



“Who said this was a good idea?” Paisley, standing in the middle of our kitchen, presses her palms to her face. “I’m canceling.” Her muffled voice pushes through the crack between her hands.

“But everyone we invited RSVP’d,” I point out.

“I don’t care.” Still muffled.

“Your family flew across the country to be here for this day.”

“There’s a plane from Raleigh to Phoenix every morning. Almost”—her hands shift like a curtain opening, but her fingers remain pressed to her eyes—“as if there’s a schedule.”

I grin. My wife gets sarcastic when she’s reached a certain threshold of stress. The level after this one is tears, a physical response she despises.

I stride over the wood floor, passing the counter where there's a fruit and veggie platter, the charcuterie Paisley spent way too much time and money on, and sweating pitchers of bright lemonade and dark iced tea.

"Ace." I gently tug her hands down. Her blue-green eyes stare back at me, vulnerable, tears caught in the fringe of lashes. "The party starts in one hour."

"Luca won't know the difference," Paisley says, her voice as weak as her argument. "He doesn't even know it's his birthday today."

She's right. Our little guy isn't aware this day is special, that today marks his first full trip around the sun.

"I made a big deal about this birthday, and now I wish it were only the three of us. No balloons, no spending three days cleaning from top to bottom, no"—she grimaces at the counter—"*charcuterie*."

I curl my fingers through hers. "Is that really what has you upset right now?"

"No," Paisley says quickly. I love how she doesn't hold back her feelings with me. She never has. Paisley trusts I will accept her, *I will love her*, no matter how she feels or what she says.

"My real problem," Paisley continues, swinging our clasped hands, "is that our baby boy is turning one, but I could swear it was only yesterday we were leaving the hospital with him. And now I want everyone I invited to this party to develop instantaneous telepathy and choose not to come to our house."

My stoic face breaks, my lips fighting their way into an amused grin. Like a mirror image, Paisley's does the same.

“Fine,” she groans. “Let them come.” Her arm sweeps dramatically to the twin white bakery boxes stationed beside the sink. “Let them eat cake.”

She leans into me as I drag my lips over her forehead. “Such a kind and benevolent queen.”

Paisley leans away, eyes squinting, face playful. “Off with your head,” she announces, stage-whispering because Luca is only halfway through his nap. Lord knows if we want a happy Luca, we need a fully napped Luca.

My fingers curl around Paisley’s hip, tugging lightly. “There are other things I’d like to take off.”

Paisley taps my shoulder, a *tsk*. “We have guests arriving in fifty-six minutes.”

“It won’t take that long.” With Luca around, we’ve learned how to love in less time.

Paisley slips over to the counter, gesturing at the boxes of compostable plastic cutlery she bought for today. “I need to unbox and organize the cutlery.”

Hah. My wife. Always playful. Always loving the thrill of the chase, even when it’s in our kitchen and she is prey wanting to be ensnared.

By her husband. *Me*. Lucky bastard, I am.

I duck quickly, my left shoulder against her thighs, and lift. Out of the kitchen and down the hall we go.

“Oh no, Klein,” Paisley deadpans, delivering a less-than-halfhearted blow to my lower back. “Put me down. I have so much to do.”

I smack her rear, covered only by the cotton of her sundress. “*Make my wife see stars* is on the top of my to-do list.”

“Ok, fine.”

I grin at her easy acquiescence.

She winds her arms around my neck as I lay her back on our bed. On our nightstand is a monitor, a squeaky giraffe, and a contraption that removes snot from Luca’s nose, though I’d really like to not think about that right now.

“Kiss me, Klein,” Paisley instructs, and I oblige. My wife. My lady. My Ace. Paisley.

Not a day goes by that I don’t feel grateful for her. For our son. For this life we’ve built, and continue to construct.

I kiss her deeply, the way she likes to be kissed. She wraps her legs around my waist. I push her hair from her face, and she turns, sighing into my hand. “Love you, Wordsmith.” She grins impishly up at me. “Now, where are those stars you promised me?”

The party is in full swing. Luca doesn’t have any friends (um, obviously), but Paisley’s handful of mom friends show up for the event. They wear bright smiles of excitement, a lot of concealer under their eyes (according to Paisley), and their husbands dutifully tote diaper bags.

Paisley wants me to get to know the husbands, *so we can all be friends*, and I’ve promised to give it my best shot.

Sienna hides in the kitchen, refreshing food trays and making more lemonade to refill the glass pitcher. She’s not usually a member of the supporting cast, but she’d announced that today was Paisley’s and my day as much as Luca, and she wanted to help.

Sienna has changed since her debacle of a wedding that I am most grateful for. She's a little less *me, me, me* and a little more introspective.

Robyn and Ben haven't changed, judging by the way they're whispering in each other's ears and grinning like loons.

Oliver tosses a football to Spencer in the backyard.

Paisley's dad, twenty minutes late, enters the front door looking sheepish, his ears red-tipped. My antennas are up based on this look alone. Andrew has never looked less than completely confident.

A woman follows behind him. Paisley, seated on the couch with a bouncing Luca on her lap, registers her father before her gaze swings to me.

I know exactly what those wide eyes are saying. Is Andrew finally over Robyn?

"Andrew," I stride forward to greet him. "Thanks for coming across the country to be here. We appreciate it."

"I wouldn't miss my grandson's first birthday party. Plus, uh," he glances at the woman behind him, "I had a meeting with a client." Pink blossoms over his cheeks, making his face look like a Valentine's Day greeting card. Is that lipstick on his collar?

She steps around him, introducing herself, but I'm too distracted by her presence to register her name.

I fetch drinks for them, and by the time I get back, Paisley is announcing it's time for cake.

Cake at a one-year-old birthday party is a big deal. Luca will have his very own miniature cake, a *smash cake* I'm told it's called.

Paisley straps him into his highchair and we huddle around him. Spencer takes pictures, candid and posed shots. Andrew and Robyn beam, catching each other's eyes for the briefest moment to share a look that says *we created this*.

Luca, with his green eyes and wisps of blonde hair, watches us sing. Jarred slightly by the noise, he finds Paisley in the group. He kicks his feet, chubby fist pounding the tray, and yells a string of vowels.

"Someone wants cake," Paisley jokes, catching my eyes. It's our turn to smile warmly at each other. *We created this*.

Paisley places the small cake in front of Luca. She takes his hand, putting it on the top of the frosting and pressing down slightly to show him what's possible. She takes a step back and he keeps his eyes on her, experimenting with pushing his fingers further into the frosting.

In five minutes time, Luca is covered in vanilla frosting. He may have gotten in a few bites, but mostly he used his body as a canvas.

My mom shows up at my side. "Grandma reporting for cleanup duty."

I extract my sticky son from his high chair, find a clean square of forehead to place a kiss, then hand him over to my mom. Robyn jumps behind my mom and they both disappear into Luca's bedroom.

Later, when Luca is down for another nap and only family is still at our house, I snag a few minutes alone with Paisley on our back porch.

"My dad brought a *woman*," she says, gripping my forearm. "Like, *a date*."

I nod. "Did you get a chance to talk to her?"

Paisley's head tips as she thinks. "Seems nice, I guess. Not overly friendly, but I guess that's a good thing. She lives here, in Phoenix, and has a daughter who lives in that cute small town we've been to before, with that street of antique shops. Green Haven?" Paisley pushes hair from her eyes. "She's a grandma, too. Her daughter's name is Colbie, and she and her husband have two kids."

"So what you're saying is that you're getting a step-sister?"

Paisley chuckles and bats at my shoulder. "Hardly. My dad lives across the country. Why would he start a relationship with a woman who lives here?"

"It's not like he's never here," I point out. Andrew visits every three months like clockwork. He stays at the hotel nearby and fits himself into our daily routine. It's been good for Paisley to see her dad make this effort.

Paisley pinches her lower lip. "True," she says, the word garbled. She releases her lip and leans into me. "Anyway. The party was a success. I saw you talking to a few of my friend's husbands."

"I made an effort, just like I said I would. One of them—Howie?—plays soccer. I invited him to this week's match."

Paisley smiles. My heart beats faster. There isn't much I wouldn't do to make Paisley smile.

Eventually, Luca wakes up from his next nap, and everybody sits on the floor to play with him.

When I first got to know Paisley's family on Bald Head Island, I thought they were an interesting bunch. They lacked the warmth of my mom and Eden and Oliver.

Looking at them now, Robyn tucked into Ben, Andrew sitting across the circle by himself (his lady friend left an hour ago, saying she had to prepare for a trial in the morning), Sienna and Spencer taking turns rolling a big ball to Luca, I see a family trying to get there.

A family who, once upon a time, was stunted by a hurtful choice with ramifications that wouldn't let go.

Paisley sails into the living room after changing into cotton shorts and a T-shirt. Her hair is pulled back from her face, and she settles on the couch beside me, relaxing into my side.

“This is nice,” she says, murmuring into my neck. “I ate another slice of cake.”

I chuckle quietly. “I most definitely had two slices.”

“What are you whispering about over there?” my sister calls out, bulldozing into our moment.

“Cake,” Paisley answers.

Eden rolls her eyes, a knowing and affectionate grin tugging up the corners of her mouth. “Of course.”

I look down at Paisley. She's already looking up at me. “Of course,” she mouths, then kisses me.

Paisley hands out hugs when her family leaves. “We'll see you on Bald Head this summer,” she says, referring to our now-annual trip to the island that's only two months away.

Robyn twirls her fingers on her way to the Uber waiting to take her and Ben to their hotel. “Your grandmother won't stop talking about it. She hated missing today.”

Paisley shakes her head. “She had a good excuse, what with recovering from knee surgery and all.”

I spoke with Lausanne yesterday during her weekly phone call to Paisley. She has big plans to be ready for Luca this summer. *There are sandcastles to build with my great-grandson, and I must be ready for them.*

Paisley gives a last wave and closes the door. Luca wakes up, and we go through his bath time routine together.

I kiss Paisley's temple as she uses soap bubbles to give Luca a mohawk.

"Love you," she says simply, sparing me a brief look before returning her attention to the baby.

Love you more. I don't say it. Paisley will argue if I do.