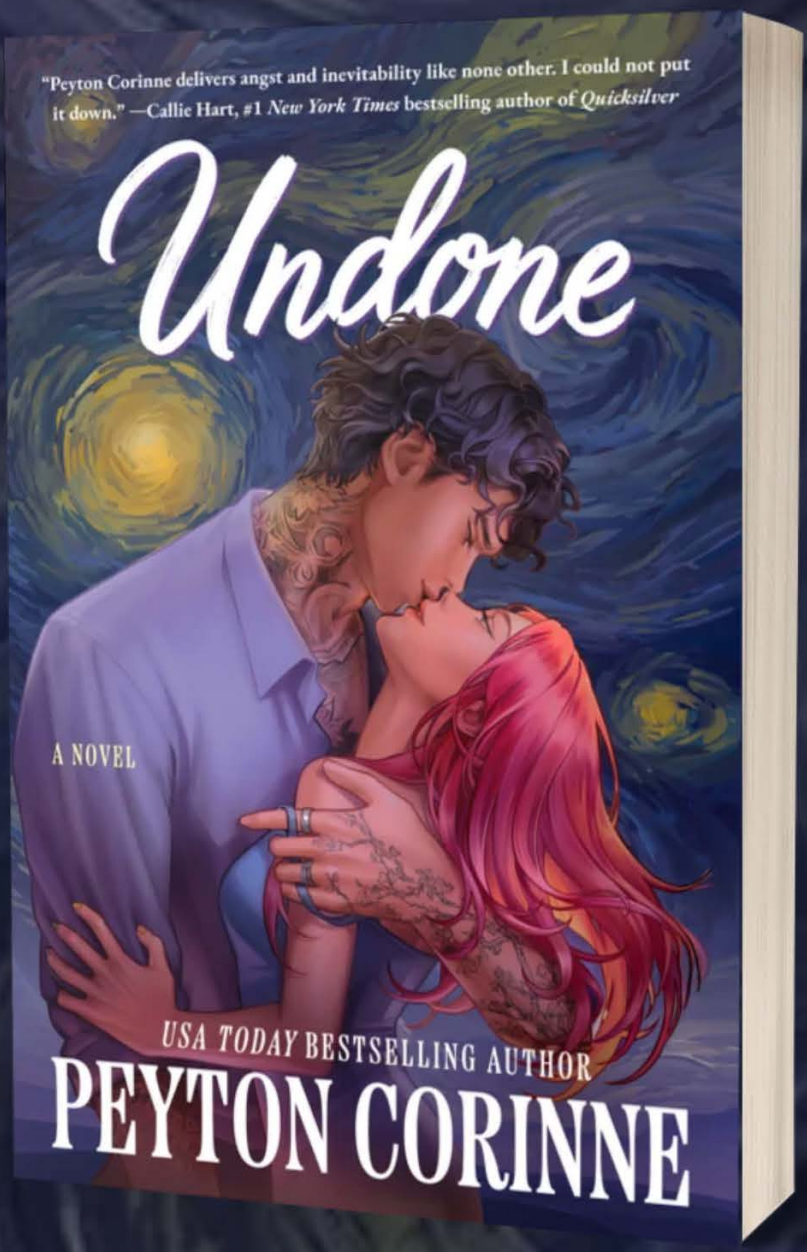


EXCLUSIVE BONUS CHAPTER

SEVEN YEARS LATER

Rhys

I couldn't talk about it with my dad. Bennett was dealing with his own stuff now that Paloma was pregnant again, and Freddy was in the middle of playoffs. At least, that was what I'd told myself was the reason I called Toren Kane at three in the morning while sitting in the farthest bathroom in the house because Sadie and Mills are both light sleepers.

Our son, Maximillian Koteskiy, or Mills as we tend to call him, was born on a stormy night in the middle of a game. I managed to make it to the hospital—dripping sweat, smelling awful, but I was there. It took hours for my nervous system to calm down, a deadly mix from the game itself and my heavy concern about Sadie, who had had such a difficult pregnancy that I'd vowed never to get her pregnant again. (Though she wouldn't let me get a vasectomy just yet.)

There hasn't been one singular night that I've come in late from an event or away-game streak that I wasn't greeted by my sleepy wife and equally sleepy son, matching freckles and cat-like eyes, though Mills's are brown like mine. Sadie swears he looks like me, probably because of his little dimples, but I can only see her when I look at him, so overwhelmed that they exist and that somehow, in this world, they're mine to cherish and love and protect.

"Hello?" Toren's scratchy, deep voice is almost too loud through the speaker of my phone.

"Kane."

He pauses. I can imagine him double-checking his caller ID like he picked up before realizing who was calling.

"Rhys?"

Where I was expecting something quiet, as if I woke him up, there's a loud fumble before he curses under his breath.

"Shit—Stellan. No. We don't do that," he says, his voice firm but still gentle. "You're going to wake your mother. Just go to sleep." Then to me he says, "Sorry, Rhys. What's up?"

"Well, I was worried I'd woken you up, but . . ."

"No. You didn't," he cuts me off quickly. "The twins are shit sleepers."

The guy has like eighteen kids by now. Or five, but still. For a while it seemed like Lily was never *not* going to be pregnant. Only two years after Van, they had their second son, Nate. Then a third son, Henry, two years after Nate. Then last year, they'd welcomed a set of twins, including their first girl.

A few of the guys on the team teased him about it at first, five kids and he's only thirty-three—but he'd quietly said something about Lily and him never wanting their kids to feel alone, to have the big family they didn't . . . no one said anything after that.

Still, it's a whole Kane horde whenever we go somewhere now, especially with Stellan and Sage.

"I'm sure you're exhausted, then." I'm not sure why I say it, as if I'm giving myself any excuse *not* to talk about this with him. I did the hard part already; I made the call—why is it so hard to just ask—

"Are you all right, Koteskiy?"

I grit my teeth, clenching my eyes tightly. *No,* I want to say. *No. I'm not okay. I'm spiraling over pee-wee-fucking-hockey*.

The truth is easy to admit in my head. Mills is five and has a very

intense interest in hockey. Of course he does, the kid is surrounded by it. His dad plays, his uncle plays, there are trophies and memorabilia at his grandparents' house. With me and Sadie, skating is literally in his blood.

I just . . . I can't.

When he was three, we took him to the ice on family day, decked out in his pads and helmet, dressed like a red marshmallow with all the fluff of his jacket and pants. Sadie and I planned to take him out on his little baby skates, hold him up and just let him glide a bit.

But when we got there, I couldn't do it. My wife, patient and steady, let me hold him in my hands and skate us in circles while she took pictures, skating her own loops around us.

I clear my throat, shaking my head as the words pour out.

"I just wanted to see if you were coming tomorrow."

There's a pause before Toren's low voice slips into my ear. "You called me at three in the morning to check that I'm going to Liam's graduation party? Really?"

He doesn't believe a word, but my head is pounding, and my mouth won't move.

"Sorry I called. Good night, Kane."

"Rhys, wait—"

I hang up and walk to Mills's room, only daring to look through the cracked-open door so as not to wake him, before crawling carefully back into bed next to my wife.

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The party is in full swing when we arrive. Mills is on my back like a koala, but his little hand is gripping Sadie's, where he holds it high above her head, touching us both just like he usually prefers.

"There's my favorite nephew!" Liam greets, looking up from his phone and stepping over to hug us all as one big bunch. He's eighteen—taller than Sadie, which isn't much of a feat, but a few

inches shorter than his brother and me. His hair has grown darker, but still has that strawberry blond to it, and pale freckles are sprinkled across his face.

"I'm your only nephew," Mills says, kicking his legs to let me know he wants down.

He slips down my back, running to jump into Liam's arms for a minute. I take the moment to wrap an arm around my wife.

"All right, we dropped him off for a playdate," I say, nuzzling my nose into the top of her hair. She smells like lavender and warmth. Like home. "Can we go have *our* playdate now?"

She elbows me lightly and blinks those gray cat-like eyes up at me. "We played *plenty* this morning, hotshot. You're still not satisfied."

I dip my lips down to her ear. "Oh, I'm plenty satisfied by you. Always, Gray. But I could go again—"

"Can you *not* do that in the kitchen?" Liam groans, putting down Mills as the doorbell rings and he heads to answer it with a mocking salute in our direction.

Mills darts to Sadie, tucking his hand into hers. He's not a shy kid, but he likes being with his mom. They're two quiet, moody peas in a pod, and my favorite people in this world.

"Glad you made it," a big, burly hockey player says as his arm wraps halfway around my wife. "I've missed you guys."

Sadie squeezes her brother tight, still one of the only people he *allows* to do that, before stepping away so Oliver can kneel and punch his fist to Mills's.

"Honors graduate, a Stanley Cup champion, and Boston's favorite center?" my dad's booming voice announces as he enters the kitchen. "My home is so full."

My mother smiles at him, ducking under his arm to come scoop up Mills with a bright giggle, already talking to him and taking him out to the garden to play.

"Where is the graduate actually?" my dad asks, stepping over to hug Sadie and me, respectively, before realizing Liam isn't in here.

" . . . anyway, they basically told me I'll get to start workshops immediately so . . ." Liam continues as the new group enters. His hand is behind Lily's back as he talks to her about his art program, her hip occupied by a little boy who looks like her twin, while a nervous-looking Henry sticks to her leg.

Toren is behind them, his hair swept into a low bun as he keeps it long now. His eldest, Van, is at his left, with a matching little bun of black hair. He's got Nate on his back and his daughter, Sage, held up in his arms, looking much smaller there than her twin next to their mother.

Sadie steps away from me only after teasingly pinching the skin low on my side, just beneath my shirt, and hustles over to the cluster of Kanes in the doorway.

"Mills is outside playing in the yard, if you all want to join him. We're going to have cake in just a bit."

Van and Nate, who nearly *leaps* off his much-too-tall father's shoulders, sprint toward the backyard as Toren calls after them, "Slow down! And play gentle!"

They're closest in age to my son and seem to all get along, though Annie Reiner is still Mills's best friend, as he often loudly insists.

Henry doesn't budge from his mother's side, but Lily doesn't force him, only bending down to speak softly with the boy. Toren steps to them, creating a shadowed bubble of privacy for them in a way I can't tell if it's subconscious or intentional.

My dad steals Sage from Toren's arms, cooing at the sixteen-month-old.

"Congrats, kid," Toren says, stepping over and slinging a tattooed arm around Liam's shoulders, ruffling his hair playfully. "I'm so proud of you."

Liam blushes, but tucks into the hug easily. They spend a lot

of time together, always have. Every important decision Liam has made, Toren has been a part of it. Getting his driver's license, changing his last name to Koteskiy, and even deciding what to do after high school graduation. It's always been Toren he's called or gone to for help.

He could help you, too, if you let him.

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I'm outside, slumped against the brick, watching the kids play in the yard, when Toren finds me.

Van holds Sage's hand as she toddles and plays tag—or at least a slow, silly version of it—that the boys all happily play with her. Mostly just running a few steps, letting her tag them, and having more fun the more she giggles.

"For you," he says, handing me a blue plastic plate with a piece of Liam's cake and a fork. Like a peace offering.

I'm not hungry, but I take it.

And then, it's awkward. Silent in a way it isn't usually. We've been teammates for eight years now, closer friends at this point arguably than with Freddy, Bennett, or Holden, because we don't see them as often. But we've never really talked like . . . this.

Toren heaves a breath before his intense, bright eyes find mine. "I know I'm not great at this stuff, but I'm . . . I am *trying*."

I shake my head. "No. I know. It's me . . . this is just really hard to talk about, I guess."

"Tell me what's in your head."

"It's stupid."

Toren smiles, disarming and gentle. "I'm sure it's not."

So I take a deep breath, and another bite of cake, before I tell him everything.

The anxiety I feel when Mills mentions playing hockey that's always at war with the desperation to allow him something that I

based my entire life around. To share this thing with him in that way. And yet, every time I try to let him go, let him skate and learn to fall, I nearly make myself sick with anxiety and terror. That I have dreams now where I'm watching that hit at the Frozen Four all those years ago, but I'm my dad and it's Mills there on the ground . . .

Toren listens quietly, never interrupting, entirely focused on me. It's the same way he is with everyone. Intent, attentive, unrushed. As if his entire purpose in this moment is to listen to me. I've seen it before in the way he is with his wife and his kids. I've just never been on this end of it.

"It's the hit," Toren says, taking a sip from his black plastic cup. "You have PTSD, Rhys. That's not something that just goes away."

I shake my head, ready to deny it. "It's not—I mean, that was a decade ago."

"Sure," he says, nodding. "And yet, sometimes it feels like yesterday for me."

His eyes are focused, sharp. At first, I'd found them entirely unsettling. Maybe it was partially my desperate hatred for him that covered the fear his presence instilled in me. Or it was just the almost unnatural coloring and his intensity working together at all times. But over the years, I've seen him smile so much more than he ever did. I've seen him hold *several* babies and love his wife loudly. He's no longer seen as some smear on the league, but instead as a *golden player.* A once-in-a-lifetime talent.

Now, as he looks at me, I can see him so differently than I did at twenty-two.

"I never think about it, Kane."

Toren smiles sadly, as if he can see right through my lie. "Yeah . . . well, I do. Especially now, with Van and Nate playing. Watching them? I think about your dad. I think about that night a lot. I'm sorry, Rhys."

We've never talked about it pointedly. We just . . . moved on. Lived our lives, became teammates and friends. But maybe the avoidance was hurting us both more than I realized.

"It doesn't matter that it's been twelve years since that game," he says. "Looking at you sometimes hurts. Even playing on the same team for the past eight years, any time you've gotten hurt has taken years off my life. And when I watch Nate or even Van play, I'm constantly plagued by this weird feeling in my gut. Because I physically can't protect them there."

I swallow hard against the lump in my throat and nod slightly.

"So, I won't pry if you don't want to talk about it. But just know that what you're feeling? That's normal. You love your kid. You want to protect him, and we both know what this sport can take from you. We've seen it. We've experienced it."

"It's pee-wee hockey," I argue lightly. "Not the NHL."

"Doesn't matter," he says, before tapping his finger to his head. "Not in here."

We don't speak for a moment, just listening to the distant laughter of our kids, of Liam and his group of friends at a table playing a card game. Van perks up, his eyes darting over. At first, I'm sure the observant kid is looking at us, until a newcomer enters our small circle.

Lily, still with Stellan on her hip, though Henry must be playing now as her shadow is missing, stops just in front of Toren. He dips his head slightly, his hand grasping her chin as he inspects her paler-than-normal face.

Then, taking Stellan off her body, he gently orders, "Go throw up."

Without arguing, Lily lets Toren kiss her head, then turn her body before she heads back inside a little swifter than she appeared.

My eyes go wide. "Is she all right?"

He laughs and nods, pressing a kiss to his youngest son's head.

For the overprotective husband I've seen in action more often than not, he seems entirely too calm.

"Yeah . . . we're, um . . ." His face heats, a rare blush running along his dark skin. "Don't tell anyone yet, but Lily's pregnant."

A disbelieving chuff of laughter works out of me, and I shake my head.

"Do you have some kind of kink I don't know about?" I whisper under my breath, before grabbing my cup on the small table I left it on just to our side, putting our half-discarded cake away to offer him a toast.

He shakes his head. "Something like that." His lips touch Stellan's dark auburn curls and he lowers his voice. "Lily doesn't like the odd number. She's scared someone will be left out. It's . . ."

I can hear the words left open in the space. *It's stupid* would be easy to say. But I don't think Toren is capable of saying that word in relation to anything about his wife.

"No. It's . . . kind of beautiful." We click our plastic cups together. "Congratulations, Tor. You're a good dad."

I can see the compliment hit him, truly melt over him as he takes it in. It's clear it means more to him to hear that than all the praise he's received for his skill in hockey over the years.

"Yeah?" he says, his voice soft. He holds Stellan up, the kid falling asleep against his dad's meaty shoulder. "So are you, Rhys."

It feels just as good to hear it.

"You free Wednesday?" he asks.

"Yeah, why?"

"Think your dad could get us the Waterfell rink for the morning? I was thinking of taking Nate and Van to skate. Maybe you and Mills could come? Just to try some easy stuff. Might be nice to be in the old community rink."

There's a lump the size of a hockey puck stuck in my throat as

I look at this man. My enemy once. The physical manifestation of my anxiety. And now my teammate and friend. We've been in each other's lives for twelve years, but what he's offering feels entirely different, deeper.

"Yeah," I say, voice thick. "I'd like that, Toren."