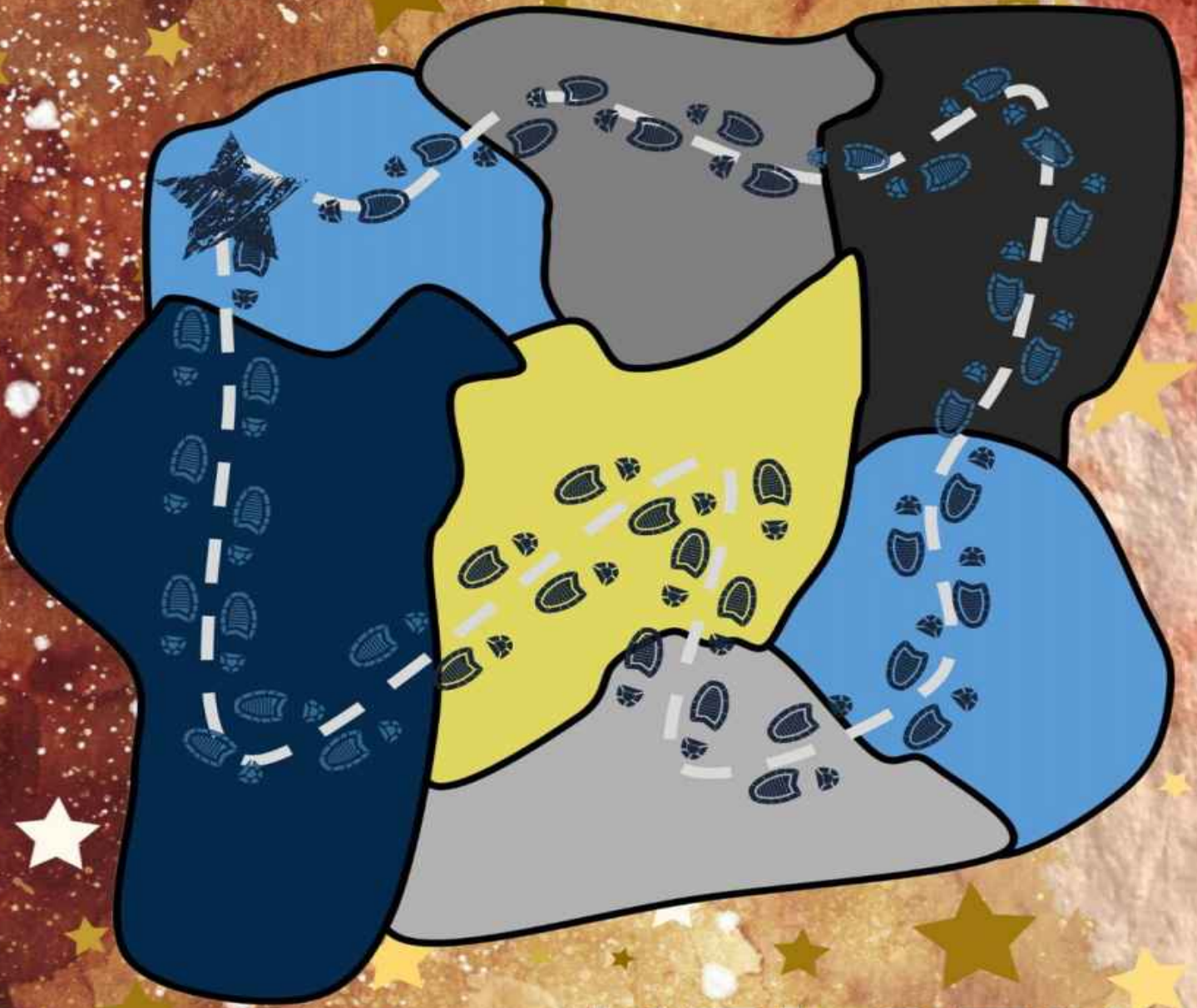


End of the
ROAD



**KELSEY
SOLIZ**

End of the Road
Territory Walk Book 7
Kelsey Soliz

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This book is dedicated to Madison, Gabriella's arch nemesis. You've provided so much excellent fodder for jokes, and I can't thank you enough for being such a major cunt bitch.

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Felix

Donny.

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Bennett

Barf. Everywhere.

After I'm pelted with foam darts, the overwhelming stench of vomit is the first thing that registers.

Rory is the first to go, scrambling away from me like the angel she is, upheaving with that awful retching noise. I'm slightly nauseated from the trip, but I was expecting something, so I was prepared. It's much better than it was the last time I made this trip, but— there goes Jameson.

He had only made it a few feet towards Rory before his body decided it also didn't like world jumping.

With two of them yakking at the base of this incredibly fucking sacred tree, is it any surprise that Felix falls victim as well?

Honestly, it's inevitable at this point.

I do my best to tune them out as I try to comfort Rory, but Donny is so fucking dramatic when he starts heaving that it triggers even my sister, which makes all of her mates shoot death glares at me.

Holy fuck. She's pregnant.

Excuse me for a moment.

Off screen puking from Bennett

"Sorry, I feel like that was my fault," Rory says as she finally gets control of herself.

"It's the noise, right?" Foster, my sister's gigantic ass shifter mate asks.

"Yeah," I manage to choke out. "If everyone can just breathe through it, hold it in, maybe we can stop it before all of Gabby's guys start in on it as well."

Gabby's nerdy professor mate, Balfour, which is a wizard at runes and potions traces a weird symbol in the air and the relief is instant.

"Thanks baby," Gabriella purrs, holding her stomach as she's helped back to her feet.

"Guess we need to tweak those runes now that the portal has moved," Bal says, looking worriedly at Rory.

"I'm good. I was just thinking earlier how I've avoided morning sickness so far, but I've been fighting a tickle all day. It was bound to happen, especially once Donny pulled us through."

"Morning sickness?" Gabriella looks at Rory with a huge grin.

"Surprise?" I tell her.

"Everyone is pregnant right now, it's so weird!" Gabby exclaims. "Come, babe. Let's get you cleaned up and get you

some water. How far along are you?"

"Nine weeks or so...it was a bit of a shock considering I used preventative measures," Rory explains as she glares at us. Still funny we knocked her up while she was on birth control.

I roll my shoulders back, pleased as punch with my situation.

Gabby finds it in herself to scowl at me over her shoulder at me as well for not telling her about Rory, but I throw one right back. Gabby didn't tell me she was pregnant either, and from the looks of it, she's been hiding it a hell of a lot longer. Somehow.

I hand off my mate to my sister as I reluctantly greet all of Gabby's mates, introducing them to the guys we brought. There are just too many people here right now for two women to handle. How the fuck do they do it?

Donny is on the heels of Gabby's mates as they walk off, nearly tripping over their heels so that Rory isn't taken too far from him. He's going to be weird here, but that's fine. If he needs to be next to Rory to not lose his shit, I think it's a small price to pay.

"I'd apologize for the nerf attack," Gabby throws over her shoulder, "but you had to have known that was coming. I'm just so glad you're here!"

The homesickness wells within me again as she accepts some cold waters from another of her mates and hands one to Rory.

"Mommy?" a little voice calls from the other side of the car. This kid with dark curly hair comes walking around, expertly avoiding the hands of Pax, Gabby's aquatic shifter mate. As the kid sees me, his little eyes light up.

"Uncle Bennett! You're here!" He runs at me and my arms open to receive him even though I have no idea who he is. He smells like strawberries and sunshine and he's wrapping his arms around my neck like he never wants to let go.

I give anyone that will pay attention to me panic eyes, because how long was I fucking gone? Did they seriously incubate, hatch, and grow an entire small child? Does time

between our two worlds move way differently than what we were led to believe initially?

“Uh, hey there...buddy,” I say awkwardly, trying not to let the kid know I was clueless about his existence just a moment ago.

Gabby starts cracking up, bending over to wheeze as she says things about the look on my face.

“Hey, Adler, come here my man.”

The kid, Adler presumably, turns his head to one of his dads and shakes his head. “No thank you.”

I’m still waiting on an explanation when Gabby walks up and tickles him, making the kid’s arms twitch as he unwraps his body from mine. “We talked about this, remember? Personal space, love.”

“Um, what’s happening? Did we just decide that certain things weren’t communicable over the distance?” I’m trying to be polite, but I’m so beyond confused.

Rory steps to my side and twines our fingers together, all of the guys she brought hovering right behind her.

“I was going to play this whole scenario out like time worked super differently and try and psych you out, but we’ve just been sort of private with Adler as we’ve been getting to know each other. We adopted him about a year after you left, and he’s the reason Bal’s been working on the healing runes for the portal. We were trying to make sure it was safe for him to travel through so you could meet in person.”

I squat down and hold my hand out to this little boy that seems to be nervous for how I’m going to react to him. I don’t know his story about why he needed a family, and maybe I’ll find out in time, but for now, I think the most important thing is just letting him know he’s mine now that Gabby has semi-explained why he’s here and calling her mommy.

Eventually he puts his hand in mine, and I wrap mine around it, swiping my thumb over the top. “It is so cool to meet you, man. You have the best mom, you know that? You have no idea how happy I am to be your uncle.”

His smile finds its way back to his face. “I’m glad you came to visit.”

“And now you can meet my mate, Rory. I guess she’d be your aunt. And these are some more of your other uncles: Felix, Donny, and Jameson.”

Adler starts crying, his lip quivering. “I get...four uncles?” he whispers.

“Actually, there are six more, but they couldn’t come this time.”

Rory winces as Gabby starts laughing again, clearly realizing that we left without them all knowing.

“Oh, I love you Rory. That’s hilarious you just peaced out. Brave. The secret to managing this many guys is making sure they know you make the rules. Well played.”

Rory smiles a little. “Thanks. I’m sort of terrified of what’s going to happen though if we don’t get back without them noticing.”

“We’ll get you sorted, no worries. You got a few hours to spare?”

I look to Rory, wondering if this is the only time I’ll ever be able to stand here like this with her, where I grew up. I’m wondering if it’s selfish to ask Rory if we can stay for a bit since she’s worried about everything back in her world.

“We’ve got a few hours,” Rory answers, smiling at me, because she knows what I need right now. In that moment, it doesn’t even matter that my sister and all my brothers-in-law are standing in front of me watching, I need to kiss her.

She squeaks as I pull her in, clearly unprepared for such an amorous assault, but I need to feel her lips on mine, need to know she’s real. Sometimes it’s hard to decide that because things are so good between us.

“Oh,” she says when I find it in me to pull away.

I tuck a strand of hair behind her hair and wipe off a small dribble of spit I likely left on the corner of her lip. “You’re pretty fucking amazing, you know that?”

She doesn't answer with words, but by burying her face against my chest as she wraps her arms around me. "I love you, Bennett. This is incredible to me that I get to be here right now; I only wish we could stay longer. We'll come back for a longer visit, okay? Promise. Now that Donny is...*Donnier*, maybe it will be easier to keep in closer touch with your family."

"See, the goddess does weird shit sometimes, but she usually knows what's up. Rory, thank you for loving my brother the way he needs. You better come visit more, our kids should know each other. They'll be cousins, after all. Look at us Bennett, actual adults with kids. That's pretty crazy."

I finally grab my sister for a hug, which is difficult to do with her gigantic pregnant belly. "Okay, you told me about Adler, what's going on here? Because you visited briefly not too long ago, and this was definitely not here."

"Did you forget part of my magic is altering my body at my every whim? I hid it as long as I could, mainly because I wasn't keen on random people trying to touch my belly or ask who the daddy was, or really talk to other people at all about it, but the bigger she gets, the stronger her magic gets, and I can't block her out anymore. Also, was kind of hoping to tell you in person."

"Girl?" Rory asks with a smile. "Congratulations. This world is different, isn't it? Bennett has told me that everyone here has way more magic, but that's hard to comprehend that without being right in front of it. Nobody back home can do anything like that."

"Donny, right?" Gabriela says, addressing a very distracted Donny. His hands are still sparkling slightly, and he seems enraptured by them.

Rory elbows him.

"Huh?"

Gabby crooks her finger to beckon Bal over again, who slings an easy arm around Gabby's shoulder. "Any trouble jumping over?" She asks Donny.

"Besides the rehashing of what we had for lunch? I don't think so. These might be hard to hide though," he says about his

hands.

“Oh, I can help with that if you want.” Gabby waves a hand and scrunches her eyes, and she uses her sculptor magic—the magic she used to hide her pregnancy, and with a push is able to project that body-altering magic to Donny. His hands immediately return to a regular flesh color, and he puts them in his pockets now that they’re no longer interesting to look at.

“That should hold,” Gabby says as she pants slightly. I know it’s harder for her to fix things permanently, but it doesn’t hurt her. Just winds her a bit and requires her to top up her magic... which we don’t need to talk about right now because that’s fueled by sex. I just like to pretend in my head she gets it from eating marshmallows.

“If you want,” Balfour offers, “I can try and add some more runes to the portal to make the return trip better? Now that I’ve been through the portal and it’s attached to something that can talk, it’s much easier to figure out how to make it better for you all.”

“It won’t...hurt, will it? If you alter it?” Rory asks, ready to jump in front of Donny and protect him from Bal’s good intentions.

“Not at all,” he reassures her. “Won’t feel a thing.”

“Go for it,” Donny says, giving up his palms.

Bal mutters something under his breath as he rubs his thumbs over Donny’s wrists, and I think he’s trying to find the magic he left behind on the other portal to ease the passage. Once Bal gets what he needs, his mutters turn to other mutters, and light-colored runes appear on Donny’s wrists.

“Sweet, alien tattoos!” Donny exclaims.

I roll my eyes. “That’s hardly an accurate description.”

“Different world, clearly a different species. Aliens. Bennett, you’re an alien too. We’ve had this discussion.”

“No, Donny, we haven’t, but I don’t think it’s necessary.” Seriously. He’s never accused me of being an alien, but I’m actually kind of shocked it took him this long to end up at that conclusion.

“Anyway...” Jameson says, trying to stop Felix from encouraging Donny’s further antics. I know he’s getting ready to.

“Dad’s meeting us at the diner down the way, but if you guys aren’t up for eating after that repulsive barf session, we could do something else,” Gabby tells us.

Rory freezes, but I reassure her with a hand at her low back. “Rory?”

“I...can do that. Yeah, I can totally meet your dad without panicking. Sounds so fun...”

“I literally never turn down food. I’m game,” Donny gives.

“Sounds great,” I reply to Gabby, amused by Rory’s obvious panic.



Rory

Bennett's family is great. That makes sense though because Bennett is great. It hits me as we're sitting there finishing our meal, and he's laughing about something stupid with Gabby's mates and telling his dad about stuff we've done, and coloring on a kid's menu with his new nephew, how much he actually gave up to come to my world. All for the promise his sister made him that there was someone over there waiting to meet him.

It's difficult to comprehend that sort of commitment— that he would literally give up everything he knew for the chance to meet me. Fuck. I'm crying.

I tap Felix on the thigh to let me out of the long booth, giving him a smile that hopefully hides how emotional I am, then rush off to the bathroom. Three deep breaths in and Bennett's sister walks in, in all her gorgeous glory, confusing my sexuality again. I mean, I'm happily mated and straight, but this woman is absolutely stunning.

"Just wanted to check on you, you looked a little overwhelmed. I'm not usually good with all these crazy female mood swings but being pregnant seems to have made me a bit more sympathetic."

I laugh as I dab the corner of my eyes with a paper towel. "I just...he had a *life* here. He gave that up, so he could meet me. That's...how do you repay something like that?"

She tilts her head and steps a little closer. "By making sure he knows he made the right choice. It killed me when I realized the goddess wanted him over there— him and I have always been pretty close. I had just finished accepting all my mates and felt like everything was starting, but I had to tell him goodbye, without even knowing when I'd see him again for sure. It really, *really* sucked. Especially when I found out how sick he got on the trip there."

"Thanks, I feel a lot better. I needed that," I laugh.

Gabby laughs and it eases something in me, because a laugh like that tells me she doesn't resent me for taking her brother away. "He was miserable here. He didn't know what he wanted to do with his life, he was broken-hearted, kind of just generally lost. He was already talking about wanting to go travel or something when the goddess shared her plans, and I just knew in that instant how happy he'd be over there, finding his own way.

"I knew the goddess had to have someone pretty damn special picked out for him if she wanted Bennett to follow her through the portal, and it turns out she was right. Even that first day when I came through and met you, I felt the connection the two of you already had. It's only grown stronger, and I've never seen him smile so deeply or laugh so freely. Every time I talk to him he's just...settled. He knows who he is, what he wants, and that's you."

“I was trying not to cry,” I complain as I do just that.

Then Gabby starts crying too, blaming it on the pregnancy hormones.

“It means a lot to me to know you guys approve of me.”

The door opens and Donny stumbles through, stepping up to the sink to wash his hands as he winks at me.

“Donny, this is the women’s bathroom,” I say, wide-eyed.

“Oh, I know.”

“Um...” Gabby doesn’t know how to handle this.

Once his hands are free of that ‘pesky alien ketchup,’ he wraps an arm around my waist and kisses my temple. “Wanted to check on you. It’s like an alien invasion out there. Scary.”

Gabby still doesn’t know what to say.

I shake my head at him and lean into him. “I’m good. Just emotional.”

“Would it help the situation if I mentioned that I had a vision about Gabby’s daughter needing to be betrothed to somebody in the future to secure peace?”

“Yeah, don’t think so...” I inform him.

Gabby stares down at her belly and cusses.

“Also, thought you might be feeling guilty for taking Bennett away seeing as his whole family seems to love him so much. I wanted you to know that I really think we can do this whole world jump thing whenever we want to. I think I’ll be able to get the hang of it and give that to you guys. It’s the least I can do after all you and Bennett have given me.”

“She’s trying not to cry!” Gabby wails.

Then I end up laughing as I hug Donny tighter. “Thanks, babe.”

“Of course. If I have succeeded in reassuring you, then I’m going to exit before the alien pie arrives to the table and gets consumed. They have this foreign flavor called ‘blueberry’.”

He walks out whistling and Gabby cocks her head to the side. “Is he...”

“He’s fine. He’s just a bit special. Yes, we have blueberries in our world. Just humor him.”

“Bennett said there was a problem with excess magic over in your world. Have you figured it out yet?”

“Oh, um, it seems to have sorted itself out after Donny started spazzing with portal light. I’m sure you already know about the man with the god complex we took down. I absorbed the magic from the connectors he had abused, and I was trying to figure out a way to get the excess magic out of me before something crazy happened—”

“Fuck. You got it out, right? That stuff’s a bitch. That’s who I have to thank for my last...I don’t know how many mates. There are too many. But I had magic taken from a different conduit, or connector as you know us, never found another home for it and I absorbed it permanently.”

My eyes widen. “I knew it! I had a feeling something real crazy would have happened! We followed the little bit of magic that Donny’s light evicted and made sure it went somewhere helpful, which it did, but when he lit up completely, right before we jumped, every single bit of magic I was holding for the other women left my body. Really hoping they made it back to the right owners...”

“Steal Bennett’s rigged phone next time you have magic questions, and I’ll see if I can help you. I’ve never had a sister before, but I’ve had a mom and that didn’t end so well. So as long as you aren’t working in league with a demon to portal me and my mates to a demonic realm to be eaten, I think we’ll get along just fine.”

“What the fuck? I need to get out of here. I don’t trust this much magic.”

Gabby tips her head back and laughs, then is cussing that it made her pee a little bit. Pregnancy seems like it will be fun.

“We’ll get you guys sorted. You want some alien pie?”

Bennett's eyes are tight as Gabby and I exit the bathroom, but he's quick to jump over the guys blocking him in so he can intercept me. I kiss him on the cheek and squeeze his arm and he gets the message that I'm good. Great, even.

"Rory my dear, it was so kind of you to take time to come meet me for a meal. It makes an old man rest easy to know my boy is taken care of," Bennett's dad says kindly.

"Uh, thanks, Mr. Alden. It was great to meet you."

He waves me off. "Please, it's Thomas." He eyes the five of us and nods his head before arriving back at Bennett. "Now I'll be able to come visit over there, I suppose. Nothing is going to stop me from meeting those grandchildren. Bennett, make sure you let me know when you're settled so we can make that happen."

"For sure, dad."

A strange look passes between my guys, making me suspicious. What are they up to?

"Probably time for us to be getting back though, right? Really don't want to deal with what the other guys are going to get up to if they don't hear from you soon, love."

"You sure? We could pacify them," I say bravely.

"I'm sure," he says honestly. "We've got a lot going on over there right now, want to make sure you're not stressing over missing anything important."

I hate to take him away from his family so quickly, but this was an impromptu visit so I know we can plan something else another time. "Will it be safe for the baby to come visit?"

I don't think I'll be world jumping with a newborn, but I need to know Bennett can have this.

"I think," Gabby tells us, "that Donny will get a pretty good grasp on the magic of the portal as he spends time with it. He should be able to read its energy and be connected to it enough to know whether or not the baby would be okay. That being said, do what you feel comfortable with. We will take turns visiting so the burden's not only on you guys."

"Thanks, sis," Bennet mumbles.

“You think you can get the portal to bring us home, Donny?” Felix asks.

“Probably shouldn’t do it in the diner...” I say. I would hope Donny would know better, but we never really know with him.

“Right-o,” Donny says as he scoots out of the booth.

Gabby and her guys take care of the bill, seeing as how our money definitely wouldn’t be good here, then we’re all shuffling outside to find a good spot to try and portal. Gabby thought ahead and brought extra vehicles to fit us all in order to drive to the diner, but I’m thinking it would be good to do this somewhere that’s not out in the open.

Gabriella gets a lot of attention, people gawking at her and wanting to say hi and hit on her, which was amusing to see her mates’ reactions to, and this feels like the sort of thing you don’t want a lot of people knowing you can do.

“In the car, maybe?” Bennett asks us. I guess there’s no need to drive all the way back to the tree since we portal from wherever Donny is. I’m thinking we only landed there in the first place because that was where the portal magic knew to go to, but maybe he’ll eventually be able to get portalling down well enough so that we could portal straight to Gabriella instead of having to travel hours to wherever they live.

We all get hugs from Gabby’s mates and sweet little Adler is upset we’re leaving so soon, but he’s pacified when Donny promises to bring him rocks from an alien planet next time we visit. Not sure why that worked, but it did.

Before I know it we’re in the back of the SUV again and we’re all linked together, making sure that Donny will bring us all back home as a group.

“Go!” Donny says, shaking his wrist out as if some sort of magic will pop out and snag us. No dice.

We stare at him, and I get nervous that maybe we might be stuck here for a bit, until he starts laughing at tricking us, then we’re moving through the orange tunnel thing again, but it’s more familiar this time. I can sort of sense its connection to Donny now, and subsequently to me, so I’m able to relax more.

The people that aren't relaxed are my mates, who definitely were not expecting us to suddenly pop up in what looks like a hospital waiting room. Not sure what voodoo Donny worked to make that happen, because I'm pretty sure we're in the right space to meet up with my other mates.

Helpful placement, I suppose, but now we definitely won't be able to get away with not telling the rest of my mates about the whole world jumping thing.

It's not that big of a deal, right?



Holden

“Thank the gods Christine’s okay. I did not want to have to tell Rory more bad news,” Brett says as he sinks into the waiting room chair. It’s not that he’s being callous, but he doesn’t have much of a connection to Christine. He’s been polite, but we’re all a bit confused about what to think right now.

“Yeah, I hope Rory makes it up here soon. It hasn’t even been a day yet, but I think I’m already losing it. Kind of happy about the fact that we don’t have to mention, right away at least, that Christine’s sister was trying to nab me,” Caden says as he sinks further into his chair, exhausted.

“Excuse me, what?!” A very sexy, very familiar voice screeches from behind us.

I fall out of my chair at the sudden intrusion, because...she wasn't there a second ago, right?

"Where is the bitch? Donny jump me to her. Now."

Then I'm up and running towards her before the other guys have registered her presence.

"Don't know what the hell you're doing here, or how the hell you made it happen, but *fuck* you feel good in my arms."

"Be sweet later. I have a bitch to maim," Rory says, pushing me off of her.

I hold her back from...whatever she's trying to accomplish. "It's been taken care of. Promise. Caden never would have—"

"Oh, I want to hear this. She tried to poach you? What the *fuck*?"

The guys finally get with it and soon we're all swarming Rory, freezing out the guys she stayed behind with.

"Back up unless you want to all get puked on," Bennett warns. Donny jumps back as if we meant he personally was going to receive the puke, but nobody else seems to care about the risk.

"Were you sick earlier? Wait, what is happening right now? What was...that?" I ask, waving my hand in the direction of them appearing out of absolutely nowhere.

"Yeah, there's a lot to discuss, I think. The short of it is, that the magic from the portal Bennett was guarding decided it wanted a new home. Ta da!" She gives jazz hands towards Donny. "He's our portal now. It pulled us all through when the power exchange finished, but don't worry, we were completely fine."

"You jumped worlds...and threw up?" Charlie asks.

"I'm fine now, promise. Bennett's brother-in-law added some runes to Donny to make the trip smoother, and it seemed to work because I barely even felt anything that last trip. Got to meet Bennett's family though, they were awesome. Oh, and jumping forced all the extra connector magic out of me, so that's no longer a concern. We're mostly sure that all the orbs made it

to their rightful owners. We should probably call and check though, just to be sure....”

“Time to be bossy,” Ari says, scooping up our connector.

This is something he does occasionally when he has shit he wants to do. He thinks that by *announcing* he’s going to be bossy, that we won’t react badly to the fact that he’s being unapologetically bossy. It’s kind of funny seeing it used on Rory, who just stares at him and allows him to move her where he wants her. This turns out to be the very stiff, very uncomfortable, very not-fashion forward sofa in the middle of the waiting room.

Ari settles with Rory on his lap and I’m first in line to sit next to them.

“Can we all just breathe for a minute?” Ari asks. “And by all, I really mean you, Rory, because I swear to the gods you haven’t stopped talking since you just appeared.”

“I—”

“Nope,” he says, shutting her up by kissing her.

When she relaxes into the kiss and stops fighting, he pulls away slightly and holds her, letting everyone else fight for spots near her.

“Okay,” Caden says, clearly trying to wrestle the situation away from Ari. It’s an interesting dynamic having two guys who seem to think they’re the first mate. Caden technically has the authority, but Ari can seriously be a bossy ass when he wants to be.

“Start at the beginning. Last we talked to you, you were still trying to get the magic to work for you, to connect with the comatose connector back at the facility. That’s clearly not where you are now, so what happened between now and then?”

Rory shoots Caden a grateful smile.

“It started when I started thinking I had this toe fungus thing growing,” Donny announces.

Jameson honest to gods *growls*. “Somebody give him an executive order to just stop talking. Please. This story would

make more sense to everyone here if he wasn't allowed to tell any part of it."

Rory starts giggling, which turns into a big hysterical laugh. It takes any lingering tension with it, leaving her relaxed and pliant against Ari as she continues to sit in his lap, her back to his chest.

"No toes fungus involved at all, really" Bennett says. He then proceeds to tell us everything about the call from his sister and Donny getting a power up in the form of glittering limbs. We learn all about how Bennett's his sister was able to later cover up the sparkling limbs, and about their trip to Bennett's home realm. This includes meeting his family and everything new with his sister and her mates, their kids that Bennett didn't know about prior, and then how smooth the return trip here was through the Donny portal. That part gets all of our attention, and by the time Bennett is done talking, Donny is snoring in a corner chair.

"So that's basically it," Rory says. "Gabriella said they were thinking of travelling with their little guy at some point in the near future, so they think it's safe if we ever feel like we want to try with either of the babies."

She has to reassure us about a thousand times that she suffered no ill effects regarding the pregnancy either coming or going, and even how she felt safe while travelling, but she shuts down, vehemently I might add, any heavy-handed suggestion to get evaluated by an actual doctor after the ordeal.

I don't know that any of us will feel comfortable discussing jumping through the Donny portal with kids in tow, until we've all experienced it and know what to expect, but it's actually a big relief to find that something is finally going well for us. It's weird as hell to know that Donny is this multi-dimensional doorway now, and I fear that's going to go straight to his head and make him even more eccentric; I also know that Rory will just love him all the more for it if that happens.

"Now it's our turn. We told you last about Christine being taken to the hospital here. We also got a tip from some guys we know on the police force that were able to poke into the case for us, that Christine's long lost sister Bernadette was actually on

parole, not straight up out of jail. She has violent crimes on her record, deserved or not, so the fact that she admitted to kidnapping and then basically threatening us while we had cops on our end listening in, isn't looking good for her. I have no idea what will actually happen with her, but she shouldn't be a problem at all going forward. We're going to protect you, Rory, and make sure that Christine is safe to do as she pleases."

Rory grabs my hand in thanks for the status update and for the first time in a few days I breathe easy, feeling like we're closer to being settled.

So naturally that's when the doctor comes in and tells us that Christine is about to be wheeled back for an emergency c-section, because the baby is in distress.

Rory is on her feet so fast, flying as soon as the doctor says Christine was asking for Rory, only stopping long enough to find out where she's going.

It dawns on me that the doctor didn't know Rory was here so was likely hoping to do a video call like we discussed earlier in case something went bad, but Rory's timing is impeccable.

What he doesn't say is that Christine likely won't make it through surgery, because she was barely holding it together before this whole upsetting day, and I add this to the list of sins her callous sister committed.

I know Rory lost her parents and has experienced grief before, which I hate, and I hate even more that she's about to go through the whole process again. From my understanding, Rory and Christine have become really good friends during the course of this pregnancy, texting and chatting frequently.

When I make it to Christine's room, the staff limits who's allowed in, because there are a fuck ton of us. There's no way in hell I'm leaving Rory in here alone, and I'm lucky enough to get to the room seconds before the rest of my bondmates, so I'm not asked to leave. I wrap my arms around Rory's hips as she sits at Christine's bedside, her weak smile telling Rory how thankful she is that she's been put in her life, and how much she loves Rory.

In a situation like this, I think it's pretty common for the would-be grievors to urge the person that's suffering to fight whatever is happening, to be selfish and find a way to keep them around a little longer so they don't have to mourn quite yet; but I fall a little more for Rory when she takes in all that Christine is currently suffering, reading what's not being said, and understand that the sacrifice that Christine is making for her child is something that Rory doesn't want to taint.

Rory doesn't tell Christine to be strong and come back, because that would be cruel. Christine knows she's never going to actually hold this baby in her arms, at least not long enough for it to make a memory for her. She knows that she's about to give up her entire life force so that this little one, whom she's allowed to thrive within her while she herself grew weaker and sicker, could have her best chance at a good life.

I watch these two incredibly strong women grasp hands and whisper to each other, watch as my incredible mate pets Christine's dull hair, watch as Rory leans forward, silently bawling, as she presses a kiss to Christine's forehead before pressing her own forehead to Christine's chest.

The flurry of nurses around us trying to hasten Christine isn't lost on us, but these women are in their own world right now.

I can't hear what they're saying as they whisper to each other, because I'm not leaning over and trying to be nosy, but this isn't for anyone but them. They're sharing their souls right now, and it's fucking beautiful.

When the nurses finally wheel Christine out, she's resolved as she blows a kiss to Rory. None of the craziness that occurred earlier between Christine and her sister matters, because the end is coming, and Christine can't fight the inevitable.

The hospital room is eerie without the beeping from Christine's monitors, and Caden and I follow Rory to the window that overlooks nothing but a parking lot. I'm grateful in this moment that Christine couldn't see that view from her bed because she was too far back in the room. I imagine from where she laid, she could only see a bit of the sky, and I noticed earlier when we arrived that she was hyper-focused on it like she expected to be passing through it soon.

“She knew and was at peace with this,” Caden reminds Rory gently.

“Yeah, my heart being broken was unavoidable though. We’ve known since we found out about the baby practically, that Christine likely wasn’t going to be around to meet her. I thought I understood what that meant, but we’re very soon to be the only thing that little baby will have in the entire world.

“That baby is comfortable and warm and protected right now, but she’s about to be ripped from that comfort, delivered into a world where the person who went to insane lengths to make sure she got life, isn’t around to so much as know the way she sounds when she’s hungry. Or how it sounds differently from the sounds she’ll make when she wants to be held or needs a change.

“I’ve seen some fucked up stuff in this world, but this is one of the worst. I know the goddess has a plan, that there are reasons for everything we just can’t comprehend, but this fucking sucks. I know I’m already in love with this baby, but I wish like hell that the body she grew in wasn’t about to disappear forever.”

With Christine no longer in the room, the other guys find their way into it, and the amazement I usually feel when I see the mate mark from Rory on my wrist is amplified as I watch her become a mother. She’s changing subtly right in front of us, shoring up her strength and deciding things in her head that we’ll never be privy to. There are silent conversations happening in her head right now that she’ll never feel the need to say out loud, that are determining the kind of mother she’s going to be when those nurses and doctors come back shortly with a newborn.

Because the cesarean was an emergency one, a nurse mentioned that none of us were able to be in the delivery room, but they’re all well aware where that baby belongs once she’s been evaluated.

Rory is running her hands over the small bassinet in the room now, all of us silent. I’m fighting the urge to just keep her wrapped up in my arms so she won’t ever have to face anything hard again, hoping that if she can’t see it, it won’t exist. But

that's not fair to Rory. She can handle this, and even though I know she's already crying over the loss of Christine, she's trying to let herself accept that it was an unchangeable outcome, and that this is exactly where she needs to be at this moment in time.

"You told me to imagine our happy ending, our end of the road," she finally whispers as she turns to me. "It starts here. Now."

Rory grabs the hand of each mate and tugs us into a big circle around her, getting us all as close as possible around her. "Each of you has an origin story with me that's big and important in its own way, and a few days ago, when I accepted Holden as my last mate, we became an unchangeable bonded group." She rubs her stomach, and her smile gets a little more believable.

"We're at a point where nothing is ever going to be the same again. There's an argument to be made that we've been hitting that point every single time someone is added to this group, but this little girl that's about to come into our lives, she's about to be everything. I don't know where we're going to live yet, but I have faith that we're going to be together, and that we're going to be happy, and that we're going to give this little girl the happy kind of childhood that everyone dreams of for their kid."

I make eye contact with my bondmates. We've been trying to figure out the best time to tell Rory that we have a home to go to, that we've had contractors on it day and night to finish it quickly, that we've been stealing any design choice we can squeeze out of Rory and running with it so it will be perfect for her. That time hasn't happened yet, but I really think it's happening now.

Jameson had this idea in the first place, so I think he should be the one that tells Rory. We all nod to him, telling him to let loose our secret.

"Would you feel more settled if we told you we had a plan?" Jameson asks, quietly so as not to break the spell she's woven over the room.

She turns so she can see him, tilting her head way up as he steps to the middle of the circle with her.

“I fucked up so badly with you, Rory, and I know you don’t want to keep rehashing that, because it’s time to move on and start building foundations. While we’ve been doing that, I’ve been making foundations of my own.”

Jameson digs his phone out of his pocket and pulls up the most recent picture of the house we have, the one that was sent to us after the landscaping was finished just a few days ago. There’s a bunch of big, mature trees in front, and the tire swing I wanted is front and center under the biggest of them.

There are rose bushes in front of a porch made for sitting on, a couple bench swings and seating for almost all of us, and a big, blue, farm-style house with white shutters. It’s pretty big, but then it would have to be to fit a family of our size.

“Finding the perfect house to fix up happened way easier than I imagined it would, but it’s ours, baby. I wanted to show you that I valued you, that I was thinking of what we could be together, that I was excited about this life we’re going to build together. It’s not a bribe to earn your forgiveness, I promise.”

Jameson chuckles awkwardly at his joke, but Rory is just staring at the phone. She zooms in and then flips through other pictures he has, and I watch as she flicks through conversations with contractors and other necessary personnel about decisions on the house, and by the time she’s done, she looks awe-struck.

“I can’t...you did this for me? You already have a house though, this is ludicrous. I didn’t want you guys to use your money on us that way. That’s not your role in this group.”

I show her the listing for our other house that she stayed in, and she looks at me, questioning my sanity like I love her to do. “What? You’re selling it? Why? I don’t want to take your memories from you guys—that house was important to you.”

I shake my head. “*You’re* important to us. That was just a house. Grace loved that house, yes, but that felt like a dismissible reason to keep holding onto it. She can’t enjoy it anymore, as morbid as that sounds, and we wanted a different family to make memories in it. We all need a fresh start, somewhere where we can come together and fall deeper in love with you. We needed somewhere to bring our new daughter that was safe and warm, where she had a bed, and you had a place to

unwind and hide from the world while you processed everything we knew was coming. This is us taking care of you, and that most certainly *is* our role.”

Rory fists the front of my shirt and looks up at me, then turns to find the eyes of my other original bondmates. Not that they’ve had a chance to stop since she was told Christine was being wheeled back, but her eyes are tearing up again.

“This...” she starts, searching for words. She clears her throat and turns to press her forehead against Jameson’s chest, wrapping her arms around him. “This feels like an awful big bribe. Flowers would have been fine.”

We all laugh an appropriate amount given the severity of the moment, but she’s far from alone as she continues to process all this information. Her hand raises to Jameson’s face to cup his cheek. “I knew when you stepped back that that was out of character for you. I think that’s part of the reason I didn’t completely blow up at you when it happened, because I thought giving you space was a safer choice.

“I can’t understand everything the four of you have been through, and I don’t have the knowledge to analyze every action you take, but when you were grasping for reasons to put distance between us, I knew that somewhere inside, you were hurting badly, and you didn’t know how to alleviate it.

“Maybe I should have been firmer with you then and we could have avoided a lot of this mess, but I’m finally the connector I think I need to be. If you’re hurting, Jameson, or any of you, I need you to make me hurt with you. You’re not going to want to, you’re undoubtedly going to try and be noble and weather it on your own so I don’t get dragged down, but I’m telling you right now, fuck that.

“To me, that’s a sign of wanting to give us up. We’re all stuck together now, for better or worse. Jameson, you’ve been proving to me that the goddess paired us up for good reason, and I know that you were the man I needed when we chose each other accidentally. This magic that marks us wouldn’t have taken if we were a bad match. I love you, actually, and I can never repay this gift you’re giving me, this gift you’re all giving this family, but if this new home is what you want, then I’m on board.”

“You’re not going to fight this?” I ask, a bit amused at how easily she accepted a fucking house after all the offhand comments about us not spending money on her.

She turns to me and presses a firm kiss to my mouth. “I think I’m finally understanding that everyone in this room is their own person, and that I can’t tell you what to do with things in your possession. You know I didn’t grow up with the kind of money you all have access to, but I’m not going to let that drive a wedge between us. If you feel the need to spend money, knock yourself out. So long as you understand I don’t need that. Money doesn’t make me happy; that’s what you all do for me.”

Ari wraps his arms around her from behind, burying his face against her neck. “You’re so fucking perfect, baby. I can’t believe that you’re actually mine, that I get this. We’re going to have so many amazing memories in our new house. We just wanted you to know that whatever our past has been, that you’re our future. We’re wholly focused on you, and nothing can change that. I think we’ve spent enough time drowning in the past. We’re going to take every moment we get with you, and we’re going to make the most of every single one.”

Quietness ensues for a few moments as Rory works her way through all her guys, seeking comfort and touching every single one of us.



Rory

Exhaustion washes over me, so I allow Caden to lead me to the reclining chaise in the room and pull me on top of him.

“I want to be there with Christine,” I murmur. “She shouldn’t be in there alone.”

Caden pets my hair, brushing a kiss against my forehead as my eyes shut. “Those nurses have all but assured us they’re going to take extra good care of her. Christine isn’t alone at all, love. It’s not us back there, but she still has someone next to her holding her hand. Promise.”

This makes my heart settle a little, though I’m waiting for the pain to hit. Any second now, Christine could be taking her last breath, and I feel like I never got enough time with her to

reassure her of how much I love her, or to convey to her what this baby is going to mean to me.

“I wonder if she’ll have your eyes,” I whisper to Caden. I’ve spent so much time thinking about Christine’s DNA, that it almost takes me surprise that this baby is going to be half Caden as well. How could I not love that? I don’t know what on earth I was thinking when I tried to cut him from my life. I snuggle in a little closer, inhaling his scent.

“We still need a name,” he says against me.

“Yeah, I’ve been trying to avoid that. That makes it real. I wanted Christine to name her, it’s her right.”

Caden laughs. “She said she hasn’t named the baby for the exact same reason.”

I sit up and smile, wiping yet another tear away. “Are you serious? We’ve been sort of dancing around the issue, but I thought it would have been insensitive if I suggested names when Christine was doing all the hard work.”

“We could keep Christine as her middle name, so that she always knows who brought her to us,” Brett suggests.

“I love that. Anyone have any suggestions?”

The guys ponder, but ultimately they bow out of the challenge. “You’re her mama now,” Bennett says. “There are too many of us here to choose just one, so that honor falls to you. Maybe when you get to hold her you’ll know who she’s meant to be.”

I nod and let my eyes drift shut again, soaking up the comfort of being in Caden’s arms. I drift off for a few minutes, listening to the murmur of the guys’ voices around me. There’s a shimmer in my periphery and I turn to it, noticing a figure I haven’t seen in a while.

I make my way to Grace and greet her with a hug, noting how happy she looks. I look around, wondering where we are. We’re not in the tree she was last time, it’s just sort of dim and endless. I can only tell that we’re in some version of where I go when I sleep.

“Hi sweet girl,” she greets me.

“Didn’t mean to fall asleep, but I’m kind of glad I did.” I give her a genuine smile, wondering why she sought me out.

“I know I said you could come see me whenever you wanted to, but apparently rules change when you’re through the journeying part of your life.”

“What?”

Grace runs a hand through the tips of my hair affectionately, and then places her hand on my shoulder. “The goddess was on board with me helping my mates to find you, but now that they’re settled and you’re coming into yourself, apparently I’m getting moved.”

I frown. “To where?”

She wags her eyebrows. “Somewhere good, I promise. I’m going somewhere not even you can find in your dreams. The goddess seemed to want me to tell you that your parents are there as well, and if they could have visited you, they would have. They’re settled though, and really damn proud of you. Thought you should know.”

“Thanks,” I say. “That means a lot. So yeah, I guess I convinced all your guys good enough.”

She laughs, and it’s just as musical and beautiful as it was last time. “Didn’t take much. They were right. You were always meant to be their endgame. Sometimes the goddess gives life to souls that are meant to burn bright and then move on. These souls, like mine I’ve come to understand, play important roles. They interact with people that could have drifted alone forever if they didn’t have a little help.”

“That seems very unfair to you.” It just doesn’t sit right with me that she feels like she was only a temporary stop in the lives of the mates she once had.

“I’ve made my peace with it. It’s much easier to understand these things when you’re where I am, because there aren’t the same distractions that affect your perspective. The goddess makes her choices available for explanation over here— it’s actually pretty neat. There’s this whole room we can go to that lets us explore things that have us unsettled. I’ve spent a lot of time reflecting, and I think I finally understand why I was given

the life span I was. I can't make you understand fully, but just know that I was loved, and that was amazing. I know they loved me, and that makes it all worth it."

I step forward to hug her. So many important women in my life that keep putting me in a place of honor, but I keep losing them. It really sucks. "So this is goodbye, then?"

"It is." She turns with a slight gasp, and the air shimmers as another familiar person walks through. Here, Christine is whole and strong. Her hair is shiny and has the most amazing wave to it, and her bones are firmly hidden beneath soft flesh instead of poking through papery skin.

Being here means she's no longer on earth though, and that fucking kills me.

"Hey there," she says as she walks up to me with a big, but sad smile. "She's so beautiful, Rory."

I don't need any further explanation from Christine to know who exactly she's talking about, but there's nothing I need more in this moment than to hold her.

It's strange to cry in a world where tears don't really mean anything, but as I hold Christine for possibly the last time, I'm wracked with them. I'm mourning this beautiful soul that my world just lost, even if the two of us started out in a rocky place.

"Please don't cry for me Rory, my purpose in life has been fulfilled. I am joyful."

"Do you have to be so damn nice about this all?" I sob.

She laughs a bit, then both women are there comforting me. Maybe I should be alarmed that two of the women I've felt closest to in this life are ghosts, but I crave the comfort they're offering up freely.

"We don't have long, but it's pure kismet that I get to see you now. Everything about us has been from day one. Before you feel any worse for me, please remember that I'm the one that put myself in this position. I did things that I'm ashamed of to get that baby, and I could have easily torn apart a family in the process. I can't express how deeply moved I am by the friendship you saw fit to give me instead, because that is one of

the only things that has gotten me through all these months of pain.

“I don’t want to make this some big, dramatic, drawn-out scene full of tears, because this is only the beginning for you. Beginnings have to start out happily; it’s a rule.”

“She’s right,” Grace adds. “There are big plans for us up here, but there are even bigger plans for you back on the ground. You’ve found love, Rory, and that’s nothing insignificant. You’ve found ten people that can’t live without you, and you’ve brought them together. You’ve gotten them to coordinate on designing a home for you all, and you’ve got them all by your side as you start the next chapter. That’s not a reflection of things that have happened to you, that’s a direct reflection of the kind of person that you are.”

Christine nods. “That’s how I know that my daughter is going to have an amazing life. It really sucks that I don’t get to see her grow the way I’d like to, but I have no doubts I’ll still be able to see her occasionally.”

Grace confirms this. “She’ll have two guardian angels in us, Rory. You likely won’t see us again like this, but there will be feelings sometimes, like there’s someone else with you, even if you can’t see them. You’re going to do amazing things.”

“You guys are so good for my self-esteem.”

They laugh again, which is much better than tears. “There, don’t cry honey. All good things, I promise. I want you to be happy; I want you to wake up and see our little girl and fall in love like I know you will. I want you to smell her little head and hear her little voice and let her wrap her tiny little wrinkly hands around your finger, and I want you to raise her up to be as strong as you are.”

I wrap an arm around each of them, feeling my body gaining consciousness again. “Thank you both, for the gifts you’ve given me.”

“You’ve got it backwards,” Grace informs me. “You are the gift, Rory.” She links arms with Christine, and I have a warming sensation in my chest knowing they’ll be able to take care of

each other, wherever they go next. “Christine and I have both lost huge, important things, and the hardest part is not knowing how the living will be able to handle being without us. The guilt I felt when I realized what happened was worse than anything. I watched those men suffer and break over and over again, and it wasn’t until you came into the plans that they finally stopped fracturing.”

“And this pregnancy would have been terrifying without any support, but knowing I was with a family that loved spending time with me, knowing I had parents picked out to love on my sweet baby, it made it almost too easy. You’re the angel here, not us. You’re the miracle.”

“Damn it! How do I still have tears left? Okay, okay. I’m done, honestly. Let’s just say we’re all going to be happy going forward, okay? We’re getting too mushy, and my pregnant butt can’t take it.”

At the mention of my pregnancy there’s a different sort of warmth that rushes up my spine and takes my breath with it, leaving me to sway. Christine and Grace are there to steady me, but they don’t look at all alarmed. “The goddess just blessed the little one you carry. Go, be with your family. I’ve got Christine, and we’ll know if you keep being sad.”

“Great, now I’m going to be haunted. Alright, I’m going to make sure Everly sees your picture every day, Christine.”

Her face breaks out in a huge smile. “I love that name. So much. I always have, in fact.”

“I don’t know how to say goodbye,” I admit.

“So don’t. We’re going to fade, and you’re going to wake up; you’re going to be the happiest woman on earth.”

“Take care of each other.”

They fade out exactly like Grace said they would, but they take any negativity I was harboring with them. If the people I feel sad over don’t want me sad, then how can I be?

Caden

There are moments in life that you look back at and get stuck on, and I know that this is one of them. It's rare to know it's happening in the moment in which you live through it, but I know this is one for sure.

Rory wakes up and her eyes are clear and determined as she shakes her limbs out and rises to her feet. She kisses me without a word, then goes around the room to kiss each and every man that's pledged themselves to her, then she plants herself right in front of the door.

It isn't long before there's a knock and a nurse opens the door, wheeling in a bassinet with a human burrito in it. My breath catches as the baby squirms, and Rory reaches for her, and they stare at each other, bonding instantly.

I've never had any doubts since Rory signed on with this whole plan that she would be affectionate with the child we've decided to welcome into our lives, but the ache in my chest that blooms when Rory cradles my child to her chest and presses a kiss to her tiny cheek makes me need to sit. I have tunnel vision, unable to look away. They're fucking spectacular together.

The responsible men in the room are taking in everything the nurses are saying regarding delivery and care instructions, and which forms still need to be filled out, but I'm just staring as I fall for my mate all over again.

Finally I figure out how to make my legs support me again, fortuitously at the same time that Rory turns to me with this massive smile on her face. The nurses leave with a round of solemn congratulations, and I'm waiting for Rory to start falling apart again knowing Christine has passed.

"That nap I took..." she shakes her head. "I knew when I woke up. Christine passed, and I got to see her. Grace, too actually. They said it would be the last time, and they wanted us all to be happy. So that's what I'm going to choose to do. Can you all choose that as well?"

“That’s what Christine wanted?” Felix asks, approaching our new daughter.

Rory nods as she places the baby in Felix’s arms, and I splinter again. This is my family; raised in a home of people that took me in and made me feel important pales in comparison to having a family that’s entirely mine. These guys are with me just as surely as Rory and this infant are.

“She’s so tiny,” Felix muses. “Do we have a name yet, Mama?”

“Everly Christine Stanner.”

I need to hold my girls. It’s common practice for children to take the name of the first mate, so even if this child wasn’t mine biologically, it likely would have been my name attached to them anyway. I get an arm around Felix and touch my head to the side of his, then he hands me Everly. I find that having her in the crook of my arm is natural, as is the way Rory fits with my other arm around her waist. With Rory’s hand helping to stabilize the baby, the other guys crowd around and gaze at this tiny little wonder.

“That’s a great name,” Charlie says. I pass the baby to him, and I know all these guys are as in love as I am. It seems impossible that Everly’s wrists are as tiny as they are, or that her toes can move for how doll-like they look.

With the baby being passed around, I get Rory all to myself again, kissing her so she knows that she’s no less important to me now that there’s someone wholly dependent on us. “I’m going to love you forever, Rory.”

She kisses me back, and the sweep of my tongue against hers has tingles coursing through my blood stream, same as the day I first kissed her.

“Good thing these marks are permanent then, huh?”

“Smart ass,” I can’t help but quip as I bite gently into her lower lip.

By the time the baby makes its way back to Rory, she’s content to just hold the baby and stare into her face. It seems like no time at all before another nurse comes in, having the

unfortunate task of explaining to us how everything went down in the operating room. We're all doing a balancing act between hurting from the life we just lost and wonder for the life we just gained; none of us are questioning what Rory told us about talking to Christine.

Because Rory is not a patient at the hospital, we're told that we must adhere to visiting hours only. Even being legal parents of this little one, the nurses will care for the baby overnight, and then we can return in the morning. That doesn't give us a whole lot of time to sit and bond with Everly, but we soak up every minute we're given.

Everly gets moved to the pediatric unit, and we're introduced to the nurses that will be caring for her overnight. They have to practically pry the baby out of Rory's arms when visiting hours end, and none of us seem to know what to do when we're standing in front of the hospital, facing a parking lot full of cars that don't belong to us.

"How did you guys even get here?" Rory asks, looking at those of us who traveled ahead.

Ari scratches his head. "Oh, uh, your brothers split us up between their cars. Should we call them? Or...?"

"I don't know, I don't want to be a burden." Rory hesitates.

I keep a firm hold on Rory's hand as Charlie sneaks up behind her, plastering himself to her back and sweeping her hair over one shoulder so he can get to her neck. "What do you want, love? What can we do right now to help you feel settled? Are there ride shares here? Bus system? Do you want to find out if there's a hotel nearby?"

Rory looks down at herself and frowns. "I don't have any of my things here. All of my bags are back at the center. I just realized we aren't going to be going back there, and I have nothing to change into. A lot of us don't, actually. I have a few outfits back home, but not much. I didn't want to leave too much behind for my family to deal with when I left for my walk. It's not very convenient that we don't have a car either. Donny, how does the portal thing work? You can't like, portal back to the center, can you?"

Donny rolls his head on his shoulders, stretching the ligaments there. “I could, but I’d have to jump back to Bennett’s world, and then I’d need to land at the center when I came back. But then I’d have to do the same to come back to this territory. Don’t think I can jump between places in this world, only choose where to land when I come back from the other.”

“Oh yeah, that’s not gonna work then,” she mumbles. “I’m not sure guys, I just feel kind of lost right now.”

“I’m gonna call Ben,” I tell her with a kiss to her cheek. “You know you’re not a burden on them, and you know they’re probably dying to see you. They expected us to come back at some point tonight anyway, and we can all just camp out on the floor of your room or something.”

“I’ll get in touch with some people at the center and work on getting all of our things transported up here,” Holden tells her.

“Are you sure?” Rory asks, still doubting her hold on these people and the reach they have in this world.

“Yeah baby,” Holden replies. “I guarantee there’s some employee there looking for extra hours. Somebody would be happy to drive a company car up here and drop stuff off for us. Probably even get it here by the morning if we wanted it to.”

“Whatever you think is best,” she says, looking back at the hospital longingly.

I step off to the side to call Ben, and as I assumed, they had people on standby ready to come pick us up when we were ready. Rory could never be a burden to them, and between all of Laney’s mates, there’re enough vehicles to fit all of us.

Somehow Laney and her mates were able to put together a huge dinner for all of us by the time we show up. Even though there’s not enough room for all of us at the table, sitting down to a homemade meal in the place where I grew up, with my mate by my side, knowing my child is safe and cared for, is all I’ve ever wanted.

“So,” Rory says, taking a sip of her water. Laney and all of Rory’s brothers put their forks back down on their plate and look at her expectantly.

“My walk is over. It’s been a pretty crazy last couple of weeks, huh?” she asks, looking around at all of us with a halfcocked smile.

“We’re just so relieved you’re safe,” Ben says, wrapping an arm around Rory’s shoulder. He looks at all of Rory’s mates, his face getting somber. “I’m trusting in all of you to take care of my sister. If how you handled things at the connector event is anything to go by, I know you’ll do a good job. Thank you for getting her to safety, for making it so that me and my family could get to safety as well. Rory,” he says, taking a deep breath like he needs to fortify himself.

“You’ve always been so headstrong, so willful. I knew you were never gonna be an easy laid-back type of connector that would be satisfied with the status quo. Had a feeling you’d want to go out and experience some grand adventures, get your feet wet and see the world. Even if you got a little more than you bargained for, I know that mom and dads would be damn proud to see where you’ve ended up. These men that you’ve found, they seem like the best sort. We can’t wait to meet little Everly.”

“I’m pregnant,” she blurts, unable to keep it in anymore. I laugh because it’s such a Rory type of announcement.

“Smooth, Scraps,” I tell her, grabbing her hand.

“You are?” Laney asks, her eyes nearly turning into actual hearts.

“Yeah. Without giving too many details so I don’t ick my brothers out, it wasn’t planned. But Everly’s going to be a big sister before we know it.”

Her brother pulls her in for a big hug, yanking her out of her chair. “Congratulations, sis. You’re all grown up now, I suppose.”

“I’m always gonna need my big brother around though,” she says, wrapping her arms around him. They’ve always been

really sweet together, unlike a lot of other siblings that like to fight. I think it's because he had to kind of step into the role of father so young.

“So where to next?” Laney asks as we finally all get back to our food. We're all squished between the dining and living room wherever we can find a seat, some of us on the floor just because we want to be closer to Rory.

Rory looks to Jameson, and he pulls up the same pictures of the house he showed Rory earlier in his phone. It's way nicer than anything I ever thought I'd live in, but I love that Rory gets it. I'm thrilled that she has mates that can provide things that I can't, that she's gonna be taken care of in ways I never could have on my own.

Jameson puts his phone down in front of Laney. “We bought her a house down in Historical District. It's being fixed up as we speak.”

“Oh my gosh, it's beautiful. Why didn't you say anything, Rory?”

Rory gives Jameson a teasing smile. “I just found out about it too, actually. Apparently they're good at keeping secrets.”

“You managed to keep this house a secret from her? Wow, you're good. This looks incredible. Good job, boys.”

“We're also having a big guest suite renovated, and it will be big enough for all of you to visit. We know how important you are to her, so we had to make sure you could visit whenever you wanted to. Of course, any or all of you are welcome whenever you'd like to come. We'd be happy to have you,” Ari tacks on.

Rory gets up then, abandoning her food for good. She leans up onto her tippy toes and pulls Jameson down so she can kiss his cheek. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“Well this house isn't much,” Ben says, looking around the room with chagrin painted on his face. “But if you don't mind some likely uncomfortable arrangements, I reckon we can squeeze you in somewhere. Should have a few air mattresses still in the basement.”

“I hate to put you out,” Ari says. “Would it be at all possible to maybe borrow a few vehicles until we can get some rentals tomorrow? I think Rory will sleep better if we’re near the hospital, and there’s a hotel right next to it. Unless of course you want to stay here. Whatever you’d like, babe.”

She looks torn, because I know she wants to stay here where she’s comfortable, and she’s scared to ask for things she considers to be expensive. She undeniably puts hotels in that column.

“You guys would probably be more comfortable in a hotel?” she asks, clearly unsure.

“We’re most comfortable with *you*,” Charlie corrects. “It’s whatever you want. Honestly, we’re not gonna be put off sleeping on a couch for a couple nights. We’re here to support you and spend time with our daughter. We aren’t far from the hospital here anyway. Ari? Were you able to find someone to cars for us?”

“They’re coming yeah, but they won’t be here until the morning. I was able to get them delivered though.”

“Let’s just stay here,” Charlie continues. “We’ll sleep fine here, and you’ve been pretty unsettled. I think it would be beneficial to you if you’re in this familiar house, in the bed you’re used to and have access to some fresh clothes. We shouldn’t take you out of your comfort zone, not after you’ve gone through so much.”

Rory looks relieved at not having to defend herself. “Okay, that sounds nice. I could use a hot shower though. I feel grimy from everything I’ve done today.”

I motion for Brett, and he follows me as I scoop up Rory and carry her up the stairs. I know she’s more than capable of doing this herself, but there’s no reason for her to walk when she has ten mates. “You look beat, Scraps.”

“Felt like I was gonna pass out with my face in my dinner plate.”

“Today was too much for you,” Brett sighs. He steps into Rory’s room, looking around with a smile. “This is where you

came from?”

I sink into Rory’s bed, holding her on my lap, watching while Brett roams around. We hear some guys walk into my room right underneath us, their voices sounding through that damn heater vent that nearly ruined everything for me.

Brett raises his eyebrows and looks at me. “Wow. You can hear everything down there.”

“Yes, I know,” I say, hanging my head and feeling my cheeks heat.

He starts digging through the dresser that’s barely full anymore. “I can see a teenage Rory wearing these in high school,” he says, holding up a pair of yoga pants with the word ‘love’ written on the ass. “I like it. That’s cute, very adolescent you.”

“Adolescent me? Rory asks. “What does that mean? Come on, put those down. There’s a reason I left those behind. I don’t know why those were ever in style.”

“Nope, you’re wearing them. They’ll give me another excuse to stare at your ass. Plus they feel soft as hell. Come on, shower time.” He finds a little tank top as well, and clearly there’s no intention of letting her shower alone.

I dart to my room to grab some things for me to wear, because it’s not like Rory’s family doesn’t know we’re all sleeping with her. Taking a shower together is hardly scandalous. I mean, the way I want to do it is, but they don’t need to know that.

“I need to kiss this belly of yours Scraps,” I say, sinking to my knees once we’re in the bathroom with the door locked. I toss the towels I grabbed to Brett so he can hang them on the rack, and Rory rolls her eyes at my selection. I grabbed the same damn cartoon towel I made her wear the day before she left for her walk, the one that barely covers anything because it’s meant for a toddler.

“You can hardly even tell I’m pregnant,” she says as I get weird about her cute belly. She strips off her shirt anyway though, giving me room to peel down her pants.

“Doesn’t matter, I still love it,” I say pressing a kiss to it. It’s slightly hard just below her belly button, slightly rounded.

“I think I have a new kink unlocked,” Brett says, watching me do this to Rory. “Yep, definitely. Didn’t think I had sexual interest in pregnant women, but all I can think about is bending you over and shoving myself inside of you. We put a baby in there, that’s making my dick really, *really* hard.”

“You’re such a horn dog Brett.”

“With you? Always.”



Brett

I get the shower going, stripping as I wait for the water to heat up. Rory's family home is charming, and if I hadn't long since apologized for being a complete bag of dicks to her when we first met, seeing her humble beginnings would have been a dose of reality.

I can't remember how it felt to be so angry, to hate connectors so thoroughly that I bitched one out in front of a restaurant full of people. I don't deserve this fucking woman.

"I love this house, Rory-girl. Thinking that fancy one your sugar daddies bought you needs to feel like this someday."

She blinks at me, her lashes flickering. "Huh?"

“Water’s good, get her in here, man,” Caden commands.

“I don’t know if I can...you know...with my family right down the hall,” she says so shyly that it’s completely out of character for her.

I smirk at her, ready for the challenge. “You’ll just have to stay really quiet then I guess, if you don’t want them knowing what we’re about to do to you.”

“No. You guys can’t be serious.”

“I don’t think they care, babes.” Caden is so relaxed, and it’s so nice having someone to help me get into her pants. Okay, she’s no longer wearing pants, but it feels distasteful to straight up say I want in her pussy.

“Let’s just shower so we can figure out where everyone is sleeping tonight.”

I send her a wink. “If that’s what you want.”

Caden and I watch her climb into the bathtub, and all it takes is a look between us to know what our plan is here. I see the way she keeps eyeing our junk— she definitely wants it, she’s just stuck on the fact that she spent years living in this house with no one to sneak around with, so now that feels like the norm.

It’s a tight fit, but the three of us manage to get at least a few drops of water to land on us in a semi- regular pattern.

“I know what you’re doing,” Rory says with her eyes closed, running her hands through her hair to get it wet enough to wash.

“I was just reaching for the shampoo; not sure if you noticed, but there’s not exactly an abundance of space in here, Butterfly.”

She knows I grazed her tit on purpose, but sometimes, gaslighting is fun times for all.

Caden spins her so her back is facing me, and I get right to work on working the shampoo through her long brown hair.

“There would actually be a hell of a lot more space if you guys didn’t feel the need to shower with me. I’m pretty good at getting myself clean.”

“Tip your head back so Caden can get the suds out.”

She rolls her eyes at my micromanaging, but the small smile on her lips tells me she's loving us taking care of her like this. Now it's time to take care of her in other ways though.

I sink to my knees while her eyes are closed, and Caden helps me to position her on my shoulders. This puts my face cheeks deep into her glorious cunt, and I can't suppress the groan that rises when her pretty pink flesh makes contact with my mouth.

I know I caught her by surprise, but she's quick to start riding my face.

I want to praise her for letting me lick her so good, but my mouth is a bit busy. My hands are on her ass, trying to stabilize her while my tongue swipes through her slickening flesh.

I have my eyes closed to keep the water that's sluicing down from blinding me, but the image in my head of Rory sitting in the stream of water while I clean her with my mouth has me ready to burst. Caden keeps accidentally poking me in the chest with his dick, but I'm choosing to not make it a thing. It becomes *more* of a thing when he starts sliding it inside of Rory, pushing my face up so that my assigned area becomes her clit.

Didn't think this was going there, but as long as she gets off, I guess it's all good.

"Oy!" Someone yells from the door.

"Ignore that," Caden says as he continues to work his way in and out of our connector.

This angle isn't great for Caden's pelvis, since every few pumps he pulls out too far and hits me in the face when he misses his intended target. Eventually I have to remove Rory from my shoulders or risk getting a black eye in addition to the fat lip I can already feel swelling. That dude is seriously hard right now if his thrusts can cause that sort of damage.

RIP Rory's vagina.

Caden gives me a sheepish look as I glare at his hogging, but while he spins Rory around so he can fuck her into the wall, I get most of the hot water to myself, so I guess I get the consolation prize.

“Brett, it’s me, your favorite bondmate Donny! Hey, be a good boy and let me in, would you?”

Rory pulls away from Caden to look towards the door.

“Ignore him and I’m sure he’ll go away soon.”

“Have we been in here while? We should probably finish up.”

“We’ve got a bit of a situation out here Rory. Could really use your help!”

“Oh no, that sounds serious,” Rory says, clearly done with this elaborately planned three way I just now planned for us.

Rory starts rushing through the rest of her cleaning, rubbing soap haphazardly as I do my best to get her hair conditioned.

“He’s most likely just trying to cock block us, honestly.” How does she not see through Donny’s ruse?

“Stop, Brett. If he needs me, I need to get out there.”

She’s out of the shower and wrapped up in some ridiculously small towel as fast as possible, leaving Caden and I in the shower together, our hard dicks nearly kissing. “We need you too, though!” I say, pulling the curtain back to see what Donny needs.

“Suckers!” he yells, pulling Rory into the hall as he closes the door on her laughter.

“Called it. That little shit.”

Caden laughs as he starts soaping up his body. “That was actually pretty good.”

I grumble as he passes me the soap. “He probably sensed her arousal through their freaky connector bond and came running to intercept her.”

“Hey, can you get my back?” Caden asks.

He spins around and I work some soap lather into his skin. “You use lotion? Your skin is so soft.”

“Nah, man. Here, turn around, I’ll get yours.”

It doesn’t occur to me that this situation is weird until Bennett pulls back the curtain and starts cracking up.

“Do you mind?” I ask, hunching my shoulders as Caden works out a knot at the top of my spine.

“Not at all,” Bennett replies. “You two are pretty gosh darn cute. Did you get a chance to wash each other’s balls yet, or were you waiting for the lighting to be just right?”

“Rory *was* here, Donny just stole her,” Caden explains.

“Fascinating. Hey, while you two are busy in here, we’ve got her bedroom set up for a slumber party, and they’re likely taking turns seeing who can lick her the best by now; but if you two are enjoying your co-shower, I’ll stop interrupting.”

Caden shuts the water off, his eyes round and excited. “I love that game!”



Jameson

“Holy fuck, does this guy not need oxygen to survive? I swear he’s been buried in there going on five minutes.”

I’ll never tell them that I’ve perfected the art of circular breathing, because then they wouldn’t be nearly as impressed with me.

What has me choking though is when someone sucks me into their mouth, ready to play dirty to get me to lose this game. I sit up as Rory slides down my torso, putting her ass right in Holden’s smug face, who flips her over in a really fucking smooth move and starts eating her out while she’s laying on top of me. Her head falls against my chest, her damp hair trailing

over my sides, but I can't be too upset, because her chest is now at the perfect place for me to grope it.

"Hey thanks man. This is great."

Holden's eyebrows raise, and the squelching sounds emitting from Rory's sex as Holden works her has me ready to start exploding. Nope, can't wait anymore.

I tip Rory's pelvis so I can slide my way inside of her, groaning at how tightly she's gripping me. This of course doesn't slow down Holden in the slightest, but it does spur Rory on to the point where she's now screaming and shuddering, meaning Holden and I just collectively won this round of hot Rory. It's like hot potato, but better, because we get to touch her pussy.

"This is fucked up," Brett says as him and Caden finally make it into the room.

"What took you so long?" Holden asks from between Rory's thighs. *Gods* he looks good down there.

"We were having a perfectly polite three-way with Rory in the shower, when you dickheads came and stole her."

"Finders keepers," I say, thrusting up into her again.

"Whatever. I get dibs next. Caden stole her from me, and then you stole her from him. It's definitely my turn next."

"So...whiney," Rory huffs out.

"Excuse me?" Brett demands, stalking closer.

"She's a bit busy right now," I inform him. "Holden, let's bring her home." I can feel his chin digging into me as I thrust in and out of her, and whatever he does to her has her squeezing me to death and her ankles hooking around Holden as she digs into his back. The three of us are pressed together so tightly. I didn't stand a chance before Holden slipped a finger inside of me, so all that does is set me off good.

"Hang tight, Beautiful. Wreck yourself on me." I slam her hips onto me hard enough to be a punishment, gripping her sides as I listen to the beautiful sounds of her screams. Holden is working some voodoo magic on the bit of her he's still got to himself, making her whole frame shake on top of me as I force

my climax into her. I can feel the weight of both Rory and Holden leaning on me as the pleasure ebbs and flows, making my vision spotty. Holden pulls himself from my body, but all it does is make me want more from him.

It takes me a minute to find my voice again, and I'm almost irritated how well they work together. "Yeah, this arrangement is fucking dangerous."

Holden laughs as he pushes himself to a plank on top of me and Rory, kissing her, then me. "It's pretty great, huh?"

"Excuse me," Brett says with a snarl, wedging his way in between all of us so he can take Rory. She drips all over me as she goes, but it doesn't faze me.

"You think you got another round in you?" Holden asks, kissing my neck. I tilt my head to watch our connector, who is currently bent over the bed as Brett fucks into her from behind. She's clawing at the blankets and screaming into them, trying her best to muffle the voice that's way too loud to not be heard everywhere in the house. I won't tell her that, though.

"Ooh, are we getting a demonstration?" Donny asks with glee. I flip him off, but I have to look up when I hear a crunching sound. "Where the hell did you get popcorn? And why are you eating it now?"

"Holden just said it was showtime. This is my showtime snack. Why wouldn't I be eating it now?"

Holden hangs his head, his shoulders tense. We're not really exhibitionists, and just being back together is still pretty new, so I don't know how comfortable he is like this. But still, it's going to have to happen sometime.

"No, don't look at him, look at me," Holden whispers, grabbing my jaw. "I'm still really fucking hard from all that," he says as he thrusts his hips, putting his length right between my cheeks. "And you feel hot and perfect. My other toy got snatched away from me, so are you gonna spread these legs for me or what, baby?"

"Fuck, I might be bi too," Donny says in response to Holden's dirty talk. Charlie smacks him across the back of the head, but Holden deserves all of my attention right now.

“You and me,” I whisper back, choosing to ignore everything around us. The more I kiss him, the easier it is to forget there’s a room full of people that may or may not be watching. The longer I feel his tongue tangling with mine, the easier it is to let my hands feel the skin covering his body, to explore it again, to enjoy it. Something cold hits my hips, and then I feel a hand pat my shoulder before the body it’s attached to walks off. I reached down blindly, looking for the lube I know will be there.

As eager as he is, Holden is ready to plunge inside of me already, but I know I’ll regret it tomorrow if I don’t take the time to at least prep a little bit. I’m not exactly used to taking them anymore; I don’t know if it’s unusual or not, but none of us have any set roles when we’re in the group. It’s really whoever’s feeling like taking control. All of us have taken and given when it comes to the four of us.

I’m able to flip the cap off the lube off so I can get my fingers soaked. I reach underneath and work my fingers inside of myself, using my finger to gently stretch my hole. The fingers that aren’t engaged are trying to grip onto Holden, the lube making them slippery. A shudder runs through him, and my blood heats and thickens in my veins as my cock hardens again. I’m able to work a second in and stretch the skin a bit, but I fear that Holden can’t hold off much longer judging by the intense way he’s staring at my fingers as he grips himself. I remove my fingers, because him coming on top of me would ruin all the fun that I’m imagining in my head. I guide him to my entrance while doing my best to relax.

The burn hits me hard, and then almost searing pain, but the kisses he dusts across my chest and the way his arms are shaking as he notches himself inside of me makes it worth it. “You’re doing so good Jameson,” he praises. “Gods you feel good. Hold your knees, I want to see myself working into your body.”

Completely lost to the haze now, he stills. My hands wrap around the back of my knees, spreading my thick thighs as much as I can. I’m completely bare to him, completely vulnerable, but I know I’m in a safe space.

“I’m gonna push further in right now, okay? Tell me if I need to stop.”

“Don’t you dare stop, you’re almost to the good part,” I warn him.

The tiny little thrusts he does in the new position helps me to relax further, and he slips inside of me until it finally starts to feel good. It still takes a good while for him to get all the way in, but then he’s hitting my prostate, so it doesn’t even matter. I’m a big fucking slut for him right now, and I don’t care who sees it. When he makes me feel this good, I’m completely shameless.

“That’s it, that’s fucking *it* baby.”

“Fuck!” I call out, my cock throbbing now. “Harder Holden, I can take it.”

“Going once,” he warns, “going twice...”

“Go! Go!” and that sets him off. He starts slamming into me, riding me, and I’m clenching and riding every wave of pleasure he gives me. Every pass over my prostate has my back arching more and more, so when he reaches forward to grab my cock I’m done for. I come all over myself as he comes inside of me, filling me up with the good stuff. The high lasts a little bit longer until he withdraws, kissing me and helping me up. There’s a pile of washcloths somebody gathered before this whole sex fest started, so we take advantage of those as we work the numbness from incredible sex out of our bodies. I’m so thankful for whoever had the forethought to get those cloths, because there’s no way in hell I’m gonna be walking down the hallway in Rory’s childhood home naked, with all kinds of unmentionable body fluids on me.

Once we’re able to throw on clothes and sneak into the bathroom we clean up properly, the shower further proof that we belong together. I stand and hold him as the water washes away the result of our physical relationship, letting myself revel in the differences between his body and Rory’s. He’s obviously taller and bigger, but his muscles feel so good against my own.

“Found you,” he says into my neck.

“You did. Promise me we won’t ever let this fall to the wayside again. That the four of us won’t ever get that distant again. I’m only now beginning to realize how painful that was.”

“Might have to take a few more cocks to get more promises from the other guys,” he jokes, “but you’ve got my promise. Rory is special, and I love that I don’t have to explain that to you, but you’re special too. Believe that.”

So I do. I believe it all the way down the hall as we slip back into Rory’s room, I believe it while I sit next to Ari and twine our fingers together, and I believe it as Rory contorts herself into strange positions and gets absolutely inundated with semen.

“Please tell me you’ve thought far enough ahead to soundproof the master bedroom at the new place,” Rory wheezes out as she crawls to me and collapses into the cradle of my legs. Charlie is wiping her down, shoving his own cum back inside of her even though she’s already knocked up. He looks up at me and lays down next to her, a slight sheen of sweat on his chest proof that he just had a hell of a cardio workout.

“It’s soundproofed,” I confirm.

I stroke Rory’s hair, enjoying this moment of calm.

“That’s good, because you guys are all screamers.”

I snort, shaking my head at her. “Oh *we* are? What was it you were just screaming into the pillow? *Fuck me harder? Give me that dick? Fill me up?*”

“Pretty sure I’ve got magic powers because every single one of those wishes was just granted.”

There’s a bright flash, and instinctively, I think we all look toward Donny, who is standing there with his phone out.

“Donny! No!”

He wags a finger at Rory. “Yes. This is our first group orgy; it needs to be documented.”

“For what purpose?”

He grins evilly. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“I would! That’s why I asked!”

They stare at each other for a second but neither one breaks. “What were we talking about?” he says with his erect dick in his hand.

“You were...where did you put your phone?”

“You know Rory,” he says, dropping his voice down an octave and crawling towards her on the ground. “Do you remember how amazing it felt when you let me shove this knot inside of you?”

I look down at Rory who just looks confused by Donny’s abrupt subject change and judging by the groans sounding from around the room, she’s not the only one.

“Was that supposed to turn me on?” She asks in a sultry growl.

Then Bennett is there, scooping up Rory before Donny can. He says something to her as he carries her to the bed, and I don’t even have to ask for him to put her in the spot I can witness where everything happens from, I’m just lucky. He’s looking at her in that way we all do, making sure she knows how precious she is as he kisses her. He settles her on his lap, wrapping her legs around him.

Donny has his eyes narrowed at them, but Bennett shoots him an ‘I got your back type of look’ as he turns around. My luck takes a nosedive then as Donny climbs on the bed, ass facing me. Yeah, I don’t need to see that.

There are blankets and pillows all over the room, and I’m sure my aging body will hate me in the morning for sleeping on the ground, but it’s hard to be upset when I’m laying down next to the guys that have been with me through every mile point in my life, and the second love of my life is spread out on the bed and being knotted by one of her mates.

Her moans and whimpers alone are enough of a soundtrack to ease me into sleep, and I know that tomorrow everything will change, so we need to sleep while we can.



Rory

It feels like getting to the hospital is too easy, and I find myself looking around like that bitch Bernadette is going to spring out from behind a corner and try and nab my baby again. Maybe that's a tad unrealistic, but when we make it to the pediatric wing and I get to put that sweet little baby in my arms again, all my tension disappears.

I listen as the nurses talk about how Everly did overnight, making sure I understand everything about her feeding and changing charts, because the bevy of nurses is only going to be available for a short while longer.

The panic sets in a little when they tell me Everly can be discharged in the afternoon as long as nothing changes, and I

think that's when it becomes real.

Some of my brothers got up early to show me the car seat they picked up for Everly, even made sure I knew how to install it properly in the rental car that Ari arranged for.

"Why don't you sit down, love? Come here, I want a picture of my girls." I follow Felix and smile for the camera, but I can't stop looking at all of Everly's features.

"Sit by us, would you?" I want to make sure he doesn't try to find something to take his attention away from me.

Wedged into that armchair with Felix, our baby cradled against us, the journey to get here doesn't matter. There are things that I should be worried about to some degree, but how can I be worried about anything when she's in my arms?

Caden crouches down in front of us, placing a soft kiss on Everly's forehead.

"This still doesn't seem fair that Christine doesn't get to be here for this, but I'm sure she's watching over her already wherever she is." I *have* to believe that, because otherwise I don't know how to feel about this situation.

"So weird that Everly wasn't her own person just twenty-four hours ago. It feels like this little girl has always existed. You still think we can do this with a second one? They're going to be so close in age." I know Caden isn't actually doubting us handling it, but saying things out loud sometimes helps us sort out the intrusive thoughts.

"Being close in age can be cool though," Felix adds. "I hope they'll be close like me and Beau. How are you feeling, by the way, after last night?" He wags his eyebrow at me, but it felt too good, so I don't even have it in me to blush.

I do, however, need to adjust the way I'm sitting as I'm hit with a twinge of discomfort in my pelvis from Donny's absurd dick. "It was a lot, but we needed that," I say softly so the nurses don't overhear.

"It will be interesting figuring out everyone's schedules once we get settled in the house. I'm assuming most or all of us will

be working eventually. That will be weird after all this time together.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Ari says, sneaking up behind me.

“It’s on my mind, can’t promise I won’t worry about it, but I can promise I won’t do it prematurely. I just want to enjoy this time right now; it feels like the first time we’ve had peace in a long time.”

There’s more there that’s not being said, giving me the feeling that the guys have all talked about the work situation without me, but I’m doing this thing where I trust in my mates to take care of themselves and let me know when my input is needed. It’s working pretty good so far. Honestly, since I completed the bond I’ve just felt more settled in general, and there’s a lot less pressure to do certain things or dig my feet into controversial topics. I feel way less neurotic around the guys and the future doesn’t feel as scary as it used to.

Because some of my mates are stupidly rich, they arrange for a private room for Everly so that we’re not tripping over each other trying to stay out of the way of nurses and other parents moving in and out of the ward. I’ve also stopped fighting them on spending money because I have no idea what their situation really is, but as they keep reminding me, I guess it’s mine too. I won’t be dumb and harp on them if they keep telling me that they’re not going to run out any time soon.

So it goes that we get to spend the day with Everly, even if it is in a hospital. We get lunch in shifts, and I get to fall for these guys even harder watching them each carve out time to hold our daughter.

Before I know what’s happening it’s time for us to leave the hospital behind. Sitting in the car next to Everly is another core memory as we watch the hospital fade behind us. It was her first home. Now she’s ours, and there’s only a hundred million things out here that could hurt her. Fuck.

“Maybe we should bring her back, just in case she needs something—”

“Look at her,” Holden says, letting Everly wrap a tiny hand around his finger. “She’s good, Rory. I know it’s scary, but

we're going to figure it out. I know you've read all the books and taken online courses about newborns, just trust in yourself. You've got this; and in case you don't, one of us will. And if we don't we'll figure it out one way or another."

"If things go badly then I'm blaming you."

He cracks a smile and I relax a little bit more. I alternate between watching her and looking out the window, watching the buildings I've grown up around welcome us all back home.

Laney and all my brothers are there in the driveway when we pull up, because apparently none of them work anymore. Then I get to watch in a bit of removed happiness as they all get to meet their niece.

Beau sneaks in while Everly is thusly entertained inside, pulling me back through the house until we're outside. I link my hand with his and pull him toward the barn, remembering the day I was out here before I left for my walk. I remember this time to avoid the spider's nest that's somehow still in the same place, not needing to embarrass myself again.

"You looked like you needed a little air."

I squeeze his hand and lead him around the back until it's just knee-high grass and the overshadowing of pine trees under a quickly darkening sky. "Does that make me a bad mom already, that I don't need to be next to her every second? That I'm relieved that she has so many parents and family members to help care for her?"

It feels scary to say these things out loud, but I know that Beau won't think badly of me for saying it.

"I think as long as you love her and try your best, that you're a great mom. We're all new to this, and that's why this is going to be so nice for us, because when one of us needs space there will always be someone else begging for a turn. Just be gracious with yourself because you have to live with the thoughts in your head."

I pull him down and lay in the grass, watching the sky change colors. "I love you."

He leans over me and kisses me, then lays beside me. “Love you too.”

The silence only lasts until I’m reminiscing about meeting Beau, feeling sentimental over everything that feels like it’s wrapping up in my life. Then I can’t help giggling. The giggle turns into laughter, and then I’m burying my face into a bewildered Beau, thinking about that party where I kissed him and told him to shut up.

“Dare I ask?”

“Just thinking about the party I stole you from, where you ran out with me so fast that you forgot to tell your date you were no longer single.”

His face breaks into a grin as well, his laugh as amused as mine. “Fuck, that poor girl. “

“Couldn’t have been too serious, you jumped ship pretty damn fast.”

He starts digging his fingers into my sides. “You want to talk about commitment? Seriously? I’ll take this moment to remind you that you were really bossy, and that you wouldn’t let me get a damn word in edgewise when I was trying to tell you I wasn’t my stupid brother.”

The tickling is absurd, but he knows it’s not my favorite, so he decides to keep his body parts and end it fairly quickly.

“Oh goddess, what a meet story. I guess I should have clued in faster that you weren’t him, because you have such different personalities, but I was so damn nervous to get everything out that I had been practicing, that it didn’t even matter what you were going to say. I was convinced you were going to push me away or something. I was terrified!”

He pulls me close, wrapping his arms around me as my head falls onto his shoulder. I feel his mouth kissing the top of my head, and it’s so nice to feel safe and content here, back home where everything started.

It’s not long before Brett wanders out and finds us, sitting in such a way to pull Beau’s head into his lap letting mine fall onto his thigh. “That baby is way too fucking cute. Thank goddess

she can't talk yet; I don't think I'd be able to say no to anything."

I reach up and feel the stubble on his face. "I always knew you were soft and squishy inside, Brett. No matter how much you stomp about, you are a complete marshmallow inside."

"Take that back."

"Nope. You're my marshmallow."

"Yeah, well...whatever. I still hate puppies."

Beau and I both start laughing, because it's just such a stupid thing to say, and we both know he's full of shit anyway.

"We all doing a slumber party again tonight?" Beau asks, reaching down to link our hands up.

"We need to figure out this lodging I suppose, huh? I just don't want to head over to Historical District and then have to turn right around when Laney goes into labor."

There's too much silence, so I twist to look at the guys who are doing that stupid 'talking about me without talking about me behind my back' thing. "What?"

"They made me," Brett admits way too quickly, like he's... scared of me or something. I'm not even scary. What a crock.

"For fuck's sake. What now?"

"They're old, their bodies can't handle the floor. That's their excuse."

I get up and start stalking toward the house, ready to lash out at one of my older mates, but I can't muster up a single word of anger when I see how crowded the living room is, with baby stuff already somehow strewn about and mine and Laney's mates literally falling over each other trying to find stuff.

Charlie sees me, and while I stand there with my hands on my hips, I already know I'm going to be okay with whatever they want to do. This is impractical.

"Okay, where are we going?"

Caden snorts. "No way. That was too easy. How did Brett talk you into it that fast?"

“He didn’t. Seeing you all tangled up here did. Sorry Laney, we appreciate your hospitality, but we have a lot of people.” I start chewing on my thumb, getting in my head about inconveniencing them all over my stubbornness to want to be in my familiar home.

She rolls her eyes. “It’s your home too, Rory. Always.”

Charlie tosses me his phone and It’s a listing for a rental home twenty minutes away. My jaw drops. “This isn’t even a house though. This is a fucking *mansion*.”

“It’s temporary, but we want you settled and comfortable, and we all need good sleep if we’re going to get this parenting thing figured out.”

“What about all the baby stuff?”

Laney is quick to reassure me, but maybe she’s also anxiously nesting and wanting her house back and will sign up for whatever achieves that. Fair. “We just had a pack and play ready because we knew Everly wouldn’t be here forever. You can take it with you and whatever else you need. The guys have already gotten everything else ordered for your new place, apparently. Turns out my guys can keep secrets, too.”

“Oh. I thought that—”

“Don’t worry about it, Rors,” Ben says. “We worked it out a while ago, ask questions later. We’ve got pizza coming, and then you can all go settle in with your little one.”

It’s a better solution, it really is, but...I feel sad not knowing if I’ll ever actually get to spend much time in my childhood home again. I look around the walls and will myself not to cry, not to feel like I’ve outgrown it. It’s served me so well, and there are so many damn memories here, and it feels stupid to cry over that, so I’m not going to. I’m going to look to the future and soak up new memories.

“Here, she’ll make you feel better.”

I accept the soft, warm baby from Jameson and settle onto the couch next to Ben, soaking up the feeling of being around family. So much has changed, but some things never will. No matter what size my family is or who it consists of, I’m always

going to have someone that's got my back, someone that cares about me.

I lay my head on Ben's shoulder, breathing easy. It's not that I don't have a good relationship with Laney's other mates, but Ben was mine before them, and they've all got their own siblings and parents. Ben is all mine.



Ari

It feels like such a small thing to support this group financially, but it makes me feel needed. We could have roughed it at Rory's house if we needed to, but I gambled on the fact that she'd be more comfortable with enough space to spread out, and it looks like I'm getting the payout.

This rental is a bit ostentatious, but it will serve the purpose of housing us until we can get to the new place. I'm just catching up on work emails, trying to make sure that the company isn't completely falling apart while all four of us have been with Rory, but we're fortunate to have good employees that can carry the torch when we need them to.

Some of us are going to have to start going into the office soon in rotations, but we're working on phasing out of spending all our time in the office so we can be with the family.

We don't care about growing the business anymore, just about keeping it stable. We've taken Grace Technology from nothing when we were begging for contracts and working ridiculous hours, to the point where we have to turn down security gigs, because we're booked solid.

We're at the point now where we don't have to be so hands-on with everything, which makes Rory's timing in our lives impeccable—almost like the goddess herself planned it. We've spent all these years busting our asses, and now we can enjoy life and know that our family will always be provided for, no matter what needs may arise.

We even have the capability to instill the rest of our new bondmates in positions at the company, getting those that are interested involved in a career. Honestly, none of them would have to work ever again with the wealth that we've built, but they all have dreams and aspirations and feel like they want to contribute to the family funds, so jobs it is.

I look up when the door opens softly, immediately shutting the laptop and putting it on the side table when Rory walks in. I see the baby monitor in her hand, and I love seeing this new mom mode activated, it's cute as hell.

“Want a roommate?”

Everyone was exhausted after last night's debauchery and poor sleeping situation, so once we got the baby stuff situated, everyone pretty much found a bed they wanted and kissed Rory goodnight. We're not dumb, we know that she runs this show. She's not going to want to sleep in a big sweaty man pile every night, and we know that when she does need that, she'll let us know.

I pull back the fluffy comforter, but Rory's eyeing the bed with a skeptical brow. “Holy fuck. Is this a round bed? I thought those only existed in pornos. Please don't tell me it vibrates.”

I laugh. “Not that I'm aware of.”

“Fuck that wicked knot that I can’t say no to. Donny fucking wrecked me last night.” She is walking a little funny now that I think about it.

“I could offer you a massage?”

She cuts me a look that would make a less determined man quit.

“I’ve heard glowing recommendations about my tongue...”

Another look that tells me she misunderstood my bragging.

“From you, and the way you...scream. I mean to say...”

“Fuck this bed is comfortable,” she says instead of picking apart my statements.

Bedtime is one my favorite times of the day with Rory, because it always feels so intimate, getting into bed after we’ve readied ourselves for sleep, spending just a little more time talking or touching or just existing near each other. It feels important to reconnect like this right before sleeping.

“Say ‘ah’.”

Her eyes are closed, so it takes me a minute to understand what she wants, but then her hand is reaching for my head and shoving it under the blankets. Her fingers tug at the roots of my graying hair, securely fastening my head to her palm as she shoves me between her legs.

Yesss.

I feel Rory arrange the blanket above me, hear her click off the lamp, and I’ve got a face full of wet pussy to entertain myself with.

I take my time on her, feasting properly, going at the pace that will tell her this is all for her enjoyment, and not because I’m warming her up for more.

My ex-wife hated this act, always felt it was demeaning, and it made her uncomfortable, so being with someone that’s as enthusiastic as I am is incredible.

“Fuck, Ari. I’m feeling better already.”

I swirl the tip of my tongue around her clit, sucking slightly before dipping lower and lapping at her entrance. “Then I’ll just keep going, baby.”

I get lost in it, not caring about anything other than how it feels to have her flesh parted and covering my face, to be tasting the most intimate parts of her. This here, this I love.

The door slams suddenly and someone else enters the room with us, but I’m too busy to care.

“Shh!” whoever’s there hisses.

“I didn’t even say anythi—FUCK! Gods, Ari, right there. Don’t change a fucking thing.”

The queen commands, and I must obey.

I keep up the rhythm I’ve set, waiting for her to pull my face tighter against her body and use me, nearly suffocating as her thighs wrap around the back of my head as she comes completely undone, writhing and screaming until she isn’t.

I pull off the white cotton shirt I was planning on wearing to bed and use it instead to wipe of my drenched face, then clean up Rory while I’m at it before tossing it off to the side. When I make my way back up to Rory, she’s snuggled up into Charlie, who is glaring at the door.

“Do we need to know?” I ask, settling behind Rory and pulling her into me.

“That fucker. Where does he get the fucking audacity?”

“Go to sleep Charlie, it will be better tomorrow, I promise.”

I squeeze Rory’s hip. “You’re not even mildly curious about what happened?”

“Nope!” she says, shoving her ass into my hard on. She just seems to take joy from feeling me hard for her.

I bury the groan along with the need to thrust into her when she gets a seemingly great idea. “Fine, Charlie. You can talk about it if you take care of a problem that I seem unable to at this point.”

Charlie’s face perks up, and I’m wondering where she’s going with this.

He sits up a bit more, switching on the side lamp again. The way he looks leaning over her, so predatory, has my dick ready to bust out of my pants and find something to sink into.

“Expand on that,” he says.

“You first,” Rory challenges.

“I’m sorry, but all of your mates are children. I went to get some water before bed...” he stares off for a minute and then shudders.

“Okay, I’m finding myself becoming more interested,” Rory says as she sits up.

“They were all lined up in the kitchen, no shirts on, comparing asses. Sickos. But that’s not even the worst of it. Have you SEEN Donny’s tattoos? They’re SO FUCKING CREEPY. He has my FACE, Rory, ON HIS ASS. WHY IS MY FACE ON HIS ASS?”

Rory fucking loses it, laughing and laughing until she’s complaining about peeing the bed and fleeing to the bathroom.

“What?” I ask, because I just don’t think my brain wants to accept what he just said.

“I knew he had the other guys tattooed on his back, Brett apparently twice somewhere, and we all know about Rory’s face on Donny’s dick, but at some point he slipped out over the past few weeks and added to the collection. He’s been keeping them from us somehow. You, me, and Holden are all on his back now, right next to the others. The thing is though, his back was ‘prime real estate’ or some shit, so instead of putting our faces on a respectable swatch of skin, he PUT US BASICALLY IN HIS ASS CRACK. Then he got genuinely upset when I didn’t want to sign it and chased me up the stairs with a permanent marker.

“You better fucking believe that I used that sweet sleeping baby as an excuse for him to calm the hell down, but then I snuck in here so he would just fuck off. I don’t know if I can ever look at myself the same way again after seeing my face, TONGUE OUT, mind you, trying to lick Donny’s ass crack.”

Rory is still howling with laughter as the toilet flushes and the sink runs, and then she comes out and has to dig out new

panties.

“You actually peed your pants?” I laugh, amused.

“Fuck you. I’m pregnant, and that shit’s hilarious.”

I shake my head. Yikes.

“Thank you. I feel better,” Charlie says, fluffing the pillow he’s lying on. Apparently sharing his horrors with us has miraculously cured him. “What problem did you need fixing, my sweet mate?”

“Sweet, huh? You sure are laying it on thick.”

“No, that was Ari, five minutes ago.” He holds his fist out for a bump. “Good work, brother. That sounded almost real.”

Rory and I both stare at him open jawed. “What?! I would never fake that!”

“What she said, I fucking got her there. The evidence is all over that shirt in the corner.”

Charlie smirks. “Okay.”

Rory narrows her eyes at him and practically stomps over. “Are you challenging me?”

Charlie grabs her hand and kisses the top of it, then snuggles up on his side and closes his eyes. “No I said ‘okay’. As in ‘okay, I believe you’.” But he says it with a smirk, a straight-out challenge.

Rory’s eyes meet mine and I read so many things in them.

“I’ll be right back,” she says as she backs out of the room.

I don’t trust that walk she does out the door. Not one bit; but it seems that Charlie is even *more* concerned, because he starts up some of his nervous ticks. Heh. I know her wrath isn’t going to be focused on me, so I guess I’m not as worried as Charlie is.

Wherever she goes, she’s quiet about it. There are stirrings from the baby monitor, but I can already hear the guys sleeping with the pack and play in their room tending to Everly. Shifts for the win.

“I took that too far, didn’t I? Damnit. I took it too far. Should I be worried?”

“Probably.”

Eventually Rory comes back in with her hands behind her back and an evil smile on her face. “Ari, I’m going to need your assistance with something. Charlie, I have a surprise for you. Be a sweetheart and sit up against the headboard, would you? Oh, and close your eyes. This will be so much better if you can’t anticipate all the good things that are about to happen to you.”

“I think I’m regretting my big mouth,” he mumbles before shutting his eyes.

I try so damn hard not to laugh, but ultimately fail, when Rory produces some rope she found who knows where in this house. It’s the way she stares at Charlie as she stalks toward the bed, tossing the rope across his chest to me so I can help her tie him to the headboard. I’m fucking gone for this woman.

Immediately Charlie is fighting it, which is when Rory straddles him and pins him down. “Nuh-uh-uh... you’re going to stay here and take what you deserve.”

Charlie says nothing. I keep working until she’s satisfied that he’s more or less tied down well enough.

She looks over her work with glee, clapping her hands and pulling down his pants that he was planning on sleeping in.

“Rory...” he starts, “be careful what you’re about to do. You don’t want to get in over your head.”

“I think getting in over my head is *exactly* what I mean to do, dear Charlie.”

Ooh. Them’s fighting words.

“Ari,” she says, looking at me, “how do you feel about getting your dick sucked? Because Charlie’s mouth looks far too empty. You know I think you should just stand over him and straddle him and take what you want.”

“Is this necessary?” Charlie bites out. He’s squirming, but I know he’s ready for this. He’s so turned on right now.

Rory manipulates me into position, but before anything else happens she leans forward and presses some kisses on Charlie’s neck. She nibbles on his ear a little bit, breathing heavy against

his skin; then she leans in and whispers, “Shut the fuck up and take that dick like a good boy.”

Rory smacks my ass and propels me forward, and then I kind of have to do a weird semi-squat position to get the angle right, using the wall for leverage, but hell if it doesn't feel fucking amazing.

“Good call baby,” I manage to get out. “This is helping so much.” Charlie's eager to get ahold of me, his neck straining to reach more of me when I pull too far out. His warmth encapsulates me, and then he's suctioning me, dragging his tongue right over the tip, making my knees wobbly.

“There's enough room here to spread these legs, isn't there Ari? I won't mention who—”

“Donny,” I immediately say. “It was Donny, wasn't it?” I have no idea where Rory was going with that sentence, but when we're in a situation like this, Donny is almost always the answer.

Rory giggles and then continues. “Okay. When *Donny*, yes, found out that you guys are all into each other, he sort of... bought me a gift. Wasn't sure if it was supposed to be a joke or not, and I wasn't sure if I'd ever want to use it, but now I'm thinking I do. I think our boy here needs to be taught a lesson. What do you think, Ari?”

Rory digs through one of the bags that got delivered from the connector center, and I'm blocking Charlie's view, but when Rory pulls out a strap on, I lose my ever-loving mind. I find myself slamming into the back of Charlie's throat, feeling him gag around me. I pull out before he actually loses it, but I start riding his face as I watch her play with it in her hands for a second, pulling out lube next. It's got a strange shape to it, and it takes me a minute to understand where everything goes. But then it's sliding into her body, and it makes so much sense.

One end hooks inside of Rory, while the outside vibrates against her clit, and then the other end will go into Charlie, so that they both get to feel something at the same time. Her head falls back as she turns on the vibration, going so far as to put the remote for it in my hand. What a fucking gift.

“I’ll just get you warmed up there hot cheeks,” she says. She leans over to take him into her mouth, and I watch like I’m hypnotized as two of her also lubed-up fingers slowly tease Charlie’s ass, and I’m pretty sure he has no idea what’s coming. He jolts at her touch, knees falling wider open as he melts beneath me. There are some garbled words coming out around my own cock, not sure which ones exactly, but it’s likely something along the lines of how good Rory’s fingers feel.

I’m getting about a million different fantasies stacking up in my head as she works him, his hips thrusting towards her.

With the first press of the dildo against Charlie, his fingers start digging into me, cutting into my hips. We left his hands enough room to move slightly, but where he’s touching me is the only spot he can reach, the only place he can take his overwhelm out on me. Of course, this little bit of pain in addition to what he’s doing with his mouth, and the blissed-out expression on Rory’s face, all add up to me not being sure how long I can actually last.

“Fuck, Rory, do you have to be so goddess damned sexy? So fucking wild? Where the hell did you learn to do shit like this? You’ve had that for how long now, and you didn’t think you’d use it? Are you crazy? Damn. That’s the hottest thing I’ve ever *seen*.” I don’t even know if my words make sense or not, but they’re an accurate reflection of what’s happening in my head.

Her eyes flutter open and catch mine, then one hand reaches forward to land on top of where Charlie is digging into me. I feel her fingernails digging my side right above his, and the other hand reaches down to start stroking Charlie.

“There we go... it’s right...there!” Charlie’s legs are shaking at this point, his voice getting more and more frantic as she figures out just how to pound into him at a good rhythm. If all the thrusting is making her tired, she doesn’t show it. She’s completely lost to her actions.

I’m sure I’ll have a crick in my neck later from looking back at her so much, but her breasts bounce with every thrust, and my mouth is watering, wanting to pull those pretty little nipples into it.

I play with the remote in my hand, not quite knowing what the buttons do, but loving the reactions I get when I press them. She settles into a good rhythm with her hand on my hip, almost clumsily fucking Charlie now, then she screams, long and loud. Charlie erupts, marking all three of us, but Rory just keeps moving. I fall over with them, coming down the back of Charlie's throat with a shout.

Rory hand starts painting in the release dripping all over Charlie, but she still moves. She looks wrecked, but still evil. So breathy, so wrecked, but she still manages to sass. "I don't know if that looked real, do you Ari?"

I pull out of Charlie's mouth with a ragged inhale, completely falling to the bed like a limp pile of wet noodles. "Mine definitely was. But no, I think he needs more."

"Fuck!" Charlie finally yells out now that he has full faculty of his mouth again. "What the hell woman? My ass can't take any more... I'm sorry, okay? I was just trying to tease you a bit!"

"There we go," she exhales, falling over him. Rory pulls the toy from their bodies and tosses it onto the bed. "No wonder you guys are all stacked. That's really fucking hard work. *Gods.*"

Nobody speaks for a minute; we're all breathing too hard and running through the post-sex aftershocks.

"Three things," Rory says, holding up her fingers. "One, we should probably shower. Yeah, definitely. Two, we're gonna need new sheets. Three, can I sleep yet? Fuck. You guys kept me up all night."

I look around at the mess we made and laugh a little. This woman is going to keep me so damn young.



Rory

Sleep comes hard and fast after we finally get everything clean, the relief of really good sex doing wonders to relax us all into oblivion.

The smile on my face is starting to feel like it's becoming permanent, because no matter what shit we face during the day, one of my mates is always ready to pull me out of a funk and find a way to lift my mood. Or they're there to validate the hard feelings and hold me while I bleed out, using their bodies and words to staunch the flow.

Listening to the little noises Everly makes is yet another layer of comfort, even if it's a sound I'm not yet used to; just knowing

she's finally here, and that she's safe, makes my sleep a restful one.

In all of the nights that I've slept with my bonded mates, I've never been awoken by one of them dealing with past trauma. Most of them have been through stuff that would cause nightmares, but so far, nobody has had any.

It could be the bond between us getting stronger that's allowing Ari, Jameson, Charlie, and Holden to really show me their true selves, or it could just be a freak trigger that happened accidentally, but I'm pulled out of the deepest sleep I've been in in a long time to whimpers and shouts, sounding out the deepest pain I've ever heard expressed.

I don't know what's happening, not at first, but when I feel Ari stiffen behind me and yank me back, I understand that Charlie is having some sort of very realistic nightmare, and that it likely isn't the first time it's occurred.

Ari flips on a light behind him and tries to keep distance between me and Charlie, but that is my *mate*. It would be physically impossible for me to not try and soothe Charlie's pain, to not find a way to connect with him and show him that whatever picture is in his head isn't real.

"Be careful Rory, he's swinging. He'd never forgive himself if he hurt you or the baby."

I try to figure out how to reach Charlie without putting myself in danger, and my voice seems like the safest choice.

He's sobbing, and there are footsteps in the hall that tell me Charlie is waking up others, but they're likely just worried and want to check on him.

Ari gets out of bed to head them off, and I start singing a lullaby my mom used to sing to me when I had nightmares, a silly one she made up once about geese wearing poofy dresses and trousers while waltzing under the full moon. I'd nearly forgotten about it actually, but memories have an eerie way of resurfacing right when you need them the most.

Nothing about this song makes sense, and the melody is all over the place, but it's doing its job. Charlie is starting to become less frantic, and as I repeat the song a second time, his

arms relax. I'm able to reach forward and slowly curl one of my hands into his, and I use my fingernails to stroke soothing lines up and down as forearms, something I always enjoy when I'm feeling stressed.

He pulls me closer and starts kissing me automatically, gripping onto me and breathing me in. He's still shaking, and it hits me how different these shakes are than the ones we experienced earlier when we were in the middle of exploring each other's bodies.

"Rory?" he calls in a desperate voice.

"I'm here, I'm right here. I've got you." I hold him for a minute, letting him take what he needs.

What he needs though is to pull back and look at my face, to trace it with his fingers so he knows that I'm not making things up.

"You can't leave me, not like she did. You can't Rory, promise me."

"I promise."

We both know I can't actually promise that, but that's what he needs to hear right now, so that's what I'll give him.

"Sorry," he says, starting to calm down.

"Charlie don't ever apologize to me for what you've been through. Never."

"Can I tell you about her?"

"Anytime you need to, Charlie, that's what I'm here for. She's a part of you, and I accept that. I'll tell you that as many times as I need to until you understand that it doesn't come with any conditions."

"It's just... it was that day all over again. The day we lost her. Part of me knew it was a dream, knew what was happening when everything started, but I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop it, Rory, why couldn't I stop it?"

I keep holding on to him, squeezing, doing anything I can to nurture him. "You did everything you could by loving her, by

giving her a safe place in this world. Maybe that doesn't feel like it was enough, but it was for her, I promise you."

"I was supposed to meet her for lunch that day. She had a meeting, a consultation with a case down at the police station. All she had to do was go in and get a reading on somebody that they were questioning. That's it. It wasn't a violent case; it was a simple property dispute."

"What happened? I know the basics but walk me through it. Maybe going through what you went through that day will ease your mind. If you think it'll help, of course. If you want to talk about something else, anything else, then we'll do that. We can go get the baby and you can hold her, she's great at relieving what ails you."

Charlie looks like he wants to smile, but he's shaking his head. "I can't hold something that pure when my hands feel so dirty."

He's lost in thought for a minute, and then Ari is back in bed, curling up on a Charlie's other side. He holds him too, putting him between us. Ari's propped up on one arm, his hands supporting his head while the other hand reaches for Charlie's. Both of their hands intertwined is such an image. Thick fingers with short nails, hands that are so good at touching me, good at building things, but now they're a tool for comfort, a means of connection.

"I was just about to leave the office. Back then it was nowhere near the setup we have now, so we were still working a lot of hours. We are trying to push it farther, to make a stable income for everybody. We had some steady clients, but it was very much a labor of love. The building we were in was only a few blocks away from where Grace was gonna be at, so we were going to meet at a little sandwich shop between the two buildings.

"I only had to walk one block, Rory, that's it. All I had to do. But she never made it.

Every other time we've done that, met somewhere for lunch on our lunch breaks, she would always be there just a few minutes before me, no matter how early I got there." That thought gives him a better smile while he reminisces about this

quirk that Grace had. “It was kind of a game between us, who could beat the other person there. She always won though, and I have no idea how.

“I walked into the café that day, and she wasn’t there. There was a twist in my chest, and I walked right back out of the café, because I think I just knew. No, I *know* I did. I heard the sirens a second later, and then I ran towards the station, needing to know that she was safe.

“There were cops on foot everywhere, police cars coming from all directions, and the bodies, Rory; it’s sick, but I saw the first body on the ground, and I nearly tripped over it, but I didn’t even pay it any attention. All I could do was look at it, and confirm it wasn’t someone that belonged to me.

“Then another body came into sight, and another, and I heard gunshots, and I knew it must have been some sort of mass shooting incident with the way everything was going down.

“Even in death she was beautiful. She couldn’t just die on the sidewalk like everybody else. She had to do it in the only square of flowers around. There was this little garden that the city maintained, kind of in front of the police station, a little bit of nature within all the concrete, you know? Even though there was blood seeping out of her, and she was already gone, she looked like she was simply reaching for one of the blooms.

It took a second for the pain to hit me, the pain of the bond being severed flooding my chest. I’ve never experienced anything like that. It’s hard to shift your mindset from being about to see someone you love, to suddenly seeing them completely dead. Your brain doesn’t comprehend it, not right away. All I knew is that she lay there, on the patch of dirt and flowers, and that that was the last thing she felt against her skin.

“The images my brain was seeing was telling me that I hurt, that my world had just ended, but then there’s the pain from her bond as well, making everything a thousand times worse. It’s like a double heartbreak, and I couldn’t even move. I was paralyzed.”

“Did they catch the guy who did it?”

“He ran for a bit, but they got him. He wasn’t... he wasn’t even near the station on a summons. He wasn’t there under charges either. He had shown up because he had complaints about some city ordinance that had just been passed in his neighborhood. He was very upset. Clearly unhinged. He was there threatening the police to fix things, and that’s when the shooting started. They say he strolled right out of the police station and just started shooting. He wanted people to suffer because he couldn’t understand why he couldn’t get what he wanted.

“I know he was sick, and we studied every report about him that was released, and we know that he needed psychiatric help, but that doesn’t make the crime any easier to swallow.

“Grace just happened to cross his path; she had been called in, too. Grace wasn’t supposed to be there originally, and everything ended because all these terrible things lined up too well.”

I’m crying, my heart hurting so much for what these guys have experienced. I have no way of understanding how deep that pain would reach— it’s hard to imagine walking down the road to meet one of my mates only to find them dead, instead.

“I had to hold her. I had to pick her up and put her in my lap and smell her while I still could. She was still a tiny bit warm when I put her against my neck, her perfume she applied that morning still on her skin. Her fingernails were painted a pearly white color, and she had this bracelet on that we had given her on our first anniversary. I remember everything about that day. Every detail. I could probably sketch out what shapes the clouds were if I needed to. The only thing I can never do is understand why it had to happen.”

“I don’t know how to make this feel better for you Charlie, other than to say that you’re not alone, you are loved, and that the process you’re all going through to heal from this, it’s gonna be an ongoing one. I think some days will be easy and some days won’t be, but no matter what mood you wake up in, you’re mine, you understand?”

“You want to know something incredibly freaky?” Ari asks into the silence.

“I’m not sure, do I?”

“You know what I was doing that day, Rory? I don’t think I’ve ever put two and two together until right this moment, when I have the memory of Grace’s last day and you in the same place.”

“What were you doing that day?”

“I was at an Eagles’ meeting. They actually work with the government sometimes, since we have a lot of resources for connectors. This is such a weird detail for me to remember. Sometimes Eagles do welfare checks. If there’s a certain connector that’s underage, and we feel that they’re in a tenuous position, the Eagles will touch base with their family to make sure that the connectors are well cared for.

“Seriously, this is really weird. There was usually a handful in each territory that we had to look out for, but I specifically remember that meeting, and whoever was in charge of this was describing a young connector up in the Northwest Territory that we were tracking. He just got done telling us all she was a minor, being cared for by an older brother who was hardly even legally an adult, and he wanted somebody to drive a care package up there and check in on them.”

“What?” I’m completely thrown off base, trying to remember any details I could. “I remember gift baskets,” I say, “We’d get them a few times a year. A few people in suits would show up, usually with one of their bonded connectors so that they didn’t seem threatening. They’d take me, Ben and Caden out for dinner, buy us groceries, and the gift basket always had things like toys and gift certificates for clothing stores. They were a godsend for our family.”

“I wasn’t too deep into the organization at that point,” Ari mentions, “but I had enough connections that people knew I was ambitious. I think I had originally volunteered to go up to the Northwest Territory for that welfare check, with a couple of other guys. They were trying to show us how to do them properly, to train us. But then Grace passed, and I got into different things within the organization.”

“So...you were supposed to what, come visit me? That’s so weird. You’re really old.”

“Ten years ago, I was in my late twenties. You would have been a young teen? Thank the goddess age doesn’t matter as much when you have more numbers attached it.”

“I knew it,” Charlie whispers. “You were always meant to be ours, Rory. Can’t you see? You’re different than Grace, and I’m learning that it’s okay to feel the way I do. I know I loved her; I know we had an amazing life together, but we shouldn’t have survived her dying. We should have gone insane, should have lost our minds completely. We’ve been functioning, because there was somebody else out there who needed us. Somebody else out there that *we needed*.” He puts his hand over my belly, feeling the small bump.

“I’ve never had this before; this baby and the one in the one in the other room, you, all my boys...I’m telling you I couldn’t have dreamed up a better life. I don’t know how I got a second chance at finding a connector, and I don’t think we need to look too closely at the differences between our relationship and the one I shared with Grace, but what we’re doing here is so far beyond anything I’d ever imagined I could have. The way you pulled me from that nightmare, singing that weird song? Who else would that have worked on?”

I laugh, a little bit of relief seeping into it because he’s telling me that I got through to him. It makes me feel like all warm and fuzzy inside to know that I made a difference to someone.

A little sigh comes over the baby monitor, making us all look at it.

“That’s mine,” Charlie says with pride. “That tiny little human being is my daughter. And I have her because of *you*, Rory; because of the kind of human being you are.

“And I’m sorry, but holy fuck why did I never fantasize about being pegged by a beautiful woman like you before? Fuck, I’m getting hard again.”

He pulls me in tighter, burying his face in my hair. “You can’t go anywhere, and nothing can happen to you; because if something were to happen, I know it would be over for me, too, and that little girl needs parents. If you were to go away, Rory,” he whispers, “my soul would just shatter. You’ve got little hooks

in every facet of my life, in every vein in my body. Trying to pull this bond out of me would shred me.”

“Oh Charlie,” I let out, not knowing what else to do. Kissing works.

“You think you can try and sleep now?” Ari asks. “Or do you need to get up and move around?”

Charlie motions for the lamp, so I flip it off again. Charlie pulls me and Ari into him, an arm around each of us. I reach for Ari over Charlie’s body, wrapping a leg around Charlie’s to attach myself as firmly as I can. My heart is so full, and our happily ever after is looking pretty damn good from here.



Felix

We've been at this rental house for almost a week now, soaking up every minute we can with the baby. We've taken her to a few checkups already, and as fragile she is, the doctor said everything is looking great. I did not like her having to get shots, but I suspect it's one of the few things we're not going to enjoy as parents.

This little baby is cuddled up on my chest sleeping, and even though I have no reason to be tired, I'm so relaxed with her there, and she's so warm, that I find myself trying to nod off. Not that we have anything to do really, but being productive is quite difficult when there's a cute baby to snuggle all day.

I think all of us are getting sort of used to working together with her, finding ways to balance responsibilities without being overly rigid and drawing up an actual plan. We do make a plan for who's with her at night since it usually results in little sleep, so we switch that off, but during the day, if Rory's not holding her, we're more or less fighting over who gets to.

"We're almost out of diapers already," Rory calls as she organizes the stack of baby stuff against the wall. "Did you see how big that box was? How are we almost out already? Might as well get more formula, too. Anybody want to go to the store with me?"

"I'm in," my brother says. "Just need shoes."

"I should get out of the house." I'm getting a bit antsy, because I know we're going to be moving out of the rental soon and into our new home, but every picture we get from updates on the interior has me wishing we were there already. It's been so long since I've been somewhere that felt like home, and I'm so excited to get into it. This rental is great now, but I know it's not mine, so I can't fully relax. Doesn't help that we've been more or less cooped up all week because none of us want to expose the baby to any more germs than we have to.

The only other people we've seen are Rory's family, who stop by to say hi or drop off meals because Laney is so extra. I don't know how that girl hasn't gone into labor yet. She's a day overdue now and looks so uncomfortable.

I see Holden's leg bouncing up and down as he looks at the baby, so I gesture for him to take her, unable to stop kissing the little cheeks before walking away.

"Hold on one second babe," I say to Rory as I pass by her. My hand slides along her lower back as I duck into the bathroom. I grab myself a snack then one for Rory, doubling back to grab one more for my brother so he doesn't whine at me. Because she'll probably forget, I also grab a bottle of water, and then I'm grabbing keys for one of the rental cars.

Everyone is starting to make plans to get all of our individual stuff shipped to the new house, and I know it's gonna be our mess once we move in. With all of us pretty much owning our own vehicles in our own territories, and most of us coming from

whole households' worth of stuff, we're gonna need a bunch of storage sheds in the yard of the house before we can sort through what we want and what we don't want.

Moving in together officially sounds great on paper, but then you look at all the aspects, like the fact that we have eight couches, eight dining tables, ten beds... it's kind of a logistical nightmare.

The best option is for all of us to go home on our own and pack up what we want, but that means that Rory is without anybody while that happens. Or we take turns and stagger it, which means it takes even longer, who knows. I suspect it's going to be one of those things that we just put off until we can't anymore, and we make do with what we have until we reach that point.

I link my hand with Rory's as we walk through the house, her calling out to everybody so they know she's leaving. A few people call out things they want us to grab while we're out anyway, and Rory takes it upon herself to make a list on her phone, so we don't forget anything.

A short drive later and Rory looks so good between me and my brother as we walk through the store, even though she's in leggings and somebody else's sweatshirt. It's huge on her, sinking down to her knees, and her hair is in this bun that looks too messy to be purposeful, and she's all mine.

Okay fine, I have to share her with so many people, but she's still mine.

I can't help but wrap my arms around her as we walk around, gathering the bits everybody needs, loving how good it feels to just be in public with her doing normal shit. Beau is in a good mood too, getting all puppy eyed at all the cute things in the baby department.

"How does somebody so tiny require so many things?" Rory asks, staring at our cart that's somehow nearly full already.

"No idea," I say, "but they make it all look so necessary and adorable that it's hard not to buy everything."

Money is still a bit of a sensitive topic for me, and a lot of the other guys, too, I think. Ari, Jameson, Holden, and Charlie sat

all of us down to explain how their finances work, and how they'd like to make them work with all of us. Maybe it's completely crazy, but once we all talked about it, we just decided to make one, massive joint account with all of us on it.

That seemed easier to most of us than trying to maintain eleven separate bank accounts, trying to figure out who pays what and how to balance things out. If we just pool everything together, then everybody knows which account to use for household expenses, and everybody just kind of sets their own spending limits. Ari and them have also assured us that we have places in their company if we want to work, but that he hoped some of us would choose to stay home with Rory and the kids, so she doesn't get overwhelmed or feel isolated.

We're all supportive of Rory wanting to put off working for now. It will give her a chance to heal after she delivers our second baby, plus the thought of not being around them during the day really stressed her out. We didn't necessarily plan to have two babies so soon, so this is the plan for now. Rory knows she has other options, but staying home with the babies was her favorite.

It's actually really nice that we don't have to stress about money, and I'll probably stay home some, but at the very least, I don't think I'll ever stop gigging because it's like therapy for me. It doesn't make a ton of money, but I've been looking into the scene at the new town we're moving to and keeping my eye out for places I can play. I'm hardly upset I had to leave my last job, but I do know I want to contribute to household expenses at least a little bit.

"Oh shoot," Rory says, interrupting my thoughts. "I forgot something over in the frozen aisle. Brett wanted some of that gross ice cream with the nuts in it. You guys go grab the formula over there, I'll be right back."

We grab what we need pretty quick, and then because we're right next to it, we end up in the book section, and I haven't seen Rory with a new one anytime lately, so I decide to browse and see if there's anything I think she'd like. If I bury it in the cart she won't know it's there until we're paying, and then she'll feel too guilty to make the cashier put it back, so she'll have to take it home and read it. It's a genius plan, really.

“Oh this one,” Beau says conspiratorially. It’s got a ripped half-naked dude on the front, so I’m pretty confident it’ll be naughty.

“Yep she needs it,” he says dropping it in the cart. Beau starts reading the back of another one so I move farther down the lane, finding an adult color book with cuss words Rory can doodle in when she’s feeling stabby. I grab some colored pencils too, just because I can, suddenly not worried about spending somebody else’s money if it means Rory can be a little spoiled. We haven’t been able to spoil her much on the trips we’ve been going on, traveling so much with little room to carry things, so it’s kind of nice to be less migratory.

“Do you think she knows where we are?” Beau asks looking around. I realize it’s been a bit longer than it should have taken her.

“Maybe she ran into someone she knows? This is her hometown, after all. We should go check on her, even if we’re being stupid for doing it. Maybe she got distracted by the ice cream flavors that’s happened before, you know. She’s probably just unable to decide which kind she wanted.”

Except when we get to the ice cream aisle she’s not there. My chest tightens as I grab my phone, hitting the button to call her.

Beau starts walking down the aisle but comes back with her phone that was apparently sitting on one of the shelves. That’s not good.

Fuck. How did I lose my mate? I thought it would be crazy to follow her to the ice cream aisle when it was right next to where I was, but now I feel stupid as hell because we don’t know for sure that all of the threats that Bernadette cast on us were baseless.

My brother looks a little green in the face as he starts running up and down the next aisle over, and I stay put, hoping that maybe she’ll walk back to where we are.

Five minutes go by, then ten, and now she’s been gone for maybe twenty minutes, and I know something bad is going down.

No. I refuse to accept this.

Spinning circles as if she'll materialize out of nowhere, I go down to where her phone was sitting, noting it's right across the freezer from where Brett's gross ice cream sits. I can see that behind the freezer there's a walk-in compartment for store employees to get in and restock things, and that's when I notice that there are people in there.

I yell for my brother and run to the end of the aisle where there's an opening to the giant walk-in freezer, and I run in thinking I'll be able to maybe rescue the damsel, but what I find instead is two goons on the floor, one bleeding and one with a box knife sticking out of his thigh.

There's a store employee in a blue apron staring up at me with wide eyes, and I watch as Rory follows through with a giant kick to the balls to the guy that's already bleeding.

"Am I interrupting something?" I ask way more calmly than I feel.

I take stock of my connector, but even though her hair is a little mussed and her lip is bleeding a little, she looks pissed off more than anything else. I'm sure there are a whole lot of other emotions happening under the skin, but she just looks furious. *Gods*, it's hot.

"Felix, please call the police," she says way too calmly.

Beau walks in behind me and crashes into me, gasping as he sees the scene in front of us. He runs to Rory and pulls her out of the way, and the employee walks around them as well, eyeing the villains-turned-victims wearily as we get out of the frigid walk-in.

"What the fuck just happened, Rory?" She falls against my chest and grabs Beau, pulling him in as well as she starts shaking.

"Is she okay?" The employee asks.

"Are you okay?" I ask the employee in return.

"I... I think so? I was just in there unpacking a pallet, I was kind of tucked around the corner, so I wasn't visible from the doorway. Those two guys came crashing in, pulling Rory, and they had their hands over her mouth so she couldn't scream.

They were being a little rough with her, and I don't know what came over me. I took the box knife in my hand and just started coming at them. Fuck. I just stabbed a few people. Fuck. Am I going to jail? Oh no. Oh no, no, no."

"Hey, you're okay, you're safe. You might have just saved our connector's life," Beau reassures her. I nod at my brother because that very much does seem like the score.

"Do you remember," Rory says with a shaky voice, "when some of the guys were talking about their conversation with the deranged Bernadette, and she said she had the means and reach to get what she wanted? This was her reach. It wasn't a very impressive one, but I think they've been following me. We haven't left the house though, so they haven't been able to move until now."

"Fuck." Beau pales. "Our bondmates are never gonna let us go alone with Rory in public again, are they?"

"Kind of don't want *Rory* to go in public ever again," I reply.

"Do we...*have* to tell them?" Rory asks. "You guys heard that nightmare Charlie had last night. He's so freaked out that something's going to happen to me, this might break him."

I do my best to reassure her because his reaction isn't her worry. "It's not going to break him, because you're still coming home to him safe. Okay? He'll probably just push you up against the wall or bend you over something and have his wicked way with you, and then force you to cuddle with him for a few hours. Really, there are worse ways to spend an afternoon."

She rolls her eyes at me, but her face looks a little less worried as she peeks around our arms to see the employee. "Thank you, seriously. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been there. Those box knife skills were epic."

"Me? You were the one that went all crazy woman and started kicking them everywhere. You're Rory, right? I have a brother that went to school with Ben. My mom's kind of been following your journey through the territories; she called it her hometown reality show."

"Oh, yeah that's me. You know my brother?"

“They only had a few classes together, but I remember he came over once to work on a project with my brother way back in the day... I should probably get a manager, huh?”

“You ladies stay here. I’ll go get help; Felix, can you barricade the glass doors, just in case they try to escape?” It’s unnecessary though, because it’s not long before Jameson crashes down the aisle with Holden close behind.

“How the hell did you guys get here so fast?” Because seriously; were they just sitting in a van outside in case something happened to Rory? Not sure if that’s creepy or goals...

“Might have hacked the store’s closed-circuit security when we knew Rory was coming here. We were out the door the second we saw somebody put their hands on her. Where the fuck were you guys?”

It makes sense, I suppose, that he only looked for the pretty woman when he was sharpening his stalker skills.

“Chill man,” Holden admonishes. Then he looks at my brother and me. “Where the fuck were you guys?”

“Stop!” Rory interjects. “I just ran over here to get ice cream; Felix and Beau were right over there. The losers in the freezer were waiting for me to be alone, they would have jumped at the slightest chance.”

Jameson gets a manic smile on his face as he looks through the freezer doors, where the perpetrators are probably shivering quite badly by now.

“Jameson, no.” Rory says this like a command as her hands land on his shoulder try and pull him back. He could shake her off if he wanted to, but he lets her stop him.

“Why?” he whines.

“Let the police handle it, please?” Holden ducks in before she can stop him too, and there’s definitely some more crashing before he’s dragging the guys out of the freezer that would apparently rather freeze to death slowly than face the crowd out here waiting for them. They’re both sporting matching bloody

lips now, and Holden's knuckles looks newly red, but I'm not going to say anything.

"Here," he says to Jameson, trying his best to toss a guy his way. Jameson and Holden both sit on one of the goons while they wait for the police to arrive, and Beau and I pull Rory farther down the aisle, so she doesn't have to look at them so closely. "What hurts?" I ask her.

"Just because I know you'll try and strip me down in the middle of the store if I don't offer it up freely, he grabbed my arm pretty hard. That'll probably bruise. My lip, he smacked me when I started mouthing off. Oh, and my hip. He cast me into the side of the freezer in there when that force of a woman over there came at them like a banshee with her knife raised."

Beau and I check out all the injuries on Rory and brush kisses on them, only finding a little calm when we see it's nothing more than a few bruises. This doesn't stop me from signaling behind my back to Jameson and Holden that she's hurt, and they do an excellent job of making the next injuries to the goons look accidental.

Finally the store manager comes on scene not long after the police, and I feel like we've had so much interaction with police by now they must know us all by name or reputation.

In fact, they greet Jameson, and almost gush when they get to meet Rory. I'm assuming Jameson knows them from working together on Christine's case.

Beau and I are comforting Rory while Holden and Jameson talk to everyone, Holden waving his finger around to indicate the security cameras in the store. The store employee, who apparently is named Rachel, is also giving her account, and then the two bad guys are dragged off.

Holden is quick to find his spot next to Rory the second he's done answering questions. "Next time, more people go with you when we need something at a store, okay?"

"That's it?" Rory looks stunned that that's the only admonishment any of us are going to get.

"Do you... want me to reprimand you? Spank you?"

She flushes beet red, and I just want her out of here. “Why don’t you guys get her home? Beau and I can go check out and meet you there, because we still need to pay for everything we came here to get.”

Jameson smacks me across the back of the head. “Didn’t you hear what Holden just said? We stay together. Here.” Jameson turns to the ice cream cooler and grabs an entire armful of pints in every flavor, then walks down to the frozen pizza section and grabs way too many of those, dumping everything into the cart, which is so over-full now, that it’s comically overflowing. I guess nobody has to cook tonight now, so there’s that.

“I’ve found that when there’s something you don’t want to talk about, ice cream makes everybody a little more rational. Let’s go pay.”

“Good thinking,” I say.



Brett

I'm pacing the floors of the entryway waiting for Rory to get home, because once again, I have to hold her to ensure she's okay. I've had to do this way too many times.

As ragey as I'm feeling, Charlie blew a fucking gasket when Holden called us from the road to give us a brief explanation of what had happened, none of us even knowing him and Jameson left the house.

Attempted kidnapping.

Those words won't stop reverberating around in my skull, pushing my psychosis for that girl higher and higher with no release to settle me.

Holden didn't give us any other details at the time since they were racing to get to her, and we all sat in the living room soothing Everly, praying like hell to the goddess that brought all of us together to bring our little girl's mother and our mate home safely.

When we finally got a text from Rory telling us she was fine, the tension in the room dropped significantly, and everyone found different things to distract themselves with while we awaited her return.

We got a follow up text from Felix telling us she was a little banged up from two guys putting their hands on her, then a picture of Holden and Jameson "accidentally" breaking the culprit's faces, and I found air making its way back into my lungs, slowly.

The way my entire world stops and focuses to a pinpoint on that woman when something isn't right surely isn't healthy, but that doesn't stop me from obsessing. I know Rory is trying to brush it under the rug, likely not wanting to cause a lot of upset over the situation, making light of the situation when she sent a picture of two men being led off in handcuffs, but she isn't home yet so I can't calm down fully.

I need that woman in front of me so I can look at her and see how bad it is.

Charlie is drinking, trying to numb the terror that crested through all of us before the situation got resolved, sitting in a chair next to me. We won't be leaving these spots until Rory is home, because literally nothing else matters right now. Everly is with one of her other dads so I can focus completely on Rory.

The second we hear the rental cars pull up the drive, I'm out the door and yanking Rory out of the front seat so I can carry her. I'm gentle with her as I climb the stairs, listening to Charlie follow me up, but I can't look at her face yet. I know whatever injury I glimpsed out of the corner of my eye is going to set me back, and I need Rory to be sitting on a stable surface when I come undone.

"Brett?" she asks, sounding scared.

“Not yet, Butterfly. Talk to me in a minute when we’re in the bathroom.”

I feel her small hand grip onto the collar of my t-shirt, shaking slightly, and I nearly stumble at the slight tell of how scared she must have been.

Donny is also completely out of his mind since he was able to feel a jolt of her through their bond. The difference between us though, is that instead of brooding about it like Charlie and I have decided to do, his initial reaction was to don a frilly apron he found in the kitchen so he could bake cupcakes. He’s insisting Rory’s craving something with cinnamon, so we’re just letting him do his thing.

“I don’t think you understand how we feel about you, Rory. How fucking vital you are to us.” I still can’t look directly at her.

She doesn’t reply, but then we’re in the bathroom and locking the door. I grunt in agreement when Charlie drags a chair in with him to prop under the door, making sure that Rory belongs solely to us while we have her.

“Going to need these off of you baby,” Charlie says as he starts peeling off her clothes.

I watch as Rory loses all trace of defiance and gives in to us. She lifts her arms as her top comes off, pulls her hair off her neck so Charlie can unhook her bra. She holds onto Charlie’s shoulder as he pulls her shoes and socks off, gently combing through his hair with her fingers as he pulls down her leggings. Charlie presses kisses to her stomach, resting his head against her abs while he breathes against her skin.

I get into position next, pulling off my shirt so I can feel her skin on mine. I stand behind her and pull her flush against me, curling over her so I can inhale her as creepily as Charlie currently is.

That’s when I’m finally able to summon the strength to check out her injuries.

I spin her around as Charlie finishes undressing her, letting my thumb trace around the slightly puffy lip, licking off the slight crust of blood still sitting on the corner of her mouth.

“This mouth isn’t to be touched by anything other than us, and it’s a damn good thing that those men are in custody, because otherwise I’d be doing things that would likely put me in jail.”

With wide brown eyes, Rory allows me to flutter kisses all over her chin and neck, finally coming back to her mouth so I can gorge myself on her taste. I soak in the way her breathing changes as I stroke her tongue with mine, using my hands to cradle her head so I can kiss her even better.

“Brett.” She’s whimpering, clawing at me, and then she breaks down, collapsing against Charlie because she’s finally caught up with the fact that she’s home and she’s safe, and that however innocuous the transaction with the two men at the grocery store might have been, it was still traumatizing. To know that there were people watching you, waiting to attack? That’s got to mess with her head, stripping away the sense of safety she usually feels.

Charlie scoops her up as she starts crying and I get the shower going, needing to soap away the other touches from the men that hurt her.

“We’ve got you Rory, you’re safe,” Charlie says against her hair. He’s shaking slightly too, and like me he’s likely trying to balance his need to keep her safe with Rory’s need to not be completely sheltered.

“They just came out of nowhere; I was just getting some ice cream that Brett wanted. I Just wanted to make him happy.”

That guts me, knowing that if I hadn’t asked for the ice cream, she might not have wandered off.

“All I need to be happy is *you* though, Rory. You had no way of knowing they were waiting; you did nothing wrong. You hear me? You. Did. Nothing. Wrong. You have every right to be at a grocery store and go where you want to go, and if I could, I would take every threat out there away from you. I can’t do that, so instead I’m just going to make sure you know how treasured you are, and how much we love you.” I make sure she understands before I finish undressing, barely taking my eyes off of her.

The hot water slips down her skin as Charlie carries her into the shower, not even putting her down long enough so he can strip out of his own clothes. When Rory starts clawing at his shirt so she can feel his skin, Charlie just tears it in two and discards it onto the shower floor, pulling her against him.

I drop to my knees and press kisses over the bruise I can see starting to take shape on her hip, pushing down a wave of fury at the bruises already on her arm from being grabbed. “Going to wash their touch away, Rory.”

“Okay,” she mumbles back to me.

I take my time with the soap, rubbing up and down her back and lightly massaging around her new bruises so I can pamper her as much as I’m able with what I’ve currently got. Then I have to spin her around and kiss her stomach as well, because I need to feel that swell from our baby, so I know they’re safe.

Jameson has already scheduled some intake appointments with doctors for Rory at our new place, and I can’t wait to hear that heartbeat again.

Rory is a puddle of relaxation by the time we finally shut the shower off, and we rub lotion into her skin and comb her hair before wrapping her up in our clothes, needing to see her look as claimed as possible.

Charlie digs around in a drawer before coming back with a fucking huge diamond ring, sliding it onto her hand like it’s just some trinket she always wears.

“What the hell is this?” She sputters.

“Something we picked up for you. Wanted something as big as possible so everyone knows you’re taken from a distance.”

“Charlie! This ring is ridiculous!”

“Good. Don’t take it off.”

I smirk at her because I don’t know of any other woman that would be upset by such a lavish gift. “Poor connector. Are you being spoiled again?”

She narrows her eyes at me, and I watch as she comes a little bit more into herself after the store ordeal. “Don’t mock me.”

“I could do something else to you that ends in the same two letters, but I feel like you’re a bit fragile right now and—”

“Fragile?” She stalks towards me, pulling the shirt off we just put on her. I’m blinded by her bare breasts, so I don’t see her kick out until my knees are collapsing and hitting the floor.

“Hmm, you look good on your knees for me.” Great. Now I’m hard. I was doing so good, too.

Rory walks to the door and moves the chair out of the way, revealing a whole plethora of other guys just standing there listening in. Guess we’re all creepers for her.

“Beau, you’re needed in here.”

She pulls him in and re-locks the door, but not before winking at her other mates that look relieved to see her in better spirits.

Rory positions Beau right in front of my and pulls off his shirt, making my mouth water when the two of them are both side by side, making out without tops on. I watch their flesh get all squished together and find my hand is suddenly on my dick, pulling at it and working myself up further.

Rory is off of Beau so fast when she sees me move, her hand digging into my scalp and grabbing a fistful of my hair by the roots so she can pull my head back. “Did I say you could touch yourself?”

“No fair! I want to see Rory be bossy! That’s literally my favorite!” Jameson yells from beyond the door. “Remember when I took care of those bad guys for you, baby? Remember? You can boss me around, too!”

Rory rolls her eyes at Jameson but doesn’t move to let him in.

“Open wide, Brett.”

I do as I’m told, then she’s shoving Beau’s dick into my mouth and making me choke on it. “There. That ought to keep you busy for a minute.”

I watch then as she turns back to Charlie, who’s just casually leaning against the vanity. “Can I help you with something, darlin’?”

She holds up her left hand, where the ostentatious ring is. “When did you buy this?”

“A while ago. Just waiting for a good time to give it to you.” He walks towards her, face more serious. “I’m sorry we weren’t there to protect you today.”

“You shouldn’t have to protect me every second of the day. I should be able to walk around a grocery store without being assaulted.”

“Just the same, I take pride in being one of your protectors and providers, and it fucks me up to know I failed. I thought you’d be okay at the grocery store, too.”

She looks down at her ring while I keep sucking on Beau, my hands digging into his ass. I’m about two seconds away from fucking him though.

“Is it important to you that I wear this?” she asks him about her ring.

“Yes. Because it’s a visible claim, and it’s big enough that anyone who sees it will know you’ve got someone with money on your side. Maybe that’s stupid and shallow, but if it makes anybody think twice about doing something to harm you because they’re worried about your resources, then it’s added protection. I would just push you around in a protective bubble all day, but somehow I don’t think you’d enjoy that.”

She sighs and all the fight drains with her. “Okay.”

Charlie takes a step toward her and pulls up her hand, kissing the ring. Connectors don’t usually wear rings because they have more permanent marks on their arms, but she deserves pretty things.

“Do you like it?” Charlie sounds vulnerable suddenly, but Rory’s attention is off of me so I pull Beau down and kiss him onto the floor, flipping him over so I can finish undressing him. “You stretched out for me, baby?”

“Wasn’t exactly expecting this, so no,” Beau whispers as I bite an ass cheek. Probably good he’s here, because I’m not afraid to be rough with him like I am my pregnant mate.

“No problem, let me find some lube.”

“Front pocket of my jeans,” he says on a quiet laugh.

“Good boy,” I say with a slap to the ass that has him moaning and falling down to his forearms.

“Rory, you’re going to watch since you started this. Then you’re going to let Charlie fuck you so he knows you’re safe and whole, and then we’re all going to go downstairs and have a nice family dinner.” There. That will...do something.

The guys are still outside the door, not muffling their voices anymore, but she ignores them. What she does do is hop up on the vanity to watch the show Beau and I are about to put on for her, right as Charlie kneels in front of her and starts licking her. Her legs widen and I get the faintest glimpse of her pink flesh as I start prepping Beau, eyes unable to pick one thing to look at. I’m darting back and forth between what’s being done to Rory and Beau’s smooth, dark skin laid out before me like an offering.

When Beau’s ready for me to slide inside of him, my dick is hard as fuck and eager to be squeezed by all that he can give me. I sink to the hilt, letting him adjust before I start snapping my hips into him.

Charlie pulls Rory to the edge of the counter and slides inside of her, adding to the noises I’m already orchestrating and making the moist air from the shower reek of sex. “Want to kiss Beau,” Rory begs as Charlie starts fucking into her.

“I’ve got you, baby.” Charlie carefully picks her up without losing the connection, pushing the bath mat closer to Beau so he can lay her on it. Rory scoots until her face is below Beau’s and they start kissing again as Charlie and I fuck them, making me groan from how hot it is.

“Fuck I can’t stand you two together, makes me so hot.”

In response, Beau sticks his ass out a little more, bucking into me as he starts moaning himself.

We’ve said all we need to say about the situation already, so reestablishing this connection is important.

We don’t talk as Charlie and I keep fucking them, as Rory and Beau claw at each other and squirm against each other.

They're fucking beautiful. I reach around to start working Beau, feeling his body tense up in warning of impending demise.

“You ready to make her scream, Charlie?”

He nods and lifts her hips higher, working his pelvis into her at an angle that has her gasping for air as she starts screaming beautifully.

That's my signal to unleash on Beau, and as I pound roughly into his ass, and work his cock with my hand, and watch Charlie start playing with Rory's clit, we all climax one after the other as the other guys continue to complain beyond the door.

We might need another shower now, but we've chased all the cobwebs of doubt out of our minds, just in time for Donny to walk through the door with a plate of cinnamon cupcakes. Locked doors don't stop him, and Rory didn't move the chair back in place when she opened the door. He completely ignores the fuckfest that's winding down as he gets onto his hands and knees to kiss Rory and feed her a cupcake, swiping some frosting onto her nipple that he then has to lick off before informing everyone dinner is almost ready.

The next time we dry Rory off and put her back in our clothes, she's not shaking anymore, and her cheeks have a lovely pink tint to them. Her lips are puffy from Beau's kisses, and we're able to eat the frozen pizza they brought home all piled around Rory on the couch, our baby once again napping nearby.

When Everly wakes I'm quick to carry her to Rory, knowing she'll help calm Rory down even more.

“We can't protect you every second of the day without stifling you,” Ari says to Rory as we're starting to clean up, “so we won't try. We don't need to impress upon you how dire we are with the need to keep you safe. Is there anything we could get you to carry to defend yourself in case anyone else comes after you?”

Rory takes a sip of her soda before crossing her legs and laying Everly in the nest she just made in her legs. “What if the threats never stop?”

“They will,” I say. “They have to. We’ve got to be out of bad intentions by now. You’re too good to have earned any of this, but I have to believe this was the last bad thing that will befall you, otherwise I can’t function without smothering you.”

She nods, fingers slipping into Everly’s tights fists. “I’m probably going to be too nervous to step away from any of you for a while, so can we figure out that later? I have no desire to so much as check the mail alone.”

It kills me to hear this from her, but if she wants us to smother her, then that works in my favor. “Then you won’t have to. However silly you might think it sounds, you tell us what you need from us and we’re there.”

She nods as she continues to watch our baby, and that’s the end of the conversation. As shitty as the journey was to get to this point, it’s a relief to know that the Bernadette threat is gone now, because Jameson let slip that he forced his knee against one of the guys’ groins until he admitted everything.

Really don’t envy Jameson for knowing how that gross squishy dick felt through his jeans on his kneecap.



Rory

With Everly freshly fed and changed and down for her nap snuggled up with Caden, I go to meet Bennett and Holden in the room we've kind of set up as an office.

It's not that I've been purposely putting this phone call off exactly, it's just that I absolutely have been, because I'm terrified to know the answer.

Before we all got pulled into Bennett's realm, and we tried to follow all those magical blue orbs that got expelled from my body down the hallways of the connector center, we saw one of them land inside of a connector. We obviously didn't have the time then to chase after every single orb to make sure they were all going to the right place, but I haven't heard anything, and I

don't know if that's because the center has been busy trying to rehabilitate everybody, or because nothing changed with the release of the orbs.

I know Holden's been talking with his aunt, we've been so busy getting Everly settled and figuring out our routine with her and going back and forth between visiting Laney and going to doctor's appointments... I haven't been emotionally available enough to handle this other business that should have been at the forefront on my mind.

"Hey love, come on in," Holden calls as he pats the chair next to him. He's got a computer set up with a video call already going, and I sit in between him and Bennett, instantly smiling when I see Patty's face on the screen.

"Hi Patty," I say, genuinely happy to see her.

"Oh Rory, it is such a joy to see your face. How's your visit with your family going?"

"It's been great. We're just waiting for Laney's baby to decide they want to be born. I hear our house is nearly done, so we've got lots of exciting things happening."

Patty responds with a smile. "And Holden's been sending me so many pictures of little Everly. She's so precious. Add me to your list of people that want to come visit, and then you tell me when I'm allowed to. It would do this old lady's heart some good to hold such a tiny baby again."

"You've got it. So, Patty... I don't know how to ask this. How are... the other connectors there?" I intentionally word this vaguely in case nothing has changed.

She looks at me with straight up confusion. "Well, they're great. Why do you ask? Why, what do you know?"

I look at Holden and I look at Bennett, putting a hand on each of their knees. "That whole silly nonsense of being sucked out of the connector center and forced into a different realm, it took all the magic I was holding for the other connectors. We were able to make sure one of them went to the right place, but I've been too scared to ask if—"

"You didn't tell her Holden?" she nearly yells.

Holden looks at me, embarrassed like. “I thought you knew? You were worried about the outcome of the connectors this whole time? Why didn’t you say anything?”

Bennett takes a deep breath and puts an arm around my shoulder. “So all those freaky little blue orbs that flew out of my connector’s body... she healed everyone? All the connectors there are really okay?”

“Better than okay. In fact... no, I should just leave that as a surprise. No, they’re great. Everyone here has been in such a good mood; it’s been a nonstop party. I was up until 2:00 AM last night, and I finished a whole bottle of wine by myself. I think I lost my shoes in the garden.” Patty looks down towards the ground with a frown, as if she just remembered that detail.

Me though, I breathe deeply. “Thank you, Patty. You have no idea how much of a relief it is to know that I didn’t mess everything up.”

“Messed everything up? How might’ve you done that? I’ve spoken with each connector affected by the magical amputation, and each one of them more or less described the same thing; when you left the center with your fellas, they felt like they were getting a hug from you, even if they hadn’t met you directly. They said they don’t remember a whole lot about when they were lost, but once those souls returned to them, they were able to start putting their life back together.

“Now we have drama, because some of them are upset that their mates didn’t stick with them, but that whole issue is best saved for another day and has nothing to do with you. But I’d say that on the whole, we have a lot of *very* happy connectors here. Most of them are making plans to move back home shortly, and it’s just been incredible. Holden, I cannot believe you didn’t tell this poor woman. How many discussions have we had about this?”

I turn and narrow my eyes at him. Is this our first fight? “You have, have you?”

“I didn’t know you were worried about it! I feel terrible you’ve been stressed about it this whole time.”

I deflate, the fight gone. That was easy. “I guess I should have said something. I was just nervous that I would hear something I didn’t like.”

“I actually have somebody here that wanted to talk to you, if that’s okay?” Patty asks. “You don’t have to, but he’s been hounding me, asking to talk to you every day. I was finally able to tell him that I was going to be talking with you both on the video today, so he’s waiting outside my office.”

“Who is it?” Bennett asks.

“Well, he’s the mate for one of the connectors here. He said you probably don’t know him, but he felt very strongly that he wanted to talk to you.”

“Talk to her why?” Bennett is suspicious, and I can feel his protective mode turning on.

“Nothing nefarious dears,” Patty informs us. “He’s just, well why don’t I let him explain, huh?” She goes off screen, and we hear her office door open and close, then she comes back with a stocky guy in a long-sleeved Henley that sits down in front of the camera.

“Hi,” he says as he pulls a baseball hat off his head and starts worrying it with his hands. He’s curling the bill in on itself nervously. His eyes flash up to the screen. “You probably don’t remember me, but—”

Yes I do. “You were in the café that day. The day I went to go try and help connectors; weren’t you? You were the guy that said you didn’t want me to try and do anything to your mate, because you were worried it would just make things worse. Did I ruin things? I promise it was unintentional. I had no control over the magic.”

“No.” His face breaks out into a giant smile, and then tears start running down his face. “Everything’s perfect actually,” he chokes out. “I just had to thank you. And apologize. We were rude to you, and I know now that you were only trying to help.”

I wish I could lean forward and grab this guy’s hand or something, but I really hope he has a network of support where he is. Instead, I can offer some reassurances. “Hey, you have no reason to apologize. I meant what I told you that day in the

dining room. I respect that you were trying to take care of your connector, and if you thought that keeping her away from something that would upset her was the best option, then that was the best option. If she was anything like some of the other connectors I met, she probably couldn't really take care of herself much, right?"

"No. She was pretty dependent on those around her. We really tried everything in the beginning, we had too. There were a lot of people trying to benefit from our situation, though. Once it got out that connectors were hurting and looking for obscure solutions, a lot of people tried to take advantage of that. My group came very close to losing most of our savings, to what was probably just a snake oil salesman. We were promised great, fantastic deeds by people not intending to deliver any of it. We did lose *some* money, but I still think it was worth it, because it means that we were trying. We wouldn't get anywhere if we didn't take a few risks when we felt they were warranted."

"I'm so sorry for you and your family, and for everything you've gone through," I say honestly. "I knew I wasn't on that journey with you guys, but for some reason I felt responsible for all the connectors there."

I'm almost surprised to realize that I'm crying now. I lean into my mates, inhaling the way they smell to try and soothe myself. I see Patty step behind the guy on the couch, putting her hand on his shoulder. "You're a good woman Rory," Patty says. "It was never your job to fix all these connectors, but you did it anyway. This nice man is just one of the stories from the center here, but there are dozens more. You changed lives, Rory. And I know you said it was accidental, that you had no control over the magic, but tell me, if put in your situation, who on earth would have been able to step up to that devil and demand he forfeit the magic he stole? Who else would have had the fortitude to steal it back, and spit in his face while doing it? Who else could have been strong enough to hold on to that magic, to keep holding onto it even when he attacked you again? And then to take it upon yourself to worry about all these other people you didn't even know? You're a miracle."

"When you put it like that, I sound pretty fantastic," I joke.

Holden turns my head towards him with two hands, forcing me to look at his beautiful face. “That’s what she’s saying, doll. You *are* pretty fantastic. You’re pretty much the image of the connector community right now, in case you hadn’t noticed. I think they’re adopting you as their mascot or something.”

“What?”

And then suddenly, I’m emotionally drained from the highs and lows of this whole conversation. “I’m so relieved,” I tell Patty and the bonded sitting down. “I don’t think I ever caught your name though.”

“Steven, not that it’s important. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. My family is whole again, about to be under one roof again for the first time in almost a year, because somebody we didn’t know thought that our connector’s magic was important and worth protecting.”

“I’m happy to help,” I say.

“I really don’t want to be rude here, but could I possibly have a moment alone speaking with your mates?”

“Of course,” I say, slightly confused. “I’ll just go check on the baby again, I guess.” I kiss Holden and Bennett on the forehead and tell them I love them, wave bye to Patty and Steven, then I’m out the door.

I’d like to say I don’t try and figure out what they’re talking about without me, or that I’m not tempted to go spy on them, but that just seems like too much energy to expend right now.



Donny

I skip down the hall and scoop up the sweetest little baby there ever was, booping her lightly on the nose, even if she's too young to understand why.

“She was doing tummy time,” Brett says.

“Well now she needs to go to cousin time.”

“What?”

“Laney is finally in labor.”

“Seriously?” Brett asks, finally looking happy to see me.

You know what would be fun? As he stands up I'm there in front of him, baby in one arm, his face in the other. I lay one on

him, wet and sloppy like I'm sure he enjoys, making a pleasant smacking sound when I pull away.

"Ew! What the hell was that for?"

"Haven't you ever been curious about something and just needed to try it? Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know, you're with Beau. Hey look, there's this position I've been wanting to try with Rory—"

"I thought we were trying to go to the hospital, Donny."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Come on, then. Stop kissing me, Brett. We have places to go."

"What? You kissed Donny?" Caden says as he comes walking in the room. "How come you've never kissed me?"

I smile. "Are we all bi-curious and nobody's admitted it yet?"

Caden shrugs. "I'm sure it'll happen sooner or later. What's with the car seat?"

"Laney is in labor," Brett says.

"Nice," Caden says. "Let me go grab the other guys. They were just finishing up sorting out the laundry we washed this morning."

"Somebody needs their diaper changed," I say to the very small and talkative baby. I unsnap her onesie and lay her on a blanket, checking to make sure her stump is still healing okay. Pretty sure the umbilical cord is ready to fall off any day now.

"Who's the cutest thing ever? You know what we need to do a little one, we need to have a daddy-daughter date. Just you and me, we can go and look at pacifiers or something."

I finish changing her and get her buckled up nice and secure in the carrier, then go about making sure her diaper bag is fully stocked for the trip. "Brett can you grab a few bottles of water so we can mix the formula later when she's hungry?"

"On it," he says, heading to the kitchen.

"You hear that, baby? Daddy's getting your bottles."

Everly is such a chill baby, and now that she's started to open her eyes for longer stretches of time, it's pretty easy to see that

she has Caden's eyes. That's okay, I'm sure the next one will have mine, since there's no way it wasn't my super sperm that knocked up Rory.

Like it always does, it takes a bit to get everybody on board with leaving the house because it's just a lot of people to coordinate, but eventually we figure out how to walk out the door with everything we need and climb into a car, and even manage to operate the vehicle and get it to take us where we need to go. Miracles happen every day in this household.

Knowing we want to limit Everly's exposure to other people and their germs, especially being in a hospital, I have Rory help me put on the baby carrier so I can snuggle her up against my chest. Everly will be wrapped up safe and secure, and no greedy hands will reach out to touch her. She sleeps so good there, and it's nice having her that close to me.

I pull her out of course when it's time to meet her new baby cousin, and I know that they're both newborns, but when their little hands reach on to each other and we lay them side by side, it basically melts me.

We get a great picture of Rory holding two babies, and she just looks so damn happy there holding Everly and her new nephew, Carter.

"Laney," she says, loving on the new baby. "He's just so cute. There's far too much cuteness in this room. I can't handle it."

One of the proud new daddies scoops his kid up, and I look around the room thinking we've got a pretty sweet set up here.

I'm not talking to my mom anymore after the way everything turned out. Finding out her and my grandma had been in on everything, such as the little things like using me for a magical sacrifice, kind of soured that relationship a bit. Go figure.

I've been trying to find space within me to be upset by the loss of relationship, but I think the hurt overshadows it too much. Part of me accepts that she likely had some issues she needs to work through, and I wouldn't be surprised if she's been conditioned by my monster of a biological father, so she's likely a victim in this to some degree, but I just can't willingly bring her into my life when I have this much goodness around me.

Rory's been worried about me, trying to make sure I'm holding up alright because I've always been so close with my mom, but finding out none of it was very representative of the relationship we actually had, killed off any affection I was still harboring.

Maybe, sometime far in the future, and I mean *far* in the future, I'll feel like calling her up and checking on her. With all these strapping guys around me, and the beautiful woman at the center of us, and the world's cutest baby (sorry but it's still true, even with Carter's arrival), I just don't think I have the space in my heart to be angry the way I maybe should. I feel mostly apathetic about it all, choosing to focus on the things in my life that are working.

It's no contest that I put Rory above my biological family. The way that Rory just accepts every part of me, no matter how strange, it's a gift I get to open every single day.

Rory flits about the room with Everly, showing her off to her brothers, then passing her to Laney since Carter is with one of his dads. I watch Rory like the creeper I enjoy being when I'm around her. I've got a nice little shady corner set up and everything where I can watch Rory from, and she makes my breath hitch when she smiles my way.

I see glimpses of the woman that walked in the bar gripping onto Caden when she was just a nervous connector on the beginning of her journey. I think she'll forever be stuck in my head that way, arguing with me in front of a bar full of strangers about nonsense, letting me spin her around the dance floor and make a fool of us both.

I dream about that day I took her and Caden to the beach with the sea lions. I was so close to giving up everything I thought I believed in and taking her for my own, because I knew in that moment that she had to be mine. I can almost taste the way her lips would have been next to the salty ocean; had I not ruined everything and just flat out dropped her in the sand.

Wanting to give Laney time to rest, we start saying our goodbyes and Rory brings Everly to me to tuck her back in to the carrier I've got strapped on me still. Once she's secure, Rory kisses her on the head and then goes up on her tippy toes to kiss

me as well. “I love you,” she says, no reason to say it other than she felt like it.

I grab her hip and pull her into my side, wrapping her up as much as I’m able with Everly strapped to my front. “You’re incredible. You have no idea how fortunate I am that I get you as a mate.” Then I grab her hand while she’s in front of me blocking things and put it over my crotch.

“Donny! You can’t be hard here, we’re in the delivery unit!” Her whisper is so quiet but so, so, worked up.

“I’m always hard for you, baby. I think when we get home, Everly wants one of her other daddies so I can shove this thing inside of you again.”

She whispers again, covering Everly’s ears like there’s any chance at all she’ll know what she’s saying. “I don’t even care that that’s the line you keep using, I’m very sure it’s going to keep working.”

“Time to go!” Rory yells to everyone, pulling me out of the room as I laugh.

I pass Everly off to Beau and I’m pushing people out of the other car so I can pull Rory in, not caring that I’m rude about it. They’ll get over it when they understand why I did it. Or they’ll get jealous that I did it without them, but that’s their problem.

I rip the baby carrier off of me and toss it to Brett who’s riding shotgun, and then I pile into the back and I’m on Rory as soon as I can be.

There’s noise around us, but I tune it out. I’m suddenly desperate for her, and the needy sound she makes as I start running my hands all over her has me burning higher and hotter.

“Well I guess that’s happening,” Charlie says as he pulls the car away from the hospital parking lot. “Make sure she’s actually buckled in before you start shit, Donny.”

I give him a thumbs up and then shove my hand down Rory’s pants, swirling my finger in the slippery fun I find down there.

“I think I chose my seat well,” Bennett says as he adjusts his position on the other side of Rory.

“Want to see how many times we can make her come before we get to the house?”

“Hell yeah,” Bennett replies.

Sadly, we only get two because it’s not that long of a drive, but with my fingers shoved up her and Bennett swirling around her clit and both of us nipping at her neck and massaging her breasts, it’s hard to even convince her to get out of the car.

She cranes her head around to make sure somebody’s got Everly, but it’s not like we’ve suddenly forgotten about her just because Rory is sexed up and ready to go.

“She’s fine. Ari has her,” Bennett reassures her.

She nods and lets me carry her into the house, bouncing down the hallway until we get to one of the bedrooms. The separate room business isn’t my favorite thing, but since the new house with a giant room full of bed isn’t ready yet, this will have to do.

Bennett peels off her shirt then unhooks her bra while I get to work on her pants, shoes, socks, and panties. Once Bennett lifts her up my mouth is on her, following her descent onto the mattress. “I’ve been dreaming of burying my face between your thighs all day,” I whisper.

“Fuck, Donny,” she says as her legs try to open wider.

By the time most of the other guys wander in, my face is covered in her slick, my nose is buried between her folds, and I’m pushing her toward orgasm number three.

Bennett is underneath her, starting to prep her ass, because sometimes we can wait to take our turns, and sometimes we can’t. After playing with her the whole ride here, this is one of the times we can’t.

Rory knows it, and she’s pressing her hips into Bennett’s touch, encouraging it.

“Swear to the goddess, one of these days you are just going to break my body, the way you make me come so many times and shove so many things inside of every opening I have.”

I lift my head up with a grin. “Baby, you have no idea what images like that do to a man that’s already up front and personal with your cunt.”

She opens her mouth like she's going to do something cute, like argue.

I grab my insanely hard dick and show it off for her. "Whose face is on here, hmm? This is fucking yours."

"NO!" Bennett and Charlie immediately yell like it was planned.

I look at them, seriously offended.

Brett takes a minute to try and calm himself down, pinching the bridge of his nose like he does when he's so overcome with emotion for me that he has to take a second to cool off. Then he motions for Charlie to speak their objections for the rest of us.

"We reject that logic. If her being on...that...means it's hers, then us being on your ass, it would therefore follow, means your ass is ours. I think I speak for every man in this room when I say that that ass is no one's but yours, my dude."

I turn my head to our gorgeous mate, whom Bennett is now stuffing with his cock. "Just to keep it wet for me," he informs me. Such a sweetheart.

"Rory, you going to let them say such hateful things to me?"

"Work your shit out."

Again, everyone in the room groans and shout, "NO!"

"I'm feeling self-conscious that we're talking about my ass so much. I don't get the big deal. I thought I had a great ass."

Rory pats my leg around her screams, reassuring me. "You do honey, you so do. You want me to peg you? I'll take that ass."

I feel my eyes light up like Christmas lights. "You used my toy, didn't you?"

"Fuck yeah, she used that toy. Maybe I *should* take your ass as a thank you, but I won't," Charlie informs me.

Why am I pouting about not having anyone that wants to fuck my ass? Pretty sure I don't even want that.

"Tell you what buddy," Bennett says in between grunts. Look at him and Rory working together to keep me pacified.

“Make you a pact. If we’re both ass virgins by the time we’re thirty we’ll be each other’s firsts.”

“Really?!”

“No, but if I was into dudes like that, I totally would.”

I feel myself tearing up. “Really? Thanks, Bennett. You’re the best.”

He nods as he continues to fuck our mate, and I get hungry for more. “Hold her still.”

I crawl forward and start working a finger inside of her while Bennett continues to ream her, making my dick hurt so bad from just the thought of how tight she’s going to squeeze me once I make my way inside of her like this.

“Are you...doing what I think...you’re doing?” Rory asks between panting breaths.

“If you’re thinking I’m about to go and do dishes or vacuum or something, absolutely not.”

“Fuck, I swear sometimes trying to talk to you is impossible, Donny. I’m asking if you’re trying to...stretch me...to take both of you.”

“Oh, yes. That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

I’m mesmerized watching Bennett slide in and out of her, her body lubing him up and coating him. Honestly, dicks are just super ugly, so better Rory than me. All that silky wetness that takes us though? *Fuck* I love her cunt.

“Gonna burn a bit, little dreamer.”

“I...can take it.”

I get her stretched enough that I can start feeding my tip inside of her, first alternating with Bennett so that we slide against each other as we fill her up, slowly stretching her more and more as our cocks fill her to the point of her limits.

“Gonna come, Bennett, fair warning,” Rory announces.

“Right, I got this. I got you,” I say to her. Well, both of them, basically.

I start fucking Rory, rubbing along Bennett as I do. It's really just an added texture to this experience, but the way Rory is thrashing tells me it's doing it for her.

"Need someone on titty duty," I say to the room.

Jameson and Charlie fucking *vault* across the room to claim Rory's breasts, doing some crazy superhero move as they go that makes their clothing disappear. The two of them are on the bed before their clothes even hit the floor.

The titties aren't enough for the two sexual fiends, though.

"Think we could get three in her at once? I feel like we need a proper group orgy again." Jameson says, stroking himself.

"Our followers were promised plentiful group scenes, I believe," Charlie supplies.

"Followers? What followers?" I'm genuinely confused.

"You know, the people that creep on us when we fuck and are probably inappropriately invested in our lives."

"Genuinely confused still," I admit, "but if someone was promised group scenes, we're gonna do group scenes. Caden, get some towels ready for standby. Shit's about to get messy."

"Please stop making ass references so soon after talking about getting fucked. It's making me feel dirty," Jameson requests.

I tip my head to him. "My bad."

"Bennett, Donny, how acrobatic do you feel?"

"Fuck this, just let me cum and I'll tap out. Swear to the goddess I've been on the edge my entire life. Fuck us, Donny."

"Sorry Jameson, your kinky plan is going to have to wait just a second. Assemble a secondary team, please."

"Still here, you assholes. Stop talking around me like I'm just a hole!" Rory yells.

"Fuck, hurry Donny, the hole is dirty talking and I want to do something to it with my dick."

Rory screams in frustration at how annoying we all are, but she never asks us to stop, so I'm thinking the lady is still

enjoying herself. Whether she'll let Jameson touch her again after this is a different question.

I fuck them and fuck them. Even after Bennett comes, I keep fucking into Rory because she screams so nicely. Yes, it's a good thing we soundproofed the master bedroom at the new house.

"If you don't want to be knotted into her Bennett, I suggest you pull yourself out, because it's coming."

"Fuck!" He removes his droopy cock, and the crazy fun knot starts to work its way inside Rory thanks to the help from Bennett in stretching her out.

"You ready, baby?"

Poor thing looks wrung out already from the many orgasms she's received, but she's trying to wiggle her hips onto me, to swallow me entirely. I tease her entrance with the now bulging knot, letting her feel how big she's making it swell. In the past I let it swell once it's already firmly inside of her, so this is new.

"Please Donny, please, give it to me. I need it so bad."

I smile over my shoulder at her other guys, all sporting non-upgraded packages. "Hear that, boys? She needs me *so bad*." I turn back to the naked woman squirming underneath me. "Eyes down here, sweets. Want you to watch me wedge myself inside of you."

Jameson helps her sit up as he switches places with Bennett, propping her up so she can look down and watch as I push myself in, swiveling my hips to work my way inside of her. It's fucking burning, and I know the only thing that's going to make that stop is if Rory clamps down on me and keeps me stuck there a good while.

"Here we go. Almost...there."

She yells my name as Jameson grips her knees, keeping her nice and open for me. Such a team player. And fuck does her cunt look good right now.

I can only breathe once I'm fully locked inside of her body, everything straining to keep me conscious because of how deliciously overwhelming it feels when I'm with her like this.

“Right, gonna need to get you on your back, Donny,” Jameson says in his gruff, needs sex voice.

“I’m not taking it up the ass, I was totally bluffing.”

He shakes his head. “Not why I asked. Got enough dicks I’m working with, honest.”

I’m still suspicious as I do as he asks, but I needn’t be. It’s Rory’s ass he’s interested in.

She inhales and bites into my shoulder as he starts fingering her again, making sure that the progress Bennett made hasn’t gone to waste.

“Relax for me, beautiful. Need you nice and pliant if you want to take my cock back here.”

“Might need somebody smaller before I take you there, Jameson. Did you see the size of Donny’s knot? And you want to shove something nearly as big in my ass?”

Fuck. He’s not that big, right?

I peak over Rory’s shoulder and decide she’s probably right.

That sucks.

Oh well, mine still does magic tricks.

“Someone smaller, you ask? Who might that be?” Brett asks with all his pretty boy attitude.

Rory looks across the room at Brett, squinting. “This is a trap. Right? Fine. Jameson, it’s all yours. Don’t need to get on the business side of a dick measuring contest.”

“Good plan. Let’s leave that to hallways.”

“What?” She looks at me like I’m crazy.

Jameson kicks me. Oh. *Oh*. She doesn’t know we hung art by dick size. We measured merely on length though- girth felt too personal to hang on the walls.

“You’ve taken me before, Rory, you can take me again. Going to make you feel so good. Going to make all of us feel so good.”

I watch over Rory's shoulder as he slowly works his way inside, increasing the pressure I was already feeling. "This was probably a terrible idea, Jameson," I get out by the skin of my teeth.

"Why's that?" His voice sounds just as stained as mine. Like he's clinging to his last bit of sanity as he tries to talk.

"Why is everyone so chatty? Fuck, just stop talking to each other, it's very distracting!"

Jameson spans Rory. "You're not running the show here, beautiful. Is my dick not working hard enough for you? I can go more. I was just trying to be nice. "

"Fuck nice, fuck me like you mean it! If you can. I don't think you remember how."

"Oh, you're gonna fucking get it. Holden, it's time."

"For?" he asks.

Jameson wags his eyebrows, and apparently that means something.

"Fuck yeah!" Holden tells, jumping up to get one of their bags. "I've waited so long for this. Okay, I'm going to need everybody to take off their pants and grab one of these..."

I'd like to say everyone had a protest, but as it turns out, we're all very kinky assholes who need very little convincing.



Beau

“They’re awfully loud in there,” I comment.

All sorts of debauched things seem to be happening as I make sure that Everly is going to be good for a bit in her temporary room.

“You think it’s as dirty as it sounds?” Ari asks, closing Everly’s door.

We pause in the hallway, baby monitor stuck in my back pocket.

“I don’t know. Sometimes your imagination can make some pretty colorful images if you let it.”

We close our eyes, listening to Donny scream something about chickens and then Rory follows yelling at him about using the lamp inappropriately. No idea what that's about.

Then there's something from Brett about too many cushions, followed by a loud thump that sounds like several large bodies fell off the bed.

"On second thought, I'm not sure I want to go in there at the moment," I admit.

Ari shakes his head, right as Bennett walks out of the room in his underwear. He hands us a pink feather, telling us we might need that if we're going in.

"You're going to fucking take it!" Jameson yells, and I sincerely hope he's not speaking to Rory that way. That's what makes me run into the room, but what I see makes me stop immediately.

"What the *fuck* is going on in here?"

My eyes are open so wide that my eyeballs are at risk for popping out their sockets and just dangling on my face.

They go dry as I start choking, needing to close my eyes and turn away.

"We can explain," Rory says meekly. There's scuffling, so I feel it's safe to turn around. I catch Brett with his pants down, hand no longer on his cock. He looks ashamed.

"I expected better from you. Not from them, I expected this from them," I say, pointing at Donny and Felix. "They're fucking weird sometimes in bed. You're just supposed to be the normal kind of kinky."

"Don't kink shame us. Join us instead," Jameson says. He looks like he's buried in Rory's ass. Probably because he is buried in Rory's ass.

"Might need to sanitize some stuff first," I mumble, looking for a clean place to step. Thank fuck this rental has hardwood floors.

"Fuck. Didn't think he'd actually do that," Donny says as he rocks himself in the corner.

“Rory, babe, you good?”

She gives me two thumbs up and wipes the sweat from her brow. There’s a shit ton of cum leaking out of her, and it’s hot enough to make me try and forget what was happening in the rest of the room just now.

“We won’t speak of this again. Not at mealtimes, and for fuck’s sake not in front of anyone not a part of this bond. NEVER fucking in public. You hear me?”

“Yes, Beau,” they all mumble.

“Good. Rory, you got any more orgasms in you?”

My brother smacks me across the back of the head as he walks by to retrieve some water, bringing it over to Rory. “We don’t ask her that, man. Never. She *always* has more orgasms in her.”

I guess that’s true. It’s just a matter of perspective.

Unsurprisingly I’m no longer hard and achy, so I let my bondmates take Rory while I wait, then when I’m sure that she’s done, when I’m sure her body is probably at risk of establishing like three more pregnancies from the amount of cum currently inside of all her orifices, I take it upon myself to get her clean. I hold her in the shower and prop her up, accepting help from Caden when he joins us.

Like always, he’s so tender with her, kissing her in between sudsing her up.

“Instructions weren’t clear,” Caden says. “Are we allowed to talk about what just happened in this shower?”

I can’t help the bark of laughter that escapes me. “You guys are a bunch of fucking sickos.”

“Goddess it was fun though,” Rory says with a dreamy smile on her face.

There’s a moment of panic when I wake up, because I’m still sleeping, and I’ve been that way for far too long according

to the time. I was on baby duty last night, so I should have been woken hours ago for a feeding and change, but the monitor is decidedly silent.

Shit.

I scramble out of bed and run headlong out of the room, aiming for the hallway so I can check on the baby. It's possible she just slept for a really long stretch, or maybe somebody else was up early and grabbed her, but I won't be able to breathe normally until I see for sure.

I catch Holden walking out of the baby's room, empty laundry basket in hand. "Rory's got her. They were out back last I checked."

"Thanks," I say with a sigh of relief.

I use the bathroom since I'm right next to it anyway, then wander into the kitchen where I know I'll find some coffee. My heart is finally slowing down from waking up terrified, but everything returns to normal when I look out the window above the sink and see Rory and Everly together.

It's a bit brisk in the mornings right now, so Rory's got Everly swaddled up in a comfy blanket as she cradles her, wearing somebody's sweatshirt that's basically a dress on her. Rory's hair is up in a messy bun, and she's got sweatpants on, but the look on her face as she talks to Everly is breathtaking.

I have no idea what she's talking to her about, but she's having fun doing it. She's got Everly held up in front of her so she can see her face to face, and every few seconds she leans in and brushes their noses together before she'll walk a few more feet and find something new to look at and presumably talk about.

"They look so damn cute together." Brett walks up behind me, hands on my hips, chest against my bare torso.

I've got a big smile on my face, because they really do. "Freaked me out when I woke up and I realized what time it was. Rory should be sleeping in—why was she up so early?"

"Who knows with that one. I'm sure she'll be napping later to make up for it, though."

I keep watching Rory until she notices me, then she blows me a kiss and comes inside.

“Morning, Beau.”

She comes in for a kiss and gets shoved in between me and Brett for doing so.

“You got one of those for me, too?” he asks her.

“Always,” she smiles, reaching up to kiss Brett.

Jameson walks into the kitchen then, putting a mug in the dishwasher. “You ladies have a nice walk?”

“Sure did,” Rory says as she walks over to the cabinet to get a mug down, handling Everly with one arm like a damn pro.

“Here, I got that. You go sit, babe.”

I warm up some milk in the microwave before adding some of the vanilla syrup she likes and adding just a touch of coffee since she can't have too much caffeine now that she's pregnant, getting myself a regular coffee in the process.

When I get to the living room where she walked off to, Brett is laying on the ground playing with Everly while Rory watches, sitting on Jameson's lap.

“Here,” I say, offering her mug.

“Thank you. I could have gotten it though, you know.”

“And? Have you seen how many idle men are here? My hands work great. I like getting you coffee.”

“She knows all about those hands,” Brett reminds me, not even looking up from where he's lying.

Jameson smirks. “I was just telling Rory and Brett that me and the guys have to make a trip into Desert Hills. We've been gone too long apparently, because they're having some staffing issues in the Grace Tech office.”

“You guys need any help?” I ask, trying to be helpful.

“We've got a good number of employees there, should be fine. Unless you want to come check out the offices and get a look around. I know you said you were interested in maybe getting involved with the company?”

I shrug. “Gotta work somewhere, I like the idea of working with you guys.”

“He’s smart as hell, too,” Brett adds. “Good with people. Can’t say I know what it is you lot do when you’re in that big building, but there’s got to be something there that would suit Beau.”

“Not sure how you feel about it, but Holden just had to fire his assistant because—”

“So weird, she just quit,” Holden himself says, looking at Jameson as he walks in the room like he wants him to shut up. They’re dumber than they look though if they think Rory isn’t suspicious.

“What am I missing?” she asks, immediately calling them out.

“Nothing you need concern yourself with. Just work shit.”

“I don’t believe you,” she replies, narrowing her eyes at Holden.

“Fine,” Holden says, hanging his head in defeat. “Made the mistake of taking my assistant on a few dates, a long time ago, and she has been pretty irritating lately because she knows I’m mated now.”

“Be blunt, man. She can take it. Rory,” Jameson says, “his assistant has been basically sexually harassing him and sending inappropriate pictures. She thought she was safe since Holden has been so busy with family stuff lately, but we got a report that she was starting to sleep in Holden’s office, so we had her escorted off site by security. Don’t worry, she lost access to the building and everything, but now Holden needs a new assistant. That’s probably not the kind of work you’re looking for though, is it?” Jameson asks me.

I look to Rory, giving her the chance to respond to everything she just heard.

“Let me see your phone, please,” Rory asks Holden.

“I didn’t say anything to her, I swear.” Holden hands the phone over, and Rory immediately starts digging through it.

“I trust you completely, wasn’t worried about that. Just want to see what kind of shit she’s been saying so I can figure out how I’m going to wreck her.”

Jameson laughs. “You’re so hot. She was humiliated in front of the entire building when they dragged her out, pretty sure she’s good babe.”

Rory’s face turns a little red as she looks through emails, then hands the phone back to Holden. “Bitch is lucky she’s two territories away from me.”

“What do you think about me working for them?” I ask her.

“If that’s what you want to do. I know we can’t all stay unemployed forever. Would solve some problems, I guess. I can’t make business decisions for you guys, though. Not my company, I don’t run it.”

“Would be a good way to start learning about the company,” Holden suggests. “Could also just be a temporary thing until you get the hang of the business side of things. We can move you around later if you want.”

“Yeah, I could do that. I don’t really have any business appropriate clothing, though.”

“You can borrow some of my stuff for now, I think we’re about the same size. I’ve got a bunch of stuff at my place in Desert Hills, too.”

“Did you get a time set up with the movers Ari hired?” Jameson asks Holden.

“Yeah, and I got a real estate agent too, so I can get my place listed soon. You’re welcome to come if you want to, Rory. We’ll only be gone a few days; we could show you off around the office.” Holden wags his eyebrows.

“What about Everly?”

“Pretty sure the five of us can handle a baby for a few days,” Brett informs her. “That’s still a huge number of parents.”

She looks like she’s thinking about it, but maybe is scared to commit for some reason.

“What are you thinking?” I ask, grabbing one of her hands while I take a sip of my coffee.

“Seems selfish for me to leave the rest of the guys here with the baby. I feel like I should be here visiting with my family, not travelling more.”

“But all that aside, do you *want* to go?”

Jameson presses a kiss to the side of her head, mouthing ‘thank you’ to me, for knowing how to handle this, presumably.

“It would be kind of cool to see where all you guys work. I don’t want to be in the way, though. Speaking of where you work, is everything going okay with the connector museum? You guys don’t talk about it much.”

“Yeah, everything is good with that. That takes significantly less focus for us to run, so as long as we monitor staff and make sure our managers are all doing their jobs, we don’t need to be there all that much. Now our main business, Grace Tech, needs a Rory visit. You’re coming for sure,” Jameson says. “You won’t be in the way, and there’s nothing at all selfish about seeing the company. Got lots of people that want to meet you, and you can walk through all of our houses and stuff before the movers get to it to see if there’s any furniture or anything you want us to keep. Otherwise we’re just packing up clothing and personal items and selling or donating the rest.”

Now they’ve hooked her. She might not say it outright, but she’s asked questions here and there about what kind of place all of us lived in before meeting her, and since I think the apartment Felix and I shared is the only one she actually saw, I know she wants to go just so she can satiate her curiosity.

“I only have the clothes I travelled in, though. Might have a few nicer dresses at Laney and Ben’s I could take, but I don’t even know what I would wear if I was going into the office.”

“You don’t need anything fancy. Whatever you’re comfortable in.”

“Someone want to run me over there so I can raid the closet? I’m bound to have something there that still fits.”

“Can we schedule a shopping trip at some point?” I suggest. “She’s going to need maternity clothes soon anyway.”

Jameson winces.

“What’s that face for?” Rory accuses.

“I forgot to mention we had a whole wardrobe ready for you at the new house. Consider it a mating gift.”

“And the house? What the hell is that, then?” She’s smiling so I know she’s enjoying this, but Jameson looks uncomfortable.

Until he doesn’t. He straightens his shoulders and puts on a smirk instead. “We don’t need an excuse to spoil you. We have the money; we’re going to do what we want with it.

“Ugh, have I mentioned that it’s annoying how rich you are?”

“You might have,” Holden says with a smile. “So you’re really going to come with us?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I just want to check with the other guys to make sure they’re good with me leaving. They probably won’t like me leaving.”

“We’ll be back the day after tomorrow, Rory. They can handle it.” I want to reassure her because sometimes she needs to be selfish and just do what she wants to do without worrying about how her decisions affect the rest of us.

So it goes that we all get aboard a plane later in first class, something I would never have done otherwise. Rory gobbles up the books that Felix and I picked out for her at the store, gleefully taking them out of my hands once we’re up in the sky.

It’s not a long flight, and it’s only early afternoon when we land. After all the rough travel we’ve done with the big heavy backpacks, it’s a nice change of pace to be wheeling suitcases instead and using drivers to get places.

Rory ended up finding a long floral dress in her closet back home that she wore, and it’s adorable how her fingertips keep grazing the pale-yellow fabric, swishing it around her legs. I think she’s nervous because she spent about forty-five minutes doing her hair and makeup before we left, when normally she’s a ‘let it air dry’ type of girl who might wear mascara and

eyeliner if she's feeling it. So we all make sure we tell her how beautiful she looks and watch her confidence rise.



Charlie

When we walk in the door for our office building downtown, it feels like it's been forever since we've been in it. I know we've been in near constant contact with who we need to be to make sure that everything is running smoothly, and I know that we're still working remotely to schedule security jobs and answer emails and other shit, but I almost can't relate to the guy I used to be that holed up in here so much before.

Before Rory came into our lives, I think I spent more time in the office than I did in my apartment, because I hated being somewhere empty and cold even more than I hated being around people.

Now that Rory is with us though, I try to imagine what she thinks of everything in the building—I'm second guessing the placement of desks on the floor when we get off the first elevator, wondering if the employees we have here are good enough for her to interact with, asking myself what I was so scared of before, because every time Rory brushes my hand or smiles at me it's like I have short term memory loss. All I know in those moments is the elation that floods my system for a few seconds.

Rory calls hello back to people that greet us, doing her thing and being a normal ray of sunshine. That makes me wonder what people think of us together— we're pretty opposite.

Let's just call it like it is. I'm getting older.

My beard and my hair are mostly silver already even though I'm still in my late thirties. It's difficult to not feel self-conscious next to Rory when we're in public, because she's so fucking beautiful and young, and even though I know we're tied together permanently I feel like she could do so much better. Sucks for her that she didn't figure that out sooner though, because she's fucking mine.

I've got my hand on Rory's lower back as we make our way up to the top floor where we all have offices, Rory looking around as we go, taking everything in. I let Ari take her to his office first to show her around and introduce her to his assistant, leaving me time to boot up my computer and dust off the desk a bit.

It feels cold in here, even though there's weak sunlight filtering through the big window that looks over the city.

"I'm quitting again!" Jameson yells from down the hall. "I hate it here, let's run away together, Rory!"

I shake my head and laugh at what a dumbass he is as I hear Holden yell back, since he's right across from him, "Talked about that. You have to share, and you can't run away. Sorry big guy, you're stuck."

He grumbles and makes some noises of frustration before getting to work.

We're not here long, but we do have a meeting later today to touch bases with everyone and let them know about the personnel change. We also need to update them on the schedule that me and the guys were able to come up with for when we get back to our new normal.

We're planning on being at the office far less, so that we can do most things remotely once we're at the new house. We figure once we're set up there, we can all take turns coming out once a week to handle anything that needs our attention in person, which means that I'll only have to actually be here physically for a few days a month. Since the four of us all co-own the company, we're able to handle any problem that might need attention on those few days we're in.

Holden waves as he leads Beau down the hall, saying he's going to show him the research and development lab so he can start getting him used to our processes.

Before I know it, a few hours have already passed and Rory is wandering into my office, pink cheeked like she was getting up to something inappropriate in a place of business. Sweet. My turn.

"Got a spot for you, right here." I pat my knee as she walks further into my office, losing interest in the random plaques on the wall and boring ass books on the shelf.

"Consider me very impressed that you guys have created all this."

"Oh yeah? You want to show your appreciation?"

There's a knock on the door, my assistant Isaac there to remind me that there's a meeting in five. Hard to forget that information though when you're literally the one that scheduled the meeting.

"Got it man, thanks."

He nods, and I definitely don't like the way he looks at Rory like she shouldn't be there, but luckily she doesn't seem to notice.

"Tell me again how I'm not in the way here?" Rory asks as Isaac slinks away. I watch him do it, my hackles rising.

“Because we say you’re not, that’s why.”

“I guess I’ll just hang out in here while you guys go talk shop. Is there somewhere I can grab a water or something?”

“Yeah, we’ll get you something, but you’re not sitting out here by yourself while we work. If you want something to entertain yourself with you can use my tablet— I put a reading app on there earlier for you. Otherwise, you’re a part of this business now, so you’re more than welcome to just listen in to the meeting and offer any input you think of. Now come here, baby.” I lead her down the hall to the little lounge we’ve got, grabbing a bunch of snacks for her to munch on during the meeting. I tow her down the hallway, right into the conference room and put her right between Jameson and me.

“Ooh, snacks? Nice!” Jameson tries reaching for one of her pretzel bags, and Rory no joke *hisses* at him.

I start dying of laughter as Jameson holds his hands up in the air, then Rory takes a small scoot closer to me. She dumps her snacks in my lap for safekeeping. “Don’t let him get these.”

I’m still laughing as the last person we’re waiting on walks into the room, one of our guys we’ve had helping to run things while we’ve been with Rory. Colin has been with the company for a long time, so he’s been a huge help while we’ve been taking care of family stuff.

I look around the room to see that a lot of the employees are staring at me; my first thought is that I spilled coffee on my shirt earlier, but there’s nothing there.

“You’re smiling and it’s freaking people out,” Jameson stage whispers to me.

“Oh. That’s all? Let’s get this going. I don’t think any of us want to be in this room longer than necessary.”

“There he is,” Colin mumbles with a smile.

“Alright, thanks for assembling on short notice,” Ari starts, sending a wink to Rory.

Isaac stumbles in the door, carrying two cups of coffee. I guess we didn’t have everyone we needed to begin. Oops.

He walks towards the chair I always sit in for shit like this but stops mid step when he sees Rory sitting in the chair that he was probably going for. Usually I sit by my assistant so I can talk to him about things I need to remember later, or because I hate taking notes and I basically pay him to do that, but I don't feel like taking notes today.

“You okay there, Isaac?” Ari asks, the whole room now watching him glitch out.

“Oh, um. Yes. Sorry, I just think it would be easier if I sat next to Mr. Corbin so I can do my job.”

Rory starts getting up, embarrassed to be called out in front of everyone. Jameson and I both clamp a hand down on a leg to keep her where she is though. “She's staying. I trust you to know what to do in a meeting, just catch a seat down there and we can conference after if we need to.”

“Right...” he mumbles, doing just that. Except that when he gets to his seat he realizes he's still got two cups of coffee in his hands, so he has to walk back to where I'm sitting and deliver one to me.

“Thanks.”

He nods and finds his seat, and a slightly irritated Ari tries again. “As I was saying, thanks for getting here quick. I know most of you already know about the whole personnel switch from my email I sent this morning, but this is Beau Redding. He'll be taking over as Holden's assistant for the time being. He's going to need your help to get used to how we do things around here and to learn about the company, but he's a good guy and we're excited to have him on the team. Be gracious with him while we train him.”

Everyone gives a polite welcome clap, and I try to decide if anyone doesn't clap like they really mean it, but I decide they're all safe. For now.

“Colin has been holding down the fort admirably while we've been out of the office, and after touching bases with a lot of the employees here, we've decided to promote him to take on more responsibilities permanently.”

Colin nods and smiles, waving at the second round of applause he gets. He's well liked here, and he works hard so he's been a life saver for us.

"I would also like to thank you all, since you represent all the heads of the departments in our company here, for handling yesterday's theatrics so well. Holden's former assistant Kat is being out processed by HR, and we're happy to hear no one was injured while security had to remove her.

"As you all know, we started this company a long time ago as a way of securing our future. Me and my bondmates all have different strengths that made sense to combine for the creation of Grace Technologies, and whether you've been with the company six months or six years, you're valued.

"I like to keep our personal life separate for the most part, but we really wanted all of you to meet Rory, our new mate. She's just finished her Territory Walk, and we're planning on settling down at a new home over in the Historical District.

"That's obviously a long way from here, several hours by car in fact, but with Colin's presence here in the office, and the four of us rotating office visits for three days a week, we feel pretty confident that the company is going to continue to thrive.

"We're taking a step back from most of the client functions so we can spend time with our new daughter and also spend time with Rory, so you're going to be seeing less of our faces around here.

"That does not mean that we are less reachable, we'll still be working remotely, and will be accessible during regular office hours for video calls. Holden is just about done, I believe, securing an avenue where we can video call securely without compromising any of our customers' privacy.

"We know this is a big change, but we've worked so hard for so long, and now it's time for us to step back and enjoy what we've built. If you have any questions or concerns or anything of that nature, please let us know. Any of us would be happy to sit and chat with you to make you feel more comfortable about this switch."

“Will your assistants be expected to travel then?” Isaac asks. He’s got a pencil in his hand that is currently snapped in half and he’s trying to appear calm, but I know his ticks. He’s pissed.

“Maybe occasionally, but you’ll be well compensated if we do require it,” Holden pipes in. “Your day-to-day schedules shouldn’t change. The four of us will still be fielding client bids and working directly with our research team to ensure our equipment is always up to date and that it stays as a leader in the industry for security devices, we’ll just be doing it via video so that we can be where we really need to be.”

Most everyone looks pretty comfortable with this, and I know that it’s because most of our employees are truly good people that are happy that the four of us have finally found something good for ourselves.

The meeting devolves into shop talk, discussing a big event the company is providing security for in the next few weeks, all of us touching bases to make sure that we’ve got the logistics already planned out and ready.

Rory sits and happily munches her snacks while trying to take everything in, Beau taking notes like a mad man.

When the meeting finally breaks up some time later, Rory excuses herself to find the bathroom, while the four of us get caught up talking with some of our employees that have clarification questions.

I try to keep an eye on Rory, but once she walks down the hall, I obviously can’t see her any longer. I kind of have to be a boss right now, so I stay where I am, even though I’m itching to follow her. How much trouble can she really get in though, in a building I own?

When we’re all finally free of everyone and ready to leave the office for the day and go find food, I realize Rory has been gone longer than she should have been, but she’s not in any of our offices. A lot of people are heading out for the day, so I get Holden to track her on the cameras we’ve got absolutely everywhere in and around our building.

My mind immediately goes straight to the attempted kidnapping at the grocery store, making me distrust everyone

around me. Did we underestimate Bernadette?

My panic spiral ends quickly thanks to our tech, because it doesn't take long to track her. We find her stuck outside on the street, glaring into one of our more obvious cameras. Fuck, she looks pissed.

“What the hell is she doing out there?” Holden asks, but we don't stare at that screen any longer. We're fly down to the lobby to collect our pregnant mate who's standing on the sidewalk, unprotected, in a foreign city.

We open the door, and she stomps towards us with so much anger that I'm ready to start apologizing and begging. I have no idea what I fucking did, but that's not important.

“What. Took. You. So. Long?”

“We were in the meeting, I thought you were just going to use the restroom?”

“I was! Then that asshole told me— did you actually need me to run that errand for you?”

Holden grabs her and picks her up, striding back inside. “What errand, doll?”

“I knew it! That fucking *bastard!*”

“Who am I firing for you, Rory?” Honestly don't even care about hearing their side of the story.

“Your assistant, Charlie. He told me that you asked for me to run down to the lobby and get an important package that was just delivered while we were in the meeting, but when I got here...never mind. It was clearly a ruse, which makes no sense because he has to know that you'd find out so that doesn't even make sense. Security came and said I couldn't be in the lobby, and I didn't have my phone on me to prove I was who I said I was, so I got locked out.”

“Bradley!” I bark, striding towards the security booth hidden in the lobby. It's right between the lobby and the parking garage entrance, so he can keep an eye on the comings and goings of everyone. What were the chances everyone that could have vouched for Rory's identity drove today, so had no reason to exit through the doors that Rory was stuck outside of?

“There a reason you kicked our fucking mate out of the lobby and made her stand outside alone?”

He shrinks back from me, eyes wide. “Your what?”

“What the fuck just happened, because from where I’m standing you’re out of a job.”

He starts shaking. “No, please, I was just following orders! They came from your assistant, said there was a trespasser and that she was to be removed.”

“Rory, up to you. You want us to fire him, we’ll do it right here. If you’re a better person than we are though and believe him, he’ll be fucking apologizing on his knees for you before we go back upstairs to fire somebody else.”

“Up to me? Why? You know what? Fine. Let’s go talk to the perpetrator and get his story and see what happens. I don’t think you should fire this guy though if he really didn’t know.”

“He should have listened to you though when you said you were there with us.”

“I just saw her poking around behind reception and assumed she was doing something she wasn’t supposed to, and I’d never seen her before, so...”

“Protocol is to call up if there’s a personnel issue, not remove them immediately without confirmation from one of the four of us. Especially when they claim to be our mate and are covered in connector marks. We sign your paychecks; you know that, right?”

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Corbin. I never would have— if I knew she was with—”

“Get back to your fucking job. We’ll be in touch once we calm down and figure out what we want to do.”

Holden is just holding on to Rory and glaring, staying out of my verbal spar, but he remembers what I said. “You better fucking apologize to Rory.”

I want to crack a smile when the guy actually drops to his knees and blubbers out a sincere sounding apology, but Rory is mortified and waves him off, burying her face into Holden’s neck so she can try and get away from the situation. I hear her

whispering to him to just get her out of the lobby, so we climb back up the floors so I can try and catch Isaac before he leaves for the day.

Sometime over the course of the elevator ride, Rory convinces Holden to put her down. She's still quite angry of course, and it's probably an inappropriate time to get hard, but that doesn't prevent it from happening. We obviously apologize for not realizing she was missing sooner, but she waves us off. Pretty sure she already knows to what lengths we'd go to take care of her, so she knows how bad we feel.

When we get off the elevator, Isaac is standing there with a box of his things. He's smirking like he thinks this whole situation is funny, and he looks far too relaxed. "Did you enjoy your walk?"

Rory turns to me, and says, "There's no way I'd survive in jail, so I'm going to let you handle this one." She turns back to the guy whom I'm realizing I don't know at all. "I don't know what your problem with me is, but that was uncalled for."

She takes a deep breath and walks away, proving once again how much better than me she is. I watch Jameson pull her into his office, then wait for the door to close as I tell myself to rein in my temper.

"You want to explain yourself, Isaac?"

"Look, I've been your assistant for years now. I've tried everything to be informed, to be the best assistant you've ever had, and all you've ever done is bare minimum for me. I don't know what the hell is so special about that girl that's got all four of you up in knots, but I want no part of it. I was hoping this job would boost my career, and here I am getting relegated to the back of the conference room like an intern. I didn't deserve that. It was humiliating."

I rub my face. "Are you serious right now? You're acting out because your ego is hurt? News flash, compared to her, you're nothing. I don't know if you thought you'd ever get more from me than a work relationship, but that was never gonna happen. If you're so delicate that me having my pregnant mate sit next to me instead of across the room from me is too much for you to handle, then you have no business working for me. What you

just pulled there, sending her on an errand and having her kicked out of the building? Really fucking childish.”

He picks up his box of stuff and starts walking towards the elevator, but then he stops and drops everything on the floor, turning around to me and Holden again. “Did you know that I knew Grace? That’s why I applied here in the first place. I went to school with her, we were pretty close when we were younger. She doesn’t deserve to have this new, younger woman be flaunted in here with so much disrespect. That naïve woman doesn’t hold a candle to Grace, and it’s disgusting that you are moving on like Grace never existed. How sweet, you’re a new insta-family. It’s *disgusting*. You should be ashamed of yourselves. She’s just a young, dumb connector with no idea about how things work in real life, I can just tell by the way she looks at everybody. I feel sorry for you guys that you’ve tied yourself to her, because you’re going to be regretting that so damn soon.”

Holden steps forward, fists clenched. There’s a quiet fury radiating in his voice, lacing every word with intensity that has Isaac blanching a little. I watch Holden look into the security camera directly behind Isaac, having enough brain real estate not overcome with rage to resist punching this asshole like he really wants to.

Part of me assumes that was Isaac’s plan, to provoke an attack. No doubt us punching him on camera would resolve in a big HR nightmare, and a hefty severance package, and/or a lawsuit. Fuck that. I put my hand on Holden’s shoulder to help him stay calm.

“You know *nothing* about the Grace that we knew. You know *nothing* about Rory. We cannot allow you to sit here on our property and speak like that about either of our mates. I don’t need to defend our choice to you, because you’re *nothing* to us. You’re just a bitter, ex-employee who’s going to have a hell of a time finding work in this city when we let all of our business contacts know how fucking awful and sour you were when you left. If you think you’ve got everything figured out, then grab your shit and get out of here. If you were a decent person, you would have taken five minutes to talk to Rory and see the light that she brings to everybody around her. You could have asked

her about Grace and known that her connector abilities have allowed her to contact Grace in the realm that she now exists. You'd know that Grace has sent Rory to us, and that she's fucking *everything* to us. We would be nothing without her, and now you'll be nothing without us."

Isaac flips us off as he gets on the elevator, but I don't miss the flash of fear on his face when the doors close and his face remains un-punched. Now I'm wondering if there's anybody amongst our bonded guys that I can poach as an assistant, so I don't have to deal with this shit again. Oh my goddess, kind of want to hire Donny just so it would be so chaotic around here. Can you imagine the trouble he would cause? That might be worth dealing with to subject him to everyone else here.



Holden

After alerting security that Isaac is no longer employed here, I take a second to wipe him from the system and revoke his security clearance, deciding we'll figure out Charlie's assistant position later. Maybe we'll get somebody else from the bond group just to make it easier. Kind of want to hire Donny without telling Charlie just to fuck with him, because that shit would be so damn entertaining. But that's something to talk about later; right now I need to get Rory in my arms and get her fed.

I don't bother knocking on Jameson's door even though it's closed, because there's nothing in there that I haven't seen before.

I have seen this before, but I'm going to watch anyway.

Beau walks past me and brushes a kiss against Rory's mouth, taking a second to bury his face in her neck before straightening out. "Think I'm just going to watch this time, boys. Brett gave me a fucking hickey on my dick before we left, and it's not happy about it. If you need me, I'll be in the corner creeping on all of you touching our connector."

Jameson gives me a wave without pulling his mouth away from his current task, which includes eating Rory out while she's spread across his desk.

Can't see much from the angle I'm at, just her knees up in the air and Jameson's head, so I get closer. Ari and Charlie are still talking about what just happened with Isaac, and I could sure use a little stress relief.

I walk up to Rory gently, so I don't startle her out of the headspace that Jameson is working hard to keep her in. "Just wanted you to know he's gone, baby. I'm sorry you had to deal with that. You did so good. Sorry it took us so long to see you out there, we're gonna make it up to you."

"You're good," she moans. She gestures to Jameson. "He's got the tab; we're all paid up."

I watch Jameson slip some fingers inside of her, and then decide that the arm Rory is trying to muffle her mouth with could be replaced by something much nicer.

What? I meant my mouth, obviously. I'm not just gonna walk up and stick my dick through her lips. That'd be rude.

That's what I'm thinking anyway, but apparently my brain is no longer in control of the rest of my body, because I find my hands unbuckling my belt and pulling myself out.

Rory's head is at that great angle for giving head, hanging almost upside down off the back of Jameson's desk. I use that to my advantage as I slide myself against her tongue, starting with shallow thrusts to get her used to me being there.

"*Gods*, you look so good like this. This is the best damn thing Jameson's ever had on his desk before."

She pulls off of me and glares at Jameson. "How many women have been where I am?"

His eyes are soft and crinkly, loving seeing her get a little riled up and jealous. “Just you baby. I never messed around in my office; this company is too important to me.”

She relaxes. “Oh, so that was just a dig against Jameson’s work? Got it. Resume,” she commands, opening her mouth for me again.

I get lost in the heat of her mouth, sliding slowly towards the back of her throat until I’m tipping into it and sliding down it slightly. She’s barely even gagging, and I can’t help the sounds coming out of me as I bottom out, but I feel kind of bad that my balls are just sitting on her face.

There’s a mental image for you. Beautiful girl, balls on her face.

I reach down and shove the top of her dress under her breasts so that they’re trussed up and begging for attention, helping myself to the softness of them as I lean forward and start massaging them.

Eventually Charlie and Ari make their way into Jameson’s office, looking irritated and like they need to check on Rory, but what they see is her screaming out her climax from Jameson around my cock, her back arched and legs wrapped around his head.

I pull myself out of her mouth and then lean forward to kiss her, tucking my painfully erect cock back into my pants.

Jameson helps Rory sit up and correct her clothing, sharing a dirty kiss with a mouthful of her cum.

She looks nice and relaxed now, but when she stands up on shaky legs she narrows her eyes at me. “You could have finished, you know.”

“I’ll survive, not the first time I’ve been around you with blue balls.”

She sinks to her knees in front of me and pulls me back out. “Let me take care of you? Please?”

“Fuck Doll, you begging to suck me off?”

“I am if it’s going to get me what I want.”

“Just give her your dick so we can feed her already,” Jameson says as he wipes off his face with some paper towels.

Ari walks up behind to support me, which is good because Rory doesn't waste any time deep throating me. Every time she takes me in, Jameson's office is echoing with a cacophony of squelching.

“You gonna swallow me down baby? If you don't want to, then tap out now.”

Rory stares me down in challenge, redoubling her efforts as she brings a hand to the base of me, working me hard and fast as her perfect little mouth attacks me with fervor. Her tongue is sweeping all over the crown with each pull, her cheeks hollowing as saliva runs down her chin and tears run down her eyes. She's completely wrecked, and I fucking love it.

I give in, shooting my load down her throat as Ari holds me up and kisses my neck.

I sag against him while reaching a hand to Rory so I can help her up off the floor. She wraps her arms around me, putting me in the middle of an Ari and Rory sandwich. All the tension left over from today's crazy events are gone.

“That was perfect love,” I say kissing her and loving that I can taste myself on her. “You always take such good care of all your mates, don't you? How about we get you cleaned up so we can take you out?”

Her stomach rumbles, and she's eager to obey.

We take Rory to one of my favorite restaurants in the city, a place I just happen to be an investor in because my buddy is the chef here. It's got a warm and fun environment, but the food is killer.

The menu doesn't subscribe to any certain type of food, it's kind of a random collection of different tastes depending on what the chef feels like creating. They offer everything from fried chicken, to pasta dishes, to the most incredible burgers you'll find around.

Rory's eyes are huge as she scans the menu, and I order a few bottles of wine for the table with some sparkling water for Rory.

Once Rory decides what she's gonna eat, I pull her through the kitchens so I can introduce her to Hank.

Of course he loves her, gushing over how cute she is, making her sample all kinds of things before shooing us out so he can keep working. Our food's not quite ready yet at that point, so I take her to another cool feature of the restaurant, a wall full of little cubbies big enough to hold a rolled-up piece of paper in each of them.

"Here take this, write down something good you wish will happen to somebody, then you're going to roll it up and find somewhere to put it."

"But all the holes are filled."

"Much like you earlier, and yes." She smacks my arm. "You pull out the wish already sitting there, exchanging it for yours."

"Oh I love that. Okay, let me think."

I watch as she writes down, *'my wish for you is that your dreams tonight bring you somewhere magical, and that you get to experience something in them that you've always wanted to do.'*

"Alright, now which one do you want, baby?"

She points at one that's pretty high up, so I lift her so she can reach. She grabs the roll that's in there and replaces it with the one she wrote. I swing an arm around her shoulder as she unrolls her pick.

"*'My wish for you is that the next chapter of your life is the happiest yet.'* Well that's fitting," she says, smiling now as she kisses me on the cheek.

"It really is. Our end of the road is looking pretty good, isn't it? Come on, let's go eat."

Dinner goes great, even though we're all feeling the absence of the rest of the guys. Hank is able to stop by again after we've finished to chat for a minute, bringing a whole tray of desserts with him, insisting Rory must try them all before anybody else.

Since my place is closest, we decide to just crash there, completely unwilling to even consider all going to our separate residences.

It's funny how just maybe a few months ago that the four of us living completely separate lives was the norm, and me thinking about sleeping at one of my bondmates' houses would feel like an odd thing to do. But here I am now, holding hands with Ari, my arm wrapped around Rory's waist, while she's linked with Jameson on the other side. Beau is talking to Charlie in front of me, and we're all just laughing about stupid things that don't even matter.

"Stereotypical rich boy penthouse," Rory says, trying to sound unimpressed when we get to my place.

"Okay, but this view is pretty cool," Beau says.

"How do we want to do this? There's a king in my bedroom, I've got two guest rooms with queens..."

Rory looks around the room then looks to the windows overlooking the city, all the lights and cars moving down below. "Can we bring the mattresses out here and move the couches out of the way? It would be kind of cool to fall asleep right here, looking out over all the lights."

"Slumber party!" Jameson yells as he runs down the hall.

He's slept over a few times when he's been at the office too late, so he's probably the most comfortable here. The other guys have been here of course, but if we ever hung out, it was usually at Ari's place since he had a proper house with his ex-wife.

The lot of us start moving furniture around as Rory calls her other guys, sprawled along my couch with her hair hanging over the edge, giggling and telling them about her day.

It's kind of nice that the last image I'll have of this place before I give it up is a happy one—right now it's not a sterile environment devoid of happy people, it's got a bunch of people that genuinely care about each other having fun and fighting over who gets to spoon Rory.

I take some mental snapshots of Rory being passed around and tickled as she tries to talk to her other mates, not spending

much time on who will live here after me. I'm focused on the future, of the home that I haven't had in years, and all the shit I want to do in it.

Maybe it's weird that I'm looking forward to having to maintain the lawn and make minor repairs here and there or unclog drains, but all that comes with the territory of living an actual life, not squandering away precious years as a sort of recluse that's too scared to get close to anybody.

Whatever comes next will be a hell of a lot better than the years I spent in this apartment.



Bennett

I tuck myself into bed, feeling very hetero as Donny spoons me.

“Who’s turn is it tonight?” he asks around a yawn.

“Felix. He took a picture earlier of the slip of paper and texted it to Rory, so she’s had a few hours now to think about how she’s going to let it all play out.”

“Hmm. He’s probably going to do something lame and take us to the beach or something. He’s obsessed with their cute as hell origin story.”

“Wrong, fuckers!” Felix yells as he runs into the room and jumps on top of us. “You have no idea what’s about to happen

here. It's gonna be epic!"

Now we're a very hetero *three-man* nest of spoons, but we'll sleep all the better for it. Didn't understand what my sister's mates were on about when they tried to tell me that they all got friendly during bedroom activities, but there's a sense of comfortability that comes with being around the same people this much, loving on the same woman creates a bond that is impossible to keep distant from.

With Rory gone, sleeping alone would be absolutely terrible. Caden and Brett are on baby duty tonight, so the three of us get the pleasure of whatever Felix's pleasure will be.

"Rory sounded happy earlier, on the phone call," I mumble as my eyes get heavy.

"That's because you showed her the baby. She would be miserable otherwise because she's apart from me. I know it."

I roll my eyes at Donny's high opinion of himself, but I know that the only way Rory and him are handling this separation right now is because it's only a few days. There's no high stress involved either, so that makes it easier for the two of them to focus on themselves instead of pining over their connector.

"Yeah, sure, that's it. It's not because her other mates are showing her a good time or anything," Felix says from in front of me.

"I'm so glad you agree with me."

Nobody replies, until a few seconds go by, and we all just start laughing at how stupid we're being.

"Go to sleep so we can see her, assholes." I yawn my way through most of the words, but they come out clear enough.

It doesn't take long until I pass out, warm and comfy as I am in the bed with some of my bondmates.

The first thing I see when I open my eyes is Rory, but when I try to run to her I realize that's impossible, because we're underwater and I have...a tail.

We're all mermaids.

Rory swims towards us, swimming circles around us like she's been doing this her entire life. Since she has the power over all of this I guess it's kind of like cheating so I shouldn't feel too badly that I can't get the hang of it, but fuck if I don't look damn good as a merman.

I take an assessment of myself, noting the rippling muscles, my hair that's down and floating around me in the water, and my tail which is a teal and dark blue color, shimmering.

Rory's hair looks fucking amazing as well, floating every which way as she moves around. She's got the stereotypical seashell bra on with a light pink, pearly tail, and there are matching scales dotting her face above her eyebrow and running over her temple.

"Mermaids?" Donny asks as he looks at Felix. The thing is though, that his voice is full of awe, not judgement. "I've always wanted to be a mermaid," he whispers.

We get all the smooching out of the way before Rory starts swimming away, indicating that we should follow her.

There's a big coral archway we swim under, kelp dripping off of it to create a sort of doorway. Rory stops us before we pass fully through though, a smirk on her cute face.

"Before we go in..." she dissolves into laughter while Felix just sits there rubbing his hands together. I have no idea what's happening.

Rory clears her throat, still trying to keep a straight face, but failing miserably. "Okay, you guys need to wear these so it's clear you're here with me."

She has a bunch of collars on her hand that just appeared. Wait, what?

"Um...what are we doing here, Rory?" I don't usually second guess my mate, but if she's asking to collar me, I'm going to have a few questions.

Rory pops an eyebrow up, and it's somehow not even weird that we can all talk normally underwater. She stares at Felix. "You want to tell them, fish man?"

Felix makes grabby hands at the collars and happily slides one onto his neck. “We’re totally just playing mermaid.”

Rory snorts but doesn’t correct him. “Okay, if that’s the story we’re going with. In that case, these collars are just because you’re all such good little boys.”

I don’t understand my anatomy in this body, but hearing Rory call me that while she fits a collar onto me definitely has me aroused.

“Go get ‘em, boys!”

We follow Felix’s lead through the kelp curtain, and I know it’s not a real ocean, but it’s still pretty incredible. We enter a series of caverns that have what look like tropical underwater plants decorating the surfaces, everything gently swaying with the water current.

Fish dart around and make everyone’s hair flutter, and then dolphins with tailcoats show up and do weird little bows to Rory and Felix, who are suddenly wearing crowns and holding tridents like they’re royalty.

“Right this way, your majesties. Everything has been set up to your exact specifications.”

“Thank you, Harold,” Felix says with his nose up in the air like a proper gent. Again, I’m not phased that the dolphin is talking or wearing clothing, because this all comes with the territory of Rory’s outlandish dreams.

The main part of the cavern has clusters of low-lying rock protruding from the sand, sunlight filtering through the water to provide spotlights on each one that has a pair of mermaids, or a group of mermaids, absolutely fucking like bunnies.

“Do we look? Is that impolite? What is this, a sex club?” Why is nobody else asking these questions?

Donny is swimming next to me, his fiery red tail just a few shades brighter than his hair. “An underwater sex club, I think. Fuck, this is so cool! And they’re all essentially figments of Rory’s imagination, so whether or not you look, I don’t think it matters much.”

He makes a valid point.

The dolphin butler is there to give us a tour I guess, taking us on what would be a leisurely stroll if we had legs. After the main room, we come upon a bunch of smaller rooms that are cordoned off by rock and kelp, so we have to swim through curtains to see them. Big mistake.

The first room has a plaque above it that says, 'Flatworm Fencing'. I'm sure that in real life these creatures are much less human looking, and probably a lot smaller, but maybe in an effort to not be absolute sickos, Rory has made these weird flatworm things to be humanoid with wild patterns on their backs in blues and golds, frills running up and down their sides, swimming upside down.

They're definitely fencing, but it's not with any type of sword. They've both got what looks like a double pronged penis, and they're waving them around, wrestling basically, trying to stab each other with them?

"Why can't I look away?" Beau asks in a horrified voice. "I know there are some weird mating practices in sea creatures because I've seen the documentaries, but...it hits a little different when they look like enhanced humans and are the same size as us."

Felix is cheering the swordman on, and I'm so, *so* confused.

I look down at my pelvis and am even more confused when I see a strange pouch thing that's bulging. "Fuck. Am I...*enjoying* this?"

"I want to penis fence! Which one of you are going to challenge me?" Donny is swimming in place with his dick out, swiveling his hips like he's ready to go. I slink back to the edge of the group, not wanting to get accidentally chosen for a match.

One of the performers finally wraps himself around the other performer and stabs the double pronged penis into its back, a little blood escaping that looks...painful. I wince as the apparent loser gets impregnated, slinking off while the victor flips back around so its strange human/monster head is facing up, flailing his arms about, celebrating its win.

"Well done!" Felix congratulates them, towing Rory along while the rest of us follow, now much more hesitant to get to the

next room.

The dolphin butler presses a button that has a thicker curtain parting to allow us entrance, and bids us have a pleasant time. I shake my head, wondering if I can just look down to avoid seeing what comes next.

“Aww, they’re so cute!”

I snap my head up at Donny’s words, to see a plaque that says, ‘Pacific Striped Octopus,’ where once again we have humanoid sea monsters that this time resemble black and white octopuses. Their skin is a mix of dots and stripes, and this time the theme is oddly sweet. They’re not exactly in a cage, but like the last display, there’s a screen of some sort separating us, so it looks like they are.

The two octopuses are cuddling and dancing, wrapping around each other very sensually. Somehow there are candles dotting around them as they caress each other, trailing tentacles up and down their partner’s body.

There’s also a giant seashell spread out, holding a variety of foods that the octopuses take turns feeding to each other, their mouths where a human’s would be. They play a slight game of cat and mouse until the female, presumably, accepts the suit and allows the slightly larger male to take her.

The humanoid octopus lifts up his arms, and a whole skirt of tentacles inflates, then the female does the same and they come together so that the flat parts of the skirt are flush, and their heads are pointing in opposite directions. They wrap their tentacles all around each other as some violin music starts up, and I’m more than a little embarrassed to admit that I’m definitely aroused.

My cock is sticking out as the two humanoid octopus creatures writhe against each other, tentacles going every which way, making it impossible to know how exactly they’re mating. As they float around the space, their eyes closed in pleasure, I find myself drifting closer to Rory.

“I’m hard, and I’m not sure how I feel about that.”

She giggles and looks down, giving me a passing caress as she swims off, ready for the next room.

Which, did you know right whale females are notoriously kinky? I don't feel right going into detail here, so we're going to skip right over this part.

Finally we're led to a private room clearly set up just for us. It is a sex club though, so by room, I actually mean we end up on a stage.

Felix is the first to swim into place, gleefully strapping himself down onto some sort of mermaid sex chair. What makes it specific to mermaids, you ask? The seashells that look like they're hot glued all over the base of it. Obviously.

I haven't seen Felix get giddy like this before, he's almost channeling Donny.

"Been waiting for this awhile, Felix?" I ask him amusedly.

"You know it! Come on, this is sick!"

I look around to see an audience of random fictional mermaids in the audience, and not one humanoid sea creature, which helps me relax a little.

Chais loungers appear for those of us not currently trapped down to a sex table, and we get to watch as Rory prepares to approach Felix, looking like she's contemplating how she's going to handle hm.

Rory snaps her fingers, and a blindfold appears on Felix, then another snap and a bunch of feather-like creatures start walking up and down Felix's stomach, making him giggle. He's restrained though, so he's pretty stuck.

She turns to the rest of us, smirking as she explains that Felix can't hear us right now. "You guys want to put on a show for him?"

"What are we talking?" I ask, very hesitant after all the strange sex displays we've already seen tonight.

"I'll keep him blindfolded; you guys can just pretend to do a bunch of kinky shit to psych him out."

I laugh, but Donny looks like he wants to *actually* do a bunch of weird, kinky shit. Which, nothing new, right?

“Fuck Rory, what are you doing to that starfish?” Donny exclaims.

Rory looks mortified for a second before double checking that she didn't accidentally pick up a starfish so she could do bad things with it. When she realizes Donny is just trying to play up her ruse though, she takes a deep breath and puts a hand to her forehead to calm herself. “He can't hear us yet, Donny. Don't scare me like that!”

“Why is everyone so quiet? Ooh, Rory, right there. You know how I like it.”

Rory starts laughing again as she swims up to Felix, waving all of the feather creatures away save one, which she picks up so she can control it. She runs it up and down Felix's arm, waving a hand towards us to tell us that he can hear again.

“I do know how you like it,” she says near his ear. We all swim a little closer, even though Beau seems to want nothing at all to do with his brother on a sex table. Fair.

With zero warning she reaches into the little slit we all seem to have and pulls out Felix's mermaid dick, swallowing it down. Well, that just got much more real.

“Having fun, baby?” She asks him.

“So much. You're the best.”

“Fuck! Sharks!” Donny yells.

Felix tries to sit up but is still restrained and Rory rolls her eyes. “Ignore Donny. There are no sharks.”

“What if I want sharks?” Felix asks.

“...Do you?”

“Hmm...can they be friendly?”

“Obviously,” Rory answers him.

“I'll let you know. Put my dick back in your mouth.”

“Stop fucking that clam, Beau! Rory's clam is the only one for us!”

“What the fuck is happening over there?!” Felix exclaims, making Rory pull off him again to laugh.

“I’m so sorry. We were going to pull a prank on you, but Donny clearly doesn’t understand what I was going for.”

“Beau actually is fucking a clam though,” I confirm, looking to the corner of our stage.

“I’m not fucking it! I was trying to get a pearl out of it, and it snapped at me! I’m stuck! Rory! Get this fucking thing off of my mermaid dick!”

Oh boy. “Clams don’t have pearls, Beau.”

“Well forgive *this clam* for not knowing that! It’s still stuck to my dick though! Rory! Aren’t you controlling this shit?”

Felix starts laughing hysterically then, and Rory undoes his blindfold and restraints. “Oh my goddess, yesss. I’ve waited for this day for *SO LONG*.”

“You’re doing *this*? How?” Beau exclaims. Did the tables just turn on all of us?

“By the powers granted unto me by the queen of dreams. Do you remember when we were in ninth grade and our mascot was the fighting clam, and our first day we had gym together ...”

“FUCK YOU! ARE YOU SERIOUS? YOU SET UP THIS ENTIRE DREAM TO GET BACK AT ME?”

“I think I’m missing something...” I admit.

Felix winks at Rory as he swims off the table, which disappears under him, as does the rest of the sex club. We’re left in just an underwater grotto of sorts with coral and normal sea creatures.

“Freshman year of high school, thought I was pretty hot shit.”

“WILL YOU GET THIS SHELLFISH OFF MY JUNK?” Beau yells. Rory takes pity on him and swims towards Beau, wrapping her arms around him from behind. He stares at her like he wants to be angry at her for her part in it, but it’s not very effective because it’s Rory and she’s too damn cute to be mad at. Especially as a mermaid. Plus, she reminds him that she gave Felix partial control, so it really wasn’t her fault. I don’t think even *she* guessed Felix’s true purpose for the scene we’re in.

The clam disappears and Beau immediately gets in better spirits, but he wraps his arms around Rory and backs up like he's going to try and keep her away from his brother, sulking.

“Happy? It's gone. Thank our mate, because I wanted it on there much longer. It's not like it hurt or anything, you're just being whiney.”

“You want a clam to snap onto your fake junk and tell me it's comfortable? Even if it didn't cause actual pain, it was very alarming!” Beau yells back.

We're all just sitting here eagerly waiting for whatever story Felix is going to tell to make it all make sense, letting them battle it out.

“You have deserved that since high school.”

“BUT WHY DID HE SPECIFICALLY DESERVE A CLAM ON HIS JUNK?” Donny yells, the rest of us nodding in agreement.

“Beau was mad at me because the night before school I took the shirt he wanted to wear. So when we had to change into our gym uniform, right as we were exiting the locker room, Beau elbowed me in the side to distract me from the fact that he slapped a big, sparkly clam sticker right over my junk. I was paranoid about gym for some reason, so I was wearing a cup, didn't feel him do it, especially with all of the other students jostling around me.

“Everyone got a sticker from their first teacher of the day, but Beau had been waiting all day to get the chance to get back at me for taking the shirt he wanted; so I went the entire gym class, which was mixed with all grades, by the way, with a big sparkly clam over my dick. Do you know how long I was teased about that?”

Beau starts laughing, remembering. “It was hilarious though!”

“Fuck you, clam dick.”

“Are we all feeling like adults yet?” Rory asks, swimming in circles.

“Wait, so the whole reason we were at an underwater sex club was to set up that one joke?” Jameson asks, trying to make it make sense.

“I had to make sure he wasn’t suspicious!” Felix exclaims.

“Wow. Okay, I would have chosen to do very different things with my time, but you do you, bro.”

Felix looks pretty proud of himself at least. “I feel good about my choices.”

“What you got, Jameson?” I ask, desperate for something less sexual to happen now. Which is not a thought I thought I’d ever have when Rory is half naked.

“You saying you don’t want a bunch of fish and crabs to come out and sing to you about living underwater?” Jameson parries.

“Oh, that’d be epic,” Donny agrees.

“I think we should just cuddle after all that,” I suggest. “Big puppy/mermaid pile. I’ve been traumatized tonight.”

Rory is quick to create what looks like a big oceany nest, swimming towards it and pulling us into it.

“There we go. Now that all that weird brother shit is done, I just want to hold Rory since she won’t be home for a few more days.”

She lays on top of me, and Donny and Felix get on either side of her, the guys she’s with in person not fighting our claim.

I stroke up and down her sides, trying to understand the texture of her underwater skin, when a travelling circus pulls up and starts setting up.

“Sharks!” Donny yells, not lying this time.

We get to spend the rest of our time with Rory watching sharks of all shapes and size hula hoop and swallow fire, then make themselves into big multi-shark pyramids in tutus. They sing, they dance, and they talk about yearning to live on land so they can pet puppies. It’s all super weird and super on-brand for Rory.

I don't want to say goodbye to her when Rory starts kissing us all, because I know it's going to be way less fun to be awake without Rory there. I don't want her to feel guilty for going on the trip though, so I suck it up and tell her I'll talk to her tomorrow.

When I wake up, Felix is in a fantastic mood and bragging about getting Beau back, so I guess he really is happy about his choices.

I'm just excited about the fact I'm one day closer to getting Rory home and that I didn't have to personally experience getting a clam stuck on my fake mermaid junk.



Jameson

I turn the key to my old place, desperately trying to remember what it looked like the last time I was here. I have no idea if it's clean or not.

I do know I destroyed all evidence of previous women before I left this place, so I don't need to worry about that, but this place doesn't represent me anymore.

“You need help with that? Need a big, strong, woman to help you turn the key? It takes a certain finesse to make a lock work.”

I shove the door open and swat Rory on the ass for her sass as she walks over the threshold.

She stops right in the middle of my living room, taking it in.

“I don’t think I pictured you as an art man,” she says in a semi-surprised tone.

The pieces on the walls are pretty eclectic, and they’re likely one of the few things I really want to take with us to our new place.

“What, you figured he’s got enough art on his skin, so he doesn’t want anything on his walls?” Beau asks.

“No, I just...”

Charlie is already in my fridge grabbing a beer, Ari disappeared, no doubt to start packing clothes and shit because he knows I’m lazy and would just as soon replace my wardrobe instead of going through it. No clue where Holden wandered to, probably being nosy.

I shadow Rory, standing close enough to her to feel her body heat, but not close enough to touch. I’m reminded of when we danced at the connector event right before it all went to shit; the way she was staring me down as our bodies mirrored each other, moving together as if magnets were making us do so.

“You want to see my favorite?” My voice is low and intimate, my breath causing goosebumps to flush across her skin.

She doesn’t reply right away, but she turns her head enough to see me. “Who are you, Jameson?”

“I’m yours.”

Her eyes return to the painting she’s stopped in front of.

“I picked this up at a thrift store...It’s likely mass-produced trash, but I had to bring it home.”

We study the painting together, a wilted ballerina holding onto a barre as she melts into the floor. The image in the mirror is perfect and shiny, but the dancer in the foreground gets more deteriorated the farther she is from the reflective glass.

“Why?”

It’s a simple question, wanting to know why I bought it, but I don’t have a strong answer. “She felt sad and broken, and I guess maybe I resonated with that.”

Rory nods and moves to the frame in the hallway.

“I got this one at a farmer’s market that Holden dragged me to once. Not mass-produced trash.”

“Why?”

None of my paintings really go together, they’re all completely different styles and color palettes, the frames don’t even match, which always drove Ari mad, but I didn’t ever want to change them from the way they came to me.

“You see this shadow up here? The artist told me he imagined it to be a heart, you can kind of see the different parts of its anatomy.”

“Why is it black?”

“He said red felt too loud.”

We stare at it, and it’s deceptive. At first glance. It looks like it’s an almost completely black canvas; you have to get close to it to see the different elements.

“Do you have anything from before you lost Grace?”

She spins to face me, all the other guys suddenly giving us space.

“I bought that first one, the ballerina over there? When I was donating some of Grace’s things...so no. It was probably one of my healthier coping mechanisms, to be honest. I guess at some level I was subconsciously selecting images that mirrored how I felt inside. I didn’t think about why I needed them so much at the time I bought them, I just became attached to them and brought them home with me.”

“Which one is your favorite?”

I smile just thinking about the painting I haven’t seen in a long time. “It’s kind of in a weird spot. I was pretty moody when I lived here.”

She steps back and gestures for me to walk ahead, and I grab her hand as I do. We bypass the kitchen and the guest room, past the hall bathroom, through my bedroom, and into my closet that I bought the place for. It’s disproportionately large compared to the other rooms in the house, but I turned it into a hideaway.

Rory looks around the space painted in a dark charcoal color, probably wondering why there are no clothes hanging in here.

“I didn’t want anything in here to clutter it. There’s another closet in the guest room I use for clothes storage.”

She looks confused but follows me right to the floor. I’ve got a big circular mattress of sorts on the floor, one meant to be used as a couch alternative to people that don’t want bulky furniture. I’ve got pillows on it because this is my zen place, where I’d always hide when life got too overwhelming.

I pull Rory down beside me and flick the lights off, switching on the ones I had installed that make the ceiling light up just soft enough to make the painting look like it’s glowing.

Rory’s breath hitches as she looks at the painting I have mounted there.

“Where did this one come from?”

“Charity auction.”

Rory starts to sob, alarming me.

“Baby, what is it?”

She gets more and more worked up until she’s completely hysterical, and I’m panicking. It’s not even two seconds before my phone starts ringing, Donny’s face that he programmed in my phone lighting up.

“Yeah?”

“Put her on. Now.”

“What the hell is going on?”

“She’s sad and I need her. Please.”

He sounds so desperate, and I don’t take the time to wonder how he knew she was lying with me at this moment, but it’s clear the bond they share is strong because he knew right away that she was distraught.

“Sorry,” she blubbers, reaching for the phone.

“I’m...okay, Donny, I was just not expecting...get Caden, would you? Switch it to video.”

I take the phone and tap the video button, holding it up for Rory to see the screen as we wait for Caden to appear.

“When did you buy this, Jameson?” Rory asks me, wanting to know about the painting.

“A few years after we lost Grace. Is this another one of those freaky connection things that’s about to blow my mind?”

Her eyes flip to the screen when Caden appears on it, out of breath from running through the house to get to Rory. He’s got the baby propped up against his chest, a spit rag over his shoulder, and Everly looks so fucking cute that I’m hit with a sharp pang of longing, needing to feel that skin on her forehead that’s still a little bit fuzzy from little newborn hairs.

“Caden, do you remember the name of that artist that my mom used to be friends with, the one that would come over and paint in the backyard while we ran around?”

“Uh yeah, Miriam something, right?”

“Yes. Gods, it’s exactly like I remember.”

She grabs the phone from me and flips the camera so it’s facing up, broadcasting the painting on my ceiling. It’s a big, tumultuous garden that’s simultaneously perfectly groomed and full of life and wild.

“Fuck. Who’s place you at?”

“Jameson’s.”

“Wow. It looks like you’re sitting right beside your mom’s actual garden.”

The other guys are in my hiding place at this point, all of us staring at the life-size, realistic painting.

I’m trying to piece things together, but the answer just doesn’t make sense. I drag a chair from my room into my closet so I can see the artwork closer, finding the artist’s name scrawled in the corner. It’s hard to make out since it’s written with paint, but it definitely could be Miriam.

“Your mom knew this artist?” Holden asks, trying to figure it all out himself.

Rory stands up to get closer as well, pointing to a corner of the painting where there's a white ribbon fluttering in the breeze. I've always wondered what it was attached to in the artist's mind, why she left it there.

"That's my dress."

"I'm sorry, what?" Ari sounds like he just doesn't believe her. Honestly, same, kind of.

Rory pulls her phone out of her own pocket and starts a search for something, and I look over her shoulder to see that she's pulled up the website for the artist. It's got a big gallery of photos of her work that Rory scrolls through, scrolling through a lot because this piece is older now, and she pulls up another painting that looks similar to mine, but like the lens was just shifted to the left slightly so we're seeing a different part of the same garden.

This one has the same ribbon floating across the canvas, which is a narrower shape than mine. In this painting, the ribbon is attached to a dress on a little girl, and the dress is completely dirty, covered in mud. The white is only pristine on the part of the ribbon that sticks out onto my painting, the portion that's missing in the one Rory is showing us.

"I don't remember much about her, but mom loved her, and she loved to paint in our garden. Did I tell you my mom had plant magic? That was her connector gift. Grew absolutely everything. Our garden was always incredible.

"Mom would get mad when Caden and I played outside while Miriam was visiting, because she was worried we'd interfere with her process or knock over her canvas or something, but we'd always make a game of running around her.

"Miriam didn't want my face in the painting because she thought that was too personal, but she always told me how much she loved my hair, which has almost always been long like this. You can sort of see some of the crumpled flowers in my hair; I hated it when they'd fall off the stems and land on the ground, so I'd stick anything I found in my hair, no matter how beat up they looked.

“You have my mom’s garden on your ceiling, Jameson. That’s...what? How the fuck does this keep happening?”

There are still tears flowing down her face as she looks up at the painting, lost in her memories. I take Rory’s phone from her and try to make it make sense, reading the about the artist section, and sure enough, it says she’s from Northwest Territory. Even references that one of her favorite muses was a garden of a close friend that she was told repeatedly she couldn’t live in, jokingly.

“The timeline doesn’t even make sense. This was painted years before that auction took place. How the hell did it end up for sale in the same space I happened to need it?”

“Whoever owned it originally must have donated it then,” Charlie says, looking at Rory like...fuck. Like she’s our mate and the goddess actually made her just for us.

I fall to my knees in front of Rory and wrap my arms around her, looking up in wonder. “Always meant to be mine,” I whisper.

She looks down at me and runs her fingers through my hair, smiling at me as she smooths it away from my face. “Starting to think every single one of you are going to have some sort of story like this at some point— some connection to me that defies all logic.”

“Wouldn’t doubt it,” Caden says from the phone.

“Sorry to scare you Donny, I just wasn’t expecting to see my mom’s garden today. It’s been years since I’ve seen a picture of it when it was at its best, and it just hit me hard. Looking up at this painting, it’s like no time has passed at all since it looked like this. The garden is only a shadow of what it used to be now. None of us were very good at maintaining the plants the way my mom could.”

“Just glad you’re okay, Little Dreamer. You scared the shit out of me.”

“Thanks for checking on me.”

Rory starts cooing at the baby, making Donny hold the phone so she can play peekaboo. The baby sort of perks up at Rory’s

voice but is still too young to really understand the game.

“Gods I miss her. Okay, I’m gonna go so we can do what we came to do. We’ve still got to get to Charlie’s place today, I guess.”

“Call us later,” Brett demands.

“Only because you asked so nicely,” she says, blowing a kiss and hanging up. It takes literally zero seconds for Holden to devise a distraction for her.

“You want to see Jameson’s collection of hot pants?”

Rory busts out laughing. “What?”

“Went through a phase. Bought the same pair in like fifteen different fabrics, custom ordered. Was convinced that they were the greatest thing he’d ever worn on his body, and that they did fantastic things to his ass,” Holden explains.

“I feel offended that I haven’t seen you in these spectacular pants.” Rory stares at my lower half, making me feel naked in my joggers.

“I believe he wore them in public one time and got laughed at by three separate women, so he fled home and vowed to never wear them again. But he loved them too much to burn, so they just sit as a shrine in his closet now.”

Holden is way too eager to spill every embarrassing thing I’ve ever done, apparently. “Thanks, asshole.”

Rory is cracking up so at least there’s that, but still.

“Come on Jameson, this is happening.”

I groan, letting her pull me down the other hallway that Holden leads her to. She starts clapping gleefully when she actually sees them, the fabrics in everything from a subtle black on black cheetah print, to red leather, to white denim. Fuck they’re awful. But they really do make my ass look amazing.

“We’re obviously doing a fashion show. I’m gonna go park myself on the couch, and you’re going to try on every damn pair you own so I can see.”

“Must I?”

“Oh *hell* yeah,” she instantly replies.

Rory drops into a seat and looks at me expectantly, steepling her fingers and lifting her eyebrows. Hands on my hips, head thrown back, I’m contemplating so many life choices, but ultimately I know that I’ll give this woman anything she wants.

If Rory wants me to play dress up and show off my ass in some tight pants that I willingly purchased, then I guess there are far worse things for me to complain about.

“Fine,” I whine, stomping off to change.

The second the pants are on my skin, I remember why I was so obsessed with them. Maybe I went a bit overboard ordering so many pairs but staring at my ass and thighs in the mirror, I can’t regret them completely.

Rory wolf whistles at me as I come walking around the corner, and I do the whole model thing, stopping in various poses and angles to show off the goods. It felt random at the time that Holden would bring up these slightly ridiculous pants, but I can see that Rory is no longer lost in her head over memories of her mom, and she’s having fun.

After I try on mostly all of them, removing my shirt when prompted so she can ogle me more, we finally get back on track and go through my old place, checking to see if there’s anything besides my wardrobe I really want to take.

“Damn. I know bachelors have a reputation of living sparsely, but how did you function as an adult with only three plates in your cabinet?”

I box her in against the counter, taking in my sadly empty cabinets. “It just wasn’t a priority to make it comfortable. Felt pointless after losing our home with Grace, because I didn’t want to feel like this was really mine. If this was mine, then she was really gone.”

Rory spins in my arms and pecks me on the lips, swiping her thumb along the stubble on my jaw. “Sorry. I guess I should stop asking questions because it just keeps making you guys re-live the hardest period in your lives. “

“You don’t have to avoid the subject, Rory,” Ari says as he sets down another picture he pulled from the bathroom. “We’ve made peace with it. Maybe it’s a good thing this place is so empty though, makes it easier to move. You want any of this furniture, baby?”

Rory looks around, shrugging. “You guys know more about the new house than I do. Seems silly to buy new furniture though when we’ve got couches coming out of our ears.”

“If you want to re-use some of our stuff, we can. We can also just buy new shit that matches,” Charlie pipes up.

“Not going to rehash the money thing, but if you’re asking my opinion, I’d rather use stuff we already have, but I’m not really bothered either way. Honestly at this point, I just want to move in and let you guys continue to make the decisions, because it’s pretty much the best thing ever.”

“We’re donating then,” I say. “There’s got to be fire stations or shelters or *someone* that needs new furniture, and it will make moving into the new place a hell of a lot easier if we just give the interior designer we hired carte blanche to create new spaces in our house. I want the paintings though, even if it takes a bit to figure out where we put them.”

Rory stares at me for a minute before ducking out of my hold and walking back to the living room. “Jameson, have you touched other women on this couch?”

My cheeks redden and I hit a conflict I’m always trying to avoid.

Ari laughs, the bastard. “Better ‘fess up.”

“I don’t respect this apartment nearly as much as my office at Grace Tech,” I tell Rory, trying to get away with not outright saying I’ve fucked other women on the couch she’s standing in front of.

“That was a non-answer,” Beau unhelpfully says.

“Sure was.” Rory starts circling the couch as if it will reveal its secrets if she stares at it with enough intention. “Yes or no, Jameson? Do I actually want this couch in my new home?”

“I’ve had it professionally cleaned several times.” Which is true.

I was really hoping that I could influence her to get rid of the couch without having to explain why I no longer want my perfectly good furniture that set me back thousands.

Rory doesn’t look like she’s going to drop it, so I decide to give her a more direct answer. “You want to donate it. Really. Ari, set it up.”

“Deal.” Ari types something out on his phone, maybe emailing someone information, then we’re off to Charlie’s townhouse.

But not before Rory kicks the couch a few times, flips it off for letting her sit on it earlier, and trash talking it. I love when she gets frisky.

Charlie’s place is a little less bare than mine but is even less personal than mine was. I know that Charlie has been depressed for a really long time, so I wasn’t expecting his place to suddenly be cheery and welcoming, because I’ve obviously been here before.

It kills me to walk through his rooms though and see how alone he’s been while Holden and I have been trying to move on with other women, and while Ari was fucking married (still wild to think about now that we have Rory).

Charlie doesn’t have much to say about what to do with his things because there’s nothing he’s overly attached to. It’s mostly utilitarian stuff that he bought because it solved one problem or another. He looks almost embarrassed by the empty walls as Rory walks by them, but he’s got us now.

While Charlie is lost to whatever ghosts are haunting him, looking around a place that wasn’t home to him any more than mine was to me, I pull him close and kiss the shit out of him.

“We don’t have to stay here any longer. You saw it again, and you clearly aren’t comfortable here. Just tell us what you want the movers to take and what you want whoever we hire to donate, and we can be done with all this.”

He nods and leans into me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders for support. “This is a sad place, and I don’t want it to leech the life out of Rory. She’s too loud for this space.”

I run him through the rooms quickly, snapping pictures of anything he’s intent on keeping, then I grab Rory and carry her out the door, determined to make tonight more relaxing than the rest of the day has been. We have an early flight out tomorrow, so we all need our sleep.

It’s not until we’re done with our takeout dinner that we ate in Holden’s living room that Rory thinks to ask about Ari’s place.

“Wait. We didn’t do Ari’s house— I thought we were hitting up everybody’s place so we could go through it?”

Ari smirks. “Cora loved that place. It’s going to feel so good to sell it.”

“Did she ever fight to keep it in the divorce?” Rory asks.

“Not after you laid her out in that dream I’m willing to bet,” I laugh.

“She wanted it alright, but there’s nothing I’ve ever wanted less than for her to not have the home I paid for. Her parents live across the street from it, and I’ve turned down their offer of purchase five times as their price got increasingly higher.”

Rory gasps. “What? When did this happen?”

“It’s been an ongoing battle since she signed the papers, but we’ve been busy with far more important things, which is why I never said anything. I never had any intention of Cora getting that place ever again. I’ve sold it to a very nice gay couple who promised to be very loud in their pride, because as stuck up as Cora was, her parents are even worse. They’ll absolutely hate living across from their new neighbors, and it’s going to be wonderful for them. Fuck Cora.” Rory starts cracking up, surprised by Ari’s language. He’s not one to talk shit about other people usually.

“Got to say man, hearing you telling Cora to fuck herself is incredibly therapeutic after all the shit we dealt with while you were together. So you don’t need any help with the house?” I’m relieved we don’t have to go back there. It smells like bitch.

“Since Cora picked out almost everything in it besides my clothing, no. The new homeowners want the furniture, so I included it in the sale. Felt like another win to me for Cora and her family to know that Cora’s dreamhouse is not only occupied by people they’re prejudiced against, but that they’re also using the furniture and shit that Cora drooled over when we brought home.”

“Money hungry bitch,” Charlie mumbles under his breath. Of course this just makes Rory laugh more.

“Okay I’m enjoying this way too much. I guess I’m good with not seeing your place Ari, if it never felt like yours. We don’t need any bad juju from your previous ‘marriage’ clinging onto us.”

“We should make some good juju here then, just to be safe.” Beau stands and starts hooking his phone up to Holden’s speakers.

The band Lowlife comes blaring over the speakers, which I know is one of Rory’s favorite bands, and her face splits into a huge grin as Beau pulls her in to start dancing with him. Lowlife’s stuff is pretty raw and edgy so it’s not the most romantic music, but the lyrics hit pretty deep.

It’s not long before Rory is acting a fool and screaming the lyrics out at the top of her lungs, and it’s a fitting way to spend our last night in Desert Hills. Even if we should be sleeping.

When we’re blurry eyed and sleepy the next morning from staying up late dancing, Rory doesn’t let us leave Holden’s place until we all go in for a group hug.

“Maybe...you shouldn’t sell this place. I kind of like it.”

Holden looks around his apartment, thinking. “Hm. I guess it would be better to keep this than stay at a hotel every time we come to town for work.”

“We should re-decorate it though,” Charlie adds. “Make it more of a family place, and we could use it as a getaway as well when Rory wants one.”

“That makes sense I guess,” Holden ponders. “What do you think, Rory?”

“I love it here. We should keep it, but yeah, I’m actually good with sprucing it up a bit, especially if your furniture isn’t virginal either.”

“Umm, yeah. Sorry, Rory. You already know I dated.”

Rory sighs. “I know. Don’t need to know details, I’m just glad you’re mine now. Maybe it’s wasteful, but I don’t want furniture other women have been with you on.”

That’s fair, we can get rid of everything. Good juju only, right?” Holden says as he grabs a few suitcases and heads to the hall. “We’ll make this our joint home for when we have to work at the office, on one condition. I want you to pick out the furnishings, Rory. That way you know what it’ll look like when we’re here without you, and you’ll feel at home if you decide to travel with us. We’ll get cribs and stuff too, just in case.”

Rory is smiling as Holden locks up, and it feels like this trip was a success.



Rory

Getting back from my few days jaunt to Desert Hills felt amazing, and Brett and Donny were only extra sulky for about a day. It's crazy how quickly you can start missing people when you go somewhere else, but I guess it makes sense when I spend so much time everyday around all my mates.

Now that Laney has delivered Carter, we're wrapping up our stay in Northwest Territory, making final plans for the new house so that it will be ready for us to move into. I know it's not going to be a hundred percent finished since the timeframe has been so short, but Jameson seems pretty adamant that it's going to be nearly finished.

I'm good with that.

It's still hard to understand that this is my life now. I feel like being given a home simply because I'm loved is still a bit over the top, but I have to admit how excited I am to live in it.

"Okay, final question babe," Jameson says as he comes into the room we've got set up as a nursery. There was already a rocking chair in here and soft blue tones on the wall, so I've spent a lot of time rocking Everly in here.

"What's up?"

Everly is wide awake, concentrating so hard on me, and it's impossible to look away from. When Jameson doesn't say anything else I look up, only to see him watching me and my perfect baby with a huge smile on his face.

"You're the hottest mom I've ever seen, and I love watching you two together."

I can't help the smile that curls up my lips. "You came up here just to say that?"

"Well no, but it needed to be said. What I came up here to ask was which of these you'd prefer for our dining table. We've been putting it off because we've been stuck between two, and we finally decided to just ruin one surprise so we can move on. This is the only thing the designer is waiting on before they order the rest of our stuff."

He hands me his phone as I hand him the very awake baby, but watching them together makes me feel dopey and warm inside so it's hard to concentrate.

"Decision, babe," Jameson chides.

"Right. Let's see..."

Both tables are massive, but one is a solid wood one with more traditional finishes, and the other one is a live edge table with a bright blue epoxy running down the middle. "The blue one. Definitely."

"Ha! Knew you'd pick that one. Pretty cool, huh?"

"It's beautiful. But they know they don't have to rush everything, right? I'm okay with some things still needing some work when we move in."

“Don’t worry, we’re paying everyone very well to get it done quickly.”

“Fine.”

“I think Caden needed you downstairs, I’ll keep this sweet little thing with me.”

“Are you stealing my child from me?” I ask in mock outrage.

“She’s gonna be a daddy’s girl, so we’ve got training to do. Now shoo.”

I roll my eyes but give in, kissing them both as I walk downstairs to help Caden sort out some of the arrangements for Christine’s celebration of life.

The thing about moving on, about living my life with my new daughter along all my fully bonded mates, is that we have to lay rest to the past. There’s no version of this story where we all simply move to the next chapter of our lives without acknowledging and celebrating the life that was essentially given up to give us Everly.

I could think about all the drama that happened when I first found out about Christine and the baby, but that would be a disservice to the months that followed. Christine became a true friend, part of the family, and she deserves to have us all celebrate her.

I wish there were people we could track down to come celebrate her with us, but what I was able to round up is not a loss. I’ve got one of her foster families confirmed, some of her coworkers from where she last worked, before she was sick obviously, a few friends we found out about, and somebody that used to live in her building that would check in on her from time to time.

Looking at this grand list of everybody that knew her, knew her worth, it’s so short for how much joy she brought to our life, but then again, it’s the quality, not the quantity. If she was only close to a few souls on this earth, then they all know the high value she had.

We had to wait to plan a service until Laney was well enough, because she’s recovering from labor still. She says she can walk

around, but one look from any of her mates tells me that that's not happening unless it's absolutely necessary.

Being Jameson and knowing what sort of works speak to me, he handled everything in regard to the Funeral Home for Christine's body. He said it made sense because he was already handling all her medical stuff and had all the necessary information, but I think he's just a good man who likes to help out where he can.

Trying to figure out what to do with the ashes didn't take too long either, because I was pretty sure that one day, when Everly grows up, she's going to need a place to go and visit the woman who made her. She needs somewhere that she knows the body rests, even if it is just an urn of ashes.

Christine was born and raised in this area, so it just makes sense to place her remains at the cemetery in town. These are the trees and areas she grew up playing beneath, and I wouldn't want to relocate her in death.

It's obviously a somber affair, and it kills me to see the urn go into the niche of the columbarium wall, but the plaque we had engraved is proof that she existed. We kept it simple, but she will be remembered for being a mother and a friend.

Being Christine, she left us detailed notes about what she wanted us to do once she was gone. She was adamant this entire journey that her leaving the earth wouldn't make us all sad. She wants everybody to be surrounded by love and happiness, and even though that's harder to achieve than the melancholy trying to take over, I don't need a ghost haunting me because I didn't follow her final wishes.

So the placement of her urn at the cemetery was somber, but nothing else after that was.

Christine said in the note she left for me, that growing up in foster homes she always wished she could have some of the big birthday parties that she saw other kids in her class get. She'd get to go to some occasionally, but more often than not, all she got was to hear about them from the kids she sat next to.

Seeing as how she's not going to be there to give those kinds of birthdays to Everly, she wanted what most would consider a

funeral or memorial to be more like a birthday party. She wants a bunch of trappings that she never got when she was alive, in her honor.

Throwing myself into planning this has taken all week, but it's not surprising that a lot of people in town have heard about Christine. Lots of people wanted to do nice things for her, even if they didn't feel close enough to attend the actual ceremony we held. Which is fine, it was small and quiet and nice. We all got to say words for her, and we got to take pictures of us holding Everly in front of where we placed Christine's urn, so that Everly will have them when she's ready; but for this next part, we're sort of taking over my family home. It's the last time though, honest.

This part sure to have more people attending; people she interacted with at the grocery store, more of her coworkers, anybody's life that she touched that wanted to just stop by and see her legacy of a daughter, or anyone else that wanted to pay their respects without feeling like they aren't welcome.

For starters, because I didn't want anybody to think I was being majorly insensitive, I printed out little cards to hand people as they walked in explaining why things were the way they were for the party. We had bouncy houses, bubble machines, two sheet cakes, a piñata, pin the tail the donkey, and then people felt compelled to shower Everly with gifts as well. So, we've received mementos and blankets, even some diapers for her. None of which will go to waste.

We made sure people knew we didn't need any food so we weren't left with dozens of casserole dishes like I hear happens at funerals. Instead, we asked them to just share a recipe that their family enjoys so it's something we can incorporate into our own family once we get set up in the new house. Eating meals shared by people that knew Christine is yet another way to connect Everly to her past, an effort on our part to make sure we never forget the light Christine was.

And the day is actually a blast, the highlight for me though was when Brett got peed on while holding Everly and showing her off, because her diaper shifted.

Hearing stories from all these people, however innocuous they may be, about interactions with Christine, knowing I'm about to leave this town probably for good with the exceptions of visits, has me feeling all sorts of sentimental. This is a party to honor Christine, but as we hand out goodie bags to the adults with those little candy buttons that stick to the paper, and don our party hats and blow our party noisemakers, it almost feels like a going away party as well, because tomorrow's going to be our last day in town.

I've spent every spare second I can with Carter and Laney and my brothers, and I know they're not too far away, so I'll be able to visit of course, but not for a while. I know we're going to be busy setting up the new house and finding a routine because we're basically newlyweds, and we have a whole damn life to figure out how to live together now. We've got traditions to build and memories to make and walls to fill with pictures.

Being here around people that I was unconsciously raised next to, I feel like this is a great way to say goodbye to my hometown. Caden surprises the hell out of me when he brings out a disco ball he got from who knows where and sets a big speaker up, and we have a big impromptu dance party in the backyard. The whole event goes exactly how Christine would have wanted it to, and that makes my heart happy.

When I go to bed that night, I feel lighter and ready to move on, with the knowledge that Everly's roots already run so deep.



Ari

“You nervous?” I ask Jameson.

“She’s not going to hate it here, right? No, that’s dumb. Why would she hate it?”

“Were we this nervous with Grace?” I know I wasn’t nervous when I moved in with Cora, another red flag I missed.

“I don’t think so,” he answers, “probably because she was a part of the house buying process from the get-go. This is all one big surprise for Rory, and it’s going to be what our lives revolve around from here on out.”

“Look at it this way, if she hates it we’ll just buy another house.” It’s meant to be something to make him feel better, but

that's not how he takes it.

“So you *do* think she's going to hate it?”

“No man, chill.”

I feel like it's been a thousand years since I met Rory. With all the ups and downs Rory and I have already been through between just the two of us, and also with my other bond mates, it's artificially aged our relationship to a point where it feels comfortable to be together, in a non-artificial way, if that makes sense.

I already know we can handle each other in a crisis, that we will look out for each other when bad things happen, and that we can reach for each other in good times as well. Now all that's left to do is put our learned lessons into practice and start living.

Things will change with everybody's work schedule, but I'm so looking forward to watching Rory take control of the house and make it hers. We all know that we simply live there— it's absolutely hers.

If it wasn't for Everly, I'm half sure that Rory would have suggested using public transportation again, just for old times' sake. She felt much more comfortable strapping the baby into a rental car though, so that's what we're doing. Charlie whooped with joy when she stopped suggesting we take a bus or train.

It'll take most of the day to drive to the house, especially if we have to stop every few hours to feed and change Everly, but the trip is building up the anticipation.

Every mile we put behind us means we're that much closer to getting home, to the big house designed with Rory and the babies in mind, with room to grow and gardens to admire and corners to cavort around in.

When we pull up and I'm prompted to enter the gate code, my fingers feel numb.

Shit. What if she *does* hate it?

My eyes stick to the rearview mirror where the other car is, wishing I could see Rory through the tinted windows. What is her face doing right now I wonder, as she takes in our new property?

It's got a tree-lined driveway with our home standing at the end of it, bright and proud. I know I've seen everything in pictures constantly, but this is actually my first time being at the property in person.

I park and hop out, hands in pockets as I stand by Jameson. The other guys are taking in the house, but I'm wholly focused on Rory's reaction. By the time Holden pulls Everly's car seat out of the car and closes the door, Rory still hasn't said anything.

Jameson starts walking towards her cautiously, but I'm rooted to the spot.

"This is..." Rory's voice wavers and then we all give her space as she starts making her way to the porch.

She doesn't let anything escape her notice. Rory runs her fingers over the porch furniture and stares at all the newly planted flowers, spins to look at the view from the porch with all the mature trees covered in Spanish moss, and then I break because she starts crying.

I pull her into my arms, desperate to know what's going through her mind.

"This is ours?"

"Sure is, baby. Jameson planned it all out, but we've all been helping with the details."

"It's even prettier in person. I really get to live here? *We* get to live here?"

"Every last one of us," Jameson confirms. He places the key in Rory's palm, which she stares at before slotting into place and turning the handle.

The door opens silently, and we're hit with the subtle fragrance of roses coming from the big bouquet that's been placed on the entry table. There's a giant mirror above it which Rory looks to, then her eyes travel higher to the simple chandelier we picked out to light up the space.

There are light hardwood floors running throughout the multi-story house, making a seamless transition between all the different spaces that Rory starts wandering through. It's not

nearly as big as the rental home we've been staying in up in Northwest Territory, but it's plenty big for our needs and any future ones that might arise.

"I can't believe you guys did all this...it's like you crawled into my head and figured out what I'd want in a home. Oh my gods, is that the lamp I saw at that...wait a minute."

Rory spins around the living room before narrowing her eyes at Charlie. "That interior design place you brought me to where I was forced into a game while you had a meeting— you didn't actually have a meeting, did you? Was that seriously just a ploy to get me to choose things for the house?"

"Yup. You totally fell for it, too," Charlie says with a smile.

"I'm not even mad. I love this. And this!" she says as she runs her hand along a side table. "There's so much to look at."

"You want to see our room?" Jameson asks, letting all the other guys wander around and check stuff out.

I know I'm not the first mate anymore, but seeing my new family inside the home I was able to help purchase for them, has my chest swelling with pride. These are my people, and we have so much to look forward to.

Rory slides her hand into Jameson's and lets him pull her up the stairs, but the rest of us eventually follow as well.

Rory stops in the hallway and tilts her head in confusion, taking in all the random pieces of art hung up in matching white frames. She walks down and looks at every single one, looking like she's trying to find what they have in common with each other.

I watch in amusement as she counts them, and when she gets to ten she looks back at all of us now crowded on the stairs. "What's this about, then?"

Donny starts cackling, and while some of the guys look a bit embarrassed, in the end we all start cracking up. It's difficult not to when Rory starts looking at the pictures closer, trying to figure out who picked out which one, because she's already decided that that's what happened. She just doesn't know why.

“Not important,” Charlie says as he pushes her further down the hall towards our room.

“You’re only saying that because yours is firmly in the middle!” Donny yells.

“This was such a mistake,” Charlie mumbles under his breath.

All joking stops when Rory walks into our new bedroom, and of course she starts crying again. I think it’s warranted though. We went for a soft aesthetic in this room, and our designers knocked it out of the park.

The light-colored wood floors carry in here as well, and most of the over-sized bed is covered in fluffy white sheets and blankets, using dark taupe and grays to accent with pillowcases. To break up the light colors, the designers used burnt sienna-colored throws layered under chunky cream-colored ones, and they also managed to make the whole thing look messy, cozy and neat at the same time. Faux white fur rugs are scattered around the floors to soften them up, light wood nightstands are everywhere that we might one that nearly match the floors, and a few green accents with live plants in corners tie it all together.

We’ve got picture rails along one of the walls displaying pictures of all of us together, shots we’ve all taken candidly from Rory’s walk. Her eyes are drawn there as more tears fall, her hand covering her mouth as she takes in how many amazing moments we’ve had together.

White lights are draped above the pictures giving the room a soft, cozy glow, and she looks exactly like she fits in the middle of this space.

“This is too much to take. It’s just so...there aren’t words. I have been so wrapped up in experiencing my walk that I never allowed myself to really dream about what the next part of my life would look like, but I can see it now. It looks exactly like this. It looks like all of you, and this little baby,” she makes grabby hands so that Holden will pass Everly to her, and Rory presses a kiss to Everly’s forehead and hugs her in close. “It looks like comfort, and love, and happiness.”

Jameson steps forward and wraps himself around our two girls, kissing the top of Rory's head. "I'm so glad you like it, love. You deserve a house meant just for you. I'm sorry before, that we took you to our old place and had any expectation at all that you could live there. I had to see it from your perspective, how unwelcome you must have felt there. It kills me that you would have stayed there for us, because this is where you belong. Here, with us. We're going to experience so much life in these walls, a fresh start."

Rory nods and walks in and out of the bathroom, slack jawed at the finishings in there. "That place is ridiculous. I don't think I can process it all right now. And what is this? How the hell did you find a bed this big on what sounds like short notice? Who has a bedroom this big, what the fuck? Who lived here before, a damn circus?"

Jameson laughs. "We knocked a wall or two down. The bed looks custom, but it's actually just a bunch of king-sized mattresses pushed together. We just chose frames that make them look seamless."

"Fuck I'm excited to sleep. Everybody on the bed, right now. I need to see if this looks any less insane with all of us on it."

Have to say, I thought six king sized mattresses pushed into a two by three grid was a little over the top, but once we're all on the bedroom-sized bed and able to actually stretch out, with a baby thrown in for good measure as well, I tell Jameson that he was spot on.

"Never knew this was something I wanted," Brett says as he sinks into the hybrid memory foam mattress. "No excuse now for any of you to wake me with your boners."

"We're gonna have so many incredible sex parties on here," Donny adds on a happy sigh.

"Of course that's the first thing you imagine, you horn dog," Brett says as he toes Donny's leg.

"Okay, before this gets weird, why don't we keep exploring? You want to see Everly's room?" Felix crawls over the bed and makes his way back out to the hall.

“What do you think, baby, you want to see your new room?”
Rory coos to Everly.

“Pass her here, mama.” Caden holds his arms out and takes the baby so Rory can climb off the enormous bed.

Once Rory’s out of the room we don’t really have an excuse anymore to keep lying in bed so even though it’s incredibly tempting to just stay put and fall asleep, we all pull ourselves up. We all end up in different parts of the house— some going to unpack, others to look around some more, Holden and I to the kitchen to get dinner started. We thought ahead and had the kitchen stocked, because we figured once we finally made it here, we wouldn’t want to leave for a while if we could help it.

Rory explores until her stomach sends her to the kitchen, and it feels incredible to be able to sit around our new table for the first time and eat together, all of us more relaxed than we’ve ever been as a group.

“Well, I’d like to propose a toast,” Caden says, standing with his glass of sparkling cider we cracked open. “Didn’t know where life would take us that day I stood in your old bedroom and insisted I was in love with you, and I can honestly say going through your territory walk with you was the highlight of my life. To Rory, for being the best mate any of us could have asked for.”

We all cheers, but before we can take a drink, Rory stands up. “I have something to say, too.” She looks a little nervous but takes the time to meet eyes with each and every single one of us before continuing. By the time she finishes, her eyes are a little more confident. “Holden, you told me to imagine our end of the road, but I think I failed. No, I know I failed.

“All of you have made incredible sacrifices to be with me, and I want to make sure you know that every single day I wake up with all of you near me, I send a prayer to the goddess thanking her for finding me worthy of being a connector. It used to intimidate me to imagine having seven possible mates by the end of my walk, and no one saw the curve ball of the extra three coming, but the faith I put in the goddess was well invested.

“The depth of my feelings for you all is often overwhelming, and being your mate is the best thing I can ever imagine being.

Maybe it's a connector thing or maybe it's just a me thing, but I don't need any big lofty dreams when I have all of you. You are my dream. I feel honored to not only have chosen such wonderful souls to partner my life with, but to have been chosen in return as your connector and life partner.

“So this isn't our end of the road, because we have too many moments to live through together, too much we need to walk through, whether it be fast or slow. All of you are my fate, the path I was always meant to walk. Whatever our days bring, I know we'll be here to catch each other.

“And I want us all to be involved with each other's lives whether it's through work, or through projects done with the Eagles to support other connectors, or anything else. I hope that any lines drawn between each other get blurred quickly so that we can continue on. I hope that at the end of the day, we're all on solid ground and ready to start a new day together.”

Donny raises his hand, bouncing in his seat.

“...Yes?” Rory asks. “You don't have to raise your hand. You know that, right?”

“I have something important to say, as well.”

Highly doubt it.

“The pictures are hung by dick size.”

Rory stares for a minute before it hits her what he's talking about, then she scoots out of her chair and calmly stands, moving behind her chair way too expressionless. “So you what, had an *actual* dick measuring, like with a ruler—”

“We couldn't find one, so we just compared them side by side.” Donny smiles as all of us *beg* him silently to read the room.

“And all of you were in on this?”

We nod, various states of cringe apparent on our faces.

“Then forget all that sentimental shit I just said.” She starts walking off but turns around when she gets to the hallway. “YOU HUNG PICTURES YOU CHOSE BY DICK SIZE FOR OUR FAMILY HOME? WHAT THE FUCK? Nope, I'm too tired for this shit. I'm taking a shower and getting ready for bed,

and I'm going to try to forget that piece of information. Yep, that's exactly what I'm going to do."

**The
End!**

Epilogues

A study in patience and dedication to the cause

(you've read seven books so far, what's a few more chapters?)

Caden

One Week Later

“Are your eyes closed?”

Rory fidgets under my hands. “Yes! For fuck’s sake. Just tell me already!”

I lift up my fingers and show her the cozy little nook hidden behind a giant painting that we set up just for her. It’s every book lover’s wet dream with floor to ceiling bookshelves and a stained-glass window overlooking the backyard. There’s a Rory-sized reading spot with the absolute softest mattress Jameson could source so she’ll just sink into it.

“Is that...are those *trees*?”

Fake trees arch over the small mattress with lanterns hanging in the canopy their branches make, and a series of treated stumps acts as a staircase to the bed.

“Who the hell does Jameson know that was able to create *this* so fast? Just when I think our house is the most outrageous thing I’ve ever seen, you all find something else to show me.”

I step onto the circular cream-colored rug that covers most of the floor, climbing up onto the cushions so I can pull Rory in with me. When she’s firmly in my arms and still silent, I start stoking her back as we look around her private space.

“We all wanted you to have somewhere quiet to go when you needed some alone time. You can do more than just read in here, but this is your space. We only come in here if you

want us to, but you can hide in here whenever you need or want to.”

“We’ve been in this house several days now, and I’m really sick of fucking crying over all the cute shit you guys put into it. I’m supposed to be a badass ninja, remember? I don’t think they cry over pretty cushions and soft blankets.”

I laugh. “Yes, I could never forget that you’re a badass ninja.”

“Good. Need to make sure I’m maintaining my street cred.”

Bennett pops head in, smiling at how relaxed Rory looks curled up in her cozy nook. “She likes it, then?”

“You ridiculous man, it’s perfection. As long as you can promise me that no parts of the décor were arranged by dick size, I’ll fall fully in love.”

Bennett snorts. “Not in here, babe.”

“It’s cozy and all, but is there a reason this sweet little area is lifted so high off the ground? They had to have had this base custom built.”

“Yo, Ari, you want to come explain something to our girl?” Bennett yells down the hall.

Rory sits up, confused. “Now what?”

Bennett winks, but this isn’t anything bad. It’s actually pretty good.

It takes a minute, but Ari finds his way to Rory and asks the exact same question Bennett did, to which Rory says, “Yes, yes, but you are here to explain about why the bed is so high? You forgot I was short, didn’t you?”

“Oh, that? I told you I was going to build you an altar to sleep on so we could admire you, remember? It was a logistical nightmare to even *imagine* building an altar big enough to sustain the weight of the beds in the master bedroom, so we figured this was an acceptable substitute.”

“You actually built me an altar to sleep on? I guess I feel... flattered?”

“You’re our woman, you have our absolute devotion.”

The way Ari says this, he manages to make it not sound absolutely cheesy, but with a timbre to his voice that has shivers skating down even my spine. Yikes, that’s dangerous.

“Um, okay then.”

“Anything else?” he asks casually.

“No...” Rory says, accepting a kiss from Ari as he walks out of the room whistling, like he didn’t just go all sexy on her.

“That fucking guy,” Bennett says as he starts backing out. “I get it Rory, I really do.”

And then it’s just Rory and I, and she curls into me, her breathing evening out as she starts to nod off.

I almost decide to pull the nearest book off the shelf and read just to give me something to do while she naps on me, but I can’t resist joining her, whispering “Take me with you, Scraps,” into her ear.

There’s this strange thing I’ve found happens when Rory’s sleeping— I don’t know if it’s only me that experiences it or if everyone has figured it out yet, but her powers seemed to have grown more. Being next to her while she sleeps acts like a witchy sleep drought if you focus your mind. All I have to do is close my eyes and focus on my breathing, and I’m pulled under almost instantly.

Rory must be feeling sentimental this time because for once I’m not in a strange place where nothing makes sense.

We’re back in the garden at the home we grew up in, back when it looked like it used to. The window in the kitchen is open and I can smell fresh apple pie wafting towards us, the voice of a woman singing in the kitchen followed by giggles as deeper voices talk to her. Can’t make out what they’re saying, but just the familiar tones have me inundated with love for the people that took me in and chose to raise me. They changed my destiny forever.

“Grace told me my parents were somewhere I couldn’t travel in my dreams, so they’re not actually here, but it’s kind

of nice just to have the illusion there sometimes. I hate that they'll never meet their grandkids.”

“They would have been amazing grandparents.”

Rory nods and lays in the grass, between the garden plots from Jameson's painting. Rory's made them look like they're made of paint so they're slightly out of focus. “You can bring Everly here when she's big enough. You can replay all your memories for all of our kids, however many we end up having.

“You have all these incredible stories about how in love your parents were and how magical your mom's territory walk was, and our babies are going to grow up with an amazing mom that can show them every single memory she's ever had in their dreams. They can grow up knowing everything about your parents that you do, seeing this place and knowing where we came from.”

“I guess I could...that is going to be pretty magical, actually.”

I kiss her hand and pull it to my chest, covering it with mine. “Something tells me that if any of ours grow up to be a connector, they're going to follow in their mama's footsteps and do a real territory walk too, because you're going to make it sound as amazing as your mom did.”

“Family legacy,” Rory hums.

Eventually Rory stands and starts collecting wildflowers, forming a big bouquet as she walks barefoot through the soft grass. She's got a white cotton dress on, similar to the one in the painting, and her hair is down and dotted with various blooms. I can only watch, my heart swelling when I remind myself she's actually mine.

Felix

Three months later

“Yes, it was great having you. Have a safe trip home!”

I stand on our porch, waving with a plastic smile on my face that I haven't been allowed to erase all day. We've had family visiting nonstop for the last four weeks, all of us having someone that wanted to come and meet the baby and see the new house.

For the most part it was amazing to share our home with family and make this home feel more permanent, but on the other hand, fuck house guests.

Seriously.

As soon as Brett's aunt and uncle are driving down the lane in their car, I slam the door shut and just start cussing as loud as I can. Doesn't matter what I say, I just need to get it out.

I also need to not be wearing pants.

I tear those suckers off so my poor, suffocated legs can feel the air on them, throwing them who the hell cares where because I refuse to allow any more visitors into my home for a long time. It doesn't matter that our house is big enough that we can hide from visitors quite easily, nothing beats walking around in your home with no pants on.

Then, just because I can, I lay down right there in the foyer, spreading my legs nice and wide so I can get some breeze on these balls of mine. “So much better.”

A voice clearing has me reeling myself back in and ready to be annoyed again. “Yes?”

“Felix! What the hell are you doing? You're completely blocking the hallway; Bennett's dad needs to bring his suitcase with him to the front so Donny can portal him home.”

“No, I distinctly remember everyone leaving, you're lying, and I don't appreciate it.” I don't even humor Rory with open

eyes because I'm so damn comfortable right now. "Toss me a pillow from over there, would you?"

It lands on my face, but I'm not mad about it. The plop of the pillow is like an aggressively soft hug to my face. I'm sure some people pay good money to experience that. I put that sucker right under my head in a place of honor and continue to starfish in our entryway.

"Sorry Dad, he suffers from delusions occasionally, but since he has a twin brother we just pretend that Beau is Felix when it happens, so we don't have deal with it."

They're very convincing with the fake suitcase they roll by me, going so far as to open the door and walk down the steps, emphasizing the weight of their feet on the wood.

"Bro."

"Fuck of Beau, I'm busy."

He sighs and then I'm being lifted into the air by fucking Bennett.

"What the hell?"

"My dad saw your balls, I'm pretty sure." Why is Bennett saying that like it actually happened?

"Your dad wasn't even here man, are you okay?"

Bennett uses his weird alien levitation powers to float me up further to the window we have above our door, smashing my face and then my entire body up against the plate glass so I'm forced to look out over our front yard. Look at that, his dad really was here. Oops.

"Mrr bd." The words come out weird because my mouth is unusable in its current position against the glass.

"Leave him up there awhile so he learns his lesson," my brother the traitor says.

"Fckrrs." I can't even flip them off because my hands are framing my stupid looking face and firmly stuck to the glass like the rest of me.

“Anyone care for a mosey outside now that all our guests are gone?” Brett asks, like the fool he is.

“Did Bennett’s dad leave?” Charlie calls. Did everyone know he was still here? I could have sworn he left yesterday. Man, I was a bit off on that calculation. Maybe this is a decent punishment for showing my father-in-law my balls.

“Yeah, Donny just disappeared, so we’re good,” Jameson says as he walks out the door underneath me. He jumps up and smacks the bottom of my foot as he does so.

“Dnt dooo tht. Tht hrt!”

Jameson starts cracking up, then every single other guy my mate is bonded with take turns hitting my foot as they walk outside, making a game of who can jump the highest as they leave me inside on my own. What the fuck? Where is the loyalty? And must every single one of them take a picture of my stupid ass on their phone?

“Gs! Lt me dwn! No mrr blls, promsss!”

Beau flips me off and calls me clam dick as he continues to walk, shutting the door behind him. I have no idea what the point of them all being out there is, until Donny shows back up and Rory jumps him, and then one by one they all run a fucking train on each other, but mostly on Rory, while I get to just hang up here and watch while my dick tries to break through the glass. Maybe they’ll just leave me up here forever so I can be a living welcome mat. Oh my gods, we’d never get actual visitors. Are they secretly all geniuses?

At one point I see Rory pointing to me and begging Bennett to let me down, but by now she’s completely done with sexy time, and I can hear Everly starting to wake up from her nap, so I don’t get to join in on the fun.

Bennett lowers me to the ground when they all walk back in, telling me that Everly needs to be fed, and they need to shower.

Since I’m the only one not covered in cum and sweat I can’t argue, so I walk down the hall, rubbing my cheek as I go to take care of the baby.

“Nobody clean that window, it’s fucking perfect,” Caden announces. He claps me on the shoulder as he walks by me, on his way to take a shower. I turn at the last minute to see a perfect imprint of my body on the window that was pristine moments ago.

“Seriously?”

“You showed my dad your balls, dude,” Bennett yells back like maybe I forgot. I’m not the idiot here though.

I mumble to myself the entire way to Everly’s room, laughing at this ridiculous life we live. Everyday there’s someone doing something stupid, and it’s only a countdown to who’s turn it will be next. Rory has learned to stay out of our little bondmate games because we convinced her they help us bond. She’ll never ever find out about the secret trophy we’ve hidden in the house, a dick we glued together from paper coffee cups that we rinsed out. Someone spray painted it gold and painted little hairs on the bottom part that looks like a ball sack, and just yesterday someone cut a hole in top of the cup that’s the tip of the penis and attached some shredded straws, so it looks like it’s ejaculating. It’s the ultimate bragging right to win it, and I’m pretty sure Bennett just won it with the little stunt he pulled with me. Fuck. I need to find a way to make someone else make poor choices so I can claim it.

Donny

Another three months

“And I just sign right here?”

Fuck I’m trying so hard not to laugh right now as this poor shmuck that Jameson works with sighs in exasperation and silently counts to five. “Yes, Donny. Right on the dotted line, just like Jameson taught you. You do know how to sign your name, right?”

“Obviously.”

Since our four zaddies decided they were going to take turns coming into the office for three days a month, I only have to travel here for three days a month when it’s Jameson’s turn in the office. But boy do I make the most of them.

Oh I’m sorry, we skipped a part. There was this big, romantic thing kind of like those young yahoos do with promposals, where Jameson got on a knee and begged me to be his assistant. He said he couldn’t imagine working with anybody else and would do anything to see my shining face at work.

I had to accept, because I’m on longer in the business of breaking hearts.

So I’ve been an employee at Grace Technology for going on six months now, and I’ve made it my mission to email all my fantastic new coworkers regularly with fun memes and overly personal information about myself hoping they’ll reciprocate, so we can all be a bunch of goofball besties who hang out at work together and occasionally get shit done.

But this bastard stole the pudding cup out of my lunch yesterday, so we are not okay.

“Hang on, let me get some white out. I spelled it wrong.”

“How the fuck did you spell your own name wrong? You know what, its fine, just leave it—”

“No can do, this is a legally binding agreement. My name must be precise.”

“Donny, did you read the form you’re signing? It’s just an order form for the new company t-shirts.”

“Says you,” I tell him, taking my time to write my name nice and neat like all my schoolteachers taught me to do.

“It’s right there at the top of the page,” he mumbles under his breath.

“Oh you know what, Jameson needs me for something. Give me a sec.”

I take the form with me as the pudding thief gets irater, telling me to just leave the form back to his office when I’m done.

“No, it’ll be quick, promise!”

I dart into Jameson’s office and steal one of his pens.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting that asshole back for stealing my pudding. I didn’t have a blue pen on my desk. Look, he ordered the shirt in white, but I’m going to change it so it says purple. He looks like he’d enjoy a purple t-shirt. I know he’s in a rush to turn this in since it’s due by end of the day for production. He won’t even check it, I bet.”

“Donny, wait—”

“Can’t, got to go buddy!”

I finish my incredibly harassing prank and calmly walk back to the pudding thief, handing the paper to him with a smile. “There you go, buddy. Got my name and size all good to go.”

“What did Jameson need?”

“Oh, just a quick blow job. I took care of it though. You need anything else?”

“Donniel! I am the HR manager, you know this, right? I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to write you up again. You can’t go around the office talking about oral sex!”

“Whoa, no need to bring my made-up full name into this. Who said anything about,” I lower my voice and whisper, cupping my mouth with my hand so it stays between the two of us, “oral sex?” I look around, like I’m terrified I’ll be overheard. “You asked me what Jameson needed from me, and I told you he needed a quick blow job, as in blowing air? The fan on his computer keeps getting all dusty and malfunctioning a little, so he needed me to crawl under his desk since he was taking a call. He just gave me his secret sign for dire service needs.

“I’ve gotten real good at doing it quietly so no one knows what’s happening. I duck under there and center my mouth and give it all I’ve got. I’ve got superior lung capacity, did you know? Anyway, I’m really good at getting his equipment working smoothly. Very discreet.”

“Jameson! Fix your godsdamned assistant!” The pudding thief yells before storming off, order form grasped in his hand.

I raise my hands up in defense of my innocence. “Didn’t do nothing boss, honest!”

I sit back at my little desk in front of Jameson’s office and get back to work.

Actually, Jameson doesn’t trust me to do much when I’m here and not directly supervised, so I’m just playing with the set of mini stampers I brought with me, making mosaics of Jameson’s dick out of smiley faces and lightning bolts.

I feel Jameson walk up behind me and inspect my work. “Nice. Looks just like the real thing. This might help though,” he says, pulling out a gold sparkly gel pen from his pocket.

My eyes get huge. “For me? THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT I NEED HOW DID YOU KNOW?”

I quickly outline my masterpiece and then eye Jameson’s junk through his pants to make sure it’s true to size. “The gold really is the pièce de résistance. Rory’s going to be so proud of me.”

“I’m sure she’ll hang it up with the others. You about ready to go? We’ve got a business dinner to attend in twenty.”

“Yeah, just let me grab the garbage from your office so the mean custodian doesn’t yell at me again.”

I go to empty Jameson’s trash, only to find my precious pudding cup from yesterday’s lunch buried under some paper scraps like he was trying to hide it. I know it’s from yesterday, because yesterday I had butterscotch, which is my favorite. Today I packed vanilla, which is good, but it’s not butterscotch.

Domestic dispute, here we come.

I storm out to Jameson and shake the trash bag at him. “What the hell is this? *You* ate my pudding? You traitor! We’re bondmates! I am so not fucking Rory at the same time as you for at least a week. How dare you! And after I gave Kevin such a hard time and ruined his t-shirt order?!”

“First of all, his name is actually Will, and I tried to tell you before you gave him the paper back. Did you forget that yesterday when we arrived at the office you told me you were experiencing sympathetic pregnancy symptoms and were nauseous as hell? That weird link you share with Rory was making you all sorts of turned off of butterscotch, so you told me to take it.”

I look down at the trash, trying to remember. Had I said that?

“I made you say it twice and recorded the second time, because I knew you were going to forget you gave me permission and get pissed at me. Watch this,” he says as he scrolls through his phone and taps play on a video of me telling him to take my pudding cup.

“Well, fuck.”

“More sympathetic pregnancy symptoms? I swear, every day Rory goes without giving birth, she gets more and more forgetful. Something about growing that giant baby that won’t evict itself is redirecting all her brain power.”

I try to channel Rory through our bond, trying to decide if what Jameson’s saying is true. I instinctively hold my stomach, a shadow of pain rippling across it.

“Donny? You alright?”

I grab my phone and call Rory, and all she says after she picks up is “Yes, Donny. These contractions fucking suck.”

“CONTRACTIONS!” I yell at Jameson before fleeing down to the lobby to enter the parking garage. Then I have to get on the elevator over there and race to the top of the garage, which has been closed off just for us. We have been using the zaddies’ private helicopter they recently purchased to get to and from the office lately in case we need to get back to Rory quickly.

I jump in and start buckling up, wondering where the hell the pilot is.

Jameson isn’t far behind, looking really fucking freaked out.

“What are you doing out there? Get in! Rory’s in labor!”

“I have to call the pilot! He should be nearby.”

“Donny?” Oops. Never hung up with my phone call from Rory.

“We’re coming for you, Little Dreamer. How close together are they?”

“About ten minutes apart still, so we’ve got time. They just hurt.”

“Do the guys have Everly all packed up and ready to go? Is she excited?”

“Everly is seven months old,” Jameson reminds me. “She doesn’t talk, and she doesn’t get excited about anything other than her bottle.”

Fair.

Jameson steals my phone from me. “Just hang on baby, we’re gonna get there as soon as we can, alright? I’ll get ahold of Caden and have him keep us updated on where you guys are so we can go straight to you when we land. We love you. You’ve got this, you’re going to do so damn good.”

I take my phone back from Jameson and repeat, more or less, the sentiments he did, making sure Rory knows how

strong she is. She tells me to fuck off of course, because we're still pretty sure it's my sperm that knocked her up, and then she hangs up on me because she's sweet on me.

"She loves me," I tell Jameson. The pilot jumps on board and we are off ten minutes later, getting the clearance we need to take off.

Beau

Basically an hour later

“Here daddy, why don’t you take her for a minute?”

The nurse puts a tiny pink bundle in my arms that makes Everly look like a giant baby in comparison. It might be time to seek out a heart specialist, because my heart feels like it’s imploding.

I thought that when I fell for Rory my heart would burst, and then Brett started making me feel funny and I found a way to let it get bigger. I held Everly and I was convinced there wasn’t room in my body for any more growth, but this tiny baby with a mix of mine and Rory’s skin tones and the chunkiest little cheeks I’ve ever seen is fuel on the fire. My heart actually hurts I love her so much already.

It doesn’t even register that I’m crying until a drop falls on Kira’s face, startling her a little.

“Holy fuck she’s cute,” Felix says as he marvels over our newest addition.

“And definitely not Donny’s,” Brett smirks.

“And definitely not Donny’s,” I agree.

“That’s what he gets for leaving me before I went into labor,” Rory says as she lies on the hospital bed.

“It’s not like they could have predicted that you were going to go into labor, they were scheduled to come home tomorrow love.” Caden is trying to reassure her, to comfort her into thinking her mates didn’t abandon her, but the hormones raging through her body have her all over the place so she’s not having it.

“He’s supposed to have prophecy powers! He should have known. I’m blaming him for missing the birth, absolutely.”

“Well they’re landing now,” Caden says as he checks his phone. “They should be in the room soon.”

“Don’t let them in. I swear to the goddess they have to wait now because I’m pissed as hell that Jameson and Donny weren’t here for me.”

I just want to squish this little thing, but she’s so fragile, I’m scared to breathe wrong. “Maybe you need to remember how cute this baby is we made, and then you’ll feel better,” I suggest.

Rory smiles over at Felix and I, instantly softening. “You guys did make a cute baby.”

“She’s mine,” my brother and I say at exactly the same time, in the same tone of voice. Then we scowl at each other.

“You’re identical twins, you have the same DNA,” Holden reminds us.

“Exactly, so she’s mine,” Felix and I once again intone together. Whatever. I know the truth.

“I don’t think my vagina is ever going to work the same way again. Does the burning ever stop?”

The nurse updating the white board on the wall with all of Rory and Kira’s info smiles and pats her leg. “We’ll get you some numbing spray to take home whenever you’re discharged. You ready for a new icepack yet?”

“That would be amazing,” Rory answers, nearly sobbing. “I melted right through that one.”

I walk over to where Bennett is holding Everly, letting the bigger baby see her new sister. Of course she’s a baby so she just sort of swats at her then tries to slobber on her forehead, but I’m convinced they’re going to be best friends.

“Look at that, two babies. I don’t think most families are physically able to have babies this close together because it’s cuteness overload. It’s dangerous being around the two of them together,” Bennett wheezes.

Then we trade babies and I squeeze Everly to me, warmth shooting through my chest from my kids.

“Oh yes, sweet sassafras. This ice pack is better than any dick I’ve ever had. Don’t fight me on that, you have no idea

what this feels like under the sheets right now.” Rory sighs in relief after the nurse refreshes her ice pad, falling against the back of the hospital bed.

“We’ll be moving all of you up to a recovery suite soon. I see here you’ve arranged for a private one?” The nurse asks, checking over Rory’s file.

“Yes ma’am,” Ari confirms. “Wanted to make sure our mate got as much rest as she could.”

She smiles at all of us. “It’s so nice to have a connector group in here, doesn’t happen so often. There’s so much love in this room that it’s going to keep me in a good mood the rest of this shift. These two little girls are going to be so well cared for. I’d love to have a family picture of you all if you do birth announcements. We have a wall of all the babies we’ve delivered out by the nurse’s station.”

“We can do that,” Holden tells her.

“Lovely. Well I’ll just let you rest, my dear, and we’ll have some staffing in shortly to move you up. Once you’re there, you’ll get your new mom dinner. I would suggest trying to nurse the baby again before we bring you up since it’s been about a half hour. If you’re planning on breastfeeding, that is. The more stimulation we can get, the better for your milk production. Congratulations on your beautiful baby.”

“Thank you, I’ll give it a go as soon as these men give me back my baby.”

The nurse scribbles down something else on Rory’s chart before leaving the room.

Now for my favorite part. Boobies.

I know Donny must be a little bit psychic when he times his arrival with Rory whipping out a boob, and then I have to rub my chest because something about seeing my mate feed my baby with her own body is threatening to do me in again.

“WE’RE HERE! YOU CAN PUSH NOW, RORY!”

Donny slides into the room with Jameson hot on his heels, both of them panting and doubled over. Nobody says anything

to them, we merely wait for them to notice that the whole ‘we have time because the contractions are ten minutes apart’ thing turned into ‘she’s fucking coming really soon, get me to the damn hospital where they keep the drugs’ turned into ‘there’s no time for drugs because you’re crowning’.

Caden texted Jameson and Donny to tell them we were checked into Labor and Delivery, but nobody’s updated them since because we wanted to make sure they were safe and not forcing their helicopter pilot to drive dangerously to get here sooner.

“Wait, what is that thing trying to eat your boob?” Donny asks, squinting his eyes.

“Oh my gods, we missed it? Baby, you did so good. Let’s see her, fuck she’s so perfect.” Jameson starts tearing up as he approaches Rory, after being a good dad and slathering his hands with sanitizer. “I don’t remember Everly being this tiny, is she healthy?”

Rory looks up at Jameson, previous ire forgotten. She purses her lips for a kiss, and it gets steamy pretty damn quick. Jameson is careful not to squish the tiny newborn with his enormous chest, but I can see from where I stand that he’s really fucking happy.

“She’s healthy. No complications other than the fact my vagina is torn up to hell now.”

Brett comes up behind me and puts his arm around my waist, pulling me into him as he kisses my head. “Pretty fucking good thing we’ve got going on here. Gotta admit, I fucking love that I have a miniature version of you and Rory. She’s going to be so fucking cute as she grows into her own looks and out of the newborn phase.”

“You probably should stop cussing so much,” I mumble. “The girls are going to pick up words eventually.” I’m placating him because I don’t know what else to say. Hearing Brett go all daddy bear and get possessive of our little family is really hot and sweet at the same time and it’s confusing my dick.

“Wait, you had the baby without me?” Donny nearly screeches. “Betrayal!”

“Your daughter was just exerting her independence by choosing when to be born. You should be proud of her,” Rory says softly as she runs a hand over Kira’s dark head of hair.

Babies are magical.

The second Kira pulls off of Rory’s nipple and starts falling asleep, Donny is over the fact that he missed the birth, because he sees the new life we created together.

I scoot over to give Donny room to meet our new daughter, him and Jameson resting their foreheads against each other as they cradle her between them.

“She’s got your nose, Little Dreamer. Look at her; I’m so proud of you,” Donny says in awe.

“Even if she’s not yours?” Rory asks quietly.

Donny’s been very vocal about knocking up Rory even though it wasn’t guaranteed, but I can’t see him actually being upset by the fact our newest little one doesn’t share his DNA.

“Oh, she’s mine alright. I don’t care about what’s in her blood, I’m her daddy.”

I do something I rarely feel the urge to do and step in so I can wrap my arms around Donny. The rest of the guys follow suit until all of us are in one massive group huddle, with Rory at our center.

Everly reaches out for Rory, so she scoops her up, unable to hold her without kissing her head.

“I love you, all of you. Look at these precious little things we get to take home and raise. I couldn’t have done this with anyone else, you all are perfect.” My brother squeezes my shoulder in agreement, and everything is perfect in this moment.

Charlie

One year later

Caden: You need to stall, one of the connectors is running a few minutes late. Don't head home yet.

Once I get the text alert on my watch, I pull off into the first business I see, not sure whether to cringe or high five myself when I see that it's a sex store.

"Um, babe? What are we doing here? We have to get home-Kira's party starts soon. I want to make sure I'm there to greet the guests! We don't have time to shop for sex toys right now."

Yep, this is happening.

I park and shut the car off, walking to Rory's door to help her out. I wait with my hand extended, and eventually she realizes I'm not going to budge, and she climbs out.

With her hand in mine I open the door to the adult store, stopping in the entryway to look around and make some sort of game plan.

"What are we doing, Charlie?"

"We won't be late to the party. I just suddenly felt the urge to...stop here. Impromptu date, go with it."

"The ice cream is going to melt in the back of the car! Can't we come back in a few days when we aren't about to host all of our families for Kira's first birthday party?"

"No can do, sugar lips. Look, how fun is this?"

"No nipple clamps. I'm still breastfeeding and...just so much no."

I put the product back on the shelf and wander in deeper. This was a killer idea.

"You just want to knock me up again, don't you? Is that what this is about?"

She's going to pester me until I give her a reason not to, so I change tactics. I exhale dramatically and link my hands on top of my head like I'm embarrassed. "There's just something I've

been wanting to try, and it's hard to find time to bring it up when everyone's around. I'm worried they'd judge me for it, and I saw the store, and thought there's no better time than the present. If I wait any longer, I might lose the nerve to talk to you about it. Can we just...look for a minute? Please?"

Rory wraps her arms around me, burying her face in my chest. "Sorry, yes. Of course. If this is important to you, then we're doing this now. Show me what you've been thinking about."

I look around, desperately trying to find something I can use that's just weird enough to feel self-conscious about suggesting in the bedroom. "It's over here I think."

I tow her a few aisles over and gesture vaguely to the display, acting embarrassed, when really I'm just lying out of my ass.

"This?"

I discreetly check my phone to see Caden has given me the all clear, so I can get her home. "Sorry, it was a stupid idea. We can go."

"Oh Charlie, if you're embarrassed to purchase it, you can go wait in the car. I don't want you to feel like you have to suppress yourself around me, you know I'm willing to try anything you want to do once. Here, I've got this."

I follow her to the register with my hands in my pockets, finally realizing what it is we're apparently purchasing. Fuck. Why the hell did I have to choose a sex store? Why didn't I wait for something easier to navigate?

"Hello, did you find everything you were looking for?" The sales guy asks with a smirk on his face.

"We did, thank you."

"Great. We've got some cotton candy flavored lube on sale, it would go great with the product you've chosen, if you're interested?"

What goes good with cotton candy lube, you ask?

Why, a rainbow dildo meant to be strapped onto one's forehead so you can roleplay as Madison the Penetrating Unicorn.

No joke, that's what the label says.

"I do love cotton candy. Might as well throw it in!"

The guy does an excellent job of keeping a straight face while he rings Rory up, then I practically race through the store, lest someone I know see me buying a face dildo for my mate. Not that I know anyone that would be shopping here, but still. I know I'm here doing it and that's enough. *I* might see me here. Shudder.

"You excited? How long have you been wanting to try this?" Rory asks as she buckles up.

I roll my lips on and clamp them shut as I start pulling back into traffic, pissed at myself for getting into this situation.

"It's okay, you don't have to talk about it if it's uncomfortable. How about after the party, when everyone's gone, we can sneak away for some alone time?"

"Sounds good, love." I feel bad that she's being so supportive over something I made up, further proof that I'll never deserve her.

Rory plants her hand on my thigh as I drive us home, and I'm on edge because of what I'm leading her into. The last time I was this nervous was when we were bringing our babies home for the first time.

Today is a long time in the making.

Originally when Rory cured the connectors all that time ago, we were planning on letting a few of the mated groups do something special for her so she'd know how much she changed those connectors' lives, but when more and more connectors started stepping forward wanting to do something, it got bigger and bigger.

We decided to just plan something out for the future, so that we had plenty of time to arrange everything.

Rory asks about the connectors from time to time, wondering how they're doing. She has had occasional contact from a support group that started up, and they nicknamed themselves Rory's Girls.

Rory's gotten close with a few of them, but tonight she'll actually get to see them.

Every single connector, with their mates, are currently waiting in our backyard to surprise Rory. We've also been able to keep her out of the backyard somehow for the last month, and they've been working as a group to create an oasis for her. They wanted to do something to give back to her and to her family, and when we mentioned we hadn't quite figured out what we wanted to do with the backyard yet, they were all over it.

It's been nearly impossible to sneak around and get all the construction done without her knowing, but we've become experts at basically working around her being out of the house or sleeping.

Rory starts walking inside, frowning at the lack of cars outside. "Where is everyone? Do you think I put the wrong date on the invitations?"

No, we just had them park down the street and shuttled them in, but I can't tell her that.

"Told you we wouldn't be late. They'll be here soon, babe. Let's get this ice cream put away."

"Why don't you go put our new toy away while I do that?"

"Good thinking." I kiss her on the cheek and grab her delectable ass as I throw the stupid unicorn dildo in the nearest closet, hoping the dark and discreet bag it's packaged in will ward off anyone that might snoop. If someone sees it and gets uncomfortable, then it's their fault for looking through our shit.

I stay out of sight while Rory walks to the kitchen, putting the ice cream away we were told to go out and get. She doesn't need to know that was an excuse as well, and that we already hid five gallons of it in the other freezer in the garage.

"What the hell is that?" she asks, looking out the window that looks into the backyard. "Fuck! Who's watching Everly? She's walking around out there alone!"

Rory races out, mama mode activated, straight for the lure.

All my bondmates are hiding behind trees, well within sight of Everly. At a year and a half, she's into absolutely everything,

so Rory is correct to be terrified over the thought of her unsupervised outside.

She races out back, and I follow quietly behind. I close the door right as she jumps off the porch, going to scoop up our toddler. She starts talking to Everly and asking questions, and that's when Everly points to the trees, which confuses Rory enough to walk over to them.

“SURPRISE!” everyone yells as they step out from their hiding places in a deafening roar.

Rory screams like a banshee and very nearly drops our baby, which is hilarious only because she didn't drop her, so I start dying of laughter, sure that Rory must have just peed herself a little, judging by the way she's now crossing her legs.

“What the hell, guys? Don't scare me like that!”

But then she starts turning to see all of the connectors and their mates that she was told couldn't come today, and her mouth opens in a show of astonishment. “What are you all doing here?”

Steven steps forward, the mate to one of the connectors that was first to step forward with the idea of doing something special for Rory. Him and his bondmates run a custom landscaping and pool company and offered free services as a thank you, and everything spiraled out of control from there.

“I'm sure this must be unexpected,” Steven says as he wraps an arm around his connector, Julia, “But we've been working on and off for over a year with your mates to give you a proper thank you.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I don't need any thanks?”

Another connector steps forward. “Yet you'll receive them anyway. To you maybe it feels like it was a small thing to help us, but to us it was everything. Since we all got healed, we've bonded over it and become so much stronger together. You've made us feel confident in our bonds in a way we never would have known otherwise. We all have bright futures, thanks to your willingness to help total strangers. This is our gift to you,

and we won't hear a word about you not deserving it. It's all done anyway, and there are absolutely no take backs."

I lead Rory forward, where Brett and Ari are waiting for her with outstretched hands. I take Everly from her and follow along, wanting to see Rory's face when she sees what they've all done.

Sitting just beyond our tree line, and invisible from the house, is a brand-new pool and surrounding oasis. There are beautiful tiles installed as a pool deck, each one engraved with the name of a connector family Rory saved so she'll never forget how incredible she is.

Everyone really went over the top and installed a waterfall with built-in waterslide, connecting to a medium sized pool. There is new furniture around the pool deck, and me and the guys all chipped into put up a safety gate to keep the kids safe.

The pool features a zero entry so the babies can play in the water, and even has little fountains for them to splash in. This party was always meant to be a pool party, so as soon as Rory stops crying and hugging and endlessly thanking everyone, we fire up the grill and we get to celebrating.

We might be celebrating Kira's first birthday, but Kira wouldn't even be here without Rory, so this day is for her as well.

Donny runs inside to get some sodas we forgot, and I freeze when he comes running back outside, insisting he's a fucking unicorn.

A lot of the connectors brought kids as well so that Kira and Everly would have friends to play with, so when they see Donny charging towards them with a rainbow dildo attached to his head, that thankfully looks like a unicorn horn in pastels, the kids all squeal with excitement.

You know who's not excited? Me. I'm not fucking excited about this development.

One look at Rory says that she's not either, and a few shocked connectors that look like they might recognize the object attached to Donny's head also aren't excited. They're mortified.

But there's no taking this unicorn away from a bunch of crazed toddlers, so I guess we're just going to play it off like we do with nearly every other situation we find ourselves in. When there's this many people in a bond group, it happens more often than you'd think that we need to pretend something horrifying isn't happening right in front of us.

It's not long before Rory is laughing so hard that she can't talk, and when Caden asks why, she explains it. Then Caden tells Brett, who tells Beau, and it turns into a game of telephone between all of Rory's mates, until every single one of us are absolutely losing our minds over the fact that Donny is at a child's birthday party with a dildo strapped to his forehead while he splashes in the pool and enthusiastically neighs.

Let me tell you, you haven't lived if you haven't watched one of your life partners pretending to be a mythical creature with a sex toy on his forehead for a bunch of kids. This might be the donniest thing he's done yet.

Hopefully we still have friends after this.

THE
END
(again)

No, really.

Finishing this series was such an emotional roller coaster for me, and I don't think any of you understand how greatly I appreciate every single one of you that makes this wild career of mine possible. Honestly, sometimes when I'm writing and cackling to myself over something super weird that's happening on the page, I marvel that I get paid to write such weird shit down.

I'm sure you want to know what's next, so let me just tell you.

Before we get into that though, please leave a review and tell your friends if you've enjoyed this series— it's so difficult to be successful as an indie author, and you lovely people literally make my day when I see my books recommended in huge groups online. I love you. Forever.

Also, follow me on social media if you want to know right away what's new and which book signing events I'll be at.

I've got a Facebook reader's group you can join, [facebook.com/groups/BookmarksMakeMeRandy](https://www.facebook.com/groups/BookmarksMakeMeRandy) and you can like my author page, [facebook.com/ksolizauthor](https://www.facebook.com/ksolizauthor). My Instagram and TikTok handle is @kelseysolizauthor, and I would love it if you followed me and interacted with me!

Please make me socialize.

There will be another book in the broken wolf world coming next after I'm done with book conventions in Salem, MA and Charleston, SC (details on my linktr.ee that you can find on any of my social media groups), and this one is completely written (in my head).

Pack of Lies will be another rejected mates, second chance, secret baby romance, focused around another woman at the shelter with Ada. I'm hoping to write several more in this world as well but be patient!

The next series after that release is going to be an actual continuation of Hemlock Academy. I will be doing a live release of a prequel, so make sure you follow me on amazon so you know when it drops! This series is going to center around Gabriella's daughter Delaney, and her trials at Hemlock Academy.

Here's a short sneak peek of what this series will have, and please don't come at me when you see the release date. This is merely a place holder, and I PROMISE it will not take a year to write. I just need a far-off date for my mental health so I can write in peace.

Thank you so, so, so much for following Rory's journey and being a part of this world.

Kelsey

Six Ways to Break

Releasing late 2023 or early 2024

Delaney needs sex to replenish her magic, much like her mother before her.

The problem though, is that she can't just feed off of anyone. Delaney can only feed off of partners that have strong feelings for her, something that is both a blessing and a curse.

She knows when she's with someone if they actually want *her*, or if they're just in it for the sex.

Because of this, Delaney is scared to actually put herself out there, especially after someone she was pretty sure was going to be part of her future suddenly stops sustaining her. His feelings changed for some reason, and she's heartbroken.

As a conduit, Delaney has been blessed by the magic of the goddess to collect mates, but her mother, who happens to be the voice of the goddess, has refused to tell her how many mates she's destined for. Gabriella, the queen, is convinced that not knowing how many mates Delaney is fated for will keep her from having certain expectations.

With no idea about what she's doing, Delaney starts her stint at Hemlock Academy.

Delaney is a terrible bodysmith, and instead of being sexy and making everyone want her, she frequently loses control of her magic and causes orgies left and right. The first year doesn't go as smoothly as her parents hoped, when instead of finding mates, she just learns the quickest ways to break.

This will be a reverse harem academy romance in which our main character collects mates as the series progresses. It will be a large harem, but you'll have to read along to find out exactly how many she ends up with.

You can expect laugh out loud absurd humor and angst, and of course lots of steam. There will be MM relationships in the story, but our FMC will always remain at the center of the men.

Pre-order is live.

