

A JACKSONVILLE RAYS HOCKEY SERIES

PUCKING
EVER
AFTER
VOLUME II

EMILY RATH

PUCKING EVER AFTER

VOLUME 2

EMILY RATH

EMILY RATH BOOKS



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First published in 2023.

Rath, Emily

PUCKING EVER AFTER: VOLUME TWO

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-962350-00-6

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-962350-01-3

Cover design by: Maldo Designs

This is for all the queer people who have ever had to wait...wait to come out, wait to experiment, wait to leave, wait to lean in, heart in your throat, finally feeling brave enough to ask for what you want, what you've craved more than air.

You've waited long enough.

SERIES READING ORDER

#0.5 THAT ONE NIGHT (prequel)

#1 PUCKING AROUND

#1.5 PEA: VOL 1 (HEA novella)

#2 PUCKING WILD

#2.5 PEA: VOL 2 (HEA novella)

#3 PUCKING SWEET

#3.5 PEA: VOL 3 (HEA novella)

#4 PUCKING STRONG

#4.5 PEA: VOL 4 (HEA novella)

#5 PUCKING FREE

#5.5 PEA: VOL 5 (HEA novella)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello again, dear reader! This is the second volume of HEA content for the Jacksonville Rays Hockey Romance series. If you're here, it means you've *hopefully* read the following books:

- THAT ONE NIGHT (prequel)
- PUCKING AROUND (book #1)
- PEA: VOL 1 (HEA novella)
- PUCKING WILD (book #2)

If you haven't read PUCKING WILD, this novella will contain some major series spoilers. Like with PEA: VOL 1, this volume will hop around a little in terms of timeline. I've provided a little note at the top of each chapter so you can better orient yourself.

While I have you, I want to say two things about the relationship dynamics presented in this series. Firstly, relations in a polyamorous unit are not always fixed. They can change over time. And sometimes it can take a long time to see those changes.

Secondly, queerness has no timeline. And in the Emilyverse, we don't like strict labels placed on our queer characters. I try to treat each of my characters and their experience of queerness as their own unique journey. Their understanding/performance of their own queerness may not match yours, and that's okay.

As you read the Price Family chapters in particular, keep in mind that several years have passed. Years of sharing a life—working together,

traveling, cooking, sharing lovers, raising children, paying bills. There is so much you're not seeing of their shared lives. Give me room to show you how relationships in a unit like theirs can naturally change over time.

And remember—there are **three** more PEA volumes planned. So, you haven't seen the last of any of your beloved Rays. If there's not enough of one character in this volume for you, I'll ask you to please be patient. I have so much more story to tell. Happy reading!

XO,

Emily

TROPES, TAGS, & CONTENT WARNINGS

TROPES

Happily ever after; hockey romance; why choose; sports romance; bonus content

TAGS

HEA guaranteed; there is no actual hockey in this one; wedding weekend; no fish were harmed; accidental pregnancy; babies; protective uncles; Pelly the Pelican; parenting; why choose; Team Price; we're all daddy; no exit; Jake is fine with it, I swear; bisexual exploration; exhibitionism; bondage; impact play; light dom/sub dynamics; degradation; frotting; docking; rimming; pretzeling; hot cum massage

CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains some themes that may be distressing to readers including detailed depictions of labor and delivery. A character suffers a near-death childbirth experience.

Aside from themes of childbirth, a character reveals their past experiences with homophobia (told through reflection). Another character experiences blatant, demoralizing homophobia directly from family members (depicted on page). Two characters becomes physically ill, including two scenes of vomiting.

This book also contains detailed MF and MM sex scenes that include elements of exhibitionism, bondage, impact play, light dom/sub dynamics, degradation, frotting, docking, rimming, and hot cum massage.

MEET THE RAYS

PLAYERS

Davidson, Tyler “Dave-O” (#65): backup goalie
Fields, Ethan (#94): forward
Gerard, Jean-Luc “J Lo” (#6): defenseman
Gordon, Sam “Flash”: rookie, non-starter
Hanner, Paul (#24): defenseman
Jones, Brayden “Jonesy”: rookie, non-starter
Karlsson, Henrik (#17): forward
Langley, Ryan (#20): forward
Morrow, Cole (#3): defenseman
Novikov, Lukas “Novy” (#22): defenseman
O’Rourke, Patrick “Patty”: rookie, non-starter
O’Sullivan, Josh “Sully” (#19): forward, Captain
Perry, David “DJ” (#13): forward
Price, Ilmari “Mars” (#31): starting goalie
Price, Jake (#42): defenseman
Walsh, Cade (#10): forward
West, Connor “Westie”: rookie, non-starter
Yuley, Kevin: rookie, non-starter

COACHES

Andrews, Brody: Assistant Coach (defense)
Denison, Nick: Assistant Coach (offense)
Johnson, Harold “Hodge”: Head Coach

Tomlin, Eric: Goalie Coach

TEAM SUPPORT

Gordon, Jerry: Assistant Equipment Manager

Jones, Cody: Equipment Tech

Price, Caleb: Assistant Equipment Manager

MEDICAL SUPPORT

Brady, Brad: Interim Director of Physical Therapy

Jacobs, Hillary: Team Nurse

O'Connor, Teddy: PT intern

Price, Rachel: Barkley Fellow

Tyler, Scott: Team Doctor

OPERATIONS/MANAGEMENT

Francis, Vicki: Operations Manager

Ortiz, Claribel: Social Media Manager

St. James, Poppy: Public Relations Director

Talbot, Mark: General Manager

OTHER NOTABLE CHARACTERS

Ford, Joey: Out of the Net

Gerard, Lauren: J-Lo's wife

Kline, Mike: Ryan's agent

Lemming, Cheryl: Out of the Net

Lemming, Nancy: Out of the Net

O'Sullivan, Shelby: Sully's wife

Owens, Troy: Tess's estranged husband

Owens, Bea: Tess's mother-in-law

Putnam, Charlie: Tess's lawyer

CHAPTER BLUBRS

1. Dark Devil (Rachel)

This is one of the most requested bonus scenes from PUCKING AROUND. What exactly happened when Caleb finished singing ‘Beggin’ on that karaoke stage? Read and find out!

2. Turks & Caicos (Ryan)

It’s officially wedding weekend. Ryan, Tess, and the Rays are all in Turks & Caicos ready to celebrate tying the knot. There’s only one problem...or two...or five.

3. Waiting: Part 1 (Tess)

Ryan’s sister is in town, and she’s officially overstayed her welcome. Tess is on edge as she tries to keep the peace, but there’s only so much one Gemini can handle.

4. Waiting: Part 2 (Ryan)

While Tess is trapped in the clutches of a medical crisis, a desperate Ryan can do nothing but wait.

5. No Exit (Jake)

The Price Family arrive at the hospital for the birth of little baby No Name, and a very distracted Jake handles a surprise visit.

6. The Dentist: Part 1 (Ilmari)

With half the Price Family away on the road, it falls to Ilmari to keep it together at home, balancing everyone's needs.

7. The Dentist: Part 2 (Caleb)

The fallout from the dentist appointment leaves Caleb considering some major life changes.

LAST NOTE...

While I am Dr. Emily Rath, smutologist and purveyor of spice, I am not a medical doctor. I did my best to research the medical experiences in these chapters to make them feel real, while still creating space for story.

Let's all keep in mind this is a fantasy world.

Okay, happy reading!

DARK DEVIL



*Note: This is one of the most requested bonus scenes for **Pucking Around**. This scene takes place the night of Caleb's karaoke performance.*

Riptide's Bar & Grill goes crazy as Caleb and the cover band finish the last chords of their epic rendition of Måneskin's 'Beggin'. The women in the audience are screaming and all the Rays are hooting and pounding their fists on the tables. I can tell this isn't the first time Caleb has impressed them with his secret talent.

What other secrets does my moody Sagittarius keep hidden up his sleeve?

I'm smiling from ear to ear as I turn to Jake, but my smile falls as I take him in. He's standing there, hands in his pockets, NHL hat flipped backwards, looking like someone just knocked the ice cream off his cone. "What's wrong?" I say, my hand brushing down his arm.

"Nothing," he replies.

I can hardly hear him over the crowd as the lead singer hops back up on the stage, beer in hand, ready to take his guitar back from Caleb. I glance over to see Caleb hop off the side of the stage to more cheers. He slips his sandy feet back into his flip-flops and takes a glass of water from a passing

waitress, downing half of it in one gulp. I watch the movement of his throat as he swallows, his hand clutching the glass like he clutched the mic. His tattooed arm is muscled, the tendons corded under his colorful ink—

A hand on my hip has me jumping. I turn to see Jake staring down at me. His eyes are burning through me, his jaw set tight. I know he saw the way I was just looking at Cay. My eyes go wide in understanding. *This* is what has him so on edge tonight. He's jealous. Cay brought us here to show off for me...in front of Jake.

That's what Jake meant by learning his lesson. Something happened between them that has Jake on the back foot, taking a swing from Caleb. He had to sit there and watch as Caleb played for me, turning me on with his talent and charisma.

I sigh. They were bound to treat this like a competition, at least in the beginning. It was foolish of me to assume otherwise. They're athletes; it's in the blood. More than that, they're both confident guys, unused to sharing. I just need to know whether this need they have to compete will prove to be too much in the end. Will it break us? Will this all be over before it even has a chance to begin?

I brush a hand down his forearm. "Listen...Jake—"

"We're fine, Rach," he says over me, the heat in his eyes dimming as he remembers where we are and who surrounds us on all sides. His hand drops away from me, and he leans forward, snatching his beer off the table. "He's pretty good, isn't he?"

I take the beer he hands me, the tips of our fingers brushing. "He's amazing."

"Yep." He takes a sip of his beer. "The ladies always love the look of Cay at the mic."

"Well, he's sexy as sin," I reply, feigning an indifferent shrug. "And that voice is smooth like butter. It's enough to make anyone feel a little hot and bothered. I may need to fish one of the ice cubes out of that glass and smooth it down my neck just to cool off."

He goes stiff at my side, clenching his glass hard enough to break it.

"Maybe that ice trails a little lower," I tease. "Cools me off in other places that now feel...wet."

"Fuck." Dropping down to the bench seat of our picnic table, he's a swirling storm cloud of emotion, his shoulders rounded as he holds his beer glass with both hands.

I can't contain my laugh as I sink down on the bench beside him. I use the motion as an excuse to brush against him, my hand on his shoulder. "Don't think I don't know you're hard as stone right now," I say, leaning in. "Is your cock feeling trapped in those cute little board shorts?"

"Stop," he warns. "We're in public, remember? What happened to your stupid no PDA rules?"

My smile falls as I will him to look at me. When he does, I hold his gaze. "I don't know what game you're playing with Caleb right now, but this is not a game to me, Jake. You are not a game, and I don't take what we have lightly."

"I know," he says, turning his attention back to the beer in his hands.

"But I won't apologize for how I feel about him. Just like I won't apologize to him for how I feel about you, Jake—"

"I know," he says again, taking a sip of his beer with a grimace.

Steeling myself, I swallow my nerves, praying I'm wrong. "I refuse to hurt you, Jake. You mean too much to me. And I refuse to harm your friendship. If this is all too much for you—"

"Hey," he says, shutting me down with a look. He reaches surreptitiously under the table, his hand on my thigh. "It's not. Rach, I swear, this was...it was just a dumb guy thing. It was a *me* thing," he corrects, his tone lightening a bit. "It's not about you, baby...or you and Cay."

I raise a skeptical brow and he forces a laugh, his shoulders relaxing.

"We're good, Seattle." He gives my leg another squeeze. "Promise. I'll deal with Cay my way." He drops his hand away as a few of the guys jostle their way onto the benches at our table. Novy's big body shoves into Jake's shoulder, moving me down the bench too. Jake curses, nearly spilling his beer as he shoves him off.

Laughing, I slip off the end of the bench, using it as an excuse to touch him again. "I'll be right back," I say over the cover band now rocking out to a U2 song.

"Hey Doc, you going to the bar?" Hanner calls, already three sheets to the wind. "Get us another bucket of Coronas."

"Nope," I shout back, my hand still on Jake's shoulder. "Ladies' room."

The guys jostle him as I hear Jake say, "Get your own damn beer, Pauly. She's your PT, not your waitress." I leave him to handle his drunk teammate as I slip through the crowded tables, headed for the restrooms inside.

The restaurant is just as busy as the bar patio. A different band is set up

inside by the front windows. I smile despite myself. They're playing one of my dad's songs. My smile falls when I realize it's from their sophomore album. Harrison and I were still in elementary school when it came out. Daddy was deep in his addiction phase then. We hardly saw him during the two years he toured for that album.

I pause in the far corner of the room, standing beneath the light of a glowing beer sign. The restrooms wait just beyond in the dark alcove. But I can't move. I watch as the woman at the mic sings the chorus of 'Dark Devil.' It's a classic rock anthem—part love song, part manifesto...or so the band always says. Her voice is low and breathy, giving it more of an indie vibe. And the guitar is acoustic, not electric.

"They've got a good sound."

I jump, hand flying to my heart. Caleb is standing right behind me. I gaze up into his dark eyes. His mussed hair falls forward onto his forehead. He's got his hat tucked into the back pocket of his faded jeans. That black t-shirt is fitting him like a glove.

I smile. "So do you."

He leans closer. "Oh, you heard that out there, did you?"

I roll my eyes. "Hard not to when you dedicated it to me. Which—thanks for that, by the way," I add slapping his chest. "I almost had 'Hot Doc' dead and buried until you went and breathed new life into it."

He laughs before sobering a bit. "I can tell the guys to knock it off if it really bothers you."

I just shrug. "Trust me, I've been called worse."

"She's got a good sound," he says again, nodding towards the band's lead singer.

"Yeah...sometimes it's hard for me to hear Ferrymen songs though," I admit.

"Imitation is the highest form of flattery," he replies. "She's just singing what she likes."

"Oh—no, it's nothing like that," I say quickly. "It's not the song or even that it's my dad's song it's...there's just a lot of memories wrapped up in that one for me."

He just stands there quietly, watching me, waiting for me to go on.

With a sigh, I push through. "His body of work is like the story of my life, you know? Each album, each song...they become like their own mini time capsules. I hear one of his songs, and that time capsule gets opened..."

and then the memories come pouring out.”

He nods in understanding, searching my face. “What memories pour out with this song?”

I cross my arms as I glance around. “Seriously? You wanna do this right here? In the corner of Rip’s by the damn bathrooms?”

He steps in closer. “I’d like to know your demons better. Seems only fair when you already know mine.”

“Fine...but just know you asked for this,” I warn.

He’s wholly unfazed. “Hit me with it, Hurricane.”

Holding his gaze, I spill my truth. “My dad OD’d for the first time while on tour for this album. He cheated on my mom during that tour. He tore apart our family. The ‘Dark Devil’ isn’t a motorcycle or the police or a dangerous woman. It’s his addiction problems. It’s him fighting and losing. He got back from touring for this album and my parents divorced and he moved out. He lost everything...we lost everything.”

Slowly, Caleb unfolds his arms, his shoulders relaxing. “Fuck,” he says on a breath. “I’m sorry, Hurricane—”

“Don’t.” I step back as he reaches out.

He narrows his eyes in frustration. “What, I can’t even hug you as a fucking friend? That’s too much PDA for you? You just bared your soul—”

“No, if you touch me now, I’ll cry. And if I cry, I won’t stop. And ‘Dark Devil’ has taken enough of my tears. Please, Cay.” I splay my fingers, warding him back. “Please...just don’t.” Blinking back my tears, I heave a relieved sigh as the song finally finishes.

Caleb’s gaze darts around our dark corner of the restaurant. No one is paying us any attention. People are just watching the live music and chatting with their table mates. It’s just the two of us, standing under the light of this flickering Blue Moon sign. He leans in, his fingers ghosting a touch over my arm. His voice is low and husky as he says, “I cry watching *Armageddon*.”

I shift away. “You what?”

“The Bruce Willis movie...you know, *Armageddon*? With the asteroid drilling—”

“I know the movie *Armageddon*, Caleb,” I deadpan.

He grins and shrugs. “Yeah, well it makes me cry every damn time. Jake won’t even watch it with me anymore.”

I raise a confused brow. “Why are you...”

“Now you know something that makes *me* cry,” he says before I can

finish. “We’re even.”

“Nuh-uh.” I cross my arms again, glaring up at him. “No way. You don’t get to offer up some random movie trivia as proof of your dark and twisties, Cay. I just bared some serious trauma.”

“Well, that’s all you get, Hurricane—”

“Where the hell did you learn to play guitar like that?” I say over him.

He laughs and moves like he means to step around me. “I’m not telling you another damn thing until you pay me for it.”

I grab his tattooed arm, feeling him tense. “Pay you? What the hell does that mean?”

“It means nothing in this life is free, Hurricane. You want a more intimate look at my dark and twisties? You better be willing to pay first.”

My heart skips a beat as he gives me a look like he wants to eat me alive. My entire body hums as he drags his eyes over me. I suppress a shiver, fighting the urge to jump in his arms and let him drag me into the closest bathroom stall.

Down, girl.

Squaring my shoulders at him, I step closer, my hand still on his arm. “Caleb Sanford, if you think I’m going to fuck you in the bathroom in exchange for personal details, you can think again. I said no PDA.”

“Pity,” he replies. “Cause I’ve got a lot of sad stories to tell, Hurricane. Lots of deep aches that could use...massaging.”

“You’re an ass,” I hiss, trying to step away from him.

He grabs me by the wrist and pulls me further into the dark. All but blocked from prying eyes, he presses me against the wall and anchors me with his hips, his face lowering until his breath is hot in my ear. “Don’t pretend you don’t fucking love this ass,” he taunts, nipping the lobe of my ear.

I gasp. The feel of his teeth, his hips pressing in, his hot breath on my skin—my body lights up like a sparkler. My every sense hones in on the feel of him so close, the smell of his cologne, sporty and spiced. I swallow a frustrated moan as my body utterly betrays me. God, I want this man more than I want air.

He laughs, kissing down my neck, knowing he’s won.

That’s the thing he and Jake both need to understand: there is no contest. There never was, and there never will be. I intend to let them both keep winning me over and over again.

Caleb pulls me with him into the dark of the hallway, his mouth on mine, kissing the last feeble sounds of protest from my lips. Suddenly, half the restaurant begins to cheer, and we break apart with a shared gasp. Looking in each other's eyes, we listen as the band plays the first few chords of 'Sweet Home Alabama.' As one, we smile.

Lynyrd Skynyrd just bought us four uninterrupted minutes.

Turns out there are no ladies' and men's rooms with stalls at Riptide's Bar & Grill. Just two unisex bathrooms...with doors that lock.

Perfect.

I laugh as Caleb pulls me towards the one set deeper in the corner. It's a small space, the walls painted a dark blue. The wall around the door is papered with old concert flyers and beach events. Caleb jerks me inside, holding me close with one hand, as he shuts the door with the other. Turning the deadbolt, he presses me against the door with his hips, his free hand already reaching up under my scrub shirt, cupping me over my sports bra.

I dig my fingers in his hair, biting and sucking on his bottom lip as we kiss. I take in a sharp breath, letting him go as he pinches my nipple over the cotton of my bra. "We've got about three and a half minutes," I pant against his mouth, listening as a room full of tipsy people start singing the first chorus of 'Sweet Home Alabama'.

Wasting no time, Caleb groans with hunger, his tongue plunging back in my mouth as his hand drops from my breast, seeking to go south, his fingers dipping under the elastic of my scrub pants. With his other hand firm on my hip, he pulls me from the door and walks me over to the sink. He swallows my cry as his fingers open me, sliding through my wetness. I cling to his shoulders, head tipped back, as he presses inside me, working me all the way open.

"Such a good fucking girl," he hums against my mouth, making my pussy clench around his fingers. "You want a deep, dark truth from me? Give me one of yours first. Show me what this body wants. Show me what she fucking craves. I want to feel you take your fucking rules and bend them 'til they break."

I press against the sink, shifting my weight to one foot so I can open my hips wider, giving him more room. With one hand I grip the sink. The other holds his head, fingers woven in his messy curls. "Cay, baby, please," I whimper, already on edge from the way his fingers are moving inside me.

"A truth for a truth," he says again. His free hand grabs my face hard,

forcing me to look at him. As our eyes connect, he jams two fingers deep inside, curling them in along my vaginal wall until I shudder in his hold. Lips parted, I whine for him.

He smiles, his dark eyes depthless in this dimly lit bathroom. “I am going to devour you.” He says the words like a vow, an incantation. “I am going to strip you fucking bare and drown in your perfect cunt.”

“Cay—*mmph*—”

He swallows my words with a fierce kiss as he frees his hand from my scrub pants, leaving me empty, my pussy squeezing around nothing. Taking half a step back from me, his hands drop to my hips. With a swift jerk, he pulls my scrubs and my cotton panties down around my knees. Without hesitating, he lifts me up, placing my bare ass on the edge of the sink. I hiss as my cheeks touch the cold porcelain.

“Don’t fucking move,” he growls, his hand firm on my hip, holding me to the sink.

I grip his hair tight with one hand as he drops down to his good knee. My other hand falls back to brace against the sink basin. I push up, holding my balance, as he jerks my pants down around my ankles and spreads me open.

From his place between my thighs, he looks up, those pretty dark eyes reflecting the lights on either side of the mirror. “Be my good girl, and don’t say a word.”

Swallowing the moan already creeping up my throat, I nod.

Then he descends.

“Oh—*fuck*—” The words die on my lips as I physically bite them back. I dig my top teeth into my bottom lip as Cay eats me out, his chin moving, giving me delicious friction. He sucks and teases my clit with that clever tongue. God, he’s so good at this. “Don’t stop,” I pant, my tone breathless as I grip his hair tighter.

He growls into my pussy, the vibrations shivering through me and up my chest, down my arms, until my hand shakes. I’m not so much bracing against the sink as I am clinging to it. Then he dives in with his tongue, burying himself in my cunt.

“Fuck—” I curl around him, nearly losing my balance on the sink’s edge. He grips my thighs with both hands. Holding me open, he dives deeper, his tongue moving in and out. I ride it out, my whole body coiling tight as I feel myself ready to shatter.

Just when I think I can’t hold on another second, he pulls his head away,

panting for breath.

“No, no, no—” I pull on his hair, trying to put him back where I need him.

“Tell me what I want to hear,” he commands. “Give me your truth.”

I let out a shaky breath, feeling my orgasm fizzle away as something deeper takes root in me. This isn't the wildfire of passion. This is something more, something primal and aching. What truth does this body hold for him? What can I say that he might need to hear?

He looks up at me, his eyes glassy with need. “Say it.”

I hold his gaze, thinking of the lyrics to the song he just sang. He already gave me a truth tonight. That song was his truth—his worry, his frustration, his naked fear. Now he seeks an answer to his plea. I soften my hands in his hair, gentling my touch to a caress. “Oh, Cay...you can't lose me,” I whisper. “And you won't lose him for wanting me.”

Slowly he nods, his breath warm against my pussy.

“You won't lose us,” I say again.

I don't get another word out before he's on me, owning me, making me writhe on the sink until I come. My legs are shaking, and I feel like a snow globe inside as he jerks me off the sink and shimmies my undies and scrub pants back up, my release still glistening on his chin.

I pull him to me, and we kiss, softer now. The crowd outside cheers as the Lynyrd Skynyrd song ends. We're almost out of time. Taking my chance, I try to win another truth from him. “How did you learn to play guitar?”

He smirks, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Church camp.”

I blink. “Wait—seriously?”

He nods. “Growing up in Minnesota, the only two places I was allowed to go outside of school were the hockey rink and church. Learning to play guitar got me out of doing far less enjoyable activities.”

“Were you a choir boy?” I tease.

He doesn't return my smile. “Yes. And I did all the church plays, church bands, church youth groups. I spent every moment not in class or out on the ice being brainwashed into thinking everything I am, everything I want, everything I feel...it's a fucking sin. I lived in a cage of hate and fear, Rachel, rattling at the bars like a starved fucking animal.”

My heart drops and I reach out a hand, cupping his cheek. “Oh...Cay.”

“I hated myself for so fucking long,” he says, unveiling his own dark devil. “And then I hated *them* for putting the doubt in my head, for making

me think I deserved to be hated.”

“Who?” I whisper.

He huffs a mirthless laugh. “My parents mostly. My brothers, my cousins, my friends, sometimes even my teammates. They fed me the lie over and over. They twisted me the fuck up until I believed them. I believed I was a monster—”

“You’re not.” I cup his face with both hands, stepping in close. “There is *nothing* wrong with you, Caleb.”

His hands lift to wrap around my wrists. “I know. I’m not the one in need of their Christ’s compassion...or his forgiveness.”

Rage boils inside me, white hot and powerful. “That same kind of cruel, narrow-mindedness almost lost me Harrison.”

He nods, his hands smoothing down my forearms to cup my elbows. “I know, baby. I walked away from that life a long fucking time ago. They’re not demons for me anymore. They’re just ghosts.”

I blink back my tears, holding his gaze. “You don’t have to hide with me, Cay. You don’t have to mask, and you don’t have to pretend. Want what you want. Want *who* you want. Do it out loud. I will never hold you back, I swear it.”

He steps in, his hands dropping to my waist as he pulls me closer. “Is that enough ugly truth for you for one night, Hurricane? Are we done now?”

I nod, my hands smoothing across his chest.

“I’m trying here,” he adds. “With you and with Jake...I’m not a sunshine and rainbows kinda guy though, and I never will be—”

I place my fingers over his lips. “I don’t want that from you. Jake is enough bottled sunshine. I want you to be you. You’re enough, Cay. Just like this. It’s enough.”

Our bodies shift and I feel the stiffness of his cock trapped inside his tight jeans. Glancing over to the door, I smile. The sounds of the restaurant hum just beyond these walls. Out there, we have jobs and responsibilities and expectations. But in here, in this moment, we’re just two storm clouds who like it best when it rains.

“Rachel,” he warns, one dark brow raised as his body stiffens. He shakes his head, jaw clenching. “We’re gonna get caught...”

I brush the back of my hand down his length again, teasing him through the denim. “But I thought you liked symmetry. A truth for a truth...an orgasm for an orgasm—”

He snatches my wrist, angling my hand away from his dick. “You’re the one with her little book of rules. If we get caught in here, everyone will know...”

“Rules are made to be broken,” I say, turning my wrist in his grip as I reach out with my other hand, brushing my fingers down the middle of his stomach, stopping just above his belt. “Come on, daddy...don’t make me beg.”

Got him.

The pulse point at his neck flutters and his jaw tightens as he glares down at me, the fires in his eyes smoldering. He moves lightning fast with his free hand, grabbing my hair in a tight fist and jerking my head back until I gasp. The pain zings right through my body like a slap to the clit. *Oh, fuck yes.*

He pulls me to him, still holding my wrist as he drops our hands between us, flattening my palm over his hard dick. He turns my head and rasps in my ear, “I’m going to choke you with this dick and paint your pretty mouth with my cum. Would you like that, Hurricane?”

I whimper, clinging to him with my free hand as I rub down his shaft. “Do it,” I command. “Put me on my knees, Cay.”

With a confident grin, he loosens his hold on my hair and walks us back until he hits the wall. “Good girls say ‘please,’” he taunts, rubbing his thumb over my parted lips.

My eyes go wide as I take in the way the shadows dance across his face. This is one dark devil I’m happy to play with. This is a devil I’m falling for. This devil is coming home with me.

This devil is *mine*.

“Please,” I say, already sinking to my knees.

Gazing down at me like Hades himself, Caleb nods, giving me permission to take what I want. I reach for his belt with both hands. There’s no way we’re not getting caught. Smiling, I open his belt.

Worth it.

TURKS & CAICOS



*Note: True to Ryan’s promise in the epilogue of **Pucking Wild**, Tess and Ryan got married the night of her proposal. Readers who purchase the Kensington edition of the **Pucking Wild** paperback will enjoy an exclusive bonus epilogue detailing that scene (available March 26, 2024). All readers need to know to enjoy this chapter is that Tess and Ryan are **technically** already married.*

The sun is a golden disc sitting high in the sky, blazing heat down on my bare shoulders. I can feel the fiery kiss of it on my skin, cooled by the occasional whip of the wind. All around me, the waters of the Caribbean sway and roll. It’s gorgeous, deep blue like a sapphire. But May in Turks and Caicos is hot. As a professional hockey player, I’ve learned I thrive best in a more temperate climate.

Jake did me a solid an hour ago when he told me to take my backwards cap off. It would’ve sucked to have weird tan lines in the middle of my forehead for the wedding pictures tomorrow. He stands next to me along the boat rail, one hand on his reel as he nurses a beer with the other. “Is it weird we haven’t caught anything?” he calls over his shoulder.

“Nah, man. That’s the fun of it,” Novy replies from the other side of the fishing charter. “We’re not hanging at the dock, scooping ‘em up in a net. This is deep sea fishing, Pricey. You gotta earn it out here.”

“Be more fun if we caught at least *one* thing,” Jake mutters at me and I laugh.

This was the guys’ big surprise for me for our stag and hen parties. Tess and her girls are back at the resort having a full spa day, while me and the guys did jet skis in the bay this morning, followed by an awesome seafood lunch, and an afternoon on this deep-sea fishing charter.

Honestly, I don’t really like fishing, but that’s not the point of today. My best friends are all here, and we’re having a great time—even if we don’t catch any fish.

But I’m starting to feel this heat. And on this small charter vessel, there isn’t anywhere to hide from it. I wish I had a long-sleeve shirt to give me a bit more sun protection. Instead, I’ve just got a tank tucked in my board shorts. Even if I put it back on, it won’t do much to cover my bright pink shoulders.

Mars comes over, quietly offering me another beer, but I shake my head. I’ve already switched back to water. It won’t do to get sun *and* alcohol poisoning in the same day. Besides, we’ve got the rehearsal dinner tonight, and I’m sure we’ll all do more drinking there. I’ve gotta pace myself.

I’m just about to ask how much longer we’ll be out here when my reel jerks in my hand. I nearly drop it before the spool starts spinning like a top with a sharp whizzing sound. “Oh shit—” I grab the reel with both hands. “Guys—shit—*ouch*—guys, I think I got a bite!” I try to remember the instructions the charter captain walked us through earlier. This rig is far more advanced than the kiddie poles I used off the end of my grandpa’s dock to catch sunnies.

“Whoa, don’t let it get away,” Jake calls, reeling in his own empty line as fast as he can.

On the other side of the boat, Novy, Morrow, and Sully all cheer for me.

The boat rocks like crazy as Mars and Rob, the charter captain, move to my side. “Nice and easy,” says Mars, his eyes hidden behind a pair of polarized sunglasses.

“Give it some line before you start to reel it in,” adds Rob. “We’re gonna look for a nice rhythm, just like a dance. Jig, rhythm, jig.” He slaps my sunburned shoulder, and I hiss through my teeth.

Whatever's on the end of this line, it's strong. The end of my pole bends at an impossible angle as I hold it with both hands, giving the fish resistance.

"Whoa, she's moving in a hurry—quick—come around to the front here," Rob instructs, taking me by the arm.

"Yeah, get it Langers," Sully calls. "Keep it on the line."

Captain Rob stands at my shoulder. "Find your rhythm, mate. Reel it in and hold. Reel and hold. There you go."

"Don't give it too much room to run."

"Easy does it."

I nod, shoulders tense, as I follow the instructions coming at me from all sides. "I got it," I grunt, finding a rhythm. I reel, reel, reel three times and hold, bracing to meet that sharp resistance. "Fuck, it's strong as shit."

"You got her, man."

"Keep going—"

"Hey Langers, look this way," Jake calls. "Photo for the girls."

I glance distractedly over my shoulder as Jake snaps pictures with his phone.

The fish puts up a serious fight, jerking left then right across the front of the boat.

"Follow her," Rob calls, stepping back to give me room. "That's it, just like a dance. Keep following. She'll tire herself out."

I'm full-on sweating as I fight this thing minute after minute.

"Oh fuck, here it comes," Novy shouts.

Behind me, the guys all cheer.

There's a shadowy splash off the left side of the boat. Then she's pulling sharply to the right, and I follow, part of me wishing I could hand the reel over to someone else. But I'm here. I'm catching this damn fish.

"There it is!" Sully calls, pointing over the bow.

A bigger splash this time. The resistance is getting heavier now that the fish is all the way at the surface.

Sully is grinning like a kid. "Hold it, Langers. You almost got her."

"What is it?" I pant.

Novy slings an arm around Sully's shoulder, lifting his sunglasses as he squints. "A tuna?"

"Hey, maybe it's a swordfish," says Sully. "I've never seen one up close."

"Amberjack?" Jake offers.

“Now you’re all just fucking guessing!” I hold tight to the spinner as the mystery fish fights me.

Rod rattles around looking for something. “Reel her in a bit closer. We’ll see in a second.”

“It’s a shark,” comes Mars’s deep voice.

Jake snorts. “Yeah, right. Langers didn’t catch a—”

“Oh, holy fuck, that’s a shark,” Novy shouts, jumping up and down with his hands on Sully’s shoulders.

Morrow leans over the boat rail, peering down at the shadow in the water. “Dude, it’s totally a shark.”

My eyes go wide.

Okay, so...fun fact about me? I’m terrified of sharks. Like, don’t like to swim in the deep end of pools in case there’s sharks. Won’t go out deeper than knee-deep at the beach afraid of sharks. Saw *Jaws* exactly once and was scarred for life afraid of sharks.

Do I still watch *Shark Week*? Yes. Religiously.

You gotta know your enemy.

No word of a lie, my trepidation about doing this boat trip was all due to the fact that we might see a shark. Just *see* it. Now the guys are all saying there’s a shark on the end of this fucking fishing line, and I want to pee into my board shorts.

“Someone take this,” I shout, not caring if I’m losing all my cool points right now. “Guys, I’m serious. Fuck—take it—”

Apparently, no one is willing to step in and save my goddamn life.

“Nah man, you got it.”

“You can do this, Langers.”

“So freaking cool!”

“You’re all fucking fired,” I squawk. “I don’t need groomsmen. I’ll stand up there by myself—”

“Dude, this is awesome. I’m recording the whole thing,” Jake calls. “Tess is gonna freaking lose it.”

“Nearly there,” says Rob.

I’m slicked with sweat and my sunburned shoulders are aching. “I can’t do this—guys—I’m afraid of sharks.”

Sully shrugs. “Who isn’t?”

“Except the San Jose Sharks,” says Novy. “Who can collectively suck my sweaty balls.”

“Yeah, fuck the Sharks,” chimes Morrow.

“Fuck the Sharks,” they all cheer, clinking their beers.

“You’re not helping,” I grunt through clenched teeth. Damn, this thing is so strong.

“You got it.” Rob leans over the boat railing with a big net. “That’s it... bring her over to me.”

I inch to the side, dragging the thrashing shark along the side of the boat. All the guys clamber to get a better look, making the boat rock like crazy.

“It’s a blacktip,” Jake shouts.

“Nah, it’s a mako—”

“Dude, I *just* saw the black tip on its dorsal fin—”

“She’s a blacktip for sure,” calls Rob, settling the debate. “Looks like a juvenile.”

He wrestles it into the net as it continues to fight and thrash. It’s about as long as my arm from fingertips to shoulder. At its thickest point, it’s probably as big around as my thigh. The thing has small, beady eyes and charcoal black tips on all its fins.

As soon as it hits the net, the pressure eases on me and I take a deep breath, filling up my whole chest with air. I did it. I successfully fished. It feels oddly satisfying. Even though I probably just won myself a set of nasty new calluses on my palms. With a relieved sigh, I set the reel aside.

“You did it,” Sully cheers.

“Way to fucking go, man,” says Novy, clapping me on the shoulder.

I hiss, flinching away from his hand. “Ouch—fucker—get off me—”

Morrow waves me over. He’s watching over Rob’s shoulder as the charter captain secures the shark. “Langers, you gotta come hold it for the picture!”

“I’m not fucking holding that thing,” I cry.

“Why not?” laughs Sully.

My eyes are wide. “Dude, it’s a *shark*.”

“Yeah, but it’s, like, a rite of passage,” Jake says from behind me. “You just caught a shark. You wrestled a king of nature and won. We have to document this moment.”

“Plus, Poppy could do a million social media things with the photos,” Morrow adds. “The digs at the Sharks practically write themselves.”

“What’s the plan here, guys?” says Rob. “Photo or no photo? If no photo, I’m tossing her back.”

“Hell, I want a photo with it,” says Novy, eagerly stepping forward.

Ever the team captain, Sully holds Novy back. “It’s Langley’s shark. He should get the first photo.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “Nov can take a picture with it. You all can.”

Novy raises a brow at me. “You sure, man?”

“Totally. You’re right, we can’t deny Poppy such golden social media content.”

With my blessing, the guys all take their pictures with the wiggling shark. Rob manages the head while the others take turns holding the body. Even Mars steps into a photo with Jake.

I sigh, thinking of Sanny back at the resort, probably wrapped head to toe in cooling seaweed as we speak. The asshole made a loud song and dance at lunch about getting seasick and ducked back to the hotel. I should have joined him. Because now six grown men are looking at me, a shark balanced between them, waiting for me to man up and take a damn picture.

“Fine,” I huff, holding up a finger. “One picture. And I’m standing behind it, not holding it. Mars, stay right where you are.”

Mars continues to hold the belly of the shark and the other guys cheer as I take Jake’s place by the tail. All the guys have their cameras out.

“Just touch it once,” Jake teases.

“Yeah, pretend it’s your wife’s tits,” jabs Novy.

“Reach out there and grab a nice handful—”

“Compare my wife’s tits to a slimy shark again, and I’ll throw you overboard,” I snap.

“It’s not slimy,” says Mars. He’s the picture of calm, even with his arms holding up a live shark. “Actually, it’s rather coarse.”

“Yeah, like sandpaper,” says Sully.

“Shark scales are made of the same material as your teeth,” says Captain Rob. “They’re called denticles. And all shark species have a slightly different size and pattern to their scales.”

Actually, I already knew that. Avid *Shark Week* watcher, remember? But you forget things in the adrenaline rush of having a real shark inches away. Heaving a sigh, I step in shoulder to shoulder with Mars and wrap both hands around the underside of the shark’s tail.

“There he goes,” Jake cheers, holding up his phone.

“Yeah, Langers!”

“You look awesome!”

I let my fingers brush back and forth a little, feeling the roughness of the shark's skin. Morrow is right, it feels a lot like sandpaper. As soon as the guys get their photos and videos, Rob is calling it, hefting the shark out of Mars's arms, and bringing it over to the edge of the boat. It's the work of moments before he's letting her loose. She drops into the water with a splash and disappears, sinking into the abyss.

Riding the high of my shark catch, the guys all crack open fresh beers, except for me and Mars. Jake calls the outing a success—even though we only caught one thing—and we all make plans to go back to the resort and shower and nap before the rehearsal dinner tonight. We help Rob clear away the rods and tackle boxes and then we're all collapsing onto the narrow bench seats as Rob hauls anchor and gets ready to start the engine. Novy cranks some tunes on his Bluetooth speaker, and I'm feeling good, ready to head back and see my girl.

Rob takes his place at the wheel and turns the key. The engine sputters and grunts...and doesn't start. My smile falls as I glance from Rob to the engine.

"Not to worry," he says, slipping between Novy and Jake's outstretched feet towards the back of the boat. He drops to one knee, inspects a few things. Then he gives the key another try. The engine clicks...but doesn't start.

Fuck me. This is not happening.

Rob curses too, then he's back on his knees, checking everything over. He tries to do some kind of manual override, tugging on a string like a lawnmower. The engine growls and roars, letting out a plume of black smoke. "Come on, baby. Don't do this to me." He tries again. This time the engine whines and clicks and doesn't turn over at all. "Fuck," he shouts.

Novy turns down the music and Jake flashes me a panicked look before he's on his feet. "Hey, Captain Rob, what seems to be the problem?"

"Damn engine won't start."

"Anything I can do—"

"Just give me a minute," the captain barks.

Jake holds back, casting me a weak half smile and a thumbs up.

"It's all good," says Morrow. "My dad's boat engine was finicky too." He's always looking for the sunny side of things.

Trouble is there's nothing but a sunny side out here...as in the literal sun is literally baking me like chicken in a pan. And the only cover is the small umbrella-sized sunshade directly over the steering wheel. With a groan, I

untuck my tank top from my board shorts and tug it on. It covers my chest and most of my back, at least. But my shoulders are still exposed. I put my hat back on too, the bill facing forward to cover my face.

Captain Rob rattles around with the engine for ten more minutes as the boat bobs like a cork on the rolling blue water. He tries the emergency start again. It does little more than cough a load of black smoke from its mechanical lungs.

“Just fucking perfect,” I mutter.

“What about now, el capitano?” offers Jake. “Want any of us to try and take a look?”

Captain Rob glances over his shoulder with a frustrated glare. “Any of you know anything about Yamaha Outboard engine maintenance?”

Novy and Sully shake their heads. I know I sure as fuck don’t. I grew up the poor kid of an ER nurse. The only boat I ever got to ride was the ferry. Jake and Mars both get closer, having low conversation with the captain.

After another ten minutes of trying and failing to get it to start, Captain Rob lets out a string of curses and Jake rises to his feet. Clapping his hands together, he looks around at the rest of us. “Right, let’s get out the oars and start paddling, boys.”

We all groan as Captain Rob inches past him, reaching for the radio. “I gotta call this into the Coast Guard. Someone drop the anchor.”

“Coast Guard?” says Novy with a raised brow. “What—like we need a rescue or something?”

“Well, we’re stranded in a dead boat,” Rob replies. “And the swells out here are only getting bigger. There’s a storm moving in. We either need maintenance or a tug. Sharpish. Now, drop the anchor, while I call us in. If they’re gonna come looking for us, we better be in the right spot...unless you all wanna be lost at sea?”

We can’t lower that damn anchor fast enough.

Two hours. It’s been *two* fucking hours, and the Coast Guard still isn’t here. None of us have cell service to contact the girls, Jake and Novy fought over the last jerky stick until it fell overboard, and now we’re rationing the last

water bottle between six grown men.

Our cooler is still half-full of beer, the bottles clinking as they float in the melted ice. If anything, we can use that as drinking water too. I don't care that our grubby, fishy hands have been digging around in it all day. I am not dying out here.

"How much longer do you think?" asks Jake. It's the fourth time he's asked in the last half hour.

"They said they'll get here when they can," Captain Rob repeats with the patience of a saint.

Apparently, there was a collision back in the bay near the resort. Rob heard it all through the radio call. Some asshole with a speed boat and a death wish crashed into the side of a glass-bottomed tour boat. A sinking ship takes priority over a stranded one.

So here we sit...waiting.

For the first hour, we all tried to make the most of being stranded. We started fishing again. But when all we caught was one small amberjack, we collectively lost interest. Plus, we wanted to be ready to go the moment the Coast Guard arrived.

"Man, on a scale of 1-10, how pissed do you think the girls are gonna be?" asks Novy.

Sully and Morrow wear shared looks of horror at the thought.

"Yeah, Rachel is gonna lose it," says Jake.

"Cay will be worse," Mars mutters, his arms crossed, legs outstretched. He looks relaxed, like he's actually enjoying this.

"Oh, fuck..." Jake groans. "Yeah, he'll probably punch us both for upsetting her. And then again for upsetting him."

I can't even imagine what Tess is thinking right now. At this rate, we'll definitely be late to the rehearsal dinner. I feel fucking terrible. She'll look so pretty, her lips painted red, and those curls piled high on her head. I caught a glimpse of her dress too. It's a white silk wrap dress with a plunging "V" neck. Fuck, she's gonna look so beautiful.

She *is* so beautiful. Clothed or naked...preferably naked...or clothed, but when we're in private, so I can strip her naked.

But naked is always best.

Thank god we're already married. It takes a little of the stress off us for this weekend. It's just supposed to be about fun and fellowship with our friends. But I wanted so badly for this to be perfect for her. Showing up late

to my own rehearsal dinner is not the image of perfection I'm striving for.

"At least all Doc and Sanny will do is shout a bit," says Morrow. "Poppy is sure to cry, which is so much worse."

"Yeah, I can do crying babies all day," adds Novy. "But there's something about that woman's tears. She just...fuck, she haunts me. It's like she starts crying, and I feel like I could literally twist myself inside out to make it stop. I never want to see her unhappy. It's like...a biological imperative or something."

"That biological imperative is called love, Nov," Sully teases. "Fewer syllables to remember."

I snort, sharing a smile with him.

"I radioed the office," says Captain Rob. "They'll call over to the resort to let your wives know what's happening."

Morrow groans. "Fuuuuck, why is that somehow worse? Now she'll be picturing us stranded out here."

"I give it another hour before they all turn pirate and commandeer a catamaran to stage their own rescue," Jake says with a laugh.

Another hour out here? I won't make it.

As if he can read my thoughts, Mars pulls a resort beach towel out of the bag at his feet. "Here, Ryan. Cover yourself."

I take it gratefully, wincing as the rough terrycloth rubs my burned shoulders. But it's a block from the sun. I throw it over my shoulders like a cape, lifting it over my hat too. I huddle beneath it, feeling hungry and thirsty and sweaty and miserable.

I am never going deep sea fishing again.

It takes another half an hour before the Coast Guard finally shows up to save us. And then it's another twenty minutes before they help Captain Rob isolate the problem with his engine and get it running again. As soon as we hear that bubbling roar, the guys and I all cheer. Novy, Sully, and Morrow celebrate by opening new beers.

The Coast Guard clears off, and then Captain Rob goes full throttle. Our little fishing boat speeds across the waves, the Caribbean wind whipping at

the edges of my towel as I hold it under my chin. We race with the Coast Guard ship, riding each other's waves as we all head back towards South Side Marina.

By the time the marina comes into view, the sun is on a sharp downward angle, nearing sunset. I've long since lost the towel cloak. I even took my hat off, letting the wind whip at my hair. We've got our tunes blasting, and our collective mood has vastly improved. Even Captain Rob is singing along to a Metallica song as we pull up to the dock.

We can't get off the boat fast enough, hauling ass for our waiting rental van. As soon as our feet touch the dock, we've all got our phones in our hands, shooting off messages to the girls. My phone blows up with missed texts and calls—from Tess, from Doc, from the other wives, even one from Sanny.

"Jeezus," says Novy, scrolling his own phone as he slides in next to me in the back seat of the van. "What did they think would happen if they all bombed our phones at once? We'd suddenly stop being lost at sea and respond?"

My phone buzzes with an incoming call as soon as I buckle my seat belt. A picture of Tess in a green bikini flashes on my lock screen. I swipe to accept, raising the phone to my ear. "Hey, baby—"

"Ryan? What happened? That snooty bitch at the charter company wouldn't give us any information other than that the boat was broken, and you were stranded and—"

"Tess, I'm fine," I say quickly. "Babe, we're all fine."

All around me in the van, the other guys are answering their phones and having the same conversation. Up in the front seat, Jake is on the phone with Sanny or Doc, gesturing wildly with one hand. Morrow is the last to climb inside the van, murmuring soothing words at Poppy as Novy watches from my side, eyes wide.

"Where are you now?" says Tess. "Dinner was supposed to start an hour ago."

Guilt clenches tight in my chest and I groan. "I know, baby. We're on the way back. We're what—twenty minutes out?" I call over the middle seat to Mars in the driver's seat. He's the only European, so we volunteered him to drive the van.

"Twenty-three," comes his sharp reply. He's already backing out of our parking spot, guiding the van over the gravel lot towards the exit.

“Twenty-three minutes,” I say at Tess. “We’re heading straight back, I swear.”

“Switch to video,” she says. I can hear the tears in her voice, and I hate that I put them there.

Pulling the phone from my ear, I switch the call to video. It takes a second to connect, and the quality is a little pixelated, but Tess’s face soon fills my phone screen. She looks radiant, her red curls down and framing her face. She’s got some kind of colorful tropical flower tucked over her ear. She’s rocking a smoky eye and those red lips that make me weak.

The tension in my chest eases. “Oh...babe, you look so beautiful—”

But her face turns from a smile to a look of horror. “Oh god. Ryan—baby, you’re so sunburned. What happened?”

I fight the roll of my eyes. “Well, I was in the sun all day. And it’s not that bad—”

“Trust me, it looks worse in person,” says Novy, leaning in to press his face close to mine and wave at Tess. “Hey, Red. Don’t worry, we’ll bring him back in one piece...sans a few skin cells.”

I shove him away. Big mistake. It feels like my skin has a heartbeat. “We’re on the way back,” I say again.

“Wait—hold on—” She nods at someone off screen, telling them to wait. When she turns back to me, she looks calmer. There’s even a hint of a smile on her lips. “Okay, it’s all fine,” she says again. “We’re just glad you’re all safe.”

“Hey babe,” I say, grinning like a kid now that I know she’s not going to murder me. “Guess what?”

She raises a brow. “What?”

“I caught a shark.” My damn chest is even puffed out a little as I say it. She doesn’t need to know I squealed like a girl and tried to make someone else reel it in.

She gasps, one hand covering her mouth. “Shut up. Seriously?”

“I’m sending you some pictures now,” Novy says from my shoulder.

“Me too,” says Sully.

“Me three,” calls Jake from the front seat.

Tess’s eyes go wide as fifty photos and videos are sent to her all at once. “Whoa...” Her eyes dart as she swipes through a couple. “Ohmy—Ryan—that’s a *real* shark!”

I scowl as, next to me, Novy snorts. “What did you think I meant when I

said I caught a shark? It wasn't a toy shark or the metaphysical idea of 'sharkness.' I caught a two-foot-long blacktip reef shark—"

"And it was fucking awesome," Novy says at my shoulder. "Even if he did squeal like a girl the whole time—"

I jab him hard with my elbow.

Tess is smiling ear to ear. "This is so cool, babe." She lets out another breath of relief. "Just come back, okay? You can tell me all about it while I rub some aloe on those crispy shoulders."

I groan with relief at the very idea. My girl has gentle hands and gives great massages. Maybe those hands can travel a little further south too... maybe I slip her out of that silk dress...

Reading the look on my face, Novy points a finger at me. "Hey, there's no time for a quickie. It's rehearsal dinner time. We were promised a five-star surf and turf feast, followed by dancing on the beach under the Caribbean moonlight."

"Yeah, we expect candles and champagne and twinkle lights," says Morrow.

"We just may smell a little fishy," adds Sully.

"It's outside," Jake says with a shrug. "So long as there's a bit of a wind blowing, you'll hardly notice the stink."

We all laugh, and Tess shakes her head, her lips pursed in a smile.

"Fifteen minutes out," I say in reassurance.

"Okay. See you soon, puppy—"

Shit. I don't hang up fast enough. I drop my hand down to my lap, still clutching the phone. A stiff silence hangs in the air inside this cramped, smelly van. From the middle seat, Morrow and Sully slow turn to look at me.

"Puppy?" Novy repeats.

I narrow my eyes at all three of them. "You wanna do this now? You really wanna come at me like I don't know all your collective dirty laundry? Go ahead. First guy to crack a joke and call me 'puppy' is volunteering to get roasted."

I turn to Novy. Of all of the guys, he'll be the one to break. He can't help himself. Asshole is his default setting. I lift a brow, waiting.

Slowly, he leans away. "It's a nice nickname," he says at last.

"Yeah...very nice," Morrow echoes, hiding his grin.

"Shelby sometimes calls me nacho man," Sully offers with a shrug.

We all look at him.

“Well...it was macho man,” he explains. No one asked. “Which somehow became macho nacho man...which just became—”

“Nacho man,” Morrow says for him. “Yeah, we get it.”

Novy turns the music back on. The speaker is tucked in his backpack at his feet. Under the beat of Eminem, he looks out the window and snorts. “Puppy...totally fits.”

Puffing out my chest, I lean between the seats. “Back when Novy and Pop were first sneaking around, I caught him double-teaming her with Morrow in Sully’s guest room.”

Sully spins around, glaring between the guys. “Dudes. Seriously?”

Jake and I are laughing and Novy is already on the move, elbowing me hard in the ribs. I grunt, his bulk squashing me against the window as I elbow him back.

“Touch me again, and I’ll tell them about the cat,” I say, raising an imperious brow.

Novy’s chest rises on a huff as he glares at me. “You wouldn’t.”

“What about the cat?” calls Jake from the front seat.

“Wait, you mean Princess?” says Morrow, looking to Nov. “What happened? What did I miss?”

Novy and I have our stare-off while the guys all push me to spill the beans. Slowly, Novy turns and calls out, “The next person to make fun of Langers for being called ‘puppy’ will answer to me.”

I smirk. That’s right, he knows I can ruin him.

“Five minutes out,” Mars says from the driver’s seat.

I heave a sigh of relief. I love my guys, but now I just wanna be with my girl.

“Oh...Ryan.”

I spin around to see Tess standing in the doorway of my private bungalow—all her idea. She’s playing up the whole “separate rooms before the wedding” angle and I hate it. We’re already fucking married. But I’m playing along...for one more night. Then she’s mine again.

I let out a breath of relief, dropping my khaki dress pants back into my

suitcase. “Hey, baby.”

She looks like my every dream in that curve-hugging white silk wrap dress, her curls all windswept. Her heels are looped on her finger, her bare toes dusted with sand. She steps into the room, dropping her shoes by the door. “You really scared me, Ryan.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“And you’re really freaking sunburned.”

“I know.”

When I got back to my bungalow, the first thing I did was take off my shirt and look in the mirror. Sharp red lines mark the start of my new sunburn that stretches over my shoulders and down my arms. My cheeks and nose are red too, the tops of my ears, my neck. “I was an idiot. I should have reapplied sunscreen throughout the day. Why are you still all the way over there?”

She gives me a weak smile. “Because you look like you smell like a chum bucket. And I think it’ll clash with the ‘tropical midnight temptress’ scent bouquet I’m rocking right now.”

I laugh, all the coils of frustration in my gut loosening. “I’m so sorry we’re so late, babe. I told the guys to shower and change and get over to the restaurant in ten minutes or less.”

“Everyone else is over there already. I fought the caterers to delay, but all the food was just sitting there ready, and I didn’t wanna waste it or leave people hungry...”

“Did you eat?”

She shakes her head. “No, I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t even think until I knew what the heck was going on. The atmosphere wasn’t very festive. Everyone was worried.”

“Fuck,” I say, my guilt surging again. “Well, just give me two minutes. I’ll wash this chum bucket smell away, and we’ll go try to salvage the rest of the evening. Sound good?”

She nods.

“Wanna head back without me or wait?”

All of a sudden, her smile falls and tears bloom in her eyes.

“Baby, what—”

“Ryan, I think I need a hug,” she says on a weepy breath.

I cross the room to her without hesitation, wrapping her in my arms, ignoring the pain in my shoulders. She presses her face against my bare chest and her hands brace at my back. “I’m so sorry, Tess.” I brush my hand lightly

over her hair, taking in her intoxicating scent—jasmine and lily and something fresh and fruity. “I’m so sorry I scared you. We weren’t in any danger. The damn boat just broke, and we had to wait forever for the Coast Guard, and none of us had any cell service. I would never worry you like that on purpose.”

She nods, pulling away from me. “God, I don’t know why I’m such a mess about it. The bitchy woman at the charter company said you’d be fine, I just—” She sniffs, wiping at her eyes. Slowly, she looks up at me, her gaze hardening. “Die after me, Ryan Langley. Swear it.”

I cup her face with my sore hand. “Tess—”

“Swear it to me, Ryan,” she says, stepping away. “You went and made me fall in love with you, and now I’m this mess of a girl that cries when her husband goes off on a fishing boat. *You* did this to me. You wormed your way inside. Now you’re in me, and you’re part of me, and I can’t breathe—I can’t *breathe* for loving you, Ryan. And now you have to let me die first, and I need you to swear it. Swear, Ryan.”

“I swear,” I say gently, dropping my hand to my side. “Baby, I swear. You can go first, okay? Alice Cooper and his wife have a death pact. We can make one too. We’ll be in our 80s—well, that would make you like 90, right? But we’ll take the grandkids sledding. You’ll be in front on the toboggan, and we’ll crash ourselves into a tree, okay? You’ll feel the impact first. Will that count?”

She snuffles, trying not to smile. “Yeah, okay.”

“Okay?” I brush my hand down the silky-smooth skin of her arm. “Death pact is in place. You good now?”

“Yeah,” she says on a snuffle. “Hey, Ryan?”

“Yeah baby?”

Her teary smile fades to a grimace. “You smell so bad that I threw up in my mouth a little as you were hugging me just now.”

I nod, trying to keep my expression solemn. “Why don’t I go shower?”

She nods too. “Yeah, okay.”

“You wait here.”

“Okay, I’ll wait here.” She steps past me, rushing over to the tissue box on the little bedside table.

Shaking my head, I smile and head into the bathroom. How is it possible that I fall more in love with this woman with every passing day?

Showered and changed and smelling decidedly less like a kettle of fish, I'm determined to salvage the rest of the night. Tess and I walk hand-in-hand through the beach resort to the outdoor private dining area where all our nearest and dearest are waiting for us.

Soft music welcomes us as we approach, overlaid by the sound of our laughing guests.

"You like it?" says Tess, both her hands wrapped around mine.

It's a beautiful space of natural wood and open beam work exposing a grass roof. The place is lit up with a thousand candles in glassware that makes it feel like something out of a fairytale. Tropical flowers are everywhere. Just beyond the private dining pavilion, you can hear the push and pull of the waves on the beach.

"Babe, it's so pretty," I reply. "Do *you* love it?"

She looks up at me with a smile, giving my hand a squeeze. "Now I do."

Leaning down, I kiss her hair. "Come on. I'm starving."

We enter the pavilion to raucous cheers. Everyone gets up, clapping and clinking cutlery to glasses.

"There he is!"

"Ryan Shark Attack Langley—"

"The Shark Whisperer!"

Tess is radiant, never leaving my side as we work the party together. We tried to keep it small, only about fifty people total. And most of them are my teammates and their wives. But I have my mom and sister here, an aunt and a few cousins too. We do all the obligatory chit chat, and I show pictures of the shark to anyone who asks.

Dinner is practically over. Most people are already done with dessert. A few couples are even taking to the open-air dance floor. It's set up down on the beach between the pavilion and the waves, lit by three strings of colorful Chinese lanterns.

I have to practically wrestle Tess into a chair to make her finally eat something. I'm starving too, so once I take my seat, I snatch up my fork and not-so-eagerly wait for the catering staff to bring us the plates of food they held back. The other guys from the fishing trip join us with their partners and

we all feast on Caribbean spiced grilled chicken, steak, and shrimp kebabs. There's fresh fruit salad, ceviche tossed in a tangy vinaigrette, a paella-looking local dish they call crab and rice, and these amazing, crispy conch fritters. It's all delicious. I practically eat my weight in the fritters, slow sipping Turk's Head Lager, an island IPA.

It's well after ten o'clock by the time I'm finally digging my fork into a slice of passionfruit yellow cake with a chocolate rum ganache. "God—babe, this is so good." I offer the fork out to Tess, but she shakes her head, waving me away.

"I'm stuffed."

Fine by me. I didn't really want to share anyway. I was just being a gentleman.

We put in a good show of dancing and mingling, but I can tell she's tired. I'm tired too. Exhausted, really. And tomorrow will be an even busier day. It's taking everything in me to ignore the siren's call of my secluded beach bungalow. It'll just be me and the surf tonight. I'm buzzed enough that the sound of the ocean will rock me to sleep like a baby.

"So, how long are you guys staying on the island after the wedding?" asks Shelby, leaning over the table towards us.

"Only two days," Tess replies, sipping her cocktail. "I've got that big city council rezoning meeting next week, and Ryan was already committed to working that youth hockey camp up in Michigan."

"Ten days of ten-year-olds trying to high stick each other every time our backs are turned," says Jake, clinking the neck of his beer bottle against mine.

It's his fault I got roped into this camp. Mars had to pull out on him because of some ankle problems, and apparently, I was enough of a sucker to say yes. Don't get me wrong, I like working with kids...I also just really like the idea of laying with my hot wife on a private beach for ten days.

She leans into me, her hand brushing down my khakis. "I think I'm gonna head back."

I wrap my arm around the back of her chair. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just tired. Tomorrow is another long day, and I'll have to be up early."

"Want me to walk you back?"

She smiles, shaking her head. "Stay and finish your cake."

"I want to walk you back," I press, lowering my voice. "Gives me an

excuse to leave too. I'm fucking beat."

"I'm so tired I could cry," she says with a weak little laugh.

"Let's get the hell outta here." I push back my chair and stand, helping her to her feet. She lost her shoes somewhere over by the dance floor ages ago.

"You two lovebirds taking off?"

"Yep, early day tomorrow," I reply, helping Tess around the table. "I heard something about a wedding happening in the morning."

Everyone cheers, clinking their glasses and bottles.

"Stay as long as you want, folks. But after eleven, you buy your own damn drinks," I add, pointing a finger down the table at Novy.

We find Tess's shoes in the sand and cut along the beach back towards the private beach bungalows. They dot the beach a hundred yards off, each one a little orange glowing ball against the inky black of the palm trees and the midnight blue of the sky.

"It's so pretty here," she says, her fingers entwined with mine as we walk, our feet sinking into the sand. "I wish our sand felt this soft back home."

I slip my boat shoes off, tucking them under my arm to let my toes wiggle in the sand. "Man, you're right. This is like powder."

"Isn't it nice?"

"Our sand is so coarse and shelly."

"And the color of the water is so different here too. So bright and beautiful."

"That I definitely noticed. You should have seen it out on the boat today. It was like something out of a movie. I've never seen water so blue."

She sighs, craning her neck to look up at the sky. Clouds are rolling in off the water, but just above us, the sky is clear, the stars shining. She pulls me to a stop, the surf licking at our heels as we stand there together in the dark.

Slowly, she drops her gaze from the stars and looks at me, her body relaxed, her mood sanguine. "I love you, Ryan."

I step in, cupping her face, and kiss her lips. Now that dinner is over, and all the pictures are taken, I don't care if I mess up her lipstick. I don't care if it smears all over me. I'm done not kissing my girl. She presses back with a little hum of delight, her lips parting to meet mine.

I keep one hand on her cheek, wrapping the other around her waist, not caring that my shoes drop to the sand. She presses in, her tongue teasing mine, as the swell of her breasts push against my chest. I sink my hand into

her hair, fingers gripping, as I tip her head back, devouring her mouth.

It's been almost two years together. I've kissed her thousands of times in hundreds of ways—quick kisses in the car, slow morning kisses while lying in bed, hurried kisses in a dingy bar bathroom. Each one is precious. Each one grounds me to life, reminding me of my purpose.

My favorite kisses are the ones I claim while I'm inside her. I crave the feeling of home that comes from feeling her everywhere all at once—under my body, around my dick, cradling my hips, in my mouth, gripped in my hands. That feeling of knowing she's so completely mine.

More than being mine, I'm *hers*. Irrevocably. Completely. The kisses I give her in the heat of our passion are a claiming as much as they're an offering. In those moments, I'm giving her everything. Every piece of me. She can have it all.

"I need to be inside you," I pant against her lips, gripping tighter to her hair.

"Ryan—*mmmph*—"

I silent her protest with another kiss. She's gonna say something dumb about how we're 'waiting until our honeymoon' because it's 'fun.' Well, fuck that. This time last week, I was fucking my wife whenever and however I wanted. Then she swooped in with her suitcase and her teasing smile and cut me off without warning. If I knew pressing her against the kitchen counter was all I was gonna get for a week, I would have kept her bent over that damn counter all morning long.

"I want to be inside my wife," I beg. "Tess, baby, I almost died at sea, remember?"

She laughs, pulling away from me.

"I was practically fish food. Do you remember that? Remember my heroic return?"

She shakes her head, lips pursed in a smile. "You hockey boys really don't do well with celibacy, do you?"

My eyes narrow as I grip her hips. "What other hockey boys are you talking to about celibacy?"

She rolls her eyes. Her lipstick is only a little bit smeared. Damn, I'll have to try harder next time. She puts a hand on her hip, cocking it to the side. "My three best girlfriends are all hockey wives, remember? And my three best guy friends are my best friend's husbands. I know things that would make you blush worse than that ridiculous sunburn." With that, she turns and

keeps walking, her hips swaying in that sexy white dress.

“What do you know?” I call, jogging after her.

“Don’t forget your shoes, babe,” she calls back with a wave of her hand.

“I—fuck—” I spin around and snatch my soggy shoes out of the surf. Then I’m hurrying back to her side. “Tess, if you’ve got dirt on the guys, you have to tell me. I need it. It’s my only defense.”

“If you want to know about your teammates’ sex lives, ask them.”

I stop. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“What?” She glances over her shoulder at me. “If I were you, I’d aim for Lukas or Jake. They have no boundaries and no filters. They’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

My eyes go wide. I know without question she’s right.

I also know I don’t think I could handle it.

I hurry after her like the whipped puppy I am. “So that’s a ‘no’ to me taking you back to my bungalow and fucking you passionately?”

She laughs. “Sorry, babe. Honestly, I think a sex cleanse is good for us. Makes the wanting all the sweeter, don’t you think? Watching you eat that cake earlier was practically orgasmic. Just wait until tomorrow night. Then I’m all yours with a sweet little cherry on top.”

“I prefer whipped cream,” I tease. It’s really a tease for me more than her, because now I’m just picturing the time she let me finger-paint on her body with whipped cream and lick it off.

Fuck, that was a good night.

We’ve made it to the little front stoop of her bungalow. She turns to me with a smile, keycard in hand. “I’m glad you didn’t stay lost at sea. Now, give me exactly one kiss, and say goodnight.”

I swallow the disgruntled sound in my throat and lean forward. She does the same, eager to meet me halfway. At the last moment, I turn my lips away from hers and grab her hair in a tight fist, pulling her to me. She gasps and I tilt her head, lowering my lips to that spot on the left side of her neck that turns her into jelly. The spot just above the curve of her shoulder, a quarter inch in towards her throat. I press my lips there parting them a little, and hold, breathing out through my nose against her skin.

Like magic, my girl goes weak for me, her hands fluttering up to grip my elbows as her pulse races. “Oh god...”

The hungry beast inside me roars, but I pull away, leaving her swaying, red lips parted, eyes glazed.

After a moment, she snaps her mouth shut and glares. “You don’t fight fair.”

I smirk. “For you? Never. I will become the most unscrupulous of men if it means you let me inside that door. I will lie, cheat, and steal. I’ll lose myself for the chance to find the wet heat between your legs with my tongue.”

She leans away, eyes wide, as she steps back and presses herself up against the door.

Okay, this is too much fun. I step in, boxing her in with my hands on the door to either side of her head. “Go ahead, *wife*,” I tease, brushing the tip of my nose along her jaw to speak in her ear. “Tell me you’re not wet for me. Tell me that perfect pink cunt isn’t ready to weep for her master.”

She bites back a moan, leaning away. I can practically see the racing of her heart through her skin.

“Oh yeah...she knows who owns her,” I taunt, brushing a finger down her throat, trailing it between her breasts. “She can hear my call from a mile away.” I grip her chin tight, forcing her to look at me. “Say it, Tess. Lie to me and say you’re not aching to sit on my dick. My queen on her throne.”

She tips her chin up, and I know she’s in the mood to brat. Fuck, I need her naked right the fuck now. Her eyes flash in defiance. “I’m not,” she dares to say, her words clipped. “And I’m moist at best. But that probably had more to do with how good that cake tasted. Maybe I’ll have a bellboy bring me another slice.”

I smirk and lean away, brushing my thumb over her parted lips. “Such a beautiful liar.”

She mirrors my smile, the heat in her gaze enough to set me on fire.

“Tell your pussy to be a good girl tonight,” I say in parting. “Tomorrow she better be ready to be all kinds of bad.”

I wake from the deepest sleep of my life, jolting up in bed with a grunt. A sound like a damn fire alarm is going off. I blink around, bleary eyed, looking for any sign of smoke or flames in this tiny bungalow. The obnoxiously urgent trilling continues.

Fuck, I had too much to drink...and too much sun. And not enough sex.

A red light blinks on the nightstand and I realize with a sharp release of air that it's just the damn phone. "Who the hell makes a phone sound like that?" I growl, snatching the little red receiver off the stand. "Hello?"

"Ryan?"

My heart fucking stops. It's Tess and she's crying. "Tess?"

"Can you come here?"

I fling back the covers and launch off the side of the bed, looking for my shorts in the dark. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"I don't know—I think—did you eat the ceviche?"

I tuck the phone in at my shoulder, ignoring the pain of my sunburn as I tug on my pants. "The—what? Baby, are you sick?"

"Please, will you just come?"

"Two minutes."

I hang up the phone and snatch up the keycard to her room off the little desk, not even bothering to grab a shirt or shoes. I race out the door of my bungalow and cut across the sand towards hers fifty yards away. The starry night sky is now covered in dense clouds. The wind is picking up, whipping at the fronds of all the palm trees. Captain Rob was right; it's totally going to storm.

We'll deal with that in the morning.

I tap the keycard to the lock and the door clicks. Shoving it open, I bust inside. The room is dark, the sheets on the bed mussed. "Babe?"

"In here," she calls weakly.

I hurry over to the bathroom in the corner and gently pull back the door. Tess is lying half-naked on the tile floor. Her only clothes are a pair of cotton undies. Her hair is twisted up into a knot on top of her head. A few tendrils hang down, slicked to her forehead with sweat.

"Oh...baby." I drop to my knees at her side, inching up by her legs.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she murmurs. "I'm sorry—"

"Hey, don't," I say, cutting her off. "Always wake me. You know that." I brush the back of my hand over her sweaty brow. "You don't feel fevered."

"Did you eat the ceviche?"

I wrack my brain trying to remember all the different dishes from dinner. "I...think so. It had that peppery vinaigrette, right?"

"Rachel didn't eat any of it and neither did Shelby or Poppy," she says, crawling up to her knees with a groan. I help her as best I can. "I think it gave

me food poisoning. How much of it did you eat?”

I shake my head. “Uhh...I don’t know. Maybe a forkful or two. I liked the paella stuff better. And I ate like a thousand of those conch fritters with the spicy dipping sauce.”

“Well, I ate a whole bowl of the ceviche,” she whimpers. “In the moment, I thought it tasted so good but now...” She leans her face over the toilet bowl, bracing herself with her arms.

I lean away, closing my eyes, as she retches into the toilet. Reaching out a hand, I stroke her back. In sickness and in health, right?

She groans, reaching up blindly with one hand to flush it all away. The sound of rushing water fills the little room as she sinks back to her bottom, leaning against the wall with her eyes closed. “I’m sorry—”

“Stop apologizing.” I get to my feet and fetch a washcloth off the shelf. Running it under the sink, I soak it with cold water until it drips. “Here, baby. Put this on your neck.”

She takes it from me, draping it around her shoulders. Her skin instantly prickles with goosebumps.

I get a glass and fill it with water, handing that to her too. “Drink if you can. You’ll dehydrate.”

She takes the glass, taking a small sip.

“How long have you been like this?”

“A couple hours.”

I sigh, leaning my hip against the sink. “Baby, you should have called me sooner.”

“I didn’t want to bother you. You were so tired.”

“Hey.” I duck down into a crouch, brushing the little wispy curls off her forehead. “You’re my wife, Tess. You are my whole fucking world. My reason. We have a death pact now, remember? And while I agreed to let you go first, today is not that day.”

She smiles weakly, chasing the touch of my hand on her cheek. I let her catch me. I let my hand become the support she needs, helping to hold her head up. Fuck, my poor girl is so tired.

“Are you sure it’s food poisoning?”

She nods, eyes closed. “Yeah, I’ve had it before a couple times.”

“What are your symptoms?”

“Look at me,” she replies weakly, gesturing to her half naked body slumped on the floor.

“Okay...well, so vomiting, obviously,” I say, ticking it off on my finger. “Chills and sweating. Any nausea?”

“Yes,” she groans, crawling back into position, her hands bracing against the toilet bowl. “And stomach cramps. It feels like someone’s squeezing them in a tight fist—*urghh*—”

I step out of the bathroom, letting her be sick without an audience, while I go in search of her phone. I have to turn a couple lamps on before I find it. I sit on the edge of her bed and pull up the YouTube app. Using the voice-to-text button in the search bar, I say ‘food poisoning symptoms’ and watch the first couple videos. My confidence grows with each one.

I go back to the bathroom, leaning against the doorway. Tess is back on her side on the floor, the washcloth now folded over her eyes. “YouTube thinks you have food poisoning too,” I concede.

She just groans.

“What can I do for you, baby? How can I help?”

“You can’t. There’s nothing. Leave me on this floor to die.”

I smirk, crossing my arms. “Nope. Remember, I told you, that’s not happening today. Once we get your stomach empty, I’ll help you get back in bed. I’ll set you up with a trash can and some water. Want anything to be more comfortable now?”

She shifts the washcloth off her forehead, blinking up at me. “Oh god... Ryan...look at you.”

With a raised brow, I shift fully into the bathroom and look in the mirror. My eyes go wide.

Okay, so it’s not like I had no tan before. I live in Florida, and I regularly run on the beach with my shirt off. I had a definite base layer of tan going. But now, I swear to god, I look like a human candy cane. My shoulders, nose, and cheeks are an unnatural shade of red. Like, verging on purple. We’ll call it maroon. It makes the rest of my skin look milky white in comparison.

“Well, fuck. That’s gonna peel real nice,” I add, turning to smile down at her.

“There’s a jar of Aquaphor in my suitcase,” she says with a weak wave of her arm. “You need to get that skin some moisture, or it’s gonna get ten times worse.”

I move into the bedroom and dig through her bag until I find the white jar with the blue lid. Going back to the bathroom, I plop myself down on the tile floor with her and unscrew the lid. Digging my fingers into the greasy salve, I

rub it all over my left shoulder. “Oh yeah...that’s it...that’s the spot.”

She shifts her washcloth off her eyes again, glaring at me.

“Look at us,” I say with a grin. “A pair of champions.”

She snorts a weak laugh despite herself.

“Yeah, this is the dream, baby.” I switch to the other shoulder, wincing as I slather myself. “Stick with me, and life will be one adventure after another.”

Now she’s full smiling. “You’re crazy.”

“Crazy in love,” I tease.

She groans, flopping onto her back, her sweaty tits peaked with rosy perfect nipples. “God...we have to be up in like three hours.”

“Eh, sleep is overrated.”

“We have to get married tomorrow,” she says with a dramatic fling of her hand.

“We’re already married. Next?”

“Well, we have all those guests waiting for us,” she whines. “They’re gonna expect me to be like...chipper and shit. And I don’t think I can do it, Ryan. I really don’t.”

“They can go fuck themselves. I just paid, like, five thousand dollars for poisoned ceviche.”

She snorts, throwing the washcloth at me. “Will you stop trying to see the silver lining of everything and just be miserable with me, please? I’m having a moment.”

“Sure.” I screw the cap back on the jar, already feeling some slight relief. “But before I commence with my own litany of grievances, can I just add that I think you’re so beautiful when you have food poisoning. Your breasts in particular look immaculate from this angle. You have no idea.”

They jiggle as she fights a laugh.

“That’s it, baby. Jiggle those tits for daddy—”

“Ohmygod, *stop*,” she cries, still laughing. She bands a hand over the girls, trying to hold them still.

“Yeah, touch yourself...just like that—”

“Hey, there’s an ocean just outside, right? Good. Go walk into it and count to a thousand.”

I smile, relief floating through me, mixing with my fatigue. My Tess is still in there. She’ll be alright. I turn, leaning my back against the sink. Reaching out, I stroke up and down her calf with my fingertips. Her body relaxes and she stretches out a little, seeking more of my touch.

I tip my head back, closing my eyes, and just keep stroking her leg. As long as she's in this bathroom, this is where I'll be too.

For better or worse.

Besides, we've had our fill of bad karma for the weekend. Everything will look better in the morning.

"Umm...so was there a plan B?" Jake stands at my shoulder in his tux, dark hair slicked back, his expensive cologne wafting around him in a tasteful cloud. He can do elegance in his sleep. I don't know why I had to pick a best man who will upstage me in every freaking picture.

I look out the window of this suite we're using as our 'ready room.' It has a great view of the beach, including the chosen spot for our ceremony. Several neat little rows of chairs are set up to face a flowery archway. The ocean is our backdrop. It's gorgeous, a truly unbeatable location.

Or at least it would be...if it wasn't pouring down rain.

The sky, which was a stony grey when I woke up on the floor of Tess's bathroom, is now a decidedly steel color. And the rain, which had only been threatening to fall before, is now cascading from the sky in buckets.

Because of course it would rain the very hour we're planning to have our ceremony.

I sigh, turning away from the window. Before I can respond to Jake, Doc peeks her head into the room. "Uhh, Ryan? Tess wants to talk to you for a sec."

Jake holds a hand up to my chest. "He can't see her before the wedding, babe. That's bad luck."

I can't help but laugh. "We're so far fucking past that, you have no idea." I step past him, looking to Rachel. "Where is she?"

She leads the way down the hallway and around the corner. I take in her pretty black dress.

"Doc, you look dynamite."

She smiles up at me. "Thanks, Ry."

"How is she?"

Her smile gets decidedly pinched. "Surviving I think is the term." She

gestures to a door, and I open it, stepping inside.

This room is a suite too. The sitting room is full of ladies. My mom and sister are getting their hair and makeup done. Cassie is talking animatedly to the woman doing her eyelashes. Nancy and Cheryl, Tess's friends from the nonprofit, sit by the window holding cups of coffee.

"Oh, Ryan honey, it's raining," says mom, gesturing to the window.

"Yeah, thanks, mom," I tease, kissing her forehead as I step around her. "Is Tess through here?"

Rachel nods.

I step up to the door and knock twice. "Tess? It's me, baby."

The door opens to reveal Shelby, also in a black dress. "Do not upset her," she hisses in welcome. "We just got her makeup fixed again." My eyes go wide as she pulls open the door and says in a normal voice, "Tess, Ryan is here."

The door swings open to reveal my Tess standing in front of a trifold mirror in a wedding dress. I think the fit is called mermaid, where it's sort of tight at the top and flares out at the bottom. Her veil is already in place, covering her red curls, falling down her back to the floor. Our eyes meet in the mirror. She looks flawless, her makeup smooth and even, effortlessly covering those dark circles we both know she has.

"Let's give these two a minute," says Rachel, gesturing to Poppy, who stands at Tess's side.

Her bridesmaids all leave with Poppy shutting the door.

I still haven't taken my eyes off my wife. "Tess...god, you look so beautiful—"

"It's raining," she says, her bottom lip quivering.

I step into the middle of the room. "Yeah, and that sucks. But we spoke to the coordinator, and they said we have options. We can wait for it to stop and push the ceremony until later. Or we can use the backup room they have ready. The main event hall with the ocean view is booked for another wedding. This would be an interior room. But Eugenia says it will fit all our guests. Can't be much worse than rink side after a Rays game, right?" I add with a shrug.

"I just wanted one thing to go right," she whispers, closing her eyes.

I step closer. "Well, no matter how it happens, by the end of the day, you and I will be married...again," I add. "I'd say that's the only thing that needs to go right today. Honestly, I don't care where we do it."

She sighs, glancing longingly out the window. “I just really had my heart set on the beach wedding,” she admits.

“I know you did, baby.”

“We met on the beach. We stood in that surf, and everything changed.”

I nod. “Yeah, it did.”

She turns to me, her beautiful face framed in the white of that veil that’s leaving me feeling breathless. “And then the night of the turtle gala...that horrible night with Troy...I found you on the beach. I ran to you.”

Heart in my throat, I nod again. “You did.”

“I ran home to you, Ryan. The beach is where I found you, and it’s where I made you mine. I want to commit myself to you where the surf meets the sand. I wanna get married on the beach.”

I close the distance between us, taking her hands in mine. “Then let’s do it. Tess, baby, I’ll walk into that thunderstorm right now and marry you.”

She blinks, tears in her eyes. “You would?”

“Hell, yeah.” I cup her face, pressing closer. “When are you gonna learn that there is literally nothing I wouldn’t do for you?”

Her eyes flash with excitement as she glances from me to the door.

I lean away. “What is that look? What are you plotting?”

“If we go that way, they’ll all try to talk us out of it,” she says, pointing at the closed door.

“Wait—are you serious? You wanna go right now and get married in the rain?”

She nods. “Yeah. Just you and me. It will always be you and me.”

I raise a brow at her. “Tess, you’ll get wet—your dress, your veil.”

“I don’t care.”

“Your makeup will run.”

“I don’t care. Besides, my mascara is waterproof. It’s a good test of the product. Quality control and whatnot.”

I narrow my eyes at her, holding back the worst for last. “Your hair will get messed up.”

She smiles, enunciating each word. “I. Don’t. Care.”

“Oh, yeah? And what about the fifty other people who came here to watch us get married?”

She shrugs. “We fed them poisoned ceviche, didn’t we? And we’re feeding them again for brunch. *And* we scheduled that glass-bottom boat tour for everyone tomorrow.”

I wince. “Yeah...babe, I think that boat sank yesterday.”

Her eyes go wide. But then she shrugs again. “Eh, there’s still the brunch. And they can watch from the windows.”

I laugh. “So, wait...are we doing this? Are we going out onto that beach and getting married in a thunderstorm?”

Now her smile looks radiant. “Yes. I’m not waiting to see if maybe it clears up in a few hours. Marry me, Ryan. Run with me down to that beach, and vow to be mine forever.”

I match her smile, squeezing her hand. “Let’s do it.” I turn to lead her to the door, but she pulls me to a stop.

“Baby, no—if we go that way they’ll try and stop us,” she whispers with a shake of her head. “Your mom, Poppy—they’ll tie me to the chair, and then they’ll make me pose for more pictures.”

“Then what do you propose?”

With a wicked glint in her eyes, she pulls me over to the lanai and slides open the glass door.

“Tess, no—”

“We’re on the first floor—”

“Tess,” I growl, gripping tight to her hand as I hold her back. “This is *not* a first-floor room. That is a ten-foot drop!” I wave dramatically out at the railing.

She huffs. “It’s six feet if it’s an inch.”

“Tess—”

“And by the time you dangle over the ledge, you’ll practically have your feet on the ground.”

My eyes are wide as I stare at her. “I’ve changed my mind,” I say, shaking my head. “I want the opposite of whatever a marriage is. I want *un*marriage.”

She gasps. “Ryan Scott Langley, are you threatening me with the ‘D’ word while I’m wearing a wedding dress?”

“No. I was very careful. That is a word that will never pass my lips—”

“Oh, but ‘unmarriage’ is acceptable?”

“Wait—when did you learn my middle name?”

She rolls her eyes. “Seriously? We’re married, Ryan. Something you’re apparently reconsidering. I know your birthdate too. And your social. *And* your bank card number. I could ruin you, Ryan Scott Langley.”

“God—stop middle naming me,” I huff. “I don’t deserve to be cornered

like this for refusing to let you climb off a goddamn balcony like Jackie Chan.”

“But the balcony is less scary than Poppy,” she admits.

I growl, turning towards the closed door, my eyes narrowing in determination.

“Ryan? What is that look? What are you gonna do?”

I turn to her, my adrenaline pumping. “My wife wants to remarry me on the beach in the rain? My wife gets what she wants. Come on.” I pull her forward, heading for the door.

“Ryan,” she shrieks, hurrying after me. “Wait—my veil—”

I stop at the door, glancing over my shoulder to watch her bundle it up in her hand.

“Okay, go,” she says, that wild glint still in her eyes.

I pull open the door and stride into the sitting room, pulling Tess along behind me. Everyone in the room startles. Rachel and Shelby jump away from the door as if they weren’t just trying to listen in.

“Ryan?”

“Tess, what’s happening?”

“Do you want me to get the photographer?”

“Change of plans, everyone,” I call out as we stride across the room. “My wife and I will be getting remarried on the beach right now. Anyone wishing to watch can do so from the safety of the windows in the lobby. Spread the word.”

“Ryan—”

“What—”

Tess and I burst through the door, racing down the hallway to hear Poppy shrieking, “Tess Langley, you get back here this instant! That foundation isn’t waterproof, missy!”

We laugh, swinging left down the hall. I lead the way, knowing the girls are hurrying behind us. We bust into the lobby. The floor is streaked with dancing grey shadows as the storm rages outside. I wouldn’t even be considering this if I saw any thunder or lighting. But at the moment, it’s just buckets of rain.

Most of our guests are milling around, unsure of where to go to find the backup venue. They cheer when they see us, many of them raising glasses.

We slide to a halt in front of the doors leading out to the deck. Right, I should probably say something, a little word of warning. They flew all this

way. “Everyone, uhh...on behalf of my wife and myself, I wanna say thanks so much for coming to our second wedding.”

The crowd cheers again.

I wave for silence. “Yeah, you know, you’re all great friends, and we love you and...wait here.”

A chorus of confused questions filter across the small crowd as our bridesmaids and groomsmen come chasing us down the hallway.

“You guys are crazy,” Poppy shrieks.

“Yeah, crazy in love,” Tess counters. She turns to the crowd. “Listen everyone, Ryan and I are going out there now. I wanted a beach wedding, and gosh darn it, that’s what I’m gonna get. Stay here, stay dry, and we’ll head straight to the reception after.”

A few people laugh, but most people smile. A couple teammates cheer.

“Get it done, Langers!”

“Go get married again, you wild love birds—”

“Bring an umbrella!”

“Oh, and someone find us some towels,” Tess calls over her shoulder. I’m already pulling her through the door onto the back patio. She shrieks as the first drops of rain hit us.

I tighten my hand in hers. “You ready to do this, Mrs. Langley?”

She laughs, running at my side, her veil and her dress bunched in her hand. “Make me yours, Mr. Langley.”

This resort has an impressive outdoor patio full of tables, each outfitted with blue sun umbrellas. All the umbrellas are closed against the onslaught of the rain. Thick drops hammer down on the tops of the tables, soaking the chair cushions. Tess and I weave between them, angling for the stretch of sand.

Offshore, the thick clouds are almost black with storm, rolling steadily closer. The water, which was aquamarine, is now a muddy grey, crashing against the sand in angry, white-capped waves. All the flags down the beach are red in warning, tugging at their poles as the wind whips them into a fury.

This is crazy—quite possibly dangerous—but I don’t fucking care. I’m already drenched to the bone, my suit clinging to me, as I pound through the sand. The heavens above us pour down relentlessly.

“Oh my god,” Tess shrieks. “Ryan, this dress weighs a thousand pounds —”

I turn to see struggling through the sand, both hands holding up the

bottom of her dress. Her makeup is streaking down her face in squiggly lines of black and pink. Her veil clings to her shoulders, and her white, curve-hugging dress went from bridal to positively sinful. She looks like someone pushed her into the swimming pool.

But in her eyes, I see joy, pure and unbridled. She laughs, reaching for me with both hands. I walk us right up to the water's edge, not caring as the waves crash against my ankles, filling my expensive leather shoes with saltwater. She stands with me, our hands clasped. "So how do we do this?" I call over the storm. "Doesn't it have to be officiated to be legal?"

"It's already legal," she calls back, wiggling her hand at me where a pair of diamond rings already rest.

Right, we got married mid-season, which meant there was no chance to celebrate. This trip was only ever about the fun and fanfare, a chance to show off with my girl and escape the grind for a few days.

Laughing, I shake my head as the waves crash in behind us and the rain pours down. "What the hell are we doing out here? We're already fucking married."

"We're married," she echoes, a wide smile on her face. "Look at me, I'm standing here in a wedding dress, and I'm already married."

"Oh yeah? Well, I paid for this whole damn wedding weekend...and I'm already married!"

We both laugh like idiots, holding to each other as the waves crash over our feet.

"Just say something romantic so we can go back inside," she pants, rain pouring down her face. "Tell me you love me."

I cup her face with both my hands, my fingers brushing against her wedding veil. "Teresa Rose Langley," I call over the storm. "I'll love you forever, I swear to fucking god."

She smiles up at me looking radiant, her hands wrapping around my wrists as I continue to cup her face. God, she's mine. "You know my middle name," she says, and I know tears are mixing with the rain on her cheeks.

I nod and smile. "Yeah...seemed like something a husband should know."

"I love you, Ryan. Being your wife makes me happier than I ever thought I could be. I'll love you forever. Forever and forever. Just kiss me and say I'm yours."

My heart feels like it's gonna burst as I lean in and kiss her. She moves

her hands to my chest, clinging to my tux jacket as she kisses me back. The rain wets our lips as we whisper more lovers' words to each other, kissing again and again. We only stop when a big wave knocks into our knees and nearly topples us over.

“Okay, crazies,” Rachel shouts, running forward with a big umbrella. Jake is at her side, holding another larger umbrella. “Let’s go. Back inside, before you both get washed out to sea!”

We break apart, laughing, hands clinging, to see half our guests are standing out in the rain with us. A few have umbrellas, but most are just letting the rain pour down. Holding hands, we make our way back up the beach and into the resort lobby where the rest of our guests are waiting. The resort staff make quick work of passing out champagne and towels and we toast to our happiness looking like we all swam to this resort all the way from Florida.

Three hours later, our wedding brunch is finally winding down. Tess and I changed back into the clothes we wore last night after Poppy decided they looked bridal enough for more pictures. We did take a few pictures in our soaking wet clothes too. If I have my pick, those are the ones I want framed.

Our bridal party made all their awesome speeches and I only cried twice. I danced with my mom and Tess danced with Mars. We had an amazing meal that included more conch fritters. And, of course, Tess worked with the caterers to include an amazing Creole-seasoned lobster mac and cheese. Now I’m feeling tipsy on champagne and high on life.

Best part of the morning? It finally stopped raining. Right around the time Jake gave the first speech, the rain stopped, and the clouds parted.

“Hey, babe.” I toss my arm over the back of Tess’s chair and lean in closer.

She turns away from Rachel and looks up at me with a playful bat of her lashes. “Yes, husband?”

I smirk. If I have my way, she’ll say that again from her knees. “I have one last surprise for you.”

She goes still, eyes widening. “I don’t know if I can handle another

surprise...”

Next to her, Rachel laughs.

“It’s a good one, I promise. I rented us a special bungalow for tonight. Well, for the rest of our stay actually.”

Her excitement returns. “Really? Special how?”

I’ve been bursting to tell her about it since I booked it months ago. “It’s an overwater villa. They only have three, so they’re hard to book but—”

She gasps, lifting a hand to her mouth. “Shut up, you did not.”

I grin. “I did.”

“No.” She gasps again. “I contacted them months ago to try and book one, but they said they were already reserved.”

I puff out my chest a little, pleased to see she’s so happy. “Yeah, by me. I booked it the day after we got married.”

“Ryan,” she squeals, shaking my shoulder with both hands.

“Ouch—*fuck*—”

“Ohmygod, your sunburn—” She lets me go. “Oh, I’m so sorry, baby.”

“It’s fine,” I say with a grimace.

“Well, when can we go? Is it ready now? I wanna see it?”

I glance around the busy dining room. “Babe, we’re in the middle of our wedding reception.”

“Oh, it’s over,” she says with a dismissive wave of her hand. “We fed them, we danced, we cut the cake. We’re married again. People are already starting to leave, look.” She points to the corner where Poppy, Novy, and Morrow are trying to make a casual exit.

“Wait, are you leaving?” says Rachel, leaning against Sanny’s shoulder. “If you’re leaving, my guys and I are leaving too. Now that the weather’s clear, we wanna go snorkeling—no offense,” she adds, brushing a hand over Tess’s shoulder.

“None taken,” Tess replies, standing and pulling me up with her. She leans over the table, snatching up her flute of champagne, and downs the rest of it. “The villa is ready now, right?”

I laugh, weaving my fingers in with hers. “It’s ready. I had the valets bring all our stuff over this morning.”

She bounces on the balls of her feet, setting the glass down. “Then let’s get out of here.”

We duck out without so much as a ‘thanks for coming’ to our guests and race over to the reception desk. The receptionist orders us a golf cart and in

minutes we're zooming to the far end of the resort, the Caribbean wind in our hair. After a ten-minute drive, we pull into a tiny cul-de-sac. Thick vegetation surrounds us on all sides, but I can hear the ocean off to my right.

Tess and I slip out of the golf cart and follow the valet down a boardwalk path through the trees. It comes out on the white, sandy beach. Before us sit three gorgeous villas, perched out over the aquamarine water on a series of stilts. Each house uses a design that fuses tradition with modernity—thatched roofs and walls of glass. Instead of a wrap-around porch, each villa has a netting like a catamaran that lets you float above the water like a spider in a web.

It's so fucking cool.

"Oh, it's so beautiful," Tess coos. "Oh, baby, look at that view."

She holds my hand with both of hers as we make our way to the villa on the far end. Our valet walks us down the narrow boardwalk that connects the villa to the beach. "The fridge is stocked just as you asked, Mr. Langley," he says. "All your belongings were transferred here. Anything else you may need is just a phone call away."

"Thanks," I reply, tipping him at the door.

He unlocks the door and hands me the key before taking his leave. Tess has already dropped my hand and is peeking around the side of the house.

"Ryan, it has an infinity pool!"

I smile, tucking the key in my pocket. "I know. I rented it, remember? Now come here, Mrs. Langley."

She hurries back over to me, and I sweep her up in my arms. "Ryan, what —"

I silence her with a kiss, shifting my hold on her.

"Ryan, put me down—"

"Not a chance." I hurry over to the door.

"Babe, I have to grab your sunburn—"

"Ow, ow, ow—*fuck*—" I use her feet to push open the door and shuffle us sideways through it, all while her arm does murder to my sunburned shoulder.

"Babe—"

"Just let me have my moment," I pant, moving through the entryway into the main part of the villa. It's really just one big, segmented room. The kitchen and eating area are off to the right, the bedroom is behind the only wall to the left. This living room is huge, with an eclectic mix of furniture

including a few modern couches and something that looks like a mix between an ottoman and a bird's nest, but it's large enough for three people.

Tess laughs, her head tipped back as she tries to look around.

"The husband has to carry his bride over the doorstep," I say, weaving around the couch. "I didn't get to do it the first time."

"Well, we're in," she squeals. "The threshold has been crossed, now put me down!"

I set her down right in front of the feature I most wanted her to see. The feature *I* most wanted to see. She gasps, stepping back on instinct. Half the floor is made up of a pane of thick glass, giving you an aquarium-like view into the water below.

"Oh god, it's so beautiful! Ryan, look at the fish." She drops down to her knees, hands pressed to the glass as she watches them dart back and forth over a craggy piece of grey rock.

I drop down beside her, smiling as I peer through the glass. There are so many fish. Their colors are bright—purples and yellows, a dappled red, their scales glittering like jewels.

Tess's hand covers mine, giving it a little squeeze. "Thank you, Ryan... for everything."

I turn to face her. "How are you feeling?"

"Good," she replies with a smile. "Tired, but good...tired and wired and...exhilarated." She laughs, shaking her head. "God, is this what it feels like to be incandescently happy? I wouldn't know, I guess."

I push up to my knees, pulling her with me, and cup her cheeks, my thumbs brushing over the freckles that her makeup tried to hide but the rain revealed. I love her freckles. Every single one. Someday, I'm going to take her to a chalet in the mountains and we'll never leave the bed. I'll just count all her freckles one at a time while we drink hot chocolate and fuck like gods.

"I can't promise that I'll make you this happy every day for the rest of our lives," I admit.

"Thank god," she says with a teasing laugh. "No one should be this happy all the time. Have you seen me? I'm insufferable right now."

I smile, tipping forward to press a kiss to her lips. "I said I can't promise success...but I promise I'll try. I love you, Tess. I love you so much."

"I love you too, Ryan."

Pain forces me to add. "But I can't stay on my knees like this for much longer...unless you want me to announce my retirement from the NHL."

Laughing, she pulls us both to our feet. As soon as we're standing, we're in each other's arms. The stress of the last two days, paired with the denial of the last week, has us both feeling desperate. We can be slow and sensual later. Right now, I need my wife.

We kiss and touch, pulling at each other's clothes like we're being timed for efficiency. She unbuttons my white dress shirt, only slowing to peel it carefully off my shoulders. Even as she does, she's stepping in to press kisses to my chest. She tosses the useless shirt aside, her hands dropping to my belt.

I wrap my hands around her back, reaching for her zipper. Her dress unzips with the ease of sliding a hot knife through butter, the silky white fabric slipping off her freckled shoulders. "I've thought of taking you out of this dress for two days."

She shimmies her hips with a laugh, letting the silk pool at her feet. "You've been such a good boy this week, so patient and obliging with my silly rules."

I roll my eyes at her use of 'good boy.' It doesn't work on me nearly as well as the reverse works on her, and we both know it. "And now?"

Her smile widens, the heat of her gaze making it clear how she feels and what she wants. "Now, I'm happy and horny and I need my husband inside me. No more waiting."

I groan with relief, my hands sliding up to unhook her bra. "We can slow this down later—"

"Ryan," she pants, her hands pulling at my belt.

"Yeah, babe?"

She leans in, her lips brushing against mine. "Get your dick inside me before I scream."

I laugh, dropping my hands to my belt. "Take your own damn clothes off, needy thing. Show me how bad you want it."

She doesn't hesitate. Stepping back, she wraps her hands around her back to unhook her own bra. She drops it down to the glass floor, her heavy breasts hanging perfect and ripe, ready for me to devour. Those pink nipples taunt me. Knowing what she does to me, she reaches up with both hands and pinches them tight, giving them a little twist, making herself whimper. She bites that plump bottom lip, doing it again.

I jerk my belt open and lower my fly, kicking off my shoes, uncaring where they land. Then I pull my belt out of the loops and drop my pants to the floor, stepping out of them. Her eyes go wide as she shimmies out of her

body shaper, leaving her in nothing but a barely-there thong. “What are you doing with the belt, puppy?”

I palm my hard dick through my briefs, gripping the belt tight with my other hand. “You know exactly what I’m doing, you little tease.”

She raises a brow as she slips a finger under the strap of her thong. “Pretend I don’t.”

I step closer, taking in her every curve. “You denied me sex for the last eight days and called it ‘fun.’ So now I’m gonna remind you how we really have fun.”

“What will you do?” she whispers, tugging on the strap of her thong just enough to give me a flash of that pussy. Ever my perfect tease, she palms herself with her other hand, wiggling two fingers between her lips to stroke her clit.

My jaw tightens. “I’m gonna tie your hands behind your back, spear you with my dick, and ride you until you come apart...would you like that, tease?”

“Yes, sir.”

I groan, my dick twitching. “Fuck, you are the devil. Get over here.”

She pulls her hand from her panties and crosses over to me, raising her wet fingertips to my lips. I suck them into my mouth, grabbing her ass with both hands. She arches into me, her breasts brushing my skin.

“Turn around. Hands behind your back.”

She turns, pushing her ass into me as she snakes her hands behind her back, holding them like an equal sign, eager for me to bind her. I look around for the right surface, deciding on the sofa floating in the middle of the room. I’ll have her kneel on it and bend herself over the back. I press kisses to her shoulder as I wrap the belt around her wrists, feeding the end through the buckle.

“Oh god,” she whimpers, wiggling her ass against my thigh.

“Fuck, I know, baby. I’m desperate for you. I’m not gonna last very long —”

“Oh—oh my—” She goes still as stone. Then she’s jerking at her arms before I can tighten the belt.

“Babe—”

“Oh my fucking god,” she shrieks, all but tumbling backwards into me. She jerks her hands loose. “Ryan!”

“Tess—what—”

With her hands free, she points down at the floor of glass. “There’s a man down there!”

I look down and my heart drops through my fucking chest. A scuba diver is visible under our villa, the bubbles from his regulator blowing up against the glass.

Tess’s arms go up to cover her breasts. “Is that a hammer? Babe, he’s breaking the glass!”

I sling her behind me. “No, he’s not. He’s...” I watch the scuba diver raise his arm and make a motion like he’s using a hammer on the glass, but then I snort. The laugh escapes me as my hard dick shrivels in confusion. I can hardly believe what I’m seeing.

“What?” Tess cries. “Ryan—”

“He’s got a squeegee.”

She peers around me, both hands gripping my arm. “A what?”

I point down, full on laughing now. “It’s not a hammer. It’s a squeegee. Look, he’s cleaning the damn glass.”

“What—right now?”

“Apparently.”

Because why wouldn’t scuba diving maintenance workers clean my honeymoon villa while I’m trying to get balls-deep inside my wife? After the chaos of this weekend, I don’t know why I didn’t just assume there would definitely be scuba divers watching us fuck through the glass.

As if on cue, the diver drags his squeegee along the glass. It makes a faint squeaking sound with each pull. Seeing us through the glass, he lifts a gloved hand and waves, flashing us the ‘okay’ sign.

“Ohmygod, there’s another one,” Tess cries, pointing to the corner of the glass where another guy with free-flowing blond hair swims up, chiseling a barnacle loose with what looks like a paint scraper.

Before I know it, I’m bent over, hands on my knees, cracking up until my eyes water. I’m gonna say it’s the stress of the last few days. Traveling to a new country with fifty people in tow is never easy. Neither is being forced to fish for sharks or getting temporarily lost at sea. Maybe it’s the sunburn that’s addled my brain...maybe it was staying up all night with a sick Tess and sleeping on the floor of a bathroom...

All I know is that I’m so tired, I’m so horny, and I have literally no idea how, but I’m hungry again.

“Ryan...” Tess pulls on my arm. “They can see us. Baby, they can see

through the glass.”

“I know.” Righting myself, I turn to face her, my expression turning sober. “I know they can see us. But you know what? I don’t fucking care. I’ve legally rented this villa for the next two days, and I am going to fuck my wife on every square inch of it.” Decision made, I drop my briefs to the floor, wrapping my fist around my half-hard dick.

Slowly, Tess smiles. “Exhibitionism? That’s a new kink for you, puppy. Are you sure? We could always go into the bedroom—”

“No.” My resolve hardens with each slow stroke of my dick. I step closer, backing her onto the glass. “Lose the thong. It will only get in my way.” Ducking down, I pick up my belt again.

Tess watches me approach, holding her ground in the middle of the glass. The scuba divers work their little scrapers as she smiles and slips her thong down her thick thighs, letting it drop to the glass.

“Such a good fucking girl. Now turn around. Hands behind your back.”

She does as she’s told, turning slowly, placing her hands behind her back.

I step in behind her, binding her with the belt, tight enough to hold but loose enough for her to pull free. Leaning close, I whisper in her ear, “Last night you lied to me. Do you remember what you said?”

She lets out a little breath, her body shivering as I let her go. “I said...I wasn’t wet. I said I didn’t want to ride your dick—*ahh*—” She gasps as I grip her by her messy bun and pull her head back against my chest, forcing her to look up at me.

“And that was a lie, wasn’t it?”

She closes her mouth and swallows, not ready to give in, even as I see the need shining in her eyes.

“Speak,” I growl, reaching my free hand around to slap her tit.

“Fuck—yes,” she squeals, tugging on her bound arms. Then she nods, my hand still gripped tight in her hair. “Yes, it was a lie. Ryan, it was a lie. I was wet for you—god, I wanted you,” she keens. The sound is so beautiful. I’ll never tire of hearing it. “I always want you.”

“And are you wet now?” I slide my hand over her stomach and down, cupping her between her legs. “If I check this pretty pussy, will it be wet for me?”

She nods again. “Yes.” She widens her stance, rubbing herself against my hand. “Check me, baby. Please—touch me—fill me—*fuck*—”

I give her pussy a slap, and she whimpers again, pushing herself against

me. “I decide when and how you get fucked,” I rasp in her ear, planting a searing kiss to her throat. Then I dive in, slipping a finger between her pussy lips, sinking it into her warm center. I press in to the second knuckle and she drops her hips, trying to bury my finger deeper. I pull out of her, and she whines, so I give her pussy another playful slap.

She gasps, pressing her ass against my hip. “Ryan, please—”

“Don’t get greedy. You were the one who wanted to wait, remember?” I smooth my hand over her pussy, giving her some friction. “I would live inside this perfect cunt if you’d let me. If I had my way, we’d never stop fucking. You make me feral, Tess.”

She hums in agreement, arching up until she can kiss the bottom of my chin.

“I’ve fucked you so many times in so many ways, but it’s never enough.” I shift my hips, letting my hard dick press against her ass cheek, my precum smearing against her dimpled skin. “Feel how hard you make me? How desperate I become at the feel of you naked in my arms?”

“Yes,” she whispers, kissing me again.

“What are you gonna do about it, wife?”

I drop my hand from her hair, and she does a half turn, her arms still bound at the small of her back. She licks her lips, looking down at my hard dick. Then she glances to left and right, taking in the scuba divers. “I want them to watch you put me on my knees.” She looks up at me with such want in her eyes. “Please, sir...let me fuck you with my mouth?”

I smirk, cupping her breasts with both hands, pinching her hard nipples until she gasps. “There’s my good fucking girl. Show our guests how well you tend to your husband. Show them how you keep me satisfied.”

Smiling with the confidence of a queen, she lowers herself to her knees, her arms still bound behind her back. The scuba divers inch closer and I smirk, tapping my wife’s lips with the tip of my dick. “Open for me, gorgeous. Take me deep. Nice and slow...that’s it.”

She sucks my tip between her lips, her mouth so soft and warm, her tongue teasing as she flicks it at my tip. I run both hands through her hair, digging my fingers in gently as I rock against her mouth, holding her steady. She makes the most perfect little humming sounds as she sucks, teasing me from tip to root.

“Can I choke you?” I ask, brushing her temple lovingly with my thumb.

She hums her assent, and my shoulders go stiff. Holding tighter to her

hair, I sink deeper into her mouth. “That’s it...open for me, baby. Fuck, you’re so goddamn perfect.” She makes a little choking sound as I tap the back of her throat. She tries to relax, breathing through her nose as she presses in again, sucking me deep. “Fuuuuck, that’s a good girl.”

She pulls back and I let her. A string of saliva connects from my dick to her lips, and I take a mental picture of it to frame on the wall with the wedding pictures. My perfect temptress swallowing my dick. “I love you so fucking much,” I pant. “Finish me, baby.”

With a smile, she opens her mouth and waits. Groaning with need, I grab her by the hair and sink back inside her hot mouth, filling her with each thrust of my hips. She makes the most exquisite choking noises, swallowing my hard length and gagging when I go too deep.

“Fuck—baby—I’m gonna—” Pulling out at the last second, I grip my dick at the base and cum all over my wife’s perfect tits. Streams of my hot release paint her neck and chest as she closes her eyes and laughs, her head tipped back.

I drop a hand to her shoulder to steady myself as I finish. With a smirk, she leans forward and licks the tip of my dick, stealing the last drop of cum before it can fall onto the glass.

“Release me,” she commands.

Without hesitation, I drop to one knee at her side and undo my belt, freeing her arms. I toss it aside, bringing both her arms around to kiss the faint pink marks on her skin.

Slapping my hands away, she digs her fingers into my hair and pulls me in for an open-mouthed kiss. Breaking away first, she pants, her eyes fevered. “Seeing as our little scuba diving friends are still here, let’s finish the show.”

I smirk. “What did you have in mind?”

Leaning away, she lifts both hands and smears my cum on her chest. At the same time, she spreads her knees a little wider on the glass, giving anyone who swims under a view of her pink pussy. “Lie down, Ryan. Right here on this glass. Lie down and let me ride your face.”

I never thought I’d be into this. I’m freakishly possessive about Tess. The idea of someone else watching us fuck...watching *her*...I don’t know why I’m not under this villa dragging the divers out by their fins. But something about their total anonymity is making me bold.

“What my queen wants, she gets,” I tease. Rolling to my side, I lie down, stifling a laugh when I picture what my bare ass must look like pressed into

the glass. Whatever, I've got a great ass.

Tess is still teasing her nipples, her palms sticky with my cum. She gets herself in position next to me. Pressing a cum-slicked hand to the glass, she braces herself and swings a leg over me, straddling my face. Her large breasts hang loose and free, her nipples peaked.

My view is suddenly nothing but her peachy pink skin and her bright pink pussy. With a hungry groan, I arch up, lapping at her with my tongue. I grip her thighs, trying to pull her closer. "Don't be shy, baby. Sit this fine ass down on my face and drown me."

"Ryan, I'm already close," she whines. "Oh god—they're watching us—"

I know. I can sense the presence of the divers under the glass. I hear the mechanical click of their regulators. Closing my eyes, I breathe out against the heat of my wife's needy cunt. "Do you want to stop?"

"No, I want to come," she admits on a whimper, flinching as I lick her again.

I slap her hard with both hands, right where her thighs meet her ass. "I don't give a fuck who watches us. They know they can never touch you. Who do you belong to?"

"You," she cries.

I slap her again. "Who?"

"Ahh—you—"

Slap. "Who?" I bellow, my breath hot on her cunt.

"God—*fuck*—I belong to you. Ryan, I belong to you. Only you, baby. Only you—" Leaving cummy handprints on the glass, she sinks down, her thighs spread wide, and fucks the life out of my face, laughing as the divers watch her perfect tits bounce in their faces.

My wife rides me like a queen, her hips grinding against my chin, as I suck and lick, devouring her cunt. I snake two fingers into the crack of her ass, pressing in at her tight hole, and that sends her over the edge. She squeals, her thighs trembling around my face. Then she goes utterly still.

"Ryan, I'm gonna—ohmygooooood—"

Her pussy drenches me as she squirts. Oh fuck, I'm gonna come again. That's only happened once before. I ride it out, groaning and flopping around like a fish under her as I suck on her clit, licking and licking until she screams and more of her juices leak out, flowing down my chin. I grip her ass cheek tight enough to bruise as I sink my tongue in her as deep as it will go, claiming whatever's left inside.

She's a shaking, whimpering mess, muttering an unintelligible string of words as she spirals down off her climax. I lie there dazed, my face drenched in my wife's pussy magic. We're both breathless, utterly spent.

Beneath us, a squeegee squeaks along the glass.

I layer the last of my clothes into my suitcase and close the lid, zipping it shut. "Tess, you about ready, babe? The valet will be here in five minutes."

"Just a minute!"

I roll my eyes. She was the one who told me we had to hurry up and get ready to head to the airport, and then she disappeared in there like thirty minutes ago. Half her stuff is still scattered around the room.

Our two days of bliss are over. Aside from our surprise scuba divers on day one, we had no other unexpected visitors. We spent two perfect days lounging around, cooking and napping and swimming in the sea. Well, *she* swam in the sea. I swam in the infinity pool and kept a diligent eye out for sharks.

And sex. We had so much fucking sex. I'm honestly a little sore.

We had dinner both nights at the resort with the Prices and the O'Sullivans. On the second night, we skipped the golf cart ride back and instead walked down along the beach, holding hands and talking about our future.

It was perfect.

But now it's over. Back to real life. Tess will dive headfirst back into planning her world domination of the conservation industry, and I'll be packing my bags to head out to youth hockey camp.

I wonder how much it would cost to rent this for two more nights. We could swing that, right? Change the plane tickets and just pressure the city council to postpone their meeting and—

A shriek from the bathroom has me dropping my shoes back to the floor.

"Ryan!"

I slip around the bed and move over to the bathroom. "Tess?"

She flings the door open, right before I get to it. She has an anxious look on her face, tears welling in her eyes.

I reach for her with both hands. “What hap—”

She steps back, raising something up between us.

I focus my eyes on it, blinking as I register what it is. “Tess...is that—”

“Yes.”

My wife is holding a pregnancy test. My wife who told me she can't have children is holding a pregnancy test and looking at me like she just swallowed a rainbow. She's glowing from the inside out.

I try to remember to breathe. I don't have all the facts yet. Everyone stay fucking calm. “And...is it—”

“Positive. It's—yes. I'm—it's positive.”

She turns the angle of it, and I see a plus sign looking up at me. My wife is holding a positive pregnancy test...because she's pregnant. Tess is pregnant. I close my eyes, heart racing. “And umm...when did you—uhh... how long?”

“Only a few weeks, I think. Like, maybe five? Rachel made me do it. I told her about the food poisoning, and she went out and bought me this in town. I've had it for two days. I didn't want to believe...didn't want to hope...”

“Hope?”

“Well, I was told I couldn't have children. I tried with—with Troy,” she adds softly. “My gynecologist said it wasn't likely to happen for me but *look*.” She holds the test up with a trembling hand and gestures over her shoulder. “There are two more in there. They're all positive. I'm pregnant, Ryan, and I need to know how you feel about it before I freak the fuck out even more than I'm already freaking out.”

I'm still processing. “But—you're on the pill...”

She just shrugs, her smile falling as she lets her anxiety creep in. “Yeah, and that's usually like ninety-three percent effective, but...” She looks up at me, dropping her hand to her side. She searches my face, tears filling her eyes. “Are you not...what are you thinking right now?”

It hits me that I'm just standing here like a loading web browser. I bet I look like the world's biggest jackass. My wife's lower lip is trembling. She's about to cry. She told me she's pregnant with my miracle baby, and I'm still just standing here. Remembering how arms work, I lunge forward, grabbing her shoulders. “Oh...Tess. You're pregnant? We're gonna have a baby?”

She lets out a squeaky sound of assent. “God—yes. In case you missed all my very unsubtle hints of freaking out waving positive pregnancy tests in

your face, I'm trying to tell you I'm having a baby. Will you please have a reaction now?"

A laugh escapes me as I hold her gaze. I feel like I just swallowed a firecracker. My chest is fizzing, and I think I'm about to cry. I let her see all the emotions I was processing—my joy and fear, my pride, my love, my unbridled excitement. Stepping in close, I cup her face, pressing my forehead to hers. "Tess, I'm so fucking happy." I kiss her forehead. "I'm so happy."

Her hands wrap around my wrists as she pulls away, looking up at me with those tears threatening to fall down her freckled cheeks. "Yeah? You swear?"

I nod, kissing her forehead again. "I swear, Tess. Wait—are *you* happy?"

"Yes," she whispers. "Ryan, I want this baby. I want *your* baby. It's a piece of you and a piece of me that we can love and hold and cherish. I'm freaking out, and the timing is terrible...and I have *no* idea how we'll manage with our crazy schedules...but I want this baby, Ryan."

I smile, brushing my hands over her sunburned shoulders. "Then let the next adventure begin."

WAITING: PART 1



Note: This chapter takes place roughly eight months after the previous chapter, Turks & Caicos. Please note that this chapter contains descriptions of a complicated, life-threatening pregnancy and it ends on a cliffhanger (which is continued in Chapter 4).

“**Y**ou wanna tell me again what we’re doing out here?” Shelby walks at my side, sipping Diet Coke from her favorite metal tumbler, sunglasses on her head. We’re pounding the sands of Jacksonville Beach, trying to get back to my house before the heavens open.

“I’m committed to getting five thousand steps a day at least four days a week,” I pant. “And today is my last chance if I want to keep my record intact.”

“Tess, you’re nine months pregnant, honey. You know it’s okay to slow down a little, especially given your complications.”

I shake my head, breathing through my mouth. “Nope, doctor said I’m fine to keep walking. It’s good for me. Also, Cassie is home right now.”

“Ahh...there it is.”

I pause, wincing as Baby Girl gives me a sharp kick. I rub the side of my

belly, glaring at Shelby through my sunglasses. “What the heck does that mean?”

Shelby sighs, one hand on her hip. “It’s really not my business—”

“Don’t you dare,” I say, snatching her tumbler from her and taking a sip. Fuck, it tastes so good. I just had to go and cut out caffeine at the start of this pregnancy. My whole ‘anything for baby’ bullshit is making even me crazy at this point.

“Don’t do what?” Shelby replies, feigning ignorance.

I rattle the ice in the tumbler at her. “Don’t do your whole I’m-a-psychologist-so-I-can’t-help-psychoanalyzing-my-friends crap. You have something to say about Cassie? Say it.”

She just holds my glare, taking her cup back from me. “Sounds like maybe you’re the one with something to say—”

“I said *don’t*,” I snap. “If you love me, you’ll just tell it to me straight. What’s your problem with Cassie?”

“Okay...well, if I’m being perfectly honest, I think she’s taking advantage of your hospitality.”

I scoff. Ryan’s bratty older sister called him two months ago with a dramatic sob story about her apartment and the evil landlord and the broken sublease. Before I knew it, I was watching him move Cassie into our guest room. *It’s only temporary*, he said.

Yeah, temporary, my ass. Ryan is the world’s biggest pushover. And Cassie knows how to manipulate all his weaknesses. Dead daddy issues? Check. Helping the helpless damsel? Check. Siblings against the world? Check.

“She’s definitely taking advantage,” I reply. “What else you got?”

She gives me a sympathetic grimace. “Things are still strained between the two of you?”

I turn and keep marching down the beach, my feet sinking in the shelly sand. “Worse than strained. They’re unbearable. Shelbs, you have no idea. I don’t even want to go home if I know she’s there.”

“So, she’s effectively kicked the nine-months pregnant woman out of her own house?”

“Hey, I like the beach,” I pant, elongating my stride. “And exercise is good for Baby. Silver linings, Shelbs. Always gotta look for the silver linings.”

“Tess, you’d rather walk in a thunderstorm than be alone with your own

sister-in-law. Your situation is unsustainable. What are you guys going to do when the baby gets here?”

I groan, my hands rubbing my bump as I walk. “I know. It’s a fucking mess, and I just want her out. I want my house back. I want my *life* back.”

“Sooo...maybe talk to Ryan?”

“Oh no, it can’t be my idea. *He* has to be the one to do it. She’s his sister, not mine. Ryan has to kick her out. The world’s nicest man has to show his bratty, useless sister to the curb. Which means she’s never leaving ever. I’m gonna die, and she’ll be leaning over my coffin asking me where we keep the soy sauce packets.”

Shelby snorts a laugh, trying to cover it with a sip of her drink. “That’s why you want her out? Because she doesn’t know where you keep the soy sauce?”

“How about because she never lifts a finger to cook or clean? Oh, she can order herself a Door Dash with the click of a button...and use Ryan’s credit card to do it,” I add with a huff. “Did I tell you she ordered herself a pizza last week and didn’t even ask if I wanted anything? When I confronted her about it, she looked at me with a gooey slice of pizza in her hand and said, ‘Are you even allowed to eat pizza in your condition?’”

Shelby gasps. “Oh my god, she did not.”

“She did. I swear to god, Shelbs, I almost ate *her*.”

Shelby laughs.

“Her skills in weaponized incompetence are off the freaking charts. And Ryan doesn’t see it. Or he does, but he’s too nice to do anything about it. He just accepts that his sister is basically a terrible person. He just laughs it off as he pays her credit card bills. It’s maddening.”

“Sounds like it,” Shelby says in sympathy.

“She bought a rowing machine, Shelby. And she actually asked Ryan if she could put it in the baby’s room. When he told her ‘no’, she said, ‘What’s the big deal? Aren’t babies just, like, the size of a football or something?’”

Shelby laughs at my terrible impersonation. “Oh my god, she did not.”

“Yes! Why do you think I’m walking a marathon in a thunderstorm right now? I bet she’s in my living room right now just woosh, woosh, whooshing on that damn machine.”

“Why is she so into rowing all of a sudden?”

I roll my eyes dramatically. “Because she just watched *A Discovery of Witches*, and now she thinks she’ll meet a vampire boyfriend if she learns

how to row like Diana.”

Shelby just shakes her head, biting back another laugh. We make the turn for my beach access point just as the first drops of rain begin to fall. We hurry down the boardwalk, squealing as we make it to the back of the house.

“Oh my god, Shelbs—oh my god—” I snatch her arm and pull her to the side, leading her under the covered lanai. “*Look.*”

Shelby peeks around me, peering through the wall of glass at the back of my house. “Oh my—” She covers her mouth with her hand and we both start to laugh.

True to form, my sister-in-law is busy on her new rowing machine.

“I can’t go in there,” I whisper, shaking my head as I lean against the wall. “She’s gonna ask me if she can turn my closet into her home office, I just know it.”

“Oooo, maybe she’ll ask Ryan if she can have your bed because the guest bed hurts her back.”

“Hush. You’ll give her ideas.”

Shelby leans against the wall with me, her smile falling. Reaching out, she brushes a hand over my big baby bump. “Tess, honey, you know I love you...you know I love Baby Girl...”

I sigh, rolling my head to look at her. “I do. And?”

She smiles patiently. “And you deserve to be at peace in your own home. Don’t roll over on this out of fear that you might upset Ryan. You’re allowed to have wants and needs, Tess. This is your home; this is your family. And boundaries are healthy.”

Tears sting my eyes as I place my hands on my bump.

“You okay? Did I overstep?”

I shake my head. “No...and I know you’re right. I think, deep down, Ryan knows it too. Honestly, I think he’s waiting for me to give him the green light. As long as I pretend I’m handling this, he’s going to keep letting it happen. He would never hurt me, Shelbs. If he knew this was hurting me, he’d kick her out no questions asked.”

“So, what’s the hold up?”

I grimace, glancing back inside my house. Cassie is off the rowing machine now and doing yoga stretches like she owns the damn place. Ever the Gemini, I give my friend my dark truth. “I just really don’t want her to fucking win.”

“Honey...she’s winning now,” Shelby says gently. “She’s in the house,

and you're standing out here in the rain like a stray cat."

"Yeah, but it feels like she's trying to break me, you know? She's testing me, trying to see how much I can take. *That's* how she wins—when she breaks me, when I finally go running to Ryan. I don't want to give her the satisfaction."

Now Shelby is fully laughing. "God, Tess, listen to yourself. This is not the Tess of now. This sounds like the Tess of five years ago who would watch her husband sneak his mistresses out the back door on her Ring camera."

I blink in surprise. "Wow...you really went there?"

"I went there."

"Ouch...bitch," I add for good measure.

She just shrugs. "The truest friends tell you the truth...no matter how painful it may be to hear. You are not that Tess anymore. You don't settle, you don't hide, and you don't play games."

"I know, but—"

"But you're afraid that since Ryan loved her first, it must somehow mean he loves you less," she says, practically stealing the words from my mouth, revealing that dark and painful fear. "You're afraid of their history, their connection. I'm telling you: don't be. He loves you, Tess. You and Baby Girl are his whole world. Don't doubt that."

I nod, sneaking another sip from her tumbler. "Right...thanks, Yoda."

"Anytime," she replies. "Sooo...what are you going to do?"

I let out a deep breath. "I'm going inside my house."

Her eyes brighten. "You'll go in?"

"Yes, *mom*. Are you coming in with me?"

"Heck no," she replies with a laugh. "The last time I was alone with Cassie, she asked me if I've ever considered getting Botox for my crow's feet."

I smirk, pretending to analyze her face. "I mean...she's got a point—"

"Yeah, fuck you too." She gives my shoulder a little shove.

"Just come inside with me. One little cup of coffee."

"Nope."

"Shelby, I have Oreos."

She flips the hood of her little workout hoodie over her hair, ready to brave the rain. "Not my circus, not my monkeys. I've got four monkeys waiting for me at home."

“Coward,” I call to her retreating form.

She just waves over her shoulder, leaving me to enter this circus tent alone.

I slide open the glass door, slamming it shut rather harder than necessary. I smile with satisfaction as Cassie wobbles out of her warrior pose.

“Tess—god—you scared me,” she says, hand to her heart. “Warn a girl next time. I was in a total cool-down headspace.”

“Warn you when I enter my own home? Yeah, cool. That’s not weird at all,” I say as I pass through into the kitchen.

Here’s the thing about Cassie Langley—she’s apparently impervious to passive aggression. It’s like, the more passively aggressive I get with her, the less she seems to notice.

“Hey, I was thinking of heading down to St. Augustine today to go to this funky street art fair,” she calls. “Maybe get some lunch. Wanna come?”

I go still, my hand on the carton of blueberries in the fridge. Is this happening right now? Is she volunteering to spend time with me in a way that doesn’t actually sound horrible? I glance over the top of the fridge door to see her in sun salutation pose. “You want to hang out with me at an art festival in St. Augustine?”

“Well, yeah,” she says, switching to warrior two pose. “I mean, you know the way better than me. I’ve only driven down there like once, so...”

Ahh. She doesn’t want to hang out with her pregnant sister-in-law. She wants a chauffeur. I snatch up the blueberries and slam the fridge door shut. “You know, as fun as that sounds, Cass, I’ve got an invasive vaginal exam today, so I’m pretty much booked.”

“So, you can’t drive me? Is it not on the way?”

“You’re asking if the St. Augustine art festival is on the way to my OB/GYN appointment in North Jacksonville? No, sorry. It’s in the literal opposite direction.”

She mumbles something under her breath as she bends forward, touching her toes.

“If you wanted to be helpful, you could drive me to my appointment,” I say, tossing a handful blueberries into my dish of Greek yogurt. “It’s getting harder to comfortably fit behind the wheel.”

She lets out a bubbly laugh, rolling up to rooted tree pose. “You know the seats can move, right? There’s a little dial on the side and you can give yourself more room.”

I blink twice, spoon halfway to my mouth. “Yeah, that is a neat little invention. Only problem is that I can’t miraculously grow my legs at the same time—”

“Hey.” She pops up, jogging over to the kitchen island for her water bottle. “You could Uber to the appointment.”

“What?”

“Yeah, it’s perfect. I want to go to the festival, which means I need a car. You want to go uptown for your appointment, and you don’t want to drive. So, I’ll take the car, and we’ll just order you an Uber.”

I slap my little glass dish of yogurt onto the counter. “I don’t *want* to get my vagina prodded today, Cass. I *have* to. You know, because of the whole being nine months pregnant thing? Not to mention I’m bleeding like a leaky faucet. You’re not taking my car to St. Augustine and leaving me to fend for myself in an Uber. Now, go put your damn shoes on.”

Her gaze darts from my face to the clock over the oven in confusion. “But...the art walk doesn’t even start for like three hours—”

“You’re taking me to my doctor’s appointment!” I shriek, fleeing the kitchen. I have to make my escape before I do something I’ll only partially regret...like drag her rowing machine out to the beach and leave it for the pelicans.

There’s nothing more humbling than lying naked on a piece of wax paper with your feet braced in cold, plastic stirrups while a man who is not your husband puts his face near your exposed vagina and asks you about your bodily functions.

“And your bowel movements have still been regular? No loose stool or diarrhea?” asks Doctor Ballard.

I stare up at the ceiling tiles, bracing as I feel him insert the speculum. My phone is in my hand, the call on speaker for Ryan, who is currently on his way back from a series of New York games. He’s dutifully quiet, waiting for my response. At least my reluctant chauffeur is three buildings away getting herself a smoothie. She doesn’t need to know how often I poop.

“Umm...yeah, still regular, I think. Why?”

“Loose stool can be a sign of impending labor,” Doctor Ballard replies. “The body releases a series of hormones to prepare itself, including prostaglandins, which act to purge the bowels so your uterus can begin to contract.”

I go still. “Umm...I thought I wasn’t going that far. I’m not—we’re not doing labor, right? Because of my condition?”

Doctor Ballard slides back in his swivel chair, clicking his headlamp off. “That’s what we’re deciding today. We just want all the information before we move forward. But whenever there’s a chance of placenta accreta, I like to be safe and opt for a C-section. It’s easier to stop any possible bleeding if you’re already open and on the table.”

I nod, blinking back my tears.

“And how sure are you, Doc?” comes Ryan’s worried voice through the phone. “About the placenta accreta?”

Doctor Ballard hums, tapping something out on his tablet. “Well, you were right to call us when you noticed the heavy spotting last week,” he says at me. “Your ultrasound showed some possible signs of your placenta having attached itself to the uterine wall, but the image quality wasn’t great. If we go ahead and schedule you for the C-section today, we can get you admitted to the hospital and get an MRI. That will be a better image, so we’ll know more fully what to expect in the delivery room.”

“Wait—today?” I do my best to sit up, pushing up on my elbows. “No, but my husband isn’t here. I can’t have this baby now. Ryan—” I look to the phone in a panic.

“Baby, it’s fine,” he soothes. But I can hear it in his tone, his heart is breaking at the thought of missing it. “All that matters is that you’re both healthy.”

“Let me clarify,” the doctor says with a kind smile. “I would admit you today, and we would get you an MRI. We would monitor you overnight and have you on hand to slow your labor if it starts. We would likely proceed with the C-section in the morning.”

“But she’s only 38 weeks,” I say, shaking my head. “She needs two more weeks. It’s too early.”

“All her measurements look great,” he counters. “And the steroid injections we gave you promote rapid lung development. We’re confident in a healthy outcome. If anything, she may spend a day or two in the NICU just to make sure all her vitals are strong.”

I nod, brushing a hand over my bump.

“You are my main concern,” he goes on. “You’re already spotting heavier than is normal. To continue on to 40 weeks and risk the placenta tearing from your uterine wall could be fatal, Tess. I’m not saying this to scare you. I’m your doctor, and I’m giving you the facts you need to make an informed medical decision. It just so happens that the facts in this case involve some pretty scary words like death.”

“But you’ve done this before, right, Dr. Ballard?” says Ryan through the phone. “You’ve delivered babies with this before, and they’ve both been fine, right?”

“Well, accreta is quite rare,” he replies. “It only occurs in around 0.2 percent of pregnancies. That being said, I have treated patients with placenta accreta before, as well as some more severe cases of accreta paired with a condition called placenta previa, which is when the placenta lies low in the uterus.”

I look around this sterile room, my eyes locking on the poster showing the stages of a vaginal childbirth. The doctor already warned me on my last visit that a vaginal birth was likely out. He also said other scary words like ‘postpartum hemorrhage’ and ‘cesarian hysterectomy.’ Blinking back my tears, I turn to him. “What’s the mortality rate?”

“Tess,” Ryan says in warning through the phone. I think he might be crying.

“Tell me,” I say at the doctor.

“It remains quite low,” Dr. Ballard replies. “I believe current statistics sit around seven percent.”

“Well, seven percent mortality means what...ninety-three percent of women live, right?” says Ryan. “Babe, that’s really good.”

The doctor nods. “I am committed to doing everything in my power to ensure the safest delivery for you and your baby, Tess. My official recommendation is that we not wait. I think we should get you over to the hospital now and admit you.”

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath. “Ryan?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“When do you get home again?”

“Tonight. We touch down at like 10pm.”

I let out the shaky breath, blinking back my tears. “Well, I think I’ll be at the hospital when you get here.”

“I’ll drive straight there.” I can hear in his tone he’s trying to control his freak out. This is a lot for anyone to process. I know if he could he’d teleport to me now.

“I’ll have them call ahead to the hospital and tell them you’re on the way,” says Doctor Ballard, getting up from his chair.

“Babe, have Cassie help you get everything you need. Go to the hospital, and I’ll be there as soon as I can—”

“Ryan,” I say, sitting up as soon as Doctor Ballard leaves the room.

“Yeah, baby?”

Steeling myself, I snatch up the phone, shifting my naked butt on this stupid wax paper. My heart is racing, my adrenaline pumping. All I can think about is the ordeal I’m about to endure. Letting this surge of energy fuel me, I unleash. “Okay, look—seeing as there’s a seven percent chance I could die tomorrow, I have to tell you something, Ryan, and I need you to listen, and I *really* need you to not hate me.”

“Tess—what?”

“Do you love me, Ryan?”

“Of course, I do,” he says, his tone indignant. “Babe, I—”

“Your sister has to go.”

A long silence fills the air.

“What?”

Taking a breath, I release the Tess Langley double barrel. “Ryan Scott Langley, before you land on that plane tonight, you will make different living arrangements for your sister. Book her a hotel, rent her an RV—hell, *buy* her a damn house. At this point, I don’t care. But I’m telling you right now, that if I survive the birth of your baby, and I come home to find Cassie’s rowing machine in the middle of my living room, I will walk right back out of the house and set the whole place on fire. Do you understand?”

Another long silence.

“Oh, thank fucking god.”

I slip off the end of the exam table. “What?”

“Babe, I’ve been so fucking miserable. I just didn’t know how to say anything.”

“What?”

“Well, I couldn’t be the guy who kicked his own sister out, right? I’m not heartless...but also, I think maybe I am.”

Blame it on the hormones—or the news of my impending death—but

now I'm fully crying. "Wait—Ryan, are you serious right now?"

"Tess, my sister is a monster," he says, his tone growing more heated by the second. "She spilled French fries in my car last week and just left them in there. French fries, Tess. All over my fucking car."

"She washed my favorite knit cardigan, and it shrunk two sizes," I say through sniffling tears. "And now they're—they're—out of stock." Those last three words come out as little more than a mousey squeak.

"I've asked her like every other day for the past three weeks when she's leaving, and she just keeps saying, 'It's a tough economy out there, Ryan.' Like, what the hell does she know about it? She hasn't had a job since she was sixteen, and they fired her for taking too many breaks."

I let out a sound somewhere between a snarl and a sniff. Stumbling forward, I snatch a few one-ply tissues out of the sad grey box on the sink. "And I swear to god, Ryan, if she calls this a geriatric pregnancy one more time, I'm gonna yeet her into the sea."

"So, my sister goes then, yeah? She's gone. Tonight."

"No." I let out a deep breath, wincing as Baby Girl gives me a kick. "No, I won't even be there tonight. She can stay one more night. But then she's gone. I will not come back from that hospital with my baby and have Cassie compare her to a football."

"Right. Cassie is gone."

"And *you're* telling her," I press. "I'm having your baby, Ryan. You have to tell your shitty sister it's time to go. Our house is only big enough for three Langleys."

"I'm telling her," he says patiently. "I'll tell her tonight. Hell, I'll tell her right now."

I set the phone down so I can shimmy back into my dress.

"Hey...babe?" he says, his voice softer.

I flick my hair over my shoulder and snatch up the phone. "Yeah?"

He's quiet for a minute. "We're gonna meet our daughter tomorrow."

Fuck, I thought I was done crying. "Yeah," I squeak.

"She's gonna be so beautiful, babe...just like her mom."

"Yeah." I dab my eyes with a fistful of the flimsy, one-ply tissues. "Hey, Ryan?"

"Yeah, baby?"

I close my eyes, holding tight to the phone. "Please come home."

"I'm on my way."

“If you’re ready, Tess, then we’re ready too.” Doctor Ballard stands at the end of my hospital bed, cutting a dashing figure in his navy-blue scrubs. “Give us about fifteen minutes, and we’ll go meet your little girl.” He gives a nod to Ryan before leaving the room.

A few nurses remain, getting everything ready. Ryan just sits at my bedside, clutching my hand in both of his. He’s not moving, not speaking. I think my poor sweet Virgo is just processing it all. This is so hard for him. I know how much he hates hospitals. He told me all about his dad’s cancer and the long dying he experienced. Young Ryan had to watch helpless then too. It’s such a horrible burden...being the one who watches, being the one helpless to act. I hate that I’ve put him in this position again.

But he’s not complaining. He showed up late last night, straight from the airport. Mars drove him over, and Caleb and Rachel stopped by about two hours later with his hospital go-bag. We spent a restless night trying and failing to sleep. How can I sleep knowing I might never wake up again? And Ryan definitely isn’t getting any sleep. Not in a hospital. And he doesn’t want to miss a moment with me—looking at me, holding me, telling me how much I matter.

We ended up lying in this narrow hospital bed together, him curled around me like a child. He cried as I brushed my fingers through his hair. I cried too. We said all the words we need to say. He knows how I feel. He knows what I want should things not go our way today.

I’m empty now, limp and exhausted, like a wrung-out towel. At the same time, my body hums with restless energy. I’m fueled by adrenaline and fear and a fierce will to live. The odds of death are low. That’s what I keep telling myself. And the MRI shows a mild case of accreta. Maybe this will be a quick and easy delivery. No muss. No fuss.

Okay, so there’s a little hope in there too. Adrenaline, fear, and hope.

“Here you go, daddy,” chimes the nurse. “Time to get changed.” She holds out a plastic bag containing a set of scrubs.

Ryan takes them without looking at her. Staying right by my bedside, he strips out of his t-shirt and pulls on the scrub top. Then he drops his athletic pants, pulling on the scrub bottoms.

“Here you go,” says another nurse. “Cap, mask, and shoe covers. We’ll give you a sterile apron once we get to the delivery room.”

He takes those items too, robotically donning them until he’s standing next to my bed looking like a blond Patrick Dempsey.

I reach out an IV-taped hand, ready to do anything to make him smile again. “This may be the drugs talking...but you look really hot, babe.”

He tries to find me a smile behind his mask.

“Can you keep those for later?” I glance over my shoulder at the nurses. “Hey, can he keep these for later?”

Nurse Erin laughs. “Honestly, I doubt you’ll want him to keep a pair of used delivery room scrubs, hon.” She leans over the bed, smiling at me. “But what if I sneak a fresh pair into your recovery room? Still in the plastic,” she adds with a wink.

“You’re the best,” I say on a sigh, closing my eyes. They gave me my spinal block a while ago, so I’m numb from the chest down. “It feels so weird,” I mumble.

“What’s weird, baby?” asks Ryan, sitting back in the chair.

“It’s like I can’t feel my feet...or my knees. It’s like I just...end. There’s only half of me now.” I roll my head on the pillow, looking up at him. “Would you still love me if there was only half of me?”

Now he’s smiling. He reaches down, brushing my hair back. “I’d love you any size or shape, Tess. Top half, bottom half, front half...even a side view would be fine. You’re gorgeous in profile.”

I smile, tears stinging my eyes. “You’re too good to me.”

He shakes his head. “No such thing.”

“Alright, I think we’re all set here,” calls Nurse Erin. “You two ready to go meet Little Girl Langley?”

Keeping my eyes on Ryan, I nod. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

They wheel me out of my room and down the hall to the operating wing, Ryan walking at my side.

“Okay, daddy. Here’s where we leave you for a few minutes,” says Nurse Erin. “The scrub nurse will help you get situated out here. Once we have her in the room, and Doctor Ballard is ready to start, we’ll bring you in.”

His pressure on my hand tightens as he bends over the bed, kissing my forehead through the mask. “I’ll be right there. Don’t start without me.” He lets my hand go and they wheel me away.

Once we’re in the operating room, I close my eyes and just lie back. I let

them touch and jostle me, removing all my pillows and blankets. I'm poked and prodded as the hospital gown goes next. Then they're draping me. I feel so exposed, knowing everyone in this room can see every part of me.

Usually, I don't mind being naked. I've got a great body and it's fun to show it off. But in this moment, every look and touch feels like a violation. It's violating because they don't want anything I have to offer on the outside. No, they intend to cut me open. Literally. They want a piece of what's *inside*.

Like a mother dragon, I fight the urge to breathe fire. I have to keep her safe. I *have* kept her safe. She's mine. She's on the inside with me. Only Ryan gets to come inside with us. He's the only one we trust not to take without giving first. He's the only one we love.

I need Ryan here.

"I know, hon," someone says beyond the drape. "He'll be here in a minute. We're just getting you situated, and then he can come sit with you."

I must have said the Ryan part out loud.

A nurse comes and wraps an oxygen hose around my face, resting it under my nose. Someone else stuffs my mass of red curls under a sterile surgical cap. I'm sure I must look completely ridiculous. I keep my eyes shut, blocking out all the noise and movement until I hear, "Hey, baby." I roll my head to the side, smiling up at Ryan as a nurse leads him back in.

He looks anxiously around, taking in all the machines and doctors and nurses. His pretty green eyes are wide with fear. A large guy in teal nursing scrubs shows him to the chair by my head. I turn my palm up on the operating table, my arm flowing with wires and tubes. Ryan takes it. Leaning down, he brushes his lips to my fingertips through his mask.

Doctor Ballard explained everything in pre-op. They're moving forward with a standard C-section, but they're ready for the worst. If my accreta is worse than the scans show, if they can't safely remove my placenta, they may have to take drastic steps.

I'm ready. I've signed all the forms. I know the risks. I just want my daughter safe. I want her in my arms.

"We're about to get started here, Tess," calls Doctor Ballard. "How are we feeling?"

"Good," I manage to say, my voice trembling.

"You're in good hands. We'll take care of you and your baby," he replies. "With your permission, we'll begin."

I look to Ryan. Tears fill his eyes as he looks right back at me. He's

trying not to peek beyond the drape where I'm lying naked and exposed. "I'm ready," I say, giving his hand a weak squeeze.

"Excellent, then let's begin."

The room is full of moving people and whirring, beeping machines. I don't know what any of them do except for the heart rate monitor. Ignoring the sharp bouquet of medical smells, I glance over at the monitor, watching the pulsing of my own heartbeat. It's oddly calming. It's a cadence I can breathe to, each pulse reminding me of one fact.

I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm alive.

Ryan leans in close, his face pressed against mine. With his left hand, he brushes his thumb across my palm. His right is sort of wrapped around my head in the best we can manage for a hug. "You're doing so good, baby. You're so brave. I love you so much."

I blink back my tears. "You know what her name is," I whisper.

He nods.

"And under no circumstances will you send her to a religious school. Promise me, Ryan. No plaid skirts and no Hail Mary's."

"I know." He squeezes my hand, kissing my forehead through his mask.

"Cay has to teach her how to surf, and Jake has to teach her to ice skate. And please don't let Rachel talk her into getting any tattoos until she's at least sixteen—"

"Tess," he soothes, cupping my face. "Stop, baby. Everything's gonna be fine."

"Mars has to approve anyone before she gets married. Promise me."

He wipes away a tear as he nods. "Yeah, babe. Anything you want."

"And Cassie isn't allowed to babysit her ever. Poseidon would make a better babysitter than your sister."

He just keeps nodding. "Tess, I love you."

"You're gonna be so good to her," I murmur. "Such a good daddy. Just love her, Ryan. Love her like you love me and forgive her everything now."

"Stop talking like you're dying," he begs, not bothering to stop his tears.

"Okay, Tess," calls Doctor Ballard from beyond the drape. "We're through the uterine wall, and we're about to meet your little girl."

"Are you ready, daddy?" asks a nurse.

Ryan leans away from me, wiping his eyes. "What do I do?"

"Once we pull her out, we'll give you a moment to hold her and say 'hello,'" says the nurse. "But then we need to check her vitals."

Ryan nods, still doing everything to avoid looking around the drape. In moments, a weak cry tears my heart in half.

My daughter is here.

“Cord is cut. She’s looking good,” calls Doctor Ballard. “Strong lungs.”

My daughter cries louder, furious at being born under such bright lights. I don’t blame her. I don’t like overhead lighting either. I’m a total nester. I like soft mood lighting—a few lamps, a fireplace, lit candles on the edge of a bathtub...

“Here she comes,” says Nurse Erin. “Arms out, daddy.”

Ryan looks petrified as he forms a cradle with his arms. The nurse hands him our mewling, wet baby. She’s half-wrapped in a birthing blanket, her eyes shut tight and her little mouth open on a wail.

“That’s it,” says the nurse. “Hold her head. There we go. Want to show her to mom?”

Ryan turns, arms trembling, as he lifts up our daughter.

“Let me see her,” I say through my tears. “Ryan, is she beautiful?”

“She’s so beautiful.” He stands and leans over me, trying to show me a better angle of her face. She’s squirming in the blanket, her little fists squeezed tight.

“Does she have a name?” asks the nurse at Ryan’s shoulder.

I nod. “We’re naming her after my best friend from high school. She was the first person who made me feel like it wasn’t a burden to love me.”

“That’s so sweet. Does she know?”

I blink back my tears, looking at my daughter’s angry pink face. Slowly, I shake my head. “No...she died...car accident.”

“Well, now her name will get a whole new life. That’s pretty special.”

I close my eyes, trying to blink away the bright spots in my vision. I wish someone would turn off the lamp in my face. So bright...

“Babe?”

Everything feels too bright, too loud. And my body feels so warm. Wait—they’re taking my daughter away. I try to sit up, but I can’t. Where are they taking her? Ryan wants her back. He’s talking. What is he saying? Why won’t they let Ryan hold her?

“Let’s switch to general anesthesia. We have to get control of this bleeding.”

Ryan is back at my side, his hand in mine, his face pressed at my face. “Tess—”

“Someone get him out of here, please.”

Ryan is all I see. He has such pretty eyes, green like an apple. My whole body feels weighted, like I’m stuck in something sticky. I feel like a marble in one of those sixth-grade science projects, dropping through layers of thicker and thicker liquid—honey, corn syrup, thick black molasses.

“She’s crashing.”

“Tess, baby, *please*—”

“Mr. Langley, you have to wait outside—”

“I’m not fucking leaving—Tess—”

A scuba diver floats over my face. Bright lights twinkle over his head. Are we in the ocean? He holds a mask over my mouth, and I breathe deep. What was I breathing before? Is there no air in this room? That seems odd.

I’m sinking...sinking...

“Sir, you have to go.”

“Tess!”

Ryan’s voice is the last thing I hear before everything goes black.

WAITING: PART 2



“Tess! No, please—*fuck*—just let me stay in there,” I beg, but the nurse practically shoves me from the operating room. He blocks the doorway, letting it shut behind him. He’s a big guy, but I think I could take him.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but we can’t have you in there at this time.”

“Just tell me what’s happening—”

He places a hand on my shoulder. “She’s hemorrhaging. That means she’s losing a lot of blood—”

“I know what it fucking means,” I shout, shrugging away from him. “She has placenta accreta.” Those two words have haunted me for the last three weeks. I’ve spent pretty much every minute I’m not on the ice or with Tess watching YouTube videos, listening to doctors explain it. Hell, at this point, I could probably become a spokesman for the condition.

“You’re telling me her placenta is tearing through the wall of her uterus, right? You’re saying the worst is fucking happening. Can they get it under control? Can they save her uterus, or will they take it out?”

The nurse holds a passive expression behind his surgical mask. “It’s too soon to tell, Mr. Langley. Doctor Ballard is doing everything he can—”

I jerk my own mask off, stuffing it in my scrub pocket. “Where’s my daughter?”

He places a hand on my shoulder again. “Let’s just take a breath. I know this is scary—”

I shrug him off. “Where the *fuck* is my daughter?” I say again, louder this time. “She was in my arms, and then they took her away.”

“Yeah, she’ll be headed over to the NICU. They’ll check her vitals and make sure all her oxygen levels and everything are stable. You’ll be able to see her over there. In fact, you could go there now and wait for word on your wife.”

I lift both arms, ready to drag my hands through my hair, forgetting about the damn scrub cap. I tug that off too, shoving it in my pocket. What the fuck is happening? This is all so fucking fucked. Two seconds ago, I was holding my newborn baby girl. I had her in my arms. She was here and she was mine. I had Tess, and I had my little girl.

Now I’m standing in this mint green hallway with no Tess and no baby. My wife is on the other side of a locked door bleeding out. She’s dying while my little girl is somewhere in this hospital all alone, needing her mother.

It feels like someone just poured a pot of hot acid into my stomach. “I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“Sir, I really have to get back in there—”

I push past the nurse and stumble over to a small blue recycling bin. Snatching it up off the floor, I hurl into it. My knees are shaking, arms trembling. There’s blood on my scrubs. I have no wife, no daughter. I’m alone in this stupid mint hallway. I’m all alone—

“Langley!”

Clutching to the trash can, I spin around, blinking under the bright lights.

“Langers, get over here!” Sully waves me down, gesturing for me to come to the end of the hallway. He’s standing with Jake and Mars.

I glance over my shoulder. The nurse is gone, disappeared through the door. But I’m not alone. They’re here. My team. My brothers. I stumble down the hallway towards them, all but falling against Sully as he puts out an arm to catch me. “They kicked me out,” I sob, my face pressed to his shoulder. “They took her.”

“I know,” Sully soothes, his arms going around me.

“She was in my arms, and they took her,” I moan, not caring if they see me cry.

Someone reaches in and pulls the soiled trash can away from me. I forgot I was even holding it.

“What’s happening?” Jake murmurs, his hand on my shoulder. “Where’s Tess?”

“She’s fucking dying—she’s bleeding out—postpartum hemorrhage. Almost one in ten women die—”

“Hey—*stop*,” Sully commands. “You don’t know that’s what’s happening right now. All you know is what was happening when you left, which is that she was bleeding. They could already have that under control.”

Novy and Morrow appear at Sully’s shoulder. Novy is holding a big stuffy of our team mascot, Pelly the Pelican. It looks like he’s wearing a pink Rays jersey with my number. Morrow clutches a bunch of sparkly pink balloons. Their faces look haunted.

“What happened?” Morrow mutters.

“Tess was bleeding,” Jake explains for me. “That’s all we know. Where’s Rach and Cay?”

“They were leaving the rink right after us,” he replies, glancing over his shoulder. “They should be here any minute.”

“What about the baby?” asks Novy.

My shoulders shake again as they all look to me. “I held her for all of two seconds before they took her away,” I reply, voice breaking. “She was so beautiful—I had her in my arms, and they took her—” My words die as I press my face back to Sully’s shoulder.

“Oh, fuck that,” Novy mutters, rage lacing his words. “Here, hold this—” He shoves the stuffed animal at Morrow and stalks off.

With gentle hands, Sully leads me over to a row of chairs. We’re in some kind of waiting room nook. A nurse’s station sits a short way down the hall. Two women behind the counter watch as we shuffle over to the chairs.

“Ryan, stop,” Mars says at my back. “Take this off.”

Sully loosens his hold on me, and I look down. I’m still wearing the operating room gown thing. It’s splattered with blood and birth matter. Mars unties it and Jake slips it off my shoulders. Sully bundles it up and takes it over to the trash. I sink down onto the chair as Novy approaches the nurse’s station.

“Yeah, hi, Lukas Novikov,” he says in a raised voice. “I’m here with Ryan Langley.” He points his thumb over his shoulder at me. “His wife just had a baby, and you guys took her from him. We’d like to know where she is. Now.”

I hear the soft voice of the nurse, but I can’t make out her words.

“Well, is she stable?” Novy asks. “Can she leave the NICU? Call down and ask.” He drums his fingers on the counter. “Yeah, it’s Ryan Langley. L-A-N-G-L-E-Y. Wife is Tess. They had a baby girl all of ten minutes ago and —”

A second nurse says something else I can’t hear. Something about ‘risk’ and ‘infection.’

“Okay—well, his wife is fucking dying, and his child was just ripped from his arms,” Novy shouts. “And you just said she’s stable, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“You said there’s nothing wrong with her.”

“Yes—”

“Great, so what *I’m* saying is that someone is going over to that NICU and getting this man’s stable, healthy baby, and bringing it to him. Now.”

“Sir, we can’t just—”

“Either *you* can go get the baby, and not get arrested because you work here, or *I’ll* do it and definitely get arrested,” he shouts. “I’m fine with either outcome. But someone is getting my friend his baby, Tanya. I assume we’re flipping for it?” The asshole actually reaches into his pocket and fishes out a quarter.

The nurse huffs a response before stalking off.

Novy turns and saunters back over to us, stopping at Morrow to retrieve his stuffed pelican.

“I’m gonna be bailing you out of jail tonight, aren’t I?” Morrow says with a shake of his head.

“Hey, anything for my new niece,” Novy says with a shrug. “We Rays gotta stick together, right? Especially when it comes to the baby Rays.” He drops into the seat opposite me, the pelican perched in his lap.

I feel emptier than a cracked coconut. There’s nothing left. It’s all behind a locked door with Tess. Breathing feels like a chore. I’m actually having to remind my body to pull air back into my lungs. From the seat next to me, Mars reaches out, placing his hand over mine on the armrest. He doesn’t say anything, he just sits there, holding my fucking hand.

Fuck, I’m gonna cry again.

Before I work out whether I actually have more tears in me to shed, Novy leaps up. “Oh shit...I think that actually worked.”

I follow the line of his gaze down the hallway and my heart fucking stops. The dark-haired nurse Novy yelled at is wheeling a plastic baby cart towards

us. The nurse at the station steps around with a box of masks in her hand. “Everyone needs to put one of these on, please. And sanitize your hands.”

Without hesitation, the guys all dig into the little cardboard box, pulling out a surgical mask and slipping it on. Mars hands around a bottle of toxic-smelling hand sanitizer. He squirts two pumps into my hands, and I slick them together, not caring as the sting of the chemicals burn the open cuts on my knuckles.

I’m on the edge of my seat as the dark-haired nurse wheels the baby cart over. Inside, my little girl is awake, squirming and mewling in frustration.

“I need to scan your wristband,” says the nurse, holding out a little phone-sized tablet.

I stick out my arm with the plastic hospital band. She scans the barcode. Then she scans a code on the end of the clear baby thing. When it beeps twice, she nods to the other nurse.

Blonde nurse reaches in and plucks out my baby. “Here she is: Baby Girl Langley. Vitals are strong. She’s a healthy seven pounds, five ounces.”

I’m shaking like a leaf as she places my daughter in my arms. I look down at her, taking in the pink of her cheeks and the creases around her eyes. She’s a whole tiny person. She’s *my* person.

“If you’d like, you can do some skin-on-skin contact with her,” the nurse offers. “She’d probably like that. It would help her calm down.”

I tear my eyes away from her and look to the nurse. “What do I do?”

“Taking your shirt off is a start,” Novy teases.

“Here—” Sully reaches out for the baby, and I actually have to fight the urge to pull away. He’s not trying to take her. He’s trying to help me. I hand her over. She doesn’t like being jostled and she starts to cry louder.

“I’m sorry, pretty girl,” he coos through his mask. “I’m not tryna make your day any worse, I promise. We’ll hand you right back to daddy.”

“Shirt off,” Mars mutters next to me, his words muffled by his mask.

Remembering what I’m supposed to be doing, I jerk my scrub shirt off and hand it to him. Novy wolf whistles and the guys laugh. The nurse helps Sully get the baby out of her blanket bundle. Now she’s really screaming. Sully hands her back to me, her face squished in a rage.

I take her. Following the nurse’s instructions, I lean back and let her recline on my chest. Her little naked body feels so weak and frail against mine. Her bones are so tiny, her knees curled up and her arms tucked under her tummy. She’s no bigger than a chicken. I’m terrified I’ll break her. Why

are babies so delicate?

As I lean back, my hand braces her diapered bottom. The nurse takes a pair of baby blankets and covers us both, tucking the blanket in around my shoulder and under my arm. All the while, my poor little girl cries, hating every second of this. Her crying is going to make me cry. I can't fucking bear it. Only an hour old, and she's already so unhappy.

"Babies like to share our warmth," the nurse explains. "And when you hold her on your chest, her little body gets soothed by the feel of your heart's rhythm. It makes her feel like she's in the womb again. Just give her a minute to relax. Keep your body still and..." She smiles as the cries begin to simmer. "See? She's calming right down."

The nurses move away, leaving us with my little girl.

"Does she have any hair?" Jake asks from the other side of Mars.

I look down at her tiny head. She's wearing a little pink and blue striped baby hat. "I don't know," I admit.

Ever so gently, Mars reaches in and peels her hat off. She turns her face towards him, her nose scrunching up like she might cry again, but her cheek just goes slack against my chest instead. Her little pink lips are parted in a pout as she falls asleep.

"Only a little," Mars says to the group. "It looks red."

Of course, my girl would take after her fierce mother. I never stood a chance.

"What color are her eyes?" asks Morrow.

I shrug again, calmer now that she's calm. "She hasn't opened them yet."

"And eye color can change," adds Sully. "Joshy was born with blue eyes and now they're brown."

"What are you guys naming her?" asks Novy.

I look down at her again. In all the chaos, we didn't even get a chance to say it out loud. I brush my thumb along her back, feeling the silky smoothness of her skin. God, she's so tiny and fragile. Curling forward, I inch her up my chest a little and kiss her downy head. As soon as my lips touch her body, I break. The guys say nothing as I fall perfectly apart, hands clutching to my daughter as I cry for her mother.

I'm so fucking scared. I just need someone to walk out the door and tell me Tess is alive. Sully and Mars both wrap an arm around me. Jake, Novy, and Morrow all pull their chairs closer, each placing a hand on me too—my knees, my thigh. They sit with me as I rock my little girl and cry, tears falling

silently down my face.

At some point, Rachel and Caleb arrive. “Oh...Ryan,” she says in greeting, tears already pouring down her face. I didn’t even have to say anything. She already knows. *Thank god*. I can’t say it again. I can’t say the words. I can’t tell one more person that my wife might be dying.

The guys make room for her. Jake stands, his arms going around Caleb, as Rachel takes his chair. She leans in, hand on my knee, as she peeks over the blankets to see the baby. “She’s beautiful,” she whispers, squeezing my hand.

I nod. There’s nothing else to do, and I don’t trust myself to speak.

“Mr. Langley?”

We all jolt, everyone dropping their hands away from me. I look up into the face of Nurse Erin. She’s an older lady with curly grey hair, now hidden under a scrub cap. Tess likes her. She’s been with us since last night.

“Just tell me she’s alive,” I beg, my voice breaking.

She smiles and I can fucking breathe again. “She’s alive. Doctor Ballard got the bleeding under control.”

“Oh, thank god,” says Sully, dropping his forehead to my shoulder.

“Thank you, Jesus,” Morrow murmurs.

Rachel falls apart. She practically crawls into Mars’s lap as she sobs with relief.

Erin’s smile falls and I go still.

“What is it? Just tell me.”

Rachel lifts her head off Mars’s shoulder, glancing from me to the nurse.

“Doctor Ballard did have to take a more radical approach to stop the bleeding,” she explains. “Your wife already consented prior to the surgery. She knew this was a possibility...”

I let the air out of my chest, my hand brushing up to cup my baby’s head. “You took out her uterus.”

Erin nods. “It was the most efficient way to control the hemorrhaging. I’m sorry, Mr. Langley, but removing it really was the best option.”

I close my eyes for a moment, giving myself exactly three beats of my heart to grieve for the children we’ll never have. When I open them, I look down at the perfect little life in my arms. We have one, and one is enough. Even if Tess still had her uterus, I would never put her through this horror again. God, I’d fucking die first.

“When can I see her?” I ask.

“Doctor Ballard is just finishing up now. He has to close her incision, and she’ll spend a bit of time in the ICU—”

“When?” I say again.

“I’d give it an hour.”

I let out a shaky breath. An hour. One hour, and then I can be with Tess again. We can be a family again.

“Would you like us to take the baby up to the NICU while you—”

“My daughter stays with me,” I say over her.

She gives me a patient smile but says, “I’m sorry, Mr. Langley, but hospital policy states that newborns can’t go in the ICU. If you won’t let the baby go back to the NICU, you’ll have to wait until Tess is in a recovery room.”

“Then I’ll wait,” I reply, my hands seeping warmth into my sleeping baby. I look to Mars and Rachel. “Tess would want me to hold her, right? Keep her safe?”

Mars nods.

“Yeah, man. We’ll all wait with you,” says Jake.

“We’re not going anywhere,” Rachel echoes through her tears.

Nurse Erin smiles. “Alright, well when she’s moved back to her room, I’ll come find you both.”

Thanking her, I settle back in this stiff, uncomfortable chair. Closing my eyes tight, I let myself breathe. She’s alive. Tess is alive.

“Best possible news, man,” says Novy. “Tess is alive, baby is alive, and that’s all that matters.”

I nod, gently brushing my thumb over my daughter’s temple. Novy’s right, my girls are all that matter.

“Ryan?”

I jolt, blinking my eyes open. Did I really fall asleep in a fucking hospital? My hands curl protectively around the baby asleep on my chest. *My* baby. I look down, anxious to watch her little body rise and fall with a breath. I sigh with relief when she does. She’s breathing. She’s sleeping. She’s content in my arms.

I turn my head and tears fill my eyes. Tess is looking at me. Her eyes are open. “Oh...baby—” I scoot forward in the chair. “You’re awake.”

I look to the clock on the wall of this small recovery room. They only let me in here about twenty minutes ago. Tess was passed out and the nurses told me to let her sleep.

Now she’s awake and tears fill her eyes as she lifts a weak hand, reaching for the baby. “Is she okay?”

I nod. “Yeah, baby. She’s so perfect. She’s been sleeping on me this whole time. Her vitals are strong. The nurses checked them again just before we came in here. They keep asking to take her away, but I won’t let them. I can’t put her down. Tess, I feel like I’ll die if I let her go.”

A tear slips down her cheek as she smiles. “You’re such a good daddy.” She turns her head away, eyes closed with her face pointed to the ceiling. “I knew you would be.”

Something about her tone sets me on edge. “Wait—why are you crying?”

She snuffles, raising a hand to wipe her eyes. “Because I’m—I’m just so happy...and I’m so jealous I could scream.”

My eyes go wide. “Jealous? Why?”

“Because I want to hold her too,” she says on a whimper. “But I don’t want to take her away from you.”

My heart stops. “Oh—baby, no.” I stand, leaning over the bed. “Tess, honey, I *want* you to hold her. You can take her from me. Are you kidding? She’s yours, Tess. The nurses can go fuck all the way off, but I’ll gladly give her to you. She needs you. She needs her mom.”

Her hand is pressed flat against half of her face as she cries. “I almost died.”

Now I’m fucking crying again, my heart shredding into ribbons. “I know.”

Both her hands come up to cover her face, like she’s trying to hide her pain from me. “I was so scared, Ryan. I could hear you, but I couldn’t see you. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t hold her...my own baby...”

Before I can respond, there’s a knock at the door and the nurse comes in. “Hey, Miss Tess. I—” Her eyes go wide as she takes us both in.

“Help me,” I say at her in desperation.

She hurries forward. “What do you need?”

“Help me give her the baby. She needs to hold her baby.”

Tess sobs as the nurse moves around the other side of her bed.

Asking no questions, the nurse sets to work raising Tess's bed up a little. "Okay, momma, here we go. You wanna do a little skin-to-skin? That'll feel good, huh?" She unbuttons the shoulder of Tess's hospital gown folding down the flap enough to expose half of her chest. Then she's around the bed and gently untucking the blankets around me. "Daddy, hand her over to mom. Are you ready, Tess?"

Tess is still a crying mess, hands shaking as she reaches out. I lift the baby off my chest, and she immediately starts to squirm and cry. The sound tears me apart. "I'm sorry," I say at them both. "I'm so sorry."

I place the baby on Tess's chest, and she clutches greedily to her with both hands, her tears flowing as the baby squirms. The nurse covers them both with the pair of blankets, folding down the corner so I can see our daughter's face nestled against her mom's freckled skin.

"Deep breaths, mama," says the nurse. "You feel better now? Yeah, separation anxiety is perfectly normal. You worked hard to grow her. You just wanted to meet her, right? You'll be okay."

Tess sucks in gulps of air as she tries to make soothing noises, her hands brushing over the baby's back. Dragging the chair forward, I sit and put both my hands on hers over the blankets. She stills, only her shoulders still trembling. "She's safe, Tess," I say. "She's here, and she's perfect. You did such a good job. Look at her. She's yours."

"I think I see some red hair there," teases the nurse. "And you both have those gorgeous green eyes. She'll be a beauty."

Tess looks down with a weepy smile, inspecting every inch of our daughter's face.

"Do we have a name picked out yet for Little Miss Langley? I can get that paperwork started if you'd like. No rush if we're still deciding..."

"No, we've decided," says Tess, her breathing slowing now that the baby has settled against her. She looks to me. "We've decided, right?"

"Of course," I reply. "Tess, you love her name. Have you changed your mind?"

She shakes her head, fresh tears in her eyes. "No...but I thought maybe you know her better. Maybe it doesn't fit her personality. You've known her longer than me—"

I cup Tess's cheek, wiping away her tears. "I haven't known her longer. You're her mother, Tess. You've got nine months on me from now until forever. You know our little girl. Say her name. It's not real for me until you

say it first.”

Tess looks back down at her, stroking her silky pink cheek with a gentle finger. “Emma,” she murmurs. “Her name is Emma...Emma Rose Langley.”

I’ve heard her say the name a hundred times in the last few weeks, but it’s only in this moment that it feels real. I look at my wife holding my daughter and it feels like my entire being expands. It has to, because I have to make room for this new life, this new miracle.

Emma is here. She’s mine and she’s ours. My Emma. My baby girl.

Leaning over the bed, I kiss first her, then her mother. I place a hand on both of them, willing myself to remember every facet of this moment—the pink of Tess’s cheeks as she cries, the clicking of the machines above her head, the metallic smell of lemony hospital cleaner faint in my nose, the shape of my daughter’s tiny body under the blankets.

I’ll remember this later as the moment I first felt like a father.

I’m not just Ryan Langley anymore, and I haven’t been for a long time. For over two years now, I’ve prided myself on being Tess’s partner, someone worthy enough to claim her and love her. A year ago, we changed that title to husband.

In this moment, I get to add a new title to the list. From this moment, and for the rest of my life, I’m Emma’s dad.

NO EXIT



Note: This chapter follows directly after the events of Chapter 4 in PEA: Vol 1 (IKEA). Rachel is in labor with her first child. Her labor is non-life-threatening.

“Sir—hey, sir!” A hospital security guard flags us down as Caleb pulls up with a screech in the ambulance bay of the downtown Jacksonville hospital. “You can’t park here.”

Heart racing, I swing open the back door, launching myself towards an empty wheelchair at the same time. It sits waiting next to the automatic double doors.

The guard grabs my arm as I rush past. “Sir—you have to move this car —”

I round on him, jerking my arm free. I swear, I feel like I’m about to burst out of my skin like one of those birthday party confetti poppers. “Hey, asshole, why not try helping us instead of standing there shouting? My wife is having a baby in the fucking car!”

He lets me go, glancing in the backseat expecting to see a horror show.

“Jake,” Rachel calls. “Babe, I’m fine.”

I rush back, the wheels of the chair rattling as I drag it over for her. Mars climbs out of the front seat and slings the strap of Rachel's hospital go-bag over his shoulder. Of course, he's being Mr. Cool Calm and Collected about all this. I bet he was looking for any reason to leave his IKEA birthday party early. The imminent arrival of Little Baby Flörp is an ironclad excuse.

The guard takes in Rachel's relaxed, seated posture. No sign of blood or screaming. "Get her inside," he says at me. "And then move this damn car," he shouts through the open door at Caleb. "We've got an ambulance inbound in four minutes."

I barely hear him as I focus on helping Rachel slide out of the backseat. She groans as her body unfolds. "Babe, I can walk just fine," she says through a deep breath, stepping around the wheelchair. "My contractions are still like seven minutes apart. And I told you not to pull up here," she calls over her shoulder at Caleb.

"Rachel, you're having our baby," I say at her. "Get in the wheelchair before it falls out on the freaking pavement!"

She just laughs, shuffling her way over to the ER doors.

Behind us, Cay drives off shouting, "I'll find you inside!"

"Come on, *please*, babe?" I call after Rachel, pushing the empty wheelchair like an idiot. "Will you just sit down and let me push you?"

"Walking is good for me," she says through a heavy breath, one hand bracing her basketball of a baby bump. "Promotes natural labor."

Mars crosses around behind me, offering her his arm. They lead the way into the ER intake area, leaving me to follow behind pushing the empty chair.

Alright, so am I being a little overly dramatic right now? Yes, obviously. But this is my first kid. I'm sure when we're on number four, she'll go into labor while we're at a game, drive herself to the hospital, and just call us when it's over. But in this moment? With this baby? Yeah, I couldn't find my chill right now if I was Dora the Freaking Explorer.

Mars gets her checked in while I lose the damn wheelchair. Meanwhile, Rachel just sways on her feet, head tipped back, rubbing her bump. This is the hospital where we did the free birthing classes Poppy recommended, and Rachel's OB/GYN is already being called to let her know she's here. There's nothing left for me to do but wait.

Which just so happens to be one of the things I'm worst at.

I have a feeling that, before all this is over, Caleb will be locking me in a supply closet just to give them all a break. He comes up behind me, hand on

my shoulder, looking frazzled too. You wouldn't know it if you don't know Cay. Outwardly, he looks as calm and collected as Mars, all slouchy in his band tee and faded jeans.

But I know Cay. It's his hair that's giving him away. His dark auburn curls are a mess, like he keeps running his hands through them. As I think the thought, he lifts his free hand and does just that, dragging his fingers through the mess, giving the top a little pull.

"What's happening?" he says, glancing around. "Why are we just standing here?"

"Mars has her checked in."

He catches my grin and glares at me, his dark eyes narrowing. "What?"

"Nothing," I reply, still smirking like an asshole. "You're just cute when you're nervous."

His glare deepens as he raises a subconscious hand, flattening his curls.

I snort and he drops his hand again.

"You wanna be in this hospital for real?" he jabs at me. "Because we can make that happen."

I laugh. This is helping, actually. It's distracting me. "I'm up for a fun little case of foreign object removal," I tease. "So long as you're the foreign object."

He puffs out his chest, his face murderous as he readies a reply.

"Rachel Price!" A nurse in bubblegum pink scrubs stands at the side of the intake desk, holding a tablet and smiling our way.

Caleb instantly deflates, his gaze darting to Rachel. I duck over to her side, taking her hand before Mars has a chance to reach out.

The nurse smiles from Rachel to me. She's perky and blonde and has one of those personalities that just screams 'I love babies.' I bet she's wanted to be a nurse all her life. I bet she dressed up as one for Halloween at least twice. "Okay, mommy," she says in a sugary sweet voice. "We're just going to take you back and do an initial exam. You say your water broke?"

"Mhmm," Rachel replies. "About forty minutes ago."

"Thirty-four minutes ago," Mars corrects over my shoulder.

The nurse looks to him, eyes wide, before turning back to Rachel. "Any contractions yet?"

Rachel nods. "Yeah, like seven minutes apart."

"Closer to six and a half now," Mars corrects again.

"Are you gonna be doing that all night?" Cay asks for all three of us.

Mars turns on him with a scowl. “She’s the medical professional. She needs accurate information.”

“I appreciate that,” the nurse replies sweetly. “Well, for now, I’ll take you back for a quick exam,” she says at Rachel. “Daddy, you’re welcome to come too,” she adds at me. “Your other guests can wait here or head down to the cafeteria. If the doctor decides to admit you, they can always meet you up at your room on the L&D floor.”

“Oh, no, we’re all daddy,” I say quickly.

She glances between us. “You’re all…” She looks back down at her tablet. “Wait—is this like a surrogacy case? ‘Cause that’s not in the chart—”

“No,” Rachel replies patiently, still swaying as she breathes.

“It’s a pernicious case of polyamory, Caitlin,” Caleb drols. “Careful, it’s catching.”

She glances up from the tablet. “What?”

“These are my husbands,” Rachel explains, waving a hand at us. “All three of them. Can you please just take me back to see Doctor Varma?”

The poor girl looks like a cartoon character at this point. Her cheeks are blooming pink as she looks at us, her gaze settling on Mars again. Yeah, the cute blondes always go for him. Since we took our relationship public two years ago, fans even do polls and shit, like ‘fuck, marry, kill’ and ‘who would you choose’? I’m competitive enough to let it rankle me knowing just how many people wanna fuck my Cay, marry Mars, and kill me.

Whatever, I’m the glue of this whole dynamic. And poor Nurse Caitlin is shit outta luck. So long as Rachel is breathing, Mars will never look at another woman as anything more than a room decoration. None of us will. Even now, he’s searching her face, studying it, waiting to see any sign of distress. He’s focused like a laser on our wife, his beginning and end.

“Oookay,” says Nurse Caitlin, tapping out something on her tablet. “Let’s just take you back then, mommy…and daddies,” she adds, still blushing.

We follow after her as she leads us down a half-lit hallway towards a small intake room. Three hockey players and a pregnant woman in a broom cupboard-sized exam room? I lean down, giving Rachel’s hand a squeeze. “This is gonna be fun.”

“Three?” Rachel whines, her head falling back against the pillow in defeat. “Only three centimeters?”

“I’m sorry, Rachel,” says Doctor Varma from between her legs.

Rachel groans and I do too. She’s been at this for ages. They admitted her last night around nine o’clock. She was hardly dilated, but since her water broke, the doctor said it was safer to just keep her here. Something about sterile environments.

Well, it’s been over ten hours now. We’ve walked a half-marathon up and down these hallways, she’s bounced on her exercise ball, and eaten her weight in ice chips. All the while, she’s toughed it out through every contraction, doing little more than clenching her jaw and groaning to let us know it’s even happening.

We’re just not getting anywhere.

She was at three centimeters three fucking hours ago. They finally upped her Pitocin drip, which is only bringing her contractions closer together. So, she’s suffering more...with less progress to show for it. She’s not pacing anymore. No more trying to make bad jokes as she bounces topless on her exercise ball. She’s just lying on the bed, doubling over with each contraction.

We watch each one spike on the monitor, trying to help her breathe through them as best we can. After ten hours of tagging each other out, I’m restless, Mars is tired, and Cay is numb. Watching our girl struggle like this, knowing it’s us who put her in this position?

Yeah, it really fucking sucks.

We get that this is the process. We all wanted this baby. We all tried for it. But we’re men of action. We don’t watch other people do the hard work. We roll up our sleeves and do it ourselves. So, watching our girl do the hardest work of her life has us all feeling useless and on edge.

What I wouldn’t give to trade places with her, even if only for a few rounds of these damn contractions. She needs a break. She needs to rest.

As if Doctor Varma is reading my mind, she pushes back in her wheely chair, looking up at Rachel from over her glasses. “I think it’s time we revisit our conversation about the epidural.”

Mars instantly perks up at mention of a medical procedure. He pushes off the mini sofa to come stand behind me.

“No,” Rachel pants. “I don’t want an epidural. He just needs more time.”

“And you need rest,” Varma presses. “I’m slowing your Pitocin drip back

down—”

“No,” she cries, curling herself around another contraction.

“Doc, isn’t that like...going backwards?” I ask.

She looks to me. “Pitocin can sometimes only take us so far,” she explains. “It imitates labor by forcing the uterus to contract. Sometimes this kickstarts the body into doing all the other natural processes of birth, including dilation. But that’s not the case with Rachel. Every contraction is putting her and the baby in distress, and she’s not dilated enough for delivery yet.”

“So, what will the epidural do?” asks Caleb from the sofa.

“It will block the pain she’s feeling as she continues to contract,” the doctor replies. “More importantly, it will give her a chance to rest—”

“I said I don’t want an epidural,” Rachel pants. “That wasn’t part of the plan.”

“You need to conserve your strength,” Varma counters. “You’ve been in labor for nearly twelve hours now, and you have a while to go yet if we’re going to deliver this baby vaginally. You need a break, Rachel. A few hours rest while we let the medicine and your body continue to work, and then you’ll be ready to push. This is my official medical recommendation.”

Rachel blinks back tears of frustration, her hand on her stomach. The sight of the IV taped to her hand has me cringing. This is the fucking worst. I just want to know what I can do to help her. I want to take away this pain, fast forward to tomorrow when our baby will be safe in our arms.

Doc Varma pulls off her blue surgical gloves with a snap, tossing them in the trash. “I’ll give you a few minutes to discuss. But you know what direction we’ll need to head if we can’t get you to dilate and if you’re too tired to push.”

Rachel nods, a tear slipping down her cheek.

A shiver of fear creeps down the back of my neck. Are they talking about a C-section? Oh, fuck no. The guys and I all have a primal fear of C-sections thanks to Tess. No way am I sitting in the hall as they cut our girl open. Not if there’s another option.

Varma steps out with her intern shadow and I lean forward from my spot in the chair, gently taking Rachel’s IV-wrapped hand in mine. “Rach, it sounds like an epidural is the way to go. You’re so tired—”

“I have a birth plan. You all agreed. You said you’d support me in this.”

“Yeah, but only so long as it was safe,” Caleb counters, getting to his feet

to stand at my other side. “The human body can only handle so much, Rachel. You’re burning out. The epidural will numb the pain and let you relax; let you gather your strength for the delivery.”

“Rachel,” she mutters, her hand limp in mine.

“What?” I say, leaning closer, elbows on the bed.

She turns her head, glaring over her shoulder at us, sweat glistening on her brow. Her dark hair is thrown up in a messy bun. “I can’t take much more of this,” she warns.

“Which is why you need to rest,” Caleb presses.

“Not this,” she says, her hand still clutching her belly. “This. *You*. All three of you.”

“What did we do?” I say for all three of us.

“You’ve all been freaked out since we left IKEA,” she groans, rolling to her back. “You’re looking at me like I’m a monkey in a zoo and treating me like a bomb you’re trying to diffuse without instructions, all calling me ‘Rachel’ like we’re co-workers. It’s driving me fucking crazy.”

“Well...we *are* co-workers,” I say with a smirk.

Her head rolls on the pillow to glare at me, her pouty lips pursed in anger. The ER nurses made her take out her septum ring on intake—all jewelry had to go. She looks naked without it.

“I’m not made of glass and I’m not dying,” she says, glancing between us. “The whimpers of pain you hear are just weakness leaving my body. I was made to fucking do this. I’ve carried this baby for nine months. I’ve kept him safe. I will see us both to this finish line, so help me god. Just stop running after us. Run *with* us.”

Caleb inches slowly around the end of the bed, his dark eyes locked on her. “You want us to run with you?”

She watches him, her hand rubbing over her distended belly.

His voice lowers, his tone changing, sharpening to something darker. “You think we’re treating you like a co-worker? Too polite to argue with you, get in your face, take control?”

Her chest rises with each breath as she watches Cay stalk closer. “Your child is inside me, fighting his way out to you, and you’re all calling me ‘Rachel’ like I don’t own the deepest parts of you.”

He stands over her on the other side of the bed, glaring down at her.

Okay, why is this turning me the fuck on?

He tilts his head, letting his dark gaze trace down her body, taking in the

ugly blue flower-checked hospital gown, the monitors and IV, the crumpled sheets, and maroon hospital socks with the little rubber-dotted bottoms. He smirks, his gaze sweeping back up to her sweaty face. “You look like shit, Hurricane.”

Surprisingly, she huffs out a laugh. “I feel like shit.”

He crouches down, one hand going to her forehead as the other splays over her stomach. “You want us to stop treating you like a glass slipper?”

She nods, her hand folding over his. “I need you,” she whispers, her voice breaking as her eyes well with fresh tears. “Cay, I can’t do this. I don’t think I can do it—I’m failing—he won’t come out—”

“Stop.” He lowers his face to hers, his eyes flashing with heat. “You are Rachel Fucking Price. You walk through life boldly doing whatever the fuck you want, damn the consequences. You swirled into our lives like a destructive storm of chaos, all legs and sharp attitude. You swept us up and spun us out. You hooked us body and fucking soul.”

A tear slips down her cheek as I lean over, placing my hand next to theirs on her belly.

“We’re quiet now,” he goes on. “Watching and waiting, fearful to move, fearful to breathe, because we know we’re in the eye of the storm.” He gestures to her stomach with a nod. “Do you know what it feels like for us, watching you get to know and love our child these last nine months? Do you know how jealous we are? Do you have any idea how frustrated we’ve been, wanting to share in this with you?”

“Cay—”

“Don’t you see? You already own the deepest parts of him too,” he says over her. “You built him from scratch. He’s yours already. Sharing him with us won’t change that. Everything you touch, you claim, Hurricane. So, stop worrying. No matter how he comes out, he’s already in you. He’s in your heart and in your soul, claimed. He belongs to Rachel Price. We all do.”

She sucks back her tears, her hands going tight on ours as she suffers through another contraction.

Mars steps in over my shoulder. “It’s time, Rakas,” he says, his tone definitive. “You’re getting the epidural. Your body needs rest.”

“There’s only one bullet point on this birth plan, and that’s a safe and healthy delivery,” I add. “If Doc Varma says this is the way to go, I say we do it.”

Rachel looks to Caleb, waiting for him to weigh in last.

Slowly, he smirks. “Get the epidural, and Jake and Mars will make out for one minute.”

She snorts a laugh, easing the tension in the room, and I smile, lifting my free hand to brush her hair back from her sweaty brow. “There she is.”

Closing her eyes, she nods. “Okay. Let’s try this another way. Go get Varma.”

You know what’s worse than watching your wife writhe in labor for twelve hours? Watching a nervous surgical intern insert a three-inch long, 18-gauge needle into her spine. But Rach just had to let him do it because ‘everyone has to start somewhere.’

Doc Varma calls it a success, and I let out a ragged breath. Cay pulls his hand from mine with a wince, shaking it out. Yeah, it might be fractured now. Good thing we’re in a hospital already.

Poor Rach is bent over on the bed, her hospital gown tossed on the floor. She sweated through it and pulled it off, hating the feel of it on her skin. Hopefully, with the epidural flowing, she can lie back and rest for a while, letting her body contract and dilate until little Flörp gets his act together and gets the hell out here.

The nervous intern is all smiles as he finishes up securing the new line. They wait around for a few minutes, giving the epidural a chance to kick in, before placing a urine catheter.

I glance to the wall clock. Jesus, it’s already after eleven in the morning. We’ve been here for fourteen hours and still no baby. First thing I’m gonna do is buy this kid a watch.

“Babe, was there another gown?” Rachel says at me, already looking more relaxed.

I glance around the room, eyes darting. “I...uhh...”

“I’ll get it,” says one of the nurses, stepping away from her bed. Cay, Mars, and I are just doing our best to stay out of the way. Mars is in the chair up by her head and Cay is perched on the sofa like a watchful crow. I’m just trying to blend in with the sink, too anxious to sit.

“You shouldn’t feel this at all,” says the intern, his head between my

wife's spread legs.

At that moment, the door swings open behind me. "Surpis—oh!"

I spin around to see my parents standing in the doorway, eyes wide as they take in my very topless and pregnant wife, who is currently getting a pee catheter placed by an intern who looks like he's fourteen.

"Ohmygod," Rachel cries, flinging her arm up over her exposed boobs.

"Oh—dear—oh, we didn't know—" Mom is flustered as she quickly reads the room. Dad has already turned away with a loud clearing of his throat.

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Compton," Rachel says weakly, her own cheeks blooming pink as she does her best to cover herself with her arm. "Could you—umm—maybe wait outside for a minute?"

Hearing her anxiety kickstarts my heart. "Mom—Dad," I cry, finding my voice. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"They told us to just come in," Mom says with a wave of her hand. "Molly at the nurse's station was so nice. She—"

"Yeah, let's take this out to the hall, shall we?" I say, rushing over and ushering them out the door with a lot of distracting hand-waving. I cast a glance over my shoulder as I go, first to Rachel in apology, then to Caleb in a plea to come fucking save me.

Don't get me wrong, I love my parents, but they're a lot. At this point, we've got our routine down. They typically come to three games a year (more if we make the playoffs), and dad calls me after any significant loss or upset to tell me what I did wrong. It's not a perfect system, but it works.

Other than that, I call my Mom once a month on a lazy Monday afternoon and we 'chitty chat'—her term, not mine. Oh, and I like spending the occasional Thanksgiving weekend up at their house. She makes an amazing turkey and stuffing, and I've still never found a better couch that conforms perfectly to my ass for football watching.

But Dad stays busy with his construction company, and Mom is involved in like two dozen ladies' Bible studies and book clubs. She has a social events calendar that rivals mine—and I'm a professional athlete. Beyond those little rituals, we don't see much of each other.

"So, uhh...what are you guys doing here?" I say again, ushering them halfway down the hallway to a little alcove that houses a few chairs and two vending machines.

"Honey, you're having a baby," Mom replies. "You messaged us last

night, and we hurried up and got on a plane. Dad's friend Kevin at church flies for Delta—do you remember, Kevin?"

"Yeah, I remember Kevin," I say, glancing over my shoulder down the hall. I know Caleb saw my look. He better come running with a fake baby emergency in the next sixty seconds. 'Cause I'll be damned if I miss a moment of my kid's birth because I'm trapped by this vending machine listening to another story about Kevin Masterson's epic struggle with gout.

"Well, Kevin got us these standby tickets so we could fly down here—"

"Yeah, Mom, listen," I say, raising a hand. "That's great, and I'm glad you're here, but my wife is in labor. There's no baby yet. Maybe you should go check into the hotel or something and I'll text you when it's over."

"Oh, we don't mind waiting." Knowing Mom, she'll probably camp out at the nurses' station. She'll be instructing them all on how to properly sauté onions for a meatloaf within the hour.

"Yep, we came for the big show," Dad says, his hands in his pockets. He's always been a man of few words.

"Yeah, except the 'big show' is Rachel's legs spread in the air, pushing a baby the size of a turkey out of her body. I think you'll have more fun watching a different show on the TV at your hotel."

"Will you just tell us what you're going to name him?" Mom presses, her hands clasped like she's praying. "Rachel was being so secretive when I asked, so I didn't get to have any of my gifts personalized."

I groan. Where the fuck is Cay? "Mom, we haven't picked a name yet."

"Well, just tell me what names you're mulling."

I sigh, stuffing my hands in my pockets to mirror my dad. "Well, I think I know what I want to name him if he's mine but..."

Her smile falls as her eyes go wide.

"If he's yours?" Dad repeats.

"Yeah, I mean if I'm the bio dad," I clarify. "We all agreed that bio dad gets to name the baby. Rachel has veto power if she really hates it, but I doubt any of us will pick something truly horrendous like Flörp Flörpington," I add with a little laugh.

"But—you mean—you don't know?" Mom blinks, glancing in confusion from me to Dad. "You don't know who the father is?"

"I mean, we've narrowed it down to three suspects," I reply with another forced laugh. But I'm really not appreciating their tone right now...or the way they're looking at me. "My guess is Colonel Mustard in the conservatory

with the candlestick.”

“This isn’t a joking matter, Jake,” Dad says flatly.

“I’m joking because you’re both being so weird right now,” I say, leaning away with a frown.

“But who is the father?” Mom presses. “A child needs a mother *and* a father, Jake.”

“Yeah, and he has three,” I snap, narrowing my eyes at her. “Look, we’re getting a DNA test once he’s born so we’ll know whose name goes on the birth certificate and who will need to adopt but we’re all his father—”

“But you said this was your child,” says Dad with a deepening frown. “All this time, you made us believe he was yours.”

“He is,” I say through gritted teeth. “My wife is having my baby in there. My wife...my baby.”

“She’s not your wife,” he says softly.

Everything inside me goes numb. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Dad grunts and Mom cuts in, putting a hand on his arm. She looks up at me pleadingly. “Honey, we’re just—this has all just been a bit confusing, you know? It’s been a lot for us to take in. And it all happened so darn fast.”

“Fast?” I huff another forced laugh, feeling extremely uncomfortable. Why do they have to do this now? Scratch that. Why do they have to do this period? “Mom, most of my buddies knocked up their girls in college and *then* put a ring on it. We were married almost a year before we even started trying to have kids. What’s fast about this?”

She sighs, looking uncomfortable. Then she glances around as if expecting to be overheard. “Honey, even you have to admit it all happened rather fast. One minute you’re calling to tell me you met a great girl in Seattle. The next thing we hear, you’re married to Caleb Sanford. We got no invite to the wedding—”

“I told you, it was a spontaneous thing,” I say over her. We’re not rehashing all these hurt feelings again. I dealt with it two fucking years ago. “No one’s family was there except Rachel’s because we did it in L.A.—”

“Amy got invited,” Mom counters.

“Yeah, ‘cause—” I groan, dragging both my hands through my hair. “Mom—*god*—I flew her out to meet Rachel, and things just escalated from there. We didn’t plan on getting married then, I swear. It was a bet Rach made with Mars. And you were all invited to the big reception party we threw for everyone a couple months later. And I’ve apologized about this to you for

two years,” I add. “I’m fucking done.”

Mom *tsks* at me. “Language, Jake. I don’t know what I did to raise such a potty-mouth. Is this how you’ll speak to the baby?”

I shake my head. My frustration is about to boil the fuck over. “Mom, I swear to god, I can’t do this now.” I step away. “Rachel is in there. My wife needs me.”

“She has her husband by her side,” says Dad.

I go very still, glaring at him.

Dad holds my stare. “Mars Kinnunen is married to Rachel,” he needles. “Not you. She’s his wife, Jake.”

“She’s *our* wife,” I counter. “And his name is Mars Price. God—why the fuck did you even come here?”

“Because you said you were having a baby,” Mom cries. “You, Jake. And we wanted to meet our first grandson.”

“Only it may be your goalie’s kid,” says Dad with a frown.

I round on him again. We’re equally matched in height, but I’ve got over fifty pounds of muscle on him. He may swing a few golf clubs every month, but I’m a starting NHL defenseman. I will pound him into this mauve wall right against that stupid fucking picture of sleeping bunnies in a basket. “My goalie has a fucking name, and I wanna hear you to say it.”

Mom places a hand on both our arms. “Jake, honey, don’t get angry with us when we’re only trying to understand—”

I jerk away, stepping back. “Yeah, but you’re not trying, are you? Look, I know I freaked you out when I first came out. But it’s been over two fucking years. I understood when it was weird for you at first, but you gotta catch the fuck up already. I’m legally married to Cay, yes. But I am married in every way that matters to Mars and Rachel too. I love them all, and we’re a family ___”

“Not according to the state of Florida,” Dad mutters.

All I see is red. Someone better be ready to call security. Mom steps in front of Dad just before I swing my arm back. Both her hands are raised at me and they’re looking at me like I’m the one with the fucking problem. “Jake—just listen to yourself for a minute, honey. You’re talking about DNA tests and adopting a child that may not even be yours—”

“He *is* mine,” I bellow.

“Jake—”

“Enough.”

We all still as a new voice enters the fray. This voice sets my parents on immediate alert. Dad stiffens and Mom shrinks back against him. I close my eyes as I feel Mars step in at my back. He doesn't stop until his shoulder brushes mine. That moment of connection feels like he's hooking me with a tractor beam, mooring me to him.

"Hi, Mars," Mom says with a forced smile. Dad just stands behind her, stony faced. "Can you give us a minute, dear? This is a family matter."

"Which is why I'm here," Mars replies, his tone icy. "Protecting my family."

"We need to speak to our son alone," says Dad.

"No." One word, spoken so powerfully. It echoes in the space between us, scaring the bunnies in the basket. Not looking at me, Mars takes my hand.

"I'll talk to my son if I want to talk to my son," says Dad, trying to puff out his chest at my 6'5" Finnish bear of a goalie.

"No, you won't," he replies calmly. "Not here, and not now. You will turn around, and you will leave," he adds with a point of his finger down the hallway.

"This is a public hospital—"

"Yes, this is a place of birth and healing," Mars counters. "This is a sacred space, and you're both casting a gloom with this unnecessary scene."

Mom begins to blub in earnest now. "Unnecessary—"

"You don't approve of Jake's choices," he says over her. "You certainly don't approve of me. You've made that abundantly clear. You've been making it clear from the moment we met. But, unlike my husband, I neither seek nor need your approval."

They both just blink up at him.

"Despite the wholly inappropriate manner in which you've chosen to raise your concerns with your son, I know you must care about him and his future," Mars concedes. "You doubt this arrangement can work. You don't understand it, and you would never choose it for yourselves, so you doubt. Your doubt is so great you cannot help but voice it aloud to him, even at this moment."

"We just want what's best for him," Mom says, wiping away her tears.

"And is Jake not the best judge of that?" Mars counters.

"He's impressionable," says Dad.

"He's open-minded and highly empathetic," Mars corrects. "That is not being impressionable. That's being willing and able to grow, learn, and

change.”

“What if it’s your kid?” says Dad. “What if you’re the ‘bio dad’ as Jake so flippantly puts it?” he asks, mocking me by using air quotes. “Where does that leave our Jake?”

“Standing by my side,” Mars replies solemnly. “Showing me every day how to be the father our child deserves. A father who leads with kindness and honesty. A father who is loyal. A father willing to admit when he’s wrong and be willing to change.”

I squeeze his hand, heart in my throat, as I look at my parents like they’re strangers. How can they claim to love me and treat me this way, treat my partner this way? Do they even care about what I want? Or do they only care about what they want for me? Do they even know me at all?

“Your son is the kindest and best man I have ever known,” Mars goes on, determined to shred me into fucking pieces. “I am honored to share this life with him. It was wrong of you to come in this moment and rob him of his joy. You are wrong.”

Mom is full ugly crying now. “Jake—”

“You need to go,” I say, finding my voice at last.

“Honey—”

“I can’t have you here,” I say over her. “Not now. Not like this. Mom, please...just go. We’ll talk later, alright? I’ll call you later. But...please, go.”

Mars stands unwavering at my side, staring my parents down.

Slowly, Dad turns to Mom. “Come on, Mags. Let’s go.”

She’s a weepy mess as she lets Dad turn her and they walk away down the hallway towards the nurses’ station. As soon as they turn the corner, I feel my chest give out. I let out a sharp exhale, dropping Mars’s hand. Groaning, I double over, hands above my knees, trying to catch my breath, tears in my eyes.

“God, that fucking sucked.” I try and fail to force a laugh. “That was so—they shouldn’t have come here and said all that shit. I’m so sorry, man.”

Mars puts a hand on my shoulder. “Up, Jake. Stand up.”

With a huff, I right myself, shaking out my shoulders. I wipe quickly under my eyes, swallowing down the rest of the emotion sitting heavy in my throat. “I’m sorry,” I say again.

“Don’t apologize to me.”

“I just can’t believe they did that. I can’t believe my dad said all that shit. I mean, I knew they were still on the fence a bit, but—”

Mars steps into my space, one hand on my shoulder, the other at my hip. “Enough.”

I startle, leaning away from him, but he holds me fast.

“There will be time to process this later,” he says, his voice low. “For now, just breathe.”

I do as he says, sucking in a halting breath through my nose.

“And out,” he mutters.

I let the breath out through pursed lips and feel my body start to shake. Oh, fuck him, this is not happening right now. “Mars, I can’t—”

“In again,” he says, his blue eyes boring through me, burrowing down to the very heart of me. “Look at me, Jake.” He cups my face with his big, calloused hand. “Look only at me. In.”

I breathe for him, trying to make my shoulders follow the pattern he’s setting as he breathes with me, centering me before I can spiral the fuck out and fall the fuck apart.

That’s what Mars does for me—he holds me together. The others can’t do it. Only Mars. I close my eyes, knowing Caleb probably sent him out here. Our broody Finn is the only one who can quiet all the shit spinning in my head. They sent me who I needed most in this moment. Because, unlike my parents, they understand me.

They respect me.

They *love* me.

“Good,” Mars soothes, his thumb brushing the tears from my cheek. “You’re alright. Look only at me.”

I lean towards him, my hand raising to wrap around his wrist as I suck down air, trying to push all the negative, toxic bullshit from my mind.

“In this moment, nothing else matters,” he soothes. “Look at me. That’s it...only at me. Breathe.”

I nod, calming down enough to swallow. Feeling so fucking spent, I drop my head forward, resting it against his. Closing my eyes, I take a few more calming breaths. After another moment, I feel myself relax. “Did Cay send you out here?”

His hand is at my back, steady and strong. “I wanted to come.”

I lean away, holding his gaze again. “Why?”

He smiles at me, brushing his thumb over my parted lips. “You are my husband, joo?”

I smirk. How long has it been since we stood in the living room of his

bungalow, and I threatened that he can only call me that if he begs? All I remember is Tess standing in a towel. Oh right—and I think Langers had a busted knee.

“Is this you begging me?” I tease.

His expression doesn’t change. “I don’t beg.”

I roll my eyes, dropping my hands away from him. “Yeah, I know.”

But he holds fast to me, his hand shifting to grip the back of my neck. “You *do* know,” he presses. “You know me.”

Slowly, I nod, my gaze darting, taking in the deep blue of his eyes.

“You know me, Jake,” he says again. Lowering his hand, he presses it palm-flat to my chest over my heart. “You know *this*. You know us.”

Oh, fuck him. Fresh tears are about to fall and this time it will be his fault.

The asshole lifts my hand and places it on his chest, pressing my palm flat against his heart. “You know us,” he says again, his voice little more than a whisper.

“I do,” I say on a breath, my heart racing under his palm. I can feel the steady beat of his heart under mine.

“You have no doubts of me?”

“None,” I reply, holding his gaze.

“I have no doubts either,” he replies. “You are my husband, Jake. I seek no exit.”

Fuck. I swallow back my tears and nod. “Yeah...no exit.”

With a nod of his own, he drops his hands to his side. “You are good now?”

I nod again.

“You are ready?”

I huff. “Yeah, I’m ready, Mars.”

The corner of his mouth quirks into a smile as he holds out his hand to me. “Then come. Let’s go meet our son.”

“You’re so perfect.” I brush my finger along my sleeping son’s brow. He wiggles a little in my arms but doesn’t wake.

It must be nearly midnight. Everyone around me is passed out. They

brought in a little trundle this afternoon that makes Mars look like Papa Bear sleeping in Goldilocks's bed. Cay is crashed out on it instead, his feet sticking out the end. Mars is perched in the corner on the sofa, sleeping in a sitting up position against the wall, snoring softly.

Rachel is blessedly asleep too. I glance over at the bed. Her hair is a knotted mess, her mouth open with a little bit of drool coming out. I smile. She's never looked more goddamn beautiful. I'd take a picture to remember it forever, but I'd have to jostle this baby in my arms to get to the phone in my pocket.

Of course, I can't sleep. I can't stop looking at my baby. I can't put him down. Langley warned me it would feel this intense. The nurses tried to take him from me twice before I threatened to bite the last one's hand. 'Congratulations' messages have been flooding in from the team, friends, and family all afternoon and evening. We finally all just put our phones on silent. Little Baby No Name Flörp Price was born at 1:07pm weighing a perfectly respectable 8 lbs. 1oz.

And I'm not counting any chickens before they hatch, but he has a full head of dark hair. I look over at my reddish brunette and the blond Viking and smirk. Not that I care either way, but if I were a betting man...

"So, what should we name you, little man?" I murmur, brushing the tips of my fingers over his dark hair.

The door opens, throwing a stream of bright hallway light over us. I turn my body, shielding him from the light and glare at whoever is intruding.

"Oh—" comes a soft whisper. "They're all asleep. Should I come back?"

My heart fucking stops as tears well in my eyes. I try to get up. "Amy?"

"Don't get up," my twin rasps in a louder whisper. "Don't drop that sweet baby."

I settle back in the chair, letting her come to me. She's got her dark hair up in a long ponytail, with clear-framed glasses on her make-up free face. She's wearing a pair of yoga pants and a slouchy sweater—clearly, she just came straight from the airport...on a flight that must have come express from Japan.

"How the hell are you already here?" I say, leaning forward as she ducks down to kiss my forehead.

"I hopped on a flight as soon as you texted yesterday," she replies.

I huff. "Yeah, Mom and Dad had the same idea."

Her hand goes to my shoulder as she crouches down, peering over me to

look at the baby. “Mom told me. She was trying to call me mid-flight. I had onboard Wi-Fi, so she texted me instead.”

“Great,” I mutter.

“I think she thought I was going to side with her or something,” she goes on. Slowly, she turns to look up at me, her face stony. “I chewed her out instead.”

Closing my eyes, I nod. I really can’t cry anymore today. At this point, I’m scared for my health. I’ll need to steal Rachel’s IV bag and rehydrate.

“I told her that until they get their shit together, and let go of their antiquated prejudices, you and I will just live like orphans,” she goes on.

I sigh, opening my eyes. “Amy, you don’t have to cut them off on my account.”

“Hey, you mess with the bull, you get the horns,” she teases.

I can’t help but snort a laugh, shaking my head. My partners like to joke that I’m too Taurus to function, but that’s only because they don’t know my twin as well as me.

“Come on,” she says more seriously. “It’s not all for you, Jake. It’s for me too. This is about my peace of mind. You and I are more alike than they could have ever hoped...or dreaded,” she adds. “We don’t need their toxic energy in our lives, Jakey. You’ve got such a great family here.” She glances around at my passed-out partners. “And you’ve got great friends, a great team.”

“And who do you have?” I whisper.

She smiles, tears in her eyes. “I have you.”

I shake my head. “You need more too, Am. You deserve more. You deserve to have a whole team of people around you, fighting your corner.”

“I’ve always been a bit of a lone wolf,” she says with a shrug.

“A *lonely* wolf,” I correct. “And you don’t have to be. Come home, Am.”

She raises a dark brow. “What, and live with you, your three partners, a newborn, and a hyperactive dog?”

“We’ve got Mars’s old place. Tess and Langley moved out ages ago. It’s just sitting there empty.”

She kisses my brow again. “I’ll think about it.”

That’s what she always says. I’ve been trying to drag her back stateside for like five years now. I know she’s not happy in her job or in her life. At first, she was thrilled at the adventure of it all. On her off days and weekends, she traveled all over—South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia. But once

the novelty of being abroad wore off, her adventure stories got shorter, and her smiles grew smaller.

I know my twin. She's lonely...and unhappy.

And it fucking tears me apart.

"So, what's his name?" she whispers, reaching over me to cup Flörp's little head.

"We won't name him until we get the DNA results."

She smiles and gives me a knowing nudge. "But you're thinking of names...with that dark head of hair, you'd be crazy not to."

I shrug. "Rach has dark hair too."

"Come on, Jakey. That baby has your nose, your hair, and I bet your love of chocolate milk."

I huff a soft laugh, my hope glowing a little brighter. "Okay, if he is mine...I'd like it to be a family name. I like feeling like you're giving the child some immediate roots. It's like a piece of history that gets woven into them from their first moments. They belong somewhere." Gazing down at my son, I smile. "I just want him to belong, you know? I want him to have so much laughter and love in his life."

"I know," she murmurs, rubbing my arm.

"No, you don't," I say, still looking at him. "I don't think you can until you do it, until you feel what I felt when they first put him in my arms. It's like I felt my heart grow in size. Like it *had* to become larger because there was so much space that needed to be filled by this new little life. I was scared and happy and so fucking overwhelmed. It's..." I don't even know what I'm trying to say. Fuck, I'm so tired.

"It's being a parent," she finishes for me. "You're someone's daddy now, Jake. This little life needs you more than anyone has ever needed you. Even more than me," she adds with a sad smile. "It's a shame, because I've always liked pretending I was the neediest person in your life."

I lean over enough to kiss her brow. "We'll call you a close second."

She glances over at the lump shifting on the trundle bed. "Doesn't Cay take that prize now?"

"Fuck...yeah, he is such a needy fucking asshole."

She snorts a soft laugh. "And don't forget Poseidon. They're a matched pair."

I groan. "You know what, you're so right, Am. Everyone wants to call me the needy asshole—and I totally am—but that they pretend they're not as bad

as me is a total joke.”

“Amy?”

We both turn to see Rachel blinking awake, glancing between us.

“Hey, Rach,” she says with a soft smile. “How you feelin’?”

“Sore,” Rachel replies. “And tired.” She looks to me. “How is he?”

“Oh, I thought he was kind of boring, so I traded him in for a baby sloth,” I tease. “Much cooler. Wanna see?”

Rachel just rolls her eyes as Amy lets out a soft laugh. “I’m glad you’re here,” Rachel says at my sister, reaching for her cup of water with a wince. Amy is up in a flash, fetching it for her, refilling it, and fluffing her pillows. They talk softly, leaving me alone to stare down at my beautiful boy.

Mars stirs next, groaning as he cracks his neck, his bunched-up pillow falling to the floor. Within the hour, we’re all awake again, including No Name, who let out a loud fart and then proceeded to wail until Rachel took him and shoved a boob in his face. Time has officially lost all meaning, so by another hour later, Cay, Mars, Amy and I are perched awkwardly on the furniture in the corner, snacking on the world’s shittiest excuse for New York style pizza. I’m reluctantly reaching for another slice when there’s a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Rachel calls.

But it’s not a nurse or doctor who enters. It’s Harrison, Rachel’s high-powered executive chef of a twin.

“Ohmygod,” Rachel cries, sitting forward fast enough to jostle our nursing baby. He whimpers and fusses until she adjusts him, soothing him with a few pets to his downy black hair.

Harrison just stands in the doorway, a bouquet of flowers in his hand. “Hey, sissy,” he says at last, tears brimming and spilling over. “Fuck, you’re like...somebody’s mom now.” He presses a hand to his chest, taking a deep breath. “Whoa...this is so trippy. He’s here. He’s a whole person now.”

She’s all smiles. It glows like a light inside her. Fuck me, *this* is the most beautiful she’s ever looked. I want a picture of her sitting just like this—hair a mess, IVs in her hands, tired circles under her eyes, nursing my kid. She looks like an earth goddess, all power and calm and love.

She peers around her twin, as if waiting for the door to open again. “Where’s Somchai?”

“There was a big food truck event this weekend,” he replies with a shrug, nodding his ‘hellos’ to the rest of us as he snags a piece of pizza from the

open box Caleb holds out for him. “He’ll fly down on Monday. We rented a little bungalow over on the beach near your place. Figured we’d stay for the week—close, but out of the way,” he adds quickly. “We don’t wanna intrude. And mom and dad are on a plane now. They’ll stay with us.”

Before any of us can say more, there’s yet one more knock at the door.

“No one else will fit in here,” Caleb warns, looking around at the crowded space.

“Come in,” Rachel calls.

Esther, our night nurse comes in, washing her hands at the sink. “Hey there, mamma. How’s baby doing? He latching good now?”

“I think so,” Rachel replies, glancing down at the baby. “I think he’s falling asleep,” she says, all smiles as she takes him in for the thousandth time.

“Well, I’ve got some results here Doctor Varma wanted me to share,” she says, eyes on her tablet. “She didn’t think you’d want to wait around until she was back in the morning.”

My heart fucking stops. The shitty pizza in my mouth tastes like sand as I try to swallow it. “Oh my god,” I say, snatching for Caleb’s hand. “Esther, do you have the DNA results?”

She smiles over at me. “I sure do. Rush order.”

The tension in the room spirals up from a one to an eleven. Suddenly, no one’s breathing.

“Umm...should I go?” says Amy, perched on the arm of the tiny sofa. She glances quickly to Harrison. “Should we...we can wait outside—”

“No, stay,” I say, snatching her hand with my free hand.

She glances to Rachel and my partners.

“The twins can stay,” Rachel says, looking just as nervous and excited as us.

“Alrighty then,” says Esther, narrowing her eyes at the tablet through her readers. “Want me to just read it out then?”

“Yes,” six voices say at once.

She blinks, looking around at us with a little smile. “Alrighty then... well...” She glances over to us men. “Which one of you is Jake?”

My eyes go wide as Caleb and Amy squeeze my hands so tight. Amy gasps. Over on the bed, Rachel bursts into tears.

“They’re all looking to you, honey,” Esther says at me with a kind smile. “Are you Jake Price?”

I nod, unable to form words. I feel like I'm going to burst out of my skin.

"Congratulations, honey. You're the daddy."

"Ohmygod," Amy cries at my side, wrapping an arm around me.

"Congrats, babe," Caleb whispers, kissing me—my lips, my cheek, my temple. "I wanted this first one to be yours so badly."

I mean, I did too, but I was never going to say anything. He's mine regardless. Mars is right, no fucking exit. But there's something satisfying for me knowing I loved Rachel first and now we've made this beautiful human life together. There's a shared piece of us in the universe. It feels like a full-circle moment.

Mars nods to me, tears of joy in his eyes, and Rachel holds out her free hand, beckoning me over. I push off the tiny sofa and hurry around the end of the hospital bed. She makes as much room for me as she's able and I sit down with half an ass cheek, throwing an arm around her shoulders as I look down at my nursing son. His mouth is barely moving now. He's almost asleep again. Full and happy and so fucking loved.

"He needs a name," Rachel murmurs. Turning her face, she kisses my chest.

I place a hand on him. "I was hoping to make it a Compton family name," I admit aloud. "I want a name that's strong...a name that expresses loyalty and compassion." I glance across the room at my twin. Smiling at her, I say, "Honestly, I was thinking of Amy...but that's weird," I add quickly as she laughs through her tears.

"You want to name him Amy?" says Cay, and I know he's trying really fucking hard not to call 'veto' on me.

"God, Jake," Amy cries, dabbing at her eyes.

I blink away my own tears. "Yeah, but maybe we could change it a little. Like...make it more masculine? Like what about...Jamie," I say, stretching out the "J" sound. "That's a guy's name, right?"

Rachel considers for a moment. "Like a mashup of Jake and Amy?"

Holy shit, I'm a fucking genius. "Yes," I say with a laugh. "Yeah, just like that. Jake and Amy becomes Jamie...Jamie Price."

"Any middle name?" says Cay.

Well...fuck. I've been putting so much pressure on thinking of first names, I didn't even stop to think he'd need a middle name too. "I want Rachel to pick it," I say at last.

She looks up sharply at me. "What? Babe—no—bio dad picks. That's the

rule, right?”

“Yeah, and I’m picking that *you* pick,” I say, kissing her brow. “Jamie is his first name. Give our son a middle name, babe.”

She sighs, glancing down at him. In no time flat, she’s smiling again. “Well, if your twin is represented in his name, I want mine in there too,” she says. “Jamie Harrison.”

I look across the room with a smirk to see she broke her twin too. Now they’re both over there crying.

“That’s a really cool name,” says Caleb. “I love it.”

“Agreed,” says Mars. “It’s perfect.”

I smile down at my son, so much love filling my heart I think it could actually kill me dead. I brush his soft hair with my thumb, my other arm still around Rachel. “Did you hear that? You have a name now, little man, and it’s perfect. You’re our Jamie…Jamie Harrison Price.”

THE DENTIST: PART 1



Note: The following two chapters take place ten months after the birth of Tuomas Price (first documented in PEA:VOL 1, Ch 5).

Standing shirtless at the kitchen sink, I stretch my shoulders, cracking my neck. Morning sunlight streams in through the open patio doors. Over the rumble of a retreating garbage truck down the lane, I can just barely hear the sounds of the ocean a block away. I never tire of that sound—the rhythmic push and pull of the water against the sand. It’s nature’s heartbeat, constant as the hands of a ticking clock.

The coffee maker clicks, and I pour myself a large mug of decaffeinated dark roast. Leaving mine black, I reach into the fridge and pull out the milk and peppermint creamer.

“Did you get any sleep?” Caleb asks a minute later, stepping in behind me. He’s already dressed in a pair of athletic pants and an old hockey tee, backwards hat on his head.

I slide the milk and creamer across the counter to him. “A little.”

In truth, I’m exhausted. I was up half the night with our teething infant. Poor Tuomas has had sore gums for days. Both his top teeth are cutting

through at once. I hope tonight he'll feel some relief and we can both sleep.

"I told you I would help," says Caleb, pouring coffee in his mug before adding his sickeningly sweet milk and mint creamer.

"You needed the sleep more than me," I reason, watching him stir his coffee until it's the color of a blanched almond. "Hey—no coffee," I say just in time.

He jolts, the mug lifted to his lips. Then he groans. "Fuck me."

"Doctor Ingram said no food or drink—"

"Yeah, I was there," he says, his gaze darting sideways to glare at me as his hand tightens around his mug. "Why did you get out my creamer if you were just going to give me a hard time?"

"Because I always get out your creamer." I replace it in the door of the fridge along with the milk. Its habit at this point, honed into me after five years of daily living. I'm usually the first up and the first downstairs, so I prepare the coffee. The carton was in my hand without a conscious thought. "One sip, and then down the sink it goes," I warn.

"I'm a coffee addict, Mars. I *need* my morning fix."

"One sip. A small one."

With a groan, he lifts his tattooed arm and takes a sip of his coffee, barely enough to wet his mouth. "Fuck...that's so good." He sucks on his tongue, looking wistfully down at the contents of his mug.

I hold out my hand and he sighs, handing it over. We watch as I tip it into the sink, his creamy, minty concoction pooling across the stainless steel, racing for the drain.

His hands grip the counter as he watches his coffee disappear. "Just in this moment, I hate you."

"I can take it," I reply, setting his empty mug in the sink with a soft clink.

"Dada, look," Jamie calls from behind us.

Caleb turns, quickly stuffing his bad attitude away.

The boys sit side by side in their highchairs on the far side of the kitchen island, quietly eating their breakfast.

"Hey, bubs," Cay says at Jaime, stepping around the island to kiss the tops of their heads. "Wow, you guys have a pretty good breakfast here. Wanna share with Dada?"

"I share with Tuo," Jamie replies. "Look."

Our oldest is in a sharing phase—toys, food, even the occasional shirt off his back. As we watch, he grabs some scrambled egg and diced strawberry in

his tiny fist, squeezing it tight before depositing it on his brother's plate.

"Eat up, Tuo," he says, reaching for another handful.

"That's kind of you, Jaminen, but you need to eat too," I say in Finnish as Caleb slides their highchairs further apart.

Tuomas babbles, slapping his hand down on his new eggs, his mouth already full of cantaloupe. Jamie tries to lean over with more egg clutched in his fist, frustrated when he can't reach his brother's plate. He opens his fist with a cry and the egg falls to the floor. Poseidon is there in seconds to make quick work of the mess. He's never more than inches away while the boys are eating.

"God, they're so f'ing cute," Caleb mutters, running his hands over both boys' heads as they munch on toast squares. Jamie's hair is chocolaty brown, sticking up a bit in the back. Tuomas has my blond hair. They look so much like their mother it makes me ache.

"Have you heard from them this morning?" Caleb says at me.

"Too early yet," I reply.

Rachel and Jake are out West with the rest of the team. They left Friday for a string of away games. The Rays played the Coyotes in Arizona on Saturday, the Avalanche tonight in Colorado, and the Stars on Wednesday in Texas, before returning to Jacksonville for a home game against the Predators on Saturday.

"The Avs are having a good season," he says, likely checking stats on his phone. "Defense is tight. Should be a close game."

"I'm recording it for you," I say, leaning my hip against the counter, crossing my bare feet at the ankles.

He gazes across the kitchen at me as I bring my mug to my lips, taking another sip of my hot coffee. His frown deepens. "Do you have to do that right in front of me?"

"This is where I drink my coffee," I reply.

"You could at least put it in a travel mug, so I don't have to smell it. It's bad enough my stomach is growling at the smell of eggs and toast I can't eat."

I smirk, holding the mug under my nose, breathing in the rich bouquet of nutty smokiness, that subtle hint of salt. "I was always told Jake is the handful when it comes to going to the dentist."

Caleb clenches his jaw, trying not to wince. He's been putting this surgery off for months, always arguing that we're too busy with work and life

and the boys. He's been suffering needlessly through the pain. Rachel and Jake finally had to threaten to withhold all intimacy before he would agree to make the appointment and get the tooth pulled.

This morning is the only opening the dentist had for two months. Which means I'll be home alone taking care of *two* needy, mouth sore babies.

I smirk again.

"I'm not afraid of dentists," Caleb says, puffing out his chest at me.

"I know."

"I just don't believe in unnecessary surgery."

I hold his dark gaze. "Your tooth is rotting in your jaw, Cay."

He groans, crossing his arms.

"It's a simple procedure," I say more gently. "Doctor Ingram said they likely won't even put you under for the extraction."

"I don't like going under," he admits, looking down as Jamie teases the dog with his toast.

"I know," I say again.

And it's true. I know Caleb Price. He would tolerate any pain if it meant he stayed in control, if he stayed awake. Memories of his knee surgeries still haunt his dreams sometimes. And I know he lives in some little pain, even when his body is at rest.

More to the point, he simply abhors vulnerability in all its forms. Its why, even five years later, he often doesn't sleep in the same room as us. He feels out of control in a room where three other people and a dog are up and down at all hours.

"Do this once, and then it's done," I reason.

"No pain meds," he says. "Nothing harder than Tylenol after. Agreed?"

I nod. In this we're always agreed. Neither of us drink or tolerate drugs. We both dislike the feel of chemicals altering the natural functioning of our bodies. I know he experimented in his youth. I know he overindulged after he medically retired from the League. Now he prefers to stay clean, body and mind. Under my influence, he even switched to decaffeinated coffee. His cravings for coffee are all for taste and routine, not chemical drive.

"I just hate you're alone to deal with this," he mutters, tucking his phone away in his pocket.

"Bethany will be here to watch the boys," I reply. "I doubt you'll do more than sleep the rest of the day."

As if saying her name is a summons, the doorbell rings, and the dog

barks, launching down the hall. Checking my doorbell app, I see the boys' favorite nanny standing on the front porch, her daughter Sunny perched on her hip. She's the same age as Jamie and they play well together.

I set my mug down and move for the door when Caleb's voice stops me.

"You really gonna open the door looking like that?"

I go still, taking in my threadbare sleep pants, bare feet, and no shirt. I drag a hand over my shorn hair. "Too much?" I say with a smirk.

"Try too little," he deadpans. "I can see your dick through those pants, Mars."

I drop my hand to my side. "Why don't you get the door and I get changed?"

"Good idea." Snatching a squirmy Tuo out of his highchair, Caleb steps past me, heading for the front door.

I leave a happy Jamie to finish smashing his toast while I duck into the laundry room in search of a shirt.

Thirty minutes later, Caleb and I are in my truck, the GPS on my phone chiming directions to the dentist's downtown surgical office. I like these quiet moments with Caleb. Rachel and Jake are both talkers in the car. If they're not talking, they want the music on. And now, with the boys taking fewer naps, there's always noise of some kind.

Only with Caleb can I sit quietly and just feel the truck rumble down the road. He gazes stoically out the front windshield. There's no outward sign that he's nervous...unless you know him. His hand keeps clenching into a fist in his lap as he fights the urge to drag it through his hair.

Meanwhile, I fight the urge to reach across the cab and place my hand on his thigh. I never know if my touch will settle him or make him more tense. Jake and Rachel always crave my touch. After five years together, Rachel and I practically share one skin. Our touch is constant, whether through sex, or the connection we seek as we perform the mundane tasks of life.

With Jake, it's never been about sexual touch. I know he doesn't want that from me, and I don't want it from him. He simply craves physical intimacy—platonic and romantic. With the others, he craves sex. He craves

my touch when he's tired, when he's bored, when he needs the quiet only my closeness can bring. Ours is not the touch of lovers. It's the touch of being loved. And for us it's enough. Our partners happily provide for the rest.

Our partners...

I glance to the right, watching how Caleb watches the road. He's my partner too, and yet he remains something of an enigma. I know he loves me. That's never been in doubt. But it's unclear what he needs from me. With Rachel between us, he'll coax and tease, taking me to hand and mouth. His touch is uninhibited then, set free by our shared lowering of walls, even as he focuses most of his attention on Rachel and Jake. Is that enough? Is he satisfied?

Outside of group sex, he's never sought me out looking for more intimacy, so I must assume he's satisfied. I'm resigned to a life of loving Rachel, comforting Jake, and sharing them both with Caleb.

But there are moments...

I glance his way again, looking quickly back to the road as a light turns red. I ease on the brake, the truck rolling to a stop.

In rare moments, Caleb will look at me and it feels like he's wrapping his fingers between the bones of my sternum, gripping tight, and pulling with all his strength. I'm made breathless by the look. I *ache*. But then I blink, and it's gone. The shadows in his eyes lift, and he turns away from me. The sensation of being wanted fizzles into nothing.

Perhaps I've imagined it.

The light turns green, and I focus my attention on the road. As I make the turn into the parking garage of the health offices, our phones ding with a new message. Caleb plucks his phone from the cupholder. "It's from Hurricane," he says. "Jake just hit the ice for morning skate."

I nod.

"She says his knee is still acting up."

I make no reply as I pull a ticket from the parking machine. The mechanical arm rises to admit us.

Jake had a light knee sprain coming out of pre-season training. We've been watching it closely, praying it doesn't get worse. It feels odd to remember my own constant worry about the state of my hips and knees is behind me. I'm retired. Hockey isn't my life anymore.

Well, it's still my life in the sense that I have three partners actively working for an NHL team. But it's no longer the sum total of my life. I can

eat what I want, work out when and how I want. If my knees are hurting, I don't have to play through the pain.

I thought I would feel empty without hockey, but I don't. I've been approached so many times in the last three years and offered coaching positions, staff positions, camp and training positions, scouting positions. I've turned them all down. I may not know what I want to do with the rest of my life, but I know hockey is done for me. I'm at peace with my decision to retire.

But Jake isn't there yet. Not even close. The joy he gets from being on the ice hasn't dimmed. I pray he has several more good years left in his career. Most of all, I pray any decision to retire is a choice, not a necessity. I don't want my family to live with the pain of watching Jake get forced out of the game.

"Hey...you okay?"

I ease into a parking spot and throw the truck in park, glancing across the cab at Caleb. His face is turned my way, but his dark aviators cover his eyes. I can see the tense line of his jaw, the stiffness of his shoulders. "Shouldn't I be asking you that?" I take my sunglasses off and tuck them into the top of my t-shirt.

He doesn't move to open his door. "Why do we do this, Mars?"

I go still, my fingers brushing the handle of my door. "Do what?"

He pulls his sunglasses off, holding my gaze. A tense moment stretches between us as his eyes move slowly, studying my face.

"Ask me anything and I'll tell you," I say, unsure of what he's looking for.

After a moment, he huffs, tossing his sunglasses in the cupholder. "Yeah...right. Let's go. Let's get this fucking done."

We find the dentist's office up on the third floor, and Caleb gets himself checked in. Then we sit in a pair of stiff waiting room chairs. A house-flipping show plays on the TV at an unnecessarily loud volume. The only other patients waiting are a mother and her young son. The boy stands at a toy table, clacking a row of colorful blocks along a curling wire.

"I think there's a café down the street," Caleb offers, taking in the coffee table with its stack of outdated magazines and a fake potted plant.

"I'm fine to wait."

"This could take a while—"

"I said I'm fine."

We sink into silence, arms crossed, elbows brushing as we wait.

“Caleb Price?”

We both glance up. A pale, freckle-faced man in green scrubs waits by the open doorway. He looks from the young boy to us. Caleb sits there, unmoving, staring at him like he just said or did something foul.

The lanky dentist swallows, his smile falling somewhat. “Mr. Price? Are you ready to go?”

“Fuck.” Caleb rises to his feet at last. Tucking his hands into the pockets of his athletic pants, he pulls out his wallet and phone. “Here, man. Hold my shit.”

I take his personal items.

“Why not let him take the hat too,” says the dentist.

With a huff, Caleb removes his hat, shoving it my way. He drags a hand through his hair, pulling on the curls once before dropping his hand to pat his pockets down.

I take the hat, setting it on the seat he just vacated. Then I place his wallet and phone inside.

“Did you want your friend to come back with you?” asks the dentist.

Caleb glances back at him sharply. “He’s my husband, and no. I’m not fucking twelve.”

The woman in the corner gasps indignantly.

“Sorry,” he tosses her way.

The child stays oblivious, still playing with his blocks.

Acting on instinct, I reach forward, taking Caleb’s hand in mine. He stiffens. My touch creates a jolt that travels up his arm and across his chest. I squeeze his hand, willing him to look at me. Slowly, he turns, glancing over his shoulder.

“I’ll be right here,” I say, giving his hand another squeeze.

He gives me a curt nod. Then he’s walking away, following the dentist, leaving me to wait.

“Mr. Price?”

I jolt, my shoulders jerking as I push my hat back up over my eyes. Shit, I

didn't mean to fall asleep. How long was I out? I pull my phone from my pocket to see I've missed several calls and texts from Rachel and Jake wanting updates. With a groan, I rub a hand over my short beard. It's been over two hours.

Caleb's operation was only supposed to take one.

Fuck.

Now I'm wide awake. Slipping my phone back in my pocket, I glance sharply around. More people fill the waiting room. Two more mothers with young kids wait on the far side of the room. An older couple scroll on their phones three seats down from me.

The receptionist waves at me to get my attention. She's an older black woman with thin braids down her back. "Sorry to startle you," she calls through the glass. "Your husband is just finishing up now, Mr. Price."

"Right." I snatch his personal effects off the seat next to me and get to my feet.

"I'm told he's had a pretty strong reaction to the sedation," she warns as I step up to the window.

My heart squeezes tight. "A strong reaction?"

"Oh, nothing bad," she says quickly. "He's just a little loopy. He'll definitely need a ride home. No driving for the rest of the day, and no operating heavy machinery of any kind, not even a blender," she adds, laughing at her own joke.

I nod, feeling my heart rate slow.

"I can buzz you back if you'd like," she says. "Doctor Ingram says he's asking for you."

I go still. "Caleb is asking for me?"

She purses her lips in a smile. "Well, he keeps asking for his 'hottie husband.' That's you, right, honey?"

I sigh. No, it's not me. Caleb has another husband that he craves more than air. A husband he covets and adores and worships body and soul. A drugged and confused Caleb can only be asking for Jake. "Take me to him," I say anyway.

He'll just have to settle for me.

The door buzzes and swings open to admit me. I step through.

"Go down this hall and turn left," says the receptionist. "He's in room C."

With a nod to her, I move off down the hall. The sound of drills and other dental equipment hum behind closed doors as I make my turn, reading the

signs hanging above the doors. The door to room C is open and I can hear voices. I knock twice, standing in the doorway.

A petite young woman with a long, black ponytail turns around, a surgical mask still on her face. I can see the smile in her eyes. “Are you the lucky husband?”

“There he ish!”

I peer around her to take in Caleb. He’s lounging on an exam table. The right side of his mouth looks a little swollen, his cheek wadded with gauze.

“He’sh here,” he cries, his words muffled and slurred by the gauze. “Tiffany, look. Isn’t he shooou beau’iful?” He reaches out a hand for me, opening and closing his fist like Tuomas when he wants to be picked up.

I bite back a smile as I take in the glazed look in his eyes. Fuck, he’s toast.

“He is beautiful,” says the dental assistant, happily playing along.

“God, Marsh, you’re sho fucking hot,” he says on a groan, stretching out on the exam table. “Tiffany didn’ believe me.”

“That’s not true,” she corrects. “I said I was sure he’s very handsome... and you are,” she adds at me.

It’s taking everything in me not to reach for my phone and hit record for Jake and Rachel to enjoy this later. But this is exactly the fear Caleb voiced to me this morning. He fears being out of control, vulnerable to the will of the drugs now coursing through his veins. I gaze knowingly across the room at him, resolved. No one is going to see this side of him but me.

“So, Doctor Ingram was able to make the extraction,” says the dental assistant. “The tooth had become slightly more impacted than the scans implied, which is why we opted for more than just the localized numbing. But we got everything cleaned out, and the extraction went smoothly. He should heal up just fine.”

“Marsh! Show Tiffany our babies,” Caleb calls. “Show her Tuo.”

Tiffany gives me a gracious smile behind her mask. “I would love to see your babies, Mr. Price.”

With a sigh, I pull my phone from my pocket and show her a picture of the boys from our last family beach day. Rakas is holding Tuomas on her lap while Jamie plays in the sand next to her. The boys both wear colorful swim outfits with beach hats and sunglasses.

“Oh, how cute,” she coos. “And is that their...?”

“Their mother,” I say.

She beams at me, pulling down her mask and tossing it in the trash. “That’s so great that you guys were able to keep the birth mother in the picture. Is she a friend of yours?”

“She’s our wife,” Caleb says from behind her. The sanitary paper on the exam table crinkles as he stretches his arms up behind his head like he intends to camp out and take a nap.

Tiffany looks to me for confirmation.

“We’re polyamorous,” I say, giving her the short version. “Three men married to one woman. The children are ours.”

“Oh,” she says, eyes wide. “That’s so cool.”

“And I’m married to my shexy hockey man,” Caleb calls. “I would be married to Marsh too, but he only loves Rachel. Noooo love left for Caleb. He won’t even touch me, Tiffany. Can you believe that?”

I glance over sharply at him.

“Well...that does sound too bad,” she says, clearly not knowing what else to say.

“He’s just sho beai’ful...and sho shmart...and sho fucking shexy. But I can’t make him want me—” His voice breaks and my eyes go wide to see that he’s crying.

Stepping around Tiffany, I move to his side, my hands making contact on his hip and his elbow as I lower my face towards him. “Aarre, don’t cry.”

Caleb drops his hand down, wrapping it around my waist as he smiles up at me through his tears. “Marsh? You’re here? Hey, Tiffany, Marsh ish here!” he calls over to her.

I sigh, my shoulders relaxing. He’s high as a kite. He doesn’t know what he’s saying.

“I know,” the dental assistant replies. “You were hoping he’d come.”

He’s still gazing up at me like I hung the stars and moon. “I wan’ed you sho bad, Marsh. Hey—can we shtop for ice cream on the way home?”

“No food or drink for a few hours,” Tiffany cuts in. “And this is totally normal,” she adds at me, patting my arm. “He’ll be back to his old self in an hour or so.”

I nod, relieved.

She turns to Caleb. “Mr. Price, it was a pleasure working with you today. Doctor Ingram said we’re free to discharge you. Are you ready to go home?”

“Fuck, yesh.” He groans, trying to sit up. He weaves like a blade of grass in a strong wind and my hands go to his shoulders to steady him. His hands

lift immediately to wrap around my wrists as he tries to pull me closer. His face drops forward and he inhales, his nose brushing the fabric of my t-shirt over my stomach. “Fuck, I wanna live inshide your shkin.”

“Okay, Aarre,” I say, pulling away from him with a smile. “Let’s just get you upstanding, joo?”

He laughs. “Joo. Tha’ means ‘yesh’ in Finnish, Tiffany,” he says at her. “Marsh ish Finnish. And Finnish ish shooo hard, Tiffany. You have no idea —”

“Oh!” Her dark eyes go wide as she glances between us. “Oh, god—I get it. You’re the hockey players, right? The NHL guys? And your wife is like an actress or something?”

“Her dad ish a rockshtar,” says Caleb.

“Riiight,” she says with a nod, piecing it all together. “I remember now. Well, it’s really cool to meet you.”

“Thank you,” I say, my attention divided as I try to stop Caleb from getting to his feet. “Are you sure he can leave like this?” I say at her, my tone wary.

“You’re welcome to hang out here a little longer. Once he’s ready, you can go.”

“I’m ready now,” he says, pushing up off the table and getting to his feet.

“Hey—” My hands hold him tight as I shift to his side, getting my left arm around his waist. “Put your arm around my shoulders, Aarre.”

Caleb turns, wrapping his right arm around me, his grip firm, even as he sways.

I reach up with my right hand, weaving our fingers together to keep his hand on my shoulder. “Can you walk?”

“I can walk fine, Marsh.” To prove it, he takes a few steps, pulling me along with him.

Tiffany beams at him. “Lookin’ good, Mr. Price. You’ll be as good as new in no time.” She turns to me, lowering her voice. “I’d just let him sleep it off. And all his post-op information was emailed to his preferred email. We’ll upload it to his patient portal within the next few hours, so you can find it there too. Any questions for me?”

“Yeah, when can I have coffee?” Caleb calls over my shoulder.

“Let’s wait until tomorrow,” she replies, following us out and down the hall. “Only water today.”

“I like peppermint in my coffee. Tell her, Marsh.”

“Yeah, he’s part Christmas elf,” I say, focusing on carrying half his weight as we walk.

“It’s sho shweet and shoo good. Hey, remember when Jake got me shome peppermint lube for my birthday and we—”

“Oookay,” I say over him, squeezing his hand. “Say goodbye to the nice dentist, Caleb.”

“Oh—here.” She snatches up a box of surgical gloves and pulls one out. “We can take that gauze out now if you’d like.”

I hold Caleb still as Tiffany helps him remove the wad of gauze from his mouth.

“No straws for a few days, okay?” She tosses the bloody gauze in the trash and peels off the glove. “Sucking can impede the blood clotting process. And use moist heat if your jaw feels sore. Ice will help with any swelling.”

“We’re three hockey players and a sports doctor,” Caleb says, his words easier to understand now. “We know a thing or two about losing teeth.”

Tiffany sees us out through the main reception door, and I get Caleb down the elevator and into the parking garage. He talks the whole way, muttering incoherent things about coffee creamer flavors and plans for Jake’s birthday.

“Up you get.” I open his door and help him into the truck. He climbs up my body, his hands all over me, knocking my hat off as he pulls himself inside the cab. “Seatbelt,” I say.

He whines, his arms limp at his sides as he rolls his head against the seat to look at me. “Can you just do this one thing for me? God.”

Swallowing my grin, I step up on the truck rail and lean over him, clicking his seatbelt in place. As I crowd his space, his hands reach out for me, pulling at my hips, stroking over my ribs. I go still and he groans, his face dropping forward to press against my shoulder.

“You smell so fucking good,” he says, his tone tinged with aching need. “Sometimes I jerk off using your body wash. I pretend the gel is you.” His hands slide back down my sides, gentle caress. “I rub your cum into my skin and let that scent haunt me. Wanna smell like you—”

“Enough,” I say, heart racing as I launch away from him. I drop back down to the pavement. He keeps one hand fisted in my shirt as he looks down at me, unblinking. Slowly, I raise my hand. Wrapping it around his wrist, I give it a squeeze. “Let me go, Cay.”

He does, his hand dropping limp to his side.

Taking a step back, I swallow a groan of frustration. A minute ago, this was charming, if a little annoying. Now it's turning dangerous. He can't say these things out loud and not mean them. It's too cruel. And Caleb is never cruel to me. So, he can't mean them. He's drugged. He's not himself. My protective instincts flare, a flame burning bright. In this moment, he's mine to comfort, mine to keep safe.

Ducking down, I snatch my hat up off the pavement and toss it over his lap into the cab of the truck. Then I shut his door, taking the moment of separation to breathe, my hand splayed flat against the glass of his window.

Inside the cab, Caleb presses his hand to the glass against mine. "I miss you already," he shouts.

A laugh escapes me, and I shake my head. Shifting my fingers on the glass, I make the sign of the Vulcans.

Caleb mirrors me, smiling like a loon. "Hey, Mars..."

I lift a brow at him.

"Live long and suck my dick."

I snort, dropping my hand away from the glass. My broody Caleb is still in there somewhere, clawing his way to the surface through a sea of bubbly strangeness.

Stepping around the front of the cab, I climb into the truck and bring it to life, the engine roaring in this empty parking garage. Caleb wastes no time turning on some music as I navigate out of the garage and into the bright Florida sunlight. I'm the only one who truly appreciates listening to heavy metal outside of a gym, so Caleb finds the playlist Jake made for me called 'Jake Approved.'

"How are you feeling?" I say over at him as a classic rock song fills the cab.

"Weird," Caleb replies. "My mouth feels heavy."

"Any pain?"

"Not yet."

I nod. "We can do a warm compress when we get home."

He's not listening, too busy fiddling with the music. His thumb jams the button after only a few chords play. It's worse than a skipping radio. I suffer the screech of a guitar and the thrum of a bass drum, only for the sound to change in seconds. "Pick something and leave it," I call over to him, my tone sharp.

"Geez, bossy," he mutters, dropping his hand away from the small screen.

“You know you’re not the boss of me, right? We’re partners, Mars. Metaphors. The bread in the Price Family sandwich. And that’s for fucking life,” he adds, waving a finger at me. “No take backs.”

“I know,” I say, turning the song down a few clicks with a roll of my thumb on the steering wheel dial.

“Noooo,” Caleb wails, his hands raised in alarm.

My foot moves to the brake as I suddenly brace for impact. I use my well-honed goalie instincts to quickly check all my mirrors and blind spots, both hands on the wheel. We’re safe, cruising down the interstate towards the beach. I let out a sharp breath. “Cay, what the fuck?” I bark at him.

“You turned the song down,” he whines, throwing himself forward to adjust the volume dial. “This is our song, Mars. You can’t just turn it down. Are you fucking kidding me?”

The girly pop music blasts in the cab as he turns it back up far too loud. I glance down with a grimace and read the screen. “Since when is ‘Say Don’t Go’ our song?”

His face takes on a look of surprise that shifts to pure loathing as he glares at me. “If you diss Taylor to my fucking face right now, I will file for divorce so fucking fast, I swear to fucking god, Mars.”

I fight a smile as I turn my attention back to the road. Now is not the time to remind him that we’re not legally married so his threats are empty. Besides, I’d like to see him try and get rid of me. “Okay—”

“She’s a fucking lyric wizard, Mars. And she knows more about love and heartbreak than all the poets, all the heart doctors and brain scientists, all the movie writer people.” He waves his hand emphatically with each thing he adds to the list. “She knows us, Mars. You know? She like...she *knows* us.” He pounds his fist to his chest.

“Okay,” I soothe, reaching out a hand.

He snatches for it like it’s a lifeline and he’s drowning. He weaves our fingers together, sighing in relief. His other hand wraps around our clasped hands as he sings the chorus. His voice is deep and melodic as he harmonizes with her.

I keep my eyes on the road, letting him cling to my hand. My eyes narrow as I piece together the lyrics. She sings of a love unrequited, a love full of longing and hopeful waiting, even as the words speak of growing resentment and frustration.

This is our song? Is this how Caleb feels about me?

“Oh fuck, here comes the bridge,” he shouts, dropping my hand.

We pull to a stop at a red light, and he turns, tears in his eyes, and belts out the words as if he wrote them himself. My eyes go wide as he grips at his chest. He mimes tearing his heart out and then reaches over as if handing it to me. Unsure of what else to do, I open my hand, letting him place the invisible heart on my palm. Then he turns away as the chorus resumes, chanting the words like a prayer.

I didn’t know he was such a fan of Taylor Swift. This has to be the drugs, right?

“Do you get it now?” he says as the song fades out. “Do you see it, Mars? Do you *feel* it?” He presses his hand over his heart. “She should have just named the song ‘Say Don’t Go, Ilmari Price.’”

“It’s a good song,” I assure him, unsure of what else might ease his distress.

He holds my gaze, his expression wholly open and disarming. “Jake tells me to be patient, and I *am* being patient, Mars. I’ll keep waiting. I’ll keep pretending it’s enough because I know you’re not ready and maybe you never will be. But I’m gonna keep waiting, Mars. And maybe someday you’ll look at me the way you look at Rachel, and then I’ll know I don’t have to wait anymore. Because we could be so good together, Mars.” He says this in one breath, his voice strained with deep emotion.

Meanwhile, I feel like I’ve just been checked into the boards. My chest is empty of air as I try to breathe out. I want to say this is still the drugs talking. I want to believe he doesn’t mean a word. Because the alternative would be for me to admit that I’ve apparently been torturing him slowly for five years, unable to see or understand that he needs more.

Fuck, *I* need more.

I suppose sometimes you don’t know you need more until you do.

Caleb is calmer as we finish the drive home, content to listen to more music from Jake’s playlist. I think the sedation is fading. He’s behaving more like himself, his movements smaller and more deliberate.

I help him get inside, but he doesn’t need to lean on me quite so much. His feet still shuffle, and I notice his limp is more pronounced than usual.

“Hey guys,” Bethany calls from the kitchen. “Jamie, your daddies are home.”

Poseidon dances at our feet as I navigate Caleb around him and into the kitchen.

Bethany stands at the island, phone in hand, Tuomas balanced on her hip. His cheeks are full of banana. Behind them in the living room, Jamie and Sunny play with their toys in a patch of sunlight on the floor. “Hey—girl, I gotta go,” Bethany says at her phone.

“Okay, call me later. And hey Mars, hope Caleb feels better soon!” I hear Lauren Gerard’s voice on the other side of the phone before Bethany hangs up. Her husband, Jean Luc, still plays on the Rays with Jake, though he’s nearing retirement. Bethany and Lauren are neighbors, which is how we got introduced. “Hey, how’d it go?” she calls out, taking in Caleb’s slightly swollen cheek.

“M’fine,” he says, his hand still holding to my arm as he shuffles around the kitchen island.

He’s coming down hard off his sedation now. The fatigue is setting in.

“Isä come back,” Jamie calls at me in Finnish, leaving his blocks to toddle our way.

“Bubs, you know I don’t speak Spanish,” Caleb mutters, his shoulders sagging.

“Finnish,” I correct.

“Fuck, I’m so tired.”

Bethany just smiles, still bouncing Tuomas on her hip. “You can get him settled upstairs,” she says at me. “I’ll hang around for a bit.”

“Thanks,” I reply, letting her catch Jamie before he can get to us. He whines, calling out for me to hold him. “I’ll come right back down, Jaminen,” I say in Finnish. “Let me help Dada first.”

“You sound like a Viking king when you speak Spanish,” says Caleb, his tone taking on a hint of delirium now.

“Finnish,” I correct again.

“I miss your hair,” he says over me as we start up the stairs. “Rachel does too. You were so fucking sexy with the long hair.”

“I see...and now I am no longer sexy? My wife and my metaphor find me repulsive?”

He scoffs. “Yeah, our wife who rides your dick every chance she gets finds you repulsive. Wake up, Mars.”

With a soft chuckle, I lead him down the hall, stopping just short of the master bedroom. I turn instead to the door on the left, leading him into his private bedroom. He keeps his personal effects in here—his guitars, his electronics, his clothes. And he sleeps in here most nights. The bed is a single

king bed, not a double king like in the shared bedroom.

I look to the soft grey comforter and stack of navy-blue pillows. In five years, I've never slept in here. I've never even been invited in. Crossing the threshold emboldens me. "And you? Do you find me repulsive with shorter hair?"

"Fishing for compliments is weak sauce," he mutters, dropping my hand to move by himself over to the bed. He sinks down on it with a tired groan.

I drop to one knee, helping him out of his shoes. "Socks on or off?"

"Off."

I duck down and his hand brushes over my shorn hair. I cut it short just before Tuomas was born. I know I annoyed them when I cut it, but I wanted a change. Caleb's touch is gentle, like a caress. He keeps his hand on my hair as I peel his socks off for him. "Shirt?"

"Off," he replies, weakly lifting his arms. I help him get it off and then he sinks backwards on the bed. "I'm just gonna close my eyes for a bit, okay?" His eyes are already shut, the muscles of his face slackening. His jaw looks swollen and pink. "Wake me if you need me."

"Okay," I say, knowing I won't. He needs to rest. I take in the long lines of his body as he stretches out—his muscled chest, the soft dusting of hair that leads down his stomach, his tattoos. Aside from his full arm sleeve, he only has two other tattoos. He got the names of our sons inked on his left ribs below his heart shortly after each of them was born.

He's such a good father, patient and protective. He's a good partner for the same reasons. I may be Jake's port in the storm, but Caleb is mine. I want him looking at me the way he was looking at me in the car, full of raw hope and desperation. I want him grounding me with his words, his touch.

Rachel is the slow beating of my heart, essential to living. Jake is the breath of fresh air in my lungs. But Caleb? He's become my second set of ribs. He's our protector, our center. He keeps us safe. He keeps us whole.

I glance around his room, noting the position of his personal items on the desk and shelves. I want to stay in here with him. I want to hold him in my arms and block out the world until he's strong again. But he has to let me in. He has to really want that from me. He has to say it again in the harsh light of day. Soberly, decidedly. No drugs. No doubts.

Because if we take this step forward, there'll be no going back.

"Say it," I whisper. It's wrong of me to ask now, but I can't help myself. "Caleb...tell me not to go."

I wait for his response...but he's already asleep.

THE DENTIST: PART 2



My phone buzzes, waking me up with a start. I groan, feeling the dull ache in my jaw. Why does my jaw hurt so bad? Did I get sucker punched? Did I black out? I'm seized by a moment of panic in my groggy state as I take quick inventory of the rest of my body. I'm fine. All limbs work. That's when I remember...

Fuck, I had surgery today.

Wait...what day is it?

I blink open my eyes. I'm in my room and it's dark outside. I have no memory of getting here. The last thing I remember is being in the dentist's chair talking to Doctor Ingram about my surgery. Bits and pieces of the rest of the day flash in my mind—the iron taste of blood in my mouth, bright lights overhead, a woman with a soothing voice who reminded me of Rachel.

And Mars. He was definitely there. He must have brought me home and put me in bed.

I roll to my side, taking note of my shirtless chest and bare feet. Did he undress me too? My phone is plugged in on my side table, the screen glowing with a missed call. Next to the phone is a tall glass of water. A little note is propped up against the glass saying: *Drink slowly*. A pair of Tylenol pills wait next to the glass.

I snatch up the phone first, blinking at the brightness of the screen. It's nearly midnight. I've been asleep for...well, hours. I can't do that kind of math right now. I've missed some texts and calls. The last message was from Rachel letting me know we lost our game against Colorado.

I sit up, clutching my phone. Jake hates to fucking lose. Even after all these seasons in the NHL, he takes each loss personally. Now that he's team captain, his self-flagellation is off the charts. But there's nothing I can do about it while he's on the other side of the country. I could maybe try a video call to cheer him up, but he'd just spend the whole time worrying about me. Rachel can take care of him. After five years together, she knows how to help him lick his wounds. He'll be ready to hit the ice against Dallas on Wednesday.

Swinging my legs off the side of the bed, I reach for the pain killers while I shoot Rachel a text, letting them know I'm alive. I down the pills with a sip of the tepid water. The note written in Mars's hand flutters off my side table to the carpet.

I flip on my lamp and glance around again. My shirt from this morning is folded at the end of the bed. My socks are bundled on top. The trainers I was wearing rest heels together on the floor. I smirk, fighting the pain in my jaw. Mars is a godsend, keeping three professionals, two babies, and a dog fed, clean, and happy.

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath. The house is so quiet and calm. In that quiet, my stomach grumbles. Getting to my feet, I leave my phone on the bed and head downstairs in search of a snack.

The boys' end of the hall is dark. Without opening the baby gate, I peek my head inside their room to see Jamie sprawled out on his new toddler bed in footie dragon pajamas. Tuo is in his crib, mouth open as he sleeps. I smile, keeping the door cracked as I slip away.

Lights are on downstairs, and I know Mars will still be awake. The man doesn't sleep more than six hours at a time, and then only if he's sick or jet lagged...or maybe sometimes if Rachel has sexed him to death.

I step into the kitchen to see him standing with his back to me at the dishwasher. He never wears a shirt in the house if he can help it. I don't mind because it means his epically cool back tattoo is always on display. As a fan of tattoos, his is easily one of my favorites. It covers his whole back from shoulders to ass. The artist painted him like he was a watercolor canvas, leaving his own pale skin to create the patterns of light, shading and fine

lines. Each part of his back displays scenes from Finnish mythology. It's creepy and cool and so heavy metal.

"Hey," I say in greeting.

He goes still, a small stack of plates in his hand as he glances over his shoulder at me. "Hey." He searches my face, one brow raised in silent question.

"Just aches a bit," I say, taking a seat on one of the island stools.

He sets the plates on the counter and rattles around in the cupboard, getting a cup and filling it with water from the fridge.

"Sorry I slept so long," I say over the noise.

"Don't be. You needed it."

"The boys?"

"Out," he says with his back turned. "Bath time, snack, and they were asleep before eight." I can't see what he's doing, but in moments he's glancing over his shoulder. "Come."

I slip off my stool and pad over on bare feet to where he's standing at the sink. He holds out the glass. The water is cloudy. A small carton of salt rests on the counter next to a spoon.

"Rinse your mouth," he says, holding out the glass.

I raise a brow at him, leaning away.

His tone softens a bit. "Doctor's orders."

Damn, I remember the dentist saying something about this. I snatch the glass from him and take a swig, swishing the water around in my mouth. The saltiness makes me want to gag and it stings as it washes over my surgery site.

"Gently," he adds, his bare shoulder brushing mine as he takes the glass from my hand.

I lean over and spit the foul, salty water into the sink. "Fuck—that's disgusting."

He smirks. "You live by the beach and surf twelve months a year. Surely you must be used to salt water by now."

"Yeah, but ocean water is a little more water and a lot less salt."

We're standing close enough that he reaches out, ghosting his fingertips over my jaw, his eyes narrowed in study. "It doesn't look swollen. Would you like an ice pack? Or the dentist said moist heat can help with the ache..."

I go still, following the line of his fingers down his arm to his shoulder. He's being so attentive. He put me to bed, folded my clothes, prepared my

pills and the weird gargle water. Now he wants to get me ice? I'm not used to having his undivided attention.

He stands next to me, watching, waiting. I feel like I'm missing something.

"Umm...actually, I'm kind of hungry," I admit.

He steps past me to the stove and clicks it on. A lidded pot already waits on the front burner.

"What are you doing?"

"I made soup for you," he replies. "It'll reheat quickly."

I blink. "You made soup just for me?"

He glances over his shoulder. "You sound surprised."

Am I surprised? Not really, I guess. He and Jake are both good cooks. Thank fucking god, because the gene skipped Rachel entirely. Her brother may be a chef, but she's only allowed to make salads and cocktails. She's can bake, so long as it's nothing more complicated than Christmas cookies.

I have no room to judge because I'm fucking hopeless in the kitchen. My timing is terrible and I'm always either burning shit or undercooking it. I've just gotten really good at setting the table and cleaning up after family meals. And I try to pull my weight in other ways. Six people go through a ton of laundry.

Grilling with Mars is one of Jake's favorite things to do on his days off. And Mars can easily whip up egg tarts and breakfast scrambles. He cooks whole dinners too—roasted meats and veggies, fruit pies for dessert. Apparently, he also makes dentist-approved soup.

It feels weird that he bothered cooking for one instead of six. I'm sure I could have just scrounged something from the fridge. But now my curiosity is piqued. I step closer to the stove, our shoulders brushing again. "What kind of soup is it?"

"Beef stock with puréed vegetable."

Plucking the lid from the pot, I peek inside. The savory scent of beef and tomato hits my nose. My stomach growls louder. "It smells really good, Mars."

"The taste is bland," he admits. "I was afraid herbs might irritate your mouth."

I replace the lid. "I'll eat anything you make; you know that."

He brushes a hand over my bare shoulder. "Sit down and I'll bring it to you."

My spidey senses are officially starting to tingle. He's being almost *too* accommodating. I move back around the island and sit on the stool, intent to watch how this plays out. In minutes, Mars is placing a steaming bowl of soup in front of me. He also provides a folded napkin with a spoon and another tall glass of water. I mutter a 'thanks' as he sets each thing down.

When he peels the lid off one of the boys' plastic dishes of peaches and sets it by my soup bowl, I rattle the spoon down before taking a bite. "What the fuck is going on?"

"What?"

"What is this?" I say, gesturing to my dinner spread.

He raises a brow in confusion. "You said you were hungry..."

"It's after midnight, Mars. I could have just gotten myself a cheese stick and some grapes and called it a night."

"You don't want the soup?"

"I don't know, is it cursed?" I say, my temper rising.

"Cursed? What does that mean...you mean like poisoned?"

For some reason, I'm suddenly standing, my hunger forgotten. "Why are you being so weird?"

What the fuck am I doing? Why am I picking a fight when he's just trying to be nice? His eyes are wide, and he raises a hand towards me like I'm a puma loose in the kitchen. Maybe I am. An awkward moment passes between us as he searches my face, his blue eyes piercing in their intensity. I feel like he's looking for something. I stare back, waiting.

After another moment, his gaze hardens as he lowers his hand. "You don't want it, Caleb? Don't eat it."

It's so rare for him to use my name. He says it now, and it hits me like a bolt of electricity straight to my dick. Really unfortunate timing with the way he's glaring at me. But his voice is all growly and rough, and he's looking at me like he wants to eat me. "What the fuck does that even mean?" I call as he turns away again. "Why did that feel buried in like ten layers of nuance, Mars? What the hell am I missing here?"

He rattles more clean dishes out of the dishwasher, returning them to their cabinets. "There's nothing wrong with the soup. Eat it and go to bed. You need to recover your strength."

His tone is so hollow, so dismissive. And yet I sense something more to it, something deeper. He's frustrated with me. No...it's worse. I take in the set of his shoulders, the way he won't let himself look at me. He's hurt and

he's hiding it from me. My mind spins as I try to make sense of it.

"Something happened." I say the words out loud, even if only to myself. "Something happened today," I say louder. "Didn't it?"

He goes still, arm in the air as he puts away a coffee mug. Slowly, he lowers his hand, not turning around. I wait for him to speak, but the asshole just pulls another dish out of the washer.

"Mars," I shout, moving around the island. Now I'm the one treating him like a puma, both hands raised as I approach. "Look, man, if I did something...if I said something...I didn't mean it, alright? I can be an ass. That's not breaking news."

He rattles a fistful of forks down on the counter. Slowly, he glances over his tattooed shoulder at me. "You really have no memory of today?"

I glance around, looking for an instant replay camera. "I remember giving you my shit to hold. And I remember, like...bits and pieces. I remember the lights in the room and a dentist that looked like Rachel..."

"Tiffany," he says softly.

Her name unlocks a door to more memories. "Yeah...fuck, and she said she'd heard of us, right? You showed her pictures of the boys and then we left. You helped me out to the car, right?"

He raises a brow, that deep frown still lining his face. "You really remember nothing else?"

With a frustrated groan, I press my palms to my temples, eyes shut tight as I try to open more doors inside my head. "I remember...fuck, it's all so fuzzy." I open my eyes, hoping he can see the sorry look on my face. "Mars, I would never say anything to hurt you. You know that. I'd rip my own fucking throat out first. So, whatever I did—"

"It's fine," he says, turning away.

But it's not fucking fine. He's twisted up and I somehow did the twisting. "Mars, come on," I plead, following after him. "You can't be mad about something I said while I was drugged out of my mind—"

"I said it's fine. I hold nothing against you. I'm not mad. I'm nothing."

I drop my hand to my side, heart racing as I search his face. Why do I get the feeling that I had something and just lost it? "Mars—"

"It's been a long day, and we're both overtired." He gestures to the bowl of soup cooling on the counter. "I'll leave you to your dinner."

He's pulling away from me and I can't stop it. I have to try and stop it. "Mars, please—"

“I’ll be upstairs if you need anything.” Stepping past me, he flees the kitchen like his ass is on fire, leaving me alone with only the dog, my homemade soup, a thousand unanswered questions, and a racing heart.

Mars had to run some errands this afternoon and he left me with the boys. I didn’t even wait ten minutes before I packed them into the car and drove halfway across town to the dentist’s office. I have questions that need answers.

Last night I ate my soup and went to bed, ignoring the way the light was still on at the end of the hall. Mars was lying awake in there, but I left him alone. If he’s gonna be an ass, then fuck him. But I slept like shit, tossing and turning all night.

Things are even worse today. It’s like Mars intends to make no mention of what happened. We’re just...moving on. Only we’re *not* moving on. He’s been so distant all day, like we’re polite roommates now instead of two men woven into each other’s souls with iron thread.

First sign of weirdness? I came downstairs and found him in the living room casually wearing a t-shirt. Mars never wears a fucking shirt. I don’t know why, but I took it personally. It’s like he’s hiding from me, like he suddenly feels the need to wear armor around me.

And don’t get me started on the coffee. As soon as he saw me, he got up and moved into the kitchen, being all polite as he wished me a good morning. I met him at the coffee maker like I always do, and my hand went out like a robot, expecting him to pass me the peppermint creamer. But the asshole just refilled his own cup and walked away.

He walked the fuck away.

I haven’t gotten my own creamer out of the fridge in five fucking years. I just stood there next to the coffee maker looking like a total asshole, listening as he spoke to the boys in Finnish, watching as his shirt-covered back turned away from me.

The shirt, the coffee, the Finnish—my metaphor is boxing me out.

Fuck him.

That’s what I should do, right? I should ignore it. Ignore *him*. Instead, I

hoist Jamie up on my hip, pushing Tuo in the stroller, as I jab my elbow at the little round wheelchair access button. The glass door to the waiting room swings open and I wheel the boys in.

It takes seconds for Jamie to spy the toy table and then he's trying to tip himself forwards out of my arms. A little girl is already playing there. I set Jamie down and he waddles over with his squishy diaper butt, both hands reaching out for the colorful blocks. His little brother is content to watch from the stroller, snuggling with his shark stuffy.

"Hi, can I help you?" calls a cheery voice.

I turn to see a different woman sitting behind the glass from the one yesterday. She's looking at me and I feel like an idiot. Why did I come here? Because I'm suddenly feeling insecure and it's making me crawl out of my fucking skin?

Pretty much.

I step up to the glass, dragging a hand through my hair. "Hey, yeah, uhh...I was in here yesterday. Caleb Price. Wisdom tooth removal..."

Her fingers click on the keyboard. "Yep. I see you had an extraction yesterday." She looks up, her smile falling as she searches my face. "Are you experiencing any severe pain or persistent bleeding?"

"What—no. No, I was..." *Just do it you fucking chickenshit.* "Is Tiffany here?"

The receptionist blinks up at me. "Tiffany? Do you mean Dr. Collins?"

"I don't know her last name," I admit. "She was with me during the procedure yesterday. I know her name is Tiffany, and she has dark hair, I think."

She raises a brow. "I'm sorry, sir, but I can't give out information about the surgeons or their schedules."

"No, I just—" I groan. This was so fucking dumb. I shouldn't have come. "I just need to ask her a question about...about post-op care stuff."

She turns and starts rifling through a stack of papers. "You should have received a post-op care note direct to your patient portal, but I have a paper copy here—"

"No, it's fine. I uhh...I actually need to ask her about something else," I try, knowing how lame I sound.

The receptionist isn't buying it. Her eyes narrow on my wedding ring before she looks over to the babies I brought in with me. "Sir—"

"Look, I'm not here to stalk her or something. I'm happily married. I just

need to ask her what I said yesterday while I was high that made my husband so mad at me.”

Her eyes go wide. I swear she’s moved her hand like an inch to the left as we’ve been talking. She’s probably ready to reach under her desk and press an alarm button. This is just fucking perfect. Now Mars is gonna have to drive downtown and pick up our boys from jail while I’m booked in on a workplace harassment charge.

Before the receptionist can respond, the dentist in question walks past behind the front desk, her dark ponytail trailing down between her shoulders.

Pulling a Jake, I smile and wave like we’re best friends. “Tiffany, hey,” I call out.

She turns at the sound of her name and slowly smiles back. She shuffles something off to another person in matching scrubs and walks over to the window, one hand on the back of the receptionist’s chair. “Hi, Mr. Price. Back again? That can’t be a good sign.”

“No, I’m fine,” I say quickly. “I was just hoping I could talk to you for a sec. I promise I won’t take more than two minutes of your time.”

“Sure. You actually caught me between appointments. Let me just come around.”

Heaving a sigh of relief, I cast the surprised receptionist a smirk and hurry back over to my boys. Tiffany comes through the door and joins me over by the play table.

“These are your boys, right? Such cutie little munchkins.”

“Yeah, they’re adorable. Listen,” I say as she sits down. “I need to know what I said to Mars yesterday.”

Her smile falters. “What?”

“When I came out of surgery,” I press. “I must have talked...to you, to my husband. Do you remember what I said?”

She laughs, flicking her ponytail off her shoulder. “Oh, don’t worry about that. People say the craziest things. Just blame it on the happy gas—”

“No, I have to know,” I say over her. “You wouldn’t really get it unless you knew me and Mars, if you knew the way we are together. I can’t really explain it other than to say I think our relationship is now in mortal peril. Please, Tiffany. Do you remember anything I said to him?”

She’s thoughtful for a moment, watching as Jamie plays with the blocks. “Umm...well, at first you kept trying to guess our favorite ice cream flavors,” she says with a small smile. “And then you cried when you kept getting it

wrong, so we just told you it was right.”

“Ouch,” I mutter.

That’s really fucking embarrassing.

She laughs. “And then you kept going on about your ‘hottie husband’ and how beautiful he was and how much you wanted to...you know...do things with him.”

Ice cream and sex? Jake will be thrilled to know he was the only thing on my mind while I was stoned out of my mind. “If I said I was sorry, would it matter?”

“Don’t be,” she says with another laugh. “Honestly, it was kind of cute. You were so smitten. You kept calling him your ‘sexy Thor’ and said he was the Viking god of love. You said he was so handsome it made your heart hurt.”

I go still. “Wait...I was talking about Mars?”

“Well...he’s your husband, right?”

I turn towards her, our knees brushing in the small space. “What exactly did I say while he was in the room? Do you remember?”

“Umm... you just kept talking about how beautiful and sexy he is...and then you made him show me a picture of your boys.” She looks to Tuo in his stroller and her smile falls a bit.

“What?” I lean forward. “What is that look?”

Her smile falters. “Well...I think you maybe said something about how he only loves your wife...and that he doesn’t actually love you.”

My heart fucking stops.

“You said something like, ‘I can’t make him want me.’”

Oh, this is so fucking bad.

“And then you pulled him in close and said you want to live inside his skin.”

“Oh...shit.”

Now it’s her placing a hand on my knee. “Caleb—do you mind if I call you that?”

“Feel free,” I mutter.

“You were under sedation. I’m sure your husband understands. He’s probably just worried about you. Surgery is stressful on partners too, even minor surgeries.”

“No, this is bad,” I say, launching to my feet.

Tiffany can say what she wants about the unserious nature of confessions

made under the influence of happy gas. But Mars and I know the truth. The gas did nothing but lower my towering brick walls. The gas left me exposed and vulnerable, lying there with my heart in my fucking hands.

After five years of this strained mutual silence, Mars finally knows the truth. He knows I meant every word I said.

I get the boys back in the car and start driving home, both hands holding the wheel like I'm sixteen years old. My phone connects to the Bluetooth and music fills the car, something soft and indie rock. I don't really hear it. I can't focus. My brain is humming. I can barely follow the GPS instructions.

We don't make it ten minutes down the road before the song changes and my eyes go wide. I glance down to see a Taylor Swift album cover glowing on my phone screen. Rachel made this playlist for me. Hearing the chords to the song feels like being doused in cold water. A shiver shoots down my arms and I squeeze the steering wheel tighter.

"No, no, no..."

All at once, memories wash over me—Mars with his arms around my waist, me burying my face against his chest, holding him as he lays me down on the bed, his gentle hands as he undresses me. I lift my arms, looking up at him with such longing it makes me ache.

Fuck, I wanted him to stay last night. I wanted him to hold me.

I've always wanted Mars. I just don't know how to have him. It's the last empty space on the map of our shared lives. Rachel, Jake, and I have done the work to explore all the hills and valleys on our sides of the map. We've had the long talks and the confusing jealousy and the earth-shattering sex. We've figured out how to make this work for all of us.

But Mars isn't that guy. He doesn't do jealousy. He doesn't need long talks to work out his feelings. He just takes what he wants and politely leaves the rest. And what he wants is Rachel. He's made that clear from the beginning. Jake and I were always the side dishes to her main course.

Don't get me wrong, he loves us. I feel confident he'd never wish to live without us. If Rachel dies tomorrow, he's not going anywhere. We'll be three old men shuffling around a frozen pond with our hockey sticks, showing the

grand kids how to sink pucks in the net.

But if he wanted more from either of us, he would take it...right?

I glance in the rearview mirror, checking on the boys. Jamie is looking out the window, eating his cracker snack. Tuomas is asleep.

Mars took more the day Tuo was born. He turned to me, heart in his hands, and asked me to give him more. I did. I would have given him fucking everything—shirt off my back, lungs from my chest. I thought it was a new beginning for us. I thought we were finally going to fill in the last blank space on the map.

But nothing came of it. I told him I loved him, and he never mentioned it again. We took Tuo home and became a family of six. Well, seven including the dog.

That was ten months ago.

I've resigned myself to the truth that Mars is settled. His bonds to Jake and Rachel are more than secure. They give him all he needs. I should be satisfied too, right? I should be content that I have two loving romantic partners. Rachel is my wife, the mother of my children, the center of our family. And Jake loves me so much. He loves us all. I don't know what any of us did to deserve him. He makes me so fucking happy.

But no matter how much I love them, and how happy they make me, that blank space on the map remains. It's the last uncharted territory. Sometimes it feels like it's growing larger with time, not smaller. I fill it with my silence, my frustration, my empty hope. If Mars wanted me, he could have had me. All he has to do is reach out his hand and I'll take it.

But he hasn't...and he won't.

Because he doesn't want me like I want him.

After five years of holding this truth hostage deep in my heart, all it took was a stupid dental surgery for my walls to finally crumble. He knows the truth now. He knows I want him. And how does he respond? He pulls away. He puts on his armor and shields himself. He's saying without words exactly how he feels.

A high stick to my aching jaw would be more fucking humane.

And now I have to go home and see him? I have to pretend I don't know what has him pulling away from me? Yeah, fuck that. I won't let Rachel and Jake come home to this den of denial. They deserve better. Mars doesn't get to run from this and neither do I.

Decision made, I cut left across two lanes of traffic and turn left instead

of right on the A1A highway. Weaving down a few side streets, I pull up outside a beach bungalow. Two cars sit in the driveway. I glance in the backseat. “Okay, J-man. Let’s go see if Emma can play.”

“Yay,” comes Jamie’s soft cry from his car seat.

I get the kids out of the car and head to Tess’s front door. Ringing the bell, I wait. After a minute, Langley opens it.

Shit, I forgot he’d be here. He’s rehabbing another knee injury, which means he’s not traveling with the team for games right now.

“Hey, Sanny. What—” He glances over his shoulder into the house. “Did I know you were coming over?”

“Is Tess here?” I say without preamble.

Tess appears from the kitchen with Emma perched on her hip. Her little mini me is decked out in fairy wings and a sparkly unicorn horn headband, her wild strawberry curls sticking up in all directions. Emma is only three, but she’s a total firecracker.

Tess looks to me in confusion. “Caleb? Wha—hey nugget,” she coos as Jamie pushes his way past Langley’s legs to get to his godmother.

Langley steps back with a laugh, letting me in too. I set a sleeping Tuo down, still buckled in his car seat.

“How was the surgery?” Tess calls. She’s crouched on one knee now, her arm around both the kids. “Head is still attached I see.”

“It was fine,” I say, stuffing my hands in my pockets. “Listen, can the boys stay with you for a while today?”

She pauses from putting Emma’s unicorn headband on Jamie. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just...Mars and I have some stuff we need to take care of around the house before Jake and Rachel get back, and it would be easier to get it done without the kids underfoot so...”

Tess picks Jamie up and marches barefoot across the floor towards me. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

Emma darts around her mom’s legs, handing her a glittery wand with a light that blinks pink and purple. “Mommy, why is Cay-Cay lying?”

“That’s a very good question, kitten,” her mom replies, jiggling my kid on her hip. God, I don’t know how Langley handles two of them. Tess is nightmare enough. “What did you do to Mars?” she levels at me.

“Nothing,” I say again, my indignation rising.

“Babe, it sounds like they just need some kid-free time to get some chores done,” Langley cuts in. Sweet, gullible, puppy boy Langley.

Tess isn’t buying it. “Honey, take the kiddos to the kitchen and find them a snack,” she says, shifting Jamie over to him. Emma darts away at the mention of the word ‘snack.’

Langley chuckles, brushing a kiss to her brow, his hand gently stopping Jamie from pulling her hair as he says, “Leave something for the coroner, babe.”

Oh shit.

Maybe he’s not so gullible. Langley walks off with my kid and I suddenly regret everything.

Tess stands there, hands on her hips, fiery red hair escaping her bun. She gives me her best glare. “What the heck is going on?”

“Nothing,” I say for the third time.

“You don’t show up on my doorstep asking me to watch your babies, Cay. You don’t show up on my doorstep *ever*.”

“What are you talking about? I’m here all the fucking time—”

“Not by yourself,” she counters, pointing the sparkle wand at me. “You say you want me to watch your boys so you and Mars can ‘take care of stuff?’” She taunts me with air quotes. “What the heck is that code for, huh?”

“Maybe we’re finally replacing the tile backsplash in the kitchen,” I snap, not ready to face the music. “Maybe we’re staining the deck—”

“*Maybe* you’re full of shit. I know you, Cay. You’re standing here all freaked out like you’re about to tell me you’re pregnant and he’s the father and—ohmygod—” She gasps, her free hand raising to her mouth as her green eyes dart left and right, searching my face. She lowers her voice to a hoarse whisper. “Caleb Joshua Price, did you get some other woman pregnant?”

“What—*no*,” I bellow. “Why is *that* where your crazy head goes first? How would I even—wait, Joshua? That’s not my middle name—”

“I don’t know your middle name,” she says with a dismissive wave of the wand. “Why do you look so guilty and weird and freaked out? What are you up to?” She steps closer, pointing the blinking wand in my face. “If you did something to hurt them or betray their trust, I will bury you in a sea turtle nest!”

“Tess—”

“You tell me right now, or I will take these babies and call their mother. Maybe *she* knows what’s going on—”

“Don’t call Rachel,” I plead, holding out a hand to stop her from reaching in her pocket.

She stills. One brow raises slowly as she looks at me, waiting. “Then start talking, mister.”

I groan, dragging both hands through my hair. “Look...fine. Okay, here it is. I was high yesterday after the surgery and I said some shit and Mars heard it and now I’ve gotta go deal with it, okay? I can’t—we can’t just keep—” I bite back my words, giving her a desperate look. “I have to talk to Mars, Tess.”

She tucks the wand in the back pocket of her jeans as her eyes widen over her freckled cheeks. “Oh god...oh Cay, no. What did you say?”

I hold her gaze, searching her face. For better or worse, Tess Langley is one of us. She shoved her way into our lives shortly after Rachel and wrapped us all around her damn finger. She’s weirdly become a best friend to each of us, giving us all what we need. In Mars’s case, it’s someone to push him. For Jake, it’s someone to laugh with and plan crazy, extravagant parties. For me, it’s someone to call me on my bullshit.

Like right now...

She knows me. She’ll read through anything I say. So, I tell her the truth. It only takes one word. “Everything.”

Tears fill her eyes. “Oh god...like, *everything* everything?”

I nod.

She crosses her arms, glancing over her shoulder at the sound of our kids laughing with Langley in the kitchen. She looks back at me, her face somber. “He loves you, Caleb.”

“I know.”

Stepping forward, she places a hand on arm. “No, he *loves* you. Don’t doubt that.”

I nod, a ball of emotion sitting in my throat. “Will you just watch the boys for a bit?”

“Yeah.” She takes a step back. “Yeah, Auntie Tess has the boys tonight. Just be warned: Emma’s in a pretty serious glitter phase...”

“Good to know.”

“Your boys will be doused...”

“I’ll send you a laundry bill.”

She smirks, nodding behind me towards the door. “Go home, Cay. Fix this.”

I shrug the diaper bag off my shoulder, setting it next to Tuo's car seat. My heart is suddenly racing like I just ran a set of sprints. "There's uhh... some diapers in the bag and snacks and stuff. And Tuo has his stuffy for bedtime and—"

I fall silent as she closes the space between us, taking my hand in hers. "You've waited long enough for this, Cay."

I go still, too much a coward to look at her.

She squeezes my hand. "This truth always had to come out. No going back, okay?"

I nod, weaving our fingers together.

She steps in closer, her free hand brushing down my arm. "Make him hear you, honey...but make sure you listen too."

I lean forward and press a quick kiss to her forehead. Then I'm stepping away, giving one last look to the son Mars named for me, still asleep in his car seat. "I'll call you," I say as Tess opens the door. She follows me out onto the front porch, watching as I get into my car and pull away.

There's nothing left for me to do but go home.

Minutes later, I turn down our street to see the truck parked in the driveway. Mars is already home. Steeling myself, I pull in next to him and head inside. Poseidon meets me at the door, dancing at my feet, as I slip off my shoes and put all my pocket stuff in the dish. I listen for any sound of Mars, but the house is quiet. He always prefers it quiet unless he's working out or cooking dinner.

I step softly around the bottom floor, searching for him. The kitchen is spotless, the dishwasher churning. From the laundry room, I hear the soft tumble of the dryer. Poseidon trots away and flops down onto his massive floor pillow. Rattling open the drawer by the dishwasher, I pull out the bottle of pain killers and tip three into my palm. I lean over the sink and slurp some water.

"Still in pain?"

I jump, swallowing the pills. I glance up to see Mars in the entryway. He must've been napping upstairs. As he enters the kitchen, he pulls a shirt on

over his head, tugging it down to cover his six pack. His armor is firmly in place.

Oh...fuck. A muscle twitches in my aching jaw, matched by a twitch somewhere lower. "That's my shirt," I say over the sound of the running water.

Mars glances down, one hand smoothing absently over his chest. He's wearing my old varsity Michigan hockey tee. It's well-worn, the words faded and the cotton soft. There's a small hole at the neck. It's basically the perfect tee.

It's my favorite tee.

The first time I caught Jake wearing it, I fucked him senseless. I made him leave the shirt on the whole time, gripping it with both fists as I pounded his tight hole. All the while, he chanted out all the ways he was mine. Flashes of seeing Jake under me flicker in my mind as I take in the way the grey cotton stretches around Mars's biceps.

He glances from me to the sink. "What are you doing? Turn the water off."

"That's my shirt," I say again, ignoring his command.

He shrugs a shoulder. "It was in my drawer."

How can he be so indifferent when I'm over here crawling out of my goddamn skin?

"Yeah, but it's mine. You know it's mine, Mars."

Awesome. Good fucking start, Cay. Put the goalie on defense. That'll make this go smoother.

He looks at me like I'm a ticking bomb. "The room was dark. I just put it on, Cay. What is this really about?"

He steps around the island towards me. On instinct, I step back. His eyes widen slightly, his blue searching my brown. Reaching over, he slowly turns the water off. Silence fills the kitchen except for the soft, humming sound of the dishwasher.

"You seem really into shirts all of a sudden," I say, because apparently, I want to make extra sure this goes as poorly as possible.

"What?"

"Why are you wearing a shirt, Mars? You were wearing one this morning too. You never wear shirts in the house."

He leans away, one hand on the counter. "You're angry with me?"

"I'm not angry. I'm annoyed."

His head is tipped to the side in confusion. “At me? Because I’m wearing a shirt?”

Fuck him, we’re doing this. I square my shoulders at him. “No, because yesterday you heard me say I wanna live inside your skin, and now you’re determined to hide that skin away from me. Well, message received, Mars. Loud and fucking clear.”

A ringing silence meets my outburst as the confused Finn just stares at me, his lips slightly parted. After a moment, he seems to recover, his mouth snapping shut. “Caleb—”

“Fuck, I can’t do this.” I spin away and march around the other side of the island. “I thought I was ready, but I’m not,” I call over my shoulder.

“Get back here,” he shouts after me.

“Just give me a fucking minute!” I race off down the front hall towards the stairs, taking them two at a time. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. I only know I’m not ready to see the look in his eyes when he politely turns me down, crushing the last embers of my hope into ash.

The dog barks and I hear Mars on the stairs behind me. “Caleb—”

“Stay downstairs! I need you at least one fucking floor away.”

“Where are the boys?” he calls from behind me.

I pause, my hand bracing the wall by my bedroom door. Slowly, I glance over my shoulder. Mars stands at the top of the stairs, his large frame filling the hallway. He’s making no attempt to move closer.

“Where are the boys?” he asks again.

“With the Langleys.”

He holds my gaze. “Why are they with the Langleys?”

I drop my hand from the wall. “Because I needed to talk to you.”

A moment of silence floats down the hallway between us, filling the empty space.

“So then talk.”

I spin all the way around, glaring at him. “I know what happened yesterday. Pieces of it were already buzzing in my head. Tiffany filled in the rest. I know what you heard me say.”

Now he looks even more confused. “Tiffany? When did you talk to the dentist—”

“I went back there today with the boys,” I say over him. “You were behaving so weird this morning. I couldn’t not know.” I take a step closer to him, my hands balled into fists. “You should have just told me. I shouldn’t

have had to hunt down my dentist and beg her to tell me what happened.”

“And what did you expect me to say?” he replies, his tone cold as ice. “Did you really want me to laugh as I recounted how you clung to me, whispering your secrets in my ear? I didn’t find it all that funny when you said you used my body wash to make yourself come. I didn’t laugh when you told me you rubbed the scent of me into your skin.”

My cock swells at the sound of voice, even as I fight a tremble at his words. “Mars...I was high—”

“You were honest! Don’t minimize this, Caleb. Not this, not with me.”

I absorb each word like a blow, letting them sink deep. God, he’s so frustrated, and it’s all my fault. I did this to us. I broke everything. The jar is shattered, glass everywhere. And I’ve ruined this for more than just myself. What about Jake and Rachel? They were so fucking happy. They were content with the balance we all had. They didn’t ask for things to change.

Fuck, why do I always ruin every good thing in my life?

Mars is still shredding me with his iron gaze. “You meant every word you said...didn’t you?”

I close my eyes, taking a deep breath. My shoulders move with it as I force the air out.

“Look at me when I’m speaking to you!” he bellows, his voice burning like a fire in my chest.

I blink my eyes open. They’re dry as a fucking desert. I don’t deserve to cry about this. I don’t deserve to feel cut up over his rejection. He never once asked for me to catch feelings. He made his position crystal fucking clear from the beginning.

But I *did* catch feelings, and now here we are, shouting at each other in the hallway. We have to deal with this. Slowly, I lift my hands, showing him my surrender. “Just do it, Mars. I can fucking take it, alright? Just say it. Seal this coffin shut so we can both move on and try to salvage what’s left.”

His eyes go wide as he leans away from me.

“Jake and Rachel deserve this,” I press, taking a step closer. “They deserve to see us fight to get past this. To do that, you have to say it.” My voice lowers. “I can’t let this go unless I see you say the words.”

He searches my face, his expression unreadable. “I’m confused,” he admits at last. “What is it you demand to hear me say?”

My hands drop to my sides. “Seriously?” How can he be confused? I shake my head in defeat. “Just say you don’t want me.”

“You want me to deny you? You want me to turn you away?”

My heart pounds dully in my chest as I nod.

Angry resolve simmers under the surface of his calm exterior. He stands there, eyes locked on me...and dares to say nothing.

My humiliation tastes enough like rage to make me bold. I stalk down the hallway towards him. “Goddamn it, Mars, you fucking say it.” I shove at his chest with both hands. “Don’t hold back now. Say it to my face. Say you don’t want me.” I push him again.

He grunts, his body swaying as he holds his ground. Slowly, he crosses his arms in my t-shirt, his muscles round against the tight fabric. The sight of him in that goddamn shirt is making me fucking feral. I shove him again and he lashes out with a muttered curse in Finnish, grabbing both my wrists. He tries to pull me closer, his touch gentling. “Caleb—”

“Getoffme—get the fuck off—” I jerk my hands free of his grip, my voice cracking with emotion. “Mars, goddamn it—” I suck in air, hands shaking as I pull away. I’m such a goddamn mess. I take a step back, shoulders heaving as I look up at him. “Come on, man, don’t make me fucking beg.”

We stand in the hallway of the house we share, each holding a lit match, ready to set our life up in flames. Heart racing, I search the lines of his handsome face. He looks right back at me. He looks *through* me...and says nothing. Not a goddamn word. He knows what I need to hear, but he’s not going to say it. He won’t. God help us both...I think maybe he *can’t* say it.

Realization dawns, snatching all the air from my lungs. “Oh—you son of a—are you kidding me?” In my confusion and panic, I shove him again. “Are you *fucking* kidding me?” Another shove. “How long, Mars?”

He grunts, letting me push at him. He’s such a tree, he hardly even shifts his weight.

“How fucking long—”

“Caleb—stop—” He breaks his stoic silence at last, body checking me. I stumble back and he grabs me by the shoulders, turning me and forcing me up against the wall. “*Enough.*”

The picture frames rattle as my body meets resistance. We grapple until he has me by the upper arms, pressing me to the wall. We’re both panting, chests heaving. His lips are parted, a soft pink warming his cheeks as he glares at me.

“Just *tell* me,” I say again, my voice desperate. “How fucking long,

Mars?”

His grip softens on my wrists. “How long what?”

I hold his gaze. “How long have you wanted me?”

He drops his hands away from me. Then he’s stepping back.

I lean against the wall for support, my body feeling boneless. An eternity stretches between us, but really, it’s only seconds. I look at him, pride shredded, soul in my hands, and wait.

Slowly, his expression softens. “To know you is to want you, Caleb.”

I let out a breath, shoulders sagging. “You can’t mean it. Mars, I swear to fucking god—”

“Why would I lie about this?” he shouts. “I have nothing to gain and *everything* to lose by revealing this truth. Why do you think I have swallowed it for so long? I have lived with it burning a hole inside me because I knew you didn’t feel the same!”

“No,” I shake my head, letting his anger wash over me like a crashing wave. “No, you’ve been in the driver’s seat. This whole goddamn time, it was you calling the shots. You’re a man of action, Mars. You take what you want, and you’ve only ever wanted Rachel. You never even looked twice at me unless she was standing naked between us. You don’t want me for myself alone. You’ve never wanted me—”

“I never knew I was *allowed* to want you!”

I blink, leaning away. “What the hell are you talking about?”

With a frustrated growl, he points a finger in my face. “*You* set the rules we live by, Caleb. Not me. I merely respect them.”

My eyes go wide. “What fucking rules?”

“Rachel is yours,” he shouts over me. “Rachel is yours and Jake is yours. Even the dog is yours. You found them first, you loved them first. I share them with you. *That* is my role here. That is my place, to share them only. But I can’t have you for myself.”

“Why not?”

He huffs, shaking his head as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Because we are the safe harbor. You are held apart, removed from me like a lighthouse on the far distant shore. I can see home, but I cannot reach it. I know it’s there, but your fire cannot give me warmth.” He lifts a hand, reaching across the empty space between us, and cups my face. The feel of his skin on mine sets me on fire.

As if he knows what his touch does to me, his mouth quirks into a sad

smile. “Only they may seek shelter in your light,” he murmurs, his thumb brushing my cheek. “I must remain at the breakers, holding back the violence of the waves, destined to watch you love them from afar.” He drops his hand away, and I’m left swaying on my feet, my own hand rising to brush my cheek, chasing the ghost of his touch.

My anger evaporates as I see the pain in his eyes. Pain I put there through my own inability to see him, to let him be seen by me. “Is that really all I am to you? The lighthouse you can see but never touch?”

His blue eyes break me open with their intensity. “It’s fine, necessary even.”

“Necessary? Why?”

He nods. “Because you’re my other half.”

Oh, fuck. I step in, letting my hands smooth over his chest, fingers brushing against the soft cotton of my t-shirt. He stiffens under my hands, his eyes shutting tight as if he’s in physical pain. “Ilmari...look at me,” I whisper.

His eyes open, those pools of deepest blue devastating me. I take in the furrow of his brow, the soft lines at the corners of his eyes, the dusting of faint freckles on his cheeks, the scar on his eyebrow. He’s so goddamn beautiful. All these years sharing a life and he still takes my breath away.

“Tell me who I am,” I say, lifting my hands to cup his bearded face. “No more hiding. Stand in my light and tell me.”

His hands wrap around my wrists as he holds my gaze. “You are Caleb Price. You’re everything I’m not...everything I can’t be. You give them the things they need that I can’t provide. You help me love them the way they deserve to be loved. You’re my other half. You make us whole. Together, we are the safe harbor—”

“We’re the harbor for *them*,” I reply, letting my hands drift back down to his shoulders. “But they’re an ocean away. It’s just the two of us here now. You and me, Mars. I need to know what I am to *you*. I need to know if there’s any piece of you left I can claim...or have they taken everything?”

His fingertips brush featherlight down the ink on my forearm, sending a fire racing over my skin. My dick twitches with want. But we’re nowhere close to a resolution here. I step in closer and press my palm against his warmth, feeling the beat of his strong heart. “Rachel has already carved her name into the walls of your heart. This beats for her.” I glance up, waiting for him to respond.

He nods. "It does."

I flip my hand over, brushing my knuckles down his sternum. "And Jake and the boys claim all your softness...your quiet. You are their shelter, the place they find rest."

"Yes. I am."

I trail my hand down to his hip. "What does that leave for me?"

His jaw tightens, the heat of his gaze enough to burn down the house.

I stare right back, daring him to deny my next words. "I will not be nothing to you, Ilmari Price. And I am no longer content to stand on some distant shore, helping you hold this family together, wanting you with an ache that tears me apart." I suck in a breath, squeezing his hips as I step in. "I can't *breathe* for wanting you. I have no pride left. No clever words. Nothing. Please...just end my fucking agony and tell me there's something left. Tell me there's a part of you I can have that they don't already claim, something that can be only mine."

He holds my gaze, his blue eyes searching me. "The others have staked their claims on me, it's true. But you may have the rest. Take anything... everything. Every part of me. It's yours."

I close my eyes, letting out a shaky breath. How is this possible? Minutes ago, I marched up these stairs determined to believe he was shutting me out, pushing me away. I thought life as I knew it was over. Like Icarus, I chose to fly too close to the fucking sun, and my whole family was going to pay the price.

Now I'm standing here in this hallway and Mars is telling me I can have anything I want. It feels too good to be true. Shoving away from him with a soft curse, I step back, needing space. I can't be rational if I'm touching him. "Sudden death, Mars. You know the rules."

The corner of his mouth twitches. "Should we go down to the kitchen?"

"Don't you fucking move."

He goes still, waiting.

Swallowing my fear, I ask the question burning the tip of my tongue. Sudden death. Jake and Rachel would be proud of me for shooting this shot first. "Mars...do you love me?"

My goalie lets the puck hit the back of the net. He doesn't lift a finger to block it. "More than my own life. But you already know that. We're so far past expressing our mutual feelings of fidelity. Ask the question you really want answered."

A single moment that lasts an eternity stretches between us.

I lick my lips, heart racing. Sudden death. No going back. “Are you in love with me, Mars?”

He closes his eyes and lets out a breath. “So much it hurts.”

His words tear me open. Everything I have left pours onto the floor at our feet. I close the distance between us, my hands gripping to my t-shirt on his back as I pull him in for a kiss. He goes still, his body like stone, his lips unmoving against mine.

“Mars—kiss me back, before I lose my fucking mind,” I pant against his lips.

His arms wrap around me, hands gripping my shoulders as he pulls me against him. Then he’s kissing me. His lips are soft, his beard bristling against my mouth.

This isn’t the first time we’ve kissed. There have been many peppered through our moments of group sex, but only ever with Rachel and Jake present, encouraging us, watching us, joining us. Our four-way mutual attraction sends us all blazing into an inferno that sometimes burns for hours. We fuck and taste and tease, ending in a pile of sweaty limbs. Four hearts beat as one.

It feels like touching god, my version of it anyway.

But now just Mars is in my arms, his lips against mine. Knowing no one else is here to claim a piece of our shared passion? It’s a whole different kind of worship. I’m possessive by nature. I like to covet and control. As much as I love group sex, I need time with each of my partners alone too. Mars is right, we all need different things from each other. What do I need from Mars? What is this hole inside me that can’t be filled by the selfless love of Jake or the riotous passion of Rachel?

I grip his face, ignoring the painful ache in my own jaw, as I press myself against him, taking what I need. “Let me in,” I beg, my hands clinging to his shoulders as we share air, kissing like we’ll die if we stop. “No more living life as halves. Be whole with me. Let me climb inside your skin, inside your mind. Please, baby, just let me in, and never let me go.”

He groans, his hard dick pressing against my hip as his hands drift down to my waist, his hold on me possessive and firm. “Is that what you need from me?” He breaks our kiss, and we press our foreheads together, breathing in sync. “Rachel gets my heart, Jake gets my calm, and you get everything else? You want to step inside my bones and wear me as a second skin? You want

to possess me, body and soul?”

I grip his face, my fingers tight on his jaw as I force him to look at me. “I want to complete you. Two halves of one whole. No beginning and no fucking end. One unit, unbreakable. That’s what you promised us, Mars.”

I press a single kiss to his lips, and he tenses against me, fighting to lower his walls. This is what I want, what I *need*. This is the thing I’ve been craving more than air. It’s not enough to share this life together and share our children and our lovers. I need to share him. I need him to willingly give me everything. No more holding back.

My hands soften on his face, my fingers brushing over his short beard. “Please...let me in.”

His hands smooth over me, stroking my lower back, and I can almost hear the whirring of his brain as he considers. I arch into his every touch like a needy cat, my body swaying to feel more of him hold me. I want his touch everywhere.

“Let me in, and you can have it all.” His breath is warm against my lips as I lean in once more, my kiss like a promise. “Mars, please...I love you—”

With those words, his resolve snaps. He growls like an animal as his arms come around me, lifting me clear off the floor. He hoists me up his front and turns us, his hands wrapping around my thighs as he barrels down the hall. Caught off guard, I laugh like a kid, relief and excitement surging through me as I cling to his shoulders.

He’s carrying me like a fucking koala. I think he’s going to bring me to the master bedroom, but he doesn’t. He shoulders his way into my bedroom instead, slamming me up against the open door. It rattles in the frame, and I grunt. My body is on fire at the feel of him pressed between my spread thighs.

He holds me with one hand on my ass, pressing me into the door with his hips to keep me still. With his free hand, he reaches up and wraps his thick fingers around my neck, careful to avoid my sore jaw. “This door will never be shut to me again,” he declares.

My eyes go wide as I take in his full meaning. For as much as he’s kept himself separate from me all these years, I’ve kept myself separate from him, from all of them. I built myself a fortress of solitude in here. And since I wasn’t sexual with him before, I’ve never invited him inside. He stood at the breakers, watching as I lived a life apart, bringing his loves inside my inner sanctum, shutting the door in his face.

Closing my eyes tight, I press my forehead to his and let out a breath, knowing my own walls have to come down. “Never again.” I kiss him once, twice, pouring my passion into him, sealing my promise with my lips and my fevered words. “Mars, never,” I chant into his open mouth, his tongue teasing mine. “Never again, I fucking swear.”

Pushing off the door, he brings us to the middle of the room. I slide down his body, my bare feet touching the floor. We stand there, chests heaving, his hands at my waist and mine gripping his biceps. I search the face I know so well, looking for any sign of hesitation or doubt. “If we do this...”

“It changes everything,” he finishes for me.

Everything. I want to be his everything. I want to give him everything. He deserves nothing less. We stand at the edge, waiting for the other to make the first move.

“Do you love me, Caleb?” he says at last.

I huff. “You know I do, asshole. Ask the real question.”

A smile ghosts over his lips. “Are you in love with me?”

My hands stroke down his arms. “So much it hurts.”

We move at the same time, colliding with hands and mouths. My body is on fire as I ride the high of his acceptance. His hunger fuels mine until we’re grabbing with needy hands, trying to get closer when we’re already pressed together.

“This is my goddamn shirt.” I growl the words against his mouth, hands fisting tight to the fabric. “New house rule: you wear my shirt; you wear my cum.”

He drops his mouth away from mine with a laugh, his lips claiming my neck.

The combo of his laugh and the feel of his hard dick at my hip has me seeing black. I grab for the shirt, jerking it up. “Take it off. Get this fucking thing off.” He lets me pull the shirt off over his head and I toss it aside. I grab his jaw with one hand, the other dropping down between us to cup his dick. “You wore shirts today to hide from me, didn’t you? Admit it.”

He grunts, his hard dick twitching under my hand. “Perhaps subconsciously, yes.”

I run my palm up and down his length, watching the muscles in his neck tense. “I will have nothing between us. No more hiding, Mars. And when I walk up to that coffee maker tomorrow morning, you better be waiting with my creamer in hand.”

He smirks, his eyes flashing with interest. “Mistaking me for Jake in this moment would be a grave error.”

“I know exactly who the fuck I’m talking to.” Shoving my hand inside his pants, I wrap my fingers around his hot and ready dick. He grunts, his hips pressing forward in reflexive need. God, he’s so thick. He’s about to tear me the fuck apart, and I’m over here trembling like a virgin with eager anticipation.

I lick my lips, spreading his precum with my thumb. “I know you’ll never let me in that ass,” I tease. “You’re a top through and through. But what intimacies am I allowed? I won’t let this be anything less than perfect.”

His eyes go wide, as if he’s only just now considering what we’re about to do. I’m relieved to see it’s not shock or worry that cross his face. It’s raw, open interest. “I’ve never been with a man,” he admits.

I smile. “I know, Mars.”

“My experience begins and ends with you.”

Fuck, that shouldn’t give me so much pleasure, but it does. He and Jake have kissed on occasion. It makes me harder just picturing it. And once or twice I think Jake helped suck his dick. But that’s just not the way they are together. It’s not what either of them want from the other, and that’s fine.

That Mars wants something different with me is a gift I’ll not be taking for granted.

I smooth my hands over his bare chest. “You’ve seen me with Rachel... and you’ve seen me with Jake. You know what I like. You definitely know where everything goes—”

I pause, my thumb brushing over the words inked on his right pec. *No exit*. The handwriting is Jake’s. And Jake has a matching tat in Mars’s handwriting on his forearm. It’s the only ink Jake has aside from his wedding ring tattoo. They went out and got them the week Jamie was born, telling Rachel and I nothing about it. We thought they were just going out for sushi.

It’s a promise he made to Jake, a sign of his constancy. Mars doesn’t want an exit. He’s all in.

I close my eyes and press my lips to the tattoo, all fear and doubt leaving my body. His hand wraps gently around my nape, holding me to him as I breathe him in. Slowly, I pull away. I hold his dark blue gaze. “You are not Rachel and you’re not Jake. What they need from me is not what you need.”

He holds still, waiting.

“So, take me, Mars. That’s what you want, right? You want all of me.

You're the one who wants to crawl inside my skin and share my bones. You want my surrender?" I step back, holding his gaze as I tug my shirt off, dropping it to the floor. "Take me." I tuck my thumbs into the top of my pants, shrugging them down with my boxers. I step out of both and stand naked before him, dick in my hand. "Take all of me. Use me and break me. Do your fucking worst."

With a low growl he closes the space between us, his hands at my bare hips, reeling me in.

I groan with desperate need, my hands going to the top of his pants as I quickly jerk them down. "I need to see you—need to feel all of you."

He's kissing my chest, his hands gripping my ass as he folds himself around me. Panting, he pulls back, his thumb brushing over my parted lips. "Wait—you are still sore—"

"I'm fine," I bite out, wrapping my hand around both our hard dicks and stroking them together.

He grunts, eyes shutting tight as he moves with me. But then he's pulling away. "No. We will be careful. And the doctor said no sucking," he adds, his mouth tipping into a smirk.

If he thinks I won't be sucking his dick tonight, he's crazy. My mouth is already filling with saliva at the thought. "She meant straws, Mars. And I feel fine—"

"We're not taking the chance," he replies, his tone firm.

I actually fucking whimper. I hear the sound escape my chest and crawl up my throat. I'm officially whimpering for his dick. God, I am so desperate.

He's pleased with the sound, his hand skating over my hip until his fingers brush the crease of my ass. "But I will have everything else," he adds, his heated gaze burning my skin as he takes me in. "I will bury myself in this ass and claim you from the inside out, Cay. From this night onward, you will walk through life as mine. Say you accept, and we begin."

A laugh escapes me as I press myself against him, wrapping my hand around his hard and ready dick. "I accept, you possessive asshole. Now stop talking about it and do it."

His hand drops down to close around mine on our dicks. We stroke each other together, his foreskin stretching around his crown with each tug. Of the three of us, he's the only one uncut. "Wait—" I loosen my hold, shifting us around until I get my dick on top. "Try this way..." I move my hips a little to thrust, the bottom of my dick gliding along the top of his.

“Fuck,” he groans, eyes shutting tight as his head tips back.

I grin, my own euphoria sizzling under my skin. “Yeah, you like that? You like the feel of my metal teasing your aching dick?” I keep moving, letting my piercings stimulate his shaft.

He drops his own hand away, instead grabbing my shoulders, like I’m the only thing holding him up. His eyes are closed, lips parted, as we frof like a pair of horny teenagers.

“Get the lube,” I pant.

His eyes blink open and he looks around in a daze.

“Top drawer,” I push him with my free hand, and we stumble back towards the dresser. He fumbles the drawer open, digging out the small bottle of lube.

I take it from him, popping the cap, and dribble some slick lube over both our cocks and my hand. “Will you let me try something? I’ve always wanted to try this with you.”

He just watches my hand as I bring our dicks back together, stroking them.

“Mars,” I say again, giving his dick a soft slap.

He grunts, eyes flashing as he glares at me.

“Can I try something?” I could ask him if he’s ever tried docking, but I already know the answer. “I think you’ll like it,” I add with a smirk.

He nods. “Do anything but stop.”

Crowing with confidence, I focus on the job at hand. I’ve only done this one other time with a guy, and that was long before my piercings. The idea of sharing this with Mars already has me ready to fucking blow. “Hold your dick here,” I say, wrapping my hand around his base. “Keep it still for me.”

His larger hand replaces mine, cupping his balls as he closes his fingers around his thick shaft. Working the lube over us, I put the tips of our dicks together, our precum smearing with the lube. The softness of his crown lights me up, sending a tingling feeling of anticipation up my spine. With a gentle hand, I work his foreskin a little, sliding it back and forth around his fat crown. Then I put our tips together and pull his foreskin forward until it wraps around my head.

“What are you doing?” he pants, his eyes locked on our dicks.

“It’s called docking. I’m gonna use your foreskin to get us both off. Here, hold on—” I work him for a few more seconds, holding my own dick at the base too as I fold more of his foreskin around me, pressing in with my hips as

I do. He offers the perfect amount of resistance, cursing in Finnish as my grip on his foreskin strokes the piercings on the underside of my dick.

“Oh—*fuck*,” he barks, jerking back. He’s panting, eyes wide as he looks at me.

For a moment, I hesitate. “You...didn’t like it?”

He blinks, his brow furrowed like he can’t translate my words. But then he’s grabbing my shoulder, his hand wrapping back around his dick. “Do it again. Don’t fucking stop. We don’t stop until we both come.”

I groan with relief, pressing in to kiss him as I wrap my hands back around our dicks. I work us with both hands now. We find a rhythm, my hands greased with lube as we fuck the tips of our dicks into each other. It feels so goddamn good. It’s wet and warm and silky like a cunt. His foreskin is so thin and delicate. Each pull of it over the rounded barbells of my piercings has him shivering and groaning, aching to press closer to me.

I fucking love it.

Mars is a quick study, slapping my hand away to take over. Then I’m the one who gets to grip his hips and hold on for dear life as he fucks himself against my piercings, his silky soft foreskin driving us both fucking wild. My whole body feels like it’s coiling tighter as I near release. I should try and last longer for him, really drag this out. But I’ve waited for this for so fucking long. I need to come like I need air. His thrusting gets erratic, and I know he’s close to.

“Mars—*fuck*—I’m gonna come,” I pant, my fingers digging into his hips. “I’m gonna—”

At the last moment, he changes the angle of our cocks, wrapping them together in both his fists so my piercings rub along his shaft, our tips pointed to the ceiling. He jerks us both into another fucking dimension, and I blow on a howl, my cum spurting from my tip and hitting my bare chest.

He follows me, angling our dicks so his load lands on me too. I look down in a daze as thick white cum shoots from his tip, decorating my stomach. After a moment, his forehead drops to mine and we stand there panting, his hand around our dicks, our release painting my skin.

“You’re a quick study,” I whisper with a sated smile. “I take it you like docking?”

He just grunts, tipping his chin to claim a quick kiss from my lips. “You’ve never done that with Jake?”

“Frotting, yes. You’ve watched us do it. But not docking. He doesn’t

have a foreskin. Docking is all yours.”

He lets out another heavy breath, his shoulders relaxing. Leaning away, he takes in the mess of cum on my stomach. Slowly, he nods. “You only do that with me.”

“Only you,” I reply. Lifting a hand, I brush my finger over a drop of sticky cum on my sternum. Not caring whose it is, I lift my finger to his lips. “I will only ever do that with you,” I say, more solemn this time.

Parting his lips, he sucks my finger into his mouth, taking the taste of release onto his tongue. Whether his or mine, it doesn’t matter. He savors it, eyes closed, as his hands smooth up my arms to rest at my shoulders, his thumbs brushing the pulse point at either side of my neck. The feel of his tongue on the pad of my finger is warm and inviting. I want to feel that tongue other places. I want to feel him everywhere.

My finger pops from his mouth and I glance down to see he’s still half hard. Our crazy Finn can go all fucking night. I know what he’s about to say even before he snares my gaze, his blue eyes heating as he looks at me.

“We’re just getting started. Get on the bed.”

I smirk at him, gesturing to my cum-painted chest. “You gonna clean me up a little first, big guy?”

“No.” He steps in, smearing some of the cum with his hand. “This is what you wanted, right? To wear me in your skin? It’s what you said at me as I got you in the car.”

His deep voice acts like a key, unlocking whatever submission genes I have hidden away inside my head. I’m trembling as he looks at me, his height giving him an advantage so he’s looking down.

With my other lovers, I prefer dominance, even if they both love to brat me until I see red. But Mars is no brat. And he’s definitely not submissive. The only way to have him is for me to be the one who gives in. Apparently, I’m fucking here for it. I’m practically shaking with the desire to be used by him, adored by him. “Please,” I whisper, not caring that I sound desperate.

“Please what?” He steps in closer, lowering his face to breathe me in at my neck. It’s a deep inhale, finished with a soft, hungry groan of approval. He likes the way I smell. It’s so fucking primal. I suddenly fight an image of me letting him chase me through the dark hallways beneath the arena... letting him catch me...

I grip his arms. “Mars, please...”

“Please what?” he says again, his hands traveling lower to massage my

ass. He knows exactly what he's doing. He may have never fucked a man, but Mars loves anal. If he could, he'd probably live in Rachel's ass. I'm about to get so fucking wrecked.

Throwing all thoughts of dominance aside, I let myself sink into a sub space. I imagine lowering my body into a warm bath, willing him to sink in with me. My tone turns soft, coaxing. "Please, baby...please fuck me. Take me, and fill me, and make me feel so fucking good." I cup his half-hard dick, giving it a stroke. "I want this dick in my ass. Pound my hole raw, and paint my insides with your cum. Fill me until I overflow—"

With a growl he grabs me by the shoulders and walks me backwards, not stopping until the backs of my knees hit the edge of the mattress. "Get on the fucking bed."

This time, I obey. I sink down to the mattress and scoot back, my hands splayed across the soft, grey comforter. He follows me, climbing between my legs and balancing over my sticky chest as he claims my lips in a kiss. I chase each one, my body feeling fevered with anticipation.

He breaks our kiss, pressing me down to the bed with a hand to my chest. He holds me there, his mouth dropping lower to tease my nipple.

"Oh, fuck." I drag my fingers through his short hair. "Yes..."

He switches to the other side, nipping with his teeth before he teases with his tongue. My hands splay against the black ink on his shoulders, and I smile, still not quite believing where we are. I give his shoulders a little push and he obeys, moving lower.

I cry out as his mouth wraps around my half-hard dick. Never in all our time before has he ever put his mouth near my dick. Now he has half of it in his mouth, sucking my tip like it's a goddamn lollipop. He plays with my piercings, giving one of the barbells a little tug with his teeth.

"Fuuuck, baby." I dig my hands into the back on his head as he sucks me. But I'm still so spent from that first release. I'm not ready for round two. Thank god, he doesn't make me suffer. His warm, wet mouth pops off my dick. I don't even have a chance to reach for him before he's pulling away, climbing off the end of the bed. "No," I whine, sounding like a whipped fucking asshole.

But he's back in seconds, the bottle of lube in his hand. He tosses it down onto the bed, surveying me with hooded eyes. I'm splayed out like a naked starfish beneath him, our sticky cum drying on my chest.

"I want your ass," he says without preamble.

I hold his gaze, shifting my legs a little wider in invitation. “Then take it.” His hand casually strokes his hard dick, working himself from root to tip. “I’m quite large,” he says in warning.

“I’m well aware.”

“I won’t hurt you. I’ll make it feel good. But we can stop at any time—”

“Mars, I’m not an anal virgin,” I say, propping myself up on my elbows. “You’ve watched Jake pound my ass. You helped them tickle my damn tonsils with that purple tentacle last month. No stopping and no holding back.”

His eyes flash with mirth, and I know he’s remembering it too. That toy about near killed me dead. I sent Tess fruit baskets for a week afterwards.

I give him a smirk, flopping back down on the bed. I channel the mastermind behind that little act of anal exploration. Rachel is such a goddamn tease. Picturing her in my place on the bed, I slide my feet up a little, bending at the knees. Then I slowly let my knees fall open, exposing every inch of me to Mars’s hungry eyes.

As he watches, I snake my hand between my legs and press a finger at my asshole, rimming myself with the softest touch. “I know how much you like the prep work. I know you want to stretch and tease me, readying this tight hole to take your monster cock. Take your time, baby. We have all fucking night—”

He drops onto the bed over me, his body pressing me down as he claims my mouth, shutting up my dirty talk with his tongue. I laugh against his mouth, my arms going around his neck. He presses his chest against mine, making us both sticky with cum. Then he gets his arms under me and hoists me two feet further up the bed, giving himself more space between my legs.

I’m still laughing, my joy spilling over as he gets on his knees between my spread legs. Then, in a move I can only describe as ‘the pretzel,’ he grabs me by the hips and folds me the fuck in half, curling my body backwards until my ass is practically in the air, my toes all but touching the bed to either side of my head.

“Oh—holy fucking—*ahh*—” I cry out as his mouth descends on my puckered hole, his hands gripping tight to my thighs. He doesn’t even bother with some gentle rimming first, he just puts his mouth on me and sucks, teasing my hole with his hot, needy tongue.

“Oh my goooooood.” My hands grip the comforter in tight fists as he makes a mess of me, devouring me. His fingers hold me tight enough to leave

bruises as he probes me with his tongue. I try and relax, willing myself to open. Jake prefers the bottom, so it's been a good long while.

"Breathe," he commands, kissing my inner thigh as he presses in with a finger.

"Fucking hell." I fight a shiver as I relax, letting him sink his finger in deeper.

"Such a good boy."

I glare up at him to see his smirk. He's teasing me, his mouth twitching with a smile. "Don't fucking push it," I mutter, relaxing as he presses in with a second finger.

"Get on your knees," he commands, pulling his fingers from me.

I feel empty as he inches away, making space for me. I need more—more connection, more closeness, more of him owning my tight hole. I can't get on my knees fast enough.

He grabs me by the hips and shifts me up the bed. One large hand smooths up my back as he pushes down between my shoulders. I bend myself downwards, placing my forehead on my folded arms. I'm not used to this position. Jake always wants us to face each other so we can kiss. He says it feels more intimate.

But Mars wants to claim me. I take in a deep breath as he drops his face down, his breath warm against my ass cheek. Then he's on me again, his mouth sucking and teasing. As he plays, his hand slips between my legs, fondling my sac.

I hum with pleasure, blood racing to my dick. This amount of stimulation would be enough to make me blow, but it's the anticipation of more that has me holding back a whimper.

"You taste so good," he mutters against my ass cheek. "So warm for me. So ready. And your hole stretches so well. You want me in this ass, don't you? Want me to own you, fill you until you drip with my mess."

I stifle a growl, shifting my hands to grip the sheets as I glance over my shoulder at him. "Dirty talk me again, and you'll be topping from the bottom, Mars. I swear to fucking god—*ahh*—fuck—"

He laughs with dominance as he probes the tip of his dick at my hole. I hear the cap of the lube pop and I just hold on for dear life, breathing through it as he works lube inside me with his fingers and down his hard shaft. His will be the biggest dick I've ever taken. I'm not counting the tentacle.

"Do it," I pant, working the muscles of my rim. I squeeze and relax,

prepping myself for the burn. “Mars—baby, please—do it.”

He gets himself in position behind me, one hand on my hip, as he presses the tip of his dick between my cheeks.

“Do it,” I growl, moving my hips against the iron hold of his grip. “Get the fuck in there. Own me, Mars. Give me that dick—”

He presses forward, sinking in an inch, and I cry out, tensing at the sharp burn.

“Breathe,” he soothes, his hands softening as they smooth over my hips. His touch is tender, coaxing. “You’ve taken my tip. Breathe and bear down. When you’re ready, take more.”

I nod, pushing up on my hands to get better leverage. I want this dick inside me. I want my body to relax. I want to take him deep and feel him pounding me all the way in my fucking chest.

“Shift your hips and push,” he directs.

I roll my hips and relax my back, doing a yoga cat pose Rachel would be proud of. Mars eases in another inch and I mutter a string of soft curses.

“We can stop,” he says from behind me.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I growl, looking back of my shoulder with a glare. “I’ve got a telephone pole in my ass, Mars. I just need a fucking minute. You wanna switch, you just say the fucking word.”

He smirks, his hands smoothing up my sides. “If it’s any consolation, you’re perfectly tight. Any tighter, and I’d already be filling you with cum. As it is, I’m happy to wait all night for you, my love. When you’re ready, we continue.”

My love.

I turn away from him and close my eyes, breathing through the stretch. I am his love. *This* is love. This is the holy communion of two souls entwined by love, now joined in the flesh. I want to be worthy of him. I want to be the last piece of his puzzle, as he is surely mine. We’re complete now. Our hearts, our family. One unit, unbreakable.

Taking a breath, I ease my hips towards him. “Go again,” I command. “Mars, take over. You won’t hurt me. You know what to do. Please—god—just take me.”

He folds over me, kissing my shoulder as he holds himself at the base, pushing in deeper. It’s the work of only another minute or two before I feel the press of his hips against my ass, and I know he’s seated to the hilt.

“Oh god,” I groan, arms trembling. I’ve never felt so full in my life.

He shifts behind me, his breathing slow and steady. “Cay, you feel like heaven. So tight—” He gives a short thrust, moving my body with him. “So warm—so eager for my cock.”

“Pound me. I don’t want a soft and gentle fucking. I want you to carve your name into my fucking soul—*fuck*—”

He slams home harder, his thighs slapping against my ass. I feel it all the way through me as I absorb his thrust with my stiff shoulders.

“Do it again.”

He rocks with me, moving harder and faster. The stretch burns to the point of pain, but beneath the burn is the slow simmering warmth of pleasure. Oh god, he’s going to ruin me.

“So tight,” he pants behind me. “So goddamn tight.”

“For you,” I groan, pushing myself up until I’m grabbing at my headboard, changing our angle. “Oh god, Mars, I’m tight for *you*. Fucking own me. Shatter me. Drown me in your cum.”

He moves with me, inching up the bed, his hands sliding from my hips to my shoulders. I feel the power transfer from his chest, down his arms, to his hands. His grip on me tightens. Oh god, he’s about to unleash.

“Yesss,” I hiss through my teeth. “Fucking do it. Don’t make me wait—oh—*goood*—” I groan out in relief as he goes to fucking town. His hands hold my shoulders hard enough to leave bruises and then he’s pounding my tight hole, our skin slapping noisily. He’s all around me, inside me, taking away every other sense or feeling. There is only Mars. Everything begins and ends with Mars.

He folds himself around me, his left hand pressing against my chest as his right drops down to grip my hard cock. It’s all I can do to keep ahold of the headboard as he rams me from behind, his dry hand working my dick, the friction so hot it burns.

“Oh god, I’m gonna come,” I moan, my head tipped back in ecstasy.

His hot breath is at my neck, and then I feel his teeth scrape the skin of my shoulder as he groans with primal need. The sensation sends a shock down my spine that coils low in my gut.

“Fucking do it,” I growl at him, my instincts telling me what he needs... what I want. “Own me, Mars. Mark me—bite me—*ahh*—”

His teeth sink into the meat of my shoulder as he pounds into me harder, letting go of my dick. His hands dig into my hips and sides, his fingers strong enough to leave bruises where they grip and pull at me. My whole body

comes alive as he abuses me and uses me. It's fucking euphoric.

He releases my shoulder on a shout, his hands still clinging to me, his dick overpowering me.

"I'm gonna come," I cry.

He pulls out of me, leaving me empty and aching without a release.

"No," I whine, moving my hips against him.

But he just holds me by the hip and jerks his dick, crying out his own release. It jets all over my back, sending a shiver down my arms and blood surging back to my cock. He pants behind me, chest heaving as he inspects his handiwork. I can only imagine what he sees.

"I wanted your cum inside me," I say, my tone a desperate whimper.

He folds himself over me again, his hands smearing the cum all over my back, massaging it into my skin. "No," he growls in my ear, nipping my lobe and making me hiss. "You wanted to wear my cum. You dreamt of this, Caleb. You practiced in the shower, alone and aching for it. Now look at you, covered in my seed like a needy, perfect whore. You're *mine*." He slaps my ass, and I gasp despite myself. "You're my jaded little cum whore. And you'll wear my seed with pride because you know you've earned this, every fucking drop."

I preen under his words of filthy praise. My dick is hard as stone, and I'm ready to blow. What the fuck is happening to me? Eyes wide, I glance over my shoulder. "Where the hell did that come from?"

He smirks, his hands still massaging his cum into my skin. Leaning forward, he brushes a kiss to the mark he left on my shoulder. "I learned from the best."

I blink, dumbfounded. *Me*. He learned to dirty talk from listening to me. Well, the student has surpassed the master. A-fucking-plus. I take stock of my body, feeling for the ache. My skin is so sticky with his cum. It's all over me—my chest, my stomach, my back. I've been bitten and scratched and bruised. I'm thoroughly fucked.

But we're not done.

I glance over my shoulder again and he smirks saying, "It's your turn, Aarre."

"What does that mean?"

He smiles, brushing his fingers over his bite mark. "It means 'my treasure.'"

I nod, resolve hardening in my chest. "Yeah, it's my fucking turn."

“What do you want, Aarre? Take anything.”

I spin around, hands on his shoulders, as I press in for an open-mouthed kiss. “I want you under me,” I say against his lips. My hand drops between us, and I stroke his half-hard cock. “I wanna ride this dick until it cuts me in half. And this time you *will* come inside me. We don’t stop until my ass leaks with your cum.”

His eyes blaze as he nods.

Taking back a little of the power, I wrap my hand around his throat and squeeze saying, “And your mouth works just fine, so you’re gonna suck my dick like it’s your favorite flavor of milkshake. If I’m you’re cum whore, then you’re mine. You’re gonna choke on this dick and fucking love it—”

He bites down on my lip. *Hard*. At the same time, he slaps my ass with both hands, leaving them stinging and hungry for more abuse. My cock twitches with delight as I lick away the taste of blood on my tongue. “Fucking animal,” I mutter against his mouth.

“There is no gentleness in me, Cay,” he warns. “Not where you’re concerned. Not now, at any rate. I’ve waited too long for this.” His hands smooth over my shoulders, his fingers brushing the bite again as he inspects it. “I feel like I can’t stop until I break you...but I don’t want to hurt you.”

I cup his cheek, tilting my head until I catch his eyes. “Hey...I’m not fragile. I’ll let you know when I’ve had enough, okay? But I feel the same.” I turn my hand, brushing my thumb over his parted lips. “I’ve wanted you for so long, Ilmari. You say I’m the lighthouse, but I’m the one who has felt lost and in the dark, the treasure trapped in a box, just waiting to be found by you. I feel complete now. Our life...our family. It feels complete.”

He nods. “It does. This is enough. This is everything I need.”

“And...if you want this to stay in the family,” I begin, opening this door for him. “I’m just saying no one else has to know what we do behind closed doors—”

“Stop.” He wraps a hand around my throat, his firm possessive and final. “I will not hide from this. If you are mine, you’re mine with the doors open. No compromises, no doubts.”

I nod, swallowing against his hand. “No compromises. Yours.”

“You accept these terms?”

“Fuck yes,” I say on a breath, my hand stroking up his arm. “Mars, I love you so goddamn much. I think the only people who didn’t know just how much are in this room.”

We both laugh.

“Now that I’m done being a total fucking asshole, this is it,” I declare. “You’re it, baby. You were my missing piece. Now it’s you, Jake, and Rachel. You’re it for me for fucking ever. I am never letting you go.” I brush my fingers over his tattoo, the words written in my husband’s hand. “No exit, Mars. Promise me.”

He nods, leaning in to brush a kiss to my lips. “No exit, Aarre.”

I relax my shoulders and he drops his hand from my neck, his knuckles brushing down my chest as he lets his gaze wander over me. “You about ready for round three?” I tease. “Because all this talk of love and sunshine and fucking happiness won’t save you from choking on my dick.”

He smirks, his expression heating with interest. Slowly, he reaches out for my hand and brings it to his crotch, letting me feel his dick. He’s hard and ready.

“Un-fucking-believable,” I mutter. “You know, Jake is right, it’s really not fair. You have to save something for the rest of us.”

“Perhaps I am meant to be a model for you both,” he teases, using my hand to stroke his dick. “A daily lived example that perfection can be achieved.”

I go still, glaring at him. “Get on the fucking bed.”

He laughs, letting me push his shoulders until he’s flat on his back. I quickly straddle him, situating myself so I’m seating behind his dick. Then I fold myself over his chest, claiming his mouth. We kiss as our hands explore. Even after three years of retirement, he’s still all muscles and hard edges. It’s no mystery since he works out religiously and eats cleaner than anyone I know. He’ll be forty and still be walking around like our Viking sex god.

I can’t fucking wait.

Breaking our kiss, I shift back and reach for the bottle of lube. I pop open the cap and squeeze a generous amount onto his dick. It’s been a long time since I’ve done this, but I’m determined to ride him like a pogo stick.

He groans as I oil his dick, working him with both hands as I twist and pull. He grabs my hips, trying to pull me forward. “Get on.”

“Patience,” I tease, lowering my face to add some of my own spit to the mix. I rub it into his crown, and he groans, his head tipping back as he mutters in Finnish. “Didn’t quite catch that.”

He huffs, opening his eyes. “I said you’re going to be the death of me.”

I lean over him again, pecking his lips. “Only if you’re a very good boy.”

“Cay, if you don’t hurry up and—*fuck*—”

I laugh out loud, head tipped back, as I shut him up with my dick. I’m balanced over his hips, using my hands to guide him to my hole. I let his tip prod at my entrance, willing my body to relax and take him back in. I sink down an inch and shiver with want. “You feel so fucking good, Mars.”

I sink down further. He braces my hips, watching in awe as I swallow him whole, not stopping until I press down against his thighs. I let my body settle, rocking a little on his hips as I breathe and stretch. “New house rule number two. Are you listening?”

He hums, moving his hips with me as I ride his cock.

“Look at me,” I snap, giving his face a slap.

He growls and blinks up at me, holding my gaze.

“Here’s the new rule,” I say on a shudder, lifting myself almost all the way off his dick before I sink back down.

“Fuck—” His hands tighten on my hips.

“Rachel is ours,” I intone, shifting my weight to change the angle. He hits me just right, and my whole body feels like it was zapped with a cattle prod. My dick twitches, and his hand wraps around it, giving it a tight fist to fuck. “Rachel is *ours*,” I say again. “Jake is ours.”

He nods, licking his lips as he watches me fuck his dick. I move faster, riding him, my hands pressed to his chest as I search for the perfect angle.

“Don’t stop,” he begs, and I could come right here and now. He’s begging me. Ilmari Price. I’ve reduced him to begging me for more dick.

“Rachel is ours, and Jake is ours, but you are *mine*,” I growl, folding over him and kissing his parted lips. He tastes like me, and he tastes like him, and the combination is fucking heaven. “Oh god, you’re mine, Mars. Fucking fill me. Need you inside me. Need your cum. Please, baby—*ahh*—”

He unleashes for a third time. Grabbing my hips, he changes his angle and begins fucking me from the bottom, pounding me like a goddamn freight train until his head arches back and he blows. I feel his release shoot up inside me, the liquid warmth pooling in me, filling me.

It’s a sacred moment, purer than baptism. I’m washed clean in the love of this man, his total ownership of my body matched only by his complete surrender of his shields and ego. We own each other now; we surrender to each other.

At long fucking last, we are one.

He rides out his release, his hot cum filling me until there’s nowhere left

for me to be filled. I hardly have the strength to lift myself off him, but we're not done yet. I feel the rush of his cum slip out of me as I crawl up his body. Holding to the headboard, I straddle his face and offer him my dick. "Take it," I pant. "Baby, please—"

He takes it willingly, his hand instantly seeking out that place he just filled. He slips two fingers inside me, holding his cum in place as he sucks me down, his tongue stroking along my ladder. He groans deep in his throat. The sound travels up my dick, coiling in my chest.

"You love my piercings, don't you," I tease, lowering a hand from the headboard to stroke his short hair. "First time you ever came in this house, you touched my dick. I saw the look in your eye even then, Mars...the curiosity, the desire." I move my hips harder until he gags. The sound is like a little victory. "Shoulda just claimed you then—put you on your knees—you're fucking *mine*."

He grunts in agreement, his fingers wiggling in my ass, searching for my prostate. Once he finds it, I howl, my hands back on the headboard as I let him suck me and fuck me. I gaze down in awe, unable to look away. It's such a beautiful sight, watching this man I've loved in the shadows for so long give me everything. His mouth is warm and wet, his lips soft, his motions quick as he fingers my greedy hole. For his first time sucking a dick, he earns another easy A.

"Baby, I'm right there—" Pulling back on instinct, I grab my shaft at the base and squeeze. "Open your mouth. I wanna watch you swallow."

Panting, Mars parts his wet lips and I give my dick three quick strokes. On a low groan, I release. My cum spurts from my tip, landing in his eager mouth.

"Open," I growl. "Show me how pretty you look taking my cum."

His tongue catches my release, his lips brushing my tip as I finish jerking myself. My entire body hums with relief. I make a mess of him, my cum dripping down his bearded chin. Feeling sated at last, I smear the tip of my dick all over his lips, leaving us both in no doubt of tonight's power exchange. He fucked me, but I fucked him right back.

Boneless and spent, legs trembling, I begin to sink down. Mars catches me, his strong arms rolling me until I'm on my side, stretched out next to him. My whole body feels sticky and itchy. My pounded ass aches, my jaw hurts, and my shoulder was a human chew toy. It smells like utter debauchery in here.

And I'm so fucking happy.

Lifting a hand, I brush a dab of my cum off Mar's chin and feed it to him, watching as he sucks on the pad of my finger, eager to take whatever I offer. "I love you," I whisper, my body drifting down off its high like a leaf on the wind.

He tangles our legs together, careful not to put too much weight on my bad knee. "As I love you." With his free hand, he brushes the sweaty hair off my forehead, his touch soothing. He's excellent at aftercare; this I already knew.

I arch into his touch, closing my eyes like a needy cat. "Stay in here tonight?" I don't know why this feels like the last test of my walls. I've always struggled with this aspect of intimacy. I don't like sharing a room, even with my own lovers. My preferred form of aftercare is often to be left alone. They've all understood. They've never pressed.

But I think this room is a sign of my hidden insecurity too, my fear that I have to keep something for myself, some place to hide and retreat. When they eventually figure me out, they'll decide I'm not worth their time. They'll leave. They'll move on. They'll choose each other over me. And then I'll have only myself for comfort.

When the worst happens, I need a place that still feels like mine, a place they haven't claimed entirely. My fortress. My place of physical and emotional walls.

At the beginning of this, I asked him to let me in. I have to be willing to do the same. With all of them. Placing a hand to his heart, I press down, feeling it beat against my palm. "Stay, Mars. Stay with me." I don't just mean this room and I don't just mean tonight.

He wraps his hand around mine, leaning closer to kiss my forehead. "My love...I'm never leaving you."

I nod, fighting back my tears as he holds me...as I *let* him hold me. After a moment, we both relax, and he huffs a soft laugh. "Aarre...could I possibly persuade you to shower with me before we fall asleep?"

My shoulders shake with laughter. "Is possessive Mars gone then? Did I fuck him back to his bear cave?"

"He is sated, yes."

"Thank fucking god." I lean forward and kiss him again. "Get your fine ass in the shower, Mars. You can load down your loofah with that sexy body wash and scrub me from head to toe."

He rolls off the other side of the bed and walks away, that gorgeous back on full display. I let my gaze trail down lower, taking in his firm glutes, his sculpted thighs and calves. The man is a work of art.

And he's mine. He's *ours*. And we're so fucking lucky.

Smiling from ear to ear, I follow after him. When it comes to my loves, I'd follow them anywhere.

A loud beeping noise pulls me from sleep. I groan, rolling over on my side, my arm draping over Mars's waist. I have no idea what time it is, but I know it's still dark, which means I should still be asleep.

Shower time turned into more sex, which turned into a longer shower, followed by a truly impressive kitchen raid. And, just for fun, we fucked in the kitchen too...which led to another shower. By that point, my entire body waved the white towel. We changed my sheets and crashed into bed.

The phone beeps again and Mars grunts, sitting up as he snatches for it.

"What time is it?" I grumble, burying my face in the pillow.

"Midnight," he replies.

"Who the fuck is calling—"

"Jake." He answers the call, his voice low.

I've been so out of it tonight, I don't even know where my phone is. Downstairs maybe? Hopefully Tess didn't have any problems with the boys. Shit...I guess I'm not winning any parent of the year awards.

"Yeah, he's right here. Hold on," Mars mutters. "I'll put you on speaker."

"Why don't we just do a video call?" I hear Jake say. "I've got Rach here too."

"Yeah—and hey Cay, babe, why did you foist the babies off on Tess tonight?" says Rachel. "What the heck is going on? She said you had an issue at the dentist."

"Yeah, we've been trying to call you assholes for hours," adds Jake, his tone resentful.

"We fell asleep," says Mars. "It was—"

"Wait—you fell asleep?" Rachel says over him, concern lacing her tone. "But...it's only like midnight there, right? Kulta, are you okay? Are you not

feeling well?”

Mars glances down to me, one brow raised.

Rolling to my back with a groan, I say, “Just tell them.”

“Tell us what?”

“Yeah, what’s going on? We’re starting to get freaked out.”

Mars leans over and clicks on the lamp. I blink in the brightness. With the press of a button, he changes the call to a video call. Balancing his wrist on his propped-up knee, he looks into the video.

Rachel smiles and waves, her dark eyes shining in the light of the phone. “Hey, love.”

“Wait—Mars, where are you? The quality is kind of fuzzy,” says Jake.

“I’m in—”

Rachel gasps. “Ohmygod, that’s Caleb’s room.”

“No fucking way,” Jake cries. “Oh, holy shit, is Cay there? Mars, you turn the camera right fucking now.”

I smirk into the pillow, basking in their shared shrieks as Mars pans the camera over to me.

“Ilmari Kinnunen Price, why are you in Cay’s bed right now?” Rachel shouts, her glee barely contained. “And why are you both naked?”

“Babe, they obviously just fucked,” Jake replies for us. “Would you check out their faces? Look how fucking happy they look. Oh my god, this is too much information. I’m freaking out. Now I’m picturing it, and I’m dying.”

“Breathe it out,” Mars mutters, leaning his head back against my headboard.

“Was Mars on top? Mars was totally on top. Oh fuck, I’m getting so hard right now. You guys, this makes me so fucking happy, you have no idea.”

“Yeah, we hadn’t picked up on that,” I deadpan.

“Well, wait—how did it happen?” says Rachel.

Jake’s face is pressed in next to hers. “Yeah, when did it happen? Where did it happen? How many times did it happen? We need details.”

“Blame the dentist,” I say, rolling to my side with a wince. My whole body feels loose and achy and sore...in the best way. Oh, and my fucking shoulder hurts because some possessive asshole took a literal bite out of me.

Jake’s eyes are wide. “The dentist? What the hell, Cay? What did you do?”

“They sedated me, and I may have...opened my big mouth.”

“And then I accidentally wore his shirt,” Mars adds.

“And things sort of escalated from there,” I finish.

“Ha,” Jake shouts, turning to Rachel. “Babe, you own me a hundred bucks. I *told* you that would work. I’m an evil fucking genius.”

Rachel rolls her eyes.

I sit up, my shoulder brushing against Mars. “Wait—what worked? Jake, what did you do?”

He beams at us like he just won a gold medal in meddling. “Well, after that time I wore your shirt and you went all caveman on me, I’ve been slipping your clothes into Mars’s drawers. It’s been a bit of trial and error trying to figure out which of your clothes you’re attached to. Plus, we have a lot of the exact same shirts and stuff—wait, was it the Michigan tee?” He laughs out loud at the look on my face. “Oh, please god tell me it was that ratty Michigan tee.”

When neither of us respond, he howls with laughter. “I fucking knew it. God, when I’m on, I am really fucking on.”

I roll my eyes. “So, I assume you’ll be taking credit for all of this then? Jake was the great mastermind, bringing us together?”

“And are you?” Rachel presses, her tone and general aura more reserved. “Together, I mean.” She searches our faces as best she can through the screen, looking for hesitation or doubt.

“We’re together,” Mars replies, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me closer so I’m more clearly in the shot. Leaning in, he kisses my brow, which sends our partners cooing like a pair of sappy doves.

“But we’re not giving you any other details until you’re back,” I add, turning my face to nip at his earlobe.

“Wait—seriously?” Jake looks crestfallen. “Cay, are you shitting me right now?”

“Gives you a good reason to come back,” I say, taking the phone from Mars.

“Cay, come on,” Jake whines. “Don’t do this to us. We can’t go another day and a half without details. My brain already feels like it’s exploding.”

“You’ll be fine,” I reply, tilting the camera angle a bit so he gets a quick shot of me naked. He groans with want, and I crow a little. No matter what Mars and I share now, nothing changes how I feel about Jake. When he gets home, he better be ready to fucking crawl to me.

Next to him, Rachel flashes me a smirk. She knows exactly what I’m

doing. She can smile all she wants. She'll be on the floor right next to him.

"Well, if it's okay with you two, we're going back to bed," I say. "We've gotta get up early to go grab the boys and suck up to Tess."

"Just show her that hickey on your neck, and she'll probably make you breakfast," Rachel teases.

I huff, glancing to Mars. "So, everyone was in on this then? They've all just been sitting around, waiting for this to happen?"

"Pretty much," Jake replies. "We only talk about it all the time. I've been plotting against you both for years. You're both just too dense to notice. Honestly, I'm relieved. I was ready to throw in the towel."

"Wait—plotting? Plotting how?"

He drags a hand through his dark hair, jostling the phone. "God, where to even start? How about two Christmases ago when I got the two of you that couples massage? Yeah, that was a waste of five hundred bucks. Or last summer in Finland when you were both being all snuggly on the couch? I made that stupid excuse of going to the gym just to get out of your hair, and then I came back like three hours later and you were both just passed out from the jet lag."

I snort, shaking my head. "You're such a dumb ass, babe."

"Yeah, a desperate dumb ass," he counters. "I didn't even want to go to the gym. I ended up just walking around those little downtown shops. I had the world's worst salmon salad. I even went to a candle shop. A Finnish lady walked me through how they make their all-natural beeswax candles for like an hour."

Now Mars and I are both laughing.

But Rachel just gives us both an adoring smile, her arm around Jake's shoulder. "Love comes in its own time. Your love took a while, but it will be all the sweeter now that it's grown. And don't mind us. We just want you both living your happiest lives. Now that we're all in this together, let's just do that, yeah?"

I nod, surprised to feel tears welling in my eyes. "Yeah, we can do that." I had the phone back over to Mars.

"Come on, guys," Jake whines. "Just one tiny little detail?"

Leaning my head back into the camera frame, I give him a knowing smile. "Three words for you, babe: hot cum massage."

His eyes go wide as his brain short circuits. He sputters. "Oh—you—fuck, that is so hot."

Rachel laughs, gently taking the phone away from him. “Okay, Mr. Hockey Pants, let’s say goodnight to our loves and let them get some sleep. Apparently, they need it.”

“I’m back in like thirty hours, and then you’re telling me every detail,” he warns, pointing a finger at the camera. “I’ll know if you skip anything.”

“Goodnight, guys,” says Rachel. “We love you.”

“Night,” I mutter.

Mars and Rachel exchange a few quick words in Finnish and then he’s hanging up. He sets the phone aside, and we settle into the silence.

“So...now they know,” I say after a minute.

“Yes.”

“Apparently, they always knew.”

“Yes.”

“And...they seem pretty okay with it.”

He nods. “They do indeed.”

“Jake’s gonna wanna watch us together at least once,” I warn.

He glances down at me and shrugs. “Fine by me. I’ll make him some popcorn.”

I smirk. “And join in...with Rachel there...and most likely without.”

He’s quiet for a moment. Slowly, he smiles.

I perch up on my elbows. “What is that smile?”

He turns to me, his fingertips reaching over to brush down my sternum. “I’m just imagining how perfect you’ll look pounding Jake into the mattress while you choke on my cum.”

“Fuck.” Well, now I’m wide awake and ready to charter a jet. I want Jake here now.

“Jake is an excellent team player,” he adds. “We’ll ruin you most beautifully, my love.”

I roll to my side, glancing up. “And...you’re okay? No cold feet? No buyer’s remorse?”

He sighs, clicking out the light. Then he shifts down the bed, lying on his side. In the dark quiet of the room, he seeks me out, pulling me to him. “Roll over.”

I stiffen. “You really think you’re gonna ‘big spoon’ me? I’m the big spoon, Mars. *You* roll over.”

“I’m not rolling over.”

“Consider that new house rule number three,” I say in defiance. “Every

time you top me, I get to big spoon you. And tonight was one for the record books. I've racked up, I think..." I count them on my fingers. "Yep, no less than six nights of big spoon action. I'm cashing the first one in now. Roll the fuck over, Mars."

"Ridiculous," I hear him mutter, followed by something else in Finnish. But to my eternal delight, he says it all while dutifully rolling over. Rules are rules, after all. And my metaphor loves following the rules—

I go still, looking at the outline of his shoulder in the dark.

"What?" he whispers, sensing my sudden unease.

"You're not my metaphor anymore."

He's quiet for a moment before giving me an answer that makes my chest squeeze tight. "I never was."

Smiling, I tuck myself in against his back, fitting my hips to his ass as I nestle my face in at his shoulder. The man is too large to comfortably be anyone's little spoon, and he runs hotter than a goddamn furnace. I'll be sweating through the sheets if I stay this close to him for too long.

But just now, in this moment, holding Mars feels pretty fucking perfect.

IT'S OVER...FOR NOW

BUT!! Before you come pounding down my door, demanding to know the details of Rachel's third pregnancy (announced at the end of Ch 6 of *PEA: Vol 1*), I can only continue to reiterate that her third pregnancy is a major plot point of Book #4.

I can't go around giving away the plot of another book, now can I? I must ask for your continued patience. This is a big world, and there are a lot more stories to tell.

I promise all will be revealed.

THANK YOU

I hope you enjoyed this volume of PUCKING EVER AFTER!! Your love of these characters and this world has brought me so much immeasurable joy. I am so grateful for each and every reader who has read my books, posted about them on social media, and raved to all their friends. You're the reason this series gets to continue. You're the reason I'll keep writing more books and giving you more Rays content.

As always, I want to shout out a big 'THANK YOU' to my alpha reader, Ashley. You've been my faithful co-pilot as I've navigated this strange new world of full-time publishing. You keep me grounded, you keep me focused, and you keep gently reminding me that—no matter the outside noise—I need to follow my heart and follow the joy. Words aren't enough, but thanks all the same.

I want to give another loud 'THANK YOU' to my assistants, Sam and Rachel. You made this year bearable as I navigated attending bookish events, planned giveaways, and (awkwardly) organized preorders. You helped me keep the ship running smoothly and I'm so deeply grateful. Thank you to my other beta readers: Jess, Amanda, and Alex.

Lastly, I want to thank my growing Emily Rath Books team—my agent, Susan Velazquez Colmant, my U.K. publishers over at Penguin Michael Joseph, my U.S. publishers at Kensington Books, and my old friends at Tantor Media. For an industry that doesn't often take a chance on printing stories like mine, you've all embraced the Rays with open arms. My readers thank you and I thank you too.

XO,

Emily

LEAVE A REVIEW

If you enjoyed this HEA novella, please consider leaving a review! Reader reviews—both official and unofficial—are the life's blood of indie author success. No matter where you feel most comfortable, your honest review means everything to me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emily Rath is an international bestselling romance and fantasy author. She currently lives in Florida with her husband, son, and cat. They regularly comb the local beaches looking for shark teeth.

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