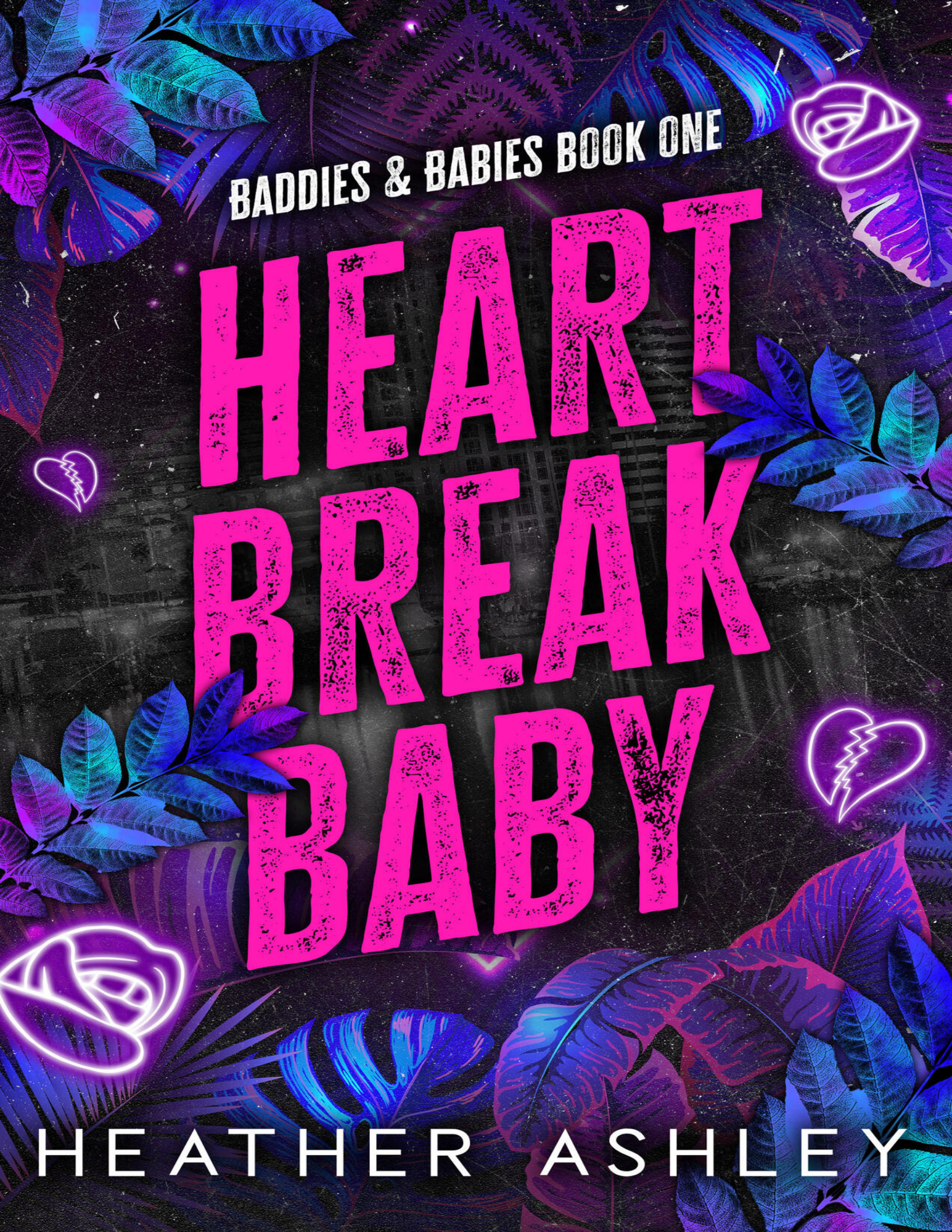

BADDIES & BABIES BOOK ONE
HEART BREAK BABY
HEATHER ASHLEY

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OceanofPDF.com

Heartbreak Baby

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PLAYLIST

Cruel Summer - Bananarama
Love Shack - The B-52s
Kokomo - The Beach Boys
Like a Prayer - Madonna
La Isla Bonita - Madonna
House Tour - Sabrina Carpenter
Pink Pony Club - Chappell Roan
We Found Love - Rhianna, Calvin Harris
Believe - Cher
Brand New - Ben Rector
Blinding Lights - The Weeknd
Bad Romance - Lady Gaga
Cake by the Ocean - DNCE
Physical - Dua Lipa
Circus - Britney Spears
Born This Way - Lady Gaga

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DEDICATION

To everyone who's ever wasted their best years on a mediocre man.

May your next one have a bigger dick, a filthy mouth, and enough sense to worship you for the baddie you are.

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CHAPTER 1
SUMNER

"WHY ARE MEN TRASH?"

I turn and squint at the woman who's just slid onto the stool next to me. The neon pink light from the *Bottom's Up* sign over the bar bleeds across her face, and she keeps slipping in and out of focus.

Yeah, it's safe to say I'm drunk as fuck.

"Why are women shady as hell?" I counter, tossing back another shot.

When I set the empty glass down, that same pink light that kind of hurts my eyes glints off the ring on my finger. I scowl down at the stupid fucking thing, gripping it and tugging it off. My skin's pale where the ring's sat for the last few years, and I wish it wasn't. I wish there was no reminder of everything I lost today.

Or everything I guess I never really had, depending on how you look at it.

I pinch the cursed thing between my thumb and finger, wondering what the fuck I'm doing with my life.

How I could've wasted so much time to end up here.

But that shot I just took burns its way into my blood, and I don't really care to think deep thoughts anymore.

So, I pin my wedding ring to the sticky bar top with my finger and flick it. It spins, the gold a blurry halo, and my head spins right along with it.

I'm afraid there's not enough alcohol in the world to forget.

I look back at the woman beside me as she shifts on the barstool. The heat of her bare arm almost brushing up against mine makes the hair on that

arm stand up. She's studying me, her eyes narrowed behind thick, dark frames. She must see something that tells her *I'm* not one of those trash men she was referring to, because she smirks, looks me up and down, and lifts her half-empty glass to clink it against the new shot I've somehow found in my hand.

"You know what?" She gulps her drink down while I toss mine back. "Lemme catch up. I have a feeling I'm gonna need to be drunk for this conversation."

"I'm not really in a conversation sort of mood." I flick my ring again and watch it spin until it clatters flat against the wood.

"Yep. Definitely gonna need to be drunk for this." She eyes me as she flags down the bartender, the movement pulling her cropped tank top tight across her chest and flashing me a strip of skin and cleavage that's damn near spilling out.

If I'd met her even yesterday, I'd look away. I wouldn't let myself go there because the vows I took meant everything to me, even if things weren't perfect.

But now?

I'd love to bury my face right in there. I bet her tits are soft and pillowy and so much more than a handful. I could lick and bite and suck on them and leave marks all over them, and… *fuck.* I blow out a breath. Despite how drunk I am, my dick gives an interested twitch. I swallow hard and focus back on my ring.

She shifts toward me, bumping her shoulder into mine on purpose, and it's like a firework goes off where her skin touches mine. "And you're gonna need to be drunker."

I bite back a groan. "I don't think that's a word."

She grins, but it doesn't make it up to her eyes. "Who the fuck cares? Is what I said untrue?"

It doesn't take long before her smile drops, and there's grief there underneath the show she's trying to put on. I recognize it because it's the same feeling I'm doing my damnedest to drown. I haven't bothered to look at anyone since I parked myself on this stool with two goals: get drunk enough to forget and then pass out on the beach under the stars.

But now I can't stop looking at her.

She's got dark, messy hair piled on top of her head and thick thighs that are made for burying a face between. There's a sleeve of colorful tropical

flowers and leaves tattooed down her entire arm. When she pushes her glasses up onto her head and fans her flushed face, I get my first real look at her eyes.

They’re a little red-rimmed, but that doesn’t stop me from falling into them. I’m dizzy as I stare like a moron, and I don’t know if it’s her or the alcohol, but for a second, the suffocating weight in my chest lessens.

The whole bar drops out from under me, the music and neon blurring into nothing until her face is the only thing left in focus. She doesn’t look away, and for a few seconds, I forget what I was thinking about.

Fuck, is she pretty.

Then the bartender slams two more tequilas down between us. We both jump, breaking eye contact with awkward laughs as the music and bar sounds come back in like someone hit play on a remote.

She slides a glass to me and holds hers up. "To the unlubed dildo of life. May she fuck someone else for a while."

I laugh and clink my glass to hers. "To the next six years being less shitty than the last."

I down my shot, licking a stray drop of tequila off my lip. Her eyes drop to my mouth and stay there, and my dick really fucking likes that.

She blinks a couple of times and then tears her eyes off my mouth.

“Six years?” Her face pinches before she knocks back her drink. “Damn. Sucks, doesn’t it? Mine was five.” She holds up her hand, fingers spread. “Five of my best, slut-era years wasted on a mediocre man and for what?” She laughs, but we both know whatever she’s about to say isn’t funny. “To find him balls-deep in some rando in my fucking bed.”

My fingers tighten around the edge of the bar. The urge to find this faceless asshole and break his goddamn *everything* is riding me way harder than it should, considering I don't even know her name.

"My wife had her tubes tied," I say. It’s the first time I’ve told anyone since I found out, and I don’t know why I’m telling her. But I keep going anyway. Once I start, I can’t seem to stop. "A year ago when she was supposed to be on a girls’ trip before we started trying to have a baby. She forgot to mention that she didn’t want fucking kids until today. When I told her I got us an appointment to see a fertility specialist tomorrow, she finally came clean.”

She whistles. “That’s some movie-villain type shit right there.” She stares at me. Her gaze softens, and I brace myself for the pity, but it never

comes. Instead, she tosses her shot back and slams the glass down. "You know what? Fuck them."

"Fuck them," I agree, twisting on my barstool so I can see her better. My knees brush against her hip, but neither one of us moves away.

She drops her head onto her crossed arms on the bar, tracing a water ring with a painted fingernail. "The cheating is bad," she says. "Like, I'm awesome and if a guy wants to cheat on me, fuck him. You know?"

I nod.

"But that's not even the worst part. Today was the day we were supposed to start trying to have a baby." She turns her head to the side so she's looking up at me, and *fuck*. There's so much hurt in her eyes. I feel it like it's my own. "But now I have to start all over. It's not like I can go on an app and put in my bio that my biological clock's ticking away and I want a baby so bad I'd do just about anything to have one." She snorts. "Could you imagine?"

My heart rate kicks up, and there's an idea sparking to life somewhere under all the tequila in me right now.

"TMI, stranger, but I'm literally ovulating right now. It's *such* a waste."

And that idea crystallizes between one heartbeat and the next. It sounds cliché, but it feels like the world stops spinning. Just screeches to a halt as this *terrible* idea of mine floods into me. Every cell. Every atom of my body.

This moment of pure fucking unhinged madness that somehow makes so much sense, I can't think about anything else.

I've wanted a family my whole life. A loud house. Kids everywhere. The kind of home I grew up in—minus the kids everywhere since I'm an only child—and have missed since the day I left.

Until today, I thought Delia was how I'd get it.

But this woman wants a baby.

I want a baby.

And she's fucking *ovulating*.

I eye her again, and my dick's more than half hard at this point imagining all the things I could do to her that no sane man would say to a stranger.

The thoughts running through my head could easily get me a kick to the balls.

Plus, I'm technically still married, but fuck it. My wife killed this marriage the second she got her tubes tied behind my back.

As far as I'm concerned, I'm a free man even if the legal shit hasn’t been handled yet.

Shit, am I doing this?

My mouth waters, thinking about the possibility. This could go so, so badly, but I’m drunk enough not to care.

So, I quit thinking about it. Before common sense can crawl out from under all the tequila and stop me, I open my mouth and let my bad idea out into the world.

"I could give you a baby," I say, my voice rough as shit. I reach down and adjust myself, and her eyes follow. "Tonight. Right now."

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CHAPTER 2
GOLDIE

A LAUGH BUBBLES up and bursts out of me before I can stop it. His dick is *so* hard, and I can't stop looking at it.

And what did he say?

I swear I heard him wrong. There's no way.

No *way.*

Who says something like that?

"You'll give me a baby?" I say between giggles.

I wait for him to take it back or say *just kidding* or crack a smile and laugh it up.

But he doesn't.

He does *not.* Nope.

I'm having a hard time tearing myself away from the dick print in his jeans. It's impressive, and I tilt my head, wondering just how big it really is.

Fuck Grant for making me miss out on stuff like this for nothing. I could've been out here living my best life getting to experience being thrown around a bedroom by a guy like *this.*

He shifts. When I manage to tear my eyes away from his hard-on, he's looking at me like he's picturing it, and *god.*

"Yes."

It takes me a second to remember what we were talking about.

Right. Him offering to knock me up.

And there I go, looking at his dick again.

He laughs. "My eyes are up here."

When I look up this time, he’s giving me an indecent smile. Oh, crap. He wants an actual answer, doesn’t he?

Obviously, it’s no.

I mean, it has to be, right?

I swallow hard, wishing I had another drink but also glad I don’t. With the way things are going, I’m not going to be able to walk if I drink much more.

And let’s just say drunk Goldie isn’t known for her great decision-making skills. But she’s also the best at letting go, and that’s exactly what I need tonight.

And this guy? I have a feeling I could have a *lot* of fun with him before sunrise.

“Love Shack” by The B-52s is pumping through the speakers, and part of me wants to get up and dance and rub myself all over him. But the other part also can’t let go of the idea that I could bang this guy and end up with the baby I’ve been dying to have for *years*.

Would that be so wrong?

I look him over again. He’s being patient while he waits for me to figure out what to say, only eye-fucking me a little.

He really is a great specimen, and if I *did* have a kid with him, they’d be so pretty. He’s tall, broad. Lots of muscles in that hot way, not the gross bodybuilder way. His brown hair’s buzzed, and he’s got eyes so dark I could probably fall straight into them and never come out.

And holy shit, I am *dizzy*.

It’s hard to tell how much is the alcohol and how much is him. He’s taking up too much space beside me, but I like it. I squint, trying to make out… are those *abs* I can see through his shirt? I wipe at my mouth, because yeah. I think I’m drooling.

I’m tingly and wet between my thighs, and I’m going to do this, aren’t I?

I’m going to let this stranger try to knock me up.

Still, the annoying sober Goldie pokes her head out of the hole I shoved her in.

"We don’t even know each other’s names," I say.

"I don’t need to know your name to put a baby in you," he says. His voice is deep and low, and I clench my thighs together at the rumble of it. “But I’m Sumner.”

I lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry as we stare at each other.

My mind feels sluggish and spinny, and thinking too hard about this is making my brain throb.

Why not take what I want? Here's this hot stranger, offering me everything I've ever wanted.

Well… almost everything. But close enough, right?

From the looks of him, I bet he's got strong swimmers. That's all I really need.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

My fingers shake as I push my empty glass toward the bartender, Kai. He raises a judgmental eyebrow at me, but I narrow my eyes, and he rolls his before coming over and topping me off. I down it in one burning gulp, letting the final hit of bad decision juice snuff out whatever common sense I have left.

I turn back to Sumner, leaning in close enough to smell the liquor and mint on his breath.

"Goldie," I say, finally giving him my name. Then I decide, *fuck it*, and let my freak flag fly. "And by the time tonight's over, I want to be filled with so many cream pies, I could open a diner."

He chokes on a laugh. "Jesus."

"No, I'm *Goldie*," I say, slower this time. Then I swivel in his direction so our knees knock together. "But you know what? We should totally do it."

He curses as his eyes drag down my body.

Then I point to my stomach. "Put a baby in here."

He laughs again, but this time it's more gravelly, and his eyes have gotten darker. "Yeah, I got that."

Now that I've decided, it's like I need it to happen immediately. I'm not sure if it's because I'm afraid I might sober up and change my mind, or if it's that I've had mediocre sex with the same guy for so long, the chance to

take this real-life thirst trap for a ride has become something I need to do to survive.

"I’m ready whenever you are.” I gesture toward the hallway at the back of the bar that leads to the bathroom. “We’ve got two choices: the women’s bathroom or there’s an alley out back.” I wrinkle my nose. “But it’s probably really hot and there are definitely roaches. Maybe even rats."

He doesn’t answer or move to pick one of our two not-so-sexy choices.

Instead, his hand slides onto my bare thigh and grips me in a possessive way that makes my nipples go hard.

I gasp, my fingers gripping the edge of the bar as he tugs. The metal stool squeaks against the floor as he spins me effortlessly. Before I can even process the movement, I’m facing him with one of his thighs wedged between mine.

The friction of his leg pressing so close to where I’m dying to have him sends a shockwave of heat throughout my entire body, and I let out a gasp.

What the hell is that?

"I'm not putting my baby in you here," he says. The sudden change in his voice to a dark, commanding pitch makes my toes curl and all sorts of things clench. He leans in, his face inches from mine, his thumb pressing a firm, possessive dent into the soft flesh of my thigh. "We’re getting a hotel."

"A hotel," I repeat. My brain isn’t exactly brain-ing at the moment, and it’s taking a second for all of this to sink in.

"Yeah." He tracks the sweep of my tongue over my bottom lip. "Because if we’re doing this, I’m going to be thorough. I'm not doing a quickie up against a bathroom stall. I’m going to spend the entire night buried inside you. I'm going to stretch you out on my cock, and I'm going to fill you up so deep and so many times that there’s no way you aren't pregnant by the time the sun rises."

Um, holy horniness, Batman. Do I… have a breeding kink?

Based on the biblical-level flood happening in my underwear, I’m gonna go with *yes*. If I wasn't already sitting down, my knees would’ve buckled.

He holds my gaze for ten thousand years before pulling a fifty from his pocket and tossing it onto the bar.

"Let's go."

He stands. I try to slide off the stool to follow him, but between the shock of what he just said and the four shots of tequila in my bloodstream,

gravity totally fails me. I stumble forward.

And crash directly into him and all the muscles.

He catches me, his large hands gripping my waist to steady me. It’s like running into a brick wall. But it’s not just the hard lines of his chest that I feel. Through the thin fabric of my clothes, pressed right against my stomach, is a thick, undeniable erection.

A really fucking *big* erection.

Oh, he wasn't kidding.

I look up, my mouth suddenly dry, but he isn't looking at me. His jaw is locked tight. Keeping one arm securely around my waist so I don't faceplant onto the floor, he reaches around me.

His fingers snatch the gold wedding band off the bar, his fist closing tight around it. I stare at his hand, a tiny, sober sliver of my brain wondering what the hell he plans to do with it. And what the hell I’m doing with a married man.

But I tell it to get fucked the way I’m about to and go back to hoping he knows what to do with that beast between his legs.

His hand slides to the back of my neck, his fingers moving into my hair as he steers me and my wobbly legs away from the bar and out into the muggy Florida night.

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CHAPTER 3
GOLDIE

GOD, *why* did I choose to live in the literal armpit of America? I wrinkle my nose as soon as the hot, moist air hits me the second we step outside.

It's disgusting, and yeah, moist is the right word for how it feels. Gross in a makes you want to immediately take a shower kind of way.

And normally I'd be rushing to hop into whatever ride I called to escape it, but my tank top sticking to my back is the least of my concerns.

My brain is fully focused on the fact that Sumner's hand is still wrapped around the back of my neck under my hair. I'm like one of those puppies who instantly submits the second someone grips me around the neck like this. It puts me in the most shiver-y, relaxed place.

But when this guy does it, it's also hot. So, so hot.

It's like the devil's taint out here heat-wise, yet I've got goosebumps all over my body from the way his thumb brushes the side of my neck, and my knees wobble.

I'm not sure how much longer my legs are gonna hold me up.

His grip is firm, steering me and my unsteady legs across the empty street and away from the bright neon of the bar. We hit the beach, my sandals sinking into the soft, sugary sand, and the rhythmic crash of the Gulf fills the quiet between us.

Wait. Why are we at the beach?

It's not like it's far from the bar, but still.

The hotel is down the strip. The beach is dark, secluded, and currently empty. And this guy's a total stranger. A sober girl would turn her ass

around and get the hell out of here. I’ve gotta say, walking into the pitch-black night with a massive, muscular man whose last name I don't even know probably isn’t the craziest thing I’m gonna do tonight.

Stranger danger, Goldie.

But then his thumb strokes my neck again, and the alarm bell shorts out in a shower of sparks. If he’s a serial killer, at least I’ll find out before I have a baby with the guy.

"So," I say, because the silence is making my skin prickle and I physically cannot shut up when I'm nervous. “Just so we’re clear, if your dick turns out to be disappointing after all this buildup, I’m going to be really fucking annoyed.”

He stops walking near the water’s edge. A short, surprised huff of a laugh escapes him. It’s a deep, rich sound that does absolutely terrible things to my heart rate.

Does this count as cardio?

I’m totally counting it.

He turns to face me. His eyes are intense, but the corner of his mouth tips up into a smirk. “We can’t have that.”

“Good. Glad we’re on the same page.”

His smile hangs there for another second before his attention drops. Something shifts in his face, and I follow his gaze to the fist he’s had closed at his side this whole time.

Slowly, he opens it.

The gold of his wedding band glints in the moonlight against his palm.

"You're supposed to make a wish, you know," I blurt out, pointing at the ring. “Before you get rid of it.”

Yeah, I’m totally talking out of my ass, but I feel like he’s sad, and I don’t like it.

He raises an eyebrow. "Is that a tradition? Every time your marriage implodes, you toss the ring in the Gulf and make a wish?"

"Obviously." I wave my hand in the air like a buzzed, slightly off-balance fairy godmother. "The sea turtles take the gold to Poseidon, and in exchange, he grants you one wish. Like a really good parking spot, or a baby. It's science."

Oh my god, Goldie. Shut up! What are you even talking about?

I feel like I should write this down. It’s creative, maybe the best story I’ve ever told.

The twitch at the corner of his mouth turns into a full, genuine smile. It transforms his entire face, melting away the angsty-ness and revealing something so warm and magnetic I actually have to lock my knees so I don’t fall over.

Because *what the hell*?

"Science," he repeats, his voice dropping an octave.

His eyes lock onto mine, and whatever smartass comment I had ready dies before it makes it out of my mouth.

Fuck.

He’s staring at my lips like he’s thinking about biting them, and my body is extremely on board with whatever filthy idea is playing out inside his head.

Then he breaks his eyes away from mine and pulls his arm back, launching the ring into the Gulf.

I whip around just in time to catch a flash of gold before it disappears into the black water with the tiniest little *plink*.

Huh.

Guess that’s that, then.

“I hope you made a wish,” I say.

But before I can even ask what he wished for, his hands are on me.

His palms cup my face, his thumbs sweeping over my cheekbones just a second before he kisses me.

Holy *fuck*.

The second his mouth hits mine, every thought in my head scatters.

Oh.

Oh, he can fucking *kiss*.

I make the most embarrassing noise into his mouth and grab the back of his neck, rising onto my toes so I can get closer. His tongue pushes into my mouth, and he’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted. I hang on while he kisses the absolute shit out of me, and it’s all I can do not to just keel right over and die.

Like, my body is in total sensory overload from just a *kiss*. Now I’m even more excited to see what he can do with his dick.

One of his hands moves down my back and grabs my ass, the other tangling in my hair and—*nggghhh*—gripping the back of my neck to hold me right where he wants me.

The one on my ass isn’t a polite little squeeze, either.

His whole hand closes around me, fingers digging into my skin hard enough that I feel every one of them. A rough groan vibrates against my mouth, and then he grabs me again, even harder this time.

And his dick pokes me right in the stomach.

Apparently he likes my ass.

Lucky for him, there's plenty of it.

He lifts me just enough to press his hard dick right between my legs so it's nothing but a tease against my clit.

That's the thing that does it, that makes my legs finally wave the white flag and give up.

He catches my weight, effortlessly holding me against him as he kisses me until my lungs burn and my brain melts into a useless puddle.

When he finally breaks away, he rests his forehead against mine while we both pant, our chests heaving in the salty air. My fingers have the soft cotton of his t-shirt bunched between them, and I don't even know when that happened.

"We need to get to the hotel," he says, sounding about as messed up over that little preview of things to come as I feel. He nods toward the towering glass high-rise looming ahead of us on the beach.

"The Saltaire." I blink up at the gorgeous, glowing exterior. "I've always wanted to stay there."

"Good." His hand drops to grab mine and weave our fingers together. "I'd hate for your first time there to be forgettable."

The low, confident way he says it sends another rush of heat between my thighs.

Shit.

I might've created a monster.

The lobby of the Saltaire is fancy with all the pale aqua and pristine cream furniture, which means my tipsy ass doesn't fit in *at all*.

Exhibit A: My messy bun's currently sliding off the side of my head, my lips are swollen, and I'm pretty sure I'm sweating tequila out of my pores.

I've never felt sexier in my life.

Not.

Sumner doesn't seem to care, though. He's got me tucked right into his side. I lean my weight against all the six-foot-something of muscles, breathing in the scent of mint, clean laundry, and sea salt radiating off his shirt. When we get to the front desk, he doesn't stumble or slur his words.

He manages to keep his shit together long enough to slide his credit card across the counter.

While the guy working does his thing, Sumner’s eyes burn down into me.

I don’t know what he sees because there’s no way I’m not a total mess, but he keeps touching me anyway. His thumb drags back and forth over the bare skin at my waist, and every pass makes me wetter, which seems unnecessary at this point.

I lean into him a little more.

Fuck. I want this man.

I want his hands everywhere. His mouth, his tongue, his cock.

And judging by the way he keeps looking at me, I’m not alone.

His eyes drag over my face, drop to my mouth, then lower before coming back up again. His hand tightens at my waist.

Yeah.

He wants me just as bad.

We step into the elevator, the bare skin of his arm pressed against mine, lighting me all the way up inside. The doors slide shut, cutting off the lobby, and Sumner doesn’t waste a single second before I’m backed up against the mirrored wall with the entire front of his body pressed against mine. He cages me in, and I’m so here for it. His gaze drops down my body, stopping at my boobs.

There’s no way he doesn’t notice how hard my nipples are.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he murmurs, his voice thick. He leans in and drags his nose along my jawline, inhaling deeply. “And I want you so much it hurts.”

Those last words are spoken against my skin in between open-mouthed kisses.

Holy fuck.

I'm really doing this. I'm going to a hotel room with a gorgeous stranger to make a baby. A sober girl would be freaking out right now. But with his big body pressing me into the glass and the unmistakable, rigid heat of his hard-on pushing against my stomach, all I feel is a desperate, burning impatience.

I tilt my head, giving him better access, and he takes it. He captures my mouth, kissing me with every bit of his body. And I figure since his hands are all over me, it’s only fair mine do the same. So I slide my hands down

his back, gripping a handful of his firm ass and pulling his hips flush against mine.

He groans into my mouth, one of his hands leaving the wall to slide up my bare thigh. His rough fingers skim the edge of my underwear, making me gasp into his mouth right as the elevator chimes.

The doors slide open.

Sumner breaks the kiss, his chest heaving against mine. His dark eyes are blown wide, promising me all kinds of dirty things as he pulls his hand out from under my skirt. He threads his fingers through mine and pulls me out into the quiet, dimly lit hallway.

I've wanted a baby for as long as I can remember, but I never once imagined the process of making one would be this reckless. Or this scorching hot.

As he pulls me down the hallway, my pulse thrums every-damn-where.

Let’s see if he can back up all that shit he’s been talking.

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CHAPTER 4
SUMNER

THE LOCK FLASHES GREEN, and I shove the heavy door open.

Goldie grabs the front of my shirt before we're even all the way inside and pulls me down to her mouth. The door swings shut behind us, leaving the room pitch black, but neither one of us gives a fuck about finding the lights.

My hands go straight into her hair.

I've wanted her since she slid onto that barstool beside me, and now that I can finally have her, I don't know where the fuck to start.

I kiss her while we stumble farther into the room, my jaw already aching from how much we've been doing this. Her hands are everywhere. Up my back. In my hair. Grabbing my ass and pulling me against her hard enough that my dick presses into her stomach.

Fuck.

My hand slides around her waist, and I get distracted there for a second because she's so fucking soft. Then I move higher and finally get my palm around one of those tits I've been staring at all night.

Jesus Christ.

It fills my hand and then some.

I squeeze, sinking my fingers into her, and Goldie moans straight into my mouth.

Yeah.

I fucking knew they'd feel good.

I squeeze again because once isn’t enough, then drag my hand down over her stomach and around to her hip. There’s so much soft, warm skin under my palms, and every time I grab somewhere new, I immediately want to go back to the last place.

I need more fucking hands.

Goldie makes an impatient sound that makes my dick jump and yanks me closer by my shirt.

Then my boot catches on something.

“Fuck.”

There’s no stopping it. Between the dark and all the tequila, my balance is fucked. I twist as we go down so I hit first, my back slamming into the carpet with Goldie landing right on top of me.

For a second, she goes completely still.

Then she starts laughing.

Her face drops against my chest as her whole body shakes on top of me.

I groan as I try to get air back into my lungs. “You good?”

“I’m great.” She lifts her head, still laughing. “That was sexy.”

“Shut up.”

She laughs harder.

I should probably care that I just ate shit in front of her, but I don’t.

Not with Goldie spread across me like this.

Her stomach is soft against mine, her tits are pressed into my chest, and one of her thick thighs is wedged between my legs. My cock jerks hard enough inside my jeans that she has to feel it.

My hands settle on her hips and squeeze as I thrust up against her.

Fuck, she feels good.

Goldie laughs against my mouth. “So this is how you’re making sure my first time here isn’t forgettable?”

“We’re just getting started.” I roll us so she’s underneath me and settle between her thighs. “And I’m not waiting until we find the bed.”

And then we’re kissing again, and it completely consumes me. We kiss for so long my lips burn and my jaw hurts, but I keep going. Keep wanting and needing this connection that has us both breathless and hungry for more. There’s an ache building in my chest, burning hotter by the second. The more I taste her, the deeper it goes, seeping out to my limbs, demanding I get closer. Knowing it will never be close enough.

I pull back just far enough to rip my t-shirt over my head, and the fraction of a second my mouth is off hers feels like actual physical torture. I toss the shirt blindly into the dark, diving right back in to kiss her messy, sloppy, and *so fucking good* while she grabs the hem of her cropped tank top and yanks it off.

Skin meets skin, and a violent shudder rips through me. Her tits press against my chest, and the soft roundness of her stomach moves against mine every time she arches under me. My hands slide down to her waist, then farther to her hips, gripping hard enough that my fingers sink in. I drag her tighter and kiss her again because I need more of her under me.

My cock throbs against the denim of my jeans, hard enough to ache. For years, I pictured making a baby with Delia. But it was always a clinical, sterile end goal. A checkbox. It was never like this. Never this sheer, desperate obsession with the process. The thought of breeding Goldie—of spreading her thighs, sinking balls-deep, and pumping my cum so far inside her she has no choice but to take it—is a primal, consuming hunger.

I shift my hips, pressing my heavy cock right up against the heat of Goldie's pussy. It’s warm, and *fuck*, I bet she’s so wet for me. She arches into the friction with a needy whimper, and I brush her bare nipple with my thumb.

Goldie tugs frantically at the clasp of my belt, then the button on my jeans when she can’t seem to get the belt open. Her knuckles brush the straining bulge of my cock, and a harsh groan vibrates in my chest.

"Let me," I bite out, shoving her hands away. I yank my belt loose and rip my zipper down, freeing my aching dick from my boxers. I don't bother taking my pants off. I just reach down and shove her skirt up around her waist.

"Bossy," she pants. "Just hurry the fuck up and put it in me."

The demand is a goddamn match dropped in gasoline. I hook two fingers into the crotch of her soaked panties, shoving the wet fabric aside to clear a path. Then I grab the back of her thigh and hitch her leg higher against my side. My fingers sink in deep enough to leave dents.

Her thighs lock around my waist and squeeze my hips. Fuck. My cock’s leaking in my fist. I grip the base and guide it straight into her pussy. She’s so wet I slide right in, and she’s so fucking tight. So hot it feels like I’m burning alive. She gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders as I bottom out, sinking balls-deep into her, but it doesn’t feel deep enough.

I curse as I tense every muscle in my body because I already want to come. I want to come so fucking bad I can barely breathe.

"Sumner," she chokes out, her hips tilting up to meet mine as she moves when I won't.

"Greedy fucking girl," I grit out between clenched teeth. I shift my weight, tilting her hips up just a little so the base of my dick grinds right against her clit.

"Oh, *god*," she moans as her head tilts back and her pussy starts to clench around me. I'm good with my dick, and between that, the buzz, and the heat that's been building between us since the bar, she doesn't stand a chance. I pull back and thrust into her again, rubbing myself against her clit at the same time in a rhythm I don't dare let change.

She comes on the fourth fucking thrust.

Her back arches off the carpet. Her pussy clamps down around my cock in a violent, pulsing rhythm that nearly takes me with her. She screams into the dark hotel room, a beautiful, messy sound that goes straight to my dick.

"That's it," I rasp, my control snapping completely. I start pumping into her, fast and relentless, giving no fucks about rhythm now that my sole focus is coming as deep inside of her as I can get. "Look at you, taking every fucking inch so beautifully."

"Yes," she chants over and over, her legs wrapping around my waist to pull me deeper. "Give it to me. Come inside me. Please."

Her begging for my load does me in. My orgasm builds at the base of my dick, getting ready to shoot inside of her as my balls draw up tight. I grip her jaw and force those glassy, unfocused eyes to stare into mine in the dark. "Look at me when I give you my baby," I tell her as the first shot of cum bursts out of me. I groan and lock my eyes on hers even as my vision goes dark at the edges with the force of the orgasm tearing through me.

"I want it. Give me everything," she says as she squeezes her thighs around me, locking me inside her. I couldn't pull out even if I wanted to.

I grip her hips, my fingers digging into her thighs to pin her flat against the carpet. I drive into her one last, brutal time, burying myself as deep as I can physically go.

My whole body locks up as I pump my cum deep inside her. Pulse after pulse, I empty everything I have into her. The sheer intensity of it catches me totally off guard—it's not just the physical release; it's a heavy, magnetic pull tying me to the woman underneath me. It's too strong to

fight, and I don't even try. I just sink my weight against her, panting into the dark.

And then it’s done.

No taking it back now.

But I don’t want to. No, I want to make sure it takes.

I want to do it again and again.

I stay buried inside her for a few seconds, letting my lungs burn while I try to catch my breath. The room is pitch black and quiet except for the sound of us panting.

When my dick starts to soften, I pull out. I fucking hate it, and we both flinch when I slip free.

Goldie whimpers, her hips jerking up to chase my dick, wanting it back inside of her, but I don't give her time to miss it. I shift down her body, push her thighs wider, and slide two fingers right back inside her.

I push deep, plugging her up so my cum stays exactly where I put it.

"Sumner," she breathes, her chest rising and falling fast. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure it takes," I tell her, my voice rough in the dark. "I read that if you come after I do, it pulls the sperm up into the uterus." I drag my thumb over her swollen clit, and her entire body twitches. "So I'm going to make you come again, Goldie. I'm going to make your body suck up every drop of my cum as deep as I can get it."

"Holy fuck," she chokes out.

I lower my head and press my mouth right against her. The taste of her mixed with my own cum explodes on my tongue, and it physically rewires my brain. It’s a goddamn revelation. A sudden, vicious addiction I already know I’m never giving up. She's still twitching from her first orgasm, and her hips buck off the carpet the second my tongue lashes over her clit.

I wrap my free arm under her thigh, anchoring her to the floor. I keep my fingers buried deep inside her, plugging her up, keeping my cum where it belongs, while I suck and lick her.

She thrashes on the carpet. Her hands clamp around the back of my head, her nails scraping over my buzzed hair hard enough to bite into my scalp. She begs me to stop, and in the next breath, she begs me harder not to. I don't let up. I work her over, drawing it out, pushing her right to the edge and backing off until she's crying out my name.

Then I suck her hard, and she finally comes.

Her pussy clamps down on my fingers, crushing them as she rides out a long, devastating orgasm. Her entire body shakes against the floor. I stay right there, reveling in her moans until she finally stops trembling.

I pull my fingers out and crawl back up her body, finding her mouth in the dark. I kiss her—sloppy, wet, and deep, letting her taste us—before gravity finally wins and I collapse beside her on the carpet. I wrap my arm around her and drag her sweaty, relaxed body flush against my side, burying my face in her messy hair.

We lie there in the dark, breathing hard and staring up at the ceiling.

As my heart rate finally starts to slow, the reality of what we just did hits me. I just fucked a stranger bare and came inside her. Hopefully my swimmers are doing their job right now, and you know what?

Another man might have regrets about what he just did. He might be panicking about how he just blew his life up.

But I don't feel a single ounce of regret. I just pull her closer, breathe in the scent of her, and smile into the dark.

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CHAPTER 5
GOLDIE

"C'MON, TRY IT," I demand, holding a hot, salty french fry dripping with cold chocolate milkshake up to his mouth. "It's literally the best drunk food on the planet."

Sumner eyes the fry like it's radioactive. He's propped up against the headboard beside me, the hotel sheet pooled around his waist, exposing a broad, muscular chest covered in a light dusting of dark hair.

I kinda want to lick it. If I lick it, then it's mine, right? That's the rule?

He finally leans forward and takes a bite. His nose immediately wrinkles. "That's a crime against potatoes. And ice cream."

I laugh, popping a fry into my own mouth. "Ah, so you're a psychopath."

I shift closer, letting my bare shoulder press into his warm arm. His hand hasn't left my skin since we peeled ourselves off the carpet twenty minutes ago. Right now, his fingers rest on my stomach, his thumb stroking lazy circles right over my belly button. The contact sends a fresh spark of heat straight between my legs.

My boobs are totally still out, but whatever. They're nice.

The tequila haze is starting to fade a little, leaving just enough clarity for my brain to process the absolute insanity of my current situation.

"Okay, but seriously," I say, chewing. "We potentially just made a human being together. You're not, like, a serial killer or a Republican or anything, are you?"

A deep, rumbling laugh vibrates through his chest. It’s a great sound. "Considering I was raised by two dads, being a Republican would make me a pretty massive hypocrite."

"Two dads? Love that for you. And for our hypothetical offspring." I point a fry at his chest. "You conveniently skipped over the serial killer part, though."

He raises an eyebrow, his thumb resuming its lazy circles on my stomach. "If I was a serial killer, I probably wouldn't be trying so hard to leave my DNA inside you."

I snort, nearly dropping my fry. "Fair point. You'd get caught immediately. Worst serial killer ever."

A slow smirk spreads across his face. "Exactly."

I dip another fry. "What's your last name, anyway? Since we skipped the awkward first date phase."

"Wells," he says. He tilts his head. "What about you?"

"Hahn."

He pauses, a slight frown forming. "Goldie Hahn? Why does that sound familiar?"

I groan. "Because of the actress. She was huge in the eighties and nineties. My mom was obsessed. *Overboard*, *Death Becomes Her*, *Private Benjamin*... they were basically on a constant loop in my house growing up."

He stares at me blankly. "I’ve never heard of any of those."

"Tragic," I say, shaking my head. "But my mom is great."

“She must be if she made you.” His thumb slides down an inch, slipping just under the edge of the sheet where it dips low across my hips. My breath hitches.

“What do you do for work, Sumner Wells? You’re way too hot to be something boring.”

He lets out another rumbly chuckle and steals the fry in my hand, sans milkshake, with his mouth. When he’s done chewing, he says, "I'm a pilot for NOAA.”

When I give him a blank look, he says, “I fly planes into hurricanes."

I stop mid-chew. "Shut up. You're a hurricane hunter?"

"Yeah." His attention drops to my boobs. "What about you?"

Yeah, we’re gonna circle back to that *hot and scary* job of his later.

"I’m a photographer," I say, licking chocolate shake off my thumb as he watches me with dark eyes. "I own a studio here in St. Pete. Bombshell."

He tilts his head, his thumb pausing on my stomach. "Bombshell. I'm guessing that means you don't do family portraits on the beach in matching white polos."

"God, no. I shoot boudoir. Lingerie, implied nudity, that kind of thing. I basically spend all day stripping women down, hyping them up, and showing them how insanely hot they are."

His eyes drop to where the white sheet barely covers me then roam over the uncovered parts. His gaze lingers on my boobs, then my stomach, then the ink running along my ribs before following the sheet where it dips over my hip. The air in the room suddenly feels ten degrees hotter.

“And you know how fucking hot you are, right?” he rasps, his grip tightening on my waist.

I smirk. “Obviously.”

A slow, wicked smile spreads across his face. "Good."

I drop my head onto his shoulder. My hand drifts down his stomach, my finger tracing the deep V of the muscle right above his hip bone. He flinches, his stomach contracting sharply.

I pause, looking up at him with a grin. “Wait. Are you ticklish?”

His eyes narrow. “No.”

Yeah, he’s full of shit.

I immediately poke him right in the side.

He jerks away with a startled laugh and catches my wrist before I can get him again, but the grin on his face gives him away completely.

“Oh my God. You are.”

“I’m not,” he says, still laughing as he keeps hold of my wrist.

“Uh-huh.” I grin and flex my fingers like I’m considering another attack. “This is dangerous information for me to have.”

His smile turns a little more sinister as he tightens his hand around my wrist and pulls me closer. “I think you’re the one who should be worried.”

The teasing answer should make me laugh, but then his thumb drags slowly over the inside of my wrist, and his eyes drop to my mouth.

That changes things.

I’m suddenly very aware of how close we are, how little I’m wearing, and how hard he is under the sheet.

He reaches over, plucks the milkshake and the fries out of my free hand, and sets them on the nightstand.

"Your fifteen-minute break is officially over," he says, and I didn't know it was possible for his voice to get deeper and rougher, but here we are.

He doesn't give me time to process the shift. He grabs my ankle and yanks, dragging me flat onto my back right in the middle of the mattress. He crawls over me, caging me in, and settles his body between my spread legs.

Sumner doesn't rush to push inside me. He brackets my head with his arms and just looks at me. His gaze drags over my messy hair, my stomach, and my thick thighs spread around him. One of his hands leaves the mattress and closes around the outside of my thigh. His fingers sink in as he squeezes, then slide higher to my hip. I lived with my ex for years, and not once did he ever look at me like this—like I'm a goddamn feast and he's starving.

He shifts his hips, pressing his hard, thick cock right against the slick heat of my pussy. The friction of his skin sliding against where I'm still wet from our first round makes my breath hitch.

"I'm going to fuck you until you pass out," he murmurs, his hips rolling forward. Just the broad, blunt head of his dick slips inside me, stretching me out for a second before he pulls back. "And when you fall asleep, I want to wake you up by doing it again."

He thrusts again, sliding in a fraction deeper, letting the friction build.

"Am I allowed to fuck you while you're sleeping, Goldie?"

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

"Am I allowed to fuck more of my cum into you so we do all we can to make a baby tonight?"

A fresh rush of arousal floods between my thighs. The sheer, dominant filth of the question makes my core clench so hard I actually whimper.

"Yes," I breathe out, my hands gripping his broad shoulders. "God, yes. I'll be pissed if you don't."

"Good."

And then he goes to work, making good on his promise to hand me so many orgasms I literally pass out.

Looks like Sumner Wells might be the best bad decision I've ever made.

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CHAPTER 6
SUMNER

MY HARD DICK wakes me up out of a dead sleep. With all the fucking Goldie and I have done over the last few hours, you'd think it'd be out of commission. But, no. It's there, throbbing away, hard as ever and desperate to get inside her again.

Desperate enough to yank me out of unconsciousness.

My eyes aren't even open before I'm rubbing against the curve of her ass, leaving a sticky trail of precum behind. Fuck, her skin's so soft, and she smells so fucking good, like me mixed with her.

Eventually, I drag my eyes open. I have no clue what time it is, only that the room is pitch black and the steady crash of the Gulf is drifting through the cracked balcony door. The freezing AC is fighting a losing battle against the warm, salty humidity bleeding in from outside.

Goldie's passed out, her back tucked flush against my chest. Her head is using my bicep as a pillow, her messy hair tickling my jaw. My hand is clamped over her bare boob, my fingers sinking into her soft skin. I give it a slow squeeze, then drag my palm down over her stomach and hip before pulling her tighter against me. Fuck, I love how much of her I can get my hands on. My dick is rock hard, sliding between her legs as I lazily thrust against her.

I'm running on maybe a couple hours of sleep and have the beginnings of a hangover from the shitty tequila, but I barely feel any of it. No, I'm wide awake now, riding a goddamn high that has nothing to do with

alcohol. It’s pure, uncut adrenaline, and the source of it is currently asleep in my arms.

For the last year, I thought Delia and I were trying for the same thing. Every month, I waited for a positive test. Every month, I told myself we’d try again when it didn’t happen, even while everything between us slowly went to shit.

Having a baby was always the part I wanted.

I never expected the trying itself to get into my head like this.

But Goldie spent the night telling me to come inside her. Begging me to give her a baby. Looking at me like the idea of getting pregnant from my dick was turning her on just as much as it was turning me on.

And apparently that does something seriously fucked-up to me.

Because now I can’t stop thinking about it.

About her wanting my cum inside her because she wants it to work. About seeing her stomach grow and knowing exactly how the baby got there. About being the one who did that to her.

My dick throbs against her ass.

Yeah.

That part is definitely new.

It’s turned into a vicious, physical craving. The more I fuck her, the deeper this addiction sinks into my bones. I bury my face in her neck, inhaling the salty-sweet scent of her skin mixed with sex and me, and squeeze her tit just to feel her sigh in her sleep.

The thought of the sun coming up puts a tight, ugly knot in my gut. Because what the fuck happens tomorrow? I don't even really know this woman. What if I actually knocked her up tonight? How do we raise a kid together? What if she wants a relationship? I'm technically still married. Everything is a massive, complicated disaster, and I’m usually the guy who plans for every possible catastrophe before I even leave the house.

But right now? In the dark? I don't give a shit. I'll worry about the fallout tomorrow. Tonight, I just want to be back inside her.

Before she passed out, she told me how much she wanted me to do this. To wake her up by fucking her. She wants it just as bad as I do.

And I’m sure as fuck going to give us both what we want.

She doesn’t move a muscle as I pull my hips back just enough to line the tip of my dick up with her pussy. She’s still soaking wet from our last

round, slick between her thighs. My cock throbs against her as I drag the tip through the wetness and line myself up.

Just the thought of stretching her out in her sleep, of pumping my cum into her again while she doesn’t even know I’m doing it is beyond any of my wildest fantasies.

I want her to wake up dripping with me. I want her filled with so much of my cum I’ve got none left and she has it all. I want it to mark her so permanently, we create life.

My hand clamps around her hip, my fingers sinking into the soft flesh as I hold her steady. I drive my hips forward slowly. I sink into her, sliding in as far as I can possibly go, and then push just a little harder to make sure there's zero space left between us.

Fuck. The wet grip of her pussy swallowing me whole pulls a raspy groan out of me, and she shifts a little at the sound. I bite my lip to stay silent, to keep her asleep for as long as I can while I fuck her. It feels incredible, but the crazy part is, it doesn't feel deep enough. I want to crawl inside her skin. I want to fuse our bodies together so she can't ever leave.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

Goldie lets out a soft, sleepy whimper. Her body shifts, her hips instinctively wiggling back against me in her sleep to take more of me. Even in sleep she wants to get closer.

I know the fucking feeling.

"Shh," I say, pressing my open mouth to the curve of her bare shoulder. "I just need to fuck you again. Go back to sleep."

I let my hips settle against her ass for a second, just reveling in the tight, wet heat wrapped around my cock, before I start moving. I pull back until only the tip of my dick is keeping us connected, and then I drive my hips forward, burying myself as deep as I can go.

Goldie doesn't wake up, but her body knows exactly what I'm doing. Her breathing hitches. Every time I bottom out, her hips roll lazily against

me, chasing the friction.

I slide my hand up to palm her tit, my thumb rolling over her nipple until it hardens against my fingers. She lets out a soft, broken whimper that vibrates against my chest.

I lock my jaw so tight my teeth ache. I want to wake her up. I want to fuck her hard enough to hear her scream my name, but I force myself to keep the pace slow.

This feels different.

She’s completely relaxed against me, asleep while I move inside her because she told me she wanted this. Trusted me enough to close her eyes knowing I’d do it.

That gets under my skin in a way I wasn’t expecting.

For the last year, I kept trying to convince myself Delia wanted the same thing I did. I kept showing up every month ready to try again while she lied to my face.

Goldie doesn’t make me guess.

She told me exactly what she wanted, then fell asleep in my arms trusting me to give it to her.

Fuck.

I don’t know what to do with how much that means to me.

It’s a mindfuck in the best way.

The room is quiet except for the low hum of the AC, the crash of the waves outside the balcony, and the wet slap of our bodies. I pick up the pace because I can't fucking help it. The grip of her pussy is too tight, too hot, and it’s dragging me straight toward the edge. I slide my hand down her stomach, slipping my fingers between her legs to find her clit. I rub my thumb right over it, determined to make her come so she sucks up my load.

I bury my face in her messy hair, exhaling through my nose and clamping my jaw shut to muffle my own harsh breathing.

The orgasm hits me with all the force of a blind, thousand-foot drop inside the eyewall of a storm.

My balls draw up tight. I don't make a sound. I just grip her hips, leaning into her so hard she’s almost pressed flat into the mattress under my weight, and drive my cock in one last time. My whole body locks up. I shoot my cum deep inside her, emptying my balls with pulse after pulse. I pump every last drop into her, my head completely consumed by the

biological need to leave her so full of me she'll be dripping with my mess for the rest of the day.

My thumb keeps up the relentless rhythm on her clit. As the last drops of my cum shoot into her, Goldie’s hips buck off the mattress. Her eyes flutter open, glassy and unfocused in the dark, right as her pussy clamps down hard around my softening dick.

She rides out the climax with a long, breathy moan, her inner muscles pulling everything I just gave her deeper inside.

"Sumner," she whispers, her voice thick with sleep.

"I'm right here," I rasp against her ear, kissing her neck.

She lets out a soft, contented sigh, her eyes drifting shut as she settles back against me and I wrap myself around her, keeping my softening dick inside her as long as I can.

My muscles finally give out, and I sink into the mattress. I'm completely satisfied, my body and my balls totally drained. But as the adrenaline fades, I notice the pitch-black sky outside the balcony starting to lift into a dark, bruised gray.

I got exactly what I wanted tonight. But the sun is going to come up in a few hours, and I have absolutely no fucking clue what I'm going to say to her when it does.

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CHAPTER 7
GOLDIE

MY THIGHS ARE SHAKING, and they have a distinctly Jello-like quality about them as I hobble to the bed and flop down. I'm panting like I just went eight seconds on a bronco, and you know what? Accurate.

Actually, my entire lower half is waving a giant white flag. Between my legs is a sticky mess, and I could really go for an ice pack right about now.

On the plus side, the throbbing in my vagina helps distract from the throbbing in my head from my hangover, so there's that. But you know what? I don't care about any of it. I just bury my face into Sumner's bare chest, inhaling the scent of salt, sweat, and sex.

He really shouldn't smell this good after the night we just had.

Beyond this hotel room door is a giant, steaming pile of bullshit waiting for me. My cheating ex-boyfriend. Getting said ex-boyfriend out of my house. The absolute insanity of letting Sumner inside of me to make a baby. I'm not dealing with a single second of that yet. Any of it. Right now, this bubble is exactly where I want to be, thank you very much.

And despite the soreness and the bone-deep exhaustion, he looks at me, I look at him, and the second our eyes connect, we're on each other again.

We spend the entire morning naked. We devour the leftover room service, picking cold fries off the plates, and then we go right back at it.

The closer the digital clock on the nightstand creeps to eleven, the more frantic we get. We fuck like the world is ending at checkout. It's a blur of desperation, skin, cum, and sweat.

He bends me over the desk, both hands spread across my ass as he drags my hips back onto his cock. Later he props me against the bathroom counter, hooks one of my thighs over his hip, and fucks me while the shower runs.

We squeeze out every last drop of this fantasy, going right up until the exact minute the front desk calls to politely tell us to get the hell out.

We don’t talk, not about anything important. I’m not sure either of us know what to say.

But it’s not awkward, not like I thought it’d be. It’s such a relief, like sinking into a warm bath, being around him. It’s hard to describe, but his energy just vibes with mine so effortlessly. I don’t have to pretend to be anything other than what I am, and I hope he feels the same.

It’s never been like this with anyone, and I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do with that. The timing literally could not be worse.

But the night I just spent with him might be the best night of my life.

Getting dressed sucks. Pulling my underwear over my beat-up vagina is an absolute tragedy. I yank my wrinkled tank top down over my boobs and wince as I step into my shoes. "I'm probably going to need a wheelchair to get back to the bar."

Sumner grabs his sunglasses off the dresser, a slow smirk spreading across his face. "Want me to carry you?"

I shake my head. “I’m good.” I scan the ground for my skirt and find it halfway under the couch, so I bend down with a wince and grab it, pulling it up over my hips. “As hot as that would be”—I eye his muscles—“I don’t think you’ve got enough left in the tank after last night and this morning to pull it off.”

He steps closer until his chest bumps up against mine, ducking down a little until I think he’s going to kiss me. But at the last second, he swoops down and scoops me into his arms like I weigh nothing. "Wanna test that theory? I think I’ve proven I have excellent stamina.”

"Shut up," I laugh, pushing against his hard chest and wiggling until he sets me down. “Yes, you’re very strong and manly and everything. But you’re gonna have to try harder next time if you want to take away my ability to walk after.”

He raises an eyebrow, and his lips tug into a smirk. “Next time?”

“Uh.” I avoid his eyes while I search for my sandals. I find one over by the closet and tug it on. “About that.” I find the other sandal halfway under

the bed and sit down to put it on, barely wincing at the throbbing between my legs. "We should probably set some ground rules before we walk out of here."

I don't feel that usual awkward panic of wondering *what are we now?* Because I already know exactly what we have to be. Even if I hate it.

Sumner's smirk fades into something much more serious. "Ground rules."

I stand up and walk toward him. "Yeah. My life is currently a raging dumpster fire. Yours is too. We're both bleeding out from major, catastrophic wounds from our asshole exes."

I swallow down a weird, tight lump in my throat and force my most confident, breezy smile. "Which means whatever this was..." I gesture to the totally destroyed room. "...stays in this room. If this worked, and we actually made a baby, we're friends. Co-parents. That's it. Neither of us is in any shape to be anything else to anyone right now."

He watches me for a long, heavy second. I can see the argument flash in his eyes, his possessive streak fighting against the logic. But the disciplined pilot in him knows I'm right. We're both walking back into active war zones when we leave this little bubble.

"You're right," he finally says, his voice a low, gritty rumble. "For the record, I don't like it"—he gestures with his chin to the bed—"because that was…"

"Yeah." The silence stretches between us for a few seconds. "But the timing's all wrong. We can't complicate this, not if it's going to work." I hold out my phone. "So punch your digits in, *friend*."

He takes it, saving his contact, and shoots a text to himself so he has my number too.

"It's a two-week wait for the test, right?" he asks. His voice is a little quieter and more serious than he's been all morning.

I nod. "About that."

"Just... keep me in the loop. Whatever you need from me, I'm there."

He hands the phone back, his fingers lingering on the plastic case. His jaw tightens, and he shifts his weight, staring at me like he wants to demand he be in the bathroom with me when the time comes.

He clearly hates the idea of sitting on the sidelines for this part. But he doesn't push. He gives me space.

It makes a sharp, weird ache flare up in my chest. He respects my boundaries, but the fact he wants to be involved so badly is getting to me way more than it should.

Everything about this man so far is the greenest of flags, and I don’t know how any woman could’ve let him go.

"I will." I grip the strap of my purse, staring up at him. I really don't want to walk out this door. I want to strip back down and climb into that bed with him.

He doesn't look like he wants to leave, either. He’s still standing too close, still touching me, still looking like he’d happily drag me back into bed if I gave him half an excuse.

But we made a deal. The fun part is over. Now we walk out of this hotel, go back to the real world, and deal with the mess waiting for us.

We finally leave the room where I made several extremely questionable life choices and had a really fucking good time doing it. Checking out at the front desk takes two seconds, and then we push through the glass doors into the brutal reality of a Florida afternoon. I’m exhausted, hungover, and my stomach is trying to eat itself, but honestly? I’m weirdly happy. Fully satisfied.

Ten out of ten, would recommend.

The walk back to the dive bar is a special kind of torture. The St. Pete midday sun is doing its best to roast us alive, turning the humidity into a literal sauna, and I’m waddling across the pavement like a cowboy who spent way too long in the saddle. Sumner keeps his pace painfully slow, staying right beside me while I hobble.

I swear his lips twitch like he thinks this is funny.

"So," I say, squinting up at him. "Are you going to tell me what you wished for?"

He glances down at me, his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses. "What?"

"Last night. When you chucked your wedding ring into the Gulf. I know you weren’t *that* drunk that you don’t remember."

By the time we reach our cars, I’m still thinking about his stupid sea turtle wish. He stops and turns to face me, stepping right into my personal space.

"I wished you were exactly as crazy as you seemed," he says, his voice dropping into that low, gritty rumble. "And that this actually works."

My heart does a stupid, frantic little flutter.

This is it. The absolute end of the line.

Before I can rattle off some sarcastic goodbye to deflect from the sudden knot in my throat, his hands cup my face.

And then he kisses me. It isn't a sweet, polite goodbye peck. It’s hot, deep, and demanding. His tongue sweeps into my mouth, taking complete ownership of it, while one of his hands comes down to wrap around my throat and tilt my chin up. My knees buckle a little, but his arm goes around my back to hold me up.

He tears his mouth away from mine, his chest rising and falling fast. He drops his hands and steps back, but it looks almost painful for him to do it.

"Time to go take out the trash," he says with a tiny grin that’s too fucking cute on a man like him.

I blink, a little shocked he remembered my drunken rambling about my ex. "I plan on it."

He gives me a nod. Then he pulls his truck door open, lets his eyes crawl all over me one last time, like he’s stripping me back down, and climbs inside.

I stand there on the baking asphalt, watching him pull out onto the street and disappear into traffic. He takes all the heat and the madness of last night right along with him.

The fantasy is officially over.

Now it's just me, a massive hangover, and a cheating ex-boyfriend to evict.

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CHAPTER 8
SUMNER

I CUT the engine of my truck. The hour-long drive from St. Pete to Lakeland gave my body plenty of time to stiffen up. My dick is sore, my back aches, and I don't have a single regret. I stare at the front door of my house, hoping like hell my cum did its job and I left a baby growing inside Goldie.

Then my gaze shifts to the white SUV parked in the driveway.

Delia's home.

The second I see my wife's car, my hand tightens around the steering wheel.

I spent the last year thinking I was the problem. Taking vitamins, reading every stupid article I could find online, stressing over timing and trying to stay positive every month it didn't happen while my wife stood there and fed me straight bullshit.

Yesterday, finding out what she'd done fucked me up. I thought I'd wake up today feeling even worse.

Then I spent the night with Goldie.

Now I'm sitting in my driveway with her sweet scent still clinging to my skin, and all I have left for the woman inside this house is disgust.

Knowing I can't put it off any longer, I grab my keys and head inside. The air conditioning makes goosebumps lift along my skin, and the same overly floral scent of whatever expensive diffuser Delia buys sits heavily in the air. The whole house looks like a showroom. White furniture, glass

surfaces, everything exactly where Delia likes it. For the first time, I notice how little of me is anywhere in here.

How did I never notice before?

She’s in the kitchen, leaning against the island, scrolling on her phone. Her blonde hair is styled in perfect waves, her makeup flawless even on a Sunday afternoon. When she hears my footsteps, she sets her phone down, crosses her arms, and levels me with a glare.

"Where were you?" she demands, her tone sharp. "You didn't come home last night and you’ve been ignoring my calls."

I just stare at her. The audacity of this woman acting like she has any right to demand a damn thing from me. I don’t even know who she is anymore. Maybe I never did.

A harsh, humorless laugh scrapes out of my throat. I drop my keys on the counter, and they land with a loud *clink.*

"You want to know where I was?"

I open the cupboard, grab a glass, and fill it from the pitcher in the fridge before I look at her again.

"I spent the night trying to get another woman pregnant."

Her mouth falls open.

"A complete stranger," I add. "She wants a baby, so I gave her what you spent the last year pretending you wanted."

Her arms drop from where they’re crossed over her chest, and for once, she has nothing to say.

I take a drink of water. "You can probably still smell her on me."

That does it.

Color floods her face, climbing fast under her makeup as her fingers curl against the edge of the island.

"Are you insane?" she snaps, her voice shrill. "You cheated on me?"

I set the glass down on the counter. "You ended this marriage the second you had surgery behind my back to make sure I could never get you pregnant."

"I never wanted kids! I thought you'd grow out of it. I thought once we got married, you'd realize we were enough!"

"You thought you could change my mind." I stare at her, trying to wrap my head around the fact that she can say this shit out loud and still think she’s the one who got screwed over. "And when that didn’t work, you

decided it was easier to lie to me than admit you never wanted the same life I did."

Her mouth tightens, but I keep going.

"You knew I wanted kids from the day we met. Then you spent the last year letting me think something was wrong with one of us while you already knew exactly why it wasn’t happening."

I plant both hands on the counter and lean toward her. "You sent me pictures from Cabo, drinking margaritas with Jessica while you were supposedly taking a mental health break because trying for a baby was getting too hard."

The words taste worse the second time around.

"You made me feel sorry for you."

Delia lifts her chin, completely unbothered. "I wasn't in Cabo. I was in a recovery clinic in Miami."

I frown, staring at her. "I saw the pictures, Delia."

"I faked them," she says, waving a manicured hand like it’s no big deal. "I used an AI app to put myself on the beach so you wouldn't ask questions. I needed time to heal."

My stomach turns hard enough that I have to swallow to keep from throwing up.

This wasn’t one lie she came up with because she panicked. She planned the whole fucking thing. The trip. The pictures. The excuse for why she needed to get away. She knew I’d ask questions, so she made sure she had answers ready before I could.

And while she was recovering from surgery she chose behind my back, I was here researching motility supplements, cutting back on caffeine, and lying awake wondering if my sperm was the reason we couldn’t get pregnant.

Then she came home and cried over negative tests she knew would never turn positive.

And I believed every fucking tear.

I spent months trying to figure out how to make things easier for her while she watched me tear myself apart over something she already knew was never going to happen.

And now she’s standing here acting like she’s the victim. Like I’ve somehow done her wrong.

Fuck that.

Delia takes a breath and smooths both hands down the front of her shirt. When she speaks again, her voice has changed. She’s dropped the anger, and now she’s calm. Patient. The same flight-attendant voice she uses when she’s already decided how something is going to go and everyone else needs to get on board.

"Look. You found out, you were hurt, and you acted out. You slept with someone to get back at me. Fine." She gives a small shrug. "We both made mistakes. But I'm willing to forgive you and move past this if you are."

For a second, I honestly think I heard her wrong.

She’s willing to forgive *me*?

I slowly stand up straight, staring at her like she just grew a second head. "Forgive me?"

"We can go to counseling. We can fix this."

"There’s nothing to fix." I push away from the counter, and something in me finally lets go. I don’t have to calm her down. I don’t have to make this easier for her. I don’t have to save a marriage she already blew apart.

"You had your tubes tied. You don't want kids. I do." I shake my head. "There’s nothing a counselor can do about that."

I don't wait for her to argue. I turn my back on her, walk down the hallway, and push into the master bedroom.

My duffel is on the top shelf of the closet. I yank it down, toss it onto the mattress, and start pulling flight suits and shirts off the hangers and stuffing them inside.

Delia follows me into the room. "You can't just walk out! We’re adults, Sumner. We sit down and we figure this out."

I stop with another shirt in my hand and look at her.

"What the fuck do you think there is to figure out?"

Ignoring her, I yank open a dresser drawer to grab my boxers. My knuckles brush against the divider separating my stuff from Delia’s, and for some fucking reason, the lace on top of her pile makes my mind go straight back to Goldie.

Purple panties shoved to the side. Her skirt bunched around her hips. Those thick thighs spread wide while she took my dick and told me exactly what she wanted from me.

Fuck.

Goldie didn’t hold anything back. She wanted my hands on her, so she said it. She wanted my cum inside her, so she fucking asked for it. Even

drunk off her ass, I never had to wonder what she meant or whether she was telling me the truth.

I look at Delia standing in the bedroom doorway.

I knew where I stood with Goldie from the second she opened her mouth. I haven't known where I stood with my own wife for a fucking year.

I grab a handful of black socks and toss them into the bag.

Delia reaches out and catches my wrist before I can grab anything else. Her fingers tighten around me, then stop. I shake her off, the feel of her touching me making me want to rip my skin off.

Her attention drops to my left hand.

"Where's your ring?"

I turn back to the dresser. "At the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico."

For half a second, all I can think about is Goldie standing beside me on the beach, making up that ridiculous story about Poseidon accepting it as an offering and giving me what I wished for.

A baby.

Fuck.

Maybe in a couple of weeks I'll find out if she was right.

Delia's mouth tightens. "Fine. If you're going to act like a child and run away, don't expect to come crawling back." She folds her arms across her chest. "I'm keeping the house."

"Good." I grab the zipper on the duffel and yank it shut. "I don't want it. Keep the sterile museum." I gesture around us. "There's nothing here I give a shit about keeping anyway."

Her face tightens.

"I'll call a lawyer tomorrow and get this started. I'd rather sleep in my truck than spend another night in that bed."

I sling the thick strap over my shoulder, grab my favorite pair of sunglasses off the nightstand, and walk right past her.

"I'll have movers come get the rest of my shit in a couple of days," I tell her on my way out.

I throw my bag into the back of my truck and climb behind the wheel. A minute later, the house I bought to fill with kids is shrinking in the rearview mirror.

My phone lights up where I tossed it into the cup holder. I've got a string of unread texts from my dads that I've been avoiding for the last couple of days, followed by a wall of messages from Trace.

He’s been my best friend since college, which means he knows me well enough to figure out something’s wrong even when I don’t tell him shit.

The problem is, he’s always fucking hated Delia.

If I call him, it’s going to be a whole thing.

Another message lights up my phone before the screen goes dark again. Could be my dads. Could be Trace. Could be Delia for all I know.

I’m not dealing with any of them right now.

I pull up Colston’s number and call instead. He picks up after a couple of rings.

"Yo, Shamu," he says. "Where the hell have you been? I texted you yesterday to see if you wanted to grab a beer."

"I was out of town." I turn onto the main road and adjust my grip on the wheel. "You gonna be home for a while?"

"Yeah, I’m just hanging out. Why? What’s going on?"

There’s really no good way to ease into this.

"I’m leaving Delia."

Silence.

"I need somewhere to crash for a few days. You care if I take your couch?"

There’s a beat of total silence on the line before Colston clears his throat. "Damn. Yeah, of course, man. My door’s unlocked, and I’ve got cold beer in the fridge. Get your ass over here."

“I love you, Jenny,” I drawl in my best Forrest Gump voice.

He laughs. “Fuck off with that. Just get here.”

I end the call and toss my phone onto the passenger seat. Explaining this absolute clusterfuck to Colston is going to require a lot of beer. Preferably after I get some food in me and make the pounding behind my eyes calm the fuck down.

Tomorrow, I have a lawyer to call and a new place to find.

Right now, though, all I can think about is Goldie and whether she’s standing in front of her asshole ex telling him exactly what she thinks of him.

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CHAPTER 9
GOLDIE

I SHOVE my key into the front door of my house, bracing myself for a screaming match. Grant was supposed to pack his shit and leave last night, but I have no idea if he actually did it. Part of me fully expects to find him sitting on my couch, ready with some excuse for why he's still here.

Except the house is completely quiet.

Grant's gone, but he left a massive, petty-ass tantrum behind.

My favorite potted monstera is dumped over on the rug, dirt scattered everywhere. The couch cushions are on the floor, and he even emptied a bottle of red wine onto the kitchen counter and left the sticky puddle to dry.

I just stand there staring at it.

Oh, fuck him.

This is what he does instead of facing me? Trashes the house and runs?

What a fucking coward.

A month ago, I probably would've cleaned this up while getting more and more pissed off with every swipe of the paper towel. Then Grant would've come home, acted like I was overreacting, and somehow we would've ended up arguing about my attitude instead of whatever he did in the first place.

God, I put up with a lot of stupid shit.

Not huge things. Nothing that ever made me stop and think, *Wow, this relationship is fucked.* Just enough little comments and shitty moods that I got used to rolling my eyes, letting things go, and moving on because fighting about every single one sounded exhausting.

But standing here with a throbbing headache and shaky legs that still haven’t fully recovered from last night, I don’t feel sad that he’s gone.

I look at the dirt all over my rug, the cushions on the floor, and the wine drying on my counter.

No, I feel relieved.

Which is probably something I should unpack eventually.

Today, though?

I'm absolutely not cleaning up his man-baby tantrum.

I pull out my phone, find a same-day cleaning service online, and book someone to come later.

Then I strip off my wrinkled clothes and step into the shower. The hot water feels incredible on my sore muscles, though washing between my legs makes me wince. Turns out spending most of the night and half the morning getting railed has consequences.

Worth it.

I grin while I wash my hair, and then my hand drifts down over my stomach.

Holy shit.

There could be a baby in there.

I’ve wanted to be a mom for as long as I can remember. Growing up with a single mom who worked her ass off to give me everything she could, I always pictured doing it differently when it was my turn. I wanted the loud house. Kids everywhere and the money to be able to give them everything I didn’t have. Somebody beside me in the middle of all the chaos.

I thought Grant was going to be that person.

Thank fuck he wasn't.

Walking in on him balls-deep in his coworker was the universe doing me a solid. Because if I hadn't caught him, I probably would have had his baby.

And then I would’ve been tied to a man who cheats on me, trashes my house when he gets caught, and runs away so he doesn’t have to deal with the fallout.

What a catch.

Instead, I did something completely fucking insane with a stranger.

And I don’t regret a second of it.

My hand drifts over my stomach again. If Sumner’s swimmers did their job last night, my whole life is about to change.

I step out of the bathroom feeling significantly less like roadkill and start thinking about what I’m doing with the rest of my day.

Then it hits me.

Crap.

No drinking until I know if I’m pregnant.

Mocktails it is.

I pull on a neon pink, sheer mesh maxi skirt over a matching bikini bottom, pairing it with a cropped vintage band tee and chunky platform sandals. It's exactly the kind of loud outfit Grant would’ve rolled his eyes at.

I check myself out in the mirror, and yeah. I look fucking fantastic.

Drag Me to Brunch is about to start, so I grab my oversized sunglasses, lock the door behind me, and head back out to meet my girls.

The Tipsy Mermaid’s already packed when I walk in. Music is blasting, somebody near the bar is wearing enough sequins to blind me, and every table is crowded with people yelling over each other and waving down servers for another round.

I spot my girls crammed into our usual corner booth and slide in beside Ellie.

Her eyes narrow immediately. "Why do you look so happy? Your entire life blew up yesterday."

"I feel amazing." I grab one of the sticky laminated menus.

Before anyone can interrogate me, Cherry Poppins, our favorite six-foot-something queen in a bright red wig, a sequined bodysuit, and heels even I couldn’t pull off, struts over to the table.

She gives me a slow once-over. “There she is. I heard the boyfriend got promoted to ex. Love that for you.”

The girls have obviously been filling Cherry in while they waited for me to show up.

“Sure did.” I grin and reach for the menu. “Dumped his cheating ass last night.”

The whole table erupts into cheers. Scout, currently sporting a rose-gold pixie cut and a shirt that says *I'm Not For Everyone*, raises her mimosa.

"I hope his dick falls off."

I snort. "That seems a little harsh.”

“It’s not.”

Ellie, Andie, and Tatum raise their glasses to clink with Scout’s while I turn to Cherry. “I’ll take a virgin mimosa.”

Cherry stares at me. “A virgin mimosa?”

“Yeah.”

“So... orange juice.”

I make a face. “Okay, when you say it like that, it sounds sad.”

“Because it is.” She catches one of the servers walking past. “Can you bring her a Neon Flamingo? No alcohol.”

Ellie’s head snaps toward me. “Since when do you skip the alcohol at drag brunch?”

Shit.

Tatum pauses with her straw halfway to her mouth. Her bubblegum-pink lipstick matches the ends of her hair, because Tatum never does anything halfway. “That is an excellent question.”

“I’m hungover,” I say with a shrug.

Nobody buys it. Not even a little.

Scout points her mimosa at me. “You’ve been hungover at brunch before.”

“I know. I just don’t want one today.”

Andie looks over at me. “You’re being weird.”

Shit.

I pick up the menu. “Can we talk about the fact that he trashed my house before he left?”

Ellie’s expression changes. “He what?”

Tatum makes a face. “He trashed your house?”

“Yep. Dumped my monstera over, threw shit everywhere, poured wine all over the counter.”

Scout’s mouth falls open. “What the fuck?”

“Exactly.” I look around the table. “And none of you stopped me from trying to have a baby with this man?”

Andie leans back and crosses her arms. “How exactly were we supposed to stop you?”

I open my mouth, then close it again.

“Okay, good point.”

“We didn’t know he was going to cheat on you and trash your house,” Ellie says. “You loved him. We supported you.”

Well.

Hard to argue with that.

“Fine.” I set the menu down. “Doesn’t matter now anyway. I found somebody else to make a baby with.”

Scout slowly lowers her mimosa. “I’m sorry, I must be drunker than I thought because I swear you just said—”

“That I found somebody else to fertilize my egg?”

Tatum gags and Andie shudders.

I ignore them both, nodding. “Yep. Met him at Bottom’s Up last night, took him back to a hotel, and let him spend the next however many hours trying to knock me up.”

Tatum stares at me. “Girl, I spent longer deciding on my name when I transitioned than you spent picking your baby daddy.”

“Speaking of names, tell me you at least know his,” Ellie says, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Tell me you have a picture. Gimme,” Scout demands, practically climbing over the table.

I pull out my phone. I obviously couldn't ask Sumner to pose for a portrait, but I did sneak a selfie around four in the morning while he was passed out. I flip the screen around. It’s grainy and dark, but you can clearly see my messy hair in the foreground and Sumner’s massive, bare, muscular chest and buzzed head behind me.

Is it a masterpiece? No. Does it clearly show that I bagged a walking, talking thirst trap? Yup.

Ellie stares at the screen. “Holy shit.” She holds up her hand for a high five without looking away. She looks about two seconds from licking my phone.

"His name is Sumner," I say, snatching my phone back before Scout can zoom in on the edge of the sheet barely covering his dick. "You know those guys who fly planes into hurricanes so we know when to evacuate?"

They all nod because *Florida*. "That's him."

Scout whistles. "Judging by those hands, I'm guessing his dick is the size of a fire extinguisher. Please tell me he knows what he’s doing with it.”

I laugh. "Oh, he knows. I had to hobble to my car when we left the hotel."

They all crack up just as Cherry makes her way back to our table carrying a giant pink goblet loaded with dragonfruit, edible glitter, and three

tiny umbrellas.

She sets it in front of me.

I stare at the thing. “Jesus. Is there even a drink under all that?”

“Somewhere.” Cherry adjusts one of the umbrellas. “I told them to make it obnoxious enough that you wouldn’t miss the vodka.”

I take a sip and immediately go back for another.

“Okay, this is actually really good.”

“I know.” She gives me a satisfied little smile and heads toward the next table.

For the next two hours, we eat an obscene amount of brunch food, throw cash at the queens, and make so many jokes about Grant’s cheating ass and his little house-trashing tantrum that eventually I’m laughing harder than I’m pissed.

By the time we leave the restaurant, hit St. Pete Beach for a few hours of sun, and finally head back to my house, the sky is starting to turn dark purple. The cleaning service did their job while we were gone. The hardwood floors are spotless, the wine is wiped up, and the monstera plant is back in its pot.

But when I walk into my bedroom, a heavy weight settles in my stomach. The bed is perfectly made. The exact bed where I walked in on Grant balls-deep in his coworker.

"Nope," Andie says from the doorway, reading my face. "Absolutely not. You are not sleeping in that."

"I can buy new sheets tomorrow," I say, crossing my arms.

"Sheets don't fix bad juju," Scout says, pushing past Andie. "Grab a corner, Ellie."

"Wait, what are we doing?" I ask.

"We're burning it," Tatum says, already digging through her purse for a lighter.

Since my bungalow sits at the end of a dead-end street with a giant, overgrown empty lot behind it, I don't have neighbors close enough to call the fire department, so I shrug and go with it.

Ten minutes later, the four of us are hauling the king-size mattress out the back door. We dump it in the center of the overgrown grass. Andie douses it in a bottle of lighter fluid she found in my garage, and Tatum flicks her lighter and tosses it on the bed.

The flames roar up, bright and hot in the twilight.

Scout cheers like we just won something, while Ellie pulls out her phone to record the whole thing. Andie has the garden hose stretched across the grass beside her, because at least one of us thought past the *let's light this thing on fire* part of the plan.

I pull out my phone.

Sumner and I agreed this morning that we were just going to be friends. We both have massive messes to clean up in our own lives, and neither of us is in any place to start a relationship.

But friends text each other, right?

I snap a picture of the blazing mattress and send it to him.

GOLDIE: taking out the trash, just like I said I would

My screen doesn't even go dark before the typing bubble appears.

SUMNER: Good

SUMNER: Fuck that guy

Another message comes through right behind it.

SUMNER: Please tell me you have a hose out there

I glance at Andie, who has one foot planted on the garden hose while she argues with Tatum about whether they should all get naked and dance around the fire.

Probably best not to give him all the details.

GOLDIE: we have a hose

GOLDIE: my house is safe

SUMNER: Good

I smile at the screen, watching the flames chew through one corner of the mattress while the girls argue behind me about whether it needs more lighter fluid. Andie is firmly in the *absolutely fucking not* camp. Scout, unsurprisingly, is not.

Then I remember Sumner had his own disaster waiting for him when he left St. Pete this morning.

I chew on the inside of my cheek for a second before typing.

Goldie: did you end up talking to your wife?

The typing bubble appears almost immediately, disappears, then comes back.

SUMNER: Yeah

SUMNER: I ended it

My smile fades a little.

Well, shit. He really did it.

I stare at the message, trying to figure out what the hell I'm supposed to say. Is there an emoji for *sorry your wife is the fucking worst?* A thumbs-up feels psychotic.

This is so weird. I know what his dick looks like from every possible angle and exactly what sound he makes right before he comes, but I don't even know when his birthday is.

GOLDIE: are you okay?

This time, he takes longer to answer.

SUMNER: Not really

A second message follows.

SUMNER: But I will be

I'm still staring at his last text when Scout starts yelling that the middle of the mattress isn't catching fast enough and Tatum tells her she's going to lose an eyebrow if she gets any closer.

Yeah. I should probably supervise.

GOLDIE: I'm sorry

GOLDIE: for what it's worth, I'm glad you got out

I shove my phone into my pocket and turn back toward the fire before this gets even more out of hand.

For the next couple of hours, my phone stays in my pocket while the girls turn burning my mattress into an entire production. Scout takes control of the speaker and starts building a playlist specifically for the occasion, Tatum keeps vetoing songs for not being angry enough, and Andie stands off to the side with the hose looking like she regrets being friends with all of us.

By the time the fire burns down, we're exhausted, sweaty, and getting eaten alive by mosquitoes.

Ellie hugs me before heading toward her car. "You sure you don't want to stay at my place tonight?"

"I'm good. The couch is comfortable, and I have about six thousand throw pillows. I can build a nest."

"You call me if Grant comes back."

"I will."

One by one, they hug me, repeat some version of what they'd like to do to Grant if he shows up again, and head home.

Then the back door closes behind the last one and I'm alone.

The house is weirdly quiet after having the girls here all day. I stand there for a second, listening to the hum of the AC and staring through the glass door at what's left of my mattress smoking in the dark.

What a fucking weekend.

I should probably be devastated. But the only thing I really want to know is whether any of the completely insane shit I did last night worked.

I look down at my stomach.

Nothing feels different.

Of course nothing feels different. It's been, what, twelve hours?

Still.

I pull out my phone and open the calendar, counting the days again even though I already know the answer.

"Fuck."

That might actually be the longest two weeks of my life.

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CHAPTER 10
SUMNER

"YO, JENNY! I'M HERE," I call out, dropping my duffel beside the front door and rolling my shoulder where the strap dug into it.

Colston's condo is nicer than any other place I've stayed, and if it wasn't my best friend who lived here, I'd be afraid to step inside because I might scuff the floors or something.

We do the same job, but Colston comes from money, so his condo is fancy as fuck. The lobby's got a Michelin-starred restaurant, there's only one other unit on this floor, and the windows in his living room overlook Tampa. I can even see the beach from up here.

As far as places to pick up the pieces of my life go, I could do a whole hell of a lot worse.

The drive from Lakeland gave the adrenaline from my fight with Delia plenty of time to burn off, and now that I'm standing still, everything hits at once. My head's pounding, my back aches, and every muscle below my waist is reminding me exactly how I spent last night and most of this morning.

No regrets there.

I haven't eaten since those room-service fries in the middle of the night, but the thought of food still makes my stomach turn.

Mostly, I just want to lie down somewhere and stop thinking for a few hours. Maybe sleep off this hangover.

I make it as far as the living room before dropping onto the couch and letting my head fall back against the cushions.

For all the expensive shit Colston has in this place, he somehow managed to buy the least comfortable couch in existence. It looks nice, but sitting on it feels like a punishment.

Colston comes out of the kitchen and presses a cold beer to my chest. I grab the bottle, hoping a little hair of the dog will knock out the rest of this hangover.

At twenty-eight, he’s the youngest guy on our flight crew, but he’s easily the best co-pilot I’ve ever flown with. He flops down beside me, pushing a hand through his messy blond hair, the perpetual half-smirk he usually wears totally wiped off his face as he eyes me.

“You look like shit,” he says.

“Yeah, well. That’s what happens when your life implodes.” I hold out my beer, and he clinks his with mine. “Thanks for letting me crash on your couch."

Colston shakes his head. "Fuck no. This thing is fine for watching the game, but if you sleep on it, you'll wake up wishing you were dead.”

I choke on the sip of beer I just took, but he’s right. My ass is already starting to go numb.

“Plus, we have that calibration flight tomorrow morning. If you blow out a disc, the chief will bench us, and I can’t let that happen. So unless you want to sleep in the flight-sim room”—he points down the hall with the neck of his bottle—"or curl up next to my weights, you’re taking the left side of my bed.”

I shoot him a side-eye. "I may be single now, but I’m not about to be the little spoon."

"What about the big spoon?”

I glare at him, and he grins.

“You know what?” I ask. "I'm building a pillow wall. If you touch me in the middle of the night, I'm kicking you onto the floor."

He laughs. “Kicking me out of my own bed for a little platonic cuddling? That’s cold.”

I take a long drink of beer. We've shared cramped racks on deployments before, so neither of us actually cares, and keeping my flight status is the only thing in my life I have any control over right now.

And getting good sleep is at the top of my priority list to make sure that happens.

I let out a long sigh as the grin slips off Colston’s face and the air between us gets heavier. "I appreciate this, Jenny."

Colston leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees. He turns his head to look at me, all the joking gone. "So. You want to tell me why you just walked out on your wife?"

I stare at a drop of condensation slowly working its way down the side of the bottle. "Delia got her tubes tied a year ago.”

Colston chokes on his beer. He coughs, his eyes going wide as he stares at me. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Nope. She lied to me about wanting kids. Said she hadn’t wanted them from day one.”

“Holy shit. That’s fucked up.”

I run a hand down my face, suddenly feeling about a thousand years old. Fuck, I don’t know if I’ve ever been this exhausted. And it’s not just from lack of sleep. This is the kind of tired that weighs your bones down.

“Yeah, it is. So, I left. Told her she could keep the house, packed a bag, and here I am."

"Fuck." Colston leans forward and sets his beer on the coffee table, his jaw tight. "That’s psychotic. I always knew she was cold, but I didn't think she was actually evil." He runs a hand through his hair, looking a little shell-shocked.

“Well, turns out we were both wrong about her, I guess.”

He picks up his drink and drains it, then gets up and heads toward the kitchen. “When did you find out? This morning?”

“Yesterday, when I told her about that specialist appointment I got us. She freaked and admitted everything.”

He whistles, comes back with two new beers, and sits down, sliding one across the table toward me. "But you waited until today to leave? You should’ve called me. We could’ve gotten drunk and Saran-wrapped her car or something." He lights up. “Or gone out for seafood and stuffed the curtain rods with shrimp tails.”

The barest hint of a smile twitches at the corner of my mouth, and this right here is why he’s one of my favorite people. I shiver at how disgusting that smell would be, but I don’t hate the idea. With a few more beers in me, it might start sounding smart.

I set my beer down and push it away. Colston’s ideas are almost never good, and clouding my judgment right now isn’t a great idea. Not again.

He eyes me. “So you didn’t leave last night. How’d you get through without shaving her head or something? Was she working?”

I shake my head, swallowing hard. "I went to a dive bar in St. Pete, drank a fuck ton of tequila, and met someone.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Well, well, well. I figured a decrepit guy like you lost the ability to pick up years ago.”

I shove him, and he laughs his ass off as he topples over onto the rock he calls a sofa.

“And when was the last time you hooked up with anyone?” I look around his apartment in an obnoxious way, craning my neck from side to side. “Where’s your girlfriend? Oh, that’s right. You don’t have one.”

He’s still laughing as he sits up, tipping his head back and clutching at his heart. “Cold, bro. You know I’m in a dry spell. You don’t need to call me out.”

Now it’s my turn to give him a skeptical look. Colston Jennings is like sunshine in human form. Women flock to him, but he’s picky. If he’s in a dry spell, it’s by choice, and I’m not about to feel bad for him.

“Ugh, can we get back to talking about you? Who is she? What happened?” He grabs a throw pillow and plops it in his lap, leaning closer. His eyes are focused and fully present in a way that means I’m not getting out of this. “I’m gonna need the whole story. Start at the beginning.”

So I do. I tell him about everything Delia did, about my plan to get shitfaced and pass out on the beach, and about meeting Goldie. I tell him about our night at the bar, and then our night at the hotel, glossing over the details of that particular part of the night.

But I do tell him about the baby thing. Because it still doesn’t feel real and I think I need to say it aloud to process everything that happened last night.

Holy fuck, I can’t believe I did that. And I might have a baby on the way.

When I’m finished, Colston blinks a few times, absorbing the clusterfuck that is the last thirty-six hours of my life. For the first time since I've known him, he doesn't have a single thing to say.

"You’re fucking with me right now, right?" Colston finally manages, letting out a short, disbelieving laugh.

"I wish I was."

He tilts his head, squinting his eyes at me before he flips me off. "First of all, you never invite me to the fun shit, so fuck you for that. And second, this is real? You're not fucking with me right now?"

I hold up my hands. "Not fucking with you."

He falls back against the cushions and blows out a breath. "So you might've knocked up some chick you don't know." His gaze goes far off, and I can see the gears in his head turning. He might look like a brainless pretty boy, but deep down he's smart as hell.

I leave him to it, focusing on the sports channel he's got muted on the TV.

But then he shoots upright again. "When will you find out?"

"In a couple of weeks, I guess," I say, leaning back against the couch, and scooping my beer back up. Fuck it, after recounting all that, I don't give a shit if I make another bad decision at this point.

Add it to the pile.

That trademark smirk of his makes its way back onto his face. "Be honest. Are you excited about this?"

And there he is. Colston's not the type of dude to get hung up on all the negative what-ifs about this situation I've found myself in. Or any situation, really. If I'm happy, he's happy.

Simple as that.

I let my own smile out, feeling the warmth of it spreading through my limbs and chasing off some of the exhaustion. "I've wanted this for so long, it almost doesn't feel real. But fuck yes, I'm excited."

Colston laughs and reaches over, shoving my shoulder. "This is some me-level fuckery, and I'm so here for it." Then he gasps, pulling out his phone. "I get to be the one to tell Trace."

I grab his phone out of his hand. "Fuck, no. No telling anybody until I find out for sure."

Colston's eyes gleam. "So I get to know and Trace doesn't? You know what this means?"

I groan, but he ignores me.

"I'm best friend number one."

Colston and my best friend from college, Trace, have this ongoing battle for what they deem my *number one best friend*. It's stupid, which I remind them of all the time, but they're relentless.

"Whatever you want to tell yourself."

He throws his hands up in triumph. “Take a picture.” He gestures with his chin toward his phone still in my hand. “I’m gonna send him this as a preview.”

I roll my eyes but snap the picture and toss his phone back when I’m done. After he taps the screen a few times, he locks it and slips it back into his pocket.

Then he focuses on me again.

“You’re still married to Satan.”

An unexpected laugh flies out of me. “What?”

He looks at me like I’m stupid. “You know, the devil? Lucifer? The Dark Lord? Or… Lordess?”

I give him an unamused look right back. “Yeah, I got that. What’s your point?”

“We need to get her out of your life. Like… vanquish her back to hell. Exorcise her, maybe?”

I roll my eyes and drain the rest of my beer. There’s the barest hint of a buzz in my veins now, and my head’s stopped pounding. “Or I could divorce her.”

He stares at me for a long beat. “If you want to take the boring route, sure.”

“I think boring’s probably the way to go on this.”

He shrugs and reaches for the remote, unmuting the game. It’s baseball, which I find boring as shit, but it’s better than silence. We both settle in to watch, but after about half an inning, my phone buzzes with a text.

Colston glances over as I pull my phone out of my pocket and check it. "Is that her? Don't respond. Let the Princess of Darkness rot on read."

But it’s not my soon-to-be ex-wife. It's a picture from Goldie—a massive, roaring bonfire in a backyard.

GOLDIE: taking out the trash, just like I said I would

I chuckle as I take in the insanity of the picture. I text back, then send another message asking if they've got a hose out there.

"Whoa," Colston says, leaning sideways to try and look at my screen. "Was that a *laugh*? Who is that?” He considers for a second and then lights up. “Is that the baby mama?"

He’s practically sitting in my lap, so I shove his face back. "None of your business," I say, locking the screen and shoving the phone back into

my pocket.

“That’s a yes. Did she ditch her boyfriend the same way you did the antichrist?”

My head falls back against the cushion, and I close my eyes. “I’m not buzzed enough for this.”

The cushion shifts under me, and I look up to see Colston’s gotten up off the couch and is heading back into the kitchen. “I can fix that.”

“We have a flight tomorrow.”

He freezes. “Oh, shit. That’s right.” He detours to a drawer in the island and pulls it open, grabbing a piece of paper. Then he shuts the drawer with his hip and brings it over to me, shoving it in front of my face. “Pick something. I’m buying lunch, and we’re going to talk strategy.”

I grab the paper, scanning over the menu for the restaurant downstairs. When I decide, I point to my pick and hand the menu back.

“Do I even want to know what you and I could possibly need a strategy for?”

Colston holds up his finger as he punches what I’m assuming is our order into his phone. When he’s done, he sets it aside and kicks his feet up onto the table.

“How you’re going to win over the girl. Duh.”

I shake my head. “It’s not like that. We’re… not like that.”

He gives me a flat look. “Uh-huh.”

“I mean it.”

He waves his hand in the direction of the pocket with my phone in it. “If you’re *not like that*,” he says, his voice going high-pitched as he mocks me and I flip him off, “then why did your face look like it did when you were texting… what’s her name again? Goldie?”

“Leave it alone, dude.”

He huffs and slumps back into the couch, folding his arms across his chest. “Fine.”

I start to breathe out a sigh of relief until he says, “For now.”

We spend the rest of the afternoon ignoring the massive crater that used to be my life. We eat our fancy as fuck food and sit on his terrible couch shooting the shit and playing Call of Duty until my eyes burn. And I text Goldie whenever Colston’s distracted.

He clears a drawer in his closet, and I manage to unpack enough of my duffel to feel like I’m not completely untethered from my own life.

I’m dead on my feet, but I need a shower, so I jump in and scrub as fast as I can. The hot water relaxes my sore muscles, but it’s bittersweet watching the dried sweat, salt, and scent of Goldie spiral down the drain.

I didn’t want to wash her away, but I can’t exactly walk around smelling like sex for days. That’d be fucking gross.

But once she’s off of me, I hate it and want her right back where it feels like she might belong.

I shake my head and turn off the water. I’m too exhausted to deal with this right now, and she’s right. Both our lives are so fucked there’s no room for anything more.

That doesn’t stop me from wanting to jump right back in with her, though.

I fall into Colston’s cloud-like bed, assuming I’ll be out in seconds.

But hours later, I’m still awake, flat on my back staring up at the dark ceiling. I built the pillow wall like I said I would. It lasted long enough for Colston to pass out before he smashed through it like the Kool-Aid Man.

Right now, he’s got one arm thrown over my chest and his face pressed into my shoulder. I think he’s drooling all over my t-shirt, but at least he doesn’t snore.

I’d shove him off, but he’d probably come right back. Plus—and I’d never admit this to him—it’s kind of nice, the warm weight of him. I’m not into dudes, so it’s just in an *I’m not so alone* sort of way.

That’s not gonna stop me from fucking with him, though. I carefully slide my phone off the nightstand, turn on night mode so I don’t have to use the flash, and snap a quick selfie of him cuddling up to me, drool and all.

I smirk as I set my phone back on the bedside table.

Eventually, the exhaustion wins, and I fall asleep with the knowledge that I'm going to give him endless amounts of shit for this tomorrow.

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INTERLUDE

THE TWO WEEK WAIT

13 DAYS TO GO

SUMNER: Did you survive the night?

GOLDIE: define survive

SUMNER: Uh, do I even want to know?

GOLDIE: you saw the picture so I'm sure it's not a stretch to imagine things got a little crazy

SUMNER: I guess it's a good sign you're texting back

SUMNER: Means you're not in jail

GOLDIE: hey, I'm not that easy to catch

SUMNER: Good to know

GOLDIE: another thing that you should know

GOLDIE: is that my vagina has its own heartbeat today thanks to you and your gigantic dick

GOLDIE: so thanks for that

SUMNER: I heard no complaints

GOLDIE: yeah, well lesson learned

GOLDIE: tequila is a liar

GOLDIE: my body wasn't made to take that kind of pounding

SUMNER: Mm, I disagree

GOLDIE: …

GOLDIE: moving on

SUMNER: Mostly I wanted to check in and see how you're feeling

GOLDIE: I think we already covered it pretty well

SUMNER: Right

SUMNER: Are you taking a prenatal?

GOLDIE: 🙄

GOLDIE: you act like I wasn't ready to start trying before I met you

SUMNER: What does that mean?

GOLDIE: it means I've been on them for a couple of months now

GOLDIE: fun fact

GOLDIE: they give you fish burps

SUMNER: I'll probably regret this but what are fish burps?

GOLDIE: when you burp and it tastes like fish?

SUMNER: I was right

SUMNER: Could've gone my whole life without knowing that

GOLDIE: and I could've gone my whole life without experiencing it

GOLDIE: but here we are

GOLDIE: not to be nosy but

GOLDIE: how are you *really* after the big breakup?

SUMNER: Better than I thought I'd be

SUMNER: I packed a bag and I'm staying with my friend Jenny

A few minutes pass.

SUMNER: You still there?

GOLDIE: Yep.

SUMNER: Damn, that yep feels hostile

SUMNER: Breaking out the proper punctuation and everything

SUMNER: Which part is pissing you off?

GOLDIE: I'm not pissed off.

SUMNER: Oh, look

SUMNER: Another period

GOLDIE: speaking of periods

GOLDIE: did you change your mind?

GOLDIE: hoping I get mine so you can move on with Jenny?

SUMNER: Wtf

SUMNER: First, I was right

SUMNER: You ARE pissed off

SUMNER: And second

SUMNER: Jenny's not my type

GOLDIE: no, I'm truly not angry

SUMNER: 😉

SUMNER: You're jealous

GOLDIE: [Connor Storrie "How Dare You" gif]

SUMNER: Good

SUMNER: Then you won't care that Jenny was cuddling me when I woke up

GOLDIE: it's like you WANT to get your truck keyed

SUMNER: 😂

Photo attached.

[IMAGE: Colston sprawled across Sumner's chest, one arm wrapped around his waist and his face smashed into Sumner's shoulder. A dark spot of drool has soaked through Sumner's T-shirt. Sumner looks directly into the camera, deeply unimpressed.]

SUMNER: Still jealous?

GOLDIE: I mean, yes?

SUMNER: Ha! She admits it

GOLDIE: who wouldn't want to be sandwiched right in the middle of that cuddle pile

SUMNER: The fuck?

GOLDIE: pressed in between two strong, hot guys

SUMNER: Goldie

GOLDIE: who's jealous now? 😇

SUMNER: Well played

GOLDIE: but now I need you to explain the whole Jenny thing

GOLDIE: did his parents hate him or…?

SUMNER: His name's Colston Jennings

SUMNER: He's my best friend

SUMNER: Well, one of them

SUMNER: We fly together

GOLDIE: so jenny comes from Jennings?

SUMNER: Yeah

SUMNER: And also on his first day at the base, one of the senior pilots yelled, "I love you, Jen-nay!" across the tarmac in maybe the worst Forrest Gump accent you've ever heard

SUMNER: And it stuck

GOLDIE: 😂😂😂😂😂

SUMNER: Half the base doesn't know his first name

SUMNER: He's just Jenny

GOLDIE: that's so stupid and I love it

SUMNER: Now

SUMNER: Let's get back to how you were jealous

GOLDIE: let's not

SUMNER: You didn't like that you thought I was sharing my bed with another woman

GOLDIE: I’m trying not to think about you in a bed at all

GOLDIE: my poor vagina still hasn’t recovered

SUMNER: Worth it?

GOLDIE: …

GOLDIE: worth it

GOLDIE: and on that note, I’m gonna go switch out this ice pack

GOLDIE: but better reinforce that pillow wall tonight

GOLDIE: he looks clingy

SUMNER: 👍

SUMNER: Sleep well, jealous girl

GOLDIE: I hope your bestie smothers you in your sleep

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9 DAYS TO GO

GOLDIE: question

SUMNER: Shoot

GOLDIE: what sort of crazy do you have to be to want to fly into hurricanes?

SUMNER: I feel like I should be offended

GOLDIE: no

GOLDIE: because it turns out I like crazy

SUMNER: I never would’ve guessed

GOLDIE: 🖕🏽

GOLDIE: just answer the question

SUMNER: that’s not really a short answer

GOLDIE: well, I can’t call right now

GOLDIE: I’m in the middle of a shoot and she’s changing

SUMNER: short answer is I was a bit of a wild kid

GOLDIE: tell me more

SUMNER: I never met a challenge or bad idea I didn't go at balls to the wall

GOLDIE: so you're an adrenaline junkie

SUMNER: I'm not as bad now as I used to be

GOLDIE: [dog giving serious side-eye gif]

GOLDIE: you literally fly into hurricanes

GOLDIE: AND we did the whole sex with a stranger to make a baby thing

SUMNER: When you say it like that it sounds bad

SUMNER: Do you want to hear the rest?

GOLDIE: continue

SUMNER: My dad was a Navy pilot so he steered me in that direction to keep me out of jail

SUMNER: Or, you know, alive

GOLDIE: Navy?

GOLDIE: but wouldn't that be like fighter jets or whatever?

SUMNER: That's some of what they fly, yes

GOLDIE: don't tell me

GOLDIE: that wasn't scary enough for you

SUMNER: No

SUMNER: Like what about the people who ride bulls?

SUMNER: You know it can fuck you up and that's half the reason you climb on

SUMNER: Maybe more than half

SUMNER: The first time I flew into an eyewall, the turbulence was so bad the entire plane was shaking like it was going to fall out of the sky

SUMNER: It was the most alive I've ever felt

GOLDIE: I was right

GOLDIE: your drug of choice is totally adrenaline

SUMNER: Yes, you were right

SUMNER: ⭐

GOLDIE: if that turned me on a little bit does that mean I have a praise kink?

SUMNER: Goldie

GOLDIE: shit she's back

GOLDIE: byeee

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8 DAYS TO GO

GOLDIE: remember when I asked you why all men are trash?

SUMNER: Uh, yes?

SUMNER: What'd we do now?

GOLDIE: let me phrase it as a question

GOLDIE: if you had a partner who'd just had your baby, would you ever tell her that her body was "ruined"?

SUMNER: Fuck no

SUMNER: Did someone really say that?

GOLDIE: the client who just left

GOLDIE: she was in tears when she had to take her robe off when we started

SUMNER: That guy isn't a man

SUMNER: Real men think the women who have our babies are sexy as fuck

SUMNER: Stretch marks are hot

SUMNER: You had to earn that shit

SUMNER: Women should be proud, not put down

GOLDIE: right?

GOLDIE: glad you think so

GOLDIE: it just pisses me off how society tells women their thighs are too big

GOLDIE: or their stomachs aren't flat enough

GOLDIE: and then the people who are supposed to love them do it too

GOLDIE: it's messed up

SUMNER: Is that why you do what you do?

GOLDIE: boudoir?

SUMNER: Yeah

GOLDIE: yes

GOLDIE: I'm tired of women walking through life feeling less than their badass, beautiful selves

GOLDIE: a long time ago I decided to love and accept myself for who I am

GOLDIE: and I want to give that to as many people as I possibly can

GOLDIE: so I show them how amazing they are through my lens

SUMNER: That's one of the hottest things about you, by the way

SUMNER: How confident you are in your own skin

SUMNER: Even I'm not that confident

GOLDIE: [Justin Timberlake "seriously?" gif]

GOLDIE: says the guy over six feet who looks like an underwear model and has a big dick

SUMNER: Okay, admittedly I have it pretty good

GOLDIE: 🙄

SUMNER: But so do you

SUMNER: You're hot as fuck, Goldie

GOLDIE: I know 💅

SUMNER: I'd be willing to get up close and personal with your body again to double check

SUMNER: You know, for science

GOLDIE: 😂

GOLDIE: sounds like someone's struggling with the friendzone

SUMNER: Yeah, and?

SUMNER: The whole hands-off thing wasn't my idea

SUMNER: And I think you like torturing me

GOLDIE: so what if I do?

SUMNER: And I like distracting you

SUMNER: You feel better right?

GOLDIE: *sigh*

GOLDIE: yes, my rage is less… incandescent

SUMNER: Good

SUMNER: So that's still a no on me coming over to double check?

GOLDIE: nice try

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6 DAYS TO GO

SUMNER: Anything yet?

GOLDIE: this whole checking in every morning to see if my boobs hurt or I'm nauseous yet is cute

SUMNER: I don't think I've ever been called cute before

GOLDIE: well you can't say that anymore since I just did

GOLDIE: also

GOLDIE: my boobs hurt

SUMNER: Is that a good sign?

GOLDIE: it means one of two things

GOLDIE: either I’m pregnant

GOLDIE: or I’m getting my period soon

SUMNER: 😑

SUMNER: Thanks for that

GOLDIE: my pleasure

SUMNER: Why did Colston just text me about where you are in your cycle?

SUMNER: And how the fuck does he know anything about that?

GOLDIE: duh

GOLDIE: we’re besties now

SUMNER: But you haven’t met

GOLDIE: yeah you might want to keep your phone locked around him

GOLDIE: he snagged my number out of it while you were in the shower like a week ago

SUMNER: I’m gonna kill him

GOLDIE: noooo

GOLDIE: he and me, we’re like peas and carrots

SUMNER: FML

GOLDIE: aww

GOLDIE: are you jealous?

GOLDIE: because that’s my favorite

SUMNER: You seem pretty proud of yourself

GOLDIE: [Maui from Moana “You’re Welcome” gif]

SUMNER: I hate both of you

GOLDIE: we’ve discussed it and we’re willing to forgive you

2 DAYS TO GO

GOLDIE: I’m freaking out

GOLDIE: what happens if the test is negative?

SUMNER: No need to freak out

GOLDIE: wow, thank you

GOLDIE: I feel so much better

GOLDIE: 😒

SUMNER: Okay. Tell me what you’re freaking out about

GOLDIE: the odds that this worked are low

GOLDIE: and I really, really want a baby

SUMNER: Well

SUMNER: If there’s no baby, then we try again

GOLDIE: just like that?

SUMNER: 🤷🏻‍♂️

SUMNER: Why not?

GOLDIE: you make a good point

SUMNER: And I hope it’s not just *A* baby you want but *MY* baby

GOLDIE: I’ll take what I can get at this point

SUMNER: Hey!

GOLDIE: I’m kidding

SUMNER: You better be

GOLDIE: I am

SUMNER: In that case

SUMNER: I told you I’d give you a baby

SUMNER: And I meant it

SUMNER: We won’t stop trying until it happens, okay?

GOLDIE: yeah, okay

SUMNER: Still freaking out?

GOLDIE: yes

GOLDIE: but now it’s in a different way

SUMNER: Want to talk about it?

GOLDIE: already texting my new bestie

SUMNER: Goddamnit

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CHAPTER 11
SUMNER

TODAY'S THE DAY.

Goldie's supposed to take the test, and I don't know what to do with myself. My skin feels too small for my body, and my phone has been permanently attached to my hand since I got out of bed.

I didn't sleep last night, tossing and turning until eventually Colston ripped the blankets off and told me to get up sometime around one a.m.

He probably wanted to punch me from all the tossing and turning I did last night, but instead he sat up with me, distracting me with COD and videos of little kids cussing and talking shit.

Now I'm pacing the kitchen while he makes coffee that I'll probably regret drinking with how buzzed I am on anxiety already.

I've got no idea what time Goldie's taking the test, but the hours I spent on the internet over the last week reading about it said it should be in the morning.

But even if she tests this morning, that doesn't mean she'll text me or call me right away.

Fuck.

Colston smirks at me as he drops a Pop-Tart into the toaster and slides a mug of black coffee across the island. "Sit down before you give yourself a coronary, old man."

I flip him off.

"Okay, but really. I'm getting motion sickness watching you. Doing this"—he gestures at me—"isn't gonna magically make her text you."

I stop to narrow my eyes at him. "Remind me of this next time you're going through shit so I can comfort you the same way—"

Before I can finish my sentence, a rapid knock sounds at the front door.

Colston stops mid-chew, eyebrows furrowed as we look at each other. "Who the fuck is that?"

We both turn to look at the door. My pulse kicks up as I set my coffee on the counter, cross the living room, and pull the door open.

It's Goldie. Standing on the doorstep looking so fucking beautiful it hurts.

It's been two weeks since I walked out of that hotel room. Fourteen days of texting her every single day, trying to play it cool while I slowly went out of my fucking mind wondering if I got her pregnant. I've been agonizing over this morning. Over what would happen. Over waiting for a text message to tell me if my life was going to change.

But she's right here.

Seeing her again knocks the wind out of me. The ache in my chest that's been there since I left her flares up, hot and demanding. God, I'm starving for her.

She's wearing oversized grey sweatpants and a tight white tank top, the colorful tropical flowers and leaves inked into her bare arm bright against the white cotton. Her dark hair is piled in a messy knot, and she's not wearing any makeup. She looks like she just rolled out of bed, which gives me all sorts of ideas until I notice the way she's squirming.

She shifts from foot to foot, doing a little dance.

"I have to pee so bad," she blurts out, pushing right past me into the apartment. "I held my morning pee all the way from St. Pete because you shouldn't have to wait for a text message. We're doing this together."

She shoves a shiny pink gift bag against my bare chest and grabs my hand to pull me along behind her. Her fingers against my skin send little sparks straight down to my dick.

"The bathroom's on the left," I tell her, letting her drag me down the hallway.

She drops my wrist, darts inside, and shuts the door right in my face.

I lean against the wall outside the door and blow out a breath. When my heart calms to a mostly normal rate, I glance down at the pink bag in my hands. Inside is the empty cardboard box for a pregnancy test. She must've already had it palmed in her hand, ready to go.

My throat dries out so much it’s hard to swallow. She could’ve taken the test in her own bathroom and kept me on the sidelines, texting me when she knew. But instead, she drove forty minutes in shitty morning traffic just to make sure I was a part of it.

I don’t even have words to describe what it means to me, and I let my head fall back against the wall as my eyes sting.

Footsteps pad down the hallway. Colston stops next to me, his Pop-Tart half-eaten, staring at the closed bathroom door.

"Was that..." He points at the wood. "Was that your Goldie girl?"

I like how he refers to her as *my* a little too much. "Yep."

"Damn. You didn't tell me she was a smoke show."

I shoot him a glare. "Watch it, Jenny."

He grins, completely unbothered. "I'm just saying. If that stick says yes, my future niece or nephew is gonna have top-tier genetics."

He's totally invading the moment, leaning against the opposite wall like he's settling in to watch a game. I'm about to tell him to get lost, but the crinkle of a plastic wrapper filters through the door.

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"You good in there?" I ask, ignoring Colston.

"Yeah," she calls back. "Just... give me a second."

The toilet flushes, the sink runs, and then the lock clicks. Goldie pulls the door open.

She stops short when she sees Colston standing next to me in the hallway, her eyes darting between us.

Colston swallows his bite of Pop-Tart. "I'm Colston. And for the record, I was serious about the donuts."

I eye him. *Donuts?* The fuck? I know they’ve been texting, but now they have inside shit I don’t know about and I don’t know if I like it or not. “If that thing is positive, I’m ordering a dozen chocolate frosted right now."

Goldie lets out a shaky exhale, a real smile cracking through the anxiety. I could kiss Colston for putting it on her face. So okay, them being friends might not be the *worst* thing in the world. "I'll hold you to that, but only if you toss in a raspberry filled. And get sprinkles."

"Consider it done."

"Alright, that's enough," I say as my stomach flips over. Right now, I don't have the mental capacity to deal with anything except what's happening in that bathroom.

Not when my entire life might change in the next sixty or so seconds.

I step right in front of Colston, cutting the conversation off, and push my way into the cramped bathroom with her. I reach back and pull the door shut, locking it so it's just the two of us.

The plastic stick rests flat on the edge of the sink.

"How much longer?" I ask.

Goldie glances at the screen of her phone, her thumb hovering over the timer app. "Forty seconds."

We're standing side by side in front of the vanity, and it's taking everything I have to keep my hands to myself. I've spent the last couple of weeks replaying every single second of that night in the hotel, forcing myself to shove those memories into a box because we agreed to just be friends. We aren't in any place to start something real right now. But having her this close again completely fucks with my resolve.

Goldie's tapping her sandal frantically against the floor, practically vibrating with nervous energy. Usually I'm the one keeping everyone else calm. It's what I do. I fly a ninety-thousand-pound aircraft into Category 5 hurricanes for a living, so I'm trained to keep my shit together when the shit's going down. But right now, my pulse is pounding so hard I can hear it, and I'm completely out of my depth.

I need to be calm for her, though, so I reach out and slide my hand around her waist to pull her into my side. She blows out a shaky breath, sinking into me as she rests her head against my shoulder. My thumb rubs a slow circle against her hip.

"God. I swear every second is a tiny little eternity," she complains, and I laugh.

But then her phone alarm goes off.

Goldie snatches the test off the counter as I grab her phone and silence the beeping. She's staring at the little digital window, and I'm staring at her,

trying to read every microexpression. Her breath catches, and her fingers are trembling so hard she almost drops the damn thing.

"Goldie?" I ask, needing to know what it says.

She turns it around so I can see the screen, and the word is right there in bold black letters.

Pregnant.

Holy fuck. I did it. *We* did it. A massive rush of adrenaline hits my bloodstream, and knowing my cum did exactly what I wanted it to do kicks my breeding kink straight into overdrive. That, combined with the feel of her pressed right up against my body, makes my cock go rock fucking hard in less than a second.

I tighten my grip on her waist and drag her closer while she loops her arms around my neck, letting out a loud, breathless laugh. I bury my face in her neck to inhale the sweet smell of her skin, feeling her rapid pulse beating right against my lips. When I pull back, I drop my gaze to her mouth. She's looking right at mine, and we're barely an inch apart. I'm going to kiss her. I'm going to back her up against this sink and—

"So, are we ordering celebratory donuts, or what?" Colston's voice comes through the door and totally kills the moment.

Goldie jumps back, her cheeks flushing bright red, and I adjust myself and grind my teeth together.

What a cockblock. I'm definitely paying him back for this shit someday.

But I can't really be that upset because holy *fuck.*

I'm going to be a father.

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CHAPTER 12
GOLDIE

THE STICK FEELS BIZARRELY heavy in my palm, like it’s made of some priceless element and not just plastic. The word *Pregnant* fills the tiny digital screen with unmistakable black letters.

Great shitballs. This is really happening.

Sumner’s standing so close his chest brushes mine with every breath he takes. The air in this spa-like bathroom is suddenly thick and hot, and my pulse is going totally haywire. I don’t know if it’s from being this close to him or because of the positive test we just got.

"So, are we ordering celebratory donuts, or what?" Colston’s voice comes through the door, totally shattering the bubble.

Sumner squeezes his eyes shut like he’s trying to find the will not to murder his friend. His jaw flexes so hard a muscle ticks in his cheek. He steps back, taking all those glorious muscles and heat with him. The sudden loss of contact makes me ache a little. My body is practically humming from the friction of his thick hard-on pressing against my hip just a second ago and all the things flitting through my imagination that I could do with it. The pull between us is so intense it takes effort not to grab his shirt and drag him right back against me.

You know, so I can rub myself all over him.

It doesn’t help that his eyes flick down my body and slowly drag back up. I shiver and press myself harder against the vanity so I don’t literally throw myself at him.

He runs a hand over his buzzed hair, gathering himself as he blows out a breath. Neither one of us answers Colston. I think we both just… need a second to process.

And cool down.

Really, I should be panicking because now I’m facing the reality of what could potentially be a really stupid decision to procreate with a total stranger. The consequences of my own actions, if you will.

But looking down at the screen, there isn't a single drop of fear in my body.

A massive, breathless rush of pure joy expands in my chest until I think it might burst open like in that movie *Alien*, except, you know, with happiness and glitter and everything instead of a slimy, gross alien baby thing.

Hot tears prick the corners of my eyes, and a giddy laugh bubbles up my throat. I’m going to be a mom. I’m getting the one thing I’ve wanted my entire life. Growing up with a single mom who worked three jobs, our house was always so quiet. It was just the two of us against the world, and while I love her, I’ve spent my whole life craving a loud, chaotic, crowded dinner table.

And it’s finally happening.

I snap the plastic cap back onto the stick, shove it into the pocket of my sweatpants, reach past Sumner, and yank the bathroom door open.

Colston’s leaning against the wall across the hall, holding his phone. He looks between the two of us, taking in Sumner’s murderous expression and my massive grin. "So. Are we celebrating, Goldie girl?"

I don't even think about it. I launch myself across the narrow space and throw my arms around his neck.

Colston doesn't hesitate. He wraps his arms around me and squeezes me in a massive, enthusiastic bear hug, lifting me off the floor for a second. "Hell yeah! Congrats on the successful creampie."

He holds out his hand for Sumner to slap, and he reluctantly does.

I snort out a laugh against his shoulder.

"If you ever say the word creampie in front of me again, Trace will take that number one spot," Sumner growls, stepping out of the bathroom.

Colston gasps. “So you admit I’m number one.”

Sumner shakes his head. “I didn’t say that.”

Then he steps right into my space, his large hand wrapping around my stomach to smoothly but firmly peel me away from his best friend and tuck me against his own side. He shoots Colston a warning look that practically screams *don't touch*, but a fond, genuine smile is fighting its way onto his mouth.

Colston holds his hands up in surrender, completely unbothered by Sumner's territorial alpha-ness. "Alright, alright. Message received. But speaking of cream-filled..." He winks at me and taps his phone screen. "I need sugar to process the fact that I'm officially about to be the coolest uncle on the planet. Are we doing a dozen or two?"

"Two," Sumner and I say at the exact same time.

Colston points his phone at us. "Freaky mind-reader shit. I love it. Go sit down. I'm ordering."

He waves us toward the kitchen. I walk over and hop up onto one of the barstools. My legs are a little shaky from the adrenaline. Sumner pulls up the stool right next to mine, his thigh pressing flush against my knee. A swarm of butterflies that feel like they're made of Pop Rocks immediately takes flight in my stomach the second he touches me.

"Don't forget the raspberry-filled," I tell Colston as he taps on his screen.

"Don't insult me. And I'm adding a half-dozen with sprinkles, too. We're celebrating. Like you said, you gotta have sprinkles to celebrate." Colston looks up from his phone and points it at Sumner. "What about you, Shamu? You want your usual plain glazed or are we getting crazy today with a maple bar?"

I blink, turning to look at Colston. "Wait. Shamu?"

Colston's face completely lights up. "Oh my god. He hasn't told you?"

Sumner drops his face into his hands. "Don't."

"Absolutely do," I say, leaning forward on the counter. "Tell me everything."

"Okay, so," Colston says, waving a hand to brush Sumner off. "His dad was Navy, right? Which means they lived in San Diego for a bit. Dad takes little toddler Sumner to SeaWorld, and they snap this picture together by the killer whale tank. Turns out the big guy here is secretly a huge softie, because he keeps this tiny, beat-up photo in his wallet for years."

Sumner groans, but Colston ignores him and keeps going.

“Cut to flight school. He drops his wallet in the locker room, the picture falls out onto the floor, and the whole squadron gets an eyeful of little Sumner Wells looking absolutely stoked while a giant orca breaches in the background." Colston smirks. "He's been Shamu ever since."

I bite my lip to keep from laughing. I turn to Sumner, who’s glaring at his best friend. "That is the cutest thing I’ve ever heard in my entire life."

"No, it’s not," Sumner grumbles. “It’s embarrassing.”

"I expect to see this picture later," I tell him before turning back to Colston. "Okay, sorry, back to the donuts."

"Right. So what's your order, Shamu?" Colston asks, picking his phone back up.

Sumner leans his muscular forearms on the granite counter. "I don't want any."

I stare at him. "What do you mean you don't want any? We're getting two *dozen*."

"I don't really like donuts," he says, completely serious, like he isn't some sort of alien in a human skin suit for this hottest of hot takes.

The kitchen goes silent.

I slowly turn my head to look at Colston. Colston looks at me, his eyes wide with shared horror.

"I'm sorry," I say, looking back at Sumner. "Did you just say you don't like donuts?"

"They're basically just fried cake," Sumner says. "They're too sweet. It's a terrible breakfast food."

"What the fuck," Colston mutters, shaking his head. "I’m trying to pretend I don’t hear it, but every time he says it, a little piece of my soul dies."

"Are you a psychopath?" I ask, seriously reconsidering if I’ve made a horrible mistake procreating with this man. "Who doesn't like fried cake?"

"Me."

"This is a massive red flag," I tell Colston.

Colston nods solemnly. “The reddest.”

"I think I made a terrible mistake. Can I take the pregnancy back? Is there a return policy on his sperm?"

"I tried to warn you," Colston says, leaning against the counter. "The guy eats plain chicken breast and unseasoned broccoli because he genuinely likes it. He’s a monster."

Sumner rolls his eyes, but the corner of his mouth is twitching. "I eat for fuel. Not everything has to be covered in sugar."

"Wow," I say, crossing my arms and leaning away from him. "Next you're gonna tell me you hate puppies and sunshine."

"I like puppies," he counters. "Sunshine is fine. I just don't want a donut."

Colston sighs heavily and taps a few more buttons on his phone. "I'm ordering extra sprinkles just to spite you. Delivery is gonna be about forty-five minutes."

"Perfect," I say, trying to put the unsettling information I just learned out of my mind.

Sumner stands up, grabs a glass from the cupboard, and fills it with ice water. He slides it across the island, and I take a long drink. The freezing water hits my empty stomach, finally taking the edge off that manic, buzzing adrenaline. But as the adrenaline levels out, a heavy, very real weight settles in my chest.

Holy fuck. What do we do now?

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CHAPTER 13
GOLDIE

SUMNER SETTLES BACK onto the stool beside me. He shifts his weight, angling his broad frame so he's fully facing me. His knee presses firmly against mine again the second he sits down, sending another zing of awareness straight up my thigh. He looks completely locked in.

"So," he says, his voice low and steady. "I know what I want. But you're the one doing all the hard work, and it's your body going through this. You get to call the shots. How do you want to handle the next steps?"

I trace a slow line through the condensation dripping down the side of my glass. Grant always treated me like a chaotic mess who couldn't handle basic things without his input. Whenever I tried to talk to him about planning for a family, he'd brush me off, scroll on his phone, or tell me we'd look into it later.

But Sumner is actively pulling up a chair to the table. He's stepping back to give me the reins but making it crystal clear he's entirely present. It's overwhelming in the absolute best way.

"I googled it," I tell him. "I need to call my gynecologist on Monday and schedule a confirmation appointment. It's basically just a blood draw to check my levels and make sure everything is progressing the way it should."

Sumner pauses. His eyebrows lift, and then a slow smile curves his mouth. He looks at me with this intense, blazing pride that makes my insides light up like those Skechers I used to wear as a kid. "Of course you did."

"I’m very on top of my shit."

"I see that." His gaze drops to my mouth for a split second before dragging back up to my eyes. "Thank you for coming over this morning, Goldie. For letting me be here when you found out."

My throat gets tight. "You contributed half of the DNA. It seemed only fair."

"Still. I appreciate it.” He rubs a hand over his head again. “When you make the appointment, send me the date and time. I'll get my schedule cleared so I can be there."

"You don't have to do that," I say automatically. My hyper-independence flares up on pure instinct. "Like I said, it's literally just a blood draw."

"I know I don't have to." He holds my gaze, his expression unwavering. "But I want to. I want to be at every appointment. I don't want to miss a single second of this."

The air in the room shifts, leaving behind a tension so sharp I could probably cut my finger on it. I'm completely trapped in his stare, my pulse pounding in my ears… and between my thighs.

A loud knock on the front door totally kills the vibe.

Colston groans loudly from the other side of the island, dropping his head back. "Oh, come on! It was just getting good.” He points at Sumner then wags his finger between us. “As you were." He pushes off the counter and heads for the door. "I'll get the damn donuts."

By the time Colston drops the pink boxes onto the island, my stomach could rival an alligator for how loud it’s growling.

I devour the first raspberry-filled donut in about three bites, completely ignoring the powdered sugar getting all over my hands and face. Colston takes down three sprinkle donuts like it's an Olympic sport. I watch him reach for a fourth, shuddering internally. He must be one of those guys who actually enjoys working out to burn all this off. Disgusting.

Sumner leans against the counter, drinking his coffee and watching us inhale the sugary deliciousness. He looks way too entertained by the mess I'm making.

But the second the sugar rush peaks, the adrenaline crash finally hits me, and somehow the combo makes me tired for some reason. A massive yawn rips out of me. I cover my mouth, blinking watering eyes.

"Sorry," I mumble, grabbing a napkin to wipe the powdered sugar off my mouth. "Between the lack of sleep and the carb coma, my body is officially waving a white flag."

"You should go home and get some sleep," Sumner says, his tone softening.

"Yeah. I think I have to." I slide off the stool.

The temptation to ask if I can just crash here is agonizing.

But I shake it off. We aren't doing that.

I wave goodbye to Colston, who's currently chewing his fourth donut. "Thanks for breakfast, Jenny."

"Anytime, Goldie girl," he says with his mouth full. "Drive safe."

Sumner follows me out the front door. We ride the elevator down to the ground floor in silence. The humid air is heavy and wet, clinging to my skin the second we step out of the lobby and into the parking garage.

Without the buffer of Colston's constant banter, an awkwardness settles in the space between us, and I have no idea what to say to break it.

I stop at my car, pressing the unlock button on my fob. The beep breaks the heavy silence in the garage right before I turn to face him.

He's standing a few feet away, his hands shoved into the pockets of his gym shorts. It's been too long since I've gotten a clear look at him in the daylight. He's got dark circles under his eyes, like he didn't sleep at all last night. I don't blame him because *same*. He looks exhausted and rough around the edges and so fucking good I want to bite him.

Maybe lick him a little.

I look up at him, and the biggest stupid grin takes over my face again. I can't hold it back. I close the distance between us and throw my arms around his neck, hugging him tight. Pressing all of my body up against his just because I can.

"We did it," I say, my voice a giddy squeal as I bounce on my toes.

Sumner's arms don't hesitate to wrap around my waist, pulling me flush against his hard chest. He buries his face in my hair, exhaling a long, shaky breath. "We did."

I pull back just enough to look at his face. "Tin roof. Rusted."

He eyes me, his brow furrowing. "I don't know what that means."

I laugh. "Love Shack?"

"Uhhh…"

“Oh my god, seriously? The song? You know… *you’re what? Tiiin roof. Rusted,*” I sing, and I sing it horribly, but I’m just so happy I don't care.

He blinks at me and then shakes his head, grinning. “Nope.”

“Wow. Remind me to play it for you.”

“Will it sound like… that?"

I glare at him, but I’m fighting my grin. “Like what exactly?”

“Never mind.” Maybe our baby will get his intelligence because clearly he’s a smart man.

His eyes turn serious again as his hands slide to my hips. His palms are huge and warm, his thumbs pressing into my skin. "I told you I'd give you a baby."

The sheer, unapologetic pride in his voice is so hot my knees tremble, and for a second I think they might give out. We stay glued together by my car door, sharing this insane secret. We both got totally fucked over by our exes, and we somehow beat the odds to get exactly what we wanted anyway.

But the longer we stay wrapped up in each other, the mostly innocent celebration melts away, and the physical reality of his body pressed against mine takes over.

His thumbs slowly stroke the skin just above my waistband where there’s a gap underneath my shirt. His smile fades, his eyes dropping to my mouth. The tips of his slides bump against my flip-flops. The gravity between us is so heavy it makes my head spin.

My thighs press together as I remember exactly how hard his cock was against my hip in the bathroom an hour ago. I want him to shove me up against the side of my car right now. I want his mouth on mine so badly my entire body *burns*.

If I stay here for one more second, I'm going to kiss him.

And if I kiss him, I'm going to let him all the way in. I absolutely cannot afford to do that. With my terrible track record with men, if this blows up, it’s going to be a disaster. I'm tied to this man for the next eighteen years. I can't risk ruining our co-parenting dynamic before it even starts just because I'm horny and he smells like clean laundry and expensive soap and warm skin.

I force myself to step back, severing the pull before it completely overtakes me.

"I gotta go," I say, my voice coming out breathless.

Sumner’s hands drop to his sides. His chest rises and falls with a sharp inhale, his jaw locking tight. "Yeah. Go sleep."

I open my car door and slide into the driver's seat. "I'll text you when I figure out the doctor stuff."

"I'll be here," he says, his voice a low gravel. He watches me with dark, burning eyes that look like he wants to drag me right back upstairs and remind me how well he knows every inch of my body. "Text me when you get home."

I nod, then shut the door, crank the AC as high as it will go to cool my flushed skin, and pull out of the parking garage without letting myself look in the rearview mirror. Because if I look back and see him watching me with those dark, possessive eyes, I know I’ll cave.

I finally got the baby I always wanted. Now I just have to figure out how to survive the man who gave it to me without climbing him like a damn jungle gym.

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CHAPTER 14
SUMNER

I STAND in the parking garage and watch her car disappear around the corner, locking down every muscle in my body so I don't go after her.

My pulse hammers a hard, frantic rhythm against my ribs. I look down at my hands, flexing my fingers as they tingle with the memory of the soft heat of her bare skin, burning a hole straight through my goddamn self-control.

My instincts are screaming at me to get in my truck, drive straight to St. Pete, pack up all her shit, and move her into my space.

Except I don’t have my own space yet, something I need to fix and soon.

I was already struggling with the whole "co-parents only" line she drew in that hotel room—the one I forced myself to agree to—but now? Now that I know my baby is growing inside of her? The thought of letting her walk around out of my sight feels damn near impossible. Assessing a chaotic situation, taking the yoke, and executing a plan is what I do best.

But Goldie isn't a storm I can navigate, and she sure as hell isn't a co-pilot I can give orders to. She’s an unapologetic force of nature who plays by her own rules and just kicked her cheating ex out of her house. If I push too hard right now, if I try to take over and manage her life, she’s going to build a brick wall between us and lock me out.

I turn around and head back to the elevator to go up to Colston's condo.

I have to play the long game. I'm going to Trojan-horse my way into her life so smoothly she won't even realize what's happening until I'm woven so

deep into her world she'll never be able to untangle me.

Colston’s waiting in the kitchen when I walk back in, licking frosting off his thumb. He takes one look at my face and smirks. "You look like a guy who’s about two seconds away from buying a minivan."

I flip him off as I walk past him, grabbing a shaker bottle from the cabinet. I dump two scoops of protein powder into it and top it off with almond milk, then grab a second bottle and do the same for him.

"Drink this," I tell him, sliding the second bottle over to him. "You need some protein to balance out the five pounds of fried sugar you just put in your body. Grab your gym bag. We’re lifting on base before the brief."

Colston catches the bottle, bouncing on his heels and practically vibrating in place from the massive sugar rush. He starts to aggressively shake the bottle, mixing it up. "Oh, I am so ready. I could bench press a goddamn Gulfstream right now. Let's go."

He downs the shake, and we head to the base. We hit the weights hard, but even maxing out on the bench doesn't burn off the restless energy itching at my insides.

An hour later, we’re showered, zipped into our blue Nomex flight suits, and walking into the Aircraft Operations Center. The familiar hum of the AOC usually settles my brain immediately. Maintenance crews move around the hangar floor beyond the briefing area, weather readouts cycle across the wall monitors, and somewhere nearby somebody’s already burned a pot of coffee.

I walk into the briefing room and find Brian already at the table, squinting at a maintenance log. He’s our flight engineer, a former Marine who’s been at the AOC longer than I’ve been flying. We all know he needs reading glasses, and he knows he needs them, but he refuses to admit it.

Across the table, Des, our flight meteorologist, is swiping through a tablet with his usual quiet, steady focus.

"Morning, kid," Brian grunts, not looking up from the log.

"Morning," I say, dropping into a chair. Colston takes the seat next to me, kicking my boot under the table.

Des pulls up the route on the monitor. "Alright, gentlemen. The science team swapped out a couple of the tail Doppler components this week. I need you to hold the prescribed headings and altitudes exactly to the numbers today so we can verify the data is clean before hurricane season ramps up."

"Copy that," I say.

It’s routine. Take the P-3 up, fly the profiles Des needs for the radar calibration, and bring the plane home.

Normally, I love days like this. Nothing dramatic, just a few hours in the left seat doing the job I’ve wanted since I was a kid.

Today, my brain won’t fucking cooperate.

By the time we taxi out and I push the throttles forward, I’m thinking about Goldie instead of the flight. About her standing in Colston’s parking garage in those gray sweatpants with that huge smile on her face. The way she threw her arms around my neck and said, *We did it.*

We fucking did.

I’m going to be a dad.

The thought hits me all over again as the P-3 lifts off the runway, and apparently I’m smiling like an idiot because Colston’s voice comes through my headset a few minutes later.

“Keep your head in the cockpit, Wells.”

I glance over. He’s scanning his instruments, but the corner of his mouth is pulled up.

“We’re dead on the heading.”

“Yeah, I know.” His grin gets wider. “I’m just making sure you don’t start mentally high-fiving your sperm again.”

“Fuck off.”

He laughs under his breath, and I force my attention back where it belongs.

We settle into the first part of the calibration run, and eventually the familiar routine does what it usually does. My brain quiets down. Des calls out what he needs from the back, Colston and I keep the plane where he wants it, and Brian monitors the systems behind us.

Then Brian’s voice comes over the intercom.

“Wells, I’m losing oil pressure on number three.”

That gets my attention fast.

I look down at the engine gauges. The pressure’s dropping and the temperature is climbing right along with it.

“How fast?”

“Steady. It’s not a bad indication. We’re losing oil.”

Shit.

My pulse kicks up, but the rest of me settles in. This is the part people don’t understand about adrenaline. It doesn’t always make you panic. Sometimes it clears out every useless thought in your head and leaves room for exactly what matters.

“Alright. We’re done.” I turn us back toward land. “Des, secure everything in the back.”

“On it.”

Beside me, Colston already has the emergency checklist open before I ask for it. The joking disappears from his face, and his voice changes when he keys the radio, calm and clean as he tells Lakeland we’ve got an engine problem and need to come straight back.

I don’t have to tell him what I need. We’ve done this together long enough that he knows.

Brian keeps his eyes on the gauges. “Pressure’s still dropping. We need to shut it down.”

“Do it.”

Colston works through the checklist while Brian confirms everything from behind us. When it’s time, I pull the condition lever back and feather the prop.

The difference is immediate.

The sound of the engines changes, the smooth roar turning uneven as number three winds down, and the whole plane pulls hard to the right.

My boot goes down on the rudder.

Hard.

The pressure shoves straight up my leg as I fight to keep the nose where I want it. My thigh starts burning almost immediately, and the yoke suddenly feels twice as heavy in my hands.

“Engine three secured,” Colston says beside me. “No fire indication. We’re cleared straight back.”

“Good.”

I adjust the trim until the pressure eases enough that I’m not trying to hold ninety thousand pounds of airplane straight with one leg.

Then I look over at Colston.

He’s already watching the instruments again, completely locked in.

This is why I trust him with my life.

“Let’s get her home.”

Three engines will get us home, but the plane feels heavier with number three shut down, and I have to keep pressure on the rudder the entire way back to stop the nose from wandering.

By the time Lakeland comes into view, my right leg is burning.

Colston handles the radio and keeps an eye on everything I can't while I line us up with the runway. He's quiet now, feeding me exactly what I need and nothing else.

"Approach looks good."

I adjust our heading as we descend, keeping my eyes moving between the runway and the instruments.

Then a gust hits us from the right.

The dead engine is on that side, and the wing drops hard enough to make my stomach jump. I shove the rudder down and correct with the yoke, muscling the plane back where I want it.

Beside me, Colston doesn't react beyond tightening his grip on the controls in front of him.

"Airspeed's good," he says. "You're right on centerline."

"I've got it."

The runway fills the windshield.

Fire trucks and ambulances are waiting off to the side with their lights flashing, but I barely register them. I'm too focused on getting ninety thousand pounds of airplane onto the ground without making their day any more interesting.

The main gear hits with a solid thump.

I keep us straight, bring the remaining engines into reverse, and feel some of the tension finally leave my shoulders as we slow.

By the time I turn us off the runway, my thigh is shaking from holding the rudder pressure.

I set the parking brake and let go of the controls.

For a few seconds, nobody says anything.

Then Brian's voice comes through the intercom.

"Good landing."

Colston drops his checklist onto his lap and sinks back into his seat. "Next time you want to get off work early to see Goldie, just ask."

I flip him off as I unbuckle my harness.

Brian starts bitching about the paperwork waiting for us, and Colston laughs, but I barely hear either of them because now that I'm sitting still,

my hands have started shaking.

I press them against my thighs.

During the flight, there wasn't room in my head for anything except getting us back on the ground. Now there is, and I can't stop thinking about how fast this could've gone sideways if the oil had gotten hot enough to catch fire.

About the Gulf underneath us.

About Goldie.

About the baby.

Fuck.

I've always known this job can kill me. That's part of what I love about it, as fucked up as that probably sounds.

But I've never had my kid waiting for me to come home before.

We finish shutting everything down, and I'm halfway down the crew stairs when I pull my phone from my flight suit.

There's already a string of texts from Goldie.

GOLDIE: wanna know something gross?

GOLDIE: I woke up craving pickles and peanut butter

GOLDIE: what have you done to me?

I chuckle as I stop walking, staring at the bright screen while the sun beats down on the back of my neck.

I type back quickly, keeping it understated because the last thing I want to do is panic her. I also don't want her to find out about what happened from Colston, and he'll definitely tell her if I wait on it.

SUMNER: Don't act like you don't like it

SUMNER: Send me your address and I'll have some delivered

GOLDIE: nice try, stalker

SUMNER: 😈

GOLDIE: aren't you supposed to be in the air right now?

SUMNER: About that

SUMNER: I need to tell you something

SUMNER: Don't freak out

GOLDIE: you’re not off to a great start

SUMNER: We had a minor engine issue and came back early

SUMNER: Everything’s fine though

SUMNER: We’re back on the ground now

Her reply comes through before I even put the phone back in my pocket.

GOLDIE: um, excuse me?

GOLDIE: an ENGINE issue?

GOLDIE: are you okay???

SUMNER: I’m good

SUMNER: Just a lot of paperwork to deal with now

SUMNER: I’ll call you as soon as I’m done.

By the time we finish the post-flight debrief with the chief and fill out the mountain of maintenance paperwork, I'm completely wiped out. The leftover effects of the adrenaline crash have settled deep into my muscles, leaving me stiff and aching from sitting in a hard plastic chair for two hours.

I roll my neck, wincing at the sharp pop of a joint, as we finally walk out of the hangar. Colston claps a hand on my shoulder.

"Dude, you look like you aged five years since we touched down," Colston says, stretching his own back. "I think our near-death experience calls for a beer.”

“It wasn’t—”

He throws his arm over my shoulder. “No arguing. We’re hitting up Last Call."

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CHAPTER 15
SUMNER

I SINK into the booth at our favorite bar just off base and pull my phone out to shoot Goldie an update.

SUMNER: Grabbing a quick beer with Jenny

SUMNER: I'll call you when I get home

Colston slides in across from me, his eyes glued to his own screen. He snorts a laugh and kicks my shin under the table. "Goldie just texted me."

I look up. "What did she say?"

"She wants to know if you're actually okay or if you're full of shit." Colston taps his screen, his smirk widening. "I told her you were fine, just cranky and buying the first round."

I roll my eyes, though honestly, I like that the two of them get along well enough to gang up on me. I'm about to tell him to put his phone away as I click my screen dark and shove my own into my pocket, but a massive shadow falls over the table.

"You look like shit, Wells," a familiar, deep voice says.

My head snaps up, and I grin at one of my favorite people. "Trace."

Trace, my other best friend—or my second best friend, as Colston likes to call him—stands at the edge of the booth. He's a beast of a dude, tall and broad, and he looms over the table. He sets a fresh pitcher of beer on the sticky wood, his arm flexing as he pulls me up into a hard, quick bro-hug. I haven't seen him in six months, and having him standing here right now is exactly what I didn't know I needed.

"When the hell did you get into town?" I ask, sitting back down while he and Colston lean over the table to slap hands and yank each other into a rough back-slapping hug.

"A couple of hours ago," Trace says, grabbing a stack of pint glasses and sliding into the booth next to me. "The university just threw a big-ass grant at us for a Gulf project. So it's your lucky day, man—I'm operating out of MacDill and the Lakeland base for the rest of hurricane season."

He pours himself a beer, then looks between me and Colston. “Alright. I’ve waited two long-ass weeks. What happened with Delia?”

Colston grins into his beer.

Trace points at him. “And this asshole has been holding it over my head the entire time because knowing something before I do is the greatest accomplishment of his life.”

Colston grins. “It’s been a really good two weeks.”

Trace flips him off. “You’re an annoying little shit.”

“Maybe, but you’d be just as bad. Admit it.”

Trace scoffs, but the corner of his mouth twitches into an almost-smirk.

I take a drink and lean back against the booth. “I found out she got her tubes tied a year ago.”

Trace’s expression changes so fast it almost makes me laugh.

“What?”

“Yeah.”

His eyes flick to Colston like he’s checking whether this is some fucked-up joke, but Colston just shakes his head.

Trace looks back at me. “You spent all that time thinking—”

“I know.”

“Jesus.” He drags a hand over his jaw. “I always hated her, but fuck.”

“Didn’t you tell him that at their wedding?” Colston asks, a shit-eating grin on his face.

I nod at Trace. "You did, which was fucked up, by the way."

He shrugs, unrepentant. "Yeah, well, you didn’t listen so."

"I was in love with her."

He picks up his beer again. “Never said you weren’t also a dumbass.”

Colston snorts.

For a few seconds, Trace just stares at me.

Then his mouth tightens. “I know we aren’t supposed to hit women, but fuck, I want to run her over with my truck.”

A laugh pushes out of me before I can stop it. "Get in line."

Trace leans forward again. "Tell me you didn't let her walk away with everything." He gives me a look because he knows me so well, and I look away because sometimes it sucks being called on your shit.

"We never merged our accounts." I lift one shoulder. "I told her she could keep the house. I just want out."

"No fucking way." Trace points at me with two fingers still wrapped around his glass. "You want out, get out. But don't hand her a free house because you're too pissed off to deal with her."

“I told him he’s being an idiot,” Colston unhelpfully adds.

I shoot him a glare. "I don't want months of fighting over shit I don't care about."

"Then pay somebody else to fight about it." He gives me a hard look. "That's what divorce lawyers are for."

I take another drink, because unfortunately the asshole has a point. "I'm calling one tomorrow."

"Good."

He keeps watching me.

Across the table, Colston sees it coming too. He shifts in the booth and takes a long pull from his beer.

“So,” he says, way too casually, “how about those Tritons?”

Trace doesn’t even look at him.

Colston lowers his glass. “Yeah, okay. Worth a shot.”

Trace keeps his eyes on me, tilting his head as he studies me. “You’re taking this really well for a guy whose wife spent the last year playing him. Why aren’t you breaking shit right now?”

Colston snorts into his beer. “Oh, this is the best part.”

I shoot him a warning glare, but the asshole just lifts his glass to his mouth, looking way too entertained.

Trace looks between us. “What?”

I take a drink and set my glass back on the table. “Because I’m having a baby.”

Trace blinks.

His eyes flick toward Colston before coming back to me. “Wait. You’re having a baby? With who? You just told me Delia can’t have kids.”

“Not with Delia.” I lean back against the booth. “That night, after I found out what she did, I went to a dive bar in St. Pete planning to drink

myself into a coma."

Colston nods. "As one does."

Trace and I ignore him. "I ended up sitting next to a woman who'd just caught her boyfriend of five years fucking someone else in her bed. We got drunk, started talking... she wanted a kid, I wanted a kid."

Trace's eyebrows start climbing.

I shrug. "So I offered to give her one. We got a hotel room and spent the night making sure it took."

He just stares at me.

Colston presses his lips together, already fighting a laugh.

Trace slowly sets his beer on the table. "You met some woman in a bar and offered to knock her up."

"That's a very simplified version of events."

"What the fuck is the complicated version?"

Colston loses it, dropping his head as he laughs into his fist.

"Fuck you," I tell Colston.

He drops his fist from his mouth and reaches for his beer, still grinning. "I didn't say anything."

"You don't have to. Your face is doing plenty."

Trace is still staring at me, but now a slow grin is spreading across his face. He shakes his head and reaches for his beer again.

"I take back every time I called you a boy scout. That is the most unhinged, fucking insane thing I've ever heard."

"And the crazy bastard actually pulled it off," Colston says, sitting back in the booth. "Goldie came over this morning to take the test. Our boy's officially going to be a dad."

Trace looks at me again, and this time the grin fades into something more serious.

"Shit." He reaches over and grips the back of my neck for a second, giving me a hard shake before letting go. "Congrats, man."

I can't stop the smile that pulls at my mouth. "Thanks."

He lifts his glass. "To strong swimmers."

Colston immediately raises his. "Hell yeah."

I clink my glass against theirs and take a drink.

"So what's the deal with this girl?" Trace asks.

I open my mouth, but Colston is already digging his phone out of his pocket.

“Her name’s Goldie,” he says. “And she’s way out of his league.”

I flip him off.

His grin only gets bigger. “Plus she likes snacks and texts me dirty memes, so she’s got a great personality.”

My head turns toward him. “I’m sorry, she does fucking *what*?”

Colston completely ignores me. He taps his screen a few times, then slides his phone across the table toward Trace.

“Look at this.”

I lean forward before Trace can even pick it up.

It’s a picture Colston snapped this morning. I’m angled toward Goldie, leaning into her space so my shoulder’s nearly pressed against hers. She’s mid-laugh, looking gorgeous as always.

And then there’s me. I’m not looking at the camera.

I’m looking at her mouth.

Looking at those lips that look so fucking good wrapped around my dick, and whatever was going through my head when he snapped the picture is written all over my face.

Yeah… one look at this picture and it’s obvious my whole “we’re just co-parents” thing is bullshit.

I snatch the phone off the table and shove it back at Colston. “Delete that.”

He catches it against his chest, laughing, and I kick him hard under the table.

“Ow, you dick.” He jerks his leg away and reaches down to rub his shin.

Trace barks out a laugh. “You’re so fucked, man. You look at her like you’re on death row and she’s your pardon.”

“Shut up.”

He tips his glass toward Colston’s phone. “And what’s the deal? Is she your new girlfriend or is it a friends with benefits situation?”

“Neither. We’re just friends who are going to raise a baby together.”

Trace eyes me with disbelief. “So you two are just co-parenting? No bennies?”

“That’s what we agreed to.”

Trace stares at me. “Why the fuck would you agree to that?”

“Because her life just blew up too, and she wanted the boundary. I’m trying to respect it.”

Colston rubs his shin under the table. “Yeah. It’s going great so far. Remind me what I interrupted in the bathroom this morning?”

I cut my eyes toward him. “Nothing happened.”

“Sure.”

Trace laughs and looks back at me. “Yeah, good luck with that whole boundary thing. I give it a week. Tops.”

He and Colston clink glasses, and I glare at them both.

Then I slump into the booth, dragging a hand over the back of my neck. “She’s… incredible. I can’t stop thinking about her, and giving her all this space when every instinct I have is telling me to take care of her is already driving me out of my fucking mind.”

Trace lets out a low whistle and sits back against the booth. “Well, godspeed, man, because you’re fighting a losing battle.”

Colston lifts his beer toward Trace. “What he said.”

I shake my head and down the rest of my beer.

Colston flags down the waitress for another pitcher and some food, and Trace finally lets me off the hook and turns toward Colston. The two of them talk shit about which of their football teams is going to be better this season.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and look at it under the edge of the table so the guys don’t start in on me again.

Still no text from Goldie.

I stare at the screen for another second before clicking it off.

I’m off the flight schedule tomorrow. I have an entire day with nowhere I need to be, and there is no fucking way I’m spending it sitting in Colston’s condo waiting for Goldie to decide when I get to see her again.

No, I’m going to St. Pete.

The only problem is, I don’t actually know where she lives.

That stops me for about half a second.

I know where her studio is, I know her name, and finding a property record isn’t exactly difficult.

Problem solved.

I shove my phone back into my pocket and look at Trace. “Where are you staying while you’re here?”

“The university put me up in a rental near the base.” His eyes narrow slightly as he looks at me. “You good, man? You just checked out on me.”

“Yeah.” I pick up my beer. “I’m good.”

I’m better than good.

I’m going to St. Pete tomorrow, and I’m going to start rolling that Trojan horse right through Goldie’s front door.

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CHAPTER 16
GOLDIE

THE WAREHOUSE my studio's in is basically a giant industrial building with exposed brick and a roof where me and the girls throw parties. Tatum's tattoo shop, Scout's neon studio, and Andie's garage all share space in this same building. It's how we all met.

This place is loud, chaotic, and it's my favorite place on the planet.

When I walk into Bombshell on Monday morning, the reception area is empty because Minji's not due in for another hour. I'm practically buzzing out of my skin, bursting at the seams with the secret I've been keeping for the last twenty-four hours, and I physically cannot wait another second to say it out loud.

I drop my bags on the front desk and march straight back out, pushing through the heavy metal door of Andie's garage next door.

Soundgarden is blaring over the speakers. Andie's sitting on a rolling stool next to a half-assembled motorcycle, wearing a black tank top that shows off the ink running down her arms, and her grease-stained coveralls are folded down to her waist. She's wearing black latex gloves so she doesn't get her hands dirty because my girl refuses to get gunk under her nails.

I walk over and kick the toe of her heavy work boot with my sandal.

She pushes her protective glasses up into her black hair and wipes her gloved hands on a rag, her ice-blue eyes locking onto my face. She doesn't even say hello.

Nope, she scowls at me instead.

"You went MIA yesterday," she says, her voice flat. "I was about to come over and pick your lock to make sure you weren't dead."

"I just crashed," I say. "I ate half a block of cheese for girl dinner and passed out. But..." I pull a breath in, unable to stop the massive grin from taking over my face. "I'm pregnant."

Andie drops the rag. A huge, completely uncharacteristic smile breaks across her face. She pulls her phone out of her back pocket, taps the screen a few times, and shoves it back away.

"What did you just do?" I ask.

"Sent up the bat signal."

Less than thirty seconds later, the side door of the garage bangs open. Scout practically sprints inside with Tatum and a breathless Ellie right on her heels.

"Tell me it’s true," Scout demands, pointing a finger with a bright yellow acrylic nail right at my chest. "Tell me I'm officially going to be an aunt."

"Yup, I'm pregnant," I repeat, and the second the words leave my mouth, the four of them swarm me.

It’s a chaotic, aggressive group hug. Tatum is laughing, Ellie is carefully trying not to smudge her flawless winged eyeliner on my shoulder, and Andie just squeezes the shit out of me. It’s exactly what I needed. After holding this tight to my chest all day yesterday, I finally get to let it out into the open, and it feels incredibly real all of a sudden.

"Holy shit," Ellie says, stepping back and fanning her face. "We have to plan a shower. I'm going to buy so many tiny outfits."

“I'm calling dibs on teaching it how to swear," Scout announces, hopping up to sit on a pristine chrome workbench. "So, how smug was Hurricane Daddy when you told him? Did he flex his giant muscles in victory?"

I lean against a tool cabinet and laugh at the mental picture of Sumner doing that. She isn’t far off. "He was actually amazing. He didn't try to take over or make it about him. He just made it crystal clear he's going to be there for every appointment, but he completely stepped back and told me I get to call the shots because it's my body doing all the hard work."

"Ugh, we love a supportive king," Ellie sighs.

"Yeah, well, he’s a little too supportive," I mutter, staring at the concrete floor. "I went to his buddy's condo to take the test so we could find out

together. And when it was positive..." I bite my lip, feeling the heat creep up my neck. "I almost let him pick right back up where we left off on that hotel room floor."

Scout gasps, slapping a hand over her mouth. "You slut. I love it."

"I didn't do it!" I defend myself, though a tingle of awareness sparks to life between my legs just thinking about how close we were. "His friend interrupted us. And then we went down to the parking lot, and we almost did it again. Sweet baby Jesus, he's so..." I shiver. "It's infuriating. I had to run away and drive back to St. Pete so I didn't break the ground rules I just laid down."

Andie sinks back down onto her rolling stool and shrugs. "So change the rules."

"I can't change the rules, Andie. He's technically still married. Then there's my messy breakup with Grant. Neither of us has any business starting a relationship."

"Sounds like you already started one," Tatum points out. "You're having his kid."

"That's different," I insist. "Co-parenting is about the baby. We can be friends and raise a kid without it getting messy. Hooking up with him is disaster-level messy."

"Because if you fall for him and he bails, you can't just burn his shit in the yard and move on," Andie says. "You still have to look at his face for the next eighteen years."

She nails it so perfectly it actually steals the air out of my lungs. I glare at her, but I don't have a comeback. My track record with men staying is absolute garbage. My dad left. My college boyfriend bailed the second things got serious. Grant cheated, and I'm technically the one who booted his ass to the curb, but still. The idea of letting myself fall for Sumner, only to watch him walk away, is terrifying.

"I have a shoot in twenty minutes, so I need to go prep the studio," I say, pushing off the tool cabinet to escape the sudden psychoanalysis. "But I called the clinic this morning. They want me to get bloodwork done tomorrow so they'll have the results for my confirmation appointment on Thursday afternoon."

"I'll block off my calendar," Ellie says immediately.

"I'll drive," Scout adds.

"No, actually," I say, shifting my weight, "Sumner's coming with me."

Just saying it out loud makes a ridiculous swarm of butterflies kick up in my stomach knowing I’m going to see him again in a couple of days. I try to mentally squash the fluttery feeling, but it's totally useless. Who am I kidding? I'm already counting down the hours.

Nobody says a word. All four of them just look at me.

Andie raises her eyebrows, seeing right through my bullshit. "Oh, you are so screwed. He is absolutely going to win you over."

"Shut up," I mutter, turning toward the door as my face heats up. "I'm going to work."

"Mocktails and tacos later!" Scout calls after me, laughing.

I give them a wave over my shoulder, and Ellie and I head back to the studio.

The rest of the day is a blur of adjusting ring lights, hyping up my clients, and staying on my feet until my lower back aches. By the time six o'clock rolls around, that early pregnancy fatigue I read about online hits me hard. I have to text the group chat and rain-check the tacos, promising them I'll make it up to them later this week.

When I finally walk through my front door at seven, I’m completely tapped out. I swear even my bones hurt, and every time I blink, it gets harder and harder to open my eyes back up.

I drop my keys into the bowl on the entryway table and kick my platform sandals down the hallway. I’ll pick them up later. My work clothes are too tight, and all I want is to strip down to my underwear and a baggy t-shirt and finish that block of cheese in bed.

And that’s what I’m gonna do… until a knock sounds at the front door.

I groan, letting my head fall back for a second. I *need* to get this bra off. But no, some asshole wanting to ask me if I’ve *heard of our lord and savior* has to show up now. I swear they time it to be the most annoying they possibly can be.

Turning around, I pull the door open, fully expecting to have to bust out my best *okay, but have you heard of MY lord and savior, Satan?* But it’s not missionaries.

It’s Sumner.

He’s standing on my porch in a pair of dark jeans and a fitted white t-shirt that hugs his broad chest and makes his arms look thick and strong. He’s holding a brown paper takeout bag and a small insulated cooler bag.

Forget the cheese. My mouth practically waters just looking at him.

I stare at him, my heart doing a stupid, frantic little flutter. "What are you doing here? And how do you even know where I live?"

“You own the house, Goldie. It took me about two minutes to find your address in the property records.”

A tiny, rational part of my brain knows I should probably be a little creeped out that he tracked down my address. But staring at his broad shoulders and the steady, unwavering look in his eyes, I don't feel creeped out at all. I just feel a rush of warmth that he actually wanted to see me enough to go to the effort.

He holds the takeout bag out to me. The second I grab it, whatever’s inside smells so fucking good my stomach growls.

"You left yesterday before we could get food," he says, his voice dropping into that low, gritty rumble that goes straight down my spine and makes goosebumps rush over my skin. "And since you gave me so much shit for the donut thing, I brought my favorite dessert instead. It's in the cooler."

"Okay," I say, blinking down at the bags.

"Can I come in?"

I step back, my brain totally glitching out. I let him walk right past me into the living room. The scent of him immediately fills up the space as he passes by, and I inhale but try to hide that I’m doing it.

What? He smells *amazing*.

I open the takeout bag, inhaling the smell of fish and fries, but my curiosity gets the better of me. I unzip the small cooler bag and pull out a sleek, unmarked pint container. Popping the lid off, I grab a spoon from a drawer and take a bite.

"Holy shit," I groan around the bite of blackberry-vanilla ice cream. It is rich, creamy, and insanely good. "Where did you buy this?"

Sumner leans against the counter, a slow, satisfied smirk curving his lips. "I didn't buy it. I made it."

I stare at him, the spoon halfway to my mouth. "You make your own ice cream?"

He pushes off the counter and steps into my space. "I told you I hate donuts, but that doesn’t mean I never eat dessert. There are way better things to put in your mouth than shitty fried dough."

He reaches out and uses his thumb to wipe a speck of ice cream off the corner of my mouth. The rough pad of his finger against my bottom lip

makes my breath hitch.

I freeze, caught in a suffocating wave of pure lust. Having him standing in my kitchen feels so natural it’s a little scary. He takes up so much space, not just because he’s tall and strong but also because he’s just… *him.* I want him to close the last inch between us. I want him to lift me up onto the counter and remind me what he can do with that mouth.

But instead, he drops his hand and takes a step back, leaving a trail of fire on my skin.

He’s doing what I asked. He’s respecting the boundary I put up. Half of me appreciates that he's a man of his word, but the other half wants to kick my own ass for setting the rule in the first place.

"I'll let you get some sleep," he says, his voice a little rougher than it was before as he starts toward the front door.

I blink. "Wait. You’re leaving?"

He looks back at me, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I just wanted to see you and make sure you ate."

I look down at the ice cream before he can see the stupid smile trying to take over my face.

“Text me when you get that appointment scheduled,” he adds.

"It’s on Thursday," I blurt out, turning around to watch the way the muscles shift in his back as he walks.

He stops with his hand on the doorknob and looks over his shoulder.

"At four," I tell him, my pulse thrumming in my ears. "At the women's clinic on Central."

He gives me the sweetest smile. "I'll be there. Sleep well, Goldie."

And then he's gone.

The house is quiet again, but the air feels different. It's lighter. Easier to breathe.

The weight of him stepping up like that leaves me… overwhelmed. I can feel him burrowing into the cracks of my life, taking root just like the plant in the corner.

And I'm terrified I won't have the strength to stop him.

At this point, I’m not even sure I want to try.

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CHAPTER 17
SUMNER

Five Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a sesame seed.

TRAFFIC on I-4 is a goddamn nightmare. I drum my fingers against the steering wheel of my truck, grinding my back teeth together as I stare at the bumper of the sedan idling in front of me. The Thursday afternoon briefing at the AOC ran long, and I didn't have a chance to change out of my flight suit before hauling ass toward St. Pete.

Technically, I'm not supposed to wear my blue Nomex off the base. It's a utility uniform, and getting caught in public in it is a guaranteed way to get chewed out by the chief. But changing would've cost me another ten minutes, and I don't give a fuck about protocol today.

I'm running late. I hate being late for anything, but being late for this makes me want to punch a hole through my dashboard. Goldie's ex-boyfriend let her down, and I don't want to remind her of him in any way. I want to be the guy who's always there. I need to prove to her that I'm reliable, and getting stuck behind a fender bender on the bridge is fucking up my plan.

By the time I finally pull into the parking lot of the women's clinic, my jaw aches from clenching it for so long. I throw the truck in park, cut the engine, and jog up to the glass doors.

The blast of air conditioning hits my sweat-damp skin the second I step inside. The waiting room is full of uncomfortable-looking pastel chairs and quiet music. A few women look up from their magazines, their eyes snagging on my suit and the patches on my chest and shoulders, but I ignore them and walk straight to the reception desk.

Once I give her my name and then Goldie’s, the woman behind the glass points me down a short hallway to room four.

I push the heavy door open. Goldie’s sitting on the edge of the exam table, the sanitary paper crinkling under her thighs. She’s wearing a tight, neon-pink sundress, the fabric stretched across her chest and stomach before pulling over her full hips, leaving her shoulders bare.

When the door clicks shut, her head snaps up. For a split second, I catch the raw, unfiltered disappointment in her eyes before she realizes it's me. Seeing it feels like taking a blunt-force hit to the ribs. She thought I wasn't coming. She thought I was going to be just another guy who didn't show up for her, and knowing she expected it wakes up a dark, violent beast in my blood that wants to hunt down whoever taught her that and make them hurt the way they hurt her.

But she recovers fast. The relief vanishes, replaced by a slow, sweeping look. Her eyes drag from the patches on my shoulders down the length of my flight suit, snagging on the metal zipper that’s halfway down my chest, exposing the black tank top I’ve got on underneath, before coming back up to my face. The sheer, suffocating gravity that lives in the space between us reaches out and wraps its hands right around my throat.

"You made it," she says, crossing her arms under her chest. It pushes her tits up, making them almost spill out, and it takes everything in me not to stare… or drool.

"I told you I wasn't missing this," I say, stepping deeper into the room. "The briefing ran long, and traffic was a parking lot. I'm sorry."

"It's fine." She clears her throat, looking away and adjusting her glasses. "You look very *Top Gun*."

I smirk, leaning my shoulder against the wall next to the biohazard bin. "I fly a ninety-thousand-pound turboprop, Goldie. Not fighter jets."

"It's the same difference. You're wearing a jumpsuit."

"It's a flight suit."

"Whatever you say, Maverick."

Before I can fire back, the door opens again. A woman in a white coat walks in holding a digital tablet. She takes one look at the two of us, her eyes darting from Goldie's neon dress to my government-issue blue, and a warm smile spreads across her face.

"Ah, good," the doctor says, tapping the screen. "Dad made it."

Pride punches the breath right out of my lungs. *Dad.* Hearing a stranger acknowledge it is a bit of a mindfuck, not gonna lie. I've been waiting my whole life for this, and it's more emotional than I thought it'd be. I glance over at Goldie to see what her reaction is, but she doesn't say a damn thing. She doesn't explain our backwards arrangement or point out that we barely know each other. She just bites her bottom lip, a faint pink flush creeping up her neck.

I just nod. "That's me."

"Excellent." The doctor pulls up a rolling stool and sits down. "So, Goldie, your bloodwork came back from the lab this morning. Your hCG levels are right where we want them to be, and your progesterone looks great. Since we date pregnancies from the start of your last cycle, that puts you at roughly five weeks along."

A deep, grounding relief settles in my chest. I spent the last year drowning in quiet guilt, tearing myself apart and wondering if my body was the reason my wife wasn't getting pregnant. Now I know my body wasn't broken at all. Holy shit, we did this on the first try.

"So what happens now?" Goldie asks, her voice a little shaky.

I close the distance between us, stepping right up to the edge of the exam table. I cover her hand where she's gripping the paper. Her fingers are cold, but she turns her palm up and laces our fingers together, holding on tight.

"Now, you keep taking your prenatals," the doctor says, smiling at our joined hands before handing Goldie a printed packet of paper. "Eat when you're hungry, stay hydrated, and we'll see you back here in about a month for your first ultrasound."

Ten minutes later, we walk out the front doors and back into the sweltering heat. The sun is beating down on the asphalt, turning the parking lot into an oven.

Goldie stops next to her car, clutching the packet of papers against her chest. She looks a little dazed. "Well. I guess that makes it official."

I look down at her. I don't want to go back to Tampa. I don't want to get in my truck and drive away. We agreed to be friends, but the thought of leaving her right now feels like tearing a layer of my own skin off. It's physically *wrong*.

"You need to eat," I tell her.

She squints up at me, shielding her eyes from the sun. "Are you telling me or asking me?"

"I'm telling you there's a food truck parked down by the beach that makes the best carnitas in St. Pete," I say, keeping my tone casual so she doesn't throw her walls up. "Let's go grab food."

She opens her mouth to argue, so I rush out, "It isn't a date. We just have some shit to figure out, and you need protein."

She eyes me, clearly trying to find the trap. But the mention of tacos wins out. "Fine. But I'm driving my own car."

"I'd expect nothing less."

We end up sitting side by side on a weathered wooden bench facing the Gulf. The food truck was packed, but we managed to snag two Styrofoam containers of tacos and a couple of cold sodas. The sun is starting to dip toward the horizon, turning the sky a bruised shade of orange and purple. The smell of salt water and grilled meat hangs in the humid air.

"So," I say, wiping grease off my fingers with a paper napkin. "Colston says if it's a girl, we have to name her Jenny."

Goldie chokes on her taco. She hits her chest, coughing, and glares at me with watering eyes. "Yeah, that's not happening."

"He's been pushing pretty hard for it."

"I will name this child Megatron before I name her Jenny."

I laugh, leaning back against the wooden slats of the bench. It's so easy to be with her, and I'm always a little bit surprised by how much fun I have just hanging out. "Colston's going to be devastated. He already bought a tiny onesie with a matching t-shirt for him."

"He did not."

"He did. It's hilarious."

Goldie rolls her eyes, taking another bite of her food. "If you and Colston are anything to go by, your friends are insane. The guy is basically a golden retriever with a dirty mouth."

"They're good guys," I say, watching a pelican dive toward the water. "Trace kept me out of jail in college, and Jenny's the best co-pilot on the

base. I trust them with my life."

"What about your dads?" she asks, turning her head to look at me. "How did they handle you wanting to fly into hurricanes?"

"Daniel, my biological dad, was the one I told you about, the Navy pilot," I explain. "He's the one who taught me how to fly. He gets it. Mark's the one who worries. He usually bakes about four dozen cookies every time I deploy to keep his hands busy."

Goldie smiles, a soft, genuine expression that changes her entire face. "They sound amazing."

"They are. They hired a surrogate to have me. They wanted a family more than anything, so they made it happen." I look at her, taking in the messy dark hair blowing across her cheek and the dress clinging to her gorgeous body. "I guess I inherited that determination."

She lets out a quiet laugh. "Well, considering the lengths we just went to so we could have a baby, I'd say you aren't the only one."

We sit there for another hour as the beach empties out and we talk. We talk about how she built her photography studio from the ground up, hustling for five years to make it successful. I listen to her explain how she loves making women feel powerful in their own skin, and the fierce, unapologetic passion in her voice sinks its teeth into my chest and refuses to let go.

I eat my tacos and watch the ocean breeze mess up her hair. Being around her is like finally exhaling after holding my breath for the three fucking years I was married to Delia. I don't have to pretend. I don't have to carve pieces of myself off to fit into someone else's sterile, boring little box.

By the time the sun sets and the stars start to flicker into existence overhead, we throw our trash away and walk back to our cars. The space between us shrinks as we walk. The back of her hand brushes against mine, warm skin grazing my knuckles, and a violent jolt shoots straight through my veins. I want to lace my fingers through hers. I want to pull her tight against my side and claim her right here with the waves crashing behind us.

But I force my hands into tight fists at my sides instead, digging my nails into my palms. As much as I want everything from this woman, I can't push her, and I promised I'd be on my best behavior tonight if she came out with me.

"Thanks for the tacos," Goldie says, leaning against the driver's side door of her SUV. "And for showing up." Her voice drops an octave, turning

a little breathless as her eyes drag down the length of my body. The look she gives me is so hungry it’s almost like we didn’t just eat dinner. "Even if you were late and dressed like... that."

I step into her space, stopping just close enough to feel the heat radiating off her skin. "I'm always going to show up, Goldie."

She looks up at me, searching my face in the almost-dark. The coastal breeze kicks up, rattling the dry fronds of the palm trees lining the edge of the street, but the only thing I can focus on is the uneven hitch of her breathing. That invisible tether between us pulls so taut it feels like it might snap my ribs. I want to lean down and taste the salt on her lips. I want to back her up against the metal of her car and devour her until my lungs burn.

But I force my hands to stay balled in tight fists at my sides. I can't rush this. If I push her now, she's going to throw her walls up even higher.

"Drive safe," I tell her, taking a step back.

Goldie blinks, looking almost confused that I'm backing off. She clears her throat and opens her car door. "Yeah. You too."

I stand in the empty parking lot and watch her taillights disappear down the street.

My dad used aviation to tame the reckless kid I used to be, and I spent the last three years burying whatever was left of him because I thought I had to compromise who I was for love. But Goldie just ripped the cage wide open. She draws out a side of me I haven't felt in a decade. With her, I feel wild again. Untamed. More alive and free than I do flying blind into the eyewall of a storm. I'm in deep. I'm tied to this woman down to the soul, and playing by her rules when I'm starving for her is going to be absolute fucking torture.

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CHAPTER 18
GOLDIE

OVER THE LAST week and a half, Sumner has systematically embedded himself into my routine.

He dropped off my favorite sparkling water at the studio between his flights before I could order more. He fixed the squeaky hinge on my front door without being asked. And twenty minutes ago, he knocked on my door with two reusable grocery bags full of food, found the drawer where I hide all my mismatched Tupperware on the very first try, and started organizing a week's worth of lunches in my fridge.

Without me having to ask or even think about it.

Who even *is* this man?

"I made grilled chicken, roasted sweet potatoes, and a quinoa thing Jenny swears by," he tells me while he shoves my sparkling waters to the side to make room. "It's high in protein and folic acid."

I start to protest, and he glances up and smirks. "And it tastes good."

Now, he's rolling the sleeves of his grey henley up past his elbows to tackle the pans I left in the sink last night.

I sigh and sit on a barstool at the island, taking a slow sip of lime-flavored sparkling water while I watch him work. "I guess I can eat it then, as long as it doesn't taste like dirt or grass or whatever." I wrinkle my nose remembering the time I tried mushrooms on my pizza but quickly shake it off as I watch the muscles in Sumner's back flex.

I'm fighting a losing battle against how attractive it is to watch a competent man operate in my space. Grant lived in this house for years. In

all that time, he maybe did the dishes twice, and he bitched about it the entire time. He treated my kitchen like a hotel buffet where I was the maid.

Sumner just puts his head down and does the work. He scrubs the heavy pan, the thick veins in his forearms flexing against his tan skin. I tilt my head and take it all in because later on in my semi-warm pregnancy-approved bath, my little suction toy and I are gonna have some fun together to a replay of this right here.

I've been a weird combination of turned on and exhausted for the last week. A heavy, bone-deep exhaustion is always lingering right on the edges of my body at all times ready to swoop in and fuck up my day.

The early pregnancy fatigue is definitely kicking my ass, but holding this man at arm's length is what's draining me most. I hate how guarded I am. I hate that the shitty men in my past built this defensive wall around me brick by brick. But sitting here watching Sumner take care of me, I can finally admit to myself why I'm fighting him so hard.

I know the second I let him in, that'll be it. Like *it* it. He'll get my whole heart. There won't be anything I can do to stop the fall. Grant leaving stung, but I recovered because I knew deep down Grant was never the one.

Sumner could be. Not just *could be* but maybe is. And if I let myself fall for him and he walks away, I won't survive it.

"You really have to stop doing my dishes," I tell him, resting my chin on my hand.

Sumner rinses the pan under the faucet and sets it on the drying rack. "They're almost done."

"Okay, but you just stocked my fridge with meals, and you didn't even use the dishes you're washing. This all makes me feel like I owe you, and I don't like being in debt to anyone."

He turns off the water and tosses the dish towel onto the counter. A flash of hard, undeniable frustration crosses his face, and my stomach tightens. I know I'm pushing him away, and I know it's completely unfair, but I can't seem to stop doing it.

He leans his hip against the counter and looks across the island at me. "Whoever taught you that letting someone take care of you meant you owed them something in return was a goddamn idiot," he says, his voice low and dead serious. "We aren't keeping score. You're growing my child. The absolute least I can do is make sure you have food to eat while you do it."

The unwavering certainty in his eyes strips the air right out of my lungs. I'm so used to everything being transactional. I'm so used to having to earn the right to rely on someone, only for them to disappoint me anyway. To have this man tell me not only am I not alone in this, but he'll be stepping up whether I like it or not is too much.

I blink a few times, trying to get a handle on my emotions because there's no way he's real, right?

I open my mouth to fire back a sarcastic joke to deflect the tension, but my phone starts buzzing against the counter.

The screen lights up with a picture of my mom. My stomach drops. My mom is a human lie detector, and dealing with her laser-focused interrogation while *the father of my unborn child that she knows nothing about* is standing across the room is a clusterfuck of epic proportions.

But I'm gonna have to deal with her at some point, or she'll call relentlessly until I eventually pick up.

I grab the phone, hit the green accept button, and spin on my stool, fully intending to walk into the living room so I can talk to her in private.

"Hey, Mom," I say, holding the phone up to my face.

Josephine Hahn's face fills the screen. She has her blonde hair pulled back in a claw clip, and she's wearing her usual pastel scrubs from the massage clinic. She takes one look at her screen, her eyes darting from my face to the background over my shoulder where Sumner is still standing by the sink. Her jaw drops open.

"Goldie Hahn," my mom says, her voice hitting a pitch that never fails to make me cringe. "Who is that man in your kitchen, and why is he doing your dishes?"

I squeeze my eyes shut and let my head fall back for a second while I blow out a long breath. *Christ on a cracker.*

I lower the phone a fraction. "Would you believe me if I said I hired a manservant?"

Sumner coughs out a laugh somewhere behind me.

She squints at the screen, leaning closer to her camera. "Is this an *Overboard* situation? Did you find a rich amnesiac and convince him he's your husband so he'll clean your house? Because in theory it's hot, but in real life kidnapping's a federal crime."

Sumner lets out another, deeper laugh, making it extremely obvious he isn't even pretending not to listen. He walks around the island. Stepping

right up behind my stool, he leans down until his chest brushes my back and his face is in the frame next to mine. I immediately catch the scent of clean laundry and whatever spicy body wash he uses, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from taking a deep breath of him.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," Sumner says, his voice a smooth, polite drawl. "I'm Sumner."

My mom stares at him through the phone. She looks him up and down, taking in the broad shoulders, the dark buzzed hair, and the handsome face currently smiling at her.

"Sumner," she repeats slowly, like she's testing his name to see how she feels about it. "What's your deal? My daughter just wasted five years on a guy who couldn't keep it in his pants, and she works way too hard to get tangled up with another one who's just going to charm his way into her life and then ditch her when things get hard. I raised her by myself because her sperm donor did exactly that to me. So if you're playing games, you can march right out her front door right now."

"Mom," I hiss, my face burning so hot I can feel it in my ears. "Stop."

"I'm just being realistic," she insists. "I watch enough movies to know the ones who seem too good to be true always are."

Sumner shifts his weight, bracing one large hand flat on the counter next to me. He looks straight into the camera. The easy, polite smile drops off his face, replaced by that intense, unwavering focus that gives me the best kind of shivers.

"I respect the hell out of you for raising her on your own, ma'am," Sumner says. "She's incredible. But I promise you, I'm not going anywhere. I happen to thrive when things get hard."

Now it's my turn to choke on a laugh.

My mom blinks, her protective glare faltering into pure confusion. "Why does that sound like you two are serious?" She squints at the screen again and turns her full attention on me. "Goldie? What's he talking about? Did you get married in Vegas or something?"

My pulse skyrockets. I take a deep, shaky breath, freaking out on the inside, and then I blurt it out. "Yeah, so, *we'rekindofhavingababy.* Okay, byeeeee!"

I pull the phone away to hit the red button, but her voice blasts through the speaker.

"Goldie Guinevere Hahn! You better not hang up this phone or I *will* be getting on the next flight down there!"

I freeze, my thumb hovering over the screen. I bring the phone slowly back up to my face.

My mom is staring at the camera, stunned. Then, a slow, brilliant smile takes over her face. All the suspicion melts away, leaving pure, unabashed excitement. She's always been a sucker for babies, and I think it makes her sad she never had more than just me.

"A baby? Oh, my god. I'm going to be a grandma." She presses a hand over her heart, her eyes shining. But then she points a finger directly at the screen, zeroing right back in on Sumner. "You said you're in it for the long haul. I'm holding you to that. If you break her heart, I'll break both of your legs. And kick you in the balls."

Sumner doesn't even flinch. He just nods. "Understood, ma'am."

"I'm hanging up now," I say, my voice coming out as a strangled squeak.

"You better send me ultrasound pictures!" she yells right before I hit the end call button.

I set my phone face down on the counter and blow out a long breath. The kitchen falls into a heavy silence. My pulse is jackhammering against my throat. I stare straight ahead into the living room, trying to get my shit together.

"So... Guinevere, huh?" Sumner asks, his voice rumbling with quiet amusement right behind me.

I drop my face into my hands. "Oh my god. Kill me now."

He chuckles, a low sound that vibrates down my spine. "It's cute. Unique."

"She watches way too many movies," I say, aiming for a *this doesn't bother me at all* vibe, but it comes out muffled through my fingers. "She speaks in quotes. You have to ignore her."

Sumner stays right where he is. His chest is so close to my back I can feel the heat radiating off him. His hands settle on my shoulders, his thumbs pressing into the tight, knotted muscles at the base of my neck. He lowers his head, his mouth hovering right next to my ear as he starts to massage, kneading the tension right out of my skin.

A soft groan escapes my throat before I can stop it. It feels *so* good.

"I meant exactly what I said to her," he murmurs, his voice dropping into a low gravel that scrapes right against my nerve endings. "I'm not going

anywhere, Goldie."

One of those Sumner Wells-patented shivers works its way down my spine. I drop my hands from my face and turn my head to look at him over my shoulder. His eyes are locked on mine, intense and filled with so many things it’s hard to pick out just one.

God, I’m so tired of fighting this thing between us. He keeps showing up—every single time he says he will, and a dozen times I never even asked him to—and I'm just so damn exhausted from pretending I don't want more.

His big hands drag down my arms, leaving a trail of stupid, traitorous goosebumps in their wake, before his fingers lock onto my hips. He spins my stool until I’m facing him and steps right between my knees, boxing me in. The absolute audacity of this man. My brain screams at me to say something sarcastic to ruin the moment, but my body goes totally rogue. I just let out a long, defeated sigh and let my forehead drop forward, thunking right against the solid center of his chest.

Sumner lets out a rough sound, like he's been waiting for this. His arms wrap around my back, gathering me up and pulling me flush against his frame. One large hand cradles the back of my head, his fingers tangling gently in my hair.

I melt. The armor I’ve worn for a decade just… dissolves. I slide my arms around his waist, burying my face in the soft cotton of his shirt, and let him hold me. It feels safe. Warm. A little like *home.* We stay like that for a long time, the only sound in the kitchen the steady, reassuring thud of his heartbeat against my cheek.

When I eventually tilt my head up, his face is inches from mine. He’s so close I can see his dark stubble and the faint golden halo around the center of his irises. He looks down at me with a gaze so soft it puts a tight, aching knot dead in the center of my throat.

The gravity between us pulls hard. It’s inevitable. He leans in, and I meet him halfway.

His mouth brushes softly against mine once, testing the waters, before he pulls back just a fraction of an inch. His eyes are open, staring down into mine, searching, but there’s no part of me that wants this to stop. So I chase his lips, making a desperate little sound I’ve never heard myself make before, and that’s all it takes to get rid of any restraint he might’ve been hanging onto.

When he kisses me again, my entire nervous system catches on fire. It’s slow and sweet and absolutely devastating, this kiss. This is everything I’ve been missing since the night in the hotel, but this time he kisses me like he’s got all the time in the world. I curl my fingers into the soft cotton of his shirt, parting my lips to let him in. A low, rumbling groan vibrates through his chest and straight into my bloodstream. I sink into him, letting the consuming heat of his body against mine melt straight down into my bones.

It feels so fucking right it terrifies me.

That’s the problem. If I keep kissing him, I’m going to hand him the keys to my entire life. I’m going to let him rearrange my soul the exact same way he just rearranged my Tupperware drawer, clearing out all my baggage just to make a permanent place for himself.

A cold spike of adrenaline cuts right through the lust. My chest goes tight. The sheer, suffocating vulnerability of wanting someone this much makes my lungs seize up. Shit, I can't breathe.

I pull back, sucking in a ragged breath, and force myself to untangle my arms from his body.

He lets me go, stepping back and putting an unbearable amount of space between us. He drags a hand over his jaw, his chest heaving just as hard as mine. For a split second, a flash of genuine hurt crosses his eyes, but he blinks it away, locking his feelings down behind a calm, steady expression.

Then he reaches past me to grab his keys off the island, shifting his weight so he makes sure his arm doesn't brush against mine.

I blink. "Wait. You're leaving?"

Sumner gives me a crooked, half-smile that’s way too endearing. "If I stay, we both know what’ll happen. You asked for boundaries and I promised I’d respect them. So I need to go."

I swallow hard, every inch of my body still screaming at me to pull him back.

He walks toward the front door, pausing with his hand on the knob to shoot a slow, wicked smirk over his shoulder.

"Think of me when you get yourself off after I leave," he says. “I’ll be doing the same.”

Before I get the chance to lie and tell him that’s not what’s about to happen, he walks out the door…

…and I slide off the stool and go straight for my nightstand.

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CHAPTER 19
SUMNER

MY SHOULDERS BURN as I hoist my end of the green velvet couch off the sidewalk. I curse, adjusting my grip on the slick wood frame before it slips out of my sweaty palms.

"If I blow out my back right now, you're waiting on me hand and foot until I recover," Colston grunts from the other end. "And I'm not gonna make it easy on you."

"Lift with your legs and you'll be fine," I tell him, walking backward toward the open roll-up doors of the warehouse where Goldie's studio is. "And I paid you for your help."

"A case of beer doesn't cover moving furniture on our only day off. You should've let me hire someone."

"You lift more than this in the gym. Stop being a whiny little bitch."

We muscle the couch over the metal track of the threshold. A blast of industrial air conditioning hits my back, carrying the sharp smell of oil and exhaust from the motorcycle garage next door. Bass from a pop song thumps against the exposed brick walls, loud enough that I have to yell to be heard.

I adjust my grip again before I drop this damn thing. Yesterday, Goldie complained about two vintage couches getting dropped on the curb for her studio. She was stressing over how she and her assistant were going to get them inside. Like I'd let my pregnant… Goldie carry heavy shit. I'm almost offended she didn't ask.

So I showed up with Colston to handle it.

"Sumner?"

I come to a sudden stop, and my best friend cusses me out. This thing is heavy as shit. But seeing Goldie always fucks me up a little. She stands in the doorway of her studio space, holding a tablet against her chest. She’s wearing wide-leg pants in a loud, colorful print and a tight black crop top that puts a sliver of her bare stomach right in my line of sight.

I love how colorful she always is. How full of life.

In this case, literally full of the life I put inside of her. My dick twitches.

Seeing her always hits me right in the ribs. It’s a physical, undeniable pull that happens every time I’m around her. The urge to drop this heavy-ass couch, close the distance between us, and pull her against my body spikes so hard my fingers tingle. I want to remind myself exactly how she tastes.

I want to bury my dick inside of her until I forget what it feels like to be anywhere else and she gives in to this thing between us, even if I have to coerce her through orgasm denial.

I’m a patient guy, but it’s starting to fray.

"Hey, Goldie girl," Colston grunts from behind me, shifting his grip on the wood. "Wanna tell us where to put this thing?"

Goldie blinks, her shock at finding us here melting into a bright, gorgeous smile with trouble at the edges. It does terrible things to my self-control. "You just gotta use those magic legs," she says, dragging out the vowels in a spot-on Forrest Gump accent. "Lift, Jen-nay, liiift."

"I hate you," Colston mutters.

"Seriously, what are you two doing here?" she asks, her eyes darting between me, Colston, and the couch.

"You texted me that the delivery guys left the furniture on the curb," I say, scoffing a little as I adjust my grip. "Like I was going to let you drag this inside by yourself. Just tell us where it goes before Jenny drops his end."

A girl pops up from behind a lighting umbrella, smacking a piece of gum. She has black hair twisted into two messy knots on top of her head, a nose ring, and a crop top that looks like it belongs in a music video from the early two-thousands.

"Oh, thank god," the girl says, her eyes darting between me and Colston like she's sizing us up for a fight. "I'm Minji, studio assistant extraordinaire and wrangler of chaos. The universe always provides when I ask it to." She

points a silver-ringed finger toward the back of the room. "Put it near the far wall. Angle it toward the windows so we catch the natural light."

Goldie nods. "What she said. Just watch the paint on the doorframe."

We haul the couch across the concrete floor, dodging a ring light and a rolling rack of lingerie, and set it down where Minji directed. Colston drops his end and rolls his shoulders, wiping a line of sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

Minji steps right up to him, popping her gum. She squints at his face, completely invading his personal space. "What's your big three?"

Colston blinks, looking down at her in confusion. "My what?"

"Your sun, moon, and rising signs," Minji demands, ticking up a finger with every one. "You give off major Gemini energy. It's chaotic. I need to know what I'm dealing with."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Colston says.

"Just as I suspected." Minji pulls a phone out of her back pocket and aggressively taps away at it.

Before Colston can defend himself, a side door opens and two more women walk into the studio. I recognize them immediately from the handful of pictures Goldie's texted me and the thorough deep dive I did on her studio's Instagram page. The blonde with the tattoo sleeves and bubblegum-pink lips is Tatum. The petite girl with the pinkish pixie cut and the loud laugh is Scout.

Scout stops in her tracks, her eyes zeroing in on me. A sharp, knowing grin takes over her face. "Well, well, well. If it isn't Hurricane Daddy."

Goldie groans, burying her face in her hands. "Ugh, no."

"I'm just saying," Scout continues, leaning against a light stand to look me up and down. "Based on the stories we've heard about your stamina, I expected you to look a little less... boy scout."

A short, amused laugh escapes my chest. I definitely don't feel like a boy scout, but I'll let Goldie's friends think whatever they want if it means they like me.

Colston chokes on a laugh, standing up straight. "Don't let the haircut fool you. The boy scout thing is strictly camouflage. Underneath all that, this guy's insane."

Scout turns toward him. "And who the hell are you?"

"That's Jenny," I offer before Colston can open his mouth, smirking right back at him. Talk shit about me and I'm gonna get payback.

Scout looks him over. "You do look like a Jenny."

Goldie snorts a laugh.

"It's Colston," he says.

"Sure it is, Jenny." Scout waves him off like the matter is settled.

Colston looks at me. "I hate all Goldie girl's friends."

Tatum walks past him, flipping him off as she does, and stops directly in front of me.

She's shorter than I am but not by a lot, and she looks like a preppy catalog model who just happened to fall into a vat of ink and piercings. But underneath the bubblegum-pink lip gloss, she radiates a dangerous, bad-girl energy that instantly puts me on guard. She tips her chin up, pinning me with a stare that dares me to test her.

"You hurt her," Tatum says, dropping her voice so only I can hear it, "and they will never find your body. I have a twelve-foot alligator living in my backyard, and I'm always looking for an excuse to give her a treat."

I hold her gaze. I respect the hell out of her for the warning, even if it is a little unsettling how casually she just threatened to murder me. "I want to be the guy who fixes things for her, not the one who breaks them," I say, keeping my voice just as quiet. "But if I ever forget that, you can introduce me to your gator."

Tatum searches my face for a few seconds. She gives a single nod, satisfied with my answer.

"Alright, back to the grind," Scout announces, clapping her hands together. "See you later, Hurricane Daddy. Bye, Jenny."

Scout and Tatum disappear through the side door to get back to their own shops. Colston and I head back outside for the second couch. We carry it into the studio and set it where Goldie points.

Colston mutters a curse under his breath and hits the button on the wall to close the roll-up door, shutting out the suffocating heat with a loud mechanical hum.

Goldie sets her tablet on a nearby desk, turning to say something to Minji, but before she can get the words out, a door down the hall opens.

A woman steps out, clutching a silk robe tightly around her waist. She's followed closely by a girl with dark hair and lots of makeup—who has to be Ellie, Goldie's makeup artist and best friend. Ellie gives the woman an encouraging smile, but the client still looks terrified, her eyes darting around the bright lights and camera equipment.

I grab Colston by the back of his t-shirt, hauling him toward the reception desk to get us out of the way before she can see us.

Colston stumbles backward. "Hey, what are you doing?"

"We don't want to make her uncomfortable," I tell him, keeping my voice low as I tip my head in the direction of the hall. Goldie told me how vulnerable this space is for her clients. I'm not going to be the asshole who messes that up.

I shove Colston into the reception area. He tries to lean around my shoulder to get a look, but I block him, keeping my own body hidden in the shadows of the hallway so I can watch Goldie work. I didn't know until now how much I need to see her in her element.

Goldie grabs her camera off a nearby desk while Minji moves to the background to adjust a reflector panel. When the client finally drops her robe to reveal a lingerie set, she immediately crosses her arms over her stomach to cover back up, hunching her shoulders forward like she's trying to make herself disappear.

Goldie sets the camera down and takes her time. She walks over with a warm, easy smile. "Hey," Goldie says, her voice carrying across the quiet studio. "Take a deep breath for me. Shake your shoulders out."

The woman hesitates, then takes a breath and lets her arms drop and does what Goldie says.

"There you go," Goldie encourages, stepping back to adjust a light box. "I know it's terrifying at first, but look at you. You, babe, are a whole damn masterpiece. Look at that waist. Those hips. Stop hiding them from me. Put your hands on your hips, lift your chin, and let me show you exactly what a beautiful badass you are."

The woman exhales, a tiny, tentative smile breaking through the fear. She puts her hands on her hips. Her posture changes, the insecurity melting away as Goldie picks her camera back up, positions the woman into flattering poses, and starts snapping photos. Goldie hypes her up with every click of the shutter, her voice bright and empowering.

I stand in the shadows, my focus locked completely on the beautiful woman I'm becoming more and more obsessed with by the day.

She lends this stranger her own fierce confidence, pouring it out until the woman starts to believe it. Even if it's only for an afternoon, Goldie's changing this woman's life by making her feel genuinely beautiful. It completely blows me away.

Paper rustles from somewhere behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to find Colston leaning against the reception desk, casually flipping through a lingerie catalog. He catches me looking, taps a page featuring a skimpy black lace set, and waggles his eyebrows at me.

I shake my head and turn my attention back to the shoot. At least he’s entertaining himself.

I already knew Goldie was gorgeous, fun, determined… I could go on and on. But seeing her in her element like this takes it to a completely different level. The more I learn about her, the more incredible she becomes.

Fuck. I'm falling for her.

The realization hits with the brutal force of a plane dropping into a downdraft. My pulse hammers against my ribs. I’ve spent my career training to stay calm under pressure, to lock my shit down and stay in control so I don’t spiral.

But standing in this hallway, watching her in her element, my discipline is hanging by a goddamn thread. Every instinct I have is pushing me to tell her, to ask for more. But I know if I rush this, she'll only push back harder.

So I'll take the torture of earning her if it means I get to keep her forever.

Two weeks later, playing the long game is officially driving me out of my fucking mind.

I’m leaning against the island in Colston’s kitchen, staring at a half-empty beer. It's been too fucking long since Goldie let her guard down and kissed me in her kitchen. I haven't tasted her since, and the cravings are almost unbearable. I've kept my hands to myself, giving her exactly what she asked for, but being around her without touching her is a special kind of hell. Every time she laughs, every time she casually bumps her shoulder against mine, my muscles lock up just to keep from touching her the way I know we both want.

The way we did in the hotel.

Except this time it’d be better because I know her and she knows me. There’s trust and a level of comfort we didn’t have before.

When she finally lets me in fully, it’s gonna be so fucking good and worth every second of torment.

I’m not going to push her, though. I want to be the guy she feels safe enough with to drop the armor herself. I want her to look at me and decide she’s ready to be with me in every way. But waiting for her to make that choice is testing me on a level I’ve never experienced before.

Colston’s sitting across from me, scrolling on his phone, when the front door opens, and we both look up to find Trace kicking the door shut.

He drops onto the seat beside me with a heavy groan. "I hate university bureaucracy bullshit," Trace announces, cracking his neck.

"Rough day?" Colston asks, popping the top on a beer from the fridge and sliding it over to Trace. "Good thing Wells’s number one best friend is here with beer then, isn’t it?"

Trace catches the bottle, flipping Colston off. "I've known him a decade longer than you, Jennings. Know your place."

I just roll my eyes and take a drink of my beer, letting them run through their usual bullshit.

Trace takes a long pull. "So, you sign the papers today?"

"Yeah," I say, setting my bottle down and rolling it between my palms. "I met with the lawyer this morning. Delia is officially being served next week."

"And you're not just handing her the house anymore, right?" Colston asks, looking up from his phone.

"My lawyer told me I'm an idiot if I walk away from that much equity just because I'm pissed," I admit. "So no. We're forcing a sale. She can buy me out or we put it on the market."

"Good. Fuck her," Trace says, taking a long drink. He sets the bottle down and claps his hands together. "Now, where are we going tonight? I need stronger alcohol than this and to make some bad decisions."

"We're heading over to St. Pete," I tell him, grabbing my keys off the counter. "Goldie's friends are throwing a party on the roof of their building."

Trace pauses, lowering his beer. He looks at me, then looks at Colston. "Be honest with me, dude. Are these friends hot? Because if I'm dragging my ass across the bridge to watch Shamu pine over his baby mama, there better be single women."

Colston grins. "Oh, they're hot. A little feral, but hot. One of them threatened to feed him to an alligator last time we saw them."

Trace raises an eyebrow, a slow smirk taking over his face. "Perfect." He looks back at me and snorts. "You're so fucking down bad it's embarrassing."

"I never said I wasn't," I say.

"Just wait until you see them together, T," Colston laughs, grabbing his wallet and sticking it and his phone into his pocket. "Standing next to them feels like you're interrupting foreplay."

I shove Colston toward the door, ignoring him. Let them talk shit. I don't care. Tonight, there's gonna be music, a crowded roof, and Goldie. And honestly, Colston isn't wrong. Getting across that bridge, finding her in the crowd, and just soaking her in is the only thing I give a shit about right now. I can't touch her yet, but just being near her takes the edge off.

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CHAPTER 20
GOLDIE

Eight Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a raspberry.

THE SUN'S setting over St. Pete, turning the sky above the warehouse a blinding neon orange-pink just in time to kick off our Friday night.

We spend almost every Friday night up here on the roof. Over the years, we've dragged up a bunch of potted palm trees, built a wooden pergola for shade, and pieced together a makeshift bar out of reclaimed wood, transforming the ugly space into our own private oasis. Scout even mounted a hot pink neon sign from her shop against the brick that says *Bad Bitches Only*.

Sabrina Carpenter's "House Tour" blasts from the Bluetooth speaker, competing with the loud clatter of ice against steel as Tatum works a cocktail shaker behind the bar. Even from ten feet away, the sharp bite of fresh lime juice hits my nose.

My sense of smell is on another level right now. I'm like a freaking bloodhound. Thankfully I managed to skip the morning sickness, but my nose is a whole different story. I think I even get a little hint of salt from the beach on the breeze.

"Spin for me," Ellie demands. She's leaning against the bar, her hair pulled into a sleek, slicked-back braid that makes her cheekbones look sharp as hell.

I spin in a slow circle. I threw on a tight, sheer black mesh dress over a neon pink string bikini. My thick thighs are out, my ass looks amazing, and I’m fully prepared to make Sumner lose his mind tonight. Eight weeks in and I'm still waiting on my bump to show up—right now it just looks like my usual belly—but I swear my boobs have doubled in size. They’re massive, sore, and this bikini top is doing miraculous things to keep them looking perky-ish.

"Flawless," Ellie declares, tapping her nails against her plastic cup. "Hurricane Daddy’s going to pop wood the second he walks onto this roof."

I narrow my eyes at her. "Are we really sticking with Hurricane Daddy? It’s cringe and such a mouthful."

“I bet he is.” Ellie smirks. “Lucky bitch.”

"Just make sure you put that wood to good use," Tatum adds, popping the top off the cocktail shaker. "If he's really the Hurricane Daddy, he better know how to leave you shaking and wet enough to need sandbags."

I groan, leaning my forehead against the cool wood of the bar. "First, ew. Sandbags? But the man knows how to use what he’s got, which is exactly why we have rules now. Co-parents only."

"Which is the stupidest thing you’ve ever done, and don’t even act like you weren’t the one who made that dumbass rule," Ellie says, pausing mid-swipe of her lip gloss to point the wand at me. "We’ve seen how he looks at you. The man is obsessed. He spent his entire day last week putting together that giant storage cabinet for the studio so you wouldn't have to deal with it, and he detailed your SUV just because he noticed it had sand in it. Plus all the flowers and food he brings you all the time. Be real. Why are you really holding out?"

"Do you think I want to?" I shoot back, lifting my head. "I want to drag him into a dark corner and let him do the dirtiest things imaginable to me. I want to leave teeth marks on his skin and ride his face until we both pass out. It’s seriously painful to be in the same room and not touch him."

Tatum pauses, the cocktail shaker resting on the bar. "Again. What's the problem?"

“The problem”—I point to my stomach—“is that he put his baby in here.” I drop my voice even though it's just us. "If we cross that line and things go to shit, I'm stuck co-parenting with an ex I have to see for the next eighteen years. One I might have to watch be with someone else. I can't handle that."

Ellie sighs, and her eyes soften. "Babe, you're the strongest person I know. You walked in on Grant banging someone else in your bed and barely flinched. You tossed his cheating ass to the curb and didn't shed a single tear over it."

"Grant isn't Sumner," I admit, my throat tightening as I finally say my truth out loud. "With Grant... the betrayal stung, but in hindsight? He was never right for me. It was easier than I thought to walk away." I look down at my hands. "But Sumner? Sumner embraces my chaos. Encourages it, even. With Grant, I constantly felt like I had to apologize for being too loud. He always took these passive-aggressive digs at my weight, rolled his eyes at my clothes, and acted like my business was embarrassing.

"Sumner likes those things about me. Even if I'm in sweats and haven't showered, he looks at me like I'm a five-course meal and he hasn't eaten in a week. He wants me exactly as I am without asking me to shrink down to fit into his life. If I let Sumner all the way in—if I let myself get used to feeling free and appreciated—and then he leaves me? That wouldn't just hurt or piss me off. It would break me."

Tatum leans across the bar, her blue eyes fierce. "He's not going to leave, G. Look at everything he's doing to prove it to you. You know your worth. Stop punishing him for what the other assholes did or you might miss out on something really great."

"Soulmate shit," Ellie says, nodding.

From the far end of the bar, Andie raises her beer bottle in agreement. She swapped her garage coveralls for a black leather mini skirt and combat boots, and her ice-blue eyes roll at me over the glass. "What they said. Stop overthinking it."

Scout pops her head up from where she's plugging in the neon sign a few feet away. "Yeah! Let the man blow your goddamn back out!"

Ellie cackles while the other girls cheer, and Andie tips her beer bottle in a mock salute.

I drop my face into my hands, laughing despite myself. "You guys have literally no idea how hard it is to tell him no," I mutter into my palms.

Before they can interrogate me for details, the Bluetooth speaker skips to the next track. The opening beat of Chappell Roan's "HOT TO GO!" blasts across the roof. Scout immediately jumps up and starts doing the cheerleading dance. Ellie joins in, spelling out the letters with her arms while singing at the top of her lungs.

I lean against the bar, letting their voices wash over me. I zone out, watching Tatum work while my brain spins their advice around in circles. It sounds so simple when they say it, but dropping a decade of defense mechanisms isn't exactly easy.

Tatum pours a pale green margarita for Ellie. Then she grabs a second cup with a Tajín rim, fills it with muddled jalapeño and fresh watermelon juice, and tops it off with ginger beer. She slides the mocktail across the bar toward me, her silver septum ring catching the string lights overhead as she smirks. "Drink up, mama."

I take a sip, letting out a soft hum of approval at the spicy kick of the jalapeño. This whole virgin cocktail thing isn’t bad.

Before I can jump into the song with Scout and Ellie, a loud clank comes from the brick stairwell housing. Since the warehouse freight elevator gets locked down after business hours, the internal stairs are the only way up to the roof.

I grip the plastic cup in my hand so hard it crinkles. I have to brace myself every time I see him now. My brain is desperately clinging to the "just friends" boundary I set, but my body is ready to smack that bitch down. I want him so bad it hurts.

I swallow hard just as the heavy metal door gets pulled open, and Sumner steps out, followed by Colston and a guy that somehow makes both of them look small.

I barely register the other two guys because my tunnel vision locks straight onto Sumner, and I drink him in like I just spent the last month in the desert without water. He’s wearing a short-sleeve button-down hanging open over a tight white ribbed tank top, jeans and crisp white sneakers.

They’re fitted just right in a way that shows off his tan and his muscles, and *fuck my life.*

The second he steps onto the roof, his eyes find me like he’s got a sixth sense for knowing where I am at all times. He ignores the rest of the party. As he walks toward me, his dark gaze drops from my face, follows the flowers and leaves down my arm, then drags over the sheer black mesh of my dress and the neon pink bikini underneath. His attention catches on the ink along my ribs before moving lower, then burns a path right back up to my eyes.

His are *scorching* when they meet mine, and I swallow hard.

My pulse kicks into a frantic rhythm. A rush of liquid heat pools between my thighs, testing every single ounce of my resolve to keep my hands to myself.

He stops right in front of me, bringing his two friends with him. "Hey. You look incredible," he says, his voice dropping lower, and tingles flare out under my skin.

"Thanks, Maverick," I say, forcing my voice to stay steady. I'm dying to fan my face because *damn*.

"Hey, Goldie girl," Colston chimes in, flashing his perpetual smirk. "I showed Shamu that meme you sent earlier and he did *not* get it."

"I told you he wouldn't," I laugh.

Sumner flips Colston off and then gestures to the guy standing beside him. "This is Trace." Ah, his other bestie. Colston's filled me in on the ongoing battle of which one of them is Sumner's number one best friend.

The new guy, Trace, has thick dark hair, a full blackwork tattoo sleeve, and he's currently smirking at me like he knows a secret I don't.

"Nice to meet you," Trace says, flashing a sharp grin that carries a dark, wild edge—completely different from Colston's easygoing vibe. "Sumner hasn't shut up about you."

Sumner doesn't even try to deny it. He just holds my gaze, completely unapologetic. "I haven't," he confirms.

Before I can figure out how to process the flush creeping up my neck, the heavy metal door of the stairwell bangs open again. A group of guys in leather vests walks out onto the roof—Andie's older brother, Jude, and a few guys from his motorcycle club who are always hanging around her garage downstairs.

I glance up at Sumner, expecting the new arrivals to catch his attention. Instead, he's watching me. He takes a half-step forward. He respects my stupid boundary by keeping his hands to himself, which I hate, but he gets close enough that his broad frame blocks the breeze, trapping me in his spicy, clean scent.

Before either of us can say anything, Scout pops up beside me and taps a neon-painted fingernail against Colston's chest.

"If it isn't Jenny," she says. "Come to lend us your muscles again?"

Colston looks down at her. "It's Colston."

"Sure it is." She shoves an empty plastic cup into his hand. "You're tall. Go grab the tequila off the top shelf."

He stares at the cup, then at her. "This is a shitty bribe. It’s empty."

"Get the bottle and you can fill it."

He rolls his eyes but follows her toward the bar.

Trace watches them go. "I'm getting a drink before she puts me to work, too."

He claps Sumner on the shoulder and heads after them, leaving us alone on the edge of the roof.

Sumner steps into my space. He's close enough that his arm brushes my bare shoulder. His gaze drops to my mouth for a split second before coming back up to mine. "I was wondering how long it would take for them to leave us alone."

"Way too long," I tell him, fighting the urge to lean into him. "They're basically a pack of feral dogs."

A slow, devastating smirk tugs at the corner of his mouth. "Good thing I don't scare easily."

I open my mouth, but before I can fire back, a fresh wave of people spills out from the stairwell. The music gets cranked up, and suddenly we're swallowed by the crowd. Tatum waves me over to help her grab more ice, completely bursting our private little bubble.

The party fills up fast now that Jude's crew and the rest of the people the other girls invited have shown up. People crowd around the bar and the seating area under the wooden pergola.

I circulate, hyping up Ellie’s outfit and laughing with Tatum, but my focus is completely hijacked. I know exactly where Sumner is at all times. He talks to Jude and Trace near the edge of the roof, but he stays close to my side of the party.

And he never takes his eyes off me.

I step up to the bar to grab a fresh sparkling water as sweat rolls down the back of my neck because it’s hot as shit and I’m melting. Glancing across the roof, I catch Sumner already looking at me. He takes a slow drink from his beer bottle, watching me over the rim like he’s mentally stripping this dress right off my body.

With his teeth.

My thighs press together on pure instinct. Between the pregnancy hormones and the way he’s looking at me, I’m basically a walking slip-and-slide. The roof is packed, but the twenty feet of space between us feels like absolute torture. I'm standing here pretending I have an ounce of self-

control left, while my brain is running a highlight reel of everything he did to me in that hotel room. I don't want to be friends right now. I want him to walk over here and bend me over this bar.

Before I can abandon my dignity and go beg him for what I really want, a wall of leather and ink steps right into my line of sight, completely ruining my view.

Some biker leans an elbow on the bar next to me, holding out a plastic cup filled with amber liquid and ice. He’s fine-looking, I guess, but he’s no Sumner.

"You look thirsty," he says, flashing a cocky grin.

"I'm good," I say, lifting my sparkling water to prove the point.

He doesn't take the hint. He steps closer, invading my personal space. "Water? Come on," he says, his gaze dropping to my mesh dress. "You're way too hot to be stone-cold sober on a Friday night. Let me get you a real drink."

Before I get the chance to tell him to fuck off, a large, warm hand flattens against the almost-bare skin of my stomach. I’d know that touch anywhere.

Sumner steps right up behind me, plastering my back to his front. When I tilt my head back to look at him, he’s completely calm on the outside, but I can feel the rigid tension vibrating through his body. There’s a violent storm brewing right underneath his surface that tells me it wouldn't take much for him to completely go off.

"She's drinking water because she's pregnant with my baby," Sumner says. His voice is a low, even drawl, but the look in his eyes is absolutely murderous. He stares the guy down, looking like he's just begging this fucker to give him a reason to snap.

The guy blinks, his cocky grin faltering. He looks at Sumner's size, looks at the arm wrapped around me, and takes a slow step backward. "Right. My bad, man. Congratulations."

The guy turns and walks away.

But Sumner doesn’t drop his arm. Instead, his fingers flex, gripping me tighter and digging in. I hope they leave bruises behind that I can look at later.

I open my mouth to tell him that I’m a big girl who can handle things on her own, but the words die in my throat when I look up at him. The

feminism leaves my body. Just floats right up out of here because, respectfully, holy fuck, the way he’s looking at me.

The calm facade he just used on that biker is completely gone. His jaw is rigid, and the look he’s pinning me with is so sharp and lethal I actually forget how to breathe. The man looks like he's about to tear something apart.

My stomach does a terrifying, weightless free-fall. A hot flush blooms across my chest, sinking straight down, down, down all the way to my toes. My entire body leans back into him, and how the hell am I supposed to resist?

He reaches out, plucks the cold can of sparkling water right out of my hand, and sets it onto the bar. His fingers wrap around my wrist, firm and inescapable.

"Sumner—" I start, but he’s already moving.

He pulls me away from the string lights and the crowd, dragging me straight toward the stairs.

He yanks the door open and pulls me into the dim concrete landing. A blast of air conditioning hits my flushed skin, but it doesn't even make a dent in the absolute meltdown happening inside my body. The heavy metal door slams shut behind us, cutting off the music and the party completely. We’re trapped in the quiet dark, totally alone.

I stare up at him, my pulse going bananas, and realize exactly how much trouble I'm in.

Because if he touches me right now, I don’t think I’m strong enough to resist.

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CHAPTER 21
SUMNER

I BACK HER against the exposed brick wall, planting my hands on either side of her head to cage her in. My chest brushes hers with every breath I take. The cold air blasting from the vent overhead does nothing to cool my blood. All I can smell is the sweet scent of sweat on her skin, and my muscles shake with the effort to not lick it off.

Goldie’s eyes are wide in the dim light, her lips parted as her hands hover in the narrow space between us—like she can't decide whether to shove me away or grab on and pull me closer. The frantic beat of her heart thumps against my chest. I step in, crowding her against the wall until her hips press right into where I'm rock hard behind my zipper.

I'm pretty sure she wants this. I see the way she looks at me sometimes, the way she reacts when my skin brushes against hers. It makes me think she wants me to stop holding back and cross the line right here, right now. But she hasn’t said it, and not knowing for sure is driving me out of my fucking mind.

"Tell me to break the rules, Goldie," I say, my voice dropping into the tiny bit of space between us.

I lower my head, resting my forehead against hers, and close my eyes. I have to talk myself down, fighting to keep myself in check when I’m dying inside with how much I want her.

"Say the word," I murmur, my mouth hovering a fraction of an inch from hers. "Three little letters. Tell me, and I'll kiss you until you forget why you ever told me no."

She shivers. Her hands finally grab the front of my shirt, holding on tight. She tilts her chin up, chasing my mouth, her breath warm against my lips.

I wait for the yes. I want it so goddamn bad.

But it never comes.

Instead, when I open my eyes and look at her, I see it—the tiny flicker of panic that flashes across her face. It’s the sheer terror of letting someone past her armor. She wants me to take the choice out of her hands so she can avoid giving herself to this, avoid admitting she wants *us*. Because if I break the rules, she can blame me when the fallout hits and she regrets it tomorrow.

It takes every ounce of self-preservation I have left, because knowing she'd regret me in the morning would fucking break me, but I force myself to step back.

I drop my hands from the wall and put a couple of feet of space between us. Stepping away from her goes against every instinct I have, leaving my chest tight and my hands empty.

Goldie blinks, her hands falling to her sides. Her chest rises and falls fast. "Sumner?"

"I could kiss you right now," I tell her, my voice tight. "I could hike up your dress and fuck you right here against the wall, and I think you'd let me. But tomorrow morning, you'd wake up regretting it. You'd use it as an excuse to build your walls ten feet higher and lock me out because I crossed the line."

She stares at me, her throat working. She opens her mouth to argue, but nothing comes out.

"You've spent your whole life expecting the men in your life to let you down," I say, keeping my gaze locked on hers. "Your dad taking off. Grant cheating. You're just waiting for the other shoe to drop. You're waiting for me to decide this is too much work, or for me to get bored and leave. So you use these rules to keep me at arm's length to protect yourself."

She crosses her arms under her chest, her fingernails digging into her own skin. "I made those rules because we're having a baby, and I can't afford to ruin our co-parenting relationship. Plus, you're technically still married and you're currently sharing a bed with Colston every night. Our lives are a complete mess right now."

"That was a good excuse a month ago," I counter. "But you're still hiding behind it. You're using the mess to push me away because you're convinced I'm not going to stick around."

She flinches, looking away like I just slapped her.

"I'm not a tourist in your life, Goldie," I tell her. "I'm not passing through. I meant it when I told your mom I was in this for good. I want to wake up next to you. I want to rub your feet after you've been standing in the studio all day. I want to make you ice cream, and watch you hype up your friends, and take every ounce of that loud, unapologetic chaos you bring into a room, because it's the best goddamn part of my day. I want the whole thing."

A shaky breath escapes her lips. She leans her head back against the brick, looking at me like she doesn't know what to do with everything I just laid out for her.

"But I'm not going to force my way in," I tell her, fighting the urge to pull her right back against me. "I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere. But I'm not going to be a mistake you blame on a weak moment. When we cross that line, you have to be the one to step over it. You have to look me in the eye and make the choice."

I take one last look at her, drinking in the flush on her chest and the slight tremble of her bottom lip. Fuck, she’s so beautiful it’s hard to take.

She lets out a shaky breath, her arms wrapping tight around her middle. She usually has a sarcastic joke or a quick comeback ready to go, but right now, she just looks stripped bare. "It's not that easy, Sumner," she whispers.

"I know," I tell her, giving in to the urge to brush her hair back from her face. “But you’re brave, Goldie. I believe in you.” I force myself to turn toward the door. "I'll be out by the bar. Take your time. Come back out whenever you're ready."

I grab the handle and shove it open. The muggy air coats my skin, followed by the loud chatter of the crowd. After being in the cool dark, it’s a little overwhelming. I step outside anyway, letting the door swing shut behind me, leaving her alone to figure out what she wants.

As much as I fucking hate it.

My hands are shaking, and sweat beads along my forehead. Walking away from her when she looks so lost feels like it just took years off my goddamn life.

I head straight toward the makeshift bar so I don’t go back inside and take everything I said back.

Trace is leaning against the wood, holding two fresh beers. He takes one look at my face, and his smirk vanishes. He hands me a bottle. “Jesus. You look like you need this way more than I do. Where is she?"

"Inside," I say, twisting the cap off the beer and taking a long pull.

Colston steps up next to Trace, his grin dropping. "Did you piss off my Goldie girl? Because I love you, man, but I'll absolutely take her side."

"I don’t know. I hope not," I grit out, leaning my elbows on the bar and staring a hole into the metal door across the roof. "Just leave it."

They exchange a look, but for once, they both have the sense to shut up.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

I post up at the edge of the bar for the rest of the night. Colston keeps sliding me fresh beers, and by the time I finish the third one, a warm buzz finally settles over my brain. It dulls the sharpest edge of my frustration, which is the only reason I manage to keep my boots glued to the floor instead of doing something stupid.

I know the exact second Goldie steps back onto the roof. I track her through the crowd, but she doesn't look my way once. It stings more than I want to admit. I hate it. I have no idea where we stand after what I said in the stairwell, but this shitty uncertainty between us doesn’t change a damn thing. I still want her. I'm pretty sure I always will.

She heads straight for Ellie and Scout, putting on a bright smile that I know is fake.

Watching her keep her distance tests every limit I have. I grip the neck of my beer bottle just to give my hands something to do, fighting the urge to cross the roof and carry her right back into the building where we can be alone and I can...

What, though?

What can I do?

Like I told her, the ball’s in her court at this point. I’m not about to force myself on her.

Trace and Colston stand on either side of me, running interference so I don't have to make small talk while I try to hold my shit together. They spend the next hour talking shit about the base's new navigation software, arguing over college football prospects, and placing bets on whether Trace's radar rig could survive a direct hit from an EF4 tornado.

Across the roof, Goldie throws her head back and laughs at something Tatum says. The bright pink of her fuckhot bikini flashes through the sheer black dress when she moves, keeping my attention locked right on her and my dick at half-mast. I scrape my thumbnail through the wet paper label on my beer bottle, shredding it to give my hands something to do. I want to be the one making her laugh. I want to be standing next to her. But I hold my ground. I promised I wouldn't push, and I'm a man of my goddamn word.

I don’t know why I’m still here other than I just want to be where she is.

By the time the party finally winds down, the crowd thins out. I'm tossing my empty bottle into the recycling bin when Goldie walks over to the bar. The fake smile she’s been wearing all night is gone, leaving her looking soft and a little exhausted.

"Will you walk me down?" she asks quietly.

"Yeah, of course," I say immediately.

Since I've had a few beers, I toss Colston my keys. He and Trace head straight for my truck to get the AC going, arguing about where to get food on the way home. Colston’s trying to convince Trace to hit up a late-night taco stand so he can prove he can eat their ghost pepper salsa without crying, and Trace is starting to cave.

I walk Goldie to her SUV, slapping a mosquito off my neck in the dark. She hits the unlock button on her key fob, and the headlights flash.

She pulls her car door open, but she doesn't get in right away. She turns to face me. Without saying a word, she steps into my space and wraps her arms around my waist, hugging me tight.

I don't hesitate. My arms come right up to hold her, pulling her flush against my chest. I bury my face in her hair, breathing her in.

And then I finally exhale.

"Don't give up on me," she whispers against my chest.

I tighten my grip on her. "Never," I tell her. "I told you I'm not walking away. Take all the time you need."

She pulls back, giving me a small, genuine smile.

"Text me when you get home so I know you made it," I say.

"I will."

Across the lot, the headlights of my truck flick on. Colston rolls down the driver's side window. "Night, Goldie girl!"

She laughs, waving at him. "Night, Jenny! Nice to meet you, Trace!"

Trace leans forward from the backseat to give her a two-finger salute.

She climbs into the driver's seat and shuts the door. I step back, watching her start the engine and pull out onto the street.

I walk over to the truck and pull the passenger door open.

Trace shakes his head from the back row. "Dude. I've known you a decade and I've never seen you this gone over somebody."

"Shut up," I tell him, climbing into the shotgun seat and pulling the door shut.

Trace can talk shit all he wants. Giving her space tonight was the right call, and the way she came back to me just proved it. She wants me just as much as I want her. She just needs the time to get past the toxic shit in her head.

But going in the opposite direction while she drives home alone is a tough pill to swallow. I want to be the one taking her home. I want to wake up next to her tomorrow and be there for every minute of this pregnancy, wrapped up in all that loud, gorgeous fire she brings to everything she does. Forcing myself to keep my distance when the physical pull between us is this strong is a bitch, but I'll do it for as long as she needs.

When she finally lets me all the way in, I already know it's going to be worth every second of the wait.

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CHAPTER 22
GOLDIE

Twelve Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a plum.

APRIL IN FLORIDA feels like walking through a hot, wet mouth, and not in the fun, sexy way. RIP my central AC that died sometime before I woke up this morning. We had a good run, her and me.

But living down here means a working AC is a must. And being knocked up makes this so unacceptable that I rage ate an entire pint of ice cream Sumner left in my freezer while stripping down to a T-shirt and underwear and planting my ass on the kitchen counter in front of a shitty box fan I dug out of the garage.

The boob sweat is no joke. Don't even get me started on the thigh chafing.

But honestly? The broken AC isn't the only reason I'm a sticky, overheated mess right now. My pregnancy hormones are completely out of control. I've been horny to the point of rage-y distraction for the last few weeks, but your girl's held strong. Between the heat and my current state of desperation, I'm so wet on a daily basis I could climb the walls *Poltergeist*-style.

It really doesn't help that Sumner is currently shoved halfway into the utility closet off the kitchen, wrestling with my HVAC unit. I texted Colston complaining about the heat an hour ago, fully expecting my text-bestie to

just validate my misery and maybe send a funny meme. Instead, the traitor snitched to Sumner. I was in the middle of Googling local repair companies when my baby daddy walked through my front door wearing worn-in jeans and an actual fucking *tool belt* slung low over his hips.

Sploosh.

Someone call OSHA because this man is a total workplace hazard. I bite my lip and tilt my head to the side to get a better view and change up the angle a little.

His white T-shirt is completely soaked in sweat to the point it's see-through. The cotton clings to every single ridge of his back muscles as he wrenches a bolt loose. I should get an award for watching him work and not trying to mount him like a mechanical bull.

We've spent the last month dancing around each other, playing by my stupid rules that I'm starting to wish I'd never set. After he laid all his cards on the table that night at the party, I decided it was time to deal with my shit and started seeing a therapist. I was so sick of my own toxic baggage standing in the way, and I knew if I didn't get my head straight, I was going to ruin this thing between him and me before it ever really had a chance to start.

And Sumner? He's been so, so patient. He comes over, he cooks, he fixes things, and he doesn't try to touch me. Oh, I can tell he wants to, but he never crosses the line.

He does so much for me, and he's never once complained or acted like he was doing me a favor. I think acts of service might be his love language.

Last week, he somehow recreated my favorite Seattle-style teriyaki when I had a craving, and it was *magical*. He dropped it off at the studio, then left before I could even offer him a bite so I didn't have to share. He rubs my feet when they swell. He listens to my mom ramble on FaceTime. He does everything he promised he would do, showing up for me day after day, and he hasn't pushed my boundaries once.

Every time he does something reliable and steady, it breaks apart a little of my resolve. My therapist told me last week that I was confusing self-protection with self-sabotage. She pointed out that I've spent my whole life expecting to be let down or treated like a burden, so I'm pushing away the one guy who actually steps up to carry the weight without making me feel like an inconvenience.

That realization hit me hard. I’m still a little scared to take the leap, but the idea of letting him slip away is way worse. I'm ready. I want this. I want *him*. I want to take the jump and feel like I'm finally coming home because that’s how being around Sumner feels.

Like home.

Plus, keeping my hands to myself for this long is turning me into an absolute feral menace.

“Goldie, I’m dying in here,” Sumner calls out over the hum of the fan. “Have a little mercy and point that thing this way before I melt onto your floor.”

I lift my hair off the back of my neck and let the air hit the sweat underneath. “But I need it.”

“So do I.”

I look toward the utility closet, where all I can see is one denim-clad leg and the edge of his tool belt. He’s been wedged in there fixing my AC while I sit on the counter contributing absolutely nothing, so I suppose letting him die of heatstroke would be shitty of me.

“Fine. You should probably take a hydration break anyway.” I hop down and fill one of my painted vintage glasses with ice and water. By the time Sumner backs out of the closet and straightens, his shirt is soaked through, and sweat is running down the side of his face.

I hold the cup out to him. “Drink.”

He takes it without arguing and steps directly into the path of the fan.

Which gives me a truly spectacular view while he tips his head back and drains half the glass. His throat bobs as he drinks, and I want to bite it.

This is some bodice-ripper shit right here, and I don’t know if it’s drool running down my chin or sweat, but *holy shitballs.*

His throat works with every swallow, and I watch, completely rapt. Like, I don’t think I could tear my eyes away even if I wanted to.

Eventually I shake myself out of it and climb back onto the counter. “Okay, fan hog. Move.”

Sumner lowers the glass and looks at me over the rim. “I thought we were sharing.”

“You’re six-three. There’s nothing left to share when you stand directly in front of it.”

His mouth twitches. “Well, we can’t have that.”

He sets the cup beside me, still full of melting ice, then shifts the fan enough that the air blows across both of us.

Except now he’s standing between my knees.

Which is significantly worse for my body temperature.

A drop of sweat rolls down his temple, tracing a path over the sharp lines of his face before disappearing into the hollow of his throat. Is it weird that I want to lick it? My mouth actually waters.

Then he grabs the hem of his soaked T-shirt and yanks it up to wipe his face.

Sweet baby Jesus. Every single coherent thought I have completely *poofs* out of my head. The man has abs for days, glistening with sweat, with that deep V of muscle disappearing right into the heavy leather of his tool belt. It's a miracle I don't slide right off the counter as I stare, hypnotized by the flex of his stomach.

He drops the shirt, leaving a streak of dust across his cheek. "I'm trying to get your AC running so you don't have to sleep in an oven tonight," he says, blowing out a rough exhale. "Work with me here."

"You brought this on yourself," I argue, dragging the back of my hand across my collarbone to wipe away a trickle of my own sweat.

I know I'm being a brat, but pushing his buttons is too much fun. I'm feeling ornery, and a month's worth of unreleased sexual frustration is making me want to pick a fight just to get a reaction out of him.

“I was going to hire a professional,” I tell him, lifting my chin. “You could be all cuddled up with Colston right now in his nice air-conditioned condo.”

“I’m faster than a professional, and I don’t charge an after-hours emergency fee.” He slides the wrench into one of the leather loops on his belt.

He also ignores my Colston comment.

“Still could’ve saved yourself all this.” I gesture at his sweat-soaked shirt, then immediately regret drawing my own attention back to it because holy abs.

Sumner catches me staring.

His mouth tips up at one corner as he sets one hand on the counter beside my hip. He’s already standing between my knees so we can both get some of the fan, but suddenly I’m a lot less interested in the air blowing across my sweaty skin.

Because now he’s looking at me.

Really looking.

And fuck me, he knows.

Between thirsting over him drinking ice water, staring at his stomach every time his shirt rides up, and wondering what sweat tastes like straight off his skin, there’s no hiding that I want to jump his bones.

Um, bone?

Anyway, Sumner leans in a little closer, his other hand coming down beside my opposite hip. He still doesn’t crowd me all the way or put his hands on me, but there’s barely any space left between us.

The fan pushes damp strands of hair across my cheek. His shirt is plastered to his chest. The glass of half-melted ice sits beside my thigh.

And all I can think about is putting my hands on him—or him putting his hands on me.

He shifts his weight, and one of his hands leaves the counter. His rough thumb brushes the bare skin on the outside of my thigh, slow enough that every nerve ending in my body lights up.

A knowing smirk tips the corner of his mouth.

“You want something?” His gaze drops to my mouth before dragging back up to meet my eyes. “You know all you have to do is ask.”

There it is.

The same choice he gave me before. The one I couldn’t make when he had me backed against that wall and all I had to do was tell him to break my stupid rules.

He waited then.

He’s waiting now.

Except this time, I already know my answer.

I feel the rough scrape of his calloused thumb all over my body in shivers and tingles. There’s a throbbing between my thighs that’s almost painful because of the damn hormones from the baby he put inside me. And now only he can fix what he’s done.

With his dick.

I’m not strong enough to hold back the whimper that falls out of my mouth when that teasing thumb of his climbs a little higher.

The smug look on his face is the match struck and thrown.

Fuck it.

I reach out, grab a fistful of his sweat-soaked T-shirt, and yank him forward.

He stumbles a half-step closer, closing that last fraction of space between us. The thick leather of his tool belt bumps against the edge of the counter. Before he can even process the movement, I slide my hand around the back of his neck and drag his mouth down to mine.

It’s messy, wet, and totally desperate. Our teeth clack together as we wrestle for control, but it only lasts about two seconds. The moment his tongue sweeps past my lips, the fight just drains right out of me. I melt backward, opening up and letting him take over. He tastes like salt and everything I’ve been waiting for. For a fraction of a second, he freezes in shock, but then a rough groan rumbles out of his chest.

His hands dig into my hips, hauling me against him as his tongue pushes deeper into my mouth. I drag my fingers up the back of his neck and scrape my nails over the velvety fuzz of his hair, kissing him back and taking months of frustration out on his body.

He fumbles at his waist, and the leather tool belt hits the floor with a loud bang.

Sumner breaks the kiss just enough to look me in the eye. He’s breathing hard, his chest rising and falling against mine. His lips are shiny from our kiss, and his eyes are almost black. "Are you sure?" he asks, and he almost sounds like he’s in pain.

"I swear to god, if your dick isn't inside me in the next five seconds, I'm going to shove you on the floor and do it myself," I tell him, my hands sliding down to grip his sides. “Stop being such a good guy and fuck me like a bad one.”

He lets out a harsh, jagged breath, grabs the hem of my oversized T-shirt, and pulls it over my head.

The shirt barely clears my arms before his gaze catches on the glass beside my hip.

Before I realize what he’s doing, he reaches into it and fishes out one of the ice cubes.

“What are you—”

The ice touches the base of my throat, and I gasp.

“Better?” he asks.

I shiver as a drop of freezing water drips down my body. “You’re trying to make me lose my fucking mind.”

His grin is slow and filthy. “That’s the plan.”

He drags the ice down the center of my chest, leaving a cold trail of water over skin that was burning up thirty seconds ago. The fan catches the wet path and sends goosebumps racing across my body.

Holy shit.

Sumner watches every single one of them appear.

“You like that.”

I shiver again, my thighs tightening around his hips. “Yeah. Don’t stop.”

His eyes stay on mine as he drags the ice lower and circles one nipple before moving across to the other. Cold shoots through me hard enough that my legs clamp tighter around his hips, and his gaze drops to where I’m holding him between my thighs.

I grab his wrist before he can pull away, then steal the melting cube from his fingers.

His eyebrows lift.

“My turn.”

I drag it down the side of his neck then lift his shirt, rubbing it over his chest, watching water cut through the sweat on his skin. He sucks in a breath when I run it slowly over his stomach.

“Still hot?” I ask.

“You’re not helping.”

I laugh as the last of the cube melts between my fingers. I wipe my wet hand over his stomach and drop his shirt. Then I grab the back of his neck and pull his mouth down to mine again.

The sound he makes when he kisses me is straight out of the best sex dream I’ve ever had.

His hands slide over my bare skin, hot against the cold water still streaking my chest. One palm closes around my breast while the other moves down between my thighs. Instead of wasting time taking off my underwear, his fingers hook the crotch and tug the wet fabric aside. He slides two fingers into me, and I groan into his mouth.

My hands drop to his waist. I fight the metal button on his jeans until it pops loose, then yank the zipper down while we kiss sloppy and hard. Reaching past his boxers, I pull his thick, hot cock free. My fingers wrap around the length, getting sticky with pre-cum. I hook my legs around his waist and cross my ankles behind his back, dragging him as close as physically possible.

I'm dripping wet and so ready for him.

Sumner pulls his fingers out of me and grips my hips, lining himself up before he pushes forward. He sinks just the tip into me, and it’s not even close to enough, but it’s already so good. I’ve missed this. No one’s ever felt like he does, and the memory of that night in the hotel has nothing on the real thing.

Even just a fraction of an inch feels so right. Like everything I’ve been starving for is finally happening. I throw my head back, and a loud, messy moan I’ve never heard myself make comes out of me. The hard edge of the counter bites into the back of my thighs while I try to force him deeper with my legs.

He stops and holds himself still, buried just an inch inside me while he pants for air and his hips move the tiniest bit like he can’t help himself. But I don't want to wait. I want him deep and I want him to *move*.

"Sumner," I whine, shifting my hips forward to try and take more of him.

His fingers dig into my hips, holding me in place so I can't do anything but take whatever he gives me. One of his hands slides up to palm my boob. He rubs his thumb hard over my nipple, and I shudder, clenching tight around the tip of his cock.

"Look at you," he murmurs, watching me shake. "So wet you're leaving a puddle on this counter."

"It's your fault," I gasp, my nails digging into the damp cotton of his shirt at his waist.

A slow, arrogant smirk tilts up the corner of his mouth. "I know. My baby is making you crazy, isn't it? Flooding your body with all these hormones just so you'd let me back inside you."

"Yes," I beg. "Get your dick in me *now*, Maverick."

He rocks his hips, sliding in another fraction of an inch before pulling back, teasing me with the blunt head of his dick. "Tell me you want me to fill you up."

"I want you to fill me up," I say, my nails biting into his back. "I want everything."

He pulls back and drives in hard, burying himself all the way, and I cry out and pulse around him because I’m already on the verge of coming.

“Fuck,” he grinds out as he gets lost in this thing between us and fucks me in a fast, relentless rhythm. "I missed this pussy."

I grip the edge of the counter, my hips rolling to meet every hard thrust. He hits deep, so deep I swear I can feel him in my fucking soul. Sweat drips down my chest as his hand on my breast squeezes tight before sliding up to grip my throat, his thumb pressing right under my jaw so I'm forced to meet his eyes.

"You feel that?" he asks. "You're so tight I can barely move. I can feel you squeezing me."

I'm panting now, my thighs shaking as I try to hold on to the edge of the counter so I don't get fucked right off it. The pressure in my belly is building, winding so tight I can't breathe. I'm so close I can taste it.

A choked sound gets trapped in my throat when he presses a little harder on my windpipe. My nails dig into his forearm, but I don't push him off. I just hold on as my pussy throbs around his dick. "Sumner..."

"Give it to me, baby," he rasps. "Come all over my cock and take what you need."

That's all it takes. My back arches off the counter. I throw my head back and let go, the orgasm ripping through me in a rush of heat and sparks. My legs tighten around his waist, my body shaking as I come hard around him.

He curses, dropping his forehead against mine. His hips slam forward one last time, and he groans as he fills me up just like he promised.

When it's over, I'm still shaking. He releases my throat and wraps his fingers around the back of my neck instead, supporting my weight and holding me tight against him as we both catch our breath. He’s still hard inside of me as his hands slide over my skin, tracing my waist before moving across my belly and then up my spine like he can’t stop touching me now that he’s finally allowed.

I press my face into his shoulder, breathing in the warm, salty scent of him as my brain comes back to life. I know I finally took the leap, and I know I'm probably going to freak out about it later, but right now, I don't care. All I can think about is how good it felt. How right. How I want to do it again.

And again.

And again.

Sumner pulls back just enough to kiss my temple, his lips lingering there for a second. "We're never going back to just friends," he murmurs against my skin, his voice raspy and deep.

I let out a breathless laugh and slide my arms around his neck. "Good. I didn't want to be your friend anyway."

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CHAPTER 23
SUMNER

GOLDIE STAYS WRAPPED around me while we both catch our breath, her arms locked behind my neck and her ankles crossed at my lower back.

My dick is still buried inside her, softening while her pussy tightens around me in small aftershocks. The fan on the counter is aimed in our direction, but all it's doing is moving hot air around the kitchen.

I press my face into her damp neck and breathe her in.

Fuck, I missed this.

I've thought about getting back inside her every day since the hotel. I've replayed that night so many times I could probably list every sound she made in order, but this was better. This time she knew exactly who I was. She looked me in the eye and chose this.

Chose me.

Having her pregnant with my baby and full of my cum hits every fucked-up button I have. I wish I could get her pregnant all over again. My dick twitches inside of her at the thought.

My hands tighten, holding her against me while my body slowly comes down from the high.

Goldie's grip loosens. She stays wrapped around me, her fingers dragging slowly over the back of my neck while her breathing settles against my shoulder.

I wait for her to say something, but I give her room to breathe.

"So," she finally says.

“So.”

“That just happened.”

“Yeah.”

She takes one hand from behind my neck to push her glasses up her nose. They’re a little fogged up and it’s fucking cute. Her other arm stays wrapped around me, keeping our sweat-slicked bodies pressed together.

“I don’t regret it.”

“Good.”

Her eyebrows lift. “That’s all you’ve got?”

I tighten my grip on her when she shifts against me. “My brain’s not really functioning right now. Give me a minute.”

She laughs, dropping her forehead against my shoulder. Her laugh takes the pressure out of the moment.

I press my mouth to her damp hair and hold her while our breathing slows. By the time she shifts again, I’ve softened enough that my cock slips free. We both shudder as we separate, and I look down between her legs. A warm streak of my cum drips out of her onto the floor.

Goldie loosens her legs but keeps them hooked around me. Her cheek stays against my shoulder, and her fingers drift lazily over the short hair at the back of my head.

“I still don’t know what we’re doing,” she says quietly.

I pull back enough to see her face. “We don’t have to figure it out right now.”

Her eyes search mine. “And you’re okay with that?”

“I know where I stand.” I run my thumb over the warm skin above her hip. “And I know what I want. Take whatever time you need with the rest. Just know I’m yours.”

She goes still against me.

“You make that sound really simple.”

“It is for me.”

She blinks and looks down between us for a second before a small smile pulls at her lips. “Show-off.”

I slide my hand behind her neck and kiss her.

She opens for me, tightening her arms around my shoulders. I hold her close and take my time with her mouth until she starts smiling against mine.

“I seriously need a shower,” she murmurs.

“I need to finish your AC.”

“Yes, you do.”

She pulls her underwear back into place, then uncrosses her ankles and lowers her legs. I put my hands on her hips while she slides off the island, my fingertips skimming across her stomach on the way down.

Her legs wobble when her feet hit the floor, and she catches herself by grabbing my biceps.

“Whoa.”

I steady her. “Want me to carry you?”

She takes a second, shifts her weight from one foot to the other, then looks up at me. “Tempting.”

My hands slide around her waist. “That sounded like a yes.”

She laughs and gives my chest a shove. “I can walk.”

She heads down the hallway toward the bathroom, naked except for the scrap of fabric between her legs. My eyes stay glued to her until she disappears through the doorway.

Jesus Christ.

Apparently one orgasm barely took the edge off because my dick twitches all over again.

Following her sounds a hell of a lot better than crawling back into that oven-like utility closet, especially when I know she’s about to get slippery and wet. The kitchen is still hot enough to make sweat roll down my spine, though, and she’ll be miserable all over again the second she gets out if I don’t fix it.

That gives me plenty of motivation to finish fast.

I tuck my dick back into my underwear, fasten my jeans, and buckle the tool belt around my waist again. I disinfect the counter and the floor, then I get back into the closet and finish clearing the clog from the condensate line. I reconnect the section I opened, secure the access panel, restore power, and set the thermostat back to cool.

The air handler starts up. I wait under the kitchen vent as the air blowing against my skin gradually turns colder.

There we go.

I give the system long enough to make sure it keeps running, then switch off the box fan. Cool air is already starting to replace the thick heat in the kitchen.

I unbuckle the tool belt and leave it on the counter, yank my soaked shirt over my head, and head down the hall.

Goldie’s bathroom is almost as big as Colston’s bedroom, with a deep soaking tub under the windows and a walk-in shower enclosed in glass on the other side of the room.

She’s behind the glass with her back to me, rinsing shampoo from her hair.

I stop in the doorway and take my time watching her. Her dark hair hangs wet down the center of her back while water runs over her shoulders and spine, catching on the fullness of her ass before streaming down her thick thighs. She tips her head back beneath the spray, completely comfortable standing there naked, and all I can think about is getting my hands on her again.

Fuck, she’s gorgeous.

She catches me staring when she looks over her shoulder. “You planning to stand there all day?”

“I was enjoying the view.”

Her eyes drag slowly down my body. “You can enjoy it from in here.”

That’s all the invitation I need.

I toe off my sneakers, strip out of my jeans and boxers, and open the shower door.

The water is cool enough to feel fucking incredible against my overheated skin. Goldie shifts forward to give me room, and I step in behind her, sliding my arms around her waist.

She settles back against my chest.

My hand moves over her stomach almost on instinct.

Her belly still feels mostly the same beneath my palm, but somewhere under my hand is this tiny person we made.

Our kid.

I wonder if they’ll have Goldie’s laugh or wild streak. What they’ll be obsessed with when they’re five. Whether they’ll think flying into hurricanes is the coolest job in the world or tell everyone their dad is a complete fucking idiot.

The thought makes me smile against the side of her head.

Goldie covers my hand with hers, threading her fingers through mine over her stomach.

For a few seconds, we just stand under the water.

Then she turns in my arms and kisses me.

It catches me off guard for half a second because I've spent months thinking through every touch before I made it, making sure I stayed on the right side of whatever boundary she needed from me. Now she can turn around and kiss me because she wants to, and I get to kiss her back.

Finally.

I cup the side of her face and deepen the kiss. Her hands roam over my chest and stomach while my free hand slides down her back and grabs a handful of her ass. She presses closer when I squeeze, and fuck, I want my hands everywhere.

She kisses me harder, dragging her nails lightly over my stomach before sliding her hands around my sides to my back. I pull her tighter and take my time with her mouth.

We keep getting distracted while we shower. I wash her back. She runs soapy hands over my chest. I kiss her while she rinses her hair, and she backs me into the tile when I'm supposed to be washing mine.

My cock takes its time recovering, but somewhere along the way it starts filling again.

By the time we're both rinsed off, I'm hard against her stomach.

Goldie reaches for a towel, then glances down between us.

"There he is."

I laugh. "He lives to serve."

She gives me a look while she takes the towel from the rack. "Good, because I have plans for him."

Well, shit.

I grab a towel of my own. "Lead the way."

She takes my hand and leads me out of the bathroom and into her bedroom before she pushes me onto the bed.

The second time takes longer. Goldie climbs on top, kisses me whenever she damn well feels like it, and makes good on every one of those plans she had for my dick.

By the time we're done, the AC has cooled the bedroom, and Goldie drops onto my chest, breathing hard. I wrap an arm around her and kiss the side of her head.

Her stomach growls, loud enough that I feel it.

Goldie lifts her head. We both look down at her stomach right before it does it again.

She sighs. "Well, that's not exactly sexy."

I laugh, and she hits me with the big browns.

“But seriously, I need food.”

Goldie pushes herself upright and lifts off me. She makes a face when my cum starts dripping out of her, then drops dramatically onto her back with one arm flung over her eyes.

“Right now or I might die.” She peeks out at me. “Do you want me to die, Sumner?”

I sit up beside her and drop a quick kiss to her lips. “So demanding.”

Her stomach growls again.

She points at it. “Take it up with your child.”

“Ganging up on me already?”

Her arm drops, and she smirks up at me. “You should probably get used to it.”

I grin and lean over to kiss her again because I can’t get enough.

She kisses me back, then groans and pushes herself off the mattress. “And now I have to pee. Sex is bullshit. You get to lie there feeling all relaxed while I have to waddle to the bathroom to make sure I don’t get a UTI.”

“Yeah, you definitely got the shitty end of that deal.”

She pauses on her way to the bathroom and looks back at me. “If you want to make it up to me, feed me.”

“Done.”

She disappears through the bathroom door, and I fall back against the pillows for a second, staring up at the ceiling with a stupid fucking smile on my face.

A few hours ago, I was still waiting for her to decide if she wanted this.

Now I know.

Whatever the hell comes next, we’re finally doing it together.

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CHAPTER 24
GOLDIE

Fourteen Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a peach.

I TURN sideways in front of the full-length mirror attached to my closet door and smooth both hands over my stomach.

Well, shit.

That is *definitely* a baby bump. Sometime over the last two weeks, it popped out.

I've had a soft lower belly for my entire adult life, and I happen to like it. I've spent enough years photographing naked women to know stomachs are supposed to have some squish to them, along with thighs that spread when you sit down and boobs that occasionally need to be wrestled into a bra that looked a hell of a lot cuter on the model.

This is different.

The curve pushing out above the waistband of my underwear is firm and round, changing the shape of my body enough that I know the fitted black knit dress I picked for tonight is going to fit differently than it did the last time I wore it.

I knew this was coming. Obviously. There have been positive pregnancy tests, blood draws, doctor appointments, and enough pregnancy apps and weekly update emails that I could probably give a moderately convincing lecture on fetal development at this point. Sumner reads the articles too,

although he pretends he doesn’t whenever I catch him knowing something suspiciously specific about cervical changes or what size fruit the baby currently resembles.

Which is a peach, in case you were wondering.

But this is the first time I’ve looked in the mirror and thought, *Oh. There you are.*

I turn a little farther, studying my reflection from the side. My bra leaves the tattoos along my ribs exposed, but my attention keeps pulling back to the small round swell beneath them.

“Look at you,” I murmur, rubbing my palm over it.

The bathroom door opens behind me, and Sumner steps into the bedroom, dragging a towel over his head. He showered while I finished getting ready, but I pout a little because he’s already halfway dressed.

My eyes drop to the strip of skin disappearing beneath the open waistband of his jeans.

He lowers the towel and sees where I’m looking, amusement flashing across his face. Then his attention drops to my stomach.

Everything about him changes.

The teasing disappears as he lets the towel fall onto the end of my bed and comes up behind me. I watch him in the mirror, my pulse picking up because he’s looking at my stomach like it’s the most incredible thing he’s ever seen.

And fuck if that doesn’t make me feel a little incredible too.

His chest is warm and hard where it presses against my back, and his hands slide around me until both palms are spread over my bare stomach.

My breath catches.

It shouldn’t feel different when he touches me there. He’s put his hands on my stomach a thousand times already, usually while we’re tangled up in bed or while he’s trying to annoy me in the kitchen, but this time there’s something for him to hold. Something visible.

His baby.

Our baby.

His thumbs move over the small bump, and heat rolls low through me when his mouth parts slightly.

“Fuck,” he says under his breath.

I look at him in the mirror. “That good, huh?”

His eyes lift to mine for half a second before dropping right back down. “You’re showing.”

“I noticed.”

“No.” His hands tighten slightly around me, like he can’t help himself. “I mean, you’re actually fucking showing.”

The awe in his voice hits me straight in the feels.

Then he shifts behind me, and something considerably less innocent presses against my ass.

I blink.

Well.

Looks like awe gives Sumner a boner.

“Is this for me?” I push my ass back against him.

His eyes meet mine in the mirror, and there isn’t even a flicker of embarrassment on his face. “You’re standing here looking like this showing off the baby I put inside of you. What do you think?”

Oh.

The blunt possession in his voice sends heat straight between my legs.

His gaze drops to my stomach again, and one hand stays spread over it while the other slides up my side. His fingers hook over the top of my bra cup and pull it down, freeing my breast before his palm closes over it.

“God, Sumner.” I let my head fall back against his shoulder and relax into him while he plays with me.

His thumb drags over my nipple, and my whole body reacts at once. Heat flashes across my skin, my stomach tightens under his other hand, and I push back against him again without even thinking about it.

He drops his mouth to the side of my neck, and my eyes drift closed.

“Do you have any idea what this is doing to me?”

“We’re supposed to be at your dads’ house soon,” I remind him, even as I tilt my head farther to the side so he can keep kissing my neck.

“I know.”

His mouth moves lower, teeth grazing my shoulder, and another little rush of heat goes through me.

“Then maybe stop making it impossible for me to leave.”

A quiet laugh vibrates against my skin. “That sounds like a you problem.”

“Asshole.”

“You’re the one standing in front of me looking fucking edible.” His hand slides from my stomach to my hip. “I’m supposed to keep my hands to myself?”

“Yes.”

He hums. “Not happening.”

Then his fingers slip beneath the waistband of my underwear.

I grab his wrist, but the second his hand moves lower, my grip is more decorative than functional because mostly I’m just holding on for the ride. My thighs tense, my breath hitches, and every good intention I had about getting out the door disappears.

“Sumner.”

“My dads won’t give a shit if we’re late.”

I open my eyes and catch his in the mirror. His mouth is tipped into a devious grin, and there’s a look in his eyes that says he’s already decided we’re not leaving this bedroom anytime soon.

Yeah, there he is.

The reckless asshole underneath all that responsibility everyone spent years drilling into him.

“They’re going to know why we’re late.”

“So?”

His fingers find exactly what they’re looking for, stroking lightly across my clit, and pleasure punches through me. The breath I suck in comes back out shuddery.

His arm locks around me above the bump, holding me against his chest when my hips jerk into his hand. He rubs my clit with the kind of confidence that comes from knowing exactly how I like it, and within seconds I’m wet enough that pretending I want him to stop would be insulting to both of us.

Pregnancy hormones have turned me into a complete fucking mess. I can be perfectly functional one second; then Sumner takes his shirt off or bends over to get something out of the refrigerator, and suddenly I’m two seconds away from pulling his pants down and taking him for a ride right there in the kitchen.

“I’m supposed to make a good first impression on your dads,” I say, groaning.

His mouth brushes my ear. “You’re showing up pregnant with their grandbaby. That’s already guaranteed.”

“You seem pretty confident about that.”

“I am.”

He slides one finger inside me and curls it, and my next breath breaks into a whimper.

His teeth catch lightly at my neck, and I feel his grin against my skin. “That sounded real concerned about first impressions.”

“I hate you.”

“Sure you do.”

I grab his forearm and rock my hips into his hand, which probably isn’t selling the whole *I hate you* thing.

He does it again, hitting the same spot while his palm rubs against my clit, and I bite down on my lip as another shaky sound escapes me.

Then he pulls his hand away.

Before I can decide whether I’m pissed about that, he hooks his thumbs into the waistband of my underwear. The fingers that were inside me a second ago slide against my hip, leaving a streak of my own arousal against my skin as he pushes them down my thighs.

I step out of them, and the second I straighten, he turns me around and kisses me.

My arms go around his neck as he bends, catches me under the ass, and lifts me straight off the floor.

I laugh against his mouth, startled by the sudden lift, and wrap my legs around his waist.

I’m not a small woman, and the fact that this man can lift me up like this without so much as a grunt will never stop being hot.

He carries me toward the bed while I kiss him, my fingers dragging over the short hair at the back of his head. My glasses slid halfway down my nose somewhere in the process, and he pulls back just long enough to pluck them off my face and set them on the nightstand before kissing me again.

“Okay, points for thinking ahead.”

His mouth brushes mine. “I’m learning.”

He lowers me onto the edge of the mattress, then straightens and shoves his jeans and boxer briefs down.

And there goes whatever was left of my ability to think.

I’ve seen him naked more times than I can count by now, but my body hasn’t gotten the memo that this is old news. My eyes drag over the hard

ridges of his stomach, the thick muscles in his thighs, and his dick standing hard between them.

Fuck.

I will never get tired of looking at this man, and right now looking isn't nearly enough.

I reach for his dick, but Sumner catches my wrist before I can wrap my hand around him.

"Uh, excuse you."

His grin turns downright filthy. "Not what I want."

Before I can ask what the hell that means, he climbs onto the bed and stretches out on his back, then closes one hand around my thigh and pulls me toward him.

I let him tug me closer until my knee lands beside his ribs, and suddenly I get it.

My stomach flips.

Sumner catches whatever just crossed my face, and his eyes drop down my body and land between my thighs. "Ride my face."

Well, fuck me. Everything clenches at the command in his voice.

Sumner gives my thigh another squeeze. "Come here."

I climb over him, planting my knees on either side of his shoulders while I brace my hands against the headboard and keep myself hovering a few inches above his mouth.

From down there, he has one hell of a view.

And judging by the way his eyes move between my thighs before lifting back to my face, he knows it.

"Lower."

"I'm not putting all my weight on your head."

His hands slide up the backs of my thighs and settle around them. "That's literally the point."

"Sumner."

"Goldie." His thumbs press into the soft flesh of my thighs. "Sit the fuck down."

A laugh slips out of me. "I happen to like you breathing."

"I can't think of a better way to go than suffocating with your pussy on my face."

"You're completely insane."

"Maybe." His grip tightens. "Now stop hovering."

“I’m serious. I’m not crushing you.”

His grin fades, and the look he gives me from between my thighs turns serious enough that I stop laughing. His arms tighten around my thighs, holding me easily in place.

“Baby.”

Something in his voice makes me stop arguing.

“I’ve got you.” His fingers flex against my thighs. “You’re not gonna hurt me, so quit worrying about it and give me what I asked for.” And then his mouth kicks into that filthy grin again. “Now sit your ass down.”

So I do. Who am I to keep arguing if the man wants to make me come on his tongue?

The second my weight settles onto him, his mouth closes over me.

My fingers lock around the headboard.

Holy shit.

His tongue works over my clit while his arms stay wrapped around my thighs, and when I reflexively try to lift myself, he pulls me right back down.

Okay. Message received.

He really does want all of my weight on him.

So I stop worrying about it.

If the idiot needs oxygen, he can tap my thigh.

I let myself relax into his hold and roll my hips against his mouth, riding him the way he told me to.

The sound he makes underneath me is filthy. A deep, hungry groan that rumbles against my clit.

My stomach twists tight as I do it again, slower this time, and his fingers dig into my thighs like he’s encouraging me.

Pregnancy has made everything so much more sensitive, and Sumner knows how to use that against me. Between his tongue and the way I’m moving on his mouth, I’m already too close to have any hope of slowing this down.

The orgasm hits hard enough that I fold over the headboard with a broken moan. My thighs clamp around his head while my hips keep moving through it, and there’s so much wetness between us that for one second I wonder if I just squirted for the first time.

I’m still breathing like I ran a mile when his tongue finds my clit again.

My whole body jolts.

A helpless whine leaves me as I try to squirm away, but Sumner's arms tighten around my thighs and drag me right back where I was.

I feel his laugh against my pussy.

"You're evil," I manage.

Apparently he considers that encouragement, because his tongue immediately goes back to work.

I'm so sensitive it almost hurts, and I can't decide whether I want to escape his mouth or grind down harder against it. Sumner solves that problem for me by keeping me pinned where he wants me while I rock my hips and chase every bit of pleasure he's giving me.

The second orgasm builds slower, winding tighter and tighter until I'm hanging onto the headboard, panting and grinding against his mouth because I'm way past pretending I have any self-control left.

Then it snaps.

I come with my thighs locked around his head and my whole body shaking, too far gone to care what kind of noise I'm making anymore.

Sumner groans underneath me.

He stiffens underneath me, his fingers digging into my thighs before he goes boneless and still.

It takes me a few seconds to even process that.

By the time I manage to lift myself off him and collapse onto my side, I'm panting, sweaty, and pretty sure I no longer have a single functioning thought in my head.

Sumner lies beside me, breathing hard.

Without my glasses, he's mostly a large blurry shape with what appears to be my entire orgasm still glistening all over his face.

Then I notice the mess across his stomach.

I squint at him. "Did you seriously just come?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't even touch yourself."

"Didn't need to."

Well.

That's fucking hot.

He reaches toward the nightstand, finds my glasses, and slides them carefully back onto my face.

The world snaps into focus.

So does Sumner.

His mouth and chin are slick, his cheeks are flushed from where my thighs were rubbing against his skin, and he looks entirely too pleased with himself.

Then he drags his tongue slowly across his bottom lip like he needs one more taste of me.

My pussy gives a last tired little throb. “Ugh, that’s unfair.”

His grin comes back. “What?”

“You know what you’re doing.”

“I also know you like it.”

Unfortunately, I like it so much I’m considering canceling dinner and climbing right back on. Then I remember where we’re supposed to be and groan, dropping my head back against the pillows.

“We’re so fucking late.”

Sumner stretches out beside me like he doesn’t have a single regret. “Worth it.”

I turn my head to look at him. “Your dads are going to take one look at us and know.”

He wipes the back of his hand across his mouth, completely unconcerned. “They traumatized me all the time as a kid with their PDA. They can deal.”

“That’s not the point.”

His eyebrows lift. “Pretty sure it is.”

I shove at his chest, laughing now, and he catches my hand before I can pull it back. Instead of letting go, he brings my palm to his mouth and presses a kiss into the center of it.

Then he swings his legs over the side of the bed and reaches for his jeans.

I grab his arm. “Oh, hell no.”

He looks back at me. “What?”

I gesture at him. “You have me all over your face and you all over your stomach. You’re not putting clothes on and calling it good.”

His mouth twitches. “I can wash up.”

“You can. With soap. In the shower.”

“They’re not going to inspect me.”

“If either of your dads gets close enough to figure out what we’ve been doing, I will fling myself directly into the sun.”

Sumner laughs. “They *are* huggers.”

“Exactly. Shower.”

“We’re already late.”

“And whose fault is that?”

He lifts an eyebrow at me, which is rich considering he started this whole thing.

I point toward the bathroom. “Go.”

He gets to his feet, but instead of heading for the shower, he holds out his hand. “Only if you come with me.”

I stare at it. “That sounds like an excellent way to make us even later.”

“Probably.”

“At least pretend you care.”

“I care.” His grin says otherwise. “Come on.”

“I already showered.”

“If I smell like sex, what do you think you smell like?”

Ugh, he makes a good point.

I look toward the bathroom, then at the clock, and finally back at the naked man standing in front of me with his hand still waiting for mine.

At this point, punctuality is fucked anyway.

And somewhere between worrying about whether his dads will like me and coming all over their son’s face, most of my nerves have burned off.

So I put my hand in his.

“Fine. But if you start anything in there, I’m blaming you when we show up during dessert.”

Sumner pulls me to my feet. “You were already blaming me.”

“Because it’s your fault.”

He just grins and leads me toward the bathroom.

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CHAPTER 25
SUMNER

A COUPLE OF DAYS LATER, I let myself into Goldie's house with grocery bags hooked over one arm and find her sitting at the kitchen island with her laptop open in front of her.

She looks up, spots the bags, and immediately narrows her eyes. "Did you buy more groceries?"

"A few things." I set the bags on the counter and start unloading them.

Goldie closes her laptop halfway. She's barefoot in black shorts and one of my old college T-shirts, the faded gray cotton stretched over her stomach. Her bump has gotten a little bigger again. The change is subtle, but I see her every day and I still notice.

"The fridge is packed," she says. "I'm starting to worry about this obsessive need to have every kind of food I've ever thought about on hand at all times."

I chuckle. "I don't see you complaining when you get a craving and we don't have to go out for you to satisfy it." I glance at her, and she rolls her eyes. "Besides, we didn't have what I need to make dinner tonight."

"What're you making?"

"Chicken bowls."

I put the chicken in the fridge, followed by peppers, Greek yogurt, and a couple packs of the blackberry sparkling water she's been going through lately.

Her eyes follow the sparkling water into the fridge. "Okay, those we actually needed."

“I know.”

She looks at me. “You don’t miss a thing, do you?”

“Not when it comes to you.”

A pretty pink flush fans out over her cheeks, but she adjusts her glasses and acts like she’s not affected by the way she’s become the most important person in my life.

I give her an out, pretending I don’t see as I shut the refrigerator, and Goldie goes back around the island and settles onto her stool. She opens her laptop the rest of the way while I pull the rice from the pantry.

“What are you working on?”

“Editing. I have a client gallery I want to finish tonight.”

I measure rice into a pot and carry it to the sink. At some point, I stopped having to think about where anything is in this kitchen. My protein powder has a spot in the pantry beside Goldie’s cereal. My meal-prep containers are stacked with hers. My shaker bottle is drying next to one of those weird vintage glasses she collects, this one covered in little painted mushrooms.

There’s even a pint of the peach ice cream I made shoved behind the frozen waffles because she claims she’ll eat the whole thing if she has to look at it every time she opens the freezer.

She’s probably right, but I’d happily make her as much peach ice cream as she can eat.

I set the rice on the stove, then pull a skillet from the cabinet and a cutting board from beside it.

Goldie peers over the top of her laptop at the peppers beside my cutting board. “Make mine spicy.”

“You sure? You had heartburn last night.”

She makes a face. “Ugh, I forgot about that.” After a second, she gestures toward the bottle of hot sauce on the counter. “Leave that out. I’ll add some if I decide it’s worth suffering later.”

“Got it.”

I get the chicken seasoned and into the skillet, wash my hands, then start slicing the peppers while she goes back to the photo on her screen.

My phone buzzes against my thigh a minute later. I set the knife down, wipe my hands on the dish towel, and pull it out.

COLSTON: found another one of your hoodies in my laundry

A second message comes in.

COLSTON: should i just box up the rest of your shit and send it to goldie's or

Then:

COLSTON: starting to think you don't love me anymore

I grin and type back.

SUMNER: miss you too, Jenny

His answer appears almost immediately.

COLSTON: too late

COLSTON: you abandoned me for your girlfriend

COLSTON: I see how it is

I look over at Goldie. "Colston's being a pouty asshole because he says I've abandoned him."

That gets her attention because she's always down for whatever bullshit my best friend's up to. She comes around the island and holds out her hand. "Lemme see."

I give her the phone and turn to the sink to wash my hands.

Behind me, Goldie goes quiet as she reads.

I glance over my shoulder. She's staring at the screen, but then her eyes lift to mine.

"Do you want to be my boyfriend?" she blurts, the words running together.

I shut off the water and reach for the dish towel. "What?"

Goldie steps closer and slides my phone into the front pocket of my jeans. Her fingers brush high on my thigh as she pulls her hand away, close enough to my dick to send a quick shot of tingles through me.

"Do you want to be my boyfriend?"

This time she says it slower, and there's nothing joking about the way she's looking at me.

I finish drying my hands and turn to face her. "I kind of thought I already was."

Goldie blinks. "Excuse me?"

“What did you think we were doing?”

“Um, spending time together? Getting to know each other, I guess?”

“You guess?”

Goldie’s mouth opens, then closes again. Her brows pinch together while she studies me. “I don’t know. We never said it.”

I lean back against the counter, trying not to smile.

Goldie points at me. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“That face.”

“What face?”

“The one that says you think I’m ridiculous.”

“I don’t think you’re ridiculous.”

Her eyebrows climb, and she folds her arms across her chest like she’s waiting for me to try that again.

I bite back a smile. “I think this conversation is a little ridiculous.”

“See?” She throws one hand out toward me before planting it back on her hip.

I laugh, which earns me a glare that would work better if the corner of her mouth wasn’t twitching.

“We sleep together,” she says, ticking the points off on her fingers. “We have sex. You come over all the time. None of that automatically gives you a title.”

I scoff, but she goes on. “Outside of the sex, it’s basically the same thing you have with Colston, and you’re not his boyfriend.”

“Colston’s straight.” I hook the dish towel over the oven handle and turn fully toward her. “And I come home to you every night. Not him.”

Her hands slowly lower. For a second, she just stands there staring at me with her lips parted like she wants to argue but can’t.

Then her gaze shifts past my shoulder. My sunglasses are beside her keys on the counter.

She turns toward the front of the house and looks at our shoes piled together beside the door, then down the hallway toward the bedroom.

When she turns back to me, the argument has gone out of her face. Her brows pull together as she looks around the kitchen again.

“Wait.” She looks at me. “Are you living here?”

I blink at her. “Goldie.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” I gesture toward the front door. “I have a key. I sleep here every night. Your closet is half filled with my clothes.”

Her gaze shifts toward the hallway.

“You cleared out dresser drawers for me,” I add.

She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out right away. Instead, she looks toward the bedroom again, her forehead creasing.

“Those were because you kept leaving stuff here,” she says finally, but she sounds less certain now.

“Yeah. Because I’m always here. You always want me to stay.”

Her eyes narrow a little as she looks back at me. “That is not the same thing as living here.”

“Okay.” I hook my thumbs into my pockets. “My razor and toothbrush are in your bathroom. My laundry goes in the same hamper as yours. I brought my pillow over because I sleep better on it, and I haven’t spent a night at Colston’s in weeks.”

Goldie goes quiet.

I watch her look around the kitchen again, only this time I can see the realization working across her face. My stuff isn’t packed in a bag somewhere waiting for me to leave. It has places that it fits. So do I.

“Holy shit,” she says, and a disbelieving laugh slips out of her. “You live here.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you.”

She turns toward me, laughing harder now. “When the fuck did that happen?”

I shrug. “No idea.”

“You just slowly moved into my house, and neither one of us noticed?”

“I noticed.”

Her laughter cuts off. “You did?”

I can’t keep a straight face anymore. “Uh, yeah. Colston obviously noticed, too.” I gesture at the pocket with my phone in it.

Goldie points at me. “Don’t you dare laugh at me.”

“I’m trying not to.”

“You’re doing a terrible job.”

She comes over beside me, still smiling, and steals a pepper from the bowl on the counter.

I watch her pop the pepper into her mouth. “You okay with this?”

She chews for a second, her smile fading into something more thoughtful. “I mean… yeah.” Her eyes move around the kitchen again before settling on me. “I just didn’t realize we’d gotten this far without talking about it.”

“That’s fair.” I set the tongs on the spoon rest and turn toward her. “If you want me to take some of my stuff back to Colston’s, I will.”

It’d kill me to do it, but I never want to pressure her into something she’s not ready for.

“No,” she answers immediately, stepping closer. “I don’t want you to do that. He can’t have you back.”

I brush a loose piece of hair back from her face and let my hand settle briefly at the side of her neck. “Okay.”

Goldie’s fingers curl into the front of my shirt before she looks up at me again. “So I guess what I’m asking is whether we’re making this official.”

“Living together?”

She nods.

“Yeah.” I rub my thumb once along the side of her neck, feeling how steady her pulse is. “I want to live here with you.”

Her expression softens. “You’re sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

She comes all the way into my space then, sliding her arms around my waist. “And you’re my boyfriend?”

I laugh quietly and settle my hands at her hips. “Until you give me an upgrade to husband.”

“Okay.” Her smile spreads, and when she shifts closer, her stomach bumps into me. “I like that.”

I slide one hand around her back. “Me too.”

Then I kiss her.

Her arms tighten around my waist as she kisses me back, and I let myself stay there for a few seconds, holding her in the middle of the kitchen with dinner cooking behind me.

I love her, and I’ve known it for a while.

I can’t point to one specific moment when it happened. By the time I realized it, Goldie was already worked into every part of my life. She gives my friends as much shit as I do, fits at the table with my dads like she’s been there a hundred times, and somehow turned this house into the place I can’t wait to come back to at the end of the day.

I've almost told her more than once.

The only reason I haven't is because I know her well enough to know she'd hear a question after the words even if I never asked one.

Do you love me too?

Then she'd start wondering if I expected her to say it back.

I don't want that. When I tell her I love her, I want to be able to say it without making her feel like she owes me anything in return.

When the kiss ends, I stay close enough that the tips of our noses almost touch. Goldie studies my face for a second.

"What?"

I rub my hand slowly over her back. "Nothing."

Her eyes narrow. "You're looking at me weird."

"Just thinking." I brush my thumb over her hip.

Before she can ask me what about, the skillet spits behind me.

Goldie looks over my shoulder. "Your dinner's burning, boyfriend."

"Shit."

I turn back to the stove and move the chicken around the pan before I ruin it.

Goldie stays beside me instead of going back to her laptop. She leans against the counter and her eyes run all over my body as she licks her lips.

"Keep looking at me like that and neither one of us will be eating anytime soon."

Her eyes make their way back up to mine as she laughs. "I'm literally just standing here."

"Uh-huh."

She reaches into the bowl beside me, steals another piece of pepper, and pops it into her mouth without breaking eye contact.

Then she smiles.

Little shit.

I set the tongs down.

Goldie's eyebrows lift when I reach over and turn off the burner.

"What?"

"You're acting like I didn't just warn you what would happen."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Right." I move the skillet off the heat. "So you haven't been looking at me like you want me to bend you over this counter?"

Her laugh bursts out before she can stop it. “Maybe I’m just appreciating my boyfriend.”

Fuck, I love hearing her say that word.

I wipe my hands on the dish towel and toss it onto the counter as my dick starts to harden.

“Or maybe you like to make me work for it.”

Goldie’s eyes gleam as she watches me close the distance between us.

She tips her face up to mine with a grin straight from the Devil himself. “I do like watching you work. It’s my kink.”

That smug little grin lasts right up until I catch her under the ass and lift her onto the counter.

Her legs wrap around my waist as I step between them and bury my hand in her hair, dragging her mouth to mine.

Dinner can fucking wait.

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CHAPTER 26
GOLDIE

Twenty Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a banana.

I SPOT the antique brass bed frame from halfway down the row of vendor tents and grab Ellie's arm hard enough to slosh iced matcha through the opening in her lid.

"Look," I say, pointing. "That beauty is coming home with me."

Ellie follows my finger.

The frame is propped against the back wall of a vintage furniture booth, with curved brass rails and ornate little details that make it look like it came straight out of some rich grandmother's house where nobody was allowed to touch anything.

Ellie lowers her sunglasses to get a better look. "Dark floral wall?"

I'm already walking toward it. "Maybe. Or the black-paneled set with deep red sheets."

"You don't own deep red sheets."

"I will."

Ellie nods, pulling her phone out of her purse. "I'll add them to the list."

I reach the booth and run my hand over the tall headboard. The brass has enough age on it to keep it from looking shiny and fake, and the frame has exactly the right amount of drama without looking like something I'd have to warn clients not to touch.

The vendor looks up from his folding chair.

I gesture at the piece. “How much for this?”

He gets to his feet and names a price while I reach for my wallet, not wanting to try and haggle. I don’t want to risk losing out on this. Ellie catches up beside me and takes my blackberry iced tea before I can drop it.

“Will it even fit in your SUV?” she asks.

I glance back at the headboard and eye its size. “Not a chance.”

“I can deliver,” the vendor says.

“To my studio?” I ask, giving him the address.

“Sure can.”

“Perfect. Sold.”

He laughs and reaches for the clipboard sitting beside his chair. “I had a feeling.”

By the time we finish arranging delivery to Bombshell for tomorrow afternoon, there’s a SOLD tag hanging from one of the brass rails.

Ellie hands my tea back and looks at the bed again. “Okay, I can already see the vision.”

“Right?” I take a drink as we head back into the crowd and push my sunglasses back up my nose. “It’s gonna look fucking hot. And Minji’s going to kill me for making her move the furniture again.”

Ellie laughs as we start down the crowded row of stalls.

The Indie Market has taken over several blocks of Central, and the street is packed with vendor tents selling vintage furniture, handmade jewelry, paintings, clothes, candles, and soap. A reggae cover band is playing near the food trucks, and there are dogs everywhere—under tables, stretched out in patches of shade, stopping every few feet to sniff each other.

I love it here.

We’ve been walking for a while now, and my feet are killing me.

I shift my weight and rub the ache above my right hip. Being five months pregnant and wearing platform sandals to be on my feet all afternoon probably wasn’t the best idea, but I’m still getting used to things in my body being different than they’ve always been.

Ellie glances down at my hand. “You need to sit.”

“I know. But I need that giant pretzel we passed first.” My mouth waters just thinking about it.

“The one the size of a steering wheel?” She takes another sip of her matcha.

“Yeah, with cheese dip.”

She nods. “Fine. We’re getting the pretzel and finding somewhere to sit.”

We turn back toward the food trucks, weaving between people and vendor tents as I look for the pretzel stand.

Three tents down, a glossy white ceramic planter shaped like a pair of ass cheeks catches my eye.

I slow down.

Ellie notices and catches my arm. “No.”

I look at her. “You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“You were going to buy the butt planter.”

I glance back at it. “It would be perfect in the studio bathroom.”

Ellie follows my stare, then looks at me again. “You already have multiple things in there. It’s not that big of a space.”

“I could maybe swap something out.”

She gives me a long look.

“I’m just saying,” I add, letting her pull me toward the food trucks. “It fits the aesthetic.”

Ellie opens her mouth to argue with me when a man’s voice comes from somewhere behind us.

“Goldie?”

I tense, recognizing that voice immediately.

My shoulders go rigid, and a hot little wave of *oh, for fuck’s sake* rolls through me. Unfortunately, giving five years to someone means you don’t forget the sound of their voice even if you’d really, really like to.

I haven’t seen Grant since the day I walked into our bedroom and found him fucking someone from the club he manages in our bed, and apparently my first reunion with the lying, cheating asshole is going to happen while I’m sweaty, pregnant, and craving carbs like nobody’s business.

At least I look damn good.

I glance down at the neon pink crop top stretched across my boobs, the black maxi skirt sitting under my bump, and the platform sandals currently murdering my feet. Yep. Still cute.

Ellie recognizes him too. I feel her arm tighten through mine before we turn around.

Grant’s standing beside a booth selling leather wallets, and the weirdest part is how completely normal he looks. I don’t know what I expected. A hunchback, maybe? A receding hairline? Maybe a really bad case of acne?

But sadly there aren’t any outward signs of karma for his cheating. He still has the same expensive haircut, the same sunglasses shoved onto his head, and one of those crisp white linen shirts he always wears when he wants to look effortlessly put together.

We size each other up.

And then he notices my stomach.

His gaze drops to the bump on display under my crop top, and his lips part. I don’t know if he’s going to say something, but no words come out, and then he just sort of… shuts down.

His face goes completely blank.

Okay.

Not gonna lie, this part’s sort of fun.

I take a sip of my tea while Grant stares at my stomach, giving him a second to catch up.

“You’re pregnant.”

I snort. “What gave it away?”

His eyes snap back to mine. For a second, he looks like he has about a hundred questions fighting to get out at once, but then his attention drifts over me again, and his upper lip curls.

“You’re seriously wearing a crop top right now?”

Aaand there he is. What a judgmental asshole.

I glance down, mostly because the question is so fucking stupid. I mean, duh? Nothing about the outfit has mysteriously changed since I checked it thirty seconds ago.

“Obviously?” I look back at him. “It’s cute, right?”

He gestures to me with a wrinkle of his nose. “Your stomach is hanging out.”

Irritation crawls up the back of my neck. I know this routine. He used to do it to me all the time when we were together. He’d start with my clothes, or my tattoos, or how loud I was being, then keep picking until I was so over dealing with him, I’d just give in to whatever he wanted.

It’s a miracle my self-confidence didn’t take more of a hit, but he did his own kind of damage regardless.

I used to endure it for some reason I can't fathom. But now I'm mostly wondering how the hell I ever had the patience to deal with this mediocre man with way too much audacity.

"That's generally what happens when the shirt stops above it."

Ellie coughs out a laugh around her straw beside me.

Grant's mouth tightens, and I watch him realize his little comment didn't land the way he expected.

Good. Fuck him.

My feet still hurt, I'm even more hungry now, and he's blocking the way to the pretzel of my dreams. Time to peace the hell out.

I turn toward Ellie. "Come on. I want food."

I barely get one step before Grant's fingers close around my upper arm. They dig into my skin, and he's being rough enough that it hurts.

Plus the sudden grip jerks me to a stop, and I stumble. A hot flash of anger shoots through me because if I'd fallen, it could've hurt the baby.

I turn on him, but Ellie is faster.

She smacks his hand hard enough that he lets go immediately, her matcha sloshing over the rim of the cup and splattering onto the pavement.

"Touch her again and I'll empty an entire can of pepper spray into your face," she says, getting up in his face and daring him to try.

Grant stares at the red mark spreading across his hand. "Jesus Christ, Ellie."

She shifts closer to me, putting herself half a step between us. "Try me."

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

A couple of women browsing the wallet booth have gone quiet and are openly watching now. Grant notices them too, and some of the fight goes out of his posture.

"I was trying to talk to her," he says, lowering his voice.

"Then use your mouth. You can do that without touching, asshole."

My arm stings where his fingers dug in, and I rub the spot as I step around Ellie. As much as I appreciate her being ready to commit aggravated assault on my behalf, I'd rather get whatever the hell Grant wants over with so I can leave.

"What do you want?"

His attention drops to my stomach again.

This time, he doesn't make another shitty comment about my clothes. His forehead smooths out, and his eyes stay fixed on my bump for a few seconds too long.

A prickle crawls across the back of my neck.

I know that expression. It's the one Grant gets when he's putting pieces together and thinks he's found something he can use to get what he wants.

My fingers tighten around my cup.

"How far along are you?"

I frown. "Why?"

Instead of answering, his eyes narrow slightly on my stomach. "C'mon, Goldie. When are you due?"

Every muscle across my shoulders tightens. "Why do you care?"

Grant's eyes lift to mine. For a second, he just looks at me, and then I see something click into place behind his expression.

"What about that condom?"

My fingers go still around my cup.

Oh, fuck.

Ellie turns her head toward me. "What condom?"

Grant's mouth tips up slightly, like he's pleased he finally managed to get a reaction out of me. "That time we fucked a few days before we broke up."

My stomach drops.

I know exactly what he means.

Four nights before everything went to shit, Grant and I had sex. We were still using condoms because we'd agreed to start trying that weekend, around the day my fertility app said I should ovulate.

He finished, and when he pulled out, we realized the condom had torn.

I remember staring at it for a second before we both started laughing because, at the time, it didn't seem like the end of the world. We were planning to start trying for a baby in a few days anyway. If anything, we joked that maybe we'd accidentally gotten a head start.

Then Saturday happened.

I caught him with someone else, went to Bottom's Up, met Sumner, and according to my app, I was ovulating.

After that, I totally forgot about that night. When the pregnancy test turned positive, I didn't question it.

It could only be Sumner.

Except Grant finished inside me too.

Four days earlier.

And as I stand here now, with him looking at my stomach like he's already done the same fucking math, that suddenly feels a whole lot less irrelevant than it did five minutes ago.

The cup creaks under my grip before I force my fingers to loosen.

Fuck.

Grant watches my face, and I fucking hate that he can probably see the exact second this stops being ridiculous to me. I just hope he can't see the way my eyes are starting to sting.

"Yeah," he says quietly. "That condom."

The smell of fried food drifts over from the trucks behind him, and my stomach rolls so hard I almost gag. A couple of minutes ago, I was starving. Now the thought of putting anything in my mouth makes me want to puke.

People keep squeezing past us in both directions, carrying shopping bags and drinks and laughing like everything's just great in the world while mine's falling apart.

The two women at the wallet booth are still watching us, although one of them at least has the decency to pretend she's looking at a display now.

I wipe my damp palm against my skirt. It's hot out here, but the sweat gathering along the back of my neck has nothing to do with the weather anymore.

"It was before I was supposed to ovulate."

Grant gives me a look. "Supposed to isn't for sure."

I don't answer.

Because I know.

I've read enough pregnancy forums and fertility articles over the last year to know sperm can hang around for days. I also know an app telling me I'd ovulate Saturday doesn't mean that's when it actually happened.

My heart starts beating harder. And faster.

Ellie shifts closer until her arm presses against mine. "Goldie?"

I put my hand over my belly without thinking, my fingers spreading across the roundness under my crop top.

No.

Sumner's been there for every appointment. He knows which foods suddenly make me gag and which side I have to sleep on when my hip starts hurting. There's baby shit showing up at the house because he keeps finding things we "might need," and half the time I wake up with his hand on my stomach like even unconscious Sumner needs to check that we're both still there.

He's this baby's dad.

My fingers spread tighter over my belly. "Sumner is the father."

Grant's gaze drops to my hand. "Sumner?"

"My boyfriend."

Something flickers across his face at that, but I can't even begin to give a shit what it is.

"And you know he's the father because...what? You have a feeling?"

My chest pulls tight.

Ellie steps forward. "You need to back the hell off, Grant."

Grant doesn't look at her. He keeps his eyes on me, and I can see from his expression that he knows he finally found the one thing he could say today that I can't immediately tell him to shove up his ass.

Because right now, I don't know.

And that scares the shit out of me.

Heat rushes into my face, and for a second the fear gets shoved aside by how badly I want to tell him to go fuck himself.

Grant studies my face. "So the thing with the new guy is serious."

"Very."

His gaze flicks over my face, then down to my stomach again. "That was fast."

I actually laugh because the audacity is fucking incredible. "You were faster. I think you made it less than twenty-four hours from talking about starting a family with me to fucking your bartender in our bed."

One of the women at the wallet booth gasps from somewhere behind him.

Grant glances toward her, and color starts creeping up his neck. "Could you keep your voice down?"

“Why?” I take a step closer. “Does the story sound shittier when strangers can hear it?”

His jaw tightens. “You’re making a scene.”

“You started it.”

Beside me, Ellie lets out a sharp, humorless laugh. “Please keep going, Grant. Every time you open your mouth, you somehow make yourself sound worse.”

Grant shoots her an irritated look, but Ellie doesn’t so much as blink. She’s still planted close enough to me that our arms are touching, her half-empty matcha hanging forgotten at her side while she watches him like she’s waiting to see if he’s stupid enough to grab me again.

I bump my elbow lightly against hers. “Don’t get arrested. He’s not worth it.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

The way she says it does very little to reassure me.

Grant ignores her and points toward my stomach. “If there’s a chance that baby is mine, I’m getting a paternity test.”

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CHAPTER 27
GOLDIE

MY ANGER'S replaced by fear so fast it leaves me a little dizzy.

A paternity test.

The test itself isn't what scares me. It's what happens if the results show the father is Grant.

He wouldn't just be the asshole I used to date anymore. He could have a permanent place in my child's life whether I wanted him there or not.

And no doubt he sees the horror of that idea playing out all over my face.

Some of the hardness leaves Grant's expression. "Would it really be that bad?"

I stare at him.

"You were ready to have my baby a few months ago, Goldie. We were going to start a family."

For one completely insane second, I can't believe he's standing here saying this to me like the part where he blew up our entire relationship is some minor detail we could maybe work around.

"And then I found you fucking another woman in our bed."

His mouth tightens. "I know what I did."

"Do you? Because you're talking like we took a little break and accidentally lost touch."

Ellie shifts beside me, but I barely register it because Grant is still looking at me with this weird almost-hopeful expression that makes my skin crawl.

“I’m just saying that if this baby is mine, maybe it doesn’t have to turn into some huge fight.”

I stare at him. “Don’t do that.”

His eyebrows pull together. “Do what?”

“Stand there and act like this somehow gives you a way back into my life. You cheated on me, Grant. And even before that, looking back, things weren’t great. Finding out there’s a chance you could be the biological father doesn’t undo any of that.”

A small thump presses against the inside of my belly, startling me enough that my breath catches. I feel it under my palm, and the panic that’s been buzzing under my skin gets worse.

Because this isn’t some hypothetical argument about a broken condom anymore. There’s an actual baby in there, moving under my hand, and I suddenly have no fucking idea whose DNA helped make them.

Grant watches my hand. “But there is a chance.”

“Yeah.” I swallow, wishing like hell I could say otherwise. “There’s a chance.”

Saying it out loud feels fucking awful.

“And if you’re the father, we’ll deal with that when we know for sure. But you and me?” I shake my head. “That’s still over. That will always be over.”

Whatever weird hope had crept into Grant’s expression disappears. “Fine. But if I’m the father, I’m not disappearing just because you don’t want me around. We establish paternity, figure out custody, and handle it like adults.”

The word *custody* turns my stomach.

My hand is still resting over the spot where the baby moved, and suddenly I can picture what that could mean. Grant alone with my kid, with nobody there to stop all those little comments he probably wouldn’t even think were cruel.

I picture my child coming home from his house and asking me if their clothes are weird because Grant made a face at them. Cutting off their own laugh because he told them they were being too loud. Getting excited about something and checking his expression before deciding whether it’s safe to keep being excited.

Oh, hell no.

I know what that shit feels like as an adult. The thought of my kid learning it before they're even old enough to understand what he's doing makes anger burn through the nausea and horror.

Ellie's shoulder is still pressed against mine, and when I glance at her, her attention is locked on Grant. She looks like she wants to tear the flesh from his body and then dance on his bones.

I look back at him. "We're done here. Leave me alone."

"Not happening. I'll have my attorney contact you."

My fingers tighten around my cup again, but I keep my voice even. "Fine."

He doesn't move right away. He just stands there looking at me, like he's waiting for something.

I know what he wants. He wants me upset enough to argue with him, ask him not to do this, maybe give him some indication that he still has enough power over my life to make me even the tiniest bit beholden to him.

I'm already fucking terrified. My palms are sweating, my stomach hasn't stopped rolling—and not from the baby—and I have no idea what I'm going to tell Sumner when I get out of here.

Grant's gotten enough from me today.

I'm not giving him anything else.

Grant stares at me for another second, his nostrils flaring, then turns and walks away.

I watch the back of his white shirt until it disappears between two vendor tents.

"Girl," one of the women at the wallet booth says behind me, "I don't even know you, but that man fucking sucks."

I turn toward her, and despite everything, a laugh escapes me. "Yeah. He really, really does."

She pulls out her phone. "And I saw him grab you, so if you need a witness for any of this shit, I'm happy to be one."

That catches me off guard enough that some of the tightness in my chest loosens. "Seriously?"

"Absolutely. What's your Instagram?"

I tell her, and she taps at her screen for a second before holding it up so I can see the follow request.

"Got you."

"Thank you. Really."

“Anytime.” She glances in the direction Grant disappeared. “Men like that love thinking they’re untouchable.”

“Well, unfortunately for him, he picked a very public place to be an asshole,” I say.

The woman snorts and slips her phone back into her bag. “Seriously, though. Message me if you need me.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Her friend gives me a little wave before the two of them head toward the next row of tents, leaving Ellie and me standing beside the wallet booth.

When I turn back to my best friend, the laugh dies almost as quickly as it came.

The adrenaline that got me through the last few minutes is starting to wear off, and my body has been waiting for that exact opportunity to completely lose its shit.

The band is still playing somewhere down the block, and people keep flowing around us, but everything feels a little too loud now.

I lift my tea toward my mouth and hear the ice knock against the sides of the cup because my hand’s shaking.

Ellie notices and takes the tea from me. “Come on, G. We’re getting out of here.”

I open my mouth to tell her I’m fine out of pure reflex, but I can’t even make myself say it.

I’m really fucking not.

My legs feel shaky now, and I’m suddenly very aware that we still have to walk all the way back to the parking garage. But that barely registers compared to where my brain goes next.

Sumner.

Oh, *God.*

I have to tell Sumner.

The baby moves again, and my throat tightens as a tear drips down my face.

Ellie is watching me closely now. “Hey. Talk to me.”

I shake my head because if I start talking here, surrounded by hundreds of strangers, I’m going to start sobbing.

“I need to sit down.”

“Okay.” She doesn’t hesitate. She takes my cup with her to the nearest trash can and dumps both drinks before coming straight back to me. “We’re

going to the car. You can sit in the AC, and we'll figure out what to do after we cool down."

That sounds infinitely better than falling apart beside a table of old vinyl records, so I let her hook her arm through mine and pull me along.

We head toward the parking garage at a slower pace, and I keep one hand over my stomach while I walk.

By the time we reach my SUV, tears are running down my face, and my whole body's shaking.

I dig my keys out of my bag, but Ellie holds out her hand before I can unlock the driver's side.

"Give me those."

"I can drive."

"I know you can." She wiggles her fingers at me. "You're still not going to."

On any other day, I'd probably argue just because she told me what to do. Today I drop the keys into her palm and walk around to the passenger side.

Ellie gets behind the wheel and starts the SUV while I sink into the seat and shove my sunglasses onto my head so I can wipe away the tears that won't stop falling. Cold air blasts from the vents, and I close my eyes for a second while she pulls the door shut beside me.

Neither of us says anything at first. Ellie gives me a minute before she finally turns toward me.

"What do you want to do?" she asks. "I can take you home. I can call Sumner or text him and tell him you need him there. Whatever you want."

I shake my head. "He's at Colston's."

"Okay. Then I can take you there."

The thought of walking into Colston's like this makes my stomach twist again. "No. I need to tell him without an audience so he has a second to process."

Ellie reaches across the console and takes my hand. "Then call him. Tell him you need him."

I look down at our joined hands.

For five months, there hasn't been a question about who this baby's dad is. Sumner stepped into that role before we even knew what the hell we were doing with each other, and somewhere along the way he stopped being

the guy I was going to co-parent with and became the person I'm building my life around.

And I love him.

I only just let myself admit that, and now I have to call him and tell him the baby he already loves might belong biologically to the man who blew up my life before Sumner ever walked into it.

My eyes start burning, and I blink hard before the tears can spill over again.

"What if this changes everything?" I whisper.

Ellie's fingers tighten around mine. "What if this changes nothing?"

"How can it not?" My voice comes out rough.

That's the part I can't get around. Because how the hell does something like this happen without changing something between us?

I pull my phone from my bag and stare at Sumner's name for a second before tapping it.

Ellie doesn't say anything while the phone rings.

Sumner answers almost immediately.

"Hey, baby."

A sports announcer is talking somewhere in the background, and hearing Sumner's completely normal voice after everything that just happened is the thing that finally breaks whatever I've been using to hold myself together.

I try to say his name, but a sob comes out instead.

"Goldie?" The warmth disappears from his voice so fast that my chest hurts. "What happened?"

I cover my mouth and try to get myself under control, but now that I've really let go, my body seems pretty committed to it.

"Hey. Baby, talk to me."

"I'm okay." The words come out broken enough that they don't sound remotely convincing. "I'm okay. I just—"

I squeeze my eyes shut.

How the fuck am I supposed to tell him this over the phone?

"Where are you?"

"In my car with Ellie. We're still at the market."

"Did something happen?"

"We ran into Grant."

Sumner goes quiet.

“He was an asshole as usual. Then he grabbed my arm for a second, but we handled it.”

Ellie gives me a look that says *handled it* is underselling her contribution, but I can’t even smile.

“What did he do?” Sumner asks. I’ve never heard his voice like this, with an edge of violence to it.

“It’s not about what he did.” My voice cracks again, and I wipe at my face with the back of my hand. “Something else happened, and I need to tell you, but I can’t—I don’t want to do this over the phone.”

There’s no hesitation. “Okay.”

I suck in a shaky breath.

“Can you come home?”

“Yeah, of course.”

My eyes close.

“Have Ellie take you home, and I’ll get there as soon as I can.”

Another tear slips down my cheek. “Okay.”

“Goldie.”

“Yeah?”

His voice is quieter when he says, “Whatever happened, we’ll deal with it when I get there. I’m not going anywhere, remember?”

That nearly starts me crying all over again. “Okay. I remember.”

“I’ll see you soon.”

The call ends, and I lower the phone into my lap.

Ellie waits a second before asking, “Home?”

I nod and wipe under my eyes.

“Home.”

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CHAPTER 28
SUMNER

THE CALL ENDS, and I shove my phone into my pocket as I cross Colston's living room toward the door.

He turned down the volume on the Rays game when I picked up the phone. Now he's sitting forward on the couch with both forearms braced on his knees, watching me.

"What happened?"

I grab my wallet off the coffee table. "She ran into Grant."

"Her douchebag ex?"

"Yeah."

I pull my keys off the hook beside the door and sit long enough to shove my feet into my shoes.

"He grabbed her arm when she tried to walk away."

Just saying it makes another surge of anger hit me. I keep seeing some asshole I've never met putting his hands on her while she's trying to get away from him, and every instinct I have wants to find him and make sure he never does it again.

Colston sits up. "He put his fucking hands on my Goldie girl?"

"Yeah." I pull one lace hard enough that I have to loosen it and start over. "Goldie said they handled it, whatever that means."

His jaw clenches. "Good."

I love that he's just as protective of her as I am.

"All I can think about," I say, my hands shaking enough that I fuck up the knot again, which only pisses me off more, "is how much I want to

break his fucking hand.”

“No shit.” Colston pushes himself off the hard-ass couch. “I could hear her crying from over here, man. I don’t blame you.”

“There’s something else,” I say.

“What?”

“I don’t know. She wouldn’t tell me over the phone, just said she needed me home.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

My mind’s spinning with possibilities, and none of them are good. I finally get the second shoe tied and stand.

Colston reaches for the sneakers he kicked under the coffee table earlier. “I’m coming with you.”

“It’s fine—”

“I’ll stay out of whatever she needs to tell you.” He drops onto the couch long enough to pull on his shoes. “But I’ll be there if either of you needs me. I’m coming.”

He finishes tying his shoe, stands, and holds out his hand.

I look at it. “What?”

“Keys.”

“Jenny.”

“You’re pissed off, your hands are shaking, and your brain’s probably already come up with six different ways to kill Grant.” He wiggles his fingers. “I’ll drive. You can sit there and work through the murder fantasies. Don’t make this a thing, Shamu.”

I drop the keys into his hand.

“And if you decide you need to go find Grant afterward,” he adds, “Goldie won’t be sitting there alone while you do it.”

Asshole knows me too well.

Right now, I need to get to Goldie.

“Let’s go.”

Colston grabs his phone off the coffee table, and we’re out the door.

By the time Colston turns onto Goldie's street, the muscles across my shoulders ache from holding them tight. He's kept his mouth shut for most of the drive from Tampa, which might be the smartest decision he's made in the entire time I've known him.

Every time my brain starts circling back to Grant putting his hands on her, I have to remind myself that Goldie's okay and I'm almost there.

I don't even let myself consider what could be worse than what she's already told me because I'll lose my shit.

Her SUV's sitting in the driveway when we pull up. Colston parks my truck behind it, shuts off the engine, and hands me the keys.

"Fuck sitting in the truck in this heat," he says as he unbuckles. "I'll make sure she's okay, then I'll hang out back while you guys talk."

I nod and shove my door open.

The humid air hits me the second I climb out, but I'm already heading up the walkway by the time Colston shuts his door behind me.

My house key's between my fingers when I reach the porch, and I unlock the door and step inside on autopilot.

The living room is cool after the heat outside, but I barely register it. Goldie's curled into one end of the couch with her bare feet tucked beneath her skirt, her sunglasses and purse dumped on the coffee table. Ellie's leaning against the kitchen island with another glass in her hand, but my attention goes straight to Goldie.

Her eyes are swollen and red.

Fuck. It kills me when she cries.

She looks up at me, and whatever was holding her together before I walked through the door shatters. She sets her water on the table and leans forward, reaching for me before I even reach the couch.

I drop into a crouch in front of her. "Hey."

"Hey." Her voice wobbles, and then her arms are around my shoulders and her face is tucked into the space between my shoulder and neck.

I wrap both arms around her and hold her as tight as I can as she trembles.

She takes a shaky breath against my skin, then another. I just hold her while her fingers knot into the back of my shirt and wait for her breathing to settle.

A few feet behind me, Colston and Ellie stay quiet.

When Goldie finally loosens her grip, I lean back enough to see her face. I wipe the dampness from beneath one of her eyes with my thumb.

“Show me where he touched you.”

Her mouth pulls to one side. “It’s nothing.”

“Goldie.”

“I told you I’m okay.”

“I heard you.” I keep my eyes on hers. “Show me anyway.”

She sighs like I’m being a pain in the ass, which is enough like normal Goldie that I can breathe a little easier. Then she lifts her left arm.

Four red marks sit above her elbow, marking where that motherfucker’s fingers dug into her skin. For a second, all I can think about is breaking every finger that put them there, but I force my attention back to her arm. The skin isn’t broken, and the marks don’t look deep enough to bruise much. I take her wrist and turn her arm enough to check the other side.

“Did he touch you anywhere else?”

“No. Just my arm.”

“I slapped his hand off before he could do anything else,” Ellie says from the kitchen.

I glance over at her and give her a nod. “Good. Thank you.”

Goldie looks past me toward the front door. “Colston?”

I glance back.

Colston’s stayed near the entryway this whole time instead of crowding around the couch.

“Hey, Goldie girl.” His eyes drop to the marks on her arm, and his mouth tightens before he looks back at her. “I volunteered for Shamu-sitting duty. Felt irresponsible to let him operate heavy machinery unsupervised.”

Goldie’s mouth twitches. “Was he that bad?”

“Let’s just say there’s a good chance he’d have ended up in jail if I’d let him come alone.”

That gets a small laugh out of her.

Colston comes closer then, stopping on the other side of the coffee table. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m okay.”

Goldie reaches out, and Colston takes her hand and gives it a squeeze. “And for the record, Ellie was right to smack the shit out of him.”

“See?” Ellie says, gesturing at my best friend. “Jenny gets it.”

I look at Colston. “You know, this might actually bump you into the number-one best-friend spot.”

His head whips toward me. “What?”

“I said *might*.”

“Hold on.” His whole face lights up as he digs his phone out of his pocket. “Say it again.”

“Not happening.”

Goldie’s smiling now, some of the strain finally gone from around her eyes, and I appreciate the hell out of Colston for getting her there.

“Come on, Shamu.” He has his phone up already, the camera pointed at me, and he’s wearing a huge shit-eating grin. “Trace will never believe me without proof.”

“Then I guess he’ll never believe you.”

“You’re an asshole.”

Goldie laughs beside me, and Colston immediately swings the phone toward her.

“You heard him, Goldie girl. Back me up.”

“He said *might*, Jenny.”

Colston’s grin drops. “Whose side are you on?”

“His, kiddo. Sorry.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Put the phone away,” I tell him.

He gives me a long, offended look like I’ve just taken something precious from him, but the phone disappears back into his pocket.

Goldie’s smile lingers for another second before it fades. Her fingers curl around mine again, and when she looks back at me, her shoulders draw inward, making her look smaller than she did a second ago. I’ve never seen her hold herself like this.

“I need to tell you the rest of what happened.”

Ellie sets her glass on the island and jerks her head toward the sliding doors. “Come on, Jenny. We’ll go hang out back.”

Colston gives Goldie’s hand one last squeeze before letting go. “I’ll be right outside.”

She nods. “Okay.”

Ellie slides the door open, and Colston follows her into the backyard. She pulls it shut behind them, leaving Goldie and me alone.

I push to my feet and sit beside her. She immediately turns toward me, tucking herself against my side and laying her legs across my lap so she's almost sitting on me. I wrap an arm around her shoulders, and my other hand settles over her stomach without me thinking about it.

Her bump is big enough to fill my palm now, and I fucking love it.

Goldie covers my hand with hers, but instead of making one of the usual comments about me being incapable of keeping my hands off the baby, she stares down at our fingers.

For several seconds, neither of us says anything. The AC hums quietly in the background while I wait her out.

Then Goldie takes a deep breath.

"There's a chance the baby isn't yours."

For a second, I'm not sure I heard her right.

My hand stays on her stomach, but the rest of me locks up. "What?"

She swallows. "Four nights before I met you, Grant and I had sex."

I hate hearing it. I know she had a life before me—hell, technically I'm still married—but that doesn't mean I want to picture anyone but me touching her. I shove the fucked-up mental image away.

"We were still using condoms because we were supposed to start trying that weekend." Her thumb rubs back and forth across one of my knuckles. "He finished, and when he pulled out, we realized the condom broke."

My stomach drops.

I've read enough of the pregnancy shit Goldie sends me—and enough she doesn't know I read—to know the timing doesn't rule Grant out.

I keep my palm against her stomach while my brain tries to catch up with what she's saying.

"When the test came back positive, I didn't question it," she says. Her cheeks turn a little pink as she glances up at me. "You were extremely thorough."

Normally, I'd be smug as fuck about that, but right now I have to remind myself to breathe as the world goes hazy at the edges.

"I forgot about that night completely," she continues. "I didn't think about the broken condom again until Grant brought it up today."

I look down at our hands over her stomach.

Until right now, I've never once questioned that this baby is biologically mine.

I take a slow breath through my nose before I look at her again. I don't want my reaction to scare her before I've even figured out what I'm feeling.

I want this kid to be biologically mine. There's no point lying to myself about that.

And I already love this baby enough that I'd die for it. I'd kill for it. I'd do anything to make sure it's happy and loved.

Goldie's fingers stop moving. When I look up, she's watching me so closely that I can practically see her trying to figure out what every second of silence means.

"I swear I forgot, Sumner."

Fuck. How can she not know I'd never think she'd do something like that? Goldie doesn't play games, and neither do I.

"I know."

"You believe me?"

"Do you even have to ask?" I squeeze her hand. "You found out today and told me today. I believe you."

Some of the tension leaves her face, and that's enough for me to move on.

"What did Grant say after he figured it out?"

"He started talking about a paternity test. Attorneys. Custody if the baby turns out to be his."

My jaw tightens at *custody*.

"I almost called my doctor from the car," she says. "I thought maybe I should find out what kind of test we can do and how soon and have some actual answers before I told you."

I look at her. "But you didn't wait until you had answers. You called me."

Her eyes lift to mine. "Yeah. I needed you. And I wanted you to know. If I didn't tell you right away, it felt like I was hiding something, and I don't want our relationship to be like that."

My fingers tighten around hers. From the beginning, she's made room for me in every part of this pregnancy, even when she was still trying to convince both of us we were only co-parents. She's never made me chase her down for information or wonder where I fit when it comes to the baby.

And today, when she was scared and didn't have a fucking clue what came next, she called me before she tried to figure it out on her own.

I turn my hand under hers and lace our fingers together over her stomach.

“What happens if he’s the biological father?” she asks.

I’ve been trying not to get ten steps ahead of facts we don’t have yet, but this is an easy answer.

“We talk to a lawyer and figure out what we can do to protect you and the baby.” I rub my thumb over the side of her hand. “Grant doesn’t get to dictate what happens next just because he started throwing around scary words.”

Goldie nods, but she’s still chewing on her bottom lip. Her fingers tighten around mine.

Then she looks up at me, her expression turning wary. “And what about you?”

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CHAPTER 29
SUMNER

I KNOW exactly what she's asking.

I shift enough to face her more directly and slide my free hand onto her thigh.

I've told her this repeatedly, but I'll say it a million more times if that's what it takes for my words to sink in.

"I'm not going anywhere, Goldie."

Her eyes turn glassy as they flit between mine, reading everything I'm not saying, looking for the tiniest hint I don't mean what I'm saying.

"Nothing about us changes because Grant figured out there might be a question about the biology of this baby." I rub my thumb over her thigh. "You're still stuck with me making you eat real food when you try to pass off mozzarella sticks as dinner."

Her mouth twitches. "They *are* dinner. They have multiple food groups."

"They have cheese and breading."

"Exactly. Dairy and grains. That's more than one, literally the definition of multiple. Plus I dip them in marinara. That's fruit. Or vegetable." She waves her hand around. "Either way, it's well-rounded."

I almost smile. "We can fight about it later."

She gives me a watery little smile back.

"I'm still this baby's dad. No matter what." I wait until she looks at me. "I made a commitment to you and this kid, Goldie. That wasn't temporary,

and it wasn't something I only meant as long as everything stayed easy. I'm here for all of it. I'm not walking away from either of you. Ever."

Her smile disappears.

"But if Grant is the biological father, he could take the baby. Or have visitation. I could have to send the baby with him and not be there, and he could—"

Her voice catches.

I slide the hand resting on her thigh around her back and pull her tighter against my side, keeping my other palm over her stomach, wrapping myself around her.

"I know."

Her voice is shaky when she says, "You don't know what that would look like."

"No, I don't. Neither do you." I rub my hand slowly over her back. "So we find out if it's even an issue first, and then we figure out the rest."

Her gaze drops to my hand covering her belly.

A second later, there's a nudge against the center of my palm. My fingers spread over the spot, and I wait for another one.

I've been feeling the baby move for a few weeks now, and somehow it still gets me every fucking time.

Another smaller movement rolls beneath my hand, and I can't help but smile.

Goldie watches my hand move as the baby goes to town in there. "But you wanted this baby to be biologically yours."

It's fair of her to assume I'd be upset, and I am, but not as much as she might think.

Pops doesn't share a drop of my blood, and there has never been a single day of my life when that made him any less my dad. He chose me, raised me, showed up for everything, and loved me exactly the same as Dad did. If anyone knows biology isn't what makes someone a father, it's me.

But that doesn't mean biology means nothing to me.

I've wanted kids for as long as I can remember, and yeah, part of that dream was having a child who came from my blood. I want to look at this kid someday and see pieces of Goldie mixed with pieces of me. I want that connection too.

"Yeah," I say. The smile I couldn't help a second ago fades. "I still do."

A tear slips down her cheek, and I wipe it away with my thumb.

“I’m sorry—” she says.

“No.” I grip her chin and force her to look at me. “Listen to me. Really hear what I’m saying.” I wait for her nod before I continue. “I want this baby to be mine in every way imaginable. I’m not going to sit here and pretend I don’t.”

She presses her lips together, and I feel her fingers tighten around my shirt.

“If the test says Grant’s the biological father, it’s going to hurt. I don’t know how much until it happens, and hopefully we never have to find out. But that doesn’t change what I just told you.” My fingers tighten on her chin when she tries to lower her face. “I want this baby. This one. No matter who gave it half of their DNA. That’s *never* going to change.”

Goldie’s trembling, but she lets out a long exhale. It doesn’t stop the tears, but I’d like to think they’re of relief now. Her cheeks are blotchy, her nose is pink, and her hair’s a mess from crying into my neck earlier.

She’s still so fucking beautiful.

“Come here.”

She’s already moving before I finish saying it. I pull her into my chest, and she buries her face under my jaw while I tug her onto my lap.

I hold her tighter, and for half a second I almost say it. The three words that’ve been trying to force their way out for weeks.

I love you.

I stop myself at the last second, but it’s getting harder not to admit the truth out loud.

No doubt the words would reassure her. I know they would. But I also know Goldie. If I tell her for the first time while she’s crying, scared this might be the thing that finally makes me leave, she’ll always wonder if I said it because she needed to hear it, not because I really meant it.

I don’t want our first I love you tangled up in any of this. I don’t want her to look back on the memory of when I told her I loved her for the first time and think of Grant or the stress of this day.

So I press my mouth to her forehead instead.

Goldie sniffles and rubs her forehead back and forth against my neck. “I really thought this would destroy everything.”

I rub my hand slowly over her back. “I know, but I like to think what we have is harder to fuck up than this.”

She holds on to me a little tighter, and I keep rubbing my hand over her back until some of the tension leaves her body.

When she finally lifts her face, I brush the damp hair away from her cheek.

Her hand slides around the back of my neck, and she pulls me down to her.

Her lips are soft against mine and taste a little salty from her tears. I cup the side of her face and kiss her back, slow and easy, while her fingers curl against the back of my neck.

When she finally pulls away, she keeps her forehead against mine. “Thank you for coming home when I called. And for being so understanding.”

I brush my thumb beneath her eye. “You don’t have to thank me for being here when you need me.”

Goldie lets out a wet little laugh. “Ugh, I was almost done crying.”

“Sorry.”

She gives me a look. “No, you’re not.”

“I never want to make you cry, but I can live with happy tears.”

I kiss her again, soft and quick, before I lean back.

Through the glass doors, I can see Colston sitting in one of the patio chairs while Ellie talks beside him, her hands moving almost as much as her mouth. He’s leaned back with one ankle hooked over his knee, watching her gesture through whatever she’s telling him.

Goldie follows my gaze, then shifts off my lap and settles beside me. “You can let them back in.”

I get up and rap my knuckles against the glass.

Colston looks over. I jerk my chin toward the door, and he pushes out of the chair. Ellie turns to see what caught his attention, then gets up too.

A second later, the slider opens and they come back inside. Colston looks at me first.

“You good?”

“Yeah.”

His attention shifts to Goldie. “How ‘bout you, Goldie girl?”

She gives him a watery smile. “I’ve been better.”

He nods without pushing for more, then drops into the chair across from Goldie while Ellie settles onto the other end of the couch.

I sit back down beside Goldie, and she looks at me. “You can tell him.”

I give Colston the short version. By the time I'm done, he's leaning forward with his forearms on his thighs, staring at the floor between his feet.

"Holy shit, that sucks."

I huff out a laugh. "That's one way to put it."

Ellie reaches across the couch and squeezes Goldie's knee while Colston looks at me. He doesn't ask if I'm okay again, but I know him well enough to see that even if I tell him I am, he won't believe me.

I give him a small nod anyway, hoping that's enough to tell him I've got this, and if I need to beat the shit out of a punching bag in the gym later, I'll let him know.

Though now that I've cleared things up with Goldie, what Grant did bursts back to the forefront of my mind right alongside the raging inferno of anger knowing he marked her skin.

Yeah, there's something else I'd like to beat the shit out of, and I turn back to Goldie because now I need to know something very fucking important. "Do you know where I can find Grant?"

Her eyes close and her head falls back. "Damn, you didn't forget about the rest, huh?"

"Goldie."

She lifts her head and eyes me. "Because he grabbed me, or because you just found out he might be the father?"

"The baby isn't why I'm going." I lean forward and brace my forearms on my thighs, forcing myself to keep my voice level. "If he wants a test, his lawyer can deal with ours and figure out how to make that happen. I'm going because he put his fucking hands on you."

"Oh," Ellie says, sitting up with a gleam in her eye. "So you're going to beat on him a little?"

I glance at her then back at Goldie. "I'm not going to *beat on him a little*."

"Uh-huh." Ellie nods. "So a lot then."

Colston coughs out a laugh, and I side-eye him. I can't really argue with any of them when my blood pressure's been sky high since I saw the marks Grant put on Goldie's skin. And Colston knows me well enough to know I'm not gonna just let that shit slide, no matter how calm I look on the outside.

“What?” He holds up both hands. “I’m staying out of it.” He manages to keep a straight face for maybe half a second. “Unless you need backup.”

Then he grins at me, all straight white teeth and absolutely no remorse. He’d be there in a second if I gave him any sort of signal I wanted him there. But no, I need to do this on my own.

Goldie looks between the three of us and drags a hand over her face. “If you insist on doing this, I really have no idea where he might be. I don’t know where he lives now. But if I had to guess, work maybe?”

I blow out a breath, trying to rein in the surge of anticipation burning through my veins. “Okay. Where does he work?”

She stares at me for a second like she’s considering whether refusing to answer will accomplish anything. It will not.

“Privilege.”

Colston’s eyebrows go up. “That douchey club downtown?”

“That’s the one.” Goldie looks back at me. “If he’s working, his car will be in the employee lot behind the building. It’s a silver BMW.”

“He *would* drive a BMW,” Colston mutters.

I shift forward to get up, but Goldie reaches over and catches my chin, turning my attention back to her. “Don’t get thrown in jail, Maverick.”

I’m careful about the way I respond so I don’t make any promises I can’t keep. “I’ll do my best.”

Goldie gives me a flat look. “Should I start Googling bail bondsmen or…?”

I smirk a little. “Nah, that’s why we have Jenny.”

He flips me off. “I’m not an ATM, asshole.”

She lets out a little laugh and crosses her arms, and I’m happy to see a little color come back into her cheeks and a little of that fire that makes Goldie who she is. “We would never take money from you.” She looks back at me. “And we won’t need to because he’s *not* getting arrested.”

“I’m just going to talk to him.”

From across the room, Colston says, “I’ll check the freezer for peas.” He gets up and heads into the kitchen.

Goldie glares after him. “Colston.”

“What? He can’t have his hands swollen for work.”

“We don’t have peas,” I tell him. “There’s an ice pack in the door.”

Colston stops halfway to the freezer and looks back at me. “Even better.”

“I’m not going to need it.”

He grins at me because he knows I’m full of shit.

“You’re being so helpful,” I drawl.

“I know. It’s because I’m awesome.” He takes out his phone and starts tapping. “I’ll make sure Trace’s in the loop, too, because as second best friend we might need him on standby.”

I roll my eyes, pushing to my feet, but before I can take a step, Goldie catches my hand. “I mean it. I need you to come back. I can’t have a baby daddy in jail. What would my friends think?”

Ellie snorts, and I know Goldie’s going for lighthearted, trying to make a joke, but her fingers tighten around mine, and the fear she’s been fighting since I walked through the door is right under the surface of the smile she’s giving me. This isn’t about whether I’m dumb enough to get arrested, which for the record, I’m not.

She needs to know I’m coming back.

I turn my hand and lace our fingers together. “I’ll always come back to you.”

Her eyes stay on mine for another second before she gives me a small nod.

I bend down and kiss her. She slides her free hand around the back of my neck and keeps me there, and I let her, kissing the everloving fuck out of her.

Grant can wait.

By the time I straighten and adjust myself, Colston’s got his phone put away and he and Ellie are doing their best not to look at us.

Colston looks in our direction through parted fingers. “Thank fuck you’re done. That was hot and I really didn’t want to pop wood.”

I laugh and Ellie throws a pillow at him. He catches it and grins at her before he looks back in my direction. He upnods me. “I’ll be hanging here.”

Goldie frowns. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Too late. I already have a whole afternoon planned.” He starts counting on his fingers. “Food, something stupid on TV, and if you get cranky, I’m putting you down for a nap.”

Ellie laughs from the other end of the couch. “I’d love to see you try.”

He points at her. “You can help.”

“Nah.” She settles back against the cushions. “I’m more of an eat popcorn while I watch the shitshow kind of friend.”

Goldie looks between them. “You both suck.”

Colston grins at her. “And yet you still love me. I have the texts to prove it.”

She rolls her eyes. “You really want to bring our texts out into the light of day like this? Because I’ll show Sumner what you said about his—”

He gasps and then glares at her. “You wouldn’t.”

“I hate all three of you,” I mutter.

Goldie laughs, and after the way she looked when I came through the door, I’ll take it.

Colston stretches his long legs out in front of him. “You can hate me all you want. You’re about to drive off in my ride home, so unless somebody wants to spend the rest of the afternoon hauling me back to Tampa, I live here now.”

“God help us,” Ellie says.

“Uber’s a thing,” Goldie adds.

I look at the two of them. Ellie’s settled into the couch like she isn’t going anywhere anytime soon, and Colston has already made himself at home.

Between them, Goldie won’t have time to stress while I’m gone.

I squeeze her hand before letting go, pull my keys from my pocket, and head for the door.

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CHAPTER 30
SUMNER

PRIVILEGE IS a stupid fucking name for a club. What kind of asshole does someone have to be to come up with this bullshit?

The place is still closed when I turn into the employee lot behind the building. It's the middle of the afternoon, so it won't open for hours yet.

The afternoon sun has baked the asphalt until heat rolls off it in visible waves, and the dumpsters along the back wall smell exactly as bad as I'd expect behind a nightclub in this heat.

Goldie's directions were right. A silver BMW's parked near the back of the lot.

I pull into an empty spot a few spaces away, shut off the truck, and sit there while the AC dies and the heat immediately starts creeping in. It only adds to the inferno burning away at me, the one I've kept at bay for the last couple of hours.

It's still contained, but I'm not sure how much longer I can hold it back.

My hands are locked around the steering wheel as I practice box breathing to maintain my composure. When I feel in control, I make myself let go, one finger at a time.

At work I make decisions while adrenaline is trying to convince my body that things need to happen *right fucking now* even if they don't. But I've got lots of practice. I'm good at controlling it. At staying calm while everything around me goes to shit and deciding exactly what I'm going to do next with a clear head.

Right now, I know exactly what I want to do.

I want to break every finger that touched Goldie. I want to make Grant *hurt.* I want him trapped and scared the way he made her feel when he wouldn't let Goldie walk away or threatened her with a battle over the baby.

I also know walking across this parking lot and doing it without Grant laying a hand on me first would be fucking stupid. From what Goldie said, he's already pissed off.

So I'll keep pushing.

I'll remind him of every way Goldie tossed him out like the trash he is and chose me.

All I need is for him to be stupid enough to give me a reason.

One reason to unleash. In defense, of course.

A few minutes later, the metal service door bangs against the brick wall and a guy steps outside with his phone in one hand and keys in the other. The door swings shut behind him.

Between the white linen shirt, tan pants, and designer sunglasses over his eyes, he looks exactly like somebody who works at a place called Privilege.

What did Goldie see in this asshole?

He glances at his phone as he starts across the lot toward the BMW. It's the only other vehicle here besides my truck, so this has got to be the shithead I'm looking for.

I open my door and step into the heat.

"Grant?"

He looks up and slows when he sees me standing beside the truck. "Yeah?"

I shut the door and walk toward him. "I'm Sumner."

His mouth tightens. Good, he knows who I am. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I came to find out why the fuck you thought putting your hands on my girlfriend was okay."

Grant glances toward the closed service door behind him. "She sent you?"

I almost laugh. He must be the kind of man who lets other people fight their battles for him. But he's about to learn we're not the same because I have no problem handling my shit all on my own. And Grant? He's a problem that needs to be taken care of.

"No."

His mouth pulls into a sneer as he shoves his phone into his pocket. “Then this has nothing to do with you. Whatever happened between me and Goldie is none of your business.”

I stop a few feet away, close enough that neither of us has to raise our voice over the idling delivery truck. Sweat is already prickling at the back of my neck, but I keep my hands loose at my sides.

“Did you know you left marks on her arm? That makes it my fucking business.” The image of them flashes through my head again, four red fingerprints imprinted into her skin, and I have to remind myself why I’m waiting instead of putting him on the ground right now.

Grant shifts his weight and shakes his head. “Jesus Christ. I grabbed her because she kept trying to walk away while I was talking. It wasn’t a big deal.”

“I don’t give a fuck why you grabbed her.”

“If she’d just listened to me, I wouldn’t have had to touch her.” He rolls his eyes. “You’re acting like I beat on her or something.”

For half a second, everything inside me goes quiet, like I just punched through the eyewall.

He says it like Goldie caused the whole thing by refusing to do what he told her. Like putting his hands on her was some reasonable consequence for her trying to walk away from him instead of standing there and taking his shit.

My heartbeat pounds in my ears.

“No.” I take another step toward him, close enough now that he has to tip his chin up to hold my stare. “If you’d hit her, this would be a much different conversation.”

Grant puffs himself up, but I’m not done.

“Did it make you feel powerful to push your weight around? To force yourself on her?”

The muscle in Grant’s jaw flexes, and I can almost hear his teeth grinding together.

“I don’t know how you spent five years with Goldie and didn’t figure out that when she tells you she’s done with a conversation, you leave her the fuck alone.”

He scoffs. “You’ve known her for what? A few months?”

“Your point? It doesn’t change what you did.”

His mouth twists, but he keeps it shut.

I let the silence hang there for a second before I shrug. “You can tell yourself I don’t know her. Doesn’t change where she went the second she got away from you.” I smirk at him. “Where do you think that was?”

I let him stew in the silence for another beat. Two. Then I lean forward the tiniest fraction and fill him in. “Straight to me.”

Grant goes still, and a flush starts creeping up his neck. For the first time since I walked over here, some of the attitude slips off his face.

I give him another metaphorical push. “Back to a life where you’re nothing. Not even a thought in her head.”

Then his whole expression changes. His mouth slowly curves into a smug smile, and he straightens, like he just realized something that’ll let him hit back at me.

“Enjoy playing house while you can. If that baby’s mine, everything changes.”

“A paternity test doesn’t put you back in Goldie’s life. It doesn’t change shit between her and me.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” His voice gets louder as he steps toward me. “But if that kid is mine, I’ll go for custody. Full custody. I’ll make her fucking beg me every time she wants to see her own kid.”

The inferno inside flickers from blue flame to white, and my vision narrows.

For one second, I almost forget the whole reason I’m holding back and put him through the side of his car. The thought of Goldie having to hand our baby over to this piece of shit, of him using a child to force his way back into her life because she had the nerve to realize she deserves better, hits hard enough that I shift toward him before I stop myself.

“You can ask for whatever the fuck you want,” I say. “If you want a paternity test, have your lawyer contact ours and we’ll handle it. But if you think sharing DNA with this baby gives you an excuse to force your way back into Goldie’s life, you’re even stupider than I thought.”

Grant squares his shoulders. “If that’s my kid, she’s going to have to deal with me.”

“About the baby. That’s it.”

“You don’t get to decide that.”

“I don’t need to decide. I know that’s how it’ll be.”

“If I’m the father—”

"*If.* You might be the biological father." I hold his stare. "But that doesn't mean I'm going anywhere. That doesn't make you their dad."

He lets out a disbelieving laugh, but there's nothing amused about it. "Pretty sure being the biological father literally makes me the dad."

"It makes you the guy who contributed DNA. Being a dad is everything that comes after. Telling me you're going to use the baby against Goldie—that you'll use them to make her suffer—shows exactly what kind of sperm donor you are."

Grant's chest rises harder with every breath. The keys are buried so tightly in his fist now that the edges have to be digging into his palm.

I hope they draw blood.

"You don't know shit about our relationship."

"I know enough." I let my gaze drag over him in the most judgmental way possible. I hope he can see the *try me, fucker* in my expression. "I know you cheated on her. I know you put your hands on her today. And I know after five years with you, it took her about five minutes to figure out she deserved better."

"Fuck you."

I smile. "Nah, unlike you, I don't stick my dick just anywhere."

His face goes red. "You think you're so much fucking better than me?"

"Goldie does."

That's what does it, what finally pushes him over the edge.

Grant drops his keys and lunges, throwing a wild right hook straight at my face.

I see the punch coming before it gets anywhere near me. Grant telegraphs the whole thing with his shoulder, and all the practice I have reacting when shit goes sideways takes over. I slip out of the path of his fist, catch his wrist as it sails past my face, and use his momentum to turn him.

He gets out half a curse before I drive him chest-first across the trunk of his BMW.

The metal makes a hollow thud under his weight. He tries to shove himself back up off the scorching surface, but I lean into him and pin him there.

I twist his right arm behind him. Grant swears and tries to wrench free, but I lean my weight across his back and keep his wrist cranked high enough that every time he fights me, he only makes it hurt worse.

I look down at his right hand. The one he used to swing at me. The one he was holding his keys in. Probably the same one he used to grab Goldie.

Ever since I saw those fingerprints on her arm, I've wanted to break every finger that left them.

So that's what I'm going to do.

I check the building for cameras, but don't see any, and I focus back in on Grant.

I ease his arm out from behind his back, but before he can take advantage of the extra room, I stretch it across the trunk beside him. I pin his wrist to the hot metal with my left hand and keep my weight pressed into his back so he can't push himself up.

"I told Goldie I was just coming here to talk."

Grant twists his head enough to look back at me. "This is your idea of fucking talking?"

I grunt as he bucks against me, trying to get free. "We exchanged words. Technically that's talking. But the time for conversation is done. Now come the consequences of your actions."

I hook my fingers around his index finger and bend it backward.

Grant's body freezes beneath me. "What the fuck are you—"

I keep pushing until the resistance suddenly gives. A hard crack snaps through the air, and the finger folds back more than it should.

His scream rips across the empty parking lot.

Grant bucks hard beneath me, trying to wrench his arm free, but I keep his wrist pinned to the trunk and use my weight to hold him there.

"You fucking psycho!" His voice cracks around the pain. "I'm calling the cops!"

"Please do." I tighten my grip when he tries to pull away again. "Make sure you tell them about the part where you threw the first punch."

"This isn't fucking self-defense!"

Probably not anymore. Can't say that I care all that much.

I move to his middle finger. This time he knows exactly what I'm about to do, and panic kicks in before I even start bending it. He starts trying to buck me off, but I'm taller and have at least twenty pounds on him.

"No. Don't—"

The joint fights me for a second before it gives with another hard crack. Grant screams and thrashes against the car, his shoes scraping uselessly against the asphalt while I keep him stretched across the trunk.

I want every second of this to stick with him. The pain. The fear. Knowing he can't get away from me. So the next time he even thinks about putting his hands on a woman, he remembers exactly what it cost him the first time.

I fuck up his ring finger next.

"Wait." His voice comes out rough and breathless now. "Fuck, man. Stop."

The begging starts before I even put pressure on it, and there's a wet break in his voice that sounds a hell of a lot like he's crying.

"Please. Fuck. Please don't—"

The finger gives beneath my hand with a sharp snap, and whatever fight he had left disappears. His body sags against the BMW, his forehead dropping to the hot metal while these broken, miserable sounds work their way out of him every time he breathes.

Three down.

Two left.

I don't rush.

Grant knows what's coming now, and judging by the way his entire arm is trembling beneath my hand, the waiting hurts almost as much as the broken fingers do.

"Sumner." He swallows hard. "Man, please. I get it. I swear."

Now he sounds scared instead of pissed off.

That's what I wanted.

I curl my hand around his pinky and bend it backward. He makes a strangled noise and squeezes his eyes shut right before another crack cuts through the air.

His knees buckle beneath him, but the trunk and my weight keep him from hitting the ground.

"Stop," he gasps. "Jesus Christ. I fucking get it."

I look down at his thumb.

He follows my gaze, and fresh panic wipes what little color is left from his face.

"No. Come on, man. I said I fucking get it."

I wrap my fingers around his thumb.

Grant starts begging again, louder this time, promising me whatever the fuck he thinks I want to hear. That he'll stay away from Goldie. That he won't touch her again. That he's sorry.

Maybe he even means it right now.

I bend his thumb back until the joint gives beneath my hand. His scream turns hoarse halfway through, but it's done.

Then I let him go.

Grant stumbles sideways and almost eats shit before catching himself against the BMW with his good hand. He cradles the other one against his chest, every finger already swelling and sitting wrong while his entire body shakes from the pain.

I straighten and look at what I did.

A hard pulse of satisfaction hits me as I take in the damage. Grant's hurting. He's scared. Exactly like I wanted. For the first time since I saw those marks on Goldie, I don't feel like tearing the world apart.

He looks up at me through crooked sunglasses, his face pale and damp with sweat.

I take one step toward him, and he flinches backward so fast his hip hits the car.

Now he understands.

"If you ever touch Goldie like that again, I won't stop at your hand."

His throat works as he swallows. "I'm going to the police."

I chuckle, and he stumbles back a step. "With what proof?"

He holds up his mangled hand.

"Looks like you were fucking around and someone ran over your hand. You should be more careful next time."

His shoulders slump because he knows I'm right. It's his word against mine.

"And that bullshit about using the baby to hurt her?" I shake my head. "You want the paternity test, get the fucking test. Anything you're legally entitled to after that, the lawyers can sort out."

I point at him.

"But you threaten her with the baby again, corner her again, grab her again, or give me any reason to think you're trying to scare her, you and I are going to have another conversation."

Grant looks down at his destroyed hand.

I don't need to explain what I mean.

I bend down and grab his keys from the asphalt, then set them on the trunk beside him.

"You might want to get somebody else to drive you to the hospital."

He doesn’t say anything.

For once, Grant seems to have figured out when it’s time to shut the fuck up.

I turn away and head back toward my truck. My pulse is still running high, and sweat has my shirt sticking to my back, but the rage I’ve been carrying around since I saw those marks on Goldie finally feels manageable again.

I pull the driver’s door open.

Goldie’s waiting for me to come back to her.

So that’s exactly what I’m going to do.

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CHAPTER 31
GOLDIE

Twenty-One Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a carrot.

THE TRIP to Costco was supposed to keep me from checking the lab portal every time I touch my phone, but I'm standing beside a pallet of paper towels doing exactly that.

We did the paternity test earlier this week. The lab took my blood, swabbed the inside of Sumner's cheek, and sent us home to wait while they did whatever science happens between sample collection and telling people whose DNA made a baby. Since then, I've checked the portal enough times that I could probably log in with my eyes closed.

Sumner stops the cart beside me. "Anything?"

"Nope." I turn the screen toward him long enough to show him the same word we've been staring at all week. "Pending. I hate that word now, by the way."

"I figured you'd tell me the second it changed."

"You mean the second after I stop freaking out."

His mouth twitches, and I lock my phone before dropping it back into my purse.

The place is packed, as per usual. Somebody has abandoned a giant flatbed in the middle of the aisle, a woman farther up is trying to steer a cart

while her kids orbit her, and a guy in front of us has stopped dead to stare at a wall of vitamins.

Sumner hits the brakes before we run into him. “This place is like the Wild West.”

I look up at him because this is where he draws the line. “Says the guy who flies into literal hurricanes.”

“Hurricanes have structure,” he says, completely serious, and I laugh while we wait for vitamin guy to figure his shit out.

We came here for my blackberry sparkling water and paper towels. That was the entire list. Somehow the cart already contains a huge pack of paper towels, a tub of Sumner’s protein powder, chips I don’t remember grabbing, and a blanket I don’t need but touched once and then refused to put back.

Costco does this to people.

The second the aisle clears, I spot a woman in a hairnet handing out tiny paper cups behind a folding table and veer toward her.

“Where are you going?” Sumner asks as he follows with the cart.

“Uh, getting a sample?” I nod toward the warming tray with a *duh* look on my face. “I can smell sausage.”

That’s all the information I need. The woman hands me a paper cup with a piece of sausage stabbed through with a toothpick, and I pop it into my mouth while Sumner pulls up beside me.

He watches me chew. “I’m guessing we’re buying those now.”

I point the toothpick at him. “See, you’re learning.”

“We have sausage at home.”

“Not this sausage.”

Sumner stares at me, then reaches past me for a sample of his own. “You know what? Fine.” I swear I hear him murmur, “When in Rome,” under his breath.

I grin while he takes a bite, and by the time we leave the sample table, a bulk pack of sausage is wedged into the cart.

I don’t say a word. It’s the Costco effect, and the sooner he accepts it, the better.

I make it through a few more aisles before I realize Sumner isn’t beside me anymore. I turn around and find him standing in front of a pallet stacked with giant boxes of baby wipes, reading the packaging while the cart sits parked against his hip.

“What are you doing?”

He glances over. “Trying to figure out if these are worth buying.”

I walk back toward him and look at the box. “That’s enough wipes for an entire daycare.”

“Good. Then we won’t run out.”

I look from the box to him. “You know this kid still has a few months before we need those, right?”

“It’s not like they go bad, and we’re here now.” He checks the price one more time, then lifts the box into the cart. “I don’t want to come back for as long as possible.”

I stare at him for a second before following as he starts pushing the cart again.

That’s all the justification this man needs to buy a box of baby wipes big enough to have its own gravitational pull.

The last week has sucked. Every time my phone buzzes, my stomach drops, and I’ve spent way too much time imagining what happens if the result says Sumner isn’t the father.

Sumner looks like he’s fine. Okay, that’s not quite right. He’s maybe a little nervous. But he doesn’t seem to be on the edge of his world ending or anything the way I am.

He told me he was this baby’s dad no matter what the test said, then went right on proving it by not changing a single thing.

My throat gets a little tight.

I’ve already admitted the part that scares me most: I love him. I knew it for sure the day Grant dropped this whole paternity nightmare into our lives and I realized how much I had to lose.

What I haven’t figured out is when the hell I’m supposed to tell Sumner.

He looks back when he realizes I’ve slowed down. “You coming?”

“Yeah.” I catch up and bump my shoulder into his arm. “What are we sampling next?”

By the time we make it through checkout, I’m feeling a bit shell-shocked. I’m staring at the receipt in awe but also a fair splash of horror while Sumner pushes everything toward the exit. I’m trying to figure out how paper towels and sparkling water turned into this much money.

“There’s something wrong with this place,” I decide.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s like magic. *Poof,* and things just appear in your cart. Next thing you know, you’ve spent a thousand dollars and don’t know what happened.

But it’s also… fun?”

He laughs as the doors slide open and the Florida heat hits us hard enough to fog my sunglasses for a second.

We’re almost to the truck when my phone buzzes inside my purse, and my hand immediately plunges inside to dig it out.

The email preview fills the screen, and my steps slow to a stop when I read the subject line.

New laboratory results are available.

For a second, I just stand there staring at it.

Sumner makes it a few steps with the cart before he realizes I’m no longer beside him. When he turns and sees my face, the smile disappears.

“The results?”

I nod and glance around the parking lot. A cart rattles somewhere behind me, cars crawl up and down the row looking for spaces, and a family nearby is trying to fit what looks like an entire living room into the back of an SUV.

There are too many people around for this.

“I can’t open it out here.”

“Then we won’t.”

Sumner unlocks the truck and starts loading everything into the back.

I shove my phone into my purse and help him. The stuff we actually came for goes in with everything we somehow acquired along the way, and Sumner lifts the box of wipes in last.

My stomach twists when I look at it.

Once the cart is empty, he hands me his keys. “Go start the truck. I’ll take this back.”

I don’t argue. I climb into the passenger seat, start the engine, and crank the air while Sumner jogs the cart over to the return.

By the time he gets back, I have my phone in my hand again.

He shuts the driver’s door and looks at me. “Ready?”

“No.” I unlock the screen anyway. “But sitting here longer probably isn’t going to help.”

“Probably not.”

I turn my head. “You could at least lie to me.”

“What’s the point? You’d know I was lying.”

Unfortunately, he’s right.

I pull up the email. Before I tap the link, Sumner holds out his hand across the console, and I take it.

His fingers close around mine. He looks calm until I notice how hard his jaw is clenched.

We sit there holding hands for I don't know how long while I stare at the link. Finally, I mutter "fuck it" and tap it, only for the lab portal to dump me onto the login screen. "Oh, come on."

Sumner leans closer. "What?"

"They send me an email telling me my results are ready, then make me log in again to see them?"

"That's probably a good thing security-wise."

"Maybe when I'm not two seconds from having a nervous breakdown."

I type my password too fast, and an error message pops up.

"Fuck."

His thumb moves over the side of my hand. "Take your time."

"Stop being reasonable. It's irritating."

His mouth twitches, which is probably the closest either of us is getting to a laugh right now.

I type the password again, slower this time, and the portal finally opens. The new result is sitting at the top, and my heart starts pounding harder when I tap it.

A PDF opens with our names and a bunch of sample information, followed by several lines of lab terminology I couldn't give less of a shit about. I start scrolling.

"Why can't they just put the answer at the top?" I mutter. "Just a simple *you are the father*, Maury-style."

Sumner chuckles as he leans closer, his shoulder pressing against mine while we both stare at the screen.

Then I see his name and my thumb stops.

Probability of Paternity: 99.99%

Right underneath it:

Conclusion: Sumner Wells is not excluded as the biological father.

I read both lines again because this is one thing I refuse to misunderstand.

“This means you’re the biological father, right?”

Sumner takes the phone from my trembling hand and reads it himself. His eyes move over the result, then go back to the top before his shoulders finally drop on a long breath.

“Yeah.” His voice sounds rough when he looks at me. “That’s what it means.”

A laugh bursts out of me at the same time my eyes fill, and suddenly I’m laughing and crying at the same time like a fucking lunatic.

Sumner is still staring at the screen, but I’m watching him.

He spent the entire week making sure I knew nothing would change if this didn’t go our way, and I believed him when he said it. The relief on his face tells me how much of that calm was for my benefit.

His eyes close for a moment, and one hand comes up over his mouth. When he opens them again, they’re wet.

“The baby’s mine.”

“Yeah.”

The smile that takes over his face is so big and unguarded that my chest squeezes. He hands my phone back and immediately reaches for my stomach, spreading both hands over the bump and leaning over the center console to get closer.

“Hey, kid.” A shaky laugh slips out of him as he rubs both hands over my stomach. “Fuck. You really are mine.”

I cover one of his hands with mine. I’ve spent the last week so scared of what that stupid report might say that having the answer right here in front of me almost feels unreal.

Sumner looks up at me, still smiling, and I laugh when a tear makes it down my cheek.

“Shit.”

“Come here.”

He slides one hand around the back of my neck and pulls me toward him. I go willingly, meeting him over the console while his mouth finds mine.

The kiss is a little awkward because of the space between the seats and my stomach getting in the way, but neither of us seems to give a shit. I grab

the front of his shirt and kiss him back while all the tension I've been carrying around for the last week finally starts draining out of me.

When his thumb moves slowly against the side of my neck, I think about telling him I love him.

I want to. Badly.

But so much of us has happened with this baby right in the middle of it. We met because we both wanted one. Figuring out what we are, moving in together, building this whole weird little life—it all happened while my stomach kept getting bigger.

I want the first time I tell Sumner I love him to belong to us.

Just me and him.

So I keep it to myself for now, even though I'm starting to think waiting much longer might actually kill me.

I just need to figure out how the hell I'm actually going to say it.

When we finally pull apart, Sumner stays close, his hand still curled around the back of my neck.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." I wipe under my eyes with the heel of my hand. "Just really fucking relieved."

His expression softens. "Me too."

I look down at the phone still clutched in my hand and remember there's one more person who needs to see this.

"I need to send the report to my lawyer."

Sumner leans back into his seat while I open the email thread. She told me to send the results as soon as they came in so she could deal with Grant's attorney and make sure there wasn't anything else we needed to do.

I attach the report and type out a quick message.

The paternity results came in, and Sumner is the father. I've attached the report. Please let me know if you need anything else from me.

I read it once, hit send, and drop my phone into the cup holder.

"There."

Sumner takes my hand and brings my knuckles to his mouth, pressing a kiss against them before threading his fingers through mine.

For a few seconds, we just sit there in the cold air blowing from the vents while people push carts past the truck and hunt for parking spaces

around us.

Meanwhile, the giant knot that's been sitting in my stomach all week is finally gone.

Grant can't claim this baby is his anymore. He can't use paternity to force his way back into my life or hold custody over my head.

I squeeze Sumner's hand.

"Can we go home now?"

His thumb moves over my knuckles as he shifts the truck into reverse. "Yeah."

I settle back into my seat while Sumner backs out of the space with one hand on the wheel and the other still holding mine.

I look over at him and catch that giant grin still stuck on his face.

"You're gonna smile like that all the way home, aren't you?"

"Right now, baby, I feel like I'll never stop."

I squeeze his hand. "I hope you don't."

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CHAPTER 32
GOLDIE

Twenty-Five Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a cauliflower.

THE PROBLEM with watching *The Day After Tomorrow* with a man who literally flies airplanes into hurricanes is that every time the movie does something scientifically offensive, Sumner makes this low noise beside me like somebody just insulted his mother.

Or father, I guess.

Whatever.

He's done it at least six times already.

"You know that can't happen, right?" he asks when the temperature on-screen drops fast enough to freeze everything in its path.

I slowly turn my head.

Sumner's stretched out against the headboard beside me in slutty gray sweatpants and no shirt. Basically what he wears all the time because he knows it makes me drool.

One arm is folded behind his head, and the other is resting over the giant U-shaped pregnancy pillow currently taking up most of the middle of our mattress.

He isn't even trying to be hot. The position has his chest and stomach stretched out on display, his sweatpants sitting low enough on his hips that I can see the cut of muscle disappearing beneath the waistband. Heat gathers

low in my stomach, and I shift under the blanket and drag my attention back to his face.

"I swear to god, if you ruin this movie for me, I'm putting on *Sharknado* next."

Sumner turns his head and gives me a look. "You wouldn't."

"Try me."

I reach into the popcorn bowl and shove a few pieces into my mouth while he looks back at the television. He lasts maybe ten seconds before he scoffs again.

"That isn't how air pressure works."

I groan and let my head fall against the pillow. "Oh my god. Nobody cares how it works."

"I care."

"Yeah, I know. It's becoming a problem."

He reaches over without looking and steals a piece of popcorn from my bowl.

I slap his hand. "And now you're eating my snacks while ruining my movie."

"I'm the one who made the popcorn."

"Irrelevant."

His mouth twitches, but he keeps his eyes on the screen.

I point the remote at him anyway. "One more weather lecture and we're watching sharks get sucked into a tornado."

Sumner glances at the remote, then back at the television. I'm guessing he sees that I mean business.

"Fine."

I smile and reach for another handful of popcorn.

Movie night was my idea because I spent most of today on my feet at Bombshell, and by the time I got home, my feet were swollen, my hips hurt, and my lower back was officially done carrying around the extra weight attached to the front of me.

Now I'm wearing one of Sumner's old T-shirts, my hair is piled on top of my head, and I'm wedged into the giant pillow he bought me with no intention of moving unless the house catches fire.

Even then, I'd get him to carry me.

The whole not wanting to move thing sucks because I have to pee roughly every fourteen seconds now.

Being pregnant is glamorous as fuck.

I'm halfway through another handful of popcorn when the baby rolls hard against the right side of my stomach. My hand immediately settles over the spot, and Sumner turns his attention to me.

"Was that the baby?"

"Yeah." I set the popcorn on the nightstand and pause the movie before holding my hand out to him. "Come here."

Sumner rolls onto his side and moves closer while I push the hem of the T-shirt up over my stomach. Somewhere along the way, this became one of those things we both prefer skin-to-skin. He swears he can feel the baby better without fabric in the way, and I'm not exactly complaining about having his warm hand spread over my skin every chance I get.

I take his wrist and guide his palm to the spot where I felt the movement. "Right here."

Sumner goes quiet, his thumb brushing once over my skin while we wait for the baby to do it again.

Naturally, the baby doesn't.

I glance at Sumner. He's still watching my stomach, waiting with the same patient focus he brings to pretty much everything.

"You know the baby probably knows you're waiting and is doing this on purpose, right?"

His thumb brushes slowly over my skin. "If that's true, I know exactly where the baby got it."

I snort. "Asshole."

Before I can defend myself, the baby kicks.

Sumner's whole face lights up. The crease between his eyebrows disappears, and this huge smile spreads across his face as he looks down at my stomach.

I smile too because I can't help it.

He's felt the baby move plenty of times by now, but he still gets this adorably happy look every time he catches one of the kicks, like it's the coolest thing that's ever happened to him.

"There you are," he says quietly, rubbing his thumb over the spot where the baby kicked. "Hey, kid."

I smile at him, because the way he talks to my stomach like the baby might understand him still gets me. Then the nickname catches in my head.

“We really should figure out what we’re calling this kid once they’re not living inside me anymore.”

Sumner’s gaze lifts to mine. “You’ve been thinking about names?”

“A little.”

He gives me a look that says he doesn’t believe that for a second.

I sigh and shift deeper into the pregnancy pillow. “Fine. I’ve made lists, browsed Reddit forums, and finally narrowed it down to one for a girl and one for a boy.”

Sumner shifts a little higher against the pillows, but his hand stays where it is. “You already have both?”

“I do.”

We hadn’t even talked about it before the anatomy scan. The tech asked if we wanted to know the sex, Sumner looked at me, I looked at him, and for whatever reason we both decided we’d rather wait. So when she got to the part of the scan that could give it away, she warned us and we looked away from the monitor until she was done.

I still can’t believe neither of us has changed our minds.

He nods and settles back against the headboard. “Alright. Let’s hear them.”

For some reason, now that I have to say the first one out loud, I’m a little nervous. I’ve been rolling it around in my head long enough that I know I like it and have become attached, but that doesn’t necessarily mean Sumner won’t look at me like I just suggested naming our child Braxtynleigh or something.

“Okay. For a girl, I really like Frankie.”

He looks down at my stomach for a second while his hand stays warm against my skin. “Frankie Wells.”

I watch his face while he says it, trying to figure out what he thinks. He looks thoughtful more than anything, which is way better than horrified or disgusted.

“Well?” I ask when he doesn’t say anything else.

Sumner looks back at me and smiles. “I like it.”

I laugh because I didn’t realize how badly I wanted him to like it until he did. “You do?”

He nods, tracing his fingers slowly over my stomach. “Yeah. I really do.”

“Okay, good, because I’ve gotten kind of attached to it.” I tuck a loose piece of hair behind my ear and cover his hand with mine.

Sumner turns his hand beneath mine and links our fingers together. “Where’d Frankie come from?”

I shrug. “I’ve always liked the name, and Frankie Wells just sounds fucking cool.”

Sumner smiles. “It does.”

“And I already know the middle name.”

He gives my hand a squeeze. “Yeah?”

“Jo.”

He looks at me. “For your mom?”

“Yeah.”

I’ve always known Mom was sixteen when she had me, but being pregnant has made me think about what that really looked like. At sixteen, I was still living under her roof, asking her for money, forgetting half the shit she told me to do, and thinking I was basically an adult because I knew everything.

But she had a whole-ass baby to take care of.

“I don’t think I really understood how young she was until now,” I say, rubbing my fingers over the back of Sumner’s hand. “How much she did for me when she was just a kid herself.”

His fingers tighten around mine.

“She had me, my dad took off almost the second she peed on the stick, and she still figured everything out. She worked, took care of me, made sure I had what I needed, and somehow didn’t murder me when I was a teenager, which honestly feels like a miracle.”

Sumner laughs, and I rub my thumb over his knuckles.

“So,” I say, looking down at my stomach, “Frankie Jo Wells.”

He stays quiet for a few seconds, considering it.

“Frankie Jo Wells,” he repeats, then looks back at me. “Yeah. I really like it.”

I smile. “Mom’s going to cry.”

“A lot,” he says, squeezing my hand.

“And then swear she isn’t crying while tears are running down her face.”

Sumner laughs. “That sounds about right.”

I grin. Well, that went way easier than I expected.

Sumner gives my hand a squeeze. “Okay. What about a boy?”

I untangle my fingers from his so I can roll onto my other hip, hauling the bottom of the pregnancy pillow between my knees once I’m settled. Sumner shifts with me and rests his hand against the side of my stomach again.

I’m a little more nervous about this one. Not because I think he’ll hate the name, but because there’s a reason behind it, and I’m curious how quickly he’ll figure out where it came from.

“Dane.”

Sumner considers it for a few seconds before saying it with our last name. “Dane Wells.”

“Dane *Mark* Wells.”

His eyes lift to mine as soon as I add the middle name, and the smile on his face softens.

“Mark,” he says.

I smile. “Yeah. That part was easy.”

I run my fingertips over his wrist where his hand rests on my stomach. “Dane’s my own spin on Daniel.”

His eyebrows lift.

“I thought about using Daniel somewhere, but I like that Dane gives the baby his own name while still tying him to your dad.” I smile. “And Mark is Mark. Middle names don’t really give us our identity the way first names do.”

Sumner stays quiet for a few seconds, looking down at my stomach while his palm moves slowly over the roundness of it. When he finally looks back at me, his eyes are shiny, and his throat moves when he swallows hard.

“You really like it?”

“I love it.”

The roughness in his voice makes my chest squeeze, but I decide to be nice and not call attention to the fact that he’s getting emotional.

“So... that’s it?” I ask.

His eyebrows pull together. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t have any names you want to throw at me?”

He shakes his head. “Why mess with perfection?”

I laugh. “Just like that?”

“They’re good names, Goldie.” His hand slides slowly over my stomach again. “I care what we name our kid. I don’t care which one of us thought of it first.”

Well, fuck.

I smile at him. “You know that’s a dangerous amount of trust to put in me.”

“You’re the one growing the baby. If we ever disagree, you get the tie-breaker.”

“See, this is why I love you. You say things like that and make it really hard for me to be unreasonable.”

Sumner goes still.

My smile hangs there for another second before my brain catches up with my mouth.

Oh.

Oh.

When I look at his face, he looks almost as surprised as I feel.

“Well, fuck.”

A quiet laugh slips out of him, but he doesn’t take his eyes off me.

Heat spreads up my chest and into my face, and I pull the blanket a little higher over my legs mostly because I need something to do with my hands. “That wasn’t exactly how I planned to say that.”

“You planned to say it?” His voice is softer now, and the way he’s looking at me makes my stomach feel weird and fluttery in a way that has nothing to do with the baby.

“I almost did the other night,” I admit. “Then you tried to burn the house down.”

His eyes narrow for a second before he remembers. “When we got the paternity results.”

“Yeah.”

Sumner watches me for a long moment. The amusement disappears from his face, and my pulse starts picking up because suddenly this feels a whole lot bigger than it did when the words accidentally fell out of my mouth.

“Did you mean it?”

The question knocks the last of the embarrassment out of me.

“Yeah.” My voice is soft between us. “I meant it.”

His hand leaves my stomach and slides around the back of my neck. The warmth of his palm against my skin sends a shiver down my spine, and I wrap my fingers around his wrist without really thinking about it.

“Then say it again.”

My throat tightens.

He waits until I meet his eyes. “Please.”

The first one slipped out while I was busy giving him shit. So much for telling him when we weren’t in the middle of baby stuff. Still, this time, I know exactly what I’m saying, and somehow that makes me more nervous, not less.

But I pull up my big girl panties and give him the words he deserves. “I love you, Sumner Wells.”

His eyes close for a second, and when they open again, they’re shiny and so, so intense. His jaw tightens like he’s trying to keep himself together, but the smile that spreads across his face ruins the effort completely.

“Fuck, Goldie.”

He leans in like he’s going to kiss me, then stops when our noses bump and my glasses hit him in the face.

I laugh, and Sumner reaches for them.

“Give me those.”

I let him slide them off my face, and he sets them onto the nightstand before coming back to me.

Then he takes my face between his hands and kisses me.

My palm slides over his bare chest and around his shoulder as I turn toward him, and Sumner braces one arm behind my upper back so I can lean into him without trying to fold myself around my stomach. There’s only so close we can get now, but neither of us seems particularly interested in giving up.

He kisses me until I’m a little breathless, then pulls back enough that I can make out his face without my glasses.

“You know I love you too, right?”

I don’t know what I expected him to say. I’m not sure I’d even let myself think that far ahead when I finally got the nerve to tell him.

But hearing it makes my breath catch, and then my eyes start burning.

Damn it.

I drop my forehead against his shoulder before the tears can really get going. “These hormones suck.”

Sumner laughs softly and wraps both arms around me, one across my upper back and the other settling over my thigh as I curl as close to him as my stomach will allow.

“Pretty sure this one isn’t the pregnancy.”

“Look who’s suddenly an expert on my tears.”

His chest moves beneath my cheek when he laughs again.

I stay there for another second, listening to his heartbeat and trying to get my stupid face under control before I lift my head.

I wipe beneath one eye with the heel of my palm. “Will you tell me again?”

His expression softens.

“I love you, Goldie.”

God.

I kiss him before he can see me start crying again.

“I’ve wanted to tell you that for a while.”

I pull back just enough to look at him. “You have?”

“Yeah.”

I stare at him for a second. “Then why didn’t you?”

Sumner runs his hand over my thigh. “Because for a while there, you were still waiting for me to decide I wanted out.”

I start to argue, but he’s not wrong.

“And if I’d told you I loved you before you were ready to hear it, you would’ve spent the next however long wondering if I expected you to say it back.” He looks at me. “Then every time I was tired or quiet or pissed about something else, you’d convince yourself it was because you hadn’t.”

You know what?

That’s exactly what I would’ve done, and damn him for knowing me so well.

“Okay, yeah. That’s uncomfortably accurate.”

Sumner smiles and lets his forehead rest against mine. “That’s because I know you.”

“Yeah, well, maybe know me a little less. You’re making it really hard to lie to myself.”

He laughs, and I feel it through the arm wrapped around me.

I settle my cheek against his shoulder again and run my palm over his chest. “Thank you.”

His fingers stop moving against my leg. “For what?”

“For not doing that to me. For always putting me first.”

Sumner presses a kiss into my hair. “You didn’t owe me anything. Still don’t.”

My throat starts tightening again, and I’ve officially had enough feelings for one night.

I lift my head and kiss him.

The kiss gets deeper, and I slide my hand over his shoulder as he shifts with me on the mattress, making room for my stomach instead of trying to pull me straight into him. The pregnancy pillow is still wedged between my legs, though, and after it gets in the way for the second time, I make an irritated noise against his mouth.

Sumner pulls back, breathing a little harder now. “What?”

“This thing has got to go.”

I start kicking at the bottom of the pillow until he laughs and reaches down to help me drag it out from between us.

“You begged me to buy that.”

“And I love it dearly, but right now it’s interfering with my plans.”

His attention comes straight back to me. “What plans?”

I look him over.

There are faint red marks along the back of his neck from my nails, and his sweatpants are still sitting low on his hips in a way that was already distracting me before he told me he loved me.

As if I needed more problems.

I slide my hand down his stomach and stop at the waistband.

“I think you can figure it out.”

His eyes drop to my hand before coming back to my face, and my body responds to the look he gives me before he even touches me.

Pregnancy has made sleeping uncomfortable, shaving a logistical nightmare, and bending over something I now avoid.

My sex drive, meanwhile, is doing fucking fantastic.

Sumner leans in and kisses me again, and I’m more than happy to let him take it from there.

A few seconds later, I catch the frozen movie over his shoulder.

“Oh.”

He follows my line of sight toward the television. “You want to finish it?”

I reach for the remote, shut the TV off, and drop it back onto the nightstand.

“Not even a little.”

Then I pull him back down to me, and Earth can fend for itself.

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CHAPTER 33
SUMNER

Thirty-Five Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a honeydew melon.

WHEN I TOLD Goldie the money from the house sale hit my account this morning, she announced I was “divorce rich” and therefore buying lunch.

I expected her to pick somewhere expensive just to fuck with me. Instead, I’m sitting across from her at a sun-faded picnic table behind a hole-in-the-wall seafood place near the beach, eating fried grouper out of a plastic basket while she steals my fries.

“You know I was going to eat those, right?” I ask when she reaches across the table again.

Goldie chews the one she just took and looks down at the pile still sitting in front of me with a pout. “Never beating the allegations you want your child to starve, are you?”

I bark out a laugh. “I think I’ve proven just how much I like feeding the two of you.” I let my eyes flick down her body, not bothering to hide how much she turns me on. When my dick starts to thicken, I clear my throat and focus back on her face. “I’m wondering why you didn’t order the same thing if you wanted what I’m eating so much.”

“Yours tastes better.”

“They came out of the same fryer.”

She shrugs and takes another one anyway. I should've known better than to argue. She finished hers a while ago, along with most of her sandwich and half my hush puppies, and at eight months pregnant, she treats anything on my plate like it belongs to her too.

Can't say I'm mad about it.

A seagull lands on the sand a few feet from our table and stares at her. Goldie stares right back, which tells me exactly where this is going.

"Don't," I tell her before she can reach for another fry.

Her mouth twitches. "I'm not doing anything."

She's a fucking menace, and I love her for it. "You're thinking about it."

The bird takes a step closer, and Goldie reaches across the table anyway. She steals one of my fries and tosses it onto the sand before I can stop her.

I stare at her. "Did you seriously take my fry to feed a seagull?"

"He looked hungry."

"So am I, and unlike him, I paid for those."

"You still have a whole basket."

"Also unlike him, I won't shit all over our heads. Or the table." More gulls land nearby, and I point at them. "See? You started something."

Goldie grins, staring me down while she grabs a handful of my fries. She never takes her eyes off mine as she tosses them in the direction of the group of seagulls, which has grown to about two hundred in the last thirty seconds.

One even catches a fry before it can hit the ground.

The rest of the flock surges forward. Goldie yelps when one swoops low enough over the table to make her duck, then immediately starts laughing while I drag my basket closer before another one decides to get brave.

"Still think bringing this on was a good idea?"

"Shut up." She wipes under one eye. "I regret nothing."

Another gull lands on the edge of a nearby trash can and caws loudly at us.

Goldie points at it. "See? He appreciates me."

"Pretty sure he just threatened us."

She grins and wipes her fingers on a napkin while I keep one eye on the birds crowding the edge of the patio. At least none of them have gotten the balls to land on the table yet.

Goldie takes a drink and settles back against the bench. "So what are you gonna do with all your divorce money?"

“You mean after financing your French fry addiction?”

She grins. “Obviously.”

I laugh and reach for my drink. “I don’t know. Haven’t really thought about it.”

Her smile softens a little. “Is it weird that it’s finally over?”

I think about it for a second. “More relieving than weird.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. There’s nothing left to deal with, and Delia’s finally out of my life for good.”

She holds her plastic cup out toward me. “Then cheers to never having to talk about your ex-wife again.”

I tap mine against it, and she takes a drink before reaching for my fries again.

I pull the basket farther away.

Goldie gasps. “Wow.”

“You’re not even eating them. You’re giving them to those assholes.” I tilt my head to the crowd of seagulls and all the beady eyes currently fixed on the two of us.

She laughs and takes another drink, stretching one leg out beneath the table while her hand settles over the side of her stomach. My phone buzzes beside my cup before I can ask if the baby’s bothering her again, and Goldie glances at the screen as I reach for it.

“What’s Jenny blowing up your phone about now?”

I unlock it and read the preview. “He wants to know if I saw the last fix on Ruth.”

COLSTON: you seeing this?

COLSTON: the pressure dropped again

Our crew is already scheduled to fly Hurricane Ruth later. She’s a Category Four out over the Gulf and has been strengthening all day, so Colston and I have both been watching every new update while we wait for our report time.

This is another jump in the wrong direction for everybody in her path.

Another message comes through while I’m still reading the most recent report.

COLSTON: if she keeps this shit up we’re getting our five

I go back over the pressure and wind numbers. He’s probably right.

SUMNER: yeah i think we are

His reply comes almost immediately.

COLSTON: holy shit

COLSTON: first five shamu

That’s followed by about a dozen confetti and unhinged emojis.

I grin before I can stop myself, and when I look up, Goldie is watching me.

“What are you smiling about?”

“If the numbers keep going in the direction they are right now, we’re getting our first Five.”

Her eyebrows lift. “And you’re happy about that.”

“I’ve never flown one.” I set my phone down beside my cup. “So yeah. I am.”

She stares at me for a second before shaking her head. “You’re fucking insane.”

I laugh and pick up my drink. “Probably.”

Her smile hangs around, but she runs her thumb slowly through the condensation on the side of her cup. “You know what’s messed up? I’m happy for you. I can see how excited you are, and I want you to get to do this. I just hate that the thing making you this happy scares the shit out of me.”

I reach across the table and take her hand. “I get it. You don’t have to be excited about this just because I am.”

She lets out a breath. “Good, because I’m definitely not.”

Her fingers tighten around mine, and some of the tension leaves her face before my phone buzzes again beside my cup.

COLSTON: also tell goldie girl no labor while we’re gone

COLSTON: trace is not meeting that baby before i do because im stuck flying with your ass

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

I turn the screen toward Goldie. She snorts as soon as she finishes reading it.

“Like this baby listens to anyone.” She grabs her phone from the table. “I’ll tell him myself.”

She starts typing, but my attention drops to her stomach. Colston’s fucking around, but he’s got a point. Once we’re airborne, Goldie won’t be able to reach me until we land.

“If something starts while I’m gone, call the doctor first. Then Dad or Pops if you need a ride. Or Trace. Or any of the girls. Don’t wait around trying to get ahold of me.”

Goldie looks up from her phone. “I know. I’ve got this, I promise.”

“I hate that I might miss it.”

Her expression changes, and she sets her phone down before squeezing my hand. “So do I. But if this kid decides to show up while you’re gone, I’ll get to the hospital, and you’ll get there as soon as you can.” She pulls her sunglasses back down over her eyes. “The good news is this baby still has a few weeks to go, so you should be good.”

Should be, but that’s not as reassuring as she thinks. There isn’t a better answer than that, though, even if I fucking hate it.

A second later, both our phones start buzzing with the group chat.

COLSTON: hey feral people

COLSTON: shamu and i report soon

COLSTON: somebody go keep goldie girl company while we’re gone

SCOUT: leaving in a few

ELLIE: i’ll head over when i wrap up

TATUM: bringing food later

ANDIE: i can come by too

Goldie looks down at her phone while the replies keep coming.

GOLDIE: i’ll be fine by myself

COLSTON: i know goldie girl

COLSTON: they’re coming anyway

She locks her screen and looks at me. “Your best friend is a dick.”

“He’s your friend too.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me.”

I laugh and check the time. We still have enough room for me to get home, grab my bag, and make the briefing without rushing, but I don’t want to push it any closer.

Goldie follows my glance. “We need to go?”

“Yeah. We’ve got time, but I want to get moving.”

She nods and reaches for her phone and drink while I gather our baskets. The seagulls are still crowded along the edge of the patio, watching us, and I look down at what’s left of my food before tipping it out onto the sand as we start toward the parking lot.

Goldie gasps. “Really? After giving me shit about it?”

I bite back a smile. “Yeah, yeah. I’m saving the trash can. You know they’d just tear into it if I threw the leftovers away.”

Her delighted laugh follows me off the patio.

Goldie makes a beeline for the bathroom as soon as we get home, and I head into the bedroom for the work bag I packed this morning. I grab it from beside the dresser and sling it over my shoulder.

Goldie comes out of the bathroom as I’m heading back down the hall with my bag over my shoulder. She falls into step beside me, and the doorbell rings before we make it to the living room.

I set my bag beside the front door and open it to find Scout on the porch with a grocery bag in one hand.

“Move, Hurricane Daddy. I brought snacks.”

She shoulders past me on her way inside, and Goldie laughs. “I just ate.”

Scout keeps going toward the kitchen. “That’s never stopped you before.”

Goldie’s phone buzzes while Scout starts putting food in the refrigerator. She checks the screen. “Ellie says she’s almost here.”

I pick my bag back up, and Goldie catches my hand before I can open the door.

“I’ll walk you out.”

We step onto the porch together, and the heat settles over us again the second we leave the air-conditioning. By the time we reach the truck, Goldie has one hand pressed into her lower back.

“Back hurting?”

“Everything hurts.” She shifts her weight and blows out a breath. “This kid weighs a fucking ton.”

I set my bag beside the truck. “Turn around.”

Goldie does, backing into me so I can slide both hands beneath her stomach and lift enough to take some of the weight off her.

Her whole body relaxes against me with a long moan. “Oh, fuck. That’s so much better.”

I hold her there until my arms start to burn and I really do have to move. When I lower her stomach again, she groans and braces both hands under it.

“That was cruel.”

I laugh and step around in front of her, but my attention drops to her stomach before I can help it. A second later, I’m crouching in front of her with both hands spread over her stomach while Goldie rests one hand on the back of my head.

“Alright, kid. Stay where you are until I get back.” I rub my thumb slowly over her stomach. “I know we haven’t officially met yet, but I’d really like to be there when you come into the world. So give me the next twenty-four hours, okay?”

The baby moves beneath my hand, and I smile before leaning in to kiss her stomach.

When I stand, Goldie catches the front of my shirt and pulls me down to her. I wrap an arm around her back and kiss her, taking my time even though I know I need to get on the road.

When she finally eases back, the worry is still there when she looks at me.

“Go fly, Maverick.”

I grin at her. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She gives me a little shove toward the truck. “Now go before Colston beats you there and becomes insufferable about it.”

I pick up my bag and climb in. Goldie stays where she is while I start the engine. When I look over at her, she lifts one hand in a wave before turning back toward the house.

I wait until the front door closes behind her before I put the truck in reverse and head for Lakeland.

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CHAPTER 34
SUMNER

BY THE TIME I pull into the AOC parking lot, I'm ready. I'm locked in and fully focused on Ruth.

The parking lot is busier than usual, and one of the hangar doors is open when I get out of the truck. Our P-3 is inside with maintenance carts and equipment still scattered around her while people move beneath the wing and around the fuselage getting everything ready.

The second I see the airplane, my pulse picks up, and I can't keep the grin from pulling at my mouth as I sling my bag over my shoulder and head toward the building.

The whole place is moving faster than normal. People cross between the hangar and operations with folders and tablets in their hands, conversations happening on the move while phones ring somewhere inside. Nobody looks rattled. Everybody's just getting ready to work.

This is what we do.

I make a quick stop at the locker room to change, shove my clothes into my locker, and zip my flight suit before heading into operations.

Ruth is everywhere once I step into operations. The wall displays are split between satellite imagery, the latest recon, forecast tracks, and the newest advisory, and I catch pieces of conversations about the amended tasking as I cross the room.

Someone near the printers is going over a flight plan. A maintenance tech passes me with paperwork tucked under one arm, and farther down,

somebody calls a question across two workstations without ever stopping what they're doing.

Colston is already here, leaning over Des's workstation with one hand braced on the desk while they look at something on his screen.

He glances up when he sees me coming. "Goldie girl good?"

"Yeah. Everyone showed up before I left."

His mouth pulls into a grin. "All of them?"

"Pretty much."

"Good." He straightens and looks back at the screen. "Figured they would."

I set my bag beside an empty chair and move closer to Des's workstation. He has the latest Air Force recon pulled up next to the satellite loop, and Ruth's eye looks even cleaner than it did before I left St. Pete.

Des glances up at me. "You see the new advisory yet?"

"Not yet."

Colston's grin immediately gets wider.

I look at him. "What?"

He tips his chin toward the screen.

I follow his gaze to the advisory and stop when I see the classification at the top.

Category Five.

Holy shit.

I lean closer to the screen, one hand braced on the edge of Des's desk while I read through the newest numbers. I knew she was headed there. So did Colston. But seeing that Five beside Ruth's name makes me grin.

My first Five.

The unmistakable click of a phone camera goes off beside me.

I turn my head.

Colston lowers his phone with a giddy little laugh. "Oh, that one's going in the group chat."

"You're an asshole."

"You should see your face."

"Delete it."

"Nope."

He's grinning just as hard as I am, which makes it impossible to stay annoyed.

"Our first Five, man," he says. "It's gonna be awesome."

“Hell yeah.” I hold out my fist.

Colston bumps his against mine.

I laugh and look back at Ruth on the screen, shifting my weight because standing still suddenly feels impossible.

Des glances between us over the top of his glasses. “You two planning to fly it or just stand here celebrating?”

“We can multitask,” Colston says, still smiling.

Des shakes his head and turns back to the data. “Enjoy it on your way to the briefing. Sondra wants everybody in there now.”

That pulls me out of my excitement, and I straighten, grabbing my bag while Des closes out whatever he was looking at. The newest recon will be part of the brief anyway, along with the updated track, what the Air Force crew found inside the storm, and what Ruth’s structure has done since our original mission was planned.

Colston falls into step beside me as we head across operations.

The excitement is still there—I’m not sure anything could kill it right now—but this is where the mission takes over. Before we ever get near the airplane, we need to know what Des expects Ruth to look like by the time we reach her, where the worst weather is setting up, what NHC wants from the mission, and whether anything about the storm has changed the route we were already planning to fly.

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Brian’s already in the briefing room when we get there, a cup of coffee beside his paperwork and his reading glasses sitting on the table in front of him.

I drop into the chair and look at the glasses. “Those yours?”

Brian gives me a flat look. “You got something to say?”

Colston pulls out the chair beside me. “He was holding the maintenance sheet halfway across the room when I got here.”

“Both of you can fuck off.”

I laugh, but Brian is already looking back at the paperwork in front of him, whatever maintenance flagged clearly more interesting than our shit talk.

Des comes in behind us and closes the door while Sondra brings the latest imagery up on the main screen.

Ruth fills the wall.

The room settles almost immediately.

Des starts with the newest Air Force reconnaissance, walking us through what changed on the last pass and what he expects Ruth to look like by the time we reach her. The pressure's still falling. The eyewall has tightened up, the strongest convection has shifted, and there are a couple areas he wants us paying attention to on the approach.

"The northeast side is still the ugliest," Des says, changing the image on the screen. "The last crew took the worst turbulence coming through here."

Colston leans forward beside me. "Is she still building?"

"Yeah. And if she keeps tightening before you get there, I'd expect that area to get worse."

By the time Des starts breaking down the newest data, I'm not thinking about what category this storm is anymore. I'm thinking about what Colston and I are going to have to deal with once we get in there.

Des moves between the satellite loop and the latest radar and recon data, pointing out what the Air Force crew found in the core and where Ruth has changed since our original flight plan was put together.

Colston taps one finger against the table. "Go back to the eyewall."

Des pulls the image back up.

I'm looking at the same section. "What'd the last crew report going through there?"

He brings up the observation and starts walking us through it.

And just like that, Ruth isn't the hurricane I've been watching strengthen on my phone all day anymore.

She's headings, weather, aircraft limits, and a whole list of decisions Colston and I are going to have to make once we're close enough to see what she's really doing.

Sondra takes over when Des finishes with the weather side of the brief. She runs us through the amended plan and what they want collected on the mission.

When she gets to the aircraft, Brian looks up from the paperwork in front of him.

“What’d maintenance find on that discrepancy?”

“They reran the check and cleared it,” Sondra says. “Sign-off should be done.”

Brian nods once and goes back to the paperwork.

Des brings the route up again, and Colston and I start working through it with him. We go over the weather between Lakeland and Ruth, fuel and alternates, where we expect to start picking up the outer bands, and what we should be seeing on radar before we ever get close to the eyewall.

Colston studies the route for a few seconds. “If that northeast side keeps building, what are you expecting by the time we get there?”

Des switches back to the latest imagery. “It’ll probably be worse than what the Air Force crew just saw. You’ll have newer radar by then, so nobody’s committing you to anything from this room.”

I nod. That’s what I wanted to hear.

I keep my attention on the route while Colston and Des work through the last of it, already picturing what we’ll need to see on radar before we make the first penetration.

The P-3 can take a hell of a beating, but that doesn’t mean we ever assume Ruth is going to cooperate. We’ll make the call based on what she’s actually doing when we get there.

Having a plan is all well and good, but it can quickly go to shit, and you have to be adaptable to get through it and come out in one piece.

By the time we’ve worked through the route and the first penetration, I’ve got as clear a picture as I’m going to get before we’re airborne.

Sondra looks around the table. “Anything else?”

I ask Des to compare the last two fixes one more time so I can see how quickly Ruth’s structure changed between passes.

After that, nobody has anything else.

Sondra closes the folder in front of her. “Alright. Dismissed.”

Chairs scrape back from the table as everyone starts moving at once.

Brian’s the first one out of the room, already heading to find whoever has the maintenance sign-off he’s been waiting on.

Colston falls into step beside me as we head back through operations. The grin is still there, but he’s quieter now, his attention shifting toward everything we need to get done before we walk out to the plane.

“You good?” I ask.

He glances over at me. “Yeah. You?”

“Yeah.”

His mouth pulls into a crooked smile. “This is gonna be a hell of a flight.”

Someone calls Colston’s name from across operations, and he veers off toward one of the workstations while I head for the rest of my gear.

I’m ready to get in the air.

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CHAPTER 35
GOLDIE

BY THE TIME I figure Sumner should be over the Gulf, my house has been completely overrun.

At some point after Sumner left, my living room turned into one of our usual girls' nights, only with a lot more Weather Channel and tragically less tequila. Andie has claimed one end of the couch, Scout's already in pajamas since she came prepared to spend the night, Tatum's in my kitchen making queso because the woman understands priorities, and Ellie has cocooned herself in a blanket in the armchair.

There are overnight bags dumped by the front door, enough snacks spread across my kitchen island to survive an apocalypse, and a couple of my throw pillows are piled on the floor.

So, yeah. Nobody's going anywhere.

I didn't ask them to stay because I didn't have to. Colston dropped one message in the group chat, my girls descended on my house, and that was that.

Which is great.

Really fucking great.

As long as I don't think too hard about how they all dropped everything because they knew I was scared. Then my stupid hormones start threatening to make me extra emotional, and nobody needs that right now.

I'm wedged into the corner of the couch with my pregnancy pillow shoved behind my back, but everything still hurts. One hand is tucked under

my belly to take some of the weight while the baby presses up into my organs enough that I'm a little short of breath.

The Weather Channel has been on since Sumner left, and at this point Ruth has completely taken over. One minute there's a meteorologist in the studio breaking down the newest satellite images, the next they're cutting to some poor reporter getting blasted by wind somewhere in Louisiana, then it's evacuation traffic, storm surge, or another update from the air.

I keep trying to pay attention to whatever my friends are talking about, but my eyes keep drifting back to the TV.

Right now they're back in the studio with a satellite image of Ruth stretched across the screen. She takes up a ridiculous amount of the Gulf, this massive white spiral wrapped tight around an eye that's almost perfectly clear in the middle.

The graphic beside it has her officially listed as a Category Five now.

Well. Shit.

I knew she was headed there before Sumner left. So did he, judging by how excited he got when Colston was texting him. Seeing that five beside Ruth's name while Sumner's already on the way to her is a whole different thing.

My hand tightens a little under my stomach as I look at the forecast track again. It still points northwest toward Louisiana, nowhere near St. Pete, but the knot in my stomach only gets tighter.

My problem is that the man I love is heading straight into the thing everyone on TV keeps warning people to get the hell away from.

Scout holds the popcorn bowl up from where she's sitting cross-legged on the floor.

I shake my head. "I'm not hungry." She keeps holding the bowl out until I give her a look. "Scout."

She moves the bowl closer, and then she wiggles it to try and entice me.

I give her a look, but she just stares back until I finally sigh and grab a handful. "Happy?"

"Getting there."

I eat a piece, then another, and catch the tiny satisfied smile she tries to hide behind the bowl.

"You're annoying."

"I know you are, but what am I?"

Andie glances over from the other end of the couch. “You know she’s just going to keep plying you with food until they’re back on land, right?”

“I don’t know if I have the room.” I shift the pregnancy pillow behind me and rub a hand over the side of my stomach. “The baby’s so big now all my organs feel compacted.”

From the kitchen, Tatum calls, “Do you want queso?”

I yell back, “Is Sumner hot?”

Tatum scoffs. “Obviously.”

“Exactly,” I call toward the kitchen. “I want queso.”

Scout pauses with a piece of popcorn halfway to her mouth. “You literally just said you don’t have room.”

“Queso is basically liquid. There’s always room for it.” I steal another piece of popcorn from her bowl and pop it into my mouth.

Andie grimaces. “No.”

I finish chewing and lift one shoulder. “It makes sense scientifically.”

Andie turns her head and gives me a long, flat look. “You cannot just put the word scientifically in a sentence and think that makes it true.”

I shrug a shoulder. “Says you.”

Scout snorts and yanks the popcorn bowl away when I reach for another handful.

The doorbell rings before I can steal it back.

I plant one hand on the couch and start levering myself up, but by the time I get both feet under me, Andie has already unfolded herself from the other end and is halfway to the door.

“I can get it,” I say.

“I know.”

“Then why are you—”

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you should.”

I glare at the back of her head and sink into the couch again while she opens the door. She’s not wrong.

Trace is standing on my porch with a backpack slung over one shoulder and his laptop tucked under his arm.

I hadn’t realized how hard I was gripping the edge of the couch until my fingers finally relax.

“Oh, thank god, Trace,” I say, and I mean it enough that his eyebrows shoot up.

Then a huge grin takes over his face. “Oh, Jenny’s gonna be so fucking pissed when he hears how excited you were to see me.”

I laugh and settle back against the pillow. “You’re the only person here who can tell me what half the shit on the TV actually means.”

He grins as he steps inside, kicks his shoes off by the door, and drops his backpack beside the chair next to me before plopping down. “Yep, I speak weather nerd.”

Trace balances his laptop across his thighs before flipping it open.

I shift forward on the couch and lean toward him, trying to get a look at the screen. “Wait. What can you see on that that’s different than the Weather Channel?”

“I can pull up the recon data coming off the plane.” He starts typing, his easy grin fading as he focuses. “Position, wind, pressure. Enough to follow what they’re doing once they get closer to Ruth. Shit the Weather Channel deems too boring to share.”

Andie shuts the door and comes over to stop beside his chair so she can see the screen too.

“Can you tell exactly where they are?” I ask.

“Pretty close.”

The page loads, and my excitement about having our own personal weather nerd takes an immediate nosedive.

The screen is covered in rows of numbers, abbreviations, and letters that mean nothing to me.

I squint at it. “You’ve gotta be kidding me. What even is this?”

Trace laughs and clicks into another view. “Hold on. I can make it prettier.”

“Please do. My eyes are crossing just looking at that.”

Trace clicks around for another few seconds, then a map fills most of the screen.

Okay. Better.

Ruth is sitting out over the Gulf with a string of little plotted points leading toward her.

I shift a little closer to the edge of the couch. “Those are them?”

“Yeah.” Trace points to the newest one. “That’s the last observation they sent.”

I stare at the tiny dot.

It’s ridiculous how much better that makes me feel. I still can’t see the plane or Sumner, but at least there’s something on the screen telling me where he was a few minutes ago.

That he’s alive and doing okay.

“And it’ll keep updating?”

“As long as the data keeps coming in.”

I nod and settle back into the couch, keeping my eyes on the map.

Okay.

I can work with this.

I know that dot represents the whole plane—Colston and everyone else up there with him included—but the second I look at it, all I see is Sumner.

On the TV, the Weather Channel switches back to footage from Louisiana. A reporter is standing near a line of cars crawling away from the coast while the banner across the bottom of the screen warns about storm surge.

I try to listen, but Trace shifts in the chair beside me and starts clicking through something on his laptop.

My eyes go right back to him.

He leans closer to the screen.

“What?”

“There’s new data.”

I push myself forward again. “From them?”

“Yeah.” He angles the laptop a little more toward me. Another point has appeared at the end of the trail, closer to Ruth than the last one. “They’re still on the way in.”

I stare at the new dot while my fingers curl into the edge of the cushion.

“How much longer?”

“Hard to say.” Trace studies the map for another second. “But they’re getting close.”

I settle back against the couch but I keep my eyes on Trace’s laptop.

Every so often another point appears at the end of the trail, dragging Sumner a little closer to Ruth.

I hate that it isn’t live. That I don’t get more information.

There’s always this gap between where the last dot says they were and wherever the plane is now, and my brain keeps trying to fill in the missing space with every terrible possibility it can come up with.

“This thing couldn’t just show me the actual plane moving? Maybe get a livestream inside the cabin?”

Trace glances over at me and the corner of his mouth quirks up. “Unfortunately, no.”

I make a face and tuck the pillow tighter against my side. “That would be so much less stressful. Someone should get on that.”

He huffs out a laugh. “You should @ them on social media and suggest it.”

“You know what? I will,” I say, pulling out my phone and opening the app.

But I’m distracted when another point pops up, creeping closer to the storm.

Whatever conversation was happening around me disappears as I lean toward the screen.

Tatum comes out of the kitchen carrying a bowl of queso with a bag of tortilla chips tucked under her arm.

“Move your shit,” she tells Trace, nudging the edge of the coffee table with her knee.

He lifts his backpack out of the way, and she sets the bowl down in front of me.

I grab the bag and dig out a chip without taking my eyes off the laptop, scoop up enough queso that it starts dripping off the edge, and shove the whole thing into my mouth.

Scout hooks her fingers around the bowl and tries to slide it closer.

“Hey.” I slap at her hand. “You have popcorn.”

“That’s a ton of cheese dip, G. No way are you going to eat it all.”

“Watch me.”

She rolls her eyes and steals a chip anyway.

Ellie shifts under her blanket and looks over at Trace. “Can you tell when they actually get into it?”

“Yeah.” He keeps his eyes on the laptop. “Once they start making the first pass, we’ll be able to follow it.”

Scout stops mid-chew, and I lean forward as much as I can with my stomach in the way.

Sumner’s flown enough storms since we’ve been together that I know the basics by now. They fly through the center, the eye is usually the calm part, and the eyewall is where things get ugly.

I really wish he'd left that last detail out when he was explaining what it's like in there.

Another point pops up on the screen.

Trace sits forward in the chair, one hand moving to the trackpad.

"What?"

"They're turning in."

I look from his face to the map. "For the first pass?"

"Yeah."

Andie comes back around the coffee table and drops onto the couch beside me.

Nobody says anything after that. Even Scout stays quiet while we all stare at Trace's laptop. The Weather Channel is still on, but we're all ignoring it.

Another point appears closer to the center.

Then another.

I'm still leaning forward, bracing myself against the arm of the couch, watching the little trail grow across Trace's screen.

"How do you know when they hit the eyewall?" Andie asks from beside me.

Trace points toward the thick ring around the eye. "You'll see the observations start crossing into it. That's the first penetration."

Scout snorts and looks away from the laptop. "There has to be a less sexual word for that. Though I guess they are basically ramming that airplane right up the hurricane's—"

Aaand that's right about the time I tune her out, blindly reaching for another chip while my focus stays locked on Trace's screen.

He clicks, the screen refreshes, and another dot appears.

"They're in the eyewall," he says.

The chip in my mouth suddenly feels dry as hell despite the cheese dip, and I have to force myself to chew while I stare at the end of that little trail.

I wait for the next point, but nothing appears.

Trace doesn't look worried, but every second the screen stays the same stretches longer than the one before it.

I rub my thumb back and forth over the seam of the couch.

Come on.

Trace refreshes the page, but this time there's no new dot.

My fingers dig harder into the fabric until they start to ache. The queso sits heavy in my stomach now, and I swallow against the sudden urge to throw up everything I just ate.

Nobody says anything to me. Thank god, because I don't want somebody telling me this is normal or that everything's fine.

I need to know he's okay. I need something new to appear at the end of that trail and tell me the plane is still flying. That everything's fine.

Trace refreshes again, and a new point finally appears farther through the eyewall.

I blow out a shaky breath.

Okay.

There you are.

A few more dots appear after that, each one carrying them farther through the eyewall.

Then Trace's shoulders drop a little.

"They're in the eye."

"Oh, thank god." I sink back into the couch for the first time since they turned toward the storm, my fingers finally letting go of the death grip I've had on the cushion.

Scout looks between me and Trace. "That's good, right?"

"Better," he says. "It's a lot calmer inside the eye."

I rub both hands over my face, trying to get rid of some of the nervous energy still buzzing under my skin.

The baby shoves hard into my side, and I immediately press my palm over the spot. "Ow. Your dad is giving me enough problems right now. You could maybe take the night off."

Scout snorts beside me.

I look back at Trace's laptop just as another observation appears.

"So they're done with the bad part?"

"Half of it." Trace glances over at me. "They still have to cross the other side of the eyewall."

My stomach drops right back down. "And then what?"

"Depends on the mission, but they'll turn around and make another pass through the center."

I stare at him.

Scout stops with a stolen chip halfway to her mouth. "Wait. They do this more than once?"

Trace nods. “Usually quite a few times.”

I look back at the little trail crossing the eye.

Scout’s eyes go wide. “You have *got* to be shitting me.”

A laugh slips out of Andie beside me, but I’m too busy trying to disassociate from reality.

I knew going in I’d have to watch him do this again and again. I’ve done it before.

It’s just never felt like this, and I don’t know what to do with all the anxiety buzzing through me.

I groan.

This is going to be a *really* relaxing night.

The next few dots carry them through the other side of the eyewall, and when Trace finally says they’re clear, I sink back into the couch.

My shoulders ache from how long I’ve been hunched forward, and I feel like the real-life version of that *it’s been eighty-four years* gif.

Around me, everyone starts moving again. Ellie checks her phone, Tatum gets up to refill her drink, and Scout reaches for the blanket she kicked off earlier and drags it over her legs.

I shift around, trying to get comfortable again, and pressure hits low in my bladder.

I close my eyes.

Seriously?

Scout catches the look on my face. “What?”

“I have to pee again.”

Scout looks up at me and winces. “That kid is really making the most of the space in there.”

“No kidding.”

I brace one hand against the couch and push myself up. There’s so much pressure low in my pelvis now that I have to stand there for a second before I can comfortably start moving.

By the time I pee, wash my hands, and make my way back down the hall, Trace is leaning toward his laptop again.

I stop beside the couch. “Already?”

“Yep. Looks like they’re turning around for another pass.”

I groan and lower myself back into my spot, shifting the pillow until I can get comfortable again. “I feel like Sumner left out some important details when he explained this job to me.”

Trace glances over. “Like what?”

“Like the part where ten years of my life come off every time he flies into one of these stupid things.” I gesture at the screen.

“Yeah,” Andie drags the word out as she moves her legs out of my way while I settle in. “I’d bet a thousand dollars he has no idea what it’s like to sit on this side of it.”

“He enjoys it way too much. He was so excited earlier when it started looking like Ruth would get even stronger.” I roll my eyes, and Trace chuckles. “But you know what? Just wait until I go into labor.” I feel like my grin might look a little unhinged. “He’ll get to see what it’s like to be helpless. Only with more blood and gore.”

Scout throws her head back and cackles. “Ohmygod, please get one of the nurses to record video of his face when the baby’s crowning.”

“Oh, it’s already in the birth plan.”

She laughs even harder, and for a few seconds, so do I.

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CHAPTER 36
GOLDIE

TRACE'S attention shifts back to his laptop as the next observation comes through, and just like that, the laugh dies in my throat.

The trail is already turning back toward Ruth, and the tight, restless feeling in my stomach comes right back with it.

Here we go again.

Ellie leans forward in the armchair, her blanket sliding down into her lap. "Is this the same part as before?"

"Pretty much," Trace says, watching the new points come in.

Tatum lowers herself onto the floor beside Scout with the bag of chips between them. Andie stays tucked beside me on the couch, close enough that our knees keep bumping every time I shift.

Knowing what's coming this time does exactly jack shit to make it easier.

This time, I know what I'm looking at. I know where the eyewall starts on the map, what the gaps between updates usually look like, and that a pause doesn't automatically mean something's wrong.

My body still doesn't give a single flying fuck.

Nobody says much while the dots carry them back through Ruth. I pick at the seam of the throw pillow I plopped in my lap while they cross the first side of the eyewall, make it into the eye, and head back out through the other side.

There's one pause long enough to make my heart kick harder, but another point appears before I can really start spiraling.

By the time Trace finally leans back and says, “They’re clear,” my neck and shoulders ache from how long my muscles stayed tense.

I slump against the couch. “I hate this.”

Andie bumps her knee against mine. “One less time you have to watch him do it.”

“That is the nicest possible way to try and make me feel better about this absolute bullshit.”

She gives me a small smile, but on the other side of the room, the meteorologist on TV says something about a burst of convection building near Ruth’s eyewall.

Whatever the fuck that is.

Trace’s head comes up, and so does mine. He looks from the television back to his laptop and clicks into another display.

Andie picks up on the sudden crease between his eyebrows, too. “What?”

“The storm’s getting more organized on this side.” He gestures toward part of the image on his screen.

I stare at the mess of colors. “You’re gonna have to translate that for me.”

“That mess,” he says, pointing at the screen, “means there’s a nasty cluster of thunderstorms building in the eyewall.”

I rub my damp palm down the side of my leggings and nod toward the screen. “See? Human words.”

Tatum looks up from the floor. “Is that where they’re going next?”

Trace doesn’t answer right away.

That tiny hesitation puts me right back on edge.

“Trace.”

“If they keep the same general plan, yeah. But they’ve got radar on the plane and a hell of a lot more information than we do sitting here.”

I look back at the TV as the meteorologist starts talking about the same part of the storm, but I’m barely listening now because I’m watching Trace instead.

He’s sitting straighter than he was a minute ago, the laptop pulled higher on his thighs while his eyes move between the recon data and the radar. He’s worried, and that does more to fuck with me than anything that’s happened so far.

The trail starts bending back toward Ruth again while Trace scans the numbers beside the newest observation. His mouth tightens.

Tatum's attention snaps fully to Trace. Ellie leans forward in the armchair, bracing her forearms on her knees, while Scout scoots closer on the floor until her shoulder presses against my leg.

Nobody has to tell us they're getting close again.

Then Trace mutters, "Fuck."

My head snaps toward him. "What?"

He drags a hand over his jaw without taking his eyes off the screen. "They're getting some really strong wind in there."

"How strong?"

Trace finally looks at me, and the fact that he takes a second before answering makes the back of my neck prickle.

"Strong enough that I'm very happy I'm sitting on your couch right now and not up there with them."

I stare at him. "That was not remotely comforting."

"I wasn't trying to scare you." He turns the laptop slightly toward himself again. "The wind measurement doesn't mean the plane's in trouble, Goldie. Those aircraft are made to withstand doing this. Ruth's a Category Five. She's going to have some ugly numbers. It's what they expect."

I nod, but my arms tighten around the pillow in my lap.

The next dot lands right at the edge of the eyewall, and another pops up inside it.

They're back in there.

For a while, the updates keep coming at a steady pace. My palm drifts over my stomach when the baby shifts, and I press against the hard little spot pushing back at me through my shirt.

"Your dad better appreciate the stress he's putting us through tonight," I mutter, rubbing over the spot.

Andie reaches over and squeezes my knee.

I slide my free hand into hers and hold on while I keep watching Trace's screen.

The line on the map stretches a little farther through the eyewall.

I blow out a breath. *Okay. I can handle this. One update at a time.*

Except now that I know how this works, every gap feels longer than the one before it. I start watching Trace almost as much as the map, learning his

rhythm too. A new point comes in, he checks the numbers, and I check his face.

As long as he looks calm, I can pretend I am too.

Then the rhythm breaks.

The trail just… stops.

At first I tell myself I'm only noticing because I've been staring at the damn thing for so long that my brain has started measuring time in little blue dots, but then Trace reaches for the trackpad and refreshes the page.

And nothing changes.

He doesn't say anything, and neither do I. Like if we let the words out, it'll make it real that something's not right.

My fingers squeeze around Andie's before I even realize I'm doing it. "What's happening? Why'd it stop?"

Trace keeps his eyes on the screen, not looking at me. "It could mean nothing."

Andie shifts closer beside me. "I'm gonna need more than *could mean nothing*."

Trace finally looks away from the screen, and his eyes flick to mine for a second before darting around the room to everyone else.

He rubs his thumb along the edge of the laptop before glancing back at the frozen trail. "The mission link can drop, especially in conditions like this. They're trying to transmit from an airplane inside the eyewall. Sometimes the feed cuts out for a little while."

I look at the last point still sitting there in the eyewall. "And you've seen that happen before?"

"Yeah." His answer comes right away this time. "Plenty of times."

I believe him, and that helps enough that I can unclench my jaw.

Then Trace refreshes the page again, and the tiny bit of relief I managed to scrape together disappears when the trail still doesn't move.

"How long has it been?" I ask.

He glances toward the corner of the screen. "Not long."

I nod like that means something to me.

It doesn't.

The Weather Channel's still droning on in the background, but nobody's paying much attention to it anymore. Every time Trace refreshes, I hold my breath, and every time, I'm disappointed because there's nothing new on the screen. It's just… stuck.

Andie's fingers tighten around mine. "How long before this stops being normal?"

Trace's hand stills on the trackpad for barely a second, but I've been watching him too closely all night to miss it.

My eyes snap to his face, searching for whatever he's trying not to show me. "Trace?"

He chews on his bottom lip for a second before looking over at me and then at her. "Longer gaps happen sometimes."

Andie doesn't let him off that easy. "That wasn't what I asked."

"I know."

The answer sends a fresh rush of panic through me, but before I can demand he tell me what the hell *that* means, a deep squeezing pressure grips my stomach. It tightens fast, pulling everything across the front of my belly taut until even shifting against the couch feels uncomfortable.

Every other thought in my head disappears.

I let go of Andie and put both hands over my belly.

Oh, hell no.

"Goldie?" Andie's voice changes immediately.

I shake my head because I have no idea what to tell her yet. "Just—give me a second."

The pressure keeps squeezing before it gradually starts to let go, but I stay exactly where I am with both hands spread over my stomach, waiting to see if it happens again.

And waiting.

On the plus side, I'm no longer freaking out about Sumner potentially crashing his plane into the Gulf never to be found again. Oh, no. Now I've got something else to lose my shit over.

Scout has turned around on the floor now, and even Trace is looking at me instead of his laptop. I breathe in slow and deep, and then blow it out. And then I do it again. And again.

"Was that a contraction?" Ellie asks.

"I don't know." I keep both hands on my stomach, looking down at it and waiting for it to tighten again. "Maybe. Hopefully one of those fake practice ones because this baby and I are going to have a serious fucking problem if it wasn't."

Scout's eyes get huge. "Do we need to start timing them?"

I grit my teeth. “Don’t put that out into the universe. Nope. It’s not happening.”

She immediately shuts her mouth.

I keep breathing while everyone watches me, which is super helpful and not at all making this worse. Another slow breath in. Another one out.

It feels like an eternity passes. It’s probably only, like, ten minutes, but nothing else happens.

That’s promising.

The silence lasts until Scout suddenly grabs her phone off the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Googling.”

I rub my temples. “Don’t Google pregnancy shit. Google always thinks you’re dying.”

“I’m not Googling symptoms.” Her thumbs fly across the screen. “I’m Googling how to make it stop.”

Tatum leans over to read whatever she finds. “It says dehydration can cause Braxton Hicks.”

Four sets of eyes swing toward me.

“When was the last time you drank anything?” Ellie asks.

I open my mouth, then close it again because I honestly have no clue.

Tatum takes one look at my face and pushes herself off the floor. “That’s what I thought.”

She disappears into the kitchen and comes back with a glass of ice water, holding it out to me. “Drink.”

“Yes, Mom.”

She narrows her eyes. “I’ll force it down your throat if I have to.”

I believe her, so I take the glass and swallow a few long drinks while Scout keeps reading off things I’m supposed to do. Hydrate. Rest. Change positions. All very reasonable advice that becomes significantly more irritating when four people are supervising me through it.

Even Trace gets involved long enough to tell me to listen to them before his attention goes back to the laptop.

So I drink the damn water. I shift around until I’m sitting differently. Tatum starts talking about something completely unrelated, and the others pick it up like they’ve all silently agreed to keep me distracted.

And just like that, I forget for a second that Sumner’s plane still hasn’t sent anything back.

And I keep waiting for my belly to tighten again.

Eventually I realize I've been listening to Scout and Tatum argue for a while without thinking about it.

I hold my breath and check in with my body, but nothing happens.

No squeezing pressure. No tightening. No second contraction waiting to ruin what is already a spectacularly shitty night.

Only then do I let myself sink back against the couch a little.

The click of Trace's trackpad pulls my attention back to his laptop.

For a few minutes there, my body gave me something new to panic about. Now that it seems to have settled down, I'm right back where I started, watching Trace reload a feed that still has no new updates.

I reach for my phone out of habit, and the second the screen lights up, I realize there's no point. I can't call Sumner. I can't text him and ask what the hell is happening. Even if I sent something, he's a little busy flying an airplane through a hurricane at the moment.

Or drowning.

No. Nope. We're not going there.

So I turn the phone face down on the couch beside me.

I don't want to hear that Sumner knows what he's doing. I know he does.

I don't want to hear that he told me he'd come back. I know he meant it.

And I really don't want anyone promising me he's okay when none of us has a fucking clue whether that's true.

I just don't want to sit here waiting when there's nothing I can do.

And somehow, without me having to say that either, they get it.

Andie stays pressed against my side on the couch. Scout settles closer against my leg from the floor, while Tatum shifts until she's sitting near enough that her knee bumps my foot. Ellie abandons the armchair altogether and comes over to perch on the arm beside me.

Nobody tells me to calm down or tries to talk me out of being scared. They just close ranks around me.

I stare at Trace's laptop screen until everything starts to blur. "How long has it been now?"

Trace glances toward the time attached to the last observation, and his lips press into a thin line before he answers.

"Long enough that they'll be noticing the gap at operations too."

Scout looks up at him. “Does that mean they lost contact with the plane?”

“Not necessarily.” Trace turns toward us, and I’m grateful that he doesn’t rush to make it sound better than it is even if I also hate it. “This feed is only one way data comes off the aircraft. Losing it doesn’t automatically mean they lost every way to talk to the crew.”

Andie looks over at Trace. “So what do we do?”

Trace drags his thumb across the trackpad and reloads the feed again, even though we all already know what it’s going to show. “We wait.”

I groan and let my head fall back against the couch. “I fucking hate waiting.”

“We know, babe,” Andie says, and I hate the sympathy in her eyes.

I look away before the urge to cry overwhelms my ability to hold it off.

That’s when I catch Scout swiping quickly under one eye.

“Oh, I don’t think so.” I nudge her shoulder with my knee. “If I can hold back tears during this clusterfuck, so can you.”

She ducks her head and suddenly becomes very interested in her phone. “What are you talking about? There are no tears.”

“So you didn’t just wipe your eye?”

“It itched.” She sniffs, which really doesn’t help her case, then peeks up at me. “Maybe I have sympathy pregnancy hormones.”

I press my lips together. “You can’t catch hormones.”

Tatum snorts and shoves Scout. “Please. You were crying at that dog commercial long before Goldie got pregnant.”

Scout twists around to glare at her. “Whose side are you on?”

“Goldie’s.”

“You bitch.”

That gets a laugh out of me, which immediately makes Scout grin.

“There. You’re welcome.”

I roll my eyes at her. “You’re ridiculous.”

“For free, too.”

My smile is still there when Trace adjusts the laptop on his thighs. He reloads the feed, then starts clicking through the same screens he’s been staring at all night. I watch the trail stay frozen in place while whatever’s left of my smile slowly disappears.

When he goes back to the time attached to the last observation, his jaw tightens.

It’s been way too long.

I know Trace said gaps happen. I know the feed going down doesn’t mean something happened to the plane. I know there are a dozen reasons we’re not getting updates.

None of that makes going through it any easier.

Come on, Maverick.

Come back to me.

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CHAPTER 37
SUMNER

BY THE TIME we turn toward Ruth for the third pass, I'm grinning almost as big as Colston.

The first two were rough, and this one already looks like it's going to be worse, but it's the rush of a lifetime.

Rain races across the windshield faster than the wipers can clear it, lightning keeps flashing somewhere inside the clouds ahead of us, and the turbulence has been getting steadily rougher since we turned back toward the center.

I feel every bit of it through the seat and the controls. The yoke trembles under my hands, the rudder pedals vibrate beneath my feet, and every hard bump pulls the harness tight across my chest before dropping my weight back into the seat again. My pulse is up, my palms are starting to sweat, and my forearms stay tense from the constant little corrections it takes to keep the airplane where I want it.

I fucking love it.

This is what I've spent my entire career training for.

My first Category Five.

And Ruth is fucking impressive.

"That burst on the right is still building," Des says over the headset. "Left side still looks better."

Colston studies his display. "I'd take left."

"Yeah."

Des gives me a heading a few degrees left, and I ease us over.

Another pocket of turbulence rattles through the airplane. The harness digs into my muscles, and the yoke shifts under my hands enough that I have to make another small correction.

The first two passes already gave me more than any Four I've flown. Hard drops, heavy turbulence, wind shoving at us from every direction.

Then we'd punch through the inner edge of the eyewall, and everything would settle as soon as we hit the eye. Just long enough to get the center fix, turn around, and head straight back into it.

This time, the ride in has been rougher from the start.

The airplane kicks downward hard enough that my ass comes off the seat before the harness catches me.

"Fuck." Colston catches himself against the edge of the panel.

I glance over, and he looks like he's having the time of his life, even as this storm's having her way with us.

Brian's voice comes through the intercom from behind us. "Everybody secure back there?"

The rest of the crew answers one after another, verifying that they're good.

"Heads up," Des's voice crackles through my headset, "it's about to get worse."

"Copy," I say as I flex my fingers around the yoke.

The rain pounding the windshield gets louder until I can hear it even through my headset. Then something harder starts pelting the fuselage, sharp hits rattling down the length of the airplane.

Colston squints out his side window. "Hail?"

"Sounds like it."

Lightning flashes somewhere ahead of us, bright enough to light up the clouds outside.

The next hit comes from underneath.

My stomach drops as the airplane surges upward, shoving me deeper into the seat while the altimeter starts climbing.

"Updraft," Colston says.

I grit my teeth as sweat prickles along the back of my neck. "I've got it."

I ease the nose down enough to keep our airspeed where I want it and let Ruth push us higher.

Colston checks the instruments beside me. "Still going up."

“I see it.”

My pulse kicks harder, adrenaline buzzing hot through my chest as the airplane keeps rising.

This is a hell of an updraft.

Brian starts calling out the engine readings from behind us while I make another correction.

The climb finally slows.

For half a second, the airplane almost feels settled.

Then my stomach jumps into my throat.

Because we drop *hard*.

“Downdraft,” Colston says.

“I’ve got it.” I brace against the drop and ride it out.

The altimeter starts unwinding while Ruth drives us down through the air. My weight comes off the seat as the airplane drops, and I keep making small corrections while I wait for the descent to ease.

Colston’s watching the instruments and barking out what he sees. “Airspeed’s coming down.”

I add power, but the airplane rolls hard to the right before I can get the speed back.

I push against the roll, but another hit catches us before the wings are level. The yoke jerks hard in my hands, and pain shoots through my wrist as I fight to keep the right wing from dropping any farther.

Colston’s already ahead of me, eyes moving between the attitude indicator, airspeed, and altimeter while I concentrate on getting the airplane level again.

“Bank’s coming back. Airspeed still dropping.”

“I see it.”

I add even more power.

Something crashes in the cabin behind us, followed by somebody cursing over the intercom.

“Everybody hold on,” Brian calls.

Before anyone can say anything else, Ruth drops us again.

My stomach lurches as my body lifts against the restraints, then slams back into the seat when the airplane catches itself. Colston grabs his controls with both hands, ready to come in if I need him, but he keeps his attention on the instruments.

“We’re still losing altitude,” he says.

“How much?”

He gives me the number, then immediately follows it with our airspeed as another hard shudder runs through the airplane.

Sweat slides down my back beneath my flight suit. My jaw aches from how hard I’m clenching it, and the muscles through my shoulders and forearms are starting to burn from fighting Ruth every time she knocks us around.

The grin I had coming into this pass is long gone.

Ruth has my full fucking attention now.

The next drop comes before I can get us completely settled.

My stomach lurches as Ruth drops us again. Beside me, Colston watches the instruments, his voice staying unusually calm as the numbers keep falling.

“Still dropping,” Colston says. “She’s a little dramatic, huh?”

“Focus, Jenny.”

“I am focused.”

Before I can say anything else, the descent bottoms out and Ruth throws us the other way.

My weight slams back into the seat as the G-load builds. Everything gets heavier at once, and even moving my arms takes more effort.

Colston grunts beside me. “Well. She didn’t seem to like me calling her out like that.”

I cut him a look, but he’s already back on the instruments.

“We’re still going up.”

I stay on them with him while we climb, waiting for the pressure to ease.

A few seconds later, it finally does.

Then my weight goes light again.

“Fuck.”

I breathe through my teeth and make another correction while Colston immediately starts calling our altitude and airspeed again.

Brian comes over the intercom. “Everybody good?”

The rest of the crew answers one by one.

Nobody’s hurt.

Thank fuck.

I roll my aching wrist before putting my hand right back where I need it because we’re still in the fucking eyewall.

Des leans closer to his radar display. “We’re getting close to the inner edge.”

I nod without taking my eyes off the instruments. The airplane is still responding to everything I ask from it, and right now, that’s all I need.

Lightning flashes across the windshield again, bright enough that I have to blink against it.

Beside me, one of Colston’s displays flickers.

His forehead creases as he taps the screen, then tries it again. “Shit.”

“What?” I ask.

“Mission link just dropped.”

I glance over while he starts checking the system. “Can you get it back?”

Colston looks over at me. “Negative.”

For a second, neither of us says anything.

Brian confirms it from behind us. “External transmission is down. Nothing’s getting out.”

For the first time since we hit the eyewall, my attention flips to Goldie.

Because I know what that means on the other end.

Goldie’s at home probably watching every piece of information she can get her hands on. If the public feed went down with ours, all she’s going to see is the track from our airplane stop somewhere inside the eyewall.

Fuck.

I can already picture what that’s going to do to her.

Another hard shudder runs through the airplane and jerks my focus right back where it belongs.

I can worry about Goldie freaking the fuck out after I get us through this.

Right now, I need to make sure I get home to her.

“Anything else?” I ask.

Brian takes a few seconds to check. “Tail Doppler’s down too.”

“Shit,” Des mutters.

I glance toward the radar display we still have. “Nose radar?”

“Still up.”

Okay.

Losing the mission link means nobody on the ground is getting our data right now, but we’re still collecting. Losing the tail Doppler means we’ve lost another piece of what we came out here to collect.

But the nose radar is still giving us what we need to see ahead of the airplane.

For now, I can work with that.

Another hard pocket throws us sideways, Colston's shoulder slamming into mine before we both straighten again.

That's when I feel a new vibration through the rudder pedals, one that shouldn't be there.

It's subtle at first, more of a low buzz under my boots than anything else, but it's enough to get my attention.

"Brian."

"I feel it," he says in the headset.

"Any idea where it's coming from?"

"Not yet. I'm checking."

Then Ruth starts beating the shit out of us again.

The turbulence gets rougher, every hit knocking us around before I can get back my equilibrium from the one before it. Colston keeps feeding me what he's seeing while I work to keep the airplane where I want it, and somewhere in the middle of all of that, the rain starts to ease.

I barely register it at first.

The pounding against the windshield gets quieter.

The turbulence evens out.

The airplane finally stops fighting me.

Then we break through the inner edge of the eyewall and into the eye.

The airplane goes steady around me, but the vibration is still there beneath my feet, stronger now that everything else is calm.

Beside me, Colston lets his head fall back against the seat for a second.

"Holy fuck," he says.

"Yeah."

He rolls his head toward me. "Goldie girl's gonna be losing her shit over that feed going out."

"I know."

His mouth tightens because there's nothing either of us can do about it from here.

I shift in the seat and roll my shoulders, forcing my attention back onto the airplane now that the air has smoothed out.

The last crossing has left every muscle in my upper body tight, and there's a knot starting low in my back from staying braced through every

hit. I flex my fingers a couple of times before putting my hands back on the controls.

“Brian, what’ve we got?”

There’s a pause while he works through the systems.

“Engines are good. Hydraulics and electrical look normal. Flight controls are responding.” He pauses again. “Mission link and tail Doppler are still down.”

“And the vibration?”

“Unknown.”

“What do you think?” I ask.

“Feels like it’s coming from aft. I’m still trying to isolate it.” Brian pauses. “Nothing critical is showing, but after a hit like that, I want to know what’s vibrating before we put her back through the wall.”

“Yeah.”

So do I.

The vibration gets stronger beneath my feet.

I glance at Colston, and his eyes drop toward the pedals before coming back to mine.

“Once we’re out, I’m not taking her through again,” I say.

“Yeah.” He nods. “I’m with you.”

Brian comes over the intercom. “Good plan.”

Des is already turning back toward the radar. “I’ll find us a way out.”

We came all the way out here to collect data, and with Ruth still changing this fast, cutting the mission short means leaving some of it behind.

I hate that.

But I’m sure as hell not taking this crew back through the eyewall with a vibration Brian can’t identify, the tail Doppler down, and an airplane that’s already gotten the shit kicked out of it.

“Abort the rest of the pattern,” I say. “Let’s get out of here.”

We start circling inside the eye while Des works through the radar with the rest of the team, looking for the best section to take us back into the wall.

He studies the radar a little longer, then shakes his head.

“The section we came through is worse now.”

I look at the mess on the radar.

“Then we’re not going back that way.”

“What about west?” Colston asks.

Des studies the radar for another second before shaking his head. “Too much building over there.”

“North?”

“Worse,” Des says.

Colston leans closer to his display while Des keeps working through the other options.

Every time I move the rudder pedals, the vibration comes through my boots again. It hasn’t eased at all, and the longer I feel it, the more I want us out of this airplane and back on the ground where maintenance can figure out what the fuck is causing it.

“Come on, Des,” I say.

“I’m working on it.”

Finally, he points toward the southeast side of the eye. “There. That section’s starting to open up.”

Colston and I both study the radar.

It’s still going to be a rough ride, but there’s less building there than anywhere else around us.

Colston looks over at me. “That’s the one.”

“Yeah.” I turn us toward it. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Brian comes back over the intercom. “Vibration’s holding steady while we’re in smooth air.”

“Anything new showing?” I ask.

“No. Maintenance is going to have a hell of a time with this one when we get back,” Brian says.

“As long as we get back safely, they can take as long as they need to,” I tell him.

Behind us, everyone gets strapped in again while we close in on the southeast side of the eyewall.

My whole body is starting to feel the last crossing now, every muscle tight and tired from staying braced while Ruth threw us around.

But as the eyewall fills more of the windshield, another wave of adrenaline hits me hard enough that the exhaustion gets shoved to the back of my mind.

My mouth goes dry.

I know exactly what’s waiting for us in there this time.

There’s no grin trying to break loose. No part of me wondering how bad Ruth can get or what kind of ride we’re in for.

I just want to get through that wall one more time, point the nose toward Florida, and go the hell home.

Des gives me our heading, and Colston works through the instruments beside me before looking over. He looks about as wrecked as I feel.

“You good?”

I roll one shoulder against the ache and flex my hands on the yoke. “Good enough.”

He holds my gaze for another second, nods, then turns back to his display.

The edge of the eyewall gets closer with every mile.

The first hit comes before we’re fully back inside the eyewall.

Rain hammers the windshield as the airplane rolls hard enough to shove me sideways in the seat. I bring the wings back toward level, but another pocket catches us before I can completely level and drops us fast enough that the air leaves my lungs in a grunt.

Some of the tension leaves Colston’s voice. “Airspeed’s good. We’re coming down.”

The vibration under my feet intensifies and I frown.

“Brian, you feeling that?”

“Yeah,” he answers immediately, his voice crackling in my ear. “It’s definitely getting worse.”

Every bit of fatigue disappears as Brian confirms what I’m already feeling.

We need to get this airplane the fuck out of here.

Then an updraft catches us and starts pushing us higher, but it doesn’t have anywhere near the force of the one that nailed us coming in.

“Climbing,” Colston says.

“Let her take us.”

I keep our airspeed where I want it and let Ruth give us the altitude instead of fighting her for it.

Des adjusts our heading while Colston keeps feeding me what he sees, and little by little, the mess on the radar ahead of us starts thinning.

Come on.

I lean forward, watching for that opening while rain continues pounding the windshield.

Then it starts to ease.

The hits come farther apart, and the constant shaking through the airplane finally begins to back off with them.

The airplane steadies enough that my muscles finally stop bracing for the next hit.

“We’re clear of the eyewall,” Des says.

Thank fuck.

Colston flexes one hand and shakes it out before rubbing at his shoulder.

“You good?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He works his shoulder again and winces. “That’s gonna fucking suck tomorrow.”

“You’ll survive.”

He looks over at me. “Your concern means a lot.”

I snort and turn my attention back to the instruments.

Brian starts another systems check while I keep us moving away from Ruth. The engines are still running normally, and nothing new has lit up since the last time he checked.

The vibration is holding steady now that we’re back in smoother air, but the tail Doppler is still down.

So is the mission link.

Now that we’re out of immediate danger, my thoughts go straight to Goldie.

I have no idea if she’s glued to the Weather Channel or letting everybody at the house distract her and not paying attention at all.

I hope it’s the second one.

But I know her. She’s definitely glued to the TV.

And if she realized something went wrong and they can’t track us, she’s probably scared out of her mind right now.

I hate that I’m the reason she’s stressed, especially this far along.

More than anything, I want to hear her voice, make sure she’s okay, make sure the baby’s still where they’re supposed to be, and tell her I’m coming home.

There’s nothing I can do for Goldie from up here, so I keep flying and try not to think about how long it’ll be before I can call her.

My overthinking’s interrupted when Brian’s voice comes through my headset.

“Mission link’s back. We’re transmitting again.”

Colston looks over at me, and some of the tension in his body eases as he sinks back into his seat.

"Make sure AOC knows we aborted," I say.

"Already sent it."

Des pops into the conversation. "They've got us returning."

Good.

At least information from the airplane is getting back to the ground again.

If Goldie's been watching any of it, she might see that we've turned away from Ruth and are headed back toward Florida.

She still won't know what happened in there, but hopefully seeing us moving in the right direction will keep her from completely losing her shit until I can call.

That takes some of the pressure off my chest.

Ruth is behind us now, still tearing across the Gulf toward Louisiana while we put more distance between us and the storm.

Colston lets out a tired laugh and shakes his head. "I can't believe we did that."

I look over at him and hold out my fist for him to bump. "Wouldn't want to do it with anyone else, bud."

He gives me a lopsided grin. "I knew you loved me the most."

I roll my eyes and look back out the window toward home. After that, neither of us says anything.

We don't really need to.

Tomorrow, I'll probably be able to appreciate what we just did.

Right now, I've had enough hurricane for one fucking day.

I'm ready to get home.

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CHAPTER 38
GOLDIE

BY THE TIME Trace and the girls leave, we know Sumner and Colston are safely on the ground in Lakeland.

The next thing I really register is the sound of Sumner's truck pulling into the driveway.

I'm off the couch before the headlights finish sweeping across the living room wall, one hand braced beneath my stomach while I hurry toward the front door as fast as I can.

Which is to say I waddle there in slow-mo, but whatever.

My fingers fumble the deadbolt the first time I try to turn it.

"Ugh, fuck offffff," I tell it, trying again.

I get it open and yank the door inward just as Sumner reaches the porch.

For a second, I forget every single thing I planned to say to him.

The words just float away.

He's in the same clothes he was wearing when he left, jeans and a black T-shirt, but there's no hiding what the last however many hours did to him.

His buzzed hair is flattened in weird patches from sweat and his headset, dark stubble covers his jaw, and he looks so tired the circles under his eyes are almost as dark as bruises. His shoulders sag, and there's a raw red mark climbing the side of his neck before disappearing under his shirt.

He looks like he's been to hell and back.

And somehow, he's also the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Because he's *here*.

The man who left this house yesterday with a grin on his face because he was finally getting to fly his dream storm is home, beat to shit but *alive*.

My eyes burn, and I blink fast because I refuse to let tears blur him when I finally get to look at him after so many hours of not knowing if I'd ever get to see him again.

God, I fucking love this man.

Sumner stops when he sees me standing there, his mouth tipping up into a tired smile.

"Hey, baby."

That's all it takes.

The tears I've been fighting spill over, and I'm moving, crossing the porch as fast as my body will let me and throwing myself at him.

My belly keeps me from getting as close as I want, so I wrap my arms around his neck and cling to him the best I can. I bury my face in his neck while a shaky laugh breaks out of me between tears.

His arms come around me the second we collide, one across my back and the other wrapping around the back of my neck as his fingers tangle in my hair.

I cling to him and cry and make a mess of my face and his shirt, but I don't care.

He's warm beneath my cheek, and he smells like sweat, stale airplane air, and whatever soap he used yesterday morning before he left.

I have no fucks left to give and breathe him in anyway.

As deep as I can.

Like I can somehow make up for all the hours I couldn't touch him by filling my lungs with him now.

Sumner presses his face into my hair and lets out a long breath against the top of my head like he's doing the same thing I am.

I can feel his heartbeat beating against mine. It's fast but steady, and after spending all night staring at screens and listening to other people tell me he was okay, this is the first thing my body actually believes.

He's home.

Sumner's fingers flex against the back of my neck, his thumb moving slowly through the hair at my nape while neither one of us makes any attempt to let go.

Eventually, he pulls back just enough to look down at me.

"You okay?"

A wet, slightly hysterical laugh pushes out of me because what kind of fucking question is that?

I wipe my cheek against his shirt since I've already ruined it anyway. "Don't ask me that right now."

His tired smile disappears, but his hand stays warm and steady against the back of my neck.

"Okay."

Then he pulls me back against him and lets me keep holding on.

I stay tucked against him until the crying finally slows enough that I can pull back without immediately starting all over again.

Up close, the red mark climbing the side of his neck looks even worse, and the skin is rubbed raw in places.

I lift my hand and barely run two fingers over the edge of it. "What did this?"

"The harness."

My eyes drop to where the mark disappears into his shirt. "The harness did all that?"

He tilts his head to the side and shrugs. "Ruth helped."

I look back up at him. "What a bitch."

His mouth twitches, but he looks way too exhausted to put much effort into the smile.

I slide my arms around his waist again, more careful this time, and he lets out a little grunt before he can hide it. The muscles under my hands tighten for a second too.

I pull back enough to look at him again.

Sumner takes one look at my face and knows he's busted.

His eyes close for a second like he already knows what's coming.

"What hurts?"

He sighs. "I'm just sore."

"Yeah, I gathered that." I keep one hand lightly against his side, careful not to put any pressure on it. "Where?"

Sumner blows out a tired breath and rubs one hand over the back of his neck. "Shoulders. Ribs. Back. Pretty much everywhere."

I look him over again, suddenly wishing I had x-ray vision. "Do you need to go to the doctor's?"

He shakes his head. "It's not that serious."

My eyes narrow. “Did somebody with medical training tell you that, or are you doing that thing all men do where you pretend everything’s fine when you might have internal bleeding or broken bones or something?”

The corner of his lip tips up again. “We got checked before they released us.”

I eye him, and he laughs, but the sound cuts off when he winces and presses a hand against his ribs.

My eyebrows shoot up.

“By the doctor on staff,” he adds quickly.

Okay, good. At least somebody who knows what they’re doing looked him over before sending his stubborn ass home.

“You could’ve led with that.” I slide my hand down his arm, still watching his face for any other little twitch he thinks he can hide from me.

A mosquito whines past my ear and I swat at it. Sumner catches my hand before I can smack at another one and threads his fingers through mine. “I told you I was fine.”

I give him my most unimpressed look. “You told me you were sore after getting tossed around inside a hurricane, Maverick. That leaves a lot of room for horrifying possibilities.”

His thumb moves over the back of my hand, and the tired smile fades a little. “Okay. I probably could’ve been more specific. I’ll be better next time.”

“Thank you.” I glance toward the open front door behind me as a mosquito buzzes past my ear. “And I’m not even addressing the *next time*.” I shudder. “Now get your sexy butt inside before the mosquitoes carry me away.”

Sumner reaches down for the duffel bag he dropped onto the porch, but he barely gets his fingers around the strap before he winces, a sharp little intake of breath giving him away.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” I grab the other handle before he can pull it up. “Give me that.”

His hand immediately slides down to cover mine, stopping me. “Not a chance.”

I glare up at him. “You’re injured.”

“I’m sore,” he corrects, so it looks like we’re going to keep having this exact argument until one of us dies. His tired eyes drop to my belly. “And you’re eight months pregnant.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, pregnant. Not broken. The door’s right there. I think I can manage it.”

He drops the strap and folds his arms over his chest, leaning against the railing. “Fine.”

I lift my chin, giving him my most confident look, before I grip the strap and give the duffel an experimental tug.

It barely moves. Like, at all.

What the hell does he have in here, bricks?

He coughs out what sounds suspiciously like a laugh, and I narrow my eyes at him.

I try again, but yeah. No. This thing is beyond my capabilities at the moment, even if I hate to admit it. Sumner watches me realize this, and even exhausted and covered in bruises, the smug little smirk and raised eyebrow are uncalled for.

I point a finger at him. “Don’t be a dick.”

His mouth twitches. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Not with words, but you think I don’t know what that expression means?” I gesture to his face.

He huffs out another laugh while I let go of the handle before I embarrass myself further. Then I gesture toward the open front door. “Fine. You can carry the stupid bag. But that is the absolute last thing you’re doing tonight.”

He slowly straightens as he hefts the bag filled with all his gear up onto his shoulder, moving slower and stiffer than I’m used to seeing. “Bossy. I like it.”

I shake my head with a laugh as I step back—waddling out of the way—to let him through the doorway. I keep a hawk-like eye on the way he moves, because even with a doctor clearing him, it’d be just like Sumner to downplay how much pain he’s in. “You’ve spent the last eight months showing me how much I mean to you by taking care of me. Tonight it’s my turn to show you.”

He stops just inside the entryway and looks back over his shoulder at me. His tired smile softens into something so unbearably sweet it hurts a little, and I rub at my chest.

He kisses my temple when he gets close enough and murmurs, “I love you,” against my skin.

Well, dang. There go my eyes burning again.

I quickly shut the door before any more mosquitoes can follow us inside, using it as an excuse to look away. “Yeah, yeah. I love you, too. Now move it.”

I turn to lock the deadbolt so he can’t see what that sweet smile is doing to my face.

The heavy *thunk* of the metal sliding into place hits me hard.

He’s home, and I can finally breathe.

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CHAPTER 39
GOLDIE

SUMNER LETS the bag drop and tries to roll his shoulders, but his jaw clenches, and he stops about halfway through the movement.

I point a finger down the hallway. “Shower. You smell like a sweaty airplane.”

His mouth tips up at the corner. “You seemed pretty into it a couple of minutes ago.”

I wrinkle my nose. “That was the trauma. I’ve moved past it.”

He laughs. It sounds rough and exhausted, and it cuts off abruptly as he winces and leans against the wall, taking in a couple of shallow breaths.

My eyes zero in on the movement, narrowing. Yeah, he’s definitely downplaying this shit.

“Go. Shower,” I repeat, softening my voice.

He doesn't even try to argue, which just proves exactly how much pain he's actually in. “Yes, ma’am.”

He shuffles down the hall, and I detour into the kitchen to grab a cold bottle of water and some ibuprofen before following him.

When I make it into the bedroom, Sumner is sitting on the edge of the mattress, leaning forward as he tries to work off one boot.

The position lasts maybe two seconds before he grunts and his body goes rigid.

I set the water and ibuprofen on the nightstand. “Move.”

He looks up, blinking like his brain is a few seconds behind. “What?”

“Your hands. Move 'em out of the way.”

His forehead creases as I awkwardly lower myself onto my knees on the floor beside him. Not a chance in hell am I going to be able to get myself up without help, but that's a later problem.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking your boots off, because watching you try to fold yourself in half is giving me sympathy pains. And I'm already uncomfortable enough."

His jaw sets stubbornly. "I can take off my own boots."

"I know." I give him a flat look. "And I can carry a heavy duffel bag. But here we are."

He just stares at me.

And I stare right back, holding out my hand and wiggling my fingers. "Foot."

Something about that finally gets through his thick skull. Maybe it's the sheer exhaustion, or maybe he just remembers that I'm every bit as stubborn as he is and he doesn't have the energy to fight a losing battle tonight.

Either way, he lets out a heavy sigh and stretches one long leg toward me.

I grab the heel, maneuvering around my belly the best I can, and tug the heavy work boot free, letting it drop to the rug with a thud.

Then I hold out my hand for the other one.

By the time I push the heavy boots out of the way, Sumner has already swallowed the ibuprofen and drained almost half the water bottle.

I shuffle forward, moving between his knees as much as my belly allows, and reach down to grab the hem of his black T-shirt.

Sumner catches my wrists.

His hands are warm and rough around mine. "I've got it."

I glance at the angry, raw mark climbing the side of his neck before looking right back into his eyes. "I know you do."

His fingers loosen slightly.

"But you don't have to."

His head falls forward and his hands fall away. He blows out a long breath and then eventually moves out of my way so I can work.

I use the bed to maneuver myself to my feet, which was easier than I expected, before I strip his shirt off, moving as slowly and gently as humanly possible.

He drops his chin to help, but the fabric barely clears his shoulders before I see what's underneath.

"Holy shit."

Angry red welts cut across the tops of both shoulders and angle down over his chest exactly where the harness must have dug in. Dark purple is already blooming beneath one collarbone, and a massive, ugly bruise spreads along his left side, painting his ribs.

I want to kiss them all better.

I just don't want to hurt him any more than he already hurts.

Sumner catches my wrist again when I go to touch him, but this time he guides my hand down, pressing my palm flat against an unbruised spot low on his stomach.

"I'm okay."

Oh, come *on*. I refuse to cry anymore. Seriously, my tear ducts need to clock the fuck out.

Sumner notices anyway, because of course he does. His free hand lifts toward my face.

I duck out of his way before he can reach me. "Nope."

His eyebrows lift. "I can't touch you now?"

"You can always touch me," I tell him, my voice a little thicker than I'd like. "But take the night off from taking care of me, okay? I've got you."

He looks at me for a long second. I can see him thinking about arguing.

But then something in him just gives.

His shoulders drop on a heavy, tired exhale.

"Okay."

That one quiet, surrendered word kills me more than the bruises.

I get him into the bathroom and reach in to turn on the shower, letting the water heat up while he works on the button of his jeans.

He winces as he tries to push them down his hips, so I swat his hands away.

"Stop. I've got it."

"You know," he says, his voice rough while I carefully help him step out of his jeans and boxers, "this would be hotter under different circumstances."

I roll my eyes. He gives me the most exhausted version of his usual smirk.

"There he is. Good to know Ruth didn't knock the perv out of you."

“Nope, he’s still in here.” As if to prove it, his eyes drop to my boobs.

I try to stand up on my own, but I end up using the counter to help, groaning when I straighten.

Fuck you, gravity.

The smile on Sumner’s face as he watches me can only be described as fond.

“So, not to stress you out all over again,” I say, knowing I need to fill him in on what happened while he was in the air. “But I had a contraction tonight.”

Sumner’s eyes snap up to mine.

I should really learn not to start conversations that way.

“Just one,” I rush out. “And it didn’t even hurt or anything.”

Every trace of his tired humor disappears, and he steps closer to me. “What? Are you okay? Is the baby okay?”

It’s *really* hard to focus with all the muscles and the nakedness happening right now, but I do my best, dragging my eyes back up to his face.

“I think it was just the stress of everything, but we’re both fine. See?”

His palm spreads wide across my stomach as if he needs to feel for himself. The baby moves almost all the time now, so it doesn’t take long for him to feel them. “And you’re not in pain or having them right now?”

“No. It was literally just the one. I probably shouldn’t even have said anything but—”

His fingers come up and grip my chin, tilting my face up so we’re eye to eye. “I want to know *everything*, Goldie. You’ve known that from the beginning. Even the tiny things you think don’t matter. They matter to me.”

His forehead falls against mine. “Thank you for telling me.” He exhales, and I breathe him in. “You’re really okay?”

I lean into the hand still on my stomach a little. “We’re really okay.”

I slide my hands carefully around his waist, doing my best to avoid the massive bruise forming on his side. “That feeling?”

He pulls back just enough to meet my eyes.

“The panic you just felt when I told you about the contraction?”

His jaw tenses because I think he knows what I’m about to say.

“That’s exactly what I felt when the tracker froze while you were in the eyewall.”

He doesn’t say anything right away. The shower continues to run behind us, filling the bathroom with warm steam, while his thumb moves in slow, soothing arcs over my stomach.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he murmurs. “I hate that you had to sit here not knowing.”

“It was the absolute worst.”

His eyes stay locked on mine.

I could ask him not to fly again. A tiny, terrified part of me really wants to. I could tell him I never want to watch another stupid blue dot crawl into a hurricane for as long as I live.

But that would mean asking him to cut off a fundamental piece of himself just so I could feel a little safer. I know exactly what that does to a person, and I refuse to do it to him.

“I know I’ve said it before, but after going through that, I think I need to say it again,” I tell him. “I’ll never ask you to stop.”

His hand stills on my belly.

“I’m serious. I’m going to hate it every single time you leave, and I’ll probably be a complete nightmare until you come back, but I won’t do that.”

The corner of his mouth pulls up into a tired smirk. “Probably?”

I pinch the skin at his waist.

He immediately sucks in a sharp hiss of breath, his muscles locking up.

“Oh, shit. Sorry.” I jerk my hand back.

Sumner starts laughing, which immediately turns into him wincing and grabbing his ribs, which somehow only makes him laugh harder.

“That is not funny,” I scold him, though I can feel my own mouth wanting to turn up into a grin.

“It kind of is.”

“You’re an idiot.”

I shake my head and point a thumb over my shoulder toward the steaming shower stall. “Get your naked ass in the water before I accidentally assault you somewhere else.”

He does what I say, and I pull my clothes off and follow him in.

Sumner stands beneath the warm water while I work shampoo over his hair, my fingertips moving carefully around the marks on his skin so I don’t hurt him.

His eyes close, and he lets out a sigh that sounds like it came from the very bottom of his soul.

The muscles in his shoulders gradually loosen bit by bit as I scrape my nails lightly over his scalp and then switch to massaging the suds in.

I've seen this man relaxed before. I've watched him sleep. I've had him sprawled naked across my bed after I rode every coherent thought out of his head.

But this is different.

He's letting go because he knows he can trust that I've got him. It's a powerful feeling, one I want to experience again and again.

I rinse the suds away and wash the sweat from his back. Then I brush my lips across every single bruise and mark I can find, needing to do anything I can to relieve even the tiniest bit of his pain.

By the time we're done and I get the water turned off, he's fading fast. He doesn't fight me when I towel him off, minus his legs because no way can I reach, and lead him into the bedroom.

I hand him clean boxers, and once he's dressed, I get him settled against the pillows.

Then I waddle out to the kitchen and heat up some leftover chicken and rice from last night's dinner. I pop it onto a tray with some lemonade and a cookie and call it good.

His eyes are only half open as he eats, and when he's finished, he sinks back into the bed.

"Sleep, Maverick," I say, taking the empty tray from his lap and setting it on the nightstand. Before I can pull away, Sumner slides his hand around the back of my neck, pulling me down to press a sweet kiss to my forehead then my lips.

"Yes, ma'am," he murmurs, his voice a little slurred and fading fast.

By the time I turn off the lamp and crawl under the covers with him, he's starting to fade.

He settles flat on his back, since his battered ribs clearly aren't interested in any other position, and I carefully curl onto my side next to him.

His hand finds my stomach within seconds, and I cover it with mine, lacing our fingers together. I love how much he always needs to be touching me, like he craves me.

I’ve never really needed outside validation, but not gonna lie, it feels good to know how much this man wants me.

It only takes seconds for him to lose the battle with sleep as his eyes fall closed. I watch the tight lines of pain and exhaustion around his eyes and mouth finally soften as his breathing goes deep and even.

He’s out cold.

I stay awake just a little longer, watching him in the dark and listening to the steady rhythm of his breathing. There was a point over the last twenty-four hours I didn’t know if I’d ever hear this again, and right now I just want to soak it in.

Nothing lasts forever, but I’m gonna need at least another fifty or sixty years with this guy.

And even then, I can’t imagine feeling like it’ll ever be enough.

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CHAPTER 40
GOLDIE

Thirty-Six Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a head of romaine lettuce.

I SHOULD'VE KNOWN BETTER.

I really should've.

"I blame myself for everything," I say, and Ellie chokes on her drink beside me.

Life has mostly gone back to normal since Ruth scared the shit out of all of us. Sumner's back at work, I'm back at Bombshell, and now that everyone can finally unclench, we decided to celebrate by hitting up drag brunch with the crew.

Cherry's belting out "Circus" by Britney Spears, and halfway through, she shimmies her hips and struts her way off the stage and into the crowd. Her attention is laser-focused on Colston.

You'd think he'd have some shame, but now that I think about it, that's not Colston *at all.*

Our favorite six-foot-something queen makes her way toward him, bright cherry-red hair swinging around her shoulders, and perches on his lap when he pats his thigh, finishing up her song. Sumner cracks up and pulls out his phone to get video.

Scout laughs so hard she nearly falls out of her chair, and Trace groans. Because yeah, Colston's eating this *up*.

Cherry slides her manicured hand over Colston's shoulder and fixes her gaze on Trace. "Why so broody, handsome?"

Colston cracks up. "He's jealous because he's the number two best friend."

Trace scowls. "Shut up, Dickface."

Cherry laughs. "Two of my favorite things, one more than the other." She winks.

Colston loses it.

Trace points at him. "Fuck you."

Andie snorts a laugh into her drink across from me.

I just lean back against the booth, resting my hands on top of my stomach, while Sumner pans his phone from Colston losing his shit to Trace looking like he wants to murder him, and honestly, this might be the best Sunday of my life.

"This is exactly why I wanted them to come," I say, leaning closer to Sumner so he can hear me over the music.

He hits stop on his video and sets his phone on the table. "To watch Colston get hit on by drag queens?"

I scoff. "As if he isn't loving this. But no." I shake my head. "For the entertainment."

Right on cue, as "Born This Way" starts playing, Cherry gets off his lap and catches his hand.

Colston's already laughing when she pulls him to his feet, and he goes with her without a second of hesitation.

She leads him back toward the stage, still singing, and by the time they get up there, she's got him sharing the microphone with her through the chorus while he grins his ass off.

Scout starts singing along as Trace drops his head into his hands.

Sumner just laughs, shaking his head, and reaches for his coffee.

He's handling drag brunch a lot better than I expected. Not that I thought he'd be weird about it. Not only does he have two dads, but Sumner isn't weird about much of anything.

But he also hates being the center of attention, and The Tipsy Mermaid has never met a man trying to quietly eat brunch that it didn't want to publicly humiliate.

So far, he's gotten off easy.

Trace has spent the last few minutes trying not to catch Cherry's attention. Colston, meanwhile, is up onstage singing into her microphone and having the time of his life.

Sumner's somehow made it this far without getting dragged into anything. I catch him inching a little closer to me every time one of the queens works our side of the room, which is hilarious considering I'm not exactly big enough to hide him.

I take another bite of my French toast.

The baby kicks so hard under my ribs that I lose my breath for a second, and I stop chewing, my eyes going wide.

Sumner's *Goldie-is-uncomfortable* radar pings as his gaze snaps to my stomach. He shifts closer. "Again? Are you okay?"

"Your child's going to come out with tree trunk legs, I swear," I huff, rubbing at my side.

Sumner's hyper-alert expression melts into a soft, impossibly fond smile, and his hand comes up to stroke across my stomach. It's sweet, but also I'm uncomfortable as fuck and *so* ready for this baby to be out.

This is probably one of the last times I'll agree to sit in a crowded restaurant before this kid gets here. My back hurts, my ankles look like gross balloons, and I had to pee twice before our food even arrived.

Still worth it.

Up on stage, the song finally ends. Colston dips Cherry on the final note, earning a roar from the crowd, before she sends him back toward our table and heads off to harass a bachelorette party on the other side of the room.

Colston drops into his seat, still grinning.

Trace looks at him over his empty Bloody Mary glass. "You done?"

"I sounded pretty good."

Trace snorts. "Calm down, American Idol."

"Hey, I nailed that last note."

"You butchered Lady Gaga in front of a room full of witnesses." Trace smirks. "Straight-up murder."

Colston gives him a long look, then reaches for his drink, shaking his head as he takes a sip.

"Asshole."

Trace laughs and settles back in his seat.

Tatum reaches across the table and steals one of Ellie’s breakfast potatoes while she's distracted laughing at them.

Ellie catches the movement out of the corner of her eye and swats at her hand. “Bitch.”

Tatum just pops the potato into her mouth and shrugs. “You weren’t eating it.”

“I was going to,” Ellie grumbles.

“Well, you waited too long.”

I watch them bicker and lean back against the booth, letting out a quiet breath. This is my happy place. This is what Sunday should be.

Good food, great friends, and all sorts of glittery, neon chaos.

Sumner’s hand slides from my stomach to my thigh beneath the table, his thumb smoothing idly over my skin.

I interlace my fingers with his and turn back toward the stage as the next queen comes out.

By the time Cherry reappears on stage to close out the set, Trace and Colston are in a heated debate about how much you should tip after a lap dance. Scout is taking Colston’s side just to annoy Trace, and Ellie and Andie are happily taking bets on who wins the argument.

Cherry hits her final pose to a massive roar from the room, scooping up a handful of cash from the edge of the stage.

But instead of heading backstage, Cherry keeps the microphone.

“All right, I’ve got one more thing before we take a little break.”

I reach for my oversized, fruit-covered virgin strawberry daiquiri.

Cherry looks directly at our booth.

Oh, fuck.

I freeze, my lips hovering right over the neon pink straw.

Beside me, Scout slowly raises her phone, angling the camera right at me.

That should’ve been my first clue.

Cherry points at me. “Goldie. Get your gorgeous ass up here.”

I stare at her like she’s out of her mind. “No.”

Sumner’s hand slips off my thigh.

I glance over at him. Instead of looking surprised that his hugely pregnant girlfriend is being summoned into the spotlight, he just calmly shifts his legs out of the way to give me room to slide out of the booth.

I narrow my eyes at him, but right now, I'm mostly focused on figuring out why Cherry wants me up on that stage. The people at the tables closest to us start clapping and cheering, trying to goad me into it.

"If this involves dancing, I'm leaving," I call out to her.

Cherry laughs. "Relax. I'm not making you dance."

That makes me feel approximately zero percent better.

Ellie starts shoving at my arm. "Go."

I swat her hand away. "Stop shoving. Let me figure out how to roll my pregnant ass out of this booth first."

I manage to extract myself from the booth and get to my feet, one hand automatically going to my aching lower back.

Cherry makes her way over and stops in front of me.

I narrow my eyes at her. "What are you doing?"

"You'll see."

"That's not an answer."

She ignores me and turns toward the booth.

The noise level in the restaurant shifts. It doesn't actually get quiet, because this place probably hasn't been quiet since the day it opened, but the energy changes enough that I can feel the focus of the entire room zeroing in on our table.

"This handsome man asked if he could borrow my stage for a minute." Cherry looks toward Sumner. "He asked nicely. And he tipped well."

Then she holds the microphone out, and when I look over my shoulder, Sumner's already sliding out of the booth and making his way toward me.

My brain stalls out because Sumner hates being the center of attention.

But he takes the microphone from Cherry anyway.

I look around. Scout still has her phone aimed right at me. Colston has his out, too. Trace looks like someone just slapped him in the face with the sudden realization of what's happening.

But… what *is* happening?

Then Sumner reaches into his pocket and drops down onto one knee right in the middle of The Tipsy Mermaid.

Oh.

Oh.

Oh, *fuck.*

Both of my hands fly up to cover my mouth, tears pricking my eyes as I look from him kneeling at my feet to the gorgeous sparkler gripped between

his fingers. “You’re really doing this in the middle of a drag brunch?” I choke out, a wet, hysterical laugh punching through my shock. “Holy shit. Yes. Whatever it is, yes.”

He looks up at me, that breathtaking smile that’s just for me spreading across his face. “You should probably let me ask the question first.”

The room laughs and cheers, but the sound feels like it's a million miles away.

I swipe a rogue tear out from under my eye, trying and failing to pull it together. “Fine. Keep going.”

Sumner lets out a quiet laugh, his smile softening around the edges.

“We’ve done pretty much everything in the wrong order,” he says into the mic, his voice wrapping around me and making the rest of the crowded restaurant disappear.

“That’s us,” I whisper.

“Yeah.” His mouth twitches like he’s trying not to laugh. “We must be crazy.”

I sniff, wiping at my other eye. “Yeah, but you’re crazier. Who tells a girl they just met they’ll knock her up?”

He chuckles, the sound low and rough over the speakers. “Still the best bad decision I ever made.”

He looks up at me for a long second, his dark gaze so steady and full of absolute devotion that a tight, heavy ache blooms right in the center of my chest.

“I know we skipped all the normal steps, and I wouldn’t change a single second of it. I want to wake up next to you for the rest of my life. I want to come home to you, raise this baby with you, and be there for every version of us that comes after this. I want the good days and the shitty ones and all the ordinary ones in between. I want the whole damn life, Goldie. Whatever comes next, I want it with you.”

My chin starts trembling.

Well, fuck. There goes whatever chance I had of keeping it together.

I look down at the ring pinched between his fingers. It’s set in thick yellow gold, holding a massive, kite-shaped salt-and-pepper diamond surrounded by a jagged, asymmetrical halo of smaller black diamonds. It’s bold, loud, and completely non-traditional. Exactly the kind of ring I would’ve picked for myself, which means he fucking nailed it.

Sumner holds my gaze, his voice dropping a little deeper over the speakers. “Goldie Hahn—”

Cherry’s head whips toward me. “Girl, what? Your name is Goldie Hawn?”

“It’s spelled different.”

She stares at me. “How did I not know this?”

“Cherry.” Sumner looks over at her with the most exasperated look I’ve ever seen on his face. “Can I finish proposing to my girlfriend?”

She lifts both hands and takes a step back. “Please. Sorry.”

I bite back a laugh as Sumner turns his attention to me again.

“Thank you.” His mouth twitches before his expression softens. “Goldie, will you marry me?”

“You know I will,” I say through my tears, reaching down to let him slide the ring onto my finger. It’s a little tight because I’ve got sausage fingers at the moment, but it’s close enough.

He stands, and I tip my head back to look at him. He raises his eyebrows. “I’m gonna need an official answer.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t hold back my grin. “Yes, Maverick. I’ll marry you.”

The entire restaurant explodes.

Colston runs over and flings himself at us, wrapping his arms around us both, kissing me on the cheek and then Sumner, who tries to throw him off.

Cherry lets out a loud “Woo!” into her microphone and does a little shimmy.

Scout is openly sobbing while her phone hand shakes, so the video’s gonna be a mess. Tatum and Ellie are screaming their heads off. Andie—stoic, badass Andie—is actually wiping under her eye with the back of her hand, smearing her eyeliner.

Trace joins in our little impromptu group hug, and then everyone’s piling on until Sumner and I are in the middle of our group of friends, surrounded by all the love in the world, with our baby pressed between us.

“Happy?” Sumner asks me, his lips almost brushing mine.

“I think it’s safe to say this is the best day of my life. So far.”

He laughs…

And then my future husband kisses me.

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CHAPTER 41
GOLDIE

Thirty-Nine Weeks:
Baby is approximately the size of a watermelon.

HALLOWEEN in my neighborhood is less of a holiday and more of an excuse to be absolutely, unapologetically extra.

By the time it gets dark, every driveway has folding chairs dragged out into it, half the houses have fog machines running on full blast, and the sidewalks are so packed with kids that the adults have mostly given up pretending anyone is following normal pedestrian rules.

There are life-size skeletons crawling up roofs, giant inflatable monsters leaning out of hedges, fake graveyards covering front lawns, and enough orange string lights wrapped around the palm trees to probably be visible from space.

Our house, naturally, is no exception.

Sumner went a little overboard once he realized people around here take Halloween seriously. We've got pumpkins lining the steps, fake cobwebs stretched across the railing, and a motion-activated zombie down by the walkway that has already scared the shit out of at least half a dozen toddlers and one grown man.

I told him the zombie was too much. But of course he had Colston there egging him on.

I'm honestly lucky it isn't worse.

I’m sitting in one of the cushioned porch chairs with a giant plastic bowl of candy in what’s left of my lap, dressed as a Magic 8 Ball. Look, there are only so many Halloween costumes that work when your stomach enters a room five minutes before the rest of you. The dress is skin-tight and black, with the classic white triangle printed right across my massive belly and *SIGNS POINT TO YES* in the middle.

It made Sumner laugh when I showed it to him, which was all the reason I needed to buy it.

He’s standing beside me in jeans and a black T-shirt because I told him he had to be Goose, but he flat-out refused to wear a flight suit when he already wears one to work every day. The compromise was a cheap *HELLO, MY NAME IS GOOSE* name tag slapped onto his chest and a pair of sexy aviators.

Colston, naturally, showed up dressed like Maverick.

Full green flight suit, aviators and all.

He eyes my fiancé, his mouth turning down into a frown I don’t think I’ve ever seen on his face before. “I should’ve made you wear the costume with feathers. It would’ve at least been *something.* This is a shitty excuse for a costume, dude.”

Sumner flips him off but quickly turns away when a boy dressed like Spider-Man comes running up the walkway. He’s got his mask shoved up on his head and he looks a little crazed.

He grins at Colston in his costume before eyeing Sumner.

“Doesn’t that Goose guy die?” he asks while digging through the candy bowl in my lap.

Colston makes a choking sound beside us.

Sumner looks down at the kid. “You’re like ten. How do you know that?”

The boy shrugs. “My grandpa loves that movie.”

Now Colston is completely losing it and can’t hide his laughter.

Sumner gives the kid a flat look. "Yeah, well, I came back from the dead for Halloween.” He points at the bowl. “Now take your candy and go."

The kid snatches two Reese’s cups and sprints toward the next house.

Colston wipes a tear out from under his aviators. “I’m so glad I came.”

“You just wanted an excuse to wear that costume.”

“An outfit this good deserves an audience, Goldie girl. I couldn't just sit on my couch.” He grins. “Watching Shamu suffer is just an added bonus.”

Another group starts up the driveway before Sumner can attempt a clapback. He grabs the second candy bowl off the porch table and starts handing stuff out while Colston starts negotiating with a tiny princess who's demanding four packs of Sour Patch Kids instead of the two he offered her.

It's adorable. And it makes me wonder about next Halloween, whether we'll have a tiny princess or Spider-Man.

I lean back carefully against the cushion and stretch one leg out, then the other.

My entire body has felt wrong since I woke up this morning. It's not really anything I can pinpoint outside of the usual discomfort. And it's not bad enough that I'm worried something serious is going on.

I just feel sort of… heavy and sore and generally fucking over being pregnant. The baby's way, way down in my belly and if I thought my bladder issues were bad before, they had nothing on this.

My back's been aching on and off, too, and every so often my stomach tightens hard enough to make me have to stop whatever I'm doing for a minute.

It reminds me of what happened a month ago when Sumner was up in that bitchy hurricane Ruth.

I'm not convinced this is labor, though. I mean, yeah, I'm uncomfortable but it doesn't hurt. Isn't labor supposed to be super painful?

Sumner disagrees.

He hasn't said it out loud yet, but I've caught him checking his watch enough times to know exactly what he's doing.

Another tightening starts low across my stomach while a family dressed like the Scooby-Doo gang walks up the driveway.

I keep smiling at Velma while the pressure builds and I blow out a slow exhale. This time, it wraps all the way around into my lower back.

Okay. That part is new and not exactly a picnic.

I breathe slowly through it and hand a miniature Snickers to a toddler dressed as Scooby.

"Thank you," his mom says.

"Happy Halloween."

They head back down the walkway, and the maybe-contraction finally starts to subside.

I exhale a long breath and reach into the bowl in my lap to steal a Reese's cup for myself.

When I look up, Sumner’s eyes are already glued to me.

“What?” I ask, pausing before unwrapping my candy. He better not be about to judge the amount of candy I plan on eating tonight or we’re going to have a problem.

“Was that another contraction?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Last I checked, I’ve never had a baby before, so… no clue. Felt like it might’ve been, though.”

“I have a clue,” Sumner says, stepping closer and tapping his watch. “That’s the fourth one in the last hour.”

I stare at him. “You’ve been timing them?”

“Yes, and I didn’t say anything because I knew you’d tell me I was overreacting.”

I glare at him because he isn't exactly wrong, but I'm still annoyed. “I *am* telling you you're overreacting.”

Colston pauses halfway through ripping into a Twix, his head snapping back and forth between us. “Wait. Time out. You’re having contractions? Like, right now? While I’m standing here?”

“They’re probably just practice contractions,” I assure him, peeling the brown paper off the bottom of my Reese's and popping it into my mouth. “Those Braxton Hicks ones.”

“Probably?” Colston's voice goes up an octave. He takes a very big step backward, putting distance between us. “Goldie girl, if your water breaks anywhere near me, I’m going to throw up. I can’t handle the fluids.” He gags. “I watched a documentary on childbirth once and it was a straight-up horror movie.”

“My water isn’t going to break tonight,” I tell him, rolling my eyes.

Sumner looks right at Colston, completely ignoring my denial. “She’s been having them on and off since this morning. But they’re getting closer together now.”

“Oh my god,” Colston breathes, practically plastered against the porch railing now. “Are we supposed to be doing something? Do I need to get you a wooden spoon to bite down on? Should I go find a priest? Or a midwife? I don't know what midwives look like, Goldie! Do I need to build a fire?”

“Yes. You should start collecting wood,” Sumner somehow says with a straight face.

Colston nods, tossing his uneaten Twix into the bushes and clapping his hands together. “Good, yes. I can do that.”

He starts to walk down the steps, and that’s when Sumner and I both lose it. I’m laughing so hard, the cramp in my stomach this time isn’t from the baby. Tears run down my face and Sumner’s bent over with his hands braced on his knees.

Colston stops and scowls at his best friend, then at me. “You know, I was going to bring you some whiskey for the pain, but now you can go through the horrorfest sober. How’s that sound? Since you want to be mean about my psychological scarring.”

“Your scarring?” I wheeze, wiping a tear out from under my eye. “It's not like you’re the one who has to go through this. They have good drugs at the hospital, dude. I don’t need your whiskey. And why were you even watching a childbirth documentary in the first place?”

Colston crosses his arms and tips his chin up, looking offended. “Because Trace said the miracle of life was beautiful and magical. He lied, Goldie. He *lied.* It was a bloodbath.” He shudders.

Sumner stands up, wiping his eyes, too. “Him fucking with you sounds about right.”

“Well, you can relax,” I say, though another tiny cramp twinges in my lower back just to mock me and when I shift in my seat, Colston’s eyes widen and he slides further away. “I really don’t think the baby’s coming tonight. I’m fine.”

Colston eyes my stomach like it’s a ticking time bomb. “Trace owes me so much therapy money.”

Sumner ignores him, having finally caught his breath, and keeps his eyes locked on me. “If they keep getting closer, we’re calling the doctor.”

“I have the internet, Sumner. It says fake labor is a thing.”

“Yeah, I have it, too,” he counters, crossing his arms. “And it also says when the pain starts wrapping around into your back, it’s real.”

I freeze with another Reese's halfway to my mouth. “How do you know it’s in my back?”

“Because you haven’t stopped rubbing it since we came out here.”

I let out a heavy sigh, dropping my hand into my lap. “Look, my due date isn’t until Thursday. I’m not going to be that person who makes everyone rush to the hospital in a panic over gas or Braxton Hicks just so they can send me back home humiliated for overreacting.”

“Nobody’s going to humiliate you for making sure our kid is okay.”

“I’m fine. Seriously. They aren’t even hurting that bad. And most first babies come late.”

Another massive group of kids reaches the porch before this can turn into a full-blown argument. Colston practically throws handfuls of candy at them like he's trying to bribe them to clear the porch faster so his escape route isn’t blocked, and for the next ten minutes, the chaos distracts me enough to mostly forget about the ache in my back.

Mostly.

I’m halfway through telling a little girl dressed like Wednesday Addams that yes, she can have the last full-size Kit Kat when that same ache clamps down across my lower back. It wraps forward, squeezing so hard and fast that the rest of my sentence gets totally choked off.

My hand closes around the edge of the plastic candy bowl and I try to breathe through it.

Yeah, that’s definitely gone to a whole new level… and I’m starting to think maybe Colston has something to worry about.

Sumner’s beside me in a blink.

“Hey, squeeze me if you need to,” he says, offering me his hand.

He takes the bowl right out of my lap and sets it on the small table next to my chair, and I grip his fingers in mine.

I lean forward, hissing a breath in through my teeth while Sumner steps behind my chair. He puts the heel of one large hand against my lower back and presses hard, hitting the exact spot that hurts the worst without even having to ask.

Fucking show-off.

When the pressure finally peaks and starts to let go, I sink back against the cushion with a shaky exhale and let Sumner have his hand back. He flexes his fingers and shakes out his hand but doesn’t complain.

The little Wednesday Addams is still standing in front of me, staring at me with wide eyes.

I try to give her a smile but I don’t know if my sweaty, shaky face is doing what I want it to.

“You still want the Kit Kat?”

She gives me one single, solemn nod.

I grab it from the bowl and hand it over. Then I give her two more to try and make up for the trauma of having to witness that.

Her dad gives me a concerned, slightly panicked look as he grabs her hand to lead her away.

"I'm fine," I call after them, though my voice is a little breathier than normal.

Sumner glances down at his watch with a frown and I catch him.

"Not helping."

He folds his arms across his chest. "You don't mean that."

I roll my eyes because he's right but I can't admit this might actually be labor. The second I admit it is the second I have to face the fact I'm going to have to *push a baby out of my vagina.*

What the fuck.

So instead, I pull the candy bowl back into my lap and dig through it, figuring if this is really happening, I'm going to need to carb load or whatever. And if it's not, chocolate makes everything better. "You're so annoying."

"That one was closer than the one before it," he says, completely ignoring my irritation.

Colston pushes his aviators up onto the top of his head, looking between us with escalating panic. "What does that mean?"

"Labor," Sumner says.

I shove my fingers into my ears. "La la la, I can't hear you."

Am I being dumb? Maybe.

Have I had nine months to prepare myself for this? Sure.

Does that mean I'm ready? Hell to the fucking *no.*

They both look at me.

I pull my fingers out of my ears and dig the toe of my sandal into the porch. "Can we not talk about this right now? I'm trying to enjoy my Halloween."

"I know, but baby, denial isn't going to stop this from happening," Sumner says, crouching down beside me and forcing me to look at him.

"Well, there are approximately nine thousand more children swarming the sidewalk who need candy. So maybe let's focus on that for a little while and we can revisit this later, okay?"

He watches me with a wrinkle between his eyebrows before slowly nodding. "Okay. But the second something changes, you need to tell me. And if I think you're hiding it from me, I'm going to pick you up, put you

in my truck, and drive your ass to the hospital even if you kick and scream the whole way. We clear?”

I shiver because *damn* I love it when he gets bossy. “Fine.”

Colston grabs a handful of candy from the second bowl and shoves it into the pillowcase of a kid dressed as a zombie, narrowly avoiding getting hit with a plastic scythe by the kid's little brother. The foot traffic hasn't slowed down at all; if anything, the swarms are getting thicker.

“We have enough candy to survive until Easter,” Sumner says, looking back at me from where he's still crouched beside my chair. “You don't need to stay out here. Let’s go inside and we’ll leave a bowl out and let them have a free-for-all.”

This contraction steals the air out of my lungs significantly faster than the last one did.

Sumner rubs my shoulders and gives them a gentle squeeze. "Inside. Now."

"But I want to hand out candy. Look at all the cute costumes," I say, gesturing at the sidewalk.

"Goldie."

"I'm not going inside until the bowl is empty."

His mouth tightens.

I know that look. It’s the one he gets right before his protective instincts take over and he stops pretending to be civilized. He reverts back to his caveman instincts, and to be honest, I’m here for it. Anyone else trying to boss me around would get their head bitten off, but with Sumner... I kind of love it. Especially right now.

Deep down, I know I’m being ridiculous. I’m just trying to delay the terrifying, undeniable reality of what's about to happen. Having him step in and take charge is probably what I need.

"We’re going in," he says, his tone leaving zero room for argument.

Before I can protest, he reaches down, snatches the giant plastic bowl right out of my lap, and dumps the entire remaining contents into the pillowcase of a very bewildered pirate standing on the top step.

"Happy Halloween," Sumner tells the kid, tossing the empty bowl onto the porch table. "We're closed."

I glare at him until the contraction finally eases up enough for me to catch my breath. Then I plant both hands on the arms of the chair.

"Fine. But if this is nothing, I’m coming back out."

Sumner steps closer, holding out a hand to help me up. "Okay."

"You don't sound like you believe me," I mutter, grabbing his hand.

"I don't. I think we're having a baby tonight."

I narrow my eyes at him as I push myself upright.

There's a strange, distinct little *pop* somewhere low inside my pelvis.

I freeze.

Sumner immediately senses the shift and looks me over. "What?"

Warm fluid gushes between my legs.

Like, a lot of it. A comical amount.

I look down at the front of my black dress, right where the big white triangle says *SIGNS POINT TO YES*. I don't know why I do it considering I haven't been able to see my feet in months.

Then I look at Sumner who's watching what I'm guessing is a pretty big puddle rapidly spreading across the porch beneath my sandals.

A tiny Batman standing at the bottom of the steps points a plastic Batarang at me. "That lady peed."

"I did not pee," I say indignantly.

His mother's eyes go wide. She looks at my massive belly, then at the puddle, and the realization hits her instantly. A knowing, sympathetic smile spreads across her face as she grabs her kid's cape.

"She didn't pee, buddy, she's about to meet her baby," the mom tells him gently, already herding him backward toward the safety of the sidewalk. She shoots me a grin over her shoulder. "You've got this, mama! Good luck!"

"Happy Halloween!" I call after them automatically, because I have absolutely no idea what else to do.

Colston, who had just opened another Twix, looks down at the puddle. The blood completely drains from his face.

"Oh my god," Colston chokes out, dropping his candy. "I told you." He gags. "The fluids." He gags again. "Fu-udge everything. I can't. The fluids are happening."

True to his word, he practically vaults backward over a pumpkin, covering his mouth with both hands as he makes a very loud, very dramatic gagging sound and scrambles toward the far edge of the porch.

I grab Sumner's forearm, my nails digging into his skin. "Oh, fuck." Because yeah, there's no denying this anymore. This baby has my *full* attention.

Sumner, though. He doesn't panic. He slides a steady, solid, *very muscle-y* arm around my waist to hold me up.

"My water broke," I whisper, the reality finally crashing into me. I'm having a baby. Like, tonight.

Then another contraction slams into me, and I fold forward with a strangled gasp and grab two handfuls of Sumner's shirt.

Sumner gets one arm around my back and holds me up while I curl into him and basically give him all my weight.

Behind us, Colston mutters, "Holy shit. I can't believe this is happening."

Nobody answers him.

Sumner keeps heavy, steady pressure against my lower back, breathing with me until the contraction finally starts easing.

He looks over my shoulder. "Jenny."

"What? I'm here. I'm ready." Colston's voice is shaking, and he seems very much *not* ready.

"The hospital bag is by the bedroom door. Goldie's purse is on the kitchen island. My bag is beside hers. Grab all three and bring her SUV around."

Colston just stares at him.

"Go," Sumner barks.

Colston blinks rapidly. "Right. Fetching bags. Away from the fluids and the contracting."

He takes off through the front door, leaving us where we are.

A group of teenagers dressed as various energy drinks starts up the walkway, but Sumner immediately holds a hand up like a traffic cop. He points down to the bowl of candy Colston abandoned on the porch table.

"Help yourselves. Take the whole thing," Sumner calls out over his shoulder to them, before turning his full attention back to me. "We're done for the night."

I straighten up slowly, leaning heavily against him, my fingers still white-knuckling his shirt.

He looks down at the wet porch, then back at me. "You okay?"

"I'm standing in amniotic fluid while seventy-five sugar-high children walk past our house and judge me. Do I look okay?"

His eyes soften, locking onto mine with an intensity that completely blocks out the Halloween chaos around us. "You look beautiful."

The words knock the remaining breath right out of my lungs.

Terror has been sitting heavy in the pit of my stomach ever since my water broke. The reality of having to push a human being out of my body is no longer a hypothetical future problem—it's a right-now problem, and I'm utterly terrified.

But the steady, unwavering devotion in his voice melts through the panic like a blowtorch.

My knees tremble, and it has nothing to do with labor. I sink a little more of my weight into him, a shaky breath rattling out of me as I bury my face in his neck, seeking out his warm, clean scent. I just let myself hold on to him, soaking in the absolute certainty that he isn't going anywhere.

"You ready to meet our baby, Goldie?" he asks.

"No," I mumble against his skin.

I feel the rumble of his chest as his mouth twitches into a smile against my hair.

"Don't you dare laugh at me right now, Maverick."

"I would never," he murmurs, his arm tightening around my waist.

"Good." A few beats of his heart go by under my ear as I close my eyes and breathe. "And you know I can't wait. I just wish you could push them out instead of me."

This time he does laugh, but I let him have it.

Then I blow out a breath and find that place inside of me that's always pushed me to do the uncomfortable. The place that lights up at pushing boundaries and exceeding expectations.

And I cling to the energy I find there. To the trickle of excitement starting to turn into a river.

Because I have a feeling I'm *really* gonna need it.

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CHAPTER 42
SUMNER

WHOEVER INVENTED the epidural deserves a goddamn Nobel Prize.

For the first few hours after we got to the hospital, Goldie was gripping the bed rails so hard her knuckles were white, breathing through the kind of pain that made me restless and my chest ache because I couldn't fix it for her. But once the anesthesiologist worked his magic, the tension completely drained out of her.

Now, she’s propped up against the hospital pillows, sipping ice water and looking way too relaxed for a woman about to push a human being out of her body.

"I’m just saying," Colston announces, tossing his phone onto the uncomfortable visitor’s couch after hanging up a FaceTime call with Trace where he bragged about being in the room with us. "Trace can claim the number one best friend title all he wants, but who’s currently in the delivery room? Me. And who isn’t here? The second best friend."

I lean my forearms against the edge of Goldie’s bed. "You’re only here because you were with us when her water broke and you drove us here."

"Semantics," Colston says, waving a hand. "I’m part of the inner circle. Hell, the night-shift nurse thought you and me were a couple and Goldie was our surrogate. Remember?"

“How could I forget?” I drawl, sinking onto the side of the bed and kissing Goldie’s fingers.

She snorts around her straw. "She did ask how long you two had been married."

"Which you thought was hilarious instead of correcting her," I remind her, though a smile pulls at my mouth.

"It *was* hilarious," she counters. Her eyes crinkle at the corners. She looks exhausted, her messy bun sliding sideways and her makeup long gone, but she’s so fucking beautiful my chest gets tight just looking at her.

The door pushes open, and our day-shift nurse, Sarah, walks in and puts on a fresh set of gloves. "Alright, guys. Let’s do a quick check and see where we’re at. We've been hanging out at eight centimeters for a while."

I step back to give her room while Goldie shifts her hips, totally unbothered thanks to the waist-down numbness.

Sarah checks her monitors, does her exam, and then pauses, looking up with a bright smile. "Well, look at that. You’re at a ten, plus one station. It is time to push, mama."

Goldie blinks, completely caught off guard. "Wait. Really? Right now? I literally feel like I could take a nap."

"The epidural is doing its job then," Sarah says, moving to the foot of the bed and hitting a button that starts transforming the bottom half of the mattress. "But baby is right there and ready to go. Let me page Dr. Evans."

The reality of what’s about to happen drops into the room like an anvil.

Behind me, Colston makes a choked, panicked noise in the back of his throat.

I turn around. All the color has drained out of his face again, leaving him looking slightly green. He jumps up off the couch and backs up toward the door, his hands raised in surrender.

"Okay. Nope. I’m out," Colston stammers, his eyes locked on the ceiling so he doesn't accidentally look at the lower half of Goldie's bed. "I love you, Goldie girl. You're a badass. Shamu, text me when the fluids are contained and the baby’s wrapped in a dry, clean blanket. I’ll be in the waiting room. Good luck. Goodbye."

He practically sprints out the door, letting it slam shut behind him.

Goldie bursts out laughing, shaking her head. "I can't believe he flies into hurricanes for a living but is terrified of a little blood and amniotic fluid. That’s second best friend behavior, Maverick."

I don’t dare tell her that I’m a little freaked out about what I’m about to see, too. Shit-talking Colston has been a good distraction to this point.

But the smile fades from my face as the room suddenly kicks into high gear. The lights click up to a brighter setting. A cart of medical instruments

is wheeled in with a couple of nurses, and Dr. Evans walks through the door tying a sterile gown behind her back.

It’s happening.

I move to the head of the bed, sliding my hand around the back of Goldie’s neck while my other hand completely swallows hers. Her fingers are cold, trembling just a little as the adrenaline starts to override the chill vibe she had two minutes ago.

I look down at her, and the absolute gravity of the moment hits me as our eyes meet.

For years, I’ve wanted this. And when it didn’t happen, I mourned the loud, chaotic family I thought I’d never have.

And now here’s Goldie.

Fierce, sarcastic, unapologetic Goldie. The woman who let me drag her out of a dive bar and into a hotel room to take a leap with me. The woman who turned my entire life upside down, handed me her whole heart, and made a home with me.

Here she is, about to give me a child.

Half her, half me, and hopefully the first of many.

My throat locks up. A hot, stinging pressure builds behind my eyes, and my chest expands until it feels like my ribs might crack. Her eyes flick back and forth between mine, and I know everything I’m feeling, she’s feeling it, too. It’s right there, reflected back at me. So much love.

The sheer, overwhelming gratitude I feel for this woman is a living, breathing thing inside of me. I love her so fucking much it terrifies me.

"Hey," Goldie whispers, her eyes searching my face. Her thumb sweeps across my knuckles. "You okay, Maverick?"

I swallow hard, forcing the massive lump in my throat down, and press my forehead against hers. I breathe in the scent of her skin, grounding myself in the warmth of her body.

"I've never been better," I tell her, my voice thick with emotion. I kiss her forehead, lingering there for a long second before pulling back to look her right in the eye. "I love you. You ready to do this?"

Goldie blows out a long, shaky breath and gives me a determined nod. "Yep. No problem. I’ve got this."

Dr. Evans takes her seat at the foot of the bed, snapping her gloves into place. "Alright, Goldie. When the next contraction peaks, I want you to

grab behind your knees, curl your shoulders forward, and bear down. Let's see how fast we can get this baby out."

Goldie grins at her. "Don't tempt me. I am *highly* competitive."

I let out a short, tight laugh, sliding one arm behind her back to support her shoulders. "Show 'em how it's done, baby."

Sarah speaks up a few seconds later. "Here it comes. Deep breath."

Goldie sucks in a breath, tucks her chin to her chest, and bears down. Her face scrunches up and her body trembles.

"Ten seconds," Sarah counts off calmly.

Goldie lets out the breath in a loud, forceful rush, falling back against my arm.

"Damn, okay," Dr. Evans says, leaning forward. "We're moving. Give me more just like that and the little one will be out before you know it."

Goldie pants, catching her breath. "Told you."

I kiss her sweaty temple, my heart hammering a frantic rhythm against my ribs. It's hard to even comprehend the reality of what's happening right now. To take it all in. It's easier to focus on the little things—every contraction, deep breath, and push—instead of what those are all working toward. "You're doing incredible."

The next contraction hits fast. She bears down again, taking the brunt of the physical labor while the epidural blocks the pain. The sheer power radiating off her is staggering. I've flown a ninety-thousand-pound aircraft through a fuck ton of hurricanes, but watching the woman I love literally push life out of her body is the most intense, awe-inspiring thing I've ever witnessed.

"Okay, head's out," Dr. Evans says, her voice picking up speed. "Give me one more, Goldie. Just a small one for the shoulders."

Goldie groans, curling forward and bearing down one last time.

The rigid tension in her body suddenly vanishes. She goes completely slack, collapsing back against my arm, her chest heaving as she gasps for air.

Then, a sharp, pissed-off wail cuts through the steady beeping of the monitors.

A harsh, shaky exhale punches out of me. We did it.

Holy fuck, *we did it.*

"It's a girl," Dr. Evans announces, quickly wiping down the squirming, screaming mess of limbs with a towel.

She lifts the baby—*our daughter*—and lays her directly onto Goldie’s chest.

A hot tear slips down my face, tracking through my stubble, and I don’t even try to wipe it away. There’s an overwhelming love filling every cell of my body, and the warmth of it is indescribable. I lean over them, my hand trembling for a split second before I gently rest my palm against the baby’s warm, sticky back.

Goldie is laughing and crying at the same time, her hands shaking as she pulls the tiny, squirming body closer to her skin. "Oh my god. Hi. Hi, baby."

I press my face against the top of Goldie's head. “Look at her.”

"I'm looking," Goldie whispers, completely mesmerized by the tiny, red-faced human currently screaming her head off.

She lets her head loll toward me. Her dark hair is plastered to her forehead, her skin is flushed and damp, but her eyes are shining with that fierce, cocky spark I love so fucking much.

"Well," she breathes out, giving me a smug, exhausted little smirk. "I always told you these birthing hips weren't just for show."

A wet laugh tears out of my throat. I kiss her mouth, then her cheek, and then her forehead, tasting sweat and salt, before looking back down at the dark-haired, beautiful little girl wailing on her chest.

I cover Goldie's hand with mine where she’s cradling our daughter, my thumb gently brushing against a tiny, clenched fist.

"Welcome to the world, Frankie Jo Wells."

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CHAPTER 43
SUMNER

AFTER GOLDIE GETS some time with her, the nurses take Frankie over to the warmer to weigh her, clean her up, and wrap her in one of those standard-issue, scratchy hospital blankets with the faded blue and pink stripes.

It takes them maybe ten minutes, but it feels like an hour. My feet are glued to the linoleum right next to the scale, watching every single thing they do to her. I don't get in their way, but I make damn sure I don't blink, either.

I don't want to miss a single thing.

When the nurse finally turns around and places the tiny, burrito-wrapped bundle into my arms, I forget how to breathe for a second.

I'm a big guy. I'm used to hauling heavy gear, wrestling a yoke through hurricane-force winds, and knowing exactly how much strength to use without thinking about it.

Then they put my seven-pound, four-ounce daughter in my arms, and suddenly I don't trust my own hands.

She's so fucking small.

My fingers actually tremble as I adjust her against my chest, terrified I'm going to hold her wrong or squeeze too hard or somehow hurt this tiny person I already love more than anything.

I carry her back to the uncomfortable chair pulled right up to the edge of Goldie's bed and carefully sit down, planting my feet flat on the floor to anchor myself.

Frankie’s face is still a little red. Her eyes are squeezed shut and shiny with antibiotic ointment, her tiny nose twitching as she takes these soft, snuffling breaths. A tuft of dark hair sticks out from the top of the little knit cap they shoved on her head.

"You look freaked out, Maverick," Goldie rasps.

I look up. She’s lying back against the pillows, looking like a mess. She’s pale and exhausted and absolutely perfect. They turned the epidural off, and I know she’s sore, but her eyes are shining as she watches us.

“I’m afraid I’m going to break her,” I admit, holding her close against my chest with both elbows tucked tight to my sides. “She’s so fucking small. Look at her.”

Goldie lets out a tired, soft laugh and shifts on the mattress, reaching a hand out. I lean forward, angling Frankie so Goldie can brush her knuckles against our daughter’s soft, round cheek.

"You're not going to break her," Goldie murmurs, her voice thick with exhaustion. "Look at how she fits right into your hands. She was made for you.”

I swallow hard against the lump in my throat. I look back down at Frankie. Her tiny hand wiggles out from the edge of the blanket. I offer her my pinky finger, and her impossibly small fingers wrap around it. Her grip is surprisingly strong.

A rough, choked sound scrapes up my throat. I lean down and press my lips to her warm forehead, breathing in her new baby smell.

"I texted Jenny," Goldie says after a minute, setting her phone on the table beside the bed. "I’m sure he’s out there terrorizing the nurses. He's been sending me panicked gifs of Michael Scott for the last hour."

Right on cue, a soft knock sounds at the door. It cracks open, and Colston’s face appears in the gap, his eyes darting around the room like he’s expecting to find a murder scene or something.

"Is it safe?" Colston whispers, looking anywhere but at Goldie.

I roll my eyes. "It’s safe. Get your ass in here."

The door pushes open, and Colston steps inside. He’s carrying two huge iced coffees in a cardboard carrier and a familiar pink bakery box. He sets them down on the rolling tray table, immediately walking over to the sink in the corner and pumping antibacterial soap into his hands.

"I'm washing up," he announces, scrubbing his hands like he’s about to scrub in for open-heart surgery. "Trace is gonna be so pissed I got to hold

her first. I’m absolutely taking a picture to rub in his face. He's been talking shit in the group chat all morning."

Goldie grins from the bed. "You brought coffee and donuts. You can do almost no wrong right now."

Colston dries his hands on a paper towel and walks over to my chair. The jokes and the swagger completely vanish the second he looks down at Frankie. His mouth drops open a little, and he just stares at her, his hands hovering awkwardly in the air.

"Holy shit," he breathes out. "She’s perfect."

"You want to hold her?" I ask.

His head snaps up, his eyes going wide. "I don't know, man. What if her head flops around? I don't know how to do the neck thing.”

"Just support the back of her head," I tell him. “If I can do it, you can do it.” I stand up, keeping my palm securely behind Frankie's neck, and gently transfer her into Colston's arms. “You’ll be fine, Uncle Colston.”

Colston goes completely stiff, sort of wrapping himself around her. He stares down at the sleeping baby in his arms, his eyes shiny. A slow grin takes over his entire face, melting away all that chaotic golden-retriever energy into something soft.

"Hey, Frankie-baby," Colston whispers, his voice dropping into a gentle register I’ve never heard him use. "I'm your Uncle Colston. I’m the fun one, and I’m gonna be your favorite. I’m going to teach you how to curse and sneak you treats when your dad’s being a buzzkill."

"I’ll revoke your visiting privileges," I warn him, though I can't stop the smile pulling at my own mouth. Seeing my best friend hold my kid hits me in a way I didn’t expect.

Colston ignores the threat, carefully shifting his weight. "Get your phone out. I need a picture of this so I can send it to Trace."

I shake my head, but I pull my phone out of my pocket and snap a quick photo of him grinning down at my daughter.

Right after I hit send, the extra-wide door pushes open.

Scout slips into the room first, clutching a giant stuffed alligator under her arm. "Where is she?" she stage-whispers, her eyes wide as she tiptoes toward us so she doesn't wake the baby. "Where’s my niece?"

Tatum and Ellie are right behind her, carrying a bouquet of flowers and a cluster of shiny Mylar balloons. Andie trails in next, her hands shoved

into the pockets of her leather jacket, followed by Trace, who’s holding a gift bag and glaring at Colston.

The room shrinks around us, filling up with excited whispers, chaotic energy, and the smell of coffee and flowers.

"You guys," Goldie laughs, wincing slightly as she tries to sit up a little straighter. "You didn't have to bring all this."

"Shut up, yes we did," Ellie says, setting the flowers on the windowsill before practically diving at the bed to hug Goldie carefully. "You did so good, G. I’m so fucking proud of you."

"Yeah, you're a total badass," Tatum adds, dropping a stack of magazines onto the bedside table. "I brought snacks that aren't hospital food, and hydration masks because the air in here is basically a desert."

Trace walks straight past the bed and shoves the oversized gift bag into my chest. I catch it before it hits the floor, and Trace stops right in front of Colston. He squints at the baby, then crosses his arms. "Your elbow is too high. You look like you're holding a football."

"Back off, man," Colston whispers, twisting slightly to shield Frankie. "I’m having a bonding moment. You have to wait your turn."

"I drove an hour and a half across the bridge in morning traffic," Trace argues, keeping his voice low as a grin fights its way onto his face. "Hand her over."

"Nobody’s holding her until you wash up," I say, stepping between them. I point toward the sink in the corner. "That goes for all of you. Hands washed if you want to touch her."

"Yes, Dad," Scout mutters, already making a beeline for the soap dispenser.

"Hurricane Daddy’s got a point," Andie says, walking over to wash her hands. I cringe at the nickname but let it go.

When she’s done, she walks over to inspect the baby over Colston’s shoulder. The stoic, badass mechanic takes one look at Frankie, and her ice-blue eyes melt completely. She reaches out a tattooed finger and lightly strokes the top of Frankie’s knit cap. "Damn. She’s actually really cute. Most newborns look like grumpy old men, but she’s gorgeous."

"Of course she’s gorgeous," Scout says, dropping the giant stuffed alligator onto the shitty bench under the window. "Look at her parents. She’s going to break so many hearts. I’m already planning her outfits. I

found a leather jacket that matches Andie's, but the smallest size it comes in is for a six-month-old."

"Send me the link. I'll buy it right now," Andie says without missing a beat.

More books to choose from.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google and find a novel you like.

The room descends into loud, messy crosstalk. Tatum starts unpacking the box of pastries Colston brought, handing a chocolate-frosted donut to Goldie. Trace and Colston start arguing over exactly how many minutes count as a fair turn holding the baby, and Scout pulls up a chair right next to Goldie's bed, demanding to know if Goldie pooped on the table during the delivery.

"Scout! You can't ask that!" Ellie gasps, slapping her shoulder.

"What? It's a thing that could happen and it's fucking horrifying!" Scout defends herself.

I step back, leaning my shoulders against the wall near the window, and just watch them.

My whole life, I wanted a loud, crowded house. I wanted a family that showed up, loved unapologetically, and made life fun. I used to sit in that sterile, silent living room of the house I shared with Delia, listening to the hum of the refrigerator, thinking I was never going to get it. I'd convinced myself that loving my ex was enough, that I'd make it work because that's what you did when you made a commitment.

It sounds cheesy, but less than a year later, all my dreams have come true.

It doesn't look anything like the traditional, picture-perfect version I had in my head. It's a tattooed mechanic, drag brunches on the weekends, photo shoots, drunken nights on the beach, and a guy who goes by Jenny. It's loud, messy, and unconventional.

And it's exactly what I've always wanted.

My eyes find Goldie through the chaos. She's laughing at Scout, a smudge of chocolate frosting on her bottom lip, her smile so wide and genuine it lights up the dull hospital room.

Like she feels me watching her, she turns her head, looking past Scout's shoulder, and her gaze locks onto mine.

The noise in the room fades out. The banter, the crinkling balloons, the monitors—all of it drops away. We just stare at each other, grounded in this intense tether pulling between us. We're both exhausted, running on pure adrenaline, but the look she gives me says everything I'm feeling.

We did this, you and me.

I hold her gaze, tapping my hand against my sternum right over my heart, and mouth the words, *I fucking love you.*

Goldie's smile turns soft. And then she mouths it right back.

A couple of hours later, the nurse finally takes one look at the crowd still packed into the room and announces that the woman who just pushed out a whole human needs to sleep.

Nobody argues with her. Well, almost nobody.

She points at Colston on her way out. "And if you hide in the bathroom again, I'm telling them not to let you back in."

Colston looks offended. "I was checking my hair."

The nurse scoffs. "You were hiding."

He mutters something under his breath while Trace herds him into the hallway with everyone else.

The door closes behind them, and the room feels weirdly huge without all the noise. Sunlight filters through the half-closed blinds, stretching across the floor, but time feels so distant after not sleeping and having our lives change so much so fast.

The adrenaline crash hits Goldie almost immediately. It's only a few minutes before her eyes flutter shut and her breathing evens out into a deep sleep.

I'm sitting in the chair next to her bed, the room silent except for the soft, steady rhythm of Goldie's breathing and the quiet hum of the hospital sounds happening outside this room.

Frankie's asleep against my bare chest.

I stripped my shirt off a while ago for skin-to-skin time. She’s tucked under a blanket to keep her warm, her ear resting right over my heart. Her breathing's a rapid flutter against my skin.

I rest my chin lightly on the top of her head, my hand cupping her back, and look over at Goldie.

Her hair's a mess, but she looks so peaceful. One of her hands is resting near the edge of the mattress, right where I can reach out and brush my thumb over her knuckles.

"You see her?" I whisper into the quiet room, keeping my voice so low it’s barely a rumble in the back of my throat.

Frankie shifts slightly against my skin, letting out a squeaky sigh.

"That’s your mom," I tell my daughter, my vision blurring at the edges as I stare at the woman sleeping only a few feet away. "She’s the toughest, most beautiful woman I’ve ever met. And you're so lucky you get to grow up loved by her."

I rub my thumb in small, slow circles over Frankie’s spine.

"She’s going to teach you so much," I murmur to my daughter. "She’s going to teach you not to take shit from anyone, how to be the best friend, and how to love exactly who you are."

I look down at the sleeping face tucked against me, and yet another tear slips down my cheek. I can’t seem to stop them today.

"And me?" I whisper, leaning down to press a soft kiss to the top of her head. "I’m going to make sure you both know I’m never going anywhere. I’m going to be the guy who fixes your broken toys, and chases the monsters out of your closet, and sics Colston on anyone who breaks your heart."

I shift my gaze back to Goldie, watching her sleep. Her stomach’s already so much smaller than it was.

I think I’m going to miss it.

At least until the next one.

I still think about that wedding ring at the bottom of the Gulf sometimes. Mostly I remember standing on the beach with Goldie beside me, listening to her talk absolute bullshit about sea turtles, and realizing I was actually smiling when a few hours earlier I'd wanted to get drunk enough to pass out in the sand.

The next morning, I told Goldie I'd wished for her to be exactly as crazy as she seemed and for our insane baby plan to actually work.

And I meant it.

I wanted a baby. I wanted a family. After finding out Delia had spent a year lying to me about both, that felt like more than enough to ask for.

I had no fucking clue what else I was going to get.

Goldie. Our daughter. A house that's never quiet. Friends who show up whether we ask them to or not. A whole life that looks nothing like the one I thought I was supposed to have.

I pull Goldie's hand toward the edge of the bed and lace my fingers through hers while I hold our daughter against my chest.

This is better than anything I could've known to wish for.

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EPILOGUE

SUMNER

One Year Later…

I THINK Frankie might be part mermaid.

I figured that out about thirty seconds after Goldie set her down at the edge of the water and our one-year-old daughter tried to crawl straight into the surf. Now I've got both hands locked firmly around her while she kicks at the little waves rolling over her legs. Every time the water pulls back, she squeals and leans forward like she thinks she can catch it.

"You see this?" Goldie asks, stopping right beside me in the shallow water.

I already know exactly where this is going. "No."

"You are literally looking at her, Maverick."

"I'm choosing to ignore whatever point you think you're proving right now."

Goldie plants a hand on her hip. She's wearing an oversized pair of sunglasses, a smug expression, and a black string bikini that puts every single stretch mark across her stomach, hips, and thighs on full display. The extra softness around her middle is still there, along with the fuller hips and thighs she kept after having our baby, and she flaunts every fucking inch of it. It's the sexiest fucking thing in the world to me, and my mouth practically waters just looking at her.

I let my eyes linger on her, and she smirks, knowing exactly what I'm doing even though I'm wearing sunglasses.

She's spent the last year waiting for this exact opportunity to gloat. “I told you our daughter belonged to the sea.”

“She likes splashing in the bathtub, too. I don't see you claiming the plumbing god gave her to us.”

“She’s practically got gills, Maverick. Admit it.”

Frankie shrieks with delight when another wave rushes over her chubby feet, splashing saltwater up to my shins. She kicks her legs, trying to dive forward into the foam.

Goldie points a manicured finger at her. “Exhibit A. The sea calls to her own.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and groan.

Secretly? Ever since that night in the hospital, a tiny piece of my brain has wondered if she might actually be right about the whole sea god thing. I got exactly what I wished for when I threw that ring into the Gulf. But there’s not a chance in hell I'm ever admitting that out loud.

Goldie just laughs. Almost two years of knowing this woman, and she still refuses to let the fucking Poseidon thing die. I swear she maintains it just to fuck with me.

She wades a little deeper, the water lapping at her thighs. “You know, at some point you're going to have to acknowledge that I was right.”

“About some supposedly magical sea turtles finding my ring in a literal ocean and swimming it down to a made-up god?” I raise an eyebrow behind my aviators. “Not gonna happen.”

“Then explain how we got Frankie on the very first try.” She gestures to our daughter, who is currently trying her hardest to beat the Gulf into submission by slapping her palm against the surface of the water.

“I know exactly how Frankie got here,” I tell her, my voice dropping an octave as my gaze sweeps over her body again. “And the only magic involved happened between you and me.”

Her grin turns wicked and knowing. It’s a dangerous look, considering we have all of our friends within hearing distance and I’ve already spent way too much of today thinking about getting my wife alone in our hotel room.

Goldie catches the shift in my attention. She slides her sunglasses down her nose just enough to peer over the dark rims at me. “Keep it in your pants, Maverick. We're in public.”

“I didn’t say a word.”

“You didn’t have to. I can see what you’re thinking right on your face. You’re not very good at hiding your feelings from me.”

Before I can defend myself, a slightly larger wave rolls in, hitting me at the knees. I kiss the top of Frankie’s damp, dark hair—the exact same color as mine—and scoop her up against my chest so she doesn't get dunked.

She immediately objects. Her little body arches backward, one chubby hand reaching frantically toward the surf as she kicks her legs against my stomach.

"Wa!" she yells, glaring at me like I just ruined her life. "Wa!"

“See?” Goldie says, thoroughly entertained by my struggle to hold onto our squirming kid. “She wants the water.”

"She can want it from here," I say, shifting her weight higher against my chest so she doesn’t launch herself back into the foam. "She weighs twenty pounds and has no survival instincts."

Goldie falls into step beside me, saltwater dripping from her legs as we head up the beach. "She has some."

"She tried to eat a shell a couple of minutes ago."

Goldie looks over at Frankie like she’s going to defend her, but our daughter just grabs a fistful of my shirt, pulls it to her mouth, and starts gnawing on the fabric. A fresh patch of drool soaks right through to my collarbone.

Goldie bumps her shoulder against my arm. "Okay, fine. Her instincts are a work in progress."

We trudge through the soft, sugary sand toward our spot. We claimed one of the picnic pavilions early this morning, beating the crowds before every other family in St. Pete decided October still counts as summer. The breeze coming off the Gulf keeps the shade comfortable, but it hasn't stopped the chaos from taking over our table.

A plume of charcoal smoke drifts our way, carrying the smell of cooking meat from where my dads are stationed at the grill, deep in an argument over the best way to grill a burger. A few feet away from them, Scout, Tatum, Ellie, and Andie are crowded around a picnic table piled high with drinks, food, and enough birthday decorations to prove none of them listened when Goldie said a one-year-old didn’t need an over-the-top party.

Trace is stretched out in a beach chair a safe distance away from the girls, his hat pulled low over his eyes to block out the sun.

Colston jogs up from the water, swinging Frankie’s pink bucket in one hand and her little life jacket in the other.

My daughter spots him, and her entire face lights up like it always does when she sees him. She starts bouncing against my chest, throwing both arms out toward him.

“Co-Co!” she squeals.

Colston stops. His usual smirk vanishes, replaced by the soft, helpless look he gets whenever my daughter gives him the time of day. “Hey, Bug.”

Frankie lunges for him, babbling a string of nonsense like she has so much to tell him **that** she can’t keep any of it inside her little body. I have to clamp my arm around her waist so she doesn't nosedive straight into the sand. “Jesus.”

"My turn," Colston says, dropping everything in his hands and reaching for my little girl.

I hand her over. Colston settles Frankie against his hip like he's been doing it his whole life, adjusts the sun hat she’s been trying to rip off all day, and wipes a smear of sand from her cheek.

"Did the big bad water try to get you?" he asks her in a low, serious voice.

Frankie pats both of her hands against his face, grinning, and babbles another long, very serious sentence back at him.

I’ve spent a year watching this dynamic, and it still blows my mind. The guy who sprinted out of the hospital room because he was terrified of childbirth is now the ultimate baby whisperer. He knows exactly how to make her laugh, keeps an emergency stash of Goldfish crackers and applesauce in his G-Wagon, and worst of all, he somehow managed to rig the system so that her very first word wasn't "Mama" or "Dada."

It was "Co-Co."

Colston hasn't let Trace forget it for a single second since. Honestly, Frankie prefers him over just about everybody else.

Colston kisses Frankie's temple. A group of college-aged girls walking past us slow down to stare at him. Between the low-slung board shorts, messy blond hair, the abs, and the fact that he’s holding a baby who looks at him like he hung the moon, he’s basically a walking thirst trap.

He knows it, too.

He catches me watching him and raises an eyebrow as I shake my head at him.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just trying to figure out why my kid is so obsessed with you."

He snorts. "Because she has excellent taste."

"She ate a crayon yesterday."

"She spit most of it out," Colston argues, shifting Frankie higher on his hip. "We're working on her palate."

Goldie leans into my side, her bare shoulder warm against my arm. "I'm telling you, the second she figures out how to pack a suitcase, she'll run away from home to live with him."

"She's not going anywhere," I tell her.

"He’s willing to walk her around the living room on his shoulders so she can smack the ceiling fan strings, Maverick. We've already lost her."

Colston puts on a smug smile and shrugs. "I’m just helping her reach her goals."

Goldie laughs. I wrap an arm around her, pulling her closer so my left hand rests on her bare hip. The cool metal of my wedding band presses against her warm skin, bringing that familiar, solid wave of satisfaction to my chest.

We got married four months ago. It was a small beach wedding that turned out to be more like a party at sunset with all of our friends and family. We’d hired a trusted sitter to stay with Frankie in a hotel room upstairs so the rest of us could let loose without worrying about it. We drank enough tequila that Pops ended up dancing on a table. Dad got the whole thing on video. Pops keeps cooking Dad’s favorite meals as bribes, but Dad refuses to delete it.

"Earth to Sumner." Goldie nudges my ribs. She pushes her oversized sunglasses up into her hair, grinning at me. "Stop spacing out. The birthday girl needs lunch before her nap."

She pulls me by the hand over to one of the tables. Colston is only a few steps behind us, dripping saltwater and having a highly involved conversation with my daughter.

He gasps. "No! And then what did the seagull say?" Colston asks her.

Frankie slaps a wet, sandy hand against his chest. "Ba-da-ba!"

"Exactly," Colston agrees, nodding solemnly. "Way out of line."

Pops spots us first. He stops messing with a stack of paper plates and peers past my shoulder. "Where’s my granddaughter?"

I hook a thumb back toward Colston. "He has her."

Pops scowls as Colston strolls under the shade of the pavilion with Frankie glued to his hip. "Again? I haven't held her since we unloaded the car."

"She’s obsessed," I tell him. “If you try to pry her away from him, there *will* be screaming.”

"I told you, she has a favorite," Dad says, flipping a burger on the grill without looking up.

Pops glares at the back of Colston's head. "I bought her a stuffed octopus the size of a loveseat. What does he have?"

"Goldfish," I tell him.

Dad shakes his head and wraps his arm around Pops. "You can't compete with the snacks, Mark. Let it go."

Goldie presses a kiss to Pops’s cheek as we walk past him. "Aww, Grandpa’s jealous."

"I’m not jealous," Pops mutters, crossing his arms. But the second Frankie lets out another squeal near the cooler, his head snaps right in her direction.

Dad catches me watching him and smirks. "He’s jealous."

"Hell, *I’m* jealous," I say, and they laugh.

I grab two cold bottles of water from the cooler, unscrew the cap on one, and hand it to Goldie. She takes it, sliding onto the bench at the end of the picnic table.

My eyes lock onto all that beautiful skin, and my trunks are suddenly not as loose as they were a second ago.

She catches me looking, pausing with the bottle halfway to her mouth. "Sumner. You've been looking at me like that all day."

I sit on the bench beside her, letting my hand rest lightly against her bare knee. "Like what?"

"Like you're trying to figure out how fast you can get me out of this bikini." She points her water bottle toward where Colston is bouncing our daughter on his knee. "The last time you gave me that exact look, we ended up with her."

"And?"

"And we're at a public park, Maverick. With our family."

"I wasn't planning on doing it on the picnic table."

She narrows her eyes, but a slow, devilish smirk pulls at the corner of her mouth. She takes a drink of her water, totally unaware of what I've got

set up for later.

I have a plan. And it’s a damn good plan.

Goldie's spent the last few months saying she wanted to enjoy Frankie being a baby before we started trying for another one. I didn't push it, because she was the one who had to do all the hard work and recover from childbirth. But about a month ago, she casually mentioned she thought she’d be ready after Frankie’s first birthday.

I remembered. Of course I fucking remembered.

So yesterday, I booked us a room at The Saltaire for tonight. Colston’s taking Frankie overnight, and Goldie has no idea.

I slide my hand under the picnic table, letting my fingers trail up and down her bare thigh.

Her fingers tighten around the water bottle. The teasing banter from earlier drops away, replaced by a sudden, breathless awareness.

I stroke my thumb over the soft skin right at the edge of her bikini bottom, leaning in close so my voice doesn't carry over the noise of Dad and Pops at the grill. "You told me you wanted to wait until Frankie turned one before we started trying for another baby."

She swallows, her eyes locking onto mine. "I did."

"Well, she's officially one."

Her lips part. "So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying Colston's taking her overnight. And I booked us a room."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Where?"

I just wait, letting her put the pieces together.

A soft, disbelieving laugh escapes her. "No. The Saltaire? You did not."

"I did. I arranged it with Colston a couple of weeks ago."

Her eyes widen. "You've been planning this for *weeks*?"

"I've been thinking about it a hell of a lot longer than that," I tell her, my voice dropping into a low rasp. I let my fingers drift down to her inner thigh and squeeze, letting the primal, possessive need I feel for this woman bleed into the words. "I'm taking you back to the exact same room where I put my first baby in you. And I'm going to spend the entire night filling you up until I give you another one."

A slow smile that means nothing but trouble spreads across her face. It’s one of my favorites. "You sound very confident."

"I went one for one last time. I don't plan on missing tonight."

She slides an arm around the back of my neck, her fingertips scraping lightly over my skin. “You know it might not happen on the first try this time around. We might have to practice. A lot.”

I wrap my arm around her waist, pulling her flush against my side. "I'm more than happy to put in the work. As many times as it takes."

She laughs softly against my shoulder, the sound vibrating straight down to my chest. "God, I love you."

I kiss her temple. "I love you too."

She pulls back enough to look at me. “Now eat something. You’re gonna need your strength later.”

Her hand slides onto my abs beneath the table, and the look she gives me makes it pretty damn clear what she means.

By the time everyone’s eaten, Frankie has demolished everything Goldie put in front of her and suckered bites off at least three other people.

Then Pops calls out from the other end of the pavilion. “Cake time!”

Colston carries Frankie over and deposits her into the portable high chair clipped to the end of the picnic table. She reaches for the edge of the plastic tablecloth, gearing up to yank the whole thing down.

"Leave the tablecloth alone, menace," Goldie tells her with all the affection in the world, gently redirecting her chubby hands.

Dad sets the cake down. It’s in the shape of a glitter-dusted purple crayon, and when Frankie notices it, she lets out an ear-piercing shriek and grabs for it. Luckily, Goldie’s quicker.

Scout and Ellie commissioned it just to mess with us, since trying to eat them is Frankie’s current favorite hobby. For some reason, it’s only the purple ones.

When Goldie saw it for the first time, she laughed and then flipped them off.

Dad lights the candle in the shape of a one stuck right in the middle. Pops starts singing before anybody else is ready, so we all join in, horribly off-key. Frankie just stares at us with wide eyes.

The rest of our family crowds around the picnic benches. Trace abandons his beach chair, Andie and Tatum box us in by the table, and Colston has his phone out and recording.

When we get to her name, she starts bouncing.

Goldie crouches beside her chair. I step in close beside them, resting one hand on Goldie’s bare shoulder while the other hovers near Frankie in

case she makes a grab for the candle.

Like I suspected she would, Frankie lunges for the open flame, and I catch her wrist just in time.

“No, Jo-Jo. It’s hot,” I tell her.

Colston laughs behind his phone.

I shoot him a look. “You’re a terrible influence.”

He grins, lowering his phone for a second. “Last I checked, Frankie-baby is *your* kid. I’m just the fun uncle.” His grin gets wider. “And you know how seriously I take my jobs.”

Trace scoffs, and Frankie gives me the dirtiest look imaginable as only a toddler can because I ruined her fun.

Goldie laughs at the dirty look Frankie is shooting me. She kisses the side of our daughter's messy hair. "Okay, Jo-Jo. Help Mama."

She looks up at me, tipping her head back to catch my eye, and smiles.

We lean in close together. "Blow," Goldie tells her.

Frankie mostly spits, but Goldie blows the flame out, and everybody cheers. Frankie gasps, clapping her hands together with everyone else.

And then, before anyone can stop her, Frankie’s hands plunge straight into the cake. She manages to shove a handful of purple frosting into her mouth, and when she gets her first taste, she freezes. Her eyes go huge as her brain processes her first real hit of processed sugar.

Colston is laughing so hard Trace plucks the phone out of his hand and takes over recording. Dad wraps an arm around Pops as they watch her go to town on the cake, double fisting it until she gets chipmunk cheeks.

“Slow down, baby, or you’re going to choke,” Goldie says, attempting to contain our daughter.

I look down at my wife. Goldie's still crouched in front of me, laughing as she tries to wipe purple frosting off Frankie’s forehead and nose, but it’s a lost cause. She’s going to need to go into the Gulf after this.

Goldie glances up, catching my eye over the top of our daughter's head.

The Gulf breeze blows her dark hair across her cheek, and her smile is so bright it puts an ache right in the center of my chest. The loud, perfect reality of what we built together is buzzing all around us. I don't need to look at the ocean for answers anymore or wonder if the universe is ever going to cut me a break.

I look at the woman who gave me my life back, and I make a wish anyway.

To a house full of kids. To watching them discover the world, to the messy, beautiful chaos of unconditional love, and to growing old with you.

Goldie's smile turns soft, a silent, knowing promise reflecting in her eyes. I run my thumb over her bare shoulder, the anticipation for tonight burning hot in my blood.

I already have everything I could ever ask for. But in a few hours, I'm going to ask for more.

Because it turns out I'm a selfish man, and I'll never get enough of her.

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SO... ABOUT THAT HOTEL ROOM

You didn't really think I was going to send Sumner and Goldie back to the Saltaire to try for baby number two and then fade to black, did you?

I wrote exactly what happens when they get there.

And yes, it's filthy.

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A LETTER FROM ME TO YOU

(If you want to avoid politics, this is your warning to skip this note)

Hi friend,

Well, you made it. You took the crazy ride with Sumner & Goldie, two of the most unhinged people I've ever written. Not because this book went dark, but because who the hell looks at a stranger in a bar and says, "Yeah, I think we should have a baby together"?

Like, that's insane.

But they were NOT quiet about wanting their story told. They kept bugging me for literal YEARS until I finally wrote it. The idea for this book happened in a few stages. First, it was the Hurricane Hunters. I found out about them for the first time back in 2017 when Hurricane Harvey hit Texas and we had to evacuate. As a PNW girlie, I was completely out of my element.

Naturally, I was glued to the Weather Channel and I was totally blown away by these men and women who *voluntarily* fly into fucking *hurricanes* for a living. Like… who does that? What kind of person would want to do that job?

Back then I wasn't a writer, but my brain has always gone off on tangents like that, just asking questions and imagining what the answers could be. What would that person's life look like?

And then back in 2024, now as an author, I had an idea for a scene where a man and woman, total strangers, meet in a bar. Both of them have

been wronged, both are drowning their sorrows, and they look at each other in a drunken moment and go, “Should we do this?”

And the story starts there.

In my original version, they banged it out in the bar bathroom. But when I started writing it, that didn’t feel right. These two needed more than a quick fuck in a bathroom stall or a back alley behind the bar.

So we get the hotel room scenes.

Now the rest of this book came from me being really fucking angry at the state of this country and the world every day. It came from having a trans child that I’m terrified for but love more than anything. Who I’m sad for because the world is against them just for being themselves. It came from wanting to make this book woke as fuck to show that love is love and if you think that’s wrong, you can fuck all the way off (disrespectfully).

That’s basically my mental state at this point. Suddenly I look around and don’t recognize the country I had so much hope for when I was a teenager or when I watched the first Black president get elected and cried because I thought, *Yes. We’re finally making progress.*

But hatred has been allowed to fester and grow, and I find myself struggling to write dark books in that climate. I want hope. I want my favorite things and the things you’ve come to love my books for (the obsession, the possessiveness, etc.), but I also want heroes who lift their heroines up. Women who love themselves enough to demand more and better. People who love unapologetically.

So I put a trans character in this book (Tatum) who’s fabulous and amazing and living her best life and her trans-ness isn’t even discussed really because who cares? I don’t have to have full conversations about being a woman when I meet new people and she shouldn’t have to either.

Sumner has two dads and he was raised with so much love and support. And he’s also the first hero I’ve ever written who takes the mental burden off the heroine as a way to support her. He doesn’t ask, “How can I help?” He just does the work. *That’s* how I imagine the fantasy for most women would go. Sumner is, to me, the ultimate book boyfriend.

And Goldie. I love her so much. She’s my first curvy girl FMC, and it was so, so important to me that she not have a single second of, “He wants me in spite of my body.” No, girl. He wants her BECAUSE of her body. I wanted her to be so confident in her skin and flaunt it proudly in what she wears and her attitude throughout the story.

Is it realistic? I guess it depends. I think we're all self-conscious at points in our lives, but at the same time, who cares what people think? I've been struggling with my own body image issues as my body has adjusted to healing after being diagnosed with celiac disease. I've gained a little weight (where I'd been underweight/malnourished and a size 0/2 for years and years) and writing Goldie was my way of processing that and my own struggles.

Does she have cellulite and stretch marks and rolls? Yes, yes she does. But she wears clothes that show off her body and Sumner loves every inch of her exactly the way she is. And that was so important to me to write with this book.

So, that pretty much wraps up my thoughts and motivations when writing this book minus one small thing - the disaster movie Easter eggs:

Frankie's middle name (Jo) + Goldie's mom's name came from the main female character in the movie Twister.

The hurricane name (Ruth) came from that bitch grandma from Dante's Peak who was selfish as fuck and almost got everyone killed. It felt fitting to name a category 5 hurricane after her.

Fuck you, Ruth.

Anyway, Colston's book is next and it's gonna be different than anything I've ever written and I'm SO, SO, SO excited to get started on it. Any guesses on what his book's going to look like love interest or storyline-wise? (hint: there was a TINY mention of his LI in this book, but we didn't meet them - but hints were given!)

I hope you enjoyed Goldie and Sumner and that it gave you a little something to smile about in the dumpster fire of life.

Until the next one,
H

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Ashley writes dark & steamy forbidden stories with toxic, obsessive heroes. She's a PNW girl through and through and lives for foggy mornings among the evergreens.

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