



DEFENSIVE MINDSET

WENDY TEMPLE

CHAPTER 1

“OOF!” JESSIE GRAINGER’S LUNGS SCREAMED for air as she landed face down in the lush vegetation. Loose blades of grass invaded her mouth, making her cough and splutter. She got to her hands and knees, caught her breath, and turned her head as an extended hand came into her line of vision.

The curse she was about to emit died on her lips as she glanced up into a face devoid of expression. But the hand offered was a gesture in itself. She accepted the assistance and was swiftly pulled to her feet. Play continued with no foul awarded—the referee deemed it a fair, full-blooded challenge.

Usually a meaningless, end-of-season encounter was played out with a little less fervour. Obviously, this opponent had other ideas if that last tackle was anything to go by. A knee in the back, a stray elbow to the jaw—this was getting ridiculous. Jessie had never come across this player; she would have remembered. She’d be hard to forget given the way she was stamping her authority all over this match and quite literally leaving her mark. Jessie’s irritation began to simmer just below the surface. The best way to get back at an opponent, she reminded herself, was to win.

She received the ball on the halfway line in the middle of the first half and ran straight at the two central defenders, hoping to confuse them and leave them uncertain as to who should challenge her. It was on. A quick one-two with the right winger, and she’d be in on goal. She knocked the ball out wide but never collected the return pass. Instead, she ran into the human equivalent of a brick wall as her match-day nemesis stepped right into her path. The impact dumped her onto her backside. This defender was deceptively strong for someone so tall and slim.

Once again, Jessie found herself staring at the outstretched hand. Shaking her head, she accepted the offer and was pulled to her feet.

“No hard feelings?” The voice was surprisingly quiet.

“Sure,” Jessie said to the defender, then whispered “not” under her breath. The slight stiffening in her opponent’s shoulders told Jessie she’d heard her. *Oops.*

The referee took appropriate action to the deliberate obstruction—a yellow card to the opposition number four and a free kick in the centre of the park, twenty yards from the goal. Jessie grinned. Perfect.

The wall lined up ten yards away, but Jessie could go either side with this. She took a short run up and struck the ball. She curled it around the wall and into the top left-hand corner of the net. Pinpoint accurate and with pace. The keeper had no chance.

“Yes!” Jessie leapt into the air, pumped her fist, and accepted the congratulations of her teammates.

Lothian Thistle, Jessie’s team, won a corner with only three minutes left of the first half. Everyone bunched together in the box, jostling for position. The number four had her hands firmly on Jessie’s waist. She struggled, feinted movement one way, then the other, but the woman’s hands were firmly fixed. She couldn’t get away from her, and the ball sailed harmlessly over their heads and out for a goal kick. All Jessie could do was glare fruitlessly at the back of the woman’s head while she refused to make eye contact. She was the most infuriating player Jessie had ever come up against. The whistle blew for half-time, and both teams made their way to their respective dressing rooms.

“Nice goal, Jessie,” Tom Matthews—the manager of Lothian Thistle—said. “We’re doing well out there, ladies. Keep passing the ball, and try to avoid injuries or bookings. Nothing reckless or rash.”

“Tell that to the opposition,” Jessie griped.

“I noticed you’re having a tough time with their number four.”

“Yeah.” Jessie waved her hand in frustration. “Who the hell is she anyway?”

“Fran Docherty, according to the team sheet. I’ve never heard of her before.” He looked around. “Anyone?” A few shrugs and shakes of the head along with a couple of “nos” was the collective response. “Maybe come up

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from down south,” Tom suggested as he scanned the dressing room, more laid-back than usual and a little subdued.

It had been a long, hard season for Thistle, and once again they'd come up agonisingly short of the league title. It was difficult to maintain any intensity with nothing left to play for. Jessie couldn't blame her teammates. Most of them wanted to get this game over with and enjoy the off season. Personally, she wanted to increase her individual goal tally and finish the season as the league's top goal scorer.

Tom's team talk continued with less fire than usual. Clearly, he needed the break as much as the rest of them. Jessie knew he'd put his heart and soul into managing them this season. He'd taken Thistle from mid-table last season to league runners-up. But nine points between them and the league champions was a big gap. They still had plenty of room for improvement.

Jessie stretched her legs out in front of her, sipped from a water bottle, and mentally prepared for the final forty-five minutes of the season.

“Okay, go out there and enjoy the rest of the game, ladies,” Tom said. “Pass the ball around and keep possession. Don't lose concentration and another goal or two would be great. All right, let's go. One last effort!”

The second half began as the first had ended, until the Ayr Hawks team was awarded a corner. Fran Docherty came up from the back to add her considerable height to the penalty box. As the ball swung in from the left, Jessie knew they were in trouble. In the ensuing melee, Jessie was blocked, allowing Docherty to rise unchallenged and head the ball past the stranded keeper. The distinctive swish of the ball hitting the net was both familiar and unwelcome in its finality.

Docherty's celebration was low key; her teammates patted her on the back as she jogged back into her defensive position with a nod. Jessie watched her adjust her socks, apparently more interested in her attire than the adulation of the small home crowd, enthusiastically clapping and chanting her name. She was tall, maybe six foot three, and skinny, with long black hair scraped back into a ponytail. Jessie thought she'd do better with a bit more muscle on her, but Docherty could play.

The game continued at half pace, both sides content to play the ball around without being overly zealous in challenges. Tackles were at a minimum, removing any real competitive edge from the encounter.

With twenty minutes left on the clock, the atmosphere of the game changed in a flash. A shot from Lothian's captain, Andrea Miller, was deflected for a corner. Jessie again found herself being marked by the number four. Arms around her body kept her from breaking free and running into space. She attempted to shake off her marker, but those hands moulded to her breasts. Frustrated and embarrassed, Jessie swung around, and her palm connected with her opponents face in a flash.

The slap was so hard it echoed in the late spring air. Jessie's palm stung, and a shrill blast on the whistle brought everyone to a standstill. There was none of the usual pushing or shoving that accompanied violent conduct. Fran Docherty stood rubbing her rapidly reddening cheek, while Jessie stared wide-eyed, shocked by the incident.

"Damn, you pack a wallop," Docherty muttered. The handprint now showing on her face.

"Right, number nine, that's enough from you." The referee produced a red card and pointed to the changing rooms.

Jessie blinked once, staring at the red card, not quite believing it. She'd never been sent off before.

"Go on, you're off."

The referee's words rang in her ears as Jessie made her way to the sideline and the home crowd erupted into a chant of "Cheerio, cheerio, cheerio." Tom stared straight ahead, not returning her glance. Jessie dropped her gaze and walked to the changing room to wallow in her shame, self-pity, and anger.

She sat down on the wooden bench and removed her sweaty shirt, then pulled at the orange lace of her Nike boot. She held the boot in her hand for a moment before she launched it across the empty changing room. It smacked the wall with a satisfying thunk, spun across the tiled floor, and settled a few feet away from her.

Why had she let this opponent get the better of her? She'd been accidentally groped many times before in the heat of a match. It had been different this time. It had been overt and deliberate. The anger bubbled up within Jessie again. That woman had violated her on purpose and she'd instinctively lashed out.

Docherty had been trying to get under her skin throughout the game. To throw her off balance. To get her out of the game one way or another.

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She doubted that Docherty had expected to get her off the pitch, but she had certainly done everything in her power to nullify the threat that Jessie had posed to their team. And she'd managed it more successfully than any other defender Jessie had ever come up against. Jessie shook her head. She never lost her temper like that. Never.

Jessie was dressed and waiting when her teammates trudged into the dressing room. She plucked up the courage to ask. "What was the final score, guys?"

"We lost, 2-1," Andrea Miller informed her, the tone of her voice carrying a hint of chastisement.

Jessie groaned. "I'm sorry I lost it out there."

There were a few replies of "don't worry about it" and "these things happen", but not from the manager.

"I'm sorry, Tom. I let everyone down."

"We'll talk about it later," he said, turning to address the room. "Good effort, girls. Third in the league isn't too bad, we'll do better next season. Now, get showered and dressed, and I'll see you all in the clubhouse before we head back home."

Today's result had cost them second place as the team behind them had won their match and leapfrogged Thistle to the runner-up spot.

Jessie didn't think she could possibly feel any worse as she sat among her teammates. Her melancholy stopped her enjoying the end-of-season high jinks, so she wandered outside to get some of the late spring air.

She made her way along the corridor to the entrance, where she saw a lone figure dressed in faded black jeans with a worn black leather jacket. Everything was black actually, including the scuffed boots and the wet hair.

Fran Docherty. Leaning casually on the side of the building, smoking.

The player who had groped, mauled, elbowed, pushed, and pulled her all over the football park. Jessie wanted to confront her, but she knew it was a bad idea. Having been sent off, she hadn't had the chance to go through the custom of thanking and congratulating the opposition at the end of the game. She pushed her anger aside and went up to the tall woman. "I'm sorry I slapped you."

Docherty stared at her as she took a long draw from her cigarette. Inhaling deeply, her gaze never left Jessie as she exhaled. "Don't worry

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about it.” With those words she turned from Jessie and continued to stare out over the park, casually flicking ash from her cigarette tip.

Clearly, the conversation was over. While her apology had been acknowledged, Jessie wished she had never bothered. The woman infuriated her, on and off the pitch, and the sooner she got home and ended this day, the better.

CHAPTER 2

PARKING IN AN EMPTY SPOT, Jessie removed the keys from the ignition of her Volvo and gazed out over the open playing fields bathed in sunshine. Hope rose within her. A new season, a new start and, right now, anything was possible. A shiver of anticipation ran down her spine.

She loved pre-season training, especially the first day. Seeing her teammates again, meeting new ones, catching up on the off-season news, and falling back into the familiar camaraderie. But also, the hard work started today. The team would begin laying the foundation for the season ahead, the season in which Thistle would win the league—she could feel it. She knew Tom had it in him to push this team all the way to the top. It was one of the reasons she'd had no problems turning down offers from other clubs. Arsenal and Liverpool, the top two clubs in English women's football, and Lyon, champions of Europe and probably the best football club in the world right now, had all asked to speak to her in regards to a move. But her life was here. Her business, her family, and her team. This was where she felt most at home. This was where she belonged.

She slid off her sunglasses and stowed them in the glove compartment before climbing out of the car and walking towards the clubhouse. A casual ease descended upon her as she entered the building to greet the many familiar faces she had missed over the past eight weeks.

"Hello, Mrs Jackson." Jessie's smile was wide. Ruth Jackson had that effect on everyone around her.

"Jessie!" The diminutive woman wiped her hands on a dishtowel and made her way around the counter to greet her visitor. Grabbing Jessie around the waist, she delivered a swift kiss to her cheek and squeezed tightly. "Stand back; let me get a good look at you."

Jessie laughed. "It's only been eight weeks, Ruth."

"I know, but I need to be sure you've been taking care of yourself. Eating properly, not working too hard, and all that malarkey." Ruth cast a judicious eye over Jessie, nodding her approval as she let go of her hands. "Not as tanned as I would've expected, but you'll do."

"Busy with the new office we opened, so no summer holiday for me this year." Jessie picked an apple from the large bowl of fruit on the counter.

"How's work? The newspapers keep saying that house sales are down. Are you and your dad doing all right? Do you want breakfast?" Ruth asked as she made her way back behind the serving counter. "I have scrambled eggs, wholemeal toast, some of those vegetarian sausages."

"Thanks, Ruth, but I had a good breakfast before leaving." Jessie bit into the juicy red apple. "And business is good. House sales are down, but the rental market is booming. People always need somewhere to live."

"Truer words, Jessie. I'm glad it's going well for you." Ruth leant forward. "And I'm so glad you're back. I thought we might be losing you to bigger and better things this time." Ruth busied herself in the kitchen. She was like a mother to all the players, making sure there was always plenty of food to eat, and washing and ironing all the kit they used.

"I'm not going anywhere, Ruth. I've got all I need right here." She took another bite of her apple. "Did you and George get away?"

"Lanzarote." Ruth removed a tray from the oven, bringing it over to the hot plates. "It's lovely. We have found a new favourite destination. The Spanish mainland was becoming too busy and noisy for us. We needed a change of pace. Now that the kids are grown up, we can relax and not worry about keeping anyone else entertained. We met some lovely couples too, more our age you know, early thirties." She winked.

Jessie laughed. "You don't look a day over twenty-five, Ruth." Ruth was in her early fifties, but had a lovely complexion. That soft, almost wrinkle-free skin some women were lucky to have would always make her look younger than her years.

Exuberant voices from the hallway alerted them to new arrivals. "Here we go, Ruth, the new season is about to kick off."

"Looking forward to it."

"Jessie! Ruthie!" A dark-skinned woman came running towards them.

"Hey, Soph, how you doing?"

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Sophie Laing was a muscular, fit, central midfielder, with a broad Scottish accent honed on a Lanarkshire council estate. The engine room of the team, dependable and measured in her approach, she rarely made mistakes on the ball. She was a gym junkie, with a love for fast food and cakes.

“I’m good. Full English please, Ruthie.”

“Are you growing your hair?” Jessie rubbed the tight black curls in question.

“Kind of. I thought I might go for a bit of a ’fro.”

“I like it.” Jessie eyes moved to the counter as a large plate of food was deposited there. Sausage, beans, egg, bacon, tomatoes, and mushrooms.

“Any toast with that, Sophie?” Ruth asked.

“Just the two slices of white, with a large glass of fresh orange, please.”

Ruth beamed her endorsement “Coming right up.”

“Cheers, Ruth, I’ve really missed your cooking.” Sophie winked and grabbed her plate from the counter.

Jessie followed, glancing around the room as they went. It appeared that most, if not all, of her teammates were now in attendance, scattered around various tables chatting and finishing breakfast. One table in particular was extremely boisterous. “What’s going on over there?”

Sophie grinned. “Morven asked her girlfriend to marry her while they were in Barbados.”

Jessie’s eyes widened. The policewoman was forever stating she would never get hitched, that she was not the settling-down type. “How romantic.”

Sophie laughed. “She’s being teased rotten about it.”

“No wonder, given the bravado that comes out of her mouth.” Jessie looked over at the woman in question, trying to smother a smirk, but failing as she witnessed the ribbing going on. Morven deserved everything she was getting today, but it wouldn’t last for long. She had broad shoulders.

Tom had yet to make an appearance to get the season under way. He’d popped his head in a couple of times and left, Jessie assumed back to his office.

“Who are the new signings?” Sophie asked as she loaded food onto her fork.

“Honestly, I have no idea.”

“Seriously? Tom hasn’t said a word to you?”

“Truly, not a thing. I’m as anxious as you are to see who walks through the door today.”

“I thought you two were close?”

Jessie nodded. “We are, but he doesn’t share everything with me.”

Sophie grinned. “Some of the players are convinced you two are more than close.”

Jessie was fed up with the familiar gossip. “How many times do I have to say they’re wrong?”

She played with the salt shaker, twirling it round on the table top. It didn’t help that she had gone on a few dates with Tom as his plus-one. “He’s a lovely guy; he’ll make someone very happy.”

“Not you, though.”

“We really are just friends.”

The double wooden doors opened and Tom once again popped his head into the room, his eyes scanning the tables. Jessie caught his gaze and raised an eyebrow. Tom offered a weak smile in return before walking back out.

“What’s up with him?”

Jessie shrugged. “No idea.” She pinched a mushroom from Sophie’s plate. “How was Corfu?”

“Hot.”

Jessie laughed. “I bet you spent most of your time in the hotel gym.”

“You know me, if a hotel doesn’t have a good gym, I don’t book it.” Sophie placed her knife and fork together on the plate. It was almost empty, apart from a handful of sliced mushrooms. She drained what remained of her orange juice before sitting back in her chair and patting her stomach. “God, I needed that.”

Shaking her head, Jessie smiled. “We have a tough day’s training ahead. I don’t know how you can eat all that before we start.”

“Fuel, Jessie, that’s what will get me through the day.” Sophie grinned as she stretched her arms above her head.

There was no doubting Sophie’s fitness, despite her diet. Jessie was sure she would pile on the pounds if she attempted to eat the way her friend did. She was certain Sophie would be having a hearty lunch followed by a large piece of cake, whereas Jessie would opt for a healthy option every time with yoghurt and fruit.

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“Heads up, Tom’s back.” Jessie nodded to where Tom stood at the top of the hall glancing at his watch, then back at the doors. The girls were getting restless, and Jessie knew he couldn’t stall any longer.

“If I can have everyone’s attention, please.” Some continued to chat. “Ladies!” That shut them up. “Good. Now I’m sure you’re all desperate to meet the new signings, so let’s give it up for a new talent—England under-twenty-one international, Abby Jones!”

It walked a young girl, no more than eighteen, brown hair, medium height. She gave a small wave as generous applause rang out around the hall. She was understandably nervous as she stood next to Tom, her cheeks flushed as she bit her bottom lip.

“Abby’s signed for us for three years. A left-sided midfielder, with a sweet left foot. She’s moved to Edinburgh to study, and we’re delighted to have her.”

Jessie thought Abby Jones could prove to be a good signing, the team needed to strengthen their left side, especially with players leaving. Time would tell.

“Next we have Danika Kaminski!” Where Abby was youthful and shy, Danika oozed confidence. She was very self-assured, tall, with dark hair and tanned skin. “Danika is a utility player who has spent eight years playing in Poland’s top league, and has signed for the next two years.”

Tom introduced three more players, not stand-out signings, but they would add depth to the squad. As the girls applauded and welcomed the new players, Tom again darted to the double doors. Jessie picked up on his agitation, assuming there must be another player, for which she was grateful, as none of the newcomers were outstanding defenders and they desperately needed one.

The door opened a few inches and Tom smiled. At first no one else seemed to notice the woman who walked over to stand beside him, then slowly, the room became quieter. Taller than Tom, she stood there with a motorcycle helmet clasped under her left arm. Faded black jeans tucked into black motorcycle boots, a leather jacket open revealing an aged grey T-shirt.

Jessie stared in disbelief. Why did it have to be her? As some of the players recognised the new arrival, lots of eyes shifted gradually towards Jessie.

“Oh, Jessie, it’s your pal,” Sophie said, laughing.

“It’s a walking cliché,” Jessie muttered under her breath. The statement made Sophie laugh all the harder.

“Glad you could make it, Fran.” Tom’s joke evoked no response from the new arrival. He turned to face the room. “Ladies, I would like to introduce Fran Docherty. A central defender. Some of you may remember her from last season’s final game against Ayr Hawks. Fran joins us on a two-year deal.” Tom allowed a few moments for friendly greetings and the applause to recede. “Everyone, go get changed, you have two tough days in front of you. See you on the playing fields in fifteen minutes.”

Jessie hung back as everyone filtered out of the hall. “You’ve got to be kidding me!” She stood before Tom, arms folded. “She got me a three-match ban!”

“I don’t want to hear it, Jessie. You got yourself a three-match ban because you let her get to you.”

“She was groping me. That’s sexual assault or something!”

“She’s not the first defender to get a bit friendly with you. Nor is she likely to be the last, now that you’ve shown it works. You reacted. You got yourself red-carded. End of story.”

“But...”

“No, Jessie. Think about it, she is a good signing.”

“I am thinking about it, and,” she said, pointing to the dressing room, “*it* has disaster written all over it.”

“I’m working with a limited budget here. Laidlaw agreed to put in £50,000 for the next three years. With limited TV revenue, I have to be creative. There wasn’t enough to sign a big name. I couldn’t go with three unknowns. Docherty is a good defender. We know what we’ll get from her.”

“I’ll tell you exactly what you’ll get from her.” Jessie’s voice increased in volume. “You know what she did to me on the pitch.”

“I do and that’s why I signed her,” Tom continued before Jessie could say any more. “Jessie, she handled you better than any other defender in the league. Yes, some of her methods are questionable. She treads a fine line, but...” he held up his hand to prevent another objection, “she’s clever, Jessie. I believe with the two of you in the team, and Sophie and Andrea controlling the middle of the pitch, we can win the league. That would mean European football and more money from TV rights. Which means better players for next season. This is the start of something big.”

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Her earlier anticipation and good mood had evaporated. She shook her head. "I don't know, Tom."

"Believe me, there is a lot more to come from her. Her best will be better than anything else out there." Tom held eye contact. "Trust me on this."

She couldn't doubt the sincerity and confidence in his voice. His eyes practically danced with excitement at the thought of the capture of this player's signature. Some of Jessie's anger deflated and she followed him out. "You'd better be right."

Three hours later, Jessie was bent over, hands on hips, getting air back into her lungs after the strenuous workout. "Well, that was a waste of lunch," she said to Sophie who'd stopped beside her, hands on knees, pulling in lungfuls of fresh air.

"Huh?"

Jessie pointed to where Docherty was clinging to the perimeter fence, retching, as more of her lunch was deposited onto the pale green grass. "Look at her puking over there, and we haven't even finished yet." Jessie continued to breathe rapidly as she monitored her heart rate on her sports watch.

Sophie chuckled as she caught her breath. "I think she's hung over. I heard her say something about a late night."

"Christ. That's all we need, someone who likes to party."

"Ah, cut her some slack, Jessie. It's the start of the season. Most of us need the fitness training, and it's not like it's the day before a big game or anything."

"Not yet," she grouched. It was fine coming into pre-season training lacking fitness, but that meant you had a tough month in front of you before the start of the season. They were all part-time footballers; the onus was on each individual to find time in their schedule to work on their own fitness. Jessie wasn't convinced Docherty possessed the necessary discipline or commitment required.

"Not everyone is as fit as you."

"You are," Jessie said pointedly. She shook her head as the dark-haired woman finally managed to stand up and let go of the fence as she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Our rivals will have a field day if they get wind of this."

Sophie gave her a playful shove. "Come on, I'll race you to the water bottles." She took off, with Jessie close on her heels.

Fran winced as a muscle in her buttock went into spasm. God help her, the weekend training had been hard and she hurt like a bastard. She sat in the empty changing room, resting her weary body for a few minutes before she could contemplate making the journey home.

She stretched her long legs out along the wooden bench, crossed her booted feet, and rested her back against the wall. Next, she fished around in the pocket of her leather jacket and found her cigarettes. She ignored the tremor in her fingers as she removed one from the packet and flicked the cheap plastic lighter until the flame sparked to life. Fran lit the cigarette, drew smoke deeply into her lungs, closed her eyes, and let her body relax. As she exhaled slowly, the door opened. She squinted through her right eye and observed Jessie Grainger walk into the changing room.

The other woman's nose wrinkled in displeasure before her eyes focused on Fran.

Aw, for fuck's sake, it had to be her.

"Smoking is banned in this building."

Fran waved ineffectually at the smoke. "Sorry, I thought everyone had gone." In truth, she wanted to enjoy a quick puff away from any prying eyes. The new players were expected to do a short interview for a local radio station and Fran was desperate not to give one. Despite what her contract said, she wasn't into that stuff.

Jessie walked over to the shelves where the clean towels were stacked, forcefully removing one before turning back to Fran. "It doesn't matter if the building is empty, it's no smoking at any time."

Fran stared at her. Everything about her screamed conformity. She wore the right clothes, had the right haircut, the latest iPhone, and everyone liked her. Why wouldn't they? She was polite, warm, and friendly. Well, to everyone except Fran, and Fran knew why.

The corner of her mouth crept up as she recalled the last match of the previous season. She had honestly had no intention of playing football this season, and had thrown caution to the wind when it had come to marking the serious striker. It had been a meaningless match, and Fran hadn't expected to come up against an opponent who played as though her life depended on the result. So she'd fucked with her. Driven the polite and

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serious woman to the point where she had slapped her. That she hadn't anticipated. Just as Fran hadn't expected to ever meet the woman again. Now here she was, standing in front of Fran. Glaring. Again.

"Could you please finish your cigarette outside?"

Fran shrugged. It wasn't really a request, but Jessie had good manners. Fran had to give her that. She had even apologised to Fran for slapping her, when, truth be told, Fran knew she deserved that slap—and probably more.

She rose carefully from the bench. Despite the fact that her thigh muscles screamed their objection and she was seizing up by the minute, she was determined not to show the uber-fit Jessie her plight. It was bad enough she had caught Fran throwing up after one lap of the grounds while Jessie was finishing her second. Without another word, Fran grabbed her helmet and left the building, but the pain was considerable. Sweat broke out on the back of her neck with the effort it took for her to walk to her motorbike. She'd give almost anything for a beer right now to take the edge off.

Fran flicked the cigarette butt to the tarmac, crushed it under the heel of her boot, and put her helmet on. Only then did she allow the pain to show on her face. With gritted teeth, she threw a leg over the bike and started the engine.

CHAPTER 3

“SHIT,” FRAN HISSED AS THE light turned green and her bike stalled. A car horn blared behind her. She had no choice but to ignore it as she put the bike into neutral, opened the choke, and attempted to kick-start it.

On the third kick the engine briefly spluttered to life, then died. She sighed and got off the bike, waited for the lights to turn green, and then attempted a running start. Her legs ate up the tarmac. She jumped on the bike, pulled in the clutch, and put it into first gear. The back wheel locked, but the bike refused to spurt into life.

“Fuck!” She took a deep breath and tried once again, but there wasn’t a flicker of life coming from the old machine. She walked with the bike to the side of the road.

Fran removed her helmet and gloves and unzipped her jacket. Her hair stuck to her head as sweat coated her back. She searched her pockets to locate her phone.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” She’d only pocketed her cigarettes before running out of her room. No phone. No cash. And the team bus due to leave for their away match any minute. “I’m screwed.”

Fran shook her head. The first competitive game of the season, and this had to happen. She didn’t want to let Tom down. He’d made her a generous offer to play for Lothian Thistle. And she needed every penny. And more.

She ran a hand through her damp hair. They’d all be bad-mouthing her. Jessie Grainger no doubt giving it a big “I told you so”. It’s what they were all expecting, and the combination of her bike breaking down, and her forgetting cash and a phone would be all the ammunition the doubters needed.

The thought of Jessie giving her that holier-than-thou look made her want to knock the beautiful blonde down a peg or two. She smirked to

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herself. Again. She pushed her broken motorbike onto the pavement and leaned it against a fence. She was going to do everything she could to get to the match. She didn't care how long it took, she wasn't giving up. She couldn't give up.

Fran walked quickly, fighting her own thoughts with every step. Each yard away from her bike seemed to be a yard closer to the dark recesses of her soul. Her mind wandered into dangerous territory.

You always fuck it up. You never get anything right. You haven't even played a single match for them and you're already letting everyone down. Just like always. Why bother? You know how it will end up. Useless, stupid asshole.

Fran gritted her teeth, and tried to ignore the thoughts swirling around her head. She reached for her safety net. Her cigarettes. She lit one and inhaled deeply. *Stay calm and breathe.* The nicotine hit her bloodstream and took the edge off. She focused all her efforts into getting to the clubhouse, and held on to the faint hope someone would be waiting for her.

Over the hill, a black cab idled toward her. Fran shielded her eyes from the sun, but she couldn't tell if it was for hire. The orange light didn't show against the bright sunlight. She put out her hand, praying it would stop.

* * *

"Where the hell is she?"

The first competitive game of the new season and Docherty was late. Andrea Miller, the captain of Lothian Thistle and their best midfielder, was becoming increasingly impatient. "We need to get going, we can't wait any longer."

She was right. Andrea led by example both on and off the pitch. She expected players to turn up on time, and put their all into both training and games.

At twenty-nine, she was one of the more experienced players in the squad. Jessie had looked up to her ever since Andrea had arrived almost five years ago and was immediately handed the captaincy by the previous manager. She blew the dark fringe on her forehead, her hands stuffed in the pockets of her tracksuit bottoms, foot tapping; her frustration clear.

Two buses were waiting for them. One full of supporters and the other filled with the team and staff, many of the occupants staring out the windows at the three of them.

Tom shook his head. "Ten more minutes."

"For God's sake, Tom, we need to get going," Andrea protested.

"Wait." Jessie hated what she was about to do, but it made the most sense. "I'm not playing. I'll stay here and if she turns up, I'll drive her to the game."

Andrea beamed at her. "Sounds like a plan, right, Tom?" She had a distinct edge to her voice as she addressed Tom, indicating she had reached the end of her patience.

Tom looked at his watch, pursed his lips, and nodded. "Thanks, Jessie." He turned to Andrea. "Right, let's go."

Jessie stood in the car park as the buses left, a sense of loneliness draping over her. She'd serve the first of her three-match ban today, and her flat mood was now plunging to new depths. The last thing she wanted was to drive for two hours sitting next to the woman who had caused her predicament. If she even bothered to turn up. Jessie shook her head. No, she'd do this for Tom. He'd put his faith in this Fran Docherty, and she was letting him down at the first hurdle. They'd tried calling her mobile. No answer. As she leaned against her car, a taxi pulled into the car park with Docherty in the back. A balding, heavysset taxi driver was gesticulating to her, as she spoke back to him. He powered down his side window.

"Excuse me? She says you'll pay." The irate driver threw his thumb back towards Fran.

Jessie blinked, then slowly nodded as she walked towards the cab. "How much?"

"Twelve pounds seventy."

Jessie pulled her purse from her bag and handed him a twenty-pound note, doubting she'd see the money again as the driver handed her change and released the locks so Docherty could exit the vehicle.

"My bike broke down," Docherty muttered by way of apology accompanied by a lift of her left shoulder as the helmet dangled from her right hand.

"We tried calling you."

"Lost my phone."

Jessie shook her head. What was the point? She doubted Docherty even cared that she'd caused the entire team and a bus full of supporters to set off late for the game.

DEFENSIVE MINDSET

“I’m driving you,” Jessie said curtly as she walked towards the car and unlocked it. “You can put your helmet in the boot. All your kit is on the bus.”

Docherty followed her instructions and got into the passenger seat, removing her cigarettes from her leather jacket before she pulled on her seatbelt. She held the pack of cigarettes in her hand, making eye contact with Jessie.

Jessie stared at the woman, not quite believing the audacity of her. She shook her head. “No. No smoking in my car.”

Docherty tossed the pack of fags onto the dash and pulled peppermint gum from the pocket of her jeans. She popped two white tabs into her mouth before offering the packet to Jessie.

“No, thanks.”

Docherty raised an eyebrow and put the gum back in her front pocket.

Jessie drove out of the car park and headed towards the motorway. She slipped her sunglasses over her eyes as the early morning sun shone brightly. Docherty reached for the sun visor.

“There are sunglasses in the glove compartment,” Jessie told her.

Opening the compartment, Fran removed a pair of Aviators. She offered Jessie a nod before she eased back in her seat and slid them on, then yawned and closed her eyes.

As they sat in a queue at traffic lights, Jessie had no idea if she was awake. She stared over at her, noting the relaxed position and entwined fingers resting on a flat, T-shirt-clad stomach that rose and fell in a soft rhythm. Her head was turned away from Jessie, affording her the opportunity to study her further.

Docherty was skinny, too skinny, Jessie thought. Her arms were littered with scars. Nothing deep, but lots of marks of varying shapes and sizes covered her arms and hands. She was pale and there seemed something unhealthy about her. It went beyond the piercings and tattoos, though Jessie found her stretched ears particularly revolting. *Who does that to themselves?*

Jessie knew there was a pierced navel under those entwined fingers and as her eyes drifted up, the outline of two nipple rings were visible under the T-shirt stretched across her modest chest. Jessie knew she wore a bra to train and play in, but the rest of the time she didn’t bother.

Jessie didn't get it. All that ink and metal...what was the attraction? Why would someone want to abuse their body like that? To deface it? To take something as truly wonderful and beautiful as a woman's body and make it something grotesque?

She flicked her gaze away from the road and over her dozing passenger again, and was surprised to find Docherty's head turning towards her. Jessie's image was reflected in the Aviators she wore. Damn, she suited those sunglasses better than Jessie ever had.

"Oh, you're awake."

Her lip curled ever so slightly in reply.

Jessie looked back at the road. "So where are you from?" Her Scottish accent had Jessie puzzled as it seemed to have no distinctive regional twang.

"Edinburgh, I suppose." Docherty stretched her arms out in front of her.

"You suppose?"

"Long story."

"Where did you go to school?"

Docherty sighed. "Heriots."

"George Heriots?"

"That's the one."

Jessie didn't know what to make of her travelling companion. Everything was so vague. She was surprised Docherty had been privately educated. *Maybe the old saying's right after all. You shouldn't judge a book by its cover.*

"What did you do when you left school?" Jessie waited a few moments but no reply was forthcoming. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry. I went to Knox Academy, in Haddington, that's where I grew up. Then I did a business and finance degree at Heriot-Watt University. I knew I would be working for my dad when I finished. He runs an estate agent's in Haddington and we've just opened new premises in Edinburgh."

Jessie felt like she had to fill the silence. She was used to people chatting with her, making an effort, doing their share of the small talk. Docherty seemed to have zero interest in the social niceties. She was so closed off, it made Jessie uncomfortable. And that made her ramble until she ran out of words.

After a lengthy pause, she sighed and answered, "I went to London."

DEFENSIVE MINDSET

“Did you play football there?” Jessie latched on to the common thread, hoping the other woman would open up.

“A bit.”

“What team did—”

“Enough questions, okay.”

It wasn't a sharp reply, but there was finality to the request. Docherty either wasn't in the mood to chat or she didn't like talking about herself. Either way, Jessie knew she had to shut up.

“Sorry.”

Docherty folded her arms and turned away. They spent rest of the journey in silence. When Jessie pulled into the football ground, there was still an hour to go before kick-off. Jessie climbed out of the car, glad to be away from the increasingly claustrophobic atmosphere that had descended around them. Docherty followed her to the away changing room, head down, hands stuffed in her pockets. There was something in the set of her shoulders that made Jessie look again, look closer.

She looks like a teenager expecting to be bawled out in front of everyone. She looks...vulnerable. Jessie wasn't sure where the impression had come from, but instead of the difficult woman she was used to seeing, she saw one who had difficulty dealing with things. Sullen transformed in Jessie's mind to shy, moody became scared, and distant became a shield that protected the world from Fran as much as Fran from the world.

When did she become Fran? Jessie shook her head, decided not to think about it, and plastered on her smile.

“Room for two more?” Jessie asked cheerily as she popped her head around the door.

“Jessie! Fantastic!” Tom declared.

“Fran's motorbike broke down and she didn't have her phone with her.” Jessie had no idea why she was explaining on the other woman's behalf. *Probably because Fran won't bother.*

“Right, well, Fran, get yourself changed then join us for the warm-up,” Tom instructed as he led the team out of the changing room.

Jessie went outside, where her teammates were warming up. She hated missing a game, and missing one through suspension smarted like hell. It was bad enough when it was injury related, but this was an injustice. She shook her head. *No, that's not fair, Jessie. Tom's right. She was doing her job*

for the team and I let her get to me. It's my own fault. Blaming someone else for my mistake won't make this any better.

Fran chose that moment to join the rest of the team. Jessie watched every player on the pitch avidly. Fran didn't exactly put much effort into warming up, and Jessie doubted she could appear any less enthusiastic as the players went through their drills with the fitness coach.

Tom joined her on the touchline. "Thanks again, Jessie."

"Don't mention it. We want to win and getting her here will help make that happen."

Tom nodded. "All the same, I appreciate it."

"I hope she works out."

Jessie had her doubts. Nothing about Fran's behaviour over the past month had convinced her she could make a difference for them in the league. Lazy and uninterested sprang to mind, but Tom was convinced otherwise. Fran continued to put in minimum effort during the warm-up, and Jessie wondered what it would take to get her to try. *What makes you tick, Fran Docherty?*

"So do I. I know her signing is tough on you." Tom clapped her on the shoulder. "Two more games after today, Jessie, and you are back where you belong."

"I can't wait!" Jessie answered with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. All morning she'd moped around, trying to be part of the game, but it was difficult. She'd missed games before, but never when she was fit to play.

As the game unfolded, Jessie mentally kicked every ball from the sidelines. Lothian Thistle were proving to have too much in their armoury for the newly promoted opposition. At half-time Thistle were leading 2-0, with Elaine Travers, Jessie's replacement for the day, finishing off a slick passing move for the second. Before the final whistle, the team added three more goals without conceding. A comprehensive victory. Thistle had been solid in defence and potent in attack.

Jessie lamented the loss of goals, knowing she could have easily scored a hat-trick, and watching Fran receive the congratulations of her teammates left a bitter aftertaste. She was pleased with the outcome, and she had to admit, reluctantly, that Fran had been impressive. Her no-nonsense approach to the game was so unlike her off-field appearance. She was efficient with the

ball and tidy when it came to clearing up at the back. Even her kit reflected her approach, nothing flashy, hair tied back, and plain black boots. She was fast winning friends and support from her teammates and the sidelines.

The buses were full of her team and supporters. The trip back to Edinburgh would be fun, with everyone in a buoyant mood after the win. She walked back to her car, a feeling of melancholy settling over her as she stepped away from her friends, only to look up in surprise at the black-clad figure standing beside the Volvo. "You could have gone back with the team."

Fran shrugged as she took a final drag from her cigarette, before dropping it to the tarmac and stamping it out with a booted foot. Jessie's nose twitched, picking up the smoke clinging to her passenger's clothing once she'd unlocked the doors and they were both in the car. Fran rifled through her pockets and found the pack of peppermint gum. She offered one to Jessie, who declined, before popping one into her mouth.

The car was quiet as she drove along the motorway, and Fran was twitchy, restless. Her hands in constant motion, stretching her fingers, as her right thigh bounced rapidly as though the nerve was constantly being tapped.

"You got a hot date tonight?"

"No, I'm working."

"Oh, whereabouts?"

"A bar."

Jessie briefly closed her eyes wondering why Fran continually rubbed her the wrong way. "You had a good game today."

Fran rolled her head to look at Jessie. "Thanks," she said before staring out of the window again.

Jessie took a slow, cleansing breath and tried to concentrate on driving. Fran obviously didn't want to pass the time with small talk, and that was fine. She pressed a button on the console to play a radio station, selecting an easy listening preset and settled in to enjoy the relaxing tunes. She was sure it wouldn't suit her rock-chick teammate, but right now she didn't care. Movement caught Jessie's eye as long, slim fingers tapped a denim clad thigh in time to the beat. Well, at least they could enjoy the music together. But the idea of the surly Fran enjoying an old eighties power ballad was as perplexing to Jessie as the woman herself.

On the outskirts of Edinburgh, Jessie finally broke the silence.

"Where's the pub?"

Fran frowned. "Why?"

"How else are you going to get there?" Jessie asked sharply as they were running out of motorway. She already knew Fran had no money.

"Portobello."

Jessie took the inside lane and slipped onto the city bypass, the quickest route to the other side of town. Thirty minutes later, she entered Portobello. It was a place she knew well. Her new office was there and her house was in Joppa, right at the end of the seaside town. The very last stop in Edinburgh before you entered the harbour town of Musselburgh.

"Just say where."

Jessie thought Fran must have been daydreaming, as they got closer to Joppa and had passed all the bars on the high street without Fran asking her to stop.

"Here's good."

She pulled in at the top of a residential street lined with large Victorian houses that led down to the seafront. "Remember your helmet's in the boot."

"Thanks," Fran said.

The boot slammed shut and Jessie watched Fran walk down the street towards the promenade, a plume of smoke billowing behind her as she lit a cigarette.

Jessie shook her head and turned the car around. She knew everyone would be arriving back at the clubhouse any time now. Her day had been strange enough, and now she wanted to hang out with her friends and teammates. She wanted it to feel like a normal match day.

* * *

The clubhouse was boisterous, with lots of people in high spirits. They'd won after all. Jessie spotted her teammates in the corner they usually sat in after a game. Sophie waved when she saw her.

"Hey, Jessie. Where's Fran?" Sophie asked, nodding towards the door in expectation of the other woman's arrival.

"She's working tonight."

"Aw, shame she isn't here to celebrate. We voted her best player today."

"I'm sure she'll be ecstatic to hear that." Jessie struggled to keep the sarcasm from her response. She doubted Fran would give two figs about the accolade. "You all did well today. Congratulations, girls."

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“You too, Jessie. If you hadn’t stayed behind, Fran would have missed the game. You get an assist.” Andrea Miller raised her glass of juice in salute, as other team members echoed her sentiment. This cheered Jessie a little. She’d felt so detached and completely out of sorts. A small smile crept on to her face as she took a seat next to Sophie.

“How was your trip?” Sophie asked.

“That woman drives me mad.”

Sophie chuckled. “What did she do?”

“We spent over four hours alone today and I doubt she said more than a dozen words to me.”

“Mm, she is the strong silent type.”

Something in Sophie’s tone caught Jessie’s attention. “Please tell me you aren’t interested in her?”

“She’s all dark and mysterious.” Sophie shrugged. “Makes you want to get to know her better.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Jessie said. She knew conversation was going to be a barrier for anyone wanting to get to know Fran Docherty.

“So what did you do, dump her in the car park?”

“No, I gave her a lift to work.”

“Really?” Surprise laced Sophie’s question.

Jessie shrugged. “She arrived here today in a taxi that I had to pay for. How else was she going to get there?”

“That was very sweet of you, Jessie.”

She shook her head. “I had no option. I either took her there or gave her bus fare.”

“Still...”

“Anyway, I’m starving. I hope Ruthie has some nice soup and sandwiches ready.” That effectively put an end to the conversation about Docherty. Jessie had had more than enough of the woman for one day.

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DEFENSIVE MINDSET

BY WENDY TEMPLE

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