



Tied up in Knots (Gummy Bear Orgy #4)

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Category: Romance

Description: Homer Alaska has always been home to Raelyn.

Its always been the perfect, quiet, small town shes lived in her entire life with her grandma Gigi since the death of her parents when she was ten.

Living above and running the local bookshop, The Book Vault has always been her dream and everything shes ever wanted.

Well almost everything.

If only Warren, one of her best friends since she was twelve, would realize how much he loves her and profess said love, everything would be perfect.

Unfortunately, its been Warrens dream to leave Homer as soon as possible, and now that his boat is complete that time looms in the near future.

Preparing for his long-awaited departure from the tiny town he loathes, Warren is finally ready to leave Homer.

What he doesnt plan for is his best friend (and the object of his suppressed inner desires and star of his unattainable fantasies) to confess her love for him with a body hardening kiss, followed by nights filled with secret rendezvous.

Even after giving into his buried feelings for her, he cant let a few nights of lust stop him from leaving the town filled with so many bad memories.

But months after leaving the girl of his dreams he discovers he may have left more in Homer than just his heart.

Returning to claim what is his, he must prove himself the reliable man shell need to help care for the unexpected bundle of joy they created.

Can pure determination alone help him move beyond his past and look to the future? Or will it push him away like it did before?

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A half-naked sea god

The man I've been in love with for the past thirteen years is walking around shirtless...

again . Unfortunately, it's not for my benefit.

Oh, and did I mention, he doesn't love me back?

Not that I gave him the chance to, since I've never told him how I feel.

The torturous scene in front of me is one of my very own personal hell.

Warren _ the guy I love but have never told I love _ works away on his sailboat, shirtless, none the wiser to my torment.

For the past five years, he's been working and living on that boat; The Knotty Boy .

Docked right behind my grandma Gigi's house, which only makes the torment worse since up until a couple years ago, I lived here.

These days I'm here more often than I probably need to be, but what can I say? The scenery is captivating.

Warren turns and flexes as he wraps ropes and ties them off, pulling with every muscle in his abdomen and arms. The black ink of his tattoos, glistening with sweat even in the cold fall air.

The tattoos cover both arms from wrist to shoulder, a collage of accumulated art over the years.

Most of it his and most of it nautical themed.

No matter how much he complains about being a fisherman, he loves the ocean.

It's in his blood and soul, just like it's in mine.

There is a mermaid, a kraken, a compass and map, a pirate ship, and a large anchor wrapped in rope tattooed on his left pectoral muscle.

This one I know is his art, the shape only formed from the edges of the interior swirls, loops, knots and indistinguishable shapes.

It's my favorite of his. I have no idea what the shapes are but they're all beautiful, accentuating his sculpted body. Basically, turning him into a god.

He's been working on fishing boats since he was sixteen, so his upper body is well toned and made for the labor-intensive work.

The crisp blue of the calm sea water, and cresting green, white-capped mountains lining all sides of the bay, frame the picturesque scene and I wish I could take a picture.

It would help in the days to come without him.

"You're drooling Rae."

"What? No, I'm not," I protest while subtly rolling my lips to make sure I'm not actually drooling.

Isabelle, or Izzy, my bestest friend of forever, sits next to me on the back porch of Gigi's house.

The house I grew up in after my parents and grandpa died in a car accident when I was ten years old.

We sit at the well-worn colorful outdoor dining table, made of broken shards of sea glass and pottery in a mosaic of ocean waves and a sea turtle.

Glasses of lemonade drip condensation on to the coasters my Gigi demands we use, also tiny mosaics of sea creatures.

"Sure, you aren't," she scoffs, obviously not believing me.

I've never told her how I feel about Warren, but I suspect she's known for a long time.

She never pushes or asks, knowing if I wanted to talk about it, I would.

I never have because...well a lot of reasons really.

One being Warren is one of my closest friends and part of our little quartet group which includes Izzy and her older brother Owen.

By the time I realized I had a thing for him it seemed weird to bring it up and disturb our well-balanced friend group.

Secondly, he's been saying he planned to leave our remote Alaskan town of Homer ever since he was thirteen years old.

It's all he's ever talked about. It's why he bought the boat and why he's been working

so hard all these years to save his money and fix it up.

So, he could one day sail away from here, from us, from me.

So, why bother risking a worse heartbreak of getting involved and then left behind?

Because I would be. Unlike Warren, I don't want to leave.

My only family is here, my life and work running the bookstore is here.

But I also had a much easier time growing up here then he did.

His family situation is toxic to say the least.

"Do you think he's really leaving this time?

" I ask Izzy who sips on her lemonade not watching Warren's perfectly timed ballet of maneuvering the sail, cranking the winch until the boom swings to the opposite side, and him ducking beneath as it rockets across the deck of the boat, the slight breeze bubbling out the main sail at the end of the movement.

He's not leaving today, just checking that everything works and that there are no tears in the sail.

I know this because I've shamelessly watched him do this multiple times.

Soon he'll lower the mainsail and tie it down, stowing it for when he does leave.

Which is supposedly in a week. He's said this before and each time something delayed his departure. This time feels different though.

“I think he actually is this time,” Izzy answers, drawing my attention away from the Warren show. I really shouldn’t stare so blatantly, but I can’t help it. What else am I supposed to look at while sitting here? There’s literally nothing but trees and water, and a half-naked sea god.

“How long do you think he’ll be gone for before he realizes he wants to come back?”

Izzy doesn’t believe he’ll stay away. She, like me, thinks Homer is a great place to live.

And although we both know about his family issues, she doesn’t think he’ll really go.

I, on the other hand, know differently. Once he leaves, he won’t come back, not for anything, or anyone.

And that thought kills me a little inside.

“He won’t come back Izzy.” Jeez, could I sound any more pathetic?

“Sure, he will. Once he’s gone and all alone, he’ll realize how much he misses us and come back. You’ll see.”

“Not likely. This has been his sole goal for most of his life. I don’t think he’ll abandon it so quickly, if at all,” I say solemnly.

I don’t have to hide my sadness at his leaving. It’s not unexpected from one of his closest friends for the past fifteen plus years. We’re all going to miss him, and I’ll have never gotten up the nerve to tell him how I feel and will forever live in regret but can do nothing about it.

“Then we’ll just have to call and text him constantly to remind him of what he’s

missing until he comes back, at least to visit.” Izzy pauses, her optimistic facade fading. “It won’t be the same without him. It’s been the four of us for so long, it’ll be like we’re missing a wheel.”

“I know, Izzy. We’ll just have to get over it and move on because he’s not coming back.”

“Why do you seem so certain of that?” she asks.

“I just am. And letting myself believe otherwise will only make it worse when he doesn’t.”

Izzy nods a reluctant agreement, her long blonde hair twisting around her shoulders in the slight breeze.

Winter is almost here, and I know that’s why Warren planned his departure for a week from today.

He wants to escape before the cold and snow trap him.

Winters in Alaska are no joke and if he doesn’t leave on time, he will be stuck for the whole season.

Which I personally wouldn’t mind, but he’s determined to make it happen.

With the crates and supplies he’s been amassing I think he will succeed this time.

“Why the long faces?” Owen asks as he steps out onto the back porch carrying a box of what are no doubt supplies for Warren. “We’re supposed to be celebrating today, remember?”

That's right, Owen decided to throw a going away bash at the local bar Anchor's Bottom tonight for Warren to say goodbye. He doesn't see this as losing a friend, but as his friend reaching a goal and succeeding. Which is probably how I should look at it as well. At least on the outside.

"You're the only one who wants to celebrate losing your best friend," Izzy chides her brother in that way only siblings can.

"I'm not losing my best friend," he argues. "He's just relocating. We'll still be best friends, that won't change. You really think he could find anyone better than me to be his best friend?"

Owen plasters on a large cheesy grin. Lifting his chin, the sun hits his short blonde hair illuminating him like a golden angel.

Like he's the ideal specimen for best friend material.

He really is but we don't tell him that, he's already cocky enough as it is.

In high school he was the captain of the ice hockey team and still plays occasionally with a local league when not working for his family's construction company. It made him very popular.

Both he and his sister were the quintessential popular kids.

I still have no idea how we managed to become friends.

Izzy was a cheerleader and class VP. It even made sense for them to be friends with Warren the resident bad boy.

Somehow jocks and popular girls always mix with the bad boys, but not usually with

the introverted, quiet book nerd.

I played exactly zero sports, participated in zero school activities, spent most afternoons in the library, and probably never would have attended a single school dance had it not been for Izzy dragging me to them.

Even after high school I didn't do anything special, no college, no travel.

I've been working at Gigi's book shop , The Book Vault, for forever and a few years ago she retired and bequeathed it to me.

It's all I've ever known or wanted. Living in the apartment on the second floor above the shop, I have everything I need.

Except someone to share it with. Someone I wished would have been Warren.

I've tried for years to get over these feelings for him, even dating other guys, but they never dwindled. Much to my dismay I think they only got stronger over the years.

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My eyes drift back to Warren as Owen and Izzy bicker.

Sadly, he does appear more upbeat as his time in Homer dwindles.

He grabs a shirt and hops out of the boat onto the dock my grandpa built when he and Gigi first moved into this house decades ago.

He makes it halfway to the house before stretching overhead to slip the black thermal over his head.

I watch over the rim of my glass and pretend to drink.

Like always, my gaze follows the progression of his shirt down his naturally bronzed chest, abs and over the dark happy trail leading below his waistband.

Hair the same dark brown as the shaggy locks on his head.

His mochaccino light brown eyes glitter in the low dusky sunlight, the last we'll have for a while.

My heart sinks when I notice the giant smile on his face as Owen hands over the box he brought. It's deposited in his boat before he makes his way back up to shore, this time slipping a jacket on.

"Alright, who's ready to party?" Owen cheers as they both arrive at our table.

I don't feel the same enthusiasm as him and let it be known with a displeased frowny

face.

I was never a party girl and never will be.

Every time we go to the bar together, I'm usually the one driving everyone else home or sneaking out early to go home and curl up next to my wood burning stove and read a book.

"Oh, come on Raelyn. You can't be grumpy tonight," Owen pouts.

"Sure, I can. Watch me," I challenge him with a grin that holds absolutely no joy but plenty of defiance.

"Come on Bambi, you can't be like that tonight.

" Warren's voice is like a balm to my charcoal heart.

He's been calling me Bambi since we were kids.

I never knew why, but I like that I'm the only one he has a nickname for.

He even got mad when Owen tried to call me Bambi once, claiming Owen wasn't allowed to call me that, only he could.

"It's my going away party. No one is allowed to be a sour puss tonight. "

"Well, some of us aren't happy you're leaving," I protest, crossing my arms over my chest. He's heard this all before, but I feel it bears repeating.

"You know I've been planning this for years, Bambi. It's not like it's a surprise."

I groan because that's not even close to the reason why I'm not happy about him leaving. Yes, I've had years to prepare for this eventuality, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. I'm free to be as unhappy as I like.

"No more grumbling. Now get your overall clad ass up and let's go."

Warren circles the table and drags me up by my elbow.

I, the mature twenty-six-year-old that I am, ragdoll in his hold, forcing him to hoist me up by the waist. It's an age-old game we play, and I revel in every touch it allows me.

He bands an arm around my middle and locks me in place with my back to his side.

He's a lot larger than me and holds me in the familiar position with ease.

"That's not going to work today, Bambi. You're coming, and you're going to at least pretend to be happy and toast to my good fortune at finally escaping this town."

I ignore his demands and continue to play a life-sized doll in his arms.

"Jesus you're getting heavy," he jokes, because I know for a fact, he can carry my hundred and fifty pounds just fine. He carries loads of fish twice my weight on a daily basis. "Okay, you can take over walking now Bambi," he orders, but I ignore him.

He drags me dramatically down the porch towards the side yard where the cars are parked in the gravel driveway.

"You better put your feet down or I'm gonna drop you."

He's not going to drop me.

When I don't respond he grumbles, and I feel him reach up and deftly pull the hair tie, holding my strawberry-blond hair in a ponytail, off my head.

Strands of copper fall forward blinding me.

Just as I'm sure he intended, I instantly plant my feet on the ground and grab for my hair tie.

If I can't wrangle it out of his hand, I'll never get it back.

He likes stealing them and wearing them around his wrist, mocking me with his victory.

"Give it back Warren."

"Not a chance. Not until we get to Anchor's Bottom . Then you can have it back."

Hmm. There's a fifty-fifty chance he's lying and I'm not sure if this is one of those times he'll actually give it back.

I stare at him dubiously, not sure I believe him.

He slides the black elastic band around his wrist triumphantly, knowing I've never been able to remove it once it's locked around his inked wrist.

"Fine. But you have to give it back when we get there."

"Of course," he says with a cocky grin, that's equal parts sweet and smug. "Besides, I like it when you wear your hair down."

Reaching up, he messes my hair like a little sister, and I have to pull out of his reach before he tangles it completely.

I don't like wearing my hair down often, it gets in the way and in my face, forcing me to constantly tuck it behind my ears.

Wearing it in a ponytail is just practical.

Thankfully I just got my bangs trimmed so it's not as annoying as it could be.

I stick my tongue out at Warren, which only makes him chuckle.

"Can we get going now? I'd like to get there before it gets dark."

It's only six o'clock but night settles earlier and earlier the closer to winter we get. It won't stop Owen and Warren from staying at the bar until midnight though, so I don't know why Owen is complaining.

"Chill out, Owen. We'll get there soon enough, and you can party to your heart's content," Izzy elbows her brother and they both make their way to the driveway.

"Is James meeting us there?"

James is Izzy's fiancé. They've been together for years and are planning a wedding, but Izzy hasn't set a date yet.

She can't make up her mind if she wants a winter wedding or a spring wedding.

We go back and forth about the benefits of each, and the conversation usually ends with me telling her, once again, to just go down to the courthouse and get it done.

Then we can have a party at Gigi's afterword. No fuss no muss.

I don't know why she insists on a color scheme and five bridesmaids, with flower arches and a four-tiered wedding cake.

None of that matters in a marriage. Just the two people who love each other and a celebration of their union.

Why does everyone have to make such a mess out of something so simple?

However, I will admit I do love looking at wedding dresses with her.

I've never had much reason to wear a dress, let alone one as fancy as a wedding dress, but it would be nice to wear one someday.

"Yeah, he's going to meet us after he gets off work. Which means we can all ride together in Owen's car."

"But I plan on partying. How am I supposed to get home once I'm smashed?" Owen pouts as if this is the biggest inconvenience in the world, even stomping his foot like an impertinent child.

"Don't worry, you big baby, I'm sure you can find someone to give you a ride home."

Owen is more likely to go home with someone than the other way around, but I don't mention that. We all pile into Owen's SUV, Izzy in the back with me as usual, Owen driving and Warren in the front seat, and head out to the bar. My mood only grows more dour the closer we get.

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Thinking of her as a sister would be incestual

I've been waiting half my life for this. When I'm finally ready to leave Homer, Alaska and make a life, a better life, somewhere else. I know Owen, Izzy, and Bambi don't want me to go, but they don't understand. They don't know what it's like to be so suffocated by a place that it drives you crazy.

Most of that is because of my family. Having an abusive drunk as a father and complacent nitwit as a mother doesn't make the best environment for a child.

Because of that I became known as a wild child around town.

I've been arrested a number of times for minor things; public indecency, joy riding, public intoxication, speeding, vandalization, noise complaints.

Basically, anything fun. I've racked up a decent rap sheet here and become more than familiar with the sheriffs in town.

Something that I can finally escape when I leave.

They see me and assume I'm doing something wrong and pull me over or question me without cause.

I've gotten used to it, but it's still fucking irritating.

I'm surprised they didn't pull Owen over on our way to the bar tonight.

I wasn't driving but I was in the front passenger seat and that's usually enough for them.

They probably heard about me leaving next week and figured they'd leave me be.

There are only a few people at the bar when we arrive, but within an hour practically everyone I've ever known is present.

Except for my parents, thank fuck. I doubt Owen even told them about tonight.

He knows I haven't spoken to them in years.

Trying to keep your distance from problematic people in a town the size of Homer is doable but requires effort.

I put in the fucking effort. Jean and Isaac Graham are the last people I want to cross paths with while grocery shopping on a Wednesday afternoon.

A few high school friends are here, a couple of guys I've worked on the boats with, Owen, James, Izzy, Izzy's parents and Gigi, of course, who's been more of a mother to me than my own mother.

But Bambi is most definitely not my sister.

I may treat her like one sometimes but with the amount of X-rated thoughts I've had about her over the years, thinking of her as a sister would be incestual.

Not acting on those thoughts was the least I could do to protect her from my fucked-up life.

Besides, she's far too good for me, just like my father said.

If there was ever one thing he told me that was true, it was that.

Being her friend is more than I could have hoped for and has been more than enough throughout the years.

Speaking of Bambi, I slide my index finger under the elastic hair tie on my wrist and snap it for good measure.

Stealing her hair ties became my little way of having a piece of her without getting to have her.

Not to mention it reminds me of my twisted desires and how if she ever discovered them, she would no doubt be disgusted by me.

I try to spot her in the bar, hoping to tease her a little more before not giving her hair tie back.

This bad boy is going right into my creepy stalker box with the rest of them.

She's sitting at the bar, facing backwards so she can better talk to the people around her.

Her copper red hair is still hanging down straight just below her shoulders and she tucks a strand behind her ear while smiling politely at whatever someone said.

In the low light of the bar, her amber, green eyes appear more like caramel covered apples, her freckles less prominent.

There's a half-drunk beer in her hand, that I know is her first and will probably be her last. Bambi's not much of a drinker, never has been.

I like that about her. I like a lot of things about her.

Like the fact that she always wears overalls.

They could be denim, pants, shorts, skirts, stretchy, anything and she wears them.

Tonight's are turquoise corduroy. Sometimes I wished she wouldn't wear them so frequently because they hide her body from me, but then I remind myself why I can't have her and hate myself for a little while.

It doesn't seem to stop me from looking forward to summer, when it's finally warm enough to go swimming and I get to see her in her two-piece suit.

I shake my head to remove the image of Bambi in a bikini and force myself to participate in the celebration.

What I don't do is go over to Bambi and pull her off the stool and place myself between her and Jordan, a kid from high school who's being far too chatty with her tonight.

I'm not sure if my need to separate them is protective or possessive.

I try not to think about it and snap the hair tie on my wrist once more for good measure, compelling my body to turn and face Owen and Lexi, a local girl he has a casual thing with.

"So, where are you going first, Warren?" Lexi asks, effectively pulling me back into their conversation.

"Probably a coastal city, just for a night or two, like Seattle. But my first big stop will be Hawaii. After that I'll head down through Central America and the Panama Canal.

I'll probably stay down there for a while before coming back up to the states and checking out Texas and Florida.

Then I'll hit the Bahamas and all the smaller island countries in that area. Puerto Rico and such."

"Oh my god, that sounds so amazing. How long is that going to take you?" she asks, as if I have a day-by-day schedule of my trip planned out.

I don't. I have no plans. Other than ports I can dock at in countries I want to visit, there are no plans on my books.

I'm letting the wind take me and guide me to where I should be.

Once I find a place that calls to me, I'll make more permanent plans.

Until then I want nothing and no one guiding my path.

"As long as I want it to," I say, giving her the abbreviated answer.

No one really wants to know why I'm doing what I'm doing. They all think it's a whim, a flight of fancy that I'll work out of my system then come home. They are so fucking wrong. I'll never return to this city if I can help it.

The thought saddens me a little when I consider that means never seeing Owen, Izzy or Bambi again. Maybe I can convince them to come see me. To leave cold, boring Homer and visit the warmer, more tropical area I settle in.

That's what I'm looking forward to most, sunshine and warmth.

Not that the cold bothers me, I grew up here, so it's normal to me.

I even have a bit of Inuit in my blood, or at least, I think.

My parents weren't big on family lineage, but ever since a friend of mine in high school bragged about his summer vacation to Hawaii, I haven't stopped thinking about it.

Palm trees, coconuts, warm sun and warm water, sandy beaches that you want to lay out on all day long in nothing but a swimsuit, sometimes less. It sounds like heaven.

Picturing it always got me through the bad times.

The times when my dad was so drunk and belligerent he would go on rants, and I would get the brunt of it.

It was times like that I would sometimes escape to Owen's house and crash on his couch.

There were many times I ended up at Gigi's place too.

As soon as I bought my boat and started working and living on it, she let me dock it at her place so I wouldn't have to pay to dock it somewhere else.

This meant I spent a lot of time with her and Bambi.

Why the fuck do I keep thinking about the past?

About Bambi and Gigi and Owen and everything I'll be missing when I'm gone?

Is it because I'm finally going to leave this time?

My subconscious is trying to give me a guilt trip or something?

Well, it's not going to work. I'm not staying.

I've been working towards this for too long to give it up now.

I order another beer and ignore when my mind starts to wander. Tonight is not about reminiscing, it's about celebrating and looking to the future, not the past.

A few hours pass and some of the older crowd says their goodnights. One being Gigi. I wrap her in a tight hug when she wanders over to say goodbye, a few strands of her wispy white curls stick to my short beard as she pulls away. She pulls them out and smooths them down.

"I'll see you tomorrow sweetheart. You enjoy your night, and remember if you ever decide to come back, you're more than welcome to stay with me. I'm always in need of a strapping young man around the house," Gigi plants a big kiss on my cheek, as she always does, and squeezes my shoulders.

She's in her mid-sixties now and I have helped her out many times around the house, moving furniture, chopping wood, changing her oil. I am more than happy to do it for everything she's done for me.

"Of course, Gigi. If I come back, I'll make sure to come to your place first."

"Damn right you better."

I laugh and hug her again before watching her white head of hair wind through the late-night crowd at the bar. Before I can see her exit a fresh cold beer is placed in my hand and my attention is drawn away, back to the boisterous talk and laughter.

?

“Heeey man. This party is awesome. Are you having fun?” Owen drunkenly slurs an hour later, as he wraps an arm around my shoulders.

I have to hold him up by his waist to keep him from taking us both down. It’s not so much that he’s too drunk to stand, but because he’s flinging himself around like a beach ball. Owen steadies himself and stands up taller.

“Yes, Owen, I’m having a great time.”

“Good, because there’s someone here who would like to give you a going away present, if you know what I mean,” he loudly whispers while trying to wink at me but it’s more like slow blinking with both eyes.

“Is that so? And who would that be?”

I’m not completely opposed to a final romp in the sack before I go. I’ve had my share of fun times with a few local girls.

“Jenny.” He says her name like a fourteen-year-old girl talking about her crush at a slumber party.

Owen points not so subtly in Jenny’s direction where she’s watching me over the rim of her glass. Her Barbie pink lips wrapping around a thin straw and sucking.

Jenny’s not bad. Not clingy, discreet. She’s managed to indulge my kink a time or two.

Not to the extent that I want, but enough to satisfy my urge.

Bondage and shibari rope tying isn’t something most people understand.

They think tying the wrists to the headboard is kinky.

That's barely a blip on my radar. But everyone has a limit and Jenny's is a little higher than most.

I consider how the night would go if I were to go back to her place, because there's no way I'm taking her to my boat.

I did that once before and learned that I get more shit talk from Bambi and Gigi when they witness the walk of shame.

So, going to the girl's place and sneaking onto my boat in the middle of the night when everyone's asleep, is best.

Bambi's sullen face from earlier, when we were talking about me leaving, flashes in my mind and instantly douses any idea I have about going to Jenny's tonight. I break eye contact with Jenny and turn back to Owen.

"No thanks. I think I'd rather be alone tonight. Lots to do tomorrow and all that."

He barely hears my excuse before he's guffawing, clearly not interested in why I'm saying no.

"Come on man, you never said no to Jenny before."

Yeah, well that's when she was paying me and helping to fund my boat refurbishment.

There was a time when I was willing to sell my "services" for a price.

I needed extra money to pay for my boat, and getting paid for something that I would

do for free seemed like the fastest and easiest option.

It's not something I'm proud of, and it's definitely something I will never tell my best friends about.

I may have been willing to have sex for money but that doesn't mean I was proud of it.

“Not interested man. If you're so gung-ho about it, why don't you go home with her? Better yet, take her and Lexi.”

Owen freezes and I can see his mind whirring trying to figure out the logistics of making that happen. Now that he's got the idea in his head, he's going to run with it. Especially since he's drunk.

“You know, maybe I will. That's not a bad idea.”

Owen unlatches from around my neck and dances in the direction of Jenny, a pretty brunette with curves I did enjoy wrapping in my rope.

For a moment I second guess my decision but know it's for the best. I still have things I need to take care of before I go and only have six more days to do them in.

I can't have any more distractions trying to stop me from leaving.

It's nearly midnight when I decide it's time to call it a night. I've had my drinks and my fun and am now ready to head home and hit the sack. Since I rode with the now vanished Owen—maybe he managed to convince Jenny and Lexi after all—I'm going to be walking home.

I have no idea when Izzy and Bambi left, but they're nowhere in sight when I start

making my way out. I guess they must have taken off earlier and I didn't notice. Losing sight of Izzy and James is one thing, they leave together all the time, but not saying goodnight to Bambi is another.

I'll check her place over The Book Vault on my walk home.

Maybe she'll still be up, and I can say a proper goodnight.

Why I feel the need to say goodnight when I'll most likely see her tomorrow, I don't dwell on.

It'd be too much for me to admit to myself and tonight is the last night I need to start deep contemplation.

I leave the bar and zip my coat around me, protecting me from the majority of the cold wind. It feels good against my heated face and neck after being inside the cramped bar all night.

It only takes me about ten minutes of walking before I'm passing by The Book Vault. Bambi's apartment is directly above the store and has street facing windows. I check them for any lights. Nothing. All the windows are dark, no sign of movement beyond. Damnit .

Standing on the sidewalk in front of her store I stare up at the dark windows far longer than I should, hoping to see movement. There isn't any. She must have gone to bed already.

Ignoring the disappointment in my chest, I resume my walk home.

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I literally have nothing left to lose

Leaving without saying goodbye to Warren to drive Gigi home, probably wasn't the most mature move but it's the one I made.

Watching him enjoy himself all night and listening to people talk about him leaving, just made me sadder, to the point I didn't want to be there anymore.

So, when Gigi asked me to drive her home, I jumped on it.

I had planned on driving back to my apartment and returning her car tomorrow but apparently, I'm really into self-torture and decided to sit on the back porch like a stalker and wait for Warren to come home.

If he comes home. I wouldn't be surprised if he took the opportunity to be with a girl tonight.

We all know how popular he is with them around town.

Always available for a night or two, never more though.

Watching him go home with women was hard enough. I couldn't imagine what watching him with a girlfriend would be like. He's never had one. Nothing past a few dates in high school at least.

The wooden porch swing Warren made for Gigi years ago, sways under my weight.

The bright blue ropes holding it up in an intricate pattern of knotting I wasn't aware Warren knew how to make.

I run my fingers along the fibers worn smooth from excessive use, picturing his callused strong hands tying the beautiful pattern.

I've often found myself in this very spot, mind wandering while I stare out at the softly lapping waves of the ocean water against the rocky shore.

It's always been my peaceful place to think or not think and just let my mind go blank.

There's not much of a beach to speak of in this area but that never stopped us from enjoying the water when it gets warm enough.

Jumping off the end of the dock was more than sufficient.

Picturing the four of us as kids, running from the back door and racing to see who would be the first to the water, has me smiling to myself.

I never won but that didn't matter to me.

Being with my friends is what mattered. Sitting on the end of the dock with our feet dangling while we ate popsicles, laughing until we cried watching the boys wrestle till they fell in, having whispered giggle fests with Izzy, and realizing I was sexually attracted to Warren the summer I turned fifteen while watching him dive into the ocean shirtless, that's what matters.

Once again, like it has a few times before, the thought to tell Warren how I feel about him makes its way to the forefront of my mind.

I've considered it in the past but always talked myself out of it.

Always picturing his rejection and disgust, then the following awkwardness until I finally became a hermit and never went out into public again.

But now...

Now he'll be leaving in a week. Now, there's no risk of awkwardness or breaking up the group, because he's already breaking it up by leaving. If he rejects me, I only have to avoid him for a few days. I literally have nothing left to lose.

If he were to leave and never return, I would be forever regretful for not at least trying.

For putting it out there to see what happened.

It would always be a 'what if' lingering in the back of my mind.

I already compare every guy I'm with to him— even though most of it is hypothetical and based on nothing but my imagination—at least this way I could move past him if he rejected me.

He would never be the one who got away because I would have at least tried.

I've dreamed of kissing Warren for years.

Wondering what his lips would feel like against mine.

If he would be a heavy, hard kisser with lots of tongue, or a soft kisser using light touches to entice.

I can imagine him doing both and wouldn't mind either.

Just as long as I could experience it once in my life. That's all I want. Just once.

But when could I possibly attempt this incomprehensible feat?

At our next dinner with Gigi? On our last group outing?

Perhaps while standing on the dock waving goodbye?

I could just smack a kiss right on him without warning and no time to react.

None seem like an ideal time. Like all other times I would chicken out and be right back where I started.

Tonight maybe? I could wait till he gets home then go talk to him alone, under the cover of darkness and with a little liquid courage still in my system and him more amenable with liquor in his. Maybe I could even get that kiss.

Half past twelve is when I start to think he has gone home with someone and won't be coming back to his boat tonight. My built-up courage dwindles with every minute that ticks by.

I should probably head inside. Go to bed.

Forget all about confessing my long-concealed crush and just accept it's never going to happen.

It's only getting colder, and although I'm wrapped up tight inside a heavy quilt I helped Gigi make for the county fair years ago, I can't stay out here forever.

I'll just end up with pneumonia or frostbite.

Before I can conjure up the energy to rise and go inside, I hear footsteps crunching on the gravel drive. Either it's a burglar come to rob me, or it's Warren.

I sit perfectly still waiting to see who rounds the back of the house before freaking out and calling the cops. A shadowed figure appears and bypasses the stairs to the back porch, hands in pockets, and heading straight for the dock. I'd recognize that silhouette anywhere.

Warren strides down the length of the wooden wharf, a slowness to his steps. I watch as he approaches the bow and slows to a stop. He stares out at the water before pivoting to stare back up at the house.

Ah fuck. He's totally gonna see me watching him.

Like a freak, instead of acknowledging him and waving, I hold the bench swing still with the toe of my foot on the ground.

I already have the quilt cocooned around me, so I use it as natural camouflage in the darkness of the shadow of the house.

It's near pitch black out and I didn't bother with the porch light so he shouldn't be able to see me, as long as I remain still.

Why am I hiding? Wasn't I just contemplating how to approach him to confess my feelings? Wouldn't this be a perfect opportunity?

Of course it would be. That's why I freeze like a deer in the headlights, validating Warren's nickname for me even more. Warren eventually turns back around having not noticed me, and steps aboard his boat and into the cabin below. A light flicks on

inside the space, and I watch motionless.

God I'm such a weirdo.

Pulling together all the sanity and bravado I possess, I extricate myself from the quilt, shivering in the cold night air, and make my way to Warren's boat. Hyping myself up the entire way with words of affirmation that he's going to accept and return my affection. One can only hope right?

I wrap my arms around my waist and rub my cotton clad arms. I'm wearing a long sleeve thermal but it's fucking cold out. I don't know how Warren managed to walk all the way here from the bar without freezing. Probably all the alcohol warming him up.

Standing at the precipice of my future _ and Warren's boat _ I watch through the windows as he moves around shifting things from here to there.

He's removed his jacket and must have turned on his hydronic heating system.

It's something he bragged about installing with how efficient it is with its on demand hot water and ability to heat the space quickly.

Being inside in the warmth sounds really nice right about now.

Carefully I step from the wood planks of the dock, on to the lip of his boat and hoist myself in with the help of the thin flexible railing. The Knotty Boy isn't a luxury cruise liner by any means, but it's big enough for international water travel. Spanning forty feet it has everything he'll need.

I marvel at the amount of work he's done since first purchasing it.

There were holes in the hull, it needed a new sail and practically every engine part imaginable.

I don't think there's a part of it he didn't refurbish.

But it had good bones, and the mast was sturdy, making for a great starting point.

A few times all of us pitched in to help with one thing or another.

Mainly painting since I'm not very handy with a hammer or any tool for that matter.

But place a paint brush in my hand and I can paint you a whole house in a day.

Stepping down into the cockpit, I circle the helm, running my fingers along the smooth polished wood, and approach the door to the cabin below. I suck in a steadying breath and knock.

It takes less than five seconds for Warren to climb the ladder like stairs and pull the door open. Fucking shirtless. Again. Doesn't he know it's like forty degrees' outside right now?

I stare down at his tattooed bronze skin stunned, because what the hell else am I supposed to do when he answers the door half naked?

"Bambi. What are you doing here? It's freezing outside."

He doesn't wait for me to explain why I'm knocking on his door at nearly one in the morning in the freezing cold weather and pulls me in by the hand.

It's far warmer inside and I climb down the few stairs into the cabin.

It's an all-in-one area with a small kitchen in one corner, a built-in couch on the other and a small dinette that's bolted to the floor with a bench seat along the outer wall.

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There are boxes of supplies partially open and in process of being put away and secured.

Loops of rope hang from the ceiling, partially for holding onto in rough waters but some are hanks of extra rope.

You can never have too much rope on a boat.

The entire interior is a mix of blues and white.

Nothing fancy and most of it second hand or gifted, which I appreciate.

My entire apartment is filled with antique and thrifted furniture and wares.

Why add more garbage to the landfills when there is plenty of lightly used furniture out there waiting to be rehomed and loved?

“What are you doing here? I thought you went home hours ago.”

Warren circles from behind me after securely shutting the cabin door. I bolster myself and prepare for the confession coming.

“I drove Gigi home and decided to stay. Couldn’t sleep and saw you walking home. Thought I would come say goodnight, since I didn’t when I left.

“Yeah. Why didn’t you?”

Crap. What do I say now? What's a good excuse?

"You were busy talking with people and I didn't want to interrupt."

"Gigi said goodbye."

Damnit.

"You know Gigi is more assertive than I am."

Warren nods but still frowns at me. Okay, so, here we go.

"So, you're really going this time?" I begin, easing into what I really came here to say. I need to confirm he's actually leaving, and I don't have any reason left to fear telling him before I confess everything.

"Yes."

"No more delays? I was hoping you would change your mind and stay," I admit.

"I know, but you know I can't. This town is suffocating."

"I kind of thought all the wide-open spaces were refreshing." I laugh hoping to ease this conversation with my attempt at humor.

Warren only sighs, repositioning himself to lean one hip against the dinette table, gripping its edge with one hand, the other is thrust into his low hanging jeans pocket.

He looks so relaxed and comfortable in this space.

He was always a little tense when he stayed with us.

Comfortable enough in the space to seem normal, but I could always see that slight hesitation and concern that he was going to do something wrong and be punished for it.

Not here. Here, he is the master of his domain and knows no one can take that away from him.

“You know what I mean, Bambi.”

I do know what he means. Slowly stepping the few feet in front of him I twiddle nervously with my fingers, pulling at the sleeve of my shirt, positioning myself for what I’m about to do.

“If that’s the case, then there’s something I’d like to do before you leave. If that’s okay.”

He smiles down at me, his warm brown eyes softening as he watches me fiddle.

“Sure thing, Bambi.”

I really do love it when he calls me Bambi. Someday, far in the future, I’ll ask him why. I stare at the impressive tattoo swirling on his left pec and, not for the first time, try to decipher what it is. I’m still not sure beyond the obvious anchor.

“Can you close your eyes?” I ask in a small timid voice.

He smirks at me, intrigued by my request. I can’t bring myself to do what I want to do if he’s watching me. Just telling him how I feel isn’t enough, if I’m going to be rejected, I want to at least get my one kiss.

Looking down at me, I can tell he wants to ask why or make some sort of teasing

joke, but in the end, he remains quiet and slowly closes his eyes.

He remains in his hip leaning position against the table with one hand in his pocket.

I shuffle about trying to get in position without touching him.

I'm going to have to in order to bring his mouth to mine.

This is it. I'm going to do it. I'm going to kiss Warren for the first and possibly last time. Here goes nothing.

Once I'm on my tip toes and using the table for balance I hover my hand behind his neck. I really hope he doesn't hate me after this.

In one thankfully synchronized movement, I pull him by the neck just enough to bring his mouth to mine. When our lips meet it's like I've been dying of dehydration and he's the cool glass of life saving water.

His lips are soft but in a firm line since he wasn't expecting me to kiss him.

I have no idea if he's opened his eyes to stare at me because I've closed mine, relishing in the contact.

Kissing Warren is so much more than I thought it could be.

It would be even better if he reciprocated the action, but his body remains rigid under my kiss.

He's not pushing me away so that has to be a good thing. Right?

I don't know. All I know is time stops and with my eyes closed all my other senses

take over.

I can smell the fresh cold air on his skin, the salt that dusts every surface of the boat, hear the lap of the waves and creak of the hull, feel the softness of the hair at the nape of his neck and the warmth of his body so close to mine.

When I'm sure I've stood here forcing him to kiss me for ten minutes, I pull away, lowering myself to my heels. Warren still hasn't moved. When I crack my eyes open, I'm staring directly at his bare chest that rises and falls with heavy breaths.

Shit. He's pissed at me and now he's never going to want to speak to me again.

Risking death by glare, I look up at him through my lashes. His eyes are wide but not filled with anger. Surprise and shock are present but so is bewilderment and interest.

I still have my hand wrapped around the base of his throat, having swiveled when I lowered myself. I can feel his pulse pounding against my fingers.

“I—”

I don't get the apology out, because Warren leans down and kisses me.

He kisses me . I don't even have time to think, just react.

His once immobile lips are no longer stunned but actively pressing against mine.

Moving and seeking more. Pressing and pulling back just to press again.

A combination of the hard and soft I imagined him capable of.

His hand has moved from his pocket to my loose hair, tangling in the straight strands.

His tongue sweeps out and prods at my lips finding easy access.

He tastes like beer and salt and my end.

Because after my first taste of him, I knew I would want more and more. Once isn't enough.

When his other hand digs into my hip and pulls me close, I let out a pathetic whimper that he devours with his tongue. At some point my arms wrapped around his neck and we've manage to get ourselves entangled in one another.

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I'll risk submitting to her fuck me golden hazel doe eyes

Holy shit. Those are the only two words my brain can process at the moment, because kissing Bambi has made me senseless.

Her first kiss surprised me so much I just stood there frozen like an idiot, watching her.

Her cute nose all scrunched up and her beautiful eyes squeezed shut.

When she pulled away, I couldn't allow her to go.

I had to kiss her back, had to taste more of her than that miniscule sample. It barely lasted ten seconds.

This kiss is not trivial, nor fleeting. It lingers and grows.

My heart racing like a wild bear rolling around in my ribcage.

She feels like a dream, one of my many hopeful scenarios where we finally give in to our mutual desires.

But this is real, she is real. The thickening of my cock in my jeans is real.

Her pliant body bending to my will is real.

What the hell is happening? Why is it happening now of all fucking times? Six days

before I leave forever. Fuck, her timing is terrible. Why did she have to wait till now? Why did she wait so long? Why...?

“Why?” I mutter against her lips when I break away to breathe.

“Why what?” her words are just as unsteady as mine.

I press my forehead to hers and close my eyes, inhaling her subtle scent of roses, which I know comes from a lotion not a perfume.

I almost stole a tube of it when I was younger and stayed at her house one winter.

The smell lingered on everything when I returned home.

It helped when my dad would go into a fit, to sit and inhale her scent on my sweatshirt, reminding me there are good people out there and although I may not be one of them, I know there's good in the world outside those four walls.

“Why did you wait till now to show me how you feel? Why didn't you tell me earlier?”

“I thought you didn't feel the same way about me.

I didn't want to ruin our friendship and make it weird to be around each other.

I was scared,” she admits in a small voice.

The same voice that she used to coax me out of the closet after a particularly unpleasant evening with my father.

The same voice she told me silly ghost stories with during a blackout.

The same voice she used to admit that one time, how much she liked me calling her Bambi.

It nearly breaks me, but I don't allow it.

Instead letting it settle in my soul, planting the roots buried deep into my being.

Because Bambi was already part of my soul, I just never allowed her to spread as far as I knew she would if I let her.

That doesn't matter now, as all carefully constructed dam breaks, and she floods my veins.

"You should never be afraid of me, Bambi. Never. You can always tell me anything."

Pulling back, I cup her jaw and relish in the way she presses into my palm, sighing in contentment, eyelashes fluttering against her freckled cheek where they rest before opening to look up at me. The vulnerability there is knee weakening.

I release a heavy breath and shake with restrained emotion for this woman.

The woman I've been in love with for years.

I know if I let this go too far, I'll risk submitting to her fuck me golden hazel doe eyes.

I'll become weak and stay. I can't let that happen.

That doesn't mean I can't indulge before I leave.

I may be the delinquent and her the good girl, but for once in my miserable life I can

give in.

I can allow myself to experience that tiny slice of happiness I've been denying myself for so long.

She'll always be too good for me and me no good for her, that won't change.

But I have to have her at least once, just to know what it would be like.

Giving in to my body's demands, I seal our mouths together again. Kissing my Bambi with leisurely and explorative strokes. Tasting every part of her and memorizing it for those long nights out at sea alone.

She whimpers and mewls in my arms and my cock strains even harder against my jeans at every sweet sound she makes.

I can feel my body pulsing with anticipation and desire, and I let it.

I don't fight it, don't suppress it. I let it flow and let myself feel for once.

And when I feel the urge to pick her up by her round ass and wrap her legs around my waist I don't hesitate.

She comes willingly, latching on to me eagerly and grinding her sweet little body against mine.

Her hips notching against mine and rubbing against my hard length.

Fuuuuuck me.

Stepping over to my small kitchen counter I set her ass on the edge and plant my feet,

securing my body in the cradle of hers.

Her heels hook around my thighs and I keep her pressed close with one hand on her ass.

When I lean in, desiring the feel of her perfect tits against my body I'm met with ice cold metal nearly stinging my pec.

I pull back with a hiss, growling at the buckles of her overalls.

"I have been wanting to get you out of these things for years." I tug on the strap for emphasis. "Why must you always wear them?"

The question comes out on a growl as I begin to unlatch the offending clothing. I have the straps undone and off her shoulders, revealing the swell of her breasts under her shirt, hard little points where her nipples poke through, before she can answer.

Fucking perfect.

"My mom used to wear them when she painted. I started wearing them when I missed her and one day just decided to always wear them because I always missed her."

Her honest and heartfelt answer has my libido slowing just enough to allow me the mental capacity to appreciate her words. She loved her parents, still does, even though they've been dead for sixteen years. Whereas I can't stand mine and wish I'd never met them.

I lean in and press a soft kiss to her lips, lingering there for a moment.

"You're always so goddamn good and sweet Bambi. I don't know why you want me when I'm so broken, but I'll take any bit of you I can get. Because not having you

might very well kill me.”

My confession must surprise her because her eyes go wide as I stare deep into them, practically drowning me in the golden orbs, although I don't know why. Hasn't it always been so obvious how much she means to me?

“Warren.”

My name is a breathy whisper on her lips and I wish I could hear it every night in my bed while I sink myself inside her. That'll never happen. All I have is tonight.

The boat sways under a small wave, probably from a passing boat, and Bambi reaches up to hold on to one of the many ropes dangling from the ceiling.

The sight of the smooth white fibers twisting around her wrists and fingers reignites my urgent need for her.

Watching them slide tightly over her skin and leave a small impression has me groaning out loud.

All sweet and good thoughts are gone as they're replaced with images of Bambi wrapped in my rope, eyes trusting and accepting, mouth open and waiting for her reward.

A.K.A. my cock. The mental picture has said cock twitching and thickening to a painful hardness.

My fingers dig into her meaty ass and I lift her, pulling the overalls off and down her body, exposing creamy pale skin, blue and white striped boy shorts, and more freckles.

The overalls and her shoes are disposed of quickly. I don't want them anywhere near my Bambi while I worship her body and show her what pleasures I can offer her.

I'm back between her legs and pressing my mouth hard to hers, slipping my tongue down her throat and tasting her sweetness.

Her arms start to lower from the ropes, but I reach up and thread my fingers through hers, locking them in place within the rope.

The combined sensation of feeling her skin and the rope in my hand nearly sends me over the edge.

My breathing is labored and I can feel myself shaking.

The need to wrap the rope around her perfect fucking body, and keep her immobile and at my will, is nearly overpowering.

"I need you to pick a safe word Bambi," I manage to say while trying to control my breathing, my face pressed against her shoulder as I fight for control.

I need her to be safe, I need her to know she's safe with me and I would never do anything to her she didn't enjoy.

"A what?"

"A safe word. Something you can say in case I get too...rough."

"Can't I just say stop?"

She's so innocent and pure she doesn't even understand safe words. I really shouldn't be doing this with her, but there's no way in hell I'm stopping now. I'll just have to

control myself.

“No. Sometimes we say stop but only because it feels too good. I need a word that means it doesn’t feel good, that it hurts, or you don’t feel safe. A word I won’t mistake for anything else.” I try to explain as clearly as my muddled brain will allow.

“Okay like...jellyfish?”

An unexpected laugh bursts from my lips, and I raise my head to look at her.

One side of her lips is curved up knowingly.

When we were teenagers, Bambi managed to get stung by a jellyfish one summer, and like every movie I’ve ever seen with a jellyfish sting, I offered to pee on it.

She adamantly protested, but in the end, I peed on her leg anyway.

There was a lot of yelling and sand throwing, but then there was a lot of laughing and jokes.

Bambi had covered her face with her hands when I started to pull down my swim trunks. It was adorable.

“Yeah, like jellyfish. So if there’s ever a time where something hurts or I’m too rough, anything, you use that word and I stop. You got it?”

She nods and bites her bottom lip. I suck it into my mouth and moan when she squirms against me.

“Keep your hands on the ropes Bambi,” I command, before removing my hands from hers.

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Leaning back just far enough, I reach down and pull her shirt up to her neck, revealing her cotton covered breasts.

Perfect handfults with tight pink nipples I can see through the thin material.

No lace, no frills, just soft pink cotton.

The bra has a front hook and I inwardly celebrate.

With one flick of my practiced fingers the closure opens and finally, fucking finally , I get an unhindered view of her.

A few goosebumps pebble across her milky skin and I trace a line down her cleavage, watching in rapture as her tits rise and fall with deep breaths at my touch. With her arms raised over head, it causes her breasts to lift even more just begging me to put them in my mouth. So, I do.

Tracing my tongue around her nipple before brushing the peak with the tip of my tongue then sucking it into my mouth.

Bambi moans and I have to palm my cock it's throbbing so hard.

I need to be inside her. Feel her tight wet heat swallow me whole and mark her as mine.

Just as she always has been, whether I could have her or not.

Bambi was always mine. Mine to protect, mine to love, mine to keep.

I cup her other breast and pinch her nipple playing with the hard pink point. I can hear her grip tightening on the rope above and I love it. She's such a good girl, in every fucking sense of the word.

"Warren. Fuck. Mmmm." Bambi mutters as I take my time familiarizing myself with her tits. Learning and memorizing every curve, freckle, and goosebump. Saving the sounds she makes when I touch her in my spank bank for later.

When I've had my fill of her nipples, nipping at them and leaving them wet and hard, I straighten and reach for my zipper.

Bambi watches, fascinated. I want to take my time and tease her, but I'm too wound up to wait.

First goes my jeans then my boxer briefs and Bambi's eyes are glued to my cock the entire time.

It bobs against my abs when I release it from its prison, and I silently groan at the relief.

I'm already leaking precum at the thought of having her.

And when she licks her lips, rolling them between her teeth I make a mental note to make sure I get my cock in her mouth at least once before the night is over.

My fingers shake with the adrenaline as I hook them in her adorably practical underwear and pull them down her hips, thighs, knees, calves and ankles. Once they're gone she spreads her legs for me, her pretty pink pussy glistening with her arousal.

“Look at you Bambi, such a good girl, already wet for me.”

I have to stroke myself a few times to ease the throbbing and urge to thrust balls deep in her immediately.

Bambi doesn't say anything, but I can read her expressions with ease.

Excitement, disbelief, desire, awe. That last one may have my ego inflating just a little.

My dick is pretty impressive. I squeeze the base of my thick shaft and hold it there for her to take her fill looking at me.

I'm taking mine looking at her. Strapped up on my kitchen counter with her shirt pushed up over her breasts and knees spread waiting for me.

I step back into the V of her legs and settle myself against her hot core.

Her center is slick and warm as my cock slips between her folds.

It settles naturally and perfectly against her body.

The rest of me follows suit. She always felt so right in my arms and now I learn every part of her feels right against me.

Like we're two pieces of broken glass fitting back together.

My arms wrap around her back and I eliminate every inch of space between us. Pressing soft kisses across her collarbone and up her throat stopping at her ear.

“Are you ready for me, Bambi?”

She nods.

“I need you to say it. Tell me you want me inside you. I have to know you want it as much as I do.”

Apparently tonight is full of confessions. Next thing you know I’ll be showing her how I hid her name in my chest tattoo.

“I want you, Warren. I’ve always wanted you.”

Her words are all I need to break that last thread of restraint.

Once this happens there’s no going back.

We’ll never be the same again. That is if I ever see her again.

I’m still leaving and for the first time since I began my journey to escape, I contemplate what it would be like if I stayed.

Stayed and explored whatever this is with Bambi.

Just as I’m starting to second guess everything, Bambi rocks her hips and rubs herself against my cock. All thoughts of goodness, settling down and staying flee. This is the only thing I can ever give her.

Pulling my hips back I slide my cock to position at her entrance.

When I slip the tip in, I can feel my balls throb.

She is so fucking tight. If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was a virgin, but unfortunately, I do know she’s not and the thought makes my hips surge forward,

pushing more of my length and girth inside her.

“Oh my god. Shit. It’s so thick.”

“Yeah, it is. Just for you Bambi.”

I thrust in deeper, and she mewls, urging me on. Her pussy swallows me in a tight hold and I shudder with restraint. I’m going to make her come multiple times before I finish. I need to, have to feel her come apart around me as many times as possible.

With a few smooth strokes I’m buried to the hilt and I have to clench my eyes shut and breathe in her rose scent to steady myself.

Once I’m in control again I begin to move. Long, deep thrusts intermixed with short fast pumps. The sound of our bodies connecting echoes through the cabin and I fucking hope the smell of our sex lingers for days.

When her moans and squeaks grow more rapid, I know her orgasm is growing.

Pulling back, I reach up and intertwine our hands again, using the position as leverage to lean back and piston into her.

I want to make her come with just my cock, then later I’ll make her come with my tongue and fingers, then again on my cock.

She won’t be able to walk tomorrow without feeling the reminder of me between her thighs.

Bambi’s pert tits bounce as I pound into her, making sure my pelvis slaps against her clit with every thrust. Her head falls back and she cries out as her pussy clamps down on my cock and she comes for the first time tonight.

Her orgasm pulses hard and tight on my shaft and I push in deep, rocking and flexing inside her prolonging her pleasure.

“That’s it Bambi, come for me. Soak me with your orgasm.”

I remain buried inside her holding my own orgasm at bay; which is near damn impossible with how hard she just came around my cock.

“That was...mmm”

Bambi’s body becomes languid and I let our hands fall from the rope. Hers easily wrap around my neck and I take advantage of her lips so close to mine and kiss her again. The tongue play has my still hard cock twitching and wanting more.

“We’re not done yet,” I tell her before picking her up and carrying her to my bed. I want her all over my sheets.

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I don't mind being held down by him

Warren wasn't joking when he said we weren't done. After blowing my fucking mind on his kitchen counter, he carried me to his bed and made me orgasm two more times, with only his mouth and fingers. Both of which are just as talented as his cock.

I'm nearly dead from all the pleasure but he still hasn't come. I can tell he wants to, that he needs to. A few times he had to grip his length and breathe deeply for a minute before continuing.

I can't believe I'm in Warren's bed and he's naked and I am becoming very familiar with all parts of him.

Every part of him is beautiful. I want to just sit and stare at his naked body for hours.

Then touch his naked body for hours. Then kiss him for hours.

Longer than hours. I would kill for years with Warren like this.

I'll have to settle for memories of this night because that's all I'll ever have.

We've made a mess of his bed, the blue comforter is crumpled to the side and the white sheets are all wrinkled beneath me.

I've just recovered from my last orgasm and Warren is kneeling over me stroking himself slowly.

I want to taste him like he tasted me. If tonight is all I'll have, I want it all.

Leaning up on my elbow I reach out and take him in hand and slip his hot hard length between my lips without hesitation.

Warren hisses and groans as I pull him deeper into my throat.

I can't take all of him, but my hand grips his base and I bob up and down his length, stroking up his shaft with every retreat of my mouth.

He looks down at me reverently as if memorizing every suck and lick.

I pop my mouth off his cock and lick up the thick vein on the underside, circling the head and gently running my teeth over his tip.

"Alright. That's enough. I can't take anymore," he proclaims, forcing me to release his cock.

I squeak when he playfully pushes me back onto the bed, my upper body bouncing slightly on impact.

He's positioned between my legs and presses the length of his body to mine the moment I'm on my back.

His mouth seeks mine, just as it has every time he's close enough.

Kissing Warren is a drug I'm finding myself quickly addicted to.

The withdrawals are going to be hell. Do they have rehab for kiss addicts?

I'm so wet between my legs he has no issue pressing easily inside me.

It's a lot smoother than the first time, but just as good.

He's a lot bigger than the guys I've been with before.

All hard muscles and flexing abs. His movements are always precise and perfect, hitting every spot I need him to.

He reads my body like a road map and follows all the directions it gives him.

We both groan loudly when he's fully inside me, pressing his face to the crook of my neck and sucking hard. It's a good thing it's getting colder, and I'll be wearing sweaters and scarves, because I will no doubt have one or two marks left by him in the morning.

He bites on the flesh of my shoulder, and I suck in a breath.

The sting of pain mixes deliciously with the pleasure his cock is giving.

He reaches up and grips both of my wrists above my head with one large hand.

I don't mind being held down by him. I like it even.

Knowing he wants me right where I am and under his control. I fucking love it.

My back arches and he slips his free hand to the small of my back then lower, cupping one ass cheek.

Urging me forward as he thrusts inside me.

Eager to find his release but drawing out the movement in long strokes.

Our bodies find a natural rhythm, perfectly in sync, as if we've known each other in and out for years.

I suppose we have, just not on such an intimate level.

Warren drives deep inside, reaching my very essence. I want him to shatter and feel everything he's been making me feel all night. I want to see it so badly I can't think of anything else.

His eyes find mine and stay there, his forehead resting against my own.

I watch his expression as it shifts. Soft desire turns into determination spurring on his movements as his pace increases.

Pupils dilate as his orgasm builds. I can feel my own growing again.

I never knew I could come so many times in one night, but Warren is proving there are many things he can make my body do and feel that I never expected.

Desire, lust, blissful pleasure, gratitude...love.

When his jaw clenches, I know he's close, but he still won't let himself fall over that edge.

"Come for me Warren. I want to feel it," I plead, wanting nothing more than to feel his cock pulse and throb inside me and hear him as he comes.

"Not yet. Not until you come on my cock again, I need to feel it first," he states with that determined look in his eye.

"Then make me come," I challenge him.

Oh my god, I just told Warren to make me come.

I never thought I would utter such words and here I am just acting all sultry and sexy and saying things like make me come.

Who the hell am I? I've never said anything like that to a man before.

But this isn't just any man, this is Warren, the guy I've fawned over for years in silent longing.

The guy who beat up a boy in high school for spreading gossip about popping my cherry.

He's so much more than any guy I've ever slept with.

I never wanted them to the point of obsession.

His hand on my ass clenches and he tilts me one way as his hips go another and he hits that spot deep inside no man has ever found before and I shatter. Screaming in pleasure, I feel him finally allow himself release.

His hips press hard against mine and I can feel his cock inside me pulsing and twitching and it only elongates my own climax.

"Fucking hell Bambi. Yes," he growls against my chest, burying his face in my boobs.

Every muscle in his body contracts and tightens as he stills inside me waiting for every last throb of his climax to subside.

The hand holding mine above my head loosens and I slip my arms around his

shoulders and hold him to me, not wanting to let him go yet.

He wraps both arms around my back and lets some of his weight rest on me, trapping me in his hold, just as tight as my own.

Neither of us wants to let go or separate.

I'm not stupid. I know I can't stop him from leaving.

No matter how much I want to. I always knew it would be the case if I were to get involved with him.

We both silently accept this for what it is while we hold each other.

One night. One time to be with each other and hold these memories for the years to come.

Tears begin to well behind my closed eyes but I won't allow myself to cry.

Not here, not now. I don't want to ruin this night or make him feel guilty for leaving.

I'll save them for when he's gone. When the nights are long, cold, and dark and I know he's out there happy. And possibly with another woman.

Much to my delight, Warren doesn't kick me out after our sexcapade is over.

Instead, he pulls me close, still completely nude, and cuddles with me.

Engulfing me in his warmth, I don't fight it when I fall asleep in his arms, rocked to a peaceful sleep by the gentle swaying of the boat.

I always liked being on the water. I find it calming and centering. I am a water sign after all.

?

Dull, grey morning light creeps in through the small windows in Warren's room.

With the oncoming winter and lack of sunlight I don't have a clue what time it could be, as I peer sleepily through slitted eyes.

It could be six in the morning or two in the afternoon.

There's no knowing without checking a clock or my phone.

Which I don't have because I left it in my room in Gigi's house.

The heavy arm slung over my waist is attached to an even larger body that's practically wrapped around me from behind. Spooning with Warren is a next level experience to wake up to.

I ignore the dawning, or already dawned, day settling back against Warren's chest, the coarse hair of his beard rubbing against the back of my neck. If he's not ready to get up yet, then neither am I. Detaching from him will only make the loss real.

Sadly, there's only so long you can pretend to be asleep before it becomes obvious, and reality takes over.

Warren stirs behind me, and I can hear him take in a deep breath. No doubt preparing himself to tell me to get the hell out and never speak of this again. Even though I knew it was coming, it still stings.

“Bambi.” His voice is quiet and reverent but also sorrowful. It’s good to know I’m not the only one suffering in the light of day.

“You can stay as long as you like, but I do have some things I need to do today. You’re more than welcome to help me organize supplies. I wouldn’t say no to the help.”

Basically, his way of saying we’re still friends but what we did last night has no bearing on the future. Got it.

“No thanks. I should probably get to the shop today.” I try to play off the awkward morning after as easily as he does, but I’m not as convincing.

His arm tightens around me for a long moment and he presses a soft kiss to my shoulder, before disentangling himself from me.

“I wouldn’t want to get in the way of your books. I know that you care about them more than your own life,” he jokes.

He’s not far off, I do care about my books very highly, and I’d gladly run into a burning building to save them. They are paper after all, they burn fast and easy.

Warren’s lighthearted joking makes it easier to get out of bed.

I have to wrap myself in the sheet and hunt around the bedroom and kitchen for my clothes.

We’re both quiet as we dress, but it’s a comfortable silence.

It doesn’t get awkward again till we’re in the kitchen and it’s time for me to leave.

My fingers tangle in my hair trying to get it to appear somewhat like I wasn't manhandled and fucked all night, as I try to find the courage to speak.

"So," I begin a bit unsteadily. "Do we just pretend like everything's normal, and nothing happened?"

He stops prepping his coffee and turns to face me, an unreadable expression on his face. Like he's trying to figure out if he really wants that or not.

With slow measured movements, Warren crosses the small space and slides a hand around my neck, stroking a thumb across my cheek in a way that feels more than just friendly.

"Nothing will ever be normal again, and I could never forget last night." He pauses before the inevitable but I know is coming. "But I'm still leaving. And what we did was just for us. It can't be anything more."

Leaning in close, he presses a heartbreakingly tender kiss to my lips, lingering long enough to make me reconsider his offer to stay. Maybe I could convince him that last night wasn't enough. Before I can slip my hands inside his pants and start convincing, he pulls away.

"You're one of my best friends Bambi, that won't change, but we can't be anything more. You'd be better off with someone else."

I don't really know what he means by I'd be better off with someone else. Wouldn't I be best with the person I love and who loves me? Well, I don't know if he loves me. Probably not. At least not any more than as a good friend. Not enough to stay.

My heart breaks knowing I'm not enough for him. Being with me is not enough for him. This life in this city is not enough for him. He's always wanted more and now

he's finally getting it.

For a girl who constantly reads, you would think I could come up with something to say, but my vast encyclopedia of words fails me. So, I just nod and mumble, "I'll see you later then."

Warren doesn't argue or attempt to convince me to stay.

The next week is going to be hell.

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You planning on showing me a good time?

I've been in love with Bambi since I was sixteen and spent the winter with her and Gigi.

The weather was especially severe that year, which forced the schools to close and all of us to become home schooled, as it does sometimes.

When there's too much snow and ice and it's unsafe to travel to school, they send us all home with packets of work to turn in by a deadline.

They would also post instructional videos on the school's website for each packet.

Being trapped at home with nowhere else to go and nothing for my father to do than drink, since there was no way for the boats to go out fishing in such weather, made for a less than pleasant home environment.

Only a few days into the home schooling and my father got in a mood, taking out his unhappiness on my face and twisting my wrist until it broke.

After I was released from the clinic, sporting a brand-new cast, I went straight to Gigi's house.

She let me in without question and called my parents to inform them I would be staying with her through the winter or until the cast came off, whichever came last.

Gigi is not a woman anyone in this town argues with. She's a tough lady who doesn't

take shit from anyone, is fiercely protective of those she loves, and makes a killer rhubarb pie.

That winter was the best months of my life.

Bambi and I spent hours reading books, or rather Bambi read me books.

I'm not a fan of reading, but I am a fan of listening to her read.

Even though she was a year younger than me, she made sure I finished all my homework and passed my classes.

I even had my first real Christmas since before my dad became intimate friends with the bottle.

We decorated a tree, after cutting one down from the acres around Gigi's house, made homemade presents and wrapped them with colorful paper and giant bows.

I think it was Christmas morning, when I opened Bambi's present, that I realized I loved her as more than just a friend.

She gave me a hand crocheted blanket that I know must have taken her weeks to make.

It was only big enough to wrap around my shoulders, had a few stray threads, and wasn't exactly a perfect rectangle, but I loved it.

Still have it, stored away in a box for safe keeping.

I had drawn her one of my doodles in the overall shape of a baby deer.

Within the design I included things she loved like books and roses, and all of our names, Bambi, Warren, Isabelle, Owen, and Gigi.

The four musketeers and one honorary musketeer.

Ever since then I've been trying to convince myself it was nothing more than puppy love, an infatuation because she was so nice to me.

Teenage hormones making me horny for any girl who smiled at me like I was the sunshine in her life.

Although Bambi was the only one who ever smiled at me like that.

Other girls only smiled at me like I was the next notch in their belt.

I may have also started teasing Bambi a little more than normal after that to conceal my admiring attention. I still like to tease her but in a far more flirtatious manner these days. And now I guess a more sexual manner.

God, I loved teasing her last night. Drawing out her pleasure until it was too much for her to handle and she broke.

She was beautiful falling apart under my hands and mouth and cock.

No other woman has looked so stunning. Her whimpers and moans are all natural, no faking or performing.

Everything about her is always real and natural, and beautiful.

I spend the entire day unboxing supplies and canned goods, carefully storing them in their proper compartments for my long journey ahead, and through it all I can't stop

thinking about Bambi.

I was such an asshole this morning. I should have been sweet and told her how long I've been in love with her. But the drunken slurs of my father filled my head, as they always do, no matter how many years it's been since I've heard it.

"A boy like you will never be enough for a girl like her. You're worthless and she knows it. You'll never amount to anything more than a loser who can't stand up for himself. You're weak Warren. Don't bring her down with you."

Father of the fucking century. It doesn't matter how many people agree that he's a worthless use of space and I should ignore everything he's ever said to me.

The words and the scars remain. Many of which are now concealed under tattoos of my own design.

Others, like the anchor on my chest with Bambi's hidden name, conceal emotional scars.

I'm going to have to get over her sooner or later.

Sooner would be preferable, since I'm leaving in a matter of days.

It'll probably be later though. Like way later.

Possibly years. Or an eternity. I've had years to get over her and haven't yet.

I'll just have to live with the ever-present feeling of a giant hole in my chest.

Shake it off Warren, you have other things to focus on right now. Like making sure the sails are secure, and that I have plenty of sunblock for when I get to South

America.

I manage to avoid Bambi for the next twenty-four hours. Her busy with running The Book Vault and me with preparing my boat. As long as she doesn't visit Gigi, it's easy to not see her for days.

My phone pings in my pocket and I stop waxing the deck and pull it out to see a text from Owen.

Owen doesn't argue. I figure he just wants to hang out again before I leave.

It would be good to have a little guy time.

Take my mind off leaving Bambi and her giant heart, addictive kisses and what I now know is a magnificently perfect body under those overalls.

And now I'm getting a semi thinking about her.

Yeah, I need something to occupy my mind before I break and sneak into her apartment and ravage her again.

I drive to the diner a block from The Book Vault in my single bench seat pick-up truck.

This truck has been with me since I was seventeen and bought it for five hundred bucks.

Much like The Knotty Boy , it required some work, a lot of work.

I didn't bother with the cosmetic crap, just the necessary.

Things like the heater and defrost. The bench seat is covered in an eighties style striped cloth and the radio is nothing more than a radio.

No bluetooth or sync here. The exterior is a faded patch work of blue paint.

I park at the diner and spot Owen through the window, laughing with Izzy and Bambi. Fuck. So much for guys night.

I momentarily contemplate turning around and leaving, texting Owen that I'm too busy to make it, but he spots me through the window and waves.

The girls turn their heads to see who he's waving at.

Izzy waves just as animatedly as her brother, while Bambi barely lifts her hand and wiggles her fingers, only the faintest smile pulling at one corner of her lips.

The movement is small and might not have been seen by most, but I see it.

Because all my attention is on her and her rosy cheeks, golden caramel eyes, and the creamy knit sweater that she wears under today's overalls.

Denim embroidered with animals and flowers. So adorable.

Sucking in a steadying breath I slide out of my truck and enter the diner. Acting like I'm not remembering waking up with a naked Bambi wrapped tightly in my arms.

"Hey man, finally. We were all hungry, so we ordered your regular," Owen greets me with a slap to my back, steering me towards our booth. The same booth we always sit in. There has to be a decade's worth of Izzy's gum stuck to the bottom of the table.

"Thanks," I manage and slip into the booth next to him directly across from Bambi.

“Hey Bambi.” My voice drops an octave when she looks up through her feathery lashes and the light catches on the dark green ring around her irises. She really is as innocent and pure as a baby deer.

“Hey,” she replies in a soft breathy voice I am far too familiar with now.

Izzy and Owen launch into a very loud and animated conversation, half of which I don’t listen to. Those two bicker like it’s an Olympic sport. Not for the first time I’m happy I don’t have siblings.

Our food arrives and we all shove our faces full of the same four meals we’ve been ordering for years.

Grilled chicken salad with walnuts for Izzy, spaghetti bolognese for Owen, double bacon cheeseburger for me and BLT with extra pickles for Bambi.

A giant plate of curly fries and every flavor of sauce they have set in the center of the table to share.

I’m going to miss nights like this, sitting with people I know better than myself and food I don’t even have to order but comes out perfect every time.

But that’s also exactly why I’m leaving.

To get out and see the world and meet new people and eat new food.

Sitting here may be comfortable but I’m tired of comfortable and predictable.

I want new and exciting, unknown and unfamiliar.

The fact that everyone in town knows about my history is a high incentive to leave.

“So, we were thinking we’d spend one last night together, like we used to in high school,” Izzy preens with a mischievous smile.

“Like what? Is it gonna get me in trouble like when you wanted to go for a swim in the school’s pool and lied saying we were allowed to be there but ended up in detention for two weeks?” Bambi, the forever law abiding good girl, shoots a glare at her best friend and I stifle a laugh.

“No. Just a trip to the hangout house.”

The hangout house is an abandoned house on like, ten acres of land just outside of town. Kids for the last twenty years have been using it for parties, hook-ups, weekend runaways from home. We use it as a hangout. On an occasion or two I used it for hook-ups too.

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The house is a two-story mashup of various styles of architecture, I think one is called Victorian, other than that I have no idea.

There aren't any restrictions when building in Alaska and whoever built the house seemed to have a flare for the unusual.

With one of those pointy witch hat towers and everything.

Now the house sits empty, windows boarded up and paint peeling. The locals have taken it upon themselves to redecorate the interior. When one kid tagged the exterior, someone saw it and the house was off limits for the next six months once the adults caught on to what it was being used for.

"Why do you want to go there?" Bambi asks. Izzy shrugs and pops another barbeque covered curly fry in her mouth.

"Thought it would be one last trip down memory lane. Ya know because Warren's leaving us forever."

Izzy gives me an unapproving scowl. I give her one right back.

"What do you say man? You in?" Owen bumps my shoulder with his and I risk a quick glance at Bambi. She looks apprehensive but hopeful.

On any other day I would say yes, so why shouldn't I now? If I said no, it would be more suspicious.

“Sure. Why not.”

“Sweet. You’re driving.” Owen pushes me out of the booth, and we all set down the same amount of cash we always do that we know will cover our food plus tip.

“What do you mean I’m driving? You know my truck only seats three.”

“It fit all four of us fine in high school. It wouldn’t be a trip down memory lane without all of us piling into your truck.”

It was standard for us all to squeeze into my truck whenever we all went somewhere together. Even though Owen had an SUV that fit five or more people, for some reason we just always went in my truck.

“Well, adult us aren’t going to fit,” I argue.

“Sure, we are,” he smiles and scoops Bambi up with a squeal and loud laugh. “Rae will just have to sit on my lap. Problem solved.”

Hell to the fucking no.

Bambi is not sitting on anyone's lap, especially another guy's. My pulse picks up and that all too familiar burning jealousy and possessiveness kick in harder than they ever have.

“No, she won’t.” I jog around Owen and snatch Bambi right out of his arms and settle her in mine. That’s better. “You’re driving.”

I toss Owen my keys with the hand behind Bambi’s back and he catches them, a dumbfounded look on his face.

“What? Why? It’s your truck, you always drive,” he argues, still confused how I ended up with Bambi in my arms and the keys in his hands.

“Yeah, well starting next week it’s your truck. So, you should drive.”

I don’t give him time to argue or question my motives. I circle to the passenger side of the truck and slide in with Bambi on my lap.

“You know I could just as easily sit on Izzy’s lap,” Bambi teases.

At least she’s not angry with me. She has every right to be, but I exhale a slow breath of relief knowing she isn’t. She even grins at me.

“Yeah, but do you really want Izzy groping your ass? You know how handsy she can get,” I tease right back.

Bantering with Bambi feels normal, right.

Far better than the odd quiet she was while we ate.

She settles in my lap, and I wrap both arms around her, turning her back to the door and crossing her legs over my lap.

Her thighs rub against my zipper and other parts that make me glad her legs are concealing my growing erection.

Bambi’s arm wraps around my neck and she leans in close, engulfing me with her rose scent.

The tip of her nose skims across my stubbled jaw and I have to force myself not to turn and take her mouth with mine.

That would be hard to explain. Instead, I dig my fingers into her outer thigh and stroke the material of her overalls, imagining the smooth skin hidden beneath.

Izzy scoots into the middle seat from the driver's side since I didn't exactly give her time to enter through the passenger side.

Owen follows behind and we all settle in for the short ten-minute ride to the hangout house.

It's a tight squeeze but not as tight had Bambi not sat on my lap.

We're all wearing thicker layers as the temperature decreases with every day.

An inner war battles in my chest between wanting to leave before the snow and ice trap me here and hoping it does and I won't have to leave.

Damnit. Why does Bambi have the worst timing ever?

If she had expressed her feelings for me years or even months ago, things would be very different right now.

But she didn't and they aren't and I'm too close now.

I didn't spend all these years not allowing myself to have her just to give in now.

She'd still be better off with someone else.

We arrive at the hangout house, the sun nearly set on the horizon. We won't have very much sunlight left. It's already more of a foggy haze.

When I slide out of my truck, Bambi is still in my arms. I don't want to put her down,

but I have to. Reluctantly setting her on her feet, letting her body glide down the length of mine, relishing in every moment of contact.

“Alright, one last B&E for the road.” Owen grabs the flashlight from my glovebox and bounds for the front door of the house.

The paint has long faded and peeled from its siding, the windows on the first floor remain boarded while most of the second story windows are bare, a few broken.

Weeds grow in the unkempt yard and the gravel driveway has long disappeared.

There’s a detached garage that’s seen better decades and is in even worse condition than the house. No one goes in there anyways.

Someone pried open the front door years ago, the two by fours across the front are just for show. Something to deter snooping adults so they think it’s locked up, but it isn’t.

We’re probably way too old to still be coming to this place. Pretty sure it’s been something like four or five years since we’ve been here. It still looks the same. Just like everything in this town always does. Nothing ages, nothing changes. Well, some things change.

I glance at Bambi walking at my side as we step up onto the porch. She’s changed, I’ve changed. But is it enough?

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Probably too many romantasy novels

I've always loved this house. Not because it's a place for unchaperoned high school parties and hook ups, but because of its unique beauty.

I have a thing for antiques and secondhand items. This house is just another prime example of how something old and used can still have the potential to be beautiful and useful again.

With a little elbow grease and paint, I'm sure new life could be breathed back into it.

Owen leads us all in, ducking under the wood planks nailed across the door frame. The cone of light from the flashlight illuminates the darkening interior.

Years of adolescents making their mark are layered in paint on the walls and floors. A mosaic of spray-painted dicks and names, declarations of love and hate. Generations of history left to age in the dark dusty house.

Even with the new art addition, the house remains beautiful and intriguing.

I'm probably the only one who ever took the time to admire the architecture and attention to detail the original builder took.

High ceilings, crown molding, wooden floors, ornate door frames and stained glass.

Thankfully no one around here is cruel enough to smash the glass and the colorful panels remain in arches over doors and on ceiling mounted light fixtures.

The foyer leads into a wide central hallway, rooms branching off on each side. A den, family room, office, or so I'm guessing. The only furniture in the house was brought in by kids. Folding chairs and crates all plastic and completely out of place in the house.

On our left halfway down the hall is the main staircase, a wooden marvel that over the years has gained its own renovation.

Names and dates are carved in the banister and steps.

Nothing as vulgar as the wall cocks and curse words.

Initials with hearts around them and a few carvings of simple images and shapes.

Flowers, a dear, a fish or two. This is Homer after all, fishing is a way of life around here.

The stairs make a one eighty U-turn halfway up and there on the banister, is where we all carved our names the first time we ever came here.

I was fourteen and it was my only occurrence of vandalization.

My name looks like it was written by a toddler but in my defense, carving on wood is far more difficult than it looks.

The light shines back and forth from room to room as we pass and approach the staircase. It's darker down here since the windows are all boarded up.

"Looks like a few new artistic renderings of the male genitalia have been added to the collection," Izzy comments as she shines her cell phone light on the wall, revealing the rather detailed drawing.

“Someone’s been peeking through my window. That looks just like mine,” Owen smirks and Izzy mock gags as if she really were looking at her brother’s dick.

“They must have been looking through a very powerful microscope then for it to look that large.”

“How would you know? Have you been watching me? That’s gross. I’m not into incest.”

Izzy punches her brother in the arm, and he laughs while rubbing his bicep.

“That’s disgusting and if you mention incest again, I’m going to tell mom what really happened to her curtains.”

Owen instantly stops laughing, his smile falling into an open-mouthed gape.

The infamous story of their parents’ bedroom curtains and their untimely demise has been a well-guarded secret between the siblings that not even I or Warren know.

Apparently, it’s so embarrassing that Owen will never tell us and too juicy for Izzy to give up the ability to blackmail Owen with.

“Fine. But one day that threat won’t work anymore, so use it wisely.”

Owen points a finger at her and squints manically while backing away. Izzy sticks her tongue out at him and smiles in triumph. It’s always some sort of competition between them, no matter what it’s about one always has to outdo the other. Those two really are weird.

Warren follows silently behind me as we reach the stairs. We all stop on the landing and find our carved names. They’re worn smooth now, unlike when we first carved

them and the edges were so jagged splinters were imminent.

I run my fingers across my name, all blocky and crooked, while Warren's next to mine is practically perfect. His fingers graze mine as we both caress the smooth wood. I hadn't noticed how close he'd gotten. Practically spooning me while standing, his arm wrapping around me to reach the banister.

"I can't believe it's been twelve years since we carved these," Izzy ponders out loud.

"I can."

My soft admission is met with still silence. If there's one thing Alaska has an abundance of _ besides moose _ it's silence. It never felt so heavy before. Knowing this is probably the last time in, either forever or at least years, that we'll all be together like this.

I thought living in a small town meant everyone would always be around. I guess some people's wanderlust is greater than others.

"I wonder if anyone stole my stash of porn." Owen breaks the silence in a way only he can, and we all laugh at him.

You can always count on Owen to keep everything light and playful.

He doesn't like silence or crying or anything serious for that matter.

I know the smiles and glee he's been exuding at Warren's departure is mostly a front to conceal his sadness at losing his best friend.

Izzy and I still have each other, and we'll always be there for Owen, but we're no replacement for Warren.

His closest, most trusted male friend. It won't be the same, but I know he's doing his best to make sure Warren doesn't feel guilty for leaving. I have too...sort of.

“What? I'm serious. That was primo porn and a bitch to keep hidden from my parents.”

Owen climbs the remaining stairs and wanders off to one of the upstairs rooms, Izzy trailing behind the ever-present peanut gallery to her brother. Which leaves Warren and I alone on the stairs, standing far too close together and our hands still resting on the railing, fingers barely touching.

He doesn't move away when they leave, if anything I think he leans closer. The heat of his breath brushing the loose strands of hair around my ear. He doesn't say anything. I'm not sure how I would reply if he did. Instead, I stand there in the circle of his body and enjoy the closeness.

He said we couldn't be anything more than friends and I don't expect a second night with him but...he's so close. Like he doesn't want to move away, like he wants more but isn't willing to admit it.

I give in to my desire and lean back against him. His body is hard but inviting, everything I've ever wanted. His arm wraps around my middle from behind and he lets out a soft moan on an exhale. As if finally holding me again soothed something inside him. I know it's soothed something inside me.

The hand on the railing slides over, covering mine, and his fingers thread between mine, gripping the wood beneath and holding me in place. As if I was going anywhere.

“I know I was a bit of an ass the other morning. I'm sorry about that. Don't think for one second it makes what happened between us less significant.”

My heart races in my chest at his words. Maybe there is hope for him to stay after all? My stupid heart is far too optimistic and even that tiniest bit of hope spreads like frost on still water.

“Could I maybe come over tonight?”

For a moment I don’t fully process his question.

My initial thought is he wants to come hang out and have dinner and watch a movie or something like we’ve always done, but then I realize what he’s really asking.

He wants to come over , come over. Like stay the night and be naked again.

I would very much like that. But I need to sound cool, casual, not eager and desperate.

“Sure.”

Nailed it.

“I’ll come over after we get back to the diner and drop off Owen and Izzy. We should probably arrive separately...”

His words trail off and I unfortunately know what he’s trying to say without speaking. The growing hope in my chest fizzles out a little but not completely. I nod in agreement. I’ll take him anyway I can get him.

Warren bends down and nuzzles into the crook of my neck, pressing a soft kiss to my jaw, my knit sweater obstructing access to anywhere else. He groans against my skin.

“You always smell so good.”

My fingers tighten around his on the railing. I want to turn, to press my lips to his and live in his embrace. I know I can't though. I can still hear Izzy and Owen bickering and banging around upstairs.

"Found it!" I hear Owen exclaim loudly and it's the only warning before he comes stomping back to the stairs.

Warren disentangles our hands and steps away from me, shoving his hands in his pockets. While I stand dizzy and recovering from the loss of him.

Waving an ancient magazine with a naked woman on the cover, Owen jumps the last few steps to the landing, Izzy close on his heels. Triumphant in his recovery of ancient porn.

"Was that really valuable enough to dig out of whatever hole you hid it in?" I ask, trying to recenter myself and act like nothing is different from any other day.

"Hell yeah."

He flips the glossy pages open with a flourish, revealing the editions centerfold.

"Miss July was the star of all my adolescent fantasies."

"And adult dreams. Weren't you just talking about her last week?" Warren asks, ignoring the naked busty beauty on the paper.

"Oh yeah, she's still got it after all these years."

Both Izzy and I shake our heads at him. Izzy gives him a smack on the back of the head for good measure.

“Grow up,” she scolds.

He ignores her and admires his prize, gently folding it back together and tucking it under his arm.

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“Are we done reminiscing now? It’s not exactly warm and cozy in here and I think I hear my couch calling.” Me wanting to leave has nothing to do with the fact that Warren is coming over. None at all. I’m simply cold and tired from working at the shop all day. That’s all.

“Fine, you party pooper. We can go now.”

The four of us pile back into Warren’s truck after one last long look at the house. Again, Owen drives and Warren insists I sit on his lap for comfort. The press of his hand to my thigh, a promise of things to come.

~

When Warren leaves the diner he heads in the direction of his boat at Gigi’s, and I walk the block to The Book Vault and my apartment above.

This secret meeting each other and hiding it from our friends feels odd.

I’ve always told Izzy everything, including all the men I’ve slept with.

How good or bad they were, things they did that were weird or amazing.

If they wore socks while having sex. Not telling her I finally got to be with Warren feels unnatural.

But what would it accomplish telling her?

Warren's still leaving in less than a week.

Nothing is going to come of us spending a few nights together.

Bringing it up would only make things awkward.

I've kept my feelings for him hidden from everyone for this long, why change that now?

Especially when telling Warren hasn't really changed anything.

I make it into my apartment and set about filling the wood burning stove to heat up the place.

It has a heating unit, but the stove is more efficient and costs way less to heat the small space.

There's only two bedrooms and one bathroom, a small kitchen connected to an all-in-one living space that houses my cozy couch and four-person dining table.

Nothing in my home matches per se. The dining table is from the fifties with glittery silver vinyl seats.

My couch Victorian tufted red velvet. The end tables spacey art deco pieces from the seventies.

It's eclectic and I love it. Whoever said décor and furniture had to match was crazy.

The pieces are still completely functional even if they don't.

Books lay stacked and open on nearly every surface.

Living above and owning a bookstore comes with its perks.

Especially a new and used bookstore. No one minds the creases or bends on the well-loved books.

I've even implemented a rental system, so if there's something here that's not at the library, they can rent the book for a small fee.

If they love it, they can buy it or return it when they're done.

Kinda like the old movie rental stores. I even make book baskets they can buy as gifts for someone, filled with bookish items to match their book of choice.

I just wish we weren't so far away from the lower forty-eight. Maybe then I could schedule some authors to come in and do a signing event.

I sigh, striking the match to light the wood in the stove. There are just some things you have to accept when living in Alaska. Like always being cold, and living for months with no sunshine and the possibility of being snowed in.

You might not think the shop would do well when businesses have to shut down sometimes for weeks, but being a bookstore, we do fairly well.

When the internet goes out what do you think people do to fill the time?

Read. Which is why the rental program is great.

I make weekly deliveries to local homes on my snowmobile.

Okay, well it's Gigi's snowmobile, but she lets me use it when the snow is too deep or icy for the car.

People love it and it helps keep me in the black during those times.

I straighten up the place, neatly stacking the haphazard books and put a record on the turntable.

Another analog way to keep entertained when the power or internet goes out.

Living off a generator is a real thing here and not having to charge devices and use up fuel is a great saver.

There's a lot Alaskans have to consider when living here that many other Americans don't ever have to worry about.

It's just one of the things that makes living here so unique, and why I don't want to leave.

I'd hate to be so glued to my phone and computer all the time that I don't know what to do with myself if the power went out.

Or how to get warm without electricity and store food for when the delivery trucks can't get to us.

I just feel more involved in living and enjoy the world around me more this way.

Makes a person look up, notice, and appreciate what's around them.

I don't have to wait long to hear Warren's footsteps climbing the stairs to my door. I turn to watch as he enters. He hasn't needed to knock in years. Hell, all three of my best friends have keys to my place just in case. You can't be too safe when living alone.

Warren strides in, silently shutting and locking the door behind him. Sliding the chain into place just in case any of those with keys try to stop by uninvited.

I swallow thickly. The look in his eyes is predatory, and like his prey I freeze in place. Watching him make his way across the room at a pace that says I'm in no rush.

Stepping around me, he reaches out to the floor to ceiling curtains bracketing my large bay of front windows.

Pulling on the tassel rope tie, he releases one set of curtains and pulls them over half the windows.

Then repeats the action on the opposite side, concealing us from the world outside.

The turquoise rope tie remains in his hands, and he wraps it once around his fist.

My gaze remains fixed to his hands and my pulse quickens at the tightening of the cord and flexing of his fist. My mind is a bit fuzzy on the specifics of our first time together, but I do recall him liking my hands wrapped in the rope hanging from the ceiling of his boat.

I picture Warren tying me up and having his way with me and I'm not turned off by the image.

"Wrists," he commands in a calm even voice. I raise my wrists in obedience, positioned in offering to him.

Warren's eyes darken and he exhales heavily, as if he wasn't expecting me to obey but thrilled that I did. This tying up thing must be a kink of his. Is it just restraint he likes or is it the ropes? I may not be practiced in the art of kink but I've read plenty.

He reverently wraps the sleek rope around my wrists in a practiced manner that says this isn't the first time he's done it.

A spike of jealousy shoots through me knowing he's done this with other women.

But another stronger emotion overpowers it.

Lust. Desire. I want him too much to worry about the women who came before me, and the ones who will come after.

Securing the knot on the rope he checks his work, satisfied. There's still room for movement so I don't chafe but there's no way I can work myself free from his skillfully crafted knots. My wrists are bound together with one tasseled end dangling like a leash, held tight in Warren's hand.

Lifting my bound wrists, he slips them over his head, causing me to stand on my toes. Our new position brings our faces so close I can feel his breath on my lips.

"Just where I want you," he whispers into my lips before finally kissing me.

It's a desperate but reverent kiss. Water to a man dying of dehydration.

He savors me, wrapping his arms around my waist and digging his fingers into my ass.

Lips pressing and sucking, his tongue languidly learning every inch of my own.

Unhurried and purposeful in his exploration, as if he hadn't learned every inch of me the other night.

My knees go weak and I'm glad for Warren's arms around me and the rope holding

mine together.

“Can I have you a little longer, Bambi?”

The question is a plea spoken against my jaw as he trails the lightest kisses along my skin. Doesn't he know by now I will always say yes to him? That I would take an eternity or an hour with him.

“I'm yours for as long as fate allows.”

I feel a little poetic in my response, probably too many romantasy novels. Even with my whimsical answer he understands, his mouth finding mine again. This time hungry and demanding. I give as much as I get and am rewarded with a growl in the barrel of his chest.

Lifting me by the back of my thighs, he wraps my legs around his waist and grinds the thick length of his erection directly against my core and I whimper. I may never get over this man, even after having him I'll always compare men to him, and none will ever match up.

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I could pay homage for hours on my knees

Bambi was so willing to let me tie her wrists. I hadn't intended to tie them but when my fingers grazed the curtain ties my impulse took over. I wanted to see how accepting she would be to my particular brand of kink. More than accepting it turns out.

With her arms locked around my neck and her legs around my waist I walk us into her bedroom. A place so familiar and yet so foreign at this moment.

Her mouth never leaves mine as I set her back on her feet.

Removing my head from between her arms I begin to unbuckle her overalls.

They fall to the floor with a muted thud, and I can see cold bumps raise along her skin as it's exposed to the cool air of her room.

Soon the stove and our activities will warm the space up.

I run the tip of a finger along her thigh and watch her suck in a shuddering breath.

I quickly remove her boots and pants from her ankles.

Kneeling at her sock covered feet I press hot kisses to her knee and thigh, her bound hands coming to rest atop my head and thread through my hair, pulling at the roots.

The sting of pleasurable pain has me groaning.

Slipping a finger along the strip of fabric between her legs I find her wet and warm. She moans when I suck on her clit through her panties and digs her fingers tighter into my hair.

My dick is throbbing against my zipper and the pressure is both a punishment and a reward. My hips rock instinctually, rubbing my swollen head against the straining material with enough force to ease my growing lust momentarily. At least enough to allow me to continue in my tasting of Bambi.

Hooking my thumbs under the side of her panties I pull them off, only detaching my mouth from her pussy long enough to remove them. Licking a long line through her wet slit and worshipping at the altar of Bambi. I could pay homage for hours on my knees, but I want more. I want it all.

I remain with my head between her thighs for a few minutes, ensuring she's worked up before pulling away and standing.

The moment I'm on my feet she reaches for my waistband.

Popping the button open and unzipping my pants.

I assist by shedding my jacket and shirt while she pulls my jeans to my ankles.

Expertly might I add considering her hands are still bound.

I kick them and my shoes off and stand naked before her, cock bobbing hard between us.

Her bound hands circle my shaft from each side engulfing me in her hold.

The long strokes paired with the slight rubbing of the rope against my balls and thigh

cause blood to rush fast and hard to my nether regions, almost making me lightheaded.

“Fuck Bambi, you’re gonna make me pass out that feels so good.”

“I bet it would feel better with my mouth on it.”

She’s not wrong but in the aroused state I’m in even the thought of being in her pretty mouth has me leaking precum.

“It most definitely would, sweet lips, but I’m in control here. You do as I say, and I say we take this top off.”

I reach for the hem of her sweater and instantly realize my rookie mistake. I tied her wrists before removing all her clothing. I curse and fidget with the garment as if I could magically remove it without having to untie her. I could always cut it.

“How much do you like this sweater?” I ask hoping she says she could care less about it.

“Don’t you dare cut this sweater Warren Graham.”

Bambi glares at me, telling me if I even brought scissors near her sweater we will not be having sex tonight.

“I need to see you, all of you.”

She bites her lip in contemplation, eying her wrists then still clothed torso. She rakes her gaze up and down my naked body, lingering on certain appendages.

“Sit on the bed.”

Demanding little thing. Didn't I just tell her I was in charge? I raise an eyebrow at her. She jerks her chin towards the bed, and I like demanding Bambi.

I follow her instructions and sit on the edge of her floral print quilt covered bed. To my delight she immediately straddles my hips and presses her hot center to my cock, lifting her arms in the air.

"Pull my shirt off and let it hang at my wrists."

Curious where she's going with this I pull her sweater and shirt over her head, letting them bunch at her bound wrists, then unhook her bra and do the same. Now she's bared to me all her remaining clothes clumped at her hands.

With a flick and flip she tosses the clothing clump over my head and wraps her arms around my neck, allowing me to see all her glorious nudity.

Reaching up I cup her small breasts and rub my thumbs over both nipples. She responds to my touch, breathing heavily and squirming in my lap.

"Now you can have me this way with no clothing in the way."

"My clever little Bambi."

Wrapping my hands around her hips I raise her up and line the head of my cock with her entrance. There's no hesitation in either of our movements. Bambi slowly lowers herself on my length as I help her along, pressing her hips down.

We both moan in pleasure as her pussy takes all of me inside her.

"You feel perfect around me," I praise, knowing my good girl likes that. I like praising her.

“You feel even better inside me,” she counters. I don’t argue.

Our bodies begin to move in tandem, my hips rocking and hers lifting and lowering. I keep her steady by cupping the round globes of her ass. When she gets too eager, I give one cheek a slap and she yips, the pink flush of her skin spreading.

“You like that?”

She nods, biting her bottom lip. It’s grown pink and plump from her fidgeting. I suck it into my mouth and soothe it with my tongue, pressing it inside her mouth as I thrust up inside her pussy, swallowing her noises of pleasure.

I usually don’t like to be in a submissive position with a woman, but with Bambi I’d let her take me any way she wants. Doesn’t mean I don’t still want to tie her in my ropes and take all control away from her.

My cock thickens inside her tight channel at the image of her completely encased in my ropes.

I would very much like to see that one day.

She seems open to it, maybe I can finally complete a full body tie.

Others were too skittish to attempt more than one binding.

Usually lacking the patience it takes to complete all the knotting and wrapping.

It’s a tediously erotic experience when done properly.

I bet Bambi would be a good, patient girl for me.

My internal thoughts have my arousal peaking and my pace increasing. Circling my thumbs around the crease of Bambi's hips I press her down hard and simultaneously thrust into her.

"Oh my god, Warren. That...yes..."

"Are you going to be my good girl and come when I tell you?"

"Yes, yes. I'll be good." She nods her head frantically, loose strands of her copper hair sticking to her sweat dampened forehead.

"Good," I grunt and force her hips to grind her clit into my stomach and use the flex of the bed beneath me to my advantage, practically plowing into her from below.

Her eyes glaze and I can feel her cunt tightening on my cock. Fuck she feels perfect, smells perfect, tastes perfect. How did I deny myself her perfection? How fucking stupid am I?

Bambi presses her tits to my chest and the scrape of her hard nipples against my skin has my balls drawing up and the tingle of my orgasm gathering at the base of my spine.

"I'm gonna come, Warren. I can't hold it off any longer," she warns.

"You don't have to. Come with me Bambi."

As soon as I say the words her orgasm breaks and floods her body. Her pussy clamping down on my length as I bury myself inside her and explode. Pulsing out my own release, her spasming convulsions draw every ounce of cum from my body.

Our bodies shake in synchronism, as we draw pleasure from the other.

I pull her body as close to mine as possible and seal my lips to hers, rocking my hips into her one last time. The sweet mewl she lets out is swallowed by our locked lips.

It takes a few minutes for us to come down from the high our mutual pleasure caused. I remove her binds and the clothes that gathered there, massaging her skin gently to ensure the blood flow hasn't been restricted.

After gently cleaning her and myself in the bathroom, I carry her back to her bed. The apartment now more than warm, and I slip us both under her quilt pulling her onto my chest. Pressing her still naked body to mine, loving the way she feels against me, even in a non-sexual manner.

I really am an idiot for letting her slip through my fingers when I had her in my reach this whole time. What the fuck am I going to do now?

~

Apparently, think about her nonstop all day.

It's been another three days, and I've snuck into her apartment every night and crawled into bed with her.

Each time using the tie from her curtains to test her comfort with bondage.

I haven't gotten up the courage to ask her for what I really want yet.

Tonight, I will though. I have to, it's my last night here.

At least my last full night.

Tomorrow I'll go to sleep on my boat and wake before dawn to leave. I told them

they didn't have to see me off in the morning, but all three of them insisted they would stay at Gigi's the night before and say their final good-bye.

So, this is my last night alone with Bambi. Weird how I went from excited to finally be leaving to questioning if it's the right thing to do.

Because it's our last night together I want it to be special.

And if I'm going to ask her to let me tie her up to the point of immobility, I should at least bring wine.

Which is why I'm at the liquor mart staring at the shelf of wine and trying to find the one brand I know she likes.

There's only one and I'm not leaving without it, I know they have it somewhere.

As I lean over, pushing aside white wine bottles hoping to find the elusive one hidden behind them, I hear a voice I've managed to avoid for the better part of a decade.

"Warren?" It's my mother's voice, and I pray that when I stand up, she is alone.

No such luck. My father, Isaac, the douche bag of the century, stands at her side and slightly in front of her. Always pretending to be the man of the family. Like he's worthy of being the head of anything. I suppose it has more to do with my mother being a willing submissive.

Interesting.

I knew my desire for bondage had a lot to do with my upbringing, but I never directly made the correlation before.

At least not in such a visible representation.

It sickens me to know I have anything in common with my father.

Makes me wish I didn't like the bondage and control so much, just so I can say I'm nothing like him.

That I didn't get off on the control and submission of my partner.

I guess no matter how much physical distance you put between yourself and your parents, one way or another you can't escape your DNA.

"Mother." I address my mother but not the man responsible for donating sperm to create me. He's no more of a father than I am.

"I thought you were running away?" Isaac says in that mocking asshole way of his. You know the tone, the one that no matter what you say always sounds condescending.

"Not running away. Just putting as much distance between you and me as possible."

My attempt at an insult is apparently funny to him, because he chuckles. And I want to stab him in the eye with my fish gutting knife.

"Aw, poor baby doesn't like his parents. How typical and average of you. Looks like I was right, and you amounted to nothing. So disappointing."

Rage boils in my veins and not for the first time I have to physically restrain myself from beating the shit out of this man.

He doesn't deserve anyone's respect or civility, but the last thing I need is to be

arrested for assault twenty-four hours before I'm finally able to escape this place and him.

"Shouldn't you be used to it by now? I'm sure everything in your shitty life is disappointing." I'm a little proud of my snarky comeback, especially when it knocks that slimy shit eating grin of his face.

The man who claims to be my father but I'm still unsure he is, steps forward as if he's going to intimidate me or take a swing.

Neither would be wise. I'm much larger now than I was when I was twelve, and he's grown a rather rotund beer belly.

He doesn't scare me anymore. I could easily hospitalize him if I wished.

Would have a few times in the past too had it not been for my friends talking me out of it.

Bambi specifically. She's too nice for her own good.

Believing everyone deserves a second chance.

Everyone but Isaac Graham. He can eat dirt.

A piss poor excuse for a human like him doesn't deserve a second chance.

Even though I had no intention of backing down from his advance, my mother reaches out a hand to his arm, stopping him with barely any effort. All posturing and no follow through, now that he knows he would lose.

"Now, now, Warren, don't upset your father like that. We just wanted to say hello."

Typical mom, take his side and blame me. Fuck these people and their twisted idea of a family.

“Me? Be upsetting? Never,” I mock. Mom scowls and Isaac sneers. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a bottle of wine to find to drink with my friends before I leave this fucked up town forever.”

I turn my back on them but don’t leave. I do still need to find that white wine for Bambi and I was here first. I don’t even know why they’re in the wine isle. My father only drinks beer and hard liquor.

After a moment of tense silence, I hear their feet stomp off behind me. If I ever needed a reminder of why I was leaving I just got it.

I manage to find the bottle I’m looking for, pay for it and leave. Thankfully my parents are gone by the time I walk out to my truck.

Tonight, will be me and Bambi, tomorrow will be my last day here with my real friends and then I’m gone. There’s too much history and hate in this place overshadowing any good that may come. My friends made it better but sometimes that’s just not enough.

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I keep it oiled

“Ooh, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea , good choice.” I set the book on the counter along with the three other books Mr. Nelson picked out. “Will you be renting or purchasing?”

All the books he chose are from our used section so he can do either.

“I would like to buy Twenty Thousand Leagues and rent the others please.”

“Of course.”

I ring him up and give him a date to return the rental books by, reminding him they must be in the same, or close to the same, condition when he returns them, or he will have to purchase them.

The books go in his canvas tote and he sets off, wrapping his thick scarf around his wind beaten neck and grey beard, before stepping out the front door.

The doorbell chimes and I smile and wave as he exits, a cold gust of wind making its way inside through the temporary opening.

The cold only reminds me Warren will be leaving soon.

Really soon. Like one day from now, soon.

I don't let the inevitable heartbreak dampen my smile.

My customers don't need to know I'm pining over him.

If I didn't smile, they would ask why, and then I'd have to lie and I'm not the best liar.

"I'm done with the stocking," Lauren calls out as she approaches the register.

It's made from a section of the original bank teller counter, with an ornately carved window frame, where there would once have been bars or glass, but have since been removed. Only the wood frame remains now, allowing for more personable check outs.

Lauren leans on the counter, her dark red hair spilling in long curls over her shoulders.

There's a lot of redheads and gingers in Alaska.

Not sure why, but there are. Many tourists ask if we're related because of it.

Unfortunately, the only family I have left is Gigi, and her red hair has long since turned white.

But it feels like Lauren could be family.

She's worked here since high school, nearly as long as I have.

I don't have to ask her to do things or scold her for not doing her job, she just knows what needs to be done and does it.

She really is the best employee. I hope she never leaves.

Thankfully she's said there's as much chance of her leaving as me, so I think it's safe to say she's sticking around.

Lauren also works as a bartender on the weekends to make more money. Especially in the slow season.

We may be a fishing town, but that doesn't mean we don't get our fair share of tourists. Summer months are busy, and winter is slow. Stockpiling nuts like a squirrel is habit.

"Great, I'll close out the register. You can head home. Mr. Nelson was our last customer."

"Great."

Lauren walks to the door and flips the open sign to closed, locks the door and pulls the shade down on the window.

"See you tomorrow."

"Goodnight," I call to her bouncing red curls as she heads to the back office to grab her things and leave out the back door.

There's a small parking area behind the store where she parks her car.

There's also a small one car garage where I keep mine parked.

If I were to leave it outside the thing would rust into pieces before I drove the dang thing.

Pretty sure I've spent more money maintaining my bicycle than my car.

Probably not a good idea but the bike gets more use.

I follow in Lauren's path, turning off lights and carrying the cash register tray to put in the safe for tomorrow.

Like many things in my life the register is an antique, used mainly for aesthetics.

We still enter everything into the tablet kept behind the counter, which we also use for credit card payments.

The register is only used for the minimal cash transactions _ and its satisfying catching sound _ so it's more of a guilty pleasure than anything. Plus, it matches the counter.

It's not long into my nightly routine of locking up and checking the store before I hear a knock on the back door. My heart races and my mouth goes instantly dry knowing who's on the other side of that knock.

Warren stands outside grinning and holding up a bottle of my favorite white wine, when I open the door.

"Hey there. Thought I'd bring something special for tonight."

"Are we celebrating or commiserating?" I joke.

"Celebrating, always. I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise? For me?" Maybe it's that he's staying. "You know I love surprises."

I really do. I hate when people spoil movies and the end of a book. You have to enjoy the little things in life and those so happen to include surprises of all kinds.

Warren presses his way into the store and closes the door behind him.

His body taking up all the available space.

In the past I would find excuses to be close to him, sit by him, lean in to look at something over his shoulder, stand close to him in line.

Always wanting to reach out and touch him, but unable to.

Now however, I don't have to because he comes to me.

Leaning in he presses a kiss to my lips that I'll dream about for years.

"Well, I hope you'll like my surprise," he says in between kisses.

My brain's gone a bit fuzzy. Kisses from Warren will do that, but I notice he's brought a bag with him as well. He usually doesn't bother with an overnight bag but there's a small black bag slung over his shoulder.

"Is it in the mysterious bag?"

"Maybe. You'll just have to wait and see."

"How about we go upstairs, and you can show me now?" I suggest. I've closed everything up for the store and there's a secondary door to the interior staircase leading up to my apartment, so we don't even have to go back outside.

"Sounds perfect."

I lead Warren up to my apartment and check on the wood burning stove, ensuring there's plenty of fuel to keep us warm for hours. I don't want to interrupt whatever

surprise he has for me because I need to add more wood to the stove.

“Okay, so what’s the surprise?” I ask as I watch him carefully set the bag on my dining table. Hopefully it’s not breakable.

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you for a while now. Something I’d like to do before I leave.”

My heart sinks a little at the mention of his impending departure barely twenty-four hours from now. I try to hold my smile in place, but he can tell my smile is a little more forced than before. Still, he goes on.

“Something I hope we’ll both enjoy. I think you will. There’s this thing called shibari. It has other names and lots of technical terms, but the gist of it is that it’s Japanese artistic, sensual, rope bondage.”

That was not at all what I was expecting him to say. Although not completely out of character. I’d noticed his appreciation for rope and how he liked to tie my wrists and restrain me. It’s mostly been minimal and playful, but I have a feeling this won’t be. The idea is...tantlizing.

“And the surprise is?”

The corner of his lips quirk and his eyes soften as he watches me, reaching into his bag.

“I was hoping you would let me tie you up. Properly.”

From the bag he produces a carefully wound ocean blue rope. It looks smooth and glossy, like it’s been oiled or something. No random coarse fibers sticking out like a regular rope would. The color reminds me of the water in the bay. Crystal blue and

endless.

Warren holds the rope reverently in both hands, patiently waiting for my reply.

“How much of me do you want to tie up? Is it like tying my wrists and ankles to the bed?”

“Not even close. I want to bind your entire body in my rope. I use special knots and rope to create a pattern on your skin. If you’re uncomfortable with being immobile I can tie the rope in a way where you can still move and use your arms and legs.

But the most common use is to restrict movement.

To put precise pressure on your body. Lots of people don’t even consider it sexual.

It can be an art, done for anxiety and other purposes.

“I will admit though, I like the control, and it is very sexual for me.”

I step closer to inspect his rope. I’ve used rope on boats my whole life, and although it’s smoother than basic rope you would find at a hardware store. I’m not sure how comfortable I would be with it wrapped around my entire body.

“Can I touch it?” I ask when I’m within reaching distance.

“Of course. I want you to be as comfortable with it as possible. And know I would never do anything that would injure you. If anything doesn’t work for you or is uncomfortable you tell me. And of course there’s always your safe word.”

“Jelly fish.”

“Exactly.” Warren’s voice has gone deep and husky as he watches me reach out and run my finger along the silky-smooth surface of the rope.

It is far more pleasing to the touch than any rope I’ve ever felt before. I can imagine the sensation of it sliding over my skin and am innately curious to experience it. I liked it when he tied my wrists with the curtain tie, wanted more of it even. Perhaps this is something I would enjoy.

“It’s so soft,” I remark while still inspecting the bundle of rope in his hands.

“It’s jute rope, specifically made for bondage. I keep it oiled and properly maintained. While temporary rope marks can be erotic...” Warren’s breathing turns shallow, and the soft brown of his eyes darkens. “Permanent damage is unwanted.”

His eyes trace the shape of my face and down my neck to my visible collarbone.

“So, it won’t hurt then?”

“Not if I do it right. And I always do it right. Especially for you Bambi. So, what do you think? Will you let me wrap my rope around you?”

The fact that I’m more concerned with how the rope will feel rather than being restrained should be answer enough.

I trust him with everything. If he told me he built a spaceship and we were going to fly to Venus, I wouldn’t question it.

Warren would never knowingly put me in a position to be harmed.

“Do I get completely naked? Or leave my panties on?”

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I look up at him through my lashes, my heart racing with the anticipation of his unexpected surprise.

My arousal growing with every second that ticks by.

I thought my fantasies of him before got me all hot and bothered, but they are nothing in comparison to how I feel with the real man standing in front of me, looking down at me like he wants to devour me.

I've never been the focus of such intense attention before. I didn't even know it was possible. Yet here I stand, panties growing damp, just from him looking at me. And thinking about letting him tie me up in his super special rope.

"Completely naked. If I'm only going to get to do this once, it's going to be perfect. I want to see every inch of your skin and every place my rope touches. I want to watch your skin flush beneath it and pinken with arousal, and just a bit of pain."

I swallow hard and nearly choke on my spit. Not to mention the fluttering going on in my nether regions right now. Every part of my body is on board for this experience. I too would like to do it properly if it's the only time I'll ever get to experience it.

"Kay," I whimper like a fool.

"Bedroom, Bambi," he softly commands.

"Uh huh." I nod and robotically turn to walk to my room, Warren following close behind me.

When I stop dead in my tracks at the foot of my bed staring at it like a woman in a trance, Warren wraps one arm around me from behind, holding me close to his chest. He leans down and presses a kiss to my jaw, which immediately calms me.

“Don’t worry Bambi, you’re in good hands. Now take off all this annoying clothing.”

He tugs on my overalls and I almost snort at his playfully derisive tone.

He’s controlling but not in an aggressive way.

At least not with me. I’ve heard him be aggressive and demanding with others, but he’s never taken that tone with me.

Maybe because he knows he doesn’t have to.

I do anything he asks _ as long as it was legal.

He knows I won’t break the law beyond going into the hangout house.

And I know he respects me enough not to force me into anything.

It’s a weird relationship we’ve manifested over the years. Close enough to know each other’s blood type, but far enough away to still be learning secrets after so many years. To not completely know what’s going on in the other’s head but keep getting closer trying to.

I feel like we’ve been on a merry-go-round that is slowing to reveal the specifics of the world around us for the first time.

Unbuckling my overalls I slip them off and then the thin sweater, goosebumps rising on my skin as the air brushes over it. The entire time Warren remains behind me,

quietly watching. That is until I hear the sound of his zipper, then the unmistakable rustling of fabric. He's getting undressed too.

My nipples pucker as I remove my bra and drop it to the growing pile of clothes on the floor. I stand in nothing but my panties now and I can feel every sensation as Warren runs a warm hand over my butt then hip and holds it there, playing with the edge of my panties with his pinky finger.

"These too."

I pull them off and turn around to find him completely naked too.

His muscles hard and tight, the rope gripped firm in his left hand, his cock straining forward, hard and ready.

I may stare at it a moment too long, but I don't reach out and touch it like I want to. Instead, I wait for his instruction.

"This is going to be more painful for me than you. I'm already hard and heavy as an anchor, and it's only going to grow with every slide of my rope over your skin.

I do have to warn you though," he tilts my chin up, forcing me to look him in the eye.

"This may take some time, so please be patient. It's not always about the end result, but the process it takes to get there. "

"Okay." There's not much more for me to say. I'm completely out of my depths here, along for the ride at this point.

"Remember your safe word and to let me know if anything is too tight or hurts. I don't want you to lose blood flow to a limb because I was overzealous in my tying."

He gives me a heart stopping grin and presses a soft kiss to my lips, while I stand here like a window display mannequin.

“On the bed,” he directs.

My bed is low to the ground, easy to get in and out of when you have short legs. With a wrought iron headboard and footboard, painted gold and looking like it would fit right in, in an old west saloon.

Warren directs me to sit on the edge and kneels in front of me. With the minimal height of the mattress that puts us almost at eye level.

“I’m going to start with your chest and arms and work my way down. Okay?”

I nod. “Okay. I trust you Warren, and I want to do this. I want to know what it feels like.” To be everything you want, and someone worth staying for.

I keep that gem of a confession to myself and smile softly, reassuring him. He uncoils the rope which makes a muted thud as it hits the rug covered floor.

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Otherwise, my balls are going to implode

It takes nearly forty-five minutes for me to get Bambi properly tied in my ropes. I may have gotten distracted a time or two by her nipples, the swell of her breast, the curve of her hip and ass. I already knew exactly what knots and patterns I was going to use on her before I arrived.

Diamonds down her front, framing her perfect tits, a lead tied to the center knot right between her breasts.

Her arms are bound at her side, restrained completely and anchored to her hips instead of her back.

I didn't want to hurt her shoulders and wasn't completely sure of her flexibility and circulation.

I didn't want to risk hurting her. Especially since I plan on leaving those on for a while.

Her legs are bent at the knee with a ladder of knots trailing up her outer thigh, holding her calf to her thigh, forcing her to remain in one position.

She looks beautiful like this, and my cock has been straining with the erection of the millennium throughout.

I've never had a woman so thoroughly restrained.

My caerulean ropes striping her skin from neck to ankle are beautiful.

I have the sneaking suspicion they wouldn't look as perfect on any other woman, only her. Only my Bambi.

“Perfect,” I whisper reverently. “How do you feel?”

Bambi sucks in a breath and her tits press against the ropes as her chest rises, the bonds forcing her to arch her back just enough to extend her chest out in the most enticing way.

“Wet. Horny,” she answers unexpectedly.

I thought she would say something like, okay, restrained, tight or something along those lines. Not wet and horny. Although the evidence of her arousal glistens between her parted thighs.

God, I want to fuck her like this. Would she let me? Either way I need something. Otherwise, my balls are going to implode.

Standing in front of her, I stroke myself, relieving the tiniest bit of pressure. In this position her mouth is perfectly aligned with my groin. Without thought I tell her to open her mouth, and she obeys. Her soft pink lips parting and tongue already reaching for my length.

She really is perfect. Why the fuck did I stay away again?

She's always been there for me throughout the years.

Made me smile when the weight of the world wanted to force me down.

Accepted me no matter how many times I got arrested.

She even stayed my friend when I slept around like a harlot to pay for the restoration of my boat.

She doesn't know that's why I did it though, and she never will.

I'd rather her see me as a horn dog than a dick for hire.

Even now as I reveal to her my most inner twisted desires, she doesn't even flinch. She goes willingly, wantonly.

I just wish this realization came at a better time. Like ten years ago, when I could have started something meaningful with her. Built something resembling a life here. Not now. Now that I've kept her out of my heart for so long and can finally escape my family forever. But maybe?

All thoughts flee as soon as her lips connect with my cock. Swallowing inches of me as I slide inside her hungry mouth. She sucks and hums around my shaft, finally giving me some real relief. The feel of her taking my cock has my mind blanking and my body relaxing.

I look down at her, gathering her ponytail in one hand as she glides up and down my length.

Arms tied to her sides, legs immobilized and spread wide.

I watch her body strain against my ropes as she continues sucking me down her throat.

She can't take all of me, but that doesn't matter.

She takes as much of me as she can, and when I feel my head bump the back of her throat, I make sure to pull back so she doesn't choke or gag. But I can't stop my hips from shifting.

With her ponytail of red locks still gripped in one hand I reach for the leash I created at her chest, coiling the rope around my hand and wrist. Gripping the fibers in my fist I use the tension to pull her closer, effectively forcing my cock further down her throat.

Bambi's doing so well, breathing through her nose and sucking on my cock every time I allow her to pull away. Tonguing my tip and treating it like a sugary lollipop.

My head drops back, and I stare unseeing at the ceiling. Focusing on the feeling of her in my hands and on my dick. The slick slide of her tongue and slight scrape of her teeth. The rope tightening in my grip as I pull her closer and hold her there.

"Fuck that feels good." I release the tension on the rope and allow her to pull off my cock. She sucks in deep breaths and licks her lips. "Does my good girl want to feel good too?"

Her fingers dig into the comforter at her sides, the only movement she's currently capable of.

"Yes, please."

"Very well. Since you asked so nicely."

Unwinding the rope from my fist I let it fall and rest at her side. Should I tease her while she's in this position? Or should I release her legs? Decisions, decisions.

I decide on untying her legs. She's not used to being in this position and for the first

attempt, I think that was more than enough time. Her arms and torso however stay bound.

The ropes come away faster and easier than they went on, leaving slight indentations on her freckled pale skin.

I can't help it and reach between her thighs, stroking her center and clit as I move from one leg to the other.

She moans in appreciation and sways forward.

Maybe next time I'll keep her legs restrained and her arms free.

What the fuck am I thinking? If I leave, there won't be a next time. But if she comes with me...

As soon as her legs are free, she stretches them out and lets them dangle over the edge of the bed.

"How do they feel? Did you lose any feeling or circulation?" I ask while rubbing her muscles gently, loosening the tension there from the position, as I kneel between them.

"I feel wonderful."

Scooting forward, she uses the only part of her available and wraps her legs wide around my sides.

My hands slide the length of her from knee to ribs, tracing the lines of rope as I go.

Pressing her back to lay down, since she doesn't have her arms for balance.

Her legs go over my shoulders and I pull her ass to the very edge of the bed and bury my face between her thighs, licking at her arousal and sucking her clit.

Bambi moans loudly but I barely hear it with her thighs squeezing my head like earmuffs.

I press her thighs apart and slip a hand in to stroke at her entrance, holding her legs open with my elbows to keep her from smothering me with her delicious pussy.

Not that I wouldn't mind dying while licking her, but I have more to do tonight.

I keep my mouth on her clit and my tongue in her pussy until she comes with a scream, her juices coating my lips.

"I'm not done with you yet," I tell her.

Standing, I pull Bambi's pliant body up from the bed by her harness and make sure she's steady on her feet.

"Time to make you scream with my cock now."

~Raelyn~

Not having the use of my hands or arms is such a rush.

Being at the complete mercy and control of Warren stokes my desire even higher than before.

I wanted to dig my fingers into his hair as he ate my pussy but couldn't.

I couldn't pull him closer or twist his head to the side, I just had to take his attentions

as he gave them.

And boy oh boy did he give it. He didn't need any redirecting or instruction.

The man knew exactly where to lick, suck and stroke, fast and slow. My orgasm nearly blinded me.

Even after all that he's still going to make me come again with his cock. Which I am looking forward to.

Using the rope still bound around my torso and arms, he directs me to where he wants me. Which is exactly where I want to be. Turning me around he gently guides me to my knees on the bed, holding me up by the back of the ropes.

"Bend over now, and I'll hold you up."

He wants me to go doggy style without using my hands and arms for support?

Well, this should be interesting. I do as he says, slowly leaning forward and spreading my knees farther apart for better balance.

I thought I would fall flat on my face, but Warren holds me steady with the ropes which puts a pleasurable pressure everywhere they touch.

Holding me at an angle but not as far as I would be were my hands free.

"That's it Bambi."

The way he praises me using my pet name, has me whimpering and shamelessly presenting my ass to him, hoping he'll fuck me soon. Thankfully I don't have to wait long. The head of his cock presses against my wet opening and slides in easily,

stretching me to full.

With one fluid thrust he sheaths his entire length inside me.

“Fuck. Warren!” I cry out his name as I feel his balls press hard against my throbbing clit. “Oh god.”

The combination of sensations has my body and brain going into overload as he begins to fuck me from behind. His thick cock pulling out and filling me each time. The sound of our bodies joining and slapping is almost as erotic as the rope still bound around me.

“You look perfect like this. Tied up in my ropes, at my will. Fuck yes,” he groans. His hand and the ropes dig into my flesh as he holds me and pulls me back onto his cock with a loud slap.

He continues his punishing pace, no longer able to restrain himself after the near hour of teasing.

I don’t mind. After the first orgasm my body is soft and warm and already starting to coil and tighten for my next climax.

I don’t know how he coaxes them from my body so easily.

I can’t even make myself come as easily as he can.

Tingles race up my spine and my pussy clenches around his length.

Just listening to him grunt and groan as he thrusts into me has my nipples hardening painfully.

I wish I could reach up and pinch them. But I can't, and that added heightening of desire has my orgasm creeping up quickly, my legs shaking and my breaths coming out quick and short.

“Warren, I'm gonna come again. I can't stop it, it's too much.”

“Don't stop it, let it happen. Come on me. Let me feel it.”

On a whimpering cry my orgasm crashes and ripples through me. Every part of my body sensitized and vibrating with pleasure.

“Oh Jesus, yes. You're like a vice around my cock. Fuck. Here it comes.”

With a growl and groan, Warren presses his hips flush to my ass and holds still deep inside me. His cock pulsing out his release and I can feel it throb and twitch, his hot cum coating my insides. I've never felt anything so intense in my life.

My body shivers as he gives me one last thrust, before every muscle relaxes and goes limp. If it weren't for Warren holding me up, I would have face planted in my comforter and died of asphyxiation, because I have absolutely no strength left in my body.

Warren gingerly pulls out and pulls me up right, holding me around my waist. My head lulls back against his chest and he turns my face to seal his lips over mine. He tastes of sweat and sex, and I lap it up as our tongue tangle.

“Come on, let's get you out of those ropes before we both pass out.”

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I will gladly paint your canvas if you're asking me to

I can't believe what just happened. It's like my wildest dream come true. Bambi completely encased in my rope and coming on my cock.

I'm a fucking idiot.

That's the only reason I can come up with as to why I let other people dictate my actions involving Bambi.

Sure, she's the good girl to my bad boy, doesn't break the rules and is sweet as apple pie, but she's also fucking perfect.

Considerate, accepting, joyful. Not to mention she's apparently a little bit of a freak too.

I think she enjoys being tied up as much as I enjoy tying her up.

We lay in her bed, pleasantly exhausted and still completely naked, wrapped in each other in a way I don't think I've ever done with another woman.

In a way I would never be with another woman, I realize.

There's no one in this world like her and no matter where I go, I know I will never find a replacement for her.

I trail my finger over her skin, drawing patterns and designs I would love to see inked

into her skin. My mark on her body forever like hers is on me.

Getting an idea that I can't shake, I reach down to my jeans on the floor and pull out a fine point sharpie. I always have one on me. You never know when you will want to vandalize a bathroom stall.

Bambi is laying on her stomach, her perfect round ass propped up and waiting for my mark. I lean over her and begin doodling.

"What are you doing?" she chuckles but doesn't stop me.

"Marking you. Property of Warren," I playfully say as I draw on her ass cheek.

"What? You are not."

She rears up from the mattress trying to look over her shoulder and make sure that's not what I'm writing. I laugh and press on her shoulders, moving her back to laying on the sheets.

"No, I'm not writing that. But I am marking you as mine, putting my brand on you."

A long time ago I thought I would one day be a famous artist. That was before my father beat that dream out of me. But when I was still star eyed and na?ve I created a signature that I was going to sign all my masterpieces with. If there's one masterpiece in this world it's definitely Bambi.

I draw the design carefully making sure each curve and line is perfect. It doesn't take me long.

"There, finished."

“What is it?”

“My signature. Marking you as my masterpiece.”

I toss the pen to the floor and admire my work and canvas for a moment, memorizing the image.

“I can’t see it,” Bambi complains.

“Um do you have a mirror or something? Oh, here.”

I grab her phone on the nightstand and take a photo and show it to her.

I stylized the first three letters of my name ‘War’ with graceful swirls and loops in a way that make the letters look more like shapes creating a whimsical but geometric design.

I didn’t want my signature to look like a name or letters but thought it would be so cool to be the artist only known as War.

Childish dreams, but the design is pleasing, especially on Bambi’s ass.

“So, am I just your canvas now? Are you going to draw all over me?”

I crawl up her body and lay down pulling her on top of me, placing her phone back on the table so she can use those fingers to touch me. My time with her is limited and I want her hands on me as much as possible.

“You’re beautiful as you are, but I will gladly paint your canvas if you’re asking me to.” I give her a devilish grin and am now thinking of painting her in my cum. Just as good as any paint.

Bambi slaps my chest but immediately rests her head on my pec, pressing herself tight against my body. I pull the blanket over us and think I could lay here with her in my arms forever. But I also can't. Not after that reminder today running into my parents. But there's another option.

Pulling Bambi tighter to my chest, I tuck the comforter around her tighter, keeping her warm.

"Come with me."

"What?" Her voice is sleepy and muffled against my chest, and I love the sound. My determination solidifying even more with my decision.

"Come with me. Leave with me on my boat. See the world with me." I don't know why I didn't think of this before. It's perfect. She'll come with me, and we'll travel the world and find a new place to plant roots that is nowhere near my parents or my past.

Bambi sits up, looking at me with a confused furrow in her brow.

"You want me to go with you? On your boat? In one day?"

"Yes." She doesn't sound as excited about this idea as I thought she would. I want to be with her and take her with me. We both get what we want.

"I can't do that Warren." Her face is crest fallen and she scoots up the bed, leaning against the headboard with the blanket pulled tight around her.

I follow her progression and sit next to her, keeping close. I can't let her go now.

"Why not? It's perfect. We get to stay together and get away from freezing cold

Alaska, and my parents. We get to see the world and have an adventure. Find somewhere better.”

“I like Alaska. Also, I have the store and Gigi. I can’t just drop everything and leave on a whim in one day.”

The sleepy sweetness is gone now, and she looks at me, obviously displeased with my last-minute offer.

“Okay then, we’ll wait a few more days. Get everything settled and leave then,” I suggest. We could delay leaving for a few days. Not any more though. I already waited till the last possible time before winter sets in.

“No.” Her voice is stern but also sad. Why is she sad? “I will not be a last-minute impulse buy. I have a life here Warren, one I happen to like. A lot. I knew you could be selfish, but not like this. Did you even consider me when you came up with this idea?”

I freeze, and not from being naked. Bambi’s never spoken to me so angrily before.

Why is she so angry with me? I asked her to come with me.

I want to be with her. This is the perfect solution.

How can she not see that? Besides, she was the one who started all this by kissing me.

I was perfectly content with how things were and ready to leave without any issue until then.

“Then why did you kiss me? Why did you wait until I was already leaving to get

involved with me?" I demand, getting a little angry now myself.

"Because I had to know. I've waited years for you to open your eyes and see me, and you never did. I had to find out for myself if my feelings were only one sided. And if I could only have you once before you left forever, then so be it."

"So that was your plan?" I ask haughtily, scooting away from her so I can turn and face her straight on. "To use me for sex, just like the rest of them?"

My words hit harder than I expected and Bambi winces, her eyes glistening with the threat of tears. Fuck this is not going the way it's supposed to. She wasn't supposed to get angry and cry, she was supposed to be happy and cry with joy. What the fuck is happening?

"I've never used you for anything other than friendship Warren. I just figured it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Looks like I was wrong. Because this isn't love, just lust."

She scurries out of bed and grabs a robe slung over a chair, covering her beautiful body that's still pink with my rope marks.

"I think you should leave now."

"What?"

How did this go from the best night of my life and being immeasurably happy, to her kicking me out and claiming she doesn't love me?

My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach and nearly seizes with the realization of what's happening. I can't leave. Not without her. Can I?

“I shouldn’t have kissed you that first night. I realize that now. It was a mistake. You’ll never be able to think of anyone but yourself.”

I crawl out of bed and cross the room to her, reaching to hold her, pull her close and tell her how wrong she is. But she recoils from me, pulling farther away. Not just physically but internally as well. All softness falls from her face and in its place is heartbreaking resignation.

She won’t come with me. She also won’t ever understand how wrong she is.

Yes, I’ve had to put myself first to protect my own heart and mental well-being, but I’ve also always thought of her.

If she was safe and happy. That no one and nothing hurt her or took advantage of her pureness.

I’ve even gotten arrested twice because of the things I did that she never knew about.

But I also learned a long time ago self-preservation came first. If I couldn’t take care and protect myself, how would I ever be able to do it for someone I loved?

I’ve worried for a long time about what would happen to Bambi after I left.

Almost talked myself out of leaving because of it.

Sometimes there are things that take precedence over others, though.

And no matter how much I love Bambi; I hate my parents more.

The pain and trauma they’ve caused me over the years doing too much damage to ignore.

I grip my bare chest, right over the anchor tattoo with her name hidden within and try to ignore the cracking beneath somewhere in the vicinity of where my heart should be, and the lump in my throat.

“Fine. If that’s what you want, then I’ll leave.”

A flash of panic shines in her golden gaze, but she doesn’t move to stop me. She doesn’t say or do anything other than pinch her lips into a thin line and stare at me.

In jerky uncoordinated movements I get dressed and shove my rope and belongings back into my bag.

Bambi follows at a distance behind me as I make my way through her apartment.

Only when I have everything in my hands and stand at the door to leave do I stop.

Looking back at her over my shoulder, hoping she tells me to stay, that she changed her mind, and she will go with me.

She doesn’t do either. She doesn’t do anything, dropping her eyes to the floor when I don’t look away first. I think I see a tear roll down her cheek, but she turns her head away from me and I can’t tell.

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I suppose it's better this way. We shouldn't have started whatever this was in the first place. It's better to break it off and be done with it. But I have to say something. She has to know that no matter what happens or what she thinks of me, I always loved her and always will.

“You may think I only think of myself, but you should know there's always been one other person I never stopped thinking about Bambi. And no matter what she says, it was never just lust, and it wasn't a mistake.”

I'm not sure if my meaning gets through to her because she turns her head further away from me, burying it in the fluffy collar of her robe.

My hand fists around the strap of my bag and I itch to turn around and stay, but don't. Instead, I face the door and open it, knowing it'll most likely be the last time I ever step through it again.

~

A day of pure agony passes after I leave Bambi's apartment. I barely sleep and the dinner at Gigi's is awkward. Thankfully everyone thinks it's because of my leaving rather than the secret relationship and breakup between me and Bambi.

I think Gigi suspects something because she eyes me then Bambi before narrowing her eyes at me again and probably looking into my soul seeing everything I keep hidden.

Dawn comes quick, or at least the time that is normally dawn but is still dark because

of the season, comes quick.

Everyone is out on the dock, wrapped in jackets and blankets and sleepy eyed.

All except Bambi. She doesn't look like she slept at all, still wearing the same clothes she was last night.

She stays at the back of the group while everyone else presses forward.

"I can't believe you're actually leaving," Izzy mumbles, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "You have to come back and visit. I don't care what you said before, you have to."

"We'll see," I say, because I know saying no will just make her argue more.

I give her a tight hug and memorize her knowing smile and tangled blonde hair.

She's been this way since grade school, and I realize how much she's changed since then.

Growing from the string bean bossy pants, to the class president and prom queen, and now to the still bossy, charity planning, and committee heading woman.

I suppose I'll have to come back when she finally decides to marry James.

I would be a real ass and horrible friend if I didn't.

"You better, or I'll have to come find you," Owen interjects as Izzy steps back allowing her brother to take her place.

Owen hugs me, and not just a bro side hug, but a full embrace with a matching back

slap.

“You’re welcome to come find me whenever you want. You’re always welcome on my boat.”

“I may just do that. It would be nice to leave the freezing cold for a warm beach and babes in bikinis.”

I internally cringe. Not only do I not want to babe watch at the beach but that had to hurt Bambi as well. And since I can’t exactly deny him and blurt out everything that happened with Bambi over the last week, I just grin and nod.

“You make sure to call me, okay man? Don’t forget about us up here.” Owen's tone changes from jokester playful to an uncharacteristically solemn seriousness.

“I could never forget you Owen. You’ll always be my best friend. And as long as I have a signal, I’ll call.”

Being out in the middle of the ocean I don’t always have cell service, only my radio to call in for emergencies.

“Alright, my turn,” Gigi demands, shoving Owen out of the way.

Gigi’s hug lasts the longest, her surprisingly strong arms locked around my waist. I imagine this is how it would feel saying goodbye to a mother.

“You be safe out there. And when you’re ready to come home, you know where to find us. You’re always welcome here.”

“Thank you, Gigi.”

She cups my face in her hands and pulls me down to press a kiss to each cheek. Holding me still for a long moment while searching my face before releasing me with a pat to my cheek.

“Be good,” she whispers as she pulls away.

She knows I won't. It's not in my nature. That would be all Bambi. The last one to say goodbye, and the most reluctant. In her hands she holds a small, wrapped package the size of a book. It's clutched to her chest protectively. Slowly she makes her way to me when Gigi moves away.

“Here.” She thrusts the package towards me. “I got it for you a while ago as a going away present.”

I take the object which is undoubtedly a book by the feel of it.

Unwrapping it immediately, because I have to know what she thought to get me.

I expect something useful like a guidebook, or something traditional like Moby Dick .

What she gives me is far more meaningful.

A beautiful copy of *The Man and The Sea* by Ernest Hemingway.

Oddly enough I know this story. It's a tale of an old man who is so determined to catch a massive marlin, that he is out at sea for three days before capturing it only to have it eaten by sharks, returning home with nothing but its bones.

A tale of reaching beyond your means and being too stubborn to accept the truth, only to return home empty handed in the end. I'm sure there are other interpretations of the work, some religious, but the obvious symbolism is there in the story itself. Her

meaning to me.

I look back up at Bambi, who's nearly frowning down at the book in my hands, unable to look me in the eye.

"Thank you," I say, and because I can't leave her like this, not with everything we said before. I pull her to my chest, wrapping my arms tight around her and burying my face in her shoulder inhaling her rose scent.

She doesn't immediately respond, but when I don't pull away, she tentatively wraps her arms around me and squeezes tight. She may be angry with me and won't come with me, but even she can't let me go without this.

"I'll miss you, Bambi. And I do love you." I whisper the words in her ear and pull away before she can respond.

I don't want to hear her refusal or argument. I just want her to know she was wrong about me. It's probably a dick move, but I can't change it now.

A chorus of goodbye's calls out as I pull away from the dock, the barest glimmer of a sunrise on the horizon. I wave as I sail away, but I'm only looking at one person on that dock. The one that holds my heart and my misery. The woman I'll never have again but am grateful I had for a little while.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:41 pm

Does it require a tarp?

Winter is most definitely here. Snow falls steadily outside, and the roads are practically empty.

Only a few locals pass by bundled up against the weather.

We've had a few customers in the store today, stocking up on books for the upcoming storm front coming in this weekend.

There won't be anyone out if they don't have to be.

All the boats have docked and a few of the businesses have closed up for the winter, or at least the majority of it.

Places like the tourist gift shops and information center don't strum up much business in the off season.

It's been nearly five weeks since Warren left and I've thought of him every minute of each day. Especially the last words he said to me before getting on his boat and sailing away.

I do love you.

I've shamefully pondered those words and their meaning.

First, taking them at face value, then picking them apart with a fine-toothed comb.

Maybe he just meant it in a friendly way, like how I love Izzy.

Or maybe he meant it like he loves me like family.

Although I'm pretty sure family doesn't have sex with each other.

At least not anymore. Then I circled all the way back to the beginning.

He loves me romantically. He wanted to be with me and asked me to go with him.

But in the end, he still only thought of himself and chose what's best for him.

Not what would be best for us both or took into consideration my life, wants and needs.

He should have known better than to think I would leave Gigi like that. My mood has swung wildly from wanting to cry because I missed him so much to wishing I'd kicked him in the ass when I had the chance. It's been a rough few weeks and I've barely been able to focus on much more than work.

At least with the weather turning, Izzy hasn't been trying to drag me out to be social. So, I've been able to hide in my apartment and between the pages of my books. Wallowing in my own self-pity.

Now I stand with an armful of books, restocking the shelves and organizing everything alphabetically by author.

Only able to focus on the titles in front of me.

People can never put things back where they found them.

There's a Stephen King novel next to Tessa Bailey. It's not even in the right genre.

I set down my stack and circle to the horror/thriller section and just as I'm rounding a shelf a wave of nausea hits me like a punch to the gut. I have to drop the book and run to the bathroom, fearing I won't be able to hold it back long enough to make it to the toilet.

Thankfully I'm able to burst into the single stall bathroom and make it to the toilet before I lose my breakfast all over the floor.

This is the third _ no fourth _ time I've thrown up this week.

I don't know what the hell I ate that's still messing with my stomach, but as soon as I get it out, I feel a million times better.

"Are you okay?" Lauren asks, concerned from the open door to the bathroom. I was in too big a hurry to properly close it apparently.

"Yeah, fine. Just some stomach bug or something I've had all week." I stand and rinse out my mouth at the sink, splashing a handful of cold water over my heated face.

Lauren laughs behind me, but it doesn't sound mocking or cruel but a little silly and humorous.

Does she find my illness humorous? I glare up at her in the mirror to find her leaning against the door frame, smiling softly, eyes fixed on the wall of the bathroom.

She finally catches my eye and unhappy expression in the mirror and immediately raises her hands in supplication.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh at you. It’s just my sister used that excuse when she was pregnant. It was so obvious what was really wrong with her that we all realized it before she did. Not that you’re pregnant, obviously. It just made me think of her face when she realized what was happening.”

Pregnant? Me? That’s impossible. You have to have sex to get pregnant and I haven’t had any in years.

Except with Warren.

Five weeks ago.

When was the last time I had my period? I can’t remember.

“Do you need some tea or water? Maybe some Pepto?” she offers, completely oblivious to my internal freak out, while I continue to argue with myself over the impossibility of it.

But the more I think about it the more it makes sense.

“No, I’m fine, thanks. I think I’ll just go lay down for the rest of the day. You okay here alone?”

She waves her hands towards the front of the store, “I think I’ll be fine, it’s pretty quiet out there.”

“Great. Thanks.”

I press past her and make my way up the stairs to my apartment, not giving Lauren time to realize I was probably making the same face her sister was when she realized she was pregnant.

Pregnant. Fuck.

That's weird to consider. I had never thought much about it.

Especially since I was never with a guy long enough to consider the long-term marriage and family thing.

Now? What the hell am I going to do if I am?

What am I going to tell people? Izzy, Gigi?

None of them know about Warren. Would they even believe me if I told them the truth?

Probably not. Should I tell Warren? If everyone in town finds out, it'll be nonstop gossip forever.

Even after the baby's born and grown they'll comment about how its father left and never came back and didn't care about them or love them enough to stay. It'll be horrible.

I plop down onto my couch and bend to put my head between my knees, running my fingers through my hair so much my ponytail slips free.

If I tell Warren about the pregnancy, he'll probably come back. I can't do that to him. He'll feel obligated and that's the last thing I want. He doesn't want a life here, doesn't want to settle down with kids, let alone in the town he hates so much. This would literally ruin his life.

A panic starts to fill my chest, and it feels like I'm being strangled.

Okay chill out, first things first. Let's find out if I actually am pregnant.

Which means I need to get a pregnancy test. Which will also be gossiped about when someone sees what I'm buying.

Because why would I be buying a pregnancy test when I'm single and _ to their knowledge _ have been for years?

This is going to blow up in my face before I even know if it's true or not.

Izzy. I can ask Izzy to get me the test. No one would question her since she has a fiancé, and it wouldn't be weird. And if anyone asks her, she can just say it was negative. No harm no foul. Right?

I really hope she'll do it for me. Even if she does, I'll have to explain why I need it and who the father is.

I'll either have to tell the truth or come up with a lie that won't garner many questions.

What would she believe? A one-night stand?

Not really my style but not completely unbelievable either.

Suck it up Raelyn, you're an adult, Izzy is an adult and your best friend. It'll be fine. Just text her.

Sitting up slowly I lean back on the couch and pull my cell phone from the front chest pocket of my overalls, black suede with gold buckles, and type out a text to Izzy.

Thirty minutes later Izzy is bursting through my front door, plastic grocery bag in

hand and talking a mile a minute.

“Okay so I got three different brands just in case. You can never be too sure with these things. False positives are a real thing, and we don’t want to panic until we know we need to.”

“I’m not panicking.”

“Not yet. We’ll see how well you’re doing once the results show up.”

She has a point. Plus, I’m obviously panicking. Just the idea of being pregnant has me freaking the fuck out.

“Alright. Have you been drinking water? We have a lot of sticks to pee on.”

“Yes, I’ve been chugging it down since I texted you.”

Izzy arranges the boxes on the kitchen counter, each stick next to its corresponding box and instructions so we know how to read the results. There’s one that makes a blue plus sign, one would be two pink lines and the third literally says the word pregnant if positive.

“I think I’ll start with this one.” I grab the test and shakily read the instructions.

Pretty basic stuff. Just pee on the stick or dip it in a cup of pee and wait three minutes for the result. Easy enough. At least the testing part. It’s the part that comes after that is difficult.

“I’ll be right here when you’re done.” Izzy grips my arm and gives me a reassuring smile. I nod and try to smile but I’m too nervous. I step into the bathroom and start peeing on sticks.

~

Pregnant, plus sign and two pink lines. Every single test is positive.

“I’m pregnant.”

The admission is a mere whisper from my lips. The words foreign to my ears. How am I going to tell Gigi? She’s going to be so disappointed in me.

Izzy scoots closer to me on the couch, wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

“It’s okay. We’ll get through this together. I’ll be here for you every step of the way.” She pauses and I know the question she’s going to ask before she even speaks it. “So, who’s the father? Should we call him?”

Fuck, right. That. Well now’s the time. Truth or lie?

Lie. Definitely lie.

“I don’t know. He was just some guy passing through after Warren left. I was sad and lonely and met him...at the coffee shop. He’s not in the picture and never will be.”

There. That should be believable enough. Right?

“So, you don’t have his number, I’m assuming?”

“Nope. Don’t even remember his name.”

Izzy looks at me concerned. I would be too if my by the book, rule loving, tells me everything best friend had a one night stand she didn’t tell me about and became pregnant. Not exactly the normal everyday occurrence around here.

“Why didn’t you tell me about him before?” I can hear the hurt in her voice, but it’s almost overpowered by her concern.

“I was embarrassed. It’s not really my thing, one-night stands. It was a moment of weakness.” That part isn’t a lie. It was a moment of weakness, just one that had been building for over a decade.

“You don’t have to be embarrassed about anything with me. I’ll never judge you, you know that. Was he at least cute?” Her simple question eases the guilt inside me, just a little, at not telling her the complete truth.

“Extremely. At least the baby has that much going for it.”

“I’m sure it will be the most adorable baby ever, and once it’s born no one will care who the father is or isn’t. You’ll see.”

My arms wrap around my waist, and I tighten my hold on my nonexistent baby bump, but very real microscopic baby growing inside. Holy moly, there’s a baby inside me. I’m going to be sick again and it has nothing to do with morning sickness.

Izzy wraps both arms around my shoulders and hugs me close, resting her head on my shoulder. I instantly calm, Izzy’s hugs are always an instant relaxant.

“Can we not tell anyone? At least for a while anyways.”

Izzy nods and looks up at me. “What about Gigi?”

“I’ll tell her. She can keep a secret better than anyone in this town.”

“True, that woman is a vault. What about Owen?”

We probably should tell Owen, that would be what real best friends do. But if we tell him he'll definitely mention it to Warren, and Warren will definitely know he's the father.

"No. Not yet. He's kind of a blabber mouth and until I'm comfortable with it all and know how to handle everything, I'd like to keep it quiet."

She rubs my arm and agrees. "Yeah, he is a giant blabber mouth."

We both sit in quiet silence. Me internally cataloging every book about pregnancy we have downstairs that I'll now need to read, and Izzy no doubt mentally redecorating my apartment for a baby and planning my inevitable baby shower.

"So when can I start shopping for you and the baby? Is now too early?"

Yup, planning parties and color schemes.

I love her for being her and not badgering me on the specifics of how I became pregnant.

Or trying to get me to confess things I don't want to discuss.

Her ability to smooth over tense situations with easier topics to calm my anxiety is a god send.

I don't want to talk about what doctor I'm going to see, what prenatal vitamins I should take, or how fat I'm going to get.

I'll deal with those one at time when I'm ready.

But right now, I just need to get comfortable with the idea I'm going to be a mom.

“No, now is not too early. But maybe wait until after I confirm with a doctor?”

She scrunches her nose and shakes her head. “Nah. I’m starting now. Ooh, we can go to that antique store you love in Anchorage to look for a crib to match the rest of your unique furniture.”

I smile at my best friend and am thankful to have her.

I wouldn’t know what to do if she weren’t here.

Probably freak out and rock in the corner like a crazy person.

Instead, I’m grinning and laughing at Izzy and the fact that she knows me so well and is spouting off possible themes for the nursery.

“I would love that, but you know that won’t be till spring.”

“Perfect, by then we’ll know if it’s a boy or a girl and can better choose decorative pieces.”

“I don’t need decorative pieces. It’s a baby not visiting royalty.”

“Doesn’t mean we can’t put a few cute animals on the walls, and matching curtains.”

There’s really no point in arguing with her now. However, if boxes start showing up at my door I’m going to have to put my foot down.

“Are you going to go to Gigi’s today?”

I shake my head. I may not know many things, but I need at least one night to work up the bravery to tell Gigi about this unplanned but nonetheless amazing pregnancy.

“No. I’ll go tomorrow. Give myself a night to get used to the idea so I can say it out loud without crying. Or barfing.”

“Good idea. I’m going to make us some dinner and I’m staying the night. No arguing. You should not be alone tonight.”

She points a no-nonsense finger at me, and I raise my hands in defense. “No arguing here.”

“Good. Now is there anything you’re craving?”

“Pickles.”

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You finally did something spontaneous

Confessing to the woman who raised me that I got knocked up by a guy who has no interest in a family, or even living in the same city as me, would be bad enough. Lying to her and telling her it was a one-night stand with a stranger is going to be worse.

Standing outside Gigi's front door I steel my spine and suck in a deep breath . I can do this, it's just Gigi. She won't be mad. I hope. My internal reassurances aren't exactly motivating, but I can't not tell her.

Last night Izzy slept over and we stayed up for hours googling everything I might need to know about being pregnant.

Searching for O.B.G.Y.N.'s in Kenai, a city about an hour and a half away from Homer, so news of my pregnancy doesn't spread through town before I want it to.

I've decided not to tell anyone but Izzy and Gigi about it until I'm too large to hide it anymore.

That should give me at least five months to figure everything out.

Not that I think I can figure everything out in such a short amount of time but at least I can get somewhat prepared for the baby's arrival and more comfortable with the idea of being responsible for an entire human being.

Being a single parent isn't going to be easy, but I'll have Gigi, Izzy and even Owen.

Between the group of us we should be able to figure it all out. Right?

I raise a shaking hand and knock on the door before using my key to enter. Accidentally walking in on Gigi in the middle of naked hot yoga session once was more than enough times to warrant a warning knock before entering unannounced.

Gigi meets me halfway to the kitchen, smiling broadly.

“Raelyn, I wasn’t expecting you today. What a lovely surprise.”

If she loves that surprise, she’s going to love the next one.

“Hey Gigi.”

She pulls me in for a quick kiss on the cheek before ushering me back to the kitchen table, the heart of her home.

I’ve spent many nights and special occasions around this table.

Blowing out birthday candles, working on homework, gossiping with Izzy, the one time we all got into a spaghetti food fight, Gigi included, and it took a week to get all the sauce off the walls.

“Sit down, I just made fresh cookies.”

The kitchen is warm from her baking, and I slip out of my heavy winter coat, hanging it on the back of the wooden chair at the dining table. I sit because I’m too nervous to stand and maybe a nice warm gooey chocolate chip cookie is exactly what I need to calm my nerves.

“Here you go sunshine, fresh from the oven.”

She calls me sunshine because when I was younger, she always said I was her little ray of sunshine.

The endearment stuck, so sometimes I'm sunshine to her.

It's kind of funny now that I think about it, but two of the most important people in my life rarely call me Raelyn.

Warren always calls me Bambi and Gigi calls me sunshine.

Gigi sets a plate of cookies and a glass of milk in front of me. I eagerly pick up a giant chocolate chunk cookie and shove at least half of it in my mouth, chewing like a chipmunk who's filled its cheeks to the brim.

Gigi chuckles. "Slow down Rae or you'll choke. There's plenty more, no need to go so fast."

I finish chewing and swallow down a large gulp of milk. The warm gooeyness helped but my heart still pounds feverishly in my chest. Here goes nothing.

"Gigi, I came over today because I need to tell you something. Something you probably weren't expecting and might be a little...shocking."

Sitting in the chair next to me, Gigi tilts her head, a small pinch between her white brows. More curious than concerned. I guess that's a good sign. Tucking a strand of loose hair behind my ear, her expression softens.

"There's nothing you could do that would shock me, Rae. I know you too well."

Okay then, here goes nothing. Better to rip the band aid off in one swift motion, right? Gripping my hands together tightly around my glass of milk I focus on the

white liquid instead of looking at the woman who raised me as her own since I was ten.

“I’m pregnant.”

There I said it. It’s out in the open and as one weight lifts from my shoulders, another lands right on top of me. Gigi’s silence is almost as bad as screaming. I have no idea what it means, especially since I’m not looking at her.

Wincing I cautiously shift my gaze to peer at her from the corner of my eye. She’s shocked, that’s for sure. Her face slack and mouth slightly open.

“Well, I was not expecting that.”

“Are you disappointed in me?” I ask, tears threatening to fill my eyes. I blink them away rapidly before they get worse. Stupid hormones.

“What? Of course not.” Gigi pulls me into her arms in a tight hug and the scent of cookies is soothing. “I could never be disappointed in you, sunshine. Especially for something like a baby. That’s not something to be disappointed about in the least.”

“But I’m not married. The father’s...gone. I was foolish and impulsive. I wasn’t thinking and didn’t take preventative measures.”

Releasing me from her embrace Gigi leans back to look at me. Her hands sliding down my arms to thread through mine. She grips me tightly and gives me that don’t be daft look.

“Everyone deserves to be a little foolish and impulsive in their lives, Rae. You just did yours with a little extra. It doesn’t matter how it happened; it just did.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with that.

I'm actually happy you finally did something spontaneous.

"She smiles at me. I'm still frazzled, and kind of confused now too.

"You are?"

"Yes. You've always been such a good girl.

Don't get me wrong, you've been a godsend, but sometimes I felt like you missed out on being a rambunctious teenager because you always followed the rules.

But now you've followed your heart and done something because you wanted to.

It just had unexpected and, I'm assuming, unplanned results. "

I'm not sure if I should be relieved or worried about her response to my news. Most people don't think an unplanned pregnancy and single parenthood are a good thing. I guess I should have known better when it comes to Gigi. She doesn't do anything the normal way.

"I guess so."

"And you said the father is?"

"Gone."

She nods with a sad smile, as if she was expecting this answer. Like she already knows everything.

“Warren’s the father, isn’t he?”

I’m pretty sure my heart just stopped beating and my brain melted out through my ears, because there’s no way she just said what I think she said. How could she possibly know that? Not even Izzy asked that. I told her it was a stranger, and she just accepted it without question.

“How did you...?”

“I’m old, not dead. I see things. Like you going out to his boat the night of his going away party and not coming back until late morning.”

One white eyebrow raises, and she smirks. My eyebrows are introduced to my hair line because I had no idea she knew about that. Or saw me. How many other things has she seen that I thought I was being covert about? Not that there were many.

“Besides you two have been making eyes at each other for years. It was only a matter of time before you finally saw each other. It could never be anyone’s but his. There’s no other man you would let down your guard around so thoroughly.”

She’s right. I wouldn’t have let anyone else as close as Warren. I guess I wasn’t as good at hiding my feelings for him as I thought I was, at least from her. Warren didn’t seem to know how I felt about him until I kissed him.

I sit back in my chair, my hands falling limply in my lap, completely unsure what to say now. Everything I thought I’d have to explain or lie about is gone now that she’s just seen through everything.

“Oh!” I sit up so abruptly I startle Gigi.

“I didn’t tell Izzy who the father is. She thinks it was a one-night stand.

I just didn't want to deal with..." My words trail off because I don't know how to explain it to her.

How it will be easier to lie about the father to minimize the pity stares and judgement.

An accidental pregnancy from a one-night stand is easier to explain than everything that happened with me and Warren.

Not to mention all the questions that I would get from everyone if they all knew Warren was the father.

"Don't worry Rae." Gigi pats my cheek affectionately. "We don't have to tell anyone anything. It's none of their business. But...don't you think Warren deserves to know?"

Yes. I would love nothing more than to call him and tell him and have him be so overjoyed he returns, and we live happily ever after. But I know for a fact he wants nothing less than to return here and be saddled with a baby. A life he never wanted.

"Maybe. But does it matter now? He's gone and he doesn't plan on returning. It's better for both of us if we just forget him altogether."

I look up from staring at the table to find Gigi frowning at me. That's more of what I expected to see when I told her I was pregnant.

"You can't keep it from him forever. He deserves to know."

"If he wanted to be part of my life he would have stayed, with or without the pregnancy. He still left, even after knowing how I felt about him. If I'm not enough for him, forcing him to stay because of a baby won't help.

It'll only make things worse. Forcing a relationship because of a child doesn't work. ”

“Did you ever stop to think maybe he did want to stay, but was too afraid to? That maybe he just needed someone, who loves him, to show him that staying was the right choice all along?”

If only she were right.

“We tried plenty to convince him to stay. You know this. No one wanted him to leave. He wasn't happy here, and nothing could change that.”

My heart cracks in my chest admitting it out loud.

It's literally been his lifelong dream to leave Homer and travel the world and make a new life for himself somewhere else.

It's not easy to convince someone their dreams are wrong.

And maybe they aren't. I'm sure he'll be happier now that he's gone.

From everything Owen tells us he's doing great.

Making his way south and enjoying every minute of it. Happier than he's ever been.

To force him to come back would crush him. I love him too much to do that to him and us. I'll just have to accept it and focus all my love for Warren on the baby we made together.

“It may have seemed like that, but I think he would have surprised you if given the chance. And one way or another he's going to find out whether you want him to or not. Things tend to work themselves out in the end.”

“As long as you don’t tell him, he’ll never know. Please Gigi, it’s better this way. Trust me.”

Pleading with my eyes I know she can see the tears gathering there. I need her to understand that no matter how much wishful thinking she has, nothing can change the reality of the situation. She huffs out an exasperated breath.

“Fine. I won’t tell him. But if he does return and asks me, I won’t lie to him.”

I suppose that’s the best I’m going to get. I nod my acquiescence.

“Oh, and there’s one more thing.”

She scowls and looks at me as if she’s about to argue with me on anything else I may ask of her. At least this time it’s a temporary lie.

“I don’t want to tell anyone else until I’m further along. Give me some time to figure things out without everyone breathing down my neck.”

Her scowl softens and her expression changes to one of understanding. Lots of women and couples don’t announce a pregnancy right away, so this is nothing out of the ordinary.

“That I can do. You just let me know when you’re ready.”

“I’ll probably never be ready, but no sooner than when I’m too large to hide it with baggy clothes at least.”

She laughs and pulls me into her side, pressing a kiss to my head.

My anxiety recedes now that I at least have Gigi and Izzy on my side.

Maybe things won't be so bad after all. Babies always make people happy.

I know the longer I think about it the happier I get.

Even though knowing its father will never see it grow or hold it or love it makes me sad.

I know no matter what, that it will be loved by the rest of us without reservation. And that'll just have to be enough.

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Pregnant women always have the best knockers

What the fuck am I doing here? Is the question that keeps looping on repeat in my head.

I swore once I left Alaska I would never return.

So why is that as soon as I made it to Florida I turned right back around and started heading back?

I've already made it back to the southern coast of California.

Probably a record of some sort. Six months from Alaska to Florida and back again.

I've anchored for the night, the coast a few miles away in the distance to the east while the sun sets over the Pacific Ocean in the west. The sunsets are always better on the west coast. With just the ocean on the horizon and nothing in between.

My boat sways gently in the calm waters.

A soothing motion that always comforted me, but even now the movement does nothing to put me at ease.

I don't know why I've been so twisted up inside.

It's been like this since I left the only home I've ever known nearly six months ago.

Nowhere I've gone has given me the feeling I was so desperate to find. Maybe I never will.

Pulling a long drag from the neck of my beer bottle, I try to force relaxation and peace. The cushioned bench on my deck, that I always loved napping on on warm summer days in the past, now feels like reclining on broken glass and rocks.

"What the fuck is wrong with me?" I yell at myself and the emptiness of the ocean around me, hoping a talking dolphin will jump on deck and answer my question. None does and I groan in frustration.

Just as I'm about to chuck my bottle into the ocean _ something I would normally never do _ I'm saved from littering in my anger by my phone ringing.

I'm close enough to shore now to get a signal, and the name on the screen and matching ridiculous face, makes me grin and hope that maybe my best friend can put things into perspective for me.

I answer the video call and prop the phone on a small table next to the bench, sitting up to get a better angle on the camera.

"Hey! There he is. Long time no see man."

"Hey Owen. It's good to see you too."

"Where are you now? Last time I talked to you I think you were back in South America somewhere."

I hadn't told Owen precisely that I was making my way back towards Alaska.

I wasn't even sure if I was going to go back or not.

Something inside me forced me to sail this way.

Not sure why. Maybe just missing my friends?

Although I didn't like the warm south as much as I thought I would.

Too sticky, and full of people. I never realized I didn't like crowded places until I was in the middle of one.

Tourists covered in white creamy sunblock and completely forgetting their common sense. Utterly annoying.

"Still in the south," I say avoiding answering his question directly.

"Well, wherever you are, it looks sunny and warm."

"It is."

Tossing my empty bottle in the recycle bin where it belongs, I pull another from the built-in cooler on deck and pop the top chugging a mouth full.

"What's that on your wrist?"

I look down at my wrists not sure what he's referring to, spotting the turquoise-colored rope wrapped twice around my wrist. I've been wearing it for so long now I'd nearly forgotten about it.

It's the curtain tie from Bambi's apartment that I used to tie her wrists together.

I pocketed it before leaving and after realizing I had no intention of removing it from my wrist, I went to a metal worker and had them fashion a clasp for it so I wouldn't

have to worry about large knots and dangling tassels.

Although I did keep a tassel and turn it into a keychain which now dangles from the floater and key for my boat.

The small rope is long enough to wrap around my wrist twice comfortably.

I never expected to be a jewelry type of guy, but I made an exception.

Wearing Bambi's rope _ the one that wrapped so beautifully around her skin _ on my body, became a type of solace.

A way to quiet the tumultuous storm that seems to be raging nonstop in my chest these days.

"Is that a rope?" Owen continues, squinting and moving his face close to the screen as if that'll make it easier to see. "I knew you were into that kind of thing, but I thought you liked to tie them up? Not the other way around."

Owen knows about my proclivity for bondage, to a degree. He doesn't talk about it around others but has no problem taunting me about it in private whenever he gets the chance.

"Yes, it's a rope. Is that why you called me? To chastise me on my choice of jewelry?" I tease him right back, hopefully deflecting any further questions about the rope and its significance.

"Like to keep it handy just in case, huh?" Owen bounces his eyebrows in a suggestive manner, and I'll let him believe whatever he wants. As long as he doesn't know the truth of it.

“Oh yeah, there are so many eager women just lining up on my dock waiting for me to tie them up with my bracelet rope,” I drawl sardonically while taking another swig of my beer.

It feels nice to jest with Owen after so many weeks and months away.

I’ve made a few friends along the way, even had a few offers from women.

All of which I turned down. Apparently, my dick wants nothing to do with anyone who isn’t Bambi, because she’s the only one I can think about while jerking off.

Which is the only way I get off these days.

Now I know what people mean when they say going through a dry spell.

Although I suppose mine is self-inflicted.

“Maybe there are. How would I know? Because I’m not with you. I’m all the way back here in boring old Alaska, not gallivanting all over the world.”

“So how are things back home?” I ask, subtly hoping to entice him to tell me everything about Bambi and what she’s up to. His last update wasn’t very informative. Just a simple “Everyone’s doing fine. Nothing new.” Which was not helpful in the least.

“Oh, you know how spring is. Boats getting ready to go out, tourists showing back up little by little. Looks like we’re going to have an influx of moose this year, must have had a good mating season.

” He moves around wherever he is, the screen shifting as he moves before settling again when he sits.

“Oh shit, speaking of mating, Raelyn is pregnant.”

“What?!”

The world stops spinning and the tiny piece of my heart that managed to survive childhood because of Bambi, falls and shatters against my ribs.

I’ve only been gone six months. How the hell did she manage to find someone so fast and get knocked up?

He must be wrong, or I must have heard him wrong.

There’s no way my Bambi is pregnant... without me.

The words echo through my head in a quiet whisper.

Am I upset because she’s pregnant, or because she’s pregnant with someone else’s baby?

“Yeah, surprised the shit out of me too. Apparently, Izzy knew all along though.”

“Who’s the father?” I demand, interrupting whatever he was about to say. It can’t be more important than finding out what asshole took advantage of my Bambi. Because now I may have a reason to return to Alaska. To kill the bastard.

“Why? You gonna come home and beat him up like you did that guy in high school for touching your precious Bambi?”

Maybe.

He’s trying to provoke me, and he knows it. He also knows I hate when anyone but

me calls her Bambi.

“Watch it, Owen.”

I can hear him laughing, but I don't bother looking at him, facing the open ocean instead, trying to tamp down the possessive jealousy I'm unable to hide.

“No idea.” He shrugs and my eyes snap back to the small screen propped on a towel.

“Says it was a one-night stand. Doesn't even remember the guy's name.”

“That doesn't sound like Bambi.” Some of the frantic energy curdling my stomach settles.

She's never been a one-night stand girl.

She's always been the long-term solid commitment type.

Our short-lived tryst being the only time I've ever known her to sleep with someone without being in a solidified monogamous relationship.

For her to be so careless is out of character for her.

“No, it doesn't. But she told me herself. No one knew about it till she started to show. Except my lying sister. Hid it under those baggy overalls of hers she's always wearing.”

Wait. Hid it? This isn't a new development? Did she find someone as soon as I left? I guess I shouldn't blame her. I did tell them all I was never coming back except for Izzy's wedding, which is now loosely planned for August this year.

“How far along is she?” I ask because apparently, I want to torture myself with

knowing how quickly she moved on.

“Almost six months, I think. I guess it happened right after you left.”

Or right before. My unhelpful brain supplies. Because knowing she was with someone else isn't bad enough, my inner sadist decides her having my baby and not telling me is better.

Could she be having my baby? We didn't exactly use protection that I know of.

I assumed she was on the pill or something since she never mentioned it.

But she would have told me about the baby.

Wouldn't she? I've been sending her postcards from every new place I've been to.

I haven't had the courage to call her, but I had to let her know I was thinking about her somehow. I even wrote as much on the postcards.

It has to be mine. The timing lines up too perfectly. Even with how mad she was at me when I left, I know my Bambi. She would never hook up with a stranger, let alone have unprotected sex with one.

The sudden realization that she's carrying my baby and I'm going to be a father hits me in a rush I wasn't prepared for.

I fall back against the bench and stare off at nothing.

I can vaguely hear Owen talking, but I have no idea what he's saying.

That is until I hear her name and the words, giant tits, in the same sentence.

“What did you just say?”

Owen grins at me and leans back holding his hands in front of his chest mimicking groping large breasts.

“Oh yeah, her boobs have gotten huge. I don’t know how I didn’t notice them before. Should have been an instant give away. Pregnant women always have the best knockers.”

“Say one more word about Bambi’s boobs and I’ll disown you and stop taking your calls.”

His face falls like a kicked puppy and he finally drops his hands from his chest. His head of blonde hair fills the screen as he leans in so close I can’t see anything else but his massive face.

“Aw come on man, I was just joking. Although they are massive.” He leans back and holds his hands up in defense before I can chastise him again. “Chill man, I’m just messing with you. What’s got you wound so tight? You used to be more fun.”

I rub a hand down my face trying to regain some sort of control over myself. I was already in a funky mood and learning about Bambi’s pregnancy _ and that I’m most likely the father, even though no one else seems to know that little fact _ isn’t helping improve it.

“I don’t know. Too much time at sea alone?”

“Then go to shore and find yourself a nice piece of ass and bring her back to your boat. Then you won’t be alone.”

I lift my head and pin him with a flat glare.

“Or not. Then come home if you’re so miserable.

You know this is where you belong anyway.

Also, I’m not sure I can manage all this estrogen on my own.

Izzy planning a wedding, Rae having a baby.

All they ever talk about now is color schemes, baby names, wedding dresses and birthing techniques.

” He shudders and shakes his head like he’s trying to shake away an unpleasant image.

“Baby names? She’s already picking out names? Does she know what she’s having?”

“A boy. Thank fuck. I don’t think I could survive adding another girl to our already female filled family.”

A boy. She... we are having a boy. I’m going to have a son.

I need to go back. As soon as the thought hits me, I realize now this is why I felt like I had to return.

Something inside me knew I would need to go home and that I should be near to do so.

If I had still been in Florida when he told me this, it would take me months to return and I might miss the birth.

But since I’m already on the west coast I can be back home in a week if I push myself

and the winds are in my favor.

I end my call with Owen abruptly. I need to start moving now. The winds are good and there's still hours of sunlight left. I'll sail in the fucking dark if I have to.

It isn't until days later when I'm so close to seeing her again that a stray thought makes its way into my mind. Not once since I spoke to Owen and decided to come home, did I consider my parents. Not once did their presence alter my plans to return to Homer.

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Like the pig?

Now that everyone knows about my pregnancy the questions have started.

Thankfully I've had months to prepare answers for all of them.

My lie of a one-night stand is much easier to portray as reality, now that I've said it so many times.

Not as many times as I feared. Gossip in a small town works like that.

Spreading the news faster than an airborne virus.

I have had to clarify a few things when the game of telephone went awry. Nothing too scandalous though. Someone came up with the ridiculous story that I had been ravaged by a sea creature and was having a mutant baby. Probably one of the teenagers in town.

As anticipated, once people heard the father is an out of townner and no longer in the picture, they instantly lost interest in him.

Which has made it easier for me not having to talk about the father or characteristics the baby might have from his father, since it's well known I don't know anything about him.

To their knowledge. In reality I'm constantly considering if he'll turn out to look like Warren or not.

On one hand, I hope he does because his father has many wonderful features both physically and non.

On the other hand, I worry he'll look too much like Warren and people will begin to become suspicious.

Especially his parents. I pray to Poseidon they never notice the similarities.

Stepping into my overalls for the day I'm barely able to buckle them over my still growing stomach.

The straps are extended to their longest and straining.

I probably won't be able to wear these ones after today again until after the baby's born.

Shame. They're black, white and blue tie die denim, so cute.

I pair them with a long sleeved blue thermal and oversized cream-colored fur lined flannel.

I go from hot to freezing a dozen times a day and wearing something I can remove and replace with my flashes makes my day much easier.

Walking past my mirrored dresser I stop short and stare at the post cards taped to the reflective surface.

All the postcards Warren sent me are lined up along the frame of the mirror.

California, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Cuba, Jamaica, The Bahamas, Florida. So many places I've never been to.

Each small rectangle an image of somewhere exotic and amazing. The same message written in varying words on the back. I miss you, I'm thinking of you. Love Warren.

It's like he's taunting me. Each new arrival makes my heart skip and sink at the same time.

A reminder how far away he is and the unlikelihood he'll return.

Still, I stick them to my mirror to look at them every day hoping one day he'll send one that says he's coming home, though I'm not going to hold my breath.

Stepping into my blue and grey Xtratuf's _ rubber boots that are popular in Alaska due to their durability and water proofness _ I roll the top down to expose the blue octopus patterned internal lining.

They're great for this kind of weather, wet and cold.

They're also great for on boats, lots of the fisherman wear them.

Not to mention they keep the chill off my feet but also allow for a comfortable fit with all the swelling going on.

I'm pretty sure my feet grew two sizes throughout the pregnancy.

I really hope they don't swell anymore because I can't afford new shoes just for the next three months.

My hair goes in my customary ponytail before I head downstairs to start work for the day.

Lauren is already there, having opened the store.

She's been my opener lately since it takes me a little longer to get moving in the morning these days.

Sometimes I swear it takes five minutes just to extricate myself from the bed.

I roll my neck, trying to work out the kinks there. Another wonder of pregnancy, everything fucking hurts. My back, my hips, my neck, my feet. Thank goodness the end is finally in sight. Then I'll be able to touch my toes again and have a new beautiful baby boy.

My heart skips in anticipation. After the initial shock of it wore off the happiness and elation began to settle in.

Izzy and I have had more than one happy cry over his upcoming birth.

Although we disagree on names. Izzy says it should be something as original and unique as my name and I just want it to be something kids won't use to make fun of him in school with.

Especially since he'll already have a hard enough time not having a father around.

As of now I have an ongoing list that I'll choose from once he's born and I get to see him for the first time. It's hard to choose anything right now. Nothing fits quite right. I'll just have to go with my gut when it's time to put a name to paper.

Slowly waddling down the stairs I make it to the store five hours later, and head to the front counter to check in with Lauren.

"Morning Lauren. How's everything looking today?"

She gives me a big smile and leans against the counter surveying her to-do list.

“Well, we received a shipment of new releases that needs to be shelved, there’s the returned rentals that need to be inventoried, a few deliveries to make.

Also, Izzy wanted me to remind you about picking out books for the fundraiser basket for the middle school you said you would donate. ”

“Well, that’s a busy day. Alright,” I pause to consider her list and what I can do to help. Heavy lifting is out so no inventory or restocking for me. “I will prepare the donation basket and make the few deliveries.”

“You sure?” Her brows furrow and pull together.

It’s common these days. Everyone thinks I’m incapable of riding my bike now that I’m the size of a mini cooper. But it has three wheels and is very stable. Besides, I rode the snowmobile during the winter while pregnant and was fine. Though I was much smaller then.

“It’ll be fine Lauren. There’s no ice and barely any snow now, and my bike has three wheels. Besides, it’s good for me to keep active. It’s only a few deliveries, right?”

“Yeah, only two.”

“Not a problem. I’ve been doing deliveries for years. It’s just like any other day. Don’t worry so much.”

Her pinched face relaxes, and she blows out a defeated breath.

“Fine. But I’m going to be tracking you with my find a friend app.” Pointing a finger at me like I’d argue with her on this.

“I would expect nothing less.”

I only allowed Izzy, Gigi, and Lauren to track my phone with that silly app, and only after Izzy's constant badgering about how I needed it since I lived alone. I don't think it's necessary but agreeing to it got her to stop pestering me.

I take the two orders and pull the books from the shelves, wrapping them in the pretty blue craft paper Lauren convinced me to use. I'll admit it's nice. It adds a little extra something to the customers purchases, and makes deliveries feel like I'm Santa delivering presents.

The books are safely wrapped in their protective blue paper and then inside brown paper bags with The Book Vault's logo stamped on the side and sit snugly in the rear basket of my bike.

My first delivery is to a regular, Mrs. Niedermeyer.

She's on a historical romance binge lately and making her way through my entire stock of available rentals.

Her husband died a few years back and she began reading to fill the silence.

Her kids all left Homer and don't visit as often as she'd like, so she spends a lot of time reading, gardening and unfortunately gossiping.

She's a nice lady and I know she's only doing it because she's lonely, so I don't hold it against her.

Mrs. Niedermeyer answers the door and quickly pulls me into a conversation I can't seem to escape from. I tuck my scarf tight around my neck and her words are only slightly muffled by the earmuff headband I'm wearing. It may be spring, but spring in Alaska is almost as cold as some peoples winter.

“Have you chosen a name yet?” she asks, smiling down at my protruding belly.

“No not yet. I’m just going to let it come to me once he’s born.” I rub at my stomach affectionately and protectively.

“You know what a good name is?”

I didn’t ask but I’m sure you’re going to tell me anyway.

“Wilbur.”

“Like the pig?” I scrunch my nose, undoubtedly looking like the pig from Charlotte’s Web she apparently wants me to name my son after.

“There are plenty of others named Wilbur that have nothing to do with a pig,” she states firmly, not at all offended by my response. “It’s a lovely name.”

I’m sure it is, but not for my son it isn’t.

“I’ll consider it. Add it to the list.” Of names I will absolutely not choose.

“Wonderful. You know I know a lot of names, thanks to all my reading. I can make a list for you as well. Might have a few options on it you might not have thought of.”

I’m sure all of her choices will be ones I haven’t thought of, nor want, but it’s hard to say no to her. She looks so excited to have something to do.

“That would be great Mrs. Niedermeyer. I look forward to reading it.”

“Fantastic. I’ll get started on it right now!”

She hugs the books I just delivered to her chest and bounds back into her house, waving animatedly as she shuts the door behind her. That is going to be one long list, and she's going to be sadly disappointed when I choose a name not on it.

I let out a long heavy sigh through my nose and make my way back to my parked bike in her driveway.

What is it about a woman having a baby on her own that makes everyone think they have to butt in and help out? Not that I don't appreciate the help from some people, but having to deal with everyone I speak to trying to insert themselves or their expertise is exhausting.

I pull a plastic bag of pickle bites out of my pocket and munch on a few standing next to my bike. I'm pretty much always hungry and pickles are always a craving. I basically eat them all day long and always want more.

"How about I just name you Pickle?" I ask my stomach. "Seems appropriate since that's all you ever seem to want to eat."

My little pickle decides to give me a swift kick to my kidneys in response.

"Is that a yes or a no?" I chuckle, rubbing at the spot he just kicked.

"Do you think they'll be just as nosey after your born?"

I hope not. Probably will be though. Everyone has their opinion on things.

Vaccinations, diets, organic soaps, medicines, toys, punishments.

"I heave another sigh, this one accompanied with a low groan.

“Do you think it’s too late to become a hermit and live in a cabin in the mountains? ”

This time he doesn’t answer with a kick, just bubbly gas. Oh the joys I experience while pregnant. Uncontrollable crying and farting. Probably a good thing Warren isn’t here. All the noises, fluids, smells and unknown substances that my body produces these days is embarrassing.

I look out from Mrs. Niedermeyer’s driveway, watching the fluffy white clouds roll by and the sway of the once again greening trees in the breeze. It’s so beautiful here. The entire reason most people live here in the first place. The fresh air and nature.

I mean I know we’re basically disconnected from the rest of the lower forty-eight, or how we refer to the rest of America.

We’re different up here on our own. Not as mainstreamed into everything, but we like it that way.

I like it that way. I can only hope my son does too and doesn’t one day decide he wants to leave like his father did.

Though I would never stop him, just like I didn’t stop Warren.

Some people’s wanderlust is too great to suppress. Others like me don’t even have any.

There are so many unknowns in my future. The one known is that I will love my son, and I will not let him be treated like Warren was. He’ll have a happy childhood, just like I did, and like Warren deserved.

“Guess we should get going huh?” I ask to my stomach, rubbing it gently in small circles. “One more delivery to make before we go back to the shop. Then I can get

you something more than pickle bites.”

This time he kicks right where my hand rests on my stomach and I smile. We’ll be alright. No matter what.

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And my future baby mama

The city growing in the distance is a familiar shape.

So familiar I instantly feel calmer the closer I get.

Returning to Homer in the past used to be filled with trepidation and depression.

Going out to sea is what settled my nerves.

The open water with no boundaries and no rules.

I could be who I wanted and do what I wanted out at sea.

It was land that always made my skin itch.

Now it's the other way around. I've been unsettled and twitchy for months out on the sea, but seeing Homer, knowing how close she is, makes it all go away. My heart stops pounding unsteadily and the storm inside settles to a calming breeze.

Sailors say the sea is their first love, their true love.

The one they always return to and that stirs in their hearts when they're not on it.

I always thought that was me. A sailor through and through.

Yet I can't wait to get my feet back on solid ground and run directly to Bambi.

I suppose being away showed me what I really wanted.

What I didn't even realize was a possibility.

It was always being at sea on my boat that was the dream. That was what was going to be my life, my love. The lump in my throat and fluttering of butterflies in my chest seems to think otherwise as I think of my family waiting on that land.

No one knows I'm arriving today, or that I was even coming back at all. Not even Owen. Bambi has to be the first and it has to be in person. I have to see her. I have to hear her confirm my suspicions. Because I have no doubt she will. Even if she tries to lie to me, I'll know.

Pulling into the harbor I tie off at an open dock, ones available for public use, avoiding the docks where the fishing boats pull in. If any of them see me, I won't be able to get to Bambi before someone calls and tells her I'm back.

I slink past people, hiding my face with the hood of my sweatshirt. Thank fuck it's always cold in Alaska. If I were still in Florida, wearing a hoodie and beanie with boots would stand out and people would look at me like I'm crazy.

As it is I manage to escape the docks without being stopped or recognized.

I'm sure someone will recognize my boat eventually, but hopefully by then I've spoken with Bambi.

To keep even more incognito, I use less populated side streets and back alleys to bypass the busiest areas.

The ones with restaurant windows facing the street and active social areas.

I make it to The Book Vault easily enough and situate myself in the shadows of the alley between buildings across the street, watching through the front window like a creeper.

I need to know she's in there before I go in.

Otherwise, all the sneaking around will be for nothing, because Lauren will see me and no doubt text everyone she knows.

People go in and out of the store, but I still don't see Bambi's strawberry-blonde ponytail anywhere.

I'm starting to wonder if she's taken the day off and isn't even in there at all, when the ring of a bike bell grabs my attention.

And there she is. Riding down the street on her three wheeled book delivery vehicle, as she likes to call it.

It's painted bright yellow and the large basket on the back is empty.

She must have gone out for deliveries. But that's not what my attention focuses on.

Her overalls are stretched tight around her rounded belly, and I can't stop staring at it.

She really is pregnant. The small swell presses at the material, obvious but not yet fully grown.

Owen wasn't fucking with me. And her tits do look fucking fantastic, far larger than when I saw her last. Asshole.

Owen shouldn't be checking out Bambi's boobs.

There are plenty of other chests in town he can ogle that aren't attached to her.

I'm going to have to have a word with him about that.

She looks beautiful. Always has to me. I remember the last time I saw her, standing there on the dock angry with me.

But I could still see her love boiling beneath the surface.

She couldn't hide it from me, even with her pinched brow and sullen eyes.

She was still beautiful. Strawberry-blonde ponytail drifting in the morning wind, cheeks rosy from the cold.

Fucking beautiful, just like she is now.

I can still remember the way she gasped when I slid inside her, the way she smile-scowled at me when I did something foolish, the way her lips plumped when she bit them, how her eyes became greener when aroused. Happy, angry, sad, or sleeping she's always beautiful to me.

Her body sways back and forth slightly with her peddling, her belly getting in the way of her knees rising with the repetitive motion. It doesn't seem to bother her though. A soft smile rests on her pinkened lips and her cheeks are rosy from the cold air and exertion.

I instantly want to bundle her up in front of a fire and bring her hot cocoa loaded with marshmallows, almost more than is acceptable, just the way she likes it.

She shouldn't be out in this cold weather in her condition.

Or on her bike for that matter. She could hit a patch of melting snow or ice and fall, hurting herself and the baby.

My awe and happiness at seeing her is replaced with a strange and powerful need to protect and coddle her.

A worry I've never experienced making my chest clench and my breathing grow rapid.

It doesn't subside until she stops in front of the store and dismounts her bike like nothing is different than when she did it before being pregnant.

I sigh a breath of relief when I see her carefully enter the store and remove her scarf and earmuffs. Through the window I can see her greet Lauren and they speak for a moment before she starts moving about the store doing something.

For a long minute I just stand and stare, watching her go about her day. She smiles and laughs and doesn't look at all like she misses me. But I suppose she wouldn't while she's working. Books are her life after all.

She stops near the front window and makes an O shape with her lips, placing a hand on her stomach then laughing, a broad smile lighting up her face.

I can't hear her laugh from across the street, but I still hear it in my head nonetheless.

Her laugh is as familiar to me as my own and I'll never forget the sound of it.

The baby must have kicked. I wish I could be standing by her side feeling it.

I should have been the entire time, but she never told me about it, about him.

For a moment I'm angry with her for keeping this from me.

She was never going to tell me the truth, or anyone apparently, since they all think the father was a nobody.

It's going to be great gossip when the truth comes out.

Because it will. If that baby is mine?which I highly think it is?I'm going to make sure everyone knows.

I'm going to make sure everyone knows the baby is mine and so is his mother. There will be no co-parenting or shared custody. We're going to raise him together, and that's that. She can argue all she wants but it's happening. I don't care where I have to live.

I wasn't any happier on my boat thousands of miles away from here, might as well stick around now that I have a good reason too.

Though if I'm honest with myself, I always had a good reason to, I just wouldn't admit it.

I was too stubborn. I thought I knew what I needed to be happy.

Now I know. I need her and I need our baby.

Determined to start moving in the right direction for once, I start by moving across the street. Crossing in fast long strides before noisily bursting through the front door of the shop.

My abrupt and sudden entrance has everyone in eyesight turning to look my way. Including the love of my life and my future baby mama.

The books in her hands are propped on top of her belly and she's smiling when she turns. It doesn't last long as recognition and shock settle in. The edges of her lips dropping slowly.

"Warren?" She murmurs my name and it's the sweetest fucking sound I've ever heard.

Then her eyes go wide, and the books drop from her hands. She looks down at the books on the floor and then her belly before turning her wide eyes back on me.

"Oh dear. Oh, dear, oh dear, oh dear." She's muttering as she turns and bolts for the door that leads up to her apartment.

Well, that wasn't the reaction I was expecting.

"Bambi, wait!" I call after her, but she doesn't stop.

She shoves open the door to the stairwell and even with her slight lead, when I step through the door, she's barely a handful of steps up the staircase. Moving slowly but determinedly, using the handrail for balance.

"Bambi, what are you doing?" I'm at her side in two lunges, taking the stairs three at a time. "Will you stop, please?"

"Uh ugh." She shakes her head and keeps her eyes trained on the stairs at her feet.

She ignores me the rest of the way up the stairs, but I hover close behind her with both hands held out, ready to catch her should she fall.

Once we're both through the door to her apartment with it closed soundly behind us, she whirls on me and glares.

“What are you doing here Warren? Shouldn’t you be out on your boat somewhere?”

“No. Where I need to be is right here with you and our baby.”

That has her biting her lips and protectively holding her stomach. I’m not sure if it’s a reflex or if she really thinks I would do anything to hurt her or him.

“It’s not your baby,” she argues, weakly.

I try not to make too much of a, do you think I’m an idiot ? face, but I can’t stop it completely. “Everyone in town might fall for that lie but I know the truth. I know you Bambi, and I also know we didn’t use any protection. That’s my baby as much as he is yours.”

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I look down at her belly and feel my expression soften.

I had never planned on having kids. Being raised by my parent's kind of put me off the idea, but seeing her now round and swollen, something in me warms. That cold bitter place formed from the unhappy memories of my childhood thaws and melts away to make room for something new. Something warm and molten.

"How did you find out?" Her voice is small and quiet, and she sounds like she was hoping I'd never find out. My eyes slide up to hers, warm liquid amber with a dark green outer rim, swelling with tears.

"Owen."

"Fucking Owen. Can't keep his mouth shut for two minutes."

"I'm glad he couldn't."

One singular tear rolls down her cheek and she blinks rapidly trying to stop the rest from falling. I can't stand to see her cry, never could. I reach out and brush away the tear. I take it as a good sign that she doesn't swat my hand away, so I press my luck.

Stepping closer to her and I cup both her cheeks in my hands. Her eyes instantly close and she leans into my touch. One hand reaching up to press against mine, sandwiching it between her palm and cheek.

"Please don't cry, Bambi. You know I hate it when you cry."

“Sorry. I can’t control it. The hormones make me cry over everything recently. A few days ago I cried because I ate a piece of pie that tasted good.”

I take a cautious step closer, almost close enough her belly bumps against mine. Leaning down I press my forehead to hers in a soothing motion, hoping to staunch her tears. She takes in a shuddering breath and allows me to comfort her, and myself.

The touch of her skin in my palms soothes more than her crying, but also the tangle of knots tied in my chest that starts to unravel, just a little.

“I thought you were never coming back,” she admits quietly as we stand together.

I lean away to look her in her glistening eyes, rubbing away more fallen tears with my thumbs.

“If you had told me you were pregnant, I would have returned months ago.”

And it’s true. No matter where I was in the world, who I was with, what I was doing or the cost of returning, I would have done it in a heartbeat. As it was, my soul was already crying out for my return. I was just too deaf to hear it.

“I couldn’t,” she admits, dropping her eyes to my chest. “This isn’t what you wanted. You wanted to travel and find a new life somewhere more exciting. This is literally the opposite of what you want. Trapped in a suffocating town, stuck with a pregnant girl you never wanted.”

I growl in frustration, lifting her chin with a crooked finger, forcing her to look me in the eye. I want her to believe every word that comes out of my mouth.

“I never said I didn’t want you, Bambi.”

I think she believes me. She sucks in a surprised breath but doesn't pull away.

"But you also didn't stay. I wasn't enough."

God fucking damn it. What kind of moron am I to have made her think so little of herself? She's everything to me, without her I'm sure I would have died long ago. Though I never told her that. Maybe it's time I explain my tattoo to her.

"You've always been enough, Bambi. I was the one who wasn't worthy."

Pulling out of her hold I pull my hoodie off over my head, my beanie catching on the material and pulling off with the sweatshirt. I toss it to the ground and reach for the hem of my shirt. Bambi's eyes go wide but don't look away. I preen a little at that.

"What are you doing?"

"Showing you how much you mean to me."

"I may be pregnant with your child, and appreciate your body, but I don't think now is the time, Warren." She's trying to scold me and sound stern, but her breath hitches a little when I strip off the shirt and stand bare chested in front of her. Every single one of my tattoos on display.

"Ha, so you admit it's my child."

She glowers at me, but I ignore it. Reaching out I grab her hand and place it flat on my chest right over my anchor tattoo, right over my heart. Her small hand is warm against my cool skin, and it nearly burns me. Her fingers twitch and brush against the inked skin.

"Do you remember when I got this tattoo?"

Her forehead pinches and she stares at it trying to recall when I came home with the piece. To be fair I hadn't told anyone I had gotten it and it was already healed by the time she saw it.

"Um, I think I was twenty-one. You never did tell us why you got it. we just thought it was another for your growing collection."

"I got it when you were dating that dipstick, Roy."

Bambi quirks her head and briefly looks up at me. This close I can see every freckle on her pink cheeks, and I begin trailing a path across them like I have so many times before. Her face is so familiar and yet every time I look at her, I find something new to appreciate.

"Roy?"

"Yeah. It was your first serious relationship, and I wasn't taking it well.

You'd always been my Bambi and here was some other guy taking you from me.

I knew I couldn't have you, but I didn't want to share you either.

So, I drew this anchor," I pick up her finger and place it right where her name hides in the shapes and trace the letters one by one.

"Put your name in it and carved it into my chest right over my heart. Cementing a piece of you on me for eternity."

Her lashes flutter as she leans closer to follow the path of her finger, her eyes widening when she finally realizes what's been there all along right in front of her.

“B-A-M-B-I. Because you’re my Bambi. Everyone else gets Raelyn, but no one can have my Bambi.”

“How did I never see it before?”

“It’s easy for people to not see what’s right in front of them. I knew you were there the whole time and still never told you how I felt about you. Feel about you. I’m just as much to blame.”

I release her hand, but she doesn’t stop tracing the patterns, learning the new shape within.

“You’re my anchor, Bambi. You hold me steady when I want to drift in the waves. When I feel lost at sea, you are the one thing that anchors me in place and keeps me from losing my way. Although I fear I may have gotten lost for a time, once again you pulled me where I need to be.”

She pulls her bottom lip into her mouth and inspects my chest, quietly listening to me bare my entire fucking soul to her.

Please don’t say it’s too late. Please don’t make me leave again.

“Even so, you left. I can’t trust that you won’t leave again.

Leaving this town and everyone in it behind is all you’ve ever talked about since we were teenagers.

Why would I believe that now you will stay?

That anything has changed? Like you said yourself, you felt like this for me a long time ago.

If it wasn't enough then, why is it enough now? ”

My confidence and hope crack a little at her words, but she's right to question me.

I've been in love with her for so long and never done anything about it.

My feelings for her never stopped me from building my boat and sailing away at the first opportunity I got.

I kept her at arm's length for years. I was a fool, and it's only in getting what I always wanted that I realize it was never what I needed. I'm going to have to prove this to her.

Determination settles in my spine, because she didn't say no, she didn't turn me away. There's still hope.

“Because now I'm seeing clearly. I'm not letting my past and my parents cloud my decisions any longer. I never thought my leaving would affect you so much. I was only focused on myself and getting away, thinking once I did everything would be better.”

“Was it?”

I reach up and cover her hand still resting on my chest, drawing strength from her touch.

“No. It was worse. I thought seeing the world would help me find my place in it. All it did was show me I'd already found my place and left it.”

Leaning down so we're eye level, I reach out with my free hand and let it hover over her belly silently asking to touch her.

She nods and for the first time I reach out and touch our growing son inside her belly.

Feeling him move and shift within. I'm so dazed by him and her that I almost forget what I was going to say.

"I promise I will prove to you things are different. That the most important people in my life now are you and him. Everyone else can fuck off."

My crass, but honest words make her chuckle. Her free hand cradling mine on her stomach. For the first time in my life I feel like I'm right where I should be.

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I may have lied

How am I supposed to believe him? God, I want to believe him. That would make things so much simpler, but I've had months to process everything. And in all my musings one thing was always the same, he left. He was gone, and this, us, was not what he wanted.

“You may be here now Warren, but that's because you reacted to surprising news dramatically.

In a few weeks or months, maybe even a year, you'll regret your decision.

You'll be unhappy, just like you were before.

I don't want that. I don't want a repeat of your childhood.

You don't have to do this just because you feel obligated to. I was just fine doing it on my own.”

Warren doesn't say anything in response to my little speech, he just stares at me.

Eyes roaming over my face looking for the truth.

It's all truth. I was fine doing this on my own.

I've had six months to get everything in order to raise this baby on my own.

With the help of my best friend and Gigi of course.

He can turn around and leave and no one has to be the wiser.

No one has to know he was here or that he's the father. Nothing has to change.

"You really think that's why I came back?" he asks, a bit dejected.

He's one of my best friends and I love him, and hate hurting him, but I can't pretend.

For the happiness and safety of my son, I can't let him waltz back into my life just to flip it on its head in the future.

It's not just me anymore that I have to be concerned with, I have to think of the baby too.

"Maybe. Sometimes you react without thinking. You make rash decisions and don't think about the consequences. You heard about the baby and panicked. It's okay. You don't have to stay because you feel guilty or obligated. I don't want that, and I know you don't either."

His brows pull together as he frowns down at me, his gaze filled with so much turmoil I can nearly see the thoughts pouring from his gaze.

"If that's what you think..." he says, dropping his hand from my belly and stepping back. The warmth of his body leaving me with a chill across my skin. "Then I'll just have to prove you wrong."

That was not what I was expecting. Although I should have known better, he is extremely stubborn.

“Warren?”

“No Bambi. I’ll prove to you that I’m not going anywhere.

That I didn’t come back out of some obligation .

I should have never left, but I did, and I’ll have to live with that.

With missing out on waiting for the pregnancy test to read positive, for not holding your hair back while you puked, for missing the first sonogram. ”

Warren’s throat bobs with an audible swallow, his chest heaving with his breaths, visibly affected by his own words.

“But not anymore. I’m going to be here from now on for everything. You have a weird craving? You call me and I’ll go get it. You need a ride to the doctor? I’ll drive you. You have swollen feet? I’ll rub them. I’m not here accidentally. You’ll see.”

Bending over he swipes up his shirt and hoodie, pulling them both back on, covering his impressive form. I will admit, seeing him shirtless again was not a bad thing.

Momentarily distracted by his body, I don’t immediately realize he’s moving again.

This time directly towards me. His hands engulf my face and hold me still as he plants a desperate and heart palpitating kiss on my lips.

I’m too stunned to do anything but react, melting against his lips and giving in to my own desire for him.

My brain is a little fuzzy when he pulls away, eyes half lidded as I watch him release me and back away.

“I’m going to go get my boat settled at Gigi’s, but I’ll be back. I’m not going anywhere Bambi. You’re stuck with me now.”

He gives me a wicked grin and slips his knit cap back on his head, flattening his mop of thick brown hair, before leaving me standing in my apartment completely confused.

I need to talk to Izzy.

~

Less than an hour later I’m sitting on Izzy’s couch sipping on hot tea, waiting in silence for her to sit so I can try and explain the whole Warren situation and why I lied to my best friend.

“So, what’s the emergency? You said it has to do with the baby but the baby’s fine?” Izzy finally sits on the opposite end of the couch and curls her legs under her, steam curling from her mug as she sips it gingerly.

“Yeah, so I may have lied to you, just a tiny bit,” I admit, hiding my face behind my mug.

Izzy narrows her gaze at me. “Lied about what, exactly?”

“Um...who the father is.” My admission is muttered but my sharp as a tack best friend still hears it.

Izzy lowers her mug resting it on her knee, her lips pursing in a disapproving manner.

“Mmhmm. So, who is the father? And why did it matter so much to lie about it?”

“Once you know who it is you’ll understand why I lied.”

My best friend waits patiently, watching me with suspicious eyes. Her soft blonde hair is pulled up into a top knot and her oversized sweater is perfectly slid off one shoulder. Her house is just as thought out and put together as she is. Everything in her life is put together, unlike mine.

I’ve always been a little off kilter and weird.

Nothing ever matches, I never do anything different with my hair, I have far too many pairs of overalls, my home looks like a secondhand store and I ride a tricycle around town.

Sometimes I wish I could be more like Izzy, organized, fashionable, sociable.

Maybe then Warren would have stayed, or better yet, asked me out years ago and never even planned to leave.

As it is, I can’t change the past until they discover time travel.

Which I’m sure is pretty far off, so I just have to live the life I’m given... and hope Warren is true to his word.

“The father...is...” When I don’t continue Izzy raises her brows and shakes her head in a ‘go ahead’ gesture.

“Warren.”

Silence, dead fucking silence.

“Warren?” she finally says.

“Yup.”

“As in Warren Graham, our friend of fifteen years and my brother’s best friend, Warren?”

“Yup, the very same.”

“I...You?...He? How? When?”

I think I’ve broken my best friend because she can’t seem to form a whole sentence, but I speak Izzy-a-nese.

“The week before he left, I admitted I had feelings for him. Apparently, they were mutual and we hooked up, then he left. Then I found out about being pregnant.”

Izzy’s eyes are practically bugging out of her head and her mouth drops open in shock, her tea completely forgotten.

“Did you tell him? Has he been skirting his responsibilities as a father this entire time? Do I need to hunt his ass down and drag him home by his balls?” Izzy progressively gets angrier and more protective with each revelation, and I love her a little bit more for it.

I hold a hand up to stop her from standing and running out the door to do just that. “No, no. I didn’t tell him, and he didn’t know.”

“Didn’t or doesn’t? Does he know now?”

“That’s kind of why I’m admitting it to you now. I was never going to. I was just going to pretend like I didn’t know the father and raise the baby on my own. But...”

“But what?”

I sigh and just get it over with. The hard part is over after all. Admitting he’s the father and that we had a rather vivacious sexual relationship _ no matter how short lived _ was the embarrassing part. The next bit is just informative.

“Warren’s back.”

Her brow furrows and she cocks her head to the side slightly. “Back? As in back in town?”

“Yeah. He just appeared at the shop today and nearly gave me a heart attack. Owen had told him about my pregnancy, and he connected the dots on his own.”

“So, he’s here in Homer? Like right now?”

“Yup.”

Izzy’s mug clinks quietly on the coaster as she sets it down, finally realizing she’s still holding it. Leaning back, she pokes her cheek with her tongue, her thinking face. Then she turns to me, determination setting in, I know she’s formulated at least three plans in those thirty seconds.

“Okay. So, what do you want to do? Are we just accepting him back, are we keeping him away? I can do whatever you want Hun. I’ll welcome him with open arms or kick him in the balls, either one is fine with me.”

I laugh and it feels good to finally have it out there, and to not be judged for it.

I take her questions into consideration. And truthfully, I’m not sure what to do.

“Well, he says he’s staying. I’m not sure I believe him.”

“Nor should you after all the years of him plotting to leave.”

I give her a soft smile of gratitude and continue.

“But I want to believe him. I think I’d like to give him the opportunity to prove himself.

I still have feelings for him, and if he really wants to be part of our lives because he loves me and wants to be here, and doesn't just stay out of obligation, then I want to give it a chance. But if his heart isn’t in it... ”

Izzy scoots over and grips my hand in hers, squeezing tightly, reassuringly. “Alright. Then that’s what we’ll do. I’ll keep an eye on him and report back to you, so you can make an informed decision. If he’s being a lame ass, then we’ll kick him out of our lives.”

“You’d do that to your brother’s best friend and ours?”

“Hell yeah. Besides, he was the one who left us first. If he turns out to be a deadbeat dad, it’s the least he deserves.”

“Thanks Izzy.”

“Of course, Rae. You should have told me sooner.” Her face shifts as she realizes that was the beginning of our conversation that we hadn’t properly addressed. “Why didn’t you tell me? Did you think I would judge you? You know I knew you had a thing for Warren.”

I did suspect she knew something, maybe not to the degree I really felt but she knew I

stared at him a little too long.

It was hard to hide, especially when I saw him with a girl.

He was with a lot of girls back then. Not so much in current years, but one was always hanging around.

I saw the looks they gave him, the hushed conversations and not so subtle touches.

He never brought any of them out with us and never called any his girlfriend.

I don't know why, he could have had his pick of the litter.

But he never picked one. I'd always assumed it was because he planned on leaving.

Now he says he's staying. He said a lot of things earlier, but he never said he loved me. He never said he chose me. There's something between us, there's no doubt about that. But is it enough?

"I was just trying to move on, I guess. I knew Warren wasn't coming back and I didn't want him to because he felt like he had to. He always wanted to leave, he never wanted to be here. It wasn't the life he wanted. So, I figured I would just make it easier for everyone."

Izzy rubs my hand, and I feel stupid now for keeping it from her. Even if I never planned to tell Warren or the rest of town, I could have told Izzy. She would have kept my secret, she always does. I guess a part of me was embarrassed that he chose his boat and the sea over me.

I was never enough. I was never anyone's first choice. Being proven right just made me feel...worthless.

“And now he’s back and claiming he’s going to stay,” she says.

“Yeah. Guess that didn’t work out like I planned,” I joke.

Izzy chuckles and pulls me in for a side hug. “No, it did not. But hey, it never does. Does it? Does anyone else know he’s in town?”

“I have no idea. He said he was going to Gigi’s to dock his boat, so she’ll know by now.”

“Does Gigi know? About him being the dad?”

I bark a humorous laugh. “She knew before I even told her. Apparently, she noticed me swooning over him more than I realized.”

Izzy laughs a knowing humor filled sound. “Of course she did. Gigi never misses a thing.”

No, she does not. I guess I didn’t inherit that trait from her, sadly.

I should probably go talk to her later once Warren is settled in.

I’m sure she’ll give him her two cents and perhaps a thinly veiled threat about hurting me.

I smile internally picturing her giving him a talking to and him apologizing like a scolded child.

Izzy and I talk for a little longer until James shows up after work. They try to convince me to stay for dinner, but I think a little time at home alone, in the quiet, would be good for me. Tomorrow I’ll have to go to Gigi’s and stress all over again. A

good night's sleep is warranted.

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Don't talk with your mouth full

As soon as I'm tied off on Gigi's dock, she's walking down the back deck towards me. I have no idea how much she knows. I didn't think to ask Bambi if she told anyone the truth about the baby's father. If anyone knows it'll most likely be Gigi and Izzy.

I decide to let Gigi lead the conversation, see what she knows first. Although I have no problem telling everyone in town that I'm the father, if Gigi doesn't know, that's something Bambi should tell her.

Gigi strides down the wooden deck onto the paved walkway leading to her private marina. Her white hair is plated in a braid down one shoulder, a cardigan with moose silhouettes across the chest is wrapped around her torso. Her arms are crossed over her chest and there's a growing smile on her lips.

Well, at least she's happy to see me. That's a good sign.

I hope. She could be lulling me into a false sense of security so she can strike easier.

You never know with Gigi, she can be sly like that.

Normally I loved it, mostly because she was protecting or supporting Bambi and even me at times.

It'll be completely different to be on the receiving end of her ire if she hates me.

I leap from the deck of my boat and smile back at Gigi, walking to meet her at the end of the worn but sturdy wooden slats where she waits for me.

“Warren Graham as I live and breathe. Didn’t you say you were never coming back?” she asks with a wicked grin on her lips.

“I may have said something like that.”

“And here you stand on my dock once again, not even six months later.” She’s still smiling and doesn’t seem at all perturbed by my being here.

I knew she wouldn’t be and that’s why I love her. No judgement, only acceptance. Let’s hope that extends to accidentally knocking up her granddaughter then leaving without ever knowing. Hopefully coming back as soon as I found out is points in my favor.

“Here I am.”

I hold out my arms and she steps forward to embrace me, squeezing tight. I hug her back and enjoy the smell and feel of her. Her and Bambi are home to me. I don’t know why it took me so long to figure that out.

“I’m glad you’re back, honey. I always knew you would be.” She pats my chest and steps back to give me a once over head to toe. “I wasn’t sure how long it would take, but I’m glad it didn’t take long. Let’s go inside and I’ll make you something to eat. You look hungry.”

She always says that, but this time I actually am pretty hungry. I haven’t eaten much today. I was so distracted with getting back and finding Bambi, food wasn’t important.

As if in agreement my stomach growls and we both look at it and laugh.

Inside the house nothing has changed, I supposed not much would in six months.

Other than one of my best friends carrying my baby.

That's a pretty big change. But the dining table is where it always has been, the handmade seat cushions still tied to the wooden bars with bows.

Knitted Afghans drape over the back of the couch, and a small fire is crackling in the wood burning stove in the corner, some home and garden show playing quietly on the TV.

It's weird the things you miss when you leave the place you consider home. I didn't realize how at peace I felt right here in this house. I always thought my peace was out on the water away from this town.

Gigi gestures for me to sit at the table and begins meddling around in the kitchen, pulling a covered casserole dish from the fridge and scooping some of its contents onto a plate. It looks like her famous lasagna and my mouth waters just thinking about eating it.

I've had my fair share of amazing foods while traveling the seas, but nothing compares to a home cooked meal. Whoever said love wasn't a real ingredient was lying. Everything tastes better when it's made with love.

Love. Fuck I'm so stupid. It was right here in front of me the whole fucking time and I just left it.

Ran away and made up some sorry ass excuse about finding happiness or some bullshit.

I guess that saying ‘the grass is always greener on the other side’ is a saying for a reason.

Things always look better to us when we don’t have them, it’s only in receiving them do we see the truth of it.

Gigi hums a tune so familiar it feels as if I’m a kid again, while she reheats the plate of food and pours me a tall glass of milk to go with it. I think to Gigi, I am still a kid, even though I’ve towered over her for years. She sets down the plate and glass in front of me and hands me a fork.

“There you are sweetheart. Nice home cooked meal to fill you up. Bet you missed my cooking when you left, didn’t you?”

” She sits in the seat next to me at her wooden round dining table.

She always said she liked round tables over square ones because they equally included everyone into the meal and conversation.

“You know I did Gigi. No one cooks like you do.”

I cut off a hefty bite and shovel the blend of pasta, meat and cheese into my mouth and moan in appreciation when the warm deliciousness hits my taste buds.

“Now that you’re here, perhaps you can tell me why it took you so long to come home? Raelyn’s nearly into her third trimester by now and you just figured it out?”

Well shit. That answers that question. I finish chewing and swallow, clearing my throat with a swig of ice-cold milk.

“I would have been back sooner, but I had no idea about her pregnancy. Not until

Owen told me, and as soon as he did, I headed home.”

The corner of her lips pulls upward at my answer, approving of my actions. At least I’ll have Gigi on my side to back me up with Bambi. I take another bite of food before she can distract me with another question. I am freaking hungry, and I will not miss out on Gigi’s lasagna.

“I knew she was wrong about you.”

“What?” I look up at Gigi and speak around the food in my mouth.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” she scolds, and I instantly snap my mouth shut and finish chewing.

“What do you mean she was wrong about me?” I ask once I’m no longer chewing.

“Raelyn always thought you would never change your mind about leaving. She always believed that being out on the ocean and outside of Alaska was what would make you happy. She just couldn’t see you like I do.”

She smiles at me and pats my hand on the table, holding it in her wrinkled but warm and strong one. You can’t be weak and live in Alaska, everyone here has to be strong of body and mind.

She continues before I can ask something stupid. “I knew once you realized what you had left behind, realized what truly made you happy, you would be back. Because what makes you happy is Raelyn.”

Is this woman some sort of psychic and I didn’t know about it? Because I didn’t even know Bambi is what made me happy until now. How could she have known all along?

I must make a face again, because she chuckles. “It was easy to see when watching you two. You both thought you were so sly, sneaking glances at one another when no one else was looking. Having a pet name for her you wouldn’t allow anyone else to use. It was so obvious to me.”

Okay now I know she’s psychic because I didn’t even ask the question, and she answered it. I raise an eyebrow at her suspiciously and she just laughs.

“Children are so oblivious. I’m just glad you finally saw what I see. That you finally found each other.”

“I’m still figuring it out, but I’m realizing a few things, being back home. Bambi’s not going to make it easy for me.” I let out a breathy chuckle.

“No, I wouldn’t expect she would,” Gigi agrees, chuckling right along with me. “But that doesn’t mean you should give up.”

“Oh, I don’t plan on it,” I state firmly. If there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that I’m not letting her slip through my fingers a second time.

“Good!” she exclaims and stands, retreating from the room without a word.

I have no idea where she went or why, but I finish eating the lasagna in a few large bites before she returns holding a small black leather box. The kind expensive jewelry comes in.

“When you’ve figured it all out, you can give her this.”

Gigi places the small box in front of me and I stare at it, as wide eyed as the fish I scoop out of the sea. It’s obvious what’s inside, what she’s telling me I should do. Something I hadn’t even considered yet but seems so obvious now. Still, I ask a

stupid question.

“What is it?”

“Open it and find out.”

With a shaky hand I lift the tiny lid of the box and see what I expected to see. A ring, and engagement ring. It’s old and nothing like those gaudy rocks you see women wearing nowadays. No, this ring has class and style, obviously a custom piece.

“It’s a family heirloom. Passed down from father, or mother, to son for them to propose with. Since I have no son, I had intended to just give it to Rae someday but hoped I’d be able to give it to you first.”

Sitting in a bed of intricately entwined white gold, sits a smooth large pearl glimmering with a hint of cerulean.

The color shifts in the light like the surface of the ocean from white to blue.

The band is thick and sturdy and amidst the elegant design holding the pearl, tiny diamonds are snugly placed. It’s perfect for my Bambi.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper, reverently plucking the ring from the black suede cushion.

“Rae’s father proposed to her mother with it. My husband and I were happy to give it to him then, and I’m happy to give it to you now. I know her parents would approve, even with all your childhood shenanigans.”

I smile, a tad embarrassed for my past behavior. Not all of it though, just the things I know Gigi wouldn’t approve of.

“Thank you, Gigi.” I hold the ring up to the light and take in its unique beauty, imagining it snugly resting on Bambi’s left hand. “I’ll try not to let you down.”

“I know you won’t,” she says as if it’s already decided.

I’m not as confident as she is, but with the ring situated safely back inside its little black box, I make sure it snaps shut tightly before slipping it into my front pocket.

“Now how about you tell me about your trip?”

For the next hour I recall some of the most interesting experiences from my six-month trip. None of it compares to being back home.

Now I just have to go repeat this whole conversation with Owen.

~

“You’re not surprised?” I ask my best friend who seems far too calm for this situation.

“I was surprised Raelyn was pregnant. Not surprised it’s yours.”

“How is that not surprising to you? It was a surprise to me.”

Owen shrugs and drinks from his pint glass, licking the foam from his lips.

We’re sitting in a back corner of Anchor’s Bottom where no one can overhear our conversation.

I met him here after leaving Gigi’s and am more shocked at his calm acceptance of my revelation than he was at hearing I was back in town.

“It was a surprise to you because you weren’t expecting it. I was always expecting you and Rae to eventually hook up.”

“What the hell is going on here? Did everyone but me know this was going to happen?”

I fall back in my booth and flop my hands on the table making the beer in our glasses sway slightly, letting out an audible exhale.

“Look man, I knew you were interested. The way you watched her and beat up any guy who got near her with ill intentions, it was kind of obvious. I figured you would either get over having casual flings and get together or you wouldn’t.”

His casual explanation of my world-shattering revelation is a bit disarming. Here I am going through a massive mental reorganization, and everyone around me is just shrugging their shoulders like it’s no big deal.

It’s all feeling anticlimactic. I was expecting disbelief, wide eyes, possible exclamation, outbursts and, I don’t know something more dramatic. This quiet passive acknowledgement is weird.

“Can we just keep this between us for now? Bambi didn’t tell people for a reason, and I don’t want it spreading around town just yet.”

“Sure thing. Whenever you two are ready to tell everyone, you just let me know. I may be a blabber mouth, but you can trust me, Warren. You’re my best friend and I’ll do whatever you need.”

I breathe a sigh of relief and shoot Owen a grateful smile.

“Okay, well...what now?” I ask. I was expecting a lot longer conversation than this

and am stumped as how to proceed.

“Now we drink to your return, and I’ll help you come up with ideas on how to woo Raelyn,” he says with a shit eating grin.

“Yes, because we all know how good you are at wooing,” I deadpan.

“I am an excellent wooer.” He sits up straight and places a hand to his chest like a Victorian dandy.

“Bullshit.” I toss a handful of pretzels at his face, and he opens his mouth to catch them like a child. Excellent wooer my ass.

“Well then, what are you going to do if you’re so much better?”

What am I going to do? I suppose fulfilling the promises I’ve already mentioned would be a good start.

Bring her whatever foods she’s craving, drive her to her doctor’s appointments, rub her feet.

But to do all those things I have to be near her, with her.

I can’t very well do them sitting here in the bar drinking beer.

I make a plan to go to her first thing tomorrow and start my wooing.

I’ll bring her breakfast, run her errands, clean her apartment.

I wonder if she’s already gotten a crib for the baby.

I could assemble one if we need it. What else do babies need?

Diapers. Clothes. I'm sure there's more than that.

Perhaps I should pick up a What to Expect When You're Expecting book.

Is that something Bambi would have at her store? I guess I'll find out tomorrow.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:41 pm

Tattooed sexy-man pheromones

For some reason I thought things would be different after Warren returned yesterday, but they seem to be mostly the same.

I wake up at my normal time, shower and get dressed, crunch on a few pickles for breakfast, and head downstairs.

The only difference is Lauren asking me questions about Warren's return.

Most of which I can't answer, and a few I choose to play ignorant.

I can't really admit I know he came back because he found out I was having his baby.

I'm standing at the register checking out a customer when the bell above the door rings and I call out my customary greeting.

"Good morning, welcome to The Book Vault." I'm about to continue with offering assistance finding what they're looking for, when I glance up to see it's none other than Warren entering the store.

This time I'm not as caught off guard. I kind of figured he would be back soon, just not this soon. In his hand he's carrying a white paper bag that smells heavenly.

"Good morning," he says, waving his free hand at me and nearly knocking me over with his bright smile.

I knew fishermen were morning people, but he's way too cheerful right now.

Regardless I have to admit, I like seeing him here and smiling with his handsome face, thick wild hair and two-day old scruff on his chin.

If only it were warm enough for him to roll up his sleeves and flash me those beautiful tattoos of his, then we'd be talkin' naughty fantasy come to life.

Thinking about his tattoos brings into stark relief an image of Warren shirtless and enlightening me on his chest tattoos true meaning. The thought has me clearing my throat and refocusing my attention on the customer in front of me.

I finish ringing them up, and as soon as they're gone, Warren is leaning over the check-out counter and sliding the bag across to me. I smell warm baked goods and butter.

"I brought you every flavor they had. I wasn't sure which you would be craving."

Leaning over to peek inside the bag, there are half a dozen croissants sitting inside. Plain, chocolate chip, strawberry filled, glazed, apple cinnamon, and one covered in almond slices...ew. I pluck out the apple cinnamon, deftly avoiding the almond one, and take a hearty bite.

"Mmm. Oh my god, thank you. I'm so hungry. Although I'm always hungry these days so that's no surprise."

Warren chuckles and leans on his elbows watching me with a grin plastered across his face. I slow my chewing and check around the edges of my mouth to make sure nothing's sticking to my face.

"I'm glad you like them. Later I'll get you lunch too. Whatever you want."

My eyes go wide and, because half of what I think about these days is food, I've already got a craving for lunch. Which will probably change by lunch time.

"A bacon cheeseburger with maple syrup and peanuts, with pickles on the side sounds amazing."

Normally when someone hears the weird concoction I'm craving they cringe. Not Warren. He only shakes his head and chuckles, like he's heard it all before and it doesn't completely gross him out to consider eating it.

"If that's what you desire then that is what you shall get. Until then, how can I help around the shop?"

I eye him over my half-eaten croissant, watching him carefully. He doesn't flinch, just waits patiently, his chocolatey brown eyes gleaming with mirth. Does he actually want to help or is he just doing this to butter me up? Either way we do have some heavy bookshelves and boxes that need moving.

"You want to help out around the shop?" I ask for clarification.

"Hell yeah. I want to do anything you need. Run errands, lift heavy shit, pick up your lunch. I am at your disposal." He leans back and opens his arms wide, presenting himself to me like a present. And what a present he is.

I hum and tap at my chin like a cartoon villain, trying hard to ignore his effortless charm. If he's offering, I might as well take advantage, right? This way I can find out if he's being sincere or not and get some free labor in the process.

"You know I could get used to having you at my beck and call, might even abuse my power. You sure you're up for that?"

His grin only grows wider, and he leans back onto the counter, getting within inches of my face and speaks low and conspiratorially.

“Bambi I am up for anything you want.”

I suck in a breath and hold it at his nearness.

The last time we were this close we were naked _ and probably making the baby in my stomach.

Heat blooms between my thighs and the familiar ache of longing and desire burns hot.

Fucking hormones making me horny all the time.

I can't completely blame them though; Warren is sinfully hot.

Warren's eyes flit down to my lips, and I inadvertently exhale, opening my lips to him in a silent invitation. He licks his bottom lip before rolling it between his teeth and I almost whimper out loud.

Stupid pregnancy hormones.

“So, what do you say Bambi? What would you like me to do?”

Pull down your pants, sit on my couch and let me ride your amazing dick. Wait, shit, no not that. At least not right now.

“There's a shelf in the back that needs to be moved.” Weakly I point vaguely towards the back of the shop. “If you ask Lauren, she'll point it out to you.”

“You got it boss. I’m on it. Just let me know when you get hungry again, okay?” He gives me a wink and finally withdraws from the counter giving me space to breathe.

I’m not sure I can survive being the sole focus of Warren’s attention.

When we were sneaking around and meeting in secret at night, that was one thing.

During the day we acted like we always had.

But having him following me around, bringing me food and winking at me, right out in public?

That’s a whole different ball game that I don’t know how to play.

Warren disappears to the rear of the store calling out Lauren’s name, his massive body hidden by the many shelves of books filling the shop.

It’s probably too many shelves to be honest, but I like having a plethora of options.

Not to mention all the used books we purchase and find.

It’s like a wonderland of paper and ink, each one filled with its own magical story.

Fiction is our greatest seller and what comprises the majority of our selection.

If you want a manual on how to disassemble a transmission, look it up on YouTube. The Book Vault is all about imagination and whimsy. Books should be one of two things: informative or entertaining. I prefer the entertaining ones, so that’s what we stock, and people seem to like it.

For the rest of the morning I work the front counter, checking out customers and

fiddling around on the tablet to keep myself distracted from the glimpses I catch of Warren between the stacks.

I may or may not take a few steps to the left to get a better angle of his backside when he flexes to reposition the shelf and lift boxes.

As soon as he turns around, I not so slyly avert my gaze, but I'm sure he knows I was watching him.

He doesn't say anything about it though, thankfully.

After one such time he surprises me by appearing at my side behind the counter, instead of safely on the opposite side. He's so close I can smell his salty sea scent and feel his radiated heat.

Warren turns his body to shield us from Lauren, still working in the back of the store.

There are no other customers right now and the only sound is the quiet music playing from the speakers.

He faces me and gently places one hand on my stomach.

I try to remain calm, not because I'm concerned about him touching my stomach, but because I don't want to give into him on day one.

The feel of his hand on my belly is comforting and warm. Our son settling at the sensation of his father nearby. It's strange how after only one meeting he somehow instinctually already knows who Warren is to him. Warren's thumb rubs small circles and we both watch the movement.

"How are you doing? Feeling, okay? Do you need anything? Should I bring you a

chair, or a blanket?”

I giggle quietly at his adorable questions and concern. It’s kind of nice to have someone fretting over me. Warren looks up at me, the cutest quirk in his brow.

“What’s so funny?”

“You are.”

“Well, I’m not trying to be. At least not right now. I’m serious Bambi.”

And he is, he’s not joking or goofing around, his face is calm and relaxed as he watches me. I reach up and cup his scruff covered cheek and scratch my nails through the short hair.

“I’m fine Warren. I have a chair and I’m more hot than cold these days.”

My answer seems to appease him, because he smiles and his shoulders relax, but his hand remains on my stomach.

Which is barely covered by today’s pair of overalls.

I’m going to have to invest in a pair of maternity overalls made with tons of spandex and elastic at this point.

Especially since I’ll grow the most in the last trimester.

After a long pause I drop my hand from his face, already missing the feel of him against my skin.

“Okay, if you don’t need anything, can you direct me towards the maternity books? I

can't seem to find them, and I'd like to do some reading so I don't feel completely inept about what's going on."

A guilty blush heats my cheeks, as I drop my gaze to the wooden countertop in front of me.

"They're all up in my apartment. I may have commandeered them for research of my own," I admit sheepishly.

"So, I'm not the only one who needs to do a little studying huh?"

I shrug and any apprehension I may have felt when he first arrived and offered his assistance, drifts away with our easy conversation.

Talking to Warren was always easy to do.

After six months away it feels like no time has passed at all.

His presence is so familiar and comfortable, it's as if he never left.

But he did leave, and I have to keep reminding myself about that. I can't let his tattooed sexy-man pheromones overpower my common sense.

"If you want to read them, you can head up to my apartment. They're kind of all over the place so you'll just have to find them."

I should probably be worried about him snooping around, but there's nothing up there he hasn't already seen or that I wouldn't want him to see. All my secrets are concealed on my body.

"Okay. I'll be back to go get that weird ass cheeseburger you wanted in a little bit.

Can't have the two most important people in my life going hungry now, can I?"

My heart races and I promptly blush again.

It's a strange sensation having his every attention on me.

This easy flirting and close proximity that we never had before.

I like it, but it also scares me. It scares me because I'm afraid if I get too comfortable it'll all go away just as easily as before.

Warren disappears upstairs to find the maternity books and doesn't come back down for an hour. Right about the time my stomach starts growling again.

I'm unceremoniously ushered to Warren's truck that he must have picked up from Owen, because the last time I saw it, it was parked in his driveway. Warren calls out to Lauren that we're leaving and doesn't wait for her reply. He even buckles me in once I'm firmly seated in his truck.

"I can do that myself you know?"

He swats my hands away as I try to take over buckling my own freaking seat belt. If he's going to be a helicopter parent we're going to have a serious conversation about boundaries.

"I know, but I want to make sure you're safe." The buckle clicks into place, and he reaches up to adjust the strap over my belly, resting his hand there reverently. "You're important to me, and I want you to know that. Not just because you're pregnant either."

His eyes are like lasers locked on mine as he says this. I want to say something back,

be snarky and break the tension between us, but I can't. I don't want to belittle his feelings and make him feel bad for caring about me. It is, after all, what I've wanted all along.

Instead, I just nod and let him finish checking my safety belt before gently closing the passenger side door.

He rounds the hood of the truck and slides into the driver's seat, turning on the heater as soon as he starts the engine.

It takes a second for the air to warm but once it does, I relax into the bench seat.

But now I have a whole new set of problems. What are people going to say when we show up to the diner for lunch and Warren's handling me with kid gloves?

Hopefully they'll just think he's being a good friend.

Us being together isn't new, everyone knows we're friends.

And until I'm ready to publicly announce him as the father, I'd like it to remain that way.

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A spam and skittle omelet

When I told Bambi I would be there every day to help her, I don't think she believed me.

Because everyday I show up in the morning at the shop and don't leave until after she's eaten a full dinner of whatever strange craving she's having, she's still surprised to see me the next day.

Like she expects me to disappear without a trace... again.

It's been a week since I returned, and every day I wake up, drive over to her shop in my same old truck, park out back and proceed to do whatever she needs for the day. I think she's testing me and having fun with telling me what to do.

She's had me clean the shop bathroom, dust every single bookshelf, alphabetize her pantry, and paint her toenails.

Though that last one was enjoyable for me as well.

I like touching Bambi, and I'll take every opportunity I'm given, even if that's just rubbing her swollen feet and painting her toes neon purple.

Today she attempted to go on deliveries.

I wasn't having that. So, after much persuading, here I am with bags of blue wrapped books on my passenger seat, driving around town, and dodging small talk with nosey

townsfolk.

I have had to deal with old ladies pinching my cheeks, fisherman ex-coworkers chatting me up about their latest catch and trying to rehire me, and a few gabby gossips trying to pry everything about my time away from me.

Eventually, I make it through all the deliveries, taking twice as long as I had hoped to.

By the time I've finished it's late afternoon and I know Bambi will be getting hungry soon.

Deciding to stop to pick something up to make her dinner, I pull into the parking lot of the local grocery store.

I have no idea what she'll be craving tonight, but I also want to surprise her.

Perusing the aisles like a lost puppy, I hope something will jump out at me. Spaghetti, mac-n-cheese, fried chicken, smoked salmon. Nothing sounds right. She's been favoring pickles lately, so I toss a few jars of those into my basket. Minis, spears, bread and butter just to be safe. Now what?

As I'm staring unfocused at the meat section, I sense a body appear at my side but don't give it much thought until the person speaks.

"Can't figure out what to make for dinner?" a familiar voice asks, drawing my attention away from the overpriced steaks.

Gigi looks up at me and grins. My frown smoothing out seeing a friendly face that won't ask me forty-six million questions and expect me to recite my life's memoir.

“No, I can’t. I wanted to make something for Bambi, but with her pregnancy cravings I’m not sure what to get,” I admit, a sheepish smile on my face.

Gigi is one of the three people in town who knows I’m the father of the baby, and the only person who knows my ultimate goal, marry Bambi and make a family with her.

She’s been watching me leave every morning all week, waving me off with a smile and words of encouragement.

The ring she gave me safely tucked away on my boat waiting for that perfect opportunity, which won’t be any time soon, not until after she trusts me again.

“That is a tough one. Her cravings are rather wild. But you know what she always loved?”

Gigi loops her arm through mine and steers me down the meat section, stopping in front of the bacon and sausage.

“Rae always loved breakfast for dinner. No matter if we had a full breakfast that morning or not.”

That’s at least a place to start. But as I stare at the choices of breakfast meat I am now faced with another dilemma.

Bacon or sausage? Pancakes or waffles? Do I get eggs?

Muffins or biscuits? Hashbrowns or country potatoes?

There are just as many choices as before, the suggestion not making my decision any easier.

Gigi must notice my growing panic and distress because she squeezes my arm in a reassuring gesture that has my brows un-pinching.

“I would suggest getting a little of everything. Just to be safe,” she says.

“Good idea.”

“And don’t forget the chocolate chips for pancakes,” she adds as I pick a pack of bacon and sausage to add to my cart. With the amount of breakfast food I’m going to buy, we’ll be able to eat breakfast every meal for a week.

“Thanks Gigi. What would I do without you?”

“Well for starters you would still be standing there staring at the meat like an owl.”

I laugh and something inside of me settles. With every day that passes after my return, I feel more and more sure of my decision. Being here is the right thing, whether Bambi is pregnant or not, it’s where I’m supposed to be.

“Thanks again Gigi.”

“For what?” she asks, her smile still firmly in place.

“For not hating me for leaving Bambi. For not turning me away when I came back. You had every right to, but you didn’t. Thank you.” She pats me on the cheek and her small warm hand cups my jaw as she turns me to face her straight on.

“You’re family Warren, always have been always will be. You don’t turn away family just because they left for a little while. You did nothing wrong. As I see it, you’re trying to do the right thing and that’s what matters.”

She pats my cheek one more time for good measure before dropping her hand and acting as if we're just talking about which brand of bacon to buy, and not the mother of my unborn child.

"Now you get going and feed my grandbabies. Go on now. Shoo."

She waves me away and we part ways, her last words to me spoken with a wicked grin. "I won't wait up for you."

I've been living on my boat just as I always had, but from her insinuation she seems to think I'll be staying at Bambi's.

Not that I would mind. I would love to stay with her.

Be close by in case she needs me in the middle of the night.

To keep her stove lit and burning so she doesn't get cold.

To wrap my arms around her as we sleep. That last one benefits us both.

The idea takes root, and as I pick out every breakfast food known to man, I plan my speech to convince Bambi I need to stay with her.

For hers and our baby's protection and benefit.

By the time I slide into the driver's seat of my truck, multiple bags of groceries secured in the back, I've come up with what I feel is a foolproof plan.

When I arrive at Bambi's the store is already closed for the night, all the lights downstairs turned off, the only light coming from her apartment above.

My arms are filled with the grocery bags as I thumb through the keys on my ring to find the one I had made yesterday.

I used to have a key of my own but returned it to her when I left.

I wasn't sure she would say yes if I asked for another, so I had my own made.

She'll probably be angry with me for stealing her keys and making a copy without asking her first, but I'm okay with that.

Because it means I have a way to get to her in case of an emergency.

I may have had nightmares about her going into labor locked in her apartment and me with no way of getting inside. The only way to assuage my growing panic and need to protect her, was to make a copy of her key without her knowledge.

Now is as good a time as any to use it. To surprise her with breakfast for dinner, and every meal for the foreseeable future.

I slip the silver key in the exterior door and turn it till it clicks.

Most of the time she only locks this door and not the one at the top of the stairs to her apartment, so I won't have to worry about unlocking two doors.

I make sure to lock the exterior door behind me before climbing quietly up the stairs.

At the top I wipe my feet on her door mat that has a picture of a stack of books and reads "Yes I really do read all these books." Without knocking I step through the door and decide to announce myself in a way she should get used to.

"Honey, I'm home."

Bambi is standing in the kitchen, the fridge door open in front of her when she turns to stare at me, completely taken off guard by my surprise appearance. I can see the sparkle of delight in her eyes before they shift to curious confusion.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, still standing in front of the open fridge, one hand on the door handle. Even her fridge is second hand. One of those retro fifties style ones with only one door and colored mint green.

“I thought I would make you dinner.” I hold up the bags showing her my offerings.

Her eyes brighten even more as her tongue swipes across her lips hungrily.

She looks so freaking cute in her overall sweatpants.

They look soft and comfortable, draped loosely over her rounded stomach, fuzzy pink slippers covering her purple toenails.

Seeing her like this solidifies my resolve to move in with her. Now just to persuade her.

“What did you bring?” She shuts the fridge absentmindedly, not even bothering to remove her eyes from the bags in my hands.

“Breakfast.”

“What kind?”

“All of them.”

Bright hazel eyes flick up to mine as I set the bags on the kitchen counter. Pulling out my haul, I set each item down in a row for her inspection and choosing.

“Are you going to make all of this?” she asks.

“Not right now but eventually, yes. I’ll make whatever you want.”

Bambi holds a package of chocolate chips to her chest like a treasure, gasping with delight.

I wasn’t sure how I would sexually respond to her being pregnant.

I thought maybe her stomach would kill my libido or something, but I can tell you right now that is so not the case.

My cock twitches with interest watching her pouty little lips part making an O shape, remembering they looked similar when wrapped around my cock.

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I shake my head to clear it of the dirty thoughts growing there.

I can't make a move on her till I know she wants it.

Thankfully she doesn't notice my lude staring at her tits which have grown since the last time I saw her naked.

I bet they're extra sensitive now too. I can just imagine her moans as I suck on them and _ NO.

Stop thinking about fucking Bambi and get back on task.

"What would you like me to make you Bambi?" My voice comes out husky and deep, but she doesn't seem to notice, only the food in front of her is important now.

She peruses her options and nibbles on her lips before answering. "Omelet and chocolate chip pancakes."

"That seems pretty normal for you."

"I haven't told you what kind of omelet yet." Her eyes twinkle with mirth and her smile is infectious. I want to make her smile like that forever.

"Okay then, hit me with it. What kind of omelet am I making?"

"A spam and skittles omelet."

I can't stop the bark of laughter that booms from my chest. I should have known better. Her cravings are the weirdest things I've ever heard of a person eating.

"And I would like the omelet on top of the pancake please," she adds.

"Of course. Why would you eat it any other way?"

"I wouldn't, it's the only way to eat a spam and skittles omelet."

Circling the kitchen island, I can't keep the massive smile from my lips as I get to work picking out all the ingredients needed to make her ridiculous breakfast. Eggs, pancake mix, chocolate chips, butter.

I didn't buy spam or skittles but apparently those are things she already had in her pantry.

Bambi sets the two ingredients down next to the eggs and starts fiddling with the spam can.

"Whoa there, what do you think you're doing?" I pluck the can from her hands and hold it out of her reach.

"Making breakfast for dinner?"

"No, you're not. I am making you breakfast for dinner. You are sitting your cute ass down and watching."

Setting down the spam can, I direct Bambi by her shoulders to the stool on the opposite side of the counter and I don't release her till she's comfortably perched on the cushioned stool. She doesn't argue and just grins at me as she props her chin on her hands.

I return to the other side of the island and pry open the can of spam I just relinquished from Bambi.

“Ooh can I have pickles while I wait?”

I kind of like that she asked me instead of getting them herself. Now she’s learning. I pull the three pickle jars from the bag on the counter and line them up in front of her.

“Which one would you like?”

“How did you know I would want pickles?” She cocks her head to one side playfully and her ponytail swooshes behind her, falling over one shoulder. It’s gotten longer in the past six months, and I don’t think she’s cut it at all.

“You’ve basically been eating them nonstop.” I casually shrug one shoulder. “Figured it was a safe choice if everything else flopped.”

“Mmmm,” she hums as she pulls the jar of bread and butter pickles in front of her.

Her small hands barely fit around the lid and before she even begins to struggle to open it I pluck it from her hands and twist the top off, unceremoniously setting the open jar back in front of her.

One flavored spear disappears in three large bites as she once again hums with pleasure.

She watches me moving around in her kitchen while munching on her pickles.

I’ve been in this kitchen so many times I know it almost as well as my boat.

I’m in the middle of cracking eggs into a mixing bowl when Bambi’s loud

exclamation almost causes me to drop an egg on the floor.

“Wait! How did you get into my apartment? I swear I locked all the doors downstairs.”

Kind of surprised it took her this long to realize. I keep cracking eggs and slicing spam, my gaze focused on the food in front of me.

“A key of course.”

“What key?”

“My key.”

I can feel her narrowed gaze and glower trying to burn a hole in my forehead, but I don't look up. It'll only make me laugh and I'm already having a difficult time keeping it contained.

“I didn't give you a new key,” she says slowly, carefully. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling.

“No you didn't.”

“Then how did you get one?”

“I had it made.”

“When?” Her voice is almost shrill at the one-word demand.

“The other day. I wanted to make sure I could get to you in an emergency.” Her face softens as I look up at her, pausing my preparation.

“I had a dream that you went into labor locked inside your apartment and no one could get in to help you. I wanted to make sure if that happened, I could get to you.”

Her expression softens even more, going from righteous indignation to grateful appreciation.

“I guess that’s okay then.”

“I promise I won’t use it if you don’t want me to, but I’m not giving it back.”

A small smile quirks the corner of her lips that makes me want to kiss her. Would she mind? I don’t think she would, maybe I’ll try later, after I’ve made her weird omelet.

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You were always my happy place

Breakfast for dinner is the best kind of dinner.

Warren watches me warily as I cut a slice out of my weird, layered meal.

The colorful skittle and spam omelet set right on top of two fluffy chocolate chip pancakes smothered in butter and maple syrup.

He made himself an omelet and pancakes as well, but he didn't add the skittles to his and eats them like a boring normal person, separately.

I'm halfway through my delicious meal when I feel a swift kick to my gut and burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Warren asks, a fork hovering halfway to his mouth.

"The baby just kicked."

"Maybe he doesn't like the spam and skittles?"

I'm pretty sure the spam and skittles were completely the baby's idea so that can't be right. The baby kicks again and I set down my fork to hold my hand to the side of my stomach.

"Here, come feel."

Warren instantly stands from the stool next to me and rounds to stand behind me, his left arm wrapping around my back to place a large warm hand on the place I indicate.

With his body behind me I feel completely surrounded by his presence.

He doesn't need to, but he presses close to my back, allowing me to lean against him for support, his right arm circling around my other side as well.

Both hands are now flat and cradling my stomach and our son within.

I rest my head against his shoulder and his chin rests on mine, his cheek pressing to my cheek as he waits to feel another kick. It comes quickly, this time in three rapid strikes right against his hand. Warren chuckles deep and delighted against my neck.

“That’s a strong kick there, Thumper. Like a rabbit thumping at the ground.”

I turn my head to try and look at him, he’s still looking down to my stomach reverently and I watch him. There’s something in his eyes I’ve never seen before.

“What’s with you and that movie?”

“What do you mean?” His eyes flick to me but only linger for a moment before returning to his hands and the kicking.

“You call me Bambi and our unborn son Thumper. Does that make you Flower?”

He looks back at me and with the most serious face he says. “You can call me Flower if you want to.”

My head rolls as I laugh out loud at his utter ridiculousness. “Now you’re quoting the movie. That’s not going to drive me crazy or anything.”

“If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothing at all.”

I only laugh harder, my stomach clenching, causing it to shake in Warren’s hands. He doesn’t let go, if anything he holds on tighter, locking me in the circle of his arms. It feels so right, so perfect. It’s warm and comfortable. A place I could live. A place I could call home.

For a moment I give into the feeling, letting it wash over me and embrace me in its possibility. It’s everything I’ve always wanted, and it’s right here within my grasp. All I have to do is accept it.

“It’s the last time I remember being happy with my parents,” he says quietly.

“What?”

“Watching Bambi . I was sitting on the couch eating popcorn and watching the movie with my mom, I think I was six. This was before my dad started drinking, before he became violent. We were a happy normal family then. It was the last time I felt like that, watching that movie with them. I guess it kind of stuck in my mind as the thing that made us happy.” He breathes out a humorless chuckle and I want to reverse our position and wrap my arms around him, reassure him that’s all in the past, but he keeps talking and I remain still.

“When we first met you reminded me of Bambi, with your large doe eyes and innocence. With your adorable freckles and optimism. Just like Bambi, always seeing the good in the world. I call you Bambi because of that and because you always make me feel as happy as I did on that day when I was six. You were always my happy place. Made me feel like I belonged, no matter what.”

My eyes are closed but I still feel the well of water rising behind them.

Crying is my default now. Something's cute, cry.

Something's happy, cry. Someone's polite, cry.

Something tastes good, cry. I pull in slow deep breaths to help control the crying, relishing in Warren's embrace tightening around me, remaining still so he can hold me.

Let him take his comfort from me however he needs.

I don't see him move, only feel it when his lips press soft and lovingly against my neck.

I should probably tell him no or push him away.

That would be the smart thing to do. He hasn't been home long enough for me to figure out if his reasons for being here are honest or not.

Though after his revelation it's hard to deny his feelings, his motives, as anything other than truthful.

I can't pull away. I don't want to pull away, and my body is certainly not letting me pull away.

My hormones are in overdrive and just that light touch sends ripples of pleasure through my body.

I stifle a moan, biting the inside of my cheek.

It doesn't stop the prickle running across my skin that makes my nipples harden and my pussy clench.

This is ridiculous. It was only one small kiss. Oh, make that two.

Warren presses another kiss to my neck and my breath saws in and out of my lungs.

God, I have been needing to be touched like this for so long.

Pregnancy has made me massively horny, which doesn't make sense since I'm already pregnant.

You'd think my body would realize it doesn't need to have sex anymore and stop pumping out the horny hormone.

But no, ever since becoming pregnant I've only wanted sex more. Stupid.

"I've missed you so much," Warren mutters against my skin. "I know you don't fully trust me again yet, but I was wondering," He pauses and rubs the tip of his nose along my skin. "If I could stay with you."

Yes, yes, fucking yes. Stay, get naked and keep touching me. Keep saying beautiful things to me. Keep making me fall in love with you. Is what I want to say, so damn much. Instead, I somehow managed to retain some of my stubbornness.

"Why? Is there something wrong with your boat?" It's a weak attempt to hold on to my resolve that is slowly diminishing day by day.

"No, there's nothing wrong with my boat," he chuckles, and I can feel the heat of his breath on my pulse point.

"Mainly I want to keep an eye on you. I don't like the idea of you being here alone.

You could trip and fall, hurt yourself trying to reach a book on a high shelf which

could fall over and crush you.

Every time I think about it, it makes me anxious.

But also, because I want to be with you.

I want to experience this with you, help you.

Be here for you. Show you there's nowhere else I'd rather be. "

He pauses and takes in a deep breath, his fingers lifting my chin to face him, cupping my cheek in his palm. My eyes open and I'm staring back into his milk chocolate gaze, completely at his mercy.

"Because I love you, Bambi."

My heart lodges in my throat, pounding like a bass drum.

Those three little words perched on the tip of my tongue, wanting desperately to be said back to him.

I've said them so many times in my head that saying them out loud should be simple, easy.

But I'm afraid. Afraid that once it's out there, once I say it, he could reject me.

Crush every tiny piece of my heart, all of which already belongs to him.

An expression of understanding crosses through his gaze, and Warren nods while softly smiling.

“You say it when you’re ready. There’s no rush, I’m not going anywhere.”

Leaning in he presses his lips to mine, and I don’t object.

The kiss is filled with all the emotions I can’t say out loud, and the ones he can.

He lingers on my lips letting me fall deeper into his seduction.

His tongue slips past my lips to taste me, gentle and smooth, withdrawing almost as quickly as he entered. I almost whimper when he pulls away.

“Okay, you can stay. You convinced me.”

His smile is broad and toothy. “Well, if I knew all I needed to do was kiss you I would have started with that.”

“Oh, well next time you’ll know.”

Slowly he disentangles himself from around me. It’s obvious neither of us wants to, but we also can’t stay like this all night. Warren presses a kiss to my temple before returning to his stool and our long-forgotten food.

“Finish your breakfast, then I’ll rub your feet before bed.”

“Bed? It’s only seven o’clock.”

“Ok fine then, I’ll rub your feet while we watch a movie.”

“Or read a book.”

He chuckles again. “That too. Though it would be rather hard for me to turn the pages

with my hands occupied rubbing your feet.”

“Fine, a movie then,” I sigh with mock irritation. “But only if we have popcorn and watch Bambi .” Warren looks at me surprised, but hopeful. I shrug, smiling. “I haven’t watched it in a long time. It’s as good as any other movie.”

~

I probably shouldn’t have suggested watching Bambi , a movie that even if I weren’t pregnant would make me weep like a baby, because watching it while pregnant is like participating in the Olympics of ugly crying.

A mother protecting her young? Could it hit any closer to home?

Warren is a good sport through it all though. Getting me a box of tissues and cuddling me close to him, pressing reassuring kisses to my tear-stained cheek. He really is being the sweetest.

But even after all that crying and emotional whirlwind, it still can’t smother my pregnancy libido the moment I walk out of the bathroom ready for bed to find Warren stripping down to his underwear in my bedroom.

“What are you doing?”

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Warren whips around at my sharp tone, which doesn't help the horniness steadily growing down south. Warren in his underwear is even better than shirtless Warren. Every single one of his bad boy tattoos on display, his dark messy hair falling into his eyes. Yum.

“Getting ready for bed. What's it look like?”

I stare at him open mouthed, because I'm not sure what to say. It would be a crime against humanity to tell him he can't sleep in my bed...in nothing but his underwear.

“You didn't think I was going to sleep on the couch, did you?” he asks with a wicked gleam in his eye and smirk on his lips.

I mean I guess I hadn't thought about where he would sleep when he asked to stay with me. And the couch isn't the most comfortable for sleeping on.

“No, I guess not. I didn't really think about it,” I admit.

He only smiles broader and pulls the covers back on the side of the bed he knows I don't sleep on and crawls in. His eyes never break contact with mine.

“Come on Bambi,” he pats my empty side of the bed. “Get in.”

Well shit.

There's no way I'll be able to sleep next to him while this turned on. And there's no way I can take care of the issue how I normally would d _ with the vibrator tucked in

my nightstand _ with him laying right next to me.

I'll just have to suck it up and ignore it, just like I did when we were teenagers at a sleepover.

Crawling into bed I lay on my side facing away from Warren.

Staring at his naked body won't help me pretend he's not there.

He holds the blankets for me as I position myself and then tucks them around me.

The light on his nightstand clicks off, plunging us into darkness.

Only the faint rays of moonlight filtering in through the blinds cast any light in the space.

For a moment everything is still and quiet, until I feel Warren moving on the bed behind me, getting closer, until the warmth of his skin presses against my sleep shirt.

It's too difficult to wear much of anything else to bed beyond an oversized shirt and panties.

So that's all I'm wearing and when Warren spoons me from behind I can feel the soft brush of his legs against mine.

That's also not all I feel. Because there's a rock-hard cock snuggling into my butt right now. I let out a choked gasp as he settles his whole body against mine, one arm casually flung across my hips and now cradling my belly.

"Uh...Warren?"

“Yes Bambi?”

“Is that how you’re going to sleep?”

“I was planning on it. There something wrong with this position?”

No, no there is not. This position is awesome, as a matter of fact I would love to do it naked with you. Would you mind removing all our clothing now?

“No, it’s fine,” is what I croak out instead.

Warren takes that as an invitation to snuggle closer, which only grinds his erection against me more.

I involuntarily press back against it. I can’t help it, I’m fucking horny, and he obviously is too.

Plus, he feels amazing. I’ve missed being held by him and being fucked by him even more.

Thinking about that night he tied me up only has my pussy getting wetter.

I try to rub my thighs together to ease the tension, but it doesn’t help.

“Do you need something, Bambi?” His voice is like warm sugary syrup drizzled over gravel as he practically purrs in my ear, right before he places a sizzling kiss to my neck.

It has me gasping and wiggling in his hold, grinding back against him without thought.

“I’d be glad to help you out with anything you need. Anything at all. I read that pregnant women get especially horny, thanks to all the hormones. Are you extra horny Bambi? Would you like me to help ease that need?”

Don’t have to ask my sex hormone riddled brain twice.

“Mhm.” I nod frantically, reaching up to grip his hair in my free hand.

“I was doing a little research, and the books say having sex while spooning is a comfortable position for the woman.”

His fingers glide down to the hem of my shirt, lifting it slowly until he can cup my growing breast in his hand. Just the slight brush of his fingers over my nipple has me moaning out loud and arching against him.

“I guess they were right about over sensitized nipples to,” he mutters with a quiet chuckle.

I just whimper like a fool as he gently plays with my nipple, getting me massively wet and horny.

Then bite on my lip when his hand trails back down south and hooks around the edge of my panties.

With practiced skill he slides them down my legs and I help kick them off somewhere in the folds of the sheets and comforter. I’ll find them later.

Once they’re gone his hand gently cups between my thighs, his finger sliding through my wet folds.

“Jesus Bambi, you’re fucking soaked. You need it that bad?”

I nod impatiently. I do need it that bad.

“Fuck,” he growls into my ear and even nips at my lobe.

Then his still covered cock rubs along my bare ass harder than before.

It’s nice to know I’m not the only one affected.

His fingers play with my pussy circling my clit softly, but even that is enough to make me cry out in pleasure.

He tests my entrance with a probing finger, but I’m already primed and ready for his perfect cock.

“I missed you so fucking much, I missed being inside you and watching you fall apart as I made you come.” His words are buried in my hair and neck as he holds onto me tight from behind.

Then I feel him shifting away to remove his boxer briefs and then settle against me once again, this time completely naked. The hot smooth skin of his thick length sliding along my crack as he groans behind me.

“You’re perfect, you know that? My perfect little Bambi, and all mine.”

“Yes.” His possessive words have me agreeing with him. I am his, always have been.

One strong hand lifts my knee and he settles my leg on top of his, opening me to him. The solid heft of him slips between my legs from behind and rubs at my swollen needy pussy.

“Warren, please don’t tease me,” I whimper, gripping his hair in my fingers and

pulling him closer to me.

“Never,” he answers, swiftly lining the head of his cock with my entrance and pushing in.

I cry out when he breaches me, and it feels so fucking good. I need more, need him to move, to fill me and call me his again. He reads the demands of my body and slides in deeper, pumping his hips as he sheathes himself inside me.

He hisses out a breath once his groin presses flush to my ass, and I moan in approval. Then he starts moving. Holding me still with his arms bracketed around my body as he rocks his hips guiding his length in and out in the best fucking way.

“Oh yes. Fucking finally,” I lament to the dark room in front of me.

I can’t see him, but I feel him, hear him, and it’s fucking heaven. My pussy clenches tight around him because I’m already coming, so sensitive and over stimulated. My body trembles but I still need more.

Warren chuckles into my hair and sucks at my neck. “Already Bambi? Did you need to come that bad? Don’t worry I’ll make you come again,” he promises in a dark sultry voice.

I can already feel my second orgasm building with his steady thrusts. The sounds of our wet flesh coming together is so deliciously naughty. His hand slips down from my stomach to play with my clit, and I convulse at the touch. Every nerve ending in me firing all at once makes me dizzy.

“That’s it baby, come again for me.”

And I fucking do, because apparently the combination of my pregnancy hormones

and Warren's perfect cock and skilled fingers can make me come on command now.

"Fuck you're so pretty when you scream for me."

How is he able to keep talking? My brain is mush and my body gelatin after coming twice on his thick length. Which is still hard and solid pumping inside me, stretching and filling me so well.

"Can you come one more time for me, Bambi?"

I shake my head because my body is already trembling and my pussy spasming around him. If I come again, I may pass out. But it feels so fucking amazing I'm not going to stop him, even if I am shaking my head no. I guess that's why we have a safe word. Until I say it, he won't stop.

"Yes, you can," he argues. "You're going to come one more time for me before I can come inside you. Do you want me to come inside you?"

"Yes. Yes, I want that," I slur my words because I'm fuck drunk at this point but feeling him come inside me is like tasting heaven.

His sure fingered hand slips between my thighs, his palm pressing into my clit as his fingers circle his length where it disappears inside my body.

"Oh god, fuck!" I scream.

Warren's pace increases and his balls slap as he pounds in all the way and holds himself there, just as I come around him for the third time.

I can feel his cock swell and pulse, releasing inside me.

He holds still as his own pleasure throbs through him until I feel his length softening and his body relaxing.

Warm kisses pepper my sweaty neck, and he doesn't shift to pull out of me or move away. As a matter of fact, it feels like he's getting comfortable. Like he is just going to settle in and fall asleep with his dick still inside me.

Now that I think about it though, that doesn't sound awful.

"Are you just going to sleep like this now?" I ask with a chuckle.

"Maybe. I'm comfortable here," he says snuggling closer and threading his leg through my spread ones.

I settle my leg on top of his and it is actually kind of comfortable. More than not, I've been sleeping with a body pillow between my knees anyways. Now it's just being replaced by his leg.

"Fine. But just so you know, I get up like a dozen times in the night to pee."

He laughs but only presses another kiss to my skin.

"I don't mind. You can wake me up as many times as you want."

Warren cradles my belly with one arm, his hand settling possessively over me.

I feel the soft rub of material against my skin and reach down to feel around his wrist. There's some sort of cord or bracelet wrapped around it.

Has he always been wearing it? I hadn't noticed it before.

Though I have been a little preoccupied lately. The fibers feel smooth and...familiar.

“What’s this?” I ask, still running my fingers over the cord.

“Hm? Oh, that’s a bracelet made from the curtain tie I stole from your apartment before I left.”

He says it so casually that I almost don’t realize what he’s said.

I lift up the comforter and peer down at it in the darkness, trying to identify the material.

It’s too dark and all I can see is a shadow of something around his wrist. I’ll just have to take his word for it and check again in the morning.

“Why do you have a bracelet made from my curtain tie?”

“For the same reason I have your name tattooed on my chest. Because I’m obsessed with you and have given up trying to hide it.”

This would be the perfect time to cry, whether pregnant or not, but instead of weeping like a lovesick puppy I burst out in cackling laughter.

“You are so weird,” I tell him, recovering myself and his arm still cradling me and our baby with the blanket.

“But you love me. So, you’re just as weird,” he mumbles back, his words getting smothered by his face pressed against the back of my neck.

I hadn’t said the words ‘I love you’ to him but hearing that he knows I reciprocate the feeling warms my chest. Relaxing back into my pillow I wiggle back against him

getting comfortable.

Before I can get too settled, I roll my head around to try to face him but with our bodies entwined as they are it doesn't really work.

At least not until he lifts on to one elbow and looks down at me.

Without hesitation he bends over and seals his lips to mine, instinctually knowing what I want. I guess when you've known someone as long as we've known each other, certain things don't require words.

"Goodnight Bambi. Get some rest. In the morning I'll make you breakfast again. Or a steak. Whatever you want."

"Thank you."

"Anytime." He settles back down behind me and then whispers in my ear. "I love you...both."

I may have one more cry before falling asleep with an ear-splitting grin on my face. Hearing Warren speak to me and our son so lovingly does irreversible things to my heart.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:41 pm

Teasing Bambi is my favorite past time

This morning Bambi is craving pickles with a side of biscuits. At least it isn't another outrageous combination. We both enjoy the biscuits, but I leave all the pickles for her. Maybe a better nickname for the baby is Pickle instead of Thumper.

It isn't until we're ready for the day and heading towards the door to go to the shop, already open below, that her sweet smile falls.

"What is it?"

I press a hand to her back and stand close looking down at her in her customary pair of overalls. She's worrying a lip between her teeth and staring at the door like it might come to life and bite her at any moment.

"What are we going to tell Lauren when she sees us coming down from my apartment together?"

"The truth. I'm staying with you to care for you and keep an eye on you through your pregnancy. And that I'm sating your sexual needs as many times as you want. Every day if I must. Multiple times in fact." I infuse my words with a playful flirtatiousness laced with a tinge of seduction.

I mean every word. If she wants to test me on that she's more than welcome to.

Bambi smacks at my chest playfully and the smile that had fallen from her lips begins to grow again.

“We will tell her no such thing. The first part is fine, but you will not tell her about the sex stuff.”

Chuckling I pull her in as close as I can with her belly between us, pressing a kiss to her lips that has her softening against me.

One person at a time I’ll make sure this entire town knows Bambi is mine and so is her baby.

I won’t blurt it out to anyone immediately, but if the rumor mill starts churning, so be it.

“Don’t worry so much Bambi. What would be so bad about people knowing we’re together anyways?”

“We are? I don’t remember agreeing to this.”

She pulls back and looks up at me, a mix of confusion and hope swirling through her expression.

“Of course we are. You agreed to it the moment you first kissed me seven months ago. From that moment on I belonged to you.”

“Oh,” she breathes out, her face flushing and bright eyes glimmering with tears.

I know now they’re not sad tears, she just can’t control them. I still don’t like seeing them but knowing they’re happy tears mollifies the need inside me to soothe her hurt.

“Can we just...not say anything to anyone about it? Not that I’m ashamed or anything, I just don’t want people pushing their way into our lives.”

Pressing a kiss to her forehead I inhale her sweet scent and do as I always will, give in to her desires.

“If that’s what you want, I won’t say anything. But I can’t promise I won’t act like we’re not together. I’m going to want to touch you and be near you and I’ve denied myself too many years to not seize every opportunity I can.”

My hand cups her cheek and I run the pad of my thumb over her freckles and brush against the edges of her feathery eyelashes. She’s so naturally beautiful with her soft cheeks, slightly upturned nose, pink lips, and smattering of freckles. I hope our son has her freckles.

A flutter stutters in my heart, and I reach down to caress her stomach. It’s about as large as a volleyball but is still growing every day. She’ll be near bursting soon enough. There are only two more months until he’s here, until I’m a father, and I’m just realizing we are so not ready for that.

We can’t live on my boat, there’s not nearly enough room.

Although I’m sure the swaying will help on sleepless nights we can’t grow and live there as a family of three.

Bambi’s apartment is nice, there’s space for a nursery in her small second bedroom, but there’s no yard to play in.

No neighbors or kids for our son to befriend and ride bikes with.

I start making a mental list of things to research today.

Alternative living options

Cribs

Baby monitors

Breastfeeding versus formula

Baby names

Possible new jobs

There are a million more things on my list that I'll need to know and get done before he's born, but that's a good place to start.

Bambi's sweet voice pulls me out of my internal thoughts of crib safety ratings and night vision camera monitors.

"As long as you aren't groping me or shoving your tongue down my throat, I guess I can live with that."

"I can't shove my tongue down your throat in front of Lauren?" I tease. I wasn't planning on doing that anyway, but now that she's brought it up.

"No, you cannot."

"Well can I do it now?"

She pinches her lips between her teeth looking up at me from beneath those fairy wing lashes and nods.

Ooh, now I have a new game to play. How many times can I make out with Bambi in public without anyone seeing us? My guess is not many because when I'm with

Bambi, no one else exists.

I lock lips with her again and this time I do shove my tongue down her throat. Only when she's mewling and writhing in my hold do I release her, breathing heavily and leaning into me seeking out more.

"Come on, let's get to work before the rumors really start."

She harumphs and scrunches her nose at me. I bop it like a puppy dog and then give her ass a little squeeze.

I let her lead the way and ironically Lauren is right at the door that leads from the staircase to her apartment into the shop and stares wide eyed at us both entering together.

"Good morning," she says brightly, trying to conceal her obvious interest.

"Good morning," both I and Bambi repeat back.

Bambi ducks her head and grips the end of her ponytail as she passes Lauren, her red cheeks revealing most of what she wanted to keep private. She's far too easy to read and I bet my boat she breaks and tells someone about us before I do.

I give Lauren a knowing grin as I pass her into the shop, following dutifully behind Bambi. This is going to be so much fun. Teasing Bambi is my favorite pastime, and she just elevated it to Olympic status.

~

Throughout the day I take the slow times to do some research on a few of the items on my list. I've decided we are in fact going to be getting a night vision camera baby

monitor, along with those fancy sock things that track their heart rate and movement.

I considered buying a crib online and having it delivered but thought better of it when I realized that, one it wouldn't match any of Bambi's other furniture and then, two none of her other furniture is new and she would probably want to find an antique or used one anyway.

So instead, I started making a list of places we could go to find such a crib.

I'm just starting my search for baby names when Bambi appears at my side. She stands next to the armchair I've reclined in and places a hand on my shoulder smiling at me.

"Hey, would you mind getting the toolbox from the garage? Lauren is rearranging the art wall and needs it."

The art wall is the wall directly behind the register and the small love seat next to it. Some of the younger customers like to take selfies and photos in front of it with their new books and post them on social media.

Not everyone in town is into the whole post pictures of your entire life online thing, but a lot of the younger generations, mine included, have nothing better to do in a small town so disconnected from the society of big cities. They need something to stay connected with the world outside Alaska.

The wall is directly across from the sitting area I'm currently occupying, and I notice Lauren removing frames and signs and setting them all out on the floor. I must have been really focused on my phone to not have noticed her doing that.

"Sure thing."

I slip my phone into my pocket and head for the garage.

I have to go outside and enter through a separate door to the one car garage.

I think it was added on in like the eighties.

The store used to be a bank, and it most definitely didn't have a garage or apartment upstairs when it was originally built.

I open the door which is unlocked _ going to have to fix that, it's going on my list of things to do before the baby arrives _ and flick on the light.

Inside the small garage is Bambi's old car.

A Saab from at least twenty years ago, that I despise and wish she would get rid of and replace with something newer and more reliable.

Every time I bring it up though she argues with me that it's perfectly functional .

Functional and reliable are two different things in my book and I'm going to need to find a way to convince Bambi of that too.

There isn't much else in the garage, which is why I suppose she hadn't bothered with locking it. No one would steal her beat up old car and a box of extension cords.

I spot the small red toolbox on a practically empty shelf on the opposite side of the car.

Rounding it I notice a stain on the concrete floor running beneath the hood of the car.

Kneeling I dab a finger in it checking if it's wet or dry.

Wet. Which means her car has a leak. Sniffing it, it smells like oil.

Well, that just moved up to the top of my to do list. If I could get away with junking the car and getting her a new one _ or even better driving her around myself _ I would in a heartbeat. But I know my Bambi, she would be furious. So that leaves fixing the damn thing.

I grab the toolbox, which is not surprisingly light, and return inside with it. Making an excuse after ensuring they actually have the tools needed, I return to the garage and get to work figuring out what's wrong with her car.

Two hours later I find myself inspecting the aisles at the auto parts shop. While I was under the hood, I saw a few other things that could use repairing and now have a decent size list and her car sitting in multiple pieces in her garage.

Thankfully she doesn't use it often during the warmer months _ and by warmer months I mean months with one inch or less of snow _ so she won't notice it for a while.

I turn down the next aisle and almost run into someone.

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“Sorry about that,” I mutter, not really paying attention to the guy, until he talks back.

“Hey Warren. I heard you were back in town.”

I look up from my cart of parts to find Jim, my ex-coworker and fisherman, standing in front of me. Jim’s a nice guy, works hard to support his family, and never judged me because of my arm long arrest record.

“Hey Jim. How have you been? The family good?”

“Oh, we’re doing alright,” he answers, scratching at the bushy dark beard on his chin.

Lots of the guys have thicker beards right now, not having shaved them for the spring and summer yet. Mine is far shorter since I’ve been mostly in warmer climates all winter.

Jim is in his late forties, not as tall as me but a little wider around the middle. Clad in the typical plaid fleece, knit cap, and weather and slip resistant boots I wonder if this is what I’ll look like in twenty years. Except with far more tattoos.

“Heard from the boys you were back in town. How was your trip? I thought you weren’t coming back?”

As he would since it’s what I told everyone when I quit my job and sailed away with every possession I own.

“Plans changed.” I shrug hoping it’s enough of a reason for him.

It seems it is because he just chuckles and shakes his head at me.

“Yeah, ain’t that the truth? You sticking around for a while?”

“Planning on it. Have a few commitments I have to stick to,” I say vaguely. It’s the best I can do without preening over Bambi.

“Good man, it’s important to stand by your commitments and see them through.”

I grimace a little internally, knowing I hadn’t done the best job of that with Bambi so far, but I’m working on changing all that.

“You coming back to work on the boats then?” he asks, easily moving from one topic to the next. I appreciate a guy who doesn’t poke and prod and dig into my personal life.

“I hadn’t thought about it really,” I answer honestly.

Finding a job is on my list of things to do but I hadn’t gotten to it yet.

I don’t need to start working again just yet.

I like spending all my time with Bambi right now.

Even if I did find a job I wouldn’t want to start until after the baby’s born.

Leaving Bambi and our son to go work on a fishing boat is the last thing I want to do right now.

But it would be good to know if there are openings for when I am ready.

“Are there any openings?” I ask.

“Always looking for more guys to work the boats. Especially ones with experience like you. Lost a few guys over the winter, moving away or wanting to do something indoors. Not everyone is made for the ocean like we are.”

He’s not wrong. There are a lot of guys, especially young ones, who come to work on the boats thinking it’s the easiest thing in the world or their dream job, only to realize very quickly they were not built to be a fisherman on the Pacific Ocean.

It’s a lot different than casual family fishing trips.

I nod in agreement and give him a knowing smirk. “That is true. So, if I were interested? There’s an opening?” I hedge, knowing if I plant the seed now that I’m interested, he’ll let the boss know to keep me in mind before hiring someone else to fill the spot.

“Of course. I can let Gerald know you might be interested. I’m sure he’d love to have you back when you’re ready.”

Something settles inside me knowing I’ve managed to secure myself a little more.

Having a good job to support Bambi and the baby is one of the many steps to me proving to her I’m not going anywhere.

We can’t survive on her small income from the bookstore alone with a baby on the way.

I know she was more than ready to do it on her own, and I have no doubt she would have been great, but now she doesn’t have to do it alone.

She never should have had to at all. I should have been here from the beginning.

Internally shaking off my disapproval of my own actions, I smile at Jim and give him my best attempt at thankfulness.

“Thanks Jim, that would be great. I’ll definitely let y’all know. It might not be for a few months though,” I tell him.

He just nods and shrugs, not in the least bit concerned about it. I take that as a good sign.

“It’s no problem,” he adds as I shift to move past him intent on continuing my search for parts for Bambi’s car. “That part’s not going to work for your truck,” he says pointing at the part in my cart.

“It’s not for my truck. I’m doing some work on Bambi’s car for her.”

“She’s the one who’s pregnant and no one knew about it, right?”

I sigh because I’m starting to understand why she kept it a secret for so long.

Everyone wants to butt in on your life and know everything going on, even if it doesn’t concern them.

I’d like to snap back with ‘It’s none of your business’, but I know Jim is a decent guy and I need him to pass on a good word to Gerald about rehiring me in the near future.

“Yeah, that’s her,” I answer a bit flatly. I promised Bambi I wouldn’t discuss us or the baby with anyone and I stand by that.

“Sweet girl. Too bad she’s having to go through all that on her own?”

“She’s not alone,” I snap, interrupting him. I don’t need to hear whatever else he was about to say.

“No, I suppose she’s not,” he reluctantly agrees, eyeing me suspiciously. My irritated tone and defensiveness barely concealed. “She has her grandmother and friends to support her, I guess.”

“She has more than that, she has?” I cut myself off before I say something that would really get the rumors spreading faster than frostbite on your toes in the dead of winter. “We’re all supporting her,” I finish instead.

“Good. It takes a village and all that. Is she still driving that beater?”

I blow out a breath, realizing I had puffed myself up in my agitation and protectiveness of Bambi, glad for the topic change. If it were any other person they would probably probe at my odd behavior, thankfully Jim isn’t that kind of guy.

“Yeah. Hard to convince her to get rid of anything that’s still ‘functioning’ .” I put air quotes around functioning because her definition is not everyone else’s definition.

“Ah well, you let me know if you get into anything too complicated and need help.”

“I will, thanks.”

He pats my shoulder and continues on his way, waving over his shoulder and calling out a goodbye as I resume my own shopping.

Who knew a trip to the auto parts store would end with me securing a job possibility? At least I’m already getting a lot done on my list. This’ll be easier than I thought. However, keeping my mouth shut about me and Bambi won’t be.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:41 pm

Why is my car looking more like Frankenstein's monster than a Saab?

What the hell am I looking at? Because I'm pretty sure the last time I saw my car it was in one piece. Yet here it sits in my garage in multiple pieces. Metal parts are strewn across the shelves and floor, the hood propped open with a light hanging from it.

It looks like someone's been working on it or dissecting it.

One or the other. And I think I know exactly who to blame for this.

It's only been two days since I agreed to let Warren stay with me, and while I have very much enjoyed his presence in bed at night _ no more sex yet, just cuddling _ he is taking liberties with my vehicle I did not approve of.

Stomping as best I can back up the stairs to my apartment, I make sure my presence is known with a loud slam of the door.

It has the desired effect, drawing Warren from the bedroom where he was getting dressed for the day.

I get a glimpse of his taut tanned skin as he pulls the shirt on over his head.

"Why is my car looking more like Frankenstein's monster than a Saab?" I demand pointing angrily at the door leading downstairs.

"Oh, I hoped you wouldn't notice so soon. I had planned to have it all fixed for you

before you would need it again.”

“Well, I need it now and all I have is a husk with all its guts removed,” I pout stomping my foot.

Warren crosses the apartment and runs his large hands up and down my arms, soothing my ire. It works because his touch is my kryptonite.

“It’s okay whatever you need we can use my truck for. I’ll drive you wherever you need to go. I promise it’ll only be in pieces for a little while.”

I sigh and let my head roll back on my shoulders wishing I could play rag doll. That was always my preferred way to sulk with Warren. But I can’t, not while seven months pregnant. So, I’ll have to settle for a head roll with matching pout.

“I have a doctor’s appointment this morning with my O.B.G.Y.N. here in town. I’ve been going to one in Kenai to avoid gossip but now that everyone knows, I figured it was time to go somewhere closer to home. With a doctor who would most likely be the one in the delivery room.”

Warren’s placating expression falls, and he looks downright dismayed.

“You had a doctor’s appointment, and you were going to go without me?” he sounds so dejected, and I instantly feel like an ass.

Why hadn’t I thought about asking him? Probably because I’ve gotten so used to doing these things on my own or with Izzy, I’d just forgotten.

“Oh, yeah. I made the appointment before you came back. I guess I just didn’t think...”

My words trail off because I don't want to tell him I wasn't thinking about him when all he's done since he got back was think about me, about us.

"You can totally come if you want to," I blurt out.

His sullen face is too much for me to handle and I so want him to be involved, really I do. It's just going to take a little getting used to now that he's here.

"Of course I want to. I always want to. Every single doctor's appointment, Lamaze class, shopping trip. Everything." Then he smirks. "Besides, your car is in pieces. I have to go with you because I have to drive you."

He has a point, but my offer still stands.

Having him with me would make everything less frightening.

Having a partner to take part in it all, to help carry the weight of responsibility and rejoice in the happiness.

I've felt half complete during past appointments that I had to go to alone.

Not having someone there to hold my hand and cry happy tears with me made it a little less special.

"Even so, I still want you there. I always did. I just didn't know you wanted to be there," I admit.

"I suppose that's mostly my fault. I didn't exactly express my feelings for you well. Nor did I give you much reason to think I would want to. But I'm here now, and I want to be involved."

His strong hands still on my arms give me a small squeeze before letting go, a smile spreading back across his lips.

I don't think I'd ever seen Warren dejected before.

Sad, afraid, angry, depressed? Sure, plenty when we were kids, and he still lived at home with his parents.

But dismayed and hurt like that? Never. It wasn't a pleasant feeling to know I'd been the one to make him feel that either.

After everything he's been through, he doesn't deserve that.

I plaster a wide smile to my face and make a mental note to make sure Warren knows about all my future appointments, as well as any other pertinent information about the baby.

"Okay, well let's get going then."

I reach out a hand and he gratefully accepts it, twining our fingers together.

Warren's truck is parked out back in the small parking area for employees, not only of The Book Vault but to the surrounding stores as well. He opens my door and assists in helping to lift me into the truck. It's gotten a little more difficult and I need an extra boost to get in.

The drive to the doctor's office isn't far, now that I'm going to my local O.B.G.Y.N. instead of the out of town one. I had all my records transferred from my previous doctor who knew I would be going to someone closer for the last few months and the birth.

“Why did you need to go to a doctor in Kenai?” Warren’s unexpected question draws my attention away from the window I was staring out.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean why did you have to drive over an hour to go to a doctor in Kenai when there’s a perfectly adequate doctor here in Homer?”

My brow pinches as I stare at him as he drives, his eyes firmly fixed on the road ahead. “I told you, because I wanted to keep the pregnancy private. I didn’t want everyone in town to know.”

“But how would they know? Aren’t doctor’s bound by like, doctor patient confidentiality and all that?”

Oh, I see why he’s confused. He assumes everyone would mind their own business.

He never did pay much attention to busy bodies and gossips.

He didn’t care what people said about him.

The only time it bothered him was when they would talk about his family.

Mostly when they would blame him, the “wild child,” for everything going wrong in his family instead of his drunk dad.

“The doctor might not talk about my private medical information, but that doesn’t mean she or her nurses wouldn’t talk about me in general. Nurses talk about patients without divulging confidential information. Not to mention any other patients seeing me coming and going.

“No one would outright reveal anything, but that doesn’t mean they wouldn’t speculate. Like why else would I be going so frequently, and be buying prenatal vitamins? Through simple conjecture anyone could easily come to the conclusion I was pregnant.

“But by going to a doctor out of town, no one there cares. To them I’m not important. And if they talk about me, it doesn’t matter because they don’t know who I am and neither do their other patients.”

I conclude my explanation just as we’re pulling into the parking lot for the doctor’s office. Warren shifts into park and turns to face me without turning off the engine yet.

“People are really that nosy?” he asks, brow pinching in distaste.

“Yes. I bet you anything by the time we leave today they’ll already be talking about why you came with me. As a matter of fact, they probably are already talking about us since you basically haven’t left my side since you randomly reappeared in town.”

Warren groans and rubs a hand over his face. Now he knows what I’ve been dealing with since he left.

“Can we just...ignore everyone else for once? Just focus on us? And not what people might say? I’m tired of being forced to care so much about other people and take them into consideration on issues in our lives.

They are not a part of our life Bambi.” He turns to look at me once again, pleading in his eyes.

“We shouldn’t make decisions based off of other people for things that only affect us.
”

Wow. I always knew Warren didn't care what other people said about him, but I never stopped to consider maybe he's that way for a reason.

Not just because he wanted to rebel or be the bad boy, but because he truly believed they shouldn't have anything to do with his life decisions.

And now I'm beginning to wonder why I care so much about what other people think.

It sure as hell would make my life less stressful, and less stress is good for the baby. And even though I appreciated the lack of people knowing about my pregnancy early on, I shouldn't have had to go out of town to see a doctor.

If Warren is staying, and we are "together" as he claims, then trying to hide it from people or be concerned about what they think is just stupid.

Because he's right. They aren't part of our lives.

They aren't affected by our decisions on who to date and if we have kids together.

And I shouldn't care so much about what they think when half the time I don't even know them.

What does it matter if they talk? That's all it is. Talk.

Determination settling into my spine, I sit a little taller and nod.

"You're right. They don't matter, and I shouldn't let them continue to guide my actions."

A feral grin spreads across Warren's lips, and he lunges towards me pulling me in for a seething kiss.

“That’s my feisty Bambi. Now let’s go. I want to see my little demon spawn inside you.”

He’s grinning like the joker as he helps me slide out of the truck, catching me by the waist and remaining close the entire walk into the office.

Inside there are a few men and women sitting in the waiting room.

Some glance up at us as we pass, but instead of worrying about what they’re thinking seeing Warren usher me in with a hand on my back and standing far closer than just a friend would, I ignore them and focus on checking in with the receptionist.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:41 pm

You want me to check his genitals?

I can't believe Bambi almost came without me today. I also can't believe she was driving three hours round trip to a doctor out of town just to avoid people talking about her going to her doctor's office. Have the people in this town always been like this, or did I just ignore them?

It makes me happy when Bambi lets me hold on to her the entire walk into the office and doesn't protest when I sling an arm around her shoulders, over the back of the chair, as we sit and wait for her name to be called.

She flips through a pregnancy magazine as we wait, and I look over her shoulder inspecting the ads and articles.

There are a few about the more unpleasant side of giving birth, things that would make a weaker man faint.

I'm used to blood and guts and if it has anything to do with keeping Bambi safe and healthy during birth, I want to know it.

When she tries to flip the page, I stop her with a finger to the corner until I can finish reading the article. A quick glance at Bambi from the corner of my eye reveals her trying to hide a smile.

"Raelyn Parker," a nurse calls from a door next to the receptionist counter.

"Right here," Bambi calls back.

I help her stand and we both head to the back, following the nurse to a door numbered six.

“You’re going to be right in here today,” she says gesturing inside the room.

There’s a standard doctor’s bed with the weird white paper draped down the center with those feet holsters folded in at the end, a bunch of machines with cords and attachments next to it.

There is only one window in the room, narrow and long running at the top of the exterior wall.

There are blinds covering it, but it offers a bit of warm sunlight to the stark room.

Everything is clean and sterile as it should be, the walls a soft white with blue trim, a picture of a woman cradling a newborn baby on some informative poster on the wall.

We’re instructed to sit, and I help to lift Bambi onto the bed, the paper crinkling loudly beneath her. She doesn’t have to wear one of those ugly paper gowns, so we just wait for the doctor. The sound of my shoes pacing on the linoleum floor is the only noise in the room.

I can’t stand still or sit still for that matter. In less than ten minutes I’ll see my son for the first time and the thought has me frantic and excited. I always thought if I were to have a child I would panic and freak out in a bad way. But the only emotion I’m feeling is happy, extremely happy.

Bambi watches me pace back and forth in front of her, the picture of calm and collected. That’ll be useful when the baby’s born, one of us will have to be the levelheaded one.

The door squeaks, alerting me to the doctor's arrival.

I instantly stop pacing and turn to face the door, standing dutifully at Bambi's side.

At least as best I can while she sits on the bed.

A dark-haired female doctor, dressed in blue scrubs and a white lab coat enters looking at the clipboard in her hands.

"Hello Miss Parker, it's nice to see you again _ Oh," she stops mid step, spotting me standing next to Bambi. "I didn't know you were bringing anyone with you."

"I hope that's okay?" Bambi asks unsure.

"Of course this is your appointment, you can bring whomever you like. I'm Dr. Amelia, and you are?"

She holds her hand out to me, and I accept it, grateful she doesn't put up more of an argument about me being here.

"Warren Graham. The father."

"Oh!"

Dr. Amelia stares wide eyed at me, her hand frozen in mine, not expecting my blunt declaration of fatherhood. I honestly didn't realize I was going to say that either, but I felt it important for the doctor to know. Small town gossip be damned.

"I thought you said the father wasn't involved?"

The good doctor finally drops my hand and turns an inquisitive look at Bambi, who is

reddening like a ripe tomato. Her cheeks, two round rosy cherries I want to bite into.

Now that I've said it, claimed my place and responsibility, she can't deny it.

"He was away for a while, and I hadn't expected him back so soon. But he is the father."

She looks up at me through her lashes, explaining my absence and her fib in much nicer words than I deserve. I give her a grateful smile, relief flooding my chest along with unwavering admiration for her.

"Alright then, well let's get started, shall we?"

Dr. Amelia sits in the rolling stool and begins going through Bambi's file asking basic questions to get up to date on her current state and confirming the first two trimesters of her pregnancy.

Going over records sent by her previous O.B.G.Y.N.

from Kenai. Apparently, Bambi has seen Dr. Amelia in the past for general female checkups but nothing to do with her pregnancy yet.

Once she's satisfied, with all her questions answered, we finally get to the good part of the appointment.

"Great, now let's get a look at this little fella and make sure he's developing well. Lay back and pull up your shirt so I can access your stomach."

Bambi begins to lean back, and I catch her around the shoulders helping lower her to the bed.

She unbuckles her overalls and pulls up her sweater revealing her extended stomach.

I stroke it reverently before the doctor squirts clear jelly on it, rubbing it in with a device attached to the ultrasound monitor.

A black and white grainy image appears on the screen. It's hard to tell what anything is at first as the doctor repositions and searches for what she's looking for.

"Okay, there's his heartbeat."

The soft thumping sound of a tiny fluttering heartbeat fills the room, and I can't stop myself from falling to one knee, my hand firmly gripping at Bambi's as I stare at the grainy image.

That's his heartbeat, he's alive in there, growing every day.

The reality of it hits me harder than expected and heat burns the back of my eyes.

The doctor is looking at the screen and I expect to see Bambi watching the monitor as well.

But when I look to her, she's looking at me.

She's seen this all before, but this is my first time.

I lock eyes with her, letting her see the most vulnerable parts of me. The parts I hid from everyone, even her. Not anymore.

I kiss the back of her hand and turn back to the ultrasound when the doctor speaks again.

“I see a foot, and there’s a hand.” I don’t see either, but I trust she knows what she’s doing. “Let me reposition to get a better view from the side.”

She moves the device on Bambi’s stomach to the opposite side and then, there on the screen, I see the white outline of a tiny body curled in a ball.

“There you are, perfect image. Let me capture that for you.”

She freezes the image and clicks a few buttons, snapping a picture of our baby. I can’t believe we made that.

I stare in awe as she prints out the strip of paper and then begins rubbing at Bambi’s belly again.

“Let’s just make sure everything else is developing, organs, bones.”

“Can you check on his…” I gesture with a circle around my groin area. “Stuff? Make sure that’s all good?”

Dr. Amelia stares at me, obviously trying not to laugh. “You want me to check his genitals?” she says as professionally as possible.

“Yeah. You know…make sure it’s a boy and all.”

Then she laughs and shakes her head at me. I doubt I’m the first father to ask such a thing. It’s a legitimate concern.

“Sure thing.”

Bambi laughs at me too, her belly shaking as she tries to stifle it so as not to interfere with the ultrasound. But the doctor appeases my ridiculous request, positioning the

ultrasound to show his little man bits. All I can see are two round shapes, but she assures me those are his testicles.

The rest of the appointment isn't nearly as exciting, but I try to pay attention and listen even as I stare at the printed black and white photo the doctor took.

Keeping Bambi's hand in mine the entire time the doctor goes over what to expect in the third and final trimester.

Lots of it sounds familiar since I started reading pregnancy books as soon as I got back.

It makes me smile when she mentions not being alone in her apartment, especially at night, because moving around is going to get more difficult, and she wouldn't want her to fall or hurt herself.

"Don't worry Doc, I'm staying with her now. I'll take good care of her. Promise."

"Good I'll hold you to that. Now have you decided on a birthing plan? Do you want an epidural?"

From my readings I know what an epidural is and am myself curious if she wants one. Bambi is a strong woman, but she's also never been great with pain.

"Yes, and yes. I've worked everything out with my grandmother and best friend."

The unintended barb is an unexpected sting to my chest. I should have been the one to work out a birthing plan with her and the fact that I still don't know adds one more item to my to-do list.

"Wonderful. And since Mr. Graham is staying with you, I assume he will be your ride

to the hospital?”

“Yes,” I answer before Bambi has a chance to.

I may not know her birthing plan _ yet _ but I know for damn sure I’ll be driving her to the hospital. My assertiveness gets me a soft smile from Bambi, and it soothes the sting from before.

We go over a few last items and then the doctor is leading us back out to the waiting room and wishing us a good day.

On our way back to the car we pass a realtor’s office. I had spotted it on the way in but was too distracted to pay much attention. Passing it now, I slow to look at the listings posted on the exterior window, showing houses and property for sale and lease.

I make note of the prices and scan through a few listings.

“Looking to purchase a house?” Bambi hedges a hint of humor in her tone. I can see how it would be amusing considering I’ve lived _ by choice _ on a boat for the last decade.

“Maybe, just keeping my options open. Can’t live on a boat forever.”

“Here I was thinking you were going to do exactly that.”

I muffle a chuckle. Little does she know how my plans have changed. I love my boat and the freedom it’s granted me, but it’s time for a change. Time to find something more suitable for a family.

Continuing down the window I spot a listing for a house I recognize.

“I didn’t know the hangout house was listed for sale.”

Bambi steps up to my side, pressing close to my arm and I instinctually wrap it around her waist. She doesn’t pull away and I count that as another small victory in my favor.

“Me neither. I just figured whoever owned it died or moved away and a family member or someone owned it and just didn’t care about it.”

We stand side by side reading the listing for the house the adolescents of the town have claimed as their own.

Nearly three thousand square feet, five bedrooms, three and a half baths, and multiple acres of land.

Considering how long it’s been sitting and its less than livable conditions, the price isn’t horrible. It’s downright cheap.

It never crossed my mind that living in the hangout house was a possibility.

It’s never been a home in my mind, yet the longer I think about it the more I realize it has been a surrogate home for many.

Bambi always loved that house. I could tell not only by the way she admired things like the dusty chandelier and the colorful stained-glass windows, but because she outright told us how amazing it would be to live in such a unique house.

An idea sparks and my mind takes hold of it, processing through the probabilities and possibilities. Ideas forming and taking shape faster than I can keep up with. Just more things on my list to research.

“I wonder what happened to the people who used to live there. Do you remember anyone ever living there?” Bambi asks, pulling me from my growing plan for our future.

I shrug, shaking my head. “No. As long as I can remember it’s been empty.”

We stare for a moment longer before Bambi sighs and tugs at my arm. “Come on, I’m hungry. Let’s go get some lunch.”

“You’re always hungry.”

“It’s not me, it’s the baby, he’s hungry. And you don’t want your son going hungry now do you?”

I smile down at her. I think this is the first time she’s referred to the baby as my son out loud.

“I don’t want either of you going hungry. What do you feel like eating?”

“Chow mein...and pickles!”

“Your wish is my command.”

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 1:41 pm

Nothing I ever did was a felony

I sit quietly in the passenger seat of Warren's truck, eyeing him across the bench seat from me.

My doctor's appointment seemed more emotional for him than he expected it to be.

I'm pretty sure he was on the verge of crying when he first heard the baby's heartbeat.

To be fair I did cry the first time I heard it.

We ate lunch at my favorite Chinese food restaurant in town, the only Chinese food restaurant in town that thankfully happens to be good.

The restaurant didn't have pickles on the menu but like a pickle ninja, Warren produced some from the glove box of his truck.

Almost like he was expecting me to ask for them.

Throughout the entire meal I caught him sneaking peeks at the ultrasound print out. But he never said anything about it. I could tell there was more going on inside that head of his. Plotting and planning just like he did before he finished his boat and sailed off to find a new life.

Now we're driving home, and questions sit on the tip of my tongue but before I can ask any the sounds of police sirens ring out behind us, and blue and red lights flash

through the window.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Warren grumbles under his breath. “I wasn’t even speeding.”

Warren pulls over and dutifully waits for the officer to approach his window, rolling it down by the manual crank. His truck is so old. If we’re going to raise this baby together, we might have to look into a larger safer vehicle.

Mine has room for a car seat but _ and I would never admit this to Warren _ it’s a piece of junk. It never mattered before because I barely used it, and it was only me. Now I’m going to need a more reliable form of transportation than my bicycle.

The officer approaches, and I instantly recognize him, Sam Gardner, or officer Gardner as he prefers to be called. He’s the same age as Warren and prides himself in giving Warren as many tickets as possible and arresting him when able.

Since I know for a fact, we weren’t speeding, running a red light or stop sign, or even changing lanes without signaling, he only stopped us to pester Warren.

“Well look at who we have here. When did you get back into town? Never thought I would have to pull you over again,” Officer Gardner crows.

“And you still didn’t need to, since I wasn’t doing anything wrong,” Warren bites back flatly, a smug smile on his face.

I kind of like it when he’s being a condescending smartass. Gardner deserves it. He takes advantage of his position pulling people over just because he feels like it. He’s probably a good police officer but I’ve only ever encountered him when he’s had Warren in his sites.

“I’m sure you’ve done something, you always do,” Gardner retorts.

“No, I’m pretty sure he wasn’t doing anything wrong, Officer.” I add the title to stroke his ego.

“Raelyn. What are you doing with this felon?”

“Nothing I ever did was a felony,” Warren inserts.

Officer Gardner tongues his cheek and glares at Warren before turning his attention back to me.

“Warren was driving me to my doctor’s appointment.” I stroke my belly for emphasis.

His eyes track the motion and it has its intended effect. Clearing his throat, he looks between us.

“And you chose him to deliver you safely?”

Jeez this guy really won’t give up, will he?

I can literally feel Warren tensing in his seat next to me. Gardner has no idea what kind of an insult he just landed. I smile sweetly, forcing my face to soften so I don’t scowl at the asshat and give him the stink eye.

“I wouldn’t trust anyone more with my safety.”

He tongues his cheek again, resting his hands on his gun belt and puffing out his chest like a damn peacock. I’m not sure if he’s trying to inflate himself to try and outshine Warren or what but it’s kind of funny to watch.

I never did get an explanation from Warren about Gardner's obsession with him. There must have been something in high school that happened between them to cause such a long-standing fixation.

"Well..." he clears his throat and turns his attention back to Warren. "You watch yourself, because I'll be watching, closely."

"That's kinda creepy, Sam." Warren calls him by his first name ignoring the whole officer title surely only to ruffle his feathers.

Officer Gardner glares at Warren but doesn't respond to his barb, instead clapping his hand on the open window frame.

"Drive safe," he says in farewell.

When he's a safe distance away Warren speaks. "It's so nice to be welcomed home so warmly."

"Ignore him, he's just jealous."

That makes him smirk, the irritation fading from his expression.

"Yeah, because I have you."

"What does that mean?"

"He had a thing for you in high school and when he approached me about asking you out, I may have adamantly and physically denied his request. I think he's still sore about it."

I am shocked silent as he rolls his window up and shifts back out into traffic.

I had no clue he did that. Were there more times he secretly protected me?

Defended me? Not that I don't think I could have easily rejected Sam on my own.

He was never my type. But I kind of like that even back then he was keeping me for himself.

We lapse back into silence as he drives. After enough time passes for the flush to drain from my cheeks and irritation at Warren being pulled over for nothing, I remember Warren's previous distraction and my curiosity.

"So, what's been on your mind?"

"Huh? Oh, you know, stuff about the baby."

"Oh? Like what?"

Warren shrugs and a grin tugs at the corner of his lips. "Names, cribs. If I should keep a go bag in my truck for when you go into labor just in case. That kind of stuff."

I narrow my eyes at him because that isn't all. "Nothing else?"

"Like what?" he chuckles.

"I don't know. You were looking at those home listings pretty closely. You dismantled my car for unknown reasons. You have a jar of pickles in your glove box. You're obviously thinking about more than just baby names. Which, by the way, I already have a short list of viable options."

We turn down my street and stop at a red light. Warren turns to face me as we sit idle.

“And what would those be? Were you ever going to tell me the names and ask if I liked any of them?”

“I wasn’t originally intending to, but since you’ve decided to reinsert yourself into my life for the foreseeable future, I suppose I could.”

With a shake of his head Warren turns back to watch the streetlight. “Okay then, what are they?”

“Levi.”

“Pass.”

I pause at his stark rejection of one of my favorite name choices. Blinking at him in shock I almost don’t continue with my list for fear of more immediate rejections.

Warren makes a go on gesture with his hand as the light turns green and we continue down the road towards home.

“Okay...Sebastian.”

“Pass.”

“Benjamin.”

“Maybe”

“Axel.”

“Hell no.”

“How about Ace then?”

Warren tilts his head back and laughs out loud. I wasn't being serious about Ace, but he was beginning to irritate me with his stubborn refusal to approve of a name.

“Ace would be a great nickname, especially if he turns out to be good at sports. What else you got?”

I huff out a breath, I do have one more name, my favorite. For a moment I hesitate because I would be really deflated if he doesn't like my last choice.

“Noah,” I finally say quietly.

“Hm.”

Warren doesn't bark out 'pass' or 'hell no' so that's a good sign. I'm weirdly nervous to hear what he has to say about the possible name for our son.

“Noah's nice.”

“Really?”

I'm probably a little more surprised than I should be but I'm happy to just be having this conversation with him.

“Yeah. Let's put that at the top of the list and then remove all the other ones you suggested so far.”

I giggle and my anxiety eases as I rub at my large baby bump under my overalls.

“Since you want to be involved in everything now, I should probably tell you Izzy

and Gigi planned a baby shower in a couple weeks. It's mainly going to be just family and a few friends like Lauren. I didn't want to have one, but Izzy convinced me it was mandatory."

Warren nods in agreement, apparently on Izzy's side. Good he can be the one to open all the presents and be the center of attention while I sit to the side and watch. I don't want to be fawned and cooed over.

It's going to be really weird with him there though too. Now that he's announced himself as the father to my doctor, it'll take maybe a day or two for the word to get around. Maybe by the time of the baby shower everyone will already know, and we won't have to talk about it. One can only hope.

"Of course I want to go to the shower. It's not supposed to be an all-girls thing, is it?"

"No. I don't know enough girls to fill a whole party with." And I'm totally fine with that. My small group of family and friends is all that I need.

"I'm sure you could if you tried. You have more friends in town than you think," he says like he knows something I don't. Does he know something I don't?

"What do you mean?" I make a face at him that he doesn't see because he's being a good driver and focusing on the road.

We've made it to my row of buildings, and he turns down an alley to head for the back parking area. The bump of the driveway jostling my bladder and I'm pretty sure a bit of pee comes out.

"All the ladies on your book delivery list would be pleased to join your party. Everyone I've been to on my deliveries has asked about you and the baby, commenting on how sweet you are and how they wish you the best.

“I know you think people in town are just nosy but most of them just want to know you’re doing well. That’s not to say there are some who are just nosy busybodies who like talking about others. You don’t have to invite those ones. But people like Mrs. Niedermeyer would love the company.”

My brow pulls tight in thought as I pick at the cuticle on my fingers. I’d never thought about it that way before. I do like Mrs. Niedermeyer, she’s talkative for sure but also nice and friendly and I would actually have something to talk about with her since we both have a love for books.

“Maybe I’ll mention that to Izzy, and she can invite a few more people.”

“I think that’s a great idea. Even if it is only Mrs. Niedermeyer.”

We park and Warren helps me out of the truck, then up the stairs to my apartment. It’s been a busy morning and with my large belly my back is killing me and all I want is to soak in a hot bath for the next hour.

When we reach the top of the stairs and enter my apartment, I press one hand to my low back and one under my stomach trying to lighten my load and stretch.

“Is your back hurting?” Warren asks, circling me like a mother hen.

“Yeah, the side effect of carrying around a watermelon on my stomach and cantaloupes on my chest.”

Okay my boobs aren’t that big but they sure as hell feel like it with how swollen and tender they are.

“Can I try something I read in one of the books, I think it might help.”

I groan and flop my hands at my side. “Anything if it helps relieve the stress on my spine.”

“Okay just stand still.”

Warren circles behind me and like before he wraps his arms around my middle.

This time he cups both his hands on the underside of my stomach and laces his fingers together.

After the count of three he performs magic, because the forward pulling weight and the pressure on my spine lightens as he lifts.

“Oh my god, that feels wonderful.”

I lean back against him and revel in the feeling of weightlessness. Warren presses a kiss to the side of my head, and I sigh. The pro side of my list of Warren living with me keeps growing with every day.

“Can you just walk around like this all day?” I ask with a chuckle.

“Whenever you need me to, I will gladly help hold the weight of our son, in or outside of your womb.”

Great, I’m going to cry again.

“Stop being so sweet,” I grumble.

“Never. You’ve rubbed off on me permanently now. No more getting arrested for misdemeanors, no more speeding, no more drunken nights at the bar, no more nights alone without you.” His arms tighten around me and his face buries in the crook of

my neck. “You’re stuck with me now Bambi.”

I was always stuck with him, whether he was physically here or not. But having him claim it himself without my insistence, only makes me settle more into his embrace. And as much as I love it here, I still want that bath.

“Will you walk me to the bathroom? I want to take a bath.”

“Oh, I’ll do better than just walk you there. I’ll get in with you and rub your shoulders. I could use a relaxing bath myself.”

I want to argue, but I also don’t. Soaking in hot water with Warren at my back and his hands digging into the knots on my shoulders and neck sounds like heaven.

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Baby Mama Parking

The water temperature is near scolding but that's the way Bambi says she likes it. So, I'll risk melting my balls off if it makes her happy. She strips down in front of me, completely comfortable with my presence in the bathroom with her.

Her skin is milky white with freckles speckling her arms, chest and thighs. She unties her hair from its ponytail and the long straight strands fall down her back in a waterfall of copper and red. Next comes her bra and underwear and...What the fuck is on her ass?

"What is on your ass?" I blurt out because I couldn't possibly be seeing what I think I'm seeing.

"Oh...um..."

Bambi whirls around concealing her adorned ass cheek, exposing her bare breasts and pussy to me in the process. I almost forget about the black and blue mark on her backside in favor of the new view in front of me.

"I kind of got a tattoo after you left," she admits sheepishly, a soft pink blush creeping up her cheeks and down to her bare breasts.

Full, soft, pink tipped breasts that beckon me to suck on them.

No. Pay attention Warren, she got a tattoo on her ass of your doodle, that's a bit more important than her breasts. For now.

“Yeah, I can see that. Is that the doodle I drew on you the night before I left?”

She shrugs and curves her lips down, trying to act innocent. Like it isn't my signature and name permanently inked on her perfect round porcelain ass.

“Maybe. I wanted something to remember you by, when I thought you were never coming back. It was before I found out I was pregnant.”

She looks completely embarrassed by the fact that she got my mark tattooed on her ass like a brand, whereas I am trying to reign in my arousal and thickening cock at the thought of my mark on her. First, I claimed her as mine by drawing it and then she solidified my claim by making it permanent.

“You don't think it was completely lame? Do you?” she asks.

“Absolutely not. If you haven't noticed, I find it extremely appealing.” I gesture to my growing erection in my boxer briefs. I hadn't finished undressing yet and my approval of her tattoo is currently trying to escape my underwear by whatever means necessary.

Her eyes shoot down to my groin and I growl at the heat in her gaze. This bath wasn't supposed to be sexual, it was supposed to be relaxing. Me pampering her and proving my dedication to her. So, no matter how much I want to make this sexual and plant myself inside her, I won't.

“Turn around so I can see it better. I only got a glance before. Please,” I add, softening my tone.

She nods and turns bashfully presenting her ass and tattoo to me. It's almost exactly as I remember drawing it. Most of it in black with hints of blue highlights, making it appear to glow. It's good work. I stroke the line of it and her skin is soft and supple

under my finger.

Seeing my tattooed arm next to her tattoo makes me smile.

“I guess it’s only fair you have my name on you since I have your name on me,” I quip.

“I didn’t know that at the time, but yeah. It’s kind of ironic.”

I think it’s more than ironic or coincidence, more like kismet. We were always meant for each other. I was just too stubborn to see it before.

“The tattoo artist did a great job. Did you show this to anyone else?”

“No.”

Of course she didn’t. This is just for me. I cup her ass and stifle a groan, my cock twitching unhappily in my underwear. I give her a little smack before backing away clenching my jaw.

“Come on Bambi, get in the tub.”

I hold her hand to steady her as she steps in then I push off my boxers before stepping in.

Lowering her down to sitting I wait until she’s stable before sliding in behind her.

She scoots her butt up against my erection and I reposition it so it’s not poking her in the back. Well as much as I can anyways.

Bambi’s moan of contentment isn’t helping my situation, but I bite my lip, forcing

myself to remain unmoving behind her.

“Better?” I ask through clenched teeth trying to sound unaffected.

“Yes.”

I reach up and begin massaging her shoulders, digging my thumbs into her neck and the tension knots I feel there.

“Uh. That feels perfect,” she groans.

I chuckle. “Anytime you need a massage, or a bath, or me to hold your belly for you, you just let me know.”

“You won’t hear any complaints from me.”

That’s exactly what I want to hear.

~

For the next two weeks things settle into a comfortable rhythm between Bambi and me.

It almost feels like we’re a real couple, except for the whole calling her my girlfriend in public, holding her hand in front of others, kissing her whenever I want, and telling anyone I’m the father of her baby.

But other than that when we’re alone she lets me hold her, kiss her, make her dinner, rub her feet, read to her, fuck her and love her.

I have high hopes that at the baby shower she’ll finally let me claim her and our baby

publicly.

I already told her if anyone outright asks me if I'm the father I'm not going to lie.

When she didn't argue with me over that I figured she's finally realizing I'm not going anywhere.

And if I can manage to negotiate this deal I'm working on, maybe I can solidify that realization.

The baby shower is this afternoon, and as soon as I heard about it, I contacted Izzy to see what I could do to help.

She was more than thrilled to have my assistance, especially when I mentioned inviting more people.

I know Bambi said she would mention it to Izzy, but I only partially believed her when she said that.

Plus Mrs. Niedermeyer kinda wormed her way under my skin.

She's a nice old lady who just wants someone to talk to.

After updating the guest list, Izzy assigned me to pick up various things for games she wants to play at the shower.

Blue clothes pins, jars of baby food, a ball of yarn, fabric markers, and circus cookies.

I have no idea what any of these items are used for, but I guess I'm going to find out later.

I load everything up into the bed of my truck and help lift Bambi into the passenger seat, her rounded stomach larger now than it was when I returned almost a month ago.

She huffs when settled, out of breath just from that small exertion.

She's been getting more winded and tired every day and I've had to coerce her into sitting more during the day and resting, rather than stocking books like she keeps trying to do.

I let her order me around and I do anything for her I can. I even tried to carry her to the bathroom once but that's where she drew the line.

"Ugh. I will be so happy to have this baby out of me soon. It feels like I'm carrying around a bowling ball with legs and fists in there."

"I'll be happy to have him out of you soon too. Not because you look like a bowling ball but because I can't wait to meet him."

Bambi chuckles and rubs at her stomach through the soft blue overalls she's wearing.

They're basically sweatpants overalls, stretching tight across her expanded waist. None of her massive collection of denim overalls fit anymore and I wanted her to feel comfortable both physically and mentally with her clothing.

I ordered three pairs in a variety of colors for her to choose from over a week ago.

"Not because you want to be able to tie me up in your rope again and have your wicked way with me?" she asks suggestively.

Even with the large obstruction we've managed to find a few positions that are

comfortable for Bambi during sex.

I haven't tied her in my ropes again because I didn't want to cause her any pain.

Things move around internally during pregnancy and her skin is more sensitive.

Without proper research I didn't want to risk it.

We have the rest of our lives for me to tie her in my ropes, I can be patient.

I waited nearly a decade to have her after all, three more weeks without tying her up won't kill me.

"Though I very much can't wait to get you tangled in my ropes again, I can wait."

Leaning in I wrap an arm around her belly and press a lingering kiss to her lips.

She moans into my mouth and slips her tongue against mine.

The sensation makes my balls tingle in anticipation, but I pull back, breaking the kiss and putting distance between us so she can't convince me to go back inside and be late to our own party.

Her libido has been crazy high lately and I do what I can to satiate her, but even I know there's a proper time and place for it.

And in the car on the way to our baby shower isn't it.

"Later. Izzy would kill me if we're late."

"Yeah, you're probably right. She's been more excited about this party than me."

Bambi's smile wanes and she looks down at her stomach, smoothing the fabric there. Tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear I slide my fingers along the smooth strands to her ponytail, twisting it loosely around my fist.

"Don't worry. It'll be fun. I promise. It'll only be people you know attending and if you ever get overwhelmed you just let me know and I'll run interference. If there's one thing I'm good at it's drawing attention to myself."

Slipping my fingers under her hair tie I deftly pull it and free her long hair. One more hair tie for my collection. Before she can wrestle it from my grasp I slide it onto my wrist.

"Hey that's mine," she argues while also laughing and smiling.

"And now it's mine."

I hold my arm high out of her reach so she can't take it back. She tries half-heartedly to get it back before giving up. With a huff of mock frustration, she reaches into her pocket and produces another hair tie identical to the black band now around my wrist.

She playfully glares at me as she scoops her hair into her hands and effortlessly ties up another perfect ponytail.

"One of these days you're not going to have another hair tie and you'll have to leave your hair down," I tease her.

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“Well today isn’t that day.” She sticks her tongue out at me for good measure and pulls her ponytail tight.

She glances up at me through her lashes. Her expression is no longer somber or sad but back to her normal optimistic bubbly self.

I press another kiss to her lips and release the hair wrapped around my hand to step back and shut her door. The rest of the short drive to Gigi’s house is spent listening to the music on the radio.

In front of Gigi’s familiar house they’ve sectioned off a spot with blue streamers and a sign that says “Baby Mama Parking.” It’s cute and I wish it also said baby Daddy. I suppose that would be a little too much to ask, even though I’m sure everyone attending the party knows by now.

I park not letting my slight disappointment show and plaster on a wide smile as I help Bambi from the truck and carry the bags of supplies inside. There aren’t many cars here yet which means we’re not late and Izzy won’t be cutting off my balls today.

Inside Izzy has strung matching blue streamers around the living room and a few tables decorated with blue, green and white balloons going for the classic boy theme.

There’s a table for gifts, one being filled with trays of food, and another where I set the bag of game supplies.

Only because there are signs explaining the games and I make the educated guess that’s where everything goes.

I don't dare touch anything or assume where anything goes because I know Izzy would have a fit if I messed anything up.

So, I just set down the bag and step away.

Most of the furniture has been pushed back against the walls or strategically rearranged to allow more room for guests, one cushioned chair sits like a throne at the front of the room with balloons, ribbons and bows decorating it. No doubt meant for the guest of honor Bambi.

To my secret delight Izzy placed a smaller, but not less important, chair next to Bambi's throne. It's decorated as well just lacking the balloons, but to me it's just as wonderful. I want to squeeze Izzy and thank her profusely for including me and not hating me for leaving.

Our friends have been more than gracious accepting me back after my absence, even knowing that I'm the one who knocked up Bambi.

Considering Bambi not only kept it from me but also them helps, since they didn't have months to accumulate animosity towards me.

We've all been getting comfortable with the idea at the same time.

Izzy exits the kitchen with a high-pitched shriek of delight and crosses the living room to greet Bambi with a giant hug, barely able to wrap her arms completely around her.

"Yay, you're here. You look so cute. What do you think of the decorations? Are you hungry? We have way too much food." Izzy rambles on excitedly, her eyes wide and bright and a little manic. I wonder how much coffee she's had today.

Bambi is only able to get out a few words before Izzy turns to me and greets me almost as animatedly. Wrapping me in a familiar hug that I reciprocate.

“You look good as well Warren. Thank you for getting her here on time and safely. Did you bring everything I asked you to get?” she asks while moving to the bag I set down on the table.

“I hope so. If not, just let me know and I can run out and get whatever you need.”

“Nonsense.” She swats her hand in the air like she’s swatting away my offer. “If we need anything I’ll send Owen. This is as much for you as it is for her. Oh which reminds me...”

She stops digging through the bag and shuffles things around on the table pulling out some sort of paper with ribbons hanging from the corners. She’s holding it to her chest so I can’t see what is on it.

“I made something else that I thought would be cute but I wanted to check with you both first before putting them out,” she says tentatively, her wide smile softening as she looks between me and Bambi.

“Okay, what is it?” Bambi asks, just as curious as I am.

I don’t know what Izzy could possibly have that she would need my input on. Normally when she plans an event she doesn’t ask for anyone’s approval of anything and just does what she wants.

“Well...I know most people already know but I didn’t want to be presumptuous, but I thought it would be cute.”

We both stare at Izzy waiting for her to get to the point, after a short breath she

finally turns the paper in her hand around for us to read. One say's Mommy , and the other says... Daddy .

“I thought it would be cute to hang them on the chairs, but I didn't want to put them up without your approval first?”

“Yes,” I practically bark out the word and I clear my throat when I spot both their wide-eyed stares. “I mean yes. I would be fine with that. You?”

I turn to look at Bambi and pray that she agrees with me. There's no doubt a look of complete vulnerability on my face. I try to relax my features and act cool, but I think I've already shown my hand so to speak.

Bambi looks back at me for a long silent moment before she finally answers.

“Yeah, I think that would be okay.”

My heart practically bursts as my lungs fight to breathe through my relief. I'm breathing heavier than normal when I slip an arm around Bambi and turn back to face Izzy. She's beaming with excitement and nearly bouncing on her toes.

“Awesome, because I also have these for you.”

From her back pocket she produces two giant buttons bordered in blue ruffles, one says Mommy and the other Daddy , matching the signs for our chairs.

“I made ones for us too.” She gestures to her chest where I don't know how I missed the ruffle button that reads Auntie . “Owen has one that says Funcle , fun-uncle, his idea not mine. And Gigi has one that says Great Gigi .”

Izzy hands me the buttons and I turn to attach Bambi's first, only to find her crying

and whipping at the tears. My smile instantly falls, and I cup her face with my free hand helping to wipe at the tears.

“Why are you crying? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” she sniffles through gulping breaths. “It’s just really sweet and I appreciate everything Izzy’s done, and because I’m pregnant I cry at everything.”

She cries a little harder and I wrap her in my arms and pull her face into my chest, Izzy instantly at our side rubbing soothing circles on her back.

“It’s okay if you wanna cry,” Izzy coos. “We probably all will before the day is over.”

It takes a few minutes for Bambi’s tears to dry, and I hold her the entire time. Izzy sticks close by but continues her arranging and organizing since people will be arriving soon.

Bambi leans back and sniffles, her eyes red but a smile on her face.

“Okay, I think I’m all good now.”

“Anytime you need to cuddle into me and cry, you go right ahead. Would you like me to put your button on now?”

I hold up the ridiculous buttons with a cheesy grin that makes her smile and giggle.

“Sure, as long as I can put on yours.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

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I didn't swoon

I was a little wary of having a baby shower.

I didn't even want to have one originally, but Izzy convinced me to.

She said I would regret it if I didn't, plus she promised there would be presents.

Many of which will be things I need for the baby.

Like onesies, diapers, baby shampoo, burp rags, and peepee teepees.

Something I learned will be necessary when having a boy to avoid getting peed on while changing diapers.

Having Warren by my side the entire time has been helpful, easing me into conversations and gently directing people away when I need a moment to rest. People eye his button clearly labeling him as Daddy, but few have commented on it so far. A few quirk a brow, others just grin.

It's nice to have it out there for everyone to see.

Keeping it a secret has been agonizing. Far too much work than it's worth, especially now that he's back.

Not once since he's returned has he mentioned missing the sea or how much he hates Homer.

For the first time in our long friendship, he seems happy with exactly where he is.

Which makes me happy, because he's here with me.

Izzy did indeed invite a few more people than we originally planned, not too many more thankfully.

I don't want the entire town here, just friends and the little family we have.

I knew Warren's parents wouldn't be invited and he has no other family to speak of in town.

Gigi is my only blood relative, which is why I cried when Izzy and Owen proclaimed themselves aunt and uncle.

They're the closest thing to family we have, and our son will most definitely be calling them Auntie Izzy and Uncle Owen.

There are others here too, a few friends from school we still keep in touch with, Lauren from the store and of course Mrs. Niedermeyer who is more than ecstatic to be out of the house and socializing.

"So, you're the father then?" Mrs. Niedermeyer asks Warren as we stand near the refreshment table, one of my preferred places in the house at the moment. I think I've been continuously eating since we arrived.

"Yes, I am," he answers proudly and a little sharply.

"That's wonderful. I'm so happy for you two, and that the little fella will have a daddy to look up to. Though I suppose you might want to refrain from telling stories of your youth. Don't think those would be proper," she says lightheartedly with a

smile and conspiratorial wink.

Mrs. Niedermeyer can talk way too much and always somehow knows everybody's business, but she's a nice lady and I appreciate that she doesn't ask why I lied about who the father was.

"I don't know, some of my stories might be okay," Warren jokes as they ease into a conversation about adolescent pranks and what is acceptable and not.

"Tee-peeing a house with toilet paper is harmless fun. You couldn't blame him for something that's basically a rite of passage," Warren argues.

"Perhaps. But I draw the line at egging and slashing tires. There's no need to waste perfectly good eggs and tires are expensive to replace," Mrs. Niedermeyer quips.

"What about you Bambi? Where do you draw the line? Is everything off limits because they're all illegal?"

I consider Warren's question and knowing smirk, giving him a cheeky smile in return.

"While I don't condone any illegal actions...I suppose tee-peeing is acceptable."

Warren's smile widens and his eyes glint with mischief. "So, you're saying when our son gets caught tee-peeing a house you won't punish him or scold him?"

"I never said that. Just that it will be a minimal punishment, and we might laugh about it after a conversation about not doing anything worse, like egging or slashing tires."

I eye Mrs. Niedermeyer whose lips twitch with amusement. Warren chuckles and

wraps an arm around my back pressing a kiss to my hair.

“Very well, if you say so,” he concedes. “As long as I don’t get punished for teaching him how to properly tee-pee a house.”

I elbow him in the ribs which only makes him laugh more. He leans in to speak directly into my ear so Mrs. Niedermeyer doesn’t hear. “That is unless you want to punish me. I might like it.”

My face flushes and I try to conceal it by slowly sipping from my glass of iced tea. Mrs. Niedermeyer doesn’t notice my blush thankfully and continues rambling on about the mischief her boys got into as children, making me laugh and take mental notes on what to expect from an active boy.

The rest of the party goes about the same.

We play a few games throughout the day, people collecting clothes pins as they catch others crossing their legs, guessing the flavor of baby food, how many cookies are in the cookie jar.

One of my favorites is drawing on white onesies with the fabric markers.

Warren’s is ridiculously amazing and mine looks like the baby drew it.

Once most of the games are played, they make me sit in the “throne” and open presents while everyone watches. Some are practical and I am thankful Izzy made me do this because some of those things I wouldn’t have even thought of. Like the peepee teepees which we get plenty of.

Others are more personal like the handmade baby afghan Mrs. Niedermeyer made and a wood carving of the name we’d settled on, Noah, from Izzy that’s painted with

fish and boats and deer. I think we may have found the theme for his room. Whenever we make his room.

So far the spare room in my apartment has a few pieces of furniture, a handful of baby clothes and supplies I've accumulated.

Still haven't been able to find the perfect crib and I won't settle for a subpar substitute.

So, all we have right now is a playpen until I find the right one.

I'm hoping my trip to Anchorage with Izzy next week will produce the perfect crib. I am running out of time after all.

But we haven't decorated or painted it. I don't know why I haven't done any of that yet, nothing felt right, I guess.

So, I just left it. Not like he's going to know the difference until he's older anyway.

By then he'll be able to choose his own décor.

But I like the nature and animals on the wooden name, it suits us.

Warren graciously collects bows and ribbons to make the customary ribbon hat and wears it around like a damn show pony. The pastel colors and glitter clash with his tattoos and dark hair. He doesn't seem to care and doesn't remove it till almost everyone has left.

"I think that went pretty well," Izzy says as she flops down on the couch next to me.

I vacated the throne of honor as soon as possible, not liking all that attention, and

made myself comfortable in my favorite spot on the couch.

“I think it went wonderfully Izzy,” Gigi takes her spot in her armchair next to the couch and smiles at my best friend and cradles a cup of hot tea between her hands. “You did a great job putting everything together. I couldn’t have done that all on my own.”

“Ugh, but now we have to clean up,” Izzy groans and flops her head back on the couch cushion.

With an unenthusiastic grunt and groan, Izzy begins to push herself up with great effort, but her brother stops her with a hand to her shoulder. She falls back, easily giving up her attempt to rise.

“Don’t worry about it sis, me and Warren are on clean-up duty.”

Warren stands next to Owen, a black trash bag in hand and already picking up discarded napkins and emptying plate remnants into the bag, his Daddy button still firmly affixed to his dark grey henley.

“Yeah, we’ve got this. You three just relax and chat. If you need anything let us know,” he adds, smiling as he continues to clean.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen them so happy to be cleaning.

If I recall correctly, they were the ones who ran off after throwing a party at Owen’s house while his parents were away, leaving me and Izzy to clean the mess before they got home.

I think Izzy is remembering the same event too because she lifts an eyebrow in her brother’s direction and glares unbelieving at them.

But they don't say anything else and get to picking up trash and putting away dirty dishes.

"Thank you boys, that's sweet of you to offer. I might act like I'm twenty years younger, but my bones and joints know I'm not." Gigi chuckles and rubs at a knee. "I'll be soaking in a hot bath tonight."

"Me too. My feet feel like they've been stung by a million bees." I kick off my slippers dramatically, one flying halfway across the room.

Warren turns to stare at the place where it lands and makes a soft thud. The look on his face has all three of us laughing as he sardonically stretches out a foot and kicks it back towards me.

"I'll run you a bath when we get home," he offers without a second thought.

I think today was more for him than it was for me.

He is literally wearing the title of Daddy as a badge of honor.

He's excited to become a father and wants everyone to know.

Unlike me, I didn't want anyone to know about the pregnancy at all.

I even lied about how I got pregnant to my best friend.

Warren always was the more social one, the outgoing and extroverted one.

I'd be happy to remain in my bookstore with all my stories, a crackling fire in my stove wrapped in a blanket with a jar of pickles and nothing more.

Though now there's something new in my daydream, Warren at my side wrapping me in his arms and a smiling baby boy playing on the floor.

Owen and Warren make their way to the kitchen and dining room packaging up leftovers and disposing of empty food containers, enough out of earshot that they can't hear what we're talking about.

"So how are things going with Warren, Rae?"

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Gigi's soft-spoken question draws my attention away from watching Warren and daydreaming of a scene that may be more possible now than ever before.

I roll my head on the couch cushion enough to look at my grandma's wrinkled and loving face.

Her white hair is piled neatly on top of her head in a bun, and she even brushed on a bit of blush and lipstick for the party.

She looks tired from the long day, probably having started much earlier than when I arrived, to help Izzy decorate and set everything up.

Not to mention cooking most of the food.

"Things are going pretty well actually. Having him around is very helpful."

"Oh yeah, I bet he's been real helpful. You've been smiling a hell of a lot more lately, which I can only assume is because of him." Izzy waggles her eyebrows suggestively and I have to smother a grin trying to play it cool.

It's a bit late for that now I suppose, since I'm pregnant with his baby. They already know we were having sex before, it's not a stretch to assume we're having sex now.

"Yeah well, you're not wrong," I admit quietly.

Izzy makes an "Oooh" noise like a gossiping teenager and pokes at my thigh. Again, not wrong.

“That’s good sweetheart, I’m so glad you two were able to work things out. I look forward to a wedding in the future.”

“A wedding?!” I practically choke on my spit. “Don’t you think that’s a little presumptuous? I mean we’ve only technically been together for like a month.”

“You two have been dancing around each other for years. It doesn’t matter how long you’ve ‘technically’ been dating.” Gigi uses air quotes like a pro around technically, giving me a sardonic look. “You know each other better than anyone.”

“Except me,” Izzy chimes in, as usual.

“Except Izzy of course,” Gigi acquiesces. “Just because what you call each other has changed doesn’t mean your feelings have.”

“Personally, I’m glad you finally hooked up. I was getting tired of the constant swooning and staring,” Izzy not so helpfully adds.

“What? I didn’t swoon!” I exclaim.

“Sure, you didn’t,” Izzy rolls her eyes, giving me a knowing look.

Okay I most definitely swooned, like a lot. But I’m not going to admit to that. Especially not when Warren could hear it. He’d never let me live it down.

“Whatever, but that doesn’t mean we have to get married.”

Not that I don’t want to get married, I would love to marry Warren.

But having a child and now living together is already a big step.

Marriage will just have to wait. At least, I hope.

It's only over the last few weeks that Warren has shifted his view on living in Homer or even in Alaska.

Sure, he's here right now and present in our lives but he's not legally or financially tethered to me, to us.

If he wanted to, he could leave at any time.

Marriage would be cement level permanent.

Something he's always had an aversion to.

"You don't have to get married, no. But I think you will, all the same." Gigi proclaims calmly.

My eyes snap up to hers trying to read her meaning. Does she know something I don't? Warren has never mentioned ever wanting to marry anyone. Family, marriage, the house with the picket fence were always the things he never wanted.

"Why do you say that?" I ask, needing to know what she knows. Although no one can ever truly know what Gigi knows. I think she's part psychic and just won't tell us.

She shrugs a sweater covered shoulder and sips at her steaming tea. "No reason, just a feeling."

Her eyes flick to Warren moving around in the kitchen then back to me and even though she tries to hide it I see the grin on her lips behind her teacup.

I know from years of trying, that begging her to tell me won't garner any more

information than she's willing to give, so I let it go. For now. I'll try again later when we're alone.

The baby kicks and effectively draws our attention away from all talk of marriage, even Warren and Owen come back to feel him kick.

I have all four of their hands on my stomach and Noah inside practicing to be a heavy metal drummer, using my organs as practice drums.

"Okay I think we need to go for a walk to get him to calm down. He's all excited now."

I reach for Warren's hand, and he instantly latches on to help me stand. I can't stand on my own these days, especially not from a soft plush couch. Using his arms to steady me, I realize I forgot to put my shoes on before standing. I groan and look down at my bare feet.

"I forgot to put my shoes back on first."

"No problem, I've got it."

Warren seeks out my shoes and kneels in front of me like Prince Charming putting on Cinderella's glass slipper. I shake the thought away because that'll just make me cry again. I'm a never ending well of tears these days and I think I've hit my personal quota for crying in one day.

Warren slips the shoes on my feet as I use his shoulders for support.

Before he stands, he looks up at me with an expression of such unguarded admiration it almost looks foreign on his face.

Tattooed bad boy Warren, who was arrested at least a dozen times while still in high school is kneeling before me and smiling like a lovesick puppy dog, fulfilling my every need without question like a dutiful servant.

I never thought Warren would bend to anyone.

He's always been so strong willed and independent.

I've always known there was a soft side inside him, he just always had to suppress it.

Push down any possible perceived weakness to survive his father.

In this moment, right here and now, I know Warren will never be that kind of man, that kind of father.

To be cruel and unloving, choosing booze over family.

He was free and clear, thousands of miles away, he didn't have to come back.

He didn't have to return and take responsibility or profess his love for me.

He did it because he wanted to, because, like I've always known, he is a good man.

Despite the tattoos, bar fights, and arrests he's still a thousand times better than his father.

The moment that feels like an eternity between us finally ends, and time resumes its normal pace as Warren stands. My head lifts with every inch he rises until I'm now looking up at him and he down at me.

"How about we walk down to the dock before we leave?" he asks.

I nod. “Sounds good. I could use a little fresh air. But first I need to pee.”

Izzy and the others remain in the house while me and Warren make our way out to the backyard, the scent of the ocean hitting me the instant we open the door.

The air is crisp and clean, no smog or smoke.

The sky is clear enough to see the snowcapped mountains in the distance.

Most of the snow has gone now from Homer, leaving only a fresh crispness in the air.

Even with the slightly warming temperatures Warren still wraps an arm around my shoulders and holds me close as we walk.

Seven months ago, I stood on this very same wooden dock and angrily said goodbye to the love of my life.

Strange how a little time can change things.

Time was never on my side in the past, I suppose it’s making up for its shortcomings now.

Because I’m standing on the same dock with the same man in a completely different position now.

Warren’s sailboat “The Knotty Boy” bobs gently on the water bumping against buoys on the dock. I understand its name better now. I spot the turquoise rope around his opposite wrist and grin. I understand the name very well now and look forward to after Noah is born so I can experience it again.

“Did you have a good day?” Warren asks softly, drawing my mind from memories of

ropes and skin.

“Yes. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be.”

“You thought your baby shower was going to be bad?” His brow pinches together and he looks down at me confused.

“Not bad, just...awkward, I guess. When we started planning it you weren’t here, and I was going to have to do it alone.”

“You wouldn’t have been alone. You have Izzy and Gigi and even Owen.”

We stop at the end of the dock and lean against the railing Gigi had installed after we graduated high school.

The water is calm and a sparkling blue. I love it here.

So peaceful and open. It’s all I’ve ever known and I’m okay with that.

There’s nothing more I need now that I have Warren and soon Noah.

Although I suppose a house wouldn’t hurt.

We’ll grow out of our small apartment in no time.

Perhaps some place near here, so Gigi can come visit and babysit often.

“What are you thinking about?”

Warren’s deep rich voice rumbles in my ear and pulls me from my thoughts.

“Oh, just things.”

“What kind of things?”

“The future, after Noah is born.”

“Anything specific?”

I shrug, leaning against his chest absorbing his warmth, reveling in his presence here with me.

Looking up into his warm brown eyes it finally settles within me, he’s not leaving.

He’s here for the foreseeable future with no intention of leaving.

The shield he built around his heart and soul over the years has finally fallen.

He no longer focuses on the past and his horrible childhood or his parents.

He doesn’t blame this town for his unhappiness anymore.

I’d like to think he’s finally seeing it as the beautiful place that I do.

A place where, if done right, one can build a happy life with a family. Something he can do with me.

“I love you Warren, I always have. I was afraid that if I ever told you, you might reject my feelings. Crush my heart and every hope I ever had of being with you. Even after you came back, I worried it wasn’t real. That you were doing it out of obligation instead of love.”

“Bambi that’s not?”

“I know. That’s not why you came back.”

“I came back because I love you and I was stupid to leave. And I don’t want to become my father. I don’t want my son to grow up hating me because I was too weak and selfish to be there for him.”

Turning in his arms I cup his stubbled face and stroke at his cheek with my thumb. He turns and presses a soft kiss to the palm of my hand, circling me in his arms and keeping me as close as possible with my massive belly between us.

“I’m sorry Bambi. I should have never left. You deserve someone better, I know that. But like I said, I’m selfish and I’m going to keep you for myself.”

A grin tugs at my lips and I try to control it, my mouth twitching.

“Is it wrong of me to be turned on by that? Besides, I think you deserve to be a little greedy. At least when it comes to love and to me.”

“Good, because I may be greedy, but I can also be very, very generous.”

Warren leans down and slants his lips over mine, consuming me in a kiss that almost has me whimpering. I try to slip my tongue against his, but he pulls back and presses a kiss to my nose.

“Not here my doe eyed deer. Wait until we get home.”

I like that he calls my apartment home. I would call wherever we go together home.

“Can I ask for one thing?”

“Anything.”

“Could we...use the rope again?”

Warren growls and rubs his nose into my hair.

“Gladly. But not as much as before. I don’t want to risk anything with you so far along in your pregnancy.”

Concern washes over his expression and one of his hands caresses at my stomach. Seems like the tables have turned. Me being reckless and wanting to do something wild, and Warren being the sensible responsible one.

“I guess I can accept that. For now.”

With a saucy grin and another kiss Warren leads me back to the house and then to his truck to drive home.

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Inch by glorious fucking inch

When we finally get home Warren has to make two trips from the truck to bring in all the presents. Then, just as promised, he runs me a bath and joins me in it. He eases the tension between my shoulders with a body melting massage.

My stomach is so large at this point that it pokes out from the water like a floating island. Warren cups the water and drizzles it over my island stomach. His hand resting on it once he's coated it in warm water.

It's still a little surreal to me to be here with Warren, for him to be here with me. It's strangely everything I've always wanted. Maybe not in the order I anticipated, but to be with Warren, to have a family with him, that's all I need. He and our child are all that I need.

"How do you feel?" Warren asks from his place behind me cradling me in his lap and arms.

"Thoroughly washed and ready for bed," I answer suggestively.

I'm ready for bed alright, just not for sleep. He also promised he would use his ropes again and I'm going to hold him to that. I can't see his face, but I can feel the prod of his cock in my back. He understands my meaning just fine.

"I think I can help with that."

We exit the bath and Warren towels me off, spending extra time and attention on my

breasts and stomach. One he holds soft and reverently, the others he cups and squeezes wantingly. The brush of his fingers over my nipples sends pleasurable shock waves straight between my thighs.

Warren leaves me standing naked in our bedroom as he rustles around in the closet, hopefully looking for the rope he promised me. He reappears with a bundle in his hands, black silky looking ropes. It looks like there's more than one this time but shorter than the turquoise one he used before.

"I promised you my ropes, but I'm not going to restrict your movement. None of your limbs will be restrained. You'll be able to move the entire time."

"What are you going to tie up then?" I ask, because how does it work if I'm not restrained?

Last time he bound my arms to my sides and my calves to my thighs. If I'll be able to move the entire time, is he just going to wrap the rope around me and not even tie any knots?

"I'm still going to tie you up Bambi. My knots will still decorate your perfect skin, frame your tempting breasts, line your arms, and cradle your stomach. But I need you to be safe, and that means the ability to move all your limbs without restraints. I can't risk your, or our sons, safety."

My heart swells and my body relaxes. I trust him completely, since we were children and until we are old and wrinkled.

"Okay, then." I nod and hold my arms out to him in invitation. "Tie me in your ropes then."

Warren prowls towards me, dropping the pile of ropes on the edge of the bed, holding

on to one end that he drags behind him. His cock stands at attention, hard and throbbing between us. The tip of it brushes my stomach when he gets close enough and he groans.

I would think he was suffering if I didn't know better. He likes this. He likes being turned on to the point of pain and desperation. It's all part of why he likes the rope bondage. The control over another and the anticipation and blissful torture on himself.

He begins wrapping the black rope around my chest first, circling my breasts and creating a diamond pattern down my cleavage.

The rope then goes down one arm then the other.

As he promised I can move normally without issue, but the sensation of the rope snug around me is...

comforting. It makes me feel safe and loved.

A second rope is tied and wrapped around my waist then he makes loose knots and patterns across my stomach.

I can barely feel the tightness there. He's keeping the knots loose so there's no pressure at all on my belly.

The precise attention and affection he gives our unborn son has heat prickling behind my eyes and water begins to blur my vision.

I quickly blink away the tears and refocus on his still rock-hard cock to redirect my attention.

It does the trick and I'm no longer on the verge of crying but I'm pretty sure I'm drooling.

"Are you almost done?" I ask breathily, hoping like hell he says yes. My pussy is throbbing and with every passing second I grow more and more needy.

"Yes. Just two more knots."

He finishes the two knots and steps back to admire his work. I can't see the ropes on my legs since my belly is in the way, but I can feel them. I know that they extend to my knees and cradle my hips. He's essentially made me a suit of rope.

"Beautiful," he whispers reverently under his breath as he stares at me.

Feeling beautiful I saunter over to the bed and perch on the edge, spreading my legs and leaning back on my hands for him to admire more. It has the desired effect, and he growls in the back of his throat as he grips his cock and squeezes.

"Bambi, don't tease me," he groans.

"Isn't that the entire point of rope bondage? To tease?" I bite my lip and hope I don't look completely stupid.

Apparently, I don't because he makes it to me in two long strides, eyes filled with purpose and lust. Bending down he slants his lips over mine and slips his tongue against mine, devouring me in his kiss.

One of his hands slide down to cup between my legs and rub at my wet pussy.

His thumb circling my clit and I moan into his kiss.

I'm so sensitive that I'm already shaking with pent up electricity. Waves of euphoria bouncing through my body, from my nipples to my clit and running up my spine.

"Warren," I whimper when he breaks our kiss.

"I know love, don't worry, I'll make us both feel good. Up," he commands, directing me to stand.

I knew I'd have to reposition since I shouldn't lay on my back this far along in the pregnancy, doggy style is usually the safest and most comfortable.

So it doesn't surprise me when he turns me around to press my back to his front.

Instead of positioning me on my hands and knees however, he wraps an arm under my belly and cups one aching breast in his large hand.

"I want to try a new position I think you'll like."

I'm pretty sure I'd like any position he puts me in, but that's beside the point.

"Okay," I easily agree. He's going to learn that I would agree with just about anything he wants to do to me.

"Put your knees on the bed."

I slide one knee then the other onto the bed as he remains firmly pressed to my back, his hard length rubbing against my ass. That feels good too.

"Wrap your arms around my neck," he says, and I reach up behind me to hold on to his neck and strong shoulders.

Two tattooed arms slide down my sides and between my thighs spreading me to where he wants me. Then he positions his hands under my belly and lifts slightly like when he's relieving my back of the weight of my stomach. Instantly I feel lighter as he holds me.

Then I feel something else. His cock, hard and thick sliding between my ass cheeks and then between my thighs. I suck in a breath when I feel him rub against my pussy and press against my clit.

Oh, he was definitely right. I am going to love this position.

"How does that feel, Bambi?"

"Fucking amazing."

Warren chuckles but doesn't stop rubbing his length against me, wetting me to the point of obscene, but in the best way.

When he's got me panting and wriggling in his hold trying to press my ass back into him, he finally lines his cock up with my entrance.

Thanks to his ministrations and my eagerness he slips in easily.

Inch by glorious fucking inch he slides inside. He doesn't stop until he's pressed flush against me, his entire length buried in me. We both moan in satisfaction when we feel his base bottom out.

My noises are incoherent mumbling and praise as he begins to move. Pulling out and slipping back inside. All the while holding the weight of my belly so I can focus on him and the pleasure he's giving me.

I grip the back of his neck and try to hold still so he can keep us balanced and so he can keep fucking me in those long strong strokes.

“More,” I demand when his pace remains steady. I need more, I need to break.

Warren grunts and groans as his pace increases, finally. As soon as his restraint breaks his thrusts become hard slaps and I relish in the sound and the sensation. His cock hard and thick rubbing at all the right places.

One of his hands releases my belly but I don't feel the weight pull so he's still holding me up with his other arm.

The muscles flexing and tightening beneath the ink.

With his free hand he cups one breast and pinches my nipple causing me to scream in pleasure.

He rolls the hard sensitive peak and pumps faster when my pussy clamps down on his cock.

I've been on the razor's edge, and I can feel myself tightening, ready to fall over that edge.

“That's it, Bambi. Fuck you feel amazing. Come for me love.”

He pumps faster, hitting deep and hard and when he pinches my nipple again my climax explodes.

Waves of pleasure wrack my body and I can feel my pussy clench and clamp down hard on his cock.

Warren groans and when he buries himself deep inside I can feel him throb and pulse, releasing his own climax.

He stills behind me his face buried in my neck and we both shake and come down from our orgasmic highs. The entire time his arm remains strong and tight around me, holding us both up.

My arms slip from his neck, drained of strength and about as solid as wet noodles. He presses kisses to my neck and shoulder and the sensation sends tiny shock waves through my body, resulting in my pussy tightening around his length still inside me

He chuckles and pulls out while still holding me. I'd probably fall right over if he didn't. With strong sure arms he redirects me to lay on my side on the bed. I go willingly, letting him prop my head on a pillow and fuss over me.

"I'll be right back," he whispers, pressing a kiss to my temple.

He leaves only to return moments later with a rag and gently cleans me.

I'm pretty much a useless blob of warm and gooey pleasure at this point.

I don't see Warren moving around but I can hear him.

At some point he returns and I feel my body pillow placed between my knees and the blanket pulled over me.

Moments later Warren's warm body engulfs me from behind, his hips and chest lining up perfectly from behind.

His arm draped lazily but protectively across my belly. His fingers fiddling with the ropes.

“Is it okay to leave the ropes on?” I ask sleepily.

“They’re fine for now. I didn’t tie them too tight. I’ll take them off before they cause any issues. Rest for now.” he presses another kiss to my neck and I do as he says.

The next morning when I wake the ropes are gone and there’s not a single mark on my skin.

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Which end does the baby come out of again?

I never thought my life could be this happy.

I don't think I've ever smiled this much.

Bambi is about ready to burst with her due date only days away, my secret surprise present for her is almost ready, the ring Gigi gave me is burning a hole in my pocket, and every single day I get to kiss the woman I love as much as I want.

Who knew giving in to my decade long obsession with Bambi and having the best sex of my life would completely change my life for the better. Now that I think about it, it kind of makes sense. Hindsight and all that. Sounds stupid now when I explain why I never asked Bambi out for all those years.

Everybody in town is now completely aware that I am and always have been the father of Bambi's baby. Seems once we told everyone, it wasn't nearly as big a deal as Bambi thought it would be. I never cared what they thought and am proud to claim her and him as mine. Soon to be a more permanent mine.

Every morning I wake up wanting to propose to her.

But after long thought, and some beer infused confessions with Owen, I've decided to wait until after Noah is born.

Not only because I don't want her to think I'm asking just because she's pregnant, but I want it to be perfect and my surprise isn't ready yet.

It'll be perfect timing when it is. She'll have had the baby and we'll be ready to start our lives together.

Izzy finally settled on a wedding date after Noah is born as well.

It's only three months from now but I guess that shouldn't come as a surprise.

They've been putting it off for so long it only makes sense that when she did decide on a date it's sooner rather than later.

I think she was going to have it earlier but then found out about Bambi's pregnancy and wanted to wait.

Izzy is the best friend I could have asked for my Bambi.

She was here when I couldn't be. She made sure Bambi went to her doctor appointments, took her vitamins, planned her baby shower and so much more that I don't think I'll ever be able to repay her for.

Doesn't mean I'm not going to try. I've already offered myself up as her gopher man for anything wedding related she needs me to do, as long as it doesn't interfere with anything Bambi and Noah will need. She agreed wholeheartedly.

Today Bambi has decided that she needs to get out and move around.

I think she's trying to induce early labor.

Her small frame completely overtaken now with her swollen stomach.

She's mentioned more than once how ready she is for him to be born already.

I can't blame her, I can't wait to meet him either.

If she wants to try to induce labor, I'm all for it.

Especially since that has meant trying everything the books say, like sex.

With the weather so nice out we've decided to walk from our apartment above the bookstore down the street to the café on the corner.

"Oh my god, I feel like a beached whale."

"Well, you look like a goddess."

She gives me a glare out of the corner of her eye, but I know she doesn't mean it and she knows I do mean it. I think she's beautiful like this. Kind of already looking forward to making the next one.

"Just hold on to me so I don't fall over and roll into the street like Veronica from Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory when she blew up into a blueberry."

I chuckle and make sure I have a hold on her arm tucked tightly into my elbow.

"I've got you my beautiful blueberry."

"Haha. Just you wait till we're in the delivery room. It won't be so funny then," she says.

I'm not afraid of the delivery room. I've watched the birthing videos and am as prepared as I'll ever be. I think. I don't think anything will prepare me for the first time I'll see my son.

I'm so focused on Bambi and watching the road, I don't immediately realize when a couple comes to stand before us just in front of the café we were heading to. I look up when Bambi stops abruptly and spot the last two people on earth I expected or wanted to see. My parents. Fuck.

"Mister and Misses Graham. What a surprise," Bambi says just as stunned as I am.

I'm thankful she can speak because I can't, and if I did I don't think anything nice would come out of my mouth.

"Raelyn, you're looking well. It's almost your due date is it not?" my mother asks in a polite tone. She was always good at public pleasantries, that's why people never believed me when I told them how horrible it was at home.

"Yes. Less than a week and I can't wait."

My father remains stoic next to my mom and eyes us both suspiciously. Mom being the public speaker for them both turns her gaze to me and smiles politely. There is absolutely no love behind that expression.

"Warren. Glad to see you again."

"Are you? I vaguely remember you not caring one way or the other what happened to me."

"Nonsense, of course I'm happy to see you, and with Raelyn. We heard about the baby and wanted to congratulate you."

My dad scoffs loud enough to draw everyone's attention. He's still glaring, but I can tell he wants to say something but has no doubt been told not to by my mother.

“You have something to say?” I ask, needing him to open his big lying mouth so I can rip into him the way I want to.

“Of course not,” my mother interjects, trying to diffuse the situation before it ignites, which it is very close to doing. “Nothing but congratulations.”

She eyes my father who is rolling his eyes but weirdly holding his tongue.

Even though I know I should let it go, let them pretend everything is okay for the sake of publicity, but I don’t give a damn about people watching us.

I want to know what he really thinks, I want to hear him prove my justified hate for him.

“No, I think he does have something else to say. Don’t you Dad? So go ahead, spit it out.”

My father chuffs and turns his beady eyes on me, narrowing them in cruel delight. He always did enjoy tormenting me.

“Fine, you wanna know what I think? I think it’s funny that you managed to do the one thing you said you never would,” he responds with a sneer.

Oh, how I would wipe that look off his face if Bambi weren’t standing right beside me.

The only thing keeping me from hitting him is her hand still on my arm.

She’s not holding me back physically, but her touch alone keeps me from getting arrested today.

But that doesn't mean I can't verbally spar with my sperm donor.

"And what is that exactly?" I tilt my head and drop my eyebrows low over my eyes as I look down at my father, because he is slightly shorter than me. I could easily have him flat on his back and bleeding with one swing if I wanted.

"Knocking up some poor girl and dooming her to a life tethered to you. I feel bad for the kid, he doesn't know what he's in for."

I begin to lunge for my father, my hand already balling into a fist ready to knock out every one of his teeth. Only Bambi's soft grip on my bicep and her strong voice hold me back.

"I'll have you know I am very happy to be having his baby!" Bambi's words are a near boom from her angry beautiful mouth.

Everyone, including myself, swivel to stare at her. All of us dumbfounded at her stern expression and determined scowl. She's never been the one to raise her voice or participate in arguments and shouting matches, especially in public.

That doesn't seem to bother her today though, because she continues in a furious torrent that stuns me.

"I like being tethered to Warren and the only thing our baby is in for, is a life filled with happiness and love. Something you forgot to give to your son. And even after all the years he spent afraid of you and hoping to earn your affection to no success, he's become the most loving and supportive man I know.

Despite your deliberate efforts to break him down and crush his spirit, not to mention his bones, I'm glad to say you have failed.

“Warren is a great man who will be a great father, and if I have anything to do with it, we will never see or speak to you again. You will never know our son or any other children we may have. Your opinion will never be wanted and neither of us give a flying fuck what you think. So, I suggest that from now on if you see us walking down the street, you cross to the other side. If you see us in a restaurant, you leave. And don’t even think about setting foot in my bookstore, because you are not welcome.

The next time I see you I won’t be as pregnant or as restrained, and if you even consider speaking to us it’s not Warren who will need to be held back.

In case that’s not enough, just remember, I know the truth of who you are and what you did to him, and I have no problem making sure everyone else finds out. ”

Bambi is huffing in barely restrained anger at my parents, all because of me. She’s yelling and threatening them...for me. That might not be attractive to other guys, but I’m fighting the need to sweep her into my arms, carry her back home and try to induce labor in the most carnal of ways.

I stare in open mouth awe at my girl, not giving a fuck as she put it _ a flying fuck about the people who gave birth to me standing in front of us. They’re both stunned silent as well.

“Now if you’ll excuse us, I’m hungry.”

Bambi goes to sidestep my parents, and I follow with a hand on her back when she stops just on the other side of them. She grips her stomach and gasps.

“Uh oh.”

“Uh oh what?”

I circle to face her, waving my hands uselessly around her trying to find whatever is causing her distress. Then I spot it, the wetness growing between her legs.

“I think my water just broke.”

“You’re...it...broke?”

“Yes. The baby’s coming. Time to go.” She reaches for my hand and redirects us back towards The Book Vault where my truck remains parked.

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My parents step out of the way, and I don't even give them a backwards glance as we carefully walk back the way we came. They don't deserve it, and I hope they abide by Bambi's demands, and we never have to see them again.

Bambi's grip on my hand is like a vice as we reach the truck, and I gently lift her in. The wet spot on her pants has grown and I hope that's normal.

"I'm going to grab the hospital bag from inside then we'll leave. Okay?"

Bambi nods and breathes like we've practiced. I gently shut the passenger door and run inside to grab the hospital go bag we packed weeks ago, sitting ready and waiting by the front door. Just in case I also grab a full jar of pickles from the fridge.

The entire drive to the hospital I speak loving reassurances to her and keep one hand on her stomach, hers resting on top of mine. I can feel something going on inside her belly, and the anticipation of meeting my son has heat burning the back of my eyes.

By the time we arrive at the hospital I'm breathing heavier than Bambi is. She doesn't seem to be in any pain yet, I don't think. There's an expression on her face, and I can't quite decipher if it's pain or worry.

"Is everything okay?"

Pinched worried eyes turn to face me but relax the moment she notices my own concern.

"Oh, yeah everything is fine. I'm just..."

“Freaked the fuck out?” I suggest, because it’s what I’m feeling right now.

“Yeah, you could say that. By this time tomorrow we’ll be parents. We’ll have another living being to take care of and I’m worried I’m going to do something wrong. All the reading in the world can’t prepare you for the reality of taking care of a baby.”

“You’re going to be a perfect mom, Bambi. If anyone is going to fuck up it’s going to be me and I’m going to need you there to keep me in line.”

She cracks a small smile and looks down at her stomach, cradling it affectionately. I try to reassure her with a soft squeeze of her hand. She instantly laces her fingers through mine and rests both our hands on her belly.

“Everything is going to be fine. It won’t be easy and it sure as hell won’t be perfect by societal standards, but it’ll be perfect for us. Every moment of it will be amazing and we’ll both be there for it all. You hear me?” She looks up at me and graces me with a small, sweet, loving smile.

“Yeah, I hear you,” she answers.

“Good. Now remind me, which end does the baby come out of again?”

Bambi laughs and I can see her shoulders visibly relax, which is a good thing because if all labor is like the one I watched, this isn’t going to be easy. It’s going to hurt like hell, and I plan on being by her side every fucking minute of it.

We make it into the hospital without any contractions starting but as soon as she’s hooked up and in one of those hospital gowns in a room, the first one hits.

Bambi’s scream has me on the verge of needing my own sedative.

Her grip on my hand is tighter than any rope I've ever tied, and I begin profusely apologizing because I know this is at least half my fault.

The contractions continue on schedule, increasing in frequency and intensity just like the books said they would. When the time comes, we opt for an epidural and Bambi's pain eases but doesn't subside completely.

Before I know it, hours have passed, and the doctor tells me it's time to push. I get into my position at Bambi's side and hold her hand with mine while rubbing her back with the other.

Labor is loud and messy, and I don't even consider looking between her legs for fear I may pass out.

I don't know how women do it. If it were left up to men to give birth our species would have died out a long time ago, because none of us would have the mental and physical ability to do what Bambi is doing right now.

I coach her breathing like we practiced and wipe the sweat from her forehead with a cold cloth. With one last command from the doctor Bambi screams and bears down and just like that it's over. One second, we're just Warren and Bambi the next, we're parents and Noah's cry fills the room.

All sound other than his cry evaporates, every movement other than the nurse cleaning his tiny body disappears. There's no one else besides the three of us in the world at this moment.

My attention is drawn from the nurse holding Noah to the doctor handing me a pair of scissors and telling me to cut. I take them and cut the clamped umbilical cord and watch every movement of our son while still holding Bambi's hand.

The doctor finishes cleaning and stitching Bambi but we're both focused on the crying baby being wrapped in cloth and brought back to us.

The nurse immediately lays him on Bambi's chest, and she bursts into tears that have nothing to do with the pain of labor.

His tiny hands fist and eyes squint trying to focus in the bright light of the hospital.

"He's perfect," she coos, caressing his pink pudgy cheek.

"You're both perfect," I correct.

She looks up at me and the world feels right for the first time in my entire life. Watching the love of my life holding my purpose in life, my heart swells like a sail caught in a squall. Filling to near bursting in record speed, pulling me in the right direction.

~

Nearly fifteen hours after her water breaking, Bambi sleeps peacefully in the hospital bed, completely beat from labor.

In my arms rests the tiniest little person I've ever seen.

A small blue knit cap on his head where strands of dark hair poke out.

His face is squished and wrinkly and if his eyes were open, they would be a beautiful shade of gold like his mothers.

I gently rock in the rocking chair next to Bambi's bed soothing the sleeping baby in my arms. Noah's barely been in the basinet they provided because neither of us could

give up holding him.

He fits comfortably in one of my arms, the tattoos dark and colorful surrounding him.

My heart skips a beat when he gurgles and twitches in his sleep.

“You don’t know this, but you’ve changed everything. If it weren’t for you, I may have missed out on the best thing in my life. Well, things now.”

I brush a fingertip over his scrunched nose and marvel at the person we made.

He may have been an accident or unintentional, but he was never a mistake.

He’s perfect and so is his mother. I look over at her fast asleep with her red ponytail all messed up and her mouth slightly open as she breathes deeply.

I don’t know how I could have ever thought I didn’t want this.

I know I was afraid that I might be like my father.

That having a family meant losing myself and falling to the bottle like he did.

Now I know that was his choice, and mine will be different.

I choose to be better, to accept the love of the woman of my dreams and to give as much love as I possess to our son.

The anger and scars I have from my childhood will never truly disappear, but I can move on from the hatred and learn from his mistakes. I have no doubt there will be times I suck at being a dad, but I won’t blame our son for that, and I won’t let it dictate the future.

“I promise I’ll never blame you for my shortcomings.

You’re going to have so much love you won’t know what to do with it all,” I whisper down to my son in my arms. “Things are going to be different for you. We’re going to laugh and play and as soon as your mother is willing, we’ll give you a sibling to love and play with too. Maybe more than one.”

“I heard that,” Bambi mutters sleepily. I look up to find her eyes half open and watching us.

“Do you disagree?” I ask and she smirks.

“No. But I’m not sure how well we’ll all fit in our two-bedroom apartment.”

“We’ll fit, don’t worry about that.”

She giggles and then winces, rubbing low on her abdomen.

“Sore? Do you need a nurse?”

“No, I’m fine. I just can’t laugh yet. I think I just peed myself. At least I hope that was pee.”

I stare wide eyed at her, mentally flipping through all the books I read about childbirth and the possible aftereffects. Bambi reaches out and pats my arm not holding Noah.

“It’s fine relax, I was joking. Nothing is wrong. The doctor and nurses said everything went as it should.”

I exhale a deep breath, relieved to know nothing went wrong with her health during

labor.

“That’s not a very funny joke,” I chide, but only half-heartedly.

“I thought it was pretty funny,” she mutters. I scowl. “How is he? Still sleeping?”

“Like a log. Hopefully that’s a good omen for the future. All the books said to be prepared for many sleepless nights in the beginning. Maybe we got lucky.”

Bambi pushes herself higher up on the inclined bed and as soon as she’s settled, I reach over and place a kiss to her cheek. Her hair sticks up in every direction and she’s still a little sticky with sweat, but she’s perfectly beautiful to me.

“I think we’re lucky,” she says with a soft smile.

“I think so too.”

I know we’re not talking about Noah’s sleep schedule anymore.

I’ve felt lucky since that first night on my boat when she had more courage than me to kiss me first. If it weren’t for that night, my life would be on a completely different path right now, the wrong path.

I internally shudder considering I could have lived a life without ever truly loving.

A life without Bambi or Noah. A half-life always missing the most important piece.

“Get some more sleep, love. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll watch over you both.”

She nods, already slipping back into sleep. I tuck the blanket up around her neck and press another kiss to her forehead, Noah still fast asleep in my arms. My perfect little

family.

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I don't know how he's going to top this one

It's been two weeks since Noah was born, and every single minute has been amazing.

Except the sleepless nights. We thought because of how well he was sleeping the first few days after he was born that meant he would be a good sleeper once we got home.

Sadly, that was not the case. Just like every other infant, he wakes every couple of hours.

Even so it's been perfect. We take turns although I am usually needed when he's hungry since Warren can't very well breastfeed him. Wouldn't that be awesome though if he could? I carry for nine months and give birth, but he has to breastfeed. Seems like a fair trade to me.

Last night was Warren's turn, and I feel somewhat rested today.

Which doesn't explain why Warren also seems alert and energized.

I would have expected him to be dead on his feet this morning like other mornings after a late night up with Noah.

But no, he's smiling with bright eyes and a strange bounce to his step as he exits our room fresh from the shower. I eye him suspiciously.

"What's got you in such a good mood?"

“Oh nothing. Just a surprise.”

“A surprise? What kind of surprise?”

“Now if I told you then it wouldn’t be a surprise now would it?”

Warren crosses the living room and unbuckles Noah from his baby bouncer on the floor. With practiced motions he scoops him up, supporting his neck, and cradles him to his chest and shoulder. It’s a sight I never grow tired of seeing.

When we first got home Warren handled Noah like a live grenade, gentle and cautious and a little frightened. It’s nice to see he’s grown comfortable with holding him, no longer afraid of dropping him.

“Come on. Let’s go,” he says, crossing to gather Noah’s diaper bag.

“Go? Go where?”

I stand from the couch where I was reading and follow him.

“To your surprise.”

I do love a good surprise, but where could he be taking us that would be a surprise in this town? I’ve lived here my whole life and have seen and been everywhere.

“Okay,” I giggle. “Are we going to be gone long?”

“I don’t know. Depends on how much you love my surprise. Which will be a lot. So maybe.”

I laugh more. He’s such a goober sometimes. But I don’t question him. His surprises are usually amazing, so I’ll go with it.

We strap Noah into his carrier and head for his truck. My car still doesn't meet Warren's standards of safety to drive around a baby in. I don't think it ever will. We'll probably need to sell it soon and buy something more reliable and maybe a decade newer.

"Here," Warren holds out a bandana to me and I stare at it. "Put this on. I don't want you to see where we're going till we get there."

"Ooh big surprise huh? Okay."

I take the bandana and tie it around my eyes. Warren double checks it's in place before I hear the truck engine turn over and feel the movement of the truck pulling out of the parking space behind the store.

While he drives, I try to figure out where we're going based on turns but I'm horrible at estimating distance, so when we do turn I have no idea what street we're on.

It only takes ten minutes to get where we're going, and I can tell we're on a gravel road and am now completely confused as to where we are.

"Where are we?" I ask, no longer able to wait patiently.

"You'll see. Just wait."

"How much longer?"

"Just...a few...seconds...and...we're here!" He draws out his words until the truck stops when he proclaims our arrival.

"Can I take this off now?" I ask, reaching up to the bandana around my eyes.

"No!" Warren's hand reaches over and stills mine, stopping me from removing the

blind fold. “I’ll come over and get you, you just wait.”

I can hear him moving around and unbuckling Noah from his car seat between us but wait patiently as instructed. A giddy feeling bubbles in my chest in anticipation. I wonder what it could be. A new car? A romantic day on the water in the Knotty Boy ? With Warren it could be anything.

My passenger door opens, and Warren’s strong hand reaches in and unbuckles me then grasps my hand. I let him guide me and slide out of the truck. My feet land with a thud on the gravel I knew we were driving on. It’s quiet and I can’t hear any movement or noise around us other than our own.

“Where are we Warren?”

Warren just chuckles and guides me by the hand. My other hand extends out reaching to make sure I don’t run into anything.

“There’s nothing you’re going to run into or any steps. You’re safe Bambi, trust me.”

“I do trust you. It’s just a natural reaction to being suddenly blinded.”

We don’t walk very far and just like he said there are no stairs and I don’t run into anything. We’re no longer walking on gravel. Now there is short grass and dirt under foot.

Warren drops my hand, and I sense him moving but have no idea what he could possibly be doing.

“Now can I take off the blind fold?” I ask again.

He’s quiet for a moment then responds. “Okay, you can take it off now.”

The bandana is finally gone, and my eyes adjust to the light with bright spots and blurry images until everything finally comes into focus.

In front of me...is the hangout house. Strange.

This is not where I expected to be. But there's something different about it.

It's cleaner. The grass has been mowed, the massive weeds that were growing around the porch are gone, the garbage that cluttered a few areas of the yard has been removed.

Even the boards on the windows have been removed.

The house itself is still in disrepair and looks as it always did. Except for the blue bow stuck to the front door.

My head tilts from side to side as I inspect the house and try to figure out why we're here and what the surprise is. Turning to Warren at my side I find him watching me carefully. A tentative smile on his lips as he holds our son in one arm, his little head resting on his shoulder.

"What are we doing here?"

"This is your surprise."

I look back at the house still confused. "What is?"

"The house."

"The house?"

"It's ours. I bought it. For us."

“You...?”

My brain must be sluggish because I don't understand at first, but the longer we stare at each other the pieces finally fall into place. He bought the house for us. We have a house.

I turn back to look at the house we've all known since high school and in my mind I can see it transforming.

Peeled paint smoothed over with fresh colors, broken windows made whole and lit from within.

The yard is green and lined with flowers.

But the best part of all is the image of us in that yard running and playing with Noah. Laughter ringing out in my fantasy.

I always loved this house. Always knew it could be more than the abandoned house teenagers graffitied. Now it will be.

“Do you like it?” Warren asks softly from my side.

“I love it.” tears well in my eyes as I continue to stare at the house that will soon be our home. “But how could you afford it?”

Facing him once again his smile is wider, and he shrugs the shoulder not doubling as a pillow to our son.

“I sold my boat.”

“You sold the Knotty Boy ? But you love that boat.”

That boat was his safe haven, his refuge and safe space to be himself and escape his father. That boat is the one and only thing he's ever fought for, ever wanted and loved.

"I love you more. I love Noah more. It's just a boat Bambi and we both know we can't live on it with a baby, especially when I want more."

I'm too stunned to speak. Unable to comprehend the sacrifice he's just made for us and our family so we can have a home. A place to grow and create memories in.

A boat is mobile, a way for Warren to remain unattached and free from solidifying himself anywhere.

For him to give it up means a lot. He's giving up his ability to leave, his ability to escape and be free.

He's putting the final nail in his foundation here in Homer.

His final way to prove to me this is what he wants and he's not going anywhere.

"Thank you," I manage through watery eyes and the frog in my throat.

"There's one more thing."

There's more? I don't know how he's going to top this one.

Warren circles to face me, the _ our house behind him, Noah still quietly cooing in his arm. The image almost has me bursting out in hysterical tears and joyous laughter. But I hold in my reaction waiting for this even better surprise.

In one swift motion Warren lowers to one knee and pulls a small velvet box from behind his back.

My heart almost stops in my chest as he single-handedly opens the box to reveal a ring.

A ring I recognize. Gigi showed it to me years ago and told me one day she would give it to the man she approved of for me.

Which is how I know he has her blessing.

The large natural pearl sits nestled in a beautifully handmade filigree, the ring over a hundred years old and worn by my ancestors. Modern times may not be as set in tradition as it once was, but I'm glad that this one thing has survived throughout the generations.

I'm so focused on the ring and its significance I almost miss Warren's words.

"I love you, Bambi. I may have been a stupid kid and done a number of stupid things, including leaving last year. But I'd like to think I've learned my lesson and come to my senses.

I want nothing more than to plant my roots right here with you.

To grow our family and then grow old in this house, reminiscing of our youth spent vandalizing our home not knowing one day it would be the place where you would make me the happiest man in the world.

Will you marry me? Let me call you wife and have many more babies with me? Please?"

I think it's the please that breaks me. A tear-filled watery laugh bursts from my chest and I fall into his embrace, careful of Noah, and wrap my arms around his neck as best I can.

“Is that a yes?” His voice is muffled, and it sounds like he’s laughing too.

I lean back and press a hard kiss to his lips speaking directly into them. “That’s a yes.”

“Good because I don’t know what I would do with this house if you said no.”

Another laugh escapes me and I kiss him again, my hands cupping his scruffy jaw. “You really think I would say no after tattooing your name on my ass?”

“I hoped not, but I’ve been wrong before.”

“That you have, but I think you’re finally starting to get it right.”

“Me too.”

He stands and holds the ring between us, fumbling with it to get it out while still holding Noah. I help him out, taking the velvet box and holding my left hand out for him to slide the ring onto my finger.

“Now there’s no question you’re mine,” he states.

“I was always yours. You just didn’t know it.”

His free arm circles my back and pulls me into his chest, cradling me and our son against his chest. A soft kiss presses against my hair as I not so subtly wipe my eyes on his dark shirt.

“I think I did, I was just too afraid and thick headed to admit it.”

“Well, I’m glad you finally realized it.”

“I think what I realized was that I would do anything for you because you own me. After that I just decided you would be mine too.”

I laugh at his corny ridiculously. I don’t care anymore how we came together, only that we did.

“Come on wife, let me show you around our new house. I think I know the perfect place to build you a library.”

I pull back shocked and admittedly excited.

“Really?”

“Of course. I’ll even build you one of those window seats you’re always going on about.”

We walk inside and Warren shows me all the clean-up he’s done so far. Mainly taking out all the trash and sweeping, laying down a few boards of plywood where there were holes in the floor to make sure we don’t fall through.

He points to the graffiti and tagging explaining how we can paint over it or cover it with wallpaper, whichever I want. Listing the things that need to be done to repair the old home. The list is long but once it’s done it’ll be our perfect home.

When we reached the stairs, we stop to stare at all the engraved names and dates, some of them our own.

“We can sand these out or replace the wood completely if you like,” Warren suggests.

I look over the years of generations that have passed through this house and what it meant to all of them. Removing giant penises and painting over spray paint is one thing, but sanding away the engravings seems wrong somehow.

“What if we didn’t?” I say.

“Didn’t what?”

“Remove the stairs or the carvings. What if we preserved it? Like a monument to the years this house was the hangout house. Besides, our names are carved up there too.”

Warren looks at the stairs and considers it. Thankfully no one was ever skilled enough to carve pornographic images into the wood. It’s all names and dates and hearts mostly.

“Okay. I think that’s a great idea. I’m sure we can figure out a way to preserve it.”

We wander through the rest of the house discussing which rooms will be which. Deciding on building my library in the den space with the stained glass over the entryway. There are plenty of rooms in the old house to have a handful of kids and not run out of room.

I picture that, our future, and how many children we may have together.

The birthday parties and bar-be-ques we’ll have here.

I picture Gigi sitting in a rocking chair on the porch sipping iced tea and the gaggle of children Warren wants running around in the yard, aunt Izzy and Uncle Owen chasing after them.

The dream is one I never expected but can’t wait to get started on.