



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

RACHEL
GIBSON

author of Nothing But Trouble

ANY MAN OF MINE



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Rachel Gibson

 HarperCollins e-books

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Chapter One

Any Man of Mine:
No Professional Athletes

Sam LeClaire was a good-looking son of a bitch. Everyone thought so. Everyone from sports writers to soccer moms.

The girl wrapped up in his sheets thought so, too. Although she really wasn't a girl. She was a woman.

"I don't see why I can't go."

Sam glanced up from the knot in his blue-striped tie and looked in the mirror at the supermodel in his bed. Her name was Veronica Del Toro, but she was known by just her first name. Like Tyra and Heidi and Gisele.

"Because I didn't know you were going to be in town," he explained for the tenth time. "Bringing a guest at this late date would be rude." Which wasn't the real reason.

"But I'm Veronica."

Now, there. There was the real reason. She was rude *and* narcissistic. Not that he held that against anyone. He could be rude and narcissistic himself; but, unlike the stories written about him, he really did know when to behave.

"I won't eat much."

Try not at all. That was one of the things that irritated him about Veronica. She never ate. She ordered food like she was starving, but she pushed it around her plate.

Sam slid up the knot and tilted his chin to one side as he buttoned down the collar. "I already called you a cab." In the mirror he watched Veronica rise from his bed and walk toward him. She moved across his carpet as if she was on the catwalk. All long legs and arms, big breasts yet hardly a jiggle.

“When are you going to be back?” she asked as she wrapped her arms around his waist. She rested her chin on his shoulder and looked at him through dark brown eyes.

“Late.” He tilted his head to the other side and, as he buttoned the other collar point, he glanced at the big Stanley Cup champion ring on the dresser. The white- and yellow-gold ring had 160 diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires fashioned into the team logo on its face. On one side the Stanley Cup and the year had been engraved. On the other, his name and number. He’d had it out to show Veronica, but he didn’t plan to put it on. Even if he had been a guy who wore jewelry, which he wasn’t, the huge ring covered the finger on his right hand to his knuckle and was over-the-top. Even for a guy who liked over-the-top.

“How late?”

Looking in the mirror, he slid his gaze to the clock on his nightstand. It was already half past six and the wedding started at seven. He really hadn’t had the time to meet Veronica. But she wasn’t in town that often, and she’d promised a quickie. He should have known better. She was Veronica and she wasn’t quick about anything. “Real late. When do you fly out?”

“In the morning.” She sighed and slid her long hands up his dress shirt to his hard pecs. “I can wait.”

He turned, and her palms slid to his waist. “I don’t know when I’ll get back. This thing could run real late.” Although with the regular season opener in just five days, he doubted it. He pushed her dark hair behind her shoulder. “Call me the next time you’re in Seattle.”

“That could be months, and by then you’ll be on the road playing hockey.” She dropped her hands and moved toward the bed.

He watched her skinny behind as she stepped into her tiny panties. There were a lot of things to like about Veronica. Her face. Her body. The fact that she was superficial, and there was nothing deep going on in her pretty head. There was nothing wrong with being superficial. Nothing wrong with living on the surface and avoiding lapses into deep thought. It made life easier. “We can always meet up on the road again.”

“True.” She reached for a red T-shirt and pulled it over her head before stepping into a pair of jeans. “But by then you’ll have a black eye.”

He grinned. “True.” He grabbed his suit jacket and slid his arms inside. Last season, he’d hooked up with her in Pittsburgh. That night against the Penguins, he’d scored a goal, spent four minutes in the sin bin for a double minor, and got his first major shiner of the season. Maybe she’d bring him the same sort of luck this year. He reached for his wallet and shoved it into the back pocket of his khaki trousers.

“Last season your beautiful face was a mess,” Veronica said as she slid her feet into a pair of pumps.

It hadn’t been that bad. Just a few stitches and minor bruises. He’d certainly suffered worse during his sixteen years in the NHL.

“You should model.”

“No. Thanks.” A few years ago, he’d done an underwear ad for Diesel, and he’d found the whole process a colossal bore. He’d spent most of an entire day sitting around in white briefs while the crew set up for different shots. The end result had been huge billboards and magazine ads of him with his junk practically hanging out and looking particularly enormous. The guys on the team had razed him endlessly, and his mother had been afraid to show her face in church for a month. After that experience, he decided to leave modeling to the guys who liked that sort of attention. Guys like Beckham.

Together, he and Veronica walked from the bedroom of Sam’s downtown loft. Within the open interior, gray shadow hugged the leather furnishings as fading sunlight cast dull patterns across the wood floor.

Sam held the front door open for Veronica, then locked it behind him. He moved down the hall, and his thoughts turned to the game in less than a week against San Jose. The Sharks had been knocked out of the first round of playoffs last season, but that didn’t guarantee a win for the Chinooks in the season’s opener. Not by a long shot. The Sharks would be hungry, and some of the Chinooks had partied a little too hard during the off-season. Sam had done his share of partying, but he hadn’t gone to fat, and his liver was still in good shape. Johan and Logan were each carrying ten extra pounds around the middle, and Vlad was drinking like a sailor on leave. The organization had just given the captaincy to Walker Brooks. No shock there. Walker had been the alternate for the past few years.

“I love weddings,” Veronica said through a sigh as they moved to the elevator.

Everyone assumed that Alexander Devereaux would put the A on his jersey, but nothing had been announced. They’d kind of floated the alternate captaincy in Sam’s direction, but he hadn’t taken the bait. Sam wasn’t the most responsible guy, and that’s how he liked it.

The elevator doors opened, and they stepped inside. “Don’t you?”

“Don’t I what?” He pushed the button to the lobby.

“Love weddings.”

“Not particularly.” Weddings were about as much fun as getting his cup rung.

They rode to the bottom floor in silence, and Sam placed his hand in the small of Veronica’s back as they walked across the lobby. Two heavy glass-and-stainless-steel doors slid open, and a yellow cab waited by the curb.

He kissed her good-bye. “Call me the next time you’re in town. I really want to see you again,” he said as he shut her inside the taxi.

Misty clouds clung to the darkening Seattle skyline as Sam walked to the corner and headed two blocks toward Fourth Avenue and the Rainier Club. The sounds of the city bounced off the buildings around him, and he glanced at his image reflected in storefront windows. A slight breeze lifted his lapels and teased the lock of blond hair touching his forehead. He slid one hand to the front of his blazer and buttoned it against the damp, chilly air.

He turned his attention to the crowded sidewalk, and within a few short blocks, he caught sight of the exclusive old club with its aged brick façade and carefully trimmed lawn that reeked of money. A

he moved down the street, he was aware of people turning to watch him. Several shouted out his name. He raised his hand in acknowledgment but kept on walking. That sort of constant recognition was new to him. Oh, he had his fans. Lots of them. Those who followed his career and wore his name and number on their jerseys. Since winning the Cup last July, his notoriety had increased a hundredfold and he was fine with it. Fans just wanted an autograph or a handshake, and he could handle that.

In the middle of the block, he looked up the street and cut across. Life was good for Sam. Last season, the Seattle Chinooks had won the Stanley Cup, and his name would forever be inscribed on hockey's highest prize. The memory of holding the Cup over his head as he skated in front of the hometown crowd brought a smile to his lips.

His professional life was on a high. Through blood, sweat, and hard work, he'd reached every goal he'd ever set for himself. He had more money than he'd ever thought he'd make in one lifetime, and he loved spending it on real estate, designer suits, fine wine, and finer women.

He walked beneath the Rainier Club's black awning, and a doorman greeted him. His personal life was pretty good, too. He didn't have one special lady in his life, which was how he liked it. Women loved him, and he loved them back. Probably a little too much sometimes.

The inside of the exclusive club was so stuffy, he had a sudden urge to take off his shoes just like when he'd been a kid, and his mom got a new carpet. A few of the guys were hanging out at the bottom of a wide staircase looking a little uneasy, but otherwise good in their expensive suits and summer tans. In another two months, several of them would be sporting black eyes and a few stitches.

"Nice of you to make it," forward Daniel Holstrom said as he approached.

Harp music drifted down the stairs as Sam peeled back the cuff of his dress shirt and looked at his TAG Heuer watch. "Ten minutes to spare," he said. "What are you all waiting for?"

"Vlad and Logan aren't here yet," goalie Marty Darche answered.

"Savage make it?" Sam asked, referring to the groom and Chinooks' former captain, Ty Savage.

"I saw him about ten minutes ago," Daniel answered. "First time I've ever seen him break a sweat off the ice. He's probably afraid the bride has come to her senses and is halfway to Vancouver."

Marty lowered his voice a fraction. "There are at least four Playmates upstairs."

Which wasn't surprising given that the bride was not only the owner of the Seattle Chinooks, but had been a *Playboy* Playmate of the Year. "Should be a good party," Sam said through a laugh, as a shiny auburn ponytail and smooth profile caught the corner of his eye. He turned, and his laughter got stuck in his throat. Everything inside him stilled as his gaze followed the woman with the ponytail moving across the lobby toward the front doors. She had on a headset and talked into the tiny microphone in front of her mouth. A black sweater hugged her body, and a little battery pack was clipped to her black pants. Sam's brows lowered, and acid settled in the pit of his stomach. If there was one woman on the planet who did *not* love him, and in fact hated his guts, it was the woman disappearing through the front doors.

Daniel put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, Sam, isn't that your wife?"

"You have a wife?" Marty turned toward the front.

“Ex-wife.” The burning acid in his stomach chewed its way upward.

“I didn’t know you were ever married.”

Daniel laughed like he thought something was real funny.

Sam sliced a gaze at Daniel out of the corners of his eyes. A silent warning that made the wings laugh even harder, but at least he didn’t open his piehole and spill all the sordid details about Sam’s drunken trip to a cheesy wedding chapel in Vegas.

He returned his attention to the front entrance for several more seconds before heading up the stairs. Her name was Autumn, and like the season, she was unpredictable. One day she might be pleasantly warm, the next, cold enough to freeze a guy’s nuts off.

He reached the second floor and passed the lady playing a harp. Sam didn’t like surprises. He didn’t like to be caught off guard. He liked to see which way the hits were coming so he could be ready for the blows.

He moved down a short hall sparsely littered with wedding guests. He hadn’t counted on seeing Autumn that night, but he guessed he shouldn’t be all that surprised. She was a wedding planner or, as she always insisted, “event organizer.” Although, really, what was the difference? Wedding or event it was the same damn circus. But it was typical of Autumn to make a big deal out of something little.

“Would you like to sign the guest book?” a woman seated at a small round table asked. Sam wasn’t the kind of guy to sign anything without his lawyer present, but the woman with big brown eyes flashed him a smile, and he moved toward her. She wore something red and tight across her chest and had a sparkly headband in her dark hair.

Sam was a big fan of tight and sparkly and returned her smile. “Sure.” She handed him a ridiculous pen with a big white feather. “Nice headband.”

She raised a hand to the side of her head and kind of blushed like she wasn’t used to getting compliments. “Are you making fun of my headband?”

“No. It looks good in your hair.”

“Thanks.”

He bent forward and his tie brushed the white linen tablecloth. “Are you related to the bride or groom?”

“Neither. I’m employed by Haven Event Management.”

His smile flattened. Which meant she worked for Autumn. Autumn Haven. While her first name fit, her last name was a total contradiction. Like jumbo shrimp or silent scream or cuddly cheetah.

“Don’t have too much fun,” Sam said, and handed the pen back to Autumn’s employee. He walked the short distance toward a large room, where an usher showed Sam to a chair near the front. He moved down a red carpet strewn with white rose petals. Most of the seats were already taken up with assorted hockey players, wives, or girlfriends. He spotted the Ross twins, Bo and Chelsea, seated between former captain Mark Bressler and Faith’s assistant, Jules Garcia. The twins worked in one capacity or another for the organization and were better known as Mini Pit and Short Boss.

He took one of the last remaining seats, beside sniper Frankie Kawczynski. In the front of the

room, a man wearing a blue suit and holding a Bible stood before an enormous stone fireplace festooned with red roses and some kind of white flowers. The guy had to be the preacher, or he could be a justice of the peace for all Sam knew. One thing was for sure, though, he wasn't a fake Elvis.

"Hey, Sam. Are Daniel and Marty still hanging out downstairs?"

"Yeah." Sam glanced at his watch. The boys had better hurry if they were going to make it before the bride. This was one of those events where the guys needed to arrive on time, and completely blowing off the wedding of Faith Duffy, owner of the Seattle Chinooks, wasn't even an option. If it had been, Sam wouldn't be sitting there, suited up and looking at his watch, waiting for the show to begin. Dreading the pleasure of his former wife.

Some sort of wedding music poured through the room's sound system, and Sam glanced over his shoulder as a woman he recognized as the bride's mother entered the room. Her usual tight clothes and big jewelry had been toned down to a simple red dress. Her only accessories were the small bouquet and the white yappy dog she carried. And like all yappy dogs, it had big ear bows. Red to match its nails.

Ty Savage and his father, Pavel, entered the room behind the bride's mother. Father and son were both hockey legends, and anyone with a passing interest in the game had heard the name Savage. Sam had grown up watching Pavel play old-school hockey, before helmets and fighting rules. Later, he'd played both against and with Ty, inarguably one of the best to ever lace up a pair of skates. Both men wore customary black tuxedos and, for one uncomfortable moment, Sam's brain flashed to his own wedding. Only instead of a tux, he'd worn a Cher BELIEVE T-shirt and jeans. He didn't know which was more humiliating, the wedding or the T-shirt.

Ty and Pavel took their places across from the bride's mother and in front of the fireplace. Ty looked calm. Not at all nervous or terrified that he was making a huge mistake. Sam figured he'd looked fairly calm at his own wedding. Of course, he'd been drunk out of his mind. That was the only explanation for what he'd done. The terror hadn't sunk in until the next morning. The memory of his drunken wedding was one he avoided like a whore avoided the vice squad. He pushed it away and locked it down tight, where he kept all unpleasant memories and unwanted emotions.

Soft harp music changed to the "Wedding March," and everyone stood as the bride entered the room. Faith Duffy was one of the most beautiful women on the planet. Tall, blond, gorgeous face, like a Barbie Doll. Perfect breasts. And he didn't think he was a pervert for acknowledging her rack, either. She'd been a Playmate of the Year, and most of the men in the room had seen her pictorial.

She wore a body-hugging white dress that covered her from throat to knees. Over the gauzy veil on Faith's head, he caught a glimpse of Autumn as she slipped into the back of the room. The last time he'd seen her, she'd called him immature and selfish. She'd told him he was an irresponsible hothead dog, and she'd finished her rant by accusing him of having jock itch of the brain. Which wasn't true. He'd never had jock itch anywhere, not even in his jock, and he'd taken exception. He'd lost his cool with her and called her an uptight, ball-busting bitch. Which in her case, *was* true, but that hadn't been the worst of it. No, the worst of it had been the look in Conner's blue eyes as his son had popped up

from behind the couch. As if his parents had just plunged a knife in his three-year-old heart. That had been the worst of it. After that night, they'd mutually agreed that it was best not to be in the same place. This was the first time he'd been in the same building with, or even seen Autumn for what no . . . two years maybe?

Twenty months, two weeks and three days. That was how long it had been since Autumn had had the misfortune to be in the same room with the biggest horse's ass on the planet. If not the planet, at least the Pacific Coast. And that was a lot of horses' asses.

She stood at the back of the Cutter Room inside the Rainier Club, her eyes fixed on the bride as she handed her bouquet of white peonies, hydrangeas, and deep red roses to her mother. Faith took her place across from the groom, and he reached for her hand. In a completely unscripted move, he raised her hand to his lips and kissed the backs of her knuckles. Autumn had planned a lot of weddings in the past few years. So many that she could pretty much predict which couples were going to make it over the long haul. She knew by the way they spoke and touched each other and by the way they handled the stress of planning a wedding. She predicted that Ty and Faith would grow very old together.

As everyone sat, and the minister began, Autumn lowered her gaze to the bride's slightly rounded stomach. Just a few weeks ago, she'd received a call from the bride requesting the champagne at the bride and groom's table be replaced with sparkling cider. At three months, the pregnancy was hardly noticeable yet. The bride was one of those fortunate women who glowed with good health.

Not Autumn. She'd been unable to button her jeans by month three, and her morning sickness had kicked in before she'd even known she was pregnant with Conner, turning her complexion very pale. And, unlike Faith Duffy, there hadn't been a man around to kiss her fingers and make her feel loved and secure. Instead, she'd been alone and sick and facing divorce.

Without looking directly at Sam, she was aware of where he sat. Aware of his big shoulders in his expensive suit and the light from the chandelier shining in his blond hair. When she'd slipped into the room, she hadn't even had to look around to know he sat in the fourth row, aisle seat. She just knew. Like the tension headache pressing against her temples. She didn't have to see it to know it was there. But unlike her headache, there was nothing she could take to make Sam LeClaire go away.

She tapped a finger against the event folder she held in one hand. She'd known Sam would be there, of course. She'd made sure the invitation had gone out on time and had overseen the RSVPs. She'd gone over the dinner seating with the bride and placed Sam with three other single hockey players and various big-busted Playmates at table seven.

She chewed on her bottom lip. He'd no doubt be pleased.

Autumn's earpiece beeped, and she turned down the volume as Ty and Faith spoke the traditional vows. The ceremony was short and sweet, and when the groom reached for his bride, Autumn waited. Even after all the weddings she'd organized over the past several years, even the ones she knew would fail, she waited. She wasn't the most romantic woman on the planet. Still, she waited for that fraction of a second. That briefest magical moment just before a kiss sealed a man to his wife for the rest

their lives.

Ty's and Faith's lips touched and a little pinch squeezed a corner of Autumn's heart. She was a sucker. No matter the statistics, no matter the pain of her own divorce, no matter the cynical voice in her head, she was a sucker for the happily-ever-after.

Still.

For a fraction of a second, Autumn's gaze lit on the back of Sam's blond hair. Her temple squeezed a bit more, stabbing at her right eye, and she walked out of the room. For a lot of years she'd hated Sam, hated him with a seething passion. But that kind of all-consuming hate took up too much emotional energy. After her last altercation with him, she'd decided, for the sake of their son and her sanity, to let go of her anger. To let go of her hatred. Which also meant letting go of her favorite fantasy. The one that involved her foot, his balls, followed by an uppercut to his pretty jaw.

She'd never fantasized about Sam's death, nor even long-term maiming. Nothing that involved driving over Sam with a steamroller or Peterbilt semi. No, nothing as violent as that. Conner needed his father, no matter how crappy, and other than the foot-in-groin fantasy, she just wasn't a violent person.

Letting go of her hatred hadn't been easy. Especially when he made plans with Conner, the plans were canceled. Or when it was his weekend, and he'd take off somewhere with his buddies and break Conner's heart. She'd had to work hard at letting go of her anger and was pretty successful at feeling nothing at all, but then again, she hadn't actually seen Sam in twenty months, two weeks, and three days. Hadn't been anywhere near him.

Applause broke out behind Autumn as she moved down the hall and into the Cascade Room. She walked between twenty round tables set with fine white linen and red napkins folded on Wedgwood china. The lights from the chandeliers and flickering tapered candles shone within crystal glasses and bounced off polished silver flatware.

The first day she'd met with Faith, the bride had expressed a desire for understated elegance. She wanted gorgeous flowers, beautiful table settings, and excellent food. Faith's lack of a clear theme hadn't been a problem, and she'd quickly become Autumn's favorite kind of bride.

A bride with good taste and no budget. The only real difficulties had arisen because of time constraints. Most weddings took eight months to plan. Faith had wanted everything done in three months. Looking around at the floral centerpieces of varying shades of roses and peonies interspersed with white honeysuckle, Autumn was proud of what she and her staff had pulled together.

The only thing that would have made the wedding perfect was if Faith had consented to let the local and national newspapers splash the wedding photo all over their pages. The marriage of elite hockey player Ty Savage, who'd quit the sport to marry a former Playboy Playmate turned hockey team owner, was big news. Especially in the sports world. It would have been the kind of advertising that Autumn couldn't buy. The kind that could propel her business to the next level. The kind of break she'd been waiting for, but Faith hadn't wanted her wedding splashed anywhere. She'd wanted to keep it low-key. No photos released to anyone.

Autumn spoke into the tiny microphone in front of her mouth, and the catering staff, dressed in tuxedos, filed down the stairs from the kitchen above. Each carried trays filled with flutes of Moët Chandon or hot and cold hors d'oeuvres. They moved into the wide hall and passed among the wedding guests.

Through the open door, Autumn watched the photographer, Fletcher Corbin, and his assistant Chuck, scramble for candid photos. Fletcher was tall and thin, with a thinner ponytail. He was one of the best photographers in the business, and Autumn always booked him when he had the time, and the bride had the money. She liked working with him because she didn't have to tell him what to do or what shots the bride wanted. She loved that about Fletcher and most of the vendors on this particular job. They knew what they were doing. They adjusted and adapted and didn't cause drama.

The bride and groom stood in the middle of the wide hall, surrounded by a knot of guests. Autumn turned her wrist over and pushed up the long sleeve of the vintage black sweater she'd found at one of her favorite boutiques in downtown Seattle. It had tiny sequins around the collar, and she'd considered it a steal at forty bucks.

She looked at her watch and pushed her sleeve back down. Since her first job as a stager, she'd worn the face of her watch on the inside of her wrist to keep from scratching the crystal. For the past five years, she'd worn one with a large face and wide band for a totally different reason.

The wedding was five minutes behind schedule. Not bad, but she knew all too well that five minutes could easily turn to ten. Ten to twenty, and then she'd have a problem coordinating with the kitchen.

She pushed a button on the receiver hooked to her belt and walked to the far side of the room. She shoved her folio under one arm and reached for the bottle of sparkling pear cider sitting in a silver ice bucket at the bride's table.

"I'm here," her assistant, Shiloh Turner, said through the headset.

"Where's here?" She tore off the gold foil from the top and wrapped her hand around the neck of the bottle.

"In the Cutter Room."

"Any stragglers?"

"The maid of honor and best man are chatting it up by the fireplace. They don't look like they're in any hurry to vacate."

The day the bride's mother had insisted that her little yappy dog be a part of the ceremony, she'd suspected the woman might be trouble. Last night at the rehearsal dinner, the mother had shown up in pink spandex and stripper heels and confirmed Autumn's suspicions. "Give them a few more minutes, then do what you can to move them along," she said, and pushed at the cork until it came out with a soft pop.

Tiny carbonated bubbles filled the air with a soft fizz as she poured the cider into two crystal flutes. There was so much to do, and she mentally ran down her list. A lot went into planning a wedding, even a small one. Everything had to be timed perfectly, and even the smallest of mess-ups

could turn a dream wedding into a wedding from hell.

Deep in her mental to-do list, Autumn shoved the bottle back inside the bucket and grabbed the glasses. She turned toward the room and almost plowed headfirst into a broad chest covered in white shirt, blue-striped tie, and navy blazer. Her leather portfolio slipped from beneath her arm as she lifted her gaze up the wide chest and passed the knot at the base of a wide neck. She looked beyond the square jaw and tan lips, along the slight curve of a crooked nose, and stopped at a pair of eyes the color of a hot summer sky.

Up close, Sam was even more handsome than from a distance. As handsome as the night she'd first seen him in a crowded bar in Las Vegas. A tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed god sent straight from heaven. The nose, the scar on his high cheekbone, and the evil intent in his smile should have been a huge tip-off that he was less than angelic.

Her stomach knotted, but she was happy to discover it was not a lump of burning anger. Nor did she feel a desire to kick him in the balls. While she disliked Sam, he'd given her the best thing in her life. She didn't know what her life would be like without Conner. She didn't even like to contemplate it, and for that reason, and that reason alone, she sucked it up and pasted a smile on her face. The same smile she used with brides who wanted white tigers or to be carried down the aisle on a pink throne. She was going to be pleasant even if it killed her.

And it just might.

Chapter Two

Any Man of Mine:
Has Human-Sized Ego

Sam turned and looked behind him. It had been so long since he'd seen the corners of Autumn's pin lips turn upward into a pleasant little smile, he knew she couldn't be smiling at him.

No one else was in the room. He turned back and tilted his head to one side in an effort to gauge her temperament. "Hi, Autumn."

Her smile slipped a little. "Sam."

"It's been a while."

"About two years."

He looked into her dark green eyes for any sign of trouble. "A little longer, I think." He didn't see a storm brewing in there and didn't feel the need to cover his crotch. Thank God. "I saw you earlier and thought I'd say hey, so you'd know I was here." He'd wanted to talk to her, gauge her reaction, and avoid any potential problems.

"I knew. You're on the guest list."

"Oh. Of course." He bent down and picked up the notebook. "Are you pouring yourself a drink," he joked as he straightened.

"It's pear cider, and it's not for me."

He wouldn't have mistaken any of the other guests for teetotalers. At least not the guests he knew. "What's Conner doing tonight?"

"Hanging out with Vince."

Vince. The male version of Autumn. Only bigger. Meaner and trained to kill. Sam hated Autumn's brother, Vince. "How have you been?"

“Good.” She glanced at the big silver watch strapped to her wrist, the round face resting above her pulse, and he wondered if she still had his name inked there or if she’d had it removed. “I’d love to stay and chat with you all night, but I’m working,” she said through that smile that didn’t fool Sam for a second. She lifted her elbow away from her side, and he slid the leather folder beneath her arm. “Thanks. Have a good time tonight.” She moved around him and walked from the room. Sam turned and watched her go. That went well. Too well, but he didn’t trust her not to blindside him or spike his food with arsenic or MiraLAX. Maybe both to make his death really uncomfortable.

His gaze slid from her red ponytail and down her slim back to the nice curves of her waist. The flaps of two back pockets drew his attention to her rounded behind. Autumn was a pretty woman. No doubt, but she wasn’t gorgeous. She had soft curves in all the right places. Slim hips and nice breasts, and he didn’t believe that made him a perv to think it either. He’d seen her naked, but her body really wasn’t anything special. Wasn’t his type. He liked tall, thin women with large breasts. Always had been drawn to the overblown. So why, for those few days in Vegas, had he found an average woman so damn fascinating?

Sam walked out of the room and stood at the edge of the crowd drinking champagne and toasting the bride and groom. He could blame that odd fascination with Autumn on the city. Nothing even seemed real in Vegas. He could blame it on the booze. There’d been plenty of that. He could blame the month of June. He always went a little insane in June, but he wasn’t sure it was any of those things.

He grabbed a fresh glass of champagne from a passing tray and replaced the empty. The only thing that was real clear, that he was very sure about, was that he’d met a redheaded girl in a bar and married her a few days later, and the next morning he’d left her behind at Caesars like a used bath towel. He understood why Autumn hated him. He got it, and he didn’t blame her. His behavior hadn’t been his finest moment. Sadly, it hadn’t even been his worst.

Through the crowd gathered around Ty and Faith, he caught a glimpse of a red ponytail. The guests parted for a brief second, and he watched her hand the bride and groom flutes of cider. There could only be one reason why Ty and Faith weren’t drinking champagne at their own wedding. And it wasn’t because they’d found religion.

Autumn moved to the edges, and Sam lost sight of her. He imagined that Ty and Faith were happy about having a child. They looked happy.

Sam took a drink from the crystal flute. Six years ago, he hadn’t exactly been happy to hear he was going to be a daddy, but once he’d held his son, all that changed.

“Hey, Sam.”

He looked over his shoulder at the team’s newest assistant coach, Mark Bressler. “Hammer.” Until about a year ago, Mark had been an elite hockey player and captain of the Chinooks. But last winter he’d been in a horrible car wreck that had ended his career and put Ty Savage in Mark’s jersey. “It appears the captain knocked up the owner.” He pointed his glass at the happy couple. “That has to be a hockey first.”

“Jesus, LeClaire. Watch your language.”

“What language?” Had he sworn and not known it?

“There are women present.”

All he'd said was *knocked up*. Since when was *knocked up* “language” and “Jesus” wasn't? And since when did Bressler care? Sam lowered his gaze to the blond woman by Mark's side, Bressler's hand in the middle of her back. Ah. “Hi, Short Boss.”

“Hi, Sam,” Chelsea said, her attention riveted on the bride. “Faith's pregnant? Are you sure?”

He shrugged. “I can't think of another reason why she and Ty are drinking crappy cider instead of the good stuff?”

“Oh my God!” Her blue eyes lit up, and she pushed her hair behind her ears. “I know something before my sister does.”

The ring on her left finger about blinded him. “That's some ring?”

She held up her hand and smiled. “You noticed it?”

“Hard not to.” He was pretty sure the moody man at her side had given it to her. “Honey, don't break my heart and tell me you're off-limits now.”

She grinned. “Sorry.”

He took her hand in his and looked at the huge diamond. “Is it real, or did some joker get you a cubic zirconia?”

“Of course it's real, numb-nuts.”

“Language,” he reminded Mark, and dropped Chelsea's hand. “There are women present.” He looked around for Chelsea's twin. “Is your sister still here? She's not as nice as you, but . . .”

“She's kind of taken now, too.”

“Damn.” He smiled and stuck out his hand to his former teammate and friend. “Congratulations. You're a lucky man.”

Mark shook Sam's hand as he slid his arm around his fiancée and pulled her against his side. “Yeah, lucky me.” Chelsea looked up at Mark, the two smiling at each other as if they shared an inside joke. The kind that people in love shared.

Sam raised his glass. The kind he'd never shared with anyone and found sappy and annoying. Never in his life would he have ever figured the Hammer for one of those sappy annoying guys. “So you two,” he said, and moved away before they started making out or something.

He cut through the crowd and approached the bride and groom. “Congratulations, Ty,” he said, and shook the groom's hand. He didn't know if the bun in the oven was common knowledge yet, so he decided not to mention it.

“Thanks for coming.”

“Sam.” The bride reached out and gave him a big hug. She was beautiful and soft and smelled great. She'd make Ty a good wife. Hell, any man a good wife. Any man but Sam. Sam wasn't the marrying kind of guy. Obviously.

“You're a beautiful bride,” he said, and pulled back to look into her face.

“Thank you.” She smiled. “And don't think I've forgotten about that conversation we had in S

Paul.”

They’d had a conversation? She was smiling, so he must have kept it clean.

“I couldn’t get you all invited to a party at the mansion, but I did invite a few Playmates here tonight.”

Oh, that conversation. She’d promised him and the guys an invitation to the Playboy mansion if they won the Stanley Cup. “I noticed.”

“I’m not surprised.” She laughed. “I had the wedding planner make sure she sat you at their dinner table.”

Under normal circumstances, that would have been welcome news. He pushed up the corners of his mouth. “Fabulous. Thanks.”

“I hope that makes up for my broken promise.”

“We’re square.” He took a step back, and general manager, Darby Hogue, and his wife stepped forward to offer the bride and groom their congratulations.

Sam took a drink, and over the top of his glass, he spotted the Playmates. They weren’t hard to pick out in a crowd. They were the four girls with big hair and bigger breasts, surrounded by Blake, Andre, and Vlad. Four on three was an uneven play. He figured it was his duty to even things out. He lowered his glass but didn’t move.

Autumn. He just couldn’t work up the proper enthusiasm required to chat it up with women in short skirts and low-cut blouses. Not while his baby-mama circled, looking for a reason to hate him even more than she already did. If that was even possible.

Instead, he struck up a conversation with Walker and Smithie and their wives. He smiled and nodded as the women talked about their own weddings and the births of all their children. Thank God Walker interrupted his wife just as she was warming up to a poop story.

“Did you hear the front office is looking to trade Richardson?” Walker asked.

Yeah, he’d heard. He liked Richardson. He was a good, solid wingman, but with Ty retiring, the team needed a more versatile guy. One who could kill penalties as well as play the wings. “Do you know who they’re looking at?”

“Bergen, for one.”

“The Islander? Huh.” The last he’d heard, Bergen was still in a slump.

“And then,” Walker’s wife said through a laugh, “he called out, ‘I poo in the potty, Mommy.’ ”

Screw it. “See you around,” Sam said, and headed for the playmates. He didn’t care what Autumn thought. She was an uptight ball-buster, and there was nothing wrong with a little conversation with four beautiful women.

Autumn knelt between the bride’s and groom’s chairs and went through the rest of the scheduled items. Autumn was a list maker, both in business and in life. When it came to weddings, she knew the list better than her own heart. Just in case, though, she had every detail written in her folio.

It was after eight, and the dinner and toasts were just about over. Faith looked exhausted, but she

only had to get through the cake cutting and first dance before the groom could take her home.

Autumn herself might get home at midnight. If she was lucky.

“Thank you,” Faith said. “You’ve kept everything running smooth.”

“And on time,” Ty added, who’d never made an effort to hide his desire for a very small wedding.

But like most grooms, he’d caved to the desires of the bride.

“You’re welcome.” She looked at her watch. “In about five minutes, Shiloh will invite everyone to meet you in the Rainier Room.”

“Could you do it now?” Ty asked, but it was more of a demand than a question.

“Not everyone is through eating,” Faith protested.

“I don’t care. You’re tired.”

“You can’t expect everyone to just get up and leave.”

“Mention the open bar,” Ty suggested to Autumn. “They’ll trample over each other to get to the free liquor.”

Autumn laughed as she rose. She buzzed her assistant and told her to mention the open bar when she invited the guests to join Faith and Ty in the other room. As she moved from behind the bride and groom’s table, her gaze landed on Sam, where he sat charming the pants, or more appropriately, the thongs, off the Playmates. They laughed and touched his shoulder and looked at him like he was a good

There had been a time when the sight of Sam with a beautiful woman or two would have carved a hole in her heart. When she would have wanted to curl into a ball, but those days were long past. He could do what he wanted. As long as he didn’t do it in front of her son. Which she suspected he did because he was an irresponsible horn dog with jock itch on the brain.

She moved from the room as Shiloh picked up the microphone and made the announcement. She checked and rechecked her list. The cake was ready to be cut, the band ready to play, and the two bartenders ready to sling drinks. She had a few moments and ducked into the ladies’ room. As she washed her hands, she looked at her face in the soft lighting. Growing up, she’d hated her red hair and green eyes. All that color against her pale skin had been too much, but she liked it now. She’d grown into her looks, and she liked the woman she’d become. She was thirty years old, had an event-planning business that allowed her to pay her bills and raise her son. The child support she got from Sam more than covered the expense of raising a child. It allowed her to pay cash for her home and vehicles and take vacations. But at the same time, she knew that if she had to, she was financially able to take care of Conner on her own.

She dried her hands and opened the door. The economy always affected her business, which was why she’d expanded it to encompass a variety of events instead of just limiting herself to weddings. She was currently planning a Willy Wonka birthday party for twenty ten-year-olds for next month. Getting all the props and vendors for the party had been a challenge, but fun. Not as much fun as weddings. Planning weddings was what she loved best, ironic given her past.

She moved down the hall through clumps of wedding guests making their way to the Rainier Room. There were a lot of beautiful and wealthy people at that night’s event. There was nothing wrong

with that. Autumn made her living catering to beautiful, wealthy people, as well as those on tight budgets. She enjoyed both, and as she knew all too well, wealthier didn't always mean easier. Or that the bill was paid on time.

As she passed Sam, he separated himself from a group of his teammates and a few of the Playmates.

"Autumn. Do you have a minute?"

She stopped a few feet in front of him. "No. I've got thirty seconds." They had a son, but she couldn't imagine what they had to talk about. "What do you need?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but the cell phone clipped to her belt rang, and she held up one finger. There was only one person in her phone with that "Anchors Aweigh" ring tone, her brother Vince. And Vince wouldn't call unless there was a problem.

"Hey, Carly just phoned," he said. "She's sick and can't watch Conner. I have to be at work in half an hour."

It was still too early for Autumn to leave. She moved to a quieter spot in the hall and said, "I'll call Tara."

"I did. She didn't answer."

Autumn ran through a mental list of options. "I'll call his day care and see if they'll take him. . . . Crap, they closed a few hours ago."

"What about Dina?"

"Dina moved."

"I guess I can call in sick."

"No." Vince had only had this latest job a week. "I'll think of something." She closed her eyes and shook her head. Sitter problems were difficult for every single mother. The odd hours of an evening planner turned those hours into a nightmare. "I don't know. I guess you're going to have to bring Conner here, and I'll have one of my workers entertain him for a few hours."

"I'll get him."

Autumn looked up over her shoulder. She'd forgotten about Sam. "Hang on." She lowered the phone. "What?"

"I'll get Conner."

"You've been drinking."

He frowned. "Obviously, I'll have Natalie pick him up."

Natalie. The "personal assistant." Autumn didn't have anything against Sam's latest "assistant" other than she thought it was ridiculous that he called his girlfriends "assistants." She shook her head. "I don't know."

"Is this really something to fight about?"

Conner could either go to his dad's with the "assistant," a place he knew, or he could come to the Rainier Club and hang out until she could take him home. On the surface, the decision appeared to be a no-brainer, but she liked Conner with her at night. She slept better knowing he slept safe and sound.

in the room across from hers.

“Forget it.” He shook his head and turned away.

But being a good parent wasn't always about her. She reached out and grabbed his arm. “Wait.” Her blue eyes met hers, and, through the wool blazer, his body heat warmed her palm. His biceps turned hard beneath her touch, and she dropped her hand. There had been a time when the heat would have leaped to her chest and burned her up. These days, she was immune and returned the phone to her mouth. “Sam's going to take him.”

“What's that idiot doing there?”

She bit the side of her lip to keep from smiling. “He's at the wedding.”

“Tell Vince hi,” Sam said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell. He pushed a few numbers, then spoke into the receiver. “Hey, Nat. I know it's your night off, but can you go pick up Conner for me?” He smiled and gave Autumn a thumbs-up. “Yeah, just take him to my place. I should be there in a couple of hours.”

Autumn hung up her phone and looked down as she hooked it to her belt. “Thanks, Sam.”

“What?”

She looked up at the smile on Sam's face. “You heard me.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I did. It's just been a while since you've had a nice word for me.”

With Sam, it had never been so much what he said as the way he said it. All oozing with nice-guy charm. Good thing she was immune to him, or she might actually mistake him for a nice guy. “I'll have Vince pick Conner up in the morning.”

His laughter stopped, and his smile disappeared. “Vince is an idiot.”

Which was a lot like the pot calling the kettle black.

“I'll have Nat drop him off home.” A few of Sam's hockey buddies walked down the hall. Handsome, rich, beautiful women on their arms. This was Sam's life. Beautiful women and designer clothes. Invitations to weddings at the Rainier Club. Adoration and fan worship.

“Thanks again,” she said, and moved around him. She'd been his wife and had given him a son, but she'd never really known him. Never would have fit into his big, over-the-top, life. She didn't shop at Neiman Marcus or Nordstrom or Saks. She haunted vintage shops, or, when she bought new, she shopped at Old Navy or the Gap or Target.

She walked into the Rainier Room and toward the four-tier red velvet cake. She had her own life and except for Conner, her life had nothing to do with Sam LeClaire.

Chapter Three

Any Man of Mine:
Likes Children

Autumn pulled her Subaru Outback into her garage a little after midnight. She'd stayed at the Rainier Club until the last vendor had packed up, and she'd written a final check to the band.

She grabbed her tote bag off the passenger seat and made her way into the lower level of the house. She'd purchased the split-level in Kirkland a year ago because it was on a quiet cul-de-sac and had a huge, fenced backyard that bordered dense forest. For the past three years, she'd saved a portion of Conner's child support and paid cash for the home. She needed that kind of security. That kind of stability. She needed to know that no matter what happened with her job or with Sam, she would always have a home for Conner.

The house certainly wasn't lavish by any means. It had been built in the late seventies and, while it did have new paint and appliances, it needed some work. The previous owner had been mad for wallpaper with flower borders, wood paneling, and faux bricks. It all had to be taken down, but unfortunately Autumn didn't have a lot of time to take care of it, and remodeling the house got pushed farther down the to-do list. Vince said he'd help her, but he didn't have a lot of time either.

In the family room, the overhead light burned, and the television blasted the Discovery Channel. Her tote pulled one shoulder lower than the other as she stepped over a Nerf Recon Blaster and a green plastic golf bag filled with two plastic clubs. She shut off the TV and checked the wooden dowel in the sliding glass door before hitting the light switch.

The blaster was the latest toy Vince had bought for Conner. It was Vince's opinion that Conner spent too much time with girls and needed a manly influence and manly toys. Autumn thought Vince was ridiculous—but whatever. Conner loved Vince and loved to spend time with him. God knew he

spent little enough time with his own father.

In the quiet of the house, the stairs creaked beneath her feet. Normally, she liked peace and quiet. She liked those few hours of calm after she put Conner to bed. She liked having that time to herself. When she didn't have to work or make dinner or keep one step ahead of her five-year-old. She liked reading a magazine while soaking in the tub, but she didn't like Conner not being there at all. Even after these past several years when he'd had overnight visitations with his dad, she still got a bit anxious knowing her baby wasn't in his bed.

She moved across the dark living room and into the lighted kitchen. She set her tote on the table, then opened the refrigerator and grabbed some string cheese. On the outside of the refrigerator door, Conner had spelled out "hi mommy" in alphabet magnets, and he'd tacked up a new picture he'd obviously drawn while she'd been at work. In crayon, he'd drawn a figure with a red ponytail and green eyes, one arm longer than the other and holding the hand of a smaller figure with yellow hair and a big smile. He'd drawn a bright tangerine sun and green grass. Off to one side he'd drawn another figure with long legs and yellow hair.

Sam.

Autumn opened the cheese and threw away the wrapper. She pulled a long string and took a bite. For the past few months, Conner had started to randomly include Sam in his family pictures, but always off to one side. Which, Autumn supposed, was a true representation of his relationship with his dad. Random. Off to one side.

She grabbed a glass from the cupboard and poured filtered water into it. Seeing Sam that night, it was hard to remember what she'd found so fascinating about him. Oh, he was still gorgeous and rich and as magnetic as ever. He was big and muscular and larger than life, but she wasn't the fool at thirty that she'd been at twenty-five.

She raised the glass to her lips and took a drink. It was embarrassing to admit, even to herself, that she'd ever been that big a fool, but she had been. She'd married Sam after knowing him a total of five days because she'd fallen madly, desperately, in love with him. It had been foolish but had felt so real.

She stared at her reflection in the window above the sink and lowered the glass. When she looked back on that time in her life, it was difficult to believe she'd actually felt those things. That she'd married a man she'd known for so short a time. Difficult to believe her heart had turned so soft and squishy at the sight of him. Difficult to believe she'd fallen so fast and hard. Difficult to believe she'd been a woman who would do something so impulsive.

Perhaps it had happened because she'd been at a real low point in her life. Her mother had died of colon cancer a few short months before that fateful trip. Vince had been in the Navy—off doing his scary SEAL stuff. And for the first time in two years, she hadn't had anyone to take care of but herself. She hadn't had to run anyone to doctor appointments or to chemo or radiation therapies.

After the funeral, after she'd packed up her mother's life in boxes for storage, there'd been nothing left for her to do, and for the first time in her life, she'd felt alone. For the first time, she'd *been* alone—alone with only two things to check off her long to-do list. Sell the house and go to Vegas for a

overdue break.

She would like to think she married Sam because she'd been lonely. That she'd had too much drink and been stupid. Which was true. She *had* been alone and drunk and stupid, but she'd married Sam because she'd fallen head over heels, madly in love with him. It was embarrassing to admit, even now, how quick and hard she'd fallen.

But he hadn't loved her. He'd married her like it was a joke. He'd left her like she meant nothing. Less than nothing. He'd left her without looking back.

She set the glass in the sink, the sound of the glass against porcelain echoed in the empty house. He'd left her devastated and confused and with a lot of other emotions. She'd arrived in Vegas alone. She'd left married and alone. She'd been alone and scared when she'd taken her first pregnancy test. Alone and scared when she'd felt the first gossamer flutter of her baby in her womb, and the first time she'd heard Conner's heartbeat. She'd been alone and scared when she'd discovered she was having a boy, and she'd been alone and scared when she'd delivered Conner with no one in the room but a doctor and two nurses.

A week after Conner's birth, she'd called Sam's lawyer and informed him that Sam had a son. A few days later, Conner had been given a paternity test, and a week later, Sam had seen his baby for the first time.

She turned off the kitchen light and moved down the hall. Autumn no longer felt alone and scared, but it had taken her a few years to stitch together a life from the shattered pieces. To make a secure place for Conner to live and forge a protective shield around her heart.

There was a part of her that wished she'd kept Conner a secret from Sam. A part of her that wanted to keep Conner to herself. A part of her that didn't think Sam was worthy of her beautiful boy, but she knew that it was best for Conner to know his father. Autumn had hardly known her father, and she knew from experience it was best that Conner grew up having Sam in his life. Even if Autumn didn't approve of him or his lifestyle, Sam was Conner's father, and that was that.

She paused by Conner's bedroom door and looked at the empty bed. His Barney pillow lay on the Barney quilt she'd made him, and her heart squeezed a little. Conner should be in his bed, hugging his Barney pillow. Sam didn't deserve Conner. She'd seen him leave the Rainier Club with a group of hockey buddies and the playmates. A child didn't fit in with Sam's lifestyle. He was an athlete, a playboy, and he was no doubt spending the night somewhere with one of those Playmates. Heck, he was probably spending the night with more than one while Autumn went to bed alone.

All by herself. Every night.

Not that she minded being alone all that much. She was too busy to be lonely, but . . . sometimes, after she'd planned a wedding like Faith and Ty's, she got a little wistful. She wanted that. She wanted a man to look at her the way Ty looked at Faith. She wanted a man to love her like that. She wanted to be the pinch in a man's heart. The catch in his breath. The reason his stomach tumbled and he lost sleep.

She'd married Sam, but he'd never felt those things for her. And if she married again, and she

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