

Broken Play

Samantha Kane

Loveswept

New York

Broken Play is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A Loveswept eBook Original

Copyright © 2015 by Samantha Kane

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Loveswept, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

LOVESWEPT is a registered trademark and the LOVESWEPT colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

eBook ISBN 9781101883600

www.readloveswept.com

Chapter 1

There were days when you owned the world, and days when the world chewed you up and shat you out. Cass Zielinski, center for the redheaded stepchild of the National Football League, the Birmingham Rebels, had woken up thinking it was going to be the latter. First meeting after the draft, after a dismal second season and their complete and utter failure to make the play-offs, he'd expected some trash talk thrown his way and the offensive-captain patch to get ripped off his jersey. Instead he sat staring at the prettiest coach's assistant he'd ever met, while the Bull's head offensive coach, Mike Richards, gave the traditional "This Is Our Year" opening speech. The speech wasn't quite polished yet, but there were only four of them at the meeting, so he had time before he had to try to bullshit the rest of the team.

"Hat." At the sound of the whispered word, Cass looked over at his best friend, Beau Perez. Beau gestured to the hat on the table. It was sitting right in front of the new assistant, and she couldn't put her armful of papers down. "Hat," Beau whispered again.

Cass clumsily yanked the cowboy hat off the table. He grew up in Texas, where people made room for hats on the table when there was nowhere else to put them. "Sorry, ma'am," he said politely to the new assistant, who was staring at him. Marian, Her name was Marian.

She blushed and smiled nervously, then looked away as she set her papers down at last. Damn, she was pretty. She had long, straight blonde hair, part of it pulled back in some sort of professional-looking style, leaving the rest to hang down her back. Under the harsh lights, it shone brightly against the dark blue of her suit jacket. She was buttoned up like it was Sunday. He could still tell she was fit, long and lean and athletic. When they'd shaken hands she'd

reached his chin in her low-heeled shoes. He was six four, so he guessed she was about five seven. Tall for a woman. She had a light tan to her skin, as if she spent time outdoors, not in a tanning bed. She made him think of those sexy beach-volleyball babes. Mike had told them she'd worked at a small Division III college in the northeast before coming to Birmingham.

Beau pinched his arm and he jerked away, glaring at him. "What?" he mouthed.

Beau wasn't a captain, but where Cass went, Beau followed. It was part of the deal when they'd signed. Beau gestured toward Mike with his head, frowning.

Beau looked damn scary when he was frowning. He was six six, with hair so dark it looked black. He had that sort of coppery skin Mexicans had, pretty and soft looking. Not that Beau looked soft. His face was all angles, his nose broken a time or two, his neck as thick as pretty Marian's thigh, Cass would bet. Beau's mouth was fierce and wide, with thin lips, but he had a sharp indent above, making his upper lip bow. Cass jerked his gaze away from Beau's mouth. Beau was looking at him, exasperated, and rolled his eyes at Cass. He looked like an exotic Hulk, but his brown-gold eyes full of laughter ruined the comparison. Beau got those pretty eyes and skin tone and hair color from his mama. Cass had met her. His daddy was some handsome stranger who had some fun and disappeared. According to Beau's mom, he'd been tall and rugged, like Beau. Too damn bad he'd walked away. He could have had a son in the NFL.

"Cass? Anything to add?" Mike asked. Cass turned his gaze to the coach, who was standing there, arms crossed, his expression clearly showing he knew Cass hadn't been paying a damn bit of attention. Mike was in his late forties, and with his short, graying hair he looked every inch the suburban dad who shuttled his kids to football and soccer practice and mowed the lawn every Saturday. In truth he was a workaholic who'd been divorced twice and had no kids. He paid someone else to mow the lawn of the house he barely saw.

“Nope,” Cass said, covering, frowning and nodding his head as if he knew what was going on. “Not right now. I think you said it all. I may have something after we talk.” Nice way to make a good impression on the front office, Cass thought, mentally kicking himself in the butt.

“I’ll just bet you will,” Mike said sarcastically. “You know we drafted a good running back in Tom Kelly,” he went on, getting down to business. “We traded for two second-round picks next season, as well. We’re still building this team.”

They sure as shit were. “Tom was a mediocre player,” Cass said, trying not to grind his teeth as he talked. Beau had told him that pissed people off. “And we got Danny Smith in the trade. We didn’t need two new running backs. We had a chance to grab Taylor Reutsch when he went free agent, instead.”

“Reutsch wasn’t a good fit for this team,” Mike said stiffly. “We discussed this.”

“And I disagreed,” Cass reminded him.

“Marian convinced me Tom’s stats indicated he had more potential than what we saw while he was at Nebraska. Their system didn’t work for him. Ours will. It’s done.” Mike’s tone indicated the topic was dead.

Cass glared across the table at Marian Treadwell. He’d underestimated her, obviously. She was more than a pretty face. And she was messing with his team.

“I’d be glad to go over his stats with you and explain why I encouraged the team to acquire him,” she said with a polite smile. There was nothing weak about her demeanor. He liked that. Liked that she spoke to him like an equal and clearly expected the same from him. Her offer was an olive branch. Cass recognized it. She wanted to stay. Cass had the power to

make or break her here. He knew it. She knew it. The whole damn table knew it. But she wasn't begging.

"Sure," he said, with a stiff smile and a nod. "That would be good. But Reutsch—"

"Reutsch is a pig," Mike said, cutting him off with a curl of his lip. "I told you to trust me, Cass. I know what I'm doing."

"I heard that about Reutsch, as well," Marian said. "I don't like to give credence to rumors, but these were too prevalent to ignore. I didn't feel that, personalitywise, he would fit in here." She was cautious, but still exuded confidence with each word she spoke. It turned him on. He was surprised by his interest in her because normally he didn't poach in team territory. But damn, she was going to be hard to resist.

She was just the type of woman he liked to take to bed. Strong, confident, not afraid of her own power. When a woman like that kneeled at your feet and gave herself over to you, there was nothing better. The rush of that was a high no drug could match. He'd given that to Beau, to replace the drugs. Taught him how to appreciate a woman's surrender, to crave her pleasure more than his own. Just the thought of Marian between him and Beau, giving them all she was and letting them take care of her, made goose bumps break out on his arms. The things he wanted to make the two of them do for him. The plays he could come up with. He practically vibrated with excitement at the thought.

"Damn straight," Mike growled. Cass paid attention. Mike didn't growl at or about anyone very often. For a coach, he was pretty laid back. "I wasn't going to say anything, but you won't let it drop. The truth is, when he played college ball he was the king of date rape. Roofies were his best friend."

“What the fuck?” Beau asked incredulously. “How did he get away with it?”

“There was always a deep alumni pocket around to keep him playing,” Mike said, throwing a paper clip onto the table in disgust. “College sports can be a dirty motherfucker.” He grimaced in Marian’s direction. “Sorry for the language.”

Marian laughed. “It’s all right. I agree. I knew one or two dirty motherfuckers during my college-ball days, too.”

There was something in her voice that made Cass turn from Mike to Marian. Her face had gone pale, and she was fiddling with her pen, not looking at anyone around the table.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” Cass said. “I should have trusted you, Mike. I won’t make that same mistake again. You’re right. A guy like that won’t fit in here. Nobody here is going to do that shit and get away with it.” He meant every word. He knew what it meant to be violated like that, used by someone to get what she wanted and damn the consequences or the rules. No one would ever do that to him again. And he wasn’t going to let anyone do it to someone else, either, not if he could prevent it.

Marian’s brown eyes grew big and she stared at Cass as if she’d never heard a man apologize before. Next to her, Mike turned his body abruptly in his chair to face her and she jumped.

“Whoa,” Mike said, his hands up in surrender. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

She laughed that tight laugh again. “No, I’m sorry. I get lost in my head sometimes. Don’t bother about me.” She cleared her throat. “Don’t forget we also snagged Kitt Doyle. When he went free agent I thought he’d get more offers despite his age and injury record.”

She successfully changed the subject as Mike and Beau began to discuss how Doyle, a good veteran left tackle, would affect the offense. She glanced up and when she caught Cass's gaze, she tensed. After a second or two, when her mouth grew tight and she looked like she might say something, he looked away. There was definitely more to Marian Treadwell than what met the eye.

He was wearing a cowboy hat and cowboy boots, for heaven's sake, Marian thought as she looked away from Cass Zielinski's penetrating stare. Did he think he was a Cowboy? Wrong team. The way the Rebels played last year, nearly the wrong league. She was exasperated, but it was with herself, not him. She was letting his sun-kissed good looks get to her. All six feet four inches and 280 pounds of him. That was a lot of good looking. He had auburn hair and a beard to match, both bleached a little redder by the sun. And the cowboy thing? Yeah, a total button pusher. But she could resist it, because damn it, that wasn't why she was here. She didn't want to screw football players. She wanted to coach them. She had something to offer this team. The head office saw it and so did Mike. Clearly the players were going to be a harder sell. If she could get Cass Zielinski on her side, that would go a long way to getting the others to accept her. According to everything she'd read, and from what Mike had told her, the whole team idolized Zielinski. He'd been playing, and playing well, in the NFL for over ten years. Everyone knew he'd accepted the Rebels deal because they'd promised him front office when he retired, which wasn't too far in the future. He was thirty-one, old for an offensive lineman. And of course, the deal had included Beau Perez.

She stole a glance at Perez. He was a scary looking son of a bitch. Taller than the average player, he was more thug than Latin lover, brooding and intense. The tattoo on his neck didn't help. She'd heard he was a real sweetheart in person, but she hadn't seen it so far. He obviously

had Zielinski wrapped around his massive pinky finger, the way he'd jumped to remove his hat when Perez frowned at him. Somehow he'd ridden Zielinski's coattails back into the NFL after a suspension for drugs. His drug use and overdose were a red flag for any coach. He'd spent months in rehab, and Zielinski had been a constant visitor. That was the beginning of the rumors.

She hated to admit she'd read every tabloid rumor about them. Most of her information about them came from the *Enquirer* and *People* magazine. They'd been caught on tape having sex with the same woman. At the same time. The sex tape had gone viral. You couldn't Google them without it turning up, despite all their efforts to get it taken down. There was no sound, and there were some malfunctions with the recorder, but you didn't need to hear it to know they were giving her a hard, rough fuck. Jesus, Marian had watched that video about a hundred times and fantasized about them both. She wished she'd known at the time that she'd be working with them. She would have passed it by. She could hardly look at them without picturing them naked and straining, as they slammed into the willing woman in perfect synch. They had clearly done it many times before in order to have that sort of synchronization. With Perez's dark hair and exotic looks, and Zielinski's reddish hair and paler skin, they had complemented one another perfectly. She began to sweat and squirm in her seat as she tried to force her attention back to what Mike was saying.

Before long her gaze slid over to Perez again. He was a loose cannon, in her opinion. For the last two years he'd walked the straight and narrow, it was true. He played hard, stayed out of the limelight, and he was clean. Regular drug tests made sure of it. But his hold on Zielinski worried her. Cass clearly led the team, but Beau just as clearly led Cass. They needed the center to make this team work. He was the center in more ways than the position he played. The team

revolved around him. He made it work, made this group of losers and misfits rise above their pasts and their reputations and play some pretty decent ball. Could they be better? Yeah, they could. And Marian was going to help make that happen. She'd hitched her wagon to the Rebels' star, and she wasn't going down without a fight.

She had something to prove. To herself and to her father. No one here but Mike and head coach Shannon Ludwig knew her dad was Rufus Sedgeway, one of the most successful coaches in Division I college-football history. And that was how Marian wanted it. She didn't want to talk about her father to anyone; she didn't even want to remember he existed on most days. He'd silenced her. He'd chosen some sleazy football players and his precious winning record over her. She'd had to go crawling back to him to ask him to help her get this job, but that was it. She knew he'd gotten her a job with the Rebels because he wanted her to fail again. He wanted to control her again. But she'd show him and everyone else. They hadn't broken her, not by a long shot.

Beau worried his lower lip between his teeth. He recognized that look in Cass's eyes. He was interested in Marian Treadwell. She was pretty. Too pretty, just the way Cass liked them. Beau liked them like that, too. Strong enough you didn't have to worry about breaking them. But he couldn't see her submitting to either of them. She was a ballbuster, no doubt about it. And she didn't like him. As far as he could tell, he hadn't done anything to earn her frowns since they'd met less than an hour ago. That meant she knew about his past and judged him for it. She wouldn't be the first. Hell, he judged himself for it. She hadn't given Cass frowns, so at least it wasn't that damn sex tape. Beau clenched his teeth at the reminder of their biggest mistake. What had they been thinking? That chick had been trouble and they both knew it, but damn if Beau hadn't needed to be with Cass like that so bad he ignored his instincts. And Cass had been

looking out for him again, trying to give him something to get through another long night. And look where it had gotten them.

Not that playing for the Rebels was a bad thing. Beau liked it here. Birmingham was nice. The people down here were nice, too. Southerners just did it for him. The way they talked lit him up. He was from California, where no one had an accent unless they came from another country. One word out of Cass's mouth was about all it had taken for Beau to fall for him. Marian had a sweet little accent, too. They hadn't mentioned where she was from. Definitely not the northeast, where she'd worked last. Not with that honey dripping off her tongue. Beau imagined closing his eyes and just listening to the two of them talking over him, saying dirty shit, the way he liked it. Damn, he loved dirty talk. He loved Cass's dirty talk. He looked over at Marian, looking so prim and proper, and hanging on Mike's every word. She probably didn't even know dirty words, her earlier cussing notwithstanding. But if she did? Yeah, he'd like to hear them. Even if she didn't like him. How sad was that?

"Mr. Perez," she said politely, interrupting his thoughts. He smiled at her, wishing she'd called him Beau so he could hear his name in her pretty little voice.

"Yes, ma'am?" he answered just as politely.

She cleared her throat. "I was wondering what your thoughts were on Tom Kelly."

"I don't have any," he answered honestly. Mike laughed and Beau smiled at him. When he turned back, Marian Treadwell was frowning. "That is," Beau said, "I don't really know anything about him. I had no idea we were considering him. I watched a few games last year, is all. Like Cass said, he was okay, not great." He shrugged. "Who am I to judge? We all know you can't predict how someone's going to fit in. You've just got to wait and see."

“Oh,” she said. “I assumed you had some insight, which was why you were here at the meeting.” Beau didn’t think she meant anything by it. She looked genuinely confused. She turned to Mike. “Are all players allowed to attend these meetings? Doesn’t it get a little crowded?”

Her questions were met with uncomfortable silence. Beau resisted the urge to squirm in his seat. She didn’t know he went where Cass went. Used to be because neither one of them trusted Beau. It’s bad when a man can’t trust himself. Now they just hated to be separated. Cass couldn’t concentrate if Beau wasn’t around. He worried too much. Marian Treadwell probably wouldn’t understand even if they tried to explain it. She didn’t look like she needed anyone around. She was completely self-contained and confident. Must be nice.

“He’s here because I want him here,” Cass said. “Do you have a problem with that?” He sounded like he was getting mad. Cass mad was not a good thing. Beau was about to step in when she answered.

“No. Do you have a problem with my asking questions about things I don’t understand? Seeing as how I’ve only been with the team for two months, and this is my first meeting with you, I confess I don’t know all the rules yet.”

She had to go and mention rules. Beau sighed inwardly as Cass got that heated look in his eyes. Cass sure loved rules. “I’ll answer all your questions about the rules,” Cass told her, and Beau bit his lip again as Cass ran one of his thumbs along the length of the other where they rested on the table. Cass did that when he really wanted to touch someone else. Beau had to clasp his hands on the table to keep them from wandering where they shouldn’t—couldn’t—go.

“Good,” Marian said briskly. “Well, Mr. Perez, I assume you feel free to contribute to the discussion, correct?” Beau nodded, hiding a smile at her sudden burst of efficiency. “Excellent. If you do form an opinion about Mr. Kelly, please come and talk to me about it. We’re still working on the playbook.”

“What about Danny Smith?” Beau asked, curious that he hadn’t been mentioned. “Mandatory minicamp starts in three weeks, and he’s not answering calls and he’s threatening a no-show in the press.” He was watching Marian closely and saw her flinch a little around the eyes. No one else noticed. She busied herself with straightening the pile of papers in front of her and didn’t answer.

“Smith damn well better show up,” Mike said. “He’s our ace in the hole. Four Pro Bowls, NFC champs last year, a Super Bowl appearance two years running. That’s the kind of player we need to help solidify the offense.”

“I hear you,” Cass said, frowning. “I’m looking forward to playing with him, for all he’s supposed to be a giant asshole. As long as he can still run the ball, he’s the man.”

“I’m sure Mr. Smith will be here for camp,” Marian said firmly. “He was unprepared to be traded by the Ravens. He’s merely having some adjustment issues.”

“He’s a salary-cap casualty,” Cass said dryly. “He knew the trade was coming. His issue is being traded to the Rebels.”

“I don’t give a shit if he and his mama need therapy to get over the trade,” Mike said. “He shows or he gets his ass fined.”

“You want me and Cass to try to talk to him?” Beau offered. It wouldn’t be the first time they’d had to talk someone into playing for the Rebels. He wasn’t sure what Danny Smith’s deal

was. Beau had enough of his own shit to deal with. He didn't bother with other people's if he could help it.

Mike shook his head. "No, not yet. I want to keep this through official channels for the time being."

Beau kept watching Marian. Her shoulders relaxed at Mike's decision. Why didn't she want them to talk to Danny Smith? She'd met assholes in football, she said. And she didn't want Danny Smith here. He was a world-famous asshole, but Beau got the impression there was more to it than that. Interesting. If Beau were a thinking man, he'd put those two together and make something of it. Maybe do the math.

Or maybe not. He mentally shook off the urge to think about it. He was only three years sober. Some days it was still a struggle to stay that way. Those days he had Cass, and sometimes whatever woman they managed to find who wouldn't sell them out on YouTube. That was enough. It had to be enough. He didn't want to get tangled up with Marian Treadwell. Something about her set off his warning bells. She wasn't the girl for them. There were secrets in her eyes and the set of her shoulders. She didn't like Cass's take-charge attitude or anything about Beau. She might be the stuff fantasies were made of, but he was worried she had an agenda. Most women he met did. She could use Cass to improve her position on the team, and Cass wouldn't even know it. He'd be too busy trying to solve her problems, trying to chase the shadows from her eyes.

But if Cass decided he had to have her, then Beau would go with whatever play Cass called. Because the one thing Beau knew for sure was that he couldn't lose Cass. He meant everything to Beau, even if he didn't know it and never would. Beau would never tell him how he really felt. He'd settle for sharing him, if that's all he could get. Even with a woman between

them Beau loved submitting to Cass's every desire, every demanding, dirty, kinky desire. And if he wanted to make Marian submit to them too, then Beau would play along, improvising as he went.

Chapter 2

“Marian!” The call of several voices rang through the locker room and Cass grinned as he wiped the sweat off his face with a towel. They were all sitting around chugging some cold water and catching their breath after a hard day at minicamp. Marian had just opened the locker-room door and stood there, her shoulder against the door frame. Today she was casual. A nice pair of light-blue athletic shorts with the Rebels logo, and a white polo, also with the Rebels logo. The big red *R* rested on the upper curve of her left breast and Cass envied that damn stitched letter. She had one foot crossed over the other as she regarded them all with a cynical smile. Her white Nikes looked too damn clean. He wanted to dirty her up, but good.

“Nice job today, boys,” she said. “If we were playing high school ball.” The entire locker room erupted in boos and Marian laughed.

Between the offseason workouts and rookie minicamp, Cass had gotten to know Marian pretty well. She had a great sense of humor, high expectations, a hard-core work ethic, a sympathetic ear, and knew statistics about everything football related.

And she never, ever came into the locker room.

Beau had theories about that, theories that Cass didn’t even want to consider, but there was a voice in his head that kept arguing louder every day that Beau was right. She didn’t like the locker room, that was for sure. She hid it pretty well. She joked and leaned casually against the door like she was doing now. But if she miscalculated and arrived before all the players were inside, there was a moment of panic in her eyes as some big-ass football player came up behind

her. And even on the field she never let herself be surrounded by them. She'd stand back or just yell from the sidelines. So it wasn't only football locker rooms that bothered her. It was football players.

Cass bit his tongue and said nothing. It wasn't his place. Not yet, anyway. But the more he got to know Marian, the more he wanted her. If what they suspected was true, then she had more guts than anyone he'd ever met. Football was her passion, anyone could see that, and she'd refused to give it up. She was living the dream, coaching for an NFL team.

What she didn't realize was that she didn't have to worry here. Cass and Beau had made it very clear that Marian was off limits. She was theirs, period. If anyone messed with her in any way, they'd have to deal with him and Beau. He hadn't stood in the locker room and made an announcement, but he didn't have to. He just stood a little too close to her, made her laugh, walked her to her car, and called her "Mari, Mari, Quite Contrary." Add a little touch here and there that was more than friendly, a few suggestive conversations, a heated look or two. He didn't let anyone else take those liberties with her, and neither did she. Marian was resisting his slow seduction for all she was worth, but she wasn't protesting. Which was why Cass was going to step up his game today.

His only worry was her obvious distrust of Beau. And Beau wasn't really helping. He had left all the courting to Cass, and that just wasn't going to work. Cass knew that once Marian really got to know Beau, once he opened up and let her in, she'd change her tune. Everyone loved Beau. Surely she could see that. And he was clean. It was the way Beau wanted it, and Cass helped him stay that way every day. So if it was Beau's past that was holding her back, Beau would have to make her see that it wasn't an obstacle. Not at all. Cass wouldn't let it be.

“Hey, sugar, come here often?” Jo Jo Jones said to her as he came around from the showers wearing nothing but a towel, his dark-cocoa skin starkly contrasting with the white terry cloth. Jo Jo was a great linebacker, but he had a death wish. He couldn’t stop smoking weed, and he liked to tease Marian. One of those was going to get him thrown out of the NFL, and the other was going to get him dead.

“Really?” Marian said with exaggerated disappointment. “You had the whole day to think of a come-on line, and that’s the best you could come up with?”

The guys all laughed and Jo Jo got snapped with a few towels. He laughed, too, as if he’d really been joking, which was good. Cass crossed beating him up off his to-do list.

“Okay, gentlemen—and I use the term loosely,” she said, teasing them. “Today is press day. You get to be smart and funny and irresistible for the press corps. Make yourselves pretty before you join us back on the sidelines.”

There were groans from all over the room. “Oh, man,” Tyler Oakes, team quarterback, said. “You have to, too, right?”

Marian frowned. “Hello? I’m already pretty.”

Cass laughed out loud with the rest of the team. “You sure are,” he said, loud enough for her to hear him. Her gaze darted over to him, as if she’d been avoiding looking at him but couldn’t help herself now. He was sitting there in his shorts and nothing else, sweating. Beau was leaning on the locker in front of him, similarly undressed. Cass looked at him, hoping to lead Marian’s eyes that way, too. Beau was sure enough pretty when his copper skin was all sweaty, his tats gleaming black and slick.

Marian cleared her throat and Cass turned back to her. "Uh," she said, blinking nervously as she backed up, holding the door with her hand. "Thanks. Hurry up. Down on the field. Press. Bye." She turned and hurried off, letting the door swing closed.

"That girl got it bad," Jo Jo said with a whistle. "You gonna put her out of her misery, or let me pick up the pieces of her broken heart?"

"Do you have a death wish?" Cass asked quietly, rearranging his to-do list again. He took a sip of his water as he stared at Jo Jo over the top of the bottle. Jo Jo backed up, his hands in the air.

"No, sir," he said, shaking his head. "Not me. I didn't say anything."

Beau laughed. "Chicken."

Jo Jo grinned. "You got that right, my man. Smart chicken." He laughed as he sat down and started to get dressed. "See, I'm gonna be the first one down there with Miss Marian, while you pigs still got to wash the dirt off." He laughed again as he danced out of the way of Cass's reaching hand. "None of that," he chided him. "Miss Marian would be very put out if I appeared all bloody for the press."

"We'll just make sure you don't appear at all," Beau said, which made Cass feel better. Beau may not have been actively pursuing Marian, but he was definitely interested in her, thank God. Cass didn't want to be with a woman without Beau. He hadn't been for . . . hell, three years. There was something between Marian and Beau. He just had to push it past the edge of whatever it was and into sex. No, more than sex. He wanted more than sex with Marian and Beau. It was time for more.

Before he could digest that mind-boggling thought, Beau slapped his shoulder. "Come on, man," he said. "We've got to shower and get down there before they miss us."

"Coming," Cass said. He put aside his confusing thoughts and focused on the upcoming interviews. He really hated the press.

Beau twisted his head and cracked his neck with a satisfying pop. He was so tense he was getting a headache. Even his eyelids felt tense, and he knew he was frowning. Most of the sports reporters were avoiding him like the plague. He felt diseased when he was around them. Like if they came too close his personal shit would infect them. But they made him feel that way with their questions. They didn't ask him about the team's chances this year, or how the rookies were playing. No, they asked him about his drug addiction and the sex tape. Always the drugs and the sex. He'd done that to himself, so he really had no cause to complain. But, Christ, you'd think no one had ever gotten clean and stayed that way. Cass was frowning from about ten feet away, watching him and picking up on his tension. Beau took a deep breath and blew it out, trying some of the breathing techniques he'd learned in rehab. Sometimes they worked, sometimes they didn't.

"Beau," a bright, happy voice said from beside him. He turned and Marian was standing there with a big fake smile on her face as she led a reporter around. It was Stan Litchfield, one of the anchors of ESPN's *Football Junkies*. Litchfield usually didn't give him the time of day. "Stan, this is Beau Perez. I'm sure you two have met. Beau is one of the veteran players who anchor the Rebels. We're thrilled with his performance at tight end."

Well, that was a surprise. "Marian," he said, politely returning her greeting. He held his hand out to Litchfield. "Stan. How are you?"

Litchfield looked unhappy. “Perez,” he grumbled, shaking his hand. “How are you doing?”

Beau gave him a crooked, cynical smile. “I’m clean and sober, thanks for asking.”

Marian’s eyes narrowed in warning, but Beau ignored her. He’d danced enough for these losers today.

Litchfield looked a little taken aback. “Are you? Good.” He grinned. “Feeling a little ornery today?”

“A little,” Beau said. “Take advantage. Ask me anything.”

Litchfield waved a hand at the cameraman, who aimed his lens at Beau, the green light on. “Last year the Rebels had a less than stellar season. Can you diagnose the issues last year, and give us an idea of what the Rebels are doing this year to fix the team, particularly the offensive weakness on the outside and the lack of solid defense in the secondary?”

Bam. Litchfield was putting him on the spot, and he thought Beau would fail. Fuck him. “Sure, Stan. We sucked last year in the running game. Truth. So we’ve picked up some great running backs in Danny Smith and Tom Kelly, a rookie out of Nebraska that everyone else was too busy kissing ass to notice. As for the secondary, I’ve never seen Michael Swan running as fast as he is this year. Rasheed Davis moved into the strong safety position and his leadership on the secondary is obvious, even this early in the game. They are going to be a force this season.”

Marian was beaming as if he’d taken his first steps under her watchful eye. Beau grinned at her. Litchfield looked a lot less bored.

“We all know Swan can run,” Litchfield agreed. “Let’s get back to Danny Smith. He’s not here. Why?”

“You want the party line?” Beau asked. Marian frowned again, and may even have gnashed her teeth a little. He ignored her.

Litchfield grinned. “Nope. I want the truth.”

“The truth is, I don’t know.” Beau paused and Litchfield looked unhappy. “But he better get his ass down here.” Marian threw her hands in the air in disbelief behind the reporter. “I know from experience that you don’t want to fuck up your team’s confidence in you,” he went on, glad to finally be speaking his mind. “You don’t come back from that. And the longer Smith delays, the more the team questions his dedication here. We don’t need players who are going through the motions to earn endorsement deals. We need guys who are ready to play, who are passionate about the game, who want to be here, and who want to win. I don’t give a fuck how great a player he is. If he doesn’t stop acting like a fucking prima donna, he can kiss the Rebels good-bye, because we don’t want him.”

Around him, most of the other players and reporters had gone silent. Cass had walked over to stand slightly off to his side, as if to protect him, but he didn’t need protection. He was over that.

“I see,” Litchfield said. He glanced around. “Do you speak for the team?”

Beau grinned. “Hell, no. Do you think they’d give me that kind of power? But I do speak for myself, and a few others here. This is the Rebels, Stan. Let’s not dance around it. This is the last stop, the last-chance saloon, as Cass calls it.” He glanced at Cass, who was grinning. “If we don’t make it here, we don’t make it anywhere. We’re the redheaded stepchild of the NFL. The

place trouble goes to either fade away or break out. I'm sick of fading away. I think this is the year we break out." Around him there was a chorus of cheers from the other players. "So, how about this for a sound bite?" He turned to the camera and pointed at it. "You better watch out, cause the Rebels are bringing trouble right to your fucking door." He saluted and turned away to face Marian. She was just staring at him in shock. "Sorry," he mouthed, giving her a half smile. He took a deep breath and walked through the crowd, done for the day. A few of the players slapped him on the shoulder and gave him a fist bump. He wasn't sure if he'd just made his career in Birmingham, or ended it.

"Get. In. Here." Marian spoke in that one-word-sentence staccato that had become so popular on television and that she'd sworn she'd never imitate. Now she knew it wasn't a choice. She was simply so mad she couldn't get more than one word out at a time. Beau didn't argue. He simply slid sideways in through her office door, past where she stood holding it. She started to close it, but a hand grabbed it from the hallway and pushed it open again. Cass. Of course. "Can't I even yell at him without your presence?" she asked coldly.

"Nope. Team captain. Got to be here." Cass turned and closed the door behind him, then leaned against it, his arms crossed, that damn cowboy hat in one hand.

"Fine," Marian said. "Since you piss me off, too, you can share the punishment."

"I don't take punishment," Cass said, his usual charming smile gone as he gave her a heated stare that made sweat pop out along her spine. "I give it."

It took Marian a moment to get past the images that flashed through her head at that outrageous claim. "On the field, not in my office," she said a little unsteadily.

"Anywhere I choose," Cass told her calmly.

"Maybe I should go," Beau said from behind her.

Marian jumped and spun around to face him. She hadn't been paying attention. She couldn't believe she'd let him flank her like that.

"Settle," Cass said quietly but firmly. "There's no threat here."

"You just made threats," she countered, backing up until her back hit the wall a few feet off to Cass's left.

"No," he said, the charm back in his voice, a sexy little drawl making it sound like *Naw*.

"Those were promises."

She actually felt a bead of sweat slip down her cleavage, and she shivered.

"Stop it," Beau said. "You're scaring her." She glanced at him and he looked a little sad, his eyes big and golden brown, and soft with some emotion she couldn't name. Instinctively she knew he wasn't the threat here, which threw her into confusion. Wasn't he the one in charge?

"I'm not scared," she said.. It was a knee-jerk reaction, something she'd said so often in the past few years—to others and to herself—that it was second nature.

Cass sort of rolled himself along the wall toward her until he was leaning over her, not quite pressed against her, his hands on either side of her head, one still holding his hat. "Good," he said, his voice rough and heavy with wanting. "I don't want you scared."

She was breathing too fast. "Move your arms," she said, and she winced at the panic in her voice.

“Cass,” Beau said. She saw his hand on Cass’s shoulder and her heart nearly beat out of her chest. She had to put her hand up to her chest and press against it to make sure it didn’t.

“You know I’d never hurt you,” Cass said softly. He turned and tossed his hat onto the couch, against the opposite wall. Then he dropped both arms to his sides. He didn’t move back, though. He stayed close enough that she could feel his heat and smell his cologne and a hint of his sweat and deodorant and laundry detergent and shampoo, all the things that combined to be Cass’s scent. She hadn’t realized she knew his smell so well. It was an odd thought and made her frown at him. He frowned back. “Don’t you?” he asked.

It took a moment to remember what he’d said. “Yes.” She did know it. But that didn’t make her heart slow down, because she wasn’t afraid of him. She was afraid of herself, and what she’d let him do if she let go.

“Yell at me.” Beau’s soft words were lost in Cass’s gaze for a second and then they sank in.

“I should,” she said, standing straighter and tugging on the hem of her shirt nervously. “What in the hell do you think you were doing out there?” She pushed on Cass’s chest, but he wouldn’t budge, so she stood on tiptoe and glared at Beau over his shoulder.

“Speaking my mind,” Beau said. He walked over and dropped down on the couch, easily within her sight, making sure not to crush Cass’s hat. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to do that.”

“So you decide to do it on my watch?” Marian said in a strangled voice. “Gee, thanks.”

“On your watch?” Beau asked, obviously getting angry. “Now you’re my babysitter, too? Jesus, how many do I need?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cass said, turning to glare at Beau, hands on his hips.

“Don’t try to distract me with a lovers’ quarrel,” Marian warned them. “I’m still pissed about Beau’s big mouth.”

Cass slowly swung his head back around and pinned her to the wall with his stare. He had the bluest eyes, and they could go cold and hard as fast as they could turn hot and heavy-lidded. “Lovers’ quarrel?” he asked quietly. Too quietly. Marian tried to slide sideways along the wall, out of his reach.

“That’s right,” she said, full of false bravado. She thought for a second that this must be what the canary felt like before the cat pounced.

Suddenly Beau laughed loudly, a harsh bark that sounded more incredulous than amused. It broke Cass’s stare and Marian quickly moved over to lean against her desk, facing them on more solid ground. “What’s so funny?”

“We”—he gestured between him and Cass—“are not lovers. We’re friends and we fuck women together. That’s it.” He didn’t sound happy about it. Or was he unhappy that people thought they were?

“Beau.” This time it was Cass trying to yank on the leash with a warning in his voice.

“Forget it,” Beau said flatly. “I’ve come out of my shell today. I’m not crawling back in.”

“If you climb into the same bed naked with someone who is also naked in order to have sex, you’re lovers,” she told them. “I don’t care what slot the tabs are going in.”

This time both men laughed in genuine amusement. “Tabs B and C go in slot woman, not slots B or C,” Cass told her, and it took a moment to figure out which was which. She was not on top of her game today.

“I sort of agree with Marian.” Beau’s answer made Cass look at him with big eyes. Beau shrugged. “Just speaking my mind today.”

“What kind of pill did you take this morning that made that seem like a good idea?” Cass asked.

Beau’s face turned to stone. “None. As my main babysitter, you made sure of it.”

Cass sort of crumbled where he was standing, his shoulders slumping. “That’s not what I meant,” he said. “It was meant to be a joke. Sort of an *Alice in Wonderland* thing. Never mind.” He shook his head.

Beau looked away and wiped a hand over his mouth and chin in a distinctly male sort of gesture. Marian felt a silly, little-girlish thrill at it. She straightened against the desk. Now even her palms were sweating. Alarm bells were ringing. “Great. Kiss and make up.” She turned and walked around her desk and sat down, breathing a little easier with the solid-maple furniture between her and the two overpowering men in her office. “Beau, you’re going straight from this office down the hall to PR. We’re going to have to try to spin this in some sort of positive light.”

“I don’t want to kiss Beau,” Cass said. Marian looked over at him, slightly exasperated that he’d ignored the second half of what she’d said. “Right now,” Cass added, and Marian was left with her mouth hanging open, whatever she’d been planning to say forgotten. Cass gave her that sexy grin he’d been using on her for the past few weeks, the one that made her knees a little weak. Good thing she was sitting down.

“Whatever,” she said dismissively, but it was ruined by the breathy quality of her voice. She cleared her throat. “You can kiss someone’s ass to save your boyfriend, then. And it won’t be mine,” she quickly added. “I’m sure someone higher up the food chain is yelling his name into a phone right now.” She sighed. “The fact is, Beau, while you are a valuable member of this team, we need Danny Smith. If he reacts badly to what you said today and continues to make trouble, then it’s your ass on the line. Not mine. Not Cass’s. Yours. You want to speak your mind, you accept the consequences.”

“That’s right,” Cass told Beau. “You can’t say shit like that and not expect consequences.” He was giving him the same stare he’d given Marian moments ago. Instead of irritating her, it turned her motor up to eleven. She’d never seen the two look at one another like that. That they should do it here, alone with her, made her feel a part of it, like they wanted her to see it and enjoy it. And, boy, did she. Cass turned to her. “You and I are not talking about the same thing, by the way.”

“Thanks for the clarification,” she told him, her voice breathless again. *Shit*. She had to get it together. “I hadn’t figured that out.” *There*. That sounded nice and sarcastic. No crazy, inappropriate lust here. Nope.

“Got it. Consequences,” Beau said. He sounded almost as breathless as Marian, which pushed her another notch higher on the lust meter. Somewhere in the midst of this conversation she’d figured out who held the reins, and it wasn’t Beau. It was the cowboy.