Pucking Strong

A Jacksonville Rays NOVEL



EMILY RATH

Copyrighted Material

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PENGUIN BOOKS

PUCKING STRONG

Emily Rath is a *New York Times* and internationally bestselling author whose chart-topping, sex-positive, queer-inclusive fantasy and romance novels include the Second Sons Regency romances, the Tuonela Duet fantasy novels, and the "why choose" sensation, the Jacksonville Rays Hockey Romances. A former university professor, she holds PhDs in Political Science and Peace Studies. Emily was born in Florida, raised in Kentucky, and now lives in the Pacific Northwest.

Copyrighted Material

ALSO BY EMILY KATH

JACKSONVILLE RAYS SERIES

SPICY HOCKEY ROMANCE

That One Night (#.0.5)
Pucking Around (#1)
Pucking Ever After: Vol I (#1.5)
Pucking Wild (#2)
Pucking Ever After: Vol. 2 (#2.5)
Pucking Sweet (#3)
Pucking Ever After: Vol. #3 (#3.5)
Pucking Strong (#4)

SECOND SONS SERIES

SPICY 'WHY CHOOSE' REGENCY ROMANCE

Beautiful Things (#1)
His Grace, The Duke (#2)
Alcott Hall (#3)

TUONELA DUET

North Is the Night (#1)
South Is the Sea (#2)

STANDALONES

CONTEMPORARY MM OMEGAVERSE

Whiskey & Sin

Copyrighted Material

PUCKING STRONG

EMILY RATH



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK,
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the United States of America by Kensington Books 2025
First published in Great Britain by Penguin Books 2025
001

Copyright © Emily Rath Books, 2025

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom
of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing
an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property
laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling
Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception

Images courtesy of Shutterstock
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–1–405–97120–1

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper

FSC
www.fsc.org
MIX
Paper | Supporting
responsible forestry
FSC® C018179

Copyrighted Material

This is for everyone who has ever been told you're too much. That you feel too much, talk too much, need too much. No, you don't. You're perfect just as you are.

And this is for Aaron. In high school, you asked me if I had a problem with you being gay. I told you I respected you as a friend but disagreed with your lifestyle. Watching your face fall shattered me. Your quiet disappointment screamed so loud. It set me on my path to accepting my own queerness. Please know I regretted my words the moment they were spoken. And know you're perfect too.

Copyrighted Material

Content Warnings

This book contains themes that may be distressing to readers, including death of a family member (off page), traumatic grief/loss, and brief thoughts of suicidal ideation. A child is injured (off page) and experiences physical pain/distress as they heal (on page). A family struggles from the effects of a parent living with dementia. A character briefly suffers from night terrors.

As an interracial gay couple, the main characters encounter homophobia and racism, this includes microaggressions, like dirty looks and rude comments. A main character is demisexual and struggles to give voice to that. As he works through owning this label for himself, he experiences moments of frustration, even self-loathing. More than once, he refers to himself as "broken." With better education, he comes to understand that sexuality is a spectrum, and he accepts himself for who he is.

Aside from the above, this book contains detailed explicit sex scenes that include elements of oral sex, anal sex, rimming, choking, edging, cum play, toy play, impact play, and public sex.

Copyrighted Material

Author's Note

This is the fourth book in the Jacksonville Rays hockey romance series. Book One, *Pucking Around*, is Rachel's story. Book Two, *Pucking Wild*, is Tess's story. Book Three, *Pucking Sweet*, is Poppy's story. At long last, it's time to fall in love with Teddy!

I know Teddy has had a small role to play in the Jax Rays universe so far, but he's always loomed large in my heart. From the first moment I wrote him as that shy intern, I knew I'd be giving him his own book. Sweet Teddy came to me so clearly formed, from his freckled nose to his nervous smile. I just knew I had to give him a happily ever after.

Readers should be warned that this book will have a much slower burn than previous books. I'm not saying there's no spice. Sweet lord in heaven, there is spice in this book. These two are gonna sizzle your fuzzy pink socks off . . . but we have to earn it first. Buckle in for some deliciously slow-burning angst and gut-wrenching pining. Ohmygod, the pining.

You ready? Turn the page, and let's go.

XO,



Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Meet the Rays

PLAYERS

*Compton/Price, Jake (#42): defenseman, captain
Boucher, Michael "Bouch" (#80): forward
DeGraw, Hunter (#1): starting goalie
Fields, Ethan (#94): forward
Gordon, Sam "Flash" (#18): forward
Hanner, Paul "Paulie" (#24): defenseman
Karlsson, Henrik (#17): forward
Langley, Ryan "Langers" (#20): forward, assistant captain
Lindberg, Christian "Lindy" (#38): center
Novikov, Lukas "Novy" (#22): defenseman, assistant captain
Perry, David "DJ" (#13): forward
Tremblay, Robert "Tremors" (#9): forward
Walsh, Cade (#10): forward
West, Connor "Westie" (#25): forward
Woodson, Chris "Woody" (#51): defenseman

COACHES

Andrews, Brody: assistant coach (defense)
Denison, Nick: assistant coach (offense)
Johnson, Harold "Hodge": head coach
Tomlin, Eric: goalie coach

TEAM SUPPORT

Jones, Cody: Assistant equipment manager
*Sanford/Price, Caleb: head equipment manager

MEDICAL SUPPORT

Avery, Todd: former head physical therapist
Brady, Brad: head physical therapist (interim)
Evers, Dustin: head athletic trainer
O'Connor, Teddy: assistant physical therapist
Price, Rachel: head physical therapist (on maternity leave)
Tyler, Scott: primary care physician

Copyrighted Material

OPERATIONS/MANAGEMENT

Francis, Vicki: operations manager
Singh, Arjan: manager of team services
St. James, Poppy: public relations director
Talbot, Mark: team owner
Varma, Roshni: hockey analytics
Weiss, John: general manager

*Jake and Caleb are listed with their unmarried and married names. Ilmari is retired. Colton Morrow is also retired.

STAR SIGNS

Teddy: Pisces (water): imaginative, empathetic, insecure
Henrik: Capricorn (earth): disciplined, responsible, cold

Copyrighted Material

Useful Swedish Words & Phrases

Du är min man | You are my husband
Du är min nu | You are mine now
Du är så vacker | You are so beautiful
Du betyder allt för mig | You mean everything to me
Du gör mig galen | You drive me crazy
Ett rent hjärta | A pure heart
Fan i helvete | Fucking hell
Gud, hjälpe mig | God, help me
Hallongrotta | Swedish thumbprint cookies, usually filled with raspberry jam
Hej snygging | Hey, handsome
Jag älskar dig | I love you
Jag är din och du är min | I am yours and you are mine
Jag behöver hjälp | I need help
Jag saknar Mamma | I miss Mommy
Jag vill ha dig | I want you
Kanelbulle | Cinnamon buns, usually dusted with pärlsocker (pearl sugar)
Min kärlek | My love
Min man | My husband
Mitt allt | My everything
Mitt hjärta | My heart
Mitt liv | My life
Mitt livs kärlek | Love of my life
Morbror | Maternal uncle
Mormor | Maternal grandmother

HELAN GÅR (POPULAR SWEDISH DRINKING SONG)

Helan går
Sjung hopp faderallan lallan lej
Helan går
Sjung hopp faderallan lej
Och den som inte helan tar

Copyrighted Material

Han heller inte halvan får
Helan går
(Drink)
Sjung hopp faderallan lej

Playlist

Crush | Campsite Dream
Money Maker (featuring Pharrell Williams) | Ludacris
Down Bad | Taylor Swift
if you only knew | Alexander Stewart
Turn Me On | Norah Jones
THE LONELIEST | Måneskin
Bleeding Love | Leona Lewis
No Scrubs | TLC
That's What I Like | Bruno Mars
No Plan | Hozier
Lost Without You | Freya Ridings
Unbroken Promise | Erick Baker
feel it all | sød ven
King Of My Heart | Taylor Swift
I Wanna Know (Acoustic) | Will Gittens & Rome Flynn
Beautiful Things | Benson Boone
Somebody Should Kiss You | Teddy Swims
Make It To Me | Sam Smith
I Was Made For Lovin' You | Kiss
The Nearness Of You | Norah Jones

Copyrighted Material

PUCKING STRONG

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material



1

TEDDY

Six Years Ago

Is it possible to lose your job before you even start it? Because if I don't get my coffee in the next *two* fucking seconds, I'm officially gonna be late to my first day of work. It's a busy Monday morning, and this coffee shop is slammed. People are pouring in through both doors like bees into a hive.

"Americano for Evan," shouts a lavender-haired barista.

An insurance salesman–looking guy elbows me as he passes. Cursing under my breath, I step back. In this cramped space, I don't see the dog on the floor behind me. He sure lets me know he's there when I step on his tail and he howls.

"Hey," his owner cries. "Did you just step on my dog?"

I raise both hands. "I'm sorry! I didn't see him, I swear."

The woman and her dog both give me death glares as she tugs him away.

Yeah, I don't think I have what it takes to frequent the Bright Bean. No caffeine jolt is worth this hassle. Groaning, I bounce on the balls of my feet, trying not to check my phone again. I know what time it is. I know exactly how late I am. "Fuck, come on."

One could say this is all my fault. I'm the one who hit snooze twice on my alarm this morning. *I* forgot to stock my mini fridge with canned cold brews. *I* got lost driving in this confusing downtown full of one-ways and detours.

In my defense, I only found out I was selected for this internship, like, two weeks ago. I tried for it back in the spring. All my friends

Copyrighted Material

matched, but I didn't. Imagine my surprise when, months later, I got an email from my advisor saying I matched with an NHL team in Jacksonville, Florida. And—oh, by the way—could I start in two weeks? I didn't even know there was an NHL team in Jacksonville. Turns out this is the Rays' first year in the League.

They had two open internship positions for their brand-new PT program, and I snagged one. But that meant I had less than two weeks to change all my plans. Instead of moving back to my university, I moved into temporary housing at the local Jacksonville community college three days ago. I'm rooming with my friend Colin, who matched with the Jacksonville Jaguars.

"Iced latte for Teddy!"

Rushing forward, I claim my coffee with a hurried "thanks." I clutch the cup in both hands like a dragon with his egg. This isn't just an iced latte. It's an iced oat-milk honey latte with a double shot of espresso and vanilla-sweet-cream cold foam with a drizzle of caramel on top. It's basically an orgasm in a cup.

Elbows out, I barrel my way towards the exit, all but stumbling into the free air. It's a muggy September morning, already eighty degrees. But I was born and raised in the South. I can do heat and humidity all day.

I'm still two blocks away from the practice center. Thank god I'm in amazing shape, because I'm about to Usain Bolt my way down this damn sidewalk. I break into a jog, ducking around a couple headed for the coffee shop. Traffic is busy with everyone going to work. Up and down the street, trucks stand open as workers unload morning deliveries. I slink past a guy walking two corgis, trying to cross the street, but the pedestrian light is already flashing in warning.

Fuck, I'm not gonna make it.

The red hand glows bright, and I'm forced to stop. I'm still one block away. I can see the corner of the building beckoning to me. Huffing for breath, I take a sip of my coffee. The flavors hit my tongue like a sweet, creamy kiss. It's soft and cool, with just a hint of nutty espresso. I let out a contented sigh. "God, that's good."

If I lose my job, at least I'll have this drink to savor.

Copyrighted Material

Waiting for the light to change, I pull my phone from my pocket. My phone has been buzzing nonstop from my family group chat. Not surprising, seeing as I have three sisters. Three *older* sisters. Three nosy, noisy, very needy sisters. They're always in my business. Always offering advice whether I want it or not. But that's family. And I've got a damn good one.

SHAE: Good morning, Teddy!
JAYLA: Happy first day of work!
SHAE: Don't you be late. You're always late.
NATALIE: I wanna see those hot hockey boys. Take pics for us.
JAYLA: Wait, he's working for a hockey team?
SHAE: Where you been, Jay? *laughing emoji*
JAYLA: I thought he was working for the Jags. That's football, right? I got myself a jersey and everything. Show me those season tickets, bay-bay!
NATALIE: NHL is hockey. Not football.
JAYLA: Well, then you've lost my interest *wave emoji*

I smile into my coffee as I scroll through the rest of the messages. Apparently, Jayla now expects me to pay for the Jags jersey she can't return. And Shae wants me to get tickets for her whole family to come to the first home game.

The pedestrian light flashes. "Walk sign, Third Street," the robotic traffic voice chirps.

Slipping my phone back in my pocket, I step off the curb. Then a few things happen all at once. First, my entire life flashes before my fucking eyes as a blue pickup truck blasts through the pedestrian walkway. Slamming on his horn, the driver runs the red light, nearly turning me into mashed potatoes.

I'm only saved by the second thing. A pair of strong arms wrap around my chest from behind and jerks me back just in time. "Look out," says a gruff voice in my ear.

Then I'm falling. All I see is sky as I drop back in slow motion, those firm arms locked around my chest. My perfect cup of coffee goes flying from my hand as I land on my savior. He grunts,

Copyrighted Material

absorbing our impact as he hits the ground first. My coffee lands next to us with a *splat*. I cry out as I watch it leak all over the sidewalk. "My orgasm!"

The hands on me tighten as the man beneath me groans, rolling me to the side.

Oh my god, I just had a near-death experience. I literally almost just died.

My savior shifts out from under me. "Are you alright?"

I blink twice. Holy fuck, this is the most beautiful man I've ever seen. He's young and white. His eyes are a deep blue, almost navy. They're wide with concern now. A wave of dark blond hair sweeps across his brow. His cheeks are bearded, like sand on the beach, all faded yellow, flecked with brown. He speaks, but there's a ringing in my ears. "What?"

"I said, are you alright?" he asks again.

Fuck me, I think he has an accent. Is he European? I sit up, and he drops his hand away. Suddenly, I want to die all over again. He was touching me and now he's not? Make that make sense.

"Should we call an ambulance?" an older lady asks, clutching her chest as she peers down the street.

My beautiful savior has eyes only for me. "No, I think he's alright. Just startled."

Startled feels like the wrong word to describe how I'm feeling right now. God just threw me into the arms of his most perfect creation. I should introduce myself, right? Maybe tattoo his angelic face on my bicep. At the very least, I should offer to pay him for his trouble. I mean, he *did* just save my life. But I'm a starving college kid. My wasted coffee was already an extravagance. I point to where it's pooling on the ground. "You spilled my orgasm."

"What?"

"My coffee," I correct. "It spilled. I think we're sitting in it."

He shrugs. "It's just coffee. Your life is more important, no?" Then he stands, unbothered by the coffee soaking the side of his shirt. "Can you stand?"

I take his hand, and he pulls me to my feet before quickly dropping his hand away. I feel the loss of his touch like the ripping of

Copyrighted Material

a bandage from my skin. I want to step closer. I want him to hold me again. But that would be crazy, right? I don't even know this guy. I'm just a chaotic double Pisces who gets his life saved by a beautiful man and immediately fights the toxic urge to ask, "Your place or mine?"

I look him over now that he's standing. He's taller than me, but I might be a little broader in the shoulders. He has a runner's build, long and lean. Except for his thighs. They're like tree trunks.

Fuck, stop looking at his legs.

And *say* something, Teddy.

Desperate not to scare him away, I opt for a very casual, "Hey, thanks, man."

He nods and turns to leave.

Oh god, I can't bear it. Someone crazy—totally not me—grabs his arm. "Wait."

He pauses.

"I—don't . . ." *Want you to leave*, I finish inside my head. *I don't want to be parted from you. Not yet. It's too soon. We've only just met.* Instead, I find the will to blurt out, "I don't even know your name."

He relaxes a little and smiles. I love how the smile touches his eyes more than his mouth. "It's Henrik." His voice is softer now, like he's talking to a friend.

Henrik.

He's looking at me, waiting. Oh fuck, I'm still holding on to him. "My name is Teddy," I manage to say.

"Teddy," he repeats. "Well . . . have a good day, Teddy."

I let Henrik go, watching as he walks away, lost to me forever.

I remember nothing of the rest of my walk to the Rays' practice center. I'm definitely late, but now I have an ironclad excuse. The intern coordinator's frown disappears the moment I regale her with the harrowing tale. I even earn enough sympathy from HR to be gifted a Rays T-shirt to replace my coffee-stained polo shirt.

Before I know it, I'm in the gym with Doctor Avery, head of

Copyrighted Material

physical therapy. He introduces me to some of the players. There's Jean-Luc Gerard, a big, toothless Canadian everyone affectionately calls "J-Lo." Then there are several young guys. Paulie, maybe? Sam, who is also Flash. Westie. Patrick. Woody—no, Woodson, I think.

Fuck, do *all* these guys have three fucking names? Between learning all their names, nicknames, numbers, and positions, my head is already spinning.

"And this is Josh O'Sullivan," says Doctor Avery. "He's a forward and team captain. The guys all call him Sully."

O'Sullivan offers me his hand. "Great to meet you, bud. You a big fan of hockey?"

"Umm . . ." I don't want to lie to these guys, but the truth is that I don't know the first thing about hockey. We don't get a lot of hockey in Atlanta. I grew up watching football and basketball. In school, I swam and ran track. The only time I watch hockey is during the Winter Olympics.

O'Sullivan sees right through me. "That's okay. We'll make a fan out of you before the season ends."

"Thanks." I flash him a relieved smile. "I'm definitely ready to learn."

Before I can say another word, my breath catches in my chest. Oh my god . . .

"Hey, Karlsson!" O'Sullivan calls with a wave. "Get over here. Meet the new intern."

I can hardly believe it as my sidewalk savior locks eyes with me across the gym. He recognizes me immediately. His gaze dips past my face to my new T-shirt. He's wearing a different shirt too. He crosses the gym over to us.

"Karlsson, meet the new PT intern," says O'Sullivan. "This is—"

"Teddy," Henrik finishes for him. Then he holds out his hand. "We've met."

I take his hand like a greedy, lovestruck fool. Am I smiling? What is my face doing? Fuck, I don't even know. "Henrik," I say on a breath.

His smile flickers as those around us share confused glances. "Call me Karlsson. Everyone does." Dropping my hand, he breaks our cosmic connection . . . and my heart.

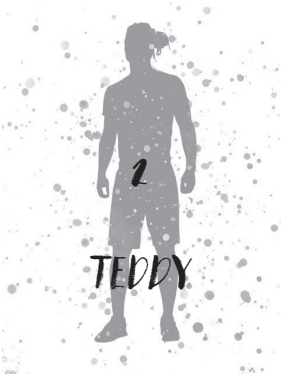
Copyrighted Material

Out on the street, in his arms, he was Henrik to me. That was when we were strangers. *Henrik*. Such a beautiful name. But now, everything is different. We're off the street. We're in his gym, in front of his friends, his teammates. And we're no longer strangers. God help me, I think we're coworkers.

This can't happen. He's an international sports superstar. People wear his number and cheer his name. He can't be Henrik with me. I'm nothing to him, just a lowly college intern. But still, as I watch him walk away, an aching truth settles deep in my soul: I want this man, even as I know I can never have him.

This is going to be the longest fucking year of my life.

Copyrighted Material



The Present

My phone buzzes as the coffee cart barista hands me my latte. "Thanks, Kelly."

"Good to see you again, Teddy," she chimes. "We sure missed you around here."

Smiling, I take a sip of my coffee and check my phone. It's my sister. *Again.* She's been pestering me all morning.

SHAE: Did you update your mailing address? You need to forward your mail.

I groan, quickly shooting her a message back.

TEDDY: You know I'm twenty-six, right? Also, I'm a literal doctor. I could kill you and make it look like an accident.

There's a long pause before she replies.

SHAE: Don't even play. I changed your diapers.

I sigh. Well, it was worth a shot. As the baby and only boy of the family, it's been difficult to shift the impression they all have of me as helpless and hopeless, constantly in need of saving. It's so frustrating. They have to let me grow up sometime.

She's right though. I *do* need to update my mail.

Copyrighted Material

"Well, look what the cat dragged in!"

I spin away from the coffee cart to see Brad Brady crossing the atrium towards me. With his pale skin, square-framed glasses, and Clark Kent haircut, Brady looks like he belongs in a vintage comic bookstore. Instead, he earns a living making grown men cry on a PT table.

"Hey there, Doctor O'Connor." He wraps me in a hug. "It's so great to see you!"

I hold my coffee out to the side, returning his hug with one arm. "You too. It's been, what, four years? How's Dylan?"

"Retired, thank god. He sells motorcycles now."

His husband Dylan is a former MMA fighter. The last time I was in town was to attend their wedding. They're the cutest, odd couple. Brady is this sweet, unassuming comic book nerd. While Dylan is a 6'4" hairy bear, covered in tattoos. He's got a lip ring and gives off total leather daddy vibes. That he's now selling motorcycles feels almost *too* on brand.

Brady gives me a once-over. "Got your java? Ready to go sign some paperwork?"

"Yeah, let's do it."

He leads the way towards the admin wing of the practice center. "It was a stroke of luck you finished your DPT in time. They weren't going to let me hire you back without it."

"Totally," I reply.

I only just finished my doctorate of physical therapy degree in the spring. I always hoped to stay in the pro sports world, but the job market is tight. I snagged an hourly position assisting at a rehab hospital, where I worked with injured kids, and felt lucky to get even that. When Brady called me a week ago, asking if I could send him a reference letter, I literally cried into my lunch.

It turns out Rachel Price is going on maternity leave earlier than expected, and the team needs a few PTs to help fill in the gaps. They offered me a ten-month contract as an assistant rehabilitation therapist. I couldn't say "yes" fast enough. Now I'm here, walking through the hallowed halls of the Rays practice center.

Brady presses his thumb to the elevator button. "I'll take you up to

Copyrighted Material

see Vicki, but then I've gotta head back over to the gym. Come find me when you're done, yeah? I'm sure the guys will be excited to see you."

"Oh, I'm sure there are no guys who even remember me left."

God, I'm such a liar. As if I didn't pull up the team roster the second I got off the phone with him last week. I know exactly who's on the team. I know who I'm dying to see.

Brady leans against the silvery wall of the elevator. "You'd be surprised how many of the guys remember you. Novy's been bugging us to hire you since you left. I told him you needed to finish your degree first, but he didn't seem to care."

I laugh. "God, how is Novy still playing on those busted knees?"

Brady snorts, leading the way out of the elevator. "Are you kidding? They'll have to drag him off the ice and rip that stick from his hands. He's assistant captain now, did you know?"

"I bet the refs love hearing that mouth chirping at them from the bench."

"Eh, he keeps it in check for the most part. He reserves his chirping for the other team . . . and our rookies. Damn near made a kid cry last week."

We turn the corner to find Rachel Price standing in the hallway. Her back is turned away from us, her dark hair tied up in a messy bun. She's chatting with Vicki, the operations manager. I don't think I've ever seen Vicki without that single strand of pearls at her neck . . . or that unamused look on her face. She points down the hall at us, and Rachel turns, waving in welcome. "Teddy, hi!"

"Oh my god—" I bite back my words, but they've already left my mouth. I quickly school my expression, offering her a wide smile.

"Look at me, calling you Teddy," she calls down the hall. "You're Doctor O'Connor now."

"Hey, Doctor Price." My voice is falsely high as I lean in for a hug, trying to avoid squashing her giant belly. "It's great to see you again. You look amazing."

She huffs, patting my back. "Seriously? I practically have my own zip code."

Oh god, she said it, not me. But yes, this woman is massively pregnant.

Copyrighted Material

"No, you look great," I assure her. "You're totally radiant."

I'm full of so much shit right now. I'm sure everyone in this hallway can smell it. Rachel just rolls her eyes as she steps back, brushing both hands over her bump. "That's sweet. But we all know I look like a python that swallowed an exercise ball. It's okay. You can be a little freaked out. It's a lot of belly."

Well, at least she can laugh about it, right?

"It might help to know there are actually two babies in here."

I gasp. "Shut up. Twins? That's so cool. I bet the guys are thrilled."

She smiles. "Yeah. These two are due after the New Year. So, your timing is perfect. With my first two pregnancies, I worked a little longer. Heck, with Jamie, I stayed on staff right up to my due date. But carrying two has been tougher on me, and my guys are being real jerks about me following doctor's orders. So . . ."

"We're thrilled to have you back," says Brady, patting my shoulder. "No one can replace Rachel. But I think, between the two of us, we can keep the place from burning down until she's ready to come back to work."

"Totally," I assure them. "I'm ready to work. And I've really missed you guys," I can't help but add. "There's something special about the Rays. It feels crazy to say it, because I was only an intern, but it sort of feels like coming home, you know?"

Rachel and Brady beam at me. "We do," she assures me. "We're glad you're here, Teddy."

"Once a Ray, always a Ray," Brady adds.

"Well, he's not a Ray until he signs my paperwork," says Vicki. "Come with me, honey. We'll see what we can do about getting you an access pass today."

"We'll see you over in the gym!" Rachel calls with a wave.

I wave back as the door shuts.

It takes me over an hour to fill out all Vicki's paperwork, but I leave her office with a new ID card, a facility access pass, and a coupon for two free drinks from the coffee cart. I make my way over

Copyrighted Material

to the crowded gym. The first smiling face I see is Ryan Langley, jogging on a treadmill. He gives me a wave. "Teddy, hey!"

I wave back, unable to hide my smile.

In moments, there are calls of welcome as players abandon their workouts to come say hello. Woody and Paulie are defensemen who were rookies back when I was an intern. I think they're both married now. Paulie has at least one kid. His wife is a supermodel or something. I saw the news of their marriage in a tabloid.

"I'm a little sweaty," Langley warns, his arms spread wide as he swoops in for a hug.

"'Sfine," I grunt as he squeezes me.

"Great to see you," he adds, patting me roughly on the back.

"You too. How's the family?"

"Thriving, thanks. Emma is five. She starts kindergarten this year."

"Crazy."

He chuckles. "Right? We actually leave first thing in the morning for Aruba."

"Cool."

"Yeah, the girls are excited. Last little summer trip before the season starts, you know?"

I just smile and nod. I watched his whole whirlwind romance take place six years ago. I was there playing soccer on the beach the day he first met his wife, Tess. I watched them fall in love. Later, Tess and I bonded over an awkward lunch. I was the starving college kid, just there for the food, and she was Doctor Price's friend, secretly sleeping with a player. I caught her giving Langers "fuck me" eyes, and that was that. Instant friendship. We've sent the occasional texts to check in over the years.

"I can't wait to see Tess again—*oof*—" All the air leaves my chest as someone slams into me from behind. A pair of thick arms wrap around me, squeezing me tight. I look down to see they're covered in colorful tattoos. I grin. "Hey, Novy."

His voice is muffled, his sweaty face pressed in at my neck. "I'm so happy you're back."

I pat his forearm. "Good to see you too, Nov."

Copyrighted Material

He lets me go and spins me around, one hand tight on my shoulder. "See this PT?" he shouts to the crowded gym. "This is my PT. You got that, assholes? I don't make the rules, but I *will* enforce them."

Some of the older guys laugh, while the rookies look ready to take his word as gospel. I pat his hand on my shoulder. "Sorry to sour this little reunion, but I'm actually gonna be working with the injured-list guys. If you're not injured, I can't promise any of my magic massages."

Novy drops his hand away. "The fuck you say?" He looks around the gym. "Who do we have to talk to? Brady? Don't even worry, bud. I'll have this settled in five minutes—"

"*No*—" I pull on his shirt to keep him from storming off. "Come on, man. Don't get me in trouble on day freaking one."

He settles down, still frowning.

"Who even is this guy?" one of the new faces asks.

Novy rounds on him. "This *guy*? How 'bout you watch your fucking tone, Bouch. This is Doctor Teddy O'Connor. We call him Teddy of the Golden Hands, because he's fucking magical. He gives the best damn leg massages I've ever had."

Langley and a few of the other older guys laugh. "I'm gonna tell Morrow you said that," Langley teases.

Novy shows no fear. "Go ahead. Hell, I'll tell him myself. I'll text him right now. That'll make my fucking night."

He pulls out his phone, and my eyes go wide. Fuck me, I am not getting in the middle of those two again. Back when Morrow was a player, he got a little territorial over how much Novy liked my massages. Ever seen a jaguar hunt a caiman while a helpless capybara watches? Yeah, I was the capybara. "Ohgod—don't," I hiss, slapping at his phone.

"It's fine." He body checks me with his shoulder as his thumbs type. "Besides, it's my ass, not yours."

I groan.

"Hey! Are you guys bothering the good doctor?"

We all turn to see Brady walking over between the row of treadmills. My heart fucking stops when I see who is walking at his side. Dressed in a Rays tech shirt and a pair of athletic shorts, Henrik

Copyrighted Material

Karlsson looks every inch as beautiful as the first time I saw him. He's fucking magnetic, with those navy-blue eyes and the soft sweep of sandy-blond hair over his brow. His beard is shorter now, little more than stubble. God, he looks so fucking good.

I swallow, trying to stifle the annoying fluttering that's currently happening in my chest. This is so embarrassing. It's been six years. And it's not like we were ever . . . *anything*. That's the worst part about all this. We were literally nothing. For the whole year I interned for the Rays, I tried to give him as wide a berth as possible, content to torture myself with secret, longing glances from across gyms and hotel breakfast buffets.

I was too much of a coward to ever approach him casually. And when I was forced to work with him as part of my job, I was usually so tongue-tied, I couldn't even speak. I'd squeak out things like, "Pressure okay?" while I was massaging his calves. And once, while wrapping an ice pack on his shoulder, I swear to god, I said the words, "All set, chilly dog."

Seriously, somewhere inside this building, they're already digging a hole for me. When my shame builds high enough, I'll just lower myself down, and they can bury me. Henrik Karlsson is as untouchable to me now as he was then. Maybe even more so because now I have more to lose. I have it on good authority that Rachel may not be coming back to work after she has those babies. If I play my cards right, this position could become permanent. It's my literal dream job.

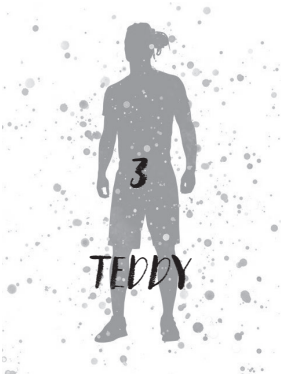
Whatever hand of fate dealt me these cards, I'm in the door. I have the job. And I mean to keep it. That can't happen if I'm too busy torturing myself, daydreaming over a man who has never looked twice at me. A man I'm not even sure is gay. A man who likely doesn't remember my goddamn name.

No, this is over. It's done. Henrik Karlsson is off limits. Frankly, I'm not interested. Do you hear me, Universe? There's absolutely nothing about him that would ever—

"Hey, Teddy." He smiles that smile that only reaches his eyes. God, I haven't seen that smile in six long years. "Good to see you again."

Well, fuck me. Apparently, the love of my life remembers my name.

Copyrighted Material



3

TEDDY

"Oh, yeah . . . that's it. That's the fucking spot, right there. Don't stop."

I still my thumbs on the back of Novy's calf.

"Hey, I said don't stop—"

"What was our *one* rule?" I say over him.

He pushes up on his elbows to look at me. "Oh, come on. Those weren't sex sounds. I was just talking."

"Yeah, in a weird, growly sex voice."

Chuckling, he flops back onto his stomach. "My sex voice isn't weird."

"I beg to differ."

All around us, the other guys head to and from the showers. DeGraw, the starting goalie, is up on another table getting stretched out.

"I told you'd I'd give you a leg massage," I go on. "It's my first day back, and I'm willing to be a team player. What I won't do is go and get myself punched in the head by your jealous partner because *you* can't control your smart mouth. Now, am I finishing this leg in silence? Or are you limping your old ass to the showers on those rusty, crusty joints you call knees?"

Novy glares at me. "I think I liked you better as the intern."

I cross my arms. "Right. Well, I think we're done here—"

"No!" He grabs the hem of my T-shirt as I try to back away. "Come on, Doc, *please*. I'll be so good for you. I won't say another word, I swear."

Copyrighted Material

I grimace. "See, it still feels like you're talking about sex—"

"Well, what can I do?" He sits up. "You wanna gag me so I can't talk? Would that make you more comfortable?"

I narrow my eyes. "You hear it, right? When you say the words, you're hearing it?"

"The seagulls on the beach can hear it," says DeGraw. He's a young Australian guy, new to the team this year. He's super handsome, with a tanned Mediterranean complexion, whiskey-brown eyes, and a mop of unruly, dark brown curls.

"No one asked you," Novy snaps at him.

I sigh. "Look, we'll try again another day, okay?"

"Nooo," he whines.

"That wasn't your last massage. But I do have to do my actual job. And I told you I'm working with the injured list this year. So, unless you want me to break that leg . . ." I leave the threat hanging in the air.

"Don't fucking tempt me," he mutters.

"I'll see you later, okay?" I turn to leave and nearly crash right into Karlsson. He's wearing nothing but a little white towel around his waist, his hair still dripping wet from the shower. His chest and arms glisten with droplets, showing off his cut muscles. As he steps around me, I get hit with a scent cloud of his body wash. Oh, fuck me, he smells so good. Like the beach on a winter morning, all windswept and fresh, with just a hint of sea salt.

"Excuse me," he says.

"Yep. All good. Not a problem," I ramble, backing away from him with my hands raised like he's walking poison ivy.

He ignores my antics, making his way over to his stall in the changing room. Most of the guys have already cleared out. A few linger, taking their time getting dressed or messing around on their phones. Rock music plays softly from the speakers, something classic with long guitar riffs.

I give Karlsson his privacy while he changes, only glancing over my shoulder when I'm sure he must be safely dressed. He sits on the bench in a fresh pair of shorts and no shirt. Unlike most of these hockey guys, he has no ink. Not even the Olympic rings. And he

Copyrighted Material

played for Sweden in the last Winter Olympics. They took home the silver medal.

I might have watched a few games.

Or every game.

"Hey, Teddy. Put these on the shelf for me, bud?"

Jolting, I turn to see the head equipment manager, Caleb Price, standing by a laundry cart. My god, six years and the man hasn't aged a day. He still looks like he's hiding a broody secret behind his dark eyes. I may have had a crush on him for a week or so back when I was an intern . . . before I clocked his unrequited yearning for Jake. He holds out a stack of white towels, nodding to the empty shelf behind me. "Can you reach?"

I blink. "What? Oh—yeah, of course." I take the towels and place them on the shelf.

"So, you're back then?"

"Yeah, assistant rehabilitation therapist. They gave me a ten-month contract. You know, while Rachel goes on maternity leave."

He raises a brow. "Maternity leave, huh? Already?"

Shit, did I just step in something here? "Yeah, uhh . . . you didn't know?"

He just shrugs, handing me another stack. "My wife knows her own limits. I'm done trying to get her to slow the fuck down."

Before I can respond, a bone-chilling cry nearly has me dropping the last stack of towels. I search for the source of the sound, and my gaze locks on Karlsson across the locker room. The other guys quickly take notice too. There's a flurry of confusion as someone mutes the rock music.

"Karlsson?"

"Fuck, what happened, bud?"

He lets out a wail that pierces my very soul. His expression crumbles as the phone drops from his hand, clattering to the floor. Then he falls forward off the bench, catching himself on the floor with his hands, shoulders wracked with sobs.

Fumbling the towels into the laundry cart, I cross the room to his side.

"Henrik, what happened?" Paulie asks again.

Copyrighted Material

"You sick, man?"

"You hurt?"

"Everyone, get back," I shout, dropping to my knees.

The guys all step back, casting worried looks and shrugs at each other.

I place a hand on Karlsson's shoulder. "Hey, can you tell me what happened?"

He lets out a grief-stricken cry and a string of words in Swedish I can't understand. Then his arms are around me, face pressed to my shoulder. All I can do is hold him, my hands splayed across the warm skin of his back.

Caleb stands sentinel at my shoulder. "Does anyone know what the hell happened? Did he say anything?"

"Nah, man."

"I think he was on the phone," someone says.

Woody steps up next to Caleb. "You know Karlsson, Cay. He never says a word about anything."

The new forward—I think his name might be Tremblay—picks up Karlsson's phone. "Hey, he was listening to a voicemail," he announces to the room. He holds the phone up to his ear. After a moment, he frowns. "The guy's talking in Swedish. I can't understand him."

There's a flurry of talk before a tall blond steps up, holding out his hand. "Give it to me." I recognize him from the night I haunted the team roster. His name is Christian Lindberg. They just traded him in from the Golden Knights. Like Karlsson, he's a forward. And he's Swedish.

He puts the phone to his ear. As I watch, his expression changes, shifting from curiosity, to concern, to horror. Slowly, he lowers the phone, muttering something in Swedish that sounds like a curse.

"Well?" Caleb presses. "What happened?"

Lindberg locks eyes with me. I already know the news is bad. Feeling protective of Karlsson, I splay my hands wider across him as I try to cover him. But I can't keep him safe from this. The damage is already done. All we can do now is try to help him pick up the pieces.

Copyrighted Material

"The voicemail is from a hospital in Stockholm," Lindberg announces.

Paulie steps in closer. "What happened?"

Lindberg's gaze is solemn as he looks down at Karlsson. "There was a car accident last night. His niece is in critical condition."

"Oh, shit," someone mutters.

"Fuck, man. I hope she's okay," says another.

But I'm still looking at Lindberg, studying the somber expression on his face. "There's more."

He looks from Karlsson to me. Then he nods.

"Just say it," I murmur.

Lindberg holds my gaze, tears rimming his eyes. "His sister is dead."

Copyrighted Material



I feel numb. Nothing feels real. Not the chair I'm sitting in. Not the glass of water someone put in my hand. Not the man sitting across the desk from me. His mouth is moving. He's speaking words in a language I know, but I can't will myself to care.

Petra is dead. My only sister. My dearest friend.

I think I'm in shock. Medically, I believe this is shock. I've felt it once before. I was seven years old, ice skating on my family's lake in northern Sweden. The ice cracked, and I dropped straight through. The water was so cold, it stabbed the air from my chest. A stream of panicked bubbles spewed from my mouth as I sank.

My saving grace was my scarf, hand-knit by my mother. Petra managed to grab the end, tightening the knot our mother had tied at my neck like a noose. I thrashed in the dark water, my feet trapped in my heavy ice skates. From the surface, Petra stretched flat on her belly and pulled me up, testing the strength of the knot with everything she had.

A scarf saved my life that day. A scarf and my fearless sister.

Afterwards, I sat before the wood-burning stove in our old cabin, wrapped in quilts, body aching with cold. Our parents stood over me, quietly debating whether to take me to the hospital. I couldn't speak. I could hardly move. I was frozen with shock.

"Karlsson?" A gentle hand squeezes my shoulder.

I glance up, remembering where I am. I'm not seven years old, sitting before the wood-burning stove. Petra doesn't sit at my side.

Copyrighted Material

No, inexplicably, it's Teddy O'Connor who sits next to me, his face full of concern.

I've always held a fondness for Teddy, ever since our curious meeting at the crosswalk all those years ago. It was a surprise when he showed up in our gym this morning, still so nervous and tongue-tied. He's tall and lean. His fair brown skin is dusted with freckles over his cheeks and nose. More than his kind smile, I've always noted his hair. He wears it in long, thin locs. At the moment, a spray of end pieces sticks out from the large knot, like the feathers of a bird's crown. His hair is bold and extravagant, so at odds with his generally meek demeanor. And yet, it fits him.

I get the feeling he only acts meek and tongue-tied around me. I've seen him with the others. He laughs and jokes. Few people can put Lukas Novikov in his place, but Teddy does. I'm not surprised he's different around me. I have that effect on people. They're made uneasy by my long silences and my general awkwardness. I'm certain I must make Teddy uncomfortable.

But in this moment, his hold on me is steady, tethering me to this room and this moment.

"We have to decide what we're doing here," says John Weiss from across the desk. As the new general manager of the Rays, he always wants a plan. "Karlsson, what do you need from us?"

"I have to go to Sweden."

Arjan Singh, the team's services manager, stands by the desk, brow furrowed with worry. "We can get you on a flight tomorrow."

"But we're less than two weeks out from the start of training camp," says Weiss. "Will you need a leave of absence to deal with this, Karlsson?"

I just stare at the glass of water in my hand.

"Karlsson?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Lindberg said his niece is still in critical condition," Teddy explains. He turns to me, those hazel eyes full of such worry. "How old is she?"

I swallow, feeling numb. "Five."

Every face in the room falls.

Copyrighted Material

God, help me. Does Karolina know her mother is dead? Who told her? She's an ocean away, lying in a hospital in pain. The poor little lamb.

"Henrik, honey, I'm so sorry." Doctor Price stands behind my chair. Next to her is her husband, Jake, my team captain.

"Will anyone be there with her?" asks Teddy. "Her father, maybe? Can you meet him at the hospital? Or what about grandparents?"

"No father," I reply. "And my parents are elderly and in poor health. It's difficult for Mom to travel." I stand from my chair, setting the glass of water untouched on the desk. "It has to be me. There are arrangements to be made for my niece."

Jake searches my face. "Are you her guardian now? Will you bring her back with you?"

We're skating perilously close to me saying out loud that my sister is dead, and I'm not ready. I clear my throat. "I must contact the hospital first to better understand her injuries. If she can't travel, that will complicate matters. But, yes, I'm all she has left."

Tears in his eyes, he gives a curt nod. "Then she needs to be here. Go get her, Henrik."

Doctor Price takes my hand in both of hers. "Let me send you over on my family's plane. That way, even if she's injured, so long as she's stable enough to fly, you can bring her home."

Jake nods again. "That's a great idea, babe. Go call Hal."

"I couldn't ask that of you—"

"I'm offering," she says over me. "I'll go call my dad right now. We can have the plane here by tonight. You'll be in Stockholm by tomorrow morning."

"It's a good plan," says Singh. "And it's generous of you, Rachel."

"It's literally the least I can do," she replies, pulling her phone from her pocket. "We'll have you at Karolina's side in eighteen hours." She steps from the room, her phone already to her ear.

"What if you need help getting her loaded on and off the plane?" asks Weiss. "She could be confined to a hospital bed or be on crutches. Can you handle that on your own, Karlsson? Would you prefer we arrange a proper medical transport?" He's still thinking through all the contingencies. I'm glad someone is. I'm certainly in no fit state.

Copyrighted Material

"Is there no one we can send along with him?" says Jake.

Weiss shakes his head. "Not ten days out from the start of training camp."

This upsets Jake and the three men argue, all talking over each other about schedules and priorities until a new voice enters the fray.

"Hey, send me."

We all turn to look at Teddy.

"What did you say?" asks Weiss.

Teddy shifts nervously in his chair. "Uhh . . . yeah. Well, I was just gonna say that I haven't *technically* started yet, right? I mean, I filled out my paperwork, and I gave Novy half a leg massage today. I'm covering for Rachel when she goes on leave." He turns to Jake. "Do you think she'd be cool staying on for one more week if I go help Karlsson?"

"She'd be totally cool with it," Jake replies, relief evident in his tone.

"I can't ask that of you," I say.

Teddy just shrugs. "I've got the qualifications. Injury rehabilitation is my jam. And I've worked with kids before. A lot, actually." His smile falls as he holds my gaze. "I can help, Karlsson . . . if you'll have me."

It would be easier to know I have support in this. I don't even know what I'm walking into. All I know is that Petra is dead and Karolina is injured. I tried calling the hospital back, but they said her doctor was in surgery. My phone sits heavy in my pocket as I wait for it to ring. Fighting the emotions threatening to tear me open, I just nod.

"Perfect," says Jake. "It's settled."

At that moment, Rachel steps back into the room. "What's settled?"

"Teddy is going with Henrik to Sweden. And you're covering for him until they get back."

She sighs. "Oh, that's perfect. I hated the thought of you going alone, Karlsson. Teddy, you're a treasure."

"It's nothing."

Standing, I turn and offer him my hand. "It's not nothing to me. I'll not forget this kindness, Teddy."

Copyrighted Material

He stares down at my hand for a moment before he shakes it. "Anything for the team, right?" But then he drops it, eyes wide. "Oh, shit."

"What?"

"I gotta go make sure my passport isn't expired!"

Copyrighted Material



5

TEDDY

What the hell am I doing? Oh god, I need to have my head examined. I signed a contract for my dream job today, and then *two* seconds later I threw myself at the world's most unobtainable man. Now, instead of getting ready for a busy week at my new job, I'm standing on the tarmac at the Jacksonville airport, staring up at Hal Price's private jet. I watch as Karlsson scales the steps ahead of me. After shaking hands with the flight attendant, he ducks inside the plane.

The U.S. customs official flashes his little light on my passport. "And what is the nature of your visit to Sweden?"

"Umm . . . business?"

His bushy mustache twitches as he frowns. "You're doing business in Sweden?"

"Well, it feels weird to say 'pleasure.' It's definitely not a vacation. We're going for family business, I guess. Karlsson's sister died. We have to get his niece from the hospital. I mean—are you—" I point at his flashlight and my passport. "You're not even writing any of this down, so does it really matter?"

"Why don't you let me ask the questions? Does that work for you?"

"Yep. All good." I stuff my hands in my pockets, rocking on the balls of my feet.

"When do you intend to return to the United States?"

Copyrighted Material

"Honestly, I don't know. Like, a week from now, maybe? What was Karlsson's answer? I'm sort of just following his lead here."

"You're leaving the country, and you don't know when you'll return?"

Fuck, I'm going to prison.

"We're coming back in a week," I say again. "And I swear, I don't even have drugs or anything. And I won't get any drugs in Stockholm," I add, panic rising.

He just keeps staring at me. "Why would you even say that to me?"

I groan. "Look, I'm sorry—I'm just really nervous, I think."

"Do you have reason to be nervous?"

Jesus, I didn't know boarding this flight would require a mandatory therapy session. "Well, yeah, I mean, I guess I tend to make a lot of rash decisions. Classic Teddy, you know?"

"I don't—"

"Well, I can't just let a thing lie," I say over him. "I obsess, and I fixate, and I fantasize. I drive myself fucking crazy. And then I do something that's *too* big, you know? This is one of those big things. I just have this feeling that I'm about to get on this plane and my whole life is gonna change. Do you ever have those moments, Julio? Moments when you just *know* everything is going to be different?"

He casually flips through the blank pages of my passport. "No."

"Well, I'm having one of those moments right now. Because a week ago, I was eating a gas station chicken Caesar salad wrap on my lunch break. Now, I'm getting on rock-and-roll legend Hal Price's private jet to help negotiate the international medical transfer of a world-famous hockey player's injured niece. The fact that I'm head over heels in love with said hockey player is by the by, because his sister just died. Do you have any sisters, Julio?"

"No."

"Well, I have three sisters. And if I lost one, I'd be a total fucking train wreck. So no, this isn't about my insanely inappropriate crush, okay? This is about Karlsson and his sweet little niece. She's lying in a hospital, alone and scared. So, can you please just sign my passport, or stamp it, or do whatever the fuck it is that you do so I can get on Hal Price's freaking plane and—"

Copyrighted Material

"Have a good flight." He hands me back my passport. "Don't bring back any drugs."

I stuff my passport into the front pocket of my backpack. "I won't. I swear to god, I'm so freaking clean."

"Good. Hope the little girl is okay. And good luck with the insanely inappropriate crush." With a chuckle, he steps aside, clearing the way for me to board the plane.

This fucking guy. He was winding me up on purpose. Not giving him a second to change his mind, I grab my duffel bag and launch up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I get to the top, where a flight attendant is waiting with a tray of drinks. "Good evening, Doctor O'Connor. Would you like an orange juice or a glass of champagne?"

Oh god, I can't be trusted to put alcohol in my body right now. And the sugar in orange juice might just send me through the emergency exit. "Can I just get a water?"

"Of course," she replies with a smile. "If you'd like to find your seat, we'll begin our departure."

I step onto the plane and walk through the galley. "Whoa."

The luxe interior is all creamy leather and faux wood paneling. Soft jazz music plays through the speakers. Karlsson is seated about a third of the way back in a club chair, phone in hand, hat pulled low, hiding his eyes.

I glance around, unsure of where to sit. There's another club chair directly across from him, but maybe he wants his space. I could sit up here at the front, but that feels a little awkward too. I don't want him staring at the back of my head for the whole flight. I guess I could keep going to the back. Maybe there's a bed or something. I could stretch out, get a little sleep.

The flight attendant makes the decision for me, stepping past with water on a tray. She sets the glass down on the little table next to the open club chair. "Would you like me to take your bag, Doctor O'Connor?"

"Sure." I hand my duffel bag to her, and she makes it disappear into a bin. I take my seat. Dropping my backpack at my feet, I glance over at Karlsson. "Did you hear back from the hospital?"

Copyrighted Material

"I did."

"And Karolina?"

"They had to take her into surgery to set a bone in her leg."

"Shit. Well, did they say what happened yet?"

"From what the police have gathered, their car was hit from the side," he explains. "It was a young driver. Apparently, he walked away without a scratch. Meanwhile, Karolina has crush injuries to her left side. And my sister—" He bites back the words, tugging the bill of his hat lower. He doesn't want to say it, and I won't make him say it. When he's ready, maybe someday we can talk about her.

"But Karolina . . . they think she'll make a full recovery?"

He nods.

"Karlsson, that's good. Broken bones suck. There's no way around that. But broken bones heal. Just means she gets to spend a couple months being pampered with ice cream and movie marathons. I bet she'll be back on her feet in no time."

He nods again. After a moment, he sets his phone aside. "Teddy, before we go, I just . . . I want to thank you again."

"Hey, don't even worry about it—"

"No, I want to." His navy-blue eyes look so forlorn. "I'm not always good at expressing myself. And I know you haven't always been comfortable around me . . ."

Shit. Does he know? Has he known all this time? Oh god, this is so fucking embarrassing. My mind races as I try to think of what to say. "Karlsson, look—"

"You don't have to bother denying it," he goes on. "It's plain to see how uncomfortable I make you. I'm not the easiest person to talk to . . . or work with. But I will endeavor to do better. Just know this is a difficult time for me, so if I struggle to perform the niceties of social interactions—"

"Hey." I lean across the aisle, placing my hand on his arm. I see the pain in his eyes, the grief and fatigue. "You don't owe me an explanation. And you sure as hell don't owe me any kind of apology. There's nothing wrong with you, Karlsson. I'm weird because *I'm* weird, not because you're weird. You're perfect, okay? You just be you, and I'll be me, and we'll just be weird and awkward together. Sound good?"

He nods.

Copyrighted Material

I smile, dropping my hand away. "So, tell me about Sweden. Do you think we'll see any polar bears?" He chuckles and my chest puffs with pride. I did that. I distracted him and put that smile on his face. See? I'm helping already.

"No, we won't see any polar bears in Stockholm."

I grin, leaning over in my seat. "But, I mean, never say never, right? There *are* polar bears in Sweden, right?"

"Not since the last ice age."

"That actually makes me kinda sad."

He's quiet for a moment, his lips pursed as he considers. "Yeah. Me too."

Copyrighted Material



Our plane lands in Stockholm at ten in the morning. By eleven, Teddy and I are walking through the main doors of Saint Ingegerd Hospital. I suppose I must be grateful the ambulance brought Karolina here. They have a top-ranked trauma center. Reading the signs in Swedish, I lead the way towards the reception desk.

Teddy walks silently at my side. Since we landed, he's been quiet, which I appreciate. Not that I mind his conversation generally, but my thoughts are all scrambled, my emotions raw. I feel untethered, floating through the ether. Everything is darkness. A sea of grief with limitless shores stretches on inside me.

Surely some of this is just my fatigue. I should have slept on the plane. Teddy encouraged me to try, but my mind wouldn't shut off. Now, my heart is in my throat, my palms are sweating, and I'm trying not to think about it. But I can't help myself . . .

Somewhere in this hospital, my sister lies dead.

Suddenly, Teddy's hand is at my shoulder, his voice soft. "Hey, you okay? You need a minute?"

I blink, glancing around. I didn't even realize I'd stopped walking. We're standing in the middle of the hallway, still feet away from the reception desk.

"Good morning," the receptionist chimes in Swedish. "Welcome to Saint Ingegerd Hospital. How can I help direct you this morning?"

Shrugging away from Teddy, I step forward. "I'm here to see a

Copyrighted Material

patient. Karolina Karlsson. I was told she's in the pediatric trauma center."

The blonde nurse turns to her computer screen, clicking on the keyboard. After a moment, she looks up. "As a pediatric patient, she has a list of approved visitors. May I please see your identification?"

I pull my Swedish passport from my pocket and hand it to her. "I have a friend with me. Can you approve him as a visitor?"

"I'll need to see his identification too."

I glance over my shoulder at Teddy. "Give her your passport."

He jolts at my sudden use of English and pats down his pockets before pulling out his passport. "Yeah, here you go."

"Thank you," the nurse says in English. After a moment of typing, she gives it back. Then she says at me in Swedish, "Karolina Karlsson is on the third floor, room 312. Please check in at the nurse's station before entering her room."

Teddy stays at my side as I lead the way over to the elevator bank. We ride silently up to the third floor, and my heart begins to race faster. I still don't know if Karolina's been told that her mother is dead. I don't know the full extent of her injuries either. Fractured ulna, the doctor said. It was cracked but not misaligned. She'll need to wear a cast on her arm for four to six weeks. Three cracked ribs, hairline only. The most worrisome injury is the fractures to her leg. They required surgery yesterday. Oblique displacement, it's called. The surgery realigned the bones, and they secured it all with a metal plate and screws. She'll have to wear a cast on the leg for up to eight weeks and not bear weight on it as it heals.

A broken arm *and* a broken leg.

And no mother.

My poor, sweet little lamb.

The elevator slows, and the doors open with a soft *ping*. I just stare at the brightly colored flyers on the wall opposite.

"Come on," says Teddy, gently guiding me out. "You can do this."

Following the signs, we find the pediatric trauma center. A tall nurse wearing clear-framed glasses stands from the station desk as we approach. "Are you Mr. Karlsson?"

"I am."

Copyrighted Material

He smiles. "The reception desk alerted us that you were on the way. Karolina will be so pleased to see you. She's been asking for you."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "She's awake?"

"Not at the moment. We gave her some medication for pain management about thirty minutes ago. It tends to make children drowsy. But you're welcome to go in and sit with her, even if she's asleep."

Teddy glances between us, trying to make sense of our Swedish.

"Thank you," I say in English.

"We alerted her doctor that you're here," he adds, switching to English. "She's with patients now, but she said she can stop by and speak to you in about an hour."

I thank the nurse again and lead the way down the hall. The walls here are so colorful. A muralist painted bright scenes of forest animals on parade. They wear party hats and carry balloons. The scene is so at odds with the somber feeling in the air. From behind closed doors, machines hum, providing life-saving support to other injured children.

The door to room 312 is open a crack. From within, I hear the beep and whir of more machines. Holding my breath, I push the door open wider. The only light comes from the large window. A TV mounted in the corner plays an old episode of *Bamse*, volume on mute.

I step fully inside the room. A large hospital bed takes up most of the space. Karolina lies asleep in the middle of the white sheets. With her eyes closed, her lips turned down in a pout, she looks like a sad little doll. Her blonde hair splays across the pillow.

Christ, she looks so small. I can see now the full extent of her injuries. The bruising around her left eye looks raised and purple. The side of her face is covered in scratches from the shattered glass. They still have her in a neck brace too. Her left arm is in a brace from hand to elbow. And her skinny leg sticks out from her blankets, freshly bandaged from knee to ankle. All around the bed, wires connect her to machines, the source of the soft beeping.

My eyes lock on the fuzzy pink sock on her foot. That's when I break. "Oh, Christ—" I catch the words, along with my sob.

Copyrighted Material

Covering my mouth with my hand, I turn away, tears burning in my eyes. I try to push past Teddy, but he grabs me by the shoulders.

"Hey—no. Come on, man, you have to stay."

"I can't," I say on a gasping breath. "Can't see her like this—"

"You have to. Hey—Karlsson, she's alive."

I shake my head, overcome with grief and fear. I can't lose her too. I won't survive it. God help me, I can't—

"Look at me." He cups my face. "Karlsson, *look* at me."

I lift my gaze. Teddy's expression is so calm. Despite all the times I thought he was meek and nervous, in this moment, he's in control. His eyes flash as he holds fast to me. They're green only at the edges, shifting to an almost golden brown at the center.

"She's alive," he assures me. "Say it."

"She's alive."

He nods. "That's good. Just take a breath and slow down. Say it again."

I take a deep breath and let it out, both my hands holding tight to his shoulders. "She's alive."

He turns me around, one arm across my chest, and points at the monitor. "Look at her heart rate. She's so strong. Her pulse ox looks good too. God, look how strong she is. She's a fighter, Karlsson."

"A fighter," I echo, my eyes darting to take in all the machinery. I'm no doctor, but I can hear the slow, steady beat of the heart monitor.

"That's one tough little girl." His arm tightens across my chest. "But she needs her uncle now. So, you are gonna sit in that chair and hold her hand. Do you hear me?"

"I don't know what to say to her," I whisper, leaning against the support of his body. "If she doesn't know . . . If they haven't told her . . ."

Teddy's hold on me softens. "Then you tell her you love her. Tell her she'll always have a home with you, no matter what. As you loved your sister, you're going to love her daughter. It's as simple as that. She's yours now, Karlsson."

Resolve hardens in my chest as I look down at her fragile, sleeping form. "She's mine."

"Yeah, man. She's all yours."

Copyrighted Material

I knew it was true in an abstract sense. With one missed phone call, my life changed forever. I became a parent. I'm beholden to someone other than myself now. God help me, I've wasted so much time already. There's so much to be done. For Petra, for Karolina. And I'm the only one who can do it. No more wallowing in grief. It's time for action.

I tap his arm, and Teddy lets me go. Turning away, I step past him towards the door.

"Whoa—*hey*." He grabs my arm. "Where the hell are you going?"

"Stay with her. When she wakes, call me."

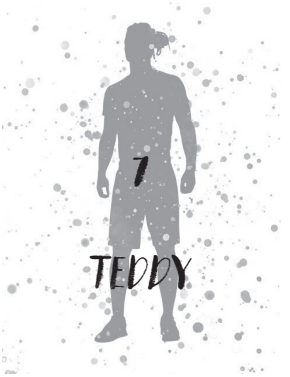
His eyes go wide. "What the hell are you gonna do?"

"I have to call my lawyer."

With a nod, he lets me go.

I've always been the backbone of my family. Petra may have been the older sibling, but whenever she needed something, she came to me. I paid for her apartment, her car, Karolina's school. I'm not leaving anything to chance now. Karolina is mine. I must make arrangements for us both to go home.

Copyrighted Material



1

TEDDY

Karolina sleeps for another hour. The whole time, Karlsson doesn't come back. In the meantime, I stretch out in the uncomfortable chair by her bed, messing around on my phone. I text my sisters and my friend Colin. After our internship year, he was offered a full-time job with the Jacksonville Jaguars. We made plans to meet up for dinner this week to celebrate my return to the 904.

Well, I won't be making that reservation. There's now the slight inconvenience of an ocean in the way.

I'm just about to slip out in search of coffee or a donut when Karolina stirs on the bed. Oh shit, I didn't even ask if she speaks English. This could turn awkward quick. I glance desperately towards the open door. Then I shoot Karlsson a text.

She opens her eyes, whimpering a little as she shifts on the bed.

"Oh hey, try not to move, okay?"

Her eyes go wide as she looks at me.

"Do you understand English?"

Slowly, she nods. Poor thing, she looks miserable. She's got purple bruising around her eye and little cuts all over the left side of her face. But her eyes are the deepest shade of blue, just like Karlsson's. They're flecked with grains of grey, reminding me of faded denim.

"Are you Karolina?" I hope my expression looks sufficiently warm and welcoming.

She nods again, which looks difficult to do with her neck brace.

Copyrighted Material

"My name's Teddy. I'm a friend of your uncle's." I glance towards the door again. "Uhh . . . Henrik. He should be here any minute."

At this, she perks up. "Morbror är här?"

"Umm . . ."

Before I can say another word, Karlsson comes rushing into the room, talking fast in Swedish on his phone. I don't have to know what he's saying to know he's ending the call. Then he drops the phone away from his ear, tears in his eyes. "Karro."

The moment she sees him, Karolina bursts into tears, reaching for her uncle with her unbandaged hand. "Morbror!"

He crosses the room to her bedside, both of them crying as he hugs her. His voice is soft and soothing. "Mitt lilla lamm, inga fler tårar. Jag är här nu."

She sobs, clinging to him.

"Jag är ledsen," he cries, brushing back her hair. "Lilla lamm, jag är så ledsen."

I don't understand his words, but I feel his grief, his resolve. He's going to take care of her. Nothing will part them now. I wipe away my own tears, letting the two of them have this moment together. They speak in fast Swedish as he pulls away, his hands everywhere as he inspects her. "She wants water," he says at me in English, before switching smoothly back to Swedish to speak to her as he adjusts her pillows and helps her sit up.

Making myself useful, I fill a cup with water from the little plastic pitcher on her bedside table. I offer it to her. "Here you go, honey."

She leans away, eyeing me warily.

Okay, ouch. Why is this hurting my feelings?

Karlsson says a few quick words in Swedish, gesturing to me, and her tension eases a bit.

"Does she speak English?"

"She understands it better than she speaks," he replies. "American shows and movies are quite popular here. But she's generally shy around strangers."

"Well, she comes by that honestly," I say with a smile. "I have a present for her. Do you think that might help break this ice?"

Copyrighted Material

He raises a brow in surprise. "You have a present for her?"

"Duh." I hand him the little plastic cup of water and duck down for my backpack. "You don't visit a kid in the hospital without bringing them a present."

I spent the last six months working for a rehab hospital where the main clientele were kids with broken arms and legs. Gotta love summer sports and the carefree "my bones are rubber" attitude of overconfident teenage boys. My last patient broke all his arms and legs falling off his roof while trying to land on a trampoline. He showed me the video footage. Honestly, it was pretty epic until he went splat.

"When did you have time to shop for a present?"

"On my way to the airport. It's not god's gift to presents," I quickly add. "But I think it'll do as a first offering of peace and friendship." Wheeling the chair closer, I set my backpack on the edge of her bed with a flourish and make a show of unzipping it. "Can you tell me, Karolina, what's your favorite color?"

She chews her bottom lip, glancing from me to Karlsson.

He says something in Swedish.

"Lila," she says in her sweet little baby-doll voice.

I'm taking an educated guess here. "Is that like lilac? Purple?"

Karlsson nods.

Oh, thank god. "Well, am I a genius or what? I guessed you'd say purple. And look at this . . ." Slowly, I reach into my backpack and pull out a plush purple teddy bear.

Her curious look turns to one of excitement as she locks eyes with the silly purple bear.

"See? It's a teddy bear, like me. I'm Teddy." I glance at Karlsson. "How do you say 'teddy bear' in Swedish?"

"Nalle," they reply at the same time.

I grin. "Well, *this* is Nalle." I hand her the purple bear. "And I'm Teddy."

She takes the bear, inspecting it with eager eyes. She doesn't need to know I have three more in this backpack in three other colors. Thank god for capitalism, right? Why make one when you can make one in every color?

Copyrighted Material

Karlsson says something to her, and she looks up at me, clutching to the little bear. "Thank you," she murmurs in English.

"Oh hey, no thank *you*." I scoot closer. "I was hoping I'd find a good home for him. You're gonna take good care of him for me, right?"

She nods, turning her attention back to the little stuffed bear.

I zip the backpack shut, hiding the other bears, and drop the bag at my feet. I'll make sure we leave them with the charge nurse to give to the other kids. Meanwhile, Karlsson says a few more words to her in Swedish. As they talk, he surprises the hell out of me by reaching across the bed and taking my hand.

What the hell is he doing?

Oh god, he's holding my hand. Henrik Karlsson is holding my hand. I can't breathe, can't think.

Never taking his eyes from his niece, he gives my hand a grateful squeeze, and I relax, all tension leaving my shoulders. In this moment, I think I'd be content to sit here and let Karlsson hold my hand for the rest of my life. He talks to his niece in Swedish for a while, and I just watch, listening to the rhythm of the words I can't understand. But the feelings are there: love, grief, safety.

"Karro has come up with a name for her bear," he announces in English.

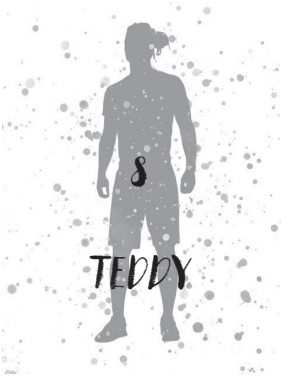
I blink myself out of my stupor and sit forward. "Oh, yeah?"

"She doesn't want to call him Nalle."

"Well, what do you want to call him?"

Gazing across the bed at me, Karlsson smiles that smile that only touches his eyes. "She wants to call him Teddy."

Copyrighted Material



8

TEDDY

After an epically long day of travel and sitting vigil at the hospital, I'm ready to brush my teeth and fall into bed. Any bed. Hell, I'll sleep in a dog bed on the floor. I'll sleep *on* the floor. Anywhere I can stretch my body out in a fully horizontal position.

My fatigue aside, it was a good day. Karlsson got to talk to Karolina's doctors and hear their rehab plan. She'll be in the hospital for a few more days, at least. She gets her arm casted tomorrow for the broken ulna, but they need the swelling in her leg to go down before they'll cast that too.

The hospital kicked us out a little after eight o'clock, declaring visiting hours over. Karlsson put up a fight, demanding he get to stay. Ultimately, I made a show of putting Teddy the Bear in charge of security for the room, which Karolina found funny. Teddy the Bear kicked Morbror Henrik out for being a noise nuisance, and I set him up as sentinel at the foot of her bed before I left too.

She's a tough little kid. Sweet and smart, if super shy. But with Karlsson as her uncle, that only makes sense. She knows her mother is dead. She knew without Karlsson having to say a word. I pray I'm wrong, but I think she might have been conscious when they pulled her from the car. Who knows what she saw that night? She's desperately sad about it all. They both cried on and off all day, holding each other and whispering soft words in Swedish. I gave them space to grieve as best I could.

Around lunchtime, I found my way down to the hospital

Copyrighted Material