Grey Sweatpants Season

 ***By C.T. Byrd***

**Interview for Cover Story in The Spartan**

To: RTaylorMgt@gmail.com

From: Penelope J. Anderson@gmail.com

Wed 10/07/2018 12:04 PM

Hey Royce,

This is Penelope Anderson—from English 102A breakout group freshman year? We slogged through *Walden* together? Hope you remember me because I've been assigned to write a story about you for *The Spartan* in advance of the homecoming game. And it’s a cover! Exciting, right!? Well, maybe not for you since you've been in *Sports Illustrated*, but you know what I mean...

Anyway, I’m emailing to arrange some time for us to meet so I can interview you. I was thinking maybe next Friday afternoon—we could get a coffee in the student union or meet on the quad—whatever is easiest. It shouldn't take much more than an hour, maybe two. Would 3pm work? If not, lmk what would be good for you.

Thanks so much and really looking forward to it. Been a minute since that English class, and it will be great to catch up.

-Penelope

(555) 514-6545 (in case texting is easier than email!)

**RE: Interview for Cover Story in The Spartan**

To: RTaylorMgt@gmail.com

From: Penelope J. Anderson@gmail.com

Fri 10/12/2018 8:53 AM

Hi Royce,

Not sure if you saw my last message but just wanted to check and see if you’re available this afternoon. I'm still free at 3pm. Let me know if you are too. If not, we can totally arrange something different. Absolutely no problem at all.

-Penelope

**RE:re: Interview for Cover Story in The Spartan**

To: BTaylorMgt@gmail.com

From: Penelope J. Anderson@gmail.com

Mon 10/15/2018 9:09 PM

Hey there,

Just trying to get in touch for a different meeting time. I'd like to give myself a week to write the story, so no later than Sunday would be really great for me. Why don't you just let me know when you're available?

Oh and in case it wasn't clear, this should be totally painless. I'll just record our conversation and pull from there. And no hard questions or gotchas or anything like that, I promise.

Thanks again. ~P

**RE:re:re: Interview for Cover Story in The Spartan**

To: RTaylorMgt@gmail.com

From: Penelope J. Anderson@gmail.com

Tue 10/23/2018 7:13 AM

Hi,

I hate to be a pest, but it's really getting down to crunch time for me. Most of the story is drafted, so I think we could cut the interview time down to 30 minutes or less. That's all I need. Wednesday night? Thursday morning? Any time you have a half-hour, really. I will make it work. Thanks!

Penelope Anderson (555) 514-6545

**RE:re:re:re: Interview for Cover Story in The Spartan**

To: RTaylorMgt@gmail.com

From: Penelope J. Anderson@gmail.com

Thu 10/25/2018 6:43 PM

Ok, this is my Hail Mary (haha). Tomorrow is really the last time we can do this. Can you spare me fifteen minutes? Otherwise, we’ll have to kill the story.

-PA

"Asshole." Penelope Anderson hit send on her latest email. Who just ignored someone like that? If he didn't want to do it, he could have just said so.

She leaned back in her desk chair and blew out an angry sigh. She hadn't even wanted this story anyway. Puff pieces idolizing the school's vaunted football program lay very much outside her interest area; she didn't like the sport or anything it stood for. And she despised the hero-worship of athletes on campus almost as much as the college-athletics-industrial-complex that underpinned it.

Broken policy, systemic bias, institutional sexism—these were the topics she cared about, the subjects of stories she'd won awards for. So it really grated that her first cover (if it even happened) would be a fucking *football* profile.

But her EIC Roger had convinced her. She could hear his irritating voice in her head now: *J-schools will see a thousand think pieces from politicized do-gooders. You want to show a breadth of ability in your application. You do a cover story on someone with his star power—and I hope you realize he's going to be the LeBron of football—and you do it well? You can write your ticket. I'm giving you a* gift*, Anderson.*

Fucking Roger. He had a point.

Penelope tapped her fingers and stared at her inbox, willing a reply with a suggested meeting time (and an apology) to appear. She really was surprised at Taylor's blatant rudeness. He'd been cool and decent in that class they'd had together. She'd thought they'd had a bit of a friendship, that he'd remember her and respond quickly, but obviously she was wrong. Maybe success had changed him.

At that moment, a new message did flash up in her inbox, and for a second her heart sped with excitement that it might be from him. But no, it was just from Mei Lee.

'Football Research' said the subject line. *Very funny, Mei*. Penelope rolled her eyes. It wasn't like she knew nothing about the game. She had a very good handle on the basics and she'd revised as diligently for this story as she would for any other.

She opened the message anyway. It was just one line; "This will be helpful." The word 'this' was a link and Penelope clicked mindlessly, wondering for the thousandth time what the hell she was going to do if she couldn't get this interview with Royce Taylor.

Taylor

*Taylor*

*Oh my God.*

This was definitely not football research, but it was certainly Royce Taylor. In a video. On Instagram. Not his account, but someone who (obviously) knew him well.

**537,969 likes**

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**DarlingNik98**Bae. @RoyceT33, #thirsttrapthursday #greysweatpantsseason

Penelope’smind stuttered as it took in what she was seeing: Royce Taylor shirtless and in nothing but a pair of very low slung grey jogger-style sweatpants and a backwards baseball hat. As she watched, a woman’s low voice said something to him and he turned from his sideways position in the shot, a slow grin growing over his face as he faced the camera. It was utterly ridiculous how good looking he was; all smooth brown skin over sculpted muscle, the sweats hitting just at the spot where the divots in his pelvis started. The smile on his perfectly structured face was so beautiful and charming that Penelope felt her own lips lift in return. *“You filming? Stop that.”* His soft voice purred as his teeth glinted and his hand went out to cover the lens, which tilted downward at the last second to show his lower half, the joggers perfectly outlining his— Penelope gasped as the video looped. She watched it open-mouthed at least seven times before she started up in surprise and slammed her laptop shut.

Her face was warm and she was a little out of breath. There was a distinct dampness in her underwear region.

What the actual *fuck*.

She pushed away from her desk angrily. So he was stupidly good-looking. Fine. She knew that already. He was also smart and thoughtful. She remembered that too. But he was still an asshole for completely blowing her off. She paced a bit and then threw a quick glance at her clock.

*Shit*, 7pm already.

She needed to stop waiting for Royce Taylor to pluck his head out of his (perfect) ass and start getting ready for this dinner. The Community Service and Civic Engagement awards were a fairly big deal and she was getting a Circle of Honor certificate, which would look great on her applications. She should focus on that instead of the epic football story fail.

She yanked her favorite blouse and tweed skirt out of her closet and ran the shower, still fuming. Stepping into the warm spray, she imagined all the extremely cutting and devastating things she would say to Royce Taylor should she ever get the chance. But then her brain moved slyly from scathing speeches to the video, serving up an image of his stomach and how it had rippled as he'd twisted to the side. And before she could stop herself, she was thinking about what would it be like to touch him, run her hand over his skin, make him smile that way. *She'd wondered for a long time what would it be like to kiss that gorgeous mouth...*

God *DAMN* it*.*

She straightened up and cut off the water, grabbing a towel and drying herself vigorously. She obviously needed to move on and accept that she wasn't getting the interview *or* the cover story, let alone any piece of Royce Taylor.

Tumbling out of the faculty club into the crisp night air, Pen called goodnight to the four grad students she'd shared a table with at dinner. They'd also been Circle of Honor recipients—for a campus ad campaign they'd designed highlighting microaggressions in the classroom. Penelope had loved it the moment she'd seen it, and been meaning to write a story about it. So they'd had an excellent time talking through ideas, especially once a cute waiter had snuck them a second, and then a third, bottle of wine.

Pen's mood was much better now than it had been earlier in the night.

"Fuck you and your pelvic divots, Royce Taylor. I have more interesting and important things to do with my time," she said under her breath, casting a baleful eye up at the athletics complex and dorms as she walked past them on her way through campus.

The athletics dorms.

Were right there.

Penelope stopped and looked up. There was a better than 50% chance that Royce Taylor was in there somewhere. It was only—she looked at her phone—9:45pm.

She stood for a moment debating, the wine saying yes, while a tight inner voice threw out objections. The building was huge. How would she find him? Would he even agree to talk to her if she just burst in on him?

She watched as a lanky red-headed guy tripped up the steps and slid his key card through the reader at the door.

*Only one way to find out.*

"Hold the door!" she called, as she rushed forward.

Turned out it was pretty easy to find Taylor's dorm room; there was a directory right in the lobby. So now Pen was standing outside of a green door with a gold 309 painted on it, hand raised to knock, definitely having second thoughts. But then she recalled every email she'd sent to him over the last three weeks and a wave of self-righteous anger washed over her.

She was rapping on the door before she knew it.

"Hold up, Derrick!" a faint voice from inside made her blood rush in her veins. *Oh shit, he was actually home*. What was she going to say!? Her confidence deserted her in a whoosh as the door swung open.

"You're not Derrick." Royce Taylor's soft (*sexy*) voice issued from his really remarkably handsome, and at the moment puzzled, face. "You're…*Penelope*." His head tilted.

"Yep, Penelope Anderson from *The Spartan*."

"And English 102A. The *Walden* whisperer."

Penelope was pleased that he remembered, so she smiled like an idiot.

He smiled back, but then a crease appeared between his eyes. "So?"

"So?" Pen was still bathing in the glow of recognition.

"So, what are you doing here?"

"Oh uh, yes. The interview! I was hoping you could give me the interview. For the story in *The Spartan*. Front page of this Sunday's edition!" Penelope realized the wine and the nerves were making her sound slightly manic, but she shouldn't seem to stop.

Royce rubbed the back of his neck. "Story? *This* Sunday?"

"Yeah, I emailed you? *Several* times." Pen felt the smile sliding off her face as Royce muttered something that sounded like 'fucking creepy.' Her smile slid further.

"You need an interview. By Sunday."

"Yeahhhh. Well Saturday, really." A part of Penelope really wanted to turn tail and run, tell him this was all a mistake, but the journalist in her hung on, pressing for just a moment longer.

He took a deep breath and tipped his head back before looking at her. "OK. But here's what's up. I am leaving for a party in ten minutes. A party that I am not missing, as it's the only social event Coach has given us permission to attend all quarter. And I have all-day practice tomorrow and then strict curfew since it's the night before the game. And obviously, I am all tied up Saturday since it's game day."

"Oh, OK." Pen felt her smile leave her face completely. She started to turn away.

"Hold up, hold up, hold up!" He put his hand out and touched her shoulder and Pen stopped. "What I'm saying is you can have the interview. But the party is the only free time I have."

"What*?*" Pen was highly confused.

"Come. To. The Party. I'll answer your questions between shots, or something." He gave her that slow smile and it did something funny to Penelope because she heard herself say OK and then found herself stepping through his door into his efficiency studio thing, perching nervously on a futon and accepting a can of coke from a tiny fridge in the corner of his (incredibly neat) room.

"I just have to go change," he said, ducking into the bathroom. "It's a costume party."

"*I* don't have a costume." Pen said to herself as he disappeared.

A few minutes later he was back. "Ok, newslady. How does it look?"

Pen looked up from her phone, from which she had been rapidly and inarticulately texting with Mei.

Royce Taylor was standing before her in jeans, a plaid shirt and an odd, orange padded-vest, smiling expectantly. "Uhhh." She squinted at him.

He deflated. "You don't know who I am."

"No?" Pen wracked her brain. He looked like a very attractive hipster fisherman.

"Marty McFly! *Back to the Future*!?" He spun in a dramatic circle and then stopped, pinning her with a gaze. "It's because I'm black, isn't it? You weren't expecting a black Marty McFly."

"I mean, maybe, er maybe *not*?" Pen said weakly. "But you look great," she amended. "It's a, uh, cool costume. I just don't know the movie all that well."

"What!? Why? It's a classic!" Royce gathered his phone and his ID.

"I don't know. I saw it once—a really long time ago?"

He stopped and looked at her again. "Hmm. OK, I guess." He fixed her with a glare that made Pen squirm. She opened her mouth to apologize, but then a huge grin broke over his face. "I'm just giving you shit. Come on, let's go."

The party was an absolute shit show.

Penelope had managed to avoid sporty/fratty parties most of her college career, an accomplishment she was somewhat proud of. It wasn't that she didn't like socializing or being big groups—she absolutely did. She just preferred a different feel.

Better booze, less vomit, more conversation.

But this party, (a bedsheet reading "Halloween Rage" had been draped over the balcony of the house as they'd walked up) was certainly very sporty *and* fratty. Penelope recognized several of Royce's teammates festooned about the place in idiotic and/or semi-offensive costumes, as well as what looked (due to their stature and overall musculature) to be members of other sports teams on campus. There were also a lot of girls dressed in sexy versions of normal Halloween costumes.

Almost the minute they arrived, Royce had gotten sucked away in a vortex of people who were yelling his last name at high volume. But he’d pointed at her and mouthed, "we'll talk later," as it was happening, so she did feel heartened. She'd find him in a bit.

In the meantime, she decided to treat the party as an interesting anthropological adventure that might come in handy if she ever decided to write a YA novel.

So she made her way directly to the keg.

Miraculously, there was no one near it, so she grabbed a red cup and eyed it warily. She always forgot how you were supposed to do this. Did you pump first and then use the spigot thing? Or both at the same time? How long were you supposed to pump? And what was the right pouring angle for avoiding a cup that was 85% foam and 15% flat liquid?

She was filling her cup and failing at the foam thing when a voice said, "Dude, you pumped it too much."

"I know, I always forget—" Pen straightened up and turned, only to come face to face with set of gorgeously formed pectorals, tiny nipples standing at pebbled attention. "Uh." Her eyes slid up and locked with a cornflower blue gaze that was both disdainful and suspicious.

"Give me that. I'll do it. Shouldn't waste good beer." Said eyes cleared and the mouth below them let out a stupendous belch. One long-fingered hand reached for her cup as the other lazily scratched a taut eight-pack.

"Thanks?" Pen said, taking a step back to put a modicum of distance between herself and what was undisputedly Colton Campbell, the Spartans' star quarterback and Laverne to Royce's Shirley. "I never remember the proper way to do it."

Colton sniffed and scrubbed at his expertly tousled dark blonde hair. "Chicks aren't usually great at it."

Penelope ruffled up at this and was about to say something, but was silenced by the absolutely perfect stream of mostly non-foamy beer that was now obediently settling itself in her cup. "How did you *do* that?" she asked in wonderment.

Colton shrugged a shoulder, an expression of pride stealing across his ridiculously symmetrical face, then handed Penelope her cup. She took a delicate sip and surveyed him over the rim of red plastic. It was amazing how *tall* he was. She was a respectable 5'8" and she really was eye to eye with those nipples.

He filled and drained a beer in quick succession. "What are you?" he said, following the question with another belch.

"What?"

"Teacher?"

"No, I'm a student here." Penelope was confused—not for the first time of this increasingly strange night.

"Sexy librarian, but like a 'before' picture?" He cocked his head and ran those startlingly blue eyes up and down Penelope's body. "That would be pretty cool if like at the end of the night, you took your hair down and your glasses off and like, tied up your shirt."

"I'm not wearing glasses?" Pen murmured. Then she realized—he must mean her *costume*.

She felt her mouth draw into an "O" of surprise as his gaze became very focused.

"Hey you want to go upstairs?" he said, eyes trained on the button that held her blouse together over her breasts.

"*No*."

"You sure? It won't take long."

"No, *thank* you."

He shrugged and looked off over her head. "Suit yourself."

Penelope looked down, face pink. Had she just been propositioned by Colton *fucking* Campbell? Mei was going to *shit.* A strong urge to giggle overtook her. '*It won't take long*.' A laugh escaped.

The blue swung back her way. "What?"

"Um." Penelope pressed her lips together. "Uh, what are you? Dressed as? What's your costume?" She realized he was in nothing but a backwards baseball hat and sweatpants.

He looked down at himself and at her, several times. It was clear she was supposed to know what was going on, but she really didn't so she put her hands up and shrugged.

"I'm *Taylor*, dude. In his thirst trap post on I.G." Colton started laughing. "You've seen it right? So fucking hilarious." He nudged Penelope, hard, then looked over his shoulder coquettishly, "'You filming?'"

"I, uh, have. Seen it." Penelope spoke over Colton's helpless laughter, her eyebrows very high on her forehead. *Oh my God.* She was *not* going to look down at his crotch, she was absolutely NOT. And then of course her eyes went *right* down there, but there was nothing, er, out of the ordinary.

"I gotta fucking find him so he can see," Colton chortled, scanning the room. "Hey, Walker!" he yelled across the room to another handsome, athletic-looking boy, who flipped him off. "You pussy, have you seen Taylor!?" The volume of Colton's shout and his beery breath made Penelope flinch. Her movement must have attracted his eyes because he looked down. "Uh, later, I guess." He gave her a chin flip and a somewhat perplexed look as he bounded away. She saw him reach the other boy (*Josh Walker, Spartans' kicker and multi-sport prodigy. Thank you, research brain*) and put him in a headlock, holding him there until Walker appeared to lick one of Colton's nipples, which resulted in a lot of shouting and Walker being chased by Colton out of the house.

Pen shook her head and took a deep breath. *Wow*. She really wasn't used to these levels of testosterone. She drifted away from the keg to lean her hip against a kitchen counter, letting the noise of the party drift over her. She wondered where Royce had gone and hoped he wouldn't be too messed up by the time they got a chance to sit down.

"Hey!" A voice puffed against her ear and Pen whirled in surprise to see Royce himself, standing there as if she'd conjured him with her thoughts.

"Heyyy," she said, tilting her head. "Are you ready to sit down?"

"Almost. I haven't even gotten a drink yet." He moved past the keg, reached for a bottle from the makeshift bar on the counter, and began mixing Jack and Coke.

"Not much of a beer person?" Pen said, a little fixated on his hands. *All of these ballplayers had such long, supple fingers…*

"Nah, I prefer smooth and sweet. You want one?" He looked up, brows raised.

"Uh, yeah, actually. Thanks. I don't really like this stuff either." Pen held up her mostly full beer. "Makes me feel sluggish."

"Exactly. I always tell Campbell it's going to catch up with him someday." Royce flashed her a smile and handed her a cup.

"He seems to have quite a capacity for it." Pen said, shaking her head.

"Oh, have you seen him in action?" Royce leaned on the counter next to her and took a sip.

"I actually uh, just met him. Kind of. He poured that for me. He was looking for you. Did he find you?" Penelope smothered a laugh, thinking of Colton's costume…and his proposition.

"Haven't seen him. Why are you smiling like that?" Royce leaned toward her with a quizzical look.

"No reason. You'll see." Pen tried harder to smother the smile. Royce was still looking at her, eyes narrowed, but then he grinned suddenly and leaned back.

"Fine. But I'm not answering any interview questions until you tell me why you're laughing."

"No fair!" Penelope was incredulous. She pushed off from the counter and pointed at his chest, although she was still suppressing a laugh. *It really was a testament to his charm that she was in such a good mood with him*. "You've blown me off for threeweeks. You don't get to dictate terms!"

"Three weeks?" His brows drew together and he cocked his head. He reached up and absent-mindedly caught her fingertips where they were almost touching him. His hand was warm. Pen felt her eyes widen in surprise.

They held there for a moment. "Your eyes are green," Royce said, a note of surprise in his voice. "I always thought they were blue."

Pen blinked rapidly, her brain dealing with a lot of overwhelming input all at once: his closeness, his bemused look, the fact that he had noticed her eyes. In the *past*?

"Uhhh," she said, a paragon of articulate speech.

Suddenly, Royce focused behind her and frowned, just before she heard an ear-splitting screech.

"Royyyyyyyyyce! Colton needs you!" Someone who looked to be dressed as a (sexy) ear of corn was hanging over the balcony above the stairs. "He fucked up the bathroom door lock again and he says you're the only one who knows how to fix it. And I really have to peeeee!"

"Ok, Madison!" Royce rolled his eyes at Penelope and gently let her hand go. "Sorry. How about we meet on one of those couches right there"—he gestured to a cluster of four sofas facing each other in the middle of the room—"in ten minutes. I promise to tell you anything you want to know." He held her gaze for a moment before jogging away, taking the steps two at a time as Penelope smiled stupidly at his retreating back.

She stayed there for a good two minutes, sipping her drink and staring at nothing before snapping out of it and reminding herself that she was a journalist and Royce Taylor her interview subject, not to mention next year's likely #1 NFL draft pick. There was absolutely *nothing* romantic going on here.

With that thought front and center, she marched over to the couches and plopped down, intending to look over the interview notes on her phone and make sure she was all queued up for recording.

She was so focused on her typing and scrolling that she was genuinely startled when a voice said, "Sucks when you're at a party, but all you can do is text someone else."

Penelope's head whipped up and her eyes focused on a body, absolutely enormous, laying full out on the couch opposite hers. Had he been there the whole time? He must have been and she just hadn't noticed him. She'd been so caught up in her task, *and on getting her mind out of the gutter regarding Royce Taylor*.

"Oh, I wasn't…" She looked with confusion at the prone figure. He truly was massive, probably as tall as Colton Campbell, but twice as wide. Long yellow hair spread out on the cushion behind his head and a wooly red-blond beard covered half his face. She couldn't see the other half because he had his arm draped dramatically over it. She still recognized him, though. *(Magnus Craig, starting Defensive Tackle. 6'5" and 320lbs. Thanks again, research brain!*) Also, Mei had a strange obsession with him, ('*I happen to like Vikings, ok!'*) so Penelope had known about him even before the story. He was hard to miss walking around campus.

"Oh, that's good for you, then. Broken hearts suck." Craig pulled his arm off his forehead and groped around on the floor. His meaty fingers closed over a whiskey bottle and he grasped it just before it tipped, then sat up slightly so he could take a deep swallow.

"They do," Penelope said, placing her phone down beside her and leaning forward. Her terrible Sophomore year breakup with her highschool boyfriend flashed through her mind.

Magnus's eyes flitted to hers. Were there *tears* in them? "Yup, you've been through it. I can tell." He sat partially up and held out the whiskey bottle. "Hey, you want some?"

"I’ve uh, got this." Pen held up her drink, but then realized it was almost gone. "Actually," she tipped the rest of it into her mouth. "Hit me up."

"Cool." Craig heaved his huge body all the way upright and leaned forward to splash a healthy amount of liquid into her cup.

They sat and sipped quietly for a few minutes until he heaved a huge sigh.

Pen looked at him. "Do you want to, ah, talk about it?"

"Sure," he said, his voice so deep and gravely it almost didn't sound real. "Tale as old as time. I thought she loved me as much as I loved her. She didn't. She cheated. I found out. I died a little inside."

"God, I'm really sorry." Pen reached out and patted his hand.

"The worst part is. It's been three months and I can't snap out of it. I go to parties, I meet girls—even beautiful girls like you—and I just...don't care." He darted a quick look at her. "I mean, don't get me wrong. It's nice to meet you and all, but I don't care in *that* way. No offense. I'm just broken. The only thing I know how to do anymore is football."

"No offense taken. And thank you for calling me beautiful." Pen was touched by the compliment. She'd been feeling decidedly dowdy in her silk and tweed in amongst all the sexy devils and cats and fairies and—she squinted across the room—was that a sexy *dinosaur*?

"You are beautiful. Your hair is a really pretty color. Like honey with autumn sunlight on it. What's your costume?" Craig asked, peering at her. "Pepper Potts?"

Pen was so taken aback by the unexpected poetry that it took a second to respond. Somehow she didn't want to tell him she wasn't in costume, so she just nodded. "Yeah, Pepper Potts."

"Well, it's really good. I barely made an effort." Craig pointed to a horned helmet sitting on the battered coffee table next to them.

Pen smiled at him. "No, it's perfect." Suddenly, she had an idea. "In fact, will you put it on so I can take a picture of you for my friend? She has a bit of a crush on you and she loves that you look like a Viking."

Craig's face brightened. "A crush on me? *Really*? With guys like this running around?" He reached up to shake someone's hand and Penelope realized Royce had appeared behind her. She twisted to look up at him, her cheeks warming.

"Hey Craig, how you doing?" Royce dropped down on the couch next to Penelope. Quite close, in fact.

Magnus was adjusting the helmet over his head. "I'm ok." He nodded at Pen. "Talking to your friend has made me feel better than I have in a long time."

Royce looked at Pen and raised his brows. "Nice," he breathed.

"Ok, how do I look?" Magnus asked, posing with the helmet on.

"Amazing. She's going to die." Penelope stood up and snapped several pictures.

"What's your friend like?" Magnus asked, a faux-innocent look crossing his features. "Just out of curiosity."

"Mei? Uhh, she's a bio-chem major, so she's very smart. On the field hockey team. Raunchy sense of humor. Fun. Thinks she's hilarious," Pen said, remembering the 'football research' email, which of course made her remember the video of Royce. She glanced at him and he was watching her.

"So I guess you found Colton," she said with a grin.

Royce looked at her then closed his eyes. "Great," he said, pitching backwards on the couch. "So you've seen it too."

"Everyone's seen it, bro. Fucking Campbell. That costume is a masterstroke." Magnus started heaving with laughter, his whole huge frame shaking.

Penelope laughed too. "There's absolutely nothing to be ashamed of, Royce," she said, patting his arm as she scrolled through the pics on her phone, looking for the cute ones of Mei from a day they spent at the lake in August. "Here she is." She shoved the phone at Magnus.

His mouth dropped open. "Damn. *She* likes *me*?"

"Yeah, since last year. She's single too. You want her number? I can ask when I send your picture over. I am warning you that she's a huge smartass though. She's the one who sent me the I.G. video." Penelope looked at Royce. "When I was prepping for your story. She told me it was football research."

Magnus cracked up again at this and even Royce laughed.

"OK yeah, I definitely need her number. I'll text you and then you can send it to me if she's down." Magnus shook his head and pulled out his phone. Pen told him her name and read out her number and he sent her a text; '*u rokk*'.

"Well, I feel about 100% better. Ready to knock some fucking heads on Saturday." Craig pounded a fist into his hand and nodded at Royce as he stood up. His height and breadth when fully unfolded were truly astounding. "Gotta take a piss. Really glad you sat down next to me, Pepper." He winked at her then looked at Royce again. "Don't fuck this one up, Taylor."

Penelope felt her face instantly go a very bright red. She stared unseeingly at Magnus's massive back as he made his way through the crowd, not daring to look at Royce.

"Right. Er, so let's get started. Where did you grow up?" she asked in what she hoped was a brisk, professional tone, while pulling up the recording function on her phone. She knew the answer to this, she'd already written this part of the article, but she was flustered.

Royce didn't respond and Pen chanced a glance at him out of the corner of her eye. Was he so disgusted by Magnus's implication that he couldn't speak? But no, he appeared distracted, looking away from her and at the couch to their left. Pen craned her neck past him and saw a couple making out, passionately and very sloppily on the arm of the couch. As she watched, they fell backward onto the cushions.

Royce glanced quickly at her and them and tapped her arm twice. "Let's go somewhere else." He stood up and offered her a hand. Pen took it and he started threading them through the crowd, which had gotten considerably larger since they'd arrived. People called out to him and he waved, but he didn't stop.

And he didn't drop her hand.

Penelope had no idea what to think. But she kept her attention very focused on the interview. She had a great couple of questions she wanted to start out with. No, not 'where did you grow up'—*God, what an idiot*. But a few things that would hopefully elicit the types of responses that could set the profile's tone and feel. She was excited to put them to him and see what he would say.

They passed out of the house and to the backyard. Pen hadn't realized there was a pool. And a DJ. The night was warm for late October and people were dancing on the massive deck. Royce kept them moving and Penelope noticed a quieter corner in the back of the yard, set up with chairs and string lights. That must be where he was headed. That was good, they would actually be able to hear each other there.

Royce slowed and Penelope realized they had gotten bottlenecked in the dancers, who were thickly clustered near where the DJ was set up. They waded into the group and had to come to a stop. Royce turned to shrug at her, then leaned in and spoke in her ear. Pen tried to ignore the sensations his proximity and voice introduced.

"Why did Magnus call you Pepper?" he asked, pulling back with a puzzled smile.

Pen enjoyed going up on tiptoe and speaking close in his ear. "People keep trying to guess my costume," she said with a laugh. "Colton thought I was a sexy librarian before picture." Royce shook his head and looked at the ground. "But Magnus thought I was Pepper Potts, and I liked that, so I didn't correct him."

Royce pulled back and looked at her, his head tilted and his eyes skimming up and down. He still hadn't let go of her hand. "Yeah, I could see that. But you're prettier."

At this highly interesting moment, the crowd opened up and they started moving again. The song, which had been poppy and bouncy, changed, and Pen instantly recognized the beginning notes of the new one.

She let out an involuntary squeal. "I love this song!"

Royce heard her because he turned. "Yeah? You like Drake? I would have taken you for, like, a Justin Vernon stan."

"I do like him too, but this is great. It reminds me of highschool!" Penelope said, swaying a bit and starting to sing along. "This was so big Junior year. Just good times, you know." She smiled at him and he looked at her for a beat.

"Well let's dance, then." He caught her around the waist and pulled her close.

Penelope was shocked for a moment, but luckily the substantial amount of whiskey she'd drunk with Magnus had kicked in and she was able to relax and loop her arms around Royce's neck as he swayed them to the moody, mid-tempo song. She realized he'd lost the orange vest because she was pulled right up against his warm body. He smelled fucking fantastic. And for once, Penelope, who was not the most carefree dancer, just relaxed and felt the music.

Royce was singing along to the romantic lyrics and it was easy to get caught up, although she was also hyper-aware of the glances shooting their way. She supposed that was the price of even being close to someone like him. What had Roger called him? The LeBron of football? She might live off this story for the rest of her life. The thought made her smile and Royce caught her eye.

"What?"

"Just. This is fun. I was pretty pissed at you earlier, but here we are."

"Pissed at me?"

"Yeah. Because you never responded! I was imagining what I was going to say to you when I was in the shower earlier. All the cutting things." Royce's eyebrows flew up at 'in the shower' and Pen realized the whiskey had really taken hold. She ducked her head. *Oh well*.

The song slowed into the break and Royce surprised Pen by letting go of her waist and twirling her out in a slow circle. Everyone was shouting the lyrics and she laughed at the sheer fun of it. Why exactly had she avoided parties like this?

Then the beat came back in and Royce pulled her against him again, tighter this time, his eyes intent on hers. Pen thought he looked at her lips, and her breath quickened. "I didn't—" he started to say, but his words were cut off when a hand landed on his shoulder.

"Bro!" It was Colton. He peered at Penelope. "And sexy librarian!"

"Pepper Potts!" Penelope shouted up at him.

He blinked a few times, then, "Fuck yeah. That's hot. You sure you don't want to…?" He pointed upwards, visibly swaying.

Penelope began grinning and shaking her head, and Royce cut in, lifting his palms. "*Bruh*."

Colton focused on him. "Oh. Sorry, dude." He looked between them with a confused expression. Then he refocused on Royce. "You are needed. In the front yard. Maddie and Parker. Something about the pledges."

"Shit." Royce rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I did say I'd help." His eyes went to Pen's. "I won't be fifteen minutes, OK? You can chill over there”—he pointed to the quiet corner—"or I'll find you. Whatever. I owe you, I know." He squeezed her hand once before moving off with Colton.

Penelope watched Royce and Colton weave through the crowd. Royce looked back at her with a grimace just before they were swallowed by the crush of bodies.

She thought about getting another drink but didn't want to brave the insanity of the pool deck to get inside again, so she just went to the darkened corner and dropped into one of the plastic chairs set up there. It seemed like the smoking area because there was a truly disgusting coffee can filled with congealed cigarette butts, what looked like rainwater and maybe some beer by the smell of it.

She pulled out her phone and read Mei's enthusiastic affirmative re: giving Magnus her number, so she texted it to him with a series of shield and sword emojis. She briefly considered trying to get Mei to come down to the party, but Mei was studying for an O-Chem exam in the morning, so she resisted.

Blowing out a sigh, Pen took a moment to wonder at these little interactions that had been happening with Royce all night. Were they all just in her head? Was he just a flirt? Or maybe he was trying to smooth over his shitty behavior regarding the interview? Or was it possible that her attraction to him (which, if she was honest, had existed since approximately five minutes into English 102A) was making her read into things. Maybe all these athletes just hooked up with whoever, whenever. After all, she could have had sex with Colton Campbell tonight if she'd wanted to.

She snorted and tipped her head back. One thing was clear; she needed to stay focused on the story, and getting the interview, above all else.

A dusting of stars twinkled overhead and she watched them with a sigh. *Wouldn't it be nice if the moments were real, though?* She'd liked Royce since the moment she’d me him, had a bit of a thing for him, really—and she’d always thought he was smart and cool. And of course, there was the unearthly hotness. She let her mind slide to the video again, then sucked in her breath and flipped her head back up.

No time for that.

"Stop being an idiot," she said out loud, trying to regain her professionalism.

"You too, eh?" Penelope looked over in surprise to see someone dropping into the plastic chair next to her. A guy she'd never seen before, he was short and slight and vibrating with a kind of nervous energy. "Smoke?" he said, tapping a cigarette out of a crumpled pack and then holding it out to her.

"No thanks, I don't smoke," Pen replied.

"You mind if I—"

"No, no go ahead. We're clearly in the smoking area." Pen gestured to the coffee can.

"That is fucking disgusting. *Frats*." The guy shook his head and lit his cigarette, then held out his hand. "Rich Cready," he said, as he took a drag.

"Penelope Anderson." Pen shook with him and then leaned back, trying to avoid the smoke.

"And you're here with Taylor, huh?" Rich shot her a sideways glance and Pen tensed, suddenly wary.

"Not really," she said.

"I saw you come in together. Saw you dancing. Looks like you're here with him."

Pen turned in her seat and blinked at him. As a reporter, she recognized when someone was trying to ferret out information. "And that’s your business, why?" she asked, putting some ice in her tone.

Cready cracked his neck and shrugged. "I'm his manager. I mean, in a sense. Obviously college athletes can't have representation, so it's not in an official capacity or for money or anything like that." His foot was jiggling and his eyes kept darting from the dance floor to Pen and around the rest of the yard. Pen just kept looking at him, keeping quiet so that he'd be forced to talk more—an old journalist's trick. "It's for class credit." Cready eventually continued. "I'm in the Sports Management program in the BusAd department. They matched us with some of the higher-profile athletes for a class project and I, uh, hit the jackpot."

Penelope's eyes had been narrowing during this recitation and when he paused for breath, she interjected. "Well, you haven't been doing a very good job!"

"What!?"

"Managing him! I'm a reporter for *The Spartan*. I've been trying to get him to sit down for an interview with me for three weeks— for a *cover story*—and he's completely blown me off. I'm here tonight because I tracked him down physically in a last-ditch effort."

"Oh *shit*," Cready said, pitching forward and putting his elbows on his knees. He peered up at Pen owlishly.

"Yeah, seems like you should have been on top of that." Pen could hear the bitterness in her voice.

"We meet once a week. He never said anything." Cready shook his head.

"I wrote him so many emails." Penelope's heart sank at the idea that Royce hadn't even seen fit to mention her to his pseudo-manager.

"Emails?" Cready's voice had a funny strangled quality and Pen glanced sharply over at him. He'd frozen in the act of bringing his cigarette to his lips. "Wait, where did you send them?"

"Uh, I don't know. Whatever the athletic department gave me." Pen picked up her phone and opened Gmail. "B Taylor M-G-T at Gmail," she said, glancing up at Cready, who threw his head back and slid down in his chair.

"Shiiiiit."

"What!?"

"I *told* those assholes in marketing to change it. Fuck! Who knows what else is in there. *Shit*!"

"What do you mean?"

"I killed that address because I decided Gmail was too unprofessional." Cready lit another cigarette, his movements jerky. "No one's been checking that account. Now it all makes sense. You must be the problem he texted me about earlier." He glanced at her. "No wonder he was pissed."

Penelope stared at him, blinking rapidly, for several seconds. "So he never saw—"

"Nope." Cready cut her off. "And I am officially the worst manager of all time."

"Not gonna argue with you." Penelope sat back in her seat, a lot of emotions washing over her, foremost of which was a funny kind of excited relief.

"Fuck. I gotta go get in front of this.” Cready jumped out of his chair. "Check that address and see what else is in there." He started walking backwards toward the house. "For what it's worth, I'm really sorry," he said, throwing his arms out. He turned, still muttering. "*Shit*, I'm so going to get an F on this project. Missing a cover story because of me..."

"If I get the interview, the story will still run," Pen called.

"Oh, you'll get the interview." A soft voice came from behind Pen's left shoulder and she felt her whole body tense with excitement.

She turned, unable to stop a smile from blooming over her face. "You're back!"

Cready stopped too. "Taylor!" He started walking back toward them. "Royce, dude, I am *so* sorry. She had the old email address that no one was checking."

Royce held up a hand. "I gathered. And it's cool. We'll talk later. Why don't you go see if there's anything else we missed in that account." It was a clear dismissal and Cready seemed to recognize it as such because he stopped walking and nodded.

"Ok, dude. I'll catch up with you after the game."

Royce nodded and Cready turned and melted into the crowd.

"How many did you send?" Royce looked down at her and his face was serious.

"Four? Maybe five. They started really nice, but got shorter." Pen wrinkled her nose at him.

He dropped into the chair Cready had vacated. "You must have thought I was such an asshole!"

"Yeahhhh, remember I *said* I was thinking up cutting remarks."

"In the shower. How could I forget." White teeth flashed at her through the dark.

"Mmm-hmm." Penelope suppressed a giggle.

Royce whooshed out a long breath. "*Fucking* Cready."

Pen straightened up. "That's what you said earlier! When I was at your dorm. I thought you were saying I was 'fucking creepy'—but you were talking about him." She pointed to where Rich had disappeared into the crowd.

"Yeah, I could tell there was a mix-up and I figured he had something to do with it—his incompetence is pretty astounding—I just didn't know the extent." Royce stared off into the distance and shook his head, then he turned quickly back to Pen. "And I would never call you 'fucking creepy'." He laughed.

"I mean it *was* a little stalkerish of me to just show up at your door."

"I was happy to see you. Also, you're a journalist. You need to be persistent."

"Ha. See if you're saying that after a few months in the NFL."

Royce got up and Pen looked at him, puzzled. He held out his hand. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" She put her hand in his without thinking and let him pull her up.

"Somewhere quieter." Royce looked over his shoulder and Pen realized that sometime in the last hour, the party had graduated from shitshow to complete debacle. People were jumping in the pool fully clothed (or in one guy's case, not clothed at all) and someone was puking in the bushes near them. "There's a side gate. Let's go." Royce had kept ahold of her hand again and Pen let him, a warm feeling stealing over her.

"Despite what we just saw"—Royce shuddered as he directed them into a deserted side yard—"I'm actually starving. Do you have any interest in an all-night diner?"

"I adore them." Pen smiled at him. "Great setting for a gritty, probing interview too. My journalistic coup; *The Inner Life of Royce Taylor*." She touched her shoulder to his and flicked her brows.

Royce stopped walking and looked down at her with a funny expression.

"What?" Pen said.

"I'm just wondering if it would ruin your journalistic integrity if I kissed you right now."

"Oh. Well. I think it could withstand—" Her words were interrupted as he pulled her close and bent his head. His lips were soft, sweet, and Pen was immediately lost in them. Her hands went up over the front of his chest to twine around his neck and her fingers stroked the soft hair at his nape. He pulled her closer, deepening the kiss. The sounds of the party fell away, but Pen was acutely aware of everything else. The crisp night air caressing her skin, the warm feel of his chest rising and falling against her, his palm splayed across her lower back and his other hand gently cradling her face. She didn't know how long they stood there—only that it was a minor miracle that no drunken partiers stumbled across them.

Eventually, his lips left hers and skimmed along her jaw to her ear. Pen sighed and ran her hands from his neck down his shoulders. "I've been wanting to do that for a long time," he whispered, his breath sending shivers all over her body.

She tilted her head to give him access to her neck, which he feathered soft kisses down. "It *does* feel like a long time since I knocked on your door," she said, her lips lifting. That part of the night seemed very far away now.

He laughed softly. "Longer than that."

She pulled back to look at him. "Really?"

"English 102A," he said with a half-smile and a shrug. "But you had a boyfriend back then."

"I did, although we broke up right after that class. Looking back I think my attraction to you may have had something to do with that."

"*Really*?"

She nodded. "I had no idea that you felt the same, though."

"Oh, I did." He leaned down again and they were occupied for a bit until Pen broke away, breathing a little heavily.

"Royce."

"Mmm?" He hummed against her lips.

"I hate to—*really* hate—to stop. But the…the interview."

She felt him smile. "Intrepid reporter," he said, pulling back. "Of course. But afterward, I'm going to need to kiss you again. That's my price."

Pen squinted at him, "You drive a hard bargain, but OK."

He took her hand again and led them through the gate. And gingerly around what looked to be a slip and slide covered in baby oil. They narrowly missed being hit by someone dressed as sexy Captain America rocketing off the end.

Royce shook his head. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"OK, so." Pen hit the record button on her phone and looked across the booth. They'd made it to the diner with only a couple of distracting interludes and she was ready to get down to business. But then Royce put his chin on his hand and smiled at her, and she lost her train of thought for a moment. *Shit, maybe she shouldn't have let him kiss her first.* "So," she said again, snapping herself back to attention. His smile deepened and a dimple appeared. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Give me your three best football memories."

"Interesting, OK." He sat back and stretched. "Of all time?"

"Of all time. And I should tell you, I have a few questions like this. They're meant to elicit a more emotional, abstract response, so I can use your answers to give the article depth and make it a little more personal. Otherwise, it just becomes an exercise in your biography and statistics." He was nodding, but Pen held up her hand. "I of course would never use anything overly personal."

"You're not going to include the fact that I used this interview as a way to get you to go out with me and then make out with me?" He tried unsuccessfully to stifle a grin.

Pen couldn't suppress her own answering smile. "Stay on task, Taylor." She pointed a fork at him.

He laughed, picking up a sugar packet and fiddling with it as he relayed a story from his childhood and two from his high school career. Pen listened and asked additional questions, but the material was great. She started to get that excited feeling she always got when she knew a piece was going to be good.

The waitress brought their food and they talked through it, Pen asking Royce the usual things about how he got into the sport and what his hopes and plans were for the future, but also peppering in her softer, observational questions.

"Describe three things you feel when you step on a football field."

"Powerful. Elated. Home, like I'm home."

"Mmm, nice. Now I want you to close your eyes and *actually* picture stepping onto the field; what do you see, smell, hear, feel—with your five senses?"

"Green grass, lights and bright color, crushed up leaves, cold air, hot dogs steaming, the band warming up, the hum of the crowd. The ball...supple in my hands."

"'Supple'—I like that."

"That's a good one, right?" His half-smile and soft voice were so lethal that Pen crossed her legs.

"Ahem. OK, only a few more."

"Good." He raised his brows before thanking the waitress as she came to clear their things. Pen's thoughts wandered in dangerous directions, but she powered through until she felt she had everything she needed, then turned off the recording function on her phone with a smile.

"This is going to be really good. Really, really good." She said excitedly as they made their way out of the brightly lit diner and through the parking lot and to his car. He opened his mouth to say something, but she stopped and turned to him suddenly. "Thank you for this, Royce. For being so open and honest and, you know, just doing it at all. I know you didn't have to."

He leaned against the car door and crossed his arms. "But I wanted to."

"I just hope you don't feel ...obligated," she said.

"Penelope." He held her gaze. "If I had gotten your first email when you sent it, I would have replied so fast."

She laughed, "I still kind of can't believe that. I threw in a reference to our class together, but I didn't expect… you're a *star!*"

He rolled his eyes, unfolded his arms and pulled her toward him.

"I mean, forget football. You have 537 thousand likes on Insta," she teased, pressing against his lean body.

"You did *not* just bring that up."

"I totally did. And you shouldn't be emb—"

"No, we're not talking about it."

"But Royce—"

He covered her lips with his. "Shhh," he whispered. Pen giggled, but then applied herself to kissing him, which was so delightful that she lost track of herself, coming-to only when a car honked in the distance several minutes later.

She pulled back slightly, taking a breath. "That girl, though. From the video. Is she—"

"Ancient history," he said, pulling her even closer and resting his lips on the top of her head.

Pen sighed happily. "Good because I passed up nearly seven minutes in heaven with Colton for you."

"So he did ask you to—?" She nodded. "Fucking dirtbag." He shook his head, then laughed and she did too.

"God, I should get you home," he said, regret in his voice.

"Yeahhh, it's what, like 3am?"

"Later. Almost four." He sighed. "I have practice in roughly eight hours. Then curfew, then game day." His fingers came up and caressed her temples. She looked at him and his dark eyes were warm on hers. "Sometimes I wish I didn't have to deal with any of that."

Pen smiled. "I know. I kind of wish the rest of this article would magically write itself."

"What are you doing Sunday?" He asked, now nuzzling into her neck.

It was highly distracting.

"Nothing, nothing at all," she breathed after a bit, tilting her head and running her fingers through his hair. "We could get together. Do something quiet since the rest of the weekend is so insane."

"Yes, please." His eyes fluttered shut as he leaned into her caress. His face was so beautiful that it took her breath away.

"Maybe you can come to my place?"

"I'd like that. Very much."

"Mmm," Pen moved her hands down and curled her fingers into his shirt, pushing up against him as she touched her lips to his, opening for him with a little sigh of pleasure. His tongue brushed hers and she forgot the lateness of the evening, her responsibilities, his responsibilities, and most everything else. She kissed him, a little recklessly, until they were all panting breaths and caressing hands.

He was the one who pulled back this time, breathing heavily. "Sunday," he said like a little mantra. "Sunday."

"Royce?"

"Mmm?" He lifted her hand and brushed his lips against her palm.

"When you do come over on Sunday, will you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Wear the grey sweat pants?"

**FIN**

Penelope Anderson doesn't even like football. But she's been assigned to interview her school’s team superstar Royce Taylor for her first cover story, and damned if she's going to let him blow her off-- even if it means tagging along with him to a fratty party. And she's going to ignore the fact that he's distractingly hot and that, thanks to Instagram, she's seen him in nothing but a pair of grey sweatpants.

Thank you for reading my bid for a Netflix teen movie greenlight. Lol.<br />

I want you to know a few things:<br />

#1 The Spartans win the game and Blaise has several amazing runs and a legendary catch.<br />

#2 Penelope's article is so freaking good that it is cited throughout his career as the most in-depth and nuanced piece written about him. Cute b/c they eventually get married. (Pen does not become just a sportswife, but stays a cutting edge journalist).<br />

#3 The song that they dance to is Hold on We're Going Home by Drake, which is one of my favorite songs of all time and I will fight people over this, even though Drake himself is whiny and problematic.<br />

#4 Sorry not sorry for totally ignoring the Fall Fumble votes and writing the Blaise/Penelope of my dreams.<br />

#5 I still can't fucking believe I wrote a football story.<br />

#6 I have a pinterest board <a href="https://www.pinterest.com/scullymurphy/grey-sweatpants-season/" rel="nofollow">here</a>. (Of course I do!)<br />

#7 Follow me on <a href="https://www.tumblr.com/blog/scullymurphy" rel="nofollow">tumblr</a> for healthy doses of ridiculousness.