He can't even send Oma a birthday card without asking me if I've done it for him, and I doubt he even knows how much money he has in the bank, but I do, and it's a hell of a lot more than I can even fathom.

"Did you just buy a car with a credit card?" Adler asks, his eyes sparkling as he takes in the brand-new Escalade in the

late-August sun. I snap a picture and send it to Landon.

“Yep.” I wrap my arm around his shoulder. “Funny how that works, huh?”

“I think I want to become a football player then.” Opening the door, he jumps inside. “It has DVD players!”

“Does it have a cell phone charger?” Marley asks, holding her phone up. “My battery is dead.”

“Aww, cute!” Nalani points at it, hanging on Cat’s hip like a little monkey, one hand fisted in her dreads, the other clinging to a bag of Goldfish crackers. It’s then I think about the fact that I need car seats for Nalani and Haisley and possibly booster seats for the twins. They are kind of short. This kid shit is harder than I thought. No wonder Landon’s freaking out.

Braylee barrels in the SUV behind Adler and Marley. “Dude, it has an Xbox.”

“Now do we get to go house shopping?” Cat asks, eagerly staring down at her phone with the real-estate app.

“Now we house shop.”

There’s a lesson in house shopping everyone should know. Actually, I have about five lessons for you today, in no particular order.

Lesson #1: If you go house shopping with five kids, in particular, a two-year-old who’s still in diapers, remember things like diapers. And a change of clothes for a diaper mishap.

Lesson #2: When the diaper mishap occurs, don't panic and think you have it under control in the Target bathroom. You never have control when dealing with a baby. I repeat, they have the upper hand. Landon can attest to this.

Lesson #2 amendment: I can now attest to this.

Lesson #2 amendment 2: The janitor at said Target can now attest to this.

Lesson #3: Plan ahead. Five kids are a lot to handle, and snacks are an important part of the day. Don't be alarmed if one throws a fit because their blood sugar suddenly drops.

Lesson #4: Hire a realtor and don't just walk into homes unannounced because their garage door is open. They can and will call the cops on you. And when they do, politely leave their home in the condition you found it, not with crumbs on the counter. Thank you, Adler.

Lesson #5: Keep a hold of Haisley. She'll make friends with just about anyone and on more than one occasion, offer to hold the sign of a homeless man and feed his dog her lunch.

Okay, I lied. I have more than five. Stay with me here. I have one more.

Lesson #6: After finding a realtor, or stealing one from another buyer, do offer incentives like Seahawks tickets and signed jerseys. You'd be amazed the treatment you get for said items.

All in all, I can say with certainty, I kept the children alive and bought a car. As for the house, I found a few that he might like.

To be fair, I had very little preparation for being a pretend nanny before being entrusted with these poor little souls looking for guidance. You can't blame me for unintentionally forgetting things like diapers and snacks.

11. LANDON DINK AND DUNK

Dink and Dunk – Short passing game. Passes that can frustrate a defense as they're usually less than 5 yards but a succession of short passes lead to first downs and uses up the clock.

Practice sucks ass. Not even joking about it. I play like horse shit and coach is screaming incoherently on the sidelines, pacing like a maniac back and forth. I don't know what my problem is, but I can't get outside my own head.

“Watch it, motherfucker.” That comes from beside me. It's Jalen talking to another rookie defensive lineman.

The hardest thing for rookies in practice is learning to control themselves. They're amped up, wanna make plays and impress coaches, but they get tired fast and they're always on the ground. I don't know how many times I was hit by them today and there's nothing veteran players hate more. Practice fast, practice physical, but don't do that at the expense of a veteran player and jeopardize his career.

That rookie the coaches are yelling at, I don't know his name and I doubt I will. There's an unwritten rule on the field. You hit me in practice and you're gone. As the rookie's picking

himself up off the ground at Jalen's feet, I can see it in his eyes he's scared.

"Give him another shot," I tell the offensive line coach, who's already eyeing the rookie himself, ready to tell the kid to find a ride home.

Kerry, the offensive line coach shrugs, squinting into the sun. "Don't know if he's going to make the cut."

I watch the kid for a moment. It's just nerves. There's nothing more terrifying than fighting for your job with eighty other players and trying to prove to everyone around you you're worth it. Talk about job pressure. "I'm fine," I tell Kerry. "Give the kid a shot. He shows potential."

Bryant, our head coach, pulls me aside after practice. "What's going on with you, LC?"

What is going on with me? My eyes sweep to Bryant's, then away. I've always liked Bryant. The right coach, he will impact more players than the average person will in a lifetime. That's saying something about how he treats his players. He's passionate and demands success. If he's quiet, he's trying to figure you out, or he's already decided he doesn't like you.

"Just some shit, Bryant. Sorry. It's not an excuse." I don't look him in the eye. Instead, I raise the towel in my hand to my face, wiping away sweat. I also don't call him coach. You don't call any of the coaches in the NFL, Coach. That shit ends in high school. You call them by their name. It's different than college-level ball on many levels. In college, the head coach rules with an iron fist and controls every aspect of a player's life from where he sleeps, what he eats and if he passes a class. Believe it or not, there are actually people who take a test for a

football player if need be. It's fucked up, and you didn't hear that from me, but it happens, and I won't go into how the NCAA controls that. But in the NFL, we're grown men. We have lives, charitable causes, families, we don't need to be told what to do 24/7. We're expected to know what to do.

My point being, if there's a problem and you don't think you can handle it, fucking deal with it. You're an adult.

"Don't be sorry, just make it right. I need your head and your heart in it. Is everything okay with the kids?"

"Yeah, it's just gonna take some getting used to and some adjustments."

He smiles at me, one that offers his condolences. "If there's anyone who has the commitment to see it through, it's you."

He's right. I know I can. I just didn't want to do it.

There's a fight in the locker room. A couple running backs get into it. Surprisingly I'm not involved, but it all has to do with our veteran wide receiver getting knocked around by a younger, stronger corner after his spot. Training camp's like that. Even if you were the number one draft pick, you're still there to prove your worth and sometimes it gets more heated than necessary.

There are some shoves, a couple punches, then everyone backs off pretty quick.

"You play like a bitch, Malik!" T.J, our veteran receiver, yells.

"But you—"

"Malik, shut the fuck up," Quinn pipes up with, always coming to T.J's defense.

You see this scene right here? Two men battling for dominance? This happens daily at training camp. They never last longer than a punch or two and almost always come from sheer desperation of a second or third-string rookie challenging a veteran to get the attention of the coaches. Then the veteran player wants to prove he's still the shit, so he throws a couple to put the kid in his place. But here's the best part. If the starter is injured in the fight, the rookie is off the team. Doesn't matter who started the fight, he's gone. It's career suicide, but it happens more than you know. I can't fathom wasting that much energy.

A few of us are in the training room soaking in the cold tubs after practice, and by the way, cold tubs are exactly what they sound like. Cold fucking tubs. Fifty degrees filled with ice water and made entirely of stainless steel for that second wave of "fuck you" after you sit down.

We use them to help our muscles recover after a long day spent destroying them. This game of football tests your will and strength like nothing I've ever experienced before. The game tells you that you're worthless, then turns around and makes you beg for another chance. It's like being trapped in an abusive relationship that's destroying your body and you're letting it. You know one day it's going to kill you, but you can't leave.

"Hey, LC, wanna grab some dinner?" Jalen, an offensive lineman I occasionally party with, asks as he soaks across from me. Let me add that *occasionally* is the key word here. As in, twice. There's a story behind why I stopped "partying" with Jalen, and it has everything to do with his alcohol problem and addiction to hookers. Dude could have all the pussy he wants, but he likes hookers because they apparently do a better job.

“Can’t,” I tell him, imagining this will be my answer more often than not.

Jalen stares at me, his eyebrows raised like I’m crazy for telling him no. “Why the hell not?”

“Dude, don’t you know? His dick’s on lockdown. He’s got kids now,” Justice pops off, amused with himself. I hope his balls shrivel up in the cold water.

I stare at him for a good five seconds, trying to melt the off-season tan from his face. “Shut up.” That’s what I say with my mouth, but my eyes say, “Say another word, motherfucker, and you’ll taste my fist.”

Does he listen? What the fuck do you think?

Piece of shit bursts out laughing. “Your pussy slayin’ days are over, man. Unless of course, Em’s putting out for ya now.” He winks, like I’m supposed to buy into his bullshit and somehow agree with him.

I’m curious how Justice knows about the kids, but I quickly remember Quinn can’t keep his goddamn mouth shut. It also doesn’t matter if he knows. It’s not like I’m hiding the kids. There are five of them. One you can hide. Maybe two. Three or more? Not a chance.

I think now might be a good time to tell you about why I don’t like Justice Bailey. Not only does he not protect me in the pocket, but I have an excellent reason for hatred. He’s an asshole. And while this alone would be enough reason, that’s not my only reason. He used to date Ember. As I understand it right, by my frequent battering of questions, he’s also the last guy she fucked, which puts him on my automatic hate radar.

My hate festers for Justice because he's been inside Ember and I haven't. I think about his words and what they're implying. The part about my partying days being over and that I'll never get a chance to go out again, even when I get a nanny because surely a nanny won't watch them 24/7. Yeah, Ember answers her phone and takes care of everything I need no matter what time of the day it is, aside from having sex with me, but surely a nanny has strict hours, right? And then I think, what if I find a hot one? Maybe she can take care of what Ember won't?

I know what you're thinking. Why not just fuck some random chick? You're the star quarterback and surely you have opportunities. And to that I'd say, yes, I have opportunities all the time, but trust is key here. Women are fucking money hungry. I'm sorry to be the one to point it out, but all they want when they see me is my money and last name. They don't give a rat's ass about me as a person. When it comes to me they see dollar signs.

That's why I don't sleep around. Sure, I have before, but fuck, you gotta be careful with that shit. There are guys on the team that even go so far as to take the used condoms with them, so the chick can't try to impregnate herself after he leaves.

I know, I got off topic there, but it's the truth and the reason I surround myself with people like Ember. She'd never do that to me. I don't know what I'd do without her. Thrown into the lifestyle of the rich, famous, and used, I was so confused for so long, wondering what was real in the life I'd been living being an NFL superstar.

That's when I met Ember, and I had no doubt in my mind she'd be there for me through it all. I'd chosen football because

it's all I've ever known. And while I knew any success I had would come with fame, I also naively signed up for a lifestyle of being under nonstop scrutiny and constantly living with the unknown. Just because I had a multimillion-dollar contract and endorsement deals, which allowed me financial security, all that meant nothing in the long run. A rookie could come in and beat me out for the position and the next thing I know, the GM could be pulling me aside and telling me to pack my bags. You never know in the NFL. Sure, NFL stands for National Football League, but those of us in the league know what it really stands for: Not For Long.

I don't know when my relationship with Ember went from her being a friend and assistant to me looking at her and considering someday, somehow, this woman would be my wife.

After I'm done soaking, I check my phone for the first time since this morning. There are some messages from Harper and my agent, Chad, but none hold my attention like they do when I see the ones from Ember.

Ember: Hope you like this one.

And then I open the picture. It's of a brand-new Escalade with Adler standing in front of it making the peace sign. I think he's getting a little too comfortable in the super-star lifestyle. I admit, I bought into it for a long time too, until Ember came along and knocked my ass on the ground.

I smile. I can't help it.



Rushing home, for once, I pull into the parking garage. The Escalade's parked next to my Mustang. When I said I loved

cars, I wasn't lying. I think I have a fleet of seven, even a Lamborghini Aventador in there... and now with this new one.

While I certainly never expected to purposely seek out a vehicle that could fit five kids, I have to say it's a nice one. SUVs have come a long way over the years. Hell, there's even 30-inch black Forgiato Concavo wheels on it. Ember has good taste for sure, but it's no surprise. She's picked out most of my cars with me.

In the lobby of the building, Gus high-fives me. "It's gonna be a good season, LC."

I flash a smile at Gus, the bellman. "You better believe it, man." I like Gus. He's one of those guys you know should be retired by now, but the idea of not having those human relationships he's carved out his entire career here sounds depressing to him, so he keeps working.

"I had the pleasure of seeing the kids today," Gus notes. He was here the night I brought them back to the condo and experienced the madness that comes with the five hooligans.

"Yeah?"

Gus lets out an exasperated laugh, as if he recalls a memory that sparks a smile. "The little one has a set of lungs."

Nodding, anxiety gnaws at me. I don't know why, maybe because I don't know what the fuck I'm doing with them and at the mere mention of them, it hits me. "That she does."

I think he senses my mind shifting to everything I've been fucking up because the next thing I know his hand clasps my shoulder. "You're doing great, kid. Even parents who plan to have kids don't figure it out until the kid's older. That's why

being a grandparent is so cool. You get a second chance to do right by your kids.”

Twisting around, I toss my hands up in the air, but it’s not an exasperated motion. It’s playful because, for some fucking reason I can’t pinpoint, the idea of going upstairs isn’t as awful as it was yesterday. “But I don’t have that option. They’re not my grandkids, old man,” I tease, winking at him, walking backward a couple steps.

“You’re cooler. You’re the uncle and you get to make their lives better by being you.”

I give Gus one last look, not completely sure what that means.

Taking the elevator up to the top floor where my condo is, that’s when the nerves return.

Drawing in a deep breath, unsure of what I’m going to be met with, I open the door to my condo. It’s calmer than I expect my place to be, only filled with people. The kids are there, along with Cat, who’s coloring with the younger girls at one end of the table, and Ember and Harper going over what looks like houses on an iPad.

You know what I notice first? The boxes of pizza on the table and bags of what looks to be groceries being put away by Pita, my maid. She doesn’t look at me, just says, “Good evening, Mr. Slade.” And then continues her diligent job of organizing my cupboards the way I taught her.

Ember glances up, then back down like she didn’t see me.

“Hi, honey, I’m home,” I say, winking at Ember like I’m going to get a rise out of her. You never know.

While I get no reaction from Ember—or Harper for that matter—at least three of the five kids say hi to me. Haisley, Adler, and Nalani all wave and blurt out everything they did today.

Marley, she barely registers my presence. She's immersed in her phone and earbuds, a sketch book in hand, blocking out anything I say. And Braylee. She doesn't say anything either. Doesn't even look up. I can't get a read on that kid yet.

Nalani shoves a crayon in her mouth and tries to eat it. "How's that taste?" Cat asks her, smiling like she knows the answer is going to be her spitting it out.

Her response is immediate as she spits it out. "Yuck."

After grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge, I take a seat next to Ember at the table. Our eyes catch, but she doesn't say anything to me just yet. Do you notice the flush to her cheeks though? Our knees are touching under the table. And for good measure, I'd die to run my hand up her thigh just to see what she'd do, but I'll test my luck later. This looks important.

Beside them, Adler is deep in conversation with Braylee. "Seattle fans are known for being the loudest." Sliding off the couch, he stands in front of his sister. "Can you scream so loud you pass out?"

Braylee shrugs, a game controller in her hand and the flickering of the video game on the television visible in her eyes. "Wanna try?"

"Sure."

Adler holds up his hand and makes the number one signal with his index finger. "One," he adds another finger, "Two,"

and then a third. “Three. Scream.”

He does, but Braylee doesn't. She's back to playing the game.

Adler's shoulders slump forward with disappointment. “Why didn't you scream?”

“I don't know. I guess I don't want to.”

“The Hawks play their first preseason game in two weeks. We need to be prepared to show our support,” Adler goes on to tell her. I hadn't noticed until now, but they all look like they robbed the Seahawks team store today. I would have gotten all this for them, jerseys, blankets, whatever they wanted, but I have a feeling Ember's behind this one. She has insisted on paying for every jersey and hoodie she has.

Until now, I haven't thought about what it's going to be like during the season or how any of this is going to work. I like the idea of them coming to the games and supporting what I do for a living. Realistically, it's not possible for them to be at every game and go to school too.

Ember pushes the iPad toward me after Harper excuses herself, saying she has a meeting to get to. “What do you think of these three? The kids like the one on Lake Washington, the one Frontenac is in a great neighborhood and close to a private school.”

“Is there a guest house?”

Swiping to the right, she shows me the one on Frontenac St. “This one does.”

Looking over the specifics, I see that it has eight bedrooms, ten thousand square feet, six bathrooms and a pool. Perfect.

“That one then.”

Ember’s eyes drift to mine. “You’re not saying that just because you think you can kick the kids out to the guest house, are you?”

I smile. “That’s a good idea, but it’s not for them.”

She stares at me, confused and searching my eyes for the underlying reason I need a guest house.

Maintaining eye contact, I hate that my voice betrays me and gives away my intentions. “It’s for you and Cat.”

Drawing in a deep breath, she lets it out slowly, like we’ve been over this so many times. And we have. She’s adamant it’s not going anywhere with us and I keep putting pressure on her. It’s that old saying, if at first you don’t succeed, try again. I’ll just keep trying until she agrees. No one does persistent like me. I’m also the master at rolling my eyes. And if you say something to earn one of these, it’s deserving and effective.

So when Ember pops off with, “We don’t need your handouts,” I give her the Picasso of eye rolls.

“I know you think I’m just doing this to get you to fuck me, and I’m not going to lie, that will always be my intention on some level, but you’re my best friend. You know I care about you and I want both of you safe and happy. If that means you’re living with me, that’s what I’ll do.”

“We’re not your problem,” she adds.

I hate it when she says that. They are my friends and like it or not, part of me will always feel responsible for Cat’s accident. That night it happened, I’d pulled Ember away to fly to the Green Bay Packers game with me because I wanted her

there. Cat ended up going to a friend's wedding with a work friend she didn't know all that well. That girl wrapped the car around a tree, died instantly and Cat's life was forever changed. Had Ember driven her like she was supposed to do, the accident would have never happened.

I know, technically speaking, I had nothing to do with that friend's decision to drink and drive, but because I needed Ember that night (aka didn't want to be alone), I changed the course of her life.

"I'm tired of telling you this, but that night wasn't your fault and you don't need to buy our happiness because you feel bad."

Leaning in closer, I bring my lips to her ear. "I'm not trying to buy your happiness. I'm trying to make sure you're safe and keep you close. Keeping you close makes me happy, so you see, I'm really just trying to make *myself* happy."

Okay, let's take a quick break here. You're probably wondering why I turn everything sexual with Ember. Does everything have to lead back to sex?

Yes, yes it does. Especially when you're not getting any.

Okay, let's continue. Do you see the look I'm getting? I hadn't thought about my answer. It just came out, much like everything else I say to her. That's one thing I love about Ember. I never have to censor myself. But judging by the look Ember's giving me, perhaps I should have.

"You're such a chauvinistic asshole."

"I am not." Do you catch the offended tone to my voice? She couldn't give a flying fuck about offending me. It's why

she'll make a great wife someday. "I'm an honest asshole."

"Fine, whatever." She picks up the iPad and stands. "I'll get everything set up for tomorrow afternoon, but you need to be there to sign the papers."

"Why can't you? You have power of attorney for me."

"I'm not signing the paperwork on a—" She pauses and looks at the price, her eyes widening. "A thirteen-million-dollar home for you."

But then I say, like it's going to make a goddamn bit of difference to her, "I trust you."

I'm given that look, you know, the one women give you when they're tired of your shit. "Just sign the damn papers. Take the kids and do it with them. It'll be a nice step into showing them you're looking out for them."

I think about what she says, I do, but I catch her hand before she gets up. "Say you'll move in with me." It's not a question and it's not meant to be.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because. If I move in with you, it's only going to get worse."

I quirk an eyebrow at her, trying to catch her eyesight, but she's distracting herself by toying with the lid to my water bottle. "What's going to get worse?"

Let's screech to a halt and pause here, people. Hell, push fucking rewind if you will because the moment, the very goddamn second our eyes meet when she drops the lid and

before I get the word “worse” out, do you notice the flicker of her lashes and the way she looks at me? It’s something between “I want to suck his cock” and “he’s going to be my baby daddy someday.”

I’m kidding, but it’d be cool if she did. If you noticed, the look I actually got was something similar to the one a girl gives a boy she has a crush on. Like when Adler’s cheeks turned pink at the Chinese food delivery chick. That kind.

Ember’s quick when it comes to masking her emotions so if you fast forward to the end of my question, the look’s gone and replaced with annoyance. “Us. We agreed to help each other out, not complicate this more.” Scooting away from the table, she grabs her bag, yells goodbye to the kids, and then she’s rushing toward the door.

Naturally I catch her before she can leave. Cat sneaks past us and out the door, but I refuse to let Ember get away from me. “I don’t think so.” Pulling her out into the hall, I corner her against the now closed door so the kids can’t hear me. “What’s complicated about us?”

“Everything, Landon. I agreed to help you out because you suck at dealing with people. And things just keep getting more and more intense.”

“Like intense as in feeling intense?”

“No, as in you’re driving me fucking crazy. I think about you all the time because you don’t allow me to think about anything else.”

“So you admit you want me?”

Her finger jabs into my chest. “See, that’s what I mean. And if I move in with you, it’s only going to get worse. Our friendship needs some boundaries.”

“Or none at all,” I suggest.

That earns me a heavy sigh. “Do you just fuck with me because you think it’s funny?”

“No.” I step closer, dipping my head to catch her eyes. “I’m not fucking *with* you. I wish I was fucking *you*.”

Beautiful bemused blues watch me. “Why?”

“Why not?”

“I’m not just some girl you can sleep with once and then forget about the next day like all your other conquests. You forget, I’m the one who usually has to let those girls down the next day. What makes you think I want to become one of them?”

“What makes you think you’d be one of them?”

“Why do you always answer a question with a question?”

“Because I can.”

“Listen, Landon. I love you *dearly*. I’d do anything for you, but I won’t sleep with you because I know where that will lead for us.” A smile tugs at her lips and the Ember I know so well turns up the heat and licks her lips slowly, purposely and with so much goddamn intensity my cock goes from aroused to full-on aching in one second. “You’ll fall in love and I’ll have to break your heart.”

A laugh bubbles in my chest, slipping quietly past my lips, and I push up against Ember, letting her know exactly what

she's doing to me. This isn't the first time she's felt my cock hard against her. Happens weekly, but pay attention to what she does next because this, my friends, this is new.

"I'm not like those girls you bring home after a game. I'm not Alessa." She pushes into me, she slides her hand down my chest and then dips it inside my shorts to palm my cock. It's not just a palming that happens either. It's like a full-of-cock grab and slide. That's a thing, too. Feels fucking amazing. "I'm the kinda girl that if we were together, you'd be begging me for more and screaming for me to stop at the same time."

I'm speechless. Are you surprised? She has her hand on my cock. Of course I'm speechless. But there's more to it than that. Let's pause here for a moment. Again, sorry. I know, awful timing, but I'd like to keep her hand on my cock a little longer and I need to explain something to you. Okay, you've seen *Gone in 60 Seconds*, haven't you? Right. Silly me. Who hasn't? Okay, now, you remember Angelina Jolie's character, Sway, right? She's entirely too skinny in that movie, but my point is she's strangely hot given her badass vibe and you fear her just as much as you want to suck on her tits. Actually, wait, I have an even better example for you. Fucking Michelle Rodriguez in *Fast and Furious*. Hot. Sexy. Little bit villain, but killer body and "don't fuck with me" attitude. That's Ember.

I don't know what turns me on more: the fact that she has her hand on my cock or that I don't know if she's going to rip it off or get me off.

Sadly, Ember's doe-eyed blues give nothing away and she winks, removing her hand, licking her lips and then letting her bottom lip drag through her teeth. "Looks like LC has more going for him than his spiral." And then she walks away.

I'm. In. Love.

"I'll take that as a yes that you're going to move into the guest house!" I yell after her.

Cat's at her door waiting for her, and during all that, I hadn't noticed she had been standing there the entire time. "What guest house? Are we moving?" Her surprised eyes drift to mine, and then my raging fucking erection that hasn't disappeared. "Did you seriously just grab his penis?"

"Cock," Ember says, wrapping her arm around her tiny dread-locked friend. "It's called a cock, babe. Penis is for anyone under eighteen."

Yep. Still in love.

12. EMBER FIELD POSITION

Field Position – The yard line that the ball is on. Many games are won because a team continually has better starting field position.

“You stuck your hand down his pants!” Cat’s face is bright pink as we stare at one another in the kitchen, drinking straight from the bottle of vodka we keep in the cupboard behind the Oreo cookies. Cat reaches for the cookies. Opening them up, she takes out two, then hands me one, keeping the other for herself. “Is he packing?”

“Yeah, he’s certainly packing,” I mumble. Taking the cookie from her, I break it apart and lick the cream off, unable to process what I did. Speaking of cream... shit. Stop it. You’re only torturing yourself more!

I’ve seen Landon buck-ass fucking naked before. He was drunk, limp, and passed out, but still I saw him in all his glory. I’ve also walked in on him having sex, twice, and once in the shower, I walked in and he was taking care of business himself. *Shhh*. He doesn’t know and he shall never. It’s my fantasy, damn it. Get it out of your head, girl, because I know

you're imagining it now and that fucking treasure nugget is all mine!

“What’s this about his guest house?”

Sighing, I set the bottle down on the counter and slide it across the marble countertop. “The house he’s buying. There’s a guest house and he wants us to move in there.”

She’s confused, her brows drawn together. “But we live here?”

“We live here because Landon pays for it. If he’s moving, he wants me there too because, for some reason, he won’t let me go as his fucking PA.”

“Because he loves you.”

I wave my hand around, then reach for the bottle. “He does not. He wants to fuck me. The only reason we’re friends is because I haven’t given in to him.”

“Ha.” She takes a drink, swallows and then grimaces. “I *hate* vodka.” She does. I lied. She once drank a fifth and then sang and danced out “Baby Got Back.” That’s also the night we were arrested for “crystalline rocks of solid material” and booked in the King County Jail. I swear to you it wasn’t crystal meth. They were fucking Jolly Ranchers—still in their wrappers—but the rookie arresting officer didn’t give a flying fuck. We spent a day behind bars where further lab tests came back negative and we got to go home. Cat doesn’t drink vodka anymore but sometimes, I like to see if she’ll remember.

So yeah, this was my bottle, not ours, but it sounded better to say it was hers and less like I keep alcohol and Oreos hidden together. Which, I do, so no judgment. Leaning

forward, Cat rests her elbows on the counter and makes me look her in the eye. “You’ve been friends with Landon since he signed with the Seahawks. He’s not using you. He trusts you.”

“How do you remember all that?”

She laughs, straightening her posture. “I remember important details. Seriously, what’s our plan then?”

“I don’t know.” And I don’t.

“I really love those kids,” Cat notes, reaching in the fridge for the milk. She then takes a glass and pours herself a cup. Dipping in the first Oreo, she takes a bite, chews, swallows and then smiles a big black toothy grin. “Do I have anything in my teeth?”

Laughing, I shake my head and screw the cap back on the vodka before I drink too much. “Nope. Nothing.” After putting the bottle away, I motion down the hall. “I’m gonna take a bath.”

“Okay.” Cat grabs the milk she poured and the Oreos, heading for the couch. “I’m gonna catch up on some shows.”

When I’m in the bathroom alone, that’s when I think of Landon, as if it ever left, but it’s then I can fully absorb what I did. I grabbed his fucking cock like I owned it. #mine #backoffbitches #cockgrabs

“Jesus Christ,” I sigh, rubbing my hands over my face, standing in front of the mirror. I stare up at my reflection. “Who are you?” #fucked

Truth is, since I met Landon that day in the tattoo shop and he changed my life, I haven’t recognized myself. I can’t say

that in a bad way either because before I met him, I'd never laughed so hard, knew friendship like his, experienced life and understood what it was like to have a family again. I didn't want to jeopardize our friendship by fucking him. Despite knowing it'd be amazing.

Did I cross the line?

Yes, I did. I won't lie to you. I would fuck Landon in a heartbeat. Look at him! You'd be crazy not to. Women love Landon. They love his undeniable good looks, athletic physique and the image he portrays effortlessly as one of the most admired quarterbacks in the league. While on the field, he maintains that cold ruthless image he paints, it's off the field I fell in love with him. I've seen him invite fans to his table at a restaurant to come sit with him and have dinner. I've also witnessed him pay for everyone's meal in said restaurant before he left without asking for anything. Whether he wants to admit it or not, he's not your typical star athlete being paid millions to be the gladiator they think he is. He's unattainable and unlike anyone I've ever met. He's an arrogant douchebag at times, but underneath everything he displays to the media, he's a good guy.

I wasn't willing to give up anything. There's a reason why I keep him at bay. It isn't that I think I'm better off alone or because Alessa, #passiveaggressivequeen, deserves him. It's because if I lost him, what would I have then? Aside from Cat and art. Truth be told, Landon brings out a side of me I crave and nothing else provides but him.

My phone rings beside me, and an unintentional smile tugs at my lips. Sliding my finger across the screen, I try my best to

sound annoyed. “What now? Don’t tell me you lost one of the kids.”

“No.” He snorts, sounding annoyed himself as I hear a door close. “You know, it’s really hard to take care of the problem you created with a house full of kids.”

I twist my voice to sound sad. “You *poor* baby.” *I’ll come take care of it and we can fuck in your closet. #Ivelostmymind*

“It’s all *your* fault.”

You totally did. “It is not.” I’m not one to admit defeat or take the blame and neither is Landon, so our friendship is fucking weird. We’re always arguing.

“Yes, it is.” See? Told you. He pauses, his voice lowering to a whisper. “Someday you’re going to let me into that tight pussy of yours.”

I know I shouldn’t instigate him, but I do because he’s fun to mess with sometimes. Sitting on the edge of the tub, I turn the faucet on. “What makes you think it’s tight?”

His answer is immediate. “Because you’ve been waiting for me.”

“Ha.”

I can literally hear the frown in his words when he asks, “Ha what?”

“If you think I’m waiting for you, you’re sorely mistaken, dude.”

“You’re gonna be sore after we fuck.”

I’d let it go on long enough. “Where are you?”

He laughs lightly like a kid who's been hiding. "In my closet. It's the only safe place."

"What did I say?"

"When?"

"When you hired me."

He's quiet for a beat, longer than I expected and then he sighs. "You said you wouldn't have sex with me. Or something like that."

"And you agreed."

"Because you said you wouldn't agree unless I agreed."

Letting out a heavy sigh, I grip the phone tighter. "You agreed to agree."

Rules can totally be broken.

"I didn't think you meant it."

I didn't.

"I did." I'm exhausted with having this same conversation all the time.

Landon snorts. "Well, that's just stupid."

"What did you call for?"

"To see if we could go look at the house in the morning. I don't have practice tomorrow."

"Yeah, I can call the realtor and arrange it."

Landon lets out a frustrated sigh. "I gotta go put kids to bed."

#thinkofme

The thought of him with those kids swells my heart in the worst way. “You do that.” And then I hang up on him. I hate that we’re constantly at this point. We’ve been here so many times over the years and I swear to myself I’m not going to let it happen but fuck, he’s so goddamn persistent at times, and it makes me sick to my stomach to even think about him with someone else.

13. LANDON ENCROACHMENT

Encroachment – A penalty where a defender is in the neutral zone before the ball is snapped.

Quarterbacks are always in control. At least, that's the general theory of the position. We want the glory. If we're passing the ball off, we're taking the easy way. That's a fucked-up way to look at it, but it's how it is for a quarterback. It's in our blood to control the game and it's why we're in that position. The quarterback is the heart of the beast. The guy who takes the fall and is also the leader of the team. For me, I don't know where that control has gone. It's like I've fumbled the ball and can't get it back.

You want to know what sucks even more? Aside from being responsible for five other lives overnight. It's having no control around a woman you've been begging to fuck and having an erection while hiding in a closet. It's like I'm a teenager again and the only escape from my siblings was the attic.

I can't get Ember out of my head and I need to take care of the problem she created. Look at me there, sitting between racks of Under Armour gear, twenty-some pairs of sneakers and the few suits I have, contemplating how long it'd take for me to take care of this without them realizing I'm gone.

You're probably wondering where the kids are, huh?

Well, I gave them every blanket and flashlight I own and told them to build a fort. Thought it'd keep them busy for a while. In about five minutes, you're going to see how very wrong I am, but first, do you see me slipping my hand down my shorts and palming my needy neglected cock and contemplating calling Alessa? The thought makes me groan, and not in a good way. Alessa. She's the last person I *want* to call, but at least she's good at taking care of my needs.

No, you're done with her, remember?

Right. Back to me. There I am, gripping my cock and getting into it, but my shorts are still on for fear the kids will come in. It's not like my closet door has a lock. Before you go wondering why I'm not in the bathroom where there is a lock, remember that there's a teenage girl in my house. Girl thinks she owns the bathroom now. All the more reason for us to get moved soon.

Just as I'm thinking of pulling down my shorts and finishing up, the door swings open and Adler's standing in front of me with a curious look and eating a bag of Puffs Cheetos. We're locked in a look of, what the fuck and something similar to me when Oma caught me jerking off to a picture of Britney Spears, pre-freakout Britney.

"Why are you in the closet?" Adler asks, looking at my hand in my shorts, and thankfully he doesn't notice I'm hard, or he doesn't know what it means and I'm really hoping he doesn't. "Do you have to pee?"

"Yeah?" Yep. Comes out as a question.

With a furrowed brow, he reaches in his bag of processed junk food and pulls out another Cheeto, stuffing it in his mouth. He talks with his mouth full as he asks, “Can I have a Coke?”

I scowl at the noises he’s making. In my opinion, there is nothing worse than hearing someone chew their food. “No. Drink water. I don’t have soda in the house.”

“Yeah you do. Pita bought some.”

“She’s fired.”

“Yeah, right.” He pulls his hand from the bag and licks his fingers, one by one. “Can we watch a movie?”

“Yes. Go pick one. I’ll be right out.”

He leaves, and I’m left there alone, again, but probably only for a moment. Hauling myself up, I stop at the door and lean my head against the frame. What am I doing? This is crazy. All I can think about lately is Ember. Why am I having such a hard time now? We’ve been friends for years and I was always able to ignore it before. Only now... she’s all I think about.

Dragging myself from my room, I make my way to the living room to find the mother of all forts built. They used every single blanket, towel and sheet they could find in my condo which was a lot. I have a sheet problem. I like nice sheets too, and if these little maniacs mess them up, their asses are on the line. I even warn them; obviously they ignore me like I’m not even talking. It’s just like every other day so far in the life of an uncle turned dad.

Sitting down on the couch cushions they have strewed on the floor, I look up at the screen. “What are we watching?”

Haisley looks over at me, her mouth full of popcorn. *Jurassic World*. Or something like that. It doesn't sound at all like *Jurassic World*, but she holds up the DVD case to show me.

I raise an eyebrow. "Isn't that a little graphic for you guys?"

A collective, "Nope," follows along with "shhhhh" as the opening scene begins. Have you seen the opening scene to *Jurassic World*? I'm not trying to ruin the plot for you, but the dinosaur they created eats its sibling. After experiencing these kids for a day, I could totally see one of them eating their sibling. More than likely it'd be Braylee eating Marley. Or vice versa. Or maybe even Adler eating Haisley. The only one who doesn't seem to have a sibling rival is Nalani, and she's too cute for anyone to hate her yet. Give her another year.

Beside me, Adler nudges me, digging into the bowl of popcorn Haisley's hoarding on her lap. She tries to pull it away, only to have him rip it out of her hands. Then she starts crying. "I had it first!" she shouts at him, tears streaming down her face.

"You're supposed to share!" he growls back at her.

What a little shit. Boys are such jerks to girls. Revel and Bonner were assholes to Jenna growing up, but I wasn't. At least that's what I'm going to tell you. In all honesty, I'm not ready to tell you anything about her other than she was my best friend growing up. I glare at Adler, take the popcorn from him and hand it back to Haisley. "Stop being mean to her."

He pouts for a minute and then asks, "How many bedrooms does the new house have?"

"Eight."

Marley perks up and pulls her earbud out of her ear having surprisingly heard that. "Do we all get our own?"

“If you want your own or you can share.”

“Our parents always said we get them eventually,” Adler adds, “but it hadn’t happened yet.”

I don’t know what to say to that. Do you?

Haisley pauses her popcorn feast and stares at me and then my hair. “Did you have your own room?”

Lifting my head up from the pillow, I raise an eyebrow. “When I was your age?”

“Yeah.”

“No. I shared with Revel and Bonner. Grant had his own.”

Haisley’s focus shifts to my hair again. I probably haven’t given you much of a description about me other than being fuck hot. But my hair, it’s also a thing with girls. I wouldn’t say I have curly hair by any means and I usually cover it with a baseball cap, but it’s wavy and thick. Pullworthy as most women tell me. It’s short on the sides but on the top, it’s kind of a mess. One Haisley, the queen of braids all of a sudden thanks to Cat, wants to play with. Now she hasn’t said this to me yet, but it’s written all over her face.

“Can I braid your hair?”

Sighing, my manhood takes a hit, but I don’t want to make the kid cry again. “Sure. Go for it.” And there goes the rest of it.

With a renewed excitement, she jumps up, knocks the bowl of popcorn over and climbs behind me. I have to admit, it’s not all that bad having someone play with your hair.

Marley glances over at us but surprisingly, she doesn’t roll her eyes. Instead, she watches Haisley and then me, an unknown emotion in her eyes. I don’t know her well enough to know what

she's thinking. And then the tears surface. They come out of nowhere. Emotion lodges in my throat. Fear, regret, confusion, they're all written in her eyes and I don't know what to say or do. It's clear seeing Haisley playing with my hair brought it on, but then again, maybe it wasn't that at all.

I mumble, "You okay?" Should I pull her aside and check on her?

Never one to give her emotions away, Marley shrugs, trying to play it off and places her earbuds back in her ears, closing herself off again.

"You can have your own bathrooms too," I add, looking to Marley, hoping maybe that might make her feel better. She nods, but doesn't say anything.

"Thank fuck!" Adler groans beside me, picking up pieces of popcorn Haisley spilled.

I swat at him. "Boy, watch your mouth."

"What? You've never shared a bathroom with four girls!"

"Tell us about Revel," Braylee whispers, holding up her iPad and the article of him plastered across the news again. This time he made a scene on his latest tour with Taylan Ash.

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head. "He's a fucking mess."

"What your mouth, boy," Adler mocks, laughing and tossing popcorn at me.

Nalani takes the piece beside me and smiles. "Ah, cute!"

We all laugh only to have Haisley yank my head back. "Stop moving."

I straighten my posture and try to act like I'm a statue.
"Sorry."

The next twenty minutes as we watch the movie, Haisley makes me runway-model presentable, along with makeup because what the hell—I'm stuck at home, might as well let her have her fun. And I gotta admit, I look good with mascara. Adler even lets them do his makeup, too.

"I feel like we've lost our manhood," I tell Adler, looking in the handheld mirror Marley hands me. Yep, she turned off her music and actually participated.

Adler laughs. "You ain't kidding. But I think my hair looks good like this." He runs his hands over the spikes in his hair.

It's after midnight by the time they all fall asleep. I have intentions on sneaking back to my room, but I'm trapped by kids. Nalani has her entire tiny body on top of mine, her head on my chest and arms sprawled out. On my left are Haisley and Braylee. On my right, Adler's using my arm as his pillow and Marley has her legs on mine. It's like I'm their personal pillow.

I think of Grant. I don't know why but I do. I picture his face and wonder again why he left me the kids. I hadn't seen him in years; hell, I didn't know anything about him other than he was living in Texas and working for his wife's family. I can't tell you if these kids are anything like him.

Lying there with a stuffed pig named Poot under my head, I think of Ember. It's not like my thoughts ever strayed from her. And I still never had the chance to take care of my problem. I don't know who I drop kicked in a previous life to deserve this kind of torture, but I want to go back and sincerely apologize to them and beg them to deal me another hand. Maybe if I pinch

the little one and tell her to cry for Ember, she'll do just that, and I can convince Ember to come and sleep on the floor with us. Think it'll work?

You're right, it won't. If she hasn't given in to me yet, no way will she with a bunch of kids on the floor with us.

14. EMBER

LINE OF SCRIMMAGE

Line of scrimmage – An imaginary line extending from sideline to sideline where the ball is spotted.

I don't know why, but the moment I wake up, I check Alessa's Instagram. Maybe because it's become a habit at this point? Probably. She's posted a picture of her and Landon that was taken nearly four months ago when they were in Paris together. They're standing under the Eiffel Tower. He looks annoyed to be there, and if I remember correctly, he was. He literally begged me to get him out of that trip with her, but I didn't. I thought it would be good to get him out of town and knew it would drive them further apart. Guess who was right on that? Yes, me.

And guess who he called and talked to that entire vacation while Alessa was off doing whatever it is models do?

Me, again.

Underneath the photo of him, she hashtags a few things. Take a wild shot in the dark as to what they are. Okay, give up? I'll save you the trouble and just tell you. #blessed #lovers #loveofmylife #loveinparis #fashionmodel #LC and... here's the cake topper of the hashtags, #hesmine. Bullshit he's yours.

Bitch, he was mine first. And then I just want to bitch slap myself because what business do I have saying that? He's a lot of things to me. My friend, my boss, yet at the end of the day, not mine. But damn it, in so many ways he is.

Rolling over on the couch, I think about how nice it would be to have an actual bedroom and how the simple act of moving into the guest house on Landon's property would accomplish that. I could have a place to paint instead of my closet paint studio. That'd be nice.

Cat emerges from her room, her dreads absolutely perfect and lying nicely over her shoulders. She lies down next to me on my couch/bed and spoons me from behind. She's a cuddler in the morning. So strange, but I love her.

"Are we going house shopping again?" she asks, resting her chin on my shoulder.

Picking up my phone again, I check the time only to notice I never clicked off Alessa's Instagram profile. Cat rips my phone from my hands and holds it close to her face. "He's in Paris? How'd he get there? Who has the kids?"

A laugh escapes me. Wiggling around, I try to get comfortable with Cat practically lying on top of me. "No, honey. He's in his condo, I think. That was taken a while ago."

She scrolls down from that photo to another one of them on the beach in Mexico. I'm in the distance on a lounge chair, glaring at the two of them. Whoa. It's pretty obvious I hate her, or I'm in love with him. Turns out, it's both.

Cat points to the picture. "Her body is ridiculous." And by ridiculous, you'd think she means good, and sure, it could be if

you like that stick-thin model body. Maybe that's why I'm glaring at her in the photo?

Nope. It's her passive aggressiveness I can't stand. And maybe a little bit of her body.

"Does she ever eat?"

"If water and tofu count as food, then yes." Picking up one of Cat's dreads on my shoulder, I stare at the twisted hair with my fingertips and then smell it. Her hair always smells like apples.

"Didn't they break up? Or am I imagining that?"

"They did, but who knows if that's going to stick. I think they got together while they were in Hawaii."

"Wasn't he in Hawaii with Quinn and Kumonde?"

"Yeah, but she was there doing a photoshoot or something."

"Weird." Cat hands me my phone back and then stares at me, her wide green eyes assessing. "When are you two going to get together and stop all this nonsense of 'he's my friend'?"

As you can see, this is a frequent conversation we have. "It's complicated, Cat. He's Landon and I'm me. Clearly, I'm not like Alessa. We're completely different from one another."

Cat sits up when I pat her knee so I can get up. "Yeah, you and Alessa are different."

"So?" Standing, I make my way over to the coffee pot to turn it on. "It doesn't change anything."

"What I mean is you and Alessa are different, but you and Landon aren't. He can't do anything without asking for your approval and deep down, you love that because he depends on

you. And you're both alike. Running from a past you want to forget."

I don't like to talk about my childhood with anyone, but with Landon, it's always been natural. Probably because he too lost his parents and then later, his sister. Maybe that's why we bonded so quickly. The day after Eldon died, I met Landon. Three weeks later, Jenna, Landon's twin sister died. I think having someone with you to pull you through something like that, who has been through it too, is what made us inseparable. I've lost my entire family over the years and I'm here to tell you, death sucks donkey dick. It's inevitable but it still fucking sucks and having someone there to hold you and reassure you it gets easier, means more than you can ever imagine. He was also there for me during Cat's accident. He held me the entire night as the two of us spent three days in a waiting room together, not knowing if she would make it through surgery. For that reason, he's my person.

There's a knock on our door and Cat jumps up to get it. Swinging the door open, she laughs. I peek my head around the corner to see Landon standing in the hall, no shirt on and holding a chocolate syrup-covered Nalani by the ankles. I'm not even joking. She looks like a cute chocolate-dipped baby. On second thought, after yesterday and the poop incident in Landon's room, I'm really hoping that's chocolate because if not, what the fuck is this kid eating to do this?

"Marley thinks she owns the bathroom and this one needs a bath. Can we use yours?"

"Most neighbors ask to borrow sugar, not bathrooms." With my coffee in hand, I smirk at him and lean into the side of the wall.

Cat swipes her index finger on Nalani's belly and licks it. By the consistency, it's definitely chocolate, but I'm surprised Cat just did that. Then again, no, I'm not. She turns to me, smiling. "It's chocolate."

"I'm glad this is funny to you, but she's fuckin' heavy. Can we use your bathroom?" Landon shifts his weight, trying to hold Nalani as far away from his body as possible but she's wiggling and smearing chocolate all over Landon, plus her face is turning red from being upside down. I can't help but focus on his muscles because they're bulging and all up in my face. I want to smear him in chocolate and then lick every single muscle and tight line on his body. And that cut V on his hips... it's amazing and my tongue definitely needs to explore that and then descend slowly into Cockridge. In case you don't know it, it's a thing or rather a very happy place I like to vacation at in the lower regions of a man. Too bad it's been, like, a goddamn year since that's occurred.

Landon grunts. "Unless you plan on licking me clean, stop staring and help me."

Cat's laughter fills the foyer and I motion for him to follow me. "I wasn't staring. I was in disbelief you even have that much chocolate in the house. But then again—" Pausing, I turn to look at him carrying Nalani by the feet while she squirms and tries to free herself. "I shouldn't be surprised at all."

"No, you shouldn't," he mumbles, the stress in his eyes evident when he walks past me and into the bathroom. "Hold still, kid. You keep moving and I'm going to lose my grip on your feet."

Sure enough, he does and drops her on the marble floor in my bathroom. Don't freak out. She hit the bathmat and only

dropped maybe three inches. Still, it's enough that she cries and Landon loses his shit.

“Seriously? Goddamn it. I told you not to move!”

“Okay, relax.” I turn him by the shoulders and make him face me. “Calm down. She's fine. It probably just scared her.”

We glance down at her, still crying but at least now she's crawling into the tub and tearfully licking her arms free of chocolate syrup.

Landon stares blankly at me. “I can't do this, Em. This is fuckin' crazy. Every morning it's something else and they're out of control.”

“They're kids. They're all out of control and yes, you can do this.” Reaching down, I turn on the water to the tub and remove Nalani's diaper. It's clear a shower is needed, not a bath so I grab the shower head and spray her down with it.

“Yay! Water!” Nalani giggles, clapping her hands in the water.

With a smile, I turn my head over my shoulder to see Landon watching her, the corners of his beautiful kissable lips pulled up in a smile.

“No one said you had to have this all figured out now, Landon. It's going to take time and once we find a suitable nanny, it'll be a lot easier for you.”

He nods, but I'm not sure he believes me. I can tell the last few days have weighed on him. Not only is that first week of training camp always hard on him, but then you add in the loss of his brother and the kids and you have one stressed-out guy.

While I'm washing Nalani, I twist my head once again and look back at Landon. He hates to be out of control. Hates it with a passion and these kids make him feel out of control. I can see it written all over his face.

Our eyes catch, and I smile at him. "You're doing fine." There's a faint blackness under his lashes and his cheeks have pink sparkles on them. "What's on your face?"

"Makeup." He pauses and bats his eyelashes at me. "Haisley made me a pretty girl for a night."

#myheartmightburst

I fight the urge to burst out laughing and fall for him a little more. He thinks he's doing so bad at this, but it's instances like this that confirm though while he's an asshole most days, he cares about these kids, whether he wants to admit it or not.

Landon's expression softens, and I think he's going to say something when a waft of smell lingers in the bathroom. It's not a good smell either. Both of us look down at Nalani in the tub.

I'm sure you can take a wild guess as to what the tub looks like. Nalani's playing with her own shit in the tub. My eyes slide to Landon who drops his head forward, drawing in a deep breath, then immediately gags, regretting it. "Kids are so disgusting."



"You have a meeting with your agent at eleven, so we need to make this quick," I tell Landon as we pull up to the house he's decided to buy.

Landon nods but doesn't say anything. Instead, he's taking in the house and the surrounding property.

You can't even call this monstrosity a house. It's a mansion on 1.6 acres. It's crazy to think he's just going to sign papers and it's his. No mortgage. Nothing. Aside from yearly property taxes which in Seattle are about equal to some people's mortgages, but whatever.

"We're gonna have to hire a landscaper," he notes.

"I'm sure I can ask around and see if there's a good one."

"Can I pick my room?" Haisley asks, popping her head between the front seats. She's like a ninja getting out of her booster seat. One minute she's buckled and the next, she's practically on your lap.

"I should get first pick," Marley adds, tucking her cell phone in the back pocket of her overalls.

Adler barrels out of the Escalade next and loudly disagrees with, "No, I should because I'm the only one with a penis in this family."

As he gets out of the SUV, Landon gives him a "what the fuck" look. "Um, what about me?"

"What about you?"

"I have a penis."

Haisley stares at Landon's crotch area and basically pokes him in the dick. "You do?"

Immediately, he backs away, bumping into me in the process, and grabs his junk. "Hey, don't touch me there."

Haisley actually looks offended. "Why not?"

“Because you’re not supposed to touch people’s private parts,” Braylee tells her, rolling her eyes as she holds her DS in hand. “You don’t want someone touching your vagina, do you?”

“Who touched whose vagina?” Cat asks, stepping out of the Escalade last. Yep, she decided Landon couldn’t buy a house without her input too. It’s like we’re the fucking Brady Bunch.

Landon leans into my shoulder. “Can we please look, sign the papers, and get this over with?”

“Yes.”

The real estate agent for the property meets us at the house along with Landon’s agent and manager. He had me buy the SUV yesterday but there was no way I was buying a house without him, so that meant his people had to be here for it. They go through all the legal parts and talk to the owners of the property while Landon and I look around.

The kids wander off with Cat to pick their rooms and it’s a good thing the house is already vacant because they’re not at all quiet or careful about any of it. It’s like they’re a cross between raging bulls and playing Marco Polo across the house from one another.

Landon grabs my hand and leads me to the private master suite on the third floor. Opening the double doors leading into the suite, he smiles back at me. “I like that it has its own wing for the master bedroom.”

“It provides nice privacy.”

Smirking, he winks and steps inside the room. At least his playful mood from last night’s returning. I was beginning to worry about him.

“Where’s the guest house?” he asks, glancing out the large floor-to-ceiling picture windows overlooking the back terrace and swimming pool.

Stepping toward him, I peek out the window myself and see the pool house. I stare down at the property sheet in my hand that lays out the house. “It says here, it’s next to the pool house.”

“Oh, right.” He points out the window to the left of the pool. “It’s right there.” With our shoulders touching, our bodies side by side, we stare out the window together. My breathing increases, like it always does when I’m near him, but this time it’s Landon’s breathing I notice over mine. It hitches when he dips his head forward. “Make this move with me.”

It’s not a question. It never is with him. “Do you really think that’s a good idea? What will Alessa think?”

“Well, we’re not technically together anymore and two, it doesn’t fucking matter what she thinks. I care what *you* think.”

Why am I caving so easily? His eyes penetrate mine and all I can think about is him penetrating me, so naturally my answer is, “Okay.” And it’s just as breathy as you might think.

Our eyes lock on each other and Landon leans in like he’s gonna kiss me. I swallow, my eyes darting over his face, his lips, the way his body moves closer. He doesn’t blink, and neither do I.

He doesn’t move.

I don’t either.

I clear my throat, trying to draw the two of us out of the trance we’re in. He leans in closer, a low growl rumbling in his

throat as his lips move toward mine. I don't stop him. My heart races, blood pumping through my veins. There's no smile on his face, and his eyes, they're hard and assessing, and they say he loves me. No, I'm kidding. They say he wants to fuck me. It's the only thing he wants from me besides my friendship. I learned quickly not to take everything to heart Landon says or does, and I'm comfortable enough around him that I could *just* kiss him and not have it mean anything to me. Or can I? Maybe I can kiss him just to see if I want more?

Fuck that shit. Girl, you know you want more!

I'm right. This is a bad idea and it's only going to complicate things even more.

Before either of us can react, Adler barrels through the door. "What the heck? Why do you get a floor to yourself and we just get rooms?"

Jumping at the sound of the door, I step back away from Landon, trying not to act like I was going to let him kiss me.

Get your shit together, Ember.

Landon laughs. His eyes return to me, and a knot of tension in my throat rises. He turns to face Adler. "Because I'm paying the bills and you're not."

Adler rolls his eyes. "Just for now, old man. Just for now." And walks away, out of the bedroom.

Landon turns to face me. "Why does he call me an old man? I'm only, what... twenty years older than him? That's hardly old."

"Clearly you had someone doing your homework in college because he's nine and you're twenty-six."

He blinks... doing the math in his head, or trying to. Then he breaks out his fingers. “Seventeen? Is that right?”

“Yeah.” I fight back a laugh, trying to busy myself with looking at the bedroom, unsteady from his beautiful, adorable, kissable face I want to smoosh between my hands and lay on my tits. Then I want to run my hands through his hair and gently push his head south and have him go down on me. Let’s face it, he’d look better with his head between my legs and then his cock. *Fuck, knock it off.* Ugh. I’m worse than him! #fuckedAF

Landon steps closer, eyeing the thick cream craftsman-style crown molding and window frames and then running his hand suggestively over the bold window casings. “Twenty is close enough.”

“And not accurate.” Averting my stare, I move to the bathroom to check out the master bathroom I saw pictures of, but hadn’t seen in person yet. Our kitchen in the condo would fit in his bathroom.

“Whatever.” With determination, he follows me into the bathroom, his chest purposely pressing into my back. “What I mean is I’m not an old man.”

“You’re older than me,” I whisper over my shoulder. He’s so close again I can feel his breath on my neck.

“By three fuckin’ days,” he whispers in my ear, then steps inside the shower to examine the bench. Suggestively, he points at his crotch and then makes a humping motion with his hips. You’d think looking at him, here’s a star football player with a million-dollar arm. Not only does he have endorsements coming out his ass and hundreds of products thrown his way every day in hopes he’ll represent them, but he also leads the Seattle

Seahawks on the field every week from September to the end of December. He's a well-manicured professional athlete and you're under the impression he's mature, right? Nope. Not at all. Case in point, he's humping the shower wall while telling me over his shoulder, "The bench provides a nice leverage point."

"You're unbelievable, and still older than me." Turning the light off, I begin to walk out of the bathroom only to have him follow and grab me from behind to tackle me to the barn wood tile floors. It's a nice floor, but what's nice is the feeling of Landon on top of me.

He holds me down, pinning my wrists to the floor. "What were we talking about?"

I snort, giving him the bitch brow. "Lunch?"

"Nice try." Landon's eyes drift intently across my face, his voice jagged when he whispers, "You're moving in with me."

"No, into the guest house." Uncomfortable, I shift, but in the process, my girly bits make direct contact with his junk.

He swallows roughly, his jaw clenching before he clears his throat. "Same difference."

The windows facing the back terrace are open and all of a sudden, we hear screaming followed by splashing and more screaming. "I can't believe you just did that!" Marley screams.

Scrambling to our feet, Landon and I peek out the window to see Marley in the pool, Braylee smiling, and a laughing Cat holding Nalani.

Landon lets out a relieved breath. "Jesus Christ."

Smiling, I pat his shoulder and walk out of the room only to have him catch my hand and whirl me to face him.

“Is that a yes?”

Sighing, I shake my head. “I’m probably going to regret it, but it’s a yes.”

#letthemadnessbegin

15. LANDON

OUT PATTERN

Out Pattern – The course a wide receiver runs where he starts running straight downfield and then turns and runs toward the sideline in an attempt to get open.

When I moved to Seattle five years ago, I lived with Kumonde for the first year having not known the city. Then, after my first season with the Seahawks, I bought my condo and rented the one next door in an attempt to keep Ember close. I couldn't have her across town and be my assistant. And after Cat's accident, I wanted them both close. So she moved in next door and the last three years have gone pretty smooth. And now my life is a clusterfuck of shit every day while I'm wading through two practices a day and nearing our first preseason game in a week. Now to top it off, I'm packing. Not exactly what I want to do on a day off, but it beats shopping for clothes like I had to do yesterday because Marley had nothing to wear. Which, I'd like to point out is complete bullshit. She just didn't want to wear anything in the fifteen fucking boxes of clothes she has stored in the corner of my living room.

“You have entirely too many shoes!” Ember yells, tossing another pair at my head. She’s in the depths of my closet that she’s helping me pack. I want to point out she’s wrong because clearly, she hasn’t seen Marley’s collection of chucks. She has a pair in every goddamn color. I’m not even joking.

Every.

Single.

Color.

They.

Make.

And one uniquely altered with duct tape and Sharpie marker. I bet if I turned them over they’d say, “I hate Landon!” on the soles.

I stare at the shoe Ember threw at me. “Hey, that one is a limited edition.” I hired someone to pack up my condo, but I’m particular about my shoes and everything else in my closet. Some would say I have a problem. I wouldn’t, but some would. Like Ember.

“I don’t give a shit if they’re from fucking space.” She throws another one at me. This one hits me in the shoulder. “You have too many.”

I pick it up and pretend to wipe off the dirt. There’s no dirt. You’ve seen my apartment. I keep it super clean. Actually, Pita keeps it super clean, but that’s beside the point. Braylee walks into my room and hands me her Gameboy.

I take it and look down at her. She usually does this because she wants me to pass another level for her but the look

on her face tells me this might be something bigger. “What? Why are you giving me a look like you want to kill me?”

“The battery died.”

“So put some more in it?”

“It doesn’t take batteries. Marley stole my charger.”

“Why?”

“Because her phone needed to be charged. Now she’s locked herself in the bathroom.”

“Why?” I feel like a broken record at this point, but you know, that happens a lot with kids, as I’m finding out.

Braylee rolls her eyes and I’m fucking impressed by it because she gives me a run for my money on being the king of eye rolls. “Why does she do anything she does?”

“Fuck. Why is she always in the goddamn bathroom?”

Braylee lets out a laugh, but her expression is not amused. “Do something?”

Do you notice my expression? In case it’s not obvious, I’m confused. I look at Ember. “Get her out of the bathroom.”

And the look I get from Ember, as you can imagine, isn’t a good one. “Try that again in a non-douche way.” In case you can’t tell, she wants to fucking murder me, as usual.

Braylee snaps her eyes to Ember. “What’s a douche?”

“Nothing,” Ember mumbles, walking out of the room and pounding on the bathroom door. “Marley, get out of the bathroom!”

“I’m taking a shower!” she yells back, her voice muffled behind the locked door. I knew putting a lock on the other day would backfire on me.

Braylee turns back to me, her hands on her hips. “Her skin is going to fall off soon if she takes another shower today.”

“How many has she taken?”

“Like two!” And yeah, she shouts this at me and rips her Gameboy back from me. “Do you have another charger?”

I give her a look like she’s lost her mind. “No. Why would you think I have Gameboy chargers lying around?”

Braylee sighs, turns, and stomps out of my bedroom. Do you hear how fucking loud her steps are for someone who’s not even five feet tall yet? It’s not just “I’m irritated” stomps either. These are like the Hulk is pissed off and I’ve ruined her life. Which, if we’re being honest, I’m well on the way to that particular feat as far as she’s concerned. I don’t think I’d disagree either.

“Gimme your charger!” she yells to Adler in a voice that’s similar to a dragon.

As you can imagine, that’s followed with a loud, “No!” and trailed by screaming. Little boy screaming. I’m embarrassed for him and impressed he can reach that pitch.

I’m not going to deal with it. Kids fight and, in my opinion, what better way to teach them about life and choices but to let them settle their arguments themselves. I don’t need to get involved in everything, right?

I see it this way, but by the way Ember is staring at me, I’m guessing I’m wrong here. I’m pretty good at ignoring

people so I go ahead and ignore her too, for good measure. Bending down, I carefully place my elaborate shoe collection into the boxes with bubble wrap around each pair. I'm kidding, I don't bubble wrap them, but you better believe they all have their own individual shoe boxes.

Sadly, Ember doesn't leave. Sighing, a growl slips past my lips when I glance up at her. I'm not a genius, but judging by the expression on her face, she's going to make me deal with the twin drama in the living room.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Her hand flies to her hip. “Aren't you gonna deal with that?”

I take a moment to stare at her. Isn't she beautiful when she's pissed off? I think so. Her cheeks get the slightest flush to them and her lips purse. Honestly, I forget that she's even talking. All I can think about is what her mouth would look like with my cock in it. Reaching inside my shorts, I adjust myself—in front of her—and shake my head.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“No.”

“Landon.” She shoves my shoulder. “Do something.”

“No. They can figure it out themselves. I've got too much shit to deal with as it is to worry about a fucking Gameboy charger.” And I'm not going to do anything. Until... Adler screams like someone has ripped his nut sac off and a loud thump follows the yelp.

Ember gives me a mocking half grin. “Now are you going to do something?”

“Jesus Christ.” I rush down the hall, Ember following closely.

In the living room, Adler’s on the floor cupping his balls and Braylee is sitting on the floor next to the power outlet plugging in her Gameboy. I’m not entirely sure, but I’m beginning to think she’s the tougher twin. She’s constantly beating him up. Do you notice the purple under Adler’s eye? Braylee punched him yesterday over the last cookie in the pantry. Literally punched her brother and stole the cookie out of his hand and ate it.

I kneel next to Adler. “What happened to you?”

All I get out of him between his rolling back and forth like he’s a pinball is that his “Balls are broken!”

Haisley steps over Adler and sits on my leg like I’m a seat for her, giving me the play-by-play of the last five minutes. “Braylee wanted the charger and Adler didn’t want her to have it. He jumped on the couch and was holding it over her head so she couldn’t get it so she punched him in the privates so he would drop it.”

Expecting an answer, I look to Braylee.

Naturally, she rolls her eyes. “What? That’s what he gets for teasing me.” And then she plops down on the couch like it’s no big deal. “He deserved it.”

Adler sits up with horror—and tears—in his eyes. “I did not! You can’t hit a man in the nut sac, you asshole!”

Did he just say that to her? You’re thinking it, aren’t you? And you’re probably wondering what I’m going to do about it too? Well, at first, I do nothing but grin because seeing a nine-

year-old boy scream “asshole” at his twin sister is somewhat amusing to me. To be fair, she deserved to be called an asshole. She fuckin’ punched his balls. I’d call her an asshole if I were him.

Just as I’m about to say something, Cat walks into the condo and eyes the boxes. “Are you moving?”

Everyone stares at her, but it’s Ember who reacts. “Yes, hon. He’s moving, remember? We went and looked at the house the other day?”

Cat blinks slowly before saying, “Oh, right.” By the expression on her face, she doesn’t remember, but she also doesn’t want to let on otherwise.

“Can you keep an eye on the kids?” Ember asks her. “I’m trying to get the last of Landon’s closet packed before the movers arrive at three.”

Cat smiles at the kids. “Yeah, I got this.” She notices Adler on the floor. “What’s wrong, buddy?”

I think he has a thing for Cat, or at least wants to act like a man in front of her because he jumps up like nothing happened and straightens his posture. “Nothing.” He attempts to go into the bathroom but as you can imagine, Marley’s still in there.

“Get out of the bathroom, Mar!” Adler yells, pounding on the door.

She shouts something back at him, but I don’t stick around to hear it. Ember’s dragging me back down the hall to deal with my closet.

“Do you think she’s like... masturbating or something? Do teenage girls do that?”

Ember stops suddenly right before we enter the bedroom and turns to glare at me. “That’s disgusting. Stop it.”

I laugh and follow her inside the room. “What? She’s a teenager. When I was thirteen, I used to jerk off in the attic. And the shower. Really anywhere I was alone.” I’m staring at the boxes lining my bedroom, but I can see from my peripheral that Ember’s expression has changed along with her breathing.

And if I had to guess, she’s imagining me jerking off. I kick the door shut behind me and step toward her. “Ah, you’re imagining me now, aren’t you?”

She shoves me back against a stack of boxes. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

A glisten of perspiration forms on her nose from stacking boxes. It’s also hot as fuck outside and the windows are open, so I imagine someone who isn’t used to sweating their balls off in this heat at three-hour long practices would think today is hot. Seeing her sweaty causes my cock to spring to life again because damn, I’d love to see her covered in sweat, my hands on her ass. Fuck yeah, I’d like to see that. God, I need to get laid soon.

Ember’s small hands curl into fists. She looks like she’s on the brink of punching me. Again. This is a daily occurrence. “Knock it off.”

Christ, look at her face. Determined set brow, thinned lips, those adorable freckles dusting her scrunched-up nose. I love pissing her off. It’s the most beautiful sight in the world.

I wink. “How about you get me off?”

Again, she doesn't like that either. “Will you act mature for one day?”

“Fuck, that's hot,” I groan, leaning in so my chest presses against hers. “Beg again.”

This time she growls and acts like she's going to kick me in the balls. Instinctively, I cover them. “If you don't stop, you're going to be rolling on the ground like Adler.”

“If you have sex with me, it'd actually help me focus so you should look at it as a helpful act of kindness.”

“Only you can take sex and turn it into an act of a Good Samaritan.”

Sensing her guard is down, I move closer until we find ourselves chest to chest. Underneath her tight tank top, I can see her nipples are pushing through her shirt. Fuck yeah, she's turned on and it only makes me want to bury every inch of my cock deep inside her pussy.

She stops me from coming closer with her hand on my stomach. “I've already told you, we can't. Landon, it'll only complicate us, and I don't want that. Do you?”

“Uh, yeah, I want *you*.” It's more than want. I want to own her. I want to rip her clothes off, spread her thighs and taste that cunt of hers. It's that bad. I know what you're thinking, or at least I can assume. You're thinking, Jesus, Landon, that's graphic. And I'd say, you have no idea how graphic I can get. You've been warned.

“That's not what I mean. Us. That would be more complicated.”

“I don’t see how having sex would complicate us,” I point out, because I’ve never understood her argument about complicating us. Friends can have sex. Friends can remain friends and still have sex, can’t they? Dipping my head forward, I catch her eyesight, my jaw muscles tightening as I pull her closer. The warmth of her body in my arms radiates through me. “We won’t know until we try.”

“You’re with Alessa....”

“No, I’m *not*.” My lips are inches from hers, begging to close the distance and finally kiss her. “I’m a free agent,” I whisper. You might be surprised to know that Ember and I, well, we’ve kissed before, but we were drunk at the time and honestly, I can’t tell you a damn thing about it other than she tasted like the strawberry margarita she’d been sucking down all night. I know it never went any further than the kiss because she passed out and I’m not an asshole. The next morning, she refused to talk about it with me and hasn’t since that day three years ago.

“Landon—”

She’s about to say something when Cat walks in. “Shit, sorry. Should I leave?”

Yes, get the fuck out!

Ember steps back, straightening her shirt out. “No. What’s up?”

“Just so I’m sure, because you know my brain is scrambled like an omelet, there are five kids, right?”

Reaching for a roll of tape beside her, Ember laughs, and I move away from her, back to my shoe collection, knowing

she's going to avoid me now.

"Yeah, there are five of them," Ember tells her.

Cat glances over her shoulder at the door, and then back to Ember. "Well I'm only counting four."

Packing a box with shoes, I grin and add, "That's because Marley's clicking her mouse in the bathroom."

A collective, "Landon!" rings through the room. Probably shouldn't have said that.

Ember smacks me on the back of the head. "I told you to shut up with that." Then she turns to Cat to reassure her she didn't lose one again. I say again because there was a small incident yesterday where she lost Adler for like an hour. She found him in the lobby with Gus talking about the Seahawks defensive line. Kid's obsessed with football. For good reason. "Marley's in the bathroom."

Cat doesn't say anything for a moment and then looks even more confused. "Yeah, okay, but that's why I'm confused. There are only three in the living room. I'm no genius, but even I can do the math and we're missing one."

Ember sighs and walks out of the room. I follow her to watch her ass. Not only to watch her ass, but where'd the other kid go? Probably in the lobby again.

Braylee's on the floor with her Gameboy. Adler's lying on the couch with ice on his balls telling Braylee that he will get revenge and he's pretty sure he could hide her body. Don't listen to him. He's talking nonsense. Believe me, I grew up with a sister who used to punch me to get what she wanted. Being punched in the sac causes you to hallucinate.

Haisley's sitting on the chair next to the window, coloring in a notebook, but there's no little one.

"Where's the baby?" Ember asks, looking at me.

"Where's Nalani?" I ask the other kids, my voice elevated to get their attention. It's no surprise that no one answers me. They don't even look up.

Ember walks over to Haisley and sits next to her. "Haisley, honey, where's your little sister?"

Haisley smiles. "I saw her climbing on the boxes." And then she goes back to her coloring.

Ember, Cat, and I look at the door where the boxes are and there's certainly evidence Nalani had been climbing on them at one point by the half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Ember points to the door. "It's open."

Panic floods through me. All three of us run into the hallway but she's not there. I check downstairs and Ember calls security to see if they've seen her. About six months after I moved in, there had been some issues with women following me up to my condo, so we had to install a camera and a security code to get to the penthouse level. Security searches through the last hour of recorded video only to find nothing. The last person to leave or enter my condo was Cat.

"She has to be in here somewhere," Ember tells me when I hang up my phone, looking around the boxes and inside some of them that hadn't been taped up yet.

Marley comes walking out of the bathroom, fully dressed now and a towel wrapped around her head with a large billow

of steam following her out. She takes in our expressions. “What’s going on?”

Still in panic mode, I level her a glare. “Is Nalani in there with you?”

“No.”

I can’t believe I haven’t had the kids a week and I’ve already lost one. Thoughts of Oma flying to Seattle to punch me in the nut sac flood my brain. I start to walk away and search the rest of the condo when I remember her taking an hour-long shower. “Why are you taking so many showers?”

Marley’s face immediately flushes. “Why do you care? It’s not like you pay for the water bill. Ember does everything for you.”

That’s an uncalled-for response, yet accurate. She storms past me and slams the door to my bedroom on me.

Ember elbows me in the stomach. “I thought I told you to leave her alone.”

“I think I’m allowed to know what’s going on in my own bathroom,” I grumble, glancing around the living room. Cat’s sitting on the chair next to Haisley coloring and it seems everyone has forgotten the baby is still missing somewhere in this condo.

That’s when we hear giggling from the kitchen. Ember and I walk over and try to listen carefully in an attempt to pinpoint where it’s coming from. We open drawers one by one and then start with the upper cabinets and she’s not there either.

I glance at the cabinet above the refrigerator and look over at Ember.

“There’s no way she climbed all the way up there.”

“The kid is like the Evel Knievel of toddlers. I wouldn’t put it past her.” Carefully, I reach up to open the cabinet door. I don’t think anyone would be surprised to see her jump out and yell, “Peeka oooh!”

I catch her, midjump before she hits the kitchen island, laughing. “Hey, now. I’m usually the one throwing not catching!” I hug her close and kiss the top of her head. She smells like peanut butter. “You scared the shit out of me.”

Nalani squirms in my arms when she notices Cat and begs to get down. “Down? Kitty? Down?”

Kitty? I’m guessing that means Cat, but I can’t be sure. Placing her on her feet, sure enough, she runs toward Cat. “Kitty!”

I don’t know how parents do this shit every single day for eighteen years. How do you not die of a heart attack at everything they do?

16. EMBER POCKET

Pocket – The area where the quarterback stands during a play while looking to throw the ball downfield and where his linemen are protecting him. If the offensive lineman doesn't properly block, then the pocket will collapse.

During the last few weeks of August every year, a few things happen in Seattle. The weather stays nice, smoke moves in from distant wildfires, the Seahawks start their preseason games and, more importantly, what I'm the most excited about, Starbucks brings back the Pumpkin Spice latte and all is right in the world again.

Landon, the one beside me with his knee bouncing and trying to stomach the scrambled eggs Haisley made him this morning, he might think otherwise. For one, he likes his coffee black, can't stand the smell of pumpkin, and it's game day, so naturally he's on edge.

Dipping my head forward, I catch his eyesight for a moment. With his Beats headphones on, he's barely listening to anything around him, attempting to get in the zone of game day. Usually I wouldn't be bothering him with this stuff, but today, I have to. "What time are you leaving for the field?"

Bobbing his head to the music playing, he doesn't look up from his eggs he's pushing around his plate like a child avoiding vegetables. Sliding the headphones off his right ear, he frowns, annoyed I'm talking to him. "What?"

"What time are you leaving for the field?"

"Around noon, I think."

"Good." I push my iPad in front of him to show him schools. "We need to get the kids registered for school. I'm thinking The Bush School is going to be the best bet because we can keep them all at the same school. Tuition isn't cheap, but I don't think that's going to be a problem. It's better to have them in a good school." I point to the screen. "They're rated number one in the state for private school and third for college prep." Let's pause for a moment, shall we? Out of everything I said, I'm more concerned with the tone of my voice. Immediately, I want to take back the possession of my words when I refer to them as "the kids" and "we" because my reference is possessive and for some reason, the way Landon raises an eyebrow at me, I'm beginning to think he caught onto it as well.

"I'm fine with that. Set it up for me."

Lifting my coffee to my lips, I nod, feeling a bit of relief we've gotten the house and school thing handled. Now we just need to get Adler enrolled in football—because the kid is freaking out over not playing—and Haisley in gymnastics. The other kids don't seem too interested in sports yet, or any desire to get settled. Braylee refuses to unpack her room and Marley, she rarely looks up from her phone and the sketch pad in her

hand. Then there's Nalani. She spends her days going up and down the stairs. Over. And. Over. Again. All. Day. Long.

I can't help but think she's going to have great legs as she gets older.

For a week now I've been staying at Landon's house. Not in the house, but the guest house. Cat and I finally moved and while I admit, it's so much better than the condo, it's still weird for me that I'm living on Landon's property. I guess it wasn't as weird when I was living in the condo he paid for because I was working for him and he paid the rent. So why is it different now?

I haven't figured that part out yet and it's driving me fucking crazy trying to pinpoint the difference. I will say that the guest house is amazing. Fourteen hundred square feet, three bedrooms (already set up my art studio in one), two bathrooms (including a large Jacuzzi tub). It beats sleeping on the couch. And having a place to set up my art, as opposed to a closet, is exactly what I need to finish my showcase for the fall expo, something I've been putting off for years. This year I'm doing it, though. And now that I have the space to do it, no more excuses. #goals #dedicatedAF

Beside me, Landon removes his headphones and pushes his plate aside, a good portion of the eggs remaining on the plate. "I can't eat that anymore. It tastes like she dumped the entire bottle of salt on them."

Reaching for the fork, I take a bite. "It can't be that bad." And I immediately regret those words. They are *that* bad. And crunchy.

With a satisfied grin, Landon smiles. "You were saying?"

Reaching for my pumpkin spice, I gulp back two drinks. “Holy shit. I feel like I just swallowed a shot of salt mixed with eggshells.”

Leaning his elbows on the table, Landon winks. “I have something you can swallow.”

I fight the urge to punch him in the face in front of children. “You’re awful.”

Without looking, he reaches for his coffee, but grabs mine instead. I don’t stop him. Paybacks are a bitch, fucker. “I’m horny. There’s a difference,” he says with a cocky edge. And then he takes a drink and spits it back out all over the table. “That’s awful.” The back of his hand sweeps over his mouth. “How can you drink that bullshit? It’s like Thanksgiving dessert vomited in a cup.”



“We get to go to the game?” Adler asks, barely able to sit still as we head to the stadium. Landon had to be at the field earlier this afternoon but me, Cat, and the kids decided to leave later.

I flip my blinker on, turning left onto 6th Ave toward the stadium. “Yep.”

“Where are our seats?” he asks. Our stares meet in the rearview mirror, excitement in his eyes and sun freckles dusting his nose. Out of all the kids, Adler looks like Landon the most. Same eyes and smile, the same intoxicating presence

they hold, and when they smile, you can't help but do the same.

“We actually have a suite for this game.” Waving to the parking attendant and flashing our pass, I enter the private parking garage. “We’re gonna head down to the field for the warmups and you can see Landon. We’ll head up to the suite after that.”

Cat glances up from her phone. “I’ve been to a game before, right?”

I smile. “Yes, babe, you have.”

Her eyes drop to her hands, fidgeting with her lanyard around her neck. “I thought so.”

Wanting to reassure her, I reach for her hand. “You’re fine. Don’t worry about it.”

The shitty part is, she will worry about it. She always does. It’s why she broke up with her boyfriend after the accident and hasn’t had one since then. She thinks she’s a burden, but she’s not.

I grab her hand. “Short-term memory is overrated, hon.”

She gives me that cute Kitty Cat look I love the most. The one where her eyes light up with a smile. “Yeah. You’re right.”

I’m not sure she believes me.

After parking the Escalade, which is crazy in a parking garage—the bitch fills up the entire parking spot—Cat and I gather up the clan to head into the stadium. All five of them stare at the building with wide eyes, taking in the sights and sounds of a Thursday night game.

“This place is huge!” Braylee notes, pulling her Seahawks’ hoodie on and adjusting the sleeves by rolling them up.

“How big is it?” Adler asks, flipping his hat around backward to look up at it. “How many people can fit in here?”

“Seventy-two thousand,” Braylee tells him, only to have him roll his eyes. Braylee loves to read and she’s like a real-life encyclopedia or one of those Magic 8-Balls you shake for an answer.

My first football game was here at CenturyLink field four years ago, two days after I met Landon. It was a crisp fall Sunday afternoon with the smells of popcorn, Beecher’s cheese and Rain Shadow meats, the go-tos at the stadium. Remembering it like it was yesterday, I sat next to Cat and Landon’s sister who I had no idea would be gone a few weeks later. But that day, that Sunday, I watched a man who was very quickly becoming my best friend, play a 21-12 win over the Minnesota Vikings. Landon threw for 233 yards and two touchdowns and to this day, I still get that same buzzing sensation in my veins when I see him step onto the field in an innately artful display of athleticism. The venue, CenturyLink Field tucked away south of downtown, has everything to do with the atmosphere of a game day.

Whether it be a preseason game or a regular season game in week eight, the energy is the same. Coming off a win last week in Kansas City against the Chiefs, the crowd has a certain feel to it. I can’t explain it either; it’s just amped. Every franchise in the league goes through low points and for years the Seahawks hadn’t done much of anything during the season, until Landon and Quinn Harvey were drafted. I

honestly believe they're the two holding the team together. Of course, they are notable players, but those two, when they find one another on the field, can drive an entire game.

With a tight hold on Nalani, who I can tell is dying to run away and climb something, we make our way inside the stadium. Landon's on the field now warming up, the sidelines swarming with media, celebrities, players, coaches. You name it and they're down there. The nice thing about it is families are permitted on the field during the pregame activities.

Cat holds Haisley, and I keep my hands on Nalani, but it's not Landon I notice first. It's Alessa. That's not unheard of because up until now, you probably didn't know she's the head coach's daughter, did you? Surprise! In part, I like to think that's the only reason Landon's been dating her on and off for the last four years, but then again, it might have something to do with her body. While I look like my ass swallowed watermelons, Alessa is tall, stick thin and has perky tits. Just imagine a Victoria's Secret model with bleach-blonde hair and freakishly long legs. I'm not even joking. Check 'em out. She's the one to the left of Landon, checking herself out in her fucking cell phone. They're long, aren't they? All I picture is them wrapped around Landon's waist and it makes me angry. When you're five foot two—I like to lie and say I'm five foot three—everyone with long legs is on my automatic hate radar.

“She's pretty!” Haisley gleams, pointing her finger at Alessa.

“She looks like a hooker,” Braylee says.

“Who?” Adler practically knocks Haisley over while trying to get a look at who they are talking about. “I wanna

see! Oh look, cheerleaders!”

He’s *definitely* Landon’s nephew.

I push his shoulder lightly. “Dude, help your sister up.”

He rolls his eyes but reaches his hand out to her. “Get up.”

Not the nicest of kids, but at least he did what he was told.

Talking to the offensive line coach, Landon’s on the sidelines, a football in his hand and dressed in his uniform. Let me tell you something. I don’t care how many football players you’ve seen in compression pants, you’ve never seen *Landon Slade* in them. It’s like seeing Chris Hemsworth as Thor, and we all know he’s the only reason you go see any of the Marvel movies. Actually, I love comic books so that’s a lie on my part, but whatever, you get what I’m saying, right? Ninety percent of the women at any movie involving Thor are there to watch Chris Hemsworth. It’s a fact.

And 100 percent of the female Seahawks fans here come to watch Landon Slade do what he does—throw the football and look damn good doing so.

While I try not to stare in a way that Landon can construe into thinking I want to have sex with him—which I do, but he doesn’t need to know that—I motion toward him and look down at the kids, setting Nalani down on the ground. “Why don’t you guys go say hi to your uncle and wish him good luck?”

All the kids—aside from Marley—rush to Landon. Even Nalani, but she gets distracted when she sees there are benches. She stops, stares at them for a moment, then climbs

up on one and takes a seat next to a three-hundred-pound center named Kumonde.

“Hi,” she says, smiling at him.

Kumonde grins back, a mouthful of gold-plated teeth and dreads that match Cat’s. “Hey, girly. You must be Nalani.”

She points at his teeth. “Ah, cute!”

Kumonde laughs loudly. “I ain’t cute, kid.”

Looking over my shoulder, I notice Marley stays where she’s at, her earbuds in and tucked away in the corner out of sight of everyone. I make a mental note to spend some time with her alone tomorrow to see if I can pry her shell of “I hate everyone” away. I’ve been where she’s at, the confusion and not knowing where you fit into the world when your entire family is gone.

With a deep breath, I turn back to Nalani who’s gotten down and heading toward Landon like she’s spotted Santa. He might as well be Santa to her. After all, guess who took the kid to Build-A-Bear the other day and closed the entire store for her and Haisley to pick whatever they wanted. That guy. He’s spoiling these kids rotten, but it’s actually a nice change. And let’s be completely honest. It’s fucking sexy to watch. Witnessing a man who lacks maturity become something more, someone who becomes a hero and a protector to five kids he hadn’t really met until they were put into his custody, well, watching that change is enough to make your ovaries explode and your uterus beg for him to plant his seed. #futurebabydaddy is a hashtag I’m thinking of handing him, or maybe I already have and I’m keeping it on the down low for the time being.

But I have to squash those thoughts because regardless of how I feel about Landon now, there's no way he could ever love someone like me. Not in a romantic way. I'm not like Alessa, or any other woman he's been with. I'm plain, a tad overweight, covered in ink and a night owl. I don't like makeup as it suffocates my skin, while formal dresses make me claustrophobic.

Alessa, she's slutty, lives off daddy's money and is what I like to refer to as #thebitch. I know, not very creative but also... #icequeen. Seemed fitting. I have many hashtags for her.

Shit, she's approaching me now. Look at the way she walks. It's like she's on a runway. "Wow, looks like you have your hands full being a nanny."

That's code for "You're failing miserably at life." And never, not once, has she ever acknowledged that while I might be Landon's assistant, he's my best friend, a title she will never hold and desperately wants to. That lands my fat ass on her automatic hate radar. She wants me to remain what I am, an employee of his while she fucks him. It kills her to know I'm closer to him than she will ever be.

Trying to cover the nervousness she evokes within me, I blurt, "You know this is a football game, not the runway." I eye her low-cut top, skin-tight black jeans, and heels. It's not exactly what most would wear. Hell, who am I to talk fashion though? I'm wearing a Seahawks hoodie and jeans, and I'm almost positive there's remnants of Nalani's peanut butter and jelly sandwich in my hair.

She bats her fake eyelashes at me. “What are you talking about, help?”

Yeah, cute, huh? She refers to me as the help, which I am, but whatever.

“I’m talking about the way you’re dressed,” I point out. Haisley tugs on my hand. “Let’s go see Uncle Landon.”

I don’t even say goodbye before I follow Haisley over to Landon.

“You know you’re more than that to him,” Cat whispers beside me, and I only nod. She sighs and pulls my face around so I’m looking at her. “I might not remember much, but without a doubt, I remember how much Landon cares about you and what you mean to him. You do know that, don’t you?”

I pull my face away, nodding. “When did this all get so fucking complicated?”

“When you fell in love with him.”

She has a point.

17. LANDON SHOVEL PASS

Shovel Pass – A passing motion where the quarterback “pushes” the ball rather than over- or underhand throws it.

“What was that about?” I ask, nodding to Alessa who’s now flirting with Quinn. It’s no surprise, and no, I don’t hold it against Quinn.

“Same thing as always. To make me feel like a crazy person.”

I hip-check Ember, winking as she passes Nalani off to me. “You’re the craziest person I know.”

Her eyes, innocent and wild, remind me of the night I met her in that tattoo shop. “Doubt that. You’re a football player. You’re all fucking nuts.”

I watch her ass as she walks away. Don’t look at me like that.

“LC, can I talk to you for a minute?” Kerry asks, pulling me aside.

If you’ve never been to CenturyLink Field, it’s something to see. Skip Pike Place and go straight to where the heart of

Seattle is. The football stadium. For me that is. I couldn't care less about anything else in the city.

On any given game day, there are a variety of people allowed on the sidelines during the game. Pregame is different. It's not unheard of for family to come down. Like Ember and the kids who are currently enjoying the sideline festivities. I have Nalani in my arms, talking to our offensive line coach. He's going over plays, leaving little room for questions or confusion and I appreciate it. I never have to guess, and he trusts me on the field. There's this saying that coaches make decisions, players make the plays. It's the truth.

Shifting Nalani to my other arm, she takes the football from my hand. "Ball?"

"Football," I tell her, smiling.

"I throw?"

I nod. "Go ahead. Throw it to Kerry."

A father himself, Kerry winks at Nalani. "Come on, kid, hit me." And then he claps his hands together like he's waiting.

Nalani pulls the ball back and turns her head into my shoulder, pointing her finger at him and then shaking it back and forth. "No hit."

Behind me, someone touches my hips, her hands on my waist. I know the touch.

My theory is confirmed when I turn to see who it is and immediately want to shove the football in her face. Harsh much? Yeah, but it's for a good reason. Honestly, my

relationship with Alessa has been over for a while, even before our argument.

“Are you coming over tonight?” Alessa skims her fingers along my chest as she walks by. You’ve seen Paris Hilton, right? Okay, now imagine her, leggy, blonde, fake... and you’ve gotten Alessa. She was fun for a while, until she wasn’t, and I can’t even pinpoint when the shift happened, just that it did. And I realized compared to Ember, there’s really no comparison.

Notice how stiff my posture is? I don’t want her near the kids. Not after the things she said to me. What about the way Nalani looks at Alessa like she has two heads, but then she sees her earrings and tries to grab them. “Aww, pretty!”

Well, that’s different than aw cute.

Alessa pulls away from Nalani. “Who is she?”

“My brother’s kids. He died, remember?”

Alessa frowns, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, I remember, but why do you have them?”

“They’re mine now.”

There’s absolutely no reaction to my statement from her. Like it doesn’t fucking matter. And it probably doesn’t to her. Why would it?

“Are you coming over after the game?”

“No.” I keep my focus over her shoulder, on the one who’s watching our interaction with an expression I can’t quite make out. The one whose heart matters in all this.

Like I've pissed her off, Alessa's lips press into a thin line of disappointment. "And why not?" And then she smiles, those big white teeth gleaming under the lights. They look like fucking bleached Chiclets crammed in her gums.

My pessimistic nature gets the best of me and I hold Nalani in my arms a little tighter, glowering at Alessa. "Because I can't."

"Why?"

Believe it or not, or actually, you probably will believe me just off the little information I've given you about Alessa, but she doesn't take no for an answer. Neither does her father, and that's why he's the head coach.

Commotion on the field causes Nalani to squirm in my arms. "Down? I get down? Peas?"

How any man resists the word *peas* is beyond me because I can't. I set her down and she wanders onto the field, touching the white lines. Keeping a close eye on her, I don't look over at Alessa who's still staring at me, wanting an answer. One I'm not going to give her any time soon. I shouldn't have to explain myself if she's sleeping with Justice.

Sorry, was that abrupt? Yeah, it was for me too, but whatever. She can fuck whoever she wants. It's not like we were exclusive. I certainly wasn't, either.

"Are you seriously saying no to me?"

I nod. "Yep."

Quinn approaches us, his arm coming around my shoulders. "Hey, girl, I hear a spot opened up on your roster?"

“Oh, fuck off,” she snaps, rolling her eyes at him.

“Whoa, pump the hate breaks.” He holds up his hands and then winks at her, suggestively eyeing her body. I admit, it’s a good one, if you like stick thin and tan. “I’m just looking for some yardage.”

I can’t help but laugh and that only pisses her off more. “You guys are so immature.”

She leans into me, whispering in my ear, “You’re going to regret breaking it off with me.”

I may not be the most mature person in the world, and I prove it when I whisper back, “Go fuck yourself, ya dumb cunt.”

Harsh? Yep. But I warned you. I can be a real fucker when I want to be.

With a wicked glare, one I’ve only seen from her twice, she turns on her heel and walks away.

Quinn watches her and bites his fist, his other hand clasp my shoulder. “I wasn’t kidding.” Then he pauses, looking kind of confused. “I’m looking to get my dick wet.”

He’s not bullshitting, either. I side-eye him. “Don’t you have enough problems with a baby mama and two girlfriends?”

“Eh.” He drops his hand. “What’s one more?”

You’re probably thinking, fuck, do all players talk like this on the sidelines? Aren’t they discussing the game?

And my answer to that would be yes. We all talk like that on the sidelines. We’re nasty motherfuckers who talk about

pussy, football, pussy, music, cars... and well, pussy. Sometimes football.

Wary of her intentions, I watch Alessa walk away, making sure she doesn't go near Ember. When she's out of sight, and I know she hasn't stopped beside Ember on the sidelines, I look away, but quickly glance back when I see a wide pair of blue eyes staring back at me.

I hate it when Ember looks at me like that. It's like a knife stabbing me in my chest. Breathing heavily, I turn back to where Nalani is. Ember walks over to her and gathers the kids up. Marley doesn't even acknowledge me. Haisley kisses my cheek and tells me good luck. I get high-fives from Adler and Braylee, and Nalani, she kicks me in the shin, for what reason I don't know, but I can only assume it's because I took her football from her.

With one last glance at Ember, I watch as she ushers the kids to the suite with Cat, and yeah, I take another look at her ass. Why not?

18. LANDON

QUARTERBACK SNEAK

Quarterback sneak – Akin to the “quarterback keeper,” it’s when the quarterback tries to gain short yardage by keeping the ball and running forward. Usually used when the offense only needs less than one yard.

The pain today is your strength tomorrow. That’s what my high school football coach once told me. I’ve played by that motto my entire football career.

After warmups, we head to the locker room and then back out on the field through the tunnel. Seems ridiculous that we’re out on the field for warmup and then leave all because we have to make our grand entrance but that’s what the fans want when they come to a game. Fireworks go off, music blares, smoke fills the air... it’s amazing and everything I love about playing on our home field. We haven’t scored, we haven’t even played a single down, but we’re celebrating because our team, our fans, they’re the best out there.

Did you know Seattle fans are the loudest in the league? They are. Okay, the Chiefs hold the record now, but I still believe we have the best fans.

Beside me on the sidelines, Kumonde winks at me. “Ready, baby?”

I smile at him just before kick-off. “Always.”

As a quarterback, I need perfect chemistry with the center. Kumonde and I practice together all day—the snap, the count, all the basics and the chemistry have to be there. It’s like a real relationship, you know? It’s like dating. Sure, the girl might be hot as fuck, but if that spark isn’t there, if the energy just isn’t right, it doesn’t matter how much time you spend together, shit isn’t going to work out for you. You think I’m talking about Alessa, don’t you? Nope. Well, maybe a little. My point is, you can’t manufacture the connection needed with someone no matter how hard you try, and if you do, it’s never going to be what you want it to be. That’s why I’ve never understood mail-order brides, but that’s beside the point. I’m talking about football now and the relationship between a QB and his center. It’s a well-practiced machine and when shit gets real, and it will, when everything comes down to that final drive and you gotta trust the guy next to you, the last thing you need is the center and QB not having chemistry. If he misses the count, if I miss the snap, it’s over. You have to have the ability to just kind of flow—to work both inside and outside the lines.

I know what I can do on the field. I know where plays can happen and where they can’t. I know the strong guys, and I know the ones who tend to get caught up. Quinn’s strong; he rarely gets caught up and pays attention. I can trust that if I throw to him, he’s gonna be there. Same with Jalen. I know where both of them are at all times and, yeah, I favor them on the field because of that. There’s a reason why they lead the league in touchdowns.

The game starts with little effort and though it’s a preseason game and it’s generally a time for the backups to get in some

playing time, I'm having an amazing game throwing for over 366 yards so far. My passing is spotless even though the guys I favor on the field are covered a lot. In the first and second quarters, I've run the ball three times already.

Halfway through the second quarter, I call the play, looking left, then right, seeing the boys poised and ready. The ball snaps, I take two steps back, then another. I see Quinn midfield but then I'm jarred from the left, blindsided, feeling the reverberation through my skull. Right before my head snaps back, I see Justice on the ground when he should have been blocking for me. My head snaps back, my helmet goes flying and then the next thing I remember about twenty of my teammates and coaches are around me.

If I could have kicked Justice's ass right then, I would.

That one knocked me pretty good. I can't even stand up without seeing stars.

They don't let me off the field without strapping me to a backboard.

Blinking, I try to focus. It does nothing and I still can't see. Panic rushes through me. I can't be out for the season. I cannot be out. I need this season to show my team they didn't make a mistake by giving me the biggest contract in the league.

Fearing they've lost their star quarterback, coaches swarm around me after that as does our team physician. I don't think he knows what the fuck he's doing half the time. He's dramatic and stupid if you ask me. I'm fine. But I'm also bleeding from a cut above my eye. I think it's making me a little loopy. Everyone's talking around me, but I can't understand any of it.

Once they get me to the locker room on that fucking backboard that I find completely unnecessary, our team doctor is in my face asking me all kinds of questions, but I have no answers. I can't even see him let alone answer him. Everything's blurry.

Coach Bryant pats my shoulder. "Let's get you checked out, LC." He smiles when I squint at him. "Just precautionary." I'd like to tell you I don't see concern on his face, but again, he's a bleary vision for me.

Taking me to the hospital? Immediately my thoughts are on the kids and Ember. I can't imagine what they just witnessed or even if they did. Their first game here and I go and do this? They've gotta be scared.

They make me take a ride to the hospital and it's uneventful, for me. For others it's complete mayhem. There's an entire medical team dedicated to me and waiting the moment we enter the ER. People are in my face asking me questions I probably didn't know the answers to before the game and I'm swarmed with doctors, my agent, Harper's there, basically everyone I know but Ember. About four nurses surround me with our team manager, all making sure I'm all right. They do a CT scan, MRI to check for swelling and soft tissue damage and a complete neurological exam. It's hours before they tell me there's no immediate indication of any trauma, but a swelling might take days to develop. At the very least, I've got a concussion.

They give me some medication, tell me I'm going to be monitored for a while, and when it kicks in, the pain in my chest eases and I'm feeling good.

Flirty. Pain medication always makes me a ladies' man. I laugh suddenly, about the time my body starts feeling warm

from the medicine they gave me and nudge the team physician, Ollie, who came with me; he's sitting next to me on his phone. He rolls his eyes when I point to the nurse because he knows I'm about to say something stupid.

"Hey, baby," I say to her, winking with the eye they're not stitching up. The nurse giggles as she continues her cursory exam. "I got something else you could examine."

Ollie shakes his head when she leaves. I apparently offered to show her my cock, only I don't remember that. Evidently, I did hit my head pretty damn good cause I'm saying stuff I wouldn't usually say. Or maybe I would?

They release me around midnight and into the custody of Ember who's looking like she wants to murder me. And get this... she slaps the concussed. "You scared the shit out of me!"

It turns me the fuck on. I love it when she's rough. Motioning the doctor forward, I smile at him. "Tell me something, Doc. Look at her." I nod to Ember. "Do you think she wants me?"

The doctor clears his throat and bends down toward me, nervously. "I uh... that's not exactly..." His voice trails off with confusion.

I look up at him, trying to focus and failing miserably. "No, no. Just look at her. Don't stare. She's off limits, but is she into me? Medically speaking? Check her heart rate."

Ember kicks my foot. "Knock it off, Landon. Let's go."

The doctor laughs, straightening his posture. "I wouldn't know. I'm a neurologist."

“You’re no help to me.” I groan and motion to Ember. “Wheel me away, woman.”

The doctor smiles at Ember and hands her what looks to be a prescription. “He might be out of it for a while.”

She takes the prescription from him. “Uh-huh.”

And just as she’s wheeling me away, the doctor says quite possibly the worst thing ever known to man. “No sex.”

Told you. Awful, isn’t it? It’s fucking horrifying. “Stop the car. What did you say?” And yes, I’m fully aware I’m not in a car. I might be concussed, but I know what the fuck *no sex* means. I glare at the man trying to ruin my life. “You can’t be serious.”

He has the nerve to smile. Motherfucker. If I could stand, I’d knock him out. “Sex is unadvised in your condition.”

“Condition?” I snort. “You mean horny as fuck?”

I’m smacked. Again. “Landon!”

“In *that* state....” The doctor gestures to my cock. No lie. Straight up flicks his wrist to the poor neglected bastard. Most attention it’s seen in days.

“You mean fucking?” I finish for him, scowling.

He nods. “In a sexual state, when you’re breathing heavily, you hyperventilate a little, decreasing oxygen content in your blood. If you stop and take a deep breath, as your heart rate is elevated, rapid reperfusion of the brain occurs, which causes pounding and dizziness. This would render you unable to stand up. You’d pass out if you tried.”

I’m not hearing any of it and point to my cock—in the middle of a hospital waiting room. “I can’t make any promises.

He likes pink tacos.”

The concussed is smacked once again and Ember jerks the wheelchair forward. She pats the doctor, whose face is red, on the shoulder. “I’ll make sure there’s no sex.”

Annoyed, I look around the waiting room. “Let’s go. I want out of this cock-blocking hell hole.” I’ve done plenty of research. When I was in high school, I did a paper on the disadvantages of abstaining from sex for a sex education project in health class. The abstaining from it part. And let me tell you something, the disadvantages are awful. It lowers your sex drive. Increases stress. Self-esteem is out the fucking window... and it’s scientifically proven you’re less intelligent. Serious as a heart attack, which by the way, is what I’ll be having if I have to abstain from having sex. And let me just add one more horrifying fact for you. It leads to erectile dysfunction. I’m just about to point out all my research to this so-called doctor when Ember begins to wheel me away. Probably for the better. I don’t think my pink taco comment went over very well with the nursing staff. They’re all give me the stink eye. Pfft. Like I’d want their pink tacos anyway.

I tilt my head back and look up at Ember. “What happened to the kids?” And then I think, what if I don’t have five little people depending on me at home? Had I dreamed up Grant dying? I turn my head to look up at Ember who’s pushing me through the lobby, media and reporters trying like hell to get to me but barricaded by security to give us room. “Wait... was that all a dream?”

My vision is still blurry and I’m basically looking up her nose. What’s the look she’s giving me? Does she look amused or annoyed? Or still murderous?

“They’re with Cat at the house.” She reaches for my hand to help me out of the wheelchair when we get to the car. “Now am I gonna have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you home?”

I stand, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and then sagging my body into her. “I love you, you know that, right?” I ask, slurring my words. “I’m going to marry you someday and knock you up and you’re going to love it.”

“It won’t be tonight.” She pulls away, distancing herself from me while making me sit back down in the wheelchair while she opens the car door. And I think—I can’t be sure—but she rolls her eyes, again. “You’re high on pain pills.”

There’s certainly some truth to that. When we’re in the SUV, I reach for her hand again, my fingers tightening around hers and fighting the urge to place her hand between my legs. “Are you mad at me?”

“Should I be?”

I tip my head, running my other hand through my hair. “I don’t think so, but by the look you’re giving me, I did something wrong, didn’t I? Was it the pink taco comment?”

Drawing a deep breath, she seems to fight back emotion. “I hate seeing you get injured. It’s a reminder that you could die doing this and then what? What happens to those kids then?”

My jaw tightens. For a moment, I don’t say anything because until now, the consequences hadn’t outweighed the invincibility I feel on the field. Until five complications came into my life and brought me to my knees. Then I swallow and blow out a long breath of air. “Noted.”

Ember starts the car, but it's from the shaking of her hands that I realize what she saw on the field, and what I went through are entirely different perspectives. Or what the kids probably witnessed. Shit, that probably scared the shit out of them having just lost their parents. I hadn't even thought about that.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, in the darkness of the car. We're parked under a street lamp, the golden yellow lighting up the side of her face, and I see the tears. Ember never cries. I wasn't even sure she was capable of them, until now. "I wasn't thinking. Please don't be mad at me."

Dropping her hands from the steering wheel, she turns to face me. "I've never been scared, until tonight. Until these kids came into your life. They've lost enough in their lives, Landon. They can't lose you too."

The selfish part of me is angry that this kind of responsibility was put on me at a time in my life where I didn't need it. Where my career was supposed to come first, not kids and a family. But as I'm finding out, life doesn't work that way. These kids need me, and I like to think Ember does, too.

"I can't control that, Em. It's my job."

"I know that, and I'm not asking you to quit. I just want you to be more aware of them and what your presence in their lives means."

Our stares lock and though I'm still a little out of it, I'm aware enough to know the expression on her face. My eyes focus on her lips once again, wanting to feel them against mine. It's been a while since the last time I kissed her, since Hawaii, and the magnetic energy screaming between us is enough to make me lightheaded, if I weren't already.

Leaning in, I pull her face to mine and press my lips to hers and whisper, "I'm sorry."

If she doesn't want it, I can simply blame it on the kiss.

It doesn't go past the kiss, even though we both seem willing. The desire and temptation are there but, then again, there's hesitation... from both of us. I don't know what it is, but it's there. There's an imaginary line surrounding us and we both know what happens if either of us crosses over.

HALFTIME



18. LANDON

QUARTERBACK SNEAK

Safety Valve – A running back or receiver that the quarterback will look to pass to if all other receivers are covered. Usually, the safety valve will not be too far away from the quarterback.

Passing distance will be minimal, but he avoids the sack.

We're both silent, neither one of us daring to say a word. I count her breaths and the loud thudding of my head. Sure, I have painkillers in me, but I feel so alive inside I can't explain it. It's like feeling tired and then finally going for a run on a cool, crisp fall morning and though your lungs are on fire and burning, you're alive inside and teeming with an energy you can't explain.

"Are you giving me the silent treatment now?" I dare to ask, unable to withhold the questions rattling around in my head.

"No."

And that's all she says. Are you confused? Are you wondering what the fuck is going on now?

Welcome to my world. But in case you missed it, Ember kissed me. Or, wait, did I kiss her? Let's rewind for a moment. Actually, just pause on the important details like her saying, "*I just want you to be more aware of them and what your presence*

in their lives means.” And hypothetically speaking, she said their lives, but what she really meant was our lives, didn’t she?

Look at her face now as we’re driving to the house in complete silence. Never mind the fact that the way the passing streetlamps reflect off her black hair makes me want to fist it in my hands and yank her lips back to mine. Tell me what she’s thinking because, at this point, I’m dying to know. Unfortunately, as I’ve found out, the more you feel, the less you say.

A phone vibrates in the center console cup holder. Ember glances down at it and then reaches for it and tosses it in my lap. “Answer it. She’s been calling nonstop.”

Ember usually has my phone on game nights. There’s no reason to have it with me, because of that one Tweet that one night I shouldn’t have sent to that one quarterback on that one team... and since that one night, Ember takes my phone until I have time to calm down after games.

With a sigh, I drag my eyes away from Ember’s and to the phone lighting up the darkness in the SUV. My heart thuds louder, anticipation gnawing at me.

After that kiss with Ember, I know what I need to do. I can’t be messing around with Alessa anymore. And even though I haven’t been with her in over a month, it’s time to make it official.

Sliding my finger across the screen, I answer the call but then press the speaker button. Fearing Ember’s reaction to this, a heavy weight presses in my stomach.

“Hey,” I say casually, keeping my eyes on Ember’s face. She does that thing like she can’t figure out what I’m doing, so

she keeps shifting her eyes back and forth from me to the road.

“Are you okay?” Alessa asks, like she’s relieved. Ha. The only relief she probably has is hoping I’m going to come over later.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I’m playing dumb, but I’m barely listening to anything she’s saying. I can’t when my focus is on Ember.

“Um, you were carted off the field, and they said they took you to Virginia Mason.”

I don’t know why, but I chuckle, the tone of it is anxious and somewhat sarcastic. “Where were you if you were so concerned?”

“I knew it wasn’t serious or your assistant would have called me.”

“Ember.”

“What?”

“Her name is Ember.” The second my eyes lock with Ember’s in the darkness, I know she’s everything I can ever want and need. Sappy as shit, yeah, but it’s the goddamn truth.

“Whatever. You know how I feel about hospitals and sick people.”

“You’re right. I didn’t need you there.”

I think for a second. Then decide to take the plunge. If I make a fool of myself, I’ll blame it on the concussion. I could milk that one for days. “I don’t know what to say to you,” I begin, trying to ease into it. Truthfully, I’ve never actually done this before. I made Revel break up with my high school girlfriend for me because he fucked her so yeah, he could tell

her we weren't together anymore. Long story, and no, I don't want to talk about it and no, I don't hold any grudges against Revel. I didn't like that chick all that much anyway. Back to the moment. Ember has always dealt with all the women I break up with. "Other than we can't see each other anymore."

Now, take a brief moment and pause here. Are you watching Ember's face? Did you forget she's in the car and I have Alessa on speaker phone? I didn't. Like I said, it's on purpose. She's still here—and with my words—with the implication I've presented, her head jerks up, eyes darting over my face. I'd give anything to know what she's thinking.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Alessa asks, and I can't help but notice there's a certain vulnerability to her words I wasn't expecting.

Regardless, I keep my eyes on Ember, who has turned away from me, her stare on the road. I notice her breathing though, and the way her chest is rising and falling rapidly. This changes our relationship, and she knows it.

Turning my attention back to the phone, I hold it up in the air like I'm putting our shit out there for the world to hear. "Do you feel like anything about our relationship works?"

"Huh?" Alessa asks, her voice tense. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Our lives are going in completely different directions." It's not a lie. They've been going in different directions for a while. She's always off doing shoots and whatever else models do, and I'm either training, playing or thinking football. I fully admit being one-tracked when it comes to football. You've heard of players eating and breathing football, right? That's me. And

maybe that's why Ember fears a relationship with me, and this one on the phone is ending. How can I give myself to someone when my mind is constantly on football? I'm not sure I have the answer yet.

Alessa breathes out heavily. "Are you talking about me not wanting kids? Because that was pushed in my face without a choice. You can't blame me for being upset about it."

"I gotta be honest," I admit, not willing to go into detail that the kids were pushed upon me too. I didn't have a choice in any of this either. "That's not all of it." I pause, and my eyes drift to the woman next to me, the one sharing the same space as me. "Ember does have something to do with it."

Ember's eyes lock on mine, so engrossed in the moment she can't look away. She swallows, hard, her brows dipping in confusion. She has to know how I feel. I love this woman, and how she can't see that, I don't know.

Alessa gives me a sigh, again, and I know where this is heading. It's the direction of, "I knew Ember would be the reason behind us breaking up." But I refuse to engage on that level. I've felt this way about Alessa and me for a while. And I think, deep down, underneath all her superficial bullshit, she has too.

"What is it then?"

"I care about you. You know I do." That's not a lie. I do care about her despite everything else that's happened. "But this isn't working. I'm not in love with you, and you don't want kids. Like it or not, they're in my life, and they're not going anywhere. I don't want them to." Are you surprised I said that?

Don't be. Those little boogers grew on me, and now I can't imagine my life without them.

"Well, so, what do you want to do?" she asks. "Are you saying you don't want to see me anymore?"

"Yeah, I am."

And then the anger, the embarrassment hits her. "Oh my God, Landon. Are you seriously breaking up with me over the phone?"

I fight the urge to laugh. "Yep."

As you can guess, Alessa hangs up on me. I doubt this is the last time I hear from her, but I'm not concerned with that. I'm more interested in the way Ember's looking at me.

"Why did you do that?" she asks, her voice small and wavering.

Words knot in my throat, and it takes me a moment to untangle them and what I need to say to her versus what I want to say. "Do what?"

"Break up with her in front of me."

"Why do *you* think I did that?"

She won't look at me as she whispers, "Because you wanted me to hear it." Her eyes move to mine, and she adds, "It doesn't change anything."

A smile tugs at my lips as we pull through the gate of my property. The lights of the house in the distance dance over the dashboard. "I think it changes everything."



The kids are waiting up for me when I enter the house, all of them wanting to know if I'm okay. Cat's asleep on the couch. I turn to Ember, smiling as I pick up Nalani from where she's climbing up my leg. "Looks like someone forgot she's watching the kids," I tease.

"I can handle watching them," Marley notes from the couch beside Cat, her sketchbook in hand.

I nod and smile, but I don't say anything. The action of nodding reminds me of how badly my head hurts. I cringe at the onset of pain. It drags through my neck to my shoulders, tensing my muscles.

Ember notices. "I'll get them to bed. Why don't you head upstairs?"

I'm just about to tell her I can handle it, knowing I shouldn't, but Haisley crosses her arms over her chest. "You promised we'd finish reading *Spirit*."

This damn kid, I know she's going to talk me into getting her a horse one of these days. She's obsessed with them. Literally fucking obsessed. I grew up around horses, and I hate to say this, but they're useless unless you have a ranch, and if I never see the likes of a ranch again, it'll be too soon.

Reaching down, I pat the top of Haisley's head. "I'll be right up." Shifting Nalani on my hip, she lays her head on my shoulder like she's tired. I bet she is. Out of all the kids, this one goes to bed like clockwork at eight every night. Easiest kid ever when it comes to bedtime. Can't say the same about her climbing up everything in sight, though.

Ember helps me get them upstairs in bed, puts Nalani down for the night, and I sneak into Haisley's room to finish reading

with her. That's when Adler comes in and starts shit. He's always trying to scare Haisley into nightmares. I'm not sure why, maybe it's a big brother thing, but this time he has help—his silent scheming twin. I'm telling you now, if anything ever happens to me, question Braylee. I can't get a clear read on that kid other than she doesn't like me. She and Marley seem to have that in common but hey, two out of three ain't bad considering the circumstances.

Adler sits cross-legged on the bed, his eyes on mine. "Why did they take you to the hospital like that?"

"Just a precaution. It's fine."

His eyes hold worry. "It didn't look fine. You looked dead."

Haisley stares at him, and then me. "Did you die?"

I might as well if I can't have sex. "No, I didn't die." I pat the bed next to me. "Now come over here so we can finish this book."

"Did you know there was this famous singer who killed people and put their bodies in the green river?" Adler asks, mischief replacing the worry.

It takes me a moment to comprehend what he's saying. Not only is the pain medication I took for my headache starting to wear off and I can barely open my eyes, but I also have no idea what he's talking about.

Reaching up, I scratch the side of my head. "What?" Next to me, Haisley perks up, staring at her brother.

Adler rolls his eyes, as if having to explain himself is a chore. "There was a killer in Seattle."

Oh, right. That guy. In case you're not familiar with the haunting statics of the Green River killer, his name is Jeffrey Dahmer, and now it probably rings a bell, huh? "Um, he wasn't a famous singer. He was a serial killer who murdered people and left their bodies down by the river." I leave out the part about him sneaking back and having sex with the bodies because I'm twenty-six and I find that disgusting. I can't imagine what a nine-year-old would think of it, let alone the five-year-old beside me.

Adler frowns. "So, like he ate cereal before he killed them?"

"What?"

Another eye roll. "He's a *cereal* killer. Did he eat cereal before he killed them?"

I give him a "what the fuck" look. What the hell does cereal have to do with it? "What are you talking about?"

"Why is he called a cereal killer if he doesn't eat cereal?"

"No, he's a *serial* killer."

"I don't understand."

"I don't think I do anymore either," I admit, turning the page in the book to continue reading, but I notice Haisley's asleep now, her head on my shoulder, thankfully she didn't hear anything about the supposed cereal killer stuffing his face with Captain Crunch.

Peeling myself from the bed, Adler runs down the hall to his room. Ember's standing at the door, having watched the entire interaction. I point to Adler's room. "What was that about?"

She smiles, shaking her head, her eyes on her hands. "Cat and I took them to the park, and Marley looked up the river on

her phone... then promptly told him and Braylee the history of the river.”

“Nice of her. How much you want to bet he has nightmares tonight?”

Her eyes lift to mine. “Probably.”

And then we’re trapped in a stare. “What?” I ask, keeping my stare on hers.

“Nothing. Let’s get you into bed.” She turns and walks down the hall to my room.

“That’s what I’m talking about.” I follow her. “Are you coming to bed with me?”

“No. I just want to make sure you get in bed okay.”

Though it’s disappointing she keeps pushing me away and avoiding what’s really going on between us, I’m more worried about the fact that she’s sighing, and I can tell something’s on her mind. Is she worried about the notorious cereal killer too?

“Are you here to let me kiss you again?” I whisper, watching her pace my bedroom floor. It’s not lost on me that she’s in here and if I really want to be convincing, I can potentially persuade her to sit on my bed, and you never know where it will lead from there.

“No, I’m not. That was a mistake.”

“It certainly didn’t feel like a mistake to me.” It’s then I notice what she’s wearing. How I didn’t know she was in her nightgown is beyond me, but I’m well aware she is now. Had she picked me up like that? I pray she isn’t wearing a bra so I can see those perfect and perky nipples salute me.

Naturally, I look, but sadly she’s wearing a bra.

“Why are you pacing the floor?” I finally ask, wondering what it is she’s doing in here if she’s not going to take me up on the offer that we fuck.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” she wails, tears letting loose. At first, her reaction catches me off guard, and then it makes sense given everything she’s lost in her life, especially at such a young age. She’s been where they are. “Seeing you with them tonight, it’s just... they need you so much, Landon.”

Standing, I make my way over to her, wanting to ease her pain. Selfishly, I want to hold her and be the one comforting her. “I know they do.” I stroke her head as she cries. “I’m fine though.”

“I know, but I was worried.” She snuffles into my neck. I can feel her ragged heartbeat against my chest, her tears wetting my neck. “Seeing you on the ground like that... and them so scared as they carted you off...”

Holding onto her tightly, I try to comfort her in any way I can. I move to sit down on the bed, and she straddles my lap. *This* position does nothing for my self-control and thoughts.

My breathing hitches, as does hers, and I may even groan when she makes contact with a very eager part of me. One second she’s crying and the next we’re moving away from each other.

“Sorry,” I mutter, pushing myself off the bed to stand, and now I’m the one pacing the room, and she’s sitting on the edge of my bed.

Ember sighs, her glossy blue eyes finding mine in the dimly lit room. She stares at me for a long moment before chewing on

her bottom lip. “I’m going to be a total girl right now.” She sighs in defeat. “Just hold me and don’t talk to me.”

I laugh at her expression, and then she punches me in the shoulder. “If you want me to hold you, don’t physically hurt me.”

“I said don’t talk. Hold me and don’t talk.” She pats the bed. “You’ll just piss me off by talking.”

“I will with one condition.”

She rolls her eyes, licking her lips fast, but it’s when her gaze shifts that I know she’s hiding her emotions from me. “What would that be?”

I lie down next to her. I want so badly to pull her into me, crash my lips on hers, and fuck her. I want to rid myself of this obsession I have with her, but I know it won’t do me any good. It’s never going away. At least not that easily. My hand comes up and softly touches her cheek before leaning in. My eyes drop to her milky flesh peeking out above her nightgown. “You let me kiss you again.”

You’re probably surprised to learn she fucking lets me. She never answers; instead, she leans in and presses her lips softly to mine. Our lips move as one, our tongues remembering a dance and our bodies, they come together like they were fucking meant to be.

Shifting on the bed, Ember moves beside me and squeezes both her thighs together around one of mine. “We should stop. You’re not supposed to get your heartrate up.”

I swallow hard. “No. Way.”

“Landon,” she breathes against my lips and my dick twitches against her stomach, hardening and if I had to guess, I’m already sporting some precum in my boxers. I move my thigh against her pussy, pushing up to put pressure on her clit.

This, *this* I could fucking get used to. Goddamn. I groan when she clings to my body, her hands fisting my shirt, unsure if she wants to pull me closer or push me away. “Let me fuck you,” I breath, and it’s fucking ragged as hell. Sounds like I’m running drills at practice.

“No.”

“Why?” My lips break away from hers, assaulting her neck and collarbone.

She cradles my head in her hands, her neck arching to give me better access. “I told you why.” She’s grinding against me so hard, that I finally roll her over and bury myself between her legs. Now we’re in the exact position we left off in Hawaii. “And the doctor also told you no sex.”

“If you don’t let me fuck you, I’ll stop what I’m doing now, but something tells me you need this,” I whisper into her mouth, deepening the kiss.

Don’t say it. Don’t say it.

“Don’t stop.” The words fall from her lips, soft and trembling with desire.

Yes!

Her thighs tighten against my waist and she lets me grind into her clit, and I know she’s close. With little separating the two of us, I can feel every time the head of my cock passes over her swollen bundle of nerves and the way her body tenses.

And just about the time I'm thinking of slipping her panties down her thighs, there's a knock on my door. "I need water!"

Fucking Christ. They always find the worst time to interrupt us.

I know what kid it is, too. Haisley never stays in her bed all night long. "Get it yourself!" I yell back, unwilling to end the teenage dry hump session. I don't stop either.

Ember pushes against my chest. I stare at her, cheeks pink, breathing heavy. "We need to stop." She straightens her posture.

"Fuck that. We don't need to stop." Wanting to avoid the need to have to jerk off tonight, I try to reason with her. Try being the key word here. "She'll go away eventually."

I'm apparently not that convincing because she pushes again. "Let me up. I'll get her water."

I roll off her onto my back. Blowing out a heavy sigh, my hands over my face. It's not that I'm embarrassed. It's a tortured action, like I want to punch myself in the face. Fuck me.

Unfortunately, doesn't look like any fucking of the physical sense is happening tonight.

20. EMBER

PREVENT DEFENSE

Prevent Defense – A defensive formation where the team on defense is simply trying to prevent giving up a long, quick play for a touchdown and keep the clock running by leaving defenders deep and along the sidelines to keep the ball carrier in bounds. Offenses can gain yardage up the middle of the field, but that will come at the cost of time off the clock.

“We have to stop doing this,” I tell him, breathing heavily after getting Haisley her water.

I should have left, but the draw to him made me return to his room. It’d been at least five minutes and he was still in the same position I left him. Flat on his back with his hands covering his face. Only now, one leg was bent at the knee.

Drawing in a deep breath, I straighten out my nightgown, regretting not putting on clothes before I went to get him, and now wearing it in his room. Unconsciously, I’d set myself up for failure. #nologicinme

Landon sighs with a slow shake of his head, but he doesn’t remove his hands from his face. “Why can’t this work?”

My heart flies up in my chest and lodges in my throat. “Because... Landon.” I twist toward him, drawing in a careful breath, trying to find the courage to tell him how I feel. “I put

my life on hold for you, and I'm scared if I start something with you, I'll never do the things I want to do."

And I'm not your type. I leave that part out because he seems to think otherwise. Haven't you noticed though? I'm nothing like #icequeen Alessa.

His hands finally drop from his face and he looks up at me. He bends at the waist, pushing forward to kiss my forehead and I feel his eyes on my neck. His fingers brush the ink on my shoulder, then trail down my spine to grip my hip. Pressing his mouth against my orchids tattoo on my collarbone, his mouth is warm, rough and exactly what I want.

He leans back to look at me, his features holding an emotion I can't decipher. His mouth opens as though he's about to say something and then his brow furrows. "Do you know how many women I've slept with?"

I don't want to think about him with anyone else. I don't want to think about his hand pressing between someone else's legs or him kissing them. I stare at him, trying not to act like someone punched me in the stomach. "I'd rather not think about it." It's the truth. I want to think about him inside me with a passion neither one of us can comprehend. I want to be owned by him.

Landon looks tortured, and I've never seen him look like this. I've seen the confident cocky guy, and the ruthless side. But this... not this side. "Well, I'm going to make you because you don't seem to get it. I've slept with hundreds of women, and every time since I've met you, I see your face when I'm inside them. I can't..." He stares deep into my eyes, like he's trying to communicate with me telepathically.

My heart literally feels like it drops to my feet. “What does that even mean?” I want to say more, tell him I want him, regardless of the consequences, but the words won’t form, or when they do, my lips won’t deliver them. What am I going to do, tell him the truth?

No, that’s just ridiculous.

When he sighs, I can’t look away. His eyes display what I thought I would never see from him. Somewhere over the course of our friendship these last five years, something has changed for him, too. I love seeing him this way, vulnerable with need for *me*.

When he leans forward, his warm breath blows across my skin with the words, “It means... I want *you*.”

My heart beats a million miles an hour, thudding loudly in my ears as my body saturates with hope. The blood rushes rapidly throughout my body, spreading like a summer wildfire scorching my skin. “You don’t know what you want.”

“Bullshit. I do. And you *feel* something more for me. Don’t you?”

“I’ve always felt something more for you,” I finally admit.

He gives me a tentative but uneasy smile. “There’s a *but* coming, isn’t there?”

Pushing myself away from the bed, I stand. “Get some sleep. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

And then I walk out. Not because I want to, but because I need to.



You know those movies where the two leads are both lying in bed wide awake staring at the ceiling, and there's some sappy song playing? That's me at least, and I imagine Landon's taking a cold shower, but you never know. Maybe he's just as confused.

I try to think back to when it changed for me with Landon, but I can't pinpoint a day or even how long into our friendship it was. All I knew was it had a good amount to do with how he followed his dreams.

I don't think anyone has ever realized how much of their lives professional athletes give up to be at the top. Sure, they have money and can buy whatever they want, but that doesn't come without a cost. And it can all be gone tomorrow. There's absolutely no guarantee it will last or even if their bodies will allow them to continue. Today was a reminder of that. Sure, he's fine now, but what if he wakes up and can't remember us? Concussions are not something to be messed with.

And then my thoughts return to him and his dream, his dedication to the sport that takes everything he has inside to succeed and rarely gives anything in return. But still, Landon plays football and does it well because he believes he can, and he's so strong-willed nothing ever stands in his way. All his hard work has led him here, to his dream come true. But that dream, at times, comes with some hefty sacrifices.

Even with all this, there is one thing that has never changed about Landon over the years, and that's who he is on the inside. He knows exactly what he wants. Something I can't say about myself.

Landon is never what people think he should be or tell him to be, which is why his first year in the NFL, he went through

three PR reps, two managers, and a handful of assistants.

I think back to what I said in his room.

“You don’t know what you want.”

And his reply was, *“Bullshit. I do. And you feel something more for me. Don’t you?”*

Why am I questioning him when the Landon I know has never been anything but truthful to me and knows what he wants?

Grabbing my phone off my nightstand, I scroll through Landon’s Instagram feed to the one picture I know is there of us. It’s the one in Hawaii with us on the beach. It’s not just the two of us, but I’m standing beside him in it with Quinn and Kumonde and his wife. We look tiny compared to them, but that’s not what finally catches my attention about the photograph. It’s the way Landon’s looking at me like I’m his favorite person in the world.

That night, later in his hotel room after I drank a glass of wine, okay, half a bottle, that’s when we almost had sex. Then his life changed forever, but I should have known once Landon makes his mind up about something, there’s no changing it.

I hadn’t realized until maybe now, that he’d set his sights on me.

I’ll be honest with you. I’ve never thought I was good enough for Landon. I know, a confident woman like me, why would I think that? Well, he’s a fucking superstar, that’s why. It’s easy to feel inferior around him. I guess it hasn’t always been me thinking that if I started something with Landon, I’d lose myself in the process. It’s a little bit of that, and a little bit of me thinking how can I ever compare to him? How can you

stand by someone in a relationship if you're constantly, and unknowingly on his part, in their shadow?

21. EMBER SNEAK

Sneak – A surprise running play.

Isn't it crazy how quickly time flies? Like you blink and it's a year later?

Don't freak out. You didn't miss a year of this shitshow. More like six hours. It's morning now, and I'm feeling about the same as I did last night. #confusedAF

If you're not hashtag savvy, AF stands for: As Fuck. Yes, I had to google that the first time I saw it.

With the end of September approaching and the first game of the regular season nearing, it's time to one, get the kids to school without a hitch, and two, hire a nanny. Now before you start to judge and ask how I can hire a stranger to raise these kids, let me remind you of one very important fact: there are five of them! There is no way I could take care of them, Landon, *and* prepare for the Westward Fall Expo. It just isn't going to happen. Also, three, and most importantly, get a Salted Caramel mocha to start my day off right. Once that's done, it's time to handle shit.

I know you don't care about any of that, do you? All you want to know about is what happens now that we kissed, made out, and then I gave the guy blue balls and walked out of his room.

Well, I'll tell you. Obviously, I went back to the guest house, but not before Landon went to bed. Passed out actually, and thankfully he doesn't have practice again until Saturday.

I, on the other hand, lay awake the entire night not thinking about everything he said to me. I had to wonder, did he mean what he said or was it the concussion talking? Had they pumped him so full of narcotics that he was hallucinating? Was that it? Had he said all that in a drug-induced fog?

Fuck me. What if he didn't mean any of it? Or worse, what if he did?

It's something I could torture myself thinking about for the next hundred hours, but while he's now in bed sleeping off the effects of the Vicodin I gave him, it's my responsibility to get these crazy little monsters to school for their first day.

Making my way from the guest house to the main house, I let myself in the back door, through the butler's pantry and into the kitchen. Never did I think I'd be in a home with a butler's pantry. It's crazy to think that before I met Landon, none of this would have been possible. I'd still be working at the tattoo shop and living with Cat in that shitty apartment above the Korean restaurant that made everything in our closet smell like kimchi.

Standing in the kitchen, I sip my newly acquired mocha, thanks to Cat and Marley running out and getting them this

morning. Turns out, Marley's a huge Starbucks fan, claiming their coffee doesn't taste the same in the south.

While using Pinterest as a guide, I pack each kid a gourmet meal specifically designed for them. You know, heart-shaped cucumber sandwiches and those little apple slices with peanut butter and raisins meant to look like happy faces. That kind of shit.

Now, do you believe for one second I did all that?

If you guessed no, you'd be right. I don't do any of that. I'm not at all ashamed to admit I hired a chef for Landon and he's premade their lunches and conveniently labeled them with their names. All I have to do is grab them out of the fridge. Some might say that's lazy... and some would say it's genius. I'm going to go with genius.

While I'm waiting for the kitchen to turn into a madhouse of kids wanting and needing shit, I scroll through Instagram. I check Alessa's feed first, curious whether she posted anything last night after she and Landon broke up.

Nothing. Not a goddamn thing. And yet, I'm kind of disappointed. At least she could have posted one of those sad Wordables quotes about being stronger without a man like every other woman when they have a breakup. Isn't that what they're supposed to do?

Braylee approaches me, her hands on her hips. "Are you serious?"

I turn to face her, wanting to burst out laughing. There is absolutely nothing girly about Braylee. She wears basketball shorts and Under Armour like she has endorsement deals with

them. Only now, because of the private school, she's wearing a skirt and a bow in her hair. Awkwardly, I pat the top of her pretty curly auburn hair. "You look beautiful."

"Yeah, well," she says as she tugs her underwear out of her butt, "I feel like I'm stuck inside a JoJo video. Why do I have to wear this crap?"

"Because the school makes all the kids wear uniforms," I point out, slowly sipping my warm salty chocolate caramel goodness. I'm not sure what's better, the pumpkin spice, or the salted caramel mocha. I think it's a toss-up. "It's only for six hours a day."

That is probably the worst thing I could have said to her. Her head looks like it's going to spin around in rage. "Six hours! Why do we have to go so long?"

I shrug. "Those are the rules. I don't make them. And it's not that long."

"Yes, it is!"

"Cool it with the dramatics." I turn her around toward the stairs. "Now go brush your teeth. We have to leave in twenty minutes."

Braylee stomps off, yanking at her underwear again as she climbs the stairs. Adler passes her in the process, smiling at me. He's a morning person, always smiling and bright-eyed the moment he wakes up. I have to admit, I'm jealous he can be up and ready to go that quickly, but it goes to show you he's exactly like Landon. I swear, the moment his eyes pop open, he could jump up and start running plays if he needed.

Adler stops in front of me wearing his navy blue slacks, gray long-sleeve button-down shirt, and maroon tie. He looks like a mini Landon with his hair artfully sculpted to stick out in the front and shaved close on the sides.

“What’s for breakfast?” he asks, popping up on the stool beside me. “I’m starving.” He then peeks at my coffee. “Where’s mine?”

I slide my cup away from him. “You’re too young for coffee.”

Like clockwork, Marley walks in the kitchen, her hair curled and her backpack on her shoulder. Adler points his finger at the cup in her hand. “How come Marley gets some?”

“Because she got up this morning and went and got it with Cat,” I tell him, digging through the pantry for the cinnamon bagels Adler loves so much.

It’s been three weeks since the kids came into our lives and you know, I’m proud to admit I know what they like to eat for breakfast now. I hand him the bagel and the individual packet of cream cheese. You can’t give him a container of it because he likes to take a bite of the bagel, then scoop the cream cheese into his mouth. For sanitary purposes, we use the squeeze packets now. It’s weird, but not as weird as Nalani’s chicken nugget obsession. She eats them with squeezable applesauce. If you’re confused, picture her taking a dinosaur chicken nugget, squeezing a good amount of applesauce in the center, and then eating them one by one while saying, “Aww, cute,” before each bite.

It’s a few minutes until seven. Adler’s finished his cream cheese with a side of bagel, and he’s wearing most of it.

Nervously, he fidgets with his tie and stands at the door. He motions up the stairs with a nod. “Where’s Uncle Landon? Isn’t he taking us?”

Kneeling to his level, I drop my bag on the floor next to the door and attempt to wipe the cream cheese off his tie. “No, he’s sleeping.”

“Does his head hurt?” Haisley asks, trying to get her jacket on. It’s going to be a while because she’s spinning in circles searching for the armhole that’s inside out.

“A little bit, but he’s going to be fine.” I don’t want to worry them, and knowing Landon, he will be back to normal when he wakes up. Maybe a little loopy for a few days, but, essentially, as good as can be for someone who is potentially crazy as fuck for playing a sport where one of the main objectives is to tackle him.

Like I’m Wonder Woman, I grab hold of Haisley to stop her spinning with one hand and keep the other on Adler’s tie. That’s when Nalani comes walking into the room carrying her diaper in her hand.

We really need to work on potty training. Note to self: make that a requirement when hiring a nanny today. Must be proficient in potty training.

“We’re going to be late!” Braylee points out, hauling her backpack over her shoulder. If there’s anything Braylee hates more than uniforms, it’s being late. And that, friends, she has in common with Landon. It throws off his entire day if he’s late even by a minute.

Standing there in the foyer, I try to think if I'm missing anything. Marley, Braylee, Haisley, and Adler are ready to go. I even count their heads to make sure I have them all lined up. Now for Nalani. Cat's in the kitchen, so I yell to her to grab me a diaper and meet me in the garage.

I manage to get everyone in the car when Cat holds up the diaper and looks into the car. "Is this supposed to go on one of them?"

My head whips around to the back seat. "Shit. The baby." Rushing back inside, I find her on the counter licking the other half of Adler's bagel he didn't eat, bare butt on the marble.

She waves to me. "Hi."

I can't help but smile. "C'mon, you little nugget."

That gets her. "Nuggets? Hungry. I eat?"

I hand her an applesauce squeeze from the fridge, carrying her into the garage. "Here. I'll get you nuggets to dip later."

The moment I have her in the car, Haisley points out, "She's naked!"

"I know." I reach over the seat to the diaper Cat's holding.

Nalani shakes her head. "No." Then she pushes my hands away.

"You have to wear something." Or does she? I have her in the car. Does she really need clothes?

Impatiently, Adler peeks his head over the seat. "Can we please go?"

Checking the time, I realize we are in fact going to be late for their first day of school and the panic in his eyes has me

leaving with Nalani naked for now. I mean, it can't be the worst thing in the world, right?

I will regret those words here in about, oh, thirteen minutes.

It happens when we're in the drop-off line. That's when everything goes to shit. Did you know there are actual "drop-off" guidelines at schools? I had no idea. Either I don't remember any of this shit growing up, or times have changed.

"There's a drop-off line?" Cat asks, staring at the dozens of orange cones and women in vests patrolling the line. It's some serious shit.

"Who knew it had gotten so complicated." I'll tell you one thing, it's fairly apparent the tuition here is in the double digits judging by the vehicles in line. In front of me is a Tesla. His electric car-driving ass needs to move.

"Well, we wouldn't have known anyway. We walked to school, remember?"

I side-eye Cat, trying not to remember high school. And then I look in the rearview mirror to see Adler frowning at the car ahead of me, his jaw clenching in anger. The last thing I want to do is ruin his first day.

"C'mon!" I honk my horn when the Tesla in front of me refuses to move.

Cat reaches for her door handle. "I'll go see what his problem is."

I reach for her hand to stop her. "No, you won't."

Cat has this problem of saying what's on her mind with no regard to consequences. So no, she can't handle this. I can though, and before this little boy in the back seat develops a stomach ulcer over the start time of school, I'm going to deal with it.

You know when you're feeling good, and you're thinking, shit, girl, don't mess with me. I'm a fucking boss today, and then you spill your coffee all down the front of you and realize you ain't no goddamn boss. You're tired #AF. So tired that you forget you're not even wearing a bra and approach a man in a Tesla because he's too shitting arrogant to follow directions and move with the flow of traffic in the drop-off line.

And that's me, the tired #AF, who did in fact dribble mocha on her white shirt and regrettably, isn't wearing a bra. But I don't pay any mind to those details or the fact it's starting to rain *and*, I'm knocking on the window of said man's car, and he's staring at my tits, his cell phone in his hand. I swear to fuck, if he snaps a picture, I'll shove that motherfucker so far up his hole it'll come out his mouth.

"Excuse me, but you're blocking the line," I tell him, darting my eyes to his back seat when I see a small hand rise. "Can you please move forward?"

Don't look at the man just yet because do you see that little devil in the back seat? The little redhaired one flipping me off? Doesn't he look like that kid from *Problem Child*?

I fight the urge to return the gesture when the father smiles, glances at my tits again and asks, "Excuse me?"

I motion forward to the five-car gap between him and the car in front of him. "Move forward so we can all get through

the line.”

Mr. Tesla eyes my appearance from the no bra, the nipple rings I’m sure are showing through my shirt, and my tattoos. Some people see them as an impulsive moment that leaves a permanent mark of a drunken mistake. Tattoos to most are a misconception of owning your identity in the world. And that’s fine if that’s what they mean to you. But to some, it’s about proclaiming who you are without words. It’s an artist’s way of bringing their deepest fears to life.

I don’t exactly look like the kind of housewife dropping their children off at this school wearing their Hermes bags and driving around in their Urus Lamborghinis. I’m more like the chick this dude sees cleaning his house.

“You’re uh....” He pauses, drops his eyes to my tits again, then looks up at me with a furrowed brow. I cross my arms over my chest.

“Stop staring at me. Yes, I’m not wearing a bra. And yes, I have nipple rings. Now are you going to pull forward or should I go around you?”

He clears his throat. “Yeah, I’ll pull forward. Sorry.”

“Good.”

Mr. Tesla makes good on his promise, and I make my way back to my car, only to be honked at myself. I had no idea dropping kids off at school was this much of an ordeal. It’s a brutal atmosphere here. Bloody brutal.

I pull up about ten feet; only we’re still ten feet from the drop-off sign. “Um, just get out here,” I tell the kids, fearing the whole late thing.

“We can’t,” Braylee tells me, pointing to the sign. “It says drop-off there.”

“I know, but you’re going to be late.”

Adler shakes his head, reaching for the door handle. “Fine, but the consequences are on you.”

I laugh. “I think I can handle the orange cone lady.”

I’m wrong. So very wrong. And I’m going to tell you why. You see that woman pointing her finger at me? Orange cone lady. I’ve apparently pissed her off.

“You can’t drop off here!” she screams, then jabs her finger to the sign. “No drop-offs before that point.”

Adler immediately shuts the door and sits up straight in the seat. For good measure, he even buckles himself in. “Told ya.”

“You’re such a pussy,” Braylee mutters to him, shaking her head with embarrassment.

Cat and I whip our heads around. “Dude, don’t call your brother a pussy.”

Braylee rolls her eyes, tracing raindrops on the window with her finger. “I can when he’s being one.”

I’m about to tell her all the reasons why she shouldn’t call him that, reasons I haven’t come up with yet, but orange cone lady is tapping on my window. “You can’t drop off here!” she yells again, because apparently, I didn’t hear her the first time.

I roll down the window. “Isn’t this close enough?”

“No, it’s not,” Orange cone lady exclaims, her white hair curling from the misty rain. “Clearly you’re new here, pull

into the parking spot.”

I do what she says and that sets all the kids off, especially Marley this time who thinks this must be the worst thing in the world. “Great, we’re new here, and this is totally embarrassing. We’re getting pulled over by the drop-off police!”

I think she’s being overly dramatic, but I get it, this morning hasn’t gone according to plan at all.

I’m not entirely sure what to think of this orange cone lady. Frankly, she scares the shit out of me, and I don’t spook easily. I feel like I should tell her my safe word.

“Rules are here for a reason,” she says the moment I’m in the parking spot. “You’re not above the law.” Law? Is she fucking serious? Then to further piss me off, she adds, “You’re setting a terrible example to your children looking for guidance.” She too eyes my tattoos and the fact that yes, I’m still not wearing a bra, as if to say my appearance has everything to do with my parenting style, should I have a style. I want to point out to her that they’re not my kids, I’m not a mother, and she has no right to yell at me. It’s my first fucking day of the school year and this drop-off routine. No need to castrate me over ten feet.

I start off with, “What the fuck do you know?” Just kidding. I don’t say that. I want to, but I begin with, “I’m sorry,” in an attempt to diffuse this woman and her angry gray eyes, who strangely reminds me of a scary version of Mrs. Doubtfire. “I dropped them off ten feet from the official drop-off zone area, yes, but you have no right to judge me or how I’m parenting my kids.” I motion behind me to the kids who

are all staring at me with wide eyes. “Go ahead, get out and walk to class.” They do as I tell them, and I turn back to the lady. “Tomorrow, I will use the correct drop-off procedures.”

The lady stands there, water dripping off her nose as the kids file out of the car and across the parking lot to the school. “Just remember, it’s for their safety.”

I nod. “I’m all about safety.” And just as those words leave my mouth, Nalani pops up from the back seat, naked as the day she was born, having undone her seat belt, and smiles at the lady.

“Hi!” she screams in my ear and slaps her applesauce-covered hand to my face.

She’s literally smothered from head to toe in applesauce. I have to hand it to her, not only did I not know there was that much applesauce in one of those packets, but the kid’s thorough for sure. Cat licks Nalani’s hand. “Ooh, it’s the apple cinnamon kind. My favorite.”

Clearly, yes, I have everything under control. #fuckedAF

22. EMBER DRAW

Draw – An offensive play where the quarterback drops back or stands in the pocket as if to pass and then runs the ball himself or hands it off to a running back.

With the kids safely in school and Nalani down for her nap, it's time to interview nannies. Lord knows after this morning and the drop-off from hell, I need it. I have a newfound respect for stay-at-home moms who successfully navigate the drop-off every morning, and completely understand why some make them ride the bus. And while I'm on the whole "stay-at-home mom" thing, let me point out something else. It's ridiculous what moms do, without pay, and they rarely complain about it. The next time I see a beaten-down mother in Target with her hair in a mom bun and coffee stains on the white T-shirt she wore to bed the night before, along with her worn-out and faded hot pants (these are what I refer to as yoga pants), I'm totally high-fiving her and buying her another coffee.

With some help from Landon's manager, I'm able to make contact with a local agency who does the basic interview process for nannies like background checks and references

checks. All we had to do was interview them and find out if they were a good fit for us. The first step was having them all sign nondisclosure agreements. I'm certainly familiar with them. I don't know how many I've had women sign, including Alessa. Fuck, was she pissed the day he made her sign one, but with Landon, it's imperative they do. You'd be surprised the shit women try to talk about after he dumps them.

And then I think about me. He's never asked me to sign one. Ever. And he tells me everything. *It means he trusts you, dumbass.*

Anyway, I'm all excited about what I had dubbed Nannypalooza. The thought of having someone whose entire job is to attend to these kids and their needs, wants, and fits, has me almost giddy. In the short time they've been here, they've worn my ass down. I'm one hissy fit away from drugging their juice with sedatives just to get some quiet. Unfortunately, Nannypalooza turned into Nannyhell faster than my first time was over. And that's saying something. It only lasted thirty-six seconds.

The agency sends four candidates. Three women and one man, and I'm quickly convinced someone leaked who was gonna be their employer because they all specifically ask about him by name. I'll break down the afternoon for you by applicant. Just the important parts because I don't want to bore you with the details.

Girl #1: I can't even say girl. Think Rob Zombie meets Betty White. She is a seventy-year-old hippy woman with false teeth and a face tattoo who claims having dentures are useful because she can give better blow jobs without her teeth

in. I shit you not. She even gave me a demonstration. Just in case I was unclear on how it worked... with a banana. I'll never get that image out of my head again.

Girl #2: Girl looking for part-time job dressed in a schoolgirl outfit. Think Britney Spears meets Jenna Jameson (the porn years). During the interview, I notice she has something white in her hair. Like someone hocked a loogie in her hair. "You have something in your hair," I point out, handing her a tissue. Maybe she'd come from watching kids... I know last week I had peanut butter in my hair for a good part of the day. But I'm not expecting her to laugh. "Oops. Hazard of the job." Turns out, she's a fluffer for a local porn production company. If you're googling fluffer, to be fair, I didn't know either. I looked it up on my phone as she was cleaning the goo out of her hair. She then follows that up with, "I can't wait to work with children and shape future generations," as she's fucking cleaning jizz out of her hair in the kitchen sink.

Girl #3: Harry Potter fan. Think... well, an obsessed Harry Potter fan. She's in her twenties with a very serious Harry Potter addiction. I mean she's dressed in a robe and carries a wand in her purse. Before the interview even started, she asked me if I knew which houses the kids were sorted into. When I told her I wasn't sure what she was talking about, she said it was okay. She had a sorting hat she could bring by, and we could find out. Apparently, she's fine with Hufflepuff and Gryffindor and can deal with Ravenclaw, but she absolutely cannot work with a Slytherin, whatever the fuck that means. Are you confused? I sure am.

And finally, Guy #1: Nice-looking with tattoos. Good fucking God. Think Liam Hemsworth with a tat sleeve. He's a special education teacher who's going for his master's degree and needs a job that has flexibility during the day for his class schedule. He specializes in kids who've suffered traumatic brain injuries. Immediately, Cat likes him. Oh, right, I didn't tell you, but she was there to go through the entire interview from hell morning with me. Although, she didn't seem as offended or affected as I was. Actually, now that I think about it, she seemed more amused than anything. Don't take this the wrong way, but sometimes Cat's injury comes in handy. Her lack of ability to completely remember one moment to the next can protect her from the type of trauma these interviews caused me.

It's then, while Kasen the nanny man is in the house that Landon decides to drag his ass out of bed.

"Who are you?" he asks, standing in the doorway with his arms defensively crossed over his chest. Also, I need to mention he's not wearing a shirt and I can see the V. I repeat, *the V*. If you're clueless and don't know *the V*, it's the road to the glory land, a path I've dreamed of following on him but so far have never allowed myself the pleasure of experiencing. And yes, I'm sure it would be a pleasure if the noises coming out of his bedroom over the last however many years is any indication.

Oh.

My.

Shit.

Are you staring? Pfft. Don't deny it. I know you are. Hell, Cat and the man-nanny both are. My mouth dries as I take in his appearance and sculpted muscles. *Goddamn, you're so pretty. Let me lick your sharp V-line and ride on down to cockridge.*

It's the intensity of his eyes scorching me that makes my heart flop around in my chest like a fish getting hooked. I am hooked by him, have been for five fucking years.

“What the fuck is going on?”

I jump up, spill my coffee down the front of me in the process, and wave to Kasen. He watches me, studying me, and before I can stop myself, I blurt out words. “This is Kasen. He's a nanny. I mean nanny... uh, he's here to job you.”

Did you get all that? Yeah, me either. It came out all wrong. *Pumpkin fucker.* Don't look at me like that. They were the first words my brain could form. I can't believe I'm at a loss for words.

Landon sends a grin of amusement my way, and I try to reciprocate it, but it fails. I can't even process my thoughts let alone make them into words and gestures.

Inhaling a sharp breath, his vulnerability at having someone in his home he doesn't know is evident. There's so much more to Landon than everyone thinks. “He doesn't look like a nanny.”

I turn back to Kasen, who hasn't taken his eyes off Cat. “What's a nanny look like?”

At the sound of my words or the kick to his shin I deliver, Kasen clears his throat, and stands, extending his hand to

Landon. “It’s nice to officially meet you, Mr. Slade. And yes, I get that a lot. I assure you, I’ve been doing it for years. Raised my brothers and sisters, and now I’m studying to become a special education teacher.”

Landon shakes his hand, his grip firm and precise like he’s trying to tell this guy with his handshake to keep his eyes to himself. “Why special education?”

Now that Landon’s beside me, his shoulder brushes mine, his eyes drifting my way. I quickly look away. I’m looking at Cat because sadly, there’s a little bit of drool on the corner of her mouth as she stares at Kasen.

“My younger brother suffered a brain injury after being hit in the head with a baseball bat when he was ten,” Kasen tells him. “The aid who used to come to our house incorporated different types of stimuli to keep his attention, like music and art. He helped him regain a lot of his memory and inspired me to want to do the same. I want to make a positive impact on families who’ve suffered the same trauma.”

While Cat swoons—and I gush over how perfect Kasen is for the job—Landon doesn’t see it the same way. He looks pissed... or is that jealousy? I can’t tell by the clench of his jaw. What the hell is he thinking? Does he hate the guy?

“Kasen, the job will be mostly afternoons and evenings. I think I can handle the mornings.”

Leaning back on the couch, Cat bursts out laughing. “Ya sure about that, babe?”

I wave her off. “You hush.” Reaching for my folder on the coffee table, I hand Kasen the nondisclosure agreement. “I’ll

need you to sign this as well. And on second thought, I'm gonna need some help with drop-off and pick-up to school."

"Not a problem." Kasen pulls out a pen and signs the agreement. "Will you be here during the day?"

"She's busy with me during the day," Landon's quick to say.

I wave him off, too, slapping at his shoulder. "I'm here, yes. But I'll be busy. I'm an artist, and there's a fall expo I'm trying to prepare for."

"Really?" Kasen's expression shifts. "Wow, that's awesome. I'm looking forward to seeing your artwork."

"You realize you're here for the kids, not her," Landon points out, crossing his arms over his chest. I can't see his face, but I hear the command to his tone, the sheer confidence he possesses.

"Yeah, there's five, right?"

I nod. "Yes. The oldest, Marley, is thirteen. Adler and Braylee are nine, and then there's Haisley, who's five, and Nalani is two."

Don't worry. I didn't forget Nalani in all this. Don't you see her? She's sitting on Cat's lap now, buck-ass naked again, and her diaper is on the coffee table next to the cheese and meat platter I set out for the interviews.

"Why is she naked?" Landon asks, whispering in my ear. It's not what he asks; it's *how* he asks it in a low throaty voice that sends my heart racing and my knees shaking.

“She likes to be naked,” I say, averting my gaze to the cheese and meat platter, rather than at Landon. I can’t look at him. Looking in his direction makes me think of the kiss and if I think about it, my cheeks will heat, and he’ll know I want him. “She covered herself in applesauce this morning.” It’s then I sneak a peek at Landon.

His eyes search the room and then land on me. Heat engulfs my lower regions. His gaze brushes over me, lingering on my lips.

Cat clears her throat. “So does Kasen have the job?”

I break away from Landon’s stare. “Yes, he does.” I twist to face Kasen. “If you want it.”

“Yeah,” he’s quick to say. “I do.”

“Don’t I have a say in any of this?” Landon asks, stepping around me so he’s at my side, facing me. He takes a step closer until he’s so close I can’t escape, and I’m backed against the wall. My eyes dart over his shoulder where, in the distance, Cat and Kasen are talking to Nalani. Thankfully, she has a blanket wrapped around her now.

I find the courage to look at Landon and instantly wish I hadn’t. I swallow the unexpected lump in my throat and then say, “No, not really. I always hire the help around here.”

I watch the roll in his throat as he swallows. His jaw hardens. “But I might want a say in it.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to know who’s hanging around here during the day.”

“Does it really matter?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Why?”

“He’s into you.”

“No, he’s not. And so what if he is?”

His lips press together, and after a few seconds of thought, he says, “He’s fired then.”

“You can’t fire him for simply being into me.”

He rolls his eyes like he’s frustrated that I’m not getting it. “Yes, yes I can.”

“Why?”

“Because whether you see it or not, you’re mine.”

My whole body sighs at his comment, like I’ve just sunken into a warm bath. “Is this about that kiss?” I fold my arms over my chest and watch as he inhales a breath, preparing to speak.

“You know it is.”

I try not to laugh, but his determination is as endearing as it is annoying. Much like everything about him. “Landon....”

A languid smile stretches across his mouth. “Don’t Landon me. You’re giving me a chance this time. For five goddamn years, you’ve pushed me away thinking you’re not good enough.” I start to object, but he silences me with his fingertips. “Don’t even try to correct me. I know you better than you think. But not this time. You’re letting me take you on a real fuckin’ date.” He reaches behind him and pulls out what looks to be tickets. “Tomorrow night.”

I peek at them, curious, and once again, I lose the ability to form words. “How’d you get tickets to The Hunna?” Landon knows they’re my favorite band, and while he rarely listens to that kind of music, he did this for me. So I can give him one night, can’t I?

“Quinn hooked me up with them.”

I take the tickets in my hand. “Fine.” My heart flutters in my chest. “One date.”

A satisfied grin creeps over him. “It’s going to be the best night of your fuckin’ life.”

#terrifiedAF

23. LANDON SQUARE IN

Square In – A pass route where the receiver runs straight downfield and then turns at a 90-degree angle to the middle of the field.

A date. Tonight. She's going on a date with me. But first I want to get to know this Kasen fucker to make sure once practice starts up tomorrow, I won't have to worry.

Fuck that, I will worry, but at least I'll have an idea as to what I'm worrying about.

I make mistakes. Surprised? Don't be. Since I joined #teamdad, they happen daily. Like today. I have the bright, awful idea of taking the kids to the park with Ember, Cat, and the new guy, Kasen. To be honest, I want to keep an eye on this new dude and make sure he's not moving in on Ember while I'm gone.

And you're probably thinking, he's not going to make a move with you around. You'd be surprised how bold guys can sometimes be.

My first mistake? Well, it wasn't exactly a mistake, and there's no way to lead into this, so I'm just gonna cut to the

chase.

I had to buy maxi pads.

Yes, sanitary napkins for Marley. And you're probably wondering what the fuck the big deal about it is.

Okay, fair question. And I'm gonna tell you.

To address the first issue, not only did Cat tell me Marley was riding the White Horse, she made me deal with it. If you don't know what that means, don't worry. I didn't either and had to Urban Dictionary it. Go ahead, look it up while I deal with my shit.

Actually, I'm going to just tell you because it's some crazy shit. The term "Riding the white horse" came from the tradition of women who began menstruating being of age to get married. They were then paraded through town on the back of a white horse which signified their virginity and purity. It was to show they were now women and open for courting by potential suitors.

Nope. There'd be no parading, purity, or virgin stealing courting happening any time soon. Fuck that shit. In fear, I googled chastity belts, only to be alarmed they made them for men, too.

Honestly, I had a panic attack "dealing" with it, but that's not even the worst part. The zit-faced teenage boy at the counter was the one who made a big deal out of it because he requested a "price check" on them and announced it over the intercom. Classic move on his part to further my embarrassment. I like to think I handled it well when I grabbed him by the tie and said, "Keep the fuckin' change," and

handed him a hundred-dollar bill, took my sanitary napkins and bolted. One might think, dude, douche move. I'd argue that. Not sure how just yet, but I'm going to go ahead and agree to disagree with you. That little Clean & Clear shit had it coming. I'd also like to point out, I've been asked not to return to the Walgreens on Broadway, but whatever. They were constantly out of the condoms I like anyway. Fuck 'em.

My second mistake? Waking Nalani up from her nap. You'd think she'd be happy since she slept for two hours. I know I'd be happy if I had a nap in the middle of the day, but nope. Not this kid. She wakes up like a Chucky-doll version of herself, letting out a feral holler I've never heard before while I place her in the car seat. By "place," I mean force her rigid body into the seat and quickly strap her in. And then continue that for the entire drive to the park.

I even had Haisley give her my phone hoping maybe that'd calm her down. Nope. She tossed the motherfucker right out the open window.

After pulling over, retrieving my phone with the crack down the middle of the screen, we pull into the park, and I'm thinking the fresh fall air might calm her down.

Wrong. So very wrong. It starts when Ember and Kasen decide to get coffee so she can go over some details on the kids' schedule.

"Where are you going?" I ask, alarmed they're walking away from us. This was supposed to be a family outing, and here she's bailing on me. But then I think, no, this wasn't a family outing. This was my brilliant fucking idea to get to

know Kasen better, and here he's making friendly with my girl.

"We're going to get some coffee across the street." Ember points to the Starbucks. "Want an Americano?"

"Yes." Call me an asshole, but I glare at Kasen just so he knows, that's my girl he's standing next to.

"I want a caramel apple cider!" Haisley shouts from the slide.

"Me too!" Cat adds, going down the slide with her.

And then they begin to walk away. I don't like it. Not even a little bit.

"He doesn't like me much," Kasen notes as he's walking away, keeping step with Ember, yet I still hear the fucker loud and clear.

She laughs. "It's not you. He doesn't like anyone."

I call bullshit on it. They left me alone with Cat and the kids as a test.

Everything's fine for something like twenty minutes and Nalani's cries have slowed to a slow hiccup. Things are looking better, right? Do you see the twins? Yeah, me neither, but that's not the scary part. They always show back up eventually. They disappear all the time. Do you see Haisley swinging next to the little girl with pigtails? She's content to have a friend her age. Now, let's focus on Marley. Do you see her standing near the fence with her cell phone in hand and talking to the kid with his jeans around his ankles?

Yeah, me too. No fucking way am I allowing this to continue. She's too young for boys. Hauling Nalani with me, we approach the two teenagers to ruin their little park romance.

At this point, Nalani looks perfectly content hanging on me like a monkey, doesn't she? Just wait. Internally, she's planning her assault for me strapping her in the car seat earlier.

"Who's this?" I ask in a voice that's stern and father like. Are you impressed? Me too. Who knew I could pull off the father tone.

The teenage boy with raging hormones and a backward ball cap eyes me. At first, he doesn't recognize me. All I get is a nod like he's some cool motherfucker and too badass to actually say hello to me. And then he notices me. "Bro, you're LC."

There's that word again. Bro. Why do people shorten words like brother and baby? I can understand shortening fucking to fuckin' or motherfucker to motherfucka. That makes sense. Baby is too short already so why call someone bae? Makes no sense. And bro... what are we, surfers? I fight the urge to roll my eyes. "Yep. Why are you talking to my niece?"

"Landon!" Marley gasps. "Go away."

The boy whips his head back to Marley. "Your *uncle* is Landon Slade?"

With a big smile, I look to Marley, nudging her arm with mine. "You didn't mention me? My feelings are hurt."

“The world doesn’t revolve around you,” she mutters under her breath. I let the attitude slide because I’ve been there before. I was a teenager once and you know, it doesn’t feel like it was that long ago.

Nalani squirms in my arms, her face blank and then she barfs. Projectile vomits all over me and the kid from *Boyz in the Hood*. For a moment, like twenty seconds, I can’t fully absorb what just happened, let alone how to react.

I look at Nalani, and she stares back, looking relieved, like that’s why she’d been so cranky.

“Dude, really?” the kid whines, staring down at his barf-covered Seahawks jersey. That’s what he gets for wearing Bailey’s jersey and not mine. “So gross.” His terrified eyes lift to mine, then Nalani. He can thank me later for the free birth control.

Feeling uncomfortable, and like I might lose my lunch myself, I nod to Marley. “Let’s go.”

Miss attitude sighs heavily. “Fine. Bye, Darnell.”

Darnell? His name’s Darnell? Well, that just verifies why I don’t like him. One of our biggest rival teams is the 49ers and guess what their quarterback’s name is? Darnell Haggard.

Peeling off my shirt, I toss it in a nearby garbage can and gather up the kids. “Where’s that no-good babysitter of yours?” I ask Haisley and Cat, like they’re going to answer. I do notice they have their drinks in hand, so Ember has to be around here somewhere.

While I walk around the park like a shirtless predator looking for Ember and Kasen, the twins finally appear, both

covered in dirt, scratches, and with red cheeks.

“What happened to you?” I ask as they’re brushing off their clothes. I refuse to let them in unless they’re clean.

Adler points behind him. “Climbing trees.”

Braylee shakes out leaves from her hair. “I climbed the highest.”

Adler shoves her against the door of the car. “Nu-uh. I did!”

Grabbing them both, I dust off their backs and point to the car. “Get in.” Once they’re in the back, I look to Nalani standing beside the car quietly. “Are you going to puke again?”

With pink cheeks and glossy eyes, she shakes her head. “No.”

Is she telling me the truth? I don’t know how to tell if a baby is lying.

Without a word, Haisley hops in next, her hands formed in tight fists like she has something in them. I intend to ask her what she has, but Marley distracts me by barreling past me and whispering under her breath, “You’re a jerk.”

“How am I a jerk? I didn’t puke on One Direction, Nalani did.”

She leers at me like I’ve ruined her goddamn life by breathing. “He’s not from One Direction.”

“My bad.”

It’s then, about the point where I’ve lost my patience and ready to tell Mr. Mom he’s lost his job before he had it, he and

Ember appear.

“And where have you two been?” I ask, as though I’m accusing them of having an affair. Look at me? I even look flustered, and it pisses me off that I’m this worked up over it.

“I was showing him around the park.” Ember eyes me like I’ve lost my mind and then hands me my Americano. “What’s wrong with you? And why don’t you have a shirt on?”

I glance at Kasen who’s also staring at me like I’ve lost my mind, slowly sipping on his coffee. “Nalani puked on me.”

I keep a close eye on the puke monster who’s buckled in now. Maybe she’ll know what to do because while the idea of Nalani throwing up in my car is about as appealing as her vomiting on me, I’m worried there might be something wrong with her.

Ember looks past me to Nalani. “Seriously? Is she okay? Does she have a fever?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug, stepping aside so she can take a look at the puker. “She feels warm.”

“Sometimes kids get sick,” Kasen decides to add. “Maybe she has that flu going around?”

“How often is sometimes?” I ask, clearly only worried about her puking in the car. “Like how often do they throw up with the flu?”

Adler gags in the back seat, his hand covering his mouth. “Gross! What’s that smell?”

Panic floods through me thinking Nalani puked again. Frantically, my eyes search the rearview mirror for the return

of the spinning head chick from *The Exorcist*. Only it's not puke. Can you guess what the smell is now?

If you guessed shit, you'd be right. Diaper explosion.

24. EMBER

HARD COUNT

Hard Count – When a quarterback calls out one sound or word more loudly than the others during his cadence in an attempt to get the defense to jump offsides. Not used very often, since it can also make his own linemen jump early and draw a false start penalty.

I've never been one for dating. Hell, I didn't even go to prom. I think I've been on one date in my entire life. Okay, two. The first one doesn't count because it was a double date with Cat in the eighth grade and I spent most of the movie trying to get Johnny Jorgenson to stop trying to finger me.

And then there was Justice Bailey. Landon's teammate. I went on one date with him, fucked him for a few weeks, and then he stopped calling me. Oh well, it wasn't like I liked him.

"I shouldn't go."

"Yes, you should. What would make you think you shouldn't?"

"It's sending the wrong impression to him."

"And that would be?"

I can barely admit it, but I whisper, "That I want more."

“No, that’s not sending the wrong impression since you *do* want more.” Cat sees right through me, as always. She may not have all her memory, but her intuition is *always* right. Case in point, she never ever liked Alessa. Speaking of her, you’re probably wondering what happened to her after Landon officially broke it off with her.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. She hasn’t attempted to call him like she did the other times he broke up with her and nothing on Instagram or Twitter, her two venting social media sites. She has Facebook, but her manager runs that so I never check it. And just to be sure, I checked tonight... and nothing. Not a goddamn word.

I hold up my phone to Cat, who’s curling my hair. “Do you think it’s weird that he broke up with her and she hasn’t posted about it?”

She stops, midcurl. “They broke up?”

I’ve told her this twice now. “Yes, last night in the car... he did it right in front of me.”

“Whoa, okay, so no.” Twisting my hair around her flat iron, she shrugs. “Not really. He broke up with her, right?”

I nod.

“If anything, she doesn’t want anyone to know they’re not together so she’ll keep quiet until he says something, and then she’ll post some kind of heartbroken statement about how devastated she is.”

“I think your memory is better than you think.”

Cat’s eyes dart to mine in the mirror, and she laughs, rolling her eyes. “No, not really. I’ve just seen celebrities act

like fools.” She tugs on my hair. “Now, the real question is, Ms. Jade...” Pausing, she holds the flat iron like a microphone. “Can you give a statement on your relationship with Mr. Slade?”

I’m not even thinking when I push her arm away, laughing, our hands get tangled, and I basically kiss the iron. The fucking straight iron!

#hotAF

Immediately, she drops it and grabs my face between her hands. “Holy fuck!”

In what I assume is shock, I don’t do anything at first. I jump up, shocked, only to have her cradle me in her arms. “I’m *so* sorry!”

It’s twenty minutes of me freaking out, Cat trying to reassure me everything will be fine and then, in the end, finding that my lips look like I have some kind of wicked case of herpes. Not exactly how I envisioned my first official date with Landon.

I’m fine, don’t worry. My lips, that’s another story. Let’s just say I won’t be doing any kissing tonight. And when you’re going on a date with a guy you’ve been in love with for five years, that sucks. Remember the kissing and how good it was? Well, you probably don’t, but I do. And it’s a damn shame there won’t be any of that tonight.

I’m standing in the kitchen with an ice pack to my lips when Marley and Haisley come into the guest house. “Landon’s waiting for you—” Marley’s words suddenly halt when she takes in my appearance. It must be horrific if it’s so

bad she stops talking. She stares at me, blinks, as if that will make it any better and then asks, “What the hell happened to you?”

I don't have a good response. I want to come up with a lie, something cool and unbelievable. Like the time I tried to shave my legs with a knife and ended up in the ER with six stitches in my knee and told everyone I fell riding my bike. When you're fourteen and in that incredibly awkward stage of waiting for the boob fairy to deliver a pair, it sounds so much better to the overly hot ER doctor stitching up your leg.

That excuse worked. This one... how the hell can I come up with anything remotely good that involves blisters on my lips?

Exactly. Nothing. Unless of course, I blame it on an allergic reaction. That might work.

“I ate salmon, and I'm allergic to it,” I tell her, pulling the ice away from my lips.

Cat, who's standing beside me, gives me a curious stare. “You did? When did you have salmon?”

I look from Marley to Cat, then back to Marley again. “What's Landon wearing?”

As if I have a huge sign on my face that points to my lips, her eyes never move from my mouth. “Jeans and a shirt.”

“A nice shirt?” I don't know why I'm asking. It doesn't matter what he's wearing.

Marley shrugs. “I guess.”

Since the accidental branding of my lips, I hadn't thought about what *I* was going to wear on the date. Cat had though, and hands me a low-cut black shirt with a pair of my skinny jeans. Skinny has never been a term I like to use because I eat... I like to eat, and that means I'm a few pounds overweight.

After tossing the clothes on the counter beside my ice pack, Cat hands me a pair of black heels. "These will go great with the jeans."


"I don't have the body for heels," I tell her, reaching for the ice pack. It hurts so badly just to move my lips; I have no idea how I'm going to make it through the night like this, let alone with people staring at me like I have some sort of flesh-eating disease. "I can't go!" I finally wail, breaking down in tears. I never cry. Never ever, but this, the possibility of missing out on Landon's kisses, this makes me cry.

#patheticAF

The girls spring into action, assuring me multiple times, "It's not that bad!" while secretly winking at each other and laughing at me. I'm kidding. They don't laugh, but don't think for one moment I don't notice their side-eye glances at each other.

Cat, Marley, and Haisley, they all do a good amount of work to my lips and make me look presentable with burn cream and lipstick. Turns out if you wear the right shade of pink, it blends well with blisters.

#cleverAF



It's a few minutes before six when I enter the house. Landon's in the den with Adler watching footage from last week's game and explaining to him the importance of protecting the pocket, something his team failed to do for him.

"She's ready to go!" Haisley screams into the den, causing Landon to twist around and look toward the door.

And there I am, blistered and ready, wearing heels for the first time in months and fighting back emotional "I hate myself for crying" tears. It must be getting close to that time of the month or something because shit, I never cry this easily. But, I've also never had third-degree burns on my lips, so there's that, too.

Landon smiles, eyeing me from head to toe. With a deep breath, he turns back around to Adler and hands him the remote. "Here. We'll continue this tomorrow, okay?"

Adler nods. "Okay, but can I have ice cream?"

"I don't care." Landon stands up. "Kasen has to deal with you."

Making his way from the den, he smiles at me once more, but he's about twenty feet away so he can't see the devastation in my eyes yet that I've ruined the date before it even started. When he greets me with the rugged arrogance he owns, "Cry for You" by Jodeci starts playing in the house. Just kidding. That doesn't happen. But it should have, huh? It'd be fitting for a man like him because my body is crying for him, begging to be touched and worshiped in the ways I know he can.

Standing before me now, his hands in the pockets of his dark jeans, he doesn't say anything. He doesn't move. He only watches me, our eyes meeting for a long battle of silent communication.

I don't win. I never do, not when I'm up against someone like Landon.

Why is he so freaking hot?

"You look nice." He breathes out the words. His penetrating gaze travels the length of my body. I feel like he's undressing me with his eyes and it makes me sweat.

"I know I do. And you look nice as well."

I want to hump your leg again.

"I know I do," he mimics, his cockiness nearly overwhelming.

#cockybastard

And then he notices my lips. His brow quirks, his head dips forward, and then he asks, "What happened? Do you have a cold sore or something?"

Tears surface and I can literally feel the heat rise from my chest to my ears, then my cheeks. "I uh... I don't know."

Goddamn it. Don't cry over a fucking blister! Get your shit together.

Cat steps into the foyer with Nalani on her hip. "Oh my gosh! What happened to your lips?"

For real? I glare at her. "Seriously?"

“Just kidding.” She laughs. “I’m still really sorry about that.” And then she throws an arm around Landon’s shoulders, her dreads whipping around and smacking Nalani in the face. “Looks like tonight’s gonna be PG, bud.”

Landon looks down at her, then back to me, his eyes wide. “How... uh, what the fuck happened?”

I roll my eyes, like explaining this is the *worst* thing ever. I feel like Marley when we ask her to put her sketchpad down. “Cat accidentally hit me in the mouth with a flat iron.”

“Seriously?” Landon steps forward, his hand on my chin to angle it up for a better look. One I don’t want him having.

I jerk my head from his hands. “It’s fine.”

“It doesn’t look fine,” he notes sternly, his eyes tight as he pulls me aside away from Cat who has forgotten all about us and is dancing with Nalani to a catchy commercial playing in the background. “You should get that looked at.”

I stare at him like he’s lost his mind. Nothing is stopping me from going. “And miss The Hunna? No fuckin’ way.”

He doesn’t like my answer. “Are you just going to see them?” His smile is there, but it’s impatient. “Or because I asked you on a date?” The heat of his body washes over mine, making me tremble with desire. I want him. There’s no doubt about it, and you know, he knows this. Tonight though, there’s something so much more primal about it.

With my pulse in my ears, I wink. “You won’t know until you take me.”

He presses against my side, and though it’s a simple touch, my body breaks out in a violent display of goose bumps. His

mouth's at my ear as he whispers, "That's my girl. Always keeping me guessing."



"How long do you think this goes for?" Landon asks, tugging his hat down lower to keep from getting noticed in the crowd, our shoulders bumping one another.

"Why?" I ask, sipping the hard apple cider in my hand. "Thinking of bailing on me?" The opening act just left the stage, and we're waiting for The Hunna to come out. It's been years since I've been to a concert, and even with the blistered lips, the night's been perfect so far. I feed off the atmosphere, the anticipation, the people, and the one next to me.

Landon smiles my way. His lips kick up at the corners as he peeks over at me. "Not a chance. Just curious."

"Is it past your bedtime?" I tease, peeking in his empty cup. He had a beer tonight and it's rare for Landon to drink since his first season in the NFL. During the season, he never drinks alcohol. It doesn't just have to do with the effects it has on his performance. He knows he can't have just one drink and be okay. One turns into ten, and before he knows it, he's rapping "Regulate" and is half-naked in the lobby of the Hyatt. True story.

Much like in the house before we left, he invades my personal space, his body heat radiating against me like an oven. "I'm far from tired." Do you notice the look in his eyes? I certainly do. I've known Landon a long time, and I've *never*

seen this look. Okay, maybe a time or two, in Hawaii, but this time, it's different. His lust-filled eyes dip, his jaw clenching. "It's killing me not being able to kiss you."

Oh, right. My lips. As if I hadn't forgotten for a half a second. I try to smile, but it hurts. "Who says I was going to *let you* kiss me?"

He laughs, the sound vibrating through my body at our close proximity. "Don't even try to tell me you're a good girl," he hisses, his breath skating along the curve of my neck. "We both know you're not." His tone is soft, yet I can't help but notice the undercurrent of vulnerability resonating within his words.

To our left, a group of women are eyeing Landon, like they know him, but can't place from where. Unless you were trying to make out his face, I doubt you could tell who he is tonight. We're tucked away in the corner, trying to remain out of sight, but I know at some point someone might recognize him.

I glare at the women. *Back off, bitches.*

Trying to avoid this, Landon moves closer until our bodies are touching. "If I could kiss you, these women wouldn't be staring at me." Pulling back, he smiles at me, winking. "They'd think I'm with you and leave me alone."

I laugh. He tries so hard sometimes. "No, they'd still be staring."

With a smirk, those intense dark eyes study mine. "Because I'm so good-looking?"

"No, because you're *Landon Slade.*"

His face tightens, his gaze on the women. “Shhh, don’t say that so loud.” He slaps his hand over my mouth, not hard, but he must have forgotten about my lip injury. “They’ll hear you and attack me.”

Pain shoots through my entire body. It’s like when you have a bruise, and someone presses on it and asks, “Does it hurt?” Of course it fucking hurts. It’s black for a reason, you inconsiderate prick. Once the pain is bearable, I glare at Landon and rip his hand away. “You asshole!”

“Holy shit.” It dawns on him what he just did. His eyes widen in fear. “I’m *so* sorry! I totally forgot about your lip.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t. Goddamn, that hurts!” I’m not sure if I want to cry from the pain or laugh at his expression of horror that he just did that. Either way, there’s no time for it because the lights of the Paramount Theater dim and the opening notes of “Still Got Blood” begin. I nearly scream with excitement and hug Landon. “I forgive you!”

I don’t let go of him right away. Instead, I hang on a little tighter, tears in the corner of my eyes threatening to let loose. I can’t explain the emotion rushing through me, but it’s there and has everything to do with the man holding me to his chest.

Landon breathes in deeply, his arms tightening around me. I pull back to look in his eyes. His forehead presses against mine. “I...” His voice fades with the heavy beats next to me.

I what? What was he going to say? I like you? I hate you? I... love you? No way. It couldn’t have been that. Don’t be crazy.

Swallowing, he shakes his head against mine, his breathing harsh, his eyes reflecting the stage lights. The lyrics, the atmosphere, it's *everything*. It's consuming and very nearly life altering. I know, you're thinking I'm insane, but it's so much more than words can portray. We're bumped and jostled from behind, but nothing can change the look in our eyes. Our friendship, our affection for one another is changing, and we both know it, regardless of what we say or do next. The bass reverberates in my chest, and my heart pounds in my ears.

Lacing my fingers with his, I squeeze his hands. We're basically facing each other, chest to chest, holding hands and staring at one another like some kind of awkward cross between a hug and a middle school dance pose. "Thank you for bringing me," I whisper in his ear, unsure if he can hear me over the screaming girls and the music.

He must have heard me because he lets go of my hands, cups my cheek with one hand and leans in to run his lips from my collarbone to my ear. "Thank you for being *you*."

My body gets hot with his words, as if I wasn't hot already. My fucking legs begin to shake. I bite my goddamn lip to keep from smiling and then regret that. Lip blister and all. I might not ever use a hot iron again.

Landon and I, we dance. To every single song. And it's like we've both forgotten the world around us and my blistered lips. We scream and shout the lyrics, even when we don't know them during the guitar solos, shoulder to shoulder with people we've never met. By the third song, I can barely feel my feet, but the smile on my face hasn't faded. And his... I haven't seen one like that in years. Tonight, he's Landon

Slade, a twenty-six-year-old without a care in the world, not LC, the NFL superstar who this city worships.

“Never Enough” comes on, and Landon leans in, his chest soaked with sweat, his eyes sparkling with the stage lights, that shadow across his perfect jaw... those lips, they move closer to me. He sways me to the music, the two of us locked in an unbreakable embrace. I can’t remember the last time I spent this much time in his arms. “Let me kiss you.”

“Anywhere but my lips,” I whisper, dancing around in front of him, oblivious to everything around us.

There’s neediness in his eyes. Tugging on my hand, he yanks me toward his chest once again. “It’s never enough with *you*,” he tells me, altering the lyrics. And then he stares at me when the line about falling in love is repeated, his cheeks flushed with exertion, his breathing slow and steady.

What does that mean?

While all the girls are screaming over the lead singer, I’m intent on one man.

My breath catches in my throat. Twisting me around, he brings himself in line behind me. The music slows, an acoustic version of “She’s Casual” begins with the lead singer by himself on stage, isolated in a single spotlight.

I can feel his heart thudding against my back and mine, it’s beating so hard it’s as if it’s trying to thump its way out of my chest. I’m drowning with each breath in disbelief he’s touching me like this in public.

Landon’s hands move to my hips, and then around my lower belly. I know where this is going when his fingertips dip

just inside the band of my jeans, his mouth is at my ear. “Let me,” he begs, slipping them lower. His words are quiet, rough with need, and they make my stomach flip and flop. He leans in close, his forehead pressing to my shoulder and then he turns his head, his nose against my skin. “Don’t stop me.”

My head spins, my body exploding into fire, melting into pure pleasure at the power his touch has over me. Oh, God. Is this really happening?

I don’t say anything in response. It’s not like anyone can see us or cares what we’re doing. This... it’s reckless, insane, and everything he is to me. With the rapid beat of his heart against my shoulder blade and his lips on my neck, his fingers dip inside my panties for the first time. I gasp the moment he makes contact with the sensitive junction between my legs.

“How do I make you feel?” he asks, breathy and low.

I sigh, unable to form words, and lean my head back against his shoulder. His left hand shifts from my hip to my rib cage, just under my breast to hold me to him.

We’ve never been here before. He’s never touched me like this.

With the lyrics mirroring our relationship floating around us, Landon’s thumb rolls over my clit through my panties, and I cry out softly. But he suddenly stops, his mouth at my ear. “When did you get a fucking clit ring and who did it?”

“It’s not a clit ring. It’s a hood piercing. And I’ve had it for a while,” I whisper back, twisting my head to look him in the eyes. “Why does it matter who gave it to me?”

Those piercing eyes lock on mine. “It fucking matters because this pussy is mine.”

“It wasn’t back then.”

His eyes capture mine again, lingering on my lips. I’m weak with need, and we haven’t even kissed tonight, but I feel like I’m going to come apart. “It’s been mine since I laid eyes on you, you just wouldn’t admit it.”

“Are we really going to fight right now?”

He basically grabs my pussy in a choke hold. I’m not even joking. He actually cups it and yanks my ass against his rock-hard cock. “We’re not fighting. We’re discussing this clit ring.”

My breath comes out in shallow pants. *Well, then get me off, and we’ll discuss it further.*

“Let me see it,” he pushes.

“Not here.”

“In my car?”

“Landon....”

“Fine.” He huffs out a breath. “But if I get you off before this song’s over, you’re gonna let me see it.”

I don’t say anything, but I nod. I’m not sure I have the words.

He slides his hand up, then inside my panties, dragging his middle finger over my clit ring, then dips it inside my pussy. His voice drops to a ragged whisper. “I decide when you come.”

Moaning into the air, I rest my head back against his shoulder, reeling in the sensations. Sliding two fingers inside me, he curls them to stroke just the right spot. Let me tell you something, Landon can get a girl off. I love how he touches me and the way he slides his hand up my ribcage to palm my breast. The intimacy of the moment contradicts the scene around us, but it doesn't matter. Nothing else matters but his touch.

My entire body thrums with the pulsing energy between us, little pants of pleasure escaping me. Squeezing my eyes shut, the music pounds around me as I let Landon finger fuck me with The Hunna singing to me. Just as my core begins to contract, Landon's hold on me tightens, his mouth attacking my neck. My body arches, my eyes squeezing shut. I cry out as the orgasm shudders through me, leaving me gasping for air. It starts in the back of my thighs, shooting upwards and exploding between my legs.

It takes me a second to come around to the idea that Landon just got me off.

My Landon. My best friend. My boss.

Shit. There's nothing I can say now. I want him. I swallow, my eyes searching his. He doesn't need my approval, not now. Not after that. Everything from my body language to the thudding of my heart gives me away.

I look over my shoulder at him. "That was...." I can't finish my words. My voice is shaking too damn much. I never realized how empty I felt inside until he touched me. Now I can't imagine myself without it. #patheticAF

For the first time since I met him, he gives me a side of him I've never seen before. His face shadowed with purple and blue stage lights, hooded eyes hold my gaze, darkened with desire. His lips are clamped together, his jaw firm. His chest is rising and falling with deep breaths. *Shit, he's fucking panting.*

Swallowing hard, he tugs my hand. "Let's go."

And I follow because he's right. It's never enough without him.

25. EMBER



TD

TD – Touch down.

Excitement burns in my veins. I don't even know how to process what just happened, the concert, and *him*... or what he just did to me. I can't remember the last time a man got me off, let alone in front of hundreds of people.

My heart pounds so loudly I feel like it's going to jump out of my chest and flop around in front of my feet. Landon leads me back to his very expensive Bugatti Chiron that he had parked with a bodyguard outside it. I'm not even joking. He paid a guy to stand beside it the entire concert.

"Thanks, man." Landon hands him what looks to be a couple hundred dollars. He's always been a good tipper.

"No problem." The man smiles like the pleasure is all his. I'm sure it is. "It's not every day Landon Slade needs his car babysat." Landon laughs, but when the guy's eyes drift to mine, he's not laughing anymore. "I could watch your girl for you, too." And then he winks.

Landon doesn't say anything and clicks the button on the remote, his jaw tensed like he's fighting the urge to lay the guy

out.

Smiling, I slip by Landon, brushing against his chest as I slide into the car. He watches my every move, no longer concerned with the man next to him or his comments about how much pussy he's going to get later after he tells everyone he watched Landon's car for him.

Straightening his posture, Landon closes the door and then turns to the man, whispering something to him and then walking around the front of the car. While the man quickly disappears up the street, I watch Landon making his way to the driver's side door.

Did the last hour just happen? Did he really do that in the concert? My skin is hot, and I just might pass out with need. A quivering breath slips out when Landon slides into the seat next to me. He looks over. He doesn't speak as his eyes run over my face before drifting down to my chest then lingering on my legs.

My breath comes in shallow pants as he places his hand on my thigh and strokes the inside of my leg. His fingers drift up further. He's gentle, and the emotion in his eyes—I gasp at what I see. I don't know what it is, but I'll take whatever he gives. "It's fucking torture not being able to kiss you."

One of my hands curls around his neck to pull him closer while the other one plants itself on the hard bulge in his pants. Leaning over the best I can, I bite my bottom lip like any slutty girl would do. Only, I've forgotten about the blisters and the burn, and it hurts like fucking hell. Immediately, I cringe and whimper a cry.

Landon growls, his body tensing. “Fuck, I know that probably hurt but that sexy little whimper you just made sounded just like the one you made when you came.” Shifting toward me, he traces his tongue down my neck to my collarbone, slips his hand under my shirt, and massages my breasts, his fingers pushing underneath the wire to palm my bare nipples. Taking my nipple ring between his thumb and forefinger, he slides the bar back and forth.

Shit, that’s good. I toss my head back against the seat, pleasure zipping up my spine.

He groans as he cups my bare breasts, his expression raw with passion, his voice ragged. “I can’t take this any longer.”

I’ve never had anyone look at me the way he is now, begging for more.

Leaning forward, he dips his head to my chest, yanks my shirt up and the next thing I know, his mouth is attached to my nipple. I gasp, holding onto his head like I’m breastfeeding him. I know, so gross, but from a bystander’s perspective, like the one looking through the windshield of his car, it literally looks like I’m breastfeeding the quarterback of the Seattle Seahawks. Now there’s a headline you don’t see every day.

“*Please* let me fuck you,” he begs, swirling his tongue around my nipple before nipping at my oh-so sensitive flesh.

With need and lust rippling through my veins, I want to beg him to do just that, but maybe someplace a little more private. “Not here. Not on the side of the street.”

In the back of my mind, I’m thinking how crazy this is, and how it will change everything about our relationship.

What will it mean for the kids?

Drawing my nipple in his mouth once more, he finally lets go with a pop and then straightens himself in the seat next to me. “Fine, but we’re doing this *tonight*,” he says under his breath, starting the car. He takes a look at the man staring in the windshield and throws his hands up. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

The guy yanks out his cell, and I can only assume he snaps a picture or a video. Luckily I’ve got my top straightened out, but I imagine he’s going to sell it to the tabloids by morning.

Gripping the steering wheel tighter, Landon revs the car, the engine screaming with the action. “That motherfucker.” And then he reaches for the door handle, like he’s going to get out of the car.

I grab his hand. “Don’t do that! That will only make it worse, and if you get out, they know it’s you. If you stay in the car, we can argue it’s not.”

“Really?” He gestures to his car, you know, the only one like it in the city. “You don’t think they already know it’s me?”

Smiling, I cross my arms over my chest, my breathing evening out. “Fine, Landon. Whatever. Get out of the car, cause a scene and see what happens.”

I don’t think he likes that since he throws the car into gear, looks over his shoulder and then enters traffic, his tires squealing on the wet pavement. I’ve never been one for speed. I mean, I like it, but I get freaked out by it and end up closing my eyes in fear I’m going to die. So I do just that, and before I

know it, Landon is skidding to a stop on a dark street and turning off his lights.

He leaves the car running for a moment and then reaches forward to turn it off.

With his breathing heavy, he looks over at me. As we sit there, a thick layer of fog rolls in. It blankets the city with pockets of glowing thick puffs of what would look to most like smoke.

Wanting contact, his warmth, I pull his hand to mine, joining them together. Oh my God, why am I holding his hand?

Landon looks confused for about three seconds. Then he laughs under his breath. “Ya gonna show me your clit ring now?”

“Maybe.”

He growls, actually growls at me. Leaning toward me, he whispers, “Wanna go someplace with me?”

“Where?”

“That’s not important.” His eyes are on the stoplight, watching cars rush by, all scrambling to make it through the intersection before it turns. Some make it—two don’t. He pauses and waits for the straggler to cross the intersection. The camera perched on the light flashes to capture the white Lexus as it speeds through. “I asked if you wanted to go with me.”

“Sure.”

It takes me a moment to understand where he’s taking me, but the grin he keeps at bay behind his hand rubbing his jaw

gives it away. When he turns onto California Way, I know. Hamilton Viewpoint. Though it's thirty minutes or more out of the way, it doesn't matter. The view is worth it.

As you can imagine, with five kids at the house, time alone is never available, and the thought of going to the same place he took me the night we met and I needed someone to talk to, is one that takes me back to where everything started for us. We haven't been here since that night. The idea has my heart skipping.

The viewpoint is located above the beaches of Alki, and from there, you can see the port, downtown, Elliott Bay, the Cascades—the view has it all.

Is he trying to bring back memories? The ones of foggy windows as we talked until the sun came up, getting to know one another? It was before I knew the football player, before I started working for him, and he became my friend. Someone I could never imagine my life without, and now here we are, and that friendship is changing.

For a moment we sit here, both of us looking over the city, breathing evenly, and I'm not sure anything is going to happen when he finally speaks. "The first time I brought you up here..." His voice trails off, and he twists his head toward me. "I had no idea I'd become dependent on you in every possible way."

"Wanna make out?" No lie, that's my response.

He shifts slightly and leans his head back so I can see his eyes glowing with the lights from the dashboard. "Is that what you want?"

My lips part and I suck in a breath, but I don't actually give him a reply.

"Come over here," he says in a rough whisper as he looks over at me.

I eye the space between us. It's a fucking Bugatti. There's absolutely no room for me anywhere but my seat. "Where?"

As he leans to one side with his hand draped over the steering wheel, his eyes find mine in the low light. "Here... on me."

I unbuckle myself and practically launch my body onto his lap. It's not easy. I'm certain I've either broken the shifter or kicked a hole in the dash. Either is possible.

He grunts when I fall onto him but smiles anyway. "I take that as a yes."

Even though the suggestion to make out comes from me, reality is still present. Public fornication isn't exactly my thing, but I can totally make an exception considering, aside from renting a hotel room, this is our only privacy.

"What if there's someone watching?" I know for a fact they patrol this area frequently. Last thing I want is to be picked up by Seattle PD, and this being all over *TMZ* tomorrow that Landon and I had been fucking. Nope. Not happening.

Problems with the current situation?

There are many. And Landon, he doesn't care about any of them. Since my first arrest had been so traumatic for me, I didn't want to be arrested again. Now, keep in mind this isn't

likely to occur, I'm sure making out in a car isn't exactly illegal, but still, this is a valid fear of mine.

Landon likes to tease me endlessly about my fears of being arrested. I'm never amused by this. He's been arrested twice, once for disturbing the peace and the other for being drunk in public. Both times he acted like it was no big deal.

"Who cares?" he mocks, trying to take my top off again.

See? No big deal for *him*.

His hands move to my ass, squeezing. "Goddamn, you have the best ass ever."

I suppose coming from the whore known as Landon Slade, I should take that as a compliment.

"Are you scared someone's going to see us?" A low laugh rumbles in his chest, vibrating through me.

"No."

"Yes, you are." His rough voice unnerves me. After all these years, he still gets to me and keeps me anticipating everything he says and does.

Straddling his lap isn't all that comfortable. Car sex is hard and in a Bugatti, damn near impossible. I'm positive the EB logo on his steering wheel is going to be permanently imprinted in my ass.

Arching my back, I let my hair fall over the steering wheel. That gets him. He moans, low and deep, and goes back to sucking on my nipples through my top. "Your nipple rings are so hot." Nipping at my chest, his teeth drag against my

heated skin, and then he rips my shirt up around my neck. “Fuck, you’re beautiful, Em. Just... so fucking gorgeous.”

My nipples harden, and it isn’t from the cold. It’s from the idea, the visualization of Landon not being able to control himself, so he takes me here, in his car. His tone, the needy way he can’t keep his hands off me, it fills my stomach with warmth.

While he’s kissing my chest, I take in our surroundings and the car. How is this actually going to work without one of us getting hurt?

He notices my hesitation and the way my hands fall from his body. “What are you doing? Don’t stop,” he urges, angling my head so he can suck on my neck now.

“How is this supposed to work?”

His lips twitch against my skin. “We get naked and fuck.”

“Cute.” I work my hands between us to the button of his jeans. “I mean in here. It’s so small.”

He gives me a look like he’s confused. “What?” His breathing is labored, his hands on my shoulders.

“The car. It’s too fucking small for this. We should go back to the house.”

He purses his lips, blue eyes studying me intently. It makes me squirm on his lap. “And do it where? The moment we walk in the door, the kids are going to be all over us, begging for our attention.”

He has a point. And Cat and Kasen are there too.

Sighing heavily, Landon scrubs his hands down his face, his head resting back against the seat as he attempts to even his breathing. “Do you not want this?”

“I do.” My voice is timid as shit, and I have no idea why. There’s absolutely nothing timid about me. “But....”

“No buts. Not tonight.” And then his mouth is on my skin again, and I forget about the obstacles in my way, like the cramped quarters. If I can live in a closet for a year, I can certainly manage to get this done.

With some careful movements and legs bent in awkward angles, I get Landon’s jeans undone quickly and attempt to shove them down around his hips. Attempt being the key word here, but I manage.

“Do you have protection?” I ask, unbuttoning mine and tossing my shirt, which had been choking the shit out of me, to the passenger seat.

He gives me a quick nod and reaches down to remove a condom out of the back pocket of his jeans. Of course, he came prepared. His eyes look up at me. He tugs my neck forward and leans in to kiss me, then stops, remembering my lip burn. He whispers, “It’s so fucking frustrating not being able to kiss you.”

“Tell me about it,” I say with a gasp.

In a rush, he has his jeans down, and we’re working on mine. It’s agreed rather quickly that he’ll open the door, I’ll step out and take my jeans off, then get back in the car.

In theory that’s what’s *supposed* to happen, but it results in my falling on the pavement, taking a chunk of skin off my

knee and laughing. He helps me back in the car, closes the door, and I'm straddling him, his cock nestled nicely between my folds as he grinds against me.

After getting the condom on, his length nudges at my entrance. "You sure, Em?" It's the first time I've ever heard his confidence waver. He doesn't blink, and neither do I. His words break, falter, give way to everything happening between us. I can tell he's into this with the intensity of his eyes. He's staring at me like he'll never let me go.

I don't say anything. Warmth colors my face. Why is he asking? "No, actually, I'm not. Can you take me home?"

He glares at me when I start laughing. "That's not even remotely funny." He grunts and sheaths himself fully inside me. Neither of us moves a muscle for ten seconds, our eyes locked on one another, my hands hanging on to his shoulders.

"I think it was kind of funny."

His eyes drop, and then he shifts his hand from my thigh to between my legs. "I can't wait to suck on your pussy." His thumb grazes my clit. "But first I'm going to fuck you." And then he moves, rocking his hips forward in the seat. "Fuck." He closes his eyes and groans as I begin to move on him, grinding my hips and swiveling. "Fast now, slow later, okay?"

I nod, trying not to laugh.

But then it's not fast. At least not at first. It's anything but that. His mouth drags down my jaw, his body trembling. Callused hardworking hands move over my thighs, spreading them a little wider as he fills me.

Heaven. Fucking heaven is what this is. I know it's so cliché of me to say this, but it's never felt this good. With anyone. Ever.

“Fuck, Ember...” Landon shudders, his body trembling as I slide down him all the way, taking all of him inside me. “You're so fucking wet. I love how greedy your pussy is for my cock.”

I knew Landon talked dirty, but hearing these words slip past his lips directed at me, it's almost more than I can take.

“I thought you said fast.” I smile, his movements slow and his breathing ragged against my neck.

“I lied,” he says breathlessly against my skin. The action sends a wave of chills over my body, gnawing at me. “For now.”

Drawing back, he stares at me. Brushing my hair from my face, he cups my cheek, searching my eyes. It reminds me of the night we met. The night we really did become dependent on one another. “Never enough,” he repeats his words from earlier. Lifting me up by my waist, he gasps, then slides me slowly back down onto his cock. His eyes close, a soft groan falling from his parted lips. There's a hint of sadness that crosses his face before he recovers.

Sadness? Why would he be sad? Leaning forward, I kiss his neck.

His head buries in my neck again, his breathing picking up as we find a rhythm together. And he's right. It's a hard and fast pace. There's nothing at all gentle about it.

He intently watches me, every hint of emotion detailed for him. I'll never have enough of this, of him. He's ruining me. The blood pumps faster in my veins, and I know this is crazy, but it's everything I've ever imagined since I met him. Sure, I didn't exactly anticipate it being in a car, but maybe that's what I needed from him. There's something more exciting and bad about it.

His feet shift, and his buckle clanks as it hits the console below as his legs fight to find something hard to brace himself against and gain the leverage he needs to push up. When he does, he moves me a little, his head falling back against the seat, his hat shadowing his face. I knock it off his head. I have to see his eyes during this. This moment changes everything about us. I want to witness every single emotion that crosses his face.

With him grunting and thrusting inside me, his hands stay on my hips, fingers digging into my flesh with each thrust. No words are spoken—we need this too badly. With a grunt, his hips rise, and his right hand pushes me down hard on his lap, filling me completely. He moves both hands behind my back and then curls them over the tops of my shoulders, the leverage he needs to go deeper. When I push up on my knees, he slams me down, and we work together like a trained offensive line would.

There's one thing about car sex. The sweating. With all the heavy breathing and the windows rolled up, it gets hot quickly. "It's so hot in here I feel like I'm going to pass out," I tell him, why, I'm not sure. Probably because I really do feel like I might pass out.

Landon stops, rips his shirt off—I don't know why we hadn't discarded that earlier—and then reaches forward, adjusting the air conditioning without missing a beat, only it's blowing right up my ass. I'm kind of ashamed to admit this, but it feels kind of good. Shh, don't tell him.

I know it's not the time to pause in the middle because you just want me to get to the good stuff, right? Sorry, I have to set the scene for you. So yeah, both of us are sweating and the most ironic, weirdest shit in my entire life happens. I bump the knob to the radio and KISS 106.1 is playing. Can you take a wild shot in the dark as to what song is playing?

Okay, give up yet?

I'm waiting.

Great, you give up. Fucking finally. It's "Cry for You" by Jodeci. I don't know why, but I laugh because, apparently, I can't take this seriously. As I try to hold back my laughter, my body moves to the slow beat, and it's more than Landon can take.

"Fuck," he cries into my hair, pushing it to the side, his hands tangling in it. "I want this to last forever, but I'm gonna come soon."

#hotAF

I exhale noisily, close to a moan, but then I fucking laugh again at the likelihood that the song I imagined earlier is now playing.

This time he stops, midthrust, and gives me a glare. "What in the fuck is so funny?"

I study his face, the sweat beading at his temples, the flush to his cheeks. Goddamn, he's so hot like this. "The song. It's funny."

"How is it funny?"

"It just is. You know, I cry for you... doesn't it at all sound ironic?"

With a growl—I'm not shitting you, he growls at me—he grabs my face between his hands and then thrusts his hips up, his cock burying deep inside me. "Pay. Attention."

He watches my every move with a heavy-lidded gaze. His rapt attention on me as I fall apart for him, above him, is everything he wants.

"It's so much better when I can see your face as you come." He leans forward, a groan rumbling in his throat as his lips move toward mine. He traces his tongue down my neck to my collarbone.

I breathe out his name and hang on as his cock swells inside me, his hips twitching.

We had sex! It's my first thought. My second is... I don't know, but we stare at one another and I'm curious if he wants a takeback.

"I can't believe we just did that," I say as I disentangle myself, landing in the passenger seat. It's then I remember my jeans are outside on the ground. Damn it. As I'm contemplating getting out and retrieving them, Landon tosses the condom in the trash bag he keeps tucked behind the seat, then opens the door and picks up my jeans and hands them to me.

He stares at me but doesn't say anything.

"What?" I ask, turning to him.

"Are you okay? You look nervous."

"I'm fine." My delivery is convincing, but it's hard to sound believing when you don't own your words. Emotion clogs my throat. My hands fidget with my jeans, trying like hell to hold in the swell of emotional girl feelings crashing down on me. I'm no longer laughing.

He grabs my hand. "Let's go check on those hoodlums."

I smile, thinking of the kids. It's nice to think about them and not obsessing over what this means now that we slept together. Will our friendship change?

There's a grin pulling at the corners of his mouth, and just before I'm about to ask him what's so funny, he leans over and nestles his face against my neck, and he whispers, "Baby, I'm beggin', baby, I'm beggin', beggin', baby."

I burst out laughing. Again.

3RD QUARTER

26. LANDON TRENCHES

Trenches – The offensive and defensive lines. Games can be won in the trenches, which means the team whose linemen perform better on that day come out ahead.

Last night was the best night of my life.

You don't hear men say that very often, unless of course they had, well, sex. Or something equally satisfying. Like winning the Super Bowl. That used to be the best night of my life, until I fucked Ember.

You're not surprised we had sex, are you? I knew what I was doing getting those tickets to the concert. I knew if anything would convince her to be alone with me for a night, it'd be The Hunna and you know, I want to personally thank those guys.

What I wasn't expecting was for it to happen in my car. Believe it or not, that's a first for me. Well, aside from high school and the only safe place out of Oma's watchful eyes was my car... and the attic. Getting dates to follow you to the attic is tricky though.

Want to know the crazy part about all this? I'm fucking clueless when it comes to women and how to make it work. I know you're thinking, Landon, look at you, that can't possibly be true.

Sadly, it is.

Now, please consider that from this point on because you know I'm bound to fuck this up. To help you understand why this is, let me take you back oh, about nine years ago when I was in high school and had been dating Veda Qualls for the past year. She was my first "real" girlfriend. Not my first... but the first I gave my heart to. I loved Veda. I love to tell everyone I didn't, but I did love that sweet little blonde and her quirky ways. Here I was the high school quarterback, king of the school, and Veda was the book nerd who used to read *Romeo and Juliet* at my games and occasionally look up to see me running plays, bringing the Allen Eagles to their third state title.

Now, you're probably wondering how it all fell apart, aren't you?

She left me for Revel. I get it, broody types work together better, and I did sorta have an on-again, off-again thing with a cheerleader, but it stung having Veda sleep with my brother. Revel didn't know any better. I don't say that out of stupidity. I never told anyone I was dating Veda so how was he supposed to know when she basically seduced him? Fuck, our family is fucking weird.

Anyway, the point to the story is I have absolutely no goddamn clue how to date, love, or keep a woman happy. But with Ember, I want all that. She'll never have another man

touch her now that I've gotten a taste of that pussy. Not literally, but you know what I mean. The pussy tasting will come, though. Soon, very fucking soon. Like now.

I don't want to get out of bed this morning. There are a few reasons for this. Look who's in my bed?

Don't stare... it'll freak her out, as I've been told, after staring at her this morning. I convinced her to stay the night with me and we had sex two more times. I'd like to go for a third down before I have to leave for practice.

"Stop staring at me."

Told you. Nice going, you've pissed her off. And yes, I'm talking to you, not me. I wasn't, maybe a little, staring at her.

I'm on my side, my arm curled under my head, watching the clock and knowing every minute wasted is another one I could be inside her. Or tasting that pussy I'm dying to get a lick of. In fact, I think I'll do that now.

I whip the blankets back off her and slide lower on the mattress. Hovering over her, I sink down and flip her shirt up over her tits.

Ember shakes her head, swallows hard and finds her words in the form of a question. "What are you doing?"

I have my head between her thighs now. "Having breakfast."

"We should get up." She tries to pull me up by my shoulders. "The kids will be up soon, and I want to go through the morning routine with Kasen once more."

“Not a chance.” I knock her hands away and then curl my own around her ass cheeks.

I drag my nose along her slit and inhale. I take a dramatic pause and wink at her.

“There’s not enough time.”

“There’s enough time for this. I’m investigating this clit ring. Who gave it to you and why didn’t I know about it until now?”

Lifting her head off the pillow, she scowls down at me. “It wasn’t any of your business.”

I squeeze the cheeks of her ass, kneading the perfect plump mounds between my hands. “It’s my business now.”

She’s not wearing any panties so I don’t have to worry about that, but the moment I catch the scent of her pussy already drenched in anticipation for what I might do to her, I lower my mouth to her cunt. Flattening my tongue, I keep my eyes on hers for the reaction and lick her once until the tip of my tongue hits the barbell in the hood of her clit.

Ember writhes beneath my hold on her and arches her back. I have to hold her in place as I take the barbell between my teeth and tug with the slightest bit of pressure. I slide my finger along her cunt, the image making me so fucking hard I have to shift my hips against the mattress. I nearly come right there. No lie. Her pussy juices are like liquid kryptonite and I’m fucking hooked.

Ember lets out a lengthy moan, her hands on my shoulders. For good measure, I add another finger and suck

her clit into my mouth, so warm and wet, making her cry out. “You taste good,” I mumble around a mouthful of pussy.

I’ll admit, I haven’t been with a woman who had a pierced clit. And even if I had, I doubt I would have paid much attention to it. Now I’m pretty much obsessed. I’d like to say Ember’s on the same page as me because her hands fist my hair, holding my head down between her legs.

I pull away, needing a breather, but then I hear the goddamn door open. Ember yanks the blankets up over my head in one swift movement.

Damn it. I could have sworn I locked it. Apparently, by the sound of Haisley’s voice in the room, I did not do this.

“I can’t find my school uniform,” Haisley tells Ember. “Why are you in Uncle Landon’s room?”

“I uh... it’s in your bedroom. I hung it up in your closet,” Ember tells her and then slaps the pillow over her waist, right where my head is and I nail my chin against her pubic bone.

Have you ever been suffocated by blankets? It’s not fun. And that’s exactly what happens to me. While Haisley and Ember have a goddamn conversation about where the uniform is or isn’t, I might die because of lack of oxygen.

Two can play at this game. With some effort, I lift my head and clamp my mouth on her pussy.

“Maybe you should go check your closet.” Ember’s voice wavers with each word.

Haisley catches on. “Are you okay? Why is there a pillow on your stomach? Where’s Uncle Landon?”

The bed dips and Haisley sits down. I assume. I don't fucking know. All I know is I can't breathe very well. But, I will say, if I die between her legs, you're not getting any complaints from me.

Ember shifts underneath my hands that are still on her ass, trying to roll over, but I don't allow her any movement. "He's uh... in the shower. I was just about to get up."

"Yeah, but why are you in his bed? Did you have a sleepover?"

"Haisley honey, go get dressed for school," Ember says, her voice trembling as I carefully suck her clit into my mouth.

If she's going to suffocate me with the blanket, I'm going to keep her right where I want her—on the edge of insanity. And I do. During a three-minute conversation, I'm guessing here, I get her off by the way her body trembles and her breathing. I kinda check out because I have no idea when Haisley left nor do I comprehend how inappropriate that probably was. I shouldn't have done that, should I? Does it go against a code of ethics?

Needing to breathe, I draw back from her about the time she rips the blanket and pillow off my head.

Finally, a breath! I look up at her. Her eyes are half closed, dazed, and her hair is falling in her face. "Did you come?"

She nods and scoots up so she's propped against the headboard.

I draw in a couple deep breaths and sit up, my cock hard as a rock. It fucking hurts and it's throbbing. "I nearly died."

"That's dramatic."

I blink slowly. If I were to look in a mirror, I swear to God I probably look as if I ran a marathon. I can literally feel the burn in my cheeks. “You were suffocating me.”

Ember rolls her eyes and swings herself around to the side of the bed. “I was not.” Standing, she walks over to the closet door and pulls on a pair of shorts.

“Where are you going?” I gesture rather dramatically to my dick and its hardness that’s not going away. “You have something to take care of.”

“I have to go help Haisley find her uniform.”

If my cock could frown, he would. Poor fucker. “Oh for Christ’s sake,” I swear, scrubbing my hands down my face, my blood pounding between my ears. “Meet me in the shower?”

A smile tugs at her lips and I can’t read the significance of it. “Sure.”

And then she leaves.

Guess who does not meet me in the shower?



Before these kids were in my life, my morning was spent on a very tight schedule. Everything was planned out, and I kept to my routine, even in the off-season. I’m a creature of habit. Not anymore. My mornings are unpredictable. Look at what happened this morning.

I’ve learned you’ve gotta be prepared for anything. And I do mean *anything*. Like nearly suffocating. Death by pussy. It’s not a bad way to go, but like I said, prepared for anything.

There I am—after my shower—where sadly, Ember did not join me like she promised. I was tempted to take care of the problem myself, but no, I didn't. I'm dressed for practice and a little on edge because I didn't get any this morning.

“Promise breaker,” I whisper in her ear as she's pouring her coffee with one hand and digging through the basket of protein bars on the counter.

Fuck, she's hot this morning. Or maybe I'm just overly horny. She's wearing a black shirt and while the color matches her hair, I like seeing her in lilac tops. They bring out the blue in her eyes. She's perfect in any shade, but I prefer her wild and me between her thighs. Preferably when I can breathe though.

My stare drags down her chest to her shirt, which is tight against her perfect tits, tits I had in my mouth last night. My heart beats faster, but it's her heat next to me, the way our shoulders subtly touch... that's what warms my body. I can't get enough of this girl and for the first time in probably forever, I don't want to go to practice. I want to spend days in bed with her, exploring her inked body and every single spot that makes her moan.

Calm down. This isn't helping your problem, man.

When she has the protein bar she wants—the chocolate mint ones she's constantly stealing from me—she offers me a smile. “Sorry, forgot.”

Unimpressed, I raise an eyebrow. “How did you forget?”

Ripping open the protein bar, she shrugs, completely unaffected by me. “I just did.”

She's maddening.

Adler comes barreling into the kitchen, his backpack on his shoulder and his hair spiked. "Can I go to the Music of Pop Culture after school?"

I think he's talking to Ember or even Cat, but Adler's looking at me, isn't he?

I set my coffee cup on the counter and stare at his spiky hair. "What?"

"The music place." He pauses, waves his hand in my face and practically smacks me. "Can I go?"

"I don't care."

Ember kicks me right in the goddamn shin like she's a child. I hate being kicked in the shin, about as much as I hate being kneed in the balls.

Rubbing my shin, I glare at her. First, she doesn't join me in the shower, and *now*, she's kicking me? What the fuck. "Why did you do that?"

Ember gestures with a lift of her eyes to Adler. "He's nine. He shouldn't go by himself."

"Oh, right." I turn to Adler. "No, you can't go."

A frown twists his lips, and then he adds to the 'pissed-off kid' impersonation and crosses his arms. "Why not?"

I laugh and reach for the football on the counter. "Because you're nine."

Beside me, Cat stares at Ember's lips as she applies some kind of cream. It must be some kind of medicated lip gloss,

but all it really does is make the big-ass blister on her lip look like she sucked her lips into a bottle for a couple hours.

“Your lips look like Kylie Jenner’s,” Cat notes. “Did you get lip implants?”

Being around Cat is like being around Dory from *Finding Nemo*.

I snicker like I’m the funniest fucker around and mouth off with, “Her ass looks like hers, too.”

It earns me a slap to the back of the head. “Shut up. There are kids present.”

Adler smiles and takes the football from my hand, tossing it up in the air and nearly knocking Nalani off the counter. Yes, she’s on the counter again trying to reach the cookies. “*Technically*, I turn ten in a couple days. That’s one year closer to being a man.”

“Technically, you’re *still* nine,” I point out, stealing the football back and reaching one hand out to steady Nalani as she attempts to open said cookie jar she retrieved. I look to Ember and hand her Nalani.

Ember takes her. Nalani offers her a bite of the soggy cookie she’s already had in her mouth. Kindly, Ember denies it. “No thank you, sweets.” Then her eyes land on mine. She stares at me, her cell phone in her other hand. Swallowing hard, she breaks our eye contact and drops her eyes to her phone. She looks good with a kid on her hip, doesn’t she? You tell anyone I said that and I’ll fuckin’ deny it. “You have practice today, and then you have to make an appearance at the children’s hospital. Also, you have an interview with *People*

magazine, and then you need to call Elliott because I think he has an endorsement deal he wants to talk to you about.”

I nod, mentally noting everything I’m going to forget the moment I walk out the door.

Kasen walks into the kitchen carrying Haisley on his back and takes Nalani off Ember’s hip. “Come on, guys, time to go!” he says to the kids who scramble around the kitchen. They’re everywhere, bags and lunches in hand and strangely, it’s organized. There are no cries not to go, and though they’re certainly not jumping up and down to head to school, they’re not giving Kasen a hard time like they were for me.

Turns out having a man-nanny is pretty great. I imagine tonight will go just as smoothly. The kids will do their homework, argue with each other and I’ll attempt to defuse the situation—probably make it worse—and Ember will rationalize with everyone and de-escalate the situation.

And after the kids are in bed, Ember will sneak into my room, and we’ll talk about her paintings. That means we will fuck and I will paint *her* with my seed. You’re not laughing at that one, are you? Didn’t think so. But goddamn, we are going to fuck. On the floor, bed, against walls, up against the dresser... in the shower, really anywhere I can get her to do it, we will fuck.

Football players are human, more or less, but we all have our own thing that relaxes us. Some play video games, some party, some drink, some play golf. Me?

I knit.

Do you believe me?

Didn't think so, and yeah, I'm fuckin' with you.

I like to fuck, and I want to with Ember.

"You're going to let me inside you later," I tell her as I leave twenty minutes later for practice.

She laughs like it's funny, her paints in hand as she heads back to the guest house. "Is that so?"

"Yep. And just so we're clear," I gesture to Kasen chasing Nalani around the kitchen, trying to get her shirt back on. "The only dick you're on is mine now. Are we clear?"

She pauses at the back door, a softened expression on her face. "That's oddly sweet coming from you."

I smile and kiss her cheek. "I thought so too. We have a deal, right?"

This one earns me an eye roll as she opens the door. "I suppose so."

Goddamn her. She makes me so fucking insane. "That's not the answer I'm looking for," I say to the now closed door.

She's infuriating. You know what's sexy though? A woman with smartass comebacks and a taste for adventure. A woman with hips to grab onto, confident, and one who knows her worth. She may not think she's good enough for me, but she's fucking perfect.

27. LANDON

INTENTIONAL

Intentional Grounding – A penalty when a quarterback intentionally throws the ball in a place where none of his receivers can catch it or in an area without any receivers in an attempt to avoid being tackled for a loss of yardage. In addition, for this play to be a penalty, he must have thrown the ball while being in the tackle box and the ball must make it to at least the line of scrimmage. The penalty is 10 yards and a loss of a down.

Once at the training facility, my phone is ringing off the hook with calls from Harper. She's my agent in case you forgot. Harper. Sometimes—and though she's constantly threatening to quit over this—I like to avoid her calls just to see how many times she'll call before calling Ember. I do this for two reasons. To piss Harper off and to get Ember to call me.

When the ringing stops, I dig out my phone and check the messages. There's like a hundred of them. Not really, but there might as well be.

Remember last night in my car while I was sucking on Ember's tits, and that guy snapped a picture? Remember how Ember wouldn't let me get out and kick the motherfucker's ass for taking it?

Yeah, well, she should have because guess what's plastered all over every tabloid this morning?


That picture.


Now, I don't see the problem with this because it's not like you can tell who the woman my mouth is attached to is. For all anyone else knows, it's Alessa.

And herein lies the problem. Alessa. The one posting shit all over Twitter and Instagram this morning about how shocked she is that I would cheat on her. It's such a girl fucking thing to do. Twist it around to make it look like I fucked around on her when, if I wanted, I could dig up all kinds of dirt on her and those Abercrombie sunglass wearing motherfuckers she's constantly hanging on at the shoots. But I don't because I don't give a shit who she's boning.

What I care about is the fact that Ember's covered in tattoos and it's pretty damn clear in the photograph the woman has tattoos on her arm. Alessa has none. Not a single mark on her golden skin.


Opening Twitter, I scroll through the tweets to find the ones Alessa posted.

Alessa Rose  @Alessamrose I can't believe it. My heart's in a million pieces.

Alessa Rose  @Alessamrose @jlorde3310 I know. They've been seeing each other for a while. I just didn't want to believe it. Have you seen her?
@geibrazil She's hardly an upgrade.

Tension rolls through my shoulders, my grip on my phone tightening. Hardly an upgrade? That's entertaining. I'll admit, Ember's not exactly what you see on the runway like Alessa and her posse of friends, but that's just it. She's better. Never one to wear makeup as she doesn't need it; Ember's natural. And I've seen Alessa without makeup. It's fucking scary.

This might possibly be a bad idea, but I type out a reply.

Landon Slade  LC_slade You can't believe it @Alessamrose? Something tells me you're not as ignorant as you lead people to believe.

I promptly delete the Tweet before sending because if I think I have drama on my hands now, instigating her on social media will only make it worse. I know this from experience.

It's when I'm inside the locker room when I realize the implications this presents for me. And then I notice more pictures on the tabloid's website. Ones of the kids and Ember out in the city. Ones of Kasen taking the kids to school and I can only assume they're recent. It's not the first time I've been the center of the paparazzi's shitshow, but this is a first for Ember and sadly, the kids they took pictures of this morning being dropped off at school.

I step into the hall to call Harper. She answers on the first ring.

"I'm taking care of it," she assures me. "Ember's already working on setting up security for the kids."

Though it's a relief she's doing that without being told, I knew she would. Whether Ember wants to admit it or not, she's good at what she does for me and always looks out for me, and now those kids.

The Players Association offers us discounted personal security packages. That's the level of stalking we're at in the NFL. I thought bodyguards were only for rock stars like my brother, until we won the Super Bowl and my name became a household one in Seattle. Now, as you've seen, I can't even go out for a night without my photograph popping up everywhere.

And then she drops the ball hammer on me with, "I think you need to make a statement."

“Why?” I’ve never been one to explain myself to the media. It’s none of their business what’s going on in my personal life. I’ll talk for hours about my career and football as a sport, but they start asking questions about anything personal, I shut them down immediately. And I’ve never once been quoted stating I’m in a relationship with someone, so why should I have to explain myself when it ends?

“Are you seeing Ember now? You realize how this looks, right?”

“I don’t give a shit how it looks. Why would it matter if I am? My personal life is none of *anyone’s* concern, including yours.” I know what you’re thinking, that’s harsh. In my defense, it’s not. Do you tell your maid what’s going on in your life?

Again, I know what you’re thinking. Landon, I don’t have a maid. And two, Harper’s not your maid, she’s your PR Rep. Okay, fine. Do you tell that dude at Edward Jones everything about your life?

And again for the third time, it’s not the same scenario, I get it, but in a way, it is. I should not have to, and I won’t explain myself. When my sister Jenna died, I was a rookie quarterback in the biggest season of my life leading my team to the Super Bowl that year. I never once commented on her death to anyone and still haven’t aside from Ember and Revel. Sure, Komonde’s gotten a few things out of me, but the media? Never. Which is why I didn’t make a statement about Grant dying, or the fact that I have custody of his five kids. Why is that anyone’s concern?

Harper hangs up on me, and I call Ember, only to have the call go to voice mail. That could mean she’s either not talking to me or is painting and completely shut the world out now. I don’t have time to track anyone else down because I’m already running to the

training room where I'm required to report to the team physician's office for a physical and neuro exam.

Rushing back inside the locker room, you know my current mood. The guys in the locker room, they sense it by the way I'm slamming my shit. Usually my leadership and personality for this team are the same off the field as it is on the field—intense when it needs to be, and the rest of the time, I'm somewhat mellow, believe it or not.

Except for when someone has pissed me off.

I pass the exam, practice for two hours and it's when I'm back in the locker room that shit really hits the fan. Hypothetically speaking.

The guys are talking about their day off and how excited they are for our first game this weekend, living it up on the high, and I'm pissed. Not only at the media, but Alessa for blowing this up and that motherfucker for taking pictures of the kids.

Komonde approaches me. "Feelin' all right, LC?"

I acknowledge him with a nod, but that's about it.

"You screwing the help now too, LC?" Justice asks with a grin. "What happened to the model?"

There's laughter behind Justice's words, and it makes me see red. Anger washes through me like I'm having a hot flash. I'm not in the mood for this shit. "None of your fucking business." I put my pads in my locker and hang up my knee pads on the cooler and push the shelf up out of my way before I knock my head on it like I do every other time when I reach for my shoes.

Naturally, as you can imagine, I stopped getting along with Justice when he started fucking Ember.

“Hey, don’t get bent, man.” Justice laughs, removing his jersey and pads. “I was just thinking of callin’ her up for another run, ya know. But if she’s off the market now.”

I drop my shoes on the floor and turn around to face him. “Listen to me, motherfucker!” I slam him up against the wall. “You know nothing about Ember. Nothing. You know a girl who sucked your dick once or twice. I can *guarantee* you she doesn’t remember your dick so keep your fucking mouth shut!”

“That’s all I need to know about her. She gives good head. What else is worth knowing?”

He’s laughing. The motherfucker is laughing. I pummel his ass right with as much force as I can muster. Our bodies slam against the lockers. Guys start breaking us apart, and I’m so pissed that I can’t even think straight. I want to kill him for speaking shit about Ember.

“Both of you fuckin’ relax.” Kumonde stands between us with his hand against my chest. He puts pressure on it with his massive hand. “Enough.”

He’s an intimidating motherfucker when he wants to be, but it does nothing to stop me. It’s not enough. I can’t even tell you why I’m so pissed off now, just that I am. I knock his arms away, and it fucking pisses me off to no end. What the fuck would Justice have to laugh about right now?

Adrenaline courses through my veins, my hands shaking as I grab his jersey he’s yet to take off. “It’s not even about you just being an all-around dick anymore,” I say, watching his reaction to my every word. “It’s about you being a *fucking* drunk.” I shove him backward into Quinn, who catches him by his shoulders. “You not only let me down last week by your lack of attention, you let the whole fucking team down, you piece of shit!”

Justice says nothing. He's hesitating. Only he doesn't back down as his body tenses. He's pissed because I've called him out on his own shit. Not many know about his alcohol abuse because the league doesn't test for it. They want to know if we're on steroids or human growth hormone—we're constantly testing on that, even in the off-season. Most players on the team go out maybe one night a week, Thursdays or Fridays before the light practice days. Playing in the NFL is so physically demanding you don't have time for that bullshit.

I shove him roughly against the wall. He catches himself against the lockers, the metal rattling as he eyes me carefully. "You're the goddamn reason I've spent the last three days in a fog. Were you drunk at the game and forgot your motherfucking job is to protect me in the pocket?"

"Not everything's about you, Slade." Justice's smile is gone. "How about I break that million-dollar arm and show you what you're really worth here?" He rights himself and shoves me away.

It's my turn to laugh at him. "I'd like to see you try, asshole." I'm shaking my head as he watches me, testing and provoking.

He shoves me. "How long have you been fucking Ember?"

I admire his bluntness. There's nothing funny about it, but I smile. Maybe that's why he smiled. "Don't ask unless you want an honest answer." I'm making his head spin and feeding him lies without even saying the words. They dated for a while, and the entire time he thought I was fucking her too. It makes him see red. It's not technically my fault if he's misconstruing what I'm saying as the truth. I didn't lie. He just isn't gathering the truth from my cryptic words.

It's by design, and if he knew me at all, he'd know that.

He waits. His eyes scan my face like he's studying me. He's looking for the lie. And he doesn't see it because he knows I don't lie. I don't need to.

I shove, harder than he does, but not nearly hard enough. I want to rip his fucking head off. I don't like where this is going, and he doesn't either. But then he says something that really sets me off, a deeper darker part of my life I never talk about. "You know where all this started."

I do know where it started between us and it wasn't Ember. It wasn't even Alessa.

It started with Jenna.



Whether I wanted to continue that fight or not with Justice, I didn't. It would have ended in a mandatory suspension. With our first game coming up this weekend, I didn't need that, so I manned up and walked away, despite my pride.

What I should not be doing are interviews.

"Days away from the Seahawks first game of the season against the Miami Dolphins, we're lucky enough to sit down with Slade and the upcoming season." Tia, the reporter interviewing me crosses her legs and smiles like we're old friends. I've never met her before today, and if I had, I wouldn't remember. I'm self-diagnosed with prosopagnosia. You're wondering what the fuck that is, aren't you?

It's a neurological disorder where you have the inability to recognize faces. Like face blindness. I can meet you and immediately I don't remember your name or what you look like. It's sometimes a blessing, and more often than not, a curse.

"LC, you've had a busy off-season," Tia goes on to say, trying to engage me when really, she's staring at the cut below my eye and

dying to ask what it's from. "As you're preparing for your fifth NFL season, you're adjusting to being a new father. Your brother, Grant, recently passed away and now you're raising his kids, right?"

I nod. What else am I going to do? Break down and Barbara Walters this shit with water works? Truth is, I haven't cried since Grant died. And I know that might make me out to be a total douche, but I wasn't close with him.

"That has to be life-changing for you transitioning from the most eligible bachelor in Seattle to life as a dad?"

"Yeah, it has been something for sure. I'm lucky enough to have my best friend there for me and helping out with them. They're great kids though." This isn't the first time I've mentioned Ember in interviews, and it won't be the last.

Tia smiles, adjusting her posture as she delves into her next question. "Do you think all this change will affect your performance?"

Toying with the bottle of water in my hand, I don't look at her. "I think it's affected me a little bit, but not drastically. But I feel 100 percent healthy and ready to roll."

"As you head into the season and evaluate yourself, do you still see any areas where you need to improve?"

Thankful the questions are about the team, I draw in a deep breath and relax into my chair. "There's always room for improvement." And I leave it at that.

Tia's lips purse, like she can't believe I'm being so difficult. I don't know why she expected anything less. I'm known for shunning the media. I don't like interviews. "The Seahawks have been Super Bowl contenders pretty much every season you've been there, but you guys have only the one ring to show for it so far. You know as well as I do, championship windows do not stay open for

very long in the NFL, so I have to ask, is there a growing sense of urgency to get another one, or has the mentality remained the same since your first Bowl win?”

Leaning forward, I catch her eyes. “You know, I’ll go ahead and ignore your dig with the questions, but just so you know, the goal is *always* to win. You start every season with that intention. I think there’s always been a sense of urgency because we’re so competitive. We always want to be the best in the world. That’s just how we think.”

Tia doesn’t back down, and I gotta hand it to her. Women reporters constantly have to prove their worth in the sports industry, and she can certainly handle herself. “What do you think holds you guys back from getting back to where you want to be and winning another Super Bowl?”

“It’s just one or two plays here or there. It’s always going to be the little things and continuing to find ways to win. We’ve been close every year. The past four years we’ve won more games and been in a lot of playoff games and won a lot of them. I think we’re going to have a great team this year. We can’t look back into the past.”

“Speaking of your past...”

Do you notice the way my breathing accelerates? The way it feels like a tidal wave crashes over me? And that’s when the interview stumbles into a part of my life I don’t like to talk about. All you have to do is some clever Google searches, and you’ll discover a past I’d like to forget. Most don’t bring it up because what the hell does it matter? Any reporter interviewing me wants to ask questions about passing yard and touchdowns. There are the occasional pries into my ongoing feud with Justice, but usually, never about my personal past. Probably because I’ve been known to

get up and walk out on them. Until now. I saw it coming too. It's always the female reporters.

“Your twin sister, Jenna, she died your rookie season.” I nod, tightly. “Do you think with your brother dying, the emotions are surfacing again? Do you think it will affect your season?”

I've never once shared what happened to Jenna, and I can't even tell you why what comes out of my mouth next does. The story never gets easier because not a day goes by that I don't think of Jenna and what she could have become. “It's different. I wasn't close with my brother Grant. I hadn't seen him in years... not since Jenna's funeral. With Jenna, she was my twin. There was a bond there nothing could break, so yeah, it's completely different.” Just saying her name is like ripping off a scab and waiting for the pain to hit and when it does, you immediately regret picking at the festering wound and the scar you know is there to stay. It's the kind of pain where you end up on your knees and are slowly bleeding to death.

“She overdosed, didn't she?”

I swallow, my breathing heavier, my posture rigid. I try not to think of Jenna because whenever I do, whenever that memory of finding her dead takes over, the rage comes soon after. I let my mind go blank for a moment, those dark eyes, that smile... *her*. I don't like to admit it but Marley... she's the spitting image of Jenna, and that in itself makes my fucking blood boil.

The blood in my ears is a whoosh, thumping steadily. Something inside me breaks. My eyes fix on Tia, wanting to burn a fucking hole through her. Fuck her for bringing this up today.

“Why does it fucking matter how she died?” My eyes bore into hers. I rip the microphone off my shirt and throw it at her feet. “Interview's over.”

I walk out of the room, photographs snapping and the media swarming me. I don't look at anyone. I do stop in front of Harper, who'd been standing there watching all this. "What the fuck was that?"

She sighs. "I can't control them trying to pry, Landon. I told them ahead of time not to ask, but I can't stop them from doing so."

"What the fuck do I pay you for then?"

I know, it's harsh.

I've lost in my life. I've lost my parents, my twin sister, my brother... and the only place I've ever had control of anything is on the field, and even then the term *control* is relative, because is anyone ever in control?

I don't need reminders of it. The memories, the nightmares, they're bad enough. Avoidance is a blackness I can sink into. A way to forget the haunting reality that anything I love dies.

I stalk past Kumonde and Quinn in the hallway and rush out to the parking garage. Once in my car, I draw in a shaking breath and toss my cell phone in the center console.

You're probably curious about Jenna, I know. And I suppose for the most part I've kept you in the dark long enough.

She died.

Satisfied?

Didn't think so.

I'll go back further.

She died five years ago.

Good enough?

Fuck, you're impossible.

Okay, I'll take you back further.

Jenna... she was a breath of fresh air. Everything about her drew you in. Beautiful, energetic, always smiling and fucking smart as hell. I was never good at school but Jenna, she was doing geometry in kindergarten. Not even joking, the girl had everything going for her.

We moved to Seattle together when I signed with the Seahawks, and she was finishing her degree at the University of Washington and interning at Harborview in the ER. She met this guy, Clay, a drug addict who came into the ER one night. I don't know all the details, but I know Jenna, and she wanted to help everyone. Even Revel and his problems. She was constantly trying to get him to stay sober but with creativity comes obsession, and you're never going to take the bottle away from him. Revel's not where this story goes though. It begins and ends with Clay.

About six months after she met Clay, her personality began to change, and while I constantly questioned it, she denied anything was going on with her. Then her appearance subtly deteriorated, and I knew it was more than the guy. I saw it with Revel... and then I saw it with the other half of myself.

I tried, God, did I fucking try to get through to her, but in the end, she became addicted to the same drug as Clay. Heroin. My sister. My twin sister... the one who was working her way through University of Washington to becoming a general surgeon, had become addicted to heroin because of her boyfriend. Never would I have thought someone like her would fall victim to addiction. Wouldn't have ever crossed my mind.

She overdosed at the age of twenty-one. I found her dead in her apartment two days after we won the Super Bowl my rookie season, and that's the day my world changed forever. It wasn't when my parents died.

No, it was *that* day, that dreary gray morning in Seattle when her bright blue eyes became gray and the life had been sucked from her body.

28. EMBER

TUCK RULE

Tuck Rule – An incomplete pass where the football comes out of the quarterback’s hand as his arm is moving forward in a passing motion (might have been trying to pass but changed his mind, or he might have been faking a pass) and he’s not completely brought the ball back under control. The play is frequently confused with a fumble.

It takes me all evening to apply texture to the piece I’m working on and then another twenty minutes of cleaning brushes before I slip into the shower that night.

I haven’t heard from Landon all day, and I’m not surprised about that either. Not after seeing those photos and hearing from Harper and the interview.... I knew when I saw Landon tonight—if I did—his mood would be off.

Lying on the bed in one of his old T-shirts I stole from him while moving, I’m half waiting for him when I notice the lights from his car sweep across the driveway. The guest house faces the drive, and I count the seconds in my head to how long it will take him to reach the garage door, or if by chance, he skips the house and comes directly to the guest house.

There's no knock, but the subtle creak of the door opening, followed by my bedroom door. He came to see me. In that moment, all the emotions of last night and this morning rush through me. What will he say? Will he want to talk about the interview... the pictures? How I left him hanging this morning?

He opens the door, then closes it and twists the lock. With a deep breath, Landon's eyes sweep over the dimly lit room and the candle burning on my nightstand. I fight the urge to blow it out. It's too romantic, right? Candles burning hint I'm expecting romance, and that's not something that's going to happen here. Thank God I didn't have some sappy music playing.

I sit up in bed, my hands fidgeting with the hem on the shirt, as if it will somehow distract me from *him*.

"Hey," he says simply, as if nothing happened today.

I pinch my lips together, shrugging. "Hey."

His forehead creases, looking around, like he's being set up for a practical joke. "What's wrong?"

"Where were you?" I ask. Whoa. Where'd that insecurity come from?

"Practice."

"It ended four hours ago."

"So," he says casually, like it should make a difference. "Didn't know I had to check in with you before I went out for a drink."

Annoyance gnaws at me. Landon's always good for popping off with a line or two to piss me off throughout the day, but I didn't exactly expect him to say that. Breathing in deeply, I push the anger aside when I notice him swaying, catching himself against the wall. He's probably upset over the interview. "You've been drinking?"

He frowns. "So what if I have been? You're not my mother."

What a tool. "Don't be a dick. You know what I mean. You never drink during the season."

He shrugs, shifting his weight like he's uncomfortable. "Well, I was." He pauses and swallows, as if it's difficult. "I needed it after today."

"I heard about the interview."

"I... yeah," he says, breathing in deeply, his hand pulling at the back of his neck and avoiding my eyes.

"Are you okay?"

He drops his hand from his neck. "No, not really."

He sits down on the edge of my bed, and I move closer to him, next to him. "Do you want to talk?"

"No." He wraps his hand around mine and tries to pull me onto his lap. I won't let him. "What's wrong?"

"I'm worried about you."

With the soft flickering of the candlelight against his face, I watch him closely, waiting for the crack, the break in his shield he's put up tonight. He doesn't say anything, his gaze

going to the floor. “Don’t be.” He frowns, licking his lips. “I’m fine.”

I blink at him, my heart so loud I can hear it beating in my ears. And they’re hot too, like they’re on fire. “Are you though?”

He raises one eyebrow at me, his mouth open, jaw tense. “Why even ask the question if you’re not going to believe what I say?” he mutters.

Is he fucking serious?

I think he instantly regrets saying that because he stares at me. “Sorry,” he says, reaching out for me.

I push his hand away. “Nope.”

“No?” he prods, his eyes full of fire.

“I’m saying no until you talk to me.”

He reaches out for my hand again and yanks me toward him. Our chests collide. “Can’t you just accept that I don’t want to talk tonight. I just want you.”

I glare at him because I can feel myself caving. “So you just want to fuck me instead,” I say quietly.

“Yes.” He leans in closer. “It sounds shitty, I know.”

Reluctantly, I let him pull me onto his lap and use me to forget the demons inside him. He’s not perfect, and neither am I. He might only give part of himself to me, but I’m guilty of the same. You only give the parts of yourself you’re willing to have broken.

Swallowing hard, his eyes burn into mine in the dim light. “Tell me you don’t regret this. Tell me this all means

something to you.”

“While I’m surprised you even have to ask...” I take a deep breath, steadying myself. I feel like I’m smack dab in the middle of a sappy Ed Sheeran song. “...it means everything to me.”

“Good.” Like the snap of a ball in real time game action, he has me on my back in the middle of my bed. “Because I didn’t get to finish this morning and this time, I plan to.”

I let him push the T-shirt up over my bare breasts, wishing I was already naked. “Are you on the pill?” he asks quietly against my neck. No surprise, but my lips still aren’t ready to be kissed. He draws back, our stares locked together. “I don’t have any condoms on me, and I really want to go without.”

“Yeah, I’m on the pill,” I tell him, my heart swelling that he would trust me like this. The Landon I know might as well have a condom permanently on his dick because I know for a fact he’s *never* been bareback.

“Good,” he says with a glint of a smile, and then he frowns, his focus on my lips. “When are your lips going to heal?” Without waiting for a response, his mouth crashes to my neck, lapping at the sensitive flesh, biting and sucking. “It’s driving me *fucking* insane not being able to kiss you.”

With one hand behind my head, his other holds my face as his tongue assaults me with passion. I want to rip our clothes from our bodies immediately.

In theory, I want to give him everything I’ve never given another, but the independent side of me, the guarded side,

wants to be careful because I know just how easily this can fall apart.

I want him to consume me completely, like the way black takes over a painting and all you see is the darkness. I want him to control me. I want all of him, deep inside, our colors bleeding together creating one image.

Then what? What happens to me then? For now, I don't want to worry about the future or what this means. Not when I'm with him. I don't want to put this in terms of a definition when maybe it doesn't need one.

I want us to escape the haunting past that brought us together the night we met. I want us to be what we started out as, friends, and maybe more. My thoughts fade when I hear the clanking of Landon's buckle, the sound of his pants being unzipped.

He devours me like a wild animal and I hold the back of his head, my hands tangling in his hair, letting the beast have his way with me. I arch my neck, unable to get enough of him. Squirring beneath him, I moan loudly.

When he shifts to his right, his hand slides inside my panties to where I'm pretty much a slip 'n slide for him. "You want it," he murmurs against me, his harsh words filling the space between us. "Don't you?"

I pant out a breath. "No, not at all."

"Liar." He slides a finger along my opening and then focuses on my clit. #imagoner

I squeeze the back of his neck, his skin hot to the touch, and I'm so ready for him, greedy for more. "Don't tease me."

“Tease you?” He laughs. “Yeah, like today wasn’t miserable for me. You got off earlier. I had to go all day thinking about this sweet pussy of yours.” His fingers prod along my clit ring, teasing, and then without warning, they plunge inside me. Though it’s only been hours since I felt him this way, a gasp escapes my mouth. “Fuck, Em.” He brings his lips closer to my mouth but doesn’t kiss me. “You sound so hot when you’re vulnerable for me.”

“I *am* vulnerable for you.” I draw in a shaking breath when his fingers slowly withdraw. “Fuck me,” I beg. “Show me how much you own me.”

A smug smile plays at his beautiful lips I’m dying to have on mine. “I plan to,” he says, pulling his shirt off.

He has a serious fucking obsession with my tits and nipple rings because he goes back to them the moment I’m bare. It’s annoying, but whatever. Because, while he’s humping the hell out of my thigh between his legs, his fingers slide back inside me. All is forgiven.

He pinches my nipple between his teeth, teasing as he slides the barbell back and forth with his tongue. Three of his fingers plunge inside me and I expand around him, every inch of my body on fire and begging for more.

“Fuck,” he growls as he removes his hand, and promptly sucks on his fingers. Yep. He did that. Sucked those fuckers like he’s licking sauce from his fingers and never breaks eye contact with me in the process.

My eyes widen. My God. He’s so fucking hot. I don’t even know how else to explain it, but the rush that rips through me at the sight is more than I can take.

“You taste amazing,” he says, his eyes wild with lust. I shouldn’t be surprised by this, but he dips his fingers inside me again, and I think he’s going to get me off but to my disappointment, he withdraws them again. “Stick your tongue out.”

“Why?”

He grabs my jaw with his other hand and then places his fingertips he just licked on my blistered lip. “Because I fucking said so,” he growls, his voice throaty and sexy, his words evidence of the power he has over me.

Naturally, since I seem to like being told what to do by him—in bed at least—I do as he says, swallowing and then sticking my tongue out.

He paints my juices on my tongue. “Taste how fucking good you are.”

I’m salty, musky, slightly sweet, and it’s not as bad as I expected. I still wouldn’t go eating pussy, but it’s not horrible.

Before I know what’s happening, he’s ripping my panties off completely and pushing his jeans down over his ass. His hard body looms over me. After kicking his clothes aside, he’s stripped me bare like he’s done to my heart.

I drop my eyes lower to where he’s completely naked. I know I’ve seen his cock before, but now that it’s illuminated by the soft glow of the candle, it’s like Thor’s hammer. You can’t look away from it. No, no. It’s the Holy Grail on display, and it’s somewhat intimidating staring at it now. I know, I know, it’s been in me already, so what’s with the nerves now, right?

It's the goddamn candle. I need to blow it out. It's making me crazy.

I focus on his cock for a good amount of time, but when I look up, I'm met with smugness, but if you look closely, you'll see the vulnerability in his eyes. It's unmistakable to me.

It's a little bit weird, but I motion forward. "Put your cock in my mouth."

That's sexy, right? No. It's not.

Landon laughs. "Don't have to tell me twice." And then he basically straddles my chest and chokes me with his cock. I bet from your view this looks rather awkward, right? There I am on my back and Landon's on all fours, his cock in my mouth. It's like a dirty game of twister, and I'm pinned.

Grasping his cock at the base, I sink my mouth around his silky-velvet steel shaft. It's so warm and smooth, it's everything I dreamed it would be. Closing my eyes, I moan and swirl my tongue along the sensitive underside before circling his head.

Shit, I could do this all day.

He lifts his right hand, the one making him millions, and tangles it in my hair. With a groan, his hips buck forward, and I take him all the way in, my lips hitting my hand still cupped around the base. I choke once, and then recover beautifully without making too much of a scene. Aside from the fact that it hurts my lips like a goddamn bitch. Blow jobs might be worse than kissing.

"If you keep doing that, I'm going to come in your mouth," he says breathlessly, squeezing his eyes shut. "I really

want to see that happen, soon, but not tonight. I need to be inside your pussy when that happens.” He pulls his cock out and stares down at me with unrestrained lust. “You ready?”

I nod. “I’ve been ready all day.”

Crawling backward, he positions himself at my entrance, and with one swift move, he pushes into me.

A gasp leaves my lips the moment he’s sheathed inside me.

A smirk paints his.

“Miss me?” he asks, his body trembling as he pushes himself in deeper.

I don’t say anything. I try and nod, find my words, but it’s too much. He’s too much.

His right hand moves to my hip again, squeezing harshly. “I fucking missed you,” he says through a gruff moan.

Oh, hell.

“Answer me, Em.” His voice is thick, teeming with hunger. “Did you miss me?”

When I don’t answer, unable to release the words, he halts his movements. I panic. With a smile, he pulls out about an inch. “I’ll stop if you don’t answer me.”

“Fuck...” I ache without him inside me. “Yes, I fucking missed you.” I push my hands against his chest. “Now knock off the games and fucking fuck me, ya fuck,” I tell him and, to my complete surprise, he bursts out laughing.

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, his laughter fading, and then he’s pounding into me, driving his cock in fast and deep and oh-so

relentlessly. “I don’t know what’s hotter, you telling me what to do or your use of fuck in every breath.”

“Shut. Up.”

He does, fuck me harder, eventually, and his quick pace has my tits hitting my chin and my body on fire. It’s hashtag worthy. #fuckedAF

And then he starts in with the talking again. “You look sexy with a cock inside you.” He licks his lips, his hot tongue almost touching my mouth. “I bet you look even better with one in your ass.”

I don’t answer him. I refuse to. I’m tempted to punch him. He stares down at my mouth, his eyes heavy, his lashes thick. Goddamn, he’s so fucking pretty.

His movements are uncontrolled, an action he fears greater than failure.

Thrusting and panting, we’re one. A shudder runs down my spine, slicing through me. I’ve never had this feeling. It’s not just because of the way he is with me; instead, it’s having someone so far in my head I can’t escape it. It’s like the first time I saw Jackson Pollock’s 1952 Convergence painting and spent two weeks trying to decipher the meaning. Landon evokes emotions in every part of my brain, owning my thoughts and memories.

What if it ends tomorrow? What if he decides this isn’t what he wants? And maybe it will. Maybe there’s no future for us. Maybe these stolen moments between midnight and sunrise is all we have. I’ll take it. Shamelessly, I’ll take anything I can have.

Needing more, I reach between us, for my clit. I need to get off.

“I don’t fucking think so,” he growls, grabbing my hand in his. He pins it to the mattress. He pushes forward with his hips, grunting hard with each thrust. I knew there was a side of Landon that was, shall I say, wild? No. That’s not sufficient. Manic? Yeah, something like that, but this guy relentlessly fucking me, hot goddamn. Where has this guy been all my life? Can I have him forever?

You know those moments in life when you’re experiencing something wonderful, like the day they bring pumpkin spice back at Starbucks? The moments that when they happen you think to yourself, shit, *I’m never going to be the same*. That’s right now.

Without warning, Landon grabs my throat, practically chokes me and growls in my ear, “You’re never to touch yourself again. I own your pussy now.” His hips drive into me harder, with expert ease because he’s the motherfucking quarterback and knows exactly how to dictate a game and play the defensive line to his advantage. “You’re going to come all over my cock without any stimulation to your clit. Do you understand me?”

I’m not all that sure he’s looking for an actual response because how can I reply? His hand is on my throat restricting my windpipe. I nod instead.

I’ll give him this. You know why I will? Because he’s unforgiving in the way he fucks, grunting hard with each thrust the closer he gets to coming. I want to bottle the sound up and listen to it forever.

“Are you holding out on me?”

“No,” I pant in his ear, adjusting my body, and then it happens; with just the slightest movement, he hits that spot deep within. You know the spot. The one they tell you exists, but you think it’s something similar to a unicorn sighting. The one most men spend their entire lives trying to find and you can’t unless you’re wrist deep trying to find it? Landon Slade, he finds it with the angle of his hips and the right pressure to each thrust. And then I’m coming on his cock like he wanted. And it’s fucking amazing.

“Landon,” I cry out, my body tightening as the heat of blissful warmth crashes over me.

My body quakes and shudders from head to toe, shaking beneath him as I pulse around his cock.

“Goddamn, you’re beautiful when you come.” Groaning, his movements speed, his cock hardens, pulses, and then he stills his hips, breathing in panting gasps.

His movements slow down, and he moves, rising up on his hands to look down at me. “I’d definitely say you missed me,” he pants, trembling.

I roll my eyes. “And here I thought your head couldn’t get any bigger.”

When he pulls out, he exhales loudly, rolling onto his back. “That’s exactly what I needed.”

I can’t help but smile.

He sighs, rolls to his side and runs his hand up my ribs. “I’m sorry about being a jerk.”

I look at him, his eyes hooded and satisfied, cheeks flushed. “You’re forgiven.”

Rolling over, I face him, the two of us still naked and I don’t mean to be graphic here, but his cum is rolling down my thighs and onto my sheets.

He blinks and his expression shifts. He looks vulnerable. “Were you with Jenna that night she met Justice?”

I heard about their fight in the locker room today. Kumonde called me a couple hours ago to warn me, but I wasn’t sure who it was about. Me or Jenna. And yeah, we both made a mistake with him. In my defense, I didn’t know about the two of them when I got together with Justice. I had no idea he’d been with Landon’s sister.

“Yeah, I was, but I didn’t know about them. I didn’t know until after I was together with Justice and he mentioned it.”

“Why were you with him?” he asks quickly.

I shrug, my eyes on his broad shoulders. They’re a work of art, finely sculpted lines of muscle. “I don’t know. I thought he was different.”

He flinches like I’ve slapped him. “And I wasn’t?”

“What do you mean?”

He shifts, drawing in a careful breath. “All this time we’ve been friends, haven’t you ever wondered what it would have been like?”

The gravity of his words sink in. Down deep in my soul, I’m curious about his meaning behind them. “With me and you?”

He nods, the air swelling between us, full of heavy breaths and underlying meaning.

“Yeah, I did all the time... and it just seemed like every time something might happen, like we might be more, you were either in the middle of the season and the timing wasn’t right, or you were with Alessa.”

He stares at me like I’m an idiot, his breath fanning across my face. “And you were with *Justice*,” he enunciates, and I know what he’s getting at. Reaching forward, he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear. “You were never mine.”

“I wasn’t with Justice, Landon. I fucked him a few times.” Swallowing over the tightness in my throat, I maintain eye contact with him and grab his hand, kissing his open palm. Landon has been with so many women, but I wondered how many of them actually loved him. And I know for a fact none of them love him like I do, the way he deserves. “And he doesn’t even compare to what I have with you.”

I mean every word.

“Tell you what,” he says, winking. “I’ll forget about Justice if you promise to *only* fuck me.”

I laugh. “Is that some fucked up way of asking me to be your girlfriend?”

His lips trail the shell of my ear. “Trust me, baby. You were mine before you had any say in the matter.”

I swallow, but don’t reply. There’s no sense in arguing the truth.

29. LANDON

LEADING WITH THE HEAD

Leading with the head – Any hit by a defender where the first contact is with the helmet. A penalty.

With the upcoming first game of the season, I'm exceptionally on edge. Everything annoys the shit out of me.

I don't know about you, but I only know one thing that gets me to relax.

I'm almost certain you won't be surprised to learn I don't get any alone time with Ember. In fact, it's like she's avoiding me and that's just not acceptable.

So I follow her around the house, and when I find her carrying clothes down the hallway into Haisley's room, I snatch her by the arm and shove her in a closet with me. Yep. In a closet. There's like fifteen of them in this house, and most are the size of bathrooms. Works perfectly.

"It's about time you made time for me today," I tell her, my back against the door. She eyes me carefully, but do you notice the faint grin? No way she's disappointed by this kidnapping.

The light streaming in through the skylight gives me enough visibility. I wondered why there was a skylight in the closet when I bought this house, but now I'm glad there's one as it means I can see her clearly.

“What are you doing?” she whisper-laugh when I trap her against the wall and push a weight against the door. There are no locks on the closets, so I legit carried a weight up here. Perfect planning on my part.

“You’ve been ignoring me all day,” I tell her, sweeping my lips along her neck, and then to really get her attention, I lick the path my lips just made all the way up toward her ear. “It’s time to pay attention to *me*.”

As I had been hoping for, she fucking moans, eagerly wrapping her hands around my shoulders and yanking me to her chest. “I haven’t been ignoring you. *You* haven’t even been home until an hour ago.”

“That’s an entire hour you’ve gone without paying attention to me.” I grab her tits in both my hands and squeeze. My lips move to hers, and I remember the blister but place the softest kiss on the corner of her mouth. “Your lips need to get better *now*.”

With a sigh, she opens her mouth over mine, kissing me gently and it’s so fucking hard not to stick my tongue in her mouth.

Running my other hand up her thigh, I grip her ass cheeks. “Take your jeans off.” I start to unbuckle my belt. It’s been too long. Only a day, hours if you want to get technical, but it’s been long enough.

“Is that a demand?”

Unfastening my belt, I pull out my cock and run the tip over her cunt. “Yes.” Reaching down, I grab the backs of her thighs. When I have a good grip, I haul her up around my waist.

Instantly, she wraps her legs around me and positions my cock against her. “It’s a fucking command.”

That gets her. “No teasing. We don’t have time for that,” she whispers, her voice ragged. “Adler has football practice in twenty minutes.”

“Have Kasen take him.” I rub the head of my cock against her opening. I do this just enough to get my tip wet, then slide in an inch. Our eyes catch, and I can tell a few things by the look in her eyes. One, I won’t last long, and two, my knees might buckle, and I might drop her. Holding someone against a wall of coats isn’t easy.

“He wants *you* to be there,” Ember whispers, pulling her lips from mine and if you’re looking closely, can you see the moment her eyes roll back in her head? Mine damn near do, too.

“I want to be in you.”

“Landon.”

“Fine. I’ll take him.” I slide in further. Goddamn. She’s hot, wet, and so fucking tight. How’d I get so lucky? I don’t ever remember it being this good with anyone else. It takes everything in me not to bury myself balls deep and never ever pull out. “You better get on with it. The play clock is ticking, and we have five minutes.”

Adjusting my hold on her, I widen my stance to prepare for the movements that are about to take place, and I stare at her. “I thought you said twenty?”

“It takes ten to get to the field.”

And now I’m frowning. “I’ll take him in the Bugatti. It’ll take two.”

“You’ve wasted two minutes on the play clock by talking. It’s fourth down. Punt or field goal.”

It’s probably the hottest thing she’s ever said to me. Groaning, I attack her chest and neck with my tongue and lips, nipping at her like an animal. “Fuck, I love it when you talk football.” I push in deeper.

Because I like torture, not really, I pull out in a slow slide then in once again, savoring the feeling of her tight cunt as her walls tighten against my head. Ember shudders in my arms, her forehead resting against my chest.

Smiling, I push back into her.

“I refuse to beg you for this, but hurry the fuck up,” she orders.

“Pretty sure I’m the one in control here,” I point out, pulling out once more to test her reaction. You should know me by now. I like to get her just on the edge of wanting to fucking punch me, and then I give in.

Ember tightens her hold around my hips, and by doing this, I slip in deeper. She stretches around me with a gasp, her pussy so tight and wet I’m lightheaded. Yep. Never been this good. I know, men say that shit all the time when they’re with someone new, but this time I mean it.

“Two minutes,” she points out, her head moving back to rest against the coats behind her.

Enough messing around. Slamming my hips forward, I bury myself in her again, and she hugs every inch. She’s scratching the shit out of my shoulders to hang on, and you know, it’s a lot of fucking work screwing in a closet, against the wall. While I

thought it was a good idea, I'm thinking maybe the floor might have been better. I refuse to admit defeat though.

I also refuse to let this go without her getting off. I strongly believe women she get off every single time you have sex. With this in mind, I reach down and stroke the her clit, but again, fucking against a wall makes it damn near impossible to let go of one of her legs and achieve this maneuver. I nearly rip my own dick off in the process and break the door.

“Stop messing around,” she moans, trying to steady herself against the wall by holding with her arms splayed out.

I rest my forehead against hers. “I want you to come.”

“I am....” And then she's moaning into my neck, her cries muffled against my skin. It's fucking amazing.

It's a second later when I come, the pleasure tearing through me as I bite her collarbone since I can't fucking kiss her. Swearing under my breath, my hips jerk forward, and I pour into her, loving that there's absolutely no barrier between us. I can finally leave my mark on her.

When I pull out of her, the loss of heat is instant, and so is my cum dripping down her thigh. I smile, reaching down for my jeans around my ankles. “Looks like you'll have a reminder of me for a while.”

Ember retrieves her jeans, she looks up at me, her face flushed. Then she notices the cum on her legs, or rather probably feels it. “Damn it. We need to go back to condoms.”

I shake my head immediately and reach for the door handle. “No fuckin' way.”

The moment we're out of the closet, or halfway out of it, Adler is standing there staring at us.

I pull at my shirt, hoping it's covering the bulge in my pants. It's gone down a little, but still pretty noticeable. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long." He shrugs. "I find you in closets a lot." He holds up two fingers. "Twice."

I throw him over my shoulder. "Come on, boy. We got football to get to."

He groans as I carry him down the stairs. "We're gonna be late."

"No way. I'm driving. We won't be late."

Do you think we're late?

If you said yes, you would be right. You can't get anywhere in Seattle in under fifteen minutes. By the time we're at the fields, Adler is a ball of nerves. Turns out his feelings on being late mirror my own.

I'll tell you something else. I didn't think about taking him to practice through. In fact, I hadn't considered about my presence in their lives at all and what it would mean for them. Melanie and Grant were normal white-collar people. I'm not. I'm in many ways a celebrity, and my life is in the public's eye. In turn, these kids are as well, which is why we have security with us. But the moment I step onto that field is the moment Adler's life changes forever. I know what you're thinking. That's a drastic statement to make. But it's true. They no longer think of him as Adler Slade, the boy who can read the defense better than any other player on the team and had eighty-seven running yards last game. No, he's now Landon Slade's nephew.

When you're nine years old and trying to navigate through a new school, new team and find real friends, that's not exactly a title you want.

I try to talk to him on the way home that night, but I'm not sure it makes much of a difference. "You okay, buddy?"

He sits next to me, fascinated by every detail in my car, constantly flipping through the playlist looking for a song he wants to listen to. I glance over at him, waiting for him to answer me. "I'm fine, I guess."

"Did it bother you that I came to your practice?"

"No, well, not really."

It's not convincing, is it?

Nope.

"Are you sure?"

His lips kick up in the corners. "I'd be a lot more sure if you'd let me drive this thing."

"Not a chance."

30. LANDON WEAK SIDE

Weak side – Using the offensive center as the middle, it's the side of the offense that has fewer players lined up. Usually the side opposite where the tight end lines up. Some plays have a balanced formation and don't have a weak side.

Do you have those days when you wake up in the morning, and everything goes wrong?

That's my day.

With the game this weekend being our first, and an away game, we put on our annual fan day at practice tonight before we fly out to Miami. Yippee. Can you sense my level of excitement?

I don't mind a practice being dedicated to the fans, but this shit is crazy. The team goes all out with live music, media everywhere, and cheerleaders. Management pulls us aside prior to the practice and demands we stay and sign for everyone. No exceptions.

It's stupid if you ask me.

"This is bullshit," Quinn says, to no one in particular. We all feel the same way, but most won't say it. I suppose when

you're paid millions every year, and you're a multiyear Pro Bowler, you can say whatever the fuck ya want.

Quinn, he's a fan favorite and knows he's about to have a really bad day. He gets stacks of fan mail every day. Does he read it?

Nope. I think it's more about his ego that he gets so much of it. He will check out the naked pictures he's sent. We all do because he makes us.

I respect the fans who have a deep connection with the team. The season ticket holders who come to every game because it reminds them of a bond they had with their dad or family. That I can respect. It's the ones who come to the practice to talk shit about us. To those guys, we're not human beings. We're commodities, their entertainment and if we're winning, they love us. If we're losing, it ain't pretty.

We head to practice and all goes smoothly.

When it ends, we're mobbed. I'm not talking about the media even—I'll get to that. I'm talking about the rabid fans foaming at the mouth to get their shit signed. They ain't asking either. They're *demanding*, shoving programs, shirts, and hurling crap at our heads to get us to sign it.

And we do it. We sign it all. We take the photos and shake hands and be that unstoppable hero they think we are.

Wanna know the truth?

Most of us are terrified of interactions like this. While it's great to be idolized, it doesn't last forever, and it's a heavy fucking burden to carry on your shoulders every season. Will these fans still feel this way about us at the end of the season?

Probably not.

“LC! Sign this!” a kid yells at me as he leans over the small fence between us, whacking me in the shoulder with a photograph. It falls to the turf at my feet.

Despite the fact that I’m wearing sunglasses, I squint into the sun at the boy. He looks about thirteen, maybe fourteen, and he’s wearing Bailey’s jersey. I already don’t like him.

My eyes drop to the photograph, and though I can’t tell if it’s even me, the number 9 on the front of the jersey confirms it is. Trying to remain polite, I toss a smile his way, nod and retrieve the photograph from the ground. “Sure, kid.”

Just as I’m pressing the sharpie to the shiny paper, he shouts, “Not on the photo. On the side, so it doesn’t mess the photo up.”

I nod, again, and scribble my name in the corner of the photograph. I hand it back to him.

Ember was supposed to be here with the kids almost an hour ago. And I’d call her to see where the hell she’s at, but coach made it clear no phones, no distractions.

These fan appreciation days are great, but they all end up being about the media. The press is going to be all over us, and I want to just get it over with.

Music is blaring, media is everywhere, cheerleaders are prancing around, and here we are, mingling. I hate it.

Quinn finds me, bumping into my shoulder. “This chick on Tinder says her three favorite things are ‘whiskey, beer, and burgers,’” and I’m a little concerned about how big her fuckin’

ass is, but,” Quinn says, showing me his phone, “what do I say my three favorite things are?”

Naturally, while fans are asking for our autographs, here we are discussing profound philosophical issues. I wonder how the fuck he got his phone past management, but this is Quinn. He probably hid the fucking this under his nut sack.

Word to the wise, don’t ever touch his phone. You never know where it’s been.

“Judging by your nightly routine?” Kumonde laughs, joining the conversation, his massive hand slapping Quinn on the back. He’s got his daughter Kalana on his shoulders, but she’s oblivious to everything around her with a bag of fruit snacks in her hand. “I’d go with Courvoisier, Crown, and Hennessy.”

“No, wait, wait, I got it!” T.J shouts, a giant grin on his face. “Football, football, and football!”

As a multiyear Pro Bowler, Quinn takes football very seriously, he even talks blocking technique over lunch. He’s also what’s commonly referred to as a manwhore. And he has no problem getting laid, but recently, Tinder and swiping right seem to be what he’s into.

Like most of the players on the team, he lives by himself in an apartment he rents, and he doesn’t have any real friends in the city, just other players he sees during the season, so he fills his time with drinking, fucking, and analyzing blitz packages. Typical for your offensive line.

“Fuck all y’all,” Quinn says. “This is serious shit!” He starts typing in one of his many phones. “I’m putting ass, tits,

and pussy.”

We all laugh. “Might as well be honest,” I tell him, smiling. “Wouldn’t want to start the relationship on lies.”

“Hey, LC,” Justice calls out. I cringe at the sound of his voice. “You ever try Tinder? Or just bag the help?”

I sweep my glare to his. “You always got something smart to say, don’t you, Bailey?”

He holds up his hands, Sharpie in hand and winks at me.

What a motherfucker.

After we’ve stood in the sun for hours signing everything fans throw at us, it’s the media’s turn with us. A pack of reporters mob me, suffocating me with questions.

It’s fine, for a while, because they’re asking questions about the upcoming game, but it’s the one asked to my right that sends a sharp pain to my chest. “Can you comment on the ambulance that was called to your house?”

My eyes snap up, searching for who said that. A reporter to my left. I clear my voice. “What are you talking about?”

The reporter takes a step back, his shoulders stiff. “Do you seriously not know? 911 was called to your residence.”

I shake my head, my jaw clenched. In that moment, I don’t think. I don’t worry about telling anyone I’m leaving and why. I just run. Still dressed in my uniform, I run to my car, and as soon as I start the engine, I call Ember, but she doesn’t answer. Next, I call Kasen, and he answers.

“Landon.”

I don't give him a chance to say anything else. "Who and where?"

Kasen answers quickly, "It's Nalani, and they've taken her to Swedish."

I hang up before he can say anything else. I don't want to talk, I just need to drive. I need to get to the hospital and find out what the hell is happening.

Seattle around seven at night might as well be labeled a parking lot. It takes me over an hour to get to the hospital. By the time I get there, my mood is far from cordial. Parking my car haphazardly on the road and sidewalk, I run into the ER straight up to the registration desk. "I'm looking for Nalani Slade. What room is she in?"

The nurse sighs and is about to say something, but when she looks up and sees who is asking, she seems to rethink her answer. It takes her a minute, just staring at me with a look of surprise. "Oh, uh..."

"Yes, I'm Landon Slade." Frustration takes over, and I slap my palm down on the table. "Nalani Slade, she was brought in earlier. *Where* is she?"

The nurse shakes her head like she needs to clear her mind and answers, "Down the hall, third door on the right. Exam room three."

I don't bother to say thank you. My mind is racing, and I just need to see that she's okay. Storming into the room, my first sight is an empty space where a stretcher should be. Second, I spot Ember standing in the corner staring at me with a look of concern.

She gives me a sympathetic look when she sees I'm still wearing my uniform. "Landon." She says my name with a tone of relief. I'm glad one of us can feel some.

"Where is she?"

"They took her for some testing."

"Testing? For what? What happened?"

"She fell off the balcony."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean she climbed the railing to the balcony and then fell off."

I shake my head, my jaw clenched. "How the hell did that happen? Who was supposed to be watching her? Where the fuck was Kasen?"

Anger sparks in her eyes and I know she hates that I'm talking to her like this, but honestly, I don't care. "He was with Haisley in the other room. I was in the room with Nalani. But she—"

"So, wait, you were supposed to be watching her?"

She presses her lips together and looks away. "I was, but —"

"No, no buts. You were supposed to be watching her. This shouldn't have happened. Fuck! Seriously, Ember, like I don't have enough to worry about! First with the pictures, then Alessa, and now this bullshit. You were supposed to be at the field. Why weren't you at the damn field?"

"We were getting the kids ready to go, Landon," she mumbles, pink creeping in her cheeks, her neck growing

flushed. “You can’t possibly think I’d let her out of my sight on purpose.”

I watch her closely. “Do you realize how I found out about this? The damn press! Some fucking reporter asked me right there in front of everyone why 911 was called to my house!” I’m pacing, running my hands frantically through my hair. I feel like my sanity is slipping. I shouldn’t be taking this out on her, I know that, but I can’t stop myself from what I’m saying. “This is going to be all over the news and the papers! Do you know how this looks? I’ll tell you how this looks, like I can’t take care of my family! Fuck. They’re gonna try and take these kids from me.”

“No they’re not, Landon,” she says sharply, her eyes narrowing. “Stop and think about it. Accidents happen all the time. No one is going to think this is your fault. It could happen to anyone.”

“You’re wrong. You know why? Because I’m not just anyone, Ember!” I tell her, my attitude haughty. “I’m Landon Slade, and every day the press, my competition, the public, they’re all waiting for me to fuck up. And here we are spoon feeding them everything they’ve been waiting for. But you’re right about one thing. It’s not my fault. It’s yours. All you had to do was get them in the car and to the field. Why is that too much to ask of you? Why couldn’t you handle one simple task?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she asks, her eyes so full of vehemence that I sort of regret everything I’m saying. She’s never looked at me like this before. In all fairness, I’ve never spoken to her like this, but I’ve also never felt fear like this.

“No, no. You’re not going to blame me. I’m not to blame. My entire life is taking care of you, those kids, and Cat. And you know it. I don’t even know who I am anymore!”

Before I can say anything to her, argue that it’s not true or think about apologizing for acting like a complete douche, Nalani comes in with the doctor. He’s holding her and she’s babbling something about her wrist and holding it up in the air.

“Hi!” And then she spots me, showing me her bandage on her left wrist and forearm. “L!”

My nerves calm the slightest bit knowing she’s okay, aside from the cast. I take her from the doctor and hold her small body to my chest. I’ve never felt relief like this, knowing she’s okay. For someone who didn’t want kids, I didn’t know this gut churning feeling could destroy you knowing they were hurt and you couldn’t do anything about it.

The doctor steps forward and extends his hand to me. “Mr. Slade, my name is Dr. Pierce.” I shake his hand. “We took Nalani down and did a CT scan as well as some X-rays, and other than a broken wrist, I’m happy to say that she is okay.” He smiles at her when she knocks the bandage against my cheek and says, “Boop.”

“We gave her some pain medication.”

I nod, unable to say anything else. My stare sweeps from Nalani to Ember still standing in the corner. She won’t look at me.

“There is some minor bruising and a couple of superficial cuts, but your little girl had a guardian angel watching over her because her broken wrist is the only real injury.”

Nalani lays her head on my chest. “Me wuv you.”

Nothing melts a man’s heart like the words “Me wuv you” whispered by a baby. Holding her head against me, tears sting my eyes and I look to Ember. She’s refusing to look at me now and is on her phone, probably calling Harper because she knows goddamn well this will be hitting the media worse than it already has.

Shifting Nalani in my arms, I hold her closer. “I’m glad you’re okay, kiddo. Ya scared me.”

And then I think to myself, maybe Grant knew after all what he was doing. Maybe these kids were what I needed to make me see there’s more to life than myself.



With Kasen and Ember’s help, we get all the kids back to the house and Ember spends the majority of that time on the phone with Harper where I make an official statement about Nalani’s condition. I don’t feel I should have to, but I suppose it’s needed.

It’s when I’m watching her sleep, her arm propped up on a pillow that it really hits me that she fell from a balcony. A fucking balcony that should have killed her. And then what would I have done? I... can’t imagine my life without them now. I know it’s crazy to think, or even say out loud but today really shook me.

And you want to know when Grant’s death hit me? You were curious when it was going to, weren’t you? It came out of nowhere while I watched his youngest daughter sleep. You

know that saying that grief comes with a surge? Or maybe that's not a saying, and simply what I'm experiencing. It surges through me with every inhale, never fully relaxing as I take long deep breaths. Before long, I find myself searching through the liquor cabinet for relief.

When Jenna died, in that moment I thought I couldn't go on without her. Grant's death was different. I didn't know him, just the idea of him and then with the kids, it never fully hit me that he was gone. Until now. Until I realized his children are in my hands to take care of. He trusted me to make sure they were safe and cared for, and have I done that? All of it sinks in and the quiet coping I thought I had been doing, spills over and I find myself taking comfort in beer.

I'm not a drinker. We've been over this; Revel's the drinker in my family, *but* when I do have a few beers—or five—I say stupid shit and I'm very unpleasant to be around.

I'll be the first to admit nothing went as planned today and, unfortunately for me, it's about to get significantly worse. In every story, there's a point when the character meets rock bottom.

You know in the movie *Bridesmaids*? Yes, I know what you're thinking... you watched that? Well, yeah, I did. Cat and I have a romantic movie obsession, and if you tell anyone, I'll fucking deny it. In the movie though, the rock bottom moment comes when Annie goes all ballistic at the wedding shower and destroys the giant cookie and chocolate fountain in unbridled rage.

Or in *Fight Club* when Edward Norton discovers he and Tyler are the same person and he's holding a metaphorical gun

in his hand. I still don't understand that movie, but that was some rock-bottom shit.

And my personal favorite, Peter in *Office Space*. I'm not really sure where his rock bottom was. Might have been the whole goddamn movie, but at least he handled it with a smile.

That's better than I can say for my rock bottom because this is me. Rock. Bottom.

And... drunk.

And here's where the significantly worse part comes into play. You should probably go ahead and pause here, dear reader. Maybe even stop reading altogether because if it's a happily ever after you're looking for, it doesn't exist. Shit's about to get crazy from here on out.

You've.

Been.

Warned.

Finishing the last of my beer, I swallow, staring down at the floor. How'd I let this happen? I rub my forehead, trying to make sense of all this. One, how'd I get attached to these kids so much that I'm taking all my shit out on Ember, and two, what are the tabloids going to say about this? Harper and Elliott have both warned me that first thing tomorrow morning, the day before I leave for Miami, a social worker will be coming over to meet with me.

I walk into the den, and Ember is in there standing at the window, staring out into the yard. She turns when I come in, her body rigid like she's ready to go to battle. Yeah, well so am I.

“Explain to me how this happened.” I point to the balcony. Fuck, I’m such a goddamn asshole. “I’m not understanding it, and if I have to explain all this to the goddamn social worker in the morning, I might as well have my story straight.”

She sighs like she’s already done before we even get started. “What do you want me to explain?”

“Let’s just say I’m you and standing here. Where was Nalani? How’d she get away? How’d a two-year-old open the sliding door and get out unnoticed? I don’t get it.” I know what you’re thinking, you’re being a douchebag, Landon.

I *know* that I am, but I can’t stop myself. Even I’m surprised by the words coming out of my mouth, and I have no idea what I’m saying. It’s like I’ve blacked out or something.

“Landon, knock it off. God, why are you being such a dick about this?” I say nothing. “Never once have you ever made me feel like I was your assistant. Until today. Until you treat me like this.” I feel like she’s punched me in the stomach. I glance up at her face, searching her eyes. “How does she climb on counters? How’d you find her in the cupboard above the fridge? She likes to climb.” Her words drip with sarcasm. “And it was an accident. What the fuck is your problem?”

I swallow thickly. I hear her words, but they don’t sink in. I laugh because what else can I do? How can she not know what my problem is? She slacked on her responsibilities, and now Nalani is in her room with a broken wrist, yet she acts like I’m the one who fucked up. “My problem is I trusted you to take care of them when I wasn’t here.”

Ember faces me, a breathless gasp falling from her lips. “I didn’t ask for this,” she says matter-of-factly. I look at her in

surprise. “I didn’t *ask* to be your assistant and I sure as hell didn’t ask to be their babysitter. This is on you, Landon. This is *your* life, and you think because you throw money around you can act like it’s everyone else’s responsibility to handle your problems!”

I deserve that, but the unpleasant drinker in me is going to go ahead and be on the defense. “My problems?” I laugh bitterly. “You think I asked for this shit? I didn’t ask for my brother to die, and I sure as hell didn’t ask for five kids.”

I know, I know. You want to fucking punch me in the face. Pretty sure Ember feels the same way. But it’s not her I’m focused on anymore. In that moment, Ember’s eyes shift behind me. The look of surprise on her face causes me to turn to see what she’s staring at. The room grows cold.

It’s Marley. Standing at the entryway to the kitchen and by the expression on her face, she didn’t just get there. “Marley, I —” I shift to approach her, but she quickly turns and races up the stairs, leaving the slamming of her bedroom door in her wake.

Shit.

I turn to look back over to Ember, and she’s gone too.

Double shit.

Be honest. You want to hit me, don’t you? Pretty sure you’re not the only one at this point, but in my defense, if I have any at all, I warned you in the beginning I’d fuck this up. At least I think I did.

“Dude, not cool,” Kasen says, making his way into the den, having heard the entire conversation. He gives me an odd

look. I hadn't realized we had an audience, but in this house, privacy is non-fucking-existent and I'm the least favorite. If this were *Big Brother*, pretty sure I just got voted out of the house.

I stare Kasen down. What the fuck is he even doing here still? Right. He's the nanny and picking up the slack that I can't seem to handle. I have too much goddamn pride to thank him though, and choose to dig the hole into hell a little deeper. Why not piss everyone off? "That's not really any of your business, is it?" Kasen shrugs. I clear my throat, feeling guilt creep in. "Are the kids in bed?"

He nods. "All but Marley." A door slams shut. "I'm assuming now, yes, they're all in bed."

I gnaw on my lip for a moment, wondering if Ember will let me apologize.

"Why did you say those things to her? She's not responsible for her falling, and she's certainly not to blame for it. It was really harsh."

I look up at him and explode because what the fuck right does he have to say anything about how I react? "Excuse me?" I growl, and in a second, I have him pinned against the wall, my forearm against his windpipe. "I should fucking fire you over today."

He gives me no reaction. And just like that, I realize I have in fact lost my mind.

I back away and Kasen coughs as he straightens up. "I didn't mean to offend you."

I don't say anything to that, because his words were justified.

My point? Nothing perfect lasts forever. Even I know that. Even the strongest hands lose their grip.

Kasen stares at me, his eyes cold like mine. He swallows and then his brow pulls together. "I say this as someone who has lost everything, who's reacted much like yourself today, but you're never going to realize her worth. You're a professional athlete, and everyone looks at you like you're a god, but until you see that you don't even compare to someone like her, you're the one who's lost everything."

I really need to fire this guy.

I'm not sure what to do, but I know I can't leave Marley thinking this had anything to do with her and her siblings. Sheepishly, I make my way upstairs and knock on her door. "Hey," I say, like she's going to answer me.

"Go away!" she yells back.

At least I get an answer. "Not a chance. Open the door."

"I said go away! You didn't want us anyway."

I deserve that, but there isn't a chance in hell I'm letting her go to bed angry at me. Having Ember hate me is enough; Marley too, nope. Isn't happening. I at least want to explain myself. I should be able to do that, shouldn't I?

Maybe don't answer that at the moment. Leaning my head against the door, I knock again. "If you don't open the door, I'm going to bust it down, and then you really won't be able to avoid me in the future."

“I’ll move out!” she shouts back, and I think she throws something at the door. If I had to guess, it was a knife and she was carving *I hate Landon* on her wall.

Can you guess what I do next?

Yep. I bust her door down.

Not really. I unlock it with a hairpin I find in the upstairs bathroom Haisley uses. “Told you I would break in.”

Sitting on the floor in front of her bed, Marley glares at me. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Really?”

Her eyes drop to the sketchbook in her lap. “Actually, I can. You don’t care about what we want, so why would you respect our privacy?”

I invite myself in and sit next to her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that in the context you took it.”

She won’t look at me and continues to draw in her sketchbook. “Whatever.”

I remember being thirteen. It’s a tough age. You’re just starting to figure out your existence in the world. You have feelings you don’t understand, apprehensions about pretty much everything, and then you add hormones on top of that and it’s a jumbled mess.

My eyes drift over the white paper and the gray markings she has scattered over the page.

I rack my brain as to what to say to her. And then I start talking, and I have no idea where the words come from, just that they’re spilling out of me. “Sometimes we hurt people

without intention. We make mistakes, and we make them again. Sometimes we hurt the ones we love and lose our temper at the ones who don't deserve it. We place the blame on someone else because it's easier than admitting you're wrong."

Still, even after that, Marley doesn't look up, but at least she hasn't hit me yet, so I continue.

"Sometimes we make it better though. We choose responsibility when the choice isn't easy. You tell someone everything will be okay, even when you know it won't. And you hold them when it isn't. And you love your uncle even when he's a fuckin' dick."

That one earns me a slow subtle shake of her head, but do you notice the slight upturn of her lips. She thinks I'm funny.

I knock my knee into hers. "I know I fucked up."

"Why did you say that?"

I shrug. "I don't know. I didn't ask for you guys. But now here you are, and I can't imagine you going anywhere."

"That doesn't make any sense."

Sighing, I lay my head back against the end of her mattress we're propped against. "I know."

31. EMBER

ACL

ACL – Anterior Cruciate Ligament. A ligament in the knee that when torn requires surgery and 9-12 months of rehabilitation for a player to return.

Have you ever played flag football with boys, and they forget you don't have a cock and balls and they tackle you to the ground and the wind gets knocked out of you?

That's how I feel right now. Like the wind's gotten knocked out of me, and I can't catch a breath. I see fucking stars. My lips are numb. Actually numb.

Are they still there? I touch them to be sure. Yep, there. Just numb... and still tender. Huh. So this is blinding anger? This is what it feels like to be so out of control with your rage that your lips go numb. Who knew? And my face, it's hot. Really hot. Like I have the worst possible sunburn, and my skin's going to blister at any moment.

How could he have said those things to me? He couldn't have meant them, or did he?

And as badass as I want to appear to others, and feel inside, I can't hold back my emotions. They're coming faster

than I can control them.

His words were like knives into my heart, only adding to the fact that I failed. His jaw, the angry way he regarded me, the heat rises in my throat, spreading across my face.

Landon, my best friend, he said those things to me, and it's the first time in our friendship he's ever treated me like his employee.

God, he's so mean, yet so wickedly handsome while yelling at me. Fuck, why was it hot?

Because you're delusional.

Hot tears prick behind my eyes. Nope. You will not cry over this. I even told myself I wouldn't change for him, and I didn't, did I?

Yes, you did, idiot. How often do you paint anymore? Truth is, I stopped doing what I loved when I met Landon because he needed me more than I needed myself.

Hell, I even told myself I wouldn't change for him. Women should never change for a man, and after Percy, I swore I wouldn't. Even from a young age, I hated it when a woman changed for a man. I distinctly remember watching *Grease*, and when Sandy changed her appearance for Danny, I thought to myself, who does that? He either likes you, or he doesn't. Fuck changing for him. You didn't see Baby in *Dirty Dancing* changing for Johnny? It wasn't like she became a completely different person other than learning how to dance.

So why did I?

I wasn't supposed to fall, but I did.

It wasn't supposed to hurt, but it does.

#stupidAF

It's late by the time I return to the guest house. Late enough that Cat's sleeping and I have nobody to talk to. Usually when I'm upset, or sad, I talk to Landon. If I see his face at the moment, I'll probably punch him.

There's only one place left where I can escape my thoughts. Pushing open the door to my studio, I sit down at my table and the mess I've made tossing everything aside every time someone needs me or my attention. The expo is in three weeks, and I have one of my pieces done. It's time I start putting myself before the ones who don't appreciate my worth. It's time to find my heart, wherever it fell.

I paint when I'm happy.

I paint when I'm sad.

I paint for a new beginning, diving in deep into the unknown. Letting the colors provoke a psychic reaction, I paint to understand and deal with pain.

I did some research after Eldon died, then again after Cat's accident about the colors of chromotherapy. For each color, there's a positive reaction as well as a negative.

It said that white is a new beginning, pure and clarifying to the mind. Maybe that's why wedding dresses are white, because it's a new beginning.

Red is love, energy, power, strength, passion and heat, but can also evoke anger, danger, and warning.

Yellow shines with hope and happiness and stimulates creativity. I've always liked the color yellow, but it can also bring out irresponsibility and instability. I've certainly been known to be both.

Turquoise is serene and healing, bringing peace to the mind and body, but also, envy, and femininity.

Green soothes and relaxes our spirit with harmony and renewal, and yet again, can also bring out envy, jealousy, and guilt.

Orange is active and friendly, but it also shows ignorance and sluggishness.

Pink is healthy, happy, compassion, sweet and playful. It's weak and shows immaturity. And then there's blue. I fear this color the most. Maybe because it's the color of my eyes and when I look in the mirror, I see blue. I see love, loyalty, trust, and intelligence. But there's also coldness and fear.

You're probably thinking, what does all that mean?

It means for every action, there's a consequence. For every reaction, there's emotion. That's really what it boils down to.

Drawing in a deep breath, I stare at the blank canvas before me. A text comes through from Landon.

LC: I'm sorry.

Like I said, for every action there's a consequence.

Mine?

I don't reply.

32. LANDON BLIND SIDE

Blind Side – The side of the field facing the quarterback’s back side when he is dropping to pass or standing in the backfield looking to pass. For a right-handed quarterback, this is his left side or the defense’s right side. Teams put their better offensive linemen on the blind side.

“What the hell is that thing?”

Braylee and Adler stare at me, then the cat on the counter. At least I think it’s a cat. Maybe it’s a rat. Are rats black?

Kasen grabs a towel off the floor, picks the wet animal up and then sets him on it. He doesn’t move. “It’s a cat.” Adler reaches out to touch him, and the cat jerks its body to the side like it has a twitch. “We found him outside this morning.”

I’m not an animal lover. They’re messy, smelly, and I don’t particularly like cats. Their fur gets everywhere and that’s not something I can deal with. Also, I had a cat once and he died after Revel threw him out the window. In Revel’s defense, the cat was sleeping in a laundry basket and instead of doing the laundry like Oma told him to, Revel’s answer was to throw it out the second-story window. The cat didn’t make

it. I'll spare you the gruesome details, but there was a car involved too. Ever since Spiral died, I swore off animals. I couldn't give my heart like that again.

"Put him back outside," I tell the kids. "We don't need an animal, and his owner is probably looking for him."

"He doesn't have a collar," Braylee points out, taking the cat in her arms. He curls up in her arms but again, jerks his body in a weird way, as if he's having a seizure. "That means he doesn't have an owner."

"You don't know anything about the cat. Look at him." I gesture to the cat's odd twitchy behavior and his extremely fluffy fur. It's as though he's been hit by lightning. "He probably has rabies."

Kasen clears his throat. "Adler put him in the microwave."

My mouth drops open, and I stare at the kid who looks the most like me. Also, he's wearing my jersey and it's probably by design so he can persuade me to let him have a pet. "You did what?"

Adler's eyes widen. "He was wet. I thought it would dry him faster."

Are you thinking, what in the actual fuck? Yeah, me and you both. But seriously, how the fuck is he not dead? "For how long?"

"Only a couple seconds before I rescued the cat," Kasen tells me, handing the kids their lunches he packed.

"We got a cat?" Haisley yells, rushing into the kitchen to see the animal who's now curled up asleep in Braylee's arms.

And then Nalani comes in, broken wrist and all, squealing as she yells, “Aw, cute!” and rips the cat from Braylee’s arms. He doesn’t even notice and falls fast asleep again. Or he’s slowly dying of radiation poisoning. In the midst of his sleeping, he keeps twitching.

“It’s okay, Twitch,” Braylee says, petting his fluffy black head. “We will take care of you. We know what it’s like to be abandoned.”

Great. Now I can’t get rid of him. I don’t doubt for one moment that’s a dig at me.

Kasen tends to the kids, gets their breakfast ready, and I look at the text messages I’ve sent Ember, afraid to admit how many times I’ve texted over the last twelve hours and she hasn’t replied. I look at Adler who’s sitting next to me eating his cereal. “Is texting her a hundred times too much?”

Adler stares at me blankly, and I’m not sure if he’s trying to remember yesterday or just fucking with me. “You don’t think so?”

I raise an eyebrow. “No?”

“And that’s what’s wrong with you. I’m eleven, and I know that.”

“You’re still nine.”

“Yeah, but I’ll be eleven next year. Same difference.”

“And that means you’re nine, not quite ten and not eleven for another year and two days. You can’t just adjust the number based on what you’ll be next year.”

“Says the guy who texted a girl a hundred and *sixteen* times, but lies and says a hundred.”

“Oh shut up.”

I’m lost wandering around Saturday morning. I have no idea what to do with my life now that Ember is avoiding me. Even though she didn’t technically live in the house with me and the kids, it’s strangely black and white now. I know, crazy, but the color she brings into our lives is gone. I think I even see a frown on Nalani when I make my way into her room before I leave.

Sitting next to Haisley, her eyes find mine. “Hi,” Nalani says, but it’s not your normal hi. This one is about as dejected as I feel.

“Hey, kiddo, how’s the arm?” She’s on the floor playing with her horses, making them gallop on her cast.

Dropping the horse on the floor, she moves toward me and then knocks me in the face with her bandaged wrist. She rubs my head where she hit me. “Owie?”

“No, I’m fine.” They haven’t put a proper cast on it yet and honestly, I’m impressed the temporary cast is still intact. I thought for sure she would have ripped it off overnight.

“Are you leaving?” Haisley asks, handing Nalani another pony.

I nod. “Yeah, we have a game in Florida.”

Haisley’s eyes drop to the floor and then she frowns. “What if you don’t come back?”

“What do you mean?”

“Our parents didn’t come back. What if you don’t?”

Jesus Christ. Talk about a hit to the heart. I was around Haisley’s age when my parents died and honestly, I can’t ever remember having these thoughts. I just knew they were there one day and gone the next. It was a strange feeling of being lost and confused and then eventually angry at them for leaving us. Like they had control over it.

“Accidents happen, yes, so I can’t make you that promise, but I plan on coming back.”

Haisley thinks about what I said or at least pretends to and then smiles. “Will you bring me back a dolphin?”

I stare at her. Is she serious? She’s five. Of course she’s fucking serious. “Like an actual dolphin?”

She nods. “Yeah. Adler and Braylee have Twitch. I’d like a pet dolphin.”

Nalani perks up. “Yeah, pease? Dollpin. I have dollpin?”

How can I say no to a dollpin? I wonder if he’ll fit in the pool?

It’s as I’m leaving for Miami, I realize I shouldn’t be. I shouldn’t be leaving things between Ember and me up in the air like this. I want to go knock on her door, but I know if she’s not answering my one hundred and sixteen text messages, she doesn’t want to talk to me. I can’t say I blame her this time.

33. EMBER

FRANCHISE TAG

Franchise Tag – A ploy by an NFL team during negotiations with one of their own free agents. If a team puts the franchise tag on a player, that player is under contract for a period of one year at a salary equal to the average of the top five players in his position. A team may apply the franchise tag to only one player at a time. The team and player may renegotiate at any time and remove the franchise tag from the player.

Landon leaves for the game, and though I pretend I don't see him leaving, I do.

I avoid. That's what I do when my heart's on fire and raging in flames of regret.

I can't say I regret any time spent with him or the last five years, and I certainly don't regret being with the kids. Okay, I don't regret anything.

Once Landon's gone, Kasen takes care of the younger kids with Cat, running the twins to their football game and Haisley to her first friend's birthday party here in Seattle. I wish I was going with her so I could make sure no kid treats her badly, but I know with the expo coming up, I need to be working.

And I need my mind off Landon. So painting is what my day will consist of.

Sitting in my art studio, which happens to be the spare bedroom of the guest house, I hear a soft knock of the door.

Twisting around, I see Marley at the door with two Starbucks cups in hand. Adorably dressed in paint-splattered overalls and a bright purple shirt, with her long auburn hair in a messy bun. She sighs and holds the cup up. “Salted caramel mocha still your favorite?”

Smiling, I nod and motion her forward. “Yes, thank you.”

Tentatively, she steps into the room, scanning her surroundings. Handing me the cup, she catches sight of my easel. Her chest expands with a deep breath before her eyes drift to mine. “It’s beautiful. I wish I could paint like that.”

“You can do anything you set your mind to.” I tap the stool next to my easel for her to sit down. “Art helps you become yourself by understanding and escaping.”

A tender smile tugs at her lips. I don’t know for sure, but she seems different. Her posture more rigid, her eyes guarded. “How do you know what you’re painting?”

“I don’t.” I shift my focus to the painting. “At least not in the beginning. I start with an idea and remove all traces of reality. You strip it back until every brush stroke, every nuance of light and shade, every swirl of color bleeding into the canvas resembles the chaos you feel inside. The chaos on the canvas, that’s where you find clarity. There’s no beginning, no end. That’s art. When you can’t tell what’s real and what’s not.”

Nodding, she doesn't say anything, but her eyes never move from the painting. She's quiet, taking in everything I said. Never underestimate the power of silence. People aren't necessarily quiet because they don't have anything to say. The most creative people in the world are the ones who listen, think, and observe.

Taking a drink of her own coffee, Marley sets the cup down on my table, but then immediately picks it up. "Sorry."

"It's okay, you can set it there."

Marley relaxes and offers another soft smile.

I nudge her with my knee. "You know your uncle didn't mean what he said last night, right?"

Marley shrugs. "I think he meant what he said. He just didn't mean for us to hear it."

"I'm not about to defend his actions yesterday, but I think with Nalani getting hurt, it was his first reminder that you kids could be taken away from him."

"He said something to that effect last night, but it's clear he didn't want us to begin with."

"You're right, he didn't, but I think he's doing pretty well considering."

Marley thinks about what I said and then stands, reaching for her coffee. "I should let you go." She leaves me with, "If you think that, why haven't you forgiven him?"

It's not what she says, but the look she leaves me with. The one that tells me forgiveness is something she never had the chance to give someone.

I don't know a lot about what happened with her parents, but from the little bits I've gotten out of her over the last month, she had gotten into a fight with her mom about not being able to stay at a friend's house the weekend they died.

Part of me wants to call Landon and tell him I forgive him. The other part wants him to suffer in my silence.



I'm alone maybe twenty minutes when Cat comes in with a party hat on and what looks to be one of those child party bags. "What's that?"

Cat smiles and sets it on the table. "Swag bag. Parents give this shit out like candy at those damn parties."

"And you have it because?" I have to admit, I'm jealous. Cat went with Haisley. I was kind of looking forward to taking her.

"Haisley hooked a sister up." And then she stares at the bag. "I think. Anyway, how are you holding up?"

What a loaded question that is. "You know in *Pretty Woman* where Richard Gere's character, Edward, totally won Julia Robert's character, Vivian, over? Okay, so if I'm Vivian, the hooker—let's use that term loosely—and Landon's the rich guy who buys and sells companies. Wait... that's what he did for a living, right?"

Cat stares at me, her brow furrowed. "You're—"

"Don't answer that."

"But—"

I wave my hand, the one holding a paintbrush, in her face. “No, really. Let’s just say we’re them, and I told myself in the beginning—just like she did—no kissing on the mouth. I broke that fucking rule in the first week with him back when we met. And I know, you’re probably super confused by this, but I promise, there’s a point to all this nonsense.”

“And that is?”

“My point is...” I pause because I think somewhere along that rant, I did lose sight of what I was trying to say. “Well, I broke all my own rules with him.”

“So why did you?”

I lean back in my chair and sigh, setting my brush on the table.

“I have no idea. Maybe because he’s Landon and he has his own gravity,” I tell Cat.

Again, she’s staring at me, and I’m not entirely sure that last part made any sense.

Cat smiles, like she’s trying to be nice. “Okay, so now what though? You’re not talking to him, and he’s so miserable.”

“I don’t know what happens now.” I point to the paintings stacked on the floor and the one on my easel. “I know I have to finish this, but at least it’s coming along.” Every artist has a masterpiece. One they favor above all else. Whether you’re a writer, artist, singer, anything you design from the creativity of your mind, you have one piece you pour everything you have into. Mine is *Blindsided*. And, as you can imagine, it’s Landon.

“You work so hard.” Cat leans into the table, her fingers brushing over the acrylic paint tubes.

“I’ve been telling myself for years I’m going to finish this piece and I know now I need to,” I admit.

Cat stares at the one on my easel. “Holy shit, girl. That’s freaking amazing!”

My eyes drift to it, the shades, the textures, the meaning only I will ever know. While Landon’s mind works in rules, strategy, and execution, this piece, it’s helpless, abandoned, lost, and it’s *him*. I paint secrets, knowing the colors will never reveal the truth. Artists are reckless, so why is it we need to be recklessly disarmed before we can truly uncover our potential?

We ignore truth for temporary happiness.

I can’t keep putting my life off for everyone else anymore, just like I can’t stop my heart from breaking. Truthfully, I’m lonely. I’m holed up in here every day, and it’s lonely. Creativity is funny like that. You can’t make it stop, but you also can’t live with it because that very thing that creates your passion for what you love destroys everything else around you and alienates you from everyone who doesn’t understand it.

I miss the kids.

I miss our daily routines.

I miss helping them with homework, and I even miss begging them to eat something healthy and knowing they won’t.

Most of all, I miss Landon. Okay, I miss the sex, but I still miss him and his personality. Even the things I hate about him, like the fact that he cannot schedule his own flights or manage his own social media.

I'm still working for him, arranging flights, photoshoots and interviews... making sure he doesn't post anything stupid on social media... taking care of him, but I haven't spoken to him directly since last night. I miss my best friend. I ache for him, every second of the day, like a hole in my chest. And I'm angry at everything that happened between us. I'm angry for *letting* it happen and the way he spoke to me.

I'm angry for the way we got carried away, for letting my girl emotions build and build, without thinking about how it would end. He's Landon Slade. I knew how it would end, yet still, I fell headfirst. No, I fucking jumped.

I'm crazy. *It's* crazy. And even though I tell myself it's over between us, the aching in my chest is unavoidable, and my heart tries to work it out. It doesn't stop me from wanting to go to him and apologize, even though I didn't do anything I need to apologize for. It's funny, you can negotiate with your heart as much as you want, but your head... at least there's one rational part of your body willing to deflect the crazy.

Truth is, I love him, and it's killing me that I can't have him.

It's killing me that he said those things to me, even if it was out of anger for the way he'd be portrayed by the tabloids and everyone else waiting for him to fail.

It's killing me that he wants me to forgive him, but I'm too fucking stubborn to do it.

I knew when I slept with him that if anything were to happen between us, I would give myself to him and there would be no coming back from it. Still, like a goddamn idiot, I did it, and it did end badly.

“Em,” Cat says. “Are you all right?”

My eyes drift to the painting, and though to anyone else, it's just a blend of colors and vaguely resembles a quarterback midthrow. To me... when I look at that blend of colors, I see him staring at me, I feel his burning gaze on my lips. Wildfire spreads through my veins, and I sense that hot and raw way his eyes on my body affects me. It's fucklust. By the way, I love that word. Who doesn't? It mean an insatiable sexual desire to fuck the hell out of that certain special someone you think about all the time.

Even when you're mad at them.

I studied French for a short time. I learned one thing. In French, you don't say, “I miss you.” You say, “*Tu me manques.*”

It means, “You are missing from me.”

#truth

Sighing, the sharp pain in my chest refuses to ease. “I'm fine. Totally fucking fine.”

“I think you're lying. You love him and you're pissed off that he was an asshole.”

“I am, but it doesn't change anything,” I admit. It doesn't change the fact that he was my friend, that he became more than a friend the first night we met. That no matter what, we can't work.

“What makes you think it can't work?” Cat asks.

“Because after everything he said to me... in all the years I've worked for him, I never felt like I was his employee. I was

his friend, along for this crazy ride with him, until then. Until he made me feel like I was anything but his friend.”

“He was scared.”

“I know.”

“Do you though?”

I let out a dry laugh. “I do, but it doesn’t stop the fact it made me realize I wasn’t living my life. I was living his. My entire life became about taking care of Landon.”

“You mean me, too, don’t you?” she asks, her face falling.

I can’t lie to her. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I tell her. “You didn’t ask for this life. It’s something you’ve been dealt.”

“Do you think he asked for this?”

She’s right. He didn’t. At least, not the kids. He wanted to be a star football player, but raising kids, that wasn’t something he planned. It usually never is.

Reaching for her birthday swag bag, Cat pulls out a princess crown and places it on her head full of dreads. “Forgive him. He’s dumb and miserable.” And then she points to the painting. “How do you do that? Make it look like him, but not at all?”

“I start with an idea and remove all traces of reality.” I look at the painting. Art helps you express yourself by understanding and escaping. There’s no beginning to it, there’s no end. It’s being helpless, abandoned, and lost in forgiveness.

If only the heart and your pride worked the same way.

4TH QUARTER

34. LANDON IN THE GRASP

In the grasp – When a play is ended by an official because the quarterback is being held by a defender and in the official's opinion the quarterback is no longer attempting to complete the play. This call is to protect a quarterback from getting unnecessarily slammed to the ground.

That game in Miami, I play like absolute horseshit. And I hear it from coaches, the media, other players, just more people disappointed in me. I can't seem to make anyone happy these days. Aside from Nalani. She loves me. And Adler.

Who doesn't love me, as if she ever did, is Alessa. You thought I was going to say Ember, didn't you?

She doesn't love me either, but here's where things took another turn into the shitter. That game in Miami where I ran into Alessa at dinner with the guys. Photographs were conveniently taken like we were there together and it wasn't at all what it looked like.

Here, take a peek at it and you tell me your take. A bunch of the offensive line went out to dinner. Where isn't important and I'm not sure I remember anyway. Admittedly, I'd had a

couple drinks with the team by that point. But look, right there while I'm by the bar with Quinn and Kumonde.

"I'm not sure if you need Jesus or whiskey," Kumonde says to Quinn, or me, I'm not sure, but I remember him saying that to one of us right before things got worse.

Wait, no, rewind just a frame or two. It happens as we're walking up to the bar and Alessa is walking away. Our paths cross and her arms find their way around my neck. I cringe because I'm not a hugger, and Alessa is the last person I need to be hugging.

A funny thing happens in that moment we're embraced for the briefest of moments. I think of Ember and how when my arms are around her, everything in the world feels right. When my body is next to Alessa, it's as though there's a storm raging inside my head and I can't decipher one thought from the next. It's all confusion.

"Miss me?" she whispers in my ear.

And then someone takes a photograph to our left.

I draw back, almost immediately. "Nope."

"You will."

She leaves, I head to the bar. All is good, right?

Ha. Not a fucking chance. The media got a hold of that photograph, or Alessa planned that, I don't know. Whatever the reason, it certainly didn't stop TMZ from making it out to be more. Next to a photograph of me, Alessa and Ember and on the other side were the words: ***ONLY I CAN MAKE HIM HAPPY!***

Oh, and my personal favorite: ***KIDS DESTROYED BY LC***

You sense my sarcasm by the favorite part, right?

You should, because I'm fucking pissed when I read that. How could they bring the kids into this? Easy. I'm a public figure and it doesn't matter what I say or do, or hell, think, it doesn't matter. My life will forever be criticized by the media.

And the picture they took of the kids together? When I was at the park with them, covered in vomit and not wearing a shirt. Fuckers. I hate the goddamn paparazzi. They take everything out of context.

With security working overtime and the kids pretty much not let out of Kasen and the bodyguards' sight, I have one very unhappy hormonal teenager and a pair of cranky twins. The little ones are too small to understand what being caged in is like, but it's rare those two aren't smiling.

But you don't care about all that, do you? You probably want to know what's up with Ember and me. Or maybe it's just me trying to find meaning in it.

Listen, I know I was a complete asshole. You don't need to remind me over and over again. That's just rude.

Now, if I thought fan appreciation day overwhelmed me, I clearly wasn't prepared for a child's birthday party. Do you notice how uncomfortable I look? And out of place. Amongst ten-year-olds, I look like a goddamn giant.

By the way, I hate having this many people at my house. I didn't even throw parties growing up—everyone was afraid of Oma anyway—but it wasn't from my fear of her. Okay, maybe

a little bit, but I don't like a lot of people around. It makes me claustrophobic.

And now my backyard is teeming with people I don't know. It's miserable. Forget the fact that it's a sunny fall evening—the only time I could fit a birthday party into my schedule—which, by the way, I was told through text messages from Ember I would be hosting and I wouldn't complain. She can't respond to my heart-breaking I'll-do-all-the-groveling-in-the-world text messages, but she's still bossing me around.

It's fucking hot.

In fact, take a look at her today. She's wearing tight black pants. I suppose they're probably those legging-looking things that are easy to slip off. I love that it shows off her amazing ass and to top it off, she's wearing a long burgundy-colored shirt that clings to her ass and outlines every gorgeous curve, movement... fuck. Not the time to be thinking about this.

With a plate full of cupcakes, Ember rushes past me, and you're probably not surprised by this, but she ignores me completely. Naturally. What the fuck do I matter? I'm only her best friend, boss in some ways, and if we're being honest, yeah, I fucking consider her my girlfriend. Might be presumptuous of me, but hello, don't you remember the last few weeks of the fuck hot sex? I do. I miss those days, as does my dick.

“Move on, dude,” Quinn tells me, noticing me watching her. “It's just pussy.” Quinn and Kumonde got an earful of my problems on the flight to Miami the other day and yet still,

they're not offering me any good advice. At least Quinn isn't, but I should learn not to trust his swipe-right Tinder ass.

Just so you're aware, I'm holding Nalani. She stares at Quinn, her brow furrowed. I'm almost certain she doesn't understand what he's saying, but I guess you never know. Her next word could be pussy for all I know.

Setting her down, she walks away from me, following Ember and the cupcake tray.

That's when I think about what Quinn said. It's just pussy. It's not though. It never was with her. "Move on? How? She's been the one constant in my life for the last five years. How can I just move on from that?"

Quinn rolls his eyes, lifting the beer in his hand to his lips. "You're puttin' too much weight on it. Tap it and cap it."

If it were any other woman, I would have listened to Quinn. But Ember isn't just any other woman. She's not the rule. She's the exception. She's the one you lay it all on the line for in the final play, even if it means risking injury.

Quinn leaves, finding interest in one of the mothers lingering in the backyard. And there's certainly a lot of them.

Kasen approaches me, setting Haisley down off his back. "Um, what's with this guy demonstrating the paint ball guns?"

I look around the backyard. "What guy?"

"Hank." He gestures with a flick of his hand toward a guy sitting in a lounge chair near the pool holding a rag to his face. "He's apparently the owner of Ballers."

"The company is called Ballers?"

“Yep.”

“Classy.” You know I roll my eyes on that one. “It’s a paintball gun. Don’t they already know how to use them?” Before you go thinking it was my idea to have a paintball gun party with a group of ten-year-olds, you might be surprised to learn it wasn’t. It was Adler’s. “What is he holding to his face?”

With a slow shake of his head, Kasen laughs under his breath. “He shot himself in the eye with the paintball gun.”

“Are you serious? Is he still alive?”

“Sadly, yes.” Kasen laughs. “He was wearing safety glasses at least.”

I’m not at all surprised by that. If you saw the guy, you’d totally understand *how* it was possible. I stare at him for a moment. Have you seen the movie *Old School*? You remember the character played by Sean William Scott? I think his name was Peppers. Anyway, he reminds me of him. Only, instead of Will Farrell shooting himself with the tranquilizer—for the sake of making any goddamn sense to you—Peppers shot himself. He even has a slight resemblance with the mullet and creeper mustache.

In my head, I keep repeating that line in the movie: “If any of these fuckers freak out on the kids, I get to take them down.”

Looks like Peppers took himself out. “What was the purpose of that?”

Kasen runs his hand over his face, sighing. “I think to show the kids what *not* to do?”

“Don’t let him near the children.” Ember rushes by again, along with Cat, and I notice Kasen’s eyes hang on Cat longer than usual. I don’t know what their deal is, but I have my own shit going on. It’s not like I need to worry about what is or isn’t going on with the nanny and Cat.

“I thought this was a drop off your kid kind of thing.”

“I thought so too.”

Haisley pushes against my leg with her hand. “Uncle?”

I look down at her pink cheeks and cute pigtails. “Yeah?”

“B’s sad.”

“Huh?”

Rolling her eyes, she points to her sister near the pool and appetizer table. “B. She’s sad today. It’s her birthday and you can’t be sad on your birthday. Do somethin’.”

What the fuck am I going to do? Offer her a pony? I don’t even like Twitch. Still in disbelief we now have a cat who can’t walk in a straight line and growls like a dog, I can’t imagine what having a pony around would be like.

My eyes catch Braylee in the distance sitting in a chair by herself. She’s not playing her video games or even remotely interested in anything around her.

I think I’ve told you this before, but I don’t know much about Braylee. She’s the quiet one of the five and honestly, she reminds me of Revel in a lot of ways. While I was always taking shit—much like Adler—and getting into fights at school, Revel was the quiet brooding one, always into his music. And I don’t know about Grant. By the time I was old

enough to understand him, he was out of the house. With the seven-year age difference, I never had a chance to get to know him.

Making my way over to Braylee, I grab a handful of Skittles off the table as a peace offering. Braylee declines them with a shake of her head. “What’s with the sad face?”

“These kids aren’t our friends. Adler thinks they are, but we don’t have friends here. I miss Texas.”

Her words are a dagger to my heart—my already beaten heart. These kids gave up their home and lives in Texas, and not once did I ever think about the implications that would have caused for them. I didn’t think about anyone but myself in all this. My stare drifts to Adler in the distance, kids surrounding him and the paintball gun in his hand. They’re thoroughly engrossed in everything he’s saying, but she’s right. It’s hard to tell if these kids are his friends or just here because of whose house it is.

I bump my shoulder to hers. “What will cheer you up? You have a paintball gun. Shoot someone.”

There’s a spark of interest in her eyes as she sits forward. “Who?”

“I suggest Quinn.”

An intentional attack on Quinn occurs and you know, it might be a few weeks before he’s swiping right on Tinder for a while. As the party kicks off and the real paintball fight between the kids go down, I slightly regret the idea of said paintball fight because I’m soaked in color—wearing a white jumpsuit—and standing in front of Ember breathing heavily.

Not because I'm nervous—though I sort of am—but because I just bullied my way for a win against a group of ten-year-olds.

“It's their birthday. You could have let them win,” Ember notes, pushing her hair from her face. Look at her, bathed in sunlight, patches of red, blue, and yellow on her cheeks. I've never seen her look so beautiful.

“I don't have it in me to *let* anyone win. Winning is earned.”

“And what makes you think you earned it?”

“Because I gave it everything I had.” Once the words slip past my lips, Ember's expression is unreadable. I'm not sure I earned anything with her, but in my defense, I gave it everything I had. I just fucked it up in the process.

Reaching up, I brush a strand of hair from her face. I see her like I did the day we met—a beautiful array of light, colors, love, and fear. She's a canvas, the space around her heart painted by others who have destroyed her over the years. While some painted off the canvas and onto the walls of her carefully guarded heart, others dared to paint over her, their strokes creating texture and rigid lines over art that should have remained pure, undefined and unbroken. I was one of the ones who painted over her, recklessly disregarding her meaning before I stumbled over the masterpiece that's her.

Standing next to her, there's a constant ever-present connection between us. It's like a live-wire of warmth and familiarity. Just as I'm about to say something to her, one of the moms walks by, her hand on my shoulder. “Thanks for inviting Aubrey and me.”

Her? I didn't invite anyone. My eyes drift to her hand on my shoulder, then her face and the child at her feet. A cute little blonde girl who looks just as thrilled as her mother to be here. "You're welcome." I shift away from her, toward Ember, but then she reaches for my hand, shaking it.

"It was a pleasure meeting you."

In the distance, I catch Quinn watching me, smiling. Fucker.

"Yeah, you, too." My eyes drift to the child at her feet, bursts of red and blue paint splattered in her hair. "Did you have a good time?"

She nods eagerly. "Yep. Best party ever!"

When the child and her mother walk away, I turn back to Ember who's surprisingly still standing there.

"You're a sexy hot pot when you're jealous."

Her eyes open slowly, blinking up at me. Her eyes lock on mine and it's like she's stealing my breath at the same time. There's a shadow of annoyance in her features. "Okay, for one, I'm *not* jealous. Two," she even holds up two fingers, "a *hot pot* isn't a thing."

"Just admit you're jealous of these mamas checking me out."

She meets my gaze head on. "I am *not*."

"C'mon." I nod cockily. "Admit it."

"I won't." And then she reaches up, clasps her arms around my neck and kisses me.

Just kidding.

She slaps me.

I'm joking, again, but she might as well have drop kicked my balls because after all that, all the attempts I've been making to right the asshole I'd been, she walks away. So yeah, that fucking backfired.

But I'm a man of commitment, or insanity, depending on how you want to look at it, so I follow her.

"Ember...."

"Not now."

"I need to talk to you."

"Not. Now."

"Okay, so when? It's been a fucking week and I can't take it any longer."

"Why don't you call up Alessa?" she snaps. "I'm sure she can help you out."

At first, I'm confused what she's talking about. I have to think about it for a moment and she uses the time to gain some distance between us. Refusing to let it go, I follow her. "Oh, come on. You know that shit wasn't true."

She studies me intently. "Do I?"

My breath pushes out in a long exhale. The thought of her trust in me being gone, it has me dead where I stand. Dramatic, I know, but thinking her steadfast, sure, unshakable trust she had in me is now gone, well, it's more than I want to think about. "You should because you know me."

And then she knocks me sideways with, "I thought I did."

“You do.”

“Now is not the time for this.”

“So when will be the time? Because I’m constantly trying to find the time and you keep putting me off.”

“I don’t know.”

And then she walks away from me. Another hit to my heart, this time a little deeper.

Cat smiles at me, like she feels bad for me. “She hates you, and I don’t know why. She told me but I can’t remember.”

Damn it. What the fuck? She’s supposed to be impressed, goddamn it.

Now, this is the part of the day that turns to shit. As if standing in a white jumpsuit covered in paint after Ember abandons me yet again isn’t the low point of the day, it’s not in this case.

It’s when one of the security guards approaches me. I haven’t had a lot of contact with them yet, as they’re here for the kids and with only one day off a week, I’m rarely home lately. The guys in front of me, they’re surprisingly bigger than me and mean-mugging just about everything in their path. Aside from Nalani and Haisley, nobody keeps a glare with those two.

“Mr. Slade, we have a problem,” the bigger of the two says to me, his arms crossed over his burly chest. His brow dips, our eyes locked on one another.

“What now?” No one likes to hear those words, especially me and with the way my life has been like a shit show lately.

“Marley’s gone.”

“What do you mean she’s gone?” I glance around. “Did you check the cupboards?”

Both security guards look at me like I’m stupid, and let’s face it, I’ve gotten this look a lot lately. “She left saying she was going to a friend’s house, but she never arrived.”

That’s not what I wanted to hear. Everything from her being kidnapped to her lying dead in the street crosses my mind. Every time I was late for curfew growing up, Oma would hit me when I got home and scream, “I thought you were dead!”

I’ve never understood that expression because if you thought I was dead, why the fuck are you at home and not looking for my corpse? And another thing, why did parents and grandparents automatically assume the worst?

I get it now. You’re brought into their lives and you’re guiding them, or at least in my case attempting to and fucking it up, but it doesn’t stop the worry and the anxiety that something horrible might happen. I’ve never felt fear like I have now since these kids were brought into my life. Until I cared enough about someone other than myself. Until I was blindsided by love.

Inside the house, Ember hands me her phone to show me a blinking light on a map. “She’s at Pier 57.”

I stare at Ember, my heart in my throat. “What’s she doing there?”

“Probably trying to clear her head. Have you bothered to check on her at all today?”

“No,” I say, unsure why I have to check on each kid every day. “Should I be? Is that what parents do?”

Ember rolls her eyes and swats at the hand I try snaking around her waist. “Yes, that’s what you do. That’s what parents do. They check on their kids. They know what’s going on in their lives and they’re present.”

I knew going into this it would be hard for me to be present in anything aside from football. The mentality needed to do what I do, and do it well, requires my focus to be on that and only that. Except now, I’ve had to shift my focus. I have to look out for my offensive line or there is going to be a gap in coverage.

I tuck my cell phone in my pocket and reach for my keys. “I’ll go get her.”

“I’ll come with you,” Ember notes, reaching for her jacket. The rain had just moved in, thick gray clouds hanging low in the sky.

I peek up at the sky, then to Ember and grab my own rain jacket out of the closet. “I need to go alone.”

At first she looks like she wants to argue with me, but then she blinks and nods. “Okay. You’re right.”

I smile. “Could you say that one more time?”

She hits my shoulder. “Knock it off.”

I don’t know about you, but she’s coming around to the idea of not hating me, isn’t she?

Okay, maybe not completely, but I'm definitely gaining some yardage.

I find Marley at the pier like Ember said she'd be, only she's not. Her phone is in a trash can and though I'm pissed she threw a phone away, there's probably a reason for it, right?

I fucking hope so.

After some searching, I find her near Pike Place looking over Elliott Bay next to a man drawing a cartoon character with a Sharpie on a piece of cardboard. Though she's near others, she's sitting alone, looking over the edge into the water. I take my time walking toward her.

When I do approach her, I make sure to stand to the side so she sees me first rather than sneaking up on her. As she notices me, her expression changes from lost to annoyed.

She shakes her head. "What are you doing here?"

"Came looking for you," I say. My voice is quiet, my stance unsure. She may punch me or run away. I have to be prepared for anything even though I don't know what to do or say to her. "Are you okay?"

"Why?"

Running my hand over my face, I frown. "Because you ran away."

"I hardly call skipping out on a birthday party running away."

"Well, when you dodge security and you threw your cell phone in the garbage, yeah, that's sort of running away."

She looks disgusted. “Did you get it out of the garbage can?”

“No. Answer my question. Why’d you run away?”

“Or getting away,” she says quickly, something flashing in her eyes. Then she blinks away the emotion.

Goddamn, she’s frustrating. I exhale through my nose, my gaze dropping to the planks at our feet and then back to Marley. I watch her for a moment, trying to gauge what’s going on with her. Rain drips from the hood of her jacket onto her nose.

“Are you crying?”

“I’m not crying because of *you*, if that’s what you think.”

“Then why are you?”

“Because.”

Not caring that we’re both soaked in rain now, I sit next to her on the pier. “When I first moved to Seattle, having lived in Texas all my life, I had a fascination with the pier. I came out here every night just to think.” A thick layer of marine fog has moved in, the visibility into Elliott Bay harsh. You can barely make out Bainbridge Island in the distance. Under a gray sky, the water’s darker than usual, almost black as it slaps against the dock. Rain coats my skin, a salty presence on my lips.

“I don’t want to talk to you, Landon.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t care.”

Damn. My heart pinches in my chest. “That’s not true. I do care.”

“Prove it.”

“Okay, how?”

“When was my mom’s birthday?”

Shit. Of course she’d ask something I didn’t know the answer to. “I, uh.” There’s no way around it. “I don’t know. I only met her once or twice.”

“That’s just it, you don’t have to meet her to know the answer to that.” She stares at me for a beat, and though I can see so much behind her eyes, I can’t read any of it. “You could have acted like you cared about us and one of us probably would have said today is her birthday.” Tension fills the air between us, followed by a palpable silence. “Same day as Braylee and Adler.”

Now I really feel like a goddamn asshole.

My brow rises, my mouth dropping open just a bit. Clearing my throat, I take in a deep breath, squaring my shoulders. “Marley, I’m sorry. Okay? I fuck up, constantly. It’s not that I don’t care. I do. I’ve literally been where you are now. And now, I’m supposed to be a father figure to you guys when I never had one growing up.” I’m being honest and real with her, and I hope she finally sees through my tough exterior and that I do fucking care. “I don’t know how to do this. I have no idea how to raise you guys, but it certainly doesn’t mean I don’t care that it’s your mom’s birthday, or that you’re unhappy here.”

Her eyes narrow, the hardness in them easing. I watch as she swallows, her eyes still locked on mine. If only I could

read them, then I'd know what to say to make this better. "It's not that I'm unhappy here. I just don't know myself anymore."

I went to therapy for a week after my parents died. I was young enough I don't remember much of it, but I do remember what therapists told my sister and me, and my brothers, but I doubt they listened. She said: When a child experiences a loss, they're emotionally frozen at the age they experienced the death until they finally accept the loss. Then, and only then, can they grow emotionally.

When my parents died, Oma tried to talk to us about it and continued to for years. She never wanted us to forget them, but nothing can make that void go away. For years I learned to turn the anger off. I hadn't realized it at the time, but my way of dealing with it became football. A place where I could tap into that anger when I needed the distraction and turn it off when I left the field.

Have I tried to talk to these kids about their parents dying?

No, I haven't. Aside from that conversation Haisley and I had that one morning in my bed.

"Do you miss her?" Marley asks, drawing me from my thoughts.

"Who?"

"Ember."

Have you ever had an adrenaline rush? You know that sudden onset of pain that hits your chest right before the exhilaration comes? The part where your body is telling you it's dangerous, but fuck, you might like it. That's how it feels

for me every single time I think about Ember. “Yeah, I do. I fucked up big time.”

Marley lets out a huffed laugh. “Haven’t we all.”

Unsure what else to do, I wrap my arm around her. “I know I suck at this shit.”

“You’re not doing as bad as you think you are.”

“So we’re cool?”

Marley laughs, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, we’re cool.”

Another laugh escapes Marley as we get up and walk in the rain. It sounds like drops of paint splattered on a canvas and immediately, my mind returns to Ember, as if she was ever far from my thoughts to begin with.

“Got any pointers on how to get Ember to talk to me?” In a perfect world, Ember’d give me her heart and soul. Let me have her and she’d follow me anywhere for the world to see. Had that really slipped from my grasp?

“No, not really. Have you tried just saying you’re sorry?”

“Like a million times.”

“You need a grand gesture then.”

I look over at her. “Got any suggestions?”

She smiles. “I have one....”

35. EMBER

HANG TIME

Hang Time – The amount of time that a punt stays in the air. Longer is better for the punting team as the tacklers then get more time to get to where the ball will be coming down. A combination of a long punt with a long hang time is optimal on most punts.

I might be at Westward’s Fall Expo surrounded by world renowned artists, but my mind isn’t on these paintings, or the artists. It’s back at the house wondering if the kids are all right with Landon being at an away game. I’m wondering if someone is helping Adler and Braylee with their math. Is Marley hanging out with that boy from her English class tonight? The one Landon told her she could never bring to the house? Is someone playing horses with Nalani? And is Haisley’s hair braided before she goes to bed like she likes?

“An anonymous buyer bought the entire collection,” Mabel tells me, smiling warmly. Carefully, her eyes find the one I favor above all others. Mabel hands me an envelope. “The buyer indicated he would pick them up this week, but he’s paid for them already. Congratulations.”

I know exactly who bought them. Don't you? I'm not known enough around the city by anyone to want the entire ten-piece collection I have here, which means the only person with that kind of money willing to take a chance on an unknown artist is someone they know or has been invested in their art from the beginning. That leaves Percy, or Landon. But... why would Percy want the collection knowing who the inspiration for it was? Exactly, he wouldn't. It was Landon. Mystery solved.

As an artist, I hide myself deep within my paintings. Around me, there are ten pieces that represent me and every single one of them holds something significant. One more than others. Mine is *Blindsided*. The one I did of Landon. Though if you didn't know any better, you wouldn't know it's him.

What gives it away?

Nothing as far as I'm concerned, but maybe it's the darkness it represents, the shadowing, or the purple. Remember when I said colors evoke a meaning from deep within? Purple, it's wealth, extravagance, creativity, devotion, pride, and magic. All aspects of Landon's life he's marked upon mine.

Now, I'm going to take you back about five years. Before I met Landon. You remember me telling you about my boss I'd been sleeping with, right?

He's about to make his appearance again, but I'm going to pause for a minute here. Bear with me.

Have you ever gotten to a point in your life where you think back and wonder who really knows you? Like the scary

shit about you. The down-deep flaws you can barely admit to yourself let alone to others.

Cat, she's my girlfriend. She knows the guys I've slept with, my insecurities, my favorite flavor of ice cream and that when I'm sad, I binge watch the original *Beverly Hills 90210*.

Landon, he knows the woman I became. The mature one who doesn't lack confidence aside from wondering how and why I fit into his life. The one who pours herself into a painting and uses color to find inspiration. The one he watches scary movies with while eating Chinese take-out.

But Percy, that boss I had been seeing and living with before I met Landon, yes, we're back to him. He knows the most. He's the guy who gave life to the woman inside me. In many ways he isolated me from friends and threatened anyone who talked to me. He introduced me into his world of bondage and painted my life with his dominance. For two years after I left him, he called me endlessly until I changed my number. I knew I wouldn't avoid him forever. Hell, we still lived in the same city, but I had no idea tonight would be the night I finally ran into him again.

Just as I turn my head, I'm met with his gray eyes and his intimidating inked face.

"It's breathtaking, Em." Percy gestures with a careful nod to the painting, breathing out slowly. "Does he know about it?"

I nod, unable to make eye contact with *him*. If you knew Percy, you'd understand how that's possible. Never in my life have I ever been afraid of a man, yet completely trusting of

him for reasons my heart will never understand. “Yes, he knows about it. He bought it actually. All of these he bought.”

Percy angles his chin down, inspecting me. His cold, hard eyes lifted to mine. “You love him, yes?”

Again, I nod. “I... do.” Tears sting my eyes. It’s the first time I’ve ever admitted this aloud, to anyone, including myself.

Percy leans forward, brushing his hair out of his eyes to get a better look at my face. “You deserve happiness.”

“I know.” I fight back tears.

He studies me for a few moments and then leans back, taking a long pull from the whiskey flask in his hand. “I don’t think you do, Em.”

He’s right. I don’t. I don’t think I ever did.



It’s nearing midnight by the time I’m leaving the expo and I’m not wild about walking to my car alone. “Do you want me to walk you to your car?” Percy asks, squinting against the rain obscuring our vision.

No, you’ll probably kidnap me.

Our eyes catch and I see the man I met in the basement of a bar he tattooed in. Few days shy of fourteen, I had no idea he’d change my life the way he did, but he doesn’t get all the credit. I’m not that same person anymore. I don’t think I could

ever go back to being her, and by the expression he holds deep within his gray eyes, he knows it.

I want to ask why after all these years he showed up, and why here, but does it matter? I think the less I know the better.

Tucking a loose strand of my hair behind my ear, I shake my head to his question. “No, I’m fine.” And nervous in your presence, but I’ll never tell him that. Something in the way he keeps distance between us tells me he knows already. “You look good, Percy. I hope you’ve found happiness.”

Nodding, his eyes narrow in on my car, but he avoids the pry into his own life. “You’ve done good, Em. I’m proud of you.”

He means it. If there’s one thing you can trust about a man like Percy it’s that he tells you the truth. And then without another glance, he walks away and out of my life again.

I watch him walk away for a moment and swing a leg over his Harley. It’s not surprising to me he’s riding it in the rain.

Sighing, I prepare myself to rush across the parking lot. Naturally, as with any day in late fall in the Pacific Northwest, it’s raining in the city. I hate walking around in the dark. Absolutely hate it. Most of the time I avoid it and only travel in pairs at night. Tonight it’s unavoidable.

My heels slap against the puddles as I scurry to my car. I hit the remote, the lights flashing and reflecting off the wet pavement. Something feels eerie about the night, but I refuse to freak myself out. Shit, you’re freaked out now too, aren’t you?

I do that thing where I open the door, toss my stuff inside and then jump inside and slam the door closed, immediately locking it. I'm not even joking. I jumped inside. Even hit my head on the doorframe in the process.

"Shit, that hurt," I mutter, rubbing the tender spot.

Taking in a deep breath, I wipe water from my face and off my jacket. I peel it off and throw it on top of my shit on the floor, not caring that I'm basically soaking everything I own.

I don't start the car, and I certainly don't drive away. Something's off. Remember that feeling of unease I had walking through the parking lot? It's about to get a whole lot worse.

And then I realize my breathing isn't the only one in the car. My eyes snap to the rearview mirror to see someone in the back seat.

Holy shit!

Squinting, I try to make out the figure, scream at the top of my lungs, and reach for my phone to dial 911. Only I drop the phone on the floorboard because I'm shaking so goddamn bad.

"Landon?" I call out frantically when I realize it's him in the back seat.

"Goddamn," he whispers harshly, holding his hands over his ears. "You can certainly make a guy go deaf, can't ya?"

"What the fuck are you doing in my car?" I cry out, my heart racing.

"I needed to see you."

I stare at him in disbelief. “By hiding in the back seat of my car like some kind of kidnapper?”

“You know, funny you say that.” There’s an arrogant set to his jaw that makes him look fucking intimidating under the street lamp lighting my car. “I was tempted to kidnap you if it meant you’d finally fuckin’ talk to me. I have duct tape and rope in my car just in case you fought me.”

Still startled and trying to rein in my rapid heartbeat, I slap at him over the seat. “So wait at the house and talk to me then. Don’t sneak in my car! How’d you even get in here?”

“I bought it and had a spare set of keys.”

I raise an eyebrow.

He sighs, noticing my inspection of him. “Okay, I stole yours and made a copy, whatever.”

I glare at him. “Seriously?”

“Well, you wouldn’t talk to me.” He shifts in the seat and then makes his way, with his ass in my face, to the front seat. My lips pull up into a smile, tempted to bite his ass.

When he’s seated, he pushes my purse to the floor and I notice how wild his eyes are, the firm clench of his jaw. He’s mad. What the fuck would he have to be mad about?

“What?”

He nods to the studio in the distance. “Are you seeing him again?”

“No, I’m not.” I pause. “Is that why you broke into my car? Because you thought I was with Percy again?”

“It’s not breaking in when you have a key.”

“Whatever.”

He leans in close. “I deserve an answer.”

“And I gave you one,” I add under my breath.

“So you’re not seeing him?”

“*Jesus Christ*, Landon. No. I’m not seeing him.”

“Why was he here then?” he asks. When I look past the question to the frown and the intensity of his eyes, there’s fear. He’s worried. “And don’t you dare tell me it’s nothing. I know you have history with him and I deserve to know the truth. I’m tired of this shit between us. This isn’t us. We don’t just ignore shit. We’ve always dealt with shit before it got out of hand. That’s why I’m in your fucking car right now because you’ve been ignoring me for weeks.”

Goddamn him. He’s such an asshole sometimes. An intuitive best friend asshole, but whatever. “Landon, you were a complete asshole to me that day,” I manage to say. I stare into his eyes, his emotions so raw, so real. While he hurt me, I hurt him by ignoring him. “I think I have the right to be upset about it and ignore you for a little while.”

“I know that and I apologized,” he whispers, and I can hear the kick in his breath. “I’m really fucking sorry about everything. But if these last few weeks taught me anything, it’s that I can’t lose you. So you’re done ignoring me.”

It’s getting hard to breathe in here. Maybe I need to crack a window. “You didn’t *lose* me.”

He laughs, bitterly. “Bullshit. You’ve shut me out of your life completely. And now you’re seeing your ex,” he says, pushing the words out in a growl.

“I’m *not* seeing Percy. He came to the showcase... unlike *you*,” I tell him, willing my voice not to shake.

His brows come together, almost in pain, his mouth dropping open slightly. “I couldn’t. I tried to, but I couldn’t just leave in the middle of the game.” And then he scowls at me. “Did Percy pierce your clit? Just tell me. I need to know.”

Tossing my head back dramatically, I sigh and throw my hands up. “No, you idiot. He didn’t. And it wouldn’t fuckin’ matter if he did.”

“It would to me,” he points out.

He’s right, it would. I watch him for a moment. His breathing, the way he stares at the windshield and the drops of rain pooling on the glass. I start biting my lip. What do I say to him now? And the whole biting of the lip is a horrible idea because though my lips are healed, they’re still tender. I open my mouth, even though I have no idea what I’m going to say to him, but I don’t get the chance before his lips make contact with mine and there’s a breathless gasp from me, or maybe him. Hell, it’s from both of us.

He lets out a sigh against my mouth, but he stays close, his forehead pressed against mine as our lips part. “God, I fucking missed kissing you.” He swallows, kisses me once more and then whispers, “I’m sorry, okay? I fucked up. Just accept that I’m a sorry bastard and fucking forgive me already.”

“Well, since you’re a sorry bastard.” I nod, smiling, swallowing hard myself because I’m getting choked up. “I... forgive you.”

“You do?” he whispers, closing his eyes. And then his eyes snap open and narrow. “You’re not just saying that to get me out of your car, are you?”

Tears spring to my eyes, but I laugh around the sudden onset of emotion. Goddamn him for making me emotional. “No, but there’s an idea.”

With a careful breath, Landon’s brow tightens. “Don’t lie to me,” he says softly after a long pause. “I can’t take being away from you anymore.”

I drop my eyes from his to his mouth, to the deep hollow of his neck and Adam’s apple, then back to his eyes. There’s tenderness there, much like that night we spent together the day we met... but there’s more. I see the love now, and he’s telling me everything I want to hear.

“You’re such a baby.” I don’t know what else to say to him. “But no, I’m not lying to you.” Sudden quiet rolls through the car and it’s then my gaze lifts to the studio. Turning my focus back to him, I stare in his eyes, thinking of the painting. “You bought them all, didn’t you?”

Knowing exactly what I’m referring to, his eyes are intense, gorgeous, and as commanding as ever. “No. Marley bought one.” He snorts, the corner of his mouth kicking up in a smirk. “Apparently, as she puts it, abstract art is the emancipation of the mind.”

I burst out laughing. “Figures.”

“It was my grand gesture.” Unable to maintain the smirk, a full-on grin pulls at his lips. “So was I your subject of inspiration?”

I roll my eyes and lie. “No.”

“Bullshit.”

My heart pinches in my chest like it’s seizing up. “I... didn’t paint it for you. I painted it for *me*.”

Suddenly, he falls silent, his mouth opening slightly as he stares at me. He draws in a breath like he’s preparing himself for something heavy before asking, “Do you love me?”

I can’t answer him, or maybe it’s that I don’t know how to with so much weight on those words. Of course I love him. I just don’t love that I put myself aside for him. It’s why I can’t work for him anymore. If I want to be with him, and I think I do, I have to separate his needs from my own and focus more on what I want out of life.

“It’s a simple answer.”

A flush spreads over my cheeks. “No, it’s not. Not when it comes to us.”

The muscles in his jaw clench. “Why?”

“Because of who you are.” I have to tell him the truth now. “I can’t be your assistant anymore. I can’t keep putting my life on hold. I want to be there for you, for the kids, Cat, but I can’t be the person who does it all for everyone else and nothing for me.”

I can’t make out his expression in the darkness as he tips his head up and looks at the roof of my car. “I don’t want you to leave,” he rasps.

I reach out for his hand, holding it on his thigh. “I won’t leave, but I can’t work for you anymore. I have dreams and my

entire life has been helping everyone but me.”

He twists in his seat to face me. Leaning in, he kisses me on the lips, like the action is second nature to him. And then he kisses me again, this time longer. He kisses me with precision. He kisses like the way you carefully make a pass over a blank canvas, still undecided in what it will be, or has the potential to be. He kisses me like he’s never had to second guess what it’d mean when our lips finally touched. It’s all-encompassing, thrilling; it’s fucking consuming.

Easing out of the kiss, he watches me, struggling with an unseen emotion. “Does that change your mind?”

My heart wants to believe him, and while my heart says, let him in, my head is saying, honey, you know better. “It’s nice, but no. I can’t work for you anymore. You’re impossible.”

“Come on, Em. I’m begging.”

Breaking eye contact, I sigh. “Stop being a bitch about it. We’ll find someone for you.”

Shaking his head, he laughs out a deep breath. “I love that you’re an asshole.”

I raise my brow, both charmed and surprised to hear him call me an asshole. It’s actually not even the first time. “Dude, that’s like the most unromantic thing ever.”

“It’s not meant to be.” His words waver, but his confidence doesn’t. Neither does the look on his face and the softness to his eyes. “I want a girl who’s going to tell me like it is. You do that.”

We don't say anything else, silence filling the space between us. He looks at me and in his eyes, I know he believes I am that girl. He's right.

"So you're not going to work for me anymore, but you love me, right?" he asks again.

I roll my head to the side to smile at him. "If I could stop, I would."

His eyebrows scrunch together. "That's not a very nice thing to say."

"Why not?"

"Because it makes it seem like you're doing it because you have to."

"Don't you see? I have to love you because you're *you*."

He lets out a sigh of relief.

Love, his love, it's relentless, and even though I attempt to slam the door in his face because I'm afraid of happiness, Landon pries the door open and lets my fears out.

36. LANDON

PLAY ACTION

Play Action – The quarterback fakes a handoff to the running back in order to make the defense believe it is a running play for the purpose of helping the receivers get open.

We're outside in the driveway and Ember's heading toward the guest house. I'm not having it, so I grab her by the hand and yank her to my chest. "Come upstairs with me."

The rain has ceased, but there's a sudden chill to the air. A breeze dislodges jet-black hair in her face. Smiling, she places her hands against my chest. "I don't think we should have sex. Maybe we should wait."

Anger rushes through me. I don't know why I'm angry at her for not wanting to have sex, but I am. Reaching up, I tuck the wayward strands of hair from her face. "Why the fuck not? It's not like we're saving your virtue here."

That one earns me a glare. "Why do we have to rush into it?"

I take her hand and lead her toward the house. "You know that quote at the beginning of football games broadcasted on television?"

She stares at me, her brow dipped in confusion. “No.”

We’re at the front door now. I put my key in, unlock it and then turn to face her, never letting go of her in the process. After I have the door open, I reach down and haul her over my shoulder. She giggles and I bite her ass cheek. “All rights reserved.”

Upstairs, I kick shut my bedroom door after dragging Ember in with me. Immediately, I drop my pants behind the closed door. Actually, I get completely naked. If I’m naked, there’s a less likely chance she’ll deny me.

“You certainly don’t waste time,” she says, staring at the pile of clothes at my feet. Lifting her gaze, her eyes linger on my cock. It’s hard and fuckin’ ready for some much-needed action. “The kids are downstairs.”

“Exactly. Downstairs. They’re fine.” I motion the length of her body. “Now take your goddamn clothes off.”

“Sure, since you’re asking so nicely,” she says, shaking her head with laughter.

“I don’t have time for manners.” With my cock in my hand, I stroke it once, twice. Then I smile because the want emitting from her is damn near palpable. “You either take your clothes off, or I do it for you.”

With a smile, she wiggles out of her pants and throws her shirt at my head. To torture my bossy ass, she *slowly* undoes her bra and slides her panties down her thick thighs I can’t wait to be buried between.

I drink in the image of her sprawled out on my bed. Fuck, she’s hotter than I remember. Curvy hips, gorgeous tits,

detailed images of inspirational art over every inch of her creamy skin. So goddamn beautiful in every way.

Stop staring, she's *mine*.

Smiling, her eyes dance eagerly over my own body before she moves to the bed. Lying in the center, she motions me forward with a curl of her index finger. I follow, prowling over. I stop at the edge of the bed, my hands clasping her ankles.

When I don't move, she raises an eyebrow. "Are you just going to stare at me or fuck me?"

"Enjoying the view," I manage to say, the need to fuck her building inside me.

I'll admit, the urge to speed this up is there, but I don't want to rush through it.

Needing her mouth on mine, I lean in and kiss her, capturing her mouth.

"Landon," she says against my mouth.

"Yeah?"

She reaches forward, grasping my cock in her hand. "I know you're probably wanting to take your time, but I really just need you to fuck me now." She grips my cock harder, stroking it slowly with just the right amount of pressure and movement for my eyes to nearly roll back in my head.

I go a little crazy kissing her. Probably because when we were together before, her lips were off-limits. They're fair game now, and I don't let up until she moans into my mouth.

My fingers find their way between her legs and find her pussy wet and ready for me.

“You need me, don’t you?” I whisper to her, my voice thick with want.

“Yes,” she groans breathlessly as my finger dances along her cunt. Her hands slip over my shoulders, to my hair.

I chuckle, pulling away from her mouth but I don’t remove my finger. Nope, I add one more and ask, “Did you miss me?”

“God, yes.” Her back arches, pushing her tits in my face. “So much, *Percy*.”

My movements, hell, my heart fucking stops. She said Percy, right? You heard that too, didn’t you?

Swallowing over the boulder that’s now in my goddamn throat, I yank my hand away only to find her smiling, barely able to control her laughter.

“Why is that funny to you?” I growl, scowling at her.

Her laughter dies away and she rolls her eyes. “I had to set your cocky ass back a yard or two.”

Now I’m pissed. And she knows it.

My jaw clenches, my heartbeat steady into a normal rhythm again as I crawl onto the bed. “I was going to go slow. Get you off first, but now, I don’t think so.” The muscles in my jaw flex, tightening as I spread her legs harshly. “Now you’re going to get what you deserve.”

“And that is?” she asks, watching my every moment.

“I’m going to fuck you from behind,” I tell her, flipping her onto her stomach.

She laughs. I position myself behind her ass and take my cock in my hand. With my other hand, I spread her ass cheeks apart.

“No, Landon,” she murmurs when I touch the entrance she swears no guy will ever go.

“You *owe* me,” I murmur.

“I don’t owe you shit.” Her voice tightens, but there’s still that underlying want in her tone. “That was a joke.”

I slowly push my cock between her ass cheeks to her opening. “How would you like it if I said Alessa’s name?” I apply pressure to my thumb, her asshole clenching in reaction.

She slaps at my hand. “Okay, I’m sorry. It wasn’t a funny joke.”

“Fucking right it wasn’t.”

The moment I push inside her, I know I’m not going to last long.

Trying not to blow my load too soon, I go slowly at first, my movements long and deep. Ember is moaning in my ear and it’s sounds pretty much like, fuck me harder, doesn’t it?

I don’t know if I should do anything she asks after that little stunt she pulled.

“Do you think you deserve to?” I whisper hoarsely.

“Yes, yes,” she whimpers, pleading with me.

And I want to say, too fucking bad and come on her back for saying his name, but I love this woman and her needs matter to me. So I say, “I’m going to make you come all over my cock just so you know who you belong to.”

Snaking my hand around her hip, I find her clit, circling my fingers over her swollen bundle of nerves begging for release.

Her body tenses, her legs stiffening beneath me. With each movement I make with my fingers, her pussy clenches around my cock. It certainly doesn't take long before she's moaning, her mouth gapes open as her breathless urges for me to fuck her harder fill the room.

I try to hold back, but the sounds and the way she arches her ass up just at the end of her orgasm sliding me deeper inside her, make me come faster than I wanted.

A rush pulses up my spine until I explode, grunting and thrusting deeper and deeper as I spill inside her.

When the feeling ends, I breathe out loudly. I put my lips to her ear, smiling around the words, "Percy who?"

She turns her head, blinking slowly. "You're a god, LC. A motherfucking god who owns my pussy."

I move off her, rolling onto my back beside her. "You're welcome."

Reaching out, I touch my hand to the back of her head, winking.

The next morning, Ember and I are in bed when there's a knock at my bedroom door. Today is my only day off and I didn't plan on getting out of bed until noon. Probably a lie.

"What?" I yell through the closed door. I refuse to get out of bed.

“Are you going to show her or what?” Marley asks from the other side of the door.

Oh, right. Remember the grand gesture? It wasn't just buying her paintings. Nope. In the two days I'd been gone, I secretly had a contractor come in and make some adjustments to the master suite on the other side of the house. I was originally going to offer the room to Kasen if he needed a place to stay but then Marley talked me into making some adjustments to it.

Ember stirs awake. “Who's at your door?”

“Marley. Let's go.” I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stand up. Ember sits up, propped against the headboard. By the way, I'm naked so naturally, where do you think her eyes drift to?

Yep. My junk.

I grab her hand. “Come on. I need to show you something. And then we'll fuck.”

Laughing, she shrugs. “Okay.”

Throwing a pair of my sweatpants on, she follows me toward the other end of the second floor to the massive cherry wood doors leading into the second master suite. And yes, I'm wearing shorts, but don't focus on that. Look at the apprehension in Ember's eyes. She's nervous about what she's going to find behind these doors. Part of me wants to be a real jokester and pretend it's a nursery or some crazy shit like that, but I don't.

Pulling her into my side, I cover her eyes with one hand and then open the door. Leading her inside, I release my hand.

“Just for you. So you can be totally selfish and only think of yourself,” I whisper, smiling against her temple.

Snorting, Ember pulls away slightly. Her breath catches when she notices the easels set up next to the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the back terrace and the distant yet somewhat recognizable view of Mount Rainier. Next to the easels, blank canvases. I imagine her sitting on the chair, completely naked, sweeping the tips of her brushes over the white matte and it’s a beautiful fucking image. “When did you build this?”

I shrug as Marley and Alder enter. “Few days ago.”

“Correction, he had it built,” Adler points out.

I stuff my hand in his face. “Go away.”

“What if I hadn’t come back?” Ember asks, her eyes watering.

Slinging my arm around her, I draw her back to my side. “I suppose it would have been a Christmas present for Marley then.”

“Hey!” Marley scowls. “No fair.”

Haisley walks in next, grinning when she spots Ember. “Do we keep her?”

“I’m keeping her. I don’t know about you guys.” And then I kiss her, deeply. I know it’s inappropriate to do so in front of the kids, but she needs to know I did this for her.

“Ugh,” Adler groans, covering his face with his hands. “They’re going to do it.”

Athletes are trained to never admit defeat on the field and that carries over to real life. Admitting you fucked up, that's defeat. Weakness. Something I wasn't good at. But I did. For her. For them.

OVERTIME

37. EMBER

CHEAT SHEET

Cheat Sheet – A paper the quarterback has on his wristband to easily see plays to be called.

4 MONTHS LATER

“Toxic and Suburbs sold,” Mabel says. “Both to a buyer in Italy.”

Is this really my life now? Am I really selling my paintings all over the world?

Why yes, yes it is. “That’s great.”

“You’ll be bringing more by soon, right?”

“Yes, I will be. They’re already finished. I’ll bring them by next week when we get back from Arizona.”

“Sounds great. Tell LC good luck for us.”

Unbelieving this is really my life, I smile around my words. “I will.”

After I hang up with Mabel, I send Landon a text telling him his favorite painting sold. You'd think *Blindsided* would be his favorite, considering the haughty son of a bitch hung that painting above our bed. Yep. *Our* bed. We're totally living together now. #cohabitating #partyfortwo #donotdisturb

What painting is his favorite? *Toxic*. It's a tangled mess of colors but if you look closely, it's lovers intertwined as one.

Landon doesn't reply but I know it's because he's in the team meeting. The team arrived in Arizona for the Super Bowl two days ago and because of school, I flew out with the kids today, the morning of the Super Bowl. Yep, the Seahawks made it to the Super Bowl for the fourth time in Landon's five-year career with them.

Traveling with Landon Slade to the Super Bowl is completely different from the days when I first met him. Gone are the late night champagne-filled parties with flight attendants handing out blow jobs in the bathroom. He still travels with the team, so who knows, maybe the blow jobs in the bathroom are still happening.

What's different?

I suppose it's how I travel. I'm still flying around on a private jet, only now the plane is filled with five kids, a nanny, a personal assistant, three security guards and a cat. Yes, Twitch made the trip. Only because Nalani stuffed him in her bag.

Traveling with kids is no easy task. If I thought Landon was high maintenance, I clearly underestimated the power of children. It comes with a few lessons, too.

Lesson #1: Don't give Nalani licorice before take-off. See below.

Lesson #2: Bring vomit bags on the plane.

Lesson #3: Bring a change of clothes for yourself.

Lesson #4: Bring a change of clothes for Adler. He has a weak stomach. If someone beside him vomits, he will too.

The suite at the stadium is different, too. It used to be swarming with women all pining over Landon. Don't get me wrong, they're still there, but less obvious seeing how his "girlfriend" is around.

Who is she? I'll cut a bitch.

Just playin'. Surprise. It's me! #hesmine #donttouch

I still can't get used to term "girlfriend" but Landon insists and announces it in nearly every interview he does. Conceited bastard. Always drawing attention to himself and the fact that he "won" me over.

"I'm hungry. I want a hot dog," Haisley groans, tossing her body dramatically onto the couch next to the large television screens replaying every play.

"Why? They're lips and assholes," Braylee tells her, cutting crayons with a butter knife. Braylee hasn't changed much in the last few months. We still don't know what the fuck she's up to half the time. #shessneaking #neverturndyourbackonthatone

"That's not true," Adler points out, constantly arguing with her. "Some are made from mechanically separated poultry."

It's like he's Wikipedia.

Braylee points the butter knife at him. “I’m going to stab your eyehole.”

I take the knife from Braylee. “Yes, you guys can pick whatever you want.” Handing them a menu, I look over at the field where the Seahawks are when the fans begin cheering.

I can spot Landon anywhere on a field. Not only does the number give it away, but I know his stance. My heart knows him and anywhere he is, my eyes are drawn, captivated and held prisoner by him.

Watching him now, controlling the line, dictating the game with his confidence, I remember our conversation the morning he left.

“How ya feeling?” I asked him, knowing he’d tell me the truth. He may spout off in interviews that the anxiety and nerves never get to him, but I get the truth. The side most don’t see of LC.

He laughed. “Actually kind of nervous.” The way his confidence turns to fear and vulnerability, he hasn’t admitted this to anyone yet.

“You wouldn’t be human if you weren’t nervous,” I told him.

“They don’t think I’m human. I’m here to give them what they want and if I don’t deliver, the entire city looks at me as a failure.”

There is certainly some truth to his statement. To a lot of football fans, the players aren’t human beings. They’re commodities. They’re entertainment and they act as if these guys are their own personal gladiators. They send them hate

mail, troll them on Twitter and social media. For some reason, they feel entitled to deserve perfection on the field from them. I can't imagine the pressure that comes with that.

The first half ends with the Seahawks up by one touchdown over the Patriots. I wonder what Landon's thinking. If he's upset, worried, careless, I can't tell as they head into the locker room and he keeps his head down, my vision of him lost in the crowd.



You remember Landon's rock star brother, right? He's performing during halftime and it's the first time the kids have seen him in person. Adler and Marley stare at the stage, mesmerized by their Uncle Revel.

Adler's the first to speak as he points to the stage lit up with hundreds of lights and spotlights. "He's our uncle?"

I laugh and shift Nalani to my other hip. "Yep."

"He's cool!" Adler gleams with bright, idolizing eyes. "I like Landon, but why'd our parents chose him over that guy?"

Specific instances come to mind, but it's not like I can tell children about Revel Slade without making him out to be a lunatic. Which, to be fair, he is. Truth is, every time I've met Revel, he's been drunk and though his performance tonight is flawless as usual, I doubt he's sober.

Smiling, my eyes drift to the stage in the center of the University of Phoenix where Revel is with Taylan Ash, his touring partner and the queen of pop music. You couldn't have asked for a more unlikely pair to be on stage. It'd be like Axl

Rose and Taylor Swift on tour together. As I watch the two of them, the chemistry, their draw, it's clear they have something going on. Not surprising either knowing Revel. He's just as mesmerizing as Landon. But it makes me think about just because you're not meant to be together, doesn't mean it won't work. Love is a contradiction that somehow, someday, finds a balance.

My eyes drift to Cat laughing behind me, seated next to Kasen and holding his hand. You're wondering about those two, aren't you? Did you sense the connection like I did at the interview?

Well, if you did, I'm happy to report they're dating.
#cuteAF #meanttobe #knockinboots

He has to constantly remind her they're together, but they're happy.

I'm just messing with you. They are dating, and they are happy, but Cat remembers him. In fact, her short-term memory has starting improving a lot in the few months Kasen's been in her life. Kasen understands Cat in ways that no one else does and to him, her brain injury doesn't make her any less than perfect.

38. LANDON

ZONE BLITZ

Zone Blitz – Any blitz in which the defenders in pass coverage play zone defense. Many zone blitzes require a defensive lineman to drop into coverage to replace a blitzing linebacker or defensive back.

The mood in the locker room is intense, focused, like we're preparing to go back out on the field for war. It's that way for everyone but Quinn.

Look at him. He's staring at his goddamn phone. Quinn shoves it in my face, a naked girl on it. "Think she's eighteen?"

I don't look. Well, that's a lie. I look. She's naked. I might be seeing someone, but I'm still fucking human. "Doubtful."

His posture slumps. "Figures."

You're probably thinking, aren't you playing in the Super Bowl right now? Shouldn't you be focusing on the game and not Tinder?

I am. Quinn clearly isn't.

I'll tell you who is 100 percent into the game. Me. And our head coach because to us, winning is what we strive for. It's what we want, and losing, it's annoyance, but it's not life or death. I'm not entirely sure Bryant understands that as he looks over the linemen. Quinn tucks his phone away.

Bryant paces the locker room, shaking his head back and forth, refusing to sit down. His words are fast, loud, and well, angry. His face is red, his fists clenched, and his mouth is rapid-firing at us, but I catch the last part, the part that actually makes any sense at all. "I don't know what to say, really. Games like this make or break your career. All comes down to today, and either, we do this as a team, or we crumble as a team."

He's not *just* talking about the game. He's talking about life. That's what makes Bryant such a good coach. He reminds us all when we're down by one touchdown that together we fight battles instead of each other. You don't place blame that someone didn't make that play or didn't own the line. We're in this together until the end.

The second half starts up but there's a problem. We're just as bad as the first half—out of rhythm. The offensive line is a moving, thinking wall protecting me and if there's a crack in that wall, the whole thing comes tumbling down.

Bryant is on the sideline going ballistic, foaming at the mouth, straight up batshit crazy.

Bryant lays into me the moment I'm on the sidelines after a turnover. "What the fuck are you doing out there?" he screams. "It's like you've never played a game in your life!"

“Bryant,” I say, trying to reason with him. “Work with me. You tell me what you’re seeing, and I’ll tell you what I’m seeing out there.” It’s difficult for coaches and players to make adjustments to the game plays during the game. It moves fast. When you’re in the thick of it, it’s a goddamn blur and there’s not time to do anything but slow down and think about what we’re doing. It’s not easy to see the shifts in defense, but when you’re eye level with it, you can recognize the patterns. It’s not a mental shift. It’s psychological.

We study photos from the last few downs and make some changes and slow the game down. The moment it happens, I can’t help but think of the kids and how different each one is and how they’ve changed me not only as a person, but as a player when I slowed down and took the time to get to know each one. I’m much more patient now. Or at least I like to think I am. I have Ember to thank for that. For making me see I could do it and for pushing me to do it.

During the second half, we drive 77 yards down the field for a touchdown. Half are rushing yards, a sign of a good offense, but it’s still not enough. There’s no time to think once their defense picks up on it—no time to process. We move together as one. Line up, read the D, get the call, go.

Repeat.

Line up, read the D, get the call, go.

And that’s how the entire second half goes for us.

I wish I could tell you that we won. I wish I could tell you we went out there and played a game we knew. That we were down by 3 and didn’t lose on the last play of the game, that our offense was right on the goal line and didn’t hand it over.

That after a trying season, we came back, stood for what we believed in and held the line, but I can't. This isn't a fairy tale. This isn't a happy ending. Now look, I can give you a complete dissertation on exactly what that means when in reality, it means we fucking lost.

By a field goal.

It's mayhem in the locker room. Excessive amounts of profanity flying back and forth along with a helmet flying through the air and smashing into the wall with full force. Quinn's either pissed at the game, or maybe Tinder.

After the media circus, I finally meet up with Ember outside the locker room where she has the kids waiting to see me. Their eyes light up when they see me, as if I'm their favorite fucking person in the world. Even Marley smiles at me and that's saying something now that she has a boyfriend. Yep. Boyfriend. I hate the kid. Little fucker doesn't deserve her, but that's a conversation for another day.

"Good game," Ember says to me, smiling as she snakes her arm around my waist but keeps Nalani in her arms.

With the kids talking a million miles a minute at our feet trying to get my attention, I raise an eyebrow after I press my lips to her temple. "We lost."

Ember's eyes move to the kids. "But you won something pretty incredible."

"I definitely did. Thank you," I whisper, bumping my shoulder into hers and staring down at the kids.

"For what?"

"I couldn't have done this without you."

Ember winks. “You did this yourself.”

“No, *you* did. You showed me what I wanted and the man I wanted to be.”

I suppose I can't give Ember all the credit. These kids showed me just as much. And though I didn't want them in the beginning, and I still think Grant had lost his mind trusting me with them, I can't imagine my life without them.

39. LANDON

KICK OUT BLOCK

Kickout Block – On running play, this blocker is running parallel to the line of scrimmage and his job is to keep the outside edge rusher (usually a DE or OLB) from crashing to the inside. It's almost always a fullback or a pulling guard who does the kickout block.

2 YEARS LATER

For a football player, I have a way normal life.

Can you tell Haisley is into the movie *Clueless*?

It's awful. Sadly, I've seen it way too many times. And because I've seen the movie approximately 109 times, it's engraved in my head.

I get up in the morning, yep, still quoting the movie, but I kiss my wife good morning and then head to practice during the week if it's football season. When it's not, I make breakfast for the kids.

It's June so I don't have to get up for practice, and I would kiss my wife, but she's not in bed. That's just unacceptable.

Peeling myself out of bed, I make my way downstairs to find her in the kitchen making breakfast.

God, she's fucking beautiful when she's barefoot and pregnant. Oh please, you better believe I knocked her up. On our wedding night. I'm not joking either. Got her on the first shot. Not technically the first shot, but whatever, you get it.

Making my way over to her, I wrap my arms around her belly and rub my unborn child. "What are you doing?"

Ember leans her head back against my shoulder, keeping up with cracking an egg over a bowl. "Making egg whites for you." Carefully, she tips the egg so the yolk stays in one half of the shell while the white spills into the bowl.

I kiss her temple. "By throwing the egg yolk away?"

She turns to face me, her swollen belly between us. "Last time I checked, egg whites don't have the yolk."

"They don't, but I crack the egg and throw it in there first." I take the bowl and look at the clear substance. "You're doing it wrong."

Now she looks like she wants to kill me. And you know, I get this look a lot since she got pregnant. Or maybe I was getting it all along. "How?"

"You're depriving the yolk of love by immediately throwing it away."

She's looking at me like I've lost my mind and I bet you are too. "Whatever. You can make them either way."

"No, you can't. Now your eggs are loveless. I hope you're happy."

And that, that's the part that earns me a fuckin' slap to the side of the head. "If you don't start being nice to me, you're going to be loveless. Now take Marley to practice driving."

"Say what?"

Do you sense how terrified I am of this? You. Have. No. Idea. Let me tell you something. I've ridden with Marley and this is not my idea of a good time.

I try to protest this, but given my knocked-up wife is about to murder my egg-white-loving ass, I'm not in any position to argue. I try though, because I wouldn't be me if I didn't. "What if you go into labor and I'm not here?"

I'm just going to go ahead and skip the conversation here and tell you how it ends, and that should tell you how that went. It ends with her handing me the keys.

Do you see Marley and me in the car? I'm not sure who's more nervous, me or Marley.

My hands are fucking shaking. We're in my Bugatti and I'm pissed because it doesn't make a fuck bit of difference to me who's in the car, no one drives this car but me. Until now. Until my pregnant wife tells me to. #pussywhipped

Marley sighs beside me. "Why can't Ember teach me to drive?"

"Because she's making me for some stupid reason." I motion to the dashboard. "Now start the car."

Can you guess what's playing in the car when the radio comes on?

One Direction. You're laughing, aren't you?

Sadly, the song is rather catchy, but I'll never admit that to anyone. Except you.

As we pull out of the driveway she does well. Until we get out of the suburbs and into the city. That's when I fight the urge to make a cross over my chest because much like that scene in *Clueless* where Dion gets onto the freeway, Marley does.

On.

The.

Freeway.

Teach me to look at my phone while I'm supposed to be paying attention. Cars fly by us at alarming rates and I realize she's doing forty on the freeway. Pretty sure it's the slowest speed this car has ever gone. "Speed up!" I yell, regretting this whole situation. How did this happen? Why are we in *this* car? "If you're going to drive on the freeway, you have to do the speed limit!"

What does she do?

Lets go of the motherfucking steering wheel. "Don't yell at me!"

I grab the wheel to keep from kissing a big rig. "I'm sorry, but can you please do the speed limit? And don't let go of the wheel."

Driving with teenagers is the number one cause of heart attacks in parents. I don't have the statistics to back my theory, but anyone who's ever had a teenage driver can back me on this one.

I think back to the movie *Clueless* and Murray telling Dion to, "Relax and drive."

I should try that approach, but I don't. Before I can say it or guide her to the nearest exit, she jerks the wheel, suddenly careening us to the off ramp. One would think we're clear now, right?

One would be an optimistic asshole I'd like to punch.

"Use your brakes!" She hits the gas instead and I freak the fuck out thinking she's going to wreck my car. "The one on the left!"

And all I can think to myself as we're approaching a red light with cars stopped is we're going to rear-end them and both die while One Direction is playing. Worst death ever.

In a hail of blaring horns and without being hit by any other cars, Marley skids to a stop in a parking lot. I turn to Marley. "Holy shit."

She gasps. "This car is awesome!"

Before I can comprehend what's happening, or what to do next, I get a call from Cat and it's enough to sober me up from my near-death experience. Ember's in labor.

I'm about to be a dad. Again.

At the hospital, which yes, we made it to in one piece thanks to the speed demon over here. Once she figured out the capability of my car, I had a feeling she'll be stealing it.

I point at her, ripping my keys from her hand. "You're never driving my car again."

Marley rolls her eyes. "Whatever."

Around the corner of the labor and delivery wing of the hospital, Adler strolls by with a can of Pepsi in one hand and

bag of Cheetos in the other. He eyes me, then snorts. “You don’t look so good.”

“Marley tried to kill me.” I look around the room and notice Kasen in the corner holding onto Haisley and Nalani. “Where’s Braylee?”

“There’s your problem. Marley drives like shit.” He points down the hall toward the vending machines. “B’s down there getting snacks.”

Reaching forward, I ruffle his hair and push his head aside, my breathing starting to slow down. “Don’t cuss.”

Adler stares up at me, his lips orange from the Cheetos. “Why?”

“Because.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Not a good one.”

Sighing, I step further into the waiting room to see Cat sitting across from Kasen with Haisley now on her lap. “Where’s Ember?”

Adler slips into a chair and props his legs up on another one. Cracking open his can of pop, he smiles. “Oh, you know. Having a baby.”

You know those moments when you walk into a room and you’re automatically hated? This is one of them. Your life can change in the blink of an eye.

The moment I walk through the doors and see my wife, my everything, giving birth, is the moment that changes forever.

Again. Much like the first time and though I don't know how good I'm going to be at this whole dad thing, I like to think I'm a pretty cool uncle, so it can't be much worse, right?

40. EMBER



CHAIN GANG

Chain gang – The officials on the sideline that hold the yardage markers. Referred to as the chain gang because the first down markers are held together by a 10-yard metal chain.

I used to give so much of myself to the ones who didn't deserve it.

I used to give my heart away like it was a piece of candy waiting to be unwrapped by anyone.

I don't give my heart like I used to. Now I'm standing in the ashes of who I used to be. I'm held captive, chained to a love that'll last forever. I'm also pregnant and fucking miserable. #notblessed #miserable #fatAF

It's probably no surprise to you that Landon knocked me up.

And now that I'm in labor, yes, I said labor, I have so many unanswered thoughts about having a baby because it's not like my mom is around to ask, and Cat's mom lives in Hawaii now. You know those T-shirts people have that say: To be honest, I'm just winging it. Life, motherhood, my eye liner. Everything.

That's me. Every day of pregnancy with five other kids to take care of.

Will my vagina explode? #askingforafriend

It doesn't explode, unless you count a baby coming out of it.

Do you want to know the first thing that Landon says to me the moment he sees our daughter? My legs are fucking spread, I'm holding a bloody, slime-covered baby in my arms and he says, "We should get married."

"Really? We're already married."

He smiles. "You just gave birth to my daughter. You look beautiful and I want to fuckin' marry you all over again. Can't you just say yes without arguing with me?"

I laugh as the nurse takes her away and cleans her up. "Where would the fun in that be?"

After they've finished cleaning her off, they return her to us where Landon takes her in his arms. "Hey there, Saylor Rose."

#myheartjustexploded

Shifting in the bed, I draw in a deep breath, trying to steady my erratic heartbeat. "You look good holding your daughter, but you're holding her like a football."

He smiles. "Of all the things my hands have held, the best by far is my newborn daughter."

I once heard someone tell my dad, to which he clearly didn't listen: a daughter needs a dad to be the standard against which she will judge all men.

Clearly, looking at Landon, I chose the right man to be my baby daddy.

The kids come in not long after that and the room's filled with tears and arguing. The tears are from Nalani who's super upset by Landon holding another baby.

"Oh, you're always gonna be my girl too," he says to Nalani, holding her to his side when Marley takes the baby from him.

"Is she our sister?" Haisley asks, peeking over Marley's shoulder.

"No, she's your cousin, dummy," Braylee says, rolling her eyes but just as eager to hold the new addition.

Landon and I never talked about adding to the brood of kids we already had, and we hadn't planned on Saylor, but life had a way of giving us exactly what we never thought we wanted.

Maybe, just maybe, life is about finding beauty in the chaos and submitting to the unknown. The most vivid, breathtaking moments, the ones that you remember forever, those are the ones you never see coming. #blindsided #blessedAF

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hardest. Book. Ever.

I struggled so much with this one. I struggled with writer's block big time and then onto thinking I wasn't good enough to write *Blindsided*. I don't know anything about professional football. For the longest time I couldn't figure out how they painted those first down lines so quickly on the field only to find out that the television doing that. #confusedAF. After a while, I started pushing out words and hoping like hell they made sense.

For that reason, I have to thank a group of very special people who were there for me every step of the way reminding me that no matter what was going on in my life, I could and would finish this book.

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what I mean, make my writing descriptive, and I honestly believe I'm a better writer today because of you girls. Thank you so much for always taking the time to be patient with the weird way my brain works. Love you girls! #besteditorsever

Janet, I can't do anything without you. Crazy, huh? No, seriously, I don't know what I'd do without you in my life. And the fact that I don't even have to go into detail here explains why. #secondmama

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My family, The Boy, Hannah... thank you for understanding when I don't have dinner done or every free seat in the house has laundry on it. Thank you for loving pizza and tacos so much. #forevertacotuesday

MEET THE AUTHOR



USA Today bestselling author, Shey Stahl is a lover of sunsets, dirt track racing, and the south, where her soul wants to be. Writing is her passion, giving words meaning, and readers experiences they'll never forget. Currently she's living in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and daughter, she can usually be found near a dirt track with an iced coffee in hand.

Visit her website for additional information and keep up to date on new releases: www.sheystahl.com.

You can also find her on Facebook:

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