

Chapter 24 – Wednesday Afternoon

“Fortunate Son”

Luis

“Again!” Coach Ames shouted at me. I dropped into a four point stance, both hands on the ground, ready to spring. I dug my feet in to get the most power I could.

“Hut!”

I uncoiled, slammed my shoulder into the pad wearing an East jersey with the center’s number on it. Using my hands and arms to stabilize and focus my force, I pushed. When the sled lifted up, I began digging into the turf with my cleats as hard as I could, pushing the sled at my running speed, noticing as it dug another line of furrows into the practice field.

TWEET!

I dropped the sled on Coach Ames’s whistle, bouncing him and the two equipment trainers from the jolt.

“Take a break,” Coach Ames said as he headed towards the locker room.

Hands on my knees, I caught my breath. I think I moved that fucking sled, the coach, and the two managers up and down the field ten times. I took a look at the jersey on the pad and laughed. It was ripped to shreds.

“Do that in the game and we own the line,” Coach Mc said as he went by. “Locker room in five.”

I breathed deeply as the burning in my calves and thighs eased.

“Luis, move over by the sled and let me get a shot,” some photographer asked. I pulled my helmet off and stood by the pad, holding my helmet under my arm and giving him my game face. Flash, clunk of the mirror, and the whine of the recharge. I missed the

sound of film cameras and the whirl of the motor drive. Flash again, followed by a hundred more, it seemed. Christ, there must be a dozen photogs around now.

I turned and jogged towards the locker room, ignoring the questions. I gave a growl when one reporter shoved a microphone in my face. I behaved when what I really wanted to do was take the stupid thing and shove it so far up his-

“After practice guys,” I heard one of the assistants say as he cut me from the herd and let me stomp the rest of the way on my own. I. Just. Want. To. Play. This. Game. All the other bullshit aside.

On the way in the door, one of the trainers handed me a bottle of go juice. Just what I needed. Fluids, sugars, and electrolytes to replace all that I had just lost. I forced myself to drink slowly. Still, it was gone by the time I sat on the bench in front of my locker. Another appeared in my hand as my helmet flew into the locker with a bit more force than necessary.

I heard an echo next to me as Mike Holloway threw his helmet. He looked as agitated as I did.

“Settle down, folks,” Coach Hammer said. “Contadino and Holloway, save it for East. Now, Coach McFarlan has a few things to say.”

I half listened as he gave a pep talk, explained Media Day to the newbies, and laid out the plan for the day. For the first hour, the first teams would be in the gym away from reporters' eyes. Then the rest of practice would be running standard plays and drills. We were not to expose any of our new plays.

Shit! I need to work with Jason on his tells. Who else can I enlist? I'll talk to the other captains later.

“When we finish practice, they'll be requests for photographs. I want everyone to cooperate. Do not answer questions, though. After showers, I'll gather a few of you to sit with me and the coaches for a press conference. I'd encourage the rest of the team to attend, we have a couple of special guests and some announcements.” Coach Mc looked around at the team. Everyone understood that ‘encourage’ meant to be there.

On his cue, the four co-captains stood. I don't really remember joining the other three at the front of the room. But, there I was, standing with Mike Holloway, Paul Rogers, and

Michael Simms. Paul is the brains of the offense at quarterback and Michael, never Mike, the brains of the defense at inside linebacker. Mike and I faced each other, with Paul and Michael behind us. We locked eyes and growled at each other.

Paul spoke to the rest of the team. "Would you want to face these two on Friday night?"

"NO!"

"Do you want them to be the only ones fired up?"

"NO!"

"Let's hear your growl!"

It started low. More of a buzz than a growl. It built until it consumed the locker room. A primal sound that tore through the soul and turned bowels of the unsuspecting into liquids.

"Bulldogs-" Paul chanted.

"Suck!" Michael responded.

The growl turned to the jeer.

"Beat-" Paul began.

"East!" Michael repeated.

"Beat-" Paul continued.

"East!" Half the team joined Michael.

"Beat-" Paul commanded.

"East!" The entire team responded.

Soon the whole team was jumping up and down in time to the chant.

"Kill 'em!" Paul screamed.

“Wreck ‘em!” Michael intoned.

“Stomp ‘em!” Mike growled.

“Humiliate ‘em!” I threatened.

“Warriors on three!” We all shouted.

“1... 2... 3...”

“WARRIORS!”

We broke with most of the team heading out onto the field looking for victims. The first teams headed to the gym.

On the way, I told my co-captains about what I had observed with Jason and his tells. We quickly formed a plan where Paul and Michael would work with him.

Mike and I realized, just before stepping onto the wood floor, we still had our cleats on. We kicked them off and joined the team. For the next hour, the only sounds heard were the coaches' instructions, cadence counts, and socks sliding on the floor. Twenty-two very focused and intent people moved through the plays flawlessly.

Rebecca

I managed to stumble back into the main art room from Francesca’s office. My mind going a thousand miles an hour, yet registering nothing. Too much, too quick. How could I process it when I didn’t believe any of it. This can’t be happening to me.

“Everything okay?” Rosalee’s voice startled me.

“Wha... Yes. I think. I don’t know.”

“How did the call go?”

“Calls.”

“Okay. Tell me about them.” She pulled me into a hug. I felt safe and like I could relax.

“Well... I talked to Ruth Massey at USC first. She offered, pending a review of my latest work, a full scholarship. Then, I had a message to call Dean Kerkoff.”

“Who’s that?”

“The Dean of the College of Fine Arts at UT-Austin. She offered me the same deal.”

“That’s spectacular.” She hugged me tight.

“I guess.”

“What’s wrong?” She turned me to face her. I really wanted to hide, but she wouldn’t let me.

“I... I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, I think you need to get your portfolio done.”

“I agree,” Francesca said walking over.

I moved from Rosa’s grasp and practically threw myself on Francesca. “Thank you!”

With an enigmatic smile on her face, she said, “Well, you have to tell me what you’re thankful for.”

I let the *folletto* have her moment and I explained to both of them, and myself, the calls. Apparently, both deans had received copies of my portfolio from the end of last school year and glowing letters of recommendation from some of my teachers. I had to give the resident pixie a harsh look which turned into laughs for all of us. In return, they had conditionally approved me for admittance next year and full scholarships. Conditional since I still had to handle trivial details like applying! And, they wanted a review of where I am now artistically to make sure I hadn’t regressed to stick figures.

“*Bellissimo!*” The pixie said as she remembered something urgent needing her attention in her office.

“Well, things are working out, it seems,” Rosa said.

“I guess.” Is hiding such a bad thing?

“What’s wrong?”

“Too much, too fast.”

“Well... When do they need something from you?”

“The applications in a month or so, the portfolio soon after and, a decision in February.”

“Anything wrong with the schools?”

“Absolutely not. Both are very good art schools. Yet, it’s a shame the best school is in a city without a top tier football team.”

“Where’s that?”

“Richmond. VCU. They have one of the absolute best art schools in the country. Don’t get me wrong, I’d do quite well at USC or UT. Honestly, I don’t know if VCU would be that much better for me.”

“Come here,” she said softly and opened her arms. I slid into them and we hugged each other. We shared a light kiss. “It will work out.”

“I know.” I did know, down to my toes. How does she get away with this? Most people I would push away. “Now, how about you?”

“Well... I said I could pretty much go anywhere, but...”

“You have a favorite place?”

“Yep. The Peabody Conservatory at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t say Juilliard.”

“Not my style. Too cutthroat. Peabody is much more laid back and just as challenging and excellent but more humane.”

I couldn't help but laugh. I tried to calm down when I saw the hurt in her eyes. I hugged her tighter. “I'm not laughing at you or Juilliard or Peabody. It's just... Rosalee and laid back...”

She tried. She really tried to stifle the giggle. Which just cause me to giggle. And her to chuckle. And me to laugh. Okay, I snorted. Which caused her to point and bend over howling. As we spiraled out of control, we were loud enough to bring Francesca out of her office in a panic. As soon as I explained “laid back” and “trailer trash slut” she couldn't help but join in.

While we were struggling to control ourselves, tears rolling down our faces, Rashad walked into the room. He took one look at us, turned, and stomped out. So much for us calming down.

“Oh! I'm gonna pee!” Was all I could get out before having to run to the potty. Thankfully, Francesca had one in her office. I managed to more or less get aim, finish my business, and wash. When I headed back into the main room, Rosa and Francesca were involved in a serious conversation about schools.

“VCU?” Francesca asked me.

“Yes ma'am.”

“It is an excellent school. But, not for you.” She wagged her fingers at me. I love how Italians involve their whole body when speaking.

“Why?”

“While you need some mentoring with your skills, the main benefit you will derive from an art college is exposure. USC, UT, and a few others will give you the exposure you need.”

“Okay,” was all I could think to say right then. I needed to think about this. She could see it in my eyes.

“Why don’t you girls go see your boyfriend practice? I think this week has been enough confusion. You need a break.”

“Her boyfriend,” Rosalee corrected.

“*Ah! Si Si!*” She gave us a knowing wink. “Now, run along.”

Luis

“I’m gonna get you this time,” I snarled at Mike, resting on my knees, getting ready to move into my stance. My pronouncement carried across the field and echoed off the nearly empty stands.

“Try it, asshole,” he sneered back at me as he moved over the ball. We both set. Head to head just inches apart.

“22-Red! 22-Red!” Paul Rogers chanted. “Hut... Hut-Hut!”

As soon as Mike moved the ball beginning the snap, I sprung and hit him full force, shoulder pad to shoulder pad. The impact sounded like a rifle shot on steroids. Combined with our war cries, it must have sounded awesome. We locked up with our blocking moves, just this side of a holding penalty for either of us. Four feet clawing into the turf, slinging grass and dirt. Each trying to throw the other off balance.

TWEET!

“Alright you two. That’s it. Five laps,” Coach Mc yelled at us. “Anybody else want to try for some laps? Half speed walk-thrus guys! Save it for the game.”

Mike and I pulled our helmets off, smiled at each other, caught the winks from the coaches, and headed out on our laps.

“How many will be joining us in a minute?” Mike asked as we started our “penalty” laps.

“The whole team.”

About halfway through our first lap, the sound of multiple rifle shots combined with grunts and war cries echoed through the stadium followed instantly by the coaches whistles. As predicted, the rest of the team joined us on the track

“So, what do we do to keep everyone fired up?” I asked Mike.

“I think we let the tension just naturally build until the Pep Rally tomorrow night.”

“Sounds good.”

“Ah... Luis... How are you planning on handling Friday?”

“What do you mean?”

“You can’t exactly wear your jersey to school, can you?”

“Oops.”

“Yeah, oops.”

“Let me talk to the equipment managers. I’m sure we can figure something out.”

“I can’t wait to see you in paint.”

“I hope you get picked next week.”

Before he could respond, two sweet, sexy voices rang out, “Hey number 96! Looking good!”

“Shit! He’s even got naked groupies!”

“My girlfriend and her girlfriend, I think,” I said as I waved to the girls.

“Damn! How does that work?”

“Don’t know. We’re still... I don’t know. Confused.”

Rebecca

“There he is, number 96,” I pointed out as I spied Luis on the track running with Mike Holloway.

“Who’s that he’s with? Damn, he’s as big as Luis!”

“That’s Mike Holloway, the starting center and one of the co-captains.”

“How do you know so much?”

“I like football!”

“And a certain football player?”

“Oh yeah! Let’s try to embarrass him.” It only took a couple of seconds to work out what we wanted to say. By then, he was getting close.

“Hey number 96! Looking good!” We both yelled at the same time. He gave a wave as they went by.

“Must be the end of practice. Oh, look, there’s my brother, Jason.”

“Really? I didn’t know he’s your brother. He’s a cutie and sweet too.”

“Got a crush on him?”

“Not really. I think I’m too...”

“Smart?”

“Welllll...”

“That’s okay. I’ve met most of the girls he goes out with.”

“Thanks. Now what?”

“I’m not sure. I’ve never been to a Media Day before.”

We hung around, watching the players run laps. Rosalee kept me in stitches with a running commentary of the sexual prowess of some (okay, a lot) or how cute, mean, ugly, scary, nice, or whatever she knew or thought each one was.

“What about Luis?”

“Teddy bear.”

“Huh?”

“He’s big, could be scary, but most of the time he’s gentle and kind.”

“Yep. You ever hook up with him?”

“Nope. Unfortunately.”

“So, what about his friend Mike?”

“Not him, either.”

“Interested?”

“Ahhh... What? Trying to get rid of me?”

“Nope.”

“Welllll... Not now. Too much on my plate.”

“You know, I don’t think I’ve really seen you hang out with many people.”

“Oh, I don’t. I really don’t have any close friends. Girls are scared of me, so are a lot of guys. Those that do pay attention want to cut through the chase and go straight to the main course, so to speak.”

“That sucks.”

“In a way,” Rosa smiled at me. It took me a few seconds, but I finally got it. “I’m in the same boat as you.”

“What! Oh, you mean friends. I guess. I do have Jason. He’s my best friend.”

“Can you talk to him about anything?”

“Most things.”

“What about girl things?”

“Until Monday, I didn’t even think about girl things.”

“Even once a month?”

“Mom talked to me about that before I went into hiding. So, no, I didn’t really think about girl things. Last night, after dinner, with my mom and Jason’s girlfriend, was the first time I’d ever done girl talk.”

“What did you think?”

“How much I’ve missed.”

“You need a bestest buddy.”

“What about you?”

“Yeah, I guess.” She looked around for a second. “Oh, look, the reporters are descending on the team.”

We watched the hunt from the sidelines as we worked our way over to the gym, we’d overheard from others that that’s where the media events were to occur.

“There’s Your Mountain and Mike now. Look, being hassled by those photographers and reporters.”

Luis

I can't believe these jackals. Put. On. My. Happy. Face. Don't possibly consider where I'd like to insert that lens. No. Reporters good. Can't eat. Can't kill. Smile.

"Luis, who is going to win?" one of the vultures shouted out.

Before I could work up a good "Memo from the Department of Obvious" comment, Coach Ames stepped in. He saved me from calculating the diameter of the orifice that would have resulted in my shoving his microphone, arm, and the camera of the guy next to him into his rectum. Without lubrication.

"Save the questions for later," Coach Ames reminded them, again. Into my ear, he hissed, "Inside. Now. Shower. Relax. We need you later."

I pulled myself from considering how many joules of energy it would take to make my target edible and went into the locker room. Mike was right next to me.

"Shit!"

"About says it all."

"Fuck!"

"Well, there is that."

We stared at each for a minute and then started laughing. After hitting the showers, we headed into the gym for the press conference. Mike was smiling like he knew something I didn't, but he wouldn't twig.

"So," Mike said to me just before we went into the gym proper, "how do you feel about being naked in front of the reporters and cameras?"

"Shit! I hadn't even thought about it!"

"Too late!" He opened the door and bowed me through first.

Okay. I can do this. Just like school, right? Yeah! Sure. Right. Two steps into the gym and every eye was on me. It took only a few seconds for the cameras to find their way and the flashing frenzy began.

“Nice ass!” Becca’s and Rosalee’s voice rose over the din. Now I felt naked. Not nude. Not unclothed. Exposed. Vulnerable! I did notice that most of the cameras turned their way, though!

“Must be nice to have naked groupies,” Mike whispered just before he headed towards the coaches. The two half-familiar people were with them now along with a third man. A very portly man that I thought I recognized but dismissed. I shook it off and headed towards the rest of the team and took a seat. I felt every camera in the place on me and noticed for the first time the TV cameras. One had the ESPN logo. Not only am I naked, I’m naked on a national sports network. Great!

I settled in with my other team members while Paul, Michael, and Mike joined the coaches and the three- Shit! Now I know where I know them from! The big, portly gentleman was Ralph Frisson, head coach of the University of Maryland. Mack White, the head coach of UT-Austin and Bob Singer of USC. Shit! Some big guns here today.

Before I could work out a wager with myself as to who was signing with who, Coach Mc stepped up to the mic. “I’d like to welcome our fans, families, friends, and the media to our campus. I’m sure the rumors that have been spreading about three famous coaches being here might have had something to do with it.” He got a good laugh. “At least enough to attract the national media!” More laughter. “I am beyond proud to announce that three of my seniors are signing their letters-of-intent today.” Maybe not wild, but the response was highly enthusiastic. Mike, Michael, and Paul were hamming it up. Their parents, who had joined them, were over the moon. The team? We were surprised, a touch upset they hadn’t shared this with us, but proud as hell of our teammates.

First up was Coach Frisson from Maryland. All three hundred plus pounds of Coach Ralph approached the microphone and did his spiel. To my delightful surprise, Mike stepped up to sign his letter. A great fit for my closest friend and a true student of the game with one of the most innovative coaches with a penchant for creating complex offenses and defenses. Plus, Maryland is an emerging superpower in a strong conference. How could I not stand and cheer him on?

Coach Mack was next and he surprised me by announcing Michael was signing. I

would have bet he'd have gone with a quarterback, not a linebacker. Yet, Michael would be a force in their defensive system. If I remember, their key linebacker this year is a senior, so I doubt he's going to red shirt. He'll be playing as a freshman. Kewl.

Well, that removed all doubts about Paul. When I thought about it, it made perfect sense. Coach Singer is known for his balls-to-the-wall style of play, easily incorporating trick plays and gutsy moves. Paul thrives under that kind of pressure. USC's long history of conference championships, Heisman Trophy winners, and National Championships means Paul is going to be high profile.

I liked Coach Singer's attitude about defense. "Bend, don't break" is his theory. A strong defense that will allow short yardage, but not give up big plays. It would be interesting playing in that kind of a system. Given how fast paced the offense is, the defense spends a lot of time on the field, meaning that a freshman might get a lot of playing time. That's a real plus in my book.

The whole team stood and cheered our three teammates at the end of the signing. I kept thinking of how I might end up playing with one of them and probably against the other two at some point in my career.

Shit! They decided. What is wrong with me? And... why am I naked? I could see the cameras move between the stage, me, and the girls. Lovely.

Before my mind could get out of control, again, the press conference started. So much for the easy stuff! The big three walked off the stage and I went up to join the other captains and face the vultures. Paul, Mike, and Michael all looked great in the colors of their new schools. And me? Naked. Damn.

"Luis, man... I'm sorry I couldn't tell you. They asked me to keep it quiet," Mike whispered to me. Michael and Paul echoing him.

"It's okay, guys. I'm really happy for all of you."

"So, when are you going to decide?"

"Soon. Very soon."

Then the questions started. Naturally, the first was for me. The naked, indecisive one. "Have you chosen a school yet?"

“Trojans!” Paul, echoed by Coach Singer, shouted.

“Longhorns!” With the same stereo effect.

“Terrapins!” Mike’s voice was particularly loud, given his face was right by my ear.

I had to join the laughter. “As you can see, it’s a tough choice. It would be fun to play with any of these three guys and for any of these great coaches. The tougher choice is which two I might play against in a National Championship game. So, in answer to your question, nope. No decision yet. This week, I’m only focused on one thing-”

“Being naked?” someone shouted.

“Well, there is that.” Good way to break the tension, I wonder who I should thank. “My focus this week has been and will be the game against East.”

Coach Mc kept the rest of the press conference focused on the East game, with only the occasional comment about my nudity, my college choice, or such. His goal was to walk a fine line between firing up our fans and not giving East any ammunition they could use against us. I think he did a good job, but then again, I was naked. I hadn’t thought about it all day and suddenly I was so exposed. I sure hope the cameras had filters to block my blush. Coach summed it up perfectly at the end. “We expect a tough game. We’ve prepared and are in top shape. We’re headed across town to play a tough opponent. I know how we want it to turn out. We’ll see if I’m right on Friday.”

The flashing frenzy started again as they had the whole team pose. They had me on one knee with the other linemen in front of everyone. It seemed to me there was way too much attention paid to what was between my legs.

As we broke up, I found myself with a naked girl firmly attached to my chest. “I’m so proud of you. You look so good.” All while smothering me in kisses.

“We’re proud of you too, son,” my father said. I was surprised to see mom there. “Well, it seems his harem is growing.”

Between Becca’s flying assault and the surprise of seeing my parents, I finally noticed Rosalee. She was sandwiching Becca to me. I smiled at her over Becca’s shoulder as my sweetie hugged me tight. “Ah, yeah, well...”

“I’m sure it is an interesting story. Something you can share with us later. Right now, we have some business to attend to. Ladies, if you will pardon us?”

“What business?”

“We don’t mind. We’ll wait here for you. I’ve got some news for you too. The phone calls. Later, though.”

“Yeah. We’ll wait here. Lots of cameras!”

“Later!” I managed as my parents dragged the suddenly Becca-free me to the football offices.

“Momma, I didn’t expect to see you today.”

“I wouldn’t miss this!”

“Miss what? What’s going on?”

“We’re meeting with the three coaches you just saw.”

“Oh!” Boy, could this day get any stranger?

A couple of minutes later, we were in the main conference room with Coach Frisson, call me Ralph. He made his pitch to the parental units and me. The key being with Mike and I on the same team, he’d have no worries about either line for four years. He stressed the desire to build as strong a legacy as USC and UT. I believed him, but Maryland, as a school, wasn’t in my top choices. A good school. Just not my school. He left with hope, but no promises from us. Hell, I hadn’t scheduled a visit.

Next was Coach White. His reputation as a master of recruiting is well deserved. Slick is the word I would use. He did the full Carney show and a promise of a great career if I came to Austin. At the end, he pushed a bit on accepting the offer they had previously made for me to attend on a full ride.

“Luis, I don’t know about that one,” my father said when Coach White left.

“I agree. I can’t put my finger on it, but he’s just not my style.”

When the door opened for the third time, we were surprised to see Coach Singer come in with Will Farrel, the actor. I knew this was going to be a different show! Coach kept it light, yet handled the serious business efficiently and very effectively. The rumors of his pranks during practices really rang true. I already had a full ride offer from them, so that part of the show was easy. What he really stressed was the desire to win at least one more Outland or Lombardi Trophy for the team, awards given to the best linemen or linebackers in college football.

Will provided some entertainment, but I also discovered he was an avid football fan and no slouch about the game. He stayed away from the business end of the discussion, but his insights and humor made it a fun time.

“Luis,” Coach Singer said as our time was coming to a close, “I would really like to have you with us next year. Not only for what I know you can add to our defense, but I think I can help develop you as a future coach as well.”

“Coach, I’d love to say yes right now. This week has been insane, though.”

“I can imagine what it would be like going naked for a week.”

“That’s part of it. I guess it is the catalyst for many of the things that have happened this week. Given how crazy it is, I’d like to wait a week before telling you yes or no.”

“That’s fair. And smart. Here are my private numbers. Call me anytime if you have questions.”

“Or if I decide I really like Austin?”

“That too,” he said laughing. “Some how, though, I see you in California.”

After he and Will left, my parents turned to me.

“I know. It sounds like I’ve made my decision. I think I have, but want to wait until after East until I decide.”

“And you have clothes on again?”

“Well... that might be a while.” So, I explained to them the bet, although we still hadn’t

addressed it. Mentally I noted that as a to-do for tomorrow's lunch.

With hugs and kisses from the folks, I headed back out into the gym. Dad was headed off to a business dinner and mom back to work. My sweetie and Rosa were still there talking with Mike.

Rebecca

“That was awesome!”

“Rosalee!”

“Well, it was. All those cameras and national TV exposure.”

“Oh my god! You're kidding, right?” I looked around and noticed that a few cameras were still tracking us. Damn!

“Nope.”

“I'm naked on TV?!?”

“National TV.”

“NO!!!” I can still hide, can't I?

“Oh, there's Mike. Introduce me, please?” She pointed towards Mike and his family. They were still celebrating Mike's decision. Good, I didn't need this distraction while I was trying to figure out how to fade into the floor.

No sooner than I began feeling safe, Mike broke away from his family and came towards us.

“Becky!” He shouted as he approached. His arms engulfed me in a huge. Damn! I'm a slut for muscles. It didn't feel like my cave at all, but it was a damn nice feeling being surrounded by someone so large and strong. “Please, please let your boyfriend know

that I couldn't tell him. I feel so bad about that,” he whispered to me.

“Tell him about what?”

“My signing. I feel horrible about not sharing that with him.”

“I'll pass it along.”

“Great. Thanks. Now, who is this?” he nodded towards a suddenly shy Rosalee.

*** End of Chapter ***

Coming soon : Part III (Wednesday) - Chapter 25 – “Don Sanche”