



She wants a baby.
Could he be her man?

RED HEART

Card

Annie Dyer

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ANNIE DYER

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Please note this book contains material aimed at an adult audience.

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Also by Annie Dyer

In Suggested Reading order (can be read as stand-alones)

Engagement Rate

What happens when a hook up leaves you hooked? Jackson Callaghan is the broody workaholic who isn't looking for love until he meets his new marketing executive? Meet the Callaghans in this first-in-series, steamy office romance.

White Knight

If you're in the mood for a second chance romance with an older brother's best friend twist, then look no further. Claire Callaghan guards her heart as well as her secrets, but Killian O'Hara may just be the man to take her heart for himself.

Compromising Agreements

Grumpy, bossy Maxwell Callaghan meets his match in this steamy enemies-lovers story. Mistaking Victoria Davies as being a quiet secretary is only Max's first mistake, but can she be the one to make this brooding Callaghan brother smile?

Between Cases

*Could there be anything better than a book boyfriend who owns a bookstore? Payton Callaghan isn't sure; although giving up relationships when she might've just met *The One* is a dilemma she's facing in *BETWEEN CASES*, a meet-cute that'll have you swooning over Owen Anders.*

Changing Spaces

Love a best friend's younger sister romance? Meet Eli, partner in the Callaghan Green law firm and Ava's Callaghan's steamy one-night stand that she just can't seem to keep as just one night. Independent, strong-willed and intelligent, can Eli be the man Ava wants?

Heat

*Feeling hungry? Get a taste of this single dad, hot chef romance in *HEAT*. Simone Wood is a restaurant owner who loves to dance, she's just never found the right partner until her head chef Jack starts to teach her his rhythm. Problem is, someone's not happy with Simone, and their dance could be over before they've learned the steps.*

Mythical Creatures

The enigmatic Callum Callaghan heads to Africa with the only woman who came close to taming his heart, in this steamy second-chance romance. Contains a beautifully broken alpha and some divinely gorgeous scenery in this tale that will make you both cry and laugh. HEA guaranteed.

Melted Hearts

Hot rock star? Enemies to lovers? Fake engagement? All of these ingredients are in this Callaghan Green novel. Sophie Slater is a businesswoman through and through but makes a pact with the devil – also known as Liam Rossi, newly retired Rockstar – to get the property she wants - one that just happens to be in Iceland. Northern lights, a Callaghan bachelor party, and a quickly picked engagement ring are key notes in this hot springs heated romance.

Evergreen

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without any presents, and that's what's going to happen if Seph Callaghan doesn't get his act together. The Callaghan clan are together for Christmas, along with a positive pregnancy test from someone and several more surprises!

[The Partnership](#)

Seph Callaghan finally gets his HEA in this office romance. Babies, exes and a whole lot of smoulder!

The Green Family Series

[The Wedding Agreement](#)

Imogen Green doesn't do anything without thinking it through, and that includes offering to marry her old - very attractive - school friend, Noah Soames, who needs a wedding. The only problem is, their fauxmance might not be so fake, after all...

[The Atelier Assignment](#)

Dealing with musty paintings is Catrin Green's job. Dealing with a hot Lord who happens to be grumpy AF isn't. But that's what she's stuck with for three months. Zeke's daughter is the only light in her days, until she finds a way to make Zeke smile. Only this wasn't part of the assignment.

[The Romance Rehearsal](#)

Maven Green has managed to avoid her childhood sweetheart for more than a decade, but now he's cast as her leading man in the play she's directing. Anthony was the boy who had all her firsts; will he be her last as well?

[The Imperfect Proposal](#)

Shay Green doesn't expect his new colleague to walk in on him when he's mid-kiss in a stockroom. He also doesn't expect his new colleague to be his wife. The wife he married over a decade ago in Vegas and hasn't seen since

Puffin Bay

[Puffin Bay](#)

Amelie started a new life on a small Welsh island, finding peace and new beginnings. What wasn't in the plan was the man buying the building over the road. She was used to dealing with arrogant tourists, but this city boy was enough to have her want to put her hands around his neck, on his chest, and maybe somewhere else too...

[Wild Tides](#)

Being a runaway bride and escaping her wedding wasn't what Fleur intended when she said yes to the dress. That dress is now sodden in the water of the Menai Strait and she needs saving - by none other than lighthouse keeper Thane. She needs a man to get under to get over the one she left at the altar - but that might come with a little surprise in a few months time...

[Lovers Heights](#)

Serious gin distiller Finn Holland needs a distraction from what he's trying to leave behind in the city. That distraction comes in the form of Ruby, who's moved to the island to escape drama of her own. Neither planned on a fake relationship, especially one that led to a marriage that might not be that fake at all...

[Sapphire Shores](#)

[Breeze Bridge](#)

Manchester Athletic FC

Penalty Kiss

Manchester Athletic's bad boy needs taming, else his football career could be on the line. Pitched with women's football's role model pin up, he has pre-season to sort out his game - on and off the field.

Hollywood Ball

One night. It didn't matter who she was, or who he was, because tomorrow they'd both go back to their lives. Only hers wasn't that ordinary.

What she didn't know, was neither was his.

Heart Keeper

Single dad. Recent widow. Star goal keeper.

Manchester Athletic's physio should keep her hands to herself outside of her treatment room, but that's proving tough. What else is tough is finding two lines on that pregnancy test...

Target Man

Jesse Sullivan is Manchester Athletic's Captain Marvel. He keeps his private life handcuffed to his bed, locked behind a non-disclosure agreement. Jesse doesn't do relationships – not until he meets his teammate's – and best friend's – sister.

Red Heart Card

It's tough being talented and from a footballing legacy, every move you make is under scrutiny. Jude has always been the spoilt baby of the team, which is why he needs to keep what he's up to in private, under wraps.

Maynards of Severton

Sleighed

Have a change of scenery and take a trip to a small town. Visit Severton, in Sleighed; this friends-to-lovers romantic suspense will capture your heart as much as Sorrell Slater steals Zack Maynard's.

Stirred

If enemies-to-lovers is your manna, then you'll want to stay in Severton for Stirred. Keren Leigh and Scott Maynard have been at daggers drawn for years, until their one-night ceasefire changes the course of their lives forever.

Smoldered

Want to be saved by a hot firefighter? Rayah Maynard's lusted over Jonny Graham ever since she came back to town. Jonny's prioritised his three children over his own love life since his wife died, but now Rayah's teaching more than just his daughter – she's teaching him just how hot their flames can burn.

Shaken

Abby Walker doesn't exist. Hiding from a gang she suspects is involved in the disappearance of her sister, Severton is where she's taken refuge. Along with her secrets, she's hiding her huge crush on local cop, Alex Maynard. But she isn't the only one with secrets. Alex can keep her safe, but can he also take care of her heart?

Sweetened

Enemies? Friends? Could be lovers? All Jake Maynard knows is that Lainey Green is driving him mad, and he really doesn't like that she managed to buy the farm he coveted from under his nose. All's fair in love and war, until events in Severton take a sinister turn.

Standalone Romance

[Love Rises](#)

Two broken souls, one hot summer. Anya returns to her childhood island home after experiencing a painful loss. Gabe escapes to the same place, needing to leave his life behind, drowning in guilt. Neither are planning on meeting the other, but when they do, from their grief, love rises. Only can it be more than a summer long?

[Bartender](#)

The White Island, home of hedonism, heat and holidays. Jameson returns to her family's holiday home on Ibiza, but doesn't expect to be charmed by a bartender, a man with an agenda other than just seduction.

Tarnished Crowns Trilogy

Lovers. Liars. Traitors. Thieves. We were all of these. Political intrigue, suspense and seduction mingle together in this intricate and steamy royal romance trilogy.

[Chandelier](#)

[Grenade](#)

[Emeralds](#)

Crime Fiction

[We Were Never Alone](#)

[How Far Away the Stars \(Novella\)](#)

For Tennille and her nose twitching.

In memory of Lee Hooley.

Because he fucking hated football.

See you next Tuesday.

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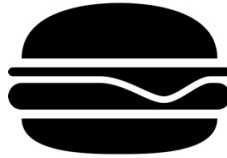
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CHAPTER 1

Jude



“SIX MONTHS. THAT'S AN ESTIMATE.”

The words weren't sinking in. I kept looking over at one of my surgeon's computers where something on the screen was flashing.

“I'm sorry, I'm finding it hard to focus with the screen. Would you mind turning it off?” I made eye contact with him, the request easier to make than it would've been even six months ago.

“Of course.” He stood up with ease that made me jealous and went to the computer, flicking off the screen. “The surgery went well, Jude. It probably couldn't have gone better. You've kept your boot on and I guess in a couple of weeks it may be able to come off. I'm estimating your rehab taking six months from now – this is if you follow the programmes that are given to you and don't try to rush things.”

I nodded, gulping on nothing. I knew this was good news. I knew the injury I'd sustained after a bad tackle at the end of the season could've ended my career. I knew I was lucky that it hadn't.

The best season of my career so far had been brought to a painful end in the eighty-ninth minute of the Champions League Cup Final, a game which we lost on penalties. I'd been given a worldy of a pass from Rowan Reeves, blindsiding the opposition's defence and allowing me to sprint towards their goalkeeper. He'd come out of his box and tackled me.

Badly.

His feet never contacted the ball, only my legs. I heard the pop as I went down and knew before the team's physio had run onto the pitch that it was my Achilles.

The keeper was sent off. Rowan took the penalty given for the foul on me and converted it, saving us from a loss and taking us into extra time.

No one else scored, our opponents putting everything into their defence, so we went to penalties.

Losing on penalties was the hardest, most heart-breaking way to go. Not being able to be there was even worse.

“Six months. So I could be playing by January?” That was still too long away, but a lot better than then worst-case scenario.

Mr Devonshire nodded. “January. But you have to rehab it properly. Not like when you had the hamstring injury.”

I didn't bother arguing. That was two years ago and I'd believed my own hype, thinking I was God. Luckily, it was an end of season injury, only not sustained when playing football. I'd slipped by a pool on holiday when I'd been acting like a complete dick. I'd thought I knew better how to rehab it. That I'd recover quicker than what any of the specialists said, because I was Jude Whittingham, current god of England's top league, and son of a footballing legend.

Spoiler: I didn't recover quicker. I added on an extra two weeks which didn't help anyone and pissed off more people than I cared to remember, including Guy, the team's manager.

“This won't be a repeat of that. What does that include then?” I knew that before this appointment there would've been a meeting with the team's physio, doctor, trainers, coaches, and Neva, the woman who was the bane of most of our food-loving lives. She was the food police, the spoiler of all things that tasted good.

And my secret ex.

“Physio. Training. Mobility exercises. Work to support your fitness. Rest when you’re told to. Follow your diet plan. Keep off the booze and the nights out.” He tapped his desk with his pen.

The noise was distracting.

“A holiday? I was planning on going to Florida.”

Maybe, but not this summer. The work you do from now on is going to be crucial. Walking round theme parks is definitely not on your programme. A week by a pool in France or Italy – that I’d sign off on.”

“Good to know.” No Mickey Mouse this year.

I loved theme parks and Disney was my favourite. The size, colours, sounds and busyness fed my brain, the familiarity safe. We’d gone to Disney every year when I was a kid; me, my parents, sometimes one of my dad’s teammates and their kids. It was where we were just a normal family and not the family of a footballing legend.

Mr Devonshire gave me a single nod. “We’ll scan again in two weeks. Then hopefully, if it carries on healing well, the boot will be off and you can get started.”

It was the best news I could’ve been given, given the circumstances. I just needed to acquire some patience for the next couple of weeks.

“Jude, I know you struggle to stay still and you find it hard to deal with boredom. Look at what you can do; find a new skill to perfect or book somewhere relaxing where you can stay off your feet - ”

I remembered that Nate Morris and his wife Amber were headed to France with their kids for a holiday, staying in a chateau that had its own vineyard. Amber was also one of the team’s physios, and probably the person who’d oversee my rehab. “That France trip? If I was to go with Nate and Amber would you sign it off?”

The nod was enthusiastic this time. “No driving. No swimming. Minimal walking because I don’t want you to fall. Watch your diet. You need to do everything you can to heal

quickly. I can give Amber a program to oversee so everything else keeps moving.”

The tackle had also caused a pulled muscle in my back and a sprained wrist because of how I fell. I’d not trained since and given my diet had been that of someone who was comfort eating their way around a high calorie food store, I’d not done myself any favours.

“Neva’s already been working on a diet plan too, so she’ll be able to help you with that if you go to France.”

“Neva?”

Mr Devonshire gave me another single nod. “Neva’s going with them.”

“Oh. Cool.” I rubbed at my face. “Sugar police.” Because that was what I was expected to say. It was true, Neva was the sugar police, but that wasn’t the reason I tried to avoid her.

I tried to avoid her because I knew she thought I was a shit.

“Sugar police indeed.” Mr Devonshire was smiling, which was a rare thing for him. “I’ll let Guy and the team know I’ve approved it. You just need to check you’re allowed to join them.”

I laughed at that, standing up with more care than I’d normally give because of the audience. “Nate mentioned it last week when I was round at his house – don’t worry, I didn’t drive.” That was what taxis were for.

Another smile and nod told me I was dismissed. I made my way out of Mr Devonshire’s office and into the waiting area where my father was sat, scanning through a newspaper.

He looked up with worry creasing his face, folded his paper and stood. “How did it go, son?”

It was good to be able to grin. “Well. Two more weeks with the boot on and then another scan. Then it’s rehab. Back on the pitch in January.”

“Then it’s good news. Really good news.” He opened his arms for a hug, a fatherly one rather than a manly one.

I took it.

I got lucky when dads were given out. Ian Whittingham had never pushed me to be a professional footballer like him. In fact, I knew he'd have preferred it if I'd chosen a different career. He'd played football with me when I was a kid and taken me to the ground where he'd played for half a decade; I got to know the backroom staff and the coaches, spending as much time as I could hanging around and playing football.

I was good. More than good.

Dad didn't let me know that. We were still a normal family. Me, him and Mum. The three of us.

"Thanks. I've got the green light to go to France for a few days too." I knew he'd rather I headed back with him and stayed with him and my mum for a week or so, but while I got on really well with them, they really did think I was still fourteen. I'd spent three weeks there after having my op already.

"Change of scenery will do you good." He got the door so we could leave the private hospital and head outside into a rainy Mancunian summer's day. A scorching hot May and early June had turned into an early autumn. "Will your friends mind you going?"

I shook my head. I knew they would be okay with it, at least now. A couple of years ago I'd have been given a room as far away from everyone as possible, because I had been a bit irritating.

"Do you want to come back for dinner with me and your mum? I can drive you home afterwards?" My dad opened the car door for me.

I checked my phone, feeling it vibrate in my pocket, and saw a message from Rowan Reeves, one of the senior players on the team.

"Can you drop me off at Rowan's?" I slid into the seat, lifting my leg in carefully. "He's got everyone round."

"Sure." My dad grinned. "Gives me some alone time with your mum."

“And stop there.” I held my hand up. “I don’t need to know anymore.”

He shook his head. “You’ll have your revenge on your own kids one day. How’s that girl you were seeing?”

The right answer was ‘which one’, but just like I’d rather not know about my parents’ love life, I didn’t want them to know about mine either, not that there was much of one. I knew that being a professional footballer attracted gold diggers. A couple of years ago that was great. I went out for a night and had women hanging off me, partly because they wanted to be with a footballer, and also because they wanted the fame that came with it. It didn’t matter back then, because none of it was serious. None of it was serious now either.

“It wasn’t anything much. Just a couple of dates.” And some not so great sex. I could tell she was putting on a performance to make me seem like the world’s greatest sex god. She was a couple of years younger than me, a trained dancer with blonde hair down to her waist and huge eyes. Her social media following was huge, which tipped me off to having an NDA signed before we went out. No photos on her social media accounts of me, or me and her together, no comments to reporters either directly or indirectly, no discussion with friends that could lead to them informing the media.

I’d learned to guard my personal life like a classified document since a hook-up had done a kiss-and-tell to a cheap Sunday tabloid. That had been a hard lesson, seeing a detailed description of your dick published in bold.

“Sorry about that. The right woman will come along. You’re young. Plenty of time.”

I didn’t think he actually meant that. My parents had met when my dad was twenty and my mum nineteen. They got married two years later and had me two years after that. I was set to be their one and only as my birth was complicated, both my mum and I critical afterwards. She couldn’t have any more children, leaving me as a one and only, the apple of their eye.

I was twenty-five. Not much more than a bit of a kid, but in my parents' eyes I was more than old enough to have my own family. Just like they had.

“The important thing now is rehabbing this injury. I want to be ready for the FA Cup third round in January. Match fit.” Which was the absolute truth. We had the Euros next summer and I wanted to make sure I was in the squad for that. I had to accept missing the first half of the season, but I could make the second half.

“Follow what your team says. You've got the skill and the football brain. Injuries can change your style, so keep a positive mind set and work with what you've got and not what you had.” He pulled up outside Rowan's gates. “Nice house.”

“Rowan doesn't think it's big enough.” I shook my head. “He thinks Dee needs more space.”

Dee was Rowan's wife, although that role was way down her list of important things. She played for Manchester Athletic's women's team and was their captain, as well as being guardian to her nephew, Toby.

“She might do when she retires.” Dad turned off his engine. “Do you want me to give you a lift home later?”

I laughed, definitely feeling like I was seventeen. “I'll be able to get a lift from Nicky or one of the others. You go and take Mum out for a meal. Something in public.”

My dad laughed. “Or we might just stay home and get our freak on.”

Even with my boot on, I never got out of a car so quickly.

Rowan was barbecuing. He'd decided he needed a hobby, and his hobby was learning how to cook, specifically how his ancestors would cook, which involved fire and meat. He actually wasn't doing too bad a job of it; this was his third barbecue of the summer and so far there were no reports of anyone keeling over with food poisoning.

I was buzzed through into the garden – Rowan was too house-proud to have people trampling through his home if they were meant to be outside – and saw a good half dozen of my teammates, their partners and kids.

“Hey, Jude!” Nicky Pryce-Jones sang from next to the pool, waving like he’d been possessed by some oddly manic demon. “Don’t let me - ”

There was a splash and Nicky disappeared, Jesse dusting off his hands. “Old that, mate. We got over his name half a decade ago.”

Nicky spluttered as he came back to the surface, pulling himself out of the pool. I had a feeling Jesse was going to end up in there in about two minutes, which meant I needed to keep out of the way.

So I did what any decent bloke would do, and headed to where the food was.

Dee was standing with Rowan, not trying to help, just watching the ribs that he was cooking.

“Jude!” She smiled when she saw me, pulling me into a big hug that had the same sort of strength as a snake, strangling any remaining oxygen out of me. “How are you?”

I nodded, getting some breath back. “Good. Had good news today.”

That stopped a few people nearby from talking.

Rowan spun round, ignoring Dee’s yelling to watch the ribs. “What’s the doc said?”

“Six months. Rest and rehab, but yeah, back after Christmas.” It was just about starting to sink in now.

Rowan nodded, poking the ribs briefly. “That’s quicker than what you were first told, isn’t it, man?”

“Three months quicker. The op did its job.” I looked over to Nate, our goalkeeper. He was steady and unmovable, in life as well as between the goalposts. “Just got to make sure I don’t fuck it up.”

Nate nodded, his two-year-old little boy in his arms.

“Shi – sorry, forgot he’s talking now.” It was too easy to forget not to swear. Toby, Rowan’s nephew, had learned not to repeat certain words, but I knew Oliver was into repeating everything.

“Amber dropped a book on her foot this morning. He heard everything, so I wouldn’t worry.” He handed Oliver over to me. “Go to Uncle Jude and don’t wriggle.”

I glanced down at my boot. I was stable and if Oliver did wriggle I could put him down.

He held his arms out for me, giggling away, wrapping his arms around my neck and babbling something that sounded like ‘ucking ugger’ which was probably something Amber had said this morning.

“You know you mentioned the chateau?” I tried not to feel nervous. I’d played for the same team as Nate for five years, but he was ten years my senior and when I’d been a dick of a kid, he’d witnessed all the stupid shit I’d got up to. It was easy to say my dad was my hero – he was. I was totally aware I’d gotten lucky in the parent department. But Nate Morris was a hero to me, too. He’d been left a widower after the death of his wife, on his own with their two girls to bring up. He’d never once felt sorry for himself, never gone on a self-sabotaging rampage, had somehow kept his shit together and been a formidable keeper.

“You want to come?” Nate waved at his son. “We’ve got spare rooms.”

“Is that okay?”

He nodded. “Course it is. We’re there for two and a half weeks – stay as long as you want.”

“Who else is staying?” I hadn’t been to the chateau before. Nate and Jesse had both invested in it as part owners a couple of years ago, the building an old ruined chateau that had been restored into a hotel or wedding destination, with a restaurant and a vineyard on site.

“Jesse and Jerrica, me and Amber. The kids. Then Rowan, Dee and Toby, and I think Otter and Ryan are coming too. Neva and Genny are there for the full time, which is great because the girls and Oliver think they’re the best babysitters.” Nate reached out for Oliver when he stuck out his arms, shouting the words ‘daddy’ and ‘hit’. I figured ‘hit’ was him trying to say ‘shit’.

I nodded, feeling relieved and said, “Cool. I’ll book flights when I get home. Those ribs really do look fu – fudging good.”

A familiar voice sounded behind me. “And which part of your diet plan do those fit into?”

CHAPTER 2

Neva



“AND WHICH PART of your diet plan do those fit into?”

I knew that the Manchester Athletic squads would appreciate it if I turned a blind eye and eradicated my sense of smell whenever I was around both them and food. I also knew that half of the team had no issue with maintaining a healthy, optimised diet even during the off-season.

The other half – they needed a recording of me every time they opened their phone to place a takeaway order or got in their car and headed near a fast-food drive through or went out for a night.

Jude had fallen into that second category until he hadn't.

Jude had fallen into my bed – until he hadn't as well. Which was something only the two of us knew about.

He turned round and smiled, his grin still far too handsome.

And far too young.

There was a decade between our ages. I hadn't known what I was thinking, getting involved with a man so much younger, but at the same time as that, I knew exactly what I was thinking. He was stupidly gorgeous and never stopped smiling, usually laughing too. In the last year, he'd grown up. The man-child had lost the childishness and become just man.

Which made me feel a bit better.

“Diet plan? What’s that?” He was smiling. “I’m injured. I just need to keep my strength up.”

“Do we need to have a chat?” I smiled evilly. “Food can help you heal.” This was true.

What was also true was that I had a glass of wine in my hand that had been poured by Genevieve and it might not have been my first.

Jude slowly shook his head, smiling. “We can have a chat when I’m not about to eat my bodyweight in ribs.”

“Those ribs are mine!” Dee swept in between Jude and the barbecue, swiping up five of the ribs, her expression that of a woman who’d just found her soulmate.

“Are guests not allowed any?” Jude looked at her in mock horror.

Dee’s mouth was already full of rib, the marinade round her mouth. She shook her head, her eyes taking on a glazed look that was slightly obscene.

Rowan shook his head. “Please curb your orgasm face.”

I started to laugh, especially when Dee just shook her head, continuing to eat like she’d been starved of all sustenance.

The ribs did look good. I hung around until Rowan took more off the grill, as well as a few steaks and more burgers, others flocking around like they’d never been fed.

Backing away, I headed to where Genny was sitting, checking something on her phone that was probably her work emails. The woman was a workaholic.

“What’s happening in the world of Manchester Athletic?” I sat down next to her, another glass of something alcoholic on the table for me.

She put her phone down. As the assistant to the club’s owner, Genny’s life revolved around the players, the players’ wives and girlfriends, the women’s team – although they were generally scandal free – and everyone associated with the club. She was the oil that made the cogs turn, and the superglue that

held things together. A kiss and tell story in the press about one of the players? Genny managed it. A player moving to Manchester from a team abroad – Genny co-ordinated it. The manager losing his shit when something didn't go his way – Genny rammed his balls down his throat so he couldn't speak any more.

Genny and Guy hated each other with a passion that was sometimes scarier than the prospect of a tyrannical leader with access to a certain red button. They were both fiery and they both knew exactly how to push each other's buttons. In the wrong order.

“We've just signed Thomas LeContier from Paris on a three-year deal. Guy's just given me the head's up.” She picked up her glass of sangria.

“Does that mean you're in work tomorrow?”

Her neat bobbed hair shook. “No. I am not in work tomorrow. I am not in work for the next three weeks. Guy will actually have to remember how to do things for himself and not expect me to clean up all of his messes.” Her chin jutted higher. “Also, Teddy's been caught with his pants around his ankles – and I mean that literally.”

Teddy was one of the club's younger players and had taken over Jude's mantle of acting like an over-entitled toddler just because he was a big shot footballer.

“What are you going to do?”

She smiled serenely. “Nothing. We go on holiday in two days. My out of office is already on and I'm not intending to speak to anyone I don't like.”

I nodded, sipping at my sangria. “Jude's coming to France now.”

“That's good. I was worried about him.” She studied me. “How do you feel about him being there?”

I took a mouthful of sangria this time.

Genny was the only person – as far as I knew – who was aware that Jude and I had hooked up a few times. Maybe it

was more than hooked-up; I tried to keep it labelled as a casual thing and that was how it'd lived in my brain.

Maybe not so much in Jude's.

"It'll be nice to have him around."

"Nice?" Genny raised perfectly groomed brows. "Nice? That's the most repressed word in the English language. You think it will be *nice* to have Jude around. That's it?"

"I think it'll be nice to have him around. I can get started on his meal plan as well." Jude generally took care of himself, but I knew he was prone to overeating when he was bored and he'd be impulsive with it. I also knew the best way to get him eating the way I needed him to in order to aid recovery would be to get him interested in the process.

"Let the poor boy have some fun, Neva. I worry about Jude when he's not playing. It doesn't help his head." Genny looked over to where Jude was standing, holding a bottle of beer in one hand and a burger in the other.

Her looking meant I looked too.

It was hard not to like Jude. It had always been hard not to like Jude.

"It doesn't. He needs to be busy." It was something I'd learned when we'd been sneaking around seeing each other.

The sneaking bit had come from me. Not him. Jude didn't know how to sneak around anything. He was upfront and honest, the words often out of his mouth before a thought had appeared. How he'd not given us away at any point was a miracle.

Or maybe not.

He knew I wanted to keep what we were doing secret. He knew that I wasn't interested in anything long term with him, that it was just fun. He was too young at ten years my junior, even though he'd once messaged me a list of couples where the man was ten years older than his partner and no one had batted an eyelid.

“You would know.” Genny didn’t even look at me as she said the words. “You kept him very busy.”

“Shush. That never happened.”

She laughed, amused. “Neva, sweetheart, it totally did and you both still remember it. Why did it end?”

“Because he was too young to have a long-term relationship.” And that was what I wanted; a long-term relationship that was going to lead to maybe marriage but definitely a baby.

“Okay.” Genny looked away from Jude. “Makes sense. How did that date go on Friday night?”

“How do you think?”

“He looked a tosser on his profile so I’m thinking looks weren’t deceptive.” Genny fished a strawberry out of her sangria. “Are you seeing him again?”

“That would be a hard no.” I sat back, trying not to look at Jude. “I have a date tomorrow – a lunch date with an accountant who works for SFMG.” SFMG was one of the club sponsors, so this wasn’t a date with someone I’d met online.

“It’s not Simon Huxton, is it?” She frowned, her nose crinkling. “Please tell me it’s not him.”

“What’s so bad about Simon?” It was totally Simon.

Genny frowned. “He’s been on dates with at least two of the girls in the ticket office, and Michelle from HR. And by dates, one date. With each. No one’s done a second.” She gave me a wary look. “I know you’re really keen to meet the one, but it’s not Simon.”

“He’s a nice guy. He opens doors. He has a nice smile. He dresses smartly.” I knew my defence was about to be torn apart by Genny’s little finger.

“He lives with his mother and he’s nearly forty. He’s never lived anywhere else. He wears a sweater vest - ”

“Tank top. It’s a tank top, Genevieve.”

“Whatever, it looks like something from nineteen seventy-two.” She shrugged and shook her head. “He expects his date to pay all the bill and he chooses the most expensive places. He then takes a selfie and sends it to his mother to prove he’s on a date.”

“Why does he need to prove he’s on a date?” Fair enough, a few alarm bells were ringing here.

“Because his mother is desperate for him to have a wife. But Simon isn’t interested in a wife. He thinks his plushies would be jealous.” She started to laugh, trying to hold it in and failing.

Amber, the usual third in our witches’ coven, walked over to us frowning. “What’ve you done to Genny?” She sat down on the other side of me, putting down a jug of sangria on the table.

“I told her I was going on a lunch date with Simon from SFMG.” I waited for Amber’s reaction.

She kept her expression entirely neutral.

“You do that, Neva. You do that.” Then she poured herself a glass of sangria. “Make sure you tell us everything afterwards.”

Amber looked at Genny, who’d just about recovered. The two of them dissolved into fits of laughter again.

I stood up, topped up my glass with more sangria and walked off, leaving them to their little laughing fit and went to sit at a table near the barbecue, more ribs and steaks being added to the grill.

I didn’t flinch when Jude sat down with me, a plate full of meat in his hand. He’d clearly just topped it up.

“Mind if I sit with you while I get through this?”

The man had always had a healthy appetite – in areas other than food. “Not at all. I hear you’re coming to France with us?”

He nodded, stripping a rib. “I am. I need a change of scenery and by the time I’m back, the boot will be off and I’ll

be able to focus on rehab.”

“Good plan.” It was. I got that.

“You don’t mind, do you?” He looked worried for a second. “I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable.”

I shook my head and felt slightly bad. “No, not at all. These are your friends too.” That had been my main reason for keeping what we’d been up to secret. If our friends had found out, they’d have gossiped – in front of our faces, most likely – and when it ended, as it inevitably would’ve done, they’d have gotten too involved.

“Cool.” He swallowed, then stared at his plate. “You okay? I haven’t really seen you for ages.”

Great, we were making small talk.

“I’m good. How’s everything else – apart from the injury, I mean?” This was really awkward.

Jude nodded, having the grace to not look awkward himself. “It’s boring, not going to lie. My diet hasn’t been great and I know I need to sort it out. I’ve been hanging out at the kids’ football camp.”

“Which is full of chocolate and sweets.” I nodded, knowing exactly how my team used it as a great excuse to eat shit that they were going to pay for later. “It’s too nice a day to lecture you now. I’ll save it for later.”

“Thanks. I owe you one.” His grin was cheeky, full of fun, and that dimple still made my heart race a little.

Jude had been cute. He’d been the player the younger girls had gone crazy for when he was nineteen, twenty. Almost prettily good looking, with the charisma usually reserved for boy band members, Jude happened to be one of the most naturally talented players in his age group. He’d debuted for the national team when he was just eighteen and had been in every squad since, as long as he hadn’t been injured, which had been rare. For the last couple of years, since nothing was happening between us any more, I’d waited to see if he’d hook up with a member of a girl group, like David Beckham did with Posh, or a model like so many footballers had, but he’d

stayed single. There was gossip and I knew he'd had plenty of opportunities. I didn't think about the ones he'd taken.

It had been my choice to end things. Not Jude's.

He made it clear he wanted us to carry on. He'd also made it clear he didn't want us to be a secret.

"How long are you staying for? At the chateau?" I was still making small talk. We needed to get past small talk.

At work, I had a role. A purpose. I was the team's nutritionist. Outside and away from the grounds, I was Neva. I had to be Neva with Jude for the time we spent together in France, and not let anyone pick up on the awkwardness between us.

Easier said than done.

"I'll fly back a couple of days before I'm due to have the next scan, so just under two weeks. You?" He shot me a grin.

It hit like a bullet to the heart.

I just wished he wasn't so damned gorgeous. Those boyband looks had morphed into a smoulderingly beautiful man.

"A couple of weeks. I think I'm just there for babysitting duties." I watched Amber's little boy run across the grass towards his Auntie Jez, Nate's little sister, lifting his arms to be picked up.

He was a cutey, all dark hair like his mother and full of charm like Nate. I'd ached when he was born, wishing he was mine, or rather, wishing I had one too.

Being around him and the other kids, even though they were older, was a blessing and a curse. I adored them. I even gave them chocolate. I was the fun almost-aunt and their choice of babysitter, which I loved more than anything, but I really wanted one of my own.

The problem was very much a man one. I didn't have the capability to make one on my own.

“I think that’s why we’re all there. Nate and Amber were definitely planning days away without the kids.” He looked over to where Nate’s two daughters were dive bombing into the pool. “Wish I could join them.”

“You will soon enough. Just don’t fuck it up.” I gave him a look I knew could make men wince.

“I don’t intend to. I have a bit more restraint nowadays.” He didn’t smile when he said it, his tone almost cutting, which was unlike Jude.

“That’s good.” For us both. I stood up, leaving my glass where it was, and heading over to Nate’s daughters. I needed a distraction.

Quickly.

MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO.

“Jude! Jude! Let’s go to the club. I’ll pay for your first dance!” Tom Hinchcliffe bellowed.

I looked over at Genny and shook my head. “He’s going to go and you know what’s going to happen.” Jude had no willpower sometimes. Saying no to Tom Hinchcliffe (who he’d played alongside in the England under-seventeen team years ago) just wasn’t in his vocab. Tom was notorious for ending up in the tabloids, usually with a couple of wannabe WAGs or Z-list reality TV hopefuls, wanting the publicity. Tom was also a free agent, without a club after being released. Too much booze, too much partying, not enough football.

Genny shook her head. “Can you try to get him home? The boy needs a keeper- and not a fucking goalkeeper. I need to pick Guy up from a restaurant – please, can you Jude-sit?”

I nodded. I didn’t have anything else to do. My other best friend was pregnant and building a life of bliss with her boyfriend and the club’s actual goalkeeper, and currently wasn’t really speaking to me. I hadn’t had a date in forever, because every man I met was either only interested because I had connections to Manchester Athletic or because he was a slimeball with a point to prove to women.

I had sworn not to get involved with a footballer or anyone involved with a football team too. It wasn’t that I didn’t like them – I did. They could be idiots, but so could most people. I knew the lifestyle though and the amount of training that was needed, the restrictions on what they could and couldn’t do, and the time spent away from home, especially at international level.

So that ruled out the majority of men I met on a day-to-day basis.

Great.

Jude knocked back the rest of his cola, because, bless him - he wasn't drinking. He didn't need alcohol to be impulsive and reckless though, he just got caught up in the crazy.

I downed my wine and walked over to him, his whole body moving even though he wasn't on a dance floor.

"Neva the nutrition police!" He grinned at me as I got closer. "You coming with us to the strip club?"

I shook my head and smiled, beckoning him over.

Jude frowned, probably surprised by my smile. I was usually glaring at him. "What've I done? I haven't been drinking."

"I know." I kept beckoning him. "I need a lift home. Genny drove me here but she's had to go to rescue Guy. Can you help?"

He looked over at Tom then back at me a few times, almost as if there was an angel whispering in one ear and a devil in the other.

Jude was a good bloke. His parents were two of the loveliest people I'd met and he'd been brought up to help others.

"Will you yell at me if we get a McDonald's on the way?" He looked at me with puppy-dog eyes.

I sighed, completely putting it on. One McDonald's wouldn't hurt someone like Jude Whittingham. He'd probably burned two-thousand calories from working that dimple so much tonight, let alone what he'd run off on the field. "Fine. It's a deal."

He whooped like I'd just agreed to marry him.

Five minutes later I had my coat and we were walking outside into the Manchester cold.

"C'mere." A big arm wrapped around my shoulders. "You're shivering."

"Because it's freezing." It really was. There was no sign of anything resembling spring yet.

His laugh vibrated through me, making me feel warm inside. Maybe a little tingly. Jude was good-looking, and he was kind, if a little dozy sometimes.

I relaxed into his arm a little, keeping my head down in case anyone noticed him and snapped a pic. My job wasn't one that needed to have me appear in the media at all, and other than the odd interview for food or health magazines, I stayed well away from it.

"Where are you parked?" I had no idea where we were walking.

"Just near the station. It's easy to get out of the city centre." Jude directed me down a side street, one I was surprised he knew.

He laughed. "I know where I'm going. My gran worked for the post office that used to be in the city centre. She used to babysit me and take me into town and she showed me all the ways to avoid people. She was great."

"Was?" I didn't want to ask the question outright.

"She died when I was fifteen. I still miss her."

Another side street, one I had no idea existed.

"I miss my dad." For some reason the feeling hit me hard. "And it's been twenty years."

Jude looked at me. "I didn't know you didn't have your dad around."

"I don't really talk about it. He died when I was twelve after having a really big stroke. He hung on for a few days after it, but he – well, he didn't get better."

Jude's arm tightened around my shoulders. "You know, I bet he's really proud of you. You've done amazing."

It was the sweetest thing he could've said.

"I hope so. I bet your gran's pretty pleased with you, too." I wrapped my arm around his waist, wanting to be nice back.

This felt far too cosy, which was a good distraction from thinking of my dad. I'd take that right now.

“I hope she would be. She wouldn’t have been thrilled if I’d gone to a strip club.” He dropped his head, looking at the ground. “She’d have tanned my arse.”

I laughed, seeing Jude’s car, a black BMW that looked far too grown up for him. “Is that new?”

“Is what new? My tanned arse? Nah, she bollocked me on the regular. I was always doing something I shouldn’t.” He grinned again, pulling at the door handle so the car unlocked.

“Your car, idiot.”

He grinned again. “Yeah, she was delivered last week. Replaced the Porsche.”

“You’re not collecting them? Not trying to do a Jesse?” Jesse had a fleet of fancy cars.

“I just have this and the SUV. That’s enough. I can only drive one at once.”

The car started, the engine low and purring. “That sounds like something your gran would’ve said.”

He laughed. “She probably would’ve. She wasn’t one for luxury things. You live in Bramhall, right?”

“Just outside. Do you want to pick up McDonalds and eat it at mine? You can’t eat it in here.” That would be sacrilege to the new car smell.

Jude shrugged, manoeuvring the car out of the car park. “I’d like to lie and tell you I’ll never eat take out in here, but I’m not good at lying. Eating at yours would be good though. I’m wired. If I go home soon I’ll pace holes in my floor or something.”

“Okay, we’re best going to the McDonald’s near me then.”

He frowned. “Will you have something from there? Do you eat fast food? Ever?”

I laughed, totally amused. “Occasionally. If I really fancy it. I’ll have something tonight. I really love the chocolate milkshakes.”

“That’s made my fucking day.”

“What? Me liking chocolate milkshakes has made your day?” He was fun to tease.

“Totally. You have no idea how high a pinny-cully thing we have you on with diet. It’s like you only ever eat good stuff.”

I really was laughing now. “That’s not true. I just eat everything in moderation. It’s my job to nag you.”

His own laugh was another rumble. “I know. But I’m still going to sleep better knowing that you eat crap food sometimes. Can I get a photo of you with the milkshake?”

So it continued until we got to mine, discussing food, what he liked to eat, asking how bad it was for him – in truth, it wasn’t as long as the rest of his food intake was good – and him trying to dig out of me what I liked to eat that wasn’t on a diet plan somewhere.

I didn’t live far from the McDonalds, the bags of food given over so quickly that the server had no chance to identify who he’d actually given food to, so it was fairly warm when we walked through my front door.

My house was probably a tenth the size of Jude’s, but he didn’t say anything about it, just finding a spot on my sofa and stretching out his legs, opening his paper bag full of fast food.

I sat next to him, stretching out my own much shorter legs, my own paper bag not quite as full.

By a long stretch.

“Secret fast food with the food police lady. Didn’t expect this to be how my night ended.” He sent me a glance that made him look like a naughty boy trying to get away with some prank.

“You could’ve been in a strip club now, with a pair of tits in your face.”

He shrugged. “I actually prefer this option. Burger, fries, mozzarella fries and milkshakes. This is what dreams are made of.”

I started laughing. I seemed to laugh a lot when Jude was around. “You’re actually being serious, aren’t you?”

“Totally.” He nodded emphatically. “I’ve seen a lot of tits. Tits are good. Tits in a strip club carry the risk of your picture in the gossip column of a newspaper and a meeting in the ‘governor’s’ office. The highest risk from eating this burger would normally be that you find out about it, but I’m sat here on your sofa while you’re eating your Happy Meal. What toy did you get?”

I was almost choking on a fry now, I was laughing that hard. “I hid the toy in your car.” I actually had.

“Really?” He lit up like it was Christmas Day. “Like a treasure hunt?”

“Like a treasure hunt. Just like that.” It was in the compartment between the two front seats. “You’re such a kid.”

He didn’t look offended. “Being a kid is magical. Or it was magical for me when I was a kid. The world was shiny and new and so fucking exciting. It’s still fun to enjoy really simple things.”

I’d never given Jude this much credit for depth before. I’d just taken him as being the kid on the team who came out with stupid stuff all the time.

“I get what you mean. Don’t take yourself so seriously all the time.”

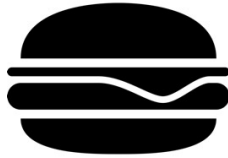
He nodded, sticking another few fries into his mouth. “You know, everyone takes football so seriously, and I get it. There’s money involved, big money. Fame, fortune, the reputation, the chance to be some kid’s hero – but it’s just a game. We kick a ball around for ninety minutes, sometimes longer, and I love it. It’s the fucking best feeling and I’m so lucky. But I’m not a soldier or a doctor or even a teacher.”

I didn’t laugh, which some people might’ve done. He was deadly serious. “You make more of a difference than what you think though. Kids look up to you. You can influence them, make a difference to their lives. Be a role model to a kid who hasn’t got one.”

He nodded, opening his second burger. “Good job I didn’t go to that strip club then, isn’t it?”

CHAPTER 3

Jude



AS IT HAPPENED, Jesse knew someone with a jet and a pilot's licence, so we all ended up in the same aircraft, taking off from Manchester with a ton of small people, some who pretended to be grown up and the adults who were actually responsible.

“Dee – where's my passport? I don't think I've got my passport? I've left it in duty free.”

Rowan's voice rang down the aisle, booming against the sides of the plane. I looked over at Dee who was busy putting hers and Toby's hand luggage in the overhead compartment for take off.

“It's in my handbag.” She shook her head. “Like I would let you look after that.”

Rowan glared, finding his headphones from his hand luggage and fiddling with them. We all knew he was a nervous flyer, although he had gotten better recently.

Dee smiled, passing Toby a game thing and then sitting down with her e-reader. More of us were on the plane than I'd predicted, probably because Nate and Jesse had been describing the chateau and the nearby golf course in great detail at the barbecue, and footballers didn't always plan too far ahead in the summer. Everything was spur of the moment, depending on injury and the possibility of being transferred to other clubs. There were always one or two players who moved on, and at least a couple who would join us, but Athletic was

steady at the moment, which made for a good dressing room, despite losing the cup final.

I found myself around a table with Nicky, his girlfriend Kitty, and Neva. Nicky was usually my roommate if we had to share for away games. He'd just finished his history degree, attending his graduation last week. He was also one of the best blokes I knew, just a really sorted guy and a damn fine footballer.

Neva looked half asleep, her eyes semi-closed. I hadn't seen her much in the airport, trying to keep a distance so no one made a comment on me talking to her or being anything different than normal. I'd flown with her a few times before, when we'd had away games in Europe, but she'd always sat with Amber and the other physios and coaches, giving the players a wide berth, or maybe it was the other way round.

She gave off a scary vibe when she wanted, instilling fear into my teammates if they were going off her food plans to the extent where they were rarely badly behaved. I'd worked out that she made things stricter for those who felt like they needed to cheat, so it wouldn't matter when they did.

I'd been the model athlete since we'd stopped doing whatever it was we'd been doing, making sure she had no reason to spend any extra time with me, because the idea of that had seemed repulsive to her.

We took off smoothly, the quietness that had been there filled with Rowan Reeves demanding a poker tournament as soon as the seatbelt sign came off.

Nicky and Kitty left their seats to go into the cockpit, somehow wrangling an invitation from the pilot.

I made my way round the table to the seat next to Neva.

"You okay? You look out of it." I kept my voice quiet and fiddled on my phone so it looked like I was showing her something.

She gave me a smile that did the same thing to my insides as it had been doing since the night I was naughty in a McDonalds instead of a strip club.

“I’m not a good flyer. I’ve taken a relaxant. It should’ve worn off by the time we land.”

“How did I not know that?” We’d spent a lot of time together once. We’d spent as much time talking as we did fucking.

She looked at me sleepily. “It never came up. I don’t like planes. At all. This helps.”

“What else helps?” She wasn’t having any alcohol. Even I knew that didn’t mix well.

“Dozing off. Honestly, I accept I don’t like flying but I can manage it. You don’t need to worry. But thank you.” Her smile was one I remembered from when I’d woken up next to her; I’d been heading off early, and she’d been lying-in.

I loved flying. One of the things I wanted to do when I finished playing football was to learn to fly a plane. I wanted to find out why she hated flying – was it because she wasn’t in control? I knew Neva liked to be in control. Or was it claustrophobia?

Now didn’t feel like the time to ask.

“You okay if I stay sitting here?” I reached over the table and grabbed my book.

She nodded. “You don’t want to play poker?”

“I’m shit at poker. My face gives away exactly what cards I have.” I’d had a couple of lucky games, but that had been it. I’d realised that Rowan and Jesse liked playing against me because I was easy to read, so I’d retained some dignity and stopped playing.

“What are you reading?” She reached out a lazy hand and looked at my book. “Crime fiction. Gulliver Holland – he’s that really hot author. I think Jez went to see him at a signing.”

“Does she like his books or just the way he looks? And does Jesse know about this? Jesse!”

He stood up and looked at me.

“Do you know your fiancée’s in love with another man? And he knows how to hide a body.”

Neva tried to smack me, but the effort she put into it was poor. “I did not say that!”

Jerrica stood up and glared at me. “What lies are you spreading, Judith?”

I slowly shook my head. “Not me. Neva here. She told me you went to a book signing because you’re lusting after the author.”

Jerrica tipped her head back and laughed. “Yeah, he’s hot. His books are good though. I’ve read all of them.”

“His books?” Jesse frowned. “Did you go to his signing because of his books or because of how he looks?”

She reached up a hand and patted Jesse on the cheek. “He isn’t a patch on you, no need to be jealous. He’s just a really talented author.”

He was still frowning. “I’m not jealous.”

“Of course you’re not.”

The plane jolted, turbulence distracting Jerrica and Jesse, making them sit back down. I looked at Neva, seeing her fists clenched, her face pale.

My mum hated flying. She’d gotten better as the years had gone on, the couple of glasses of wine she had at the airport helping to settle her nerves, and given the holidays her and my dad had since he’d retired, she’d had to get over it.

“Hey. Hold my hand. Dig your nails in.” I grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze.

I expected a refusal, but none came. Instead she gripped tightly, closing her eyes, and I gripped back. Sensory stuff could help, touch could help regulate emotions and feelings, I knew this from experience. When I was struggling to focus on something, lifting weight, or being under a weighted blanket helped. It’d taken long enough to work this out, but at least I knew now.

You remembered where your body was. Sometimes that was exactly what I needed to calm down.

I kept my hand there, feeling the sharp digs of her nails in my skin and ignoring the discomfort. I used my other hand to open my book, picking up where I was at, thanks to a handy bookmark courtesy of a receipt from the last take-out I'd ordered.

I didn't eat a shit ton of junk food. I had done at one point, but I knew the wrath of Neva wasn't the sort of wrath you wanted to encounter, and also, I liked being fit. Shit food made me feel shit the next day, but sometimes it was worth it, and that Chinese take out had been worth it.

My book was good enough to drown out the rest of the noise from the plane, the story and Neva's hand the only two things I was focused on. The turbulence was easing off, although the seatbelt sign was still on and the flight attendant who had the pleasure – or not – of dealing with us today was still sat down too.

“Have I damaged your hand?” Neva sounded sleepy still.

“I'll recover. How are you feeling?” I wanted to make some bad joke about the plane not crashing yet, but I didn't think that would go down too well. About as well as the plane going down.

“Okay. Drowsy.” She relaxed her grip a little.

The seatbelt light clicked off. We were free. Movement started.

Rowan almost ran to the toilet. Nate's girls stood up and headed over to Jerrica, carrying brushes and hair tie things. Genny got her laptop bag from the overhead lockers.

“I think we're done with the turbulence. Go to sleep. I'll wake you up when we're due to land.” I turned to glance at her and wished I hadn't.

Neva was the sort of pretty that made you want to stare. She looked Scandinavian, which she partly was on her mother's side. Almost jet black hair that was thick, the bob she had cut in when we were sleeping together still there. Her

build was athletic because she exercised five times a week, as regimented with it as she was with her diet. She was a runner and Pilates enthusiast, refusing to have anything to do with weights, something I'd teased her about until she'd threatened to pick up a kettlebell and slam it over my head. Her eyes were big and dark blue, and her skin had always had a healthy glow, which probably had something to do with the amount of fruit and veg she ate.

I'd never stopped thinking she was pretty.

"I shouldn't have taken the sedatives. They can knock me out for hours." Her words sounded too slurred, which I wasn't keen on.

"I'll use you as a crutch to get off the plane. That'll wake you up." I would've liked to have carried her off, but my Achilles probably wasn't up to that.

"Or ask Jesse to lift me into a wheelchair."

No, I wouldn't be doing that. Not a chance.

France was warm and bright, a complete contrast to rainy Manchester that we'd left behind. Neva was awake enough to manage Oliver's pushchair, not needing Jesse to try and carry her, or me to stop him and knacker my Achilles in the process. We'd landed at a local airport that was near to the chateau, so there was no queuing or delay, just a short walk outside to where a fleet of cars waited for us.

Nate had organised transport, asking us all to transfer funds into an account to be used to cover costs. He'd said he'd sort cars.

He wasn't a petrol head like Jesse, more of a practical, safety first person, given he managed to keep three small people alive, but the cars lined up for us were not what I expected.

Jesse's whistle was low and long. He headed straight over to a Bugatti Veyron, walking around it like he was appraising a horse he was about to buy. "You were thinking of me when

you hired this, weren't you?" Nate would be his brother-in-law in a few months.

I wasn't sure Nate was that pleased about that.

"If thinking that makes you happy, go ahead." Nate held out the keys, but they were swiped by his sister, which started the carnage.

I couldn't drive, which was a bummer as the fleet of cars were pretty hot, but I did get a passenger seat, courtesy of my boot, and we set off in convoy through the French countryside to the chateau.

I'd been to France as a kid, staying in farmhouses and doing activities with my parents like canoeing down one of the rivers, or horse riding. My mum had spoken semi-okay French, and she was hugely into the food, so the scenery felt familiar.

I'd ended up in a car with Genny driving and Nicky and Kitty in the back, which meant we were now going at breakneck speed around the country roads.

Genny wasn't known for her careful driving. Her father was French, and she'd grown up in France during the holidays. She'd learned to drive here, and didn't understand why road rage was a bad thing, even when there was nothing to rage about.

So I was clutching onto the car harder than Neva had been grabbing my hand in the plane.

"I want to go and see some of the castles while we're here." Nicky was talking to Kitty, but listening to him was taking my mind off the fact that Genny was going to kill us all. "There's a ton of history I covered in the last year of my degree that was connected to this part of France; it's going to be cool to see some of those places for real."

"I need to sample as much as I can from the patisseries. I messaged the owner of the patisserie in the village near the chateau to see if I could spend a morning there to see some of their techniques – they've emailed me back but it's in French."

Kitty owned the café across the road from our training ground, which was how she and Nicky had met.

“I’ll translate it for you when we get there.” Genny took a corner fast enough for me to wonder whether the tyres on one side of the car were leaving the ground. “Jude, will you please simmer down? This car was designed to be driven fast.”

“I’m fine.” I really wasn’t.

She sped up. I wondered whether I was going to vomit all over the interior.

We reached the chateau before I vomited or Genny killed us, beating everyone else there, of course.

I breathed in the fresh air as soon as I’d pulled myself out of the car, thankful I’d gotten here alive. The sound of French being spoken filled the air, along with the noise of car tyres as Jerrica pulled up next to us.

I kept out of the way and watched as two women, who I figured were the owners, one of whom was talking rapidly to Genny, were greeted by Jesse and Jerrica. They came out here a couple of times a year, and it would also be where they got married next June, after the next season had ended.

I saw Neva getting out of the car, more colour in her face than when she’d left the plane.

“Feeling better?” I crutched myself over to her. “Did you nearly die with Jerrica’s driving?”

She laughed and shook her head. “Shit, you got stuck with Genny. Avoid that one. You know she wanted to be a formula one driver when she was younger?”

“Did they ban her because she was too fast?”

“I think it was the road rage.” Neva stretched, exposing a sliver of skin on her stomach.

I was looking and I shouldn’t be. We’d agreed when Neva ended it that it was over. No flirty looks, no flirty texts. I wasn’t it for her and couldn’t be.

What she'd meant was that whatever I felt wasn't real. It was just fun based on mutual attraction. That was it.

Nothing more.

In which case, why did it hurt so bad when it was over?

"What are your plans for the day?" I kept the topic on general topics.

She shrugged. "Unpack and then try a bottle of the wine by the pool. With a book. What are yours?"

They weren't spending time around the pool. Neva had an amazing body two years ago, and now it was even better. Spending time around her while she was wearing a bikini wasn't going to help me in any way.

"Get my bearings. Have a nap."

Anything but having to stare at her.

CHAPTER 4

Neva



ON HOLIDAY, I needed two things: sunshine and fresh, simple food. I'd toyed with the idea of becoming a chef when I was younger, of going to culinary school because I loved cooking – not baking, just cooking. I'd take a handful of ingredients and see what I could make out of them, keeping it simple.

But, as I learned, being a chef who wanted to keep things simple wasn't going to get me very far. Diners wanted fancy dishes, things they couldn't cook, food that was going to be a luxury because of how it was put together, its complexity, and the calories. They wanted a treat.

I wanted to prepare tasty food that was healthy. Sustainable. Would promote healing. A friend from school had cancer when we were just seventeen. It was stage three by the time they caught it, thinking she was too young to have it. We researched all the things she could do to help fight it, to get better. It was a way of taking back control.

Diet was a key weapon. Vegetables, certain types of food with anti-inflammatory properties, avoiding foods that caused inflammation, looking at the relationship between food and hormones. Then making it tasty. Enticing.

I found my passion.

We weren't in the Mediterranean, but the local produce here was amazing. I spent an hour or so each morning walking through the little village near to the chateau, picking up vegetables and fruits, some of the meats and – because we

were on holiday – the bread. Breakfast and supper were prepared for us by Suzette and Carina and their team, but we were to fend for ourselves during the day, which meant Kitty and I could have some input into our players’ diets.

Especially Jude’s.

He’d been too easy to spend time with since we’d been here, which was useful, because we’d ended up talking a lot. Two years ago, he’d seemed more of a kid, but maybe it’d been watching his teammates settle down and Nate having another baby because he wasn’t quite as impulsive as he’d been back then.

“What’ve you bought?” He appeared from over my shoulder in the kitchen.

“Cherries. They’re at the peak of their season here and they’re good for joint conditions because they contain anthocyanins, so I’m going to add them to a salad. I think Kitty’s going to do smoothies with them too.” I smiled at him as he pinched one.

“They’re tart. Wow.” He grabbed another.

“The tart ones are really good for you.”

“They’d be better in a pie.” His eyes lit up hopefully, his smile the same one from two years ago; boyish and charming.

“I might do a pie too.” There were ways to keep the sugar content down, so we were good there.

“I’ll look forward to it.” He bounced out of the kitchen on his crutches, shooting me another grin. In the last few days he’d become faster with the boot on his foot, and seemed more comfortable. I’d heard him say to Nate that there was less pain now.

The next few months were going to be frustrating for him. That was the worry. I knew Jude had received an ADHD diagnosis about a year ago, which had made a lot of things make sense. It wasn’t common knowledge, and I’d only found out because I’d been asked by the team’s psychotherapist to give some information on how diet could help. I’d explained that there was no proven link between food and ADHD, but

key foods could help anyone – meals rich in protein and complex carbohydrates, which was important for any athlete's diet. There was also the sensory side. ADHD wasn't just about being overly energetic and lacking attention, it was about the brain seeking stimulation, and food, with its texture and taste and how it made the body feel after eating could help.

I still didn't know if Jude knew I was aware of his diagnosis. He probably was because of my role, but we'd done our best to avoid each other without it being obvious since I'd ended it.

I made my salad; quinoa, honey, cashews, leaves and other bits that were around, and then went to town on the cherry pie, using local honey again and keeping it sugar free.

Kitty was busy in the kitchen making smoothies and pastries, having spent a morning in a local boulangerie and wanting to practice. She'd opened up her little café across the grounds three or so years ago, and I'd tapped her up quickly, knowing that my players would gravitate over there, and we'd colluded so that a lot of her recipes fit with their food plans.

Jude blocked the sun from the doorway about an hour later.

"I've been told to come and find you. I think the message was 'get out of the kitchen and enjoy the sun.'" He rested against the door frame and gave me that smile. "I volunteered because – cherry pie."

I ignored the way my heart jumped in my chest.

This wasn't good. This was why I'd been avoiding him. Jude Whittingham was oozing with charisma and sex appeal, the sort that could make you want to lie down on a platter and say 'eat me'. He was also a decade too young.

"It's on a slow bake until two. Then you get cherry pie." I shook my head at him, pulling off the apron I'd put over my T-shirt and cut off shorts. My swimwear was on underneath, a red two-piece with white polka dots that I really liked, so much that I'd put off wearing it until I had the base for a tan. I tanned quickly, which pissed Amber and Genny off, needing

only a couple of days somewhere fairly sunny before I looked like I'd spent three weeks in Portugal in the height of summer.

Jude's smile turned devilish, his eyes shining with mischief.

The girl inside me danced. The thirty-five-year-old woman that made up the rest of me cursed.

"I think I'll like your cherry pie." He almost drawled it, despite being brought up in Manchester.

"Stop it. The sun's clearly getting to your head." I shook my head, hands on my hips in what I hoped was a matronly manner. "There's no flirting!"

"So flirting is not allowed in the kitchen?" He wriggled his eyebrows in a most annoying way. "Or anywhere else?"

"No. So stop it. I'm too old for you." I'd said this line so many times, and not just when Jude was there.

"Says who?"

"Jude, you're twenty-five. You're a baby. You want to party like a footballer and live the lifestyle that men your age dream of. The fast cars, the models, the sponsorships from trendy brands – you don't need a woman like me who isn't interested in living like that. I'd spoil your fun. I *spoilt* your fun." I'd felt like his big sister, telling him to go home rather than party with his friends after a game. He'd left with me, not going out with the other players, saying I was giving him a lift home, or I was on at him about his alcohol intake – Jude had never had much of an issue saying no to a drink even without me being there. He played it up, preferring to go home with me rather than carry on partying.

He didn't say anything, just folded his arms and looked at me as if I'd said something amusing.

"So don't flirt with me. Please." I hung my apron up on a peg with the others.

"What are you looking for, Neva? What is it that you want? Because since we stopped going home together I've heard you've gone on dates with men who just aren't -"

“Aren’t what?” Although I knew the answer to that.

“They aren’t, well, they’re not – I’m trying not to be a dick here.”

I frowned. “What do you know about the men I’ve been on dates with? And why would you be interested?”

He smiled as if he had the answers to everything. “Because I couldn’t understand why you wouldn’t want to date me, but you’d go out with men who weren’t even in the league below you. I just don’t get it, Neva. I was your dirty little secret twice a week for nine months, with you telling me I was too young and too much of a kid for something serious, but I don’t see you with my replacement.”

That stung. I undid the tie from my hair that was struggling to keep all of my hair in place. I’d bobbed it a couple of years ago, the first time I’d had my long hair cut since I was twelve and while I loved long hair, the bob was so much easier to manage..

Jude looked mesmerised by it, his eyes turning darker. I wondered if he was remembering how it’d felt threaded through his fingers, and whether he thought I’d messed about with it on purpose.

I grabbed hold of it and twisted it round into a messy pony tail, retying it quickly. “Sorry.”

He shook his head. “Don’t be. I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable, bringing up the past.”

I shook my head. “You didn’t.” It was a lie, but not because of the reasons he was thinking. “Let the girls know I’ll be outside in a minute.”

He nodded, not smiling and departed, leaving me wondering what the fuck had just happened.

All Amber’s little boy wanted to do was to play in the pool like his two big sisters. Unfortunately for Oliver, he was only two, which meant he couldn’t dive and run about like they were doing. They didn’t have the patience to include him all

the time either, which meant my heart strings were pulled too tightly, so me and my polka red bikini were in the pool, helping Oliver to have as much fun as his sisters.

“Here.” Nate swam over to me, avoiding an inflatable flamingo. “The girls have got mojitos out. Go and enjoy.”

I beamed at the dark-haired little man who was so much like his daddy, only with all of his mother’s dark hair and eyes. Like Nate, he was a good-natured soul and hadn’t even gone through the terrible twos, being quite amenable to everyone and everything.

“I’m good here with him, honestly.”

Nate shook his head. “Seriously – mojitos. Me, Jesse and Rowan are going to take them to the beach in half an hour anyway and get burgers and shakes for them on the way back. You’re not our unofficial babysitter.”

“You know I don’t mind.” I really, really didn’t. Especially when it came to Oliver.

Amber’s pregnancy hadn’t been planned and for a few days she hadn’t decided on what she wanted to do. I’d struggled, wanting a baby so much myself even those years ago, and being incredibly jealous that she was pregnant. We’d gotten over it. I’d been ashamed of how I’d behaved and apologised profusely, although it had been hard after Oliver was born.

Oliver went to his daddy, leaving me to pull myself out of the pool, the afternoon sun gorgeously warm.

“You look like a model getting out of there!” Dee yelled over to me, a mojito already in her hand. “Like something from a *James Bond* film.”

I laughed, pretty sure I didn’t, but it was nice of her to say so. I saw Jude looking over at me, not even trying to hide his stare.

I stared back, trying to tell him to look the fuck away in case someone noticed, not that I thought they would, given they were already probably two mojitos deep.

He ignored me, carrying on staring, his eyes running up and down my body as I walked back over to the sunbed.

“Here, pretty lady.” Amber held out a mojito. “You need to catch up.”

I sat down, sipping on the drink, feeling the sun dry me off quickly. It was a hot day, one of those perfect summer days with a sky that was cerulean blue, unmarred by clouds.

“That’s good.” It was, especially because it was loaded with sugar. “Who made it?”

“Jude.” Amber pointed to him. “Turns out he can mix a good cocktail.”

I looked back over. He smiled at me, legs stretched out in front of him, his boot off for now.

“Are you not going to the beach?” I really hoped he was.

He shook his head. “Not sure I want sand on my feet right now.”

Good point. Sensible. “Fair enough. Good cocktail.”

He nodded. “My mum likes cocktails so she made my dad go on this mixology day to learn how to make them for her. He’s pretty good at them now – he does have the world’s biggest critic to impress - so yeah, he taught me.”

I’d forgotten how close Jude was with his parents. Another reason to not be involved with him. They wouldn’t want their son with someone who was looking to settle down and have kids, sooner rather than later.

“He did a good job.”

Jude grinned, then focused back on his book, which I suspected he was only pretending to read.

Two mojitos in, and I could almost forget he was there, keeping my back to him while I gossiped with my friends, enjoying not having any of the men aside from Jude and Jesse – who weren’t counting right now – there.

“How did your date with Simon Huxton go?” Jerrica put down her empty glass. “Did you go on it?”

“No. I gave it a miss.” I braced myself.

“How come?” Jerrica sat up straighter. “I know he lives with his mum and all that, but he’s a nice guy.”

Genny spluttered. “Nice guy? Come on, Jez. He’s horrible. Not what Neva’s looking for.”

“What are you looking for?” Jerrica stared at her empty glass as if she was willing it to be refilled by magic. “An athlete? Businessman? Teacher?”

I shook my head. “I might just cut the man out of the equation all together. Really, I just want a baby. I could do that on my own.”

There was a millisecond of silence.

“Hell yeah!” Then Dee broke it. “It’s tough, but it’s tougher with a co-parent who doesn’t want to co-parent.” She should know; she’d been Toby’s guardian when his mother flitted off. Dee had Rowan to help now, or rather Toby had Rowan, as Dee had made it perfectly clear that she could do things on her own. “And you have us. You wouldn’t be on your own.”

Genny reached for the mojito jug. “None left. Bugger.”

“I’ll mix you some more. Or do you want something else?” Jude was there, clearly having heard every word I’d said.

Maybe now he’d get the idea why we wouldn’t work out.

“Oooh,” Genny sounded ridiculously overjoyed. “How about a rum punch?”

“I can do a Mai Tai.” He put his boot back on, slipping his slider back on to his other foot. “I’ll shout to you when they’re ready.”

“Amazing.” Genny looked pleased.

I watched my friends watch him as he walked into the chateau kitchen.

“Seriously, you’re all checking out his arse?” I shook my head. “Really?”

Dee swung her head back to me. “We can look. And Jude has turned out mighty fine. Ask him to be your baby daddy.”

I tipped my head up to the sky and wondered who was conspiring against me.

“That’s a good idea.” Genny leaned over and slapped my thigh. “He needs something to keep him busy for the next few months. He could try and knock you up.”

I shook my head, glaring at her. “Let’s not say anything else about this. It’s not happening. If I haven’t met anyone by the end of the year, I’ll look at other ways. Jude won’t be one of them.”

“Your loss.” Amber lay back on the lounge. “He’d be a perfect specimen.”

“See if he’ll provide you with a specimen sample, Neva.” That was Jerrica again. “You’d have pretty babies.”

“He’s far too young.” That was all I could say, because they were right. Jude would have pretty babies one day.

Jerrica frowned. “Really? If the ages were reversed no one would even comment on that.”

I shrugged. “That’s because men age better than women and can have children until the very end.”

“Fuck the patriarchy!” Jerrica held up her empty glass. “And the media, who control all of this. Judgey fuckers.”

“Here, here!” Gen got involved. “The double standards are just fucking shocking. And then we end up with women doing down on other women. I’m sure there are some men who just give themselves a pat on the back when that happens.”

“I’ve had it with the press, even from female journalists. I’ve been asked three times recently – not in interviews, but when the cameras are off – if I’m going to retire soon so Rowan and I will have a family. I feel like punching them in the face.” Dee shook her head and breathed deeply. “Can you all keep a secret?”

Genny sat back. “Do I already know this?”

Dee nodded. “You do. But no one else does. I think Ro will probably tell Nate and Jesse while we’re here though.”

We were all quiet, waiting,

“Ro and I have decided we’re both going to retire at the end of this season.” She exhaled. “Woo. That feels better.”

“Wow.” Amber put an arm around Dee’s shoulders. “Congratulations. That’s big news and so fucking exciting.”

Dee nodded. “Thank you. We’re going to get all sorts of questions, I know. The truth is though we both want to go out while we’re on top of our game, not when we’re right at the end of our careers, and yes, we do want to start a family – or rather, add to the one we’ve got. Toby isn’t a little boy anymore and I really miss that.” She looked almost teary.

I found her hand and squeezed it, getting how she felt.

“Does Rowan not want to carry on for longer?” Jerrica looked curious. “It isn’t fair that you can’t be pregnant and play, but he can, but – he’s really young to retire.”

Dee nodded. “He is. His contract ends at the end of this season and he’s turned down the offer to extend it. You know we’re really involved in the football camps for kids, so we want to do more of that, and his back is getting worse. That injury he picked up eighteen months ago is going to need surgery. By the time he recovers from that, his pace will have gone and he doesn’t want to do the rehab that’ll be involved. He’s also broodier than I am. I don’t think he’d be up for away games when we have a baby. I don’t think I’ll be up for away games then either. Sleep is important.” She shook her head. “In the meantime, I’d really like another drink. Make the most of being kid free and not pregnant.”

“Absolutely.” I stood up, needing to stretch.

“I’ll go and help Jude with the cocktails.” Jez jumped off her lounge and headed towards the kitchen. “I need to pee anyway.”

She was back, with Jude, five minutes later. Two jugs of something that was probably going to be potent were put down on a table near our loungers that were all pulled together now.

Jude handed me a clean glass, the only thing other than a beer that he'd carried out. "This is for you," he said, his words whispered in my ear. "Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you."

Then the bastard backed away, a look of victory on his face.

Surely he hadn't heard everything? If he had, why wasn't he running for the hills – or at least limping for them?

And why was my stomach flipping like a gymnast on the bars?

That needed to stop.

MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't noticed how good looking Jude was until now. I wasn't blind, even though I wasn't looking to date a footballer and not one his age anyway. But he was good looking.

Very. Good. Looking.

And he was looking at me like he thought the same about me. That didn't hurt either.

My skin prickled in the nicest possible way. A flutter of butterflies cascaded in my stomach.

What were we doing here?

"Did you enjoy your McDonald's?" What a pathetic thing to say.

"Better than a strip club but nowhere near as good as looking at you." His grin was as cheesy as his line.

It wasn't just me feeling this then. I wasn't making up the thickness in the air or how my skin was burning in the best possible way.

"It's been a night of good decisions so far." I wasn't sure who I was saying that for. Me or him?

"Let me make another one."

Jude's hand came up to my hair, running his fingers through it until he cupped the back of my head.

I knew he was going to kiss me. Now would be a good time to come to those senses I was meant to have, only they didn't seem to be working. Or rather, I didn't want them to work.

So I did what might be a future mistake. I looked up at him, his blue eyes glinting, his smile tinged with a whisper of mischief, only I didn't get to study it, because his lips found mine and began a kiss that made my knees not feel quite as

strong as they should. I had to wrap my arms around his neck to keep me upright so that kiss could continue.

He kissed completely different to how he played, with one exception: his skill level was high. There was detail, there was care, there was control. But he was slow and calm, as if he was trying harder to read me than he had to on the pitch to read the game. Nothing like I thought a man of his age would kiss. I'd expected it to be rushed, fast, something that sought instant gratification. This wasn't that.

His hand stayed in my hair, toying with it, something I loved. His other hand had dipped from my hip to my ass where he was definitely making a thorough assessment of its tone.

I could've done the same, but I didn't want to break this spell that had been cast, wanting this kiss to carry on forever.

It couldn't. It didn't. He stopped, pulling his mouth from mine, looking at me like I was a rare animal he'd just enticed into the very best trap.

"Is this better than a milkshake?" The smile that played on his lips told me he already knew the answer to that.

I managed to find some of my wits. "I'm not sure. I'd have to try it again."

Jude half laughed, sitting back down on the sofa and pulling me onto his lap so I was straddling him, my knees either side of his thighs, and then he kissed me again, the slight rub of his stubble reminding me that he wasn't a boy. The press of his hard cock through his designer pants reminding me that he was all man.

I forgot he was younger. I forgot that he was football royalty, the son of one of the country's legends. I forgot that this encounter was not what I was looking for.

Because it felt good.

His hands slid further up my waist, under my top to just below my bra, his fingers grazing the underside of my breasts, my centre pushed against the hard ridge in his pants.

I'd seen Jude naked. Most of the people who worked at Manchester Athletic had seen Jude naked. He was comfortable in his skin and he knew he had it all - the talent, the face, the body. And the cock. The changing rooms were his parade ground, not giving a shit who came in and saw him when he was getting changed or showering, fine with having conversations when he was stark bollock naked.

It had been hard not to notice. I'd asked Amber about it once, knowing that as one of the team's physios, she saw a lot more than most. She'd told me that becoming immune to how the players looked was lesson one-oh-one in working for a professional football club, and the only player she'd reacted to had been Nate.

I didn't have that hands-on role, but part of my job was to notice the players' form and shape, work with the coaches and the medical staff to support with nutrition, sometimes very specific nutrition. A lot of the time though, I worked with players on their lifestyle. It wasn't just the food; it was the other habits. Drink, drugs, supplements, excessiveness in other areas of their lives, mental health – I'd trained as a counsellor, needing to look at how food and mental health worked together and to understand how I could get my players heads around nutrition beyond controlling it.

Jude was fascinating. He had enough characteristics of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder for me to look at a specific diet and ways of eating for him. At first, I'd dreaded working with him, having seen him as this cocky, over-confident kid who was basking in the light of being phenomenal with the ball as well as feeling like he had a god-given right to success because of his father. But he hadn't been like that.

He'd listened. Joked in front of his teammates, but he'd focused on what I had to say, read the articles I'd suggested and asked questions.

Part of me wished he'd been difficult. That would be easier to deal with.

His hands disappeared around my back, toying with my bra strap.

“Can I? I want to touch you. Do you want me to?” The words were whispered, pretty utterings that made my skin feel electric.

I should say no. I should make the sensible decision. He was too young, too much of a player, too everything.

“Yes.” Because sometimes, doing what you should was the wrong decision.

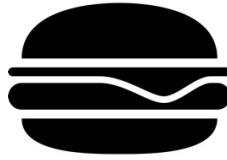
My bra strap came undone too easily, his hands skated smoothly across my skin to my front, then cupping my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples.

It was the first time I'd been touched like this in months. A short, unsatisfying relationship had ended, one that on paper should've been my forever, but the chemistry had been an underwhelming science experiment.

This was a science experiment that was about to destroy the lab – or possibly my lady parts.

CHAPTER 5

Jude



NEVA WANTED A BABY.

I sipped on the beer I'd allowed myself to have. Just one now, and then maybe one or two more with Nate and the others when they got back from the beach.

My brain was swimming in half-thoughts. Questions that weren't fully formed circled round my head like a school of guppies on speed, everything everywhere. I hated this part. I wanted to focus, but no single thought would stay still enough for me to grasp hold of it and keep it there. This was when I'd distract myself, find something else to do where I could move and get the stimulation I needed. I understood it better now, enough to want to control it more.

I breathed. Tried to empty my head. Tasted the beer, one sip at a time, seeking out the different flavours.

Every thought of Neva and what I'd heard the girls talking about was pushed out of my head. I tried to feel the sun and listen to the breeze blowing through the trees nearby, the sound of the water in the pool.

I felt my heart rate still a little, my thoughts racing less. I needed a point to start from.

Neva wanted a baby.

That made sense. She was how old? Thirty-four or five? I knew she loved kids. I knew she'd been weird with Amber when she found out she was pregnant. That was about the time we'd started sleeping together.

I looked up at where Neva was lounging, that tiny bikini doing things to me that I needed to pretend weren't going on. She hadn't changed physically since we'd ended things – she was still slender with curves in the places I liked most, her dark hair long and lush and thick and so fucking pretty when it was wrapped around my wrist.

I'd missed it. Her hair, her tits, her legs and how they wrapped around my waist. She could climb me like a tree. I missed her laugh and the way she made me feel like I was the centre of somebody's everything. Her everything.

She wanted a baby.

I could give her that.

Her eyes found me, her expression looking shocked as she realised I was staring at her.

I didn't look away, just lifted my beer to her, a silent cheers.

Her eyes softened, her chin tipping up. There was the briefest of smiles, then Jerrica said something that made everyone else laugh and Neva joined in, although I knew she had no idea what'd just been said.

I still affected her.

That was good to know.

The kids were tired when they got back from the beach. So were the adults; all of them. Jerrica had headed to hers and Jesse's room, the jugs of cocktails meaning she needed a late afternoon nap just like her youngest niece and nephew did. Jesse followed her up, looking exhausted and muttering something about never having children.

Genny excused herself to make a call – probably to Guy, because as much as the two couldn't stand each other, they rarely went more than about five hours without speaking, or so I'd noticed.

The pool quietened down, leaving just me and Neva, and Nate, who was fast asleep on a sun lounger, his T-shirt over his

head.

I picked up my empty beer bottle and headed over to Neva, sitting down on the lounge next to her.

“You want a baby?”

She put her book down and whipped her head up to look at me. I knew she’d noticed me walking over but had pretended to be too buried in whatever she was reading.

“You weren’t meant to hear that.” Her book went down on the lounge. “Please don’t say anything - ”

“But it’s true? You want a baby?” My hands went on my knees, gripping down on them.

She didn’t say anything, looking a like a rabbit caught in very bright lights.

“You never told me why you wanted us to stop seeing each other. Just that I was too young - ”

“You were. You are. I’m so much older than you and it wasn’t right.” She sounded nervous. “I needed to meet someone who was ready to settle down and be a family and you were twenty-fucking-three, Jude. Can you imagine what people would think of me if they found out?”

I shook my head. “Would it matter?”

Her shoulders dropped. “Not to you, but to me, it would. I’d have been judged. People would’ve thought I’d taken advantage of you.”

“You didn’t. I know everyone thought I was stupid and just a bit of a kid, but I wasn’t. You knew that.” At least I hoped she had.

“You weren’t what I thought you were. But you were still too young.” She looked away, but she didn’t pick up her book.

“Am I still too young now?”

I wasn’t. I was in my mid-twenties. I had a career that meant I’d had to be grown up too quickly in many ways. A massive fortune which had brought people pretending to be friends, advisors who were more interested in their own profit

or standing than in actually helping me succeed. Sharks had circled when my first club hat-trick was scored, and heard me make a clusterfuck of a post-game interview, and watched as they'd thought my brains were only in my feet.

They weren't.

When I actually slowed down enough to think, I knew exactly what was going on. I'd learned to get along with everyone I'd been on a team with, working out who was good for a joke and who I was best just listening to, or pretending to listen to. I'd had my parents, who'd always offered advice, my father even once telling me that I didn't have to be a footballer. I could do anything I wanted to – apart from play rugby. Then I'd have been disowned.

“You're not too young, but I'm too old for you.” She held up a hand to shield her eyes from the sun. The sky was clear blue, not a single cloud marred it.

“Says who?” I wasn't having that.

“People. Society.” She didn't look at me.

“Okay. And they matter because?” I could also be an argumentative shit.

Neva shrugged. “If the press had found out about us when we were seeing each other, I'd have been torn to pieces. Called a cougar. There would've been jokes about all sorts.”

“Maybe.” I couldn't say that there wouldn't have been. “But the club wouldn't have bothered. They'd have seen you as a good influence.”

She didn't answer. Probably because she knew that was true.

“But you were twenty-three. And I wanted – I still want to find someone I can have a family with.”

I'd never seen Neva look so fucking sad, like her heart was breaking.

“But you haven't. There hasn't been anyone serious since we broke up?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure I’d call it a break-up. We were only sleeping together.”

“Yeah, you made that clear at the time. No dates. No telling anyone. Just fucking.” And I had been too young to realise what that meant. I’d just discovered the power of my dick, and Neva was hot and mature, different from the girls who hung around, wanting to find an identity based on being a footballer’s wife or girlfriend. Neva was clever, passionate, knew my sport, knew what it took to be a pro-athlete. She had her own money and house; she didn’t need me and she made that really fucking clear.

I just scratched an itch.

“You don’t need to be so crass about it.” She looked away from me.

I glanced over at the still sleeping Nate. He was definitely out of it, which didn’t surprise me given the energy levels of his kids.

“I was being straightforward.” I rubbed my face. “What’s your baby plan?”

“Baby plan?” She looked back at me, surprised.

I nodded. “Neva, I heard you talking to Jerrica and all that lot. You want a baby. You told me that way back when we were sleeping together. What are you going to do? Have a one-night stand and hope it works? Look at donation?”

Even though she was wearing sunglasses I could tell she was avoiding looking at me.

“I don’t know. A sperm donor is probably likely. I’m going to have some eggs frozen too, just in case.” She shook her head. “I wanted to meet someone I could have this with, but there’s a clock ticking down. I’m financially secure. I have a good support network and a supportive employer. I can be a single mum. There are loads of decent male friends about who will be good role models too.”

That determined chin stuck up again. Defiant. Stubborn. Resolute.

The devil got me. I could be as stubborn as her.

“Let me do it.”

My heart rate upped into the danger zone.

“What?” She frowned.

“I’ll be your sperm donor.”

“Jude - ”

“Hear me out. I like kids. You think I’m too young to commit – maybe I am. But I’m not too young to father one. We can draw up a contract. I’ll get you pregnant. For fuck’s sake, it’ll give me something to do while I’m rehabbing this.” I wasn’t sure I was selling it. Those probably weren’t the right words and if she had any sense, she’d run away from me as fast as she could in bare feet.

“I don’t know. It should be anonymous.” She was shaking her head rather than running. “And I don’t think discussing this now is appropriate. Not here. Not with everyone around.”

“That wasn’t a no.”

She looked shell-shocked.

“Think about it. I’ll think about it.” I half-struggled to get up, the boot cumbersome and the sun lounger I’d been sitting on not easy to get up from. “But please don’t tell me I’m not old enough to know my own mind again.” I walked off, not sure which part of me had made that offer, and surprised that I didn’t want to take the words back.

Neva avoided me for the next three days. I’d expected as much. She’d done the same the days after we’d first slept together, and I’d learned then that she was an avoider, or an ostrich. She liked to stick her head in the sand and pretend it wasn’t happening, unless it was something to do with work, in which case she took the bull by the horns, or the footballer by the throat.

I was prepared to be ignored. It didn’t bother me, or rather, I pretended it didn’t bother me.

In truth it did.

Being a footballer meant people usually got back to you quickly. You had status just because you were decent kicking a leather ball around the field for ninety minutes or less, status that got you a table at most restaurants even when they were full or gave you free access to a sold out gig.

My dad taught me early on that I could be a prick. I could be that asshole who uses his name to get to places he shouldn't be. I knew players like that; there were men who played alongside my dad who would throw about the words "don't you know who I am?", men who my dad tolerated and was professional with, but didn't entertain.

I was brought up in a football stadium. I got to see first-hand how careers worked out and how far you got with being a wanker, and while you had to have a certain amount of self-belief to go out there on game day and listen to the taunts from the opposition supporters, and sometimes your own team's fans, there was a limit I knew had to be self-imposed.

This was hard, especially because I wanted to know now what Neva wanted. I wanted my thoughts to be calmed by hers. I wanted an answer.

Maybe I wanted her to tell me this was a stupid suggestion and I needed to go buy a brain or something, replace the faulty one I had.

Everyone bar me and Jesse had headed into the little village to pillage the bakery and other shops, the four kids going with the adults.

It was the weekend and the weather was hot, the chateau shimmering in the heat. Jesse had swum laps in the pool, making me wish I could at least get in, but that would've been foolish. Swimming was out of the question: those precious tendons needed to heal, and I needed to keep the boot on to help that process. Even without Amber being there and keeping half an eye on me, I wouldn't have risked it.

"This peace is just amazing." Jesse lay back on his lounge. "Just listen to that."

I listened. “I can only hear the birds.”

“That’s the point. No kids. No women. No noise. It’s fucking bliss, man.” He closed his eyes, looking far too chilled.

I eyed the glass of iced water next to me.

I shouldn’t.

I really shouldn’t.

I did anyway. A quick flick of my wrist and the water fell out of the glass and dropped straight onto Jesse’s chest.

“What the fuck?” He leapt up off the lounge, almost dancing.

I doubled over with painful laughter.

“You fucker. If you didn’t have that boot on you’d be in that pool right now.” He lobbed an ice cube at me after picking it up off the floor.

It hit me bang in the middle of my forehead and should’ve hurt, but it didn’t. I was still laughing too hard to notice.

“Seriously, you shouldn’t have been enjoying the quiet. They’ll be back soon anyway – the girls will want Uncle Jesse to play in the pool with them.” I couldn’t stop my grin, because I knew he both hated being their chosen children’s entertainer and loved it at the same time.

He sat back down on the lounge. “Yeah, I keep seeing Nate pissing his sides at me while I’m pulling that inflatable round.” He shook his head. “Then he whispers shit about me needing the practice.” Jesse groaned. “For fuck’s sake, man.”

“Jerrica wants babies, eh?” I settled back down, keeping my wits about me because Jesse would a hundred percent seek revenge.

“She does. Which is fine. I’m good with that.” He nodded, a smile erupting on his face that told me he was more than good with that.

“It’ll be baby fever with her and Dee.” Word had kind of gotten round us all now that this was Rowan and Dee’s last

season of professional football. A few more of their plans had spilled out over wine and beer, once the kids had gone to bed. I wanted to add Neva's name to that list, but that would be opening a can of worms that weren't ready for the daylight.

And she wasn't really speaking to me.

Jesse nodded, clearly trying not to think too hard about this. "What about you? I've not seen you pictured with any potential WAGs for at least six months." He narrowed his eyes at me. "Unlike you, Judith."

The nickname had long since stopped bothering me. "Maybe I've grown up."

He stretched back out on the lounge. "The stunt you just pulled suggests otherwise."

"I was getting fed up of waking up and not knowing the name of the woman next to me." It had happened more times than I'd been proud of. I'd also heard a couple of the younger players talking about me as if I was some sort of god because of what I'd been getting up to – that had been after the night where I'd been seen with three different women. I'd kind of shocked myself when I heard it framed by one of them.

"You could've just stuck with one. What about that singer you were getting photographed with?" Jesse propped himself up on his elbows, his shades making him look like an auditionee for James Bond.

"Belle Brooks?" I did know her name. "She wanted me to move in with her."

"Really? How long were you seeing her?" He frowned and rubbed his face. "I thought it was only a few weeks."

"It was." That had been a big part of the issue. "I think she reckoned she was living in her own prime time reality show. She had her agent reach out to mine about some reality thing." I shook my head. "She mentioned one night that we could be the new Posh and Becks."

Jesse choked. "I think that's pushing it a bit. He was one of the most talented footballers ever and she was in an iconic girl

band – I’m not sure you and Belle Brooks had the same sort of skill.”

“Thanks, friend.” I shook my head at him, lying back down. I wasn’t offended. Skill wise, I had the potential in the next couple of years to really be up there with the greats, if my head was in the game – which it was. And Belle had been nice and we’d had fun, but that was it on my part. I didn’t want a relationship where the main focus was increasing our follower count on social media. “I’ll keep your opinion in mind when I make future decisions.”

“You should do. In fact, I should charge you for that advice.” He was looking too comfortable again.

I had no ice left, so a repeat of a few minutes ago was off the table.

“What’s happened with you and Neva, by the way? Jerrica was trying to get gossip out of me last night that I was completely fucking unaware of. She said that Neva was avoiding you.”

“Neva’s avoiding me?” I had to be careful here, because anything I said would definitely go back to Jerrica and she was really good at putting three and five together and coming up with an impossible answer.

“Why? How’ve you upset our tender food-sergeant?” Jesse generally ate what he wanted, which drove Neva mad. He wasn’t as bad as he liked to make out to her; he just enjoyed really winding her up because her reactions were so predictable.

“Nothing. Just a stupid comment I made to her.” I could leave it at that. Jesse generally didn’t pry. If it had been Nicky he’d have been trying to prise everything out of me, which would’ve ended up with him in the pool.

“It’s weird. Even Rowan noticed it last night. She keeps looking at you and then looking away when she thinks you’ve noticed her.” His voice was sounding sleepy.

There was no chance for me to say anything back, or for Jesse to carry on enjoying the peace. The sound of fast feet

and voices echoed through to the pool area.

“Uncle Jesse! Uncle Jesse! Can you play sharks with us?”

I heard him groan. I thought about not laughing but I didn't have that sort of willpower.

MORE THAN TWO YEARS AGO.

I had Neva on my lap with my hands on her tits.

I had Neva on my lap with my hands on her tits.

The same sentence ran through my head a dozen times because I couldn't quite fucking believe that this was my life right now.

And her tits were fucking amazing. Just a bit more than a handful, firm and real. The real bit was important: the last three sets I'd had the pleasure of feeling had not been real and while I'd thoroughly enjoyed getting to know them very well, I did prefer the real thing.

Should I tell her that she had the best pair of tits I'd felt this year – maybe longer? Or should I keep my mouth shut?

The second seemed like the most sensible option, and the best way to keep my hands exactly where I wanted them to be for the next few minutes.

Her nipples had hardened. Her hips were rocking against me, and I figured she'd realised that my dick was definitely very, very interested. Hopefully she would stay interested too. Hopefully I wouldn't blow like a fifteen-year-old having his first ever experience.

Neva was older. I doubted she'd had the same level of experience as I had, at least in terms of numbers of partners. But that didn't mean she'd experienced sex that wasn't as good as what I had. The longest relationship I'd had was with a girlfriend when I was eighteen and she'd been seventeen. I'd been her first and she'd been shy, some of her moves reminding me of porn, making me think she was trying to be what she thought I wanted.

It got better. I got to know what she liked and she became more confident. I was going to guess that Neva knew what she

liked already and she was going to expect I was proficient at least.

Shit. I might not live up to her expectations. My dick started to tremble, feeling the pressure.

Then she pulled off her top, losing her bra at the same time, leaving her tits exposed for me to view and, fuck me, there was only one reason my dick was trembling now, and it wasn't stage fright.

I bent my head, taking a nipple in my mouth and gently sucked, teasing it with my tongue. Neva's hands moved into my hair, gripping through it as I busied myself, her hips still moving, seeking friction.

I let her nipple go with a pop. "Do you want to carry this on upstairs?" Because while I had no issue with getting it on in her lounge, a bed would be more comfortable and then she might let me stay, so we could indulge in Sunday morning sex, which was definitely one of my favourite things.

She froze, her hands still in my hair, nipples still hard. "No one can know about this."

That kind of suited me right now. "Fine. It's our dirty little secret."

"And it only happens this one time."

"As in one occasion, but we can fuck as many times as we like?" I felt like the Big Bad Wolf being given one night with Red Riding Hood.

She laughed, her tits jiggling, which just had me spellbound.

"Can you manage it more than once?"

That made me laugh. "Neva, I'm twenty-three. I can go on till my dick falls off."

"Good, 'cause so can I."

I stood up with her legs wrapping around my waist, shoulder checking through the doors to the stairs and carrying her up to her bedroom, glad we were at hers as I wouldn't

have been able to be sure that my bedroom wouldn't have resembled that of a fifteen-year-old.

I knew it wouldn't though. My housekeeper had clearly been in there at some point during the day and had tidied up, so it would've resembled the bedroom of a man, including clean sheets. But we weren't at mine; we were at Neva's. The magnitude of this was similar to being called up to the England team or winning the FA Cup, my heart beating way too fast and my attempts to slow it down futile.

I put her down on the bed, her dark hair splaying over the white sheets, her eyes shining, lips curved in a smile. Kissing her was easy, her arms wrapping around me, her legs curling over my calves and pulling me closer.

Minutes later we were both naked, the pace less frantic because the promise of repeats made it feel less desperate, less like I was clutching at grains of sand that were frittering away.

She was lean and long, toned muscles that I knew were a result of practicing what she preached as well as Pilates and yoga, but she was still soft. I explored her curves and where they led to, I found how to make her toes curl and her moans make the sound of my name. She came with my face between her legs, my hands holding her hips as she bucked against me while her orgasm shook her, and she came again on my cock, her fingernails digging into my skin hard enough for me to see the marks in the mirror the next morning.

My own orgasm paled in comparison to how I felt hers. The pride, the achievement, the satisfaction at making her come better than anything I felt. As her pussy pulsed around me, I found my release, but all I wanted was to feel it again.

And again.

And again.

CHAPTER 6

Neva



“THINK ABOUT IT. *I’ll think about it. But please don’t tell me I’m not old enough to know my own mind again.”*

Sunglasses were amazing things. Not only did they protect your eyes, they protected your embarrassment. No one knew exactly where I was looking, because if they did, they’d be asking questions.

For the last two hours, I’d watched everything Jude did between reading the odd few paragraphs of my book. I had no idea what I’d read – I was going to have to go a few pages back and recap – but I could describe every ab on his body.

In the almost two years since we’d ended things, he’d grown broader, harder. Firmer. It wasn’t like I hadn’t noticed this – it was kind of my job to notice how the team looked – but I’d tried to keep Jude in a box that was labelled ‘do not touch or unpack in any form’. He was too young, too immature and too, well, Jude for me to consider his body in any other way than a professional one.

That had been impossible to continue doing in France so far. Especially since he’d made his offer to donate his DNA so I could have a baby.

As far as specimens went, Jude was a fine one. He was fit and healthy; he was naturally athletic and dextrous, with good gross and fine motor skills. He was clever, despite the teasing he’d received from his teammates, especially when he was younger and a lot more naïve. He had ADHD, which he’d

decided not to medicate and to find other ways to help him understand better. He was a decent man.

That was the key word – man.

This was no boy. He wasn't the same as the eighteen-year-old I'd met.

He'd been entertaining Dee's nephew, Toby, for the entire afternoon. Toby had been stung by a bee earlier on and had found it particularly painful. Even though he hadn't flinched when he'd broken his arm last year, this sting was the end of the world.

Jude had taken it upon himself to cheer him up, going through football statistics from the previous season and setting up a team for Toby on a fantasy football league, then teaching him to play some card game that I was pretty sure was made up.

I didn't care about that. He could've been teaching him poker, although I was sure that Rowan would've already scheduled that lesson in. My whole body was entranced by seeing this beautiful man being so gentle and caring with the little boy, while at the same time making Toby feel part of Jude's team.

He'd be a good dad.

This was indisputable; however, he'd be a good dad to his own children, that he'd hopefully have with a woman his own age with whom he was in a committed relationship.

Not as the father-from-afar that I required.

I'd resigned myself to the fact that I wasn't going to meet the love of my life, get engaged, married and settle down in time to get pregnant, unless the fates were extremely kind. In the last twelve months I'd researched the effects of age on female fertility, had my own health checks done and scheduled sessions with a psychotherapist so I could talk through my decision.

I wanted a child, and while I knew I could look at adopting, the process was lengthy and complicated, being single put me at a disadvantage also. I also wanted to be

pregnant. I'd seen Amber experience a tricky pregnancy and traumatic birth which was hell for everyone, and it still hadn't taken away that need, so I accepted it and looked into sperm donation.

If Jude's sperm was available and I knew it was his, I'd be seriously considering it. That wasn't part of any package though. I also knew he'd want to be part of his child's life, and it was that knowledge that made this not feel like an easy acceptance of a favour from a friend.

We could try to keep it secret, but if that baby turned out to have the same trademark turn on the football pitch as his father and grandfather, there'd be no hiding it. Something told me Jude had strong genes.

I realised I was definitely staring when Jude's eyes landed on me for more than a few seconds. I knew he couldn't see where I was specifically looking, but he would've definitely felt that look.

Ten minutes later, Toby was in the pool and Jude was on the sun lounger by my side. Rowan and Dee were at the other side of the pool, engrossed in some deep and meaningful conversation by the looks of it.

"If it stops you from avoiding me, I can take my offer off the table." He stretched his legs out, the boot still covering his left. "I'd rather be friends with you."

"Friends?"

He nodded. "Friends. Or are you too much older than me to be my friend? If so, does that mean Kitty is too young for you to be friends with her too?"

He had me there. Jude was probably a year younger than Kitty.

"We can be friends." My heart was pounding a march in my chest. "Your offer – thank you, but no. It wouldn't be fair – on anyone."

He nodded, not looking at me. "I understand."

"You do? You don't want me to explain why I think that?"

He half laughed then looked at me. “I’ve been thinking about it ever since I said it, and yeah, I’m not going to withdraw the offer – if you change your mind, then it’s still there. But I kind of think you want to do this on your own rather than have the father involved and I couldn’t know I had a kid and not be part of their life. Even if that kid wasn’t the sum of love and all that, and it was because I’d had a baby with a friend, I’d still want to be their dad.”

I nodded. This reinforced what I’d thought.

I ignored the ache in my chest.

“I really appreciate the offer, Jude, but it would change your life. You have tons of time for a family. Right now, you can have a life that lads your age dream of.” I didn’t want any child of mine to have a resentful father, someone who thought their kid had stolen their freedom.

“Lads?” He didn’t look amused. “Really? How old do I have to be before you think of me as a man?”

I bit the side of my mouth. He’d been all man in bed. Far more attentive and generous than other men I’d slept with, which had surprised me.

“You know what I mean.”

He nodded. “Maybe the offer should be off the table – that’ll make this easier for you.”

“What do you mean?” My heart twinged. “I appreciate - ”

“Save it, Neva. I knew when you ended things that you didn’t think much of me, that I was just an overgrown kid you were having fun with. I shouldn’t have offered to help you out.” He stood up, taking a step away.

“Jude - ”

He didn’t stop, just walked away, leaving me feeling far more discombobulated than I probably had any right to be.

“Jude seems off.” Dee passed me the bowl of freshly made flat bread that had been seasoned with rosemary and sea salt. It

was rather moreish and given the rest of our dinner consisted of lightly grilled fish and vegetables, it was almost too healthy.

Jude did seem off, but I was trying to ignore it.

“Did you get that read?” Dee’s glare at me was almost palpable. “He seems off. I’m worried.”

“Why would you be worried?” I bit into the bread and almost orgasmed.

“Because he’s injured. He can’t play for six months and that’s if he’s lucky. Injuries play with your head. Football’s his life, maybe more for him than others. Without it, what’s his identity?” She swirled the white wine round in her glass and took a sip.

Rowan and the rest of the men had gone into the village to check out a pub they’d heard about. Everyone else apart from Dee and me had gone to a water park, taking the kids with a plan to eat at a kid friendly café on the way back. It’d been a quiet afternoon, just the sound of the birds and the breeze and a whole lot of silence. Dee had spent an hour or so talking to her agent, ironing out a couple of deals for post-retirement, so I’d been on my own with my book and my thoughts.

Thoughts that were centred on Jude.

I’d thought about his injury, knowing how difficult it was for athletes who couldn’t train or play or be an active part of their team. All you could focus on was you; your rehab, your recovery, your strength and mobility. Dee was right – it played with their ideas of themselves and of who they were. When you’d dedicated your life to one thing, having it taken away from you even temporarily could be the thing that destroyed you instead of the injury.

Trying to have a baby would give Jude something to do. Another focus. I couldn’t lie, I’d thought all about the ways we could cook that baby up and relived some very enticing moments, but considering it seriously was foolish. If anyone ever found out about his offer and the fact I’d even considered it, they would have me certified.

“Jude will focus on getting fit quickly.” It was about the only thing I could think to say and a completely asinine comment, meaning nothing.

Dee shrugged. “He will. My worry is that he’ll go at it too hard and be hyper focused and burn himself out or end up making the injury worse. You know how he can be. Intense.”

“I know. He can. But that could really help him too. He’s been on form while he’s been here. I’ve seen him doing all the right things – what he’s eating and drinking, the training he’s able to do around the injury and he’s doing exactly what he was told about his leg.” I couldn’t fault him. He’d been careful while we’d been away, mindful not to do anything that could put him in a position of hurting himself. He’d also been kind of his usual self too.

Dee stretched out on her lounge. “You’re right. And he’s not like he was three years ago either when he was just a puppy.”

That comment took me aback.

“What do you mean, a puppy?”

Dee laughed and sat up, reaching for her mojito. Rowan had made a couple of jugs full before he’d gone out, although I hadn’t had any yet. “He was always excited – like a puppy. Wherever Rowan was or Nate, he kind of bounded behind them. It was cute. But he’s changed. Grown up, I guess.” She closed her eyes and faced up to the sun. “I’m really looking forward to this time next year being able to plan to be away for Christmas. Somewhere sunny. Somewhere with a pool and warm days. Somewhere there’s no fixture on Boxing Day and Rowan and I can stay up past midnight to see in the New Year.”

For a moment I felt lonely. It’d been a long time since I’d had someone to spend New Year’s Eve with – a couple of years in fact. And it had been with Jude. We’d both dodged out on parties that were being held that evening, all of them over before nine because there had been a game on New Year’s Day and we’d had an early kick off. Jude and I had stayed at mine, binge watching an old English sitcom in between feeling each

other up. We'd ended up breaking my kitchen table, then he'd set his alarm for just before midnight because he'd wanted to see in the New Year while he was in me, which had just been hilarious and kind of sweet at the same time.

"The freedom you'll have. It'll be good." I knew what Dee had sacrificed for her career, all without the same sort of financial benefits and perks that the men's team had. Women's football had grown massively in the last few years, but it was still underfunded compared with the men's game, with some players having to accept second hand football boots off players with sponsorship deals as they were struggling to afford decent ones themselves.

Thankfully, Manchester Athletic had decided that a rising tide floated all boats and had invested significantly in the women's team, paying decent wages and supporting at the grassroots level as well. The women's squad had the same access to the coaches and fitness team that the men's did, meaning I was as heavily involved with their nutrition as I was the men's.

The women were a damn sight easier to work with. They were definitely less temperamental and didn't seem to have the same issues with taking advice as some of the men had. That didn't mean the team didn't have divas – it did. But Dee wasn't one.

"It will. I can't wait." She looked over at me. "I am worried about Jude though."

"Jude's a big boy." A very big boy in fact, the sort that wrecks you for other men. "And he has a good team around him."

"I know. I don't doubt that. But I want him to have what his parents have and then I think he'll feel more like where he should be." She put her glass down on the table and lay back down again.

"What do you mean?" I wished my damned heart would stop racing every time I had a conversation about Jude.

“His parents. They got together when they were young and they’ve been together ever since. You know all this, Neva. They’re at every club party.”

She was right, I did. Jude’s parents were really lovely people. His dad was an amazing dancer and had even been on a Saturday night dancing programme, managing to make it to the semi-finals. Jude had similar moves. His mum was smiley and friendly and had always been welcoming with everyone, including some of the WAGs we knew wouldn’t stick around.

“His parents are special. How many people get together at that age and stay together?” I didn’t know of anyone else who’d managed what they had.

Dee made a noise that sounded like she was about to fall asleep. “I know a few. I remember when I first met them; it was like – goals. It was really good, too, because I’d seen my sister with so many shit men.”

“You have Rowan now. He’s kind of like Jude’s dad and I don’t mean that in a weird way.” I figured I was digging a bit of a hole with that.

Dee laughed, thankfully.

“Rowan’s a good man. He was a manwhore before though – let’s not forget that. Then he grew up.” She shifted again, taking her mojito off the table when she was sitting up. “I think they all grow up eventually. Maybe not all of them, but definitely most. Including Jude.”

“Really? He was with that singer for a couple of months – that looked like it was all for show.” I hadn’t liked that. I couldn’t lie and say I wasn’t a jealous person; I totally was. Seeing him with the woman from the girl band, their photos in the gossip columns and hearing his teammates take the piss out of him had really been difficult, even though it had been years since we’d finished hooking up. Or nearly years. Just under two.

“I think he wanted a girlfriend. Genuinely, he’s been hanging round at either ours or Nate and Amber’s since about Easter. He said to me that he wished he could meet someone to

just be his person like I was Rowan's. It wasn't the right day to say it because Rowan had been a dickhead and bought Toby an electric bike." She shook her head. "When and if we have kids, I'm going to have to block any online shops. He's going to be horrendous."

I couldn't manage not to smile. "Just set rules around it. Have an agreement. He's pretty good when you feel strongly about something." Because Rowan would only ask how high if Dee ever told him to jump.

"I can try that. He'll want to make a list of all the crap he's allowed to buy. I've already seen stables on his search history." She sighed and shook her head. "I really hope we have boys. He'll be a little more rational with them. If he has daughters they're literally going to have him wrapped around their fingers from day one." She looked at me, frowning. "How's the search for Mr Perfect? Any more dates set up for when you get back?"

I shook my head. I hadn't even checked my online dating apps since we'd been away. "I'm going to look at going it alone. I want a baby more than I want a boyfriend."

Dee nodded. "I get that. And you have us. I know we've already said it, but we'll support you." Her eyes turned sly. "You sure there's no one on the team who's caught your eye?"

There was that sinking feeling again, the one I remembered from being at school and knowing that the boy I was crushing on was going out with the most popular girl in our year group.

"No. They're all either in a relationship or too young." Which was true.

Dee shrugged. "Age is just a number, and most 'ballers have to grow up quickly to survive. The average age for a male football player to get married is below average for most men— the management encourages them to settle down so they stay scandal-free, or at least that's the plan. Female footballers are different. They don't want us to get serious because getting serious means pregnancies or pregnancy scares. By they, I mean a minority."

“You’re really ready to finish, aren’t you?” I smiled at my friend. I hadn’t known Dee that well on a personal level before she got together with Rowan. It was after that she got to know Amber and Genny more, and she started spending more time at the club.

“I’m really looking forward to one more season, but yeah, I’m kind of ready to be done. I’ve picked up my coaching badges and I like the idea of being involved in the youth teams, but I’m ready. So’s Rowan.” She carried on talking through their plans, staying far away from single players that I should think about dating, which was helpful.

That didn’t stop me thinking about them though, or one in particular.

NEW YEAR'S EVE, JUST UNDER TWO YEARS AGO.

There was a knock at my door, two clear knocks to be precise. I knew exactly who it was and he was early, which I shouldn't have been surprised about. Jude had gone from being late for almost everything to now taking the military stance of if you weren't ten minutes early, you were late.

This was great in terms of being able to rely on him, but utter shite when I hadn't finished getting ready yet.

Although I had no idea what I was getting ready for. Jude and I had never been out on a date. We'd never been seen together as a couple, because we weren't one, although we'd managed to make up a ton of reasons why we shared a lift home together after a night out or he had to come by mine after training.

No one had found it suspicious so far. There had been no questions asked, not even from Amber, which didn't mean much because she was knee deep in nappies and feeds.

Jude was dressed in thick grey sweatpants and a tight fitted hoodie. He held a box of goodies and wore a lopsided smile that we both knew could get him out of any sort of trouble – with anyone, not just me.

“Happy New Year's Eve.” He walked into my hallway like he owned it, shoulder checking the door closed behind him and walking straight into my kitchen, placing the box on the table.

With his hands now free, his next move was to take hold of me, pulling me close and stealing a kiss.

Jude was the master thief of kisses. He stole them in the open, risking everything to take a taste and grinning smugly when he succeeded. He'd mastered the art of the kiss, knowing when a peck was enough, or messy and needy was required, or long, slow and tender was necessary. A kiss from him could have my underwear drenched and off before I'd even blinked.

At first, I'd wanted to protest his skill level, not sure how he'd managed to acquire those talents and refined them, but after a few nights together, I'd given up, accepting it that just like he had on the pitch, Jude had this natural talent.

"Happy New Year's Eve," I managed to get the words out once I'd caught my breath that his kiss had pinched. "Are you sure you don't want to be at one of the parties?"

He laughed, still holding me. "If I wanted to be at one of those parties, I'd be at one of them."

"Okay." I wrapped my arms around his neck and stole my own kiss, already feeling the need to climb him like a tree and swing off a certain branch. "I feel bad keeping you from your friends."

"I'd rather be with you." There was a quick peck on my lips.

He lifted me up and carried me out of the kitchen to the stairs, my legs wrapping around his waist, giving him all the control here.

"Let's say goodbye to this year in the best way." He pushed my bedroom door open, depositing me on the bed with a bounce, then caging over me. "Then at midnight we can see the New Year in." His mouth dropped to the side of my neck, tender kisses pressing against the skin there.

I was caught between needing to escape, fear being the driver, and stay right where I was. It was too easy to drown in Jude's words and kisses, too easy to lose myself there in the torrent of endorphins he elicited.

Nothing was going to come of this. I was a deeper notch than usual on his bedpost, the older woman box ticked, as well as the woman at his work who broke their balls on the regular.

I hadn't broken his balls; I'd done the opposite and he knew it.

"Your fucking tits are amazing." He already had my top and bra off, his tongue flicking over a nipple.

I was melting from the inside, already embarrassed at how wet he was going to find me.

“I swear I spend half of my life thinking about these unless I’m with you. You’ve wrecked me.” He switched to the other breast, mouth dipping to the nipple there, taking it in his mouth and pulling on it, just enough pinch to zing a shot of electricity to my centre.

I moaned; it was impossible not to. Jude’s hands landed on my hips, pulling down the leggings I’d quickly pulled on when he knocked on my door. Really, I shouldn’t have bothered getting dressed. A robe would’ve been enough.

He was still dressed and I was naked now, laid out in front of him like a spread at a banquet. His eyes feasted over my skin, lingering over my tits, between my legs, back to my eyes.

“You’re beautiful. I can’t believe you let me do this with you. How did I get so lucky?”

He’d said those words before, more than once. They’d sent shivers up my spine before and this time was no different.

“I think you’re delusional.”

He shook his head. “No. That insults both of us.” Jude pulled off his hoodie and T-shirt in one go, exposing a chest that was very much all man. He was taller than your average outfield player, and broader. Rather than keeping to just lean muscle, he’d bulked up just a little, making it harder to knock him off the ball.

Making it harder for me to keep my eyes off him.

“I think you’re stunning. I spent two years looking at you every time you were in the same room as me and I wondered what the hell I had to do to make you notice me, because I didn’t think that a woman like you would ever look my way.” He crawled lower.

My centre ached, my lower back lifted in anticipation of where his mouth was headed.

“I didn’t know you were looking.” I’d never noticed.

“Why would you?” He licked at my stomach, the flick of his tongue making my toes curl in anticipation of where he’d do that next. “You have a squad of players to take control over, and I’m one of the pains in everyone’s arses.”

“No, you’re not.” I breathed the words out as he gave a long lick over my pussy, my legs parting wider. “Everyone loves you.”

He looked up at me as he started to devour between my legs, his eyes staying on mine as he licked and tasted, his tongue working magic as he flicked at my clit.

I lifted myself up on my hands, watching him through glazed eyes as my body became pliant and needy, completely at his mercy.

The boyish expression he usually wore had been replaced with one that was nothing short of deadly. This was the same look he had when he was determined to win a match, focused on one goal. Right now, that goal was me.

I came hard and forcefully, Jude’s hands the only thing that stopped my hips from bucking up off the mattress.

He didn’t stop, his mouth becoming softer, less rushed until my orgasm subsided, leaving me with the need to have him inside me, urgently.

“I want you to fuck me.” I must look like a wanton woman, lying spent on the bed, naked, still asking for more.

The devil smiled, kneeling up on the mattress, slowly pushing down his sweats. His cock pressed against the material, looking like it was trying to break free.

My nipples hardened again, a new wave of need surging through my body, directed at where I wanted Jude most.

His grin was hungry, his movements too slow as he pushed down his sweats, ridding himself of them, his cock erect and huge.

My legs parted more, giving him a view that he took, his eyes darkening.

“I need a condom.” He fisted his cock, the pre-cum glistening at the tip.

Part of me wanted to flip myself over and crawl to him, to take his cock greedily in my mouth and feel him at the back of my throat, but I was too selfish, wanting him inside me. “Bedside table.” I lazily pointed to which one.

We’d never not used a condom. I knew Jude wasn’t sleeping with anyone else – I knew I was the only secret he’d ever kept, or so it seemed – but I wasn’t on any birth control. In the last few months, I’d spent the days before my period was due in a state of half-anxiety, wanting it to arrive.

And also not wanting.

Which wasn’t fair.

He nodded, reaching over to the bedside table and pulling open a drawer, one he knew well. He took a foil square, opening it carefully before sheathing himself, covering his cock with a gossamer layer.

I hated using them, for many reasons, none of which I’d explained to Jude. They stopped me from feeling him – all of him; they stopped me from becoming pregnant; they made it feel less intimate. All of those were valid.

They also stopped him from getting too close.

Jude positioned his cock at my entrance, lifting one of my legs with each hand. My body clenched as he pushed inside of me, welcoming the intrusion, the movement, the friction.

Our moans mingled, a few early fireworks crackling outside which made me laugh and him shake his head. I watched him as his body loomed over mine, taking possession of everything I was for these few minutes.

He knew me well enough by now to instinctively know what to do to make me come. The rhythm, the speed, the force, how to tilt his hips to hit the spot that I knew would get me to that finish line.

I knew my body better now in my thirties than I had ten years ago. I had more confidence in it, fewer hang ups, knew

what I liked and was happy to try new things without feeling like I was auditioning for a porn film.

What had surprised me was how easily Jude had learned all that about me too, and how upfront he was about what he liked, using his words to tell me what he enjoyed, what he wanted to try and asking me what felt good.

Maybe his generation was just made differently.

Or maybe it was just him.

I watched his face, his blue eyes focused only on me, his body tensing as he moved, holding back his own ending while I found mine.

It came easily, a tip of his hips, his eyes on my tits, his rough words telling me how fucking good I felt wrapped around his cock – I came hard again, a rush of wetness and hard, fast throbs.

Jude said my name, his head tipped back and his cock thickening. I felt him pulse, his release emptying into the condom, before he lowered himself down and kissed me again, long, slow kisses while he stayed inside me, my legs wrapping around his waist, holding him there.

This felt more right than it should.

This felt like heartbreak.

CHAPTER 7

Neva



TWO MONTHS INTO THE SEASON.

NOTHING GOOD CAME from an immediate summons to Genevieve's office, especially when you walked in there and saw Guy in there too. It was now October; the season was two months old and we'd had a shaky start, missing Jude's presence on the pitch and a semi-unsettled team with the new transfers and the knowledge that Rowan was leaving at the end of the season.

Change was brewing.

I took a seat opposite her desk, refixing my glasses and hoping that I didn't look like I'd just had a minor argument with one of kids who'd just been promoted to the first team squad and now thought he knew everything life could ever teach at the tender age of eighteen.

My reputation as a ballbuster was firmly in place. There was nothing like a packed dressing room for a good dressing down.

"Thank you for getting here so quickly." Genny glanced at Guy. It looked like the two of them were currently fulfilling their peace convention. "We need a favour."

My stomach flipped. I had a feeling I knew what this was about.

"What is this favour?" I didn't try to keep the sigh out of my voice. I was busy, like everyone else was busy. This year I had two assistants who were both competent – one very much so – and while I lost time in managing them, they saved me time with the rest of my previous workload.

I was enjoying it. I was also able to keep Jude at a distance just in case he renewed his offer.

"Jude Whittingham." Guy folded his arms and sat on the corner of Genny's desk, a move I knew she hated. When he was gone, she'd get out the antibacterial wipes and disinfect

the spot where his backside had been. “He’s got another four months to go before he’s ready to return, and by return that could be almost match fit or it could be he’s still got a ways to go depending on how it’s healing and how he’s managing it.”

“I heard it was healing well.” It was my job to be aware of players’ injury and look at how diet could support recovery, including altering macros or calories intake depending on their activity levels and what was happening with them. Even if I hadn’t been more curious about Jude, I would’ve known about it professionally.

That was my excuse for non-stalker-like behaviour anyway.

“It is.” Genny tapped a pen against her desk. “He’s doing exactly what he should, but he’s bored - ”

“I wouldn’t call it bored.” Guy shook his head at her. “That’s not what Clark said.”

Clark was our senior psychotherapist, or chief head doctor as Rowan called him.

Genny gave a very dramatic sigh. “Okay, so Jude’s missing having a main focus which is potentially resulting in behaviours that are seeking similar highs to what he’d get on match days.”

“Makes sense. Risk taking behaviour?” That would be Jude all over – at least the Jude from years ago. People often did revert back to type when life-changing situations occurred.

Genny frowned and shook her head. “No. He won’t do anything to risk his recovery, but he is risking pissing people off.”

“What do you mean?” And why hadn’t I known about it?

Guy’s smile was genuine, some amusement there. “He’s trying to help. He confided in me that he’s dabbled with online gambling and realised that he gets addicted easily.”

“How much did he lose?” I realised I needed to apply volume control.

“He didn’t. He won just short of twenty grand and then considered losing it all again, so he donated it to charity.” Guy smiled again. “I’m worried he’s going to implode.”

“He’s young, he’s - ”

“Not that young, Neva.” Genny interrupted me. “He’s mid-twenties and an adult not a kid.” She gave me a glare that could’ve frozen a dragon. “I know he’s been around the club since he was a kid, but he’s not a child.”

“So how do you think he’s going to implode?” And what was I meant to do about it? I was the food girl, not a psychotherapist.

“He needs something to focus on, something healthy, where he feels he can make a difference. Clark spoke to him at length about what he’s interested in and he mentioned food and nutrition, getting into schools and colleges to talk about it.” Genny gave me a smile that was potent. “We like this idea.”

“I’m sure you do.” The daggers I shot back were melted by her glare of ice.

“There’s so much on social media now about fad diets and how to hack your health – we know a lot of it is consumerism and the pressure to look a certain way,” Guy folded his arms and looked like he was about to jump on his soap box. He and I had enjoyed many conversations about how diets and health lifestyles were sold, made over-complicated in order for companies to gain financially, when actually, it wasn’t as scientifically complicated as they made out. Unfortunately, will-power and motivation weren’t for sale.

“Agreed.” I nodded, happy not to regurgitate our last conversation on this.

“So as a focus, we want Jude to front a campaign about healthy eating and lifestyle habits, with you as support. Potentially you could be involved and front it alongside him, which might be a good way to promote women working in the sports industry, or you could just support with the technical knowledge. Ezra in our marketing team will oversee things

and Gill in the education department will advise and sort the links with schools out.” Genny sat back, tucking the pencil she’d been tapping behind her ear.

I shot her another glare, knowing it would make no difference whatsoever. We’d had a conversation a few weeks ago where I’d been having a rant about social media, the use of filters and how they were exacerbating poor self-esteem and unhealthy relationships with food in young people – or even older people.

I’d also talked about using the club’s platform to educate around healthy eating habits without just focusing on the footballers, so there was no argument I could have around this.

“Sounds good. I take it you want Jude to lead on it? Give him something to focus on?” I gave Guy my best smile.

He nodded. “That’s part of it. I also think it’s what we should be doing as well. Jude can still focus on his rehab and recovery as well as having this project. I appreciate you still have a job to do as well, and I don’t want to significantly increase your workload.”

“I actually think work in the community’s included in my job description.” I had done bits before, but not for a while because I hadn’t had the capacity, especially with the growth of the women’s team.

“Excellent.” Guy slid off Genny’s desk. “I’ll leave it to you and Jude to touch base. Ezra has this project on the top of their priority list, so you’ll hear from them too. I’ll catch both of you later.”

He strode out of the office, not even looking back.

“I fucking hate that man,” Genny said, while he was definitely still in earshot. “If he wasn’t such a brilliant manager I’d be campaigning to get him out of my face permanently.”

I didn’t say anything. Amber and I had long since come to the conclusion that Genny and Guy were having hate sex on the regular. Both were single. Both were married to their jobs. Both were gorgeous in their own ways. I’d seen them argue

passionately, launch things across the room – although not at each other, and I'd also seen the steamiest glances exchanged.

“How not okay is Jude?” Because Guy wasn't my issue right now.

Genny shrugged. “He gets himself, you know? Having the ADHD diagnosis has made him understand why he did some of that stupid shit when he was younger. But the hyper-focusing is part of it too and the obsessive tendencies. He's kind of got that obsessing over getting better quicker under control, but when he said he needed something else – I felt pretty proud of him.”

“So he's not in a bad place, he could just end up there easily?”

Genny nodded. “That sums it up. And he mentioned wanting to work with you. He's interested in the nutrition side of it and we both know he's always been pretty easy for you to work with in terms of eating right.”

“Mainly because he's always been so upfront about cheat meals, which meant it was easy to build them in. Me telling him off was a game – you know that, don't you? He liked the idea of being naughty and he got that thrill from it. Or he'd do extra in the gym or go for another run and get a win there.” Jude's psychology once he'd had that diagnosis had been easier to unpick, mainly because he'd been able to join the dots himself. I didn't always think that a diagnosis was helpful, as for some people, it could be traumatising to receive a label, but for others it gave them a reason and broke a cycle of self-blame.

“I get that. He's always been honest. That made it easier for me when he did cock up and the media found out about it. I knew exactly what had happened before they found out so we could usually fix it.” She eyeballed me again. “Are you okay with working with him? It's not a babysitting job – he doesn't need that. This could actually be fun.”

“It's fine. I can work with this.” This being the concept and not actually Jude. “Jude mentioned me?”

She nodded. “He did. Any problem with you two? I know you don’t usually socialise.”

I took a deep breath. “No problem at all.”

Jude: We have the same project.

Me: We do. I hear this is your idea. Where do you want to start?

Jude: Meet me at Kitty’s Café? Can you do this afternoon?

That didn’t surprise me. Once he had an idea, he had to follow up on it – urgently. He’d been like that most nights when we’d been together, super focused on me, determined, a perfectionist. Each time he’d made me feel like I was the very centre of his world at that moment and I’d basked in it.

It was the same way he focused when playing football. It would be the same for this project.

Me: I can do this afternoon. I have a session with Nate at one, so how about two?

Jude: Perfect. I have a ton of ideas to go through. I think I’m on the right lines with them.

Me: Sounds good.

The rest of the morning and Nate’s session went well, which was as I expected. Nate didn’t really need me to tell him how to plan his food; he was one of the most experienced players in the squad and he knew what worked for him and what didn’t. What he was having to get used to was a slight change of diet because of wear and tear and age. Goalkeepers generally peaked in their mid-thirties, which Nate was, his experience

and ability to read the game making him the best in the league and England's first choice. He wanted to keep it that way, having no desire to retire like Rowan.

Jude was waiting for me at a table towards the back of Kitty's Café, a green smoothie in front of him and a mug of tea. He had a tablet on the table, and was using a stylus to write something on it, pausing to look up at me as soon as I entered, as if he had some sixth sense to know I was there.

"Kitty's got your favourite smoothie ready." The words rushed out of his mouth. "I texted her before to let her know you were coming in."

I couldn't help but smile. Garbling Jude had always been cute; the words just fell out of his mouth.

"Thank you." I took the seat opposite him. This wasn't going to be too bad. He was focused on something else now and probably wouldn't even remember his offer. "What've you got in terms of ideas so far?"

He nodded, his gaze still on me.

"I went and saw Ezra this morning to get some ideas off them about marketing. They said we should look to use all the platforms, but especially video ones, which I can front. They also mentioned about doing a Q and A session on socials too, with me and you so we can talk about food and the idea of balance – no specific diet bashing. I'm also getting both the teams to show photos of off-season bodies, so how we look when we're not at our peak as athletes. I wondered about a section on the club's website for recipes, and maybe example food plans – feel good food plans – so what to eat to stop you from feeling bloated, or how to balance." He finally breathed. "Sorry, that was word vomit, wasn't it?"

I chuckled. "It was, but it was good word vomit. How do you want to organise this? This isn't a short-term project."

He nodded. "I know. I was wondering about linking it in with a focus on foodbanks and eating healthy on a budget." His face dropped. "I went and did a hospital visit the other day and there was this kid there, I think he was about twelve. He

was under thirty kilos and he was obsessed with being a body builder, which I know doesn't make sense. He wanted to watch videos of people training and then chefs cooking healthy stuff. The nurse mentioned that his mum wasn't flush with cash and didn't buy healthy food so he wouldn't eat it."

"Disordered eating. Possibly linked with other things going on. He's in the right place to get the help he needs though." I could feel Jude's worry for the kid. "We can definitely look at making everything accessible. I think it would be worth showing a day in your life when you're mid-season, compared with the off season, and rehabbing an injury."

For the next half an hour, we listed ideas, sorting them into categories which were evolving into mini-projects, some of which could be bounced straight over to Ezra to put them together on the club's website or as material for schools and colleges.

Jude was easy to work with as usual. Enthusiastic, positive, quick. He didn't pretend to know about everything, but he wasn't shy about his ideas and asking questions either.

"How do you want to oversee this?" I sat back in my chair, aware that a couple of women were looking over at us, which wasn't unusual. Kitty's Café was known for having Manchester Athletic footballers hanging around there, which attracted autograph and wedding ring hunters alike.

"I can make a schedule for when we're doing different things, like the social media interviews. I can book time in with you to draft content for the website – we don't need to worry about presentation or grammar because Ezra said they'd oversee that. Fundraising wise, Genny's trying to get a meeting with a publisher about the recipe book, but she wants you to be lead on that, so it's based on nutrition, so you'll be the expert and I'll be the - " he searched for the word.

"Face of it?"

"No, because I think they want you on this too. Pairing the two of us together. I can see how it works. It's an opportunity

for you to branch out what you do, too.” He kind of looked hopeful.

“I’m not interested in creating a fad diet plan.” I raised an eyebrow. “But I guess this is exactly not that.”

“True. And we aim it at normal people. Students, teenagers who might be cooking for themselves, older people who have a budget to stick to.” He looked at his notes.

I could feel his passion for this. It made me curious.

“What’s got you with this? Not being funny, but you grew up with an international footballer for a father – you didn’t experience any money worries and you’ve always had access to nutritional advice.” It was blunt but true.

He shrugged. “Being in the schools. A few things I’ve read recently – I’ve had time to look through stuff. I’ve been trying to understand more around the science of what I eat as well; what I can do to help recover and be in the best shape I can. I don’t want to take ages to get back to match-fit.”

“You should’ve contacted me. I could’ve given you more stuff to read.” The words were out before I’d thought about them.

Jude studied me, his eyes full of curiosity and some distrust. “I think you know why I didn’t.”

“This is work related.” I shook my head, feeling shitty. I had spent the rest of the holiday at the chateau avoiding him without being obvious to other people. He would’ve more than noticed though.

Jude sat back, stretching his arms behind his back, his head tipping back, lifting his chin. “I didn’t want to make you feel awkward.”

“Let’s put it behind us.”

“Just to clarify what do you mean by ‘it’?”

I squirmed. This was possibly a moment where I was being backed into a corner. “Your offer. What happened with us before.”

“So what do you mean by putting it behind us? Forgetting it? Moving on? What does that mean for you?”

“Forgetting it.”

He shook his head. “No can do, Neva. What we had – and it wasn’t just hook-ups, whatever you tell yourself – was the longest relationship I’ve had and the best sex. I’m not going to forget that, even if I wanted to.”

“Moving on then. Let’s acknowledge what happened and move on from that.” I felt like I was trying to barter with a merchant for a priceless vase.

He nodded once and folded his arms. It was obvious that his biceps hadn’t lost any muscle tone.

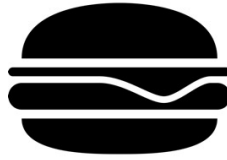
“I’ve acknowledged it and moved on.” He didn’t take his eyes off mine.

“Moved onto what?”

His grin was worrying. “You’ll find out in due course.”

CHAPTER 8

Jude



IT WASN'T the first time I'd appeared in the online gossip columns and it probably wouldn't be the last, but it was the first for Neva.

I found her waiting for me outside the physio room where I'd been scheduled with Amber, her expression only being described as stressed.

"Did you see it?" She folded her arms over her chest. "It must've been those girls in Kitty's Café."

"Probably." I put a hand on her lower back and guided her along the corridor to a room which I knew wasn't in use but was unlocked – I'd used it this morning to make a phone call to my agent.

Surprisingly, she didn't fight me. I'd expected her to push my hand off her at the very least, or get a barrage of bad words. Clearly the gossip column had bothered her.

I closed the door behind me. Neva leaned against the physio's bed. "You know that gossip doesn't make any difference? It would happen anyway because we'll be seen working together with this project." The club would push the initiative on their media platforms and it could hit local news, if not wider. After the disaster of a high profile relationship I'd become a meal ticket for paparazzi – I just needed to say thank you to someone in a shop and I was in the middle of a whirlwind romance.

Neva nodded but without conviction. "I doubt it. I'm not in your usual girlfriends' age bracket."

I laughed because it was the only thing I could do. “There are pop stars dating women more than ten years older than them and not that much is said. Our age difference is a bigger deal to you than to anyone else.”

She didn’t say anything, her arms still folded, her expression tight.

“Neva, the only person who’s bothered by being older is you.” Maybe I was pushing my luck.

She shook her head. “Maybe.” She looked at me differently. “I want things at a different pace than you.”

I shrugged. “I have to meet with Ezra, so I’m not going to get into that with you. But the photos and gossip – don’t read it, don’t look for it. If you respond, they’ll make more of it. Say nothing and something else will become the dish of the day.”

“Okay. I’m sorry if it’s embarrassed you.” She brushed at an imaginary speck of dust off her jacket.

“What?” I took a step backwards. “What the fuck would’ve embarrassed me?”

“You’ve been associated with me.”

“Oh, fuck that. That’s the most stupid thing I’ve heard and I’ve spent the morning with Rowan and Matty trying to draw penises on each other.” We’d learnt that neither had any artistic skills.

I walked to the door. I didn’t participate in people’s pity parties.

“It’s just - ”

“It’s just nothing, Neva. You’re amazing. You’re intelligent, driven, curious, kind, sexy and you broke my heart when you ended it between us. Don’t try and make it seem like I would ever be embarrassed to be seen with you when it was clearly always the fucking other way round.” I left the room and closed the door, resisting every urge to slam it behind me.

I went home. I avoided Ryan and Nicky's invitation to hang out and play pool, and dodged a call from my agent which I knew was about a deal from a sportswear company who wanted me to put my name to a new range they were bringing out that I wasn't really interested in. I didn't check my social media or my emails, because I didn't want to see anything about me and Neva.

I went home and walked straight into my kitchen, faffing with the camera I'd bought and the stand, setting it up like I'd practiced a couple of nights ago.

I needed to focus on something productive, immerse myself in something that wasn't how I felt right now and what I actually wanted to say. Four years ago I'd have not let the conversation with Neva go. I'd have stayed there, arguing, persuading, getting more and more involved, more invested and saying things that I couldn't take back.

I'd learned now to walk away. Think. Focus. Strategise. Do something else that distracted me and gave me sensory feedback, which would help me to regulate. Everyone with ADHD was different; there were certain characteristics that people recognised, but a heap of different diversities were there too. With me, I needed sensory stimulation: weighted blankets, lifting weights, movement – all those helped stimulate my brain in a positive way, as did having something of interest I could focus on and get my happy chemicals in that way.

At the moment it was cooking.

I wasn't a good cook. I wasn't any sort of cook. But since I'd started to recover from the injury, I'd become interested in how big a part diet could play in terms of recovery, along with the physio and strength and conditioning work. That meant learning to cook too, because why not try everything?

I'd thought it would be fun to record my attempts, figuring they could be used for social media content or something on the website if I could look less idiotic at some point, hence the camera set-up. I looked into the lens and started to introduce myself and what I was going to do.

I had my ingredients out and ready, everything to hand, as well as one of Neva's simple meal recipes that also explained what macros it contained. As I chopped and prepared veg and herbs, I talked through what training I'd done today and how physio had looked, and, in the layman's terms in which I was fluent, I related how my food was connected to that.

I was completely oblivious to the man sat on my sofa, partially watching me in between checking something on his phone.

"Oh, look. I seem to have a visitor. It's Jesse! Jesse, come up here and try some of this." I managed to hold off being too over the top about it, knowing that I could edit this out – definitely the expletives that Jesse came out with.

"Seriously? You want me up there?"

He gestured to himself and then to my kitchen worktop.

I nodded. "Tell us what your menu looks like today."

He frowned but came up anyway, looking totally awkward as I asked him questions about his training and what his typical diet looked like. It was the sort of content I'd talked about with Ezra and while this video might not make the cut, it was good practice.

I turned the camera off after Jesse and I had finished tasting what had just come out of my oven – it was a quick meal to prep and cook, no more than fifteen minutes.

"What the fuck are you doing, man?" He frowned at me. "Seriously? You planning to audition for some bake off programme or something?"

I laughed; I had no idea how to bake a cake. "No, I'm trying out content for this thing I'm doing about healthy eating."

He nodded. "Cool, I forgot about that. That's what Neva's helping you with, isn't it."

"Yep. By the way, how the fuck did you get in here?" I'd set my security when I got it, which meant Jesse had the codes

just because he'd been hanging out there a lot around that time.

“You haven't changed anything from when I stayed the other week.” He picked up an apple out of the fruit bowl and bit into it. “I knew the code and I've still got the fob for the gates.”

I shrugged. This was fair enough. Jesse was one of the most private people I knew so there was no way he was ever going to tell anyone anything, including codes. “What are you here for?”

He stifled a yawn. “Sorry, man. It's been a long day. Just to chill. And check you're okay – you left the complex like a rat on speed.”

I raised my eyebrows. “A rat on speed?”

Jesse shrugged. “Have you seen how quick a rat moves? Imagine if it had taken speed.”

“I'd rather not. Everything's okay anyway. Thanks for checking up.” I pulled ingredients from the fridge to blitz a smoothie for both of us.

“So what's going on? How's the injury?” He took a seat on one of the barstools. “I heard it was healing well.”

“It is. It's doing okay. Everything's on track for me to be back after Christmas.” I shrugged and paused for a second while the blades did their thing, then poured the mix into a couple of glasses. “Here.”

“Thanks. Is this one of Neva's?”

I nodded. Of course it fucking was. “I'm aware there can be setbacks with the tear but I'm doing what I've been told so fingers crossed I'll be back for the game on New Year's Day. You lot could fucking do with me sooner.” The team's form at the moment had been hit and miss. We were fifth in the league and we'd had a couple of losses to teams we really should've beaten. Morale in the dressing room was low and a couple of new players hadn't gelled.

“We could, but we’d rather have you back permanently so don’t fucking rush it and end up reinjuring it. That’s the worst thing you can do.” He shook his head. “But if your injury’s doing well, why didn’t you hang around?”

Jesse could be far too perceptive. “Just wanted to get back here. I want to get a bank of content ready for this project.”

He nodded. “That you’re doing with Neva.”

“That I’m doing with Neva. Food’s kind of her thing.” I fucking hated Jesse.

“Neva who you’ve wanted to bang since she joined the club.” He kept his eyes on me while he sipped the smoothie.

I wished I’d added a laxative to his.

“That’s not true.”

“Judith, you’ve always been the worst fucking poker player because you cannot lie. So don’t bother. In fact, I’ll rephrase it – you were banging her and she got cold feet which was why you started the Epic Sulk Era.” He put his glass down. “Not bad that,” he said, looking at the glass.

There wasn’t much point defending myself because I was a shit liar and I’d known Jesse too long for him to not see right through me anyway.

“What makes you say that?” Don’t defend, just deflect. That was probably the best strategy here.

“Jerrica is Amber’s sister-in-law, therefore they like to drink wine and talk. All the talk.” He shook his head. “Amber is best friends with Neva.”

“Neva told Amber?” I slapped my forehead as soon as I said it. “Unpick that later. What do you think happened?”

Jesse grinned smugly, the bastard.

“So something did happen with you and Neva? Get in there, son.” He was still grinning.

“Look, Jerrica likes your face for some reason, if you don’t want it to be rearranged then quit chatting shit.” My patience was not what it normally was, and normally it was pretty bad.

“Sorry.” He looked anything but. “Neva never said anything. It was when Amber was pregnant and they didn’t spend a ton of time together, but Amber and Genny, apparently, figured that Neva was seeing someone, but didn’t say anything about it. It was the same time you stopped shagging every female supporter between the ages of nineteen and thirty, so we knew something was going on – not necessarily with Neva though. Then you got all moody and stopped with the hooking up and started trying relationships. It’s been interesting watching you.” Jesse’s grin this time was marginally less irritating. “My boy grew up.”

“Fuck off.”

That seemed the best way to sum it up.

“Seriously, Judith, I saw how you and Neva avoided each other like you were both contaminated with sewage the second half of the break in France. It was amusing as fuck.” He chuckled, obviously entertained by the whole thing. “I did wonder what’d happened.”

I shook my head. There was no way I was going to go into details with anyone. Jesse wasn’t a gossip; he was a fucking vault when it came to keeping things to himself. He was one of the most private people I knew.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

I shook my head. “There’s nothing to tell. She’s made it clear she thinks I’m too young for her and that’s that.” I shrugged. “If that’s how she feels, that’s how she feels.”

He nodded. “Yep. Agreed. You good working with her on this project thing you’ve got going on?”

“I’m fine with it.” Because while I wouldn’t keep badgering her to change her mind, I’d make damn sure she knew exactly what she was missing.

NEW YEAR'S EVE, LESS THAN TWO YEARS AGO...

We'd managed to eat and dress, although the clothes we'd put back on gave easy access. Neva's couch was new and firm, which made it a hell of a lot easier to relax on, knowing I was going to put my body through hell in the game tomorrow. I would be up against a defender who carried a huge grudge against me, which meant he was going to make my life as painful as possible. It was also forecast to piss it down, so I'd have a slippery pitch to contend with too.

Neva was curled up between my legs, her head resting on my chest. She was relaxed and soft, her oversized sweater drowning her, baggy sweatpants covering her legs, the waistband loose enough for me to slip my hand down.

I loved her being like this. There was a vulnerability to Neva that she kept hidden behind a fence of fierce, the determined sergeant major who found it almost impossible to crack a smile some days. But here, like this, she was peace and softness personified.

We were watching a music programme, live bands set up to bring in the New Year. Already fireworks were exploding in the distance, heard above the sound of the music and the crackling of Neva's open fire.

I twirled her hair around my fingers, the warmth of her body seeping into mine. After midnight, I had every intention of peeling off those clothes and being inside her in front of her fireplace, a fantasy I'd had since the first time I'd visited her house for that McDonald's take out.

I'd set the year off how I hoped it would go.

"Have you made a New Year's resolution?" She shifted her head and looked up at me, eyes sleepy and hooded.

I had, but it wasn't one I wanted to share. There was another I could though. "To be less impulsive. I'm getting better at it – I just want to carry that on. What about you?"

She smiled, shifting herself onto her belly on top of me. "To start working towards the things I really want."

"What are those?" My heart stepped up its beat.

"A family. I've been so jealous of Amber having a baby, which wasn't fair on her. I need to think about how I make that happen." She nuzzled my chest.

I wondered if she could feel the now rapid pounding of my heart.

"I could help practice with that, you know – how you make a baby." The idea was there now but I wasn't going to say any more in case it spilled out of my mouth. A little girl or boy walking between me and Neva, holding our hands as they tried not to stumble. I could teach them football or cricket or to read. To be brave and fearless and kind. The sort of stuff my parents taught me.

Her laugh was gentle. "You can help me practice trying for one, but that's it."

The countdown to midnight started on the TV, the audience joining in with the presenter. Fireworks had already started in force, the booms and bangs muffled through the windows and shutters.

Neva edged up to me, her mouth on mine as midnight struck and we entered a new year. I moved both my hands up to the sides of her head, taking some control of the kiss, tasting the wine she'd drunk. My cock hardened, my body responding to hers, the kiss becoming more frantic, filled with unspoken words because our mouths were too busy for them to spill out and spoil what this was.

I pulled her sweater over her head, leaving her naked from the waist up, her full tits in my hands as soon as I could, toying with them in the way that I knew she responded to best. She broke our kiss, tipping back her head and giving me better access, my lips fixing on her collar bone and then trailing down from there to her breast, flicking my tongue over her nipple and teasing it into a tight peak, before tormenting it with my mouth.

She pulled at my hoodie, separating my mouth from her body.

“Not fair. You should be naked too.”

I lost my top, then my sweats, moving us both onto the floor without any injuries. Her sweats came off, our bodies ending up on the soft rug in front of the fire, just like I'd hoped for, Neva straddling me, angling my cock at her entrance before sinking down, my back flat against the rug, the warmth of the fire nothing compared to the warmth from her.

She was tight and slick and warm and wet, everything I fantasized about far too often. This was my New Year's resolution – being inside her more often, being with her, stepping out of the shadows and making this official.

I let her ride me until she found her release, having that control while I watched her, nipples hard, chest flushed, head tipping back. I palmed her tit, lifted my head to take my mouth back to it and heard her moan, her hands pushing against my shoulders as she sought her release.

Her pussy pulsed around my dick, her movements becoming erratic as she came. I flipped her over onto her back, intending to spend the first part of this year buried inside her.

“Good girl,” I muttered the words into her ear as her legs wrapped around my waist, my cock still impaling her. “Coming for me like that. Let me give you another.”

I braced myself over her, my pace slow and steady, lifting a hand so I could slide it down her body and brush against her clit.

Her whimper told me she thought she couldn't. “Give me another orgasm, Neva. Then I can fuck you properly.”

Her hips were trying to buck, the sensitivity of that spot with the slight movement from my fingers and the deep slow thrusts of my cock taking her easily back up to that peak.

She broke again, soaking my hand which I fucking loved. I moved my hand away, supporting my own weight and starting

to move quicker inside her. Deeper. Harder. Searching for my own ending.

It wasn't until I exploded inside her that I realised I hadn't used a condom.

CHAPTER 9

Neva



Marianne123: They look so cute together!

LivvyHearts: #Couplegoals

I love Jude Whitty: What should be their couple name – Nede? Or Juva?

Hotbabe20: Jude! You should do this with me!

Marielle001028183: I'm hot and horny – come see me on OnlyFans

LizzyBettyBe: Is he actually with her? He could do so much better.

JulieJuJu: This is so true – I've spent so much money on diets.

CliffoSalford: Jude the team needs you. Get off this shit and get training.

I love Jude Whitty: @CliffoSalford – you get this is all about how he's recovering? Arsehole.

TaylorNoHair: @CliffoSalford – you realise that training would fuck up the injury?

CliffoSalford: Just saying, poncing about doing this is avoiding the real work.

Hotbabe20: Are these two together for real? They have chemistry! They're so hot!

Marianne123: I love her hair. And her skin. If this is what healthy eating does, I need to bin my fast food apps!!!!xxx

I REALLY SHOULDN'T HAVE LOOKED

at the comments from the live piece Jude and I had done on social media, but the devil got the better of me. There were thousands of them, too many to read through, which was probably a good thing. The media team at the club used technology to scan for any key words that suggested a threat or hate speech and, as I hadn't had any communication from them, I assumed everything was okay.

What was there was speculation about Jude and me. There were comments about my appearance – most of which were positive. There were one or two mentions of my boobs and how they had to be fake – they were not but this wasn't something I'd be taking to social media to explain because I didn't care whether people thought they were fake or not.

Jude knew they weren't.

Which wasn't an appropriate thought because it didn't matter what Jude thought.

Or that was what I was telling myself.

What surprised me most about the comments and the video was how they were right about the chemistry we had. Our conversation – because that was how we'd decided to do it; he interviewed me about how his diet plan compared to mine, and to someone who wasn't training to compete for anything but wanted to look good – had been easy. We'd bantered, probably flirted, joked, high-fived at the end. All of that had felt good and Ezra had been thrilled with it.

I was too. I was also confused.

My body sang when I was near Jude. I laughed more. I found it easier to smile. He stopped me from being too serious and living inside of my head.

Twenty times yesterday I'd wanted to bring up his offer. The one he'd taken off the table because of me and the doubts that I had about him. I wasn't sure why those doubts were there.

"Therein lies the madness. Stop looking at those comments." Amber sat down next to me. "Your live was great. You looked fab, you sounded even better. I heard Ezra saying they'd never had so much interest after something like that before. There's even an article in one of the papers today about how it raised important questions without pissing on anyone else's parade."

I nodded. "We were careful not to bash anything. Groups that support each other with weight loss can be so beneficial. We made sure we made that point – just that you didn't need to pay a subscription to do it."

"And you and Jude were very, very hawt too. And I mean 'hawt' not just hot." She fanned herself. "Nate got lucky after I watched you two together."

"That is wrong on so many levels." I shook my head at her. "Seriously."

She looked at me curiously. "He likes you. It was so obvious."

I didn't know what to say because I kind of knew that already. "He's a good guy." He was. Even after my semi-sulk in the physio department a few weeks ago, he hadn't been anything other than friendly and professional towards me. He'd stayed away from any potentially difficult conversations, but I'd caught him looking at me in a way that was more than friendly.

I hadn't hated it.

"You make it sound like I'm thirteen. *That boy likes you. Do you want to be his girlfriend?*" I shook my head. "I'm not looking for a partner anymore. I just need to aim straight for the goal and get pregnant."

"Why don't you take Oliver for a few nights? That might change your mind." She smiled sweetly. "In fact, have him for

a week. Then you'll definitely be happy being child-free."

We both knew that wouldn't be the case but I got her sentiment. "Is he being a little turd?"

"Yep. The terrible twos have started over night. Seriously, over night. Even Nate nearly lost his patience when he was still awake at two this morning and yelling out of his cot." She rubbed her face and pulled out a smile. "Are you enjoying working with Jude?"

"He's good fun." Which was true, plus another obvious statement.

Amber sighed and studied me. "I really wish you'd trust me sometimes. You can tell me if something's going on. You've been really distant since we came back from France and that was months ago now."

"I just don't want to give you anything else to be concerned about." I'd learned to deal with shit myself, that it wasn't fair to burden someone else with it. That was why I'd avoided relationships; I'd never wanted to have to rely on someone to support me. I wanted to do it myself and be independent.

"I'm more concerned that you won't tell me. I might not be able to help, but I can at least sympathise. I know you want a baby and it's not straightforward because you're not in a relationship – unless there is something going on." She eyeballed me. "Something's going on."

I didn't usually share shit that had happened. There was no point. And he'd taken the offer off the table.

"Jude offered to be the father." It came out anyway.

Amber sat up a little straighter and put her coffee down. "Come again? No, you don't need to repeat it. I heard you. Jude – our Jude – offered to be the father."

"He did. When we were in France. I don't think the offer stands anymore." Which I was stupidly sad about.

"Okay." Amber shook her head as if she was trying to connect her brain up. "Was it like a co-parent thing or a sperm

donation or what? What was the fine print?"

"We never got that far talking about it. He would've wanted to be in the baby's life. It's Jude, there would be no way he wouldn't be involved." I'd seen him with Toby yesterday, giving him coaching tips before a kids' game. He'd been patient and fun, not patronising him.

"Did you want to go ahead with it?"

I shook my head. "He's too young. It would change his life forever." It would've changed everybody's life. Mine, his, his parents. His future partner's and any children they might've had. I felt sick at the thought.

"Isn't that his choice to make? I mean, I guess you'd have told him your worries but it should've come down to whether you felt you could co-parent with him or not and how it would work. If it would work. But it's his choice as to whether he's too young. Some people don't get a choice – it isn't planned." She smiled softly. "I get where you came from though. The guilt I felt when I found out I was pregnant was immense. Nate, his daughters – all of that was just huge."

"Nate was thrilled."

Amber shrugged. "I think he chose to be. He said when he told me he knew I was pregnant that it was on him too – it took both of us to make that baby and we did so knowing that there was always a chance of contraception failing."

"It worked out well though."

Amber nodded and smiled. "It worked out perfectly. I wouldn't change anything apart from parts of the pregnancy and the birth. That was traumatic. But when I look at Oliver – especially when he's sleeping – I forget the trauma." She shook her head, hair floating round her face, but she was still smiling, which was good.

I chuckled, glad of the lightness she was trying to inject. "Do you think I should've taken him up on his offer?"

Amber stilled. "It's your decision, no one else's. How would you've gone about making this baby? Would he have

given a sample, and someone popped it up there, or would you've used traditional methods?"

I laughed and looked away, wanting to share with someone what'd happened with Jude. "We never got that far with the conversation."

Amber raised her eyebrows and took a swig of her coffee again. "I bet he's all focused in bed and 'grrrr.'" She moved her free hand up like a lion's claw, which looked absolutely ridiculous.

"Really? Is that what Nate does? *Grrrrr*?" I mimicked her. "I hope for your sake he's a lot better than that."

"Oh he is, trust me. I am curious about Jude though – not that I'd go there. Not that he'd go there either. I've seen his equipment and it's not lacking and I think he knows how to use it. When he puts his mind to something he has to be perfect at it."

I braced myself. "He is. He's pretty damn good at it."

Amber almost dropped her coffee.

"What? Fuck. You – you've slept with Jude?"

She was also about ten times too loud and we were in the canteen at the training ground, meaning ears were everywhere, or were usually. The only person in there with us was Ezra and they had their earbuds in and were occasionally singing.

"Shhhh. Keep it down." I shook my head but I couldn't help but laugh.

"When? Was this on an away game? Was it more than once?"

I saw realisation dawn.

"Hang on, was this when I was pregnant?"

I nodded.

"More than once?"

I nodded again.

“How many times? I need the details. How huge is he? Does he *grrrr*?”

I hid my face in my hands. “Several times over the course of a year. He’s a grower and a shower but he knows how to handle it. No, he doesn’t *grrrr*, but he likes to be in control.”

When I looked at her, her mouth was open, and she looked stunned.

“Amber, are you okay?”

Her eyes bulged. “A *year*? You were dating for a *year*?”

“We didn’t date. He used to come back to mine, usually after matches or in the evenings. We didn’t tell anyone because it was just sex. There wasn’t a relationship.”

She slowly shook her head. “A year. It was a freaking year. Did you sleep over together? Did you text each other about things that weren’t sex related? Did you watch films together or order take out – hang on, this is you, no take out involved -”

“We had McDonalds a few times. And Thai. I do eat things I haven’t prepared you know.”

Her jaw dropped again.

“That’s a relationship, Neva. That’s not just sex. You had a relationship with Jude Whittingham for a year and didn’t tell me. Do you know how this would’ve helped during those first few weeks of having a new-born attached to my nipple? I’d have loved that gossip!” She finally put the coffee cup down. “Seriously, that’s probably the longest relationship Jude’s ever had – isn’t it the longest you’ve had? Apart from that tool you went out with when you were at uni?”

“It wasn’t a relationship. There was no commitment or promises.” I looked up at the entrance to the canteen, a sixth sense telling me that Jude had entered the room. “He’s just come in. Don’t say anything. Seriously, you’re the only person who knows.”

“Which is a freaking miracle. How the pair of you kept that quiet – especially him. I’m surprised he didn’t shout it

from the rooftops. He liked you for ages.” She waved over to him.

“Amber! Stop it!”

She grinned evilly. “He’s a bloke. He won’t have any idea we’re talking about him.”

I paused, looking for where Jude was. He’d actually gone over to sit with Ezra. “What did you mean, he liked me for ages?”

“It was obvious he had a thing for you. Come on, Neva, you’re gorgeous and you have a banging body, plus you have this whole ‘I’m in charge’ vibe going on that makes you a challenge. I think Jude liked that. I need more details though.” She checked her watch, a recent gift from Nate. “Shit, I need to go. My brother and his wife are staying with us this weekend and I said I’d be home to let them in. You’re not off the hook for the info. I’m calling a girls’ night.”

“Go meet your brother. I need to see Dee anyway.” I stood up, trying not to look at Jude, which was hard, because I could feel his eyes on me.

“Okay, but I need more details. I promise not to tell anyone. Even Nate.” She moved her fingers across her mouth in a zipping motion.

I didn’t believe that for a second. Amber had loose lips after wine. However, Nate wouldn’t say anything to anyone. He’d probably forget about it ninety seconds after Amber blurted it out.

“Right. Go. See you later.”

She blew me a kiss and half ran out of the canteen.

I thought I’d managed to avoid Jude. The problem was he was conniving and knew exactly how to find me, particularly when he got me on my own.

This time, I was coming out of a bathroom, cursing the fact that my period was early and I hadn’t been prepared, so I now had underwear stuffed with tissues and the need to find a pad or tampon fairly quickly.

“Neva - ” he followed after me. “What’s the matter?”

I kept walking, almost at a run.

“What’s up? Neva?”

“I’m fine.” I managed to laugh. “I just need to get something urgently.”

“What? Can I help?”

Actually, he probably could.

I stopped walking, that familiar feeling between my legs, a reminder that I wasn’t pregnant and a reminder that Mother Nature chose to refrain from usual warning signs. I knew I was due on – I’d had the symptoms five days ago, which ended suddenly, like usual, and then it was anyone’s guess when the main course would start. In another hour, I’d have cramps. In another day, I’d start to feel like I’d been reborn.

“I need a sanitary pad. Or tampon. My period just started.”

The words hung in the hallway like heavy weights waiting to crash down. I’d said those words before, a week after New Year’s Eve when we’d forgotten a condom.

Jude swallowed, I saw his Adam’s apple contract. “Will Genny have some?”

“In her bathroom. She keeps a stash there. Do you mind? I owe you.” I looked back towards the bathrooms I’d just come out of. “I’ll be in there.”

“I’ll be five minutes.” He took off before I could say anything else.

I headed straight to the loos, locking myself in one of the two cubicles, breathing a sigh of relief that the mess wasn’t too bad. Tomorrow, I’d go and shout at someone for not having a box stocked up with sanitary products and make sure it was done, even if I had to do it myself. Or I could get a few women to march round and make a point.

I heard heavy footsteps mid-plot, then Jude’s voice called my name.

“Shall I slide them under?” he said. “That okay?”

“Thank you – that’s perfect.”

A couple of pads and applicator tampons came under the door. I sorted myself out, assuming Jude had left the bathrooms until I came out of the cubicle and saw him leaning against the sinks.

“I wanted to make sure you were okay.” He folded his arms, biceps pulling the material of his club hoodie tight across them. “You look pale.”

I glanced in the mirror. He was right.

“I just need to get home. Have something to eat and a hot drink. Curl up in front of the TV and binge watch *Buffy*.”

He nodded. “Grilled cheese, tea by the bucketful and that Christmas blanket with reindeer and snowmen on that has a hole in from when the fire spat out a hot bit of coal.”

“You remember.” I knew what he was thinking of. That same couple of days when I found out our lack of contraception hadn’t led to a baby.

He nodded. “I was okay if you had been pregnant. I even looked at car seats.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “You mean you looked at custom car seats.”

His smile matched mine. “Pretty much. I was disappointed when you weren’t pregnant. Relieved as well – because I really hadn’t ever thought about it before. I weirded myself out because I was disappointed. I’d kind of thought what would happen if you were and how our baby would’ve looked, if it would’ve been a boy or a girl and what name we would’ve chosen.”

My jaw had dropped in a similar way to Amber’s earlier.

“I’ve shocked you, haven’t I?” He wasn’t smiling now. “I didn’t say anything to you because I didn’t want to scare you off.” His slight laugh was full of irony. “Not that it would’ve mattered.”

“Because it all ended a few weeks later.” I nodded, feeling the first of what would be many cramps. “I was worried I’d

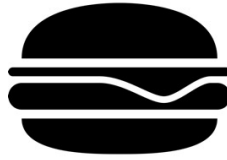
end up trapping you. The stereotypical older woman trapping a younger man with a baby.”

“You’d already trapped me. And not with a baby.” He shook his head and lifted a hand to ruffle his hair. “You need to get home to your blanket. Give me a call if you want anything.”

I froze, realising I was going to say something almost unplanned for the second time that day. “I really fancy McDonalds. Do you want to grab it to go and come to mine?”

CHAPTER 10

Jude



IT WASN'T MEANT to be on my food plan, but I was having it anyway. Two super huge burgers for me with fries and onion rings, and just the one for Neva, with fries. Large milkshakes for both of us, which made it feel like déjà vu, walking into her home loaded with brown paper bags.

She had the fire on, which again, made me feel like I'd travelled back in time a couple of years. Her dark hair was pulled back in a pony tail, that looked more like a paintbrush because of its length and thickness, and she already had on sweats and a sweater.

Outside was heavy wet and cold, autumn handing the reins over to winter already, meaning it was the season for nights in by the fire and classic films, or going to just one bar and staying there because it was too fucking nasty out there to move on.

It wasn't nasty in here. I handed Neva her food, sitting next to her on the sofa, just leaving a couple of feet of space between us.

"How're you feeling?" I wasn't afraid of periods and stuff. Because I had no sister or female cousins to learn from, my mum had made sure that things like that were normalised. When she started going through perimenopause, me and my dad were sent reading material and thermal underwear, because she was going to be the master of those hot flushes.

Neva nodded and gave me half a smile. "Better. I'm going to have a bath later and an early night. I'll feel fine tomorrow.

Thank you for helping before. If I'd asked Matty or someone they'd have acted like I'd just asked them to kill a puppy."

I laughed because that was too true. "Genny did wonder what the fuck I was doing in there. She followed me in and said I was acting suspiciously." I grinned because it had been funny. "I told her – I figured you wouldn't mind."

"God no. If I'd had my phone on me I could've rung her to bring some down," she said, between mouthfuls of burger. "Why does this taste so good?"

"I think they put catnip in there." I stuffed half a dozen fries in my mouth, aware that I probably looked feral, but not caring because I wasn't trying to impress Neva.

"I think that only works on cats." She obviously wasn't trying to impress me either, because her table manners were non-existent too.

To be fair, this was how we'd been since day one. Comfortable. Easy.

Maybe that was where I went wrong. I should've made more of an effort, created some date nights at mine with a chef or something like that.

"What do you want to watch? Buffy?" I needed to fill the room with something other than my need to talk about what happened. What could happen.

"Yeah, can you cope with season six?" She pulled her blanket over her legs, a movement that brought her closer to me.

"More than season four. You don't fancy season two?" Two was my favourite. I'd watched the whole show through twice while we were seeing each other, or however it should be called.

"I binged two and three last week. I can do five. I'll need tissues for the episode when Joyce dies." Because that got me. I'd felt Buffy's pain.

"I'm stocked up. I read a book at the weekend where the author killed off this side character called Ivy – Amber had

warned me about it and that I'd need tissues." She reached over and pinched one of my onion rings. "Sorry, but they're just too good."

"Help yourself." I didn't usually share junk food but I'd found I made an exception for Neva.

She started up season five and I added another log to the fire, nabbing some of her blanket because it was definitely on the colder side. Part of me wanted to relax into the sofa and let everything melt away because I was here again, another part was wary of doing that.

Fucking terrified, maybe.

When Neva told me that she didn't want to see me anymore I'd hated spending time on my own. Even going out with friends felt painful, especially after games because that was often when Neva and I had ended up together. She'd given me a lift, or the other way round, or we'd snuck off together. There'd even been a couple of away games when I'd spent the night in her room, setting my alarm for some godforsaken hour so I could get back to my bed before anyone noticed.

When it stopped, I'd felt empty. It had taken a long time to get back to feeling like me, and I'd never really managed that. I'd been some different version of myself, changed because of what we'd had.

Even sitting here was risking that again.

Three episodes in and we had hot chocolates and ice cream. Somehow, Neva's head was against my shoulder and she was resting on me, a hot water bottle on her stomach, while Buffy kicked ass.

I swallowed, certain parts of my body very aware of having a pretty lady cuddled up to me whilst on the same sofa as where we'd previously gotten very lucky.

Nothing had changed. Not for me. I still felt the same.

"Do you still want a bath?" I rested my chin on her head, wanting to press a kiss there but knowing it wasn't appropriate.

“Hmmm, I do. But I don’t think I can be bothered running it. I had a shower this morning so it’s not like I need *need* one.” She relaxed into me a little more.

“I’ll run it for you.” I’d shared a bath with Neva, so I had an idea of how she liked it – scalding hot and full of bubbles. I untangled myself from her huge leopard print blanket.

“It’s okay. Honestly, Jude, thank you but I’m okay. I appreciate you offering to run one though.” She sat up, more alert, as if she’d just woken up. “I don’t expect you to hang around to check I’m okay though. I have this almost every month. I’m pretty used to it.”

I sat back down, waiting to see if she rested back on me or not. I kind of knew what I was doing here.

At least I thought so.

“I’d like to put my offer back on the table.”

She was about to rest back on me when I said the words, pausing as soon as they came out.

“What do you mean?” She twisted round to face me. “The baby offer?”

I nodded. “The baby offer. I’ll help you get pregnant.” I pushed a hand through my hair, almost more nervous than before a cup final. “I know there’s a lot to work out if you say yes. But I think we can work that out – it’s not like an accident through a one-night stand.”

The room was filled with the sound of Buffy chirping at a mortal enemy and nothing else. Neva hadn’t responded.

Another minute passed by. I itched my nose, my tell that I was desperate to start with the verbal diarrhoea and one I’d learned to control, not letting those words run away from me.

“I probably wouldn’t get pregnant the first time. I can track when I’m fertile – I do that already, but it would take more than one go, unless I’m lucky.” Her words were almost inaudible.

I tugged lightly at her paintbrush pony-tail. “I don’t have a problem with being your sex slave for a few months. Unless

you want to go to a clinic and do whatever they do.” I really didn’t want to be jizzing in a jar, but I wasn’t in a position to argue.

Neva laughed then settled back against me, although I could tell she wasn’t relaxed. I could practically hear the thoughts zooming around her head.

“You can tell me what you’re thinking. I won’t be offended.” I swung my leg that was on the floor onto the sofa and stretched it out. “If it’s a no, I won’t bring it up again.”

“It isn’t a no. It’s an *I need to think about it*. How would we co-parent if we weren’t in a relationship?”

She’d said ‘*if we weren’t*’. In my head, that translated as “we might be”. It wasn’t off the table.

“We get along. We can spend time together as a family without there being any arguments. You know what my schedule is like during the season but we could work out when the baby was with me or with you. I’d want to be their dad, Neva. I wouldn’t want to just be some person that they’re around. I’d want them to know me. I’d want to know them.” I paused, taking a breath. Feeling better now I’d said that.

“You sound like you actually want a kid.” She looked round at me, pulling her hair out of its tie. “This isn’t just an offer to be kind.”

“It never was. I would like a kid – can men be broody? My dad had me when he was younger than I am now, so I don’t feel too young for it. I have savings and I can financially support as big a family as whatever happens, and I have time. Even during the season there are afternoons and days when I’m around. Nate does the school pick-up most days.” I’d been with him a few times when he went to collect Oliver from nursery and then the girls from school, although his eldest now hated him showing up because she said he was embarrassing, which just made Nate do stuff on purpose to embarrass her.

“Men can be broody. I hadn’t thought that you’d feel that way though. It would complicate things for you though. When

you meet someone you want to be with, you'll have a kid and a history. That will make things complicated.”

She had no idea that the only person I'd met who I wanted that sort of future with had been her.

“It'll be the same for you, and it's the same for lots of people who are single parents. And that's if I meet someone. That's not guaranteed.” I wanted to say something about taking a chance on us, but that would be like introducing a mouse to a cat.

She'd run.

“I get that. We'd need to set a time limit on how long we tried for. I might not get pregnant.” The words sounded like they could choke her.

“I might be firing blanks. I could get checked.” I fucking hoped I wasn't. I did want kids, and if I couldn't have them, any future with Neva was off the cards completely.

“That time when we didn't use anything – I wasn't in my fertile time then. It was unlikely I'd have gotten caught. I know it scared you though.”

It felt like I was chipping away at the brick wall. “It scared me for a couple of reasons and probably not what you thought.”

“Really?” She pressed pause on the remote control, Buffy's face freezing on screen.

“I shit myself.”

She laughed and nodded. “I could imagine your panic.”

“Yeah, but that wasn't the big thing. I told you before that I actually wanted you to be pregnant and that was what scared me the most. I kept thinking what if you were, and what they'd be like. If it'd be a boy or a girl and what we'd call them. I think I had it all planned out.” I swallowed and waited for her response.

“Why didn't you tell me this then when it happened?”

“Because you kept saying stuff that just reinforced what you said at the beginning, that it wasn’t a relationship and I was too young for you and all that. You were so fucking relieved when you got your period.” I moved my hand from her hair.

“I was relieved for you. I didn’t want to trap you.” She looked tearful.

“You wouldn’t have done. And I’ve said it now. I know you want a baby, my offer’s there. We can make it work however it needs to be.”

“Let me think about it. Shall we carry on with Buffy?” She pressed play, not waiting for an answer.

“Do it.” I relaxed back down, feeling better for getting that out there and hoping she understood.

I was in the gym by myself on Sunday afternoon, going through the programme Amber had set to work on my Achilles and other bits that could keep the rest of me ready to go for when I got the green flag to return to playing. I’d got my head round that overdoing it would lead to a longer period of recovery, or create more damage that would mean I wasn’t the player I had been. I knew that while speed had been a key strength when I was a teenager and in my early twenties, I’d been pushed off the ball too easily, so I focused on strengthening my upper body, building muscle in my shoulders and back, so no one could barge me off the ball.

The weight from the additional muscle mass had slowed me down a bit, but it hadn’t affected my performance. I’d been able to protect the ball better from defenders, and my size had made them think twice about trying to knock me off it. I’d also incorporated some of the training one hundred and two hundred metre sprinters used, knowing that I could still be broad shouldered and built and run at speed.

It paid off, and it was a strategy that would hopefully give me longer in the game as I wasn’t a one trick speed pony.

I didn't know how long Neva had been standing there before I noticed her. Yesterday had been an away game for both the men's and women's teams, so the training ground was quiet. No one would be around today until this afternoon at least, when only anyone who'd pick up an injury would be in for treatment.

"Hey." I picked up my towel and wiped my face, aware I was dripping in sweat because this had been a tough session. "You okay?"

She nodded and smiled. "I figured I'd find you here. Kitty said you'd called in for a smoothie before."

"You should've just texted me. I'd have met you somewhere. This place smells like decaying jockstraps and no one apart from the youth team should have to put up with it." I rubbed at the back of my neck. "You want to go somewhere for lunch?"

"I'm not sure I'm hungry after that mention of decaying jockstraps." She was laughing. "But yes. It's a yes, by the way."

I didn't need to ask her about what. I knew exactly what she was referring to. My heart started to beat faster than any cardio worked.

"Good." Any more than one word and I'd fuck it up. We'd stick with that.

"Shall I meet you somewhere after you've showered?" She was hovering near the open door, which figured, as it didn't smell the best in here.

"I'll be fifteen minutes, tops." I picked up my crap from next to the bike. "Something's not right in here. It shouldn't smell this bad." I sniffed a few times, frowning. "Does it smell fishy to you?"

"Really, Jude? I don't want to – is it that bag there? Near the bin?" She pointed to a bin near the smith machine, something that didn't get used very often.

I headed over, the smell getting worse. The bag was red and black, a cheap faux leather thing that probably belonged to

one of the under-eighteen's team.

I held my breath and peered in it. What was probably a sweaty kit was in there, as well as – “Fish.” I announced it but didn't put my hand in the bag to pull it out. “At least they were making healthy decisions.” I zipped the bag up and held it at arm's length and out of the door.

“Oh god, that's vile.” Neva scooted along the corridor. “I'll meet you outside the canteen.”

“See you there, baby mama.” I shot her the goofiest grin I had in my armoury.

She shook her head. “Those words should never be said again.”

I just laughed, knowing I'd be using them a lot, just to hear her arguments back.

I felt as if I'd just won the semi-final of the Champions League cup: full of pride and excitement and a fuck-ton of nerves. Part of my brain was cheering that there was a possibility I'd get to fuck Neva again; another part of it was shouting that this was a terrible idea and I didn't cope well with the rejection the first time, so why would this be any different? Another part was purchasing that car seat.

I needed to hold it all together and not let myself get overwhelmed with all of the thoughts.

The shower was a good place to do that. The water, especially when it was either on the hot or the cold side, the stimulation good at grounding me to one thing, even if it was momentary. The sensation of the water on my skin helped too, which explained why as a kid I'd always liked playing out in the rain or being wet. I'd been a really good swimmer, partly because I was happy to continually be in the pool if I wasn't playing football.

I focused on the feel of the water, letting it calm me down. While I dried off, I made a list in my head which started with *listen to Neva*. I'd said my bit and laid it out there. It was up to

her now to set out the fine print. Even if it meant jizzing into a cup it was fine. All I had to do was eat and listen to her, and respond when she asked me a question.

My dad called me when I was getting dry. I hadn't spoken to him for a couple of days – he and my mum had been in London watching a couple of shows in the West End which was my mum's passion. If there was someone's thoughts I wanted, it was my parents. Now wasn't the time to have that conversation though. Neva was waiting.

She was reading something on her e-reader when I saw her. I knew that it could be anything from a newspaper to a magazine to a steamy romance book that Jerrica wrote. Neva liked reading.

I hadn't been much of a reader when I was younger. I struggled to sit still for long enough. I was the same in school, sitting at a desk was really hard, my brain would wander, and I found I didn't pay attention to the teacher. I needed to move often and that wasn't always allowed. At fourteen, I'd felt stupid and a failure because I was always in trouble for being restless, and some of the teachers found me frustrating because I did better than I should in tests. At fifteen I was spending more time training for football, so the club had tutors in place for the subjects I was taking exams in and that was better. There was more freedom to talk about a topic while doing keepy-upsies and the information stayed in that way. I ended up doing okay, well enough to have gotten into sixth form to do a level three sports qualification if I'd wanted to. I hadn't wanted to.

“Ready to go?”

She jumped when I spoke, engrossed in whatever it was that she was reading.

“Have you got rid of that bag?” She frowned. “It really was putrid.”

I grinned. “Yep. Left it in the youth team locker room. I think it's Dean Beaver's – the kid with the unfortunate name.” He'd had a lot of ribbing for that. “Not that I looked for any name tags in there.”

Neva crinkled her nose. “Why’s he left his bag?”

“He’ll have forgotten it. The cleaning staff leave things for a few days because people like Rowan like to keep their personal property everywhere. It would’ve stunk even without the fish being in it.” There had been worse things found, things which Neva probably didn’t need to know about. Some of the team were pretty gross.

“I don’t want fish for lunch.” She tucked her e-reader away in her bag. “How about Thai?”

I nodded. I could happily eat most things. Even fish. “What about the Thai restaurant on the roundabout in the village?” It wouldn’t be too busy at this time, and we’d be able to have a conversation without being heard.

“That’ll do. I haven’t been there in ages.” She glanced at me, as if checking for something. “The last time I ate from there was when you picked up take out.”

I stopped, realising something. “Apart from Kitty’s, this is the first time we’ve eaten out together, isn’t it?”

“I think so.” Her laugh sounded embarrassed. “Is it going to be weird?”

“Why would it be weird? If you’re worried about someone seeing us and taking a photo, it’ll just be put down to us working together on the healthy lifestyles project.” I was set on dampening any concerns she had as much as I could. I didn’t want her to pick up on a thread that would make her change her mind.

“Fair enough. I’ll drive my own car and meet you there.” She stopped at the doors out of the training hub. “It’s easier to get home from.”

“See you in half an hour.” I took my chance, bending down and pressing a kiss to her cheek.

She didn’t flinch or even look around to check if anyone had seen. That was good.

“Looking forward to our date.” That was pushing it, so I headed off before she could disagree.

CHAPTER 11

Neva



JUDE GOT to the restaurant before me, of course. He drove quicker and had a head start getting to his car, getting through lights before I did. He did wait in the car park for me, opening my door like a gentleman, which wasn't necessary, but it was nice. I had a sudden premonition of what he'd be like when I was pregnant – if I got pregnant – and how over-protective he could end up being.

I wasn't sure I'd hate that.

“Hey.” I looked up at him. I was wearing my flats today, which meant Jude had just short of a foot on me in height.

“Ready for food, baby mama?” His grin told me he knew exactly how I was going to react to that name. “I can see sweetcorn cakes and pad Thai in my future.”

“Were they suggestions for baby names? If they were, you need to rethink. And by that, I mean you need to rethink what you're calling me.”

He opened the door to the restaurant, following me through. We were greeted by one of their team who obviously recognised Jude and sat us away from anyone else in a booth at the back, which was about as private as we could get.

We ordered drinks and prawn crackers, Jude asking for a couple of starters without even looking at the menu, which surprised no one.

“Hungry?” I toyed with the menu, feeling shy. This was probably going to be a conversation I'd remember for the rest

of my life, one way or the other.

Jude nodded, not giving me a jokey response which I'd expected.

"Can we get to the bit we both want to talk about, then we can crack on." He tapped his fingers once on the table, a sign that he was struggling to keep a lid on what was simmering. "You want to try for a baby. With me."

I couldn't help but laugh and smile, the shock of my decision a good kind of shock. "Yes. I do. I think you'd be a good dad." Which was where my head had been for the last few days. "And I think you know what you'll be letting yourself into. Kids aren't easy."

"I know. I've seen Nate do it on his own and seen how Rowan's been with Toby. I know it'll be hard, but I'm hoping it'll be worth it." He took a deep breath. "I'm going to suggest something that I think'll make you feel better, maybe. I'm not bothered about doing it but I'm going to end up being advised to. I'll speak to my solicitor on Monday about our situation so it lays out an entitlement – moneywise – if I get you pregnant. You know I'll want any kid to have the best, not spoiled, but to have opportunities like I did - "

"I am paid pretty decently, you know." I reached out and grabbed his forearm. He was starting to rub at his nose, which meant he was trying really hard to not go on a Shakespearean length monologue. "But I get what you mean, and this would be your child. I am putting my foot down on the being spoiled though."

"I know. I wouldn't not work with you for big decisions. If I don't make a formal agreement, someone will tell me I'm being stupid because some women would try to get pregnant because it would come with a big pay cheque." He looked at the table. "I'll ask my solicitor to draw up an agreement about time as well. I wouldn't do this with anyone else, but I need to make sure that I get my time with them, just in case something turns sour. I know it won't, Neva. I feel shit mentioning it."

"But do you feel better now you've said it?"

Another nod, then he looked up. “I do.”

“I think we should have that and then I feel better about you knowing I’m not going to try and scam you. If you told me it was sperm only, I’d have accepted it and not named anyone on the birth certificate. I’m also really glad that’s not going to be the case.” There was more I could say, but that would’ve been too overwhelming for this restaurant. I’d spent yesterday actually getting excited about the idea of having a baby, starting a password protected board for nurseries, looking at baby equipment and even maternity clothes. That was probably getting carried away, but after years of thinking this would never happen, it now possibly could.

Possibly.

With a man who would be there to hold my hair back if I had morning sickness and go to antenatal classes. I would have a partner even if we weren’t together.

“Neva, how do you want to do this? That’s the next question. I mean, I can jerk off into a cup or something, but I’d rather, you know, do it properly.” He rubbed at his hair. “I’m doing this all wrong. I was meant to let you do the talking and I’d just answer the questions and now I can’t shut up.”

“It’s fine, Jude. You answered something without me having to ask. If we have a baby, we have to do things as partners and be consistent. I won’t be able to afford the sorts of things you can, so my suggestion is that we pay into an account what seems fair and everything comes from Mum *and* Dad, and not Mum *or* Dad. I don’t want your money for me, and if you didn’t want to financially contribute, I could do this on my own, but I get where you’re coming from.”

“Thank you.”

I saw his shoulders relax and his expression settle.

“About the other thing, I think we just go for it. That’s if you want too.” That was something else I’d thought a fuck-ton about last night too. My period had ended which meant I was now starting my frisky phase.

“Hell, yeah, I want to. How many times a day or do you want to wait until it’s the optimum time of the month.” He shook his head, probably at my expression which would’ve shown how entertained I was at him knowing stuff. “I did some reading, alright?”

I laughed now, the waiter coming over to take our orders, although we hadn’t even looked at the menu.

“Chicken Pad Thai for a main, please. Can I have some ribs to start too.” Jude sent me a look that asked for a hall pass for this meal.

“Sure. For yourself?” The waiter looked at me.

“Papaya salad to start and Thai king prawn red curry for a main, with some jasmine rice on the side.” I handed back my menu, waiting for the waiter to go.

Once he was out of earshot I leaned in closer to Jude, catching the scent of his cologne, the same one he’d worn when we were hooking up. “There’s more chance of getting pregnant at certain times of the month – I have an app that tells me when that is. But you can get pregnant at any time. So regular might be better, and it might take a few months. It’s not guaranteed to happen the first month, especially because I’m older.”

“The average age for a woman to have her first baby is thirty, nearly thirty-one.” He said the fact as if he was reading it off a piece of paper. “That’s average. In the middle. So babies when you’re out of your twenties do happen a lot, it seems. Besides,” his grin went cocky. “You’ll have my super sperm. I know it might not happen straight away, but if I’m coming inside you instead of a cup, I’m down for it taking a while.”

I started to laugh, glad to see that Jude was back to his norm. “So do we just hang out? Like we did before?” Would kissing be weird? “Or make dates knowing that we’d be, you know, *doing it*?”

“That’s a lot of pressure. Do we, just have a couple of drinks and watch something steamy on TV? Or I could try and

seduce you?”

He didn't realise that he'd already done that so many times before.

“Maybe both. I have a few rules.” I braced myself.

“Go on. I think I know what one is.” He sipped at the juice the waiter had brought when he took our order. “No sleeping with anyone else.”

“Definitely. No risk of diseases and no complications.” I waited for his response.

“I would've asked the same of you.” Jude abruptly stopped talking when the waiter approached to serve our food. Then he attacked the sweetcorn cake somewhat viciously. He waited until the waiter left before speaking again. “I don't want you getting attached to someone while I'm trying to put a baby in you.”

I bit my bottom lip. His words were having the sort of effect that shouldn't be occurring from a woman who liked to be in control the vast majority of the time.

“That won't happen. I won't be seeing anyone else. There hasn't been anyone else I've even gone on a third date with. I'd say there was more chance of you meeting someone.” I hated the thought of that. I wouldn't admit it, of course. Jude didn't need to know about my jealous streak.

He slowly shook his head. “I'm not going to meet anyone. I'm not looking any further than you, so that's something you don't have to worry about. What're the other rules?”

“We tell people the truth. That we're not together, but we're having a baby together – if we get to that stage.”

“We will. Help yourself.” He pushed a plate towards me. “I don't want to hide this time. I'd rather say that I wasn't going out with the team because I was going somewhere with you as friends. Have meals out – maybe not in a McDonalds; we can do take out.” He grinned again.

I took a deep breath. I was a private person. I had more control when people didn't know too much, only Jude was the

opposite of this. He wore his heart on his sleeve unashamedly.

“Okay. But please keep the really private stuff to yourself.”

“So you don’t want me to describe to anyone exactly how I fuck you well enough to have you seeing stars and naming them after me? Don’t worry, I’ll be keeping you to myself.”

I clamped my thighs together and wished we’d had this conversation at one of our houses and then I could get him to show me those stars right now.

I had a feeling that’d been his intention in the first place.

“Amber did ask me about the size of your penis.”

It was his turn to try to not choke, which he did a much worse job of than me.

“Why would Amber ask you? Why is Amber interested? Shit.” He took a big gulp of his drink and looked slightly worried. “Nate’s going to kill me if he thinks Amber’s thought about my dick.”

“I only told her last week about your offer. She wheedled it out of me that we’d had a fling.”

“Eleven months isn’t a fling, Neva.”

“I don’t know what else to call it.” I waved my hand, as if I was batting him away and almost knocked over my drink.

“It was a relationship.” He almost murmured the words as if he was saying it to himself. “We just didn’t tell anyone or call it that at the time. We were seeing each other two or three times a week – just because we weren’t going *out* out doesn’t mean it was only sex.”

“I know. It wasn’t just sex. You can’t binge watch all seasons of Buffy and Angel and it not be a relationship. It was just easy to say that it wasn’t.” I felt raw being so truthful. “We’re good with moving forward though. If anyone asks why we’re spending so much time together, just tell them the truth.”

Jude shook his head, scooping up the last of the sweetcorn cakes. “I’ll just say we’re friends. They don’t need to know the

rest for now. If I tell them I'm trying to get you pregnant, it'll be all I hear every fucking training session. And if I am firing blanks - " There was another shake.

The waiter came by with our starters, my papaya salad looked mouth-watering. Jude's ribs did not look like anything on his meal plan, but I kind of thought that was a good thing and I'd probably steal one.

"Did you hear about Genny and Guy having a bust up last night at the hotel?" He was already halfway through a rib. It wasn't how much he ate – he needed the calories even though he wasn't playing at the moment – it was the speed.

He demolished.

My head went to how he'd often demolished me, feasting between my legs before he'd even let me touch him. His clever mouth had done more for me than any battery powered toy ever had, or any other man.

"Neva? Did you hear what I said?"

"Wha – sorry. Something about Genny and Guy?" He'd totally caught me out and by the smirk on his face he had a good idea where my head had been.

"They had a fight – or an argument in the bar. Do you want details or are you carrying on with whatever fantasy's going through your head?"

I sat up straighter, ignoring the aching between my legs. "Details, please."

"They were staying at this really decent hotel near Tottenham's ground. Genny was at the bar, all dressed up and talking to a man – no idea who. Guy apparently went over to her and scared the bloke off. She had a lot to say and he had a lot to say back, although no one knows what was said, because the moment anyone got close enough to hear, both of them told them to go away. They disappeared after. No one knows where." He shredded the meat from another rib.

"I think they have hate sex." I pinched Jude's last rib. "Do not repeat that."

“I won’t. I can keep a secret.”

“I know you can. But I’d rather not have Genny or Guy think I’m making up rumours. I’ve thought it before when I’ve gone into Genny’s office and they’re both in there, looking like something’s just happened.” I paused to finish the rib. “Genny doesn’t have a picture of Guy on her dartboard anymore.”

“Can I try your salad?”

“I like how you asked. It’s spicy.” I pushed the plate towards him.

Jude didn’t waste any time finishing it off. “That was good. So you think Genny and Guy are having a secret hate affair?”

“I think they both get off on their banter.” I was glad of the topic change away from us and this other project we were about to start.

“I’d rather not think about it.” He frowned. “So what did Amber say about my dick?”

AROUND EIGHTEEN MONTHS AGO...

“Is everything okay?”

I was at his, which wasn't usual. Since the pregnancy scare, I'd been at his more, although more wasn't the right word. We'd gone a week without sleeping in the same bed as each other, which I didn't think had happened for six months.

I didn't like the fact that my bedding no longer smelt of him. I didn't like how my bathroom felt too tidy and I had excess milk in my fridge because he hadn't been round to drink it.

Every time he'd suggested coming round, I'd found a reason to say no; I was out, or babysitting Oliver and Nate's girls, or I was having to work late.

In truth, I was scared.

I'd had a week where I thought I could be pregnant. I hadn't taken the morning after pill, something I'd done without Jude knowing. I didn't want to interrupt my cycle and the chance that I could be pregnant was slim.

A small piece of me wanted to be pregnant, even though it would've sent Jude's life into freefall.

Since I'd had my period, he'd been fine. When we were alone, he was more affectionate than he'd been before and the sex had been off the charts, as if he was trying to give me even more.

This couldn't continue.

I was worried he felt more for me than he should, and even more terrifying, I didn't feel that this was something casual anymore.

I was seriously falling for the man, which was something I couldn't allow myself to do. He was too young and I didn't want to trap him with something I knew he'd give me freely.

Somewhere there was a woman for him who was the same generation. Somewhere there was a man who wanted the same things as me.

We just had to find them.

“Kind of.” I sat on his barstool at his kitchen island, my car keys in my hand, my phone still in my car. I didn’t intend to be here long.

“What do you mean, kind of?” He sat down next to me. “Are you ill? Is there something you need me to do.”

I wanted to sob at that point because he could fix this. I could fix this. All I had to say was that I was falling in love with him and he’d either tell me he felt the same or break my heart. I was less terrified of the second than the first.

“No, I’m fine. Not ill and there’s nothing I need.” I watched him, his expression changing as he put things together.

“You want to end things with us, don’t you?” He stood up and paced to the other side of the kitchen.

I nodded. “I do. The pregnancy scare was a sign that we needed to stop. I don’t want to go on birth control and we’re risking an accident just using condoms.”

Jude nodded, looking out of the window rather than at me. “I forgot once, Neva. I won’t forget again.”

“I know. I trust you. But condoms aren’t always reliable. I don’t want to trap you with a baby you didn’t ask for.”

“Why?” He turned round suddenly. “Why would you think you’d trap me?”

“I want children at some point. But that’s not going to be with you. I’m too old for you.” I’d never wished harder that I’d been born ten years later. Maybe if I had, my heart wouldn’t be breaking now.

“You know as well as I do that’s fucking ridiculous. We get along so well. We like the same things. We have the same beliefs. Why wouldn’t it work?” He rubbed his hand over his hair, his tell that he was stressed about something.

I slid off the stool. "I don't want to argue about it. Please? Just accept what I'm saying."

He opened his mouth to speak then closed it, shaking his head and looking at the ceiling. "If you don't feel the same way, I get it."

"Let's speak again soon. When things have settled." I picked up my car keys and walked to the door, out of his house and to my car.

I made it down three roads before I had to pull over because I couldn't see the road anymore as I was crying so hard.

CHAPTER 12

Jude



NEVA HAD BEEN in my house since the time she'd ended things, but never on her own. I'd had parties and barbecues here for my teammates and friends, and other than at first when she'd made excuses to stay away, she'd come over with Amber and Genny and Jerrica.

My home was probably the same as your typical footballer's home. Worth a few million, with a heated pool, sauna and steam room. There was a gym most hotels would like to have and six double bedrooms and one more bathroom than I always remembered.

My favourite part though was the basement. I had a snooker table down there and games consoles, a few retro arcade machines and a pinball machine that I'd bought with my first big pay packet, because that had seemed important at the time. I also had a cinema, complete with recliner sofas that had cool boxes and glass holders at the ends which was just as good for falling asleep in as they were watching a film. I think I'd ended up watching some films three times because I kept missing the ending.

We grabbed drinks from my fridge, both of us getting a couple of bottled beers, because like I said, we had the cool boxes down there. I also had a beer fridge, but I hadn't stocked it up recently, mainly because it was during the season, and while in theory I could have a few beers whenever I wanted, given I wasn't playing, I wasn't going to go down that path of self-destruction.

Choosing a seat was a different strategy in itself. What I wanted was to sit next to Neva. I wanted to be able to have her relax on me like she had the other night, to have that connection back.

I went for a triple seat at the front, sitting at one side so Neva had the option of where she wanted to be. I knew I was overthinking it, but then, what was new there?

Neva sat next to me, nudging my leg with her knee. “This is the awkward bit, isn’t it?”

I nodded, grinning, hopefully not like a madman. “Yeah. What do we do to not make it less awkward?”

“That’s what tequila’s for, but I don’t want to go there. A beer? Buffy? Let’s just see what happens. We don’t have to do anything tonight, so there’s no pressure.” She took a delicate drink from her bottle of beer. Neva was used to wine glasses.

I studied her for a couple of seconds. This situation was a first for both of us, and probably a last.

“Which season? You pick.” We needed some normality.

“Let’s start from season one. Go through the lot from the beginning.”

“Good plan.” I fiddled with the app on my phone, getting the series up. “How are we sitting?”

She laughed, a sound that was almost a giggle. “This really is awkward. Just press play.”

I did as I was told, settling into the seat and reclining it. The opening credits rolled through and we were transported into the *Hellmouth*. Familiarity was a comfort blanket, as was knowing Neva’s reactions to the show. By the end of the second episode, we’d both kind of chilled. Neva was stretched along the recliners, her head resting against my shoulder. I felt like a teenager on a date to the cinema when I slid my arm around her, waiting to see if that was okay.

She relaxed more, turning her head to smile at me. “Maybe we should just get it over with.”

“What do you mean?” A vampire was turned into dust on the screen.

Neva sat up, turning her body round, her eyes staying on mine. “A kiss. We were good at kissing. Let’s see if we’re still good.”

That did not need to be suggested twice.

I ran a hand along her back and into her hair, cupping the back of her head with my palm. My cock already had received a message that this could be on. I was hard, and when this kiss started, there was a good chance that she was going to find out just how non-awkward this was for him.

Our mouths met, closing the rest of the distance. Neva was on her knees on the seat, bracing herself with her hands on my shoulders. I shifted her closer to me, breaking the kiss so she could straddle my lap.

Heart racing, her body pulled closer to mine, I found her lips again, remembering how kisses started and where they’d led to time after time. Muscle memory and current need took over, the kiss consuming all other senses. She tasted faintly of beer and her, the mints she kept in her car just there. Just like she’d tasted all those times.

We pulled apart, bodies entwined, our expressions serious.

“Do you want to go upstairs?”

Her eyes were filled with what I knew was need, but something else was there too – an uncertainty.

I guessed I understood it. This wasn’t just about a night filled with orgasms anymore. I wanted to tell her to forget the baby making, put it to one side and just enjoy what we were together, but that meant overlooking the reason why we were doing this to begin with.

“Yes.” She whispered the word. “I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be. When’s the last time you had an orgasm?” I didn’t want to know if it was by her hand or someone else’s.

“A couple of weeks ago. Self-induced. I’m overdue.”

I nodded, standing us up. “Let’s just focus on how good we can make each other feel. We were geniuses at doing that.”

“You can’t carry me though – your injury.” She had her legs wrapped around my waist and while I’d been moving heavier weights in the gym than Neva, carrying her up two flights of stairs probably wasn’t part of my rehab programme.

She untangled her legs and dropped her feet to the floor. Even in the dim light of the cinema room, I could see that her cheeks were flushed, her eyes dilated, her hair mussed from my hand.

“Sure about this?”

She nodded. “Are you?”

“More sure than anything before.”

We were in my room minutes later, clothes hurriedly being discarded and finding their way to the floor, an urgency that we hadn’t had before. Sex before was usually a follow on from being around each other, when a touch turned into a kiss, which turned into me being inside her.

I tried to slow it down, trying to memorise seeing her body again, the swell of her breasts, the hard tips of her nipples, the rise and fall of her chest as her breath quickened with anticipation. She could change her mind at any time and I’d accept it.

I’d carry my heartbreak one more time.

Her whimpers and half-formed sentences filled my ears as I trailed my mouth from her neck to her breasts, giving a quick suck to each nipple, fast hard pulls that had Neva parting her legs, making space for me. I kissed her stomach, trailing my tongue lightly over her skin, feeling her shiver.

Her hands pressed on my back, my arms, her legs trying to wrap over mine.

“I want you to fuck me now.” She moved her arms to lift her shoulders up, her look determined. “Please, fuck me. I want to come when you’re in me.”

I kneeled up, letting go of her and pushing down the sweats I still had on, along with my underwear.

My cock stood hard and thick and bare. I'd only been in her without a condom that one time in front of her fire on New Year's Eve, and I hadn't been cognizant enough at that point, drunk on lust and need, to fully notice the distance.

This time I'd be fucking her bare because we wanted to make a baby. There would be nothing to stop nature from taking its course.

"Are you sure about this?" I really fucking hoped she said she was.

"Yes. Totally. I'm aching badly." She put a hand on her pussy, pushing a finger inside her.

I could've lost my load then.

"Take it out, Neva," I demanded. "You're touching what's mine."

She moved her hand, and I pressed my cock against her entrance, filling her in one thrust, her hips moving and her head tipping back. Already like diamonds, her nipples became even more prominent, her tits bouncing as I started to fuck her, my hands under her shoulders, holding on to her as she took everything I had to give, her pussy feeling tighter and slicker as she grew closer to her orgasm.

I wasn't far off. The sensation of her around me while I was bare was overwhelming, the thought of coming in her knowing she could get pregnant was enough to almost get there alone.

"You're going to milk my cock when you come, aren't you?"

Neva nodded and then I felt the first pulse of her orgasm, her body convulsing, her moans loud, adding to the drenching of my senses. I'd fantasised about the sounds she made when she came, heard them in my sleep before I woke up hard and frustrated.

Everything tipped me over that line. I emptied inside of her, my own groan filling the room now. Her arms pulled me tighter to her as we both stilled, my cock still hard inside of her.

Our eyes met. Something settled inside me, something felt at peace. That something wasn't my cock. I lifted one hand, taking my weight with the other and cupped her tit in my hand, squeezing her nipple with a pinch.

“Are you trying to go again?” She rubbed her hand over my chest. “I can feel your cock twitching and he's not getting any softer.”

I started to move inside her again, gentle small strokes. “It's the benefit of being with a younger man.”

She lifted her legs higher, giving me permission to go deeper. “Maybe it's just you. It's nothing to do with age. It's just you.”

I was happy with it being just me.

Neva stayed.

I wasn't sure if it was the fourth or fifth time she'd stayed at mine; I'd usually stayed at hers for whatever reason I'd never worked out.

But she stayed the night.

This meant middle of the night sex was had, and then there was just enough in the tank to have one more round in my kitchen while we made breakfast together, eggs and steak for both of us, with fruit to finish up.

Then we left at the same time, her to go to a meeting with the medical staff at the club and me to meet with my agent.

It felt domesticated. It felt too easy. I pondered on it during the drive to the hotel where we were meeting, wondering how it would be if this was for real, and then wondering why it couldn't be for real.

Bert was in his late sixties and had been my father's agent until he retired and my dad transferred to someone who specialised in ex-footballers. His daughters, Suzanne and Iona, were now the main people in the agency and at some point, when Bert decided to retire, I'd switch to one of them. They had the same principals as Bert, client first, sensible advice, understanding of personal ethics.

Like not supporting companies that didn't pay a living wage, or had records of bad form towards its employees.

There was a room that could be partitioned off in the hotel's dining room that Bert always booked for meetings. The place was fairly quiet during the day, which meant it was already pretty private, but Bert worked on the side of paranoid.

"You alright, lad?" He stood up as I approached, opening his arms for a hug and a slap on the back.

I'd known him all my life, even had a Christmas Day with him and his daughters one year, the first year he had them with him for Christmas after he and his wife had divorced.

"Good. I'm good. Healing well." I took the seat opposite his. "How's the gout?"

He shook his head. "Rather not talk about it. Have you looked through the offer from the health food place?"

Straight to business. Typical Bert. "I have and it's a no. It doesn't sit well with what I'm working on with Neva, and it'd be a lie, because I'm not using any of their supplements to heal."

"Thought that would be your response and I did tell their rep that it was unlikely. I've got one I think you'll like – fancy a sports car?" He gave me the make and listed its features.

I shook my head. "No point. They'll want me to be seen in it, and it's not something I'll be driving." I waited for Bert to dig deeper, because this had, in the past, been something I'd have been all over.

"Why's that?"

“Just checking, you’ve taken your heart medication today?”

He eyeballed me and reached for the packet of cigarettes he kept in his jacket pocket but never smoked. “Are you going to drive me to one of these?”

I shrugged. “I’ve already had a contract drawn up and I want this.”

“Fucking hell. What’ve you done?” He took a cigarette out of the packet and tapped it on the table.

“Neva. We were seeing each other a couple of years ago and we’ve not got back together but - ”

“Hang on, was that the reason why you didn’t end up in any tabloids for nearly a year?”

“It was. I was with her.” I braced myself. He would now want to know the ins and outs of a cat’s arse, to use one of my grandfather’s favourite sayings.

“She’s your nutrition person. Always seems busy. Older than you – at least she comes across that way. She’s serious too.” He frowned. “What the fuck does she see in you?” His finger was pointed forcefully in my direction.

“Don’t know. My charm and wit, probably. But she wants to have a baby and I said I’d help out. I haven’t told my dad yet - ”

The smile Bert was trying to hold back broke into a laugh. “Well, good on you, kid. Won’t do you any harm.”

I looked at him, puzzled. “Where’s the lecture?”

“If you’re old enough to look that happy at the idea of being a dad – because I know you’ll be involved with this kiddie – you’re old enough to make decisions about it. And I know you – something like this you’ll have thought about all ways till Christmas.” He patted my hand. “I’ll pray that it isn’t a daughter. You’ll never know what peace is if you have a daughter.”

“We need to get pregnant first.” I was worried about that. I didn’t want to see Neva be disappointed, although I knew it

was possible. I didn't want to have the conversation in a year's time, which was the time limit we'd agreed, to say we'd done trying and it wasn't meant to be, because that meant we were over.

Bert watched me, interested, putting his cigarettes away. "Enjoy the making part. Try to get her to forget about thermometers and temperature and just enjoy it."

"Not sure that's doable. We're not *together* together. We're just friends and co-parents to be. Hopefully."

"Which is bullshit. I figured you were balls deep in love with someone when you stopped fucking about. Looking at you, I don't think that's changed." He shook his head. "It's worth the heartbreak, if that's what happens. I went through hell with my divorce, but I wouldn't have swapped the early years when we were courting and getting married. It was only the end where it turned sour. And now we're both happy."

Bert had remarried, just like his ex-wife had. They now got along fine at any family parties.

"Tell you what, when you know there's going to be a baby, why don't we approach some nappy companies. I'm being serious – stop laughing. It would be a huge talking point for the product and it'd show that men can do those things." He nodded at me, still looking far too amused.

"I actually like the sound of that." I did. It was the sort of image I wanted, even if my teammates would rip the piss. "The fee could go in the baby's fund."

There was another grin from my agent. "Okay, let's go through the rest of this. We've got a couple of deals coming to an end, so I've got them to update me. One's for your boots, so this is a big one. They're worried about your injury, so I'm going to need something from your medical team to say you're on the mend." He carried on going through each deal, the waiter dropping off olives and breads with oils, that I'd probably miss.

For the first time, I felt like I was really listening to what Bert was saying, asking more questions about the income and

commitment, pulling up my accounts on the tablet that I'd brought and considering my overall wealth.

It didn't take a genius to work out why.

This wasn't going to be just about me anymore.

It would be about my child.

And Neva, if she'd have me.

It was past lunchtime when we finished, a new boot deal, a meeting with a brand of men's cologne that I liked, a couple of interviews and a few other bits tied up. Plus advice that I hadn't thought I needed.

"You're determined, Jude. You're a hard worker. And you've grown up. Don't doubt yourself – you're not just your father's son, although there's a lot to be proud of there, you're your own man, and he's a good one."

I was thinking about those words when my phone vibrated, Neva's name showing up. I opened the message, and grinned, glad Bert wasn't around to try to read it.

Neva: Fancy some afternoon delight? Can you get to mine in half an hour?

Me: I can get there sooner. And get you there sooner.

Neva: Seriously? He's still going to work after last night and this morning?

Me: He's already half working. It's how life's going to be from now?

Neva: We'll find a steady rhythm. I'll leave my back door on the latch and wait upstairs for you.

Me: We're talking about your home's back door – not your *back door* on your person.

Neva: Yeah, that back door's kind of pointless at the mo. Nice try though.

Me: I prefer the front door anyway. See you in twenty.

It didn't take me that.

CHAPTER 13

Neva

NOVEMBER



I DIDN'T EXPECT to get pregnant overnight, or even in the first month. To be honest, I was thinking it'd be more like six months, but that didn't stop the disappointment when my period started in November, the smear of blood in my underwear – caught by surprise again – yanking out the tears, even though I was at work and hated anyone seeing me as being vulnerable.

By now, Genny, Jerrica and Amber knew what Jude and I were trying to do. No one had asked too many questions about it or tried to put me off – the pregnancy thing that was. They seemed to understand it, although the lack of interrogation did make me wonder if they were scared of asking, or they'd worked something out that I hadn't.

There had, however, been a gazillion questions about the size of Jude's dick.

By questions, I meant an inquisition.

Was it the same size when it was hard – that was Amber, who'd seen it enough times at work.

Could I get my hand round it?

How much energy did it take to get it working because it was so big?

Did he have to refrain from sex before a match day because of his recovery time?

Did he know what to do with it?

I'd kind of ignored most of them and just let them speculate, listening to them descend into conversation about other penises they'd encountered. I had told them that Jude knew exactly what he was doing, more so than any other man I'd been with.

It was those nights I remembered about now, my uterus starting to cramp, the rush of blood beginning like it usually did. I hated my body right now because it had betrayed me.

I didn't have any more appointments or meetings this afternoon; I was technically done for the day, so I could sit here and find some equilibrium until the place was locked up at just after eleven, if I wanted.

I toyed with my phone, imputing data about my cycle, needing to do something practical.

A message pinged through, Jude's name appearing at the top of the screen. When I'd mentioned it might take months for me to get pregnant – if it happened – he'd been relaxed about it, mentioning keeping his strength up would be the only problem, followed by a big grin, that was full of promises about how he was going to make this a satisfying experience for everyone concerned.

Jude: Want to grab a drink at Kitty's Café? I've had good news about my Achilles.

I wiped away a tear that had decided to fall. It wouldn't just be one. I thought about lying to him, because I didn't want to rain on his parade if he'd gotten good news, but I definitely wasn't up for a drink in public.

I wasn't going to lie. That wasn't fair on either of us.

Me: I've just got my period. Currently hiding in the toilets. Can we rain check?

Jude: Which bathrooms?

That meant he was on his way to find me.

Me: It's okay. I've got supplies this time.

Jude: Not why I was asking. The ones near your office?

Me: Those ones. Honestly, I'm okay. Go celebrate with Jesse and Nate.

The door to the bathrooms opened seconds later. I knew it was Jude, whether it was the sound of his footsteps or just the way he charged the air with his own brand of electricity.

“Hey. Neva.” He pushed at the door, which was locked. “Let me in.”

“I'm on the loo.”

He laughed. “Yeah, nothing I've not seen before. Remember, I'm the bloke who doesn't have boundaries.”

I leaned over and slid the lock . If we did have a baby, he would see a lot more during the birth.

“This is the sort of scene that takes any mystique out of our – agreement.” I hesitated over the last word, almost saying relationship instead.

Jude leaned against the side of the cubicle and smiled. “Not for me. I don't work that way. This just means I know you better and that's an achievement unlocked.”

I managed to smile. “You're such a gamer.”

“Ex-gamer. Haven't played for months. In fact, I've given all the age-appropriate games to Toby.” He shrugged. “What's the plan? How do I get you to my house and tucked up in front of Buffy?”

I sniffed, more tears incoming. “I can just go home. You need to celebrate.” I pointed at his leg. “What was the news?”

“I’m ahead of schedule. Had a scan today – didn’t think I was having one – and it’s healing well. I can step up what I’m doing and we could be looking at a New Year’s Day return.”

I smiled. This was good news for everyone. The team was missing Jude, and although he was travelling with them to away games now and being in the dressing room for them and for home games, it wasn’t the same for anyone.

“That was the best case, New Year’s Day, wasn’t it?” I’d heard that date bartered around a bit after the initial injury.

He nodded. “I’ve figured that they tell you the best case scenario at first so you don’t go into self-destruct mode. I got told the worst case a week after which was no return at all.” There was a carefree shrug. “I’m hating not playing. I need to be back out there on match day rather than being on the bench.”

“I know. And you will be.” I really believed that. I’d seen him train and work with the physios, following everything they said to the letter, understanding why they were saying it too.

“Right, how am I getting you home? Carrying? A wheelchair?” He raised his brows. “You can’t stay here all night – the imprint of that seat will be on your arse for a decade.”

I started laughing because he was probably right. “Give me a minute to pull everything up and sort myself out. You sure I’m okay to come back to yours?”

“Pretty much. Just let me call the six women who are there waiting for my return.” He lifted his phone, showing it to me.

I started laughing again because he was taking the piss out of himself, and I knew from the conversations that we’d had – usually in bed – that he’d been strictly a one woman man. “Ask them to open a bottle of red wine and let it breathe. The merlot would be a good choice.”

“On it.” He exited the cubicle and closed the door too.

I did what I needed to do, listening to him make a phone call to Jesse, who'd recently moved into a house near to Jude's. He was asking him to nip round and put the fire on, and open the merlot.

That was when I cried.

Huge fat tears started to drop as I fixed a sanitary pad and pulled everything up, glancing at the toilet bowl that really did look like something had met a bloody end down there.

A sob broke lose.

The cubicle door opened. Jude stood there, filling the space.

"Is this because you're on your period, is it because you're not pregnant, or is it because you were hoping for an orgy with those six fictional women?" He was still holding up his phone.

A noise that was a mixture of a laugh and sobs snorted out of me. "It's because you're so nice."

His laugh surprised me. "You know, that's not what every man wants to be called – nice. Badass. Hench. Sexy. I get nice." He pulled me into his arms. "I'll take nice because it's coming from you." He reached round me and flushed the loo. "I'm so glad I'm not a woman."

"Yeah, some days it's crappy." I was let go and headed to the sink, needing to wash my hands. "Let's go. I need a takeout, wine and something Christmassy on TV." I didn't need to pick up my oversized handbag because Jude already had it.

Being looked after was something I was starting to enjoy.

I just needed to make sure I didn't get used to it.

I left my car at the grounds, sitting back in Jude's reclining car seat with the seat warmer on high. He had a mix of girl bands playing on the sound system, which wasn't his usual indie-rock choice.

“Since when have you been in your Spice Girls era?” I’d nabbed a heat pack from Amber’s room and was holding it against my stomach. These cramps were nasty and the pain relief I’d taken hadn’t seemed to have kicked in yet.

Jude took a corner at a perfectly reasonable speed, turning the steering wheel with just one hand, something I found a ridiculous turn on.

“I figured if we had a girl I needed to be up on girl power and stuff like that.” His cheeks coloured slightly and he didn’t expand any further, which was unusual for him.

I couldn’t stop the smile. That was probably the most ovary-exploding thing I’d ever heard, and if I hadn’t wanted specifically Jude’s baby before, I did now.

He glanced at me. “What? Why are you smiling at me?”

“Because that’s just the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.” I knew he was going to hate being called cute.

“Nice. Cute. I’m going to have a complex if this carries on. When your period’s stopped, you’re going to be using completely different words, I’m telling you now.” He shook his head, turning into the road that led to his house.

I smiled at the thought of that. The vibe between us had become easy. Uncomplicated. But that was kind of how Jude was, or how he seemed. I got the feeling sometimes that still waters were running deep, deeper than what he let on.

“When I’m not feeling like this, I’ll think about that comment some more.” I relaxed back into the seat, even though he was slowing down to take the turn into his drive, the gates opening automatically.

I liked Jude’s house. It was huge – because why wouldn’t it be – but it felt homely. I knew his mum had helped him chose the furniture and décor, but he’d insisted a couple of times that it had stemmed from his ideas. It was also the place he wanted to be for a good while, as he had no intentions of leaving Manchester Athletic.

“Home.” He parked the car in the garage, the door something else that was automatic. “Do you need any stuff?”

Have you got everything here you need?"

One of the things that had changed since last time was that we were staying at his more than mine. It was out in the open now that we were 'kind of seeing each other', which was how we'd both explained it to people that we didn't want to tell the full story too. It would be easier for people to assume I'd gotten pregnant by accident than we'd been trying to get pregnant even though we weren't in a romantic relationship.

"I think I've got everything here." I eased myself out of the car, Jude whipping round to grab my bag off me. "I am able to carry stuff, you know."

"I'm capable of cleaning my own football boots, but it doesn't mean I do it. Besides, I'm practising in case I end up being a girl-dad. I think it suits me." He moved it over his shoulder.

I shook my head, the question I'd been wondering about since texting him about to fall out.

"Aren't you disappointed I got my period?"

He shook his head. "Honestly, no. And it's not 'cause I'm relieved or anything like that. I didn't think it'd happen straight away and I wanted a bit more time with you before baby fever hit. I know we got to know each other pretty well before, but it's been awhile."

"You wanted more sex."

He was grinning in such a way I figured this was definitely the case.

Jude shrugged, those broad shoulders looking even stronger. "Yeah, course. But can't we still have sex when you're pregnant?"

"Well, yeah, but there's no reason to if I'm pregnant."

His smile left his face.

"Jude, don't you think it will blur things?" I needed him to say yes. It would blur things.

But I wanted him to say no. I wanted him to want more. Maybe it was because I was hormonal or because he'd just been so fucking good at everything.

He locked the door from the garage to the kitchen behind him. "Can we talk about it when you get pregnant and decide then?"

Why had I thought he was too young for this?

I nodded. "That's probably the best idea."

"Bath? Wine? Takeout? What food do you want? I'm good with anything you want to order. But please choose quickly because I'm freaking starving." He sat down on the sofa, the smile not yet back.

I felt bad. Jude had been nothing short of amazing. Genny had said a couple of times that she thought he wanted more than just a baby arrangement, asking me why we weren't just making a go of it.

I was worried if we did, and it ended because one of us fucked up, things would get weird between us. I knew that wasn't brave or maybe even fair, and I kept avoiding conversations with Jude about relationships.

This, sitting on his sofa, with a blanket over me that he'd bought specially for me, a glass of red wine on the coffee table and him massaging his thumbs into my feet, was a relationship. I wasn't stupid enough to think it wasn't.

I wasn't stupid enough to not understand why we weren't going to discuss it either.

"Chinese. I really fancy Chinese. Do you?" I relaxed into the sofa, the work he was doing on my feet almost orgasmic.

"I'll eat anything. Usual?"

"Please and thank you." I smiled at him, feeling really grateful for him right now.

"On it. No bath?"

"Before bed." Outside, heavy rain started to batter against the bifold doors. "How does Christmas look here?"

He moved his hands from my feet and picked up his phone to order the food on his app. “I don’t usually do much. I have Christmas dinner at my parents if they’re not away, and then I’ve usually been at Nate’s or Rowan’s.” He studied his phone for a second, brow furrowing. “I’ll get a tree this year. Make it more Christmassy. What are you doing for Christmas?”

“I don’t know this year. My mum’s going to be in France with her friend, so I’ll probably go to Genny’s.” Although Genny had said something about seeing an old friend, which had made me and Amber suspicious.

“Have it here with me.” He put his phone down and carried on with my other foot. “I think my parents are on a cruise for Christmas.”

I thought about it for a moment. Waking up in my own little house – which I loved – by myself, or here with Jude.

I wanted to be here.

“Let’s have Christmas here then.” I moved my feet and swung round on the sofa so I could lounge against him, liking too much how he pulled me closer to him, pulling the blanket over both of us, and opting for *The Muppet’s Christmas Carol*, to which I discovered he knew all the songs.

We talked about food and our nutrition endeavor while we ate Chinese at the kitchen island, my one glass of wine replaced with water to combat the salt I knew I was inhaling. We’d been in six schools so far, all locally, and did direct work with pupils aged fourteen to sixteen. The feedback had been interesting: they understood eating healthy and had an awareness of nutritional content, but there were barriers – parents not being able to afford the food they would possibly choose, or convenience food because they were going from school to a quick dinner and to another activity, or other reasons. Jude talked about body image and what sort of diet an athlete had and why, making comments that he was looking forward to retiring because then he wouldn’t have to look this way, or be this fit. We’d enjoyed it, each visit becoming smoother, bouncing off each other with a topic we were both

passionate about. I handed out recipe cards I'd been working on, easy healthy meals that could be made cheaply from ingredients that could be bought easily.

"I want to show you something," Jude said, polishing off the rest of his chow mein. "But don't laugh."

"I'm going to laugh now, aren't I?"

He passed his phone to me. "Press play."

I did, seeing a video of him in this kitchen, talking to the camera as he made one of the recipes I'd given him to make. I didn't laugh, because actually, he was pretty good at this, so much so, I doubted it was his first attempt.

"You want to do these for the website? They'd get a ton of views."

He nodded. "I've shown a few to Ezra. They've suggested setting one up properly – they're just waiting for me to say yes."

"I think you should."

"I think you should be on it with me. It'll give more credibility to it and we could follow one of your recipe cards that you're giving out." He sat back on the kitchen stool and folded his arms. "Let's do a practice one tomorrow."

I thought about it for a moment. I didn't hate being on camera, and I could see that this meant a lot to Jude. "Okay. Let's try it."

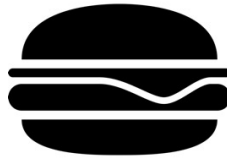
"Awesome. Thank you, partner." He flashed me that grin.

I stifled a groan. His smile should've been registered as a lethal weapon.

CHAPTER 14

Jude

DECEMBER



I HAD no idea what to do with a crying Neva.

Or any other woman. This was where my experience was limited.

I knew my mum had moments when she'd been sad, and she'd cried. I saw how my dad cheered her up and tried to fix things, even if it was just putting things into perspective. I knew she'd been heartbroken because she couldn't have any more children after me, and there were times when that had really gotten to her. She'd thought about adopting, and I think they'd considered surrogacy, but it hadn't replaced her want to carry another child.

“Just because you haven't gotten pregnant yet doesn't mean you won't soon.” This was true. Factual. I was holding her in my arms sitting on the bathroom floor, which was thankfully heated otherwise we'd have been really fucking cold.

Her period had been late. Her hopes had been up. Not going to lie, mine had been too. But right now wasn't about my disappointment.

“But I might not.” She was shaking. “It might never happen.”

“We've been trying two months. Give it four more and then we'll make an appointment with a doctor, if we're not pregnant by then.” I threaded my fingers through her hair and massaged her scalp.

She took a couple of deep breaths. “Maybe we’re having too much sex. That can have an effect on how high your sperm count is. Maybe I need to start taking my temperature so I can see whether I’m fertile. Should we try to look at what else we can do?”

I brought her closer to me, moving her back against my chest.

“Maybe we need a couple of months where we’re not trying so hard. Maybe just pretend that this is what it was a couple of years ago.” It killed me to say that, but if I could get her to not focus on becoming pregnant, then maybe it would just happen.

The sex we were having was fucking awesome, the best of my life, and while it hadn’t been that long really, I’d had a more than the average amount of sex for someone my age, or so I reckoned.

But afterwards, when we were lying there, I could tell Neva was thinking about what might be happening. Was this the time when we would conceive? Would it be forty weeks from now until she held our baby?

I knew she was doing everything she could, because Neva liked to be in control. The only time when she handed control over to me was when I was fucking her or going down on her. I’d worked out why she’d taken up a career in nutrition.

Food was the last thing you could control. What you put into your body was the ultimate control over you. By learning everything she could about food and nutrition, Neva had developed a way of control that was difficult for anyone to argue with. I got it.

I’d talked with my mum about it, after telling her what the plan between Neva and me was.

There were many conversations I’d anticipated having with my parents in my life. *Mum and dad, I’ve offered to help a friend have a baby* wasn’t an opening sentence I’d ever thought I’d say to them.

My mum's response had been classic. *"So you haven't gotten someone pregnant by accident? That's a relief."* Followed by – *"That means I'm going to be a grandma."* Her face had lit up and she'd beamed.

I'd spent the next twenty minutes explaining what was happening, Neva's worries about her age and how we were really good friends – which was an exaggeration at the time but one that was needed to avoid being attacked with a million and twelve questions.

My dad had been the one to probe. Asking how I'd be a father if I wasn't together with the mother. I went through the details Neva and I had hammered out, and the agreement we'd both signed. My father had looked at me curiously, and said very little, making a joke about my mother needing to look at how to be a glamorous grannie, to which she'd battered him with a cushion.

Both of them had asked questions since, usually when I was on my own with one of them. My mum asked lots about Neva, who she'd met a few times and liked. She seemed to understand Neva's position and was happier about a planned baby and not me knocking up some WAG wannabe. My dad asked more about how me and Neva were getting along and if there was more to it.

My answer had been short and incomplete. It was an arrangement, but I knew it was more than that. I wanted more than that, and I figured she did too. She just hadn't accepted that she was allowed to fall for a man who was younger. I didn't tell my dad that, but the look he'd given me suggested he suspected there was more than just friends making a baby.

On my bathroom floor, with her just about managing to control her sobs, I felt helpless. I wanted this for her, and for me. I didn't want her to be upset and I was worried that her being anxious about getting pregnant wasn't helping.

"I know. No one will see us until we've been trying six months." I rested my chin on her shoulder. "Because not getting pregnant straight away is normal."

“I know. I know this.” She relaxed some more. “Thank you for being you. For understanding.” She turned round and managed to smile at me. “Thank you for being my future child’s father. You’ll be an amazing dad.”

I pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Maybe some of the time. I’ll try my best.” Another kiss. “They’ll be lucky to have you for a mum too, even if you’re going to be a helicopter parent.”

She laughed. I gave myself a medal.

“They’ll have you to balance me out. Or balance each other out.” She was definitely past the worst of her crying now.

“I have a suggestion. Hear me out.” I had no idea if this was the right time to suggest this.

“Okay. Go on.” She was definitely mellowing.

“We have ten days between matches coming up so Guy’s given us permission to go away. Why don’t we book a few days away – somewhere in Europe – and just have fun and pretend we’re a normal couple.” I paused, waiting to see how much she protested. None came but I decided to nip it in the bud. “I know we’re not like a normal couple, and I’m not saying this is a date or something romantic, but we get a change of scenery and we can relax.”

She was quiet for another few seconds. I’d lied about the romantic thing. I intended to romance the hell out of her, even though this was meant to be anything other than that sort of relationship.

“Where would we go?”

I thought quickly. “Amsterdam?” Paris would’ve been too obvious, Rome would’ve been my next choice but I knew she’d been there a few months ago with Genny.

“I haven’t been to Amsterdam. Is this because you want to watch the sex shows?” She was smiling properly now.

“That would be interesting, but I’m not bothered if we don’t. There’s a ton of other stuff to see. What do you think?”

“You’ve got me in a soft moment. Why not?” She shrugged, snuggling into me more. “No one’s going to say anything. Apart from making comments about you and sex shows.”

I laughed, knowing she was exactly right. “I’ll book us something. Can you get time off?”

“Yeah, I have loads of leave to use up. I was saving it in case I went down the donor route. So I guess this is the same thing.”

“Funny girl. Okay, I’ll book. What do you want to do today?” It was a Sunday and there was no game as we’d played at home the day before, scraping a one-nil win. Nate had been the most pleased because he and his defence had locked the other team out, despite them having more position. The bad start to the season had gotten better, but that was more due to luck rather than any improvement.

It was blowing a gale outside so I was really hoping she wouldn’t say anything that involved going outside, and it was only just after seven in the morning, so watching Buffy episodes in bed did not sound like a bad plan. Falling back asleep during one sounded even better.

“I don’t have really bad cramps, but they could happen, so a bath and get in bed for a bit longer.” She started laughing. “That’s what you were hoping I’d say, isn’t it?”

“Totally. Maybe we could get Sunday lunch later if you were up to it?” I knew that her cramps would last four or five hours and then they’d ease off, so somewhere for a late Sunday dinner was possible.

“Maybe. Let’s see.” She pulled herself off my lap and stood up. “I know you’re thinking I’m going to say it’s too coupley.”

“I was wondering if you’d think that. Do you think that?”

She nodded. “But we both know where we stand and what we’re doing, so we’re not giving ourselves the wrong impression, and if anyone sees us, it doesn’t matter.” She

started to run a bath, daylight just about coming in through the windows. “Shit, I need to change your sheets.”

“I am capable of doing that.” I knew some of my teammates would just move to another bed and have their housekeeper sort out messy sheets, but even though we’d had a housekeeper – who was more of a friend of my mum’s who didn’t have a great time and needed extra income – I had to clean my own room, change my own bed and do my laundry.

I also liked clean sheets and for the bed to be made a particular way.

“I got them messy. It’s my blood on them.”

I shrugged, standing up. “There’s probably my jizz on them too from the wet patches. It’s blood, Neva. Not some toxic substance. I’ll get clean sheets on while you’re in the bath.”

“Thank you.” She brushed away a loose tear. “Seriously, you’re amazing.”

I grinned, taking the compliment and loving it, trying to not read too much into it. “Want a cup of tea too?”

She nodded.

I was taking this as a step in the right direction, even though we’d had a disappointment.

We’d spent that Sunday mainly in bed, watching old Christmas films and catching up on last night’s celebrity dancing programme. We’d also planned our trip to Amsterdam, the trip we were now on.

The boat we were sat on was shrouded in the night, the lights onboard deliberately mostly dark. We were about to set off on a boat tour of the Light Festival, seeing light art installations that’d been put up around the canals and harbour.

We’d only landed a couple of hours ago, both of us only having carry-on luggage as we were only here for three nights. The hotel had picked us up from the airport, one of the

benefits of being a footballer, and we'd pretty much just checked out our room and headed out.

The Christmas markets were on, and I'd wanted to go on this tour as well, not managing to stop talking about it during the plane ride.

Neva had listened, asked a few questions and then lifted her eyes from her e-reader a few times when I repeated the same information. I rubbed at my nose and tried to keep myself in check, but I knew I'd only relax when I was on the boat.

Which I was now.

Neva pressed close to me. She'd probably say it was because she was cold, but I figured it had more to do with being somewhere we weren't surrounded with people we knew.

"It's so pretty." She focused on the display we were sailing past. "It feels like magic."

"It does." I wasn't sure I was referring to the same thing. Not exactly. "I feel like I should take photos but I don't want to."

"Why?" She glanced at me, puzzled.

"Because I just want this to be in my head, exactly how I remember it."

Her laugh was soft. "I get what you mean. There, look at that one."

We spent the rest of the cruise pointing out the lights and other buildings, exchanging whispers about the couple opposite us who'd clearly had an argument.

When the cruise ended, we headed over to the Christmas markets, Neva's mittened hand in mine – she'd forgotten her gloves so I picked up a pair from the first stall we'd found selling them – and spent an hour drinking mulled wine and looking over what was being sold. I picked up a wooden penis keyring for Jesse as I'd ended up with him for my Secret Santa for the second year in a row. This year I was getting him a box

of dicks, possibly from Amsterdam, which meant they'd be an interesting situation if my luggage was searched.

We walked over the bridge with all the padlocks on it, posing for a selfie like everybody did, Neva now wearing a bobble hat because it was cold and she'd under packed.

We headed back to the hotel slightly tipsy from mulled wine and giddy from the lights and a Christmassy feeling from all the lights and decorations. The concierge gave us an amused look as we worked out where the lifts were, Neva's hat skew-whiff on her head, her dark hair poking out from underneath. Her cheeks were pink from the cold, her nose not far off Rudolph's at the end.

I wrapped my arms around her as soon as the lift doors closed, pulling her close to me and bent my head down to steal a kiss.

I didn't expect her to be reticent. The day – even the flight over – had been as perfect as it got and it'd felt like a date, the sort of date where I might've been considering proposing or something along those lines.

What we were actually trying to do was a lot longer commitment than any marriage had.

Neva's lips were cold at first, warming up as the kiss took hold. The lift ride was short, ending either too soon or not soon enough. I wasn't sure I wanted the kiss to end, but I wanted to be in our room soon. We'd said we'd walk around the red-light district tomorrow, maybe go in a few places, but I had no desire to put on our own live sex show. I didn't want anyone seeing Neva like I did.

And I didn't want Genny's wrath tomorrow if we were papped and ended up in the press.

"Come on." I practically ran her back to our room. "Before we make a scene."

"Before *you* make a scene." She shook her head, but she was still keeping up with me.

I unlocked the door to our room, one of three penthouses because even though we were only there for three nights, why

not? As soon as we were inside, I pulled the catch over and caught her again, my hands undoing the zip on her coat, starting to unwrap her like she was my favourite present ever.

She was just as hungry, unzipping my jacket, her hands pushing up under my jumper and the T-shirt I had underneath – Amsterdam was having a colder than usual spell – and then slowing it down with the kiss, demanding I match her pace.

I let her. I passed her control.

She backed us over to the bed, toppling me back onto it with a giggle. I pulled her hat off her head, grinning at how messy her hair was, how pretty she looked, how happy.

“If this was the movies, we’d have managed to lose our shoes and socks, and our pants would be off now.” She attacked my belt as I lay on my back on the bed, looking up at her with my hands exploring her tits. I could feel that her nipples were hard already, her bra and vest, the only remaining clothes she had on her top half, all that was separating me from my goal.

“There’d have been a cut scene while the non-sexy bits happened.” I tried to kick my trainers off, but it wasn’t happening. “I think we need a cut scene.”

She moved off me and started to unzip her boots, then began the skinny jean dance which I always found too fucking amusing.

I yanked off my trainers and lost my cargo pants and underwear, kicking them off the end of the bed with my socks and the T-shirt and sweater I’d already discarded at some point, leaving me naked, with Neva’s eyes covering me.

I smirked, knowing she liked what she saw, resisting the urge to flex muscles that were definitely more prominent than they were even a few months ago.

Then I forgot about that because she was naked, her gentle curves on display for me, her full tits tipped by hard, dark nipples, the tidy patch of dark hair between her legs enticing me to play with what was below it.

She climbed on the bed, straddling me, giving me instant access to her tits. I cupped them in my hands, feeling their weight before plucking at her nipples, her back arching and pushing them forward.

“I fucking love these.” I pulled myself up with my abs, teasing one nipple with the flick of my tongue, my other hand dropped to between her legs and cupping her pussy. She was slick and warm and ready, her hips moving against my hand, seeking friction.

Neva gave me half a minute before pushing her hands against my shoulders and pressing me back against the mattress, lifting her hips and lining her entrance over my cock. She sank down with a sigh, taking my whole length in one action, her moan satisfied and sending a shot of electricity straight to my cock.

“You feel so fucking tight.” I managed to get the words out, my hands now on her hips, steadying her.

Steadying me.

“You feel so fucking huge.” She sighed, her pussy twitching around me. “Fuck, Jude. How do I ever move on from this?”

“Don’t.” She started a rhythm, quick, shallow movements up and down my cock that were rendering my brain useless. “This is perfect.”

I started to use my strength to bounce her on my cock, needing the pace to be quicker, needing some control here too. My hips moved in time, my whole body feeling as if it was melting into hers.

“I’m going to - ” She lost the last word to her orgasm, her body tensing, hips stiffening, pussy tightening before it started to pulse.

It was a good thing I had more stamina on the pitch.

I exploded inside her, my vision becoming starry and my balls tightening as my release came, pulling her hips down onto me so I was as deep as I could be.

I emptied myself, feeling lightheaded as I came back down to earth. Neva laid on top of me, my cock still inside her.

This was my new favourite position.

“Maybe we should move to Amsterdam,” I muttered, my arms around her, bringing her closer. “If this is the sort of sex we have here.”

“We have amazing sex at home.” She lifted her head and looked at me.

“Did you just give me a compliment?” I’d teased her often enough about never complimenting me, like she was trying to keep a lid on my ego.

“I was complimenting both of us.”

I stroked her back, her skin soft and warm. Her tits flattened against my chest, but I was sure I could still feel her heartbeat, if that was possible.

I knew I was in love with her. I had been before, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever stopped.

“This is exactly where I want to be.” I hoped the words gave her some idea of what I was feeling.

“In Amsterdam?”

“In Amsterdam with you.”

I saw her smile, the glow from the bedside lamps illuminating her lips.

“I’m not sure there are many places I’d rather be either.”

I would take that right now.

CHAPTER 15

Neva



IT HAD BEEN KEPT quiet from the media, with only the team and immediate coaching staff knowing, so when Jude made his return on the bench the week before Christmas, the stadium erupted. There were eyes and flashes of cameras focusing on him, and he was pretty much the only thing the match day commentary could talk about.

We were the early kick off on a Saturday, Christmas Day in just a couple of days. The plan was for him to come on for the last ten minutes of the game today, and then have a longer stint in the Boxing Day game, before starting on New Year's Day.

His recovery had been exceptional. He'd managed to find ways to keep his stamina up – he hadn't gone into detail with anyone about how he'd done this, but I suspected those nights and Sundays in his bed, or whichever room in his house, had helped, and he'd built on his strength in other areas.

Jude had accepted that the injury would mean he'd lose some speed so he'd planned to work around this, looking at how he'd need to adapt his game. He'd told me he'd already been working on this, knowing that as he got older, he would lose seconds off his pace, and he would want to eventually play upfront rather than on the wing, so strength was going to be even more essential.

This had been in one of those late night discussions, after a couple of sessions of epic sex, when we were curled up in his gigantic bed. I'd begun to realise that Jude ran far deeper than

he'd come across when he'd first stepped up onto the first team. The amount of planning he was doing not just for now but moving into the future made me question too much about myself.

My father had died when I was young, leaving me with my mother who'd crumbled. We didn't have a massive support network and pretty much lived from hand to mouth, although she had a decent job, working as a paralegal. Her wages just about covered our rent and outgoings, leaving a little for new clothes and one holiday a year. We weren't on the breadline, but there wasn't much for savings.

My goal as soon as I was old enough to have one was to stay out of debt, get a degree and own my own little house. I wanted to be beholden to no one.

Unfortunately, my mum had wanted a few extras one year, a new TV and cooker that amounted to just over a thousand pounds. A friend of hers mentioned taking a loan from someone she knew, which turned out to be a huge mistake. It was unregulated and my mother ended up owing triple what she'd borrowed at ridiculous interest rates and threats to her and me if she didn't pay.

I'd been fourteen at the time and knew what was going on, so I'd managed to get a Saturday job at a café and started giving my mother the money I earned. Eventually, the loan shark was reported and arrested and the situation went away.

So my goal had been to be self-sufficient. I'd managed it, and now I was saving what I could so I didn't have to worry if I couldn't work for a time or for when I didn't want to work, but my plan was nothing like Jude's.

He wanted to go into punditry, so his sponsorship deals were carefully considered. He was passionate about the healthy lifestyles work we'd been doing and he wanted to pursue that further, something that we'd talked a lot more about. This work was already leading to him being offered deals with brands that otherwise wouldn't have looked at a footballer, but he and his agent seemed to be onto something.

There was a balance that he was planning between ensuring he could continue to be busy, highlighting causes and issues that he believed in, and keeping a steady stream of income so he didn't have to worry about using the nest egg he'd built up.

The planning was important to him, because he knew without structure, he'd be searching for highs in low places.

I watched as Jude warmed up with the rest of the team, the fans already chanting his name. There was expectation on his shoulders, that him being back would somehow revive the season and we'd head back up to the top of the league. I'd asked Jude if he was feeling the weight of those expectations. He'd just grinned and shook his head, not fazed in the slightest, but he hadn't explained any more.

Warm up finished, there were the usual match day announcements, the toss-up between the captains won by Rowan. The crowd grew louder as the referee got ready for kick off, the electricity in the atmosphere connecting fans together.

"Are you nervous?" Amber dug me in my side with her elbow, Oliver on her knee, ready to watch his daddy.

We were in one of the boxes the club reserved for club staff who weren't needed pitch-side. I wasn't expected to attend games – it wasn't a contractual obligation – but I usually did. My dad had loved football, it was one of the things I remembered really clearly about him, and watching the game made me feel closer to him. I'd worked for the club for nearly a decade and if I hadn't fallen in love with football, I'd probably have struggled to last that long working there.

I got the match-day excitement. I understood the match-day rituals of both players and supporters and the staff. Winning was everything.

Especially when someone who had shards of their heart mingled with yours was on the pitch.

"More so than ever." I wanted the win. I wanted Jude to be the talisman who could bring about that win. I wanted him to

play and score, or at least assist. I wanted so much from this game that I knew disappointment was inevitable.

Amber switched Oliver to the seat next to her. He was watching his dad (who'd already waved at him) in goal. His sisters were sitting behind us with their Auntie Jez, who was more interested in picking bridesmaids' dresses. Oliver had no idea of the fate in store for him, where he was going to end up dressed in a mini suit for his Auntie's wedding.

"I always feel like I've been on a rollercoaster for about two hours at the end of every game. If Nate's conceded a couple of goals I know I'll need at least another double gin. If he's kept a clean sheet, I'll need bath salts the following morning." She grinned, glancing at the play that was going on down on the pitch. "Was Jude nervous?"

"What makes you think I know?"

She shook her head. "When's the last time you spent a night at your house, Neva? I've driven past there four times in the last week and haven't seen your car there once. How serious is this baby-making getting?"

I looked away, concentrating on the ref who was making a decision whether a foul committed by the other side was worthy of a yellow. The crowd was chanting "off, off, off," but that was unlikely to happen.

A yellow card was shown, eliciting an orchestra of boos.

"Jude. You. Where are things up to?" She glanced behind her, probably checking what the girls were up to. "Is it still just friends having a baby together or is it more yet?"

I shrugged. "Friends. Neither of us is seeing anyone else and I don't think he's planning on seeing anyone else. No baby yet though."

Amber smiled, ruffling her son's hair. "It'll happen. Then you too can have your internal organs rearranged."

I gave a very unattractive snort. "You make pregnancy seem like the thing of dreams."

“It was vile. It was a good thing he was cute when he eventually came out, else I’d have demanded a refund. Zero out of ten; would not recommend.” She opened her handbag and pulled out a packet of crisps. “Wonder mother skills – give junk food when you want peace.”

“Nothing wrong with a packet of crisps.” Oliver didn’t think so. He attacked the packet with hands that looked like they belonged on a four year old rather than a child just over a year younger. He was going to be big like his dad. “I wouldn’t recommend ten packets in a day though.”

Amber nodded. “Agreed, although I think his record was about seven. That was his grandparents’ fault though. And sisters. And Nate’s. But he had a nice day.” He looked at his mum. “Do you remember the day when you ate all those crisps, Olly?”

He nodded at her. “I like crisps.”

“I know. Has Daddy given you any crisps today?” She smiled at him, stroking his hair.

He nodded.

“How many packets? One? Two?”

Oliver nodded on two.

“I’ll murder Nate later.” She sat back in her chair. “Shit, what’s happening?”

We were both catching up.

“Ryan’s down.” Otter Penhaligon, Ryan’s wife and successful actor, leaned over us. “Their defender’s just kicked him in the head. Shit.”

I could feel her panic rising as the club doctor ran on the field.

We turned to watch the close up on the TV, seeing that Ryan was sat up, holding his head. There was blood pretty much everywhere, which meant something had split.

I hoped it wasn’t his eye.

James, Amber's colleague, was on the field as well, Jesse and Nate were around Ryan, while Rowan was having serious words with the referee.

A red card was produced and the defender marched off field, shaking his head. Boos went round the stadium, changing to cheers as soon as Ryan was on his feet, being led off the field with James' supporting him.

"I'm going down there." Otter picked up her bag, swinging it over her shoulder. "I need to see he's okay. Will he be going back on the pitch?"

Amber shook her head. "No. Head injury – they'll want a scan because that was a nasty hit and I think he was unconscious for a few seconds." The TV had been showing a replay of the incident. It was a high foot, the studs making contact with the side of Ryan's head, slicing through skin and knocking him straight down.

I felt sick.

Otter's back was to the screen so she was spared seeing what'd happened to her husband, else she might've lost the plot somewhere.

"Are you okay going down there?" Amber stood up, picking up Oliver. "I'll go down with you."

"I'll look after Olly." I held my hands out for the little boy.

"You might want to watch the game." Amber passed him to me. "Jude's coming on already."

My head snapped round, watching Jude jumping up high a couple of times, his track suit off. His and Ryan's hands made contact as Ryan headed down the tunnel to the medical room, and Jude ran on the pitch, the crowd's applause for Ryan morphing into a roar for Jude.

"This means he's playing up front rather than on the wing." Dee Jones sat down next to me. She'd been playing for the women's team at an early kick-off away match in Liverpool, which had ended in a draw. "So he won't be expected to do as much running."

She was wrong. Jude's first touch of the ball since his injury at the end of last season saw him run with it through the middle of the pitch, his speed still there, dodging a defender and then sending a worldy towards goal.

The opposition's keeper leapt, his body bending almost inhumanly, and he tipped the ball over the bar.

It was a world-class save that even had Nate applauding, and Jude as well. I watched the players get ready for the corner, Oliver sitting on my knee, clutching a teddy bear dressed in Manchester Athletic colours. He was spellbound by the ball, which was useful, because so was I.

I was used to seeing Jude take the corners, but with him playing out of position, I expected him to be in the box, waiting for the cross to come in.

He wasn't. Instead he'd run to the corner flag, setting the ball up and shouting to his team mates, his gesturing over the top as usual. He'd scored from a corner once, getting enough bend on the ball to send it into the top left corner of the net.

His run up was shorter than usual, and I wondered if that was tactical to do with his injury. Him coming on the pitch so soon hadn't been part of the plan. Part of me was thrilled for him, the other part terrified that this might be too much too soon.

The ball lifted off the ground as he made contact with it, sending it perfectly up and into the box, straight onto the thick head of Rowan Reeves, who put it tidily away in the goal, heading it down between two defenders that were making a bad job of helping their keeper.

The stadium erupted. The Manchester Athletic players ran towards Rowan who was running towards Jude.

"For *flight's* sake," Dee glanced at the kids. "I hope their celly doesn't wreck Jude's Achilles."

"With the luck we're having this season anything can happen." The door to the box had opened and Genny entered, catching Dee's words. "Ryan's on his way to the hospital."

Otter's with him. I want to say it's precautionary but it's not – he's also bleeding all over the show.”

Nate's girls were too engrossed in whatever Jerrica was showing them on her tablet to be worried by what Genny had just said.

“Not good.” Head injuries were no fun. Head wounds did bleed a lot – Genny hated blood so she tended to dramatize anything to do with it. “But standard practice. Is Otter okay?”

Genny nodded. “She's okay.” She peered onto the pitch. “Jude's got the ball again.”

I focused back on the game, seeing a defender trying to steal the ball. Jude moved his body to block him, his strength making it difficult for the other player to intervene. He passed it to Nicky, who was having a really good season despite the team being off-kilter.

Nicky passed the ball back when Jude had found more space, taking two of the defenders with him as he pelted up the left side of the pitch.

“He's going to go for it again.” Genny sat down, staring at the screen instead of the field, the camera work doing a really good job of showing exactly what was going on. “What the hell is going on with their defence? They're panicking – man on!” She started to shout at the screen as one of the opposite players went for a sliding tackle on Jude.

He dodged it, my heart remaining in my mouth until the ball left his foot and sailed over the goalkeeper's head and into the net.

We all erupted. Even Nate's daughters forgot about their tablet and bridesmaids' dresses and leapt to their feet, cheering for the team.

Cheering for Jude.

The noise reverberated around the stadium, encapsulating all of us. I saw Jude run towards our box, where he knew we'd be watching. He tapped his chest where his heart was and then lifted his hand up, looking at me.

At least I figured he was looking at me.

I hoped he was looking at me.

I was already standing, but I held my hand up back and saw him smile, his big gorgeous grin breaking out across his face.

“Are you Jude’s girlfriend?” It was Libbie, Nate’s eldest, who asked.

“Kind of.” I hoped she didn’t ask for an explanation of kind of.

“You’re lucky. He’s my favourite player.” She sat back down, the tablet in her hands.

I grinned at Jerrica. It had really annoyed Nate when he found out that Libbie had a crush on Jude.

Jerrica grinned back, trying not to laugh.

I focused back on the game, knowing that Jude would be thrilled with the assist and goal, but I’d be more thrilled if he got to the end of the game without any injuries.

He did.

We all headed down to the lounge to wait for the players to come through once they’d showered, or before for some of them. Nate always found Amber and the kids before showering, mainly so he could embarrass Libbie with how badly he smelled.

Usually, I’d be with Jude for the games if he wasn’t watching from the bench, then he’d head to the dressing room to see his teammates after. Today was the first time it was different. I didn’t know if he’d get showered first or come and see everyone in the lounge.

It was the latter.

I heard him before I saw him, his laugh filling the hallway outside before he was the first player in the room, his eyes fixing on me and his smile growing even wider.

I wondered if I needed to play this cool. To be as enthusiastic for Nicky who was with him as I was for him. Most people involved with the club knew there was something going on with Jude and me, but not what exactly.

I didn't think *we* knew exactly what anymore.

Jude headed straight for me, and as soon as he got there, I was pulled against his very sweaty body. I didn't think to try and avoid it or consider what other people were thinking because it didn't matter. What mattered was that he'd returned from injury, playing almost all of the game and had two assists and a goal.

"Are you in one piece?" I breathed the words into him. "Are you okay?"

His laughed vibrated right through me. "I'm going to ache like hell for the next couple of days, but my Achilles feels fine." He moved me away a few inches. "Do I get a kiss for well done?"

I wouldn't have said no even if my job depended on it. My arms went around his neck and his fed around my waist, holding me in place while his lips pressed against mine, giving me a sweet, hard kiss that had goose bumps prickle over my skin in the nicest way possible.

"You can have more than a kiss later." I whispered the words so no one else could hear, but the look on his face probably gave away exactly what I'd just said.

Since Amsterdam, things had felt different between us, less prescriptive when we slept together.

"I'm looking forward to it." He gave me another kiss, this one slightly less sweet.

"Are you going out with the team?" This was what would normally happen, although it had been less so recently with Jude meeting me at his or us leaving together.

He shook his head. "Nicky asked if we wanted to grab food with him and Kitty. Food sounds really good and then a bath. If I don't seize up I'll be fucking surprised."

“You need physio first.”

He nodded. “Physio, shower, let the doctor check me over - ” he stopped, Genny standing on a chair and shouting loudly.

“An update on Ryan – he’s been checked over and released from hospital with a mild concussion and stitches. He could be back for the Boxing Day fixture. We need Jude, Nicky and Rowan out for media now please!” She stepped down and headed straight out, opening the door into the room attached where the media were set up for post-game interviews. Guy usually went first to give the players a chance to regulate. This was after a few classics from Rowan a couple of seasons ago where he’d still been high off adrenaline after scoring in the last minute and stealing the match which took us one win away from being league champions.

Since then, protocol had been for Guy to go first and players to be called afterwards.

“You best go.” I pushed him away lightly. “Then shower. You stink.”

He gave me a wink and disappeared to go and do his presser. I felt sorry for the reporter who’d be interviewing him – he definitely didn’t smell fresh.

Three hours later, washed, massaged, checked over and given orders to rest for the next couple of days and ice up, we were fed and back at Jude’s, heading straight up to his bed without even passing the kettle, just filling up our water bottles.

“I sound like an old man, but there is no way I could’ve gone out to a club tonight. Jesus, I don’t even think I felt like this after playing my first game.” He almost fell onto his back on the bed and groaned. “This is what it’s like to be Rowan Reeves after every game. Fucked. No wonder he’s retiring.”

“Don’t tell Rowan that.” Those were the wrong words to say.

Jude’s grin changed to wicked. He held his phone up and took a selfie, keying in a few things before turning it off and

putting it by his bed. “I told him I knew what it was like to be him. I also mentioned I didn’t expect a response because I knew he’d be asleep already.”

“You live dangerously.” I pulled off my socks and sweater, slipping my leggings off too, leaving me in just a slip, bra and underwear.

Jude’s grin grew again, the look in his eyes a different sort of wickedness.

“You know, I think you might have to do the work. I’m too tired.” He patted the mattress next to him.

This felt like a trap.

I sat down, but not where he’d patted.

“We can just sleep.” The words surprised even me. We’d only been in bed together twice and just slept, unless I’d been on my period. There had always been that voice telling me I needed to try, needed him to come inside me, just in case that was the night when I’d conceive.

“I’m not that tired. I’m still a bit high from the game.” His words did sound a bit sleepy though. “I didn’t think it’d go that well.”

I shifted closer to him, his hand landing on my thigh, sliding up and down it. Delicious shivers cascaded over my skin.

“You might need to help me get some of these clothes off.” I tugged at the jeans he’d worn to the restaurant where he’d ingested two fillet steaks, chips, veggies and a huge dessert that was meant to be shared between two people, but Jude kept to himself.

Nicky hadn’t eaten much less.

He lifted his hips and unbuttoned his jeans, kicking them off onto the floor. His cock was already hard, pressing against his underwear and fighting to escape it. I willed it to break free.

I’d become fascinated with Jude’s cock over the last few weeks, spending far too much time looking at it, seeing how it

moved differently depending what I did or what he was looking at.

Now seemed like a good time to experiment further, given he was tired, or at least pretending to be.

I straddled over his legs, pulling my slip off and taking off my bra. His cock pressed harder against his underwear in response and I knew without looking exactly where his eyes were. Then I pulled down his underwear, releasing the beast. He lifted his hips again and then sat up, pulling off his sweater.

“Feels wrong having clothes on the top when I’ve got nothing on the bottom.” He lay back down again, now completely naked.

I pressed my palm against his cock, feeling it harden further, before rubbing it up and down.

Jude groaned, his hand stretching out to cup my breast. “That feels good already.”

I thought for a moment, deciding what to do. He liked it when I was on top. He liked it when he was on top, or behind or standing up and against the wall. Jude liked sex.

What he hadn’t had a lot of since we’d started our assignment was oral. I knew why; we were trying to make a baby and babies weren’t made from jizz that was shot down your throat, but I wanted tonight to be about him.

Which made me question exactly where we stood. Was this just about having a baby together, or was there more to it?

I paused that thought at the same time as I took the tip of his cock in my mouth, running my tongue around the head, enjoying the groan Jude made, his hand taking hold of a fistful of hair and pulling on it slightly.

“You don’t need to do this,” he hissed.

I responded by taking more of him in my mouth, as deep as I could, using my hand at the base.

“This is fucking amazing.” His hips started to move, but he didn’t seize control, letting me set the pace and the depth.

I kept up the rhythm, feeling his balls tightening when I cupped them, pulling slightly on them, my name escaping from his lips.

It wasn't power I was feeling full of, it was something else, something I didn't want to put a name to right now.

"Neva, are you wet?" Jude's words sounded strained. He was nearly at the end.

I was wet. Seeing him play on the pitch and his elation at scoring had been more of an aphrodisiac than I'd thought it could be.

I released his cock from my mouth. "Yes."

That was all he needed.

He moved from under me, flipping me over and pulling my underwear down and off. "I want to come inside you and not just because I want to get you pregnant, I just want to fuck you bare and fill you up. Is that okay?"

I nodded.

"Are you ready for me?" His hand slipped between my legs. "You're wet." He pushed two fingers inside me, pumping them in and out. "You're ready for my cock, baby mama."

His words had brought me close to my own edge, his fingers making me dance at the precipice.

There was no ceremony for him entering me with his cock, his hips driving into me, his face full of an expression that was telling me exactly who he thought I belonged to.

I cried out as he fucked me, hard and needy, making me feel so full I knew I'd feel the emptiness inside for hours afterwards.

Jude's fingers slipped to my clit, bracing his weight on one hand as he worked me to an orgasm that took over every nerve ending I possessed.

"Don't think I'm fucking you just to make a baby," he said, his thrusts deep and slow as he reached his own orgasm. "I'm fucking you because it's my favourite thing to do."

I felt his cock pulse, filling me up with his seed, nothing between us yet again. Another sweet orgasm rolled over me, my pussy clenching at his cock as if it was trying to milk him dry.

Jude groaned, letting his weight fall to the side of me. “I don’t know what was more satisfying: that or scoring.”

I laughed, not sure either. “Maybe we need a repeat of this in the morning and you can decide.”

He nodded, almost falling asleep already.

I tidied myself up, going to the bathroom because nobody likes UTIs and then tucked myself up against him in bed, Jude already fast asleep. His arm draped over me, his soft snores gentle and barely there.

I fell asleep feeling lighter than before, as if the goal he’d scored had started a new chapter for both of us.

CHAPTER 16

Neva



CHRISTMAS WAS QUIET. The pressure was on to get the results from the games over the Christmas period, as it was often the team at the top of the league going into the new year who would be crowned champions at the end of the season. We were currently third, the win when Jude made his return taking us behind the second placed team on goal difference and just three points away from going top. Despite the shaky start to the season, we were still in the running, which the pundits were saying was the sign of champions – we could pull out the results even when we weren't playing well.

That meant the usual parties and celebrations that players might try to get away with over Christmas were non-existent. None of them would've had a busy Christmas Day even if we'd been ten points clear at the top, but they might've snuck something in the day before, or been planning something for after the Boxing Day match.

Christmas Day ended up being me, Jude, Kitty and Nicky. Nicky's mum and his two brothers had gone to Disneyland for Christmas as a present from him, so we'd decided to cook it between the four of us, which made the whole day about food.

Jude and I had spent the evening on the couch, watching TV and feeling each other up, which ended up with a deep clean of his sofa. Then it was an early night to get ready for game day, rituals all in place, the bedroom set to an optimum temperature, clean sheets, no caffeine three hours before bed.

I slipped under the covers next to Jude, not quite ready to fall asleep yet even though he was absolutely out for the count. For Christmas, he'd bought me a blender that I'd had my eye on, but had been reluctant to spend so much on, and a stocking full of bits, including diamond stud earrings that definitely weren't just a 'bit'. It was a lot more than I'd expected, but I'd put it down to Jude earning more than the GDP of a small country.

I'd bought him new headphones and some training gear that had nothing to do with who he was sponsored by and everything to do with it just being nice gear. His stocking – we'd agreed to do stockings – was full of socks and toiletries, because he was obsessed with how he smelt, which was no bad thing – for me or whoever was his happily ever after.

We didn't talk about what next Christmas would be like, whether we'd have a baby and be celebrating their first Christmas, or what would happen if we didn't.

There was a stalemate.

The Boxing Day game saw Jude come off the bench for the second half, setting up a cross for Nicky to score a rare headed goal. It was the decisive goal, Nate keeping a clean sheet for the second successive game and Athletic taking all three points, but more importantly, we played well.

I travelled back with Genny and Jerrica, the game an away one at a ground just over an hour away, and turned down drinks at Genny's apartment where she was holding a small, meant to be sensible Christmas gathering.

The idea of alcohol was turning my stomach. I was tired as I hadn't slept amazingly the night before and I didn't feel fantastic. I picked my car up from the ground and headed home, wishing I'd waited for Jude and gone to his instead when I walked through my door and realised my heating wasn't working.

This wasn't good. I felt off, and if I was starting with a virus or something, I didn't want to be around Jude. The plan was for him to be the in the starting eleven for the next game on New Year's Day, not laid up in bed with a virus. There

were already enough coughs and colds and other nasties going around at this time of year.

I checked out my boiler and found it had definitely been unalived. This was a problem. I needed an engineer, but it was late Boxing Day and there was probably already a waiting list of people who needed a central heating engineer for the same reason.

I did have heated blankets and a fire though.

Before I could do anything, my phone rang, Jude's name flashing up on the screen. He spoke as soon as I answered.

"Where are you?" He didn't sound happy. "I thought we were going back to mine."

"We were." I sighed, pulling a blanket around me and sitting down on my sofa. "I don't feel great and I don't want you to catch whatever I might be starting with, so I've come home."

There was silence at the other end.

"Jude?" I wasn't sure that he was still there. "You okay?"

"Yeah, still here. You looked pale this morning. What do you think's up?" He changed the phone to hands free on his car, the click one I was familiar with.

"Not sure. Genny mentioned drinks at hers but the idea of alcohol's knocking me sick. I'm tired and I feel under the weather."

"You're not coughing, sneezing or have the shits?" His bluntness could be considered endearing.

"None of that. Yet. I do have an issue and I might need to come to yours." That was probably the most sensible option. "My heating's broken and my house's freezing."

"Drive over then. If you're worried about spreading your germs, sleep in a spare room. There are enough of them. I need to eat when I get in, so shall I do something for you?"

The idea of food didn't seem great, apart from toast. Nice thick bread to make buttery toast. "Do you have any bread

in?”

“Is that a sign you’ve been kidnapped?”

I laughed. I could understand why he was saying that. Bread and me weren’t things that usually went together.

“I haven’t been kidnapped. I just fancy toast. There’ll be a shop open on the way to yours. You sure you don’t mind me and my germs being there?”

“It’s all good and I’m pretty sure I’m resistant from everything after what I’ve been eating recently. You never get ill. Weird.”

It was weird. Every couple of years I’d have a nasty cold or throat infection, usually because I’d ended up running myself down. That wasn’t the case right now. I’d been looking after myself better than ever and sleeping better, early nights had become usual because Jude had been upping his sleep as he upped his training.

“I don’t feel *ill* ill – just not right. Anyway, I’ll be there in half an hour. It really is too cold to stay here.”

We ended the call. I grabbed a few more bits that I wanted to take with me and locked up, heading to Jude’s via a petrol station that had a mini-supermarket attached, where I picked up a load of super processed bread.

The warmth of Jude’s house hit me as soon as I got inside, his fire roaring. He didn’t keep his distance, wrapping me in a huge hug as soon as he let me in, then pressed a hand to my forehead.

“You don’t feel like you’ve got a temperature.” He frowned. “You didn’t sleep well last night though. Maybe it’s just that.”

“Maybe.” It could be. I wasn’t a doctor, and I didn’t need one for this. “I’ll be fine. How are you feeling after that game?” I went into the kitchen area and practically drooled as I popped two rounds of bread in the toaster.

Jude propped himself against the kitchen counter, watching me. “Still on the high from the win. That dickhead who plays

for them has done a bit of a number on my chest.” He pulled up his T-shirt, showing the start of what was going to be a really nasty bruise. “No fractured ribs so we’re okay. And I got him back.”

I grinned. I had no ethics where revenge on the field was concerned. “And the ref didn’t see.”

Jude grinned. “Didn’t even glance. The dickhead should’ve been off the field anyway. I think the ref knew he’d cocked up not giving him a second yellow.”

We passed the rest of the evening watching the sports round-up on TV, the plan for me to keep my distance failing miserably, the plan for me to stay at Jude’s until my house no longer resembled the insides of a fridge put in place.

I slept better, in Jude’s bed of course, although there were no baby-making shenanigans, but I still felt odd. I felt the same for the rest of the week, still having the same affinity for toast and butter.

We knew that if we won the game on New Year’s Day we’d go top of the league by a two point, as our opposition was the current league leader. This would give us that psychological advantage of starting the second part of the season top and with improving form.

The days beforehand were spent in training sessions, most of them light, many of them strategic, and the players having physio and time with the sports psychologists. Food plans were a constant, but this was the time of year when there was temptation to overindulge, and some of the players had, leaving one or two feeling sluggish and it was showing.

Jude was on good form. He was fitter than ever, stronger and psychologically in a good place. The remainders of his reputation for being a bit of a wild child seemed to have dispersed and there was talk in the media that he was in line for the England captaincy. He was taking more of a lead on the field and in training sessions, being more vocal.

The opposite of how I was.

The game was due to kick off in thirty minutes. As we were at home, I'd be watching from the box with my usual girl squad, which included Jude's parents today as they were back off their cruise. I'd seen them briefly this morning, accepting his mum's hugs and even one off his dad, his mum giving me a knowing look and telling me how much she knew Jude had loved his Christmas presents.

If I'd been feeling on form, I'd have managed it better, but I was still off, which meant I smiled and was quiet.

Too quiet.

"Can I have five minutes with you in my office?"

Genny tapped my shoulder and gave me a smile, one that worried me.

"Sure." I followed behind her. She wasn't my line manager, and I didn't answer to her – it was the club doctor who was my direct report – but that didn't stop a nervy feeling in my stomach.

The press had picked up on Jude and me, which Genny had anticipated. Because no more fuel had been given, they'd moved onto someone else, so I wasn't concerned that the media had flagged something that could be damaging.

I also knew that Jude hadn't been playing away, so there was no worry there.

"What's happened?"

She closed the door behind me and pointed to her table.

A pack of pregnancy tests were lying there.

"This feels like déjà vu." She took a seat on one of her occasional chairs.

I noticed Guy's face was back on the dartboard. It was a photo of him that I hadn't seen before where he was wearing a Christmas hat.

"You think I'm pregnant?"

She frowned. "You don't?"

I froze, tears welling up in my eyes. “I – I - ”

“Have been trying for a baby for a couple of months and you’ve been lacking energy this week and eating bread. I think you need to do a test, Neva.” She shook her head. “I might rebrand my office ‘the pregnancy testing one stop’. Amber, now you and I’ll put money on having Dee in here before next September.” She smiled. “It’s cute. Now go and pee on a stick and we might make kick-off.”

I picked the pack up and headed into Genny’s office bathroom not able to speak. I should be due on my period next week and I had none of my usual pre-menstrual symptoms apart from being tired and my boobs ached a little, but nothing like they’d usually do.

Squatting over the loo and peeing on a stick, I practiced controlling my breath and trying to get my heart rate down. This seemed unreal, but what Genny was saying kind of made sense. I’d been lost in thoughts of never being able to get pregnant so I hadn’t considered that I might be.

I placed the test down, washed my hands and flushed, closing the lid and sitting down on it, knowing this would be the longest ever wait.

“Have you fallen down the loo?” Genny tapped at the door.

“No. Just waiting.” I kept staring at the stick.

“Do you want me to come in or leave you to it?”

I wasn’t sure. If I was pregnant, I’d want to tell Jude first. If I wasn’t, I was going to need Genny.

I worked on the likelihood of it being the second, leaning over and unlocking the door.

“Come in.”

She did, closing the door behind her and leaning against it. “I won’t say anything either way, but why don’t you watch the game with Jude’s parents whatever that stick says.”

I nodded. “I don’t think I can manage that.”

“Why don’t you go back to Jude’s and watch it on TV? I’ll get one of the drivers to take you. You have a key, fob and all that don’t you?”

I managed to nod again. “Good plan.”

“Neva, the stick - ”

I picked it up, Genny’s suggestions having distracted me for long enough.

There were two blue lines on it.

I was pregnant.

Athletic won the game three-nil. Jude scored two. Ryan grabbed the third when he replaced Jude with fifteen minutes to go. The team was elated, even Guy looked pleased when he was interviewed, followed by Rowan and then Ryan, who was always the best of the team at interviews, probably because Otter had schooled him on what to do.

Jude wasn’t up there, which was strange. He was usually a go to for reporters as the camera liked him and he could string a coherent sentence together. He’d also scored twice – three times if you counted scoring in me.

I was on his sofa, possibly the place where our baby was conceived, wrapped in blankets, with a pile of thick cut toasted bread in front of me, watching the aftermath of the game when I found out why he wasn’t being interviewed.

My phone rang, his name on the screen.

“Genny said you’d gone back to mine and I needed to call you. She said you were okay, but fuck, Neva, what’s the matter? I’ll be back in half an hour.” His words came out with the force of a hurricane.

“I’m okay. I know why I haven’t been feeling right.” I didn’t want to worry him.

The line went dead, only for it to ring again with an incoming video call from him.

“Where are you?” I couldn’t tell where he was. “Is that the medical cupboard?” A box of bandages falling on his head gave it away.

“I think so. It’s the first door that wasn’t locked. Are you pregnant?” His expression was deadly serious. “Is that why you’ve not been feeling right?”

My eyes filled again with tears that dropped straight out and my throat contracted. I nodded – hard. “Yes.” It was the only word I could get out.

His expression transformed from serious to elated, a wide beaming smile brightening the dingy cupboard. “We’re having a baby?”

I nodded again. “We’re having a baby. Please don’t say anything, not yet. Just come home – I mean back to yours. I feel bad for asking for you because I know your parents are there and you’ll want to celebra - ”

He cut me off. “The only place I want to be is with you right now and I won’t say anything. I know we wait for three months before telling people.”

“What will you tell your parents?”

He swallowed. “That you’re not feeling great and I’ll catch up with them later. Not going to lie, Nev, my mum will guess by midnight and she won’t be able to contain herself. I won’t lie to her.”

“I don’t expect you to. How long till you can leave?” I hated how needy I was feeling right now.

His smile was gentle this time. “Ten minutes. I’ve already showered. Be home in half an hour.” He shook his head. “This is the best day ever, you know that don’t you? And it has nothing to do with the win.”

I nodded, the tears there for real now.

“Are those happy tears?” He looked worried.

I nodded again. “Very. Just get home.”

“On my way.”

He didn't even stop to put his kit bag down in the entrance hall, dropping it on the floor besides me. I was already up on my feet, ready to be enveloped in one of his hugs, but instead he held the tops of my arms and looked at me, his eyes travelling from my toes to my face and back down again, lingering on my stomach.

"There's no bump yet. There won't be for a bit." I started laughing at him. He looked so amazed and enthralled.

"I know." He nodded, his eyes looking shiny. "I've read books on it. I didn't tell you that because the pressure was enough already. Didn't take that long really, did it?"

I shook my head. "It felt long. I think it was when we were in Amsterdam or on this sofa when we got back. That's when I think it happened."

The hug came then, a big warm hug that I'd decided was the best thing ever. "Does that mean we'll call the baby Amsterdam?"

I laughed, hoping he was joking. "I'll make an appointment next week to have a test with the doctor."

"I'll come with you."

I knew he'd say that. "Okay. I'll let you." I laughed, getting I'd have a guard dog for the next nine months.

He stepped away from me and shook his head. "No, seriously. We joked about my job being to provide the sperm, but you know that was only a joke, don't you?"

My jaw dropped. Shit, he was really worried about this. I shook my head rapidly. "It was only ever a joke. I know you're as invested in this as I am."

He bit his bottom lip and nodded. "I'm thrilled and excited and really fucking scared right now, so I'm probably going to say stuff that might make you mad. Please don't get mad."

"You need to say this now, don't you?"

He nodded. “I do. Even if you don’t listen.” His eyes were wide.

I wondered if he had more adrenaline coursing through him now than when he’d scored the opening goal today. “I’m listening. I sound like a radio psychologist.” I half-laughed, feeling worried about Jude and what he felt right now.

“I want you to move in here while you’re pregnant. I don’t want to miss things like when the baby kicks or seeing them grow inside you. I want to be able to look after you and know that you’re as safe as I can make it for you.” His shoulders sagged as he said the words. “I’m so happy that you’re – we’re – pregnant, but I’m afraid that my role’s over now until I have my allocated time with the baby.”

I swallowed back the sob. I could now blame pregnancy hormones on being so teary, in fact, crying at stupid things this week now made sense.

I wasn’t going to take away Jude’s joy. I didn’t want to go back to us being just friends either.

“We don’t need to have sex anymore.” I sat back down on the sofa and patted the spot where that deed had been done several times. “There must be a reason why it’s still advisable to have sex.” The idea of barren months ahead was not appealing.

Jude had started to laugh. “I can continue to provide my services.” His arms folded. “I read that some women get really horny in the second trimester.”

I started to laugh, one of my hands on my still flat stomach. “You’ve done your research.”

“I listed evidence why you should be here and not go back home. Your boiler being fucked really helped.”

“Did you break it?”

“Not guilty.” He shook his head. “Will you stay here? And I could say you can have your own room and all that like Nate did with Amber when she was pregnant, but I’d rather you just stayed with me.”

I looked at my toes, taking in the view because I knew in another few months, I'd go some time without seeing them.

"I'll stay here. One of the new physios is looking for a rental, so I might rent my house out for six months so it isn't empty. If I was by myself I'd worry myself stupid. You'll keep me sane." Some of the tension I'd had fell away.

Jude nodded and breathed out a lungful of air. "That's good. I feel better. Can we carry on as we are? Whatever this is between us, and say, set a date when the baby's six months old as to what we want to do about us?"

"You're renegotiating."

He sat down next to me, his arm coming around my shoulders. "Kind of. I like how things have been the last few months. I like you being here. I like the life we've been having. I've never gotten along with someone like I have with you."

I was crying again.

He wiped my tears away with his cuff. "Has it been that bad that you're crying over it?"

I shook my head, choking on a laugh that was also part sob. "I've liked it. I've been calmer."

"It was all the sex. Those endorphins." He took a deep breath. "I mean, if you meet someone you're interested in you need to say. I won't like it though. I don't want any other man near you." His tone changed to one I didn't recognise.

"You sounded like you growled."

"I think I did. Please don't go on a date with that bloke from the accountants again. Simon what's his name."

"I'm not going on a date with Simon what's his name. Promise. Or anyone else. I don't need to." I glanced at his sweatpants that were hiding as much as usual. "Have you eaten?"

He shook his head. "I can definitely have a takeaway. Are you still only eating toast and butter?"

All of a sudden I was desperate for a Chinese takeout. “Hot and sour soup, ribs, and crispy chilli beef in honey and chilli sauce.”

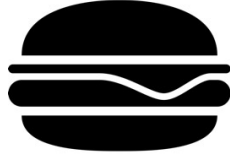
“Specific.” He grinned, amused. “No bread?”

“No bread. Get ordering.”

Jude groaned. “This is it, isn’t it? I’m going to be your slave for the next year.”

CHAPTER 17

Jude



MAY

MORNING SICKNESS. Scans. Worries about spotting. The ever-growing list of absolute essentials that other people kept adding to. Weird cravings at strange times of the day. Nightmares about babies that came out already dressed in football kits. Contradictory advice from everyone who thought they had half an idea about pregnancy and childbirth.

Nate found it all fucking hilarious.

He'd been through this three times, the third time being particularly worrying, so I did actually listen to him.

So did Rowan, because we all knew that a baby was first on the list of his and Dee's to do list as soon as the season ended.

"Read a few books. Listen to your midwife. Don't tell her what to do; just say that it really upsets you when she does such and such a thing and that will guilt her into not doing the thing she was going to do." Nate had a bottle of beer in front of him and the ears of me and Rowan, and Jesse, who was pretending not to listen but we all knew was practically taking notes.

We were halfway through the pregnancy and at the end of the season, which had finished better than it started. New Year's Day saw us take the top spot and we didn't leave it, winning games like we'd done the previous season and not scraping the barrel for any form of result anymore. We took the league title for the second season running, which sent us into the Champions' League final confident. We'd had good form all the way through that, during the league stage and then the knockout rounds, better than last season when we'd had a few dodgy results.

Confidence paid off, and we won the final one-nil, Rowan scoring the only goal, which was a fitting way to end his professional football career. Dee's season ended with a trophy

as well, and she took the club's player of the season award, so everyone was feeling positive.

"Any other sage advice?" Rowan downed the rest of his beer.

Nate shook his head. "Best and hardest thing you'll ever do in your life. Don't buy all the shit because you don't need it, but set up a standing delivery for washing liquid and nappies and learn how to do a quick load. Take it in turns to sleep. Babies don't always sleep, so you won't either."

"Fuck." Rowan shook his head. "Can't they come out aged six?"

"Imagine that." I winced. Neva had a moment the day before wondering how on earth she was going to get a baby out of a hole that just about fit my dick. I decided not to say that out loud though. Go me.

"True." Rowan nodded. "You all set for this, Judith?"

I shrugged. "Ask me in another five months. Are we all ready for France?" We were heading back to the chateau for three weeks of sun, swimming pools and a holiday where I didn't have my foot stuck in a boot. A holiday where I could watch Neva in her bikinis without being worried she was going to poison my food.

Her body had changed as we knew it would, but I'd been surprised at how I'd changed with it. I reined myself in trying to do everything for her because she hated that; she was also pretty good at asking me to do things and I knew she had a game she loved where she'd ask me to get something as soon as I sat down. I ignored the game, storing it up for future disagreement winning opportunities.

It blew my mind to know that her belly was growing with the baby that I'd put inside her. I mean, it was one act where I'd busted a nut, and one of those swimmers had been enough to get in there. The rest of it was being done by her.

She was incredible.

What was possibly just as incredible was that no one had asked me or her about our relationship. The team and Neva's

friends knew that it was a baby agreement, but no one had asked for details or when the expiration date was, or whether we were still having sex. They just assumed that we were together.

Or as Neva had said, *together* together.

My parents had been the same. They were over the moon at becoming grandparents. Somehow, my mother had kept a lid on it until we had the twelve week scan and then she'd turned up at my house with a car boot full of stuff and a new haircut that made her look a decade younger than her actual age, which freaked Neva out.

"Your mum looks about thirty-five! That's the same age as me, Jude! It's like one of her friends getting pregnant by you!"

I'd sat there and laughed at her, because Neva didn't look like what people thought thirty-five was meant to look like. I had commented that my mum did have some bangworthy friends, which had resulted in me having a very quiet night until I'd snuck under the covers and gone down on her, which had resulted in two orgasms for her, and me in the good books, although my balls were blue for a couple of days.

Neva's comments about her being older than me were coming less and less. She'd said a week or so ago that pretty much no one had asked why she was having a baby with a younger man, and only one person had made an assumption that she'd trapped me by getting pregnant – and that was a comment online.

I'd just laughed, before risking the chances of having more children and mentioning that I'd achieved hero status with some of my teammates because I'd knocked her up.

She'd glared at me, picked up a knife and thankfully put it in the dishwasher. "Who said that?" she'd demanded.

I'd refused to give any further information, so she'd somehow managed to get it out of Ryan. It'd been some of the younger players who'd mentioned how they'd crushed on her, and how one had tried flirting with her once and she'd shot him down. I also shot him down afterwards, grabbing him on

his own for the twenty seconds it took to make him shit himself.

After that, whenever I pissed her off, which was daily or more, she'd mention how a certain player had given her a compliment or mentioned having a coffee. Some days I ignored her. Other days I found another punishment, usually involving withholding her orgasm until she'd apologised or told me that she'd never let another man touch her apart from me.

So yeah, life was good.

JULY

I still had no idea how such a tiny woman could carry such a massive bump of a baby. Neva hadn't seen her toes for two weeks, and there was at least another two months to go before she saw them again.

I'd taken to painting her toenails and cutting them, finding the activity something I could hyper focus on, which was good for us all. She'd started maternity leave already, taking a full season away from the day-to-day duties that she had at the club, but still being on the phone to give advice to the man who was covering her leave.

This had given her time to start to put together a recipe book for pregnancy, and her newfound love for social media. Neva had wanted to chart the baby's growth and her own journey, and we'd agreed that it made sense to own our story rather than the media pulling it out of thin air.

She'd posted about technically being a geriatric mum, disputing the term, and she'd blogged about how she was looking after herself. There was stuff about me in there too, and how we managed to eat differently at times. A few of the players and their girlfriends or partners reposted it or commented, so Neva had amassed a large following without intending to.

One of the most liked pictures was of me painting her toes. The other was me kissing her bump when we were in France, the chateau behind us. It'd been Rowan who'd taken the photo, and he'd taken it the same night he'd announced that Dee was pregnant too, which we'd all guessed because she wasn't drinking the champagne Genny had decided to buy in bulk.

Pre-season training had started already. The summer had been a hot one, more of a sweaty-ball summer than a hot girl summer. And my house was full of baby paraphernalia.

We had a designated nursery, a room that adjoined to another bedroom, with a decent sized bathroom between the two as well, which had lots of light and seemed right for baby stuff. This made it seem sensible to decamp out of my room and into that bedroom, so when one of us wanted undisturbed sleep, we could go to our original bedroom. When it was time, the baby would start to sleep in the nursery, then eventually, that would become their bedroom.

No one had mentioned Neva moving out.

No one had brought up that this wasn't a real relationship.

No one had said the three little words – not to each other yet. I'd said them plenty to the bump.

And those words were ready to be said to Neva when the time was right. I just didn't know when that time would be.

My mother had found me one day when I was sat in the garden, working out how we were going to child proof the swimming pool. The contractor had just finished, leaving me with the plan, which on paper seemed to be enough to do the job.

I'd been musing whether I needed something else to make sure that when our baby was toddling, they didn't toddle into the pool, because if they were anything like me, they would be Houdini incarnate.

“So are you and Neva official now?” My mother tried to put her arms around my shoulders. “You seem very comfortable together.”

“We haven't put a label on anything.” Which I'd figured had made things easier because there hadn't been any pressure to be the perfect boyfriend or girlfriend.

“Do you want to? Me and your father adore her and we couldn't wish for a better person to be the mother for our grandbaby. I told Neva that yesterday.” My mum switched to squeezing my bicep. She couldn't get her hand around that.

I nodded. “I do.” I folded the plans for the swimming pool into a small rectangle and pocketed it. “We said we'd talk

about what we were going to do as an *us* when the baby was six months old.”

“Don’t leave it that long. She’s carrying your child and I know this was all about her wanting a baby and you wanting that too, but it’s obvious to everyone that it’s more than that. I think everyone’s assumed that you’re just together.” She paused, folding her arms. “Is she still worried about the age difference between you?”

I shrugged. “I try to avoid bringing it up unless I’m teasing her. And there is an age difference. It doesn’t matter and it won’t matter in the future.”

“It won’t. Maybe you need to check that’s where her head’s at too. I hope I’ve managed to reassure her a bit though. I think she was worried that we thought you should be with someone the same age as you.”

“And you don’t think that?” I knew if my parents had any concerns they’d have voiced them. I also know that if they didn’t have any concerns they’d support my choices in anything.

“No. I think she grounds you and you lighten her up. You’re opposites in some ways, in good ways. A bit like me and your dad. He was the serious one and I was the one who’d make him laugh and relax. We were friends first too.” She smiled so happily. “That’s important. It wasn’t all about where we wanted to be, it was about where we were. We lived in the moment but he did make me think about how that moment could make our futures. I think she does for you. I think this baby will be amazing for you both too and they’ll be so lucky to have you as parents.”

I didn’t know what to say, so instead I grabbed her in a big hug, standing right next to the swimming pool.

“Mum, you’re amazing and I love you, but - ”

I side stepped, taking us both straight into the water, the previously calm and peaceful pool now disrupted by my six feet something and my mother’s flailing arms.

She swam straight over to me, shouting obscenities, and then trying her best to drown me, which was difficult as we were in the shallow end by now and she was a foot shorter than me.

Voices told me we had company, Neva and my dad staring down at us.

“Do you know what your son has done?” My mother tried again to drown me. ‘I should’ve done this at birth!’”

My dad was doubled over with laughter, Neva was giggling and trying not to laugh loudly, obviously wanting to show some solidarity with my mum.

My mother climbed out, now yelling at my dad because he was laughing and therefore siding with me. I pulled myself out of the water and stood next to Neva, pointing at my parents. “That’ll be us in twenty-five years’ time with our kid pushing you in the pool.” I watched, wanting to see if I could read anything from her at this prediction of our future.

She smiled.

Then pushed me back in.

SEPTEMBER

Holding my daughter in my arms for the very first time was something I would've given all my trophies up for.

She was born after a fourteen-hour labour, four days late, weighing a decent seven pounds ten and fifty-one centimetres long. Her birth was uneventful; a straightforward delivery, timed perfectly so her very beautiful and very tired Mum could have all the drugs she wanted.

“It’s not a boy so we can’t use the name Achilles.” I’d been tormenting Neva for weeks about wanting to name our child after the injury that’d effectively led to their birth. “How about a Greek Goddess name?” I grinned, not sure whether this was the right time or not to tease her.

She sat up, a boob escaping from the sheet that was covering her. Our little girl was half an hour old; Neva had been tidied up – no stitches needed – once the afterbirth had been dealt with. I’d taken Nate’s advice over that and not even tried to see what was going on. We had a few minutes on our own before the midwife was back to help Neva and the baby latch on.

“I was thinking about that.”

I passed our daughter back to Neva, surprised at how confident I felt doing it. Neva held her to her chest, near her boob.

“Want me to put a blanket over her?”

“Yes, keep her warm.”

I placed it like I’d seen the midwife do before. “You were thinking about Greek Goddess names? Seriously? I thought you wanted something more traditional?”

She looked down at the baby. “One of the Seven Sisters – the Pleiades – was called Maia. She’s the goddess of fields and

fertility and I thought that was rather nice. I think she looks like a Maia too.”

I just thought she looked beautiful. Perfect. But I liked the name. And her mother had just gone through a shit ton of pain to bring her into this world so if Neva wanted Maia, she could have Maia.

“I think it’s perfect. Maia Whittingham. Middle name?” I sat down on the bed next to them, threaded my arm around Neva’s shoulders.

“Let her choose her own middle name if she ever wants one. But Maia Whittingham is perfect.” Tears were on her cheeks. “I can’t believe she’s here. I can’t believe she’s real.”

I wiped her tears away, happy to do that for the rest of my life as long as they were happy tears. “She’s real, and we’ll know how real she is when she’s trying her lungs out in the middle of the night.”

“Let me enjoy this moment.” She glared at me and then gazed at our daughter. “She looks like you with my hair.”

“I think she looks like you.” I kissed her shoulder. “You were amazing, by the way. I’ll never complain about being injured ever again.”

She laughed softly, stroking Maia’s head with her finger, a head full of dark hair. “I can’t remember it now. I probably said some horrible things.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll remind you of them when you’re pissed off at me for something.”

The midwife came in, a big smile on her face when she looked at us. “Do you want me to take a photo? You look gorgeous altogether like that.”

“Please. Jude’s phone’s on the side.” Neva spoke up.

A few snaps later and we were down to business with feeding. I watched as the midwife, whose name was Julie, taught Neva how to get Maia to latch on to feed.

We both knew that this could be tricky. Neva had researched a lot about breastfeeding and knew she wanted to

try it, but she'd also said that if it wasn't for the baby, she wasn't going to beat herself up about it.

It looked like Maia would enjoy her mum's boobs as much as I did. Just in a totally different way, of course.

"She's doing really well." Julie the midwife beamed at us both. "And you have a name. It's lovely."

The next few hours were filled with more baby stuff. Nappies, getting Neva up and moving and in the shower, leaving me alone with my daughter for the first time. I couldn't stop staring at her, completely stunned that she was actually here, which was how my dad found me, gazing at the tiny mite in my arms because there was no way I was putting her down, possibly ever, unless it was to pass her to Neva. I'd happily carry her round for the rest of her life, even when I was an elderly man of eighty and she was fifty-four.

"How is she, son?"

I turned to the man I hoped to be as good a father as.

"Neva or Maia?"

"Is the right answer. Both."

"Neva's amazing. Maia is just -" There were no words.

My dad stepped closer, smiling at his granddaughter. "I remember when you were this small. I felt like a clumsy oaf holding you. Never did drop you though – that was your mother."

I laughed, still holding Maia. "You can hold her tomorrow. For today, she's just mine and Neva's." I was standing by that.

"Fair enough. As long as I get to hold her before your mum -"

He spoke too soon, my mother coming through the door into our room, loaded with balloons and flowers.

"You will not be holding her before me. Take these." She thrust her offerings at my dad and came over to me. "Oh my. Jude, she's beautiful."

“She wasn’t when she was born.” I touched my daughter’s head with my lips, another kiss. “She was red and wrinkly and covered with slime, and she screamed louder than you did when I jumped you into the pool.”

“Bit like you. You were so loud I asked the midwife if she could shove you back in.” She touched Maia’s tiny hand. “You are divine.” She spoke to the baby, clearly, as she would never refer to me or my father as ‘divine’. “And I’m going to spoil the bones of you and your mummy.”

“Hey.” Neva walked back into the room, wearing a dressing gown she’d bought specifically for after the birth. “How’s my girl.” She came straight over to me and held her arms out.

I passed Maia to her, the only other person who was getting to hold her, maybe for the foreseeable. Certainly until we were sleep deprived, so possibly tomorrow.

“Has she been okay?” She looked up at me, almost anxiously.

“Not a peep. Sleeping and she keeps making this little ducky movement with her mouth.”

“Ducky?” She frowned at me, still a smile though.

“Like this.” I tried to mimic the movements, which just made Neva and my parents laugh. “Like a little duck.”

And that was how my daughter got her first nickname.

Ducky.

CHAPTER 18

Neva



OCTOBER

MY BABY HAD GROWN. She was no longer the tiny duck we'd brought home from the hospital six weeks ago. She was heavier, bigger, hungrier and louder.

My daughter was loud.

Even at such a young age she knew the art of manipulation and she had Jude exactly where she'd want to keep him for the next half a century or more. Every squeeze of his finger, every gurgle, every flicker of an eye and he was doting on her.

I'd commented once on how it wasn't me who'd wanted a sperm donor, it'd been him who wanted a surrogate, which had made him laugh and come back later with a huge bunch of my favourite flowers and lots of murmurs in my ear about how he'd gotten so lucky and other sweet things that made my heart beat even faster and feel even bigger.

I was lucky too, which I had mentioned to him at the end of my favourite celebrity dancing show one Saturday evening. I was just worried that when Maia was six months old, we'd be making a decision I no longer wanted to make.

It was a Saturday today, and Halloween, which meant I was about as dressed up as the previous ten years – in other words, not at all. I knew that when Maia was older, we'd be having or going to Halloween parties, which would be painful enough to require some very good red wine that Amber would certainly share with me.

It had been the first match I'd taken Maia to, so she could watch her daddy kick a ball around for ninety minutes. She had, as expected, slept through it, and was passed around the arms of whoever was in the box with us, so I could enjoy watching the father of my child impressively filling his shorts.

Jude hadn't scored, but he got two assists and we'd won, so everyone, including Maia, was in a good mood tonight.

I was in a very good mood. Tonight was a big night.

I'd had an appointment with my midwife yesterday that had been routine, or so I'd told Jude. It had been the appointment when I got the go ahead to have sex again with the advice of lots of lube.

I knew things were working down there as I'd given myself a couple of sneaky orgasms, checking a few things were still where I expected them to be and worked as I wanted, especially after pushing a human out of my vagina. I'd been happily surprised, especially after reading a few horror stories about how things hadn't gone so well, so I intended to make the most of this in case there was another baby in my future and things didn't go the same way. I also knew Jude was fucking his fist in the shower after he caught sight of my boobs, and he'd struggled to get to sleep a couple of times because of the boner he was sporting. I missed his cock, and I wanted to make use of it regularly in the hope that we weren't just about making a baby.

"Maia's asleep." I snuggled in next to him. "We've got about four hours before her next feed." I was managing to still breastfeed and topping up with a formula I'd found that I really liked, and luckily so did Maia. She took a bottle as well as she did my boob, which made life a lot easier and we were easing her onto more bottle – it was a slow process though.

Jude made things easier too. For the couple of nights before a match, I'd be up with her during the night, same for the night of the game as well. The other nights, he picked up the feeds or if she cried, so I was getting some sleep. His parents had stayed a night every week too, giving us a night off which they loved and we did too, especially because she was still at home – I wasn't ready to leave her with someone else yet.

He wrapped an arm around me and pressed a long kiss to my hair. "What do you want to do?"

I considered it for a moment. I could hint and risk him not picking up on what I was hinting for, or I could be forthright about it.

“You know that appointment I had yesterday?”

He nodded.

“I got the all clear.”

He squinted, as if trying to work out what I meant. “All clear – oh *the all clear*.” He swallowed and dropped his eyes to my breasts. “But do you want to, you know? I know you’re tired and you know - ”

“Jude, are you able to form sentences or - ” my eyes dropped to his crotch. “Oh. That’s why nothing’s making sense.”

His sweatpants were now a tent for dolls.

“I think hearing you say ‘the all clear’ was almost as good as when you told me you were pregnant. Are you sure?” His eyes were back on my boobs.

“Sure, and very, very interested in using this time wisely. How about in front of the fire? I don’t want to wake her up if we go upstairs.” As I spoke a little whimper came from the baby monitor.

We both peered at the screen. Maia was still sleeping, but that little noise was a sign she was waking up and wanting attention.

Neither of us moved. We were directly underneath her room, and there was absolutely no chance of her hearing anything or sensing our movements from here, but that didn’t matter.

My libido had woken up and I was cuddled next to a man who’d never failed to make my heart and other areas flutter. I had a tube of lube in my bag just to make sure, but judging by the heat in my underwear, I didn’t think I was going to need it.

I just needed my gorgeous daughter to stay asleep for another three-quarters of an hour.

No other sound came from the baby monitor. I saw her little hand clench and relax, and her lips purse and ease.

“Are we bad parents if we do this?” I looked at Jude, the tent in his pants had reduced.

He shook his head. “It gets the feel good hormones going. She’ll sense we’re more relaxed.”

“You weren’t going to agree we were bad parents, were you?”

He shook his head. “No. No, Neva. You’ve said the words I’ve been waiting to hear, or some of the words anyway.”

“What do you mean?” I was slightly confused and a little bit nervous, because I had a feeling I knew what he was referring to.

Jude put a finger under my chin and tipped it up, his mouth crashing down onto mine. We’d kissed, managed a few steamy kisses that had had led to a swift blow job or two for him. He’d wanted to return the favour, but I’d still felt weird about how everything was down there, like I needed to get to know it again myself.

“Do you still want me?” His words contained a vulnerability I didn’t think I’d heard before.

“Yes. Every time I’ve seen you holding our baby I think my ovaries have exploded and it felt like the Sahara was having a small downpour, but I needed to feel like things would still work.” I kissed him back, my response softer than his, containing a promise. Some days I hadn’t had any libido at all, understanding that oxytocin was produced when I was breastfeeding, so my body got a hit from that and wasn’t telling me it wanted sex, but I wanted sex. I wanted my body to belong to me again, I wanted closeness with this man.

When I pulled away, I noticed the tent was back.

“Are you worried if it’ll feel weird?” His hands were under my hoodie on my waist, touching my skin and making it feel electrified.

“Yes. I’ve got lube. Just to make sure.” I hoped he wouldn’t feel offended.

But this was Jude and he didn't do offended. "I want whatever it takes to make you feel good."

I shifted my legs over him, straddling his thighs, the steady breathing of our baby the only sound coming from the monitor. "Let's make the most of this."

"On it. I don't want to rush though."

"Me neither. But let's take what we can." My words were interspersed with kisses, our hands already busy at work on each other's clothes. His sweater was lost, my hoodie was somewhere on the floor with my T-shirt, my rather unattractive maternity bra still on, although Jude's hands had found their way to my breasts.

I sighed, the touch a relief.

"You still like them?"

His eyes were glassy with lust. "Fuck, yes. I love how they're feeding our girl, but, Jesus, Neva, they're killing me."

We explored them, finding out what felt good and what felt weird, rediscovering my body and how it was different, laughing over the inevitable breast milk, moving over to the rug in front on the fire when we lost our bottoms.

I found the lube in my bag that I'd left downstairs, planning this somewhat, and applied it to Jude's cock and my entrance, even though I felt wet already.

His hand slid between my legs, toying with my clit, circling his fingers over it at a pace that was usually guaranteed to have my pussy clenching.

"My boobs might leak when I, you know – get there." I could feel everything building.

He was studying my body like it was a masterpiece. I had stretchmarks and my belly had a post baby bump that was deflating nicely, and I'd be forever grateful that it had grown Maia, but it wasn't the body Jude was used to.

It didn't seem to be an issue for him.

“You look so fucking gorgeous. I think I’m going to explode as soon as I get inside you. Fuck, Neva, you’re like this goddess.” His eyes were drowsy with desire and I wasn’t hating it.

Suddenly he looked alert. “Are we going to end up making baby number two here?”

“We’re good. I’m covered.” I’d gone through all that yesterday, at least I thought I had. I was about to come, and my body was ready for this.

He pressed a little harder on my clit and my whole body convulsed, the inevitable happening with milk and nipples.

Jude leaned down and licked at them, which we were both finding strangely okay and not weird.

“Do you think you’re ready for me?” He put a finger to my entrance, pushing in slightly. “I don’t know if you want to hear this but you feel great and I think I could come from just doing this.”

“It feels good.” Almost too good. Like normal. “I think we should just try it.”

“Sure?”

I nodded, his hand leaving between my legs and rubbing up and down the length of his cock that glistened with the lube and pre-cum.

My body prickled with anticipation, wanting that feeling of being filled, and, at the same time, being the centre of Jude’s world, even if it was just for these few precious minutes.

He entered me carefully, almost too slowly. When he was fully seated he paused, the look of utter control on his face stunning.

“Is this okay?”

“It feels amazing. Please move.” Because if he didn’t start moving, I’d find a way to make him do it.

He did, keeping his pace even, making my body sing and whimper, remembering what else it could be used for.

Everything tensed around him, the world feeling less focused but much brighter as he induced my orgasm, his cock hitting the spots where I most needed it.

“You feel so fucking good.” His control was about to break. “Oh fuck.” He leaned down, taking my mouth with his, demanding a long, messy, hard kiss before I pulsed around him and then felt him empty inside of me, a sense of satisfied bliss overtaking every element of my body and mind.

His body pressed against mine, spent too. I wrapped my arms around him, luxuriating in this sense of closeness, loving the weight of him on me, the feeling of him still being inside.

Relief was there too. Relief that he still wanted me. Relief that we were doing this even though I no longer was trying to get pregnant. Relief that we were more than just parents together, at least I hoped.

Thought.

A wail broke through our quiet bliss.

“She timed that well.” Jude untangled himself from me. “I’ll go check on her.”

His cock glistened with the mix of us; I couldn’t help but look hard as he pulled on his sweats, grinning wickedly when he saw me staring.

“I’ve still got it then?” That swagger. “Am I a DILF?”

I started to laugh, possibly a mistake given the situation. “Can you pass me a tissue?”

He did the honours, cleaning me up gently and looking rather smug at the mess he’d made of me in the best possible way.

Maia let out another wail.

“I need an answer – am I a DILF?”

I shook my head at him. “Let me see you with our daughter and I’ll let you know.”

I followed him upstairs, my hoodie on and tissues in strategic places. I needed a shower once I’d checked Maia was

okay.

By the time I got to our parenting bedroom, Jude had hold of her, clutching her against his chest, murmuring sweet nothings to her.

He'd been amazing with her from the start and I loved this view more than any other. Him looking utterly in love with her, her form tiny against his broad chest.

"I love you." The words blurted out. I slapped my hand over my mouth.

His eyes danced. "Who? Me or Maia? I'm not sure who that was aimed at."

He knew damn well. "Both of you."

"I've heard you tell Maia that a hundred times. I always knew it was her you were talking to, so this time, I think it was me. Are you in love with a DILF, Neva?" He wriggled his brows.

"If you weren't holding my baby I'd throw something at you right now." Truth.

His grin was really fucking annoying.

He looked at Maia. "Did you hear that, baby girl? Your mummy loves me. I've been waiting months for her to tell me that."

"Really?"

He changed his gaze over to me. "Really."

I tapped my foot on the floor. "Any reason why?"

Jude shrugged maddeningly. "Just wondering how long it would take for you to give in to your better senses and realise that a younger man is the only way." He flexed the bicep of his free arm.

"Seriously, stop while you're ahead." I put my hands on my hips. "Is she asleep?" I stepped over to them, Jude's arm now unflexed and going around me, pulling me close so the three of us were hugged together.

I looked at my perfect little girl, feeling something I'd never understood before. She was fully asleep now, her expression content. In another few hours she'd be hungry again, wanting her midnight feast before sleeping for another few hours, safe and cosy and loved.

"I didn't think eighteen months ago that I'd be swapping my Saturday nights spent in bars in Manchester for helping a baby get milk-drunk." He hugged me a little harder.

"I didn't think I'd be standing here with a DILF."

He grinned at that. "Told you I knew you thought I was a DILF."

A week later, and I hadn't heard those three words from Jude.

I was trying to persuade myself that it didn't bother me, that I didn't need to hear them back. I was pretty sure he felt the same, the things he did told me that. He would make me a cup of my favourite fruit tea in the mornings after doing the early feed; he'd stocked up on elderflower cordial made by a woman in the village; he'd run me a bath in an afternoon when he came back from training and make sure I had an hour's uninterrupted reading time whilst wallowing in warm water.

Jude was a good guy; I'd always known that. He'd always been fun and impulsive and kind with it, but those elements were becoming more as he'd grown up.

He was also a damn wind-up merchant.

"So you love me then," he said, as we walked around a park with a well wrapped up Maia in the sling on his chest.

"I'm not talking about that right now, we're in public." I tried to shoot him a glare and failed miserably.

"I think now's a good time to tell me. In fact, I think you should tell as many people as possible. See that woman over there with the dogs? I think we should tell her that you're so in love with me that you can't contain yourself and you've booked a plane to fly over the ground on Sunday with a banner

that says ‘Neva loves Jude’.” His hand wrapped around my waist and squeezed me to him.

“Let’s not speak to that woman. Let’s go and have a hot drink in that nice café instead.” I elbowed him as hard as I dared.

His laugh was really irritating.

“I know you’re doing all this so I demand you tell me if you feel the same.” I looked up to give him a glare.

The glare faded when I saw his expression. No one had ever looked at me that way.

“You said we’d talk about us and what was happening when Maia was six months old. I’m holding out till then, as you wished.” The smirk returned.

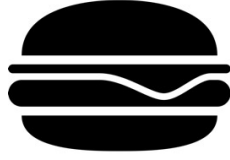
“She’s seven weeks. That’s the same thing.” I was feeling snarky today.

Jude shook his head. “Let’s go and get that hot drink.”

We did, and he managed to swerve the topic again, leaving me to wonder what exactly his game plan was.

CHAPTER 19

Jude



NOVEMBER

I WANTED her to think about it.

Hormones were rumbling around both of us, all good ones in the main, although I knew there were times when Neva felt the pressure of being a new mum. My own mother was being amazing, managing to come over when Neva wanted an extra pair of hands and helping Neva take some time for herself, especially when I had away games.

I'd been called up for the England squad for two internationals, both away in Europe, which meant I'd be away for ten nights in total. Leaving was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do, getting into my car to do the drive to the base, Neva and Maia on my drive, waving at me – or rather Neva was while Maia opened her dark brown eyes to look at me.

My heart broke while I drove away and I ended up phoning Neva as soon as I was on the main road and then for most of the drive there, plus in the airport before we boarded the plane for our qualifier game in Turkey.

Amber brought the girls and Oliver to stay with Neva for a night, which went some way to making me feel better. I also knew that Neva was doing okay with me being away because she had to. Genny stayed with her for a couple of nights, and then my mum arrived so Neva could get a little time to herself as she'd decided that she was never going to feel guilty for my parents looking after Maia because they loved doing it so much. My mum had been in seventh heaven after holding her granddaughter for the first time and she hadn't returned from there since.

I, however, was a mess.

I missed them both horrendously. I missed my daughter's little smiles and giggles. I missed her curious eyes and her love of food. I even missed her ability to cover me in whatever she was eating and by the last night away, I even missed

changing her nappies, which showed the extent of my desperation.

Nate had pissed his sides at me.

“I want to tell you it gets easier. It kind of does.” He tapped his ridiculously big hand on my shoulder.

“What do you mean, *kind of*?” I wasn’t sure I liked that.

“You get used to it. You know it’s horrible leaving them at all. Although Libbie is becoming a tweenager and she’s starting to hate me and say I’m embarrassing so being away sometimes gives me chance to come up with new ways to annoy her.”

This was true. He’d stuffed her pillow with his dirty socks the week before which he’d found hilarious and Libbie had sought revenge – which I didn’t think was going to end any time soon.

“How’s Neva? Still just co-parents?” His face told me he knew that wasn’t the case.

“I’m going to ask her to marry me on New Year’s Eve.” I didn’t look at him because I was saying the words more for myself than him. “Don’t say anything. Not even to Amber.”

“I won’t. There’s no way Amber wouldn’t tell Genny.” Nate shook his head. “You sure you know what you’re doing?”

I nodded. “I think so. You know we were kind of seeing each other before all this.”

“I heard. Just a casual thing.”

“For her. I was hoping she’d want more. She didn’t. I think she does now.” In fact, I was pretty sure that was exactly what she wanted, she just wouldn’t say.

“Having a baby together is a bit of a long term commitment, so I’d guess she does.” Nate shrugged, pulling on his coat over his hoodie because it was fucking freezing in Copenhagen where we were about to travel back from. “Although Neva isn’t the most straightforward of people.”

“She is when you know her.” Nothing about her scared me now. I loved the fucking bones of her and thought she walked on water. I also loved irritating her on purpose because she usually wanted to laugh and sheer stubbornness stopped her every time. She was amazing with our daughter and if I had my way we’d have at least two more, the big family that my parents hadn’t been able to give me.

Nate smiled. “You’re totally gone on her, aren’t you?”

“Yep. I know she’s older and she thought I was too much of an overgrown kid, but I think we’ve kind of balanced each other out. It just works.”

He nodded again. “Don’t over think it. Just ask her. Do you need to wait till New Year’s Eve though?”

“Yes.” I kind of had a plan.

“Any mad gestures or is this going to be low key?” Nate looked too curious about this.

“Low key. At home, just us. Got a few things to do first though.” Like tell the woman I loved her. I also wanted her to tell me that this was a permanent thing with no need for review dates. I wanted to hear from her that this was a relationship and not an agreement to be co-parents.

I knew for myself I needed that. I needed to know I was more, and while I felt that I was, for my own sanity and peace, I needed to hear it.

Just like hearing someone tell me I had ADHD, I needed to hear Neva tell me that she wanted us on a permanent basis with no best before date.

“Want to share what they are?” Nate was being really fucking nose-y.

“No. You’re not going to say any of this to Amber, are you?” I doubted it, but I wanted to check he wasn’t on a mission to get info for Amber to pass it onto Neva. I’d had Neva try to get me to do the same thing in reverse, so I was wise to this.

“No. Genuinely not – Amber’s too involved in what Genny’s up to at the moment. She’s convinced Genny and Guy have been using that desk for things that aren’t work. I’m meant to be finding out shit about that.”

“Have you managed anything?”

He shrugged. “I think so, but I’m not telling Amber. I like being first choice keeper. If I reported it back to Amber, she’d end up saying something to Genny when they were drinking wine, and Genny would have a go at Guy and that would be the end of me. Some things are worth more than promised blow jobs.”

“Agreed.” I eyed the man who’d been something of a mentor over the years. “I won’t say anything to Neva though – what do you know?”

He laughed and started to talk.

There was nothing better than the sight of Neva and Maia waiting for me at home when my car pulled up on the drive. Maia was dressed in a padded onesie that was meant to look like a duck, if ducks were purple.

I parked and scrambled out of my car, desperate to hold both of them. Neva looked good, not tired or exhausted and she was smiling, talking to Maia and pointing at me.

“I’m so glad to be home.” I rushed over to them, pulling them into a huge hug, capturing the scent of baby mixed with Neva’s perfume. “How are you?” I kissed Neva, then stole Maia from her arms. “Have you been good for Mummy? Have you kept her up all night?”

“She’s been amazing. Your mum had her for a night so I could go out with Amber – Amber thinks she heard Genny and Guy getting it on in Genny’s office, by the way – and we’ve been out doing some Christmas shopping, and - ” she eventually breathed.

We walked into the house – I could get my luggage later, luggage that included presents for them both.

“Go on, what?”

“A production company has been in touch asking if I’d be interested in a series about relationships with food, with each episode on a different focus, like pregnancy, preparing for weddings, that sort of thing. I’ve spoken to Genny and the club is happy for me to go ahead, and for it to be connected to the club. I got in touch with your agent and ran the contract by him too.”

She was excited, I could tell. Neva did get excited about things, but it usually came with a side helping of nerves and what ifs.

They didn’t seem to be here.

“Did Bert think the contract was okay?”

“He did. He re-negotiated some of it and I need to check a few more things with you as you might be part of it.” She bit her lip and looked nervous. “I showed them your cooking videos and I think they would like you in it, and maybe Maia too as I’m going to do a couple of episodes on babies and children, exploring nutrition. But we can talk about that afterwards.” Her arm went round my waist, squeezing it.

“Did you miss me?” I felt so fucking needy asking that.

She laughed, pausing so I stopped walking too.

“I’m so glad you’re home. We’ve both missed you. I showed Maia videos of you cooking and she smiled and made noises when she heard you. And she told me she can’t wait for you to change her nappies again.” Neva smiled big and wide.

I kissed my daughter, her hands currently attached to whatever she could grab hold of on me. “I bet you didn’t say that, did you, Ducky? You like it when Mummy changes your nappies.”

“No, definitely not. Daddy’s her favourite.” She sat down next to me on the sofa.

My coat wasn’t even off and I wasn’t sure I wanted to move, now I had Neva leaning against me and Maia cuddled into my chest.

“In another couple of weeks she’ll be three months old.” We settled into the sofa, our little family of three. “Halfway to six months. That’s when we said we’d review what was happening here.”

Neva sat up. “Do you want to bring our review date forward?”

I sat up as well, disturbing Maia who made a noise I was pretty sure was meant to be a quack.

“Did you teach her to quack?” I stared at Neva.

“Jude, you can’t teach an almost three-month-old anything. But that did sound like a quack. Maybe we should stop calling her Ducky.” She tugged at the duck style hood, pulling it off Maia’s head.

“She’s not going to think she’s a duck. I think it suits her. Like a shortening of Duchess.” Because that was her status at the very least. “Back to review dates.”

Neva frowned. “Do you want me to move out? I need to give three-month notice to get back into my house and - ”

“No, I do not want you to move out. I want you to move in permanently, but I don’t know what you want. Or I think I might know, but I could be wrong.” I was making a hatchet job of this.

She held out her arms to take Maia. “Take your coat off and we’ll talk. But so you’re not spending the next thirty seconds stewing, I don’t want to move out.”

I took my coat off and threw it onto a chair. “Is that because you like Maia having both parents together or because it’s easier to parent when we do it together or because of me. I want it to be mainly because of me and I know that sounds selfish.” It was out there.

Neva started to smile, her eyes dancing. “It’s because of you, Jude. I want to live with you and not just because of all of the above about Maia, but if I wasn’t in love with you, I’d want to be set up on my own so I could find someone to fall in love with. I don’t need to do that.”

I nodded, not sure yet of what to say or how to say it because all the words were fighting to come out in no particular order.

I rubbed my nose and tried to sort through the sentences.

“Jude, I want to be with you. I want to be your girlfriend, although girlfriend sounds ridiculous when I’m in my thirties.” She patted Maia’s back, a little gulp of wind coming out of our daughter.

“Girlfriend sounds passable. Does that mean I’m your boyfriend?” I grinned, knowing that was going to irritate her.

“Probably. Do you want me to move in – like move in properly? Although this would still be your house and if things didn’t work out then I’d move out and be fair about everything and - ”

“Neva, this isn’t permanent until you move out. I’m no king of academia, but that’s not what permanent means. It means I don’t see you moving out, unless we move out together and in somewhere else together. That’s not a bad idea actually. Then you can choose somewhere you like and, that might be a thing.” I knew I was losing my point. “But this is a permanent-like-you’re-my-person thing.”

She nodded. “If that’s what you want.”

“It’s what I’ve wanted since I discovered that you’re a secret McDonald’s eater.”

She blinked at me a few times, then put Maia down in her chair.

“What do you mean?”

“You were never a hook up. Not for me. I know I was for you and I was alright with that because I was going to take what I could get, but I didn’t want it to end. I don’t want it to end now. I’m pretty set on that. I just want you to be the same.” I sat back down, relaxing into the sofa.

“I’m in love with you. I’ve told you that three times now - ”

“Twice.” I grinned when I interrupted her. “The first time you said ‘I love you’, you wouldn’t admit you were saying it to me, you wussed out by saying it was to both.”

“Okay, pedant. Twice. You haven’t said it once. I still worry that I might’ve trapped you.” She sat down on the chair where my coat was.

“If you trapped me, you lifted up the lid, told me exactly what the rules were and I crawled inside that cage and closed it myself. If this is trapped, feel free to keep me as your prisoner for the next lifetime and the one after that, because you make my world feel full. You make it feel like everything is perfect just because you’re in it and you’re mine. You make me be a better person and if you don’t know that I’m in love with you and have been for years, then I’m doing it all wrong. But just so we’re clear – I’m in love with you. I love you. I love our daughter and I hope we can give her brothers and sisters but if we can’t I’ll just love you both even more. There. I’ve said it now. Do you believe me?”

She didn’t speak, just nodded, tears flowing down her face while she desperately tried to wipe them away.

“Neva – those are good tears, right?”

She didn’t answer, just dived on me with enough force to knock me back into the cushions, her mouth finding mine and her arms wrapping round me almost too tightly at first.

“They were good tears. I get that now,” I said once we broke for air. “Only good tears.”

She nodded. “That was a speech and a half, Jude Whittingham. How long have you been preparing that?”

I laughed, realising that my cock was hard because Neva was in my lap and our daughter was in the same room.

“I’d like to say since that McDonalds, but that wouldn’t be true. Just now.” I shifted her into a slightly less erotic position. “What do you want to do about your house?” It was currently rented out.

“Keep it and put it in trust for Maia.” She shook her head at me. “She can live there at some point if she wants because

she won't live with us forever.”

I shook my head. “I heard of an all-girls boarding school set up in the middle of Dartmouth, which has no phone reception. We can send her there and then she can live in a turret.”

“Was that the last fairy tale you read to her?” Neva was not even trying not to laugh.

I nodded. “I wasn't joking about the boarding school.”

She shook her head. “Yeah, not happening. We'll sort my house out. You know, I'm proud of that house. I worked so hard to get the mortgage for it and save the deposit. Please don't offer to pay it off.”

“I won't.” I gave her a kiss, this one more child friendly, should Maia open her eyes and see her parents canoodling. “Will you let me be yours?”

She nodded. “You're still too young.”

“I'll always be too young. But I'll still be yours.” I tucked her hair behind her ear. “Maia looks fast asleep. When's she due a feed?”

“She had it just before you got home. Why? Do you want to go upstairs?”

I nodded. “It's been ten days.” My cock thought it was ten years. “Do you want to go upstairs?”

She laughed, which my ego wasn't sure how to take. “She can't understand what we're saying. We don't actually need to talk in code yet.”

I shrugged. “One day we'll be talking like this and she'll be like ‘Mum, Dad, you're just disgusting.’ A bit like Libbie is with Nate and Amber now.” I pressed a kiss behind her ear.

Her hand was trailing up my chest, under my sweater and T-shirt, playing havoc with my resolve.

I removed her hand, manoeuvring her from my lap, then going to check on my daughter. She was definitely sleeping well, which would last as long as it lasted, meaning we needed

to make the most of this. I switched the baby monitor round so there was a camera on her, then turned round to Neva, offering her my hand.

“We need to get an overnight sitter so we don’t have to rush things like this. I’m going to end up being trained into being a two-pump chump.” I shook my head, keeping my voice low.

“I won’t let that happen, but yes, just a few hours would be good. I think we have about half an hour right now.”

“Upstairs?”

She shook her head. “Lounge.”

We moved into a smaller room that would probably become a playroom if we decided to stay living here. It was private, just having a bookcase and comfy chairs and a huge sofa that I’d fallen asleep on several times. Jesse had once nodded off on it and slept for twelve hours, waking up and wondering if he’d been kidnapped.

I wasn’t thinking about Jesse now.

My arms were full of woman, a woman I’d thought almost constantly about for the last few days, months – probably years. A woman I was in love with and who loved me back.

I slowed down the pace, wanting to be able to remember more of this because it was a first we’d never have again.

I trailed kisses over her skin, stripping her clothes and leaving her bare for my eyes only. Her tits were still full and perfect, her nipples sensitive. I could say they were my favourite thing, but they were my favourite with everything else.

My cock hardened, eager to be inside her, keen to speed this up. We’d had plenty of interruptions from a hungry or rudely awakened baby, so he’d gotten used to working to a fairly quick timescale.

I was hoping our daughter was wanting to enjoy a nice long nap, so I took the longer route, memorising the curves and dips of Neva’s body, listening to the little whimpers she

made as I kissed and licked and touched the areas I knew were sensitive in the very best way, whispering words that told of what I was going to do to her and how she was going to have my name on her lips over and over again, like it was her mantra.

It didn't take that long for it to happen. My mouth between her legs, her clit sensitive, her pussy wet and keen. I sucked on her clit, feeling her fingers pulling on my hair as she drew closer to her orgasm.

She broke like a dam. I lapped up the taste of her, savouring it, the salty sweetness that I'd dream of later.

"Your turn." She propped herself up and looked at me through sated eyes. "How do you want me?"

"Under me." I slid up her body, taking a nipple briefly in my mouth, perfectly switching to her lips, my cock lining up at her entrance, before I slid home.

She was tight and warm and slick and the centre of everything. I groaned as I filled her, my eyes not leaving hers, wanting to see everything she felt, needing to be consumed by being surrounded by her.

"I love you." I said the words. "I fucking love you."

"You said it the right way round this time." Her legs wrapped around my waist, encouraging me to move, her pussy still quivering from her first orgasm.

"It's correct both ways round." I upped my pace, feeling her tense again, slipping my hand between us to apply direct pressure to her clit, wanting her to come again before I did.

Her back arched, her body sought more friction.

"I love you too. So very, very much." She was close again, almost on the verge.

I tilted my hips, hitting that spot at the right angle and she came hard and fast, her pussy pulsating around my cock and milking my own orgasm from me.

I watched her as we came, her face flushed, her head tipping back, her lips saying my name.

This was where I was meant to be.

I'd found my place.

CHAPTER 20

Neva



NEW YEAR'S EVE

GENNY WAS SITTING at her desk, peering at her computer screen, although her eyes kept flicking to her phone.

She hadn't even noticed I was standing at the doorway, watching her.

"Fuck, Neva. Give a girl some warning." She pressed a button on her phone to turn her screen off.

There was definitely something going on in Genny's life.

That, however, wasn't my priority right now.

"I have been standing here with Maia for about five minutes waiting for you to realise I was there." Okay, so five minutes was probably a bit of an exaggeration.

Genny was out of her seat and crouching over to look into the pram where Maia was lying, babbling happily to herself. "Can I have a cuddle?"

"I was hoping you'd want one. I need a favour."

She picked my daughter up and snuggled her, looking all kinds of in love with her. Genny didn't want her own children and at just over forty, she'd decided that ship had sailed and she was happy to wave it into the distance, but that didn't mean she didn't go gaga over Oliver and Maia.

"If it's to do with this little girl, the answer is always yes." She ran a finger over Maia's cheek.

"I wanted you to keep an eye on her while I did a pregnancy test. Have you still got a stock of them in your drawer?"

Genny thankfully sat down rather than drop my first born. "You said what?"

I sat down on the sofa in her office next to her. “I need to do a pregnancy test. I’m two weeks late for my period and I might not be on the contraception I thought I was.”

“Oh. Neva, how’ve you managed that?”

“Baby brain. I thought I’d had the injection at my six week sign off – and even if I had, I wouldn’t have been covered – but I hadn’t. It was a vitamin B shot. So there’s been no contraception. And now no period. Maia might be getting a sibling sooner than we thought.” Because Jude and I had discussed having another baby in the not too distant future, just not quite this soon.

“Top drawer. You’re way too calm for this.” Genny frowned at me. “You’re not freaking out.”

I shook my head. “If I am, I’m pretty certain he’ll be thrilled about it and I will be too. I think I’ll be disappointed if I’m not.”

“You’d have two under two. That will require some serious replacement of sleep.” Genny looked horrified, but then she couldn’t manage on anything less than seven and a half hours of sleep a night.

“They won’t stay under two.” I heard how I sounded, like I knew I was pregnant already, but I was pretty sure I was. I fished a test out of Genny’s drawer and checked the expiry date. It looked new, with one test missing, so someone else had obviously been in this situation recently.

I headed into her bathroom, hearing Maia making a noise which was her version of laughter. I’d had a decent drink of water already, knowing that I’d be peeing on a stick again.

I sat down on the toilet lid and waited, two lines becoming clear fairly quickly.

I was pregnant.

A little voice in me sang and I welled up with tears. I didn’t doubt that Jude would be over the moon, as would his parents, and Maia would grow up with a sibling around a year younger than her, so they’d be close enough in age to possibly be friends.

A knock at the door brought me out of my daydream.

“Any news?” Genny’s voice came through it. “Maia wants to know.”

I opened the door and nodded. “I’m pregnant. Baby number two due on or before her first birthday. I think you might need to keep my temporary on permanently.” I’d wanted to be a mother for so long. I could do this and carry on my work on social media and with the programme we were starting to film in February.

“Okay. They’re not you but they’re okay. Congratulations.” She hugged me with one arm, the other holding Maia. “When are you telling Jude?”

“Tonight. So if you hear something loud above the fireworks, you’ll know what it is.” I knew I was beaming. “I’m thrilled.”

“And you weren’t actually trying?”

I shook my head. “We thought it was practice. Anyway.” I smiled again.

“He’s going to know as soon as he sees you.”

I laughed. “He’s a man.” I thought about that for a second. “But this is Jude. He probably already knows. He wouldn’t even let me carry the shopping in earlier.”

“Want to go to lunch? Catch up about Christmas? Talk about how Jude’s going to look when he’s pushing Maia in a trolley and carrying another baby on his chest?”

I grinned, still a little in shock but not completely. The prospect of labour and giving birth so soon wasn’t the most attractive, but what would be at the end of it would be worth it. “He was named DILF of the year in some magazine this week.”

He’d actually not told me about it, but Amber had. Nate and Jesse had been taking the piss out of Jude all week, changing his name to ‘Hot Dad’ on his locker, and printing out the photo used in the magazine to hang up around the locker rooms.

He'd been embarrassed about it, which I'd found hilarious and a bit endearing at the same time.

“Lunch then? How about Carlotta's? I fancy tapas. Something that isn't turkey or roast beef. I've totally had enough of that.”

I nodded. I needed to do something rather than go straight home and work out how I was going to break the news to Jude that broken sleep was going to be a thing for a while longer.

“Lunch sounds good. I'll drive – you can have a wine.”

I guessed I was the designated driver for a while longer.

I worked out how to tell Jude about the next addition to our team while I was driving back from Genny's, dropping her off with the wine she hadn't drunk at the restaurant – she'd ordered a bottle - and leaving her to get ready for whatever she was doing tonight, something she'd been extremely vague about, which meant I was texting Amber as soon as I had both hands free so we could speculate whether she was spending New Year's with her arch enemy.

Jude was home when I arrived there, complete with our daughter and my secret surprise. I passed him Maia, because as much as I adored her, I was also going to enjoy a nice swim in the indoor pool, followed by a bath and some new body moisturiser I'd been given for Christmas from Jude's mum.

Then I was getting creative.

Which apparently took a long time. I had sequins in a box from a craft set Nate's girls had been using when I'd babysat them one afternoon. I also had glue from a face painting set, so I was all set for my little announcement board.

An announcement board that was in fact my still rounded stomach.

Like most women after giving birth, I was still carrying some baby weight. I'd been slim before, because my diet had to be an example of what I preached and I was a huge pilates and yoga fan, but I hadn't been in any rush to try to go back to

what I'd been like before I was pregnant with Maia. I'd documented the slow, steady weight loss, looking at reasons why women struggled to get rid of the baby belly – mainly because as a mum you put yourself last so you were generally sleep deprived, stressed and snacking, too exhausted to be organised about yourself.

I had lost weight, but not in the same way a model or an actress might. There was no need to.

Right now, I was decorating my squidgy belly with sequins, not something I'd been envisaging. I was also trying to write a message upside down, which was harder than I thought it would be.

“Are you okay in there?” Jude spoke through the bathroom door and tried the handle. The door was locked, as I figured he might try and find me if Maia was napping.

We'd definitely been making the most of the naps, as evidenced by what was growing in my belly now.

“I'm good. I'll be down in ten minutes.” I was nearly done. I just needed to figure out how to dress without nudging any of the sequins off.

“I'm sorting dinner. I'm making us a happy meal,” he said through the door.

“Is that a euphemism?”

“It can be. Maia's asleep. She polished off that bottle and still wanted more. Did you feed her before?”

“Were there any newsflashes about a baby causing ear damage to the public in South Manchester?” Because that was what would've happened if she hadn't been fed.

Carnage. Burst ear drums. Stampeding dogs.

“Fair point. Shall we give her a top up before she goes to sleep?”

“Can do. What are you cooking for dinner?” I was curious as to what a happy meal actually was.

“A happy meal. Burger. Fries. I’m just making my own. I’ve done the prep and filmed it while you’ve been in the bath. Don’t you need your back scrubbing?” Jude sounded antsy.

“No. I’m good. I’ll be down in ten minutes.” I put on sleep shorts and a long T-shirt that was fairly fitted so wouldn’t move around too much. Over that I threw a baggy hoodie that used to be Jude’s.

“Shall I pour you a glass of wine?”

He was definitely trying to get me in the mood for something.

“I’m going to express later so no. Maybe after that, but thank you.”

There was silence. Probably a little huff because he wasn’t getting his way.

Wouldn’t hurt him.

I checked my decorated belly, giving it a little rub knowing there was another ducky growing inside, making sure the sequins didn’t knock off. In fact, they felt so secure I was worried they’d be on permanently.

In less than the ten minutes I’d promised, I was downstairs, Jude behind the kitchen island and Maia being entertained in her play area, a few sparkling lights making her giggle. She wasn’t normally this awake at this time, so I suspected she hadn’t eaten enough which meant her schedule was going to be screwed.

We’d manage. Jude was about to get some news that was going to change a lot of schedules, so in the scheme of things, all was good.

“You’ve made the burgers from scratch?”

He nodded, then talked me through the ingredients.

“I’ve done the bread too this afternoon while you were out. Go and sit down and I’ll bring it over. Everything will be ready in about twenty minutes.”

I grinned, fishing a bottle of juice for myself out of the fridge and headed to the sofa, lounging back on it with an eye on Maia, who was looking like she was going to start wailing the song of the ignored baby.

Drink down, I picked her up and settled back down with her on the sofa, doing a bit of shifting round with clothing to see if she would latch on and top up. It worked, Maia settling into me and starting to feed happily, the whole closeness a comfort for both of us.

And Jude, who was perving over.

“Can I get a photo?” He produced his phone and held it up. “Just for me.”

I nodded, smiling up at him and then Maia. “I think she’ll have a good sleep after this. We can veg out in front of whatever’s on TV.”

“Our usual New Year’s Eve.” He went back to the kitchen counter and picked up two brown bags, both of them decorated with cartoons that looked like they’d been drawn by him.

I held mine up with one hand, inspecting it. “Are these pictures of us?”

“They are.”

I laughed, loving the gesture. “It’s pictures from us, from things we did – the McDonalds take outs, at the chateau in France – this is really cute. I love it.”

Maia gave a little murmur which meant she’d finished, thank you very much.

Jude held his hands out to take her. “I’ll wind her. Have a look at what’s in there.”

I pulled out a cardboard burger box, *Jude Loves Neva* written on it inside a big heart. It was cheesy and corny, but I loved it all the same. He sat on the coffee table – which was thankfully a solid wooden thing – watching me, looking entertained and slightly smug, Maia in the burp position against his shoulder.

The burger inside the box was made up exactly like my usual order, even with a pickle and burger sauce. There were also fries inside the bag, a napkin and what looked like a box with a toy inside. I left that in the bag, emptying the fries into the other half of the burger box, my mouth watering because Jude had done an amazing job of this.

“You recreated our first meal together,” I said, watching him put Maia down after a rather lady-like burp. “From scratch.”

“Thought you’d like it.” He opened his bag and began to eat. “How was Carlotta’s with Genny?”

“Good. What was weird though was that Genny completely avoided telling me anything about who she was spending New Year’s with. I’m convinced it’s Guy.” My heart was beating a little faster at the news I was going to give – no, show – Jude shortly.

He shrugged. “She hates him. Why would she be spending New Year’s with him?”

“I think they’re having hate sex.”

He laughed, polishing off his burger, chomping on that before answering. “Is that a thing?”

“Totally. We have it when I’m annoyed with you.”

“You’re never annoyed with me. Have you seen your happy meal toy?”

I peered back in the bag and pulled out a plastic bag containing a cardboard box. I felt Jude’s eyes on me as I opened it. By the time I’d dumped the card and found a black ring box inside, he was down on one knee.

“Open the box, Neva.”

I swallowed hard, my heart now properly racing. Encased in velvet was a platinum band, a pretty pink diamond glistening from a simple setting.

“Do I need to explain what I’m asking?”

I looked from the ring to him. He was still on one knee.

I shook my head, taking the ring out and staring at it, then looking at him.

“Is there a yes in there? Will you marry me?” A huge smile was on his face, his eyes dancing, as bright as the diamond I kept looking at. “I’m thinking that’s a yes. You haven’t run out of the room yet.”

“It’s a yes.” I left the sofa and went onto my knees next to him, passing him the ring. “Will you put it on?”

He took it and found my ring finger on my left hand, pushing the band onto it. “Marry me, Neva.”

“I will. I love you.” I managed to get the words out between the tears that were now falling. “I didn’t expect this.”

“I was going to wait till midnight then I figured we’d both be asleep.” He pulled me into his arms, our kiss starting just like many others had before, with a messy need that I could fall into and throw away my worries.

“I love you. I did before and I didn’t think love could be more than it was, then you grew our child and I love you more than then.”

His words were sweeter than cherry wine.

“Thank you. Thank you for everything you’ve given me.” And he had no idea just how much he had yet.

The kiss returned, merging into something more that had me losing his hoodie, the T-shirt clinging over my outgoing-incoming baby bump. I sat down with my back against the bottom of the sofa, the rug soft underneath me.

I stiffened slightly, watching Jude as he pushed the T-shirt up and noticed the sequined words, half hidden by my sleep shorts.

“Is that a message for me?”

“It is.” I raised my hips so he could pull down the shorts, exposing the words.

“Neva?” He looked up at me. “Is this true? *Home of Baby Whittingham Number Two?*” I had ended up drawing on some

of the words because that was a lot of sequins.

“It’s true. I found out today. I thought I was on contraception and I wasn’t - ”

“Don’t you dare fucking apologise.” He bent down and kissed my belly. “I couldn’t think of a better way to bring in another new year with you. This is everything.”

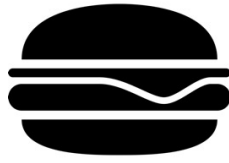
It was everything.

My everything.

And it couldn’t be more perfect.

Epilogue

JUDE



FIVE AND A HALF YEARS LATER, BACK IN FRANCE

“**THEO**, please don’t try to drown your sister.” I’d tried for half a minute just to sit down. That wasn’t going to be possible obviously, so I was up on my feet again and sliding into the pool to prevent my son Theo from dunking Maia’s head underwater.

It wasn’t Maia I was worried about. She was a little fish at nearly six years old, swimming three different strokes and spending most of her free time either in water or asking to go in water.

The concern was revenge.

Slugs in shoes, woodlice in underwear, toy cars with punctures. These were all methods of revenge that she had no issue in enacting.

My sweet, beautiful baby had grown into a very independent and sassy little girl who was a miniature of her mother.

“Daddy, can we go to the beach this afternoon?” Theo jumped on my back, his foot kicking me straight in the spot where a football boot had been a few days before.

“Tomorrow. We’re spending the whole day there.” Which I was simultaneously dreading and looking forward to as the women were staying at the chateau for a day of facials, massages, wine tasting and food. The men were taking the vast amount of children to the beach.

The number of kids here had exploded over the last few years. We’d kept coming here as a bit of a tradition, especially since Rowan, Ryan and Jesse had all retired in the last few years so we didn’t see as much of each other on the football field. We all still lived close by, so off season and during the week were usually a different matter and the women were still close.

The total of kids was well over double figures, mainly because Nate had managed to father five in total, thanks to Amber getting pregnant with twins. Maya Genevieve and Lucas Jude had been born a year after Theo, the topic of whether Maya was too close in name to Maia going on for at least three months before the birth.

Neva had been all for it. Amber had felt guilty that she'd stolen Maia's name. At the end of the day, they were pronounced slightly differently, and Maya ended up being called Maya-Gen a lot of the time.

A year after that, we'd had our third baby, another boy we'd named him Xander, another take on a Greek name that had become our theme, since Neva still wouldn't let me use the name Achilles.

With our three and Nate's five, we also had two from Ryan and Otter, two from Jesse and Jerrica and twins from Rowan and Dee. Nicky and Kitty had just had their first baby, so between us we would be responsible for sixteen kids, including Toby. Enough for a football team and five substitutes.

Which was why we still holidayed at a French chateau that had its own vineyard. This was also the first summer where no one was pregnant – that we knew of anyway.

“Want a beer?” Neva appeared, in a bikini, a sheer animal print wrap around her. She handed the bottle to me, because there wasn't much need to answer the question, she knew what the response would be. “Babies and toddlers are almost all sleeping. Nicky and Jesse are on duty. Everyone else is about to descend. Enjoy the peace.”

There was another screech from Theo as Maia grabbed hold of his feet underwater.

“What peace is this?” I directed the top of my bottle at my children. “Just think, in another week my parents are turning up and taking them all to Disney for a week.”

Somehow, probably because they were insane, my mum and dad had decided to take the three children to Disney in

Paris and give Neva and me almost a week on our own. We were both excited about being on our own together and absolutely bricking it at the thought of not being with our three small people.

“I’m not sure Disney will survive.” She shook her head, watching Theo climb on Maia’s shoulder and proceed to fall into the pool.

They were close, best friends when they wanted to be and each other’s most irritating object too. There were only eleven months between them, so Maia grew up without remembering any experience of being an only child, because Theo was always there.

He was bigger than her now, taller and stronger, and in the same year group at school although we’d asked for them to go into separate classes.

I hated to think how protective he was going to be when Maia was old enough to start going on dates; he’d already thumped one kid who’d tried to be mean to her, although to be fair, Maia could hold her own.

Neva sat down at the side of the pool, feet dipping in the water. “Can you believe they’re ours?”

They’d started to be nice to each other now, sitting together on one of the inflatables, which hopefully meant they’d tired each other out.

“Some days, no. Days when I find a trail of food, pencil sharpenings, stuffed toys and dirty clothes throughout the house, yes.” Because some days they were just like me.

“I think they’re just yours on those days. Xander scored a goal before. Side footed it and everything.” She gave me a grin that melted my insides. “I think he gets it from me.”

Theo was more Neva than me, very into racket sports and more academic than I’d been. Xander was already football obsessed. We had three sporty children – our problem was it was three different sports.

“Yeah, babe, he gets his football skills from you.” I shook my head - easier not to argue. “I can hear the masses.” There

had been a couple of hours over lunch where we'd all done our own things. For the rest of the afternoon, the older kids would entertain each other, while the younger ones would be entertained by whoever was on duty – someone, probably Genny, had put together a rota. We'd created a soft play space, sensory area and a nap station, which was working better than we'd expected.

“Remember we need to make our children look less feral before the wedding.” She looked round at Theo and Maia who were now out of the water and lying on their stomachs on the grass, watching something on a tablet. “They need suntan lotion on.”

“I'll sort it. You go and read your book. I'll sort them.”

She gave me the smile that was my favourite one.

“I'm glad you made me that offer when we were here, Jude Whittingham. Best offer I ever took.” Her arms wrapped around me, clearly not caring that I was dripping with pool water.

“Best offer I ever made. Are you still glad you married me?” I pressed a kiss to her lips, hearing loud yuck noises coming from my spawn.

I ignored them.

“Very. And when Amber gets here, we could leave her to look after those two and I'll let you know just how glad.” She kept her voice low.

“Baby number four?”

“Absolutely not.” She smacked my shoulder, so I grabbed hold of her and pulled her into the pool, laughing at her screams.

“I love you, Neva Whittingham.” I whispered against her now wet hair. “And our life.”

She smiled, which I figured meant I was forgiven.

“I love you, Jude. Bloody good job after that.”

I stole another kiss, one that was hot enough for the cat calls to come as Amber and Nate and Genny and Rowan all arrived, the peace spoilt.

Which was how we liked it.

THE END

Want to know how Neva and Jude get on during their wedding day? Jump in here for a bonus epilogue: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/717bpjtfev>

What's next on your reading list? How do you like your single dads?

Jonny Graham is a single dad to three of the most scene stealing children I've written - a reader even named her dog after his youngest, Sadie Grace! His story is [Smoldered](#), a firefighter, older brother's best friend, single dad romance set in the small town of Severton - read on for the first chapter.

Another of my single dads is Zeke, one of the English Gentleman series, and can be found in [The Atelier Assignment](#). He's a tortured artist with a young daughter, and isn't too impressed when Catrin Green turns up to catalogue his artwork.

You can also take a trip to London and meet Jack, single dad to his teenaged daughter, Lauren. He's working for chef and restaurant owner Simone Wood in [Heat](#), part of the Callaghan Green series.

Smoldered

CHAPTER ONE

Chaos was around five foot six, with silky, shiny fair hair and blue eyes that had caused more than one man to drown.

It also possessed the authoritative tone of an army sergeant and, on a bad day, needed no weapons to command every living thing in the surrounding area.

Chaos had a name; one that Jonny Graham knew well. One that he'd grown up hearing and occasionally yelling himself. A name that induced fear and terror into both men and small children alike. This clubhouse, the place where residents of Severton came to play sports, have barbecues, watch fireworks, was more than used to chaos. Jonny was pretty sure that there was a place reserved for a plaque to mark some of the more extreme moments.

“It’s Rayah, Daddy! Can I go and see her?”

Jonny looked down at the imp that was his daughter. Sadie Grace Graham had never known her mother, yet she had come already pre-programmed to manipulate the absolute hell out of any male, including her father and two elder brothers.

“Do I have any form of choice?”

Sadie shook her head, dark red curls bouncing around, her smile sweet, a clear giveaway that she was up to something. “I want to to tell her I’ve got a new reading book.”

Like hell she did.

“Truth, Sadie.”

The bottom lip came out and Jonny shook his head.

She slumped her shoulders and looked up at him through dark eyelashes. “I want to ask her about Charlie’s party.”

Jonny considered the sweet smile, one front tooth pretty much through, the other part way there. To the unsuspecting stranger, his daughter was the image of an angel, all cherubic

innocence and goodness. To a resident of Severton, she was mischief incarnate. Much like Rayah Maynard had been.

Still was.

“What do you want to ask her about Charlie’s party?”

Charlie was Jonny’s eldest son, ten going on thirty-nine. Sadie Grace was his tormentor, the tiny torturer who had him so under her thumb Charlie could barely stand up.

Just like someone else had been.

“I want to make sure she’s going.”

Jonny narrowed his eyes. “You know that Rayah will be there already.”

Sadie shook her head. “Of course Rayah will be there. It’s one of our birthdays. Rayah’s always there. But I need to ask her ask her about *things*.”

“What *things*?” Jonny hesitated, unsure what was about to come out of his daughter’s mouth. It could be anything. Sadie Grace had filters, just ones she chose not to utilise.

“Girl things. You wouldn’t understand.” Her last word was barely comprehensible. The slight lisp she’d always had masking the word, probably more than it should’ve, because Sadie knew the power of that lisp.

So did Jonny. And he was immune to it. He was also immune to feeling as if he had two heavy weights tied to his feet in a piranha-infested pool when it came to single-parenting. He’d already used up his quota of sleepless nights worrying about the fact that his three children no longer had their mother around. They had a village instead.

“Try me.” She was six. *Girl things* hadn’t started yet.

Her smile slipped. As much as Sadie was a master manipulator, Jonny was immune to her ways. It had been a case of survival, because if he’d been sucked in by her charm, the world would have no chance.

“Clothes. I wanted us to have matching party dresses.”

His heart melted a little. And broke. Grace, Sadie's mother, would've done something like matching dresses. Before Sadie was born, before the hit and run that had killed her, Grace had bought a tiny baby-grow and a matching set of adult pyjamas. Jonny had kept them. Over the years he'd let go some of Grace belongings - clothes, books, her over-sized music collection - but the little baby grow and PJ's had stayed wrapped up, never worn.

"Rayah might not want to have matching party dresses, baby." Knowing Rayah, she'd be planning on a night out after Charlie's party, so she could well be wearing leather trousers and some form of material around her chest. Jonny pictured her wearing a sack-like outfit, complete with rope belt, because anything else was asking for trouble on many, many levels.

Sadie gave a petite nod. "She said she would. She said we could go shopping. I had to ask you, but I wanted to check she still wanted to."

Jonny stared at her, not really doubting what she said. Sadie didn't tell lies; she might use the truth sparingly, but she didn't need to make things up.

"So can I go and speak to her, Daddy?"

Jonny inhaled deeply and nodded. Sadie adored Rayah. Out of everyone in Severton who helped him with childcare, Rayah was Sadie's go-to human of choice.

"You looking for me, Poppet?" Her voice was musical and low, containing something that was enough to capture the attention of the children that she taught and most people who met her.

"Rayah!" Sadie somehow ended up in Rayah's arms, even though it was brief.

For months, Jonny had to coach Sadie to call Rayah 'Miss Maynard' when she was her reception class teacher. Pretty much straight after going into the next class with a different teacher, Sadie had been back to being on first name terms with Jonny's childhood friend.

“You’re still jumping hippopotamus!” Rayah’s focus was solely on the little girl.

Jonny tried not to pay too much attention. It was late September, so the short shorts that summer had coaxed out of Rayah’s closet were no longer there. Instead she was wearing tight jeans and a sweater that did everything to cling to her curves. Not that he noticed. Because she was a childhood friend and his best mates’ sister and cousin. Permanently in the Friend Zone.

“Where’s your jacket?” That was what he chose to focus on.

Rayah put a hand on Sadie’s back as she clung to her legs. “In the car. I was only popping into the clubhouse to pick up Jake’s wallet. Yet again.”

Jonny laughed. Jake was one of his closest friends, always had been, probably always would be. He ran his family’s farm and had recently branched out into keeping alpacas, although no one was quite sure why. “Is that the second time in a week?”

Rayah rolled her eyes. “Third in two weeks. I’m waiting for the day when you have a chip programmed into your hand so Jake no longer needs a wallet. Although he’d probably manage to lose his hand instead.”

Jonny was pretty sure that would happen. Jake Maynard was known everywhere he went, mainly for his personality, which was larger than life and drew people to him. He was also known for leaving belongings everywhere, but because he was Jake, they were always looked after and returned. “Any reason he couldn’t pick up his own wallet?”

Rayah shrugged. “He’s been out in the fields from four in the morning ‘til nine most evenings, so I figured I could help out. It’s a big harvest this year.”

“I think I’ve been commandeered to help out at the weekend.” It was an autumn ritual: all hands on deck for the harvest on the final Saturday, followed by a party in the fields nearest the farmhouse. Ever since he could remember, Jonny

had been one of the extra set of hands in the fields. When the boys had been tiny, he and Grace had still been there, helping where they could while the babies were looked after by the older town residents. After Grace had died, he'd still been there every year, because it was normality. Charlie was just about old enough to help out this year, even if it was picking up the apples in the orchard. Harry, Jonny's middle child, was a year too young, but he would want to be where Charlie was.

"I think everyone is in on it this year. The extra land from Niall James' farm was a good move, apart from the fact Jake's more than doubled his land. If he suggests more alpacas, encourage it. At least they farm the fields themselves."

"I want a pet alpaca. Can I have one, Daddy? It could live in the garden and I promise I'd look after it." Sadie slipped her hand into his.

Jonny sent a quick prayer up to the stars for help. He was good at saying no, but he hated it. He wanted to give his kids everything they wanted, but that wouldn't be good for anyone.

"Alpacas need to be in a flock." Rayah had crouched down in front of Sadie. "But I bet Jake would let you choose one to adopt. You could pick a name for it and visit it."

Jonny exhaled. That was a solution everyone could manage.

Sadie's eyes had grown inextricably bigger. "So my alpaca could still have friends and be mine too?"

Jonny wondered if this was the start of a very important life lesson.

"Definitely. Shall we pick an alpaca this weekend when you're at the farm for Mabon?" Rayah's shoulders now had Sadie's probably sticky hands on them. She had also given harvest its pagan name, part of the town traditions.

"Are you going to help make corn dollies like last year?" Sadie's attention was stolen by something else, but Jonny had no doubt, she'd return to the alpaca request later.

"Yep. Are you going to join in?"

Sadie nodded excitedly and clung onto Rayah a little more. Rayah stood up, lifting his daughter.

His heart twisted. Six years had been enough time to understand that his children had lost their mother. He'd gone through the grief and the guilt in waves since then, and missed Grace, cursed her for not being there, in moments like this.

But it wasn't his grief any more. Instead it was the pain of his kids that he wanted to heal, even if they didn't feel that pain themselves.

"Do you need any help with Charlie's party tomorrow?" Rayah put down the rather too-big-to-hold-for-too-long Sadie.

Jonny watched her fair curls bounce wildly about her shoulders. Rayah hated her hair. He remembered how she'd once ironed it, frustrated with the waves that were unfashionable at the time and not being allowed straighteners for fear she'd set the house on fire.

She'd been metaphorically setting things on fire ever since.

"I'll take any help offered." His response was his standard one. After a few months of trying to prove he could manage on his own with just his parents and Grace's parents to help, three kids and a full-time job as a firefighter, Jonny had realised it was a choice between going insane or accepting help from certain people in the town. It had taken a village. The Maynards had stepped in: Zack always there when he was needed; Scott – even though he'd been sprayed with projectile vomit from Sadie – had been more than happy to cover the nights when the kids were in bed and Jonny was at work; Jake entertained them when Jonny had needed to catch up on sleep; and Rayah had been his constant. His kids' constant.

"What do you want me to organise? Games? Parent drinks? Decorations?"

He thought about the balloons he'd ordered, and the other superhero things that had been delivered a week or so ago. He'd become fairly decent at decorating a room for birthdays and Christmas. But dealing with other parents was a skill he hadn't mastered. Severton had its ration of single parents, like

any other town. And non-single parents. Some of whom were keen to get a little closer to find out the length of his hose, and not the one he used for his job.

“Parents. I think a few are dropping their kid off, but some have mentioned staying around. That’s the beauty of having the party at the clubhouse – there’s a bar.”

Rayah nodded. “Which means it’ll go on for longer than planned. Is there a game on later?”

Jonny rolled his eyes. “Rugby starts at three. That might mean it’ll be the dads bringing the kids.”

Sadie wriggled free and bolted over to Alex Maynard who had just arrived with both of his dogs. She was obsessed with having some sort of pet, but however much she said – or screamed – that she would be the one to look after it, Jonny knew it would be one more favour he’d be asking of his friends.

Rayah gave him a grin that told him she was laughing at his discomfort because she knew exactly what he was hoping for. “You need to stop picking Sadie and Harry up from school in your grey sweatpants. Then you might stop being treated as meat by the mothers.”

“How I dress is not an invitation to be eye-fucked. I’m hoping Michaela Robbins or whatever she’s called gets lucky on some dating app, because I’m not sure how many more excuses I can make for not going out with her.” He’d thought at first that Michaela was genuine in needing her smoke alarms checking. Then there had been a fire evacuation plan she’d wanted him to assess, even though it was a three-bedroomed semi-detached. Shortly after, her cat had gotten stuck up a tree, although he had at the time thought she might’ve put the cat up there herself.

Rayah chuckled, her eyes glinting.

He knew that look. It was one that suggested she had plans, and not ones that were going to be at all helpful to him.

“You know; she could be a good move.”

Jonny raised his eyebrows. “I have no idea how you’ve come to that conclusion.”

“Which conclusion’s that?” Alex Maynard appeared without his dogs.

Jonny figured that they had probably been kidnapped by Sadie. Given that they were big enough to put a saddle on and ride, he wasn’t too worried.

“Jonny’s finding all the female attention he gets at the school gates overwhelming.” Rayah’s eyes didn’t leave his.

Jonny shook his head. “There are so few blokes there. It’s like I’m an endangered species or something.”

Alex Maynard chuckled. He was the understated one of the four Maynard men, preferring to watch and comment only when he deemed it necessary. He was also a detective constable and police dog handler and knew far more than what he ever told.

“I overheard Tracey Kennedy talking about what you were wearing in the bakers on Wednesday. She also mentioned three women that she knew were planning to ask you out for a date over Christmas.” Alex shoved his hands in his pockets and looked around, exuding calm.

“Can’t you start hovering near the school more?” Jonny wasn’t happy with this kind of attention. “Give them something else to perv over?”

He heard Rayah choke.

“The last time I did an after-school talk on safety we had a two hundred and thirty percent increase in call-outs with women alone in the house afraid there was an intruder.” Alex kept his tone matter of fact. “We started sending Prescott round to investigate. The calls stopped when word got round.”

Prescott had been a beat cop for as long as Jonny could remember. When Jonny was six, he remembered Prescott looking like a skinny Santa Claus. Not much had changed.

“Maybe you should both go on a few dates. You know, one’s that take place in Severton. Not the clandestine affairs

you both have out of town.” Rayah’s words were cutting. Her glare even more so.

Alex shrugged. “I’m not the one complaining. And if I started taking dates out in Severton I’d make it look like I was available. Have you got Jake’s wallet?” He looked at Rayah.

“Just on my way in for it. Why?”

“He owes me twenty quid. I figured I’d intercept it before it found his hands again.” Alex shivered. “And then try to get my coat back off him.”

“Good luck with that.” Jonny knew that once Jake had taken possession of something there was little chance of reclaiming it.

Alex merely tipped his head to one side and strolled off into the clubhouse. He had never been seen flummoxed or rattled by anything.

“You should let me set you up with someone.”

Jonny’s head span back round to Rayah with enough speed to pull a tendon.

“What?”

Rayah had folded her arms and her eyes were glinting dangerously. He knew that look; it was one that made him suppress a groan.

“If you go on a couple of dates you could buy yourself a little breathing space.”

He inhaled deeply, aware that Sadie was running around nearby with a couple of the other kids. “The kids...”

“The kids need to see you having a life, Jonny.”

It was a line he’d heard before. As much as he’d let the guilt go, it felt wrong to have his kids find out that he’d moved on.

“They need a stable parent. Or one who can pass as a stable parent.”

“Your boys need to learn that it’s okay to have different sorts of relationships with people. Romantic ones. Charlie really likes a girl in his class – it kills me to tell you this – but he won’t ask her out.”

“Because he’s ten.”

Rayah stared at him. It had been a long time since Jonny had felt like crawling under a desk and hiding, possibly back when he was in high school and his English teacher had caught him reading some inappropriate material while he should’ve been planning an essay on George and Lenny in *Of Mice and Men*. She had the teacher look down to perfection.

“Jonny, do you remember when you were ten?”

He tried to stare at her blankly.

“It was a long time ago.”

She laughed. “Well, there is that. You were going out with Jemma Martin. Until she dumped you for Scott.”

He felt his face heat up. “Charlie thinks girls are gross.”

“He doesn’t. There are three girls in his class that keep giving him sweets and at least two have their name and his surname scrawled at the back of their books.”

Jonny tapped his foot. His eyes focused anywhere Rayah wasn’t. “That doesn’t mean he’s interested in them.”

“You’re right. He isn’t. But he really likes Layla Wardle. He helped her when she fell over in the playground yesterday and he tries to sit next to her at lunch.” Her expression lost its tension. “It’s sweet. But you need to have a chat with him.”

“He’s ten, Ray. He’s...”

“Completely clueless about girls. Harry isn’t. He’s already broken two hearts since September. But then, he’s spent more time with Jake.” The snark was back.

Jonny looked around for Sadie and saw her playing with two of the boys in her school. She was demanding that they pretended they were various animals and obviously having fun. He did not want to think about her growing up. Any of

them growing up. He and Grace had been young parents, only twenty-three when Charlie was born, and neither of them really had a clue what to do. He wasn't sure he had a clue even now.

“Maybe I should curb their Jake-time.”

“Maybe you should go on a date. Show your boys how to treat a woman and give Sadie some expectations. Plus,” Rayah dug him in the chest with her finger, “you stop this competition to see who can get you in the sack first.”

Jonny gripped her finger before she could leave a bruise. “Seriously? There's a competition?”

“Too right. Sadie's six, so this has been a thing for two years.”

Jonny kept hold of her finger. Touching Rayah was something he hadn't done for years. As kids, they had fought, she'd gotten on his nerves like the younger sisters of friends did, just like Sadie irritated Charlie and Harry's friends, but he couldn't remember when he'd touched her.

He wasn't sure he didn't like it.

“Who would I date?”

“Who would you want to go out with?”

Jonny looked around as if expecting some dating show contestant to appear with three possible choices. Nothing happened. “I don't know. I don't pay much attention to the women round here.”

Rayah's eyes rolled far enough back to see behind her. It was a gesture he'd noticed Sadie had adopted. “I know. You take your hook-ups from fields further away. And I get that. But that's made you more alluring to the single – and not-so-single – mum brigade.”

“But I don't want anything serious. And you know the score, Ray, you don't shit on your own doorstep. If I date someone locally then there will be expectations. From everyone. Especially Charlie and Harry.”

“Then you just have to be careful who you pick.”

The slight release of his fingers around hers gave her opportunity to jab him again in the chest. Rayah Maynard hurt.

Jonny thought for a moment. He didn't want his sons to think that taking a woman out was a bad thing and hell, he wanted to make sure Sadie knew exactly how to be respected by a boyfriend – or girlfriend. It was a situation he'd been trying to avoid in much the same way as he avoided Gran and the potent moonshine disguised as gin that she sold. "Okay." He looked Rayah straight in the eye. "But you have to set me up with someone. Someone who won't get all hung up on having one date with a firefighter."

Her expression was unreadable.

"One date. I set you up."

He nodded.

"Done."

The Atelier Assignment

CHAPTER ONE - CATRIN

Three dresses. Check.

Three pairs of shoes. Double check.

Three posies of flowers. Triple check.

One already glowing and ridiculously calm bride-to-be. Checked several times and still put together, and not in the least bit Bridezilla-ing.

I, on the other hand, had turned into a cluckingly fussing bridesmaid who'd already been ordered at least three times today to sit down and breathe. By the bride, of all people.

My sister, the middle one of us, was getting married. This was a wonderful thing; I loved weddings, adored romance and flowers and all the hearts that went with it. My idea of a pretty perfect night was to binge watch rom-coms or a Regency romance series with a box of chocolates and a pot of tea, maybe a glass of Irish cream liqueur on the side, all whilst under a blanket and in front of a real fire.

The thought of adding a boyfriend or fiancé of my own into the mix only spoiled my plan. I was quite happy enjoying other people's romances, thank you muchly.

Like Imogen's. She looked like a princess. Her hair had been put up, tendrils framing her face, and her dress was exquisite. Despite the fact that her wedding was a fake one, to a groom who was dashing and handsome in the best possible way, this was going to be a perfect wedding.

"Catrin," the door opened, and my cousin Ava stepped in, her expression the epitome of serenity. "You need to check your car."

I glanced briefly at Imogen, making sure nothing had changed in the second I'd looked away and returned my gaze to Ava. "Huh?"

“Your car. You need to go check it.” Ava’s voice contained that quiet insistence that worked with the teams she oversaw on the properties she flipped, and on her brothers.

I waved it away with my hand. “I’m sure it’s– ”

“Cat, go check your car before you get changed into your dress.” Ava placed her hands on my shoulders and ushered me towards the door out of Imogen’s suite.

My sister was marrying her fake fiancé in his family’s Scottish castle, situated in the highlands; it was like something from a fairy tale. I’d driven up two days ago, my car full of clothes, accessories and more make-up than a department store cosmetics department. Everything had been neatly packed and labelled, and I’d managed to fit in spares of items that we might need. I knew most of it would travel back in exactly the same state it had arrived there in, as it wouldn’t be called on, but it was there. Just in case.

Ava guided me down the corridor, to the set of stairs in the east wing of the castle, and towards the side door that led straight to the car park. My car was parked near to the door, a handy spot in case I needed to grab something quickly, its cherry red paintwork perfect except for the scrape that was now sullyng the passenger side door and all along to the back.

I swallowed.

I tried to calm down my shit.

I perfected the glare at the man who was standing next to the SUV that was one of my favourite possessions.

“Can I have your name and insurance details.”

Ava’s arm stayed on my shoulder.

The man, who was dressed in black, an outfit more appropriate for a funeral than a wedding, folded his arms and stared at me with the same expression he’d gift something that had just shat on his shoe.

“I’ll just buy you a new one, if that keeps the peace.”

My mouth opened and then closed again. “I don’t want a new one. What I’d like is for people to master the art of

driving so they don't maim other people's vehicles." I could see now what had happened. Somehow, his monstrosity of a four by four had been reversed, catching the side of my car. He'd probably been on his phone, or checking his reflection in case a smile had shattered it.

He shrugged. "Didn't realise my sensors were fucked. It'll be sorted by the time you leave. And if you'd parked properly in the first place, this wouldn't have happened."

Out of my siblings, my three sisters and brother, Shay, I had the most controlled temper. Shay had tormented me as a child, trying to push all my buttons to get me to yell or cry or react, and it never happened. I would just ignore him and find something to tidy. Until he deliberately messed something up. That was my one nerve.

"My parking was fine. What about an apology?"

His eyes narrowed; his mouth morphed into a sneer. He looked like some wild panther about to launch itself into a fight.

"You're getting a new fucking car. I think that's enough of an apology." He shook his head, as if he couldn't believe what I was asking.

"I don't want a new car. I want my car, the one I look after and enjoy driving, to be put back to normal. I don't need a new car when this one can be fixed." My own arms were folded now.

"Are you for real? You can get this one fixed and sell it and have a new car. Or sell the new one – I don't care. Don't tell me you want compensation too? Were you magically in the car when I scraped it and now you've got whiplash? Because you wouldn't be the first person to make up some fairy story to get more money. Or maybe you need money for parking lessons." He'd edged closer to me as he spoke, his expensive cologne invading my airways.

I had no idea who he was. He wasn't attached to my family, at least I didn't think so, and I didn't recall ever meeting him before.

I took a step closer too, refusing to let him occupy my ground. “If you think I’m some poor female looking for some easy cash, think again. I don’t need your money, and I don’t need you to buy me a new car. I don’t even need you to pay to get it fixed. And I certainly don’t need parking lessons! What I would like is an apology.” My finger had now pointed at, and dug into, his chest, as if it had a life of its own and I no longer had control over it. “But money can’t buy you the manners to apologise, so clearly you don’t have them.”

He caught my hand, capturing it in his. His hand was warm, and his grip was strong, but not threatening. If I pulled my hand away, it would come free.

I didn’t pull my hand away.

Later, I’d replay this scene in my head and wonder why I didn’t yank my hand out of his. I’d wonder why it was paralysed, why I couldn’t pull it away.

Later, I’d wonder a lot of things.

“Send me a bill for the repairs after you have them done to your liking.” He let go of my hand.

For a moment, it floated there, as if it had decided it needed a new owner, or to return into the car basher’s smooth grip.

I pulled it towards me in case it was captured again.

“How do I know who to send them to?”

He smirked, the first sign of any smile I’d seen. “If you’re here for the wedding, you’ll know before the end of it.”

Then he walked away, leaving his monstrosity parked haphazardly, blocking several cars in. I hoped no one needed to leave in an emergency, unless it was to get him to a hospital for emergency treatment. In which case, we could find a tortoise-drawn carriage.

I put my car and its damage in the ‘to deal with later’ compartment in my head and focused on making sure my sisters managed to stay on task, rather than becoming distracted with something other than Imogen’s wedding.

Lainey was recently married herself, falling in love with her neighbour and merging both of their farms into one in the process. She was a psychotherapist, specialising in equine therapy, and equal parts practical and theoretical, which was usually a good balance on occasions like these, only today she was distracted by the fact we were all there.

All of us.

Five Green siblings, seven Callaghans and the three Holland brothers. This was a feat that had only occurred once in the last ten years, and that had been for our Great-Grandmother's funeral in County Cork, after she'd passed at the age of one hundred and four, there or thereabouts, because no one actually knew when she'd been born. There had been several Callaghan weddings, and Lainey's, which most of us had managed to attend, but never every single one.

Until today.

And Lainey was in a cloud-like heaven about it, mixed in with a side of delusional at exactly how the next few days were going to go down. She thought everyone would manage to be well-behaved, something only Imogen would think happened, regardless of what actually did.

Already I knew that Gulliver, the youngest of our Holland cousins, had slept with two of Noah's guests, Jemima and Holly, who happened to be cousins. They'd found out, of course, but rather than be mad at Gully, they were now in some war to try and win his affections for themselves.

Gully was revelling in the attention.

I was hoping he'd fall in the nearby loch and maybe take Shay, my brother, with him. He was being an absolute tool, but then again, it was a wedding, so why would he be anything different?

"We must get a photo of all the cousins together." Lainey sat down on Imogen's bed; her dress still not properly fastened at the back. "Maybe we could plan a holiday for everyone in the summer – use Jake's yurts." Her eyes looked glassy as she daydreamed.

“Let’s talk about it after the wedding, because by that point we might be happy to not see each other again for a long while.” I prodded her to stand up and started to do the buttons on her dress, cursing Imogen for not choosing one that had a zip. “Jake might not want Shay and those three on his land when he gets to know them.”

She shrugged. “Jake won’t mind.”

“They could destroy your village.” The four of them in Lainey’s small town could have the same effect as a minor natural disaster.

She shrugged again, falling back into her dreams of a family summer. I left her to them, finishing the buttons then heading to Maven, the sister just two years older than me.

Maven was the artistic director at a theatre in London and spent most of her days wrapped up in playscripts and dreams. I’d wanted to be her when I was younger, slightly jealous of her creativity and imagination. Our family seemed to be split between the practical and academic, with five of my Callaghan cousins being solicitors, Shay a doctor, Callum a vet, and the rest being artistic and creative.

I excelled at neither. I loved art, and I wanted to be an artist when I was little, but I had no talent for it. I was dyslexic, so studying was difficult, although I managed to find strategies to make it work, however exhausting that was. My talent was for organising, so somehow, I finished a degree in the history of art and ended up as a curator for an art gallery. I enjoyed my job, but I didn’t get the same buzz I knew Lainey did from her therapy work, or Maven did when a production went live. I wished I knew what that was like.

“How was your car?”

Maven kept her voice low. Imogen had no idea what had happened and that was the way it would stay.

“Scraped. Fixable. Worse things happen.”

She smiled, using a finger to blend in the eyeshadow the make-up artist had applied. “Who went into it?”

I shrugged, unpinning one of her curls and fixing it in a way that I knew wouldn't annoy her later. "Some guest of Noah's. He was a dick."

Maven laughed. "He must've been if he's made you swear."

I rarely swore. I saved certain words for when I absolutely had nothing else, and I had nothing else for that loathsome man who seemed to not be able to care less about what he'd done to my car. I had no doubt that he was drowning in money; most of Noah's friends were wealthy, given the fact he was the son of a Lord and mixed in circles I'd only ever danced on the periphery of.

"Getting it fixed is just another thing to add to my to do list. I'll deal." It would get sorted. It always got sorted. Somehow. Probably at the expense of sleep. "Let me fix your hair."

The stylist had put Maven's hair up in a tousled knot, but I could already tell it was going to be too tight and Maven would be fidgeting with it in under an hour. Imogen wouldn't notice if I changed it.

Maven's smile was small but grateful. She wouldn't ask for it to be changed, because she wouldn't want a fuss to be made, but neither would she turn down my offer.

She took a seat on a stool in front of me and dropped her chin. I plucked out the pins and saw her shoulders relax as her hair came out, sandy blonde curls freed from their shackles. I re-pinned a couple of strands back up, twisting them first to create a style that fitted with Imogen's bohemian look, and making sure that that Maven could manage with them for a couple of hours at least.

"You should've done this as a career." She looked at me over her shoulder when I'd finished. "You're really good at it. I still need make-up artists I can rely on at the theatre."

I smiled and shook my head. This wasn't the first time she'd mentioned it but working in the theatre wasn't something I aspired to. It was Maven's passion, the late nights

and long days completely worth the buzz of opening night, and the whole process with rehearsals and seeing the cast develop her entire reason for being. I preferred art that was still. That you could study and ponder. Hence working in galleries.

“The theatre is all yours.”

She gave me a smile that didn't reach her eyes. “I've been asked to direct a play this time.”

“That's good?” Maven ran the theatre; she headed up the direction it was taking in terms of which plays would be produced, oversaw the budgets and basically ran the show. She'd directed plays before but chosen to go down the overall creative route recently. This was an interesting turn of events.

“I'll tell you more about it after the wedding.”

“Okay.” That meant it was a big thing, and she didn't want to go into it now. Not when our sister was getting married in a huge wedding, but to someone she'd never actually even slept with. “I'll wait until then.”

Any response from her was paused by a knock at the door. I headed to it before Imogen could get there, knowing she was desperate to see Noah before the ceremony. When I opened it, using my body to block as much as I could, it wasn't Noah standing there.

It was the devil in the disguise of a gorgeous grumpy man, who was dangling my car keys, and not looking in the slightest bit guilty for scraping my car.

“I thought you might need these.”

I snatched them from his hand. “Thank you for your trouble.”

His arms folded across that broad chest, dark brown eyes darkening dangerously. “Maybe take care of them in future.” He raised his brows, his eyes not leaving mine, and then walked off.

I watched his back, desperate to launch the keys hard at his head, but somehow managing to maintain a smidge of composure.

A chin pushed into my shoulder. I heard a gentle sigh, which I knew would be accompanied by a lusty look.

Whoever he was, he was Maven's type. Tall, brooding, difficult. Arrogant.

"He's the dick who scraped my car."

"He's also a viscount."

I slammed the door shut. "Come again?"

She nodded. "Ezekiel Brooksbank, Viscount Davenport."

"So born with a title and no manners. Excellent. Why do we have this ridiculous class system? No one cares." I headed towards the mirror, wanting to fix my own make-up and hair with the five minutes we had left. I dealt with all manner of nobility through the gallery. We showcased art by some of the most up and coming artists, as well as notable ones whose originals went for more money than some people made in their lifetime. The gallery auctioned pieces, sometimes collections, and the buyers had to have a fat wallet to even get on our radar. It was the epitome of extra.

Maven put a hand on my shoulder and pulled me back to her. "Cat, our sister is about to marry a man who is the son of a lord. Let's save any judgements on class and history and the aristocracy for when we're back in London, and no one is around to hear us or care what we say."

I glared at her. "Fine. But I cannot be held responsible for whatever I say to that man."

"Zeke. He has a name."

"Given to him by Satan."

"Maybe you should avoid him for the next few days." Maven patted my shoulder. "Stay clear."

"He can only hope to be that lucky!"

We walked down the aisle in front of Imogen, me with Eliza, our cousin Claire's little girl who had been desperate to be a bridesmaid, and Maven and Lainey just behind. The chapel was packed, even though *chapel* wasn't an accurate summary.

Noah's grandfather, whose castle grounds the wedding was taking place in, happened to have a 'chapel' there too, full of history and stained glass. It was a beautiful building, and I was hoping that tomorrow I could have a chance to explore.

Right now though, as I found my seat, my attention was on the bride as she walked towards her groom. Noah was dressed in a kilt, something we hadn't known about beforehand. Noah had also turned around to see Imogen as she was walking up, and I just hoped someone had taken a photograph of the expression on his face. However fake this wedding was, the look of lust combined with adoration on his face was certainly not.

I glanced across the crowd, who were all standing, watching the wedding party, and felt a thud as my eyes locked with those belonging to Zeke Brooksbank, lord of his own little world and little brain.

Eliza's hand tightened around mine, reminding me to smile, because Zeke's eyes had torn my smile from my face. Irritation sullied what really could be a handsome man, his eyes cold and his mouth without any curve. I pulled my stare away, focusing on Noah who was completely captivated by my sister, as he should be. There was an air of excitement and celebration, a buzz from the guests which helped me pluck that man from my thoughts and straight into a tidy box where he could be imprisoned, hopefully for good.

Heat

CHAPTER ONE - SIMONE

When I found out who had placed the fresh stock on the wrong shelf in the cold store, not only would hell be paid, their wages would be docked considerably. And, if they had any issue with that, they could be thankful they still had a job. If they still had one. I hadn't yet made up my mind.

Today was not a day where I would be taking prisoners. I had no space. And very little patience.

“Someone looks like she could do with a day at the spa.”

I raised my head over the counter and saw two of the women I considered to be my closest friends. However, if I was going to get a lecture on being too harsh on my employees and needing to find alternative ways to relax, I'd downgrade them to paying customers.

“I have no time for days at the spa.” I stood up, aware that I was wearing chef whites that were anything but white and my face definitely had a brown streak down it from an unknown source.

Vanessa and Sophie were looking as if they were ready for a photoshoot for London's top business women with perfect make-up and what were probably designer suits. I felt decidedly under-washed at the very least.

“What time do you finish? We're treating ourselves to lunch, shopping, cocktails and maybe more shopping seeing as Jackson has Teddy for the full day.” Vanessa beamed at me, one hand on her still softly rounded belly. The clever money said that she wasn't making any effort to lose the baby weight because it wouldn't be that long before she was accumulating more of it.

I shook my head, wondering what fresh hell I'd designed for myself by running two restaurants and being in the midst of opening a third. “I don't think I will finish today. I may as well just move in here or into Toad Hall.”

“That’s a point. Why exactly are you here? I thought you were interviewing chefs at the new place today?” Sophie Slater knew all about running a business; she owned eight spas across the capital, with one specialising solely in men’s wellbeing. I’d met her through Vanessa and we’d bonded over too much vodka and her tales of terrible one night stands – mine were sadly lacking because of, again, the whole time thing.

Plus, we had five divorces between the two of us – there was nothing like sharing good divorce stories to solidify a friendship.

“I was. But Van Gogh has phoned in sick and I can’t get in touch with Jack. We have a party of ten in at one and I’m pretty sure I’ve got a food critic coming in at some point today.” Which was never what I needed. We had a list of London’s terrible tasters pinned up in the staff room, with their names, preferences, foibles and photos. One picture was currently on the dartboard but needed replacing as it was a little too holey.

Sophie raised a brow. “You have a chef called Van Gogh?”

“Victor. You know we rarely use normal names here.”

She gave a little nod, her blonde hair coming loose. “Do we need to have the working-twenty-five-days-straight-isn’t-healthy-talk again?”

“What I need is a chef who is reliable and manages to get in to do their shifts. I knew Van Gogh was starting to get twitchy. His previous employer – Donny from Haven - told me that he did four months and then moved on elsewhere. However, I was arrogant enough to think that he’d be different here. More fucking fool me.” I knew I was walking the boundary between completely losing the plot and chef-meltdown when the cuss words came out.

“And if you were at those interviews for the Topsy Toad, you might be slaughtering two big fat birds with one stone. How many times have you tried Jack?” Vanessa sat down on one of the bar stools, picking up the lunch time menu.

Jack was one of my chefs at The Mount Street Social, probably my best chef out of the three, and possibly the most talented across both of my restaurants. He had never let me down, despite me trying to find fault for no particular reason.

“Twice. He worked last night so he might be sleeping. You two get comfy; I’ll get Rich to serve you. How’s Teddy, Van?” I couldn’t not ask about her little boy who had stolen my heart. He was three months old and as cute as peach pie with added sugar.

She gave a thoroughly satisfied smile. “He’s starting to understand the concept of sleep, which is useful. Seph babysat him last last night. We came in to find Teddy asleep on Seph’s chest and Seph desperately trying not to fall asleep. It really was cute.”

She held out her phone and showed me a picture, Seph’s sleepy eyes looking over the thick-rimmed glasses that made him look like a hot geek. Not that I was lusting after my friend’s younger brother. He was eye candy but he confided that much over food that he felt like my brother.

“I assume he’s since put that on social media?” Seph was nothing if not an attention whore.

“Indeed. I think the likes were in the tens of thousands. Jackson was calling him several names when I was leaving.” She looked at the menu. “I’m thinking a pre-shopping cocktail won’t hurt.”

“Have you stopped breastfeeding?” I knew she’d been finding it painful and difficult, having been on the end of an emotional phone call when she was telling me what a failure she was as a mother.

Vanessa nodded. “Not the easiest decision, but we were mainly on formula anyway. And he’s growing so much. I gave it my best shot.”

Sophie put a hand on her shoulder. “Stop it. We’ve had this conversation. And if you turn into a blubbering mess I will tell Jackson and you know what he’ll do.”

I smiled at Sophie. We all knew what he would do. Out of all of his brothers he was the biggest fixer and if he thought that Vanessa was still feeling down about the whole feeding thing, he'd be trying to make some huge gesture.

"I'm over it. We have a healthy son who is on the ninety-seventh centile for his height. And the rest of today is about me."

The restaurant door opened and a mountain of a man walked through it; one that I recognised by the sound of his footsteps or even the faint scent of his cologne. Working in a kitchen was intimate. You spent fourteen-hour days together in a small confined space with a ton of heat. It was pressured: food was an essential and everyone was a critic, especially on a Saturday night when the restaurant was packed and what could go wrong would.

But I could list the facts I knew about Jack Rhodes on both hands with a finger to spare.

"Do you need a lesson on how to answer your fucking phone?" I snapped as soon as he was in hearing distance.

Jack gave me his usual half-amused glance. Nothing I did or said ever pushed his buttons and I'd spent the last six months trying my best to do so.

"Sorry, Chef. I've been busy. I got your message though, so if you want me to take over I'm good to go." He started to take off his jacket, exposing biceps that his t-shirt looked to be strangling. He was built, something Sophie had not failed to notice. Hell, neither had I and I'd been dead from the waist down for the last half-decade.

"If you can, it means I can get to Toad Hall to interview the chefs." The Topsy Toad was my latest project, a tapas bar aimed at mid to high range diners, looking for an intimate, less formal experience than a high-end restaurant. The Mount Street Social and my first restaurant, Blue, were doing phenomenally, except for the odd staffing issue. Toad Hall, as we'd nicknamed it, was my baby. In my head it was going to be the sort of place where I wanted to hang out and relax, enjoy good food and drinks in a subtle and atmospheric

building. I'd taken breaks in Spain and Cuba and had checked out the eateries that were off the beaten track, finding inspiration easily.

Jack studied me, making me wish I could tell what he was thinking just for once, and then gave a subtle nod. "I got this. You sort yourself out. You might want to start with a shower."

I moved my hand up to where he'd glanced. "I think it's stock. Long story, but Ramirez is getting his pay docked."

His grin froze me. For the most of it, I ignored that fact that Jack was one of the most attractive men currently in my life. This wasn't because I had a no banging my employees policy – we worked in a kitchen; sex and food kind of hung together and at the end of many a busy shift there were shenanigans of the highest order that no one acknowledged because shit like that happened – but I didn't need any complications. Given how little I knew about Jack, I was wary. Experience had taught me well.

"I take it he's been rushing the cold store?"

"You knew?" I raised my brows so the fire leaving my nostrils didn't singe them.

Jack shrugged then folded his arms, making his biceps bulge. I was pretty sure that Sophie was gawping at this point.

"I've spoken to him twice already. He's careless and too concerned about banging his new girlfriend to do his job properly. Let me have another word."

"Why? The last two words you had clearly weren't very effective." There had been a memo in management school about how to speak to your staff but I'd missed it, mainly because I hadn't attended. No chef I'd ever worked under had taught me anything less than being blunt. There wasn't time.

Jack didn't flinch. "They were more effective than you'd think. Ramirez is good at a lot of stuff, just not organising at the end of the day. Trust me."

My back stiffened. I despised being told to trust anyone, two marriages had seen to that, plus a father who, despite

being an amazing chef and mentor, had seen me as only one thing.

“He cocks up again and he’s gone. The specials, the belly pork and David from the fish market will be later. Think about the salted cod.” I moved away from him, back towards Vanessa and Sophie and pulling off my apron that looked as if the contents of six pans had been thrown over it. Generally, I had more decorum with my chefs as we needed to work as a team, but Jack’s persistent ghosting was irritating more than it should.

“What time are you interviewing?” Sophie had just given her order to Rich.

“In about two hours. I need to look less cheffy and it might take that long.” I also smelled faintly of the fish we were serving today having already gutted and boned the salmon myself.

“Go grab a shower then have a cocktail with us. You might need something to temper you after that.” Vanessa gestured towards Jack, who was giving instructions to the other seven members of the kitchen team who were on duty. His manner was the opposite of mine: quieter, fewer words, but he commanded as much respect. I couldn’t dispute that.

“You realise you’re staring at your chef?”

I jumped as Sophie whisper in my ear, her hand clamping down on my arm.

“Jesus, you need a bell round your neck!”

“Only on a weekend. But seriously, you two have some serious sparks. I’m a tad jealous. Tapping that would be a pleasure and a half.” Sophie licked her lips, something that I found rather disturbing.

I looked at Vanessa and she shook her head. “I’m assuming she’s between fuck buddies again?” Sophie was notorious for casual relationships. She ended them easily, often leaving a pining man who would try his hardest to woo her back. It never worked. Sophie’s walls were built higher than mine.

“If you can call it between. I’m not sure what the correct phase is. But she’s right. You do have some chemistry. He looks at you like he wishes you were on the menu and I bet he has a very large appetite.”

I decided not to reply. I’d used up most of my daily words on the delivery man who was about to dump some of my produce on the doorstep at five this morning instead of waiting for me to unlock the door and yes, I had been here since that time.

The shower was blissful. Somehow I’d accumulated three days’ worth of food splatterings and grime on my chef whites and I definitely smelled like gone-off fish. It wasn’t until I got out of the kitchen and restaurant I realised what I’d subjected my friends to. Or Jack. Not that I was bothered about him – besides, he knew too well what it was like working in a kitchen.

I turned up the heat and doused my hands in a healthy dollop of Jo Malone body wash, one of my favourite indulgences. Just because I spent my days without make up and with my hair scraped back, didn’t mean that I didn’t like nice, girly things.

The Mount Street Social had an apartment above it that I usually rented out, generally to a member of staff that was in need of accommodation. At the moment it was free, my previous front of house manager having found a permanent place a few streets away that had a garden. So at the moment I could take advantage of a decent bathroom and big walk in shower rather than using the tiny staff bathroom stuffed in a cupboard. It was also handy if I was pulling a lot of consecutive hours, which in the early days I had been.

I lathered up and started to scrub. My father had drilled into me that preparing food wasn’t always the most pleasant of jobs. I’d wanted to be like Mary Berry or Nigella, making cakes and puddings and looking glamorous in the process, but

I'd ended up as a fine dining chef instead of a TV celebrity, and getting to see how the other half lived had made me glad I'd taken the former option. Both Blue and Mount Street were regularly stalked by paparazzi looking for their next fatty end of gossip. Mount Street was designed to be dark and hazy, the use of plants and walls creating natural boundaries and giving at least the illusion of privacy.

Right now though, I wasn't thinking too much about work. I'd done seven days straight between the two restaurants, sorting menus and dealing with an implosion of staff and somewhere within all of that, I'd forgotten who I was, and that I wasn't just a robot.

I rinsed off, slightly disturbed by the fact I couldn't actually remember the last time I'd washed my hair. Turning the shower off, I heard a knock at the door, a fairly insistent banging that suggested the person outside had heard most of me singing at the top of my voice.

The towel wrapped around me was short and my hair was dripping. The thought that it was a little too indecent didn't particularly bother me: whoever it was was from the restaurant and if they were interrupting my shower, they could take me as they found me.

Jack stood in the doorway, hands in his pockets, his grey t-shirt tight enough across his chest to be obscene, not that I was looking. It was that long since I'd last had sex that I was pretty convinced my vagina had healed over and was about to start eating grass. In fact, I couldn't actually remember the last time I'd seen a real life penis. I also had no idea why Jack standing outside my bathroom was making me think about the last time I'd had sex.

Oh wait, could be something to do with the fact that his eyes were dropping down every few seconds to where my boobs were attempting to escape the towel.

And he wasn't unattractive.

There were a few women, and the odd man, who came into Mount Street purely to see Jack at work. The restaurant had been tagged a few times on social media with him in a photo,

usually looking studiously at a pan or as he was carving meat. The rest of the team teased him about it, all of which he took in his stride. Jack wasn't a drama queen; he was anything but.

“Is the kitchen on fire?” My favourite language was snark.

He shook his head. “I tried your mobile but you were obviously rinsing off the smell of rotten fish. We've a request for a closed restaurant three weeks on Saturday. Booking for twenty but they want the whole place.”

That meant royalty, either the crown type or Hollywood. “Who is it?”

He shrugged. “It's PA to a PA, probably to another PA. If we accept the booking and cancel other reservations then we'll get more details, but they're prepared to pay a huge deposit.”

These things had happened before. Just not when I was wearing only a towel.

Jack's blue eyes bored into me. “We have a full restaurant that night.”

I shook my head. It didn't do us any favours to cancel for a celebrity who would no doubt be in the press the following day. “Offer them a date when we're not booked and see what they say. You want me to do it?” I was a shit delegator.

He smiled at me. “I think I can handle it. I do have some people skills. Not ones that extend to not staring at a semi-naked woman. Sorry.” He pushed a hand through his hair and I realised that this was the first time I'd see Jack look anything other than perfectly managed.

I shrugged, holding the towel at the sides. Working in a kitchen meant that you were close. In the heat of a Saturday night when the restaurant was packed and you were chasing your tail, you banged into each other. Body parts would be nudged, touched by accident, brushed against and you barely noticed. It wasn't about the touch, it was about the food and that was far more important.

The kitchen in Mount Street was in the restaurant. Diners could watch us cook, see their meal prepared. You were the entertainment. There had been occasions when both my boobs

had ended up briefly in someone's hands and no mention of it was made. We were a performance, unscripted, but polished.

“I'll let you off. I figured you'd help it if you could.”

He laughed and turned away. “I'll get back on the phone to the PA. My bet is that they'll reschedule. You should check out the review from last Thursday's critic. It fucking glows.”

If the review didn't, something else was currently glowing. My cheeks. For some reason, Jack had made them feel hotter than the shower.

About the Author

Annie Dyer enjoys her alarm to be off, her books to be steamy, and her gin to be dry. Her stories are set in the UK and filled with more heat than an English summer. She writes about strong women and the men who are men enough to make them happy! Her books are made to binge read, and guarantee a happily ever after. Annie lives in Manchester, England with her husband and pets, in a Victorian house with leopard print carpet!



Also by Annie Dyer

In Suggested Reading order (can be read as stand-alones)

Engagement Rate

What happens when a hook up leaves you hooked? Jackson Callaghan is the broody workaholic who isn't looking for love until he meets his new marketing executive? Meet the Callaghans in this first-in-series, steamy office romance.

White Knight

If you're in the mood for a second chance romance with an older brother's best friend twist, then look no further. Claire Callaghan guards her heart as well as her secrets, but Killian O'Hara may just be the man to take her heart for himself.

Compromising Agreements

Grumpy, bossy Maxwell Callaghan meets his match in this steamy enemies-lovers story. Mistaking Victoria Davies as being a quiet secretary is only Max's first mistake, but can she be the one to make this brooding Callaghan brother smile?

Between Cases

*Could there be anything better than a book boyfriend who owns a bookstore? Payton Callaghan isn't sure; although giving up relationships when she might've just met *The One* is a dilemma she's facing in *BETWEEN CASES*, a meet-cute that'll have you swooning over Owen Anders.*

Changing Spaces

Love a best friend's younger sister romance? Meet Eli, partner in the Callaghan Green law firm and Ava's Callaghan's steamy one-night stand that she just can't seem to keep as just one night. Independent, strong-willed and intelligent, can Eli be the man Ava wants?

Heat

*Feeling hungry? Get a taste of this single dad, hot chef romance in *HEAT*. Simone Wood is a restaurant owner who loves to dance, she's just never found the right partner until her head chef Jack starts to teach her his rhythm. Problem is, someone's not happy with Simone, and their dance could be over before they've learned the steps.*

Mythical Creatures

The enigmatic Callum Callaghan heads to Africa with the only woman who came close to taming his heart, in this steamy second-chance romance. Contains a beautifully broken alpha and some divinely gorgeous scenery in this tale that will make you both cry and laugh. HEA guaranteed.

Melted Hearts

Hot rock star? Enemies to lovers? Fake engagement? All of these ingredients are in this Callaghan Green novel. Sophie Slater is a businesswoman through and through but makes a pact with the devil – also known as Liam Rossi, newly retired Rockstar – to get the property she wants - one that just happens to be in Iceland. Northern lights, a Callaghan bachelor party, and a quickly picked engagement ring are key notes in this hot springs heated romance.

Evergreen

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without any presents, and that's what's going to happen if Seph Callaghan doesn't get his act together. The Callaghan clan are together for Christmas, along with a positive pregnancy test from someone and several more surprises!

[The Partnership](#)

Seph Callaghan finally gets his HEA in this office romance. Babies, exes and a whole lot of smoulder!

The Green Family Series

[The Wedding Agreement](#)

Imogen Green doesn't do anything without thinking it through, and that includes offering to marry her old - very attractive - school friend, Noah Soames, who needs a wedding. The only problem is, their fauxmance might not be so fake, after all...

[The Atelier Assignment](#)

Dealing with musty paintings is Catrin Green's job. Dealing with a hot Lord who happens to be grumpy AF isn't. But that's what she's stuck with for three months. Zeke's daughter is the only light in her days, until she finds a way to make Zeke smile. Only this wasn't part of the assignment.

[The Romance Rehearsal](#)

Maven Green has managed to avoid her childhood sweetheart for more than a decade, but now he's cast as her leading man in the play she's directing. Anthony was the boy who had all her firsts; will he be her last as well?

[The Imperfect Proposal](#)

Shay Green doesn't expect his new colleague to walk in on him when he's mid-kiss in a stockroom. He also doesn't expect his new colleague to be his wife. The wife he married over a decade ago in Vegas and hasn't seen since

Puffin Bay

[Puffin Bay](#)

Amelie started a new life on a small Welsh island, finding peace and new beginnings. What wasn't in the plan was the man buying the building over the road. She was used to dealing with arrogant tourists, but this city boy was enough to have her want to put her hands around his neck, on his chest, and maybe somewhere else too...

[Wild Tides](#)

Being a runaway bride and escaping her wedding wasn't what Fleur intended when she said yes to the dress. That dress is now sodden in the water of the Menai Strait and she needs saving - by none other than lighthouse keeper Thane. She needs a man to get under to get over the one she left at the altar - but that might come with a little surprise in a few months time...

[Lovers Heights](#)

Serious gin distiller Finn Holland needs a distraction from what he's trying to leave behind in the city. That distraction comes in the form of Ruby, who's moved to the island to escape drama of her own. Neither planned on a fake relationship, especially one that led to a marriage that might not be that fake at all...

[Sapphire Shores](#)

[Breeze Bridge](#)

Manchester Athletic FC

Penalty Kiss

Manchester Athletic's bad boy needs taming, else his football career could be on the line. Pitched with women's football's role model pin up, he has pre-season to sort out his game - on and off the field.

Hollywood Ball

One night. It didn't matter who she was, or who he was, because tomorrow they'd both go back to their lives. Only hers wasn't that ordinary.

What she didn't know, was neither was his.

Heart Keeper

Single dad. Recent widow. Star goal keeper.

Manchester Athletic's physio should keep her hands to herself outside of her treatment room, but that's proving tough. What else is tough is finding two lines on that pregnancy test...

Target Man

Jesse Sullivan is Manchester Athletic's Captain Marvel. He keeps his private life handcuffed to his bed, locked behind a non-disclosure agreement. Jesse doesn't do relationships – not until he meets his teammate's – and best friend's – sister.

Red Heart Card

It's tough being talented and from a footballing legacy, every move you make is under scrutiny. Jude has always been the spoilt baby of the team, which is why he needs to keep what he's up to in private, under wraps.

Maynards of Severton

Sleighed

Have a change of scenery and take a trip to a small town. Visit Severton, in Sleighed; this friends-to-lovers romantic suspense will capture your heart as much as Sorrell Slater steals Zack Maynard's.

Stirred

If enemies-to-lovers is your manna, then you'll want to stay in Severton for Stirred. Keren Leigh and Scott Maynard have been at daggers drawn for years, until their one-night ceasefire changes the course of their lives forever.

Smoldered

Want to be saved by a hot firefighter? Rayah Maynard's lusted over Jonny Graham ever since she came back to town. Jonny's prioritised his three children over his own love life since his wife died, but now Rayah's teaching more than just his daughter – she's teaching him just how hot their flames can burn.

Shaken

Abby Walker doesn't exist. Hiding from a gang she suspects is involved in the disappearance of her sister, Severton is where she's taken refuge. Along with her secrets, she's hiding her huge crush on local cop, Alex Maynard. But she isn't the only one with secrets. Alex can keep her safe, but can he also take care of her heart?

Sweetened

Enemies? Friends? Could be lovers? All Jake Maynard knows is that Lainey Green is driving him mad, and he really doesn't like that she managed to buy the farm he coveted from under his nose. All's fair in love and war, until events in Severton take a sinister turn.

Standalone Romance

[Love Rises](#)

Two broken souls, one hot summer. Anya returns to her childhood island home after experiencing a painful loss. Gabe escapes to the same place, needing to leave his life behind, drowning in guilt. Neither are planning on meeting the other, but when they do, from their grief, love rises. Only can it be more than a summer long?

[Bartender](#)

The White Island, home of hedonism, heat and holidays. Jameson returns to her family's holiday home on Ibiza, but doesn't expect to be charmed by a bartender, a man with an agenda other than just seduction.

Tarnished Crowns Trilogy

Lovers. Liars. Traitors. Thieves. We were all of these. Political intrigue, suspense and seduction mingle together in this intricate and steamy royal romance trilogy.

[Chandelier](#)

[Grenade](#)

[Emeralds](#)

Crime Fiction

[We Were Never Alone](#)

[How Far Away the Stars \(Novella\)](#)