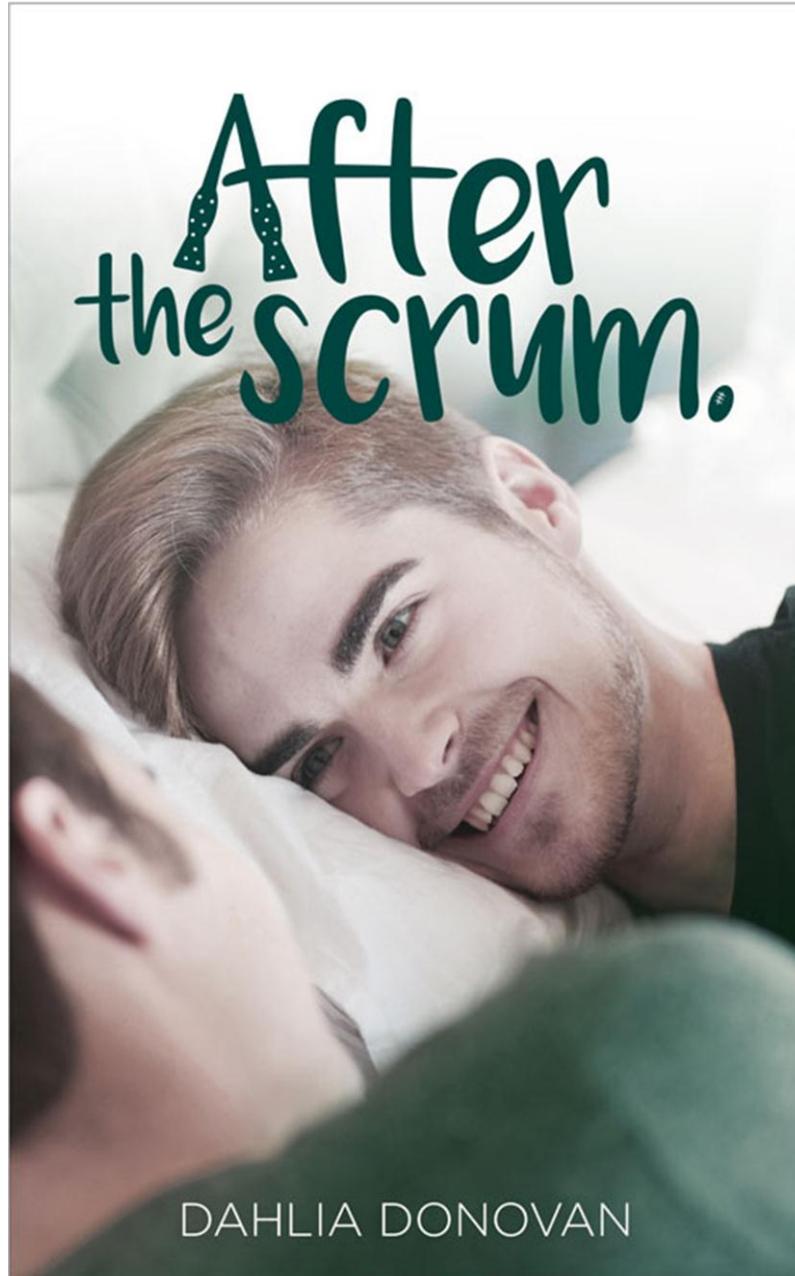


After the Scrum: Excerpt

By Dahlia Donovan



From Chapter One of After the Scrum

I'm retired. I am retired. I've retired. I'm a former rugby player. And I'm bloody talking to myself like a bloody moron. This is not a good sign.

Stretching his six foot one, bulky body, Caddock Stanford unfolded himself from his favourite leather recliner. He could no longer afford to pretend his career hadn't come to a painful end. The English national rugby union team no longer looked to the Brute for direction on the pitch.

For almost eight years, Caddock had been the star on the front line of the scrum. He'd been playing since he was a lad, since his hands were first big enough to hold a ball. Nicknamed "the brute" for his total lack of fear and his raw power when ploughing through the other side, he'd led his lads to victory an impressive number of times on the national team.

Only a few days before his fortieth birthday, Caddock had suffered one tragic loss after another. It started with news of his younger brother, Hadrian, dying in a tragic accident while scuba diving. Haddy had been a marine biologist—and a father of one bright four-year-old boy.

So many lives changed in one instant. Caddock had experience as a *brilliant* uncle who spoiled little Devlin Stanford rotten. He'd never been a father, had no desire to be one. Yet now his nephew had become his sole responsibility.

As if his life hadn't been flipped on end enough, it had taken one hit to his knee in training before a World Cup game to bring his stellar career to an abrupt halt. The doctors believed the Brute would never enter a scrum again. They'd advised against him even attempting it.

The worst part of it all—his knee was fine. Ninety percent of the time, it didn't bother him at all. But the doctors feared another hit could render him crippled for life. His manager hadn't been prepared to take the risk.

Shouldn't it have been his decision? Caddock had argued pointlessly with anyone who would listen. He'd still found himself kicked out on his arse. Legends apparently had an expiration date, and his had come due.

The world moved on without him. No one had time for a former champion, no matter the number of titles behind his name. The Brute would be a faded legend mentioned in anecdotes by pundits, but nothing more. No amount of raging at the wind would change any of it.

Forty. Retired. And a father. Now what? The infernal question rolled around in his mind and kept him up late at night. Devlin deserved the best care one could provide. A moping mountain wouldn't do the lad a damn bit of good. He needed a restart—a scrum—to deal with life after rugby.

Starting toward the kitchen to make a coffee, Caddock sighed when a familiar voice called out, “Uncle Boo!” Since Devlin started to speak, he'd tried to teach the lad to call him Uncle Brute. It backfired spectacularly when he became a bastardized version of his own nickname.

Uncle Boo.

Bloody Boo.

“Uncle Boo. *Uncle Boo.* Uncle Boo.” Devlin bounced into the kitchen clutching his favourite blue teddy to his chest. He'd clung to it as the last toy his father had given to him before his trip to the Great Barrier Reef. He waved the bear wildly, almost knocking himself over with his enthusiasm. “Blue wants bickies.”

“Does he now?” Caddock crouched down to contemplate the bear seriously. “Custard or chocolate biscuits?”

“Choccy.” His little nephew grabbed his hand to tug pointlessly at him, trying to drag him toward the cabinet where his favourite biscuits were hidden on a top shelf. They'd been moved up there when he discovered the little Devil could climb just about anything. “Pwease?”

“Oh no, not the magic word.” He lifted the boy up to sit on the counter. “Just one now. We're having tea and sandwiches in a mo.”

“Thwee.”

“One.”

“Two.”

“One.” Caddock had learned to be firm when sad blue eyes peered up at him. Devlin could melt a bloody iceberg with his pout. “And a half.”

Devlin gave him a wide toothy grin, though he was currently missing two of those teeth. He immediately shoved the entire half into his mouth. “Thank you!”

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Author Bio

Dahlia Donovan wrote her first romance series after a crazy dream about shifters and damsels in distress. She prefers irreverent humour and unconventional characters. An autistic and occasional hermit, her life wouldn't be complete without her husband and her massive collection of books and video games.

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