

Taking a deep breath, I toss my jacket onto the table and, leaning against it, begin bringing the screens to life one at a time, slowly combing through the hundreds of files I've made on the players so far. Once they are all downloaded into the system, I connect my tablet to the stereo, blasting the Beastie Boys as I get down to work.

I'm not sure how much time passes before the tap on my shoulder, but it nearly scares me out of my skin and I half-leap off the table.

Carson smiles as I frantically tap my tablet, killing the music. In his early sixties, he doesn't look a day over forty-five, his sandy brown hair thin but still covering his full head, greying only around the temples. He just grins, adjusting his wire frame glasses and speaks over his shoulder, "I told you she's unconventional."

"Actually," I defend, "Studies have shown that by enhancing the activity in your audio cortex, your ability to perform complex equations doubles. It also floods the body with endorphins that reduce blood pressure and boost productivity and coordination."

"What does that mean, in English?" he asks, peeling the ball cap off of his head.

"Loud music makes your body work better."

Looking around him I see two men standing just inside the door. One I recognize immediately, despite the baseball cap and reflective aviator sunglasses. Dean Kincade has had his face splashed across every magazine cover and television screen for months. Starting with his Heisman Trophy win at Oklahoma State and, most recently, he'd been caught on camera making out with a very prominent, very married Hollywood starlet at an LA hotspot. It also helps that he's a giant at nearly six foot seven and has shoulders so broad he looks more like a lumberjack than a quarterback.

He made the sexiest man alive top ten last year—and for good reason, I decide as I sweep a gaze over him.

It's not until I see the man standing next to him that a familiar tug pulls low in my stomach. Paxton Davies is an NFL legend, and a god among men besides that. He's the shorter of the two men at only six foot four, his light brown hair clipped short, his eyes blue and intense in the glow of the overhead lights. I bite my lip, trying to resist the urge to fangirl all over the poor guy.

Paxton was one of the players I'd done my second thesis on, not to mention that while other girls had been plastering posters of boy bands all over their bedroom walls, he'd been plastered on mine. Every bit a champion in his own right, the man is a hero of the game and it's hard to quash the flip in my belly as he smiles warmly, holding out his hand.

"Doctor Vaughn."

Thirteen-year-old me squeals in delight and I struggle to keep my composure as his big, warm hand wraps around mine. I shake it, trying to hide what I'm sure is the goofiest grin on the planet.

"Mr. Davies."

"Please, Doctor Vaughn, call me Paxton."

I actually feel my IQ drop ten points at the sound of my name on his lips. “Oh, yeah, that’s not going to happen,” I mutter, extending my hand to the other man.

Dean takes it, holding my hand for just a moment longer than is really necessary. “So, you’re the team doc? Nice.”

Beside me Carson levels a glare at the rookie that clearly says, behave. “As I explained earlier, Dr. Vaughn is heading up a new bioresearch program here at the Memphis Knights Organization. But I’m sure she can explain it better than I can.”

“Of course,” I say, turning my mind back to what I’d been working on. The weight of Paxton’s gaze falls on me and it’s all I can do to keep my voice level, to push back against the irrational desire warming inside me even now. “The program I’ve created is a mixture of medical and mental science. Basically, it allows me to look at each individual player and create a profile that will help us to better prepare for our opponents.”

“And that helps us win games, how?” Dean asks, sounding extremely bored.

I point to one of the screens, “Here, let me show you. Your first pre-season opponent, the Charleston Cheetahs.” I open the file, exposing the list of players. “I created a profile for each starter, and anyone I considered noteworthy on the team, anyone who might affect the outcome of the game.” I open the first file. A photo and basic bio spring to life on the main screen, while other feeds open on the surrounding ones. All his social media accounts, public records, a few videos I’d stripped off the cameras at the hotel he stayed at last week.

“Tyler Taysun, quarterback. He’s the biggest weapon in their offensive arsenal. Last year he scored more points against us than any other QB in the league. But something came up when I ran his profile. Firstly, this,” I open one of the screens with a loop of video footage of him at a fundraiser last year, he’s walking down a narrow hallway with one of the children from his charity. Then, on the opposite screen, grainy footage of him walking through JFK earlier this week.

“This,” I explain, “was taken last year. This is footage from a fan’s cell phone last week. Notice anything?”

They all stare for a minute, but say nothing.

“Here, its subtle. Let me show you what I see.” On the first screen I strip down the footage and overlay a re-creation of his gait in skeletal animation, then I do the same to the second set of footage. “Can you see it now?”

Paxton pipes up. “His gait is different.”

I nod, “Substantially. He had that ankle injury toward the end of last season, but with what they were reporting, it should have healed up by now. But this, this is not healing. Not like it should be.”

Zooming in with a few taps of my tablet, I show the second skeletal animation in better detail. “If I were his doctor, I’d be very concerned about early onset osteoarthritis in the bone at this point. But the big takeaway for us is that it’s going to seriously limit his mobility in the pocket and, if he’s having pain which I’m sure he is, he’s not going to want to risk taking a sack, which means he’s going to get the ball out fast, or rely primarily on the run game.”

“You can’t possibly know that,” Dean challenges. “Not from something someone shot on a crappy cell phone.”

“Mr. Kincade, I hold doctorates in Sports Biomechanics and in Athletic Psychology, plus I’m the reigning pub trivia champion of Stanford University two years running. I assure you, the number of things I can’t possibly know are very few. This is,” I wave at the screen, “basic predictive science. It’s no different from when you watch game tapes, trying to know and understand your opponents. It’s the same type of program investigators use to recreate crime scenes or to run scenarios in cause of death cases. I’ve just applied it to football.”

Paxton steps up to my side, so close I can feel the warmth radiating off him, his chin tilted up at the screen. My eyes slide over to him and I’m helpless to prevent it. Something in the back of my mind is chanting, don’t sniff him. Don’t you dare sniff him.

“And you have a profile on every player?”

I nod, clutching the tablet to my chest, wishing I’d worn something a little nicer than my grey tweed skirt and calf high brown boots. Somehow the abstract idea of meeting him hadn’t prepared me for this, for the reality of him standing next to me. “I factor in variables both physical and mental, information from social media feeds, paparazzi images, any data I can get my hands on. The program flags potential issues, which I then investigate and make a game related report on.”

He offers an impressed whistle and I fight off a blush.

Hero worship, the clinical side of my brain decides. It’s nothing more than that.

Something down lower disagrees.

“Roger Bransford,” Dean throws out the name as a challenge, bringing me out of my quasi-daze. A few taps on my screen and his file pops up, followed quickly by the other outlets I’ve compiled for him.

“Dick Terry,” he says again. I repeat the process.

Paxton straightens, exchanging a knowing glance with Carson.

“And what about us?” Dean asks quickly. “Do you keep these files on our players too?”

I look at Carson, who nods once. “Yes, to a lesser degree, and only as a matter of comparison. It’s the coaching staff and trainer’s jobs to evaluate our players, I focus on the opponents. But I am available to lend a hand if needed.”

A few taps and Rick’s file opens on screen. He elbows his way past Paxton who chuckles.

“Is that your prom picture?” Paxton teases. Sure enough, a grainy image of a very young, brace faced Dean in a dark blue tux with his arm around a red-haired girl in pepto-pink ruffles fills the lower screen.

“Nice mullet,” I jab, bringing the image to the center screen.

“It was Texas and it was Homecoming, freshman year.”

“Yee haw,” I say, tapping my pad and the file vanishes, leaving the spinning Knight’s logo on the main screen while the others go dark.

