

PITTSBURGH TITANS

DRAKE

The league betrayed him but now he's back.

Pittsburgh Titans' Plan Crashes Killing All on Board

It's a devastating story from International Airport... plane for the Titan... landing. Wednesday reports are citing... in the landing gear... the plane to drop to... chartered Airbus 3... somersaulted on... bursting into flame... described it as "an... unimaginable tragedy... The Titans were... following a 3-2... Columbus Hawk... earning another... Titans were en... playoffs for the... row and clinch



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SAWYER BENNETT

DRAKE
PITTSBURGH TITANS

By
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Kindle Edition

Published by Big Dog Books

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About the Author

CHAPTER 1

Brienne

IN ALL MY years of advocacy in boardrooms, or getting pleased I've never implored anyone for anything. I might have said please if I was warranted for politeness or because it turned on my lover, but I've needed something so bad and so far out of reach that I had to beg for it.

I know how to distinguish between wants and needs, and I ignore wants because I'm strong.

If it's a need, I know how to bargain my way to success because I'm smart.

But right now, I'm desperate, and negotiations aren't working.

Setting aside the acquisition proposal because I can't concentrate, I glance up for an appreciative look at the verdant grasses and summertime sky punctuated by the corn and soybean crops of southeastern Minnesota.

It took us roughly an hour to get here from the Minneapolis airport, but I barely noticed, as I had work to do.

"About five more minutes," the driver says as we get closer to the town of Red Wing.

"Thank you," I reply, letting my gaze wander over the scenery.

The Town Car my assistant scheduled isn't a luxury but a necessity. True, I don't have a driver's license, but I use a driver purely because I never have enough time in the day to do all I have to do, and thus I work with what I can. There's not a time when I don't have something major pressing. Outside of the four to five hours of sleep I get a night, I'm pretty much glued to the grindstone. I never had enough hours in the day to meet my obligations before the Titans' plane crashed, and now the responsibility of team ownership has stretched me thinner than ever. God for our general manager, Callum Derringer, who's patiently guided me through the pains of learning how to be a good owner for this hockey team.

I really should use these remaining five minutes to get through the

the contract to purchase a small-town bank chain based out of Altoona. As the CEO of Norcross Holdings, the board will look to me for guidance on this matter. Is this a good deal or should we leave it alone? It's only dozens of major decisions I have to facilitate for my family's empire.

Although *family* isn't quite the right word.

It's been my empire since my father died two years ago and my mother died in the crash a little over five months ago. I'm the designated heir left to lead our dynasty. It's a multibillion-dollar legacy stemming from investments dating back to the early 1800s in coal, steel, oil, and real estate. Modern times led my family to establish Norcross Bank, which is a national institution, and of course, we own the Pittsburgh Titans.

There are aunts and uncles and cousins galore, but none are qualified to sit in the CEO chair. My father groomed me to run Norcross Holdings. My brother Adam really only cared about cultivating the Titans' hockey franchise. Family members sit on the board and hold positions throughout the majority of companies that fall under the main umbrella, but I'm the one who manage it all.

A pang of longing hits for Adam, followed by the cold hollowing ache in my chest that I've truthfully recognized as loneliness. While I am never truly alone—surrounded by business peers, acquaintances, some I'd call casual friends—I'm lonelier than anyone could imagine.

Adam and I were close and losing him sliced deep. He was the rock, the steady shoulder I could always rest a weary head on. He was kind, generous to a fault, and the kind of man who was going to make a woman incredibly happy one day. He wanted nothing more than to find a future Mrs. Adam Norcross and have lots of kids.

It makes me sad he never found that before he died.

While Adam was a hard worker and put his heart and soul into the company, he was always able to disconnect at day's end. It's why I know he would have made an amazing father and devoted husband, because kids and family would have been his priority.

Thank you. Not me.

It's virtually impossible for me to settle, and I have way too many responsibilities to take on anything else. I'm away from home by five every morning to hit the gym, and I'm in the office by seven. From there, it's nonstop work, which often blows right through lunch and ends u

ona. As business dinner of some sort. When I get home, it's more work while on this bed with my laptop propped on a pillow, and if I'm lucky, I can squeeze one of fifteen minutes of pleasure reading. Usually, I fall asleep with my head perched on my nose and my digital reader sliding to the floor.

I repeat this seven days a week, and I haven't had a vacation in a long time. While I'll indulge in the occasional massage to alleviate knots in my neck and shoulders and neck from stress and long workdays, the only other person I know of who has is Clay Bessel. He's a brilliant neurosurgeon who is as busy and successful as I am. We are friends with benefits. Sometimes that means he'll be in town now at a charity gala, and sometimes it means he'll fuck my brains out when our schedules align.

I'd like to say we're good together, but we're not really together. Just like most of the people who serve a particular purpose and happen to like each other, we're just a team, a company when we can fit it in.

My phone dings, nabbing my attention from a large dairy farm where I manage. It's Callum. *Just got off the phone with Coen Highsmith. He's coming back. He'd like to talk to you though.*

I exhale harshly, relief slumping my shoulders. Coen is an older member of the Titans and wasn't on the plane when it went down—his friend sidelined with the flu and therefore didn't travel with the team.

One of the Lucky Three.

While I was successful in putting together a team to get right back on the ice, Coen wasn't part of that success. He was mired in darkness—my guess some survivor's guilt—and repetitively sabotaged his career with horrible mistakes.

It cost him the season after he was suspended for attacking a referee. When I last saw him in April, he'd told me he was quitting hockey. It's been a while, but it's still heavy on my mind how we could get him turned around. Whatever did happen, I'm eternally grateful.

I shoot Callum a quick reply. *Best news I've heard in a while. Fingers crossed for you. I'll call him later.*

Callum gives me a thumbs-up emoji, and I drop my phone on the seat.

The car slows and the driver hangs a left into the entrance of a neighborhood called Shadow Creek Estates.

Estate might be a bit of a stretch for the homes in here—they cluster in a

I lie in more than two to three thousand square feet and don't appear to be much weaker in a few years old, if the young trees dotting the yards and border glass sidewalks are any indication. It's a beautiful community, though landscaping is neatly manicured with pretty flower beds and ornamental plants on every corner.

In my mind, I wonder if coming here was a mistake. This could end up being a colossal waste of my time, but I'm not one who easily gives up.

I driven This is an absolute last-ditch effort.

My date The driver hangs another left and proceeds down a street with a different sign. He follows it until the roadway stops and a cornfield starts. On the left is a lovely craftsman home in dark gray with white trim and robust two wooden beams along the veranda porch. Both doors on the double-car garage are closed, but a large motorcycle sits in the driveway.

"No need to get out," I tell the driver. "If you can just wait here for me to pass."

"Yes, ma'am," he replies as I open the door. Stepping out, I smooth down the jacket of the pantsuit I'd chosen to wear in today. It's ice-blue with a mandarin collar and slim pants of the original shade that come just above my ankle. My cream-colored Stuart Weitzman pumps are four inches, and some would consider them hazardous to work in.

But I can run in these things, plus I like that the heel gives my five-foot height a boost. It provides a benefit when working in a male-dominated environment to be seen as strong, and sometimes that's merely the illusion of being tall.

The motorcycle is a Harley, or so says the logo on the gas tank. I'm wondering if he has a visitor and if I'm intruding.

It's been Not that it would stop me. I'm on a mission that's incredibly important to me, I'm the future of the Titans' hockey team.

I start up the sidewalk, my heels clicking on the sun-warmed concrete. I'll have to make it no more than three steps before the front door opens and McGinn walks out.

leather Physically imposing at a whopping six six, no man has a right to be so dangerous and sinfully sexy at the same time. I'm usually into clean-cut, freshly-shaven men. Clay has perfectly styled hair, ageless skin due to his religious use of vanity products, and the lean body of a runner. His hands aren't perfectly manicured and dexterous since he operates on brains and nerves for a living.

ore than Drake McGinn looks like he just stepped off the stage of a dive b
ing theplaying heavy metal all night. He's covered in tattoos, and his beard
h. The neatly trimmed, is thick and not just a few days away from a razor. Hi
te lighthair is carelessly pulled back into a ponytail a few inches in lengt
unbound, my guess is it would fall just to his shoulders. Strand
being loosened from the binding, framing a face that's near perfect with a
jawline, sensuous lips, and blue eyes that look like glacial ice as the s
them.

ead-end And those shoulders. They're a broad, solid mass to his large fra
he right in the net, he's as light as a feather on his skates and as limber as a
ugh-cut ballerina. His size makes it incredibly difficult to sneak a puck past h
garage his agility and speed mean that any tiny hole he might leave unco
be shut off with ease.

me." He's an exceptional athlete, or so I've discovered as I learn mo
more about this sport.

o travel It's confounding to me that while I prefer my men in expensive s
e same just naked, I have to admit his well-worn jeans, fitted gray T-shirt, and
itzman's biker boots complete a package that would have most women fallin
all day. feet.

e-seven I'm not most women, however.

ninated His gaze lands on me, and his mouth parts in surprise before flate
ision of disdain. He barely spares me a glance before heading straight
motorcycle, although he mutters as he passes by, "What are you doing
nk. I'm "I'd like to talk," I reply as I follow him.

"If it's about the repetitive offers you keep throwing my way, the
rtant to is still no."

Yes, Callum has been working with Drake's agent to get him back
crete. Itable, but he's proved to be a very frustrating man. He simply doesn't
Drake play for us, and that makes negotiations incredibly difficult.

"I'd still like to be heard," I say as I watch him open a saddlebag
look so side of the bike. He does nothing more than riffle through it before b
ean-cut, it closed again.

e to his "Don't have time," he says, lifting the helmet from where it hang
nds are strap on the handlebar. "Have to be somewhere."

l spinal "Where?" I ask, moving closer to him. "Maybe I could meet yo
Take you to dinner?"

ar after Drake swings a long leg over the bike and sits. His jeans pull tight
l, whilehis thighs, and I force myself to look upward. He dons his helmet and
s blondthe chin strap. "I'm going down the road to have a beer."

h. Left I bite my tongue because that's not somewhere important. Not w
ls haveowner of a hockey team has flown in to meet with you.

strong Reaching out, I put my hand on his arm, and damn... those muscle
sun hitswarm, tattooed skin are way too appealing. "Give me five minutes."

"Not interested."

me, but Straightening the bike, he flips the kickstand back, and I notic
a primaagain how his hot-as-hell straddle over the beast of a machine tight
im, andjeans across his pelvis. I can't help but look.

red can When my eyes slide up, he's staring at me intently, and I'm powe
look away.

ore and His eyes narrow slightly, but there's an underlying current of sor
hellish within those cold depths. "You're checking me out."

suits, or My hand falls away from his arm, and I step back. "I'm not."

l heavy "You are." He leans forward, props an elbow on the handleb
g at hischecks out my body with agonizing slowness. "You're not very subtl
it either. You know, if you want to try to work out a deal with me, ma
could go inside and negotiate further."

ning in The offer is crude, and God help me, causes my skin to flush. I
to hishere on business. "Sorry, but I'll pass. I have a boy toy at home if I
here?" scratch an itch."

Drake's head falls back and he laughs. His teeth are perfect, gl
answerwhite. "A boy toy to scratch an itch? Jesus, lady, that's pathetic."

"What?" I exclaim, because it's not that he insulted Clay, b
k to theinsulted my way of being.

want to An empowered woman who has sex when and how she wants it.

Also... he just called me *lady*, which is beyond disrespectful.

g on the "I'm not a boy, and I'm not a toy," he says with a smirk. "I'm
ucklingleagues, and I don't scratch itches. I create them, then soothe ther
create them all over again. I'm the type of man who would make you t

s by its I blink at him, stunned he's talking to me so brashly, but I'm
enough to know he's doing it on purpose to get a rise out of me.

u after. His mouth curls into a wry grin. "Kind of like the way you're here
beg me to be your goalie."

t across I'm absolutely speechless, and his smile peels back into a delighte
adjuststhat he's rendered me so.

Drake starts the engine and it bellows, filling the air with such a g
hen theburst of noise, I scramble backward.

Without another glance at me, he backs the bike out of the drive
s underemits a deafening roar as he pulls away.

I'm only befuddled for a moment when my business acumen k
He's not the first difficult man I've dealt with when trying to make
e onceand he won't be the last.

ens his He doesn't intimidate me in the slightest, and now that I know w
dealing with, I will change tactics.

rless to Like I said, I can run in these heels, and I do so now, flinging mys
the back seat of the Town Car. "Follow that motorcycle."

nething "Yes, ma'am," the driver says, and we take off.

Drake doesn't speed but seems to like a leisurely pace throu
countryside. As such, it's not long before we catch up to him, and I s
ar, andin the distance, pulling off the road.

e about When we pull up, I take in the low-slung, cinder block buildin
ybe wepeeling white paint. A dilapidated, crooked sign reads Duke's Bar, :

exactly the kind of place I'd expect Drake to hang out. He's already
But I'mhelmet propped on his seat, another dozen bikes lined up in the parking

need to "Do you want me to stop?" My driver is dubious, and I am too.

"Yes, please."

eaming It's with head held high that I step inside the bar, and it takes
seconds for my eyes to adjust to the dimness. There are no windows,
ut he'swalls are covered with dark paneling. The only illumination is from
beer signs and lights over three pool tables.

There's no place on this earth I could be more out of my element.
is a dump with a sticky floor and the stale, musty smell of sweat and b

the big Every head turns my way, and a glance around the bar tells me
n, thenot be all that safe here. Grizzled-looking men with leather vests eye
eg." I'm a piece of candy.

i savvy A foreign, exotic candy, but sweet all the same.

Scantly dressed women with heavy makeup look like they want
now tome as I present a temptation they can't offer with my fine cloth
confident bearing.

and sneer No matter... I'm Brienne Norcross, and I've stared down scarier
the boardroom.

guttural I spy Drake at the end of the bar just as a young woman with a tight
and flirty smile slides a beer in front of him. She's pretty, braless
away. Evidenced by her nipples poking against the thin fabric, and I'm better
type who doesn't have one boy toy, but multiple.

icks in. Not that I think there's anything wrong with that—more power to
a deal, but I need Drake's attention right now.

I march up to the bar and take the stool next to his. He doesn't know
that I'm craning his neck to see me as he's watching me through the mirror
behind the bar.

self into The bartender looks toward me, eyebrow cocked in suspicion, as
inadvertently wandered in off the street. "Can I help you with something?"

"Yes," I say with an engaging smile. "I'll pay for his beer, and I'll
bring the glass of wine. What do you have?"

see him The woman snorts, and Drake chuckles.

"What's the joke?"

ing with "We don't have wine," she replies. "We have beer on tap and bottled
and it's bottled. We're not fancy here."

inside, My face flushes and I nod toward the taps. "Whatever he's having.

ing lot. I let it remain silent between us until the woman returns with my beer.

I give her a fifty. "Keep the change."

She ogles the green in her hand before breathing, "Thank you."

is a few When she moves away, I angle toward Drake. "Is this how you
and your days? Drinking?"

in neon "I'm having one beer." His tone is unbothered. "That's all I'll drink.

I'm driving, particularly on the bike."

Duke's "Where are your kids?"

beer. "They spend Saturdays with their grandma."

I might "Your mom?" I ask, surprised he's offering conversation.

me like "She's the only one they got," he replies irritably.

I pick up the mug and sip. The beer is awful, but I swallow. "You
other family in the area?"

to kill Drake turns to me. "Just tell me why you're here and the terms
are and offer, so I can tell you no and you can leave me in peace."

I hear it in his tone and see it in the iciness of his expression

foes in through me. His patience is gone.

“I owe you an apology. A really big apology.”

ght tank It’s true.

less, as During our first meeting in Pittsburgh when we invited him to talk
ing the something heinously offensive, and it’s not something I’m proud of.

there for us to gauge mutual interest, and I asked him about his kid
o her—knew he was a single dad, specifically how he planned to take care of

since he would be traveling so much. It was about as sexist a remark
need to could make, highly inappropriate to ask in a work setting, and I
ed wall complete dumbass.

While Drake had already come in itching for a fight because of t
if I had he’d been treated by the league in the past, it enraged him, and he’d b
ag?” told me to go fuck myself.

have a “It was an awful question,” I continue. “Completely inappropriate
had you asked me the same question, I would’ve slapped you. I can o
that you give me a little grace, as I was quite discombobulated follow
crash and didn’t know what I was doing half the time. It was wrong
er in a promise you, that’s not who I am.”

Drake doesn’t say anything but faces forward and studies his beer.

” “I think you came into that meeting angry because of the way the
eer and abandoned you. Betrayed you, really. And I think because I’m the own

I did something admittedly stupid, it was very easy to walk away from

So again, I apologize. I wanted to be a better representation of wh
I spend league could be for you. You were judged unfairly, and harshly—”

“What could you possibly know about it?” he snaps, turning my w
k when “I know the gist of what happened.”

And what happened was a travesty. His wife—well, ex-wife
accused him of gambling on his own team, and he was eventually blac
from the league. This all happened while he was recuperating from
surgery, and by the time he recovered and was ready to return, the

Wolves didn’t want him anymore. Nothing had ever been prov
ou have everyone chose to believe the worst. Even after an investigation exo
him, no one wanted to be tainted by the scandal.

of your Our goalie coach, Baden Oulett, vouches for Drake. He’s a p
friend and apparently these stories were fabricated by Drake’s ex-wif
slicing was battling for sole custody of their kids. Sole custody was a ne

because his wife was addicted to drugs.

Ultimately, the courts decided that Drake was not only a fit parent but the best parent and awarded him sole custody. The kids' mother was granted limited visitation rights. That pretty much confirmed her allegations. He was false, but no one in the league has shown interest in him since.

As I said, I'm interested, though.

We made him a good offer, but he's rightfully jaded. No one gave him the benefit of the doubt when the accusations landed, and the media was ruthless in their pursuit to shape it into a sordid story of drug abuse and gambling.

No one was interested in a single dad being set up by a vindictive vultress. By the time it died down, Drake had left the league in disappointment due to the way he was treated, and he never looked back. Until the Titans came calling, and I said some stupid things that only asked him to flip us the proverbial middle finger and retreat back to his life in the Minnesota burbs where he's raising his three boys.

"Please reconsider our offer." I push my beer aside, leaning an elbow on the bar to face him. He gives me the courtesy of his attention. "I know you're angry at what's happened to you, but what better way to get back at the league than to show everyone you're still at the top of your game, and better yet, you're on a team that believes in you one million percent. Join the Titans and win it all. Everyone who ever doubted you choke on it."

"You don't believe the allegations against me?" His expression is dubious.

"I've never, ever been one to believe rumors. I believe in things I can see and what I have proof of. Besides that, Baden vouched for you, and now—him implicitly."

He regards me before turning back to his beer. He picks it up, takes a sip, and shrugs.

"We need you, Drake. Our team could be great, but we need you, not just as a player, but as a goalie."

His laugh is mirthless. "You're scraping the bottom of the barrel. You're a solid goalie. There are a lot more secure choices out there."

"That's disappointing," I say quietly, and he glares at me. "You're as much of a cocky son of a bitch. I'd expect a man like you to know your value. You're a necessity player, and you know damn well anyone who gets you isn't scrap-

bottom of the barrel.”

but the “The offers haven’t exactly been rolling in,” he grumbles.
ed very “One offer has,” I retort. “And it’s a damn good one. We’re offer:
is weremoney commensurate with a top-tier netminder. So leave the pit;
behind. You’re being handed a chance that few get. It’s on the ta
another forty-eight hours. Then it’s gone forever.”

ive him I don’t say another word.

lia was Elegantly turning on the stool, I hop my four-inch heels down
ise andgummy floor and walk out of the bar without a backward glance.

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bottom of the barrel.”

“The offers haven’t exactly been rolling in,” he grumbles.

“One offer has,” I retort. “And it’s a damn good one. We’re offering you money commensurate with a top-tier netminder. So leave the pity party behind. You’re being handed a chance that few get. It’s on the table for another forty-eight hours. Then it’s gone forever.”

I don’t say another word.

Elegantly turning on the stool, I hop my four-inch heels down to the gummy floor and walk out of the bar without a backward glance.

CHAPTER 2

Drake

THERE ARE 2,668 billionaires in the world. The United States has followed by China with 607.

Out of the top fifty, only four are female.

Brienne Norcross is on that list, coming in at number thirteen with a net worth of 47.3 billion dollars.

I googled it for no other reason than to see how out of touch with the world she might be after her surprise visit to my house last month. There's something so intimidating about the fact that she's so rich she could buy her own company if she wanted to.

By all accounts, she's a driven businesswoman who commands the respect of some of the nation's—if not the world's—most powerful men.

That's right... men.

She's a woman in a male-dominated business sphere, and she's got a backbone of steel. She proved it by walking into that biker bar seven weeks ago and pushing her apology on me.

It's an understatement to say I didn't like it, but by the time she kicked me out the door after giving me forty-eight hours to decide, I at least respected her business savvy.

From an attraction standpoint, the woman had my attention from the moment I walked into the conference room at the Titans' arena for a meeting not long after the plane disaster.

My first thought was that she was a cold ice princess until she started trading insults and I saw a fire inside her. She's a woman who can make you want to get burned.

Not ashamed that I've had more than one dirty fantasy about her since she sat down on that bar stool and basically handed me my ass. It involves me mussing up that sleek hair she wears knotted at her nape and she goes down on me.

Crude as it may be, I know that woman would give great head. Her proclamation that she had a boy toy in Pittsburgh wasn't as laughable as it made it out to be. It means she loves sex, and as a progressive, confident woman, I bet she's fucking brilliant at it. She'd be the type who would take all she's got and wouldn't be afraid to demand the same in return.

Not that any of that matters.

I'm at her home now, getting ready to take my place with the Titans. Those dirty little thoughts need to be tucked away. Training camp starts tomorrow, but tonight Brienne is throwing a welcome-back party at her house.

Except it's not really a house but a mansion. A muted red exterior, a monstrous gabled roof, a turret, and lots of paned floor-to-ceiling windows ablaze with lights from every room. As I approach the front porch, I hear music and laughter.

A lot of hope is circling around this season, and since I've committed to this team, I'm going to let myself be hopeful too.

It took me the full forty-eight hours to decide whether to accept Brienne's offer, not because I was being stubborn and trying to piss her off, but because I truly had to think about the pros and cons. I'm raising three boys on my own. Sure, they have my mom to dote on them whenever she wants, and my sister will babysit in a pinch, but I pretty much care for them twenty-four hours a day. Having played in the league for nine years before my departure, I managed to invest millions, and now I never need to work a day in my life.

Because of that, I've had all the time for my boys that they weren't getting any attention from their drug-addict mother. Stepping back onto the ice would mean I needed to figure out what I could do in a way that kept my boys secure and feeling loved. They were everything, and my actions are taken only with the total consideration of my choices will affect them.

Ultimately, it was my sister, Kiera, who convinced me to go for it. Not only because she proclaimed she would move to Pittsburgh with me and take care of the boys, as she has the ability to work remotely. She's a confident woman, usually a aunt to Jake, Colby, and Tanner, and with her willingness to help, I'd have a lot of excuses.

Inside the party, I search for Baden. While I know other guys from the league for so long, Baden and I actually played together

ad. HerWolves before he went to Arizona. I was the primary goalie and he
ole as I backup, and we were tight. While I hated to see him go in the ex
nfidentdraft, he blossomed in Arizona and became one of the best goalies
l give it league.

Until his injury, that is.

Now he's a coach here in Pittsburgh, and we've come full circle.
tans, so we're not teammates anymore. He's technically my boss, and I'm co
p starts that.

at her A bar sits in a spacious area to the right as soon as I walk in. It'
with antique furniture and what I'm sure are priceless works of art. I
d-brickbeer and meander through the crowd.

-ceiling Some might think it would be awkward to be back in an indus
door, I totally betrayed me, but it wasn't the players who did that. It was the
of the team I played for—the Wolves—and after they released me, it
itted to owners and general managers who wouldn't even look at me.

The players never turned on me, and those who were my friends
ienne's true. Those who were merely acquaintances listened to those who kn
because and their support came my way. It was probably the only thing that k
on my sane during this last year—messages of support from players I barel
and my on other teams.

ity-four I stop and have small conversations. Some of the guys who came u
rture, I the minors approach to introduce themselves. I've got a gift for remen
my lifefaces and names, so tomorrow when I step out on the ice, I'll have
because head start on identifying my new teammates.

Someone taps me on the shoulder and I turn to see Baden wearin
rather Ifucking grin. We clasp hands but can't go so far as to clap each other
are my back in a classic bro hug as we're both clutching beers.

of how “Dude... you don't know how fucking stoked we are that you're h
says.

it, and This isn't a surprise to him. He's the first person I called after m
to help accepted the Titans' offer. Baden has kept in touch and even helped m
devoted place here in Pittsburgh over the last few weeks.

run out “You settled in?” he asks.

“Mostly. I came by myself on the bike and met the movers day
having yesterday. Kiera's coming with the boys in a few weeks. She's got
on these things settled at work.”

was the “So glad she’s going to be here to help out.”

pansion “You and me both.”

is in the Baden tips his head toward a hall. “Come downstairs. I’m in the room with the gang.”

“The gang?” Last thing I want to do is hang out with the coaches. Except administration. That’s what Baden is now, and while it’s different world with since we used to play together, I’m staying far away from any management. It’s a line I don’t cross because I’ve been brutally betrayed by those who aren’t teammates.

I grab a I may have accepted Brienne’s apology for her ill-conceived comment about my ability to care for my kids, but I don’t trust her or any try that management.

owners Baden, obviously, is the exception.

was the “The gang,” he repeats. “Gage and Stone, their girls, and mine, of

I really want you to meet Sophie. You just missed Coen and his girl stayed Tillie, but you’ll meet him tomorrow at training camp.”

ew me, “I’ve met him before. Cool dude. Assuming he got his head out kept me ass?”

y knew Baden barks with laughter. “Yeah, he did. Mainly because of Tillie a good influence. It’s new with them though, so I think that’s why they up from hang around too long.” He winks, but I don’t need the prompt. I get nbering what he’s saying.

a good I hear a woman’s voice off to the side, and my body tight recognize Brienne Norcross’s slightly husky tone and penchant for directing a big anywhere.

on the Glancing right, I see her talking to a couple I don’t recognize. Older—maybe early sixties—and I’m guessing one of them is in upper management. Or hell, maybe they’re involved in one of the other companies within her conglomerate.

y agent “Give me a minute,” I say to Baden. “I want to say hello to Brienne

e find a “Sure thing,” he says, but I’m already turning from him.

The ice princess is looking especially gorgeous tonight. Her silver hair is loose and falls only to her shoulders. I’ve wondered how much before was, given the two times I’ve seen her, it’s been sleekly knotted in the

t to get It shines like silk and softens the angles of her face.

She looks younger.

She's wearing black pants with legs so wide I mistake them for a skirt at first. The hem hangs low, and I get just a peek of a stiletto heel gamethey're as high as the damn shoes she was wearing when she visited Red Wing, she's in danger of breaking an ankle.

Admittedly, those shoes were sexy as fuck.

Her sleeveless, cream-colored blouse dips just enough for me to see a hint of cleavage. Brienne's skin isn't pale, but it's not quite tanned either. It's a creamy perfection and looks like it was made to be touched. Her jewelry adornments are small hoop earrings and a thin gold necklace with some charms of charm I can't quite make out.

The whole ensemble is classy with a touch of sexiness I hadn't expected. But maybe it's just me who's turned on by this ball-busting woman. It's a long time since I've been really turned on by someone.

I walk her way, and as I approach, the other couple fortuitously moves along. Her gaze catches me just before she starts to turn away, and she glances back at me, gracing her lush mouth. Her lipstick is a deep red, but the rest of her makeup is understated, giving her a very Gwen Stefani vibe.

"Drake," she says warmly as her hand extends outward. "I'm so glad you made it to the party. I wasn't sure when you'd be arriving in Pittsburgh." Her skin is as soft as I'd expected, but her grip is strong. I can't exactly stand people with weak handshakes, men or women.

"Got here a few days ago," I say as our hands break apart. "Nice party." She glances around. "Well, it's not like I cooked all the food. The bartenders are the true heroes here, and my assistant did most of the planning."

Lifestyles of the rich and famous. Still, I compliment her. "It's nice. They've brought everyone together for some fun before training camp."

She smiles and clasps her hands before her. "So, are you all moving home?"

"Yeah... Baden helped me find something over in North Shore, near the arena."

"Avoiding a long commute?" she inquires. "A lot of the players live outside of Pittsburgh."

"I want to be close to my kids when I'm in town," I explain. Her expression something shutters on her face. I expect it's because she asked an inappropriate question about my children in our first meeting.

Brienne clears her throat and braves on. "You have three, right?"

a long I nod, a swell of elation and love hitting me just thinking about heel. If “Jake is about to turn seven, and Colby and Tanner are five.”

l me in “Twins?” she asks in surprise.

“Double the trouble is what they say, but they’re good kids. My : bringing them in a few weeks, and she’s going to stay to help out.”

e a hint “That’s wonderful,” she exclaims and then looks to be strugglin er. It’s rare they... do they... like, are they of an age they can read? I could see er only books. Or maybe some toys. Building blocks, maybe?”

ne type “You don’t know much about kids, do you?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “A distinct lack of experience of any kind.”

pected. For some reason, this doesn’t surprise me. Brienne doesn’t g :’s been maternal vibes.

No matter. Not looking for a mom for my kids.

moves Not looking for anything, really. Unless she wants to hook up, th a smile down for that.

akeup is And even as I think that, it occurs to me I give zero fucks that sh boss. She’s the one person who could slice me from this team with a lad you of her pen. She sits on the Titans’ throne, and that’s a line no player 1.” ever think about crossing.

fucking And yet... zero fucks.

It doesn’t even make me pause as I give her a bold once-over. S arty.” her head curiously.

caterers “Where’s your boy toy?” I ask.

Her mouth parts in a surprised gasp that I’d be so impertinent, ice you shock is no more than a flicker. Something flashes in her eyes.

Challenge, I think.

d into a Brienne’s lips curve in a smile that’s both coy and sexy. “Tied bed.”

not far I can’t help but laugh because that was way too good of a comeba impressed with the speed at which she handles things and turned or ers livethought of a woman confident enough in her desires to potentially have tied to her bed at this very moment.

in, and Not that I’d ever let her tie me down. I have to be in the driver’s s ked an what happens when you’ve been badly burned before. You never g control.

You trust no one, and that includes in the bedroom.

t them. “I have to say,” she drawls as she lets her gaze run over me, “you up well.”

I’m wearing a pair of dress slacks and a button-down shirt, and sister is might prefer my jeans and T-shirts, I know how to dress for the occasion. My closet has as many fine articles of clothing as it does biker wear.

g. “So, I glance down at myself and then back up to lock eyes with her. And over it... you like the jeans better. And you sure as hell like the tattoos.”

Her eyes drop to the open collar of my shirt where my tats crawl up my collarbone. When her eyes rise to meet mine, I can see she definitely knows what she sees.

ive off But professionalism takes over. “Are you flirting with me, because it would be considered improper.”

I shake my head and lean toward her. Dropping my tone, I give her the honest truth. “I don’t flirt. I fuck, and that’s it.”

Brienne gasps, not in horror or shock, but more like a tiny exhale as her cobalt eyes darken.

I twitch I take advantage of the shock. “Boy toys flirt. That’s not me.”

should “And why do I need to know the difference?” she asks. I’m pleased my voice is huskier than usual.

My lips curve in a wicked grin. “In case you want proof of what she tipssaying.”

I watch in fascination as her eyes go from sizzling in contemplation to icing back over to the multibillionaire owner of an empire. “Not interested. Her tone is bland... dispassionate as she glances over her guests.

“Oh, you’re interested,” I say knowingly, and her eyes fly back to me. I’m most certainly flirting now.

l to my Not with Brienne but with danger, because I’m quite sure I’m violating about a dozen sexual harassment rules.

ck. I’m And still... zero fucks given.

at the Any good psychologist would tell you I’m smacking back at the establishment that betrayed me. I’m lashing out and testing my limits.

even be punishing the league, and she’s merely a representative of it.

eat. It’s You could probably say I’ve got residual issues, and I guess I’m giving them out on Brienne.

Not that I’m trying to hurt her because this woman, with her balls of steel and spine of steel, wouldn’t be hurt or offended by my assholery. She

u cleanstrong for that.

To my surprise, Brienne's teeth sink into her lower lip, as if while I'm considering something about me. I half expect her to slap me or at the very least, lay into me for my audacity.

Instead, she seems pensive.

"Admit it. Almost wistful, and it causes a tightening in my groin that baffles the fuck out of me.

But she does nothing more than tip her head with a polite smile. "I like good seeing you, Drake. I expect great things from you out on the ice."

She turns on those sexy-as-fuck heels and walks away without a glance at Drake.

I take a moment, study the curves of her ass, and tell myself I'm not messing with fire, I'm messing with dynamite.

And yeah, I think to myself, I have less than zero fucks to give about the danger that presents.

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CHAPTER 3

Drake

THE TEAM MEETING room is called The Bowl because it's shaped like a bowl. The center is circular, covered in dark, polished wood, and sits at basement level. It's the same level as the locker room, coaches' offices, therapy room, and the players' lounge. It's also the same level as the ice.

From the center of the room, rows of seating rise upward and outwards. Five rings of seating split by three staircases. Surrounding the highest ring is a walkway and railing, and on the walls are eighty-inch TVs spaced about ten feet apart around the entire circumference for us to watch game film.

I enter from the basement level, lifting my chin Baden's way. He's sitting in the front row with our new head coach, Cannon West, as well as our newest assistant coach, Gage Heyward. Gage transitioned from player to coaching staff this season, and I think it's a ballsy move. Frankly, he did so well last season, I'd have tried to keep him on the ice for one more year, but I learned at the party last night he was just done with it.

If anyone knows what it's like to just feel "done" with something, I do, so I respect his path. In addition to Gage, the team has two associate coaches: Sam Thatcher and Maurice Dupont. I met both last night, and they seem good, but you never know until you get out there. I do know that Cannon West will be good for this group. He's pretty young to be given a head coach position for a professional team, but he's apparently got a talent for connecting with people that can't be ignored. At least that's what Gage said last night.

Glancing around, I spot Coen Highsmith and Stone Dumelin sitting together. I met Stone last night, but Coen had already left by the time I arrived. We've met a few times over the years at games and such. I did so with interest as he publicly fell apart this past season, and I'm curious to see if he's gotten his shit together. He's a skilled player and could be essential to this team's success.

Sitting with Coen and Stone are three more players I met last night who were down in the minors prior to the crash, so I don't know them at all and do not remember names.

Boone Rivers is a talented center who moved up to take Coen's place last season after Coen's suspension. Boone played incredibly well, so I wait and see if those two will battle it out for that spot on the first line. The other two are the first-line defensemen, Kirill Zucker and Nolan Carrie. Again, their spots are always subject to change based on how they perform in training camp. Some new players will be added this week, and trades were made over the summer.

I know I've got a good shot at the primary goalie slot. I've got the most experience and the best record. Jesper Keane shows great promise, but his groin injury last season is slow to heal. Patrik Stenlund is too inconsistent to hold the primary slot, and I doubt at the end of training camp he'll even be a secondary. I saw Kace Elliott was invited as a goalie prospect, and he's sitting on the bench, good, but not as good as me. I'll still need to earn any spot I get.

I trot up to the third row and plop down next to Stone. The seats are wide and comfortable to accommodate our frames and covered in buttery-soft leather. Each seat has a flip table that can be positioned across the lap, but we're here to take notes. This is merely a welcome meeting before the physical testing starts. That will consist of on- and off-ice drills to test our strength and endurance.

I'm not worried about it as I've worked out more since leaving the team than I did when I was in it.

"You meet everyone?" Stone asks, indicating the players sitting in the immediate vicinity.

"Yeah," I say, glancing down the line and giving the group a chin. I specifically lean forward and reach across Stone to extend my hand to him. "Good to see you back."

Coen smiles as we shake. "Good to be back."

The room falls silent, and I look down to see that Brienne and I have walked in. I expect they're here to give traditional welcome remarks, but I'm still skeptical and distrusting of management. Granted, Brienne is all kinds of hot today in a formfitting navy-blue dress with matching heels.

That hair is once again pulled back from her face, her lipstick cherry red.

There might have been a fantasy or two of ways in which I could have

ght. All the coloring on her mouth, but I'm sure I'm not the first guy to thi
ll, but I about her—only the guy who might act on an opportunity because
care if I offend anyone. No one gave two fucks about me when
osition ostracized for something I didn't do.

o we'll Brienne bypasses the podium off to the side and steps to the middl
ne. The floor with Callum at her side. She turns slowly to look at everyone an
r. out her arms. "Welcome, gentlemen. It's our first day of training camp
w they can feel the energy in this room. I know you're all excited to get sta
k since I'll keep my comments brief.

"First, let me just commend the returning players once again
re most amazing effort last year. Rebuilding this team and carrying on Adam
, but has been the hardest thing I've ever done. It's also been the most rew
stent to so thank you for that."

en have Unexpectedly, the room erupts into thunderous applause. I look ar
s damn surprise and join in. I wasn't part of last year, but it's apparent the
have tremendous respect for Brienne. She had no experience and
are big better than anyone expected.

leather. Hell, she got me here, didn't she?

e're not Brienne blushes, and it's a nice look on her. She waves her har
ologically laughs. "Okay, no more of that. I appreciate it, but time's ticking. Tl
gth and other thing I wanted to say is that we have a fresh slate, and not
holding us back. I'm incredibly proud that we've brought Cannon We
league head coach, and with such a diverse and talented roster here at camp,
see that we have any barriers to prevent us from excelling in this lea
g in the other words... the sky's the limit, gentlemen. Let's all aim high, okay?

Even though she asked us not to, another round of applause bre
n lift. I and several of the men yell and whistle their enthusiasm. Brienne grin
o Coen. does one more slow turn before exiting the room. My eyes are pinned
as she leaves, and I muse long after she's gone about what type of w
takes to keep all this running.

Callum I know there's nothing she won't do, as she proved by coming
emarks, Wing to talk to me in person. While it doesn't make me trust her as fa
e look ownership and leadership go, I do respect her.

pumps. Callum Derringer speaks next, introducing Cannon West. It's a s
ed. one in this room really needs to hear, but it's fascinating all the same.

ness up He's officially the youngest coach in the league at only thirty-

nk that originally played with the Toronto Blazers and was a top-scoring left-
I don't You always wonder about the things that are more important than I
I was and to Cannon, it was his wife. She had late-stage breast cancer, and
the game to spend time with her, care for her, and watch her die. W
e of the was gone, he didn't return to playing but rather started coaching,
d holds Sweden, then in the minor leagues back in the States. He was pulled u
p, and I the Titans' own farm team, the Greenville Mudcats, and while ev
rted, so agrees it's a risk to give him such a pivotal role on this team, I haven'
a single person speak against it.

for an I met him last night at the party, and he's one of those people yo
's work help but fucking like. I'm excited to see what he can do to help th
arding, coalesce into winners.

When Callum calls him up, he's greeted by a rowdy cheer, a
ound in probably has to do with not just our excitement that he's here but l
se men almost everyone is giddy that the former coach, Matt Keller, is gone.

did far Or so we discussed last night. I was filled in on the apparent g
Gage putting him in his place when he made a disparaging remark
Jenna, and by putting him in his place, I mean he almost strangled the
ids and Another mark in the column for Brienne, I suppose. She fired K
he only the spot for the remark, and yeah, that's surprising. Most managen
hing is least in my experience, sides with the coaches over the players.

st on as It makes Brienne a continued conundrum, but one I'm not going
I don't too much thought into figuring out. She's hot in a way that should be
gue. In but she's also a distraction I don't need, not to mention she sits ac
" employer-employee line I can't cross.

aks out Well, I could, but I shouldn't.

s as she Coach West pumps his hands downward in the universal sign th
l on her *shut the hell up*, and the room silences. One voice in the back r
oman it "Remember the shit show of our first team meeting with Keller?"

No clue what that means, but I'm guessing he was an ass from day
to Red Stone leans over to me, his voice low so it doesn't carry. "The ass h
r as her to make us all stand up and share our touchy feelings. Called on
asked me how I felt about being here."

tory no I wince. "Jesus... what a douche."

Stone's brother died on that plane, and I can't imagine a dumber q
six. He anyone could ask.

winger. “Got that right,” he replies and draws back into his chair to listen.
hockey, new coach speaks.

he left “When my wife died,” Cannon says, and it’s a jolt to all of us
when she would be his first words, “I thought my life was over.”

first in He pauses, lets his words hang heavy in the air. No one so much
up from twitches a muscle.

everyone “She was only twenty-seven, and the cancer took her fast.”

’t heard A knot forms in my gut. I lost a wife, too, but it was to drug addiction
it wasn’t fast at all. Cannon West loved his wife through cancer, and
you can’t mine as long as I could through addiction. I worked harder at helping
his team free of her demons than I’d ever worked at anything in my life.

When she admitted to me in therapy that she simply loved the high
and that than anything else, I was done. I could forgive her for not loving me
because than the drugs, but I couldn’t forgive her for not loving our kids enough.

In the end, Cannon and I both lost our wives. He loved his when she
glory of and I hated mine in the end.

about And I didn’t even hate her for the lies she told about me, which ruined
guy. career. I hated her because of what she did to my boys.

eller on “My world was flipped upside down, and I couldn’t see a clear path
ment, at hockey—at least the part where I’d step foot on the ice again. It’s not
couldn’t physically do it, it’s just that I didn’t want to anymore.”

to put The knot turns into a lead ball that drops low in my abdomen. Fuck
illegal, doesn’t hit close to home—that’s exactly how I felt when the
ross abandoned me. When they chose to believe my vindictive, cheating,
out wife that I was betting on my own games, it destroyed my passion
play. The thought of strapping on my skates made me sick to my stomach.

at says Still does sometimes, but here I am. It’s my chance to give it a go
nutters, if my career can be resurrected, if my character can be redeemed.

West continues about how he pulled himself out of his depression
one. turning to coaching. “Caring for my wife while she was in hospice taught
at tried that I’m good at giving of myself. And that’s what coaching is...
me and That’s why I’m here, to give all of you every bit of wisdom—even
some say I don’t have enough at the tender age of thirty-six—to give you
energy, my strategies, my comfort when you’re down, and most importantly
question to give you your best chance at success.”

I jerk when Stone starts a slow clap next to me. It echoes through

as our room for only three beats before others join in. He stands, eyes locked on West in admiration. I follow suit along with the other players.

It appears that this opening meeting is far better than the one that I had with Keller in February.

such as



MY LEGS ARE wobbly following our on- and off-ice tests. After the meeting ended, we all headed to the locker room where our cubbies were welcome beacons. They're set in an arcing half circle rather than resting on thick gray carpeting with the Titans' logo in the center. I'd found the facilities when I first came in February (before the infamous meeting with Brienne that pissed me off so much I turned down their offer), and I'm impressed now as I was then. Norcross Holdings owns the arena, and they spared no expense.

We traded our street clothes for workout gear, followed by the first series of tests, including timed sprints, push-ups to a metronome until failure, and bike sprints. Our results were recorded, and we were ranked against other team members, although those results aren't available to us.

Next, we geared up for the ice and completed another series of tests. As a goalie and as such, my speed and stamina are judged differently, but I had to do the drills, including goal line to far blue line timed sprints, to failure, and finally a sixteen-lap endurance test for time. I kept watch of the digital clock they set up, and I was right up there with the best of them. I got into distance running this past year off the ice, and while it's not necessarily apples to apples—running to skating—my endurance is better than it's ever been.

Dressed back in jeans and a T-shirt, I head toward player parking where my bike waits for me. It's a gorgeous seventy-five degrees here in the week of September, and I intend to take a ride northeast of the city. One of my favorite pastimes, developed during my hiatus from the game, is spending the rest of the afternoon riding wherever the road takes me. My obligations with the boys never seem to allow travel too far away. I'm

Bypassing the elevator that services all levels of the arena, I head for the fire escape stairwell as the player parking lot is up just two floors

ked oneven my Jell-O legs can handle that.

“McGinn,” a voice calls out, and I look back to see Maurice Dupre had of the associate coaches. “You’re wanted in Ms. Norcross’s office.”

“Now?” I ask in irritation, and it’s not lost on me that he addresses me formally as Ms. Norcross. Many of the people here do, but not all.

“I assume so,” he says with a pointed look. “She’s the boss, after all.”

“Goddamn it,” I mutter as I turn away from the stairwell door and head to the elevators. She’s on the top level, and no way I’m climbing that far.

Stepping out into the executive offices, I’m greeted by a receptionist. “I don’t even have to give my name before she says, ‘Ms. Norcross is expecting you, Mr. McGinn. Her office is through those doors, left at the end of the hallway, and go all the way down. It’s the corner office.’”

I’m as surprised as I am grateful. “Thanks,” I say and follow her directions. I find Brienne’s office.

It’s not as big as I’d expect, but it’s hers is that I can see her through the open door. She’s sitting behind a large, masculine desk with the Pittsburgh skyline behind her, framed in the floor-to-ceiling windows. To the right is a stunning view of the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers where they form the Ohio.

Brienne’s on the phone, but her eyes lock with mine and she waves me over.

The plaque outside her door still bears her brother’s name, and I wonder why she’s left that in homage or if she’s been too busy to have it changed.

As I take a seat in a burgundy leather club chair, I take in the traditional furniture and dark colors of the artwork. I’m guessing all this is Adam’s, as it doesn’t seem to suit her taste.

Then again, her house—or rather, mansion—was filled with traditional furnishings and décor. But that didn’t jibe for me either. I peg her as a progressive, modern woman who would appreciate sleek lines and open spaces. She doesn’t seem to favor frills either. While I have no doubt that her clothing is designer, she doesn’t wear a lot of jewelry, and once again, her makeup is simple and tasteful outside of that red lipstick, which I think will be her trademark.

I settle back into the chair, prop a booted ankle on my knee, and I listen to her conversation. It has something to do with the Federal Reserve Board.

I’m lost in the first few seconds of my eavesdropping. I might not understand what she’s saying, but I do understand a woman who’s brilliant and confident.

I’d read that she has an MBA, but I have a feeling most of her

stem from firsthand experience. She was raised to run this empire without, one father would no longer be able to do so.

She wraps up the call in less than five minutes and apologizes. ‘I’m so sorry to keep you waiting.’ Standing from her chair, Brienne rounds the table and sits in the club chair next to the one I’m in. She crosses one long leg over the other, looking as comfortable in those skyscraper heels as she would in movehouse slippers. I can’t help but notice the bottom of her dress has a slit in the side, and her legs are smooth and bare.

They’d look good over my shoulders, no doubt. I don’t even think to chastise myself for my lecherous thoughts, but I’ve never since my ex went psycho, the only interest I have in women is their physical nature.

And Brienne is a woman I can’t help but be interested in.

“How was the first day of camp?” she asks with a faint smile.

“It was fine,” I reply with a frown. “But that’s not why you call me here, so why don’t you cut to the chase? I’ve got plans.”

“Right.” She nods, and the smile vanishes. “There’s an article in the *Times* about you.”

Immediately, rage builds. It’s not that I expected my return to home to be ignored, but the fact that Brienne feels the need to warn me about it in the press isn’t flattering. “And what does it say?”

“It’s more about me than you,” she replies without any rancor. “He clearly doesn’t give a fuck what people think about her, judging from the careless wave of her hand. “Questioning my business acumen in bringing down a similar one. But this won’t be the first article, and eventually reporters will be asking you about it. So I’d like to get ahead of this, set up an interview with you and a trusted journalist who—”

“No,” I growl.

She blinks. “Excuse me?”

“Not doing it.” I stand from my chair, fists involuntarily clenching. I’ve been down this road before. Brienne rises, and I’m not sure what she’s listening to my face, but I’m guessing it matches the darkness within me. She walks to the door to close it, and I’m so angry I can’t even appreciate the curve of her ass.

Turning around, she takes a few steps back toward me. “We can’t do this in the bud if we—”

hen her I stride to her, three long steps, and we're toe to toe. She backs up what I'd call fear, based on her expression, but definite wariness until I'm sobacks against the door she just closed.

he desk Despite her more than average height and the ridiculously tall he eg overstill has to tip her head back to look at me. She swallows hard and tries to hold in "Drake... we have to confront it. Otherwise, it will get worse."

ight slit "For who?" I growl, pressing my palms to the door and effectively her in. "I'm guessing you think worse for you, but that's your problem mine. I've been through this shit already, and I'm not getting sucked because into the public perception circus. Crystal told lies about me in an attempt to get custody of our kids. It was blatantly untrue, and no one should believe it. I refuse to address those allegations again. They were put long ago."

I expect her to argue—I'd never expect her to give up something I'd called me was important to her or the team—but something flickers in her eyes, a sudden awareness of how close we're standing, and I'm stunned when my eyes wander down to the base of my throat where she can see the star tattoos. Etched along each collarbone are two dates. On the right, my birthday, and on the left, Colby and Tanner's.

It means Her chest rises as I dip my head to study her studying me.

Fuck if her hand doesn't rise and come within an inch of my collar. She fingers curled to pull it down to see more. My breath freezes, and my muscles lock tight. I don't know what I'll do if she touches me, but it might be worth trying to bend her over her desk and—

Not asking Brienne's hand drops, and she ducks under my arm, sliding out of my reach and smoothing her dress. My head swivels slowly to look at her, palm pressed to the door.

We stare at each other in what seems like an intense battle of wills. I know there are a few things that could happen. I could kiss her. She could kiss me. It could be she'd get down on her knees for me if I asked, or maybe she'd let me bury my face between her legs. Every single option is acceptable. "I'll issue a press release," she finally says and retreats to her desk to handle it.

It feels like a snap of energy releases when she puts distance between us and I sigh as I straighten. That wasn't an option I'd considered, her a retreat from me.

), not in I turn slightly, see that she's picked up her phone and is flipping t
ntil shesomething. She glances up, no smile and no warmth. "That will be all
you."

els, she Fuck if it doesn't rankle me, the dismissal.

s again. I want to see challenge in her eyes, but I'm not getting it today. I g
a curt nod and walk out of her office.

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I turn slightly, see that she's picked up her phone and is flipping through something. She glances up, no smile and no warmth. "That will be all. Thank you."

Fuck if it doesn't rankle me, the dismissal.

I want to see challenge in her eyes, but I'm not getting it today. I give her a curt nod and walk out of her office.

CHAPTER 4

Brienne

DRAKE SHUTS THE door behind him, and when I hear the latch connect with a soft *snick*, I sink down into my chair with an exhale so long, my lungs fill. Tossing my phone onto the desk, I lean my head back against my chair and close my eyes.

Christ, that was intense.

I have no clue what is happening, but something comes over me when I'm in Drake's presence and I lose every bit of my innate self. Gone is the businesswoman, and in her place is a woman who's so discomfited that she almost pulls his shirt down—without permission—to look at his tattoo.

What the fuck, Brienne?

I don't understand it. I can have my pick of men. Hell, I have a good setup as one can have with Clay, and he's absolutely gorgeous.

So why am I lusting after a tattooed hockey player with a chip on his shoulder who's been pretty much an ass since our first meeting?

A tiny voice—maybe the devil sitting on my shoulder—says, *I know Drake McGinn would be a walk on the dark and disorderly side. He'll get you up, take away all your control, and you'd come out on the other side a different woman.*

That voice isn't wrong. I know a man like Drake would change me. A forbidden fruit that once tasted, would lead me to sin over and over again.

I just know it.

"It's wrong," I say out loud, because I need to put it out there in the universe with my voice. My words are clear and confident. "It's completely wrong to have a relationship with a player."

That inner voice pipes up again. *That's part of what makes it exciting, though, right?*

"Shut the fuck up," I growl at myself.

"Excuse me?"

My head jerks up, and I see Jenna standing in my open doorway. I even heard the door open I was so mired in what might be nothing more than a crush.

A crush where I feel like the unseen girl in high school who has revisions of the captain of the football team.

Yeah, that was me. I may have come from a wealthy, powerful and attended private schools, but I was not popular in high school. I was tall and gangly, flat chested, and had bad skin. Braces didn't help the picture.

The hot guys never looked my way, but I looked at them with long hair and

It's how I feel with Drake, and I'm pissed at myself. I'm thirty years old and one of the richest women in the country. I'm invited to dinners at the White House. I'm no longer gangly but graceful, I sport cup breasts, and I have a killer smile. How can a brash, tatted, long tatted, she hockey player—five years my junior, by the way—have such a pull on me when she is the picture.

"Brienne... are you okay?" Jenna asks, and I sit forward. I hadn't realized I'd laid my head back and closed my eyes again while ruminating.

"God, yes," I exclaim, offering her a smile. "Sorry... zoned out."

"Those looked like some deep thoughts."

Bad thoughts, I chastise myself. *The most wicked*.

"What can I do for you?" I ask expectantly.

"It's time for lunch," she says, frowning with worry. "With Tonya."

"Shit," I mutter, rising from my chair. I'd forgotten we're meeting one of the Titans' marketing managers. They want to roll out some merchandise, and while I normally wouldn't involve myself in the

stages of a campaign, our current VP of marketing is out on maternity leave. He's gain. "I totally forgot."

"Which is why you asked me to come get you at one p.m.," Jenna says, the frown still in place. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes," I say with a reassuring smile as I move around my desk. "I'm a little frazzled today."

She cocks a golden eyebrow at me. "Interesting that you're frazzled. Drake McGinn walked out of your office."

I shoot her an eye roll. "Please... that was just a short meeting and a press release."

"Okay," she drawls as she follows me out of my office, but I hear the

[hadn't within her tone.

ore than Glancing over my shoulder, I see her head ducked and lips upward. "What?" I demand irritably.

omantic Jenna shrugs as we walk down the hall. "Nothing. I mean, he is su I could see a woman getting a little off-kilter around him."

family "He does nothing for me." An absolute, bald-faced lie. "I like my was too little more clean-cut."

e whole "If you say so," she says.

"I say so."

ing. Although I know damn well if Jenna came into my office after work, we cracked a bottle of wine as we often do, I'd probably blab my attraction to state Drake. Jenna may be an employee of the organization, but she's been nice C-friend too. It's usually just a drink after work in my office, or a few times; we've gone out to lunch when my schedule allows, but she's the first one I've been able to actually develop a real friendship with.

realized In all my life, I've never had close female relationships, probably because I was thrust into a male-dominated world and I've had to be tough and off much of the time.

Jenna's an impossibly easy person to open up to. Kind, funny, and I know I could tell her about Drake and she wouldn't judge in the slightest.

But there's nothing going on with Drake, and there never will be.

" I tap out a quick text to Clay as we move toward the elevator. *Dinner tonight with place?*

ne new Best way to scrub Drake McGinn from my mind is to have Clay early me in bed. Of course, it's a crapshoot since fifty percent of the time I've leave. he's not, and vice versa.

I'm surprised when I get a quick text back. *Absolutely. Eight p.m.?*

replies, *That works,* I type back and exhale in relief.

There... back on track. I'll have my chef whip up something light

"Just a we'll share a drink, and then I'll let Clay fuck my brains out.

It's a good plan.

ed after



about a

THE DOORBELL RINGS, but I don't move to answer it. Daniel will handle the grinthe employee who manages most of the household affairs, and since

the term *butler*—it implies I can't open the damn door myself—I call Daniel the curledhouse manager. He's the only full-time employee for the house, and he's been here for thirteen years, so there's no way I can let him go.

perhot. Daniel also cooks for me in the evenings if I'm home because he wants me to burn down the place. I have a once-weekly cleaning service, but the men are actually, it takes them no time at all as most of the house is closed off. I ban use the master suite, my home office, and the kitchen where I'm able to make up a smoothie with no danger.

The house is a lot of square footage for just me, and I don't particularly like living here, but it's a duty. I was living in a condo downtown and decided to come back home after my father died. Someone needed to live here, and I didn't want it. He liked being in the city, too, like me.

But I was head of the family once my father breathed his last, so I made a womanological choice. There's no rule against selling this place—it's more rock than I could ever hope to use—but it is the family home, passed down through generations, so I feel obligated.

I closed It should've been Adam's one day, after he married and could fill the house with kids. Except I'm here now, and it's so empty even the tiniest sound echoes through the cavernous rooms.

My fingers fly over my keyboard as I want to finish my thoughts before I lose them. In fact, email before I lose them.

After only a few moments, Daniel steps into the office and announces, "Clay. 'Dr. Bessel has arrived.'"

I glance up as Clay sidesteps Daniel, offer him a quick smile, and I'm free, a finger that I need a minute.

"Can I get you a drink, Dr. Bessel?" Daniel asks.

"Gin and tonic," Clay replies.

"I'll take one too," I say while still typing.

Clay is patient as I finish the email, and when I hit Send, I move from my desk and into his arms.

Not for a hug, because that's not our relationship. Instead, my hand goes into his chest, and he gives me a light kiss on my cheek.

Clay Bessel would tick every box on a list a woman might write if she were building her fantasy man. Raven-black hair with piercing blue eyes, a chiseled jaw, and a strong physique. He's brilliant, accomplished, and I hate wealthy. Not Norcross wealthy, but top-notch neurosurgeons make

him my living.

nd he's He is what every woman aspires to have as a lover. Moreover women would want to land an engagement ring on her finger from someone like Clay.

ice, but "You look as lovely as ever," he says as I step back from him.

asically I sigh, pulling the pins from my chignon so my hair falls free. "I got to whiptime to shower before you came, but I had too much to do. Did you have a day off?"

icularly "I did and got in eighteen holes and shot a seventy-one."

moved "Nice," I commend. On the very rare occasion I have a Saturday or Adam Sunday free, Clay sometimes takes me out for a round of golf.

He leans in, his hand going to my hip. "If you want, we can skip the head to your room. You can take that shower, and I'd be more than happy to scrub your back."

ugh the Ordinarily, I'd take Clay up on his offer, but all I can think about were Drake standing here and how, if I'd mentioned I hadn't had a shower, he'd have picked me up, thrown me over his shoulder, and echoed me to the master bath.

He wouldn't have asked.

on this He also wouldn't have kissed my cheek in greeting but would have thrown me over backward with a sinful kiss. He wouldn't have said I was love. He would have said something dirty like, "You're so hot, I'm hard as a rock."

I try not to laugh at the comparison, because really, I know nothing holds up Drake other than he's a jerk more often than not.

Daniel returns with our drinks.

"Thank you," I say to him, cursing myself that I'm thinking about him. He's become like that phenomenon when you hear a catchy tune and can't purge it from your head. It plays on repeat.

rom the I can't stop wondering what would've happened if...

No. Time to stop.

ls press "Dinner is ready when you are, Ms. Norcross." Daniel backs out of the room, and Clay holds his glass out to me. I tap mine against his, and we sip.

e eyes, Rather, I take a small gulp.

rd, and We move out of the office and head to the formal dining room. No one eats at a great table in the breakfast nook or at the kitchen island, but Daniel likes to

formal table when I have a dinner guest. Hell, if I let him, he'd be up
; many master suite sprinkling rose petals all over the bed. He's no dummy.
Someone knows that when Clay comes to dinner, he'll end up in my bed soon af

Because... that's our routine. It's what we do and have done for
year.

wanted Clay pulls my chair out, and after I sit, he takes the adjacent chair
have the head of the table. With napkins in our lap, Daniel brings in two
plates. He sets them before us and with a flourish, removes the
domes.

Friday or "Oh, that looks fabulous," I breathe out.

Daniel smiles and gives a half bow. "Mixed greens, strawberries,
dinner and fresh poached lobster tails with a champagne vinaigrette."

More than "Perfect," Clay says.

After filling our glasses with ice water, Daniel retires to the kitchen
it is if it we're left alone.

time to "How was your day?" Clay asks as he slices into his lobster.

carried I fill his ears with all the things I handled today and he nods along
for important clarifications, and tells a joke that makes me laugh. I a

Clay's week has gone, and I'm regaled with the details of a risky pro
cedure he performed on a ten-year-old girl with a brain tumor. Of course, Clay
easily, but to boast about his technical skills in the operating room, but why sh
ck." he? Removing tumors from little girls' brains is about the most inc
g about something a human could do.

I push my empty plate forward, settle back into my chair, and I
Clay talk about his upcoming surgical schedule and that he's going
Drake, guest lecturer at Johns Hopkins next week.

and then Normally, I get lost in his words—the stories that are amazing an
that are trivial—because it takes my mind off my own mayhem. It's
know, in theory, at least, that there's someone who is as driven in their
as I am. Someone who is okay with the long workdays and the lac
t of the personal life because of it.

we both I wonder what kind of conversations would follow if Drake ar
down to a meal. Frankly, I can't even imagine such a thing. Not be
don't think he's as driven as Clay or has a lack of intellect. It's ju
rmally, seems more of an action guy.

to set a If he were here right now, there wouldn't have been a lobster sa

up in the rather we'd be tangled up in the sheets, feasting on each other.

Daniel "—don't you think?"

I blink at Clay. "I'm sorry... what?"

His eyebrows draw in over his worried gaze. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just distracted thinking about... work. What did you say?"

"I said..." He pushes out of his chair and takes my hand, drawing
His hands circle my waist, and his head tilts to kiss along my jaw. "I
we get you up into that shower, don't you think?"

I try to force myself to relax.

Clay's mouth moves to mine, his hand sliding to my ass.

"Wait," I say, pulling my head back. "Hold on a second."

His grip loosens slightly. "What's wrong?"

"I can't do this."

"Headache?" he asks sympathetically.

I remove myself fully from his embrace, shaking my head. "No, I
like that."

"Tired?"

"No. I just... I think..." I don't have the words. Because not
making sense. I can't stop thinking about Drake McGinn, but there's
in hell anything will ever transpire between us. I own the team. He's a
It would be an absolute conflict of interest.

I think.

I'm not sure since I don't make player decisions, but it's not
something I'd move on. I'd be the laughingstock of the league if I
to be involved with a player.

And on top of that, I don't think the man likes me. He's one of the
taciturn people I know.

"Bri," Clay says softly, tucking his hands in his pockets. "You want
to take a break? Because that would be okay."

"No," I say, which seems to be the only word coming out of my mouth.
I shake my head, reaching out and touching his chest, a sadness welling
inside me. "I don't want to take a break. I want to end this."

Clay's mouth parts in surprise, his head dropping to stare at his
feet... before lifting again. "Is it that you want more? A more
relationship? Because it's not something you or I ever wanted. This
relationship has worked because neither of us has time for more."

“It’s nothing like that.”

“Maybe we could talk about that,” he muses, as if the idea has merit, but he has to dig for it. “It’s not something I’d thought about doing.”

“No, Clay.” This time, I step into him, put both my hands on his chest. “I adore you. We’ve had some great times, and I don’t necessarily want to stop. Hell, I don’t have time for more. But...”

“If you say you’re not attracted to me anymore...”

“That’s not it at all. I’m completely attracted to you.”

“If it’s not that you want a deeper relationship and you’re still attracted to me, then what’s the problem?”

My skin flushes in embarrassment, but I won’t lie to him. “I’m thinking about someone else.”

Instead of irritation, relief sweeps his features. “Oh, well... I mean, nothing doesn’t think of others? There’s been a time or two Heidi Klum has joined in the bedroom, so that’s—”

I rear back in annoyance. “What? I don’t think of anyone else when we’re intimate. But you do? Heidi Klum?”

“No,” he exclaims quickly. “It’s just that guys sometimes think about other women and, well... I’m a guy, you know.”

I shake my head hard, trying to clear my thoughts. “Clay... I might be interested in another guy. Not a supermodel guy I fantasize about. Just another guy.”

“Oh,” he drawls out, and I can practically see the light bulb go on over his head.

“I’m okay if you want an open relationship,” he offers.

“I’m not.” My tone is sad as my hand slides down and slips into his pocket. “That’s not my style.”

For the first time, he seems a little angry. “Have you and he... had sex?”

“God, no,” I rush to assure him. “There’s not really even a spark between us and probably won’t ever be. But... I am thinking about him. His shoes can’t be present with you when my mind is on someone else, even if I admitted never fantasizing about him.”

There’s not much to say after that. Clay tries to mine information from me, likely because his ego’s dinged up more than anything and he w

know what type of man could drag my thoughts away from him, but I
someto engage.

ing, but It's like I told him... there's nothing between me and Drake. So r
jumped the gun ending this with Clay, or maybe Drake was merely a c
hest. "It to make me see that things with Clay have run their course. Regardles
t more.sad kiss we share when I see him to the door.

All I know is when I slip into bed after a few more hours of work,
a weight off my shoulders.

And it's a tattooed hottie with a prickly nature who I'm thinking
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know what type of man could drag my thoughts away from him, but I refuse to engage.

It's like I told him... there's nothing between me and Drake. So maybe I jumped the gun ending this with Clay, or maybe Drake was merely a catalyst to make me see that things with Clay have run their course. Regardless, it's a sad kiss we share when I see him to the door.

All I know is when I slip into bed after a few more hours of work, there's a weight off my shoulders.

And it's a tattooed hottie with a prickly nature who I'm thinking about when I close my eyes.

CHAPTER 5

Drake

MORNING IS MY favorite time of the day. I'm not groggy when I wake up, even if I had a late night. I've always been one of those people ready on whatever life throws at me, and that usually starts the minute I roll out of bed.

Sometimes it's simply getting breakfast on the table for rambunctious boys. Sometimes it's suffering a media blitz to destroy my credibility because my ex-wife is a psychopath.

Sometimes, like today, it's hitting the gym before sunrise for a workout.

The arena is deserted, but it's still a shining beacon despite the darkness. More than half the building is glass, and it glows from within. The exterior is illuminated with well-placed landscape lighting, and it comes across as welcoming, even if no one is in the building at this time.

I use my passkey to enter at street level and navigate a maze of hallways that leads to the workout facility. Six thousand square feet of exercise space runs the length of the building that faces the river. The glass is reflective, and I can't see in unless you press your face against the windows, so the players have privacy but also an amazing view over the water. Thankfully, fans don't press their faces to the window as this part of the building sits on an embankment, so even though I enter at street level, the windows are fifteen feet off the ground on the river side.

It's day four of training camp, and I've got nothing scheduled until this afternoon when the goalies will have devoted ice time with Badger, expecting a myriad of drills to help him decide what order to play us in for the preseason.

I'm humble enough to know that I'm not a shoo-in for the starting lineup, and I'll give more than a hundred and ten percent this afternoon, as I've done all training camp. It's felt fucking good to be back on the ice, and I'm

I'm not as rusty as I thought I'd be.

Since this afternoon won't be physically demanding, concentrating on finite skills than endurance, I need to get in a good workout this morning.

While the general lighting throughout the arena is always on, I'd expected the workout room to be dark when I arrived. I didn't see any other cars in the lot, yet the inside is ablaze.

As soon as I walk in, my eyes scan the area and when I see her, I take a deep breath and walk right back out again.

Goddamn Brienne Norcross is on a stair climber, her back to me. I don't recognize that shade of silvery blond anywhere, but more than anything, I recognize her bearing. Shoulders back, determination in her steps, a three-pointed aura of doggedness, even as she attacks her workout.

She's wearing a pair of black leggings that reach her ankles and a racer-back top that comes down just to her lower ribs, leaving some skin on display.

I almost leave because my traitorous body reacts to seeing her there, but not that her clothing is overtly sexy—it's what women typically wear at the gym. It's not even how fine her ass looks as she trudges up the rotating stairs.

It's that I've been thinking far too much about our encounter in the hallway three days ago when she almost tugged my shirt down to see my tats. It was a mere few seconds of our time together, and yet I can't stop the thoughts running in my head, wondering what would have happened if she'd made a move on me. "Fuck," I mutter under my breath. I glance at my watch and consider going for a run along the river, but I didn't want to do cardio today. I can't do that today. I have plenty of it this afternoon and wanted to do some lifting.

I harden my resolve and send a word of warning from my brain to my dick. I move to the warm-up bikes, situated past the stair climber. I don't want to startle Brienne. She needs to know someone's in here with her. And as I get closer, I see she's got earbuds in, so she won't hear me coming.

Swinging a wide arc so I'm not close to her when she sees me in my peripheral vision, I wait for her to notice me. She jolts slightly, her eyes widening.

I hold up my hand in a casual wave but keep walking right past her. I don't glance to see if she waves back.

The warm-up bike I choose is angled away from her as I don't want to look her way. I don't want her to think I'm even remotely interested.

I last a full five minutes on a slow cycle with high tension to warm up my legs. I nab my small duffel that holds a few towels and my water bottle. I give a casual turn her way since that's the direction I need to go to hit my expected weights.

As in the And... she's gone.

I ignore the mild pang of disappointment and head across the facility almost two TRX cages, a slew of cardio equipment, and stands of dumbbells and kettle balls.

me. I'd Once again, I'm brought up short when I see Brienne at a squat rack, loading up a barbell.

and an I watch as she puts on ten, thirty... forty pounds on each side, along with the bar, equals a hundred and twenty-five pounds. It's not a red heavy, even for a woman, but I don't know her experience.

skin on She steps up to the rack, ducks under the barbell, and raises her body until it's resting on her upper back.

ere. It's Before her hands curl around the metal, I call out, "You really need a spotter."

stairs. She doesn't even so much as flinch and definitely doesn't look nervous. Fucking earbuds.

toos. It I watch with slight nervousness as she pushes the weight off the bar, replay and steps back a few feet. She executes nearly flawless squats—ten reps, which tells me that's not an uncomfortable weight for her—before she considers the barbell again.

I'll get She steps aside for a rest and bends to grab her water bottle, and I look in her direction. Once again, I arc around so as not to startle her.

lown to When she sees me, she offers a thin smile and pulls out her earbuds, but I "Good morning."

with her, "Good morning. You should really have a spotter." Not exactly surprising, because the weight she squatted was safe, and she clearly knows what she's doing. But this lets me initiate conversation.

y, eyes In fact, I'm so confident she knows what she's doing that I fully expect her to put me in my place and tell me she doesn't need any help. Instead, I'm pleasantly surprised that she replies, "I know. But there's no one fool enough to work out with me this early."

want to She recaps her bottle and tosses it to the floor. Tucking her earbuds back in her ears, she repositions herself under the barbell.

pick up my Without asking me for help.

title and Two options: turn away and go find my own nook to lift weights,
the freedom to be her spotter without invitation.

I quickly move to the front of the rack so she sees me, holding up a
to request her to wait a second. She pulls the buds out. "What's up?"

ty, past "I'll be your spotter."

balls and "Sure. Thanks." No smile. No real indication she likes my offer, but
not turning it down. She tucks her buds into the side pocket of her le
at rack, and Christ... she's cool as a fucking cucumber.

I move behind her as she settles in again, staying close as she steps
which, from the rack. There's a mirror in front of us, and it's startling how
overly taller I am now that she's in tennis shoes rather than heels.

While I hadn't noticed before, I definitely notice as she goes into her
squat that her top is scooped, revealing a fabulous, dark valley of cleavage.

She's got amazing tits, and as I glance down at her ass when she reaches
the bottom of her squat, I have to again remind my dick to ignore the
before me.

My way. My eyes go back to the mirror to look at her reflection, and more than
slamming body, it's her face that holds my attention. She's wearing
eye makeup, but she doesn't look that different from the other times I've
seen her, except for the absence of that red lipstick. Her skin is flawless,
her eyebrows perfectly arched, and her mouth so lushly shaped, she doesn't
need the lipstick, even though I like the dirty fantasies it inspires.

I move But the things I like beyond all that are the keen intelligence and sensibility
that suffuses every line and angle within her expression.

her buds. Even with her silvery-blond hair pulled back into a messy, casual ponytail
that shimmers under the fluorescent lights, Brienne Norcross radiates
confidence and confidence.

That the When she gets to the eighth squat, she shows no sign of difficulty,

I step in just a tiny bit closer, my hands floating near her hips, but I don't
expect she should falter.

and, I'm When she finishes her tenth rep and settles the bar back on its hooks,
I say, "Good job."

She blows out a breath. "Thanks."

back in Conversation isn't free flowing, that's for sure. I don't mind, though,
enjoying the view.

Brienne ignores her water and moves to the plates on the side of the bar to add more weight.

“How much you going up?” I ask.

“Twenty.”

“That’s a good jump,” I remark as I move to the other side of the bar to grab a ten-pound plate while she does the same.

As we add the discs to our respective ends of the bar, she says, “I can do heavier, though.”

I’ve no doubt, admiring the curves of her ass and shape of her legs.

She moves back into position, and I step in behind her. Once again, my hands hover, ready to help if she needs it.

Because she jumped in weight and is on her third set, I keep my first thoughts at bay, pay attention to her stability, and watch for signs of strain. She’s clean through the first five, but on the sixth, she’s slower coming up. By the seventh, there’s a slight hesitation before she rises out of the rack. Her face screws up and a low growl emits from her chest.

Legs shaking, she starts to rise, and in my heart of hearts, I know she doesn’t need the help, but fuck if I can stop myself. I step in closer, placing my palms just above her hips, and guide her to the rack so she can see the weight.

I immediately release her, because there’s no good reason why I shouldn’t need to continue to touch her. And truth be told, if she truly needed the help, my hands would have been on the bar alleviating the weight rather than her hands. Rather than stepping away from the bar, she turns and ducks under it, facing me. It makes me back up a foot, but not much more, to give her some tailroom.

Chin lifted, her eyes bore into mine, almost with challenge.

I can’t fucking help myself. My hands go to the barbell and I cage it, and yet just like I did against her office door three days ago.

In a near perfect re-creation, her eyes drop to the collar of my T-shirt as she studies my tattoos. I watch to see what she does, half willing her to look at the cotton just above my collarbone for a better look. It would be a sign, well, I don’t know what, but it would be her crossing the line and not me.

Instead, her gaze comes back up to mine and despite the fact she’s under the bar and toward me, putting us in very close proximity, she chastises, “You didn’t need to help me on that last one. It makes me

he rack if you just wanted a touch.”

If she’s trying to scare me, she’s going to be disappointed. “Why did?”

“I’d say it’s inappropriate, given I’m your boss.” She again lifts her rack to in what I’d call defiance.

And that makes me want to push her buttons and cross every line I’m only more.

“More inappropriate than you moving in close to me right now . . . inappropriate than you almost pulling my shirt down in your office this ain, my day?”

I expect her to deny those actions were anything to do with this lustful attraction we have between us, but she admits it. “Not more inappropriate. The same.”

ing up. It feels like a victory to hear that admission. My lips curl. “So when e squat, that leave us?”

“Leaves us in the same position as before. One of us has to have some common sense.” She attempts to duck under my arm, just like she lightly other day.

in hook “Don’t,” I growl, surprised at the actual tinge of menace in my didn’t give that command any thought, but apparently, my entire being would ready for her to give up the cat-and-mouse.

elp, my She freezes, her eyes coming back to me.

r hips. “I want to test a theory.” My words feel thick in my throat as I nnder it, drop briefly to her mouth.

er some “What’s that?” she whispers.

“I’m going to touch you, and if you think it’s truly inappropriate, going to have to make me stop. You can fire me if you want. But my e her in, is . . . you won’t stop me.”

Annoyance flashes over her face. “What makes you think that?”
hirt and I pull back only slightly, just so I can bend my head to look down pull at body. I take her in, every sexy inch. “You’re breathing faster—chest n for . . . and falling—and there’s a tiny pulse jumping in your neck. Your mouth ne. parted, your eyes hazed with just enough desire that I know you’re more stepped curious where I’d touch you and what it would feel like. More than anything, she I know damn well you want to touch me, and you don’t strike me wonder hypocrite.”

I give her the opportunity to run if she wants. I won't stop her if she ducks under my arm. I won't chase either.

Brienne studies me before giving a tiny shake of her head. "No, I'm not a hypocrite."

And that, right there, is permission.

With my fingers still firmly curled around the bar behind her, I lean into her, and brush my cheek against hers. She sucks in a breath as my lips move to her ear. I drag my tongue along the shell of her ear before murmuring, "You have no idea the dirty, dirty things I want to do to you. A lesser woman would run, but I don't think you're a lesser woman." I'm not touching her anywhere, except for my beard brushing her hair, and yet I feel her entire body shudder within the space between us.

"Are you going to let me?" I ask, the words rumbling from within my chest as my lips graze her ear again.

Brienne's hands press flat to my abdomen, and my muscles leap to meet her touch. I pull back so I can look down at her.

Her blue eyes are glassy with turmoil, and her teeth are sunk into her bottom lip. The fact she's considering it and not slapping me has me on edge. If she gives me so much as an inkling that she's on board, I'm signing up to find a quick, private place to fulfill my promise to do dirty things to her.

The sound of laughter from the entrance of the workout room interrupts me, and Brienne scrambles under the bar and backs away from me until her back comes up flat against the mirrored wall.

Her chest rising and falling catches my attention, and I'm not sure if it's turned on or if it's an adrenaline burst from someone almost walking in. "Yo... Drake." I turn to see Coen and Hendrix heading our way. "You guess they're here too?"

"Always," I reply.

As they get closer, Brienne moves from behind the rack and unloads her weight from the barbell. I move to the other side and match her efforts. "Hi, guys," Brienne says cheerfully and doesn't offer any explanation as to why we're both at the squat rack.

The obvious answer is we're working out together, but it's more than a simple question.

Neither Coen nor Hendrix ask, but I doubt they would in front of Brienne. Maybe after practice and a few beers, but not now.

if she With the plates back in their rightful places, Brienne nabs her water from the floor. “Thanks for the spot, Drake.”

m not a “Sure thing.”

She lets her attention drift over all three of us. “Good luck at camp. Kick ass.”

tilt my When Brienne is gone and out of earshot, Hendrix backhairs a harshplayfully in the chest. “Dude... how’d you get so lucky as to spot her earwrong, or is that woman hot as hell?”

o do to “You’re not wrong.” No sense in denying the obvious. “And I guess both just happen to be early birds.”

er jaw, “Guess I need to get my ass out of bed earlier, then.” Hendrix “You done, man?”

hin my I shake my head. “Just getting started.”

“Then let’s get at it,” Coen says. “What are you doing?”

o at her “Upper body since we have drills with Baden this afternoon. You?” “Same.”

nto her Hendrix, Coen, and I work out for the next hour, and I enjoy getting to know them. They already have a bond as they were original teammates, two of the three who weren’t on the plane that fateful night. I can tell there’s a bit of emotional distance between them, and I interrupt, wonder what that’s about.

ntil she I know from Baden that Coen burned a lot of bridges last season what he termed an “unstoppable spiral.” But this week at camp, Coen if she’s seemed like a normal dude. He’s been affable and outgoing, but he’s been in game mode and has taken all the tests and drills seriously. “Early probably thinks he has to prove himself again, and he wouldn’t be wrong.”

That’s what training camp is about—proving ourselves fit for the upcoming year.

ads the “You guys want to get a beer tonight?” Hendrix asks as we head toward the locker rooms to shower.

ation as “I’m down,” I say, not having any other plans.

“Busy,” Coen says with a slight smile.

egs the “Hot date busy?” I hazard a guess.

“Love of my life busy,” he corrects, and it’s said with such raw feeling that Brienne doesn’t even know what to say.

Having a *love of your life* is a foreign concept, since the one I

er bottle was my soul mate turned out to be a destroyer of souls.

“When’s Tillie going back?” Hendrix asks.

“Saturday.” No mistaking the glum tone. “But she’ll be back tomorrow today after for a few days.”

“Your girlfriend doesn’t live here in Pittsburgh?” I ask.

Coen shakes his head as we enter the locker room. “She lives in Coudersport, which is about three and a half hours away. We’re still trying to figure out this long-distance thing and how it’s going to work.”

“Bummer,” I say because it seems like the polite thing to do, but I can’t connect with the emotion he’s experiencing.

After all the evil things my ex-wife did to our family when I tried to help her with her drug use, I’ve decided I’m never trusting another woman with my kids.

I’m sure as shit never going to let one get close enough to fuck with my kids’ hearts and heads the way Crystal does. I’m their protector, and my purpose in this life is to ensure they’re loved and raised well without any adult making them feel worthless. The only people I trust to do that are my sister and my mom, and I’m okay with that.

“What about you?” Coen asks Hendrix. “I heard you were in a relationship. Still, someone pretty seriously?”

Hendrix shrugs. “I wouldn’t call it serious, but it is monogamous.”

Coen clutches his heart as if in shock. “Oh no... a single professional hockey player in a monogamous relationship.”

“It happens on occasion,” Hendrix mutters. “You’re proof of that.”

“I’m beyond monogamous. I’m committed,” Coen says as we all head to the locker room. Heat our cubbies.

“I’m not ready for commitment,” Hendrix exclaims, his face paling.

Coen snickers. “Dude... monogamy is a form of commitment, whether you like it or not.”

It’s interesting listening to these guys define sexual boundaries in terms of obligation. All I know is I’m distinctly against anything that smacks of commitment.

“When did you become a relationship expert?” Hendrix asks Coen.

“Since I met Tillie,” he replies. “And when you know, you know.”

“What about you, Drake?” Hendrix turns to me. “Are you committed to anyone?”

“No fucking way.” My denial is swift and sure. “I don’t have time

and even if I did, I don't want to put in the effort. I'll gladly fuck all the bunnies you chumps with leashes around your necks don't want."

e week Hendrix snorts, and Coen shakes his head, chuckling.

As I head into the shower room, I think about Brienne. She has a lot but I wonder if she's monogamous.

ives in Not that I'm averse to sharing.

ying to Just how progressive is Ms. Norcross? Is her appetite for pleasure that she'd take more than one lover into her bed?

I can't Would she take two at the same time?

She certainly has the confidence to do so, but I have no clue to stopdirection her moral compass points.

heart. I'd like to find out, though.

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and even if I did, I don't want to put in the effort. I'll gladly fuck all the puck bunnies you chumps with leashes around your necks don't want."

Hendrix snorts, and Coen shakes his head, chuckling.

As I head into the shower room, I think about Brienne. She has a boy toy, but I wonder if she's monogamous.

Not that I'm averse to sharing.

Just how progressive is Ms. Norcross? Is her appetite for pleasure such that she'd take more than one lover into her bed?

Would she take two at the same time?

She certainly has the confidence to do so, but I have no clue which direction her moral compass points.

I'd like to find out, though.

CHAPTER 6

Brienne

“GIVE IT TO me straight.” I glance over at Callum. His arms are crossed, eyes pinned to the ice.

For a moment, he says nothing, but when he looks my way, I see a slight expression. A sizzle of excitement rushes through me. “This is a good team, mean, it’s a damn good team.”

I let out a slow breath, my gaze returning to the ice. Callum and I are watching the scrimmages underway on the last day of training camp. The rink is at the end of the tunnel that leads from the locker rooms out onto the ice.

At day’s end, the coaches will decide who stays and who goes.

They’ll have a good idea of which lines the players will land on, and which ones that’ll shake out in the preseason.

I’ve purposely avoided asking Callum this question all week, afraid to let my hopes up. It’s not just a matter of me building a team that has Stanley Cup potential, because that equals money and this organization is a big money-making business. It’s also about giving this city a team they deserve. They’ve been so loyal and dedicated following the crash, I want to reward them with the best.

“Ms. Norcross.” I turn toward my assistant, Tina. “Eddie Olmstead is ready for you.”

“Shit,” I mutter, looking down at my watch. “I totally forgot.”

I promised an interview with the local sports reporter. While I’ve done a few interviews to the national sports entertainment shows, I like giving the local guys access too.

“Want me to handle it for you?” Callum asks.

“No, I’ve got it.” I glance past Tina and see the reporter, his video camera right behind him.

Bringing forth my most welcoming smile, I move toward them and shake hands out my hand to Eddie. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Olmstead. Ma-

you Eddie?”

“Absolutely,” he gushes, accepting my handshake. He throws his arm over his shoulder. “This is Deebo, my cameraman.”

I nod at Deebo, who smiles. His camera is situated on his shoulder on a tripod in his other hand.

“Would you like to go up to my offices?” I ask.

“Actually,” Eddie says as he glances toward the ice, “mind if we sit here so we can capture the scrimmaging behind you?”

I look at the ice, my eyes drifting briefly over Drake in net. He’s an impossibly big man, but you add the pads, and he’s a giant.

Admittedly, I’m dying to know how he’s been doing, but I can’t bring myself to ask about him specifically. I’m afraid Callum will see right through me, because what he’d see is a woman who, just yesterday in the video facility, would’ve probably let Drake McGinn do anything he wanted. The memory of it makes me flush, and I force those thoughts away.

Swiveling back to Eddie, I smile brightly. “No, I don’t mind at all.” “Give us just a few minutes to set up,” he replies, and Deebo gets to work.

Callum moves off to the side so as not to get in the shot, and well-positioned perfectly a few feet from the glass, Deebo starts rolling.

I’m asked the usual questions—feelings about the crash, rebuild the fans’ team, how we got knocked out of the playoffs. I get these questions so often I’m on autopilot when I answer.

Except if anyone focuses on Adam. If I’m asked about my brother, I get almost too choked up to speak about him, but luckily Eddie doesn’t go in that direction.

“Today’s the last day of scrimmages,” Eddie says and glances at me behind me. I look back over my shoulder briefly for a fond scan of me, then back to the reporter. “What can the fans expect?”

I beam at the camera. “We’ve brought together an amazing amount of talent. Many of the players who came up to form our new team from last season, and some prime trades we made over the summer. It’s always a problem to have—it will be difficult making our cuts.”

“Do you see playoff potential?” Eddie asks.

“You saw us make the playoffs last season.” I give him a chastising look. “What do you think?”

Eddie laughs, pulling the microphone to his mouth. “I don’t think I’ve thumbagaint you at all. Now, you’ve made some bold decisions in the past year, bringing a few veterans out of retirement. Gage Heyward was pivoted out of the locker, a year, and now he’s on the coaching staff. But talk to us about Drake McGinn. He’s been off the ice for a year... does he have what it takes?”

He tips the microphone for my answer. “I’ve not been watching him as closely, and that’s a question better suited for Coach Oulett or Coach Oulett but I can tell you he was one of our acquisitions we worked hard to get. I have such faith in him.”

The low door to the ice opens behind me, and I glance back to see a line of players coming off. I’m guessing scrimmages are over.

I use this as a good escape point. I step to the side to let the players walk past us and hold my hand out to Eddie. “Thank you for the interview.”

He looks slightly peeved I’m ending it, but I gave him more than enough. I smile and move farther into the tunnel, stepping back to allow the players to pass. I hold out my fist and each player who walks by bumps it, and they all get a grin on their exhausted faces.

“Drake,” I hear Eddie’s voice, and I turn to see the big goalie coming on the ice. “Can I get a few minutes with you?”

Oh, shit.

Drake has his helmet tucked under his arm, his stick in that same spot as always. His long hair is pulled back but soaked with sweat. He’s clearly irritated, singled out by a reporter, and I personally know he wants nothing to do with the media.

I slide that way along the wall, standing right behind Deebo.

“You looked great out there,” Eddie says, holding the microphone toward his own mouth. “How are the ice legs?”

Drake wipes a hand from his forehead back and huffs out a breath. The microphone angles his way. “I feel good. Everything’s strong.”

He starts to step away but Eddie asks, “Does your return to the team signify that all the rumors regarding the betting scandal have been a good rest?”

I see Drake’s free hand curl into a fist, his expression turning thunderous, and without thought, I leap forward and into the conversation. “We have absolute faith in Drake McGinn.” Eddie is surprised to see me there at his side and has to offer me the microphone. “He’s a top

I'd betgoalie, and we're lucky to have him with us."

past by Drake takes the opportunity to join the other players walking down the last tunnel. Eddie looks crushed until he spies Coen. He's another player I can't ignore from more than just a professional angle.

"Coen," Eddie calls out. "A few words for WRKT Pittsburgh?"

I stand poised, ready to jump in to Coen's aid if he needs me, but I don't want to get in the way of the reporter a generous smile. "Sure."

I exhale my relief. Our media department does a good job handling interviews, but I didn't want any of my guys ambushed. My worry about the for naught when Coen laughs at something Eddie asks.

He's clearly got this in hand.

I turn away and run right into a wall.

A padded wall.

My eyes go up, up, up to see Drake glaring down at me. "I don't need any players to fucking defending me," he says through gritted teeth.

To my surprise, Callum is there—must have been walking along with the other players—and he steps in close to us with his voice lowered. His eyes are pinned on Drake. "Hey... how about you have a little fucking respect for your boss."

Drake turns his ire toward Callum, and the last thing I need is this volatile in front of a news camera.

I step between them, forcing Drake to look down at me. In my icy tone, I say, "If you have a problem with how I handle things for my players and this organization, then you schedule a time with my assistant to meet me privately. You do not dare chastise or speak to me that again in public. Are we clear?"

Drake McGinn is such a crapshoot when it comes to emotion. The actions, I half expect him to quit the team right there. He's so prickly about league and team authority, I'm sure it grates on him that I've got the league to put him in his place.

Instead, I get a curt nod as he growls, "Oh, I understand all right."

He storms off down the hall to the locker room.

"You okay?" Callum asks.

I roll my eyes at him. "Why wouldn't I be? I've dealt with more assholes than him before."

Callum chuckles. "I suppose you have."

Truly, a grumpy hockey player is nothing compared to some
own the greedy, manipulative, lying assholes I've dealt with across the neg
: who's stable.



ie gives

I KNOCK OUT a few errands on the way back to my office, including
; player stop to see if our new VP of operations needs anything from me.
appears second week on the job, but he seems to be acclimating well.

I have meetings at the Norcross Holdings offices this afternoon, I
going to take advantage of the next two free hours I have to re
prospectus about a new investment opportunity on the verge of going
While I use an entire team of financial advisors to help me man
eed you billions under my control, I always read every prospectus that our bo
consider. It's tedious, but it's part of the job.

I pass Tina's desk. "I'm going into DND. No calls or interruptions.
yes are Because if I get the slightest bit distracted from this prospectus, I'
ect for finish it.

"Yes, ma'am," Tina says. "Can I get you anything?"

turning "I'm good," I assure her and head into my office. As soon as the
closed, I settle back against it for stability, leaning over to take off one
heels.

est, no- I sigh as I settle that foot on the ground and hold up the
ow I do Ferragamo. "Why do I torture myself?"

with my Smiling, I drop the shoe and lean over to remove the other one. M
me like sink into the plush maroon rug, and even though it's too dark and ma
ns and for me, I'll never get rid of it because it reminds me of Adam. In fact,
y about see changing anything about this office that he used to inhabit.

right to I'm just about to push off the door when it moves.

Opens, pushing me out of the way.

I stumble forward, turn back glaring, and gasp to see Drake st
through, his expression dark and furious.

"What in the hell?" I snap.

bigger Tina's right on his heels. "I'm so sorry, Ms. Norcross. I told h
were not to be disturbed, and—"

I hold up a hand as Drake walks past me. "It's okay, Tina. I've ;

of the handled. Close the door on your way out.”

When she’s gone, I turn to Drake. He must have taken a quick
and come straight here. His wet hair is slicked back in a ponytail, a
wearing his trademark jeans and T-shirt—arms completely covered in
I’d love to study—and those heavy biker boots that should not be that

Drake’s hands hang loosely at his sides, but his fingers are curled
as if he’s waiting for an excuse to form a fist.

He’s clearly itching for a fight, and I don’t think I’m really e
problem. I’m just the face of it.

I walk toward him, keeping my tone level. “What part of me telli
to make an appointment didn’t you understand?”

He ignores my question, speaking to me through gritted teeth. “In
wasn’t clear down there, and because Derringer cut me off, I do not n
ard will to defend me with the media.”

His tone is ice, despite the fury in his eyes.

“I don’t think you need me to defend you, but I’m wondering
bothers you so much?”

Drake sneers at me. “Because you’re doing nothing more than ke
story alive. How about try the words *no comment* for a change, rath
using me to get screen time?”

How dare he!

Now I’m pissed. I move toe to toe with him and poke him in the
“You ungrateful son of a bitch. You’re pissed at the league because
stood up for you back when the allegations came out, and now you’re
because someone *is* standing up for you. You need to pick a lane and
discipline it.”

Drake lunges, and it’s so fast, I can barely take a breath befo
jerking me into his body. I open my mouth to protest, but it’s immedia
off when his mouth slams into mine.

My entire world spins like I’m caught in the power of a tumbling
try to kick for the surface before I drown, but Drake’s kiss is an ur
from which I can’t escape.

The fact my fingers curl into his T-shirt in an attempt to pull him
tells me I’d rather drown.

A slide of Drake’s tongue against mine, and a ripple of lust
through me. Our teeth clash, and his palm slides to my ass to squeeze

his lower lip, and he curses before jerking my formfitting dress up my showerbunch around my hips.

nd he's My head swirls with how fast things are moving, but it's th
tattoosexciting thing that's ever happened to me, and you couldn't pay me to
sexy. down.

inward His hand plunges down the front of my panties where he rubs a
finger through my wet folds before circling my clit. I groan from the
ven thepleasure, and my knees almost buckle when that finger slides knuck
inside me. Drake merely holds me upright with his big palm curled un
ing youass.

"You're soaked," he growls into my mouth as he withdraws his ha
case itI hear the triumph he's feeling.

eed you I gasp as he hauls me up his body. Wrapping my legs and arms
him, I hold tight as he walks me over to my desk. A small part
conscience warns me to stop this, but the turbulent surge of lust he
why itthrough my entire body feels too damn good for me to let it go.

There will be no sweeping of materials off the desk to make room
eping aa neat freak and my desk is bare except for my laptop, a landline phone
er thanwooden box on one corner where I put completed work for Tina to pic

Our kiss is only broken when Drake settles my ass on the edge
wooden top and starts to pull off my panties.

e chest. "The door," I gasp, jerking my head over my shoulder. "Lock it."

no one "No time," he says as he settles into my chair and scoots it f
e pissed"Suggest you keep it quiet."

stay in His hands spread my legs wide, and I am completely bared to h
gaze is an inferno as he takes me in before glancing up. "You might
re he'slie back for this."

tely cut I know what this is because he's staring too hungrily between my
it to be anything other than his mouth on me.

wave. I There's no hesitation. I go back on my elbows and save him the ha
idertowmoving one of my legs over his shoulder. I curl it in tight, an insister
he get on with it, and watch with eager eyes as he bends forward to p
1 closerlips to my pussy.

I bite down hard on my lip as he zeroes in on my clit. His large har
coursesmy thighs, fingers digging into me. Drake's beard tickles my skin,
e. I bitehums in pleasure against my flesh.

legs to He's a master with his tongue, and by that, I mean I'm already headfirst into what I know is going to be a shredding orgasm. He abs e mostdevours me, and I'm so turned on by the lewdness of the act—and slow itthis man is a virtual stranger, as well as a major pain in my ass—that come, I have to bite down on the heel of my hand to keep from scre skilledMy back arches and my hips undulate against his mouth, dragging on intenseripples of pleasure as he continues to work at my clit.

le deep "Enough," I hiss, not able to take any more direct contact, and mder myanything, wanting to return the favor. I need his cock in my mouth now

Drake rises from my chair—dislodging my leg from his shoulder, and reaches into his back pocket. The angles of his brow make him look and angry, and maybe he is, but I can't think about that right now as aroundhim pull a condom from his wallet.

of my He tosses it at me. "Get it out."

's sent I sit up, my legs still wantonly spread, and tear at the foil. I guess his dick isn't on the agenda right now, but this is even better. I want as I'mhim inside me.

e, and a Grumpy, enigmatic man that he is, I don't think there's any other k up. understand him.

of the I tear into the foil but get sidetracked by Drake unbuttoning his jeans. My mouth waters as he pushes them down his hips and frees himself.

It's beautiful.

orward. He's beautiful.

Drake wraps his hand around his cock—the tattoos on his arms wim. His—and strokes it, his eyes moving to me. He nods at the condom. "No want toto do your part, boss."

I ignore the nickname and pull the condom free. While he holds legs forstill, I roll it on, making sure to squeeze on the down stroke, which e grunt of approval.

issle by My entire body quivers in anticipation of having him inside me. I start to lean back. To my surprise, his hand slides to my nape, and he presses him off the desk into a standing position.

His mouth claims mine in another brutal kiss that makes me ache for his grip. It's short-lived, though, as he spins me around so I'm facing my desk and he then pushes me down onto it. My chest and stomach hit the wood, and his big hands move to my ass where he kneads the flesh.

rushing Then I feel him pressing inside me, and it's glorious.

solutely I look over my shoulder, and my breath freezes at his expression. He's twisted with need, but his eyes are softened with awe as he watches me when I disappear into my body.

reaming. Slowly he slides in, inch by agonizing inch, until I'm stuffed full and his pelvis presses against my ass.

Hands at my hips, he wastes no time setting a fast pace as he fucks me more than Greedy, deep thrusts, taking for himself the pleasure he deserves after giving me such an amazing orgasm.

er—and It feels so good and so right, despite being the filthiest, most wicked harsh I've ever done.

I watch So very fucking naughty, here in my office with a player, but yet it's just right.

Drake jerks me back a bit, only to curve over my body so he can suck his hand between my legs. His fingers hit my clit, and I practically lose my mind to feel shit.

I moan so loud that Drake's other hand clamps over my mouth, just enough room to suck in oxygen through my nose. His chest presses against my back and his teeth graze my ear. Through his staccato breaths, he moans. My with every thrust. "Love. Fucking. Your. Pussy."

I can't reply with his hand over my mouth, so I nod furiously and chuckles darkly.

"Might come up here every day and fuck you now," he says as he thrusts into me over and over again.

eed you God, what a job perk that would be.

"Has your boy toy ever done this to you? Come into your place and let himself and bent you over your desk?"

elicits a I can't answer because I'm too busy moaning from just how good he's making me feel... like never before.

), and I But no, Clay would never do this. He's too mannered, and God help me, one of the reasons I'm so attracted to Drake is because he's not mannered at all.

for him. He pretty much told me to go fuck myself at our first meeting when I asked and offered him a spot on this team, and while that was about as unprofessional as you can get, a part of me admired him for his principles.

I lose concept of time, but it doesn't feel like much has passed since

first orgasm. My second one catches me by surprise, ripped free from on. It's unholy combination of Drake's deeply powerful strokes and his himself strumming between my legs. The man's a multitasker as he manages his hand clamped over my mouth the entire time so I don't scream a of himus away.

Drake's hand moves from between my legs to my hip where he hcks me steady so he can continue to drill me. I know without a doubt he could : giving a third orgasm from me, but suddenly, he plants deep and lets out growl of release as he jerks inside me.

ig thing His breath hisses between his teeth as he settles his weight on top Not too much to crush, but enough that I feel pleasantly trapped.

t... it's Drake's hand on my mouth moves to my jaw, and he twists n where he stares at me a long moment before giving me a hard kiss—li n thrust no tongue. Pressing his forehead to mine, he says, "After the way the ose my fucked me, I never knew fucking the league could feel so good."

Fury rages through me, and I slam a hard elbow into his ribs. Dral leaving back, his spent cock slipping from me, and I whip around to face him. ses into "You asshole," I seethe as I pull my dress down. "Is that what th e grunts You getting a little something back from the league?"

Drake shrugs as he peels off the condom and tosses it in my trash and he tucks himself away, bringing his regard to me. "Does it have to be a more?"

e slams I'm so pissed I want to scream, but I have to remember where I am it doesn't have to be anything more than a fuck, but I don't want to be a means for some sick justice you think you're owed."

of work His hand shoots out and wraps around the back of my neck. Drake down, slides his nose along mine. His beard tickles my cheek. "Trust od he's no pussy is ever going to make things right with me for what the league fucked you because I wanted you, plain and simple. Just like you let r elp me, you because you wanted me too."

ered at I look around for my panties, because I don't know what to say to can't tell if it was a compliment or a put-down.

hen we Drake has completely messed with my head right along with my ional as and I don't like being out of control.

Nabbing my underwear from the floor, I slip them on and shim nce my lacy silk up my legs. Drake watches me without any shame, his

om therubbing across his lower lip in contemplation.

fingers “How about you pencil me in tomorrow around two p.m.?” His s
to keepmischievous, and I have no clue if he’s serious.

nd give “I’ll be in New York tomorrow at two.” Smoothing my dress, I pu
away from my chair and sit down in it.

olds me He steps to the side, but I ignore him as I pull my laptop to me. M
d wringis still hammering, but I don’t want him to see the residual effect he l
a feralby being in my space.

I don’t want him to know he has power at all.

of me. Without looking at him, I turn on my laptop. “This was a good ti
if you don’t mind, I have work to do.”

ly head I expect him to leave.

os only, Instead, he squats beside my chair, and I have no choice but to tv
leagueneck to look at him. It’s such an unexpected move, and now I’m curios

Drake stares at me, and I can’t figure out what he wants.

ce rears Then his hand runs up the inside of my leg, past my calf...

grazing along my inner thigh. My legs involuntarily part for him as v
is was?at each other, but he doesn’t smirk. Just watches me intently.

He drags a finger over the crotch of my panties, and my breath hitc

can. He “This was way more than just a good time,” he says gruffly, pres
nythingright where my clit still pulses with aftershocks. My legs snap shut, t

his hand but stopping further movement. He smiles. “We’ll be doi
n. “No, again, sooner rather than later.”

used as I open my mouth to argue, but close it just as quickly.

I want to do this again too.

e bends Sooner rather than later, as he said.

st me... My legs loosen, and I nod. “Until next time, then.”

ie did. I He holds my gaze, then rises, withdrawing his hand and pressing
ne fuckkiss to my temple on the way up.

“By the way,” he says as he looks down at me. “You’re going to
o that. Ifix your lipstick before you see anyone.”

“Shit,” I mutter as I reach into my desk drawer for a compac
y body,enough, my red lipstick is smeared, not only from his kisses but fr
hand clamped over my mouth. I’ll need to clean it off and reapply.

my the Drake chuckles as he walks out of my office, and when the doc
thumbbehind him, I lower my head to my desk and bang it lightly.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

smile is

ish him

y pulse
has just

me, but

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is.

knee...
ve stare

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rapping
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t. Sure
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or shuts

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER 7

Drake

I'M MINUTES AWAY from appearing in a professional hockey game. Sorry I swore I'd never do when I walked away over a year ago.

Do I have a chip on my shoulder?

More like a boulder.

I gave years to the Buffalo Wolves, years of hard work and loyalty. The second Crystal lobbed her lies that I had bet on the outcomes of games I played in, they dropped me like a hot potato.

No investigation.

No one from the organization even bothered to talk to me about the allegations.

I was recovering from knee surgery when Crystal went on the radio and told a reporter I was throwing games to win bets. She threw in allegations of domestic abuse. The Wolves used my injury to let me just fade away, claiming I wasn't stable enough to return physically, but that was a complete shit. The surgery was a success, and my rehab was smooth.

What no one knew was that Crystal was a strung-out addict who was trying to make me suffer after I cut her off. I tried to get her help. I found rehab facilities, but she'd leave after only a few days. I laid out ultimatums, tried more rehab, and fucking begged her to get help.

None of it worked, and I couldn't trust her around our kids. I made her leave and sought full custody, and in turn she tried to ruin me.

Call me a gentleman or just plain stupid, but I never played that game in the press. I could have easily gotten up on my soapbox and thrown accusations under the bus. She wouldn't have been able to withstand my allegations of drug abuse because they were truthful.

The only reason I didn't do it was because of my boys. While I still have high hopes Crystal will ever bounce back, she might one day realize she don't want this shit haunting my children. They've lost enough now that

mom is practically out of the picture.

I try to push those thoughts aside because I've got to be in game. It's the first game of the preseason, and we're playing in New York at the Phantoms.

We've already had the warm-up skate, and now we're getting last words from Coach West. The atmosphere in the locker room is electric. We're all ready to get out there and show the world that the Titans are nothing to be reckoned with this year.

That's not just big talk. I've been more than impressed with manager Callum Derringer made over the summer, keeping the guys they brought from the minors who had excelled and making some good trades. Coupled with Coach's own brand of inspiration and hockey intelligence, we come in playoff contention.

West stands in the middle of the locker room, and the players gather in a semicircle around him.

Coach is affable as hell and laden with humility. He's one of those who speaks softly but carries a big stick, except the stick isn't used to beat down. His stick is belief, and he has that in spades for his team. He comes out that to us during every drill, one-on-one talk, or film review. It had taken no time at all to gain the devotion of every player and coach in this rock of hockey.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm nervous as fuck," he says because I'm worried about what you'll do out there. I know every one who will go out and kill it. I'm nervous wondering if I've done enough for you. I've done right by you. If I've failed in any way, I'll improve upon it. Today starts the season, and I will make it my mission to be your coach at the end of every game. All I ask is that you go out there and give your hearts out, but I know I don't even have to ask. I know you're because you love this game and you love this organization."

We roar our approval and tap our sticks against the cubbies and benches. "I've got nothing else for you," Coach says with arms spread. "Brienne wants a few words."

My body locks tight just at the mention of her name, and the door opens, walking into view, apparently having stood in the wings of the locker room, and I realize I've spent way too much energy thinking about the woman sitting at their hookup three days ago. Hell, I'm not even sure *hookup* is the right

What we did has no definition—it was a whirlwind of carnali

consumed us both. I've certainly never done anything as bold as this mode. I have ever hungered for a woman the way I do her.

against She's fucking dangerous.

I'm surprised she's here to talk to us, but I'm not surprised she's in the 15-minute game. She said she was going to be in New York, so she must have stayed all weekend.

a force Maybe with her boy toy?

Which doesn't bother me.

neuevers Much.

light up Brienne steps beside Coach West, hands clasped before her. She's a fucking amazing in a dark gray pinstripe pantsuit with wide lapels and platinum hair pulled back in that signature knot I want to mess

princess to everyone here except me, as I know exactly how hot she is. She starts talking, but I'm not listening. I'm watching as her eyes slide around the room, taking in each of her players. I don't know whether these guys are pissed, but her eyes slide right over me without a pause.

beat us Maybe she's trying to show me just how good she is at removing me from the scene to show me that disconnect. Maybe she's still pissed over my insinuation that fucking her was like fucking the league. There's no doubt that with this push at Brienne and take risks, she could fire me for my behavior.

s. "Not But she better not be thinking anything other than I fucked her because you wanted her more than I've wanted anything in what seems like forever. She's a conundrum. I want her again but have no clue how to make it happen. I don't have a way to contact her, other than to schedule a meeting which sort of takes away from the spontaneity, and that's certainly paralyzing." Brienne wraps up her remarks, warmly letting her attention touch every player but me. I have visions of walking up to her, grabbing her by the necks of her neck, and shoving my tongue in her mouth to show her I could be ignored.

Wouldn't that be a sight?

in she's I'd surely get fired and might even have more than one man in the room. I leap to kick my ass.

rice our The thought amuses and puts me in an even better mood than before she walked in. Now I'm ready to get out on the ice and show them that every other exec they made the right decision with me.

at, nor We head out of the locker room and into the tunnel. Baden meet
the door and claps me on the shoulder. “You better block
motherfucking shot out there, dude.”
ere for “Got it covered,” I reply with a wink.
st have It’s a bold proclamation, but I’m so ready for this.



THE ARENA IS silent as the buzzer sounds. Half the Phantom fans have
the vision of their team getting beat 6–0 at the start of the third peri
e looks too much for some to handle.

gs, her We’re pumped on adrenaline as the final period ends, and we m
up. Ice way off the ice, the tunnel echoing with our voices as we praise one
rns. and talk about the game. Tonight I played some of the best hockey of
s move and I was aiming to prove myself. My performance amounted to a bi
o laugh you to all those teams that could have had me but were too scared to ri

herself, Inside the locker room, there’s more cheering and ass slaps, and
ion that Kirill wraps his arm around my neck and gives me a fat kiss on my ch
e way I my shutout. I shove him back, chuckling.

Baden appears, shaking his head in disbelief. “I told you to stop
motherfucking shot, and you did. Forty-three, to be exact.”

cause I “Just doing my job,” I say, not because I’m humble but because I
would make him laugh.

make it And he does. Leaning in, he says, “Those fuckers at the Wolves
reeting, be shitting themselves about now.”
t of the

I snort as I turn toward my locker. God, I hope so.

h every Baden claps me on the back and heads off.

he back “We are celebrating tonight,” Kirill announces from my left.
an’t be going out in New York City to party among the very people whose a
just kicked.”

“You’re damn right,” Hendrix says on the other side of him. H
is room forward, eyes on me. “You in, McGinn?”

“Sure,” I reply.

Why not?

I I was “I want to get laid like a king,” Kirill exclaims as he works on hi

Brienne “I wonder if any hot New York ladies have a problem fucking a Titan?

s me at every I'm sure there will be plenty willing.
"This is where monogamy sucks," Hendrix mutters.
Kirill looks at him with sympathy. "My condolences."
I agree. This is where monogamy sucks. Good thing I don't have a problem. Having been with Crystal for most of my hockey career, I really got to go out and have fun with my teammates. I mean, sure... and partying, but I never got the spoils of victory in the form of hot women willing to jump into bed for a one-night stand.

left as a Kirill loops his arm over my shoulder. "We'll have a blast tonight. It's a great bar that will be filled to the brim with gorgeous, loose women who will be like picking fruit off the tree."
"Can't wait."
It's exactly what I need.
May not be what I want—that would be Brienne—but I definitely need it.
I start to remove my sweater when I notice a small, square envelope tucked into the back of my cubby. It has my name on it, handwritten in blue ink.
After pulling it free, I rip into it and pull out a folded piece of paper.
Room #9391. If you want to stick it to the league again.

every Jesus.
Brienne.
I feel like all the air has been sucked out of my lungs and I'm absolutely frozen, except for my dick stirring. The euphoria from the win fades, replaced with clawing hunger.
I look around, half expecting her to be in the room, despite the presence of undressed men, and watching me for my reaction. Of course, she's not here, and I read the note one more time.
"We're not here," she says.
Apparently, she's not bent out of shape about me comparing fucking the league and she clearly knows it was in jest.

leans "I'm going to take a rain check," I say, staring intently at her while wondering when she put it here.
I turn to look at Kirill and brace for the disappointment. "Dude... don't worry. We're going to be each other's wingmen."
Grinning, I shake my head. "I don't need a wingman. I'm sorry that's all I can do. I'm sure Hendrix will help you out."

“It will be the only excitement I’m getting tonight,” he mutters.

I want to tell him if he hates being tied down so much, drop the v
but I hold my tongue. My thoughts on relationships are very differ
ive thatmost.

I never Hendrix might be bitching and moaning, but he liked the girl en
.. beersgive up other women. That involves some trust, something I don’t hav
women It fucking takes forever for everyone to shower, dress, and board
back to our hotel. Players disperse as soon as they step foot o
I knowsidewalk, but I head inside.

. It will Through the lobby and directly to the elevator where I press the bu
the ninth floor.

I’m not surprised room 9391 is at the corner of the building and
door plaque that says Presidential Suite A. Must be more than one, p
need it. at each corner.

ie taped There’s even a doorbell, so I press it.

. The door swings open, and Brienne stands there, still wearing th
r. pantsuit she had on at the game, except her heels are off.

She steps back and waves me in.

I don’t enter, instead tossing my duffel inside on the floor and r
out to hold on to the door casing with both hands. I lean in slightly.

“I’d prefer you greet me in these situations wearing nothing,” I say

solutely Her eyebrows shoot upward. “Is that so?”

replaced I nod. “Take off your clothes.”

“Close the door, and I will.”

all the “Nah,” I say with a smirk. “Get naked, then I’ll come in.”

ot here, I expect her to balk. It’s not cool that I’m here at the owner’s hote
even if I have an invitation. We’re flirting with some ethical lines.

ing her Someone could come along any minute and see me loitering.

She doesn’t hesitate, though. Her fingers work the jacket she’s wea
e note, slips to the marble floor, revealing a translucent cream blouse. Ignori
Brienne undoes a button at the side of her pants and lets those pool
. come her feet. She steps backward out of them, as if to draw me into her lair.

My eyes watch greedily as she removes the blouse, holding it c
hat you releasing it so it flutters to join the rest of her ensemble.

Christ, she’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, standing with her sh
back and not a shy bone in her beautiful body.

Her hands reach for the clasp at the front of her bra, but I say, “Don’t touch my woman, My throat is dry, my words raspy and needful.”

I step into the room, let the door close behind me, and walk to her.

More like crash into her as my hands go to her face and I pull her through her toes for a blistering kiss. A long growl vibrates out of me as her hands grab my jacket.

She tries to tug it off, but I have to break the kiss to help her. As she reaches for the doorknob, her hands abandon the jacket and work at my belt. My cock hardens about the time she slipped out of her pants, but the frantic way she’s trying to get it on forget at it makes me ache.

“You played so good tonight,” she says without taking her eyes from my hands working my button and zipper.

I suck at those front-clasp bras, so I merely pull down the cups until her breasts spill free. I cup them, pinch her nipples, which causes her to moan, but then she has my cock free and she’s stroking it hard.

“Fuck,” I mutter as lust almost drives me to my knees.

My hand goes to the back of her neck and I squeeze, causing her to lean up at me. Her eyes are glazed with hunger, and she licks her bottom lip.

Voice thick with need, I palm her cheek. She nuzzles into it ever so softly as my thumb circles the wetness on the head of my dick.

The innocent touch, coupled with the heat in her eyes, weakens my resolve.

“Get on your knees, boss,” I say, pushing her downward, and she complies beautifully.

Let’s see what she’s got.

In the room,

around the ring. It
around the
ring that,

out and

oulders

Her hands reach for the clasp at the front of her bra, but I say, “Don’t.”

My throat is dry, my words raspy and needful.

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She tries to tug it off, but I have to break the kiss to help her. As soon as I do, her hands abandon the jacket and work at my belt. My cock hardened about the time she slipped out of her pants, but the frantic way she’s trying to get at it makes me ache.

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“Fuck,” I mutter as lust almost drives me to my knees.

My hand goes to the back of her neck and I squeeze, causing her to look up at me. Her eyes are glazed with hunger, and she licks her bottom lip.

Voice thick with need, I palm her cheek. She nuzzles into it even as her thumb circles the wetness on the head of my dick.

The innocent touch, coupled with the heat in her eyes, weakens my legs.

“Get on your knees, boss,” I say, pushing her downward, and she obeys beautifully.

Let’s see what she’s got.

CHAPTER 8

Drake

BRIENNE NORCROSS ISN'T the first woman to be on her knees before me, but I can say without a doubt she's the most stirring.

Before marrying Crystal, I was no saint. Hookups with nameless, faceless women who left no lasting impression in the way they went down on me.

After marrying Crystal, she wasn't into oral unless it benefited someone in some way. I got it when she wanted something. When the marriage disintegrated because of her drug abuse, she fell to her knees in a moment of hesitation and thought I'd accept that as payment for not kicking her out.

That was a hard pass for me.

Since then, I've not had much opportunity to be with women. Let me say, single parenting three boys under seven is not for the faint of heart. It's hard work and requires all my devotion. Sure, I've had help from my mother and sister, but they were working full-time jobs after I left the league, so I've been the boys' primary caregiver.

As it should be—don't get me wrong.

All of this to say it's been a long fucking time since a woman has looked at me with a lust so powerful, I'm not sure I can stay standing if she puts her mouth on me.

Not if.

When.

Brienne Norcross has a gleam in her eye that says she's looking for a challenge. She's to seeing if she can bring me to my knees right alongside her, and I know she will hold her back.

A shudder ripples up my spine when she does nothing more than grind her teeth along the underside of my erection. I grunt and my hands latch onto her head, not to control her but to steady myself.

"Not sure I'm going to survive you, boss," I mutter just before she takes me in deep.

I mean, impressively, unimaginably deep, and my eyes practically into the back of my head.

Reaching out, I slam a hand against the wall for balance, and it her. She chuckles as she works me with her mouth, her tongue, her teeth. Christ... her throat, causing vibrations to pulse through my dick dangerously close to losing my shit.

Brienne's hands go to my ass, and she uses the leverage to take me deeper each time. She hums in approval, tiny noises that tell me she's enjoying everything about this way too much. My balls start to tingle.

Okay, we have to put this on the back burner, as I'll be damned. Tonight together is going to end quickly.

Slipping my fingers into her hair, I grip hard and ease her off my back. She licks her lips as she looks up and continues to stroke me with her hands. "Fair."

"How so?" My hand on her head loosens and my thumb glides along her jaw.

"You made me come with your mouth. I want the same shot."

Christ, her dirty talk isn't even all that dirty, but it punches through me with a power that's hard to resist. I'm on the verge of pushing her back against the wall, but instead I haul her up to ravish her mouth.

She utters a low keening of disappointment.

Smiling against her mouth, I lift her, hands under her ass. "You can't expect another crack at me later. I want to fuck you too bad."

Her arms circle my neck and she whispers against my lips, "I promise you better keep."

I reluctantly interrupt the kiss to look around. The suite is massive, with its own dining room table, large, sprawling living room, and through a doorway into a bedroom.

I head that way, stumbling slightly as Brienne nibbles on my neck. Something so slight, but it makes my pulse pound. I grip her ass. "Behave."

She laughs, and it's light, musical, and a bit naughty. "If you think that's a word I understand when it comes to sex, you've picked the wrong woman."

Yeah... she's going to be a handful, but that's something I can handle along. It's why I'm so attracted to her.

illy roll In the bedroom, I let her slide down my body, and we finish und
each other. She attempts to lower to her knees again, but I toss her on t
amuses following after with a condom held in my teeth.

eth, and Brienne's legs part, and I kneel between them to take in her beau
. I am only seen bits and pieces before, but a naked Brienne Norcross is sor
to behold. She's fit and toned, her breasts full with the prettiest pink n
e me in want to bite, and she owns every bit of it as her elegant finger
e she's manicured nails glide across her breasts.

As I smooth my palms up her thighs to spread her legs a little
d if our Brienne's hand snakes down her stomach. At first, I think it's to touc
perhaps to roll the condom on—but instead, she touches herself, and
ne. She completely hypnotized.

d. "Not I know my way around a woman's body, but I watch her carefully
exactly what she likes and what makes those cute little pleasure nois
ong her up in her throat. I commit it to memory, though not sure I'll need it.
her orgasm in record time in her office the other day.

My hand drops, covers hers as she strokes her clit, and I just fe
ugh meshe's doing to herself. Her breathing hitches, and I don't want her
c on my before I'm in her, so I take her hand and put it on my cock.

Without urging, she starts to pump as I tear open the condom wr
knock her hand away, pull the condom on, and lower myself over her.
an have Brienne's legs spread and wrap around my waist as she undulates
me. I bend my head, lips around a nipple before drawing it into my
that's a and sucking hard.

Hard enough she gasps, her body jerking under me. I grin as I la
ve with softly, using the lull in her movement to press into her.

door, a "Yes," she whispers, her hands clasping at the back of my neck. I
head, and our eyes lock as I slide deeper and deeper into her boc
ny ear. there's nowhere else for me to go.

harder. A harsh breath rasps out of her. "That feels way too good."

"No such thing," I correct her.

behave Given I'm so turned on I can barely think—and I nearly lost m
wrong when I was in her mouth—I decide this needs to be slow. I want to d
out as long as possible.

new all I peel her hands from me, link my fingers with hers, and stretch h
above her head. Letting my head drop, I fuse my mouth to hers as I thr

She groans, and I suck it down, grinding my pelvis against her bed, every downward stroke.

“Just like that,” she gasps into my mouth before sinking those teeth into my lower lip. It stings in a good way, and then she licks at it.

Brienne attempts to free her hands, but I hold her tight. She buckles under me, wanting more—maybe harder, maybe faster—and her aggressiveness turns me on.

I withdraw almost all the way from her tight heat, lift my head to look at her, and slam back in. Her entire body rocks, and her lips pull into a tight smile of pleasure that undoes me.

So much for slow and steady. At her whispered urging, I fuck her hard but deliberately. I keep my eyes pinned on her, fascinated by the way to see of expressions morphing across her face as she struggles to ride the waves of pleasure.

“Don’t hold back,” I growl as I tunnel into her. I raise up on one knee, hitch her leg to my waist, and it gives me a better angle.

I thrust deep and she gasps. “So close. So, so close.”

Her hand starts to slide down to touch herself, and I grab her by the wrist. Pulling it away, I pin it to the bed and give her an evil smile. “I’m the only one who’s going to get you where you want to go.”

She neither pouts nor argues, but instead tilts her head back and arches against me with delight. Leaning forward, I run my mouth along that exposed neck, then down her jaw until my lips find hers.

I kiss her deeply before lifting my head again, just to watch her face as her moans fall silent and she bites her lower lip. I remember from the other day in her office that just before she came, she went quiet, and I expected to lift my getting ready to blow.

Answering the challenge to knock her orgasm loose, I grab both her thighs and spread them wide and lift them high. With her ankles at my shoulders, I drill into her, but it only takes two thrusts before she’s crying out.

Goddamn, she’s a fucking vision with her body arching, her eyes closed, and it’s what causes me to tip over. I thrust one last time and bottom out on her, feeling the pleasure shred me as I release.

Gritting my teeth, I bow my head, my hands gripping her legs hard against her arms, dragging out every last memorable drop.

When I’m emptied, I’m so depleted, I let her legs down and fall off.

rs with I hold most of my weight off her, but our chests, pressed together, a
with sweat. Her heart beats madly against mine as we struggle to ca
eth into breaths.

“You okay?” I ask, my chin resting on her shoulder.

s under “I’m wrecked like I’ve never been wrecked before,” she says in a
iveness voice as her fingers trail along my biceps.

That comment shouldn’t please me as much as it does, but to v
look at powerful, sexy, confident woman like Brienne Norcross is qu
wistful achievement.

Maybe it’s my ego, but I can’t help taking a dig. “Boy toy could
Brienne nothing or two.”

myriad She makes a dismissive sound, and I raise my head off her shou
well of look at her. “His name’s Clay, and he’s not in the picture anymore.”

I could have done without knowing his name, and that it bothers
re arm, know his name bothers me even more. I can’t care about stuff like tha
let her know. “You didn’t break up with him because of me, did you?”

Brienne frowns. “No. I ended things before you.”

e wrist. “Good,” I say adamantly. “Because I’m not asking you to.”

he only “Good,” she mimics. “Because I fuck who I want and when I war
was convenient, just like you’re convenient. Just like there are a
laughs convenient men.”

eck, up Well, damn. She turned that around on me.

“We’re in agreement, then,” I say, dipping my head and featherin;
ce. He along her jaw.

her day She sighs, hand going to the back of my head. “We’re in agreeme
t she’s don’t owe each other anything.”

“Except good orgasms,” I murmur as I lift my head.

ier legs Brienne smiles. “Except good orgasms.”

ilders, I That seals it. We agree we’ll fuck on occasion and are free to l
others. It’s the perfect deal for me and holds with my current philosop
glazed, I’m never committing to another woman again.

1 out in It’s refreshing to find a woman like Brienne who feels the same.

I lucked out.

ard as I Except... the thought of her being with someone else doesn’t s
right, but I push that away when she scrapes her nails along my neck.

nto her. “I hope you’re not going to run off,” she says. “I believe you pro

re slick could get my mouth on you again.”

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A purr of desire bubbles in my chest, and my spent cock isn't so spent. It twitches at the thought of Brienne's pretty lips on me, and something deep in my belly tells me that, despite the casual boundaries we've established, she's going to be a lot more complicated than I'd like.

CHAPTER 9

Brienne

THE CAR SLOWS to a stop, and I tell the driver I'll only need a few minutes to grab the two bouquets and exit the vehicle before walking across a small knoll to the Norcross family plots. My parents share a grave marked by a large headstone of white marble, even though my father remarried after my mother died. While his new wife was significantly younger than he was, she didn't begrudge him the happiness. I think she cared for him, and the greatest act of love she showed was agreeing to let me and Adam bury him with my mother. It's not like she wasn't left well cared for by his estate. Last year, she was living in Miami with someone closer to her own age and the child.

I put one of the bouquets on my parents' headstone, trailing my fingers along the stone warmed by the last days of summer. Moving to my father's grave, I sit on the ground cross-legged facing his marker.

Adam Norcross
Gone but never forgotten.

No, never forgotten, and it's not fair the world only had thirty-three years with him. It's not fair I only had him for the duration of my thirty-three years.

Leaning forward, I place the flowers at the base of the gravestone. I pluck a piece of grass to wind around my finger as I catch my breath and think about my life.

"This week has been both exhausting and exhilarating, as I'm sure you know." I'm not sure where Adam's soul is—if there's a heaven or an afterlife or if he'll be reincarnated. I choose to believe he's watching over me, and I smile.

"How about our Titans?" I smile brightly as if he were sitting right next to me. "Winning the first three preseason games. I'm pretty sure beating Cannon West on May 15 may go down as the single most brilliant move I'll make in my career. This team. Who knows, maybe you were guiding me along the way."

are really starting to settle down, especially after I fired Keller. That's oddly satisfying, and while I'm still learning the ropes, I knew early on I know he was bad for the team.

"I'm starting to be able to spend less time with the team and more working on the million other things Norcross has going on. That's because Callum is taking so much off my plate. I honestly don't know how you did it without a great general manager like him. I know you would have loved it. I really loved having him on your team."

I pause, thinking through my week, if there's anything else I missed. I come here once or twice a week, just to say hello to my brother. I don't have a lot of free time, but the celebration is on the way home from downtown, and it's a sadly serene way to end the greatest day.

Sighing, I close my eyes and let myself be at peace here with my brother. Here I can be honest. "I'm so tired, Adam. There's not enough hours in the day to do everything, and while I'm learning the value of giving up control and relying on people like Callum, I'm still drowning. I wish I could be mad at you for leaving me with this team, but I'm too mad at the universe for taking you away." I imagine if he were sitting here now, he'd have his shoulder against mine and tell me to buck up. "No worries, though," I tell him. "You know my backbone is made of the same steel that built the family's fortune. I've got this covered. Mainly because I know you've got an angel on my shoulder."

The single biggest thing I miss about my brother is not being able to talk to him. While this is a poor substitute, it makes me feel better. Growing up, whenever I was down at my watch, I utter a small curse and toss the blade of grass. "I've got to go. I'm doing something tonight that I know you would not approve of, and I'm sure you're watching over me right now and biting your teeth."

Standing, I wipe my backside of grass and dirt before heading back to the Town Car.

It's closing in on seven p.m. when we pull into the long driveway. I see Drake's motorcycle. He's leaning against it, long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankle with his palms pressed onto the leather seat. His black shirt is molded to his massive chest, his hair pulled back on top but falling below.

That was He's a wet dream.

Enough to When the car stops, I tell the driver, "I can get out on my own."
"Yes, ma'am."

And more I exit the car, sling my briefcase over my shoulder, and saunter
his only Drake. He does a slow perusal of me, dragging his thumb across his lower lip in appreciation.

He'd have "It appears we're starting a habit," I say.

He pushes off the bike, rising to tower above me. His smile is casual and lazy, and it's a good look on him. "More like an addiction," he says.

Her and That might be true.

At a cemetery Since Drake's visit to my hotel room in New York, we've been talking every night. It's not been discussed—I had his cell number, and the afternoon when we were back in Pittsburgh, I texted to see if he was available. the evening. It was the same message as the written note I'd left in his room: *If you want to stick it to the league...* and then I told him where to meet and at what time. I had no expectations he would show up, but he did. I could see every night since. This included visits to my home and one to my university during another away game.

He'dge his Last night I was surprised he came over. We had a home game, and the Titans trounced the Edmonton Grizzlies, making it three straight wins in our preseason. It was absolutely a reason for the players to celebrate. I'd thought he would decline my invitation.

But he didn't, arriving at my house late last night, again launching into a talk that soared among the stars. I know it doesn't mean anything other than a victory dance. I said... perhaps it is a bit of an addiction, because we can't seem to stay away from each other.

He'dn't would not Drake doesn't hug me. I don't kiss him. We don't hold hands. A grin follows me toward the front door.

Daniel greets me. He doesn't wear a uniform per se but always a button-down dress slacks and either a button-down or sometimes a polo shirt.
"Good evening, Ms. Norcross."

I, and I I don't correct him. I've asked him on more than one occasion to talk to Brienne, and he won't, so I let it go.

Black T- If Daniel is surprised to see Drake walking in, he doesn't twitch a muscle. This is the earliest Drake has been here, so Daniel has not noticed before.

“I can have your dinner laid out now, if you’d like,” he says and glance toward Drake. “There is more than enough to feed your guest.”

“No, thank you, Daniel. I’ll eat later. You can head home toward evening.”

“Of course,” he says as he holds out a hand to me. “If you’d like, your briefcase in your office.”

I give it to him. Daniel knows that just because I’m home and a guest, my workday is not over and I’ll need the contents inside.

After Daniel departs, I turn to Drake. “Are you hungry? I can do whatever Daniel made.”

Drake steps into me, touching me for the first time by framing my face with his giant hands. He kisses me leisurely before saying, “Yeah, I’m free for hungry.”

He then picks me up and carries me off to bed.

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DRAKE IS BREATHING deeply, so I feel safe to slip out of bed without him. Illumination filters in through my window from the outdoor lighting, and I take a moment to appreciate how stunningly hot he is naked in my bed. Big, muscled body, long hair all messed up, and tattoos I enjoyed exploring.

He’s become equally knowledgeable about my body, and there’s no place on it he hasn’t touched, kissed, or licked.

Our appetites are insatiable, and my time with Drake has been enlightening. He makes me feel things sexually I never knew were possible. I’ve always been open in my sexuality. I’ve always owned my desires. I had a healthy sex life ever since I lost my virginity my first year in college.

But Drake actually makes me crave sex.

“Good No, not just sex.

I crave sex with him.

It must be an addiction, like he said.

He’s nothing like the man I bashed heads with all those months ago. I first tried to get him to join the team. He was rude and crass, arrogant, though I despised him back then, I was still attracted to him. I would’ve thought he had a generous bone in his body, though.

gives a He has proven me wrong, time and again, because when we're in is completely different. He is hyperfocused on pleasing me, dominating for thebecause he knows I need it. He knows I'm tired of being the strong c making all the decisions. When he's not growling orders or fucking t I'll puthe wants it, he's actually lighthearted and, I dare say, funny.

We don't talk about anything deep, but we have times whenever have a not focused on attacking each other. A dam has definitely sprung open don't know what to do with it. I crave him, and he clearly feels the same heat up When I let Drake into my body, I knew he would complicate r He's forbidden—he's a player, and I'm the owner. I don't think there ny facewritten rule, but it's certainly not professional. And Drake come ah, I'm baggage. If the media ever got wind of us being together, everything past would be dredged up again, and I'm quite sure I'll get pulled thro mud with him. I'm strong enough to handle that, though. And anything newsworthy, it'll become old news soon enough.

Ultimately, I did it because I wanted him too much. I've followed rules my entire life, and I've operated within borders because it was re waking But I'm too fascinated by Drake. I feel too alive when I'm with him.

Right now, he's a risk I'm willing to take. I want to reach out and touch him, but I don't want to wake is lying I've actually have work to do, and frankly, I don't mind the way he looks os I've bed.

I consider putting on pajamas but instead I grab his T-shirt draped s not a chair. It swallows me up, but it smells so good. Woodsy, clean, and a s been male.

Tiptoeing out of my bedroom, I make my way to my office. It's re possible. my office... I still think of it as my father's, furnished with his ma re. I've walnut furniture, leather wingback chairs, and the lingering scent of h lege. smoke. I know I should redecorate the house, but I simply haven't time or energy to make it truly mine. It's a low-priority item, and I don't to be comfortable in an office to be productive.

Removing my laptop from my briefcase, I turn it on and pull out o when folders with documents I need to review. I immediately fall right i id even task, immersed in the world of Norcross Holdings.

When I'm working, I have no concept of time. The word *workaholic* I never been used on more than one occasion to describe me. It's a good thing.

bed, he what I do, or else this would be absolute torture.

ing me, I don't know how long I'm at my desk, but something disturbs me and concentration—a vibe, more than anything. Lifting my head, I see Drake in the doorway, leaning against the jam with his arms crossed over his chest, wearing nothing but dark gray boxer briefs.

r we're God, he's sinful to behold, and I just stare.

n, and I "What are you doing?" he asks. Drake pushes off the door—no clock, how long he's been standing there—and moves to one of the big chairs across my desk from me.

e's any "Working," I reply.

es with He settles back, spreading his legs out before him, and laces his fingers in his over his stomach... right where a small patch of dark golden hair leads through the waistband of his—

as with "What are you working on?"

I blink at him, and it occurs to me that usually when someone interrupts my work, especially when I'm in deep concentration, I get irritated. Looking at the gorgeous man sitting across from me, who just doled out phenomenal orgasms not that long ago, I can't find the will to be the least bit grumpy.

him. I I hold up a thick document. "I'm looking at a proposal to buy shares in my paper mill that's about to go under and repurpose it into a small distribution center."

l over a Drake's eyebrows rise. "I'd like to say that's hot, but it sounds a little unflattering."

ally not Chuckling, I shrug. "It's definitely not the adrenaline rush of hockey. He nods down at the desk, indicating the other folders. "Similarly interesting stuff?"

is cigar "By your standards, I suppose. For me, it's par for the course."

had the "You're a smarty," he casually remarks. "You went to Columbia, right? I don't need to ask." I cock an eyebrow. "Have you been stalking me?"

at three He merely smirks and gestures to the work on the desktop. "You don't have anyone to help you steer the ship?"

nto my The question is odd but only because this is our first real conversation where he's shown interest in me outside of the bedroom.

olic has I lean back into the large leather chair that held my dad's frame but it's a little big for me. I kick my feet up on the desk, crossing them at the ankles.

Drake's eyes drift there briefly but then come back to my face.

"By help, if you mean dozens of high-level executives I can pay for help, of course. I have a lot of help. But all the major decisions have to go through me before I can even give advice on what we should do. That's my responsibility."

"I have to be fully versed in any business ventures. I do a lot of reading and research, coupled with a lot of talking to people to figure out whether investments are good risks."

"Sounds like a big load on your shoulders," he muses.

Sadness wells within me, and I'm hesitant to admit it, but I do. "My brother. While my dad left Norcross Holdings to me, Adam concentrated on the Titans. Even though we ran separate entities, he was still there as a sounding board and shoulder to lean on. It's hard not having that."

Drake nods as if he understands what I mean, but I don't pry too far. "You have a sister, don't you? I think you mentioned she was bringing the boys to Pittsburgh soon?"

Drake's grin is blinding in its brilliance and love. "Kiera. My youngest sister by two years. And yes, they're coming this weekend. Six more days and I cannot wait."

I can't help but smile as his joy is infectious. "What does she do?"
"She's an oncology nurse, but she doesn't do active patient care. Instead, she acts as a liaison between the doctors she works for and the patients, helping them find services they need. It could be something like psychological counseling or arranging transportation for treatment. I help them navigate insurance... those types of things."

"Helping to ease their journey," I surmise.

"Yes, and she's very good at it. Luckily, it's a job she can do remotely, mostly phone work. The doctors she works for adore her, so they're willing to shift her schedule a bit so she can be available for the boys after school and when I'm on road trips."

"That's really great. And I'm sure it will be a comfort for them to have family here rather than a nanny."

Drake's expression darkens slightly. "Especially since their mother's death failed to provide any manner of reliable or consistent support for them."

I proceed with caution, because now we're talking about super powerful people, and Drake and I have agreed there's really nothing between us but the past. "And yet, I can't help it. I'm curious, and he brought it up. "Do you

me asking about your ex-wife? I imagine she's got to be about your favorite person in the world."

Drake's laugh is mirthless. "Right alongside the owner of the house means Wolves who believed her lies, but yeah... she's worthless. A strung-out addict who can't bother to show up for visitation with her kids. The judge, which gave me full custody, and she's only allowed to have supervised visitation if she shows up high or drunk, I don't let her in the door. She hasn't tried to see the boys in almost two months."

"I miss her," I murmur, not really understanding those bonds. "That's the best that I obviously don't have kids, but it is hard for me to fathom a mother who does that. Have you had to explain her issues to them?"

Drake's eyes bore into me. "I can't. There is no explanation for how deep a wound would cause a mother to turn from her kids. All I can do is be there for them and give them all my love. One of my hesitations in coming back to the league was my fear I wouldn't be there for them, and they need me now more than ever."

"That's a valiant reason for not coming back." I try to inject some humor into the conversation. "Far more valiant than just thumbing your nose at me after I offered you a job."

He laughs, his voice sexy with innuendo. "Let's just say I'm enjoying my life right now very much. And yeah, I obviously walked away from the league because I was pissed, but with Crystal being so disruptive and helping unreliable, it was important for me to be there every day for my boys. The even reason that the shit show with the gambling allegations was probably the best thing for my kids at the time. I can tell you, I wouldn't have taken your offer had my sister Kiera not agreed to come to Pittsburgh with me."

"Well, I'm glad for her." I infuse my tone with a little sexiness. "The school worked out well for me personally."

Drake's smile slips a bit. "Once my kids get here, you need to know that our evenings are devoted to them. The thing we have going on right now, we see each other every night... it will be over."

I wasn't prepared for that, but in the few seconds it takes to absorb what he's saying, I realize I actually can't be surprised. I spread my arms in a personal gesture that it's all good. "Hey... there are no strings between us. We're just out there on that."

He studies me, head tilted slightly as if he's trying to figure

ur least something. “We’ll find other ways to see each other.”

I give him a noncommittal smile, but deep down—a place I don’t
Buffalove give a lot of attention to—hope we find a way. You know, that
ut drug addiction thing. I suppose we can hook up at away games, not that I
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But then I can’t think about it anymore as Drake straightens in hi
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My chin jerks inward because even though I know he’s a dirty tal
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I give him a noncommittal smile, but deep down—a place I don’t want to give a lot of attention to—hope we find a way. You know, that whole addiction thing. I suppose we can hook up at away games, not that I will be going to all of them.

Or maybe we just end it.

The thought makes my chest heavy.

But then I can’t think about it anymore as Drake straightens in his chair, leans forward, and rests his elbows on his knees.

His eyes punch right into me. “Spread your legs,” he commands.

My chin jerks inward because even though I know he’s a dirty talker and does even dirtier things when he sets his mind to it, his order is shocking.

“Excuse me?”

His eyes pin to mine. “Open your legs. I want to know if you put on anything under my T-shirt, which looks very good on you, by the way.”

“You want me to spread my legs just so you can see if I’m wearing panties?” I tease.

His eyes flame with an intensity that makes my heart slam against my ribs. “No, I want you to spread your legs so I can watch you play with yourself. Then we’re going to do a repeat of our first time together when I fucked you bent over the desk. And then I’m going to make you come to bed and get a little sleep.”

The rush of emotions is almost unbearable. Shock over his crudity, lust just thinking about his promises, and tenderness that he would care whether I got some sleep.

There’s only one thing I can do in this situation.

I shift myself in the big executive chair and spread my legs, resting my feet on the edge of the desk. My hand drifts down, and Drake watches hungrily as I touch myself.

CHAPTER 10

Drake

I WAKE EARLIER than usual, and for a few reasons. I'm a morning person by nature, so I've got an internal alarm that cannot be snoozed. I have immediate and full awareness of where I am—in Brienne's bed with my body pressed against hers. This is troubling because I've not stayed all night before and it's not meant to, so my mind is preoccupied with making an exit.

Christ, I should be exhausted, but I'm exhilarated. After I found her in her office working last night, I never did fuck her bent over the desk, but I did because condoms weren't within reach. I plucked her out of her chair and she drove me crazy by touching herself and brought her back to her bed.

Where I proceeded to have her bent over the side of her bed.

It was just like in her office in one fundamental aspect—the encompassing way in which I possessed her. What man doesn't love a doggie-style romp where you can grab onto hips, look down, and stare at yourself in front-row porn? But last night, same as in her office the other time, I ended up curling my body over hers. Pressed my torso into her back and wrapped my arms around her—one at her stomach, the other right at the base of her throat—and held tight as I tunneled into her.

Almost as if I didn't want her to get away. It was feral and possessive. And while I can definitely be described as wild, I am in no way committed to long-term female companionship.

Yet last night, I felt like an animal protecting a juicy piece of meat. If anyone else were to come near, I'd tear them to pieces.

Yeah, that's why I'm awake earlier than normal because it's bugging the hell out of me that I give this—whatever this is between us—more thought than I should. Passing thought about how fucking good it is with her.

I lift my arm to peek at my watch and see it's nearing five a.m. I won't be up in another half hour or so since she hits the gym early, same as I won't be going this morning because we have a game, which is

thing. I'd probably drag her into the locker rooms.

I need to leave and put some distance between us.

Carefully and a bit reluctantly, because she does feel good against my chest. I slip out of bed. The darkest part of night has waned, and I watch her sleep for a minute.

She's under deep, not a restless bone in her body. I think she's exhausted herself to exhaustion each day and sleeps like the dead at night. I'm not sure how person by person doesn't help that for the past week, I've cut into her sleep time and extended her further with our insatiable fuckfest.

Her hair is curled and had been kicked off onto the floor last night, then my eyes shift to Brienne.

Not in consideration of crawling back into bed with her but worried in her what her morning routine is like. If I had to guess, I bet she drinks a lot of coffee and grabs a protein shake on the way out the door. A woman who works out only after doesn't have time for anything else.

Her room. Call me nostalgic, or maybe I've grown soft over the last year caring for my kids, but one of the most satisfying things for me in caring for them is the simple act of preparing a meal.

I mean, I could use a little sustenance myself, so why not make her a good meal and treat her some and force her to have a somewhat leisurely morning? She can't skip her workout and it won't kill her, and I can spend a few more minutes in her presence.

At the base of my back, suppressing a groan, I scrub my hand through my hair and admit to myself for even caring about her breakfast habits. It goes against everything we said this was—it's nothing more than great sex.

Stupid of me. Okay, stupendous sex.

The best I've ever had.

But, and if I can't have that, whatever.

Despite my brain telling my ass to leave, I drop my jeans and grab the rubber band from the dresser to pull back the top portion of my hair. When it's secure and out of my face, I wander into the kitchen. I'll see if I can get some eggs, and that's it. I'll wake her up and leave them by her bedside.

Brienne: With coffee, of course.

As me. Maybe some toast. And bacon.

I'll make myself some, and it will diminish this stupid need I have to care for her.

“Pussy,” I mutter as I root through the fridge.

She shouldn’t matter, but something jarred loose last night when she came to see me, her working in her home office. I’m not just talking about piddling and sleeping for she was full-fledged absorbed in reading some thick document at 10 p.m., and I watched her for a while before she even noticed me. I’ve never works never said as much, but I’m guessing that’s routine for her.

Of course it is. The time we spent talking in her office was refreshing. I enjoyed learning more about her, which only increased my admiration—a far cry from the man I couldn’t stand the woman at the beginning of the year.

Means I’d As I start bacon to sizzling and cracking eggs to scramble, I have to wonder the way our discussion ended is causing some consternation. With Tanner and Colby coming this weekend, my life will change back into a cup of being a dad first and foremost. I wasn’t exaggerating when I told her that like here evenings were for them and them alone. My boys come first, always, and that will never change.

Coming to And yet, I’m feeling a sense of loss because this last week of night is the Brienne have been amazing.

Just not sure what that means.

Brienne “Good morning, sir,” a man’s voice says from behind me. I’m not skipping a startle, but I jerk in surprise.

is in her I glance over my shoulder just as Daniel walks in. I’m really not sure who he is or what he does. My instinct is butler, but he’s not like any butler I’ve ever seen on TV or in movies. He’s probably early forties, incredibly handsome. Begrudgingly, I acknowledge, quite handsome.

I don’t think Daniel is Brienne’s boy toy, because she said his name was Clay, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t have more than one.

That feral feeling of wanting to snarl at any male intruder creeps back and I have to force it away.

Grab the I can’t deny that he’s caught me in an awkward situation, mostly near Brienne’s kitchen, cooking breakfast. I alleviate the discomfort by scrambling toward the coffee maker, which is really a huge, fancy espresso machine with many valves to mess with. “I couldn’t figure out how to work that thing,” I say.

“I’ll be glad to get you a cup, sir,” he says formally, and I’m not sure I’m hearing disdain in his voice or if maybe he’s just overly formal.

seem to “This isn’t what it looks like,” I say as I go back to cooking, even though it’s exactly what it looks like. He saw me come in with Brienne last night.

and now I'm here, in my underwear, making breakfast.

I found “No judgment, Mr. McGinn,” Daniel replies as he pulls a lever or around a button that makes the coffee machine hiss.

eleven “So you know who I am.” My words are cautious... prodding to Brienne's reaction. I pour the eggs into another skillet I'd had heating.

“You can't be employed by the Norcross family and not be a Titan earning I hear amusement in his voice, and I'm relieved. Daniel turns from the machine and hands me a steaming cup of coffee. “You look like your type who takes it black.”

to admit Nodding, I accept the brew and sip before setting it on the counter. Jake, “Thanks.” As I stir the eggs, I say, “You know this can't get out.”

into me “I understand your privacy is important, sir.”

her my “Fuck my privacy,” I growl as I spare him a glance. “It's already and that invaded over the past year, but this could hurt Brienne. She would be to bear the brunt of any backlash.”

its with I'm relieved when I see respect fill his eyes, which tells me he's looking at her. I'm hoping it's just as an employee and not as a bed warmer who's not here, but it's not like I can ask him that.

easy to *Besides, I admonish, it's none of your fucking business what she does when you're not around. Just as it's none of her business what you do.*

ire who “Oh my dear God,” Brienne says as she walks into the kitchen, but I've robe around her body. Her hair is a mess, and a flash of pride washes through her. I fit, and when I see a hickey at that curve where her neck and shoulder meet. “You're naked.”

me was She can't see me fully as I'm behind the large kitchen island. I look down and then up at her with a grin. “Not totally naked.”

back in, “I'm going to make a grocery run,” Daniel announces, and Brienne glances at him. I see no wariness or concern from her that he's found me naked in which confirms he's loyal.

prodding But exactly what is the basis of that loyalty?

ne. Too Daniel makes a quiet but hasty exit, and Brienne rounds the corner. “That must have totally freaked him out.” straight to the coffee machine. “He left without offering to make me sure if she says with a tinkling laugh. “He left without offering to make me sure which he'll later consider a serious breach of his duties.”

though Eggs fully scrambled, I turn off the heat and remove the pan to set it on the counter. I move into Brienne's back and wrap my arms around her waist.

tenses slightly, because we don't do affection.

pushes But my touch has a purpose. "Just exactly how serious is Danie loyalty to you?"

test his She doesn't lean back into me but busies herself making what look fancy, frothy drink. "If you mean will he say anything, he won't."

s fan." "I sensed that. But why is he so loyal?"

om the Brienne shrugs. "He's been a Norcross employee for a long tim r're thepaid well with great benefits, so—"

"What kind of benefits?"

ounter. And now she catches on, turning in my arms and leaning back to me with narrowed eyes. "What are you implying?"

"You know what I'm implying," I say, leaning in to drag a kiss al ly beenjaw. "He's a good-looking guy."

the one Brienne pushes at my chest and snaps, "Well, if you're into him, I in a good word for you."

loyal to Laughing, I pull back slightly, but I tighten my hold. "Not intere ren I'mhim or anyone else." I'm relieved by her anger, because it confirms nothing between them. "I am interested in feeding you some food a ie doesfucking you on the counter before I have to leave. Preferably before gets back as that would indeed be awkward."

elting a Brienne relaxes and nudges me playfully. "You are not fucking me hroughcounter because he could indeed walk in on us."

r meet. That only makes me pull her in closer, my hands going to her ass t her to me. "Bet I can make you change your mind."

glance She sighs in defeat. "You can totally get me to change my mind wi whole alpha, sex-god mojo."

e's eyes "Sex god?" I bark out a laugh as I release her. I turn to plate up t ie here, and bacon. "Is that what I am?"

"You know you are," she mutters, moving around the island to on tall stools. "Your fingers, mouth, and dick are magic."

ounter, I'd like to return the sentiment, something like she drives me cra ut," sheI'm slightly obsessed with her, but I'm not admitting shit. We drew coffee,between us, and I'm not going to even hint that it might be blurring.

I remain on the other side of the island, not trusting myself to beha t on theboth dig into the eggs.

ist. She "What's on your agenda today?" I ask. "Norcross Holdings or

work?”

In his “Both,” she says with a smile, then looks at her watch. “In fact, I to hurry this up. My driver will be here soon to take me to the gym.”

is like a “Lifestyles of the rich and famous,” I say, not with any derision earned her money and should use it as she sees fit.

“I’d drive myself, but I’ve never quite had the time to master the al e. He’s My fork pauses halfway to my mouth. “You don’t know how to dr She shrugs. “I mean... I know the basics. I took driver’s educatio never got my license. I just never needed to.”

o regard “You never needed to go anywhere?”

Shaking her head, she smirks. “Of course, I’ve had to go places. ong herschool, I had friends who drove or our family had a driver. I went Columbia when I was seventeen, and I didn’t need a car in New York can putthere six years doing my undergrad and master’s, and by the time I g to Pennsylvania to take my place beside my dad, it just seemed like osted inof time to learn. Once again, I had a driver to take me everywhere.”

there’s “Damn.” I’m absolutely amazed. “I’ve never met a grown wom nd thendoesn’t drive.”

Daniel Brienne’s expression turns wistful as she sets her fork down on w pleased to see is an empty plate. “I sometimes wish I drove, thoug e on thereally around the city, but I’d love to take off on a drive throu countryside. Pennsylvania has the most beautiful mountains. I don’t h to presstime to learn, though.”

Something tugs inside my chest that she can’t even have somet ith yoursimple as a peaceful drive because her responsibilities are too great.

I’m on the verge of offering to teach her, but that muddies the wate he eggsthrow out a radical change of subject.

“You know what sucks?” I say.

e of the “What’s that?” She picks up her coffee and sips.

“That I can’t spontaneously pick you up, set you on the counter, a azy andyou.”

v a line Brienne chokes and sputters, coffee spraying from her mouth. She napkin and wipes herself. “Jesus, Drake... a little warning before y ive. Wefrom normal conversation to dirty talk.”

I grin. “Sorry... it does suck, though. Having to walk all the way Titansthe bedroom to grab a condom.”

“No worries,” she replies and nods to the counter behind me. “I’ve got stash in one of those drawers.”

My eyebrows shoot high. “You do?”

She’s “No,” she exclaims on a laugh. “Why would I keep condoms in the kitchen?”

“So I could spontaneously fuck you in here when I wanted?” I reply. “No, I can’t do that. I’m not a slut.” I reach across the counter to grab her hand. “But I have a brilliant idea, but I ditch the condoms.”

Brienne’s hand jerks, and she tries to pull away, but I hold tight and pull it to my lips. I slide her index finger into my mouth, lave my tongue around it until it glistens. “I enjoyed the show you gave me last night... take it off to yourself. Give me a repeat performance.”

I was “I’ve got sexual whiplash from you talking about giving up condoms without masturbating,” she grumbles. “I haven’t even finished my first coffee.”

“Get used to it,” I proclaim, walking around the counter. “I’m not going to let you get comfortable in what I might do to you.”

Fuck me... Brienne shudders just from my words.

That I’m Moving behind her stool, I reach around to pull her robe open and touch her thighs. I put pressure on them, and she spreads her legs without hesitation. “Touch yourself,” I remind her softly, leaning over her shoulder. “I can watch.”

She does, and the vision is so erotic, my cock immediately aches. “It doesn’t just get hard... it hurts.”

Putting my lips near her ear, I murmur, “Get an STD test. I’ll be there, so I can see. I want to be raw with you.”

Brienne groans, her head falling back to my shoulder. But she agrees. “What’s the point? We both know this has an expiration date.”

She’s not wrong, but it doesn’t change what I want. Even if we only get to fuck this for a little while, I want to feel one hundred percent of her.

But I let it go, knocking her hand out of the way and taking over. She grabs her squirming and writhing on the kitchen stool, and when she’s on her own turn of coming, I pull my hand away.

Brienne curses at me, but I just laugh as I lift and toss her over my shoulder. I walk her back to the bedroom and take my time about getting a condom on.

keep a I make her wait for it, not to punish but to make her understand th
of spontaneity.

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CHAPTER 11

Brienne

“I NEED THEIR agreement that they will not refer to them as the Three,” I say to Jenna who sits across from me.

I love the sleeveless pink ensemble she’s wearing today. It’s got a scoop neck and is, by all means, a lovely, demure dress that comes below the knees. But it doesn’t hide the burn scars on the side of her neck, an even peek out on the back of her shoulder.

Jenna’s blossomed into such a confident woman these last few years that I sometimes envy her ability to change and grow. It makes me aware that while I lead a full and valued life—I’m a billionaire man, after all—I do the same thing, day in and day out, and who I am is probably who I’ll be when I die.

“I’ve told them no references to the Lucky Three,” she affirms. “If they even hinted at it, they’d never get anything from the organization again.”

She’s talking about an interview a national sports magazine wants with Coen Highsmith, Hendrix Bateman, and Camden Poe, the three players who were not on the plane.

I can’t help but grin. “Look at you, going all tiger mode.”

“Learning from the best,” she quips.

And she has been learning, soaking up everything like a sponge. She’s been her to be a media liaison and she’s doing tremendous work, but she’s going to outgrow this position sooner rather than later. I’m okay with that, as long as she has plans for Jenna.

“And please reiterate to the men that they do not have to do this just to be protective of my players, but they all three readily agreed, thinking it would build hype for the upcoming season.

“I have,” she assures me. “And they are all more than happy to be interviewed.”

“Part of me thought Coen would bug out.”

“Everyone’s thinking it,” Jenna agrees with a small smile. “But has turned things around. I think just being part of this team is sometimes really needed.”

“I totally agree.” *Just like Drake*, I think.

“And speaking of the interview,” Jenna continues, “they’d like to do it at the arena and...”

Lucky Yes, Drake really needs the team dynamic. I bet it was the single loss for him after he left hockey. He was so thoroughly let down by even a sweet in this league, the bonds he forms with the team during this first month low her be crucial.

d some I start to chastise myself for thinking about Drake during work months Hell, for thinking about him at all. No man takes up space in my brain this. I don’t have time for it, and he’s already disrupted my life enough

keenly Just this morning, I didn’t get to my workout because of him, a y times thrown off my entire day. If I could erase everything, I would.

n today Well, no, I wouldn’t. I didn’t quite miss my workout because Drake me a workout of his own. Insisted I straddle him and ride him hard.

“I told Titans’ That’s what he said. “Ride me hard, Bri.” And he made me work for it because he wouldn’t let me finish until I got there first. I was tired, depleted from the night before, but G is to do me, I got there.

Titans “That’s a good girl,” he said as I splintered into a million bits under starlight.

I hired I must have burned a thousand calories, but it was worth watching Drake’s face contort with pleasure as his hands dug hard into my hips. I hired muttered curses of release.

going to He left while I was in the shower. No goodbye kiss. No promises. I have each other tonight after the game, although we both know I’ll text you to invite. I slid to the tile floor and as the water poured over me, I tried to s.” I’m out why I like to be dominated by Drake. His “good girl” praise affected t would deeply, and all he’s done since we started screwing is assert master control.

do the Fuck... it’s what I like best about him, and I wonder if I’m losing my mind.

And to make matters worse, I only want to please him. I do it v

expectation of anything in return, although Drake hands out more p
he surethan any other partner ever has, and yeah... that has me coming back t
hing he “Brienne.” I blink, and Jenna comes into focus. “Did you hear
said?”

I give a slight cough. “No, I’m sorry... what was that?”
conduct Jenna frowns but a knock on the door captures both our attentio
walks in, a notepad in hand and a pen poised. “I’m sorry to disturb yo
biggestNorcross, but Sandy Creighton’s secretary just called, and she’s not g
veryonebe able to make lunch today. Apparently, nasty flu. Would you like
nth willgrab you something to eat?”

Truth be told, I’m grateful Sandy canceled. It was to discuss final
: hours.on a charity dinner the Titans’ organization is holding on Friday. Man
ain likeplayers will be there, and tickets to sit one-on-one with them for dinne
t. event are selling for two thousand apiece. Norcross Holdings will mat
and it’sdonations, and all proceeds will go to the children’s hospital I
Pittsburgh, for whom Sandy serves as a board member. The details are
ke gavemuch ironed out, and I know Sandy only wants to do lunch to lobby fo
money for the hospital.

Sure, I’ll give it, but I don’t want to have to sit through lunch w
him offDespite being a very effective fundraiser, she’s one of the cattiest w
od helpknow. Conversation with her is like driving splinters under my nails.

“I’m good, Tina. Thank you for offering.”
irsts of “Yes, ma’am,” she says as she backs out and closes the door.
“Come to lunch with us,” Jenna says.

atching My gaze snaps from the closed door to Jenna. “Excuse me?”
and he “We’re taking Tillie out to lunch. She’s heading home in a fe
She’s been spending all her free time with Coen, which is understa
s to seesince they’re trying this long-distance dating thing, but we managed
him anher for an hour. It’s me, Harlow, and Sophie, just some fun girl time.”

o reason Yeah... I don’t do girl time. “I don’t want to impose.”
cted me “You’re not imposing,” she insists and then levels me with a dire
ery andthat seems to punch right into my soul. “And besides, if I can say so
getting fired, I’ve never met anyone who needs girl time more than yo
ing my That catches me off guard, but it would never get Jenna fired. I li
honesty. “Really?” I ask, now curious.

with no Jenna rolls her eyes. “You work too hard and carry a lot of we

pleasure your shoulders. As far as I can tell, I'm your only girlfriend, and I'm l
oo. we're able to sneak a drink or dinner once a month. You need to ste
what I from CEO mode and let your hair down. Sometimes it's nice to lau
have a good time for no other purpose than laughing and having
time."

n. Tina "It sounds frivolous," I mutter.

ou, Ms. Jenna laughs. "You're coming to lunch with us. Besides, I know
going to got to be curious for the inside scoop on the players. We'll let you in
e me to the juicy details."

That piques my interest. I wonder if I'll learn anything about Drake
details *Christ, Brienne... let it go.*

y of the Let *him* go.

r at the Just have some girl time.

ch final I offer Jenna a genuine smile and decide to trust that she knows
here in might need, because I know she cares for me the way I care for he
e pretty right... count me in."

or more



ith her.

omen I As I FOLLOW Jenna through the restaurant, we get a few curious looks.
not be as entertaining as one of the hockey players walking throu
people know who I am.

The woman who rebuilt the Titans.

Jenna ignores the looks and stares, as do I, as we walk behind the
d' toward the table where our lunch companions await. As we approac
surprise on their faces—Harlow with her flaming red hair that wou
heads faster than any hockey player, and Tillie and Sophie, looking s
alike with their blond curls, except one is golden and the other muc
Clearly, Jenna didn't tell them I'd be joining.

Even though they're shocked to see me, their smiles immediately t
just welcoming but excited.

Sophie stands first—she's the one I know the best after Jenna sin
known her the longest. We've had nice talks at various events last sea
at the welcome-back party.

"Oh my gosh... this is a great surprise," she exclaims, and I'm r
what to do when she rounds the table and hugs me.

lucky if I return it, of course, but I hadn't anticipated this warm of a welcome away from you. "I was just telling Jenna the other day I wish you'd join us sooner or later. We're so jealous when she gets to have drinks and dinner with you." "I know I must look like a deer in the headlights, because it floors me every time she's being genuine."

She wants to hang out with me, and that's not something I've had from any other woman before. At least not sincerely. Lots of people want to hang out with me because they want something—like Sandy Creighton today.

"Thank you for having me," I say and motion for her to sit back down. She smiles to Tillie and Harlow. "I don't know the last time I just had a good lunch."

"It had to have been before I came to work for you, which was several months ago, because I've never seen you do it," Jenna says with a laugh. "What I do is take an empty chair, rest my napkin on my lap, and shoot her a look. "All right, okay, truth be told... I don't have girlfriends I hang out with."

"I know you can't be against friends," Harlow muses. "You're too busy. I'm going to guess you don't have time."

Nodding, I reach for my filled water goblet. "If any of you know how to find an extra five hours in the day, let me know. I'd pay top dollar for it."

I might as well. They laugh, and it makes me laugh. "My date with these ladies will go down as one of the best outings I've had in a very long time. They're all just so... easy. Kind, funny, witty, and engaging, they make me feel like one of them and not someone who sits in an ivory tower bathing in my billions."

None of them seem intimidated by me, and that's a gift more precious than gold.

"Tillie," I say, looking across the table at the woman who goes by the name of Highsmith's head out of his ass. A certified miracle worker, in my opinion. "I heard you're heading back to Coudersport soon. I'm thinking maybe I should offer you a job here so you can keep Coen straight."

She snickers and shakes her head. "I'm heading back tomorrow, but I'm doing fine on his own right now. Although there's no doubt things would be a lot easier if I lived here."

"You're an artist, right?" I ask, pushing my empty plate away. "I don't remember the last time I finished a meal as I'm usually working. I'm not sure I'm eating, and sometimes I forget to eat altogether."

ne. “Watercolors, mostly, but I dabble in other things.”

netime. “Is there a reason you can’t move here with Coen? It seems like I could paint from anywhere.”

me that Tillie wipes her mouth with her napkin and drapes it across her lap.

“I’ve just opened an art studio where I give free lessons, so I’ve committed to it. But I’ll come stay here as much as I can when Coen has home to meet. He’ll come to Coudersport when he can.”

“It’s truly amazing, the change in Coen.” I’ve got a lot of admiration for this woman. Until Coen, I’d never met anyone who’d been spiraling so far. I didn’t think there was a way to save him. “I know it’s going to be hard on you both.”

s seven “Don’t you think it’s interesting,” Harlow drawls as she drums her fingers on the table, “we have four women here who caused the fall of confirmed bachelors. We’re pretty badass.”

I agree.

o nice. Jenna shakes her head. “Speak for yourself, but Gage wasn’t a confirmed bachelor. He never liked playing the field.”

how to “Neither did Baden,” Sophie says.

it.” Harlow snorts and looks at Tillie, who shrugs. “Well then, Tillie and I are badass because Stone and Coen were definitely players both on and off. We’ve had it.”

ty, and “Word,” Tillie says and holds out her fist for Harlow to bump.

ts in an That right there... that easy interplay between them—and these ladies had met within the last two weeks.

recious I want that.

“Whether they were players or not,” Jenna says, drawing our gaze to Coenway, “some men are just ready to fall. I’d say Coen and Stone were really in a bad way.”

nion. “I’ll tell you someone who is not ready to fall,” says Sophie, leaning back and lowering her voice. “Drake McGinn. He’s been so burned by the divorce and his ex-wife, it worries me that he won’t be able to bond with the twins.”

out he’s Now, that assertion perks me right up.

uld be a Sophie’s eyes are sad. “Baden says he’s a great guy who has had some pretty shitty things done to him.”

. I also “I know the guys are putting extra effort into it his way,” Harlow adds. I smile while that is super sweet and not at all surprising—we have a great group of guys here.

“But he’s being a bit reclusive. They’ve invited him to go out after school.”

single game and even on some non-game nights, but he declines. Says like you other plans, but he doesn't know anyone here, so I don't think that's it.

I choke on my sip of water and tumble into a coughing fit. All four plate stare at me with concern.

mitted to "Are you okay?" Jenna asks, patting me on the back as I bring my games to my mouth.

No, I'm not okay. Drake isn't going out with his teammates because of hooking up with me.

o badly "Fine," I wheeze as I nod. Waving my hand, I motion for them to hard on continue talking.

"He's probably got a lady friend already." Harlow laughs. "Which fingers she'd much rather be doing that than hanging with the guys."

of four "He'll come around," Sophie says. "Besides, all our guys fell. Drake needs someone to wash away the bad taste his ex-wife left behind. He's not to trust again."

confirmed "Yeah," Jenna says and gives me a warm look. "Brienne already trusts to trust her and take a chance on the team. He's open-minded."

Thank God I'm not taking another sip as I'd choke on that, as well as I am. He is in no way open-minded. He's completely closed off.

off the His teammates have the best chance of making him see the good there, that he can create trusting bonds.

It's definitely not going to be me.

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"He's probably got a lady friend already." Harlow laughs. "Which means he'd much rather be doing that than hanging with the guys."

"He'll come around," Sophie says. "Besides, all our guys fell. Drake just needs someone to wash away the bad taste his ex-wife left behind. He'll learn to trust again."

"Yeah," Jenna says and gives me a warm look. "Brienne already got him to trust her and take a chance on the team. He's open-minded."

Thank God I'm not taking another sip as I'd choke on that, as well. Drake is in no way open-minded. He's completely closed off.

His teammates have the best chance of making him see the good out there, that he can create trusting bonds.

It's definitely not going to be me.

CHAPTER 12

Drake

I GLANCE UP at the clock ticking down on the massive scoreboard above the ice. In twenty-three seconds, the Titans will take their first loss of the season.

I'm on the bench tonight as Baden wanted to see how Kace Elliot perform for an entire three periods. The kid is good, and if I had to bet on who would earn the slot on the team over Patrick Stenlund, I'd bet on Kace. Baden already counts on me that I'd have the primary slot, even though the final determination hasn't been made public yet. I think that's just a matter of us being long-time friends, plus it's a confidence he knows I wouldn't disclose.

I'm not being cocky when I say the primary slot should be mine. I've been on fucking fire every time I stepped out on the ice, and I know I have the desire and drive to show all those fuckers in the league who want me that they made a mistake.

My eyes drift from the scoreboard to the owner's box that sits behind the first and second tiers of the arena.

People mill about inside, silhouettes because of the box's back lighting. I assume one of those people is the gorgeous but frustrating Brienne Neill. I can't imagine she'd miss a home game.

The woman confounds me. It's been three days since I've heard from her. It's been ten days since she left that first note in my cubby in New York City, and every afternoon for seven days after, she texted me invitations to dinner. The invitations quickly morphed into an inside joke. *If you want to stick it to the league,*

Code for sticking it to her, which I very much want to do any opportunity I get.

But it's been three days of silence, and because I'm a man and women never want to insinuate that this means anything more to me than a homecoming, I haven't reached out to her.

That's not how we play the game.

When I left her house three mornings ago, I assumed things would be the same. We don't make plans, and I told her I wouldn't be able to be on most nights because of my boys. She was cool with that. We're both to do our own thing, and we don't owe each other explanations.

And yet, it's bugging the shit out of me she's gone silent.

The buzzer sounds, and although any loss is disappointing, the fans in the arena don't act like we've lost. Their cheers are deafening and supportive of me. We exit the ice.

The one thing that has amazed me since joining the Titans is the reason the fans bring to every game. It was obvious when I watched them on the edge my season after the crash that everyone was so grateful to have a team, and excitement was actually palpable through the TV screen. That fanatical love for their team has not diminished in the off-season. Even though I lost the preseason game and we lost, the arena shakes as the fans scream and sing "Titans, Titans, Titans!"

Usually in preseason, by the end of a losing game, nearly half the arena will have emptied out just from people wanting to get a jump on traffic. I've never look around, the stands are almost completely full, a testament to how our supporters are.

When we near the locker rooms, Baden falls into step beside me. "Between second?"

"Yeah," I reply, moving off to the side so the other players can pass. "What did you think?" he asks quietly, arms crossed over his chest. He's asking me about Kace.

"I would take him over Patrik any day. Not to be an asshole about Patrik doesn't have what it takes to make it in this league. He's inconsistent, and you never know what you're going to get. Kace is from New York City, but he's got a steadiness that's very impressive for his age."

"I'm thinking the same," Baden says with a nod, smiling at other as they walk past. "I just wanted to get your take on it. Thanks."

"Anytime."

It makes me feel good that Baden asks my opinion. It's a bit of a bump, and I make my way to my cubby.

The first thing I do when I reach my locker isn't undress but get my phone off the top shelf. I unlock the screen and open my texts—there

ould stay from my sister Kiera.

see her *The Titans played a great game. They would've won if you'd been in net.*

both free I smile because my sister is my biggest fan, even though she knows preseason and all the players are getting their shot on the ice. But they always think I'm the best and want me out there a hundred percent of the time.

relative as I shoot her a heart emoji and then add, *The boys all good?*
All tucked into bed and sound asleep, she replies.

of fervor I send a thumbs up emoji. *I'll call them in the morning.*

TV last I'm disgruntled that's the only text. Nothing from Brienne.

and that "Hey, McGinn... up for a beer tonight? We're tired of you saying I'm

sm and I glance over and see Stone with his sweater off, removing his hands
this is a look back to my phone, almost willing a text to appear.

I chant, It doesn't.

"Yeah, man. I'm up for beer."

the arena

ic. As I

w great



COEN, STONE, BOONE, and I share a table at Mario's, which is traditionally where the players hang out after a home game win. Yeah, we lost tonight, but the stakes aren't as high for us as a team. Individually, yes... preseason is stressful as it's when final determinations are made about who will make the team and who goes. It's safe to say Coen, Stone, Boone, and I were all worried about our spots. Boone had stepped into Coen's place on the first night, but when Coen got suspended, but now that he's back, he's been killing everyone's tonight wing, the spot vacated when Gage moved to the coaching staff.

is green, "It's about time you came out with us," Boone grouches to me as the waitress brings our beers.

players I take a sip and look around the place. It's nice, but crowded, and I've done the limelight stuff in forever. I've tried to avoid attention, given the shitty experiences I've had this past year.

a balm "Admit it," Stone says, punching me in the shoulder, a smirk on his face. "You have someone you've been seeing on the side. It's why you're ditching us after games."

grab my "What?" I exclaim, eyebrows raised as I try to look offended and surprised at the same time. "No fucking way."

An absolute lie, but no way in hell can I explain this thing with E
What we're doing is forbidden.

s this is I think.

t she'll Not sure, but it's absolutely something that cannot get out.

of the "I've just been trying to unpack and get everything settled before t
arrive." It's a partial truth, as I have been unpacking a bit each day,
can.

"Remind me how old your kids are?" Coen asks. I have to s
expected him to be an asshole based on how he acted last season, b
one of the chilliest dudes.

no." "Jake is almost seven, and my twins, Colby and Tanner, are five."

pads. I "Jesus... twins?" Coen's eyes are wide and awestruck. "That's g
all kinds of awesome and terrifying at the same time."

Laughing, I shake my head. "Honestly... I've learned to roll w
punches trying to raise three little boys."

"Three sounds like a good number," Coen muses.

"Not even dating but a few months, and you're already thinking o
Boone teases.

tionally Coen shrugs. "I'd love to talk Tillie into moving here permanently
ght, but the season. I haven't really thought past trying to figure out how to m
ason is long-distance thing work."

stay on I feel like I've become a bit of an expert over the last year on figur
I aren't how to make things work, so I give unsolicited advice. "Compromis
irst linework, patience, and a whole lot of humility."

ig it on "That's your formula?" Stone asks.

"It's not the entire formula, but those are the main ingredients."

fter the "You should write a fucking self-help book, dude." Stone laughs
raising three kids on your own has toughened you up so that you can
I've not anything."

ven the I chuckle because raising these boys is the hardest thing I've ever
my life. "That's one way to look at it."

is face. It's also the most rewarding, so it goes without saying I don't r
always single fucking heartache or frustration. I don't even regret Crystal l
she gave birth to my boys who hold every inch of my heart.

hocked "So, what do you guys think about how the team's shaping up?"
asks, and just like that, we're talking hockey. That's par for the cours

Brienne going out with teammates. You're either talking hockey or getting laid. Coen and Stone are in committed relationships, and I'm sure as hell not getting laid tonight, hockey is where we stay.

Although maybe I should get laid.

The boys That would probably end this obsession with Brienne. I glance around when I notice several hot women, a few who are overtly staring at our tab and our calculated looks. I could crook a finger and one of them would be in my hand today, I'dtonight.

But he's The waitress appears. "You guys ready for another round?"

Stone drains the rest of his beer and sets the bottle down. "I'm heading home to Harlow who's far better company than you losers." Boone catches the move and shakes his head. "No way, asshole. You're staying out tonight since your honor is with the here."

"I'm beat, man," Coen says, but I can tell that's not why he wants to leave. This isn't his scene anymore.

Of kids," Boone's head swings my way. "It's you and me, man." He looks across the bar shoulder at two women a couple tables over. They stare back at him for a few seconds during miles of invitation. His eyes come back to me. "We'll both score tonight, I'll make the take the I clap Boone on the shoulder. "Sorry, man. I'm out too, but I think I can handle both those ladies on your own. Double the fun."

Going out "You guys suck," Boone mutters, but then turns to the waitress, who has been patiently waited for us to decide what to do. He jerks his head toward the women. "I'll take another beer and buy them a round."

We all rise from our stools and pull money out, including a general tip for the waitress. We leave Boone behind and make the short walk back to the arena. "I bet arena and the players' parking lot."

Handle "Glad you came out with us," Stone says as he pulls his keys from his pocket.

Done in "Only three more days until my boys come home, so don't count on this being a frequent thing."

Regret a "Away games," Coen says with a grin. "You can come out and watch because during away games."

"That I can do," I say, especially since it appears I'm not going to see Brienne anymore. The thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. "See you guys tomorrow."

l. Since I head toward the Tahoe SUV I purchased last week. I'd brought t
it out todown to Pittsburgh when I moved here and left another Tahoe back h

Kiera. The boys are all still in car seats, and the Tahoe is safer than her

After settling behind the wheel, I inhale the fragrance of new leat
around,release my breath slowly.

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my bed I'm not ready to sleep.

But more important than the things I don't want is the one thing
very much right now.

'm out. Resolving myself, I put the Tahoe in drive and head to Brienne's h

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I head toward the Tahoe SUV I purchased last week. I'd brought the bike down to Pittsburgh when I moved here and left another Tahoe back home for Kiera. The boys are all still in car seats, and the Tahoe is safer than her car.

After settling behind the wheel, I inhale the fragrance of new leather and release my breath slowly.

I don't want to go home.

I'm not ready to sleep.

But more important than the things I don't want is the one thing I want very much right now.

Resolving myself, I put the Tahoe in drive and head to Brienne's house.

CHAPTER 13

Drake

IT'S NEARLY TWELVE thirty in the morning when I pull into Brienne's driveway. It's fifty-fifty whether she'll be awake. I know the woman on barely five hours of sleep a night—after seven days in bed together learn a few things.

I might know her sleep schedule, but I don't know if she's even awake. She might be out with other people following the game, or she could be at another man's house.

Hell, there could be another man in *her* house with her right now. In the case, things are about to get really awkward.

As I stop my Tahoe and cut the engine, the one thing that gives me confidence that she is indeed awake and not with another man is that I see the light from her home office. It's situated in the L-crook of the west side of the driveway, although from this angle, I cannot see the desk where she'd be sitting.

Chances are slim, but I suppose she could be in there with another man. The thought makes me want to punch something, especially since I'm playing with herself sitting in that big leather executive chair. I feel possessive of that area, having claimed it as my own, although I don't know if I'm talking about the actual office or Brienne's body.

Maybe both.

It's all fucked up in my head.

I exit my vehicle, walk to the double arched doors, and press the doorbell. That gong-like sound reverberates through the house, and I wait patiently because her office isn't just a few feet away. I hear nothing from inside, which wouldn't really be surprising as the doors are solid wood and thick as hell.

The door unlatches and swings open, revealing Brienne standing in the doorway. I'm actually shocked to see her wearing a pair of loose, drawstring bottoms and a faded concert T-shirt.

I've only ever seen Brienne in her executive-chic wardrobe or when

naked in bed with me. It's not that I didn't think she wore pajamas. I never thought about it until this second, but I assumed a billionaire wears silk and designer labels to bed, not a T-shirt that's clearly seen in the laundry of wash cycles.

I looked pointedly at her chest. "Shinedown?"

Her expression and tone are flat. "My favorite band. What are you doing here?"

Brienne's eyes didn't seem the type who would ghost me.

"Ghost you?" she asks with a frown.

"You didn't text me today. You didn't invite me over."

Brienne makes no move to welcome me in and crosses her arms over her chest. "You can't ghost someone if there wasn't an expectation of contact."

We never made any promises to each other, and we never made any promises.

I rub thoughtfully at my beard as I give her an understanding nod. "I see where you're coming from." I step into her, and she moves back.

I cross the threshold and reverse her into her foyer, shutting the door behind me.

"But I disagree on the promise thing."

Her eyes shimmer with curiosity as she cocks her head. "I don't remember any promises."

I shake my head slowly, disappointment evident in my tone as I read her expression.

"Come on, Brienne. There was an implied promise." I dip even closer.

"A promise that I'd make you feel my voice husky with seduction. That I'd blind you with lust. That I'd shred you. Don't tell me you don't want me to fulfill it."

She takes in a shaky breath. "I'm not a liar, so I can't say I don't want you."

"But I don't need it. And neither do you."

I straighten slightly, frowning at her. "Cryptic much?"

Brienne tosses her hand in a careless wave. "You should be spending time with your teammates. Besides... this was going to end, anyway."

"No," I say darkly, reaching out to touch a lock of her silvery hair. "It wasn't. It was going to change because my boys are coming home."

"It wasn't going to end. We'll work around it."

"It's not a good idea to—"

My hands go to her shoulders and my mouth slams down on hers. "I'll get her to shut up."

Truly, I She melts into me, and I slide one hand to her nape and the other wouldher belly before inching down into her loose pants. She trembles as sharefingertips flirt with the edge of her panties. I break the kiss and stare at her, but her eyes lock on my chest, as if she's afraid to meet my gaze.

“Do you want me to leave?” I ask softly.

u doing “Yes,” she breathes out, still refusing to look at me, but I hear through her voice.

s. “You Chuckling, I slip my hand all the way into her panties and cup her ass. “I don't think you do.”

Hips flexing involuntarily, she tries to press into my touch. I don't touch her, rubbing my finger through the wet folds, barely grazing her clitoris. “I don't want me here,” I say triumphantly.

contact. Tipping her head back, the hazy fog of lust clears, and a gasp of determination takes root.

. “I can I don't like it.

I cross “My body clearly wants you, but my brain doesn't.” Her words are meant to scrape some control back for herself.

Part of me loves that response because she only mentions her body, not her heart. I don't want that useless organ involved.

But another part of me hates that she's using her brain, because she's in a fight against mine, I'm way outmatched.

closer, The most I can hope for is that I'm able to strip the common sense from her by appealing to her body. I push a finger into her, gritting my teeth over the fact that I don't want fucking warm and tight she is. Her muscles contract around my invading finger. My cock presses painfully against my zipper in a very pronounced desire to feel all that wet heat.

“Drake,” she gasps, her hands coming up to clutch at my dress shirt. I'm still wearing my suit, which is required on game day, minus the jacket I left in the car. “This isn't a good idea.”

I pump my finger in and out slowly, pressing my lips to her temple. “It's the best fucking idea either of us has had all day, and you know that, but it couldn't deny it if you tried, because I can feel right now just how much I want this.”

She groans, grips my shirt hard, and her forehead falls onto my chest. Just at that moment of tenderness hits me that she's unable to fight it, because Brandy is the type of woman who can do anything she sets her mind to. It makes

r skims feel powerful to know she can't resist what I'm doing to her, but I also as my this comes at a cost to her pride.

lown at I grip the back of her neck, dip down, and kiss the top of her head. beat yourself up. I'm not giving you much choice here."

Head snapping back, she doesn't try to pull away but simply glare. e lie didn't want you, you would never have me. I always have a choice, no what your magic finger might be doing to me right now."

pussy. It's a risk, admittedly, but I need Brienne to own up to her desire v out over practicality and professionalism. Slowly, I withdraw fr 't deny panties and step back. Her hands fall away from my chest.

t. "You "Magic finger is gone." I lift it to my mouth and lick her essence with relish. She groans and closes her eyes against the sight. "Now tel glint of leave."

Breath frozen in my chest, I wait for her to decide. If she tells leave, not sure I can obey her. I'd try to convince her again because e sharp, her too bad.

"This has disaster written all over it," Brienne says with a sigh. ain and enough of a green light for me. It's that sigh of capitulation that prop back into her, my hands framing her face for a searing kiss.

stacked Her hands clap around my wrists to hold me there, and she groa my mouth as our tongues slash against each other. The knowledge she se away this as badly as I do sends a lustful, electric pulse straight to my balls.

er how I tear my mouth away, looking around. Grand sweeping staircase on, and her, which would be uncomfortable as fuck, master dining room with esire to for twenty to the left, which I could get on board with bending her formal sitting room to the right, but the furniture would break. I kr irt. I'm master suite and office are behind the staircase to the right, and the ki and tie on the left.

Which way to go?

le. "It's "Out back," she says, and my eyes snap to hers. "Back pati it. You clarifies, pulling from my hold and taking my hand. She leads me aro ch you left of the staircase but rather than veer toward the kitchen, she through a wide alcove to another large sitting area with a vaulted ceiling hest. A space has been designed for comfort with thick cushioned chairs and ienne's large fireplace against one wall, and another wall with two sto kes me bookcases split by a walkway. It's accessed by an iron spiral staircase,

o know I look over my shoulder, I see the bookcases wrap around the wall of
alcove we just came through.

“Don’t On the opposite side are paned, floor-to-ceiling windows and the
so massive, it has two sets of French double doors that lead outside.
es. “If I glows softly, as well as hard- and softscapes revealed with strate
matter placed ambient lights.

Brienne leads me to one set of doors, her grip on my hand ass
winning strength, her skin soft as silk. My eyes drift down to the completely c
om her pajamas she has on, and I decide I like this look on her. She’s not the
ice princess of the boardroom or the seductive siren when she’s naked
e away This Brienne looks a lot like me.

ll me to She doesn’t speak but leads me around the curved pool surround
boulders and lush plants. On one end is a small mountain of well-plac
; me to from which a waterfall pours into the pool.

I want A guest house sits back on the right, a smaller replica of the main l
think she might be taking me there, but then she veers off into the ya
That’s on the cooler side tonight—probably low sixties—and I wonder if she
pels me Part of me wishes I hadn’t left my suit jacket in my SUV, as I cou
offered it to her.

ins into I also regret leaving my tie, because I could have tied her up.

e wants “Here,” she says, dropping my hand as she nods at a piece of
outdoor furniture. It’s a sofa, completely circular, and large enough
behind three people easily—or one large hockey player and a sassy CEO. I
a table half-domed canopy to provide shade, which is connected to a raise
over, a covered in pillows.

ow the I hike an eyebrow and smirk. “You want to fuck out here?”

itchen’s “I want *you* to fuck *me* out here.” She tips her head back to a dar
sky that’s not watered down from the city lights, the view unencumb
trees. “I want to watch the stars while you make me come.”

o,” she Jesus fucking Christ.

und the Her words almost bring me to my knees. Seductive, wicked... beau
moves Any thoughts I had about bending her over are quashed, but I don
ig. This at all. A naked Brienne splayed out on those cushions with her hands
sofas, at my hair, my face buried between her legs, and her eyes reflect
ries of starlight... it’s almost too much to bear.

, and as “Get naked,” I tell her as I start to unbutton my shirt. I glance arou

ver the I can't get an idea if any neighbors are close by. The landsc
established and mature with trees and large bushes. I can't see any ho
room is up nearby and only hear crickets chirping feebly against the incoming
A pool coolness.

egically I stall as I watch Brienne pull off her T-shirt, my eyes zeroing in
breasts. Going to have my teeth there too.

ured in She shimmies out of her pajama bottoms and panties, stepping fro
ommon and coming straight at me. Her fingers go to the buttons of my shirt, a
perfect moves me along.

in bed. Knocked out of my stupor over the fact she looks like a goddess ba
moonlight, I grab my wallet and pull out a condom.

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I can't get an idea if any neighbors are close by. The landscaping is established and mature with trees and large bushes. I can't see any houses lit up nearby and only hear crickets chirping feebly against the incoming autumn coolness.

I stall as I watch Brienne pull off her T-shirt, my eyes zeroing in on her breasts. Going to have my teeth there too.

She shimmies out of her pajama bottoms and panties, stepping from them and coming straight at me. Her fingers go to the buttons of my shirt, and she moves me along.

Knocked out of my stupor over the fact she looks like a goddess bathed in moonlight, I grab my wallet and pull out a condom.

"Get two," she says without breaking stride as she peels my shirt apart. Grinning, I follow orders.

CHAPTER 14

Brienne

THE CHARITY DINNER for the children's hospital was something Adam seven years ago. It was one of many charities he donated to, both individual and as the head of the Titans' organization, but this was one he leveraged the power of his hockey stars to raise funds.

Who knew that people would pay such big money to have a few h one-on-one time with their hockey heroes? Granted, only the wealthy afford to pay two thousand dollars for a private dinner, although I put five plates myself and gave them to fans who wouldn't ordinarily have a chance to attend such an event.

Held in the dramatic foyer of the Carnegie Music Hall, the event was an elegance. Capable of serving up to five hundred for special dinners, the hall is a feast for the eyes with its fifty-foot ceilings supported by massive pillars and three-tiered chandeliers dripping with crystals. The ornate décor could never be considered over-the-top for the amount of money flowing through here tonight.

It's a formal, black-tie gathering, and I chose an ivory Valentino gown. The bodice has a boned corset that will keep my posture honest. The folds in soft vertical pleats from my lower back to the floor. It's made of silk and the skirt is so light and soft, it floats outward when I walk.

At the entry to Carnegie Music Hall, a backdrop for pictures has been set up. I'm so used to these events over the years, I don't hesitate to put one hand on my hip while the other hangs loose and relaxed at my side, holding my crystal-studded clutch just large enough for my cell phone, lipstick, and credit card.

"There you are," Sandy Creighton croons as I enter the large foyer. The event truly went all out. I take in the spread of small tables set with fine china and crystal, each with only two settings so every donor gets an intimate dinner with a hockey player. A four-piece string ensemble is

one end of the hall, although the event hasn't commenced yet. A fifteen minutes and the guests will start arriving.

"How are you feeling?" I ask as she leans in and gives me an air each cheek.

"Much better." She loops her arm around mine and walks me through the hall. "Just a little bug, but I'm good now. The reason I wanted to have you here with you was to inquire if Norcross Holdings would perhaps do a million-dollar donation to the funds raised."

Just like I called it. I knew the request was coming, and I'm prepared to answer. Most would think, given the billions my companies generate, I wouldn't have any problem with tossing out a match to whatever is requested tonight. But I'm not able to make charitable donations whenever I want. Norcross Holdings donates millions each year, but that's handled by the executive charitable board, and there is a vetting process.

Still, this was Adam's baby, and I came prepared to make it work. "I can't pledge a company donation of that size without executive approval, Sandy, but I'm personally prepared to donate double the amount raised. Tell me the final number, and I'll get a check over to you."

Sandy beams and hugs me, throwing out effusive gratitude. We move through the space to check last-minute details with the caterers, bartenders, and waitstaff. I stop and talk with other board members who've arrived early, which includes a quick hello to Clay who's also on the charity's board. I'm happy he brought a date—I only want what's best for him.

The doors open, and donors and hockey players stream in. Attendance for this wasn't mandatory, but from what Callum told me, almost every executive would be on the list. I didn't ask who hadn't because I'm pretty sure Drake's boys are arriving tomorrow, and I know he'll have things to do to prepare for them.

At least that's what he told me last night when he left. I didn't invite him to stay the night, and he didn't offer, but we spent a few hours on the sofa where he did, indeed, fuck me twice. It got chilly, but we pulled out blankets from the pool house, and while Drake recovered for round two, I laid on our backs and watched the stars. He talked a lot about his kids, his sister, his excitement over their imminent arrival palpable.

I spy Jenna and Gage as they float in. Gage is actually sharing

Another with a donor, and Jenna will dine with me at one of the larger tables on the board members. They walk in my direction, and I can't help but be momentarily stunned by how kiss on how stunning and confident Jenna is. She's wearing a sapphire-blue dress with a deep V-cut and spaghetti straps. Her hair is piled in loose curls on top of her head, and her scars are visible to all who lay eyes on her.

During the lunch break, while some of it has to do with the hot hockey god beside her—the head coach—she's mostly walking with swagger tonight because she's learned to accept herself as she is. Her metamorphosis has been incredible, and I'm so proud of her.

As the night progresses, I and the other board members exchange greetings, and they amble off to get drinks. Until the 8:30 raised starts in half an hour, it's all about rubbing elbows and mingling.

I want to be a player in attendance to thank them for their time and commitment, as well as to thank the donors for their contributions. A few I know personally, and a true means I know they can afford more than two thousand dollars a plate. I encourage them to donate more. Sandy's going to love me by the time the amount is finished.

In fact, I see Senator Marlton up on the balcony level, which holds the dining tables and another bar. I can squeeze some money out of him for a later date. Lifting my dress, I traverse the stairs to the first landing, but before I can access the next flight, a hand touches my elbow. I turn to see Clay standing there, without his date. I blink in surprise and look at him inquiringly.

Best for me. He steps closer as he nods over his shoulder. "Glenna's in the bathroom. Thought I'd take a few minutes to say hello."

I beam at him. "I'm glad. She seems nice."

Clay shrugs. "She's convenient."

There's no way I can be offended on her behalf over that statement because at one time, Clay was convenient to me, just as I was to him. I'm sticking to the same lifestyle, and I can't blame him.

"How have you been?" he asks, tucking a hand into his slacks. Clay makes his fashion look effortless with his perfectly styled and fetched tailored formal wear.

"Busy," I reply with a laugh. "But that's nothing new, right? And you know it."

"Same," he says.

I start to ask him how the practice is doing, but the flash of a man's long blond hair catches my eye in the crowd below me, and I focus in.

set for Oh my God... Drake is here.
oved by It happens every time I see him—my pulse kicks into a mad gallop
e gownwearing a tux, same as everyone else, except he ditched the tie and
; on herwears his white dress shirt open at the collar so his tattoos are on display
normally wears his hair pulled back, but tonight it's loose and wavy, framing
-playerhis beautiful face. He looks amazing, and yet, I still prefer him any day
e she'sweek in his jeans and T-shirt.

dible to Drake stops to talk to a group of players near one of the bars, and
I should tear my eyes from him, but they seem to be stuck.

e dinner "... and it puts me in the horrible position of missing you. So
Glenna is convenient, but no one compares to you."

it every An electric shock has me wanting to snap my head Clay's way
well ashim what in the hell he's talking about, but at that moment, Drake's gaze
whichon me. He has a tall pilsner glass in hand, and there's no doubt the
te, so Ieyes lock with mine that he knew exactly where I was standing.

e this is Across the hall, through the crowd, I can feel the heat in his stare
with the man less than twenty-four hours ago, and he truly wore me
ls morenight, but I'm on fire for him again. Baden steps up beside him to talk
or sure.almost reluctantly, Drake turns his attention to him.

e I can They exchange a few words and then Drake looks back up to me
tandingweirdly, so does Baden. Drake nods, asks a question, and Baden responds.

Are they... talking about me? Has he told him about us?

hroom. "So I guess what I'm trying to get around to saying is..." Clay's
penetrates my fog of lust and curiosity. "Can I come home with you to
"What?" My head whips back to him. "Come home with me?"

Stepping in closer, Clay lowers his voice to a sexy rumble. "Let me
atementhome with you, Brienne." His hand rests on my hip and he squeezes
n. He's"You know it will be good. We're fire together."

No, we're really not. Not the way Drake and I are.

pocket. I look across to where Baden and Drake are talking, except they
air andtogether anymore. In fact, Drake is walking our way having apparently
ditched his beer, his eyes pointedly focused on Clay's hand on my hip.

ou?" Oh shit. My mind goes utterly blank.

Drake hits the first stair and trots up, his eyes pinned on Clay.

an with Clay sees Drake approaching and his hand falls away from my
because of any impropriety, but because he's swinging it out for a hand

“Holy shit,” Clay drawls as he grins. “Drake McGinn. I’m a huge fan.”
p. He’s Drake’s eyes are steely as he reaches us on the landing, and I can s
insteadis expression that he wants to punch Clay. Instead, he accepts his har
lay. Heshake and asks, “And you are?”

raming “Clay Bessel. I’m a dear friend of Brienne’s and also serve on the
y of thefor this charity.”

As Clay reveals his name, I swear I see flames in Drake’s eyes. I
I knowlocks and Clay lets out a bit of a yelp as he pulls free from Drake’s grip

Laughing nervously, Clay rubs his hand. “Hey, hey... you got a
o yeah,shake there, buddy, but these are surgeon’s hands and can’t be damage

Offering a tight smile of apology, Drake inclines his head. “S
and askdidn’t realize they were that delicate.”

ize falls I look at Drake in horror because that was a blatant insult to
way hismasculinity, but it seems to go right over his head. Clay laughs and v

his fingers. “They perform delicate procedures. I operate on brains and
e. I wascords.”

out last I have to suppress my grimace because that just comes off as irr
ilk and,and pompous and I’m afraid Drake will hurl another backhanded insult

Instead, he gives Clay a genuine smile. “Listen... do you mind if I
ne, andMs. Norcross? I need to discuss something urgent with her.”

nds. My eyes bug out in shock. I don’t want to be alone with Drake whe
sense dark vibes coming off him, and I’m pretty sure my panties are v
s voicefrom that inappropriate but hot jealous caveman display. “Surely it c
night?”for office hours,” I say with a sweet smile.

“Actually,” he says, eyes coming to mine, “it’s a news-related item
ie comeknow you wouldn’t want to wait to hear about it.”

gently. News-related item? About the drama with his wife from last year?

“No problem,” Clay says, clapping Drake on the shoulder. “I’m g
get another drink. Brienne, do you want one?”

r’re not I shake my head. “I’m good.”

arently Clay’s eyes darken with intent. “We’ll finish our talk later.”

My smile weakens and I can barely hold it in place as Clay tu
walks away.

Drake snags a passing waiter, pulling a glass of champagne fr
ne, notguy’s tray, and hands it to me. We move over to let other people by us
dshake.wide landing. He stands casually to my side so we’re almost shou

shoulder in dual postures of casual, light conversation.
see it in “You said there was a news item?” I ask, glancing out at the crowd for another daring to look at Drake.

“Yeah.” His tone tight and slightly brittle. “A big news item.”
I turn to look at him with dread, and his eyes meet mine, hard and unyielding. “It’s actually more of a news flash. If Dr. Bessel puts his hand on your jaw again, I’ll break his delicate little surgeon’s fingers.”

God, that’s so hot I might just go up in flames right now, but I push my strong feelings aside. “You have no say over who touches me. We agreed.”

“I’m adding strings,” he growls, dipping his head toward me, anyone’s watching, they know this conversation just turned serious.

Clay’s we’re fucking, you don’t fuck anyone else.”
This is a different attitude, but I go with it. Drake has the distinct thrill of spinal always making me feel impetuous.

“And the same goes for you?”
His expression tells me he thinks that’s a stupid question. “Of course it does.”

Okay... this is actually a serious conversation but not the place to step back, draw in a breath, and contemplate.

I take a delicate sip of my champagne. What he’s suggesting is crossing all the boundaries we’d agreed to.

Hell, it’s fundamentally changing who I am, because while I had a relationship with Clay, he never would’ve gotten jealous over another woman, and IHe most certainly would never threaten to hurt someone who got in his way.

For the first time in my life, I feel not just wanted but... revered. I’ve never made me feel that way.

“Okay, then... we have an understanding.” I don’t dare look at him, instead let my attention roam over the crowd.

“Want to kiss on it?” he asks, and gone is the tightness in his voice.
I risk it, twisting my neck to look up at him. “No, I don’t want to be a spectacle. Not here, anyway.”

Drake grins at me. “Fair enough.” He starts to walk away, then leans back, he murmurs, “What time do you want me at your place on Thursday night?”

“Who says I’m inviting you?” I ask coolly, because while we m

agreeing to monogamy, it's still casual.

and "I did," he growls. "What time?"

I blink at him. "I thought you had some last-minute stuff to do ready for the boys."

and "It's mostly done. I can finish in the morning. What time?" he repeats

and I offer a dramatic sigh, but secretly I'm pleased. "I'll be home by ten

"I'll be there," he says and once again turns to descend the steps, with those come to another halt. "One more thing."

and "What's that?"

"Since the boys are coming, I won't be able to see you until Tuesday and away game. Are you going?"

"While "Yes," I reply, although I hadn't committed until just now.

"Perfect." His smile is licentious, and it makes my belly flip. I'm silent of champagne, hoping the bubbles will distract me. "Gives us both plenty of time to get tested and have results before then. I'm fucking you in Boston."

course it I suck in the bubbly right down my windpipe and start choking. He chuckles but taps me gently on the back until I get myself under control for it. I

He dips his head. "Glad the thought of it affects you the way it affects me.

I don't suppose there's any chance you'd let me drag you into one of our changing unisex bathrooms right now?"

"No," I exclaim, taking a step away from him and pasting on a casual smile. "No way. Now go away. You're bothering me."

er man. Drake laughs deeply and pivots. But then a thought occurs to me. "No way.

Stopping on the third step down, Drake turns and tips his head.

No man "Were you telling Baden about us?"

He shakes his head. "Just asking him if he knew the guy who was in my lim, but to you. When he told me it was Clay and I saw him touching you, I needed to stake my claim."

"You're a barbarian," I mutter.

kiss on "You have no idea." He winks and starts back down the stairs.

I watch him retreat but rather glance around to see if anyone noticed us.

I get no time before someone touches me on the shoulder—one of the housedonors—and I'm back in CEO mode, ready to relieve people of more money.

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CHAPTER 15

Drake

I GLANCE AT my watch for probably the fifth time in just as many minutes. I know it won't make my sister show up any faster. Just as I know sitting here on the porch with my eyes pinned down the street, waiting for her to come into view, won't hurry matters along.

I've never been away from my kids this long. It's been a tough weeks—one week for training camp and two weeks of preseason—but it was the best decision to leave them back in Red Wing with my sister and I could've tried to find a nanny, but it wasn't a good choice. My boys are going to be stressed out enough moving to a new place, and to have me leave them with a virtual stranger wasn't an option.

While Kiera wrapped up things back home—packing, working with her employer to set her up for remote work, and watching her nephew concentrate on getting through the first few hectic weeks on a new town in a new city.

But now that's all over. My family will be whole again very, very soon, and it feels like I am holding on to an electric fence. I'm so excited.

Even though the task of raising three kids on my own while also trying to deal with their strung-out, absent mother has been trying at times, I've bemoaned being a single dad. If anything, while the work of solo parenting is so demanding, I realized quickly that I was fucking cut out for this shit. My love for Jake, Colby, and Tanner is so deep and intense, just being around them is like a nonstop endorphin rush I've never felt before.

You've felt it since, says the little devil sitting on my shoulder.

He's not wrong. It's just a fact that being near Brienne ignites a flood of endorphins to rage through me, but I push those thoughts away. I'm still full of her last night after the charity dinner, and I can focus on her on Tuesday after our game in Boston.

Kiera's driving my old burgundy Tahoe, and it finally comes in

down the tree-lined street. My heart gallops as I push up off the porch vehicle drives closer.

The back window rolls down, and I see Colby waving at me madly a-d-d-e-e-e!” he yells, and I break into an all-out jog to the sidewalk Kiera parallel parks.

All three boys are yelling as I jerk the door open. Jake is the mor at getting himself out of his car seat in the third row, and next thing I nutes. He’s crawling over his brother and flinging himself at me.

Laughing, I wrap an arm under his butt to hold him to me, sp ing out moment to tickle his face with bearded kisses. Kiera’s at the other pa r car to door to free Tanner, and I continue to work at Colby’s harness one-ha h three

seems to take forever, but in only a few seconds, I’m holding all three t it was Jake on one hip, Colby on the other, and Tanner hanging off m mom. I with his arms locked in a death grip around my neck.

All three boys are crying—good, happy, emotional tears—and yea /s were re gone^{too}.

I flop us down on my small front lawn that’s starting to crisp in tl with her month of fall. I spend quality time letting them crawl over my chest a ews—I the ever-loving shit out of me.

Yeah... think I’ll just stay this way for eternity.

I look up and Kiera stands above us, a huge smile on her face. M y soon, is a replica of me. Only two years younger at twenty-six, she has th dark blond hair and ocean-blue eyes. She’s tall—but so was our d ying to passed away when we were kids.

I might have gotten the brawn in the family, but she got the brai e never breezed through her nursing degree and has been considering a nting is practitioner’s degree, but selflessly, that’s on hold while she helps n /y love them is the boys.

“How was the drive?” I ask as I sit up, trying to extricate myse their exuberance as they’ve now decided to wrestle with each other. I l restorm have at it as I know they’ve got to be going a little crazy after all that had my the car.

As they run around the yard, Kiera holds her hand out to me. “As r again they were all three asleep, it was awesome. When they were yelling to view other, not so much.”

I grab her hand and she helps haul me up but most of the effort is

and the part. I pull her straight into me for a hard hug. “I can never repay you for doing this for me.”

7. “D-a- She squeezes me tight. “There’s not anything I wouldn’t do for you and your wheremy hellion nephews.”

My eyes catch Colby running toward the sidewalk. “Halt,” I yell, and he adeptly stops mid stride. “You boys stay away from the sidewalk. Stay only on the sidewalk, grass, and you’re not allowed out front unless Aunt Kiera or me are with you. Understood?”

Colby and Tanner nod, but Jake, at a year and a half older, pouts. “Why can’t I come with you?”

“Yes, bud,” I say, releasing Kiera and scooping him up to tickle him. “Even you.”

“When can we play out here without you?” he asks after I set him down. “When you’re eighteen,” I drawl.

Jake screws up his face and stomps his foot. “That’s what you do to me, Dad. You take away everything.”

“Then stop asking questions you know the answers to,” I quip at him and give him a pat on the butt. “You can play in the backyard by yourself because it’s fenced in. I might have had a play set installed just like the one you have at home.”

All three boys scream in delight—something I’m sure girls do too. “I’ve never had a play set since because my boys are pretty vocal when excited—and race up the stairs to get to the front door.”

I wink at Kiera. “Come on. I’ll give you the grand tour.”

The house I bought is in an older neighborhood, but I wanted something close to the arena for convenience.

As we step inside, the kids take off running to explore. Kiera looks around before leveling a chastising look my way. “You didn’t get the furniture unpacked.”

I had everything packed and shipped here, but some boxes were still in untouched.

“But I got all the furniture arranged and all the beds put together,” I say. Her look becomes a glare. “I’m not good at putting out that knick-knack and hanging art. That’s your forte.”

“No, it’s not,” she says with a backhanded slap to my arm. “But you’re better at it than you.”

you for I take her elbow and steer her to the second floor and left down the stairs.
“This is your room.”

you and Kiera halts and refuses to step across the threshold. “I am not taking the
master suite. This is your house, and you’re paying for it.”

and he “You *are* taking the master suite because I’m going to be gone soon
and you’re going to be working and watching the boys. It’s not fair.”

“Drake,” she exclaims wearily. “This is too much.”
“Even “Oh, quit being a martyr,” I growl playfully and push her into the
hall. “Then yell down the stairs. “Okay, Wild Things... assemble.”

le him. More yelling and laughter, pounding feet, but no one comes up the
stairs. “Wild Things,” I yell again, this time louder. “You got until the count
down. three. One... two...”

Pounding feet now run up the stairs, grins on their red, sweaty faces.
say to “Come see your room,” I say as I move down the hall in the opposite
direction.

nd give They follow me into the largest guest room, which also leads to the
use it’s attached bonus room above the garage. I did away with their beds that
ad back in the moving truck and bought a triple bunk bed set. The boys shared
back home, given they were so close in age. They loved it and are still
, but I young to want their independence.

ie steps They didn’t have bunk beds, though, and they squeal when they see
“I get the top,” Jake yells.

“I want the top,” Colby says, making a beeline for the ladder that serves
nothing the top two levels.

“No, me,” Tanner says, grabbing onto his brother and pulling him back down.
a looks “Freeze frame,” I say in an even tone. I don’t need to shout it, and
t much rarely do I have to raise my voice for obedience issues. They know when
hear *freeze frame*, no matter what they’re doing, they’d better stop.

remain The consequence is a time-out, a brutal punishment for
rambunctious boys, or so I’ve been told.

I point All three stop, and Tanner lets Colby go.
knacky “Eyes on me.” They all turn my way, and Kiera walks in.

“Like a troupe of trained monkeys,” she says with admiration.
at I am I ignore her and squat to gather the boys in. “I know you each want
top bunk, so here’s what we’re going to do. Each week, we’re going to

he hall rotate.”

“What’s rotate?” Colby asks.

ing the “It means to take turns,” Jake says, his chin lifted in the air.

“Smarty pants.” I ruffle his hair fondly. “Yes, it means you w
o much turns. But Jake is the oldest, so he gets top bunk first. Then Tanner,
t’s only older than Colby by sixteen minutes, so you go next. Then Colby gets

Whoever starts at the top, the next week goes to the bottom and the ot
move up. Make sense?”

room. I All three boys nod.

“And,” I drawl, looking at them seriously, “if you Wild Things ca
e stairs trouble for Aunt Kiera, she’s going to take away the top bunk privile
ount of the offender.”

“You mean it’s a consequence?” Jake asks.

s. “That’s exactly what I mean.” I stand up, pointing toward the d
pposite that leads to the bonus room. “Now, who wants to see where all t
are?”

into an “Me!” they shriek and stampede off like a herd of bison.

at were Kiera laughs. “Well played on the bunk bed.”

a room I grin at her. “I’ve had a lot of time to think the last three weeks.”

still too “And you missed the hectic, fast-paced life of single fatherhoo
than you could ever put into words?” she guesses.

e them. “That’s the fucking truth,” I mutter. “Come on... let’s have a bee
was Mom when you left?”

services “Crying bitterly and threatening to move to Pittsburgh,” she says
head back down the stairs.

back. “I’ve told her to come. I’ll set her up in her own house, or we ca
in fact, bigger one for all of us.”

en they Kiera takes a seat at the kitchen table while I grab two beers fr
fridge. “I didn’t think she’d ever want to leave Red Wing because
: three church friends, but I don’t think she was kidding.”

“Good,” I say, uncapping and handing a bottle to my sister. “I’d
have her here.”

I settle into the adjacent chair, taking a sip of my brew. “You look

“I am,” she says with a soft sigh.

ant that “Well, I’ve got the boys covered all weekend outside of tomorrow’
oing to and practices. I’m leaving for Boston Tuesday morning.”

And... Brienne is back in my thoughts. I got my STD test today and should have the results by Monday. I expect it to be negative because I've been incredibly careful and never have unprotected sex.

Will take you're resumed the life of a single man. Not since Crystal, at any rate, and honestly, I've not wanted to

the top. Not until Brienne.

her two "Have you heard from Crystal?" Kiera asks, and that effectively banishes the blond siren from my brain.

I shake my head, picking at the label on the bottle. "Nope. You?"

use any "Not a word. Mom hasn't heard anything either."

reges for "Still trying to figure out if that's a good thing or a bad thing," I say, pulling off a strip of wet paper.

"A good thing," Kiera says acidly. She hates Crystal. Same as me, because of what she did to me, but what she's doing to our boys.

he toys "Did she ever reply to you when you told her you were moving to Pittsburgh?" Kiera asks.

"Not a peep." I tip the bottle back, take a deep swallow. I left my phone on her phone, with her mom, her attorney, and she never replied. "Tell me if you say anything about her the last few weeks? They haven't mentioned her name during our FaceTime calls."

Kiera shakes her head. "No. Which is why I'm glad she's not here. How picture. The longer she stays away, the better they can move on."

That's a struggle for me. Those kids loved Crystal—at least when she was as weak as I am now. Hell, maybe they still do, but they don't talk about her anymore. It didn't take them long to not necessarily forget her, but to let me get into who was left behind. Between me, Kiera, and my mom, they were a shit ton of love and stability. When Crystal pops back up, she causes a shit ton of trouble for them that security, and that's not something I will tolerate.

of her And when she does come to see them, she's not the most remembered. She knows the rule that she can't come to see them too often, so when she does show, she's twitchy and doesn't stay long, constantly looking at her watch until she can get her next fix. The boys see very tired." their mom wants to be somewhere else, and it breaks my heart.

So yeah... maybe it's best if she stays away for now.

's game "What's the social scene like around here?" Kiera asks. At twenty-five, single, and quite the serial dater back home, this is not a surprising que

lay and I shrug. "Haven't really been out."
ise I'm Not unless you count Brienne's house.
"Any hot single teammates?" she asks.
since I My eyes narrow, and I point a finger. "Don't even go there."
"Why not?" She pouts and leans back in her chair, an impish
forming. "You'd save me a whole lot of trouble barhopping and s
anishesleft."
Curling my lip in disdain, I ask, "Do you really use a dating app?"
She shrugs. "Weren't a lot of good choices in Red Wing, but Pittsb
a lot bigger. Then again, I'm not opposed to you hooking me up."
I muse, "Never in a million years would I do that," I mutter. "And I'm g
put out a news bulletin that I'll kill anyone who comes near you."
it's not Kiera laughs, shaking her head. "It's cute that you think you can
my life like that."
ving to I don't argue with her because Kiera's the type who would do sor
just to spite me. My only solace is that she's going to be too busy v
essagesand watching the boys to get into too much trouble.
ne boys "You dating anyone?" she asks.
r to me My instinct is to deny, deny, deny. "Nope."
Because Brienne and I aren't exactly dating.
in the "Are you fucking anyone?" she asks.
I choke on my beer. "Language, little sis. And that's none o
she wasbusiness."
out her "Oh, stop being a prude and tell me who. It's evident by you
atch onrefusal and deflection that you are."
getting Well, shit. Could she really get that from just a few words?
ripples "It's no one important," I say to get her off the scent. If I deny i
push harder. "Just a hookup."
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if she'smine against it. "You deserve a bit of happy."
stantly I'd like to think so, and lucky for me, Brienne is something more th
clearlya bit of happy.

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I shrug. "Haven't really been out."

Not unless you count Brienne's house.

"Any hot single teammates?" she asks.

My eyes narrow, and I point a finger. "Don't even go there."

"Why not?" She pouts and leans back in her chair, an impish smile forming. "You'd save me a whole lot of trouble barhopping and swiping left."

Curling my lip in disdain, I ask, "Do you really use a dating app?"

She shrugs. "Weren't a lot of good choices in Red Wing, but Pittsburgh is a lot bigger. Then again, I'm not opposed to you hooking me up."

"Never in a million years would I do that," I mutter. "And I'm going to put out a news bulletin that I'll kill anyone who comes near you."

Kiera laughs, shaking her head. "It's cute that you think you can control my life like that."

I don't argue with her because Kiera's the type who would do something just to spite me. My only solace is that she's going to be too busy working and watching the boys to get into too much trouble.

"You dating anyone?" she asks.

My instinct is to deny, deny, deny. "Nope."

Because Brienne and I aren't exactly dating.

"Are you fucking anyone?" she asks.

I choke on my beer. "Language, little sis. And that's none of your business."

"Oh, stop being a prude and tell me who. It's evident by your quick refusal and deflection that you are."

Well, shit. Could she really get that from just a few words?

"It's no one important," I say to get her off the scent. If I deny it, she'll push harder. "Just a hookup."

"Well, good for you," she praises, holding her beer bottle out to me. I tap mine against it. "You deserve a bit of happy."

I'd like to think so, and lucky for me, Brienne is something more than just a bit of happy.

CHAPTER 16

Brienne

I DON'T KNOW how the players feel, but a mixture of excitement and swirls in my stomach. It's the first regular season game, and things are different the minute I stepped foot inside the arena this afternoon.

There was a buzz, a palpable energy, and I felt it even though no one was here. Just the players, coaches, and support staff.

It's not the first game I've been to as the Titans' owner, but it's the first time I've started a fresh year with this team that has quickly occupied a big chunk of my heart.

Yes, I'm carrying on Adam's legacy, and it's why I'm working so hard into the ground so I can keep running Norcross Holdings and give my full attention to the Titans—because Adam loved it so much. I'm probably going to have to give it up one day... turn it over to someone who can do better things. I'm smart enough to know I'm well on my way to burning out.

But today is not that day.

Today we play the Carolina Cold Fury, a team that almost won the title last year but fell in game seven to the Arizona Vengeance.

My dad, and his dad, and his dad before him always shot for the top. "Aim as high as you can," he told me just before I left for Columbia. "If you fall short, you aim higher the next time."

I've followed that advice ever since.

The Carolina Cold Fury won back-to-back championships. The Arizona Vengeance won back-to-back championships.

I don't know if we can do it this year, or maybe the next, or the year after that, but I intend to repeat that feat, even if it takes the rest of my life. I'm aiming for it, and I intend to help build a team that has such talent, drive, and passion that we'll not only win two Cups in a row, but three.

Yes. That is my goal for the Titans. Everyone's going to be watching the Carolina Cold Fury and the Vengeance this year, but they need to be watching

team.

Checking my watch, I decide to take a break from work and head to the family lounge. It sits next to the players' lounge and is a place loved ones can hang out before and after a game or practice. Callum told me that family members aren't allowed in the players' lounge as that's where the guys to prepare mentally for games. However, Adam wanted a place where family could gather, as they are very much a part of the success.

I thought that was sweet, and it's a great way for me to connect with significant others, children, parents, and siblings of my men. I plan to spend time before every game solidifying those connections and be known as the matriarch of this familial unit. It's not something I have at Nike Holdings. Not to say employees aren't important, because they are, and they are treated and paid well. But the corporate world lacks the camaraderie, even among the executives and board members I've known myself years and years.

In the family lounge, I scan to see who I do and do not know. I'm sure that after the welcome party at my house where I met most of the significant others, I can now recall almost everyone's name. With a career like mine, I must be able to connect faces and names.

The majority of these family members won't stay here in the city. We're still hours from game time, so many will go out for a late lunch, walk along the river. Maybe visit a museum or get in a little gambling at the casino. But for now, it's about a little time to socialize with their family.

I first focus in on those I don't recognize, which leads me to introduce Boone's parents, visiting from California. I move on to meet Komokov's parents, also visiting but from a little farther afield. They traveled from Moscow to see their son play tonight.

As I leave them, I spot Harlow at a table with a man and woman who I'm betting are her parents. I make my way there to introduce myself. I remember during our girls' lunch the other day that her dad is a prominent attorney in Pittsburgh, and their entire family is huge Titans fans. All three are wearing Stone Dumelin jerseys—so adorable. I know Stone doesn't have a great relationship with his own parents, but Harlow told me that her mom and dad have essentially adopted him.

Before I get there, though, a tiny buzz of awareness skitters up my spine and I turn to see Drake walking through the door. He's in his suit, and it means he just got here, but my eyes are more riveted by the three tiny miniature Drakes he has in tow.

I know he has three boys—Jake, Colby, and Tanner. And that's all I know until today because we don't really talk about such things.

What I can see now is that they are all replicas of their dad with the same blond, slightly wavy hair and crystal-blue eyes framed by dark lashes. One of the boys carries one of the boys and holds the hand of another. A woman who looks just like him—presumably his sister Kiera—holds the hand of the boy walking in behind them. He's a replica of the kid Drake is holding in his arms. That child looks around in wonder and is glued tight to her side and she's overwhelmed. She bends down and says something to him, and when she says it is, he grins. Two dimples pop out, and Kiera smiles right back at him, showing off matching divots in her cheeks.

I wonder if Drake has dimples, but I'll never know unless I ask him. He has a full beard. I think I'd like to see his dimples, but that would mean giving up the beard, and I really, really like his beard.

I know I should go meet Harlow and her folks, but I'm frozen with Drake as he effortlessly moves around the room, introducing his kids to the other players and family members.

It's funny how the entire reason I'm down here now is to show the players' families that I'm accessible, that I'm more than just an over-the-hill Titan perched on her pedestal.

And yet... I'm actually a bit terrified to be introduced to his sisters.

First, I'm not good with kids. Like, at all. Frankly, they scare me. I don't know how to talk to them.

Mostly, I shouldn't want them to like me because that suggests I'm more important than just a hot fling.

And he can't be more than that.

When his head swivels slightly and those blue eyes lock with mine, my breath stutters. He gives away no emotion because he can't. Too many people are around, but damn if he doesn't offer just the slightest jerk of his head, indicating he wants me to come over.

My lungs inflate—with relief? My legs move in Drake's direction.

y spine, that giddiness?

, which Jesus, I'm fucked in the head over him.

the little Drake fully turns toward me, dips his head to say something to him and then nods my way. I put on my biggest, most welcoming smile as I knew it on her, because she is an adult and I know how to talk to adults.

I step up with my hand out. "You must be Drake's sister, Kiera."

the same She radiates joy as she shakes my hand. "It's so nice to meet you. Drake Norcross. Thanks for giving my buffoon of a brother a second chance."

who also I think I love her already. "First, it's Brienne. Second... he told you the third, our first meeting?"

ing—the "You mean when he was an a-s-s-h-o-l-e?" she spells because of the way she speaks as if pairs of sensitive ears.

whatever "I had reason to be," Drake grumbles, but it's good-natured. He looks at me and shines with amusement.

"Why did Aunt Kiera spell out *asshole*?" the kid holding Drake's hand asks as he looks up to his dad.

and mean "Jake," Kiera exclaims.

Drake chokes back a laugh and touches his son's shoulder. "Lay off the adult words, kiddo." He then turns him toward me. "This is my oldest son, Jake. Clearly, he's very smart and can spell big words. Jake... this is Daddy's friend, Ms. Norcross."

now the "My dad was a butthole?" Jake asks, cutting an impish grin to his father. I bend at the waist, my hands on my knees. "No, honey... I was just frustrated and didn't express himself well."

after and "Ever the diplomat," Drake says, head inclined in respect. He looks at me slightly so I can see the boy in his arms. "This is Colby. And the other one, the one clinging to Aunt Kiera is Tanner."

I smile at the boys, not knowing what to say. I can't shake their hands, but I know Drake is their potential business partners, and I clearly have no clue what is appropriate to talk about. I would've never thought a seven-year-old would spell *asshole*, but there you have it.

ine, my Instead, I smile at Drake. "I know how happy you are to have them, and I'm glad you got to bring them to the arena before the game."

s head, His eyes bore into mine, and I'd like to imagine they are secretly saying, *wish I could have five minutes alone with you*, but I'm sure he's just preoccupied with family and the game.

Drake nods. “*One* of the best things that has happened in the last few weeks.”

The intensity in his stare and the emphasis on the word *one* caused my skin to prickle. I can tell without him clarifying a damn thing that I’m not the only one of the other best things, and an annoying ache stirs between my shoulder blades, accompanied by a twinge in my heart.

“That’s wonderful,” I manage. I turn to Kiera to avoid Drake’s request. “I know you’re new to the area and will need to get settled in, but I’d like to have you join me and some of the other Titan women for lunch sometime.”

“Titan women?” Drake asks, eyebrow arched. Colby wiggles in his seat, and he sets him down, only to take his hand so he doesn’t jet off.

“Me, Jenna, Harlow, Sophie, and Tillie when she’s in town,” I explain. That produces a slight frown as I’m sure he’s wondering what the owner is doing hanging out with the love interests of some of the players. “Let me give you my phone number.”

After Kiera and I exchange contact information, I say my goodbyes and make a beeline for Harlow and her parents. My heart is racing after the encounter, and I try to take stock of why that is.

I think it’s because I wanted to make a good impression on Drake’s boss, that bothers me. I don’t want to have to worry about those things.

I don’t want to have to change my behavior for him, and I don’t want him to think I’m anything more than a good time.

I also know that I don’t always get what I want.

For the next hour, I hang out in the lounge, spending time with the players and families. None of them stay long. Drake only hangs around a few minutes before he walks out with his sister and kids.

As I head back up to my office to get some work done before the game starts in a few hours, my phone vibrates. I pull it out of my pocket, slip it into my dress pants with big pockets for phones—and see a text from Drake. *I love having my kids here, but I hate that I won’t be able to stick it to the league tonight.*

I smile as I step into the elevator, my thumbs flying over the screen. *can stick it to the league on Tuesday night in Boston.*

After I hit Send, I type a few more words. *BTW, my test was negative.*

Neither one of us has mentioned the STD test that Drake reminded me about at the charity dinner. I never promised I would get one and I

ast few clue if he did. In fact, we've had no communication since he left my
that night.

ses my When he replies, a flush of heat travels through my body and
one of between my legs. *Seriously, Brienne? Now I'm going to be thinking of fucking you bare c*

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clue if he did. In fact, we've had no communication since he left my house that night.

When he replies, a flush of heat travels through my body and pools between my legs. *Seriously, Brienne? Now I'm going to be thinking of fucking you bare all night.*

I don't know why it pleases me so much. I clearly don't want his game affected, and I know it really won't be. Drake's too much of a professional.

It's enough to know that he wants me more than any man has ever wanted me before.

Good luck tonight, I text back. Get us a win.

He doesn't respond, but I didn't expect him to. I bet he's already back in game mode, and despite his attention and sexy words, it's exactly where I want him to be.

CHAPTER 17

Drake

BRIENNE NORCROSS IS driving me fucking crazy. And she's not really anything other than existing. I trot off the team bus as it pulls in front of the hotel. We beat Boston 3–2 tonight, and the mood is jubilant. Most of the guys are going out, but I declined the invitation.

When asked why, I gave the simple truth. "I don't feel like it."

The longer, greater truth is Brienne texted me her room number, and the only thing I want to do tonight is sink my cock into her. We've both been tested, she's on birth control, and the thought of having her with me between us has invaded my thoughts continuously for the last two days.

It's safe to say that what started out as a hot-as-hell occasional fling has progressed to something else. It's definitely led to promiscuity, but that's only so we can do away with condoms.

It certainly doesn't have anything to do with that stupid display of jealousy when I saw that douche, Clay Bessel, put his hand on Brienne's ass. I thought my head was going to explode, and I seriously wanted to do more than hurt his delicate little baby fingers.

That night, after I'd proven to Brienne and myself that it was uncomfortable as hell to fuck on the grand staircase, I asked her what a good doctor said to her.

"He wanted to come to my house tonight," she replied without hesitation. She wasn't trying to spare my feelings.

"I would have broken a lot more than his fingers," I muttered.

Brienne laughed. "Jealousy doesn't look good on you."

"I don't get jealous," I proclaimed.

"Mmm-hmm."

"What would you have done?" I asked.

She appraised me. "If I saw a woman touch you intimately?"

"Yeah."

Her smile was provocative. “I certainly wouldn’t make a jackass of myself in public.”

She and I both know I didn’t make a jackass of myself in public behavior was only hers to witness, but the comment earned her a squint over the dining room table, which we both enjoyed.

The memory gets me worked up, but luckily, Brienne’s room is in sight. My mouth actually tingles in anticipation of kissing her, and I wonder how she’ll greet me at the door. I bet she’s as amped up about the way of the Boston as I am—maybe we’ll break some hotel furniture tonight.

Of course, in my desire to have her, maybe I’ll just drag her to the bed for our first time.

I shrug out of my jacket and toss it over my arm. I already remove the tie on the way up and shoved it in the pocket before loosening the top buttons of my shirt. I hate fucking dressing up.

Knocking on the door, I try to quell the anticipation, but she doesn’t let me wait. She’s there, still in the dress and heels I assume she wore to the game. She would have been in a luxury box reserved for visiting owners of probably had hobnobbing to do. Her hair is in her classic upswept knot. I can’t wait to mess it up.

Rather than giving me a sexy smile or flirty comment, she pivots on her heel and walks deeper into the suite. “I need just a minute, Drake. I’m in the middle of a really important email I need to send.”

Frowning, I shut the door and follow along. The executive suite is indeed every other I’ve seen in fancy hotels, the fourth suite I’ve been to since Brienne’s invitation since we started fucking. Spacious rooms, high-end furniture, countless amenities, and a private balcony.

Brienne settles into the chair at the desk, her laptop open and her hands flying across the keyboard. She bites down on her lower lip, some notice she does when concentrating. Not that I’ve observed her work that one time in her home office, but I’ve seen her do that when she’s trying to concentrate on not coming.

Trying to stave off an orgasm to prolong the pleasure.

It only makes me work harder to topple her over.

Tossing my jacket on the sofa, I watch Brienne immerse herself in her work and completely ignore me. I glance at my watch: 11:58 p.m.

It’s quitting time, as far as I’m concerned.

Unbuttoning my cuffs, I move behind her. She doesn't flinch or stop typing when I start to pull the pins from her hair. There are only four cuffs as my hand sifts my fingers through the soft locks. She rolls her shoulders and hums in her throat so I know it feels good.

Bending over, I expose the side of her neck and run my lips against her skin, giving her a good dose of my beard tickling along her skin.

She tries to jerk away, but my hand stays fisted in her hair.

"I can't concentrate," she grumbles, her eyes still fixed on her screen.

Moving to the side of her chair and squatting, I reach over and slide my hand into the floor. She pulls her fingers out of the way in the nick of time.

"Drake," she exclaims in frustration, but then she gasps as my hand slides along her inner thigh.

"You're done working, Brienne."

"But—"

"No buts," I say as I nudge her legs apart and rub my knuckles over her silk-covered pussy.

Head falling back, her legs fall open, and I smile. Just that easy, she lets me do what I want, and it's all mine.

Not her body, but her work, which I know is important. I'm not trying to diminish it, but I'm going to bet that the world won't end if that email gets finished right now.

Inching a finger under the seam of her panties, I glance up at her. "You really didn't think you'd get away with putting me off, did you?"

Brienne's eyes burn as I discover just how wet she is for me.

"You didn't think I'd wait a single minute to touch you?" I whisper.

I move her chair so she's facing me, not allowing her a chance to answer. I grab her knees before her, the luxury carpet providing excellent cushion from underneath. "I worship her. Pull up your skirt."

She huffs out a breath but wiggles the tight material up and over her head so I can get a gander of my hand between her legs framed by delicate underwear in a pale peach that looks far too sweet and demure for her. "Within."

"Spread your legs, woman." My voice thickens with want, and my erection starts to get hard as she obeys me without the slightest hesitation.

Grabbing her legs, I wrench them farther apart and hoist them over my shoulders. Brienne gasps and then bucks as I roughly pull her panties

drop her side, exposing her to me.

of them, Staring at her as I bend closer, I murmur, "Been dying to have my slightly on you for days."

"Oh God," she groans, her fingers threading through my hair. "I long it, the hell do you manage to turn me on with just words?"

"I'm going to try more than words right now," I reply before giving a long lick.

en. Brienne cries out, arches her back, and practically strangles me with her legs. Chuckling, I bring my hands around to pin her in place and bury my face in her sweet pussy.

and slides She writhes, begs, squirms, and pleads. Her hands pull hard at my nails raking against my scalp. I fuck her with my mouth mercilessly, and not saying I'm a master at oral, but it takes no more than a scant minute or two before she's coming hard.

over her I don't lick her through all the pleasure, but even as she's spasming, I work my pants down to release my dick and pull her off the chair. She gives straddles me.

Brienne's bleary-eyed and loose as a rag doll, but her hands clammy, clinging to my shoulders. Her head drops, as does mine, and we both watch as she doesn't my cock to rub the tip through her wet folds.

Christ... the feel of her against my bare skin, it causes me worry. "You concerned I might pop off like a fucking schoolboy the minute I get her, but if that's the case, so be it. Not going to be the first time I come over her tonight."

level the I line up, one hand going to her hip, and urge her down onto my lap until our foreheads touch as we both watch the show going on between our bodies. Which is so erotic as hell watching myself disappear into her.

So goddamn tight as she rotates her hips to work over my girth, and her hips, sweat breaking out on the back of my neck.

ate silk "Jesus, Bri," I growl, both my hands at her hips to steady her. "The siren killing me."

"What a way to die, right?" she whispers.

my dick I lift my head, taking my attention from the sight of our joined bodies to peer into her eyes. She stares back at me, our mouths inches apart. I never my rocks down onto my cock.

s to the When she bottoms out, her eyelids flutter before closing in rapture.

my forehead presses against hers as I try to slow the gallop of my heart. Mouthwarm, wet, and tight, and it might be the best sensation I've ever felt. As we start moving, I know things are going to turn feral.

How in "Lie back," she says, and I lift my head to look at her. She's bleary-eyed anymore, but rather has a steely glint of promise aimed at me. "On your back."

This isn't how I imagined tonight going down. I thought I'd have her under me and I'd control everything, as one normally does when fucking my powerhouse woman like Brienne Norcross.

But right now, I don't think to deny her. Wrapping one arm around her hair, back to keep her pinned to me, I shift so I can lie back on the thick mattress and I'm Brienne moans as I test our bond, punching my hips up slightly.

"What are you thinking?" she asks, bringing her hands to my chest for leverage. She rises just a bit before settling back down, teasing me with a promise of what's to come.

so she "I'm thinking that nothing should ever feel this good."

She smiles, giving a slight nod as she starts to ride me slowly. "I never knew."

as I fist My hands grip hard, and I stop her movement, holding her pinned to me. "Never knew? You've never had sex without a condom before?"

ry. I'm She tries to move her hips, desperate to create that friction, but I hold her in place. Brienne rolls her eyes. "Is that so hard to believe?"

e inside "But... you're experienced. I mean, really experienced." She glares at me, and it makes me grin. "I mean that in a good way. I just assumed."

ne. Our Something flicks across her face, an emotion I might call embarrassment, but it's gone before I can make something of it. "I'm experienced, yes, but I've never had the urge to have sex without a condom. I feel So this is a first."

"Fuck," I rasp, because... that means I'm a first for her.

'You're Brienne knocks my hands off her hips, catching me by surprise. She lifts herself nearly off my cock before pressing back down. My vision blurs as my head spins.

odies to "Feel good?" she asks with a husky laugh.

as she "Don't stop doing that," I grit out as she does it again. Damn, I'm going to last long. "But slowly, Bri. Fuck me slowly."

ire, and "I can do that," she says as she initiates a slow undulation of her hips.

t. She's mine.

t. Once She's a fucking goddess. Hardly any of her body is exposed to me doesn't matter. I focus on her face and the way she bites into her lower lip not so Concentrating on making this good for both of us.

at me. I lightly place my hands on her thighs, but I let her drive. I'm mesmerized by her sinuous motions, and every slide of her flesh against mine gives her pleasure to swell within me.

cking a Brieenne Norcross asserts complete dominion over my body, and I let the fuck go. She rides me with the force of a thousand tornadoes, her hands and her darkening like thunderstorms as lightning bolts of ecstasy wrack my back on the carpet. Hurricane Brieenne can rage over me any day.

rest for She falters, tipping her head down, eyes widening.

with the "That's right." I squeeze her legs. "I love watching you fuck your cock."

I never dirty mouth." "Jesus, Drake," she gripes, but she doesn't miss a beat. "You've never dirty mouth."

"You love it."

on me. "Don't hate it," she gasps as she presses both hands onto my chest. She slows her pace. Ordinarily, this would forestall the onslaught of release. I hold her with her eyes half-mast as she focuses on how I feel inside her, I'm reaching my tipping point.

s at me, "Just like that," I praise gruffly, and admittedly, it comes off as pleading.

deem Brieenne smiles at me, and it's triumphant.

t. "I'm My hand slides to her clit, and I touch her lightly. "Want to feel your whole body on me."

No clue if it was my torrent of dirty talk or the touch to her clit, she explodes with a cry that has her arching her back and exposing her throat as she thrusts her throat to me. I lunge upward.

on dims Wrapping one arm around her, I fist her hair and force her mouth open. It's her own orgasm that finally prompts me to fall with her.

As she cries out, her pussy contracting around me, I roll her over. I'm not driving into her. Brieenne buries her face into my shoulder, groaning and moaning as she continues to come, and it takes all of three hard thrusts until her body is roaring out my release.

My hips continue to buck against her, and while I don't dare say
e, but it's fucking delirious that I've come inside her.

lip. I hate that my thoughts go to my ex-wife, but I search for a
memory where that was important to me. Even as we were trying
nerized pregnant, the most I managed was perhaps a clinical excitement that
causes my sperm would hook up with her egg.

But as I collapse onto Brienne, my lungs fighting for the same
just let's her trying to pull into herself, I can only accept I have a weird satis
er eyes that I've marked her in some way.

ody. Groaning, I roll us to our sides, my hand pressed to her ass to l
locked together.

e." Brienne's fingers play along the nape of my neck. "Are you g
stay?"

rself on "Are you going to work?" I ask.

Her lips curve upward. "I have that important email to send."

e got a The beast inside me that wants to fuck her again just as soon as I re
wants to drag her off to bed and start the foreplay right away. I want t
her to leave her computer alone. She works too fucking hard.

est and But the man who was screwed over by the one woman he shou
ase, but been able to trust most in the world tells me I'm getting too attached.

near the Too close.

I shouldn't care about that stuff, and it's freaking me out.

is a bit I rub my nose along hers. "I think I'll leave you alone to get you
done."

"Thanks for understanding," she says, brushing her lips against mi
u comes soft kiss. "This was incredible."

My arms tighten around her. I don't want to leave, but I need to.
but she stay up working too late, okay?"

creamy She snorts. "It's cute that you think you can dictate such things."

Maybe I should cart her off to bed and keep her occupied. Fuck he
outh on wear her out, and make her sleep.

No, asshole. That's not your problem.

ver and Anything that Brienne Norcross does outside the boundaries
jerking extremely amazing sex doesn't concern me.

til I'm "Are you coming on the next road trip?" I ask. It's five days aw
that sucks, but it's the best I can do. On the plus side, it's a four-day ti

it, I'm two cities, so there's potential to spend a few nights with her.

"I'm pretty sure I'm going," she says with a smile. "As long as single emergencies pop up."

Not the best answer. I know I certainly don't want to wait that long, maybe her again, but I've got responsibilities.

Kids to care for. Hockey to play.

I kiss her jaw. "Then hopefully I'll see you in five days."

"Until then," she whispers.

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"I'm pretty sure I'm going," she says with a smile. "As long as no emergencies pop up."

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Kids to care for. Hockey to play.

I kiss her jaw. "Then hopefully I'll see you in five days."

"Until then," she whispers.

CHAPTER 18

Brienne

THE PHONE ON my desk buzzes, and I note it's Tina's extension. I connect.

"Ms. Norcross, I have Gary Breit on line one."

"Thank you," I reply and press the flashing button. "Hi, Gary. Did you closed the deal?"

"I'm sorry, Brienne. They're not budging."

"Is there anything that will convince them?" I ask, tapping my pen on my desk and staring out the window at the Pittsburgh skyline.

Gary sighs, and I picture him taking off his glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. He's my closest strategic advisor and handles most negotiations for me. He's right across the river at my Fifth Avenue office, which I don't go to anymore unless there's a board meeting. "I think they need to see the numbers."

"What's wrong with you?" I quip.

He laughs. "I'm not Brienne Norcross, head of an empire. You're the one who gets visible again."

"Meaning?" I drawl, but I know what he'll say.

"You're spending too much time across the river."

I snort. "Funny how the deal we're talking about is in Mannheim, Germany. Why does it matter which office in Pittsburgh I operate from?"

"Don't be obtuse," he chides. "You know what I mean. The board is getting antsy because you are putting a lot of time and energy into the deal."

"We're rebuilding."

"I get it. Trust me, your team gets it. The city of Pittsburgh gets it. The potential global investors we deal with on a daily basis don't understand. They only care if you're steering the Norcross ship."

I drop my pen and rub my neck. He's not wrong. I've spent a lot of time focused on the Titans because it's kept me close to Adam. I haven't been able to let him go, but I can't let others who depend on me suffer. "See you at the meeting. I can be in Mannheim by tomorrow evening."

“On it,” he says and disconnects.

I hang up and slide right back into reviewing the quarterly report for Norcross Bank. I’m not so immersed that I don’t hear my office door and my head pops up because no one enters without knocking.

I’m startled to see Drake standing there. It’s game day, so he’s wearing a suit, but there’s no reason he should be here in my office.

Not that I’m displeased. My mouth waters just looking at him.

Completely at ease, he shuts the door and walks my way. He unbuttons his suit jacket and settles down into a chair opposite my desk. The juxtaposition between the dapper, well-tailored suit and his messy black hair pulled back coupled with his full beard makes him the most fascinating man I’ve ever seen. The tattoos don’t hurt either.

“You don’t have an appointment,” I say bluntly.

“The man who gives you orgasms gets special dispensation,” he replies easily, and damn it, he makes me laugh.

“Missed you at the gym this morning.” I settle back into my chair, crossing one leg over the other.

“Decided to have a lazy morning with the boys,” he replies. “Honoring you with chocolate chip pancakes.”

I smile, because that’s about as sweet as it gets. “You’re a good man, Drake.”

He smiles back, but it’s not sweet. It’s wicked. “I do regret nothing, but I do regret not being there to watch you, though.”

Laughing, I shake my head as I sigh wistfully. “Sometimes I’d kill for a lazy morning.”

“So give yourself one,” he says.

“One day,” I muse, then execute a swift change of subject. “I remember meeting your children and Kiera at the last home game. Your kids are so cute. Look just like you, minus the beard, long hair, and tattoos.”

Drake chuckles. “They’re good boys. My sister’s not bad either.”

“I’m glad you have someone here to depend on.”

“Me too.” His voice is gruff, maybe a bit emotional. He’s not had many people he could trust. Then his expression changes, goes from softly smiling to radiating intensity. “I can’t stop thinking about our night in Boston.”

I jolt as a barrage of erotic memories surge through me. “It wasn’t a night. More like an incredible half hour.”

He leans forward in his chair. Elbows to his knees, he clasps his hands for “Thought I’d come by and see if you’d let me bend you over the chair open, again.”

Good God, but the thought causes my legs to squeeze together tearing at the ache. My voice quivers. “That’s not going to happen again.”

I can tell by his expression that’s exactly the response he expects. My lips curve upward. “But you want to, don’t you?”

Flushing with desire and frustration, I nod. “Yeah... I do. But we can’t. The “Why can’t we?” he asks, head tipped in curiosity. “There are no hard and fast rules. I checked.”

My jaw drops in surprise that he’d take the time to look at our resources material. “No, but I’m pretty sure as the team owner, being by a player in my office during business hours isn’t really the professional vibe I am trying to maintain.”

Drake laughs and waves his hand. “Fucking you in your office as a chair, still not sure what the problem is.”

“Because there’s a level of impropriety for an owner to date a player. It will look like you’re getting special allowances.”

“Sleeping with the boss to work my way up the ladder, huh?”
“Well, no,” I admit slowly. “You’re kind of at the top of the ladder already.”

“I’m getting paid more money than the other players.”
“Exactly. You are getting paid a lot, and people will think it’s because of me.”

“But my contract was ironed out well before I even kissed you, although I had dirty thoughts about you well before then.”

“You did?” I ask, my eyebrows rising and my belly flipping. I thought I really couldn’t stand me.

“From that very first meeting. You pissed me off so much I knew I wanted to put in your mouth to get you to shut up.”

A lesser woman would be offended. But I’ve got a solid and healthy ego. I don’t mind to mention I like having him in my mouth very much. I think it’s amusing he thought of me in that way, even though we were both rotten to each other that day.

“Look,” I say, waving a hand between us, “it doesn’t matter if we do anything wrong, the media will spin it that way. You know more

hands anyone that negative press sells.”

at desk “And I hate the fucking press. Bunch of vultures never get it right.”

This is definitely not a conversation I ever thought we’d have, so quell more than confusing. I almost wish he’d go back to wanting to bend me at the desk. The risk of getting caught might be preferable.

ed. His “Why are you asking these questions? Are you saying you want me?”

an’t.” Drake’s chin pulls inward, his eyes wide with shock. “Of course, I want to date you. No offense, but I don’t want to date anyone. I’m looking for a relationship.”

human That shouldn’t hurt. Even though anything more than a casual, sex-fueled fling isn’t possible, it stings that he wouldn’t want something deeper with me.

ssional Drake rises from his chair, and I think it’s to leave, but instead he leans around my desk. “But there are so many things I want to do to you.”

de, I’m “Like what?” I tip my head back to look at him. His expression says he’d like to eat me up.

ayer. It Bending at the waist, he places a hand on the desk and the other on the back of my chair. His face hovers over mine, and his voice sounds like gravel. “Definitely want to fuck you on this desk. Maybe I’d sit in that fancy chair of yours and put you on your knees and fuck me.”

A shudder ripples through me. I would love either of those scenarios. His hand on the chair shifts, and he drags a finger over my shoulder, bending in a little closer. “Or maybe I should just splay you out on the floor and lick your pussy until you come over and over again. I definitely want to do that the first time.”

ught he I practically wheeze at the image, and my panties are embarrassing just from his filthy words. He hasn’t even touched me yet, other than what I should, but I know I’ll let him. In mere seconds, he’s seduced me, and I’m ready to take the risk.

hy ego, “Brienne,” Jenna says as she walks through my door, looking at a folder in her hand. Her gaze lifts, lands on Drake and me, and it couldn’t be more obvious we were having a very intimate conversation.

I push my chair away from him in a blitz of panic, but Drake isn’t fazed. He didn’t at all. He straightens slowly, a lazy smile on his face.

re than “Oh my God,” Jenna exclaims, clutching the folder to her chest. ‘

sorry to interrupt. You didn't have anything on your calendar. I would never—"

and it's "It's fine, Jenna." I stand from my chair, smoothing my skirt. "Drake and I were just discussing... um... well..."

Drake's cool as a cucumber. "She had something in her eye, and I was removing it."

Such an obvious lie, but Jenna pounces. "Right. Of course. That makes sense. I'm, um... I'll come back when you're done, um, getting dirt out of your eye."

"No need," Drake says. "I'm leaving."

Jenna bows her head and steps back, an obvious move to give us some privacy.

Drake leans in and murmurs so only I can hear. "I'll see you on the trip."

"Probably not," I reply softly. "I'm headed out of the country tonight and I'll be needed back here upon my return. Not sure it's feasible for me to go on this road trip."

Displeasure consumes his face. "That's a shame."

I don't reply because it would only be to echo that sentiment. In a loud enough voice for Jenna to hear, "Thank you for coming by to discuss the press release."

"No problem," he says and walks away, as if we weren't just having a incendiary conversation about dirty things.

When the door closes behind him, Jenna cocks an eyebrow. "Did you enjoy the release?"

"That wasn't what it looked like," I say, taking my seat and pulling my chair in closer to my desk.

"It looked to me like you and Drake were about to kiss," she says, and I'm moving to the guest chair and plopping down.

Scoffing, I pin my eyes on my laptop. "That's ridiculous, right? I mean, why would a team owner kiss a player?"

"It's Drake McGinn," Jenna says, fanning herself dramatically. "The question is why wouldn't a team owner want to."

Sighing, I sit back and close my eyes. I rub at my temples to stave off the beginning of a tension headache.

"It's okay, Brienne," Jenna says, and I open my eyes to find her

ld haveat me. “You’re allowed to have a social life, you know. A sexual soc
A sex life. I mean... well, you know what I mean.”

ake and “We’re not...” I stop, give a slight shake of my head. I can’t lie
and I don’t want to. “It’s inappropriate. We can’t.”

d I was “You already have?”

“Yes, but we can’t keep on—”

akes “Why not?” she asks curiously. “You’re both consenting adults.”

t out of “I’m his boss.”

“Technically, you’re not. Callum is. You just own the team.”

I appreciate her wanting me to have this. I really do. But she does
a bit ofthe big picture. “If the press got hold of this, they would make it sort
the old stuff with Drake would be dredged up, and it would look bad, s
he roadwas accused of gambling and throwing games. Sleeping with the owner
like he’s gaming the system again. And I can’t let anything damage
orrow,could be a really amazing season for these men. I don’t want to ta
r me toaway from them, and Drake’s already been through enough. I don’t w
under that firestorm again.”

“Fine,” she says, leaning forward. “There could be n
stead, Irepercussions. So keep it secret, then. If you’re enjoying yourself and
uss thata fun time, don’t give it up.”

“Really?” I ask, eyebrows knitted as I ponder. “You don’t think t
ving antrampy of me?”

Jenna rolls her eyes. “What’s happened to you? You’re the wom
“Presstold me you had a friends-with-benefits situation when I first came t
with you. This is no different. Except, if you don’t mind me sayi
ing mybenefits with Drake look like they’d be far superior to those Dr.
provided. I’m just saying.”

e says, I bust out laughing and can’t seem to stop. She’s not wrong. Clay
hold a candle to Drake.

I mean, No man ever has.

Shaking my head, I reach out my hand. “Let’s talk about somethin
7. “TheWhat’s that?”

Jenna hands over the folder. “It’s the press releases for this v
off theassume there’s not really one about Drake.”

“No, there’s not really one about Drake,” I say with faux irritation.
smilinglet’s concentrate on work.”

ial life.

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CHAPTER 19

Drake

AS I ENTER the kitchen through the garage, I'm surprised to see Kiera sitting at the table, a cup of tea before her. She's bent over her electronic reader, her head rises and she smiles. "Tough game."

"It happens," I say as I toss my duffel and suit jacket on the floor and loosen my tie as soon as I got in my car to leave the arena. Pulling a chair, I settle down adjacent to her. "I had an off night."

We lost to the Minnesota Raiders, 4–2. I never quite know what went wrong. It could be something as simple as not getting enough sleep or maybe my nutrition needs tweaking.

It could be I'm preoccupied with other things, and while I do my best to be one hundred percent in game mode, sometimes things creep in.

Once when Crystal and I were together, Colby had a really high fever and she had to take him to the emergency room on a game night. I played like shit. While I felt like I was concentrating on the game, I probably wasn't giving it my all because of my worry about Colby.

But I'm sure this is a sleep or nutrition thing, or maybe my fucking legs weren't sharpened correctly. I'm positive it has nothing to do with the blond who isn't quite fitting into my plans the way I'd anticipated. The way my disappointment about not seeing her during the upcoming road game has anything to do with anything.

"Kids go down okay?" I ask.

Kiera pushes her reader away and nods. Pulling one foot up on the table, she wraps her arms around her shin. "Yeah. I think they're finally settled into the new beds. I let them watch the first period of the game. Tanner and Colby conked out about two minutes in. Jake didn't want to watch, and I had to use stern Aunt Kiera to get him to bed. He babbled the entire time as I was tucking him in that he's going to be a goalie like his daddy. They might be a little tired for school tomorrow, but I think w

you play is really important.”

My fucking chest swells. It’s weird, because I have this steady, c well of love and devotion for my kids. But sometimes they do someth could be just a smile, or a funny statement, or a cuddle—and it ma heart feel like it will burst.

“I need to get Jake into a youth hockey league.” The boys all kno to skate, but over the last two years with Crystal going off the rails, a at the been no time to enroll them in organized sports.

but her It’s time, though.

“How come you didn’t go out with the guys after the game?” she a

floor. I I shrug. “I felt like I should be here.”

g out a Kiera’s brow furrows. “Why?”

“Because my kids are here.”

causes “But... they’re asleep. You won’t see them until morning. You enough have gone out with your buddies, and the kids would’ve never know need to have fun, Drake.”

best to “I don’t want to.” Rubbing my hand over my jaw, I realize tha quite true. I do like my teammates a great deal.

1 fever, “You’re restless,” she observes. “You might not have wanted to ved like with your teammates, and you might feel like you have an obligation t wasn’t home to your sleeping kids, but you don’t want to be here.”

I glare at her, pissed at her perception. But I find myself adi g skates “There’s a woman.”

a sexy Kiera grins, her eyes sparkling with curiosity as she leans f

re’s no “What? Like an honest-to-God woman you’re interested in?”

oad trip I grunt in dissatisfaction at her characterization of things. I can te romanticizing this because she hates that Crystal broke my heart, a broke me from trusting again. “It’s not like that,” I assure her.

e chair, Disappointment draws her mouth downward. “Oh... a booty call.

getting her smile returns. “Okay, I totally get that. Who doesn’t love a booty

me, but fact, I need to find—”

to stop “Stop,” I growl, holding up a hand. “There is nothing I want to hea led the you and booty calls.”

like his Kiera laughs, then reaches out to rest her hand on top of mine. “

atching her.”

I sigh, flipping my hand over so my fingers curl around hers. Squ

briefly before pulling away, I say, "It's complicated."

constant "Married, huh?" she says with exaggerated disappointment.

ling—it "No," I snap. "What's wrong with you?"

kes my "Prostitute, then?"

"Kiera," I warn with narrowed eyes.

ow how She snickers and throws up her hands in surrender. "Okay, serious—there's why is it complicated?"

Tipping my head back, I take in a breath. It's do or die... lie or truth.

sks. It's my sister, though, the person I love most next to my kids. Bringing my gaze to her, I admit, "It's Brienne Norcross."

Kiera just stares at me, eyes wide and blank.

"Say something," I demand.

1 could Her foot comes off the chair and she doubles over laughing.

n. You Like, hysterically.

Straightening slightly, she gasps, "Brienne Norcross?"

at's not I nod curtly.

And she starts laughing again.

go out Settling back in my chair, I drum my fingers on the table and wait for her to get it out. Eventually, her laughs turn to chuckles and she sits up wiping tears from her eyes.

mitting, "Are you done?" I ask.

"Are you fucking crazy?" she throws back at me with a snicker. "I got a crush on the owner of the Titans? Are you trying to figure out how to ask her out or something?"

ll she's "It's not a crush."

nd then "Then what is it?"

She's so damn naive sometimes, and because she laughed at me, I want to shock her. "We're fuck buddies."

call? In The remainder of the humor fizzles from her eyes, and her mouth is a mask of disbelief. "Tell me you're kidding."

ir about "I'm not."

"Oh, wow." She leans back in her chair, curling a lock of her blonde hair around her finger in contemplation. "How did that even happen? I thought you couldn't stand her."

ueezing "She grew on me," I mutter. "Suffice it to say, and sparing you

details, we've been together a lot, but it's obviously a secret."

"That is a complication," she says, sympathy shining in her eyes.

If only that were the only one, but the problem goes deeper. "It's not practical to keep it going."

She smirks. "Sex is never practical."

ously... I ignore it. "Now that the boys are here, I can't see her. We can't really make away games work, and she doesn't go to all of them."

tell the It irritates me like a kid denied his candy that Brienne has to go out of the country and miss the next away game. I know that's ridiculous.

ringing "Why only away games? And what do the boys have to do with it?"

I look at her as if she's grown two heads. "I'm a single dad, Kiera."

"You say that as if your life is over and you can't do anything for yourself."

Well, I can't. I don't think. "They're my priority."

"That's all well and good, but let's take tonight for example. The boys are asleep. I'm here watching over them. You can either go to bed alone, or you can go to bed with Brienne. The kids won't know if you're here or not tonight."

for her I point my thumb at my chest. "But I'll know."

again, Kiera rolls her eyes. She does that with me a lot. "If you want to be a martyr because your crazy ex-bitch left you holding all the responsibility, fine. Jake, Colby, and Tanner, by all means... knock yourself out."

You've A flush of anger wells in me. I don't like the term *martyr*. "What does that even mean?"

"It means Crystal is in the past. Your life is now. You are a single dad with three great kids and an amazing, stupendously gifted, and generous sister helping you. You are a good man. You deserve happiness, and you should decide to know hockey and the boys bring you great joy, there's more to life than just hockey. You need to take it for yourself."

sags in Outside the accolades she gives herself—which, fine, are deserved—Kiera's words hit me like I took a puck to the face without my mask.

nd haircall. Take something for myself? "Just go over there?" I ask. "Get my hair cut."

thought "You get whatever you want, Drake. Get your rocks off, take her out for dinner, or—"

you the "We wouldn't be dating," I interrupt.

“Because of the whole team-owner-screwing-a-hockey-player drama would create?”

It’s not “Because I don’t want to date. I don’t want a relationship.”

“Okay,” she says softly.

“I mean it.”

an only Kiera holds up her hands. “Fine. You don’t want a relationship.”

“I don’t,” I confirm, my shoulders set in staunch defiance.

it of the “Fuck buddies to the end,” she proclaims.

” “Damn straight.” I stand from the table and reach into my pocket phone.

” I shoot off a text, and for once, I keep the message simple and outgoing for purview of our usual inside joke. *Can I come over?*

Immediately, the three little dots flash, indicating an imminent response.

I hold my breath until one word flashes on my screen: *Yes.*

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CHAPTER 20

Brienne

DRAKE MAKES IT his mission to destroy me with an orgasm, and while I never believe that a man can just order a woman to do it on command, I'm clearly ready when he growls in my ear, "I need you to come on now, Bri."

And I do.

Oh, how I do.

Like, in a way that shreds me into fragments that feel as though I've just been get put back together again.

"Fuck yes," he snarls as he gathers me in tight thrusts to the point where I shudders as he comes. His face buried in my neck, he says, "So good."

And the rolling timbre of his voice tinged with reverence, and may be a touch of awe, sends another ripple coursing through me. I involuntarily curl around him, and he grinds against me.

"Jesus." He chuckles, biting my shoulder. "Make it stop."

"Never," I gasp in offense.

Drake rolls us to our sides so we're facing each other, keeping me wrapped around my back so we're locked tight. I feel him twitch inside me.

He looks around my bedroom, eyes coming back to me. "At least you've made it to your bed this time. I'm learning to control myself around you."

I pout. "Party pooper."

Laughing, he leans in to kiss me but instead bites my lower lip. Not just not sweet either. A sizzle of lust spears through me, and it's boggling. I want him again already.

I roll my hips, hiking my leg over his. I flex my muscles, squeezing him, and he hisses. "That's a good way to get yourself fucked again."

"Oh, the tragedy," I moan dramatically. "Whatever will I do?"

"Smart-ass," he says, gripping one butt cheek in his big hand.

squeezing before kissing me.

And not a bite to the lip or a playful kiss, but a deep, toe-exploration of my mouth. When he lifts, it's to rub his nose along mine with a sigh, he rolls off and onto his back.

The loss of him between my legs is a stark reminder that we have to back down to earth at some point. I'm so glad he came over tonight, we have nothing but stolen minutes.

I don't I roll the opposite way, intent on grabbing my clothes from the floor, I'm my wrist is ensnared. I glance over my shoulder at him.

my dick Drake is still on his back wearing a lazy smile, his other hand behind his head. "Where are you going?"

I cock an eyebrow at him. "You know where I'm going."

"To work," he surmises with a knowing smirk. "It's what you were all never when I got here."

"And what I'll be doing when you leave."

guilt and "I'm not ready to leave," he says, and tugs me back across the bed, fucking pulls me right into his body and forces me to lie beside him. "Seriously aren't you exhausted?"

be a bit "Yeah, from you," I say, taking these few blissful moments to rest my head on his chest while my fingers play with the thin line of happy-tracks on his lower abdomen.

"If you expect me to feel bad about wearing you out, not going to bed, I'm talking about work, though. Isn't that exhausting?"

an arm I shrug, running my palm up his stomach and watching as his abs contract under my touch. I'm not willing to discuss my work because there's nothing to be done about it. I can't not do my work.

east we "You know," I tease, lifting my head to look at him, "if I cut out rest with you, I'd have more time to work."

not hard, His hand is in my hair, gripping hard, and his eyes flash as he pulls my mouth. "Wrong answer," he murmurs against my lips before kissing me.

ing that Of course, he robs me of my breath, so I'm dizzy when he releases, but I'm surprised to see a mixture of warmth and worry in his eyes. "Explain it to me. Why are you burning the candle at both ends every night we're together? Do you ever get a break? A vacation? A day off in the morning?"

nd and "Never," I say.

He frowns. "Why?"

I consider his question. I have significant resources at my disposal, and delegate duties to others. I could give up running the Titans and go on only running Norcross Holdings, although I'd still work long hours.

I give him the best answer I can. "It's all I know. It's who I am. Even if my identity is so tied up with my work and success, I don't know how to do it. It's why I don't have any close friends, I don't go out, and I don't do vacations."

"It's why you don't have a boyfriend, only a fuck buddy," he points out. "Exactly." I lean forward with the intent to kiss him.

His fist still threaded deep in my hair stops me. "Sounds lonely."

I frown. "Do I look lonely to you?"

"I don't know," Drake admits, softening his hold. "I don't know what lonely looks like."

I raise up on my elbow, and his hand drops to stroke my back. His conversation is making me uncomfortable with the spotlight on me. "Familiar...you feeling being back in the league? Did you make the right decision?"

"Yeah," he says. "Not sure the bitterness toward certain people will just rest my ego away. Pretty much the entire management of the Wolves, who can't believe Crystal. But I'm seeing it wasn't the entire league that betrayed me."

This was a good move, and I suppose I really should thank you for it. "It's a chance."

"You're very welcome. And thank you for accepting my offer. It's a ripple that made our team so much stronger."

"You've put together something really amazing, both with the guys we brought on last season and the new acquisitions this year."

I smile, shaking my head. "That wasn't me. That was all Callum. I think we're strong? I'm a bit out of my element and still learning."

Drake shifts, moves up a bit on the pillow, and leans on his elbow. "Yeah... the first line is solid as a rock. With Coen back at center, finally Stone and Boone as wingers, Nolan and Kirill on defense, it's going to be one of the best lines in the league."

"And our second and third lines?"

"Not sure about Nicholson at left wing on the second line. He reminds me a lot of Stenlund... has moments of brilliance and moments of stupidity, but not consistent. But past that, the second line is solid. Adding Foster M

at center has helped. He's a solid veteran player, and he'll balance
l. I can younger guys on that line."

back to "Wow... you're more than just a pretty goaltender," I tease
actually know your stuff."

I guess He smirks, sliding an arm over my waist and pulling me closer. "
v not tomore than just a pretty owner. You're a powerhouse."

n't take The compliment stirs something inside me that makes me want to
means a lot that Drake respects my confidence and accomplishme
s out. many men can't handle it. It always seemed to be a contest with Clay.

With Drake, though, he's so self-assured, he can handle a strong v
In fact, the reason I like him so much isn't his magic dick, but that he
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w what On the contrary, he controls and dominates me, and I think I actual
that. I need to let someone else steer the ship and make the decisions,
k. This it's just in the bedroom.

low are "I like that you've settled into Pittsburgh and the team," I say,
?" with the ends of his long hair. "Guess you don't need to stick it to the
ill ever anymore."

hose to Drake laughs, sliding a hand to my ass and pulling me in clo
ved me. resurgence of the magic dick. "I'm done sticking it to the league, but
for the done sticking it to you."

He kisses me, and I grin against his mouth. "I'm glad."

You've "I'm glad you're glad," he replies and rolls me onto my back. I
my arms go around his neck and he kisses me again.

ays you

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at center has helped. He's a solid veteran player, and he'll balance out the younger guys on that line."

"Wow... you're more than just a pretty goaltender," I tease. "You actually know your stuff."

He smirks, sliding an arm over my waist and pulling me closer. "You're more than just a pretty owner. You're a powerhouse."

The compliment stirs something inside me that makes me want to cry. It means a lot that Drake respects my confidence and accomplishments. So many men can't handle it. It always seemed to be a contest with Clay.

With Drake, though, he's so self-assured, he can handle a strong woman. In fact, the reason I like him so much isn't his magic dick, but that he doesn't let me intimidate him.

On the contrary, he controls and dominates me, and I think I actually need that. I need to let someone else steer the ship and make the decisions, even if it's just in the bedroom.

"I like that you've settled into Pittsburgh and the team," I say, playing with the ends of his long hair. "Guess you don't need to stick it to the league anymore."

Drake laughs, sliding a hand to my ass and pulling me in close to a resurgence of the magic dick. "I'm done sticking it to the league, but I'm not done sticking it to you."

He kisses me, and I grin against his mouth. "I'm glad."

"I'm glad you're glad," he replies and rolls me onto my back. I sigh as my arms go around his neck and he kisses me again.

CHAPTER 21

Drake

DILLON MARTELLE IS our third-line left-winger and one of the team's s acquisitions. Callum got him from the LA Dragons, and he has the p to knock Darius Cermak off left wing. They battled hard during t camp and both put in excellent performances during the preseason. being so close between them, I think Darius got the second-line positi because he was on that line last year, and second line has remained intact, except for Foster Macinnis, who took over the center spot when moved permanently to the first line, taking over Gage's vacant rigl position.

Married with two kids—a boy and a girl—Dillon and I have bond parenting. A lot of the players don't have children, so they don't und that life is very different when you do.

We have today mostly off as we're between home games. Coac kept this morning's practice to only an hour so our legs will be fr tomorrow, although I also got in a workout. And now we're all at I house for an impromptu get-together.

The main reason I accepted the invitation was because childre invited, and I want my boys to start bonding with the other kids.

Dillon and his wife, Carly, live north of Pittsburgh in a new subc that reminds me a lot of where we lived in Red Wing—large, cooki houses with no trees and young landscaping. Pittsburgh is growing, th the thriving medical and banking industries, and families are pushing limits outward.

Kiera is in tow and currently watching the boys as they climb all c Martelles' huge wooden play set, complete with a small climbing w fireman's pole they slide down from the playhouse at the top. I grin l Kiera stands close, fretting as they play. She's always worried they'll get hurt.

I'm more the type of dad who knows they have to fall to ap- gravity, although I will settle them down if they get too rambunctious now, they're just having fun making new friends. They've settled in new school, but I don't know any of the parents there and can't arrange playdates. Kiera and I will get it figured out, but for now, they to run like little hellions and have a blast.

I grab a beer out of a huge metal tub filled with ice. The get-to- summer casual with catered BBQ served on thick paper plates, as well as so potential dessert for the kids. My type of party—it doesn't require me to dress raining bad enough I have to do it several times a week for games.

Things Glancing around, I see most of the players are here with their sig- on only others and children, if they have them. I note that Coach West didn't c- mostly no clue if he was invited, but I'd assume so. I saw Gage and Baden ear Boone Brienne is most definitely not here, and I didn't even bother to l- nt-wing her as I know she's on her way to Germany. She wouldn't have been- though, because there's such a wide chasm between the team own- ed over players.

erstand At least, usually, but I've obviously crossed it.

I move to the back lawn toward a group of guys playing corr- h West Camden, Nolan, Kirill, and Hendrix—all four defensemen. The fir- esh for guys are as single as they come, but Hendrix has a girl hanging on h- Dillon's and I assume that's his new girlfriend.

"Hey, man," Nolan says as he glances up. He's bent at the waist, a- n were launch an underhanded lob at the board. He tosses and misses, b- bouncing off into the grass. "Fuck... I suck at this game."

division "It's why you're a defenseman," I say with a smirk. "You can't t- e-cutter puck through the net either."

anks to They all laugh, especially since it's not true. Any defenseman ha- the city able to score goals too. It's just not their primary job.

"Want in?" he asks as he walks down to pick up his beanbags.

over the "I'm good." I look back at the play set, see my kids are still ali- r- all and Kiera is still hovering.

ecause "Drake," Hendrix says, nodding to the brunette on his arm. "Thi- fall and girlfriend, Tracy."

I nod at her as she makes no move to unlatch herself from Hendri- to shake hands. "Nice to meet you."

preciate “You too,” she says, then leans into Hendrix. “I’m bored. Can we do something else?”

to their Poor dude... Hendrix flushes because he’s thinking what we’re exactly thinking—that was pretty damn self-centered. But he’s the one who’s committed to monogamy, so he’s going to have to figure out if he can give himself to the right woman.

either is Reaching out a hand, I take the beanbags from Hendrix. “I’ll take them to the table, man.”

up. It’s “Thanks,” he mutters and then lets Tracy lead him away.

“Damn, she’s a bitch,” Nolan says as he glances after Hendrix.

nificant “Pussy must be magic or something,” Kirill says as he moves up to the line. He tosses and nails every shot. As he walks to retrieve his bags, he notices Kirill. “What’s the deal with your sister?”

ook for “There is no deal with my sister,” I reply as I set my beer on a table and move to the line. “She’s fucking off-limits to everyone on this floor and if I so much as see anyone looking at her in any way, I’ll pound them into the ground.”

“Seriously?” Kirill asks while the other guys snicker.

whole— “Dead serious. As in, you’ll be dead.”

st three “But I’m a nice guy,” Kirill says with his arms outstretched. “I’ll be your teammate. Who better than—”

I roll my eyes before concentrating on my target. “You just hypotized that Hendrix’s girl’s pussy is magic. You think I want you thinking about my sister like that?”

“That was because I have no respect for Hendrix’s girlfriend,” Nolan says. “She leads him by the hairs on his balls.”

Camden snorts. “That’s true. She’s got a firm hold on the wrinkles on his balls.” I launch my beanbags and miss all three. I absorb a good deal of attention from the guys, but there’s no further talk about Kiera. I glance over periodically. A few of the wives talk to her, but she seems pretty interested, and kids.

After I finish the game, I walk around, talking to various players. My season is still so new and there are many guys I don’t know much about. I’m committed to becoming a solid part of this new family.

Grabbing my second beer from the ice tub, I run into Gage down the same.

e go do “What’s up, man?” he says, twisting off the cap.

“Not much.” I look to the play set where Kiera’s bent over tying T
e’re allshoe. Jake is at the top of the rock wall, and one of his feet slip, then th
ie whogoes right after. He clings to the top, legs scrabbling to find purch
latchedKiera had been watching, she would’ve darted to save him.

I just watch and let the pride swell when I see him calmly find a f
ce yourand propel himself over the top.

I glance back at Gage, and he’s silently scanning the backyard.

It’s weird he’s being quiet.

To the extent it’s awkward.

for his And then it hits me. Jenna caught Brienne and me in a compr
ie asks,situation, and Jenna and Gage are together. He probably wants to bro
subject—I’m sure to give warning—and doesn’t know how.

nearby I don’t like beating around the bush, so I say, “If you need
is team,something about me and Brienne, just spit it out.”

id them Gage spins my way and frowns. “You and Brienne? What do you r
“Fuck,” I mutter. “I assumed Jenna told you.”

“Told me what?”

“Never mind. Forget it.”

m your I start to walk away, but Gage steps into my path. “Oh, no you don
just implied that something happened between you and the owner
hesizedteam that obviously my girlfriend knows about but didn’t tell me
out mywouldn’t expect her to if it’s a secret. But you were clearly ready to
it, so spill it.”

” Kirill Standing near the beer tub isn’t the most private place to talk, so I
head and Gage follows me over to a quiet area of the backyard.

s.” And I proceed to tell him everything, minus the dirty bits.

ribbing “Dude,” is all he says.

r at her “I get it’s wrong, but honestly, this isn’t really going anywhere. It’
t on thefling.”

“If it’s just a fling, you would never have told me the details.”

rs. The “Whatever,” I mutter before taking a long pull from my bee
out. Butnothing anyone needs to worry about.”

ing theanything wrong. There’s no specific rule about the owner of the team.’

“I know. I’ve checked.”

Gage lobs a knowing smile that I ignore. “There are guidelines on disclosing personal relationships within the organization to make sure no special allowances are made. Like Jenna and I—we’re not in the same class. If it doesn’t really matter. Our jobs don’t affect each other.”

Brienne’s doesn’t really affect me either since my contract is set in stone. Technically, down the road, she could cause issues. If she were pissed at me, she has enough pull with Callum to get me booted.

It’s not something I’d considered before, and many would think I should never go down because the risk to my career is too great. I think with my bad experiences with the league, I’d be extra cautious.

Oddly, I don’t think Brienne would ever do anything to hurt my career. I promise I won’t let her take advantage of me as one of her players. I’ve seen enough of her to know that about her, and I’m not worried.

I spot Baden grabbing a beer and heading our way, so it’s time to change the subject. Despite the fact he was a personal friend before I ever came to the team, I don’t want him knowing. “Where are Jenna and Sophie?” I ask. He reaches us.

“They had a preplanned shopping trip for today, so they’re off to the store. God knows what,” Baden says. “Which gives me the perfect opportunity to start letting people know while she’s not around... but I’m ready to put it all on Sophie, and I want to do it at a game.”

Gage and I stare at him.

“What?” he says defensively. “It’s a brilliant idea.”

“Sounds complicated,” I point out.

“Because you’re completely unromantic.” Baden laughs. “I’m going to run it by Brienne when she gets back from her trip.”

“Why Brienne?” I ask a little too sharply, and Gage gives me a questioning look.

“Because I want Sophie to be up in the owner’s box, and Brienne’s been the one who’s joined their little group.”

“It’s a great idea,” Gage says. “I’ll be dropping the question soon, I promise. It’s just I haven’t figured out how just yet. I’ve talked to her dad, though, and he’s giving his blessing.”

Baden laughs. “That’s totally old school. Nice.” He then nods to Coen, standing with his arm around Tillie, here visiting for the week. “You’ll never see it coming. One day, they’ll just be married.”

s about Gage nods with a grin. “They’ll totally elope. And Stone and Harl there’scan see them not getting married. They’ll live together, have kids, an area, soold, but I don’t see them going conventional. I bet they’re the first pregnant.”

t, but I “I can’t wait for Sophie to get pregnant.” Baden sighs, and I’ve e to getenough.

“You two ladies done with your gossip?”

that’s a They both laugh, and Baden punches my shoulder. “Seriously, . You’dyou’re lucky.”

“How’s that?” I ask.

areer or Baden looks over to the play set. “You’re a dad. I have a feeling r moralnothing greater.”

Reluctantly, I have to join the conversation now because if he’s changeabout my boys, he’s speaking my language. “You couldn’t be mor ie here,Once you have kids, your life becomes infinitely better.”

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propose “Not a fucking peep in weeks.” Irritates the living fuck out of m left messages and even sent mail to her last known address. disappeared.”

“Think something bad happened to her?” Baden asks.

“God, I hope not,” I say, glancing at the kids. “It’s hard enough v oing tojust being absent.”

“Well, it’s impressive that you’re able to have a hectic career and c pointedthem.” Baden sips his beer. “But you know what... you really shou dating again. It’s time to put yourself back out there and find a good w

; sort of “Just because you’re ready to get married and have babies doesn’ I’m looking for that again,” I say with a stern look. “I’m more than too, butwith the way things are right now.”

got his “I bet,” Gage murmurs, and I glare at him.

over to
end. “I
ried.”

Gage nods with a grin. “They’ll totally elope. And Stone and Harlow... I can see them not getting married. They’ll live together, have kids, and grow old, but I don’t see them going conventional. I bet they’re the first to get pregnant.”

“I can’t wait for Sophie to get pregnant.” Baden sighs, and I’ve heard enough.

“You two ladies done with your gossip?”

They both laugh, and Baden punches my shoulder. “Seriously, dude... you’re lucky.”

“How’s that?” I ask.

Baden looks over to the play set. “You’re a dad. I have a feeling there’s nothing greater.”

Reluctantly, I have to join the conversation now because if he’s talking about my boys, he’s speaking my language. “You couldn’t be more right. Once you have kids, your life becomes infinitely better.”

“Any word from their mother?” Baden asks. Most of the guys know my history with Crystal and have taken time to ask about my current situation. Not being nosy, just concerned.

But as my personal friend, Baden knows more than most.

“Not a fucking peep in weeks.” Irritates the living fuck out of me. “I’ve left messages and even sent mail to her last known address. She’s disappeared.”

“Think something bad happened to her?” Baden asks.

“God, I hope not,” I say, glancing at the kids. “It’s hard enough with her just being absent.”

“Well, it’s impressive that you’re able to have a hectic career and care for them.” Baden sips his beer. “But you know what... you really should start dating again. It’s time to put yourself back out there and find a good woman.”

“Just because you’re ready to get married and have babies doesn’t mean I’m looking for that again,” I say with a stern look. “I’m more than happy with the way things are right now.”

“I bet,” Gage murmurs, and I glare at him.

CHAPTER 22

Brienne

HAULING THE LAUNDRY basket off the floor, I balance it on my hip and make the trek back to my room. While I humor Daniel and let him do a lot of things personally, I draw the line at him washing my clothes or allowing the housekeeping service to do it.

I'm exhausted, having just flown in from Germany this afternoon. The first thing I did when I got home was shower, change into soft yoga pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt, and throw in my laundry. Daniel prepared me a salad with lettuce, and tomato sandwich, and I munched on that while I checked e-mail.

Now that my laundry is done, I'm going to kick back and watch the Titans game on TV. Yes, I'll have my laptop perched on my thighs so I can work, but I'll also be watching. I couldn't watch the game night before last due to time zone difference and meetings. The Titans are on an extended road trip when they played in Florida, and now they're in Atlanta tonight before returning home tomorrow.

That would've been three guaranteed nights with Drake had I not had to go to Germany, but sadly, these impromptu trips and emergency meetings are a part of my regular job.

I put my laundry away, grab a sparkling water from the fridge, and sit down on a plush couch in the den. Stretching my legs out with a cushioned ottoman to my back, I turn on my laptop and click on the large-screen TV above the fireplace.

When I find the game, I turn it to a sustainable volume that will allow me to hear the commentary and concentrate on my work at the same time.

Ten minutes later, I'm glued to the TV. I've always loved hockey since my father owned the Titans, I grew up watching games. I traveled with several of them with Adam once he took over. But to be honest, I'm more interested in the game now since being at the helm.

Also admittedly, and with a touch of chagrin, I'm a little obsessed with the game.

watching Drake in the net. He's a hulking beast, his large frame almost filling up the entire space. Most shots taken at him go low, the wrongly assuming he's not agile enough to stop the puck with his legs.

Most times, they're wrong. Drake is on fire and playing every bit as he did before he was injured when with the Wolves. I don't know personally as I didn't watch him, or any other non-Titan player for that matter, but Callum has told me on more than one occasion that Drake would make absolute best acquisition since the crash.

I am proud that I've made a genuine contribution to the success of the team, considering I'm the one who convinced Drake to come back from retirement.

Of course, I've negated any such professional accomplishment by screwing the best acquisition, and I feel guilty about it.

Not enough to quit, mind you, but my conscience prickles.

My phone rings and I grab it, not answering right away as the breakaway heading straight for Drake.

He easily blocks the shot, and I glance at my phone.

Kiera McGinn.

I'm shocked to see Drake's sister calling and I hesitate in answering to avoid her, but because I'm so flummoxed to see her name.

Common sense prevails, and I connect the call. "Hello?"

At first, I don't hear anything, but then my blood turns cold when I hear a child crying.

And it's not the cry of a child who is upset his favorite toy has been taken away but a wail of fear.

"It's okay, baby," I hear Kiera's voice, but it sounds muffled and weak.

"Kiera." My voice is loud, trying to get her attention. I swing my legs over the couch and my laptop thuds on the carpet. "Are you okay?"

She sounds so frail, my hair stands on end. "Hey... Brienne... she won't bother you."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry... I tried to call Jenna but didn't get an answer, and I don't know anyone else here."

"Jenna's in Atlanta with the team. You're sick."

"I thought it was just a cold or something, but I spiked a fever a few days ago, and it's climbed up to 104. I'm so damn weak from all the vomiting."

I can't get off the couch and the boys are freaking out. I haven't been
shooterfeed them and—"

"I'm on my way," I say, bolting for my bedroom to throw on
as wellshoes. "What's your address?"

She gives it to me, and I do the calculation. "It'll take me half an
hour to get there. Are you good or do I need to call an ambulance?"

"No ambulance," she says. "The kids are scared enough as it is."

"Okay. Just hang tight, and I'll be there in twenty."

of this

out of



THE UBER PULLS up in front of Drake's house, and I climb out, heading
front door. I don't even knock before it swings open, and his oldest
stands there.

"Hi... Remember me? I'm Brienne. A friend of your dad's and
Kiera's."

He nods solemnly and moves back to let me in. "She's really s
said you were coming."

"Show me where she is."

He leads me into the living room where I find Kiera on the
shivering under a blanket. The twins, Colby and Tanner, stand bes
with tearstained cheeks.

Tossing my purse on a table, I move next to Kiera. She smiles we
me as I touch the back of my hand to her forehead. Why, I don't kno
told me she had a 104° temperature, and I have no reason to disbelieve

But I grimace upon feeling the heat pouring off her.

First thing's first... I turn to Jake and squat so we're eye to ey
going to help make your aunt Kiera feel better, but can you do me a fa

He nods.

"Take your brothers to your room or somewhere you can play o
TV. Your aunt is going to be just fine, but I'd feel better if you boys
back a bit so you don't get sick too. Okay?"

Jake nods, but Colby starts crying again, and I turn to him. Reachi
I take his little hand. "I promise she'll be okay. I'm going to take go

of her. I want you to be a strong, tough little man so she doesn't worr
you. Can you do that?"

hours
ng, and

able to He nods, and Jake takes his brothers' hands and leads them away.

I turn back to Kiera and the worry gushes forth. "They're old enough to be out of sight, right?"

Even in her weakened state, Kiera manages a smile. "Yes. They were the ones who set the house on fire."

My nervous laugh is filled with relief. "I have no clue how to talk to kids, much less talk to them."

"You did fine," she says, and then a massive shudder ripples through her body.

"Have you taken anything for the fever?"

"I tried Tylenol, but I threw it right back up again. I think I have a fever because everything hurts and I'm pretty sure I'm going to throw up again."

Kiera tries to sit up, but I put a hand to her shoulder. "Stay there. I'll get a garbage can. Where's the medicine normally kept?"

"Master suite bathroom upstairs," she whispers, clearly an effort to keep her voice down so I don't bother asking where that is.

I snoop through Drake's house and find myself surprised that Kiera is in the master suite, which sort of makes sense. She's here more than I would expect. I pop my head into the boys' room. They're all cuddled on the top bunk. Jake is reading a story to his brothers.

My heart throbs at the sight, which only confirms to me that Drake is raising good kids.

Having been sick on occasion myself, I grab the essentials. A garbage can, a bathroom garbage can with a clean bag, a hair tie from Kiera's vanity, a can of ginger ale I find in the fridge, and both the Tylenol and ibuprofen from the medicine cabinet. Finally, I grab a washcloth and run it under the faucet. "I'm sorry, but the water the faucet will produce."

At Kiera's side, I help her to sit up so I can tie her hair out of the way. I crack the ginger ale and although she tries to refuse, I make her take small sips. "Every time you throw up, you have to put some back in."

I drape the cloth over her forehead and then go back to the kitchen for a closer perusal of things. Realizing that I don't have quite what I need for Kiera feeling better, nor do I know how to feed three boys, I call Drake. After I tell him what I need and where to deliver it, I head back into the boys' room.

Kiera's eyes are closed, and I reposition the cloth on her forehead.

startles, her eyes bloodshot and watery. “I feel like shit.”

ough to “You look like you feel like shit,” I say, and that earns me a smile.
got someone on the way with chicken noodle soup, Gatorade, and ice
on’t die for the kids. Hope that’s okay?”

“I wouldn’t normally give them ice cream this late, but I don’t have
care for strength to fight you.”

“I wasn’t sure if I’d need it, but I don’t even know how to get kid
ugh her for bed. I thought I might need it for bribery.”

Again, a wan smile, but I take that to be a good sign.

“Thank you,” she murmurs weakly. “I hated to call you—”

the flu “Stop,” I say with a stern look. “I gave you my contact informati
ain.” you to use. I’m really happy to help.”

Let me “Is it because you and Drake are together?” she asks softly.

My body locks tight, then I glance around to make sure the kids
o speak, nearby before pinning my eyes on her. “What?”

“Drake told me about you two.”

ra lives “I’m... it’s not... I don’t...”

Drake. I “Relax,” Kiera whispers. “I’m too sick to even gossip with you a
nk, and but for the record—and maybe it’s the fever talking—I think you two
be great for each other.”

Drake is My head turns left, then right. I’m panicked, like the walls are clo

Why would she say such things? She knows him better than anyone,
A small would she ever think someone like her brother, who is very relat
, a coldverse, would be great for someone like me, who is also relationship a

rom the I start to tell her there’s nothing going on, and in fact, I’ve all but
coldest to call it quits because his sister thinks we’re great for each other, but
fallen asleep.

way. I Exhaling a shaky breath, I glance at my watch. Daniel won’t be he
e a few while, so I go check on the boys.

When I step into their room, Jake looks up from the book and t
en for twins turn their heads my way. Three mini Drakes.

l to get “You boys doing okay?”

Daniel. Jake nods. “Is Aunt Kiera going to get better?”

e living “I’m sure she will. It’s getting late, though, so I think you can g
your pajamas.”

ad. She “We haven’t had dinner yet. Aunt Kiera couldn’t get off the couch.

“Oh,” I reply and have a mini panic attack. What do little boys eat?
e. “I’ve “She was going to make us macaroni and cheese,” Jake says.

cream Relief surges through me. “Yes, I can totally make that. How ab
guys get into your pj’s and I’ll go make your dinner? My friend D
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ice cream.”

s ready Three sets of blue eyes light up. “We love ice cream,” one of th
says.

I have no clue which one, so I ask, “Are you Colby or Tanner?”

“Colby,” he says.

tion for “No, he’s not.” Jake gives his brother a scolding look. “That’s
and he’s trying to trick you.”

I walk up to the bunk beds, a faux tough expression but with
s aren’t curled so they know I’m amused. I still have to tip my head back to
them, letting my eyes move between the twins. I study them i
knowing that no matter how identical they are, there will be som
different.

about it, I spot it right away and point to Tanner’s forehead. “Your cowlic
would left. Your brother’s turns right.”

Tanner grins, revealing a missing front tooth. “That’s how my dad
sing in. apart.”

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it she’s extra ice cream?”

“Quite the little negotiator,” I muse as he jumps to the floor and
re for ato e to toe with me. “I like it. I’ll consider it if you help me get them re
bed after, including a good tooth brushing.”

hen the “Deal,” he says, offering his hand.

Laughing, we shake on it, and then I leave him to his job. I realiz
can absolutely delegate when I need to.

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I walk up to the bunk beds, a faux tough expression but with my lips curled so they know I’m amused. I still have to tip my head back to look at them, letting my eyes move between the twins. I study them intently, knowing that no matter how identical they are, there will be something different.

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“Yes,” he says, rolling over and scrambling down the ladder. “Will I get extra ice cream?”

“Quite the little negotiator,” I muse as he jumps to the floor and comes toe to toe with me. “I like it. I’ll consider it if you help me get them ready for bed after, including a good tooth brushing.”

“Deal,” he says, offering his hand.

Laughing, we shake on it, and then I leave him to his job. I realize that I can absolutely delegate when I need to.

CHAPTER 23

Drake

I'M EXHAUSTED. THE extended road trip was a drain, but not in a bad way. There's the physical toll of playing hockey, traveling, and sleeping in hotels, but it's balanced by the competition that fuels us and the high of winning. Sometimes the high of winning can be just as depleting once you come back.

This week we flew from Pittsburgh to Miami where we lost to the Spartans. From there we went to Atlanta where we beat the Sting last night and I had another shutout. Rather than stay overnight, we hopped the plane at the airport and boarded our plane back to Pittsburgh. The greatest thing about the Titans owning a team plane is that we were out of there just before midnight, no hassles or delays.

It's almost two in the morning, and I'm looking forward to pass out for a few hours before the boys wake me up. They're fond of crashing into my room and using me as a trampoline.

Just thinking about it makes me smile, interrupted by a deep yawn. I walk up to the front door.

Hitching my duffel on my shoulder, I slip the key into the lock and open myself in quietly. As I shut the door behind me, a sound catches my attention from the kitchen.

I drop my bag and move through the living room, able to see the soft glow of a small table lamp. The kitchen is dark, but as I round the corner, moonlight filters in through the window over the sink. I see Kiera at the sink rinsing a cup.

Reaching out, I flip on the light. "Boo."

"Jesus," Kiera gasps as she spins around, hand clutched to her chest. "except... it's not Kiera."

It's Brienne.

A million things hit me at once, the first of which is utter shock at the woman I've been having copious amounts of down-low and di-

with.

In my home.

Uninvited.

Where is Kiera? Did she let Brienne in to wait for me?

Why has Brienne suddenly taken it upon herself to cross the line I drew? I've never invited her here, and it's telling that there's not a molecule inside me that's happy to see her in my personal space.

Maybe I'm just exhausted and stupefied, and I'm sure I'll regret words later, but I growl, "What are you doing in my home?"

Not house, but *home*. A private, personal place.

She had a slight smile when we originally locked eyes, and if I'm right, it was happiness to see me. It's gone now, though, her expression shuttered. What little that bleeds through is guarded.

"Where are the boys? Kiera?" I demand, knowing instinctively it's unnecessary to ask.

"Sleeping," she grits out.

Yeah... those were bad questions.

I close my eyes, pinch the bridge of my nose, and sigh. I need to cover and not come off as a jackass, but I'm spinning a bit out of control.

Something brushes by me... a mere whisper of movement. My eyes open, and I turn to see Brienne stomping through the house.

She heads right for the front door, grabbing her purse.

I scramble after her, taking hold of her arm before she can escape my attention a minute."

Brienne jerks away but wheels to face me. She says nothing because her glare speaks volumes.

"I'm sorry. I was caught off guard." Lamé explanation, and the way I can defend the tone with which I questioned her. It came off exactly how I felt at that moment... as if she was redefining the boundaries of our relationship without consulting me first.

Within that frigid expression, I realize that her being here doesn't have anything to do with what's between us. Which means... something is wrong with someone in my family and panic bursts within me.

She must read the horrid thoughts flashing through my brain because she holds up a hand. "Kiera has the flu. She called me last night because she's pretty sick, and the only other person she knows is Jenna, but she was

road trip.”

“Is she—”

“She’ll be fine. Her fever finally broke a few hours ago. I fed them and put them to bed. I was just waiting for you to come home before Kiera’s pretty weak, and I didn’t want to leave the kids alone.”

“Christ,” I mutter, rubbing a hand over my face. “I’m sorry, Brienne, you for coming over and helping—”

“You’re welcome,” she clips out and turns for the door.

“Please, just wait.” I grab her wrist, as close to begging as I’ve ever been with any woman. “Don’t go.”

She stills, looking at me warily.

I take in a breath and let it out. “When I saw you in the kitchen— Fuck, this is painful to admit. “I was pissed.”

“You thought I crossed a line without permission,” she says, tugging her wrist free but not bolting for the door. “You thought I was perhaps taking more than what you had offered.”

I’ll never lie to her. “Yeah... that’s exactly what I thought. And to start obviously wrong.”

“Well,” she says calmly, lifting her chin, “you don’t have to worry. I don’t want anything more than what you offer. I was only here for Kiera.”

Fuck. Why does that sting? Why wouldn’t she want more from me? “Wait. Yes... I know I’m contradicting myself. Talk about a mixed bag of emotions—but it also hits me like a ton of bricks... Brienne came and took care of her sister.

My children.

Walked away from whatever mountain of work I know she has. She actually selflessly gave of herself. She didn’t do it for me either, but because of our good woman.

Her words are efficient as she leaves instructions. “I got Kiera’s fever to break by alternating Tylenol and ibuprofen. Her next dose of Tylenol is in three hours. Four more hours after that, hit her with ibuprofen. She’s had some vomiting earlier, but that seems to have settled. Cold ginger ale and some crackers are all she’s been able to keep down, but I’ve managed to get her hydrated. There’s Gatorade and soup in the fridge, if she can tolerate it.”

Once again, she moves for the door, and I don’t grab for her this time.

I use words instead. “Don’t go.”

She freezes, her head bowed slightly, but she doesn’t turn to face me. Stepping up behind her, I slip my arms around her waist and pull her into my arms. “I’m the biggest asshole around. You didn’t deserve me I left against my body.”

Brienne relaxes into me without hesitation. She could make me suffer by refusing my embrace, but she doesn’t. “I get it,” she says. “I know it’s a shock to see me here. I would have texted, but Kiera didn’t want to worry.”

“Were the boys freaked out?” I ask.

“There were some tears. They were a little scared, but ice cream makes them all better.”

Chuckling, I squeeze her. “And you said you didn’t know how to communicate with kids. You’ve totally got it figured out.”

“Ice cream is universal,” she says, but then to my disappointment she turns away. Turning to face me, I note her smile doesn’t reach her eyes. “I should get going. I have to be in by eight for a meeting with Coach Williams. I need a little sleep.”

Reaching back, her fingers touch the doorknob and something clicks. My panic wells up inside me.

“Stay the night,” I blurt out.

Her eyebrows shoot up. “Excuse me?”

“Come get a bit of sleep with me. I know you’re exhausted.”

“You and I don’t sleep when we’re together,” she points out.

“I’ll be a gentleman. I promise.”

Brienne shakes her head. “Not a good idea. I don’t think the boys find me here... you know... with you. In your room. It’s not right.”

“The couch,” I say, reaching out and taking her hand. I walk back to her and pull her along. “Just lie down with me for a bit. I’ll set the alarm which is long before the boys wake up, and you’ll have plenty of time to get home for a shower and be at the office before eight.”

Brienne glances back at the door, and I use the opportunity to pull her purse from her grip. I toss it on a chair and tug her right down onto the couch with me.

I lie back, arranging her body to drape over mine, and she feels better than any blanket. She’s wearing a pair of soft stretchy pants, and my hand slides under the band just an inch to stroke the skin on her lower back.

dick twitches, but she needs sleep, not sex.

I wrap my arm around her to hold her in place, and her head nestles into the crook of my neck. She sighs, her breath floating across my skin. My arm tightens around me. Sliding a leg in between mine and wiggling my fingers for comfort, she asks, “How did you play tonight? I didn’t get to play tonight.”

“A shutout. We won 3–0.”

“That’s awesome,” she replies, but her words are laced with sarcasm.

She’s been working her ass off to care for Kiera and my boys for the last several hours.

“Get some sleep,” I order, but she doesn’t respond.

She’s already out.



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est, and

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here.

Scrubbing my hands over my face, I tap the alarm and swing my legs over the couch.

Brienne was here in my house, and I asked her to stay the night. *She* did, for at least part of it. We didn’t have sex. She took care of my kids and my sister.

Goddamn it, things have changed, and I didn’t want them to. I’m not ready now, nor do I think I ever will be ready, to let a woman back into my life where she’s in a position of trust. Crystal is dangerous in her own right.

addiction. It makes me want to puke when I think of the times she was with the boys—had driven the boys—and was probably high. Had something happened to them, it would have been my fault for not seeing what was in front of my eyes.

It’s not that I think Brienne does drugs or that she’s dangerous. I know my kids and Kiera were in capable hands with her.

The best hands, actually.

But one thing being married to Crystal taught me is that you never know someone. We were together nine years, having met during freshman year in college. She got pregnant with Jake two years after that.

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we got married. Next came an NHL career and two more boys. It had less of a full life, but it wasn't until she'd become so erratic near the end of the season that I understood something was very wrong.

Once I figured out it was drugs, and she refused to go to rehab to get clean, I moved to cut her out of our lives. That resulted in her going offensive, leveling the allegations against me that Wolves ownership management believed, and that led me to... well, here.

I didn't want a relationship.

I *don't* want a relationship.

I look at the door and ask myself, *Why did you ask her to stay? Are you disappointed she's gone?*

I don't let myself answer because I'm afraid of what I might say.

Pushing up from the couch, I head upstairs. I check on the boys, glancing into their room. All three are still lumps under their blankets.

I move to Kiera's room. Her door is open, and the rising dawn provides enough light as I enter that I can see she's asleep. I bend over and touch her forehead, relieved to find it cool, but a bit clammy.

She stirs and her eyes flutter open. "Hey," she rasps as she sits up, legs off the headboard. "You just get in?"

"A few hours ago. Brienne was here."

"Sorry if it was awkward that I called her. I was so sick I couldn't get off the couch, and I was worried about the boys."

I sit down on the edge of the bed, angling toward her. "Don't you apologize for doing something to help the boys or yourself. You did nothing."

Kiera nods and reaches out to the bedside table, grabbing the bottle of water. She takes a sip and grimaces.

"Want something else?" I ask.

She nods, handing me the bottle. "Some cold ginger ale. Lots of ice."

"How about a visit to the doctor?" I suggest as I rise from the bed.

Kiera shakes her head. "I already feel much better. I bet by tomorrow I'll be as good as new."

I cock my eyebrow, because I know she must've been really bad. I call Brienne. "On the off chance you're not, I'm going to have some people on standby who can help with the kids if needed."

We've got a home game tomorrow, so I'll be in and out between then

been at today's practice. But the team has a roster of wives who are happy to help in times such as these. I never even thought to give that to Kiera, though I also know Jenna will be glad to help if necessary.

Brienne is not an option again, not because I don't want her to because clearly I do to some extent, as evidenced by me asking her to help last night—but because she's busy running an empire. She doesn't have to play nursemaid or babysitter, although I know deep in my gut, she would if I asked.

"I'll get you some ginger ale. Want some toast?"

She shakes her head. "Not just yet. My stomach's still a bit queasy." I smile and turn for the door.

"I really like her," Kiera says, halting me. I glance over my shoulder first, "Brienne. She's pretty amazing."

Swallowing hard, I shrug. "She's okay."

Kiera laughs. "You're so full of shit and you know it."

I refuse to respond because she won't believe my denials.

Hell, I'm having a hard time believing them myself.

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CHAPTER 24

Brienne

FLIPPING OPEN MY compact, I check my reflection. No hiding the dark but my lipstick is still perfect from when I applied it this morning.

I barely slept an hour, and it was done in fitful increments. While sweet that Drake asked me to stay with him, and I don't deny it while lying on his body, I was uncomfortable.

Not because of the sleeping conditions, but because it was just we reacted badly to me being in his house, and try as he did to apologize and explain himself, it's left a black cloud of uncertainty hanging over me. What woke me up and kept me awake, even though Drake slept soundly underneath me on the couch.

I absolutely hate how much it hurt that he was angry to find me here. Yes, I know we've couched our relationship in terms of this not a *relationship*, but the truth is... we're not just hooking up. He's been jealous. We've committed to monogamy, he's forever concerned I work too hard, and now I've helped care for his sister and kids.

We've moved to something more, perhaps without realizing it, and our true feelings were abundantly clear last night, just in that one question: *are you doing in my home?*

I finally gave up on sleep and snuck out around five a.m., thankful for the early morning Uber drivers. That didn't give me the time I needed to get home for clothes and then head to the arena gym for a workout, so I grabbed a taxi and headed into the office.

This morning's meeting with Cannon West is long overdue. A week and a half into the regular season, and I want to see how he's doing.

I want to know if he likes us as much as we like him.

When I took over the Titans after Adam died, my goal was to build a team that would withstand the test of time. We did our best with what we had last season, but this summer I had Callum push to the very edge of our

cap with strong offers. Drake was an example of that, and I haven't let
of sleep over the money we spent.

I want to give this city something to be proud of.

While the players are key, it's the head coach who pulls it all together.
I could have the best twenty players in the league on my team, but without
a coach to inspire cohesion and maximize the talent, it would be
wasted.

I offered Cannon West three million to take the job, and it was a lot
more than most would have offered for someone with such limited coaching
experience. But Callum suggested we roll the dice, and I like a
calculated risk.

So far, we're off to an amazing start, and we don't look like
a decimated team we were last year.

The investment in Cannon was a good decision. And I need to know
how it feels like he made a good investment of his time and energy
in this organization.

A knock on my door has me stuffing the compact into my purse
and standing from my desk chair just as Tina escorts Cannon in.

I smile as I walk around the desk to greet him. The gods of greed
and jealousy blessed Cannon West with near-perfect good looks. Like the kind of
facial features that grace the covers of high-end fashion magazines. His
hair is neat and trimmed, but he wears a perpetual five o'clock shadow
but his hazel eyes have laugh lines at the corners, despite him only being thirty-
one. *What* the only thing that mars the perfection, and yet... it's the laugh lines
that make him so beautiful. He's always got a smile on his face, and I'm
thankful for that as I know he's suffered greatly.

That is the main reason I wanted him as our coach. I wanted him to
lead the players, the city, hell, the world that was watching us that you could
lead from despair and find peace in your life.

"Cannon." I offer my hand, and he shakes it. "Thanks for meeting
me."

"The boss calls, I come running," he quips with a smile that pops
a dimple on his stubbled cheek.

"Technically, Callum's your boss." I lead him over to a buffet
table where Tina arranged bagels, croissants, pastries, and fruit, as well as a
tray of freshly brewed coffee.

ost a bit This is a breakfast meeting, so I told Cannon to come prepared
Upon smelling the fresh-baked goods, it occurs to me that I didn't eat
last night, other than a bite of the boxed macaroni and cheese I made
ether. Iit. By the time the boys finished second helpings, there wasn't any left
ithout awas too busy wrangling them and caring for Kiera to find anything
moneysnack on.

Despite having missed my workout this morning, I have no hesita
ot moretaking a bagel and loading it up with lox, cream cheese, red onion
achingcapers. Cannon takes a croissant and fruit.

u good, We move over to the round table that seats four, perfect for
collaborative meetings. It works well enough to have breakfast too.

ike the After pouring coffee, we sit and make small talk as we eat.

Cannon's an easy guy to talk to... humble, funny, and genuine. Str
ow if hewith him isn't shallow, and we easily move through topics as frothy
in thislatest blockbuster movie he saw last weekend to the rising cost of gas
global conflicts causing a riptide of economic disparity.

e, and I When our plates are clean, I pour us each another cup of coffee. I
back in my chair, I look him square in the eye. "Be honest... how
ousnessliking it here?"

lawless Cannon doesn't appear surprised by my question. There's really n
his darkreason I'd want to meet with him.

7. Light A man clearly skilled in word craft and decorum, he smiles. "I feel
irty-six,need to offer more thanks for the opportunity you've given me. There
ies thatof pressure to perform, and you took a big chance given my
arvel atexperience, but honestly, I can't think of any place I'd rather be right

This organization is the perfect fit."

o show I smile back at him. "I'm glad to hear that. No need to tell y
can riseadversities this team has faced. You could have been walking into a te
wasn't redeemable."

ng with Cannon scoffs, waving his hand. "This team doesn't need rede

They did that last season by continuing to fight. The men you gave n
out onethe ability to be champions. It might not be this year, but under C
leadership and your vision, we're sitting on the edge of a new dynasty.

at table "I'm relieved to hear you say that." I pick up my coffee. "Things s
a carafebe going so smoothly right now, if you'd even hinted at any dissatisfac
was going to melt down."

to eat. A bark of laughter escapes Cannon, those lines around his eyes deepening. “One thing I know with certainty is that Brienne Norcross is not going to melt down.”

“I can’t help but chuckle and nod my agreement. “That’s true. But I don’t want to throw an impressive temper tantrum.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” And then his face softens, catching me off guard. “How have you been doing? I know inheriting the team is stressful, but you lost your brother on the plane. I imagine a lot of things to forget that when dealing with you because you’re so strong.”

His thoughtful observation touches me. “Adam and I were very close, but we still have some periods of deep grief. I seem to wander into pockets of grief at random times. But at least I’m not reeling the way I was for the first few months after.”

“Those deep pockets will get easier,” he assures me, the tone of voice I’ve gained through the death of his wife settling around me like a comfort.

My laugh is humorless. “I’ve figured out if I take on more and more work, it keeps my mind occupied, and I don’t have too much time to think about it.”

Cannon’s look is chastising. “You’re avoiding. You need to deal with your grief, or it won’t get better.”

“How do you deal with it?” I ask. Because immersing myself in work is a little left little room for me to focus on my sadness.

Shrugging, Cannon taps his finger along the rim of his coffee cup. “It’s probably a little different for me. Melissa was really sick long before she died. I had weeks to prepare for her death, and toward the end, it was a relief.”

A painful pressure settles on my chest, and I resist the urge to reach out and take his hand in sympathy.

“I hope that doesn’t sound awful,” he continues. “I didn’t want her to die, and I would have cared for her forever. But I hated seeing her suffer. I’m so ashamed how her dignity was taken because dying of cancer is so ugly.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

Cannon smiles wistfully. “Every day I watched her slip closer to death, I was grieving. But I also was hopeful it would all be over for her soon. Because I was grieving her death long before she went, I was already well i

is eyesprocess. I imagine the shock of losing Adam so suddenly was inc
ss doespainful to deal with all at once.”

“Yes,” I say, thinking of those who are left behind. Cannon’s s
ut I dohow he lost a loved one through a slow death versus how I lost some
quickly is a pointed reminder there’s no recipe on how to deal with ar
ne a bit“I want to ask a favor, and feel free to say no... but I formed a suppor
as beenfor the family members of the victims. We’re really connected via pho
peoplesocial media because we’re scattered all over, but we have a monthly
call to check in on one another. I’d love to have you talk at one
close. Imeetings... about your experiences with grief. You’ve survived it, but
of themsome who are really struggling.”

irst few “I’d be glad to,” he says easily and then stands from his chair. “An
to cut this any shorter, but I have a hockey team to run through a practi
wisdom I stand and walk with him to the door. “We should do this periodi
loak ofwant to make sure we keep you happy. I have a feeling you’re going
us to great things.”

d more “I can say the same about you,” he says, sticking out his hand.
o think We shake, and then he leaves after I make him promise us a
tomorrow’s game. He winks, because we both know that’s not a prom
with thecan really uphold on his own.

After Cannon’s departure, I settle back at my desk and immerse m
ork haswork. It’s not hard to do. Like I told the coach, the escapism I find i
prevents me suffering the emotions I’d just as soon not feel.

“It was The memory of Drake’s anger at finding me in his home in the
ore shemorning hours flips my stomach unpleasantly. He made it ri
: was aapologizing and explaining, but the truth is, what happened today is th
reason I drown myself in work. It’s to avoid complicated entanglemen
ach out And things with Drake seem messy now. The fact that he h
feelings means it’s super messy.

r to die, I sigh and try to focus on reading emails so I can move them
r, and Iappropriate folders. Periodically, I forward one on for someone
handle.

But Drake keeps popping into my mind.

death, I I glance at my watch, noting I have another meeting in ten minute
cause Ithat, I’m off to more Norcross meetings across the river.

nto the Knowing that I’m not going to stop thinking about the complicat

redibly Drake McGinn and whether I should stay submerged within it, I res
put one matter to rest.

story of I grab my phone and flip to my texts. I reread the one Drake sen
eone sosix fifteen a.m. and to which I have not yet responded. *You could have at lea
ry of it. me up to say goodbye. I would have waited with you for your driver.*

t group Goddamn him. Why does he have to act sweet and caring? Why
one and have to act like this could be more than sex?

Zoom It stresses me out so much because when it all boils down, I ar
of our likely to truly fall for him than he is for me. Every time he does sor
I know contrary to our original agreement, it makes me feel like I'm walking
thin ice over a dark lake of uncertainty.

d I hate I've been ignoring the text hoping the longer I did, the less I'd be i
ice." to respond.

ically. I Yet I can't stop thinking about it.

to lead With a growl of irritation—aimed at myself—I type back a
innocuous text. *Sorry. Didn't want to disturb you.*

win in There. I've responded. I'm not being rude anymore, and he's
nise he ready to start practice. He won't see it for—

A reply text chimes from Drake. *Little liar.*

I'm stunned at how fast he came at me, calling me on the carpet.
yself in that I didn't want to disturb him, it's that I didn't know what to say.

in work My phone chimes again. *But that's okay, I'll give you a pass since I was a jackass.
You apologized for that,* I text back, and I'm frustrated that I'm falling
e early- his charm.

ght by The little three dots blink, and I await his response.

ie exact Almost breathlessly.

ts. Damn you, Brienne.

urt my *I was wondering... if Kiera is feeling better tomorrow... do you mind if I come over
game?*

to their This is it. If I want to end it, now is the time. I have good reason l
else to I'm starting to have deeper feelings, and he has the ability to really hur

But damn it. I don't want to end it. I like him, and I like the ti
spend together.

s. After The voice of reason, though... the one that tells me no matter ho
ions of Drake makes me feel, he'll probably, at some point, end things, and

olve to feel worse than I've ever felt in my life.

So I should do it.

it me at My fingers hover over the screen, but he sends another text.

1st woken An addendum to his first one. *You know... so I can stick it to the league?*

My breath rushes out in a long exhale of relief.

does he There.

We're back on track.

n more He's using our original code that suggests nothing more than
nothing hookup. We're back to sex only, and the silly, sticky, awkward feeling
on very stay out of it.

If we keep things like this, I can't get hurt.

nclined My fingers fly over the screen. *I'd very much like for you to stick it to the league*

quick,

getting

It's not

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prey to

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t me.

ime we

w good

d I will

feel worse than I've ever felt in my life.

So I should do it.

My fingers hover over the screen, but he sends another text.

An addendum to his first one. *You know... so I can stick it to the league?*

My breath rushes out in a long exhale of relief.

There.

We're back on track.

He's using our original code that suggests nothing more than a hot hookup. We're back to sex only, and the silly, sticky, awkward feelings can stay out of it.

If we keep things like this, I can't get hurt.

My fingers fly over the screen. *I'd very much like for you to stick it to the league.*

CHAPTER 25

Brienne

THE NORCROSS SUITE is never empty during a game. It's designed upward of fifty people, but since I've taken over the Titans, I've kept significantly fewer. Its function is mostly to treat business acquaintances to a luxury event during a game where we'll discuss business. It's how my dad and Adam used the box.

I'm no different, having brokered deals over drinks as we watch hockey.

But tonight *is* different. Only four other people are in the box tonight besides me: Jenna, Sophie, Harlow, and Tillie. I wanted to invite Kiera, and although she's mostly recovered from her flu last week, she said she wasn't up for a night out just yet.

I did struggle whether to invite her. I feel like I've been a little like an eggshell with Drake since Kiera called me for help, like maybe I was an intruder. While I want Kiera to become part of this group of women who has a support system, I think a little space from me—for Drake's benefit—isn't a bad thing right now.

So, tonight it's the OG, the first true group of female friends in my professional life. While it's all new and sometimes unsettling to have other women who are interested in friendship with me, I'm finding that a support system is not only enjoyable but important.

While I haven't been able to join them again for lunch since our last outing, Jenna started a group text so we can plan get-togethers or check in on one another. It's nice having one of the ladies text just to check in on me or drop a late-night note telling me not to work too hard.

It's why I want Kiera to join this group. While I'd gladly drop everything to help her again, she needs an expanded network, and the ladies are happy to pull her in.

The owner's box itself is split in half, the main part lushly decorated with plump leather chairs set in intimate groupings, a fully stocked bar,

buffet table that is always loaded with food. The arena portion is three rows of seats staggered downward that overlook center ice. Those seats are done in buttery leather and fully recline, although no one ever takes advantage of that during a game. It's far too exciting to sit back.

The girls are in the first row watching the on-ice action. We're watching the Detroit Cardinals tonight, and as we wind down the second period enjoying a comfortable lead of two goals.

I'd stepped away to take a business call, and now that it's finished I grab a Diet Coke from the bar. I had a glass of wine earlier, but one's messy even if I do have a driver who will take me home after the game.

Truth be told... I like the idea of having all my senses keenly aware when I'm with Drake later tonight. I don't want to miss a single minute of intensity, and the dulling effects of alcohol would be a travesty.

Jenna sidles up next to me and bumps my shoulder. "It's almost time to go down during the next TV timeout."

I grin, nabbing my drink and following her back to the first row. Harlow sits farthest in, followed by Tillie, Sophie, then Jenna and me. We take a little on seats and watch the game, Harlow hurling periodic insults at the players. Our second line is doing an amazing job on a power play.

As has happened dozens of times tonight, my eyes wander over to Foster Macinnis in goal. With the action at the other end of the ice, he's all alone but so cavalier. I can't see his eyes, but I can tell by his stance and posture he's hyperfocused on the action and ready to defend his goal should they come his way.

My eyes drift down to the ice where Liam Nicholson takes a pass and winds up a hard slap shot. Unfortunately, he whiffs the puck and a Cardinal defenseman clears it out, stopping play.

Jenna elbows me in the ribs with excitement, and she and I both crack our necks to look down at Sophie. While I really want to attend a game with my friends and I can just chill out and have a great time, tonight's everything meticulously planned.

Mostly by Baden, with help from Jenna, but I was brought in as an accessory. It's all getting ready to go down, and Sophie has no clue.

Tillie and Sophie are deep in conversation. Harlow looks past them and smiles knowingly.

Everyone's in on it but Sophie.

When the ref whistles the stop in play, the red TV timeout light turns on and the players skate to their benches, except the goalies who stay in their nets. Drake picks up the water bottle sitting on top of his net, tips it back, and squirts water in his mouth through his mask.

The announcer's deep voice booms over the speakers, "Titans! We've got a special request tonight from your very own goalie coach, Oulett."

The crowd cheers in response to Baden's name, and Sophie's head bobs toward the ice.

I lean forward, holding on to the rail, and I see Baden on the ice looking directly across the ice and up at the box. My eyes drift to Drake, who knows what's going on, as does everyone on the team—and he's looking at the box too.

Not that they can see us clearly, but they know we're up here with them.

"What the hell?" Sophie mutters, and Jenna snickers.

"If everyone can turn their attention to the scoreboard," the announcer says, and chills run up my spine as the arena lights dim.

Baden appears on the massive hanging board at center ice, clutching a prerecorded video. He looks directly into the camera, his smile soft and tender. "Hey, Sophie."

A cheer erupts throughout the arena. It's well known that Baden is the puckster who saved the woman he saved from attackers, which cost him his hockey career and landed him the goalie coach position here in Pittsburgh, and he's been a star ever since.

"Oh my God," Sophie whispers. Her hands clutch the rail, knuckles white.

"You know I'm a pretty low-key guy," Baden says to the camera. "When it comes to you and how I feel, I want to shout it as loud as I can so everyone can hear."

Tears twinkle in Sophie's eyes, and I notice the scoreboard moving as the split screen. Somewhere in the arena, one of the cameramen has zoomed in on her sitting in the front row of the owner's box. As fans start to figure out where she is—because I'm sitting three people down from her—they turn their seats and point up at her.

Sophie doesn't see any of it. Her eyes are pinned on the video.

turns on, “I love you,” Baden says, his eyes intense as he looks at her through their camera. “You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

his head The implication is heavy and beautiful and sad all at once. If it weren’t for Sophie, Baden wouldn’t have suffered excruciating pain and ten years of fans...paralysis, a lengthy rehabilitation, and then the loss of his playing career. Baden yet, he’s clear in how he views it.

All of that was worth it to have her.

and whips Tears sting my eyes, and I glance at Jenna, blinking hard to disguise my own waterworks.

the bench, “I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” The camera zooms in on the ring—hesitantly as video-Baden pulls a ring box from his pocket and holds it up. The king opens it, and the videographer zooms in on the sparkler set within the folds. “I’ve got this ring waiting to slide onto your finger after the game.” Sophie’s gaze cuts down to the bench where Baden stares up at the owner’s box, a grin on his face. He pats his pants pocket, and the crowd roars.

the announcer “Will you accept it?” Baden asks from the scoreboard.

Sophie’s smiling and nodding like crazy, and a thunderous rumble of early approval from the fans shakes the seats. Staring down at Baden on the scoreboard, she mouths, “I love you.” It’s shown on the scoreboard screen, and Baden’s view of him now sits beside her. He mouths the words back, and the crowd dating nuts.

And that’s it. The lights come back on, the TV timeout is over, and the announcer says, “The Titans’ organization wishes warm congratulations to Baden Oulett and Sophie Winters on their engagement.”

knuckles “Did you all know this was happening?” Sophie exclaims as she looks up from her chair.

a. “But Laughing, I step out of the row and throw my head toward the back of the stadium. I can’t see. I can’t see. I can’t see. And I’ve got champagne to celebrate.”

The women follow me up, and I manage to open the bubbly without making a mess. Jenna pulls out chilled glasses, and I pour.

When each of us has a flute in hand, we form a circle and I lift my glass high. “To Sophie, the first of our little group to take the big step into matrimony. May you and Baden have a long, beautiful life together.”

“Hear! Hear!” Jenna says and adds, “And may you not pick bridesmaids’ dresses with pouffed sleeves and large bows on the butt.”

ugh the We laugh and tip the champagne to our mouths.

“That was really beautiful,” Tillie says.

weren’t “I’m the luckiest woman in the world,” Sophie says, her smile
nporaryblinding. Her happiness is so palpable, it actually squeezes my che
er. Andnever envied another woman for what Sophie has right now, but I feel
pang of jealousy, and that’s beyond scary.

“Did you see that ring?” Harlow sighs, hand hovering near her
pel her““You know damn well the video didn’t even do it justice. I cannot wai
the real deal.”

ms out “Did you have any idea it was coming?” Jenna asks.

up. He Sophie shakes her head and thus begins a lengthy series of questi
e velvetwistful sighs of happiness for our friend. When the third period sta
ie.” head back to the seats to watch the rest of the game.

at the Jenna tugs on my shirt sleeve and holds me back. When the other
crowdare seated and away from us, she says, “It was really nice of you to m
happen for Sophie.”

“I was glad to do it. The Titans are a family.”

nable of Jenna shakes her head. “No, you did this as a friend of Sophie
the ice,because she’s part of the hockey family. There’s a difference.”

l a live I glance over at Sophie, talking and laughing with Harlow and T
fans gothey watch the game. When my eyes come back to Jenna, I nod. “
right. It’s a friend thing, not an owner thing. And I like that.”

and the “I’m glad you like it,” she says, reaching out to squeeze my fi
tions to““And since you’re finally accepting of this new crew, I’m going to as
question... friend to friend.”

bolts up “What’s that?” I ask, reaching into the mini fridge for a bottled wa

“How are things going with you and Drake?”

ar. “We I spin around so fast, the water bobbles in my hand, but I secure it
it hits the ground. I shoot a panicked look at the other women, but they
withoutfar away and can’t hear. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” Jenna says. “Are you still seeing each o
y glass I can’t lie. “Yes, but it’s really not anything. Just a fling. In fa
towardsomething I should put an end to.”

Because feelings are brewing and that spells disaster.

ick ugly Jenna tips her head. “Why should you end it?”

’ I give her the politically correct answer. “Because I’m crossing

shouldn't have. It's wrong."

Something changes in Jenna's expression, and her eyes harden a t almost "Then you and I can't be friends anymore."
st. I've "What? Why?" I'm beyond confused and have no clue why she'd a slightour friendship to sex with Drake.

"Because you cross the line with me all the time. Every time we throat.drink, or go to lunch, or plan surprise proposals, it's wrong."
it to see "It's not wrong," I insist.

"It's no different," she maintains. "If you want to sit on your thro insist there's a line that no one can cross, it has to be a universal line."
ons and I hate that she's making sense, but I'm not about to give in on this irts, we closer, lowering my voice. "It's a lot different. You and I are having and Drake and I are having orgasms."

women "Aha!" she exclaims, delight in her expression. "You're having ake this time with him."

I glare at her. "Well, duh. Orgasms are always a good time."

"Totally agree on that." She snickers but then turns serious. "I 's. Notsaying... you've found a way to include me and the girls in your p life. I'm your employee. Their significant others are your employees. illie as managed to separate the two, and there's no reason why you couldn 'You're Drake."

"It's not like that," I insist. "It's moot to even have this dis oream, because it's nothing more than sex, and it's secretive sex at that. So tl k you adon't matter as much."

"Are you sure it's only sex?" she inquires.

ter. I frown, because her tone sounds... knowing. "Why would you ask

She shrugs, an innocent twinkle in her eyes. "I just noticed you st t before him a lot tonight. And Gage told me about Kiera being sick, so I reac y're too to her to see if I could help. Kiera told me that you went over and took her and the boys the other night."

ther?" I curse that unfortunate bit of information getting out, but I know i act, it's these women will blab about it. "I was happy to help a new player' and kids."

Jenna smirks. "Of course. And you give your personal cell phone i out to all player family members?"

a line I Damn it. No, I don't do that. I only gave it to Kiera because

relationship—sexual or otherwise—with Drake.

iny bit. I ignore the question. “Look... Drake and I aren’t anything more fun time. Those things don’t last.”

ever tie “They could if you wanted them to,” she says and then backs away on joining the other women. She winks at me. “Just sayin’.”

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relationship—sexual or otherwise—with Drake.

I ignore the question. “Look... Drake and I aren’t anything more than a fun time. Those things don’t last.”

“They could if you wanted them to,” she says and then backs away, intent on joining the other women. She winks at me. “Just sayin’.”

CHAPTER 26

Drake

THIS SHOULD FEEL like old hat by now... coming to Brienne's house game. I've got no guilt in not going home as I know the boys are asking Kiera is caring for them. She's feeling much better, although still a bit but she insisted I go out after tonight's game. While I didn't directly say I'd be doing, she assumed I'd be seeing Brienne.

As I walk up the steps, Brienne opens the door, and I about swallow my tongue to find her in lingerie.

Sexy scraps of black silk and lace cover her breasts, and a tiny point points toward the apex of her legs. She's wearing her trademark heels... black strappy sandals with a four-inch, gold-plated spike.

"Jesus," I murmur as I take her in.

Brienne's hand slides up the edge of the door, and she leans against the door in a sensual pose. Her smile is wicked. "You like?"

"I love," I mutter, then immediately add on so my meaning can't be construed otherwise, "That outfit is what wet dreams are made of."

Brienne reaches for my belt buckle and tugs me inside. I shut the door and let her lead me by the hand into her bedroom. My eyes are pinned to her ass, completely bared except for a thin piece of lace nestled between her cheeks.

I stay at her mercy, just out of curiosity. I'm usually running the show and she usually bends to my will, but tonight she seems to want the lead.

Brienne pushes me down onto a bench that sits at the end of her king bed. She kneels between my legs, and my breath hitches as I watch her slender fingers work to open my pants.

"You played a great game," she says, as fixated on what she's doing as I am. She frees my cock, already stiff and aching, and squeezes it. "As a member of the team, I wanted to show you my sincerest appreciation."

She bends over me, intent on wrapping that warm mouth around my

but my hand rests against the front of her throat and I hold her o
watches me curiously.

I shake my head. "Give me Brienne. Not the owner of the team."

Warmth floods her expression and her lips curve upward. "Oka
whispers. "You'll only get me."

"Good answer," I growl, my hand slipping around to the back
neck.

after a The best answer, really.

I push her down, and then her hot mouth is on me, drawing me i
it tired, and she sucks so hard, I might hear angels singing.

I hiss in pleasure as Brienne goes down on me, but truly, it's not
right now. The last few days I've been obsessed with how she helpe
and my boys. I've berated myself for having feelings about it, ar
berated myself for being pissed for having feelings about it.

I want to get back to just doling out orgasms, and taking a few in
but it's not enough anymore.

This woman would suck me dry if I let her right now, and she
every minute of it. There's probably not a man alive who would h
strength to push her off, and yet, that's exactly what I do.

My cock pops free, and she frowns. "What's wrong?"

I haul her off the floor and into my arms, answering her with a pu
kiss. My teeth clash against hers as one hand drops to her ass. I sque
hard before letting my finger trace the lace that disappears down the c
her ass.

Brienne groans as I stroke her there, her hands fisted into my sh
she might fall. I slip my finger further, inching it under the silk to
deep into her pussy. So fucking wet already, I might lose my mind.

"I need inside you," I mutter against her mouth. "Right now."

"Yes," she whispers before kissing me. Her hands work at the bu
my shirt, but I don't have time for it.

When I said I need in her now, I meant *now*.

I pick her up and walk around the bed, tossing her on it. I climb r
top of her, her legs willingly spreading to draw me in.

Breathing hard, neither of us needs words. We work as a team to
the same goal. I push my pants down farther, taking my cock in
Brienne's fingers slip into her panties and she pulls the crotch aside. V

ff. She pin our gazes between our bodies as I notch against her wet cunt and c
hard and deep.

“F-u-u-u-c-k,” I groan as Brienne lets out a strangled cry.

y,” she It’s too much and not enough. I gather her in close and press my feet
to hers. I’m still fully clothed, inside her without even taking off her j
of her and yet this is the most intimate thing I’ve ever done with a woman
clawing desire to be inside her almost drives me crazy, and even though
blood rages with need, I’ve never felt more settled.

n deep, I let out a long breath, try to temper the mad gallop of my heart
attempt to get this surging lust under control. I make a tentative roll
enough hips against her, and her soft moan almost does me in.

d Kiera I need a distraction, and she has the softest mouth I’ve ever had
and then pleasure of tasting. I lift my head enough to capture her lips, sliding
tongue against hers. Brienne’s fingers sift into my hair as her legs
return, around my back. She grazes one of those gold-plated spikes on her
over my calf, and I feel it in my balls.

’d love My body starts to rock against hers, slow, gentle thrusts as I concentrate
on the sweetness of her mouth. I’ve got one arm wrapped under her neck
the other around her back, holding her pressed tight to me. I must be crushing
her, but she doesn’t utter a complaint, instead tightening her legs around
nishing hips.

eze her Feels so fucking good I could do this forever. But forever can’t
rack off when it feels like this. Tension coils within as if I’m a screw being tightened
while Brienne makes begging, whining sounds into my mouth.

irt as if I lift my head and look down at her. Blue eyes hazy with lust stare
slide it me as I thrust into her harder.

Brienne gulps for air, and I can feel her legs trembling against me
so close, Drake,” she gasps, her nails scoring against my scalp.

ttons of I’m on the fucking edge, teetering, barely hanging on.

I grind my pelvis down against her, and she cries out her release. Fuck
buck, but I’ve got her pinned down so thoroughly she can do nothing
right on write through the pleasure. Her muscles squeeze and contract around
and it’s the push I need.

achieve My orgasm sweeps over me, and it’s unlike any I’ve ever felt
in hand. There’s no shredding me up and turning me inside out with overwhelming
Ve both pleasure, which is typical with Brienne. Instead, it’s something far

drive in powerful.

It's quiet and heavy and rumbles through me slowly as I empty into Brienne with a long, satisfied groan. It's like one of those overhead avalanches sliding down a mountain, so powerful it shakes the earth. Sliding my hand to her left thigh, I roll us both to our sides, even an. The still thrusting through the orgasm that, though gentle, felt like it reconstrued my me.

Brienne's arms wrap around me and her face presses into my neck art, and was different," she whispers.

Which means she felt it too.

I don't respond, afraid to acknowledge it out loud.

Dreading the conversation that might come from it.

Wary of a new path that might form before us.

Instead, I gather her close and hold her, trying to find a way to acc sandal the boundaries have changed.

"Are you staying for a while?" Brienne asks.

"Why? You going to work?" I tease.

She chuckles and squirms slightly. "No, but the zipper on your p rushing biting into my leg."

"Shit," I mutter, and although I hate to do it, I pull away. "Do you me to go?"

"No," she says without hesitation. "I'd like you to stay."

We stare at each other. I've stayed before. My days of fucking l leaving right after are long gone. We talk—innocuous stuff—and v back at again. I always leave at some point, but it's never rushed.

But I think we're both feeling a shift, and there seems to be an i e. "I'm awkwardness because of things we don't say.

If I were a coward, I'd throw out some excuse about needing to ge and check on the boys. It would be lame, but Brienne would accept it.

Instead, boldness prevails and I decide to see where this goes ing but obviously call a halt to it at any time.

"I'll stay," I say, rolling off the bed and pulling her up with me. V our clothes and I take her into her bathroom where I use a warm, w before. between her legs to clean her.

Then we're back in bed, and I resist the urge to touch her right r more could go again right now, but I want to prove that I'm not afraid of sor

outside our sexual intimacy, even if it's scary as fuck.

myself "How shocked was Sophie tonight?" I ask.

e slow Delight fills Brienne's eyes as she smiles wistfully. "It was brilliant
never saw it coming."

as I'm I settle in, propping my head in my hand as Brienne chatters on ab
structedevening with the girls. I tell her how Baden had been a nervous wi
until that moment, then was walking on cloud nine in the locker roo
c. "Thatthe game, and it had nothing to do with our win.

The conversation morphs, and we talk about the game. She as
Kiera's doing, and I tell her a funny story about the boys.

And then, I'm kissing her again. On her mouth, over her jaw, ac
breasts, down her belly, and finally between her legs. With Brienne's
twisted in my hair and her hips squirming under me, I bring her to
ept thatorgasm with my mouth before fucking her again.

When I need to leave, she slips on a robe and walks me to the doo
on my chest, she rises on tiptoes and places a gentle farewell kiss
cheek. I would normally walk away without a backward glance, know
pants isI'll text to set up our next "date."

Instead, words tumble out of my mouth before I can stop them. "V
ou wantyou have planned for tomorrow?"

She frowns over the absurdity of the question because I never ask
thing. "Work."

her and "Yes, I know work." I reach out, tap my finger against her nos
ve fuckwhat exactly do you have to do?"

She glances up as if mentally recalling her schedule. "I think
nherentmeetings in the morning, a lunch with a potential investor, and the
meetings in the afternoon."

at home "Cancel them," I say as I put my hands on her hips and pull her clo
Her frown deepens, and I can tell she's confused.

. I can Hell, so am I.

"Why?" she asks.

Ve shed "I want to take you on a bike ride tomorrow. We'll have a picnic."
et cloth Brienne's chin pulls inward, and she looks at me as if I've sprouted
"A picnic?"

away. I "A picnic," I repeat with a wink. "It will be a little chilly, so you
nethingto dress appropriately for the bike. Jeans are good, but if you have

pants, I find them particularly sexy, and they're better against the v
good coat and gloves."

nt. She She tries to pull away. "I can't just cancel meetings to go on a r
picnic."

out her "Of course you can. You're the boss."

reck up "One of these meetings has been scheduled for three weeks."

m after I shrug. "So. You're still the boss. No one would question you."

Brienne's teeth press into her lip, a sure sign she's contemplating it

ks how "Come on," I cajole, leaning in and nuzzling her neck. "You v

hard, take a few hours for yourself. A beautiful ride in the count

ross herleaves changing colors. You can snuggle up to me on the bike and I

fingers you too. How can you say no?"

o a fast "Because—"

I shut her up with a hard kiss, my hands framing her face so she ca

r. Handaway. When I let her up for air, I release my hold and walk backward.

on mysay no. Just be ready to go tomorrow at one p.m. I'll pick you up here.

ing that "But—"

"If you're not here, that means no. If you're here, it means yes. I'll

What doat one. Remember, leather pants or jeans, coat, and gloves."

I wait for a denial, but she stays silent. Her frown hasn't lessened

such acan see she's warring with the idea. It not only goes against her very

work ethic, but it further blurs the lines that are already hard to disting

e. "But I know that, and she does too.

This may be the dumbest thing I've ever done, but I can't seem to

I havehelp myself. I want to see more of Brienne, and I want to see her ou

n morebed.

Hopefully, she'll show up tomorrow.

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pants, I find them particularly sexy, and they're better against the wind. A good coat and gloves."

She tries to pull away. "I can't just cancel meetings to go on a ride and picnic."

"Of course you can. You're the boss."

"One of these meetings has been scheduled for three weeks."

I shrug. "So. You're still the boss. No one would question you."

Brienne's teeth press into her lip, a sure sign she's contemplating it.

"Come on," I cajole, leaning in and nuzzling her neck. "You work so hard, take a few hours for yourself. A beautiful ride in the country. The leaves changing colors. You can snuggle up to me on the bike and I'll feed you too. How can you say no?"

"Because—"

I shut her up with a hard kiss, my hands framing her face so she can't pull away. When I let her up for air, I release my hold and walk backward. "Don't say no. Just be ready to go tomorrow at one p.m. I'll pick you up here."

"But—"

"If you're not here, that means no. If you're here, it means yes. I'll be by at one. Remember, leather pants or jeans, coat, and gloves."

I wait for a denial, but she stays silent. Her frown hasn't lessened, and I can see she's warring with the idea. It not only goes against her very austere work ethic, but it further blurs the lines that are already hard to distinguish.

I know that, and she does too.

This may be the dumbest thing I've ever done, but I can't seem to fucking help myself. I want to see more of Brienne, and I want to see her outside of bed.

Hopefully, she'll show up tomorrow.

CHAPTER 27

Brienne

DRAKE DOESN'T LOOK surprised when I walk out my front door to me. In fact, his expression is smug as he stands beside his bike, an extra helmet tucked under his hand.

I'm surprised, though. I hadn't committed until about an hour ago, canceling my lunch and afternoon meetings. I had my driver take me home where I quickly changed clothes.

Good lord, the man is hot. A red bandanna has been tied over his forehead, and his long hair (which I don't think has been cut since he joined the Brotherhood) is spilling out the back. He keeps his beard nicely groomed, but I've noticed he's longer too.

Drake's expression is appreciative as he does a slow perusal of me. I've got a lot of leather pants—all designer and not meant to ride on a motorcycle—and I settled on a dark burgundy pair. Because all my boots are riding boots, forward and not practical, I picked a black suede pair with a block heel and a metal spike. Contrasted to Drake's faded jeans and heavy, lug-soled boots, mine are completely out of place.

And I don't care.

"Cute jacket," he says with a grin. It's fitted black leather—also dark brown—and has silver zippers and wide lapels.

"It's biker chic," I reply.

"You look hot." He fingers the edges of the black cashmere scarf wrapped around my neck before clutching it to pull me in for a kiss.

Forceful and gentle at the same time, it's that exact combination that makes me want him so badly. Not just in body, but in... everything.

Drake shimmies a helmet on me, adjusting the strap under my chin. It's snug. It covers my whole head and has a plastic face shield. It's different from the one he'll wear—which only covers the top of his head—currently resting on the bike's long leather seat.

“Why do I get a big helmet?” I ask.

“Because your brain is more precious than mine,” he quips. “Ever before?”

I shake my head. “I’m a little scared.”

“We’re going on a slow, easy ride. I’ve mapped out a route that w us a little southwest into West Virginia. We’ll stop at a park and hav before heading back. Just keep your feet where I tell you and you et him, around me tight, and you’ll be fine.”

lmet in



hastily THE RIDE IS glorious, I have to admit. The bike rumbles between my le e home pressed up against Drake’s back with my hands tucked into his jacket for extra warmth, I have the oddest sense of peace, even with it bein is head, chilly from the wind.

e team) We stick to two-lane roads that wind through beautiful, rolling ced it’s farmland and forest. I’ve never driven through here, despite it being le an hour away, and I realize that even though I’ve traveled the world, . I have so much, so close, I haven’t seen.

cycle— After an hour, Drake pulls off into a small public park that’s i fashion more than two baseball fields, a decrepit basketball court, and a few l versus tables.

, I look It’s a bright, sunny day and warm on its own in the mid-sixties, bu in the wind has chilled me. I’m shivering as he helps me off the bike removing my helmet, he runs his hands up and down my arms and the designer me into him for a warm embrace. I snuggle in because we are an entire away from Pittsburgh, the Titans, my seat at the head of the organizati his workspace down in the goalie net.

e scarf “Hungry?” he asks as he releases me.

“I am.”

on that To my surprise, Drake opens one of the bike’s saddlebags and pu an insulated soft cooler. From the other bag, a wool blanket.

in until I follow him past the picnic table to a sunny spot in the middle of a iffereent area that’s lost all its summer green. The ground cover crunches un irrently boots.

It’s fascinating to watch this big, powerful man who not so long a

quite the chip on his shoulder set out a picnic lunch.

And it's a thoughtful one at that. Club sandwiches, a container of hummus, and cold, bottled water.

We settle onto the blanket, him stretched casually on his side, me trying to look way too good eating his sandwich one-handed. I sip water, nibble on a carrot first.

"What did you do this morning?" I ask.

"Gave Kiera the morning off. She went to get her hair done, handled breakfast for the boys and took them to school. Then I cleaned house a bit."

I wave a carrot at him. "It's weird... I think a lot of women would have a hard time imagining you so domesticated, but I don't think I could do anything else any other way. You're one of those men who will do what it takes to get something done, even if that's just cleaning up the house."

Drake smiles as he sets down his sandwich, picks up a carrot, and dips it in the hummus. "I've always been a neat freak. It's a bit harder to mess with three boys, but I don't mind. What did you do?"

I unwrap my sandwich and tuck in a stray piece of lettuce. "Well, it's been hours struggling with whether to accept your offer."

Drake laughs. "It's hard for you to step away from work, isn't it?"

I'm poised to take a bite of the club. "I have responsibilities."

"Which you more than meet," he says pointedly. "You need to leave your car in my care."

I chew and swallow a delicious blend of rye bread, turkey, bacon, and tomato. Drake leans forward and wipes mayo from the corner of my mouth, and my breath catches. I don't know that he's ever looked so handsome or down-to-earth.

"You're part of my self-care," I admit softly.

"Orgasms do have their health benefits," he replies, his eyes twinkling.

"So do long bike rides in the country and out-of-the-way picnics during the middle of a workday."

He holds my eyes before inclining his head. "You're welcome."

I look away and take another bite of my sandwich.

"You ever do something like this with your boy toy?" Drake asks.

My head pops up, mouth full. I shake my head as I chew. I swallow, I sip my water as I work up the courage to ask. "You ever

with other women?"

carrots A laugh gusts out. "Never."

"Not even your ex-wife?" I might be a glutton for punishment, I decide and curious.

It crosses my mind. Glancing off to the side, Drake seems to search his memory. When he turns those beautiful eyes back to me, he says, "I guess there was a need for it."

, and I "You mean, you saw I had a need for it?"

I pick up the "Maybe I had a need for it too," he murmurs and then lifts a shoulder to say he's not really sure.

I have a hunch. I put my sandwich down and wipe my fingers on a napkin. "What will you become?" His eyes seem to laser onto mine. "Things have changed, and I'm not sure into what."

"I don't know either. I know I wanted to spend today with you, but I wanted to spend it on my bike and here in a park just eating and talking. It's a little complicated, though."

"Because of who and what we are," I say quietly.

I spent the afternoon "There's that," he says, ignoring the food and grabbing a dried breadcrumb to roll between his fingers. "But it's complicated because of my ex-wife."

That doesn't make sense. "She's out of the picture, right?"

It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. "In the sense that we're divorced, sure. But she's Jake, Colt, and Tanner's mom. She'll never be fully out of the picture. Even if she shows up to see them again, she's still in the picture because those boys are wondering where she is. She could be dead in a ditch right now, never to be found, and she'd never be out of the picture. I'm always trying to explain to them why she is the way she is and why she seems to have abandoned them. And I'm sorry, Brienne, but part of me is always going to compare her to you, wondering if you'll change the way she did."

I lean back as if he's slapped me in the face.

His hand shoots out and grabs mine. He squeezes. "I don't say that to mean, and I'm 99.9% sure I know exactly who you are. But I thought of Crystal, and she did a fucking number on me when she wouldn't get off drugs for her family. Drugs were more important than her family, and I want to be in that position again. The league also gave up on me, and I haven't forgotten that. I also know you're not the league. You're a beautiful woman."

warm, sexy woman who I like a hell of a lot.”

My heart twists that it’s so complicated for him, and I squeeze his hand but I’m back. I know exactly what he’s saying. He’s not worried that I might get into drugs and disappoint him in the future, but he is saying that he doesn’t want to be the woman who has a totem pole of priorities that rank much higher than his kids, ever would.

He’s protecting himself and his family.

“I’m not Crystal,” I say as I pull my hand free. “But I also understand your worries, and I can’t blame you for them.”

“You and I fit in a lot of ways,” Drake says. “When I tell you that I have never been more attracted to a woman, or more in awe of a woman, I mean it. But when I tell you that as great as you are in bed, I like you out of bed, I mean it. And honest to God, that’s mostly due to a lack of faith in myself.”

“What?” I exclaim. “You’re one of the strongest, most capable people I know. How can you think that?”

“Because my wife got lost to drug addiction right before my eyes, my ex-so wrapped up in hockey, and being a dad, and trying to be a husband the way I thought she needed, I didn’t see what was happening.”

Now I’m offended. “You’re surely not blaming yourself for her choices?”

He shakes his head. “No, I’m not doing that. But I am questioning my ability to see things for what they are, especially when it comes to relationships.”

“You know what I am,” I whisper. “I’ve shown you everything.”

“Yeah... you’re just like me. For your own reasons, you’ve avoided relationships because you need things simple. You haven’t had time to get to the important things, sort of the way I didn’t have the time either. And here we are, wondering if we could ever be something different.”

“Wow.” A long exhale deflates me, and I look away from Drake. I knew not only deep but a bit raw as we’ve peeled away layers to figure out what we give up inside.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t try,” he says, and the sudden rush of air, and that floods through me tells me all I need to know about myself. My beautiful, slides his way. “But it’s sure as fuck going to be complicated.”

I move our lunch items aside and crawl across the blanket to Drake, who is hand-down on my side, facing him. A hand to his cheek, I rub my thumb over his beard. “I know it’s complicated, but I’d like to see where this goes. I’d like to want to push past our fears because if we don’t at least try, I’m afraid I’ll regret it, or will be major regret.”

Drake’s eyes bore into mine before he leans in to kiss me. It’s gentle, but it feels like a promise. When he pulls back, he says, “Do we keep this secret?”

I chew on my lip as I consider the implications. “There aren’t any rules against it, but there will be strong opinions. From the fans, from the management, from your teammates. Many will be against it, but I won’t.”

Drake grimaces. “It will be a media frenzy. It’s going to stir up all the shit with Crystal’s allegations and me leaving the league.”

“So we keep it secret,” I say, leaning in to kiss him. “Just me and you until we see where it goes.”

“Well, and Jenna and Gage,” he points out.

“And Kiera and the boys,” I add.

“Oh, and Daniel... your house man knows.”

Laughing, I let him roll me to my back, and he kisses me deeper. His arms wind around his neck, and I give in to the way he consumes me.

Drake lifts his head, his expression thoughtful as he stares down at me. “I like seeing you like this. Relaxed. And underneath me. That’s also nice to look at.”

Grinning, I tug on his hair. “Thank you for insisting I do this. I’ve had a hard time slowing down. I’m really grateful.”

Drake rubs his nose along mine before kissing me again. His lips are soft against mine, brushing across them, his beard tickling my skin. “How about you tell me how grateful you are the next time I’m inside you? You’re coming to the game in Columbus tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I say before drawing him back down to me. “This is what’s feeling like today marks the first day of what might be a very new and different life.”

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CHAPTER 28

Drake

“OF COURSE YOU’D be dressed up as Thor.”

I turn to see Baden walking across the players’ parking lot toward give a twirl of my hammer before resting it on my shoulder. He’s dressed as Batman, and I eye him head to toe. “Batman. I don’t get the connection.”

Baden jerks his head over his shoulder toward the line of cars closest to the arena, all with their trunks open. “Sophie dressed as Wonder Woman, and she picked this out for me.”

“Wow,” Colby says as he looks up at Baden. “Batman’s my favorite.”

I’m holding Colby’s hand and on the other side, Tanner’s. He looks so impressed.

Baden squats in front of Colby. “I like your cowboy outfit.”

“I’m going to be one when I grow up,” he announces proudly.

“I think your dad should buy you a horse,” Baden proclaims, and I look at him even as Colby turns hopeful eyes up at me.

“I’m going to be a fireman,” Tanner says, and Baden’s eyes sweep to him.

“You’ll be a mighty hero, for sure.” Baden then turns to Jake and says, “And you’ll be the best goalie in the league.”

My heart thumps proudly. Jake wants to be just like his dad and has. I really need to get him into a league, I think once again. He’s wearing the full Titans’ getup, including a replica of my hockey mask.

Baden rises and hugs Kiera. “Hi, Harley.”

She laughs and pulls back. Admittedly, she looks just like Harley although the shorts she’s wearing could be a little longer, in my opinion. I see one of my teammates even spare more than a second glance at her and kindly rearrange his face.

“Come on,” Baden says as he turns toward the cars. “Let’s go get a treat.”

It's Halloween, and the Titans' organization does something even for the kids. Usually it's a big party, but this year, the players got together and decided they wanted to do a trunk-or-treat in the arena parking lot. The players without kids decorated their vehicles and loaded the trunks with candy and toys.

Those of us with kids only had to show up in costume and enjoy.

Costumes weren't required of the adults, but I couldn't resist the Halloween outfit. Too many people compare me to him in size, and plus... the hair is the same.

The car on the end isn't actually one of the players' but rather a black hearse. It's creepy as hell, and I don't recognize the couple sitting in the back. There—a very tall, bulky Frankenstein with perfectly applied makeup, bolts, and scarring. The woman is dressed as his bride with the black and white beehive hairdo, pale skin, dramatic eyes, and black lips.

"Whoa," Kiera says in awe.

Frankenstein lumbers to the back of the hearse, pulls out a bag of candy, and turns toward my kids. Colby edges in closer to me.

"If it isn't the McGinn clan." And then I recognize Coen's voice.

"Dude," I exclaim as I take him in. "That is a stellar costume. I can't even tell it was you."

"Tillie created it," he says proudly, and I turn to give her a hug. She's the artist in the family.

Tillie might look scary, but when she pulls candy out of the basket and fills my kids' buckets, that makes her okay with them.

"Thank you," they say softly, still a little scared, and Kiera moves down to the next car.

"You've successfully guaranteed my kids will have nightmares," I say. I watch them. The next car over is Hendrix and Boone, both of whom are dressed up as Power Rangers.

"Fuck, really?" Coen sputters.

"No, not really," I say with a laugh. "Not once I reassure them you're a hockey player."

"They'll be fine when they make it to Gage and Jenna," Tillie says, sliding an arm around Coen's waist and nodding down the row.

I look and my jaw drops. "Is that... fucking Cinderella's carriage?" and then my jaw drops further. "And holy shit... those costumes."

Gage and Jenna are Cinderella and whatever the fuck the prince's

ry yearis. Jenna is dazzling in a blue gown covered in sparkles and lace that togetherout in a wide arc all around her.

lot. All “We don’t fuck around when it comes to the kids,” Coen says with authority.

I snort and shake my head. This guy was the team’s resident jackass months ago, and now he’s champion of all the children. I’d bet a thousand Thorbucks he and Tillie get pregnant sooner rather than later.

r. “I’ll catch you later,” I say, holding out my hand and fist-bumping vintage Coen’s.

tanding I walk along with the kids and Kiera, marveling at the extent to which pup, neckchildless players went to decorate their cars with spiderwebs, pumpkin-and-grave markers, and spooky cat cutouts. Everyone is dressed in elaborate costumes, and all the kids are interacting so well.

At the end of the row, a long table has been set up with fall decorations and a woman bent over helping kids with what looks like some type of project involving paper pumpkins. I start to glance away, but she straightens and laughs at one of the kids, and my heart trips as I realize I couldn’t Brienne.

I honestly didn’t expect her to be here, and I most certainly didn’t expect her to be dressed up. I didn’t recognize her at first because she’s dressed as Hela, and the long black wig with gray streaks and dramatic eye makeup threw me off.

But as I’m taking her in, I have to stifle a groan over how unbelievable she is in a skintight suit of black and green that showcases every detail that I know by memory, taste, and touch.

I say as Kiera has the boys at a table where they can bob for apples, so I move away over to Brienne.

She sees me walking toward her, and her eyes widen as she takes in my costume. It’s not a cheap one you can buy in a package—I ordered it from a cosplay company, so it’s pretty authentic. She clearly did the same.

“What are the chances we’d choose costumes from the same movie?” she asks with a grin.

She glances back at the kids, sees everyone’s occupied, and the question I ask, closer to me. “I didn’t pick the costume. Jenna did. I don’t even know what I’m dressed as.”

My name My jaw drops. “You’re Hela.”

at puffs “Yeah... she said that. I don’t know who that is in the movie world like the wig. I think I look good as a brunette.”

ys with “You’d look good in a potato sack,” I assure her. “How do you know who Hela is? Wait a minute... do you know who I am?”

ss mere “Some type of Viking?”

ousand I groan and clutch my heart. “You’ve never seen a Marvel movie, have you?”

umping “I don’t watch movies or TV,” she says, chin lifted as if that’s something to be proud of.

rich the Leaning in a bit closer but still keeping distance so it doesn’t seem inappropriate, I lower my voice. “I totally have to work on your ability to relax and be entertained outside of the way I fuck you and the way you do it after.”

orations I’m pleased that she flushes, but her smile is way more satisfying.

of craft “By the way,” I murmur softly, “my pants are way too tight for you. You’re dressed like that. Next time have a care in the costume you pick.”

lize it’s Brienne snorts, but her eyes drop briefly to my crotch. Good thing I have control today, or else she and everyone else would get an eyeful.

: expect “Brienne,” Jake says as he runs toward us. “Kiera said I could come see you a hug.”

nakeup I glance back to see Kiera walking our way, holding the twins’ hands.

Brienne squats and lets Jake throw his arms around her shoulders. I’ve probably watched stunned at the obvious affection my kid has for her, and it hits me they must’ve made more of a connection than I’d thought. She spent hours with them, fed them, gave them ice cream, tucked them into bed. I’ve watched her take care of Kiera, and she eased their fears.

Of course, they’d be happy to see her.

s in my Colby and Tanner break away, and they also rush up to give her a kiss. I shift my eyes to Kiera, who levels me with a very pointed look as it

“Look... your boys like a woman who’s in your life. Better not let me see you go away?”

“Let me see what you guys got,” Brienne says, taking a critical look at the boys’ buckets. “Nice haul.”

ow who “We’re going trick-or-treating in our neighborhood next,” Colby says. “And we’ll get even more candy.”

“Now, that sounds like fun,” she says, rising and leaning over

d, but I Kiera. “You look amazing.”

“As do you,” Kiera replies.

It know Jake tugs on my cape, and I look down at him. “Can Brienne come or-treating with us?”

Brienne’s eyes widen and she shakes her head at Jake. “Oh, no, we have That’s a family thing.”

“You should come,” I say, surprising myself that the invitation just nothing right out without a single care that I was inviting her into my person with my kids.

It look My eyes rake briefly over Kiera as her mouth falls open. She ability to snaps it closed and grins. “That’s a great idea.”

You feel Brienne looks between me and Kiera. “Really? Are you sure?”

I’m relieved she’s not saying no, not coming up with an excuse to spending time with me and my kids. Definitely pleased she’s willing you to be up work because I know that’s exactly what she’ll be doing once she home.

So I’m in “You have to come,” I assure her, pointing back and forth between “We can’t let this classic pairing go to waste.”

She give “In fact,” Kiera drawls, her eyes shining with mischief and matchr “we’ll go trick-or-treating, and then Drake, you can give Brienne a ride ds. adult party tonight.”

olders. I I hadn’t really planned on going, but Darius and Aneta Cernis me—hosting an adult costume party. I’ve come to learn they’re the social several who always throw themed parties on our evenings off. I have no d. They Brienne was even invited.

“No, I wasn’t going to the party tonight,” Brienne is quick to pop and I’m betting that’s more to let the players have fun without the hugs. looming over them. It’s why us dating could be a problem.

of say, Then again, I wasn’t going to go either. I like my life a bit quieter.

her get “But you’ll at least come trick-or-treating with us.” It’s a statement question. “And I’ll take you home after.”

s inside Where I will enjoy peeling her out of that costume.

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"As do you," Kiera replies.

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"You have to come," I assure her, pointing back and forth between us. "We can't let this classic pairing go to waste."

"In fact," Kiera drawls, her eyes shining with mischief and matchmaking, "we'll go trick-or-treating, and then Drake, you can give Brienne a ride to the adult party tonight."

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"No, I wasn't going to the party tonight," Brienne is quick to point out, and I'm betting that's more to let the players have fun without the owner looming over them. It's why us dating could be a problem.

Then again, I wasn't going to go either. I like my life a bit quieter.

"But you'll at least come trick-or-treating with us." It's a statement, not a question. "And I'll take you home after."

Where I will enjoy peeling her out of that costume.

CHAPTER 29

Brienne

IT'S DARK BY the time we walk the last block to Drake's house, and the boys are worn out. Jake walks in front of us, sucking on a lollipop and carrying a hockey mask in his other hand. Kiera carries his bucket of candy.

Tanner holds my hand, his feet slow and shuffling. I'm carrying a bucket of candy, which is quite heavy since the boys made out like bandits.

And my heart melts every time I glance over at Drake walking beside me. He's got a sleeping Colby in his arms, the little boy's cowboy hat hanging around his neck and his head is on his dad's shoulder. He's conked out.

"Thank you for inviting me," I say.

Drake's head twists my way, and he smiles. "I'm glad you can see the boys really like you."

"I like them too. Once I figured out ice cream was the great equalizer, I realized it wasn't so hard."

Drake laughs, hitching Colby a little higher.

"Seriously," I say thoughtfully. "It's easy because you're raising kids."

"Thanks." His voice is gruff, his eyes warm.

When we reach their house, we trudge across the small front yard, up the porch, and into the house. Once inside, all the buckets of candy go on the kitchen table, and I follow Drake and Kiera up to the boys' room to help them change into pajamas and brush teeth. I feel like an old hand having now done it twice.

Now that they're home, the boys aren't so tired. "Can we watch a movie?" Jake asks.

"Sure," Kiera says. "Your dad and Brienne are going to a party."

We're not, but she's giving us an out so we can have time together.

"No," Jake insists, taking my hand. "I want Brienne to stay and watch a movie. *Toy Story*."

I glance at Kiera, then Drake, who looks like he might kill me if I decline the invitation. I can already tell by the look on his face he's ready for me and Hela to battle it out in the bedroom.

"One movie won't hurt," I say, giving him a pointed look.

He actually grins at me and relents. "Fine. *Toy Story*, then you both go off to bed."

"Yay," they all yell and run to grab spots on the large sectional.

The boys ring his doorbell. The doorbell rings, and Drake grabs the bowl of candy Kiera had set out for trick-or-treaters. "Don't these kids know it's dark and trick-or-treat is over?"

ing his side me. Kiera and I exchange a knowing smile because he likes to play games but he's a softy when it comes to children. Drake opens the door, but there aren't any kids there.

anging a smile on her face. Just a thin woman—gaunt, actually—looking up at Drake with a pensive smile on her face.

ne. The "Mommy?" Jake whispers behind me, and my stomach pitches as I look back to the woman.

Drake's ex-wife. Crystal.

alyzer, I I suppose she was beautiful at one point, but her skin is sallow, her hair cracked, her eyes dull. Her brown hair is tangled, and her clothes look like they've been through a wringer.

g good The woman leans to the side—wobbles a bit—sees the kids, and her arms go out. "Jake, Colby, Tanner. I've missed you so much. Come here. Mommy a hug."

I feel like I'm stuck watching a very bad movie.

, up the on the where I Drake moves to the side to block Crystal's view, and in a calm voice says without taking his eyes off his ex-wife, "Kiera... take the boys to their room."

at this, My head whips to Kiera, and I'm stunned to see all three kids already moved to her, hugging onto her legs and waist, looks of confusion on their faces. Not one of them looks like they want to go to Crystal's request for a hug.

atch the go play some video games." "Come on," Kiera says, her voice soothing but with some urgency.

Without hesitation, the boys let their aunt lead them away with a backward glance.

Drake's voice is so razor sharp, I flinch. "Get the fuck off my property."

I accept I spin back that way, a hulking beast of a man standing in the doorway Thorblocking entry to his children's mother.

"I just want to see them for a little bit," Crystal whines as she sways to side.

boys are "Jesus Christ, Crystal," he hisses. "You're fucking high as a kite were you thinking coming here?"

"I just wanted—"

set out "You don't get to just want anything," Drake snarls, and it's pure listening ishear in his voice. "I've been trying to contact you for months to figure where you were. The boys wanted to see you. And then, after months of being drunk and rumpy, stopped asking. I left word with your attorney, your family, that you were moving to Pittsburgh, and still nothing. And now you show up on my doorstep, high on God knows what, and you think I'm going to let you pinch ten feet of those kids?"

"I'm entitled—"

is I look "You're entitled to nothing, you crazy bitch," he hisses, and my face turns cold at the malice. And yet, I can't blame him one bit. "You get your property and do not come back. If you do, I'm getting a restraining order. If you her lips you want to have any type of relationship with your kids, you have to be clean, and then it can only be preapproved and supervised. Those are the old terms, and you know it."

ie give "I've tried," she says as she starts to cry. "It's so hard."

I can't see his face, but I can hear the clench of his teeth as his jaw squeezes out. "You've never tried, and now your kids don't need me, even anymore."

boys to "But I need them," she screams, and it's such an about-face pathetic whining, I involuntarily take a step back. Crystal starts to lunge and has to kick Drake, and my heart breaks as he tries to deflect the blows without causing her any harm.

I accept Finally, he manages to grab her wrist and then steps out onto the porch. He walks her right down the steps and into the middle of the yard with his Thor cape flowing behind him. I step toward the door, curiosity making me continue to bear witness to the horrors of Crystal McGinn.

thout a "You come near me or the kids again, I'll end you," Drake says, and for the first time since the woman showed up, I'm actually a little fearful. "Drake. They may just be words, but he's so angry right now, I'm not

Norway, he wouldn't kill her to protect his children.

"Hey... what's going on?" A man steps out of a car parked at the driveway, his eyes going to Crystal. "Is everything okay?"

Is that her boyfriend? Does Drake know him?

"I'm calling my attorney," Crystal hisses.

"I suggest you do it after you leave because if you don't, I'm calling cops in about thirty seconds."

The man scurries forward, apparently not liking the thought of Crystal outriving and grabs Crystal's arm. He pulls her across the yard and shoos them into the car, all the while she's cursing at Drake. It's horrific to watch and I wish they pull away, I breathe a sigh of relief.

Drake pivots, storms back across the yard, up the steps, and disappears into the house. He slams the door and marches past me, his face a mask of fury.

I reach out, grabbing his forearm before he hits the hallway. "I can't do anything, what can I do?"

He wheels on me, yanking his arm away. The rage on his face softens off my lessened, and in fact, it seems as if my words have made him angrier. "I can leave."

"But—"

"You need to leave. This is a family matter."

My heart cracks a little, but I understand how awful this is for him.

"Okay," I say softly. "I'll call you later to check—"

"No," he growls, shaking his head. "This is none of your business. You just... I need you to leave me alone, okay?"

"Drake," I whisper, my stomach rolling over the implications. "Or I can try to help you calm down—"

"It's over, Brienne." He steps toward me, but nothing in his posture has softened. I recoil at what looks to be disdain in his expression.

"I don't have room to care if you think it's for me, not for anything else. I have don't have room to care if anyone but my kids. It was stupid to think I did."

"You don't mean that. You're upset about Crystal, but I promise you I'm not like her. You have to know that."

"My kids come first," he growls angrily. "Can't you get that?"

"I do get it. And I respect that. I don't need to be first in your life, but I don't need to be below this anger you have for your ex-wife."

"Well, I'm sorry. I can't seem to let you be anywhere else."

Kiera steps into the living room, her expression wary. “Is everything okay?”

“No,” I say, my eyes never leaving Drake’s. I make a last attempt to calm him. “Don’t let her do this to you. To us. You’re going to lose something that could be very good for you.”

Drake says nothing, his eyes flicking back and forth between mine and Kiera’s. His mouth flattens. “So be it.”

He turns to Kiera. “Take Brienne home while I go talk to the boys.”

“Okay,” Kiera says, looking to me with sympathy.

“No,” I say softly, shaking my head at Kiera and holding up a hand. “I’ll get an Uber. I’ll wait for it outside.”

Drake doesn’t respond but turns his back on me and walks up the stairs. I hear as he enters the boys’ room and the door shuts behind him.

“I’m sorry, Brienne.” Kiera eases up to me, puts her hands on my shoulders. “He didn’t mean that stuff.”

“He did, Kiera.” My chest squeezes painfully, a sure sign I’ve fallen for him way harder than I ever thought possible. It’s no wonder it hurts so much when I hit the bottom.

“Let me get my keys. I’ll drive you home.”

“No.” I embrace her in a quick hug. “You’re actually needed here.” I turn and hurry away from Kiera. Grabbing my purse near the door, I step out onto the porch and pull out my phone. Tears blind me, and I blink them away to see the Uber app so I can order a car.

With a sigh, I sit on the porch and wait for my ride, understanding for the first time in my life, I’ve actually had my heart broken.

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CHAPTER 30

Brienne

I SKIPPED THE gym this morning, not because I was afraid I might run into Drake—he’s on the way to Los Angeles for an extended road trip with both LA teams, then to Houston before coming back to Pittsburgh because I have so much to do today, I couldn’t spare the time.

Who knew that, with a broken heart, would so easily come a respite to erase all reminders of what I’d built with Drake?

Sunday, I moped all day, replaying every conversation and interaction I’ve ever had with the man. I focused on the last few weeks when we’d grown closer and shared our feelings to see if I could pinpoint something crucial I’d missed. I had my driver take me out to the Laurel Highlands to just drive around. I looked at the changing leaves as I pondered why I sometimes cried, slightly perturbed I couldn’t even drive myself, and I’d spend time getting my driver’s license.

None of it brought clarity, but when Monday dawned, I knew the only way to heal myself was to go back to the way things were before I met Drake.

The walls went up, and I reminded myself that relationships and friendships were for chumps. While I had no intention of going back to Clay, I knew that had that had run its course with or without Drake, I knew that one day when I was ready, I’d keep my time with men boiled down to the physical necessities. Or I’d just pursue a better relationship with my vibrator.

Yes, it’s anger driving me as I walk into my office. I drop my bag beside my desk, set my travel coffee cup down, and press the intercom button to summon Tina.

She arrives within fifteen seconds, notepad poised to take notes and she settles into a guest chair. “I want you to arrange for someone to come here, get all my files and belongings here and have them moved back over to my office at Norcross Holdings.”

Tina stares at me dumbfounded. “I’m sorry... what?”

“You heard me. We’re moving back across the river.” She looks at me as if she needs an explanation, but I’m not about to give her one. “I’d like to get it done today, so I suggest you get working on it.”

“Of course,” Tina says, scribbling a note, then looking back up. “And to remind you, your driver will be here at four p.m. to take you to the airport for your flight to L.A.”

un into “Cancel the flight,” I reply curtly, opening my laptop.

against “You’re not going to the games?” she asks.

gh—but “No.” I look up at her, an idea striking hot. The road trip out of Los Angeles, then Houston, was going to be four nights with Drake, and I have no way I can be there when we’re not together. “In fact, I think I’ll skip the game in New York.”

raction “For the Westgate Board of Visitors’ meeting?” she inquires. “I usually do that via Zoom.”

nothing “Book me at Casa Cipriani for three nights. I think I’ll do some shopping while I’m there.”

eds and She stares at me as if I’ve gone utterly insane. “But... you never vowed to go shopping.”

he only “I guess it’s time to try new things, then, huh? It’s called self-care. Anything else?”

ver met “No, ma’am,” she says, rising from the chair. “I’ll handle all of that for you. Get away.”

feelings She hurries out of my office, but I take a breath before calling her. “Tina.”

n I was She turns back to look at me. “Sorry if I’m being snippy. I had a busy weekend.”

ies. “No worries, Ms. Norcross. Just let me know how else I can help you.”

riefcase “Thank you.”

i button She closes the door, but I have one more quick meeting before I start my workday. I buzz Jenna’s office.

as she “Good morning, oh glorious boss,” she says.

pack up I can’t even muster a smile—I feel dead inside. “Hey... got a minute?”

office at “Sure. Be right there.”

When Jenna walks in, I steel myself to keep this purely professional.

“What’s up?” she says cheerfully as she plops down in the chair. “I’ll be right there.”

vacated.

it me as “I’m moving back to my offices across the river today, and I want
like this you know. Your main work is with the Titans, so you’ll be staying here

“Um... okay,” she says as her brow furrows in confusion.

and just “And... I’m not going to be able to join you and the ladies for dinner
airport lunch anymore.”

“What?” she exclaims, coming right out of the chair and putting
palms on my desk.

I lift my chin and pray my voice stays steady. “I think our relationship
to Los should only be professional.”

there’s Jenna glares at me. “You’re going to need to elucidate.”

head to My chin notches higher. “Blurring those lines is confusing
inevitably, someone’s going to get hurt. It’s easier if we keep to our roles

but you “Easier for whom?” she demands angrily. “Because I can assure you
not easy for me to lose a friend.”

topping My lower lip trembles, because fuck... it’s not easy for me either.

“What is going on?” she asks, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

ever go “Nothing.”

“Something,” she snaps. “Something is most definitely wrong, and
I, Tina, to know what it is.”

“It’s nothing to worry about,” I insist, looking away from her
laptop.

“But I do,” she says softly. “You’re my friend, no matter if you’re
going out, otherwise. You’re clearly upset and sad and you need to let me help
better.”

a rough It’s the last part—*let me help make it better*—that gets me. Even
nothing can make me feel better. No amount of moving across the country
you.” hiding in New York will cure me.

Tears pour down my cheeks, and I can only imagine the look of alarm
start my Jenna’s face since everything is blurred. She rushes around the desk
over, and pulls me into an awkward but secure hug while I sit in my chair.

She squeezes hard. “I don’t know what happened, but just let it
out?” Trust me... there is nothing more cleansing than a good cry.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I sob into her shoulder. “I don’t cry. I never
do. If someone dies, I do, but otherwise I don’t. I’m a strong woman. I’m
strong as steel, and I’m being utterly ridiculous.”

“Tears don’t mean you’re weak,” she coos.

“Drake has made me weak.” I hiccup and pull back to look at my e.” She loosens her grip. “This is all Drake’s fault.”

Jenna’s expression hardens as she steps back and leans her butt nks ordesk. Arms crossed, she says, “What did that asshole do?”

I let loose a torrent of word vomit covering our last few wee ing hersparing the plot of the story but going light on the sexual details. I fo the last few days and how we made a connection. How we both agreeo ionshipmore than just sex and we’d explore a relationship. Then I explain ho went south after Crystal showed up.

“He kicked you out of his house?” She gasps. “Oh my God... h g, andbiggest asshole ever.”

les.” “No,” I say, reaching into my purse for some tissues. I blow my r ou, it’sget it. He has so much baggage with Crystal, and it was an awful si

The kids were scared, he was furious. He was only being a protective c

“Sure, he was being a protective dad, but he was also an asshole. Don’t excuse his behavior. You’re not the enemy, and he treated you l were.”

l I want “To him, I could be the enemy.” Because this all boils down to l inability to stop looking at me through his jaded lenses. “He doesn’t to myrisk it with me, and I have to respect that.”

“Well, I don’t have to respect it,” she grouses. “He’ll always ou sayasshole to me.”

I can’t help but laugh, blotting at my eyes. “You can be mad at l me. I’m just sad, but it will pass.”

Because Jenna’s arms unfold, and she places her palms on the desk near h river or“So... you’re just giving up, then?”

“It’s not a competition,” I remind her.

larm on “No, but you’re in love with him. And you clearly understa , bendsmotivations behind whatever this madness is that’s taken hold of the a air. Maybe you shouldn’t give up.”

all out. “I’m not giving up,” I say, my voice quavering. “I’m moving on.”

Jenna shakes her head. “I don’t know, Brienne. Drake doesn’t se ean, iftype who would give up if he has feelings.”

nade of I glare at her. “He was just an asshole a second ago. Now you thi worthy?”

“I’m just saying... you two were building something. He invited
friend, go trick-or-treating with his kids. That is a lot of trust right there.”

“You’re giving me whiplash, Jenna. Is he an asshole or not?”
on my “Oh, he’s an asshole for hurting your feelings. I’m just wonder
perhaps he needs some time.”

I rub at my temple, wishing away the lingering headache I’ve had
waking up this morning. I didn’t sleep well.

“He texted me late last night.”

“What?” she asks, pushing off from the desk. “What did he say?”

I pull my phone out of my purse, scroll to the text, and hold it out
for her to read.

We need to talk.

“Not exactly a groveling apology,” she mutters. Her eyes lift to
me. “Are you going to respond?”

I concentrate on the near constant ache in my heart that hasn’t
let up since he told me we were through. I zero in on the pain he caused, and
realize that I don’t have the capacity for more. I need to figure out how
to heal, and that means distance.

It was foolish to think I could cut Jenna out of my life. But for now
I want to stay safe—so my heart doesn’t get broken again—I can’t afford to
take a chance with him.

“No,” I reply, turning the phone back around to me. “I’m not replying
to him.”

With a few efficient taps, I block his number.

Then I delete his text.

My hands shake.

and his
asshole.

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It was foolish to think I could cut Jenna out of my life. But for my own safety—so my heart doesn’t get broken again—I can’t afford to take the chance with him.

“No,” I reply, turning the phone back around to me. “I’m not replying.”

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CHAPTER 31

Drake

I WALK INTO the arena with my game bag slung over my shoulder. By the players' lounge, I head straight to the locker room so I can ditch my

Normally on game day, I'd hang out in the players' lounge for a bit of the shit, but I don't feel like it today. It's been a fuck awful week of an extended road trip that seemed to last ten years.

Tossing my bag down on the bench at my cubby, I see a note taped to the back wall. My heart kicks into a hard gallop remembering how Brien left me a note to come to her hotel room. Snatching the paper, disappointment settles like a lead weight in my stomach when I see it's not from Brien

Need to meet with you as soon as you come in. – Baden.

Fuck.

I jerk off my tie, toss it into my cubby, and slide out of my coat, not having the time to put it on a hanger. Then I head to Baden's office, where I'm sure I'm going to get my ass reamed for playing like hell this past week.

I'm surprised to see Gage there when I enter. He's leaning against the wall, arms folded over his chest. His chin lifts in greeting, and he makes an effort to leave.

Just great.

I'm sure they're about to double-team me.

"Sit," Baden says, pointing to the chair after I close his office door. I've been here since February, and after eight months still has absolutely no decorations in his office. Only a framed photo of him and Sophie sits on his desk.

I slump down into the chair, spreading my legs out and clasping my hands over my midsection. The pose says I'm not interested in whatever he's about to hand me.

He cuts right to the chase. "What's it going to take to pull your h

of your ass?”

I cock an eyebrow at him but hold my tongue.

“I obviously don’t need to tell you that you had a terrible road to your practices in between have been lackluster. What I do need to tell you is that if you don’t turn it around tonight, Kace is going to take your position.”

“Don’t give a fuck,” I say.

Baden blinks in surprise before exchanging a look with Gage. When his eyes land back on me, he says, “Look, man... I know that shit with you last week was unsettling.”

Unsettling is a pretty word for what went down, but I handled it as best I could, and I’m moving forward. That night, I talked to the boys and reviewed all the things they’d been told when Crystal and I separated and I was put into custody. They saw a therapist for several months after, both together and then individually. While my gut wanted to hide all the ugly details to protect them from the reality of their mom’s situation, the therapist said that honest and open communication was essential. They had to know their mother was sick and that her disease because they needed to know her absence was in no way their fault.

The hardest part of the conversation was reminding them that Crystal loves them tremendously. My inner asshole doubts it because I’m an addict who can’t get clean, but the smart part of me that listened to the therapist said that Crystal is ill, and despite her inability to beat the addiction, I know she will take care of her kids.

I reassured them that I love them and that I will always be there for them. And... that was that. Kids are fucking resilient, much more so than adults. They asked questions, but then they wanted to eat candy and watch *Story*.

Jake asked where Brienne had gone, and I lied to him because I couldn’t admit I was an asshole. “She had to go take care of something at her home.” He’s “Will she come back?” he asked.

“Not tonight.” Then I distracted them with their trick-or-treat bounty. Once the movie was rolling, I went into the kitchen to grab a beer.

Kiera accosted me. “You need to fix this with Brienne.” I wasn’t ready to hear that. I shook my head. “Tonight with me proved that I need to concentrate on my kids. I can’t let anyone else get close to them who could hurt them.”

“Brienne would never hurt them,” she snapped.

Snark was my friend that night. “Yeah... I didn’t think Crystal would have her kids, but here we are.”

“I don’t think you’re worried about the boys getting hurt.” I glare at you in fury, raging that she’d suggest I didn’t have my kids’ best interests at heart. “You’re more worried about yourself getting hurt.”

That shut me right up because while I couldn’t even think about admitting when I was wrong, deep down, I knew she was right.

Crystal Sitting up in my chair, I look between the two men, my gaze settling on Baden. “My lack of fucks to give about how I’m playing has nothing to do with Crystal. That shit’s been handled.”

“Then what the hell is wrong with you?” He throws his hands up in frustration, and I get full confusion.

I rise from my chair. “I made a mistake coming back into the league, but I should have put Kace in goal.”

I turn for the door, but Baden storms out from behind his desk and cuts me off. “Don’t you even think about walking out that door. I’m your friend first and foremost, and I deserve to know what is going on.”

That punch lands, because Baden is my friend before he’s my coach. We’ve played together for the Wolves, and when they cut me loose, he was the only one who knew how to support me. He’s the one who got me this opportunity to come back.

I rub my hands over my face and growl. When they fall away, I realize I’m at a loss as to where to begin. He knows I’ve been seeing Brienne. I never told Baden. Gage merely shrugs.

“Wait a minute,” Baden says, looking between me and Gage, brooding. “Do you know what’s going on?”

“Yeah,” Gage admits, and his tone is so heavy and ominous, I can’t help but feel like I’ve been hit by a train.

My head whips his way. “Jenna knows something. What did she tell you?”

“What the hell is this?” Baden demands.

I spare a short glance at my friend. “I’ve been seeing Brienne.”

“Whoa... what the ever-loving fuck,” Baden says, stumbling back. Crystal’s butt comes up against his desk. He sets his palms down and looks at me in horror.

“It started out as a fling... a hookup.”

“You hooked up with the Titans’ owner? I thought you two hated each other.”

uld hurt other.”

“Far from it,” I mutter. “It was just sex at first, but then it turned into something more. We kept it secret as I didn’t want to deal with the press. Not on the heels of everything that happened last year. We were trying to figure things out.”

“I don’t even know what to say,” Baden murmurs in confusion. “I’ve never heard of this happening before. I mean... can you even do that?”

I shrug. “There aren’t any written rules against it, but we know we have to be careful about perception. Brienne didn’t care if she took any heat. She was confident it would be minimal since my contract is set, and she’s not the one who makes those decisions, anyway. But again, she didn’t want the press to focus on me after me.”

Baden nods. “So I’m going out on a limb here, but you guys broke up. That’s what’s causing your shit attitude and even shittier play?”

“I broke up with her.” I explain how it all went down the night she left. “I handled it badly, and I’m pissed at myself. I took my anger out on Brienne, and she didn’t deserve it. I told her to leave and that was the last I saw of her. We overreacted, but that was impulsiveness driven by my rage for Crystal.”

“So, apologize to her,” Baden says, as if that’s the miracle cure for my ailment.

“I’ve tried. I texted her the next day, and every day after, asking her to talk to me. I’ve called, and it goes to voicemail.”

“That’s because she blocked your number,” Gage says.

I spin on him in disbelief. “She what?”

“She blocked you.” His tone is casual, as if this shouldn’t come as a gut shock based on the way I behaved. “She moved her office across the street and is backing away from the team.”

“Jesus Christ.” I rub at the back of my neck as it tightens with stress. “I didn’t come on the road trip.”

“She went to New York. Took some time off.”

Furious jealousy blurs my vision for just a second. Did she see someone else until there? Has she moved on that quickly?

No. Brienne wouldn’t do that, although I wouldn’t blame her if she did.

“I want to fix this.” My head swivels between Gage and Baden. “I handled it badly, but I can’t fix it if she won’t talk to me, and I’m about to lose my shit.”

Baden glares at me. “You need to hold it together and get your head into the game. We play the Vengeance tonight, and the last thing I need is bullshit to suck against the defending Cup champions.”

I’m trying. “Fuck the game. I want Brienne. I need her in my life because otherwise none of this means anything.”

1. “I’ve seen Gage start laughing, and Baden and I both look at him as if he’s not,” I shake my head. “Dude... you’re in love.”

It’ll be a mess. “No shit,” I growl as my fists clench. “Do you think I’d be this fucking confident if I weren’t?”

She who? His laugh winds down to a chuckle. “If it makes you feel any better, coming to town up too. Brienne tried to cut Jenna out of her life. Gave her the song and dance about needing to maintain a professional relationship. Jenna woke up? Was rebuilding those tough Brienne walls, but Jenna wouldn’t let her. She was quite the badass and refused to let Brienne hide away. Maybe you’ll tell Crystal to insist on the same.”

I get out. “Again... there’s the whole matter of her blocking me. I’d settle for the time she’d just give me the time of day.”

“Looks like you’re going to have to do a face-to-face,” Gage says. I glance at my watch. Would she still be in her office? At her home?

“Not now, jackass,” Baden grumbles. “You have a game to get ready for. If she comes on the off chance she tells you to go fuck yourself, I don’t want you messing with your head. So tuck this away until after the game. Then go see your girl.”

Yeah, that’s what I’ll do. I know she’ll go home after the game, and she won’t be able to ignore me when I’m banging on her door.

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Baden glares at me. “You need to hold it together and get your head in the game. We play the Vengeance tonight, and the last thing I need is for you to suck against the defending Cup champions.”

“Fuck the game. I want Brienne. I need her in my life because otherwise, none of this means anything.”

Gage starts laughing, and Baden and I both look at him as if he’s nuts. He shakes his head. “Dude... you’re in love.”

“No shit,” I growl as my fists clench. “Do you think I’d be this fucked up if I weren’t?”

His laugh winds down to a chuckle. “If it makes you feel any better, she’s torn up too. Brienne tried to cut Jenna out of her life. Gave her the whole song and dance about needing to maintain a professional relationship. She was rebuilding those tough Brienne walls, but Jenna wouldn’t let her. My girl was quite the badass and refused to let Brienne hide away. Maybe you need to insist on the same.”

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Yeah, that’s what I’ll do. I know she’ll go home after the game, and she won’t be able to ignore me when I’m banging on her door.

CHAPTER 32

Brienne

WITH FIVE MINUTES left in the game, I leave the owner's box with Callum and we head down to the tunnel where we can greet the team as they come off the ice. We're up 4-0, and it looks like an assured victory over the Vengeance.

This is a huge win, especially coming off a less than successful road game. Everyone played like they were on fire tonight, and we had the added support from what have become known as the loudest fans in the entire league.

Drake appears to be over whatever slump he was in this past week, and despite feeling like I want to burst into tears every time I think about him, I'm happy he's got his mojo back. I know he has to be reeling with the fact that Crystal has reentered his life, but he seemed really settled in goal tonight.

"I want you to be prepared to talk to reporters," Callum says as we head down in the private elevator. "The entire sports world has been watching us very closely this summer, during the preseason and these first few weeks of the regular season. With the win tonight, they've seen enough to know that we've put Pittsburgh back on the hockey map."

"You should do the interview," I say as the doors slide open and we step into the hallway that circles the entire basement level of the arena. "I made all the important decisions to get us here."

"Yeah, but you're the face of the team," he counters with a smirk. "Besides... you had a lot to do with this. We wouldn't have Drake McCallum if it weren't for you."

Another stab to my heart, but I manage a tight smile. "Yes... he's a great addition."

Before we reach the tunnel that leads from the ice to the hallway, Callum stops and turns to me. "Listen... I know you've moved your offices back to the river. I hope that doesn't mean you're stepping away from the team."

I clasp my hands and look down at them. It's hard to keep my con-

because my emotions are still so raw, but I have it under control when my gaze and shine it up with a professional-grade grin. “The team is and you and Coach West are more than capable of carrying them for glory. I’ve got a lot of pressing things at Norcross Holdings that need attention. But I’m around if you need me.”

“We always need you,” Callum says, and then we step into the tunnel to watch the end of the game.

Callum, The last two minutes are exciting as the Vengeance battle viciously come to score. They pull their goalie early and do an amazing job of deflecting every shot down at their unprotected goal.

But try as they might, Drake easily blocks every shot they take toward goal. He’s in the zone tonight.

When the final buzzer sounds, the arena erupts into a deafening roar.

I have to resist clamping my hands over my ears.

While the Vengeance exit through their tunnel on the opposite side of the ice, the Titans swarm, congregating down at the net where they congratulate Drake for his shutout.

I can’t help but get pulled into the joy of the moment. Every one of the guys out there is grinning so broadly, their jaws might crack. Drake is taking his mask, and looking upon his handsome face hurts. I start to turn away, but his eyes lock onto mine across the ice, and I freeze.

While his teammates clap him on the back and tap their sticks to congratulate him, he just stares at me. I start to get hot and then embarrassed, but I’m not when someone calls my name.

“Ms. Norcross.” I turn to see Eddie Olmstead with Deebo the cameraman. “Who can forget a name like that? “Can we get a few minutes?”

The gate between the ice and the tunnel opens, and the players are coming off.

“Actually... I’d like to greet the players, and I know you’ll probably been a to interview some. You can get me at the end.”

The reporter flashes a smile and surges forward. “Drake... can I have a few minutes?”

I step back several feet with Callum, pressing against the wall as hulking players lumber by. I congratulate every one of them with a fist bump, and every one of them gives me a huge smile.

I glance over at Drake. The reporter and cameraman have their backs to me.

en I liftme, and Drake is at an angle as they mic him up for an interview. s solid, I could back away, give them privacy, but the glutton in me wants ward tohis voice. Despite blocking him from my number, I still receiveed myvoicemails. Texts don't come through, but the other night, I found a f my voicemail inbox entitled Blocked Messages, and I listened to the innerl toand over.

They weren't long. He offered no apologies. Only requests that I c y to tryso we could talk.

ng long I ignored them, but I didn't delete them.

You know... glutton and all.

on our "You got a shutout against the Vengeance," the reporter says as h the microphone to his mouth. "That's got to feel good."

oar, and Drake's pouring sweat and his hair is matted, his mask tucked ur arm. He nods at the reporter. "Yeah... a shutout always feels good. ' e of the some great defense going on tonight. It's always a team effort."

ratulate What a statesman. I can't help but smile, but when Drake looks p reporter to me, it slides off. I duck my head and stare at my shoes.

e of the "You've had some trying times, not only with the claims made t flips upwife, Crystal, but with the Wolves releasing you—"

ay, but "Let's stop right there and let me make a few things clear," Drak and my head snaps up. His voice is calm and nonthreatening, and his legs,control of the narrative. "First, she's my ex-wife, and the reason she's n savedwife is that she made false allegations, all of which were investiga disproved. So let's make sure you report that accurately, okay?"

eraman. The reporter nods dumbly.

"Second, the Wolves—and most everyone else in the league—c rs startbelieve the lies, because the media twisted it that way. Sells better i villain."

ly want At this point, poor Eddie is speechless.

"Lastly, I'm back in this league because someone believed in me fi have astart." Drake's eyes slide past the reporter again and land on me. My body flushes with the attention, and I feel like bolting. His gaze is so t as theon me that the reporter turns to see what's making his interview go t bump,rails. "Brienne Norcross," Drake says softly.

He doesn't look at the camera but keeps his eyes pinned on me, a acks tohelpless to look away. "She gave me a chance, and I took it. I'm also

fucking in love with her, and I've been trying to tell her that for a while but she won't give me the time of day. So I guess now I'm going to make the most of this opportunity."

My mouth gapes in shock, and beside me, Callum mutters, "Is he overcrazy?"

Drake pulls off the microphone and hands it to the cameraman. He walks past the reporter and walks over to me, his head adding enough height to tip my head way, way back.

"Get this on camera," Eddie snarls at Deebo.

"Drake," I whisper as he drops his helmet and stick. "They're filming me holds "Don't you know me by now?" he says gruffly, pulling off his gloves. "I have zero fucks to give."

His hands come to my face. They're sweaty... he's sweaty... but we had care. I'm hypnotized. He bends closer to peer at me. "The only fuck I need for you right now. I am so sorry about how I handled things. I don't want to lose you, and I'll do whatever I need to do to fix this. I'll be whatever you need me to be."

Vaguely, I hear Callum cough as he mumbles, "I'm just... going to go."

"Stupid fucking in love with you," Drake repeats the same words into the reporter, which will be bleeped out when that goes on the air. "I want my ex to forgive me, tell me you love me, too, and then let's figure out how to live together, okay?"

I'm entranced, and my heart feels like it's about to burst. All I can do is nod.

Drake grins and bends the rest of the way to press his mouth to mine. His hands lock around his wrists, and I hang on, his kiss deep and claiming. "I have zero fucks to give that we're being recorded."

Lifting his head, he stares at me. "I need the words, Bri."

"I love you," I whisper.

"That's good. I need the other words too."

"I forgive you."

"That's what I needed," he murmurs and kisses me again.

But it's not just a kiss... it's a dialogue. It's the deeper conversation we should have, condensed into a mating of lips and tongue. It's a stupid reaffirmation of love and hope and a future together.

le now, So much to figure out, but all the time in the world to do it.
have to “Drake... are you and Ms. Norcross seeing each other?”

Drake lifts his head and swivels it slightly toward the reporter
fucking microphone is angled at us. “You seem like a smart guy. You just got
on tape. You heard every word I said. Think you can figure out the
push that story and report it accurately, yeah?”

at that I The reporter nods.

“Good. Now turn off the camera and get out of my way so I can l
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So much to figure out, but all the time in the world to do it.

“Drake... are you and Ms. Norcross seeing each other?”

Drake lifts his head and swivels it slightly toward the reporter whose microphone is angled at us. “You seem like a smart guy. You just got all that on tape. You heard every word I said. Think you can figure out the truth in that story and report it accurately, yeah?”

The reporter nods.

“Good. Now turn off the camera and get out of my way so I can kiss her again.”

CHAPTER 33

PITTSBURGH TIMES

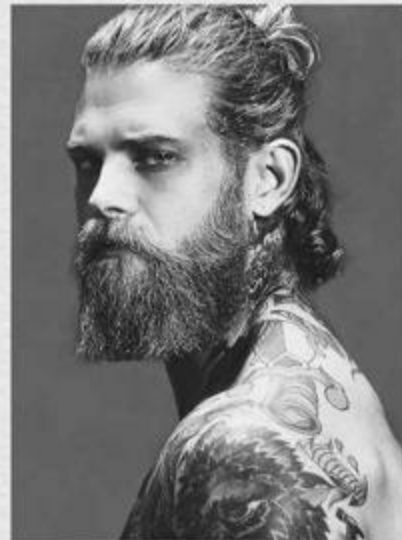
THREE RIVERS SPORTING NEWS

Titans Goalie Shocks Team Owner With Kiss

By Lisa Kuhne

Pittsburgh Titans goalie Drake McGinn is no stranger to making headlines. Having spent the last year battling allegations of betting on hockey and throwing games to benefit financially, followed by a messy divorce, McGinn has had his share of the spotlight. After leaving the league as a result of the allegations, which were proven false, McGinn has managed to keep his personal life out of the media in recent months.

But last night, Drake McGinn once again set the hockey world abuzz when he seemingly announced his relationship with Titans' team owner, Brienne Norcross. Following a post-game interview, McGinn made a very public declaration, stating he was "stupid in love" with Norcross before kissing her in front of cameras and media personnel. Norcross looked stunned for a moment before



returning McGinn's kiss...and his pronouncement of love.

An embattled hockey star and the billionaire team owner who took over following a devastating plane crash? Hollywood doesn't have anything on this Pittsburgh love story.

CHAPTER 34

Drake

“LET’S GO,” I say as I hold open the back door of the Tahoe. “Move it, move it. We’re late.”

All three boys scramble from the back seat and go running up to the door of Brienne’s house.

If it’s a testament at all to just how comfortable they’ve become over these last few weeks—and vice versa—they crash through the door with so much as a knock or press of the doorbell.

Shaking my head, I move to the back and open the tailgate, pull out the grocery bag. I walk up the wide porch steps and make a mental chastise the boys for leaving the door open.

I find Brienne in the kitchen, and she is a sight to behold. She stands behind the island holding Colby on her hip, her head pulled back so she can see the toy cowboy Kiera got him at the dollar store, a favorite place of mine. I learned long ago to let them each have a toy in the car to keep them entertained and not fighting.

A lot of things about this woman turn me on, but seeing her connect with my son practically undoes me.

Jake and Tanner jabber up at her, each holding their own toy. Colby slides down to his feet and takes Jake’s hockey puck to examine.

“This is cool,” she says before handing it back to him. “You’re serious about these left and right in your hockey league, huh?”

“Daddy got it for me. It says Pittsburgh Titans on it.”

“So I see,” she says, tousling his hair. Turning to Tanner, she asks, “What do you have?”

Almost shyly, he offers a piece of paper. “I drew you a picture.”

“Oh, wow,” Brienne says, cutting a quick look to me before taking the paper from his little hand. I have no clue what he drew, but when Brienne opens her hand and presses it against her chest. “Oh, Tanner... it’s beautiful.”

“You said you liked daisies, so I drew daisies,” he says.

Damn if my heart doesn't twinge over the thoughtfulness. Brienne and hugs Tanner, then one for Jake. “Okay, rug rats... TV's on in the kitchen, all cued up to Disney+. Get out of my hair so I can finish cooking.”

The kids run out, sounding like a herd of little elephants, which leaves me with a wide-open opportunity to pounce. I round the island and pull Brienne into my arms.

“I got a present for you,” I murmur seductively, tipping my head back to kiss her jaw.

She shivers but pushes me back. “Yes, I know exactly what your present you got for me.”

I grin at her. “Worth a try.” I then glance around the kitchen and realize it looks like a tornado hit. “Um... you sure you got everything under control?”

Brienne glares at me and moves to a large silver pot. “Of course, I have everything under control. I've followed Daniel's instructions to a T. I put the turkey in at six and it's cooking nicely. There's apparently a little red thing that will pop out when it's done. Did Kiera make it to Red Wing?”

“Yup. I'll have the boys call her and Mom in a bit.”

I invited my mom to come to Thanksgiving this year, but she'd already made plans to eat with her church friends. Kiera decided to go home for the visit, though, so it's just me, the boys, and Brienne, who insisted on preparing the meal from scratch.

Brienne starts to mash the potatoes by hand, an arduous task as I've done it myself on occasion. She blows out a breath of frustration, grunting with effort. I nudge her out of the way with my hip. “This is man's work. You finish.”

That earns me an eye roll, but she moves on to the next task on her list. “Did you bring the cranberry sauce?” she asks as she pulls open the double ovens to peek inside at what appears to be a nice-looking turkey. “And the bean casserole.”

“In the grocery bag,” I say, nodding to it. “There's something else in there too.”

She cocks an eyebrow at me and saunters over. Peeking into the paper bag, she laughs in delight as she pulls out a bouquet of fresh daisies. “Apparently, Tanner wasn't the only one listening last week when he said daisies are my favorite.”

“I listen to everything you say,” I assure her. Hell, I pretty much squats about her all the time.

The last three weeks have been amazing, more than I could have imagined.

Since we practically broke the sporting news cycle with my declaration of love, life has been damn near perfect.

Although we made big news, we’re no longer interesting, and the girls has moved on, mostly because we refuse to comment about our relationship.

The guys give me lots of shit about it, ribbing me that I’m only on this type of because of my sugar mama. It’s all in good fun, though.

Crystal has disappeared again, and I’d like to say that’s a good thing, but I realize it’s not. It only makes us wonder when she’ll resurface, and it leaves me walking on eggshells a bit. The only comfort is that the boys are thriving. I’ve got happy, which is all that matters.

Brienne spends as much time with us as her work schedule allows. She actually turned most everything Titans related over to Callum and is learning

how to give up a little control at work to free her evenings some.

plenty of nights with her on away games or here after our home games. We already still haven’t progressed to staying the night at my house with the boys, but tonight will be a test to see how they handle it. We’re going to start making tonight.

I fully intend to have my way with Brienne then, but we’ll just have to do it super quiet.

This will be a good way to introduce them to the concept of love. Let me. It’s like a big, fun sleepover to them, and hopefully, that will facilitate a smooth transition as Brienne becomes more ingrained into our family.

list. “Have you ever thought about living together?” I ask as she opens one of the cranberry sauce.

She doesn’t jolt with surprise, which tells me she has. She slides her hand my way. “Sometimes.”

“Would you move in with us?” I grin at her, knowing the answer she says it.

“And give up this luxury?” She gasps, sweeping her hand outward. “When we’re ready to move in together, you’ll come here. We can put the boys in one wing, and you and I will take the other. But that’s anytime soon. I want the kids to be good with it.”

obsess “Are you kidding? They’d move in with you tomorrow if you let them. They adore you.”

ve ever “I love them too.” She sighs and then looks across the kitchen with a wistful expression.

“What’s going on in that pretty noggin of yours?” I drop the mask and the pot and move over to her. My arms slide around her waist and I pull her back into me. Her hands cover my arms, and her head falls onto my chest. “I’ve never thought I’d have this. It wasn’t even a dream of mine, but now I have it, I don’t understand how my dreams were never this big.”

I ponder that, giving her a squeeze. “I guess we all change, right? I know is that you are an absolute dream come true. I didn’t know I was looking for you either.”

Brienne turns in my arms, tipping her head back. “I love you, Dad. I love Colby, Tanner, Jake, and Kiera. I’m sure I’ll love your mom when I meet her.”

3. She’s Her tone is sweet and grateful, but she looks a little sad. “You’re not earning Adam?”

I spend “You know me well,” she says, leaning in and resting her head on my chest.

ays, but “I doubt that that will ever go away. But you’ve got a new family who loves you very much, Bri.” My hand comes to the back of her head to hold her close to me.

ve to be “I know,” she murmurs. “And it’s made me happier than I ever knew possible.”

rnights. I tug on her ponytail, and she tips her head so I can put my mouth on her neck. I kiss her deeply, bending her back a bit.

“Ewww... gross,” Jake says as he comes into the kitchen and holds his hand to his nose by the refrigerator.

Brienne and I break apart, but I don’t let her go. Jake grabs a bottle of eye water and starts to walk out again.

“You’re going to be kissing someone like this one day,” I call out to him before he leaves.

“No, I won’t,” he calls back.

d. “No. Brienne laughs and tries to pull away, but I tug her right back and claim Kiera’s mouth again. Jake may think this is gross, but I most certainly do not.

t them.

fully. **Cannon West just joined the Pittsburgh Titans!** A widower and
ner into youngest coach in league history, Cannon isn't looking for love, just l
pull her to lead the Titans to a championship. But sometimes we find love wh
hest. "I least expect it, even the local coffee shop. [CLICK HERE](#) for details .
v that I Cannon!

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New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling
Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that
to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy ro
and both women’s and general fiction, Sawyer writes something
about everyone.

A former trial lawyer from North Carolina, when she is not bringing
to life, Sawyer is a chauffeur, stylist, chef, maid, and personal assistan
very adorable daughter, as well as full-time servant to her wonc
naughty dogs.

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