

The background of the cover is a vibrant yellow-orange gradient, suggesting a sunset or sunrise over a tropical island. Two tall palm trees are silhouetted against the sky, one on the left and one on the right. In the center, a thatched-roof hut sits on stilts. Inside the hut, a man and a woman are embracing. To the right of the hut, a man stands on a balcony looking out. Below the hut, a child is swinging on a swing set, and a man is sitting on the ground. The overall scene is romantic and idyllic.

TOTALLY SHIPPED

On the Island Book 2

NICKY SHIVERS

This book is dedicated to Maria Beasley, who invented the life raft in 1882.

“The happy ending cannot come in the middle of the story.”

—Peter S. Beagle. *The Last Unicorn.*

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JULY

DAISY

“I know I put it down somewhere...”

Leander looks up at us, a guilty expression on his face.

“Guys, I think I lost the fire-starter,” he says.

By ‘fire-starter’, Leander means the one object that makes at least one thing on this island relatively easy. And nothing is easy when you’ve been marooned on a deserted island in the South Pacific for months.

With an exaggerated sigh, Gray pulls it out of his pocket. “I found it on the sand earlier.”

“Whoa, nice one! Losing that would have sucked,” Leander laughs.

Gray walks over to the shelving and places the flint-stone in the correct spot.

Nine-year old Keyara immediately gets up, shaking her head. “I’ve rearranged the stores, Uncle Gray. Now the flint goes over here.” Moving a couple of feet, Key carefully sets it next to some bundles of dry grass. “I made kindle packs, so you can just grab them to start a fire. The lighter goes next to them.”

That’s our Keyara. Getting more independent in actions and thinking as the weeks pass.

“Nice one, Key.”

The little girl gives Gray a pleased smile.

My old boss at the children’s library said there are two kinds of people in the world: the kind who return the shopping cart to the corral, and the kind who leave it loose in the parking lot.

I always return my cart.

Brooke?

She never does.

Not because she is some kind of monster, but because she has already moved on to the next thing in her brain. Someone else will put the cart away; it’s no longer her problem.

Key obviously puts the cart away.

Leander? He wouldn't return the cart. Leander has ADHD, and without his meds, he skips from one thing to the next in no particular order.

It drives me and Gray a little crazy. We both like things to be ordered, thought about carefully, and carried out in a methodical manner. I'm a librarian; dewey decimal systems are heaven for me. Gray also loves to bring order from chaos. I wonder if it's because he grew up in chaos?

Rex wouldn't use a shopping cart. It wouldn't even occur to him. He'd go to the store, grab the two items he needs, then head out again as soon as possible.

Rex 'get shit done' Malone.

And finally, my lovely Killian. He'd wander the aisles, his head probably thinking about poetry and the light reflecting off the jelly jars. He would use a cart—or a trolley, as he would call it—and have just a couple of things rattling around in the bottom. He'd walk around aimlessly, changing his mind about what he was buying, and finding odds and ends he didn't realize he needed..

And I imagine his cart would not get to the corral because he would see an elderly couple getting out of their car and wheel it over to them to be helpful. And then he'd get in a conversation with the pair and end up back in the grocery store, helping his new friends do their shop.

Sweet dreamer, Killian.

Learning to survive together on this island is interesting. All our different personalities are revealing themselves, bit by bit.

I'm thinking about this as Leander zips off across the sand.

We're a good team.

Yes, we may all be broken or flawed in some way, but together we made an incredible whole. And yes, when I'd said that out loud, Leander had made comments about *my* incredible hole.

The last few weeks have been comparatively easy, now the shadow of Harvey has left our home. I've finally stopped looking over my shoulder every time I head to the water hole.

Mostly.

Sometimes I get the feeling I'm being watched, but I'm pretty sure that is my paranoia speaking.

Life has developed into a pattern of foraging, fishing, and firewood-collecting. The chickens regularly lay eggs. It seems like they love to eat

bugs, and there are plenty of them around here.

Our campsite now has three different teepees; the main family shelter, a small smokehouse for smoking fish, and the annex for when any of us want a little privacy. Finding a bamboo grove has upped our building game exponentially.

Talking of wood...

“Hey, beautiful,” Killian calls out as he sees me. His skin is now such a dark tan that the tattoos on his back and shoulders hardly show as well. “Come fish with me.”

Happily.

“Going fishing” often ends up much more interesting than just dangling a line in the water.

“Catch anything this morning?” I ask, as we walk back to the rocks together.

“Unfortunately not. Maybe today is the day we convince Keyara to let us have roast chicken on the menu?”

“Good luck with that! If you think she’d let Ron, Hermione, or Harry be for the chop, you don’t know that little girl.”

“Aye. But I’ve been thinking, we need to name one of the chickens Voldemort. Then she’d be OK with it.”

“She’d still never let us do it!”

“I fear you may be right.” He pulls me towards him and starts kissing me. “The fucking fish are not biting, but I would very much like to do some biting—of you.”

That does sound exciting. It’s been ages since me and Killian have been together.

“And maybe we could invite a friend to play. Want Gray to play doctor with us?”

I follow the direction of his eyes to see our shared lover walking towards us.

His broad, tan chest is covered in sweat. Looking at Gray makes my mouth water.

I nod and Killian raises his voice. “Our baby needs some playtime. Can you help us out with that?”

Gray immediately grins and jogs the last few yards towards us. Killian gives me a wink and presses a soft kiss to the top of my head.

“Good girl—now let’s lay you down.”

He pulls my tatty shirt over my head, then I wiggle off my shorts, lying back in just my underwear.

Gray kneels beside us. “Daisy?”

Killian shakes his head. “Daisy is not in charge here, I am. She just does exactly what she’s told.”

Killian’s words are getting me thoroughly excited for a thorough exam.

As Gray moves towards me, I can smell his smoky, earthy scent. I want his big, rough hands on my body.

It’s as if he’s heard my thoughts.

As Killian unclasps my bra, Gray’s hand hones in on my naked breast, his calloused palm feeling almost dangerous against my soft skin. His palm traces over my nipple, making it stand to attention.

GRAY

Killian is moving lower, and I guide his mouth onto her sweet nip. Daisy is weaving her fingers through his hair as she bites her bottom lip.

Fuck.

The two of them are all I want, sexually. I've fantasized about the three of us together, but... this is reality. I move my thumb over her wet bottom lip, then drag it down over her chin, her neck and towards Killian. I pull Killian's mouth off her nipple by grabbing the back of his hair.

He looks up to me, his eyes heavy with lust, and I put my thumb in his mouth.

"Suck it."

I hear Daisy draw in a sharp breath. She's watching us, mouth slightly open and pupils blown. I remove my hand from his lips and press Killian back to Daisy's breast, as I trace a path from her nipple, over her stomach and down to her panties.

"This is everything I've ever dreamed," I tell her. "Fuck, you are so beautiful."

Daisy moans and closes her eyes as I circle my fingers over the sheer fabric of her panties.

"You belong to us," I tell her.

"I belong to you," she moans back.

Killian is being so gentle, it makes me want to do the opposite. I take her nipple and pinch is hard, making her gasp out.

"Good?" I ask her.

"So good," she whispers.

My eyes stray to Killian, he obviously has a massive hard on under those shorts. As do I. I pull him up by the hair again.

"Take your clothes off."

"Back at ya, big boy," he grins, quickly whipping off everything. My eyes are drawn to his piercings.

I reach down and pinch Daisy's nipples again, looking at Killian's beautiful studded cock. "Isn't he gorgeous, Daisy."

She doesn't reply, just moans.

"Put your cock in Daisy's mouth," I order.

There are so many fucking things I want to do with these two people, I don't even know where to start.

I feel a small hand reach over to my cock.

"You too," she moans.

Both of us in her mouth? Damn! I like the idea, but I don't think she's manage it.

She tilts back her head, lips parting as she eyes my cock. I look at Killian, his eyes darting between Daisy's mouth, and my body.

I can feel their desire. I'm swimming in it.

"Are you going to let me...you know...have you both?" Daisy whispers, licking her lips again. I feel pre-cum ooze.

Killian reaches up, drags his shirt over his head, and tosses it aside.

He's fucking gorgeous.

She's fucking gorgeous. Daisy parts her legs slightly, and I'm suddenly desperate to get between her thighs. Fuck, so many options. How do people do sex like this?

I suck in a breath, as Killian kneels closer to Daisy, and her little, hot tongue darts out and swipes across the top of his shaft. He gasps a breath, abs hardening.

I didn't even realize that I was stroking myself. My cock pulses in my palm.

"Suck him off," I tell her as I watch Killian move closer again. She flattens her tongue against the base of his dick and licks upward. It's almost as if I can feel Killian's pleasure as my own.

"Fuck, Daisy," he groans.

All I can think about is fucking Daisy's mouth, with Killian's cock rubbing alongside mine as we force our way deep down her throat.

I can't stop myself.

Pressing the tip of my cock hard, I realize I am growling.

"Get over here," Killian tells me, his dick pulling out of her mouth with a plopping sound.

As soon as she parts her lips for me, I am thrusting inside her warm, wet mouth. She angles her head to invite me in deeper but I pull back.

I hear her moan, but it's time to see if she can live up to her big words.
Have us both in her mouth.

“Open. Wider.”

Killian and I are almost hip to hip above Daisy, and she is resting against a small sandy rise. Her eyes widen, then water as we stretch her lips to capacity.

Killian's shaft smashes against mine and we manage to both get our tips into Daisy.

“That's it. Take it,” Killian growls, his voice is vibrating with need—and pride. Our girl is doing so well.

As Daisy gags, she looks up at me through teary eyes, mouth stretched, then nods. Wanting more.

This is everything.

I don't move, just let Killian push in another inch. There Daisy finds her limit. After a second, I pull out, then Killian follows suit.

Our girl has so much drool running down her chin. She swipes it up with one hand and rubs it over my cock. At the same time she takes Killian deep in her mouth again. Killian's holding her head, fingers woven through her hair. The wet, sloppy sounds are fucking insane. I'm insane for this girl, this guy, but I'm not ready to come yet. There is pussy needing to be played with.

I pull back, and my cock comes free. “We need to look at that beautiful pussy,” I tell Killian.

He nods. “I fucking love ‘in-charge Gray’.

Daisy agrees, nodding as she gets her breath back. I move downwards and part her legs.

“Oh fuck, look at that pussy, glistening in the sun, so wet and ready.”

Killian's staring at her pussy, the smell of her desire is intoxicating. I lean down, and her body quivers as I run my tongue over her thigh and then up. I bypass her needy clit and give attention to each side of her throbbing center.

“Gray, please,” she begs.

“She's begging you,” Killian tells me, so I flick my tongue briefly over it.

“You wanna taste?” I ask Killian. “She tastes so fucking good.”

Killian comes closer and kisses me, then leans down and sucks hard on her pussy, making her squeal.

Fuck, I going to just come here on the sand if I'm not careful.

“More...” I hear Daisy gasp.

I work one of my fingers inside her, as Killian continues to suck on her

clit.

Then I finger-fuck her. Watching Killian's mouth go to town on her pussy makes my ass ache, I wish that mouth was doing that work on me at the same time.

I'm rocking my hips, and as I do, a hand reaches behind me and starts to finger my entrance. Argh, fucking amazing.

We are a mess of panting and groaning.

I can feel Daisy's pussy flexing and clenching around my fingers, her orgasm building.

"Good girl," I murmur. "You gonna come for us?"

Killian growls into her pussy.

Her breaths get more frantic and then she arches her back off the sand, and she cries out, her body quivering. "I-I- I'm coming..."

And I feel her shatter on my fingers.

DAISY

I think that may have been the most exquisite orgasm of my life.

When I regain my vision, what I see before me is two huge needy cocks.

“You want to see how I switch it around on Gray?” Killian asks. “He gets so bossy when it comes to you, but when I’m in charge, he’s my little bitch.”

I never knew I’d get so turned on my words like that. I look at Gray, and his eyes are narrowed, but he doesn’t challenge what Killian is saying. Killian reaches over and twists Gray’s nipple, making him gasp.

“You want Daisy to hear you moaning like a little whore?” Killian asks. He pronounces it hoo-err. I feel my face redden, but it’s not with embarrassment, the idea of these two men playing dirty games is so hot. Killian’s hand slaps at Gray’s butt, loud and stinging. Gray’s cock is so thick, and he obviously liked the pain as I see it twitch and bob with each slap.

“Let’s show her what a little hoo-err you can be,” Killian says, grabbing Gray by the hair. He pulls him down hard, pushing himself into Gray’s mouth, thrusting hard and rough. I feel myself get wet again as Gray chokes on Killian’s length.

Killian’s butt flexes, and I picture him ramming into me in the same manner. Suddenly he pulls out and slaps his cock across Gray’s face. Gray is gasping for air, drool spilling down his chin. Killian meets my eyes. “What do you think, Daisy? Shall we let Gray have a special reward if he chokes down my whole cock?”

Reward?

“I’m thinking he can fuck your pussy senseless, but first I want to feel the back of his throat.” Killian grabs Gray’s face and squeezes it. “You hear me?”

Gray nods so Killian lets go of his face. “Good boy, now open your hoo-err mouth again.”

I hear Gray whimper and gasp as Killian ruthlessly pounds into his face. I’ve never seen this side of Killian.

“Deeper bitch,” he growls, as Gray gags again, then, “Fuck, that’s it baby, that’s it.” He has his hand on the back of Gray’s head, so he can’t move, and slams in over and over.

Then Killian’s shoulders go rigid and his buttocks tighten as he bellows and unloads in Gray’s beautiful throat.

Eventually pulling back, with a sigh, Killian leans down and kisses Gray. “My beautiful wolf, my Gray Wind.”

When he moves to one side, I get a view of Gray’s happy sex-ravaged face, and his massive erection.

Massive.

“See how wet she is,” Killian croaks.

Oh, believe you me, I’m wet.

Gray is still not saying anything as he collapses onto the sand on his knees. My knees are already parted, and I’m throbbing in anticipation. Inch by inch he works his massive girth into me.

“So tight,” Gray hisses as my breath hitches.

Killian lays on the sand next to be, stroking my stomach. “Imagine that thing in your ass, macushla.”

I do, and feel my body clench in both fear and excitement. I’m sweating and panting, just a mess of lust.

“I’m surprised he can get that thing in your tight little pussy,” Killian murmurs, “like fucking you with an oak tree.” He licks my bottom lip then looks at Gray. “No thrusting yet, macushla, just keep that thing in her tight pussy.” He reaches down a hand and starts to tease my clit, the finger circling around and around, then slowly up and down the sides of my nub. Along with the intense stretch from Gray, the feelings are instantly sending my skyward towards another orgasm.

“Ok, baby, you can feck her now,” Killian commands. Gray doesn’t need telling twice. My pussy is obliterated as at the same time Killian’s clever fingers tap and tease my clit. My heart hammers and I can hear all kinds of noises coming out of my throat. Gray goes even faster and harder than groans, expanding wider and shooting hot cum so deep inside me, I’m surprised I’m not crying cum tears. Killian stops teasing me and rubs in the exactly the perfect place, sending me into a second orgasm which is even deeper and harder than the first.

Afterwards we cuddle together, my body trapped between two walls of muscle. I feel safe and cared for.

REX

Daisy wanders up the beach, hand-in-hand-in-hand with Gray and Killian.

Fuck those guys.

I get up to go chop more firewood.

Ever since we booted Harvey, everyone acts like we are on fucking *Love Island*—whatever that shit is.

Hello, people! We are actually in a disaster situation.

“I’m off to the pool,” she calls out. Gray and Killian blow her fucking kisses, then head off fishing again.

“Take someone with you,” I growl.

“I’ll be fine,” she replies, giving me a bright smile.

Fuck that. Harvey may be gone, but I don’t like how overconfident everyone is getting.

“Take. Someone. With. You.”

I’ve expressly told Key and Daisy to not go off on their own. There are a thousand dangers on this island. Trip over a root, break an ankle. Get bitten by a snake, die of poisoning. Eat the wrong fruit, *die of poisoning* (or almost die—I’m looking at you, Leander).

I watch Daisy go blithely off into the jungle, against my direct order.

I put down the ax of hell and grab some shoes. Fuck.

I honestly don’t give a shit about all the fucking. I just can’t get my head around their carelessness with safety.

Leander and Key are deep in a game of chess, using a board Leander made. No idea how to play that shit. I’m not gonna lie, sometimes Leander makes me feel inadequate in the brains department.

But I’ll keep his fucking girlfriend safe.

And if I was fucking her, I’d make him feel inadequate in a whole different way.

I walk along the path to the pool and within a couple of minutes catch up to her.

“Are you following me?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.”

It’s not even five fucking minutes later, halfway to the pool, when she stops suddenly and leans her hand against a tree.

“You alright?”

I see her body tremble slightly.

“Daisy?”

She turns, sweat on her brow and upper lip. Not unusual, but the sheen of her skin is tinged green.

“What’s going…” I’m interrupted as Daisy leans over and vomits on my feet.

I pull her hair back, out of her face, but I’m too late. Bits of half-digested coconut are hanging in globs from the strands. She straightens up and wipes a hand across her mouth.

“Sorry,” she whispers.

“What happened?”

“I puked on your feet.”

“Not that. Why’d you get sick?” She sways, and I take her by the shoulders. “Lean on me a minute.”

“I’m fine.” Her voice wobbles.

“Yeah, you look it,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I told you to take someone with you.”

The sight of her doubled over and puking gets my blood boiling again. If those assholes are all going to fuck her, the least they can do is take care of her properly.

“Your feet are a mess,” she says, quietly.

My frown deepens. I don’t care about my feet. I want to know if Daisy is ill. “Do you think it’s something you ate?”

“I’m probably just dehydrated.”

Yeah, it could be that. “Can you walk?”

She straightens up. “Of course—honestly I’m fine now.”

“Then let’s go and get clean, for the love of god.”

When she looks up at me, I see tears in her eyes. And even though there is vomit in her ratty hair, and she’s covered in scratches and bites (both bug and human), she still looks so goddamn beautiful.

Fuck my life.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers again.

Fuck it. I scoop her up into my arms and walk the remaining path to the pool. It’s just easier.



Daisy and I swim in silence, both probably very relieved to get clean. There is an air of awkwardness. The two of us don’t hang out alone very much.

I keep it that way on purpose.

Eventually Daisy swims over to me to ask a question. “I keep thinking

over and over, how to make some normalcy for Keyara. What do you think about starting up some school lessons for her?”

School?

“What kind of thing are you thinking of?”

“Regular school stuff. Leander can teach math—he’s really good at that. I could do reading and writing. We already use the charcoal sticks on aluminum for drawing.”

I think for a minute.

School lessons could make a good structure for Key. As long as we keep survival as first priority, not spelling bees.

“OK—sounds good. Thanks for thinking of it, Daisy. I want to do whatever Nikau and Nanda would do, but I’m no parent. I’m sure I’m fucking up all over the place.”

Sometimes I think about Nanda and Nikau, and it hurts my heart so bad.

They must think Key is dead, that we all are. Poor Nanda, she already had it rough, with Nikau going through his chemo, but then to lose a daughter?

I should never have gone to Sāmoa. Me messing with their family put them right in the path of the Rex Malone curse.

“Please come, Rex. Nikau can’t manage, and he has the boat leased for another two years—we’ll have to keep paying whether we use it or not.”

I thought I was doing them a good turn, but I should have known better.

“It will be good for you, too. To have a change of scene...a change would be good.”

What she really meant was *you have to change, Rex. You can’t keep going deeper and deeper into the darkness.*

But the darkness is exactly where I should have stayed. Then Keyara would be at home with her parents, exactly where she belongs.

Fuck, I wish I could telepathically let Nanda know that Key was doing alright here.

LEANDER

I wake to an odd noise.

The noise happens again and I realize it's someone vomiting.

Uh-oh.

"Hey, everyone alright?"

It's morning, but only just. The sun is just breaching the horizon when I exit the shelter. Then I smell something gross.

"Urgh, what's going on..."

A few feet away, Daisy is leaning over and groaning.

She's clutching her midriff and rocking.

This is all too familiar to my dance with the strychnine devil—fuck.

As I start moving towards my poor Daisy, she gives another groan and wretches again.

"Sweetheart!"

I grab one of the filled water bottles from the shelter, then hold Daisy's hair and rub her back.

It doesn't seem the same as the strychnine poisoning—more like regular food poisoning, but who knows?

"Daisy is sick?" Key emerges from the shelter and walks towards us. "Like you were?" She looks at me with big, scared eyes.

We've had such a peaceful and productive few weeks, we forget disaster is potentially around every corner.

"She'll be OK, Key. Look at me, I got really sick and am fit as a fiddle now."

Daisy is straightening up. "Ugh," she groans, "I feel like I've a family of eels swimming around in my stomach."

Ugh indeed, poor Daisy.

"Gross," says Key. "Are you OK now?"

"Much better," Daisy says, though she still looks a little green.

"Having to barf is never a laugh," Keyara says.

That makes Daisy smile. “You get runny poop when you eat funny soup,” she says, making Key giggle.

I pass Daisy the water bottle. “Better now? Do you think you can keep down some water?”

“Yes, I think so. It must have been something I ate.”

I turn to Key. “Daisy had a snaccident.”

“Snaccident! Snaccident!” she chants. “You get runny poop when you eat funny soup!”

“Urgh, thanks guys,” Daisy grumbles.

Rex has joined us now. “What’s going on?” He is chewing his lip and looking anxious.

“Daisy had a snaccident,” Key tells him.

“I ate something that didn’t agree with me,” Daisy adds. “I’m OK now.”

Rex doesn’t look happy. “Go back to the shelter and rest. We’ll get you coconut water for electrolytes.”

Daisy must still be feeling a little rough, because she doesn’t argue.

Rex looks grim. “We need to keep an eye on her. Our bodies are undernourished and can’t afford incidents like this. It’s critical we all keep hydrated.”

He’s not wrong. Poor Daisy. I press my lips to the top of her head.

“Go rest, Daisy. We need you to be safe and healthy.”

She gives me a weak smile. “I’m fine now, promise. Nothing to worry about.”

AUGUST(?)

DAISY

A bolt of terror shoots through me.

Oh. Em. Gee. I don't think I can deny it any longer.

Which of the guys is the most level-headed?

I think about Gray and Rex boiling over with anger about Harvey.

Neither of them.

So Killian or Leander. Leander is very excitable, so after thinking it through, I decide Killian is the person I need to talk to first.

Dear, calm, cool, Killian

I can see him over by the rocks, doing some fishing, so I head over to talk.

Go see my man, let the worms from the can...

Killian grins as I approach. "Macushla! Come to check out my rod and tackle?"

"Err, not quite. Can we talk about something?"

Killian takes my hand. "This sounds serious, let me set my line." He balances the fishing pole under a rock then sits on a rock and pulls me onto his lap. "Now, my love, what's going on?"

The million dollar question.

It's nice curled up in Killian's arms. It's stress-free and easy. I feel like this might be the last stress-free and easy time I have for a while. Taking a deep breath, I tell him what's on my mind.

"So...We've all had a lot of worries and a lack of calories since being shipwrecked...right?"

"Sure?" He looks at me, puzzled.

I squeeze his hand. "And that can affect people in different ways. Like, for a woman that might mean that they don't get a period."

Killian doesn't say anything, just nods, encouraging me to go on.

"Well the thing is, I haven't had a period since we were shipwrecked."

"OK."

"And I've been feeling real sick the last few mornings." I gulp, it's a hard

reality to face. “You know what they say...sick in the morning is nature's warning.”

“Oh feck! Daisy! You think you're pregnant?”

I nod.

“Pregnant?” Killian whispers, blinking his eyes.

“I think I am and I'm freaking out.”

“No shit. Feck, macushla.” He takes me in his arms. “Pregnant. Like, there is a baby inside of you right now, that kind of pregnant?”

“Is there another kind?” I ask, tears forming in my eyes. How can this have happened? I have the birth control implant in my arm, and it's supposed to last three years.

I got the implant two years ago...maybe two and a half.

HE double hockey sticks.

Killian starts rubbing my back in circles. “It's OK, I'm here for you. All of us are. We're all here for you.”

“I don't even know how pregnant I am. And if I truly am, I guess there is a good chance I'll miscarry as well. It's not as though I'm pumped full of prenatal vitamins.”

“Macushla, we are going to wrap you up in cotton wool and take so much care of you. You and the baby are going to get through this perfectly, I just know it.”

I look up at him. He is obviously concerned, but there's another gleam in his eye. “Wait! Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like what?” he asks.

“Like you're actually a little bit happy about this disaster.”

“Aww, I can't deny the idea of your belly filled with babies is massively exciting, even if it's not ideal circumstances.”

“Yeah, no kidding, the circumstances aren't ideal! I mean, I've always wanted children—I love kids. But having them on a deserted island with no doctors and absolutely nothing sterile... It's daunting.”

He holds me tighter. “I know. It's terrible of me to like the idea now.” He slides a hand over my stomach. “You were vomiting a while back. Was that morning sickness?”

“Probably, but I've stopped actually throwing up now, thankfully.” As I press myself against his chest, my breasts go zingy, if that's even the word.

Giving birth on this island, breastfeeding on this island—what would we use for diapers? It's all too much!

“What are we going to do?” I whisper.

“We are going to have a baby,” he replies, amazingly calmly.

Suddenly, the sensation of peace sweeps over me. We are going to have a baby. My mind clears; women have had babies without medical intervention for centuries. I can do this, I know I can.

I'm going to have a baby.

“We need to figure out a plan,” Killian is saying. “Who else have you told?”

“No one but you.”

As I say that, Gray steps out of the jungle, grins and heads towards us. “But Gray is headed this way, so I guess he’s next.”

GRAY

Pregnant?

I feel like my head might explode. Daisy and Killian just dropped a fucking bombshell.

“Pregnant! Fuck! I shouldn’t have fucked you so hard last night! Why didn’t you warn me? Did I hurt the baby? I’m so sorry.”

We had such a wild evening. If I’d known I would have been way gentler.

“Sex doesn’t hurt babies,” Daisy says. “Even monster penises like yours can’t damage them. If there even is a baby, it’s safely tucked away in my womb, not my vagina!”

Pregnant.

How did we not consider this a possibility? Yeah, Daisy had one of those implant things, but they don’t last forever.

Pregnant.

Fuck. It’s not having a baby that is the problem. I love that idea. I love the idea of our future with Daisy. She would be our wife, and the mother of our child, or children.

But in the future I want, we are all living in a huge home, and we have a kitchen, and a dozen bathrooms, and access to a fucking hospital and doctors. I can see that future, and I want it badly.

But this future? Pregnancy, birth, and raising a baby on this island?

The thought drives me insane.

I love Daisy so hard, and to put her in such a dangerous position makes me want to cut my dick off. And our child—we have put our child in danger, too.

How could we have been so irresponsible?

I look over at Daisy, and her eyes are wide and filled with tears.

“Get it together,” Killian growls at me.

It’s not that easy.

“What’s going on in that head of yours, Gray?” Daisy asks, putting her small hand in mine.

Shit. I don't know how to voice what I'm feeling, so instead of talking, I stand up and run into the sea. Kicking off my shorts, I swim out into the ocean to clear my head.

I'm being a dick, and I know I'll be freaking Daisy out—and Killian is probably going to punch me in the nuts—but I'm scared.

I wish I could take her place, take the pain and the responsibility from her and put it on myself.

I don't have a blood-sibling, just Rex and Leander. But I nearly did.

I was young, maybe six? I had no idea how far along Mom was, but she had a round belly that looked at odds with her skinny frame. She'd undo the top button of her jeans, and her tight tee-shirts would rise up. I'd watch with fascination how a brown line formed from her navel, going down into her pants.

“What's that mark?”

“You get it when you have a baby,” she'd sighed, obviously not happy about it. “It's fucking ugly.”

She didn't explain any further, and for a while I thought maybe it was some kind of zipper, and that's how the baby came out.

And then I learned that it was definitely not how the baby came out.

“GRAY!”

I went running into Mom's room. My parents slept in the only bedroom in the trailer. I had a cot mattress squeezed into the closet in the front room. When I ran in, Mom's face was white and scared, she was groaning, clutching her stomach.

“Find your Dad, he's at Billy's...”

Billy's? I wasn't allowed to go to Billy's. His trailer was at the other end of the park. People were always coming and going from Billy's.

“Hurry up! Having kids will fucking kill you. You nearly killed me, Gray. This one is going to kill me. Never get someone pregnant, you'll be killing them. Do you want me to die, Gray?”

I ran.

It took ages for someone to open the door, maybe they couldn't hear my soft, six-year-old knocks. Finally, Billy opens the door. He smells of rotten eggs, and even though it's cold, Billy isn't wearing a shirt. Billy hardly ever wears a shirt.

He wipes his nose with the back of his hand. “Hey Pete, it's your spawn.”

“What the fuck you want?”

“Mom said to get you.”

One of the men made a whipping noise. “Better hurry along there, don’t want to keep your lady waiting.”

The rest of them laughed, calling out things that I didn’t understand at the time.

“I’ll come when I’m done here,” my dad said, shutting the door on me.

By the time I got back to mom, she was already miscarrying. Our trailer usually stank of stale beer and body odor, but now there was another scent overpowering everything: blood. Blood was everywhere. Mom was moaning and not making sense.

It had been drilled into me that I was never to call 911, but it suddenly went quiet. Mom passed out, and there was so much blood.

In the end I went and fetched our neighbor, Mrs. Kennedy. She called an ambulance.

Mom survived, the baby did not.

I survived the beating Dad gave me when he eventually returned.

There had been so much blood.

So much.

What if that happened here?

“Having kids will fucking kill you.”

I look back on the shore. Killian and Daisy are huddled together in the gloom. It’s too late for what if’s. We’ll just have to coddle her, not let her lift a finger, and really hope for the best.

Even if my gut fears the worst.

REX

“No, this is not happening. No fucking way.”

“Swear.”

“Key, sweetheart, *please*.”

Keyara cocks her head on one side and I flap a hand at her. “Fine, another pebble in the Rex cup.”

Having Key interrupt gives me a moment to slow down my reaction. Daisy’s eyes are wide and worried. Gray and Killian look like they want to punch me.

Yeah. Like I’m the one in the wrong.

Leander gets to his feet. “Say again?”

“I think I might be pregnant,” Daisy repeats quietly.

Keyara is wandering back from depositing my cussing marker. “You’re having a baby? I get to have a cousin here?” She runs to Daisy and wraps her arms around Daisy’s middle.

“Slow down, noodle. It’s not certain, but it’s possible, so I thought it best to let you all know. We can’t keep secrets on this island.”

I’m glad she told me, but what the fuck! What the fuck do Gray, Leander, and Killian think they are doing? Haven’t they ever heard of withdrawing? Why didn’t they get vasectomies like me?

Because they weren’t punishing themselves by denying themselves a family.

I tell the small voice in my head to shut up.

This is so irresponsible of them. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes.

I look at Daisy, her small frame. The idea of her trying to give birth without doctors and hospitals...It makes me fucking furious. I need to take a minute to cool down.

I’m standing on the shore, looking out to sea, when a small hand slips into mine.

“Rex? You seem really mad.”

I am mad. Mad at all of them.

“So irresponsible of you,” I mutter.

“I know,” Daisy whispers back. “But we couldn’t stop ourselves—it’s love. It’s comfort. You know what I mean?”

“Know what you mean?” I snap. I can’t help it. I’m furious she is pregnant, and if I’m honest with myself, I’m furious everyone is fucking her and I am not.

“I do not know what you mean, and you know why?” She looks up at me with big eyes. “Because I’m not fucking you, and I’m not going to fuck you.” I pull my hand from hers and swipe it over my face.

“I can’t even fucking get-off anyway. I haven’t gotten off since the fire. Don’t think I’d like to have some comfort, some fucking pleasure, even if it’s only by my own hand? I do. I fucking do. But every time, suddenly I’m fucking back on that mountain, knowing my crew are dying. It’s a fucking boner-killer, let me tell you. But not Gray, not Leander. Oh no, they can fuck anything that moves.”

I see the hurt in her eyes.

“They can fuck you. Get the comfort you talk about.” I turn my back on her. “Whatever. You’re pregnant. We’ll all have to deal with it.”

“Rex...”

“What?”

“You *can* have comfort. You *can* have connection. You *can* have love.”

I shake my head; she doesn’t get it. “I’m sorry, Daisy. I shouldn’t have shouted at you. Give me a minute and I’ll be alright.”

“Can I hug you?” she asks.

I want her arms around me. I want them so bad. I want her comfort, her love.

But no. It’s not fair. It’s not fair to Stephan and Alicia. Nor Hutch and Carlo.

I shake my head. “You go on. I’ll see you back at the fire in a few minutes.”

“If you’re pregnant,” Leander says to Daisy when I walk back over to the fire, “we have to get off this island. We just have to.”

He’s completely correct.

“I get to go home?” squeals Key.

I sit next to her, and put a hand on her shoulder.

Poor kid.

I need to put everything out of my mind but survival. Every now and then, Keyara melts down, wanting her mom, her dad, her own bed, her friends. In general she has been remarkably resilient, seeing this whole thing as an adventure with her uncles—but that attitude is not going to last forever. Leander is right, we need to be more proactive in getting off here, for both Daisy and Keyara’s sakes.

I look around the fire, taking in their faces, one by one. All of us are very thin. No one looks well.

“I want us all to brainstorm. Come up with any and all ways we can increase the likelihood of our rescue. It doesn’t matter how far fetched it is—let’s spend the next couple of days thinking about rescue, and then start putting some of those ideas to work.”

Rescue.

Yep, it’s time to actually respond to our situation, not just be in the mode of passive survival.

“Tomorrow, after dinner. I want everyone—including you, Key—to come up with a rescue solution by tomorrow night.”

As I say that, the air cools dramatically, and within minutes a heavy rain shower begins. We run to throw firewood into the shelter, then huddle around it, out of the cool rain. The rain has been coming more and more frequently. Samoa’s rainy season is just around the corner. Another reason to get off this island.

All of us are damp and uncomfortable as we try to get to sleep.

The next day, we have our usual chores, and our usual meals, and as the sun starts heading down to the horizon line. We sit, finishing our bowls of fish and yam, and I bring the meeting to order.

“Every idea, no matter how preposterous, will be considered,” I tell the group. “We are in such a weird and extreme situation, maybe we need something weird and extreme to get us the help we need.”

“I got an idea,” says Key. “We could put a message in a bottle. Taylor Swift has a song like that.”

“Absolutely,” I tell Key. “We have a couple of bottles that still have lids, so maybe you can start thinking about how to make a message to put in there? Think you could do that?”

She nods, looking pleased that I’m taking her seriously.

“We can build a raft, and then I can set off on it and hope to find a shipping lane,” Gray suggests.

“No!” says Daisy in horror. “You are not doing something so reckless.”

“Daisy,” I say, a warning in my voice. “We are considering everything, so please don’t start laying down the law.”

She opens her mouth to say something else, then closes it again, probably seeing by the look on my face that any arguments will go *nowhere*.

I totally understand what Daisy is saying; the idea of Gray going off with only the slimmest chance of rescue is terrible. But so is the idea of Daisy giving birth on this island.

“OK Gray, maybe you can start planning out how to make a raft, and planning how to supply it.”

He nods.

“What did you come up with, Killian?”

“Well, I did wonder about setting a monstrous fire—like a massive entire island fire—on the other island. If the whole island was ablaze, surely that would get us some attention? But the drawbacks of that plan are how to set a fire to what is basically a rainforest, and also what to do about Harvey, since we can’t really set him on fire, too.”

I disagree that we can’t set Harvey on fire. It’s an idea that is worth thinking through.

“Let’s ignore the Harvey aspect and think about the practicalities; would the island burn? And if it does, would we be in danger over here? Would anyone pay attention to a large amount of smoke? Is there some kind of accelerant to be found or made that could help boost the burn?”

“Pitch,” says Leander. “You know, resin. But that is only in evergreen trees, like firs and cedars. I’ve no idea if the trees in the tropics are resinous.”

He’s right; pitch is a reasonable accelerant. Gray, Leander and I know that firsthand. “Can you and Killian start investigating all the trees on the island, find out if any of them are resinous? If nothing else, it will make our fire-starting at camp easier.”

None of us have talked about the rainy season yet. It’s coming up fast—maybe another twelve weeks or so. Today we’ll brainstorm rescue, but soon we need to figure out how to survive the cyclones if we don’t get rescued in time.

Hope for the best and prepare for the worst.

I look to Leander. He looks back at me, a frown on his face.

“Well?” I asked him.

“Well...” he replies. “I think I want to piggy-back off Gray and Keyara’s ideas.”

We all look at him.

“If Gray is floating out at sea and a ship sees him, they pick him up right? And then he tells them we are out here somewhere and need help. But does Gray actually need to be on the raft? What if we treat it like a message in a bottle? Make a raft, make it visible, and have a message attached to it?”

“I like it,” Daisy says, sitting up straighter. “It has exactly the same odds of working, but without a human having to take a chance.”

“But would a ship stop if there wasn't a human on the raft?” Killian asks.

“It just needs to look as though there *could* potentially be a person onboard and they’d have to help—it’s maritime law that you have to help another vessel in distress.”

“I think that’s a clever idea, Leander.”

“And we could make several rafts,” adds Gray, “just keep churning them out. Each one would improve our odds.”

“And so that leaves us with you, Daisy. What have you come up with?”

She blushes prettily. “I haven’t really come up with anything good. I did have some wild flights of fancy, like catching one of the migratory birds that comes through and putting a note on its leg, like homing pigeons. Then I thought about trying to make a piece of aluminum real shiny so we can use it as a signal mirror, in case we ever see another plane or boat in the distance.”

“I think the homing pigeon, or homing parrot, might be a little bit of a stretch, but I think trying to fashion a signal mirror is a must. Next time we go to the plane, you come with us and look for something you think might work.”

“What about you, Rex? Did you think of anything else?” Daisy asks me.

“Truthfully, I’ve been really struggling. But one thing we definitely need to do is have a bigger and better SOS sign.”

Early on, we had spelled out SOS using seaweed and logs, but the wind or tides would batter it around, sometimes leaving it unreadable.

“We need to make it a sturdy permanent sign, as big as possible. We never know when a plane, or even a satellite, could go over us. It’s crazy that we don’t have our SOS sign at maximum efficiency.”

I don’t know about everyone else, but I for sure feel a little better having some tasks to do that work towards rescue. I honestly don’t think the giant

fire idea is a particularly good one, but setting out rafts with messages is not bad. And having a signal mirror definitely can't hurt.

Honestly, I'm losing my mind that Daisy might be pregnant.

Fuck, I can hardly look after the people who are already here. How can I keep a baby safe?

LEANDER

After Rex's big freak out—I mean, 'meeting'—we decided a trip to the plane was in order. We'd taken a lot from there already, but now we were thinking about new things to build, so another scavenging trip was in order.

Both Daisy and Keyara were determined to go on the expedition with me and Gray. Killian had said Gray could wear his shoes, while he'd stay behind to fish, tend the fire, and make food for when we returned.

Rex hadn't said if he was coming or not. He'd just looked broodily into the middle-distance.

"How many bananas do you think, Daisy?" I could hear Key's voice, high with excitement. She hadn't been anywhere except the pool, so this was a big trip for her.

Daisy is amazing with Key; it just goes to show what an amazing mom she was going to make. I'd never really asked Daisy about her parents. Were they good to her?

My own parents were mostly a disappointment. They liked material things and exciting events, not small boys and untidy emotions.

Those were left to Nanny Clark.

She'll care that I'm missing. My brothers will care, too.

My parents will enjoy giving press interviews about my disappearance. Amazing really, there wasn't an ounce of selflessness in the pair of them.

I imagine Malcolm will be coordinating any kind of search and rescue effort—he reminds me of Rex in a lot of ways, but with a liking for nicely tailored suits. And then poor Jasper—he was the emotional one. He'll probably only tell his feelings to his ponies.

I feel like I'm a mix of my two brothers. None of us are like our parents—thank god.

One evening, when us boys were ten, eight, and seven respectively, our parents had taken us to an event at the polo club. It was a final of some prize

cup, and Westhall Wipes were sponsoring the event. Nanny Clark had gone back to England for her sister's funeral, so Mom and Dad were actually having to be in charge.

Sometime during the day, my parents had been invited to a New Hampshire house party by another one of the elite polo club. They'd taken off in his helicopter, completely forgetting about us.

We didn't mind, and we didn't let anyone know. Jasper was horse-crazy even at that age, so he had already found his way into the stables. We spent the whole weekend in the arena stables, eating junk food from the office fridge, playing cards, and feeding the polo ponies horse-nuts and sugar cubes.

*One of the stable girls eventually found us. She was eastern European with enormous tits. She took us to her apartment, which she shared with two other stable girls. They made us have a shower (I'm sure we stank), then ordered pizza. We all watched *The Forty Year Old Virgin* on VHS.*

Behind the scenes, Olga (our rescuer) had made some phone calls. Eventually a driver showed up to take us home, but still, it was one of the most fun weekends of my childhood.

I would never forget my child. *Will* never forget my child. My baby was going to be the center of my life, along with Daisy, of course.

And yeah, maybe it wasn't my sperm but Killian's or Gray's that had actually mingled with Daisy's egg, but that didn't matter. It was my baby—our baby.

"You ready?" I look up to see Gray offering me a bottle of water.

We are looking for things to aid our rescue, yes. But I also wanted to see if there were things that would make Daisy's life comfier over the next few months.

"Yep, can't wait. We've got a lot to look for. You coming Rex?"

Keyara and Daisy wave at him. "Come on, Uncle!"

"Alright, alright—jeez," Rex groans, making me grin.

Fuck, I love my girls.

I wonder if our baby is a girl.

Everything is as we left it in the airplane glade—or rather 'Jungle-Bush Intercontinental Airport', as I want people to call it. No one else is picking up what I'm throwing down, though. Killjoys.

This visit, we are going to breach the cockpit of the plane. Up until now, we haven't bothered. The front is completely stoved in and thick vines and thorny briars cover the entire nose and windshield.

But as we go in through the cargo hold, Gray is finally able to pry open the cabin door. A massive branch had been holding firmly in place, but with the aid of one of the iron fence poles and a lot of weight, the door is now openish onto the small, crushed space.

Gray, Rex, and I told the girls to hang out in the glade while we were opening the cabin, partly so they didn't get hit by any of the pried-off door frame, and partly in case there was a skeleton to be found.

There was not—thankfully.

At first glance, what there was were various control panel instruments, the frames of the cockpit chairs, and a thermos (which looked amazingly intact).

“Babes! Come check it out!”

“What can you see?” squeals Daisy. It's exciting; in the world of our jungle island, this is the only place to find any sort of man made goods. I pass back the thermos.

The girls 'ooh' over it.

“Hey, my turn.” Gray muscles me aside, and squeezes his giant body in the little space. We can hear him grunting, and eventually he retracts back into the hold, a big grin on his face.

“Which hand, Key?” He holds out his massive bear paws, both fists closed tight.

“That one,” Key squeaks.

Gray opens his palm.

“What is it?”

“It's a compass, Key. It tells you which direction it's going.”

“Cool! Oh, does it need batteries?”

“Nope, it still works perfectly. Here, peanut, can you look after it?”

She's so pleased, and immediately runs around the glade watching the little arrow spin.

“And for you m'lady?”

I hadn't noticed that Gray still had one hand closed.

“For me?” Daisy flutters her eyes and clutches her chest.

Gray opens his right hand to reveal something that looks like a thin box. Daisy carefully takes it from him, inspecting it, then clicking a tiny catch.

“Look!”

It's a cigarette case. The inside is mirrored, and amazingly still holds three cigarettes.

"Now we have a birthday present for Killian!"

"And a signal mirror," adds Gray.

We all settle back against the interior of the plane and watch Keyara playing.

"I imagined there would be more useful things here than there are," Daisy sighs.

It's true, the plane has slim pickings left.

"We're going to make it, Daisy," I tell her. "You're going to be OK, I promise."

Gray grunts in agreement, while Rex says nothing. Keyara is skipping around the glade with her compass.

Daisy gets to her feet. "I should check in on Key."

REX

While we are trekking back to the campsite, Daisy stumbles over some tree roots. Even though Leander and Gray immediately leapt into action, I'm the closest. I'm the one who lifts her up from the jungle floor, then holds her as we cross through patches of thorn bushes.

Gray had Key on his shoulders, while Leander was weighed down with stuff from the plane. And I held Daisy.

She felt so right in my arms—a perfect fit.

I'm spending so much time trying to ignore my attraction to her, but having her curled up next to my chest with my face buried in her hair makes ignoring my attraction increasingly hard (as was my cock, surprisingly).

There was something about her that just seemed to gel with all of us. Leander, Gray, and Killian were, cards on the table, in love with Daisy, and she loved them. But I wasn't willing to go there. What could I bring her that she didn't have already with the others?

I needed to keep a distance, and just be there when needed. I'm terrified about this whole baby thing—how are we going to care for a baby, and for a new mother, on this island?

“Rex?” she says quietly.

I pause for a moment, the others are twenty yards ahead of us. She looks up at me, and it takes everything I've got not to kiss her.

Even though she bites that sexy fucking bottom lip and gives me big eyes. Even though she is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

“Rex?” she asks again.

“Yeah, sweetheart?”

“I guess you can put me down.”

I'm not sure if I'm imagining it, but I swear she sounds disappointed. A branch cracks somewhere behind us.

“What was that?” she asks.

I realize that she still is jumpy. Another result of goddamn fucking Harvey

Bannister.

“You’re safe with me, beautiful,” I tell her, and she relaxes back into my arms. “Let me carry you a little longer. You shouldn’t exert yourself too much.”

“OK, just a little, then I’ll be good,” she sighs, snuggling deeper into my arms.

You’re already good. You are good, beautiful, and sexy as hell. You are also brave; a warrior princess. You’re a mother to Keyara, and somehow you’re healing all our mental wounds.

But I won’t tell you that.

I can’t tell Daisy, but I will show her with everything I do. I’d lay down my life for her without a second thought. I’m sure the guys know that I’m in deep, but they also know how fucked up I am.

There is so much that needs to be done to keep Key, Daisy, and the baby safe. We really need to get thinking about improving our shelters for the rainy season. Leander, Gray, and I were on Sāmoa last winter, and the rain is no joke. It’s a warm rain, but so fucking wet.

With the rains, the sky darkens, the air takes on an intense humidity, then the drops begin to fall and you’d be instantly soaked through. Just wet.

Then there are the cyclones—a combination of wind, thunder, rain, and lightning so intense that it flattens trees, downs power lines, and sinks boats easier than an exploding engine. You wait it out in your home, hearing groaning and cracking outside as the infrastructure breaks around you. You pray your roof doesn’t blow off, or collapse on top of you.

What if we’re still here and there’s a cyclone?

Yeah. That’s something to be addressed.

The water would rise, so we’d need to evacuate to higher ground. Maybe we need to make an emergency evac area and store some supplies there just in case.

Prepare for the worst, hope for the best.

I keep carrying Daisy, because she hasn’t mentioned getting down again, and after a few minutes I hear a small snore coming from her.

“Daisy…” Keyara calls.

I put a finger to my lips. “Ssh, she’s fallen asleep.”

“Is she OK?” Gray demands.

“Yeah, just tired.”

I guess being pregnant makes you sleepy. It’s amazing how small and light

she is, considering she's currently making another human being.

My cock stirs again.

Fuck, I wish that was my baby in her belly.

Keyara starts singing some song, its lyrics are something like 'you belong with me'. Leander joins in.

Yeah baby, you belong with me—but also, you don't. I'm cursed.

But I'll keep watching over you forever.

Gray has built two raft bases in five days, and he looks fucking beat. The chopping and cleaning of tree trunks is brutal at the best of times, but with the ax-of-peril?

Glad it was him instead of me on that job.

Daisy has been busy weaving palm fronds tight to make a stiff sail of sorts; we figure the rafts need uprights to be more visible to ships. And the woven sails will help with visibility, too. Getting the mast to stay standing vertical has been the biggest pain in my ass, but I finally figured out a method using lengths of vine and treating the mast like an old-fashioned tent pole.

I've been pretty impressed with what Key came up with for making a message that could be read. Pokerwork.

Pokerwork, or pyrography, is when you heat metal, like a poker, and burn designs into wood or leather. She's quite right; it's the perfect waterproof, fade-proof way to write what we need.

Leander has been polishing pieces of aluminum with various fruit juices. Something about citric acid removing oxidation? Whatever it is, he's definitely made them shine. We are adding these to the rafts as well, hopefully to work like signal mirrors.

Killian has made a new and improved SOS sign from felled branches and seaweed, and he and Leander have built a massive pile of firewood and palm fronds ready to be a signal fire. They also carefully collected pitch to use as an instant accelerant.

All in all, we are better prepared to signal for help if anything comes our way. And once we set the rafts out to sea, we'll have rolled the dice on getting help that way too.

Now I'm just anxious to start preparing for 'winter'. Killian and I are going to hike to the highest point of the island and find somewhere up there to build a retreat.

I watch Daisy and Key playing in the shallows, splashing water on each other, and my heart beats a little faster. "Get those signal mirrors attached, Leander," I yell at him.

Time is ticking, every second bringing us closer to the storms and the baby that will be intersecting soon.

OCTOBER (probably)

DAISY

The last few months have gone by so quickly.

It seems like no time since I had a flat stomach and no belief that I was actually pregnant. Now, at maybe eighteen weeks along, I have a cute little bump. I smooth my hands over my shirt, and can't help smiling to myself.

The guys have been working non-stop. Our beach side shelters are reinforced and water-tight, and we now have an 'outpost' half way up a ridge towards the center of the island. Rex and Killian had discovered a system of caves, and had been storing bottles of water and coconuts in there, along with piles of firewood.

During this time, there has been zero sign of Harvey, thank cheese-its.

While the guys work, I stay on the beach with Key, doing lessons, playing, and looking out to sea for rescue. More now than ever, I need to see a ship on the horizon or a plane in the sky.

I already love this baby so much, and I want ultrasounds, vitamins, and doctors, and all the things that will give him or her the best chance to thrive.

What I do have is breadfruit, and that's definitely better than nothing. I am always hungry. *Always.*

Leander discovered breadfruit basically by tripping over one. Now that we know what we are looking for, we are finding patches of them all over the place.

So the days have been busy, but the nights have been long and languorous. Rex and Key have their own sleeping area now, and I spend the night with my guys. Sometimes there is love making, sometimes cuddling, or stories, or massages. Gray does a coconut oil rub on my poor tired feet that is out of this world.

The love we share is like nothing I could have ever dreamed of. Not an ounce of jealousy comes between us; we know that we are all better together. With my guys, I feel like I can face anything, which is a good thing, really, seeing as I'll probably be giving birth in twenty-odd weeks.

The sun is lowering its way down the sky, so I call Keyara. “Come help me with dinner, sweetpea?”

We walk back to camp, ready to cook yet more breadfruit and fish. The catch of the day is already gutted and gently cooking over the fire, and breadfruit is steaming in the cast iron pan.

I give Killian a grateful nod.

“This wasn’t me, but I’ll take the credit! You look beat, macushla. Lay down for a while, I’ll make food.”

I’m not going to argue; I *am* tired. I get tired so quickly now.

“Can I go play, then?” asks Key.

I raise an eyebrow at Killian. Key *should* be on dinner duty tonight as well. He clears his throat, sheepishly. “Ah, you go, Key. I got this.”

“Don’t go far,” I tell her. “Why not stick to the tree house?”

She’s happy with that and skips off.

I really am beat. “Can you make sure you save me some? I’m going to have a cat-nap.”

“No problem, macushla.” Killian comes over and kisses me on the head. “Go lie down and brew some more baby.”

Although I must be through the first trimester, I am still so tired. I spend a lot of time worrying about things like diapers, diaper cream, formula if my boobs don’t work, and probably another billion things that I don’t even know that a baby needs. I thought the second trimester was supposed to be this golden time in a pregnancy. Maybe it is if you have proper nutrition, and a bed, and, I don’t know, Netflix? Pizza? Pickles and whipped cream?

Keeping busy during the day has become so much more important. If I don’t, I wind up thinking about how disastrous this all could be.

There’s a reason I’m more than mega-worried, and I haven’t mentioned it to the guys. Before my mom had me and Brooke, she had another pregnancy. It ended in still-birth when she was seven months pregnant. Something to do with the position of her womb, or the shape of it? The baby died, and for a while, so did my mom’s heart.

What if whatever the problem was is hereditary?

There is no point sharing that information, and there is nothing to be done, so I put the weight of that particular worry squarely on my shoulders.

The guys have enough to deal with.

So...desert island diapers. Any thoughts?

REX

This morning on the island, the dawn is different.

There is a slight chill in the air, and the sky is full of clouds. It's yet to be seen whether they'll be burned off by the sun, or develop into rain.

I'm glad the storm shelter is now as ready and efficient as I can make it. No point storing produce that will quickly spoil, I change out the coconut pile every week. When I am up there, I climb a little higher and look across to the neighboring island. Occasionally, I see a plume of smoke from a campfire, so I know Harvey is still alive and kicking.

Whatever. I'm more concerned with dug-out supplies. I have transferred some breadfruit to a patch of loamy-soil up there. Hopefully they can grow; then we'll have more food on hand in an emergency.

We've spotted more planes recently. They've been high up in the sky. Really high; I guess seven or eight miles up. We lit the signal fire anyway, not really expecting anything to come of it.

Nothing has.

I wonder where the rafts are, and whether they are still floating out there somewhere. Gray is working on another couple—we have a pretty endless supply of wood and time, so why not?

The clouds are darkening. I've been thinking about doing a cyclone drill for sometime. Seems like today could be the perfect day.

I'm good at this.

I must have been through a hundred drills in the fire service, as both squad leader and then crew boss. We practiced a lot, for all kinds of scenarios... Maybe this is different, but the mentality is the same. A natural extreme is approaching, and we need to react in an appropriate manner—or something like.

And leading these is second nature to me; I'm not someone who likes to take orders.

I look back at the shelter where everyone is still sleeping and make some

calculations. The wind is picking up, and the clouds are moving this way. The amount of time to collect what we need, batten down the hatches, and get to our muster point?

Too long. Time to get this thing going.

I fucking wish I had a whistle or a gong to clang. Instead I head into the teepee and start shaking people.

I start with Gray and Leander, as they are used to jumping to my command.

“Typhoon drill, potentially not a drill. We need to assemble right now.”

Seconds later they are up and ready to act. I fucking love my guys.

“We take supplies we can carry, plus essentials like the fire starter and water bottles. Lock down everything else we can, heavy logs, etc.” I’m talking in a low voice, but Killian and Daisy are stirring. I want Gray and Leander in action like yesterday, because I know explaining things will take longer for those not trained like us.

They leave, not needing any more explanation. I go and wake Keyara.

“Hey, noodle. We are going to head up to the retreat because there is a storm coming. We’ll leave in five minutes. Can you grab whatever you want to take with you?”

Her hair is wild and her eyes are calm. Sāmoans are resilient people, and take all types of weather events in their stride.

“We are just doing this mainly as a practice—remember how you have cyclone drill at school?” I tell her.

She nods her head, reaching around for her jelly shoes. My heart swells; Keyara is the best. She’s nine (almost ten, as she reminds me daily), and smart. Just funny, pure goodness. A selfish part of me wishes that we never get rescued, so that Key can keep free of the pain and cynicism of the western world.

Daisy and Killian are sitting up, listening to what I’ve been saying to Keyara.

“Drill or real?” asks Daisy quietly.

“Drill—hopefully.”

She nods and Killian helps her to her feet. I take a moment to look at her vulnerable belly, the sweet curve I will protect with my life.

She’s in good hands with Killian.

I go outside and see how the crew are doing.

“I’m making parcels of food for everyone to carry,” Leander calls to me.

“Gray is on lockdown.”

I can see Gray heaving heavy logs that spell our SOS sign over to the shelter to reinforce the structure.

“Good. We won’t stop at the pool, so bring all the empties. We can have rain fill them.”

Leander nods and gets on with his work.

I wish I could have some way to know what this weather front is going to be. At first, I honestly thought this was going to be a drill, but as the minutes pass the sky is getting darker, and taking on a purple tinge. I don’t like it. My mind is racing about anything else I need to think of.

“Rex?”

Daisy and Key are standing before me, ready to head out. Killian is helping Gray. Leander is bundling fruit into banana leaf parcels.

“TWO MINUTES!” I yell.

Yes, it’s an arbitrary amount of time, but time is of the fucking essence. The wind whips and the woven sun hats Daisy made go racing down the beach.

“OK girls, we’ll start, and they’ll catch us up.”

Forward planning. Speed and efficiency is everything when it comes to emergency evacuations. Yes, I’ve been a little obsessed with getting us prepared for cyclones, but it doesn’t take a genius to figure out why.

We continue along the path until we hit the rise. Rain has actually started sprinkling now, so I’m worried about the girls slipping.

“Careful, watch your step.”

I let Daisy go first, then Key and I take up the rear, so I can break a fall if need be.

The cave shelter creeps closer, and the rain and wind gets heavier. I adjust my position to keep my legs spread. I’m convinced either Daisy or Key are going to slip.

After an excruciatingly slow climb, the cave is almost within reach when I hear a yell behind me. Leander, Killian, and Gray have caught up.

Good. Everything is going to plan.

If this was an actual cyclone, we would have evacuated safely. Though it looks as though the weather is just a storm, not actually jumping the shark to deadly.

Once we all make it to the cave, I look around at each pile of supplies and try to relax my mind. There is no reason to panic. That little fucking gremlin

in my head can fuck off. This time, everything is in order, and nothing bad is going to happen.

Leander is already lighting a fire, and Killian is setting out bottles to fill with rainwater. We'll have some coconut and some breadfruit for dinner and wait out the storm.

Easy.

KILLIAN

We did good.

Even though the storm that came through was pretty violent, our shelters still stand with minimal roofing materials lost. I was expecting our camp to be in a much worse state.

I'm in a worse state than our campsite.

One minute everything is great, the next I'm puking my guts out thanks to some fucking rancid coconut. I've been put on 'light duty' by Captain Rex, and so has Gray. I don't like sitting around while Leander and Rex do all the hard work, but at least I have my two favorite ladies to attend to me.

"A banana, Uncle Gray? Uncle Killian?"

I've been upgraded to uncle status, which makes my heart swell.

Gray and I are lounging by the fire, being waited on by a very eager nurse Keyara. Keyara is being followed around by Ron and Hermione.

The chickens came through the storm fine; we had caged them, then put the cages in our shelter.

"I think they need bananas. Hermione, what do you think?" she says in a very serious voice.

"Not yet, noodle. My stomach can't handle anything yet."

I love nurse Keyara, but what I'd really love is for nurse Daisy to come give me a sponge bath. I feel gross, but also horny.

Shite, I must be feeling better. Maybe I do want a banana.

Keyara and her chicken friend head off and Gray leans over.

"I keep thinking about Daisy in a nurse's uniform..."

"...giving us a sponge bath? Yeah, me too."

"Hey, guys?" Daisy calls from over by the shelter.

"You think she read our minds?" Gray asks me.

Fecking fingers crossed.

"You two should go to the pool and wash-up. Me and Keyara are sorry to tell you this, but you are both stinky."

Keyara giggles. "It's true, it's true, you smell like poo!"

She and Daisy high-five, then Keyara chases Ron into one of the shelters.

"Want to come scrub our backs for us?" I ask Daisy hopefully.

"Nope, not a chance. I'm not coming anywhere near you until you're fragrant again." She has her hands on her hips, telling me she's not joking.

"Looks like it's just you and me," Gray murmurs. "You can be my sponge bath nurse if you like..."

Hmm, my cock instantly springs up, excited by the idea.

"We'll be back in an hour or two," I tell Daisy. "Only come looking if you change your mind about scrubbing our backs."

"Boys are gross," says Keyara, coming out of the shelter.

Yes we are, Key. Yes we are.



As I lay in the water I notice how my ribs and hip bones are jutting out way more than they used to. Gray has also lost a lot of his bulk. Even though we're eating, we are probably not getting enough calories for all the ones we burn. And I intend to burn some more calories right now.

I swim over to Gray. He has his back to me, leaning against the waters edge.

I move my body into him and he arches back a little, pressing his ass into me.

He must hear my hum of appreciation because he turns around and kisses me.

"Let me take care of you," he says, in a husky whisper.

Heat floods my body, Gray has shed all his bi-sexual inhibitions now. Apart from one.

Gray moves his arm and wraps his fingers around my cock, stroking slowly. When his fingers slide over my head it sends a buzz throughout my body.

"I love feeling you get all hard in my hand," he says. His hips roll against me, grinding his cock against my thigh. Then he says what I've been dying to hear.

"I want to fuck you, babe. I'm ready."

My cock jerks in his hand, making him chuckle. "You like the sound of that?"

“Please, yes, please.” My words are barely more than a whisper as my mouth has gone dry with anticipation. “I want your cock...inside me please...” I’m a fucking drooling mess.

“I figure that we’ll never be as cleaned out and ready as we are right fucking now,” he grins.

My beautiful, practical, Gray. I guess food poisoning is good for one thing!

“Good thing I brought some coconut oil then,” he smiles at me, floating over to the pile of things we brought with us to the pool. Gray had packed some melted coconut in a bottle, forward planning, i like it!

“You want inside me?” he says, crooning in my ear. “You’re going to have to be patient.”

He pulls me out of the pool and lies me down, his fingers run over my hole, massaging in the coconut oil slowly.

My muscles start to relax.

I put down my hand to fondle myself, but Gray tells me not to.

I lay there needy and eager as his finger presses inside me, moving at the same slow pace. My hips buck and I try to push myself down on his digit.

“Be patient, I’m going to take my time and not rush this. I want to savor every second.”

Feck, yes please do.

I’m trembling but manage not to stroke my cock again.

Gray adds more oil, and a second finger to my ass, and now I’m getting desperate.

“Please, Gray.”

“Sweetheart, I gotta get you ready for this thick, ol cock of mine.”

It's sooo thick. I swallow, my heart beating fast with nerves and anticipation.

My cock is so hard, I can feel it twitch and seep. Feck!

“You're getting nice and loose for me now. Feel my fingers, Killian? Feel them sliding in, three now...”

Ahh, I’m losing my mind.

“Ready to take my cock?” he murmurs.

“Feck, yes, please.”

He runs a series of kisses up my neck. “Or maybe I should make you wait some more, it’s so much fun watching you squirm.”

Gray has moved his other arm so his hands are circling my cock again. I

feel like I could come in two seconds. The flat slab of rock beneath us may not be very comfortable, but I don't feel any of that, all I feel is Gray. He tips me onto my side, withdrawing his fingers. I feel him nudging his fecking giant shaft against my hole.

Relax, Killian, I tell myself.

Holy, fecking mother of Christ!

I feel the sudden stretch and the fullness that is so...

"Jaysus, Gray, that's so..."

"So good," Gray groans in my ear. He has a hand still on my cock, stroking me lazily, and he, with agonizingly, torturously, perfectly slow thrusts moves inside me.

He keeps slowly moving until he is fully inside me, so deep it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I'm gasping, wriggling, but he holds still.

"Are you ready for more?" he asks.

More? There's more?

I move my hips and that's enough encouragement. Gray lets go of his restraint and to fuck myself on him.

Oh, feck.

He drags his cock almost fully out of me before plunging back in, over and over.

The eyes fall to the back of my head, I can't speak, all I am is sensation.

"GRAY!"

Gray pumps my cock and I can't wait any longer, thick ropes of cum shoot out over his fist, and at the same time he shudders, growling my name as I feel him fill my ass.

Eventually I regain my senses. Gray hasn't pulled out, we are still rolled onto our sides and his massive arm lays across my body as he kisses the back of my neck.

DECEMBER-ish

LEANDER

I haven't been keeping track of time.

Killian thinks it must be mid-December by now. It rains every other day, and has been for weeks. When he mentioned it was December over dinner last night, Keyara nearly lost her mind.

"Will Santa know where to find me?" she yelped.

We all looked at each other. The little girl has done such a stellar job of keeping positive, but it's been seven months on this island now. I worry that if we can't make Christmas happen, she might lose it.

Damn it, she deserves some holiday fun.

"Santa will know, noodle. But he'll probably leave the majority of your gifts at your mom and dad's house," I tell her. "But we will be celebrating here too, so you never know!"

The others look at me like I'm nuts, but I'm not—I'm just fucking resourceful.

We have to face it: there is nothing ahead but more island life, so we gotta keep making things better and better here.

"I'm with you, Leander. One hundred percent," Daisy says from the far side of the fire.

In your face, rest of the crew.

For the last few weeks, Daisy has been really sensitive to smells. And the smells of us guys are apparently the worst thing ever. Poor Daisy. She looks continually exhausted; cooking a baby is hard work.

And she's been a little bit snappy with us all, but you can't blame her for that. Baby-baking, remember?

"I think Christmas would be fun," she adds.

Ha! If *Daisy's* on board with making a special Christmas for Keyara, the others need to pull their thumbs out of their asses.

Last year, we went to Nanda's house over the holidays. It was probably the best Christmas I've ever had. Sāmoa is a very Catholic country, so there are

lots of carol singing, church services, stuff like that. And also a lot of family meals, gatherings, and gift-givings.

“Can we play kilikiti?” asks Key. “We always play kilikiti on Christmas.”

“Well, duh,” I reply. “What else would we play? Hopscotch?”

She giggles as Daisy makes a puzzled face.

“What’s kilikiti?”

“Kinda like cricket,” I tell her.

If only any of us knew how to play *cricket*.

“And we have to'ona'i?” Key continues. This time I don’t know what she’s talking about.

“What’s that, noodle?”

“It’s a feast, Uncle Leander. We can do umu again!” Then she leans closer to me and whispers, “We can give Uncle Killian the cigarettes!”

Key decided to keep the cigarette case we found on the airplane to give to Killian on a special occasion. I’d promptly forgotten about it, but apparently Keyara hadn’t.

Daisy squeezes my arm as we see Keyara bubbling with happiness. Around the campfire, Killian, Gray and Rex are also grinning.

“What does your family do around Christmas, Killian?” I ask him.

“Well, decorations always go up on December 8th. And the pudding will have been made in November, gotta make Christmas pud at least six weeks in advance.”

Irish people are very odd. I tend not to like my pudding old and stale.

“Mam will have started trying to persuade Dad to watch Tom Hanks films with her. He’ll only do that at Christmas; it’s his gift to her. My sister ignores most of the Christmas stuff. She’s just interested in Nollaig na mBan.”

Killian looks around at us, knowing we want to know what he’s talking about.

“Sister?” says Daisy,

“Null-ug na Mon?” says Key.

“Good pronunciation, young Key! It’s on January 6th, and it’s known as Women’s Christmas. All the women get to have a blow out and all the men have to wait on them hand-and-foot. My sister and her friends go crazy for it—like a yearly bachelorette party.” He turns to Daisy. “I guess I haven’t told you about my sister, Molly? You’ll like her, Macushla. She’s a rare craic.”

The longer Killian talks about his home life, the more Irish he sounds, to the point where I’m struggling to follow anything he’s saying.

“Hmm, that’s nice. Maybe we’ll do a null—a noll—a Women’s Christmas for these two girls?” I say, making Daisy smile and Key nod enthusiastically.

“Anyway, moving on... how long do we think it is until Christmas? Hopefully it's at least ten days, because we've got some planning to do.”

Rex takes my hint and declares it's officially two weeks until Christmas.

“Two weeks is fourteen days, right?” asks Key.

“Yep,” I ruffle her hair.

“Wahoo! That means the thirteen days starts tomorrow. We will have to sing carols every day from tomorrow until Christmas,” she tells us, seriously.

“Then I think you will need to be in charge of that, Key. Can you do that?”

The little girl nods. “Absolutely. We can start with ‘White Christmas’—I love that one.”

Sāmoans take the holidays *very* seriously.

That night, after Key fell asleep, the rest of us sat around the campfire and brainstormed gifts that we could come up with.

“I was thinking jewelry?” Daisy says. “Threading shells onto something? Maybe thin wire from the plane?”

“I like it,” says Rex. “I can help you come up with some kind of cordage.”

“I’ll make her a cricket kit,” Killian says. “You said that game she likes was like cricket, right? I’m probably the only one who actually knows how to play.”

“Kilikiti—perfect.”

“I have no clue,” Gray grumbles. “Christmas isn’t really in my wheelhouse. I never had Santa visit me when I was a kid.” He gives a rueful smile. “I guess I’ll go to the plane and see if there is anything I can macgyver from the scraps there.”

Daisy is yawning her head off by this point, so once she’s also snuggled in the shelter, I point out to the guys that we need to make Daisy presents as well.

“Duh,” says Killian.

“Great, now I’m doubly stumped,” Gray sighs.

“I believe in you, Gray,” I tell him. “I believe in us all, and that we can make the magic of Christmas on this island.”

The fuckers start throwing banana skins at me.

DAISY

For weeks, I've been feeling anything but sexy.

The idea of a penis coming near me actually makes me gag. The guys have been angels, but I still feel bad. The smell of their sweat, the feel of their touch, all of it—disgusting!

But when I wake up this morning, something is different.

Gray comes over and hands me some cut up coconut. He stands several feet away and stretches out his hand towards me. Poor thing, I bit his head off yesterday because of his armpit odor.

I look up and give him a massive smile.

“Err, Daisy? Everything alright?” he says, a little nervously.

“Will you hug me?”

He actually looks scared. “I'm not sure that's a good idea. Won't it make you go crazy?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Don't call pregnant women crazy, Gray. Now get over here and hug me.”

Moving towards me, Gray makes soothing motions with his hands. “I apologize for being slightly nervous, it's just you've been...” He eases himself onto the sand and puts an arm around me, “a little tense recently.”

I immediately get a little tense as he says that, but then tell myself to chill. I've been a beast and I know it. “I'm sorry, I know I've been losing it. My

brain is completely out of my control.” I run my fingers along his bicep. It’s so tan, and muscular.

Holy moly! I’m horny!

I lean into Gray and press my cheek to his chest. “But I think I’m regaining some mental balance now. I’m regaining all sorts of feelings actually.”

“You are?” says Gray, hugging me tighter. His body feels so good. I’ve missed being touched by the guys. It’s been a hard few weeks.

“It’s no surprise you’ve had a hard time. You’re going through something the rest of us... can’t really comprehend. I mean, I really try, but growing a person inside you? That shit is a mind-fuck.” He makes a move to get up, and I don’t let him.

“Stay a while,” I say. I feel awkward, like I haven’t done in ages. I want Gray’s hands on me. I want him to touch me, to make love to me, and I’m too embarrassed to ask.

Suddenly my eyes are full of tears.

“Babe! What’s wrong?”

“Stupid hormones,” I tell him.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” he says, immediately looking nervous, like I’m going to snap at him again.

I wipe my eyes. “There is something I want but I think hormones are making it hard for me to ask you.”

“Just say it, darling. Anything you want. Anything at all.”

I flop back on the sand and give a groan. “I want your hands on my breasts, I want you to suck on my nipples,” I almost shout in exasperation. “I want my clitoris loved on, sucked and teased.”

I glance up at Gray, he’s staring at me open-mouthed.

“AND I WANT A MOTHER FLIPPING PENIS INSIDE ME—STAT!”

As luck would have it, Rex is just walking out of the jungle, loaded with firewood, when I scream that.

He immediately drops his load of logs and high-tails it back into the trees.

Gray ignores him and swoops me up into his arms.

“Where are we going,” I ask him, a little pitifully.

“Anywhere Keyara and Rex aren’t,” he growls.

I can see Key at the end of the beach with Leander. “Key’s over there,” I offer, pointing her out, “and Rex went back into the jungle.”

“In that case, you and I have a hot date in the shelter coming up in about five seconds.

GRAY

Daisy's warm hands move down my stomach and onto my hardening erection. Her head shifts so she can place light kisses all over my shaft. Goosebumps breakout over my body.

It's different. The love, the sex, both different with Daisy and with Killian; both are intense and beautiful in their own way. But no comparison's ever needed. Daisy and Killian are mine. They are both perfect.

Daisy let's her teeth drag along the sensitive flesh, and my goosebumps get fucking goosebumps. I let out a groan and she whips that hot, wet tongue up and down my length.

My. Fucking. Love.

Intoxicating.

“Have you missed this, Gray?”

“Your lovely mouth—fuck, baby. You don't know how much,” I tell her. My balls are growing tight, and I have to concentrate on not just shooting my load right there and then.

“Tell me how much.” Her mouth stops.

“Babe!”

I can't believe it when she stands up. “Babe? I've missed you more than anything. I dream about your pussy, your tits, your mouth.”

How can I tell her just how much it's been tortuous to be hands off? I'm

fucking terrible with words.

But she's just kicking off her shorts.

“Oh, Gray, I've been dreaming of this too”

She huddles back onto her knees and flicks over the tip of my shaft. Fuck, I love this girl so much. Her belly hangs round and ripe as rocks on all fours. I don't know how I got so fucking lucky to have this goddess in my life.

I bring her face up to mine. “If I kiss you, will that set off the puke-factor?”

She shakes her head. “I think that stage of the pregnancy has totally gone. I think I've entered the ‘I must have penis’ trimester. That's a thing, right?”

“I really hope so,” I reply, and gently take her bottom lip between my teeth and nibble. She straddles me and leans forward. Her swollen breasts press against my chest, the nipples hard as walnuts. I run my hands over her back and down to that peachy ass. “Baby, roll onto your back, let me eat that sweet pussy of yours. I've missed it so much.”

“Can't,” Daisy pants. “Need dick now...”

She reaches a hand beneath her, taking hold of my shaft and then slips herself down. Fully impaling herself on my length. My mind shorts-out.

So fucking perfect.

Daisy begins to rock, small movements that drive me wild. Leander always laughs about his premature ejaculation, but I won't laugh if I come right now. Daisy straightens until she is sitting completely upright on me. Shit, it feels amazing.

My fingers trace over her breasts, down her stomach and towards her sweet pussy. “Can I touch you while you ride me?” I ask.

She nods. “Please.”

I don't go straight for my target, but take some time to swirl my fingertips around her nipples. She moans and bites her lip.

I take pity on her and drag my fingers down her body to my favorite place.

“Please, Gray, please. I need you to touch me.”

She leans further back, and her belly rises, giving me a heavenly view of her pussy riding my dick. I slide my hand into the spread of folds and instantly find the hard little nub.

“Urgh... please...”

I circle my fingers around her clit, and she begins to ride me at the same time. I can feel her insides clench and throb.

“Fuck, Daisy. You're fucking heaven.”

“I'm so close,” she whispers, her breath coming out in little pants. Her muscles squeeze my cock some more. Fucking hell, there is no way I'm going to last.

“I'm, I'm...” she calls and I feel the spasm as her orgasm takes over. Her clit pulses and her insides throb. It's too much, too beautiful.

My cock swells and balls tighten, and before I can even catch my breath, I'm filling her with cum. On and on and on. How much fucking cum can one ball-sack contain.

“ARGHHH!”

I'm at fever pitch, the world around me melts away and I'm lost to pure pleasure.

“I LOVE YOU!” We scream in unison.

So fucking much.

After, I hold her in my arms.

I realize that I've never had a vacation. Moving to Sāmoa was going to be work, but in a tropical setting. But right here and right now.

Gray Tyson is on fucking vaycay.

CHRISTMAS DAY

DAISY

W_HO_A!

I can't get my words out.

Keyara can though.

"I LOVE IT! I LOVE IT!" she screams at the top of her voice. "Ia Manuia le Kerisimasi!"

I just keep gazing around at the space while Keyara runs circles. Gray squeezes my hand and I squeeze it back. He's been holding mine ever since we left the beach.

"Guys," I breathe out, smiling. "This is amazing."

Tiny lights have been strung around the airplane glade. I have no idea how they've made them, but it's just like having twinkle lights from a tree. Talking of which, some kind of tropical pine is in the center of the area with more tiny lights on it. I move forward, mesmerized, and realize the twinkle lights are actually little hammered cups of scrap metal that have been filled with some kind of tree resin. So amazing.

And also very handy, going forward. We can actually have lights other than the campfires.

Piles of dry grasses are heaped into pillows, and flowers are strewn around the ground, making a carpet of petals.

It's beyond perfect.

A table has been set up, laden with all kinds of things to eat.

"Are those..."

Oh my chicken! Deviled eggs?

The whole scene is the most magical thing ever.

I drop Gray's hand, and kiss him, then rush over to Leander and Killian, doing the same. Rex is swinging Keyara around and around, but when he stops and she skips off, I go to him and take his hands.

"You made us Christmas."

He grins. "It's our pleasure."

I place my palms on his shoulders and lift myself onto my tiptoes, kissing him on the mouth.

“It’s perfect.”

He looks down, but with a smile on his face as Leander takes my hand, and leads me to the snack table.

“I know you’ll be disappointed about not having any monkey wine, but I have made an array of juices for you to choose from.”

Killian comes up behind me and kisses my hair, adding, “We’ve even got Rex to agree to singing some carols.”

“What? It’s a Christmas miracle!”

“Daisy, Daisy! We have to put our presents under the tree!” Keyara is smiling so brightly, we don’t even need the twinkle lights.

“Oh! The presents! They are still at the beach.”

“Not a problem,” Rex says. “Key told me you’d been working on things together, so we brought them with us, didn’t we, Key?”

“Yes, yes. Can we put them under the tree now?”

I watch Killian go and stand next to Gray and take his hand. Leander pulls me into his arms.

“It’s a good thing we made wrapping paper, or all our secrets would be out in the open already,” I say as Key places the banana leaf wrapped gifts carefully under the tree.

“Banana leaves!” Leander says, striking himself on the forehead. “Of course! Back in a minute.”

He plunges into the jungle and comes back with a pile of the giant leaves. “Come on, guys, we’ve got wrapping to do!”

This Christmas even comes with last-minute present-wrapping. It has everything!

Key and I snuggle on the pillowy grass pile and watch the lights. While the guys work on whatever mysterious wrapping they have to do, I tell Keyara my favorite holiday stories: *The Velveteen Rabbit*, *The Tailor of Gloucester*, and *The Polar Express*.

At the library, every Tuesday and Thursday during the holiday season, I would set up rows of chairs so they resembled a train. Then when the kids came in, I’d hand out hot-cocoa and read *The Polar Express*. At the end of the story, each kid got a silver bell. I would love to be able to do that again with Keyara and my baby involved.

But there are no chairs, or hot cocoa, or silver bells on this island.

For a moment a wave of depression overtakes me. This island Christmas is really amazing, and the guys are the sweetest men ever—but will this be what Christmases are like forever?

“I love you, Daisy,” Keyara says, snuggling closer. Then she leans over and talks to my belly. “I love you, baby. Merry Christmas, baby.”

I blink away some tears. Even though the future is terrifying, right now I wouldn't change a thing.

“What's this?” Gray asks, walking out from the plane, arms full of parcels. “Seems like there is a surprise delivery that we just found!” He deposits his load under the ‘tree’. Keyara's eyes grow huge and she leaps to her feet.

“Can I look?”

When I see her beaming excited face, I think about this baby, and how they are going to have holidays like this too. I dart my gaze over at Rex; he is looking from Key to me, and there are tears in his eyes.

“You should read the labels,” Gray tells her.

“There are labels?” I ask. Wow, good job guys.

“I'll be Santa's helper!” Key squeals, running over to the pile and picking one banana-leaf wrapped object up.

“What does it say?” I ask her.

“It says ‘Key,’” she giggles. “Who is it from?”

“That one is from me,” says Leander, smiling broadly. The parcel is flat and square.

“Can I open it?”

“Go for it!”

I can't quite see what is inside, but when she holds it up, I know immediately. “Chutes and ladders!”

Leander has turned a square of aluminum into the board game. The detail on it is incredible. “How on earth did you do that?”

“Scratched onto the metal all the markings, then rubbed charcoal into the scratches. I have to say I'm pretty pleased with myself.”

“So you should be!”

Key is running over to him and hugging him round the waist. “I love it! Look Daisy!”

Close up I see the work Leander has put into this. Wow, the board is ten squares by ten, so a hundred squares! The snakes all have hilarious faces with crossed eyes and forked tongues.

“Me and Daisy have a gift for you, Uncle Leander!”

Key and I had decided joint gifts was the way to go for us. There's only so many presents that could be made on a deserted island.

Leander slowly approaches the tree as Key eagerly points out his parcel, hopping up and down in her role of Santa's helper.

"Maybe you should hand all the guys our gifts?" I suggest.

Everyone was getting the same thing. Key and I had carefully cleaned and polished some halved coconut shells, then heated the end of the screwdriver and burned the outside to personalize them.

Finding that old toolbox in the plane wreckage has made our lives so much easier, even if Leander did manage to lose the box-cutter knife.

Carefully, Keyara hands out the parcels, and all the guys pull the vine-twine from the banana leaves to reveal their gifts.

"Wow! I love it!" Leander says, pulling Key into a hug. All the guys ooh and ahh over their gifts, which is sweet because they really are not very impressive.

Leander has a crown on his bowl—for being the 'wet-wipe prince'.

Killian's 'bowl' is decorated with a shamrock. Gray has a hammer—it's supposed to look like Thor's hammer, but looks more like a toilet plunger.

And finally, Rex's bowl is decorated with an anchor. Key and I had gone backwards and forwards for ages about what to put on Rex's bowl. We'd settled on an anchor, because he anchors us together, and, as Key put it, 'he likes boats'.

One by one, the guys give me and Key a hug.

"I've got a present to give you," Killian says. Picking up something long that is wrapped in a leaf, he hands it to Keyara.

"Ooh, what is it?" she asks, holding up a piece of bamboo.

"It's a flute—shall I show you?"

He presses it to his lips, and somehow a breathy Irish jig comes out. I can't believe it, it actually works. "You guys are so creative!"

Killian passes the flute back to Key and she happily starts making tooting noises.

"Good thing it only produces a soft noise, I've got a feeling we are going to be hearing a lot of that," Leander laughs.

Killian comes over and tells me to close my eyes. "This is for you, my love. Sorry it's not wrapped. You can open your eyes now!"

In my palm is a string of beads. There are all kinds of blue and green pebbles that are strung together on some sort of cord. "Oh! It's so lovely!" I

run my fingers over the delicate necklace, making the stones clink together. “How on earth did you make it? It’s perfect.”

I was so sad to have lost my turquoise beads.

“A lot of trial and error! I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it? I love it—and you.”

Leander calls Keyara over. “Wanna give Uncle Killian his special pressie?”

“Ooh yes!”

Leander and Key formally give Killian the cigarette case, complete with three cigarettes, that was found in the plane cabin.

“These can be our cigars for when our baby is born!” He laughs and picks out a smoke. It crumbles between his fingers slightly. “Oop. Going to have to handle these with care. Also, never start up smoking, Key. You may be able to quit, but you’ll never be able to forget.”

We continue on gift giving. Rex (with some help from Killian) has made a bat for Key to play kilikiti with. For me, he shyly pressed a piece of sea glass into my hand. It’s shaped like a heart.

“Thought it was pretty,” he says, gruffly.

Sweet Rex.

Gray made an incredible woven basket for me, and a ‘shop bought’ frisbee for Keyara.

“Found it washed up on the beach,” he grins.

“I love this Christmas,” Keyara beams, “but I would like to see snow one day.”

“You’ll have to come visit me, with your parents, when I’m back in America,” I tell her. “We nearly always have a white Christmas where I live.”

I say that spontaneously, but I really mean it. If we get off this island, I want to know this little girl forever.

Killian picks up the flute and starts playing ‘White Christmas’, and Leander instantly starts singing.

Sitting around the fire, we sing and eat and tell stories until Key has fallen asleep on Rex’s lap. “I’ll put her to bed, and lay with her for a while,” he says, and carries her into the body of the plane.

“Guys, this has been so special, thank you so much.”

“Oh, you’re more than welcome, especially as we have one more present,” Killian says.

All three guys stand and circle around me.

“And now we get to worship you...”

KILLIAN

I pick Daisy up and carry her over to the mound of dry grass.

She giggles as I gently place her down on it.

“You guys! What about Rex, he’ll be out any minute.”

“Nope, why do you think he went to lay with Keyara, we told him we were going to give you an extra special gift at the end of the night.” She squeals as I fling myself down next to her.

I take a moment to study her beautiful face, then I look up at the two men standing next to us. Leander and Gray both have massive erections.

This is happening. Freaking finally.

It’s about time Daisy had all her men at the same time.

For a moment I fiddle with Grandma’s ring. It’s still on my pinky, a miracle I haven’t lost, considering the weight I’ve lost means it now slides loose, instead of being super-tight like before. I want to give this ring to Daisy so badly, but I hold off. It wouldn’t be fair on Leander or Gray, there should be a ring from all of us. And then there is the fact that I’d love to give Gray a ring as well. I love them both so much.

I’ll keep the ring on my finger for now, and instead give Daisy and Gray something else they’ll enjoy.

I lean forward and gently kiss Daisy, then help her off with her tank top, shorts, then her underwear. Then I stand back up, next to Lea and Gray.

The three of us stand silent, staring down at Daisy. We watch her nipples harden, and study the swell of her belly. The fire casts golden shadows across her skin. She gazes back at us, eyes full of love.

“Beautiful,” Gray whispers, then kneels down, taking the pebbled nip into his mouth.

“So beautiful,” says Leander, joining Gray and brushing his lips along her neck.

Daisy’s head drops back, a sigh drifting from her lips.

I watch Gray circling and flicking his tongue around her breast.

“So good,” she murmurs, diving her hand into Gray’s hair.

I can’t stand by just watching any longer. I drop to my knees and gently push her legs apart.

She’s so perfect.

I run my knuckles over her pussy. We are so lucky.

Gray’s eyes lock on mine.

So lucky.

“So fucking perfect,” Leander groans as he moves down to join Gray in nipple-land.

I gently trace circles over her mound, and she presses her hips forward, making my stomach contract. I exhale, and allow my knuckles to graze her clit. Gray groans as she whimpers.

“You want us to worship you?” I ask her.

“Yes,” she breathes, eyelids fluttering.

I give her clit a little pinch. “Don’t close your eyes, baby. We like when you watch us.”

Leander groans and starts rubbing his cock against her thigh. I watch as it leaves a trail of precum over her skin.

I spread her legs further, which pulls the lips of her wet pussy apart.

Oh feck, what a girl.

Leander slides down from her breast and starts to massage her throbbing clit.

Feck no, bro. That’s my job.

In one movement, I pick up her legs, loop them over my shoulders, then bury my face in her pussy. I devour her, she tastes like heaven.

I can’t see anything but her marvelous flesh, but I hear Gray growl at me. “If you make her come, I’ll beat your ass.”

Shite, that just makes me suck on her clit even harder. Our baby can come more than once, and Gray can beat my ass with pleasure.

Daisy is squirming and gasping.

“Killian!” Gray growls.

I guess I can give them a little treat. I lower Daisy down, then curl two fingers inside her dripping hole. She gasps.

“Like that?”

“Yesss,” she hisses.

I withdraw my fingers and smear her juice all over her nipples.

“Suck on those now,” I tell Gray and Leander. They fall on her hungrily,

and now I've distracted them I go back to my own main course. Two fingers go back into her pussy and then I chow down, nibbling her lips, then sucking on her clit.

She opens her legs even wider and her hips roll and then I feel her explode on my tongue, her pussy clenching around my fingers.

"KILLIAN," she screams my name, and I feel an extra push of her warm juice as her muscles contract and she comes in my mouth. I let her ride it out, even though I selfishly just want to fucking plunge my cock in that hole straight away.

Eventually the shudders stop and pull my face away and look up at her.

Our beautiful, dirty little girl. It's all about her tonight. She gives me a cat-and-canary smile,

Oh, macushla.

She's our gift, and we are hers.

GRAY

We all fall asleep around the fire.

I sleep real hard, thanks to monkey-wine. Monkey-wine, laughter, and loving. I know I have a huge grin on my face as I wake up. I lay on the ground with my eyes closed and go back over all the fun of 'Christmas Day'. It was honestly the best Christmas I've ever had.

It's still quiet in the glade, so I don't think anyone else is stirring yet. I'll be a good team player and get the fire going.

If only we could find a coffee bean plant. Life could be virtually perfect here.

Moving quietly, I'm surprised to see Daisy is no longer snuggled between Leander and Killian. Probably had to go potty. She has been complaining about needing to pee all the time, poor baby.

I've got the fire lit, water on the boil, and fresh bananas collected when Key comes leaping out of the plane.

"I slept on the plane, Uncle Gray! Do you want to play frisbee? Did you know the day after Christmas is called Boxing Day?"

"I do, noodle, but let's wait until we are back on the beach? We'll get some breakfast here first."

She nods in her good-natured way; the kid is so easy-going. "Where's Daisy?" she asks.

"Probably taking a bathroom break," I tell her.

"I need to go too..." she says, I notice her hopping from one foot to the other.

"Want me to come with you?"

She shakes her head.

"Alright, don't go too far though."

"I won't," she says, skipping off.

Leander is the next one up. He sits up, and it makes me grin to see a squashed crown of flowers in his hair. Not sure when that happened.

“Morning,” he says. “Gotta see a man about a dog...”

He stumbles through the trees. When we are at the beach, we have a latrine area, but out here it’s a free for all. Hope he doesn’t trip over the girls while they are attending to business.

Damn, should have brought more eggs with us. If you mash a banana and add it to beaten egg it almost turns into a pancake—definitely everyone’s favorite breakfast.

Those almost-deviled eggs last night were bomb. We’d mixed the yolks with a bit of cooked yam.

“Morning, Gray.” Rex jumps down onto the floor of the jungle. Killian is shifting as well and waves a hand at me.

“Pine tea?”

I throw some pine needles in the boiling water. Yeah, not coffee, but it’s not too bad. We’ve all gotten used to it.

There is some distant laughter, then Leander and Key come back, Leander chasing Key as she giggles like crazy.

“Still no Daisy?” I ask, as they sit down by the fire.

“Nope, she must have gone in a different direction.

The fire hisses as water sloshes over the edge of the aluminum basin we boil water in.

“You guys watch the fire, I’ll go track her down.”

There is no reason to worry, but I don’t like her being out of sight for too long. She could trip, or just keel over. Her center of gravity is off, and darling Daisy was clumsy *before* being pregnant.

The jungle smells ripe and rich, and leaves drip with condensation.

“DAISY?”

There is no sound except for the regular buzz of insects and rustling leaves. “Daisy? Babe?” No response.

I walk a circuit all the way around the glade, and come up empty.

“DAISY?”

Now I hear someone moving through the undergrowth, thank fuck. I was beginning to get anxious.

But it’s Killian, and for the first time, seeing him makes my heart drop. He seems to be on the same wavelength. “You haven’t found her?”

“No, and I don’t like it.”

“I’ll walk back to the pool. Maybe she went there.”

“Weird that she wouldn’t have told one of us?”

“Yeah, but maybe she woke early. I’ll go now.”

He doesn’t wait for a reply, just heads off at a jog.

I head back into the glade. Rex and Leander look up at me expectantly. I shake my head.

“I couldn’t find her.”

“Daisy is lost?” Key jumps up immediately, fear starkly obvious on her face.

“Probably not, but we should just take a little look-around.” Rex says, taking her by the hand. “Come on, noodle. You and I can look for her together.”

It’s been at least an hour, and Daisy is nowhere to be found.

Nowhere.

“She wasn’t at the pool,” Killian had said. “So where is she?”

The million dollar question.

Rex is helping Key collect all the gifts. The little girl is obviously really worried; tears are threatening to fall any minute now.

Rex rubs her on her back. “I’ll take Key back to the beach with all our stuff. Maybe she’s there?”

Leander, Killian, and I are going to search this area again, but try to be more methodical, and look for footprints, or any sign of her at all.

Any sign at all.

Where are you, Daisy?

DAISY

Jungle bathrooms leave a lot to be desired.

We have a system where we mark our ‘deposits’ with a couple of sticks, so other people know not to dig in that spot. After doing my business, I bend over and make the X out of a couple of twigs.

Urgh.

My lower back is nagging this morning. I’m sure it’s something to do with ligaments and pregnancy hormones. Add it to the list of a million things I don’t know about having a baby.

Heading back to the glade, I use a branch to batter down a plant that is in my way.

It’s probably because of my plant bashing that I don’t hear who’s right behind me.

One second I’m humming away happily, the next a hand goes across my mouth.

“Just look at you, Jackson. Ripe with my baby. You must have been so worried, but you can relax now. Daddy’s here.”

If I scream, all my guys will come running. I open my mouth, but that’s when I feel something sharp poke into my stomach. I don’t know what it is but it does not feel good at all.

“Now, now. I don’t want you to make a noise, we’ll get you out of here with no fuss please,” he hisses in my ear. “You understand?”

I’m frozen. All I can think about is a knife next to my belly.

“I don’t want to hurt the baby,” Harvey continues, “but I will if I have to. After all, we can just make another. Now are you going to come with me quietly?”

I nod. What else can I do?

“So here is the plan: you’re going to take a walk with me, and you are not going to make any noise, you got me? I have a knife and I’m fucking not afraid to use it. I’ve been waiting to take you back, Brooke. I’m fucking not

waiting any more. I'll stab our baby without blinking an eye. Do you believe me?"

Do I?

I try to move my head to look at him. He allows the motion.

Harvey looks completely crazed. He's gaunt and filthy. He's missing a tooth and his left eyelid is puffy and swollen.

"What do you want, Harvey?" I whisper into his hand.

"My family, Brooke, my family." He narrows his eyes and presses the knife harder into my abdomen. I feel the metal break my skin.

"When I saw you were pregnant...I knew I had to take you back. I need my Brooke and my baby."

He's completely lost it.

"So now we are going to head out of here," he continues, speaking in a low voice. "You'll come, and don't make a fuss, got it?"

"No," I whisper, and shake my head, but the knife traces around my belly button. It's the missing box-cutter; the one we all blamed Leander for losing.

Just one slip of Harvey's hand, and my baby...

"Please, just let me go, Harvey. Go back to the other island and no one needs to know about this."

Hard lines shape around his mouth and eyes, and he grips the back of my neck. "Just move."

If I can just get away from his blade, I can run and scream and I'll have help within seconds, but his hold on my neck is too strong and I dare not yell with that wicked blade next to my baby.

As move farther from the airplane glade, Harvey slows down, then slams my back against a tree, pinning me there and pressing my jaw so hard, I can't help but cry out in pain.

"You think this is what I want?" he spits. "I want to be back in my penthouse apartment in Beverly fucking Hills. But apparently this is the rest of my goddamn life, and I refuse to spend it alone without some companionship...so Brooke, it's time to get over your nonsense and come home with me."

Harvey is murderously strong, the rage in his body is terrifying. I feel like he could snap my neck in an instant.

"OK," I mumble. I'll just go with him and trust the guys to find me.

"So, are you going to come sensibly?"

"I'll be sensible," I nod.

I'm desperate to run. But he'd catch me so easily. When he turns, I quickly take off my new necklace and I drop it on the jungle floor, praying the guys will spot it.

We move off, further into the depths of the island, and must walk for at least an hour or two. I'm exhausted and thirsty. Harvey and I don't speak as we trek. What is there to say, anyway? He'll do some more crazy talk, and not listen when I ask him to set me free.

Eventually he stops, and I realize we are at a freshwater spring I've never seen before. This is a part of the island I don't know.

"Drink," he commands, pushing me to my knees.

With pleasure. As I fill my belly with water, I think about self-defense classes my father would give me and Brooke.

Why hadn't I paid more attention?

Because Dad didn't pay any attention to me. He'd work drills with Brooke over and over again; she was athletic and graceful. I'd fall over my feet and Dad would sigh.

"Just do some stretching in the corner, Daisy."

Thanks, Dad. Stretching isn't going to help me now.

I wonder where Harvey is taking me, and how long he has been on our island. I guess we never considered him coming back. What a mistake.

What if he wants me to swim to the next island? I just don't know if I could do it.

My hand goes automatically to my bump again. But the next second I am yanked to my feet by my hair.

"That's enough, we need to get going again."

But where? That's the question.

REX

I try not to let Key know how worried I am.

“Just double checking,” I say as we take a small detour via the pool, just to make sure Daisy didn’t head there, but was missed by the others.

One of the life rings from the boat floats in the middle. The words “Mary-Mo” half submerged, but no signs of Daisy.

“We’ll come back later,” I tell Key, “let’s get all this stuff back to camp first.”

I’d always thought of myself as a proactive person, but in this situation I’m flailing. It’s too much. Daisy is lost, and I think it’s breaking me.

What could have happened? She got turned around in the woods? Or maybe there was some kind of pit that she fell in. We haven’t seen any large mammals, and I’m pretty sure they don’t exist on these islands, so it’s not like something ‘got’ her.

The only large mammal we don’t have a bead on is Harvey.

I consider the idea that he may have snatched her. It would be a crazy move; he’d know we’d track him down and kill him. Is he that crazy? Maybe several months alone are enough to send someone over the edge. I have to keep close to Key, just in case.

I picture Leander, Killian, and Gray spreading through the jungle, looking for their love. They won’t rest until they find her. It’s surprisingly not weird that the three of them love her and share her. Yeah, she’s the only chick on the island, but this isn’t like that. I see Daisy and I see she is a little bit broken like the rest of us. When the three guys and Daisy come together, they seem whole.

I often wish I was part of the equation, but then remind myself that Key is my priority.

And I don’t deserve a happy ever after.

The Forestry Service had paid for us all to have therapy, for mental recovery they said, on top of the physical recovery. I quit after one session. If

you fuck up and it costs people their lives, then you have no right to ‘forgive yourself’ and ‘move on’. Fuck that bullshit.

I was in my emergency shelter, flames racing towards us and smoke everywhere, I listened to Alicia on the radio, crying for her baby. I heard Carlo reciting the rosary. Hutch never said a word.

And Stephan.

“Rex, are you there?”

“I’m here.”

“We are going to die up here.”

“No, we are going to survive. It’s gonna be close but we’ll survive.”

“We are going to die. Why didn’t you get us out earlier, Rex? We are going to die here. I don’t want to die.”

Then the screams as the fire reached him first.

After that everything went quiet on the radios. Everyone passing out from smoke inhalation. When the rescue chopper finally got to us, only Gray and Leander were still breathing.

And me.

How could I still be breathing when the others were not, it wasn’t fair. The fire had somehow skirted the three of us. Gray wasn’t burned at all. Leanders feet were scorched, the boots melting to the soles of his feet. And me? My two fingers had been exposed.

They said it looked like I was just about to leave the fire shelter, but had passed out before unfastening it completely.

I don’t remember if that’s true.

I just remember the screams.

As we walk the path to the beach, Keyara is quiet. Her bounce is gone.

“They’ll find her,” I say. “Most likely we’ll see them come traipsing out of the jungle before the sun goes down. But if they don’t, it just means they need a little more time to find her.”

“Can we look too, Uncle Rex? Please? I don’t want to just wait on the beach.”

A parrot flaps past our heads.

“How about we cook some eggs, hard boil them, and we’ll go for a little while and look around. We’ll take the eggs with us, so if we run into any of the others they can have a snack.”

“OK.” She squeezes my hand and gives a deep sigh.

Key should be playing and laughing at home with her family, not trudging through the jungle, looking like the weight of the world is resting on her shoulders.

When Daisy gets back, we’ll start making another set of rafts to float out to sea. One day someone will spot them. We make it out of the jungle and on to the beach. Key immediately runs off to check the chickens.

I find myself peering out to sea, then searching the sky.

Nothing there.

But one day there will be, I have to believe that for Keyara’s sake, and Daisy’s sake. And, of course, for the baby.

DAISY

My mind is spinning.

I just don't know what to do.

We pass another thick grove of banana trees, and this time Harvey lets me take one to eat. I'm starving and devour it quickly, but I mostly wanted the banana so I could leave the skin somewhere as another breadcrumb for the guys.

I also need to pee, and much as I don't want to go in front of Harvey, he's not giving me any option.

"Go right there or piss your pants, your choice."

I pull my eyes from his raging face and focus on the beautiful flowers growing on a vine behind his head.

Look at the flowers, little baby. Don't worry about the nasty man. Mama's got you.

Harvey spits in my direction. It seems like he loathes me, so it doesn't really make sense that he wants me as a companion, but none of the last few months make any sense if you think about it. I need Harvey to stop hating me, for sake and safety of my baby.

"Hey, Harvey. How have you been the last few months?" He makes a snarling face, but I go on before he can snap my head off, "If we are going to be spending our time together from now on, we need a truce."

"How have I been? Busy! Preparing our new home for the birth of our baby."

Oh.

I'll pretend to buy into Harvey's crazy until I can find an opportunity to escape, or until the guys come get me. Hopefully one of those things won't take too long.

Harvey has us pushing through a swath of bamboo now, the tall grass whipping and slashing my skin. He's not even breaking a sweat, but me? I'm on my last legs.

“Please, Harvey. I need a break. I’m sorry for the inconvenience,” I add trying to get on his good side.

But he ignores and just keeps us marching on and on, until after climbing a small rise, we are suddenly out onto a sandy beach. “Is this where you’ve been staying?”

“Here? No.”

Nervousness claws at my insides as he looks across the water to the second island. If he forces me to swim, I’m really scared I won’t make it.

But then Harvey is dragging some kind of bamboo contraption from the long grass. He heaves it down the sand, keeping one eye on me at the same time.

Don’t run, Daisy. He’ll catch up to you and hurt you. Have faith in your men, and in yourself.

I glance behind me, back into the depths of my island. Somewhere back there is my real life, where we make Rex sing songs around the campfire, and Ron and Hermione lay us breakfast. It’s a small, simple, happy life—and I want it back, badly.

“Come on,” Harvey growls, moving towards me. Once again the wicked knife is very present, he is signaling his intention to use it if I don’t obey.

Harvey takes off his homemade shoes and signals me to remove my boots. Once that is done, he lashes them to the bamboo raft, along with...

Wait—how does he have the ax-of-peril?

He must have gone to our campsite while we were at the plane glade. His pant pockets do look weighted down. I watch as he ties his clothes to the raft with his cracked leather belt.

“Shirt and shorts off, too,” Harvey tells me.

My stomach cramps, I just want to curl up in a fetal position.

“Now.”

The shaft of the knife is waved in my direction again.

Realizing I have very little choice in all this, I do as he tells me—but as soon as his gaze shifts, I throw my tank top into the bushes.

Find it, guys.

And if they don’t, one thing I need to remember is that Harvey can’t stay awake forever. Once he is asleep, I can steal the knife. I can...

Do I have it in me to take a life?

If it saves the one inside me, you bet I do.

LEANDER

As the sun begins to set, I stare up at the string of beads and rub my eyes.

Am I imagining them? All day I've been convinced I've seen Daisy's footprints or broken foliage which could only have been made by someone passing by. But each time I follow the leads, they take me nowhere.

Blue stones.

Necklace.

Daisy had one that Killian made for her.

And if it's here, it's a message. It says—follow me this way.

We'd agreed that we'd all split up and spend the night in the jungle, but meet back at the beach in the morning. Just in case we could hear Daisy call for us.

I stare at the necklace for a few moments more, then pick it up. Is this a Hansel and Gretel trail? Is she leaving me breadcrumbs?

A shiver creeps up my spine. If Daisy purposely left the beads, it means she was trying to show us where she was, or at least where she had been.

Like someone had taken her.

Someone like fucking Harvey.

I think I knew it was him hours ago, I just didn't want to believe it. I wanted to convince myself she'd just wandered off somewhere, then lay down for a nap.

Nope.

I keep walking, looking for evidence of someone passing through this particular part of the jungle. Maybe I'm on a wild goose chase again, but these bushes look battered down, I'm not kidding. This has to be the right track. Before long I'm wading through the razor sharp grass of a bamboo grove, then, thank fuck, out on to a beach.

I haven't been to this beach before.

There is nothing out of the ordinary to see. In the fading light, the piles of seaweed, drift wood and palm fronds give me no clues. It will be dark soon,

and it's impossible to move safely through the jungle in the dark, so I guess I'll sleep on this beach.

I kick off my sneakers and run my fingers over my feet. From the ankles down, the skin resembles puckered cow-hide. The nerves are shot, I can barely feel my own hand on my foot.

Whatever.

I can't be arsed to make a fire, and I'm fucking exhausted, so all I do it piss in the bushes, finish off the water from my bottle and hit the hay.

If hay is hard sand.

Tropical storms are something else.

In the early hours, a front has rolled in. I wake up to the force of wind and rain battering the small beach. I'm cold, tired, and sad.

When I was young, me and my brothers loved storms. Nanny Clark was from England, where the weather was always kinda boring, according to her. So when a storm front hit Vermont, we'd run out onto the lawns (yeah, we had plural lawns) and shout at the thunder. We'd turn into wild beasts under the lightning.

Until one night when the lightning forked down and struck the metal flag pole of Dad's eighteenth hole. Malc, Jasper, and I were bouncing around the grounds. When that happened it was shocking—literally. Our hair stood on end, like Doc Brown in *Back to the Future*. Then, BAM! We were knocked off our feet. Afterwards, we were told we were on the edge of the lightning's ground current. Just far enough away to not get truly zapped, but still, a close call.

I can see lightning flashing far out at sea and it makes me shudder. Sure, they say lightning doesn't strike the same place twice, but does it strike the same person twice?

Probably. Fucking bitch lightning.

What I wouldn't give for Nanny Clark to be here now. She'd brew us a cup of tea, then help us figure out a plan.

Finally, the rain lets up, and I maybe get a few minutes more of sleep. When I open my eyes again, the sun is up. Handily, my water bottle got filled during the night, so that's a plus.

I watch the waves roll up the shore and try to think logically. I have Daisy's beads in my pocket, so I didn't imagine that. If she was headed this way, she would probably have arrived at this beach. But this morning, there

is no trace of her *anywhere*.

I don't want to head back to our camp, though. The necklace is proof that she is, or at least was, on this side of the island. I'll spend today trying to do a thorough search, though after the rain last night, her trail is going to be virtually impossible to pick up.

First things first; see a man about a dog.

It's when I'm having a slash that I see a grubby, worn pair of familiar panties, caught on the limb of a tree.

DAISY

Groggy and blinking, I struggle to a sitting up position.

It's quiet.

I'm in some kind of shelter, and I'm wearing damp clothes. I rub my gritty eyes, trying to remember how I got here, my subconsciousness reluctant to bring me back to reality. The rain, the storm, the swim, Harvey.

It's all too much.

The last thing I remember was being dragged up a beach by Harvey.

After the swim from hell, he'd wanted us to keep walking in the dark, rain coming down so hard it hurt my skin.

But my legs gave out.

And then I woke up here.

Wait! What if Harvey has gone off somewhere? This is my chance to run.

My boots are by my head, so I bend—with some effort—and put them on. Then, very quietly I peek my head out from under the branches.

"Hey!"

Harvey sits leaning against a rock. His eyes are still wild, but now bloodshot and exhausted. I wonder if he slept at all.

He has bottles of water and a pile of fruit next to him.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, like it's just a regular day.

"I'm okay, I guess." I'm not. I am wary, and don't really know how to act. It's like treading softly around the lair of a bear. He holds out a bottle of water to me. I grab it, then back off a few feet away.

"Err, how are you this morning?" I ask.

"I'm good." Harvey takes a bite of banana. "Crazy day yesterday, huh?"

You could say that.

"I bet you can't wait to see your new home," he adds.

I shake my head. It's involuntary.

Harvey scowls, but doesn't say anything. Just stands up, throwing his banana peel in the bushes. "Time to get going."

“Can I have five minutes? I just need to pee and eat something. I’ll pass out if I don’t eat.”

I’m not stalling, it’s really true.

“Five minutes.”

“Thank you.” I force myself to smile. “I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, just pee here.”

I give up on the idea of privacy, and do my business behind the palm fronds. I’m still thinking about how to leave a trail for my guys, so instead of putting my bra back on, I slip them off and hang them discreetly on a bough. The discreet aspect is not helpful for somebody trying to track me, but it’s not like I can be blatant.

Harvey has a leafy branch, and it’s obliterating our footprints in the sand.

As I walk through the jungle, following in Harvey’s wake, my legs feel weak. Somewhere along the way, I’ve lost the energy to confront him. I need to conserve what resources I have left for the baby. That’s the most important thing. And I need Harvey to think I’m on his side, so he’ll let me rest and eat enough.

But first I have a burning question.

“How long have you been planning all this, Harvey?”

“I’ve been watching you all for weeks, Brooke. I knew they wouldn’t take care of you properly, so I kept an eye on things.”

I shudder, remembering all the times I’d been by the pool, or collecting fruit and got the strange feeling someone was watching me. An image of Harvey lurking behind bushes comes into my head.

I shudder again.

“If you want me to be taken care of,” I say, “I’ll need plenty of rest, food and water. Can you do that for me?”

Harvey’s eyes are wild.

“Brooke, you don’t think I know how to care for you? Our baby” he asks, sounding wounded.

I don’t respond—what can I say?

That I’m not Brooke, and that this is not his baby?

I imagine he wouldn’t take that very well, so I just give him a weak smile.

“Don’t worry, I have everything we need set up. After all, we are going to be a family, so I’ve made a family home for us. You don’t have to be brave any more—I’ve got you. I know we’ve had our problems, but we can start over now.”

Kidnapping, sexual assault. Yep, we've had our problems.

I decide against saying anything controversial. He's not going to let me just waltz away from here, so why poke the bear?

"It's fine if it takes you a little while to get used to your new circumstances," he says, his voice now emotionless. "But you don't have any choice. You think you and a baby could survive out here without me?"

My mind freezes at the idea of still being Harvey's captive by the time I go into labor.

Harvey gives me a wide grin.

"Come along now, Brooke. We'll be home soon."

GRAY

Shit.

I half expected Daisy to be at the beach, sitting around the campfire with Rex and Key.

But no.

The fire is burning, though, and Rex has obviously been fishing. There are eggs and fish cooking, and bushels of collected fruit. Fuck, I'm ravenous.

I hope Daisy has managed to find some food.

"Uncle Gray!"

"Hi, sweetpea."

Rex looks up and I shake my head.

"Killian came back not long ago. He didn't see anything either."

I look around, but there is no Irishman to be seen.

"He went to the pool," Rex adds.

"You want some breakfast, Uncle Gray?"

"Thanks."

I approach the fire, feeling dazed, then slump down. I guess I'll eat, and then I'll head off on the search again. Fuck, if only we had some walkies, it would make everything a lot easier.

As I take a bite of egg, there is a noise behind me and Killian walks out of the jungle—with Leander in tow.

"Look who I found."

Leander is hollow-eyed. I probably look the same.

"Eat," orders Rex. "Then we'll discuss next steps."

What do people do when they have no plan? Pretend they do; it's either pretend, or give in to despair. 'Discussing next steps' is Rex's way to hold on to hope. Without hope, things get bad real fast.

I choke down some food and drum my fingers, waiting for everyone else to be done eating too. Now that the sun is climbing up the sky, we can't let another day go by without finding Daisy.

Killian clears his throat. “Leander found something.”

Silence for a moment, then both Rex and I explode.

“Why wait to tell us? What did you find?”

“For fucks sake, Leander, what?”

“I made him wait to tell you,” Killian says. “Otherwise you would have not waited for nutrition. We will get Daisy back, but only if we keep ourselves reasonably healthy. Look, I want to race after her as much as you all, but we have to think practically, and not let emotion rule us.”

I’m growling. Fuck that. I don’t know if I can forgive Leander and Killian for not telling me the news straight away.

“What. Did. You. Find. Leander?”

“I found Daisy’s panties, and her beads. They led to a small beach I hadn’t been to before. I think Harvey must have her. She definitely left those things for us to find.”

“Taken,” mumbles Rex.

“And probably taken to the other island,” Killian adds.

Maybe forcing us to refuel wasn’t such madness. We’ll have to trek across the island, then swim over to the next one. My whole body goes cold when I think about Daisy having to do that. “Let’s take the life-rings—we can use them for swimming, and if Daisy is there, she can have them for the return journey. We can just tow her.”

“Good idea,” Leander says, going over to collect them.

Rex stands up and rolls his shoulders, then walks to the second shelter, coming back out with a basket with straps. Daisy had woven it a few weeks ago.

“You should take a lot of water, some eggs, and fruit. You don’t want to waste time having to forage.”

I watch Killian walk over to him and take the basket from him. I know it’s killing Rex to have to stay with Keyara, but that’s his job. Leander, Killian, and I will get Daisy back.

Fucking Harvey. We should have killed him.

There is not much we need to take with us that, in a matter of minutes, we are setting off again. Rex and Keyara hold hands and wave.

Keep her safe, Rex.

A tear rolls down Keyara’s cheek, and then another. I hate seeing it.

“We’ll find her, Key,” I shout to her, before stepping into the jungle.

And this time, I’m going to take care of Harvey once and for all. A person

can't be allowed to live after something like this. It's just not possible.

Leander takes us first to the plane glade so he can find his bearings from there. We stop for a water break, walk around the remnants of Christmas. Some of the decorations are still up.

Just two days ago, but it feels like years ago now.

"Gray?"

"Hmm?"

Killian passes me a cooked egg. I grab it and it's gone in two bites, then look at him. "Break is over."

Leander and Killian are with me. No real rest until we get her.

After another hour or so, Leander points out where he found her beads.

"I marked a trail after I found it, so it's just straight-forward to get to the beach. Probably another two hours."

Killian clears his throat. "That leaves us enough time to swim before the sun goes down, but only if we hustle."

So we hustle.

Leander loses his trail markings a couple of times, but he always manages to find them again. I'm trying to be patient with him, but it's not easy. When he calls to a halt again, I can't contain myself.

"For fuck's sake."

"Dude! It's difficult to follow a jungle trail at the best of times, and last night there was a storm."

"Yeah, but come on. This is taking too long."

"I know," Leander replies, distraught.

Oh my God. I'm a fucking asshole. I shake my head, and take a breath. "It's OK. You're doing fine."

"Nothing is fine," Leander replies, turning his back on me, his eyes looking back down at the undergrowth.

I feel like such a piece of shit right now. None of this is Leander's fault. And he's the only one of us who actually found signs of Daisy. My anger isn't with him. Who am I to criticize him when I couldn't keep her safe?

A tiny piece of my brain says maybe we are wrong about Harvey. Maybe we'll get to this beach and find her waiting for us.

But I know that is not very likely.



Pristine white sand, no heaps of trash, hardly any seaweed. This little beach looks straight out of a vacation ad.

It's fucking disappointing.

No traces.

"So her panties were just over there."

If you turn one hundred and eighty degrees from where Leander is pointing, you're directly facing the smaller island. Harvey's island. That just has to be where she is now.

"Ready to swim?" I ask, taking off my shoes. Ironically, they are actually Harvey's shoes. At least the fucker doesn't have decent footwear.

Killian and Leander are already stripping down. We are so much more adept than when we first made this swim. Now we neatly parcel everything up and lash it together with strong vines. Then we scout around and find some lengths of bamboo, and quickly put together a flotation device, with the poles between the two life rings. We can hold onto the 'raft' and just kick our way across the channel.

The end scene from *Jaws* flashes through my mind.

Smile you son of a bitch, we're coming for you...

DAISY

I can't go on.

We've been walking forever, and I feel like I've been hit by a truck.

"I need to stop," I gasp, and a second later I'm on my knees and vomiting. It's mostly water and stomach acid. Finally it eases up and I sit back up and wipe my mouth. Harvey passes me a water bottle.

"Take small sips, your stomach might reject it."

The sympathy and care in his voice makes tears spring to my eyes. It's like, now we are on this island, all his aggression has gone. It's a relief, but also somehow worse than his anger.

"I won't light a fire, but don't worry. Before long, you're going to be warm and happy."

I'm so tired that I'm actually enthusiastic about that.

"How much further?"

"Thirty minutes, tops. You're going to love our place."

"Have you anything to eat? It helps with the nausea."

Harvey puts out a hand in his pocket. "Coconut?" His smile is wide, and unsettling.

"Thanks." He passes me a large chunk, and fumble between the water and the food.

"Let me cut you a smaller piece." All of a sudden, the box-cutter is out and he brings it down on the coconut chunk which is resting on my thigh.

"Argh, Harvey stop!"

Oh, God. He's cut through the coconut and into my leg. Blood pours from the long wound. Why would he do that?

"Oh, oh, that's no good." He wipes the blood away with his filthy hand.

"Just leave it," I tell him. He relents, but seems pissed again.

Harvey puts out a hand and hauls me to my feet.

I sway, and grasp hold of a branch to stop my fall. The branch snaps in my hand.

I'm an idiot! I haven't been doing anything to mark the trail we are on.

While Harvey is fiddling with his homemade shoes, I try to snap off twigs and flatten grass.

"Time to walk."

It's so hard to keep going. My thigh is throbbing. I'm definitely getting much weaker. Is something actually wrong or am I just exhausted? I think of the baby, and tears spring to my eyes. Please let my baby get through this.

We climb up a small rocky incline, and then walk along a gravelly ridge. From there, we are maybe a couple hundred feet above water-level. It's late afternoon, and I really hope we get to where we are going before it gets dark.

"Careful around the corner," Harvey tells me, and when I've moved past an awkward boulder, I think I see where we are aiming for.

A cave mouth is set into the side of the cliff-face, a few hundred feet away. There is an expanse of rocky shale that we need to climb to get there.

Around the cave I can see signs of occupation. Piles of wood, woven things, rotting fruit, plastic flotsam.

"Home sweet home," Harvey tells me proudly. He scrambles up to the cave with ease, but it takes me a lot longer. I'm so hot; dust is coating my eyeballs, and the small of my back feels as though a gremlin is tormenting it. And, of course, I need to pee. Finally making it to the ledge, I flop down and close my eyes. Hello new home on the rocky ledge, I'm never going to leave again.

"Come on, Brooke, just a little further."

Nope.

I don't think I can move, but Harvey tugs on my hand like a little kid at a candy store. Reluctantly, I get to my feet and get pulled into the cave.

Stumbling into the dark cavern, I look around. Harvey has a very weird smile. The cave stinks, and there is an odd light in this place; it's freaking me out.

"Come on, come on."

And then we round a corner.

"Hot springs!"

The air is warm and steamy. The water bubbles softly and the cave smells of sulfur. This must be the place that Gray and Killian found.

"You can rest here, Brooke. The water is good to drink—I'll get dinner started."

Any movement sounds painful, but the idea of cleaning my leg? Try and

stop me. I need to get in while I still have the tiniest dribble of gas in the tank.

I don't stop at cleaning the wound on my leg. I wade in up to my chin. Even though the water is hot, it's not shockingly so. The floor of the pool is gravely, but not uncomfortable on my feet—these stones have long been smoothed by the ever moving water. In the dark and the steam, I try to forget about my predicament and just focus on the baby.

“Do you like this, little bean?” The ‘little bean’ gives a gentle kick, like a butterfly fluttering in my stomach. I rub my hands over my belly and sing a nursery rhyme that would be sung at the mommy and me book club.

*“Rub-a-dub-dub,
Three men in a tub,
And who do you think they'd be?
The butcher, the baker,
The candlestick-maker,
All put out to sea.”*

As I sing, I sway in the water and can feel every beat of my heart pump the blood around my body. I imagine the little bean, curled snug inside me, enjoying the warmth and the gentle motion. I hope hearing their mama's voice makes them feel safe and loved.

Blood pumping.

I feel so drowsy now. It would be very easy to just slip under the water and sleep forever.

Heat. Blood.

Come on, Daisy. Time to get out now.

This cave feels magical, and I don't think I'm the first pregnant woman to soak in these waters.

Time to get out now, Daisy.

Reluctantly, I listen to the echoes of all the mama's before me, and drag myself out of the water. As soon as I leave the water, I realize how close I was to passing out. The wound on my leg is steadily streaming with blood again. I tear the bottom of my shirt and make a makeshift bandage, then press my hand tight against it.

Thank you, sisters.

The spirits don't reply, but I know they heard me.

KILLIAN

I can't believe how long and tiring this swim is.

During the thirty minutes of swimming, we say very little. There is just the odd grunt now and then as we move steadily through the water.

The sea is mostly calm, but every now and then a rogue current tugs at our legs. A couple of times we just hold onto the bamboo poles and float for a while. My skin feels like it's burning from the nipples upward. That's a surprise; we are all so tan that I thought getting a sunburn would be impossible by now.

There is probably some science explanation about light bouncing off the water.

The shore of the small island is only a few hundred yards away now.

"Everyone alright?" grunts Gray.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

The pain in my thigh muscles is intense. Just keep going. Thank feck for the floaties. How could Daisy have managed this? Shite, it's unbearable to think about.

"This reminds me of a riddle..."

Oh Leander, there you go, being all cheerful when everything fecking sucks.

Neither Gray nor I respond, but Leander carries on regardless.

"Three men are on a boat. The boat capsizes and not a single man gets wet...how is that possible?"

Gray growls, which makes me laugh.

"No, seriously," Leander nags us. "Think about it."

He is seriously annoying. Especially because now I can't get the riddle out of my head. After a few minutes I give up.

"Alright, tell us the answer."

"Because none of the men were single! They were all married! Get it?"

I have to laugh.

When we find Daisy, we need to *all* marry her. (Apart from Rex, I guess).

I glance down at my hand and see Grandma's emerald ring.

Beyonce would tell us to put a ring on it.

Happily, Queen B, happily.

After what feels like another hour, we are virtually at the island, and it's virtually dark.

"Do you think Harvey is watching us approach?" Leander pants as we wade ashore.

"Who knows. Feck, I'm knackered." I flop down on the sand and try to get my breath.

Gray collapses next to me, breathing heavily. Leander is hopping from foot to foot.

"Cramp," he says, briefly.

"Get a banana, the potassium will help," Gray tells him. "Meemaw got terrible leg cramps. Always slept with a banana by her bed."

"Meemaw. That was Rex's grandma, right?"

I realize I know so little about Gray's own family. He never talks about them. This isn't the time for a trip down memory lane, but I do want to know about them sometime.

Leander passes a banana to me as well.

Fecking bananas.

"You know what I'm thinking? I'm thinking about steak, with mashed potato, green beans, and a pint of Guinness would do the trick right about now."

Leander throws his skin at me. "Shut it."

"Bacon cheeseburger," says Gray. "With a mountain of fries."

"Alright you fuckers, I'll have a giant Chicago-style pizza, deep pan, all the cheese, sausage topping."

In the fading light I pointed up the beach. "We should find a place to camp out while we can. Somewhere not obvious."

We don't want to give Harvey a heads up. When we catch up to that fucker, I want him completely unaware of what's going to hit him.

It's going to be a lot.

DAISY

I glance at Harvey.

He has a fire going, with the smoke only partially leaving the cave, and my eyes are constantly watering. I wring out my shorts and shirt, then slip them back on. My knees are rubbery and skin tingles with heat. The hot water was incredible, almost enough to make me forget my circumstances, but the heat made me dizzy, and I figure it might not be good for my blood pressure. You always see those signs by hotel hot-tubs that say pregnant women should ‘use with caution’.

I may be a little delirious.

There are so many things I’m doing wrong with this pregnancy; undercooked fish, hot tubs, getting kidnapped by a lunatic...

The sky is dark outside, so the only light is what the fire is giving off. I don’t know what to do; stay back here, close by the steaming water, or go and sit near the fire with Harvey. I was hungry, but I’m not anymore. Somewhere along the way, I’ve lost my appetite.

Another thing that is not good for pregnant women.

The tension in my body is so high, I feel like I could snap in two. I’m tired and I’m scared. Harvey is unpredictable, and all I want is to just go home.

“Brooke, come here.”

I don’t want to fight, so I cautiously make my way across the cavern floor to the fire.

“Here, I said,” he snaps, as I hover a few feet away. I inch toward him until his fingers reach out and close around my wrist.

“Come sit with me, Brooke. Or am I going to have to drag you?”

I sit.

He passes me a coconut that was warming by the fire. My head throbs and I hold it in my hands, just looking at it.

“Eat, Brooke. You have to think of the baby.”

He’s right, I have to think of the baby.

I jump when he leans towards me and brushes my hair back from my face.

“So beautiful. Motherhood suits you. It’s a girl, don’t you agree? My two girls, here with me at last.”

He picks up his own coconut with shaking hands, and swallows a mouthful of the warm meat. “Tomorrow I will get us some protein, but for now you need to eat your supper, then rest.”

Sand is caked over half Harvey’s face, but he doesn’t seem to notice. There is a gritty noise as he chews; it makes my stomach turn.

“I think I’ve eaten enough now,” I whisper. “Could you tell me where I’m to sleep?”

“Darling Brooke, where do you think you will be sleeping?” Then as quick as lightning his mood shifts. He snarls and squeezes my arm hard enough to leave bruises. “You are mine. You’re going to sleep right here in my arms. And I’m never going to let you go again. You, me, and baby make three.”

LEANDER

It's hard having to wait for the sun to rise.

I don't know if any of us really slept much at all. I do know we were all ready hours ago, and waiting for the sun to finally creep over the horizon is irritating. As soon as it's light enough, I head up a small incline to get a view of our surroundings.

There is no sign of human life. Nothing.

As I'm looking around, studying the terrain and asking myself *where*, Gray and Killian join me.

"The hot springs," Gray says, putting a hand on my arm. "Killian and I think that's the obvious place to look. If we were Harvey, that's where we would be."

I stare at the two of them. "Would he go somewhere obvious then?"

We could spend the whole day traveling towards these hot springs, and be going in the completely wrong direction.

"None of us can know," Gray tells me gently. "But at least it's somewhere to try. Otherwise, we're just shooting in the dark."

He's not telling me anything I don't know, I'm just frustrated. "Can you find them from here?"

Killian points to a ridge that sticks up high above the tree canopy.

"That's where the caves are. We should be able to get there in no time—a couple of hours, maybe?"

Staring into the jungle, I send a mental message to Daisy. *Hold on my love, we are coming for you.*

"Alright then, let's do it."

I stop when Gray briefly pulls me into a hug.

"We'll find her today, I just *know* somehow. It's all going to work out, brother."

"Then let's get going. I don't want to waste another second."

I mean that literally. Every second without Daisy is time wasted. I love

her; I want to spend every second with her, grow old with her, have a family with her. Spend years laughing, and loving, and being a family. And having lots of sex, even when I'm ancient and I can hardly get it up any more.

"What do you think? Just travel as the crow flies?" Killian asks. He points out a line that will take us down to the jungle floor. By taking that route, we'll need to find a way up the rock face.

"We need to find the way we came down last time, on that fan of shale. That's probably the best way," Gray replies.

Right, Gray and Killian have been there before, so I can leave the route planning to them. As we walk, I keep an eye out for signs of human activity. Just the reassurance that we are on the right track would give us a boost.

We hide the buoyancy rings in some long grass. Killian plucks some lychees off a nearby bush. Leaning over, he gives me a handful. "Eat."

"Thanks." The juice stings my lips. The sun has fully risen now, and as it shines on my face. My skin feels tight, sunburned. My long hair and scruffy beard give me some protection, but my lips are chapped and my nose is peeling. What I wouldn't give for a 'Daisy aloe rubdown'.

Stepping into the jungle, heading towards the interior, is a relief. We're all glad to be out of the intense sun rays. As I walk, I try to think up some optimistic thoughts about the future. I think about our baby.

I want to make so many things for the baby—a castaway nursery. We can make a crib, and mobiles out of vines and seashells. I can use my shirt for a baby-sling. I think that's what they are called? Like a hammock you have hanging off your chest?

Maybe each of us should donate our shirts to use as diapers. How did people do all this stuff in the old days? Just let a baby hang out and piss and shit everywhere?

I go back to nursery planning, which seems easier to figure out than diapers.

Malc, Jasper, and I had an amazing nursery. Seriously, there was literally a huge room at the top of my parents house that was called 'the nursery'. It was where Nanny Clark looked after us all one-by-one when we were born. Also on the top floor of the house were all our bedrooms (not our parents of course; the third level was for kids and 'the help' only). Next to the nursery was 'the schoolroom'.

Not that we were homeschooled, but when we were at home, we were either to hang out in the nursery or the school room. We ate our dinners with

Nanny in the nursery, and once we were all washed and pajamaed, we'd make our way downstairs to basically see our parents for the first time that day—to say goodnight.

Often, they were not at home and had forgotten to tell Nanny. I think she only stayed because she loved us, not because my parents were good employers. I'm quite certain they were not.

When I'm a father, I want my child to come to me with a big grin on his or her face. Not afraid like we were, hiding behind Nanny's skirts, not wanting to interact with the pungently-perfumed parent-people.

And I want to support my child in whatever they are interested in. I'll sit with them and listen and talk and play. That's how I want my family to be. That's how my family *will* be.

"Lea, this is where we hit the shale."

We are still in the dark of the jungle, but at the edge now—a rocky incline is ahead of us.

"If Harvey is up there, will he see us coming?"

"No, see how the ridge circles around? The entrance to the cave is beyond that curve. We'll be able to get really close, but we should try and move quietly."

"Roger that."

Taking a moment to drink our remaining water, and eat another fucking banana, we don't speak. There is no need. If Harvey is up there, we all know what needs to be done.

Twenty minutes later, we are just around the corner from the caves entrance. I can smell woodsmoke, so it's obvious Harvey is here.

We need to take him by surprise, so if Daisy is there, he can't hurt her or use her as a hostage. Waiting is frustrating, but it's better than rushing in to a situation and fucking it up. After a while, I hear a voice for the first time.

"...more fruit...gotta feed her..."

Fucking perfect.

I can feel my brothers tense; we are all a hair's breadth away from exploding.

And then there he is, stepping around the corner and straight into the three of us. His eyes widen with shock, and then he turns to move. I get to him first, and spin him around. Then Gray slams him into the rock face. Killian is already gone, off to find Daisy as we'd planned.

Harvey isn't going down as easily as I expected. He's hissing and struggling, and surprisingly strong. It takes both of us to keep him subdued.

"I'LL KILL YOU ALL," he screams. "SHE'S MINE!"

"Wrong thing to say," Gray growls, smashing his fist into Harvey's jaw.

Harvey drops like a stone and I watch as Gray drags him along the ledge. I don't care if he is dead or alive. My mind is on one thing—Daisy.

DAISY

Harvey has taken my boots.

He figures I can't escape if I don't have footwear. He's not wrong; there is no way I could travel across those rocks and then the jungle floor in bare feet.

So I've gone back to the hot springs. It's dark back in this part of the cave, but there is just enough light to see. If Harvey is off foraging for a while, I want to be able to enjoy the water without the worry of his eyes on me.

I quickly strip off my clothes. My shorts don't fasten anymore. I need to figure out a way to keep them up, but that's a problem for another day. Everything is a problem for another day—I can only handle this right now. And right now, it's mommy and me swim-time.

I dunk my head under the water and when I surface again, I think I'm hallucinating.

"DAISY, WHERE ARE YOU?"

That voice...I really hope I'm not hallucinating.

"I'M HERE!"

A minute later, through the gloom, Killian comes into view. As soon as he sees me he runs, then falls to his knees and cups my face.

"Sweet baby Jesus, are you alright? Oh my little love. Did that fecker hurt you?"

It's hard to form words because I'm crying so hard.

"Shhh, macushla, you're safe now." Killian pulls me out of the water and into his arms.

More footsteps are coming, and then Leander is here too.

"Is she alright? What did that fucker do?"

They have to be careful. Harvey could come back, and he has that knife.

"H-Harvey," I stutter. "Kn-knife."

"HE CUT YOU!" screams Leander.

"A little, it's not too bad, but you—you need to b-be careful."

"Harvey is not a problem," says a third voice, and then Gray comes into

view.

Killian gets up and wraps his arms around Gray. “You did good,” he murmurs into Gray’s hair.

Gray shakes his head. “I didn’t, I couldn’t.”

Poor Gray buries his face in his hands.

“What happened?” asks Killian.

“I chickened out—couldn’t do it. I was going to kill him. I was, but then... I couldn’t fucking take his life. I just knocked him out then tied him up,” answers Gray. His eyes, he looks terrible. “I’m so sorry, I let you down.”

“Gray...” I beckon him down and he joins us on the edge of the pool in a warm and wet hug. “I love you,” I tell him. “I’m glad he’s not dead by your hand. You don’t need to carry it around with you.”

“But I love you, Daisy. I want to make sure Harvey never hurts you again.”

“We’re not murderers,” says Leander, “however much we want to murder him. I guess we are disappointingly civilized.”

I look around at their gloomy faces.

“Guys! Get a grip! I don’t want you to kill Harvey. I don’t want that. Not killing him makes you better men than killing him would. Yes, he is a royal pain in our collective behinds, but to be honest, I think he has completely lost his mind. We cannot condemn a man to death for having a—a fucking mental break from reality!”

They don’t look convinced, but I know I’m right.

“...Swear,” says Leander, eventually.

I smile at him; at all of them.

“Believe me, this is right.”

“But what do we do with him now? We obviously need to keep an eye on him,” Killian says.

“Yeah, it’s fucking annoying,” Leander says, “but we’ll have to take him back with us. Figure out a way we can keep him contained.”

“Speaking of which, I’d better go and check he’s still tied up,” groans Gray, getting to his feet.

I stand too, then squeeze my arms tight around his waist. “I love you, Gray.”

“I love you, Daisy.” I move forward for a kiss, but we are interrupted by Leander.

“Dudes! Hot water!”

Oh, right! Leander hadn’t seen the springs before. He cannonballs in then

resurfaces.

“Go check on the douchebag, then get back here Gray. This is fucking amazing.”

We don't head home straight away; it's too late to start a jungle trek and then a mammoth swim. Instead we eat, drink, and swim in the amazing spring waters all afternoon. As soon as it's dark, we cuddle up together to sleep. I sleep all night without waking once, though the guys take turns to keep watch over Harvey.

The next morning, we set off at first light and covered the journey to the north beach slowly and with frequent stops. Moving at a pace I could handle was more important. Harvey was silent most of the time, apart from a little tune he kept humming to himself.

The moment the north beach comes into view, the idea of that swim makes me freak out, but I try not to show it.

Keep it together, keep it together.

Killian is holding my hand and feels me tense.

“Macushla, what's wrong?”

I could feed him a line, but he'd know I wasn't being honest. Killian always knows.

“I'm worried about the swim. It was so hard. I nearly didn't make it on the way here.”

My mind flashes back to that nightmare, with Harvey threatening to abandon me in the middle of the ocean if I didn't keep up. The cramps in my legs, my belly, my back. The pain.

I'd swallowed so much salt water that I was retching at the same time as swimming. I know it won't be like that with the guys, but it's still daunting.

Killian rubs circles into my back as Leander gives me a gentle smile.

“Relax, baby, I promise you we'll make it easy for you,” Leander says. He drags out the life rings from the long grass, and I feel a little more optimistic at the sight of them.

“I'm going to lash more bamboo to these,” he continues, “and make a raft for you to lay on while we do all the swimming.”

That does seem more doable.

I'm still nervous though.

Gray stands next to me as Killian and Leander walk away to find more wood and vines. I know they'll do their best to make me a secure raft. But the

ocean is so big and powerful, and I feel so small and tired. I can't shake off the weepy feeling. I turn to Gray.

"Hug me?" I ask, pathetically.

He takes me into his arms.

"It's all my fault. I should never have let him take you. I should have killed him."

I press my face into his chest. "Oh, Gray..." I hesitate, I'm not sure what to say to comfort him. "You did what was right. Harvey was the one in the wrong. I'm OK, we are all OK, that's all that matters."

Gray sucks in a breath. "That's not true, Daisy. I failed you and I don't know how to make up for it."

Tears fill my eyes. "You don't have to. You rescued me."

I want to convince him, but I don't think I'm doing a good job.

He's going to keep carrying around guilt until he sees me happy and safe. That won't really happen until we get back to our camp. "Let's swim now," I say. "We've got the floats, and there are still hours of daylight. The sooner we get back to camp, the sooner I can hug Keyara, and Rex. And the sooner we can eat a proper meal!"

Leander looks up from where he is giving the raft one last look-over.

"Are you sure?"

"Yep, one hundred percent. I don't need to wait. I've got you guys, and I know as long as I'm with you."

I try to give them a convincing smile. "I'll be perfectly safe."

REX

I force a smile on my face and play yet another round of frisbee.

It's taking too long, they should have been back by now.

As soon as Gray, Leander and Killian left, something inside me snapped. The tight control I had been keeping on my emotions.

Daisy was in trouble, and they were going to her, not me.

I wanted it to be me.

Gray was on a mission with Leander and Killian, and not me. I was left behind, and that feels fucking wrong.

It's been me and Gray for so long.

Age eleven I started middle school and met Gray. We became best friends immediately. On the first day, entering my new homeroom, this big kid called Bradley snatched the chair from behind this skinny little Mexican kid called Santiago. The kid had hit the floor so hard, and started to cry. Bradley, with his meaty face and expensive clothes, had made it his mission to give Santiago a hard time. I decided my mission was to protect Santiago; I fucking hated bullies. Without knowing, Gray had also decided on a role of Santiago's protector.

We'd flank the skinny kid like secret service agents, giving each other hand signals and coded looks when Bradley was around. Then, after school, the three of us would go back to my house and Meemaw would make us sandwiches, or we'd go to Santiago's and his dad would make us quesadillas.

We never went to Gray's place.

Santiago is now coding new software in Silicon Valley, living in a fuck off giant house, and has a super hot wife called Kelly. When we get off this fucking island we should go visit. I could do with a relaxing week or two by his infinity pool. Fucker.

I'd take Daisy to stay there—she'd get on with them. Introduce Santiago to my girl.

Daisy.

Yeah, she's my girl. She's the girl I aim to marry. That baby in her belly, that is going to be my baby, regardless of who put it there. Yeah, I know I'll have to share her with the others, but that doesn't matter one bit. A quarter of her is better than the whole of any other woman. I want to pick her up and never let her go. I want to kiss those pouty lips, and run my hands through that tangle of long blonde hair.

I love her. I think I've loved her for months, but it's only now I'm letting myself feel it.

I throw the frisbee again. It sails high above Keyara's head.

"You're doing it wrong," she pouts.

Uncle Rex is doing *a lot* of things wrong today. At least, according to Miss. Keyara.

"Throw it back?"

"This game is stupid. I don't want to play any more."

"No problem, let's go fishing for a while. We need to do that anyway."

Keyara looks at me mutinously, her bottom lip trembling. "I don't want fish. I want a sandwich."

"Me too, noodle. Maybe we can make egg and banana pancakes for dinner?"

"No! I hate those. I hate this stupid island. I HATE YOU!"

Key throws the frisbee at my head and takes off running.

Her tantrums are few and far between, but when they come, they're pretty dramatic. I watch her dive into the shelter.

I'll leave her be for a while, then go in for a conversation and some hugs.

Giving her space, I collect three eggs and mash them in with ripe bananas and set the whole mess heating. Though she may deny it, banana pancakes are her favorite thing to eat. Or at least they are her favorite thing to eat, here on the island.

"Key? Noodle? Can I come in?"

She doesn't reply, but I hear her little sobs and my heart breaks.

"I'm coming in," I tell her. "I've got hugs for you."

As soon as I lie next to her, she throws herself in my arms. "I want Daisy back," she cries. "And I want Mami and Papa. I want my Mami..."

Tears fall down my face as I rock her. "Shh, honey. Everything will be alright. Daisy will be home soon, and we'll get back to Sāmoa one day. We just need to be patient a little longer."

A little longer. If only that were true. My gut tells me we are going to have to be patient for a very long time.

Key eventually settles. We lay together in silence for a while, then she sits up. “Why aren’t they back yet?” she asks.

Good question.

“They had to travel to another island, and it takes time to do that. Several days to get there and back. We don’t need to worry, though. Killian, Gray, and Leander are probably moving slowly so Daisy doesn’t get too exhausted.”

“Do you think Harvey was mean to her?” she asks, chewing her lip. How do I answer that?

“I think Harvey was lonely; that’s why he took Daisy off to the other island. He wouldn’t be mean to someone he wants to be his friend, would he?”

“Will he be coming to live with us again?”

“No, honey, he most definitely will not.”

“Good,” she says.

Then, smiling for the first time in days, she gives me a hug.

“I’m hungry, can we have banana pancakes?”

GRAY

Our makeshift raft moves steadily through the late afternoon.

The brightness of the sky is changing; we don't have a ton of daylight left. I'm not happy about our progress.

Daisy is looking out to sea, a glazed expression on her face. There are smudges and scratches across her face, and bug bites and bruises cover her arms and legs. Harvey had sliced her with his makeshift knife—basically a shiv—and cut her on the neck, the belly (my blood boils just thinking of that), and across her calf. That's the one that went the deepest. The seawater has opened up the wound, and there is a thin stream of blood trickling down her ankle. She doesn't notice.

“You doing alright, love?”

The raft bobs up and down, and Daisy gives me a thumbs up, but in truth she is worn out. I hate to see those large purple shadows beneath her eyes, and the way her wet clothes outline her swelling belly and stick thin limbs.

“Not long now.”

I watch as she puts a hand up to shade her eyes, then she shifts and leans forward a little.

“Careful babe,” says Leander.

Daisy freezes, but it's not because of what Leander said.

“There's something in the water.”

I'm on alert, instantly. "What is it?"

"I don't know. I saw something for a moment, but now it's gone."

The raft is taken up on a wave, and as we crest, I can see quite clearly what the something is.

"There's a shark..." I hiss, doing my best to keep my voice calm.

"A SHARK?" Harvey screams, immediately starting to thrash around in the water and kick harder.

The dark fin comes at us.

"What do we do?" Killian's voice is shaking. We have so little time to think.

Daisy is frozen, her mouth open, clutching at the bamboo platform.

The shark surfaces close to us, swimming past fast. It's slate gray, and long. Maybe twelve feet?

"Don't splash, don't move," I shout out. I'm pretty sure that's the right thing to do. Despite the bad rep, sharks don't often attack humans unprompted—I think.

The shark slides under the body of the water again.

Think, Gray, think.

The shark fin slashes through the water towards us and nudges at the raft. Daisy screams as it rocks, and some of the wood comes loose. The bamboo was barely lashed together in the first place, and under the battering of half a ton of shark muscle, it doesn't stand a chance.

"He's coming again," cries Leander. "I'll get in the way." The shark's great head rises out of the water, and the jaws crunch down on the battered Mary-Mo buoyancy aid.

It's never going to give up.

"GRAY!" screams Daisy. I put out my hand to comfort her, and that's when I see her bleeding leg. A steady flow of blood trickles down her thigh and through the bamboo slats of the raft.

Blood in the water.

"BLOOD! DAISY'S LEG!" I shout. "WRAP SOMETHING AROUND IT!"

She immediately grabs at the clothing lashed to the life ring and pulls some toward her leg, but the raft is rocking wildly and she starts to slide.

The shark splits the ocean, the great mouth grinning as it races towards us.

Daisy is trying to scramble backwards, Leander is plunging under the water towards the beast, and Killian is swimming to the back of the raft, aiming to pull Daisy out of reach. Harvey is thrashing beside me, going completely crazy, clinging to me and the raft.

"LEANDER!" Daisy screams.

"HARVEY! LET GO!" I yell, desperate to get him off me. The shark tail thrashes in the water; there is chaos and churning water everywhere.

Once again, Harvey starts pulling himself up on the raft, almost capsizing it. I try to punch him, but miss.

He's stretching past me, trying to grab something.

A second later he has a jagged length of bamboo in his hand. Time slows as I watch him plunge it into his wrist, then pull it out. Again and again he stabs—blood begins to gush.

"To save Brooke. To save my baby," he croaks, then pushes away into the ocean, thrashing about, screaming at the shark.

"OVER HERE! OVER HERE!"

I watch as he stabs his shoulder, trying to get more blood into the water.

With a flick of the tail, the shark goes under again, this time coming up, jaw open and lines of dagger-like teeth just inches from Harvey.

There is a terrible noise and Harvey screams.

I swear I can hear his bones snap.

“SWIM!” yells Killian.

He’s right, we have to go...NOW!

Holding on to the raft, I kick with everything I have. Daisy and the baby are the only things that matter. “Hold on, Daisy.” I’m praying the raft structure will maintain for just a little longer, the shore is so close.

She’s screaming and crying, completely incoherent.

I glance up and see Daisy looking over our heads. Harvey’s screams have been cut short with a grotesque gurgle. Horror is reflected in her face.

“NEARLY THERE...” I scream.

My feet touch sand.

We push and push until the mess of bamboo sticks carrying Daisy is completely ashore. Killian pulls Daisy into his arms, and I lay there panting.

That’s when, through her sobbing, I can finally make out her words.

“Leander...where is he? He went under...” she wails.

My heart stops. I look around and realize for the first time he’s not with us.

“LEANDER!!”

Killian and I stand as one. I look up and down the beach. Nothing.

“LEANDER!”

“Go left, Killian, I’ll go right. Daisy—keep looking out to sea, scream if you see anything.” Not waiting for a reply, I set off running, moving through the surf, looking desperately for any sign of him.

Fuck.

All the way to the end of the short beach, I run. No sign.

This can’t be happening.

DAISY

Gray sprints back to me. I'm at the ocean's edge, scanning the water desperately.

"Anything?" he asks.

I force the lump out of my throat and whisper, "Nothing."

"I'm going further out." Killian shouts, and gestures up the beach.

Gray pulls me into his arms, but I remain stiff. "Did you see the shark actually attack him, Daisy? What did you see?"

What did I see? Blood, a massive mouth, sharp teeth. What did I hear? Screams.

"I don't know," I tell him. My voice is surprisingly steady. "It was all so chaotic. I saw him, and then Harvey did his thing, and then it was just a race to the shore. I didn't see."

How could I not have seen where he went?

That's when my knees give out, and I collapse onto the wet sand. Now the tears come, great hulking sobs.

"Daisy, breathe. Come on now, babe, breathe with me."

In the distance I hear Killian shouting. "LEANDER!"

I shake Gray off me. "Go look, and keep looking, Gray. I don't need you. Please, just go look."

Gray gets to his feet, strokes a hand across my wet hair, then takes off running. I don't care if I hurt his feelings. No one should be worried about me at the moment. I want all their attention on my sweet Leander.

Leander.

There is a story in Greek mythology about a handsome young man named Leander. He falls in love with a beautiful priestess named Hero. But she lives on the other side of a dangerous river. Every summer night, Leander swims the river to be with Hero.

But summer turns to fall, and fall to winter.

And then Leander drowns, trying to swim to his love.

Hero throws herself into the raging winter river and quickly drowns herself.

I won't drown myself if Leander is gone. But part of my heart will forever be dead. This I know.

GRAY

I run until I hit the end of the sand. Now it's just rocks and coral.

I look back along the beach to Daisy's huddled form. Shit, I have to find him. He has to be alright.

"LEANDER!"

Picking my way over the boulders, I try to stifle the panic rising inside me. The waves crash over the rocks, knocking me over. The drag tries to pull me into the ocean. I've cut my shin and my elbow. The blood dripping into the water takes me back to the moment the shark dove under. The last moment I saw my friend.

I'll see that creature in my dreams, from now until the day I die. The black, flat eyes and gaping mouth, like a diabolic grin.

I think of meeting your end in that mouth.

Could anything be more terrifying?

I have to believe it would be quick. Please, Jesus, that it would be quick.

There is no Leander anywhere around these rocks. Nothing to do but head to the other end of the beach and look again at that side. I have to believe there's at least a chance he's still alive. That little fucker. I blink away tears. That little fucker making me cry.

Killian is still holding Daisy. I hear her wail but I just blaze straight past her, increasing my speed.

"LEANDER!"

The waves suddenly get calmer and the noise of the crashing ocean calms, like the sea is holding its breath.

"GIVE HIM BACK!" I yell at the surf. How can we ever walk away from the beach? Turn our backs and head into the jungle. It will be

impossible.

“Are you there?” I whisper, moving slowly over the craggy rocks.

Fuck. I slip and slice myself again.

“Fucking get it together, you little shit,” I hiss. “I can’t go back to Daisy without you.”

My breath is coming out ragged. I balance precariously and wait for my heart to stop thumping so hard.

“Now would be a really good moment to show yourself, brother.”

Some movement catches the corner of my eye. A seabird flies low across the water. I watch its path.

And that’s when I see.

A hand. It moves slightly as the waves come in.

I make my way across more of the rocks. I’m not going fast because I don’t think I want to see.

“Leander?”

The hand. It moves again as I get closer.

“Leander?”

“I’M HERE.”

KILLIAN

“It’s OK, Daisy. He’s safe, we’re all safe.”

I move Daisy closer to where Gray is gently helping Leander down on the sand. I feel her shaking, my body is as well.

We become one trembling pile.

We stay like that for a while, I can’t tell how long.

Leander is panting like he’s just run a marathon. I reach out a hand and put it on his back.

“Lea, we made it. You did good.”

“Fuck me. A current took me under, I couldn’t fight it.”

Daisy tightens her arms around him. That was all so fucking intense.

And now Harvey is dead.

Harvey sacrificed himself so Daisy and the baby could live. Without that sacrifice, one or all of us would be dead. Leander first; he was already putting himself in the path of that beast.

I look out to sea. There is no sign of the shark now, and the water looks calm and tranquil.

My body feels completely battered, I can only imagine how Leander is feeling.

And poor Daisy. “Macushla? How are you doing?”

She has yet another huge bruise now blooming on her thigh.

“Daisy?”

“I’m alright.”

I give her a look; there is a wildness in her eyes like I’ve never seen before.

“I am, Killian. Harvey saved us. I thought Leander was dead. It’s a lot to take in. I don’t think I can process it right now.” Tears spill out over her cheeks.

Daisy gets to her knees and kinda flops her body over the three of us, like we are her human life raft. We hold each other and let her cry until finally she is all cried out.

“What do you need?” Gray asks her. “Food? Water? More rest?”

She shakes her head vehemently. “I want to go home. I need to go home. To Key, to Rex.”

“Then home it is.”

Gray lifts her to her feet. “And we’ll give you a chair-lift all the way there.” He raises an eyebrow at me and I move closer. “Hold onto my wrists,” he tells me.

Daisy tries to say she’s fine to walk, but eventually lets us carry her.

Leander leads the way, beating the trail, then Gray and I carry our Daisy, who is carrying our baby, through the jungle and back to the rest of our family.

REX

Last night I talked to my old crew.

When Key was asleep, I sat by the fire and spilled everything.

“Alicia, Hutch? Hey guys I love Daisy, is that OK? Stephan, I know your girl lost you, is it alright if I have a girl? Carlo—can you forgive me if I find happiness?”

There were no shooting stars, or heavenly interventions, to give me an OK from beyond the grave, just a shifting in my soul. A weight being released. I would never be rid of the guilt, but I was going to find ways to live with it in a healthier manner. I try to see my survival as a gift. Try to be worthy of that gift.

Fuck.

It’s hard. My automatic response, anytime I see someone wearing one of those ‘choose joy’ t-shirts is to imagine punching them in the face.

But...

Fuckkkk.

I think about Daisy and I being together. Her smooth tan skin, those heavy breasts, and that long blonde hair. Inside my shorts, my dick gives a pulse, and before I even realize what I’m doing, I pull my erection into my hand. I haven’t got myself off in eighteen months. Punishment.

Eventually, if you don’t wank, the desire goes away. Or at least it did with me, but meeting Daisy changed that. Right from the very first time I met her, my cock started begging for attention again. My body aches, desperately wanting release. What I really want is to plow myself deep inside Daisy, but for the first time in forever, I’m going to give into my right hand.

I imagine Daisy’s fingers running over my length, gently smearing the precum that is already leaking from the tip.

My erection is so hard it’s almost painful. Daisy taking me in her mouth, Daisy opening those sweet thighs. I pump my hand, going faster and harder, and when my balls tighten, I stifle a desperate grunt. I imagine Daisy smiling

up at me, then opening her mouth and my orgasm tears through me that I feel like I might pass out.

“Daisy,” I whisper, catching my breath. Somewhere in the back of my mind I imagine Carlo laughing and giving a round of applause.

“About fucking time, Malone. Look at you ‘choosing joy’ what a pussy.”

Carlo would seriously take the piss, but I’m doing it.

Rex Malone is aiming to choose joy.



Keyara and I are making sandcastles.

“Hey-ooh!” comes a shout from the edge of the jungle.

My heart!

Without thinking I race across the beach towards the group— I’m racing with Keyara to get to Daisy. Muscling Leander, Gray, and Killian aside, I grip Daisy’s face between my hands, and pull her to me.

“I love you, Daisy.”

She looks at me with such...fucking joy...that any resistance inside me just falls away. My heart, body and soul belong to this woman. Our lips meet, and she immediately digs her hands into my hair. I kiss her harder and harder, claiming her. The taste of her mouth, the little sounds she’s making, all of it driving me wild.

“I love you too, Rex. Forever.”

“Beyond forever,” I growl.

If this life ends, I’ll find her in the next and the next.

“Ahem.”

Eventually I pull back. Not letting my eyes leave her face, I address the guys. “Y’all, I’m all in,” I tell them.

“About fucking time,” grumbles Leander. He has a hand on the shoulder of a bouncy Keyara. Leander leans down and scoops her up. “I know you wanna see Daisy, noodle, but let’s let her and Rex talk for a moment, ok? Besides, we gotta make the place ready for her to lie down and get some rest!”

“Nice and cozy makes you dozy!” says Keyara with a nod.

She wriggles out of Leander’s hold, but only to drag him, Gray, and Killian up the beach, leaving Daisy and I alone.

Thank you, Leander.

“I’ve been losing my mind, Daisy. Please tell me you’re OK, Harvey

didn't hurt you?"

She instantly reassures me. "I'm fine; he really didn't do anything. I'm just tired from all the trekking and swimming." Standing up on her tiptoes, she kisses me again.

Her lips are chapped and rough, but to me they feel as soft as silk. Her baby bump presses into me. It's all intoxicating. I sweep her into my arms and carry her bridal style across the beach and into the privacy of the shelter.

"Don't come knocking if this shelter is rocking," she giggles.

I growl a response, my senses overwhelmed by the smell, taste, and feel of her. I want to rip her shirt, push open her thighs, grab at her ass, but I stop myself. She is fragile and exhausted. I'll make love to her by not making love to her.

"Let me get you food and water, and I'll massage your feet. There is coconut already warm by the fire."

"That all sounds great, but first, please don't stop holding me. I've wanted to kiss you for so long."

Her hands are moving over my chest, stroking my face, playing with my hair. I love it all.

And it makes me groan, this restraint is fucking hard. My mouth waters to suck on her nipple.

"We are not going any further than this," I tell her. My fucking voice is croaking. "No further than this until you regain all your energy. And you need to put on weight, you're so skinny."

Despite her pregnant swell, her hip bones jut out and I can see her ribcage. It's not good.

"We are going to fatten you up, and I want you sleeping ten hours a day, you hear me?"

"That does sound really good," she sighs. "I want you so badly, but baby needs have to come first."

I grin at her. "This will not be the last time our lovemaking is interrupted by the baby, so we might as well get used to it."

"I know," she whispers. "I just want to be filled up with your cock."

My name is Rex Malone, and I'm feeling joy.

"I'll go fetch some food."

As soon as I emerge, Keyara speeds into the tent. Leander, Gray, Killian are sitting around the fire. They look up as I exit the shelter, all three of them grinning.

“WHAT?”

“Nothing, brother, nothing at all.”

GRAY

“Hey, babe?”

I feel an arm go around me and Killian breathes into my neck. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah.”

No, yes, I don't know.

I turn around and see him and Daisy looking at me with worried faces.

“Talk to us, Gray,” Daisy pleads. “Don't keep it bottled up.”

She takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. Daisy is very hard to say no to.

“It's this whole Harvey,” I mumble. “It fried my brain. Like, I set out to kill him. Then didn't kill him, and then he died anyway. I don't know how to think about myself. Am I a good man? A bad man?”

Am I my father?

“Babe,” Killian says immediately. “You're the best a man can be.”

“It's true,” agrees Daisy. “Come on, let's go walk along the wet sand, you can talk it out with us.”

We walk to the far end of the beach, then snuggle in the shade of a large pine tree. I'm in the middle. Killian holds my left hand, Daisy my right.

“Now talk,” Daisy commands.

So I talk.

“Back on the other island, when Leander and Killian had rushed past me and into the cavern. I stayed with Harvey, right? I had him pinned. I told him I'd never wanted to kill another human being until that moment.”

It's true that I wanted to kill him, but something inside made me hesitate.

“L-l-look,” he'd gibbered. “I won't d-do anything like this again.”

“You won't.” I had said. I wasn't going to let him harm a hair on Daisy's head, and there is only one way to ensure that.

“But I couldn't bring myself to kill him. He was on his knees by this point,

begging for his life.”

Harvey had seen the indecision in my eyes.

“Just let me stay here alone—you’ll never see me again. I’m just alone. I’m just lonely. Come on, man, surely you understand?”

I pull him away from the wall and whip him around hard, he’s screaming.

“I’M SORRY...” he screamed.

“I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t kill another man in cold blood.”

“That’s because you are a good person,” Daisy tells me.

A good person. Ha! I hit him. I hit him and I heard his nose crunch under my fist. His head bounced off the rocks.

“It would be so easy just to roll him over the edge of the cliff,” I tell them. “I thought about it. I claimed it was an accident. I even bent down and put my hands under his body. I was going to do it.”

But I don’t.

Instead, I took the wire from my pocket and bound his wrists and ankles.

“You did the right thing,” Killian says.

“My dad killed a man,” I tell them. “He beat a guy to death. The jury said it was manslaughter, not murder, but I think about those words a lot--Man. Slaughter. Dad lost his temper and beat a man so badly that the guy died from his injuries. I saw it happen.”

“Ain’t you got any nuts in that sack of yours?” Dad says to me. He’s holding some weasely guy by the collar, but I can’t tell who it is, on account of all the blood.

“Here’s your chance to man-up. One of these days, you’ll need to put a punk down, so come get a few swings in. Ain’t nobody gonna teach you better than this. Put your boots on, kick his teeth in!”

Dad’s eyes gleam with excitement.

And I so want to please him. This is the first time he’s ever really... seen me.

“Dad wanted me to join in. Help him beat the guy up. It was all so messed up.”

“Gray, you little pussy, I ain’t gonna hold him here forever.”

I run into my room and grab my boots. They are heavy, and far too big for me, but some guy left them in the trailer one night—must have gone home high and barefoot. Tying them is hard. No one has ever shown me how to do shoelaces properly, but I’ve been watching people, and I’ve almost got it.

Takes time though.

“GRAY!”

I stand and walk back into the main room.

If I do this, Dad will approve. Dad will like me. I’ll be like Dad.

I’ll be like Dad.

Instead of kicking, I turn, yank the handle of the trailer open and run.

I’ll never be like Dad, never, never.

“I spend my life trying not to be like my father.”

“And this...this thing with Harvey. That bought you too close, right?” asks Daisy.

She’s spot on, of course.

But it seems to me that Gray is overthinking things. I put my arms around him and stroke the front of his shorts.

His breath stutters.

Then I grab Daisy’s hand and press it against his cock.

KILLIAN

“Killian! Gray is having a hard time,” she scolds. I’m about to give him a hard time alright.

“Macushla, this is going to make him feel happier, I promise. We need to get him out of his head.”

Gray’s face has changed from being filled with worry, to filled with lust. That was easy.

He reaches over and wraps an arm around Daisy, pulling her closer. Then he slides his thumb over her bottom lip. “Can you kiss me better?” he asks in a husky voice.

I move behind Daisy and slip my hands under her tattered tank top. Daisy moans as I gently massage her breasts. Gray’s nostrils flare. She’s already wet for us, we both know it.

Gray gently pulls down her shorts. The top button is permanently undone these days. She parts her legs slightly, and I can tell when he finds her clit, because she lets out a moan.

Still standing behind her, I kiss my way up her neck. “See, he’s already in a better head space,” I murmur. Her hips rock as Gray’s fingers slide in and around her sexy mound. Her tits are so lush now, and her nipples--oh my fecking christ--heaven. “Now it’s time for you to make him feel so much better, don’t you think so, macushla?”

“Please,” she moans.

Gray pulls his hand away from her body. He stares into my eyes, it’s so

fucking hot to look at him while feeling up my girl at the same time. With one hand, he pulls down his shorts and tosses them to one side. Both Daisy and I have an intake of breath. You can't help it when Gray's masterpiece of a cock is out in all its full glory. It bobs upright against a backdrop of his washboard stomach.

Moving closer, he moves a hand around Daisy's head and buries it in my hair. She's sandwiched between us as Gray leans in and kisses me softly, then moves on to Daisy and kisses her. I trace my hands down her back until they reach that perfect ass. I play with her cheeks some, then separate the peach and slip a finger down to massage the entrance of her little puckered hole.

Daisy groans into Gray's mouth.

Gray brings a hand back to her pussy. I massage the back and he takes care of the front.

"She's dripping wet," he tells me. "So ready for us."

"I'm so ready," Daisy echoes. "Please..."

"Macushla is begging for some dick, Gray," I tell him, nipping her ear lobe between my teeth.

"All in good time, all in good time," he replies.

Daisy isn't keen on waiting apparently and takes matters into her own hands. Or rather, Gray's cock into her own hands. I watch her stroke him, then circle her hand around his girth.

Gray and I groan in tandem. As she touches him, my own cock bucks and twitches as though those strokes were on my own shaft.

Bringing a hand out of her pussy, Gray offers me his fingers to suck. "Thank you," I say. I'm truly grateful, because it's the best taste in the world.

"I want to taste," Daisy says.

"Good girl," Gray tells her, stirring a finger in her honeypot then bringing

it to her mouth. She cleans herself off his middle finger.

“I want to taste you as well,” she says. “Help me down.” Daisy starts lowering herself to the sand.

“Daisy,” Gray starts to say, but the rest of his words disappear as she moves her head forward and her tongue slips out to lick the precum from the head of his cock. I immediately fist my own.

Gray is making groaning noises, and I’m breathing hard. This beautiful girl takes Gray’s beautiful cock into her sweet mouth.

My dick is throbbing. Maybe Daisy senses it, because she releases Gray from her lips. “Take a taste of this, Killian,” she tells me.

Bossy Daisy, I love it.

I drop to my knees. Together we put our mouths on Gray. I’m kissing Daisy, and we are licking and kissing Gray’s monster missile as we do so. I feel his cock swell even further, and know he’ll blow if we don’t pull back soon. I’m not ready for this game to be over.

Daisy is a mindreader, because she pulls back then tugs on Gray’s hand to bring him down onto the sand with us.

“I need...” she whispers.

We both know what she needs. Gray’s head buries between her legs. I watch his tongue lap around that sweet, sweet pussy. I take one of her nipples, tugging at it with my mouth. She makes little gasping sounds, then calls out as I watch Gray suck on her clit.

“Want to see Gray work on my cock too,” I whisper in her ear.

“Yes, yes.”

I lay on my back next to Daisy.

“Gray,” she pants, “go to Killian now.”

Sweet thing, she's so close but letting me get some Gray mouth before she comes.

Oh feck! Gray wraps his hand around my cock. I love Daisy's tiny fingers on me, and I love Gray's fecking shovel hands. Two ends of a spectrum. Daisy lets out a moan as Gray's tongue sweeps up and down my piercings.

"Sit on my face," I tell her, "facing Gray."

She does as she's told, and it's fecking intense. Her pussy and ass smother me, but if I'm going to go out, this is the way to do it.

Gray swallowing my shaft to the back of his throat now.

I slurp on Daisy's honey-pussy. I am in fecking heaven. One hundred percent.

And feck, I'm going to come.

My cock pulses as she grinds on my face. I hear Gray gag, which turns me on so much I lose it. I thrust my hips, getting even deeper and then I let go. Rivers of salty cum shooting off into Gray's beautiful throat. My own tongue plunges into Daisy's hole, fecking her with my mouth.

Her insides pulse and tighten, then she floods into my mouth, grinding and crying out. I lick and suck and lick and suck. I never want it to stop.

But Gray pulls her off my face. "Taste this," I hear him say. I imagine Gray passing my cum from his mouth to Daisy's and even though I just blew, my cock twitches again.

"My turn," he grunts, and he rolls Daisy onto her side so they lie like spoons. I get the pleasure of watching Daisy's face as that mammoth cock slides into her. I know the stretch she's feeling—it's so good. Her eyes flutter and she rocks her hips.

"My girl," Gray growls, thrusting into her again and again. They are both covered with a sheen of sweat.

“Gray, more, please, more.”

He picks it up a gear, and instantly she screams out, “GRAY!” I watch our girl shatter on his massive dick. Seconds later Gray is coming as well. Together they are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Later we lie together, petting and kissing one another.

“Are you feeling any better, Gray?” Daisy asks.

“I think I’ll need some more of this therapy tomorrow,” comes the answer.

Good reply, my man.

Maybe MARCH?

LEANDER

Daisy guesses she will give birth in about seven weeks.

Things are going to get real, real soon.

I get up to put more wood on the fire and nearly fall over. “Whoa, turned into Gray there for a minute?”

It’s odd, but I have started getting dizzy spells. I didn’t want to mention it to anyone, especially Daisy, because she’d just worry. But when I nearly fall in the fire, it’s pretty obvious.

“Me too,” says Key, unexpectedly. “When I stand up, everything goes swirly.”

For a moment everyone is silent, then Rex asks if anyone else has been experiencing dizziness.

“Duh,” says Gray.

“A little,” Killian answers.

“A lot,” Daisy says.

“DAISY! Why haven’t you told us?”

“Leave it, Leander,” Rex growls. “There’s something I’ve been thinking about, and that’s our nutrition, or lack of it. Because our diet is so limited, we have to be short on various minerals and things. I think the dizziness is to do with that. Look at our dry skin, our fingernails. My hair has gotten super thin. That’s all signs of malnutrition.”

Fuck. That has to be extra bad for Daisy; she’s trying to make a baby without enough fuel.

The odds of this baby surviving are already not the best. We don’t talk about it, but we all think about it.

“We can eat more calories,” Rex says, “but I don’t think that’s good enough. We have to vary our diet, or we could get really sick.”

“Alright,” Killian stands up and starts pacing around. “We vary our diet then, we’ve got too complacent on what we are eating. For example, we’ve all stopped eating seaweed, because none of us really like it, but we start that

again.”

“We found the breadfruit by pure accident,” Gray adds. “Who knows what other stuff is out there that we haven’t found yet.”

In the background we can hear the clucking of the chickens. No one voices what must be our collective thought.

“Uncle Rex?”

“Yes, noodle?”

“Is mal-mal—what did you call it?”

“Malnutrition.”

“Yeah, that. Is it bad for our baby?”

I love how Keyara refers to the bump as ‘our’ baby.

“Well, we have to be mindful to make sure Daisy has the right food,” Rex says eventually, pulling Key into a hug.

“Then,” she says in a small voice, “I think we need to cook a chicken for Daisy.”

“Honey, no...” Daisy is instantly on her feet. “You love those chickens.”

“Yes, but I ate chicken at home all the time. And you could have Snape. I don’t like him because he always pecks at me.”

Eating a cockerel or two really would help things.

“Are you sure?” I ask Keyara. “Don’t feel pressured.”

She nods again. “I’m sure.”

“Thank you, sweetpea.”

Rex and I meet eyes. A couple of cockerels is not going to be enough to keep us all fit.

“How about we start doing some really intensive foraging? Go in teams and spread out all through the island?” suggests Rex.

“I wouldn’t know what was edible and what was poison,” I tell him.

“Oh, we know that,” Daisy laughs. “Too well.”

“We’d just bring anything possibly non-toxic back to camp, then discuss it with them,” Rex tells us. “And I want to start this soon—like tomorrow. We have rain every day, and that makes us lazy and just want to stay in the shelter, but we can’t do that any more.”

“Tomorrow it is,” Killian agrees, then picks up Gray’s hand. “Wanna be my foraging partner?”

It’s cute how Gray blushes whenever Killian is lovey-dovey with him.

“Then you and I, Rex?”

“That leaves the girl’s alone.”

“We’re fine. Just bring what you find. I still remember some of what Brooke taught me about what’s edible and what’s toxic. Until then, we’ll hang out here,” Daisy decides. “Besides, me and Key hardly ever get girl time any more, isn’t that right, honey?”

Keyara leaps out of Rex’s arms and flings herself at Daisy. “Yeah, we need a break from smelly boys! Isn’t that right, Luna.”

“Who’s Luna,” I mouth to Daisy.

Daisy points down at her bump, then gives a shrug.

Luna, eh? I guess I could get behind that.

“Alright, it’s decided. Tomorrow starts a brand new culinary adventure.”

DAISY

The guys have gone hunter-gathering for the third day in a row.

Me and Key have big plans for the day; we are going to play the most epic chutes and ladders tournament in history.

Tomorrow, they'll spend the day here and we can assess what they've discovered. And tomorrow is the day Snape will be going to the great chicken coop in the sky.

My mouth waters at the thought of it/him.

I'm not going to lie, I'm not feeling that good. I ache, and I'm dizzy. I'm hoping it's just regular pregnancy stuff.

The weather isn't helping—it's raining again.

We've kinda got used to being damp all the time. There is a downpour at least once a day now, sometimes many more times than that. The sky is mostly overcast with heavy clouds.

"I'm going to have a nap before playing. Is that OK, Key?"

"I'll nap too," she replies, snuggling in to me.

In my dream, I'm giving birth to the baby, but I'm out at sea, back on the Mary-Mo.

"Daisy, Daisy."

"Is it time to push?"

"Daisy!"

Keyara was shouting at me. Why was Key in charge? Where were the guys?

"DAISY!"

I wake with a jerk. Oh, right. Not in labor, and still on the island.

"What's up, Key?" I ask as I rub my eyes.

"You've got to look outside."

I haul myself to my feet with a groan. My legs ache, my back aches. Being pregnant and not having a bed to sleep in is no joke.

Outside, it's like someone has thrown a bucket of inky-purple paint all

over the sky. The wind is whipping up as well.

“The sky, Daisy...”

“Yeah, it looks a little rough, doesn’t it, darling.”

“No, you don’t understand. The sky.”

As I squint at the horizon, I wonder if it’s my imagination, or whether I am really seeing waterspouts.

“You know, Key, I think this might be a good time to practice our cyclone drill.”

Why does this have to happen when the guys aren’t here!

Key is immediately in action, pulling on her battered jelly shoes, then piling our cooking things into the shelter and grabbing water bottles.

I pocket the fire starter and fill a woven basket with food. Two minutes later we’re ready, just as sheets of rain start pounding us.

“COME ON!” Key yells. Now she really *is* the one in charge.

The wind is so loud and the trees bend and creak. This really could be a cyclone; I really flipping hope not.

Key and I plunge into the jungle; the ground is already getting sodden and my boots sink into the soft loam. We can’t panic—if we panic, one of us might get hurt. We just need to carefully make our way to the retreat. It doesn’t take many yards until I’m breathless and panting. The baby started taking up my lung space two weeks back. I see a long stick leaning against a tree and use it as a cane.

It’s dark under the jungle canopy, and rain pours off the leaves like overhead hoses on full blast. I wipe the wet from my face and check in on Key. She’s grim, but determined, and gives me a thumbs up.

One step after another we plow forward. I’m a little worried we’ll lose our way; everything looks so different right now. I stop by a massive tree trunk. The path splits around it.

“This way,” Keyara yells, tugging on my shirt and pointing to the left.

“Are you sure?”

She nods. Flipping fiddlesticks, I follow Key’s directions and trust her sense of direction.

We keep walking. I’m beyond exhausted, and my back hurts so much. I didn’t think the cave was this far from the beach.

“I have to stop,” I gasp.

“We have to go!” Key tugs me.

She’s right. I push myself onto my feet from my leaning post and pain

tears through my body. Through my abdomen.

It's just a cramp, or a muscle pull.

I take a deep breath then continue on. It still hurts, but not quite as much.

Walk it off, Daisy.

Branches are waving back and forth. Keyara goes down on one knee when she stumbles over a fallen limb.

“Key!”

“I’m ok.” Even in this dim light I can see how scared she is, but she doesn’t let on. Brave little girl. She steadies herself on my arm and stands.

“I lost the bottles.”

“That’s OK, I’m pretty sure Rex stored more in the cave anyway. We’ll be there soon and make a cozy fire.”

I imagine crackling flames warming us and it gives me the boost I need to keep going. We are definitely on the right track, as the terrain is starting to slope. Water runs down the loose rockface; it’s going to be slippery as anything.

“Key, we have to be super careful now.”

I’ve carried the food basket all this way, but I’m going to have to put it down, I’ll need both hands for this.

“We could stay here?” says Key.

“No, we need to get to the cave. It’ll be safer there.”

I don’t mention that I’m terrified the trees are going to start blowing over. “You go first, I’ll be right behind you.”

Key gives me a worried look, but does as I say, scrambling up the rock face with reasonable ease. I waddle over to start my ascent. The rocks aren’t that steep, I tell myself, it’ll be a walk in the park. The slope is forty-five degrees—if that.

It feels practically vertical as I climb. My lungs are screaming, so are my thighs. I don’t know if I can do this. I lean myself into the gravel and just breathe.

I’m sorry baby. Mama’s so tired.

“DAISY!”

No! I have to keep going. Keyara and the baby need me. I make my jelly legs keep going, keep going, keep going until I’m virtually at the ledge where Key is anxiously waiting.

“Nearly there sweetheart,” I gasp. And as I do, another searing cramps tears across my stomach.

I crawl my way along the ledge and finally made it to the cave.

“AAAHHH!” It hurts so bad. I can’t think, I just hurt. It’s too much!

“I’m going for help,” Key tells me.

“No! Don’t leave here. Stay with me,” I tell her with a groan. Once the pain subsides a little, I try to get the flint to spark, to no avail. It got so wet on the way here.

“Let me do that, Daisy.” Key snatches it from me.

I lean back and catch my breath. “Key, I need you to listen to me.”

Her eyes are wide and staring.

“Key?”

She turns to me, as another spasm of pain rips at my abdomen.

“I love you, Key.”

She comes over and grabs my hand, squeezing it tightly. “Are you having the baby?” She tightens her grip.

“I...I might be.”

Key closes her eyes and lets go of my hand. “I’ll make the fire.”

LEANDER

The weather has gone crazy.

One minute, we were celebrating the discovery of a crop of self-seeded taro plants, then the next the fucking heavens open and all hell is being let loose.

“Shit, we gotta get back to the girls.” Rex was pulling up taro tubers and shoving them down the front of his shirt. “Let’s take as many of these as we can.”

I follow suit, and all the time I’m harvesting, the wind gets stronger and the sky blacker.

“Rex, we have to call it—it’s fucking mental. Look at the clouds.”

They are dark and boiling and have a purple tinge to them. The air inside smells of ozone. The heavy clouds are effectively turning the early afternoon sky into dusk.

“Right.”

We start walking at a good pace. It took us a while to get out here, but we were stopping and foraging the whole time. The return journey should be way quicker; my ankles are aching, but they often do.

At least I can walk.

My mind drifts back to a time when I couldn’t even stand. The weeks lying in a hospital bed were the worst of my life. It wasn’t the pain of having my skin debrided, or the fact I was always fucking freezing from various liquids pumping into me from IV’s.

It was the fact I survived when the others didn’t.

Alicia was worth so much more than me. Carlos, too. Fuck, all of them.

“Why me?”

The hospital shrink would come in and talk about survivor's guilt. Sure, I understand that, but so what if I know the term? Survivor’s guilt is there for a reason—it’s not wrong.

I should feel guilty. What kind of monster would I be if I wasn’t?

The door of my room opens, and the PT walks in. She's young and pretty, and I know I'm fucked up because I have no desire to flirt with her.

"Today is the day, Leander! Time to stand on your own two feet."

Fuck. That's all I've been trying to do for these last few years, stand on my own two feet and not rely on family money.

But the family money has got me the best plastic surgeon on the eastern seaboard, and extra PT that the fire service insurance doesn't cover.

So by not standing on my own two feet, I will learn to stand on my own two feet again—ironic.

I close my eyes and try to go back to sleep, but the PT doesn't take the hint. "This is going to be great," she says. "Don't knock it until you try it. You're gonna be surprised how fast you can be up and about again."

Thunder cracks, and a bough crashes down not three feet from where I am.

"Fuck, you OK, Lea?"

"Yeah. I hope the girls are at the cave by now."

"They will be. Daisy would see the storm and know to move."

"So we head straight there?"

We are having to shout to be heard over the storm. Rex stops marching and moves closer. "The evac site is virtually en-route, it makes sense."

Oh Rex, I think things stopped making sense years ago.

DAISY

I'm in labor—I think.

It's too early.

Unless this is false labor...how am I supposed to know? Everything has been so uncomfortable for days; twinges, strains, aches, but this *feels* different.

I stand up on wobbly legs and try to assess the situation. I'm in a filthy cave, there is a cyclone raging outside, and the only person to help me through this is a nine-year old girl.

“How many water bottles do we have, K-Key?” I barely get my question out before I'm doubled over in pain. And the pain isn't static, it's building and building. How can this keep getting worse? How long has it been since the last one? Ten minutes? Eight?

I lean against the stone wall and let the pain wash over me. Keyara is saying something but I can't concentrate on her words, I just concentrate on my breathing.

“Breathe, Daisy, it's alright, just breathe.”

For the last few weeks, Killian has been doing Lamaze classes with me. He is the only one of us with any baby knowledge—well, pregnancy knowledge.

“You'll need to keep moving during labor. Have an active labor. Don't lie on your back—especially to give birth. You want to be crouched or on your knees.”

“Fine. And I wander around between contractions, but what about the pain?”

“Long, deep breaths through the nose, then exhale. Breathe in for five, breathe out for six. You just concentrate on the breathing. Breathe in for six, breathe out for seven. Elongate your breaths.”

“You'll be with me?”

“I promise. You're not doing this alone, Daisy.”

I breathe, and move around the cave.

Breathing counts as tension mounts.

“Wow, good job on the fire, Key.”

“And we have seven water bottles, four of them were empty so I’ve put them in the rain to fill up—don’t worry, I jammed them between rocks so they won’t blow away.”

“You are amazing.” She really is. “Now, Key, if the guys don’t get here before the baby comes, I’m going to need your help, OK?”

Her eyes grow even wider. “OK.”

I try to imagine giving birth.

Don’t lie on your back. On my knees for the baby please.

“I’ll be on all fours, you know what I mean? And the baby will come out between my legs. I’ll need you to hold her as she comes out. We don’t want her to fall on the g-g-gr…”

Urgh.

Five seconds inhale, six seconds exhale. Six seconds inhale, seven seconds exhale.

A puddle forms on the floor between my legs. I guess my waters have broken.

Keep Calm, Daisy, you need to reassure Keyara.

I realize I’m failing when I see Keyara cupping her hands over her ears, and my cries echo around the cavern. It’s like my brain is not communicating with the rest of my body.

“It’s OK, Key…we are all going to be OK,” I croak.

I don’t think she believes me.

I don’t think I believe me.

KILLIAN

Holy feck, this storm came out of nowhere.

It's not just a tropical shower, it's wild.

And we are all the way on the opposite side of the island, as far from Daisy and Key as it's probably possible. The power of the wind is enormous, and lightning flashes illuminate the gaps in the canopy as Gray and I hustle. We'll be splitting up soon. Gray is going to the camp, to see if the girls are still there, and I'm going straight to the storm shelter. The howling wind is making the trees dip and dance, the force almost bringing one day as we hurry along the mud path.

I really hope Daisy and Key have already evacuated.

A call comes in from Gray. "I'm going this way," he shouts. "Meet you at the cave."

Hurry, Gray, and be safe. Please.

I rush further inland, my bearings are a little shot, so all I can do is aim for the general direction of the high rocky peak. Rivers of water churn up the ground. Poor Gray, having to deal in the home-made shoes.

A bough crashes to the ground in front of me, I cringe with my head in my hands, but it seems like the rest of the tree is not going to follow.

Keep going. Must keep going.

Eventually I see formations of prominent rocks scattering the jungle floor, and the trees are getting thinner. All of this is a good sign.

"Come on, Killian," I mutter, peering through the gloom and trying to decide which was to go next.

When I turned fourteen, I got lost on a school camping trip. I was new to New York state, and life in America. The camp was in an area called Hardscrabble.

I liked the name of the place, but not really the company of my classmates. Until I met Zoe. She, like me, had snuck away into a thick area of trees, not

far from the cabins, to indulge in some smoking.

I was smoking reds, she upped me by bringing a joint to camp-out. After that auspicious meeting, the two of us hung for the whole week, and made it our mission to do none of the activities that were planned, but just wander the woods and get high.

Now I think back on it, our teachers were really young, probably early twenties, and we must have given them a fucking heart attack when we didn't make it back one night. We'd intended to, but...

We got lost. Really lost.

For twenty-four hours. Search and rescue had to come and find us.

What I wouldn't give for search and rescue to come find us right about now. Walking blindly in the now pitch-black, I realize my hands are in contact with the hard rock face.

My knees turn weak with relief.

Now just gotta make the climb up to the ledge, then move along the ledge to the cave.

I'm grateful for the lightning now, with each flash I get a glimpse of what is ahead of me. No point putting it off, with a prayer to Mother Mary, I start pulling myself up the scree.

The noise of the storm roars on, but as I climb higher, the noise lessens. I'm above the trees, I guess. The lightning flashes and I see the ledge just a couple of feet above me.

I roll onto it and lay back, soaking wet and exhausted. Shite, I can't imagine how Daisy and Key would have climbed up this; it would have been nearly impossible.

Maybe Gray has found them. Or Rex and Leander. When the storm started, they obviously would have come running as well. I'll probably find them in the cave, warming coconut by the fire.

Thunder booms, making my ears ring. I've got to get moving again. It takes a moment for the ringing to stop, then I get to my knees and stand.

It's at that moment that I hear the scream.

My heart is racing, the sound of my blood rushes in my ears. I'm truly fucking terrified, but push everything out of my mind except moving along the ledge and finding my girls.

The cave is dark, the only illumination is coming from the flickering fire. It

lights the sheen of sweat on Daisy's face. The hollows that are her eyes.

"Daisy?"

Her eyes are unfocused. I put my hand out to Key and she grabs hold, like for dear life.

A moment later, Daisy screams again.

It's the sound of agony. "Breathe, Daisy...count with me."

She moans and sways and I try to move her arms away from the cold stone wall and drape them around my shoulders.

"Don't panic, Key, this is all normal," I tell the little girl—and myself. *This is all normal, right?*

Daisy's body is hot to the touch, and streaming with sweat.

"One, two, three, four, five, and exhale."

Daisy breathes with me, I hear Key doing the same. We are one unit, like we are sharing one set of lungs.

"Killian," Daisy whispers as the contraction finally releases her. "You came."

"Of course, and you're doing so good. So good, macushla."

"I don't think I can do this. I can't do this."

"Yes, you can, Daisy. You're so strong, so amazing."

"I'm not! I'm not Brooke. I'm just Daisy—and I suck at everything." She starts to sob and I hold her in my arms.

We breathe and sway together and eventually she calms down. "Are you thirsty?"

She shakes her head. I can't believe that, but maybe the concept of trying to drink is just too much right now.

"I'm scared."

"I know, baby."

"UNCLE!"

I glance over my shoulder and see Rex and Leander frozen in the cave mouth. The next second they are moving. Moving fast.

"What do you need?"

Rex picks Keyara up into a tight hug, Leander starts stoking the fire.

"Wet a cloth, we can moisten her lips."

Leander has his shirt off before I even finish the sentence. "It's already soaked with rainwater." He moves close and tenderly offers it to Daisy's mouth. She has her eyes closed, but her lips part and she started to suck on the fabric.

“You need me to spell you, Killian?”

“No, I’m good for now, but maybe in a while.” I tamp down the urge to get snap at Leander, but feck—I’m Daisy’s support.

“You’re doing so great, baby,” he whispers, stroking her hair, and I immediately feel like a twat. He loves her just as much as I do. This baby is his, just as much as it’s mine.

“So great,” Rex says from his place by the fire—Keyara curled on his knee.

Something catches my eye; a commotion, and Gray comes barreling in.

“Hey, you’re all here? Thank fuck. Shit, you’ll never guess...what?”

He comes to a sudden halt. Then runs the last few steps to Daisy.

“Daisy?”

Her body has been flopped on mine, but now I feel it start to stiffen.

“Gray?” she whispers. Then she can’t speak any more, a low groan comes deep inside her throat.

“Breathe with me...”

“What’s happening, Killian?”

I can’t concentrate on Gray, Daisy is clutching my shoulders, tears streaming down her face.

“She’s in labor...” says Leander, moving to Gray and putting an arm around his shoulder.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

“One, two, three, four...”

“Isn’t it too soon?” Gray is yelling in the background

“Five, six, seven...”

“Her due date has always been guesswork, maybe this is fine...”

“MAYBE?”

“Gray,” I hiss at him, “take it down a notch.”

Daisy’s body starts to slacken again.

“I can’t,” she whispers. “I’m too tired, I can’t keep going.”

“You’re nearly there. Someone start counting, when need to time her contractions.”

If we were at a hospital, someone would be checking to see how dilated her cervix is. Is that something we should do?

We’ll wait on that. Wait until the contractions are much closer. That’s when we need to ensure she doesn’t push until she’s fully dilated. How could we have done this to her?

Daisy's eyes are closed again. Gray moves behind me. "Sorry," he says quietly in my ear. "Can I help?"

"Get behind and hold me."

Gray's long arms circle around my chest, and my tired muscles appreciate the slight reprieve from holding Daisy up.

"Daisy, suck on this, get some energy." Leander is feeding her tiny bits of warm coconut.

Warm coconut.

"Open up some fresh coconuts, the inside will be sterile. And I need all your clothes."

Nobody questions me, just does what I ask.

"Daisy babe, let's get you down on the ground. Get clothes under her knees and hands...pad the floor for her."

"I can't move," she groans.

"Sure you can, it'll feel better, and I can see how far along you are." Looking over my shoulder, I tell Rex to start heating some coconut to turn to oil—I can use it to clean my hands.

"Remember to add water to the coconut, then scrape the oil that comes to the surface."

"Yeah, yeah."

I'm going to feel for Daisy's cervix.

"Down we go..." Leander and I lower her down.

"OW! OW! OW!"

As soon as she is on all fours, Gray starts to rub her back. I wish there was more light, but I guess measuring the cervix is a touch thing anyway.

"Clean oil," Leander says, pouring it over my hands. As I rub it all over my fingers, another scream comes from Daisy. Leander gets low on the floor and murmurs encouragement as I kneel behind her.

"OK, babe, I'm putting my hand on you."

Feck, am I really doing this?

In the flickering light, Daisy's skin is slick with sweat and her spine rocks and arches.

Holy mother and all your angels, help us through this.

"Here we go."

Her body keeps moving, rocking, under my hands, and I can hear her moans all the way through her core to my fingers. Edging in carefully, I try not to freak out. My fingers reach the end of her vaginal canal, and come to a

flat round donut shape. Right, this is where I measure.

Wait, I feel something round, plugging the donut. Oh my mother fucking christ, that's the baby's head. I just touched our baby.

Focus.

Good thing I learned the metric system at school. The diameter of the opening feels pretty fecking big. I try to estimate. At least seven centimeters, if not more. I try not to react as Daisy cries. I know this must just be adding to her misery, but we have to know.

Eight or nine. That's my best guess. Which means we are close.

"I'll check again when you get the urge to push," I tell Daisy. "And, macushla? I felt the baby's head. It's right there, and they are waiting patiently to meet us."

"You felt her?"

"I did, and real soon, so will you when she's curled up at your breast. Not long now."

DAISY

Not long now?

Another minute is too long, another second is too long.

I count my breaths.

“Daisy, what’s seven times six?” says a little voice.

Huh? I can’t answer, I can’t speak. I can listen.

“What do you mean, Key?” someone asks.

“Papa always does his tables when he feels sick. After he has his treatment. He says it helps keep his mind dis-dis..”

“Distracted?”

“Yes, distracted.”

Seven times six?

Err, my mind is like mush, but I eventually figure the answer. Then I start working through the rest of the sevens until I get to fourteen times seven and...

AGHHH! It hurts so much. I can’t do this any longer. I don’t feel like pushing at all. I’m going to be stuck in this hell forever.

The pain lessens.

What’s eight times three?

Hands are rubbing my back. I don’t think it helps the pain, but I don’t want them to stop. It’s like if I feel their touch, I know I’m not alone.

Baby, you gotta help your Mama, I don't have much gas in the tank.

All I want to do is collapse on the floor and sleep for a million years. Arms are holding me up, and I sink into them, letting them take all my weight. My legs won’t stop trembling. Another contraction starts to build.

It’s too soon; the last one just ended.

No. No. “Nooooooooooooo.”

This time it feels like something breaks inside me, like my spine just snapped. “Back...broke...” I try to tell them, but they don’t hear me.

“Nooooooooooooo.”

It's too much, I-I-I-

Have to push.

“Wait, Daisy,” someone says. They’re not the boss of me. I’ve got to push, I have to. I have to push my broken spine all the way out of my body.

“Daisy, baby, pant! Pant.” Puff puff puff; air blows in my face. Pant? I have to pant? I don’t think I have any breath left, but I try a little.

“Good girl, so good. Pant like me, huh, huh, huh...”

Something is stretching me; I’m burning. Between my legs is nothing but fire. I wish I could scream, but I have to pant.

“Killian? Is she good to go?”

“One second... yeah, yeah—she’s there.”

“Alright baby, stop panting now. The next time there’s a contraction, you’re going to give a big push, OK?”

Push? I don’t want to push any more. Now I just want to sleep. Sleep...

For a second, I actually am asleep until...

“AHHHHHHH!” The push feeling is back, and it’s even bigger this time.

“Yes, I can see the head! So close, baby.”

“Push, Daisy...”

What do you think I’m doing? “AHHHHHHH!”

“One more, one more.”

One more? You do one more, you do it...shit...

“AHHHHHHH! I scream and scream and scream, I can’t stop screaming. And in amongst my screams, I hear shouts, and feel movement, more shouts.

Then nothing.

REX

How life changes in just a couple of seconds.

One second we are sailing across the ocean and I'm grumbling about celebrities. One second we are fighting a fire, and I'm feeling good about our team work.

Daisy is still unconscious. Leander has the baby cradled in his tee-shirt. Poor baby, the first thing it has on its body is Lea's tattered sex instructor shirt. Keyara and I are propping Daisy up, I'm trying to moisten her lips with water while Key strokes her forehead.

Killian is between Daisy's legs. Who the fuck knows what's going on down there.

And Gray? Gray ran outside. He's freaked out, but I can't help him right now.

The baby mewls quietly. "You hear that?" asks Key, her eyes shining.

"I did, noodle. I did."

So did Mama Daisy. That coo was all it took to bring Daisy back to us.

"Hey," she croaks. "Did I? Did we?" Her eyes are half-closed and bleary. Leander kneels with his bundle.

"Princess, look what I have here..."

Tears are pouring down Leander's face, and Daisy's face.

"Uncle Rex, you're crying."

And my face apparently.

One second we are a family of six people trying to survive on a deserted island.

And then the next second, we become a family of seven.

Killian sits up, a grin on his face. "Nice work, love. You passed the placenta when you were out of it!"

That's good right? It seems to be by the look on Killian's face.

Daisy isn't listening. All her focus is on what is in Leander's arms. So tenderly, Leander lowers the bundle to Daisy. It immediately starts to snuffle

and root around for her breast.

It?

“Is it...”

“She’s a girl,” Leander grins. “Now we have three princesses. It’s perfect.”

A girl.

“A cousin, Keyara. A little girl cousin.” I squeeze her hand but she doesn’t return the gesture. Looking down I see her scowling.

Uh-oh. I hadn’t anticipated this.

“Key?”

“She’s not my cousin,” Key snaps, her bottom lip pouting.

“Honey, it’s OK...”

Apparently it’s not, as Key gets to her feet and runs from the cave. Shit. Daisy is in my arms, cradling the baby.

“Can you go after her, Lea?”

He nods. Daisy doesn’t notice; she’s gazing at her baby.

“You need anything, Killian?” I have no idea what the fuck he’s doing.

“The bleeding is slowing, like it’s clotting on its own. This is good.”

This is good, this is all good.

Apart from Key. Fuck, poor little thing, she’s been through so much. I should have realized not being the only child would freak her out. I can hear her at the cave entrance. She’s yelling at Leander.

“SHE’S NOT MY COUSIN,” she yells, and stomps her foot. “SHE’S MY SISTER!”

“Tell Keyara her sister wants her,” Daisy murmurs to me, making my heart explode with love.

“Key? Come see what your sister is doing...” I call.

Within a second Keyara comes running back to us. “What is it? Hello, baby. I’m your sister.”

DAISY

I'm a mom.

Rex, Leander Killian and Key are in my peripheral vision, but my eyes are focused on one thing. The little bundle laying on my chest.

She's so perfect. My perfect little girl—our perfect little girl.

"I love her," whispers Key.

"Me too," I reply. "And I love you, Key."

Rex is holding Keyara tightly in a hug. My eyes prickle when I see how he's making sure Key feels loved and completely included. That's what a father should do.

The love in his eyes as he looks between me, our daughter, and Keyara, is endless.

"You're amazing," he tells me. "A miracle, a warrior. Our little girl is going to be just like that too. Just like Keyara is."

The baby gets a little disgruntled, making little complaining noises. I don't think I'm producing milk yet. She starts to cry a little more, and that quickly forms into a full pitch wail.

"So loud!" Key covers her ears, and we all laugh. That's when I realize I'm missing someone.

"Where's Gray?" Though I'm totally exhausted, a jolt of adrenaline goes through me. "Is he OK?"

"Gray got really worried about you; he went out for a breather, I'll go fetch him," Killian tells me.

"Please do. I want to show him everything is alright."

"Of course, one minute."

Rex holds a bottle of water up to my mouth and I drink down thirsty. "Thanks. I'm starving as well, do we have any food?"

"We have taro root in the embers, but we can't have that for another few hours. Gotta cook it for a long time so it isn't toxic—I'm afraid it's just coconut until then."

Beggar's can't be choosers, so I happily allow Rex to feed me bite-size pieces.

GRAY

I don't want to live.

I stare into the darkness, the edge of the cliff is so close and it draws me closer.

My mom's voice echoes in my head.

'Having kids will kill you...'

We killed Daisy.

There was so much blood, her screams. This was too much; how could she live through this?

If she survives, she'll hate us forever. How could she not when we just put her through that? We deserve it.

Her body split open, the blood pooling out. Daisy, unconscious or dead. Just like Mom, with blood everywhere.

I don't realize I'm crying until Killian is there. He pulls me close and wipes my face.

"What did we do, Killian? What did we do?"

The edge of this cliff seems really tempting right now.

"We increased the size of our family," he tells me. "Come and meet our daughter; her mom is desperate to see you too."

My heart stops beating. I think it actually stops beating.

"She's alright?"

"They both are."

Walking back into the cave, the place smells of blood, smoke, and sweat. Some may think those are the smells of hell, but in this instance, it's the smell of heaven. And in this heaven, my angel, my two angels sit in front of me.

"Gray?"

I fall on my knees. "Forgive me angel, I left you."

"You want to see our baby?"

Together we gaze down at the most perfect baby in the world. A tiny

button nose and little rosebud lips wrinkle as she sleeps. Is she dreaming?

“What’s her name?” I say quietly, not wanting to disturb her in any way.

“To be decided. I don’t think we need to rush. Keyara has already changed her mind a dozen times on what she thinks it should be.”

Leander comes and crouches next to us. “We can do it *Twilight*-style and just mash up our names.” His brow wrinkles. “LeReGraDaiyarian? No... Kilgradalerexara.”

As always, Leander makes us laugh. I feel like such an idiot, the way I acted. Freaking out and running away is the opposite of helpful.

“What can I do?” I ask. I’m talking to Daisy, but really everyone. I let everyone down.

“Um, I’ve got a thought,” Killian says. “Daisy, I think you should eat your placenta. It’s huge and packed full of all the nutrients you need.”

Daisy’s eyes grow wide but she nods.

Of course, yeah, that’s a good idea.

“I’ll go out and get banana leaves to wrap it in,” I say, getting to my feet.

Killian shakes his head. “It’s still storming.”

“It’s easing off. We want the placenta to be cooked straight away, right? It could spoil so easily.”

“Let me come with you,” Rex says. “I agree the storm is passing. There is actually a little light on the horizon—it will be morning soon.”

The babe stirs at Daisy’s breast, then roots around looking for a nipple again. Poor Daisy looks absolutely shattered.

“We’ll be back soon. Keep the fire stoked, Killian.”

I hadn’t told anyone about our camp being destroyed yet. As me and Rex go down into the jungle, I break the news.

“Holy shit, everything is gone?”

“Yeah, it’s bad.”

“Well, we just have to rebuild. But one thing at a time; let’s get everyone fed first. Let’s dig up some breadfruit.”

When we get back to the cave, Killian wraps Daisy’s placenta in leaves, then places it on the hot coals. I hand him the fruit.

“You want me to toast your nuts?” he winks.

I feel like Killian has spent too much time hanging out with Leander. “Yeah, and then when they are cooking, can we have a quick family meeting?”

I say this in a low voice. Daisy is sleeping, and so are the baby and Keyara.

Killian gets the tone of my voice. He nods.

The four of us guys move to the entrance of the cave, and I fill them in on what to expect when we get back to the beach.

“We just gotta put one foot in front of the other and do it,” says Leander.

“Thanks, Mary Sunshine.”

It’s painful, actually physically painful, to know that the shelters that I poured my blood, sweat, and toil into are just *gone*.

Yeah, we can and will rebuild, but how many times will we have to do this? And what if we become so malnourished and weak that rebuilding becomes impossible?

I talk through the various components we’ll need to gather. What if we can’t find the ax-head? Fuck, that is gonna be a bitch.

The reality of rebuilding everything is slowly sinking in.

“Lets eat, Gray.” Killian puts a hand on my shoulder. “Everything will seem easier when we’ve food inside us. The breadfruit should be done.”

None of us mention it, but the smell of Daisy’s placenta cooking is fucking crazy-making; it smells so good. After an hour or so, Killian examines the Daisy meat, pulling a piece from the edge.

“Alright, macushla, bon appetit.”

“This is me-eat,” she giggles, nervously nibbling on the chunk. “Oh, it’s pretty good!”

“And there’s a lot more—this thing must be at least four pounds!”

“Can I make a weird request?” Daisy asks.

“Of course, anything,” Rex answers for all of us.

“I want Keyara and you all to share the placenta with me. I need you all to be strong, and this is one way to do it.”

I’m stunned. I think everyone else is as well.

“You want us to eat part of you?”

“Well, I’m in,” grins Leander, “I love eating Daisy, so I know this piece of her will be absolutely perfect.”

It’s obvious the rest of us have more discomfort with the idea, even though the smell of roasting meat is just torturous. A hot meal of Daisy-organ; it’s a lot to wrap my head around.

“Think about Key, and how her body desperately needs nourishment. If you all eat it, she will as well.”

Rex coughs, looking a little rattled. “I-I think Daisy is right. The err, meat,

can't keep. It would be hard for her to eat the whole thing in the next few days, so it makes sense."

Rex, dear Rex. Daisy said the magic words about Keyara. And I guess if the captain is eating placenta, the rest of us will as well.

"Don't look so despairing, all of you! I'm a little bit offended!"

I guess placenta is on the menu.

LEANDER

It's been six days since the birth of Kiledrexay.

"Kiledrexay is nix-ay," says Daisy.

"What about the shortened form, we could call her 'Kiley'?"

"No to Kiley," Daisy tells me firmly.

"And why not? I think it's cute."

"K names make me think Kardashian," she sighs, swapping little Kiley from one boob to the other.

"Hey!" says Killian. "I heard that."

"K names are cool!" Keyara adds, high-fiving Killian.

"What about Isla?" This is Rex's suggestion. He has his pants twisted about the baby needing a name based on her arrival situation. He has already suggested Storm, Coco, and Coral.

Keyara has decided her sister should not be named after any of the Harry Potter characters, thankfully.

Gray says he doesn't do names—whatever that means.

"Actually," Daisy says in a manner that gets all our attention. "I think I do have a name."

"Oooh!" Keyara bounces around. "What is it?"

"It's...Amalthea, Thea for short."

"So pretty! I love it," squeals Key, and the rest of us all nod and make happy noises.

Thea.

Huh, unexpected. I mean, I like it, but I wonder if there is a story behind her choice.

"Why Thea, or Amalthea?"

Unexpectedly, Daisy flushes. "It's just a name I like; always have."

To be honest, I don't think any of us care what the name is, we just want the girls to be happy and healthy, to be safe and strong. Daisy could have chosen *Karen* and I would have rolled with it (probably).

“Does Thea want some quality time with Daddy Leander?” I put out my arms, looking hopeful. When I pick up the squirming bundle (who is now swaddled in Killian’s deep vee tee) my brain turns to mush. Why don’t people have dozens of babies? If we were not castaways, I’d be voting for having a ridiculous amount of children.

“Hey, Thea. This is Papa Leander. I’m going to be by your side until you’re all grown-up, you understand? I promise you’ll never feel abandoned or unwanted. And I will tell you every single day how much I love you,” I pause and realize I have a lot of eyes on me. “And your Mom and sister Key. You guys are loved forever.”

I cough, thinking of the guy’s eyes on me. “You lot are ok, I guess.”

Daisy and Thea are staying cozy in the cave for a while Rex, Gray, Killian, and I are getting to work rebuilding. It’s tough, because I find myself desperate if I am more than a few minutes from the cave. I always want to be within earshot of Daisy and Thea. I’m drawn to them like a magnet. It’s like my previous capacity for love was just a facade; a painted wall and when Kiley—uhh, Thea, was born, the wall was smashed down, and now I see and feel this whole new world of love.

I’m like Truman, escaping to reality at the end of *The Truman Show*. That’s what it feels like.

Mama seems quite content staying where she is, especially now her milk has come in. Every night, when the darkness descends, we sit around the fire, talking softly, enjoying being together.

And during the day, it’s hard labor.

Which is a lot harder than it should be. If we were feeling weak before the cyclone, it’s infinitely worse now.

The first thing we decided is our main abode is going to be in the jungle glade where we found the old crashed airplane. Daisy and Key are not keen on this idea; they love being by the beach, but we compromised by saying we’ll build a beach-house for hanging out during the day, and then have our sleeping quarters on the plane.

A cyclone could easily hit us again, more than once. Rebuilding every few weeks is just too much to comprehend. Yes, the plane is a half-hour walk from the beach, but it’s also a good distance from any storm surges that will head our way.

As we set our plans into motion, the days blend together in a flurry of construction and resource gathering. Rex and Key have been scouring the

beach area, trying to find any salvageable materials, and are in charge of fishing. Me, Gray, and Killian have teamed up with fitting out the plane as new lodgings, handling the heavy lifting and clearing the area of dangerous overhanging trees.

The beach house is on the back-burner until the plane glade is done.

“Feck, can we take a break for a day?” Killian says, flopping down on the sand. “I’m wiped.”

We all look at Rex. I’m on team Killian; my muscles are killing me, and I feel like a piece of shit.

“Yeah. Tomorrow we’ll do twenty-four hours of RnR—sound OK?” I see Rex’s hand is shaking.

We are all tapped out. A day of rest sounds like fucking heaven.

Perhaps APRIL

DAISY

The last few weeks all I've wanted to do is sleep.

After we all moved into the plane-glade, I settled in the interior of the plane and have barely left since.

I don't feel like doing anything, I'm just so tired. I know the guys are worried about me, but I don't have the energy to reassure them.

This morning, Killian and Leander are getting bossy, insisting I get up.

"Let's all go to the beach? Thea is ready to see the ocean, and I think you'll feel better to be out and about."

"Yeah," Gray runs a hand through his shaggy hair. "It's not raining today; in fact, there are breaks in the cloud and you can actually see the blue sky. Lovely day for a walk."

"I'm not sure I'm up to it, love," I moan.

"Have you completely stopped bleeding?" Killian asks.

I nod. Not bleeding any more is huge. Between me and Thea, the need for cloth is not being met, in any way.

"It's only a thirty minute walk, Macushla, and we can stop at the pool. You'd love a bath, right?"

I see Gray and Killian exchanging looks. They'd been on me last night for picking at my food.

"It's time, Daisy," Gray says, bending down until his face is level with mine. "You need to start moving."

I look into his eyes, they are full of worry. Slowly, I nod.

Getting down the slope and through the jungle to the beach seems like one of the hardest things I've ever done. I don't let on how much I'm struggling, but the struggle is very, very real. Gray is carrying Thea, and Killian has his arm around me, encouraging me on.

My weakness is making me scared. If I can't handle a simple walk to the beach, how can I raise my baby? Have her survive and thrive? It's all too much. I'm too tired. I can't give up, though. Without me, Thea would die.

We stop at the pool, and Killian convinces me to get into the water with him. It actually does feel pretty good. I float on my back with my eyes closed, listening to the little cooing noises Thea is making.

“Thanks for making me do this; it’s helping.”

“We’re all worried about you, Macushla. How can we help?”

I float some more until I start to shiver. I don’t know how they can help. All I want is to go to sleep and wake up in a soft bed, inside a house.

After some food, we move slowly on to the beach. Rex, Key, and Leander all cheer when we get there. They are playing frisbee, and have a fire going with fish roasting.

“You made it,” grins Leander, bouncing over.

Killian lowers me down to the sand. “Lean on me,” he says, as I put my arms out for Thea. She’s routing around looking for a nipple.

“I made it.”

I’m pretty shocked at how the beach has changed; not just our shelters being gone, but the storm has toppled dozens of trees. The shoreline has changed, too. Tons of sand have shifted to the far end of the beach against the rocks, making this strip narrower.

We sit on the ground where our shelter once stood. It’s like we’d never been here at all. Our presence was wiped away so easily by nature. I think about the pilot of the plane. We never found any signs of human remains, only the metal hull and interior survived the years. Maybe someone will land on this island and find the plane, but they won’t find any trace of me, or Thea. The guys, Keyara—we’ll all be dust.

The fire puff’s smoke in my direction and I cover Thea’s face as she wrinkles her nose. “Smoke follow’s beauty,” I whisper to her. When Rex hands me a coconut shell containing fish and fruit, I smile and take it, eating one-handedly and trying not to drop any food on Thea’s head.

“I can take her,” he says.

“It’s no problem.”

The more tired I get, the more I just want her with me, attached to me.

For the next couple of hours, the guys play with Key, or catch more fish, or come sit with me by the fire. Normally, I would be delighted by all this, but now I just feel...nothing much at all.

I wonder if I have postpartum, or if I’m sick.

Or maybe I’m just sick of being on this island.

“Time to head back,” Killian says after a while.

The journey back seems daunting. “Can’t we just stay here for the night? Why do we need to go back?”

He hesitates. “Let me talk to the others.”

Really, though, why do we need to go back? We’ve lost virtually everything we had and are back to square one. Just us, on the sand, with nothing.

REX

The beach starts to darken, and I realize we are definitely staying here the night. Daisy looks absolutely exhausted.

“Come on. Let’s find a place to get comfy,” I tell her. I put my arms out to take Thea.

“It’s OK, I’ve got her,” she tells me, as she struggles to her feet. I put my arm around mom and daughter and Daisy lets me lead them to a sheltered spot by a couple of fallen trees. Leander and Key beg to take Thea down to the water's edge. Daisy and I watch them carry the baby off, singing silly songs all the way.

Gray and Killian are off for some alone time, so now it’s just the two of us.

Daisy hasn’t been herself for a while. She’s disengaged, like she’s just going through the motions. Maybe this change of scene, sleeping at the beach, will give her a boost.

I pull off my shirt and lay it on the sand. “Your bed awaits, m’lady.”

She gives a weak smile as she lies back on the ground.

Fuck, I would give anything to be laying her on a proper bed. One of those fancy memory foam things that cost thousands of dollars. And with a pure white comforter filled with goose-down

I pull Daisy into my arms, and she settles her head against my chest. It feels good, and the sensation of her hair on my bare skin sends shivers down my spine.

Pull it together, Malone, this isn't about your horn. This is about Daisy.

I would do anything for this girl.

I would live without sex for the rest of our lives, if that's what she wanted. I'd be grateful for just her head laying on my chest, and feel honored for the opportunity to merely hold her in my arms.

I love her. More than anything, I love her.

And I wish I knew the best way to help her out of this depressive state she's in. I'll do anything, anything at all that would help.

I move my body onto the side, and stroke her hair.

"Daisy?"

"Yes?"

"Do you trust me?" I look her in the eyes. She nods, but her eyes have tears in them. It hurts my heart.

Fuck.

"Can you talk to me, love? Tell me what's wrong?"

After a long pause, where I decide I've fucking made her retreat even more, Daisy speaks.

"I don't think I can, because I don't understand myself. I love Thea, I love you all, but I feel almost dead inside. Like I can't feel anything any more."

"Oh, love. I wish I could help."

There is another long pause, and then she puts up a hand to brush the hair out of my eyes. "Maybe there is something," she says.

"Anything."

“I-I wonder, maybe if you...touch me?”

My heart does one of those flip-flop maneuvers.

“Touch you, sweetheart? Make you feel good?”

Her eyes flit away for a second, then come back to me. “I’m afraid. I’m afraid I can’t feel good down there anymore. Everything hurt so bad.”

“Do you still hurt?”

“No. I think I’m healed; I stopped bleeding a while back.”

I hold her close and run my hand down her arm, softly. “I would love to touch you. I’ll touch you so gently. Can I do that? And you can tell me to stop at any time, but I would love to touch you, if you're open to it.”

Daisy bites her lip then nods. “Yes,” she whispers. “Just yes.”

I thread our fingers, then move forward, my mouth gently pressing onto hers. It feels like a thousand years since I’ve had these sweet lips on mine. Almost in spite of herself she’s kissing me back, gently at first, then more and more fiercely.

The faint moan in her throat goes straight to my cock.

Stupid penis. This is about Daisy, not me.

“Rex,” she whispers.

“Is this OK?”

She nods, so I kiss her again, skimming my hands over her face, then down her neck and over her delectable left boob. Once again, my cock twitches and I tell it to fuck off.

“I’m going to touch you over your shorts,” I tell her, letting my hand travel downward, eliciting another moan from my girl.

Down, boy. It's Daisy time.

My finger traces circles over the worn cotton fabric. I keep doing that until Daisy squirms. "More," she whispers.

Still over the fabric, I move my fingers further down between her legs as she lets them fall fully open. A dampness appears through the fabric, making my mouth water. "I'm going to take off your shorts now."

Poor Daisy has been underwearless for months.

Getting to my knees I pull the shorts off, tracing kisses along her belly as I do so. I feel her stomach muscles tightly knotted, but I feel them relax under my mouth. My head dipped low, I can smell her arousal.

"Do you like this?" I ask.

"Yes."

I kiss the top of her mound. "And this?"

"Yesss," she hisses.

I'm holding myself back, a tight rein on my urge to just pounce on the prettiest pussy of all time.

"Oh, Rex," she sighs, drowsily.

"You're so beautiful," I tell her.

"I'm skinny and stretch-marked."

"No, you're perfect."

I kiss her belly again, my hand heading further downwards, circling the pubic hair then sliding down to find the clitoris, stroking it with the utmost delicacy. Within a minute her body tenses, then she lets out a sigh.

There is nothing earth-shattering about her orgasm; it's not one to go in the

history books of life-changing orgasms. But when she looks up at me, big eyes full of tears, I know I'll remember this moment forever.

“That was so lovely,” she smiles, and I feel incredibly pleased with myself.

“The loveliest,” I tell her, kissing her temple and smoothing back her hair. “Think you can sleep?” I ask.

But Daisy's eyes are already closed, and by the heaviness on my arm, I know she's already there.

MAY (be?)

REX

“What’s going on with Key?” Gray asks me.

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “I’ve never seen her like this before.”

“I’m worried.”

Key is so listless, she’s lost all her bounce. Just wants to sleep all day and only eats if we encourage her. It’s her birthday coming soon, probably. She’s not even showing any enthusiasm for that.

“I’m really worried,” Gray repeats.

“Get in line.”

Talking of lines, I look at Gray and see deep grooves carved into his forehead and around his eyes. Hard to tell what’s going on under that beard. This island time is aging us hella quickly.

The frisbee comes scudding towards us. Gray reaches out a hand, loses balance, and goes down hard.

He doesn’t spring to his feet, just lies there on his back.

“Gray?”

“Fuck.” He lets out a long sigh, “I think I’m going crazy. I keep imagining I can hear a plane.”

I cock my head to one side; all I hear are waves.

Gray shields his eyes with his hand and turns his head skyward. “I thought I heard one the last couple of days as well.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because there was nothing to see. Maybe my whole vestibular thing is coming back.”

Gray had terrible tinnitus last year.

“Maybe, but why don’t we throw up a signal fire just in case? If nothing else, it’s good for us to get into the practice again.”

“Seems like a lot of effort.”

“You chill. I’ll do it.”

As I drag branches and palm fronds to heap on our small fire, I have to

agree with Gray. This is a lot of effort, but if we stop trying, it's going to be the end of us. Quitting is not an option.

The fire smolders for a while, then catches properly. The flames get higher. As the greenery catches, clouds of smoke swirl up into the blue. Daisy and Thea had been at the water's edge with Leander, but now they walk back towards me.

"Signal fire?"

"Gray thought he might have heard a plane."

They immediately crane their necks and look around. None of us see or hear anything.

"Are Gray's symptoms coming back?"

We look at him laying in the sand with his eyes closed. I haven't seen him this shutdown in a while.

"Maybe?"

The gray smoke swirls up into the sky, immediately getting lost among the dull clouds.

I think back to when we were on Buckletop Mountain.

The planes were flying overhead, dumping load after load of water and not making a dent. The wind had changed direction out of fucking nowhere. The sky was filled with low dense cloud, and the air was thick with smoke and lightning strikes. Why the fuck had god decided to add those to the mix?

We could have maybe made it out if I'd reacted quicker; left the elementary school to burn. But I thought we could beat it.

Thinking you can beat a blaze is a dangerous business; a wildfire is so unpredictable. When I realized I'd fucked us all, I have never known a pain so intense. Utter failure.

I'd killed us.

Crawling out of the fire shelter bags after the smoke and the flames had swept through was hideous. I didn't want to be alive. I'd passed out to the screams and prayers of my crew, and if I survived and they didn't?

Alicia, Carlo, Stephan, Hutch.

Another plane had buzzed overhead, gallons of river water falling down on us, but too late. Lying on the hot ashy ground, I heard the planes buzz, but couldn't see them, just hear them.

Buzz, buzz, hum.

"Rex?"

“Rex!”
“REX!”
“PLANE!”

GRAY

The plane circles, getting lower.

It's a small plane, a Piper Cherokee or something like that.

We all are waving frantically.

It's low enough that we can see the pilot and co-pilot. The co-pilot has the door open. That's not unusual for these little planes' it's the only A/C you can get. What is unusual is the co-pilot waving something orange at us.

And then he drops it.

"It's going in the water."

"Run! Get it!"

Killian launches himself into the waves as the plane dips its wings, then circles again. Wading through the surf, Killian is triumphantly holding up the orange object.

"What is it?" Leander shouts, asking the question for all of us. Killian jogs up the beach.

"Life jacket, but it's been duct-taped together. There is something inside."

He hands it to Rex, who picks at the tape. "A fucking radio!" Rex instantly turns on the handset.

"Radio check, this is the island, come in?"

"Read you loud and clear island, this is Piper three seven tango, go ahead."

The cheers and screams erupt and Rex makes a shushing motion.

"Piper three seven tango, we are a party of seven, castaway at this location for approximately one year. Were shipwrecked from the Mary-Mo. Request immediate assistance, over."

Fuck, is this really happening?

There is a pause, then, "Say again, island?"

"We are the survivors of a shipwreck. Boat out of Sāmoa called the Mary-Mo, approximately one year ago. Four males, three females including an infant, over."

The drone of the plane comes and goes as it circles.

“Copy that, island. We will alert authorities immediately. Keep on this frequency. Does anyone in your party need critical assistance? Over.”

Rex scans the group of us; we are thin, and dirty, but smiling. Tears are flowing down Daisy’s cheeks. Leander tosses Keyara up in the air. Even Thea gurgles happily.

“Negative, but we could all do with a fucking burger and a shower, over.”

“Roger that, island! Returning to Sāmoa now, will be out of range shortly. Stand by for rescue party, over and out.”

It’s been twenty-four hours since the plane buzzed the island, and now we stand on the beach listening to the engine of a zodiac getting closer.

We are going to get home.

The boat cuts through the water, leaving a wake of white-topped waves.

Leander is sitting on the sand. Daisy is next to him, leaning into his body. Killian has Thea in his arms. She’s wailing—poor little thing. It’s not surprising that she’s not into all the weird noise. Rex and Key are cuddling together. And me? I’m just...frozen with shock. The engine noise is so jarring, and as it gets closer I can smell the gas from the engine. I’m having trouble comprehending it all.

A hand reached out and touches my shoulder.

Killian pulls me to him, and together we shield Thea. Our heads are close together and Killian presses his lips to my temple.

“It’s OK, babe.”

Finally the noise of the engine cuts.

Three men in American coast guard uniforms come striding out of the surf. It’s fucking wild. I wonder what they are thinking, what they are seeing.

Gaunt faces, shaggy beards, beautiful babies.

“Rex Malone?” says the first, in a rich Texan accent.

Rex raises his hand.

“Oh my God, you guys are actually alive!” say the second. “Harvey Bannister?”

The men are bubbling with excitement, but that fades when Rex shakes his head.

Thea starts to cry again and that gets their attention. “A baby?” The first man shakes his head, “Never mind about that now. I’m Commander Penny from the US Coastguard. Now let’s get y’all organized.”

Commander Penny turns to the two men beside him. “Let’s get life vests

for everyone, please, and bring the drinks.”

“Sir.”

“We have rehydration fluids for ya’ll.” He looks at Daisy, smiling, “Ms. Jackson, I presume?”

Daisy nods, her eyes wide and blinking.

“And can I say, on behalf of the whole world, we are so very happy to see Brooke 'Action' Jackson still being completely amazing. Congratulations on the little one. We’ve a med-bay onboard and the board, so we’ll soon have you with a doctor.”

What?

He thinks this is Brooke?

So...

Everyone’s eyes meet. It’s so unimportant in the scheme of things, but weird nonetheless.

There is some chaos as we don lifejackets and get into the inflatable cutter boat.

“You know, a fishing trawler found a beat up raft. Pulled it in and saw a message from y’all attached to it. That was some smart thinking.”

“It’s OK baby, it’s OK,” I hear Rex saying to Keyara. The little girl is sobbing up a storm. I watch him stroke her hair. No wonder her head is spinning; everything is going to change very fast now.

The rescue team rush around yelling. Why are they yelling?

“We’re taking you home, miss,” one of the coastguards tell Key.

“To my mami?” she whispers.

“Yes, miss. And I’m sure she is going to be very happy to see you. Very happy indeed.”

Once we are all loaded in, the boat roars away from the island. The island that was our home for so long gets smaller and smaller, disappearing into the sea haze.

I’m not sad to see it go. What I want to see is Keyara getting back into her mother’s arms. I want to see Thea and Daisy getting the medical care and support they need.

And for us all, somehow, to live happily ever after.

LEANDER

All of us have been hooked up to IVs full of fluids.

It's fucking crazy how much better I feel from just this one clear bag of liquid. We've been offered sedatives, but everyone refused. The only thing we all wanted was food. Real food.

"Just a little at a time, Key. Your tummy is going to have a hard time if we eat too much too soon," Daisy tells her.

Key pouts, and I fully empathize. We have just been given bowls of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. The taste is mind-blowing, with flavors and textures that I never thought I'd ever eat again.

"But I want more," Key complains.

"Eat too fast, have a pain in the ass," I tell her.

That cheers her up.

"Swear!" She says with a grin. Then, she immediately crestfallen. "I forgot the swear jars. Now I don't know how much you all owe me."

"It's alright, you can just give us your best guess and then we'll pay up. We trust you."

"You're going to owe me the most, Uncle Leander."

Yeah, I'm not fucking surprised.

Daisy, with Thea attached to her boob, keeps drifting off to sleep. The crew don't have any diapers onboard, but for the first time, Thea is wrapped with a perfectly white hand-towel covering her bottom. Over the thrum of the engines, Commander Penny fills us in our presumed deaths.

"The Mary-Mo life raft was found, and there was a massive search of the sea and surrounding islands that went on for two weeks. After that everything got scaled down." He looks at us, his eyes full of pity, "You had traveled further than anyone could have anticipated, compared to where the raft was. I'm so sorry."

"Do our families know we are alive?" asks Killian.

"No. It's going to be a media circus when the announcement happens, so

the Embassy decided to keep things quiet and work with you to get in touch with your families yourself.”

That’s going to be a weird conversation. Who will I call? Jasper or Malcolm, probably. Not Mom or Dad. I’ll call Malcolm; he’s the most together of us all.

It’s odd that the coast guards think Daisy is Brooke. It means Brooke must have kept up the pretense of being Daisy all this time. Shit is going to get complicated. It’s all going to be complicated. We can’t split up now, we just can’t. We all belong together. The idea of handing Keyara back to her parents is wonderful and terrible all at the same time. Will Killian go back to New York? Where will Daisy and Thea want to live?

Do we stay on Sāmoa?

It’s all giving me a headache, and I wearily lean my head against the gently vibrating table.

The next thing I’m aware of is bustling all around me. I sit up and groan, I feel so stiff and achy. Rex is snoring gently on a couch, but no one else is around. On the table next to my head is a pile of clean clothing.

Clean clothes! Fuck, maybe I could have a shower!

I pick up the clothing and wander out of the small cabin. It’s so fucking odd to hear voices I don’t recognize, and to walk on something cool and smooth. A sailor comes up to me.

“Can I help you?”

“Yeah, thanks. Is there a shower anywhere?”

He gives me a grin. “I’m glad you asked. The rest of your friends have already cleaned up…”

“And I stink?”

“You really do, sir. No offense.”

“None taken.”

The person I see in the mirror is very different from what I was expecting. My skin is deeply tan, and lines around my eyes are pronounced. Tangles and dreads make up my hair, which is now several shades lighter than it used to be—same for my beard. I’ve scratches and scars and dirt on every inch of my skin. My toenails are off the hook. How had I not noticed that on the island? I’ve basically got bird-claws for feet. A row of showers are to my left, and toilet cubicles to my right.

Toilet paper.

My stomach gurgles, struggling with the soup and sandwich, but I don’t

care, because then I'll get to use toilet paper. No more leaves, at last.

First things first. I strip and step under the water, not waiting for it to get warm. As the water runs over my face, I open my mouth and drink at the same time. I feel like I could stand here forever. It takes a while, but I eventually muster the energy to use some soap. My hair is a dead-loss; I'll have to shave the whole lot off, but I rub some soap into the mats anyway. Dirt comes off me in brown rivulets, and I watch with fascination as the bottom of the shower fills with silt and sand.

"Leander?"

"Hey, Rex. Welcome to heaven."

I hear water running in the cubicle next to me.

"Holy fuck."

"Right?"

We don't talk any more. There is too much to talk about, think about, and deal with. At the moment, we just should enjoy this bliss.

Eventually exiting the shower, I see Rex has a pile of clothing identical to mine. They're basically hospital scrub pants, a plain t-shirt, and some flip-flops. It makes me think about Gray and Rex's homemade flip flops. I wonder what happened to them?

"Do you know what's going to happen next?" I ask Rex as I dry myself.

"We are going to American Sāmoa first to deal with some paperwork, then onto Sāmoa. I'll call Nanda and Nikau."

"And tell them you have their daughter. That you kept her safe." After a moment I add, "It's going to be hard not having the little noodle around."

He doesn't reply.

"There is a lot to figure out," I say, mostly to myself.

"Yeah," Rex says, exiting the stall. "Nothing is straightforward, that's for sure, but as Meemaw always says; 'making things easy is hard'."

DAISY

Pulling into port, there are vehicles and people everywhere.

I'm immediately getting ushered into an ambulance. Someone is trying to take Thea out of my arms and I hiss at them. This is all too much.

"Wait for me!" says a voice, and I see Leander running over.

"Leander, don't let them take me away from you all."

"Baby, it's OK, I'll come with you. And we'll all be together again soon, but they need to check you two out properly."

"What about Key?"

"Rex is going in an ambulance with her. Gray and Killian are together."

OK, that's good. We've all got someone; it's not as good as being altogether but I can handle it for a while.

"They keep calling me Brooke," I whisper under my breath. "What should I do?"

"Just play along," Leander advises. "You can always say you were delirious, but maybe try and get in touch with Brooke and your parents first. See if you can make sense of this all."

Within a few minutes we are being greeted by a small group of people standing outside a tiny hospital. I'm guided to a wheelchair, with Thea still in my arms. Leander refuses to use the second chair and walks along beside me. A nurse wants to lead us to separate rooms, but Leander firmly tells them that wherever Thea and I are, that's where he will be too.

"Absolutely," says a voice. "These people have been through enough, let's not traumatize them any further." An elderly man with kind eyes leans down towards me. "Joseph Maro, Hospital Chief. We are very happy to see you all. Is it alright if we check you and the baby out? Just a few tests."

Leander squeezes my hand.

"OK, thanks."

"Great, and I've just had a word with someone from the Embassy, who will be along soon. They're going to assist with your return to the USA."

“I can talk to them. You rest, sweetheart,” Leander tells me.

“I’d like to run blood work for you as well, sir. Maybe set you all up with a course of antibiotics.”

Thea is amazing, and only gives a small wail when she gets poked. After the blood work, a nurse leads us to another room, where we finally meet up with the others.

Keyara immediately runs over and coos at Thea then snuggles into my side.

“Is everyone OK?”

Before anyone answers, the door opens and a small man in a shirt and tie comes into the room.

“David DeLong, US embassy.” He holds out his ID then tells us he has been briefed on our situation. I can’t concentrate on a word he’s saying, though.

“Is that...” says Rex.

“I can smell...” says Gray.

The room is filled with the aroma of fresh coffee, as a smiling young man pushes in a cart with an old-fashioned urn on top of it.

“Thought you good folk could do with some,” he grins.

It’s the best coffee I have tasted in my life. This guy is my hero.

Then a cold feeling washes over me.

Is it bad for nursing mothers to drink caffeine?

There’s so much I don’t know. One of the doctor’s had said a midwife would be calling in to see me soon. I need to start a list of questions.

To be on the safe side, I sadly forgo the coffee and concentrate on what Mr. DeLong has to say. He is passing a cell phone and tablet to Killian.

“You can use this phone to make calls, or the tablet for FaceTime. Whatever you prefer. If you need help finding the phone numbers of your loved ones, let me know. The news of your rescue has not broken yet; we haven’t even told the TV company because we wanted your families to know first. I imagine you are going to have some very interesting conversations.”

He meets my eye and smiles.

Mr. DeLong is definitely not wrong.

“Who are you going to call first?” I whisper to Leander.

“My oldest brother, Malcolm. What about you?”

“Brooke, I think. She’s got some explaining to do!”

“You think she’s teaching little kids to read?” Leander murmurs in my ear.

I snort; the idea is so ridiculous.

“I have no idea what my brother's cell number is,” Leander says aloud. “Malcolm Westhall. He’s in Beverly Hills and has an investment company called WestThrall Entertainment.”

I know my sister’s cell number. We got phones at the same time, for our fifteenth birthdays, so our cell numbers are one digit apart.

“I’ll call my sister.” I stand up, no point delaying matters. “Is there somewhere I can go and be private?” I don’t mind the guys hearing my conversation, but I don’t want anyone else to.

“Sure. There is a smaller waiting room next door.”

Mr. Delong shows me where to go and I sit alone on a hard plastic chair and think about what I’m going to say.

Hello Brooke.

After that I’m stumped, so instead of over-thinking I just plunge in.

The phone rings. No one answers, and I’m told the voicemail inbox is full. OK, try again, from a different angle.

Text.

With proof that it’s me. Using a codeword no one else would know.

ME: Hey—this is Daze. I’m alive. Just been rescued. If this is Wookie, please call me.

I wait for a minute then the phone rings.

“Hello?” I say tentatively.

“Daisy?” My sister’s voice is choked. “Is that really you?”

“Yep. We were shipwrecked, and just got picked up by the coast guard yesterday.” It’s at this moment that everything hits me and I just start to sob, then can’t stop.

“Daisy! Daisy!” Brooke is screaming. “Mom! It’s Daisy, she’s alive.”

“Mom’s there?” I’m bawling now.

There is some garbled noise from the other end, then my Mom comes on the line. “Daisy? You’re really alive?”

“I am, Mom. I’m in Sāmoa. There’s so much to tell you.”

“It’s a miracle. How are you getting home? When will you be here? Your dad is going to lose his mind...”

“I don’t know anything, Mom. The others will probably figure that all out.”

“Others?” It’s Brooke, I can tell the phone is now on speaker. “Harvey, too?”

I knew this question would come.

“Not Harvey. He didn’t make it. Everyone else did, though. All the crew, and Killian.”

“Harvey’s dead?”

“I’m sorry, Brooke. I’m so sorry.”

Brooke doesn’t reply.

There is a knock on the door and Leander puts his head in. “Are you doing OK?”

I nod. “Listen Mom, Brooke, I need to go so someone else can use the phone. I’ll get back to you as soon as possible...but there’s one thing. Do people know about our switch? They are calling me Brooke here, not Daisy.”

There is a moment of silence, but then Brooke speaks. “Can you be Brooke just a little longer? I’m so sorry, Daze. Fuck, I really am so so sorry. Oh God, everything is my fault. I’ll explain what’s going on soon, just trust me? Please be Brooke?”

Oh boy, where have I heard that before?

REX

Leander is in charge because Leander's family is the only one with money.

We decide that he'll get his brother's credit card and start paying for everything; it will be a while before we can get back into our own bank accounts.

Leander said his brother had totally freaked after learning that we'd all survived, and was completely chill about handing over his bank details.

I can't imagine how Meemaw is going to react; I hope the shock isn't too much for her.

Killian has taken Key off to get an ice cream. I wanted to speak to Nanda first. When we left Sāmoa, Nikau was really sick, possibly dying. I want to know the lay of the land before I let Keyara talk to her mom. I call the landline of the family house.

"Hello?"

"Nanda?"

"No, this is Talia."

Talia, Nikau's cousin.

"Don't freak out, Talia, but it's Rex. I'm alive and I have Keyara with me, she's safe and well."

At first there is no reaction, and then I just hear screaming and sobbing. Suddenly another voice comes on. "Ai kae lou alelo! Who the fuck is this? What the fuck did you say to my wife?"

Fuck, what was Talia's husband called?

"You think this is funny, asshole. What's your game?"

John! That's right.

"John, it's me, Rex—Nanda's cousin. I'm alive, Keyara is alive, it's not bullshit. We have just been rescued, we've been on an island all this time."

"Rex?" His voice changes from a roar to a croak. "Really? It's you? Key is OK?"

"Yes, I promise. Is Nanda there? Nikau?"

“Oh, Rex,” he says. His voice is heavy. My heart drops to the floor.

“John?”

“They moved back to the States.”

“WHAT?”

“Long story, but they are actually living with Nanda’s Auntie Malia.”

Nanda’s auntie? Meemaw?

“They are with my grandmother? Shit, I guess that means Nikau is doing OK?”

John is laughing. “He is! Completely in remission! Shit, Rex, this is just fucking amazing. You have no idea how devastated they’ve been. Do you want me to call them?”

I think about it for a moment, then decide against John breaking the news.

“I appreciate it, but I’ll do it. They’ll want to speak to Keyara immediately. Thanks, John.”

“Good point. Fuck, it’s good to hear your voice man. Can we help in any way? It’s a ten hour ferry ride from here to where you are, but I can get on the morning service.”

“No need. Seeing as Nanda and Nikau are in Missouri, we’ll head there ASAP. Daisy’s folks are there, too.”

“Daisy?”

“I gotta go, speak soon,” I tell him.

I dial the country code for the USA, then add the only phone number Meemaw has had for as long as I was born, and probably much longer.

After several rings, someone picks up.

The voice is not one that I expected.

“Thomas Malone here.”

The voice is flat, instructing the caller on the important person they are speaking to. It’s not friendly or encouraging. If I were a tele-sales person, I’d hang up and not bother trying again with this number.

“Dad?”

Tough Love’s flat voice suddenly has another ounce of emotion. It’s foreign to my ears.

“R-R-Rex? How?”

“It’s a long story, but I’m alive. We were rescued yesterday. Are Nanda and Nikau there? Is Meemaw OK? ”

“Where are you?”

“American Sāmoa, at the medical center—is Nanda there? I have Keyara, she’s safe and sound. Can I speak to her?”

“Are you staying in the South Pacific, or coming back to the States?”

“Nothing has been decided yet, Dad. Can you just get me Nanda or Nikau if they’re there?”

There is silence for a moment, then Nikau is on the line. Once again, I have to convince a very put-out husband that I am not some dick trying to pull a prank.

“Nikau, it really is me. I just spoke to John at your old house! I have Keyara with me.”

The noise I hear through the phone line sounds like a dying animal, gasping, screaming, and moaning all at once. I gesture to Gray, and he goes to the door to usher Killian and Keyara back into the room.

“Key, sweetheart, I’ve got someone who wants to speak to you.”

I press the phone to the side of her head.

“Hello?” she says in a small voice, then bursts into rapid Sāmoan, crying and laughing at the same time. “Tama! Tama! Na ou misia oe!”

Tears pour down her cheeks, her bottom lip is trembling. I have to help her hold the phone receiver. I don’t think any of us realized how much Key has been holding it together.

“Mami!” she screams.

After a few minutes I take the phone back. It’s Nanda on the line.

“We are in American Sāmoa,” I tell her, “at the Medical Center in Faga’alu.”

“We’ll leave for the airport and get a flight immediately,” she tells me decisively.

“No, no. We’ll fly to the States, and we’ll bring her to you. Can you wait just a couple of days? I imagine we’ll come into St. Louis or Columbia. It won’t be long, I promise.”

“Oh, Rex, thank you, thank you! My baby! I can’t believe it. My heart had died. Nikau and I had both died. We were just empty bodies, but now my heart is alive again.”

She breaks down crying some more, so I confirm further details with Nikau.

“Can I speak to Meemaw, Nikau?”

“Your dad wants to talk to you again, Rex,” he answers.

My body chills.

“Dad?”

“I’m sorry, Rex.”

No.

“I’m so sorry. She’s in the hospital. Heart failure. She probably only has a few days left.”

“GO TO HER!” I’m screaming. “GO TELL HER TO WAIT, TELL HER I’M COMING.” Then managing to lower my voice I add. “Tell her I love her and will be there as soon as humanly possible.”

“I will. Do you need resources to get here?”

“No. Just tell me which hospital.”

He does, and I switch the phone off and pass it to Killian.

After the phone call, Keyara looks as stunned as I feel. “I want Mami now,” she whispers.

“Soon, Key. First we have to fly to America. You’ll see your parents, and I’ll see my meemaw, so soon.”

Gray comes over and puts a hand on my shoulder.

“So, we’re off to Overlook Bluff?”

“Yep.”

“Me and Thea are coming, too,” Daisy says, looking like she’ll punch anyone who tries to stop her. “Thea will want to meet her great-grandma.”

My eyes fill with tears.

Leander takes the phone from Killian. “We’re all going,” he says. “I’ll book flights for us all.”

“Even you?” I ask Killian.

“Of course. Your family is my family now. I’ll just call Mam and Da and let them know I’m safe, but I’ll catch up with them once we have everyone else sorted.”

I have to step away and look out of the window to stop myself bawling like a baby.

KILLIAN

“A baby?”

I think Mam was more excited learning she is a gran, an *actual* gran, than learning of my survival. She wants me to measure Thea, so she knows how big to make the booties and cardigans she will soon be knitting. For a woman who is doing a Doctorate in Irish Literature, she surely has an affinity to humble crafts.

“So is she a Lonergan, or will she have her mother’s last name?” Mam asks. “Not that it matters either way; I just need to know because I’ll embroider her initials.”

I love that Mam thinks that way.

And her question is a reasonable one. Thea’s full name has been a hot topic today.

“I’m submitting a request for temporary travel documents, for you all and for the baby,” Mr. DeLong had told us. “So I’ll need her full name.”

“Oh.” Daisy had wrinkled her brow. “Gosh, I’d not thought of her full name. Obviously she needs to have all your names included, but in what order? And is that a terribly clunky name to give a baby?”

I could see Daisy was beginning to freak out over making the decision, so I suggested Thea just go by “Baby Jackson” on the official paperwork.

“Yes! Good idea, this is all so much...”

It is so much.

Phone calls and video conferences with officials in Sāmoa and Washington D.C. More conferences with the TV production company, the charter boat company, and what seems like dozens of insurance companies.

Malcolm Westhall has definitely won MVP of our return. He has hired us a lawyer and a crisis management team.

“Malc, the crisis has passed!” Leander laughed.

“Oh, little brother, you have no idea. The press are going to fucking hound

you for years. If you want any semblance of privacy going forward, you need a team who will take control of your media, and spin the story whichever way you want.”

It’s hilarious to me that Hollywood types think some weird publicity is a ‘crisis’. Lord have mercy that they ever get put in a real crisis situation.

“We haven’t quite figured out Thea’s full name yet, Mam.”

“Never mind, I’ll just embroider Thea instead. In Ireland the name Thea is ‘Treaasa’, and means Gift of God. That’s what our little Thea is. A sure gift, thank you Holy Mother. Now hold the line, your father wants a word...”

“Son.”

“Da.”

Silence for a second.

“I’m glad you’re alright, you put your mother through a real hella worry.”

“Oh, and you weren’t worried at all, Da?”

“Eh, I mighta shed a tear, but don’t go telling no one. Your sister, though, she had a hard time.”

Poor Molly. I love my little sister to bits; she’s a real softy.

“I haven’t spoken to her yet, it’s hectic here. Tell her I’ll see her soon.”

“How soon, son? When does your mam get to beat your hide for worrying her so much?”

“A couple of weeks—there’s a lot to sort out, but it won’t be long. Now put Mam back on.” I can hear my mother in the background, and it’s obvious she needs to have another word.

“Yellow? Pink? What color shall I make the matching set?” she asks, her voice high with excitement.

“How about a green, the color of the rolling hills of Sligo?”

“Cheeky pup, I know when you’re making fun of me, but you know what? Just for that I will make it green!”

“Love you, Mam.”

“Love you too, Killian.”

“Everything alright at home?” Gray asks me.

“Aye, some tears and some scolding, but everything is good. What did I miss here?”

“Malcolm’s crisis team is holding a press conference in LA. They are

saying we won't be in the States for a while, but there will be a media day when we get back. That gives us a little breathing room."

None of us are looking forward to being 'celebrities' when we get back, but it's inevitable.

"And travel arrangements?"

"DeLong says our documents arrive tomorrow, then we are set to fly on a private jet, no less. Organized by Leander and his brother."

I'm very much a Socialist, but I'm not going to lie, sometimes Capitalism comes in handy.

I look over at Daisy and see her biting her lip.

"Macushla?"

"I'm worried about what lies ahead. Like, how can we all keep together? Will you go back to New York?"

I immediately go over and hold her tight. "Nothing will keep us apart," I say. "Nothing will ever come between us ever. Our family is what matters most. You, me, Thea, Leander, Gray, and Rex. Wherever you are, we will be too. Even if you decide you want to live in Timbuktu—we'll be there."

She snuggles into me. "I don't think I can have the responsibility of choosing where we all end up. I don't have any roots, really."

"That's perfect, then. We'll make roots together. And we don't need to rush to make decisions, let's just see how things play out."

"Together?"

"Together."

DAISY

We've all been given beds at the medical center.

The doctor wanted us on IV antibiotics, and various other medications I was too tired to take note of.

I've no problem with it all. Thea and I are clean, and hydrated, and in a comfy bed. And best of all, we are all in a ward together! The six-bed patient room has been designated the Island survivor zone.

"Did you get some of that papaya cake, Daisy?"

"Sooo good."

"Yeah," Keyara grins. "The nurse snuck me two extra slices!"

"Did you clean your teeth after?"

She nods. We've all been brushing our teeth A LOT.

"Do you need anything else, honey?"

"No, except..." she pauses.

"Key?"

"I wish I had a book to read! I'm bored!"

A chuckle comes from the bed where Rex is lounging. Having 'being bored' as our biggest problem is just amazing.

I look over to where Thea is happily sleeping in a crib.

"I think there is a little gift shop at the entrance. Shall we go take Uncle Leander's credit card details and see what we can find?"

"Yay!"

Hand-in-hand we head down the corridor and indeed find a small 'store'. It has a selection of snacks, a few wilted bouquets and a small selection of books and magazines. Keyara immediately starts pawing through them. I wander over to the main entrance doors and look out over the parking lot. It's not a pretty view, but I drink in all the civilization.

A woman in a parked car meets my eye. She immediately gets out and starts pacing towards me. The automatic doors swoosh open as she approaches.

“Brooke?”

I don't know this woman, at least I don't think I do.

“Err, hi?”

“So glad to see you,” she beams. “And you look amazing, considering what you’ve been through.” She leans forward and gives me a hug. Does Brooke know her? She must do!

“How are you?” I ask, wishing I could say ‘who are you?’ instead.

“Good, good.” She grins and looks at Keyara in the store. “Getting some retail therapy in?”

“Key’s looking for a book,” I tell her.

“Oh, I can totally bring her some books in! I’ll do that this afternoon.”

“Wow, thanks, that’s so kind of you.” I start to relax. I’m sure I can bluff my way through this. OK. I can always blame any flubs on island amnesia.

“You want to sit?” she asks. There are a few tables and chairs scattered around the lobby.

“Sure,” I walk over to Key. “I’ll be sitting over there,” I tell her, gesturing.

“OK,” she mumbles, not looking up from her book.

My ‘friend’ pulls out a chair for me. “Thanks.”

“Of course! Can I get you a coffee or tea?”

“No, no, I’m good.”

“I imagine coffee hits you pretty hard, having gone without caffeine for so long!” she laughs. This woman has a loud laugh. And piercing eyes. As she looks at me, it’s like she’s taking account of my every detail.

“OK, humor me here,” she says. “But what is the thing you missed the most when you were on the island?”

“Erm, well...” I don’t know how to answer that. It’s a huge question. And I don’t even know who this woman is. I decide to give her a non-answer. “The thing I missed most was my toothbrush.” I tell her with a smile.

“Ooh, interesting! Not your family?”

I don’t answer, so she plows on with another question. “It must have been awkward being the only woman on the island...”

Is that a statement or a question? I give a noncommittal shrug. “Not really.”

Her face turns serious. “And poor Harvey, what a tragedy. What a terrible thing to happen to him. Just awful.”

How does she know what happened?

“It was terrible,” I whisper. “I can’t talk about it.”

“Of course, of course.”

“DAISY!” Key shouts. I look at her and she clamps a hand over her mouth for a second, then shouts again. “BROOKE!”

I’d asked Keyara to call me Brooke while we were sorting everything out. She knows everything about my switch, of course. It’s a hard thing for her to remember though. She comes skipping over.

“Brooke, I made my choices!”

I smile at the woman opposite me. “I’d better sort out these purchases. Err, nice to see you.”

“I’ll come back with some more books this afternoon,” she says. “Hi, Keyara, my name is Maddie.”

Keyara hides behind my back. “Hi,” she whispers.

Feeling awkward, I give a little wave and Key and I head into the store. As we do, Mr. DeLong steps up to us, a worried expression on his face. “Was she bothering you?”

I look back at the woman who is now scurrying away quickly. “No? But who was she? She acted like she knew me.”

“Maddie Faulk. She’s a journalist, works for NBC. She was vacationing here when the news of your rescue broke and has been trying to get in for an interview ever since.”

Flip! I’m such an idiot.

“I messed up,” I tell him. “I didn’t know, and I talked to her a little.”

If only I could go back in time an hour! I go over everything I told her in my head; I don’t *think* anything was too interesting.

“Not to worry—” I can hear the sigh in his voice “—journalists are inevitable. We can only keep them from you for so long.”

Inevitable? That doesn’t sound fun.

“D-Brooke?” Key tugs on my hand some more.

“I need to go purchase some books for Key,” I tell Mr. DeLong, still beating myself up.

He pulls out a bill and gives it to Key. “They’re on me,” he says.

“Ooh, thanks!” she replies quietly.

As we walk back to our ward, I see the car belonging to Maddie Faulk has moved.

Do not talk to Maddie Faulk.

Should be easy enough to remember.

LEANDER

A name flashing across the screen catches my eye.

The TV, which hangs high on the wall in our ward, has been on mute all morning. But now I pick up the remote and hit the volume.

“Err, guys...”

On the screen a coiffed blonde woman, and a square-jawed man are sitting behind a news desk. Behind them is a picture of Brooke with a graphic announcing “Brooke Jackson’s first interview since dramatic rescue!”

“And now for the latest in the Harvey Bannister and Brooke Jackson shipwreck story, we are now going to cut live to our correspondent in American Sāmoa. Are you there Maddie?”

The screen splits in two, and now the image of Maddie Faulk standing outside the medical center comes into view.

“Thanks Sky, I’m Maddie Faulk with NBC.” Maddie looks extremely smug. “I’m standing here outside the medical center where Brooke Jackson and the other castaways from the Mary-Mo explosion are being treated after their dramatic rescue. A quick reminder. Harvey Bannister and Brooke Jackson, along with five others, were missing and presumed dead after their ship sank last year in the South Pacific. Seven people were rescued two days ago, but Harvey Bannister was not among them. The American Embassy has put out a statement saying that Harvey did not survive the time on the island. Added to this, is the scandal that Brooke Jackson came back with a baby! And she’s not saying who the father is!”

I managed to have a little time with Brooke yesterday, and she shared with me some of her feelings about the last eleven months.”

The screen cuts to a picture of Daisy. She is wearing hospital scrubs and looks gaunt and tired. The photo was obviously taken in the hospital somewhere. Next we hear Maddie’s voice on a recording.

“Ooh, interesting! So you missed your toothbrush the most, not your family?”

“Not really,” Daisy’s voice replies.

“Hey!” she says, leaping out of her bed. “That was an answer to a different question!”

Maddie is back on screen. “And even more interestingly, when I asked her about the death of Harvey Bannister, this is what she said.

“It was terrible. I can’t talk about it,” comes Daisy’s voice.

“We all want to know what that means. Why can’t Brooke Jackson talk about Harvey’s death? Did something untoward happen? Why won’t she share any details? Rumors have been flying ever since she was rescued, and we the public demand to know the truth.”

Then a photo of Harvey, with the date of his birth and a question mark for the date of his death is put on screen, then the NBC TV crew are back.

“That interview certainly leaves more questions than it gives answers, don’t you agree, Sky?” the male newscaster says.

The blonde trills back. “It sure does Pete. Was Harvey the father of the baby? Or is it one of the many male crew members? What happened on that island, and how did Harvey die? Seems like Brooke is keeping her pretty lips tightly closed.”

“Good grief!” Daisy cries. “What are they trying to say?”

I grab the remote and turn it off. The press coverage after Buckletop was excruciating.

“The press are going to be a fucking pain in the ass, Daisy. There’s no way around it. It’s gonna get crazy for a while, but then they’ll move on to the next big story.”

Daisy leans into me. “They’re going to find out I’m not Brooke, and then our whole story is going to be scrutinized. What if they find out about Harvey...”

“Babe, I don’t know what your sister is planning, but she’s the one we need to speak to. Until then, we’ll just keep our heads low and try not to panic.



Arriving back in the USA is fucking terrible.

We fly to Hawaii, then Dallas, and finally to St. Louis.

STL was a nightmare—a heaving mass of paparazzi. Reporters were chasing us through the terminal, even though Malcolm had met us there with a couple of private security guards.

“Brooke, Brooke over here...”

“... Brooke...what happened to Harvey?”

“Action Jackson...who’s the daddy?”

“... Leander Westhall...any comment?”

“Mr. Malone...exclusive... ten thousand...”

“Keyara...photo shoot...”

That was too much. I pushed my way into the crowd of press and pulled the dude yelling at Keyara up onto his toes. My fist bunched his shirt, and my other fist just bunched.

“Shout at her again, and you’ll regret it. And you leave the kid alone, got it?”

Malcolm had got us a hotel in St. Louis, but we declined and just went straight to rent a vehicle. The two things we were concentrating on were reuniting Key with her parents and getting Rex to the hospital to see Meemaw—before it was too late.

GRAY

When we finally get to Overlook Bluff, all of us are shattered.

We are at the modest family home of Rex's grandparents. All six of us, plus Thea. Less than a week from rescue to being here.

Not too shabby.

Unlike this little house. The white clapboard and blue shutters are faded and peeling. The picket fence has half come down and the front yard is a mess of weeds. It's down a narrow road that is not maintained by the city.

The mailbox has dents and a couple of bullet holes in it. Me and Rex put them there when we snuck out his grandpa's gun. That did not go down well, let me tell you.

A curtain twitches, then I heard a high-pitched squeal. The front door is flung open, and Nanda tears down the steps.

"Keyara! Pepe laitiiti!" she screams, running full tilt and nearly falling into her daughter.

"You're alive! My little love!"

"Key! You're alive—"

Then there is Nikau. He stumbles after his wife. The last time I saw him he looked a hundred pounds and deathly pale.

Now his voice resonates out of his broad chest. "I knew it! I knew there was a reason why the Lord chose that I would survive." He joins Nanda and Keyara and they are dancing in a circle. Dancing with joy.

Nanda looks like she's aged a hundred years. Her scalp is visible through her thinning, patchy hair.

Nikau picks up Key and throws her in the air. "I just knew. I knew you were out there. Otherwise what was the point of me surviving? I just knew it."

I don't think Nikau will ever let that kid leave his side again. Their reunion has everyone crying.

And the fact that Nikau had miraculously gone into remission from his

cancer?

I'm not a religious man, but sometimes I wonder.

I scan the doorway, half-expecting Meemaw to be there, wiping her hands on her apron and telling us to wash up for supper.

But the next person to step into the doorway is certainly not Meemaw.

He's a handsome black man with an extremely upright posture—old Thomas 'Tough Love' Malone himself. You can tell by the lack of emotion.

Rex's dad was always scary to me. He'd come into town occasionally, criticize everyone and everything, then leave again, looking nothing but glad to be getting away from his parents and his son.

Rex steps away from the rental car where he was leaning.

Leander and Killian fuss over Daisy and Thea, but I step around the SUV and join Rex as he greets his father.

"Dad."

"Rex."

Then.

"Gray."

Huh...all these years I wondered if he actually knew my name, as he always just referred to me as 'boy'.

Tough Love narrows his eyes slightly, then walks down the stoop steps, circles around Key's still shrieking reunion, and puts out his hand.

His son has been missing, presumed dead for almost a year, and Thomas Malone offers his hand to shake.

Cold. Fish.

Rex gives it a brief pump. I guess he didn't expect anything else. But we'd just watched the outpouring of love from Nanda and Nikau, and I thought, just maybe, Tough Love might, I dunno? Care?

Rex waves a hand back to the rest of us.

"Dad, I want to introduce you to some people. These are the people who I was... castaway... with." Rex clears his throat. This is so weird, it's like he's introducing a Sunday League kickball team, not the people he's just spent twelve months fighting for survival with.

"You know Gray," Rex says, "and this is Leander, I don't know if you remember him. Then this is Killian, and this is Daisy."

Tough Love's eyes narrow. "And the baby?"

"Thea."

Rex doesn't elaborate, and I'm glad about it. Thomas Malone doesn't need

to know our business. We're only here because we needed to drop Key off first thing, then we're headed to the hospital.

"Daisy needs somewhere to feed and change Thea, so we'll come in for a beat before going to see Meemaw."

Not waiting for an answer, Rex walks up onto the stoop and pushes the front door open. "Come inside, Daisy. Let's get you settled.."

Nanda pulls herself away from Key. "Please, whatever you need. I can't thank you enough. I can't. Whatever you need."

Everything is too much for Thea, who starts to yell her noisy little head off. Nanda leads Daisy inside, and Leander follows, carrying the diaper bag.

We've only been in civilization for four (or is it five?) days, and already we are all so grateful for diapers. Holy cow are we!

I watch as Daisy ducks her head under the glare of Thomas.

Fuck that guy—seriously.

"Walk us through the problems with Meemaw," Rex says. "Tell us everything—now."

That's the fucking ticket, Rex.

I've known Tough Love since I was in grade school. Neither of us have ever spoken to him like this before, but fuck this. "Yeah," I add. "Talk to us like we don't know anything about it, like we've been fighting for our lives on a deserted island for twelve months."

"Would you like to come in first?" Tough Love answers, keeping his cool.

"Strange you're inviting us into a house that isn't your own," I mutter, as first Rex, then me and Killian enter the house.

It smells just the same. Lemon-scented cleaner and wood smoke. The tick-tock of the grandfather clock was as low and resonant as ever. The clock was far too big for the little room, but it was a family heirloom. Pops had a story about his grandfather buying it from a store in the white part of town. It had been a struggle, but he had been determined to bring back this mother-of-pearl in-lay clock for his new wife, after she'd spent a year admiring it in a store window.

Through an archway, Nanda is pouring soda into a cup for Keyara, who is sitting on her father's knee. Key is stroking the condensation of the side of the glass, mesmerized.

"You boys want some cold drinks?" she asks.

Neither Rex nor I answer, but Killian gives her a thumbs up.

"Meemaw," Rex says again.

Tough Love sighs and takes a seat. “It was a couple of weeks after you went missing,” he says, “she wasn’t complaining on the phone, but I came down to check in—I could see she wasn’t right. I did come and check in with her, you know. She was beside herself when you went missing.”

He scowls, like we upset her on purpose.

“When I got here, I noticed her feet were a real mess. Well, both her legs *and* feet were really swollen. That, with her constant wheezing, didn’t seem right. I had Brandi take her to the doctor.”

Brandi was Meemaw’s neighbor, mid-sixties, sweet as pie. Of course Brandi took Meemaw to the doctors. I’m sure Tough Love was much too ‘busy’.

“Brandi gave me an update; Mom needed beta-blockers. She’d had some tests at the hospital and the doctors said her heart was just...failing. Mom didn’t want any intervention—she could have had a pacemaker, but after you and Gray disappeared, she didn’t see the point. Fatalistic, you know how she was.”

“How she is, not was,” Rex replies through gritted teeth.

“Well, she’s been up and down since then, but her breathing has got progressively worse, and she can hardly move. Then last week Brandi came over and was scared enough to call me, said Mom wasn’t making much sense, delirious and coughing. I told her to call for an ambulance. When they arrived, they said she was in end-stage heart failure and rushed her to the hospital. Mom has been there ever since. They don’t expect to last much longer...”

I realize that I’m clenching my fists so tight that my knuckles are turning white. I tried to force myself to breathe.

“Is she conscious?” I ask.

Tough Luck looks at me, like I don’t have the right to ask. Fuck that—I love her.

“Is she conscious?” Rex repeats.

“According to Brandi, she’s awake, and sometimes lucid.”

I can’t keep biting my tongue. “And when were you last at the hospital?”

He hears the accusation in my voice. “I don’t see that’s your concern. I have called the hospital every day though.”



Twenty minutes later, Keyara, Nanda, and Nikau watch us leave from their

position on the stoop. I see them waving in the rear view mirror until we are out of sight.

Leaving Key is hard, but not as hard as I thought it might be. She is so obviously in the right place, and not countries away like we feared. I will miss the little noodle, though; we'll have to figure out a regular visiting schedule.

Daisy spends a lot of the journey on the phone, talking to her folks. We will be going down to see them after spending time with Meemaw. Not sure if Rex will go there or stay here. Everything is up in the air.

"My parents are making a fuss," Daisy says as she hangs up. "And they don't even know about Thea yet! Dad is bent out of shape because I came here before coming home."

"You OK?" I ask.

"Yeah, I've finally let go of my need to please them. I'm a grown woman with a large and loving family of my own. These days, I make decisions for myself and not based on them."

That's my girl.

The drive goes by quickly, and we soon arrive at Jefferson City General Hospital. Pulling into the parking lot, I circle looking for somewhere to park. It takes me twenty frustrating minutes to find an empty slot, but soon enough we tumble out and head to the main visitors' desk.

Rex learns where he can find Meemaw, and we all decide he should go ahead on his own first. Before he enters the elevator for the fourth floor, I fling my arms around him.

"Love you, brother."

He rests his head on my shoulder for a moment, then disappears up to find his Meemaw.

REX

She's so tiny.

When I arrive at the room, Meemaw is awake and hooked to an IV, and various monitors. Her face is still pale and sunken, and she doesn't move to look as I enter, just focuses on the view from her window.

I take the seat beside her bed and pick up her hands. It takes a moment for her eyes to register me. Finally, she gives a tired smile.

"I've missed you, Rexie-boy," she says, her voice soft. "But I knew I'd see you again, in one life or another."

Her eyes glisten as I stroke her fingers.

"Have I passed over?" she asks. I'm startled for a moment, and take a second before answering.

"Is your grandpa here too?" She scans my face.

"Meemaw, you're still on the living side of heaven," I tell her. "I've been trapped on an island for a year, but finally got rescued. I didn't die."

She widens her eyes. "So Gray—is he alive too?" Her fingers twitch. "Please tell me he's safe."

"He is, Meemaw. And he wants to see you. Can I tell him to come in?"

"I'll be cross if you don't. I don't have any time to waste, my love."

Gray comes in and pulls another chair close to the bed so we can talk. This is when I tell her about Daisy, but while she nods, I can see she is drifting off and not taking in what I'm saying. She finally dozes off completely.

"I'll ask Leander to get us an Airbnb nearby," Gray says, not needing to be told that we will not be leaving Jefferson for a while.

"Thanks, Gray. Y'all should go rest up, I'm going to stay here."

"I'll stay with you, but Leander and Killian need to make sure Daisy is getting the rest she needs."

"Agreed."

"And as soon as Meemaw is... as soon as she is able, they can all come

meet her. Meemaw can meet Thea, alright?”

“Right. Now, as Meemaw would say, be off like a herd of turtles.”

“That one never made any sense.”

I look fondly down at the sleeping old woman.

“But we’d never argue with her, or she’d cream our corn!”



We stayed in Jefferson for three nights. The hours pass in that way which is unique to hospitals; indescribably strange. Meemaw is awake and cognizant for maybe fifty percent of the time. When she is, we’d tell stories, and laugh, and try to pack as much joy into those moments as possible, and when she slides out of focus, I want to punch the wall.

I’d missed so much time with her.

I should never have gone to Sāmoa, but Meemaw had insisted.

“It’s only a year, Rexie-boy. Nanda and Nikau need your help—don’t worry about me, I’ll still be here when you get back.”

Meemaw had a large circle of friends, and had set up a fiercely independent lifestyle after Pops died a decade ago.

I wanted to be angry at my father: he’d only come to the hospital a couple of times, but truthfully I just felt sorry for him. I’d always had such a good relationship with Meemaw, and now she was surrounded with love, from my friends, my lover, my child...What did he have?

Not a grandchild. I don’t mention to him that I am one of Thea’s dads.

Meemaw was just delighted with Thea. We lay the baby next to her, close to her wrinkled, withered cheek. Leander, with a new phone, takes photo after photo. I know I’ll thank him for those in the future.

“She’s as sweet as sugar on a plum. You tell her that Meemaw will always love her now, won’t you?”

Of course we will.

Meemaw said the house was mine, and to do with it whatever I liked. Something to chew on later, but obviously Nanda, Nikau, and Key can stay there as long as they like.

More hours pass. Killian brings us sandwiches. Daisy goes to the *Airbnb* to shower and sleep.

It was heading towards the evening when the nurse had told us it wouldn’t be much longer.

And then she died just before midnight.

GRAY

Meemaw asked to see me alone.

Sometimes she was lucid and sometimes her mind wandered off into a dreaming world where we couldn't make sense of what she was saying.

But she was lucid when she said, "Rexie-boy, you go take some fresh-air. Me and Gray have some visitin' to do."

So off Rex went. Obedient to his grandmother, as he was to no one else.

I watched him leave then scooted my chair closer.

"Rex is in love?" Meemaw said, wasting no time.

"I . . . I think, no, I know he is." I wonder how the old lady will handle our love-mash-up. "He loves Daisy and she loves him."

Meemaw gives a sad smile and nods. "And you love her too?"

"I do."

"Now, I don't pretend to understand how y'all are fixin' to make this work, but I trust you both, and I know you'll do right, but Gray..."

She coughs and closes her eyes for a while.

"Shall I get the nurse?"

Without opening her eyes she tuts. "Impatient like ever! Just give me a minute."

Eventually Meemaw looks at me again. "Daisy . . .he showed me a photo of her. She's lovely."

"Do you want to meet her?" I ask. I figure the old lady wants reassurance about her grandson's future.

"No, no need. It's something . . ." She meets my eyes, and I see how troubled she looks.

"What's going on, Meemaw?"

Shaking her head, a tear trails down her frail crepey cheek. "Brandi is so good with the internets," she says in a non-sequitur.

Brandi? Her neighbor?

"I'm a little lost," I say as gently as I can.

Whatever is bothering Meemaw, I want to help. I'll do whatever I can to give her peace of mind.

The black pinpricks of her pupils in her tired brown eyes draw me closer.

"Rex is my world," she murmurs. "Both you boys."

I feel tears in my own eyes.

Meemaw falls asleep again. I just hold her hand. Maybe the idea that both Rex and I love the same woman is too much for her to comprehend. I'm not sure how to give her peace.

After an hour she wakes and looks up at me. Despite everything, she still has that Meemaw spark. The one which would have us dancing to Stevie Wonder (her favorite) while she made us after school snacks. The sparkle that had us constructing pillow forts and pulling out old VHS tapes for Saturday movie nights.

"Can you listen to me carefully, Gray?" she asks. "I don't have much time left, and I don't think I can make decisions and be confident about them any more."

"Of course, Meemaw. Whatever you need."

She beckons me closer. "I need you to do whatever you think is best," she whispers.

When Meemaw whispers her secret to me, I nearly have a heart attack on the spot. Everything changes in that second.

"Rex's birth-momma, she saw Rex was missing on the news."

"What do you mean, Meemaw?"

"Does Rexie ever talk about his mama?" she asks, instead of answering my question.

"Not really. I mean, he's told me that she walked out when he was a few weeks old. But we don't talk about her—it hurts him too much I think."

"That's what I thought. Such a pretty girl, but not so bright. And Thomas was no help—he frightened the girl, I think. All his shouting." I squeeze Meemaw's hand. "The day she left was a Monday. Rex was ten weeks old. She told me she was going to the store. I gave her money to get some formula and groceries. She took Pop's car. Left and never came back."

"And you went to the police?"

"No Sir! I know better than that. I knew she was in the wind. She was welcome to our car and our money, because she'd left us with the best gift of our lives."

“Rex?”

“Rex.”

She smiles. I think she’s picturing baby Rex. Then her face shadows. “She sent me a letter, saying she had seen on TV that Rex was missing, presumed dead.”

“Does she know he’s alive now?”

“No, I didn’t want to tell Thomas about her.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Rex’s mama, Linda, she said in her letter that she knew Rex didn’t want anything to do with her. Thomas had made that clear.”

“Thomas?”

“Linda said she’d been in touch with him many times over the years, and he always told her Rex didn’t want anything to do with her.”

What? I can’t have heard that right.

“But Meemaw, Rex thinks his mom has just always abandoned him—that’s all he knows,” I say.

“Oh, honey. I know. And now Rexie will find out his own father deliberately kept his mom away from him. I don’t know what to do, so I thought I’d tell you.” Her eyes are wide, begging me to take on her pain. “And what if Linda is not a good woman? I don’t want her in Rex’s life if she is bad. Brandi and I were worried she only got in touch because there might be insurance money for her, her being Rex’s mom and Rex dying in an accident.”

I nod. That’s possible. It’s not like she came forward after the mountain fire, when Rex could really have done with some more love.

She pats my hand. “You’ve such a head on your shoulders, dear Gray. I know you’ll figure out the right thing to do.”

It feels as though someone is reaching into my chest and pulling out my heart. It’s too much.

“I’ll take care of everything,” I choke out. She gives me a relieved smile. I’ll take this burden for her, of course I will but...

But...Fuck me. Meemaw, excuse my French, but Fuck me.

After we talk, I Rex pokes his head around the door. “You two have enough private time yet?”

I give him a tight smile and stay sitting. Moving seems like too much effort. My body is leaden.

“Sure did, honey,” Meemaw says. “Now come back here and hold my hand.”

My eyes are full of tears as Rex and I sit either side of her. We sit there through the night and in the morning she’s left us.

“Meemaw?” Rex whispers. “Are you there?”

We both know she’s not.

Rex’s hands drop limply to his sides. His eyes look heavy and swollen with tiredness and tears.

I blink a few times, keeping my own tears at bay.

The sun starts to rise on our first day without Malia Malone.

It’s time to meet Brooke. It’s weird to be meeting her for the first time. And we’ll meet Daisy’s parents.

And, potentially, Rex’s mom.

I have the name and address Meemaw gave me.

My head is going to explode. Shit.

DAISY

Gray and Rex come back to the Airbnb with us.

“Meemaw insisted we don’t rush to hold a funeral for her. She said she wanted us to get our feet beneath the table again first. Typical—always thinking of others.”

I’m grateful for Meemaw’s thoughtfulness. Gray and Rex both look absolutely shattered, poor things.

We are all continuously tired. It’s being surrounded by noise and people and everything none of us are used to. It’s incredible how exhausting traffic noise is when you’ve not heard it in a year. Or how the smell of antiseptic is hard on the lining of your nose. And the floors of buildings make your feet ache after soft loam and sand.

In the master bedroom, I draw back the covers of the bed and crawled into the crisp sheets while Rex and Gray take turns showering. Thea is sleeping in a travel crib a few feet away.

I fall asleep before they get into bed either side of me. But when Thea’s little whimpers wake me a few hours later, I realize I’m sandwiched between them.

They have just been through so much, I’ve been absolutely longing to hold them both close. Feel their skin against mine, give them love. Be there through their mourning.

I feel Gray stir awake as I try to gently move around him.

“Daisy?”

“Shh, I’m just getting Thea, go back to sleep.”

“You need help?”

“Nope, just sleep, big guy. I love you.”

“I love you too, babe,” he mumbles.

Gray gives a snore and I settle into a large armchair while Thea eagerly latches on. As she feeds, I listen to the slumbering noises all around me. Gray, Rex, and I are in this room, but the door to the bedroom next door is open, and I guess Leander and Killian must have crashed out in there.

Amazingly, Thea falls back to sleep after only fifteen minutes of feeding; normally she'd keep going for at least half-an-hour. As I lay her down in the crib, I realized the sun was beginning to rise.

Today is the day we were going to go see my blood family.

The peace of my early morning is broken with thoughts of all the chaos and mayhem me and Brooke's switch is going to create when the news broke. Already, our rescue had been in the headlines around the globe. No one has been able to keep track of any of the Mary-Mo survivors though—thankfully.

We've managed to keep in the wind.

I walk into the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. A lot of conditioner and some scissors had got out the worst of my hair mats, but I still look very...wild. I set the shower running and told myself to forget about what I looked like. It just didn't matter.

"Want some company? How are you doing?" Rex is standing in front of me, rubbing his eyes.

I put a hand onto his bare chest. "How are *you* doing?"

"I'm sad, but OK. I'm at peace with Meemaw's passing, I think. I'm so grateful I got to see her."

"I'm so glad for you too. The timing was miraculous."

"You're miraculous," he tells me, arms going around my waist.

"Sweet talker," I murmur, then reach my arms around his neck. "I'd love some company in the shower." I move closer and press myself against him. The doctor had told me I'd healed nicely from birth, but should still wait a week or two before having penis-in-vagina sex.

When she said that it hadn't been a problem, sex was the last thing on my mind. But apparently, my body and mind were changing. One minute ago, my breasts were just a milk-machine for my daughter, but in a personality switch, they have suddenly started tingling in a very different way. Rex must be able to feel my hardened nipples through my thin tee shirt.

"Hmm, are you alright, Daisy?"

"Don't I feel alright?" I ask.

"You feel beautiful, and sexy as hell, and I apologize for the boner that is throbbing against your belly."

“You don’t have to apologize for a thing like that,” I say, and slide my hand down his stomach.

“Shit, Daisy. You’re making me want to do all kinds of things to you and I am trying to be respectful. You’ve just had a baby and all that.”

My hand reaches the waistband of Rex’s briefs, “True, but that doesn’t stop me from wanting to touch you, or having you touch me.” I press my hands to the cloth of his briefs, feeling a hardening erection beneath the cotton.

“Fuck, Daisy, there is nothing I want more in the world, but it’s too soon, right?” Rex picks me up and settles me on the bathroom counter.

“It’s not too soon for making out, you know that!” I tell him, as he presses his mouth towards mine. He grabs a handful of my hair in his fist. “Fuck, well in that case, we have to be gentle, you’re still a fragile little thing right now.”

I growl in frustration, but it’s true. My poor vagina is not up to any kind of fun battering, and my boobs leak milk and ache constantly. But somehow I still feel sexy, and powerful. Becoming a mother is an earthy, messy, animalistic experience, and I feel like I now know my body like I never have before.

We kiss, and I run my hands over his chest, and open my legs. “Please, Rex, help me.”

His eyelids are heavy and he gives a crooked grin. “Anything.” Then Rex reaches out a hand and squirts some lotion on his fingers from the pump by the sink. “Lean back, let me gently massage you.”

His fingers skim so gently against the top of my vulva. I’m so sensitive I immediately start throbbing. I’m already wet. It’s a relief to know things still seem to work down there.

“Is this alright?” he asks, sliding a finger down one side of my clit, and then the other.

“So good.”

“And this?”

He circles the little nub and I feel it swell, I’m so close already. I stretch out an arm and free his cock completely from his briefs. There is so much precum glistening from the top, that it lubes the whole shaft as I stroke downwards.

“Oh, baby, you do that and I’ll only last a few seconds.”

“Me too, Rex, I’m so close.”

And then.

Dammit.

I hear Thea start to make the little snuffly noises she makes right before waking up.

“We’ve probably got twenty seconds,” I tell Rex.

“No problem!”

He increases the pace of his fingers and I instantly start building to an orgasm. My hand on his cock works as though it has a mind of its own, and Rex’s length throbs and twitches.

I feel the base of my spine tingle, my center heats. “Rex,” I whisper, “I’m going to...”

And then I come, and so does Rex. His cum splatters on my belly, as his fingers help me ride the waves of my orgasm.

“Fuck, baby,” he pants.

“Sooo good,” I reply, still swirling around in orgasm land.

“Wahhh!” yells Thea from the other room.

“I got her,” says Leander, through the door. “You guys continue on with what you’re doing.”

Rex picks me off the counter. “Time for a shower then...”

DAISY

After a teary goodbye to Keyara, the guys and I drove south for a couple of hours. Now we are staying at a Splendid Inn, on the edge of Rocky Grove, my hometown. We are not at the hotel right now though. We are parked in the street opposite the house I grew up in.

I get out of the van and walk across the road. My heart rate increases as the front door begins to open.

On the island, I had made a sort-of peace with never seeing my parents again, or my sister. Out of the doorway steps my dad. He doesn't say anything and for a moment.

It's so weirdly similar to arriving at Rex's home. Rex's dad opening the door and being cold. Am I going to get a handshake from my dad?

But then his face crumples.

"Oh, my Daisy. You made it home. Well done."

He waits as I walk up the steps and then pulls me into his arms. I feel him pat me on the back several times. "Well done," he says again. Maybe it's an odd thing to say, but I guess Dad saw the island as a challenge to conquer. And this is the first time I've succeeded at anything in his eyes.

All of a sudden, my mom is there as well.

"She's here?" Mom is wiping her hands on her apron, hovering around me and dad. I pull away slightly to make room for her, and then she is inside the hug, saying, "Oh, Daisy" over and over.

Then, "You're so thin."

"Let's get you some food," my dad says, pulling me towards the entrance hallway.

It's like they haven't even noticed I have four hulking men and a baby hanging out a few feet away.

“Err, I should do some introductions first,” I say, gesturing behind me.

“So should I,” says a new voice.

I look up and see my sister walking towards me. My eyes nearly fall out of my head. It’s Brooke...but it’s not. My sister, my identical twin sister, is twinning in a beyond-expected way.

I look between her and dad, and then look back to the guys.

My sister.

And in her arms?

A baby.

GRAY

“Meet the parents,” whispers Leander. “I can totally see the dad as Robert de Niro. I vote Killian as Greg Focker.”

The Jackson parents and Daisy murmur together, I can’t make out their individual voices, but hugging is going on.

Yeah, all kinds of emotions are flying around the place.

Maybe Angela does.

Us guys just hang out by the rental. Rex is jiggling Thea up and down in his arms.

“Did you know Daisy’s dad is called Michael?” Leander asides into my ear. “He’s Michael Jackson. Think he can moonwalk?”

Sha-mon.

Another person steps out of the house, and there is Daisy’s twin.

I know they are identical, but somehow my brain didn’t imagine them to look so—alike. Dense, right?

They are incredibly alike, right down to the baby.

A baby?

Just when you think this whole thing can’t get more Shakespearean twisty, there’s another bombshell. Brooke has a baby.

There’s another flurry of crying and hugging.

“Hey, Leander, pass me the phone.” Leander had bought a cell phone and we were all currently just sharing the one phone. He gives it to me and I start taking photos. Daisy will want a record of this.

Daisy releases herself from the hug and calls, “One minute,” as she bounces down the steps towards us.

She reaches out for Thea. “Hey, sweet girl, wanna meet Grandma and Grandpa?”

To us, she gives a nervous smile. “Hey, guys. I think maybe I should just hang with the family on my own for a little while—is that OK?”

“Of course!” Rex exclaims. “Makes total sense.”

“We’ll go back to the hotel and chill,” adds Leander. “I’ve got a whole season of *MasterChef* to catch up on.”

“How can we support you?” I ask.

She smiles at me so sweetly. “You’re all already doing everything. Obviously, I want Mom and Dad, and Brooke, to get to know you, but we just need a beat first. How about you come back at seven, and we’ll all eat dinner together?”

“Sounds good, macushla,” Killian tells her as the rest of us nod.

I drape the diaper bag over her shoulder and give her a kiss. “I love you, Daisy.”

“Love you too, Gray.” Daisy picks up Thea’s hand and gives us a wave with it. “Say bye to your daddies, Thea.”

“Bye, Thea.” We all wave and make goofy faces.

And she laughs.

“Whoa!” We’re all so excited, Thea laughs again. It’s a magical chuckle of a laugh. I surreptitiously wipe a tear from the corner of my eye.

“Call us if you need anything,” Rex says. “But if not, we’ll see you at seven.”



Linda Kaminski.

I have her address from the letter she sent Meemaw. It’s odd, sitting, holding this letter written by Rex’s mom. I don’t know when I last saw a handwritten letter. Maybe never.

I look her up online.

LinkedIn offers me various profiles. So does bankruptcy court.

Hmm.

I do an image search and halfway down the page I know I spot her. Those bright blue-green eyes are unmistakable. I follow the link and see she is the manager of a woman’s shelter in St. Louis.

What the fuck am I supposed to do with this information?

Rex is not going to like me keeping this from him, but I also feel like I need to honor Meemaw’s wishes.

DAISY

The kitchen is large and open and has a huge table surrounded by a dozen chairs. At the moment, only Brooke, Dad, and I are at the table though. Mom is busying herself, making the dinner she intends on feeding everyone later.

“Are you sure you don’t want to sit, Mom? Join us?”

“I can hear perfectly well from here,” she replies, pulling vegetables from the crisper. I can’t tell what’s going on with her. She had given me a swift hug, eyes full of tears, and now it’s like she can’t look at me.

Dad puts a glass of ice water in front of me. Like diapers, it’s another thing that I will never take for granted again.

“So...” says Brooke, gesturing to Thea on my breast, “...snap?”

The babe attached to Brooke is bigger than Thea. This babe already has a thick head of chocolate brown curls, pretty gray eyes framed by dark lashes, and full chubby cheeks.

I love her...him, instantly.

“A boy? Girl?”

“A girl, Amelia.”

I grin. “After Earhart?”

“Of course.”

We are not alike personality-wise, but we still know an awful lot about each other.

“Thea’s full name is Amalthea.”

Brooke narrows her eyes, then gives a smile. “Of course you did!”

“It seemed appropriate,” I reply.

“I don’t get it,” my dad says. Dad doesn’t like when he’s out of the loop. There are a lot of things he doesn’t like.

Especially not being the center of attention.

He’s exhausting.

I flap a hand at him. “Don’t worry about it, it’s a sister-thing.”

“Fine, don’t mind me,” he says in a cold tone. “I’m just the one who has

been picking up the pieces, while you go off living Brooke's life.”

He also *loves* to play the victim.

I decide to not rise to any of his jabs, and instead concentrate on the important things. Brooke and I have so much to discuss, but instead we are just making baby smalltalk. I want to grab her hand and take her up to our old adjoining rooms so we can speak freely.

We can't talk in front of Dad. He'll monopolize the conversation.

I am desperate to ask who Amelia's father is. I've been doing some math.

Just like the old days, Brooke reads my mind.

“These babies need changing, ” she declares, wrinkling her nose. She stands, her chair scraping across the kitchen floor. “Come on, Daze. You can check out Amelia's nursery. I've got stacks of diapers in there.”

Mom is headed into the pantry. “Take your shoes off if you're going upstairs.”

Dad motions with his hand. “Go change the babies...then we'll talk.”

Home sweet home.

Not a lot has changed at the house. A few new houseplants, and some more photos are on the walls. There are a surprising amount of photos that are of only me. That's never happened before.

Wow. I just realized, that *never* happened before. In the whole house, there was never a solo photo of me. Plenty of Brooke, standing with trophies or certificates, but the only photos of me were when I had my sister next to me.

“Did you photoshop yourself out of these photos?” I ask, as we walk up the stairs.

“Nearly had to—these were hard to find. I insisted they went up.” She stops and looks back at me, as though she is going to say something, but Amelia wriggles and starts to cry.

“Come on, it's not just an excuse. This one really does need a freshie.”

Brooke's old room is now painted a butter-yellow, and hosts a crib, changing table, and all manner of toys.

“This looks great. You always said you didn't want kids.”

“I didn't,” she replies, expertly unsnapping Amelia's outfit. “But you did.”

That halts me in my tracks.

“Wait, what?”

“You, Daisy, this is about you.”

I watch my sister wipe Amelia's bottom (not with a Tushy Tickle—that

would have to change) and apply some diaper cream.

“You died, Daze,” she says, continuing on with the baby and not looking at me at all. “You died because of me. What was I going to do? To the world, Brooke Jackson had died. I wasn’t worried about the mess or scandal of admitting I was still alive. It was nothing like that. I just...it just...”

Now she does look at me, her eyes red-rimmed.

“You were dead, but I was alive—as you. I couldn’t bring myself to kill you twice. I just couldn’t do it. So I decided to try and live a Daisy life; be kind to strangers, volunteer at shelters, all that bullshit. Then I found out I was pregnant—she’s Harvey’s, you may have guessed.”

“Brooke!”

Her eyes are brimming with tears.

“So there I am, pregnant, and pretending to be you, trying to live your life because I feel so fucking guilty. You would have kept the baby, so I kept the baby. I’ve been trying to keep you alive, Daze.”

“Oh, Wookiee.” I sink to my knees and lay Thea on a play-mat. Amazingly, she starts gazing at the tiny toys dangling above her instead of screaming her head off. Amelia is also content for a minute, so I take my sister in my arms.

“But what about Brooke? If I was dead, and then you were trying to be me here, what about Brooke?”

“I let her go...I just couldn’t be her. I couldn’t do it. Brooke’s gone, and you’re back and I am so happy, so happy. But I just don’t know what will happen to me now. I’m not Brooke, I’m not Daisy. I’m no one.”

My strong, clever, cool-as-a-cucumber sister is lost.

“Did you know that Really Wild Films split the prize money for *Champion*. The three other finalists got a share, and so did I. As next-of-kin to Brooke.”

She had me as her next-of-kin?

“When I’m competing, doing an iron-man, or triathlon, I know exactly what I’m doing. I’d have been fine if I’d been shipwrecked, but this? Being you?” she trails off.

Everything is a mess, but I am going to find the right way out of it for all of us. Especially Brooke. My heart aches for her.

But first...

“Wahh!”

Our needs take a back seat—we are mama’s now.

“Alright, Thea, alright! Do you need a freshie as well? Brooke...”

“You watch Amelia, I’ll grab your diaper bag.”

Before she runs out the door I grab her hand.

“It’s all going to work out, Wookiee.”

She gives me a wobbly smile. “At some point, I’m going to want to know how Harvey died, but not just yet. Is that OK?”

I nod, and Brooke takes off to get my bag.

Tears filling my eyes for my sister and my niece. Amelia doesn’t look upset at all; she chuckles while I begin to strip Thea. When I blow a raspberry, it cracks her up.

“It’s all going to work out isn’t it, Amelia? Aunty Daisy is going to figure out a plan...but first we have to clean your cousin’s smelly butt!”



The guys rejoined me—us—for dinner. And that wasn’t at all awkward. The four of them were freshly showered, and in the crisp new clothes we’d all had Amazon deliver when we were in Jefferson City, but boy, did they all look out of place.

“Is this the first time you’ve bought a boy home, Daisy?” my sister grins at me. Evil witch.

“Very funny, sis.”

The guys don’t know how to react to any of this. Leander is the only one who looks even slightly comfortable. He also brought several bottles of wine to have with dinner, which was a good thought. I’ve heard the phrase ‘pump and dump’ but have never used a breast pump, so no wine for me, unfortunately. I’ll just plow through the evening completely sober.

“Lovely pot-roast, Mrs. Jackson,” Gray mumbles.

“Oh, er, thank you. I guess you can call me Angela.”

“Angela, yeah. It’s tasty. Err, where did you grow up, Angela?”

Bless Gray for trying to make small talk.

“Just a little north of here,” my mom replies.

“Isn’t Thea adorable, Mr. Jackson,” Leander beams at my dad. “She doesn’t look much like you, but I definitely see some Angela in there.”

Dad shifts in his seat, then puts down his silverware.

“Alright. Enough.”

The room goes quiet and we all turn his way. Gosh, it feels just like home used to.

“Thea. I want to know about her. Who is daddy there?”

My, how things don't change. Dad is very much still Dad.

I close my eyes for a moment then open them again. “I understand that you have questions...”

Alright, this is when it might get awkward.

“...and I'm not sure where to start.”

Leander holds my hand under the table. We'd talked on the drive down, and I said I'd explain about our situation. Now though, I'm having second thoughts. I'm a teenage girl again, having to explain a C minus. Or a dent on the fender. Or forgetting to hang out the laundry.

“Mr. Jackson, firstly I'd like to say thank you for you and Angela's hospitality. As Gray has said, it's a delicious pot roast. We are all pleased to make your acquaintance, because I imagine we will be seeing each other, somewhat frequently, from now on.”

My dad opens his mouth, but Leander doesn't give him a chance to speak.

“You asked about Thea's parentage, and we'll get to that, but firstly, I'd like to express what a wonderful daughter you have.”

It's incredible, but when Dad turns his head, he doesn't look at me...

HE LOOKS AT BROOKE!

Rex gets to his feet and comes to stand behind me. “Leander is completely correct, Daisy is the most beautiful human being I have ever met, and I love her so utterly and completely.”

Killian straightens in his seat, “And so do I. For you to have had this amazing girl, this amazing woman in your life for twenty-nine years, and not appreciate how special she is? It boggles the mind.”

“Thea is the luckiest girl in the world,” Gray adds, “because not only does she have four absolutely doting daddies, she has a mom who will always stand up for her, fight for her, and be the warrior mama that all little girls deserve.”

Tumbleweed moment.

“More potatoes?” asks Mom, waving the dish around.

My father frowns.

“Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. We all fell in love with your daughter, all four of us. And we are lucky enough to have Daisy love us back. I know it's not a traditional set-up for a relationship, but we are an extremely happy polycule, and intend to stay that way.”

“Until death do us part...” rumbles Gray in a deep voice. The frown on his face is deep and troubled.

“And we will be making a home together just outside Jefferson City,” Rex adds.

This was another thing we’d discussed on our drive. Meemaw’s house was small, but it stood on six acres of land. Nanda, Nikau, and Keyara could stay in the house, and we would build our own family home on the connecting land. That way Thea could grow up close to Key.

“Well I...I just...” my dad starts blustering.

“It doesn’t seem right,” my mother says, following Dad’s lead, as usual.

“I’m sure you can find some information about polyamorous relationships online,” Leander says. “Don’t feel bad about being ignorant. Older people find it hard to embrace change. Delicious mash, Angela.”

He says all this with a straight face.

Killian’s face isn’t straight when he chimes in. “Did you know that polyandry is practiced in cultures all over the world? But Americans are awfully uptight for the most part.”

My sister...looks sad. “I always thought I’d be the boundary breaker, not you, Daze.”

Dad folds his napkin and lays it on the table. “Well, I can’t condone it.” He’s been very quiet, and has not been thrusting his opinion into every aspect of the conversation, which is unusual for him.

“Respectfully, no one is asking you to, Mr. Jackson,” Killian smiles, not at all respectfully.

Dad’s face gets very red. He just doesn’t know how to handle this situation.

“Daisy is her own woman now, Dad.” Brooke says quietly. “You’ve really come into your own, Daze,” she says, turning to me. “I’m proud of you.”

I smile. “And now we have to figure out how you can move on with life. You don’t have to feel obligated to be me anymore.”

“You can finally get back to competing,” Dad says, looking at Brooke, his

face settling. I imagine he's decided to ignore me and my issues, and just focus on Brooke again. Par for the course.

Brooke ignores him and keeps talking to me. "I don't think I know how to move on. I can't think. Normally I'm good at problem solving, but everything has turned my brain to mush."

"I'll take coffee on the porch, Angela." My dad stands up and stomps out of the room.

"Yes, dear," my mom calls after him.

Brooke and I share a moment of exasperation. Mom starts working on a custard for dessert.

What did I expect? A sudden connection to my parents because of what I'd been through? Now I have Thea, my mother's indifference is even more mind-boggling. What had happened to her maternal instinct? Are some people just born without it?

"Have y'all talked to the media yet?" Brooke asks.

"No, we've avoided it so far. They haven't been able to track us down. Malcolm, Leander's brother, has been running interference, because he is connected to the TV production company."

"Malcolm Westhall, right? He got in touch with us after the accident. Sent us some extra compensation money. It was a nice figure, but he said he couldn't settle properly until you were declared officially dead, and that takes years. Will I have to give that money back now?"

I look at Leander and he shrugs. "Malc told me he sent everyone's families some money, but I think it came out of his own pocket, not from the company."

"Whoa, is your boy rich, Daze?" Brooke exclaims.

Hmm, I think he might be richer than I knew.

"That's neither here nor there," I answer. "Look, I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted. I vote to turn in for the night, and revisit this all in the morning. Maybe we'll get clarity then."

"Are you staying here?" asks Mom.

"No, the guys have sorted us out a hotel." I look around the table and give a nod. As a unit we rise.

"Ready for dessert, Brooke?" my Mom says.

I roll my eyes. Rex picks up Thea in her car seat, and Gray grabs the diaper bag.

"Let's roll," he grunts under his breath, "Fucking Stepford is freaking me

out.”

I do feel bad for my mom, but nothing I say or do will ever change her. I’ve learned that, so instead I give her a brief kiss on the cheek, and hug Brooke. On the way out I give dad a little wave.

“We’ll figure this out tomorrow.”

Famous last words.

JUNE

DAISY

I fidget nervously with the hem of my floral sundress, standing outside the Martha's Vineyard beach house where Harvey Bannister's parents—Cookie and Ralph, as I've been instructed to call them—are summering. The salty sea breeze ruffles my hair. It's the first time I've smelled the ocean in weeks.

"Are you ready?" Gray asks, his hand squeezing mine.

"As I'll ever be, which isn't saying much," I admit with a sigh.

"You got this," Killian says, squeezing my other hand.

Leander and Rex are back at the hotel with the other members of our party—Brooke and Thea.

The baby in my arms squirms. "Hey there, sweetie. Are you getting restless, Amelia?" I plop her over my shoulder and start to jiggle. The endless mom-jiggle dance. "Alright, here we go."

A housekeeper opens the door and shows us in. Mr. and Mrs. Bannister both rise from their seated positions as I enter.

"Brooke! Oh, sweetheart, come here."

Tears well up in her eyes as she pulls me into a tight embrace, the baby squashed between us. I hug her back, trying to convey comfort despite the guilt churning inside me.

"It's so good to finally meet you," I say, my voice trembling slightly.

But they are not looking at me, the Bannisters are gazing down at Amelia.

"She looks just like him," Mr. Bannister, Ralph, whispers, his voice filled with sorrow and a glimmer of hope.

"May I?" Cookie asks, putting out tentative arms.

"Of course." I gently place my niece in her grandmother's arms. "I am so sorry for your loss," I say. "I can't imagine the pain you must be going through."

Ralph nods. "It's been a difficult year, but knowing about Amelia—"

"—eases the sadness, she's perfect," Mrs. Bannister says.

I came in alone. Gray and Killian are waiting. I know it was the right

move, but I really wish I had them standing beside me right now, so I didn't feel so alone in this situation. The charade is worth it, though. For Amelia, and Brooke, and the Bannisters themselves.

"Shall we sit?" Ralph says. His wife is oblivious to anything but Amelia.

Over the next hour, we exchange stories about Harvey. Or rather, I listen to his parents' fondest memories, and how proud they were of his success.

As they speak, I felt the weight of all the secrets pressing heavily against my chest. The baby born on the island was not Harvey's. The wonderful man they are describing is not the Harvey I knew. But there is one story I can share with complete honesty.

"My baby would not have survived—I would not have survived, if not for Harvey's selfless act."

"You were in the ocean on a raft, and the shark appeared out of nowhere?"

I nod. "Yes. I'd gotten cut while climbing these horrific cliffs, and I think the blood in the water attracted the shark. It was terrifying, and being pregnant, I knew I couldn't do anything to save myself. But Harvey, without a second thought, distracted the shark, allowing me, and Amelia, to get to safety."

"He was so brave," Cookie sighs, holding back tears.

"He truly was," I reply.

Brooke wants Harvey's parents to be part of Amelia's life. They had already lost their son, and she didn't want to take away their granddaughter.

When the hour is up, I make my excuses and stand again. Cookie strokes my cheek. "He must have loved you so much."

"We loved each other. I want you to know that the last year of his life was so filled with love and happiness," I tell them.

Lies of course, but this is the better way—for them and for Amelia.

I almost stumble when I exit the house, but Killian and Gray are there, waiting.

"Here, Macushla, we've got you."

Killian takes Amelia from my arms and straps her into the car seat. Gray wraps me in a massive embrace.

"That must have been so hard, but it was the right thing. What's that quote you like? You always have a quote that makes you feel better..."

"What use is wizardry if it cannot save a unicorn?"

"You nit-wit."

KILLIAN

Today is the day we've all been dreading:

Press Conference day.

The Jefferson City Hilton is the venue.

As we pull up in our rental, there must be a couple dozen people milling around. It's hard to tell if they are hotel guests, press, or just rubbernecks.

We've spent weeks perfecting our story, and now it's time to set it out for all to see.

And pick apart.

I glance at Daisy and Brooke, seated side-by-side in the middle of the van. They've gone all out to look identical; same clothes, make-up, hair. But it's obvious to me which one is Daisy.

She's the one biting her lip and looking out the van window.

Poor thing.

It makes sense for 'Brooke' to be our spokeswoman today, but it's a lot of pressure on Daisy. She's not used to the TV cameras and the attention. But Brooke 'Action' Jackson is who the press are here to see.

"Macushla, you've got this," I tell her.

She takes a deep breath. "Yep. Let's do it.



We are standing on a small raised platform. The room is full of people poised with cameras and phones. It makes my stomach turn. Gray looks blank, Leander is goofing around, Rex is trying to slink into the shadows, and Daisy?

I see her square her shoulders, then step forward to the microphone, like the bad-ass she is.

"Hello, everyone. Thank you all for coming. You might know me; I'm

Brooke Jackson. With me today are my fellow castaways: Leander Westhall, Rex Malone, Gray Tyson, and Killian Lonergan.”

I give a little wave when Daisy says my name, then feel ridiculous. Ah well, it will give Molly a laugh.

Behind us, a projector is showing a map of the south pacific. There is an X where our island is. Was.

The questions start up immediately, but ‘Brooke’ waves an authoritarian hand, hushing the room back to a low murmur.

Like I said: bad ass.

Daisy glances at her notecards, then starts to tell the story we put together.

“I know you have many questions, especially about Harvey, so I’ll start there: Harvey was absolutely integral to our survival. He worked hard, and never complained. Let me tell you, that man became a champion fisherman. And when we decided to build a raft and travel to the neighboring island, looking for help, that’s when Harvey gave his life to save mine. To save us all. A shark attacked the raft, and Harvey purposely threw himself in the path of that terrible creature, and was killed. He did it so I could live.”

The press are eating this up, you could hear a pin drop.

“Afterwards, life got harder. I gave birth to Harvey’s daughter. We all worked hard to keep the children, Keyara and Amelia, safe. But we were all exhausted and malnourished. Life was getting harder, and even if we survived a year, we didn’t know how many more years on the island there would be. Our rescue came at a crucial time; I don’t know how much longer we could have gone on without another tragedy happening.”

Daisy now goes on to thank all the agencies that found us and brought us back to the states. The projector changes to a very handsome and heroic looking photo of Harvey.

“I want to talk some more about Harvey,” Daisy says. “Harvey and I talked frequently about what we would do with our lives when we were rescued. He came up with a plan and I am going to honor him by moving forward with his idea.”

I give a drum roll in my head.

“The Harvey Bannister Survival Academy. This academy will be a place where people come to learn bushcraft skills, and challenge themselves in survival situations. And Harvey wanted this schooling to be televised. He often said that television is a window for people to see new worlds. That’s why I am hosting a new reality show that follows recruits training at the

academy. Cameras will follow them, so the whole world can learn with them.”

Brooke is putting all her Harvey life insurance into this project.

I don't understand ever wanting to be on reality TV, but this is what she wants, so we are all supporting it. Daisy and Rex convinced Brooke to build the survival center on land adjoining the Malone farm. We'll be a few acres away from the cameras, but close enough for Thea, Keyara, and Amelia to grow up like sisters.

I realize I've spaced out for a while. Daisy has covered a load more ground, and now she just has to fix the last bit of this mess.

“Thank you for your time,” she says to the journalists. “Before you go, I'd like to introduce you to one more important person in this story... my sister Daisy.”

She gestures to the side, and Brooke steps out of the shadows, holding Thea.

There is an audible gasp at their twinniness.

“Yes, she's my identical twin, Daisy Jackson, and yes, we both have babies,” Daisy laughs. “And she is coming to live near the Harvey Bannister Survival Academy, so that our children can grow up together. Daisy is not going to be working at the survival school though; she's actually putting together a brand-new literacy program for children in Overlook County.”

She's so close to the finish line. I wish I could hold her hand, but Brooke Jackson does not have that kind of relationship with us guys. Talking of which, a reporter calls out a question.

“What about the other castaways?”

Daisy looks to Leander, and he steps up to the microphone.

“Hi, Leander Westhall here. Me and my castaway brothers are currently building a new home in Overlook County. We've all become such good friends, that we decided to live close to Keyara and Brooke. They are like family to us—we haven't figured out what we are doing with the rest of our lives, but at the moment, we are taking it one day at a time.”

That is absolutely true.

Daisy regains control of the mic. “So we are going to close now, and I'll be holding more press conferences as we get closer to building our new survival community. After all, I always want to be where the 'action' is!”

The press conference ends with Daisy doing Brooke's signature 'Action

Jackson' pose and everyone laughing.

Nice work, Daisy. Operation Harvey the Hero, and Brooke the Badass: A tragic love story-turned new-enterprise is underway.

JUNE - ONE YEAR LATER

DAISY

So we nearly miss our own wedding.

But it's not my fault!

Well, maybe it is.

The night before the wedding I'd told the guys I was sleeping alone.

"It's tradition."

There was a lot of moaning, but they finally agreed.

And I went to bed alone, in one of the eight bedrooms of our ridiculous house. Gray tells me it's not a house, but a barn. Whatever, it is lovely—just huge.

"Gotta fill it with more babies," Leander winks.

The insurance from the accident gave us an impressive amount. We pooled it and bought all the land around Meemaw's house. This is where we live now.

And Brooke is next door with her newly built Harvey Bannister Survival Academy. The first students, and the tv show pilot, start filming next month.

Nikau, Nanda and Keyara are still in Meemaw's cottage. Key rides her bike along the driveway to come visit Thea nearly every day.

Not this morning, though. This morning she'll be at home, having her hair done by her momma.

And I've got other plans for the morning.

I wander into our kitchen, wearing the "here comes the bride" tee-shirt Brooke had given me.

"No panties? What are you trying to do to us?" Killian groaned.

I pour myself some coffee and give my butt a wiggle. An enjoyable chorus of groans come from the table where Leander, Gray, Killian and Rex are sitting.

Killian's eyes meet mine.

"No sex until we're married, you said yesterday. And today you show up in the kitchen like this? Someone is sending mixed messages."

His voice is slightly hoarse and makes my nipples harden.

I lean over to get some sugar, even though I don't take any in my coffee. And yes, I'm completely aware that it makes my tee-shirt rise up and expose all of my butt crack

I hear kitchen chairs scrape across the slate floor.

The next second a mouth descends on my ass and bites—hard. I give a yelp.

“Now now, no complaining.” Leander has his stern voice on. “You set this up, now you've got to take what comes.”

What comes? Or what cums (wink wink).

This was my plan all along, but I put up a little show of protest anyway. “We have to wait until our wedding night!”

“Fuck that,” Rex says. “Leander, spread those legs apart. Show me the pretty pussy I'm about to marry.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

As Leander spreads my thighs, I lean on the counter top, and arch my back a little. I'm so wet, I'm sure my juices are flowing down the inside of my thighs. Someone's hand pulls at my buttock cheek, another set of fingers works through my pussy folds, sliding back and forth.

“So wet,” Rex growls.

“For fucks sake, get her on the floor, on the rug, there's no room on this stupid counter!” Lucky for me, Gray has the ergonomics of the operation in mind. I'm instantly swept up in someone's arms and a couple of seconds later, placed on the massive shaggy rug that covers the wooden floor in front of the fireplace.

Gray directs Killian and Rex to put a pile of cushions under my butt. “Then spread her.”

“Mother Mary, will you look at this juicy pink thing.”

“Such a needy girl.”

Rex peels off to latch onto one of my nipples, I feel Killian's hand slide around to rub little circles around my back hole. Then I dissolve in delight as Leander's mouth finally makes it to my clit. He slides his tongue up and down, alternating between a flat warm lap, and a sharp, hard lick. It's divine.

Killian's finger teases the tight ring of muscles in my ass. He's got lube from somewhere, and I shiver under his touch, it feels so good.

Rex rolls my nipple between his fingers as he trails kisses up my neck. “Want me to mark you? It'll look so good with your wedding dress...”

I don't care, he can do whatever he wants to me. Anything, as long as he doesn't stop.

My eyes are closed, but Gray orders me to open them. As I do, a massive scrotum homes into view. "Lap them, little kitten. You know how I like it."

I do indeed. Massive Gray loves soft, rhythmic nibbling and lapping all over his cock and his balls. He calls me kitten. Then when I've been good, I get to lap on his milk.

Someone slides a finger inside my pussy, so there are now fingers in both my holes. It's like a duet of fingering.

Rex grazes his teeth on my nipple and it nearly sends me over the edge. "Holy fuck, you're so hot."

Gray shifts, so now his ridiculously thick shaft is waving in front of me. It's so beautiful, thick and veined, the tip shining with precum.

"Please may I?" I croak

"You may," he responds, and I eagerly start to trail little licks up the shaft. I love this.

Rex is moving now. "I need pussy," I hear him growl. Things shift, and then Killian is lying next to me. Together we torture Gray with our licking and kissing.

Gray still thinks he's in command though. "Fuck her. Both of you,"

He must be talking to Leander and Rex. I don't know whose fingers are where now. I'm stretched and filled with them, but still I want more.

One of them takes my clit in his mouth at the same time. I feel the orgasm in me building and building.

"Please, please don't stop!"

Killian takes my mouth and kisses me as Gray strokes his shaft against our faces. Leander's tongue continues but his fingers leave my pussy.

"Please, I need them."

And then I don't, because Rex is in me. I know it's him, it's so beautiful as he pushes forward little by little, teasing me.

"More please, don't stop."

So he doesn't. Rex slams into me and immediately an explosion takes over my body, starting in the small of my spine, deep in my belly then traveling to my clit, my nipples and then to the very top of my head. I buck my hips, wanting to ride this out forever, and when I do I hear a roar as Rex floods into me.

It's perfect, absolutely perfect.

But I know I want more. I can take more.

“Please, keep filling me...”

Like synchronized swimmers, they move as a unit. Leander and Rex shuffle back, as does Gray, then Killian flips us over, so now he is on his back and I’m sitting on top of him.

“You want it, macushla?”

“So much.”

Killian lifts me at the hips and impales me on that magnificent pierced cock.

“ARGH!”

“I think she likes it,” I hear Leander chuckle as he moves towards me.

“Think you can multitask, princess?”

Multitask? That’s my favorite thing!

“Open wide, princess, I need you to suck me dry.”

“Fucckkk,” someone groans as Leander thrusts in my mouth. He fists my hair and fucks my face and I love every second.

Killian had stilled his hips, but now he starts pounding me again. I want to tell him how much I love it, but my mouth is otherwise occupied. My nipples are electric, and I know I have a mouth on each of them. Killian thrusts faster, I feel him thickening even further inside me. As his orgasm builds, it’s like his heat is transferred into me, and I know I’m going to come again.

“Fuck!” Killian yells, slamming his hips up as my pussy clenches down. Together we come, and it’s like my pussy is milking him dry. His cum blasts into me so hard, I’m surprised it doesn’t come out of my eyeballs. I’m still pulsating with my climax as Gray pulls me off Killian.

“Nooo,” I whine, but Gray flips me on my back and has his mouth on my slit, sucking like a man possessed, drinking every drop of me and Killian’s mingled juices. As he sucks, the end of my orgasm throbs into his mouth.

“Ahhh.”

“Keep that mouth open, princess, and no swallowing.”

I do as I’m told (with the tiny part of my brain that is still working) and the next second ropes of thick come splatter all over my face and into my mouth. All I want is to down that salty nectar, but I try to be a good girl and let it pool.

With a groan, Leander is next to me, now, angling my head to him.

“Kiss me with the cum,” he says, his voice husky and breathless.

I gather up the delicious mess and when Leander’s lips meet mine, our

mouths bathe in his load. As he finally pulls away, I feel my legs pulled apart again. I work myself to my elbows to see Rex and Gray gazing at my open hole with a look of absolute worship on their faces. I've never felt sexier, more powerful or more cared for in my life.

"Gray..."

He grins, "Saving the best til last."

I feel the head of his tree-trunk cock push against my opening. The stretch has me gasping.

"Such a big boy isn't he, macushla..." Killian murmurs. "Don't worry, if I can take that up my ass, you can take it in that sweet pussy."

I know I can, I have many times. But there's always an...adjustment!

Gray's eye's lock on to mine. "You're so fucking perfect."

I'm moaning so loud as he starts to thrust. "Good girl, so tight for me, even though you've had all those cocks in you."

My fingers dig into the shag of the rug as Gray increases his pace. His fat, blunt tip banging inside me again and again. Fingers graze my body. Someone kisses my neck, someone pinches my nipple, and then the wave comes again.

"MY LOVES!" I scream. "MY LOVES!"

GRAY

We've been working on setting up the wedding for a couple of days—I never thought I'd be so invested in flower arrangements.

The meadow that runs between Nanda and Nikau's, and our new barn, is the ceremony venue. Brooke has set up her survival school and training center a couple of fields further out. On

balmy summer evenings, we often hear her voice bellow across the valley, whipping her new recruits into shape.

The academy is going great; a mile-long waiting list and a huge viewership on Netflix. Brooke has created a slick business.

Slick, unlike our wedding. Daisy wanted it DIY and low-key—and that absolutely suits me. Though I still want the floral arch to be just perfect.

I tug on a peony, and Killian puts a hand on my back.

“It's good, babe.”

I straighten up and lean back into his chest. Killian puts his arms around me, and we take a moment to just...be.

There has been so much change, chaos, and construction over the last year. Building the barn, helping Brooke with her center, repairs at Meemaw's for Nanda and Nikau...Rex and I have found our thing is construction. And there is a never-ending amount of work for us.

Leander has been working with Daisy, running the children's literacy program. He's brilliant with kids, probably because he's just a big kid himself.

I turn and gently kiss Killian.

He's back doing sound for film and TV. He'll sometimes be away for weeks at a time, but that just means we get to have a lot of make up sex when he returns.

Yeah, the last year has been A LOT.

But this wedding is simple. It's about us, it's about family, it's about joy.

Mary and Patrick, aka Mam and Da Lonergan, have been such a great help.

So has Killian's sister, Molly. Killian definitely lucked out in the family department. Rex also kinda got lucky in the end. Sure, I just wish Meemaw and Pops were here.

But Meemaw asked me to do what I thought was best, so Rex does have a parent here.

Linda.

Linda Kaminski.

Aka, Rex's Mom.

After a lot of thought, I decided to write to her. I met her for a coffee and got all the details. Tough Love was a total bastard of a boyfriend—no surprise there. He hadn't physically abused Linda, but the psychological abuse was real. And mostly hidden from Meemaw and Pops. Linda knew she would never be strong enough to stand up to Thomas Malone, so she ran.

And regretted it for the last thirty years.

She'd reached out to Rex's dad several times, and each time he'd told her:

"Keep away. Rex wants nothing to do with you."

Linda is a timid woman; scared of her own shadow.

But now, she and Rex are getting to know each other. And she's so happy to be here. Rex wanted her directly involved in the wedding prep, but clever Daisy knew it would be too stressful for poor little Linda.

So Daisy, when learning about some of Linda's interests, which are mostly needlecraft, asked if she would be so kind as to embroider a cloth to lay in Keyara's flower girl basket.

Linda has not only gained a son, and a baby grandchild, but a grand-niece in Keyara.

She's over the moon. Or at least we think she is. Linda is very shy and prone to blushing.

The idea of her being crushed by that bully, Tough Love, makes my fucking blood boil.

And yeah, he wasn't invited.

DAISY

I walk down the aisle on my own.

My choice. Even if my parents had been here, I still wouldn't have wanted Dad to walk me.

I'm over being his disappointing daughter.

I've never been disappointing at all! It's his loss if he can't see that.

I'm here. Me. Daisy Jackson.

And *I* matter.

The path through the field to my waiting men has been covered by a bower of pale pink peonies and baby's breath. The heady smell, combined with Nikau's gentle guitar playing, is magical.

A few yards in front of me, Keyara is taking her role as a flower girl very seriously. She looks so lovely in a powder-blue dress and a flower crown of white roses. As she slowly spreads petals down the grassy aisle, Key stops for a moment when she gets to Brooke and Amelia.

Amelia is fussing, so Key hands her some petals. Amelia immediately shoves them in her mouth, making everyone laugh. On the other side of the aisle, Killian's sister Molly sits with Thea. Thea is fast asleep. She's going to miss her mom getting married!

All our siblings have been amazing, preparing for this event. Malcolm, Jasper, Molly, *Brooke*.

Brooke sits, looking proud as punch, with Amelia on her knee, and her new partner by her side.

Rosita was the first staff member for the Survival School, and it was obvious from the very beginning that there was some special energy between Brooke and her tracking specialist.

Now the little family of three live together in a very plush yurt at the edge of the property. Even though I've suggested several times that we build an actual property, they are sticking with the yurt for now. Brooke doesn't want to get 'soft'.

Ha! Just one look of her and Rosita being all gooey-eyed and I know that the hard-edged Brooke ‘Action’ Jackson is gone forever.

Even Harvey’s parents approve of Rosita.

My parents, not so much. I wish they could take a leaf out of Mam and Da Lonergan’s book; they are just the best! So beautifully open-minded. I make a mental vow to be that way with Thea, if, or when, she throws some curve ball at me.

Not that there’s many, compared to my curveballs.

As for Leander’s family, when Jasper got into town, he told us the funniest story. Irene and Malcolm II (Leander, Jasper and Malcolm III’s parents) were disappointed we weren’t having a destination wedding: they thought a tropical island venue would be just the thing.

“They’re clueless,” Jasper had laughed.

They really are. And they, along with my parents, are the ones missing out. We don’t need them.

Gray’s folks couldn’t come, even if they were invited, because they are both currently detained by the State of Missouri for several years. Rex’s dad wasn’t invited

We don’t need any of them. Everyone who *is* important to us is with us right now.

It’s not particularly warm today; late sixties at best. Puffy white clouds muffle the sun from time-to-time, but in general, we have blue skies. It’s not humid at all, not even one-percent.

As I get closer I see Nanda mopping her eyes with a handkerchief. She looks radiant, her dark brown curls shining luscious and full. She’s sitting next to Brandi, Meemaw’s neighbor friend. Brandi is lovely—she’d shyly offered to make our wedding cake.

“I have a recipe that your grandmother gave me,” she told Rex. “So I thought, maybe you’d like me to make that? It’s taro and coconut cake.”

The cake looks amazing. It’s sitting on the kitchen counter, waiting to be sliced during our reception. A framed picture of Meemaw next to it.

My guys also look amazing.

Killian and Gray are holding hands and look so beautiful. Rex stands to the left of them, Leander to the right.

I walk towards them, a huge grin on my face.

“Macushla.” Killian smiles, and the deep lines on either sides of his mouth and round his eyes fall away.

I look from him to Gray. Gray has a tear running down his cheek.

“You look so beautiful, princess,” Leander says, reaching out a hand. I take it and he pulls me close. Rex moves close too, sandwiching me between them. He pulls gently at the neck of my gown. I know he’s looking at the bite mark he put there earlier.

It makes me get a little hot in my white, lacy, wedding panties.

“Let’s get this show on the road,” a gruff voice interrupts.

Leander’s brother, Malcolm, had agreed to be officiant. Well, he’d insisted, really. I was ‘officially’ marrying Leander, in the eyes of the law, but in the eyes of us all and everyone present, I was marrying all my guys.

I let them choose who got legally married to me, and Leander was the choice.

“He’s the one with the huge trust fund. Gotta lock that shit down, baby,” Rex had told me.

"We are gathered here today," drones Malcolm, trying to conduct the entire service in a serious manner, but still makes us laugh.

REX

I look over the sea of faces, and my eyes narrow in on one.

Linda.

AKA, Mom.

It's surreal how easy it is to see her here. Mom doesn't demand attention or take up space. She speaks in shy monosyllables, eyes cast down, desperately timid.

I can't hold anything against her; with my dad, she never stood a chance. But I have high hopes for the future. We are building a relationship.

I give my mom a big smile, then turn my attention to Daisy.

Her and the big guy are exchanging vows.

"I, Gray Elvis Tyson," he is saying.

How have I known Gray for nearly my entire life and never known *that*?

Leander catches my eye and does a hip-wiggle followed by a pelvic thrust. Killian elbows him in the ribs.

But Daisy ignores them, she just has eyes for Gray.

Fuck, she looks like a wet dream. That dress is wow...and is she wearing stockings and a garter?

Shit, I can feel I'm getting a semi. This is not really the time or place.

Leander nudges me. “Err, Rex? If you can stop thinking about fucking the bride and concentrate for a minute?” he whispers, loud enough for Daisy to hear.

Oh, right. It’s my turn in the spotlight, or rather, sunlight, with our girl.

She giggles and opens her mouth slightly then bites her bottom lip.

Bad girl, she knows exactly what that does to me. I give my head a shake, I’ve got vows to say.

Taking her hand, I tell her my truth. “Dearest Daisy. I fell in love with you the moment I saw you at the end of the dock in Samoa, on that fateful day.”

Daisy laughs. “You did not! You were so annoyed by me!”

“I was, my love. I got turned upside-down because I knew I loved you, and I *really* didn’t want to. But I will admit I was annoyed you wearing those stupid boots.”

“I loved those boots!” Brooke calls out and everyone laughs. When the chuckles subside, I take Daisy’s hand.

Malcolm cuts through my thoughts of how I’d like to punish Daisy for her sass. “Do you, Rex Henryk Malone...” he asks, “take Daisy Mae Jackson, to be your wedded wife?”

Malcolm pauses, and I can see him forcibly suppressing an eye roll.

What’s going on?

“Do you promise to live long...and prosper with her?” Malcolm asks me.

Daisy starts giggling. That girl.

“I do,” I grin, “I really do.”

LEANDER

Daisy is glowing. There is a luminosity to her skin, and her eyes are huge and dreamy. She looks so beautiful. I could gaze into those eyes forever. And in fact I will.

“Ahem, Leander?”

I drag my gaze away from Daisy and onto my brother. “Sorry, Malc. I just got caught up looking at my girl.”

My stoic brother actually cracks a smile. “She is lovely, but I’ve got kind of an important question for you.”

“Hit me,” I tell him.

“Do you, Leander Fontaine Alexander Westhall, take Daisy Mae Jackson,” Malcolm asks me, “to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“You bet I do,” I say, looking at my almost wife. “Forever and ever. And if I die before you, I’ll become one of those horny ghosts that ravish you in your bed at night.”

Daisy giggles. I love her so much. I love everyone around me. I take a moment and look at Rex. He grins and gives me a nod. Then Gray and Killian, then Malcolm.

Malcolm has given me no shit about our polycule situation. He may seem a little straight-edged, but he is good-hearted and just wants me to be happy.

“Lea, you never do what is expected, so why break the habit of a lifetime?” he told me.

Jasper had just asked if Killian's sister, Molly, was single. Those Irish accents, shit, they are like catnip to some people.

Do I, Leander Fontaine Alexander Westhall, take Daisy Mae Jackson, to be my lawfully wedded wife?

I give Daisy's hand a squeeze. "So much, yes."

Fuck yes. I want to shout it to the hilltops. And why not?

I turn to our friends and family. "And once again for those at the back, YES!" Grabbing Daisy, I dip her low and kiss her hard. Her tits nearly explode out of the neckline of her dress, and I don't mind that at all.

Straightening back up, Daisy giggles and pulls her bodice around, while Killian passes me the ring.

The one ring to wed us all.

I think it's beautiful that Killian is letting me put his grandmother's ring on Daisy's finger. We'd discussed four rings, but Daisy had nixed that idea.

"Just Killian's ring. I don't need a piece of jewelry from all of you. I want the ring that went through all our adventures with us."

And Killian wanted me to place it on her finger.

"Your name is on the legal document, so I want this ring to be what legally binds us."

It's my honor. I slide the ring onto her finger, tears in my eyes.

"I, Daisy Mae Jackson," she says, gazing first at me, then Killian, Gray and finally Rex, "take you, Leander Fontaine Alexander Westhall, take you Killian Finley Lonergan, take you Gray Elvis Tyson and you, Rex Henryk Malone...to be my lawfully wedded husbands, forever!"

Forever. And ever and ever. There is no happy ending, because nothing ever ends.

Certainly not our love.

Honeymoon

DAISY

We are spending our honeymoon in our own house. We'd looked at various options, but nothing seemed as inviting as a staycation.

One of the eight bedrooms is named 'the fun room'. It has a custom bed, bigger than two kings, taking up the majority of the space. But there are other things, like mirrors and straps and all sorts that make it indeed a very fun room. We'll have to figure out something a little more subtle as Thea grows into a curious kid, but for now we can let our freak flags fly.

Nestled amongst my guys, the day after our wedding, I finally give them what they've all been asking for. Something they've all wanted for a very long time.

The 'why' of why I agreed to stand in for Brooke in the first place. Why I ended up on the Mary-Mo, headed out of Sāmoa, and not Brooke.

"It was after college. I'd just moved to Rhode Island, and was about to start my new job. My dream job.

Brooke had been taking part in a triathlon outside of Providence for a couple of days, so I'd gone to cheer her on, and afterwards, we'd gone to a party hosted by some of Brooke's mud-runner friends. Everyone was lovely. No one was drinking tons; they were mostly athletic types, and the food was a healthy array of veggies and lots of grilled chicken.

Brooke was off networking, so I did my normal party thing and kept to the shadows, nibbling on food and looking at what books the host had on their shelves. And then someone offered me some fudge, and I'll admit, I got greedy. You know I have a sweet tooth and everything there was so darn healthy.

That fudge was good.

After another hour I decided to head home. Brooke had got deep into an arm-wrestling tournament that I had no interest in watching. I made my goodbyes and headed out. But as soon as I got outside, I suddenly had an urge to walk the long way home through the park. When I stepped off the sidewalk and onto the grass a profound conviction came over me. Suddenly I knew the truth.

I was a unicorn.

There was a full moon, and the silvery beams called me to become my real self. I stripped off every last piece of clothing and galloped in the moonlight, my mane flying behind me.

And then everything went dark.”

“Just breathe, Miss.”

A stranger is draping a blanket around my shoulders, an ambulance flashing its lights a few yards away. Someone is stroking my hair. Paramedics lead me to the back of their rig.

I don't remember much after that until I wake up in the hospital with an IV in my arm, and my sister dozing in a chair next to the bed.

“What the?” I croak.

My sister is instantly awake and right in my face.

“What the fuck, Daisy? Good thing I'm listed as your emergency contact! What the hell?”

“What happened? I left the party and then...”

“The nurse said you were brought in a couple of hours ago, stark naked and delirious. You tried to kick one of EMT's in the nuts—kept screaming that he was a red bull.”

“What!”

“You were telling everyone you were a unicorn, and your human name was Amalthea.”

Oh. My. Giddy. Aunt.

“The cops are coming back soon,” my sister tells me. “They were here earlier. You're going to be charged with public indecency.” Brooke takes my

hand and squeezes it hard. “Did you have any of the mushroom fudge at the party?”

Mushroom fudge?

Oh no.

I try to explain this to my sister and she starts dying with laughter. “Only you, Daisy! Only you! You’ve screwed the pooch this time.”

I wish I could laugh about it all, but Brooke said I was going to be charged with public indecency? I start my new job at the Children’s Library next week. They’ll never let me work there with a charge like that hanging over me!

“What am I going to do? Oh, Brooke, what am I going to do? My job!”

I’m sobbing so hard I can hardly catch my breath. Brooke stops laughing and rubs my back.

“They’ll never employ a criminal, especially with a charge like that. Oh, Brooke. I’ve ruined my life.”

“This library job means that much to you?” she asks.

Brooke doesn’t get it. Being a children’s librarian is the last thing she’d ever want to do, but for me it’s a dream come true. “Brooke, it means everything. EVERYTHING!”

“Shit,” she says, then lets out a long exhale. “Looks like I’m going to have to have a public indecency charge against me then.”

Before we can discuss further, a cop enters the room. “Daisy Jackson?”

“That’s me,” Brooke says, raising her hand.

The cop looks confused. “I thought Daisy was the one who got picked up last night?”

“Nah,” Brooke says, putting some irritation into her voice. “My sister was pretending to be me. She does that when she wants to avoid trouble. The person prancing around naked in the park last night was Brooke Jackson.”

By this point, I am frozen and virtually hiding under the bed sheet. The cop comes closer. “Is that true, miss? Can you give me your name?”

After a beat the name comes out in a whisper.

“Brooke.”

“That’s what happened?” laughs Leander. “You got high on shrooms and became a unicorn?”

*I nod, all the guys are cracking up. “You know how I’m always quoting from that story, *The Last Unicorn*?” I ask them as the laughter subsides.*

They all nod their heads, still chuckling.

“Well the unicorn is the last of her kind, and she gets turned into a human called Lady Amalthea...”

“Amalthea?”

“Thea?”

“Our daughter is named after your shroom trip?”

Is she named after my shroom trip?

No. No she’s not.

“She’s named after the slightly-magical reason she exists in the first place. If I hadn’t accidentally eaten all that magic mushroom fudge, Brooke wouldn’t have had to save me from a police charge. And I wouldn’t have owed her a huge favor. If I hadn’t owed her a huge favor, I’d have never set foot upon the Mary-Mo.”

Killian pulls me into a tight hug. “That must have been so fucking stressful, but I can’t tell you how glad I am that it happened.”

“It led you here,” says Gray.

“It really did,” I agree. I look around at the four of them. My loves. We’ve had such an incredible journey to get to this place.

A place where I am loved. Where all of us give and receive love completely unconditionally. Thea will never have a moment’s doubt of her worth, or of how much her parents believe in her, whatever path she takes.

And that path could be *anything*. She has five parents with very distinct personalities.

But right now she’s content to smush applesauce around her face and play ‘stuffy giraffe’ peek-a-boo for hours. Simple pleasures, never again to be taken for granted.

Stuffy giraffe! Huh!

Thea totally prefers her giraffe over the unicorn stuffy I bought her...but that’s alright. She’s her own person.

We are all our own people, and each other’s people.

A little broken, and a little rough around the edges; we are traumatized and we are strong. Apart, we would not survive, but together? We are just right.

Stuffy giraffe and all.



Dearest readers,

If you enjoyed this book, please help other readers find it:

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I'm currently working on a new series where we will get to know Leander's brother, Jasper, in his exciting world of billionaires, polo-playing and partying princes. In the meantime, why not check out my rockstar reverse harem, [Together in Harmony](#).

HARMONY

San Francisco

We are waiting for the transport ambulance to arrive.

"Everything's going to work out," I say, both to myself and to the two women beside me.

My aunt squeezes my hand. "It really is, my love."

Sheila is endlessly optimistic, which is a good thing considering her current challenges. She has Parkinson's, and Patsy is in a wheelchair. Selling the house and moving into sheltered housing just makes sense. Sheila and Patsy will have their own place, with nursing staff on site, and I will have...

"The cabin," says Sheila, "you've got the keys, right?"

"Yep, and all the instructions." I pat my jeans pocket. "And yes, I'll call you from the road *and* when I get there."

"I dread to think what state it is going to be in," Patsy says, for the billionth time. "It's been years since we've been there."

"It's going to be perfect. I'm so excited," I lie.

"And you'll come and visit at Thanksgiving?" Sheila asks.

"Yep. And we all know I won't be lonely because..." I gesture to the crate beside me. A paw reaches out and tries to swipe my ankle.

The aunts adopted Einstein after a neighbor passed. As the cat is not exactly a ‘people-person’ (human-hater would be a better description), the aunts decided he’d be better off with me than at the care home.

Lucky me.

The transport pulls into the avenue. It’s time.

I watch the older women get loaded up, and wave until they disappear back over the hill. Now, it’s time for me to hit the road. I’ve got 500 miles to drive from San Francisco to central Oregon. Solo road trips are not in my wheelhouse *at all*.

Well, nor is living in a cabin in the middle of nowhere, come to that.

Ah well.

“Einstein? You ready?”

I pick up the carrier, and he gives me the side-eye.

Neither of us are ready, but we have to go anyway.

HARMONY

Gold Creek, Central Oregon

I’ve taken to country living exceedingly well, considering. Considering how grueling it’s been.

The first four weeks have been hectic. Inch-thick dust and insane cobwebs covering every surface were nothing compared to my run-in with the raccoon family in the woodshed. The cabin had been almost completely encased in green vines when I arrived. The vines had even breached the windows, and were winding around the kitchen cabinets. Breaking through them, I’d felt like a prince heading toward Sleeping Beauty.

Except this castle had a front door that doesn’t lock, a mouse infestation, and several broken window panes.

I’d met a nice man in a hardware store who had told me the secret to mending anything was duct tape and WD40.

“If it sticks, try a squirt of WD40. If it breaks, try using duct tape.”

This amazing advice means I can now lock the front door *and* the kitchen windows are sort of boarded up.

I haven’t told Sheila how decrepit the cabin is.

“It just needed a little spit and polish,” I’d said.

In between spitting and polishing the cabin, I’ve also had to earn money. There is no internet at the cabin, so I drive into town and download my assignments from the free Starbucks wifi, then come home and spend a few days sorting thousands of survey results into little boxes on a spreadsheet. Then I go back into town, email the results, pick up the next assignment, and maybe some more duct tape. Rinse, repeat.

I’ve educated myself on how to use a wood burner. The cabin has electricity—thank Benjamin Franklin—and it heats a very small tank of water. I’ve also learned the art of rapid showering.

Pioneer life-lite.

Einstein has been on the fence about it all. He’s not any more affectionate, but he doesn’t actively swipe at me these days, which is progress. I’ve been listening to a podcast about anti-social cats. I’m supposed to spend a lot of time talking to him, letting him know we are litter-mates.

He’s not buying it.

Einstein spends most of his time sitting on top of the fridge, watching mice run around the edges of the kitchen. Einstein is not a mouser. The mice to cat ratio at the cabin is about 20-1. I haven’t cracked the Einstein code, but there are several more episodes of *Cats With Claws* to listen to yet.

All in all, I’m exhausted, but cabin life is working. I have somewhere to live, no one here has a clue who I am, and I am earning enough money to get by.

Not too shabby.

And today is my birthday. Twenty-three.

I worked double yesterday, so I could have a whole day with zero spreadsheet-filling. Today I will ignore the mice and just relax. I have a book, a festive drink, snacks, and a blanket. I’ve set myself up in the meadow next to the cabin. Sunlight is streaming down, and life feels pretty good right now. A dragonfly zooms by, and I make a mental note about working on a dragonfly poem. Something about a dragon and a fly having a baby, and it’s a dragonfly?

Hmm, that’s kinda bad, even for me.

Though I fill in spreadsheets during the day, in the evenings I write poems for my blog. Being alone in the cabin has totally unleashed my creativity.

Thanks, Sheila and Patsy.

They'd been absent for most of my life, but now we finally know each other, I have a real family for the first time.

"Darling, I'm not sure you are quite ready for cabin-life," Sheila had said. We'd been living together for a while, so she has a pretty good idea of my strengths and weaknesses.

"I'll figure it out," I told her, kissing her cheek gently.

"Of course you will, it's just..."

Just that I had spent my entire life in either an empty mansion, with a revolving door of nannies, or in expensive hotel rooms, watching coke-fueled orgies.

Neither had set me up to be independent, but I was learning.

Sheila and Patsy's cabin is down a long track in the middle of central Oregon. It's surrounded by a high desert landscape; miles of sagebrush, rocky outcrops, and the odd meadow.

I pick up my mason jar and take another sip of warm cocktail. Eating a few more chips, I turn the page in my book and let the warmth bake into my bones. The nylon fabric of my bikini halter pulls at the hair at the back of my neck.

Should I?

I'm not a topless type of person, but...it is my birthday after all, so what better time to rock a birthday suit?

Brave Harmony, remember?

I undo the knot and pull off my polka-dot polyester top, then lay back with my book.

The next hour is sunshine, Sun Chips, and a tequila sunrise (well, tequila and orange juice, anyway). The combo must put me to sleep for a while, because when I open my eyes again, the shadows have lengthened.

Oof! The tequila, combined with the heat, is making my head swim. I should have worn a hat. And have also put on sunscreen. My boobs are starting to prickle.

I look, and yep, definitely some very pink boobies. Time to go.

Pushing books, chips, and rug into my tote bag, I then pick up my bikini top and put it in the bag as well. I'm in the middle of nowhere, there is not another human for miles. I can do whatever I like!

I'm awfully brave when there are no other humans involved.

LENNOX

Looks like the show is over.

The girl is packing things into a bag, getting ready to move.

The last twenty minutes have been highly enjoyable. I'd been going for a run, on my way to meet up with Hugo and Asa, when I spotted her. She'd been sitting in the grass, her back to me, then turned to reveal the most luscious breasts—round, full, and pale.

Her tits had very quickly started turning pink. I'd wanted to go over and lick the hot flesh to cool it off. Yeah, and then I'd take that tight brown nipple and bite down on it, hard enough to make her yelp.

Naughty girl, trespassing on our property.

She's a dozen yards from me, but completely unaware that I'm here. I stand in the dark shadows, doing stretches and being a creeper.

Hugo is going to lose his uptight mind. He'll want her charged with trespassing, and prosecuted—but I have a much better idea.

I'll put her over my knee and give her a spanking.

Naturally, I would pull down those jean shorts first.

I'll spank her until her ass is as pink as her burned boobs. Then I'd lick her butt better too.

Fuck, I'm so horny, and now, not surprisingly, I have a huge boner.

The girl stops gathering her stuff to do some sort of yoga stretch. Tits swinging.

Exhibitionist.

She likes to be watched, and I'm happy to oblige.

I see sweat trickle down her neck, into the valley between her breasts. That perfectly cock-sized valley, just asking for a pearl necklace.

Talking of—my cock pulses and I feel pre-cum seeping out. Might have to take matters into my own hands. I take a swift look around.

Fuck.

Hugo and Asa are pounding down the trail in my direction. I'll have to rub one out later. My brothers-from-another-mother are headed this way, fast...

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About The Author

Nicky Shivers



Nicky lives in the Pacific Northwest and spends most of her waking hours writing, and researching, some very odd things. She has newly adult kids, a happy husband and a very intense cat.

Nicky wishes she could have Jackson Galaxy come live with them for a while.

Books By This Author

Together in Harmony: A Why Choose Romance

Rockstars? Rom-com? Reverse harem? Check, check, check!

"Super fun to read, heartfelt and spicy..."

"...intriguing and the spice was off the charts!"

Totally Wrecked: A Why Choose Romance

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