Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Any Man of Mine

Written by Rachel Gibson

Published by Corgi Books

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

ANY MAN OF MINE

Rachel Gibson



CORGI BOOKS

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

ANY MAN OF MINE
A CORGI BOOK: 9780552164498

First published in the United States of America by Avon Books,
an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

First publication in Great Britain
Corgi edition published 2011

Copyright © Rachel Gibson 2011

Rachel Gibson has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

In this work of fiction, the characters, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or they are used entirely fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Addresses for Random House Group Ltd companies outside the UK
can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk
The Random House Group Ltd Reg. No. 954009

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at
www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Typeset in Palatino.
Printed in the UK by
CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1



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 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 could 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 razzed 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 this 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 alter-

nate 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. As 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 then 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 winger 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 horn 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 now . . . 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 heath.

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 of 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 temples 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 Peter-