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# FAIR PLAY

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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Fair Play  
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“**W**hat does this button do?”

I smack my best friend’s hand away from the football’s team brand new camcorder, and give her the evil eye. She knows better than to play with it, which makes the shocked look on her face all the more amusing. But the fact is, I’ve been entrusted with the very expensive device to record the Falcons’ first home game. Since I can’t afford to replace it, I can’t let my friend go around poking at every shiny knob and possibly breaking something.

“What?” Peyton says, blinking dark lashes over big innocent eyes. “I’m just asking a question.”

“No. You’re pushing buttons you shouldn’t be pushing. Now sit there before I send you to the bleachers with everyone else.” I point to the bench to the left of us and raise a warning brow.

She gives a light laugh, brushing off my threat. “You’d never do that. You love me too much.” She’s right. I wouldn’t. Peyton and I have been best friends since kindergarten, and

for the last three years we've been college roommates choosing apartment-style living over a sorority house. She's here for a degree in social work, and I'm here because I want to be a filmmaker. Yeah, working in Hollywood, behind the scenes, has been my dream since childhood.

Beside me, Peyton gives a very big, very happy sigh and takes in the football field from our perch—only the best, first class seating for the camera woman. “I do love the perks of being your best friend,” she says as she admires the football players warming up. A few are so close we could practically reach out and touch them if we wanted to. I don't.

“I really can't understand the fascination,” I murmur. “A bunch of guys in tight pants chasing a ball.”

She crosses her arms, and waggles her brows at me. “What's it called again when a player passes the goal line with the ball in his hand?”

“Winning,” I say, giving her a look that suggests she might be dense, but when she breaks out laughing, I crack a smile. Yeah, I get it. I'm the one who's dense. It's true, I know nothing about football, but I need this fourth-year credit to complete my cinematic arts degree and really, do I need to understand the game to record it for the team to analyze later? That would be a big fat no. I hope.

“Well, at least you know how this thing works,” Peyton says, once again scoping out the buttons on my camcorder. “How about this knob? What does it do?”

“Peyton, cut it out.” I slap her hand again and laugh at her childish antics. How we remained friends all these years when we're so different is a mystery. But we love each other like sisters. Sisters? Wait, that's not right at all. I'm an identical twin and my sister Ivy and I go together like hotdogs and

Ferris wheels. Peyton and I, however, no matter how different, we just work.

I stare at her. "Don't you have football players to drool over?" Unlike me, she knows every player, and doesn't hold the same kind of grudge against them as I do.

I adjust my ballcap to shade the sun from my eyes as I glance out at the football field. I catch sight of my sister Ivy as she kicks one leg out and flirts with one of the players, trailing her finger over his chest. Blonde and bubbly. That's Ivy. We were raised by the same two parents, yet we're so different, and I wouldn't be caught dead in a cheerleading outfit that barely covered my ass. That's her business though, and I don't judge or interfere in her life, just like she doesn't interfere in mine.

I'd like to think when push comes to shove, she'd be there for me, just like I'd be there for her. At least, I think she'd be there for me. We might not hang out, but we love one another and have each other's best interests at heart. Of that I'm certain. It's funny really. Ever since we were young, we fell into certain roles. The extrovert and the introvert, the outgoing one and the quiet one. I always stood in the shadows and let her have the limelight. Pretty Ivy, the theater student who lights up a room with her smile and flamboyance when she enters. Which of course, makes me the introverted smart, quiet one. We both easily fell into those roles and have yet to stray.

Peyton gives a low, slow whistle. "I don't know what you have against tight pants. Look at all those cute butts and luscious muscles. Talk about slurpalicious." She rakes her teeth over her bottom lip. "Don't you want one little nibble, one taste?"

I give her a playful shove to move her away from the camcorder. “No. No nibbles. No tastes.” I’m a virgin with no plans to change that anytime soon, and as my best friend, she damn well knows it. I take up position behind the camera, and look at the world through my beloved lens. I exhale a contented breath. This is where I belong. This is where I feel most at home.

Okay, yeah, so it’s true. I’m the world’s biggest nerd. Do I care? Nope. Not one little bit. I’m happy to stand in the shadow and view the world through my camcorder lens. As I do, I catch sight of Ivy again as she shakes her ass for the boys on the field. Truth be told, I actually hate football players. Back in high school, they bullied my friend Jacob until he ended up taking his own life. Terrible hazing went on at our school. The bullying was torturous and cruel, and no matter how hard Peyton and I tried to help Jacob, get him help, the bullying continued, and actually increased the more we tried to stop it. A stab of pain sears my heart at the painful memory, and I suck in air to breathe through it. I know I shouldn’t lump all jocks into one category, shouldn’t label them all as egotistical bullies, but a single player has yet to prove me wrong. Arrogant assholes. What more can I say?

I check my watch, as my stomach growls. “Hungry much?” Peyton says. “Maybe you’d like a nibble after all?”

“Really, Peyton. Did you just meet me?” I tease and reach into my backpack and grab a granola bar, all the while trying to cleanse my brain of football players and their tight asses—one player in particular. Peyton holds her hand out, and I place a bar in her palm. Granola bars and juice boxes on the go. The life of a busy fourth year student—or that of a toddler.

She tears into her wrapper and looks me in the eye. Her brow is furrowed as she examines me like I’m a bug under a micro-

scope—a new kind of species no one can figure out. “You really don’t find any of those guys attractive?”

“Nope, not a single one of them.” A little white lie never hurt anything, right? “I prefer brains over brawn.”

“That’s a pretty blanket statement don’t you think? I bet a lot of them are smart.” Peyton doesn’t hold the same grudge as I do. She figured it was a few bad apples on our high school football team who persecuted Jacob until his suicide, not every jock in the world. I don’t forgive as easily. Maybe it’s the social worker in her. She sees the world through a different lens, and that’s her right.

“Yeah, probably.” I shrug. She’s right, but it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to hold it against her if she wants to date a player.

She grins. “What about Landon Brooks?”

A chunk of granola lodges in my throat and I try not to react, try not to let my eyes bulge out of my brain as I choke. Reacting will only fuel her ridiculous fantasy that Landon and I would be good together. She’s wrong, a million times over. A trillion, even.

I snatch a juice box from my backpack, rip the straw open and jab the foil opening. After a big sip, I roll my eyes. “Oh, Please, Landon’s ego is as big as—”

“His cock?”

Ohmigod.

My granola bar jumps back into my throat and I take another huge sip. In my calmest voice, I stare at her and say, “That is not what I was going to say. I mean, come on. I have no idea how big his...his thing is, and I don’t want to know.”

“His *thing*.” She laughs. “Oh, come on, Ella. You can say cock. I know you’ve watched porn before. We’ve watched it together, for God’s sake. We all have fantasies, and that’s normal.”

Flustered, I say, “Okay, fine. His cock. That’s the last time you’re going to hear that word on my lips, and the last time I’m going to think about it.” It’s possible that’s a lie. I might actually think of it tonight—when I watch porn.

“His cock is going nowhere near your lips then?”

I plant one hand on my hip and glare at her as she teases and twists my words. “How many ways do you need me to say it, Peyton?”

She braces her hands on the bench behind her and leans back, lifting her face to the sun. “I can tell you like him.”

“I do not like him.”

“What do you have against him anyway?”

Oh, other than the fact that he’s living rent free in my head, nothing. “He’s an asshole, and wait, why did you say his ego was as big as his cock. How do you know that?”

She gives me a slow grin that says she knows me too well. “Ah, look at that, you are thinking about his *thing* again.” She wags her dark brows. “You know, they just don’t call him Torpedo because he’s lightning fast, on the field. It’s because he has a big—”

“Stop,” I say. I take a fast breath. *Do not think about Landon’s torpedo*. I’m two seconds from demoting her to the bleachers, when she sits up straight, her mouth gaping. “What?” I ask, my blood draining to my toes even though I have no idea what’s going on. I only know that look on her face and it’s

bad. So very, very bad. She looks past my shoulder and points her finger.

“Uh...”

Ohmigod. I mouth the words, “He’s behind me, isn’t he?”

As she gives a slow nod, I spin around. Landon is adjusting his helmet as his gaze moves over my face. He’s not smirking, or showing any sign that he overheard us. Thank God!

“Hey,” he says and my stupid ovaries quiver as my gaze lands on his brutally handsome face. He’s not typically handsome, with a square jaw, perfect skin, perfect features. No. He’s a bit harder, his face scarred from fights, and football. It only makes him hotter.

“Hey,” I squeak out.

He smiles at me, then looks past my shoulder to Peyton when she clears her throat. “Hey, Peyton.”

“Landon,” Peyton says. “Looking good out there.”

He turns his attention back to me. “Coach wants to know if you’ve got this thing all figured out.” He gestures with a nod to the camcorder and I try not to react to his sexy Texas accent. “You know how to work all these buttons?”

“Yes, I do,” I say, and while I get that he has no idea how to use the camcorder, there are plenty of buttons this guy knows how to press. Yes, I’m talking about the buttons between a girl’s legs and the ones on the end of each breast. I’ve heard the rumors, and have zero intentions of ever finding out if they’re true. I’d have a better chance of landing an assistant director position with Spielberg right out of college than this guy has of landing a position between my sheets. Not that he wants that, but chances of either of them happening: zero.

His gaze rakes over me, and my goddamn legs nearly give out as those dark eyes ignite my blood from simmer to inferno. What the hell is wrong with me? I do not like football players. I do not like Landon.

*Yeah, you just keep telling yourself that, Ella.*

“Wait, am I seeing double,” he asks, and looks from me to Ivy and back to me again.

“Ivy is my twin,” I say with an exaggerated sigh, and steal a fast glance at her across the field. As if feeling my eyes on her, her head lifts, and she stares at me. I can’t see her expression from where I’m standing. I can only imagine she’s in shock to see me talking with Landon. Not because I don’t associate with football players, but because a nerd like me would never be worthy of his attention. She has nothing to worry about. He’s all hers.

Have at him, sis.

“How come I’ve never seen you around before?” He shifts from one foot to the other, and I become acutely aware of his height, and of the way his muscles fill out his uniform. Does he even need all that padding? The fresh scent of soap, fabric softener, and something uniquely Landon fills my senses. It’s not a bad scent. Nope, not bad at all. Which really sucks.

“I hang in different circles,” I tell him and like the nerd I am, I snort, and tap the camcorder. “Cinematography.”

“Oh yeah?” Dark eyes leave mine to steal a quick glance at the camcorder, and for a second he almost seems truly interested. “You’re one of those audio/visual students?”

I nod and resist the urge to roll my eyes, because honestly, the fact that he doesn’t know what my major is called isn’t his fault. I don’t know a thing about football, and I kind of get

the sense he's trying to be nice, although for the life of me I can't figure out why. I'm pretty sure he's not trying to lure me to the locker room so the team can beat the crap out of me, like those boys in high school did to Jacob.

"You mean nerds?" I ask, with a raised brow, and Peyton kicks my ankle. I whimper, but don't take my eyes off Landon. God, he's so alluring, his face brutally interesting, I'm not sure I can.

Something passes over his dark eyes. A hint of sadness? I'm not sure why I suddenly feel like I've bruised him somehow. Jeez, I'd never purposely hurt anyone, whether I liked them or not.

"I never said that. I just mean..." He shrugs one of those broad shoulders and it's all I can do to keep my gaze from dropping...from admiring all his muscles. "You, uh, you like movies, huh?"

"Yes. I like movies," I respond, and resist the urge to walk through the door he just opened. Once someone brings up movies, I could go on and on about films, rambling about what I like, what I don't like, but I don't want to bore him to death. He has a game to play, women to impress.

He rubs a scar beneath his eye, and it flares red. "Seen anything good lately?"

How did he get that? Football, or something else? "Yes," I say again, and he smiles.

"Any recommendations?"

Porn.

What. The. Hell.

*Get yourself together, girl!!!*

“Depends on what you like.” I say, trying for casual when my stupid brain is conjuring up all kinds of unwanted images. Landon on top of me, underneath me...

“You should come to the party tonight.” He gestures to the field with a nod. “I’ll show you what I like.”

Holy shit, no. He is definitely barking up the wrong tree here. I am not one of his groupies, bunnies, cleat chasers, or whatever the hell they call women who sleep with footballers. Wait! My brain takes a moment to catch up, alerting me that the guy everyone calls torpedo—and not just because he’s lightning fast—invited me to a party. Did I just enter the twilight zone or something? I think I might have heard him wrong.

“I’m busy,” I say.

This time his smile is cocky, full of brazen confidence, and I get it. I really do. I get why women hand their panties over. “Come on, you can’t be too busy to celebrate our win?”

“Pretty sure of yourself,” I say in a bored voice, even though there’s a storm going on inside me.

He cocks his head. “Attitude is half the battle, don’t you think?”

“You don’t want to know what I think,” I mumble.

He grins, and despite myself, my stupid lips twitch. God, why am I acting like a dim-witted moth around him? Yes, he’s a shining star and has his own gravitational pull, but I am not into egotistical football players. My only goal is to keep my head down, finish my degree and get a job in Hollywood. Why I’m suddenly on this guy’s radar is beyond me. Did he lose a bet or something? Have to talk to the nerdy girl? If not, and if there’s something about me that appeals to him, he

should go after Ivy. We look alike, except she dyes her hair blonde, and he could have her with a snap of his fingers.

“Her name is Ella,” Peyton says. “She’ll be at that party.”

I spin, and give my former best friend the death glare. She studies her nails, like she doesn’t have a care in the world. From across the field, a whistle blows, and I nearly jump ten feet in the air when a big, strong hand lands on my arm. I spin to face Landon, and he snatches his hand back.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to touch without permission.” He holds both hands up, palms out. “I just ah, I gotta go. Coach is calling.” He pauses for a brief second.

“What?” I ask as I reposition myself at the camcorder and reach for the record button. Wait, why is it on? Rattled, and pretending not to be, as Landon continues to stand there, six feet of sex in a football outfit, looming over my small frame, I flick the record button off, and close my eyes, hoping when I open them again, he’ll be gone.

“Aren’t you going to say good luck?”

Nope not gone, and goddamn that cocky grin of his. I’m going to give my traitorous body—one spot in particular—a good hard lecture when we get home. With my vibrator.

“Good luck,” I murmur, sounding uninterested.

He backs up an inch and I can almost fully refill my lungs again. “See you tonight, Ella.”

“Not going to be there,” I say.

He pauses and I sigh as I look at him. Why won’t he leave already?

“How about this? If I score a touchdown, you come, if I don’t...then it’s my loss. In more ways than one.”

His loss? Okay, I really am in some alternate universe. Football players do not flirt with me, and that’s the way I like it.

“Why would I bargain with you? What could possibly be in it for me?”

“Come tonight.” He flashes perfect white teeth. “Find out.”

“We’ll be there,” Peyton says, finality in her tone, letting us both know it’s going to happen and the conversation is over.

“We will not be there,” I clarify through clenched teeth. We have a better chance of getting snow in Southern California this late September evening. Not. Going. To. Happen.

“See you tonight, Peyton,” Landon says. “See you too, Ella.” He points to the camera. “Now you’d better press record. You don’t want to miss my touchdown.”

My God, could the guy be any hotter...I mean, cockier. Yeah, cockier, that’s what I meant. The guy is *not* hot. Nope not hot at all.

Much.

With a homefield win in the bag, my teammates and I all slap one another on the back, and nod to the cheering crowd as we tug off our helmets, and raise them over our heads, before file off the field and head toward the locker room. The crowd cheers louder when Sam, our wide receiver, attempts a flip and lands on his head. I'm not worried, the guy is as tough as leather, and it'll take more than a concussion to bench him.

Grinning, I shake my head at his undignified flop and steal a fast glance over my shoulder to flash a smile Ella's way, but she's not looking at me. Did I really expect to be the object of her attention? Not really. Just hopeful thinking, I guess. I grin. Does that touchdown mean she'll come to the party tonight or is that just more hopeful thinking?

Ella Holmes.

Christ, when Coach said he'd hired someone new, after the last one couldn't handle being on the road with us, who knew he'd hire someone so damn sweet and interesting, or that

she'd be Ivy's twin, for Christ's sake. How did I not know Ivy had a twin sister? Truthfully, it's been a long time, freshman year actually, since a girl intrigued me. She might not want anything to do with me, but that simply fascinates me more. I kind of like it, really. I like that she's different from the girls I usually talk to.

I was a little thrown off my game when I first set eyes on her, thinking I was seeing double, and while she looks like Ivy, the two are nothing alike. Ivy would never be caught dead in overalls, and a ballcap covering her long curls. I mean, I like Ivy and all. We're friends and we've partied together, and she's slept with many of my buddies. She's just never been into me.

I guess I just don't have the pretty boy face she's attracted to. I've let that roll off my shoulders, because I'm not hard up for women. Nope. None of us have to date the palm twins anymore. Outside of football, you could say fucking is pretty much the team's pastime. Getting my grade up in English had better soon be my pastime, or Coach is going to bench my sorry ass. Fuck, I hated English class last year, and here I am putting myself through this torture again. Why couldn't Shakespeare just speak English? Well, I mean he spoke English, but what the fuck ever. Didn't we all outgrow riddles with Dr. Seuss?

I turn back around, my thoughts returning to Ella as someone jumps on my back. Judging by the person's light weight, and the long sleek legs wrapped around my waist, it's not a teammate. Nope, furthest thing from a teammate, in fact. Soft hands wrap around my body, and nimble fingers link together on my chest. I angle my head to see who it is, and my head rears back when I see Ivy's brilliant smile, her long loose hair framing her pretty face. Look at that, she has freckles like her sister. Nevertheless, giving a piggyback ride

to the cheerleaders after a winning game is nothing new, it's just that Ivy has never jumped on my back before. She's never jumped on my *anything*.

Why now?

"Great job out there, Landon," she says, her mouth near my ear, her voice a low seductive whisper. "You were *torpedo* fast."

Why the emphasis on torpedo? It's not like she was ever interested in riding my torpedo before. I put my hand over hers and hold her steady as we head toward the doors. But something gnaws at my gut, something uncomfortable and foreign. Drawn by a force I don't understand, I slowly turn, and even though she's at a distance, I can almost feel Ella's camera pointed my way, capturing my every movement. But that's ridiculous, right? I'm nothing to her. Sure, we all have big egos, but I'd be giving myself credit if I thought I was on Ella's mind the way she's on mine. I've never met anyone more disinterested, which totally fucking sucks. She's the kind of girl I could have real conversations with.

Ivy slides down my back and spins me to face her. She goes up on her toes, puts her palm on my cheek and forces me to look at her. "Hey, what's the matter with you? We just won the game. We should be celebrating."

"Yeah, celebrating. Tonight." She gives me a wide smile and wets her bottom lip. She looks like she has something to say but I speak first. "How come you never told me you had a sister?"

Her eyes narrow, turn venomous, then, as if catching herself, she gives a dismissive wave and chuckles. "Ella. Oh, come on. She's head movie nerd and has nothing in common with us. Why on earth would I mention her?"

“I don’t know. I just thought you might have...” And Ella and I both like movies, so we do have something in common. Not that Ivy would know or care about what I liked. I’m a footballer, and I’m not naïve. I know people see me as a dumb jock. My goal is to make it to the NFL, but it’s good to have a backup plan just in case, and when I retire, I’d like to write a screenplay about a horrific incident that happened to Brady and me when we were fourteen. Putting that incident down on paper might sound ridiculous to some—especially since I’m having a hard time passing English—which is why I’ve never told anyone I wanted to document that day. Not even my best friend.

“Well, she’s hardly your type,” she says, and sidles up to me. Her hands go to my chest and her fingers spread. “No sense in bringing her up.”

“Landon, come on for Fuck sake,” Caleb says. “Let’s get this meeting over and get a cold one.”

I put my hands on Ivy’s and remove them from my chest. “Gotta go. Team meeting. See you later.”

Disappointment moves over her face. “Sure, and you can count on seeing me later.”

I pause for a brief second. What is all this attention suddenly about? Sure, she’s gorgeous, but she goes for the pretty boys. Why the sudden change? I have no time to think about that when our infamous quarterback, Brady—my best friend and roommate—grabs me by the collar and hauls me backward.

“Dude,” I say and he lets me go and throws his arm around me. He punches me in the gut.

“Hey, Ivy, huh?”

I look over my shoulder in time to see Ivy turn, her gaze zeroed in on her sister, who is packing up her equipment. I can't see Ivy's face, but her stance is tight, her palms fisted at her sides. Something tells me the twin sisters don't get along. Here I thought twins were tight.

"That girl is tight."

"Yeah...tight. I was just thinking about that."

"That's my boy," Brady says, and squeezes his arm around my neck. Of course we're both talking about something entirely different. I laugh it off, and he says, "You getting with her tonight?"

"Is that all you think about?" I ask.

"Of course not." He plasters on a mostly serious face. "You know I think about football too."

I laugh at that. "If I don't start thinking about English..." I stop and make a slicing motion across my neck. "Benched."

Brady goes completely serious, and that's one of the things I love most about him. He's a baller and a man whore, but he cares about me and my future. Ever since that day we skipped school and got caught in a lockdown at the theater... my brain freezes, and a shiver goes through me as I take a trip down memory lane. Well, we were always best buds, but after that horrific day, we bonded in a deeply meaningful way. Apparently, trauma can really bring two people together.

"You need a tutor, man."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing."

He goes quiet like he's deep in thought. "Why don't you check in with student services?"

“Yeah, I guess.”

In the locker room, we’re all in a good mood, everyone ribbing each other and talking about our plays. A few palms land on my back, congratulating me on my touchdown. We all shower, and thirty minutes later we’re in the classroom. Whether we win or not, Coach likes to go over the rival team’s plays right after the game, when they’re fresh in our mind.

I’m still keyed up as I grab a seat and pull out my notepad as Coach stares at a file on his desk. His head lifts and a knot tightens in my gut as his gaze cuts to me. Fuck. Why do I get a feeling that worried look on his face has something to do with my English grade? I stifle a laugh. I’m the guy who wants to write a screenplay. Who the hell do I think I am? If the NFL doesn’t pan out, my dad has a nice little corner office in his car dealership.

The door yawns open and my thoughts switch gears when I catch a glimpse of sweet little Ella with her hair stuffed under a ballcap, shuffling a camcorder, tripod, and backpack. I zero in on the freckles around her nose, and a surge of energy has me sitting up a bit straighter as adrenaline rushes through my blood.

She steps inside, and lets out a loud oomph when she almost trips on the bag one of the guys left on the floor. I’m two seconds from jumping up and grabbing her when she finds her balance, and tries not to look embarrassed. Brady’s gaze goes from Ella to me, and he angles his head with a pensive look on his face as I try to relax my shoulders and present casual.

There is no way for him to know she’s Ivy’s sister from where we sit, and okay, yeah, it’s true, she’s not the kind of girl I

gravitate toward, which is why Brady is giving me a curious look. I'm not sure what it is about her, I only know that something about the audio/visual girl interests me. Could it be the chase? Or could it be something more? I don't know and maybe I shouldn't give that any deeper consideration. I have a career to focus on and an English class to pass. Fucking is a team pastime. Relationships, not so much, and Ella has long term written all over her, and definitely not with a baller.

Coach calls Ella up to his desk, and a few minutes later, the game she recorded fills the large white movie screen at the front of the class. I spot myself in the background warming up before the game. Guess she must have hit the play button early. Ella backs away, and heads toward the door, and I stare at her backside, drawn to the curves she hides behind baggy overalls.

"Great job today, guys, and there's one play I definitely want to go over," Coach says, pulling our attention forward as he hits his screen with his long pointer. He circles his desk, and stands before us. He directs the pointer at Blake. "Blake, when you ran—"

*"Peyton, cut it out."*

Coach shuts his mouth and his brow furrows when a voice fills the room—Ella's voice. Holy shit. My gaze jerks to Ella. Her hand goes perfectly still, inches from the knob, and her entire body stiffens. Jesus, is she even breathing?

*"Don't you have football players to drool over?"*

*"I don't know what you have against tight pants. Look at all those cute butts and luscious muscles. Talk about slurpalicious. Don't you want one little nibble, one taste?"*

*"No. No nibbles. No tastes."*

“What the fuck?” Jared says, as desks scrape the floor, every player leaning forward to better listen to the private exchange between Ella and Peyton.

Ella spins, her mouth agape. Wide eyes meet Coach’s. “Turn it off,” she shrieks her voice bordering on hysteria.

*“You really don’t find any of those guys attractive?”*

*“Nope, not a single one of them. I prefer brains over brawn.”*

Coach stands there for a second, like he’s trying to put the pieces of a puzzle together.

“Please, turn it off,” Ella whines, and my heart jumps into my throat when the guys start laughing, clueing in that it’s Ella’s voice they’re hearing.

“This shit just got real,” Trey yells, and bangs his fists on his desk. I take a fast glance around the room. This is bad. So damn bad.

“Turn it off,” I shout, and all eyes turn to me, including Ella’s. I focus solely on her, take in the pleading, almost desperate look on her face as Peyton’s next words ring out and rattle around in my brain.

*“What about Landon Brooks?”*

My entire body goes stiff. Goddammit, I need Coach to turn it off as much as I need him to leave it playing. A part of me wants to know what she thinks of me. A part of me doesn’t.

*“Oh, Please, Landon’s ego is as big as—”*

*“His cock?”*

*“That is not what I was going to say. I mean, come on. I have no idea how big his...his thing is, and I don’t want to know.”*

*“His thing. Oh, come on, Ella. You can say cock. I know you’ve watched porn before. We’ve watched it together for God’s sake. It’s okay to have fantasies, and that’s normal.”*

*“Okay fine. His cock. That’s the last time you’re going to hear that word on my lips, and the last time I’m going to think about it.”*

*“His cock is going nowhere near your lips then?”*

Every guy in the room starts hollering, and joking, and shouting out profanities—everyone except me, that is. I glare at them, but they’re too busy having fun with this at Ella’s expense. Goddammit, I need to do something, and I need to do it now. I plant my feet on the floor and stand.

“Turn it off,” Ella pleads again, her voice a small whisper, as her cheeks redden to the color of a ripened cherry. Her hands go to her face, and she lets out a horrified groan. I’m about to throw myself at the laptop when her pleas prompt Coach into action. He hurries to his desk and waves his hand over his laptop like he’s trying to figure out what the hell to do. He stabs a few buttons and the video ends.

I sink back into my seat as the room falls silent. Ella backs up, hits the door with a thump. I’m a second from jumping back up and running to her rescue when Coach slams his laptop shut and takes a fast breath.

“Can I see you outside?” he says to Ella, and when she nods quickly, the two disappear into the hall.

“What the fuck, dude? What did you ever do to her?” Caleb says, and the guys start messing with me, everyone except Brady, who is eyeing me. I give the boys a cocky grin and shrug.

“What can I say.” I point to my scars. “Some like this face, some don’t. My cock, however, all girls like that. She just

doesn't know it yet." The guys break out in laughter and I sort of feel like a total prick for saying that about Ella. In this environment, we all have a role to play, and we all play it well. We're a team, a brotherhood, and the last thing I want is for these guys to think I'm soft.

"That's my man," Beck says, and gives me a fist pump. I stare at the door, look through the small glass panel, but all I can see is Coach's back. Shit, man. I really hope he isn't firing Ella. She seemed like she needed this job, but it was more than that. There was something about her as she looked at the camera, like it was her lifeline or something. Then again, I'm a jock, all brawn and no brains, so what the hell would I know right? I snort. Yeah, I should just cut and run, now that I know what she really thinks about guys like us. Here she thought I was judging her when she called me out, asking if I was labeling her a nerd. I wasn't. But she sure as hell was packing us all into one nice and tidy package, wasn't she?

The guys simmer down when Coach walks back into the room, and I get a glimpse of Ella adjusting her backpack over her shoulder before she darts down the hall.

Forget about her, dude. You do not need the drama.

Deciding to do just that, I turn my attention to the front of the class again, and Coach, looking a little flustered, says, "Let's just call this a day, okay. Go, get out of here," he says and the guys all jump up, ready for our aftergame party. He points to me as I slowly stand. "Landon, I'll need a word with you."

My stomach tightens. I'm not sure why he wants me to stay behind, but can't help think it has something to do with my English, or Ella. Either way, my lungs are tight, like I'd just been sacked by a linebacker.

“Want me to wait?” Brady says.

“No, go. I’ll catch up with you guys later. Save a keg for me.”

Brady grins. “Later.”

I stop at Coach’s desk, and before he can get a word out, I say. “Don’t worry, Coach. I have no plans to get involved with Ella, or even talking to her again. She’s trouble and who needs that kind of bullshit, right?”

Intense eyes—eyes that never lose sight of the win—meet mine and hold. “You do.”

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?