



Pittsburgh Titans' Plan Crashes Killing All on Board

It's a devastating so
International Airport
plane for the Tita
landing Wednesd
reports are citing "c
in the landing gear
the plane to drop to
chartered Airbus 3
somersaulted on
bursting into flam
described it as "an
unimaginable trap
The Titans were r
following a 3-2
Columbus Hawk
earning another
Titans were ex
playoffs for the
row and clinch

PITTSBURGH TITANS

VAN 2

His past threatens to unravel his future.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SAWYER BENNETT

VAN2
PITTSBURGH TITANS

By
SAWYER BENNETT

VAN2
PITTSBURGH TITANS

By
SAWYER BENNETT

All Rights Reserved.

Copyright © 2023 by Sawyer Bennett

Kindle Edition

Published by Big Dog Books

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book can be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means in information storage and retrieval systems, without the express written permission of the author. The only exception is by a reviewer who may quote short excerpts in a review.

Find Sawyer on the web!

sawyerbennett.com

www.twitter.com/bennettbooks

www.facebook.com/bennettbooks

All Rights Reserved.

Copyright © 2023 by Sawyer Bennett

Kindle Edition

Published by Big Dog Books

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book can be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without the express written permission of the author. The only exception is by a reviewer who may quote short excerpts in a review.

Find Sawyer on the web!

sawyerbennett.com

www.twitter.com/bennettbooks

www.facebook.com/bennettbooks

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

About the Author

PITTSBURGH TIMES

THREE RIVERS SPORTING NEWS

Van Turner: A Titan Rising from Retirement

By Lisa Kuhne

From Vermont's serene landscapes, Van Turner, the former defenseman for the Carolina Cold Fury, is poised to make a dramatic comeback to the ice. The 31-year-old, who was instrumental in clinching the Cold Fury's second Cup championship three years ago, is leaving his quiet retirement to join the Pittsburgh Titans. Titans coach, Cannon West, confirmed Turner will bolster the team's defense on the third line.

Turner's story is not all ice and glory. In the midst of the Cup finals, it was revealed that he was the offspring of notorious serial killer, Arco VanBuskirk, whose life sentence ended not in parole but lung cancer two years ago. The revelation spurred speculation that Turner's retirement was a response to this unwelcome attention, but in all his press interviews, he maintained that he was content settling down with his now wife, the former Simone Fournier, starting a family and relishing his hockey achievements. The Fournier connection isn't lost on hockey fans as Simone's brothers, Lucas and Max, currently wear the Cold Fury jersey.

While it's big news that this former powerhouse of an enforcer is back on



the ice, it's somewhat overshadowed by a tell-all biography recently published that delves into the chilling world of VanBuskirk, including his son's life, through a series of prison journals gifted to a reporter. Turner, who has refused so far to comment on the biography, remains a tantalizing mystery to the hockey world, but it's clear he's prepared to reenter the spotlight. The motivation behind his return may be uncertain, but what's undeniable is his resolve to leave an indelible mark on the ice once more.

CHAPTER 1

Van

I HATE THIS shit. The press is a necessary evil but I never forget it's in itself an evil. I'm required by the Titans to attend this press conference held in the arena. The room hums with anticipation as I follow Coach West and owner Callum Derringer, through a side door and up onto a raised dais. The polished surface of the long mahogany table reflects the bright lights that illuminate the room. Three chairs are set behind it and before each chair a microphone.

The room is abuzz with chatter as the crowd engages in speculation and conversation, their theories about my comeback. When we're spotted, the whirl of camera shutters and voices are amplified as the press poise themselves on the edge of their seats, ready to capture the first words of this new chapter in my career.

Derringer takes the first chair, Coach West the next and I sit down at the far end. Luckily, there's a swath of heavy canvas fabric pinned to the front of the table with the Titans' logo centered. It prevents anyone from seeing the nervous bounce of my leg.

Arranged in semicircular rows facing the dais are the cream of the press corps, armed with notepads, voice recorders and cameras, their eyes fixed on me. Some reporters are seasoned stalwarts, their faces marked by years spent under the harsh lights of arenas, while others are more wide-eyed and eager, their fingers poised above iPads to take copious notes.

On one side of the room, a sideboard holds coffee and bottled water, accompanied by an assortment of pastries. On the other side, a large screen displays a live feed of the event for those outside the room.

Callum pulls his microphone closer and clasps his hands on the table in front of him as he looks out over the forty or so people in attendance. 'Good afternoon and gentlemen, members of the press, good afternoon. As you know, I'm Callum Derringer, general manager of the Pittsburgh Titans. We're pleased today to welcome an extraordinary athlete back to the sport we all love.'

Turner, a man whose talent and dedication to hockey are well known and respected. We understand this is big news and want to do our best to accommodate your curiosity. We will only be allotting fifteen minutes, as I'm sure you all appreciate we have to get Van on to his first practice. Please respect the time frame and make sure your questions are succinct and respectful. I understand the high level of interest and the numerous questions you all have, but we request that you maintain a level of decorum. This is important news and we want to be open, but it is not a tabloid frenzy. Let's keep the focus on the sport and on the exceptional talent we're adding to our team.

A young reporter in the front stands holding a digital recorder. "It's been three years since Van Turner's retirement. What prompted the decision to bring him back into the league, especially after such a significant breakthrough? Was it worth it to send Perry Veleno down to the minors as he's been there for a while now, I hear he's put up some impressive stats?"

Callum doesn't wait for me or Coach to weigh in, instead leaning into the microphone. "Van Turner's legacy with the Carolina Cold Fury is well known for itself. He brings not only a wealth of experience and skill but also a unique resilience and tenacity that is the cornerstone of this new team. He's passed all his strength and endurance tests, demonstrating he's still in excellent condition, reinforcing our belief that his addition to the Titans is invaluable. And I wouldn't have sent Perry Veleno down to the minors if I didn't think this was the best move for the Titans in its entirety."

The reporter lobs a follow-up. "It's one thing to maintain strength on-ice, but stamina... it's another to keep your ice skills sharp."

Not a question, but an observation that still demands a response. West takes it. "We did significant on-ice testing. We put Van through drills that were skill unimaginable and he's as sharp today as he was three years ago." "That's true... I never left the ice, even when I retired. I played in a rec league and helped coach the Dartmouth team. "However, I think the mere fact that we signed him to a three-year contract should tell you all you need to know. Ladies and gentlemen, have confidence he will not only be an immediately impactful player, but a long-term cornerstone for our defense."

Eager to be the next, I'm afforded the opportunity to ask a question, but my question is tossed out at once. Callum points and a female reporter stands. "With Van Turner joining the third line, what specific changes or improvements are you expecting?"

wn and hope to see in the team's performance?"

Coach West answers. "Van's defensive abilities are top-notch, you can't argue with that. His leadership on the ice can solidify our defense, but it's his specific understanding of the game that will help enhance our overall performance." He says Van's return isn't just about adding a player to our roster—it's about bringing back a seasoned professional who knows how to win and can impart that knowledge and mindset to the rest of the team. This is especially true since, as you know, we've rebuilt with younger players coming up from the minors."

More questions are hurled and an older reporter I recognize from the arena's been last played stands. He's old-school, clutching a spiral pad and pen, his voice a low, steady tone. His eyes come straight to me. "Van, can you comment on your recent book and its impact on your decision to return?"

Well, that's fucking disappointing. Not that I expected the topic to be averted, but I didn't expect a veteran reporter to care about this shift in my life. The mention of my father causes a twinge in my gut, an old wound that refuses to heal.

What I'd like to do is smash my fist into his face, but instead, I smile. He says my words carefully. "Let's keep this about hockey. I'm here because I want to see the team play, not to discuss a book I had no hand in writing."

The next question comes from a middle-aged man in the front row, his glasses reflecting the overhead lights. "How does your wife feel about your comeback, given her own connection to the hockey world?"

Simone.

My heart clenches at the mention of her. I wrestle with my emotions, Coach remembering why I'm here and what I left behind. "Simone is part of every hockey community, and she understands what this life demands."

That did not answer the question, but I truly have no clue how to respond about it. I never discussed it with her. I'm surprised by how steady my voice sounds despite the fact it feels like my chest is cracking open. I glance down at the room, nearly begging with my expression for someone to ask a different question. "Van, do you think the shadows from your past will affect the game or the Titans' dynamic?"

The pain in my chest recedes, replaced with a burning anger in my chest. I answer Van the fucking idiotic question. It's a jab, trying to draw out a reaction. I do my best to smile onto my face, holding my ground. "I'm here to play hockey."

believe my skills on the ice will speak louder than any perceived ‘shame’. His As for the Titans’ dynamic, I’ll do my part to contribute positively and strategically the best hockey I can.”

performance. The next few questions are focused on the training regime I’ve maintained over the last three years and not on my personal life. Even though no one asks about Arco or Simone at this moment, I’m still incredibly helpful in the spotlight. A bead of sweat rolls down my temple, but I let that be the only visible sign I’m uncomfortable. I maintain my facade, bearing the weight of my decision to step back into the public eye. After all, I’m here to play, and that’s all they need to know.

“Okay... we have time for one more question,” Callum says, his father’s roaming the room. A flurry of activity explodes, a disorienting storm of reporters shouting questions faster than I can process. The lights from the cameras flash relentlessly, the barrage of voices growing louder. My past—the father, my marriage... they’re all on display, picked apart by these vultures.

“Van, are you afraid your father’s legacy will haunt you on the ice?”
“Did Simone push you to rejoin the league?”
“What’s the real reason behind your sudden return to the game?”
“Are you worried about your past distracting your teammates?”
“Did you read your father’s biography?”
“Did you see your father before he died?”

The questions are painful, each one a stabbing needle of inquiry. The room spins as the noise crescendos, my heart pounding in my ears. I drop my hands to my lap so the vultures can’t see me clenching my fists in anger. My skin prickles with the need to do violence because these assholes are here for the hockey.

They’re here for the drama, for the man whose life has been a spectacle of tragedies.

I knew this was going to happen and it was still a better choice than staying with Simone. I’d rather be subjected to this every day than another moment inside the home I built with my wife because that becomes too painful to deal with.

A thunderous voice booms through the chaos. “Enough!” Callum yells as he pounds his fist on the table, his face flushed with anger. “This is a hockey press conference, not a tabloid interrogation. If you can’t keep your questions related to the game, the team or Van’s professional career, you

adows.'leave."

nd play His words hang heavy in the air, casting a noticeable chill o
reporters. The cacophony is replaced by a sudden, deafening quiet. I re
en I've held breath, grateful for the respite.

though Suddenly, the spotlight seems less glaring, the weight on my shou
uneasy touch lighter. But as the echoes of the questions linger, I know my fi
t be the only just begun. I'm back in the game, back in the limelight, and no
ing the than ever, I need to hold my ground.

here to "Now," Callum says, his tone calm but brooking no nonsense. "
one last appropriate question that someone would like to ask?"

is gaze For a moment, no one moves.

orm of No one says a thing.

om the Then another female reporter stands from the back row. She loc
ast, myshe just stepped out of a beauty magazine with perfect facial featu
tures. expertly coiffed hair. She must be an on-camera personality. "Va
?" doubt you've followed the Titans this season. They're poised to roll i
playoffs at the top of their division. What do you think you bring to th
that could help them clinch a championship?"

Finally... a fucking question that makes sense. For the first tim
smile is genuine. "I bring experience. This team is young and
incredibly well meshed, the playoffs are an entirely different creature t
ry. Theregular season. I know the stressors that come with the territory a
drop my hoping more than anything to be a guide and a resource. Of course, I
ger. Myready to pound anyone who threatens one of my teammates."

1't here That gets a laugh from nearly everyone and the tension in me
little more. Thankfully, Coach West stands up. "Unfortunately, we do
tacle of practice to get to. Thank you everyone for attending."

I waste no time following Coach out the door, ignoring question
ce than yelled in the hopes I'll answer just one more.

in have The last one I hear before exiting hits me hard. "Van... Van... v
iat had Lucas and Max Fournier think about your return? What will it be like l
against them?"

1 snarls It's going to be a pisser because I'm sure they both want to kick
his is a for what I did to Simone. Our last argument before I left home was bi
ep your I said hateful things to push her away. I know my barbs hit the mark b
you can her French Canadian accent, usually so very light and melodic, had l

thick from the emotion. Whereas her brothers, who had left Montreal when they were young, had all but lost their accent, Simone wore hers like a piece of armor. It was always the tell when I knew I'd really pissed her off.

But Max and Lucas are not the ones I'm worried about. It's the younger brothers of the Fournier brothers, Malik, who I have to be wary of. He just happens to live here in Pittsburgh, is former Special Forces and currently works for a more world-renowned security company where he's operated as a paid mercenary.

He's probably got a dozen different ways to torture and make me suffer. I'm sure he then could easily hide my body.

I'd deserve it too.



It looks like the locker room is filled with the familiar post-practice symphony of voices. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed it until just now. The clatter of gear, the murmur of conversation, the occasional echo of laughter.

After my shower, I return to my locker, toting my gear and maneuvering through the narrow aisles.

Practice was good. Damn good, actually.

While I kept myself in shape and ran drills all the time with my teammates and the Dartmouth team, I did harbor a tiny bit of worry that maybe I wouldn't have been enough to play at the professional level again. My personal concern has been put to rest and my new teammates have been offering hardy congratulations on my return.

Boone Rivers, our first-line right-winger, has his cubby next to mine. He's almost fully dressed, tugging down his T-shirt as I step up next to him. On the other side of him is Foster MacInnis, the second-line center, who is lacing up his shoes, his brows furrowed in concentration.

I drop my towel and reach for my clothes. Nothing strange about being butt-ass naked in front of these strangers. That's just part of the sport.

"How'd you feel out there?" Boone asks, breaking the silence between us. His voice carries a note of easy camaraderie.

"Good," I reply, casting him a glance before pulling on my boots. I obviously need to get up to speed on the playbook.

"You'll get there."

"It felt great to be back on the ice," I admit, donning my jeans. At

ill when only thing worth anything I have going for me these days. “But I felt a badgerusty to be playing at your level.”

“You didn’t look rusty,” Foster chimes in, glancing up from his laoungestfact, you looked slick as hell out there. That assist you fed me was pens tohook.”

is for a “Thanks,” I respond, a slight smile playing at the corners of my mcanary. I treasure the thrill of the game sparking back to life within me. Iffer andbright against the barren emptiness.

“So, where you staying?” Foster asks as he rises from the ben slings his duffel over his shoulder.

“Renting a place over in the Historic Mexican War Streets neighb The front office had a list of places for me.”

“Nice area,” Foster says.

, and I “Convenient,” I reply. “It was already furnished.”

ear, the “Does that mean you won’t be moving your stuff from Vermont?” asks.

ry as I My stomach pitches as that’s getting dangerously close to a su don’t want to talk about.

league then sit on the bench to put on my socks.

it still “Is your wife staying behind because of a job?” Foster asks geniall

n. That The weight of the question hits harder than I expected. I swallow e been deciding honesty is the best route. “No, she won’t be joining me. V taking some time apart.”

o mine. That’s a delicate way of saying I left Simone and have no inter to him, reconciling with her, but I’m not about to splash my dirty laundry arou already

Boone and Foster stare back at me with awkward expressions, Foster who recovers first. “Ah... shit, man. I’m sorry. I wasn’t being it being anything.”

reen us. “It’s cool,” I say, waving a hand at him, but if he’s as sensitive to r as I am, then he knows it’s anything but.

Foster’s voice drops. “I’ve been through it if you need to talk.”

xers. “I “Divorced?” I ask because that’s the end goal for me, right?

“Yeah,” he says with a sad shake of his head. “We have a daugh they both live in California. You have kids?”

out the All I can do is shake my head, the threat of an emotional explosior

a little buckling my knees. I mean... thank fuck we don't have kids. That

Simone never got pregnant. Thank fuck that's one disaster averted.

ces. "In "Not that it makes it any easier," Foster continues as he fishes off the pocket for his keys. "But still... let's get a beer sometime and commiserate

I manage a smile, but the last thing I want to do is talk about Simone's mouth as anyone. Foster claps me on the shoulder as he moves past.

It burns My regard cuts to Boone and I hate the sympathy on his face. I bite my

him to say something about my wife, but instead, he says, "I've been reading some of the shit in the press about your dad." My hackles rise, preparing

to tell him to shut the fuck up. "Ignore that shit. Not one person on the neighborhood cares about that stuff and neither should you. It will be old news tomorrow."

I blink in surprise, half expecting the same curiosity about my serious father that the reporters have. "Thanks, man."

Boone "We got your back," he says simply, turning to his cubby.

And I have no choice but to believe it.

subject I

read and

y.
work hard,
we're...

attention of
and.
but it's
nosy or

my tone

later and

is nearly

buckling my knees. I mean... thank fuck we don't have kids. Thank fuck Simone never got pregnant. Thank fuck that's one disaster averted.

"Not that it makes it any easier," Foster continues as he fishes in his pocket for his keys. "But still... let's get a beer sometime and commiserate."

I manage a smile, but the last thing I want to do is talk about Simone with anyone. Foster claps me on the shoulder as he moves past.

My regard cuts to Boone and I hate the sympathy on his face. I brace for him to say something about my wife, but instead, he says, "I've been hearing some of the shit in the press about your dad." My hackles rise, prepared to tell him to shut the fuck up. "Ignore that shit. Not one person on this team cares about that stuff and neither should you. It will be old news by tomorrow."

I blink in surprise, half expecting the same curiosity about my serial killer father that the reporters have. "Thanks, man."

"We got your back," he says simply, turning to his cubby.

And I have no choice but to believe it.

CHAPTER 2

Simone

STUDYING THE TWO open suitcases on my bed, I mentally calculate if I bring dressy clothes. On the one hand, there could be some functions that require more than jeans, cargo pants or leggings. On the other hand, there are team events, it's highly unlikely I'll be invited to them.

Deciding I can buy a fancy dress there if I need it, I do nothing more than toss in a pair of strappy black sandals with an incredibly high pebble sole. Those go with anything.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket causing an electrical surge of nerves to zip through me, only to fizzle when I see it's my brother, Malik, texting.

Not that I don't love to hear from him, it's just that I don't particularly want to hear what he has to say today.

When are you leaving?

I glance at the suitcases, do some mental math and text back. *About an hour.*

You're making a mistake running after him, he replies.

I move over to one of the cozy chairs set by the bedroom window and sink into it. This indeed could be a mistake. I tap my finger along the screen of my phone a few times before responding. *You'd run after Anna.*

I can envision Malik rolling his eyes and I already know the gist of his answer before it chimes its arrival. *Yeah, but she's not an asshole. Van is. Don't do that.*

Sighing, I type out my reply. *Leave it alone. He has his reasons.*

None of which are good enough.

Malik might be right about that, but I'm willing to give my husband the benefit of the doubt.

Tossing my phone on the other chair, I lean my head back and rub my temples. I've had a perpetual headache for the last two weeks, brought on by screaming matches, bouts of painful silence, tears wept in private, and I never see how hurt I was and the never-ending barrage of texts and calls.

my brothers threatening to kill Van.

I close my eyes and try to conjure something good. It's hard to see through all the darkness that's enshrouded my life since Arco's big game came out.

It shouldn't be difficult. Van and I have had a storybook marriage for three years, we've lived a beautiful life in Vermont and never once have I ever mentioned regret about not playing professional hockey anymore. It was his sole decision to leave after he won the Cup with the Cold Front following me north where I finished my last year of undergrad at Dartmouth followed by a master's, and Van took classes at Green Mountain College even if it meant leaving me.

He proposed.

More than I could have dreamed of. We got married.

I became a research biologist and went to work for Dartmouth College. He graduated. He joined as a coach for their hockey team. We lived, we loved, and oh God, how we loved. Not a day passed without Van looking at me as if I'd hung the moon and the stars that went with it. Every morning I woke up giving thanks to the heavens for bringing this man into my life particularly when I was in the hospital.

We had it so good and it got better every day... no, every minute.

The best part was just at the beginning of this year; we finally decided to get pregnant. We'd held off a few years so I could finish school and establish my career. While I was adamantly opposed to medical school, which had been my original intention to follow in my dad's footsteps, I couldn't deny that I was damn good at math and science. I didn't want to be a doctor, but I did love the thrill of research. It took me one semester to finish my undergrad and another two years to get my master's in biology. It was more than I could have dreamed of to make my parents proud.

Life was settled and our next big adventure was a baby.

Christ, we already fucked like rabbits and I didn't think we had any room in our lives for sex, but Van proved me wrong. He was always pouncing on me and when he'd come deep inside me, he'd groan, "That's my baby. Take it all from me. Let's see what we can make."

My thighs press together because that memory leaves an ache not just at the center of my chest. My eyes flutter open. I miss my husband and it only seems like he's been gone a few days. Pain lances my heart as I know he left with no intention of returning. Our last argument made it clear that my husband was broken and didn't want to be put back together.

When Arco's biography came out two weeks ago, Van spiraled into filter. He went from horror at the revelations to anger to melancholy. I tried everything I could to reassure him, but he didn't want to hear any of it. He was standoffish, mean and insulting. I've seen that side of him before, so it didn't shock me. Hell, that defined his core personality when I first met him, but I was driven by the hope that I would break past those walls. He retracts when he's scared.

I did it once before and I could do it again. I had faith and hope and a mouth, relentless when I want something.

Then came the day that changed everything.

"I don't want kids," he said in the middle of an argument, and it knocked the breath out of me. Not that we'd been having sex since the book came out after I'd read it. That essentially killed our libidos and Van was sleeping in the guest room. I laughed, "You can't mean that," I gasped.

"I've never been more serious about anything." His glare locked onto me. I was resolute and I heard the certainty in his voice.

"But... why?" My head was spinning. I couldn't fathom how all the joy in creating a new life could be doused so quickly.

When he responded, it chilled my bone marrow. His tone was meant to establish dominance. "Little Arco. Killer. Rapist. Freak."

"What?" I whispered, not understanding.

"That's what they called me," he sneered. "That's what little Arco is, but I know when they want to be mean. That book will ensure our kids hear the degradation. They're going to be called names and vilified all because their parents happened to be spawned by a sociopath."

"No." I shook my head adamantly. "You're wrong."

"I'm right and you know it," he said quietly.

I railed against him, using logic, pleas, tears and flat-out tantrums. I always tried to see he was wrong. None of it worked and finally, I capitulated. That's what I did, I abandoned my hope of having a family with Van. I decided it was good enough for me that I have him.

I found him on the back deck after work one day. He was drinking and he was staring sullenly at the woods. I moved to him, draped myself over him and he died a little inside that he wouldn't embrace me.

I put my palms to his face. "I don't need children, Van. I only need you." I was shocked to see the look of horror on his face and he pushed

rapidly of the chair, nearly dumping me to the ground. I scrambled from his
I tried he stormed into the house. I followed, incredibly pissed.

it from “What the fuck, Van?” I yelled at him.

of Van He rounded on me, pointing an accusing finger. “You’re not doing
hen weme or yourself.”

valls he I threw my hands out in exasperation. “Doing what?”

nd I’m it.”
“Denying yourself something you want or making me feel guilty

“I want you!” I yelled at him. “Despite the fact you’re being a
idiot, I want you. I’ll give up kids for you. We’ll be fine.”

nocked “You don’t fucking get it, Simone,” he bellowed, stomping over
me out. kitchen table. He picked up a copy of the hardback biography. I fo

om. bought the damn thing so I could read it and let him know it wasn’t th
He held it up, shook it and snarled. “This changes everything.”

on me “It doesn’t,” I yelled back. “Nothing in that book touches you, Van

The pain in his face shredded me, but then I was terrified as he ro
of our me. “It doesn’t just touch me, Simone. It suffocates. It kills. It annihila

Then he whipped the book across the living room, into the kitchen
ocking. it crashed into a shelf of collectible mugs. They exploded, shards of

spraying everywhere. It was the only time Van had exhibited a
tendency in my presence and it scared me. I took a few wary steps bac

kids do He noticed it, too, and pounced on the meaning behind it. “Se
e same. growled low. “You think you know me, but maybe I’m just like Arco.

father I like hurting things.”

It took me about half a nanosecond to understand what he was do
was trying to force me to abandon him and I wasn’t going to do it. I

once before and it didn’t work. “You’re being ridiculous,” I said, cross
s to get arms over my chest. “Break all the damn pottery, for all I care. I’m not

ted and up on you. On us. We don’t have to have kids.”

ould be Van sighed, raking his hand through his hair. He’d let it grow
longer since leaving the league and I loved it. “You might not be gi

g a beer on us, but I am.”

his lap “The hell you are,” I screeched. “You don’t get to quit me. You kn
a stubborn bitch, Van, and I’m never giving up on you.”

l you.” Something changed in him... that very second, I saw it. I’m not s
l up out was the sputtering of the flames in his eyes or the way his shoulders

slap and slightly, but it scared me. “The past three years have been a farce, and I’m still the same asshole you met on my front porch three years ago, blinded to the truth because you dazzled me so much.” Van stepped in; that to his expression so serious, my stomach flipped end over end. His gaze my face and when it came back to lock with mine, he shook his head. “You’ve lost your shine and I can see that very clearly now.”

about The tears came immediately, blurring Van’s body. There were no he could’ve said that would’ve hurt me more. It was a slap to a beautiful fucking of our history together.

After the first time we had sex, he tried to rebuff me and I knew it to be because he was scared to develop a connection. He was such a dick and polished to scare me off by showing me just how mean he could be. “Now that that bad, wearing my sweat on your skin, you’ve sort of lost your shine. Time to go on.”

That didn’t hurt me then and the memory of it doesn’t hurt me now. I stared at But what tore my soul from my body when he said those words just then. “It was because we had made a joke of it.

, where Me being shiny to him.

pottery I often asked, “Am I still shiny?” and he’d always tell me I was the shiniest.

He’d often tell me that would never change. It was a promise of forever?” he I cried freely, for once not hiding my sadness from my husband. The Maybeth layer of tears, I watched as Van walked away.

Right out the front door and I heard his truck rumble out of the driveway. He He never came back.

He tried Well... at least not when I was home. I went to work the next day, trying my able to concentrate on my projects. I pretty much spent the entire time just giving head, figuring out how to make my husband see reason. By the time I had resolved that this was going to be a long-haul battle and I would win a little deep. Van was not getting away from me.

ving up Except when I got home, he shattered all of that. His drawers and closets were empty and there was a note on the kitchen table, short and to the point.

ow I’m

Simone,

ure if it *I’m signing a contract with the Pittsburgh Titans. I’m going to find an attorney there that can help process a divorce. I’m sorry.*

sagged

Simone.

And that was it. The fucker didn't even bother to sign his name beyond enraged when I realized he'd been planning this for a while. No way he just picked up the phone yesterday and found a way back into the league. His agent had to have been working on it since the book came out.

That evil asshole Arco VanBuskirk sold his life story to some digging biographer and that book ruined my entire life.

It was a week ago that Van left and I haven't heard anything from him.

I claw out of the bad memories, pushing myself up from my chair. It is probably right. I shouldn't chase a man who doesn't want me anymore. Honestly, I'm exhausted to the bone. My husband abandoned me because he couldn't handle the hard truth of his life. It's grounds enough for divorce, legally and emotionally.

My phone buzzes, short bursts of static sounds indicating a bar of incoming texts.

Proving that I'm still a sucker, I lunge for it, thinking it could be Van. It's not.

Malik has now added Lucas and Max to the conversation. All three of them are hammering at me.

Malik: If you won't listen to me, maybe you'll listen to collective reasoning.

Max: Baby sis... you got to let him go.

Lucas: Simone's never made the best decisions, as evidenced by the fact she got caught with him in the first place. I say we kill the motherfucker and end it now.

Malik: You know I can make that happen with the snap of my fingers.

Max: Lay off, guys... Simone's a smart woman. She'll do the right thing.

I toss my phone and ignore their conversation. They've always been overprotective bullies when it comes to me, and if it makes them feel better to flex their brother muscles, so be it.

Sauntering into the bathroom, I transfer my toiletries to my travel kit. Nothing my brothers have said has changed my mind.

And it doesn't matter that Van deserted me and is apparently going to hire a lawyer to file divorce papers.

I'm never fucking giving up.

Besides... my eyes drift over to the rectangular piece of plastic sitting on the vanity next to my toothbrush holder. It's been there for two days. There's been a plus sign on it for the last two days. It has become my main driving force. I pick it up, examining the bold plus sign in the window. "Joke's on him," I mutter and toss the positive pregnancy test into the gold-travel bag. So much for Van deciding he doesn't want children.

him.

Malik
ore, and
ause he
ce both

rage of

an.

hree of

ht up

7s been
etter to

el case.

etting a

Besides... my eyes drift over to the rectangular piece of plastic sitting on the vanity next to my toothbrush holder. It's been there for two days and it has become my main driving force.

I pick it up, examining the bold plus sign in the window.

"Joke's on him," I mutter and toss the positive pregnancy test in my travel bag. So much for Van deciding he doesn't want children.

CHAPTER 3

Van

AS I DRIVE home from the arena, I take stock of my emotions. I thought I'd feel different following my first game back. I skated on the line against the Columbus Hawks and had a decent game, considering I'd been out of professional play for three years. My conditioning held, and fueled by adrenaline, I wasn't as rusty as I thought I'd be. The victory was fucking good.

It's just... once I walked out of the locker room and left that all the emptiness returned. Of course, I also felt empty walking into the arena and it doesn't take a genius to figure out I'm mourning the loss of Simone and the game only took my mind off things temporarily. Granted, I'm Simone's mother who cut her loose, but it doesn't mean it's not without effect.

I declined invites to join the team over at their postgame hangout called Mario's. Despite assurances and support from the owner, the management, coaches and players, I'm too on edge over Arco's book to let myself up to anyone. I dread the inevitable questions and the risk of re-creating chasing me into a bar is too real. I don't want to fucking deal with that besides, I've never been a big people person, anyway.

At least not before Simone came into my life and now that she's gone, I took no time at all for me to regress to my surly, walled-off self preservation and being alone—this is where I feel safest.

Fucking Arco.

I've never felt actual hate toward a single person, but I feel it throughout me every time I think about him. If he weren't dead already, I could get away with it, I'd murder him in cold blood without a single thought to my conscience. He was pure evil, a sociopath who thrived on not only killing but on torturing his son after it was all said and done.

I visited Arco three years ago—ironically after Simone and I had become intimate for the first time. He had lung cancer and was dying. I was a

for punishment, so I went to see him. Not because I loved him or because I needed to make my peace with all the heinous things he'd done.

I needed to know if I was anything like him. Three days after I was convicted and sent to prison, my mother killed herself. She couldn't face the truth and took a handful of pills, knowing I'd be the one to find her. It was my aunt, Etta Turner, who whisked me away to California, changed my name from Grant VanBuskirk to Van Turner, and helped me start my career. Truly, I grew up away from the spotlight, hidden behind a new name and a new life. But I never forgot my dad or the horrific things he did to women. I knew all the gory details since my mom forced me to sit through his trial at the tender age of eight. I never stopped wondering if I was anything like him since his DNA gave me his physical features. We looked alike and I was terrified my insides matched his.

That visit confirmed we were nothing alike. He was a self-centered narcissist who tried to torture me emotionally during that very short visit. Simone left with all my questions answered and wiped my hands clean of him.

Of course, Arco wasn't done with me. He spilled my true identity to the world as an independent reporter who wrote a hack piece opining that I was probably as crazy as my sire. It nearly destroyed me that my shameful secret was revealed to the world and I almost lost Simone because I reacted badly to it. I tried to push her away and crawl back into my fortress of solitude. Luckily, I realized my mistake and rectified it.

Fortunately, Simone is a forgiving woman who loves me to the depths of her soul.

Sucks that it's not enough this time, because when that tell-all biography came out, it sealed my future. While I could reason with myself that Arco dead all the sordid details of what he did and the interest in it would fade away, the fact that the biography hit the *New York Times* bestseller list ensured it would never go to the grave. I was always going to have to live with it and if it was just me, fine... I'd deal.

But now it was going to follow Simone and haunt our children. The thought of my kids suffering the same abuse and bullying I did since being related to Arco was untenable. That book ensured I would never procreate and put anyone else in harm's way to suffer Arco's sins.

I'd probably stay immersed in these wretched loops of painful memories if not jolted by the car parallel parked in front of my house. Norma

and not drive right by, turn down the next street and loop into the back alley
one. My garage sits, but the green Vermont license plate catches my attention.
He was followed by the immediate recognition of Simone's BMW.

handle My head swivels to see her sitting on my front stoop, the porch
r body illuminating her clearly. She doesn't see me, head bowed over her cell
changed She has three pieces of luggage sitting beside her.

fresh. I "Fuck," I growl, slamming on the brakes and leaving rubber
v mom. asphalt.

. And I Her head pops up to lock eyes with me through the passenger window.
s entire There's no mistaking the stiffening of her shoulders or the wariness
nything expression. I'm sure she can see I'm pissed, but even as angry as I
t alike, followed me here, I can't say I'm surprised.

It was probably expected and I refuse to let myself admire her for
d, cruelty and sheer bullheadedness are two of the reasons I was so attracted
visit. I her when we first met.

Shifting into reverse, I whip into the spot right behind her and
y to a truck. I round the back end, cross over the sidewalk and come to stand
ably as base of the stairs.

revealed "What the hell are you doing here?" I snarl, hoping to scare her
tried to submission. "And how the hell did you even find me?"

quickly "Malik," she says. Of course it would be Malik. He works for a company
that can locate anyone in the world. Hell, they located him when he was
months of kidnapped in Syria and held prisoner in a hole in the middle of the desert
months.

ography "You need to go," I say, pointing back at her car.

at with "Nope."

t would "Goddamn it, Simone. You're not welcome here."

ller list "I'm married to you and any home you live in is considered
to deal property, so I'm allowed to be here as much as you are."

That's bullshit and she knows it.

en. The "And what are you hoping to accomplish?" I ask, throwing my arms
aply by in confusion. "Other than pissing me off."

I never "I like pissing you off," she says as she rises and dusts off the back of
jeans. "And I'm here to make you see reason. I'm getting you back."

emories I scrub my hands over my face, at a loss for what to do or say.

illy, I'd "If you wanted to play professional hockey again, why didn't you

“Where?” Simone asks softly, and I’m knocked off-kilter by that question first, would have supported you. I would have uprooted myself in a nanosecond to let you pursue that dream.”

“Christ, I know she would and it’s why I love her so much. But I was about to tell her that. “I didn’t tell you because coming back into the country was my escape plan. I didn’t want you to follow me.”

Hurt flashes in her beautiful hazel eyes. “That’s cruel.”

“I told you before that I wasn’t a nice man and that I was going to leave you one day.”

“I remember. And you did hurt me once and I forgave you for it. I am going to forgive you for this as well. Just out of curiosity, how long have you been planning this escape from me back into the league?”

“The day the book came out,” I admit truthfully. When a reporter contacted me to ask me about it, and I realized what was happening, I called my agent the very same day. I knew right then that I would never drag kids through my exit and I’d have to cut Simone loose so she could live her dreams.

Simone crosses her arms over her chest. “You should have just left me one day, then. It would’ve been a lot easier.”

“I know,” I mutter. “I’m kicking myself.”

“A lot easier on me, you asshole,” she barks, marching down the stairs. “I want to come toe to toe with me. She has to tip her head back to see my face. ‘You should’ve cared if it’s hard on you. In fact, I don’t believe it is hard on you. You should’ve seen to give two shits that you’re ending our marriage. You don’t care how much you’ve hurt me.”

My hand flies out so fast, she squeaks with fright. I grasp her around the back of her neck and pull her in closer. “Don’t ever say I don’t care about you. It’s because I care I’m doing this.”

That earns me a solid punch to my stomach and it hurts enough I can barely breathe. She steps in closer, pokes a finger in my chest. “You’re a morose coward. But that’s okay. You used to be that way once and I managed to get you around. I’ll do it again.”

“Jesus Christ, you’re fucking nuts, Simone,” I yell at her. “Why can’t you just accept this and be done with it?”

“Because I’m not a quitter,” she seethes. “I’m back in your life and I’m going to do whatever I can to get your head out of your ass.”

“F-u-u-u-c-k!” I bellow, clapping my hands on top of my head.

tion. “I pissed I think it might explode. I take in her resolute stare and cannot deal with her. I brush past her, jogging up the steps with my keys in hand.

She follows behind me and when we reach the top, I spin and I’m not hand out to stop her trajectory. It presses into her chest and I hold her by the length of her arm. “I don’t want you here.”

“Too bad. I’m your wife and you love me.”

“I don’t want you anymore.”

to hurt “Liar,” she retorts.

She’s infuriating and so fucking stubborn that I have to resort to force. “I don’t love you, Simone. Not enough to work this out.”

“Such a liar,” she says as she smacks my hand away and moves toward the door. “Get my bags, will you?”

“No way. You are not staying here. Go to Malik’s house.”

Challenge and a devious glint spark in her eye and my pulse skitters through my veins. Simone knows how to get her way. “What’s wrong, Van? Afraid your resolve might not be that strong? That you can’t stand up to me? Afraid your resolve might not be that strong? That you can’t stand up to me? I toppled you once and it wasn’t that hard.”

Okay, now that just affronts me on a competitive level. It’s true. Simone was like a dog with a bone when she came after me before, but she has no clue the level of sincerity or deep belief I have that I’m doing this. “I don’t want you here.”

I don’t take the bait. Instead, I say, “I’m giving you about thirty seconds to clear off my porch or I’m calling the police to say you’re trespassing.”

“You call the police and I’m calling every news agency in Pittsburgh and have them record the police removing me from my own home. I don’t care about them going to love hearing the entire story of how you’re abandoning your wife because of some stupid book.”

Rage flashes hot through me from my complete loss of control and I wouldn’t put it past Simone to do just such a thing.

My mind spins. The woman is absolutely too fucking tenacious. When she set her sights on me, she poked at me over and over again, impervious to my insults to get her to back away.

Simone knew no bounds and had no shame. She moved in with me without my invitation to the house I was sharing with her brother, Luca. She immediately decided she wanted me. Provocation was her game and I’m so used to stepping over boundaries whenever she felt like it.

ot even Once she came into my bedroom.
nd.
put my *“What the fuck are you doing in here?” I snarled.*
l her at *She pursed those utterly kissable lips. “Just trying to get to know
You make it kind of hard, you know.”*
 *“I don’t want to know you. I’m a temporary roommate to your brother.
You’re just a houseguest.”*
 *She pouted and I had a million dirty fantasies about that mouth
cruelty. that just hurts my feelings.”*
 “Apparently not enough to drive you out of my room, though,” I snarled.
s to the *“Come on, Van.” She tried for a begging tone, but I could tell
woman begged for nothing. “Give me a shot. I make a fun friend,
you’re interested in a benefits package with that friendship, I’m
dynamite in the sack.”*
ers with *I was stunned stupid. “You did not just say that to me.”*
fraid of *She batted her eyelashes. “Why not? It’s the twenty-first century.
fold up it or not, women have a firm grip on their sexuality. Some of us even
ue that don’t get too bent out of shape about this—actually like to have sex.”*
but she *I felt like I was in a bad dream, unable to come up with a good comeback
he right and on top of that, my dick twitched.*
 *“I really, really like to have sex,” she added. “And you look like you
seconds fantastic at it. I mean... I’m fantastic. I’m also quite bendy in bed
3.” flexibility is—”*
urgh to *My dick more than twitched, it started to swell and I bolted from
m sure room. Six foot six of solid muscle and meanness out on the ice and
ling me running from her.*

ontrol. I The more Simone rattled me, the harder she came at me. The harder
 I came at me, the easier I wore down until she provoked me into action.
 me to acknowledge the boiling lust for her and I took what she offered
. When That changed the entire trajectory of my life. Led me to my greatest
rious to And now, my greatest loss.
 I cannot go back there again. It was too hard walking away from
hout an week.
is, and But it’s suddenly clear to me what I need to do. Telling her to leave
nd she spewing lies that I don’t love her will not do the trick. They’ll just m

double down.

No... I need to do something different. Something that will frustrate to no end and will have her running sooner rather than later.

Now you. I'm going to ignore her.

brother. Turning my back, I unlock the door and enter my house. She scans after me, assuredly afraid I'll try to lock her out.

Now I don't. Merely toss my keys on the small table by the door and the alarm at the wall panel. I unbutton my suit jacket. I hadn't bothered with an overcoat because the short walk through the players' lot in the garage didn't warrant it.

ell that "What are you doing?" she asks hesitantly, but I don't look back at her. "Going to bed," I reply as I move through the living room.

and if "Aren't you going to help me with my bags?"

and if "Nope." I stop at the edge of the hallway that leads to the firemaster. I jerk my head to the staircase. "There's a guest room up there.

Believe "You want me to sleep in the guest room?"

n—and "I don't give a fuck what you do, Simone. But there are a few rules to stay here."

neback, "What's that?" she snaps, irritation written all over her beautiful face. "Don't come near me. Don't talk to me."

ou'd be She scoffs because I can already tell she's deviously brainstorming around that. "Is that all?"

om my "You're a roommate. Nothing more. I expect you to have a care for my house and my personal property inside of it. As such, don't you dare enter without locking it tight and entering the alarm code."

I I was "Fine. Give me a key and the code."

der she I shake my head, leveling her with a viciously triumphant smile. "Forced that's not happening."

Forced "Then how do you expect me to come and go?" she asks.

it love. "Not my problem. Preferably, you would just go, but if you're going to pursue this stupid idea of brow-beating me into getting back with you, you'll have to stick around. I plan on being out of this house as much as possible and you'll just have to stay behind to make sure it's safe."

her last "I won't be kept prisoner," she says with confidence.

ave and "You won't risk someone stealing things that are important to me. I won't risk someone stealing your stuff. So I'm guessing you'll stay put."

ake her "You won't risk someone stealing things that are important to me. I won't risk someone stealing your stuff. So I'm guessing you'll stay put."

She rolls her eyes. “You know this is so childish.”
I lift a shoulder. “Just establishing clear lines. Stay on your side, ok
I can see she’s flummoxed and a thrill sweeps through me that I h
upper hand. She chews on her bottom lip, her gaze darting around, tr
ables infigure out how to get back on top. I’ll let her stew on it in private.

Smiling to myself, I head into the master bedroom and lock th
disablebehind me.

ed with
e arena

: her.

st-floor
.”

s if you

ce.

ig ways

for this
leave it

“Yeah,

oing to
I don’t
ossible

ie. You
t.”

She rolls her eyes. “You know this is so childish.”

I lift a shoulder. “Just establishing clear lines. Stay on your side, okay?”

I can see she’s flummoxed and a thrill sweeps through me that I have the upper hand. She chews on her bottom lip, her gaze darting around, trying to figure out how to get back on top. I’ll let her stew on it in private.

Smiling to myself, I head into the master bedroom and lock the door behind me.

CHAPTER 4

Simone

“THIS IS COMPLETELY stupid, Simone.”

I glance from the kitchen table over to the front door where Malik is installing a new alarm panel. My attention slides back to Anna sitting across from me and she grins in amusement. He’s been grumbling since he got here over an hour ago to change the locks and alarm panel.

Malik isn’t happy I’m not staying with him and Anna. Of course, I’m not happy I’m pursuing my husband, but he’s never going to deny me the right to pursue my dreams.

And Van is my dream.

“You know he can just get these changed again,” Malik says as he looks over a laptop resting on the arm of the couch.

“He won’t,” I say with the utmost confidence. I know Van well. I can piss him off, frustrate him to no end, but he won’t bother changing his mind. He knows I’ll just change it back again and he doesn’t have the energy to battle me on this.

Part of me feels guilty as I’m not doing this to make him mad or poke him into dealing with me. I simply can’t be constrained to the point where I need to be able to run errands, see my brother and go to a Titans game for my husband. I can’t be a prisoner.

Anna shakes her head as her fingers play with the rim of her coffee cup. “I still don’t understand how it came to this.”

I love my sister-in-law very much, just as I love Malik. But as much as I love them, I love Van more and I’ll never divulge his secrets. His terrible shame stemming from Arco’s biography is private. It’s not something I was asked me to keep to myself, but it is the deepest, most intimate secret of himself he’s shared with me. While most of this has come in the form of arguments, it’s still protected information.

I can only give them a vague idea, so I choose my words carefully.

struggles with the stigma attached to his dad. He's afraid repercussions."

"He needs to man the fuck up," Malik mutters.

My head whips his way and I glare at my brother, completely de-my husband. "Not repercussions to himself, you dumbass. To me."

And to our unborn children, but that isn't something I'm going to either. We didn't tell anyone we were trying to get pregnant. We didn't the pressure of others impatiently waiting for it to happen.

Malik is "But surely he knows you don't care about that," Anna says, drawing attention back to her.

got here "He knows," I reply, picking up my cup to take a sip. "But *he* cares that's all that matters to him."

ie's not "He pulled this shit with you three years ago when that first article chance out," Malik says, turning toward the panel where he pushes some

"And you didn't stick around to put up with it. You left and he's groveling after you. I don't understand why you're the one chasing when he bends being the same dick."

Because it's different. Because babies are involved, or at least the babies, and Van can't see past the horror.

his will "It's not your place to judge his feelings," I tell my brother, and I it back. "It's not your place to judge how I'm handling this." shoulders sag a little.

time of He glances back at me. "I'm not. I just love you and don't want you even to again."

ouse. I "I'm already hurt," I admit candidly. Malik curses under his breath. to root "I'm going to let Van fix it. Now, let's talk about something else."

God, please let this be fixed.

ee cup. Malik nods and goes back to work. Anna taps the table to draw attention. "Your brother and I are embarking on a new adventure."

ich as I "Oh, really," I say, propping my chin in my palm. "Tell me all."

ror and "We're trying to get pregnant," she squeaks with excitement.

ng he's I manage a brilliant smile as I force back the overwhelming sadness part of used to be just as excited at the prospect of getting pregnant. Only form of weeks ago, I would've been screaming it at the top of my lungs, but it's my secret to bear until I can knock some sense into my husband.

y. "Van "Yay!" I yell and reach for her hand. "I'm going to be an auntie again." Anna already has a daughter named Avery from a former marriage.

of the husband Jimmy died while on a mission with Malik. Anna went through birth alone, and Malik was captured and held prisoner for months. When he returned, somewhat a shell of the man he once was, it was Anna who brought him back to life. They fell in love and got married. Just last month they formally adopted Avery, but they decided to leave her last name as Fournier rather than change it to Fournier, to honor her father.

I sit back and listen to Anna gush about their decision while she finishes up at the alarm panel. When he comes to the table, he bends over and kisses the top of her head. My heart squeezes because when he has touched me a million different ways, one of my favorites was his soft and gentle touch in passing.

Malik goes to the fridge and pulls out a beer. Holding it up, he says, "I can't believe I came to Van's good for something."

I don't bother chastising him. He's never going to not be mad at Van. I can only hope that when I repair my marriage, my brothers will forgive me.

When he plops down in the chair next to me, he asks, "What the hell are you doing about your job? Did they give you an extended vacation or something?"

I shake my head. "I'll work remotely."

"You can do that?" Anna asks.

"For a while. I'll be working on mostly data analysis and reports based on studies carried out by on-site teams."

"And what's the current project, Miss Smartest Fournier Sibling?" he asks.

I snicker because my brothers may not have gone to college but they are all as bright as I am. "We're assessing the impact of acid rain in the New England forest ecosystems."

Malik cocks a brow. "There's acid rain in New England?"

I pat him on the arm. "Hate to tell you, big bro, but there's acid rain around any areas that have sulfur- and nitrogen-emitting industries."

"Like the type that will melt your skin?"

Laughing, I shake my head. "You watch too many sci-fi movies. Now it's rain is far too weak to burn skin, but it is hell on the ecosystem."

"And that's why you're the brainiac in the family," he says, raising his beer in silent toast. His smile slides, though. "But seriously... come stay with me and Anna. I'm totally fine if you want to try to work things out with

ugh thatbut I know this is hard. You should be around people who love you.”
 /hen he “I am,” I reply simply. “Van hasn’t stopped loving me. In fact, he
 broughtthat this is the right thing to do because he loves me.”
 , Malik “Fucking moron,” Malik mutters.
 as Tate Not going to disagree with him there. “I know what I’m doir
 support me while I do this, okay?”
 : Malik “Fine,” he says, holding up a hand in capitulation. “But promise y
 ds overspend time with us.”
 ile Van “That is a promise I can absolutely make.”
 s just a “And when Lucas and Max come week after next, we’ll figure a v
 can all get together.”
 ys, “At That would be awesome. I don’t know how their schedule will pa
 they’re doing an overnight or an out-and-back when they come to p
 /an andTitans, but at the very least, we’ll manage to hang for a bit. At least tha
 ve him.me something to look forward to.
 hell are
 tion or



I’M SITTING AT the kitchen table, working on my laptop, when I hear V
 his key into the door. I stand up and walk that way because his key nc
 writing works. He was gone when I woke up this morning, and it’s nearly ni
 He said he was going to be gone as much as possible to avoid m
 , Malik should feel guilty about it, but I don’t. I don’t intend to make this comi
 for him.
 hey are The knob jiggles and then he bangs on the door.
 re New I open it and step back.
 “Why the hell doesn’t my key work?” he fumes, but I can see by t
 on his face, he knows.
 cid rain I nod to the small table to the new spare sitting there. “There’s y
 and the new alarm code is 5683. It spells LOVE, in case you forget.”
 Van curses but I turn away and walk into the kitchen. I don’t look
 Jo, acid him but I can hear his keys jangling, so I know he’s switching out the
 the new.
 ing his “Did you eat dinner?” I ask pleasantly. “I made salad and baked c
 ay with It’s in the fridge.”
 th Van, Van doesn’t look at me or answer my question. I log out of the Da

portal after saving my work and shut my laptop.

He thinks Opening the fridge, he pulls out a beer, twists off the cap and thro
the sink, done specifically to annoy me, I'm sure. He takes three lo
from the brew and then rummages through a cabinet, pulling out a
ig. Justsoup. I watch as he pulls the top off the can and eats it cold with a spo
Ignoring me.

you will Refusing to eat perfectly good food I prepared.

"I'm done with my work," I say, an innocuous attempt at conve
"My boss is going to let me project manage remotely until we can fig
way wehow to fix things."

Van doesn't even flinch, concentrating on his icy chicken noodl
n out ifleaning against the counter. He stares blankly ahead.

I wonder what he'd do if I just blurted out to him that I'm pregna
at givesto get a reaction from him because this patent ignoring me is grating
nerves. I don't do it, though, because I am never going to use this l
leverage. I don't want him beholden to me in any way. I'd rather be a
mom than force him into a lifelong commitment with me that he
want.

Van slips Van tosses the empty soup can in the garbage, the spoon in t
no longer without even rinsing it, and I have to restrain myself not to get up an
ne p.m. He walks back into the living room and settles in the middle of the
e and I resting the beer on the coffee table. Grabbing the remote control, he t
comfortable the TV and flips through the channels.

I grit my teeth when I see him land on a reality TV show about
mechanic brothers who refurbish old cars. They're obnoxious loud
who make crude jokes and belittle people. Van watches it for the car
he look want to scratch my eyes out and pour acid in my ears when it's on
home, he'd only ever watch it if I was busy doing something else. He
our key laugh at me—my hatred of the show—but he never subjected me to
like I never subjected him to my obsession with *The Bachelor*.

back at His intention to drive me away made clear, I push up out of the ch
old for walk through the living room. I cross right in front of the TV and wat
carefully. He doesn't let his attention focus on me at all.

hicken. He thinks by ignoring me, I'll go away. He thinks by failing to
with me, I'll leave him alone.

mouth Yeah... he's wrong about that.

I walk up the stairs with purpose. I slept in one of the guest rooms last night. It had no linens on the bed, so I made do with a blanket I found in the pullout of the closets. But if I'm in that room, I can't be near Van, so things will have to change.

on.

rsation.

figure out

e while

nt. Just

, on my

baby as

a single

doesn't

he sink

d do it.

couch,

urns on

it three

mouths

s, but I

1. Back

e would

it. Just

hair and

touch him

engage

I walk up the stairs with purpose. I slept in one of the guest rooms last night. It had no linens on the bed, so I made do with a blanket I found in one of the closets. But if I'm in that room, I can't be near Van, so things will need to change.

CHAPTER 5

Van

I WATCH SIMONE as she heads up the stairs and fucking everything on my mind clenches tight. My fists because I'm angry, my body because watching her ass sway as she takes the steps is killing me and my heart because everything is all fucked up.

This was supposed to be a clean break and she's making a mess of everything.

Rationally, I understand my wife doesn't want our marriage to end but I can't believe her without reservation when she says she can handle the fallout from Arco's book. But I can't go through watching her potential children suffer. I'm protecting her the best way I can and that means breaking away from her life so she can go on to find someone to love her never as much as I do—but who can give her a beautiful life with beautiful kids who will never have a moment of this ugliness in their lives.

Leaning forward, I pick up my beer and bring it to my mouth but it freezes halfway as I hear Simone coming down the stairs. I settle back on the couch, rest the bottle on my thigh and laser my attention to my shoes.

She moves in front of the TV and once she's passed, I permit myself to look at her.

Jesus fucking Christ!

I have to suppress a groan and order my dick to behave. Simone is wearing next to nothing—just a tight white tank top with spaghetti straps and a pair of white bikini panties. Her ass is slamming, her tits full and pushing through the fabric. I wonder if the little minx played with her tits upstairs to get them hard to grab my attention. There's no doubt in my mind this little display of near-nakedness is part of the war she's waging.

If it was just her wearing skimpy clothes I could probably deal with it but I'm confused by the fact she's carrying a blanket, a pillow and a small table so I continue to watch.

Rounding the coffee table, she moves to the end of the couch and the pillow and blanket there before resting the tote on the floor.

I hate to break my self-imposed silence but I can't help but ask, are you doing?"

Her gaze lifts. "I'm going to sleep on the couch tonight."

"Why?"

She proceeds to fluff the pillow and spread the blanket. I slide to my body end of the couch away from her. My move amuses her as evidenced by her husky laugh. "I'm going to recreate how it was when we first met. You're trying to ignore me and I was sleeping on the couch."

Simone flips the blanket back and slides onto the cushion. She presses her legs and I scramble off before her feet touch me.

"So jumpy," she coos and makes no effort to cover herself with a blanket. Smooth-as-silk legs with red painted toenails and my heart thumps hard. I hate being attracted to her so much.

I settle into a corner chair, refusing to be forced out of the room. I don't want to sit here, watch my crappy TV show she hates and completely ignore me. I know she can see she has no effect. Although, admittedly, the way I jumped from her was a point in her favor.

I sip my beer, settle the bottle back on my leg and try to focus on the television, but it's no use. But from the corner of my eye, I see Simone lean over to rummage through the tote she brought down. I cut a glance at her to see she's pulled out a bottle of lotion, and not just any lotion. A special brand that I buy her that she likes like cherry blossoms.

Putting my focus back on the television, I hear the click of the television opening and I can see her moving, rubbing lotion on her legs and arranging her hair. Simone's sweet scent reaches my nose and fuck if that doesn't make my dick hard and my nipples notice.

She's a witch and she knows all the subtle ways to seduce.

"Can I ask you a question?" she asks.

I refuse to look at her. Refuse to answer.

Simone sighs. "I just want to know if you'd have sex with me tonight."

There's no stopping my head from turning her way. "What?"

"Sex. I want to have sex with you. I miss having sex with you. Do you?"

Yes!

I tosses “No.” My head swings back to the TV, but it’s not enough to ju
her. I need to start breaking down this eternal optimism she has
“What“Besides, I told you before... you lost your shine.”

“No would have sufficed,” she pouts. “You don’t have to be a jerk.

“Apparently, I do,” I mutter before taking a long pull on my beer.

She doesn’t reply, doesn’t move. Several minutes go by before :
the farout another sigh and then reaches over to her tote. I refuse to peek b
by herthe periphery, I can see she grabbed something from the bag and she
ou triedback onto the couch.

A buzzing sound fills the air and it forces me to look at her, my c
extendsjust too fucking sensitive.

My jaw drops when I see she’s got a vibrator in her hand. Purple
with thesix inches in length and a fairly thick girth. I know it well because I b
fuckingfor her probably a year ago and I use it on her from time to time. She r
tip of it casually along the top of her thigh, then back down again, h
I intendpinned to it.

e her so “You know,” she says softly, her gaze lifting to meet mine—assu
d awaybe watching. “I’d really love to crawl on my hands and knees to you.

to take you in my mouth. I’d make you see stars, baby.” The fingers
the TV.free hand curl into the chair’s upholstery. “But I know you don’t w
throughlike that since I’m not shiny anymore.” Simone changes the trajectory
a bottlevibrator and it slides along the inside of her leg where she rubs it al
: smellspanty line. “Guess I’ll just have to take care of myself.”

My cock swells to aching proportions and I cannot stop watching h
e bottlelets her legs fall open, uses her delicate fingers to pull her panties to t
ns. Theso she can—

ck take I lunge out of the chair, spilling my bottle of beer and cracking n
on the coffee table. I abandon the beer and try not to hobble thro
living room and down the hall to the master bedroom.

I slam the door behind me, locking it for good measure because
can’t be trusted. I pace with agitation. Christ, she knows how to rile
ght.” and there is nothing in this world I want more than to go back out th
her across my lap and blister her backside with my palm before fuck
So willhard. It’s what she wants me to do. It’s what she’s goading me to do.

I hear something and freeze.

Was that laughter? She’d have every right to be amused over m

st deny retreat and I'll let her have this joke because she played that perfectly. for us. I tip my head but I can't tell exactly what I'm hearing. Ever so ca to not make any noise and with much thanks that this house was r " renovated so there are no squeaky hinges, I unlock the door and ease just an inch.

she lets The soft sounds of weeping reach me and it feels like my chest ut from right down the middle. Out of all the fights we've had the last few e settles Simone has held a stiff upper lip. She only cried once and that was th left, although I suspect she might have done so in private. She's a uriosity woman and likes to be strong.

The desolation within her soft sobs makes me question what I e, about monster I am. Because no matter how much it kills me that I've hurt h ought it not changing my mind about anything.

uns the Quietly, I shut my door again and lock it.

er eyes Moving to the bed, I sit on the edge and open the drawer of the l table. I pull out the thick hardback book. The dust jacket is bright wh red I'll on the front is a black-and-white picture of my father. The publisher c I'd kill go with a candid taken during his trial. It was of him sitting at the defe on my table, leaning back in his chair to talk to me and my mother as we sa rant me front row. My stomach cramps seeing eight-year-old me sitting there y of the Sunday suit with my hair slicked down. I look terrified and out of pla ong her dad is smiling, holding hands with my mom, propped on the low w separates the front of the courtroom from where the public sits. He d er. She look like a man on trial for multiple rapes and murders but rather he side father and husband who has been separated from his family.

Nausea wells and bile surges up my throat as I read the title of th y knee "*Chip Off the Old Block.*"

ugh the I don't know how much input Arco had into this book. I only k sold his prison diaries to a biographer, but the title is a direct message

Simone When I visited my father in prison before he died, he knew exactly me up, was there and he played right into my fears. Arco sat across from me ere, put bulletproof glass separating us. We communicated through a phone ing her didn't lessen the crudity of his words.

"My jizz is what knocked up your bitch of a mother," he told me evil glint in his eye. "You got my fucking DNA, boy. You're my y hastymatter what some paper says. A regular chip off the old block."

It's what he used to say to me growing up. Arco wasn't a tenderly and carefully he didn't believe in hugs or cuddles. He was funny, gregarious and eventually loved him. But he never told me he loved me and he never hugged me. It opened because he had no conscience and no capacity to love.

He could only deceive.

cracks And murder and rape.
weeks, Arco used words carefully and when he called me a "chip off the old block," he did it with intent. When I was little, I only wanted his pride and I'd beam when he declared such. Now it makes me physically think of his DNA coursing through my body.

kind of I'm wondering why the biographer focused on that phrase. It was never, I'm in the diaries and perhaps my dad wrote about that last encounter between

Maybe he had a good laugh over how easy it was to terrify his grandson who was a big, tough hockey player.

bedside My fingers play at the edge of the book. I want to read it, but I've never quite been able to bring myself to do it. I know Simone bought a copy and she showed it to me.

andant's "It's nothing but drivel, Van," she had said with a wave of her hand. It in their was nothing more than a nuisance, like a gnat buzzing around her head. In my "The biographer didn't do much other than regurgitate Arco's words with a little literary prose and he comes off like the lunatic he was. None of it's credible. I didn't have the guts to ask her what it said about me and she doesn't offer. I think she figured I'd never read it and what I didn't know could have hurt me.

Taking a deep breath, I open the cover of the book and stare blankly at the title page. My hand shakes as I grab a chunk of pages and start flipping through them not with any real intention of reading anything. It's a victory just opening the book.

to me. But a phrase catches my attention as a chapter header whizzes by. I stop, flip back to the spot.

thick,
but it *Chapter 5: Unveiling Shadows*

with an I skim the first few paragraphs and realize it's about me. Or rather, reflections about his only son who was called Grant VanBuskirk at the time. I think I might vomit and my brain is telling me to slam the book.

can and think of the weeping woman on the other side of the door who doesn't know this is a big deal.

. That's That I can persevere.
I inhale deeply, blowing out slowly.
Try to calm the frantic racing of my pulse.
I focus on the words and start reading.

the old
e in me
sick to
clearly
een us.
wn son
haven't
he read
nd, like
r head.
with bad
dible."
e didn't
ouldn't
he inferring?
nkly at
lipping,
uing the
y and I
Arco's
time.
shut. I

Within the faded pages of Arco's diaries lay a chilling chronicle of observations on Grant, his son. The entries, devoid of warmth or remorse, offered a disconcerting glimpse into the mind of a convicted serial killer. Veiled within these revelations, the secrets of Grant's young existence came to light, raising unsettling questions about the twisted threads of their shared bloodline.

Through the prism of Arco's warped perspective, a peculiar essence emerged—the contours of Grant's character and a sincere desire that his son have the same unnatural detachment that made him a sociopath.

Arco found himself captivated by his son's unquenched curiosity, recognizing in it a familiar hunger for exploration. At a tender age of six, Grant's quest for knowledge surpassed most childhood inquisitiveness, evoking memories of his father's own sinister proclivities.

I try to suck in a breath, but there's no air in my lungs. What the hell am I

Among the haunting tales, one incident loomed over their shared history. Grant's encounter with a delicate bird's nest concealed within their backyard sent ripples of unease through the mind of the man who penned these unsettling memoirs. Instead of a passive appreciation of its fragile beauty, Arco writes how Grant succumbed to what he called a "predatory instinct." It welled Arco with pride when his son's innocent hands closed around the unborn lives within. For Arco, it was a chilling reflection, a confirmation of a dark legacy that had unknowingly bestowed upon his son.

From behind prison bars, Arco revealed in the twisted possibilities of his story the notion of Grant carrying forth his father's malevolence,

't think *mastering the art of manipulation, ignited a nefarious pride within him. His imagination wove intricate narratives within his diary where Grant's path intertwined with his own, both predator and prey mirroring each other's dark desires.*

In this enigmatic dance of nature and nurture, the omniscient observer glimpsed the blurred lines of Grant's fate. Would he succumb to the haunting allure of his lineage, embracing the legions of darkness that coursed through his veins? Or would he defy the shackles of his bloodline, forging a path untainted by the sins of his father?

the
Jesus!
Fuck!

liar
The book falls from my hands, thudding to the carpet. I lurch off and stagger into the bathroom. Falling to my knees, I barely get the cover opened before I vomit. The beer comes up mixed with the splashing in the toilet bowl. My stomach empty, I continue to wretch words I just read reverberate through me.

the
Panic starts to overwhelm me and it feels like a cinder block is chest. I try to drag in a deep lungful of air to break the claustrophobic anxiety, but I'm only able to pant through the terror of it all.

fuck is
I push away from the toilet bowl and sag against the shower. Something tickles my cheek and I reach up, realizing my face is wet with tears.

ired
That fucker lied. I had no such predatory instinct and I most certainly never tried to destroy those bird's eggs. I was so excited to find them she showed my mother. I wanted to touch one, but she wouldn't let me. All sitting on the patio, drinking a beer and watching us.

n of
And that was it.

he
That's all that happened, but he portrayed me as having the same desires he had.

his
He's a sociopath, I remind myself.

For
Rather, his official diagnosis was antisocial personality disorder.

he
Among its many characteristics are manipulation and lying for personal gain.

ies.
All of it is a big fucking lie and yet... it's been printed. It's in the

of

thin of thousands upon thousands of people. News channels are discus
ries reporters are calling me to get my side.

rey, Because they fucking want to believe that I crush eggs with bab
inside.

ient I rub my hands over my face and when I open my eyes, they lanc
he book lying just past the bathroom door on the carpet.

acy There's no way Simone read this book because if she'd read just t
the passage, she'd be running as far away from me as possible.

'his My resolve is renewed. Simone can't be a part of my life. She
deserve the fetid stink of Arco's legacy and all I can think is, *Thank j*
didn't get pregnant.

the bed
e toilet
e soup,
1 as the

on my
a of my

r door.
et with

ertainly
n and I
rco was

ne dark

ersonal

e hands

of thousands upon thousands of people. News channels are discussing it, reporters are calling me to get my side.

Because they fucking want to believe that I crush eggs with baby birds inside.

I rub my hands over my face and when I open my eyes, they land on the book lying just past the bathroom door on the carpet.

There's no way Simone read this book because if she'd read just that one passage, she'd be running as far away from me as possible.

My resolve is renewed. Simone can't be a part of my life. She doesn't deserve the fetid stink of Arco's legacy and all I can think is, *Thank fuck we didn't get pregnant.*

CHAPTER 6

Simone

THE ZOOM MEETING is wrapping up and I share my screen with the team. You'll look at the spreadsheet, I've broken down this week's collection prospects. Hardy's team will handle soil, water and foliar samples. Renshaw will do the insects and invertebrates."

"Bug dude," someone calls out, but I don't know who.

Several people laugh and Renshaw says, "Can't help it if you seem so are too weenie to catch and dissect the critters."

Ordinarily, I would laugh and give everyone else hell about nothing seems funny anymore. I plow right along. "Farber's team handles lichens and tree core samples. Any questions?"

Of course there are and I weed through them one by one. Ordinarily were back home, I'd be on one of the collection teams as we work on the rain forest project and then I'd have my face pressed to a microscope, which is my favorite part of what I do. But now I'm doing mostly project management and data analysis as I work from Pittsburgh.

"If you can have results to me in ten days, that would be good. Any questions?"

Blessedly, there aren't any and I sign off after goodbyes where I smile on my face. Once the camera's off, I rub my eyes. They're so gritty from a combination of crying and not sleeping well. I've been at Van's home going on my fifth day now and he hasn't spoken a word to me for four. Granted, he's been on a road trip to Los Angeles the last two days coming back tomorrow, but I don't know the details because he hasn't shared them with me. My texts go unanswered and the only way I knew he was traveling for games was to look up the actual team schedule online.

He's so fucking frustrating and I'm running out of ideas. All my attempts to provoke him go unanswered. He's mastered the ability to ignore and often staying away from the house until it's time to go to bed and

leaving first thing in the morning. I'm still sleeping on the couch, just to catch a glimpse of him. I cook every night but he refuses to eat my food.

I'm lonely and miserable and about to give up. Last night I went to Anna and Malik's house because the isolation is getting to me. I know I have to hear Malik's disgruntlement over my attempts to get Van around, but it was worth it to have some company.

"Jesus, you look like shit, Simone," he'd said when he opened the door this am. "If I could just before pulling me into him for a hug.

"Feel like it too," I admitted as I ran my fingers through my hair. I know my tangles and I wasn't even sure I'd brushed it after my shower that morning.

Anna was next to hug me as she held Avery on her hip, and then I pulled my niece away from her because kids always make me happy.

But it also made me sad, too, because I'm starting to understand that I probably isn't going to be a part of our baby's life. It's one of only a few things

that I worry about, but I have about being pregnant and the current state of disaster in our marriage. It's been weighing on me so heavily that I also broke down last night and told Anna.

It was a spur-of-the-moment decision and I probably wouldn't have made it if I had Van at least been engaging me somewhat. But I'm overwhelmed by my solitude and desperation, and I need someone to understand fully what's going on with me. While I love Malik to the moon and back, I need a woman on my side.

Malik had gone to put Avery down to sleep and I purged everything to Anna. Her eyes got wider and wider and nearly bugged out when I told her I was pregnant, but God, it felt good to let that secret out. We didn't have much time to talk about it because Malik would be returning shortly, so she hugged me hard and promised she had my back. I extracted a promise from her not to tell Malik and she had no qualms about it.

"Have you seen a doctor yet to find out how far along you are?" she asked, and I nearly burst into tears.

I admitted that I didn't want to go until Van could be by my side. But the likelihood of that happening is looking more remote by the day.

Sighing, I push the kitchen chair back from the table and rise. My back is killing me as I've been up working since six a.m., nearly three hours on a hard, wooden chair without a break.

I stare longingly at the coffee pot. I've had to cut that out since

so I can't I was pregnant and I miss caffeine like I'd miss air if I were underd. That's especially so since I'm functioning on only a few hours of sleep over tonight.

new I'd Maybe I'll go for a walk. It's nearly fifty degrees out today, which turned practically balmy coming from Vermont where it's a good fifteen degrees colder today. That should clear cobwebs from my head and the sunshine through the door does me good.

But honestly, the thought of changing out of my pajamas—long pants and a T-shirt since Van doesn't even look at me if I'm dressing in skimpy clothes—has me reconsidering. Maybe I'll try to take a shower before getting back to work, but I know as soon as I lie down and close my eyes, my brain will spin in constant rumination about my husband.

Indecisive, I stand in the kitchen, trying to decide what to do, but just as I would have it, someone knocks on the door, jolting me with surprise.

I look down at myself. I'm not even wearing a bra under the T-shirt I pulled on last night. Van's and swamps me. I'm wearing his clothes because that's the only way I can get to him and the smell brings me comfort.

Fuck it.

I pad through the living room, looking through the peephole before I knock on what's the door. I'm stunned when I take in the blond woman on the other side of the door. I jerk back in shock but surely I'm mistaken.

She knocks on the door again and I bring my eye to the peephole for confirmation.

Yup... that's who I think it is.

Unlocking the dead bolt, I pull open the door and the woman smiles at me but she's not who I thought. "Simone... hi... I'm Brienne Norcross."

She offers her hand and I take it without hesitation for a brief moment. "Um... hi."

"May I come in?"

I snap out of my daze and scramble back, sweeping my arm for her to enter. "Of course. Come in."

Brienne Norcross is about as close to American royalty as you can get. Back in the day, she was the CEO of Norcross Holdings, she is a multibillionaire and also the owner of the Pittsburgh Titans. I don't know exactly how old she is but I think she's in her thirties, and she's exquisite with her blond hair in a sophisticated style, her flawless complexion and a ruby stain on her lips to match her red power

erwater. As I close the door, she looks around at the interior of the house. ep eacheven know how Van came up with this place since he won't talk to

it's been renovated recently and it's quite beautiful. My gazes fall hich isblanket and pillow and Brienne sees it too.

degrees "Was watching TV last night on the couch," I explain as I move ine willthe blanket.

"I always fall asleep with the TV on," she says. "Guess it's the or ; fleeceto stop my brain from working. Drake hates it though so I have to v ssed inhim to fall asleep and then I can turn it on. I'm definitely the night ow ort naprelationship."

ose my I knew through the sporting news grapevine that Brienne was dat Titans' goalie, Drake McGinn, but I see her sporting a massive diam as fateher left finger, so I'm assuming they're engaged. I'm going to gues happened in the last few weeks as I haven't been watching much in t irt, butof news. I've been too focused on my marital troubles.

closest "Um... can I offer you some coffee?" I ask.

"That would be lovely," she says and follows me into the kitchen.

I close my laptop, push it to the side and nod at the table. "Please.. e I open Brienne is silent as I prepare her a cup of java and I'm relieved sh side. Iit black since there's no cream or sugar in the house. Van drinks his black and I can't have it, so there's been no need to have the ne role foraccompaniments. It's not like I'm doing any entertaining.

Sliding into the chair opposite Brienne, I can't help but ask, "W you here? I mean... you're clearly here to see me since Van's on a nils attrip, but how did you even know I was here?"

Brienne takes a delicate sip of the coffee and sets the cup down. shake.brother's worried about you. So he passed word on to Baden who cam me."

I was aware my brother knew Baden Oulett, the Titans' goalie r her toMalik's company, Jameson Force Security, has done a customized s system for the home he and his fiancée Sophie renovated.

get. As "And what exactly did my brother pass on to Baden, which got pa r of theto you?" I ask, not quite managing to keep a polite lilt in my voi k earlypissed at Malik.

d twist, "That you're here alone. That Van left you to join the Titans and er suit. you for a divorce." I wince at her blunt words. "You followed him

I don't make it work but he's making it difficult. That you're lonely." me, but "Jesus," I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose. I offer on my apologetic smile. "I am so sorry he laid that on your doorstep. He right and I'm perfectly fine."

to fold "You don't look fine," she says with brutal honesty. "You've got circles under your eyes, which are also red and puffy. I'm guessing you're not sleeping, or both."

wait for I don't bother denying what she can so obviously see. "I appreciate your concern but you've got far more important things to manage than checking on me."

ting the "I'm not here to check on you," Brienne says with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I'm here to help you."

s that's I blink at her in confusion. "Pardon?"

he way "You're part of the Titans family, Simone. You need friendship and you've got a whole slew of ladies waiting to bring you into the fold."

"I'm not really part of the family," I mutter, sinking a bit in my seat. "Van has asked for a divorce and I followed him here uninvited. He doesn't want me at the games."

ie takes "Fuck him," Brienne says, and I actually gasp. "Your brother passed on to me the reasons why Van left you and why you need a divorce. I also know that you think his reasons are bullshit and you're attempting to knock some sense into your husband. You are most certainly a part of this team and if Van doesn't like it, well then... I'm glad to get him away from his contract."

My jaw sags, my mouth hanging open. I can only stare at her, completely in awe and slightly terrified of the power she wields.

e to see "Please don't cut him from the team. This is the only joy he has now."

coach. "As long as he's not actively hurting you, which I will not abide, your security position is safe."

"He's not hurting me," I rush to assure her. I mean, he is, but it's not my intention. Still, I'm not going to jeopardize Van's career. "He's not ignoring me and my attempts to talk to him."

"At least you're here... in the house. That has to account for something," she says hopefully.

here to "I forced my way in and refused to leave. He pretty much stays in

only coming in late at night to sleep.”

her and Brienne’s eyes cut to the couch. “I’m assuming not in the same room as you had no you.”

“Sadly, no,” I grumble with frustration and I’m not sure why I’m not suddenly at ease, but it all comes gushing out. “I’ve tried to seduce him, cry, plead, avail which has always been the best way to get him to open up. I’ve

harassing him and poking him and in all ways tried to annoy him but the more you even anger is better than silence. I’m getting nothing. He’s so caught up in this biography that came out and his insistence that it will ruin our—”

not wanting to give away we were trying to have kids. “He’s afraid that the wave of stigma will be too much for me to bear.”

“Surely he’ll change his mind once it all settles down. This is just yesterday’s news before too long.”

and I’ve I snort with derision. “That stupid book keeps hitting the *New York Times* bestseller list. It’s not dying down.”

my chair. Brienne’s expression turns grim. “He is getting hit by reporters every day. He doesn’t seem to be holding up okay and the entire position is simply *no comment*, but I’m sure it’s frustrating for him.”

and on to I nod. “Yeah... I get it. I really do. I mean, I read the book. It’s awful. It says so many things are distorted or are flat-out lies. Van hasn’t read it yet, but you’re God, but he knows how vile his father was. I’m sure he’s imagined that he’d be right about it. Still... none of it matters to me. None of it matters to the fans. That was proven when he was first outed as Arco’s son years ago.”

completely “Why’s he so upset now?” Brienne asks.

I can’t tell her the real reason. That the stakes are higher with her as directly involved. Instead, I lift a shoulder. “I think this is worse. Before it was just an article, but now it’s an entire book built on Arco’s personal diaries. It’s when his back a lot of horrible memories for Van.”

Brienne drums her fingertips on the table, appraising me. “I’m sure you’ll come around.”

merely “I don’t think he will.” My voice cracks and I blink back tears that are threatening. I’m so fucking sick of crying. “I was actually thinking of heading back to Vermont.”

Blinking in surprise, Brienne leans forward. “You can’t give up on me... haven’t even been here a week.”

“No offense,” I say with resignation, “but I’m exhausted to the bone from trying. And besides that, it’s hard to get my husband back when I can’t get near him. He’s become a master at avoiding me.”

“Well then,” Brienne says, a sparkle of deviousness in her eyes, “I’m going to have to find a way to put you in his path, won’t we?”

I can’t help but frown. “What do you mean?”

“I mean... you’re coming to the games for starters. Special guests are invited. That means you’ll come to the after-parties.”

“Van won’t like that.”

“And as you will be my guest, I’m betting he won’t have anything to say about it.” Brienne chuckles. “Also, did you know we have a family lounge at the arena? You can hang out there all day on game days if you want.”

“He’s going to be so mad,” I muse, imagining Van’s expression if he were to walk into the lounge on game day and find me there.

“Isn’t that what you want? To provoke his emotion?” she inquires.

“Yeah... that’s exactly what I want. If I can at least have proximity to the team’s locker room, I can work my magic. I feel exhilarated all of a sudden, a well of energy surging within me. I’m back in the game and with Brienne at my back, I’m not going to be able to hide away from me completely.”

A genuine smile splits my face. “I don’t even know how to thank you.”

“Invite me to the renewal of your vows or something,” Brienne says with a laugh, pushing up out of her chair. “Now... go get a shower. Eat something. Maybe take a nap. But tomorrow night, be ready. I’m putting together a dinner to introduce you to some new friends that I think you desperately need. I’ll have my driver come by and pick you up at seven p.m.”

“But—”

“No *buts*, Simone.” She walks to the door and opens it. Turning to look at me, she repeats, “Be ready tomorrow night at seven. And then after, I’ll also have my driver pick you up for the game. That way you’ll be able to drink and have fun.”

“Um... I don’t drink,” I say. *Not with a baby on board.*

“No matter. You won’t have to worry about driving, then.”

“I don’t know about dinner tomorrow night,” I say fretfully. “I know Van will be coming back and I might get a chance to talk to him.”

Brienne’s mouth curves into a crafty smirk. “Or... he could find out where in the hell you are and it would eat him up.”

ie from Oh my God... she may be as devious as I am when it comes to v
i't even Van down. I grin at her. "Okay... I'm in for dinner and the game."

Then she's gone and I have to wonder if I imagined it all. But i
"we'll was indeed Brienne Norcross breathing new life into my campaign to
my husband.

And I'm here for it.

t in my

g to say
unge at

n if he

to him,
of hope
, Van's

ou."
ys with
ie food.
a girls'
erately

back to
ie night
ou can

nean...

wonder

Oh my God... she may be as devious as I am when it comes to wearing Van down. I grin at her. "Okay... I'm in for dinner and the game."

Then she's gone and I have to wonder if I imagined it all. But no, that was indeed Brienne Norcross breathing new life into my campaign to reclaim my husband.

And I'm here for it.

CHAPTER 7

Van

SKATING OFF THE ice for a line change, I drop onto the bench and grab a bottle of water from one of the trainers. I squirt it in my mouth and then hand it back over my shoulder.

I follow the action with Coen leading the first line. He executes a pass to Stone on the far side. Stone cradles the puck on his stick, constantly scanning the ice for a perfect opportunity. He spies Boone darting toward the net, creating a distraction for the Dragon defense.

Stone whips the puck toward the net and I hear the Los Angeles fans gasp at the speed with which it careens toward their goalie. Fate has a different plan for us as the Dragon goalie scoops it out of the air in an impressive display of athleticism that has the fans roaring with approval.

“Fuck,” I growl. That was a good fucking play, executed flawlessly. It should have to be denied by a remarkable save.

Such is the nature of the game.

And admittedly, something I’m enjoying. The intensity of competition in hockey has been a bit of a balm to my soul. It lets me evade the horrors of my past. When I feel the chill of the arena, the sound of blades cutting through the air transports me to an almost fantasy dimension where I can escape competition.

Coming back to pro hockey was the best decision I’ve made in my life.

A minute and a half later, I’m back on the ice with my third-line partner. This is only our fourth game together and we’ve had only two practices. But we’re meshing well. Our center, Anders Blom, is a young kid at only nineteen years old. He was drafted from the Swedish Hockey League. He’d been down in the minors when the plane crash happened and was pulled up to join the team. He needs some seasoning and according to our GM it’s one of the reasons they wanted me on the team.

Many came up from the minors and are young—at least by my standards.

at thirty-one.

Our left-winger, Evgeny Denisenko, is twenty-five but sometimes thirteen. I've quickly figured out he's the prankster on the team and always cutting up at practice. I don't say anything, though, because he's on the ice with me in the heat of battle, he's fucking solid.

Dillon Martelle is the third-line right-winger and he's closer to me than the others. At twenty-eight, he's married and has two kids. He's spent almost all of his career in the minors but is playing super competitively this season.

Lastly, Mason Lavoie is my defense partner. A hulking kid of nearly seven feet, he's only nineteen and one of the youngest on the team. He's whip-smart and fairly agile, despite his size. His biggest weakness I know so far is his uncertainty about when to act the enforcer. His blood doesn't boil the way mine does and I tend to push boundaries when out on the ice.

Callum specifically wants him to learn from me, so we've had a few talks.

With every stride, every check, every calculated move, I immerse myself in the rhythm of the game. The familiar sounds of skates carving on the ice, sticks clashing, and the thud of the puck hitting the boards are a symphony that guides me forward.

Yes, coming back to the league was the best thing for me. It's what I needed... to replace Simone. I immerse myself in the battle, letting my emotions ebb and flow as the momentum shifts back and forth between the Titans and the Dragons. We trade goals, both sides refusing to back down. The tension in the arena is palpable as the clock winds down to the final minutes of the game. Every shift counts—every play could be the difference.

In these crucial moments as the final seconds tick, I find solace in the camaraderie of my teammates. I'm the newest member of the Titans and over the last six days, I've had nothing but their unwavering support. They've accepted me into the brotherhood with open arms and I've done my best to give it back. When I was with the Cold Fury, always hiding in fear that my true identity would be revealed, I kept myself closed off from everyone.

I'm not doing that this time.

While I might not be a fuzzy teddy bear, I'm forcing myself to connect with the relationships. This is my new family now.

standards



OFTEN, AN EAST Coast team would finish a West Coast game and fly back west overnight across the country. Tonight we're staying in LA though since we have two days until our next home game and we had a late-night flight yesterday when the team is exhausted and the powers that be who created the schedule budgeted a night's stay so we could sleep in real beds rather than in airplane seats.

It's evident we're close to the playoffs as normally many of the players would hit the bars in a place such as Los Angeles, especially after an early sixtonight. But every single one of them head up to their rooms, although not. He's stopped in the lobby bar for a beer.

I was invited but declined, wanting to give Etta a call before it gets too late. She's in Redding and on West Coast time. She would have been in the ice tonight's game except for a broken ankle that has her laid up.

Once in my room, I shed my suit, making sure to hang it up. Clad only in my briefs, I settle onto the bed with all the pillows propped behind me. I dial Etta and she answers on the first ring. "Oh, Van... you played so good tonight. I was cheering you on so hard. Could you hear me?"

Laughing, I put her on speakerphone so I don't have to hold it up to my ear. "Yeah... I heard you."

"Ugh... I'm so disappointed I couldn't be there."

"How are you feeling?" I ask. Poor Etta missed a step on her back and rolled her ankle. Thank fuck Mark wasn't working that day and was able to help her.

"I'm fine. Still feeling stupid for not paying attention. But Mark is taking very good care of me."

I have to admit, I wasn't happy when Etta started dating Mark Casper. They'veHe's a veterinarian specializing in reptiles, which I thought surely would be a deal breaker for her. But no... turns out love is stronger than her phobia of snakes.

Eventually, I got over it, mostly because it's what Etta deserves. I've spent her entire life on hold to take me in and raise me with love and devotion. I want her to have all the happiness in the world.

"Speaking of taking care of someone," Etta says, and my entire face locks because I know where she's going. "Where is that sweet wife of mine? I've put in a few calls and texts the last couple days and she's not answering. Is she out on a research trip?"

ack that Etta doesn't know we've separated. I haven't had the guts to
ve havebecause I know she'll land firmly on Team Simone. Etta read the boo
sterday.it came out and while she doesn't discount my feelings about i
chedulemanaged to put it out of her mind, calling it "ridiculous clickbait." She
airplaneclue how far it's caused me to spiral. How it's why I'm back in the le

I could run far away from my normal life with Simone.

players "Van?" Etta says, bringing my attention back to her question.

r a win "Um... I'm sure she's just busy," I say lamely, knowing that wi
h a fewmore questions.

"What's going on?" she asks, in a tone that says I better not bullshi
got any I sigh and rub my hand along the back of my neck, digging i
been atmuscles knotting with tension. "Simone and I are getting a divorce."

"Like hell you are," she snaps. "You two are the perfect couple."
in only "We're not," I say wearily.

There's a long, drawn-out silence but finally, she says, "T
ayed soeverything."

"There's nothing to tell. I asked her for a divorce."
o to my What follows is a litany of curses so loud, I have to turn the volum
on my phone. She ends by saying, "Now Van Turner... you owe me a
I've never once asked you to pay up for the way I rescued you, l
ck deckdemanding you tell me the full story because in a million years you'l
as thereconvince me that Simone is on board with this."

"She's not," I admit without any pretense. "She's firmly against it."
's been "Is there someone else?" Etta asks, and I can hear in her voice th
dreading the answer.

person. *Yeah, Etta. His name is Arco and he's fucked up my life.*

uld be a "No. It's not like that."

fear of "Then what the hell is it like?" she demands.

I know that after I hang up with Etta, she's going to call Simo
She putmatter that it's nearly two a.m. on the East Coast. I know Simone won
otion. Iany direct questions. She loves Etta as much as I do.

I know I have to give her the full truth. "Simone and I have been tr
e bodyget pregnant."

'yours? "Oh," Etta gasps, and I can even imagine her putting her hand o
swered.mouth, expression brimming with hope. "A baby."

"I can't do it," I say, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. "I can

tell her a kid into my world, Etta. This book changed it all. It says horrible things when about me and it provides even worse details about the crime she's committed. It's not fair to Simone and it would be bordering on abuse if it has to make my kids suffer with that. You, out of anyone, know how bad it is to argue some. How cruel people can be when you have such a dark stigma attached to you. So I decided I didn't want kids, came back into the league and got a divorce with Simone for a divorce."

Ellie spark "No," she says. "No way. It didn't go down like that. You're trying to get something out."

Ellie to her. "Jesus, I hate how perceptive she is. "Simone said she'd give up the kids if it bothered me that much, but I can't do that to her. She was always be a mother, and you know that. I'm giving her a divorce so she can have a happy life."

"Her happy life is with you," Etta retorts. "You don't have the right to tell her otherwise."

Ellie "None of this is a surprise. It's why I'd been dreading talking to Etta about it. Like I said... one hundred percent Team Simone."

Ellie "I'm not going to argue with you about it," I say, the exhaustion coming a lot and topic clear in my tone. "This is my life, too, and I have a right to do what I think is best."

Ellie "It kills me when I hear a tiny sob. Etta's voice is watery. "How could you cut out someone you love? How can you cut out the best thing that ever happened to you?"

Ellie "You're the best thing that ever happened to me," I say, but that's not exactly true. I'd say Etta and Simone are probably tied in that respect.

"Van... please don't do this to her. She's a beautiful soul and I'm going to crush her."

Ellie "My chest squeezes so painfully, it robs me of my breath. I can't respond because the pain I'm causing Simone comes back on me and I can't lie to her. But, I do as I always do when my heart screams at me."

Ellie "I remind myself that my children would feel the same way when they're being verbally tortured by other kids. Simone's just going to have to deal along with me so we don't bring it down on precious souls too delicate to ever handle the cruelty."

Ellie "I'm sorry, Etta. But my mind is made up. I'm giving Simone the best chance at a strong marriage with children. I'm giving her the best chance"

thingstrue happiness.”

s Arco “You’re an idiot,” she snaps, and it’s not lost on me that Simc
buse tocalled me that once or twice in the last few weeks. “Where’s Simon
was fordemands.

ched to “She followed me to Pittsburgh. I’m sure she hasn’t called yo
d askedbecause she didn’t want to be the one to break this news to you.”

Another silence and I’m trying to think of something to say to ma
leavingfeel better about this. But then she cuts my legs out from under me. “I

three years, Van. That’s how long you’ve been under my wing and I’v
he ideayou like no other. You’ve been everything I could hope for in a child
born topride knows no bounds where you’re concerned. But tonight.
have adisappoint me. For the first time in twenty-three years, I’m ashamed of

And then she hangs up on me.

it to tell I’m so stunned, I just stare at my phone, so many emotions barreli
me that it takes a while to process what just happened.

a about Etta removed herself from my corner, a place she’s lived for ov
decades.

over the Now I’m truly alone.

what I

can you
at ever

at’s not

you’re

’t even
tenfold.

they’re
bear it
icate to

he best
ance at

true happiness.”

“You’re an idiot,” she snaps, and it’s not lost on me that Simone has called me that once or twice in the last few weeks. “Where’s Simone?” she demands.

“She followed me to Pittsburgh. I’m sure she hasn’t called you back because she didn’t want to be the one to break this news to you.”

Another silence and I’m trying to think of something to say to make Etta feel better about this. But then she cuts my legs out from under me. “Twenty-three years, Van. That’s how long you’ve been under my wing and I’ve loved you like no other. You’ve been everything I could hope for in a child and my pride knows no bounds where you’re concerned. But tonight... you disappoint me. For the first time in twenty-three years, I’m ashamed of you.”

And then she hangs up on me.

I’m so stunned, I just stare at my phone, so many emotions barreling into me that it takes a while to process what just happened.

Etta removed herself from my corner, a place she’s lived for over two decades.

Now I’m truly alone.

CHAPTER 8

Simone

I'M LAUGHING SO hard my stomach hurts, and if I had a full bladder probably pee my pants. The other women around the table have heard the story before, but they're laughing just as hard.

I gasp, wiping tears away as I shake my head at Tillie. "I can't believe you did that to Coen's yard." She turned his deck and backyard into a veritable zoo by covering it with bird- and small rodent food, salt licks, deer and numerous gaudy birdhouses to attract feathered friends. It was like they were neighbors and there was a real enemies thing going on. "What are they doing?"

Tillie snickers, running her finger over her wineglass. "Oh, he threatened me, bullied me and made me clean everything up. But... well, then. I blush, my smile turning soft and reminiscent. "Let's just say probably Coen not only angers him but turns him on."

Pain lances through me at the potent reminder. That's exactly how it was with Van. Or at least, that's how it was when I first captured him.

Not so much these days.

"What about you and Van?" Harlow asks. "How long have you two been married?"

It took me a hot minute to get everyone's names down. Harlow's sister is Jenna Stone and she's an attorney. Throughout dinner, I've learned a lot about these ladies that Brienne congregated, offering me a ready-made team of women to lean on.

"Two years," I say, lifting my water glass to take a sip. "Been there for three."

"He's such a good addition to the team," Jenna says. She's engaged to one of the assistant coaches, Gage Heyward. "They could really use someone with his experience heading into the playoffs."

My eyes cut to Brienne and I've been wondering all night if she

anyone the truth about my marriage and how close it is to dying a
death. Only she and Sophie know since Malik opened his big dumb
Oh, I gave him hell about it today in a phone call where I cursed him
then grudgingly admitted I was happy to be going for dinner with the
tonight.

The mere fact that I'm being asked questions about Van without a
there's something wrong tells me both ladies haven't said a word. It
der, I'd feel quite right to let them believe that everything is okay.

ard this "Um... actually, I think you need to know that we're separated."

believe They all look at me with shock and sympathy. It's Ava—Coach
girlfriend—who grabs my hand. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

into a "But Van just got to the team last week," Danica says with concern
icks for dating Camden. "It happened after you got here?"

seems I blow out a huge breath, looking around the table. "It's actually
hat did more involved than that. And separated isn't the right word. He left

Vermont without even telling me he was coming back into the league."

eatened "That asshole," Stevie says, and I like that she speaks her mind. I
.. She tonight that she owns a bar and is dating Hendrix.

ovoking "I agree," I say with a laugh, accepting the humor in her proclamat

"It's because of the book," Kiera says, and my head swivels h

ow it is "It's got him all twisted up and he's running from it."

My jaw sags open and I just gape at her. "How did you know?"

"I remember when that first article came out about his dad," Kie

vo been She's deep in the hockey world as her brother is Drake McGinn, th

Drake engaged to Brienne. "Didn't y'all split up then?"

ngaged I nod. "Yeah. He flipped out when that happened and it cause

it about between us. But he fixed it."

ribe of "And here you are again, dealing with the emotional fallout fro

bastard's book," Sophie grumbles.

ogether Stevie raps her fist on the table, turning everyone's attention to h

motions around the table. "I'm sort of new to this group, just like yo

aged to can tell you, no one will have your back like these women. Brienne l

omeone you into the fold and now you have all of us. I get that you don't ki

but that will change very quickly as we've got a long dinner plan

he told tonight whereby we're going to divulge all to each other. But... just

know... I'm the woman who you come to for revenge and retribution.

horrible one who will call Van the asshole and figure out ways to help destroy his mouth. He can't get his head out of his ass. Also, I have access to several meatheads, but bikers who will break knees for fun and not money. So there's that."

women I stare at Stevie a moment before I burst out laughing, as do all the other ladies. Chatter wells as they tease her for being the ball-buster and not my hintfind Brienne's. She's been mostly silent, letting the other ladies pull the conversation, but her message is clear as she returns my look. See... you. *We've got your back.*

West's



1. She's MY SPIRIT IS light as I walk up the front porch of Van's house.

And immediately becomes heavy as I realize that without any the referred to it as *his* house and not *our* house. I glance over my shoulder a little limo pulling away from the curb. Along with it goes all the happy vibrations me in bolstered me throughout the night.

The house is dark inside, although the porch light is on. That's no learned doing, as I had turned it on before I left for dinner. I know the tear ion. touched down hours before the limo arrived to pick me up, but Van er way. come home at that point. He might be inside now or he might still be who knows. But I can guarantee if he's in there, he's already locked a his bedroom so he doesn't have to deal with me.

I unlock the door and slip inside, quickly silencing the beeping ra says. panel by punching in the four-digit code. I set my keys on the table, ie same purse slip to the floor and turn to find a huge, hulking figure in the dark

I shriek with fear but immediately, even in the shadows, recognize d a rift "Where the fuck were you?" he demands.

I reach back, flip on the living room light and take in his om that expression. It's the most emotion I've seen from him in days and i er. She actual words he's said to me.

I'm almost giddy from the attention and I want more. I push pa u, but I "Not sure it's any of your business, really." brought

Van's hand clamps on my upper arm and he pulls me to him. ow us, safety is my business," he growls low in his throat. "I was worried so ned for happened to you because your car was here but you weren't. You cou so you left a goddamn note, Simone." I'm the

him if “Kind of like the way you let me know you were leaving on an aw
1, burly You haven’t said two words to me in days, Van. Why would I give
courtesy?”

ie other I know that sounds petty and in truth, I didn’t think he’d even be
ny eyesworry about me, which is why I didn’t leave a note, but I hope the
me intomade that it hurts being left in the dark.

. I told “You still haven’t told me where you were,” he says.

I don’t owe him anything, but I give him the truth. “I was o
friends.”

“Malik and Anna?” he asks, hand still holding me tight.

I can’t figure out if he’s driven by jealousy or true concern bu
would be fine with me. Something to make me believe he cares.

ought, I “Malik and Anna are family, not friends,” I say.

r at the “You don’t have any friends in Pittsburgh.” I can see the anger l
bes that bright in his eyes, which means he’s jealous. Ordinarily I’d use th
weapon but one thing I’ll never do is lead him to believe there wo
t Van’s someone else. “I went out with Brienne Norcross and some of th
n plane Titans women. She sent a limo for me, so how could I decline?”

hadn’t Van releases me so suddenly, I stumble back. “Brienne Norcro
e out... asks aghast. “Why the hell would you be with her? Or the Titans wom
away in I snap at him hotly. “Because they happen to care that I’m he

foreign city by myself and that I’m lonely.”

alarm “And how did they know you’re here and lonely?” he snarls, h
let my reddening with what I think might be embarrassment. “Did you call l
k. and let her know what a douche your husband was for leaving you l
Van. Did you cry out all of your misery to my fucking boss?”

“No, Van.” My voice is quiet... calm. “Malik told Baden. Bad
; angry Brienne. Your boss showed up on the doorstep and was intuitive en
t’s five know something was wrong the minute she saw me. I think it was t
circles under my eyes from lack of sleep or the fact they were re
st him, constantly crying. Take your pick. But she had the decency to ask m
was wrong and I told her the truth.”

“Your Van’s expression crumbles. “I’m sorry,” he whispers. “You know
nothing trying to hurt you, right?”

ld have It’s the first moment of true vulnerability I’ve seen from him and
quick to take advantage. I walk right into him, pressing my body aga

ay trip?muscular frame. My hands slip over his shoulders and I tip my head
you the“You’re hurting me all the same. You’ve shut me out and you’re not
me the chance to fight for you.”

here to Van doesn’t return my touch but he doesn’t pull away either. His
point is gravelly. “I don’t want you fighting for me. I want you to forget about

I shake my head adamantly. “Never. It won’t happen. I’m not moving
from you, baby, and the sooner you accept that, the sooner we can start
ut withthings.”

“I can’t—”

I grab his hand and pull it to my chest, forcing his palm over my
t either“You’re in here, Van. You’re entwined with every cell in my being
remove you would kill me.”

His expression is a turbulent storm of angst, his jaw locked hard.
burning Words alone won’t get him to soften all the way so I move his hand
at as my breast. My nipple puckers under the touch and Van inhales sharply
ould betraying to pull away. I grip him hard. “Touch me, please.”

the other His gaze drops to where his hand rests on my chest, indecision w
his eyes. I want to reach out and touch him, but I think I’ll die a
ss?” hedeaths if he’s not hard. He always gets so hard for me with suc
en?” provocation.

re in a Instead, I grab his other hand hanging loose at his side and
between my legs. “Touch me here.”

his face Van’s hand reflexively squeezes and my hips jerk, a tiny moan esc
Brienne It’s that tiny sound that seems to snap Van out of a daze and he w
behind?away from me. I’m breathing hard, a mixture of desire and pure frustr
can’t help myself... my gaze drops down and I’m somewhat mollified
en toldthick line of his erection through his jeans.

ough to “You still want me,” I point out bluntly. “Why are you pulling awa

he dark “I’ll want you to the day I die, Simone. But that doesn’t change
d fromthing.”

ie what “Aaagghhh,” I scream with frustration, my fists balled up and I st
foot. “Why are you being such a pigheaded asshole? Why do I even
I’m notsomeone like you?”

Van’s expression remains impassive and for the first time in one
I movefights, he’s not the first to turn away. I march toward the door and
inst hispick up my purse. I swipe my keys from the table and jerk the door op

d back. “Where are you going?” Van asks.

giving I ignore him, stepping over the threshold and slamming the door
me. I’m halfway down the steps when the door opens and he calls out
voice is “Simone... where are you going?”

me.” I throw my middle finger up in the air. That should be answer enough
ing on “Simone,” he barks but I head straight for my car, intent on putting
t fixing much distance between us as I can tonight.

The man is stealthy, I’ll give him that. He catches up to me and taps
by the elbow, halting my progress. “Have you been drinking today?
y heart. Because if you have, I’m taking your keys.”

and to Funny how simple words slice deep. *No, I haven’t been drinking but
I’m pregnant with your child.*

“I haven’t been drinking,” I say calmly. “Now let go.”

nd over “Where are you going?” he asks again, although he releases me.

r before “Malik’s.” I don’t offer more because I’m not sure that’s where I’m
going. I just know I want away from Van right now.

ring in He studies me for a moment but then nods. “Just be careful, okay?”

million I struggle not to scoff. Instead, I turn away from him and walk around
h little front of my car. Van doesn’t go back in the house but watches me with
hands tucked in his pockets. Normally, I’d give anything to know
force it going on in that beautiful head of his but right now, I don’t care.

When I pull away, I know immediately the thing that will make
aping. better. It’s not going to Malik’s and it’s not calling any of my
renches members.

ation. I I dial Etta.

l by the She called me first thing this morning and I didn’t answer because
been avoiding her. I wasn’t sure what she knew and I figured it was

y?” Van to let her know what was going on. She left a voicemail, which included
a damn few nasty but choice words about him and it became clear to me that
knew everything, so I called her right back.

ump my We had a good talk. I had a good cry. She vowed to help me in a
en loveshe could. She was the first official member of my female tribe. Brie and
the others completed it tonight.

of our “Hi, honey,” she coos when the line connects.

bend to “I hate him,” I snarl into the phone as I drive to God knows where.
en. know my way around at all, but it doesn’t matter. I can use Google Maps

find my way back.

behind “You don’t,” she says softly. “You love him so much that you can’t let go, hate him.”

“I can’t reach him,” I lament. “It would be so much easier if he just loved me. If he didn’t care. Why can’t he be normal and just have an affair? Why is he choosing the dumbest of all?”

“You know it’s not dumb to him,” she chastises. “As much as I don’t like what he’s doing, he’s in emotional overload. He’s making what he thinks is the best decision to protect you.”

because “He’s more chivalrous than that, I think to myself. He’s doing it to protect the kids we’d planned on having. I don’t tell Etta I’m pregnant. I can’t tell her to keep that secret from Van. Only Anna knows and that’s the way I’m keeping it.”

“I’m out of ideas, Etta. I’ve tried to reason until I’m blue in the face. I’ve tried to seduce him. I’ve screamed at him. Cried. Nothing is getting through.”

“Time,” she says.

“What?”

“Time. It’s going to take time for this to settle. This is going to take what’s away. You and I both know that and he’ll see it won’t follow him.”

Bitterness weighs on me. “Until the next story comes out and he runs away with Etta doesn’t deny that, but how can she? This is twice now Van’s family has let me down because of his dad. If I did repair things, could I trust it to stay? I have no clue.”

“I love you, honey,” she says sweetly. “You know that, right?”

“Of course I do. I love you too.”

“It’s my deepest wish you two work this out. I believe you are soul mates. But you need to consider that Van might not have it in him. Because of what she you, I want you to be happy and it might not be with him.”

I’d ordinarily rail against such a notion, but I don’t have the energy to argue. “However,” she continues, “it is far too early to be throwing in the towel. I need you to shore up your resolve and go back at him swinging. You can’t let his face and you continue to harass him. You make him understand, okay?”

I smile at the vehemence in her tone. It gives me a little strength. “I don’t will.”

“Do you want me to come?” she asks.

Yes. Because Etta is who Van respects most in the world. Her being
want to might change the tide. “No. I need to handle this. I can either make it
it wasn’t meant to be.”

“I didn’t “I’ve got faith in you.”

Those are nice words, but I don’t believe them about myself. I think
reason just running on borrowed luck, and it feels like it’s running out.

disagree
what he

protect
I don’t trust
I say I’m

because. I’ve
enough.”

to fade

ins.”
is flaked
sick?

my mates.
I love

7.
I towel.
stay in
I say?”
Okay. I

Yes. Because Etta is who Van respects most in the world. Her being here might change the tide. “No. I need to handle this. I can either make it work or it wasn’t meant to be.”

“I’ve got faith in you.”

Those are nice words, but I don’t believe them about myself. I think I’m just running on borrowed luck, and it feels like it’s running out.

CHAPTER 9

Van

I FOLLOW BOONE through the parking lot of Mario's, nervous as fuck. It's my first time out in the public eye after a game and I have no clue if I'll be accosted by reporters. I'm still getting daily requests for interviews from the PR department and they show no signs of letting up. I guess they're getting the hint that *no comment* truly means *no comment*.

It's the lesser of two evils, though—accepting my teammates' request to come out and celebrate with them or go home to Simone where we'll have a fight or I'll break down and fuck her.

It almost happened last night. When she pressed her body into mine, it was sensory overload. My dick got so hard it was painful and then when I pushed my hand between her legs, my knees almost buckled. It took a lot of willpower to pull away from her, and I'm not sure I can do it again. I've fucked her too much. I fucking jack off every day to the hundreds of memories I've built with her over the years and I'm resolved that's all I'll ever have.

"Van," a man calls out as we approach the door and I immediately turn. That's not the tone of someone who knows me personally but rather someone who's trying to get my attention. There's most likely a camera poised, ready to take a picture, and I hunch my shoulders and keep my back behind Boone.

"Van," the man yells again and he sounds closer. Definitely a reporter. Judging by the eager inflection in his voice.

"Oh, fuck this," Boone snarls and whips around. I almost run in to help but he stomps past me and yells, "Don't you people have anything better to do? How many times do this team and Van have to say no comment?"

I turn to see that it is indeed a reporter and he's standing there with wide eyes, taken aback by Boone's attack. I clap my hand on his shoulder. "Go on, man. Let it go."

Boone grumbles in frustration but we pivot toward the doors to Mario's.

On game nights they have extra security and when we enter, Boone through the glass doors to the reporter still standing out there. “He doesn’t get in.”

The bouncer nods.

“No press gets in,” Boone adds.

“Yes, sir.”

I’m not sure Boone has the authority to tell them who can and can’t get into an establishment, but it seems to have worked.

“Thanks for that,” I say.

“Got your back.” He then pushes past me, glancing over his shoulder to follow him. “They’ve got a sectioned-off area back here for us.” We walk through the crowd. “You can hang in there and keep a buffer between you and the press. They’re usually super chill and respectful.”

He says this to me because he knows I’m on edge about being in the media spotlight, not for being the newest addition to the Titans, but for being the son of a notorious serial killer.

“I’m good,” I assure him. I’ve been practicing in my head what to say to the first person who asks about my dad or the book.

I would like to say “Fuck off,” but pretty sure PR would frown on that. Instead, I’m going to be genial and just say, “We can talk about anything you want.”

Some of the players and their significant others are already inside the cordoned off area with red velvet ropes. I ignore the sharp stab of guilt Simone is banished to the house simply because I didn’t invite her to the game, and the even sharper stab of longing to have her by my side. My mind has been etched so deep it’s a fucking chasm and I’m not going to fall in for fear of falling in and losing myself completely.

We step over the rope and come upon Hendrix and his girlfriend, talking to Liam, Anders and Foster.

“Dude,” Foster exclaims holding his fist out. “You made it.”

“Figured it was time to hang out with you bozos,” I drawl.

A waitress appears and I order a beer. Boone melts further into the crowd of players and their women, but I hang on the fringe. I’m more of an observer and while I’ve become very at ease talking to my mates while on the sidelines, chitchat is still a bit uncomfortable.

I listen with half an ear as Anders complains about a bogus call that

points made against him for hooking in the first period. It was indeed bullshit. I shouldn't get needs to let that stuff go. No sense in continuing to stress about it.

I should say that to him.

In a constructive way so that he understands I'm just trying to increase my level of experience. That's one of the reasons Callum wanted me to come here. I'm bringing some seasoning to the team.

I open my mouth to say just such a thing but something catches my attention behind him over near the bathrooms. My jaw drops to see Simone coming out of the ladies' restroom along with Baden's fiancée, Sophie, and Harlow as I Stone's girlfriend. The three of them are laughing and even more windshocking than seeing Simone here is the fact that she's wearing a fan jersey with my name on it.

Christ, I can't even begin to process the emotions slamming around me. The first and ever-present is intense longing for the woman, not just because she's beautiful and sexy but because no one has ever loved me the way she has. I'm also perplexed that there's an animalistic pride in seeing her wear my jersey and I immediately banish that from my thoughts. She's a part of Team Van. She's not even supposed to be in Pittsburgh and I'm shocked that. So as hell that she's here celebrating with my team because all that does is bring me the lines for me.

She's not playing fair and I'm going to put a stop to it.

"Excuse me," I mutter and step across the ropes, heading toward Simone. It's Sophie who sees me first and nudges my wife to get her attention. She then nods my way.

I plaster on a smile, lifting my chin to greet Sophie and Harlow before my attention cuts to Simone. I keep my tone pleasant, but to those who know me—my brat of a spouse, for instance—you can hear that I'm irritated. "Stevie, I speak with you a moment?"

Sophie and Harlow exchange a look with Simone and I can see all three want to know about these women. They know Simone's side of the story and I know I'm not happy.

Harlow squeezes Simone's shoulder. "We'll meet you back at our apartment."

"Okay," Simone chirps with a smile. She watches them both melt into the crowd before turning to me. Her smile is pleasant, eyes sparkling. She hitches her purse higher on her shoulder, holding on to the strap with both hands. "You played a great game tonight."

t but he I don't bother with niceties. "What are you doing here?"

Her look of confusion is overly exaggerated. "Why wouldn't I be here? My husband plays for the Titans. All the other wives and girlfriends are here."

Here, to Rubbing at my temple, which is now aching, I speak in low tones. "I'm separated."

She says my "We're living together," she points out.

Simone "I've asked for a divorce and as such, you're not welcome at the party, and events."

In more The smug look on Simone's face has me bracing for a slap. A Titans gaze cuts across the room and she waves at someone. I twist my neck over my shoulder and see Brienne and Drake standing there. Brienne looks at me and gives me a side-kiss back at Simone.

Not just My wife turns her attention to me, eyes glittering with challenge. "I'm not the Brienne you would disagree with you on whether I'm welcome."

Doing her "Christ, you're a piece of work," I mutter angrily.

She is not "Can I buy you a celebratory beer?" She looks so hopeful and I don't want to piss her off to hurt her, yet again. But she's going to accept this and ignoring her is the best weapon I have.

"Pass," I say and turn on my heel. Not going to give her a moment of my attention.

Simone. I can't even hope that by ignoring her she'll get frustrated and leave because she now has friends here. She'll hang out with her new cronies and have no incentive to leave. But at least she won't have my notice.

Before my Before I reach the velvet ropes, a woman steps in my path. I'm looking a little short, so lost in my thoughts I almost barrel over her.

Mind if It would be impossible not to notice she's beautiful but that thought briefly crosses my mind. I'm more on guard wondering if she'll ask me for an autograph. I need Arco.

And they "Van... hi... I'm sorry to stop you like this, but I wanted to tell you I'm a huge fan. I lived in Raleigh when you played for the Cold Fury and even signed my jersey. My job recently transferred me here to Pittsburgh and I'm out when I saw you joined the team. I just wanted to know if I could get a picture... I don't have anything to sign or else I'd be begging for an autograph too."

Some of the tension eases. "Yeah... sure."

She beams and flips the screen on her camera. She's got a beer in her hand and holds her phone out with the other for us to take a selfie. Her hands aren't quite long enough to get us both in, so I take it from her. "Here... I'll take it."

The woman scrunches in close but not inappropriately so. She says, "We're following suit and snap a few photos."

As I'm handing her phone back, the waitress arrives with my beer. She tries to fish out my wallet, but the woman says, "Oh, please... let me buy it for you."

She's got a twenty in her hand and the waitress makes change.

"Cheers," she says as she holds her bottle out and I tap the neck of mine to look against hers.

"Thanks." And now I feel obligated to talk to her.

I don't have a damn thing to say, feeling incredibly ill at ease given that I'm an introvert and my wife is lurking somewhere. But she surprises me when she says, "How has it been coming into a zone defense when the Coyotes played more man-to-man?"

I blink in surprise that she wants to talk hockey. And not because I'm a woman but it's just most fans don't want to talk logistics.

I manage an actual smile—relief that this is just hockey talk—an adjustment that feels out of place but engaging. "Being out of the league for three years, it's a bit of an adjustment. But I'm adapting."

"You most definitely are. I think this team is going to go far in the playoffs. Even has a real chance of going all the way."

"That's the dream, right?" I take a sip of my beer before asking, "Do you still consider yourself a Titans fan or still a Cold Fury fan?"

She grins. "You mean, who am I going to root for when they come to play next week?"

"Time to pick a team..." My words trail off as I was going to introduce her to my wife's name.

She holds her hand out for me to shake and I don't hesitate. "Lauren had a great idea. Pick a team, Lauren."

I note that she doesn't release her hold on me but instead, she squeezes tighter. "If you're open to it, I pick you. For tonight, anyway. Interested in getting out of here?"

Jesus fuck.

I try to slide my hand free, but she grips hard and steps in even

in one going up on her tiptoes to put her face closer to mine. “Sorry if this is my arm’s forward but I wasn’t kidding when I said you’re my favorite player. Let me.” kill to have a night alone with you. I promise I’ve got no boundaries in bed, I bed and you will walk away a happy man.”

I’m on the cusp of jerking my hand free and taking a step back but I start Lauren is suddenly ripped away from me. It takes me a split second that for process that Simone has Lauren by the hair with one hand and the other fistful of the woman’s sweater. She pulls her back so violently that Lauren’s feet go out from under her, her bottle of beer flying.

of mine “Holy shit,” I bark and shove my beer at the person standing close to me.

By the time my hands are free, Simone’s on the floor with Lauren in a headlock and she looks like she’s ready to commit murder. “I should have known when for touching my husband but as it stands, I’m just going to have a real old Furytime stomping your ass.”

“Get off me, you crazy bitch,” Lauren screams and reaches back to grab a chunk of Simone’s hair.

“Goddamn it, Simone,” I yell, reaching down to break her hold on Lauren. “Let her go.”

It’s all an “Not until I get in a few good punches,” she snaps back. “She said there were no boundaries in bed. Well, I’ve got no boundaries protecting what’s in my pants in the She heard all that, huh? I hadn’t even noticed her, but she must have been standing right behind me for that part.

‘So, are Next thing I know, Boone is there and he’s reaching down to help me untangle the women. He tries to pull Lauren free as I clamp onto Simone’s wrists, but her hands are curled into tight claws in the woman’s hair and clothing. “Let her go.”

sert her “Not until I teach her a lesson,” she snarls.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Simone. You’re causing a scene.”

“I hate to say it and I’ll never admit it, but my wife looks fucking fantastic.”

Her eyes are blazing and her skin is flushed, chest heaving as she watches me kill this woman for propositioning me. I get it because I’d feel the same way if a man did that to Simone.

“Let go of her hair,” I bark.

“Let me yank some of it out and I will,” she throws back.

closer, “Get this bitch off me,” Lauren shrieks.

is overly I can't hurt my wife, but she's got to release the other woman. I let
and I done wrist and immediately put my fingertips to her ribs where I do
s in themore than tickle her.

It's Simone's Kryptonite. She cannot stand to have her ribs touch
out then she screeches the minute I start wiggling them against her.

cond to Lauren is freed and Boone pulls her away from us. I latch onto Si
er has upper arm, hauling her up and grabbing her purse off the floor. I start
auren's her through the crowd. She doesn't hesitate to let me guide the way u
sees the exit door looming and tries to put on the brakes.

osest to "I'm not leaving."

"Yes, you are," I reply, pushing her along with ease.

en in a When we reach outside, she tries to jerk away from me. "You can
kill you throw me out of here."

ly good "I'm not throwing you out. I'm taking you home."

o grab a girls." "But I don't want to go home. I was having fun hanging out w
old on you back again."

"Yeah, well, that was a shit show of embarrassment. I doubt they'

I expected that to piss her off but instead, she falls silent.

she has "Where's your car?" I ask, still refusing to give up my hold on h
nine." sure I trust her not to bolt across the parking lot to head back inside.

ve been "Over there," she says with a nod.

"Give me the keys."

help me Without a fight, she reaches into her cross-body bag and hands the
both of I unlock the doors remotely and escort her to the passenger side. She s
ie poorly sullenly and offers me a glare as I close the door.

She doesn't say a word to me as we drive to my house and just a
pulling into a parallel spot out front, her phone rings. She nabs it fr
purse and connects the call. Has to be one of her newfound female
bulous friends. Her end of the conversation has my teeth grinding.

wants to "Hey," she says softly into the phone with a brief pause before sh
me if a "I'm fine." Another pause. "I'm positive. I'm good. He's making
home."

I shoot her a glare but she's got her focus out the passenger window

"I know. I'm sorry. I was really looking forward to hanging out w
tonight."

et go of Guilt smacks me hard in the face and that pisses me off. I have not
nothingfeel guilty about. Simone made an ass of herself and the best thing
remove her from the scene.

ed, and To be honest... I wanted to leave too. I didn't feel comfortable v
being there, not because I had intended to talk or flirt with other wom
mone'sI didn't like it that I'd told my teammates we were separated and di
movingand there she was, acting like we were together.

ntil she Sort of.

So fucking confusing.

We exit the car and I lock it, following Simone up the steps
continues her conversation. "I didn't mean to lose my shit like that." F
n't justlistens to whoever is on the other end, and then she chuckles as I unl
door. "You'd do the same thing, so don't pretend otherwise."

Jesus... how well does she know these ladies? She's only been
with mywith them for like a whole day. What in the hell did they talk ab
night?

'll want Simone sighs as I toss the keys on the table. I normally woul
straight to my bedroom and lock myself away, but I'm far too curious
the rest of this conversation.

er. Not Walking into the kitchen, Simone opens the fridge and pulls out
of water. She holds her phone between her shoulder and ear as she li
the other woman.

The minx has the nerve to shoot me a disapproving glare. I scoo
m over.back, leaning against the counter and crossing my arms over my
lides inmake no pretense that I'm doing anything but eavesdropping.

Simone paces back and forth, quietly listening before snor
s we'rewhatever's said to her. "I'm thinking it's not such a good idea for me t
om her team events where Van might be looking to hook up with another wo
hockeycan't handle it."

"I wasn't looking to hook up with anyone," I snarl as I push
ie says,counter, pissed she's maligning my character to one of my team
me gosignificant others.

"Didn't look that way to me," she shoots back. "It was embarrass
v. way you were flirting with her."

with you "Embarrassing?" I exclaim, advancing on her. "I'm not the on
assaulted another person tonight."

thing to “It’s your fault that I was in that position,” she yells, then she
was to remember someone’s on the other line as her voice lowers. “I’m so

Brienne. I need to disconnect now and have a serious conversation with
my husband.”

en. But Jesus Christ... that was my boss checking in on my wife, worried
to have—what? Hurt her?

Simone disconnects, setting her phone on the table, and I let her
“I cannot believe you’d fucking talk about our personal shit with
Norcross. Are you trying to get me fired?”

as she “Well, what was she supposed to do when you manhandled me
’cause... Mario’s? She was concerned about me since I’m a hockey wife.”

ock the “You aren’t a hockey wife,” I bark at her.

“I’m well aware of that,” she screams, and it’s not her normal
friends’ voice that’s suffused with anger and frustration. It’s filled with pain.

out last She spins away and lunges at her purse she’d set on the kitchen

Opening it, she pulls out a T-shirt and whirls to face me. Holding it
up, she says, “They gave me a T-shirt tonight.” She points to the pocket. ‘
to hear “Titan Queens.”’ She flips it around and I see on the back it says ‘
power behind the Titans.’ My chest constricts over the kindness and
a bottle even further over the cruelty.

stems to She balls it in her fist and shakes it at me. “But I can’t wear it. I’m
aware that I don’t have the right because you took that away from me.
I’ve lost everything away from me.”

chest. I Simone looks down at the shirt, as if surprised to see it in her hand.
her face screws up in disgust and she marches over to the utility room
pulling it open. Out comes a huge butcher knife and she jabs it through
the wadded-up cotton shirt and starts sawing at the material. It makes a
small hole. She abandons the knife and uses her hands to rip it all the
the seams.

off the She whips it at me, catching me in the chest, and my hands automati-
cally snag it before it drops to the floor.

“Are you happy now?” she cries.

sing the No, I’m not happy. I’m devastated for her right now. She may have
the act of destroying that shirt, but I’m the one who ruined all it stood for.

ie who But maybe... just maybe... Simone will finally give up. Maybe this
straw that will break her stubborn back and she’ll go home to Ver-

seems to ignore my soul rebelling at the idea of her moving on, falling in love
I'm sorry, having a family.

with my "It's what's best for her."

Simone just stands there staring at me, her chest rising and falling with that agitation. I clutch the ruined shirt, afraid to say a damn thing.

I wait for her to come to the conclusion... it's best that she move and I
have it. Except, it's not defeat I see dulling her hazel eyes. Instead, they're
Brienne and calculating. They narrow in on me as if she's puzzling out a mystery.

Mustering up my most dispassionate, disconnected expression, I walk
out of the room.

"Will you have sex with me tonight?" she asks, and the question seems
random and not at all in context with the fight we just had that my jaw
is raised. I can't formulate words to answer her.

"No, huh?" Simone pivots on her foot, grabs her purse and phone.
I sit in a chair, then... I'm out of here."

As she walks up, she says, "There's something about the set to her spine and the way her shoulders
'It says they're tossed back that makes me uneasy. "Where are you going?"

The real "Out." But she doesn't walk out the door, instead cutting up the stairs
with a cramp in the bedroom where she keeps her luggage. She's still sleeping on the bed
to annoy me.

"I'm well "Out where?" I ask, starting after her. By the tone of her voice, it
seems like you're incumbent upon me to find out more.

"Out to get laid," she says as she disappears into the bedroom.

And then "Like hell you are," I bark, taking the stairs two at a time. When I reach the
drawer, the corner and enter the bedroom, I see she's digging through her suitcase.
ugh She's tossed her purse and phone on the dresser.

decent- Holding up a minuscule black dress to observe, she nods her satisfaction
and tosses the dress on the bed.

"You are not going out to get laid," I snap with irritation.

atically She ignores me and instead kicks off her boots and shimmies out of
her jeans. She spares me a glance before pulling her sweater over her head.

When she reaches for the dress, she says, "You don't tell me what you
want to do, Van. You want the divorce. You're the one pushing me away.
for. You're the one who refuses to touch me. So fine. I'm going to go
and find someone who will rock my world tonight and then just maybe I can find
the strength to leave you."

again, Fury such as I've never experienced sweeps through me, so intense and overwhelming, my vision dims. My hand flies out, wrapping around the neck of Simone's neck and I walk her backward until she bangs into the wall. I place my other palm beside her head and bend down so my face hovers just before hers.

long. I make sure she's got her eyes locked onto mine so she has no doubt about my next words. "Until such time as we're divorced, you will not sleep with another man. You're certainly not going to do it just to punish me."

wait her To punctuate that proclamation, I tear the dress free from her grasp and toss it away.

in is so "You don't own me," she whispers. "I can do whatever I want."

7 drops. "No, baby," I murmur with a slight shake of my head. "You can't throw me out of the damn bed if I have to."

"Okay," The corners of her mouth curve upward, and I see a flash of triumph across her face. I can barely comprehend that look... that she feels like she's won something... then her hand is pressing against my crotch.

And there she finds me fully hard and I'm not even sure what happened. I mean... I'm always on the verge of getting a hard-on around the couch. It's been that way for three years I'm so fucking attracted to her.

She squeezes me and I can't stop the groan that rips free.

It seems "You know what you need to do, then," she taunts, running her fingers up and down my cock now straining to bust free of my zipper.

Yeah... I know what I need to do.

I round And I hate myself for it.
suitcase.

satisfaction

the look of her

.

at I can

go away.

go find

find the

Fury such as I've never experienced sweeps through me, so intense and overwhelming, my vision dims. My hand flies out, wrapping around the front of Simone's neck and I walk her backward until she bangs into the wall. I place my other palm beside her head and bend down so my face hovers right before hers.

I make sure she's got her eyes locked onto mine so she has no doubt about my next words. "Until such time as we're divorced, you will not touch another man. You're certainly not going to do it just to punish me."

To punctuate that proclamation, I tear the dress free from her grip and toss it away.

"You don't own me," she whispers. "I can do whatever I want."

"No, baby," I murmur with a slight shake of my head. "You can't. I'll tie you to the damn bed if I have to."

The corners of her mouth curve upward, and I see a flash of triumph across her face. I can barely comprehend that look... that she feels like she's won something... then her hand is pressing against my crotch.

And there she finds me fully hard and I'm not even sure when that happened. I mean... I'm always on the verge of getting a hard-on around her. It's been that way for three years I'm so fucking attracted to her.

She squeezes me and I can't stop the groan that rips free.

"You know what you need to do, then," she taunts, running her palm up and down my cock now straining to bust free of my zipper.

Yeah... I know what I need to do.

And I hate myself for it.

CHAPTER 10

Van

MY HIPS PUNCH forward, a natural reaction to the grip Simone has on my forehead to rest against hers, exhaling in defeat. I can't make pull away.

It's not that I'm afraid Simone will give herself to someone else but I don't believe her taunts for a minute. It's purely that I don't want to let go anymore tonight. I want to give her something because I've caused much pain and I know my touch and my attention will be a balm to her.

I also know it will confuse things, but she's pushed me past my breaking point.

"You want me to fuck you?" I ask, my voice hoarse with desire. The words continue to stroke me.

Simone is oddly silent, so I lift my head to peer down at her. She slides her tongue while running her tongue over her lower lip. It takes all my willpower not to bite her.

Sliding my hand from the front of her throat to cup her around the back of her neck, I make sure she's clear on what this means. "You know I won't change anything. I'll make you come and still walk away."

Fire flashes in her eyes. Utter defiance and a slight smirk that tells me she believes she still has power over me. I can practically read her thoughts. *Yeah, baby... I remember. I remember you tried to do that three years ago when I was gunning hard for you and you always came back.*

"Just shut up and kiss me," she demands.

I stare at her hard, trying to find something within her expression that might turn me off this course, but another hard stroke on my dick distracts me. Fuck it.

I pull her up to my mouth by the grip I have on the back of her neck. Christ... her lips against mine feel even better than her hands on my chest. Not sure how that's possible, but I have no intention of fucking her.

tonight so my dick doesn't matter.

Simone purrs into my mouth, greedy for the attention. Her tongue with mine, and I lean into her, pinning her to the wall. It also traps her against my cock so she can't move it. I don't want to get sidetracked.

Inching my hand up the back of her neck, I grab a hunk of her hair and pull her head to the side. Trailing my lips down her neck, I'm satisfied with a full-body shiver. Love how much the tiniest touch affects her.

Simone has never been a docile participant and she attempts to shove me back so she can stroke my erection. I sink my teeth into that tender spot where the bottom of her neck slopes into her shoulder and she groans.

I reach down, grab her wrists and pull her hands away from me and thrust them to the wall.

"Let me go," she demands. "Let me touch you."

"Unless you want me to walk out of here, try to be obedient and keep your hands to yourself."

"But—"

"Let's not talk either," I add.

Simone glares at me but remains silent.

"Good girl," I praise, and I'm assaulted with what seems like a flood of memories of me ordering Simone to do something and her compliance so beautifully.

She's always been my good girl.

Tentatively, I release her wrists and pause a moment as our gazes are coiled up with each other. Then I'm jerking her bra down, relishing the way she gasps at the sudden move. I cover her breasts with my palms, squish their fullness and then pinching each nipple. Simone's hips jerk forward then she sinks back against the wall. I let my eyes roam all over her body, emotions churning like a poisonous potion of lust and fury and self-love and love.

I want to fuck her so bad, but I won't.

But I will make her feel good, at least for the moment.

"Do you want me to make you come, baby?"

Her lips stay sealed but she nods.

I should splay her out on the bed, but why bother? Right here and now, enough and not for the first time in my relationship with my wife, I sink my knees before her. A move I've done a hundred times, I peel her

down her legs and she steps out of them gracefully.

tangles Her body is a work of art and there's not a place on it I haven't e-
er handthoroughly with my mouth, my fingers and a good deal of toys I've
her over the years.

air and With a hand on the back of one thigh, I lift her leg high and drape
l by hermy shoulder. Simone stares down at me with flushed cheeks, her
pressed against the wall for balance. I drag my thumb down through
ove meof her sex, find her soaking wet.

er area "Van," she wheezes.

My head snaps up and my hands fall away. "No words. Make
e. I pinsounds you want, but no words."

She nods frantically, biting down hard on her lower lip.

"This is for you, baby. It doesn't mean anything other than I want
id keepfeel good right now."

Anger flashes in her beautiful eyes, but she keeps her mouth
reward her by circling my thumb over her clit. "That's my girl."

Air gushes out of her and I don't waste any more time with tea-
place a gentle kiss on her lower belly before running my tongue up l
millionSimone groans and I hear a thump, most likely her head falling back
obeyingthe wall. I don't bother looking up because I am focused on making r
come.

I lick her just the way I know she craves, plunging two fingers ins
remainheat. Hungrily exploring every fold and crevice of her pussy, I sa
he waysweetness of my wife and her keening sounds of need echo in my
ueezingshow her no mercy, but she'd never ask me for it. I told her I wouldn
ard andher, but that's apparently a lie because I ruthlessly plunge my tong
er, myfingers into her tight channel. My dick is so hard it hurts, but I let th
oathingfuel my desire to give Simone the pleasure she deserves.

I wince as she takes fistfuls of my hair, gripping tightly. Her hip
against my mouth, silently demanding more. It brings back b
memories of the first time I went down on my wife. I can remember it
were yesterday, and I'm transported back in time because I'm going t
the same exact thing with her.

is good
nk onto
panties

*After we first met, Simone pursued me relentlessly. She flirted, tea-
taunted. The sexiest goddamn woman I'd ever known and she was l*

away at all my defenses. Chipped and chipped and chipped until I exploredshit.

bought I kissed her and it was everything I feared it would be. Sizzling and full of so much promise that she'd rock my world, I almost bolted.

it over Almost.

palms Instead, I tried my best to scare her off. "Get your ass in my bed the lipsnaked. I'm going to show you what happens when you aren't smart enough stop provoking me."

My words had the opposite effect, and it was excitement and it all thewritten all over her beautiful face.

Goddamn fucking, incorrigible brat.

you to That was my exact thought and it's what I think now. Here I am falling prey to her stubborn insistence that we belong together. Fuck if shut. I love her more for her fierce determination.

I purse my lips on her clit, suck gently and then lash my tongue. I keeps her mouth shut but I can hear the moans deep in her throat. She asing. I my head in her hands, wantonly gyrating against my face, demanding her slit. and more from me. against

ny love That first time I fucked her, it was done without any thought or caring how she felt. She dared me to do it and I put her right on her hands and side her and took her from behind. Best fucking pussy I'd ever had, and I vor the intentions of busting a quick nut and walking away from her.

ears. I Except from the moment I drove inside of her, I knew that was just r't fuck dream. Simone loved it hard and rough and didn't care that I sue and whispering sweet nothings in her ear. She threw herself backward c at pain cock, creating as much friction and pounding as I was trying to give her

She was an animal and there was no way I could have ever stopped s rotate It was, up until that point in my life, the hardest orgasm I'd ever beautiful shot my soul into her and when my heart rate came back down, I hated t as if it for my weakness. I flopped onto the bed, rolling to my back and staring through ceiling with complete disgruntlement.

How in the fuck had she managed to do that to me?

sed and Yeah... a goddamn fucking, incorrigible brat.

acking She wasn't finished with me, though. The scheming minx wanted

lost my and wasn't giving me the chance to walk away from her. Simone ro
top of me and fused her mouth to mine. I had no idea how much I need
hot and kiss, but I was immediately lost to it. And despite the fact I outweighed
a good hundred pounds, she somehow managed to roll us so she was
back and I was on top of her.

and get She fisted my hair, gave it a hard yank and then put a palm to the
ough to my head.

Eyes gleaming with lust and challenge, she pushed me down her
triumph She never said a word, but her intent was transparent.

What she needed was clear.

That fucking woman pushed me right down until my face was on
pussy. She spread her legs wide, tilted her hips up, and said, "Give it
again, Van."

I don't And fucking Christ... I buried my face between her legs and gave it
hard.

Simone

She holds Just like I'm doing now.

She gets more Exactly like I did then.

It's come full circle for us, right in this moment.

Simone starts panting as I fuck her with my mouth and fingers, and
her hips to maximize her pleasure. Taking alongside my giving. It's
the things I love most about her... that she's not ashamed to ask for what
had all wants in the bedroom.

I've always, always given it to her.

It's not a pipe With pure joy on my part.

It wasn't Just like I am now.

It went into my I twirl my tongue around her swollen clit before battering it. I thrust
my fingers in and out, and I have one small regret not being on that bed
too. I have one in her ass too.

It had. I Simone sucks air deep into her lungs, her fingernails scraping my
and her hips buck hard as she starts to come. It came on fast and I
prepared for it. I grip her ass with both hands to hold her still and suck
clit hard to extend the orgasm. She shudders, gasps, pulls at my hair,
never begs me to stop.

I'm the one who finally pulls away, turning my cheek to rest against
my belly for only a second before I rise from the floor. I lick my love

illed onrelishing her taste and already missing her body. My dick strains aga
led thatpants, my balls ache and my heart feels shredded. But at this m
l her bySimone is blissed out and I use the opportunity to put everything betw
on heraside and enjoy the peace in her smile.

It lasts only a few moments before the haze clears and her exp
e top ofturns wary.

She starts to move toward me, gaze cutting down to my erectio
r body.me...”

I hold up a hand, take a step back. “Nothing has changed.”

Simone huffs in irritation.

ver her “I told you I’d make you come and then walk away.”

t to me, “Yeah,” she mutters, bending down to swipe her panties from th

She steps one foot in, then the other, shimmying them up her legs.
t to herdidn’t think it would stop at just me having an orgasm.”

I’m in the danger zone right now. My mouth wants to curve
amused smile and I know the minute I fall prey to Simone’s charm:
going to have me giving up all that I believe in right now.

“Oh, I’m going to have an orgasm,” I say, putting enough chill in r
that the light in her eyes dies just a little. “Just not with you.”

rotating The words are meant to hurt and put distance between us... remi
one of of that first time we had sex and then she demanded I eat her pussy. I
hat she away after the orgasm faded, except I told her, “Now that you’re wea
sweat on your skin, you’ve sort of lost your shine. Time to move on.”

Simone’s shoulders slump slightly, the only indication that wha
said hit the mark.

I leave the room, not looking back. I trot down the stairs, straight i
rust my bedroom where I lock the door behind me.

l as I’d Within moments I have the shower on, the water hot, my body nal
my cock in my fist. Leaning my forearm against the tiled wall with th
y scalp, rising all around me, I bow my head and jerk off to the memory of wh
wasn’t did to Simone.

c on her
but she

inst her
ver lip,

relishing her taste and already missing her body. My dick strains against my pants, my balls ache and my heart feels shredded. But at this moment, Simone is blissed out and I use the opportunity to put everything between us aside and enjoy the peace in her smile.

It lasts only a few moments before the haze clears and her expression turns wary.

She starts to move toward me, gaze cutting down to my erection. “Let me...”

I hold up a hand, take a step back. “Nothing has changed.”

Simone huffs in irritation.

“I told you I’d make you come and then walk away.”

“Yeah,” she mutters, bending down to swipe her panties from the floor. She steps one foot in, then the other, shimmying them up her legs. “But I didn’t think it would stop at just *me* having an orgasm.”

I’m in the danger zone right now. My mouth wants to curve into an amused smile and I know the minute I fall prey to Simone’s charms, she’s going to have me giving up all that I believe in right now.

“Oh, I’m going to have an orgasm,” I say, putting enough chill in my tone that the light in her eyes dies just a little. “Just not with you.”

The words are meant to hurt and put distance between us... reminiscent of that first time we had sex and then she demanded I eat her pussy. I walked away after the orgasm faded, except I told her, “*Now that you’re wearing my sweat on your skin, you’ve sort of lost your shine. Time to move on.*”

Simone’s shoulders slump slightly, the only indication that what I just said hit the mark.

I leave the room, not looking back. I trot down the stairs, straight into my bedroom where I lock the door behind me.

Within moments I have the shower on, the water hot, my body naked and my cock in my fist. Leaning my forearm against the tiled wall with the steam rising all around me, I bow my head and jerk off to the memory of what I just did to Simone.

CHAPTER 11

Simone

A RECEPTIONIST SITS inside the lobby of the arena's executive suite. It's the second time I've been to the facility, the first being the game day yesterday. Brienne had directed me to where I'd catch an elevator up to the top floor where double wooden doors lead into the inner sanctum where the higher-ups who run this organization.

A pretty young blond looks up from surfing her phone. Her hair is immaculate and there's no computer. I wonder if her only purpose is to greet people or answer the phone. She smiles brightly. "You must be Adam Turner. Ms. Norcross told me you'd be coming in to see her for lunch."

I'm surprised she knows that, given she has no apparent appointment calendar on her spotless desk, but I nod. "Yes, that's right."

"Follow me," she chirps as she stands.

I'm treated to a short tour as she points out various offices and conference rooms. We happen to walk by one office where I see Jenna at a desk, talking on the phone. She's a media liaison for the team.

Jenna sees me and waves with a bright smile. I wave back and continue following the receptionist to a corner office.

The brass nameplate says Adam Norcross and I assume this must have been Brienne's brother's office. He died in the crash and she took over the team. I bet it's still hanging not because she hasn't had time to change it but because she has no intention of doing so. It's an honorable nod to him and the work he did for the team.

The door is open and Brienne looks up to smile at me. The receptionist disappears and I'm motioned in as Brienne stands. "I'm so glad you're here. Come over this way to have lunch with me."

She moves from behind the desk and walks straight to me for a hug. "Thanks for making time," I say as we pull apart.

"Come sit over here." She motions to a table that seats four in the

It has two place settings with a platter of roasted chicken and veg along with a fruit tray. “I had this brought in. Hope it’s okay.”

“Looks incredible.” I look around the space as I move toward the desk. “And your office is stunning.”

“It’s all Adam’s style,” she says as she plops down in a chair. She immediately reaches for tongs to load up her plate. “I couldn’t bear to eat here.”

It’s clearly a man’s office... pure masculine elegance with the Ohio State colors and the city skyline beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows. It’s all dark wood paneling and thick burgundy carpeting, heavy oil paintings in gilded frames.

Brienne hands me the tongs and I grab a chicken breast with zucchini. I’m normally a healthy eater, but I suppose it’s more important that I’m pregnant.

There’s a bottle of sparkling water along with a pitcher of iced tea. Brienne asks, “Which do you prefer?”

“The sparkling is great,” I say and watch as she pours us each a glass.

I have to say... I like that. Brienne could easily have had a waitress serving our food and beverages but she’s such a grounded person, I think she’s one of those who would rather do it herself.

I take a moment to cut up all my chicken and vegetables while talking about the game tonight. The team is in Atlanta playing the Sting but I’ll head back after.

“Do you go to many away games?” I ask.

She smiles as she plucks a green bean from her plate with her fork. “Not so many since Drake and the boys moved in. I’m hanging back over the summer.” Smiling at me gently, she takes a bite of the veggie and points at me while she chews. “I assume you’re not at the point where you can’t go to some of the away games.”

I shake my head, feeling glum about that observation. “No. Things aren’t going well and after the debacle the other night at Mario’s, Van would probably not come to any more games or events.”

“Oh, bullshit,” she snaps.

“Actually, I don’t know that he’s wrong.” I set my utensils down. “I wanted to come talk to you. I wanted to apologize for the way I acted at Mario’s. I made an ass of myself and I hope I didn’t embarrass your team. I know Van is horrified, but I wanted to assure you he’s not.”

getables professional. I don't want my behavior to reflect poorly on him."

Brienne drops the rest of the green bean on her plate and uses the table napkin to wipe her fingers. Her stare is empathetic, but there's an unyielding quality to her expression. "While I would prefer my hockey family no air and fans, it was defused quickly, thanks to your husband's quick intervention. I'm not worried about what happened. I did want to make sure you were okay though, not because I thought Van would hurt you. It's clear he loves you, but I'm not sure he's ready to protect you from the hissy fit he'll throw if you go to Riverlot by just how idiotic this quest is for him to protect you from the hissy fit his father. I wanted to make sure you were okay emotionally."

I snort. "Not sure I'm ever going to be better emotionally. Van is testing my limits."

"You're not wearing him down yet?" she asks.

I consider how I provoked him into giving me an orgasm the other day. I'm so assured that if we could at least connect physically, it would bring me back to a more emotional state.

I was wrong.

I shake my head. "He's a stubborn man."

"Give it time," Brienne says. "You have a good history together and some space can get between him and the book, he'll start to come around." "Maybe," I hedge, but I'm not so sure. My confidence is at an all-time low.

Brienne's gaze hardens. "Regardless, you are a member of this family and I don't care if Van doesn't like it, you are welcome at any time and events."

Laughing, I nod. "Okay... I'll make sure he knows that, but I'll pick and choose my battles."

"I assume you'll be here for the Cold Fury game at least."

"Yeah, wouldn't miss that for the world," I assure her. My brothers aren't going to stay after the game rather than fly back with the team for a pregame Fournier get-together. "I'll even be wearing a Titans jersey."

"Van's jersey," she corrects. "Or you could wear your Titan Quarterback shirt."

My face flushes. "Yeah... about that... it sort of got destroyed."

Brienne's eyebrows shoot high.

"I cut it up in a fit of rage during an argument with Van. I'm sorry." Chuckling, Brienne waves off my apology. "I'll have Jenna get you a new one."

another one, and if that one gets cut up, we'll get you another. The p
a linendon't give up."

ielding I manage a smile and stab a piece of chicken. I've been trying so h
t attackI'm not gaining any ground. There will come a time when I'll give up.
on. I'm The rest of lunch is pleasant and I learn more about Brienne pers
e okay,including more details of her clandestine affair with Drake, which turr
s you aa beautiful engagement. We only chat for about thirty minutes, then I
story ofis rushing off to a meeting.

I poke my head into Jenna's office to say hello, but it's empty. I
testingnotepad and pen, jotting her a quick message to call me so we c
together. Van might not want me here, but I've already joined an a
community of women and I'm going to take advantage of my time wit
r night, On the way back to the house, I make mental notes of how my we
dge theprogress. Van comes home tonight and with two home games ahead
there will be opportunities to interact with him.

Presuming he comes home.

The man won't sit down and have a rational conversation with
nd onceeverything devolves into a fight. I've fallen back on a tried-and-true
nd." with Van, which is to provoke him into interaction with me, but th
all-timebeen working out so far. Sure, he broke the other night, but I kn
husband well. Part of that was his regret for hurting and shutting me
hockeywas trying to give me something, even though he made things all th
r gamesconfusing.

As I coast to a stop at a red light, I become aware that I have
ink I'llwhere I am. I'd been so mired in my thoughts that I must've missec
somewhere and I'm in a part of the North Shore area I don't recognize

"Shit," I mutter, immediately reaching for my phone that's conne
ers arethe navigation system. I flip to Google Maps and try to type in our ad
a long-I can get directions.

A car honks behind me and I see the light is green. I give a wave c
eens T-head in apology and hit the gas. As I drive, I try to type in the addre
just my thumb. I also scan the neighborhood to see if I recogni
buildings.

I finally get the address in, hit Start on the directions and toss my
" on the passenger seat. I look up and see there's a red light right above
get youI'm already halfway through the intersection.

joint is, Movement from my left catches my eye and I turn to see a large truck bearing down on me. A man is driving, his eyes wide open in shock toward me, but in the middle of the intersection while he has the right of way. He slams his brakes and horn and it's all squealing tires until the front of his truck personally slams into my driver's side door. There's a horrific sound of tearing metal and my window explodes, raining chunks of tempered glass all around me. My car slides to the right a good ten feet and then both vehicles come to rest, locked together.

I grab a My heart slams inside my chest and I'm dizzy from the shock of what can get happened. I immediately do a systems check and realize I'm okay. It's amazing how hurts too terribly except for my left arm and hip, which took a blow from the door caving in, but definitely nothing broken.

Next will Steam billows from the truck's grill and since my window is gone, it's all of us, wafting in front of my face. I'm able to get my seat belt off and then see the driver is opening my passenger door.

"Are you okay?" It's the man who was driving the truck.

I me and "Yeah... I think so." I offer him a sincere apology. "I'm so very sorry. I was method was lost and wasn't paying attention. Totally my fault."

It's not Luckily, the guy is more relieved I'm not dead than pissed and he tells me how my me crawl over the console and out the passenger door. The police arrive quickly along with an ambulance. Statements are taken and insurance is more exchanged. I'm issued a ticket and tow trucks come as neither vehicle is drivable.

No clue An emergency medical technician checks me out and while my blood pressure is a little high and my arm is starting to throb, I don't think I need to see a doctor and I tell him so.

Directed to "Are you sure?" he asks as he puts the blood pressure cuff away. "I took a pretty hard hit. You're going to be far sorer tomorrow than you are today."

Over my "I can just take some ibuprofen or something..." My words trail off as I realize, I don't know if I can take any pain medicine without harming my baby. I don't know anything at all as I haven't had my first obstetric appointment because I'm bound and determined to have my husband on my phone side. "Actually... I'm pregnant. Maybe I should get checked out."

I me and "That's a good idea," he says with a smile on his face.

I don't want to ride in the ambulance but I sort of have to, given

The truck isn't drivable and the EMT guilts me into it because I'm pregnant. I see my chance to make a concession, though, and let me sit in the "captain's chair" rather than on the gurney. I've never been in an ambulance before and I had no idea there was a chair a patient could sit in, but I gladly take it.

g metal On the way, I call Anna and tell her about the accident. She arranges for me to have my mother take Avery and assures me she'll meet me at the hospital.

"Don't tell Malik," I say before she hangs up.

hat just "I won't," she assures me. "Not as long as things are okay."

Nothing "I'm fine. Just a precaution to get a checkup because of the baby. Obviously, I'll need a ride home."

"All right... hang tight and I'll be there soon."

me, it's When we get to the hospital, I'm triaged quickly, given that I'm pregnant and put into a curtained room. The nurse hands me a gown and instructs me to change into it, which I do, then I sit in one of the two chairs rather than on the bed. I'm determined to make this seem not as serious as it is. I'm sorry. I potentially be.

When the nurse comes back in, she's pushing a rolling piece of help equipment. "The doctor is going to need to do an ultrasound," she explains. "He'll arrive in about an hour."

"No, he can't."

ance is She blinks at me in surprise.

hicle is "I mean... I want my husband with me for the first ultrasound."

The nurse glances at her watch. "Well, it will be a little bit longer. Someone from obstetrics can get here. How soon can he get to the hospital? I need to know."

I shake my head, tears coming hot and fast. "He's out of town. He doesn't want me to be pregnant, so that's a bit of a sticking point."

7. "You are to have it done." The nurse places her hand on my arm. "I'm sorry, honey. You really are to have it done."

I nod, wiping at the tears. "Yeah... I understand."

off as I "Is there someone who can be here with you?" She reaches over to get some of the medical-grade tissues and pulls several out to hand to me.

stetrics "My sister-in-law is on her way." I dab at the tears. "What exactly do you see on this ultrasound?"

"Given that you're only approximately seven to eight weeks along, it's a little early. But the biggest thing we'll want to do is confirm a heartbeat."

my car "Okay," I say, gusting out a sigh of disappointment. I'm going to let her go.

t. The first moment when we hear our baby together.

er than For a brief flash, I consider calling Van. He'd be at the visiting
no idea doing pregame prep. I could tell him I'm pregnant, I was in an accid
that I'm scared. I could have him on FaceTime with me while we
makes ultrasound.

it me at Just as quickly, I discard that idea. It would mess up his game. It
mess him up... I mean, major fucking with his head and I can't do that

Besides, I'm never going to lure him back with the baby. I know I
the "right thing." He'll come back to me because of the baby, even tho
baby and doesn't want it. He'll be terrified the entire time and our marria
crumble anyway.

I'm not doing that to either of us.

egnant, "I'm here," Anna says as she jerks the curtain back. Her attentio
acts me first on the nurse before moving to me freely crying. Her hand claps
than on mouth. "Oh, God... did you...?"

it could She can't bring herself to ask, but I shake my head. "We haven't d
ultrasound yet. Wanted you to be here first."

iece of I don't share with Anna my desire to have Van at my side. No s
lains. even going there.

In the end, I'm in the emergency room for almost four hou
ultrasound was quick and I heard my baby's heartbeat as Anna squee
hand. The doctor assured me all was well. They wanted to x-ray my s
before as the pain had increased and dark bruising started showing up. I decli
dital?" did have to wait for an orthopedist to examine it.

And he It was a long, exhausting ordeal, but I came out knowing the ba
okay. When we got home, Anna tried to get me to eat something bu
ly need honestly exhausted. I wanted to go to sleep.

After she left, I trudged up the stairs, wanting the comfort of a n
rather than the couch. The doctor said I could safely take Tylenol for th
o a box but I didn't because it was bearable.

I got undressed, put on one of Van's T-shirts and fell into a deep sl
y will I minute my head hit the pillow.

ng, not

ose that

first moment when we hear our baby together.

For a brief flash, I consider calling Van. He'd be at the visiting arena, doing pregame prep. I could tell him I'm pregnant, I was in an accident and that I'm scared. I could have him on FaceTime with me while we did the ultrasound.

Just as quickly, I discard that idea. It would mess up his game. It would mess him up... I mean, major fucking with his head and I can't do that.

Besides, I'm never going to lure him back with the baby. I know he'll do the "right thing." He'll come back to me because of the baby, even though he doesn't want it. He'll be terrified the entire time and our marriage will crumble anyway.

I'm not doing that to either of us.

"I'm here," Anna says as she jerks the curtain back. Her attention lands first on the nurse before moving to me freely crying. Her hand claps to her mouth. "Oh, God... did you...?"

She can't bring herself to ask, but I shake my head. "We haven't done the ultrasound yet. Wanted you to be here first."

I don't share with Anna my desire to have Van at my side. No sense in even going there.

In the end, I'm in the emergency room for almost four hours. The ultrasound was quick and I heard my baby's heartbeat as Anna squeezed my hand. The doctor assured me all was well. They wanted to x-ray my shoulder as the pain had increased and dark bruising started showing up. I declined but did have to wait for an orthopedist to examine it.

It was a long, exhausting ordeal, but I came out knowing the baby was okay. When we got home, Anna tried to get me to eat something but I was honestly exhausted. I wanted to go to sleep.

After she left, I trudged up the stairs, wanting the comfort of a mattress rather than the couch. The doctor said I could safely take Tylenol for the pain, but I didn't because it was bearable.

I got undressed, put on one of Van's T-shirts and fell into a deep sleep the minute my head hit the pillow.

CHAPTER 12

Van

AS I DRIVE by my house, I frown seeing that Simone's car isn't parked in front. I glance to the other side of the street, in my mirrors that I passed it.

Maybe she parked in the back alley by my single-car garage but it would be foolish. It's dark back there with only one streetlamp on the corner for the entire short street. I've never specifically told her not to park there because I was trying not to initiate contact or show her my concern, but I assumed she was smart enough not to. Plus, she's been parked out front for a single day since arriving.

I circle the block and my frown deepens as I note Simone's car isn't there.

Which means she's not home, and that means she's out somewhere. My eyes drop to the dashboard clock. It's almost two a.m. I had a good run in Atlanta tonight—an out-and-back—and my ass is dragging. I want more than to pass out in my bed for some solid sleep, but I'm so irritated that Simone not being here, I know sleep won't be in my future.

I park, close the garage behind me and walk through the door that leads into the backyard. All the homes here have stand-alone garages at the end of the property. Great to protect your car from the elements but sucks when you have to walk through the backyard in snow or rain. Luckily, there's no precipitation and it's a relatively mild evening in the upper forties. With the nice chill in the air, my blood is boiling as I slog up the steps to the kitchen door.

I'm just about to slip my key in the lock when a light comes on in the kitchen. Not the overhead light, but the one from the refrigerator door that illuminates Simone standing before it perusing the shelves, which were empty except for the groceries she buys.

I go still, watching her. Her back is to me and it gives me the oppo

to drink her in. To watch her without her knowing. I spend so much lately averting my gaze from her, this feels like a refreshing drink of water after being out in the sun all day.

She's wearing one of my T-shirts—Dartmouth Hockey—and it covers her from the mid-thigh, absolutely swallowing her up. Simone always wore my shirts at home and that strikes something deep within me.

Mostly, though, I'm relieved to see her standing there and not on the other side of the parallel God knows who, doing God knows what. I know how fucked up that would be if I've given her no reason to be at home waiting for me. Quite the opposite of what I've pushed her away at every chance, except for that one mistake three nights ago when she came on my tongue.

My dick pulses just thinking about it.

Slipping my key in the lock, I turn it and Simone looks my way. She sees me clearly through the glass panes and with the porch light providing enough illumination. I can only see half her face from the glow of the refrigerator, the other side shadowed. I see enough, though, to know she isn't smiling at me or looking in the mood to talk, and I'm not sure why I feel so relieved.

Simone turns back to stare inside the fridge as I enter the house. I lock the door behind me and because she's usually all up in my room trying to get me to interact with her, I'm momentarily dumbfounded by her ignoring me.

I can't fucking help myself. "What are you doing up?"

"I haven't eaten since breakfast," she replies, reaching in to grab a cup of yogurt.

"Why not?" I wince internally, berating myself for asking the question. *Just walk away, Van.*

Despite Simone moves over to the counter, sets the cup of yogurt down, and rummages through a drawer for a spoon. Her back is to me. "Got into a car accident today. By the time I got home from the emergency room I was exhausted so I went to sleep. Just woke up."

She says it all so blandly, like it's not a big deal, but I feel like I'm about to blow a circuit.

"You were in a car accident?" I demand, flipping on the overhead lights. "Are you okay?"

She turns to glance at me over her shoulder, her fingers working on the lock.

ch timetearing the top off the yogurt. “Just banged up a bit, but I’m fine. The
f waterso much.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter as I toss my keys down and drop my duffe
omes to floor. I move to her, letting my eyes run over what visible skin I can see
hirts at And right there, her left elbow is mottled black and blue. Carefully
her arm to examine it. “Is this it?”

ut with She leans to the side, glances down at her left leg and lifts the T-
is sincereveal a bruise on her hip. “I got hit in the driver’s side door by a truck
pposite, few bruises. Nothing broken.”

I made “No one called me.” I’m not sure why that bothers me, but it does.

She shrugs without explaining why I was left in the dark. Reluct
let her arm go and she turns away. I’m puzzled that I’m not gettin
She canfrom her. This is the perfect time for her to get attention from me beca
castingobviously worried. She could milk this. Simone would merely need to
of the that she feels weird all over her body and I’d examine it to make s
ow shedoctors didn’t miss something. I’d fall for it, too, not just because I w
ether toher until my dying day, but because after touching her the other nig
can think about is getting my hands on her again. The proximity to h
I closenow has me half-hard.

y space *Why the hell isn’t she using this against me?*

led that “You’re sure you’re okay?” I press.

“Fine,” she murmurs, dipping her spoon into the yogurt and starin
at the container as she brings it to her mouth.

b some I study her, trying to find something in her words—or lack ther
get my bearings.

uestion. “I don’t buy it,” I snap and that causes her head to jerk my way. “

been all over me the last two weeks, trying to wear me down, ar
wn andyou’ve got me as a captive audience because I want to know if you’r
n a caryou’re going silent? What the fuck is the game, Simone?”

1 I was I get a rise out of her, and maybe that’s what I was going for bec
her eyes narrow, a thrilling rush sweeps through me to have her attenti
n aboutfucked, but my cock steps up to the plate, stiffening with the desire to j
Christ... I have to be cracked in the head trying to provoke he
d light. stand my ground. In fact, I poke her even more.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I attempt a scathing glance dc
king atbody. “Is that your play, Simone? Be here waiting for me in a T-sh

car, not probably some skimpy panties on underneath—”

“—not wearing any panties,” she says quietly and I almost falter.

I on the Almost.

“Making me feel sorry for you because you were in an accident, I take bumps and bruises and you, what... think I’m going to go all soft and on you?”

I know the words coming out of my mouth are as ridiculous as they are. Just and Simone must think even more so because she tosses her spoon counter before taking two steps to come toe to toe with me.

I don’t give her a chance to talk, though, goading her further. “Wearing my T-shirt and telling me you’re not wearing panties is going to break me? Is that what you think, baby? That I’ll fall to this because of your manipulation and fuck you?”

Simone scoffs, rolling her eyes. “Honestly, Van... I’m not sure you even know what to do with it if I were naked and sopping wet for you. You’ll love to understand what you mean by the shine wearing off. Not sure you’ll do it for me.”

Okay, I know I brought that on, but fuck if she didn’t just shred my ego. In all of her bratty glory over the years, Simone has never implied or come right out and alleged that I couldn’t satisfy her. And deep down I recognize her machinations, I’ll admit she just struck hard and deep.

I walk into her, causing her to back up until I walk her right into the center island. Reminiscent of the other night, I have her pinned. I rest my hand on the counter and push the other one right between her legs.

She wasn’t lying about not having on panties and because I could feel her pussy in the pitch of black, my fingers immediately discover she is wet and okay, sopping.

A low growl bubbles in my chest and I can’t fucking help myself as I slowly press my finger inside her, all the while staring at her as it slides in. Her eyes stay locked on mine but when I’m in to the third knuckle, her eyes flutter closed and her hips rock.

“I know what to do with this,” I say, my voice husky with pure desire for this woman.

“Prove it.” She stares at me with defiant challenge.

Later, after I come down off my orgasm, I’m going to berate my

this utter lack of strength and conviction. I'll call myself ten times a f
I'll be even more of an ass to Simone to make up for giving in, but th
all come later.

it? Few Right now, I'm going to prove it.

I tender I lean in and catch her bottom lip with my teeth, causing her to ga
surprise. I bite it lightly and then lick it before sweeping my tongue ins
y soundmouth. She moans as I deepen the kiss and her knees nearly buckle as
on thethe wet tip of my finger around her clit.

Having decided to fuck my wife, I'm almost delirious with lust. I f
"Thinka randy teenager getting ready to lose my virginity, having had noth
oing tomy fist and dirty fantasies of Simone.

mental "Get my cock out," I rasp into her mouth.

Simone is the most sexually adventurous woman I've ever known .
e you'ddoesn't have a shy bone in her body. She knows my body as well as
. I kindhers, and she's a pure genius at undoing my pants. This isn't the fi
'd evenwe've both been swept up into a cyclone of desperate need.

I press two fingers back into her and she barely falters while un
ny manmy pants. She multitasks, rotating her hips as she releases my dick f
mplied,prison. I kiss her hard, one hand working between her legs and th
d whilecoming up to pinch a nipple. Simone moans and jerks but all the wh
ard andfists my cock and gives me long, sure strokes that have me practically
stars. I don't want to come like a schoolboy, so I bat her hands away fi
nto theand use the time to whip off her T-shirt. I kiss my way down her nec
a handmy tongue over her nipples and start to lower myself back into th
position I was in the other night. Going to lick her straight to a hot c
find herthen I'm going to fuck my wife, followed by some self-loathin
indeedconfusion.

"No," Simone says, a hand to my cheek to stop my progress. Sh
yself. Iworried about something. "Just fuck me, Van. I don't need that."

inks in. Need it? Who cares if she needs it? I want to give it.

le, they "I just want you inside me right now," she says, and while her wo
off, I can read between the lines.

lust for *Before I change my mind.*

I surge upward, taking Simone with me. My hands go under her
her legs wrap around my waist. Our mouths fuse and I consider my c
self forToo far to her bedroom or mine, so I spin us around and pin her aga

ool and refrigerator.

hat will I keep one hand on her bottom, the other sliding into her hair to h
captive. My mouth works against hers, our tongues tangling, and
writhes in my arms. Her pussy rubs back and forth over my cock, driv
sp with fucking mad with the need to be inside her.

side her We know each other so well and have fucked in every p
I circle imaginable that using touch and instinct alone, the head of my dic
itself at her wet entrance. There's been virtually no foreplay—at least
feel like physical kind. Our sparring and anger have done enough to get us worl
ing but I flex my hips and Simone pushes downward, sinking onto my sh
exquisite slowness. Air hisses through my teeth and I can't concentrate
mouth.

and she “Christ,” I groan, resting my cheek against hers. I shake m
I know slowly... a pathetic attempt to deny that I don't want to do this.

st time Simone stills but wraps her arms around my neck, sliding her fing
my hair. She puts her mouth near my ear and whispers, “Give it to me
zipping promise I won't throw it in your face later and you can go back to is
rom its me if you want.”

e other I hesitate only a fraction of a second before I remember I already
ile, she peace with myself for this mistake. I punch my hips forward, slamm
r seeing rest of the way into her, and Simone lets out a cry of pleasure. My mo
rom me forceful, the refrigerator shifts and I can hear the contents inside
k, flick tossed about.

e same Wheeling around, I move for the table. It's sturdy-looking enou
orgasm, better yet, there's nothing on top of it. I kick a chair out of the way
ng and Simone on it, not once disrupting my place within her.

When her back is flat against the thick wooden surface, I pound aw
e look without finesse and there are no sweet, filthy words that I would n
give her. She wanted to be fucked and I want to fuck her.

That's it.

rds trail

ass and
options.
inst the

refrigerator.

I keep one hand on her bottom, the other sliding into her hair to hold her captive. My mouth works against hers, our tongues tangling, and Simone writhes in my arms. Her pussy rubs back and forth over my cock, driving me fucking mad with the need to be inside her.

We know each other so well and have fucked in every position imaginable that using touch and instinct alone, the head of my dick finds itself at her wet entrance. There's been virtually no foreplay—at least not the physical kind. Our sparring and anger have done enough to get us worked up.

I flex my hips and Simone pushes downward, sinking onto my shaft with exquisite slowness. Air hisses through my teeth and I can't concentrate on her mouth.

“Christ,” I groan, resting my cheek against hers. I shake my head slowly... a pathetic attempt to deny that I don't want to do this.

Simone stills but wraps her arms around my neck, sliding her fingers into my hair. She puts her mouth near my ear and whispers, “Give it to me, Van. I promise I won't throw it in your face later and you can go back to ignoring me if you want.”

I hesitate only a fraction of a second before I remember I already made peace with myself for this mistake. I punch my hips forward, slamming the rest of the way into her, and Simone lets out a cry of pleasure. My move is so forceful, the refrigerator shifts and I can hear the contents inside getting tossed about.

Wheeling around, I move for the table. It's sturdy-looking enough and better yet, there's nothing on top of it. I kick a chair out of the way and lay Simone on it, not once disrupting my place within her.

When her back is flat against the thick wooden surface, I pound away. It's without finesse and there are no sweet, filthy words that I would normally give her. She wanted to be fucked and I want to fuck her.

That's it.

CHAPTER 13

Simone

VAN MOVES INSIDE my body, snarling rumbles of need coursing through so hard I feel it vibrating into me. He pulls out and slams back in, banging table into the wall. He hikes my right leg up over his hip for more leverage driving into me over and over again.

I want him to kiss me but I'm afraid to demand it. I'm afraid of anything to disrupt this man who is being reminded right at this moment he can't ever leave me.

He can't give this up.

Driving his hips against me, he hits something that only Van has been able to reach. Oh, I'm sure it's a physical thing but it's emotional. When Van loses control while inside me, it's a primal claim on my soul and that turns me on more than anything he could ever do. He moans and grunts telling me just how good—no, how perfect—I feel. He sends me into that free fall of ecstasy. An intense orgasm rips through me; it comes on so unexpectedly that I cry out my husband's name. It sounds like a prayer of worship.

Van groans and thrusts into me faster.

My body is still shuddering through the last vestiges of my own orgasm when I take note that my husband is on the verge of tipping. I know the signs... how he holds his breath and all sounds of pleasure go utterly silent. It's as if he's bracing himself to get wrecked and I know he's only seconds away from joining me—

"Fuck," he roars, pulling out of me so fast, I don't know what's happening. Van leans over me, planting a palm beside my head on the table and uses his other hand to jack his cock. I stare wide-eyed with confusion as he curses through his release, jetting all over my stomach. Van's face is red up and I'm not sure if it's pleasure or pain I'm seeing.

"Fuck," he huffs out, his favorite word to use that could mean

number of emotions. His hand twists on his cock, wringing out a few drops of semen before falling away.

“Why did you pull out?” I ask with a frown as he straightens up, his body rising and falling from the exertion of what we just did. Don’t be wrong... my husband has marked me many times over the years, I wasn’t that.

“Don’t want you to get pregnant,” he says flatly and once again I’m left in the cold, dark world of Van Turner. His head drops, refusing to look me in the eye as he tucks himself back into his pants and zips up.

Average, Van turns to the kitchen sink to wash his hands while I lie like a lump, splayed out on the kitchen table. His semen puddled on my belly. I do wrong and I realize, that was the most unsatisfying sex I believe I’ve had, despite the fact I got off. Those moments of pleasure that wracked my body just moments ago seem so very wrong.

I push up off the table and Van twists to look over his shoulder and as ever bend over to grab his T-shirt from the floor and wipe the fluid from my mostly stomach. I drop it just as quickly and run out of the kitchen, throwing off living room and up the stairs into the guest bathroom. I turn the shower on and when the water’s hot enough, I step in and wash myself clean. I do. His face under the spray and let it take my tears down the drain. I’m desperate to him because the one thing I thought could still bond us seems broken too.

And like When I’m cried out, I wrap my hair in a towel, another around my neck and cross the hall to the spare bedroom. I’ll pull on warm pajamas and get into bed. I don’t even have it in me to go sleep in the living room, just so I can release have Van’s attention. In fact, I think I decidedly don’t want it tonight.

For all the I pull up short, though, when I see Van sitting on the edge of the bed, silent, waiting for me. His forearms are resting on his thighs and his head is hanging. It lifts when he hears me enter. “Are you okay?” he asks.

And God, does that make me so sad because I can hear so much of what’s his tone. It hurts the most to know he’s leaving this marriage while loving me to the depths of his soul.

As if in a vision as “Yeah... I’m fine.” *Lie.* “Just going to get dressed and go to bed.”

As he screws Turning for my suitcase, I expect him to leave, but instead he says, “I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

And any “I know.” I know while sex felt good for him, it was a line he didn’t want to cross.

more “I didn’t mean to disrespect you,” he says, punctuating the words with a
know he’s clarifying something to me.

I turn to face him, gripping my towel tight around me like it’s a
get medon’t even know what to say.

“I’m tired of fighting, Simone.” Van scrubs his hands over his face.
I’ve never heard him sound more defeated. Even when all the shit went
n in the three years ago with his dad, he never sounded this beaten down. “I
e in the of worrying about you. I’m tired of people asking me about my father
tired of everything.”

It occurs to me at this moment that ever since the book came out, Van
/ seems I have done nothing but fight. Heated arguments, yelling bouts and per
ve ever cold silence. I’m not sure if we ever actually had a calm discussion.

I move to sit beside him on the bed and I take one of his hands in
“Tell me everything that’s in your heart right now and I’ll only list
at me. If fighting.”

Van looks at me and I see all the love there. It’s not something he
igh the prove to me. “I can’t begin to describe to you what this is like for m
wer on know the facts, but you don’t know the feelings. The things he wrote
put my book...”

“You read it?” I ask in horror. Why would he do that to himself?

Van nods, gaze going down to the carpet. “I read enough and I
y body vomit when I think about every person who read that book, and
d go to wondering... did I stick my hand in that nest and crush those eggs? V
o I can little killer in the making? Did I kill the neighborhood cats and was I
chip off the old block?”

“No one would ever believe that, Van. That book comes across as
head is but lies. You have a successful career, a family who loves you and a r
of friends who know the real you.”

“There are many who will want to believe it, baby. Many do be
ile still and wonder if I’m a monster hiding in plain sight. We live in a world
people want to believe the worst about others. Reporters are always g
ask me about this and it’s never going away.”

Van rises from the bed, but not to leave the room. He turns to fa
tucking his hands in his pockets. “I’ve got this recurring waking night
I’t want I think about it all the time. I imagine we have a kid... a daughter, l
that’s what I want first. And she comes home from her first day of

so that I and you and I are waiting for her to get off the bus. But instead of her running toward us with smiles, she's crying, because some kid at school told her that her grandpa was a serial killer." Van's voice cracks and he shakes his head.

"I just can't do it. I suffered through it myself as a kid, but I was lucky. My father took me away and gave me a new name, a new life. Our kids can't see that, so I have to do the next best thing and refuse to bring children into this world. I'm tired of this show. And I know you've said you can do without children to stay with me. I'm not, but I can't do that to you, Simone. You are built to love and there are so many lucky souls out there just waiting to be born so you can be their mother. I can't let you give that up. I won't let you give that up."

Months of this is the point where I normally would argue with him, but for the first time, I'm not going to. I want him to know I hear him. That I understand.

And I push up from the bed and move to my husband. I don't care if he's not, but I press into his body and wrap my arms around him for a moment. I turn my cheek and press it to his chest. "I'm sorry, baby. I wish I could do anything to make this all better for you and I know I can't."

And for the first time since we separated, Van touches me with care and tenderness. He accepts my empathy. He wraps his arms around me and I reciprocate the hug.

It doesn't last long... only seconds, but it makes up for that shitty moment I just had. And it gives me hope.

But he does pull away and when he does, I don't like the look on his face. Was I a "I'm going to move into a hotel."

really a "Why?" I exclaim, panic taking over.

"Because I can't be near you and stay true to my convictions. You're not just a temptation and I'm not talking about sex. I'm talking about the network that you represent too much hope and honestly, babe... it hurts to be here right now. I just want to be done with this." Van turns for the door but when he walks out, he says, "You know I love you, right?"

I where "I know."

going to "It's because I love you so much that I'm doing this."

"It's a mistake," I whisper.

He glances back at me. "It's a risk I'm willing to take."

Van slips out the door and I sit on the bed. My mind is spinning... processing everything that happened tonight. Surely there's something I'm missing... some logical piece of information that will help

running change his mind.

her that I know that Van thinks he just laid down the law, but I can't give
is head. There has to be a way to save my marriage.

ky. Etta Or the alternative, I need to let him go and hope he can figure it out
ape it, own.

is freak

with me,

re some

other. I

or once,

likes it

a hug. I

d make

are and

ne and

sex we

his face.

I're too

the fact

have it

t before

already

here is

help me

change his mind.

I know that Van thinks he just laid down the law, but I can't give up yet. There has to be a way to save my marriage.

Or the alternative, I need to let him go and hope he can figure it out on his own.

CHAPTER 14

Van

THE COLD FURY are already on the ice for pregame warmups when the step out. I follow Boone, skating in a clockwise circle on our half arena. Rob Zombie's "Dragula" blares and fans line up at the glass behind net with signs that say "Drake... I want to have your baby" and "Titan Puck Around."

I skate slowly, my legs already limber and warm from riding a stationary bike and doing stretches a bit ago. Eventually, our team lines up for the one drills, lobbing easy pucks at Drake to get him in the zone.

As I stand at the rear of the left-hand line near center ice, someone hits me hard in the back. I turn to see Lucas standing there.

Even though I was with his sister for three years, two of which were spent being married, Lucas is the one brother who never fully warmed up to me. He's genial enough at family gatherings but I don't know that he ever truly forgiven me for the fact that I started seeing his baby sister right under his nose while we lived in the same house. This, despite the fact that his sister was the one who relentlessly came on to me.

From the very start, she was unrelenting in her flirting. She made comments about the way I looked or how I acted that threw me off balance but there was nothing coy about how she did it. She called it like she saw it.

"Hmmm," she said on the very first day we met, her tone suggesting she was trying to figure me out since I'd been pretty standoffish. "I'm going with brooding. It's a better fit for the hotness you exude."

What the fuck was she even talking about?

"Hotness?" I was at a loss as to how to deal with a woman who said things I didn't understand.

"Oh, come on." She let her gaze roam brazenly up and down my body before smirking at me. "Just look at all you got going on. All that muscle. And those deep, sensitive eyes filled with mystery. Total"

and totally broody.”

I tried to pay her no mind. Ignored her, actually. And yet deep down I knew that I was going to be in trouble where she was concerned.

Lucas jolts me out of my memories. “Going to kill you tonight,” he says in a low voice, and he’s not joking. The words are stone cold and laden with malice.

“Good thing we’re not on the same lines, then,” I mutter before the Titans away. No way am I going to fight her brother, especially not during the important game that has playoff-standing ramifications.

Lucas sneers. “On or off the ice, doesn’t matter when.”

“Whatever.” I skate away from my brother-in-law and join the line on the opposite side. I scan the crowd. I don’t know where she is, but the doubt Simone is here watching. She wouldn’t miss a chance to see Lucas wo-on-Max play.

I don’t think she’d be here to see me, not after the way I left last night. There was a finality to our encounter and I know that because she listened to me. Heard how I felt.

Chose not to contradict me, fight for me or attempt to offer hope.

I told her I was moving out and she let me. I packed a bag and walked out the door, Simone was nowhere to be seen. Presumably under his guest room, going to sleep.

She let me go.

I know I’m supposed to be glad it’s over. Simone is free to get a new life. To have the happiness she deserves. It’s everything I’ve reached for because that book came out.

And yet... there’s not one part of me that has any relief from the overwhelming sensation of doom. If anything, I feel worse.

Simone told me I was making a mistake.

Did I?

“You good, man?” I glance over my shoulder and see Boone. “Sorry, I was talking to Fournier.”

“Yeah, all good.” Boone knows I want a divorce from Simone. Everyone knows she’s the little sister to Max and Lucas Fournier.

Boone taps his stick against the side of my leg. “Got your back, and I’ve got your hotness.”

I lift my chin, acknowledging the offer. Not the first time he’s told me that, and there’s not a doubt in my mind if Lucas somehow ends up on

at the same time as me and comes after me, my teammates will be right down, Hell, they all know about my troubles with Simone as word travels the grapevine and most of them were privy to her attacking that he says Mario's. But I haven't divulged details to any of them, nor do they know reasons for us separating. It's obvious the stress of Arco's biography weight on me but no one really knows how that led to me leaving Simone turning I move along with the line, lost in my thoughts. I run a drill and winding unfinished, I search for Lucas on his side of the ice before choosing the line. I'll keep distance between us. I'd already hurt his sister once. Like couples do, we had a make-or-break moment when it first hit the news on the Arco was my father. Simone wanted to stand by my side, but our relationship's now too fucking new and I was too unsure of myself to accept what she said and so freely giving to me. I had no confidence in what we had.

her last use she when I go in the A freelance reporter who recognized me that one time I visited prison wrote a sensationalized article revealing my true identity to the just as the Cold Fury were starting their championship run. The article entitled "The Unknown Madness of Van Turner," and it was the thing I thought was the most horrific thing that had ever happened to me. The first, learning my dad was a serial killer, and the second, finding my mother's body after she committed suicide.

ew life. or since Simone was in California with me for the game and she immediately kicked into caregiver mode. She knew about Arco and she was my sister's champion. Except when she asked, "What are we going to do?" my reaction was to immediately push her away.

om this "We?" I scoffed. "Why is this a we thing? Last I heard, your dad was a prominent doctor, not a serial killer." That didn't anger her. I had no empathy and it made me feel even worse. "I need you to stay out of this. It's hard enough to deal with the fallout of all this shit, but I don't need to worry about you at the same time."

aw you Simone didn't back down. "You don't need to worry about me."

re, and "You see, but I will. And fuck... it's hard work just letting you constantly judging my actions and trying to figure out if they measure up to what I think are acceptable standards for you. And while I'm worrying about that shit with you, I've now got to deal with the entire world knowing about my shame."

it there. Simone frowned. "Your shame?"

through "Yes, my fucking shame," I yelled at her. "Do you know how di-
fan atdisgusting this shit makes me feel? I'm swept up into his sickness
10w theassociation. How many people are looking at me and wondering is he
hy is afather?"

one. In hindsight, I'm sure it wasn't what I thought, but at that mo-
nen I'mthought she looked at me with pity and I couldn't take it. I tried to leav-
he nextspace between us.

e many She begged me not to push her away. "I've got your back."

ws that I snarled at her. "You've got my back? You've got my back?"

ionship She lifted her chin and stood her ground. "I do."

she was Disdain was evident in the scathing timbre of my tone. "And just
you have my back, Simone? Just how are you going to support me t
this?"

Arco in "By standing beside you. By defending you. By telling and show-
: world,world that you're kind and generous and loving and—"

cle was "I fuck you, Simone." My tone was flat and without any tenderr
rd-mostgive you orgasms. I laugh at your silliness. But I am not kind nor ge-
d was a nor loving. So you'd essentially be lying on my behalf. Is that how
died bysupport me?"

"You're more than that," she whispered.

ediately "You know I'm not. And besides that, do you think people are g-
talwartaccept what you're saying? I give a little interview with the mec-
sponseproclaim I'm a good guy, but instead the media shows highlights of
fights to speculate that I'm a violent person. I know how this shit pl-
I was aIt's why it's easier to keep people out."

iad her And still, she would not give up. She would not abandon me. Re-
his. It'sbrat that she was. "Van... I get you're angry, and maybe the natural
o worryto drive away those that care about you—"

"You're wrong. I don't intend to drive Etta away at all." The imp-
was crystal clear that only Etta was welcome in my life. I'm not sure
in. I'mmeant that but I was spiraling so quickly. I said the words even thou-
e up tofelt wrong. "I made a mistake. I should have never gotten in this de-
g aboutyou. Should have never opened myself up like I did."

g about "Sounds like you're blaming me for some reporter who wrote an
about you," she said, showing the first sign of anger.

“No, not blaming you. Just angry for taking myself off the radar temporarily and with.”

Ultimately, that day ended with us parting ways. I told her I need like his and maybe later... after I got through the playoffs, we could... I'm not sure what.

Simone was having none of it. A backbone of solid steel, she wasn't one who would let me string her along. “That’s not how this works. There is no compromise either now—when you need me the most in your life—or not fucking ever.”

The dumbest words I’d ever issued in my life came tumbling out. “It’s not fucking ever.”

She left California and we were done.

Not forever, though. I realized how stupid I had been and there was a lot of apologizing for the way I hurt her. I was a lucky man she gave me another shot.

ing the

I force those memories away, but it’s not lost on me that I’m redefining my history. I’ve once again pushed her away and with any luck, she’ll be back to Vermont sooner rather than later now that I’ve moved out of my house. The only difference between now and then is I have no intention of going after her to grovel.

When warm-ups are complete, we head back to the locker room for minute instructions from Coach West. I have to admit, his pep talks are good. He’s not the type of person who speaks because he likes himself. He chooses only words that he knows will impact us and by the time we take the ice again for the start of the game, we’re all fueled by high adrenaline.

From the first face-off, the energy in the arena is electric. The Coyotes are at the top of their division, same as us. They’re striving to take back championship rights from the Arizona Vengeance, who won the last two years. We’re a cobbled-together Cinderella team that no one thought would be this good.

It’s late in the first period when there’s a line shift and I’m back on the ice with Mason, Dillon, Evgeny and Anders. We’re getting more in sync each passing day and we transition smoothly, right into the defensive zone.

Anders takes point, Evgeny on the left and Dillon on the right. Mason splits the defense and I station in front of the net, trying to block

o begin Fournier's field of vision.

That's when I see him.

ed time Lucas is out on the ice, which hasn't happened yet and he's not sure playing with his regular line. I'm not sure if he came out on his own or if the coach sent him, but when our eyes make contact, I know he's going to go for a shot at me.

ter. It's net. I get to it first, but then I'm slammed into from behind, a stick jabbing me painfully in my mid-back. The puck is at my skates and I'm trying to keep it loose, but Lucas is tying me up.

"Come on, asshole. Let's me and you have a go," he snarks as he chops at my skates in what looks like a reasonable attempt to free them. I have a chance to shove him but he catches my leg and it fucking hurts.

I toss an elbow back at him and it connects. He shoves me again. "Can't wait for Simone to be done with you. Get herself a replacement. Someone who's not a pansy-ass."

reading Rage flows through my veins and I spin on him. Lucas smiles at me in triumph, immediately tosses his gloves to the ice and pulls up one after the other. It's the universal sign that he's ready to go and I have no choice but to drop my own gloves.

or last- The crowd roars its approval, not just because their new defenseman is really quite the record of pounding other players into the ground, but because everyone knows we're brothers-in-law. Granted, no one knows the anniversary.

he time The rest of the team stays clear, as do the refs, letting us have a go.

ype and We circle each other to the left of the net and as if by some pre-arranged moment, we crash into each other. We're both seasoned fighters and I know his style well since we were defensive line mates together for the Col.

ack the Normally, I'd say I'm the meaner of the two and that gives me the advantage, but Lucas is riding his heroic white steed tonight, trying to avenge his brother's death.

ast two I grab his sweater at his chest and throw a quick right cross. It glances off his helmet but he strikes fast, his fist at my left cheek, hitting me in the eye.

would I feel the skin tear. I pull back my arm and let it fly, landing two solid punches on his head, although still mostly helmet. I'm pulling back for a third punch when something slams into me from the side so hard, my skates go out from under me.

son and me. I hit the ice with a jarring impact and a huge body lands right on top of me, knocking the air from my lungs. I focus and see it's Max looking at me.

through his goalie mask before he's pulled off by the refs.

I jump up, ready to go at Lucas again but see that both teams not outmobbed each other, having taken offense to Max jumping into the fray if hisThere's a lot of shoving and cursing, name-calling and dares to drop the puck to take a shot. Eventually, the refs get players sent back to their respective benches, and in the while, the crowd screams for blood. The Titans' fans are not happy to be double-teamed, but none of them know I had that coming.

Immobilized I skate to the bench while the melee is being sorted out and let one of the trainers slap two butterflies on the cheek wound. I then immediately head toward the penalty box.

Lucas is already sitting in his little glass prison, hatred radiating from his expression as he watches me. We're both given five-minute major penalties for fighting and to my surprise, Max is given one too. He doesn't see the penalty, though, but rather a player of their coach's choosing joins Lucas as a man. This is fortuitous as it puts us up a player, and with the advantage we can capitalize when Foster scores a goal just eighteen seconds into the second period with play. When our penalties are up and we come out of our respective benches, I dig the knife in just a bit as Lucas and I skate past each other. "Thanks for the goal. I have a goal."

Man has



because

popularity.

planned

I know

and Fury.

advantage,

sister.

comes off

so hard

it hits to

and when

in under

the top of

g at me

WE'RE ALL RIDING high after defeating the Cold Fury, so much so that I've been able to put Simone out of my mind for a good half hour while I relax and change. I've enjoyed the recaps of great plays, snapping towels and the boisterous vibe going on.

"Van," Boone calls out as I gather my duffel and head for the locker room. "Mario's. Meet you there for a beer?"

I shake my head. "I'm out, man. Going home to bed. I'm exhausted."

Of course, going home means going to the hotel I checked into.

"Old man," he taunts, and I don't let it get to me.

I throw a hand up in the air. "See you at practice tomorrow."

I leave the good vibes and excited banter behind, stepping out into the hallway, and come up short as I see Max waiting there. He's clearly fresh from the shower with his dark hair the same color as Simone's wet and his

eyes staring at me warily. He's in street clothes and not a suit, and that

he must be staying here in Pittsburgh for the night. I presume to visit Simone and Malik.

the fight. “Here for round two?” I ask as I move past him and head toward the players’ entrance into the parking garage.

and all “You’re welcome, by the way,” he replies as he follows me.

by I got That stops me and I turn to face him. “What should I be thanking you for?”

of the “For stopping Lucas from killing you. It’s why I took you down to the ground so the refs would stop the fight.”

from his *Huh? So he wasn’t trying to kill me along with his brother. Interesting.* I shrug and turn away. “Well, thanks.”

enalties “Come on, man,” Max says, jogging past me and getting in my way. “I’m brought up short. “Give me five minutes of your time to talk to Simone.”

age, we “What’s to talk about? I’ve asked for a divorce, she’s clinging on to me with no power any hope. Lucas and Malik hate me. So should you.”

boxes, I “But does Simone?” Max asks pointedly.

for the I don’t even think to lie to him. “No. She still loves me.”

“And you still love her.”

“Always,” I admit with no shame. “Which is why she can’t be with me.” Max lowers his gaze, shaking his head with a smirk plastered on his face.

“What?” I demand with irritation. Like he has the most obvious reasons that I’ve and I can’t see it.

shower “I’m going to make a prediction,” Max says with a chuckle as he walks away and claps a hand on my shoulder. I stare at him, teeth clenched. “I predict everything is going to turn out just fine.”

re exit. Meaning that Simone will move on and have a wonderful and fulfilling life without me? “What makes you say that?”

l.” “Because you both love each other,” he replies, letting his hand fall. “You can’t love each other like that and let it go.”

“Why is everyone so insistently ignoring the fact that I am, in fact, in love with her? I’ve made my decision. It’s done. Go, her go, despite being in love with her? I’ve made my decision. It’s done.”

nto the “If you say so,” Max says with a grin. “But I predict you’ll visit me because you’ll have faith that you and Simone can handle anything as long as you’re together, and I also have complete confidence that my sister will welcome you back with open arms. She did it once before, remember?”

sit with Yeah... I remember. She was too good a woman for me and stil
that matter.

ard the “Good luck,” Max says, pivoting and walking away. He takes thre
and then turns to face me, as if he has just one more thing to say. “C
see you at the next family get-together.”

ing you I snort because that’s ridiculous. “Whatever.”

the ice

ting.

way so
about

without

me.”
s face.
answer

steps in
lict that

ulfilled

l away.

, letting
e.”
vise up
long as
ter will
”

Yeah... I remember. She was too good a woman for me and still is, for that matter.

“Good luck,” Max says, pivoting and walking away. He takes three paces and then turns to face me, as if he has just one more thing to say. “Oh, and see you at the next family get-together.”

I snort because that’s ridiculous. “Whatever.”

CHAPTER 15

Simone

ANNA KISSES MALIK on his neck before she pushes up off the love seat exhausted and going to bed. Love you.”

“Love you back.” Malik holds on to her hand until their arms stretch and their fingers slide against each other before breaking apart.

“Good night, Anna,” I say, and Lucas and Max echo me.

When the door to the master bedroom closes, we’re all silent for a moment. The Fournier siblings are all together in Malik and Anna’s room. They’re staying the night and flying back commercial tomorrow, taking the opportunity to spend time here with us all in the same close quarters close to midnight, but I’ve got nowhere to be tomorrow. I decided to stay here tonight so we could all hang out as long as we wanted to.

I know Lucas and Max are exhausted as they played a well-fought game. Lucas is currently sprawled out on the big couch and I’m sitting on the floor with my back resting against it near his feet. Max is cocked back in a recliner and Malik is still sunk into the love seat Anna just vacated.

“Get me a beer, runt,” Lucas demands, moving his knee to bump the back of my head. He’s got two empties sitting on the coffee table.

“Bite me,” I reply.

“Twerp.” Lucas swings his legs over my head and rolls off the couch. “Anyone else want one?”

“I’ll take another,” Max says, draining the last of his bottle.

Malik lifts his chin. “Me too.”

“Sis?” Lucas inquires.

I hold up my bottle of water. “I’m good.”

I’d told them earlier I had an upset stomach and wasn’t in the mood for a drink. I was patted on the head while they got busy with the beer. It’s typical for a Fournier get-together. It’s not often we’re all under the same roof, but after the parents go to bed, the kids usually stay up late and

the last handful of years, that's included significant others, but Max, Jules, and Lucas's wife, Stephanie, stayed back in Raleigh with my a perfect nieces and nephews. And, of course, Van's not here.

No, he's holed up in a hotel somewhere, avoiding me.

When Lucas comes back in, he delivers each beer and then plops c couch, but this time he doesn't lie down. He pats the available seat c "Get your ass up here and let's talk."

at. "I'm It's not the offer to give up the hard floor that has me dubious, tone in his voice that sounds like this was preplanned.

touch and I glance around, eyeballing Malik and Max, and yup... they're no casually slouched in their chairs but sitting up straight. Apparently, been waiting for Anna to go to bed to gang up on me about Van.

t for a "Actually," I say as I stand, stretching and giving a huge fake s living "Kind of tired. I'm going to bed."

orrow, I try to walk past Lucas but he grabs the back of my shirt and sli ity. It's toward the seat next to him. I can't stop my momentum and the mir to stay butt hits the cushion he points at me. "Stay."

t game. "Woof, woof," I mutter, but I stay. I scoot back into the corner couch and cross my legs. "But I'm going to talk first." I look point ne floor Lucas. "You're an asshole for fighting Van tonight."

in the "It's just hockey," he says smoothly.

o me in "You're full of shit. Everyone saw you instigate it and it was uncal Christ, Lucas... you split his cheek open."

"Max was in on it too," Lucas says petulantly. "Why am I the o getting yelled at?"

couch. I snort. "Because Max ended the fight."

Lucas's gaze snaps to Max and he narrows his eyes. "You weren't me to avenge our sister?"

"Sorry, dude," Max says, shaking his head. "I was stopping it : only way was to get Van on the ground."

"You traitor," Lucas exclaims dramatically.

ood to I blow Max a kiss. "It's why you're my favorite brother."

This is "Whatever." Lucas scoffs and faces me. "But now that we have yo e same and can talk some sense into you, I want you to give Van the divor talk. In seeking. He's killing you slowly... death by a thousand paper cuts stand the fucker and I say good riddance."

's wife, He doesn't elaborate but after that kind of statement, what more noticeably said? My head turns to Malik who I suspect has similar feelings.

Malik's expression is sympathetic, but he shrugs. "You tried, S
Now it's time to move on. While I love having you in the same city
onto theyou have a career back in Vermont that you should go back to. Di
ushion.work. Take your mind off things."

"And divorce Van?" I ask for clarification.
but the While his expression is still soft in understanding, his nod is firm.
And divorce Van."

no longer I swing my head toward Max, now perched on the edge of the r
they'veHe's got his elbows on his knees, beer bottle held loosely in one hand
what about you?" I ask.

no yawn. "I want you to be happy."
"Me too," I say with a bitter laugh. "And to me, that's savin
ngs memarriage. Yet you want me to give up and not fight?"

ute my Max nods at Malik and Lucas. "I agree with these bozos. I think
done everything you can. I don't agree you should give up hope, but
of theyou should give up trying. Van knows how you feel. It's on him now."

tedly at Always the voice of reason. Lucas and Malik are the hotheads, b
has always been so steady, you can't help but take his opinions serious

I grab a pillow and put it on my lap, tugging at the tasseled fringe
led for.going to ask all three of you the same question and I want you to be
with me."

nly one "Shoot," Lucas says, draping his arm over the back of the cou
angling more my way.

I address him first as he's the most vocal about disliking my husba
joininghe tried to beat the shit out of him on the ice tonight.

"Do you care about Arco's biography? Does that change how yo
and theVan or feel about him?" Lucas opens his mouth to answer, but I h
hand out. "And don't tell me you dislike or hate him, because I know
well you don't. He was your teammate and he's your brother-in-law, a
watched you two over the years and—"

u alone "Fine," Lucas says with a grimace. "Yes, I like Van. I'm pissed as
ce he'shim though for even going where he went with you. He's disappoint
. Can'tAnd to answer your question, no, that shit doesn't bother me at all. A
a psychopath and anything he wrote in those journals that got turned

needs to book was probably done with the intent to manipulate perception. I
anyone who reads that shit can see he's just glorifying things in an attempt
to torture Van long after the asshole kicked the bucket."

as me, "You read the book?" I ask, completely incredulous. Lucas hates re
ve into "Of course I did. I wanted to be able to defend him if someone
something to me about it."

Tears prick at my eyes over how thoughtful that was.

1. "Yes. "We all read it," Max says, and my head turns his way. "Even M
Dad, and we all discussed it."

ecliner. My jaw drops. "Without me?"

1. "And "You had enough on your plate," Malik says, drawing my attention
of us think it's horseshit, by the way."

"And have any of you actually said that to Van?"

ing my Utter silence. They glance at one another, then at me with guilt
expressions.

you've "Jesus," I mutter, taking the pillow and slinging it hard and fast at
I think It catches him in the face and beer spews out of his bottle all over h

' "You couldn't have taken five minutes of your time to reach out
ut Max brother-in-law to tell him not to worry about it? That it came ac
ly. kooky? That you had his back?"

s. "I'm "We just assumed he would know that," Malik says in defense
honest inaction. "The stuff in that book about Van was so ludicrous, I h
didn't think it even required me saying I didn't believe it."

ich and I throw my hands in the air. "And here we are... I'm on the b
divorce, you jerks are trying to beat Van up and telling me you hate h
and and not one of you tried to support him."

More silence. They all look regretful, I'll give them that.

ou view "I have a question for you," Malik says. "Why is this upsetting
old my much? I mean, I get there are horrible innuendos made and it's awful
v damna serial killer as a father, people wondering if you got anything from h
nd I've all... but it's no different from what he went through three years ago v
was outed as Arco's son. There was an article and the press went nuts
hell at his teammates stood by his side and no one believed the negative s
ted me. why now is this upsetting him to the point he wants to cut you lo
rco was makes no sense."

l into a I hadn't wanted this to come up, but it has, and I can't lie to my b

I mean, I also want them to not be disappointed in Van. I want them to understand that his feelings and emotions are legitimate and must be given credit, even if none of us like the way he's handling things. "Van and I had been reading, trying to get pregnant when the book came out."

Lucas said "I didn't know that," Lucas exclaims and looks to Max and Malik. "Y'all know that?"

I don't give them a chance to respond. "We didn't tell anyone we were pregnant and trying. Didn't want the pressure of all you busybodies checking in on me all the time, asking if I was knocked up." None of them have a rejoinder to that, so I continue. "But to answer your question why Van was so upset, he couldn't continue. "All see past his children having to live with this stigma. He didn't want to suffer the same embarrassment or bullying he had to endure. The book was a lot different than just being outed as the son of a serial killer. That because of the lies about Van that he'd have to defend and he doesn't mind taking the blame for himself. But he didn't want our kids to have to suffer so he changed his mind, doesn't want to have kids and asked for a divorce."

Lucas shrugs. "Okay," Max says with a nod. "I can accept not wanting to have kids, but to your which would be a huge point of contention in your marriage—but if you get a divorce? Y'all could have put the subject of kids on the back burner or just not had them."

"I told him I would stay with him even if we didn't have kids," I point to Malik. Max points at me. "There... that's how you handle this situation—honestly compromising or waiting for things to clear, so why ask you for a divorce?"

"He's got someone on the side," Lucas snarls. "I bet—" "No, he doesn't," I say with a glare that has him snapping his mouth shut. "Van loves me, but in his mind, I deserve to have children. He thought about it, and he's letting me go, he's giving me my best shot at happiness. That I'll have a fulfilled life without him."

Van so "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard," Malik mutters.

having "It's not," I say sadly. "He and I talked the other day and I really told him about it. He's not taking this lightly. He's thought this out and he feels it's the best. While I disagree with him, I can't diminish his feelings."

.. All of "I still say it's stupid," Malik says.

shit. So Lucas nods. "So stupid."

lose? It I glance at Max. "What's your take?"

"Stupid," he concurs. "But I honestly think things will work out. Van is jammed up with emotions and can't reason through this. I think

erstand should leave him alone and go home. Let him figure this out because
edence, goad him into anything, you'll never know if he wants a life with you.'

ad been That gives me pause. I had an ace in the hole. I'd been considering

Van I'm pregnant and I know that would force him back into a marriage.
k. "Did he. He'd do the honorable thing ultimately. But Max is right... would
really be enough? If he was forced to do it?"

we were I can't do that to him. I can't do that to myself. I'm going to keep
all the pregnancy a secret for a while and I'll just have to see what Van decides
at, so I do.

ouldn't I'm suddenly more than exhausted. I stretch my legs and scoot
them to the couch. "I'm really going to bed now."

k was a When I stand, I walk around the room and give each of my brothers
a hug, telling them I love them. They reciprocate, as they always do.
that on Fourniers love each other fiercely.

ged his When I reach the staircase, I look back to find them all staring at me with
tender expressions. My gaze stays on Max. "You think Van will let
kids—through on this?"

why a "I do," he says.

—" For the first time since I arrived in Pittsburgh, a tiny flicker of hope
flips in the center of my chest. I'm not going to fan it to flame just yet,
it's big enough to tide me over for a while.
rice?"

th shut.

inks by

a more

listened

s this is

I think

ink you

should leave him alone and go home. Let him figure this out because if you goad him into anything, you'll never know if he wants a life with you."

That gives me pause. I had an ace in the hole. I'd been considering telling Van I'm pregnant and I know that would force him back into a marriage with me. He'd do the honorable thing ultimately. But Max is right... would that really be enough? If he was forced to do it?

I can't do that to him. I can't do that to myself. I'm going to keep the pregnancy a secret for a while and I'll just have to see what Van decides to do.

I'm suddenly more than exhausted. I stretch my legs and scoot off the couch. "I'm really going to bed now."

When I stand, I walk around the room and give each of my brother's a hug, telling them I love them. They reciprocate, as they always do. We Fourniers love each other fiercely.

When I reach the staircase, I look back to find them all staring at me with tender expressions. My gaze stays on Max. "You think Van will come through on this?"

"I do," he says.

For the first time since I arrived in Pittsburgh, a tiny flicker of hope burns in the center of my chest. I'm not going to fan it to flame just yet, but it's enough to tide me over for a while.

CHAPTER 16

Van

I'M NOT SURE if this is a good idea, but I'm committed now. I follow and Drake into the UPMC Children's Hospital, a photographer and Titans' staff members right behind us. We're here to visit the inpatient and dole out jerseys and signed sticks in an effort to brighten their day.

Boone set this up and I was surprised to learn that he visits the hospital a lot in his free time. He approached Brienne about having the Titans do these visits and publicize it to help raise money to offset the cost of medical expenses some families can't afford.

It's a fucking brilliant idea but not something I would've necessarily done on my own had he not invited me. It's better than sitting in my hotel room today, moping about my broken marriage and my serial killer father.

Boone is arranging for all of our teammates to take turns with him. I got the first invite and Drake pulled rank, being the fiancé of the team captain and got in on today's visit.

We're greeted by some hospital executive whose name I didn't catch. We pose for pictures in the lobby. Then Boone leads us to the elevator and stops on the fourth floor. Today's agenda includes the oncology ward. Honestly, I'm a bit terrified to see kids with cancer. I'm sensitive to the needs of children, anyway, but visiting those in pain or potentially dying has my stomach tight with anxiety.

Boone seems at ease, though, waving to nurses and doctors we pass. Then he's entering the first room.

"Aiden, my man." Boone's voice is affectionate and as I follow him, I see a boy sitting up cross-legged in his bed. He's bald and thin except for his face, which looks slightly swollen. He's hooked up to an IV and is extremely pale with dark circles under his eyes.

His face lights up when he sees Boone though. Drake and I hang back near the door as Boone offers his hand to the kid and they do

handshake, half hug as Boone bends over the bed. When he pulls back, he turns and points at us. “Brought some friends.”

Aiden’s mouth drops open when he sees us. “Holy shit—”

“Hey, hey... language,” Boone warns.

“Holy crap,” Aiden amends and slowly swings his legs out of the bed. He’s wearing a pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt and those hospital sock grips on the bottom. He maneuvers the IV tube out of the way like he has lots of experience and grabs hold of the pole from where the medicine is hanging, moving it across the room toward us with shuffling steps.

Drake moves first, holding out his fist, and the kid bumps it with his. Then he turns to me and I offer the same.

“Drake McGinn and Van Turner.” The kid shakes his head in disbelief. “Can’t believe you’re here... in my room.”

Boone gives Aiden a faux glare. “You never get that excited when you visit.”

Aiden shoots him a grin. “I see you a lot.”

“The specialness has worn off, hasn’t it?” Boone teases.

My stomach churns, thinking of the way I’ve told Simone she’s not just shiny to me. She knows it’s a lie, right? Formulated specifically to make me feel mad enough to leave me but never in a million years could that woman be anything less than pure brilliance.

“We brought some gifts,” Drake says, and he motions one of the photographers into the room and the photographer enters as well. “Can we get some pictures with you? Probably make the front page of the sports section.”

“Hell yeah,” Aiden exclaims, then ducks his head when Boone gives him a disapproving look. “I mean, heck yeah.”

I’m intrigued by Boone and the way this kid knows him so well. I wonder if he’s this close to all the kids he visits.

We spend about five minutes talking to Aiden. He’s given a Higley jersey after he admits Coen is his favorite player, but he asks the three of us to sign it. Drake also gives him a goalie stick with his signature on it.

We pose for photos, including some with Aiden’s phone. “My phone is going to die that he missed this,” he quips, scrolling through the photos. His phone is handed back to him.

“Listen... got a lot more kids to see,” Boone says as he motions for us to get back in bed. “I’ll see you Sunday.”

ack, he Aiden radiates an energy that wasn't there when we first wal
"Really?"

"Really," Boone says and then hugs the boy. "Gotta give you ext
luck before your transplant, right?"

he bed. Transplant? Jesus... the things these kids go through.

ks with We move right to the next room and Boone goes in first. "Ameli
e's had little princess," he calls out.

hangs, Christ... does he know all the kids in this ward? It's pretty
amazing, to be honest.

is own. Drake and I follow him into the room and see a little girl no more t
or seven years old. She's completely bald like Aiden, rail thin and loc
awe. "Ishe would blow over in a strong wind. As we enter, she's playing
Land with a man I'm guessing is her father.

I come Amelia looks really sick and I can see the stress lines on her father
I can't even imagine having a child with cancer or whatever she has.
know what any of these kids have, but they're obviously very ill.

The little girl squeals when she sees Boone and I note her da
longergenuine smile seeing his daughter light up like that. I suppose it's th
ake her moments you cherish most.

an ever I glance at Drake and we exchange a look. He's a dad and I can s
his face... he'd go crazy if this happened to one of his boys.

staffers We spend almost four hours at the hospital, visiting with ki
pictureshanding out Titans gear. We talk with parents, giving them a little
from hovering over their ill children, and we thank doctors and nu
ves himtheir fine work. It's fulfilling and draining at the same time.

After we leave the hospital, we head to a bar for a few b
wonderdecompress.

At a high top with a shared bowl of peanuts among us, I ask, "Ho
ghsmithdo you visit the hospital?"

ie of us He shrugs. "Once a week, sometimes more."

Drake shakes his head. "I don't know how you do it, man. I'm
y dad'safter seeing those sick kids for just a few hours."

os after "But don't you feel good in your soul?" Boone asks with a grin.

"I do," Drake admits.

r Aiden I do too. I've felt like such a shit for all the stuff I've done to Simo
was a bit of a balm to make kids smile all day.

ked in. “Kids are resilient as hell,” Boone says. “We have a lot to learn from them.”

ra good “That’s God’s honest truth,” Drake says. “My ex-wife has put me through hell and I still marvel at the way they’re able to deal with it better than I did.”

a... my This gets my attention. “What do you mean?”

I’ve come to know a little about Drake by talking to him and other members of the fucking team. I also remember when it was hot news, his wife accusing him of cheating on games. All untrue, of course, but it was a lot of shit he went through.

han six Drake takes a sip of his beer. “She’s a drug addict, so you never know what she’s like. Whether she’ll be high as a kite or

oks likewhat you’re going to get with her. Whether she’ll be in a Candydepressive state or totally normal. My kids were always walking on eggshells around her. Always worried about what kind of mom she’d be. The last time she showed up, they were afraid of her.”

I don’t “How did you protect them from that?”

Drake shrugs. “I realized pretty quickly I just couldn’t shield them completely, and to be honest, I’m glad I didn’t. I had to guide them and teach them how to cope.”

That seems impossible to me. “And how did you do that?”

I get a strange look from Drake as he grabs some peanuts. “You have to be honest with them. I kept it age-appropriate but I was transparent with them about the issues surrounding their mom. I guess I just taught them that they have no control over what she does and says—they can only stay strong for themselves. They can only control how they react.”

I’m stunned by how stoic he is about all this. It’s horrific thinking about boys dealing with a strung-out mother.

“It can’t be that simple,” I mutter, staring down at my beer.

“Fuck no, it’s not simple,” Drake says with a laugh. “It’s hard work.”

“But don’t you worry about your kids being screwed up over the things they’ve seen and heard?”

Drake exchanges a look with Boone and it seems to convey that they know my questions go beyond simple curiosities.

With his gaze coming back to me, Drake crosses his forearms on the table. “Let me tell you something, my friend. Children are the greatest gift any human can hope to have in their life. But it’s a nonstop ride of worry. You’re doing the right things, saying what they need to hear, protecting

...n from when they can't for themselves, and letting them fall because they
learn what that feels like, and even more... how to get back up again. I
ny kidshard as it is, it's the absolute best thing you could ever hope to have
it. Farlife. It's worth all the pain and worry just to tuck them into bed at ni
have them say *I love you, Daddy.*"

My entire body flushes with warmth, a strange flood of regret mix
s on the sudden awareness that I've just been clued into something very
bettingimportant. So monumental, it could make me a happy man again.

1. All this time spent obsessing over the worst, I've never consid
r knowcould be okay. Or that there was a way to guide children through tough
or in al never really had that. I mean... Etta... she just whisked me away
ggshellslife with her was idyllic. It never occurred to me that with the right pa
ast timea child could indeed handle ugly things.

I'm still not quite sure I'd be any good at talking to kids the way
does, but the one thing I know is that he's made me a bit more open-r
d themIt's not just black-and-white anymore.

id teach "Sorry," I say as I rise from the table and nab my wallet from m
pocket. I drop a hundred-dollar bill on the table. "I gotta go. Drinks
me."

ou talk Boone and Drake don't know the details of my woes with Simone
h themwe're separated. But I'm sure they're both smart enough to figure ou
at theyjust had an epiphany of some sort.

true to It takes all my effort not to speed on the thirty-minute drive to our
I don't even bother parking in the back but slide into the parallel sp
g of hisSimone's car normally occupies. I make a mental note I need to find
status of her car—whether it can be repaired—but that's not what's im
right now.

k." I fly up the steps, fumble with the key in the lock and practicall
e thingsthrough the front door. I'm yelling her name as I disable the security al
"Simone," I call out. She's not in the kitchen or living room. I bc
ey boththe stairs. "Simone."

When I turn into her room, I immediately know she's gone. The
on theempty except for the furniture that was here when I moved in. S
est giftclothes, shoes... all of it gone. Even the linens are stripped off the bed.
rry that She's... gone.

ig them I can't even begin to process it. The woman is the most relentless p

need to know. She doesn't ever give up in a fight, and the first time we br
Even as doesn't count. She didn't give up that time but rather gave me an ulti
in your which I didn't accept, so, in essence, I'm the one who gave up. I c
ght and blame her for leaving that time.

But fuck... I kind of blame her now. Where is my hotheaded ter
ed with who tries to seduce me back into being a husband? Or the woman who
fucking my face and yells at how stupid I've been?

When Simone first found out about my dad, I panicked and tried
her out of my life. Our relationship was new and I was so fucking ashc
who I was.

"Just stay the fuck away from me," I snarled at her. All my wal
going back up, my instinct to protect myself overwhelming me.

Did she stay away? No.

She ran at me, her petite body slamming into mine, and she wrap
arms around me tight. She clung to me, pressing her face into my che
squeezed me so tight I thought she'd crack a rib.

I didn't reciprocate the hug. I was frozen in fear.

"You better hold me, you motherfucker," she growled, and it v
fiercest, most intimidating thing anyone had ever said to me. "I kno
Van Turner. And I think you're mighty fine. Don't you even think
telling me I deserve better, or that you don't have anything to give me
very least, you better sure as fuck keep giving me what you've been
me, and if I had my way, you'd talk to me and tell me everything."

That was probably the moment I fell a little in love with m
Demanding I give her what she deserved and feeling like I deserved
return.

"I'm not surprised," I finally muttered, wrapping my arms around
She looked up at me. "By what?"

"That you won't take no for an answer. You're relentless."

Where the hell did my brat go? There's no way she could have gi
It's not in her makeup.

I pull out my phone and call the one person I know will know
Simone is and who will be willing to talk to me.

Anna answers on the second ring. "Hi, Van."

erson I

oke up “Where is she?” I ask.

matum, “Who?”

ouldn’t “Don’t play dumb blond with me, Anna. You’re one of the s
people I know.”

mpress Anna laughs. “She went back to Vermont.”

gets in Even though I knew that, it still fucking hurts to hear it. “But... wh
“Probably because you’re a big fucking dum-dum.”

I nearly choke as I bark out a laugh, so surprised to hear Anna dro
to push bomb and *dum-dum* in the same sentence. “Yeah... that I am,” I assi
imed of “When did she leave?”

ls were “Night before last. Are you going to call her?”

“No,” I reply and I hear a sharp gasp of dismay from Anna. “
won’t be good enough. I’ll need to grovel and that can only be c
person.”

ped her “But she’s in Vermont. You’re in Pittsburgh. You’ve got a hom
st, and tomorrow night.”

That is indeed a problem. “I’ll look into chartering a plane. It c
more than a couple of hours’ flight time. Surely I can fly there, win n
back and get back home to Pittsburgh in twenty-four hours, right?”

Anna’s silent a moment, then says, “If you can’t find a private
ow you, call me back. I’ll see if I can requisition one of Jameson’s planes.”

At the “Thanks, Anna.” My voice is gruff with emotion that she’s willing
k about me out, especially since I know her husband wouldn’t lift a pinkie

giving “I’ll reach out to Brienne first to see if she’s got some contacts, but
y wife, you know if I run up against a wall.”

l her in “Good luck, Van. But something tells me you’re not going to n
She laughs to herself and adds, “I’d still grovel if I were you.”

her.

ven up.

r where

“Where is she?” I ask.

“Who?”

“Don’t play dumb blond with me, Anna. You’re one of the smartest people I know.”

Anna laughs. “She went back to Vermont.”

Even though I knew that, it still fucking hurts to hear it. “But... why?”

“Probably because you’re a big fucking dum-dum.”

I nearly choke as I bark out a laugh, so surprised to hear Anna drop an f-bomb and *dum-dum* in the same sentence. “Yeah... that I am,” I assure her. “When did she leave?”

“Night before last. Are you going to call her?”

“No,” I reply and I hear a sharp gasp of dismay from Anna. “Calling won’t be good enough. I’ll need to grovel and that can only be done in person.”

“But she’s in Vermont. You’re in Pittsburgh. You’ve got a home game tomorrow night.”

That is indeed a problem. “I’ll look into chartering a plane. It can’t be more than a couple of hours’ flight time. Surely I can fly there, win my wife back and get back home to Pittsburgh in twenty-four hours, right?”

Anna’s silent a moment, then says, “If you can’t find a private charter, call me back. I’ll see if I can requisition one of Jameson’s planes.”

“Thanks, Anna.” My voice is gruff with emotion that she’s willing to help me out, especially since I know her husband wouldn’t lift a pinkie finger. “I’ll reach out to Brienne first to see if she’s got some contacts, but I’ll let you know if I run up against a wall.”

“Good luck, Van. But something tells me you’re not going to need it.” She laughs to herself and adds, “I’d still grovel if I were you.”

CHAPTER 17

Simone

POKING AT THE burning logs in the fireplace, I watch the sparks fly up thinking they're hell's little fireflies. There's room for another log soon. We never go to sleep while a wood fire is still burning but I'm awake and know I can outlast it this evening.

The temperatures dipped way low tonight and I'm feeling the chills on my skin. There's no shame when nine o'clock rolls around. I'm snug in my fleece pajamas and fuzzy socks, I make myself a cup of cocoa the best way... with heavy cream, sugar, Ghirardelli chocolate, and a dash of cayenne pepper to warm me up from the inside. Van taught me how to make it that way and he learned it from Etta.

When I'm settled on the couch and holding the steaming mug before me, I look down at my belly and give it a slow rub. "Don't worry, little b, you went light on the pepper. Still, I hope you come out as spicy as me."

I grin, thinking about all the ways my life is going to change. My heart flutters sweetly when I think about all the love I have to give to this child.

What I don't think about is wondering if she'll have a dad. I know she will because I know Van won't abandon it. Now, whether our marriage can be repaired is another matter. This isn't the first time Van has gotten angry and his first reaction was to wall himself off. It might be that he's just not ready to be everything I need and I'll have to come to grips with that.

But for now, I'm going to wait for him to work through this. I will give him the time he needs without me breathing down his neck or trying to push him to love me the way I want. If he can't come to terms with his decision, though, I'll tell him I'm pregnant and invite him to be involved in my pregnancy journey as much or as little as he wants, but not as my husband. I'm going to be in a marriage that is less than what I used to have with him.

I sip my cocoa and put it on the side table, nabbing the remote. I'll watch some Netflix. Just as I'm about to turn on the TV, a flash of

comes through the living room window, rolling through the room cutting off. Someone just pulled into the driveway and my pulse s race. No one would be visiting me at his hour.

No one but...

No way.

I roll off the couch and walk to the front door that's covered by curtain. I pull it aside and see a white sedan sitting behind my rental (upward, too shadowed to see clearly, but it's definitely a man who gets out and o I add toward the porch.

m wide And as he finally steps into the glow from the sconce beside the do breath freezes as I realize it's my husband wearing nothing but jean l of the long-sleeve T-shirt with a duffel slung over his shoulder.

ind and Pressing my hand to my chest, I feel my heart in a mad gallop. I o of hot deep breath, unlock the door and swing it open just as he reaches the to e and a He halts, taking me in as frosty breath billows from his mouth, h ne how roaming slowly from my head to my feet, then back up to tether to m

ore me, He says nothing, but neither do I. There's no tension, though... w aby... I have no clue why, but I'm also not surprised.

I can only think back to Max saying he believed everything woul y heart out okay and I guess deep down... I believed him.

ild. "I'm going to grovel," Van announces as he drops the duffel and ow she toward me. "But first... I just want to hug you."

age can There's never a moment that runs through my mind to deny him. I t scared let him walk his body right into mine, wrap me in those strong arms a not cut me tight to his chest as he presses his cheek to my head. I burrow in listening to his heartbeat, which is slow and steady compared to mine.

ill give even feel the cold blowing in through the door.

to force Van pulls back, putting chilly fingers under my chin and forcing n lemons, up. "I love you," he says.

in this "Never doubted it," I assure him. Not once did I ever think he just I'm not of love with me.

. His smile is lopsided. "I'm an idiot."

l binge- "Never doubted that either." I pull back from him. He me f lights something about groveling and I'm going to insist he get on with it.

Van stares at me for a moment, accepting we're at the part of this :

before where he's going to have to humble himself a little. However, it can't start with a cup of cocoa.

I turn for the kitchen and I hear Van grabbing his duffel from the door before shutting the door. His footsteps are heavy as he stands just inside the kitchen, watching me pour the steaming chocolate from the pot into a lacy favorite mug. I glance at him and I'm relieved to see he doesn't look too bad. It's uncomfortable. No matter how bad these last few weeks have been, I don't want either of us to suffer anymore.

I hand Van his hot chocolate and we move into the living room. I sit on my seat on one end of the couch and to my surprise, Van doesn't sit on the other end. Or even the chair to my right.

He stands on the other side of the coffee table before the fireplace and I take a patient sip as he takes a sip of his cocoa and sets the mug up on the table before facing me.

His eyes are wide. "So," he says, spreading his arms as if he has a speech all planned. His face falters and then his face crumbles, as if he doesn't quite know how to proceed, which is... I give him a little push. "How did you even get here? You have to be here by tomorrow night. Surely you don't intend to drive back because if you are, you're going to need to leave pretty soon."

Van offers a sheepish smile. "I chartered a small jet out of Pittsburgh. Note, our savings account is about \$16,000 light because of that."

I'm shocked by that number because Van is kind of frugal. He's got millions from his hockey career, he doesn't spend money in a frivolous way. Still, it's adorable that he seems chagrined about it.

"How about you tell me why you're here."

"Obviously, because I came to my senses. Max told me I would be here. I don't did."

I didn't know Max had talked to Van. "What in the world did he say to you that I haven't over the last few weeks to make you decide to stop working?"

Van shakes his head and moves around the coffee table to sit next to me. He shifts on his hip to angle my way. "He didn't say anything in particular. Just told me things would work out. It was Drake who made things work out for me."

My face puckers in confusion. "Drake?"

"Yeah... I went with him and Boone to the children's hospital."

done morning, visited with the sick kids—which, as a side note, was absolutely gut-wrenching—but we went out for beers after.”

There’s no helping the soft hum from my throat. The thought of the visiting sick kids makes me a gooey mess inside. He hears it and nods gently, reaching out to take my hand. I don’t pull away, instead letting my fingers rest in his as he continues to talk. “Drake’s ex-wife is an addict. I don’t know exactly how they are, but I saw them once at the arena and they’re young. Like she’ll resume. Anyway, they’ve seen some shit with her.”

“Poor kiddos,” I coo, wanting to wrap them in a hug. Drake as well. “Yeah... poor kiddos, except... they’re well-adjusted and happy.”

Now I see where he’s going with this. “You saw firsthand that kids can handle tough things and come out just fine.”

“Sort of. I mean, yes... it was validating to hear his advice and he’s right. Except kids are resilient and need transparency and honesty and guidance to start with all of that, they can handle all kinds of things. But I had a different kind of epiphany.”

I tilt my head. “What’s that?”

Van’s gaze falls away from me and he rubs his jaw. I feel the warmth radiating off him and I squeeze the hand still entwined with mine. “Van...”

When he turns his regard back to me, his expression is awash with regret. “Despite my epiphany is that I wasn’t trying to spare my future children from the flash pain of my past... I think I was really wanting to spare myself. I didn’t know how I could do it. How I could protect them and be a good dad. I felt it was insurmountable and I felt weak. I never had a father figure, so I didn’t know how to do it and I had it in me to do right by them.”

“Oh,” I murmur, glancing down at where our hands are connected. “I never would have expected that at all. My head lifts. “But you’re not weak. You’re being the strongest, most accomplished people I know. You overcame a difficult childhood to become an incredibly successful, kind and loving man. You inspire me to do anything you set your mind to, baby.”

Van nods. “Yeah... I know. I mean, I’m scared, but you’re right. I know I can do this. That was my secondary epiphany after acknowledging my fear... that I can do this, and with you by my side, it won’t be as scary as it sounds. It’s hard work, but I can do what it takes.”

I nod in agreement, but still... Van’s first inclination was to p

solutely away. To abandon our dreams of having kids and I tell him this. “You even try to figure this out with me. You left me.”

of Van “And therein lies the true problem... can you forgive me for it? I can smile you once before and I can’t one hundred percent guarantee I won’t freak out again in the future. But the one thing you have to remember is that I never did I stop loving you. I once told you that I’d never love another woman the way I love yours and that holds true today. If you kick me out even now, it will be true in fifty years. Even if you marry someone else and have kids with them, I’ll love you until my dying day.”

I. A small breath wafts out of my mouth, but the rest of the air is trapped in my lungs.

ids can Van leans into me, cups my cheek. “Please say you forgive all the pain I’ve hurt you. Please say you love me the way I love you. Most of all, please assure me that you still want a life with me and that you want to have babies and can raise them to be strong, fierce children who can handle anything.”

ent sort Van’s eyes are lasered onto mine, his body tensed for me to pull away. Instead, I say, “I’m pregnant.”

I watch him carefully because this is where I’ll know for sure just how guilty he is.

n?” For what seems like forever, his expression is as unyielding as a stone sculpture. But then something beautiful and miraculous happens. The change is subtle at first... a muscle in his jaw twitches and the corners of his mouth don’t seem to lift as if he’s undecided between a smile and a frown. His brows draw together... as he processes those two words I just uttered. Then a spark ignites, crossing his gorgeous blue irises, and his pupils dilate as if trying to absorb the news I just handed over.

d. I had That uncertain smile gets bigger, tentative at first until it takes on the appearance of a full-blown smile. Relief and joy radiate, but his eyes soften with wonder. He glances down toward my belly. I pull his hand and place his palm there.

You can “We have a baby in there?” he asks in wonder, his voice crackling with emotion.

know I My heart melts. “We do.”

ny true “When?” he asks, then his eyes fly up with fear shining brightly. “Something new he’s considered. “The accident? Is it okay?”

“The baby’s fine. They did an ultrasound at the hospital.”

ush me “Oh God, Simone.” Van falls forward onto me, laying his head in my

I didn't stand while I can't see his face, I can hear the tears in his voice. "I should have been there for you. I should have been by your side every step of the way. I did it to I pet his head, whispering soothing words. "It's okay. You're here. I don't get "Why didn't you tell me?" he asks, lifting to stare at me. I'm sure I remember, there's no condemnation, just curiosity.

inner soul "I wanted you to want this baby, not be obligated to it. I didn't want to force you here to get you back that way."

else and Van nods, his gaze drifting toward the fire in contemplation. "How do you trust that I'm here for the right reasons, then?"

it seems His focus remains on the fire, as if he's afraid to look at me. I don't provide the answer. I reach out a hand, slide it behind his neck and forehead. He turns to face me. "Because I trust you love me, Van. That is something that has never once been damaged in all of this craziness. Not once did I question your love and wear your loyalty. In fact, I know it was the depth of your love that has made me acting crazy."

ish him Van's expression is dubious, so I bring our faces closer as I repeat the words he needs. "I trust your love for me."

ist how He just stares, his expression doubtful.

g as a "Do you hear me? Do you believe me?" I press, squeezing his neck. "I always believe everything you tell me," he murmurs. "You're the change person who I know will always give it to me straight."

mouth "And you know I love you, right?"

inward "You must to even let me in the door," he says dryly.

dancing "I love you more than anything, Van."

orb the And finally, after weeks of wanting him to make a true move, Van expresses how he feels in actions instead of words, Van takes my face in his palms and kisses me. It's soft and gentle, his lips having immediate contact as he covers mine. His tongue slips in my mouth, touching my own briefly before pulling away. Resting his forehead to mine, he says, "We're having a baby." I hear the excitement in his voice and it's music to my ears. "We're having a baby," I echo.

ly overweird that you being pregnant makes me want to fuck you really bad?"

I snicker and press my mouth to his, giving a slight shake of my head. "Lucky for you, pregnancy hormones make me hornier than normal."

my lap, "Jesus... I've died and gone to heaven." Van leans back, his lustful

ld havetiny bit as he asks for one more affirmation. “What else do I need t
ray.” make this right?”

now.” “Nothing,” I assure him.

irprised “Well, I did bring you something that I was hoping to use to convi
to give me another chance,” he says, moving off the couch and roun

want tohis duffel. I twist to see him rummaging in it and he pulls out a white s

Returning to the couch, he spreads it open and hands it back to me
ow canwhen I see it, then start laughing. It’s a Titan Queens T-shirt like the o
up.

when I I reach for it but he jerks it back, wagging a finger. “You only ge
rce himyou pack your bags and return to Pittsburgh with me tomorrow mornir
at washave to act the part of hockey wife if you want the official T-shirt, as
ur loveyou want that. I know we have to figure out your job and everything.”

ad you Laughing, I throw myself into his arms, knocking him onto the c
kiss him hard before saying, “Yes, I’m going back with you.”

eat the He grins up at me. “Almost all my dreams have come true.”

“What other dream needs to be fulfilled?” I ask as I stroke my
over his collarbone.

κ. “I need you to get naked, Simone. I need it bad.”

the one

ve that
e in his
nastery
efore he
oy.”

“We’re

n. “Is it
,
y head.

elled a

tiny bit as he asks for one more affirmation. “What else do I need to do to make this right?”

“Nothing,” I assure him.

“Well, I did bring you something that I was hoping to use to convince you to give me another chance,” he says, moving off the couch and rounding to his duffel. I twist to see him rummaging in it and he pulls out a white shirt.

Returning to the couch, he spreads it open and hands it back to me. I gasp when I see it, then start laughing. It’s a Titan Queens T-shirt like the one I cut up.

I reach for it but he jerks it back, wagging a finger. “You only get this if you pack your bags and return to Pittsburgh with me tomorrow morning. You have to act the part of hockey wife if you want the official T-shirt, assuming you want that. I know we have to figure out your job and everything.”

Laughing, I throw myself into his arms, knocking him onto the couch. I kiss him hard before saying, “Yes, I’m going back with you.”

He grins up at me. “Almost all my dreams have come true.”

“What other dream needs to be fulfilled?” I ask as I stroke my fingers over his collarbone.

“I need you to get naked, Simone. I need it bad.”

CHAPTER 18

Van

“VAN,” BOONE CALLS before I’m able to slip out of the locker room better get your ass over to Mario’s for a celebratory beer.”

“Not tonight. I’ve got a hot date.”

Several of the guys laugh and I throw my hand up in the air to say goodbye. I spread the word during the pregame prep that Simone and I are back together.

I turn left out of the locker room and make my way over to the lounge where I find Simone sitting around a table with some of her Titan Queens. I haven’t met all the significant others yet, given how I pretty much avoided everyone during my first two weeks with the team. Simone sees me coming, but some of the other women do and nod my way.

Turning in her chair, she catches sight of me and I’m dazzled by the smile she bestows. I’m the luckiest fucking man on earth that she’s still in love with me, warts and all. Bending down, I press my mouth to hers for a second. When we break apart, she introduces me to Stone’s fiancée Harlow, her wife Tillie, and I’ve already met Gage’s fiancée Jenna. They’re all wearing their Titan Queens T-shirts.

“Where are the rest of your girls?” I ask. Simone sits in the owner’s box with Brienne and her new posse to watch our win over the Wasatch Breakers.

“Already headed over to Mario’s with their menfolk,” Simone says. “You ready to go?”

“More than ready.” I hold out my hand to Simone and she uses it to pull me from her chair. Turning back to her friends, she bids them good night and blows a kiss with promises to hang out at the next home game.

Simone and I mutually agreed to go home after the game, wanting to be alone. The past few weeks have been horrible for both of us, but Simone deserved none of it. I want to spend the night worshipping

physically and emotionally. I want to fuck our brains out and then I want to stay up all night talking about all the things we need to do for the band.

She yawns as we head to the players' lot in the garage. I know I'm exhausted, given our escapades after we made up last night at our house in Vermont, only for us to catch an early charter flight back to Pittsburgh and not be able to get to the arena. Add on a three-hour stint for the game and I'm thinking maybe I should just tuck her into bed.

1. "You hold her hand the entire trip home, resting it on my thigh.

"Did Etta ever call you back?" she asks.

Chuckling, I nod. "I had to do some groveling, as expected." I call my aunt first thing this morning to let her know that Simone and I were going to be just fine, and then we ended up playing a little bit of phone tag as I got ready for game day. "Then I had to listen to her berate me for what I did to your family course, I took it. I deserved it."

"You kind of did," Simone admits with a sheepish grin.

"It's a testament to how much Etta loves you. I swear I think she doesn't have disowned me if I didn't make things right."

"No way," Simone says with a squeeze to my hand. "She loves me too much."

We're silent a moment, then I can't help but ask. "And the Fift clan?"

Coen's wearing Simone snorts. "I didn't talk to them. I just sent a group text that we were back together, everything was fine and unless they wanted to incite wrath they'd forgive you and treat you well."

"It will be fine," I assure her, although I wouldn't put it past Loring's box hington make me do some extra sucking up to him.

Once we get home, Simone slips into the master bathroom which I replies. undressed, hanging my suit in the closet. Yeah... tonight I should let her have a good night's sleep. I can fuck her in the morning and then we can talk about the baby over breakfast.

I'm just pulling back the covers on the bed when the bathroom door opens and Simone is standing there wearing one of her skimpy negligees instead of her usual material that hides nothing. I can see her nipples and her pussy through the little night dress, and my cock starts to lengthen.

I'm frozen as she moves to the opposite side of the bed and then

want us across it toward me. Her breasts sway and she licks at her lower lip. G
by. Her knees, she slides her hands up my chest and over my shoulders
n she's behind my neck. "Hi," she whispers.

come in "Hey, baby." My hands slide under the dress to rest on her bare h
gh so my thumbs stroke back and forth over her silky skin. My gaze roams c
nd I'm face. "You are so fucking beautiful."

Lifting one hand, I bring it up to her head and run my fingers thro
long hair. She purrs and leans into me.

"As sexy as this little nightie is, I'm going to dispense with
lled my announce as I pull it up and over her head, letting it float to the ground
going to "You going to take these off?" Simone asks, her fingers tugging pl
it was at my briefs.

and of She doesn't have to ask twice. I pull back from her for two sec
slide them down my legs and kick them away. Simone's hand wraps
my stiff cock, and I groan as she bends forward to run her tongue al
e would length.

Wrapping her hair in my hand, I tug her upward and away from m
you far Without releasing my hold, I lean back so I can take her in. She's
knees, legs spread slightly and chest heaving with pebbled nipples. W
'ournier other hand, I drag my knuckles over the lips of her sex.

Simone shudders and I drop my gaze downward, watching as I tv
said we hand to press a finger into her. "Oh, baby... you are soaked already."
icur my "Can't help it if I want you," she murmurs.

I withdraw my finger, rubbing the wetness over her bottom lip. "K
ucas to Simone."

Her hands to my face, she touches those sweet lips against mi
le I get gentle graze before claiming my mouth. I groan at the taste of mint toc
er get a and her sex swirling over my tongue.

k about It seems like forever we just make out, tongues dueling and my
playing in lazy strokes between her legs.

m door Moving my mouth to her jaw, I ask, "What's going through you
ees that right now, baby?"

a sheer "That I'm going to die if you don't fuck me soon," she complains.

ugh the Chuckling, I ease her onto the bed and bring my body down on
hers. Simone's legs part and wrap around my back as I take her mouth
crawl this time deeply before moving to tiny nibbles against her lips and al

going to neck. My cock aches as it presses against her wet heat, but I'm not ready to lace myself inside her just yet.

I want to drive her out of her mind first.

Lifting my torso, I work my mouth down her neck and over her nipples. Licking and sucking at her nipples. Simone's fingers thread through my hair as I move down her body. When I reach her tummy, I press a kiss through her whisper, "Hi, baby... please ignore what me and your mommy are doing right now."

I glance up and find my wife watching me with the sweetest smile on her face. "What?" I demand. "I'm going to talk to our kid all the time. Get it?"

"What?" I demand. "I'm going to talk to our kid all the time. Get it?"

"You're going to be the best dad," she whispers.

"Right now, I want to be the best husband, so be quiet and let me do my job."

Simone sinks into the mattress and spreads her legs wide for me.

"Going to make you feel so good," I promise just before I clamp my mouth over her pussy. Simone's hips buck, but I hold her down. Nipping at the inside of her thigh, I say, "Keep still or I won't let you come."

She huffs out an exasperated breath, but I know if I were to look at her, she's smirking. I lick at her clit with teasing, gentle circles, soon running my tongue up her center. And fuck, does she taste good.

"Van," Simone pleads, her hips trying to gyrate for more friction. "Will you just kiss my head and find her staring at me with wild eyes. "Will you just come so you can fuck me?"

"No, I don't think I will. I think I'm going to edge you all night—"

"You better not," she warns.

Laughing darkly, I rest my chin just above her pelvis and wait until my head lifts so her eyes meet mine. "You're not in the driver's seat, baby. Are we clear?"

Simone attempts a glare, but I know her too well. That's excitedly etched all over her face because my wife loves to be dominated.

Flopping back down with a huff, she mutters, "Fine."

Yes, very fine. "Now I've got to start all over," I tease.

It's with nibbling kisses inside her thighs and barely-there strokes along her fingers along the lips of her pussy. I circle my tongue around her

eady to gently press a finger inside her before pulling it out ever so slowly. She makes tiny, strangled noises and does her best to keep those hips moving. Her thighs are shaking and her breathing turns ragged, but my breasts, girl stays still and takes it like I knew she could.

my hair “Want to come?” I ask her.

ere and “Yes, please,” she moans.

am doing “All right, baby... you can give it to me now.” I thrust two fingers and curl them, causing her to groan. I purse my lips around her clit and bite hard.

Simone splinters, screaming out my name. Her hips buck hard, causing me to use my teeth in the chin, and I chuckle as I continue to lap at her. “Mmm... the good girl.”

Fingers sliding into my hair, Simone jerks hard at me... her demand is to do my move north and give her more.

I kiss my way up her body, whispering hello to the kid as I pass her. Simone reaches in between our bodies, her hand fisting my cock, and I am not joking that she wants it now. Her other hand comes to my ass and pulling it up pulls on me hard, attempting to guide me into her body. I’m still smaller than she is and I don’t budge, instead dropping my face to hers. “Kiss me and tell me how good you taste on my mouth.”

Sometimes Simone’s eyes flash with lust and she runs her tongue over my lips before kissing me so deep I see stars.

When I lift I pull away and tether my gaze to her gorgeous face. “Tell me your favorite meme.”

“I love you, baby. Always. Never going to change.”

“Never,” I agree as I press my hips forward, finding exactly where I want to be and slide my cock deep inside her pussy.

Until her “Fuck,” I groan, pressing my forehead to hers and holding still for a moment. I am second to get my bearings.

Simone’s fingers play lightly at my hip, waiting for me to move. She bites my neck, runs her lips along my neck. Even those delicate touches from in bed have my balls tingling.

I press my palms into the mattress and raise my torso so I can look down at my wife. Our eyes lock and hold as I start to move inside her. Simone’s tongue is in my mouth and I let my gaze divert just for a bit to look down between our bodies. I fucking love watching my dick tunneling in and out.

Simone laying claim to all that is mine.

As from I roll my hips, pressing deeper into her body. Simone gasps and I gently sweet hand, shove it between us until her fingertips are at her clit. "Make you come again, baby."

"Okay," she huffs out as her legs spread wider for me.

I grind down into her, thrusting harder as I can feel the very edges inside orgasm brewing.

And suck Faster and faster, the hard punches of my hips banging the bed into the wall.

Reaching "More," Simone rasps, her breath stuttering in ragged bursts through my full lips.

I put my hand on the back of her thigh, lift that leg higher and go into that even deeper angle. My first thrust in and Simone is screaming, her body arching off the bed and her body stiffening in a choke hold of an orgasm. I feel rippling all around my cock.

And she's It's just the sort of thing that drives a man like me crazy, watching her wife clawed apart by the pleasure I give her. It's enough to throw me completely stronger edge and I slide in to the hilt one last time, close my eyes as I groan. My first orgasm so intense, I think I might have just impregnated my wife again.

I drop down onto Simone, holding most of my weight off her. Our lower lips are slick with sweat and I feel my pulse thumping in my neck.

"Damn," Simone whispers. "You outdid yourself, honey."

You love I can barely breathe, but I manage to brush my lips against hers in agreement.

Rolling us to our sides so I don't crush her, I pull Simone in close. I need Our legs remain tangled and I run my fingertips up her spine as we lie there silently. I'm so fucking mellow I could sleep right now, and I know you or just need it.

"Van?" Simone murmurs, her breath wafting across my chest.

She lifts "Mmm?"

From her "Will it always be this way between us?"

She's talking about our insane sexual chemistry. It was explosive from the first time we kissed and it hasn't lessened in the years we've been together. Except for the clusterfuck I've made of the last two weeks, sex between us has given me pleasure that I'm confident most people could never have of her, achieve. She's the only one who rocks my world and I'll never get

this.

grab her “Always,” I assure her.

yourself “We’ll have to make time for this after the baby comes.”

Mellow mood evaporating, I lift my head to look down at her because this upsets or worries me, but because it intrigues me. “Why’s one of my Simone giggles. “Because babies are a lot of work. And we’re going to lose sleep and we’ll be too tired to fuck.”

into the “Yeah, that’s not ever happening,” I say with confidence, but then my smile turns soft. “Tell me more stuff about babies. What’s our new life going to be like?”

“Hmm,” she says as if pondering where to start. “Well, one thing I know for anwas that dads get to change all the poopy diapers since moms have the job of breastfeeding.”

sm that “I don’t believe that for a second.” I laugh and then roll her to her side. I scoot down the bed and rest my cheek on her stomach, facing her. I know I can’t feel or hear anything, but it fills me with such wonder that a tiny baby is growing in there. I stroke Simone’s skin and press my lips just below her navel button. “Hey, baby... are you going to be a boy or a girl? I’m leaning for a girl and I’m not sure why. I think because I want to spoil you the way your body spoils your mom. And I hope you come out just like her, even her attitude, because your mom is the best person I know and the world would be a better with two like you in it.”

n silent On a sniffling sound, I twist to find Simone crying. She wipes at her eyes and smiles down at me. “Don’t stop,” she says. “Keep talking.”

to me. Her hand comes to my head and she strokes my hair as I tell our daughter the wonderful things that await her in this world when she arrives.

we both

Boone Rivers uses his fame and fortune as a professional hockey player to his advantage, but not in the way most people would think. Volunteering as often as his busy schedule will allow, Boone meets one brave young man who turns his world upside down. [CLICK HERE](#) to get all the details.

re from

Boone!

re been

ny wife

hope to

tired of

Nestled within the lush, rolling hills of Kentucky, among its proud horse farms and ancient bourbon distilleries, the Blackburn and Mardrag families’ bloodline conflict runs deep and without forgiveness. Preparation

swept away with this series of seductive romance standalones rife with drama and entwined with the bitter rivalry between these two dynasties. [CLICK HERE](#) for all the details on the Bluegrass Empires series

er. Not that?"

going to when my e going

g I read task of

back. I know I person low her hoping e way I r bratty will be

he tears

kid all

player
teering
big boy
ls on

horse
gon
e to get

[Click here](#) to see other works by Sawyer Bennett

Don't miss another new release by Sawyer Bennett!!! [Sign up for newsletter](#) and keep up to date on new releases, giveaways, book reviews, and so much more.

Connect with Sawyer online:

[Website](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Facebook](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Amazon](#)

[BookBub](#)

About the Author



high New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling
ities. 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 i
about everyone.

[her](#) A former trial lawyer from North Carolina, when she is not bringing
'ws and 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.

If you'd like to receive a notification when Sawyer releases a new bo
up for her newsletter (sawyerbennett.com/signup).

New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling author Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that appeal to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy romance, and both women's and general fiction, Sawyer writes something for just about everyone.

A former trial lawyer from North Carolina, when she is not bringing fiction to life, Sawyer is a chauffeur, stylist, chef, maid, and personal assistant to her very adorable daughter, as well as full-time servant to her wonderfully naughty dogs.

If you'd like to receive a notification when Sawyer releases a new book, sign up for her newsletter (sawyerbennett.com/signup).