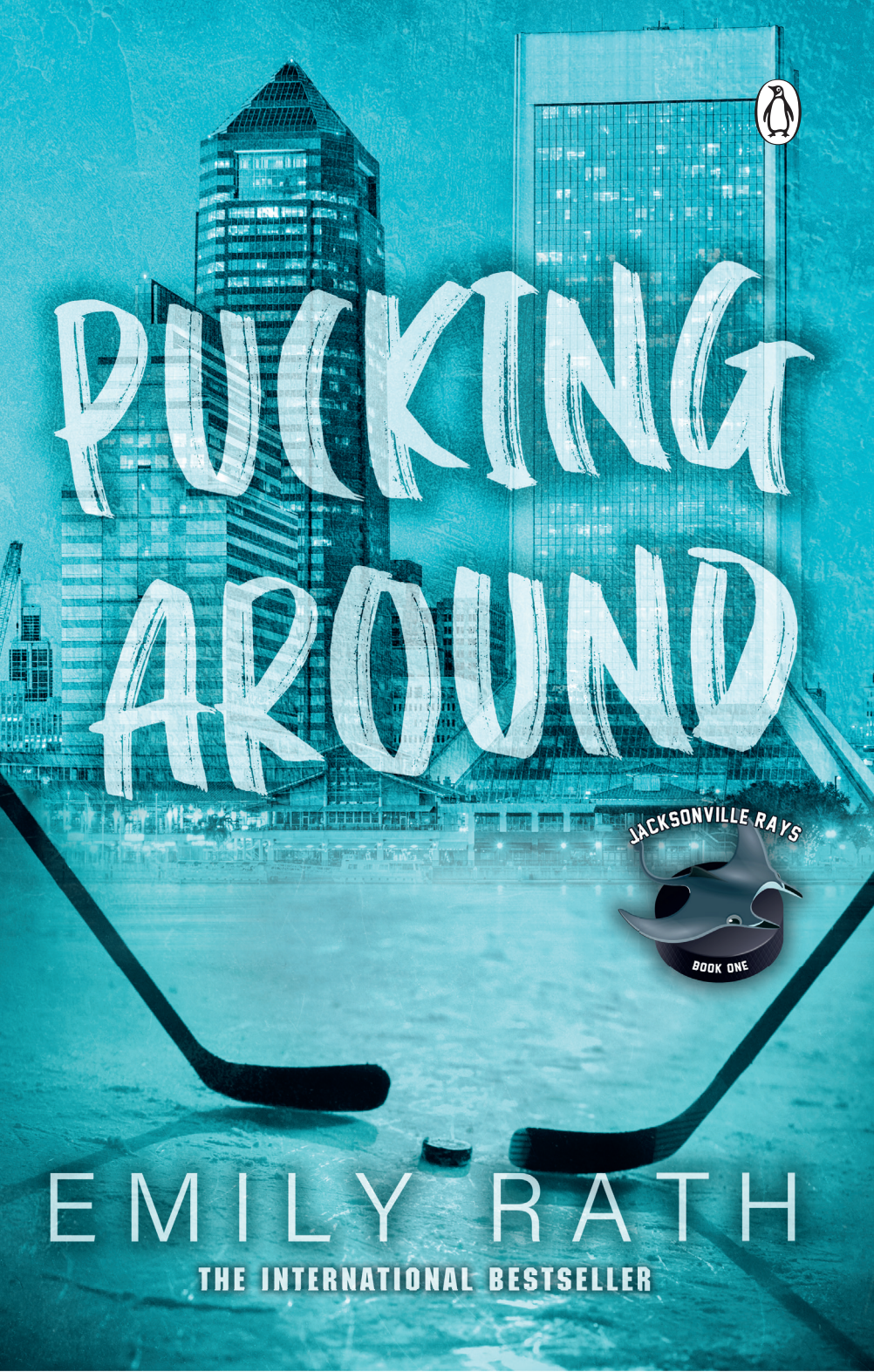

PUCKING AROUND
JACKSONVILLE RAYS
BOOK ONE
EMILY RATH
THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

PENGUIN BOOKS

PUCKING AROUND

JACKSONVILLE RAYS HOCKEY #1

Emily Rath is an international bestselling romance and fantasy author. She lives in Florida with her husband, son and cat. They regularly comb the local beaches looking for shark teeth.

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Additional Content

#1.5 PUCKING EVER AFTER: VOL 1

LEMONGRASS (A novella exclusive to the Queer & Cute Anthology coming June 2023)

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PUCKING AROUND

JACKSONVILLE RAYS HOCKEY #1

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To all the haters who think this story
would be better without Ilmari in it—

who hurt you?
Oh, and suksi vittuun.

And to all the lovers who embraced
this story with open arms

—thank you.
Mä rakastan sua.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story starts with a spicy prequel novella called **THAT ONE NIGHT**. While you can definitely read this book without reading the prequel, you'll be missing a bit of character development between Rachel and Jake.

If you're ***not*** going to read the prequel (or if you just need a refresher), here's what happened:

- Two months ago, Rachel was in Seattle for her brother's wedding
- She meets Jake in the bar of her hotel and they share one passionate night
- Jake begs for her name and wants her to stay longer
- In the morning, Rachel leaves without waking Jake

This story starts two months after that one night. Enjoy!

XO,

Emily

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TROPES, TAGS, & CONTENT WARNINGS

TROPES

Hockey romance, 'why choose', friends to lovers, instalove

TAGS

MF, MM, MMF, MFM, MMFM, hockey romance, romantic comedy, instalove, friends to lovers, queer awakening, too much sex, don't poke the bear, golden retriever, everyone has tattoos, baby girl, bend over, daddy, Finnish 101

CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains some themes that may be distressing to readers including one family's history of receiving harassment, vicious bullying linked to homophobia, and a brief discussion of a family member's attempt to unalive. More than one main character has a history of substance abuse; one went to rehab for treatment (discussed, not shown). A main character also has a history with disordered eating (briefly discussed as part of their past).

This book contains detailed two-, three-, and four-person sex scenes that include elements of impact play, choking, voyeurism,

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bondage, double penetration, double vaginal penetration, toy use, degradation, dom/sub, spit play, snowballing, and breeding kink.

STAR SIGNS

- RACHEL: Cancer (water): intuitive, emotional, guarded
- ILMARI: Aries (fire): bold, ambitious, temperamental
- JAKE: Taurus (earth): focused, sensual, steadfast
- CALEB: Sagittarius (fire): adventurous, adaptable, blunt

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MEET THE RAYS

PLAYERS

Compton, Jake (#42): defenseman
Davidson, Tyler (#65): backup goalie
Gerard, Jean-Luc "J Lo" (#6): defenseman
Hanner, Paul (#24): defenseman
Karlsson, Henrik (#17): forward
Kinnunen, Ilmari "Mars" (#31): goalie
Langley, Ryan (#20): forward
Morrow, Cole (#3): defenseman
Novikov, Lukas "Novy" (#22): defenseman
O'Sullivan, Josh "Sully" (#19): forward
Perry, David "DJ" (#13): forward
Walsh, Cade (#10): forward

COACHES

Andrews, Brody: Assistant Coach
Johnson, Harold "Hodge": Head Coach
Tomlin, Eric: Goalie Coach

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TEAM SUPPORT

Gordon, Jerry: Equipment Manager
Sanford, Caleb: Equipment Manager

MEDICAL SUPPORT

Avery, Todd: Director of Physical Therapy
Jacobs, Hillary: Team Nurse
O'Connor, Teddy: PT intern
Price, Rachel: Barkley Fellow
Tyler, Scott: Team Doctor

OPERATIONS/MANAGEMENT

Francis, Vicki: Operations Manager
Ortiz, Claribel: Social Media Manager
St. James, Poppy: Public Relations Director

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FINNISH WORDS & PHRASES

En voi elää ilman sua/I can't live without you
Haluun tätä/I want this
Joo/Yes
Kulta/Sweetie
Leijona/Lioness
Mä haluun sut/I want you
Mä kuulun sulle/I belong to you
Mä rakastan sua/I love you
Mä tuun/I'm coming
Mennään naimisiin/Marry me
Mitä helvettiä/What the hell?
Mitä vittua/What the fuck?
Mun leijona/My lioness
Niin mäkin sua/I love you too
No niin/*Versatile meanings
Oon sun/I'm yours
Oot kaunis, rakas/You are beautiful, darling
Oot niin timmi/You are tight
Rakas/Darling

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Saatana/Goddamn it
Suksi vittuun/Get the fuck out (literally: ski into a cunt)
Tule tänne/Come here
Vain sun/Only yours
Voi helvetti/Oh, hell

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1

RACHEL

"RACHEL!"

I groan, not ready to open my eyes and face the truth. It's morning. *Again*. And I'm officially going to murder my roommate Tess...just as soon as I remember how eyelids work. Why did I let her talk me into going out last night?

Because you're twenty-seven and single, girl. Live your damn life! I can hear her voice echoing in my head along with the steady *thump thump thump* of last night's dance music.

I'm pretty sure there was drinking last night. What else explains why my tongue feels superglued to the roof of my mouth? Oh god—I think I'm gonna be sick. I'm getting too old for this. I can't bounce back like I could when I was eighteen. There's only one solution: I'm just never drinking again. No more dancing. No more bars. Consider this my retirement from night life.

"*RA-CHEL*! Girl, get *up*!"

I roll onto my back, wincing as I gaze up at the blades of my slowly circulating ceiling fan. I think I slept with my contacts in. My eyes itch so bad.

Make a list, Rach. Make a plan.

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That's been my mantra for the last two months as I've tried to put the pieces of my shattered life back together.

Hot shower, strong black coffee, maybe some eye drops—

"RACH!" Tess stomps down the hall and stands in the doorway, her wild, red curls spilling around her shoulders. She's a smokin' hot size twenty with a perfect, pear-shaped body. Per usual, she's wearing nothing but a crop top and her undies, a spray of peachy freckles dotting across her chest. The girl sheds clothes around this apartment like a husky sheds hair.

Not that I mind. I'm the daughter of a super famous rock star. Born in California and raised on a tour bus, I've seen some wild things in my time. A naked Tess doesn't bother me one bit.

"Girl, did you not hear me hollerin' for you?" She pops a hand on her hip and tosses my phone on the bed. "Someone's been trying to call you for like thirty minutes."

I reach blindly for it without turning my head. "Who is it?"

"I don't know. A New York number, I think. And there was a missed call from Doctor H."

I bolt upright, swallowing down the instant wave of nausea that hits me. "Ohmygod, Tess!" I snatch up my phone. "My boss is calling, and you let it just keep ringing?"

"Hey, I've got my own boss breathing down my neck, thank you very much," she says with a huff. "You handle *your* arrogant asshole, I'll handle mine." She flicks her hair over her shoulder as she turns. Her cheeky undies show off her freckled booty as she saunters away.

I roll my eyes, knowing she means well. Tess is just being overprotective because she's never liked Doctor Halla. She doesn't like the way he micromanages me or his cold, aloof manner. I guess it's just never bothered me. He can't help that he's European.

I drag a hand through my tousled hair, checking my text messages while I wait for my brain to warm up. Six texts and a missed call from my twin brother and his husband. I'm pretty

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sure Somchai is back in Seattle, which means this is early for him.

HARRISON (8:01AM): In NYC for cooking show. Wanna fly up for taping on Sat?

HARRISON (8:04AM): You *skull emoji*??

HARRISON (8:05AM): MISSED CALL

I grin, shaking my head. Just like a twin to give me exactly three minutes to respond to a question before he jumps to rigor mortis in his mind.

HARRISON (8:07AM): Hello *eyes emoji*

SOM (8:12AM): Girl, you better be dead bc your stupid brother just woke me up at 5AM. CALL HIM BACK

SOM (8:14AM): Plz don't actually be dead

HARRISON (8:20AM): I texted Tess and she says you're hungover, not *skull emoji* LMK about Sat

Now I'm laughing. These two are too much. My brother and his husband are rising stars in the culinary world. Apparently, Harrison was asked to be a guest judge on some new cooking show. He's always been more comfortable using our famous father's name and connections. I wouldn't be surprised if he drags him to the taping.

Which means that if I go, I'll be seated in daddy's shadow when the cameras inevitably pan to him for a closeup. Then I'll get three weeks of hassle as the tabloids remember I exist.

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Yeah, no thanks.

I type out a quick reply in our group chat.

RACHEL (8:31AM): Not dead. Can't come bc I gotta work. But good luck *kiss face emoji*

Spotlight glare is literally the last thing I need right now because, two months ago, my own career rocket crashed out of the sky. I was in Seattle for Harrison's wedding when I got the news that I lost out on the Barkley Fellowship. The top sports medicine fellowship in the industry, it pairs early career doctors and physical therapists with professional sports teams. The last three residents Doctor Halla put up for it all won. After their ten-month rotations ended, they were all offered permanent positions.

I was supposed to be lucky number four. Doctor Halla was so sure I would win that he confidently started interviewing for my replacement in the residency program. I had to crawl back from Seattle with my tail between my legs and beg him not to give my spot away. He was kind about it, righteously indignant, swearing he'd never recommend a doctor to their sham of a program again.

So that's where I've been for the last two months, back in Cincinnati, going through the motions day to day. When I'm not putting in my residency hours at the hip and knee clinic, I'm working out or hiding out...until Tess gets fed up and drags me out.

My therapist might be ready to prescribe Prozac, but Tess has a whole other kind of therapy in mind. Dick therapy. Since I got back from Seattle, she's been on a mission to get me laid. She thinks a wild night with a guy will cure me of my funk. But just the thought of touching another guy has me cringing.

I go still, my phone balanced in my hand.

Another guy. God, I'm such a mess. As if I already have a guy

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and Mr. Random Hookup would be the *other* guy. I don't have a guy. Not even close. But hey, a girl can dream, right?

In my case, my nightly dreams are full of only one guy. *The* guy. My Mystery Boy. I haven't told anyone about him. Not even Tess. We met on my last night in Seattle. It was the best one-night stand of my life. I've never felt so dialed in to another human soul before. But that's all it could be for me. One perfect night. No names. No numbers. I woke in the morning and quietly packed my bags, leaving him naked in my bed looking like my every dream.

I regret not telling him my name. He asked me to stay. He wanted me like I wanted him…*want* him.

I groan, dragging my hand through my messy hair again. I can't think about Mystery Boy right now. I've got to deal with Doctor Halla.

DR. HALLA (8:08AM): Price, call me ASAP

DR. HALLA (8:15AM): MISSED CALL

Taking a deep breath, I lift the phone to my ear and tap the little green call button. The dial tone chirps three times before it connects. "Dr. Halla, sorry I missed your call—"

"Price, are you here? Come to my office," he says in that posh, slightly accented voice.

"I—no, sir. I'm not scheduled to come in until this afternoon."

"Damn. Well, I didn't want to do this over the phone…"

I do a quick inventory. A shower is pretty much nonnegotiable. And I have to put some food in my stomach. And coffee. Lots of coffee. "Umm…I can be there in thirty minutes—"

"No. I don't want to keep them waiting."

Them? Why do I feel suddenly on edge? "Sir, what—"

"You got it."

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My mind cranks like a pair of rusty gears as I try to puzzle out his meaning. "I—what?"

"The Barkley Fellowship. You got it," he repeats. His delivery is so deadpan that I'm not sure what to say. Is he joking? Because it's not funny. "Price? Did you hear me?"

"Yes." My heart is racing a mile a minute. "I don't understand—"

"I just got off the phone with Dr. Ahmed from the selection committee at the Foundation," he explains. "Apparently, you were first on the waitlist."

"Oh my god." I shove off the bed and stand on wobbly legs, looking helplessly around my room.

"Apparently, one of the fellows made the genius decision to go whitewater rafting and his raft flipped," Dr. Halla goes on. "Broke both his tibia and dislocated his shoulder, so he's out."

"Ohmygod," I gasp, pacing from the bed to the window. "So, what does that—"

"It means you're in," he replies, cutting right to the chase. "Dr. Ahmed called me as a favor. She knows you're my resident. She wanted to make sure you'd be serious about accepting. I told her you were. I hope I didn't overstep," he adds quickly.

"No, sir, I—" I hardly have words to speak. This can't be happening.

"You *are* still serious about it, right?"

"Of course," I all but shout into the phone. "I—this is just the last thing I expected. Didn't the fellowships already begin?"

"They only started this week," he replies. "That was the other reason she was calling. Usually, the fellows get some say in their placement. If not the specific team, then at the very least gender and sport. You'll need to be willing to fill this other fellow's place. It's already set up and it's too late to change it now."

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Oddly enough, the total lack of control is giving me a kind of

thrill. I feel like I'm skydiving. "Yes," I say. "I'll do it. Whatever it is, I'm in." I'm grinning now.

"Excellent," he replies. "It'll be more of a physical therapy role than primary care, but they're intrigued with your background in both. Dr. Ahmed wanted to check with me to make sure your experience at the clinic will translate well. I told her you're the perfect candidate."

My heart flutters. "Thank you, sir. Thank you so much for your support—"

"Say nothing of that," he says brusquely. He's not big on gushing. One of the residents hugged him at the Christmas party last year, and I thought he might turn to stone. "I believe Dr. Ahmed already tried to call you this morning. Call her back, and formally accept the fellowship. And don't worry about your shift this afternoon," he adds. "I'll apprise Wendy of the situation."

"Thank you," I stammer again.

"This is a great opportunity, Price. I'm pleased for you. Maybe you can get me tickets to a game this season."

His words register and I stop in my pacing. The fellowship started *this* week. Meaning I have to quit my job, pack up my life, and move, and I don't even know where I'm moving!

"Wait—what's the team?" I call out. "What sport? What city? Did she tell you?"

"Yes," he replies. "Your fellowship will be with the Jacksonville Rays."

My mind spins. Jacksonville. Atlantic side of Florida, I know that much. But my mind is drawing a blank at the Rays. The Jaguars are the NFL team...baseball maybe? God, if this is a test of my fit for their program, I'm utterly failing.

"I've never heard of the Rays," I admit.

He chuckles. "Well, you wouldn't. The Rays are the newest expansion team for the NHL. I don't think they've even finished the new arena yet."

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I all but shriek with excitement, which is completely unprofessional, but I don't care.

Hockey. It's one of the most ruthless, injury-prone sports. The men play with literal knives strapped to their feet. Lots of bone breaks. Lots of shoulder, hip, and knee injuries. Dislocations. Groin pulls. It's my dream placement. And a new team means all new equipment, new facilities, over-eager fans.

"Sir—" I squeak out, unable to think of any other words.

He just chuckles again. "Have fun, Price. You've earned this." Then he hangs up.

I stand there with the phone in my hand, utterly speechless. I won the Barkley Fellowship.

Tess ducks her head back in my room, green smoothie in hand. "You talk to Dr. H? What—girl, what's that smile? What happened?"

I start laughing, tears brimming in my eyes.

She pushes off the doorframe. "Girl, what—"

"I'm moving to Jacksonville," I blurt out.

"What—*when*?"

I wipe a tear from under my eye, shaking my head in shocked disbelief. "As soon as possible."

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2

RACHEL

"I don't know what else to tell you, ma'am. I'm looking at the screen, and I'm not seeing any record of your bags," the airline desk clerk drones for the third time.

I let out an exasperated groan, juggling my heavy backpack and purse on my shoulder while I snatch up the receipts on the counter. "Then explain *these*," I say, flapping them in the air. "The guy in Cincy checked all three of my bags. Clearly, they connected somewhere because—*look*—I've got one right here!" I gesture to the bag at my feet. It's one of Tess's old bags. The thing is holding itself together with little more than a prayer.

This is officially a disaster. The two missing bags have pretty much all my essentials. The bag I managed to claim was a last-minute pack job of odds and ends—a few medical textbooks, some bulky winter clothes, two evening gowns, and random workout stuff. I'm gonna look great waltzing into my first day of work tomorrow wearing a custom backless Chanel dress and my spin shoes.

"Can you *please* check again," I say, slapping the receipts back down on the counter.

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It's been 32 hours of pure chaos. I'm hungry, I'm exhausted,

and I'm feeling totally on edge after a long day dealing with multiple delayed flights. I didn't even sleep last night, too busy packing. I said a tearful goodbye to Tess before I was at the airport by 6:00AM for my first flight.

But a series of mechanical delays means it's now after 5:00pm, and I've only *just* landed in Jacksonville. And now this human gargoyle wearing a button on her vest that says 'I love corgis' is telling me my luggage has disappeared off the face of the earth.

"I don't understand how two bags can just go missing—"

"Oh…wait," she murmurs, the screen of the computer glowing in the reflection off her glasses. "Yeeep…here they are. I typed the flight number in wrong."

I stay very still. It's easier this way. I don't get a manager called on me this way…or a police officer. "Please just find them."

While she starts clicking away, I shift the bags on my shoulder, looking down at my phone. It's been blowing up since I stepped up to the counter. Apparently, it finally decided to wake up from airplane mode. All the messages come flooding in at once.

I'm sure Tess wants updates. There are a few messages in the Price Family group chat too. I also have a few messages from an unknown number. I read those first.

UNKNOWN (5:05PM): Hey, this is Caleb Sanford from the Rays. I'll be picking you up from the airport. I drive a blue Jeep.

UNKNOWN (5:15PM): I'm here. Outside door 2.

UNKNOWN (5:20PM): Can't sit much longer before the guy makes me go around again.

Shit. No one said there would be an airport pickup!

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UNKNOWN (5:30PM): MISSED CALL

UNKNOWN (5:45PM): Look, I don't mean to be a dick, but I can't wait much longer. It says your flight arrived 45min ago.

UNKNOWN (5:47PM): This is Dr. Price, right?

"Oh my god," I cry, shifting all my stuff around on my shoulder.

Great, now I look like a total jerk that just ignores calls and texts for an hour, leaving people to wait on me. I need to call this guy back. I need to get out of this damn airport!

"Please," I say over the counter for what feels like the hundredth time. "If the bags aren't here, I can come back, but I can't just keep standing here—"

She raises a hand in my face. "Ma'am, I need you to calm down."

Oh, no she didn't.

"Calm down?" I seethe. "I haven't begun to be *un*-calm. You're the one who said my bags weren't even in the system two seconds ago—" I choke back the rest of my tirade. It's not worth it. "*Please*," I say again. "Just tell me—"

"Got it," she murmurs, her eyes back on the screen. "Looks like two of the bags were misdirected during your connecting flight in Charlotte. We can have them rerouted here sometime tomorrow morning."

I sigh with relief. "Thank god. What do you need from me?"

"Nothing," she replies, sliding the bag receipts back across the counter at me. "We've got all your contact info. Someone will be in touch letting you know when the bags have arrived."

I snatch up the receipts. "Thanks," I mutter, only adding the 'for nothing' inside my own head.

"Welcome to Jacksonville," she deadpans, already waving at the next person in line.

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I fight with the strap of my purse, which is now wrapped in my

backpack strap and hooked around my metal water bottle. At the same time, I reach down for the handle of my checked bag. It's one of those boxy, black rectangles, lumpy down the front with all the odds and ends I've crammed inside. The thing weighs a ton! Whatever, it rolls. And now I'm on a roll.

I hurry away from the lost baggage desk, dragging my one lonely bag behind me. I've got my purse strapped across my body, so my left hand can be free. I'm already tapping the call button on my phone. It rings and he picks up immediately.

"Hello?" His voice is deep.

"Hi—" *Shit—what was this guy's name?* "This is Rachel Price," I say. "I'm *so* sorry! My bags are lost and then my phone was stuck on airplane mode—it was a whole thing. I'm coming out now!"

"I'm pulling around again," he says. I can hear music rocking in the background. "Blue Jeep." He hangs up.

I race over to the double doors marked with a big number 2 and rush outside. The Florida heat hits me like a slap to the face. I'm used to the dry heat of a California summer, not this swamp. Thank goodness my hair is already up in a knot. I've got to get this hoodie off pronto.

A topless, dark blue Jeep pulls to a stop at the crosswalk about ten yards away. A surfboard is strapped to the top rails, and a dog peeks his head out of the backseat. He's adorable—black pointy ears, with a white snout like a border collie. His pink tongue lolls from his mouth.

I run towards the Jeep, the wheels of my bag rattling against the cement. I lift my hand holding the phone, awkwardly waving the Jeep down. The guy in the driver's seat nods. He's wearing aviators and a ball cap with the brim pulled low.

"Hi," I say, breathless as I stop at the passenger side of the Jeep. "I'm Rachel Price. I'm so sorry again! My phone wasn't working, and two of my bags are missing, and I've been up for 36 hours, and

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I'm just a red-hot mess. But I'm here now, and I'm ready to go and —ohmygod, you are *so* cute—"

The guy in the front seat stiffens, his mouth opening a little in surprise, but I'm not actually paying attention to him. As I spilled my guts, the dog hopped between the seats, popping his face over the edge of the passenger door. He's got gorgeous icy blue eyes, so bright and curious. I'm a huge sucker for animals. I could never have one growing up with the way we always traveled, so now I become painfully awkward in social settings if there is a dog involved.

"Sy, back," his owner commands, cranking the Jeep into park.

The dog wiggles his whole body, his tail flapping in the guy's face before he hops dutifully into the backseat.

"Need help with your bags?"

"Oh, no. I can get it," I say, my eye going back to him.

Oh shit.

Here I am fawning over a cute dog when his owner is even cuter. He slips his aviators off, tucking them into the top of his t-shirt, and I get the full effect of those dark eyes and cheekbones for days. He's got a day or two of stubble along his jaw, and the sexiest bow pout to his lips.

"I—"

Girl, get yourself together.

I snap my mouth shut.

Shit, when did it open?

"I'm fine," I repeat. "Let me just..." I don't even bother finishing the sentence. I just duck my head in shame and move around the back of the Jeep.

"Here, let me," he calls out. "The door can get jammed sometimes." That's when he unfolds himself from the driver's seat and —oh my sweet heavens. He's sculpted perfection. I could see the shoulders from the Jeep, but I wasn't betting on the height too.

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He's graceful as he moves, turning his back on me to fiddle

with the door. Ink covers his right arm from the wrist up, disappearing under the sleeve of his t-shirt. Swirls of color and detailed patterns. He swings the door open, and I step back, ready to heft my bag inside.

"Here, let me get it," he mutters.

"No, don't bother." Why is my voice coming out so squeaky?

"That looks heavy."

"I'm a big girl," I reply, hefting it by the handle.

Then a few things happen at once. First, the car behind us honks, making me jump and the dog bark. Then the PA system starts blaring about parking in restricted areas. Lastly, as I lift the bag, I snag the edge of the door. This must have been just enough force to fray the ancient bag's last will to live. I hear the fabric tear, and then all hell breaks loose.

And by hell, I mean the contents of my bag. Yep, I stand there, mouth open in horror, watching as all my belongings flood from the shredded canvas, spilling all over the curb at our feet.

Surfer Boy exchanges a wide-eyed look with me before we jolt into action, trying to catch all my falling stuff. I shriek as a book slams down on my exposed toes. This has me knocking back against the open Jeep door. Now the dog is barking in alarm, watching us scramble to keep my stuff from rolling into oncoming traffic.

Once we get the bag to the ground, I drop to my knees, desperate to shove everything back inside.

This is it. I've finally found it.

Hello, limit. I'm Rachel.

I work quickly, stuffing things back inside the broken bag. A few seconds pass when I realize Surfer Boy is just standing there, making no effort to help me. I glance up, my eyes trailing up his bare legs dusted with sand. Did he come straight from the beach? I pass over his board shorts, up his cut torso, to his face.

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He's looking down, but he's not looking at me. No, he's looking

at the thing in his hands. His expression is frozen on his face, totally unreadable.

And *thing* is right because—

Oh my fucking god.

My heart drops out of my chest. Someone bury me in the earth right here in this airport loading zone. And make sure to dig a hole for Tess right next to me, because I plan to haunt her to death! Surfer Boy is holding a dildo. *My* dildo. It was a gag gift from Tess, and it's most certainly a gag that she packed it for me. It has to be, because the dildo is large and purple and shaped like an octopus tentacle.

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3

CALEB

I'm standing in the 'no parking' zone of the Jacksonville airport with a tentacle dildo in my hand. It's electric purple and rubbery, and I can tell from the weight its battery operated.

Holy fucking shit.

How the hell did I get here?

I've been waiting for this woman for almost an hour, getting myself more and more worked up about entitled doctor types who have no consideration for others. I was ready to hate her. Hell, I was ready to drive off and leave her ass here.

But then my phone finally rang, and this walking hurricane of a girl swept through the automatic doors, sucking me into her vortex. She talked at me so fast, I could barely make out the words. All I could do is watch the elegant arch of her throat as it moved. Then Sy had to go bouncing around, distracting us both.

She's gorgeous, I'll give her that. Her curvy body is clad in high-waisted black leggings and a cropped hoodie unzipped to show her cleavage. She did the world a favor by strapping her purse between her breasts and running towards me like a Baywatch model. Once she's close enough, I see the little glint of gold at her nose.

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Fuck, she's got a septum piercing.

I'm a sucker for a pierced and tatted girl. Does she have tats too? I can't tell. What I can tell is that the guys are gonna go crazy. She'll be breaking hearts by day's end tomorrow. Coach is gonna have to put up an electric fence around her office. We'll probably have to make the rookies take cold showers before she examines them.

And here I am, still holding her dildo.

She's on her knees, scrambling to gather her shit, cursing under her breath. She looks up at me and I'm still just fucking standing here, like I've been turned to stone. Her dark gaze drops from my face down to my hand and her lips part in an "O."

"Oh my god," she shrieks, launching to her feet. "*Give* me that—"

She all but slaps the dildo out of my hand.

Say something, asshole.

"Just trying to help," I mutter, slipping my hands in the pockets of my board shorts, decidedly *not* helping. I'm afraid to help now. Afraid of what else I might find...what else I might touch. Does she actually use that thing or—

"It was a joke gift," she says quickly.

I hope she can't read my thoughts, because I won't deny the moment where I just pictured myself flipping that little switch and turning it on. I'm curious to test the toy's range of motion.

"My roommate's idea of a going away present," she adds, shoving the toy deep inside her bag. "I don't—I've never—*god*, will you just get down here and help me before we get towed?"

I don't bother hiding my smirk. So, she's never used it before?

Don't go breaking my heart, Hurricane.

I bend my good knee, dropping down with a slight wince, and help her shove things back inside the broken bag. The rest of the plunder is innocent enough—books, random chargers, and cables. I pick up a snow boot. "You expecting snow on the beach?"

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She huffs and grabs it, shoving it inside the split in the bag. "Always good to be prepared. Thought I might need to pack snow gear for an away game or something."

That's smart. I wouldn't want to be stuck with just my flip-flops in Toronto either.

We finish gathering her stuff quick as we can and team-lift the bag into the back of the Jeep. Whatever wouldn't fit back inside is tossed unceremoniously on top. She tucks her backpack safely in the backseat, keeping her purse with her as she climbs in the front.

I slide in on the driver's side and slip my sunglasses on. "Any preferences on the music?"

"No," she replies, helping herself to my phone charger. "Sorry, my battery is dying."

"Okay, well it's gonna get a bit windy," I say. "You might wanna—"

"I know how Jeeps work," she huffs, clicking her seatbelt on.

We both go still as we sit in the silence of her response.

Then she groans, burying her face in her hands. "Oh, shit—I'm so sorry. That was the bitchiest thing to say ever."

"It's okay—"

"No, I'm *so* sorry, I'm just—*god*—I'm so tired," she says, a note of desperation in her voice. "I think I might be getting a bit delusional."

I swear, if I have to deal with a tentacle dildo *and* tears in the same car ride, I'm gonna ask for a raise. Airport runs already aren't in my job description, but I'm trying to pull my weight, be a team player. Look what I get for my trouble.

"I haven't slept in like two days," she goes on.

Yeah, those are tears in her voice. I am now officially uncomfortable.

"And I'm so hungry. I haven't had anything but a bag of pretzels since this morning. But that's no excuse," she adds quickly. She turns to me, her fingers brushing lightly against the ink on my

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forearm. "I'm sorry. God, I'm such a mess that I don't even remember your name. I feel like a total bitch. You put it in your text, but I was in such a rush, and I couldn't check it again. And you were waiting for me for so long, and I'm sure you think I'm a total jerk, but I'm not—"

The words only stop because she's out of air. Yeah, this girl is a total swirling vortex of mass chaos.

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. Then she opens them, those dark brown pools sucking me in. "Can we start over? *Please*, let us start over." She holds out her hand to me. "I'm Rachel Price. I'm the new Barkley Fellow, and I've had a *really* rough two days."

I look down at her offered hand. She's tugged her hoodie sleeve up a bit and now I can see that she has tattoos.

Be still my cold dead heart.

A pair of hearts outlined on her wrist, a small, detailed sketch of an electric guitar on her forearm. There's a signature alongside the guitar.

Sy chooses this moment to pop his head between the seats, nosing her open palm, which diffuses the tension. She giggles, giving him a pet between the ears. "At least someone wants to give me another chance. I swear I'm not a bitch. No, I'm not," she croons in that sugary sweet talking-to-a-dog voice all people seem to have. "No, I'm not. I'm really nice. Yes, I am."

Sy eats it up, licking her hand as she laughs out loud.

With a groan, I gently push him back and put out my hand, letting her shake it. "I'm Caleb Sanford, Assistant Equipment Manager."

She smiles. "Wow, tough job. You guys work crazy hard."

"Yep." I drop her hand, placing mine back on the wheel.

"And who is this angel?" she asks, turning in her seat to give Sy more attention. "His eyes are so gorgeous. I could just eat you with a spoon. Yes, I could," she coos.

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The furry idiot is a total chick magnet. Too bad he warms them up only for me to put them right back on ice.

"His name is Poseidon," I reply. "I call him 'Sy' for short."

"Ooo, how regal," she says, her fingers scratching the thick fur of his neck. "You feel a bit salty, Sy. Were you swimming in the ocean with daddy earlier today?"

I go stiff.

Wait—no. My arms—my—*shit*, not my dick. My dick is definitely not going stiff at hearing a gorgeous woman call me 'daddy.'

With a groan, I turn away from her, my eyes firmly on the road as I jerk the Jeep into gear. At the same time, I crank up the radio, blasting the air with my favorite mix of rock music.

She fishes a pair of sunglasses out of her bag and slips them on, leaning back in her seat with a smile the moment we hit that Florida sunshine. Between the wind and the music, it's hard to have a conversation in a Jeep...which is one of the reasons I like driving with the top off.

She doesn't seem to mind. In fact, it seems to relax her. Within minutes. she's got one arm propped on the side door, her hand weaving to the beat of the music, as I coast us onto the interstate.

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4

RACHEL

"Well, here you are, hon. Home sweet home."

I follow the apartment manager inside the open door of my new apartment. My hands are full with my purse, my apartment paperwork, a drink cup sloshing with crunchy ice, and a bag of leftover tacos. I heft it all onto the kitchen counter, turning to face the view.

This is a fully furnished unit on the fourth floor of a brand-new complex not five miles from the arena. Caleb said the Rays bought out the top three floors of this building to have places to house rotating staff like me, as well as keep units in a constant state of readiness for farm team guys.

"You've got all the amenities," she says. "Dishwasher, stove, microwave are all here. And there's a small washer and dryer stack in your hall bath." She points to an open door.

I step past her into the living room. It's just a one bedroom, but there's a kitchen with a little breakfast bar and a narrow living room capped with a wall of glass that leads out to a balcony. Beyond the balcony, I can see I have a view of woods beyond.

"Bedroom is through here," Loretta calls. "You've got a full bath and the step-in closet."

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I follow her into the bedroom, noting the beachy colors everywhere—nautical blue, sand beige, and white. Everything in the unit is accented with wicker and seashells. There's a jute rug in the kitchen. A sand dollar art print is framed over the queen-sized bed. Not a single decorating element is what I would have ever picked for myself. It's coastal chic and I love it.

Okay, I'll get used to it.

Fine, I'm buying a different bedspread at a bare minimum. Anyone who can handle this much sand beige must be part camel.

"It's perfect," I say.

Footsteps behind us have me turning. Caleb is standing in my kitchen, glancing around with a slight frown on his face. "Whoa…I forgot they look like this when you first move in."

"Like what?" I say, taking my heavy backpack as he hands it over to me.

He scrunches his nose. "Like aisle four of a Home Goods."

I stifle a laugh. Yeah, I'll be hiding at least a quarter of these decorations in a cabinet.

"Making new friends already?" Loretta calls. "Don't worry, hon. We're not all as surly as this one." She jabs a thumb at him.

Caleb picks up the glass bowl of seashells on my counter with a rattle. "Just curious, Lo, are there any shells actually left on the *beaches* here in Florida, or are they all in these fancy salad bowls?"

"You said something about recycling?" I say over him.

He smirks, setting the bowl back down.

"Yes, we recycle here. There's a laminated list on the counter of what needs to be separated out," Loretta explains. "And if you're caught breaking the rules, there's a $20 fine. The next fine goes up to $50."

"We take ocean conservation very seriously," Caleb chimes.

How the hell did he get around me and into the living room so fast?

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"Take only photos, leave only footprints," he intones. At the

same time, he's now holding what looks like a dried sea sponge decoration.

I roll my eyes at him. This guy is so hard to figure out. Is he an asshole or is he charming? Maybe he's a charming asshole. I smile, trying to focus on Loretta's long-winded explanation on proper dishwasher usage.

As she talks, I can't help but glance over at him. He's making himself at home on my sofa, moving around the striped pillows. He was so stand-offish at first. Understandable, since he thought I was standing him up...which I kind of was, totally inadvertently. Then there was the whole dildo debacle, which he was super cool about and hasn't mentioned again. On the drive he seemed distant. He clearly didn't want to talk, which suited me just fine. Especially since he's got great taste in music.

I thought I had him pegged as the surly asshole loner type. But then, just before we got to the apartment complex, he pulled into a little strip mall and bought me tacos.

"You said you were hungry," he said with an indifferent shrug.

Sure, we ate in silence, but it wasn't an awkward silence. We sat outside at a little metal café table, sharing our chips with a very happy Sy.

Whatever Caleb lacks in charm, his dog more than compensates.

"Oh, no—Sy," I cry, cutting Loretta off. "You can't leave him in the Jeep. Bring him up."

Caleb has his nose buried inside my coffee table book: *Florida's Seashells: A Beachcomber's Guide*. "It's okay," he replies, closing the heavy book and tossing it down. "I dropped him off when I brought up your backpack."

"Dropped him off?"

"Didn't this grumpus tell you?" Loretta laughs.

I glance between him and Loretta. "Tell me what?"

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Caleb crosses over to me. "I'm your new neighbor, Doc."

My heart skips a beat. "Neighbor?"

"Yep, he's right next door in unit 403," calls Loretta.

"Why else do you think I was volunteered to pick you up from the airport?"

I gaze up into his dark eyes and feel something in my belly swoop. And no, it's not the tacos. Oh, this is so not happening. No way.

Red alert. Back up, Rachel. Shut it down.

I'm not getting involved with a coworker. I don't care if he's gorgeous and working a smolder so hot it burns.

"So, if you ever need some sugar," he murmurs. "You know who to ask."

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5

RACHEL

I sigh with exhaustion, swaying at my kitchen counter as I pour myself a generous glass of chardonnay. I successfully made it to the end of this marathon two days. At this point, I'm not sure which I need more: sleep or air. It's a toss-up, really. As soon as I down this wine, I plan to crash.

Once Caleb left, I unpacked my one ridiculous bag, confirming what I already knew. The only choice in clothes for tomorrow are two evening gowns, a couple bikinis, a white lacy swimsuit coverup, or my winter gear. So, I called for an Uber and made a Target run. Three hours and $600 later, I was back in my apartment with a stocked fridge and pantry, a new comforter on the bed, new pillows on my sofa, and a load of laundry spinning in my mini washer—to include new scrubs and underwear.

Just as soon as the washer buzzes, I'll toss the clothes in the dryer and go to sleep.

I fiddle with my phone, turning on some music. I stripped my leggings off as soon as I got home. Sports bra too. So now I'm wearing nothing but my undies and the softest cropped band tee I found in the junior's section.

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Grabbing my phone and my glass of wine, I saunter across my

apartment towards the balcony. I'm a snob about making my outside spaces comfortable, and I'm already planning a patio makeover for this weekend—a plush lounger, some cafe string lights, plants for the railing. I could have one just for herbs. Basil and dill, maybe some rosemary. I make a note on my phone, using my elbow to slide the glass door shut behind me.

It's so lovely out here. The humidity from the day has finally cut, so now it's just warm. And so blissfully quiet. My music plays as I scroll mindlessly on my phone, slow sipping my chardonnay. I'm a few pages into my latest monster romance when I hear the loud buzzer on my washer go off. Draining the rest of my wine, I go to open the sliding glass door.

Shunk.

It doesn't budge.

"Oh, you gotta be kidding me," I mutter. I tuck my phone under my arm and give the handle a harder pull.

Shunk. Shunk. Shunk.

"Oh, no. Fuck, fuck, fucking fuck!" I hiss, setting both the phone and the empty wine glass down. "Come on, door. Please, don't do this to me," I whine, trying to see if there's something I'm missing, some lever that need lifting or a latch that needs flipping. But no. Nothing. There is literally nothing on this side of the glass except the handle.

"Oh, come *on*!" I snatch up my phone and go quickly through my contacts, looking for the number to the front office. Of course, I haven't plugged it into my damn phone yet!

"This is just perfect," I mutter, opening my internet to do a google search.

I swear to god, when I get myself out of this, I'm going to bed and I'm never waking up again. I jerk the phone up to my ear, waiting as the dial tone plays some shitty elevator music. After what feels like an eternity, an answering service finally connects.

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"Thank you for calling the Silver Shells Maintenance Service. Our

office is currently closed. If this is an emergency, please hang up and dial 911—"

I hang up.

Oh god, I am *not* calling the police to come rescue me! I have a sudden image of a firetruck raising up a ladder to my fourth-floor balcony. A handsome fireman reaches out his hands, ready to lift me over the rail like I'm a kitten stuck in a tree. I'm sure all my new neighbors will enjoy watching me shimmy my bare ass over the balcony into a fireman's ladder-bucket-thingy.

I gasp.

I know my new neighbor!

I glance over the edge of my balcony towards Caleb's unit. Less than two feet of space separates our railings. The angle isn't quite right for me to see inside his unit, but I can tell that a light is on.

"Please, oh please," I mutter, pressing the call button on his contact.

It rings and rings. No answer.

"No," I whine, dropping the phone to both hands to shoot off a text.

RACHEL (11:04PM): Hey Caleb, this is Rachel. Are you home? I see the light is on. Can you come out onto your balcony?

RACHEL (11:04PM): Right now. It's kind of an emergency.

I wait, desperate to see the three little dots flashing at the bottom or—better yet—hear him open his sliding glass door.

Nothing.

RACHEL (11:06PM): Caleb please! I'm stuck out on my balcony!

I keep waiting.

Nothing.

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Oh god, my heart is starting to race with anxiety and now I *really* have to pee!

Going for broke, I take a deep breath and start calling his name. "Caleb Sanford! Hey, Caleb!"

I wait.

"Caaaaaleb!"

Inside his unit, I hear Sy barking.

"Yes, help me, Sy!" I call out like an idiot. "Get daddy's attention for me! CALEB!"

And *whoosh* goes my relief with the sound of his sliding glass door as it opens. Sy hops out, his little black and white head darting between the railing bars as he barks over at me.

"What the—"

"Caleb!" I call again. "Oh, thank god."

"Rachel?" He peeks around the corner at me. He's shirtless, his coppery hair mussed. I can see that his tattoo sleeve goes all the way up his arm, over his shoulder. The rest of him is long and lean, cut with muscle. "What are you—"

"Do you ever check your phone?" I cry, cheeks burning with embarrassment.

He raises a confused brow. "It's in my room. Rachel, what the—"

"I'm locked out," I blurt.

"What?"

"I came out on my balcony, and I shut the door behind me, and apparently it locked!"

He chuckles, dragging a hand through his messy hair. "Oh yeah, Lo should have warned you. Don't shut the door all the way unless you wanna get locked out."

I deadpan at him. "Yeah, gee, thanks. I think I've learned that lesson. Now, can you *help* me?"

He glances around. "Well, did you call the maintenance number?"

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"The office is closed. The auto message said to call 911."

"That's probably your best option. They can unlock your unit and get you free."

I whimper, already moments away from doing the pee dance. "But that'll take *ages*."

He smirks. "You got somewhere fancy to be?"

I freeze.

Of fucking course.

If I can see him standing there in nothing but his shorts, he can see me in my thong and cropped Guns N' Roses tee. I cross my arms over my braless tits. No way is he getting more of a show from me today. He's seen my dildo and now he's seen me in my underwear. He's not getting a glimpse of the girls too.

"I can keep you company if you want," he says with a shrug. "While you wait for the police."

I groan again. The last thing I want is to sit up here, possibly for hours, waiting for the police to force entry into my unit and come free me from this balcony prison. If that happens, they're going to find a sobbing mess of a woman sitting in a puddle of her own pee.

And that's when the world's worst, most genius idea slips into my head. "Or..."

"Or what?" Caleb replies, one elbow leaning on his rail.

I judge the distance. Not even two feet, with more than enough space where both our balcony railings extend out. Easy peasy. Just don't look down. "Or I could just climb over there."

He blinks at me. "The fuck you say? We're on the fourth floor. You fall, you fall to your death, Doc. Splat."

"I'm not going to fall," I huff. "Look, just extend out your arms and we can better judge the distance—"

"No," he barks, taking a step back. "No fuckin' way. I'm not gonna help you ninja crawl your way over here. How would that even help? You'd still be locked out."

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"But you've got a bathroom," I plead. "And if worse comes to worst, maybe I could crash on your couch and maintenance can open the door for me first thing in the morning. That way we don't have to involve the police. *Please*, Caleb—"

"You're fuckin' crazy, Hurricane," he mutters, shaking his head. "I'm not helping you. No is my answer. Don't even ask."

I whimper, hands dropping to my sides. Oh god, I can feel the tears coming. Once the lower lip starts quivering, there's no stopping it. And I'm not a crier. This has just been a ridiculously stressful two days.

"Oh, what is that?" he growls, tone wary.

I sniffle. "Nothing. It's fi-fine."

Oh god, this man is going to *hate* me. Between the way we met and my dildo surprise and now this, I wouldn't blame him if he never speaks to me again. And we have to work together! He was giving me a ride to the arena in the morning.

Now he's standing there like a handsome, bare-chested Hercules, leaning over his railing, looking at me like I'm a three-headed hydra.

"Don't." He shakes his head. "Please don't do that. Don't fuckin' cry. I can't stand when people cry—"

"I can't help it," I snap at him. God, I can't let him watch me fall apart. I duck away from the railing's edge, using our shared wall as a barrier as I fall quietly to pieces.

After a minute, he groans and Sy whimpers. "Come on...Rachel?"

"It's f-fine," I garble. "I'll be fine. Just g-go back inside. I'll call the p-police and wait h-here."

I can hear him muttering to the dog. "God—*fuck*—fine!" he shouts over at me. "Rachel, I'll help you."

I go still. "You will?"

"Yes—fuck," he mutters again. "But if you fall and die, I'm

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telling the police that a crazy woman was trying to break into my apartment."

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, sniffing back my tears. "That's fair," I call over. "Here—take my phone first." I reappear at the balcony's edge, leaning over with my arm outstretched, phone in hand.

He reaches it easily. See? This is totally gonna work. He takes it and slips it in the pocket of his shorts. His mouth is set in a grim line. "How do you wanna do this, Doc?"

I survey the scene. "Umm...I think if I sort of climb up, I can reach out with one hand." I mime as I talk. "Then maybe you can support me as I let go and reach out with the other. Then I'll sort of just jump over, and you reel me in. Thoughts?"

"Yeah, I think this is the stupidest fucking idea ever."

I scowl at him. "Shut up, we're doing it."

"Why can't you just sit over there and wait for the police?"

"Because," I huff, testing out the railing as I shimmy my way up.

"Because why?"

"Because I'm taking back control of my life!" I shout. "In the last 36 hours, I've gone from wallowing in the depths of a depression thinking I didn't win this fellowship to learning that I did." I climb up, using all my yoga balance to cling like a monkey to the bars of my railing.

"I packed up my life, said goodbye to my best friend, moved to a state and a city I don't know, to take a job I'm not sure I can do, with a team I've never met," I go on with a huff, carefully letting go of the wall to reach out my hand towards him.

He's there in an instant, his warm hand wrapping tight around my wrist, providing me balance and support.

"I've survived flight delays and missing bags. I had a stranger fondling my dildo in public—a dildo I totally use, by the way," I add as I fling my other arm out towards him.

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"Shit—*fuck*—" he grunts, his hands going from my wrists to just under my ribs as he takes a death grip hold of me. "Wait —seriously?"

"Yeah, I was lying before," I reply. "And before you ask, yes it vibrates and *yes* it feels amazing. And now we are never going to talk about it again. *Ever*. Do you understand me?"

"*Ungh*—yeah—"

We're both panting as I'm now in a kind of stretched-out downward dog pose, with my feet pressed against the top of my balcony railing and my hands gripping tight to his bare shoulders.

He shifts his hold on me and stills. "Uhh...Doc?"

"Yeah?" I pant, wiggling my toes and doing my best not to look down.

"My hand is umm..."

"Totally grabbing my bare tit?" I finish for him. Because yeah, this crop top is too big, and his hand just slipped right under the bottom hem. He's got a fierce hold on my ribcage, and I can feel his thumb brushing the underside of my boob. "Yeah, I got that Caleb, thanks. Just pull me the fuck over. Ready?"

"Yeah—*shit*—please don't die—"

"Please don't drop me," I echo. "3-2-1-*go*!"

I push off with my toes and his arms snake around me tighter than a vice, pulling me across the void. His skin is hot, and his breath is in my ear, as one arm bands tighter at my shoulders and the other drops down, his strong hand at my waist.

I cry out as my shins whack into his railing, but he gets a hand on my butt and lifts me up and over to safety. He stumbles backwards as I go full koala on him. We're wrapped in an embrace more intimate than what I've shared with some of my former lovers. I don't know where his skin ends and mine begins. We cling to each other, heart's racing, as Sy dances around at our feet.

"Uhh...Doc?" Caleb says after a minute, his breathe warm in my ear.

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I huff a tight laugh. "Your hand is cupping my bare ass? Yeah, I know. Thanks for the play-by-play, Sanford. Why don't you put me down now."

He grunts, loosening his hold on my bare ass cheek. I un-koala myself, sliding down his front with my whole body as he sets me on my feet. We stand there, both still shaking, my hands on his shoulders and his hands on the bare skin of my waist.

There's an energy sparking between us. It makes me nervous. I haven't felt it since—

No, don't go there.

I can't do this again. I can't let my ridiculous notions about vibes and energy drag me down yet another path to heartache. Mystery Boy was a one-time encounter. Earth-shattering sex? Yes. Soul-shattering to leave the next morning? *Hell,* yes.

Caleb is different. This has to be different. I know him and he knows me. We're about to work together. Heck, my contract is already signed. We *do* work together. This is wrong. This is dangerous. This is not happening.

I inch away from him, my body stiff.

"Are you okay?" he murmurs, his hand raising to brush softly along my jaw.

I close my eyes at the gentle touch. "Don't be nice to me," I murmur. "Please—"

He stills. Then his hand is under my chin, tipping it up. "Look at me, Hurricane."

Hurricane? Is that supposed to be me? Why does the nickname make my pulse flutter?

I open my eyes and glance up at him. The light from his apartment is soft, casting half his face in shadow. He's beautiful. Those sharp cheekbones and dark eyes put me in mind of a fae prince, cold and mysterious. Not to mention those pouty, kissable lips.

"Are you okay?" he repeats.

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I nod. Then after a moment, I shake my head.

I don't even know how it happens, but in moments I'm back in his arms, crying against his chest as he holds me, his hand soothing down my back. I cling to him as I let loose all my exhaustion and stress and pain. When nothing is left to feel, only one thought remains.

"You wanna talk about it?" he murmurs.

I let out a soft sigh, my body relaxing against him. "I miss him."

He stiffens slightly. "Miss who? Your boyfriend?"

I shake my head. No. Not my boyfriend. Not my anything.

"Your husband?"

I smile, pushing off his chest. "Nope. Never married."

"Me neither. Brother then?"

I laugh, shaking my head again. "No. He's...no one," I reply, even as my heart says the word I really mean.

Someone.

He's my someone. Somewhere out there, he's being a whole person. And I'm here, afraid to let myself give in to the energy sparking between me and this beautiful man. Who knows, maybe this surly equipment manager is meant to be my *new* someone.

But I'm not ready for new. I'm not ready for any of the changes life has suddenly thrown my way. And yet, I have to find a way to fake it until I make it, because my life is happening right now. I've got the throbbing shins to prove it.

"Come on," Caleb says, offering out his hand. "You're dead on your feet, Doc. Let's get you set up on the sofa, huh? Live to fight another day."

Nodding, I take his hand.

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6

RACHEL

"Ready to go?" Caleb is standing in my doorway holding a travel mug. He's dressed in a Jacksonville Rays tech shirt, a pair of workout pants, and trainers. His coppery brown hair is slightly damp, curling at his nape, and he didn't bother to shave. His five o'clock shadow from yesterday is officially stubble today, and I don't hate it.

"Yeah, just give me a sec," I say, leaving the door open as I dart back in to grab all my stuff off the counter.

I only left his apartment about an hour ago. I spent the night on his couch wearing a pair of his grey sweatpants to hide my bare ass. At some point in the night, Sy joined me. I woke up to my alarm, body sweating, with sixty pounds of dog tangled between my legs.

I slipped out while Caleb was still sleeping and did a barefoot walk of shame down to the leasing office. I was ready and waiting the moment the guy arrived at 7:00AM. He was cool about it, dropping everything to help me get back inside my unit. I barely had time to shower and get dressed before Caleb was knocking on my door, ready to drive me over to the arena.

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"Here," I say, hurrying back over.

He holds out his free hand and I give him my spare key. "What the hell is this?" he mutters, looking down at it like it's a live tarantula. "A little forward don't you think, Hurricane?"

"Ha ha," I say drolly, closing the door behind me. "Look, you're literally the only person I know in this city, okay? We work together and now we share a wall. For now, you're my person. The moment I find someone to relieve you of this heavy responsibility, I'll take the key back, thus sparing you the continued horror of being associated with me."

He frowns, closing his hand around the key. "How do you know I won't use my newfound power for evil?"

I snort, snatching the travel mug out of his hand. Of course, the one thing I forgot at Target last night was coffee. I need a fix more than I need air. I take a sip of his and instantly regret it. "*Blegh*—holy shit, that is so sweet." I shove the travel mug back at him while he laughs.

"No one asked you to try it."

Gross! Now I want sandpaper for my tongue to scrub this taste away. "What kind of psycho drinks peppermint mocha in the middle of summer?"

He just keeps laughing, leading the way towards the stairs.

"I take it back," I call.

He pauses, glancing over his shoulder. "What?"

"A guy who drinks peppermint coffee can't be trusted with my key." I hold out my hand. "Give it back, please."

He just keeps walking. "Too late, Hurricane. It's my key now. And if you think I won't use it to go in there and rearrange your seashell collection whenever I want, then you clearly didn't think this through."

"I hate you," I mutter, dropping my hand to zip my backpack.

He just grunts.

I guess this is our new friend language. Insults and grunts.

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I sling the backpack on my shoulder, following behind him. His movement pulls my focus from my phone. He's got a definite hitch in his step this morning, favoring his left leg. "Hey—are you —you're limping. You okay?"

His shoulders stiffen and he doesn't turn around. "Yeah, m'fine. Knee is just tight."

I purse my lips, watching him work his way down the first set of stairs. My physical therapist alarm dings as I evaluate his posture and gait. He's in pain. Was he limping yesterday? I don't think so...

I gasp. "Oh god, was that from last night? Caleb, did I hurt you? You know we can take the elevator—"

"No," he grunts again. "Leave me alone."

Great, now you've pissed him off.

Apparently, it's going to be one step forward, three steps back with this guy.

We get out to his Jeep and the first thing I notice is that he's got the soft top on it. I'm secretly grateful. I love a windy Jeep ride as much as the next Cali girl, but I was kind of hoping to make a good impression today. And Jeep hair and sex hair make pretty much a perfect circle.

I was ready just in case. My hair is up in a styled high ponytail. Add one more thing to my missing shopping list: contact solution. I'm out, so instead of wearing itchy contacts all day, I had to opt for my glasses. They're cute enough—thick black frames that Tess says make me look like a brunette Elle Woods.

Well, Doctor Elle, because I'm wearing a set of navy scrubs. I'm not sure what the uniform will be, but a doctor can never go wrong with scrubs.

"Any chance we have time to stop for coffee?" I say as we both get in.

"There's coffee at the practice arena," he replies, still acting

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surly. "Usually, a breakfast spread too. It's for players, but they never eat it all, and no one cares when staff picks at it."

As soon as the Jeep starts rolling backwards, my phone dings with a text. Scott Tyler is the newly appointed team doctor for the Rays. We talked on the phone twice the day I won the fellowship. He's chipper and he used the word 'cool' a lot. A major change from stoic Doctor Halla.

DR. TYLER (8:13AM): Welcome to Jax! My kiddo has a dentist appt this am, so I'll be in a bit later. Have Sanford take you to see Vicki. Then shadow Avery til I get in

I purse my lips, glancing over at Caleb. I'm trying to gauge his lingering level of grumpiness. He seems calm enough, sipping his gross coffee with his eyes on the road.

"Doctor Tyler just texted," I say.

No response.

"He's delayed this morning," I go on. "Says you should take me to see Vicki. Who's Vicki?"

"Operations Manager," he replies. "She's a real ball-buster."

"And who is Avery?"

"Head of PT."

I run down the growing list of names and positions in my head. Right, Todd Avery is his name, I think. "And is he a nice guy?"

"I don't work with him much," Caleb replies. "He's tough. Has a bit of an attitude. Guys don't have much to say about him yet. We don't really have any major injuries yet though, so ask me again in a month."

Right, brand new team. New staff. Clean slate. Everyone is untested, not just me.

"Doc Tyler is popular though," he adds. "He's got great energy.

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And the first thing he did was make the dietitians up the guys' daily carb intake. That went over well."

I smirk. It's a clever way to gain loyalty. People don't bite the hand that feeds.

I relax back into my seat. "So, what do you think of the team so far? Do we have high hopes for a good first season?"

He shrugs. "First seasons are always rough. The guys have to figure each other out. They can practice all they want, but the only way forward is to just play the game. They need experience. Real experience playing as a team when it counts."

"Hmm, trial by fire," I say. "Or in this case ice."

"Exactly. You can see the arena now," he adds with a point.

I peer out the front windshield, unable to hide my smile as the unmistakable silhouette of a brand-new arena comes into view.

"They're still finishing construction," he says, needlessly pointing to the pair of cranes. "But the practice center is off to the left over there." He points towards another smaller complex. "The center is finished and all the support spaces, the gyms, the offices. First ten games of the season had to be switched to away so they could finish up the new arena. The travel will be brutal, but the tradeoff is then we'll be home for like a month solid. That pretty much never happens."

I sit back again, fighting the buzzing of nerves rising in my stomach. It feels like the first day of school. "So, tell me about the guys. Any divas I should know about? Bad blood? Feuds?"

He glances over at me with a frown. "Did you do *any* research before taking this job?"

"Nope," I reply cheerily. "No time. I was waitlisted for the Barkley Fellowship, and I only found out I was getting off the bench exactly..." I check the time on my phone. "Yep, 48 hours ago. In that time, I've been a little preoccupied with packing up my entire life, getting stuck in airports, hunting down bags, getting locked out on my own balcony,

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and dealing with your grumpy ass," I add with a side glare. "So no, I can honestly say I don't know a damn thing about the Jacksonville Rays. I can't name you a single player. I didn't even know the team existed until they told me I was moving here. But I'm a quick study."

He huffs a laugh. "Jeez. Talk about your trial by fire."

"Right?" I add with a grin. "So, maybe my new key-wielding wall mate can help a girl out...give me the deets. What's the skinny? What's the haps? The dirt?"

He groans. "Please stop."

"Talk, or I keep going," I tease. "The 411, the gossip, the—"

"Fuck, *stop*," he growls. "God, you're worse than a chihuahua."

"And I haven't even had caffeine yet," I reply with a smile.

He sighs, his hands flexing on the wheel. "The guys are cool. Some have worked together before, like Karlsson and Langley. They're the first-string wingers. They've got a good rhythm. The goalie is dynamite. He was the first guy the Rays signed. Mars Kinnunen. They call him the Bear."

"Oooo, why do they call him the Bear?"

He smirks. "Meet him and find out."

"And defense?" I know enough about hockey to know how important the defensive players are. They typically work in pairs, and some players can go for years skating with the same guy if the chemistry is good.

"Solid," he replies. "More solid than offense. Today they have an exhibition game."

I nod. We're pulling into the training complex now and I lean forward, excitement humming through me.

"My buddy is on the team," Caleb goes on as we drive into the dark parking garage. "He was the first defenseman they signed."

I glance his way, slipping my sunglasses off and trading them for my regular frames. "That's so cool. And now you get to work together?"

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"Well, you asked about divas," he says. "Just know that you've been warned."

"Uh-oh. What's his name?"

"Compton," he replies. "No. 42, Jake Compton. Be sure to give him hell. I guarantee he's earned it."

He pulls into a parking spot and cuts the engine as I laugh. "Okay, will do. Jake Compton is officially on my naughty list."

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7

RACHEL

After securing me a cup of coffee, Caleb takes me up in the elevator to the managers' offices on the fourth floor. As we ride up, my phone dings with an automated message. My two missing bags are currently in route to Jacksonville! Who cares if I'm still feeling nervous? I'm holding a coffee, and by the end of the day I'll have a full wardrobe again.

I take a sip of the liquid heaven as the elevator doors open, revealing a long hallway dotted with doors. Skylights let in bright sunshine and the floor has a cool, custom paint job that makes it look like water. The walls are painted in the Rays colors—a teal base with accents of white, navy, and burnt orange.

Caleb shows me through the first doorway on the left that opens into a small waiting room. There's no receptionist, just a series of four more doors that lead to offices.

"This is the Operations Managers' suite," says Caleb. "Vicki is in here." He knocks on the first door to the right.

"Come in!" a woman's voice calls.

Caleb swings the door open. "Hey, Vic."

"Oh, hi honey."

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I peek around him to see an older black woman in lipstick and pearls wearing a stylish business suit.

"I have your missing doctor," he says.

"Oh, good gracious," Vicki cries, getting up from behind her desk. "Oh, Doctor Price, you come here, honey. I heard all about your nasty flight delays."

I don't even realize my legs are moving before she's got me in a fierce hug, enveloping me in her floral perfume.

"What a way to welcome you to Jacksonville. I swear, it's almost not worth flying anymore."

I laugh, hugging her back. "Yeah, it was brutal. Two of my bags are still missing. Caleb was great though," I add. "He picked me up from the airport and got me settled at the apartment."

She lets me go, giving him a stern look. "Did he behave?"

He rolls his eyes. Apparently, I had his grump persona pegged.

"He bought me tacos," I reply.

"Good boy," says Vicki, patting his cheek as she moves back towards her desk. "Submit your receipt if you need a reimbursement."

He huffs, hands in his pockets. "I think I can spring for a few tacos, Vic." Then he glances at me. "Well, Doc, you good? I gotta..." He gestures with his thumb over his shoulder.

"Of course," I say quickly. "Thanks again, Caleb. Really."

He gives us both a nod and ducks out.

"Well, sit down, honey," says Vicki, shuffling papers on her desk. "We've got a few more things here for you to sign. And I have an update from the dealership. We should have your car ready by this afternoon. They've been playing hardball with me on lease prices. I finally had to sweeten the deal with a few season tickets."

"Oh good," I say with a mix of relief and dread. I hate driving. That's the one drawback to Jacksonville so far. The city is massively spread out, so driving is my only real option.

"And the apartment works for you? No complaints?"

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I still, my cup of coffee halfway to my lips. I haven't decided if I want to share my balcony story with anyone yet. Caleb knowing feels like enough of a humiliation. "Umm…yes, it's perfect."

"She's here?" comes a loud voice from the hallway.

I glance over my shoulder to see a tiny woman with perfectly styled blonde curls rush through the main door of the office suite. She's got bright blue eyes and a wide smile. Like Vicki, she's dressed in business attire, her stylish black heels clicking as she walks right in, dropping her massive bag to the floor. Okay, *she* has fierce Elle Woods energy, not me.

"Are you our new Barkley Fellow?" She's got a thick southern accent. Georgia maybe? Alabama?

I stand, offering out a hand. "Yes, hi. Doctor Rachel Price."

She looks at my hand and laughs. "Oh sweetie, here in the South we hug."

Before I know it, I'm being squeezed for the second time in as many minutes.

She lets me go. "I'm Poppy St. James, head of PR for the Rays. And can I just say that I am *so* excited to have our team participate in the Fellowship program this year? I mean, who doesn't love good press? And when I learned that *you* were going to be our new Fellow? Well, I just about died!" she adds, placing a hand over her heart as she flashes Vicki a smile.

My own smile begins to falter. I think I know where this is going.

"I mean, it's enough that you're gorgeous and *so deeply talented,*" she adds, emphasizing each word. "But then I found out about your family. I mean, nothing goes with hockey quite like rock and roll, right?"

Just wait for it...

"Say, do you think your daddy might be interested in coming out for a game this season?"

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There it is.

My smile is officially fake. But this is the life of a celebrity's daughter. The second people make the connection, I cease to exist. I become merely a conduit through which people seek to reach him.

"Umm, you know, I'm not really sure of his schedule," I hedge.

"What are you two talking about?" says Vicki, clearly confused.

Poppy glances around me. "Oh, you hadn't heard? Our talented new Barkley Fellow has some added star power. Her daddy is Hal Price from The Ferrymen!"

Vicki blinks. "Is that a band?"

Poppy gasps. "A *band*? Vicki, they're only one of the *biggest* rock bands of *all* time! The Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, Led Zeppelin—they're in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame for heaven's sake!" She turns back to me, her hand on my arm. "I swear, when I told my brother, he nearly fell out of his chair."

"That's great," I say, still wearing my patient smile.

"Say, does he ever play the National Anthem? You know, like Hendrix? Oh, wouldn't that be amazing, Vic?" She all but squeals with excitement. "The Ferrymen in our arena! Can you imagine?"

"That would be really great," Vicki replies.

"Yeah, you know, I can ask," I say, knowing this won't end until I say something.

Poppy has her eyes on her phone as she reaches inside the massive purse she dropped by the door. "Sorry, I've got like three press events stacked up this morning and I'm trying to hunt down Claribel. I wanted her to get a few pics of Rachel in action—*oh*—do you mind if I call you Rachel?"

"Poppy honey, *breathe*," says Vicki with a chuckle.

Poppy stands still and closes her eyes. She takes a deep, cleansing breath and opens them again. "Thanks, Vic. I needed that. I'm sorry, I'm just a big ole mess these days. It's all this stress leading up to the first game day."

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"We're all a little on edge," Vicki assures her.

Poppy smiles, stepping forward with a folder in hand. "I promise I'm not always like this. I can be normal. You'll see. Hopefully once the season starts, we'll all find our rhythm."

"Of course," I reply. My esteem for her is rising again. I can appreciate her for being honest. She's being totally neurotic right now, but at least she knows it and she's sorry.

I take the folder from her. "What's this?"

"That's a schedule for some upcoming public relations events," she explains. "With a new team, we can't leave it to just the players to help put the Rays on the map."

I tug out the top paper and scan it. *Holy shit.* It's a blocked schedule going day-by-day for the next two months showing all kinds of events from a meet and greet at a hospital to something next week called Fin Fest. There's hardly a day not accounted for, including some weekends.

"I'm attending all these events?" I say, glancing up at her over my list.

"Yeah, don't you think it'll be great?" she says with a smile. "We've got the coaches hitting the town too, the players, even staff. Like I said, it's all hands on deck. I really hope you're a team player because we mean to win this game."

"Which game?" I say, returning the paper to my folder.

She finally glances up from her phone. "*The* game. The only one that matters." She narrows her eyes at me, lips pursed. "Sports at this level is never just about the sport, Rachel. It's about everything else. Our most important game this year won't be played on the ice. It's about winning the hearts and minds of the people of Jacksonville. We need to let the hockey world see that the Rays are here to play and we're here to stay."

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8

CALEB

If someone told me ten years ago that I would go from being the number three draft pick in the NHL to a glorified blade sharpener, I would have laughed in their face. Hockey is my life. It's always been my life. But *playing* the game, not sitting on the sidelines.

Growing up in Minnesota, I was skating almost as soon as I could walk. I skated my way through high school into a coveted spot as a starting forward for the University of Michigan. My nickname was The Lightning because I was so damn fast. I was the great hope for the Sanford family to make it to the NHL.

And I did...for seven minutes.

Seven minutes and thirteen seconds to be exact. That's how long I was on the ice. One bad check into the boards, one brutally broken knee, one career ended before it even began.

Pittsburgh kept me on their injured list for over a year before it was clear my rehab was only going to restore so much function. I just had too many setbacks—unexpected inflammation, nasty infection, a third surgery. I've still got three screws in there holding it all together.

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In my life before the injury, everything made sense. I knew

exactly what I wanted. I had the drive and the natural talent. I hardly studied in school and still got good grades. If I wanted girls, all I had to do was curl my finger. Parties, drinking, friends—I had it all in the before.

But now I live in the after. The after is a place where I wake up every single day with my knee hurting. The after is a dark place where I'm in my head more than I'm out of it. The after is where the risk of spiraling is always just within reach. Within the span of two years, I went from starting in the NHL with a two-year, multi-million-dollar contract, to waiting tables at a sports bar in Duluth, Minnesota.

It was Jake who saved my life. We grew up playing in the same junior league. Eventually, we both earned starting spots at Michigan. I was the third draft pick our year to join the NHL, he was the thirteenth. We both went to the Penguins.

After the injury, I shut him out like I did everyone else. But he's not the type to let anything or anyone go. I shouldn't have been surprised when he showed up one night during my shift at the bar with a one-way plane ticket in his hand. He'd just been traded to the LA Kings, and he was anxious about moving across the country all alone. He gave me the plane ticket, ordered a burger with fries, and left me a ten-thousand-dollar tip with a note at the bottom of the receipt that said, 'You'll have your own room. Oh, and I signed you up for surfing lessons. You start Monday.'

I didn't think. I just left the bar, packed my life into two bags, and moved across the country into the spare room in his downtown LA apartment. We've never looked back.

Here we are, six years later, and Jake is one of the top-ranked defensemen in the League, notorious for his ability to grind men into the boards. He was one of the first trades Jacksonville made. And he doesn't keep anything from me. I know he's got a five-year contract worth over seven million a year. There was a handsome signing bonus too. Nice enough that he bought a beach house. A

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gorgeous place one block off the water with great views of the ocean.

More importantly, I know he was responsible for getting me this job as Assistant Equipment Manager. He hasn't said anything, and he won't, but I know. This is the first job I've had in the hockey world in six years. It was time to come home. He knew it and so did I.

So here I stand in the narrow hallway outside the practice arena, sharpening Jake's blades—my best friend, my guide through the crazy, confusing world of the after.

I kill the sharpener, giving the blade a closer look. A few of the guys come shuffling behind me in their brand-new practice uniforms. "Hey guys, lookin' good," I call out.

They both grin. They're young guys, both new recruits. Sully follows close behind them, giving me a pat on the shoulder with his gloved hand. No. 19, Josh O'Sullivan, is a twelve-year veteran of the NHL. I fully expect coach to give him the captaincy. He's a great pick—grounded family man, keeps his nose clean with the press, and apparently, he knows his way around a grill.

"Hey, dinner tonight at Rip's," he says as he passes me. "We're celebrating the end of the preseason. Be there!"

I wave him off, moving in the opposite direction towards the equipment manager's room. Jake's was the last set of blades I needed to sharpen this morning. I bring a load of fresh laundry through into the locker room.

"Hey, Sanny," Morrow calls. He's a defenseman too. "Did you hear about Rip's tonight?"

"Yeah, Sully just told me."

"Cool. You comin'?"

"Probably." I toss him his jersey. "A man's gotta eat."

He stuffs his head into the jersey. "Cool. You bringing the DLP?"

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DLP. Domestic life partner. One of the first things the players

did once they got traded to the Rays was start a group chat. Not all the guys are on it. In fact, it's a sore subject for some of the more eager rookies that they aren't considered 'in' enough to be added.

When a couple of the guys found out I was added, they lost their shit. The joke spread like wildfire that I had to be added because I'm Compton's domestic life partner. We don't even live together anymore, but the nickname stuck, and now one or both of us use the DLP excuse all the time to get out of plans.

"No idea," I reply. Come to think of it, I haven't seen him all morning. "Where is he?"

Morrow just shrugs. "Don't know. He wasn't at morning meeting."

He shuffles past me as I slip my phone from my pocket and shoot off a text.

CALEB (10:45AM): Where the fuck are you? Exhibition game starts at 11.

Immediately there are dots at the bottom of my screen.

JAKE (10:45AM): Aww, you miss me, baby? Need something pretty to look at?

I snort, shaking my head. But then my mind flashes to images of a face much prettier than his...a face with dark eyes, long, dark lashes, and pouty lips. A face framed by walnut brown hair and accented with a little gold septum ring. She took it out this morning. It was the first thing I noticed when she opened the door.

Conjuring up the image of Rachel does more. Now it's like I can feel her all over again, pressed up against me so close we were practically sharing one skin. I feel her heartbeat thumping against my own ribs, feel the smoothness of her skin against my hands—her sides, her bare ass.

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Fuck, I almost lost it when I realized she was wearing nothing but a thong, climbing over the balcony like a damn monkey. She's fearless. Crazy. A total hurricane.

I'm not gonna lie, for a moment there I thought she might kiss me. That would have been a huge fucking mistake. After six years of dealing with all my physical and emotional bullshit, I'm still a goddamn mess. I'd be no good for anyone, least of all a coworker with whom I now share a wall.

I raise my phone and snap a picture of J-Lo while he's still got his shirt off. His chest of curly black hair is on full display.

CALEB (10:48AM): Nah, I've got this cuddly bear to keep me warm.

Jake immediately dislikes the message. Moments later my phone pings.

JAKE (10:49AM): If you leave me for J-Lo, I swear I'm gonna walk into oncoming traffic

My phone pings with a photo. It's a closeup of him, hat pulled low over his face. He's scowling. In the background above his head, I can just make out the words on a sign.

CALEB (10:50AM): Why the hell are you at the DMV?

My phone rings and I answer, tucking it under my ear as I start the process of organizing the locker room. It always looks like a tornado blasted through whenever the guys use it.

"Man, don't get me started," Jake mutters.

"What happened?" I nod at Jerry, the other assistant equipment manager. We both get to work straightening things up.

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Jake groans. "Apparently, whichever genius helped me the last time messed up my fuckin' ID. Flipped my birthdate around."

"That sucks."

"Yeah, I think Vicki was ready to cancel my contract if I didn't come get it fixed. She's been hounding me for like two weeks. I just kept forgetting."

"Are you missing this game then?"

"Yeah, we all gotta keep Vic happy, right?"

"Totally," I reply, tossing a used banana peel in the trash.

He groans again. "There's still like a thousand people ahead of me in this line. And hey, you never told me what happened with this new doc. What's her name again?"

The group chat has been blowing up for the last hour as news of Rachel's presence spread. Novy was the first in the chat with a 'whoa, hot doc alert.' Since then, the guys have been playing 'hot doc spotted.' I think based on the last ping she's somewhere over in the PT suite.

"Uhhh…nothing else happened," I say, lying through my teeth.

I told him about the dildo. I don't know why I'm not telling him about the balcony. There was just something about it…her vulnerability at the end. It was funny until it wasn't. I feel protective over her.

"Oh, shit—hey, they just called my number. Gotta go."

"K—hey, are you comin' here today?"

But he hangs up before I even finish the sentence. Asshole. He's always doing that.

"Hey," says Jerry. "What's this I hear about a hot new doc on the block?"

I groan. We're only two hours in to her first day and already the team is buzzing like a hive of damn bees. This can only end in disaster. My plan is to just sit back, grab the popcorn, and watch as she eats them all alive.

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9

RACHEL

"So, everything looks great with your records, Price," says Doctor Tyler. He's a lanky older guy with the body of a marathoner. Silver hair, dark eyes. He never seems to stop smiling. It's a major change from Doctor Halla.

He clicks around on his laptop screen. "You've had a great mix of primary care and PT, which I always love to see. It's been a major juggling act here. As we race towards the start of the season, I find myself in serious need of a deeper bench of clowns."

I laugh. "Well, sir, I can juggle with the best of them."

"Looks that way," he replies.

"Please don't ask me to *actually* juggle anything," I add quickly.

He smiles. "I'm not gonna lie, I think you're a better fit for our team than the first Fellow they assigned. I did some research on Doctor Halla's rehab center and I admire the holistic approach he takes with all his preventative therapies. Healing the body before it breaks. Very forward-thinking. I want that kind of innovation for the Rays."

"Well, whatever I can do to bring that kind of care here, I'm ready," I say.

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He claps his hands together. "Excellent. Well, right off the bat, we've got a couple guys on our injured list. You'll work with them closely, keep them on track towards recovery."

I nod, slipping my tablet from my backpack, ready to take notes.

"You'll be working with Avery this season. But go gently," he cautions. "He likes to think he knows everything...if you know what I mean," he adds with a knowing look.

"Yes, sir."

I've been doing this long enough to read between the lines. And seeing as I just spent an hour with Avery in the rehab center, Tyler's not-so-subtle warning tracks. Avery is a control freak and he'll likely have trouble taking advice from a woman. Maybe I'm wrong, but he's got that vibe.

"All our starting guys are about to go through their last round of physicals," Tyler goes on. "I'd love for you to be in on those," he adds. "You'll be our hip and knee tsar. No player is gonna hit that ice unless he gets *your* approval first."

Nerves flutter in my stomach as I sit forward. "Wow, that's—you haven't even seen me in action yet, sir. You really want to give me power to bench your players?"

"Well, is anything in your records a lie, Price?"

"What? No, of course not—"

"You graduated *summa cum laude* with a degree in kinesiology from USC?"

"Yes—"

"An MD from UCLA specializing in sports medicine, where you completed internships with the LA Lakers and the Galaxy?"

Did he memorize my resume? It feels odd to have it listed out like this. "Yes, but—"

"Most recently you were two years in on a three-year primary care residency program with the Cincinnati Sport Clinic."

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"Yes."

"You were working directly under Doctor Benjamin Halla, one of the best in the biz—don't tell him I said that," he adds in a fake whisper.

I'm smiling now. "Yes, sir."

"And while there, you treated athletes, providing physical therapy, primary care, cortisone injections—you've even clocked hours in the operating room," he adds, clearly impressed.

It's all true, but it makes me sound cooler than I am. The operating room isn't my favorite place to be. I prefer to work on athletes before and after the surgeons take their turn. But Doctor Halla demands a holistic education for all his residents, so I clocked hours observing hip and knee replacement surgeries whether I wanted to or not.

"Based on your records, you've worked with everything from Olympic swimmers to golf pros to—I believe it was *twelve* of the Cincinnati Bengals?"

I sigh, frustrated with myself that I let self-doubt creep in. "Yes, sir."

"Well then, Price, I don't think there's really much else to say," he says with a shrug and that same kindly smile. "You're qualified. Hell, you're *more* than qualified. Our guys are going to be in good hands. And I need everyone pulling their weight. You ready to grab an oar?"

I nod. "Yes, sir. More than ready."

"Perfect. Then let's go. The exhibition game starts at eleven, and I want you to see the guys in action. I'll have Hillary get the players signed up to do physicals with you starting on...oh, let's say Monday? Give you the weekend to settle in. Sound fair enough?"

I smile, standing as he stands. "Yes, sir. More than fair."

He groans. "Yeah, and you can nix the 'sir' nonsense. Call me Scott, call me Tyler, anything but 'sir.' It reminds me too much of my father," he adds with a suppressed shiver.

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I laugh. "Got it. And you can call me, Rachel."

He leans over his desk, offering out his hands again. "Welcome to the Rays, Rachel. Now, let's go meet the team."

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10

RACHEL

The practice arena is buzzing with activity. Tyler takes me through to a restricted section of the stands right on center ice behind the plexiglass. The chill of the ice raises the fine hairs on my arms. A few other people are already seated in this section, tablets and clipboards in hand. We do a quick round of intros, but it's hard to hear over the blasting sound system.

Avery I already know. He's a big guy, built like a linebacker. He keeps his hair shaved close and his brow is furrowed with lines. He's sitting next to a young guy I saw in the PT room earlier. I think he might be an intern. He's super handsome—tall and lanky, with deeply tanned skin dusted with freckles across his face. His eyes are a piercing green and his black hair is thinly locked, pulled away from his face with a sport headband. When he sees us, he gives a smile and a wave at Tyler.

On the far side of the rink, the arena seats are full of excited fans eager to watch the exhibition game. The music thumps through the loudspeakers as the guys skate around.

"Is that the Bear?" I say at Tyler, pointing to the goalie.

Tyler chuckles. "Kinnunen? Heck no. That's Kelso, the third

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string guy. He's fighting it out with Davidson for a bench seat. Trust me, when Kinnunen is on the ice, you'll know."

I spot Caleb, back bent over a guy's skate, jerking a blade loose. He clicks a new one in, giving the guy's ankle a tap. In moments the player hops the barrier and he's back out on the ice.

Caleb glances around, spotting me, and I wave. He gives me a cool guy nod and turns away. I roll my eyes, but in moments my phone dings.

CALEB (11:03AM): How's the first day going, Hot Doc?

I huff a laugh, glancing towards him, but he's gone.

RACHEL (11:03AM): Hot Doc? Seriously? What happened to Hurricane?

The buzzer goes off and all the guys clear the ice.

CALEB (11:04AM): To me, you're Hurricane. To the rest of the guys, you're Hot Doc.

To my horror, my phone pings with screen shots from a group chat. Apparently, the guys have been tracking my whereabouts for the last hour like I'm an escaped cheetah loose in the building. It's beyond embarrassing.

"Oh god," I groan, tapping out a reply.

RACHEL (11:04AM): How much is it gonna cost me to get you to help me squash the Hot Doc nickname?

My phone is quiet for a few minutes, and I settle in with my tablet, ready to take notes as the guys start hitting the ice to the cheers of the fans. It's just an exhibition, so it's Rays on

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Rays. Half the guys are wearing white practice jerseys, half are wearing teal. Kelso, the third string goalie is in a white jersey.

The crowd roars as a new goalie takes to the ice wearing teal and my breath catches. He's massive. The goalie pads already make a regular guy look like Optimus Prime. This man could swallow Kelso whole.

"Thaaaat's Kinnunen," Tyler says with a grin. "Two-time Stanley Cup winner, star of the Finnish Liiga. That's the Bear."

"Yeah, I caught that," I reply. My phone dings but I can't take my eyes off him. How can a man that big play goalie? He can't possibly have the agility needed to move fast enough. Right now, he's ambling towards the goal like an unbothered grizzly, twice as big as the next closest guy.

Kinnunen takes up his place in front of the goal, flipping his helmet up to take a drink of water. It's hard to make out much beyond a blond beard.

"Kinnunen is shortlisted for the Finnish Olympic team," says Tyler. "We've got some scouts coming to town to catch a couple games."

"Cool." I sit forward on the bench. "Any of the other guys Olympic hopefuls this year?"

"Not sure," he replies. "I only know about Kinnunen because reps from the Finnish Ice Hockey Association contacted me wanting his medical records."

"And we can do that?"

"With the player's consent, yes. If he consents, we can send his medical records to his mailman."

I laugh again, checking my phone.

CALEB (11:10AM): All the tea in China, Hurricane.

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I grin, glancing back down at the bench to see Caleb inside