

Chapter from Hatch's Point of View:

The chilly morning air bit into Hatch's face with the precise amount of sting required to focus him. He needed the assistance, considering he'd spent the wee hours of the day staring out into the darkness and attempting to forget the vividness of the dream that had jolted him awake and kept him that way.

The sensation of running at five a.m. around the large lake just outside Avon, Michigan, brought back a headful of memories. He'd grown up here, safely ensconced in his upper-middle class home complete with a stay-at-home mom and a business-man dad. His life had contained few speedbumps, other than the ones that involved his intense—some would say epic-level—ongoing competition with his older brother.

Their father had encouraged it. Their mother had enabled it. Until recently, he and his brother texted each other when they felt they'd achieved something the other would find enviable. The life-long one-upmanship contest had gone beyond friendly more than a few times. He recalled those moments with the sort of mental clarity that hurt.

When he had received the prestigious Kressler Trophy for college quarterbacks, Jack managed to take the shine off that moment by nearly killing himself in an auto accident. When Hatch had married a woman who could easily pass for a lingerie model his second year as a pro, Jack broke the news that he and his doctor wife were splitting up, which had managed to ruin Hatch's good news. They'd had one of their typical passive-aggressive back and forth texting sessions over it, and when the time came for his and Alex's over-the-top, Hawaiian destination wedding, Jack hadn't even bothered to show up.

Of course, the fact that he'd been passed over for the best man designation might have had something to do with that. But seriously, what man took a powder for his only brother's wedding?

They'd spoken sporadically at best, ever since. When Hatch's life had crumbled underneath him a few years ago, he wanted to reach out to his brother, seek his advice, or at least get a few you'll-be-fine-style comments. But he hadn't. And that had somehow solidified their estrangement.

Hatch slowed during his second lap around the five-mile diameter path he'd been running on since he was twelve years old. He'd known every bump, hill, and crevice in it at one time, but since he'd been gone, the city had paved a path to accommodate bicycles, which made the run a lot easier, if about a half-mile longer. He wasn't gassed or even breathing that hard, but thoughts of his brother had put a hitch in his pace that was pissing him off.

He came to a full stop at the crest of the hill overlooking the entire span of the lake, his breath visible around his face. His life had been a series of forward motion successes, fueled by his own dogged determination to do nothing but succeed. He'd been the first one up, the first one working out, the last one to leave every practice, ever striving for the pinnacle. And he'd by-god surmounted it. He'd had it all—the career he'd dreamed about after college, even if it meant bouncing around between teams as a “small” quarterback with a penchant for running his own plays, the hot-as-shit wife, the huge house, vacations, clothes, cars. The works.

And he'd collected it all up in his arms and tossed it out the open window at the highest floor possible. Period.

Dumb. Really, really dumb.

He leaned forward and rested his hands on his thighs, letting sweat drip onto the asphalt between his feet. The strength of his sudden need to hear his brother's voice almost forced him to his knees. He had loved his ex-wife, in as much as he could love anything that wasn't directly

related to the game of football. They'd been happy, anyway, and he'd fucked it six ways to Sunday out his own stupidity. But he'd let it, and her, go, resolved to never hurt anyone else like he'd hurt her.

"Shit," he spat out as he shoved thoughts of his many failures out of his head. "Focus, Hatcher. You've got work to do."

He resumed his run, willing his mind blank and free of remorse, memories, or anything else that would distract him. He'd planned on a three-lap course today, counting on the fifteen miles to bring him to the Zen state he'd been residing in since he agreed to take the coaching job. Or at least the state he'd inhabited between that moment and the one where he'd clapped eyes on Olivia Grant.

Hatch set his jaw and went faster, pushing himself to his newly established limit as a non-pro player and semi-sedentary older man. God knew he'd worked harder than this in his life, many times over, but for now, the fifteen-mile, fast-paced run was what he was counting on to help him out of his Olivia-induced fog.

The time they'd spent together so far had been pleasant. She had a clear idea of what she expected from the documentary and a well-thought-out plan to implement it. He'd been impressed by her focus and intensity—not to mention her legs—during the hours they'd logged discussing the project so far. It had taken every ounce of his willpower not to reach across the desk and tuck an errant strand of her blonde curls behind her ear every time it dropped over her eye.

When she'd looked at him, pinned him really, with those shocking green eyes, it took him several seconds to gather his wits and say something he hoped made sense. He'd even caught himself winking at her at one point. *Winking*. That was so far outside the realm of his normal behavior he knew something about her was making him crazy.

After deciding that four laps around the lake would be necessary to drive Olivia's compelling green eyes—and her perfect rear view—out of his brain, he finished up with a light jog to cool down and get his pounding heartbeat back to normal. As he slowed, other thoughts filled his mind, mainly the challenge he now faced as head coach of a program that had been allowed to run to seed. Everything from the weight equipment to the players themselves looked sloppy and second-rate. And that pissed him off.

He was ready to fire a couple of assistants as he'd been told he could do but didn't look forward to that process. A gaggle of rich boosters were already after him with their emails and text messages full of suggestions and ideas and, of course, invitations to their lakefront homes, their golf clubs. It was, in short, a massive task. One he relished, but also one he dreaded.

He climbed behind the wheel of his classic SUV, one of the few things he'd kept after the great pre-divorce sell-off, and drained over half a water bottle in a couple of long gulps. It was only late spring but it was going to be a warm day, even though the breeze off Lake Michigan always provided relief to Avon and to the football stadium, which sat perched on a hill, not far from the body of water separating Michigan from Wisconsin.

"Call Rob," he said as he screeched out onto the still-deserted road and the sound of the ringing phone filled the vehicle's interior. He figured he might as well cut one of these cords now. Waiting around didn't do anyone any favors. He gritted his teeth while the ringing sound filled the vehicle's interior.

"Hello?" The about-to-get-canned assistant D-line coach answered on the second ring.

"Hey, Rob," Hatch said as he turned onto the main road into town. "We need to talk."

"Well, that sucked." Hatch sat on his small back patio that evening, water bottle in hand.

“Yeah, but it all had to be done, and we all know it.” Scott Durbin tossed another log on the bonfire in the pit, then sipped his beer, keeping his back to Hatch.

“All in a day’s work, boss.”

Hatch glanced at one of other men on his patio. George Hawkins was one of the three previous staff members he planned to keep and even to promote. The other two were tossing a ball back and forth beyond the fire pit in the waning light. He held up his water by way of response. George reached over and touched his beer bottle to the plastic. They both drank. The silence in the wake of the firing he’d done earlier felt heavy, like a thick blanket on his shoulders.

He observed the game of catch a few more minutes, his mind awash with the protestations and other negative responses he’d gotten from his former staff. With a loud sigh, he rose and stretched his arms up over his head. His legs ached, and his head was starting to pound from stress and too little food.

“Where’s that damn pizza?” He wandered inside, taking in the surroundings of his new home, knowing that the frugal, some would say miserly way, he lived was the topic of plenty of athletic department buzz. As he approached the front door of the rented bungalow he’d chosen because it put him within walking or biking distance of his new office, the bell rang.

He thanked the delivery guy, handed him a tip, and was shutting the door when the guy spoke, “Hey, aren’t you the new coach? Hatcher, right?”

“That’s right,” Hatch said, holding the four heavy boxes of food in one hand. He wasn’t in the mood for this but knew from direct experience that pissing off a fan could turn around and bite you in the ass. “You go to Lakeview?”

He’d done a quick appraisal of the kid and decided he could be college age. Then again, he could be in high school.

“Not yet,” the young man said. “But I want to. And I want to play ball there.”

“That’s great,” Hatch said, trying to sound enthusiastic. “Be sure and stay in touch with the assistant coaches.”

He knew the drill. If he even so much as said a single thing about this young man’s playing for him, he’d be in violation of multiple recruiting rules. He smiled, hoping the kid would get the hint and get off his front porch. But he lingered, his eyes bright, his smile wide.

Hatch did yet another assessment of him. Tall? Check. Wide shoulders? Check. Huge hands? Check. “Hang on a second.”

He dropped the pizza boxes on the kitchen counter and headed outside. “George, would you talk to the kid at the door? He’s apparently a football player and...”

“Got it, Coach.” George jumped up and headed inside.

“Food’s here,” Hatch said.

He flopped into his chair, not hungry, not thirsty, not anything but exhausted and also somehow enervated at the same time. His phone buzzed down in his jeans pocket, so he pulled it out. When he saw the name of the message sender, he got the oddest sensation, as if an army of ants were marching across his skull and down his back. He shivered.

“You all right, Hatch?” Scott had a couple of slices of pepperoni on a plate and was sitting down at the table with a fresh beer.

“Yeah,” he said, opening the screen so he could read Olivia’s message. He by-passed the ice-choked cooler well stocked with local beer and grabbed another water. He sipped while gazing down at her words.

Coach, I was wondering if we might be able to interview you on film this coming week. I know we said that wouldn’t happen for another week, but I’m ahead of schedule on editing, and thought

I might get a jump on the footage of you.

He sighed and leaned back in the chair. This whole documentary thing was beginning to feel like a giant mistake. There was no time for it, much less inclination. Plus, the woman in charge was simply too tempting and he had to focus.

Sorry, can't.

The response was almost immediate.

I know I'm getting ahead of our schedule, but it will shorten the length of time you're bothered by me. I promise. I'm batting my eyelashes at you right now if that helps...

Hatch groaned and tossed the phone on the tabletop.

Scott snagged it and glanced at the text exchange. "Hey, if she's being a pain, I can rein her in for you."

"No, she's not a pain. I'll handle it."

But the mental image of Olivia, she of the firm, fit legs, the perfect ass, the lush lips, and compelling eyes, batting her lashes at him for anything, much less so he'd get more one-on-one time with her was making him weak in the knees. And way too hot below his belt. He waited a few seconds, then got up for food, grabbing his phone from Scott on the way.

Ok. But I really only have about two spare hours this coming week. And it has to be before Friday, sorry.

Her reaction was almost as fast as before, which made him wince at being such a jerk about the whole thing. Even if it were pure self-preservation on his part.

Ok. No problem. I get it. See you at the race!

"Are you still in here sexting with that hot as fuck reporter?"

Hatch glanced up at George, annoyed at the interruption at the same moment he had to acknowledge that the concept of Olivia sweating alongside him, in shorts and a sports bra at the 10k made him have to mentally run stats tables of his last year as a pro quarterback to keep from popping a teenager-worthy woody right in his grown-up kitchen.

"None of your business. Here." He tossed one of the full boxes at George's chest and tapped out his quick reply.

Yeah, I'll see you there. And you should know, I never lose when I'm betting on myself.

He sighed, staring at that last comment, realizing how very close to home it hit. He had lost plenty of bets. But that was all in the past. He tucked the phone back in his pocket, grabbed more beer, and headed outside. "Okay, I didn't invite you assholes over here just to eat my food and drink my beer. We have work to do."

The men all pulled out their laptops and notebooks. Hatch passed around the beer and an opener. "That's better," he said, taking his seat and flipping open his comp book. He kept physical, hand-written notes and always had. It was how his mind worked best.

Later that night as he was about to turn out the light, he plugged in his phone and noticed that Olivia had sent one last message.

Well, you've obviously never bumped up against me. I don't lose, either. See you at the race!

With a loud groan, he fell back on his pillows, wanting more than anything not to be fixated on "bumping up" against Olivia Grant but knowing full well that, thanks to that last message, he'd be wide awake again by three a.m.