



Brat on the Ball

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Description: George Reynolds and Ollie Gunnerson are from different worlds. George is a professional rugby player with all of the hardness and endurance that entails. Ollie is a professional footballer, paid handsomely for his skills on the soccer field. A chance encounter at an exclusive nightclub leads to the two finding solace in one another, and as they cross paths again, they find themselves needing each other more. Against the odds, they find ways to make an unlikely relationship work.

George is used to living life on his own terms, out and proud, and will fight against any forces that try to bring him down. Ollie is stuck in the closet, and beholden to sponsorship deals and shady management backhanders as his star is on the rise.

With George looking to his personal future, and Ollie to his professional one, the two will have to battle the world outside as well as fractures within that threaten to tear them apart.

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Chapter One - George

The lecture hall was huge and airy and yet somehow still stifling. However many years ago, someone had decided that painting all the walls a gross shade of beige and packing it with veneered benches and stuffy desks would provide an optimum learning environment. Judging by the game of hangman I was playing by myself and somehow losing, it seemed that the environment was doing very little to stimulate the mind.

There were a hundred people packed into the theatre and I could count on one hand the amount of people listening to Dr Ramoray's lecture on Ethics in Journalism. I should have been listening. But I'd already read all the reference texts and written my assignment. I was only attending so I didn't lose any marks for attendance.

"Try R," whispered the pretty woman next to me. I had been in the same module as her since the start of term and still hadn't learned her name. I hadn't really socialised with anyone. It wasn't my thing, much as my reputation on and off the rugby field would say otherwise.

"Sure, R can be in there." I popped an R in the middle of my five letter word. I still hadn't decided what it was going to be yet, but her intervention had saved my poor man from an untimely death at the hands of the letter Q.

"E?" she asked.

"Why not?" I added an E after the R and decided then what the word was going to be. And it was pretty apt for two strangers playing hangman at the back of the class as

the lecturer droned on.

“F?”

“Sorry,” I drew his left leg. “One more guess or he swings.”

“I can’t believe you’ve been so cruel. Playing against yourself and letting him get so close to death.”

“I should have guessed better letters then,” I sniped back.

“Fine. C?” she asked. I drew his last leg.

“Sorry, the little man hangs. I hope you can cope with that on your conscience.”

“What was the word, then?” she asked after a minute.

“Oh. Sorry.” I filled in the rest of the letters. BORED.

“So stupid,” she said. Pretty loudly. And the whole lecture theatre turned to look at us.

Dr Ramoray looked up. “Anything to add to my stupid lecture, either of you?”

The woman next to me seemed frozen, so I took my opportunity. The subject projected onto the whiteboard was something in which I had an unfortunate amount of expertise. “I’d say that outing any celebrity, no matter how important a journalistic scoop, is immoral and unethical, Dr Ramoray. It feels like early 2000s gutter reporting if I’m completely honest and I’m not sure anyone here would want the reverse to happen to them. As we’ve seen with Ireland’s Taoiseach recently, if someone’s sex life makes no difference to how they govern, act or play, why the fuck

should we care?”

“...quite,” said Dr Ramoray. “But wouldn’t you argue that sexuality is in the public interest? Could the outing of, say, a professional rugby player provide a role-model to struggling youth?”

I knew exactly what he was referring to. We must have really pissed him off with our interruption.

“I was outed against my will by the tabloid press about three years ago,” I said. “I’ve never aimed to be a role model for anyone except how I play on the pitch. My sexuality is entirely incidental and makes no difference to how I play.”

“I only mean to say...” started Dr Ramoray, but I interrupted him again.

“I don’t care about anyone else’s opinion here, Doctor. I only care about how I’ll approach sports journalism. And I certainly won’t be forcing anyone out of the closet.”

The whole room had gone quiet, and the professor looked over his glasses at me for a long moment before turning back to the class at large. “Right then, that’s today’s lecture over. Remember, your final essay on ethical responsibilities in journalism is due on the first of February. I know that feels like a long time away, but you’ll be surprised by how quickly it comes, so I hope you all have at least an early idea of what you’re going to write.”

People were already packing up, so I stuffed my notebook in my bag along with my laptop and walked to the door at the front of the lecture theatre. “George?” Dr Ramoray called. “Can you wait a minute?”

“I’ll be waiting for you outside,” said the woman whose name I still hadn’t learned. I

shrugged, and she walked out of the door with everyone else, leaving me alone in the big lecture hall with the professor.

“You had some passion for the topic of outing celebrities,” said Dr Ramoray, “have you considered writing your thesis on that?”

“No,” I admitted, though I had no idea what I was actually going to write my thesis on. “It all feels a little bit personal, if I’m totally honest with you.”

“But that’s perfect,” said Dr Ramoray. “You are your own test case. You have evidence in spades as to the effects of forced outings in the media.”

My mind flashed back to how it had all happened. Being caught kissing a man in a park at night — a park I’d frequented for much more than kisses. **MORE QUEERS IN WALES’ CAMP?** had been the headline. The irony being that it had put me off my game enough that I wasn’t called back for Wales for a very long time. I’d spent my exile getting paid lots and lots of money to play French club rugby and having sex with beautiful Parisian men. There were worse things to do after being outed.

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But it had left its scars. Scars that were still under the surface if I scratched hard enough. The years I'd missed out representing my country. My father's rejection, and the horrible mixture of feelings I'd had watching Rhys Prince's rise to fame as a proudly, openly gay player.

"You with me, George?" Dr Ramoray waved his hand in front of my face

"Yeah, sorry...I'll think about it. And sorry for interrupting your lecture."

"You didn't need this lecture anyway," Dr Ramoray smiled. "You should teach this one."

I laughed. "Thanks, Doc."

He smiled and turned back to his desk, obviously a dismissal.

The woman I'd been playing Hangman with was out in the hallway waiting for me.

"So...George Reynolds, right?" she held up her phone to show me she'd been Googling.

"Glad you didn't let that journalism degree go to waste," I shot back. "What does it matter?"

"Woah, no need to get defensive," she said. "I was just interested to see what got you so heated in there. I thought you were going to throw a book at Dr Ramoray for a second."

“Eh, I’ve said what I need to say,” I said.

“I thought you might be that gay English footballer at first,” she said.

“Soccer? Do I look like a soccer player?” I gestured down at myself. The shirt I was wearing wasn’t exactly skintight, but it was enough to show I was carrying more pounds than a soccer player ever would.

“Guess not...soccer, though? Bit American.”

“Rugby is football, and soccer is football. So is American football. I’d rather differentiate between them with their proper names.”

“Very high and mighty of you,” she said. “I’m Elsie, by the way. Elsie Rowland.”

“Reynolds and Rowland, Private Detective Agency!” I whispered. Elsie just gave me a funny look. “OK, perhaps that could do with some work.”

“What did Ramoray want you in there for, anyway?” Elsie asked. I explained to her the conversation we’d had, and she nodded. “Smart. I can see why he thinks you’d have an expertise in the subject. But you’ll never get a first just focusing on yourself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know why he thinks it would be OK...if you were to write an essay on celebrities being forcibly outed, you’d need some kind of test case to compare your own experience to. Like is it more damaging to be outed as an actor, football—sorry, soccer player, rugby player? Is toxic masculinity more prevalent in one sport or another?”

“Can I keep you?” I asked.

Elsie laughed. “You couldn’t afford me. But if you want to go for a coffee to discuss our thesis’, let me know. I’ve AirDropped you my number.”

I looked down at my phone. I’d received her contact as ‘Elsie’ followed by a kissing emoji. “You know I’m gay, right?”

Elsie held up her phone. “Duh. I like prettier boys, anyway.”

“Me too,” I said. As Elsie walked away, I thought I might have made my first new friend in a long time.

* * *

The gym at the Millennium Stadium was top of the line, but I liked the old-fashioned stuff. As I pummelled the two ropes into the ground one by one, sweat poured down my face and soaked my front. My arms were in agony, my heart was pounding. I felt alive. But I’d been missing one too many Cardiff Old Navy training sessions, and the exercise felt like a punishment.

“Working hard or hardly working?” asked a familiar voice. I looked up at Finn Roberts — really looked up, as at six and a half feet tall he towered over even most rugby players — as he stood over me with a clipboard. He was wearing a shirt, jeans and brown leather shoes.

“What’s all this pretentious shit?” I asked him. “You’re a player-coach, you should exercise with the rest of us.”

“And you should learn to keep your fucking mouth shut when you know you were studying when I ran my drills earlier.” Finn scribbled something on his clipboard.

“You’re almost caught up. Just sprint circuits on the treadmill and I’ll consider you done.”

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“For fuck’s sake, I’m a tank. I don’t do cardio.”

“And I squeal like a bitch when I bottom. Oh, sorry, there’s me thinking we were sharing irrelevant information.”

“Seriously?” I crossed over to the treadmill and turned it on to a slow walk. Finn sidled over and turned it up to a jog and then put the incline up to something resembling Everest. “You...bottom? I’ll believe it when I see it.”

“Sorry, Nathan said we weren’t allowed to start an OnlyFans. And last time anyone filmed me having sex, I definitely didn’t make OnlyFans kinda money,” said Finn. He grinned, but I knew the pain that had come before the smile. Someone had outed him, just like me, but dialled up to a hundred. “Anyway, speaking of Nathan...I have a hot date tonight and I might just get laid. Both ways, if I’m lucky.”

“Gross...” I breathed. Finn laughed and walked away. I looked around after a minute. He was gone, and there was no one else in the gym. I could stop the treadmill and pretend I’d finished my circuit...but I was too pro for that, tempting as it was. I ran the 5km that the whole team had been prescribed and wrote my time on the whiteboard when I was done. Rhys Prince had moved to Edinburgh midway through the previous season, but still held the record on Garrett’s Hill Run Challenge. Someone had scribbled out Garrett’s name and replaced it with Finn’s.

The sweat was pouring off me, and I grabbed a towel from the basket by the door to the changing rooms as I passed by.

The changing rooms felt eerie and empty as the lights flickered on at my presence. I

was used to training with the squad, having the camaraderie of lads who had nothing in common with me but the game. But I'd been focusing on what life might look like after rugby and my university course had demanded more from me. Finn and Coach had given me permission to take a couple of hours a week of daytime study, so long as I made up for my training in the evening. And I was exhausted.

I pulled the shirt over my head and dropped my shorts, somehow feeling even more exposed than I could when everyone was there. I grabbed my shower gel from my lonely sports bag and stepped under the shower water. It was freezing cold, but that was exactly how I liked it after a workout. It felt like all the tension from the day drained out of my body as the water cascaded over my muscles and rinsed away the sweat and grime.

It wasn't enough to get rid of the other tension I had pent up though, and I'd been denying myself for weeks. I desperately needed a release. And I knew just where to get it.

Chapter Two - Ollie

The changing rooms were packed with lads, and we all laughed as Cory Tyler whipped the back of Perrie Nomad's ankles with a spare towel. "You twat!" shouted Perrie, yanking aside Cory's towel and throwing it to the other side of the room. I averted my eyes and sprayed my deodorant. We trained in Cardiff's specially built athletics centre just down the road from Cardiff City Stadium.

I pulled on my boxers and a pair of jeans and a button-up shirt. "Hot date?" asked Cory, sidling up to me and throwing an arm around my shoulder.

"Nope, just out with John again," I said.

"Your agent? Are you looking for a nicer contract?" his voice had dropped to a

whisper.

“Nah, you know I’m happy here. He’s just got some sponsorships lined up for me.” The lie slipped off my tongue as easily as it had every time I mentioned my recent flurry of meetings with my agent to anyone. It was easier to pretend John wasn’t actively shopping me out to teams in the Premier League.

“Are you off out tonight?” I asked him. We had a two-week gap between games so for once we had a Saturday off.

“Yeah, gonna see if any bird will have me,” Cory said, thrusting his hips and almost dropping his towel again. “You?”

“Call them birds and you won’t be getting any fucking action,” I said. I stuffed my training kit into my bag. “If John lets me go before midnight, I might see you out.” I hauled the bag over my shoulder and nudged him to the side. “See you later, mate. Have a good weekend.”

“And you,” he said. I pushed through the rest of the lads, my heart beating in my throat as I thought of the conversation I was going to have with John tonight.

Outside the training centre in the car park, I pressed my key to unlock my car. There were twenty-odd identical blue hatchbacks in the car park, a gift from the company that sponsored our shirts. They were nice, top of the range from what they were. But I was making enough money to buy myself an Aston Martin if I wanted to. Instead I was driving a souped-up version of what most urban mums were driving their kids round in because I was contractually obliged to.

I drove straight from the stadium to the centre of Cardiff and parked up next to the old museum. I texted the team’s shared assistant to ask her to pay for an all night pass for me and she replied with a thumbs up. I walked through the park in front of the

museum. “Hey, mate!” a kid shouted. “Are you...are you really Ollie Gunnerson?”

I pasted on a smile and turned to look at the kid. Him and a couple of friends must have been playing football, as they all stood a few feet away, starstruck with a ball laying forgotten between them. “That’s me,” I said. “Want a selfie?”

They all rushed forward and one of the kids fumbled with his phone. They must have been about eleven at the oldest, just old enough to come out to town by themselves. I smiled for the picture.

“My Dad hates Cardiff,” said one of the kids. “He’s a Swansea fan.”

“Get the picture printed on a t-shirt for him then,” I suggested and the kids laughed. “Do any of you want to be footballers when you grow up?” To my surprise, not one of the kids said they would. I remembered when everyone wanted to be a footballer.

“I want to be an accountant,” said one. “More stable income for a longer time, you know?”

I picked my jaw up off the floor before replying. “Yeah...that’s, uh, sensible. Well done, kid.”

I left the kids behind and picked up the pace toward Queen Street, shaking my head as I did. Kids wanting to be accountants. That would have been un-fucking heard of when I was that age...fourteen years ago. Maybe I was getting old.

It took me ten minutes to walk to the Ivy to meet John, so many people stopped me to ask me for a selfie. It hadn’t been so frequent when I started playing for Cardiff, but I was a player for Wales too and we’d been doing better than ever on the international stage.

The maitre'd smiled as I walked in and led me over to the private corner booth where my agent was waiting. John was a middle aged fat man who somehow did a fantastic job of getting sportswear deals and high-price transfers for his young, athletic stars. He smiled at me as I sat, and as usual there wasn't much behind that smile. John was practised in the art of acting and bullshitting, but not so much that I couldn't tell when he was.

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“How’s my favourite footballer?” he asked.

“Bet you say that to all the footballers,” I said.

“Aye,” he laughed. “Doesn’t mean it’s not true when I’m talking to you though. But your dilemma has been a bit of a thorn in my side.”

I looked around furtively before realising John had chosen a secluded booth for exactly that reason. “Dilemma? I asked you to find a way for me to...”

It was John’s turn to look furtive. “Maybe it’s not the time, son. Have you considered waiting until you’re a bit older?”

“John, I’m twenty-five now. I’ve known since I was about sixteen, and I’ve hidden it enough for the sake of my career.”

“Hidden what?” John asked with a sly smile.

“Hidden...you know.”

“You can’t even say it to me in private and you expect me to put the effort in to get you out publicly? I don’t think so, son. Give it time.”

“Fuck. Fine,” I said. I felt embarrassed. How long had I known I liked men? How many stupid teenage experiments had led me to that conclusion? And I still struggled to say it out loud. “What did you call me here for then, if not that?”

“Reading has upped the offer for you. They can offer a starting salary of £40,000 a week and they’ll pay whatever transfer fee Cardiff ask for when the window opens up.”

“John, I’ve told you. I’m Welsh through and through, and Cardiff is the team that raised me.”

“That’s double your current salary!” John said. “And you can still play for Wales.”

“John, I’m not interested.” I wasn’t. I had enough money.

“Well, consider it. We still have three months until the January transfer window. Play a few good games and I’ll have you on fifty thousand a week. And...”

“And what, John?” I asked.

“You’re too good for Cardiff. They are at best a Championship team. You could go up to the Premier League and hold your own.”

The waiter brought out a steak and chips for John and a Caesar salad for me. “Drinks?” He asked.

“I’ll have the Sauvignon, he’ll have an orange juice,” said John. The waiter nodded without even looking at me and walked away.

John tucked into his steak straight away and gestured for me to start eating mine, like I’d been desperately waiting for his signal. I lifted a leaf with my hand and stuffed it into my mouth.

“Use your knife and fork, this place is expensive,” John said.

“I know, I’m probably paying for it.” I picked up another salad leaf and dropped it dramatically into my mouth.

“For fuck’s sake, will you behave?” John pulled the bowl away from me.

“I need to be taught how to eat, John. Just like I need to be told what deals to take, what jobs to do, not to come out, even what I eat in a meal I’m paying for. I need you to tell me how to do everything.” I grabbed at the fork and idly started playing with the tines.

“Fine. Fine. I’ll stop pushing the Reading thing, so long as you’ll think about it. And I’ll think about...how you come out.”

“Perfect.” I shoved the fork into my salad and took in a big mouthful.

“In the meantime...” John looked down at his plate as he spoke. “You know you’re not the only one, yeah? I’ve had to get some weird shit to keep the talent happy. If you want me to find a discreet masseuse who can keep you happy for a little while longer, I’m happy to make that call.”

“Gross, John. I’m not going to pay for sex.”

“Fine, fine. It was just a suggestion. I just can’t exactly imagine you meeting someone through the traditional means, y’know? I don’t want you meeting some idiot on Tinder who decides to sell your story and pictures to the tabloids.”

I shuddered. “No thanks. I’ll stay a nun.”

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“There is another option...” John scribbled something down on a piece of paper. “If you won’t pay for it...there are a couple of clubs around where you should be pretty safe. But they have a clientele that tends to skew a little more adventurous than you might otherwise expect.”

“You’re sending me to a kink club?” I asked, incredulous.

“I’m not sending you anywhere,” he said. “I’m giving you a potential solution to a problem you’ve presented. That’s what I do. I solve problems.”

He stood up and wiped a hand down his jeans, leaving a streak of grease. “Just...be safe, mate. I don’t want to deal with any headlines in the morning.” He left without a proper goodbye, and without shaking my hand.

John walked out just as the waiter brought his glass of wine and my orange juice over. “Pass it here,” I said, gesturing to the wine. “I paid for this shit anyway.”

I needed to get drunk for what I was considering doing.

Chapter Three - George

It was a cool Cardiff night, but at least it wasn’t raining. I always packed light to go to Wings, the one kink bar in Cardiff where I felt completely safe that no-one would think to rat me out. In London I was practically anonymous, but in Cardiff there were enough rugby-player loving twinks to make me worry some kind of compromising footage could get leaked. I wouldn’t want to go full Finn Roberts.

The club was down an alley off Queen Street, not as public facing or bright as most of the other clubs in the city centre. People didn't just stumble into Wings. You had to want to be there.

Other than the obvious difference in clientele, the club was much like any other gay club. I could vaguely hear Whitney Houston from one end of the alley, and it got louder as I approached. The sign flickered weakly in the darkness.

“Alright, Reg?” I nodded to the bouncer just outside the cloakroom. He smiled and nodded back, waving me through. It stung that I didn't get asked for ID any more. But being friends with one of the bouncers, and being a six-foot hairy chub of a man probably didn't help.

The club was lit red in the first little room, the cloakroom, and a bored looking young woman I'd seen plenty of times before held out her hand for my entry fee. I took out a five-pound note and pressed it into her hand. I stripped off my jacket too, and grabbed an extra pound from my wallet for use of the cloakroom. I hadn't been wearing anything under my jacket and the feeling of the cool outside air on my back and warmer air on my front made me feel alive. I loved being here. I could feel the hum of the music vibrating the floor and running over my skin.

The woman took my jacket and gave me a numbered ticket to get it back later. As I passed her, she reached out to touch my arm. “New lad in tonight I've not seen before. Would you mind checking he's alright?”

“Fresh meat?” I joked.

“That's how the others will see him. I trust you to look out for him.”

“Sure thing.” I didn't know the woman's name, but my reputation obviously preceded me. I didn't like it when people were lecherous with inexperience. It was the kind of

thing that scared off new people from ever coming back.

I stepped into the club. The place was carpeted in ever-present smoky dry ice and my trainers stuck to the floor beneath it. The lights inside were low and red, and the mass of bodies on the dance floor writhed as one.

Cardiff's one kink bar was nothing like the ones I'd seen in London or Amsterdam. There were no darkrooms, no sex on the dance floor, no drugs being taken off the bar. It was for the most part somewhere for men to meet, decide if they were compatible or not and then head home for some kinky fun. Then again, there were more toilet cubicles in the place than any other bar I'd ever been in, so maybe I was actually naïve.

What I loved about Wings was the dress code, or complete lack thereof. I was shirtless in jeans, but there were leather daddies, men in jockstraps and booty shorts, guys in latex, and men were of all shapes, sizes and ages. Kink was freeing for these people. And for me.

Because I knew I wasn't bad looking. But on a lot of apps, I found myself rejected by guys because I was carrying a few extra pounds. No matter that I was fitter than most of the six-pack loving bastards that rejected me. But in Wings, all were welcome.

A gorgeous little twink in a jockstrap sauntered up to me as I approached the dance floor and stroked one palm down my furry chest. "What a daddy," he muttered, either to me or himself. "Buy a boy a drink?"

"I'll be back," I grunted, pushing through the mass of bodies towards the bar. Now and then, I felt a hand grab my arse or try to cup my crotch and I eased them away. I liked the scene, but I was all about consent.

I finally pushed through the middle of the mass and headed straight to the bar. "Hey

Phil, I'll have a pint of Heineken..." I started, and tailed off.

Because I'd spotted the guy that they had asked me to look out for. And he was beautiful. He was leaning on the bar and facing the other way, toward the dance floor. He had short dirty-blond hair, the smoothest alabaster skin I'd seen in my life, and eyes that flashed blue whenever a disco light lit up his face.

I knew he was the man I'd been told to look out for because of his expression, like a deer in the headlights, and that he was wearing a shirt, jeans and shoes. No one dressed like that unless they were going for business realness. And he didn't look nearly confident enough to be role playing.

A couple of the older regulars were talking to him and I could tell they were scaring him a bit, whether intentionally or not. One had his hand on the guy's bicep as he spoke, and as I watched, the other moved his hand over to the guy's thigh.

"Hey!" I shouted. All three turned to look at me. "Back off!"

The poor guy looked even more scared as the two older men backed off and I gestured for him to join me. I probably looked just as scary to him as they had, and I did my best to look as non-threatening as possible by crossing my arms over my chest as I leaned in to speak to him.

"First time?" I asked him, having to shout into his ear to be heard over the music. I could smell him up close, some expensive aftershave and something else. Like the remnants of the minty-smelling stuff I used to stop chafing when I was playing rugby. I wondered for a second if he was some closeted small-town rugby player.

"Could you tell?" he asked.

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I just laughed. “What can I get you to drink, handsome? You look like you need something.” Phil had placed my drink on the bar and was waiting for me to pay.

“I don’t know...” muttered the man.

“I don’t want anything from you,” I said. “ I just want you to feel safe and comfortable.”

Somehow, my planned hookup had turned into a night of babysitting the newbie. But I found that when looking at a man like that, I didn’t totally mind.

“A...wine, then please. Any kind.”

“Fancy,” I said, gesturing to one bottle behind Phil. Phil poured a generous measure of some cheap red and passed it over. I pointed the man over to the booths in the corner. “It’s quieter over there,” I said. “Want to join me?”

He nodded, and we skirted the periphery of the floor to the other side of the club, where the walled-off booths made the music seem quieter and kept us shielded from any wandering eyes. He sat down and I slid onto the bench next to him.

“It’s overwhelming your first time here, I know,” I said as he sipped on his wine. “But they’re a good group of lads, really. I wouldn’t come here otherwise. What are you looking for?”

“I...I dunno,” he said. “I came here with a plan. Then I got scared.”

“We’re not all so bad,” I said. “So, what was the plan?”

He hesitated. “...get laid.”

“No plan B?”

“Plan B was not to be rescued by a stranger from two men double my age,” he said.

“What’s your type, then?” I asked.

“What?”

I gestured across the dance floor. “If you’re not looking for a leather daddy, what are you looking for? Are you on the rubber scene? Are you a secret Dom? You can find pretty much anything here if you’re looking for it.”

Even under the lights, I could see him blushing. “I’m looking for someone to tell me what to do.”

Fuck. I had been critical of the guys who preyed on inexperience, but what he had just said had gone straight to my dick. I loved telling guys what to do. It was what I was most good at. Still. I’d be a guide if he wanted me to. I could tell him what to do.

“Come and dance with me,” I said, standing and holding my hand out. “Let’s find what you’re looking for.”

Chapter Four - Ollie

He was who I wanted. Out of the entire club, the stern guy with the attack eyebrows and arms that could break me in two was who I was most interested to meet. And I’d said the stupidest thing, tell me what to do. Teach would have been more accurate. But

perhaps advertising how little sex I'd had in my life wasn't the right move anyway.

The club was warm and as he reached out to touch my hand and pull me into the fray I could see the sweat beading up on his skin. I realised I didn't even know his name, but maybe that was for the best. Maybe that's how they did things here.

He drew me into the centre of the crowd, where people were so close that I could feel the leather harness someone was wearing rubbing up against my back. A hand seemed to come from nowhere and brushed my crotch, but the man I was with grabbed their wrist and moved them away.

"No one can touch you without you asking for it, remember that," he shouted over the music. I nodded.

Up close, he was just as rugged and fucking gorgeous as I'd thought when I'd first seen him. He looked just about as un-stereotypically gay as I could have imagined anyone to be. His chest was covered in hair and his shoulders were big and round and those arms...

Damn. Those arms. He was carrying some extra weight on him too, but all I wanted was to touch, to stroke. But I'd hardly ever done that in private, let alone in public.

"C'mon, let loose!" he said into my ear. "Get into the rhythm!"

"What rhythm?" I asked as I did a terrible attempt at a robot.

"Fucking hell man, you've really got to loosen up." He held his hands near my hips and looked at me. After a second, I realised he was asking. I nodded, and he touched my hips, moving me gently from side to side. "This is how you do it," he said.

It felt like there was a direct line from his fingertips to my heart. It thumped

erratically as I tried to move with the music, but every little slide of those fingers on my hips. I didn't even know what the song was. It didn't matter. Every step we took, every little movement, brought us closer together. He was slightly taller than me, and his breath ghosted over my lips as he leaned down toward me. I leaned in too, closing the distance, and for the first time in far too long, I was kissing a man.

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His hands were no longer ghosting across my hips. One was holding on hard enough to bruise and the other had travelled upward to grip onto my hair at the back, holding my head as his tongue breached my lips.

I had told this man I was looking for someone to tell me what to do. And he wasn't telling me what to do, but he was making his intentions pretty fucking clear. He was making me his, and I knew the second he started asking, I'd be like putty in his hands. I gave as good as I got, and even though a little part of my brain was screaming that someone could be filming, or taking pictures, and tomorrow I'd be the first football player outed since the 90s, the much bigger part of my brain was screaming oh yes God yes please keep going. My cock was like a steel rod in my jeans and I just wanted to be naked with this man, even if he took me on the fucking dance floor.

I noticed those hands were gone and then his lips left mine, and at first I thought he'd decided this wasn't working. I felt the sting of rejection in my eyes before his hands were deftly unbuttoning my shirt. "What did I say about letting loose?" he asked.

Once my shirt was unbuttoned all the way down, he trailed one rough hand down my chest and to my stomach before dipping his fingers into the waistband of my jeans to pull me close for another kiss. "So beautiful," he muttered between kisses. "So fucking hot."

For once, I felt bold. I felt confident and fucking sexy. "What are you going to do about it?" I challenged.

"Want me to take you home?" he asked. "Let me tell you exactly what to do and how

I want you to do it.”

I shivered, but something settled in my stomach. “I...I can't be seen leaving here with someone,” I said. “Sorry.”

He growled. I couldn't hear it in the music but I could feel it in his chest. We were so close to one another. We were so close that I could feel he was as hard as he was. We were rubbing each other through our clothes. Just a couple of layers between me and something I hadn't had in so, so long. And never like this. I had never wanted anything like this.

His hand was in mine, then. “Come on,” he said. He led me off the dance floor and over to the bar. He let go of my hand to ask the barman a question I didn't hear. The barman looked over at me and winked as he passed something over to my mystery man.

He grabbed my hand again and led me downstairs to a quieter room. To one side was a door with a sign for unisex toilets. Anyone welcome. The other was a wider door. The disabled toilet.

“You want this?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. He swiped the key on the disabled toilet door and led me in. It was dark except for a green emergency light, but he didn't turn the light on, just locked the door behind us and kissed me again.

“You wanted to be told what to do?” he asked between kisses.

“Yes,” I breathed.

“Then take your cock out and get on your knees.”

I'd never been in a situation like this. So I did the only right thing. I did as I was told.

I unzipped my jeans and my sprang free as soon as I released it from my underwear. I got to my knees and looked up at him.

“What are you waiting for?” he asked. “Unzip me and get to work.”

My heart pounding, I reached for the buttons on his jeans and undid them one by one. My hands were shaking as I popped each button and felt the hard length of him under his boxers. I pulled down the waistband to pull out the thick cock beneath. I hadn't touched another man like this in about seven years, and hearing him grumble as I gave an experimental stroke, pulling back the foreskin over the head and then pulling it forward to push out a bead of pre-cum. I swiped my thumb over it and then brought it to my mouth.

“Don't you think that would taste better from the source?” The man's hand gently gripped at the back of my head and pushed me toward his cock. I let the head breach my lips and took as much of him in as I could before gagging and pulling back.

“No,” he said. “I like it when you choke on my cock. Don't pull back.”

And then he pushed his cock into my mouth again, and this time when I felt my gag reflex act up, I choked around his cock. It embarrassed me to feel my cock jumping as I choked. I liked it.

“Open up for me, babe,” he said, gently rocking his hips and fucking my mouth. I did my best to take all of him, letting him get deeper each time before I gagged and had to pull back a little. My eyes were streaming from having choked so many times, but he kept going. I knew I was leaking pre-cum, and I reached down to touch myself.

“No,” he said, pulling out of me and putting one hand under my chin. “I'm getting

off. I'll tell you when you're allowed to."

He thrust back into my mouth without warning and held the back of my head as he made me take him to the hilt. I didn't resist. I didn't want to resist. I just wanted to surrender to him as he pistoned his hips to make his cock touch the back of my throat.

"Fuck, you're such a good boy," he said. "You do as you're told, don't you?"

He was thrusting harder and faster now, his hand almost painfully holding onto the curls at the top of my head. "I'm going to come, and you're going to swallow every drop for me. Aren't you?"

I tried nodding around the cock in my mouth, but just felt stupid doing it. "Fuck, boy. I'm..."

He didn't finish his sentence before I tasted the bitter saltiness of his cum on my tongue. I gagged and did my best to swallow it all as his cock pulsed in my mouth, filling it with his cum. He pulled my hair so that my nose was buried in his pubes and I had no choice but to swallow around his thick cock. But I was loving every second, and it felt like my own cock would explode on a hair trigger.

"Good boy..." he muttered, pulling out and sinking to his knees. He kissed me deep, his tongue telling me he was still in charge as I shared the taste of his cum with him. One of those big rough hands came down between us to pull on my cock. Two strokes and I was groaning, biting down on his bottom lip as I spilled over his hand and onto his bare stomach.

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“That’s it, come for me...” he coaxed, pulling my head down onto his shoulder as I shook. It felt like I was coming down from a high as everything we’d done seemed so suddenly clear to me. I pulled away from him, getting up on shaky legs. “I need to go. I have to...”

I pulled up my jeans and tucked myself away, leaving him kneeling on the floor. It wasn’t until I was out in the night that I realised I’d never once asked his name.

Maybe that was for the best.

Chapter Five - George

I had spent all of Sunday in a haze. I felt like Cinderella, or maybe the Prince. A perfect bubble had been formed and then burst in the middle of the night, and I was trying to pick up the pieces. Like Cinderella, I didn’t even know his name. Unlike Cinderella, neither of us had left a shoe. I wanted to know he was OK, to know that he wasn’t regretting things. I prided myself on my aftercare, but he’d disappeared into the night before I could hold him close.

The feeling of that mouth...I couldn’t. It was just a one night hookup. And it didn’t matter if I wanted more. I scrolled Grindr all day to see if I could find him again. But someone so closeted he was afraid to be seen out in public with a man wouldn’t have his face on a hookup app. I didn’t, after all. So unless I could recognise the planes of those abs or that smooth, gorgeous chest I would have no chance. And I knew the feel of them much more than I knew the look of them, anyway.

Rather annoyingly, as I trained in the Millennium Stadium on Monday morning, Finn

Roberts was the first to notice I looked so morose. “Woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning?” He thumped my back hard, which would have been less annoying if it didn’t make me drop the weight I was holding. It crashed to the floor with a clang.

“You fucking bastard,” I rounded on him. “I could have dropped that on my foot!”

Finn held his hands up in surrender. “Sorry,butt. Didn’t know you’d lost your pet rabbit/dog/grandmother. I won’t bother you any more. Except...”

“Exceptwhat?” I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at him. Despite everything, and all that had gone wrong in his life, he could be an absolute clown. And sensitivity wasn’t his strong point.

“The boss wants to see you. Pronto.” Finn gave a slightly weaker smile.

“If I’m being dropped this Saturday, the least he can do is tell me.”

“Well, I dunno, maybe that’s what he’s trying to fucking do,” Finn slapped the back of my head with one hand. “Come on. Get moving.”

I saw red, but just about tamped down the anger before I hit Finn. If he was just a player, I’d have no qualms about teaching him a lesson in how to talk to me. But as a coach, he had a power over me that he once hadn’t. We weren’t equals anymore, even though I’d spent years on the field, and that rankled me.

I made my way down the hallway to Steve’s office, not caring that I was still sweating. If he wanted to see me now, he could cope with me plonking my sweaty arse down in his fancy office chair.

I walked in without knocking. Steve was still on the phone, and held up one finger to

tell me to wait, so I perched on the edge of the chair. I knew I was annoying him, and I didn't care. Finn had popped the bubble I'd been in and I was feeling abrasive.

Steve put the phone down and gestured for me to sit. I sat down in the chair properly then, and he looked me up and down, just for a second. Just enough to let me know he was still the boss, even if I wasn't going to be as pliant as he'd like.

"Someone pissed in your cornflakes?" asked Steve.

"Something like that," I replied.

Steve seemed to be waiting for me to elaborate, but when I didn't, he pushed a small paper cup of coffee across the table toward me. It was black and unsweetened, just the way I liked it.

"Let's talk about your future," he said.

"Is this the part where you fire me?" I asked. "I've been doing uni work, but you know I put in more graft than half of this team put together."

Steve sighed. "When I was your age, my coach at the time sat me down and asked me for my plans for the future. Not because I was getting too old for the game, or because he wanted to fire me, but because he said he was tired of good rugby players only realising they needed a plan for the future when it was way too late. We're not footballers. Most of us will never be millionaires."

"I got that sponsorship for that oil company!" I protested.

"You are the most grumpy man I have ever seen in my life. There's no wonder they never called you back after that one advert. Would it kill you to smile?"

“And I’m guessing you’re not about to offer me captaincy of the team and a little pay rise?” I half-joked. Everyone secretly wanted to captain, I was sure of it.

“I will refer you to my earlier point. You may be one of the best players on the field and there’s a reason I paid to have you back from La Rochelle. But you do not have the temperament or optimism to captain this team.” Steve gave me a grim smile and took a sip of his own coffee. “So I see a couple of avenues forward. We could work on your coaching skills...”

“No thanks,” I muttered. “I’m studying sports journalism for a reason.”

“I know. But unless you’re making the necessary connections now you’ll never make a living out of it. You might be as ruggedly handsome as Callum Anderson, but he’s already got a monopoly on the elder statesman commentary, and he’s a lot more relaxed than you as he does it. People would invite him into their homes. But they’d run from you in a dark alley.”

“OK, I get it, I get it,” I said, my confidence bruised. It wasn’t like I went out of my way to be friendly to people, and I knew I could get a little moody sometimes. But it stung to think my outer shell was so repulsive that it could threaten my future career.

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“Academia is where you excel, right?” asked Steve.

“Right,” I muttered.

“Well, why don’t you start building up a journalistic profile for yourself now, whilst your star is still on the rise in rugby? Long-form articles are doing pretty damn well at the moment, and with social media you can make yourself again. Show people the side of you we all know is in there...deep down.”

“I’ll...think about it,” I said. It actually wasn’t a bad idea. I had a load of articles I’d written for university just sitting on my computer, ready to put out into the world with a little tweaking. And I knew my way around the rules and history of rugby better than anyone else I knew.

“Good. I can reduce your training commitment too, if you like,” he said. “I want you to fly into a new career once you’re too old for this line of work. We’ve worked on that with Finn, and I will do the same for everyone eventually.”

“No. No way. Less training means less game time,” I said. “I have no intention of slipping.”

“Alright. You do you. Just...consider it, OK? I’m trying to extend your career here, not burn you out.”

“Yes, boss.” I stood up. “Thanks again.”

I left the office with a slightly lighter step. But I still couldn’t stop thinking about the

man from the club. I wanted to see him again. I needed to see him again.

Chapter Six - Ollie

Football was a religion, and Cardiff Stadium was my church. The fans singing, the insults across fences in place to separate home fans from away. The smell of freshly mown pitch. It was a cool December evening, and I was ready to play for my city as if I were playing for my country.

“You’re fucking shit!” came one shout as we all emerged from the tunnel, and I just laughed. The fathers on the sidelines at my under-eight academy team had more creative insults than that.

The pitch gleamed with dew under the bright floodlights, and I grinned as the starting whistle blew. We were playing against Reading, and a little part of me knew my performance was being watched by their managers. Despite John sending me more and more insistent demands that I meet with their reps, I hadn’t taken him up on the offer. There was just something about my home city that made me want to keep playing for them. Reading was only two hours away in England, but Reading wasn’t home. And England certainly wasn’t.

The game was quick and snappy, much as our manager had told us to expect. Reading kept us on our toes and we had to be one step ahead. Early on, I kicked the ball to Cory Tyler, who directed a kick almost perfectly on target. It glanced off the crossbar, and then Reading gained possession and put the team on the defensive.

“Don’t just stand there like a spare prick, get going!” I shouted at Cory as he failed to drop back. We were playing a formation that left me upfront, specifically for goal scoring, so that other players could drop back defensively if the game turned in our favour. But much as I liked Cory, he liked the limelight a little too much.

He dropped back half-heartedly, and I stayed ready to get the ball if it fell back into our possession. Reading dominated in our half of the pitch, and would have scored twice if our keeper Sven hadn't been so on the ball. As the whistle blew time on the first forty-five minutes, we were frustratingly drawn with Reading on 0-0. Our own fans insulted us just as creatively as Reading's group as we made our way back through the team tunnel to the changing room.

"Come on lads," our manager, Tim, said once we had all quietened down and stolen some sweets off the trolley to keep our energy going. "You're playing like two different teams. The more you aim for glory, the less you play cohesively. I want to see you playing better ball between one another. Got it? We can still win this game."

We cheered as one and headed out for the second half. It seemed Reading had been given a similarly critical team talk, because they played even better in the second half. I hardly got to touch the ball, and the game seemed to be played in our defending half entirely. They had three shots on target within thirty minutes, which Sven saved. But the fourth went sailing past him and into the goal. The fans groaned as one, and I put my head in my hands. Cory had been playing way too far up into our half, and hadn't dropped back to defend enough. I was sure there were other problems with our defence, but that was the only one that stood out to me and made me want to rip my hair out.

Finally, with minutes left on the clock, we gained some kind of dominance. I watched as Perrie Nomad and Chen Ng passed masterfully to one another up the field, then to Christopher Hart in midfield. Christopher passed to Cory, who ran up the field with the ball, covering a fantastic distance. But Reading's defence was keeping up, and I wasn't being marked.

"Man on!" I shouted at Cory to warn him he was at risk of being tackled. He kept his eyes on the goal as he ran with the ball, jumping over one defender's legs as he went in for a slide tackle. "Man on! I am clear!" I shouted. I thought for a second that

perhaps Cory couldn't hear me. That single-minded determination and the sound of the crowd had drowned me out. But then he glanced my way, for just a second, and I knew he'd heard me. "I am here," I shouted. "Pass the ball!" And his eyes were on the goal again as he went to kick...

And lost the ball to a Reading defender who had taken advantage of his moment of weakness. The ball was back in Reading's control, and when the whistle blew we were down, 0-1.

"You played like fucking pussies!" shouted one fan as we entered the tunnel.

"Rough game, right?" asked Cory as he drew level with me in the tunnel. I could feel the red mist of rage descending, so I kept walking without saying anything to him. We made it to the changing room, and I didn't wait around for Tim to get to us and tell us what a shit job we'd done. I just stripped and headed to the team showers. But Cory took the stall next to me. I kept my eyes away from him as I showered methodically.

"Everything alright, mate?" he asked. I sighed, but kept my mouth shut. That was until he kept talking. "Did you see the shot I almost took? I could've drawn us the match. Bad luck with that Reading defender though, right?"

"You selfish fucking prick," I said, turning to him and jabbing his chest. I didn't care at that moment that we were both naked, and that others were watching the argument unfold. "You better have a good excuse for not passing to me out there. I was up front. I was clear. I had a shot. But you wanted all the glory."

"I didn't see you mate, I promise," he muttered, not meeting my eyes.

"You fucking liar! I saw you look at me!" I was pushing him now, up against the cold tile, and he looked genuinely scared. "You heard me calling, and you took a risky

fucking kick to get all the glory for yourself. For a fucking draw, how shit is that? But your actions are the reason we lost. You are the reason we're closer to relegation than promotion right now, and you need to know that.”

“Well, if you could stop being such a fag about it-”

I hit him, then. I was angry, and I was scared, and I hit him across the face, hard. Suddenly big hands were pulling me back even as Cory slumped down on the cold white tile, his hand holding his cheek and eyes that screamed betrayal. I had gone too far. But he had gone too far without having any idea of how.

“Calm down,” Sven was saying in my ear. “Breathe. Come and sit down.”

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“Just keep that prick away from me,” I muttered. I headed back to the changing room, ignoring the mutters and the stares. I didn’t want to deal with them. I didn’t need them to tell me I’d done wrong. I dried myself off and got dressed in my tracksuit, and pushed past Tim as he walked into the room. I might lose play time. I might lose my week’s salary for fighting. But I didn’t care. I just needed to get out.

It wasn’t until I was in my car and five minutes from the stadium that I realised where I was driving. Towards Cardiff city centre. Towards the club. And, I thought, towards him. The man who would make it all feel better.

* * *

I parked the car in my usual spot by the museum and walked with my hood up toward the back alley that housed Wings. I could hear the dullthump-thump-thump of the music through the pavement and my pulse quickened. I was nervous. For the club, for the atmosphere. But more than anything, I was nervous that my man wouldn’t be there. I didn’t know his name, or his job, or even how old he was. But I knew his eyes, the feel of his stubble on my skin. How his hands liked to explore.

I waited in the line for the club with my hood over my face, scared that any passer-by might recognise me. It was risky for me even being here. But John wouldn’t have recommended the place if the clientele weren’t discrete.

I got to the front of the line and went to step past the short bouncer, but she held out a hand to stop me. “You can’t go in dressed like that,” she said.

“I can take the hoodie off?”

She cast a look up and down my whole body. “Tracksuit bottoms. No. Hoodie. No. Workout shirt...still no, I’m afraid. No dice.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, turning away. It was a stupid journey to have made anyway. One week away from a guy and I was ready to jump him again. If he was even in the club two weeks in a row and not balls deep in another guy.

“Honey,” a guy shorter and skinnier than I said, “just take it all off.”

“What?” I asked. He was just behind me in line and wearing a similar get-up to me. “They won’t let you in if you’re dressed like that, but they will if you’re dressed like this.” He shimmied out of his tracksuit bottoms and pulled off his hoodie. He stood in the freezing alleyway in nothing but a pair of golden hot pants and his trainers.

“Oh, I can’t...” I started, and then something took hold of me. “Fuck it. Fuck. It.”

I ripped off my hoodie and then struggled out of my tracksuit bottoms. I heard a couple of wolf-whistles in line as I revealed the little blue pair of briefs I was wearing, and I thanked whatever god might be watching that I hadn’t put on a jockstrap after the match.

“Come on, sweetie,” said the other guy, leading me by the hand into the club. He showed me the cloakroom, where I could put my clothes before pulling me further into the club. He was cute, but not at all what I was looking for. I didn’t want someone breakable. I wanted someone who’d break me. A very particular someone.

I felt more self-conscious than ever, in so little clothing in the middle of all those dancing people. And I was watching out for him the whole time. A couple of people tried to grope me, but I was firmer this time, and so not-hard that no one could mistake my lack of clothes for consent.

Then, like some Bible story, a gap opened in the middle of everyone as they parted for a second. And there he was.

Chapter Seven - George

Cardiff Old Navy had won our game, and I celebrated with everyone else as we normally would. But after just a couple of pints, I had slipped out of the celebrations and headed to Wings. I'd been sitting at the bar, watching over the crowd. I didn't really have a type, exactly. Normally the gorgeous twink in the bright pink jockstrap would have caught my eye, or the leather otter with twelve different piercings on show. But I was looking for one particular man, as unlikely as that might be.

I'd ordered myself a pint of beer, and a glass of Shiraz sat next to it. I was waiting, and I hated myself for it. I didn't wait. I took. I fucked around with who I wanted, when I wanted, and my natural confidence tended to get me exactly that. I growled at a guy who tried to take the barstool next to me and he backed off. I scanned the crowd, desperately seeking a flash of those blue eyes or a hint of smooth alabaster skin.

And then, for just a second, the crowd of dancers thinned, parted. And I saw him. My Cinderella. Our eyes caught first, and then I let myself look down at the rest of him. He was dressed in just a pair of briefs that cupped his package and barely covered his arse. Fuck. I'd told him to loosen up. But a shiver of jealousy ran through me that he wasn't loosening up with me. I saw the beautiful, confident, hot pant-wearing guy he was with, and I was off the barstool and striding across the dance floor before I could stop myself.

I hadn't even noticed that I'd picked up the drinks, so when someone danced into me and threatened the balance of the glass of wine in my hand I glared at them until they backed far enough away to give me a clear line to the man.

“You came,” he said breathlessly as we met. I wordlessly handed him the wine glass. “You waited?” he asked.

I nodded, feeling self-conscious. For a second, we swayed together to the beat of a song I wasn't paying attention to. I wanted to kiss him, to touch him, to make sure everyone around us knew he was spoken for. But I wanted that on both a primal and an emotional level, and it was weird to think how much this guy had wormed his way into my brain in the space of a week.

In the end, the club made the decision for us. Someone bumped into him and knocked him into my chest. A little wine spilled down my chest where I'd unbuttoned my shirt, staining my body hair and skin red, but it was worth the excuse to curl my free arm around his waist and hold him close to me, our faces inches apart. There really wasn't much difference between our heights, which meant it was easy to lean in and capture his mouth with mine.

His hand gripped my chest like I was supplying him with life, and I liked it. I enjoyed being needed by him.

“What do you want?” I asked, moving my hand up his back slowly to gently grip the back of his neck. To keep his mouth close to mine.

“I want...no...I need you to help me forget what an idiot I've been today,” he muttered in my ear.

“Do you want to be punished?” I asked.

There was no hesitation. “Yes.”

“Can I take you home?”

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“No. Here. Like last time.”

“Come on then,” I said. I took our drinks, left them on the floor to get kicked over, then grabbed his hand and made my way downstairs to the basement, to the same disabled toilet we’d used the last time. I locked the door and pushed him up against it, seemingly just in time as his cock head pushed free out the side of his briefs, already slick with pre-cum. I yanked my own trousers down to free myself, letting my balls rest on my waistband as I rubbed slick pre-cum over the head. He whimpered into my mouth and I captured his bottom lip between my teeth, biting just hard enough for it to give a little sting.

“Remember,” I pulled away for just a second, “No means no. All you have to do is tell me you’re not enjoying it, and we stop. Understood?”

His mouth immediately met my neck, and bit down, then sucked hard. Right, understood.

The feeling of his mouth on me was ecstasy, sending a thrill through my body from that point. I stroked his cock again, letting the foreskin glide over the slick head as he whimpered into my neck. He took his mouth off me and moved as if to slide downward, but I kept an iron grip on his cock that stopped him from moving.

“I know you want to serve, but I decide if or when you do that, understood?”

“Yes,” he said. One hand found my chest and bitten fingernails raked furrows through my chest hair, and I hissed, automatically clenching my hand even tighter around his cock. He moaned in response. So he really did like a little pain.

I moved to kiss his neck, much as he'd kissed me, and deliberately marked him as I continued to stroke his cock. My cock was standing hard to attention, and I kept brushing up against it, but I knew if I did anything with it now that it would be over far too soon. I marked his neck and chest with my mouth over and over, but he never complained. Just whimpered and groaned and yesed as I did it more and more. I drifted my free hand back around to his front and pushed my index finger into his mouth. He started to suck on it, dulling the sounds of his moans, and then I pushed my middle finger in too.

Once they were wet, I trailed them back around and down his spine, pushing into the back of his briefs. With one hand still firmly on his cock, I traced down his crack, feeling fine hairs tickle my finger until I found his tight, puckered hole.

I gently pushed one slicked finger inside, knowing without lube it would hurt a little. Much as I thought it would, his cock jumped in my hand as I pushed insistently. The man's hand found my chest and raked another four lines down my body. I didn't care. I liked the pain too. So with him pushed up against the door and trapped by my body, I stroked his cock and pushed my finger in up to the second knuckle and gently manoeuvred it in and out of him. I knew it wouldn't hit the prostate. But it seemed he was getting off on the pain and my dominance.

"Fuck," he whimpered, his voice an octave higher than I'd heard it before. "You're going to make me..."

He didn't need to say any more. I adjusted my grip so that I could hold my cock above his, and stroked us both, rough and fast, in unison. I pushed my middle finger inside him as he came with a shout and I was spilling too, all over my hand and coating both of our cocks. I loosened my grip and slid my fingers out from him, and took a tiny step back so I wasn't crowding him so much.

"...fuck," I finally managed after a second.

“Thank you,” he muttered. He reached for the lock but I stopped him, grabbing him with the hand that wasn’t covered in both of our release.

“No. You’re not running away this time, Cinders.”

“But...” he started.

“No buts. Aftercare is important.” I gestured for him to sit down on the cool floor and he did, his back still against the door. I got some tissues and wiped down his stomach and crotch, cleaned myself off, washed my hands and then sat down next to him. I held out one arm and after a second he settled under it, his head on the left side of my chest. I hoped he couldn’t hear my heart beating the way it was.

“Thank you,” he said again.

“For what?” I asked.

He gestured vaguely with his hand. “...all this, y’know?”

“You know sex is good for both of us, right? No need to thank me. I’m not doing you a favour.”

He hesitated. “Just...you taking control. Does a lot for me. Helps me to feel better about shit, when I’m not expected to be the one in control.”

“Then I’ll thank you too. Helps me to be in control,” I said.

“I...I think I have to go,” he breathed. “I don’t want to run out on you, I promise. I just...life is complicated.”

“You’re not married to a woman, are you?” I asked, joking. Half joking.

“No. Single, I promise.” He extricated himself out from under my arm and stood up.

“You’re not leaving like that,” I said, nodding toward his cum-stained briefs. “This might be a kink club, but you don’t strike me as the kind of lad to walk through a room looking like that.”

“Oh, fuck,” he said. “I…” he seemed to have frozen again, that brief boost of sexual confidence overshadowed by reality.

“Let’s get this sorted,” I said. “Take them off.”

He hesitated, then shimmied his briefs down his legs and over his trainers. I pulled off my shoes and trousers, then gave him my much less wet boxers. He gratefully took them and pulled them on as I got re-dressed, minus the underwear. My boxers had been tight on me, but hung off his thinner frame. A primal part of me loved seeing him in my clothes, so I took off my shirt and hung it over his shoulders to cover up the worst of the love bites. I realised I might have gone a little overboard with the number of pink and purple bruises littering the upper part of his chest and neck.

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“Come on,” I said and held out my hand. He took it, and I led him out of the toilet. We made our way through the noisy club, and I glared at anyone who got too close or even looked at him with lust in their eyes. We pushed through the throng and headed to the cloakroom, where I handed over my ticket and my man handed over his.

The attendant came back with my hoodie and brought back another pile of clothes for the other guy.

“My hoodie too,” he said to the attendant, who had already turned away.

“Wasn’t one there,” she said.

“Can you double check?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes and headed to the back again. He pulled his tracksuit bottoms over my boxers and then pulled on his t-shirt, though the largest and highest of the love-bites still peeked out above the collar. I realised that the workout clothes were damn expensive.

“So you weren’t just in your tight little underwear to cruise?” I asked.

“They wouldn’t let me in otherwise,” he said with a shy smile as the cloakroom attendant came back and shook her head.

“Someone must have taken it,” she said.

“Fuck,” he muttered, barely audible over the music from the club.

“Do you want me to go back there and look for it?” I asked him.

“No. No way, I don’t want to cause a scene. I just...I didn’t want to be seen,” he said.

I took my shirt from the counter and put it on and thrust my hoodie toward him.
“Take it. You need it more than me.”

“I...I couldn’t,” he said.

“Please,” I said, not dropping my hand.

“Thank you. Really.” He took my hoodie and put it on, and all that primal, carnal energy bubbled to the surface. I was always dominant in bed, always liked the control. But I had no issues with a pass-around party or group stuff. But this man? This nameless man I knew nothing about? I wanted him to be mine. I wanted people to know I’d marked him, that he was wearing my clothes because he was mine.

He put the hood up so that his face was covered as we left the club and stepped out into the cold street. It surprised me when his fingers entwined with mine, and he held my hand all the way until we reached the end of the alleyway and faced the more brightly lit street outside.

“Thank you,” he said, and leaned in to peck me on the lips gently, quickly. He furtively looked around as if afraid anyone had seen.

“Same time next week? I quite like that hoodie,” I joked. But he surprised me again by nodding quickly. His fingers brushed against mine once more, and then he was walking down the street and into the darkness of the night.

* * *

My mouth felt fuzzy and gross, and my head was pounding like someone was tapping on my temple with a tiny mallet. It wasn't even the alcohol; I'd only managed a pint before I saw my mystery man the night before. It was a lack of sleep brought on by not being able to stop thinking about him.

I wished I'd never bought a king-sized bed. I never invited guys back here anyway, always went back to their place or to a hotel. But for some reason, it was starting to feel empty.

That and the fact I'd never really felt a need to decorate the little flat I'd bought in Cardiff Bay. It always felt like I had one foot out the door, in case I got a better offer to play for an English or French club. So the white walls and grey laminate floors had remained the same since the day I'd put down a rental deposit, and I had the same bedsheets that had been in my little flat in Paris when I'd played for Stade Français.

I swung my legs out of bed and shuffled into the living room. I had little to do for the day, but last night had my mind racing. Much as I'd like to think I was a brilliant investigative journalist, there were a thousand pretty twinkles within a two-mile radius. My mystery man might be special to me, but there were no skills I possessed as a run-of-the-mill sports journalism student that could help me find out who some random guy was.

That didn't stop me from thinking about him, though.

I spent the morning cleaning up the flat, then sat down to start work on my dissertation. But the blank page was taunting me. I typed out a title; *Out of the Closet - How Queer Sportspeople and the Media Intersect*, but then couldn't bring myself to actually start typing the body text. Maybe it was a little bit too close to home. Perhaps I needed to find a dissertation I could give myself a little more distance from.

I hopped into the shower and turned the heat to its highest setting. He was distracting

me from everything, and it wasn't fair. Men weren't allowed to make me feel this way. I was the big, butch rugby player who pumped and dumped. Fucked and fucked off. Came and went.

And still...I couldn't get him out of my mind, even as I stroked myself until I came at the thought of his lips on my body, the feel of his smooth skin under mine, that waistband rubbing against my wrist as I pulled the orgasm from his shaking form.

And then holding hands with him in the street until he got too scared. Lending him my hoodie.I should have used that as an excuse to get his number, I thought. I'd let him go without the guarantee that I'd actually see him again.

Who was I kidding? We'd both make our way back to Wings on Saturday. That's what we had agreed.

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Shit. We were playing away Saturday and would be overnight in Edinburgh. The thought of someone else putting their hands on him in Wings again...

I turned off the shower, feeling worse than when I'd gotten in. For fuck's sake, pull yourself together.

I dried myself off with a towel and was walking to my bedroom to get dressed when I noticed someone was knocking on the door.

"Who is it?" I called.

"Your favourite giant!" Finn called back.

"Fuck's sake," I muttered, heading to the door. I didn't bother to get dressed. He had seen me naked before. I swung the door open and was greeted not only by Finn, but by his little boyfriend, Nathan. Before I could cover myself, he lowered his glasses and gave me a very obvious once-over. "You were right, babe. Not all rugby players are as big as you."

"You better believe it," growled Finn as I ran to the bedroom to get changed.

Once I'd pulled on a pair of tracksuit bottoms, I re-emerged and tried to look them both in the eye. They were both lounging on my sofa like I'd invited them over, and Finn had stolen a box of cornflakes from one of my cupboards and was shovelling them into his mouth with one hand.

"You're OK with your boyfriend looking at other men like that?" I asked Finn

casually, doing my best to get a reaction.

“Last year, he wasn’t the most confident when it came to sex. I’ll take any advancement in that confidence, especially when he’s reminding me I’m a big boy,” replied Finn casually.

“I don’t think you need much reminding, babe,” said Nathan, patting him on the thigh. Normally, I’d be feeling sick at the sight of them so happy. But there was a little twang in my stomach, or perhaps my heart, at the sight of them so happy.

“I’m guessing you’re not here for a cock measuring competition...” I started.

“I’d win,” interrupted Finn.

I sighed. “We know. So why are you here?”

“Oh. Yeah. Two things. One, to check on you. You left the celebrations early last night, and I wasn’t sure where you’d gone. Turns out we didn’t need to worry.”

“No, you didn’t need to worry. I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself.”

“Apparently, someone else can look after you though,” said Finn.

“What?” My mind immediately went to the thought of the papers getting a picture of me and the mystery man, or a picture leaking on Twitter of me and him on the dance floor. “How do you know?” I asked, pulling out my phone to check if I had any notifications I’d missed.

Finn laughed, and a second later I had a text from him. He’d taken a picture of me stood shirtless, looking down at my phone...with a very obvious love bite on my neck and red scratches through my chest hair and down to my stomach. Oh.

“Right,” I said dumbly. “What’s the second thing?”

“Nope. Not yet. What’s his name? His job? Is he good enough for our Georgie...wait, is he still here?” Finn was up on his feet, knocking the cornflakes to the floor. He took one step toward the bedroom. I put one arm out to stop him.

“My bedroom is my domain,” I said, “and unless you want to be tied up and spanked, I suggest you keep away. He is not here. I do not know his name or his job, and nor do I care.” The last bit was a lie, but I did my best to keep my usual impassive demeanour intact.

“Noted,” said Finn, taking a step back. “Though if you’ve got any handcuffs we can borrow, I would be much obliged to you.”

“The second thing?” I asked, slowly but surely losing my ability to be congenial with the man.

“I got tickets to watch Cardiff on Wednesday,” he said. “If you’re interested, that is. They’re playing Leeds, so it should be a good match.”

“Oh. Soccer.”

“Yes, soccer.” Finn echoed me, unconvincingly. “I just thought you might like to do something that’s not studying or working out.”

“Fine,” I muttered. “On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You and your pink haired freak get the hell out of my house. I am going to have a nap, another wank, and write my dissertation, not necessarily in that order. And I

think you'd make all those things impossible.”

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“Noted. Let’s go, Nath,” said Finn, reaching out his hand to pull his lover boy from the sofa. As the door closed behind them, I breathed a sigh of relief. I definitely needed to sleep. And then I would write my dissertation, so long as I could get that damn man out of my head for more than a minute. Because he was driving me to distraction more than anything else.

Chapter Eight - Ollie

I’d spent Sunday in a haze, lounging around in the hoodie of a man whose name I didn’t even know and sniffing the collar for his aftershave like he was some high school crush.

Walking into Cardiff’s training facility in Pontypridd on Monday was like having a bucket of cold sick thrown over that happy haze. No one would look me in the eye, and I knew it wasn’t because of the love bite - I’d taken care to hide that with a scarf. No, everyone was looking at me because I was in trouble over what had happened on the weekend.

“Gaffer wants to see you,” said Sven as I passed him in the corridor.

“I know,” I muttered, making my way toward Tim’s office next to the changing rooms. I wasn’t ever as angry as I’d been on Saturday, and I felt completely deflated now. I’d really fucked up.

I knocked, and there was a long silence before Tim spoke. “Come in.”

I opened the door slowly, and it creaked. “Should get those hinges oiled,” I muttered

to myself. Something my dad would say. I closed the door behind me, and it creaked even louder.

“Should oil those hinges,” Tim said, and I couldn’t help but smile a little bit. His face was stoic and unreadable, but that wasn’t unusual for him. “Sit down, Oliver.”

I sat down in the chair across from him. The whole office was decorated in navy blue, and he had a Cardiff City mouse mat and mug. The desk was the only thing that looked out of place, a big mahogany thing that made me feel like we were sitting at opposite ends of the room.

“You fucked up,” said Tim. He was quiet, and firm, and not half as angry as I thought he would seem. “And for the first time, I think you’ve really disappointed me. I’d like to know why.”

I felt my stomach drop out from under me. I’d have preferred it if he shouted at me. “I…” my heart was pounding. “I think I could have helped us draw that match. At the very least, got us a point. And Cory deliberately tried to take a shot that he knew he wouldn’t make.”

“So we have a prima donna on our hands. You’ve played with men like that before,” said Tim. “What’s so different this time?”

I opened my mouth and closed it again. Because I’d been annoyed at Cory, but hadn’t crossed a line until…

“Just annoyed, I guess,” I said.

“I don’t believe you.” Tim tapped one hand on the desk. “I spoke to Chen. And he told me…”

“What?” I asked.

“Cory’s choice of language might be what pushed you over the edge. I heard that he used a word I’d rather not have spoken in my changing rooms.”

Again, I felt my mouth open and close, like I was a goldfish desperate for air. “...It offended me, yeah.”

“And is there a reason for that?” Tim asked. He watched me intently, his eyes boring into my soul.

I didn’t know what to say. But it didn’t matter. Because Tim had seen through everything, and all I had been trying to hide. In the end, all it took was one word. “...yes.”

“OK. That’s all I need to know until you want to tell me more. OK?”

“Thank you,” I breathed.

“But we do need to talk about your behaviour. No matter what motivated it,” said Tim. “We pay you twenty thousand pounds a week to play, but also to attend post-match interviews, to promote our sponsors, to meet your fans. You not being there for any of that has ramifications for our contracts. So I’ll be fining you a week’s pay. Understood?”

“Understood...thank you.” I breathed a sigh of relief. I should have been disappointed to lose almost the equivalent of an annual average salary for most people, but I knew if Tim hadn’t known my situation, I’d have been liable for a worse punishment. And he knew. Well, ish. But it felt like I had nudged gently the closet door open.

“Just so you know, Cory lost a week’s pay, too. I don’t tolerate offensive language in my changing rooms. And if it happens again with anyone, I expect you to come to me first, before you blow your lid. Because if anyone is going to punch someone who says anything like that, it’ll be me.” Tim cracked a smile. “Go lace up your boots. It’s fitness for the day today. We have a match on Wednesday, which gives you a lovely weekend off afterward. And I expect you to score a goal against Leeds. Your style of play is exactly what they struggle to cope with.”

I groaned. Fitness was a bastard, but I knew we needed it after the match against Reading. I was quick in short bursts, but our stamina had failed us. Tim had turned back to his laptop, so I stood up. It was only when I had opened the door that he spoke again.

“Ollie. Just know I’m here whenever you need me, OK? I’m not just the team’s manager. I care about every single one of you.”

“Thanks, Tim. I really appreciate it,” I said.

The door next to Tim’s office led me to the changing rooms, so I headed in and got changed into my training kit and boots. A bag landed on the bench next to me, and I looked up at who had thrown it down. Cory was standing next to me, looking like he would rather be anywhere else.

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He opened his mouth, and for a second no noise came out. “I...I’m sorry, mate,” he said. “You’re right. I was trying to score even though I knew you had a better chance. I just wanted...I wanted to be like you, just for one game. I wanted to bring us glory. And it was wrong.”

“No worries, mate,” I said. I held out a hand to him. My conversation with Tim had pushed away any of the anger I still had left. “Just...work with me in future, yeah? I will always pass to you if you’ve got a better chance at scoring than me. I want us to be a team.”

Cory reached out his hand to me, and I took it. He surprised me by pulling me into a rough hug, slapping my back as he did. He put his lips to my ear. “And...I’m sorry about what I said,” he whispered. “I’ve got a gay cousin and I...I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t know if you...I mean...I’m...yeah. Sorry.”

“Noted,” I choked out. He wasn’t a bad guy. Not really. And there was something in his tone that told me a gay cousin wasn’t the only reason he felt so ashamed of what he’d said.

* * *

Training was brutal over the next two days, but we were playing with a synergy as a team that I felt we’d been missing for ages. Cory and I seemed to have come to an understanding how we’d play, with him supporting me as our up-front player. He passed the ball beautifully to me three times, and three times I got the ball past Sven. Once our defenders caught on to the strategy, we switched positions and Cory scored a goal by shooting the ball into the top-right corner, past Sven’s hands. When he

pulled me in for a hug, our smiles were genuine.

“We’re gonna fucking win this on Wednesday, OK?” I said.

Cory grinned. “Let’s do it.”

Chapter Nine - George

I trudged my way up the steps at Cardiff City Stadium, pint in hand. We were sat in the home stands, which was a weird enough concept to me coming from the world of rugby. The home crowd got about ninety percent of the stadium, and a tiny chunk of space in one corner was reserved for away fans. Fences separated the two to stop them from fighting.

“That’s fucking ridiculous,” I pointed out to Finn as we sat down. Nathan had a hot dog bigger than his head in his hand, and Finn was holding a pint of lemonade for himself as well as Nathan’s pint of lager.

“I know, you’d think they were playing a sport where they bash each other’s brains out on the pitch. You know what they say, though. Football is a gentleman’s sport supported by barbarians...”

“...and rugby is a barbarian sport supported by gentlemen,” I finished. “True that.”

In the Arms Park and Millennium Stadium, the supporters all sat and stood together and mingled. Sure, there was the occasional fight. But for the most part, rugby supporters could be trusted to sit together in the stands with little incident, and head to the same pubs and clubs later to celebrate — or commiserate — with a pint. Soccer supporters had to be bussed in and out of the stadium to prevent serious fighting, and the police were involved in the big derby games.

“Have you been to watch a football game before?” asked Nathan, leaning over Finn to steal one of my chips.

“Nope,” I said, making my distaste clear. “Anyway, it’s soccer.”

“Not this shit again,” said Finn. “It’s so American. No one has called it soccer in this country for decades.”

“Well, rugby is foot-“ I started, but the announcer started calling the names of the teams out, starting with the opposition team. The entire crowd around us booed, and I winced. Booing was rare in rugby too, though it was getting more mainstream by the season. “Your team plays shit!” shouted one guy behind me. Very original.

“Play better, you pussies!” another shouted. Finn smirked next to me.

“This is very you,” I muttered.

“I know.” He stole a chip like his fiancé had.

“Bastard,” I muttered, moving my chips to one side. I may not have been a fan of soccer, but I could certainly appreciate their players. As the Leeds players ran out in their white kits, I leaned over to Finn. “Smash. Smash. Smash. Smash.”

“We are not playing that game here,” he said.

“Pass,” muttered Nathan, and we both laughed. “Pass, pass, pass. Actually, George, you can have them all. I much prefer a big rugby player.” He patted Finn’s bicep. “More robust.”

Then the announcer started calling out the Cardiff player’s names, and the crowd went wild. As each player ran out, starting with Sven Barstad, their gangly

Scandinavian goalkeeper, the crowd got louder. “Smash, smash, smash,” I chanted, even as Nathan continued to say “pass, pass, pass.”

And then the last player was called. “Ollie Gunnerson!” shouted the announcer, and the crowd went wild.

“I’m making an exception, smash,” said Nathan.

I couldn’t make my mouth move to agree with him. What would I have said? Already smashed, sorry mate.

From our vantage point in the stands, it was obvious that Ollie Gunnerson had a big purple blotch on the side of his neck. I rubbed my love bite self consciously as I looked down at him, and my heart pounded at the sight. I finally knew who my mystery man was. And it wasn’t delighting me.

He was just as beautiful under the bright floodlights as he was in the dark club, and the smile he gave the crowd was absolutely radiant. I knew I was looking at a man in his element, in the place he was meant to be. And I knew then why he was so scared to be out, even in a place as safe as Wings. He didn’t want to be the only gay professional footballer in the country.

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The whistle blew, and I jumped. I'd been so focused on the man himself that I hadn't even realised that he'd taken his place at the head of the pack, closest to the centre of the pitch. He kicked backward to another pretty attractive guy, and the team seemed to move as one into enemy territory with Ollie at the front.

The team played with ease and scored a goal within minutes of the game starting. As his teammates jumped on him in celebration, the collar of Ollie's shirt was pulled down to reveal the slowly yellowing love bites that peppered his lower neck and collarbone.

"Jesus Christ mate, he looks worse than you did on Sunday..." Finn tailed off into silence as he took in my expression. "Wait."

"Don't." I whispered out the side of my mouth.

"But you...and..."

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up."

"Fine," muttered Finn. When he reached over to steal a chip, this time I didn't stop him.

With the knowledge of the grilling I was going to get in the car on the way home, the whole match passed incredibly slowly. I hardly watched the ball as it got passed between the players. Unless it was Ollie who had it. I kept my eyes glued on him throughout the match. Of course I did. There was no way I was looking away. I didn't know if I could. Half-time took an age, and I refused to speak to Finn and Nathan the

whole time except for a couple of grunts in the negative or affirmative to whatever they'd asked me. The second half of the football was just as exciting as the first, or so I was told later on.

All I saw were Ollie's shots toward the goal. Two on target that got deflected by the goalkeeper, then one that hit the back of the net. The game finished three-nil, with Ollie responsible for two of those goals, and assisting with the third.

I stood at the same time as everyone else, and we made our way through cramped stadium corridors and out to the car park. Finn was practically bouncing as he clicked his car keys and the lights flashed.

I opened the back door, but Nathan ducked under my arm and jumped into the backseat, then pulled the door shut behind him.

"Front seat, boyo," said Finn, and I rolled my eyes before heading round to the passenger side front seat. "Good lad."

"Don't be a twat, or I won't tell you anything," I muttered.

"Just spill the beans." Finn reversed without looking and the car's brakes automatically engaged to stop him hitting the car pulling out behind him. They beeped the horn, and he threw a casual middle finger their way. Once they'd gone, he reversed the whole way out and carried on as if nothing had happened. My knuckles were white where I had been gripping on to the door.

"So...there's nothing really to spill," I said.

"Lies," said Nathan.

"Boring," offered Finn.

“No. Seriously. Nothing at all to tell. I’ve been going to Wings on a Saturday for a while to pick up men...”

“Ooh, kinky. I know it,” said Finn.

“If you could stop interrupting. Anyway, one night a couple of weeks back, I ran into him. And we did...stuff. Normally that’s enough for me. Move on to the next guy. But the week after, I went back and...well, I realised I was waiting for him. I don’t know why. It felt stupid, but then...he was there.”

“And you proposed? And now you’re in a secret romance?” asked Nathan. “Wait, no, you were in love, and then found out you were actually brothers. And it’s icky now, but something keeps pulling you both together...”

“You’ve been watching too much Star Wars again,” said Finn. “Or wait, is that Thrones of Blood?”

“What else am I meant to do now you’re working full time? Packing customer orders is boring by myself. Anyway, George. Tell us. What happened next?”

“And then I saw him tonight,” I said. My heart thumped irregularly. “I...I didn’t even know his name until tonight. I didn’t know who he was...”

“Oh, fuck man. He has no idea who you are either, does he?” asked Finn.

“Nope.”

“And this complicates things.”

“Yup.” I ground my teeth together. “I wanted to pretend he was just another shag, I did. But I just can’t fucking stop thinking about him.”

“Well, you marked him up good. If there was any doubt, I bet you’ll see those love bites all over the gossip pages tomorrow. People will be wondering who his freaky girlfriend is.”

“Not helping,” I growled. “What the fuck do I do?”

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“Well, we’re in Edinburgh this weekend. Let loose, have some fun. And then later, if you still think you feel the same way about all this, you can try to contact him.”

“But I don’t know how I feel about this!” I didn’t know why I’d opened up so much to Finn and Nathan. It hadn’t made me feel any better, though any idiot could have predicted that when talking to the giant clown driving the car.

“Calm down, big guy,” said Finn, resting a hand on my leg that I’m sure was intended as a comfort.

“Fuck’s sake.” We pulled up outside my flat and I felt worse than when I’d gotten in the car. As I opened the door, Nathan piped up from the back seat.

“What brings you calm?” he asked.

“Rugby,” I answered without hesitating.

“Nope. That’s your job right now. What’s your hobby? What makes you tick over when things are quiet?”

I hesitated. “I’ll let you know later. I think I have an idea.”

Nathan had sparked a little something inside of me. All these thoughts were tumbling around in my head, and there was only one way to clear them.

I had to get them down on the page.

Chapter Ten - Ollie

My legs were aching, but the massage from our expert physio was hitting exactly the right spot. Cardiff's physio rooms were clinical, and I didn't exactly have cucumbers over my eyes, but a gentle loosening of tight muscle followed every sharp dig into my leg. It was like this after every match.

Saturday should have been our day off, but after the gruelling Wednesday match our physios had been on standby for the days following to make sure we were fit for next week's training. A few of us had made our way to the training facility for a bit of TLC.

"How do you think Sven relaxes after every match?" I asked Cory, who was laying across from me on an identical bed and wincing at every prod and poke from the assistant physio.

"What do you mean?" he asked a bit too quickly, his cheeks darkening as he glanced back at the physiotherapist in alarm.

Right. Unpack that later, I thought. "I mean, he's gonna hit thirty soon, right? My legs ache like hell and I'm not even twenty-four yet. There are men playing in their mid-thirties."

"Probably the same way we do," said Cory. "Just takes a bit longer for an old man."

"I heard that!" Sven had walked into the room in a towel, which he dropped to reveal the most horrific budgie-smugglers I'd ever seen. They were bright pink, decorated with tiny yellow bananas.

"We can see your bananas, Sven," I muttered.

He chuckled, and then hissed, as he lowered himself into the ice bath in the corner of the room. “To answer your question, lots and lots of ice,” he said through clenched teeth. “Though I fear I am not long for this wonderful game.”

“So dramatic,” muttered Cory.

Sven lifted one long, furry leg from the bath and rested it over the side. “Want to massage all the pain away? Or maybe I can drink your blood to make me feel six years younger?”

“Shut. Up.” Cory had gone bright red. Sven returned his leg to the water with a splash.

“Goalkeepers only have to stand around at one end of the pitch and throw themselves dramatically to the floor now and then anyway,” I joked in an attempt to lighten the tension in the air.

“I have seen you make more dramatic dives than I ever will, little striker,” Sven growled.

“Right, you’re done,” said the physio, patting my leg. “Sven, your session isn’t for another twenty minutes. You can stay on ice ’til then.”

“I am Norwegian. I eat ice water for breakfast,” he grinned.

“No wonder you’re such a gangly prick,” muttered Cory as I left the room. I wondered what had caused such a frosty atmosphere between the two.

* * *

I was pulling on jeans in the changing rooms when Cory caught up to me. He limped

slightly on one leg, evidence of a rough tackle he'd had right as the game had finished. Footballers had a bit of a reputation for faking injuries on the field, but slide tackles done wrong could be dangerous.

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“Everything OK between you and the Scandi bastard?” I asked.

“It’s pronounced Barstad,” Cory joked. “Anyway, have you seen the latest on Twitter? They’re wondering who the lucky lady is that left all those love bites on your neck. Latest odds-on favourite is that queen from Thrones of Blood, and I’m wondering if I should put a bet on it.”

“You know you shouldn’t,” I muttered.

“And why’s...” Cory tailed off as his phone beeped and he was distracted by it like a dog by a bone. “Oh. Don’t worry, you’re yesterday’s sports news.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?” I said, secretly relieved that we’d moved on from the topic.

“Some rugby player has published a couple of blogs over the weekend, and they’re picking up a bit of flak from the press. One about player respect from the crowd, and another on outing sportspeople.”

“Someone is outing sportspeople?” I asked, louder than I’d meant to.

Cory held up a finger as he read slowly. “Nope. Against, rather than for. Seems he was outed a little while back. The press have a...journalistic imperative and a coll-yeah, I was not good at English in school.”

He passed the phone over to me to read out loud. The blog was simple, in black and white, with no pictures or frills. “A collective responsibility to ensure that we do not cause undue stress or harm to those in sports. Neither should we expect those who are

struggling with their identities or finally taking those few brave steps out into a scary world to act as role models. They are entitled to live the life that best suits them, free from the glare of media scrutiny.”

I felt myself choke up as I read the last few lines. “Wow,” I muttered. “That’s...nice. Seems like a nice guy, saying things like that.” I passed Cory’s phone back. “Got any plans for the rest of your day off?”

He smiled. “Just going out with a friend. How about you?”

“Clubbing, I think.” I hoisted my bag over my shoulder.

“Whereabouts?”

“Just...going out,” I said. “Which friend are you out with?”

“Just...a friend,” he said. “No one you’d know, really.”

So we were both keeping things close to our chests. Maybe his manager was pursuing a move in the summer. As I left the changing room, I bumped into Sven, who still hadn’t dressed except for his little skimpy Speedo.

“You look ridiculous,” I joked as we passed each other.

“What can I say? The ladies love a big Norwegian banana,” he grinned. I rolled my eyes.

I had been anticipating this night all week. I took my mystery man’s hoodie from the boot of my car and walked towards the city centre. It was a good thirty-minute walk, but the breeze was bracing and it meant I didn’t have to deal with any threatening letters from the Council about parking over the limit.

I had a condom and a sachet of lube in my wallet. I didn't know what I thought might happen, but I wanted to be prepared for anything. Though the thought of being fucked in a disabled bathroom at a seedy club wasn't exactly the most romantic or appealing thing in the world. Still, with him, anything seemed appealing.

The sun was setting as I got into town, but it still didn't feel late enough. I grabbed a coffee from a local chain and sat outside for a second, pulling the hoodie over my head when it got too cold to keep sitting outside. I watched Cardiff go by on a Saturday night, as the crowds got rowdier and louder. A couple of teenagers, drunk and obviously on their first night out, spotted me even though I was wearing the hood and asked for a picture, so I took the hood down and smiled until they had left, then pulled the hood back up over my head.

When I stood up from my table, I pulled the drawstrings tight and looked around to make sure no one was following me. I was terrified of someone seeing, but my heart was pounding out of my chest for all sorts of reasons. Fear. Anticipation. It was exhilarating.

Only when I took my place in the line for the club did I take my hood off. I'd done enough on the dance floor in this place that hadn't come out in the wider world. I had no reason to fear that people would out me here. I pulled the hoodie off as I reached the door, and the bouncer smiled at me knowingly.

“Am I allowed the t-shirt and jeans, or do I have to go in naked again?” I asked.

She snorted. “Much as I'm sure you'd get more attention with the t-shirt off, I'll let you keep it on. Just put the hoodie in the cloakroom.”

I did, and then headed into the club. I was early enough that the press of bodies on the dance floor wasn't insane, and there was no queue for a barstool. I ordered my glass of wine and a pint of lager...and waited.

I knew I was early and just had to be patient. I could wait for my rough-and-ready man. I could. Really.

I'd finished my first glass of wine and was on to my second when I started to wonder what was keeping him. A guy dressed entirely in leather that was so tight I had no idea how he'd squeezed into it flirted with me, and I gently turned him down. I spotted the twink from the week before, who stood and chatted for a while before being spirited away by two men in pup masks. It was only once I had reached the bottom of the second glass that I really doubted that my man would show up.

I looked over the rest of the room. People came here to pull, right? And I knew I wasn't a bad looker. There was a reason my twat of a manager had tried convincing me to take up a deal to pose for a calendar. But no matter how much I looked over the crowd of bodies, I couldn't find someone I trusted to treat me like he did. I felt safe with my mystery man, even without knowing his name. And he'd let me down.

I left his pint on the bar and headed out through the dance floor. I collected my hoodie, but as I passed the bouncer on my way out, she put a hand on my arm. "He left this for you," she said, passing a folded-up scrap of paper to me. "It's a note."

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“I can see that,” I said sharply. “Why not give it to me on the way in?”

“He asked me to give it to you as you left,” she said. “I think he wanted you to have your chance to have some fun with someone else, if that’s what you were looking for.”

“Thank you,” I huffed. I definitely hadn’t ended up having fun with anyone else.

I walked halfway down the alley before opening up the note. In scratchy handwriting, there was a mobile number. And underneath...

Sorry, work stuff came up. Let me make it up to you?

-G

I smiled.G. I finally knew something about my mystery man.

Chapter Eleven - George

I was muddy and gross from sliding across the pitch at Edinburgh’s stadium, but I felt so fucking alive. I was pretty sure I had a cut above my eyebrow that was stinging like hell, and I was limping from a low tackle that had knocked my kneecaps together. But I’d supported the team to a tight victory against Edinburgh. I hadn’t scored a try, or converted any kicks. That was fine. I was a packhorse, supporting the rest of the team to glory.

I clapped Rhys Prince on the back as we walked parallel through the tunnel. He was a

fellow Welshman, and one of a weird amount of openly gay players that had come out in the last couple of years. We had played opposite one another today, but would play together for Wales when the Six Nations rolled around. He was part of a new breed of rugby players, a prettier breed that was as appealing to the papers as soccer players were. But he wasn't afraid of getting down and dirty with the rest of us, as evidenced by the mud covering his face and the stud-marks from where he'd had his legs stamped on.

"You coming out with us later?" he asked me, seconds before we diverged into our separate changing rooms.

I nodded. Finn had made it clear I had no choice but to go out with his little contingent.

The team was in good spirits as we entered the changing room, and Pete was all smiles. Finn bounded in behind us with his little clipboard, as he'd sat the game out to focus on coaching from the sidelines.

"Well done lads," said Pete. "I know you'd all like to go out and sample the best of what Edinburgh has to offer...so that's all I've got to say. Get changed. Reynolds, Stratham, I need you for media rounds."

I grunted in response. Great. But I knew what it meant. I needed to tart myself up pretty enough for the camera. I jumped in the open shower block and did my best to clean every speck of mud from me, which wasn't always easy after a rough game. It got everywhere.

Finn wolf-whistled from the doorway. "Look out, lads, Georgie's love bites still haven't faded, and he's on the prowl for more!"

"Look out boys, the fully dressed homo is watching us all in the showers," I retorted.

He hadn't played, but sat on the sidelines and helped management make all the calls for the game.

"Wow. I thought we were rid of homophobia in these changing rooms," said Finn. "Consider me very disappointed."

"Fuck off," I said. Next to me, a couple of the lads laughed.

"Still coming out tonight?" Finn asked.

"If you're lucky. Go on, piss off. I'm sure you're needed in front of a camera somewhere," I said.

Finn gave a quick nod and then was gone. I finished showering and got dressed in my media suit. It would be good enough for a night out too. I joined Andy Stratham, our captain, outside in the hall and we walked toward the media room together.

Rhys Prince was waiting for us outside the door, primed to perfection and looking gorgeous in a slim-cut navy suit that made his eyes sparkle. I'd had a crush on him when I came back to the Wales camp, but he'd been secretly dating Callum Anderson, a Scottish rugby legend. All those smiles I'd sent his way had been for nothing. As we drew closer, I noticed the pin in his lapel. Two flowers crossed, a thistle and a daffodil.

"Ready?" he asked.

"As I'll ever be," I replied. Though I was studying journalism, I never enjoyed stepping into the circus that was the media room. Journalists were always looking for blood after a match, and would do everything they could to fetch the juiciest soundbites.

The din was immediate when we stepped in, and we all took our places at the top table, under the light with about forty microphones pointed in our direction. Pete Grainger was already waiting at one end of the table, and Edinburgh's manager was at the other.

The questions were mostly run of the mill, and directed far more at the two captains than at me. I wondered why I'd even been called into the media briefing. I hadn't scored any spectacular tries or created any big upsets.

Then, as one journalist spoke my name and uttered their question, the penny dropped. "Your blogs recently caused quite a stir. Do you hate the media for outing you years ago?"

I steeled myself before answering. I didn't want to make an enemy of the newspapers. They could make me public enemy number one if they wanted to. "I think that the media needs to be careful about how it breaks stories. I don't want any young sportspeople who want to live their lives thinking that they need to become some kind of role model just because of their identity. And I think our media is far too quick to kick people down who are just trying to get by."

The journalist nodded, and another spoke. "You also wrote about the differences in sports fans. Do you think that football fans are all hooligans?"

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I ground my teeth together. “No. And if you’d read my blog, you would know that was not the point I was making.”

Pete cut in immediately. “I think George’s blog was quite clear in that he doesn’t think all soccer fans are hooligans, but that expectations in rugby make violence less likely than it is in football. I don’t think anyone could seriously suggest that’s the point he was trying to make.”

The pool went silent for a moment, and then the questioning moved back to the captains and managers. When it was all over and the journalists had filed out, Steve put a hand on my arm. “Well, if you thought your little page had gone viral before, that’s nothing compared to how it is now.”

“I had no idea so many people were reading,” I admitted truthfully. “Finn said he’d tweet it or something, but I stay off social media.”

“You really are the last dinosaur. Ah well, you got people talking. Keep going,” grinned Steve. “And I hear you’re off out to town.”

“I am.” I looked over to where Finn and Rhys stood in conversation, each glancing over at me now and then.

“Have fun. And make sure you’re back to the hotel for the team bus by 10am tomorrow,” said Steve, clapping me on the arm roughly.

“Let’s go, boyo,” shouted Finn. “We have drinks to down and men to flirt with!”

“Nathan isn’t here,” I said to him. “Better not be trying any funny business.”

“I value my life and my arse. No, you’re going to be doing all the flirting for us. Rhys, Callum and I are living vic-vi...through you now.”

I couldn’t help the grimace that crossed my face. “I think I’d rather cut out my own eyeballs,” I muttered.

“Cheery. Let’s go,” said Finn, taking the lead and leaving me and Rhys in the dust.

“When did you get so grumpy?” Rhys asked casually.

“I...what?”

“When we were playing for Cardiff, you were a laugh. You always seemed happy. Baby faced. Now you’re all frowns and hard lines.”

“I was...ah, I was trying to impress you,” I admitted. “Sorry to your boyfriend and all, but you weren’t exactly advertising that you were off the market.”

“Sweet. I’ve still got it,” Rhys smiled.

Finn was waiting at the end of the corridor already, holding the door open for us. “Come on! I want to see some bears in their natural habitat!”

“You already are,” I murmured. Rhys laughed.

It was cold and dark outside, and a ginger giant of a man was waiting for us. I’d met Callum Anderson a few times, and he waved at Finn and me before pulling Rhys in for a kiss that left nothing on the table. They were completely and utterly in-fucking-love with each other.

“You played well today,” he said in a deep Scottish brogue once they had come up for air.

“We lost though,” complained Rhys.

“Which means I win,” he replied, snaking one hand down and patting Rhys’ arse. Rhys blushed and looked awkwardly around. I didn’t meet his eyes. “But who cares about winning or losing when you played so well? I’m very, very proud of you.”

“Spoken like a true pundit,” replied Rhys.

“Right, enough of this lovey-dovey crap. Where are we off?” asked Finn. “I need a pint in my hand and food in my belly.”

“Regents,” said Callum. “Friendliest gay bar in town.”

We walked as a group through Edinburgh old town centre to the bar, where flags for every subsection of the LGBTQ community hung above the bar. I ordered a pint for each of us, and Finn whispered in my ear to ask that I buy a non-alcoholic pint for him. The music was lower here, not yet at nightclub volume, and I appreciated that.

The bar was quiet, but filling up, and I couldn’t help but cast my mind back to the guy I had back in Cardiff. Was he waiting for me in the same way, or had he thrown himself at the first guy in the club once he realised I wasn’t turning up?

“Oh God, you’re growling. Why the hell are you growling?” Finn asked, looking around the room. “Did someone glance at you wrong? Insult the rules of rugby? Piss on your seat?”

I took a sip of my pint to fortify myself. “I did something potentially stupid,” I admitted.

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“Tell me, tell me.” Finn bounced on his seat and downed what was left of his pint.

“I left a note for...for Ollie, at the club.”

“Down, boy. Are you trying to stop him from getting some action?”

I put my pint down with a bit more force than I'd meant to, and the beer spilled all over my hand and the bar. “No. I asked them to give him the note on the way out.”

“Ah. So you're more pissed off that you didn't stop him from getting any action. I see. Very caveman.”

“Who are you calling caveman, Lurch?” I challenged. Finn was a Sasquatch if I'd ever seen one.

“Ooh, you wound me. But I'm not the one leaving notes for a guy I fucked in a club once.”

“Shut. Up. And we didn't...”

“What, fuck? Jesus, George. You've got it bad.”

I picked up the dregs of my pint and knocked it back as quickly as I could, indicating to the bartender for another. The music was being turned up slowly with every song, and the dance floor was getting busier.

Callum pulled Rhys onto the dance floor, and I watched as they moved in sync with

one another. Callum hadn't been out when I first met him, and it was amazing to see how comfortable he was in such a short time, dancing with his boyfriend in front of all these people. I thought of Ollie, and the couple of female supermodels he'd been linked with in the Personal Life section of his Wikipedia page. Would he ever want something like this?

I shook my head like I was clearing the thoughts out of it and grabbed my new pint from the bar. He was someone I'd...met. Twice. And I was just fantasising over the allure of him, and the things we hadn't done yet. Nothing more. If I wanted to fuck a guy from here, I could. And I would. There was plenty of prime Scottish beef here to sample if I wanted to.

"Watch this," I muttered to Finn. "I can get him off my mind. I can get anyone here."

I took a swig from my glass and trained my eye on one guy who had just walked through the door. He was skinny, with a nice amount of neatly trimmed brown stubble. His shirt was unbuttoned, revealing an expanse of chest hair. I kept looking until he looked at me, and made his way over.

"Want something from me, handsome?" he asked. I did my best to smile back, but it didn't come as easily as usual.

"Depends what you're offering," I said.

"Buy me a drink and I'll decide what it's worth offering."

"What do you want to drink?" I asked.

"You look like the kind of man who wants to decide for me," he quipped, one hand coming to rest on my thigh. "So let's set the tone starting now."

I gestured for the bartender. “He’ll have a glass of Shiraz,” I said automatically, then wanted to curse myself for asking for that. I had Ollie on the brain. My plan was to get him out of my head, and here I was already fucking up.

I passed the man his wine. “What’s your name?” I asked.

“Call me Al,” he said.

“I’m George. You gonna be my long-lost pal?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“I could be your bodyguard...has no one ever made that joke to you before?”

Al’s stern expression cracked, and he laughed. “Every day of my life. Trust me to have a mother who named me a two-letter name. It’s not a shortening. My name is just...Al.”

“Well, it’s cute. And funny,” I said.

“You think?” he batted his eyelashes comically, and I laughed again. That hand on my thigh slid ever further up.

Normally, with a guy like him, in a place like this, I’d have been all over him. I’d already have him on the dance floor, my thumbs under his waistband and touching his arse so he knew who was in charge. We’d both be sporting semis on the dance floor, and a tipsy walk home would have resulted in him being bent over, clutching the headboard and screaming so loud he wouldn’t be able to look his neighbours in the eye for weeks.

But. And it was a big but. It was like I was locked in chastity. That hand on my thigh

was doing absolutely nothing. Those lovely caramel brown eyes were just...nice, rather than seductive. I had Ollie Gunnerson on the brain, and I had no idea how to get him out of it.

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“Earth to George. Earth to George.” Al was snapping his fingers in front of my face. “Thanks for the wine, sweetie. But I need a guy to take charge. And your head just isn’t in it tonight.”

He kissed me on the cheek and sauntered off to the dance floor. To my left, Finn laughed out loud.

“Not a word,” I growled.

“Any guy here, sure. Just as long as you aren’t pining after a man who doesn’t even know who you are.”

I went to reply when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I grabbed it quickly, checking the notification as my heart pounded out of my chest.

And there it was. The message I’d pretended I wasn’t waiting for.

Unknown Number: Hi. It’s Ol.

Chapter Twelve - Ollie

Hi Ol. It’s George.

Hi, Ol. Did you want to meet Monday? My place. No public pressure.

Hi Ol. I’ll send you my address later. No pressure, remember.

Those few texts were all I had. Monday's training session had pushed me to my limits, and I was sitting with my feet in a bucket of ice-cold water in my penthouse overlooking Cardiff Bay. We'd not texted much, just those brief things to organise...whatever it was we were going to do.

I had showered again when I got home, just in case George wanted more than we'd had so far. I knew I did, but I didn't know if his demanding attitude would make it an easier or tougher prospect. Would he know to be gentle if I asked? Somehow, I knew he would. We had shared a lot of trust in one another.

I sniffed the hoodie laying next to me, and though it was smelling more like my apartment by the day, there were still hints of him on it. The minty smell of Vicks rub, a couple of grass and mud stains at the bottom. Was he a sportsman like me? I'd googled 'George sports', which had led to the sweet sum of fuck all, because there were millions of results. 'George Dom Top' hadn't led to anything either, but it had been a fun diversion.

My phone buzzed again, and I checked it, ready for him to send me his address. Unfortunately, it was a call from my manager, and I picked up with a sigh.

"Hi, John. What do you want?" I asked.

"Why do you always presume I want anything?" he asked. "As always, it's me bringing something to you. Not the other way round."

"What do you have?"

"Well, Reading was a dead end after you strung them along-"

"-you strung them along John, I told you no from the start-"

“-anyway, I’ve started to get some big-name interest in you.”

Despite my best interests, I bit. “What? Like the Premier League?”

John laughed. “No, kid. The Saudi league.”

“No. No way.”

“Wait till you find out how much they’re paying! You’ll get used to the heat!”

“I don’t care, John-”

“Half a million!” he shouted over the phone. “Half a million a fucking week! Over twenty mil a year.”

“OK? What am I supposed to do with that information?” My heart thudded. It was a lot of money, but surely even John wasn’t so much of an idiot that he was considering it.

“You thinking about it?” he asked.

“No, John. In case you’d forgotten, I’m gay.”

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“Not to the world you’re not. You’re just another fucking football player who’s not going out with any girls at the moment.”

“John. I am not playing for a country that would throw me in jail for who I love.”

“Just one year! One year and we could both retire. I’m not getting any younger.”

“You’re not getting any poorer, either. No means no, John. I won’t play there.” I hung up the phone and switched it to silent. He tried to call back twice, but I just watched as it rang out. He’d stressed me to hell with his inconsideration, and I knew what I needed to calm me down. I knew who I needed.

Then, finally, what I’d been waiting for arrived. A text from George. With his address. And I had to laugh.

George: Can you get here in an hour?

Ol: How soon can you be ready?

George: I’m ready.

I got up, dried off my feet, and without putting on my shoes, got in the private penthouse lift. The problem with the whole privacy thing was that I had to take the lift to the bottom of the building, only to take the slighter grottier lift back up.

Because George, the mysterious man that he was, lived three floors below me. I laughed again in the lift, laughed until I was holding on to the railing to support

myself. Because it was so ridiculous, so implausible, that I couldn't believe it. How could we live in the same building? So many times we must have passed each other in the foyer, or parked our cars near each other in the car park.

I got out of the lift on the twentieth floor and walked down the carpeted corridor to the address George had given, and knocked.

"Finn, I swear to God that better not be you because I have a hot piece of..." George tailed off as he opened the door and looked at me. "You," he said.

"Me." I suddenly felt nervous. The sunset was streaming in through George's windows, and all the lights were on in his apartment. What if he didn't like me in the cold light of day? What if he was having second thoughts?

I knew I wasn't. He was even more beautiful in the light. Every shadowy angle of his face, every raised bump and scar made him even more appealing to me. It took me a minute to notice he was dressed in a shirt and jeans. I'd just rushed down in my tracksuit, shoeless and impulsive, because I wanted to know it was real. That the man I'd been chasing was so close.

"How did you...?" he tailed off.

I pointed upward. "We live about ten metres from one another."

"No way."

"Yes way."

I tried my best to discern the smile he was giving me. Was he pleased to see me? Did he...

And then George grabbed me by the front of my shirt and was kissing me as the door slammed shut behind me. “I...” he started, seemingly unable to say what he wanted to. I didn’t know how to say what I wanted to either.

One rough, calloused finger traced my collarbone, and then he was pulling aside the collar of my workout shirt and pressing his lips to the crook of my neck and sucking. I could have come then and there, just from him giving that to me.

“I...they were fading,” George’s finger traced where I knew he’d left the love bites. “I need...fuck. Sorry. This isn’t me.”

He backed away from me, and I just wanted his touch on me again. My heart was thumping with both nerves and anticipation. I looked around the place he had. It wasn’t totally different the penthouse, a little barebones, the furniture obviously quick catalogue buys and the walls painted white. Otherwise, it was just a basic, slightly small flat. The kitchen and living room were one, and there was a dining table with two chairs pushed in one corner.

“Let me...you like wine, right?” George was heading toward the kitchen, and I followed him to lean on the counter. He took out a bottle of white from the fridge, and two glasses from the cupboard. I noticed how his hand shook as he poured, and then he slid the glass over to me. There was a metre between us physically, but I could feel the mental gulf widening by the second.

“I...I’m Ollie,” I offered.

“I know,” said George. “I watched you play last week.”

Fuck. Shit. I looked round the room for an emergency exit, like I could throw myself out of the nearest window for a safe landing. My heart had dropped into my stomach. He knew who I was.

“Hey. You OK?” he asked.

“Are you going to tell anyone?” I asked. Well, screeched.

“No. No way, man. I know how it feels to be outed against your will as a sportsman.”
George took a step closer to me and took my free hand in his. “C’mon.”

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He led me over to the sofa and sat me down, and sat far enough away that we weren't touching. "My name is George Reynolds, and I'm a Welsh rugby player who was outed well before I was ready. I've made my peace with it now, but I wouldn't expect anyone to go through the same."

"Right." I was still shaking from his revelation, and took a sip of wine to steel myself. There would be bloody murder if any of the coaching staff found out I was drinking on the night before training. But I needed reassurance and confidence only alcohol could provide. "I...I want to come out at some point. I just...it's hard. I don't want to be the first."

"I get that. Another player on the Welsh squad, Rhys, he's always been out. But his partner didn't come out until he was thirty-five, and Finn Roberts got outed last year in some pretty nasty circumstances. So I'm by no means the first openly gay rugby player, not even in Wales. Though judging by how few there are elsewhere, there must be something in the water." He chuckled.

"There are more of us, I'm sure," I said. "I bet if someone came out, there would be more of us to follow."

"And you've never hooked up with another footballer?" George asked. He sounded like he couldn't believe it. "I know of at least six international rugby players who aren't out. And I know how each of them sounds when they come."

Somewhere, underneath all the panic and weirdness, jealousy bubbled up. For some reason, I hated the thought of George and anyone else. "No one," I finally answered. "The last sexual experience with a man before you, I was seventeen. He was in the

Cardiff football academy, but as far as I know, he never made it professional.”

“Damn,” George whistled. “And you’re...how old, now?”

“Twenty four. You?”

“Twenty nine. Just wanted to check you weren’t like eighteen. You’ve got an ageless face.”

I could feel my cheeks heating, and took another sip of the cold wine to calm it down. “Football doesn’t make us as rough and gruff as rugby players,” I said.

“Pussies, the lot of you.” George took another sip of his wine, and for the tiniest second, it pissed me off. And then I saw the smirk on his face and realised exactly what he was doing. Pulling pigtails. Playground flirting.

“Well, at least I’ll look eighteen at thirty. Whilst you’ll hit sixty at fifty,” I challenged.

“Well, with all those moisturisers sponsoring you, how could you ever have this rough manly skin?” George rubbed his cheek as if to prove a point.

“Guess you’ll just have to rub that rough and manly skin up against mine,” I said, almost automatically. I felt ridiculous the second I’d said it, but the tension between us changed. I looked at George, and he looked at me.

I don’t know which of us dropped our wine glass onto his carpet first, but George was on top of me in seconds. His hands pinned mine back to the arm of his sofa, and his tongue plundered my mouth like he was searching for hidden treasure.

He pulled back for a second, and I immediately tried to regain the connection, but his

feel grip on my wrists stopped me from kissing him. “Remember, no means no,” he said. “I like a little control over the situation. So your consent is implied. If I ask you to do something, if I try to do something, I’ll be waiting for you to tell me you don’t want it. And if your mouth is full...well, just tap my thigh.”

“So if I struggle?” I asked, feeling suddenly more bold than I ever had in my life.

“Then you struggle.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then it all stops.”

“What if I say...make me?”

“Then you better be feeling brave,” said George before he was kissing me again. His grip on my hands was giving me pins and needles, but I didn’t mind. I wanted it. I wanted more of it. What we’d done in the club had felt dirty, but here, in private, it felt like I needed more to get that same feeling. So I bit down on his bottom lip. Hard.

He pulled away. “Problem?” he grunted.

“No. Just wanted to remind you I was here. And waiting.”

“Little brat, huh?” George smirked. “Reckon you’ll be so smug with your mouth full of dick?”

“Make me,” I replied.

George smiled, but said nothing more. He unbuckled his belt and unzipped his jeans, then released his cock from their confines. He shuffled his way up my body and then

pressed the head to my lips. I breathed in the heady scent of him. The musk. George's hands returned to my wrists, but only one was in a vice-like grip. The other was gentler, lighter. I knew what it was for. So I could break free and tap his thigh if things got too much.

Then George pushed insistently against my lips and I had no choice but to let him in. He pushed in so hard, so fast, giving me no chance to adjust. He wanted me to take it, and I did. I gagged around his length and thickness, but I was used to it a little more than I had been, and I let him in as he sank to the hilt. I gagged again, tears springing to my eyes, but he held me there for just a second. I looked up at him, still fully suited, and he smirked.

“Bratty, but you can take it,” he said, pulling out before pushing to the back of my throat again. Every time I gagged, my cock twitched inside my trousers. I was so desperate for release, but knowing that George controlled that release was even more of a turn on. So as he gently used my mouth, pulling out and pushing back in, I refused to tap out. I didn't want to tap out. I wanted to thank him.

For minutes, George pushed in and pulled out slowly. Every push in made me gag and made my cock twitch. Every smirk he gave me made me want to submit more, and every moan made me glad I was doing what he wanted. After a few minutes, he withdrew slowly and looked down at me. I was sure I looked a mess, with tears in my eyes and spit on my chin.

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“Bedroom?” he asked. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, and let him lead me to the bedroom. It was the same as the rest of the flat, sparsely decorated, and basic. But all I needed was the big king-sized bed in the middle of the room.

“Strip,” said George. His cock was still hanging out of his trousers, but he made no move to undress.

“And what if I don’t?” I challenged.

“I think you’re too new to all this for punishment,” said George. “So I’m just asking you to do as you’re told.”

And I did. I pulled my t-shirt over my head, and then lowered my trousers. George looked over my body like a predator looks at its prey. Finally, I lowered my boxers, and was stood naked in front of him. Mostly, I was embarrassed at how hard the experience had made me.

“Fucking gorgeous,” he said. He stepped forward and placed his hands gently on my hips, and I shivered at the touch. One hand skated over my hip-bone to my stomach and then rested just above my cock, before giving it the gentlest of strokes.

“I’m going to fuck you,” he said quietly, breath hot on my cheek.

“And if I refuse?” I challenged, though at that moment I wanted nothing more.

“You know the word you need to use.” George pushed me back toward the bed, and my knees buckled as I met the mattress. He pushed my legs upward, and kissed each

of my feet before kissing down the back of my legs. First my calf, then my thigh, then he was nuzzling behind my balls before his lips met somewhere that no man had ever touched.

His cool tongue entered me and I moaned at a pitch I had never reached before. His lips were heaven and his tongue was taking me there stroke by stroke. My eyes were closed tight as I let my other senses do all the work.

“Fuck,” I whined. “George.”

The strokes stopped, and he chuckled. “And that’s how you tame a brat.”

“Please don’t stop,” I got out before he was entering me with his tongue again, strokes alternating with flat licks and gentle prods until I was begging for more. His grip on my legs was like iron, holding them high, so he had access to exactly what he wanted.

And then it stopped, and I wanted to cry. My cock was leaking pre-cum onto my stomach and I needed release.

“Please,” I muttered.

“You want me to fuck you?” George asked. One finger roughly pressed against my spit-slicked hole and I pushed against it eagerly. I nodded, words escaping me as he pushed into me. It hurt, but I wanted more. I needed more.

“Hold your legs up,” he said. As soon as I’d done as I was told, George was gone. Seconds later, something cold drizzled over my hole and I finally found the strength to open my eyes. George, still fully clothed with his fly undone, was standing between my legs with a tube of lube. He’d rolled a condom over his hard cock, which looked an intimidating size now that I knew where it was going.

“This is going to hurt,” he said ominously, “but I’m gonna make you forget all that, OK?”

I nodded, and he pushed one finger into me slowly, all the way until I could feel his knuckle brushing up against my taint. He’d relaxed me, so it went in easily, but as he pulled out and then pushed a second finger in, I felt a sting that made me hiss.

“Relax,” he said, pushing his fingers in and out until the pain receded. I could feel the pleasure buzzing at the very edge of things, but I’d gone soft with nerves.

I breathed out slowly and did my best to relax around his fingers. It wasn’t easy, but when he added a third, I didn’t feel the same sting I’d had with the second.

“Fuck me,” I said quietly. It was what I wanted.

“When you’re soft? No.” George played with my soft cock between two fingers as he pushed into me again. “I want to know you’ll come on command when I ask you to.”

“Please,” I begged. I needed it. Needed him.

George leaned down and took my cock in his mouth, pushing his tongue underneath my foreskin and playing with the head. With every deft push in and flick of his tongue, I could feel I was getting harder again. Every nerve ending in my body was on fire as he played with me. Only when I was finally almost at full mast did he straighten up and look me in the eye.

“Are you ready?” he asked. All I could do in response was whine. He notched his cock against me and then slowly pushed his way inside.

Chapter Thirteen - George

I knew I had to be gentle. To make things good for him, to take my time and to ensure he came back. Because God, I wanted him back. So I slowly pushed my way into him, cold lube and the warmth inside him doing funny things to my cock.

He moaned, high and quiet, and I kept my eyes on him. He winced, eyes screwed up against the sting I knew I was causing, but he didn't once ask me to stop. And those were our rules. So I kept up the slow but relentless push until I was buried to the hilt inside him.

"That's it, good boy," I muttered, leaning down to capture his mouth with mine to distract him as I pulled back slightly and then pushed back into him. I bit down gently on his bottom lip and felt him smile against my mouth as things started to feel good for him.

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“You’re....killing me,” he panted, sweat glistening on his forehead. He was still holding his legs up for me like a good boy, but I pushed his legs up higher. He was a soccer player. I knew he had to be a little more flexible.

With the easier access, I pushed into him, harder than I had before, and the groan in response was all the encouragement I needed to go, harder and faster. I liked to draw out sex, to make it a process we could enjoy for as long as we could, but the sight of that alabaster skin against my dark grey sheets was too much. I wanted to own Ollie Gunnerson, and if it weren’t for the thin condom separating us, I’d have finished deep inside him and made him mine in the most primal, caveman-like way I knew.

My thrusts were fast and erratic, but Ollie seemed to enjoy every second. Every thrust brought out new octaves of pleasure, every movement a symphony of my own making.

“You’re...so beautiful,” I said, realising I’d brushed his bottom lip with my teeth. I moved down a little, biting his collarbone, then his chest. I needed him marked again. I needed him to be allmine.

“Touch yourself,” I said, pushing his legs even further back so I could pound with impunity. His hand came to rest on his cock and he stroked himself, hard and fast. I was still fully clothed, cock only freed from my fly. Having Ollie naked, vulnerable, and sweating under me was driving me over the edge.

Ollie’s moans reached a new pitch. “I need to come,” he whined.

“Come,” I encouraged him. “Do it for me.”

I could feel his tight channel tightening around my cock as he let himself go, spilling over the thin sheen of sweat that had built up on his stomach and chest.

Fuck. I wanted to come inside him, but with the condom between us I needed to mark him in another way, so as I reached my climax, I pulled out and ripped the condom off. In a couple of strokes of my hand, I was spilling all over his semi-hard cock and stomach, our releases mingling in his skin. Mad with lust, I kissed him again, so hard our teeth clashed. And then, when I pulled away, we looked at each other. Into one another's eyes, and I felt like I saw him and he saw me. Maybe that was madness, maybe I was just lust-drunk. But in that moment, I'd never felt closer to anyone. Numberless hookups had come and gone. But Ollie was something special.

And then he broke the tension. "Well. I'mverysticky," he said, gesturing down at his stomach. He really was a mess, and a little bit of me was embarrassed at how I'd lost control in the moment. I was always cool. Always in control of the situation. But I got a thrill of seeing him covered in my release, and how I'd taken him apart. I'd renewed my love bites, and he hadn't complained, so it seemed he was OK with people knowing I had claimed him. Or that someone had, at least.

"Come on then, let's get you showered," I said. I held out a hand, and he took it. I led him to the shower and turned it on. I stripped off my clothes, realising I'd got cum and lube all over my jeans, and stepped in. Ollie just stood there, outside the shower cubicle. "Are you coming in?" I asked.

"With you? After we..." Ollie looked so confused, and his expression reminded me of the time he'd turned tail and run at the club.

"Yes. As I told you before, aftercare is important." I didn't think to mention that aftercare would normally have just involved a wipe down and cuddles in bed. He didn't need to know that this wasn't something I normally did. That I felt a need to be close to him after the sex was over in a way I never did with anyone else.

“Are you sure? I can wait...”

“You’re dripping cum all over the tiles. Get your arse in,” I growled, and Ollie stepped into the shower with me. Yes.

“Good boy,” I growled, and watched as a blush crept up his neck and into his cheeks. I took a sponge, applied a little body wash, and wiped down his chest and stomach until they were clean. I turned him and washed down his back methodically too, using my hands to wash over his arse. My thumb brushed against his hole, and I watched as goosebumps formed across the small of his back. I was fascinated by Ollie. I wanted to see every inch of him, to know how his body reacted to everything I did. I turned him back to face me, and kissed him. “You’re all clean,” I said.

He took the sponge from my hand and, shyly at first, washed me too. I was surprised when he turned me around and gave as much attention to my arse as I had to his. I was some people’s cup of tea, but there wasn’t a huge market for rugby-scarred chunky men with furry butts. When he turned me back around, I noticed he was half-hard already.

“Liked my arse, did you?” I asked, pushing him against the cold tile and kissing him gently to cut off his immediate answer.

“Do you ever...?” Ollie tailed off, leaving the question unasked.

“Bottom? Yes, sometimes. But you can expect the same attitude I have when I top,” I said.

“How is that possible?” Ollie asked.

I grinned sheepishly, suddenly self-conscious at the things I’d not yet shown him. “It’s amazing how a good set of restraints can help to make a top more compliant.”

“Maybe...maybe not yet then,” said Ollie. I shut off the water and wrapped him in a towel, then hunted in the airing cupboard for one for myself.

“Are you in a rush?” I asked.

“I don’t need to be anywhere,” he said. We dried off and walked back through the bedroom to the living room. I sat down naked on the sofa and gestured for him to join. He sat next to me; and when I raised my arm, he tucked himself under it like he was meant to be there. The skin on skin contact was perfect, and I knew I could get addicted to him.

I looked down at the wine glasses and spill marks on the carpet. “That’s gonna smell like grapes and alcohol for the next twenty thousand years,” I sighed.

“I know a good cleaner,” said Ollie. “I’ll send you her details.”

“God, this is domestic,” I said.

Ollie laughed. “It’s nice. It’s what I need. I don’t really...get domestic all that much. I live by myself, and I live for my work.”

“Cardiff City’s star striker, huh?” I teased.

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“I’m not that good,” he protested.

“I know you’re that good. I watched you play, remember?”

“Did you know who I was, in the club?” asked Ollie. “Is that why you came to watch?”

“Nope. I got dragged along by some mates of mine,” I said. “I think my stomach dropped out of my body when I saw you, and they knew it.”

Ollie stiffened. “They won’t say anything, will they?”

“No, love. You haven’t kept up much with Welsh rugby, have you? We’re a very queer-inclusive space nowadays. Finn’s partner Nathan is great, and I used to play with another gay guy who lives in Scotland with his boyfriend now, the ones I mentioned earlier.”

“That must be nice,” said Ollie. “Football clubs and fans can be absolute cunts about it all.”

“I’ve heard,” I said. “I wrote about it recently, actually.”

“You are the blogger I’ve been following? Jesus Christ, it’s like there’s something dragging us together,” said Ollie. “I loved your blog about coming out in sport. It’s how I feel.”

My heart thumped irregularly against my ribcage, and I hoped he hadn’t noticed.

“You mean you want to come out at some point?” I asked.

“Yeah. I’ve got my plans...it’s just hard to say, even out loud to myself. Let alone out to the world. And I don’t know if I’m ready to be a role model. So your blog struck a chord with me.”

“I’m glad it could help,” I said, as casually as I could. The thought of Ollie coming out had sent a thrill through me. Like an obstacle between us had been removed, and I could see a bright and shining future. I snorted.

“What’s funny?” Ollie asked.

“Nothing, just thinking about how weird it is that two gay sportsmen living so close to one another never hooked up through Grindr,” I lied. Because in reality, I was getting all moon-eyed about a future with a man whose name I had only learned days earlier.

“I’m not on any of that,” he said. “Too risky.”

“You could just be another headless profile,” I teased, running one finger up his chest, across his nipple, and then across the network of love bites I’d left on his collarbone and upper chest. “This smooth skin would have the men battering down your door.”

“Is that what you want?” he asked.

“What?” The question had taken me by surprise.

“Do you want me sampling all the delights out there? Or do you want me to keep coming back to you?”

I hesitated. I knew the genuine answer. That I wanted Ollie all to myself. But that sounded insane. Like I could ever want more than a quick fling with a guy so insecure he hadn't come out. Like I could ever want anything more than a quick fling, anyway. I was a serial fucker. So why was I feeling so warm and fuzzy about the guy laying in my arms?

"George?" asked Ollie. "You zoned out there."

"I...you do what you want," I said with little conviction. "I don't own you."

Ollie shifted to face me better. "So the love bites, the notes at the club...none of those are in any way meant to stop me or anyone else from doing anything?"

I hesitated. "...guilty," I managed. "I...like you. And I don't want you getting hurt by some idiot who only cares about getting off. I mean, I want to get off. Obviously. But with you I..." I tailed off, trying to finish the sentence without it sounding lame.

"I get it," Ollie said. "But for the record, as long as you want to do what we did today at some point again, I will not be downloading Grindr, or Tinder, or any of that stuff. OK?"

"OK," I said. I leaned over to the coffee table and grabbed my phone. I held down the Grindr app until it wobbled, then deleted it. "Me too. But the second you decide you wanna go elsewhere, just let me know. I don't want to be strung along."

"OK," said Ollie. "Sounds good." He tucked his head under my armpit and laid there peacefully as I stroked up and down his back. I realised after a second that his breathing had shifted lower and deeper. With him asleep, I let my eyes wander his body. That smooth, pale skin, almost hairless except for his happy trail, pubes and a smattering of light hairs across his arse. His face, so young and unmarked.

I understood then why so many people craved intimacy when I'd mostly avoided it except for aftercare. It brought us closer without talking. It made me want to understand him, to know him more. I wanted to introduce him to Finn, Nathan, the whole team. It made me want to be less of an all-round grumpy sod for him.

I grabbed my phone and snapped a picture. Nothing revealing or identifying, just the top of his head resting against my chest, and sent it to Finn.

George: Score. Keeping him.

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Finn: Nathan is planning your wedding already.

I sighed. Because it was stupid. Much as Ollie might want to come out, things were so far in his future, things I had already been through years ago. I couldn't take him out on a date, I couldn't bring him along to training, or sit in the family box at his games. We were in different parts of our lives. So if all I could get from him was this, then I was happy. I would be happy with it for now.

For a second, I considered waking him up to send him home. But I didn't want that. Instead, I manoeuvred myself so that I could pick him up, bridal style, and carry him to bed. We could rest just a little while.

Chapter Fourteen - Ollie

I snuggled in a little closer to the duvet. It smelled like all the things I loved most - the grass on the pitch, the heavy-duty deodorant and Vicks that followed us sportspeople round everywhere. My alarm was blaring, so I rolled over to turn it off. And collided with something warm, squishy and furry. And it was the source of all those delicious smells.

Like I'd been electrocuted, I jolted upward as my brain finally kicked into gear. "Shit!"

"...Morning," said George. He was sitting up in bed, a lamp on low as he read a book propped up on his knees. I scrambled for my phone, which was tangled up in my jeans on the floor. I turned it off and turned to face George. I knew exactly how I looked, red-faced with my hair stuck up in every direction like it always did in the

mornings.

“You wear glasses?” I asked. I didn’t know why that seemed to be the most pressing matter in my mind at that moment, but it was weird. I couldn’t square the big, rough rugby bloke I knew with the gold, round-rimmed glasses he was wearing. They took him from athlete to academic in seconds, and I could imagine him wearing them alongside a frumpy jumper and chinos. Though the size of his arms would split most shirts. And those thighs might do the same to any poor pair of non-stretch chinos.

“I do. But don’t tell anyone.” George tapped his nose, then opened the drawer next to him to pull out a box of contact lenses. “I wear these on the field and out and about, but I couldn’t be arsed faffing around this morning with them. I’m going to uni later.”

“You study?” I asked. “Any more surprises?”

“Ollie. I earn in a year what you earn in a month, and my career will still be over at thirty-five. I need to be preparing for what comes next.” George held up the book to me so I could read the front of it. *Sports Journalism - A History in Pictures*.

“The blogs, right?” I asked. “That’s why you blog. Because you want that as a career.”

“I want to write. Speaking of career...what time do you have to be in training? I could drop you off.”

“Shit!” I looked down at my phone again. I perfectly timed my mornings. Alarm, get dressed, drive to training, but I’d completely forgotten to set my alarm the day before. And I’d wasted five minutes asking a hookup about his career choices. “Uh...no, it’s fine. I can drive myself.” I dragged my trousers over my legs, then my t-shirt. My keys jangled in my trouser pocket, so all I’d need to do would head down to the underground car park and drive to training, possibly picking up a couple of speeding

fines along the way. It wasn't until I'd already opened the bedroom door that I realised how rude I seemed.

“Thank you for last night. Will I see you again?”

“I think you know the answer to that.” George looked over the edge of his glasses at me with a sly smile. Fuck, he was handsome. “Text me when you want another night like last night.”

“Can't I just book in advance?” I tried, only half-joking.

George laughed. “Goodbye, Ol. Have fun at training.”

I ducked my head and left. I thought I might blush the entire way down to the car park.

* * *

I made my way to Pontypridd, caught in the ridiculous morning traffic out of Cardiff. But by some miracle, I was only five minutes late to training. Though at some point in the car, I became disgustingly aware of my sore arse, and how my legs felt like jelly after the pounding I'd had from George. So as I changed from my comfy tracksuit to the standard Cardiff training kit, I winced.

“Everything OK?” asked Cory from next to me. “Is it your hamstring? Do you want me to get you the physio, or a medic?”

“No, no. I'm fine. Seriously. Fine,” I said. It was barely true. So when Tim walked in and announced we'd be spending the morning going over last week's plays on the TV, as well as watching our opponents for the upcoming match, I sighed in relief. We all trooped down the hall to the dark training room to watch the match.

About half an hour after we'd all sat down, Tim tapped me on the shoulder.

"You've got a visitor," he said. He didn't seem at all happy. "You don't have much learning to do from this game, so you may as well see him."

Him? For a second my mind flashed to George. But that would be ridiculous. So when I emerged into the corridor, it was even more disappointing to see John standing there, that shark-like grin splitting his face in half.

"Morning, princess," he said, holding out a Starbucks coffee cup. "Tim has agreed to let us use his office. Let's go."

I trudged after John, leaving the door open behind me as he made himself comfortable in Tim's office chair. I stood behind the chair I'd normally sit in.

"I'm busy, John. What do you need?"

"Hey, hey. Calm down, take a seat." When I didn't move, John's smile faltered only slightly. "Suit yourself, boyo. I have good news."

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“You’re retiring? Being replaced by a younger model?” I asked. “Or have you actually started working on me coming out, like we agreed weeks ago?”

“All in good time, all in good time. No. I’ve had another offer from the Saudis. Five-hundred thousand a week, as well as fifty percent of shirt sales.”

“It’s still a no, John.”

“Then you’re a fucking fool.” John slammed his hand down on the desk, and I jumped. “Don’t you see how selfish you’re being? I have slaved away for you to do as well as you have, and for what? Ten percent of your wages, Two fucking grand a week. And here I am, asking you to consider just a year of the best fucking money of your life to set us both up for retirement. And what do you give me in return for all my years of hard work? Fuck all.”

I gritted my teeth together as I tried to think of a response that wouldn’t involve me tearing his head off. “You get two grand a week from me. Somewhere around the same from Cory, and you’ve got another ten players in the league below netting you about five hundred a week each. If you can’t live on the yearly minimum wage every month, then I don’t think that’s a problem for me to solve.”

“What’s got you so feisty recently?” he asked me, a mocking tone in his voice. “You used to do as you were told.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m...happy. With my club. And I am thinking about taking the next step, something you were meant to be helping me do in a way that won’t get me executed by the press. Instead, you’re sending me to a country where I actually could

be executed.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. Jail time at worst. And they never prosecute their biggest sports stars, surely you know that? Just a slap on the wrist for you and some time in the slammer for whichever poor young prostitute you’ve got involved with.”

“You’re a thoughtless prick,” I said.

John glared. “Talking back will get you nowhere. You’ve trusted me with an awfully big secret. It would be a shame if it were to get out in the wrong way. Football Star Gets His Rocks Off at Kink Club. I can see the headline now...”

“I’m not going to Saudi Arabia. No matter how much you threaten me, I will not be going.”

John stood up. “Then consider Reading when the next transfer window comes up, or I won’t be so nice.”

He knocked me aside as he stroked out of the room. As I idly rubbed my shoulder, I could feel myself freezing up mentally again. What the fuck do I do now?

Chapter Fifteen - George

The drive up to the university for my seminar was done in a rush, having crammed the day’s training drills that Finn had prescribed all into one morning so that I could get to university. As I passed the turning that led to the university training grounds — as well as Cardiff City’s football facility — I thought of Ollie. I was itching to text him, but I didn’t want to seem desperate. I was the cool, stoic one. Always had been, and always would be.

The university was just off the dual carriageway at the next slip road, an institution

built into the Welsh hillsides. It was less prestigious than Cardiff University, but I'd been so focused on rugby as a kid in school that I hadn't achieved the grades needed to get in there, despite being plenty intelligent. So, as an adult, I'd busted my arse to get into the University of South Wales. And I'd made it. Now, I just had to pass my Masters.

I pulled into the car park, and, checking my watch, ran up the steps to the lecture theatre where Dr Ramoray would host his seminar. It might be my last chance to workshop any dissertation ideas before I had to really start writing it.

I was running late, but as I burst into the room, I found there was no one there. "What the..." I checked my schedule again. I was definitely in the right place. But the room was empty. It took me five minutes to log into my university email account, and I stood tapping my foot as the disgustingly slow system loaded up. And there it was. Apologies for Seminar cancellation, from Dr Ramoray.

I growled, only to myself. For most full-time students, it was a minor inconvenience, But I'd worked fucking hard to do a day's worth of rugby training in one morning, for nothing. I didn't want my future career and current one to suffer in tandem because of lecturers not turning up.

"You too?" Elsie was standing in the doorway, looking down at her phone.

"Me too. I'm going home," I muttered.

"Nope. I gave you my number, and you didn't text me once. We're getting a cuppa and talking academia. How exciting for you."

"Fine," I said, "but you're paying."

"Deal."

* * *

The university's cafeteria was massive, and busy. The disadvantage - though I was sure some people wouldn't see it as one - of it being such a small university with so many local students, is that many were fans of Cardiff Old Navy or Wales, so I'd been stopped twice in the queue for my coffee to take a picture.

"Has anyone seen Kim Kardashian?" laughed Elsie as we sat down. "I think I'm drinking with acelebrity."

"Shut up," I grumbled, though Elsie was so lovely that I found it hard to be annoyed with her. She dumped four sugars into her coffee and then stirred it.

"Want some coffee with your sugar?" I asked.

"You try being a single mum to a toddler and then lecture me on my stimulant intake." Elsie fixed me with a glare that could topple even the biggest rugby player. "I was up all night working, then I had to take Blod to school, try to finish some of my uni work and then come here. I am running on twelve minutes of sleep, I think."

“Blod?” I asked.

“Short for Blodwen, flower in Welsh,” explained Elsie. She turned her phone to face me, where an adorable little girl who looked about eight years old looked out of the screen.

“So, you’re doing this for her?” I asked.

“Yes. Well, and me. Though I tell everyone it’s just for her, makes me seem less selfish. I had her at eighteen. Her father is worthless, and I’ve been working at a supermarket ever since. Four years ago, I decided it was time for me to make something of myself. I’ve always had a good nose for gossip, and I used to write stories in school, so the lady at the Job Centre recommended I try getting back into education. How about you?”

I explained my career so far, and how close I was to the likely end, as well as the conversation Steve had with me. “...so once I’m done with this, I’ll play rugby for a few more years. But at least I have a qualification under my belt. Which is more than most players can say at the end of their career.”

“Nice,” Elsie nodded. “I saw you’d started that blog. It’s going well, then?”

“I hadn’t realised it was,” I admitted. “Checked the views yesterday, though, and it seems to have blown up a bit.”

“You bastard. The rest of us work hard at this course, and you sail into a sports blogging career like it’s nothing.”

“Don’t be stupid, it’s just a blog! My thoughts,” I said.

Elsie rolled her eyes. “Got your laptop?”

I opened up my bag, pulled my laptop out and put it on the table.

“Right, log in to your blog.”

I logged in, and Elsie turned the screen to face her, then clicked my analytics page. “Let’s say you double this, get you up to a hundred thousand readers a week. Automated ads will net you...let’s see...about a thousand a month of additional income. Then, if you had a sponsor, say a sports advertiser who’d pay you commission on clicks...”

I could understand what she was getting at. “I would have money just from blogging?”

“Yes, stupid.” Elsie grinned. “Smile, there’s your pension.”

“Damn.”

“Yup, and if people are clicking just to hear your opinion, they’re more likely to buy from you. Start a podcast and you could be rolling in the sponsorship dough. YouTube, TikTok, all ways to monetise what is essentially the same content, just in different formats. Do you cover women’s rugby?”

“No,” I admitted. “I know a few players, but I’m not completely in it the same way I am with men’s.”

Elsie held out her hand. “Get me a separate login for your blog, and I can cover the week-to-week happenings in women’s rugby. You publish a weekly opinion piece, as

well as a round up of the men's Premiership scores. We will take this blog to new heights."

"What are you, some kind of superwoman?" I asked.

"Better. I'm a mother."

Elsie took me through the process of setting up a separate login and giving her admin access to the blog. "I'll work out my profit split once I've set you up some ads, lovely boy. But stick with me, and you won't be looking for jobs once your rugby career is finished. Just don't say anything so controversial it gets you fired from your team in the meantime, OK? I already look after one child."

I smiled at Elsie. I really, really liked her.

Then my phone buzzed, and my smile grew wider.

Ollie: Is tonight too soon to come over again?

Chapter Sixteen - Ollie

Over the course of a couple of weeks, I started to fall into a routine. I had hardly slept in my penthouse; I was texting George all the time. I found that I was starting to rely on my time with him to de-stress after a tough day. And there had been a lot of tough days.

John was a constant thorn in my side, always needling me with the prospect of a forced move across teams. Not only did he think he could convince me, but that the transfer fee would be too good for Tim to resist. So it seemed either way I cut it, I was London-bound. And despite a couple of good games, the call-up to the Wales squad for the European Cup qualifiers hadn't yet come, and it was looking like it

wouldn't anytime soon.

So I'd gravitated toward George. Though he was rough, and liked me to do as I was told, at least in the bedroom, it felt like I was being taken care of. And afterward, we would shower together and crawl into bed. Almost like a real relationship.

Almost. Because I still wasn't out, and we couldn't do anything that a real couple might do. We couldn't date, or hold hands in the street, or meet one another's friends. And I could see that was bothering him. But I didn't know what to do.

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That didn't stop our relationship becoming more obvious in some ways, though.

“Fucking hell, they're getting worse,” said Cory at the end of one particularly tough training session. We were showering, and as ever, he'd chosen the shower head next to mine. He was looking at the love bites that peppered my chest, some new and purple, some old and yellowing. “Whoever they are, they must be feeling real frisky.”

I laughed uncomfortably. At least he wasn't looking at the ones on my upper thighs, or the one I was certain George had given me on one butt cheek the night before. It took me a second to realise Cory had mentioned at they, rather than she. And it made my heart beat a little faster, though obviously he was using it as a sign of support.

“They are feeling frisky,” I said, stepping out from under the spray and wrapping a towel around myself. “But so am I. So it's all good.”

When I got back to my bench and pulled my phone from my training bag, there were two notifications. One, I'd set up for the Reynolds Blog, which had been renamed Sportswatch: Holding Rugby to Account, and a text from the man himself. I checked the message from George first.

G: Do I get to see your place tonight?

I sent off a reply to confirm, glad I'd had the cleaner in whilst I was training today. And I checked out his latest article to give it a like and a share on social media. Why Soccer Referees Could Take Lessons from Rugby.

“Oh, that guy is taking potshots again, is he?” asked Cory.

“Do you mind not reading over my shoulder?” I asked, turning my phone screen away from him.

“Jeez, just asking questions. I’ve been following him too. But he uses a few too many long words for me.”

“Like what?” I scanned the article quickly. “Gregarious? Frenetic?”

“That one,” said Cory, pointing.

“Professional? Surely you see that one all the time.”

“Oh...yeah.” Cory looked away, then started drying off like he was in a hurry.

“Cory, have you ever been tested for dyslexia?” I asked.

“No...why...why would I?” Cory had pulled on his shorts, and yanked his t-shirt over his head.

“Just...you seem to struggle with stuff. Stuff that maybe you shouldn’t.”

“I’ve gotta go,” said Cory. He grabbed his phone and ran out of the room. He’d left his training bag and his wallet on the bench without even looking back.

One of Sven’s shovel-like hands came to rest on my shoulder, and I jumped. “Is he OK?”

“I don’t think so,” I replied.

“I will go after him. He needs support.” Sven grabbed Cory’s wallet and had followed him out of the changing room before I could blink.

I pulled my t-shirt on and grabbed my bag. My heart thudded with anticipation the entire drive home. George and his apartment had become a safety blanket from the outside world. It felt strange to let him into some of my world, no matter how small a part of it.

I took the private lift up to the penthouse, then remembered I'd need to let him know the code. So I did, and lounged on my sofa as I waited for him to text me back.

Five minutes later, the lift doors opened and George strode into my living space with the confidence that I loved, and was on top of me before I could even say hello. We were both wearing grey training sweats. He laid on top of me and ground up against me until I got hard.

He peppered me with kisses, and I knew exactly what he wanted as he kissed down my neck toward my collarbone.

"People have been asking about these," I said.

"Yeah?" George asked, his voice muffled by how close he was to my skin. "Good."

"You absolute caveman," I said, but I didn't push him away as I made my marks.

"You're mine," George said. "I can't tell people that, so I'm making do. And every time I see an article about which woman they think did it, I know it was me."

"I'm yours? Who said?" I teased.

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George rubbed his hard cock up against mine again, and the feeling through the fabric sent shivers down my spine. “Me.”

Using one hand to prop himself up over my shoulder, George fumbled with our trousers with the other, and we both sprung free. With his rough, calloused hand, he gripped us both tight and stroked. His grip was so tight it hurt, but like everything with George, the pain never eclipsed the pleasure. He stroked roughly, and the feeling of his cock head rubbing up against mine was almost enough to make me cum straight away.

George normally liked to draw things out, so it was a surprise when he kept up the pace and leaned in to capture my mouth with his, his teeth briefly closing over my bottom lip and drawing out a groan. I couldn't even tell him how close I was as my breaths came quicker. Every stroke, every swipe of his tongue over swollen lips brought me closer to ecstasy.

And then I was groaning into his mouth as I reached my climax, spilling all over his hand. He kept stroking me through the sensitivity until he was finishing too, cum coating his hand, my cock, stomach, and mixing with his.

“Mine,” said George, not moving away.

“Yours,” I agreed. I was. And he was mine. And God, I wished I knew how to make that work for us.

We got cleaned up in our usual way, and then George walked through the apartment and out onto the balcony like he owned the place. “You have a hot tub?” he asked.

“Yes, on a balcony that is very visible to the penthouse opposite,” I replied. George gave a rebellious little wiggle to show me how little he cared.

“You bringing the food?” he asked.

“Sure,” I rolled my eyes. He had really made himself at home. I didn’t mind. More George was never a bad thing. So I watched as he slipped naked into my hot tub, then I went to the fridge to fix us up some sandwiches. What had started as George offering me the odd glass of wine on arrival had turned to him preparing meals for the both of us, and now he was in my place I had to follow suit. I rustled up the most basic ham salad sandwiches in the world, grabbed a protein chocolate bar each and a can of Sprite and carried them out across the balcony, praying that the billionaire in the penthouse opposite wasn’t looking out the window at us. Not that I hadn’t seen him and his pretty little boyfriend getting up to enough through the windows.

“Wow, the gourmet shit,” said George as I placed the plate carefully on the side of the hot tub, then sank in beside him.

“Shut up,” I growled, then ripped a hole in the corner of a chocolate bar wrapper with my teeth. “Eat what you’re given. It’s good for you.”

“I made a spaghetti bolognese yesterday! And curry last week!”

“Sorry, Mr Continental, but they cook most of my meals for me at training. What you have here is the most sophisticated meal I have ever prepared.”

“I’ll take it,” said George, then leaned over to take a bite of my protein bar.

“Hey! You have your own!”

“I know, I’ll eat that too,” he grinned.

“Bastard.”

“You love it.”

We lounged in the hot tub for a bit longer, our legs crossed over in the bubbling water.

“Do you ever think about what you’d be if you weren’t a football player?” George asked.

“Nah,” I said. “I don’t think I ever will.”

“Even after you’re done? You’ve got, what, ten years left of your career, and you don’t care what happens next?”

I closed my eyes and floated my toes up above the water so that the cold air chilled them. “I don’t need to,” I said. “I earn enough every year that even with this place, I can put some money aside. I’ll never need to work again, but I might like to. So I can worry about that later.”

“Yeah, you’re lucky,” said George. “I have enough saved after my career is done to take a year off, maybe two. But I don’t earn enough to have the luxury of waiting to find out what’s next. That’s why I’m working my arse off at rugby, and my degree, and my blog.”

I cracked one eye open, and we made eye contact. “You don’t seem to work all that hard right now,” I said. With one quick movement through the water, he splashed me with a mini tidal wave of water.

“Bastard,” I spluttered, splashing him back. George launched himself toward me and pushed me up against the edge of the tub.

“It’s not my fault you’re so fucking distracting,” he growled, licking a stripe up my neck that made me shudder.

“Am I now?” I grinned. “Well, I wouldn’t want to distract you too much from your very important work. If you fail, I can’t have you living the rest of your days here as an unemployed house-husband.”

Something changed in the atmosphere between us. “Life could be worse,” George said.

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“It could,” I agreed. And for just a second, I let myself imagine the domesticity of it all. How it would be to wake up with George every day. To argue about shopping and meal prep, and who hadn’t locked the balcony door the night before. And the making love.

“Come and watch me play?” asked George.

“What?” I shook myself out of the vision.

“Sunday. Cardiff Old Navy are playing. I’ll get you a ticket,” said George.

“Why?” I asked. And watched his face crumple. George adjusted himself, put a little bit of distance between us. “No, I mean...” I didn’t know what I’d meant to say at all.

“It’s fine,” said George. “Forget I asked.”

“No. I’ll go. It’s just...you know I’m not ready to be out, right?” I asked.

“I know,” said George. “I’m just asking you to attend as a friend. Not as my...mine.”

“Your Mine?” I teased. “Or My Yours?”

George shushed me and paddled closer again. “You’re playing Saturday, right? I’ll keep up on the Cardiff City app. I would have come, but I’ll be in training most of the day.”

“Busy boy, however will you find time to do anything else?” I asked. “No Wings trip

for you that night.”

“Will you be there?” he asked.

“Yup. As soon as the match is done. I’ll get a train back from Sunderland to go to Wings and fuck the brains out of whatever guy looks my way first-”

George tackled me back into the water, and when I emerged spluttering, he cut me off with another kiss.

“Mine,” he growled at me. “No one else.”

“No one else,” I agreed. And how could there be? George Reynolds was capturing my heart.

Chapter Seventeen - Ollie

I had never watched a rugby game the whole way through on TV, much less in person. But George had got me a ticket for the family and friends box at one end of Cardiff Arms Park. It was a third of the size of Cardiff City Stadium, but it packed a punch. There were old terraced stands where the die-hard fans still stood rather than sat, and both teams mingled in a way I’d never seen at a football match. Weren’t they worried a fight could break out at any time?

The place buzzed with an atmosphere that was hard to describe, even in the little box I was sharing with a few other people I’d never met. The little box had its own bar and snack table, and was walled in by glass on one side to keep the cold out. One man recognised me and asked for a selfie, but didn’t seem all that interested in why I was even there.

“Ollie?” asked a pretty woman I’d never met. She had walked into the room hand in

hand with a young girl. “Hi, I’m Elsie. Say hello, Blod.”

The little girl hid her face in her hands straight away and refused to say anything.

“Tough crowd, sorry.” Elsie pried Blod’s hands away from her face and pointed out the buffet table, and the little girl ran over straight away to grab some sweet treats.

“How...how do you know me?” I asked.

“Oh. Sorry. I’m in uni with George. And I help him run his blog.”

Shit. How many people has he told about us? I thought.

My expression must have shown on my face, because Elsie put a hand on my shoulder and leaned in to whisper. “Don’t worry, love. Your secret is safe with me. I’m a journalist at heart, and it didn’t take much deduction to figure out what was going on.”

“How?” I asked, despite myself. We had done our best to be as discreet as possible. This was the closest I’d ever been to George in public, and there were six thousand people between me and him.

“One, his phone buzzes all the time. I’ve seen the occasional text from Ol,” she started. “Then there’s the fact that he suddenly has almost as much interest in blogging about football as he does rugby. And the fact that each of you has a little evidence peeking over your shirt collar. And finally, he invited me to this match. And I think that’s because he subconsciously wants a friend’s approval of everything that’s going on.”

“Oh,” was all I could think to reply. George felt that way about me? Us? I felt trapped in a wave of uncertainty, unable to push our relationship forward but so wishing that

he would.

When the players all ran out onto the field to start the match, I was enthralled by the game. George wasn't a flashy, scoring player like I was. He was a tank, and he used his bulk to dole out hit after hit on the opposition players. I winced every time he stuck his shoulder into someone's stomach, or took someone down with a well-placed arm. Rugby was brutal, and I wondered why I'd never watched before.

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Leinster was the better team, or so one of the people in the box with me commented, but Cardiff made up for it with pure willpower. When Leinster had the ball, they threw themselves at the opposition with no fear of being hurt. When Cardiff was lucky enough to take the ball, the players huddled close and sent the ball small distances to one another, playing like the underdogs they were. When the final whistle blew and the Cardiff Old Navy boys were only a couple of points below Leinster, there were sighs of relief in the box like they'd pulled off a win.

“Coming down to meet the players?” Elsie asked.

“Oh, I dunno, I should probably go...” I started, but then I felt a little tug on one finger and looked down. Blod had wound her fingers around one of mine and was looking up at me expectantly. “Go on then,” I said, and she smiled, still mute.

We walked out of the box and down the stairs to a blank corridor. At Cardiff City Stadium, the walls were painted navy blue, with the football team's crest emblazoned in white at every opportunity. Here there was just a plain white-brick corridor, with nothing to show the team, the games they had won or the glories of being a rugby player. It felt like the place was stripped back to the bone.

We all milled around in the corridor until the first white-shirted player walked out. Every player that followed was identically dressed, all in white shirts, grey chequered trousers and a tie with the Cardiff Old Navy crest on it. I was reminded again of the flashiness of football, and the way we'd all out-compete each other with the latest Armani suit and Rolex. This team was unified, all presenting the same image to the world.

George entered the corridor last, flanked by a dark-haired guy who stood tall above everyone else. His eyes alighted on me and widened. I saw them dip to my neck, and I adjusted my collar. It was George's eyes I wanted to see though, and when he saw me, his face broke out into a smile that I wanted to put on him forever. He pushed through the crowd to get to me, and only when he was standing right in front of me did he seem to remember he couldn't do anything he wanted. Or what I thought he wanted, because I wanted it too. To hug him, congratulate him on a game all done. To kiss him in front of all these people. I couldn't do it.

But why? The voice was louder than it ever had been before. That voice that had compelled me to ask John about coming out. It had been growing in strength for weeks, but now it felt so strong. Like if I just opened my mouth and...

"Are you OK?" George was asking, and I realised I had completely zoned out for a second.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm..." and then, like an instinct I couldn't resist, I had to pull him into a hug. Friends and family everywhere were holding one another in the corridor. I was just another. "You played brilliantly," I whispered into his ear.

"You don't know if I did or didn't," he whispered back. I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Shut up. I've played professional sport for long enough to know an outstanding player when I see one."

"Scuse us, can we push in?" Elsie asked, and I realised I had been holding George for way longer than I'd intended to, and we'd maybe been pulling a bit too much attention to ourselves..

I stepped back, right into the massive frame of the man behind me.

“Sorry, sorry,” I started.

But one gigantic hand reached out, grabbed my arm and turned me around. “Finn,” said the man with a smile. He really was massive, but in the least intimidating way I’d ever seen. He just radiated joy.

“Ollie,” I replied, holding a hand out. Finn took it and shook it, and I remembered George mentioning that Finn was a queer friend of his. Finn leaned in to talk to me. “I’m trying to convince George to come out tonight. Fancy joining us?”

“I...I don’t know,” I muttered, “It’s...Monday.”

“Tomorrow, yes. I don’t drink, so you can keep me company as a sober companion if you like. My fiancé will join us at some point, I hope. We’ll be going to Wings, so you can...well, you won’t need to be so uptight.”

“Go on then,” I whispered. I wanted to go back to George’s after the match to show him how much I really liked his playing today, and I might get him back to his flat quicker if I was with him on a night out.

So once George and Finn had made sure they had no media responsibilities and George had said his goodbyes to Elsie, I walked with them through the darkened streets of Cardiff. We stopped off at a pub, where a couple of people stopped and asked us for a picture.

“Hey, mate...you’re rugby players, right, and you’re a football player. What the fuck you doing here together?”

I froze up for a second, and it seemed George had too. So Finn swooped in to save the day. “Have you heard of the Rugby-Football partnership? It’s a scheme being run by the FA and WRU to integrate the teams more closely together, in line with paragraph

five subsection c of the code of...did you want to hear more? I've got a two-hour presentation here."

Both lads shook their heads and walked off, back into the warmth of the bar area. "Brilliant," George laughed.

"Top class bullshitter," said another, unfamiliar voice. I turned to see a little guy with round glasses, big wide eyes and shocking pink hair walking up behind Finn. Finn leaned down to kiss him, and when he pulled away, his cheeks were a dark shade of pink. "Ollie, this is Nathan."

"Nice to meet you." I held out a hand to shake Nathan's. He seemed much gentler than Finn, and I wondered how they'd ever met or got together.

"You taking me to a private club, dear?" asked Nathan.

"Are you wearing your jockstrap?" Finn asked in earnest.

Nathan goggled at him. "That was a joke, wasn't it?" he asked. "When you mentioned that this morning, it was a joke."

"I said 'I will wear mine if you wear yours' and you thought it was a joke?"

"Oh God," Nathan put his head in his hands. "For a man who was outed by an inappropriate video, you're very strangely open when it comes to potentially compromising situations."

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“Only with you, baby,” said Finn. He nodded at my empty wine glass and George’s pint. “Ready to go?”

“Ready,” we said in tandem, and ambled as a group toward the alleyway that led to Wings. I looked around furtively, but in the dark we were just another random group of men out on the town. I didn’t need to fear anything. George and I were standing so close we could hold hands, and now and then our fingers touched, which somehow felt almost as intimate as when he was inside me.

As we ducked into the darker alleyway that led to the club, I finally felt brave enough to thread my fingers through his. I could feel him watching me in the darkness, and kept my eyes ahead.

That night, we danced. And laughed. And kissed on the dance floor like no one was watching, even though everyone was. Because how couldn’t they, when the six-and-a-half foot tall Sasquatch in a jockstrap next to us was kissing a tiny man with hot pink hair? Between us all, we were a sight. But we were nothing new at Wings, and it was a place for secrets to be set free. So I let George pepper my body with kisses and imagined that we were somewhere else. A local pub. On the beach. Walking down the street, hand in hand, as lovers should. But we weren’t. And I wasn’t brave enough, yet.

That night, we walked home together, our fingers linking whenever I thought we were out of sight of the crowds. We took the private lift to my penthouse, and made love in the hot tub. And then on the sofa. And in the shower. And finally when we lay between my silk sheets, panting and spent and so obviously falling for one another that it hurt, I asked George something I never thought I would ask.

Chapter Eighteen - George

All day I thought about what Ollie had asked of me. And for a man who was great at writing words, I had no idea where to start with the request. I wanted to ask Elsie, but I hadn't asked him how much he had told her, and I wanted to honour his request and his privacy all at once.

It had been a long day of training, and I'd barely made a dent in my dissertation work, so I forced myself to head to the University library to sit down and write. I found research on homosexuality in Ancient Greece, on whether the Vikings had a concept of sexuality, and even on the sexual repression of the Golden Age of Hollywood. But there were so few openly gay sports players, that I had no idea how to proceed. It felt like I was writing a dissertation on a topic no one had ever approached before.

So I turned to Ollie's question instead as I thought about what he'd asked me. He'd spoken when we were so close to falling asleep I thought I might've imagined it until he brought it up the following morning.

"Will you be the one to help me come out?" he had asked.

"How? As your boyfriend? You want to get up and walk hand in hand down the street in daylight?"

"No. I don't want it to be some tabloid shock. I want you to blog about it. I want it to be news that you break. Not yet though, I'll let you know when I'm ready."

"OK, love."

And then he'd left, and I had no idea how to approach what he had said to me. Was he going to give me an interview at some point? And when was that? Because I'd

been so happy to hold him and kiss him, to twine my fingers through his, that it felt odd to detach ourselves again. I couldn't do it forever. I needed a plan from him. When he wanted to do it. Because I was rapidly falling for Ollie, and I had no idea if I could sustain the relationship as long as I didn't know when he would come out.

I opened my blogging software idly and wrote a draft framework of what the article might look like:

Ollie Gunnerson, 25, becomes UK football's first openly gay player.

I scrapped that. It didn't feel right, then started again.

Ollie Gunnerson, 25, blazes a trail for other LGBTQ footballers to follow.

That didn't work either. Without him, I couldn't have written the article. So I pressed backspace and wrote out something I did know.

I am in love with Ollie Gunnerson. I don't know what I'm going to do about it. I don't know how to love him, and cliché as it sounds, it might just drive me mad if he can't love me back in the way I need him to.

It felt like the most honest thing to write, and the words flowed as I sat at the computer and let them flow. The future article seemed to write itself. By the time I reached the end of it, I was surprised by how much I actually knew about Ollie. How much I had fallen for him.

Once I was done with a first draft and had carefully filed it away under Breaking News, I went back to my dissertation. I felt empowered and energised to write something that would make any player who came out proud. I looked back to Wales' first queer player, a man named Gareth Thomas who had come out toward the end of his career, and the unlikely number of players in the nation who'd come out since.

Rhys was going from strength to strength. His boyfriend was one of the most respected sports commentators in the UK, and Finn was making his transition from playing to coaching with grace.

But that wasn't the overriding story. I read more about promising American footballers whose coming out had them dumped from their teams within a year, boxers struggling to get matches, trans athletes being discriminated against across the board as soon as they started to transition. I realised that the little world I lived in had shielded me to how bad it really could be for LGBTQ athletes.

And then I saw the name of a soccer player I'd heard of before, but never really paid much attention to. Someone who had come out in the 90s to rampant homophobia in the UK, emigrated to the USA, and then ended his life. No matter how grim the research got, I recorded it. By the time I had finished for the evening, my eyes were getting sore from staring at the screen and the sun had long descended below the hillsides that rose up either side of the university. I methodically printed out every article I'd read, so that I would have paper copied to highlight at home. I was old fashioned that way.

I stretched, feeling my bones creak. In front of me was the skeleton of a dissertation. It was barebones, just a thousand words or so when I needed another four thousand. But my thoughts and more references would bulk it out, as well as an introduction and conclusion. It wasn't as positive as I had hoped it would be, and in some places it was downright morbid. But I had something. Something special, and new.

My phone buzzed.

Ollie: You around?

I sent a quick text to let him know I'd be rushing home, and packed up my laptop and notes. I was so ready to see him.

When I got back to my apartment, Ollie was sat down and leaning against the door in the corridor. His eyes reminded me of a Dog's Trust advert. He looked so forlorn.

“You OK?” I asked.

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“Just missed you,” he said, and his face broke out into one of those beautiful smiles I liked so much.

I put my hands under his armpits to lift him. “I missed you too. Now why aren’t we using your much superior apartment, so I can take you in the hot tub?”

“I don’t want the hot tub,” he said. “It all feels too tame after a hard day.”

“So what is it you want?” I caged him in against the door with my arms, aware he would be wary of people opening their doors and seeing us like this in the corridor. “Answer me, and I might just give it to you.”

Ollie jutted out his chin defiantly, then moved so he could whisper in my ear, his breath tickling me. “I want you rough, like that last time in the club. I want to hurt.”

My key was in the door before I could think, and Ollie fell backward as it swung open. I caught his arm, and then slammed the door shut with my other hand.

I felt in control, and powerful, and I felt like Ollie might know that. Might know it and like it. I pushed him up against the now-closed door and kissed him aggressively. I pawed at his trousers between both of our hardening cocks as we kissed. Our teeth clashed, and I knew I’d be leaving us both with swollen lips, but I didn’t care. Ollie wanted me rough and ready, and that’s what he was going to get.

I didn’t want foreplay or sweet nothings. I wanted it hard and fast and cruel, and so did he. I put one hand on Ollie’s shoulder and turned him to face the door, then lowered myself to my knees. I pulled down his trousers to just below his arse, then

spread his cheeks with my hands so that I could see his hole. I spat on it before I let myself feast, licking and prodding at the sweet skin until Ollie was whining. I spat on his hole again before testing him with a finger, feeling it slip in, but spit wasn't as silky as lube, so there was a friction to it as I sank into the warmth up to my knuckle.

“Jesus,” I muttered, then pulled my finger out and went back to rimming him. I wanted his hole so prepared that I could just slide in when I did have to get the condom and lube.

I pushed again with my finger and then added a second. There was some resistance, but I pushed past it, and once I'd crooked my fingers up toward his prostate, the ring of tense muscle relaxed around my fingers.

“Good boy,” I said, pushing my fingers in and out of him. “Such a good boy. Stay here, stand exactly like this whilst I grab supplies.”

“No,” said Ollie. I immediately moved back and stood away from him. That was our safe word, and I wouldn't ever disrespect it.

“Is everything OK?” I asked. “You want to stop?”

“No,” said Ollie. “I can't wait for you. I need it now, I need it hard. I need it rough.”

Chapter Nineteen - Ollie

I couldn't believe I'd said it. But I had. And I was oh-so aware of George as he stepped up close behind me. He must have released his cock from his trousers, because I felt it nudging up against me, like he was testing the boundary.

“You sure?” he asked. “It will hurt, doing it like this.”

“I need it to hurt,” I confessed. “Makes me feel better.”

“I’ll try to be gentle,” he muttered. I really hoped he wouldn’t be. His fingers rubbed up against my hole again, gently massaging it and helping me to relax. I felt him lean down, using my thighs for support as he spread my cheeks and spat on my hole again. It felt so degrading, but so fucking hot. Then I heard him spit again, and when I looked back, he was slicking up his cock.

“You definitely want this?” he asked, coming in close again, positioning himself so that his thick cock was notched against my hole.

In response, I pushed back so that the head breached me. The sting was worse than when I was properly lubed up, but it felt so good to have him inside me, bare and wanting, that I didn’t care. George wrapped one arm around my neck as he pushed into me. We were both braced against the door, and I hissed as he pushed into me.

“Keep going,” I said. “Please, God, keep going.”

“I am, baby,” said George as he slid in, right to the hilt. The stretch was amazing, the pain beautiful and so necessary. Gently, too gently, George started to pull out and pushed himself back in. Every time he pulled back, I fell apart, and every push in put me back together again. It was heaven, in every sense of the world. His arm around my neck was restricting my air a little, but also felt like it was anchoring me.

“You’re doing so good,” he whispered before he captured my earlobe between his lips. “Sofucking good.”

I could only whimper in response. My brain couldn’t come up with anything remotely coherent or sensible. I could just lose myself in him and the feeling he was giving me.

George’s pace picked up, and I could hear the sound of flesh smacking flesh as he

pounded into me. “So close,” he whispered. “So fucking close.”

His free hand came to rest on my cock, hardly moving as he pounded me. But it didn't matter. The movement of our hips gave me just enough friction to bring me closer to orgasm. I could feel it building, building, and then I was finishing all over George's hand and the door. “Fuck!” I shouted, finally finding my voice as George groaned low and deep in my ear, pumping once, twice more and then collapsing against me so I was flat against the door.

It wasn't until George slid out from me that I realised there were tears leaking from my eyes.

“Shit, are you OK?” he asked, turning me to get a better look and wiping at my cheeks with one finger. Trembling, I fell into his chest and felt as his arms reached around me to constrict me.

“I'm so, so much more than OK,” I said. I thought back to the first time we had done anything in the club bathroom, and how I'd run away from him. I couldn't run now. His arms wrapped around my body. His hold on me was both physical and metaphorical. George anchored me to the ground we stood on, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I knew what I wanted to say to him. There were words which would show just how more than OK I was. But they could wait. I had time.

* * *

There were times recently when my life had felt oppressive and closed off, like I was against the world, despite everything that life had given me. Despite the money I had in my pocket, and the fame and fortune, things had been...weird. But not now. Now I had George, and that feeling of safety in his arms I hadn't even realised I had been craving.

I crept out of bed in the morning and tried to work George's coffee machine with zero success. In the end, I heaped two spoons of instant coffee into some mugs, and popped some toast in the toaster. I could have brought it all in to George, but I left the toast and coffee on the side. He'd be up early enough for training, and I felt there was no need to disturb him. I walked over to the living room and slumped on the sofa, feeling completely at home in George's little space yet completely at odds as to what to do whilst he was sleeping.

He'd left a folder on the coffee table labelled dissertation research. I picked it up and looked at the first page. We're Coming Out: A History of Attitudes to Homosexuality in Sport.

I smiled at the title and turned the page absently as I took a bite of my toast. Rather than an essay, he had copied and pasted research into the little folder. The first few pages made me smile. There were even clippings of papers when he had first been outed, and then his continued career success afterward. Then I read on, to Rhys, and Finn, and even to the trailblazers who had allowed them to come out so freely and play at the peak of their game.

My smile faltered a little on the next page. Stories of athletes who had come out to waves of public support, but whose careers had stumbled afterward, either because the media scrutiny had impacted their play or...just because, sometimes. It seemed being gay, just by itself, was enough to ruin the careers of some sportspeople.

Then I flicked over the page again, and I saw exactly what I'd been afraid of seeing without even knowing it. I read through the notes George had compiled on a player from the 90s who had come out, and everything that had happened to him afterward. And how his life had ended.

I pulled my phone from my pyjama pocket and Googled him with morbid curiosity. There were hundreds of articles on his coming out, his troubles and eventual death. In amongst the memorials and remembrance posts, there were still people mocking him for his sexuality and for taking his own life. I didn't realise that I had started crying until my tears dripped onto the screen.

I wiped my eyes with my sleeves and put the phone down, and took a deep breath to compose myself.

"OI? You OK?" George had entered the room, a pair of chequered pyjama shorts slung low on his hips.

"Yeah," I muttered, my sniffles doing nothing to convince anyone that I was remotely fine.

His eyes dropped to the open folder, and my phone in my lap. "Oh, Ollie," he said, and crossed the room to hold me in his arms. "Everything is going to be OK."

"Is it?" I asked. What had seemed like a barely surmountable mountain was now more than that. It was a cliff, thousands of metres high with no handholds to assist me. It was a pit of lava with a little sign that said No Swimming.

“Yes. It was OK for me, it’s been OK for so many people,” said George.

“Does it ever stop? All of this?” I handed him my phone. An article from just a year before where the footballer’s actions were still being questioned.

“No,” admitted George. “But it gets easier.”

“How?”

“I have no idea. I just...learned to see past it, I guess.” George took my hand in his. “When you decide to come out, I will be with you every step of the way. As your boyfriend, or your friend, or your mentor. I am here for you.”

That brought out another sob. “I want to come out...I just don’t know when.”

George’s hand stiffened in mine, but he didn’t move it away. “We need to talk about that, Ol.”

I felt my heart sink. “Why?”

“Because we need a plan,” he said. “I need to know where we’re going. Right now, we’re flying. At some point, we have to land at our destination, and I need to know how that’s going to look.”

“But...I don’t know how!” I was so frustrated that he couldn’t see my dilemma.

“You know how. You’ve asked me to blog for you. And I can do that. I just need you to tell me when to pull the trigger.”

“I’m not...brave, like you,” I said to George. “I know what I am. I know that I...that I have feelings for you, and they’re getting stronger every day. But I am not. Every

day, this scares me more. Something new happens that makes me feel like I cannot do it, George. I know what I am, but I can barely say it to you. Let alone myself.”

“But you can.” George implored. “I believe in you. I just need to know when I can expect it, love.”

I pulled myself out of his touch. At that moment, it felt oppressive. “I wish I could give you an answer, George. But I just don’t know.”

“OK. Then I think I need to give you some space,” George said. I felt my heart slip even further away.

“Are you ending things?” I asked.

George hesitated. “No. I’d follow you to the ends of the Earth. But I need you to do as I’ve asked, and think about what you want next. If it takes five weeks or five years, I am here for you. But I can’t live in uncertainty, and I don’t want to be the voice in your ear that pushes you before you’re ready. So take a week, think about what you would like to do. Because I can’t not know who we are.”

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I understood, but that didn't make the heartbreak any less real. George wasn't breaking up with me, but in giving me this time to myself, I could feel the weight of the ultimatum above my head. I needed to come out at some point, and he needed to know that it would happen.

"I will be back," I choked out as I pulled myself away from him completely. "I will decide. And I will make you proud."

Then I left his flat with my head held high, wondering already if I had promised too much in the name of love.

Chapter Twenty - George

It felt like I had the weight of the world on my shoulders again. I hadn't realised just how much of an influence Ollie had had on my outlook on life, and it hurt to feel like I'd lost him.

I was in the training gym, and using the punch bag for the first time in years. I wore padded gloves like an MMA fighter, and the little sting on my knuckles with every hit was keeping me focused. It felt like the outlet I needed in the moment, and I knew that in Saturday's rugby match I was going to be deadly. Woe betide any bastard who tried getting past me.

"Are you fighting that bag, or eye-fucking it?" asked Finn. I glared at him, so he walked around to stabilise it and stop it from swinging away so much. "Go on. Give it your fucking worst. Get all those feelings out."

So I did. “Fuck...homophobia,” I said with gritted teeth between hard punches. “Fuck...love. Fuck...that people feel they need to hide.”

“Go on, big boy. Get it all out,” said Finn gently.

“I’m just...so...fucking angry about it all! Why can’t he be who he needs to be?”

“Well. That seems pretty rough, bud.” Finn let go on the bag as I stepped back, panting. “What did you do?”

“Asked him to come out,” I said.

“Woah, man. You of all people know that’s his choice.”

“I know!” I stepped forward to give the bag a good hit again. “But I know my limits, too. So I just asked that he tell me when he plans on doing it. And he doesn’t know. So I’m giving him time.”

“And you both want him to have this time?” Finn asked.

“That’s not quite how I’d put it.”

“Right. So how would you put it?”

“I’m in love with a man who has plans to come out one day, but no idea when. I need that clarity, Finn. I can’t just keep him locked in my flat forever. Now I’ve got a taste of what it is to be with someone like Ollie...I can’t keep this relationship in the closet.”

Finn hesitated before answering. “I think you did the right thing, actually.”

“Well, it’s a Christmas miracle,” I muttered. I sat back down on the hard carpet and wiped the sweat from my forehead. “So what do I do next?”

“You wait, exactly as you just said. You let him decide and get back to you. And you support him, whatever that decision is.”

“When did you get so wise?” I asked.

“My fiancé is incredibly intelligent,” said Finn. “It rubbed off on me when he rubbed against me.”

“Oh, and Finn is back in the room.” I managed to crack a smile. “What do I do in the meantime?”

“You practise. You play rugby. You keep writing and studying. You keep yourself occupied,” said Finn. “That’s not wise Nathan advice, that’s Finn-the ex-alcoholic advice. It’s easy to put yourself into a hole.”

“And say I spent the last week finishing my dissertation and building up my blog because I suddenly had a lot more free time?” I asked.

“Seriously? You go on a break and the first thing you do is write? You are so lame,” said Finn.

“Thanks.” I got up. “Speaking of, I need to make a phone call. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Go on then, use and abuse me. I’m just a sounding board now. What happened to friendship?” Finn was still muttering as I closed the door behind me.

I made my way to the changing room and grabbed my phone from its cubbyhole. Before making the call I needed to make, I checked my texts. Nothing from Ollie.

Though I was the one who had given him space, it still felt weird to not hear from him at all.

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George: I hope you're doing OK.

I sent the text, and moved on before I could dwell too much on what I'd sent, and what I was missing.

I knew Elsie was waiting for my call, so I dialled her. "Are we ready?"

"Ready. I've set you up with the ads I mentioned, and I think we're going to get a good few offers of sponsorship from companies directly. People like you and your perspective," Elsie said.

"I don't think they ever have before," I chuckled. "Seriously though, you think this could work?"

"Darling, if you weren't so busy with your rugby career, we would be empire-building. Podcasts, YouTube channel, the lot. As it is, it should be enough to give you a post-career war chest and pay toward Blod's after-school club fees."

"Right. OK. So what's next? What do you need me to do?"

"Nothing. I'm going to just put all the draft posts on a schedule and put them out daily, from oldest to newest, just to give this soft-launch as much power as possible. Do you want me to read through them for you?"

Finn walked into the room and noticed I was still on the phone. "Team talk. On pitch," he stage-whispered.

I nodded, realising I hadn't answered Elsie properly. "Nah, I've proofread my stuff. Just put it out, I guess."

"Will do, boss."

"I'm not your boss."

"Good boy. You'll live."

I laughed as I pressed the red button. Elsie was proving to be a valuable ally and an even better friend. I felt like with her at my back, my future was secure.

The only thing missing now was Ollie.

Chapter Twenty-One - Ollie

I'd been training with the lads for a couple of hours when Chen Ng mentioned that Tim was waiting for me in his office.

"Not fired, am I?" I joked. Chen just shrugged.

Cory grabbed my arm before I could leave the training field. "Can we...talk later? I need to discuss some stuff with you."

"Sure, mate." He looked genuinely worried, so I gave him the most reassuring arm pat I could and made my way into the training building. I rubbed my hands together. The mid-February chill was horrible, and I relished the warmth of the inside, even if I had no idea what the occasion was for Tim to call me into his office. He normally led training, but he'd been absent for a couple of days.

I veered into the changing room before facing Tim. I had taken to checking my phone

between every training session, and constantly at home, for a text from George. Though I'd kept my distance and not texted him, I was hoping against all odds that he would text me.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw he had texted, and I felt like an idiot for getting so excited. He was just checking in on me. We hadn't seen each other for almost a week. I was giving him space. Or he was giving me space, I didn't know.

But I didn't reply to him. Because I still didn't have an answer to his question.

I was in love with George Reynolds. A man. That was easy to admit. Internally, I could admit that I had only ever fancied blokes, and the high-school hand jobs had probably been something a little more than the usual teenage experimentation for me.

So why couldn't I say the words? Why couldn't I come out, especially for George?

I had no idea.

I put my phone back into my bag and walked the short distance to Tim's office. "Come in," he said after I knocked.

As soon as I opened the door, I could tell that he was in a grim mood. "Sit down," he said. "Oh. Shut the door too."

Shit. I shut the door and sat down gingerly, trying not to show the fear on my face.

"Have you heard of Al-Nassr?" he asked me quietly.

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“No,” I admitted. “Are they a new sponsor?”

“They’re a football team in the Saudi Arabian League,” said Tim. And my heart dropped.

“No,” I said before I could even think. “No way.”

“We’ve received an offer for you from them,” said Tim. He didn’t look happy about it at all. “The offer is...well, it’s astronomical. I don’t mean to disparage you, but it’s far more than any Championship player can expect to receive as a fee.”

“They shouldn’t even be offering outside of the transfer window!” I exclaimed. Translation: I had thought I was safe from John’s machinations for a good few months yet.

“They’ve offered to take you on loan, with promise of payment in full in August.”

“I don’t want to go,” I said. “Please, please don’t make me go.” I was aware I was pleading. But I couldn’t imagine anything worse.

“Ollie...your agent went well beyond his authority here. He negotiated the deal and has presented it to the owners of the club. And I have to do as I’m told. They see it as a fantastic return on investment.”

“Tim, you cannot send me to Saudi Arabia. I would rather die.”

“Look, I know it’s not perfect, but...” Tim started, but he didn’t seem to know how to

finish.

“It’s less than perfect,” I spat. “It’s not safe. I will be in danger.”

“Tens of players go to Saudi Arabia every year now. The pay is good, the lifestyle is even better. Unless you can give me a solid reason that I can present to the owners, I will be hard pressed to keep you. Ollie, please understand that I don’t want to lose you. You are my best player, and a good person. But the owners want to see a return on their investment, and you’re suddenly looking like the most appreciable asset they’ve ever owned.”

“You know why I can’t go,” I said. “I don’t have to say it.”

“I think you do.” Tim’s eyes were steely. “You think you’ll be the first player to go to Saudi Arabia with a secret? Unless you are prepared to talk about why you’re so reluctant, I have nothing to go on.”

“I...” I stood up, pacing the little office as my mind ran over itself, running faster and faster like a Catherine Wheel. “I’m...”

Shit. I could feel myself hyperventilating, my breaths coming faster and faster and making it harder to get any actual air in. My heart was beating out a heavy rhythm on my ribcage.

“Ollie? Are you alright?” Tim had stood up, but I was hardly aware of his hand on my shoulder. I was floating, and as nice as Tim was, he wasn’t the kind of man who could anchor me down. Not like...

George. Just the thought of him was enough to bring me back down to Earth. To slow down my breathing just enough to get in control of myself.

“I’m gay,” I whispered. I knew Tim had heard me, but I needed to say the words a little louder. To announce it, to him and myself. “I’m a gay man, Tim. I cannot go to a country where they would be prepared to jail me, or worse. And even if they wouldn’t do that to me because of who I am, I am not prepared to go to a place that would view me as less than human because of who I have fallen in love with.”

Tim wrapped his arms around me. “I’m so proud of you,” he whispered in my ear. “Thank you for telling me.”

He let me go after a second and returned to his chair. I perched on the edge of the other chair, too keyed up to sit down properly.

“So what comes next?” he asked.

“...next?”

“Yes. I can talk to the owners, but you need to be...prepared. To be a little more open with this. There are other closeted players in the league who’ve chosen money over principles and gone over to the Middle Eastern leagues.”

“I...don’t know if I can,” I admitted. “I’ve only just said it out loud to myself. I can’t imagine the reaction if I put it out in the world.”

Tim pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “This will make it a more difficult prospect. The owners, well, they didn’t become billionaires because of their stunning empathy.”

“So what do I do?” I asked.

“You sit, and you wait for me to work this out. I don’t want to lose you, especially knowing what I do now.” Tim gave me a weak smile. “Let me hash it out with the

owners. In the meantime, I have two requests for you.”

I hesitated, afraid to ask what they were, so Tim continued. “First of all, you look through your contract with John. He is a shark, but there will be a break clause in there somewhere. I cannot have him go against your wishes like that again. Does he...does he know about you?”

“Yes,” I admitted. I watched Tim’s kind eyes turn to hardened steel at the admission.

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“Right. And my second request...you mentioned that you’re in love with someone. I just hope they’re a good person. And that you can fall back on them when you need them. Because when — not if, when — this gets out, you’ll need someone in your corner. Someone who can make you feel loved when the day is over, and when the world is at its worst.”

I choked back...something. Perhaps I wanted to cry. I didn’t know. The whole situation just felt weird, and I’d never actually expected to get this far.

I wanted George. I didn’t want to go to Saudi Arabia. And I knew what I needed to do.

Chapter Twenty-Two - George

I was lying on the sofa at home in the evening, doing my best not to constantly check for messages from Ollie — there were none — when there came a knock at the door. Well, less of a knock and more a banging that could have woken the dead.

“I’m fucking coming!” I shouted as the banging continued. I checked through the peephole, but the landing light that had been on the blink for weeks had failed to turn on. I grabbed an umbrella from by the door and held it up, ready to club the intruder if they were dangerous. I opened the door.

And there he was.

My Ollie.

“What the f-” was all I got out before he was wrapping me in a hug I had been pretending I didn’t need. “Hey, hey, are you OK?” I asked, stroking his hair idly with one hand. I nudged the door closed and pulled him further into the room, only realising when we were almost at the sofa that I was still holding the umbrella. I threw it to the floor, and the thud made Ollie jerk back and away from me. His eyes looked red and puffy, like he had been crying, but he gave me a little smile before another tear leaked out.

“I missed you,” he said.

“It’s only been a few days,” I protested.

“Well, I missed you, OK?”

“...I missed you too,” I admitted quietly. “What’s upset you? Who has upset you?”

“No one, I...well...”

“Tea? Coffee? Wine?” I asked.

“Wine. Definitely wine,” he said.

“Go sit down. I have a Chardonnay in the fridge.” I eased him to the sofa and poured out two generous glasses of wine. He would never need to know that I hadn’t ever kept wine in the fridge before I first met him, and how neglected the little case of Budweiser I’d bought last month was probably feeling.

“Now tell me what’s up,” I said. “You’re worrying me.”

Ollie hesitated before speaking, and I felt my jaw and heart drop at exactly the same time when he started talking about being sent to Saudi Arabia. “Please tell me you

didn't take them up on that," I said. "You're not going, right?"

"No, I don't want to, anyway. But I think John has pushed me into a corner," Ollie admitted. "He knows I'm hesitant about coming out, knows how much it scares me. And I don't think anything less than coming out will appease the owners enough. It'll make them and me a lot of money if I have to go, but the bad publicity might stop them from sending me if I've already come out, or even spoken against the Saudi Arabian league."

"How long do you have to decide?" I asked.

"A couple of weeks before they loan me, and then I'll be sold in August. Fuck, I'd never realised how much football sounds like a slave market before," Ollie said, taking a gulp of wine. He wasn't shaking so much anymore, and I noticed for the first time he was still in his Cardiff training kit.

"So...what's the plan?"

"I don't know, George. I want to do it. I really do. And I think I'm getting there. But coming out in the next couple of weeks...I'm considering going out just for the loan period, and organising my coming out before it can become a permanent thing. I don't know, it all feels so fucking crazy."

It was my turn to take a gulp of my wine to steady myself. "Please don't go," I muttered. "You can't." I felt so weak, so silly at the whole situation. But I couldn't lose him.

"I might not have a choice if I can't be brave enough to do it," Ollie said. His eyes were watery, but no tears were falling as he gave me the tiniest smile. "But I can say it to you, now. I am Ollie Gunnerson, Championship footballer. And I am a gay man."

My heart swelled to a thousand times its size. “I am so proud of you, Ol. But it won’t take much more to say it to the outside world. A quick Tweet, a statement to the press. I even have the post you asked me to write ready to go.”

“I’m scared to read that,” Ollie laughed. “I bet you’re a right harsh bastard about how long all this is taking me.”

“Never, my love.” The words teetered on my tongue. Those three words that were so, so true but so hard to admit out loud.

“I...I don’t know what to do now,” Ollie said. “I know that time isn’t on my side. But I know what I need to do. I just don’t know how I’ll have the strength to do it.”

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“Did you come straight from training?” I asked.

“Yeah. I...I spoke about all this with Tim and then spent a couple of hours trying to figure out what to do. I couldn't figure it out, so I hoped coming here would help.”

“Then let me take care of you.” I leaned forward to take the wineglass from his hand and put it on the coffee table. “We're going to clean you up, and then we're going to bed. You can show me stupid dog TikToks for hours until your heart slows enough for you to fall asleep, and then in the morning we can both call in sick and figure it out together. OK?”

“OK,” said Ollie. I took his hand, pulled him off the sofa, and to my little en-suite shower. Ollie let me take his clothes off, and then watched as I took mine off. As soon as the water was warm enough, I took him into the shower and helped him to wash the difficulties of the day away. And if we both got a little hard, who could blame me for indulging a little more?

Once we'd dried and gotten into bed, and I'd realised that he had absolutely no spare clean clothes, we spooned, and watched silly videos, and then kissed until I could feel the earlier tension flowing out of his body. And then I lazily pushed into him and stroked him slowly until we both came. When I came back with a towel to clean him off, he was already snoring gently. And I was sure that everything was going to be OK for my little Ollie.

* * *

I woke up to my phone buzzing insistently, and blearily reached over to turn off my

alarm. But it wasn't my alarm, it was Elsie. I was vaguely aware of Ollie's phone buzzing too as I flicked the button to answer. "Hey," I said.

"Wasgoingon?" grumbled Ollie. I smirked at the way his hair stuck up every which way.

"What's up, Els?" I asked.

"Do you want me to take it down?" she asked.

"Take what down?" I asked, but was drowned out by Ollie's groan next to me as he checked his phone.

"The post! I didn't even know it was in the drafts, but it was the first thing that was posted on my schedule. It went up at midnight!"

"What post, Elsie?" I asked. It felt like my brain still hadn't caught up in the morning, and that I was missing something obvious.

"The one where you out your boyfriend, you knob!" Elsie shouted down the phone.

Shit. I put the phone down without giving her an answer, expecting Ollie to meet my eyes with terror in his. But he was on his phone, already scrolling through page after page of notifications. "Shit, Ol, I'm so sorry. I will fix this, I promise. I can work this out. This is not your burden to..." I didn't know what to say. I had outed him with my own negligence and stupidity. And Ollie still wasn't looking at me. "Do you want me to take it down?"

It was a few seconds before he answered, so quietly. "What's the point? It's out there now."

“Are you OK?” I asked.

He hesitated. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Look at this.”

He had held out his phone so that I could see what he was looking at. The screen showed a post from some faceless account. Fags in football? I wouldn’t wanna be the poor cunt bending over to pick up the soap in that changing room.

“Shit, Ol.”

“But look,” he said, scrolling down further. Another post. My son has been bullied in school for being gay and wanting to play football. I hope this brings him hope, and shows him there’s a place in the world for boys like him.

“I...don’t know how I feel,” Ollie said. “Some people are awful, and some aren’t. And I just don’t know what to listen to.”

“Never listen to hate,” I reached over and clicked his screen off. “There’s no need to listen to wankers like that.”

“Some of the posts...they mentioned we were together. How did they know that?” he asked. “How has this all...?”

“It was me. I wrote the post you wanted, about coming out. I saved it in the drafts to show you later...and completely forgot it would post under Elsie’s scheduling system.” I faltered, realising exactly what I’d put out into the world.

“Read it to me,” said Ollie. “I want to hear it from you, not some journalist with an axe to grind or a football fan who can’t tell his arse from his elbow.”

I grabbed my phone. I remembered lots of what I’d written, but not exactly. So I

typed in the blog address and clicked on the post. There were already three hundred comments.

“Ollie Gunnerson. The Soccer Star Who Loved Me,” I started, already faltering over the title. I knew there was much worse to come, so I refused to look up at Ollie as I spoke.

“Ollie Gunnerson, 25, is making history as the first professional football player in the English division to come out since Justin Fashanu, thirty years ago. But Ollie doesn’t aim to make history. He told me that ultimately, he would like to be known for his skills on the pitch, and his commitment to the game he loves so much.

“Ollie Gunnerson is an enigma. A soccer star who avoids the limelight, though the limelight obviously loves him. With his charm and his skills on the field, he’s fast on his way to becoming one of the greats. But in a sport where homophobia is rife and so many players have felt the need to end their careers just to come out, he has reason to fear that who he is could impact his career. Ollie could be one of Wales’ picks for future Euro and World Cups, and the fear that coming out could impact that trajectory is palpable.

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“But I know Ollie. I know how fantastic a player he is, and how committed he is to the sport. And I know that he’s one of the best men I’ve ever known. From the second I caught eyes with him across a crowded dance floor, I knew he was going to be something special. Even if it took my brain a while to catch up to my heart. Because I know who he is, both on and off the pitch. And I am in love with Ollie Gunnerson. I don’t know what I’m going to do about it. I don’t know how to love him, and cliché as it sounds, it might just drive me mad if he can’t love me back in the way I need him to.”

I stopped reading, looking down at my phone and willing my tears not to fall. I couldn’t make eye contact with Ollie. Until he put one finger under my chin and tilted my head up so that I had to look at him.

“I love you,” he said. “And thank you. I can’t think of a better way to come out. Me, you. Us, together. And people are going to know it. Now let’s get up and go before the paparazzi arrive.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Cardiff Stadium. It’s time for us to make a plan.” Ollie smiled at me, and for the first time in our relationship, I felt like he was a hundred times more certain than me about what the future held.

Chapter Twenty-Three - Ollie

By the time we got to the stadium, there were already reporters and paparazzi outside. Being the first professional footballer in a generation to come out was drawing just as

much attention as I had worried it would.

“Are you scared?” George asked as we drove slowly through the little crowd into the players’ private car park, camera bulbs flashing through the window.

“Yeah,” I admitted, reaching over the gearstick to take his hand and squeeze it. He squeezed back, and like so many times before, he grounded me to the spot. I was where I needed to be with him.

I parked near the back of the car park, away from the gates and the flashing lights and shouted questions, but still reached for George’s hand as soon as we were both out of the car.

“You’re taking this very well,” he remarked.

“Just be there for me when I crash, yeah?” I smiled, but my resolve might as well have been held together with duct tape.

“Of course.” George’s grip on my hand tightened, and I led him into the stadium. We walked past the few staff who were already working, and to Tim’s office.

I knocked, and walked in before I got a response. Tim was on the phone, and held up a finger. “No, we will not be commenting at this time. I don’t know, tell them I’m ill. Or dead!” He slammed the phone down and smiled weakly at us. “You’ve certainly made an impression, Ollie. I take it this is George Reynolds?”

“Pleased to meet you,” said George, the gruff rugby lad persona in place as he reached over to shake Tim’s hand.

“Sit down, lads. Let’s talk, shall we?” Tim gestured, and I realised he’d set out a second chair in the corner. George took it, and I sat down in my usual chair across

from Tim.

“Now, I was asleep in bed with my lovely wife when I got the DEFCON one call this morning, so please forgive me for being a bit light on the details. But it seems that George’s blog has caused quite a stir with revelations as to your sexuality. I admit when I asked you to think about how you were going to approach this, I wasn’t expecting...well, this, at all.”

“I didn’t mean it to happen this way,” I said.

“So the man over there who is...let me check my notes...deeply in love with you happened to write a blog on the night we talked about you doing out, without any interference from you?”

“Well when you put it like that...” I started.

I didn’t get to finish though, because seconds later the door was being hit like it had offended someone. “I’m fucking coming in!” shouted a man. A man with a very familiar voice.

“Down, boy,” I muttered as George stood up to face the intruder.

John burst into the office with a face like thunder. “You littlecunt,” he said with more venom than I had ever heard in his voice. “You’ve fucked up your life, my retirement, all because you were selfish. One year would have set you up for life and you threw it away. For what?”

“Love, I guess,” I said, containing the tremble in my voice. “And bravery, if I’m lucky. Not selfishness. I try my best not to be selfish, given all I already have. But I guess that concept means nothing to you.”

“I will end you,” he said. “I will rip your life apart if I have to. I know things...”

“I’d rather you didn’t speak to my player like that,” said Tim. But John just held up a hand to stop him talking, the arrogant little prick that he was.

“I know things. The places you’ve gone, the things you’ve done.”

“Like?” I asked. I was tired of his games, but slightly scared of what he had.

“Wings,” he hissed. “You visit kink clubs. You think that’ll go down well with marketing, or the team owners?”

I felt the blood drain from my face. Could he know what had gone on in there?

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George cleared his throat in the corner. “Apologies. I seem to recall suggesting Wings as a nice place to get a drink, as Ollie wasn’t out when we first started talking.”

“And you’ve got witnesses to that, have you?” John asked.

“Sure. The bouncer knows us well, she’s lovely, and she’ll attest we’ve always met there. We’ve also been out with Finn Roberts of the Welsh national rugby team, and I’m sure he could give a statement too. All we ever did was dance, and drink, and talk.”

John growled. “Bullshit! I’m the one who suggested you go there in the first place, Ollie!”

“Check. Mate,” said George. He held up his phone, set to record. “Never trust a journalist. There are two potential stories here. Either Ollie met with me of his own accord, and nothing beyond innocent drinks occurred. Or you sent him to a kink club with the intention of using it to blackmail and extort him if he ever stepped out of line. Now which is it?”

John grabbed my arm. “You are stuck with me, boy. As long as you and I walk this planet, we have a contract. A contract which requires mutual consent to break. I will keep shopping you around to different football teams who offer the best money, and the second I sense you’re happy where you are we will move on to somewhere else. You will never get your shot at playing for Wales. You will always be just another mid-tier striker who never found a home. Understood?”

“No, I don’t think we are,” I said. “Tim?”

Tim smiled and slid my contract over the counter. “Give him hell.”

“Yesterday, I thought I’d check out my contract with you. On Tim’s advice, and with his help, we checked every page.”

“That contract is like iron,” John smirked.

“I thought so too! Now, I’m just an airhead footballer. But Tim has brains, he’s been in the business for years. And there are clauses for basically everything. What I can eat, drink, what sponsorship value I can take on, all the usual handcuffs in a contract like this. But we noticed something odd right toward the end, perhaps something you couldn’t have anticipated way back in my football academy days.”

I picked up the contract and read the passage Tim and I had highlighted the afternoon before. “Agent has a duty of care toward the player. They may not take up offers that they know could prove dangerous or materially damaging to the reputation of the player. That’s pretty obviously meant to stop you offering sponsorships to ridiculous companies, but...I think I have a reputation to uphold now. And threatening to send me to Saudi Arabia when you knew I was in the closet? Totally dangerous.”

John went a dangerous shade of red, then purple. He took a step closer to me, and for a second I thought he was going to hit me. And then George was there, in between us, shoving John back into a wall. John’s head hit the plasterboard with a thunk and he left a little dent as he slumped down.

George picked up Tim’s mug of coffee and splashed it on the floor in front of John, used his phone to take a picture and then offered him a hand up.

“Oh, what an awful fall! Honestly, if you will spill liquids on a linoleum floor.” He

pulled John up roughly and held him just for a second by the scruff of the neck. “Now piss off.”

John scarpereed from the room, and George looked back at me. He smiled, but his eyes were wild.

“You enjoyed that, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Little bit,” he admitted. “Are you OK?”

I let out a shaky breath. “Surprisingly, yeah. I think I am. I have no manager, my life has been flipped upside down, and I don’t know if I’ll still be forced to go to a Middle Eastern club, but I’m OK. I will be OK.”

“The owners have had a...significant change of heart,” said Tim. “Selling you is no longer as attractive a financial proposition as they might have thought.”

“So the other team doesn’t want me because I’m gay?” I asked.

“Quite the opposite. They’d still love to have you, sports-washing really is the new black. Any way to...what’s the word they use nowadays? Pinkwash, they will take it. To have a gay player would be an asset to them. But judging by the massive sales spike in Ollie Gunnerson shirts since we woke up this morning, I think you’re more of a financial asset than ever.”

“People are buying more of my stuff now?” I asked. “And not just, like, to burn it? Or to make little voodoo dolls and stab them with Pride flags?”

“I don’t know,” confessed Tim. “But you shouldn’t care.”

“But...” I started. George took my hand and squeezed. I looked at him, and he gave

me a little smile that lessened just a couple of the rough lines and angles of his face. And I knew what he was saying, without saying anything at all. He was here for me, and nothing else mattered.

“The genie is out of the bottle now,” said Tim. “Let’s just embrace it. Whatever that means.”

* * *

The flash of cameras was almost blinding, but we’d all had our coffees and woken up a little after the drama of the morning. And I was ready. I kept my face as smooth and worry free as possible, but I had George’s hand clutched in mine like it was a lifeline.

“I just want to give a brief statement,” I said, fumbling with the little folded up scrap of paper until George let go of my hand and rested his on the small of my back. I took a deep breath and unfolded the paper. “The blog, as published by George Reynolds, is true. I’m gay, and I make no apologies for that fact. We are also-“ I paused, knowing it defined something we’d struggled to define ourselves; “-in a relationship. I’d ask for privacy at this time, and I will be happy to arrange interviews in due course.”

The flashes went mad; the reporters started shouting out their questions, but I did as Tim and the Cardiff City Football PR team had suggested, and just gave a little wave. On impulse, I leaned in to kiss George on the cheek. He gave a little tug on my hand, and we walked back into the safety of the player car park.

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“Want to go back in and talk to Tim? Get your training done for the day?” George asked.

“No fucking way. I’ve made back my weekly wage in shirt sales. They can have me back tomorrow,” I said.

“Good. Now let me take you home,” said George. When I unlocked my car, he jumped into the driver’s seat. I slid into the passenger seat.

“Have to be in control all the time, do you?” I asked.

“Only in the bedroom. This is a courtesy,” George said. He grinned as he pulled back on the gearstick and reversed out faster than I ever would have dared to.

“Fucking hell!” I gripped the side of my seat.

“I’ve been taking lessons from Finn,” George joked. “Now let me see if I can scare these reporters.” He drove as close as possible to the gates and revved up the engine as loud as he could, and they scattered. “Pussies.”

“Well done, you scared off the big scary men. Now take me home.”

“Right you are, boss.” As George drove through Cardiff, I looked out of the window at the chilly February day. The sun was shining, people were happy. Nothing had changed. But the world had shifted under my feet. I was an openly gay man. And that was huge, for me at least.

“What do I do next?” I asked George.

“Whatever you want to do. The world is your lobster, as my Nan would say.”

“Your Nan was a wise woman.” I traced my finger through the fog my breath had made on the window. “But, I mean...surely, I’ve got to do something, right? I can’t just be a football player now. I’m...I don’t know, the first. Surely that has to mean something.”

“I thought you just wanted to come out, and didn’t want any of that role-model stuff?” George asked.

“I didn’t. Maybe that’s changed, I dunno. But I don’t want anyone to be as scared as I was of all this. I want to fight the bastards who’ll try and bring me down so no one else has to.”

“Ol, you’ve had a long day. Let’s get you home. Later on, you can decide what you want to do. But right now, you need to be looked after, and you need to rest.”

“Yessir.”

George pulled into the underground car park. When I got out, I automatically went for the general lift, rather than the penthouse one.

“My place, is it?” George asked.

“I prefer it. It has you in it,” I said.

“Well, your place would have me too,” said George. “That’s the great thing about being together.”

Together. It made me feel all warm and fuzzy. But I knew I had to ask. "I know the words boyfriend and love have already been thrown around, but...this is real, right?"

George pulled me in for a kiss just as the doors opened. "Sorry," he muttered to the family who were waiting outside, then he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me out into the corridor. For a second, I was horrified that we'd been seen, and then I remembered I wasn't hiding anymore. And grabbed his collar to pull him in for a kiss myself.

"Wow, someone wants to be in charge," he said, muffled by the fact I wasn't letting go. "And yes. We are real. I love you, and you love me, and that's all we need, right?"

"You don't think we're moving too fast?" I asked.

George just laughed and dragged me to the door. "I'm still waiting for you to take me out on a date. I won't put out on the first date though. My mother always said it wasn't right."

"How about before?"

"Now that I can do, Mr Gunnerson." George unlocked the door and as soon as we were through he was ripping my t-shirt up and over my body. His mouth found his favourite spot before I could do anything else.

"You don't need to mark me any more, everyone knows I'm taken," I said.

George laughed and gave my chest a nip with his teeth. "This is more essential than ever. Now everyone knows these are my marks." He moved down and sucked on an unblemished part of my chest as if to make a point.

“God, I want to fuck you so hard right now. I’m so fucking proud of you,” he said, sliding back up my body and then capturing my lips between his teeth. I couldn’t do anything except ruck my fingers through his short hair. George pulled away from me, and I whined.

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“Bedroom. Now,” said George.

“Make me,” I challenged.

He captured my mouth with his again, and his hands came to rest against my arse. Just as I was relaxing into the slow, sensual nature of his kiss, I was being lifted by my thighs.

“Put me down!” I shouted, but George only laughed as he ran me through the flat to his bedroom. He threw me down on the bed and pounced on me before I could react. He used one hand to undo his belt whilst his other hand kept my hands above my head, and then he shuffled up my body to feed me his cock. I gladly lifted my head to taste him as he pushed in and out without urgency.

“Fuck, you’re a good boy when you’re gagged,” he said. “Maybe I should buy you a ball gag. Stop all this ‘make me’behaviour in its tracks.”

I whined as if I wanted to argue, but his words had me unbearably hard in my trousers. I let George test my gag reflex for a few minutes before letting my teeth graze his shaft as a little act of rebellion.

“Fuck, that feels good,” he said. Ok, so it had the opposite effect to what I’d intended. I wasn’t complaining about that either. Finally, he moved away to let me breathe. “I want to fuck that arse of yours so bad.”

“Please,” I whined, all pretence of rebellion gone.

“Patience,” he whispered. George moved off me, discarded his jeans and t-shirt and then pulled my joggers down in one motion. My cock slapped against my belly, already oozing pre-cum. As he spread my legs, I winced at the sudden pain.

“You OK?” George asked.

“Yeah, just...ouch. I think after, y’know, all we’ve done recently...” I tailed off. I wanted him so badly.

George lifted my legs higher and stroked one thumb over my hole. “Ouch, boy. I need to be more considerate with lube.”

“I wouldn’t have it all any other way,” I smiled.

“New plan,” said George. “Move up the bed.”

I shifted myself upward. George got off the bed and walked around it, then rummaged around in his bedside drawer. “Here, put this on,” he said. I was black silk sleep mask.

I did as I was told, and felt as George’s fingers circled my wrist and guided it up toward the corner of the bed. “What’s going on?” I asked.

And then I felt the cold metal and heard theclickas George secured a cuff around my hand. I heard his footsteps around the bottom end of the bed and a couple of seconds later, the cuff clicked into place on my other hand. I gave each a quick tug, but they were secure. My heart rate went up a notch. This was a whole new level of trust in our relationship.

I could feel the mattress dip as George sat between my legs. I thought I felt him leaning over me, and when his breath ghosted my face I knew how close he was.

Without another word, he touched my lips with one finger, then drew it down my chin, my neck, my chest and stomach so slowly. I bucked my hips and whined. “Fuck, I need you to touch my cock,” I said.

“Ask and you won’t receive,” chuckled George, skating his fingers through my pubes, grazing my cock and then down the upper part of my thigh.

“You bastard,” I whined.

“I know,” said George. “But I’m your bastard now, and I’d do this to you every day for the rest of my life if I could.”

Finally, he reversed course and moved up my body again, now trailing two fingers up my balls and gently over my shaft. He dabbed at the pre-cum at the top and then spread it oh-so-slowly over the head.

“Fuck,” I whined. “I want you. I need you.”

“How do you want me?” he asked.

“Fuck me,” I begged. “I don’t care how much it hurts.”

George’s hand moved away from my cock. “No. I’m looking after you, remember?”

“Need...to fuck,” I panted, bucking my hips and pulling at my restraints. Why wouldn’t he do what he so clearly wanted to do?

Then his hand returned to my cock, only this time it was slicked up with cold lube. “Fuck!” I shouted, probably loud enough that the neighbours on all sides could hear me. George stroked me gently, so gently that I couldn’t make any progress toward orgasm, and I knew he knew exactly what he was doing.

“Please, I just need...” I let my voice fade away into nothingness. When I pleaded, I was going to get nothing that I asked for.

And then George was straddling me. My mouth dropped open automatically, ready for him to take my mouth like he had earlier. But that wasn't the plan. George's fingers wrapped around my cock - deftly, gently - and then I was sinking into a beautiful warmth.

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“Fuck, George.” I bucked my hips up automatically, and George let out a strangled gasp I’d never heard from him before. “Sorry.”

George’s hand came to rest on my chest, holding me down as he sank down all the way onto my length. Not being able to see him was killing me, but the silk over my eyes made me so much more aware of everything. The gentle scratch of callused skin on my chest, the tightness and warmth around my cock as he sank down onto me.

“You’re killing me,” I whined. George just laughed as he adjusted, before rising and then sinking down again.

Every movement was heaven, every sensation something completely new. The cold pain as I pulled against my restraints, desperate to touch him. George, scratching down my skin. It all felt so good, but...

“I need to see you,” I breathed. “Please, George.”

For a second, I thought he was going to ignore my request. And then he was moving the mask from my eyes and I could see him in all his glory. Straddling me, head back in bliss as he pushed himself up and down, his cock hard as he stroked it with one hand. His body; hair and muscle and the little roundness of his belly. I knew I wanted to look at George Reynolds for the rest of our lives.

Every movement pushed me toward climax. Every movement made me pull on my restraints more, scraping against my wrists and making the headboard creak.

Then it was all coming at once. George’s grunts reached a crescendo, he was spilling

through his hand and all over my chest and stomach as I unloaded inside him. And still he rode, until I was wincing with sensitivity and sweat slicked every inch of skin where we touched.

George pulled himself off me and winced. “It’s been a while since I’ve done that,” he confessed. When he got to undoing the cuffs, he frowned. “You’ve been pulling too hard on these.” He kissed each of my wrists in turn. He laid down in bed next to me and held me close, fingers stroking the exposed skin of my chest.

“How long are you gonna stay with me?” he asked.

There was only one answer I could give to that. “Forever.”