



DECKER

Changing the Play
KAYLEY LORING
CONNOR CRAIS



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Narrated by Connor Crais

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DECKER

Changing the Play

Kayley Loring
Connor Crais



PROLOGUE - Decker

DUUGRRHHH! That was the combined sound of a two hundred and eighty-pound lineman driving my 6'4", two hundred twenty-five-pound body into the ground and my accompanying grunt. Number 74,

defensive lineman for the New York Rebels, took his time rolling off
me before I slowly peeled
myself off the ground.

Slower than I used to anyway.

I was only thirty-six. I mean, you had to throw “relatively” in front of
“young” now, but “young”

was still in there. As a man in the world, thirty-six was still pretty
good. As a QB who had taken hits

from guys who were built like rhinos that moved like cheetahs, I was
getting up there. That would

slow anyone down.

It was the 4th quarter, almost over. One minute, fourteen seconds left
with one time-out, down 4

points, so a field goal wasn't going to help. We were only 18 yards
away from the end zone. In my

younger days, I'd be frantically moving everyone to the line, checking
down and distance, making

sure I ran through the play in my head before the snap. I'd been here
many times before. Been down

and needing a touchdown. Maybe I was physically slower, but my
ability to process that game had

never been faster.

That gave me time to check in with my teammates. They still had gas
in the tank, but they looked

tight. It was only our second game, but I understood why.

We played like shit in our third preseason game, the one where the
coach played all our starters.

We lost our first game when the real season started. Everyone believed
we were a playoff team. We

had talent. We still had a chance to end this season with a Super Bowl.
But we certainly weren't

playing like it.

We needed this win.

I searched the stands. In the third row I clocked a hot chick jumping up
and down screaming at

me. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but she was wearing a
vintage *Decker the Panty Wrecker* T-

shirt—a nod to my...faster youth. Her outfit was complete with official team-sanctioned fake tattoo

sleeves that mimicked my own real ones.

I sauntered up to the huddle. “Section F, row 3,” I said.

The guys looked confused, racking their brains for that play. Then it clicked, and they all turned

around, except our rookie running back, Dee Jones. One of my linemen turned him around to help him

find what I was talking about.

“Damn,” Jones whistled.

“You hit that, Deck?” Maurice “Mo” Woods, my longtime go-to receiver and best friend asked.

“Nope.” I winked. “Not yet anyway.”

Lame joke and I wasn’t that guy anymore, but everyone laughed, and I could feel them loosening

up. *Good.* Mission accomplished.

The offensive coordinator sent the play into my helmet, and I relayed it to the team. The first

option was a run for Jones. Made sense. Get the first down, call time-out. Three shots at the end zone.

The other play, that I could “kill” to, was a pass up the seam for Mo.

The offense and defense lined up. “50’s the Mike!” I yelled, pointing out the Mike linebacker so

everyone knew their assignments. I took a moment to scan the defense. They expected us to run. They

were acting like they were playing the pass, but my guess was they wanted us to hand it off.

Yeah, I’m getting this ball to Mo. We’re ending this.

“Kill! Kill!” I yelled, telling everyone that we were changing from the running play to the pass

play. Jones shifted. I barked out, “Hut!” and Bull, the center, hiked the ball to me before the defense

could communicate the change. What could I say? They were just too slow.

I dropped back. Mo slipped past two defensive players, got to the middle, and I hit him with a

laser in stride. He dove toward the end zone just as the safety tried to tackle him, but he broke the plane with the tip of the ball.

Touchdown!

The whole stadium erupted in an eerie moan in honor of Mo's nickname, "The Ghost." He did

stuff like that—disappeared on the defense, reappeared in the end zone, and didn't make a sound after

he scored. He calmly handed the ball to me, and I spiked the shit out of that fucker. The crowd went

nuts.

I jogged back to the sideline.

"Left a little time out there," I heard from behind me. I turned to see Dash Taylor, our huge rookie

defensive end, putting on his helmet. Kid had a lot of talent and was built like a freight train, but the

reason we were even able to draft him was because no one else wanted to deal with that attitude.

"I didn't know if you could handle it, Rook. Next time I'll do my job *and* yours." I gave him a

satisfied half smile, moving deeper to the bench before he could come up with an obnoxious reply.

The defense did hold—helped by a sack from Dash no less—and we won our first game. 1–1 on

the season.

Later in the locker room, after the highs had been fived and the daps had been dapped, there was a

hush that settled. Where was Coach Bud? He'd usually be here by now to give the post-game speech.

We could all feel it.

Coach came in, followed by our team secretary, Nancy. They were both crying. You'd think that

seeing our coach crying would be the bigger deal. But it wasn't.

Buddy cried.

All. The. Time.

After a win, after a loss, after a particularly great pastrami sandwich—didn't matter. He was an

emotional guy. We loved him for it.

But Nancy crying? She was a tough old broad. That concerned me. It concerned all of us.

“Can I get everyone’s attention please?” Buddy asked, though we were already silent. “Jerry...”

Buddy struggled to get past his tears.

Everything slowed down. I thought about Jerry Strong, owner of the Boston Tomcats, the man

who’d drafted me. I thought about how much it meant that he believed in me, as a man and as a

quarterback. I thought about the big things we shared. The joy of winning Super Bowls. The

unbelievable pain of losing the last one we were in. The frustration of not being able to make it back.

I thought about the small things. The jokes we shared, the late-night talks. The simple phone calls. In

reality, there was probably only a second between when Coach said Jerry’s name and the next time he

spoke, but time was slow enough for me to weigh an entire decade’s worth of friendship in that

instant.

Buddy cleared his throat and took a deep breath.

“Jerry’s dead.”



ONE
Hannah

“I can’t believe you own an NFL franchise. Even if it’s the team that rhymes with *Schmomschmats*,”

Jen muttered into her laptop. Her husband, the New York Rebels fanatic, wasn’t even at home as we

FaceTimed, but the word *Tomcats* was never to be used in his presence unless preceded by the words

those fucking. Their team colors of red and black were not allowed to be combined together in the

family wardrobe. “I mean, they probably won’t make the Super Bowl this year, but it’s still a huge

deal. Bigger than huge. I can’t believe he left it to you.”

I stared at my reflection in the hotel room mirror. “I still can’t believe he’s dead.”

“Oh my God, Hannah,” she gasped. “I’m so sorry. I’m such an asshole.”

I didn’t even realize I’d said that out loud.

“No, you’re not.” I had to laugh a little at that. My best friend was the opposite of an asshole. She

was more like two really cute and cuddly butt cheeks that surround an asshole. “I think *I* might be an

asshole. I still haven’t cried yet.” It was Tuesday morning. I found out on Sunday evening that my

father died suddenly of a heart attack. Monday afternoon I was informed by my father’s attorney that

I’d inherited the Boston Tomcats. A few minutes later I called the attorney back and confirmed that he

wasn’t kidding.

Was that really only yesterday?

I had flown from New York to Boston late the night before so I could get up early here and go to a

meeting, but I couldn’t even remember if I’d slept or not. *Did I eat dinner last night?* I still couldn’t

even remember the last time I had actually hugged my dad.

Okay, *that* made me tear up a little. I guess I was human after all.

“You’re in shock, honey.” She lowered her voice to a whisper again so her daughter couldn’t

hear. “When Baxter died, I couldn’t cry for a week, until we got his ashes back. That dog was my best

friend—after you, of course. But you were estranged from your dad. It’s not weird that you don’t

know how to respond. I mean, you’re weird and annoying because you haven’t slept and you still look

gorgeous, but I only hate you a little for that.”

I made a weird and annoying face at the iPad that was propped up on the dresser in front of me. I

had no idea how I was supposed to respond to this situation. I’d never thought about what it would be

like when my father died, and it definitely never occurred to me that he would leave me his beloved

football team—even after I got my MBA and became a wealth-management consultant. Despite all of

his ex-wives, I was his only offspring. But the Boston Tomcats franchise was his only baby as far as I

was concerned.

Wait. Do I own my father’s baby now?

“I just need to look at the numbers and talk to some spreadsheets and graphs and food and about

three glasses of wine about this. Then I’ll be able to understand things. Then I’ll be able to make

some decisions... And then I’ll be able to process my feelings. Things always happen in that order.

But I’ll need the wine first, in this case. And during. And afterward.”

“Atta girl.”

“Okay, I have to figure out what to wear to this meeting and learn everything there is to know

about football in the next half an hour, so talk to me.”

Jen’s seven-year-old daughter, Ella, suddenly popped up in the FaceTime window. “Ooooh! Can I

help dress you?!”

“Yes, but I have very limited options with me here.” Still wearing only a bra and panties, I

reached for a blouse to show them.

“Wow, your boobies are so big!”

“I know, right?”

“How do you not know anything about football if your dad owned an NFL team your entire life?”

Jen shook her head.

I shrugged. “Sibling rivalry with a bunch of players I’ve never met, stubborn determination, and

an appalling lack of foresight. My parents divorced when I was six, and my mom and I moved to New

York right after that. It’s not like I was around it much.” I had to take in a shaky breath before

continuing. I had avoided Boston and football as much as possible for twenty-three years, so facing

both of them at the same time, without my father, made me more than a little nervous. And I did not

like being nervous. “Okay... Buttoned-up blouse with dress pants that says *Hi, I’m the new owner*

and I wear the pants in this relationship? Or an understated wrap dress that says *Hi, I’m the new*

owner—I have boobs and a vagina—deal with it?”

“Boobs and vagina!” Ella giggled, jumping up and down.

“You’re going to the stadium, right?”

“Yeah, I’m meeting with the general manager, but a guy named Jonathan is supposed to give me a

tour of the place first. The equipment manager, I think he said? I guess because he’ll be there early.”

“Please tell me you packed a tight skirt.”

“I packed five of them.”

“So you’ll wear a partially unbuttoned blouse, tight skirt, and heels that say, *Hi, I’m your new*

owner and you can kiss my sweet, beautiful ass. Done. Go brush your teeth, Ella. I have to educate

your aunt Hannah about football pants now.”

Ella rolled her eyes. “I think she should wear a pretty dress, but whatever. Bye, Hannah!”

“Bye, cutie.” I chose a black pencil skirt and started putting myself together.

“Should you wear a cardigan or something?”

“Nah. I mean, it was a little chilly when I got here last night, but I’m sure it’ll be warm and humid

like in New York.” I had no idea if that was true or not, but it felt good to be able to say something

with confidence this morning.

Jen tapped something into her phone and then held the phone screen up to her laptop camera. “You

own almost sixty of these men now. Please tell me you’re a little bit excited.”

I squinted at my iPad screen, at the image of a man in football pants. “I mean, that’s mostly

jockstrap padding though, right?”

She flipped her phone back around, tapped at the screen again, swiped at it a few times, and then

showed me an image of the backside of a man in football pants.

That man had a tight, tight butt in some tight, tight pants.

I blinked and shook my head. I couldn’t think about butts and bulges in football pants my first day

on the job. Or ever, for that matter. “Just tell me about the player positions and the rules and the point

system.”

“Ohhhh-kayyyy...” She scratched her chin. “So, the quarterback is the star of the team.”

“Well, even I know that.”

“Quarterbacks usually have a leaner body type than most of the other players. Like, really cute

tight butts, you know? They have to run and throw, and they lead the team in the huddle. And um...

there’s the offense and the defense, but I always get confused about that.”

“Uh-huh...”

“The ones who have to guard and tackle are big. Huge truck-like guys. The ones for the Rebels

are tanks and—oh, they creamed the QB for the *Schmomschmats* this weekend.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Oh, but lemme show you a pic of the QB because he is *fine*. Don’t tell Justin I said that.” Her

tongue was sticking out and her eyes were suddenly wide, glowing and manic as she typed.

“Okay, why don’t you tell me about the point of the game. Like, how do they score?”

“Ohhh, I’m pretty sure this guy scores often and long and hard.”

“Jen.”

“Yeah, I have no idea how football scoring works. I honestly don’t believe anyone does.”

“Well, that’s comforting.” I checked my phone and opened up the email attachment she’d just sent

me. “Jennifer—this is a picture of someone from the waist down.”

“I know. That’s your quarterback. You *own* that.”

My mouth was watering, so I had to swallow hard and clear my throat before saying, “I don’t

even know what to do with that.”

“That’s because you only date money nerds.”

“I mean I don’t know what to do with that *information*. What’s this guy’s job? What’s his salary?

Is he worth it? Is this team even good? Are they doing well right now? Should I wear my hair up or down?”

“Oh, up. Definitely do the sexy secretary thing. The regular season just started, and they actually

beat the Rebels the other day, so I guess they’re doing well. I can Google it.”

“Thank you.” I carried my iPad with me to the bathroom so I could do my hair and makeup. I was

ninety-five percent sure I was the only franchise owner who was putting this much effort into hair and

makeup for a meeting with the GM. “I did start to research this stuff yesterday, but I had to take care

of some things for clients before I left.”

What I did find out was that there were a few other female franchise owners, but at twenty-nine, I

was the youngest owner of an American football team—by twenty-some years. Now that I was almost

thirty, I usually relished it any time I was the youngest person in the room, but in this case, it did not

bode well in terms of respectability. So the up-do might help with that.

“Okay. What about the game? Are there any terms I should know? Plays?”

“There are. I just don’t know them. But I will Google them. Except I have to take the kid to school

in fifteen minutes.”

I groaned. “I have no idea how to do this.”

“Of course you do! You have an MBA! You were made for this! And the good news is you don’t

actually *have to* run the franchise just because you’re the owner. You could either sell the team or hire

a management team that you trust and then delegate the responsibilities. It could be like a part-time

job. That way you can come back to New York. To keep being my best friend. And managing your



clients’ money, of course.”

I wrinkled my nose and twisted my lips to one side. “I mean, obviously I don’t want to leave New

York and I definitely want to keep being your best friend...” But Jen and I both knew I wasn’t going to

sell my father’s biggest investment and most prized possession right away—not unless I could get a

great price for it. We also both knew that it was not in my nature to delegate responsibilities. It was in

my nature to want to know and understand and have some semblance of control over every aspect of

any business I was involved with. That was how I had been with every investment I’d made with my

trust fund money, and that was how I'd been with every investment I made on behalf of my clients at

work. So my only real option at that point with the Tomcats was to jump in feet first and pretend to

know what I was doing until I *actually* knew what I was doing.

I needed to look at the numbers and figure out what this team was all about. In a fiscal sense. Not

physically. "Wow. I really need to get some sex," I mumbled. "I mean *sleep!*"

Jen was snort-laughing at me.

"I meant sleep! I need sleep! Shut up."

"You said it, not me!"

"We need to focus. Come on. The news hasn't broken yet about my inheritance, so I have a little

time to bone up on this subject. Let's do this."

"Yeah. You need to bone up on any one of these subjects. Take your pick."

I buttoned up my blouse a little more, ignoring that last comment. "I just need to know three good

football terms, and I'll be able to wing it."

"Okay, okay. I gotchu girl." She stretched her arms out and flexed her fingers. "Google search

activated. Let's get you boned up."

We were both silent for a few seconds before bursting out laughing.

I was *not* doing my father proud.

The first thing I said to myself as I drove my rental car up to my brand-new assigned parking spot at

Minuteman Stadium was: "Holy shit." Because this place was enormous.

The second thing I said to myself, as I got out of the car, straightened myself up, and strode with

confidence toward the entrance to the building was: "Shit..." Because even though it was mostly

empty now, Minuteman Stadium might as well have been called Planet Men. This place was gigantic

and clean and just teeming with testosterone somehow, even though it was early in the morning and I

didn't see anyone else around. It felt like I was wading through an atmosphere that was totally composed of rapidly deployed civilian New England man-molecules. Or maybe I was just tired. And maybe it had been too long since I'd been boned up. But I couldn't even imagine what this place must've been like on a game day. So many people. Soooo much testosterone. *I own this*, I thought to myself. *I literally own this stadium*. It was still too much to process. I realized, as I was entering the building, that I forgot to email the equipment guy to reconfirm that he could give me the tour. My meeting with the GM didn't start for an hour. I found myself in an wide, empty, shiny corridor with several double doors on either side. My inner ten-year-old was dying to roller skate all over this corridor, but Grown-Up Me couldn't decide if I should find the ladies' room to give myself a mirror pep talk or find someone to talk down to so I could feel better about myself. I wondered if I should stop watching *Home Alone* and *Wall Street* so much. One of the doors opened, and a very tall man in gray sweatpants and a tight white T-shirt walked out carrying some kind of large football equipment thing over his shoulder. His arm was casually draped over it as if he were giving some little kid a ride, and he moved with such grace it looked as if that thing weighed nothing at all. I stopped in my tracks, about twenty feet away. He appeared to be so focused on the floor in front of him as he crossed the hall. He had something on his mind. He didn't even realize I was there. He opened another door with his free hand and carried the equipment inside, letting the door shut behind

him.

I figured I'd just stand there and wait for him to come out again.

I figured I'd just stand there and wait until I stopped thinking about the intensity of that guy's

expression and the tattoos on his muscle-y arms and what was going on in those sweatpants.

The door opened, and his alarmingly handsome face peered around as if he was checking to see if

I was there.

"Hello. Are you Jonathan?"

His lips were caught somewhere between a smirk and a boyish smile, but it was the sparkle in his

eyes that made me trust him. Or did it make me want to run away and breathe into a paper bag? Those

blue eyes took a slow and steady journey down and back up the front of me before he answered.

I mean. Normally, I would've rolled my eyes and walked away from this, but I guess I was too

sleep deprived. Or perhaps my body actually enjoyed the attention. Or maybe this guy was just a lot

better at checking women out than every man in New York was.

"Nobody really calls me that," he finally said, very matter of fact, as he sauntered out into the

corridor and placed his hands on his hips. "But sure. And you are?"

"I'm Hannah."

He took a few strides toward me, and I managed to propel myself in his direction with one hand

extended.

"Hello."

"Hello, Hannah. You can call me Johnny." His grip was firm and meaningful. His hand was so

big, I just wanted him to carry my groceries and throw me over his shoulder and toss me onto his bed

—not at the same time though. I wanted him to rearrange my furniture and then break my bed and

crack the wall because the headboard kept slamming against it.

Wait, what?

What was happening to me?
He finally released my hand.
We both ran our fingers through our hair as we stared at each other.
It felt like I was having an allergic reaction to his pheromones. Or his testosterone. Or maybe my body was in fact having a very positive reaction to his pheromones and testosterone. It was such a new experience for me that my brain was interpreting it as an attack on my immune system. Or maybe that biological clock thing coincidentally started kicking in right at the exact moment I first laid eyes on him because I really wanted to have this man's babies. I didn't want to marry Johnny or even date him—I just wanted to procreate with him. And that was absolutely unacceptable and very, very aggravating. "Well. Shall we get to it, then?" That smirky-boyish smile became a full-on smirk as he wrinkled his brow at me. "Get to what, exactly?" "The tour. Of the stadium. And then I have to get to my meeting with Walter." "Right. Walter...?" "Lipnick. I'm supposed to meet him in less than an hour, so..." He flicked at the scruff on his chin and scrunched up his face, but he seemed amused. "Sure. Walt. Right. You gonna be working here?" *What kind of question is that?* "Of course I'm going to work. I'm not just going to be a figurehead." "All right. Yeah. Why not? Let me show you around the stadium."



TWO

Decker

Oh man. *They don't build them like this anymore*, I thought to myself. I held the door open for her

because I was old school and a gentleman. But also because the front car was so sweet, I wanted to

get a look at the caboose.

I never said I was perfect.

But her ass was.

Good God.

I figured this must be Walt's new secretary.

Wait—they're called executive assistants now, right?

Nah.

This chick was a secretary. Her hair up in that bun and the business skirt that wrapped her tight

like a sexy *Mad Men*—era secretary made me want to put on a suit and drink scotch.

She turned to look at me, and I deftly looked ahead with a completely relaxed face, like I wasn't

just devouring her behind with my eyes. A less clutch man would have given it away. Would have

stammered or blushed. *But I've won Super Bowls, motherfuckers.* I could have pretended I didn't

just stare at her and dream of unwrapping that tightly wrapped corporate gift basket.

“Right this way.” I’d give her that tour of the building. Would a multimillion dollar MVP

quarterback usually give the new executive assistant a tour of the stadium?

No.

But new executive assistants didn’t usually look like this.

Or smell that good.

Or wear a tight skirt and heels to a stadium.

And she was not an executive assistant.

She’s a naughty, naughty secretary...

I was staring again.

And she saw me staring.

But it was fine.

I coughed into my hand, which confused her—the way I confused playoff-caliber defenses.

I took her to the weight room first. Her head swiveled up and down and around as she took in the

massive space. There were dozens and dozens of lifting stations and machines. It was world class.

“Pretty amazing, right?”

“It’s huge,” she said, eyes wide.

My brain went somewhere, and my dick began to stir. *Down, boy.* “Yeah, Jerry—uh, Mr. Strong,

the owner—upgraded it around five years ago. State of the art.”

“You knew him well? Jerry Strong?” She was looking at me now, and she was not making small

talk. I didn’t know if this woman was capable of making small talk.

“Yeah. Really well.”

She nodded thoughtfully but didn’t say anything. Finally, she took a deep breath and made a

sweeping gesture with her arm. “So, how does this all work?”

“Uh...” I scanned the room. “Well, we use these weights and machines to get stronger and...make

our muscles bigger.”

The look she gave me did not inspire confidence.

“Isn’t it important for an equipment manager to know the ins and outs of the equipment they

manage?”

Ummm. “Yes?” I flashed her a smile. “I know what works and what doesn’t. Here—” I picked up

a forty-five-pound dumbbell. “I want strength but not size, so we aim for the six-to-eight rep range.” I

curled the dumbbell with my non-throwing arm. I’d already done arms this morning, so this was

completely unnecessary. Possibly stupid. Except Hannah was really, really pretty. She had this

delicate little cleft in her chin—perfect spot for me to place the tip of my thumb when I tilted her chin

up to kiss her. That fact made overworking my non-throwing arm in front of her a good idea. Smart,

really.

I got a pretty good pump. Muscles bulged and veins popped. You know—for science. For the tour.

I put the weight down. “And we track all that so we’re constantly improving,” I said, slightly out of breath.

She gave a slight nod, her eyes a bit glassy as she stared at my arm. “There is something to be

said for...practical knowledge.”

I grinned.

Yeah. That was definitely a good idea.

She cleared her throat and tore her gaze away from my outstanding bicep to look me in the eye.

“You’re allowed to use the workout equipment?”

“Uh...yeah. They let me pretty much have the run of the place,” I offered with a smile.

“Seems like a liability,” she murmured while looking around.

Okay. Very pretty. A little weird.

“Pretty impressive place though, right?”

“I suppose.” She folded her arms in front of her chest and looked up. I got a good long look at that

neck. I liked it. I liked the way she blew air through her puffy lips. I had no idea why she was

contemplating the ceiling, but I was fine with it. “I don’t know why these ceilings are so high. Seems

like the heating and cooling bills would be through the roof.”

I barked out a laugh. She looked at me like I was the weird one.

“Through the...roof.” I pointed up, but her look did not in any way soften. Guess she wasn’t being

funny. My bad.

She let out a big sigh. “Just seems really expensive.”

“I think we can afford it.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Oh no. Very pretty. But possibly a little crazy.

“What’s next on the tour?” she asked.

We made our way to the auditorium where we watched game film. There was a big screen at the

end of it, a podium off to the side of the stage, and row after row of comfortable seats.

“This here is the film room,” I said, motioning with my hand as we stood at the very top of the auditorium space.

“I see.” She touched the tip of her index finger to that cleft on her chin, nodding thoughtfully. “I

suppose you watch a lot of action movies here. War movies, maybe?”

Oh man, was that cute. I couldn’t help the smile, and my mouth made a few false starts before I

could actually speak. “It’s for studying game film.”

“Oh.” Her porcelain cheeks turned the most adorable shade of pink, though she tried to remain

steely. Yeah, I was back to considering asking her out at the end of this tour. Sure she had strong

opinions about HVAC systems, but that wasn’t a deal breaker. “Does the whole team meet here, or is

it broken down by position?”

I was impressed by her recovery and by her question.

“Both. We meet as a team, but also positional meetings can take place here.”

“I see. To study the past games to fix mistakes,” she said, gaining her confidence back.

“Exactly.”

“So where do all the fraction backs sit?” She seemed really pleased by her use of the term

fraction backs.

“Fraction backs?”

She turned to look at me. “Yes. Halfback, quarterback...” She trailed off when she saw the glee on my face.

“One-third back?” I teased.

The pink returned to her cheeks. But I could tell she had no idea where she tripped up. “Yes,

thirdback...” She cleared her throat and pushed some imaginary loose strands of hair behind one ear.

“Of course.”

“Come on, let’s keep going,” I said, saving her.

We walked the wide hallways around the stadium toward the field.

“So where are you from?” I asked.

“New York. Just flew in last night.”

“Ah. That makes sense.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, clearly offended.

I offered a half smile. “Nothing. You just have a certain...attitude.”

She tilted her head to one side. There was fire in those eyes. “Attitude?”

“Yeah. Like you own the place.”

“Well, as a matter of fact...” She started to say something, but it was cut short when I opened the

large door to the field. We were standing in the nosebleeds, but you got a fantastic view of the whole thing.

It had been ages since I’d been up here. It was dawn, so the sky was a gentle pink and orange. I

was hit by a wave of nostalgia. I had played here my entire career, over a decade. Ever since I was a

rookie. Worked, bled, fought, lost, and won here. I still played here, still practiced like it was game

day every single day. I glanced over at the owner’s box. It was never going to be the same.

“Amazing,” she whispered. She stood right at my shoulder. She had been keeping a certain

distance before, but maybe the overwhelming size of this place made her want to get closer to me or

something. I was totally fine with that.

We stepped down into the bleachers. The frost wasn’t here yet, but it was early in the day, so she

wrapped her arms around herself to keep warm. She seemed vulnerable all of a sudden. I had a real

urge to put my arms around her and keep her warm myself—which was surprising, given that I’d just

met her.

“It is,” I said, looking out onto the field. I really wanted to ask her if she forgot to bring a jacket

because she assumed it would be warm and humid here like in New York this time of year. But I was

having trouble flirting and teasing her at that moment. This place was more than just amazing. There

was magic here. It also hit me how much of that magic was behind me instead of ahead. I pointed to

the owner’s box. “That right there... That’s where the best damn owner in all of sports sat.”

I glanced over at her. She was staring in the direction I was pointing, but her face was a mask.

“What made him such a great owner?” I swore I heard her voice tremble a little. But if she was

experiencing any kind of emotion, she wasn’t showing it on her face. A good trait for a secretary, I

figured.

“He cared. He cared about everyone. From the janitors to the secretaries.” I nodded at her, and

she gave me a weird look. “Executive assistants. Right.” Undeterred, I continued. “To the concession

people, to all the coaching staff and the players. He was true blue. And a football guy to the core.”

“And that’s a good thing?” There was an edge to her voice. Not just a New York edge, but

something more.

I indicated the beautiful, enormous cathedral to football around us.
“Here? Yeah. Here, that’s a great thing.”

“Well, I guess it’s a great thing when you’re surrounded by the people of Boston—who are well known to be calm and level-headed. Soooo much more tranquil than New Yorkers.”

Yeah, I heard the sarcasm. But I just shrugged and smiled. Which only seemed to wind her tighter.

I’m not saying it made me a good person, but I was really enjoying it.

She blew air through her nostrils and then took a few steps away from me. This woman was

absolutely filled with tension that needed to be released. She spun around and said, “I guess I’ll just

have to get used to nonsensical shitty roads and words being pronounced wrong and deep-dish pizza.”

The sarcasm was turning to straight anger—out of nowhere.

“Deep-dish pizza? That’s Chicago.” I said, my grin wide, my tone disbelieving. “I guess you’ll

also have to experience Boston’s other local treasures and traditions, like luaus, surfing, and wicked awesome Texas barbecue.”

Her frowning face was telling me to shut up, but those flaring nostrils were just egging me on.

“I could give you a tour of Mount Rushmore and the White House while you’re here too, if you’d like.”

She couldn’t even form words, she was so pissed at me.

“So, you’re one of those New Yorkers who actually believes the rest of the universe outside of

New York doesn’t exist.” It wasn’t a question.

It might have been my imagination, but it looked like her eyes were welling up with tears. “It just

so happens I was born in Boston. But I’m not the one who ignores the real world. It’s all the idiots in

here!” She was yelling. Actually yelling. Her voice ricocheted off the empty stadium walls. Wait,

were those tears in her eyes? “The painted-faced morons getting all worked up over a stupid game.”

My grin fell. *Now that’s not cool.* “Whoa. Easy there. It’s not a stupid game.”

She pushed imaginary strands of hair behind her ear again and lowered her voice again. “It is a

stupid game. It’s an opiate for the masses, distracting them from the people and things that really

matter in life. Forgoing responsibility to get a dumb ball from one end of a lawn to another.”

“Hey. You clearly don’t know anything about football. You don’t know anything about this town.

You’ve made a lot of judgments about things you know nothing about. Yeah, I’d say you’re a true New

Yorker.” My words were harsh, but my tone was calm. That was what I did when the pressure rose. I

got calmer.

“And you’ve made a lot of judgments about a person you just met that you think you know but you

don’t. That sounds like a true Bostonian to me.”

“Well, actually, I’m from Ohio.”

“Well, we’ll just see if you should still be working here because maybe you should go back

there.” She stepped closer.

“Well, maybe we’ll just have to see if you’re a good fit here, or you can go back to New York.” I

stepped closer, towering over her.

“I would love to,” she said, looking straight up at me and not backing down an inch. “Where is

Walter’s office?”

“Down that hallway to the left. There’ll be a sign.” My eyes were locked on hers. Our faces were

inches away from each other. I smelled strawberries. “The sign will be in English.”

She turned sharply and stomped away in those heels. I watched,
enjoying every determined sway
of her hips.

I wasn't actually going to talk to Walt about her or prevent her from
getting hired.

But I was certainly not going to ask her out.

Hopefully, even if she started working here, I wouldn't have to interact
with her again.

High. Maintenance.

THREE

The Boston Chronicle

From the desk of

Eddie "No, the Irish One" Murphy

Friends, Sullys, fellow Murphys—please raise me your beers.

I come not to bury Jerry but the team he loved so dear.

*I've already written his obituary, and there shall be many more hymns
sung for the late great*

*philanthropist and even greater football man: Jerry Strong. However, I
am but a mere sportsman.*

And so, please allow me to do what I do.

Tell you why the sky is falling.

At the start of the season I tried to warn you.

*"The Super Bowl..." people whispered, feigning humility before the
football gods. In their*

*hearts they wanted to yawp to the sky. "We got da best quawtahback in
da whole league!*

Undahfeated season comin' ah way!"

*"We have the weakest offensive line and a cap stretched further than
Thanksgiving Day pants,"*

*I whispered back. Not out of humility, but because my voice was sore
from trying to convince*

*people for years that the Tommys have been moving in the wrong
direction. We keep thinking we're*

one player away from being one play away from being one win away.

*That Super Bowl was a decade ago, folks, when we were still lucky
enough to have Jerry and*

Johnny was young.

“He’s losing arm strength,” I whisper. Now we’ve lost our owner midseason, and his

replacement? Jerry’s crown slipped through six of his ex-wives’ well-manicured fingers to fall on

the head of his twenty-nine-year-old New York–based financial-whiz daughter.

Not the team upgrade we were looking for.

“But maybe she can use some of that financial brilliance for our team,” you say.

“Maybe,” I reply.

But here’s the thing. Not once have I seen her in the owner’s box on game day. Not once have I

seen her around. I’m not going to speak about her and Jerry’s relationship. I know more about

game ties than family ties. But this I do know: Football was in Jerry’s blood. When he looked at

the Tomcats, he saw his team.

If his daughter only cares about financial statements, what will she see?

I know what I see, and I know more about spread offenses than spreadsheets.

An asset so distressed, it’s a liability...



FOUR
Decker

It felt like a game night. The cheerleaders were going through their routines. The stadium lights

glowed in dusk, and the sound system blared. The scoreboard was lit up, and my entire team and all

the coaches were out on the field.

Of course—this wasn't a game night. This was Jerry Strong's funeral. Yes, the cheerleaders wore

their uniforms and danced, but tracks of mascara trailed down their cheeks from crying through their

routine. I suppose that could have seemed cruel, but no one was *required* to be here. They were all

asked or simply wanted to be here for the man who they knew could no longer be here.

The scoreboard also didn't have the Tomcats versus another team. It was ***Reaper: 1 Strong: 0.***

Let it be said that Jerry passed with his sense of humor intact. Outside the stadium, I could hear the

sounds of thousands of people tailgating. The team had opened up the parking lot to season-ticket

holders and even provided free hot dogs and burgers. It was all per Jerry's wishes. I knew this

because he had told me about it.

Johnny, it's going to be grand. You're going to think I won the big one instead of kicking the

big one, he told me in his office one day. I think it was last season. Maybe the one before. Can't say I

gave it much thought at the time. We talked about a lot of other things that day, and we were in the

middle of our push to get to the playoffs. But now, experiencing the funeral he had planned, it dawned

on me that he knew. He must have seen it coming.

Also out of place for a pro game was the Essex High School marching band, Jerry's alma mater,

ready to play Jerry off one last time. And a ***Tomcats!!!*** banner that lay on the ground, ready to be

erected at the very end of the ceremony. His request was for the other pallbearers and me to ram

Jerry's casket through the banner, tearing it open—harkening back to the days when he was a scrawny
lineman for the Essex Bears.

In fact, the only thing here that was not in the spirit of a Friday or Sunday football game were my
teammates. Every single man was here, along with the coaching staff. We all wore black suits and sat
in chairs in the middle of the field.

We were all stuck. We wanted to celebrate him. With the tailgating and band and cheerleaders and
the banner, he had clearly wanted a celebration. Everyone here wanted to give him that, of course. But

we also wanted to grieve for him. A quarterback I admired was once asked what his favorite

championship was out of the multiple that he won. "The next one," he would always reply. I agreed

with that. You know what my favorite day with Jerry would have been? *Tomorrow*.

Fall Out Boy's "The Phoenix" blasted over the sound system as Jerry's casket was wheeled out.

He loved that song. He would clench his old fists and punch at the air and say, "Let's get the people

going!" I didn't think the song choice was a comment on how he was going to rise from the casket

Undertaker-style, reborn during his own funeral. But I was sure he enjoyed planting that idea into

everyone's head. I turned to follow the casket's journey and could no longer ignore the pretty blonde

who sat eight seats down from me, separated by six ex-wives and Nancy the ornery secretary. The

fact that all of his exes were here to pay their respects was a testament to the fact that while Jerry was

clearly terrible at *being* married, he was terrific at both getting married and getting divorced.

Hannah Strong. Jerry's daughter. Not a new secretary. The new owner. At first I was mad that she

had lied to me. But then I realized I had just assumed she was the beautiful new secretary. I mean, she

looked nothing like Jerry. Thank goodness for that.

She sat between Alice, Jerry's fourth wife, and Rue, Jerry's third. Not only had the ex-wives

come but they'd also very helpfully sat in chronological order. Rue had red hair, but it looked like a

dye job. I bet she was a blonde when she was younger. And there were a lot of similar features

between her and Hannah. Including that porcelain skin.

If I remembered correctly—and I may not have because there was a lot to keep track of when it

came to Jerry's wives—I think he and Rue were married the longest. Made sense that they would

have had a kid. What didn't make sense was that this was the first I was hearing about her. I'd worked

my brain ever since I saw her photo on the news, trying to remember Jerry mentioning that he had a kid.

And I came up empty.

It made even less sense considering everyone was here to pay their respects to a man who was

undyingly generous to people and their children. Mo was with his wife and four kids, and I knew for a

fact every single kid here had a fond memory of Jerry giving him or her a present or snack or the type

of experiences that childhood memories are built on. My parents were on the other side of me, and he

couldn't have been more gracious with arranging travel and tickets and letting them sit in the owner's

box whenever they wanted. My brother wasn't here, but that was his fault or mine. Certainly not

Jerry's.

So where had Hannah been?

And why couldn't I stop staring at her?

Thank God for sunglasses. It did feel mildly blasphemous to be checking out the deceased's

daughter while his casket was on stage. It would really have been more proper to check out her ass

again when she left after the ceremony was over. But Jerry also shouldered some blame here. He was

the one hiding a smokeshow daughter all these years.

I glanced down at my hands, my tattoo sleeves spilling out of the cuffs of my white dress shirt.

He worked in a building with giant, muscled-up, aggressive dudes who got at each other for a ball

for a living. Maybe he didn't want her around that.

Maybe.

The funeral started, led by the team chaplain, Father Peters. We all knew where Jerry really

worshiped on Sundays. His funeral was in the friggin' football stadium. Being a man of God, Father

Peters said all the requisite prayers. But this being Boston, he also offered up some prayers for

victory and for the New York Rebels to lose badly...and then for that team—after their horrific

winless season that he cursed them with—to find their way back to the light. Because Christian

charity and all that.

Psalms were read. Coach Buddy got up to tell a story. But of course, a man who cried all the time

during normal events was an absolute mess at a funeral. He would stammer out, "You know..." and

then start blubbering. And yet, somehow, we did all "know." Then he would compose himself enough

to say, "Remember..." but then fall apart all over again. I saw a lot of people nodding their heads. We

all did "remember," and Buddy's inability to form complete sentences allowed us all to remember in

our own personal way. By the end of it, I think it was a total of about nine words and five minutes of

crying, but it was a strangely effective speech.

My buddy Mo recited a beautiful prayer. A couple of ex-wives got up and said nice things. It

didn't really matter what they said—the fact that they got up at all and spoke so highly of an ex-

husband was all anyone needed to know about the kind of man Jerry was.

Then it was Hannah's turn. She rose gracefully from her seat and walked over to the podium. Her

black dress was skintight and hugged every one of her curves. Her body was even better than I had

imagined underneath that buttoned-up blouse. Again—I wasn't checking out the deceased's daughter.

That was a recipe to be struck down by God like I was a New York Rebel.

I was simply admiring her grace under all this pressure.

I looked around at my teammates. Most of them were also wearing sunglasses, but I was an expert

at reading them. They watched her, and they all had the same *who the hell is this* mixed with *I hope*

she doesn't fuck up our shit look on their faces.

Can't say I disagreed.

And why *didn't* she tell me she was the new owner when we met?

And why did she have to be so stunning?

Dammit.

Hannah cleared her throat into the mic, the awkward staccato bouncing around the stadium. "Most

of you don't know me. Because my father didn't take me to games once my parents were divorced.

Most of you don't know me because even during the summer, when there wasn't football, my father

was busy scouting players and signing contracts. And I was in a really expensive boarding school in

New York. I got really expensive gifts from him during the holidays. He gave me a car when I was

sixteen. I say this because that was how my father showed me he cared. He gave me stuff. Really,

really nice stuff. And now he's left me the thing he cherished most in life...the most important thing in

the world to him—his football team... I'm going to do my best to treat it as a sign of his ultimate love and not the thing he replaced me with."

There was a pause. Silence. And then she walked back to her seat. I mean, it wasn't like there

was supposed to be applause after a eulogy, but oh man, was the energy in the stadium the complete

opposite of approval. I looked around at the guys, and those questions they had were answered. *Who*

the hell is this? This is Hannah Strong, Jerry Strong's daughter. And yes, she might really fuck up our shit.

I made my way to the podium to deliver the last speech of the day. I had thought about writing

something. But I'd given impromptu speeches in the huddle before. Most of them ended with

touchdowns. At least that was how I remembered it.

It wasn't until I reached the mic, pulled it up, and saw my parents looking back at me that I

realized what I wanted to say.

"I was twenty-two when Jerry selected me number one in the draft. I was born and raised in Ohio

to two great parents who gave me a loving home and taught me how to be a man. I went to Ohio State,

homegrown son attending his home school, and there I learned how to be a football player. But then

when Jerry drafted me—being uprooted to the East Coast, making all that money right away...being

famous. I... Well, let's just say I didn't handle it all that well. I handled it like a lot of twenty-two-

year-olds might in that situation. So Jerry called me into his office.

"We all know fun, friendly Jerry. Every person who's gotten up here has mentioned that guy. And I

love that guy. But Jerry made his money. He ran a team. *That* Jerry was *shark* Jerry, and that's the guy

I met in the office that day. His face was hard, and he stalked around his desk. 'What do you want?' he

asked me. I shrugged. 'I don't know.' And then he was mad. 'You don't know!? You don't know?' He

got right up into my face. And then he got real quiet. 'The average American male has around twenty-

eight thousand days on this planet. You've already used eight thousand of them. If you're lucky, your

quarterback career will be fifty-six hundred days. If you don't know what you want, you won't know

how to use the rest of them.' He got up and turned around, and he was walking away from me.

"'I want to win the chip,' I said.

"'What?'

"'I want to win the championship.' It was the first time I'd ever said it out loud.

"I remember Jerry nodding. 'Good. Then every single minute of every one of these days you have

left in your football career needs to be dedicated to that. Eat right, sleep, practice, learn. Doesn't

mean don't have fun or spend time with family, because you're not going to be able to do this alone.

But don't waste your time, son. Time is a precious thing.'"

I paused and looked at the casket. The whole stadium was silent, and I fought the tears I felt

coming. I took a breath.

"My mother gave me life. My father molded me into a man. But Jerry made me a professional. I'm

thirty-six now. I've known...I *knew* Jerry for more than a third of my days. Time is a precious thing.

And I'm thankful for every single one that I had with him."

I looked at the crowd. I looked at Jerry's casket. I looked at the cheerleaders and the scoreboard

and the field and the seats and realized I couldn't end it there. That wasn't what Jerry wanted.

"So in honor of Jerry's last season, we're not just going to the playoffs, we're not just winning the

conference championship, we're not just going to go to the Super Bowl. We're going to spend every

minute of every day making sure that we win the whole damn thing!”
My teammates started clapping
and got to their feet. “For Jerry!” I added.

A bunch of the guys echoed it back. It felt good. It felt like things were
going the way Jerry wanted
it to again.

I signaled to the Essex High School marching band, and they started
playing their fight song. I

motioned for the other pallbearers to grab Jerry, and we hoisted him
onto our shoulders. The band

was roaring and people were clapping and Jerry was being carried off
the field on our shoulders.

Yes, this was right. This was what Jerry would have wanted.

It would have been perfect, except for the banner we were supposed to
run Jerry’s casket through.

I didn’t know if the cheerleaders set it up early or in the wrong place,
but they were blocking the aisle

that Hannah and all the ex-wives had started to march down. A couple
of the exes stuttered, thinking

to go back, but were bumped from behind by other ex-wives. Nancy,
the team secretary, God bless

her, cocked her elbows and swung them back and forth, revving her
seventy-year-old body up to mall-

walking speed. She had clearly decided that she was going to break
through the banner.

I had no doubt that tough old broad would tear through the sign like
she was a professional

football player amped up pregame on Sunday.

I believed in her.

Right up until she bounced off of it like it was a trampoline. She was
launched back into the exes,

and most of them fell over. There was a growing pile of expensive
pantsuits and designer dresses,

and I whistled for Jones to take my place at the coffin. I sprinted ahead
toward the ladies and called

for other teammates to scoop them up. They jumped over rows of
chairs, and each of them took an ex.

Bull, our huge center, scooped up Nancy, who beat at his chest, screaming bloody murder that she

wanted another shot at “the damned sign.” I easily lifted Hannah—Ms. Strong—into my arms and then

turned back to my pallbearer teammates.

“Move, move, move!” I shouted.

They gathered speed with the coffin, and when they reached the banner, the casket easily tore it in

half and Jerry made his last entrance on the field before he exited this world for good.

I looked down at Ms. Strong, and she looked up at me. We were both breathing a little heavily.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You’re welcome.”

Another awkward pause filled with breathing.

“I’m not the equipment guy,” I finally said.

“I know.”

“I’m Johnny Decker, QB1 for the Boston Tomcats.” I smiled.

“I’m Hannah Strong...” She did a pretty good job of keeping a straight face. “I own you.”



FIVE

Hannah

Welp. At least I didn’t say “I own *that*” while gesturing at his crotch or butt area. Or any and all of

the areas on his supernaturally fit body and ruggedly handsome face.
Because that was all I had been

thinking about ever since I'd realized Jonathan the cocky equipment
manager was, in fact, Johnny

Decker the cocky first-string quarterback. Known far and wide as
"Decker the Panty Wrecker" since

his college days, Jen had informed me.

My star quarterback.

Who wrecked panties.

The one who was playing out his last year of an eight-year 225-
million-dollar contract, even

though he was thirty-six years old and hadn't led the Tomcats to the
Super Bowl since his third year

with the team. The "fine" quarterback who got creamed by the Rebels
during their last game...the first

game my father had missed in forever.

I mean—I had been busy analyzing numbers and boning up on
football. My meeting with the GM

didn't go the way I'd hoped it would. He was guarded and didn't give
me much information.

Understandable, since he'd just met me. It was fine. I was perfectly
capable of getting the lay of the

land on my own. I planned to ask him more specific questions later.

Except the more I looked at the team's national and local revenue
streams, profit, operating

income, and salary cap, the more I got confused. The more I read
about the rules of the game, the less

I understood it. And well, if every now and then the image of smirky
lips, pumped biceps, or lady

boner-inducing gray sweatpants entered my brain, that wasn't my
fault.

My father and the NFL and the Internet and Johnny Sweatpants were
to blame.

The whole situation still felt so surreal.

I had been trying to come to terms with the realities and
responsibilities of owning practically

everyone in this stadium, including Johnny Decker and all of his parts.
And I still wasn't sure what to
do with it.

I mean *him*.

I mean *them*.

I mean the responsibility of owning an NFL franchise and all of the
people included therein—not
his parts.

I was certain that he had riled me up on purpose that morning when we
met. I had just started to

calm down after our encounter when I caught a glimpse of the team
photos in the GM's office and

realized it was the quarterback who had made fun of my pizza
confusion.

I *knew* that deep-dish pizza was a Chicago thing. Everyone knew that!
I was just overwhelmed. It

was just a bad case of bicep-induced brain flatulence.

And now— *this*.

There I was, in the very strong arms of Decker the Panty Wrecker,
breathing heavily while trying

to arrange my facial muscles into a glare so I didn't accidentally put
my mouth on his mouth. Trying to

ensure that my panties remained unwrecked. Trying to form more
words or find some other way of

conveying to him that he could put me down now.

It was just that I sort of liked being held like that. My family was not
composed of huggers. So this

was probably the closest I'd get to a sympathetic embrace today.

The marching band stopped playing, and despite what was going on all
around us, the sound of my

rapidly beating heart and our heavy breathing was all I could hear.

"You can put me down now."

"You can loosen your grip on me a little."

I did. I loosened my grip on him. "I just didn't want you to drop me."

"I can bench two hundred and fifty pounds. I got this."

He carefully lowered me down and didn't let go until we were both
sure my knees wouldn't give

out.

Not from swooning—from all the craziness that was going on around us.

“So...” He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “You’re not Walt’s secretary.”

“No, I’m not. Always a good sign when a man assumes any woman who works in a building is a secretary.”

“Always a good sign when the new owner of an NFL team doesn’t even recognize the quarterback.”

“Well, this may come as a shock to you, but not everyone is obsessed with football. Not even in the Strong family.”

Always one to unwittingly humiliate me at every given opportunity, my mother showed up from

out of nowhere, taking Decker’s hand in both of hers and exclaiming, “Johnny Decker. I’m Rue Strong

—Jerry’s third. It is so nice to finally meet you. Jerry always spoke so fondly of you.”

“What?!” I blurted out. “When?”

“When we’d talk, silly.”

I wanted to ask her when she had talked to my dad in the period of time since Johnny Decker was

someone he would talk about. But Johnny Decker seemed to think it was more important for him to

politely respond to her first. It seemed being a cocky asshole was the kind of behavior he reserved for

only one member of the Strong family. I felt so special.

“It’s very nice to meet you, ma’am. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. And yours. He was a good man. My, you have a very strong grip, Mr. Decker.” She

finally let go of his big strong hand. “Did you notice that, Hannah? When he was holding you in his big, strong arms?”

“Uh, no. I was too busy watching the *casketastrophe*. Can’t believe *that* little football-inspired

plan was a fiasco.”

My mother reached up to give my cheek a little pat. “Sarcasm has never really suited you, now

has it, my love?”

I frowned at her. “I’m just glad no one got hurt.” I placed my hand on her shoulder. “You’re okay, right?”

“Oh, yes, I’m fine. You know me. I bounce good.” She gave Decker a saucy little wink. “All the Strong women do.”

“It’s an excellent trait to have,” he said. “Too bad the *charm* skipped a generation.” He gave my mom a wink.

Rude.

“She has her moments.” My mother swiped at some imaginary lint on my sleeve. “She just takes a

while to warm up to people.” She crossed her fingers and held them up. “Fingers crossed she’ll find a man who can tolerate her before *I* kick the bucket.”

I couldn’t believe she was chastising me for being single at my father’s funeral— *oh wait, yes I*

could. “Mother. Too soon.”

“Not soon enough, hon,” she mumbled.

Fortunately, she spotted my aunt Janet, who was sizing up one of the truck-like players from

behind, and excused herself to prevent the *other* chronically single Strong woman from grabbing a

tight end in public. As she walked away, I could see that her hair was a bit poofy in the back from the

pantsuit pile-up. I should have gone over to fix it for her, or at least point it out because she always

told me how important it was to look good from behind. But that was my tiny act of revenge for the

“maybe she’ll find a man” dig.

“I *am* sorry.” Decker’s voice was soft and low and barely recognizable. “For your loss, I mean.

Are you okay?" He reached out to touch my forearm, very gently. It was a kind gesture and a genuinely tender thing to say.

I responded by fighting back tears and babbling. "It's interesting, seeing everyone here. The

players, the coach, everyone who works at the stadium. You were his real family... I was actually a

little worried that my dad's other exes would be resentful because they didn't inherit his most famous

asset. But it turns out all of the exes are very happy to not have to deal with any football stuff ever

again. Can't say that I blame them. My aunt Janet, the one who's trying to tackle that big, good-looking young fellow over there—"

"Dash Taylor. Defensive end."

"Right. Dash Taylor. Defensive end. Right. Anyway, Janet used to run my dad's company with

him. The diversified holding corp. He left his half to her. We've never been close, my aunt and I, but

I've always looked up to her as a lady boss. Anyway, I guess I always thought if I were going to

inherit anything, it would be his share of that company. But it's fine."

People were starting to make their way toward the exit. It was time for some of us to head over to

the cemetery, to Jerry Strong's final resting place. Unfortunately for him, his wish to actually be

buried here at Minuteman Stadium could not be granted.

As he walked alongside me, Decker signaled to someone—a very handsome black man who was

with a lady and four kids—that he was leaving. "Interesting. So what you're saying is—it's fine and you're okay?"

"Yup. Thanks for asking." I sighed. He deserved a real answer. "Really. Thank you. I'm still in shock, I suppose. But I'm fine."

"Well, I'm sure it will come in waves. We're all still in various states of shock. And you *were* his

real family, Hannah.”

I winced. I didn’t know if I winced at what he said about family or hearing him say my first name,

but if I actually let myself feel both of those things, it would have put me over the edge.

So I fought back tears and started babbling again. “He actually gave me a custom-made pink

Tomcats football for my seventh birthday. Well, that was one of many presents, of course. I barely

remember it, but my mom keeps telling me the story. I asked him to explain the game to me, and he

told me that the ball is the thing that everyone wants. It’s the most important thing to them. That’s why

everyone’s trying to protect it or take it from someone else. So I asked him why some of those men

threw it or kicked it away if it was so important to them. And he was stymied. He couldn’t give me a

good answer. So finally he just said, ‘Sometimes it’s better for everyone if you let something that’s

really important to you go. That’s just how it’s always been, Hannah.’

And I said, ‘Well then it’s

always been stupid.’”

After rubbing his forehead and exhaling for a long beat, Decker finally said, “Well, I guess I’m

glad you didn’t tell that story up there on the podium.”

“Not quite as inspiring as your little anecdote, huh?”

“Do you still have it?”

“Do I still have what?”

“The custom pink Tomcats football.”

“Oh. Yes. It’s in storage.”

“Storage? You mean it’s not even inside your home?” he asked—so judgy.

I was getting mad again. Why did he do this to me? “Yes, that’s what I mean. I live in an

apartment. In New York City.”

He pulled his sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on his stupidly handsome face again.

“Right. New York City. Had any good pizza lately?”

“I haven’t had anything good here actually.”

“Have you eaten anywhere other than the hotel?”

“I’ve had the stadium cafeteria food.”

“Really? I’m surprised I didn’t see you there.”

“I ate it in the office.”

“Your new office, you mean. So you *have* been back to the stadium?”

“Yes.”

“And you haven’t introduced yourself to the team yet.”

“Correct.”

“You should introduce yourself to the team. As a group and individually. Not today. After you learn their names and positions.”

“Listen. I know you’re used to yelling out orders and having your teammates run wherever you tell them to, but some of us professional businesspeople have our own ways of doing things. And I was going to introduce myself to the team and learn their names and positions. I just wanted to get my ducks in a row first.”

“Uh-huh. How’s that going for you? Those ducks running and lining up where you tell them to? Or are they growing a little resentful because you haven’t shown any interest in them at all?”

I lowered my voice and felt my blood pressure rise. “If the ducks are resentful because their new

owner is busy acclimating herself to her very significant new position after the sudden passing of her father, then perhaps it’s the ducks who are the assholes and not me.”

“Whoa. Nobody’s calling you an asshole. This is New England. We only insult close friends and

family to their faces here—and we mostly call them *cawksuckahs*.”

I almost smiled at that.

He was trying to get me to laugh, but I wasn’t going to fall for it.

I was going to win this conversation.

He put his hand on my arm again, but this time he wasn’t so gentle.

“Hang on here for a second.”

He stopped walking, and I stopped to face him.

“What?”

“There are photographers outside the gates, so we shouldn’t walk out together, and we definitely

shouldn’t walk out there looking like we’re arguing.”

He was right. Why was I even with him? I should have been with my mother. I looked up at him.

He removed his glasses and looked me straight in the eyes. I could tell, even before he opened his

terrible, beautiful man-mouth, that I was not going to like what was about to come out of it. “I’m just

going to give you one more piece of advice before we part ways, for the sake of the team: Boston

sports reporters are a tough crowd, and the locals take this team very seriously. It would be best if

you don’t speak directly to the media for a while.” He grinned. “You know—not until you have more

of an understanding and respect for the game. And the franchise. And the city. And Massachusetts.

And sports in general.”

“Hey! I like baseball,” I snapped back. “And golf. They make sense to me.”

“Figures.”

The unbelievable appalling nerve of this guy—telling me what to do. “You know what—I *will* be

speaking directly to the media. It’s expected of me. I’m the new face of the front office.”

“It’s not your face that’s going to offend people—just the words that come out of it.” I opened my

mouth, but before any words could come out, he put his sunglasses back on, touched my arm again,

and said, “See you at the cemetery. Again, I’m sorry for your loss.” He walked off ahead of me, and I

almost didn’t stare at his butt in those perfectly tailored pants.

I turned to scan the crowd for my mother. She was approaching, chatting with another one of the

players I didn't know the name or position of. I mean, there were almost sixty of them—it was hard to

keep track. Also, they were usually wearing helmets in the pictures I'd seen. Also, Jen kept sending

me pictures of them from the waist down.

I waited for my mother and then continued walking with her to our limo.

I was pretty sure I managed to look solemn, not angry, for the photographers.

But I *was* angry.

And something else...

But *mostly* angry.

I didn't understand football, and I hated feeling like an idiot, and my body was so attracted to that

asshole, and that *really* made me feel like an idiot.

And I really, really hated that.

Or maybe I was just angry and something else because it was easier than feeling the thing that I

still couldn't seem to allow myself to feel...

Sad.

SIX

The Minuteman Minute

WITH EDDIE "NO, THE IRISH ONE" MURPHY

*** *The Boston Chronicle Online* ***

EDDIE

Welcome to *The Minuteman Minute*, presented by Sokay headphones. I'm Eddie Murphy, and I'm

here with the new owner of the Boston Tomcats, Hannah Strong. Hannah, thank you so much for being

here today. I feel honored to be your first interview.

HANNAH

Thank you for having me. I just want to say that I loved you in *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Coming to*

America.

EDDIE

First off, let me say what a huge fan I was of your father—we all were—and what enormous shoes

you have to fill.

HANNAH

Thank...you. I was making a joke about the—your name. Because Eddie Murphy was—

EDDIE

So what's wrong with the Tommys?

HANNAH

Excuse me?

EDDIE

Well, you got the win for Jerry after the funeral, but you just lost the last one. 2–2, back to .500 for the

crew. You got a fresh set of eyes on the situation; you're in charge now. What's wrong with this team?

HANNAH

I mean, I just got here—

EDDIE

You're saying you don't know what's going on? There's no one steering the ship? No one—

HANNAH

The offensive line.

EDDIE

What about them?

HANNAH

Looking at the financials and the salary caps... *cap!* The salary cap. It seems we've lost a lot of

experienced employees from the defensive—I mean the *offensive* line—and we can't give Decker the time he needs to throw.

EDDIE

Interesting. Seems you're protecting an aging quarterback better than the guys you just threw under the bus.

HANNAH

Wait, that's not—

EDDIE

So you don't think they can make the Super Bowl this year?

HANNAH

I don't know.

EDDIE

Wow. A lot of people consider this team a Super Bowl contender. Sounds like you don't.

HANNAH

Well if we keep winning one and losing one, we won't have a winning record.

EDDIE

Wow, harsh words from the top.

HANNAH

No, I'm just saying—the math! That's *the math!* I mean...football is a very complicated game with a

lot of rules, and an NFL franchise has a lot of moving parts. Everyone involved with the Tomcats—

the Tommys—is great, and I'm a big fan of some of the parts—

DING

EDDIE

And that's all the time we have. This has been *The Minuteman Minute*, presented by Sokay headphones.



SEVEN

Hannah

"It's not that bad," Jen assured me over the speakerphone on my cell. "I mean, your voice sounded

really nice. And there definitely aren't tons of angry Bostonians ranting about you on Twitter. And the hashtags FreeTheTommys and GoHomeHannah are definitely *not* trending..."

I lowered my head to the desktop with a thud. Both my forehead and the desktop were probably

dented from the many times I'd done that since listening to the tiny, horrible online interview an hour

ago. "I would love to go home," I mumbled. "I miss you. I miss my office. I miss my clients. I miss my

apartment. I miss the pizza. I miss not being hated by everyone around me."

"They don't all hate you. They just hate everything you said."

"But he didn't let me say everything I wanted to say—it wasn't fair!"

"I know." I could hear her stifling a laugh. "It was so unfair of the star of *Coming to America* to

be so rude to you."

I groaned. "I can't believe I chose to let *that* guy interview me just because of his stupid name."

"I mean, you didn't actually think the guy who voiced the donkey in *Shrek* was going to interview

you about the Tomcats for the *Boston Chronicle*, did you?"

"No! I just thought he'd be funny or nice at least. With a name like that."

"Didn't your PR staff advise you?"

"Yes, but that's not the point! I can't believe he was so mean to me! And nobody told me it would

literally be a one-minute interview."

"It wasn't even a New York minute."

I almost laughed at that. *Almost*.

"What were you even getting at though?" she asked hesitantly. "About losing the defensive—you

mean—offensive line?"

I sat up and rubbed my forehead. "I finally got the general manager to explain *one* thing to me..."

I caught my breath.

I heard him before I saw him. Or maybe I felt him before I heard him. Decker. Stomping down the hall.

My instinct was to hunch down in my desk chair while simultaneously combing my fingers through my hair. “Derek!” I yell-whispered to the floater assistant, who was probably named Eric, through the partially closed door. I’d kept Nancy on as team secretary, but she was off today. “Eric! Don’t let him —”

Johnny Decker stormed right past the assistant’s desk and into my office. “Thanks, Darren,” he said as he shut the door behind himself.

“You can’t just—”

“No, *you* can’t just.” He strode right over to my desk in a tight black T-shirt and sweatpants, pointing at me with his big long index finger.

I hopped right up out of my chair. We stood face-to-pecs across five feet of walnut-stained oak

wood that was covered with books and files. He’d come to pick a fight, and he’d get one.

“This is a team. We operate as a team. You don’t talk about our problems with the media. You

don’t talk about my players outside of the franchise. You never, ever throw any players on my team under the bus.”

“I can say whatever I want in my interviews, and it’s not *your* team. I own it. *I* manage it now.”

“You have no idea who or what you’re trying to manage. Math? You think it’s about *the math*?

The bottom line?”

“Everything is about the bottom line—we just have different definitions of what the bottom line is.”

“The team is the bottom line. Winning is the bottom line. The Super Bowl is the bottom line.”

“There are numbers attached to every team member, every win, every game. Did you see

Moneyball? I did! I saw it three times.”

He wrinkled his brow. “Are you a film student? Why are you always talking about movies and

pizza? This isn’t baseball. We sacrifice our bodies. We endure pain out there every single day.”

“I read the book too. The *Moneyball* book. I learned a lot about business—and Jonah Hill was

really good in that movie!” I had no idea why I was so obsessed with that movie all of a sudden, but it

did make me more comfortable thinking about Jonah Hill’s performance than it did thinking about how

Johnny Decker would perform if he were on top of me at that moment.

His jaw was so tense and his nostrils were flaring. He was staring at my mouth, but I could tell he

didn’t want to hear another word come out of it. He held one big hand up to silence me and then

rested two big, clenched fists on top of my desk.

“Stop talking about baseball and listen to me. You’ve got my entire offensive line on the

defensive. You want to protect your quarterback on the field? Guess how I ensure my guys protect me

on the field? I take them to dinner. I buy presents for their entire families. I make sure they know that

I’ve got their backs off the field. You want to be the owner of this team — *you* need to let them know

that you have their backs. *You* need to meet the team and fix this, like yesterday.”

“I’m going to!”

“Good!”

“Stop telling me what to do.”

“Start listening to other people’s advice—especially mine. I told you not to talk to the media. I

told you.”

“All right! Yes. You told me. You were right.”

He seemed exactly as shocked as I was to hear those words.

We both stopped talking long enough to realize we were breathing heavily. Again. It was the only way we could breathe around each other, it seemed.

My heart had never pounded this hard before, not even the time I dropped my phone onto the track in the subway station in Queens and jumped down to pick it up.

“So you’re a fan of *some* of our parts, huh?” He smirked, shaking his butt as he turned and walked away from me.

“That’s not what I meant!”

“That’s not what they’re saying on Twitter.”

“Shouldn’t you be throwing a ball around or something?”

“Yeah I’ll get right on that.” He gave me a little wink before walking out the door.

He left the door open, and I watched him shake hands with Derek-Eric-Darren in that bro-dude

way. He was so cool and charming all of a sudden. Meanwhile, my chest was still heaving.

“Wow.” Jen’s voice was soft and low from the speakerphone. “That was hot.”

I had completely forgotten to hang up on her.

“Oh my God.” I took her off speakerphone.

“Is he still there?”

“No.”

“That was the Panty Wrecker, wasn’t it? I could literally hear your hormones shrieking like they were at a Harry Styles concert.”

“Those weren’t my hormones. Those were my brain cells trying to be heard over the testosterone

tornado.” I picked up a pen, just so I could throw it down again. “He has no idea.” I picked up a pad

of paper and slapped it against the desk. “He’s so monomaniacal he can’t see what’s wrong with this

team.” I opened a drawer and slammed it shut. “He is infuriating.”

“Yes. You both sound extremely infuriated. I need to take a cold shower. So do your brain cells.”

“Goodbye, Jen.”

I hung up the phone and dropped it on top of my copy of *Football for Dummies*.

Decker was right.

Every damn thing he said was right, and I hated that.

But I was right too.

He'd understand that eventually.

Probably around the same time I finally understood why the guys who *defended* the quarterback were called the offensive line.

This fucking game made no sense to me, but I would never give up until I understood exactly *what it was* I was giving up.



EIGHT

Decker

Buddy had kicked the shit out of us. The man had a heart of gold and hair-trigger tear ducts, but he

was a football coach through and through. We had won the game after Jerry's funeral, lost last week,

and now we were back to .500 sitting at 2–2. Buddy was searching for something to ignite this team.

This week he used the old *we hadn't been practicing hard enough*. We practiced in full pads, full contact. It was brutal.

We were all beat as we entered the locker room. We didn't talk much as we made our way to the

showers, although the defense was chirping a bit. They had played much better than the offense when

we scrimmaged. And no one talked more shit than Dash fucking Taylor.

“I hope all you guys get your treatments. Because I ain’t going any easier on you tomorrow.”

I had let a lot of his preening go. Now he was clearly emboldened by our incredibly beautiful but

incredibly wrong-headed owner and her singling out of the offensive line. She was scrambling my

brain, but I would deal with her. I was getting pretty close to being done with Dash’s shit though.

“Jawing after a practice,” I said, shaking my head. “I hope you can perform when it counts.”

Dash turned to me, his dumb grin still plastered to his face, but I could tell by his eyes he didn’t

like what I had to say. “I already got three sacks on the year, baby.”

“It’s a much longer season here, Rook. We’ll see if you got the stamina to keep it up.”

Dash scoffed. “Listen, old man—I can go on forever. It’s *your* ancient ass that needs to worry

about keeping it up.” He moved toward me, and my offensive line closed in, letting him know that

wasn’t going to happen. Dash backed down, but not before tossing out, “Oh, *now* you guys block for him.”

I clocked Mo, and he just shook his head as he got changed. I tilted my head to the side toward

Dash, and Mo nodded. When the time was right, Mo knew what to do.

Some rookies like Dash needed to be taken down a peg. But I saw the dark look on our rookie

running back Jones’s face, and I knew that if he didn’t gain some positive momentum, we might lose

him. I’d seen it before. He was a talented kid. Honestly, more talented than a fourth-round pick had

any right to be. But he’d had a tough day out there, stuffed over and over again at the line of

scrimmage by the defense and unable to move the ball anywhere. I tried to remember what he was

going on about this morning before we started. Something about comic book movies?

I dramatically shook my head. "I think it's good that *The Guardian* was released simultaneously in theaters and on FilmFlix."

Jones looked up at me, and his passion for superheroes immediately punctured his grim mood.

"No way, man. They're ruining the theatrical experience!"

"What theatrical experience? People talking, overpriced snacks..." I smirked and shook my head.

"Oh man, that moment when the lights go down and the rumble of the bass kicks in. Nothing like it!" he insisted.

"That's not true. Got a seventy-inch TV, surround sound, and I can have pizza if I want."

Jones shook his head with a disbelieving smile. "There are theaters where you can get pizza. And

unless you dropped serious cash, there's no way you're up to true Dolby Digital standards."

"Mo, help me out. Theater at home?"

"I got a wife and four kids. They would have to perform the movie in front of me live to justify me

hauling them somewhere else. Home all day long," Mo declared.

"But you're not getting the full experience!" Jones protested.

"I see the same exact movie. Just cheaper and more comfortable." I shrugged.

"Actually, Jones is right," Bull interjected, holding up his meaty pointer finger. "True experience

of the mise-en-scène cannot be had, not as the director intended, if not seen in the exact medium the

production was designed for."

"That's what I'm saying!" Jones exclaimed, both hands up in the air.

"This is the dude that looks like a big owl, right?" I asked like the old guy I was. We laughed and hit the showers.

After we were all toweled off, smelling like roses, and had started getting dressed, Coach entered

the locker room. He looked distraught as ever, and he was shaking his head. “You guys tell me. You

tell me what it’s going to take. Because we get there on game day, and it’s like you believe the press.

We are not a Super Bowl team. We are not a playoff team. We are a .500 team that’s flirting with

being a losing team. And if that’s the case, you will not be bouncing your grandchildren on your knee

about *almost* and *should have been* because you know it’ll be bullshit. We are our record, and right

now we ain’t nothing.”

Buddy started choking up. “There are a lot of you I’ve gone to war with—our backs up against the

wall—and we’ve achieved the highest level in this game. I see new faces—all fine young men that I

know will matter to this game, to your family, to your community. You will not look back on the work

you did, the extra effort you made, and wish you had taken it easier! I promise you that!”

Tears were streaming down his face, but we were listening. You could hear a pin drop. That was

why Coach cried. Because he meant what he said and he said what he meant. He was right. I just

hoped we could figure out what to do about it.

“Ms. Strong wants to see you in the cafeteria. Now.” Coach wiped his eyes and walked out.

The cafeteria?

What was that all about?

“Maybe Hannah’s hungry,” Dash mused. “She doesn’t need to go to the cafeteria. She can just

enjoy a big, meaty sausage right here.” He grabbed his crotch.

More guys laughed than I would have liked.

I took that moment to finish my silent conversation with Mo. I motioned my head toward Dash

again, and Mo gave me a small half smile. He'd already taken care of it.

"All right, guys. Unless you're in the mood for mini wieners, let's get to the cafeteria," I said,

happy that got even more laughs.

I only clocked Dash out of the corner of my eye. He looked pissed and then confused.

"Wait. Where are my clothes?" I heard him say.

I waited until I was out of earshot before laughing. *A ghost probably took them*, I thought.

Hannah was waiting for us at the end of the cafeteria as we all filed in. She wasn't wearing a

business suit this time. She wore a green midlength dress and heels, her silky blonde hair half pulled

back. She looked classy. And sexy. And tense. Very, very tense. While her face was placid, I was

worried she was going to break her own fingers, she was clasping them so tightly. Next to her stood a

man dressed in white, with one of those chef SpaghettiOs hats.

"Thank you all for coming," our new owner said. Her voice was tight, but I could tell the attitude

she was going for was *excited and filled with team spirit*. "Great practice today! Really awesome

passing and catching and running and tackling!" She paused, probably waiting for us to cheer and hoot

and holler or something. We didn't. She cleared her throat, licked her lips, and continued. "I'm sure

you're all wondering why I called you here. Next to me is world-renowned Chef Pierre Laurent. I

imagine this might seem a little strange since my father never cared about nutrition. As I recall, his

idea of a light meal was *not* pouring parmesan cheese onto his pepperoni pizza."

There were some light chuckles in the room. I found myself grinning and nodding—I wasn't

rooting for her. I was amused by that memory of her father. I was still mad at *her*. But there was also a

part of me that wanted her to win the guys over. I wanted whatever she was about to say to go well. I

needed this to go well. For the team.

There was another part of me that wanted to win *her* over.

In her office.

On top of her desk.

Or in one of our hot tubs.

Or maybe on one of these tables, if everyone else would just clear out of here.

“So—nutrition. It has recently been impressed upon me that I am now part of a team. Which is

great! And every member of the team is responsible for moving the team forward. Toward our goal.

To that end, I have tasked Chef Pierre Laurent and his team to design and prepare meals that are

specifically designed for each individual’s dietary needs. They will be based on body composition

and player position, and they will incorporate the latest nutritional science. And they will be

delicious. Nutritious and delicious. Because that’s what we deserve. As a team. A meal plan for

champions!”

Hannah finished her speech with a bright smile. The look on her face told me she thought she was

at tremendous risk of being hoisted onto our big burly shoulders and carried out of the cafeteria while

we chanted her name.

We did not do that.

The look on my guys’ faces told a very different story.

“What about Taco Tuesday?” asked Bull. Bull was a giant hulking man—a monster on the field

but the definition of a gentle giant off of it. Right now his face looked like a tomato and the

tremendous bulk of his body was quaking.

Oh no.

She was blowing it.

This wasn’t good.

It was funny.
But it wasn't good.
Hannah's confidence vanished. "Well... I..." She looked to Chef French-ar-dee, who just shrugged and offered no help. "The menu isn't set, so..."
"What about Flapjack Fridays?!" Derek, another huge man yelled, standing up, this time from the defensive side of the ball.
"And what about *Wednesday? Fritters Away!* ?" asked Marshall, impressively giving the right pauses and pitch to communicate all that punctuation.
The largest and hungriest members of the team had begun their revolt. And poor, lost Hannah struggled to find the magic words that would calm the herd. "Well, no final decisions have been made yet, so I'm sure that some—" "Some? Some?" another giant dude with high caloric needs protested.
I sighed. I learned something new about Hannah every time I saw her. I thought maybe her funeral speech was a one-off. But no. This lady should really give up public speaking. Clearly nothing good ever came of her getting up in front of a crowd of people to try to communicate something. And she still didn't understand this team. At all. Not even a little bit. But dammit, she was trying. At least she wasn't talking to us like we were numbers on a spreadsheet. And she probably wasn't wrong about the nutrition. And while I still hadn't forgiven her for what she said on *The Minuteman Minute*...it was time for me to complete her lesson in having people's backs.
"Hey!" I said, standing up. Everyone immediately quieted down. "Coach just got done saying that

what we're doing isn't working. So now we're going to try something new." The enormous foodies in

the room all sat down. I looked over at Hannah. Her mouth hung open in disbelief that I was helping. I

let her sit in that for a moment.

A long moment.

Finally, I ended with my best seize-the-moment-we-live-but-one-life pregame speech voice.

"Winners get tacos. Losers get whatever rabbit food this guy wants to throw at us." I motioned to the

chef and sat back down.

The guys weren't exactly thrilled, but they would listen to me because I had earned it. Something

Hannah needed to learn.

"Thank...you?" Hannah muttered, clearly not sure if I was entirely on board.

I gave her a quick nod.

Her lips started to curl into a smile, but then I said, "Anything else, Ms. Strong?"

She frowned at me. "No, Mr. Pant— She blushed and cleared her throat.

Uh-oh. Was somebody thinking about panties being wrecked?

Right here, in the middle of the cafeteria, Ms. Strong?

I grinned at her.

Now she looked as mad as a taco-less Bull.

"No, Mr. Decker. Nothing else." She addressed the rest of the room. "This is all a work in

progress, so we'll just have to figure it out as we go along. We will. Go team!" Hannah added in at

the end with an awkward fist in the air.

Yeah. Public speaking was definitely not her thing.

Dash came rushing in wearing brand-new team apparel that he'd clearly pulled from the stadium

gift shop. It still had price tags hanging from it and was at least a couple sizes too small. I would have

hoped that he'd look like a big meaty, overstuffed sausage. But with his enormous frame and bulging

muscles, he looked less like an overstuffed sausage and more like a superhero crammed into a bachelorette party stripper costume. But he looked pissed. And embarrassed. And that was enough for me. All the guys burst out laughing, and Hannah appeared confused. “It won’t be all bad, boys. If we eat right, we’ll have no problem fitting into our uniforms,” I deadpanned. Dash looked murderous. Hannah looked confused. And I was grinning. We weren’t the team we needed to be yet. But I considered that progress.



NINE

Hannah

It was after eight thirty on a Friday night and I was starving, but I refused to leave my office to go to the cafeteria in the wake of Tacogate. I had already consumed all of the protein bars and the entire tub of Red Vines that were in my secret snack drawer. I was so hangry, but Nancy had already gone home and I couldn’t remember the name of the floater guy, so I couldn’t ask him to go to the cafeteria to get

something for me.

So I would stay in my office. I would continue to stare at player contracts and my highlighted,

dog-eared copy of *Football for Dummies* that made me feel like more of a dummy with each page I

read. I would continue to peruse online listings for apartments in a city that hated me. I would do this

until everyone else in the building had gone home so I could go to my car and then drive around to

check out some neighborhoods. Then I planned to return to my hotel room, order room service, and

fall asleep while watching season one of *Grey's Anatomy* and definitely not thinking about Johnny the

Meal-Plan Wrecker Decker.

Although I suppose he wasn't the one who wrecked it, exactly.

But he didn't exactly make me look good either.

Or maybe I hadn't been making myself look good.

Or maybe inheriting a football franchise was quite simply ruining my life.

Just as my thoughts had turned toward my tastefully decorated Manhattan apartment and my mouth

had started watering thinking about the pizza place just down the street from it, I got a FaceTime call

from Jen.

I accepted the video call on my laptop and almost burst into tears at the sight of her friendly face.

She leaned in to squint at her screen and said, "You haven't eaten dinner yet, have you?"

"I'm fine. Hi. I miss you."

"I miss you too! Are you still at the office?"

"Yeah, I'm just finishing up. It's fine. I'm fine."

"Yeah, you definitely look and sound like you're fine. We don't have to talk about how fine you

are, but Ella's in bed and Justin's at a dinner meeting and I need some juicy gossip. You met any nice

football pants lately? Have you tried a lobster roll? Have you *pawked your cah in Hawvahd Yahd*

yet?”

“Yeah, no. I’m just looking at rentals right now actually.”

“So you’re going to stay in Boston?”

“I mean, not permanently. But it makes more fiscal sense to rent an apartment at this point, even if

I’m only here for a couple more months.”

“Speaking of physical sense—did you watch that YouTube I emailed you? Of Johnny Decker’s

commercial for Manscape aftershave?”

I’ve only hate-watched it fourteen times so far.

I tried to assemble my face into a confused expression. “Whose? Which commercial? Which

email, I mean? I’m not sure—I’ve been so busy. How are you?”

“Yeah. He cleans up pretty good, huh?”

“I think I like him better with a beard,” I muttered. “His face is less... aggressively handsome that way.”

“Yes, but your delicate skin will get all scratched up when his face is making a touchdown on your face and end zones.”

“That’s not a thing that will ever happen. Especially not to *multiple* end zones.”

“We’ll see.”

One of my end zones was starting to get a little tight and wet just at the thought of him, so I needed

to shut this down. “I should probably get head now—go head out.” I squeezed my eyes shut and shook

my head before continuing. “Out to my car. So you’re good? Great. Love you, bye!”

I hung up on my best friend before she could dig into my slip of the tongue.

I was just light-headed from hunger.

I watched that stupid Manscape commercial one more time while I packed up my bag, checked my

phone to make sure I had the addresses of the buildings I was interested in, and left my office for the parking structure.

I had to admit, I'd grown somewhat fond of Minuteman Stadium when it was empty. The week

before, I had gone out to the nosebleed seats that Decker had taken me to on my first day here and just

looked out at the empty field as the sun was setting. I stared at that owner's box and wondered if my

father had ever thought of my mother or me when he was in there without us. I would never know the

answer, but at least I was starting to get some sense of what his days and nights were like here.

I was feeling a tingle at the tip of my nose when I turned down the hall, lost in thought. I was right

outside the locker rooms and forgot to check to see if any of the players were around. It was too late

to run back around the corner and hide when I spotted my star quarterback's perfect backside heading

for the door to the parking garage.

Perhaps he heard the clicking of my heels on the floor. Or maybe it was his keenly developed

sense of awareness of what was going on around him. Or maybe he could smell the perfume that I had

applied right before leaving my office just in case I ran into a pair of football pants on the way to my

car. But his graceful gait slowed and he didn't even turn to look at me when he said, "You're here

awfully late, Ms. Strong."

"How do you even know it's me?"

He leaned into the door to the garage, holding it open for me, gesturing for me to pass by him. "I

saw your reflection in the glass."

"Oh."

He smelled clean. And manly. It was probably that Manscape aftershave he got paid to use. I tried

very hard not to touch him as I passed through the door, but it wasn't my fault my shoulder brushed his

chest. His pecs were so big and his shirt was stretched so tight across them. I could feel damp heat

emanating from his body. He was probably in the hot tub earlier or something. And then he took a shower or something. And then towed off or something.

I muttered *thank you* for holding the door open for me and then speed-walked away from him and his aftershave and his pecs and his damp heat.

“There aren’t any cars in that direction,” I heard him say. I could hear him grinning. He was always grinning at me—whenever he wasn’t glaring at me—and it was infuriating.

I stopped in my tracks, looked up, and realized I was heading straight for a cement wall.

He walked slowly, in the same direction as me, once I’d turned myself around. “Got any fun plans for tonight? Hot date with a bowl of steamed broccoli and organic yams?”

“Something like that. I’m going to drive around town and check out some neighborhoods.”

“Oh yeah?” He furrowed his brow. “Any neighborhoods in particular?”

“Yes.” I felt no need to further explain.

“Which neighborhoods in particular?”

“Why?”

“Because there are certain neighborhoods that I would not advise a woman to drive around by herself at night, especially if she isn’t familiar with the area.”

“Well, I have a GPS app, so I’m not worried.”

“Which neighborhoods, Hannah?”

I hated that I liked it so much when he called me by my first name.

“Nothing around the South End, I’m guessing,” he said.

“Actually, I saw a number of nice old buildings in that area online. But first I’ll check out a few in Roxbury and Central.”

He stopped walking and sighed. “No. You’re not doing that.”

I continued on toward my car. “Yes. I am.”

“Not at night. Not alone, you’re not.”

“Yes. I am. This is the only time I can do it, and I want to see what the neighborhoods are like at

night anyway. I’ll keep my doors locked and stay in my car. I’m not worried.”

“I can see that.” He pulled his phone out of his back pocket and held it up to his ear.

I slowed my pace so I could hear his conversation, but it wasn’t necessary. His deep voice was

loud because he was so used to yelling out plays to his teammates, and it echoed around the nearly

empty parking garage. “Mo. Can you hear me? Something just came up. Tell the rest of the guys I can’t

make it... Not exactly, but yeah. Tell ya later. Bye.”

A black Range Rover honked and flashed its hazard lights nearby as its door was unlocked.

“Get in, Ms. Strong.”

It was an order and my brain hated it, but other parts of me had a different reaction. “No thank

you.”

“I’m going to drive you around the city so you can look at those buildings.”

“I don’t want you to do that. Thank you.”

“Trust me—it’s not how I want to spend my Friday night either, but it’s easy to make one wrong

turn in this town and get completely lost. I happen to know that your dad wouldn’t have wanted you

driving around certain neighborhoods by yourself at night. The last thing I need is the ghost of Jerry

Strong haunting me every night while you’re making my life a living hell every day.”

“Every day, huh? I don’t even *try* to make your life a living hell on the weekends, so that’s

impressive.”

“Uh-huh. Get in my car so I can drive you around those neighborhoods. Your rental car will be

fine here overnight. If it isn’t, I will personally pay for any damages. I will drop you off at your hotel,

and you can get a cab back here tomorrow. Or I can drive you back here. We'll figure that out later."

My brain still hated that he was giving me orders, but my feet were obeying him. I walked around

to the passenger side door of the Range Rover, frowning.

"You're still staying at a hotel, I assume?" He followed me around and opened the passenger door

for me.

Which was nice.

But *not* ordering me around would have been a lot nicer.

"Yes. That's why I'm looking at apartments."

He waited until he made sure all of me and my belongings were safely inside the vehicle before

shutting the door.

Which was nice.

But *not* forcing me to ride around Boston in a luxury four-wheel-drive SUV with him would have

been nicer.

The inside of his car smelled clean and manly and leathery, and I wanted to make out with the

seat.

But I didn't.

He tossed his duffel bag into the back seat, and when he climbed into the driver's seat, his jaw

was clenched. He did not look happy. He wasn't kidding about not wanting to do this.

"You're going to throw me out of the car and leave me in some alley, aren't you?"

"I mean, I wouldn't *throw* you."

As soon as the engine turned on, the speakers started blaring loud hip-hop music, the bass

vibrating through my bones. "Seriously?"

He rolled his eyes, switched off the music, and then backed out of the parking space.

"Well, you don't have to turn it off. You can put something else on. Just not so loud."

He said nothing, just drove out of the parking garage.

The silence made me uncomfortable, and he knew it.

But I refused to ramble on like a nervous idiot. I just looked out the window and took some deep

breaths. The truth was, it felt nice to have someone else driving me like this. I was used to having

chauffeurs, but this felt more like...not like a date... But sitting in the passenger seat when a man was driving was different.

It was nice, not having to worry about traffic and whether or not I was going the right way and

whether or not I'd be safe at a stoplight, and yes, okay, it was nice to have company.

It would have been a lot nicer if he were nicer to me though.

He waited three whole minutes before saying anything. "Where to first?"

"You're asking me? You mean I'm actually allowed to have some say in this matter?"

"Just tell me a neighborhood."

"Roxbury."

"We should go to Central first."

I knew it. "Sure. Whatever you say, Captain."

He was quiet for a beat before getting an incredulous look on his face.

"Why are you looking at rentals if you're an heiress?"

I bristled at that. I had never liked being referred to as an heiress.

"First of all, I've had jobs ever since I was in college."

"I know that."

"And I own my apartment in New York and I don't know how long I'll be staying here. Secondly,

I've always been frugal, and the local taxes in Boston are mildly outrageous."

"That's thirdly."

"What is?"

"That was your third point. I already regret asking this, but why don't you just stay at the hotel, then?"

I took a deep breath before answering. “Optics. Because I want to make it look like I’m

attempting to embrace the city.”

He didn’t look over at me, but the corner of his mouth turned up.

“Good. You’ve finally had an idea that isn’t terrible.”

“What a ringing endorsement.”

He slowed down and then stopped at a stoplight.

“How did you know I’ve been working since college?”

He slowly turned his head to face me and flicked at the stubble along his jawline then rubbed his

lips together before saying, “Because I Googled you.”



TEN

Decker

She clearly had no idea what to do with that. How much did I know? Why would I admit to some light

cyberstalking? If she pressed me, I would say it was for that moment right there—the look on her face.

But the truth was, I was curious. I wanted to know more about her. I could lie and say that it had

nothing to do with all the daydreaming about her body, constructing what she would look like naked

from bits of evidence, like I was a detective piecing together clues and recreating a crime scene. I

could've lied and said that it was just that she was the new owner of the team and I needed to know

more about who was ultimately in charge of the big decisions for the Tommys.

Instead, I just let her sit there wondering.

I watched her take a breath and try to muster a response, but she collapsed and just looked out her window.

"Hungry?" I asked, my eyes back to the road. I heard a much aggrieved sigh, and I couldn't help my smile.

"You don't know me," she said petulantly because I did know her and she knew it. Or at least I

was starting to. At the very least, I knew that if she wasn't sassing me back, then she *must* have been tired or hungry.

"We could grab some pizza—"

"Don't say it," she warned.

"I mean, it won't be deep-dish, but—"

"You just can't help yourself, can you?" She folded her arms.

I could've lied and said that I was only trying to feed her because I liked calling her out on it. I

could've lied and said it had nothing to do with the fact that I kind of wanted to take care of her. I

could've lied about all of that.

Again, I just let her sit there and stew.

"So is that a no to pizza or a no to food at all?"

"What kind of dumb pizza do you have here anyway?"

"It's mostly Greek actually."

"Greek? Does it have feta cheese on it or something?"

I smiled. "No. Not as crispy as New York, has some fluffiness, but not nearly as thick as a deep-dish."

"Can't be that good since I've never heard of it."

"Oh, so you only care about things that are popular?" I took my eyes off the road to look at her,

and if she could have shot lightning out of her eyes, I would have been dead. “You know the old

saying *bad pizza is still good because it’s still pizza?* ”

“I don’t think that’s a saying,” she muttered, ignorant of the truths in the world.

“Well, you understand the concept at least, right?”

“Yes, Professor. I understand the concept of pizza.”

So irritable. Clearly I had to get some food into her quick.

“Greek pizza can go toe to toe with any pizza when it’s made well. But it’s probably the worst

pizza on the planet when it goes wrong.”

“Doesn’t sound worth the risk, then,” she said smugly.

“Well, I know all the good places darlin’.” I wagged my eyebrows.

“Can you fold it, this Greek pizza?”

“It’s not a fancy napkin. It doesn’t require folding.”

She slapped her hand against the dashboard and adopted a tone that I imagined the founding

fathers took when they hashed out the Constitution. “Good pizza should be foldable.”

“Well, this great pizza doesn’t fold. When in Rome, sweetheart.”

“If I was in Rome, I could get authentic Italian pizza!”

Yeah, she was definitely hangry. Instead of responding, I pulled up and parallel parked my Range

Rover right in front of Chuck’s Kitchen in two moves. I had good reflexes and great parking karma. I

climbed out, sauntered around the car, and opened the passenger door for her.

“I didn’t say I wanted pizza,” she said hesitantly. She was probably still unsure if I was going to

feed her or leave her to fend for herself.

“This isn’t a pizza place. You haven’t earned our pizza yet. So you’re going to get something that

you can’t really get anywhere else. Come on.” I gave her the order and held out my hand like a

fucking gentleman. She took it, smirking at me like a fucking lady.

We strolled inside, and I pointed at a booth for her to take a seat in and sat opposite her.

As soon as the waitress approached to take our order, Hannah told her, “We aren’t on a date.”

“I’m not lookin’ to break any news here, honey. You wanna date one of your employees, that’s your business. Good luck and God bless.”

“Hey, Jillian. How are you tonight?” I gave her my famous QB smile. It wasn’t working on my non-date at the moment, and I didn’t want it to go to waste.

“Hey, Johnny, good to see you. The usual?”

I nodded and held up two fingers, making sure Hannah got a good look at my big, strong hands.

“You got it.” Jill gave me a wink and disappeared back to the kitchen.

“How does she know who I am?” Hannah stage-whispered to me, hunching over so her head was close to the table.

I shrugged. “This isn’t New York or LA. The pro athletes are about it for celebrities in this town,

and you’re responsible for the future of a lot of them. You’ve been in the news nonstop. You’re famous, Ms. Strong.”

She ducked so low her chin was nearly touching the table. Her eyes shifted around the place,

looking for reporters or possibly assassins.

“I don’t want to be famous,” she said quietly.

My smile disappeared.

She wasn’t being sassy or defiant. Her voice was small and earnest. I suddenly felt something I

didn’t feel comfortable feeling for her—genuine sympathy.

“It’s not all bad,” I offered. “You get used to it.”

Her gaze landed on something or someone, then shifted back to our table. I looked over at the bar

and caught a couple guys who were staring at us. I gave them a wave.

“Johnny!” they yelled in unison.

“Sup, fellas!”

Hannah had now gone into witness protection-mode. Her eyes were shut, and she shielded the

sides of her face. Clearly she was not comfortable with the attention.

“Whatcha drinkin’ over there?” one of the guys asked.

“Sam Adams!”

“Comin’ your way, buddy!” the other one yelled back.

I turned my attention back to Hannah with a broad grin. She glared at me. That seemed to be a

pretty common state for us. Me smiling and her glowering.

Jillian returned with our beers and two giant lobster rolls.

“Beers are compliments of the guys at the bar,” Jillian informed us before leaving to take someone

else’s order nearby.

I took a bottle and raised it to them. They raised theirs then broke out into an “MVP! MVP!

MVP!” chant. Hannah looked like she was considering sliding down under the table.

“In a town where you’ve won two Super Bowls, you never have to buy your own drink,” I said to

Hannah and then took a swig. When Jill walked by again, I called out, “Hey, Jill?”

“Yeah, hon?”

“Put those guys’ drinks on my tab.” I winked.

“You got it, Johnny.”

“What. Is. This?” Hannah asked. She stopped glaring at me to wide eye the lobster roll in front of her.

“That is the best lobster roll in a town filled with places that know how to make a great lobster roll.”

“You expect me to eat *that* and drink *this*”—she held up the bottle of Sam Adams—“at nine o’clock at night?”

“You can do what you want, Ms. Strong. But if you don’t eat or drink any of it, I’m going to eat

mine and yours. And I’m pretty sure that isn’t part of Chef Ratatouille’s meal plan.”

She remained stock-still as she stared at me. “I’m not eating that.”

I shrugged. “Fine. Like I said—”

She picked up the beer and started chugging it. She didn't stop until the bottle was empty. She

slammed it down on the table and looked at me.

I nodded, impressed.

"Now," she said, "if you'll kindly— *BWHAYFUHAAAA*." The burp that exploded from her mouth

was not feminine or demure or subtle. It was every single gas molecule in that beer she'd just drunk

making a jagged return to the stage. She clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide in shock.

I threw my head back and laughed. The guys at the bar applauded. She made a move to leave, and

I held her arm with one hand to stop her, grabbing my beer with my other hand. I tipped my head back

and downed the whole thing in four gulps. I slammed it onto the table, filled my lungs, and let out a

belch that rocked the restaurant and absolutely crushed hers.

My burp won.

Because I was a champion.

I grinned, raising my fist in the air, and the bar applauded again.

Hannah was looking at me quizzically.

"We're teammates, remember?"

A small smile from her. Genuine. It was nice.

The cheering from the bar died down, and we just stared at each other for a moment.

"I hate football," she finally said.

"Yeah, I got that."

"No." She shook her head. "I only just figured out how much. I thought I just didn't like football.

It's more than that. All the resentment about my father choosing football over me. The game was his

favorite child. Plus, I wasn't a boy. If I was a boy, I wouldn't be tipsy after one beer, and I wouldn't

be saying this to you right now." She sighed. "You're not tipsy at all, are you?"

"Well, no. I am a boy, so I'd be buzzed, not tipsy. But no, I'm not."

“Well, I’m a girl. So I’m tipsy. After one beer. And I could never play football or get my father to pay attention.” She disappeared into some sad place inside herself, and I didn’t know what to say.

“Do you know why I’m named Hannah?”

I shook my head.

“I’m named after my father’s favorite player. John Hannah. He was the biggest, meanest, greatest lineman ever to play the game.”

“You’re right about that.”

She shrugged. “It’s not something I really know. It was a fact I was told. It didn’t make my father want to spend any more time with me, so it’s not really worth anything to me.”

I nodded slowly. “Well you know...it could’ve been worse.”

“Oh yeah, how’s that?”

“His favorite player could have been Dick Butkus.”

It took Hannah a few seconds to process the deadpan humor, but she laughed, and it was great.

Not reserved at all. Her laugh was bright and open—the opposite of how she’d been ever since she got here.

I felt satisfied and took another bite of my lobster roll.

“Wait a minute... You tricked me.” Hannah was staring at the plate in front of her while pointing an accusing finger at me.

“I promise you, they’re the best in town,” I said past my mouthful of amazing lobster roll.

“No, not your seafood hot dog.”

I almost choked laughing at that. *Seafood hot dog*. The things that came out of this woman’s mouth. I stared at her gorgeous mouth for a second before swallowing and forcing myself to look away.

She frowned at me and continued. “I was talking about football. Why am I sitting here defending

why I don't like football? Maybe you're all insane. What's so great about a game with super random

rules that make no sense and guys violently smashing into each other to get to a ball? Unfulfilled

familial love aside, it's a stupid thing to do."

"Maybe. But look at anything too closely and it probably seems dumb."

"What?"

"You're in finance, right?"

"Yeah."

"Moving numbers around for companies that cure cancer and solve hunger and homelessness,

huh? Or are you paid a lot of money to help companies make even more money doing really arbitrary shit?"

She took a moment and narrowed her eyes. "I have corporate as well as individual and family

clients. And I also advise a number of nonprofits. But maybe I see your point. Maybe."

I rested my elbow on the table and moved in closer to her. "Look, I don't like eighties glam rock.

Maybe the tats say I should, but I don't. You don't have to like football. But if that's the case, then you

should really slow down and just be a figurehead for a while. You're really pretty, so I don't think

people would mind that." I didn't know why I said that. Maybe I was buzzed. Maybe it was because it

was the first time I'd sat across from her for this long and just stared at her face.

She smiled and blushed as she lowered her head, so I'd take the win, even though it was a mistake.

"Why do you like it?" Her head was still lowered and her shiny eyes looked up at me through the

blonde hair that hung in front of her face like a silk curtain. This question felt like something different.

Something important. "I'm really asking."

“Football?”

“Yes.”

“Camaraderie. The game is fun.” I shrugged.

“And the money ain’t bad,” she added, a little cynical.

“Well, you’re signing my checks now, so you should know. But I loved it long before I made any

money from it. Or got a free education out of it.” I stopped short of mentioning all the girls I’d gotten

out of it. Partly because I was still being a gentleman and partly because—let’s face it—I’d never

needed a football jersey to get the girls. It certainly hadn’t hurt. But it still wasn’t helping at the

moment with my non-date.

“And you love all that in spite of the violence of the game?”

“No, *because* of it.”

Her head snapped back up. “What?”

“I partially fell in love with football because of the violence. I’m a much older, slightly more

mature, definitely pampered quarterback, so that’s a lot less true now. But when I was young? I had a

lot of violence in me. A lot of anger. These tats I have now are just for show, but they might not have

been if it weren’t for football. My father and my coaches and your father—they were able to get me to

channel that into something good. Something bigger than me and sanctioned by society.

“Every week I go to war with my band of brothers. Together, we try to crush our enemy to achieve

victory. At the end there’s a winner and loser. Cut and dry. Not much you can say that about in this

life. It disciplines whatever *that thing* was. Y’know? The thing that threatened to overtake us before

we found football. When you find something you’re that passionate about, you’re really living.

“It’s America’s favorite sport, and we’re doing the thing. We’re a part of the identity of this entire

region. We're the ones people are either rooting for or against. But there are rules, whether you understand them or not. We're not gladiators."

I watched her consider what I'd just said. Really think about it. And it was kind of thrilling to know that I was finally getting to her. Even a little bit.

"But the game is still really dangerous," she finally pointed out. "People do get hurt. *You* have. A

lot." She wasn't arguing, for once. She was engaging with me.

I liked it.

"I know. It's part of the game. I'd bet you all my money that players would tell you it's worth the

risk to do the thing we love. We're drinking beer way too late to get a good night's sleep, and I'm

going to be forced to eat not one but two buttery lobster rolls. Life's a risk," I said with a smile.

She smiled back and answered me by taking an enormous bite of her lobster roll. "Oh my God,"

she said around her mouthful of lobster. "This is absolute heaven."

"I told you." I took my own bite, and we chewed happily in a rare quiet moment between us. I

watched her enjoy her food. The way her eyelashes fluttered. She sat up all of sudden, swaying back

and forth as she savored the taste. She swallowed, touched her thumb to the side of her buttery lips

and then sucked the butter off it. She groaned. She wasn't putting on a show—she didn't even seem to

realize I was watching her. God damn, she was just so into it. When she opened her mouth to take

another big bite, I had to look away. She was my boss. And my late boss's daughter. I needed to be

less into her. "You know who *did* love eighties glam rock?" I said when I was done chewing.

"Who?"

"Your dad."

"No way!" Her expression was full of doubt and delight.

"Yep. Do you remember when his hair was that platinum blond?"

“Yeah. That was before his last divorce, right? I was just starting to understand that my father was

a public figure, like I am now, I guess. I tried not to pay attention to news stories about him, but I

remember seeing headlines. They thought he had lost it. A three-quarter-life crisis.”

I shook my head, grinning at the memory. “They were wrong. He dyed his hair for a costume party.

He was going as the lead singer of Twisted Sister.”

Hannah laughed hard again, making that beautiful, open, not-at-all-controlled sound. “Oh my

God!”

“We all told him to get a wig, but he was set on dyeing it. His hair was in no way long enough. So

instead of looking like a glam rocker, he looked like one of the Golden Girls.”

Hannah and I couldn’t talk, we were laughing so hard. When we settled down and finally caught

our breaths, Hannah’s smile completely disappeared and she got that faraway look again.

“I wish it was *me* telling that story to *you*.”

I nodded, not knowing what to say to that. I felt for her, I really did. I could always sense this

longing and regret whenever her father came up. It made me feel protective of her, I guessed.

She looked at me and smiled. “But thanks for telling me. Really.” She took another big bite of her

lobster roll.

“You’re welcome.”

By the time we were finished with our late dinner, it was way past a good time to scout

neighborhoods, so I drove Hannah back to her hotel. I put the car in Park, signaled to the valet that I

wasn’t staying. I turned to look at her. Her hand looked holdable and her mouth looked kissable.

“So I guess we’ll have to do this another time,” Hannah whispered as she unbuckled her safety

belt.

I arched an eyebrow. Was she thinking what I was thinking? That we had to do this? That we

needed to kiss?

“To find me a rental,” she explained.

“Oh. Are you asking me to help you?”

“Well—”

“Or telling me as an employee?” I grinned at her.

She blushed, and *not* touching her was getting harder. Everything was threatening to get harder.

“I mean, I do own you, right?”

“That you do.”

“But if you don’t want to—”

“It would be my pleasure, Hannah.” I could tell that calling her by her first name did something to her.

“You have a lot of layers, Johnny Decker.” She studied my face, let her eyes drift down to my arm.

I shrugged. “No more than most.”

She squinted at me, shook her head slightly. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“Well, you’re pretty interesting yourself.”

“I had a really nice time,” she said.

“Me too.”

I didn’t even realize our faces had gotten as close as they did, but when she grabbed my face, she

only had to move a couple of inches to crash her lips against mine. They were just as soft and smooth

as they looked, but they came at me like a linebacker and I was fine with that. She let out a frantic

little moan when my tongue slipped inside her mouth, but she welcomed it. No hesitation at all as she

let me in deeper. She tasted like beer and butter and lobster, but her hair smelled like oranges and

vanilla. I had kissed a lot of women over the years, but I had never kissed one who smelled like a

sexy Creamsicle before, and I fucking loved it. Her skin was scented with some fragrance I didn't

recognize. I wanted to know if she smelled like that everywhere.

She moved her body closer to mine, and my hands roamed up her arms, just barely grazing the

sides of her breasts, and then to either side of her face. She sighed and shivered. I groaned and kissed

her harder. We'd both just had a big late-night meal, but we were so hungry for each other. She was

devouring the lower half of my face like she'd devoured that seafood hot dog, and she could have had

all of me right then and there if she'd wanted me.

When I threaded my fingers through her hair, just as suddenly as she had smashed her lips into

mine, she pulled away from me with a gasp, her eyes wide in realization. "Shit.

Thanksforthefoodandthebeerthelobsterrollewaseverythingyousaiditwas whichwasprettysurprising.

Okaygottagogetagoodnightssleepbye." She was gone in a whirl of car door opening and purse snatching.

There were two Deckers that night. The one from before, who longed to kiss Hannah and put his

hands on her. And the one who'd done it. The Decker from before thought it was a good idea. The

best idea. Why not make out with the beautiful Hannah Strong, complications be damned?

The Decker who got to kiss her? He didn't regret it.

But two words came thumping over and over again in my brain as I watched Hannah flee into the

hotel lobby.

Oh.

Shit.



Chapter Eleven

HANNAH: Hi, John. This is Hannah Strong.

DECKER: Hi, Hannah. Nobody calls me John. But it's good to hear from you.

HANNAH: I just wanted to say thank you for last night again and please keep the fact that you kissed me between us.

DECKER: Hmmmm. I'm pretty sure you kissed me.

HANNAH: You tricked me!

DECKER: How did I trick you?

HANNAH: I've become acquainted with your "panty wrecker" reputation. You somehow duped me into making me crash my face into your face.

DECKER: I'm afraid that was all you, darlin'. The panty wrecker you're referring to was the old Decker. New Decker was a perfect gentleman last night.

HANNAH: Gentleman. Right. <face with rolling eyes emoji>

DECKER: It's true. The old Decker would have taken you out longer. We both would've been

drunker. We still wouldn't have made it inside your place. I just would have held your back down

on the console with one hand while I enthusiastically removed your panties with the other. It's

also possible Old Decker would have made you put those wrecked panties in your mouth to

cover the screams from all the amazing orgasms I would have given you in that back seat.

HANNAH: I see.

DECKER: But that didn't happen, now did it?

HANNAH: No. It did not.

DECKER: Because I'm a new Decker. I've learned to control myself because I'm focused on

football. You hate football, so I understand why you don't have that same kind of control around

me. Which is why you crashed your face into my face. And why I have no doubt you will do it again.

HANNAH: I'm not sure what you're talking about. But I am absolutely positive you need to get over yourself.

DECKER: See you at the office, Hannah. <winking face emoji>

HANNAH: <raised middle finger emoji>



TWELVE

Hannah

"For example, our two-level structure is called Drag or Race," Coach Buddy explained to me. He

was so excited and animated. I was pretty sure he was still talking about pass patterns. Or possibly

formations. Or RuPaul. "Within this concept—we have curl, stutter, and juke routes."

“Right.” I scribbled *curl, stutter, juke* onto my pad of paper and underlined the words to show

how much I understood the concepts. It was after eight, and it was so sweet of him to find the time to

tutor me. I didn’t want to let him down. But I had no idea what he was talking about.

“In Drag, the curl is the first route to go underneath the original stem of the stutter route. You see?

In Race, the stutter route goes under the juke.”

That was when the pencil snapped in half. In my hand. Football still broke my brain. I wanted to

break *football*, but instead I broke a pencil and startled poor Buddy.

“We can take a break,” he said.

“No, I’m fine—I think I get it now. A curl is when the receiver runs up the field and then goes

around the scrimmage line and turns back to pass it to the tight end. Right?”

He shook his head slowly. “No, honey.” He sighed. “No.” He scrubbed his tired face with the

palms of both hands. “Why don’t I show you a video of the play? You need to see it in action.”

“That would be so helpful. Yes. Thank you.”

I already knew it wouldn’t help. I had watched hours of videos of hundreds of plays, and I still

had no idea what I was looking at. But I had to learn. I *had* to. I had now officially left my job in New

York because it was so clear to me that anyone could do what I did for my clients there. It didn’t have

to be me. But the Tomcats had somehow become a family business with my father’s passing. So *this*

was my job now. And I needed to understand everything about my work because that was my life.

I might never fathom why this sport was more popular than baseball. I would probably never

comprehend why I couldn’t stop my face from connecting with Decker’s face at the lips that night a

week earlier or why it made me so angry that he was such a good kisser. I definitely didn't know

when I'd see him again since he didn't text me while they were in Atlanta—and that was totally fine

and good and for the best. But I *would* understand stutter juke curls before I left Buddy's office.

He angled the monitor on his desk so I could see the video, and there he was—my QB1. I could

not help but admire his grace and agility on the field—especially in slow motion. I couldn't take my

eyes off of him, to be honest. Buddy narrated the play as the wide receiver ran beyond the line of

scrimmage and then immediately turned, making a slight curl, and took a couple of steps in Decker's

direction to catch his perfect throw. They gained a few yards. It was magnificent.

"That was a curl. Yes?"

"Yes! You got it!" Buddy clapped his hands and then raised the roof. It was embarrassing how

happy he was that I got that right.

But it made me happy too. Alarming, it seemed that I could only understand plays if I was

focusing on Johnny Decker. But I also loved the way Coach Buddy treated me. He was a sweet man,

and you always felt like he was giving you his full attention. Even when he was crying.

He paused the video on Decker, who was midair as he was high-fiving Maurice. They seemed to

be BFFs, and they worked so well together. That joy that Decker had spoken of at the lobster roll

place was so evident on their faces.

"He's good, isn't he?" He was getting choked up, I could tell.

"Hmmm?" I finally tore my eyes away from the monitor.

"Decker."

"Oh." I cleared my throat and made a checkmark next to the word *curl* in my notes with the

bottom half of my broken pencil. “He seems to know what he’s doing.”

“He could have been the GOAT.”

I had never paid much attention to sports news before, but people kept talking about goats. I

couldn’t think of an NFL team called the Goats. “And that’s a good thing?”

He sniffled. “Huh? Oh. It stands for Greatest Of All Time, sweetie.”

“Ohhhhh.” I wrote down **GOAT** in my notes, and next to it, **Johnny Decker???** “He’s really that good?”

“Well, he’s been injured a lot lately. So, you aren’t catching him in peak form. I wish you had.”

I’m not allowed to touch his peak form, Buddy. Don’t encourage me.

“But back in the day? The Super Bowl years?” He shook his head. “It was a beautiful thing.

Beautiful.” He sighed, long and hard. He did that a lot. “I wish I had more time.”

Buddy was retiring at the end of the season, and no one liked to bring it up to him because that

topic was guaranteed to cue the waterworks. So, I didn’t bring it up. “Are you thinking we might not

have a shot at the Super Bowl this year?” I asked hesitantly.

Welp. I might as well have asked him how he felt about retirement. A high-pitched humming sound

was coming from the back of his throat, and he squeezed his eyes shut. But then he pulled it together

and got all positive. “We still have a shot. It’s a longshot. But we still have a shot. I will not let my

boys think anything different.” He stared at Decker, paused on the monitor, and sighed again. But this

sigh felt sadder and more meaningful than usual. “I meant I wish I had more time to make things right

for Decker. We let him down. Your dad and me.”

I sat forward in my chair ever so slightly. This was something important. This was the thing no

one was admitting to me.

“We just didn’t make the right moves.”

“What do you mean?”

“We just didn’t draft the right players. Didn’t sign the right guys. You think you’re doing the right thing at the time. But here we are.”

“Where are we?”

He shook his head. “It’s too late for him now. Here anyway.”

I could hear his phone vibrating in his pocket. He dabbed at the corners of his eyes with the

knuckle of his index finger. “Oh no, what time is it?” He looked at his phone. “I have to take this.” He

turned and walked over to the windows to take the call. I could tell from his tone and hushed voice that it was his wife.

I was starting to piece things together. The numbers were making sense to me. While the game

itself did not, I could see what my general manager and coach saw but didn’t want to say out loud. We

still had a chance, but it was a slim one. If anyone got hurt, though, there was no way Decker could

get back to the Super Bowl before he retired. He was a would-be GOAT who’d be spending the rest of his career on a mediocre team.

I mean, I barely liked Johnny as a person, but even I didn’t want to see that happen. So much

potential. Wasted time and opportunities. It was sad, really.

And I wasn’t just thinking about the fact that I couldn’t have sex with him.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart, but I have to head home for dinner. I’m late.”

“Oh, that’s fine, of course. I don’t want to take up any more of your time.”

“Would you like to join us? My wife just asked me to invite you.”

I wrinkled my brow at him. “Did she really?”

“No. But I promise if you do come, she’ll be nice to you. Well, I can’t promise that, since she still

hasn't forgiven you for that Eddie Murphy interview. But she's a very good cook and she won't be mean to you."

I put my broken pencil and notepad into my bag and stood up. "I appreciate the offer, but you should go be with your wife."

"You sure? You're just going to eat in your hotel room again, aren't you?"

"No, no. I have plans. Don't worry about me."

"Really?"

I couldn't lie to the man. "I have plans to order something new from the room-service menu tonight."

He looked like he was going to cry again.

"And I plan to take a nice, long, relaxing bath." He didn't have to know that I had recently started

using a tub tray and catching up on emails on my laptop while taking relaxing baths. I didn't want to

risk making him tear up again if I tried to explain how relaxing it was for me to attack my inbox while surrounded by bubbles.

He stared at me for a moment, blinked, and probably decided I was a lost cause. "Okay, honey.

Have a good night, then."

"Good night, Buddy. Yay for curling, right? We crushed that one."

He forced a smile. "Yeah. Crushed it."

On my way back to my office, I stopped by the ladies' room. I had my very own private bathroom

here, but I had noticed that most of the other women in the front office avoided making eye contact

with me. So, I started using the ladies' rooms in an attempt to look like one of the girls. I missed the

company of women. Being around so many men all the time was doing something weird to my hormones.

The room was empty when I walked in, but as I was about to leave the stall, I heard a group of

women enter. They were speaking my language. They were talking about FloQast, which was

accounting software. They were from the accounting department.

They were primping at the mirrors and went silent for a moment when they saw me approach the

sink. I smiled at them and said hi, even though they weren't looking at me.

"Hey," said the tall woman with the curly brown hair. I was pretty sure her name was Geena

because I remembered being introduced to her and thinking that I could remember her name by

thinking about how she looked sort of like Geena Davis in *Beetlejuice* but not really. "That's a great

blouse, Geena," I told her. If her name wasn't Geena, well, what was she going to do—fire me? I was in the mood to take a risk.

She looked genuinely surprised, and for a split second I was worried I got her name wrong. But

then I realized she was surprised I remembered her name. "Thank you, Ms. Strong. I was worried the

color was a little too bold for work." It was burgundy.

"Oh, not at all, it's very elegant—but not too elegant. Call me Hannah. Please." I turned on the

faucet and soaped up my hands. "Don't let me interrupt."

That was when the other two women introduced themselves to me. I dried my hands and then

shook theirs. That was my opportunity to show them I was one of them. I asked them how they liked

the latest update for Microsoft Excel because I had thoughts. They also had thoughts. It felt great to

talk to like-minded lady nerds. Finally, I felt like I was in my element again. Taking the Excel route.

That was how I scored social touchdowns.

They told me they were heading over to the dive bar that "we" always went to and asked if I

wanted to join them. They casually mentioned that "the guys" would probably be there since they

were back from Atlanta. I told them I had to text someone to let them know, but yeah—I would love to join them.

And then I sent Jen a text that was just a bunch of random emojis and typed, *Never mind xoxo*.

Maybe Decker would be there. He was one of the guys. Fine if he wasn't there. But if he was—

this would be the perfect opportunity for me to show him just how little I'd been thinking about him

all week. I could show him how totally fine I was about the fact that he put his mouth on my mouth,

semi-sexed with me afterward, and then did not check in with me from his away game. I would prove

to him that I was never going to kiss him again. And I would have so much fun doing that.

I let my hair down, fluffed it up, and applied lipstick. I visualized the bar we were going to and

envisioned myself walking in like Kelly McGillis in *Top Gun*. Maybe Decker and the team would

serenade me. Crazier things had happened. Not to me, but they happened in the world. Maybe not in

the world, but they happened in 80s movies.

I would show them just how fun and easygoing Hannah Strong could be. I would order a lobster

roll if they had it and beer. I could always leave early after having a bite to eat and go back to the

hotel to tackle my inbox later.



THIRTEEN

Decker

Parking a ways from the bar gave Bull some time to chew my ear about all the things wrong with

Hannah as we walked from the car.

"It goes beyond food," he complained. "Don't get me wrong. The food is a problem. A big

problem. It's kind of the main problem. I'm a big, powerful guy."

"Indeed. Bull-like, some would say," I added helpfully.

"Yes, my nickname is apropos. I require a great deal of fuel. I feel, as an autonomous individual, I

should be able to select the fuel that I put into my body. Every day. Even at work. *Especially* at work.

Since it is essential for the quality of my work that my body is properly fueled."

"Couldn't agree more, Bull."

"And she's charging for the vending machines now in the locker room."

"Jerry was very generous when he made them free," I had to point out.

"Yes, he was a great man," Bull said reverentially.

"Seems like most of the gripes are food-related."

"Not true," Mo piped up from behind me. As always, he moved like a ghost—I hadn't realized he

was there. "She changed the security features in the building. It's harder to get in and out."

“Yeah, and there was something weird with my game check,” Jones added. “It came from a different bank.”

“Well, I mean, she *is* a finance person. I guess she decided to make a change, and we can assume that it’s in the team’s best interest—financially speaking.”

“Are you defending her?” Mo asked me. He wasn’t accusing. Even if he was, his voice wouldn’t

have been raised. But that little arch to his eyebrow meant that he was surprised and he was digging.

Was I defending her?

“Hell no. I’m just trying to explain why she’s annoying in the particular way that she’s annoying.”

“It’s not all bad,” Dash said from behind me. I braced myself. His tone always warned of

something stupid on the back end. “She’s hot in that nerdy, buttoned-up kind of way. But I guess my

complaint would be that she doesn’t show enough skin.”

Yeah. Predictably stupid hotshot rookie comment.

I would never in a million years acknowledge that I agreed with him, but yeah, more of Hannah’s

skin would be great.

We reached the bar, and I held the door open, turning back to look at the group. “Hey. Let’s try and

keep the topics of this annoying subject professional because there are plenty of those to keep us busy.

But whatever the problems are, she owns the team now. So she’s going to be here running things

whether we like it or not.”

Most nodded. Dash just snickered with his fellow defensive teammates, and they walked past me

into the bar. Mo stayed behind.

“Why is he here?” Mo asked quietly, nodding toward Dash.

“You know the old saying. Keep your friends close...”

“And your jackasses closer?”

I laughed. “Yeah. Well. Like it or not, we’re going to need him. I’m hoping to take some of the

knuckle out of the head,” I said as I watched Dash hit on a waitress.
“Seems like a knuckle *to* the head would be more effective.”

We laughed as we slipped into the bar.

I stopped in my tracks.

She’s here.

I heard her laugh, even through the din of the bar. I scanned the room without even thinking and

spotted her with a group of girls. She noticed me, and we locked eyes for a brief moment. She

immediately looked back to her friend, carrying on her conversation as if all her attention weren’t

still on me.

I stopped staring at her and joined the guys at another table. We ordered drinks and shot the shit.

In between pulls of beer, I would glance over at her. She was wearing a simple black skirt and white

blouse. Came straight from her office, but she was wearing her hair down. It looked wilder than

usual. White blouse. Probably meant white bra. She seemed like the type to match. So that meant

white panties. She seemed like the type who’d wear full plain white cotton ones. But she also seemed

like the type who wouldn’t want panty lines in that tight skirt. That meant a white thong. Lacy? No,

simple. Small. Tight. Something I could pull off with my teeth—

“Johnny.”

I jerked and realized Mo was in my ear.

“Huh? What?” I sputtered.

He followed my gaze. “She’s here?”

“She’s eating a lobster roll,” I said, trying not to smile, still staring at her.

“Seems like a bold choice this late at night,” Mo said.

“Yeah. It is.” I’ll admit it. I was a little proud.

I called the waitress over and ordered a round of Sam Adams for Hannah and the girls she was

with.

“What’s going on with you?” Mo’s eyes narrowed.

“Can’t have a lobster roll without beer,” I explained.

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“What?” I spread my arms wide in the seat. I was the picture of nonchalant, problem-free relaxation.

“Don’t bullshit me, man.” Mo shook his head. “I know you.”

“I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Mo looked over at Hannah, then back to me. “You like her.” Not a question. He was sure of it.

I leaned forward. “Look—she’s hot. I’m a man. It’s not rocket science.”

Mo shook his head slowly. “Just be careful, Johnny.”

“Hey, you know I’m not like that anymore. I’m not going to hit that. Way too complicated.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” he said in his quiet Mo way, barely loud enough for me to hear.

It was my turn to narrow my eyes. “What are you talking about? You think I *like* her like her?”

Mo didn’t say anything, just shrugged his shoulders and looked smug in a way that would have

made him really punchable if I didn’t love him so much.

“Get out of here. I don’t even like her as a human being.”

I couldn’t tell if Mo was about to call bullshit, but we were interrupted by the waitress, who

brought us a collection of some of the girliest drinks I’d ever seen. Hot pinks and ice blues with

enough fruit to fit on the Chiquita banana lady’s head.

“What the hell?” Dash said, looking at the drinks.

“Ms. Strong is here?” Jones asked, looking in her direction.

I looked her way and found that she was already looking in ours. She raised her beer mug and

gave a girly little wave. Annoyingly cute. But cute. Very cute.

I smiled in appreciation.

Maybe she was starting to get it.

I dropped the smile before anyone else could see it.

“We don’t actually have to drink these?” Jones groaned, picking up a piece of fruit that was big

enough to be sold on a stand by the side of the road.

“No, you do not,” I told him.

Hannah made her way over.

“Hello, gentlemen,” she said in a singsong voice when she reached us.

We all nodded and said hello. It was the most confident I’d ever seen her in front of the guys.

Maybe it was the fact that it was after hours, or maybe it was the liquid courage coursing through that

beautiful body, or maybe it was the fact that all these big men were treating the girlie drinks she sent

us like they were hand grenades—but the energy was completely different.

I liked it.

A lot.

“Ms. Strong.” I nodded my head slightly.

“Well, guys. Aren’t you going to drink up?”

We all looked at the adult fruit juices.

No. The answer was clearly *no*.

She looked serious for a moment before busting out into that bright laugh and clapping her hands

together. “I’m just messing with you guys.”

Most of the guys laughed and relaxed. I was impressed.

Not bad, Hannah.

“I was just destroying your balls,” she added gleefully.

She was met with a chorus of: “Whoa, what the hell?”

“That seems aggressive.”

“Unacceptable!”

The wave of protest hit Hannah pretty hard. She blinked, and I could see her crumpling back into

her nervous shell.

I physically got up between her and my teammates. I wasn’t sure why.

“I think you meant *busting*

our balls, Ms. Strong.”

“Busting? Destroying? What’s the difference?” she asked, frowning.

“Several future generations,” Bull replied with a pained far-off stare. I knew there was a good

chance he was protecting his boys with his hand under the table.

“Trust us, there’s a big difference. And secondly, your behavior is not appropriate. You’re not

following the proper rules that were put in place for a very specific reason.” My tone was deadly serious.

I watched her collect herself, smooth her tight skirt, and straighten her blouse to become

Professional Hannah. “I apologize, Mr. Decker. You’re right. It’s inappropriate for me to—”

“If you want someone to drink something disgusting, you have to win a bet first.” I grinned.

Hannah looked confused, then angry. “Hey. I’ll have you know those drinks are delicious.”

“For *your* people,” I said.

“My people,” she scoffed. But she was fighting a smile.

That made me fight one of my own. “Come on,” I said as I started to move past her.

“Where are we going?” she asked, even though she immediately turned to follow me.

“You’re going to play me in darts. If you win, we all have to drink that stuff.”

“Oh man, I really don’t want to—” Jones started, but Mo held up his hand and shook his head as if

to say, *Don’t even worry about it.*

Dash called out, “If you’re as good at darts as you are beautiful and intelligent, we’re in big

trouble.” He held up his girlie drink with a grin that probably worked a lot more often than it should.

Lame. That was a lame line he threw out there too. So lame.

“Why, thank you, Mr. Taylor,” Hannah said with a smile that I *knew* worked and that I absolutely

did not want working on Dash fucking Taylor.

“Come on,” I said, gently taking Hannah by the elbow and leading her over to the dart board. I

glared at Dash as I walked by, and he somehow made his smug face look even smugger.

I heard Mo tell the waitress behind us, “Miss, you can take these back. We won’t be drinking them.”

I smiled. Ms. Strong had no idea what was coming. I collected the darts from the board and handed her half of them.

“All right. We’re going to play 501. The way it works—”

She cut me off. “Not 301? Worried you aren’t going to be able to score fast by landing on a double ring?” Her hands were on her hips. It was so damn sexy when she did that.

I chewed my grin as I looked at her. This was going to be even better if she actually knew what

she was doing. “Ladies first.” I flourished a hand toward the board.

She stepped up to the line on the floor and screwed up her face in the cutest damn way as she held

up a dart. She rocked the first dart back and forth and then let it fly. It hit the single 12. The next one

was a single 20. The last one hit the 9.

“So what is that?” I asked, stepping up to throw.

“I’m at 460. You’re still at 501.”

I looked at the smug look on her face. It was still cute. Everything her face did was cute. But I

could see she thought this would be a night where I learned some lesson about not judging someone’s

skill at a game because of gender or something or blah blah blah. I wasn’t some Neanderthal dude

thinking a woman couldn’t beat him at darts. It was possible. Anything was possible. Except Hannah

beating me tonight. I absolutely knew without a doubt that I was going to crush her. I wasn’t

underestimating her. She was underestimating me.

I fired off three darts in quick succession. All three hit the bullseye. Two 50s and a 100.

“How many is that?” I asked casually.

Her jaw had dropped. She cleared her throat and managed to articulate, "You're at 301."

"You got your wish. *I'm* playing 301 at least." I gave her a grin.

She didn't return it.

After that I didn't toy with her. When I threw, I played to win, and I quickly put her out of her

misery. She mostly hit the board, but I won with her still having 392 points to go.

"Well, this sucks." She groaned.

"Not much fun getting your balls pounded, is it?"

She rolled her eyes at me.

"What did you expect? I literally throw and play a game for a living. In fact, you pay me a ton of money to do that."

"You really don't have to remind me."

She turned to leave, but I hooked my thumb and middle finger around her slender wrist and she wasn't going anywhere.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I get it. You're good at games. You're good at throwing. Good night." She tried to yank her arm

away in a huff. I held her back with my grip. If she really wanted to leave, she could have, but she bounced back toward me.

And when I say *bounced*, I mean she bounced in a very enticing way.

"First of all. If I had lost, we would have had to drink those drinks."

"So?"

"So. *You* lost. And you foolishly did not declare the terms before we started the game."

"And what does that mean?" Her expression was still hard but curious.

"It means that I now own you. And can do with you as I please."

"That seems unfair and illegal." Her words were defiant, but her tone betrayed that she was intrigued.

"Too bad," I said, my face inches from hers.

"What are you planning to do with me?" She caught her breath. She was trying to hold everything

completely still, but I could feel her trembling.

The air between us felt dangerous. We had just enough alcohol in us to make some bad decisions.

Awesomely bad decisions. The kind we'd definitely love in the night but regret in the daylight.

"I have some ideas..." I paused. A million filthy ideas flashed through my mind. Okay, a million

was a slight exaggeration. Most of them involved her bent over. But it was a lot. Thankfully, I also

had a lot of willpower because indulging any of those fantasies would have been a mistake. "I will

make you reinstate Taco Tuesdays," I said.

She pulled back slightly, looking equal parts disappointed and relieved. "Is that all?"

"Pretty much any food-related change you made, I'm going to insist you put them back."

Her eyelashes fluttered, and then she shrugged and said, "Okay. Fine. You win. Good night." She

tried to leave again, and I gently guided her back to me.

"Wait. One more shot."

"You don't actually think I can beat you?"

I scoffed at that. "No. I'm way out of your league. We aren't even in the same universe."

"Yeah, why would I want to leave? Your kind and gracious manner is addictive." Her words were

dripping with sarcasm as she made a move to leave yet again.

This time I let her go and went to collect the darts. "But you can do a lot better. You're holding

yourself back," I offered.

Hannah stopped in her tracks. "What do you mean?"

"You weren't aiming at the bullseye, were you?"

She studied me for a moment before answering. "No. How could you tell?"

I shrugged. "I just could. The way you play this game might work against someone who's not very

good—let the other guy beat himself. But after I fired off that first round, your circumstances

changed.” I made my way over to the board. “You should have upped your game and changed the way you played.”

She stood at the throwing line, still unsure where I was going with this.

“Well, how do I do that? It may not have seemed like it, but I was trying to win.” She really

wanted to know the answer, and there was an adorable little pout on that mouth that really needed kissing.

I shook my head. “You didn’t even know what you were playing for. You can’t come out on top if

you don’t aim high enough, and you aren’t going to try hard enough to hit that mark unless the stakes are high enough.”

Her head was tilted, her brow wrinkled. She still wasn’t getting it.

“Go ahead, Strong. Line up your shot.”

She brought the dart up to her line of sight and squinted one eye.

“Aim for the bullseye this time.”

I gave her a moment.

“So what if I miss it? What happens then?” she asked.

I sauntered over to the board and wrapped my arms around it, leaving the bullseye clear but much of the rest was covered.

“You’re not going to miss it.” I assured her.



Hannah

He was so sure of himself. Usually that cocky grin and tone of voice drove me nuts, but coupled with

his apparent confidence in my dart-throwing abilities, it was incredibly heartening. Annoyingly so.

Not nearly as annoying as how turned on I was by his incredible aim. Coach Buddy wasn't

kidding. When it just came down to skill, this guy had what it took to...get what he wanted.

But I did too.

"I might hit you."

"No, you won't. I believe in you."

"Maybe I *want* to hit you."

"No. You don't. Don't overthink it. Just aim and throw."

Somehow, even when Decker was coaching me and trying to encourage me, he was infuriating.

But it did feel good to hear those words *I believe in you*. It also felt like he had seen me naked when I

realized he could tell I wasn't aiming for the bullseye. But that kind of felt good too, thanks to my new

friend Sam Adams.

I fought all of my instincts to the contrary and did what he told me to do. I didn't overthink it. I

took a deep breath and held it. And then I aimed at the bullseye. And I threw.

I didn't hit him.

I also didn't hit the double bullseye.

But I hit the single bull.

I hit it good.

Johnny did a really good job of seeming totally at ease before I threw that dart, but as soon as I

didn't hit him I caught that tiny sigh of relief. It was a badass move anyway. He dropped his arms

from the board, and I could tell he was as thrilled as I was—and I was really thrilled. "Ya see?

Better."

He sauntered over and held his big, strong hand up for a high five.

I slapped that hand. All I wanted to do was jump up and throw my arms around him. It seemed

like he had to refrain from throwing his arms around me too.

It really seemed that way.

But we were both professionals. Tipsy professionals—but we were surrounded by his teammates

and the accounting department and locals. So we both took a step away from each other. That

somehow just added to the tension.

“I knew you could do it.”

I crossed my arms in front of my chest. I couldn’t help it if that made my boobs look even more

prominent in that blouse, and I certainly couldn’t help noticing that Decker noticed. “It almost sounds

as if you’re taking credit for my amazing aim and throwing ability.”

“Almost? Let me try that again—I knew you could do it,” he said, with just a smidge more

arrogance.

I was discombobulated. But I smoothed down the front of my skirt and tried to recombobulate

myself. His gaze followed my hands.

That did not help with the recombobulation.

I cleared my throat. “Well, I guess you should let your teammates know they don’t have to drink

the girly drinks.”

He didn’t even glance over my shoulder at them. “Oh, they already know. Mo had the waitress

take the drinks back as soon as we left the table.”

“What?!” I turned to look. Indeed, the guys were all happily guzzling beers and laughing with each

other. Not a piece of fruit in sight. When I turned back to face Decker, I could tell he’d been checking

out my butt. I was so glad I had worn a thong that day—not that anyone besides me was going to see it

that night. But by having a great butt and not having panty lines, it was almost as if I had scored more

points without even trying. “So...are we playing 301 again, or what?”

“No. We both proved that you can hit a target if you know what you’re aiming for.”

That line was so heavy with meaning, I almost felt the ground shake when it fell from his lips.

“So what do I win?”

“Your dignity and my respect—regarding this particular accomplishment only.”

“Well, I would like to renegotiate the terms.”

“Absolutely not. We get our good food back. That was the deal.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’ll get your menu back, but Chef Pierre Laurent and the healthy options will remain.”

“Fine.”

“But I want one more thing.”

“I know you do, Strong.” He was grinning and his nostrils were flaring. “I told you.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” My cheeks felt flushed. Everything felt flushed. That *wasn’t*

what I was talking about, but it was all I could think about—wanting *him*.

Except that I didn’t want him.

Or rather, I didn’t *want* to want him.

I shook my head vehemently. “I want you to teach me football.”

He scoffed. “What?”

“I mean, obviously you can’t teach me everything about it, but I want to learn. I’m trying.” I

sounded a little whinier than I’d meant to, and I was probably pouting, but it seemed to have an effect on him.

“What do you want to learn exactly?”

“Just the basics. I don’t want to sound like an idiot when I talk to the press. I don’t want to feel

like the only person in the franchise who doesn’t know what you guys are doing on the field.” I

sighed, staring down at the floor. Not a sad Coach Buddy sigh, but a sigh of admission. “I’m the

youngest owner in the history of the NFL, and everyone expects me to fail. I can't fail at this and I don't want to sell the team."

I glanced up at him. He was on the verge of accepting my request, but I'd have to admit one more thing. "I left my job in New York this week."

He raised his eyebrows. "You did? I didn't know that. So...you're staying." It was more of a

statement than a question. Something he was coming to terms with.

"For now, yes. I want to do what's right for the team, and I can't do that unless I at least know the difference between a shotgun and a rifle formation."

"Pistol."

"What?"

"There is no rifle formation. You need to learn the difference between a shotgun and a pistol

formation. And there's not much difference. The pistol is run from a shotgun snap."

I waved my hand at him and turned to walk away. "Okay, you know what—"

He took hold of my wrist again. I didn't even know how it was possible to have a tiny orgasm just

from feeling him grip my wrist in public—in a totally nonsexual way. But it did. "You were in the

ballpark," he said. "Close enough. I'm impressed that you even know what a shotgun formation is."

"I wasn't trying to impress you."

That was true. On some level, I was still trying to impress my dad. But I couldn't think about that.

"Whatever. I will help you." He let go of me.

"Thank you."

"When I have time."

I rolled my eyes. "Great. Thanks." I walked back over to the table where Geena and the other

ladies were. I could tell they were all trying really hard not to ask me about Decker, and I appreciated

it very much. I picked up my purse and coat from the chair, paid the bill for the table, and said good night to them.

I was about to head out when I remembered I should say goodbye to the guys too. I turned to go back and ran right into Johnny's chest. "Whoa." I looked up at him.

"I know. I'm tall, aren't I?" There was that infuriating smirk again. "I smell good too."

"A lot of people are tall, and a lot of people smell good. You really need to get over yourself."

"You really need to keep telling yourself that, don't you?"

I took a step to the side so I could wave broadly at whoever was looking at me. I got a raised

glass from Maurice and Jones, a nod from the Bull.

I wasn't usually the type to play games with men, but when I caught Dash Taylor winking at me, I

gave him another smile and a coy little wave. He was a wall of muscle with a cute dimpled face on

top, and I could tell there was a boy who wanted to prove himself under all that cocky attitude. I

could also tell it drove Decker nuts when he flirted with me.

Decker's jaw was clenched when I looked back at him. "Good night." I gave him that same smile

and coy little wave.

"I'm walking you to your car."

Bad idea. Being alone with Decker right now is a very bad idea.

"Fine." I lowered my voice. "But I'm not kissing you."

"We'll see."

The cool night air felt good on my warm face. The sidewalk was empty as he walked alongside

me in the direction of my car. I wanted to keep bantering with him, but he didn't say a word. Probably

thought it would make me uncomfortable. Probably thought that if I was uncomfortable, I'd be even

more turned on.

Well.

He was wrong.

I mean, I was turned on, but I wasn't uncomfortable.

I'd had a good night.

Finally.

For the second time since I'd come to Boston—and the first good night was with Decker too.

I was confident. I was in control. I was in top form. Kelly McGillis from *Top Gun* could eat my

dust. I clicked the key fob, but the car doors didn't unlock. I clicked the button again. And again.

"That's not your car," Decker told me. As if he knew this all along.

"It looks exactly like my rental."

"And yet it's not. You know what—you aren't okay to drive. I'm calling you a cab."

"I can call one myself."

"Wait, there's one right there."

I turned to look, and there was indeed a cab heading down the street.

He curled his index fingers into his mouth and whistled, the way they did in movies. That should

not have been hot, but it was. He held his hand up, and the cab pulled over.

Everything seemed to come easy for him. Women did. Of this I was certain.

But I wasn't going to kiss him.

I found myself leaning back against the cab door, looking up at Decker while he put his hands on

either side of me against the roof of the car. He was staring at my lips. I was staring at his.

"I'll text you the name and address of this bar so you can find your car in the morning," he said.

His voice was soft and low, as if he was telling me he was coming back to my hotel with me. And if

that was what he was saying, I didn't seem to want to tell him no.

"Okay."

"Okay." He dipped down the slightest bit, and I rose to my tiptoes to meet him.

Neither of us seemed to care that someone could have seen us, but the street was quiet and the

voice of Mr. Samuel Adams in my head was like, *Dude. You bettah kiss that asshole in honor of*

Oktoberfest right now, I swear to gawd.

So I did. Not hard and fast. Or soft and slow. I kissed him fast and soft.

I held his gaze as I pressed my lips to his. I licked him, with the tip of my tongue, from his stubbly

chin up to his bottom lip, and then I tugged at his lower lip with my teeth. Ever so gently. Not teasing

so much as hinting.

Well, maybe I was teasing him just a little.

He stayed perfectly still. His hands were still resting on the top of the car, but I felt the muscles in

his arms tensing. His lips were warm and receptive, but he was letting me take the lead. Waiting to

see where I was going with this.

But I wasn't going any further with it.

Not here.

Not tonight.

I lowered my heels and pulled back from him.

He blinked and made a soft guttural sound.

I grinned at him, and he frowned at me—for a change.

But then he nodded, barely perceptible, but he nodded in understanding.

He opened the back door of the cab and held it open for me, grinning now. "Good night, Ms.

Strong."

"Good night, Jonathan."

He shut the door as I buckled my seat belt, and I could read his lips through the window. "Told

you you'd kiss me again," he said.

I narrowed my eyes. *You wanted to kiss me too*, I mouthed back.

He turned and walked away, making some subtle adjustments to his pants, but he was nodding.



FIFTEEN

Decker

I rubbed my eyes. When I was young, I didn't study enough film. Now that I was old, my eyes didn't

hold up anymore. I was alone in the film room, all the lights were off, so it was only lit by the glow

from the screen. I rewound and played my interception against the Miami Sun last year.

I would have probably been here late regardless, but it didn't help that Hannah kept popping up in

my mind so I had to keep rewatching things. I thought about all the things we'd said. All the things we

could be. Another little kiss was enough to make me obsessed with taking that body out for a test

drive. My entire week in every shower that wasn't a communal one involved me pumping my fist

over my rock-hard dick and thinking about her bent over or on her knees or on her back or just about

any position I could think of after another go at her mouth.

Aaaaaaand I missed the play again.

On top of that, my dick was starting to stir.

As if on cue, I got a text.

It was her.

Dammit.

HANNAH: Where are you? I need your help with a football thingy.

If she'd just said she needed my help, I would have had to respond. Since she added "football thingy,"

I could safely ignore it.

I rewound the play. AGAIN.

I leaned forward, watching the safety open up and—

Another text.

HANNAH: You better not be ignoring me. Your car is in the lot.

And I missed the play again.

I guess I could see her.

So I could give her that banging she needed.

Dammit. Now I was straight-up hard.

"There you are!" I heard behind me. I turned, and there she was, framed by the light of the hallway

and carrying what looked like four or five textbooks and files. I was thankful for the little desk

covering my lap.

"Hi."

"What are you doing?" she asked, looking from me to the screen.

"Watching film."

"Okay, perfect. This'll work too." She completely ignored the *this is absolutely not going to*

work expression on my face and collapsed into a desk behind me with her reams of paper.

I went back to studying the play. Of course, if she was distracting in my imagination, having her in

the flesh behind me—all fragrant and tapping her pen—was even worse.

When the play was done, I rewound it again. I thought I saw something.

"Is this game from this year?" she asked.

"No," I answered without turning around.

"Why are you watching a game from last year?"

I sighed and rubbed my eyes again. "We're playing them next week. I want to squeeze any

advantage I can."

“Ah,” she said as if finally understanding all the mysteries of the universe.

I went back to watching and played my interception again.

“Why did you throw it to the other team?”

This time I turned and glared at her.

She had the decency to look ashamed and pretended to lock her mouth and throw away the key.

If you need something to fill your mouth with, young lady...

I shook that thought out of my head and went back to watching.

“That guy on the other side was open,” she said.

“I know that,” I gritted out.

“Well, why didn’t you throw it to him?”

I turned around. “Why are you here?”

“I’m here because you wouldn’t meet with me.”

“I was clearly busy.” I pointed at the screen.

“Watching the same play over and over again?”

“Yes. This is part of the job. It’s how we learn from our mistakes. You should try it sometime.

Why are you here? Why were you looking for me?”

“I need your help with all these football plays.” She held up her books. I could have sworn one of

them was *Football for Dummies*. Which was hilarious. “I’m a finance person. I like details.”

“You would probably catch a lot more details if you showed up for our away games like every owner is supposed to.”

She frowned, then raised her chin defiantly. “I’ve been busy working here.”

“And?” That wasn’t the only reason she didn’t want to travel with the team, and I knew it.

“And what?”

“And what is the other reason you don’t want to travel with me?”

She scoffed. “It’s not all about you, Decker.”

“If you say so.”

She waved her hand dismissively, rolling her eyes at me. “Don’t change the subject. I’m still

confused, and I want to learn. You have posts, post route, dig route, fly route..." She placed her hand

over her heart. "*These* are your spreadsheets." She said it the same way some romantic girls say

they'd *found their person*.

We stared at each other for a moment. She was annoying. But she was also still trying.

"So what's the problem?"

She threw her hands up in the air, exasperated. "I'm still not getting it! Help *me* help *you*."

I was having trouble keeping a straight face. She was adorable when she was all worked up about

things and quoting *Jerry Maguire*.

"I won football lessons from you in that game of darts, remember?!"

"Oh, I remember that game of darts. Do *you* remember it?"

"Okay, so I didn't win it, but I negotiated this."

I gave her a look.

"Okay, I guilted you into tutoring me."

"That's more like it."

"Come on, man." She was feeling genuinely beaten down if she was calling me *man*. "I can't even

tell the difference between a post and go route." She had her hands on her hips, and she was breathing

heavily.

I didn't hate it.

"This was a go route." I pointed at the screen.

She studied it. "So why wasn't the ball thrown past the defense?"

Good girl.

"You see that guy?" I pointed to the player who was catching my interception.

She nodded.

"His name is Xavier Ross. Probably the best safety in the league. Leading up to that game, when I

studied film, I noticed that if you looked him off, he'd open his hips to the right. That meant the left

side of the field was open to me. He'd have to spin all the way around to try to get over to the left

side of the field. But here's the thing..."

I moved toward her.

"He knew that I knew that. He baited me by opening his hips right when I looked him off, and

when I released it left, he turned all the way around and caught the ball. It was amazing. It's also

something I'm going to make sure doesn't happen again in the next game."

She nodded. Quiet. Still. She was getting it.

"But why didn't you throw it to the guy who was open running the... the...?" she asked as she

searched her papers frantically.

"The dig route," I finished for her.

She slammed her books back down. "Why didn't you throw it to him? He was open."

My shoulders sagged a little. "You have no idea how fast it happens out there. I have to read the

defense before they get there. I have to throw before the receiver is actually open. You're Monday-morning quarterbacking."

"Monday morning?"

"Yeah, on Sunday we have to play. But on Monday, when there are replays and slow motion,

everyone sitting in a comfortable recliner suddenly becomes the greatest QB in the world and knows exactly how the play should have gone."

"I see," she said.

I smirked.

"Aren't there games on Monday?" she asked, crinkling her nose.

I furrowed my brow. "Yeah."

She crossed her arms and lifted an eyebrow. "So shouldn't it be called Tuesday morning quarterbacking?"

"Okay, that's it." I turned off the screen. "You got a change of clothes? Running shoes?"

"Uh. Yes?"

"Good. Let's go," I said, moving past her.

She stood up. “Where are we going?”
“Class is over. It’s time for a field trip.”



SIXTEEN

Hannah

Here’s the thing about American football—it’s a contact sport.

If I had remembered that, I never would have agreed to change into my jogging pants and

sweatshirt and followed Decker out onto the field. But he ordered me to meet him there in ten

minutes. And I wanted so badly to learn something—anything. And then when I got out there and saw

how surreal and beautiful it was with the lights on at night, I was just awestruck.

When he handed me the football and told me to bend over, I just stood there staring at him. He

then put his hands on my shoulders, turned me around, and nudged my legs farther apart with his foot.

He pushed down on my upper back while pressing his knee into the back of my knee, causing it to

bend, and said, “Squat and bend forward. You’ve seen the center hike the ball a million times, right?”

This is the QB center exchange. You’re gonna snap the ball to me. Under center snap. Come on.”

I did. I squatted down, just as I’d seen centers do a million times, holding the ball on the ground

between my legs. Decker was right there behind me. His hands were placed firmly beneath my butt.

He was really putting pressure on there.

“You feel where my hands are?”

Yes. Yessssss. Oh my God, yes.

“Yes.”

“Okay, so you know where my hands are. That’s where you’re gonna snap the ball to. Straight up into my hands. Right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re gonna snap it back to me and push off from the pressure of my hand. In a real game it

would be your job to protect me from the other team as soon as you hand the ball off, but right now

you’re gonna run straight ahead.”

“Okay. But I still don’t understand why the guys who protect you are called the offense. They’re

defending you. They should be called the defensive team.”

He exhaled and said nothing. Too frustrated even to argue with me.

“Fine. I will hand it off to you and then run. How far?”

“Just take ten steps and then turn back so I can throw it to you.”

“Only ten?”

I could tell he was rolling his eyes back there. “You can take twenty steps. You ready?”

I mean, I did yoga, so I could hold a pose for a pretty long time. But the blood was rushing to my

head and this just felt ridiculous. “Okay but seriously—who came up with this idea? I mean how on

earth is *this* the most logical way to get a ball to someone?”

He ignored my question and called out, “Hut!”

I was still adjusting the ball in my hand.

Once again, he said, “Hut!”

“I’m not ready yet!”

“You literally just have to hold the ball up through your legs and into my hands right here.” I felt

those hands even more. “Don’t overthink it, Strong. Aim and throw. But don’t throw it, just snap it

back.”

“Okay, okay, I’m ready.”

“Hut!”

I snapped it back, and then I checked to make sure he had the ball. He did. “Yay!”

“Go! Go! Go!” he yelled.

“All right, all right!” I ran twenty paces and then turned to face him.

He threw the ball right at me.

I was expecting it to come at me in slow motion.

But it didn’t.

That ball came at me fast and hard.

But I caught it.

I dropped it.

But I caught it with my upper arms and felt it against my boob for a second first. I squealed. “I

caught it! I caught it—did you see?!”

He was grinning. “Sure. Good job.”

“Now what?”

“Throw it back to me.”

I picked the ball up and threw it back to him.

Well, I threw the ball in his general direction, and then he ran to where I’d thrown it to and he

caught it.

It was thrilling.

“Now what?!”

“Now we do it again.”

“But I did it right the first time.”

“It’s called a drill. We do it again.”

He just wanted to touch my butt again, and I knew it. “I think I got it. Teach me something else.”

“Okay, hotshot. Catch.” He threw the ball to me again.

This time I caught it and held on to it. I squealed and jumped up and down. I was so happy, I

didn’t even realize he was coming at me. He came at me so fast.

“This is called a tackle,” he said as he wrapped his arms around my waist and we fell to the ground together.

“The fuck?!” I let go of the ball.

Surprisingly, getting tackled didn’t hurt. I didn’t get the wind knocked out of me. Decker somehow

twisted around so he cushioned my fall.

Except I found myself lying on top of him.

Right flat on top of him.

Both of us breathing heavily.

No protective gear between us.

Not even a sports bra.

Just a layer or two of clothing.

I had no alcohol in my system, but I was high on adrenaline and hormones and all that damn

Decker under me and around me and looking up at me.

I dipped down and kissed him on the mouth.

I knew what I wanted, so I did it.

I aimed and threw my lips down on his.

And he kissed me back. He received my mouth and my tongue. His hands slid from my waist to

my butt, and he gave it a squeeze before flipping me over and caressing my hip. It felt so good.

It felt way too good.

I pulled away and managed to stand up.

That was when I noticed it had started to rain.

“So what do you call *that* play?” I asked, straightening myself up.

He stood up and adjusted himself. I caught a glimpse of that good hard thing I had felt against my

thigh just now. *Jesus*. Sweatpants.

“I call that *you* kissing me again,” he gritted out.

I picked up the ball and ran toward the nearest goal post.

This field was huge. *My* stadium was huge. But it felt so good to be running and catching and

hiking and kissing in the cool night air that I felt big enough to play in it. The raindrops on my face just

felt amazing.

I had the ball, and I ran with it.

I finally understood why they did this.

But then Decker tackled me again.

This time he didn't break my fall.

We both dropped to the ground, side by side. I let out an *oof!* But again, it didn't hurt.

"You okay?" His hand was resting on my waist awfully gently for someone who'd just tackled me.

"Yes." I was still holding the ball. "Hey, I still have the ball!" I sat up.

"Yup. You're at the ten-yard line." He stood and held out his hands to help me up.

I didn't want to let go of the ball, so I managed to get up all by myself. "This is the end zone, right?"

"Yes. This is it."

I was giddy. My butt was cold and my clothes were damp, but I was having fun. "Can I get a touchdown?!"

"Go for it."

I went for it.

I ran.

I didn't sense him behind me, so I just kept running.

I ran past the end line and slammed that football into the ground. "Yeaaaahhhh!" I was so out of

breath when I turned back and saw Decker just standing there at the ten-yard line where I'd left him.

Hands on his hips, he was pacing back and forth. But he was smiling.

"Did you see?! Did you see?! I touched down!"

He laughed at that. "Well done." He didn't yell it out. Just said it. "You won the game."

"Because you let me."

He shrugged. "Feels good though, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. It really does."

He nodded. "You do realize it's raining, right?"

"Right. We can go back inside." I picked up the ball and hugged it to my chest. My heart was

beating so fast, but I wasn't nervous.

We didn't talk at all as we walked back to the building. Maybe Decker was just letting me feel the

rush. And it *was* a rush. I got it. I got why he liked it so much.

I didn't know if I would have felt that kind of rush if I'd been playing with anyone other than him,
but I understood how he felt.

I mean, he probably felt really frustrated then because of the whole situation-in-his-sweatpants
thing that I was trying not to think about.

But I finally understood why people truly enjoyed playing the game.

It wasn't until we got back inside that I realized how cold and wet I was.

"You need to take a hot shower," he said matter-of-factly when we were outside the locker room.

"Is there one for ladies?"

"I have no idea." He opened the door to the locker room and looked around. "No one's here."

I poked my head in. God, the locker room was huge. There was a lounge area with armchairs in

the center, and the entrance to the showers was off to the side. "Are you sure I'm allowed?" As soon

as I said it I knew he would laugh at me.

"You do *own* the building, Ms. Strong."

"You know what I mean."

"Just hurry up before the chill sets in."

"Well, where are *you* going?"

"I'll wait out here to make sure no one goes in there. Hurry."

"Okay, but what about *you*?"

"I'll dry myself off first."

"Don't you dare catch a cold, Decker."

"Will you get in there?"

"Okay, okay... You better not look!"

"Trust me, I don't plan on letting you torture me any more than you already have tonight."

I didn't even know what to say to that. I wasn't trying to torture him. He was Johnny Decker. A

legend among women. I was but a humble team owner who'd kissed him thrice.

I hustled into the shower area—which was very clean, thank goodness, and dimly lit.

Except that it was just one big communal shower room. No stalls.
“Um...” My nervous voice
echoed around the tiled walls.

“Just use one of the showers toward the back,” he called out. “No one will see you!”

“They better not!”

“Will you relax?” He sounded so frustrated with me. “I’ll put a bar through the door handles so no one can come in.”

“That sounds like a fire hazard!”

I heard a thumping sound. He probably punched a locker door.

“Never mind!” I called out. “Do that!”

“I did!”

“Good!”

I pulled off my running shoes and socks, peeled off my sweatpants and sweatshirt, and turned on

one of the showers at the back of the room. I was still a bit high on the rush of that touchdown but not

quite high enough to shower completely naked in a communal shower stall in my NFL stadium with

Decker the Panty Wrecker right outside of it.

So I left my tank top and panties on.

It was unfortunate, perhaps, that I had chosen to wear the white ones that day.

But no one would see.

I faced the wall and stepped under the shower head. The spray of hot water felt great, and— *oh*

God—the water pressure was amazing. I let out an audible sigh. He was right. I got warm just in time.

My body relaxed under the water and heat. I was so relaxed I didn’t think twice about using the

liquid soap that was in the dispenser, even though I had no idea what kind it was. I used it in my hair

and all over my body. I felt awake and clean and good.

And then I got that same feeling I had the first time I came to Minuteman Stadium. The ghosts of so

much testosterone. So many fit men had showered here over the years.
So much of a fit man was on
the other side of that wall from me.

I turned off the faucet and looked around for a towel.

A hand towel, even.

There was nothing in here except a little steam and my wet shoes and clothes on the floor.

Well, shit.

I didn't want to torture Johnny. But I needed a towel. And it wasn't like I was naked. I looked

down at the soaking-wet white tank top and bikini briefs that were like a second skin...like see-

through skin.

"Um. Johnny?"

A large rolled-up bath towel flew around the corner and landed about two feet away from me.

He'd anticipated my need and managed to hit a dry area of the tiled floor.

Without seeing me.

"Thank you!"

"No problem."

I toweled myself off.

Well, there was one more problem.

I didn't have any dry clothes to change into.

"Um...Johnny?"

A tattooed arm appeared from around the corner, about fifteen feet away from me, and placed

matching folded-up sweats on the floor of the shower room by the entrance.

"Thank you."

"Welcome," he called out. Again, like it was no big deal. He had anticipated everything. Like a

GOAT.

Still wearing the wet tank and panties, I wrapped the towel around myself, picked up my wet

clothes and shoes, and carried them over to the entrance of the shower room. I could change here, and

the next time Decker saw me, I'd be wearing men's sweats.

Or...

Maybe I was overthinking it...



SEVENTEEN

Hannah

Maybe it wouldn't hurt for us to make out a little—we were both adults who were capable of

maintaining solid boundaries between our work and personal lives.

And I mean, he was my star

quarterback. He was clearly very tense. If there was something I could do to improve his overall

mental and physical well-being, wasn't it my responsibility to do that?

And if it would make me feel

good at the same time, well, didn't I owe it to *myself* too?

I placed my shoes and wet clothes on the floor, combed my fingers through my damp hair, and

stepped around the corner.

Decker was sitting in a leather armchair—legs spread apart, bare feet firmly planted on the floor.

Elbows on his knees, head in his hands. He certainly looked like a man who had recently survived a

little torture. He was wearing a dry pair of gray sweatpants, and he was shirtless.

He raised his head slowly, probably expecting to see me in his sweats. But the expression on his

face when he saw me standing there, ten feet away from him, wrapped in a towel, was priceless.

When I removed the towel and let it drop to the floor and he saw me in the wet white tank top and

panties, his face was...well, I didn't know the word for *more than priceless*, but it was that.

His jaw tightened and he stayed exactly where he was as I slowly approached him.

"Fucking hell, Hannah. What're you doing?"

"Aiming and throwing myself at you."

He sat up straight, and I climbed onto his lap, straddling him. I was done with thinking. He was so

fucking hot, it was an assault on my dignity. I had to fight back with my mouth and hands and wet

underwear. And my tongue.

I licked his stubbly face from his chin to his lips, and then my mouth touched down on his. He

grunted, but as always, it was as if he was just waiting for me to kiss him. He cupped the back of my

neck with one hand and squeezed one ass cheek with the other.

I already felt like I was losing control. I wanted to rub my cheeks around on his hairy pecs like a

cat. I wanted my pheromones all over him.

Mine.

What is wrong with me?

The sex hormones I used to produce in response to the men I'd dated could have filled a shoebox.

Right now they could have filled the entire stadium. And I really, really wanted Decker to fill me up

with his...anything. With his everything.

I realized I'd been moaning and frantically stroking his hairy chest like a blind woman trying to

identify her guide dog. I wanted to match his infuriatingly calm demeanor—women probably

straddled him all the time, for God's sake. Or maybe what I really wanted was to stimulate him more.

I wanted to *be* the fire hazard.

My hand slid down his chest, his abs to the very intimidating rock-hard bulge between his legs.

Holy shit. Decker had a GOAT dick. Greatest of all time. I mean, if it wasn't one of the greatest of all

time, then I would not be able to handle one that was.

And I wanted to handle his.

My hand massaging his erection over those sweatpants was the thing that made my QB lose his cool.

He groaned into my mouth, dipped down to nip at my breast through the thin fabric, and then

grabbed hold of the neckline of my tank top, ripping it apart like it was wet tissue paper. I gasped.

Without even thinking, I leaned back and gave him full access to do whatever he wanted to me.

He wanted to lick me all over, tease my nipples with the tip of his tongue and suck on them. He

wanted to scrape the skin of my chest with his beard, and I was fine with that. When I bore down on

him, he wanted to drag his nails down my back and squeeze my ass and growl, "You're a fucking goddess, you know that?"

He sounded mad at me... But not mad enough.

"No." I squeezed my thighs together. "Explain."

He grabbed a fistful of my hair and tugged at the back of my head. "You're a fucking aggravating goddess, and you're driving me crazy."

I rocked my hips back and forth a little and he groaned, and I was starting to feel really good

about pretty much everything. "How do I drive you crazy, Johnny?"

"By being so fucking hot."

"I really can't help that. Anything else?"

"By being so fucking stubborn and hot."

"I'm determined. It's one of my strengths. Anything else?"

"By always trying to walk away from me."

Somehow I now had access to a reservoir of confidence that I didn't know was there. "I think you

like to watch me walk away from you.”

He grunted and gave me a little slap on the ass, and the surprising sting of his hand did things to

me. I felt astonishingly tingly things all through the center of me, up and down and all around. Nobody

had ever done that to me before, and I had never felt those things before. I liked those feelings a lot.

I wanted to feel them again.

I bit his lower lip and whispered, “I think you like that I drive you crazy.”

He growled, and I felt the hot sting of his hand on my ass again. “Don’t push it unless you can

handle the consequences, Strong.”

I didn’t know if I could handle the consequences, but I wasn’t afraid of them at that point either. I

kissed him so deeply and reached down to stroke his hard cock again. He was hard and powerful all

over, but I could feel it in his kiss. I felt how vulnerable he was to me in that moment, and I did not

expect to be so emboldened by it. “What else do I do to drive you crazy, Decker?”

“By being so hot and relentless and not understanding anything about anything.”

Okay, too far.

He was kissing my neck, but I tried to push him away. “I am not an idiot.” I tried to wriggle out of

his arms.

“I didn’t say you’re an idiot.”

I somehow managed to stand up and slip away from him. He grabbed my arm. “Don’t you walk

away from me now, Hannah.” His stern voice was like a slap on the ass, and I hated how good it felt.

I didn’t get very far. He wrapped his arms around my waist, lifted me off the floor, and brought

me back to the armchair, setting me down so I was facing the back of it. I found myself kneeling and

gripping the back of the chair. He was pressed up behind me, one hand tugging on my hair, the other massaging my clit through my panties.

“You still want to leave?” His breath was hot against my shoulder.

“No.”

“Good.” He was rubbing me with just the right amount of pressure. It was such a simple thing, but

if the boys I’d dated in high school and college had known how to do what he was doing, I probably wouldn’t have studied so much.

“Oh my God. Decker. Holy shit.”

“I’m gonna make you feel good even if you can’t handle it.” He yanked my panties down, and I let out a little yelp.

But he wasn’t the boss of me. “We’ll see.”

He held me to him so tight with one arm, chest pressed right up against my back, as he reached

around and slipped his fingers inside me. Two. Three fingers.

He groaned.

“Fuck. Hannah, you’re so wet.” He was somehow massaging my clit with the knuckle of his thumb while fucking me with his fingers.

I cried out, squeezed my thighs together, reached back to circle my arm around his neck. I pushed

my ass back against that impossibly hard part of him that was straining against his sweatpants. But

that was the last thing I could make my body do before it was taken over by the most intense, frantic

orgasm I had ever had. It was like when he threw that football at me. It came at me fast and hard, but I

was ready for it.

He finally found a way to shut me up, and I was not mad about it.

He didn’t stop doing what he was doing until I went limp. It could have been a minute later or

five. I have no idea. It was the best I’d ever felt, even if I couldn’t handle it.

I was so out of breath, but I had to say his name. It came out in an exhaled whisper. “Decker...”

His breathing was pretty ragged too when he said, “Told you.”

Cocky. Bastard.

It turned out you can’t roll your eyes when you’re coming down from the greatest orgasm of your not-very-orgasm-filled life.

But I would get him back for that.

He deserved it.

I managed to turn around on the seat of the armchair, still on my knees, to face him. He gripped the

sides of the chair, dipped down to kiss my breasts as soon as he saw them. My soggy tank top was

hanging from my shoulders like a torn white flag. I hadn’t completely surrendered to him yet, but I

also had not lost this battle.

He didn’t have the crazed sense of urgency anymore.

But he still had that massive erection.

And I wanted to make him feel good.

When he pulled away from me, I stood up, and he let me push him into the chair. I leaned forward

to kiss him softly, slowly. All over his face while dragging the tip of my index finger along the

waistband of his sweatpants. Back and forth, and then I lowered myself to my knees, between his

legs, as he watched. I took a deep breath and looked down when I carefully pulled the waistbands of

his sweats and boxer briefs away so I could free that wondrous part of him and cup his balls.

God Almighty. It was a thing of beauty. I looked up at him again. His eyes were hooded and blurry

as he watched me lick up the palm of my hand and then take hold of him with it. Squeezing, releasing.

He felt so good in my hand. Hot and hard.

“Jesus. Hannah.”

He sucked in a breath when I ran my thumb over the head of his cock. He was so close to the

edge, and I wanted to get him over it. I gently stroked up the back of his shaft with my fingertips,

lightly teasing the frenulum. Once, twice, three times. He exhaled slowly. Dropped his head back. He

groaned when I licked him all over. Quickly, sloppily, so I could rub him up and down. Fast and then

slow. Changing my grip. Twisting and gliding. When I used both hands, that was when the rhythmic

contractions started. His eyes were shut tight, and I watched his face. It was the only time I could just

stare at him like that in person and fully appreciate how handsome he was. Even when he was all

tensed up. He was so big and strong, and it was beautiful to see him so defenseless.

I was still stroking with both hands when he came.

I waited for him to lift his head and look down at me before cleaning him up with the towel. He

wasn't grinning or smirking at me like he usually did. He certainly wasn't frowning. All the tension

had disappeared from his face, his whole body. He looked grateful. He pulled me up for a kiss.

I had never been so inspired to do what I just did before—not like that. Not for any other guy. Not

so willingly. It was almost as if I liked him or something.

My body liked him. I could no longer deny that. And I wanted his body to like mine.

I definitely liked how he was cradling my face in his hands and kissing me so deeply.

He finally pulled away and stared at me with those striking blue eyes.

He didn't say anything, and I felt myself getting nervous again. I didn't want to feel nervous. I

wanted to keep feeling good. Even though I knew I'd realize what a bad idea this was tomorrow.

"Now what?" I whispered.

He sighed. The most masculine, frustrated sigh I had ever heard. "I mean, I know what I want

now, Hannah, but I don't want you to regret it tomorrow."

Record scratch.

“Oh.”

He was rejecting me.

That did not feel good.

“Don’t make that face. I’m not rejecting you. Jesus, that’s the last thing I’d ever do.”

I covered myself up and moved away from him. “No, it’s fine.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. I get it.” I walked over to pick up the sweatpants and sweatshirt and rounded the corner to

the shower room again to put them on. But I had to struggle to get the stupid ripped wet tank top off.

And that really did not feel good.

“Do you?” He was still there in that armchair, I could tell. It didn’t matter how concerned he

sounded. He was a jerk.

“Of course! I highlighted the paragraph in *Football for Dummies* where it explained why the

owner of a franchise shouldn’t have sex with the starting quarterback. It was the only part of the book

I understood. I can’t believe I forgot it!”

“Well, if that’s the case, then you better not have sex with the second string QB either,” he

muttered.

I poked my head around the corner and glared at him.

“It was a joke.”

“It wasn’t funny.”

“It will be tomorrow.”

“I won’t be thinking about what happened tonight tomorrow.”

“Oh yes, you will.” He wasn’t being cocky.

But it pissed me off anyway.

“Well, thanks for the field trip. I learned a lot.”

“You know what...” He stood up and headed in my direction, to the shower room. “I still need to

take a shower.”

“Well, I’m not stopping you.”

“Stay right there,” he ordered.

“No. I have to go back to my office to change, and then I’m going back to my hotel.”

“Stay there. I’ll walk you to your office and your car.”

“No.”

“Hannah. Give me one minute. Stay.”

He was disrobing, and I really wanted to look and see him in all his naked glory, but I couldn’t.

I looked away.

But I stayed there.

Because I wanted to—not because he ordered me to.

It was important for me, as a businesswoman, to not make a big deal out of this.

I was a grown-up.

A professional grown-up.

So was he.

We couldn’t avoid each other, and we were both adults who were capable of maintaining solid

boundaries between our work and personal lives.

We made out a little. Or a lot. *Big deal.*

It was a mistake. People made mistakes, and then they moved past them. That was life.

I didn’t know what this particular pass pattern was called, but I would learn how to do it.

For the sake of my new job and the team.



Decker

“You really don’t have to walk me to my car,” she said as I held the facility door open for her.

“Maybe. But I’m going to.”

She just smiled and walked past me.

My body positively vibrated. I had never felt so clean—we practically glowed and our hair was

still damp—yet still so dirty at the same time. We shouldn’t have done that, and we shouldn’t have been doing this.

We didn’t talk on the way to the car. I tried to think of stuff to say, and I would’ve bet any money

she was doing the same. So instead of focusing on the uncomfortable silence, we each just focused on

our complete failure to fill it. It wasn’t until we reached her car that she spoke.

“So, that thing that...happened...” She leaned her back against the driver’s side door. Yeah, I

probably couldn’t describe it any better if I tried. I placed a hand on the car roof next to her. I didn’t

cage her, but my proximity certainly raised the temperature.

“Yes?”

“You know why that can’t happen again.” She said it like someone who was bluffing. Someone

who wasn’t good at bluffing.

I squinted and looked down. “Why do I feel I’ve heard this song before?” I locked eyes with her

again. Those beautiful blues were open, confused, lustful, longing, afraid. They showed me every

single thing she was feeling right in that moment.

“Yeah. But this is different. It’s still a bad idea because I’m the new owner—”

“And you own me.” I smiled.

She smiled back but looked no less tense. “Yeah. It’s still a bad idea for those reasons. But it’s

also a bad idea...” She looked away, gathering her thoughts. She looked me dead in the eye. “I’m

afraid of you.”

I dropped my arm. Now *that* I didn’t expect. “Why are you afraid of me?”

“Are you really a panty wrecker?”

“Oh.” I shook my head. “Yeah, that. Look, that was true, but *was*, past tense.”

“So I’m not just another conquest?”

“No.”

“I mean my tank is...and my panties are—” she began.

“If you’re trying to calm things down right now, I wouldn’t finish that sentence.” We laughed. I

took a breath. “I’m not saying I’m blind to the effect I have on women, but I don’t indulge like I used

to. I grew up, got older, wanted to focus more on football. I only have so much time left in my career.”

“So I’m a distraction?” She tried to play it like it was just more of our bantery flirting. But she was clearly worried.

“Well, I didn’t study as much film as I would have, had you not showed up.” It was the truth.

She bit her lower lip. “And is that okay?”

I wanted it to be.

In that moment, looking at how pretty she was in the yellow light of the street lamps and how

vibrant my body felt after what she did to me, boy, I wanted it to be.

“No, it’s not,” I said.

She nodded and looked down.

“That’s why I’m not married. I have to find a woman I love more than football. I never wanted to

leave behind a stable of ex-wives like...”

“Like my father,” she finished for me. She looked angry, but it was a cold disappointment. The

heat between us had evaporated.

“I didn’t mean—” I started, but she held up her hand.

“No, you did. And I appreciate it. It makes all this a lot easier. Like I said, this can’t happen

again, and now I really know it can't. Because I'm never going to come in second place again."

"Hannah," I said, but she was already in her car and drove off without another word.

I was left in the parking lot, thinking I only said half of what I wanted to. The bad half. Yeah, I

needed to focus on my career. I didn't know how much time I had left.

But I chose to *not* watch film tonight and spent the night with her.

That had to mean something.

What exactly? I had no idea.



Chapter Nineteen

DECKER: That didn't come out the way I wanted it to.

HANNAH: It's fine! That came out fine. Things went in fine. Everything's fine! Good night!

DECKER: Well look at those exclamation points. Things must really be fine!!!!!!

HANNAH: They are, jackass!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

HANNAH: Are you seeing anyone else now?

HANNAH: I meant anyone. Are you seeing anyone now?

HANNAH: Never mind. Good night!

DECKER: I'm not seeing anyone else, Hannah. I only want to see you. Are you going to LA with us?

HANNAH: Yes.

DECKER: Good. I'm glad

DECKER: !

Chapter Twenty

INSERT: Upbeat **MUSIC** - Yellow and orange graphics - **WAKE UP, BOSTON!**

INT. WAKE UP, BOSTON! STUDIO, ANCHOR DESK

STACY FLICKER

Welcome back. It's seven thirty-five AM in Boston, I'm Stacy Flicker, and we're very fortunate to

have the new owner of the Tomcats—Hannah Strong—joining us and making her *Wake Up, Boston!*

debut. Hello and welcome, Hannah. Good morning.

HANNAH

Good morning, Stacy. Thank you for having me.

STACY FLICKER

Well, sure. What a cute sweater set.

HANNAH

Oh, thank you. Well, it's red and black, you know. Team colors. Yay, team! And your hair is just

sensational.

STACY FLICKER

Yes, it is! First of all, my condolences for your loss. Your father, Jerry Strong, was a frequent and

beloved guest here on our show. I'm sure you were as surprised as anyone that he left you his NFL

team. You, uh, weren't a familiar face at Minuteman Stadium when Jerry was still with us—did you

love football growing up, or are you finding it all a little too overwhelming? Have you bought a ticket

back to New York yet?

HANNAH

Actually, I've started looking at apartments here in Boston, and I've really gotten to know and love

the game—that's what's important. You know, it's never too late to learn the difference between dig

routes and fly routes! Which I do know now. I know enough to do a Monday-morning quarterback! I

mean, to do some Monday-morning quarterbacking. Or *Tuesday* morning quarterbacking, as I think it should be called.

STACY FLICKER

Well, who wouldn't want to do our starting quarterback Johnny Decker, am I right? I know all the women here at *Wake Up, Boston!* would like to be in a huddle with that man. That's gotta be some incentive to go to work every morning.

HANNAH

Well, you know. John is a very dedicated player—on the field—and an incredibly skilled, large part of the team. But we have almost sixty players, and it's my job to make sure every single one of them is doing well and staying in line with our goals for the franchise on every level. For instance, at this

Sunday's game, Coach Bud successfully implemented a ball control style of offense. I know John is able to lead a high powered, quick strike offense, but controlling time of possession might just be how we get it done.

STACY FLICKER

Absolutely, and we've heard rumors of a little friction between you and your star quarterback. Would you care to comment?

HANNAH

I am not aware of any friction between myself and any member of the Tomcats team, but if there were friction between myself and the player you mentioned, it would be handled in a totally professional manner.

STACY FLICKER

Speaking of Decker's big, capable hands—let's take a look at a clip from his new TV spot for Manscape aftershave.

INSERT: Ten-second clip from Manscape aftershave TV commercial featuring Johnny Decker at a

bathroom sink with a towel wrapped around his waist, shaving.

BACK TO:

INT. WAKE UP, BOSTON! STUDIO, ANCHOR DESK

STACY

(fanning self with 4x5 card)

Whew! Who needs coffee when you can wake up to that?! As team owner, I guess you can just walk

into the locker room whenever you want! Insert GIF of Rachel from *Friends* saying *I'm so happy and not at all jealous*.

HANNAH

(clears throat)

While there are many things I *could* do as team owner, I am certainly staying focused on what's best

for the team as a whole. Like I said, Johnny Decker is just one of our very talented players.

STACY FLICKER

He certainly is a player, and we certainly enjoy staying focused on every single part of him. Hannah

Strong, new owner of the Boston Tomcats, thank you so much for stopping by on your way back to the

worst city in America, home of the Rebels. And now here's Patricia O'Malley with a look at the

spectacular display of fall foliage in and around Boston.



TWENTY-ONE

Hannah

I was in my hotel room after work—I had upgraded to a larger suite a while ago but was getting

weary of hotel life. It wasn't like I did much here other than eat room-service meals, sleep, change

clothes, and work in the bathtub. I missed eating takeout, sleeping, changing clothes, and doing bath-

work in a home that I owned or at least signed a lease for. That said, I was packing for a trip to LA

and another hotel room.

But this time, Decker would be staying in the same hotel.

So I was multitasking: I was eating dinner off the room-service table between gulps of wine,

packing for the trip, FaceTiming with Jen on my iPad. And I was hoping I hadn't somehow given

away that I'd interacted with my starting quarterback's penis on that ridiculous morning show

appearance, while reminding myself that I absolutely, positively should not interact with my starting

quarterback's penis, mouth, or hands ever again. His butt was also off the table. As were his insanely

sexy hairy chest; entire abdominal region; and those beautiful, strong arms that he could bench press

me with.

Not that I believed he even wanted to bench press me all that much. He could bench press pretty

much any woman in New England, according to Stacy Flicker. Who was I kidding? The world maybe,

even.

Since the night of the Locker Room Incident, I had been alternating between intense focus on

work, intense accidental focus on my memories of said incident, and thinking I should get a woman

face-palming emoji tattooed to my forehead. Surely everyone could tell that I was consumed with

regret about the totally awesome things Decker and I did to each other that one time. But I was also

strangely okay with it. My body wanted it to happen again and again, but my brain...my brain *also*

wanted it to happen again. Hell, even my tank tops wanted it to happen again. And that was unfortunate.

“How many nights are you packing for?” Jen asked from the iPad that was propped up on the

dresser. I looked down at the bed and realized I had laid out enough clothes for approximately half a year.

“Um. Two nights. But it’s Los Angeles. In the fall. I need layers. Business as well as casual

options. And boots. Business and casual boots. And possibly over-the-knee socks.” *And fifteen pairs of underwear in case of panty-wrecking emergencies.*

“Uh-huh. You seem a tad more nervous and distracted and confused than usual, boo.”

“Hey. I’ve only been like this since I came to Boston.”

“I mean. That is laughably incorrect. But the whole *inheriting an NFL franchise* thing has

certainly taken it to another level.”

“I just haven’t been to LA since I was a little kid, that’s all.” That almost sounded convincing. “I

don’t know what to expect.” That was true. But I also needed to change the subject. “I’m just thinking

about the ridiculous morning-news thing I did the other day. I mean, I’ve seen that show before. That

host is usually so cheesy and well-behaved—which was why I agreed to go on there. That was

supposed to be the first time I sounded competent about football, but she was totally obsessed with

Decker.”

“Well, that guy does things to women’s brains.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I knew exactly what she was talking about. And I

didn’t want to talk about it. Or maybe it was all I wanted to talk about, but I couldn’t. So I paced

around some more.

Ella was sitting next to her mom, wearing a pink nightgown and a dazed look in her eyes because

she'd just been given cough syrup. She was trying to focus on the iPad, but I was probably driving her

nuts. "Stop moving so much!"

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I'll try to slow down." I slowed down to take three sips of wine instead of

one big gulp.

"How is this the first time you've traveled for an away game? Or did you just not mention it to

me? Or did I forget? Or was I not paying attention to you because I was too busy staring at pictures of

football pants?"

I cleared my throat. "This is the first away game I will be attending with the... *Schmomschmats*."

Her husband was at home—in another room, but I was playing it safe. "I felt my executive presence

was better felt in the front office." That also almost sounded convincing.

"Riiiiight."

"That's my story, and I'm stickin' to it." I put the wineglass down and held up a charcoal-gray

business suit in one hand and a navy-blue business suit in the other.

"Which one of these should I

wear to a business lunch in downtown LA?"

Ella made a face and looked like she was sick to her stomach. "Why can't you dress like a girl?"

Jen's facial expression wasn't much more enthusiastic. "Do you still have that understated wrap

dress that says *Hi, I'm the new owner and I have boobs and a vagina—deal with it?* Because you

should pack that."

"Boobs and vagina!" Ella exclaimed, just like that first morning I was here in Boston. But she

didn't giggle or jump up and down this time. She rubbed her nose with the back of her arm, closed her

eyes, and plopped her head down onto her mom's lap.

"Yes, I still have that dress. But everyone knows I'm the new owner now, and those other things

have been... *dealt with*. To a degree."

Jen was looking down, stroking Ella's forehead, but that got her attention. "You mean..." She

glanced at her daughter and then lowered her voice. "The B's and the V have been dealt with?"

"To a degree." I shook my head vehemently. "Never mind. It will never happen again. You know

what—I bought a sweater dress! Be right back."

I got the sweater dress from the closet and laid it out on the bed. I noticed there was a text

notification on my phone—from Jen.

JEN: To exactly what degree have your boobs and vagina been dealt with, young lady?

I looked up at her on my iPad screen. "Seriously?"

"Text me back," she muttered, gritting her teeth. "I can't make the snotty princess leave the room

now that she's actually being sweet to me. So text me everything."

"There's nothing to text. There is no everything. There's barely even one thing."

She held up her phone so I could see her manic thumb movement while she said, "Seen anything

good on Netflix lately? We just binged a thriller called *You Can't Fool Me*. It was riveting."

I raised an eyebrow. "No, I'm still trying to get through *It Can't Go Anywhere So What's the*

Point? "

"That sounds really boring and stupid. You should watch an episode of *You Only Get One Life*

called *The Point is The Big O*. But also pick up your phone and look at it and respond to me

immediately."

JEN: Your panties got wrecked, didn't they?

JEN: To what degree, Hannah? Hand stuff? Mouth stuff? Just the tip?

JEN: It's a big tip, isn't it?

JEN: Answer answer answer!

JEN: Also, you need to hit that hard if you haven't already.

JEN: Have you?

JEN: Answer. Answer. Answer.

JEN: Hit. It. Hard.

I shook my head at her. "I think my favorite episode of that series was *Mind Your Own Business*.

Wherein the heroine's best friend realized she should mind her own business. And then she did that."

"But did you see the episode after that one? Wherein the heroine finally did the thing that her best

friend told her to do in a text message and found out that the things she had experienced with other

men—for instance, the tax attorney or the economics professor—were not indicative of the potential

for how those things could make her feel?"

"Stop talking so much," Ella whined.

ME: I felt the things, okay? The Big O was had. Hands and fingers only. Well, his mouth on the

Bs.

JEN: Holy ducking Schmomschmats!!!!!! Decker's hands and fingers and mouth?

ME: I cannot confirm nor deny.

JEN: You're nervous about having hot, hot hotel sex with a hot, hot guy and falling in love with

him, aren't you?

ME: I am aware of the negative ramifications of sexual intercourse with an employee.

JEN: Haha you said RAM.

JEN: But also, I get it. Of course I do. Of course it would not be wise to have sexual intercourse

with a superhot former bad boy, two-time Super Bowl-winning employee.

JEN: But also, you need to get rammed by Decker.

JEN: I'm pretty sure my life depends on it.

JEN: *I meant YOUR life.

JEN: *But also mine.

ME: Could you please be the best friend who supports the heroine's decision to do the right thing?

JEN: Yes. As long as we're clear that the right thing for you to do is get rammed by Decker.

ME: Please stop saying that. I have very conflicting feelings.

I plopped down on the edge of the bed and heaved a sigh. "Why does everything about football confuse me so much?"

"Aww, buddy. I'm sorry you're confused. Oh—did you say something about boots and over-the-knee socks? Because, YES."

Ella groaned. "Mommy. How long am I going to feel like this for? Because I do not like it."

"Probably two whole days after tonight, and then you'll start to feel better. Think you can handle that, baby?"

"Ohhhhkayyyy."

ME: How long am I going to feel like this for? Because I do not like it.

JEN: It's going to feel like that until you do it with Decker. And then it will feel really good. And you will like it. And then you will probably freak out about it because you're you. But you'll live.

JEN: And you'll have a great story to tell your grandkids. Or at least a better story than "I had sexual intercourse with some very polite and responsible men who were very good with numbers and really bad with my clitoris."

I almost laughed at that. And then when I remembered how good Decker was with my clitoris and all those other parts of me, I almost cried. "I think I just...I don't like wanting someone this much.

Nothing good can come of it."

"I'm pretty sure multiple good things can come of it."

I looked up at the camera, and when she saw how genuinely scared I was, she took in a sharp

breath. “Oh, buddy... I know it hurts. I remember what it’s like, believe it or not. But a lot of

genuinely good life things can come of it too, really. You just have to get in the game...”

JEN: More than hand and mouth stuff, I mean.

“Yeah. I get that.”

“But it’s okay if you don’t know what you want yet.”

“Really? Because apparently every man in the *sportsball* industry thinks you have to know what

you want and then you have to focus on winning it at all costs.”

“Well, they’re not wrong. In some situations.”

JEN: But if you decide what you want is for Decker to ram you in Los Angeles, then everybody wins. You. Decker. And me.

JEN: <winking face emoji>

“I mean, I can’t. He’s insufferable. And it’s wrong. It’s just wrong... But I guess I’ll have to take an extra suitcase for the boots.”



Chapter Twenty-Two

DECKER: How do you like the plane?

DECKER: Pretty sweet, huh?

DECKER: Ah. You’re either ignoring me or you turned off your phone for takeoff. Since I’m

clearly irresistible to you, you're probably just following the rules.

HANNAH: YOU DIDN'T TURN OFF YOUR PHONE FOR TAKEOFF!?!?

DECKER: There she is. And you obviously didn't turn yours off either.

HANNAH: I was just about to! You could have killed us!

DECKER: That's not how that works. If it was, terrorists wouldn't need box cutters, they'd just threaten us with iPhones.

HANNAH: You're clearly the only terrorist here.

DECKER: Calm down. I think I saw it on MythBusters or something where they proved none of it can get through the shielding.

HANNAH: You risked our lives based on a thing you THINK you maybe saw on MythBusters or some other show?

DECKER: Yep.

HANNAH: <angry face emoji>

DECKER: Well, since you just survived a harrowing near-death experience, I'm sure you don't

want to waste anymore of your life playing it safe. You can come on back here and join the mile high club.

HANNAH: <face with rolling eyes emoji>

HANNAH: Who says I'm not already a member?

DECKER: Me. I'm saying it. You aren't.

HANNAH: Well, I'm not joining today either.

HANNAH: And what are you doing in the back of the plane?

DECKER: What are you doing in the front?

HANNAH: Everyone knows the front of the plane is the best part.

DECKER: On a commercial flight. On a private jet we all get the same luxurious ride. Plus no one bothers me back here.

HANNAH: But I'll still be able to get off the plane faster.



DECKER: And get called by the teacher first.

HANNAH: Nothing wrong with that.

DECKER: Not at all. I, however, don't need to get off quickly...

DECKER: Aw, come on. That was wide open.

HANNAH: No more talk of getting off or openings.

DECKER: But either way you'll be stuck waiting for bags while I'm still lying here sleeping.

HANNAH: Lying?

DECKER: Push the third button on the left-hand side.

HANNAH: O

HANNAH: M

HANNAH: Gaaaawwwwwddddd

DECKER: Right?

HANNAH: Just swiveled and reclined all the way back. This is heaven.

DECKER: It's even better with a buddy.

HANNAH: Decker...

DECKER: Fine, fine. Well how about dinner when we land? I know a great sushi place.

HANNAH: <face with rolling eyes emoji>

DECKER: I was being literal. A sushi restaurant.

HANNAH: Oh.

DECKER: But I also know a GREAT sushi place. <winking face emoji>

HANNAH: Oh, for crying out loud.

DECKER: Yes. You will be. You obviously have my number, but FYI my reservation at the hotel

will be under the name P. Aanteerekker. It's Dutch.

HANNAH: Oh, for crying out loud.

DECKER: I'm just kidding. My hotel alias is Jack Reacher.

HANNAH: Mine is Dick Butkus.

DECKER: <face with tears of joy emoji> That's the funniest thing you've ever said. On

purpose, I mean.

HANNAH: I'm not kidding.

DECKER: Well that makes it even funnier, then.

DECKER: But think about it. Dinner. At a restaurant. In LA.
With me.

HANNAH: That's not a good idea.

DECKER: I know.

DECKER: But sleep on it.

HANNAH: Fine.

HANNAH: I just might.

HANNAH: Okay, I slept on it and I still think it's not a good idea
for us to go out to dinner

together. But thank you for asking.

DECKER: You'll change your mind again before we land.

HANNAH: I won't.



DECKER: Shhhh. Go back to sleep.

HANNAH: I was planning to, so I'm not doing it because you told
me to.

DECKER: Sweet dreams.

HANNAH: <face with rolling eyes emoji>

DECKER: <winking face emoji>

HANNAH: Yeah, I still don't think we should go out to dinner just
the two of us.

DECKER: Okay. I'll be joining the guys for sushi, then.

HANNAH: Oh.

DECKER: Do you have a problem with that, Ms. Strong?

HANNAH: No!!!

DECKER: Good. Because I would rather dine with you. So if you
change your mind...

HANNAH: I'm not going to. Enjoy your night out in LA with the
guys!

DECKER: I'm not going out all night. Just for dinner.

HANNAH: None of my business!!!

DECKER: It actually is your business. For business reasons, I mean. We have a big game tomorrow.

HANNAH: What am I supposed to do—give my players a curfew?

DECKER: Actually, Jerry would sometimes give us a speech about priorities and

responsibilities, etc. when we're on the road. For the rookies mostly. Especially in places like

LA. But you could make it a little clearer what exactly it is you want from us. Or me, in particular.

HANNAH: Well, I wouldn't want to come between you and football, now would I?

DECKER: Hannah. You're being difficult.

HANNAH: Sorry, Decker. Didn't mean to distract you. Putting my phone away now.

DECKER: Hannah.

DECKER: Hannah. You're walking away again.

DECKER: Okay. Enjoy the rest of the flight. See you when I see you, I guess.



TWENTY-THREE

Hannah

The league rented out an entire luxury hotel in Marina del Rey. Hundreds of us had flown in from

Boston—players, members of the front office, coaches, doctors, and more. Everyone was there for

one reason and one reason only—to ensure that the Tomcats would beat the LA Knights the next day.

That was my main reason for being there. It wasn't about sushi. It certainly wasn't about enjoying

the pool or the nearby marina at sunset. It absolutely wasn't about having hotel sex with my starting

quarterback. I was so glad I had chosen to sit at the front of the plane because it made it easier to

avoid Decker once we'd landed. The team had their chartered bus from LAX to the hotel, and I had

my own driver. I didn't text him back and I didn't hear from him again, so I assumed he was having a

wonderful time out on the town with his teammates.

Which was fine.

He didn't need the distraction of personal complications, and neither did I.

And I had a lovely time enjoying my room-service meal in front of the private balcony

overlooking the marina. But there was a spa in the hotel. And I didn't have any other plans that

evening. So I decided to get a ninety-minute massage after my exotic fruit salad dinner. It was a pretty great decision.

When I was on my way back from the spa, I decided to stop by the front desk to ask which room

Jack Reacher was in—because my very relaxed body told me to. After showing the clerk my ID and

telling him to Google me so he would believe I was the owner of the damn team that was staying here,

I found out Decker was staying in a suite on the same floor as me.

Which was interesting.

But still not a good idea.

After taking a shower in the marble bathroom and slathering myself in the scented body oil I had

purchased at the spa, I consumed one glass of wine. I noted that Decker still had not texted me and

realized it was up to me to make the next move—whatever that may be.

By eight thirty, the next glass of wine I consumed convinced me that my next move would be to put

on a very short sweater dress and very long over-the-knee socks and very tall sexy boots. A sexy

Weeknd song that just happened to come up on the satellite radio station I was listening to had an

interesting suggestion—I needed ice. From the ice machine at the end of the hall.

I carried the ice bucket down the hall and walked very, very slowly past the door to Decker's

suite. Unfortunately, the floor was carpeted, so if he was even back in his room, he would not have

been able to hear the clicking of my high-heeled boots. Which meant I had to sneeze and then say,

“Excuse me,” loudly, to no one at all.

Absolutely no one at all opened his door, and it was not my fault the nearby ice machine made so

much noise while dispensing ice.

He must still be out with the boys, I thought. As long as he's in top form for the game tomorrow,

that's all that really matters. But I also thought there might be something caught in my throat, so I had

to cough while standing right outside his door on the way back to my suite.

That was when the door opened and Decker grabbed my arm, pulling me into his room.

I dropped the ice bucket in the hall.

But I didn't even think about picking it up because Johnny Decker had me pressed up against the

wall just inside the door and he was kissing me so hard I could barely breathe.

His tongue tasted like sake and spearmint and bad decisions, and I was suddenly a little bit

drunker than I was before his lips were on mine and his hands were in my hair. He didn't say a word,

but the deep, manly sound that was vibrating at the back of his throat told me I was kidding myself

when I didn't believe he wanted me enough.

He wanted me exactly as much as I wanted him, and it still scared me but I would let him ease my

fears however he wanted to for the next hour or three.

My eyes were closed. My hands found his exposed hairy chest. I grabbed on to his unbuttoned

shirt because I needed it to keep from falling to my knees.

He kissed the way he played. With a fierce kind of grace and a controlled kind of power. But

there was some dark, animalistic energy beneath the surface that he had trained himself to discipline.

Like the wolf he had tattooed on his arm. And the most honest thing I could admit to myself right then

was that I had that energy too. I had disciplined it with spreadsheets and denial, and he was the first

person I'd met who could bring it out of me.

I wanted him to.

For one night anyway.

He finally broke the kiss and slid his hands down to my waist.

"Hello, Jack..." I said as a greeting.

"Hello, Dick..." he replied.

I had to laugh at that. But this wasn't funny. It wasn't funny at all. He was just staring at me, letting

the silence and the sound of our heavy breathing do what he knew it would do to me. I frowned and

wriggled around when he squeezed my hips, tried to push at his chest, but he wasn't budging. He was

so much stronger than I was. It terrified and delighted me.

He clearly enjoyed watching me squirm. "Still a little confused, huh?"

"Apparently it's my natural state."

"I can help you with that." He was so sure of himself. It used to make me angry while

simultaneously turning me on, but now it only turned me on. He pulled away just far enough to be able

to look me up and down, and then he grunted. His eyes got hooded and his jaw got tighter and tighter

as his gaze traveled over the cream-colored sweater, my bare legs, the black thigh-high socks, and

knee-high boots.

It was very satisfying.

I was getting access to that hidden well of confidence again.

“The fuck are you wearing, Strong?”

“My ice retrieval outfit. If you don’t like it, maybe you should take it off.”

“I like it a lot.”

“Then you should definitely take it off.”

He grunted again, and before I could say *holy shit*, he had picked me up and I was folded in half

over his shoulder. He carried me—one arm around the back of my knees, one hand on my ass—over

to the edge of the huge bed. He dropped me down in a very ungentlemanly way, and I was fine with

that. I lay back on my elbows and watched as he unbuttoned the cuffs and removed his shirt, tossing it

aside. His eyes never left mine. He didn’t look happy, but he looked absolutely determined. I didn’t

know what he had planned for me, but I knew it would feel good.

He grabbed my right ankle and let my foot rest flat against his pec. If the four-inch heel was

digging into his chest, it didn’t seem to bother him. He slid his hands up the length of the leather boot,

savoring the texture of it, and then slowly pulled the zipper down toward him. Pulling it off, he let it

drop to the floor and then did the same with the other one.

Then he traced the bunched-up edge of the sock, tickling the skin of my toned thigh before slipping

the socks off and tossing them away. All the while he stared at me and said nothing. The anticipation

was doing things to me. Terrible, fantastic things. He spread my legs apart and lowered himself to his

knees between them. By the time he started kissing his way up my inner thigh, I was flat on my back,

whimpering and trembling all over.

But I was just as determined to prove that I could handle this as he seemed determined to make me

come undone.

His hands were gliding up my legs and under the sweater. "You smell like a fucking orange grove

outside an Asian temple. What is that?"

I took a deep breath and said, "A hint of things to come."

He raised his head to stare at me, his jaw dropping the slightest bit. "Jesus."

His plan to slowly drive me wild with impatience appeared to change. His head disappeared

under the sweater dress. I tried to hike myself up onto my elbows again so I could witness whatever it

was he was doing and remember it for the rest of my life. He pressed up on the small of my back,

encouraging my hips to rise up, and reappeared with my panties between his teeth.

I was flat on my back again, silently reciting the Lord's Prayer.

I gripped the bedspread and held on for dear life, bracing myself for what would come next.

What came next was delirium.

Decker's hand on my abdomen, his thumb pulling things up tight, exposing my clit so he could

blow on it and then slowly lap upward with his warm tongue. He groaned. "Fucking hell, you weren't

kidding." He tickled me down there with the tip of his tongue, slowly and then picking up speed the

more wound up I got.

It was unbearable.

But, also, exactly what my body needed.

When he began swirling his tongue around, I realized I was crying out, "No! No! No!" and he was

holding on to my hands so tight.

Thank God he knew that those *nos* meant *oh, fuck yes*. He kept doing it until I was writhing

around uncontrollably, and then he fucked me with his tongue and I went still for a few seconds. My

body was in shock because it felt so good. And then it tumbled into a wave of ecstasy that was seemingly endless.

When he sucked on my clit, I cried out loud, just like he said I would.

I couldn't take it anymore.

I rode out the climax.

I didn't know if it was one big one or a bunch of them because I'd never experienced anything like it before.

He didn't stop what he was doing until I was a post-orgasmic blob of my former self.

I finally understood why the French called it *la petite mort*. A part of me died a little after that. It

was the part of me that didn't want to surrender to Decker and how he made me feel. I may have lost consciousness for a minute.

When I came to, Johnny Decker was hovering over me, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "You ready for more?"

I was. I just wasn't ready to let him know how ready I was yet. "We'll see."



TWENTY-FOUR

Decker

"We'll see," she said. She was trying to sound tough and hard to get right after I had made her a

quivering puddle with my mouth. Buttoned-up, sometimes-brittle Hannah Strong opened herself to me

and let loose. I absolutely wanted more. She was trying to pretend she didn't. Her false stubbornness

used to piss me off and turn me on.

Now it just turned me on.

I kissed her slowly, deeply. Making sure she tasted herself as my tongue surged within her mouth.

Just as slowly I began to peel her sweater dress off her shoulders. She tried to pull me to her, but I

just didn't give in. She was soon left in only her bra, something lacy that did nothing to hide her

excited nipples. Putting my weight on top of her, kissing her hard and rubbing my hands from the tops

of her shoulders, down her arms, over her chest, her stomach, her hips, but not her pussy. I was going

to make her wait before I got back there.

I lifted her up, and she wrapped her legs around me again. I was deft with her bra, unhooking it

and sliding it down her shoulders. She moaned and thrust her chest at me, begging for it to be licked

and sucked.

Yeah, *we'll see*. Her words echoed in my head, but her body betrayed her. She couldn't physically

play hard to get. Of course, my body also betrayed me, my erection so hard it was becoming painful. I

wanted to draw it out.

I couldn't.

I broke our kiss. "Condoms." It wasn't a question.

"What makes you think—"

"I binged an entire season's worth of entertainment with the show you put on outside my door.

You're a planner. You wouldn't do that without also bringing condoms."

Her cheeks were already flushed from what we'd done. But her eyes betrayed how embarrassed

she was. "You saw? How dare... I would never," she sputtered.

I grabbed her tits firmly, and the forefinger and thumb of each hand found their respective nipple. I

growled and rested my teeth gently against her neck. I kissed her there instead and didn't squeeze her

nipples. She moaned, loud and pitiful.

"Where?" I whispered in her ear.

"Pocket of my dress," she said around her gasp. I placed her back down on the bed and grabbed

her sweater dress. I found four where she said they would be and smiled.

She watched me from the bed, propped up on her elbows, tits out, mouth agape. Her knees were

together so I couldn't see her pussy. I grabbed one of the condoms and stalked toward the bed. She

didn't move, just looked up at me. I placed a hand on her knee and gently encouraged her to open

herself. She complied, spreading her legs and lying all the way back on the bed. Her pussy glistened

from my mouth and her excitement. Her luscious tits were covered in our sweat, and every single

curve was perfect and calling to me.

I was wrong about not being pissed off. She was so exquisite naked it didn't just turn me on,

didn't just make me stupid with craving. She filled me with a white-hot rage at how fucking perfect

she looked and that I wasn't inside her.

Her hands found their way up into her hair, and she squirmed under my gaze.

She didn't close herself off.

She let me *see* her. And I drank all of it in. I didn't know if I'd ever be here again. Since all this

was a stupid, hot mistake.

Well, it was time to make that mistake.

Her body tipped me over the edge and erased any thoughts I had. It was all needed. I quickly shed

my pants and boxer briefs. She rose and helped me sheath myself in the condom, licking her lips as

her delicate hands grazed my cock.

"You're so big," she moaned.

"Wait until I'm inside you," I gritted.

"No more waiting." She grabbed my face, and I pressed my lips down on the frustrating goddess.

She fell back onto the bed, and I fell with her. She reached for my cock and I took the base, and

together we notched it at her entrance. I pushed in a little; she grabbed the sheets and opened herself

wider. She cried out and I grunted. She was oh, so deliciously tight.

I took my time easing my way in.

When I did, when I reached deep inside her, I didn't fuck her angrily like I'd imagined, working

out my frustration with her with each thrust.

She didn't fuck me petulantly, purposefully getting me riled up and doing the opposite of what I

wanted, even when it was what *she* wanted.

Instead, we listened to each other. She moved with me, and I with her, our rhythm growing and

evolving, no one leading or pushing the other. The pleasure between our joined bodies ran the show.

I placed my hands on her breasts, my large fingers surrounding her nipples again. This time I

followed through on the threat and pinched them. She cried out in pleasure, thrust her chest out, and

grabbed my hands with hers. I softened my grip and swallowed some of her cry by placing my mouth on hers.

Her hands moved from mine and wound around my back. I felt her nails dig into my back, and we

smiled into each other's mouths. *Well played, Strong.*

I grabbed her hands from behind me and held them down over her head. I broke our kiss while

continuing to thrust my cock deeper and deeper. I lightly bit her ear before I growled, "Outside here,

you own me. But for the next few minutes, this beautiful body belongs to me."

She moaned, clearly liking that idea. I easily held her arms over head with one hand while I

moved my other to massage her breasts again. I kissed her. I rubbed her tits, danced with her tongue,

and filled her with my cock all in the same building rhythm. She fought my hold on her as she began to

lose control again, and it drove me even more wild. I broke our kiss and started to pound into her. It

was easier to move inside her, but she was still so deliciously tight around my cock.

We reached a violent crescendo, our bodies slapping together, our cries loud. When she neared

the edge once more, her sweet, tight little pussy pulled me right over the edge with her, and we came.

Together.

Wave after wave of pleasure hit us, and after the last spasm subsided, I collapsed gently on top of

her. We heaved breath into our bodies. I didn't look at her right away or say anything. If I did, we

might banter, go back to the old way of dealing with the tension between us.

I liked this new way a lot better.



TWENTY-FIVE

Hannah

Well, my best friend was right. I did feel better about pretty much everything after doing it with

Decker. It did feel really good. I absolutely liked it. And I didn't even freak out about it right away.

But I definitely did not plan to tell my grandkids about how deliriously satisfying it was to feel

that man pounding into me, or how much I loved it when he pinned me down and told me I belonged

to him for the next few minutes, or how surprising it was the way he rammed me with such intensity

and care. He wasn't just fucking me. It felt like we were having the kind of conversation we weren't

yet capable of having verbally—with our bodies.

We had somehow unlocked a new way of communicating with each other, and the end result was a

lot of orgasms and a little less fear.

We had sex three times that night. The skin on my chin and chest was pink and raw, and I knew I

would be sore between my legs in the morning. But it was worth it to have him confidently,

effortlessly maneuver me into different positions and to feel him inside me from more angles than I

had ever known possible. It was worth it to experience the wild abandon with which he devoured my

breasts when his mouth could reach them and to witness how much pleasure he got from watching me

rock back and forth on top of him. Slowly, frantically, slowly again. I was so full of him I almost

wanted to cry. Not from pain but from how good it felt to be that connected to someone.

Hearing him call me *Hannah* when we weren't having sex did things to me, but the way he

groaned my name when he was about to come nearly did me in.

I had no idea if he was like this with other women, and I didn't want to think about it. But I did not

expect him to be like this with me. What we did in the locker room was hot and dirty. This was hot

and some kind of wonderful unknown thing might have only existed between the two of us. Maybe it

was just for an hour. Maybe it was the start of something we couldn't name yet. But I liked it,

whatever it was.

I liked this side of Decker.

I still wanted more though.

So much more.

But I also wanted to savor the feeling of just being close to him—and enjoy it for as long as I could.

All my life, I had never wanted to belong to anyone. If I had a conscious desire to want someone

who was all mine, I certainly wasn't aware of it. I had barely become comfortable with the idea of

owning my father's team. I still found it a little funny that—on paper—I owned Decker. But I wanted

both of us to feel like he owned me for a little while longer. Even if he only wanted to own my body.

It was more relaxing than I ever could have imagined.

We faced each other, our legs entwined on top of the glorious mess of bedsheets. The sweat on my

totally naked body was starting to dry, and I shivered. He reached around to cover me with the

blanket and kissed my forehead. We hadn't spoken since he returned from the bathroom. I think he was

afraid I'd ruin it by saying something dopey.

But for once, I wasn't afraid of being honest with him. "Thank you," I whispered. "You're really

good at making me feel good." Okay, that was the exact opposite of banter, but I didn't regret saying it

yet.

He didn't even laugh at me. Or grin. He just smiled and pushed the loose strands of hair from my

face. "Thank *you*. You are also very good at making me feel good."

I giggled. I was probably blushing all over. "Glad to hear it."

He was resting his head on his arm and just kept looking into my eyes while stroking my cheek

with his thumb, and I was starting to feel those flutters of anxiety in my chest again.

"We shouldn't have—"

He covered my mouth with his hand. "I know. You don't have to say it."

"I mean, I'm glad we did."

"Good. So am I."

"I just can't risk anyone—"

"I know."

"I should probably—"

"Not yet, Strong."

"You need to sleep."

"I will. I'm going to sleep really well tonight, and so are you."

"Separately."

"Separately. For sure. But not yet. You can hang out for a little bit."

"Okay. Yes. I will hang out. Here. With you. For a little bit."

Now I could tell he was just amused by me. "Fantastic. Do that."

I sighed and tried to get comfortable again. "So...it seems like Dash Taylor has gotten a little less

cocky lately. He's falling in line more. That's good, right?"

“You talking about Dash Taylor while we’re naked in bed together is definitely not good.”

“Fair enough... Well, I did a little research on the Knights, and I guess they’re heavy on the defense—”

“What’s your favorite episode of *The Office*, Hannah?”

“*The Office*? I don’t think I’ve ever seen an entire episode of that show.”

He disentangled himself from me, sat up, and said, “Okay, thanks for stopping by.” If he was

joking, it wasn’t clear from his delivery.

“Hey! I don’t watch sitcoms. I watch eighties movies and *Grey’s Anatomy* to unwind.”

“Eighties movies, huh? I can live with that.”

I huffed and sat up too, keeping myself covered with the blanket even though my face was getting

warm. “Well, you don’t *have* to live with it, so...”

“I wasn’t asking you to move in with me.”

“Obviously. I know that.” I looked around the room for my underthings and sweater dress, frowning.

He was shaking his head. “You’re leaving now.” It wasn’t even a question.

“You should have let me leave when we were still getting along.”

He grabbed my face and kissed me hard until my resistance left before I could. He wasn’t going to

let me ruin what we had that night, and I was so grateful. It had only been a few minutes since he’d

been inside me, but I already missed him, and I guess that was what scared me.

“Don’t go yet,” he said. It was something between an order and a dare.

I promised I wouldn’t go yet in the language we spoke more fluently—with our lips and hands and

tongues. I reached for his cock and felt how hard he was again—*Thank God*—straddled him, and

lowered myself down onto him, inch by agonizing inch.

He sat up straight, sucked in his breath, and looked down to watch.

“I’m on the pill.”

“I haven’t fucked anyone else since I met you.”

That admission should have shocked me, but on some level it made sense, and I believed him. I

believed him because of how he kissed me. I believed him because of how I drove him crazy. I

believed him because I wanted to believe it. I wrapped myself around him tight, and he waited until

he was as deep as he could get before thrusting up into me.

We were back to communicating with grunts and moans and heavy breathing.

It could very well be *one step forward, two steps back* if we’d decide to try to move forward

with each other.

But even then I knew that every step would lead us somewhere we’d never been with anyone else.

And that even when it hurt, it would feel good.



TWENTY-SIX

Decker

I walked from the field after my pregame ritual to our locker room, absolutely floating. I felt like

kicking my heels and whistling. A 6 foot 4 tatted-up athlete didn’t do things like that. But inside?

Fucking cartwheels.

Because I had been inside Hannah Strong the night before, and it was even more glorious than I could have imagined.

And boy, had I imagined it over the last few weeks. Alone. With my cock.

It was so much better with her in the flesh. That perfect, naked flesh. The helping, the sucking, the

“Hey, Decker!” I heard from behind me. I turned.

“Wally! How you doing, buddy?” I saw Wally, one of the LA Knights’ long-time security guards

with a big smile on his face. We handshaked into a hug.

“I’m good, I’m good.”

“How’s the family?” I asked.

“Oh, you’ve done it now,” he said with a laugh and pulled out his wallet. Inside were several

pictures of his wife and three kids. They had big, beautiful smiles on their faces but didn’t come close

to the smile on his face as he showed them to me.

I shook my head. “Amazing. They’re growing so fast. But not you. Only you would still have

pictures in a wallet instead of on a phone.”

“Yeah, I’m old school. Speaking of, you’re almost as old as me now. When are you going to get

yourself some of this?” he asked, pointing at his family.

“I know you’re tired of me beating your team, but I got a lot of football left in me.”

He smiled. “You’re going down today, but a job’s a job. There ain’t nothing better than finding a

good woman, making her love yours, and then making a bunch of new people out of that love.”

Wally gave me a variation of this speech every time I saw him. I first met him when I was a

hotshot rookie. I was in some place that apparently I wasn’t supposed to be, and back then you

couldn’t tell me where I could and could not go. But Wally could. He didn’t care who I was and

cussed me out. I appreciated that. And every year he'd show me his family. The only things that had

changed were his hair was grayer, the kids were bigger, and his pride in his family somehow greater.

But there was something else different this year. I found it harder to deflect his point.

I thought of Hannah. It was brief.

But I imagined us married with kids.

I shook my head. "Maybe someday, Wally. I'm glad you have your beautiful family to go home to

after I destroy your team today."

He laughed. "This is why I'm trying to help you! You're going to lose so bad today, and you have

no one." We both laughed and bro hugged, and I thought of Hannah again. Because apparently I

couldn't stop thinking about her.

"Good seeing you, Wally."

"You too, Deck."

I burst into the locker room. I was all high fives and head nods and finger guns. I did my fourteen-

part hand shake with JJ Ware and didn't miss one move.

"What up, Dash?" I pointed at him, smiling.

He smirked. "Well, if it isn't—"

"The guy you're going to get the ball back for so I can jam it down the Knights' throats? You're

damn right."

"Yeah, well, you need me because—"

"You know it. You're a beast out there. A beast. Are you a beast?"

Dash was lost in the woods. "Uh, yeah. I'm a beast..."

"Fuck yeah," I got near his face, eyes locked. "You get out there, you unleash hell."

Mouth agape, he took a moment before he nodded. "Yeah, I will."

I clapped him on the shoulder. I went to my locker to get dressed. Mo's locker was next to mine.

Always had been, since our first year together. He shook his head as he taped up an ankle.

“Did you at least take the condom off before you showed up?” he said quietly so only I could hear.

“What are you talking about?”

He stopped what he was doing and gave me a look. “Come on, man.”

I laughed. “Yeah, all right. I didn’t go the prize-fighter route and abstain. But at least I’ll be loose out there.” I wagged my eyebrows.

“Who was she?”

I shrugged. I didn’t want to lie to him. It never worked anyway. “Does it matter? Their names

never mattered before.” I tried to sound cocky, but I didn’t really like being that guy anymore. I also viscerally didn’t like describing Hannah that way.

Mo’s voice got real quiet. “Deck, that hasn’t been you in a long time.” He was chiding me, but it

felt really good that he was on my side. I figured everyone saw me the way they used to see me. And I

questioned if I’d really changed or just gotten busy with football. But Mo saw me. I decided to tell him the truth.

I looked around and leaned in. “It was Hannah.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“What? How did you know?”

He gave a little shrug. “She hadn’t cleaned up the ice when I went for a walk around the hotel.”

“How do you know it was her ice?”

“Is that really what you want to ask me?”

I held his stupid penetrating gaze for a moment then sighed. “No. You think it was a big mistake?”

“Was it a one-time thing?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Then I don’t think it was a mistake,” he said.

“Wait. Wouldn’t it be better if it was a one-time thing?”

He shook his head and smiled. “You seem happy. Back in the day when you had a night like that,

you weren't like this. *This*”—he indicated to me with his hand—“is something entirely different. And

I think it's a good thing.”

“Crazy. Go figure.”

“Yeah, I guess Jerry Strong in a hot female body was all you needed.” He laughed, and my face twisted in disgust.

“Ugh. You son of bitch.” I laughed and punched his arm.

Of course half of her came from Jerry. But she was certainly her own woman. Which was a good

thing. Or Mo would have decimated any chance of something developing between Hannah and me.

We all got dressed, and I gathered the team for a quick talk.

“We're about as far from home as you can be without being out of the country, but it doesn't feel

like it.” I looked around at the faces of all my teammates. They were focused. Ready. Good. I just

needed to add one more thing. “It doesn't feel like it because I brought most of the people who matter

to me here with me. The people who have my back and I have theirs. Most of the people. We know

there's a big piece missing.”

The room got quiet.

“If Jerry were here, he'd tell us a story about Hog.” Some of the veterans laughed, remembering.

“For you young guys, ‘Hog’ was the nickname of the greatest offensive lineman who ever played.

He'd tell some sort of story about ‘Hog overcoming this’ or ‘Hog overcoming that,’ like ‘Hog’ was

Babe the pig or something.” Got a pretty decent laugh from that one. “I don't have any good Hog

stories. But those smiles I see now, I want those out there. This has not been an easy year. Not by a

long shot. But we've put in the work. And the man who told us legends about the greatest of all time

told those stories because he believed we could achieve anything the hog did. He believed in you. I

believe in you. Believe in each other. So let's take all the tragedy and frustration and angst and let it

fucking go. Go out there and let it fucking rip!"

Cheers, clapping, and shouting.

"Come on, bring it in. *Believe* on three."

Thousands of pounds of dude all huddled as close together as possible with our hands in the air.

"One, two, three...BELIEVE!!!" We all shouted in unison as we dropped our hands down. I

smiled as I jogged toward the locker room exit with my teammates.

I had missed having a Strong inspire me since Jerry died.

I was glad to have it back.



TWENTY-SEVEN

Hannah

I stood outside the locker room with my pass hanging around my neck, wearing my sweater set, jeans,

and on-duty boots. LA was so laid-back. I didn't hate it as much as I thought I would.

I hadn't seen or spoken to Decker since I left his room last night. The players had a strict pregame

ritual, and I didn't want to mess anything up for him. Well, I didn't want to mess anything up any more

than I already had, I mean.

We had only spent a couple of hours together the night before, but so much had changed between

us. It felt like that for me anyway. Our ability to compartmentalize would really be tested today.

Although a part of me still believed this was just how things went for Decker. Bed some floozy one

night and then win one for the team the next day. I happened to be the lucky floozy that week.

Another part of me knew that he wouldn't have let any of that happen if it didn't matter to him. He

understood the risk I was taking. Even if it was just one night. I really had to hand it to Decker though.

He somehow managed to both compartmentalize and sum up his entire personality in his text early that morning.

The message was just a folded-hands emoji, a fire emoji, a rose emoji, and a winking-face emoji.

I responded with an American football emoji and clapping hands.

And that was it.

No hearts.

But no eye-rolling or swearing-face emojis either.

It was progress.

And now we had a game to win.

The doors to the locker room opened, and my team started pouring out. I clapped for them and

said really original things like, "Yeah! Go team! You'll do great!" At least half of the men looked

totally shocked to see me, but Buddy stopped to give me a little pat on the shoulder, even though he

was talking on his headset. I wasn't sure if there was some other way I was supposed to show my

support and make my presence here felt.

Should I have jumped out of a Tomcats logo-shaped cake or something?

Just as I was wondering what I should have been doing, the man who couldn't stop telling me how

I should do things appeared and locked eyes with me. We were surrounded by people, and I could tell

he was in game-mode, but for a millisecond I felt that connection between us again. It was a flicker

and then it was gone, but it was enough.

“Hey,” he said with the briefest of nods.

I had to clear my throat. “Hello. Go team!”

I hadn’t spent much time up close with Decker when he was in his uniform, but Lord Almighty,

what a glorious thing to behold. Equally as glorious as the thing I beheld the night before. But once

again, I felt something I wasn’t expecting to feel—proud. I was so proud of him. I was proud of my

team. And okay, yes, I was proud of myself for hitting that.

Decker held back to talk with me, clutching his helmet between his arm and his waist. “Good to

see you.”

“And you.”

“You’re welcome inside there, you know? The locker room?”

“Oh yeah, sure, I know—”

“You didn’t know that, did you?”

“Well, no, actually. It didn’t seem appropriate for me to be in there when my players were naked.”

He smirked just the tiniest bit, but we both managed to sidestep the topic of naked people in

locker rooms. “You can come in for the pregame speech. You really should show up for that, actually.

Your dad sometimes used to give them along with Buddy. I took over for him.”

I felt the ghost of a tingle at the tip of my nose—the idea of Decker taking over for my father. But I

shook it off.

“I gave a hell of a speech today,” he continued, grinning. “I was inspired.”

And now I was blushing. I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “Well that’s...good to hear. Go

team.”

“You said that.”

“Yeah. I’ll show up for the next one.”

“Good. See you after the game.” He started to strut toward the exit to the field. When he was

about five steps away, he stopped and turned back. “You’re Hog...” His eyes were wide as he came

to some realization that involved calling me a hog.

“Excuse me?”

He walked back to join me. “When Jerry gave speeches, he would always talk about Hog. Hog

was the most determined person he knew. How every time Hog fell down, not a second would go by

before Hog would get back up again. He never used pronouns when he was talking about Hog. *Hog*

made up for every single shortcoming with determination and hard work. Hog was so much more

capable than Hog even knew. ”

My face was all scrunched up. I was a little worried I had banged something loose in Decker’s

brain. “Why Hog? What does that mean?”

“Hog was John Hannah’s nickname,” he said, like he was giving me the passcode to the kingdom.

“He was talking about you, Hannah. That must have been his secret nickname for you. He was

thinking about you all the time.”

And I guess he was giving me a code to something that I didn’t know I needed.

The tip of my nose was tingling again.

The rims of my eyes were tingling.

Johnny Decker had just told me something that no one else on earth could have told me, and I

really wanted to cry and hug him for that.

But he had a game to win, and there was no crying in football.

Well, there was, if you were a man.

If you were a woman and the youngest franchise owner in the history of the NFL and you were

still learning the difference between a 46 defense and a Cover 2 you couldn’t cry in public. Certainly

not in a stadium. Definitely not when you were talking to the starting quarterback you rode like a bouncy ball.

But he managed to make me feel closer to him *and* my father at that moment.

“I gotta go,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“Yep. I’m great. Go team!”

“Jerry named you after the greatest offensive lineman of all time,” he said as he walked away

from me backward. “Remember that.”

I nodded. “Thank you, Decker.” I barely had a voice, but he heard me.

“Anytime, Hog.” He grinned, then turned and jogged off to the field.

I watched him go. For football pants reasons. And also because I had a realization too.

Last night wasn’t a mistake.



TWENTY-EIGHT

Hannah

We had been back in Boston for the week. There was the usual awkward transitional period upon

returning from having hotel sex in another town. I say “the usual,” but I was only assuming it was the

usual thing that happened. I had never had hotel sex with an employee of any kind, much less mind-

blowing hotel sex with a superhot star quarterback in *any town* before. But we got through it and

found a new way to be *somewhat* together at his place at night a few times.

I never spent the night though.

We were always busy during the day, and when he called me on my cell phone, I called him Jack.

He called me Dick. It wasn't funny. But it was our thing. It was Saturday, and I was at the office—that

was not unusual. But it was our bye week, which meant there was no scheduled game that week. I

knew that because I Googled it. My assistant wasn't there. The whole building was practically empty.

I loved it. I could focus. I could be productive.

And then Decker called me out of the blue, and I was so excited to see his name on my phone I

almost didn't want to ruin things by answering it.

"Hello?"

"We getting together tonight, Dick?"

"Hi. I wish. I have a dinner thing with a potential sponsor."

"Oh yeah? Just you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just you representing the team?"

"As the owner of the team, yes. Why? Did you want to go too? As another representative of the team?"

"No. I've seen you eat. No thank you."

"Well, then I guess I'll see you tomorrow maybe."

"Are you going to the charity tailgate thing tomorrow?" he asked.

"You mean the charity barbecue thing I approved in the budget? In the parking lot?"

"There will be barbecued meat involved, yes. As well as people you will have to talk to and get your picture taken with."

"Well...I really don't want to stand around getting my picture taken while I'm talking to people

and getting little pieces of meat stuck between my teeth. Like you said, you've seen me eat. Can we

get together afterward?” I didn’t sound too needy or desperate or anything. “For a little while?”

“We can. But only if you go to the tailgate party. You really should be going to more events, Dick.

This one will be fun.”



“It really doesn’t sound fun to me.

“I’m telling you it will be fun.”

“In a parking lot? What if it rains?”

“People still show up when it rains. They set up canopies. And I seem to recall you having a lot

of fun and looking really good in the rain.”

I was blushing. Head to toe, inside and out. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I think you do. But it won’t rain tomorrow.”

“Because you say so?”

“Yes. Because I say so. And I’ll see you there. Because I say so. Wear something unappealing so I

won’t be turned on the whole time.”

“But...even if I wear something unappealing on the outside, won’t you still be wondering what

I’m wearing underneath?”

He lowered his voice. “Fucking hell, Dick. What are you trying to do to me?”

“It was an actual question! I really don’t want you to be turned on all the time. Believe it or not,

Jack, I’m trying to compartmentalize. That means *not* being attractive to you when your head should

be in the game. Or the charity event. Or the film watching or the meeting or whatever it is you’re

doing right now.”

“You’ll have to try harder, then.”

“I will. And to be clear—we’re talking about going to the event separately, right? Not, like, for a

date?”

“Is this a trick question? Because it feels like a trap.”

“Please. You know I don’t want people to know we’re...whatever...
ing...with each other. Trust

me, that’s the last thing I want.”

“Okay. Then yes, we’re talking about going separately. But you can meet me at my place after.”

“Okay. Good. Then we need to remember to keep up appearances. By which I mean I will act like

I still find you arrogant and condescending, and you need to pretend to still be annoyed and

aggravated by everything I say and do.”

“Trust me, I won’t be pretending.”

“Trust me, neither will I.”

He lowered his voice again. “Fuck. Now I’m thinking about what you’re going to be wearing

under your clothes tomorrow.”

“Would it be better if I don’t wear anything under my clothes tomorrow?” I asked innocently.

“God dammit, Dick.”

“I was just trying to annoy and aggravate you.”

“You don’t have to try, but game on. See you tomorrow. You probably didn’t give them a big

enough budget for toothpicks, so maybe you should bring your own.”

“If you’re trying to be arrogant and condescending—”

“I don’t have to try.”

“Game on.”

Decker was right. It didn’t rain on the day of the tailgate party. It was a beautiful autumn day. And he

was also right about the toothpicks—I had to bring my own. It wasn’t in the budget, but if Johnny

wanted to, he could have had an entire life-size stadium built out of toothpicks with a tiny portion of

his Manscape money alone. Since I wasn’t planning to attend the event, I also did not approve the

menu. I should have brought a vegetable in my backpack as well. If Chef Pierre Laurent were here, he

would have set the parking lot on fire.

Or stuffed his face with every bacon-wrapped thing the WAGs had to offer.

WAGs stood for Wives and Girlfriends. A term reserved for the wives and girlfriends of famous

athletes. That was one football-related term I did not have to Google. I had heard my mother and aunt

use it all the time when I was growing up. They weren't always being derisive either.

I wondered what my mother would think if she knew I was a secret almost-WAG. Who was I

kidding—she'd be thrilled. She'd seen Johnny Decker.

But I wasn't really his *G*. And I couldn't even imagine being his *W*. I was his *B*—his *boss*. Not his

bitch.

This was a work function, not a date.

Which was why I would not be discussing my underwear situation with him here, no matter how

badly he wanted to know what was going on beneath my not-at-all-sexy outfit.

I had spent plenty of time admiring the amount of money the paid parking brought in for the

franchise, but I had my own space in the garage. So I hadn't spent much time in this parking lot

outside the stadium. It had a vaguely park-like feel to it. There were trees and patches of grass. There

were lawn games set up on the grass, trucks and buses parked all over. There was a college band

playing a Beyonce medley on a stage. There were cheerleaders. There were red-and-black canopies,

red-and-black folding chairs, red-and-black balloons tied to everything. Everyone here was wearing

the team colors—including me. I'd even used red-and-black hair bands for my ponytail.

I hadn't been to a gathering like this since my father's funeral. That event wasn't exactly somber,

but this was definitely festive. It was the kind of gathering of friends and family that I rarely went to—

that I rarely got invited to. I didn't feel like I belonged here, but I wanted to. That longing to belong

was a new feeling. Or maybe it was a very old feeling that I hadn't allowed myself to feel in a couple of decades.

I had come late and missed the arrival of the players. The party was in full swing. I'd planned it

this way because I knew people would have loosened up by the time I got here and wouldn't pay as much attention to me.

Nancy called out and waved a barbecued turkey leg at me. Laurie, the head of PR, did a spit take

when she saw me. Guess I should have told her I'd be coming today. She gave me a look that meant

— *Can we do photo ops?!* I graciously smiled and shook my head, pointed to my watch, indicating

that I wouldn't be here long enough for that. She gave me a very disappointed thumbs-up and went back to guzzling her beer.

I continued doing my circle around the lot. I had perfected this technique in grad school. Jen

would always badger me to show up at parties when I preferred to stay home and study. I did a solo

promenade around every party at a reasonable pace and pretended to be looking for someone in

particular. This way, most people didn't stop to chat with me but everyone noticed that I was there.

The mayor tipped his baseball cap at me. Coaches and players gave me friendly nods when I caught

their eye. Their wives and girlfriends looked me up and down as they leaned in to whisper to each

other. So many happy kids were running around, laughing and playing.

And the shirtless dudes in red-and-black body paint.

Oh Lord, the body paint dudes.

I'd seen them at the games.

“Thanks for coming.” I nodded at them. They had paid to be here, and that money would benefit a

program that matched low-income students with much-needed mentors. These men were loud,

obnoxious, drunk idiots, but no one would have known I thought so because my smile was genuine. I

was grateful to them for supporting our charitable foundation and our team.

And I was smiling because I knew I was going to see Decker.

My heart was racing, in fact.

He was the particular someone I was looking for.

I saw him almost every day, so it didn’t really make sense that I would have this much

anticipation, but it was the first time we’d be at a fun event like this together. Well, not together. But at

the same time. And he wanted me here. Well, he thought I should be here as the owner of the team. But

he wanted to see me later.

That meant something to me.

I would rather die than let him know it, but I’d had a smile on my face ever since our phone call

the night before.

I was ready to do our thing. Our banter thing. Our friction thing—but in a totally family-friendly

kind of way.

And as always, I heard him before I saw him.

Or I felt him before I heard him.

Instead of storming down the hall to my office, he was somewhere out here laughing.

I found him playing ring toss with some little kids. They must have been Mo’s children. Decker

was holding a little girl on his hip as he tossed a wooden ring around the neck of a painted wine

bottle. He cheered on the little boy who took his turn after him. Mo and his wife were taking pictures

off to the side.

Decker put the little girl down on the ground and danced with her to that Beyonce song. He had

such an easy way with her, and it shook me to my soul. Or I guess it shook me to my ovaries. My

ovaries were quaking. And crying. They were having a fucking meltdown.

How dare he be so good with children?

Who did he think he was—being all cute with little girls in pigtails?

That wasn't his thing.

His thing was being cocky and cool and making touchdowns and wrecking big-girl panties.

He wasn't supposed to be adorable Uncle Johnny too.

Neither my brain nor my body was prepared to handle that.

I was about to walk away when he finally looked up and saw me. We were about fifty feet from

each other. People kept passing between us. But when we locked eyes, I felt something. I knew he felt

it too. We weren't at a game, we weren't in my office, we weren't in bed. We were out in the world,

at a family event, and we wanted to be there together.

I wanted to hold hands with him, and I wanted to share a red-and-black cupcake with him, and I

wanted to be the one who was dancing with him to the Beyonce song.

I wanted to belong here with him.

But I didn't.

And I couldn't.

I frowned at him and then walked over to one of the buffet tables to get myself a slider or six. I'd

get my picture taken with the mayor and some adorable kids while laughing lightheartedly, and then I

would be on my way. I didn't need to see Decker later. I needed to keep him away from my ovaries.

And all the parts that led to them. Including my brain. Far, far away.

But first I would check my phone because I felt it vibrating in my pocket.

There was a text notification from Decker.

DECKER: Where are you running off to, Strong?

I probably shouldn't text him back if I want to keep him away from my ovaries and the parts that lead to them.

DECKER: I thought I told you to wear something that wouldn't turn me on.

Well, I didn't want to be rude.

ME: You said to wear something unappealing. I'm wearing oversized black sweatpants and a red sweater. How is this turning you on?

DECKER: You're wearing a remarkably thin child's size sweater, Strong. I can see the outline of your bra from all the way over here.

DECKER: Your black bra.

DECKER: You know I love that bra.

DECKER: You're the devil.

I wasn't. He was. *He* was the devil.

ME: It's not my fault that the only red sweater I have shrunk when it was laundered by the

hotel staff. And I had no idea you loved this black bra. And if it's that troubling for you, I can

get the matching cardigan from my car. But it shrank in the wash too. <woman shrugging emoji>

That wasn't flirtation. Those were facts.

DECKER: You're wearing red panties, aren't you?

ME: Are you asking as my employee or as a concerned Tomcats fan?

DECKER: I'm asking as the guy who'll be removing them with his teeth in a couple of hours.

Shit.

ME: Then I guess you'll find out in a couple of hours.

Oops.

ME: <smiling face with horns emoji>

Crap.

I slid my phone back into my pocket without even waiting to see if he'd respond to that. I had gotten

way too good at flirting with him. And I liked it way too much. I glanced back at him and found him

smirking at me as he tossed a Nerf football to Mo's son. I casually turned my attention to the cheerleaders, but my ovaries were doing back handsprings and round-offs.

I figured I could stick around for a little while longer. I grabbed a bottle of Sam Adams and a hot dog and wandered around. I chatted with people. Locals. Fans. Everyone was so happy and friendly with me. I figured they must not have realized who I was.

"Having a good time, Ms. Strong?" Decker was standing right behind me. His tone wasn't

flirtatious at all—in fact, it was downright condescending.

I turned to face him and smiled. "Well, I *was* anyway."

He grinned and tapped at his teeth. "You got a toothpick on you? You got something..."

My hand went straight to my mouth.

"I'm just kidding." He laughed.

I felt around my teeth with the tip of my tongue. "That's not funny."

"Yeah. It is."

The event photographer came over and asked us if he could get a picture of the two of us.

Together. I shook my head vehemently, but Decker said, "Absolutely. We'd love that."

"I better not have hot dog between my teeth," I muttered.

"Enh. They'll Photoshop it out."

I glared up at him.

"I'm just kidding. You're fine."

He leaned in, all toothy, casually draping his arm around my shoulder, and I stood there, frowning,

stiff as a board. But my secret red panties were wet as...as all my panties had been since the moment

I first laid eyes on Johnny Decker.

The photographer was too polite to ask me to smile, and Decker was deeply amused by my

unhappiness. He winked at me and then pretended to yawn. "They're red, aren't they?" he said from

behind his hand.

“None of your business.”

“I’m right. I can feel it.”

“What is wrong with you? Talk about something else,” I muttered.
“Have you eaten yet?”

“Oh yeah. You tried the short ribs?” He patted his flat belly. “Let’s go get you some.”

We strolled over to one of the many grills.

I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He had such an easygoing charm about him. The way

he looked everyone in the eye. Old ladies and men. Little kids and teammates. But he wasn’t a golden

boy. He was just a...a genuinely nice guy who worked hard and was good to people?

Was that possible?

It must have been the Midwestern thing.

“You’ve really never been to a tailgate party before, have you?” he asked. It wasn’t accusatory

and he wasn’t even making fun of me. He was sort of shocked.

“No. I almost went to one in college. But I didn’t.”

“Wow. That’s a great story.” He looked around. “I think there’s a guy from the *Chronicle* here.

You should tell him about that.”

I punched his arm. “I went to parties. Just not the tailgate kind.”

“Not even when you were little? With your dad?”

I had no recollection of parties with my dad, and I wanted to change the subject. “No. You did, I

suppose? In college, obviously, but growing up?”

“Yeah, my mom loved tailgate parties. Still does.”

“Yeah? Do you have brothers or sisters?”

“Yeah. Big brother.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.” I instantly regretted saying that because it sounded like I’d done

research on him or something. Which I had. Weeks ago. But in a *team owner who needs to*

understand her star asset kind of way. Not in a *grown woman with a stupid crush on a crazy-hot*

athlete kind of way. And I definitely didn't ask the next question in a team owner who's falling for

the impossibly sexy alpha man who was just playing with little kids
kind of way. "Are you close?

With your family?"

"Yeah. Well. With my parents." He gazed off into the distance. "Things are a little weird with my

brother and me, I guess. Sometimes." He shook his head. "Or maybe not weird between us, but I feel

weird about things. With him. He's...you'd like him. He's great. He's a really good guy. His kids are

amazing. I mean, they're little turds but they're amazing. He's divorced. I don't get to see them enough

anymore. That's probably my fault too."

Oh no. He was opening up to me. In public. And I was imagining him with kids again. We were in

line for short ribs, surrounded by people, and he was having feelings. I was having feelings. I wanted

to hold his hand and rest my head against his shoulder and gaze up at him lovingly. But I couldn't. So I

asked, "Where do they live?"

"Ohio." He shoved his hands into his pockets and stared down at the ground. "Garrett was the

reason I wanted to play football. He was incredible. So much better than me. All the scouts had their

eye on him. Would have had an amazing career. But he got injured in college. And now he coaches

high school football in Cleveland. But you know...he says he's happy, so..."

I couldn't stop myself from touching his arm. Just a little squeeze. Without looking at him. "Do

you feel guilty because you're the one who went pro?"

"Nah... Maybe."

"Is that why you're holding yourself back?"

"Excuse me? How am I holding myself back?"

"Never mind."

He laughed and shook his head again. “Wow. You are not good at parties. No wonder no one ever invited you.”

“Excuse *me*? Who said I didn’t get invited to parties? I got invited all the time. I just didn’t care

about going to parties once I turned twenty-one. It just so happens I was super fun at parties in college

before that. A legend, one might say.”

Shit. What am I getting myself into?

“A legend, huh?”

Shut it down, Hannah. Shut. It. Down.

“Yup.”

“For being fun?”

“*Super* fun.”

His face lit up. I felt a dare coming on. A bet of some kind. And I was dying to prove myself to

him. Again.

Crap.



TWENTY-NINE

Decker

I loved her pretty little mouth for a lot of reasons. Kissing it. All the things it had done for and with

my cock. And right now, getting her equally pretty little ass in trouble.

“I sincerely doubt that,” I said.

“I know you do, but you’re just wrong,” she said with a cute little shrug.

I tilted my head toward the keg. “Well, you know a legendary fun person would chug a beer with

me.” I walked over to the keg and asked the guy running it for two beers. He poured one and handed it

to me. I felt her eyes on me the whole time.

He started to pour the other, but Hannah stopped him. “That’s not necessary.”

“Come on... A legendary partier such as yourself can’t handle chugging one beer?”

She folded her arms, and I tipped my head back and chugged the beer in five gulps. The painted-

up dudes around me cheered, and I held up the plastic cup.

Hannah smirked and shook her head gently. “That’s not how the legend was born.” She sauntered

over to the keg, picked up the tap, and put the faucet in her delectable mouth.

I’d never been jealous of a beer tap before.

She held out her arms, never breaking eye contact with me. The guys around us realized what she

was asking and looked to me. *Really?* they asked silently. *It’s what the lady wants*, I indicated with a

shrug. Two big guys gently took her arms and lifted her, placing her legs on their shoulders. Another

guy started pumping the tap. The rest began chanting, “STRONG! STRONG! STRONG!” and Hannah

Strong began chugging beer.

I was impressed. And not just by how much fun and life was underneath that worried,

professional demeanor. I hadn’t talked about my brother with anyone in a long time. Watching her

upside down, beer leaking from her mouth... Clearly we brought something out in each other.

Something different.

Something special.

I was also impressed because the way she was being held, those thin black sweatpants were stretched across her delicious ass, becoming semitransparent. I could see the outline of her red panties peeking through. She was really becoming a team player. I also loved that even when I was wrong, I was right.

Laurie ran over. I couldn't tell if she sensed a PR nightmare or opportunity, but her eyes were wide and mouth open. "Oh my God! What is she doing?"

Hannah pulled the tap from her mouth, and the guys let her down. They all cheered and lifted her onto their shoulders like she was a coach who just won the Super Bowl.

I clapped and grinned like an idiot. "Becoming an absolute legend."



THIRTY

Decker

There have been amazing revolutions in the last few years in the field of sports analytics. In baseball they used to only care about hits. Now we knew that getting on base—even if you were walked—mattered too. In basketball, they apparently could measure a guy's defensive rating as well as they could measure his offensive rating. In football? We never used to go for it on fourth down. Now the

stats nerds told us to go for it all the time.

Jerry might have looked like an oil tycoon, Buddy like he was one jaunty hat away from being in a

black-and-white film, and I looked like I belonged in a motorcycle gang or prison. But we all

embraced the analytics revolution. We would all go for anything that helped give us an edge.

But there was one place where the stats guys would never convince me they were right.

They didn't believe in winning streaks.

They didn't believe "the zone" was real. They thought that if I made a bunch of completions in a

row, I wasn't more statistically likely to make it or miss it. The one throw had no correlation to the

next.

They were wrong.

I was a two-time Super Bowl-winning QB. I'd been the MVP of the league. Of course I thought I

was going to make every throw. I wouldn't have thrown them otherwise.

But there were times where I knew I had been in the zone. Where we couldn't stop scoring and I

was unconscious with the ball. There wasn't even a possibility of missing.

Now, what I had just discovered was that feeling could extend to my personal life off the field.

Since Hannah came into my life, or rather since we got together and she started being less frustrating,

she made me feel things I'd never felt before. Not just my body. Not just my heart. Even moments that

she wasn't a part of—she infused them with joy.

Was that what love felt like?

Maybe.

I wasn't sure.

I thought I'd been in love before. Candace, my girlfriend in college, meant a lot to me. But in a lot

of ways my dating career was like my playing career. Lots of early wins that I didn't appreciate.

I'd been young, 6'4", and had a six pack.

Now I was older.

And rich.

And famous.

And I still had that six pack.

Just being honest. You didn't have to be a stat nerd to do that math. Female attention had never been hard to come by.

Hannah was completely different. Her affection had been hard won. Breaking down her walls.

Breaking down mine. More than that, it was everything she was and everything she made me and

everything she made me want to be. Ever since being with her, I was in the zone. Food tasted better,

laughs were louder, and small things just seemed to go my way.

Another thing about being in the zone—at its absolute peak—that was where the truly mystical

and crazy could happen. One time I made sixteen completions in a row, and on the seventeenth it

bounced off my receiver's hands and into the defender, but then it bounced off the defender's helmet

and landed in the arms of a completely different one of my receivers, who took it to the house. *That*

kind of crazy.

That moment in real life?

That was when Dash fucking Taylor texted me, asking me to come over, needing my help.

I GPSed my way to his condo and knocked on the door. I had zero expectations. I couldn't even

imagine what he asked me over for.

Dash opened the door, and I immediately noticed he wasn't wearing his normal smug grin. "Hey,

Decker."

"Dash. What's up?" I wasn't unfriendly but actually trying to be professional.

“Come in,” he said and moved his sizable frame out of the way to allow me inside.

I checked out his place. He was taken early in the draft, so he got a pretty big bonus and a hefty

contract. You never knew how guys a few months out of college were going to handle that. But his

place was nicely furnished and clean. Whether he did it himself or hired someone to do it, that was

better decision making than I expected out of Dash.

“Beer?”

I shook my head. “Nah. I’m good. Why am I here, Dash?”

He clapped his hands together uncomfortably. I had never seen him like this. Not smug. Not

arrogant. He looked...bashful. “I...uh, I need your help.”

“With what?”

“With that.” He pointed.

I followed and saw a box, tape, and wrapping paper. Much of the tape was balled up, the

wrapping paper was half on the box, some was twisted in a cone shape. It took me a moment to

process what the office supply store massacre meant.

“Were you trying to wrap a present?” I looked over at him.

The giant hung his head. “Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you follow a YouTube video or something?”

He looked up at me with a hangdog expression. “I did. I don’t know where I went wrong.”

I pointed. “That piece of tape right there. You just put it directly on the box. It’s not holding any

wrapping at all. You’re supposed to tape the wrapping paper.”

“I know it’s not good, man. I called for help.”

I chuckled. “All right, I think I’ll take that beer.” I removed my jacket.

It took us about fifteen minutes, but in the end we had something that wouldn’t be too

embarrassing to give to someone. But the edges still didn’t quite line up and the tape pattern didn’t

make much sense. But at least it covered the whole box.

Dash stared at it. “I thought you’d be better at this.”

“Given what I walked into, you really shouldn’t be throwing stones.”
He held up his hands. “I’m not saying I’m any better. I called you because you’re so precise I figured you’d be able to do this.”
“I’m precise on the football field. I had a personal assistant who used to do this type of stuff for me.”
“What happened to her?”
I hesitated. “She, we, uh—”
“You banged her, didn’t you?” Dash gave me a cocky grin. It wasn’t his usual challenge. He wasn’t fucking with me. He was shooting the shit.
I grinned too. “Yeah.”
We laughed and took pulls off our beers.
“Women can be complicated.” Dash was staring at the gift again.
“Yeah. That they can be.” I wanted to ask but thought better of it.
“They can also be pretty great.” I thought of Hannah, and a warm feeling spread through me. *I should get her a present*, I thought.
“Yeah,” Dash said, but he was deep in thought somewhere else.
“Anyway, I should get going,” I said, rising.
Dash shook his head. “Yeah, ‘course.” We walked to the door, and I opened it. “Hey, Decker.”
“Yeah?” I turned back to him.
“Thanks. And...uh...sorry.”
I nodded. He didn’t have to say anything more. I held out my fist.
“You’re welcome. Let’s kick some ass on the field. We’re better at that than wrapping presents.”
“Fuck yeah,” he said and bumped my fist with his.
I left.
Top of the world.
And wanting to buy Hannah a present.
Just because. Women could be complicated. And frustrating. And think they should meddle in football operations before they were ready and look completely fuckable all the time when you weren’t in a place to fuck them.

But they could also ground you. And make you giddy. In a manly way, of course. And they could

make you feel things you didn't think were in the cards for you.

Yeah, things couldn't have been any better when I walked out of Dash's condo. I had won over my toughest teammate.

And I was with the girl beyond my dreams, because I couldn't have dreamed up someone as amazing as Hannah.

Of course, I should have expected what happened next. After that crazy pass that bounced off my

guy and the other team's guy and then into my guy's hand for a touchdown, the very next play I threw a

pick to the other team and they ran it in for a touchdown of their own. I played like crap the rest of the game and we lost.

That was the brutal truth about winning streaks, whether they existed or not.

They didn't last forever.

Chapter Thirty-One

INSERT: Flashy graphics, **EXCITING MUSIC.** Jump shot! Home run! Long pass! **TITLE CARD:**

SPORTS DESK.

BILL NEWMORE

Welcome to the Sports Desk. I'm Bill Newmore. If you thought she would come in as a figurehead,

you'd be mistaken. Hannah Strong, daughter of the late Jerry Strong and new owner of the Boston

Tomcats, hasn't wasted much time. News of a blockbuster trade between the Tomcats and the San

Francisco Condors broke today. Involving a whopping fifteen total players, pick swaps, and cash

considerations, the Tomcats traded highly paid veterans for younger and cheaper talent. Ms. Strong

held a press conference at Minuteman Stadium earlier today, explaining the move as a win for Boston.

CUT TO: HANNAH STRONG in front of a microphone stand, cameras flashing.

HANNAH STRONG

I understand people might be shocked, but this move was carefully considered and negotiated by myself and our general manager, Walt Lipniki. We feel this deal gives us the most flexibility in being able to make the Boston Tomcats competitive for years to come.

REPORTER

What about this year?

HANNAH STRONG

We're still fighting. We're not giving up. The players we acquired are ready to contribute now.

INT - SPORTS DESK STUDIO

BILL NEWMORE

Ms. Strong may feel that way, but others are not so sure...

CUT TO:

EXT - MAN-ON-THE-STREET INTERVIEWS

A reporter's arm extends a microphone to a white-haired man.

CAPTION - PHIL GRACE, LOCAL FAN

REPORTER

What did you think of the trade?

PHIL GRACE

I think it was a mistake.

CUT TO:

CAPTION - KATIE-LYNN HAVERFORD, DECKER FAN

KATIE-LYNN HAVERFORD

I don't think she has any idea what she's doing, and she's crushing Johnny's chance of another championship.

(Looks at the camera)

We love you, Johnny!

CUT TO:

CAPTION - BILLY O'SULLIVAN, TOMCATS MEGA-FAN

BILLY

This stinks! It all stinks! She's a plant for New York, I'm tellin' ya. Givin' away all our veterans for a

bunch of cheap bums. Decker and her father and Coach Bud made them winners, and she's destroying everything they built. They're gonna be the (BEEP)in' Pussies again!

REPORTER

Sir, you can't swear on TV.

BILLY

It's not my fault! I didn't name the team. I didn't trade away those *playahs*. It's the world that's makin' me this upset! I'm the victim *heah*!



THIRTY-TWO

Decker

I stormed by Hannah's front desk. I expected Nancy to put up some sort of fuss. But she just nodded

and said, "Good morning, Jonathan." I kind of wanted a fuss. The plan involved a fuss. But I didn't let

her oddly gentle welcome throw me off my game. I stayed mad and burst through the doors to

Hannah's office.

"What the hell, Hannah?"

She didn't move from her desk. Just raised an eyebrow. "Decker?" She was calm too. Did they

have a heavy lunch or something?

"Don't you 'Decker' me. You need to imagine me slamming a newspaper down on your desk with

the headline *Goofy owner screws up team.*" I was loud.

She remained quiet. "Why don't you have a newspaper?"

"What am I? Eighty? Nobody under fifty buys a paper newspaper anymore."

She rose from her desk and walked around it. Her movement was as gentle, calm, and deliberate as her voice.

"You're upset about the trade?" she asked like she was a therapist.

"That's putting it mildly."

"Do you want to yell at me, or..." She looked me up and down, and something burned in her eyes.

"Do you want to... *discuss* it?"

I chewed the side of my mouth. My dick clearly voted to "discuss" it, as I started getting hard

immediately. My voice dropped to match her quiet intensity. "I'm willing to...talk about it." It would

be the last thing she would win in the next half hour.

She sashayed to her office door, putting extra swing in those hips, and my gaze shamelessly

devoured that extra sway. I overheard her say something to Nancy, asking her to get a coffee from

down the road, Nancy protesting a little, then leaving. I couldn't tell you exactly what was said

between them, as there wasn't enough blood in my brain.

Wait, was this her strategy? I thought I would angry-fuck her while giving her a piece of my mind.

But that minx planned on making me forget all about it.

Well, Hannah was about to find out how wrong she was.

She shut the door behind her, locked it, and sauntered over to me.

"So what is your specific issue?" she asked while unbuttoning her blouse.

"You made our team worse," I said, taking off my T-shirt. I tightened my six pack and flexed my

chest and arms. Enough of this calm shit from her. When Hannah had completely opened her blouse, I

roughly tugged it off her shoulders and pulled her body to mine.

"I beg to differ," she rasped, looking up at me, hands on my bare chest.

"Yeah, begging might be involved."

She smiled at that, and I couldn't help smirking back. She disarmed me again by rubbing her hands

over my shoulders and lowering herself down onto her knees.

"Please," she pouted, looking up at me. Gently rubbing the pads of her fingers along the waistband

of my sweatpants, she hooked her fingers in and pulled them and my boxer briefs down. My erect

cock bounced in front of her face. "Tell me, specifically, what the issue is," she said quietly, staring at

my cock and running her tongue along her lips.

"You traded away a lot of guys—" She stopped me by licking my cock from base to tip. I threw

my head back and groaned. I placed a hand in her hair. I didn't apply any pressure, just shifted my

hands through her silky strands. She didn't think I could handle her blitz. But I was a championship

winning— "Oh, fuuuuuck."

She took all of me in her mouth, down to her throat.

Her mouth was heaven.

Absolute heaven.

She rocked rhythmically back and forth, taking me in and out of her mouth. She rubbed the

sensitive spot on the underside of my shaft with her tongue with the perfect amount of pressure. She

knew what she was doing.

With my cock.

And this negotiation.

I couldn't speak. As she took all of me into her mouth once more, she said something that might

have been *I thought you wanted to talk*. Of course the delicious vibrations from that sweet throat

only made it harder to speak. I just grunted and moaned.

I couldn't go out like this. I closed the hand that was in her hair and pulled her back. I wasn't

violent, but I was forceful. And if the look she gave me as she glanced up at me was any indication,

her lips swollen and wet, she fucking loved it. I grabbed the backs of her arms and just lifted her

straight up off the floor and crashed my lips against hers. Now it was her turn to moan.

“Erickson,” I grunted, then kissed her. “Was a...” *Dancing tongues.* “Great...” *Nibbled earlobe.*

“Blocking...” *Deep kiss.* “Tight end.” I was out of breath and looking into her glassy eyes.

Her chest heaved. “He was overpaid relative to his production.”

I growled. Not so much because I was angry that she was right. Though there was that.

If she was going to look like that and do that to me and talk football like that?

I needed to be inside her.

I grabbed her, and she kissed me hard. I lifted her off the ground, her legs instinctively wrapping

around me. I swung her over to her desk and cleared the top of it with one hand. I hoped the stupid

research she used to make her dumb trade was on there.

When I sat her on top of the desk, she broke the kiss. “We got a pick, and Badowski is young, but

he could become a great pass *and* blocking tight end.”

I could have said *Good point.* Instead I growled again and turned her over and bent her over her

desk. I lifted up her skirt to her waist, revealing the smallest red G-string. I gripped it with my hands

and yanked it down.

And ripped it.

Hannah gasped and turned her head. “Did you just—”

I looked down at the wrecked panties in my hand. “Yep.”

“Jesus, so literal.” She laughed.

I laughed.

Instead of breaking the tension, it added another flavor. She reached back, sweaty, out of breath,

glassy-eyed, and giggly and grabbed my cock. I grunted at the feel and sight of her small, delicate

hand wrapping around the large, straining flesh of my dick. She guided me to her entrance, and I

followed her momentum, pushing in all the way until I couldn't go any deeper. She cried out. And

continued to laugh. I growled and laughed.

I slowed the movement, pulling in and out of her, and I couldn't believe it could be like that. I'd

lusted after women before, and they'd lusted after me. I'd annoyed and been annoyed by them. I'd

pissed them off, and they'd returned the favor. I'd laughed with them and at them when I was young

and stupid, and they'd done the same to me when I was *being* young and being stupid. I'd lust-fucked,

drunk-fucked, angry-fucked.

But Hannah was all of it. Every single color all at once.

We moved and grinded against each other, still smiling and sometimes laughing, growling and

moaning. And I couldn't pick which one was at the front edge. I was still mad. And annoyed. And

good God, did she do good things to me. I was laughing like I was drunk.

If I were going to be really, really honest, there was something else underneath all that. Something

giddy in my heart and fluttering in my stomach.

But in a manly way.

Something I now knew I definitely hadn't felt with any woman before that made me want to say

words to her that I couldn't take back.

"You don't think Badowski can produce for us?" She was breathless and didn't even look back at

me as she asked. Just continued to push against my dick when I thrust all the way inside her. She said

"us." We were both Tommys. And if she was going to keep talking football while fucking, it was

going to get harder to ignore wanting to express that giddy feeling.

"I'm not saying he can't. I'm not saying any of the young guys you got can't help this team. But the

veterans you traded, *I knew* what we had in them.”

Hannah twisted around and lifted her long leg. I guided it with one hand while lifting her other leg

with my other hand and pulled her all the way around. Her back was now on the desk, and we were

facing each other. Her tits glistened from sweat, and her nipples tempted me with the promise of salty

and sweet. I lowered my mouth, scraped the nipple first with my stubble before licking the outer ring

and then finally taking the nub into my mouth.

She ran her fingers through my hair as I rolled her nipple gently between my teeth and continued to

fill her with my cock. She writhed in pleasure underneath, mewling and panting. I loved making her

unravel.

“What we had in them was a .500 record and no room to get better,” she said brokenly through her

gasps and panting.

I wasn’t much of a betting man, bar bets with beautiful blondes notwithstanding. I believed in skill

and the thrill of competition. That was enough juice for me. But if you had given me odds on me

getting tired of talking football before the woman I was pleasuring did, I would have taken that bet,

confident that there was no way I could have lost that one.

And yet there I was, done talking shop.

I pulled my mouth off her tit and grabbed her breasts with my hands. I kneaded them while

increasing the speed and intensity of my thrusts. Hannah couldn’t speak anymore. Her cries joined the

drumbeat of my pounding into her, louder and louder, until I could feel the crest. Her tight pussy

pulled at me, begging me to release my seed into her and join her where she was going. I held it. And

held it. Until I saw Hannah, beautiful but buttoned-up Hannah, become a writhing wave of pleasure as

she cried out in orgasm. I released and spilled myself inside her, growling and finding her mouth to cry out the rest of my pleasure.

I collapsed onto her for a moment, but since I wasn't going to be able to fit on the desk, I scooped

her up and lowered us both gently to the floor. I slipped out of her. We lay on our backs, and she

snuggled into my chest, my arm around her.

"That was quite the discussion," she said. The heady joy evident in her voice.

"Yes it was," I sighed out, still trying to come down.

There was a long moment where the only sound in the room was our breaths returning to normal.

"You don't think we can win," I said.

She was silent for a moment. Not moving, just breathing. "I don't know."

"But you don't think we can." I raised myself up a bit to look at her.

She looked at me, biting her lower lip. Damn, she was cute, even when she was breaking my

heart. "No," she said.

"I know you've learned a lot about football. But you don't know *winning*. You don't know what it

takes to get a group of guys together, moving in the same direction, sacrificing to get to the top of the mountain."

She rose on her elbow to meet my eyes. "You're right. I don't know that. I understand that for you

to lead this team to the top, you have to believe. But while football might be new to me, knowing

when an organization can be turned around and when it can't? *That* I do know."

"I'm telling you, Hannah. You don't know what a man who believes is capable of." We were

inches apart.

She looked from my eyes to my mouth to my eyes again. "I think I'm starting to."

We shared a sad smile that still had a glow underneath it from all the fun we just had. Like I'd

said, Hannah brought all the emotions to the table. We cleaned up and got dressed. Hannah walked me

to the door, holding my hand.

"Decker," she said as I opened the door, "I just want to say—" She abruptly stopped speaking. I

followed her wide eyes and found Eddie Murphy standing just outside her office. I wished it was the

other one. I loved *Shrek*. I loved *The Nutty Professor*. I could take or leave *Bowfinger*. Unfortunately

it was the fucking Irish one. Eddie's hands were in his pockets, and his face couldn't have looked any more smug.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, eyes narrowed.

"I came to ask Ms. Strong some questions about the recent trade."

"You're not supposed to be in here," Hannah finally choked out.

Eddie made a big show of looking around. "Didn't see anyone here. No one threw me out.

Besides..." Eddie eyed us, his shit-eating grin growing wider. "I don't think I'm the only one doing something I shouldn't."

THIRTY-THREE

The Boston Chronicle

From the desk of

Eddie "No, the Irish One" Murphy

Do you hear that?

It's the sound of moaning.

It's coming from the Tommys' stadium.

No, it's not cheers for the Ghost.

It's the collective groans of 65,000 people who have to watch a team being ripped apart by their new owner.

I suppose she didn't want to be the only new face around. Because they're all over the place.

From new tight ends, wide receivers, and linebackers, it's out with the old veterans and in with the

new cap space.

But one person we don't have to worry about Ms. Strong trading? Our venerable veteran quarterback.

Even though he's brought us two Super Bowls, her love for him might go deeper than ours.

Much deeper.

I mean, I don't need to explain to you the birds and the bees.

Or should I say the owners and the QBs?

That's right, ladies and gents. It's varsity-athlete-dating-head-cheerleader time. It's straight

high school drama over at 88 Kraft Lane.

Maybe that's why all this, from the panic trades to the listless play of our beloved Tommys...

is starting to feel like amateur hour.



THIRTY-FOUR

Hannah

"Yawn. What else ya got?" I muttered to my computer monitor. No one else was in my office, and my

phones had been strangely silent all day. I had walked from my car to my office with my head held

high that morning, but my heart sank every time I passed someone and caught the look in their eyes. I

was losing what little respect I had recently gained in this building. It didn't surprise me, but it still

hurt.

If this were a reality show, I would have been that contestant who yelled out, “I didn’t come here

to make friends! I came here to win!” and then hugged herself while rocking back and forth in the

privacy of her room—because of course I wanted to make friends while winning. Everyone did. And

I was confident that I would, eventually. One day they’d all understand. This wasn’t just about the

bottom line for me. It was about making the Tomcats great again. That kind of greatness could not be

achieved overnight.

The only thing that could change overnight, apparently, was my reputation—thanks to Eddie

Murphy’s innuendo.

I finished reading the fifteenth article about how I had just hit a new low and found a whole new

way to bring shame upon the beloved Tommys and their beloved QB. When it came to the trades—not

one journalist mentioned Walt. Not one person noted that unlike my father, I was actually consulting

with my general manager and taking his advice. I wanted Walt to get credit for the work he did. But if

I did it now—if I brought up that he had presented me with options for midseason trades—it would

look like I was throwing him under the bus for my mistakes.

One day, Walt would probably get credit for the choices I’d made. And I would be fine with that. I

mean, nothing felt fine right then, but as my mother always said: “We bounce good. All the Strong

women do.” That included bouncing back.

Still...several of the articles mentioned they had reached out to other female owners of NFL

franchises but they had “no comment.” I didn’t blame them for not commenting. But it would have

been nice if someone had said “Hannah Strong is a reliable, professional woman—a boss-ass bitch,

in fact—who has been doing her job since Day One. It's none of my business who she's engaging in

sexual relations with, and it's certainly none of your business, New England media!"

I flipped my computer monitor the double bird.

I had been raked over the coals by the press ever since I'd arrived in Boston, but I wasn't quite

numb yet. I supposed that was a good thing. At least I still cared. I cared a lot, dammit. I wasn't going

to sell the team, and I wasn't giving up on it either. I wasn't going to let anyone down, even if it

seemed like that was what I was doing at the time.

I lowered my forehead to the desktop and let out a quiet moan.

I just needed a hug.

It came in a form that I really wasn't expecting.

Nancy messaged me from her desk outside my office.

NANCY: Emailing you a link to something.

ME: Oh boy. I think I got the gist of it, thank you.

NANCY: Trust me, you'll want to see this one.

I clicked on the link she sent me. It was to Decker's Instagram post. I didn't even follow him on

social media. I was afraid I would be too tempted to comment or jokingly troll him, and then I'd just

get attacked by everyone who didn't understand what a hilarious, lovable person I was.

But Decker knew.

Or he had some idea anyway.

He had posted a selfie pic. Just him looking straight into the camera. Not smiling, not frowning.

Serious. Respectable.

Here's what johnnydecker12 wrote in that post: ***Hannah Strong is not a careless person. She is***

an intelligent businesswoman who makes shrewd business decisions that are meant to benefit

our team. Anything she or I might choose to do in private is just that —private. Whether you

agree with or approve of her decisions and choices, she deserves our respect. She certainly has mine. —Decker

I didn't cry.

But I felt hugged.

I thanked Nancy for the link and then sent Decker a text.

ME: Are you busy? Can we meet somewhere?

ME: Somewhere no one will see us together, I mean.

DECKER: Are we about to have another...discussion? Why don't you send Nancy out for coffee again? I can be in your office in five minutes.

ME: Not that kind of discussion.

DECKER: <frowning face emoji>

ME: But I would like to convey my gratitude in a quiet, respectful, face-to-face way, in private.

DECKER: Got it. I know just the place.

ME: I figured you would.

DECKER: Somewhere I've never been with anyone else, Hannah. Not with one other person anyway.

ME: <face with raised eyebrow emoji>

DECKER: I mean with a group of people. You know what—you can think what you want. I have twenty minutes before I have to meet with Trask.

Five minutes later I snuck into the equipment room across from the locker room. Decker locked the

door behind me and pulled me over to the far side of the room. He dropped the bag he was carrying to

the floor. As much as I appreciated that the first time I saw him he was walking out of this room, it

wasn't exactly a discreet location. But I kept that to myself. Because I was getting pretty good at *not* being annoying. To him anyway. Sometimes.

I wrapped my arms around him and buried my face in his chest. "Thank you." My voice was muffled, but I said it to his heart.

"You saw the IG thing?"

“Nancy sent it to me.”

“I was wondering if you’d see it since you don’t even follow me.”

I looked up at him and rolled my eyes. “Just let me thank you.”

“By all means. Go on.”

I squeezed him harder. “It means a lot to me. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome. I meant it.”

“I know.”

“I still think it was a bad move though. The trade.”

“I know that too. Time will tell. But what you did was a good move. As the face of the Tomcats.”

“Yes. It was.”

“And as a not-so-secret male companion...” I twisted my lips to one side.

He placed his hands on either side of my face. “I think you mean *as your boyfriend*.”

I tried so hard not to smile. It was so dumb, how happy it made me to hear him say that he was my

boyfriend out loud. But I was. I was happy. “I do mean that.”

“Well, it’s been a while since I was anyone’s boyfriend, but I’m pretty sure I’m good at it.” He

kissed my forehead. “I want to be. For you.” His body stiffened. “Fuck, that was cheesy. Forget I said it.”

I laughed and then remembered we were trying to be discreet and lowered my voice. “Nope. I’ll

never forget it.” I got on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek.

“Whatever.” He reached down to pick up the bag he’d brought in. “I got you something...” he

muttered sheepishly as he handed it to me. It was a shiny pink gift bag. The handles were tied together

with a black ribbon. “It’s just a little thing.”

“Can I open it now?!”

“Yes. It’s not a Christmas present. You can open it now.”

I untied the bow and pulled a pink jersey out from the bag. He held on to the bag while I held the

jersey up to look at it. It was a custom-made pink #12 *Decker* jersey. Personally signed by him across

the front of it. I couldn't speak because of the heart-shaped lump that was forming in my throat.

"It probably seems totally narcissistic," he continued. "But the only other pink jersey I ever had

made before was for my mom. I figured it would match that pink football your dad had made for you."

He remembered. Oh God, he remembered.

I just stood there staring at him, all teary-eyed.

He shrugged. "You don't have to wear it. You can sell it on eBay if you want. I just felt like

getting you something."

I grabbed that surprisingly adorable man's insanely handsome face and kissed him so hard on the

mouth I nearly sucked the adorable life out of him.

"Thank you," I managed to say when I finally stopped kissing him. "You can't imagine how much

this means to me."

"You're welcome." He glanced down at the stack of landing mats nearby. "You sure you don't

want to discuss the pros and cons of that trade again?"

I grinned. "How about we do that at your place? Tonight?"

He wrinkled his nose. "Fine."

"But thank you. Again."

"You're welcome. Again. Just try not to do anything to piss everyone off. Again."

I held my tongue. Again. I could make no such promise. "Whatever I do, it's because I'm such a

shrewd businesswoman. And awesome girlfriend."

"We'll discuss exactly how awesome a girlfriend you think you are at my place. Tonight."

I pulled his face down to mine so I could whisper sweetly in his ear, "Good luck forming

complete sentences tonight, *boyfriend*."



THIRTY-FIVE

Hannah

Decker winced and sucked in a sharp breath when I maneuvered his arm through the sleeve of his

button-down shirt. We were so used to tearing each other's clothes off, but this time we were moving

in slow motion. Instead of smashing into each other, the goal here was to reverse some of the damage

others had done by crashing into him. The team doctor had already tended to him before we left the

stadium. But I was determined to make him feel better in absolutely any way I could.

That meant undoing a few buttons of my own blouse before getting his shirt off. It meant leaning in

a little more than necessary so he could stare at my cleavage while I got his other arm out of the other

sleeve. It meant I sashayed like Jessica Rabbit when returning from the kitchen with a couple of bags

of frozen peas and I only felt a little bad knowing that I was causing him another kind of pain. In my

defense, I was trying to take his mind off all the blows his upper body had been dealt by directing

some of the blood to the below-the-belt region.

He clenched his jaw. He barely shook his head while almost grinning at me. But he never stopped

staring. Even when I gently pushed him back so I could hover over him, surveying the damage to his

beautiful, strong, seemingly indestructible body. Even when I accidentally dropped a bag of frozen

peas onto his bruised ribs while lowering myself to kiss his forehead.

I meant well.

I really did.

We were at Decker's town house, on his bed. We weren't doing what we usually did on that

mattress. I had driven him home after a disastrous game against the Colorado Mustangs. Our center,

Bull, was injured early in the game, and that created a very specific problem that somehow no one

had anticipated for Johnny. He'd been sacked harder than a bag of potatoes at Thanksgiving, and it

was my fault.

He felt guilty for the dramatic loss, and I felt guilty because I'd traded for younger, faster players

in the hopes that he could get rid of the ball faster—so that *this* wouldn't happen. I had been battered

and bruised by the press, and he'd been battered and bruised by linebackers. All I could do was nurse

his wounds, and all he could do was let me. It wasn't our usual power play in the bedroom. I actually

wanted to take care of him. There was no other way I could show him how sorry I was. Even though I

knew, from a business standpoint and possibly even from the team's standpoint, that in time people

would see I'd made the right choice.

At least that was what I had been telling myself up until I saw firsthand what that choice meant for

my boyfriend.

We were both feeling the sting of defeat, and yet whenever it was just the two of us behind closed

doors, it actually felt like we had a fighting chance. Us against the world. Instead of us against each

other.

Well, the truth was, I couldn't speak for him. He hadn't told me how he felt about me in words. He

told me in the time he spent with me whenever he could, and he told me with his eyes and lips and

every single manly part of him. All those parts I had tried so hard to avoid staring at and fantasizing about early in the season.

Two months in, and so much had changed for me, inside and out.

There was who I was out in the world, and there was who I was when I was alone with Johnny

Decker. Out there, I had become accustomed to defending every decision I made. I was well aware

that I'd have to fight all of New England for the right to own the Tomcats, even though it was given to

me. In here, when it was just us, I had finally started to let my guard down. I no longer wanted to fight

my feelings for Decker, and I was even willing to give in to the fear of giving myself to him

completely.

"Take your shirt off," he mumbled as I held a bag of peas to his shoulder.

"Hold still." I let that bag rest on his shoulder, adjusted the one on his ribs, and then got up to fetch my overnight bag.

"Where you goin'?"

"To get the aloe vera."

"Stop fussing."

"No. I'm going to put aloe vera on those bruises. Do you have arnica gel?"

"No."

"How can you not have arnica gel?"

"I don't know what that is. Take your shirt off."

"It's good for bruises."

"So is nudity." He tried to hike himself up onto his elbows so he could see me. "Ow." He hissed.

"Stop moving." I found the tube of aloe vera gel and returned to the bed.

He finally closed his eyes. "I can't believe we lost to the fucking Mustangs."

"You played really well today."

"Psssh. I was a pussy."

"Shhh. You're never a pussy."

He groaned. And not in the sexy way.

"Baby..." I whispered. I kissed the bruise just above his waist before gently rubbing aloe vera on

his skin. Suddenly, I had a flash memory of watching him get tackled over and over again. My eyes

stung with tears. *What have I done?* "I'm so sorry."

He exhaled. "I was distracted. It was my fault."

"No." A tiny sob escaped my throat. "I tried to save you... The team. I didn't do my job."

He sighed. "*You*, shhh."

I couldn't hold back anymore. That was another thing I had to stop fighting. The tears.

Finally.

The sting of loss I was feeling had very little to do with the game against the Mustangs. It was the

loss of my father. Finally. It suddenly felt like I had taken a blow to the heart. The weight of it all. I

struggled to breathe. And then the quiet sadness I'd been holding inside burst forth in a cascade of

tears.

Finally.

I made some forlorn high-pitched sound and covered my wet face.

"Hey." I heard the bags of peas fall off him as he sat up. His voice was strained. My hurt was

hurting him too, but his concern just made me cry even harder. "It wasn't your fault. I'll be fine."

I shook my head the tiniest bit.

"Your dad?"

I nodded the tiniest bit.

My voice was small and childlike, but I had to say it out loud: "I can't believe I wasted so much

time being mad at him."

He wrapped his arms around me, and I let him hold me. I knew how hard it was for him to hold

that position. But I also knew how much it would heal both of us to let him comfort me.

I wept. I didn't know I was capable of weeping. When my parents got divorced, I was too angry

to let myself feel sad. When I got older I was always trying too hard to be strong. I thought that meant

not letting the heartache seep through the cracks in my armor.

I didn't want any armor between myself and the man who was comforting me.

I let everything go.

Decker didn't let go of me until I noticed the bags of peas were no longer frozen. I reached for

them and tossed them off the bed. He didn't even make fun of me for being so fussy that I couldn't just

let them sit there. He just put his arms around me again and kissed the top of my head.

I would never get the chance to know my father better in person. Thanks to Decker, I knew that he

liked glam rock and that he referred to me as Hog and talked about me when he was trying to inspire

his team. I had no idea if he was the kind of man who would play matchmaker. But for a moment I

wondered if this was what he had in mind—leaving me his team so I could find myself with his best

player.



THIRTY-SIX

Decker

I held Hannah as her sobs slowly turned to sniffles. I kissed the salty wetness of her cheek on her right

side, and her eyes closed. Just as gently and slowly, I kissed the tears off her left cheek. I held my

face in front of hers, and I waited for her to open her eyes. She did.

I'll take care of you, my eyes said.

I know, hers replied.

I kissed her lips as gently as I had her cheeks. She grabbed my face and deepened the kiss, and I

grunted because her thumb had found my bruised cheek. She pulled back and opened her mouth to

apologize, but I stopped her with my thumb across her lips and a small smile. She returned it and

kissed my bruised cheek as slowly and gently as I had hers.

We kissed again. We wanted to move harder, faster, me desperately wanting inside her and her

clearly wanting me to be there.

Now.

But we were both forced to move slowly, injured as each of us were, my broken body and her

injured spirit forcing us to take care in how we made love.

I climbed on top of her. My left ankle burned, and I grunted in pain.

"What's wrong?"

“It’s nothing,” I gritted. It hadn’t stopped me from playing. It wasn’t going to stop me from fucking her.

She gently took my face in her hands. “Don’t hurt yourself anymore,” she said. It was quiet but firm.

I sighed. “My ankle is killing me.”

“I could be on top,” she said, running her hands across my chest.

Boy, that sounded good, but— “I don’t think my ribs could take that right now.” I smirked and sighed. “I’m a broken loser.”

“Don’t you dare,” she said in that same quiet yet firm tone. She kissed the ribs that now had a nice nebula-looking bruise forming on them. As gentle as she was, her kiss still stung. She looked up at me, hungry. “You could take me from behind.”

She had already made me hard, but that husky suggestion made the deepest part of my cock, the absolute root, throb with need. My hand found her hair, and I fisted it. I wanted very badly to just flip her over and fill her with the cock she effortlessly made this painfully hard.

I noticed the shine of her cheeks where my kisses had missed.

I moved my mouth close to her ear. “I want to hold you when I fuck you.” I nibbled her earlobe, and she moaned, her fingers running through the back of my hair.

She gave me a sultry look. “You can still take me from behind.” She rolled over and encouraged

me to lie next to her on the side that wasn’t bruised. My hard cock pressed against her ass through our

clothes. She pulled down her pants and panties, and I released my cock from my sweats and boxer

briefs. She reached underneath for my cock and notched it at her entrance.

I slowed again and pushed into her inch by delicious inch. Whatever pain flashed and cracked

inside our bodies was drowned out by the sweet pleasure of joining them. When I'd seated myself

fully inside her, I began to circle my hips, not pulling myself out much, just grinding my pelvis against

her. My hand wrapped around her front and pulled off her top and bra until her breasts were fully

exposed. I squeezed her tits and played with her nipples in the same gentle rhythm I ground against

her ass and pussy. My lips found her neck, but it wasn't enough for Hannah. She twisted her head and

found my lips with hers.

We held that gentle, steady rhythm—me inside her, my body pressed to her back, our lips straining

to touch, and my hands ripening the front of her body. We didn't increase the rhythm. The pleasure

built on its own until we couldn't kiss anymore. Her face contorted into tortured bliss, and mine

twisted into frustrated pleasure. We still didn't speed up. The frustration and the building pleasure

pulled us over the edge—me first, unfortunately. But filling her with my cum pushed her into a

desperate orgasm. Her limbs went wild, and I held her tight to keep her safe.

It all subsided, and we were wrapped together, heaving breath and spent.

She turned her body to face mine and looked at me. I stroked her hair. This was where I wanted to

be. No pressure, no distractions. The first woman I'd ever been with who healed me instead of

looking for ways to hurt me. Someone I had no choice but to open myself up to. And someone I could

defend and protect from the world that might threaten her. And heal the parts that I was able to.

"I love you." It was surprisingly easy to say.

I thought it would be a big, difficult moment. But she gave me a small, dreamy smile and, on a

pleasant sigh, said, "I love you too."

It wasn't hard for either of us because every part of us already knew the truth about how we felt about each other. We weren't speaking something new into existence. We were just naming something that was already there. It was what I said next that would really change things. Maybe if I hadn't just lost my mind inside her, I might not have said it. But as they say in my line of work, *talk is cheap*. I took a deep breath. "Move in with me."



THIRTY-SEVEN

Hannah

"What...?" I was still floating around in the words *I love you*, so I really wasn't sure if I'd heard him correctly. And if he said what I thought he might have said—and not *Moving my knee*—then I definitely needed to hear it again.

Decker hesitated the tiniest bit before whispering, "I said *move in with me*," as he kissed my forehead.

No one had ever asked me to move in with them before.

I spent years, as a child, secretly wishing my father would ask my mother and me to move back in

with him whenever he was between wives. I was so disappointed when he didn't—on some level I

promised myself I'd never want anything that much from another person again. I didn't have a

roommate in college, and I had never dated anyone long enough to even consider taking any next steps.

Not that Decker and I had been dating long enough to take any next steps either. We had only spent

the night with each other a handful of times. But each time it got harder and harder to say goodbye,

even if we were going to see each other a few hours later.

With Decker, next steps felt possible. All the steps seemed possible. Even if we weren't ready for them. Yet.

I needed a home in Boston. I was finally able to admit to myself that I wanted to come home to

another person. I wanted to come home to *my* person. And I wanted my person to be Decker.

"Johnny..." I placed my hands on either side of his handsome head. "Now I'm worried your brain got damaged today too." I wasn't even joking.

He grinned, but he didn't laugh. "It's not brain damage, and it's not because I just came inside you

either." He rested his forehead against mine. "Although it is partly because I would like it to be more

convenient for me to be able to come inside you more frequently. You need a place to live, and I want

you to know that you can live here. I want you to."

Just knowing that he wanted me to live with him—when he could barely stand to be in the same

room with me a month ago—was enough to make me believe in miracles. Or the power of letting a

man take you from behind and come inside you, at least. What better way to win over a city that

despised me than to move in with its favorite adopted son?

But also—what better way to forget about the press and my job and the fact that I would never be

able to see my dad again and tell him I was sorry or that I always loved him—than to stay inside this

bubble with Johnny Decker?

He wanted to protect me. I could tell. And I wanted him to.

But it was my job to protect him. The franchise depended on it. My father's legacy depended on

it. Decker's career depended on it. And that meant that things could get even more complicated soon.

Even without us living together.

I kissed his cheek. "I love that you asked me to," I told him. "Thank you." I kissed him on the lips.

"I would love to live with you someday." I kissed his other cheek. "But not yet. It's not a good idea."

"Yeah, I know." He smirked. "You're way too messy."

I so wanted to punch his bicep for that, but he had already taken enough of a beating. "And you're

way too disrespectful of my undergarments."

"Wrong. I wreck them because I respect them."

"Well, I may be an heiress, but I don't think it would be financially prudent for me to have to

replenish my undie wardrobe at such an alarming rate."

"Then stop wearing undies."

"Wow. I should hire you to manage the salary caps."

"Cap."

I really wanted to punch him in the bicep again. "I knew that! I was kidding!"

"Sure you were." He covered my mouth with his to keep me from protesting.

I didn't really have anything to complain about. My boyfriend loved me and wanted me to live

with him, and my boyfriend was Johnny Decker. We were still on a winning streak with each other.

The odds were pretty much always against us, but who cared about numbers when one plus one equaled us?

When he finally stopped kissing me, I said, "I'll go get another bag of frozen peas."

“Don’t go yet.”

“Okay.” I traced the outline of the main tattoo on his throwing arm. It was a tribal design. Simple and evocative. “Why a wolf?” I’d been wondering ever since the first time I saw a picture of him shirtless. “It’s a beautiful design. I just always wondered because you don’t seem like the lone-wolf type.”

“I’m not. I mean, I was before I started playing football. It’s interesting that that’s what you think of when you think of a wolf. Wolves are actually highly social animals. Very protective and devoted to their pack. For me it’s a symbol of loyalty and leadership.”

“Yes. That’s you.” I wanted to cry again. But I was going to focus on being happy for the rest of the day. “So alpha.” I grinned.

“You know, the alpha wolf works closely with its mate. To keep the peace within the pack. Keep everyone safe.” He gave me a meaningful look, and I got the meaning of it.

“Yes. I did know that.” I was Team Jacob back when I read *Twilight*, which was why I did a school report on wolves back in ninth grade. Which was why I knew that the term and concept of the

“alpha wolf” was in fact outdated because early research was done on wolves who were in captivity.

But I didn’t tell him that because I liked where he was going with this. “Yes. We do.”

I also didn’t tell him that it was this alpha female’s job to keep *him* safe too. And I hadn’t done that. Not yet.



THIRTY-EIGHT

Hannah

I couldn't stop thinking about wolves.

Which is to say that I couldn't stop thinking about the symbolism of Decker's wolf tattoo.

Which is to say that I could not stop thinking about Decker.

Which is to say that nothing had really changed about my thought patterns since the moment I'd met him.

What had drastically changed were the actual thoughts. I was trying to get us out of salary cap

hell. I was trying to do that without blowing up the team entirely so I didn't completely ruin any

chance this year. But I was also trying to allow us to reload stronger for next year. It was an insane

balancing act. And I was falling off the beam. I was trying to get Decker one last real shot at the Super

Bowl with his pack. New members of the pack, but at least he'd be able to stay here and hopefully

bring home another trophy before the end of his career. Go out with a bang.

But I let out a little whimper when the full weight of what my general manager Walt Lipnick was

telling me. It was a couple of days after that last game. I knew as soon as I saw his face when Nancy

let him into my office that he had bad news for me.

“We got Bull’s MRI back,” he said, staring down at the floor. He wouldn’t take a seat. He was

pacing back and forth, rubbing the back of his neck, sighing.

Somewhere in the building, I knew Coach Buddy was crying.

I had to clear my throat. “He’s not going to be able to play for a while, is he?”

Walt finally stood still and pinched the bridge of his nose as he shut his eyes tight. “He’s out for

the rest of the season.”

“God dammit.”

I thought we already had the worst-case scenario, but things just went from worst to *are you*

fucking kidding me with this shit???

All over the internet, people had been complaining about what Bull’s injury meant for Decker and

what it was doing to their fantasy football teams, but this nightmare was my reality. My team’s reality.

Decker was the one who’d be dealing with it out on the field though. It was Bull’s job to keep the

quarterback from getting hit. Our backup center was in no way as capable as Bull was at doing that

job.

Walt finally took a seat in front of my desk. “Without Bull, we...” He shook his head, sighing

again. “We don’t have the linemen to protect Decker. Not the way things are now. Next year, maybe.

But if the way things went on Sunday is any indication...Decker’s just going to keep getting hurt.

We’re shortening his career. There’s not much he can do here.”

I was holding my head in my hands. I just wanted to rest my forehead against the desk, but that

was not a good look for a boss. “How did we not see this coming?”

I could tell Walt was very carefully considering how to answer that question. He’d been biting his

tongue around me ever since I got here. To him I was just some idiotic young spoiled brat in a skirt

who wanted to shake things up because she was rebelling against her daddy. But I had finally shown

him that I was really trying to figure things out so I could do the right thing for the team. I had finally

earned the right to get some real answers so I could do the job I wanted to do.

He spoke very slowly. "Listen, I don't want to throw anyone under the bus here. Least of all your

father. Jerry was a great man. He was a great owner."

I leaned forward a little and nodded. "Yes. I understand. *But...*"

"He didn't take my advice much. He was always his own talent scout. Buddy would weigh in too,

of course, but Jerry had his own way of doing things. He just wanted a winning team. It worked for a

while. It could have worked this year. But it didn't. He knew the bargain he was making, and he

didn't care about backup plans. There was never any contingency plan for a shit storm of this

magnitude." He glanced up at me. "Sorry."

"I think it's more of a shit tornado actually."

He almost smiled at that. "Right... I think you have a handle on the cap situation now, Ms. Strong.

But in terms of men on the field..." He sighed. "We just don't have the guys to get it done this year.

Decker won't make it to next year. If he gets injured as bad as Bull did, our second-string QB doesn't

have what it takes yet. Not even close."

"Yeah. I see that now."

We were both quiet for a long time while we let it all sink in.

It was midseason, and the Tommys were a lost cause in terms of making the playoffs this year. I'd

known that, deep down, for a while. But I refused to think of Decker as a lost cause. As a

quarterback, as my boyfriend, as a man. As an alpha wolf.

I just had to find a way to protect my wolf mate before he chewed off his own foot to save his

pack.



THIRTY-NINE

Decker

I looked left but didn't wait until our new right end Badowski, or "Badman" as we liked to call him,

broke from his route before I threw the ball. Our timing was off, and he had to dive for it, hitting the

ground and rolling after securing the catch. If this were a real game and not just a voluntary late-night

practice, he would have been downed by the other team.

Badman, even though he made the catch, came up off the ground shaking his head. He knew it

wasn't right. Maybe Hannah knew what she was doing—this kid got it.

"What'd I do wrong?" he asked.

It was my turn to shake my head. "Nothing. I'm leaning on you more than Colt did." Colt was his

former quarterback on his old team. When I watched film on them, Colt would wait too long for things

to develop before trying to feed Badman the ball. I thought that was the only reason the Forge would

trade him to us. "I want us to develop the timing there. I'm throwing it before you even make your

break. And you"—I placed an arm around his massive shoulders—"don't look for me. Expect the ball

to already be there when you turn around." I pointed a finger at him. "You're too big and too fast. I hit

you in stride, they're going to have a hell of a time bringing you down."

"You hit me in stride, they ain't gonna bring me down." He smiled. It was on the razor edge

between confident and cocky, but there was just enough self-deprecation in it. He knew how good he

was, but he also knew how good he could be.

"All right, let's run it again." I grabbed the ball, and he jogged to a line parallel to me on the field,

as if we were lined up against a real team. I held the ball out and called out, "Hut, hut, hike!" I pulled

the ball into my chest and dropped back.

Badman exploded off the line with a grace and suddenness a dude that big and strong had no

business having. He trucked it up the field, and I threw a laser while he was sprinting away from me.

He stopped on a dime and whipped to his left. The ball arrived right when he turned, and he caught it

with a satisfying thump. He juke'd right and sprinted all the way up the field to the end zone. That

wasn't part of the drill, but when he spiked the ball, I laughed.

"How about that!" Badman yelled from the end zone. The other guys working in other parts of the

field laughed and cheered.

I took a deep breath of late-October air. It had just the right amount of dry chill for football. The

other young players had shown up as well for this extra practice. It was voluntary. A favor to me. I

didn't often pull rank, and I wanted nothing to do with hero worship. But I could tell they did it

because of who I was and what I had done. When we started running, throwing, and catching, though,

we were all boys in the yard after school. Everyone, including me, had a stupid grin on their face.

"Fucking sweet, Badman. Get some water."

"You got it, Deck." Simple words, but he said it in the tone of a man who would run through a

brick wall for me. And he physically could too.

“Hey, Trask!” I called over to my offensive coordinator Gordon Trask, who was working with

some of the new wide receivers. I saw him clock me and then say, “I’ll be right back, guys.”

“Hey, Deck, when am I up?” Deion Moss, one of the wide receivers, asked.

“You’re next,” I said, smiling at him. “I want to see the Flash.” That was the kid’s nickname. He

had a real set of burners on him.

“Sorry. Too quick,” Deion said, shaking his head. “You can’t see it. You just experience it.”

Everyone laughed, and we pointed at each other in acknowledgment.

Trask made his way over to me.

“What do you think?” I asked quietly so only he could hear.

“That Badowski kid is something,” he said, looking out onto the field.

“And Deion is as fast as he thinks he is.”

I smiled and looked out onto the field too.

“They did good.”

“They?” I raised an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, Walt and...”

“My girlfriend,” I finished for him.

“Yep.” He laughs.

My chest swelled with pride for Hannah. She’d come so far. But it wasn’t really the place to gush.

“Does that make you uncomfortable?”

He shook his head. “None of my business.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

He turned to me. “Hey, I came late to this party. You and Coach and Mr. Strong built this

foundation. I’ve been here a couple of years, and I’m just trying to focus on putting you in the right

offensive to maximize all the talent here. And I appreciate that you’re open to my ideas.”

“Well, they’re great ideas.”

“Our record says otherwise.”

I sighed. "You think we're better with these guys?"

"Tons of raw talent. But they're just as raw as they are talented. They will help this team. I don't

know about *this* year though. We're running out of time."

Time... Shit.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Uh..." Trask checked his watch. "Eight fifteen."

I had completely lost track of time. I was supposed to be showered and in a monkey suit to be

Hannah's arm candy at the gala. I was currently covered in sweat in a football uniform and nowhere

near a shower.

If Hannah were any other girl, I knew I would be in trouble. But, of course, that's why I wasn't

with any other girl. That was why I hadn't dated until Hannah forced me with her deliciously sassy,

infuriating mouth to kiss her. No woman had ever understood what football meant to me. No woman

could.

Until Hannah.

Not only did she get it but she was on the team. She was a Boston Tomcat, no less than me or any

of the guys I'd gone to war with over the past decade. No less than her father was. Maybe in the back

recesses of my imagination, I thought a woman who could understand football was possible but

unlikely. But a woman understanding who I was the way Hannah did? Not in my wildest dreams did I

think that could happen.

"Come on, Deck. My engines are getting cold," Deion yelled.

Hannah will understand.

I repeated that phrase over and over in my head.

I repeated it as I thanked the guys and dismissed the practice. I repeated it as I took the fastest

shower in the history of showers.

I repeated it as I threw on my tuxedo and as I sped toward the benefit.

The only problem was, every time I repeated it, I went from sure that it was true...to *hoping* it was true.



FORTY

Hannah

I was usually the one who showed up late for dates. Not because I was irresponsible—I always let

my dates know that I'd be there late—but I used to go out with men who were, quite frankly, less

exciting to me than my job. I never wanted nor expected to feel the butterflies or the racing heart as I

waited for a date to pick me up at my place or when I walked into a restaurant or ballroom to meet up

with him.

Until I had a real date with Mr. John Patrick Decker. A formal one. Our first public event together

as boyfriend and girlfriend.

I supposed there would come a time in my life when I no longer envisioned romantic moments

playing out like the end of John Hughes romantic comedies. But I hoped not. As I walked out of the

lobby of my hotel earlier that night to get into the chauffeured car by myself, I imagined looking up

and finding Decker leaning against his SUV on the other side of the driveway. He'd hesitantly wave at

me, and I'd glance over my shoulder and then point to myself and mouth, *Me?* And he'd say, "Yeah,

you." He'd walk over to me and explain that he left work early so he could be with me and then get

into the back of the limo and tell the driver to take the long way to our destination.

Then, when I slowly walked through the lobby of the Fairmont Hotel alone, not in a homemade

pink dress but in a Tomcats-red gown that I had tailor-made for this occasion, "If You Leave" by

OMD played in my head and I visualized *Deckie* walking out of the ballroom to greet me in a thrift

store jacquard jacket and fancy bolo tie, his pompadour hair... I'm just kidding. Decker was no

Duckie Dale. He may not have been a Blane either, but when I walked into the ballroom, I was half

hoping to find him sitting there alone at a table, waiting for me.

Alas, he was not.

Which was fine.

For the first hour.

I posed for pictures, did the rounds, shook the hands, sipped the champagne, made the small talk,

ate the meal, watched the couples dance on the dance floor. I explained to everyone that my date was

on his way here from practice. He had to change into a monkey suit in the locker room and was

probably getting made fun of by the guys, haha. *This benefit is very important to him. Traffic must be terrible. He'll be here soon.*

It was even fine that I didn't get so much as a text from him.

But then it started to feel *familiar*.

It started to remind me of being at home with my mom when I was little. When we were waiting

for my dad to show up for dinners and birthday parties. My mother would put on some 80s movie to

cheer herself up until finally my dad would breeze in as if he were right on time, clap his hands, rub

them together, and say, “All right, let’s do this!” My mom would give him the silent treatment, and

then I’d hear them arguing after I went to bed. Occasionally I’d hear them doing other things after they

argued—but I instantly tried to erase that from my memory.

I had come to understand why my father was so passionate about the game and his team. I had

come to understand something about Jerry Strong, thanks to Decker. I understood that Decker and my

dad were not the same person. But no amount of understanding could make me such a perfect

girlfriend that I’d be completely forgiving of my date for standing me up, now, could it?

And yet I did have a movie moment. I’m just not sure which movie it was from. I was sitting alone

at a table. The band was still playing on stage, but three-quarters of the guests had already left. I was

about to leave. I sighed, looked up, and saw Johnny Decker stride into the ballroom. He was wearing

a tux and he was so devastatingly handsome, even with his damp hair, but it was the way he looked

around for me that took my breath away. He still appeared cool, but I could see that he was worried

he wouldn’t find me. I could see that he felt bad about being late. I could tell he was prepared to do

anything to make it up to me. I felt the butterflies. My heart raced.

When he spotted me, he exhaled. I could see that he thought I looked smoking hot in my red

sleeveless gown with the plunging neckline. And I thought, *There’s still time. We can still be together*

here. We can still dance together and have a drink, and he can have his arm around my waist while

we chat with people and smile for the cameras.

But I also needed him to understand that he fucked up.

Because that was my job—as his girlfriend.

And I’d looked a lot hotter two fucking hours ago.

As much as I wanted to get up and run into his arms, I sat there and crossed my arms in front of my

chest. I held his gaze as he approached. He didn't approach warily. He wasn't all defensive. And he

wasn't acting like this was no big deal. He just walked over with his usual athletic grace and strength,

pulled the chair out beside me, turned it around, and straddled the seat. He rested his arms against the

back of the chair and said, "You are stunning, and I am so sorry I'm late."

"Over two hours late."

"You are the most beautiful woman in Boston, and you can't imagine how sorry I am."

"Did you lose your phone?"

"Once I left the field, I didn't want to waste any time texting you. I'm here now, and you're the

most beautiful woman in all of New England. Okay?"

There it was. The defensive tone. He was expecting me to be like this—and surprise! I *was* like

this. It was *my* fault for being mad at him for being two hours late.

"Well, I asked them to keep your dinner warm. Find a server."

"I'm not hungry. Do you want me to pose for pictures with you or something?"

I barked out a laugh and rolled my eyes, and then I caught sight of a group of plastic rich ladies

who were watching us from across the room. *Oh, wouldn't they just love to see us fight in public.* I

smiled at them. I smiled at him and said through gritted teeth, "Only if you want to represent the team

here tonight, honey."

He grinned and leaned in, as if to kiss me on the cheek, and whispered in my ear, "Just give me an

idea of how long you plan to be mad at me for. I was two hours late, so perhaps one hour might be

appropriate."

The smile remained plastered on my face, but my eyes were tearing up. "I'm sorry I can't give you

an ETA for my forgiveness because I've been sitting here alone, feeling abandoned for football all over again."

It was the brief pause before he responded that gave me hope that he wasn't an asshole. He

actually considered what I'd said. He understood. "I haven't abandoned you, Hannah. But you're the

one who dropped this eight-player-problem into my lap. You of all people should understand."

I could not keep my nostrils from flaring, even though he did have a strong point. "Yes. I should, shouldn't I?"

"I mean, I hope you understand."

"Understand that a date with me meant less to you than practicing with your teammates?"

He looked past me and nodded. "Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Murdoch. Great to see you. Have you met my girlfriend, Hannah?"

I glanced over my shoulder and waved at the elderly couple. They didn't come over—probably

because everyone in the ballroom could tell we were quarreling. But it did feel really good to be

introduced as his girlfriend, dammit.

Well played, Decker.

But I still didn't forgive him.

He lowered his voice again and took my hand in his. "You know how much you mean to me,

Hannah. But you also know how important it is for me to get those new guys ready for the next game

so I don't get creamed again."

My teeth would be ground to a fine dust by the time he was done explaining himself, but I wanted

him to explain. "How exactly were you getting them ready?"

He breathed a hesitant sigh of relief and squeezed my hand. "We did timing drills. They all

showed up for it. They're great guys. You made good picks."

I liked what I was hearing, but that still didn't make up for the two hours and no texts.

"Badowski and Deion especially," he continued.

"Right? Badman's time for the three-cone drill at the Combine was sick."

There was this flicker in Decker's eyes that told me he wanted to drill me right then. And I would

have been fine with that. *If* he had sent me a text to let me know he was running late.

"I mean, I know the Combine tests aren't necessarily predictive of game-playing skills," I

continued, "but he really has something."

"He really does, babe." He was so excited. He told me all about the plays and the drills and the

players. It was like he was a little boy who'd just made eight new friends at the playground.

I was just as excited as he was, and I couldn't even hide it. I asked him about each one of those

new players, about their strengths and weaknesses, and told him my concerns. He was holding both of

my hands, and I knew how happy he was that we could talk about this stuff now without him having to

explain everything to me.

I could have just left it at that. Me being understanding and him being grateful. But I didn't. "Was

Mo there?"

He was taken aback by that question. "No. I mean, he would have been if I'd asked him to. But I

didn't want to take him away from his family."

"Uh-huh. I see."

He didn't see why that little comment hurt me. Until he did. He shook his head and said, "I lost

track of time out there. I am sorry. I should have called."

I looked him in the eyes and said, very sincerely, "You told me you couldn't believe in somebody

who didn't believe in you. I believed in you. I always believed in you... I just didn't believe in me."

He screwed up his face and looked at me like I was nuts. “What? What does that have to do with

what we’re talking about right now?”

Well, if he didn’t get my 80s movie references, then we clearly were not meant to be together.

“It doesn’t. Never mind.” I huffed, stood up, picked up my little purse, and started to walk off toward the exit.

He caught my arm. He was still so very good at keeping me from walking away from him. “Wait.

Is that from some John Hughes movie?”

Dammit, Decker!

“If you can’t name the movie, I’m leaving.”

“*Pretty in Pink*. But we can leave anyway if you want. Together.”

I turned to face him. “No. Let’s dance.”

I could tell by his expression that he really didn’t want to dance. It was a standard jazz band

playing standard jazz songs, and the dance floor was almost empty but for a few elderly couples.

“Okay,” he said. He held his arm out for me to take, and he led me out to the dance floor.

I had never slow-danced with anyone as tall as him before. I felt safe in his arms, and I did not

hate it. And I couldn’t imagine hating him, even if he’d run drills with the new guys all night and

didn’t show up at all. That was the problem.

But I still didn’t look up at him.

He stopped moving all of a sudden, and then he pulled away from me.

Here we go. It’s on. We’re going to have a fight...in public.

He walked away from me. Strode on over to the stage and the band’s lead singer. As they finished

up the song, he held his hand out to the middle-aged gentleman, introducing himself, even though the

singer looked a little starstruck. Then, the singer called something out to the band and walked offstage

as Decker picked up the microphone.

The remaining guests started applauding and cheering for him even before the music started.

Before he combed his fingers through his hair. Before he started singing.

It took me a few seconds to realize he was singing “Try a Little Tenderness.” The Otis Redding

song that Duckie danced to in *Pretty in Pink*. Except he sang a jazzy version of it, to match the style of

the band. The song was about young girls who get weary from waiting and anticipating, even though

their man will never be exactly who they want him to be. It might not have occurred to him to text me

that he was running late, but he knew he had to do something to change my mood. So he changed the

play.

Dammit, Decker. Why do you have to be such a charming asshole? Why can't you just be an asshole?

He didn't even know all the words, so he made some of them up.

“She's not even bein' judgmental

Or puttin' on New York airs

She's much softer now she knows the difference

Between a curl and a hook pass, yeah...”

He had every woman and most of the men in that ballroom in the palm of his hand. But he held my

gaze the entire time. He had me. He knew it, too.

When he finished the song—to a standing ovation—he returned to me on the dance floor, took me

into his arms, dipped me, and kissed me. He even managed to do it without causing me to have a

wardrobe malfunction in that dress. He somehow managed to become a GOAT boyfriend that night.

No one else would remember that he hadn't been there for the entire event. I had pretty much forgotten it myself.

When the band started up with another jazz song, he slow-danced with me again.

He lowered his head to my ear and said, “So...matching panties tonight?”

I smirked up at him. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Yesssss.”

But there was one more thing I had to ask him, and I figured I might as well bring it up then.

Because apparently I would always be the only one who was brave enough to be the asshole in this

relationship. “Are you coming to the breakfast meeting tomorrow?”

“What breakfast meeting?”

“With the investors. For the naming rights to the stadium. I asked you last week.”

He groaned. “I really do not want to go to that.”

“Well, I would really like it if you were there.”

“Are you asking me as the owner or as my girlfriend?”

“Which answer will get you to show up on time?”

His body stiffened...and not in the good way.

But he would show up on time. As my boyfriend and as my star quarterback. Because he knew it would be good for the team.

I didn’t think of that night as the beginning of the end for us. I’m pretty sure he didn’t either. We

both wanted what was best for the team, and we both wanted what was best for each other. I just

thought he understood that I was willing to do whatever it took to do what was best for him.



FORTY-ONE

Hannah

It was early November.

It was a dark, cold, wet day in Boston, but I had spent the night at Decker's place, so it started out

pretty great. We showered together. He made me breakfast. It was a protein smoothie, but it was

breakfast and he made it for me. We drove to work separately, as always, but when we kissed each

other goodbye, it was the kind of kiss that was filled with the confidence of knowing we would be

kissing each other again at the end of the day.

That was what made it so bittersweet.

I had ESPN on the flatscreen in my office while I was replying to emails. It was just background

noise until I heard the breaking news about the Chicago Cougars. They were a surprise contender for

the Super Bowl. They were 7–1, they had a stacked defense and a killer offense, but the breaking

news was that their quarterback Cal Harper had just been injured so severely that he would be out for

the rest of the year. My initial reaction was to feel badly for the Cougars, but then I realized—this

was the opportunity I had been waiting for.

My heart was racing again, but not as fast as my mind was spinning, and I felt a little sick.

I took a deep breath.

I had to make one calculated move, and I had to move fast.

Like an MVP quarterback.

The window was closing, but I could still make one last trade for the season.

I did a quick search of Cal Harper's salary. He was a second-year QB who was a third-round

pick. He basically had a rookie's salary, so it was reasonable. Decker's salary cap hit was thirty-

three million, but the Cougars would be able to fit it under their cap because their team was young

and had so many players on cheap contracts. And Kevin McDonald was their head coach—Kevin had

been the Tomcats offensive coordinator for years, so Decker had a history with him, and the Cougars

ran a similar system that the Tomcats ran all those years. It would make the transition so much easier

for Decker.

It made sense.

I knew that what I was doing was virtually unheard of in the NFL, but it wasn't against the rules. It

just wasn't done. Maybe it took an outsider like me to shake things up.

This was the absolute last thing I wanted to do, but I was going to do it.

Decker will understand.

I repeated that phrase in my head when I asked Nancy to make the call for me. I knew that no one

would like it, but I was certain that Decker would understand.

By the time she got the Cougars' owner, Cormac O'Doyle, on the phone, I went from being sure it

was true...to hoping it was true.

FORTY-TWO

The Boston Chronicle

From the desk of

Eddie "No, the Irish One" Murphy

*I checked outside my house for airborne bacon. I would check for
frosty conditions in the great*

*brick-pizza oven down below, but for as many people have told me to
go there, I have yet to visit.*

I was wrong. Can you believe it?

*I jest, of course. This team has proven me wrong a lot. But I thought
the one guy who had*

*absolute job security was the man who won not only our hearts but the
heart of the woman who*

actually writes the checks.

*And while pigs do not fly and hell has not frozen over, an event no less
astonishing has just*

taken place.

*Our quarterback, John Patrick Decker, number 12, the greatest player
this franchise has ever*

seen, is no longer on the team.

Traded by his girlfriend, the daughter of the man who drafted him.

*Traded to a Super Bowl-caliber team that was missing a quarterback
from a team that had a*

Super Bowl-caliber quarterback and not enough else.

*I know, I know. Trades like this don't happen. But then again,
relationships like Hecker (I*

*wouldn't ever say Dannah—with our accents, people would think you
want supper) don't usually*

happen either.

Maybe the paramour got tired of her boy toy.

*Maybe Decker lived up to his other nickname (oddly enough, it rhymes
with anti-pecker) and*

got himself in trouble.

Maybe Decker can lead his new loaded team to a championship.

Maybe this was a good football move for the Tommys.

Maybe-maybe-maybe.

*All I know is even though there's a chance hell's weather is now better
than New England's,*

*let's just pray our illustrious, jilted, and I assume newly single owner
isn't taking her team, and all*

of us who follow it, down south for a visit.



FORTY-THREE

Decker

I ignored her calls. I ignored her texts. It wasn't about punishing her. At least it wasn't *just* about

punishing her. I just didn't have anything to say. What could *she* say? Words weren't going to make

any of this better. Actions had been taken, and they definitely shouted louder. She'd gotten rid of me.

Banished me from the city I'd adopted, that had welcomed me as one of their own. Cast me from the

team I had achieved the ultimate glory with. From teammates who were like family.

She sent me to Chicago like a fucking special delivery deep-dish pizza.

I zipped up my duffel bag. Cormac O'Doyle, the owner of my new team, the Chicago Cougars,

had sent his private jet, and I was scheduled to take it from Logan to Chicago in about an hour.

I looked around my house. Nothing was really packed. My duffel was filled with some clothes

and not much else. I wanted to look around and feel something about leaving my home. But I was

numb. It was just stuff. I could hire someone else to pack and ship it. Hell, I had enough money to just

keep paying for this place and leave everything as is.

The stuff didn't matter, but I didn't have time or the energy for people who actually mattered either.

I didn't really have time to say goodbye to anyone. Mo and I sent a few texts, but that was it.

There was only one person I wanted to talk to. One person I wanted to hold, who could help me

make the rest of the world disappear. The only person who filled me with a passion that rivaled what football did to me.

My owner, my partner. My teammate.

But that same person had crushed my dream of having her and my team. Now I didn't have either.

I sighed and threw the bag over my shoulder.

I wasn't one to look back.

Great quarterbacks had to have short memories.

It didn't matter if the last pass was an interception or a touchdown. All that mattered was what I

did the next time I threw it.

There was a team in Chicago that wanted me. I was going to focus on that.

That short memory and forward momentum lasted all of the time it took me to open my front door

and walk outside it.

She was waiting for me, leaning on my car.

I turned and took an extra moment locking my door.

"You wouldn't take my calls, so I figured you wouldn't open the door if I knocked."

I turned around and looked at her, my expression neutral. "You'd have been right."

She looked beautiful. Sad, slightly pink from the cold and maybe crying, but still beautiful. She

was always beautiful. I should have taken her call, if only so I didn't have to see her.

"I wanted to explain."

"There's nothing to explain," I said as I made my way to my Range Rover.

She blocked me. "That's not true. I owe you at least an explanation."

"You don't owe me anything, Ms. Strong. You own the team. I'm just an employee." I shrugged,

acting like I didn't give a shit.

"You're not just an employee."

"Yes, I am. If I was something more, you couldn't have thrown me away so easily."

Her face contorted as she fought tears. "I didn't throw you away."

"Yes, you did." I wasn't stoic or acting indifferent anymore. I was pissed. "The worst part is I

thought you were getting it. I thought we were building something."

"We were. We *are*—"

"No, we're not. I can't believe that time I wasted on you."

Her head snapped back as if I'd slapped her. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. You were never going to understand what it meant to be on a team. Pull and sacrifice

for someone else. I guess Daddy did more damage than I thought."

She shoved me. I didn't budge, but I felt the anger. Her face was contorted in injured rage. "I did

this for you."

"For me?"

"Yes, you! I couldn't watch you destroy your body week after week. I couldn't watch you do that

to yourself."

"There it is," I said.

"There what is?"

"You don't believe in me." It hurt to say it. And I wanted to make someone hurt because of it.

"I do. You have no idea how much I do." It was a plea.

"No, you don't. And maybe you never did. This is what I do. This is who I am."

"I know." Her voice was small. "I'm on your team. This was the hardest thing I've ever had to do,

and I just buried my father." She was about to break out into sobs.

I shook my head. "If we were ever on the same team, we aren't now. You made sure of that.

Goodbye, Hannah."

I climbed into my car and drove off.
I didn't look back.



Chapter Forty-Four
The Breakup Montage

HANNAH: Hi, John. This is Hannah Strong.

DECKER: Hello, Hannah. I know it's you because my phone recognizes your number.

HANNAH: I thought maybe you deleted me from your contacts.

DECKER: Well, I didn't. I just changed the name in my contacts to DESTROYER OF DREAMS.

HANNAH: That's funny. I changed yours to STUBBORN ASSHAT.

DECKER: That's hilarious. My laughter is echoing around inside my ass. Because that's where

my head is, and I steadfastly refuse to remove it from that location. I mean this in the kindest,

most easygoing and open-minded way—what do you want, Hannah?

HANNAH: I know you don't want to hear from me, but I wanted to say good luck out there this weekend. But please don't tell anyone I said so.

DECKER: I wouldn't tell anyone, but WHY can't I?

HANNAH: You're on a different team now. Isn't it against the rules for me to root for you?

DECKER: It would be frowned upon if we were playing each other, but we're not. And even then, I can't think of any rules against it.

HANNAH: Oh. Well then. Good luck.

DECKER: Thank you. I appreciate that. Good luck to you and the Tommys.

HANNAH: Thank you. I mean, I know how difficult it must be for you to catch and throw a football when your head is up your ass, but you have an amazing team looking out for you, so

I'm sure you'll do fine.

DECKER: I know it's difficult for you to NOT ruin everything, especially when things are going really well, but you should have just ended this convo with "Thank you."

HANNAH: I'm just so impressed by how good the cell phone reception is in your ass. Thank you.

DECKER: Funny you should say that, since you're the one who's always thinking about the bottom line. Thank you.

HANNAH: Super funny that you'll never have to deal with MY bottom line again. Thank you!

DECKER: Too soon.

HANNAH: Thank you.

November 8th

Chicago Cougars - 27

Milwaukee Reapers - 13

DECKER 24/36 260 yds 2 TDs 1 int

HANNAH: Congrats on the win.

DECKER: Thank you. The first week was a lot, so I'm glad we could get the win. This team is really talented.

HANNAH: You played really well.

DECKER: Thank you.

DECKER: This should probably be a phone call, but I wanted to apologize for the way I spoke

to you when I left. It was uncalled for, and I was out of line.

HANNAH: It's ok. I understand.

DECKER: No, it's not ok. But thank you.

HANNAH: Well I'm sorry too.

DECKER: It's ok. I understand.

HANNAH: No you don't. I'm sorry that I was right and you were really awesome with your new team. I feel really bad because it must be hard for you to deal with just how right I was.

DECKER: Don't push it, Strong.

HANNAH: <shrugging woman emoji>

DECKER: <face with rolling eyes emoji>

November 15th

Las Vegas Royals - 31

Chicago Cougars - 10

DECKER 18/41 189 yds 1 TD 2 int

Calling Parents (Home)...

MRS. DECKER

Hello?

DECKER

Hey, Ma. How are you?

MRS. DECKER

Good, John. How are you?

DECKER

(sighing)

I'm good. Is Dad there?

MRS. DECKER

Yes, but we're talking right now.

DECKER

Ma.

MRS. DECKER

Don't you "Ma" me, young man. I've been picking you up and dusting you off since you started

walking at ten months old. You're sad. Talk to me.

DECKER

I'm not sad.

MRS. DECKER

Oh, really? You're not sad?

DECKER

Okay, I'm a little disappointed. I had a crappy game. But that's why I want to talk to Dad.

MRS. DECKER

That is not why you're sad, and you know it.

DECKER

Ma, don't start—

MRS. DECKER

You were developing a beautiful relationship with a beautiful girl who was smart, rich, and a clear path to a bunch of beautiful grandchildren.

DECKER

You say *rich* like I'm not loaded.

MRS. DECKER

Well, she's even richer than you! She was more than the total package. She was the double-bonus package! And you threw it all away.

DECKER

I did not throw it all away. She—

MR. DECKER

Hello? Who's on here? Vikki, you on here? I was going to call Louis from down the street.

MRS. DECKER

I know who Louis is. You don't have to call him "Louis from down the street." We only know one Louis.

MR. DECKER

I knew a Louis in middle school.

MRS. DECKER

Christ on a creampuff. Your son's on here, Tom.

DECKER

Hey, Dad.

MR. DECKER

Oh, hey. You stunk today.

DECKER

Thanks, Dad.

MRS. DECKER

This is what you want? You're sad about football, and you want to talk to your father?

DECKER

Well, it's not like you're doing a bang-up job cheering me up about Hannah.

MRS. DECKER

Ha! See? You *are* sad about that.

DECKER

Of course I'm sad about it!

MR. DECKER

You screwed that up about as bad as you did handling Cover 2 today.

DECKER

Why did I even call you guys?

MR. DECKER

Because you do better when you're coached up. You're not too old or too great or too rich to still need that.

MRS. DECKER

But since we're ALL getting older, it's best not to just give up on a wonderful relationship. You were never one to give up on anything.

DECKER

I'm not giving up. Ma. I'm hurt. And I don't think it's anything I can salvage. Unlike the team, which—

I know we played like dog crap today, but all the pieces are really there. I can feel it.

MRS. DECKER

All the pieces are there, John.

MR. DECKER

And you will figure it out.

DECKER

Okay, well. Thanks for the encouragement. Enjoy the rest of your day.

MRS. DECKER

When are you coming for Thanksgiving?

DECKER

I've got a game that day. Great talking to you, bye!

November 21st

Bye Week

November 26th - Thanksgiving

Chicago Cougars - 42

Detroit Diesel - 6

DECKER 38/45 412 yds 5 TDs 0 int

GARRETT: You need to call Ma.

DECKER: I will. Everything ok?

GARRETT: From her standpoint? No. She's very emotional today. She misses you.

DECKER: I mean, I get that. But I've played on Thanksgiving before and she wasn't like that.

GARRETT: Well she doesn't so much miss YOU as she misses all the grandchildren she's never going to have because you can't find a nice woman to settle down with.

DECKER: Here's the deal. I can't help her because I can't settle down with the nice woman I met who I broke up with because she traded me.

GARRETT: Yeah. Exactly. You're rich and successful, but you're also stupid. I'm much smarter



and better looking, but I'm only a high school coach. It's a given that I'm going to die alone since I'm divorced, but YOU shouldn't disappoint our mother like this.

DECKER: Yeesh.

GARRETT: Yeah. It's pretty bad over here. Thanks for leaving me high and dry. I don't have the kids with me this week.

GARRETT: Btw, if you send them noisy Christmas presents again this year, I will follow through on my threats to murder you.

DECKER: Noted. But also I will probably forget that note when I'm online shopping. How are they?

GARRETT: Total nightmares. I miss them so much it hurts.

DECKER: I miss them too. How's Dad today?

GARRETT: You crushed Detroit. So he's been happy to only talk about that.

DECKER: How's your team doing?

GARRETT: Oh, hey, thanks for asking! Apparently you're the only one in our family who remembers I have a team too.

DECKER: Well, I may be stupid, but I have a pretty good memory. Which is why I'm so rich and successful.

GARRETT: My team's great. Teenage boys are consistently easy to work with and always

focused on nothing but football. I've got the easiest job in the world. Unlike your ex-girlfriend.

DECKER: Low blow.

DECKER: Happy Thanksgiving.

HANNAH: Happy Thanksgiving. Can't believe you have to work on Thanksgiving.

DECKER: Given how we carved them up, I wouldn't really say it was work.

HANNAH: Was that a turkey joke?

DECKER: Depends.

HANNAH: On what?

DECKER: On if it ruffled your feathers.

HANNAH: You don't see any laughing emojis over here, do you?

DECKER: Gotcha. Well, that's ok, I was just winging it.

HANNAH: <woman face-palming emoji>

December 6th

Arizona Blaze - 14

Chicago Cougars - 26

DECKER 15/23 219 yds 2 TDs 0 int

December 13th

Chicago Cougars - 34

Minnesota Minotaurs - 21
DECKER 34/44 362 yds 3 TDs 1 int
December 20th
New Orleans Blues - 3
Chicago Cougars - 16
DECKER 18/24 184 yds 1 TD 1 int

HANNAH: I couldn't believe how much snow there was at your game. Is it fun to play in the snow?

DECKER: What isn't more fun in the snow?

HANNAH: Well, I could think of a few things.

HANNAH: Like yoga!

DECKER: Nice save. Well, they have hot yoga. Why not cold?

HANNAH: Brilliant idea. We should start a cold yoga studio chain. We'll be rich.

DECKER: Well, we are rich, but enough with this football garbage. It's time to start my yoga career.

HANNAH: Namaste, Decker.

DECKER: Namaste, Strong.

HANNAH: Oh, also, I moved into the town house.

HANNAH: Oh, also, I bought a town house.

DECKER: You did? Why didn't you tell me?

HANNAH: I'm telling you now.

DECKER: Wow, that's great. Congratulations. What neighborhood?

HANNAH: It's only a few blocks from your old place actually.

DECKER: Oh. Cool.

HANNAH: Is that weird?

DECKER: Nope. Say hi to my old neighborhood for me. I miss it. I've got a nice place here but no time to make it feel like home yet. So I'm glad you're getting settled.

HANNAH: Yeah. Okay, well. Namaste.

DECKER: Namaste here in my new neighborhood and build a snowman or something.

HANNAH: Nice save.

12/26 (Saturday)

Chicago Cougars - 28

Indiana Racers - 10

DECKER 25/38 285 yds 3 TDs 0 int

DECKER: Merry Christmas, Mo. Kids get the gifts I sent?

MO: Yeah, Deck. Thank you. Well, sort of. The kids were excited. Gabby and I a lot less.

DECKER: Why's that?

MO: Those toys make a LOT of noise. Gabby and I are going to remember to return the favor someday.

DECKER: Ha. Fair enough. You're welcome and I'm sorry. Merry Christmas.

MO: Merry Christmas. You call Hannah to wish her a Merry Christmas?



DECKER: No. She didn't call or text me either.

MO: Dude.

DECKER: I didn't send her a present or anything, so it felt weird to call her.

MO: Dude.

DECKER: If she wants to talk to me, she knows how to get in touch.

MO: Dude.

DECKER: Yeah yeah. Enjoy your beautiful, loving family. And good luck tomorrow.

MO: Thanks. And I will. Enjoy being stubborn and alone.

DECKER: I do.

HANNAH: There are games on Saturday!!!??

DECKER: Yes. You didn't miss yours because I wasn't there to tell you to go, did you?

HANNAH: We're playing tomorrow like civilized football people.
I guess you wouldn't know
that since I didn't tell you.

DECKER: I did know that. Good luck tomorrow. And Merry
Christmas. Belated.

HANNAH: Merry Christmas. Belated.
Calling Jen...

JEN

Hey! I was going to call you after dinner.

HANNAH

Are you busy? You can call me later.

JEN

Please. I'm at my mother-in-law's house. I was only
saving my call to you for after dinner so I'd have something to look
forward to. You okay? You're all
alone, aren't you?

HANNAH

Don't laugh, but I actually came back to hang out at the hotel for the
weekend.

JEN

Aww, I'm glad. That's not sad at all.

HANNAH

Decker and I didn't even exchange e-cards. It's so weird. He's been
weird ever since I told him I
bought a town house.

JEN

You mean since you told him you bought a town house a few blocks
away from the one he used to live
in that he asked you to move into before you broke his heart?

HANNAH

Ouch. When you put it that way.

JEN

I mean *I* don't see it that way. That's probably how he sees it though.

HANNAH

Well, it's not like he misses me or anything. I don't see why it would
bother him so much.

JEN

And why do you assume he doesn't miss you?

HANNAH

He has never said so.

JEN

But you miss him?

HANNAH

(sighing)

Sometimes I miss him so much I can't breathe. It's so much worse around the holidays.

JEN

I know. I'm sorry... And did you tell Decker this?

HANNAH

No.

JEN

Well. You're both being stubborn. And you have every right to be.

HANNAH

He's not the only one who got his heart broken.

JEN

Oh, I know. I'm Team Hannah. Well, I'm really team Dannah. But I know you did the right thing. God

knows my husband is thrilled that the *Schmomschmats* lost their best player and didn't make the playoffs.

HANNAH

Hey. Too soon.

JEN

Sorry. My point is: I love you. And I'm confident that one day that stubborn asshat will realize he still does too.

HANNAH

Yeah, well. It's a little late for a Christmas miracle. Love you. Talk soon.



FORTY-FIVE

Decker

"There he is!" I said, finding Mo in an empty room of the stadium. He wasn't in sweats or a football

uniform but a tailored gray suit. "Looking sharp, man."

"Deck," he said with a smile as we clapped hands into a hug. "Good to see you. Man, it's still

strange to see you in that." He indicated my blue-and-orange Cougars uniform.

"Jordan wore a blue-and-orange Wizards jersey. If it was good enough for him..."

"Yeah, but Jordan never won anything with the Wizards. You guys are killing it."

"Thank you. How'd your season go?" I was trying to be polite.

He gave me a knowing smile. "Come on, man, you know how it went. I'm in a suit because I'm

going to be an analyst on TV instead of playing in the playoffs."

"Yeah, I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. It certainly was an adjustment. Erickson did his best at QB, but he isn't you. Not

only that, I was made the face of the franchise since you're gone."

I grinned. "Please tell me you're on the front of the stadium."

"Forty feet tall," he said, shaking his head.

I laughed.

"Don't laugh. I hate it," he said through his smile.

“I know, that makes it even funnier. You’re the only wide receiver in the league looking for less

attention. You know, I’m surprised they aren’t pushing Dash.”

“I don’t think she thinks he’s ready.”

The temperature in the room changed a little.

“How is she doing?” I asked, wanting to know and also not wanting to. We’d been in touch, but it

wasn’t the same. We didn’t really share what was actually going on with us anymore.

“She’s not around the team as much as when you were there. She took a real beating in the press

and with the fans for trading you away.”

My face hardened, and I nodded.

“What happened between you two?” Mo asked. “We never talked about it.”

“What?” What the hell was he saying?

“You guys seemed like you were getting close. I thought something was developing.”

I looked at him like he had grown another head. One that had no idea what it was talking about.

“Uh, Mo, she traded me away.”

“So? That’s just football. I’m talking about your relationship.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

His eyebrows rose. “You don’t know the difference, do you? Aww, man, I thought you were getting it.”

“She threw me away. What am I not getting?”

He shook his head, looking almost disgusted with me. “How are your ribs?”

“They feel fine.” Where was he going with this?

“Yeah? Healed up real nice? Got a well-oiled offensive machine and big athletic linemen that

have kept you upright through this last half of the season?”

“That’s a great talking point when you’re on TV,” I said earnestly, ignoring his sarcasm.

“Deck,” he said, chiding.

“Yeah, I get your point. But you don’t break up the team when things get hard. You fight, you dig

deep and take on anything, for all the guys on the Tomcats. You know that better than anyone.”

“No, you’re not getting my point. Come on, man, we weren’t going anywhere. We weren’t going to

make the playoffs, and even if we did, we weren’t going to win it this year. And if we kept going the

way we were going, there was a decent chance you weren’t going to make it to the end of the season.”

I didn’t say anything back. I couldn’t. He was right. As much as I didn’t want it to be true and it

was my job when I was with the team to make sure I didn’t believe it was true, we weren’t a great

team and weren’t going to achieve anything. My time with Chicago hit that home. The learning curve

couldn’t have been steeper, but the team was so talented it didn’t matter—we kept winning anyway.

“Did you at least let her explain why she did what she did?” Mo asked.

“We talked. Briefly.”

“And what did she say?”

“She said something along those lines about me getting hurt. But she said she did it for the team.” I

said that last point like I got him. What she did, she did for a team that I was no longer a part of. If it

was ultimately for the Tomcats and I wasn’t on the team, any benefit to me was secondary. End of the

list. Back of her mind.

Mo smiled and shook his head. Seemed like he’d moved on from being annoyed by my stupidity to

being amused by it. “What team do you think she was talking about?”

Okay, he was right. I was really not getting his point. “Well, Mo, I don’t mean to belabor the

obvious, but—”

“How were the Tomcats better without you there? We weren’t better on the field, and we weren’t

better off it. A ton of hate came down on that poor woman, and no one was happy about it. And you?

You're a game away from the Super Bowl. Healthy and playing better than ever. What did the

Tommys get?"

"I don't know. Draft pick and cap room?" It was a weak point, and my tone said as much.

He looked like he was about to give up on me. "I love you, Deck. Like a brother. I love football

and my teammates. But it all pales in comparison to the love I have for my wife and children. I fell in

love with Gabby young, but that love has only deepened. By God's grace, she created life with me.

Life! Everything I do, I do for my family. That's my real team."

Oh shit.

"If you ended things with her because she traded you so you could thrive, she didn't betray your

team—you did," Mo said, no condemnation in his voice but no holding back the truth either.

I collapsed onto a nearby bench, head in my hands, as the realization of just how wrong I'd been

and how much I'd screwed up came crashing down on me.

Mo put a hand on my shoulder. Since I was no longer being an idiot and finally got it, I guess he

was going to be nice to me. Not that I deserved it. "Do you love her?"

I looked up at him. "Like nothing else," I admitted to him and, for the first time, to myself.

"Then you need to fix it," he said simply, like it was a broken door handle or something.

I rose quickly and started pacing. "How do I do that?"

He shrugged. "You may have screwed up, but if there's one thing I can trust about you—you do

your best work when your back is against the wall. First thing you need to do is win this game."

"Oh good, it's not like I'll be distracted."

He shook his head and smiled. "You won't. You finally have something bigger than football to

fight for. And I'm happy for you. The first step is not screwing up this gift she gave you."

"Is this what you're going to talk about at halftime when you're on TV?"

He laughed. "Depends on how good you play."

"Thanks man." I put my hands on his shoulders. "For everything. I love you." I hugged him.

"I love you too, brother." We slapped each other on the back.

I pulled away. "Give Gabby and the kids my best."

"I will," he said, and I walked away.

Then I stopped. An idea began to form.

"Hey, Mo?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to go up there and dismantle the Seattle Hydra, and then you're going to talk about how

awesome we were on TV. And then I'm going to need your help to get my girl back. Sound like a plan?"

He smiled, the small, knowing one he used in the huddle when we were on the same page. He

nodded—imperceptible when a defense was watching, but it always spoke volumes to me. I walked

out, ready to win.

This game.

The next one.

And then my girl's heart.



FORTY-SIX

Hannah

I wished I had been happy for my father, even when we weren't really in each other's lives. He was a

great man who had achieved great things in the only way he knew how. I told him that when I visited

his grave on a cold February morning. I left him a bouquet of red roses with a black bow, and I

thanked him for leaving me the Tomcats. I thanked him for somehow knowing I had it in me to figure

out football. I thanked him for the Hog speeches. I thanked him for introducing me to Decker.

But I really was happy for Decker, even though I had no idea if or when I would see him in person

again. He was back on top where he belonged. I mean...he belonged on top of *me* too, but I was so

excited for him. He was getting what he deserved, and as much as I wished I could be with him when

it was happening, I didn't want to be a distraction. I wanted to be the one who helped him get that

trophy. Even if it was from behind the scenes. Even though he broke my fucking heart by being a

bullheaded turd.

My heart, like his injuries, had healed in time. I was even able to wear the pink Decker jersey

around the house again. And at least I had a heart that was worth breaking now.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Hannah,” my mother said when I told her that on the phone. “You always

had a good heart. You were just so precious with it. And stop talking like it’s over between you and

Johnny. Men are stubborn. But that one isn’t stupid. He’ll come around. You’ll see. Maybe you should

get a sharp new hairstyle. Try going red. It worked for me!”

“I really don’t think it was my hair color that was the issue, Mother.”

I was in my office, getting ready to leave early for a change, but I called my mom because Nancy

had brought in a package. Back at the end of October, I had asked Jen to look through my storage unit

when she had the time. I wanted that custom pink Tomcats football that my dad had given me when I

was seven.

I’d finally realized what he meant when he told me: “Sometimes it’s better for everyone if you let

something that’s really important to you go.” I’d been hoping to present the football to Decker when

the time inevitably came that I’d have to trade him. Jen didn’t get around to finding it until last week,

though, and had it FedExed to me. It would look good in my office anyway, and maybe it was a more

fitting tribute to my father if I kept it there.

But I needed to talk to my mom.

“How did you do it?” I asked her. “How did you make it work with him for as long as you did?”

“With Jerry?”

“Yes. With my dad.”

“Well, I loved him, honey. I wanted it to work. That’s what you do when you commit to someone.

He never wanted to hurt anyone. He just never quite figured out how to show the women he loved

how much he loved them. I don’t think he loved us *less* than he loved his job. It was just easier for

him to love his job. And it got less and less easy to live with that. We both knew it when we got to the point where we weren't fighting to save our marriage anymore. We were just fighting. But I don't regret our marriage one little bit, and I know he didn't either."

"I know."

"The thing your dad admired in you the most was that you never gave up when you wanted to do something."

"How did everyone know this but me?"

"Well, honey, you didn't want to know it until you were ready to know it. You did the right thing

for Johnny, and he might not be ready to know it yet. But when he does, you just promise me that you

know how much you want him and you better fight to keep him. Okay? Promise?"

"Okay. Promise."

"That's my little Hog."

"Okay, now how did you know he called me Hog and *never* told me about that?!"

"Oh, just calm down now, missy. Go get that hair ready for your man."

"He's getting ready for the Super Bowl. I'm sure I'm the last thing on his mind, Mom."

"Well, then fix your hair for *me*, please."

I sighed. "Sure. Thanks, Mom."

I shook my head as I hung up, and then I placed the pink football on a built-in shelf in my office. I

would ask Nancy to get a nice glass case for it. And I would stare at it from my desk, with a sad

smile, and remember what a noble thing I did in letting someone who was really important to me go.

He just better win that fucking trophy.

I gathered up my things and walked from my office to the parking garage. When I was in the

garage, I saw Dash Taylor. He was talking on his cell phone and hung up right before he saw me. But I

saw the huge smile on his face. I heard how his voice was different. I knew he was talking to a girl.

“Oh hey, Miss Strong.” He slid his phone into his pocket and gave me a little wave.

“Hey there, Dash. Didn’t mean to interrupt your phone call. Was that your girlfriend?”

“Noooo. Nah. She’s just a friend— *that* was just a friend. On the phone. It’s a her. I mean, I guess

we’re friends. It’s complicated.”

“I see. Well, I’m glad you have a good friend who makes you happy, then.”

“Yeah, I mean...” He shrugged. “She drives me nuts most of the time too. You know how it is.”

“I do. I really do.”

I stopped in front of my car, and he stopped too, dragging his fingers through his hair.

“Hey, I’m really sorry we didn’t win more this year, Miss Strong.”

“Oh, Dash. It’s okay. You played really well. We’ll do better next year.”

“Yeah. We will. I just mean...” He seemed to be struggling to find the right words. I had a soft

spot for this guy. He was smarter than he thought he was. “I mean I’m sorry if my attitude got in the

way of things. I’m gonna work really hard for you. For everyone.”

“I know you will.”

He kicked at the ground. He was such a big, strong man, and it was sweet to see him acting this

way. “Well, anyway. A bunch of us are watching the game at the bar on Sunday if you don’t have any

other plans. I’m sure you do, but I just thought I’d throw it out there, in case...”

“Well, thank you, Dash. I appreciate it. I’ll think about it.”

“Kay. Well, I never thought I’d be rooting for the Cougars, but I’ll be rooting for Decker.”

I smiled. “Yeah. Me too.”

I got into my car. Just when I turned on the engine, I got a call from Nancy.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Strong? Can you talk now? I’ve got Mr. O’Doyle from Chicago calling for you. Can I put him through?”

Suddenly my heart was racing again, but not in the good way. Was he calling to tell me Decker had been injured? I mean, why else would he be calling me?

“Sure. Yeah. Put him through.”

“Hey there, Hannah Strong. How’re things over there in the Cradle of Liberty?”

Okay, he would not be making small talk if Decker were injured.

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, you know. I’m leaving the office early because we ended the

season early. How’s it goin’ over there in...” I couldn’t think of the nickname for Chicago. “Deep-

Dish City?” I smacked my forehead as quietly as possible.

Fortunately, he just laughed and let it slide. “Not to rub it in or nothin’, but honest to *Gahd*, things

could not be better. Listen, here’s why I’m callin’. I don’t know if you got plans, but I’d like to invite

you to sit with me in the owner’s box over in Tampa on Sunday. Least I could offer, seein’ as how I

stole yer quarterback out from under ya.”

“Well, that’s not how I remember it happening, sir.”

“Yeah, I’m just messin’ with ya. So whaddya say? You can bring a friend.”

“Well, that is very kind of you to offer, but I don’t know how certain people would feel about me being there.”

“Aww, hey. Any of those jerks in Boston got a problem with ya, you just send ‘em to me and I’ll deal with ‘em.”

“That is also very kind of you to offer, but I don’t know how a certain *person* would feel about —”

“Yeah, you let me deal with that guy too. Come on. I can’t send my jet to get you, but I happen to

know you got your own.”

“I suppose I do. Sure. Why not?! I’ll go. I mean, I’ll probably wear some kind of disguise so people don’t recognize me, but yes. I’ll be there. Thank you. And good luck.”

“All right, then, Miss Hannah. I’ll see ya there.”

I hung up and wondered if I should let Decker know that his new owner had invited me to the big game and that I was planning on going.

But I didn’t.

I didn’t want to be a distraction.

I just wanted to be there when he got what he wanted.

Because I loved him.



FORTY-SEVEN

Decker

I looked at my teammates, jaws chewing and knees bouncing. The blue and orange of the Cougars

uniforms weren’t strange anymore. The faces weren’t new. It had only been a half a season, but I

knew these men—knew what they could do. I also knew if we played the way we were capable of, we’d be champions.

“I want to thank each and every one of you. I know it’s strange, losing your leader halfway through

this magical season you were having. Given the heart and determination this team has, from the top of

the organization, Mr. O'Doyle"—I nodded toward him, and he nodded back— "to everyone on this

team, the coaches, the training staff, everyone who works at Marine Field, had Cal not gotten hurt,

you'd still be here in this game."

I saw some heads shake in disagreement, which I appreciated, but out of loyalty to both their

former quarterback Cal and myself, they didn't take a strong stand on either side.

"I see the focus, I've seen the drive. I've seen the grit, I've seen the talent. This team has

answered every challenge that's been thrown our way. I've won two of these big games. For some of

you, this is your first playoff run. Let me tell you, when you get out there, it won't matter. The game

will happen the way football happens. The game we've dreamed about our entire lives, in the

backyard with our friends—the Super Bowl. But the game isn't bigger than you. There are monsters in

this room. Warriors! The only way you regret this day decades from now is if you don't do what you

know in your heart you're capable of doing. If you don't leave everything out there. So let's do that. I

am proud to lead this team."

I raised my hand in the air. The men followed with theirs. "Now we are going to finish what *you*

started. Let's kick some ass!"

Shouts and hoots and a rising and falling "Oh yeah!" in unison. The guys moved into the tunnel,

getting ready for the announcements and fireworks before taking the field. That was a pretty good

speech, but honestly not one of my best. But you didn't need the best hype speech, ever before a Super

Bowl. If anything, guys were too pumped. And the halftime show would be so long, it would feel like

two different games. We were going to have to pace ourselves. So I said what I really felt, and I'd

dole out what the young guys needed to know as the game went along.

Mr. O'Doyle walked up to me and slapped a hand down on my shoulder pad. He was in his early

fifties, young by football owner standards, but he was third generation. Unlike Hannah, he had been

groomed to take over the Chicago Cougar franchise by his father and grandfather.

"I'm glad you're here, Decker. You are even better than advertised. I feel like I had thirty cups of

coffee, and you seem as cool as the other side of the pillow."

I nodded. I was strangely calm. I meant what I had said to the team. It was football. I knew how to

play football. What butterflies I had were reserved for a certain fabulous blonde and the plan I had for her.

It was the thing I had feared for years, that a woman would be a distraction and I would be one of

those old men looking back and regretting not achieving what I could have achieved because I was

blinded by lust. But with Hannah, I knew what I would regret decades from now. *Not* having her.

She didn't take my drive away.

She had *become* my drive.

"Is she here?"

Mr. O'Doyle smiled a wry, knowing smile. "I don't know. Haven't been up to the owner's box yet."

I sighed and nodded.

"But she said she'd be here," he added.

It was my turn to give a knowing smile. "Then she'll be here."

"You know, I was a little worried when you first asked me to help bring her here."

"Oh yeah?"

"I paid good draft picks for ya. I want this so bad I can taste it. My father has two, my grandfather

five! This will be my first championship if we win today. I didn't want you distracted."

"So why did you help me?"

A slightly hazy, faraway look softened his features. "Y'know, in seventh grade, Becky Morrone

stole my heart. She had a Michael Jackson trapper keeper that I was jealous of and wore thigh-high

white socks and short plaid skirts."

I'd been in a few Super Bowls. This was still easily the strangest start to pregame speech from an

owner that I'd ever heard.

"So one day, me and a couple of guys found a way to get on the school roof. Just boys being

stupid. But then someone noticed us and we gathered a crowd. Becky was there. I locked eyes with

her. And then some idiot on the ground wanted us to jump to another part of the roof. I don't know

how far away it was in reality, but in my memory it was ten feet away and we were twenty feet up.

Some of the guys joked about jumpin' it. They would run up to the edge, then stumble back. Because it

was stupid. We'd never make it. But I took another look at Becky, and she smiled at me. That was it. I

backed up and sprinted toward the edge. People were laughin', thinkin' I was kidding..."

He chuckled and shook his head.

"Right up until I took a flyin' leap off that ledge. I remember hearin' everyone gasp. The jump

itself was in complete silence."

"But you made it," I said grinning.

"You're damn right I did. Felt like the whole school was watchin', and everyone—I mean

everyone—cheered."

"Including Becky Merrone," I said.

"Includin' Becky Merrone," he said with a grin that made him look thirteen again. "I should have

fallen to the ground and died. Or broken my legs at the very least.” He chuckled again and shook

away the memory. He moved closer to me and looked me square in the eye. “I’m not worried about

how you’ll play today because this plan of yours doesn’t work if we lose.”

“We’re not going to lose.” It wasn’t a promise. It was a simple statement of fact.

“I know,” he said. “That’s why I brought your girlfriend here. Nothin’ improves a man’s

performance more than havin’ the lady he’s in love with watchin’ him. I learned that lesson in middle school.”



FORTY-EIGHT

Hannah

“Will you stop trying to hide your face?!” Jen reached over to move my hand away from my forehead.

“You’re already in disguise. You’re just drawing more attention to yourself now, you goofball. Why

don’t you put a big flashing neon sign that says *I’m Not Hannah Strong, Don’t Look at Me!* over your head too?”

“Shhhh! Don’t say my name!”

We were in Tampa, Florida, in the luxurious owner’s box at the stadium, and the players were

about to be brought out onto the field.

I was so nervous I couldn't even sample the deep-dish pizza slices that were provided by the

caterers. Not that I approved of deep-dish pizza. But it would have been funny to tell Decker I'd had some, if I ever spoke to him again.

"What exactly are you nervous about? There are only a few other people in here, and I'm pretty

sure most of the people out there can't see us, unless they have binoculars."

She wasn't wrong. We were in the seats up against the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the

field. The other guests in the suite were watching the monitor. It felt very private. But it also felt like I

did have a big flashing neon sign over my head that said, *I'm Hannah Strong. I'm still in love with*

my ex-boyfriend, but don't tell anyone I'm here, especially him!

"It's the Super Bowl," I told her. "Everyone's nervous."

"Not really."

"I just really want him to win," I whispered. I had to sit on my hands so I'd stop covering my face

or wringing my hands together. If there was a sexy way for former WAGs of quarterbacks to attend

their Super Bowl games, I hadn't quite nailed it yet.

I was in disguise.

Even though Decker was correct about it not going against the NFL rulebook for me to publicly

root for a team other than the Tomcats, I didn't want to take any chances, since I still wasn't exactly

being embraced by the good people of Boston. I bought face paint at a nearby drugstore and let Jen

paint a cougar face on me in the Chicago team colors.

I also took my mother's advice about giving myself a smart new hairstyle and wore a red wig. It

really clashed with the orange-and-blue face paint and everything I was wearing, but I wasn't there to

win a beauty contest. I was there to watch the would-be love of my life win his third Super Bowl championship from as close a distance as I could without him seeing me.

I heard Mr. O'Doyle's voice behind me and turned around. He furrowed his brow and then recognized me and said, "Ah. There she is. Glad you could make it, Hannah."

"Yep. We're here!" I introduced him to Jen, and he introduced us to his family. My heart ached a

bit, thinking of the Super Bowls I could have attended with my dad, but I'd always turned him down,

thinking Nancy had only invited me as a polite gesture. She'd informed me I was wrong about that. He

had even picked out every gift he'd ever given me all by himself.

O'Doyle's ten-year-old daughter asked me for my autograph and said I was the first lady team

owner she'd ever met. She said she wanted to be like me when I grew up. No one had ever said that

to me before, and I wished I had looked a little less ridiculous in that moment. But I hugged her and

posed for a picture with her and wrote her an incredibly sappy little note with my signature. When I

handed it to her, she said, "Except *I'm* going to marry Johnny Decker." And then she flipped her hair and walked off.

I mean. I couldn't exactly blame her for being such a little turd. I hadn't ever said the words out

loud, but that was the first time I thought to myself, *Actually, I think I'd like to marry Johnny Decker.*

I hadn't been a magical thinker since I was that girl's age, but I had this fleeting thought: *If he wins*

the Super Bowl, I'm going to win him back.

Cormac eyed my face paint and wig and said, "Well, I guess we know who you're supporting today. Redheads!"

"Woo-hoo!" I cheered awkwardly. "I'm here to win!"

“You just might win big today,” I think he muttered, but I wasn’t sure. I figured he was a redhead fan.

When the announcer started introducing the Cougars and the players ran out onto the field through the blasts from the fog machines, I jumped out of my seat and started cheering for real. I couldn’t help

myself. I was tearing up and giddy. There was a glass partition, hundreds of feet and thousands of people between myself and Decker, but it was almost overwhelming to be in his presence again. I

wished I knew how he felt in that moment. I wished he knew how excited I was for him. But most of

all, I just wanted him to take home that damn trophy. No matter where his home was.

The Cougars came in hot and absolutely crushed the first half of the game. I was so proud of

Decker and surprisingly in tune with the plays he would run. Even when he’d suddenly change

strategy. I might not have understood how his stubborn brain worked as a man, but I had somehow

instinctively picked up on his moves out on the field from watching so much film.

“Yes! You can’t play zone against my...against Decker! Not without getting pressure up front with

just four!” I was so amped up. If I could have, I would have run out there to the forty-yard line for an

epic high five before dry humping him in front of around a hundred million viewers. I was so proud of

him, but I was also proud of myself for having so much self-control. I didn’t even realize it until Jen

tapped my knee, but I kept calling out the formations. “Yeah, you take ‘em down with that inside drag route, you animal!”

Everyone in the suite was staring at me.

I glanced over at Mr. O’Doyle and grimaced, but he nodded his approval.

I was, after all, a fellow NFL team owner.

I still had a lot to learn about the game and about Decker, but I was an awesome ex-girlfriend,
whether Decker knew it or not.



FORTY-NINE

Decker

We had dominated the first half. But like I'd said, the epic halftime made it like we played two

completely separate games. The Storm came out in the second half and lived up to their name. They

made adjustments and started cutting through our defense. They switched their defense from zone to man and were matching up well.

I looked up at the scoreboard. Eighteen seconds left. We had just used our last time-out, and we

were 17 yards away from the end zone, down 4 points. Field goal wasn't going to cut it. We needed a touchdown.

"What do you want to do?" I heard Kevin ask me. I squinted up at the owner's box. I couldn't see

her. But I knew she was there. Watching me.

I would never be back here. I guess somewhere in the back of my head I knew, but now I really

felt it. This was the last time.

Which meant this was my last chance to win this game, to wash the taste of all those years I failed

after being too young to appreciate just how hard it was to be a champion at the end of the season.

She'd given me this opportunity, and instead of thanking her, I'd blamed her.

"We have time to get another first down," Kevin said.

I shook my head. "No, we're ending this. Give me three wides and Taste." "Taste" was Tavon

Tate, the best running back I had ever played with, and I'd played with a lot of good ones over the years. Kid was special.

Kevin smiled. "You got it, Deck."

I jogged out to the field and put my helmet on. The guys huddled up around me.

"All right, boys. This is it. Go time. The time for dreaming is done. You're living it. We get this

touchdown, and we're champions forever. No one can ever take that away. But more importantly—we

don't score this touchdown, you will all be assassins of love. You will doom me to a fate where I'll

die alone, unloved and unfucked for the rest of my life."

They laughed, easing some of the tension. Exactly what they needed.

"We got you, Deck," Taste said.

The other guys murmured in agreement.

"And I got you guys. RB West Left Slot 268 Y wheel." I announced the play to the team but bore

my eyes into Taste. He nodded, understanding that if he drew the linebacker who couldn't keep up

with him, he'd be getting the pass and ending this game.

The ref blew the whistle, starting the clock.

All of us walked up to the line.

A memory flashed. Alone in my driveway shooting foul shots after school. I'd make little bets

with myself to up the pressure. If I made the next one, I'd ace the next test. If I missed, Alexandra

wouldn't go out with me. Thousands and thousands of tiny little bargaining prayers determined by the trajectory of a ball. I didn't know if it had any real effect. I didn't keep that score. But it didn't stop me from doing it. I hunched over at the line. "52 is the Mike!" I called out and pointed. I was now a grown man, my after-school basketball career long in the rearview mirror. Part of me knew that it was silly to think that the outcome of this play, winning the Super Bowl, would determine the outcome of whether Hannah would be with me or not. But I wasn't going to take any chances. "Hut! Hut! Hike!" I screamed at the center. He snapped the ball into my hands. Clean and easy. Before the play even developed, I knew she would be mine. I had time to smile. I had time to think and feel that it would all work out. Because everything slowed down.



FIFTY
Hannah

The only time I sat down for that entire game was during the halftime show. I was so filled with glee for the whole first half, but the second half was a different game entirely. Every muscle in my body

was tensed up. I probably even had tension knots in my pinkie toes. Jen had to keep reminding me to breathe.

There were only eighteen seconds left on the clock, and the Cougars needed a touchdown to win. I

said a silent prayer for the first time in two decades. They had played so well, but if they didn't get

this, it would be devastating. After a lifetime of not understanding how anyone could get so caught up

in this ridiculous sport, I had never wanted so badly for something to happen in my entire life. I

wanted the Cougars to win with every molecule of my being, and I was so terrified that they wouldn't.

I couldn't watch them on the field.

I turned my attention to the big screen.

It was when the center snapped the ball to Decker that I finally took a breath.

I saw Johnny's smile.

I could see it in his face and the way he moved.

He knew he had this.

And I knew it too.

My eyes were glued to the players on the field again. But I swear, everything seemed to slow

down. The wide receiver was running up the seam. But I saw the running back swinging left. I could

see how it was all going to play out right before it happened. I wished Decker could see what I was

seeing from this perspective, but I couldn't risk missing anything if I grabbed my phone to capture it.

It was all so beautiful.

Everyone else in the room was chanting, "Throw it. Throw it." But I whispered as if I was saying

it directly into his ear. "Throw it, Johnny. Throw it."

He nearly got sacked, but it was almost as if he just refused to acknowledge that anything could

come between him and his goal.

He scrambled and heaved it to Tavon Tate. Tate did the rest.

And that was it.

They did it.

He did it.

Touchdown.

Game over.

Everything was right in the world.

Everyone in the suite and at least half of the people in the stadium erupted in cheers. Hooting and

hollering. Confetti falling from the sky over the field. I was in some heretofore unknown zen-like

state. I was filled with glee again. Jen was jumping up and down, hugging me while ordering me not

to tell her husband she was so happy for a former *Schmomschmat*.

I literally could not have been happier for another person, but I just couldn't bring myself to cheer

about it like everyone else. I had a lump in my throat. I started to tear up. I just couldn't handle being

there and not *being* with Decker.

I ran my alternatives through my head as if they were plays. Brokenhearted coward plays. I could

have Nancy send him a gift basket. I could hand write a congratulatory note on official Tomcats

letterhead. Maybe text him a funny GIF later. The one person who'd be more than happy to tell me

what I should do was a little too busy being hugged and chest-bumped by some very large men.

I only had to give Jen one little look, and she nodded at me, picking up her coat and bag.

Cormac O'Doyle was already on his way down to the field, of course. We said goodbye to his

family and then snuck out of the owner's box. I tried to hold my head up high, but I had never

experienced anything quite so bittersweet. As much as it felt like all was right in the world for a few

seconds, it was just wrong that I couldn't celebrate this win with Decker. All wrong.

Jen rubbed my back as we walked down the hall. When I looked up, I saw a familiar face. It was

Mo. Looking all dapper in a suit. He was grinning from ear to ear, staring at me. He didn't recognize

me at first, but when he did, he said, "Whoa." He stopped where he was and waited for us to reach him.

"Mo! I didn't know you were here."

"I was just coming to get you."

"You were?" I hugged him. "How did you know I was here?"

"The Ghost knows all." He shook hands with Jen and then said, "Come on down to the field with

me. Both of you. That's where the party's at."

"Oh, I can't. We can't. We were just heading out."

"You got somewhere more important to be right now? Your man just won the Super Bowl."

I was smiling through tears. "He's not mine anymore."

Mo put his arm around my shoulder and gave me a little squeeze. "You sure about that?"

Jen slid her arm around my waist. "You aren't actually going to deny me the opportunity to walk

out onto the field at a Super Bowl game, are you?"

It was probably almost like how Decker felt when he was in the zone. When he didn't even need

to think because his body was doing the thing that needed to be done even before he knew he had to

do it. I let my feet lead me down to the field with Mo and Jen. If Decker could pull it together for a

win while he was being tackled by a linebacker, I could congratulate him face-to-face, even if I didn't

know how he'd react when he saw me. If he'd even pay any attention to me. Or recognize me.

I wanted to see him.

I didn't know if he was my man or not anymore, but he should at least know that I was still his girl.



FIFTY-ONE

Decker

The confetti rained down. Guys were collecting family members who were streaming out onto the

field. I saw our punter, Hanson, run to the end zone and make a confetti snow angel. There was no

purer joy than celebrating something this hard won. Sure I had won Super Bowls before, but there

was absolutely nothing stale about the experience. The joy was grade-A, unfiltered, street-grade stuff.

This one was different, though, because I wasn't entirely done with accomplishing what I needed

to. Not all the butterflies had been tackled out of me.

The commissioner presented the trophy to Mr. O'Doyle. He gratefully accepted it. He thanked the

team and his father and grandfather and the city of Chicago. A huge cheer erupted from the remaining

crowd. The Cougars fans traveled well, and they had been a big boost the whole game. Kevin, Coach

McDonald, was handed the trophy and gave his own speech. My heart was bursting for him. I loved

this team, and they made me feel no less a part of it, even though I was literally Johnny-come-lately.

But Kevin and I had history. Seeing him achieve this as a head coach was something special.

But I'd be lying if I heard what he said outside the shout-out he gave me. Outside of all the

dapping and hugging and enormous grown men happy-crying, which was distracting in its own right, I

was searching for a very particular pretty face.

"Johnny Decker, come on up here!" I heard Jim Barb, the broadcaster who'd called tonight's

game and was presenting the trophies, say. I made my way to the presentation stage. "You know,

Johnny, I've been calling games for thirty years, and I don't think I've ever seen a season like yours.

How does it feel to finish it off like this?"

"It feels great, Jim. This team was great before I got here. I just contributed what I could," I said

into the mic Jim held.

"Well, that's modest because you, Johnny Decker, just won your third Super Bowl MVP!" Jim

handed me the trophy, and the guys cheered.

I grinned and raised it up over my head. When I dropped it back down, Jim handed me the mic. "I

want to thank Kevin McDonald, Mr. O'Doyle, and Don Carrington the GM for believing I wouldn't

screw up the awesome team they built. I want to thank all my teammates. You guys were always

champions. You just proved it tonight!" Huge cheers from the guys and the crowd. "And I want to

thank Chicago! You made me feel like I was at home right away!"

Another huge cheer from the crowd.

Then I saw her.

She wore a red wig, looked like a cougar—the animal, not the hot fifty-year-old—and like the

mascot threw up the team colors all over her. But it didn't matter. I'd know my beautiful girl

anywhere, anyhow.

"There's also someone I'd like to thank that I didn't when I should have. I was ungrateful and

pigheaded. I'd like to thank Hannah Strong. She was brave enough and cared enough about me that she

was willing to take on all of Boston's hatred to give me this opportunity." I looked at her eyes, which

were wide and disbelieving. "To protect me. Thank you."

Her eyes began to well with tears.

"I would like to, here and now, officially announce my retirement. I can't think of a better way to

go out." There was some murmur of protest from the crowd and the team. "Don't worry. Cal will heal

up and be back next year, and you'll make another run at this thing. I have no doubt. And I have a lot

of work to do this off-season to thank the fans of Boston for all the wonderful years they gave me. I

don't have the time or the space—I may never—to properly thank what that city and that team meant

to me." I paused for a moment. I needed to execute this like we'd executed that last play. "I also have

a lot to thank the game of football for. There's the family you come from, and they couldn't have been

more amazing." I held the trophy up to my family—my mother, father, and even my brother—who had

made their way onto the field. "I couldn't have asked for a more loving, encouraging, but tough family

who wanted the best for and got the best from me. I love you." I blew a kiss to my mom.

"But then there's the family you create. Football gave me brothers who I would die for. It also

gave me a second father, who gave me an opportunity and helped make me the man I am today." I

looked at Hannah, who was weeping openly. *Not yet, baby*, I thought. "If that bounty wasn't enough, it

has now given me the woman I want to make my wife."

Hannah's hand snapped to her mouth, and the crowd gasped. I jumped down from the stage and

made my way to Hannah. She let me take her hand.

“Football and the people in and around it made me the man I am today.
But you make me so much

more, and to become the man I could be, I need you by my side. I’m
ready to end the last chapter and

begin a new one. Hannah Strong, will you marry me?” I dropped to
one knee and placed the mic on
the ground.

She took a moment to compose herself enough to answer. “You’re
asking me in front of a hundred

fifty million people while I look like this?” she huffed through her
tears.

“I imagine a lot of the Kansas City Storm fans already turned it off, so
I’m sure it’s a lot less. And

it doesn’t matter what you wear. You’re the most beautiful girl in the
world.”

“You’re trouble, Johnny Decker.”

“Takes one to know one, Hannah Strong. I won this for you. I won it to
win you. I don’t care about

the trophies. You’re my prize. I’m sorry it took me so long to see it.
Please, let me spend the rest of

my life making it up to you. Will you be my wife?”

Her face contorted in emotion as she nodded. “Yes. Yes, Johnny. Yes!”

I rose and hugged her, and the crowd and the team roared in approval
as I kissed my future bride.



EPILOGUE ONE – Hannah

For once, Decker was the one who was getting trolled by people on social media and ribbing from

journalists—because he proposed to me without a ring.

I mean, it wasn't like there were pockets in football pants. Where was he supposed to hide a ring

box? That speech he gave was enough for me. It hadn't even occurred to me that there was no ring

when he was down on one knee. Why would it? Mr. Decker always knew what to do.

He did, of course, present me with one when we got back to his hotel room. A gorgeous one. I

wasn't the kind of girl who fantasized about weddings or coveted diamond rings while I was growing

up, but wowza. I really liked that ring. A lot. I liked wearing it. I liked staring down at it on my left

hand. I very much enjoyed sending a picture of it to my mother.

But I really loved waiting a couple of days before posting a photo of it on Instagram. Right after I

finally started following him. But it felt good—alerting the world that he had, in fact, done the right

thing. *After* I'd decided he'd taken enough of a beating—not that he got much of one. But why should I

have been the only one on our team who caught flack? And by “our team,” I meant us. Me and my man.

Side note—a few months later, Decker was absolutely delighted to post a picture of his new

Super Bowl ring. It was crafted in ten-karat gold and had over three hundred diamonds. That seemed

fair. And he only gloated about it for an entire week!

But I met him at the airport that morning when he first returned to Boston, a retired player. He told

me there was something he wanted to discuss with me. A negotiation of sorts. He waggled his

eyebrows. But I had to get back to work. I had to work late. He was not pleased that I didn't take the

day off, but I asked him to meet me in my office before we went out for dinner. I had sent Nancy home before he got there.

It was only a matter of hours since I'd seen him, but I caught my breath when he poked his head in.

It would always, always thrill me to catch sight of this man. I knew that for certain. But I wasn't about to show my hand or anything.

"You done working yet?" he asked. He was being a grumpy Gus.

As expected.

"Just waiting for you," I answered. Playing it cool. I tugged on the sleeves of my crisp white

button-down shirt. "You had something you wanted to discuss with me? Have a seat."

"Nah. I'm good."

"Oh yeah?" I unbuttoned a couple of buttons and then let my hair down, shaking it out. "You sure?"

His jaw tightened as he shut the door and locked it. "Well. There was something..." He sauntered

over and took a seat in front of my desk.

I held up a finger and pretended to finish reading something on my computer screen before saying,

"I'm listening."

He cleared his throat. "Well, you're probably not aware of this. But it's customary for a player to

sign a one-day, one-dollar contract with the team he spent his career with so he can retire with that team."

"Is that right?" I knew. Nancy had told me. "I had no idea. A dollar, huh? I'll have to check my cap. Things are a little...tight."

He grinned and flicked at the stubble on his jaw. "These aren't supposed to be difficult

negotiations. You don't have to make things harder than they already are."

I pursed my lips and casually undid one more button. “I don’t know...” I sighed. “You sure that’s

what you want? Because once you sign that contract...I own you again. And I’m going to want to spell

out what I can and can’t do with you. In *great* detail.”

“And she’s making things harder again, as usual.”

I shrugged and stood up, walked around to the front of my desk. Besides the shirt, I was only

wearing high heels and panties. Decker sat up straighter, gripping the arms of the chair.

“I certainly don’t mean to make things harder. Why don’t I just write up a little contract right

now?” I turned to face my desk, bending over to grab a pad of paper and a pencil.

He grunted when he read what was printed on the backside of my panties.

Property of Decker.

I had to lean forward a little more, to find a better pencil. And to make things a little harder.

“Your panties are confusing these negotiations.” I felt his big, strong hands on my hips and smiled.

“Who owns who?”

I turned to face him. He smelled sensational, as always. I would have gladly given him a two-

dollar contract. But I was, as always, a shrewd businesswoman. I kept that to myself. “Perhaps you

should remove them, then. So you have more clarity.”

He leaned in, completing the *unbuttoning of my shirt* play, as he said, “Good idea. I wouldn’t

want to wreck them.”



EPILOGUE TWO - Decker

I lay on the couch looking at my fantasy football team. It was a keeper league, and with Mo retiring

last year, I didn't have a strong wide receiver left on my team. Three-time Super Bowl-winning

champion, and I couldn't even buy a win against my mom last week. She auto drafted! I didn't even

have the excuse that I just wasn't paying attention to football anymore, as I was the color commentator

next to Jim Barb on the lead announcing team on CBS. Hannah had offered me a front office position

on the Tomcats, but it was just too soon.

Maybe someday. We did work well together, after all.

As if on cue, our most successful collaboration came tottering into the room, kicking the gate

closed behind him. Our one-year-old son, Liam, giggled at me. Since he was the spitting image of me

and had started walking at ten months, I already had his football number picked out.

Hannah said it would be a "discussion."

"Probably not the fun kind," I had muttered at the time.

I sat up on the couch and held my arms wide. Liam rumbled into my chest. I hadn't known if I'd

ever get married. I hadn't known if I'd ever have a kid. But Hannah had changed all that, and I was so

thankful she had. She and Liam made my heart so full that—

Oh God, what's that smell?

I took a peek into his diaper, and sure enough, I found an epic poop.

I lifted his face to mine. “Well, I guess you are my son. You absolutely wrecked that diaper.” He

gave me a partial-toothed grin, and I couldn't help but smile back. I placed him back down on the

ground and walked over to the gate.

“Okay, Liam, here's the plan,” I whispered. “You're going to slip past the defense...” I gently

nudged the gate open. “The end zone is Mommy. Make it there and she'll change you, and we both

score, buddy!”

“First of all,” Hannah's voice came through the monitor.

Aww, shit.

“Make sure that if you're communicating the play, the other team isn't listening in. Secondly...”

Hannah stepped in from the hallway. “Make sure the other team didn't already run that play.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. She pointed her finger at Liam's diaper. I looked down and saw that

Property of Decker had been written in Sharpie on the back of it. I looked up at her with a rueful

smile. “Well played, Mrs. Decker. Well played.”

She shrugged and smiled wide. I held out my hand. She took it and eased into my side.

“What can I say? I learned from the best,” she said.



And then I kissed the hell out of my beautiful, clever, infuriatingly wonderful teammate.

THE END

Acknowledgments

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Thanks to Stacy Garcia for the last minute Hail Mary! (P.S. I'm not 100% sure what a Hail Mary is in football so hopefully it's a good thing)

Thanks and laugh crying emojis to the Chicago Cougar Kerri Wallace for providing us with the

name for the fictional Chicago team—as well as dozens of other hilarious potential team names

that are way too filthy to print even in one of my books.

I am always grateful to my ARC team and the magical internet fairies who do a much better job of promoting my books than I do.

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I'm sure we both had no idea it would end up here, but I'm so grateful she got in touch and didn't

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Thank you to all the authors who let me narrate their stories the past couple of years, letting me

play in their worlds and grow as a romance storyteller.

Thank you to all the wonderful romance fans who have embraced my work, generously sharing and supporting as I try to get better every day.

Thank you to Kayley for giving me this opportunity—someone who clearly didn't need me to create

successful, fun, sexy stories but was still willing to take a chance on me—a total newbie as a

writer. I think what we created is special. But she of course had no way of knowing that at the time.

She is either reckless or brilliant. Actually I know she's both, which has clearly worked in my favor.

Lastly, thank you to my wife and children. I have asked myself in the past what all of this life stuff

means, what is all this for? I no longer ask those questions. They are the answer.

Also from Kayley - I am now just mad at Connor for being a better person than I am in every

possible way including typo-making and for making me look like an even bigger asshole than

usual. I could not have written a football romance without him, unless it was about a bunch of people who don't know anything about football.



Author's Note

If you would like to listen to the authors bicker with each other while discussing their totally professional co-writing process for DECKER: Changing the Play, you can listen to this very special podcast episode of Multiple Eargasms with Kayley Loring...

LISTEN

ON

SPOTIFY:

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/5MlpR8rZTCukCj3P40M8TF>

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*The **duet-style audiobook** for DECKER: Changing the Play will be narrated by Connor Crais and*

Mackenzie Cartwright, featuring Ava Lucas and Ron Butler.

It will be on Audible in March—after the Kindle and audiobook for A Very Vegas St. Patrick's

Day are released. Kayley and Connor are writing that one together too!



Up Next In The Boston Tomcats Series...

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* Most of my books are available in audio and they are fantastic productions narrated by the best romance narrators!

The Brodie Brothers Series

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Narrated by Connor Crais

CONNOR CRAIS TITLES ON AUDIBLE

Keep in Touch with Kayley and Connor

You finished the book!

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Kayley:

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Come join me and a bunch of hilarious women in my Facebook reader group Kayleyville ! I'm most available in here.

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Dear lord, I'm on TikTok now: FOLLOW ME ON TIKTOK

Visit my WEBSITE

EMAIL ME at: authorkayleyloring@gmail.com ! I'd love to hear from you!

I am most active in Kayleyville and on Instagram FYI :)

Connor:

Come join me in my Facebook group Connor's Corner ! This is the group I'm in and I regularly post in here about my projects as a narrator and

author.

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