

## Rose

I was walking back and forth in front of the bread aisle, counting my steps, lost in my own little world, when I spotted my handsome—and very much real—husband walk through the doors. I had been asleep when he left for work that morning, so I hadn't seen him get dressed. It had become a beloved morning routine of mine to watch him get dressed—and undressed of course—in front of me. However, it was a whole other different routine to watch him roll up his sleeves. That required a separate time in the evening routine when he got back home. I think he enjoyed watching me watch him more than I did, but we never let that slip.

Rooted to my spot, completely mesmerised by my husband of now two years, I watched him as he paused just inside the doors and stepped aside to let an elderly lady pass him by. His eyes started searching for me in the produce section and when he couldn't find me quickly enough, my favorite frown appeared on his face.

My heart fluttering in my chest, I smiled to myself and felt wildly happy down to my toes. As if he could feel my gaze on him, his eyes snapped to me and the frown deepened. That was expected. I was the bane of his existence. I watched as his lips formed my name and my smile got bigger. He strolled in as if he owned the place and made it to my side as quickly as possible, eyes on mine the entire time.

“Rose, what are yo—”

I didn't let him finish. “I'm going to hug you, Jack Hawthorne.”

I only had enough time to notice the frown on his face disappearing as he froze and then I was holding on to his forearm and going up on my tiptoes so I could give him a good hug. He closed his arms around me, and I closed my eyes and pressed a lingering kiss to his cheek. Then taking a deep breath of his hypnotizing scent, I hummed to myself and something inside me that had settled as soon as I'd seen him settled a bit more. “You're wearing my favorite.”

“What else would I wear, sweetheart?”

For Jack, it was as simple as that. I loved his cologne, so he only wore that.

“I missed you,” I whispered, tightening arms around him.

“I always miss you. You know you don’t have to warn me every time we hug, don’t you?” he mumbled next to my ear and a shiver worked its way down my spine.

“I like it better this way,” I admitted, amused at his rough tone.

“Rose,” he whispered, his voice softening. “What are you doing here? What am I gonna do with you?”

I dropped back down to my heels and stared into his deep blue eyes. He reluctantly let me go, but I stayed close. We were still in front of the bread aisle, and I was standing as close as I could get to him. “Love me for the rest of our days? That could be good.”

He smiled at me; eyes and lips and all and my heart gave another heavy thump in my chest.

“Excuse me,” someone murmured and Jack caught my hand in his and gently pulled me to the side and away from all the bread.

When I noticed how cold his hands were, I moved both my hands up and down on his arms. “Jack, you’re freezing.”

“I’m fine. Now tell me, what are you doing here?” he asked, his hand sneaking around my waist and soothingly circling my back.

I tried my best to keep my face blank. “What does one do in a grocery store?”

He quirked his eyebrow. “That’s not gonna work with me. You’re supposed to be home, resting, Mrs. Hawthorne. We talked about this, remember?”

“I do remember, Mr. Hawthorne. I also remember you and Sally ganging up and banning me from the coffee shop. So I’ve done nothing but rest these last few weeks. We’re out of a few essential things, so here I am.”

“And I’m guessing it couldn’t wait until I got home?” I shook my head and after a sigh he continued. “You weren’t supposed to go out on your own. Not now. We had a deal, Rose.”

I tilted my head to the side. “Who says I broke our deal? Didn’t you see Ray outside?”

He gave me a knowing look. “You’re splitting hair. What if something happens and neither one of—”

I felt a particularly strong cramp and couldn’t stop myself before squeezing Jack’s wrist. He stopped mid-sentence then the soothing circles followed too.

I let out a long breath.

“What’s wrong?” His gaze turned concerned and his eyes dropped to my huge stomach that was between us. To our baby.

I let go of his arm to be on the safe side and caressed my stomach instead. “Just a little enthusiastic kick, nothing new,” I lied. We were supposed to have our baby exactly a week from that day.

Jack’s hand landed on mine and stopped my movements.

He tilted my chin up with his other hand and looked into my eyes.

“You’re sure?”

I smiled and nodded. “All good.”

“Both of you?” he asked softly as he cupped my cheek.

Gazing into his deep blue eyes, I bit my lip and nodded.

“Rose.” His palm still covering my cheek, he pulled at my bottom lip with his thumb, forcing me to stop biting, then leaned down and still staring into my eyes gave me a scandalous kiss. I opened my mouth for him and his tongue swept inside. Warmth spread all over me, and I put my hand on his cheek. I remember groaning and trying to get closer to him, but my stomach bumped him and, chuckling against my lips, he stopped kissing me.

“Not funny,” I mumbled, a little out of breath, which made him smile against my lips.

Giving me another quick kiss, he straightened. “If nothing is wrong, what am I doing here, Rose?” my wonderful husband asked after giving my hand a quick squeeze.

“One would think you’d prefer to see your very pregnant wife, whom you love more than anything, instead of being cooped up in your office. You’re grocery shopping with me.”

“I always prefer to see my very beautiful and pregnant wife over anything else. And Ray couldn’t help you with this urgent shopping trip in the middle of the day?”

I shook my head and pulled him toward the carts. If I wasn’t going to get any more kisses, it was a good idea to start shopping.

“I wanted to see you. Isn’t that enough? And I’d like to remind you that grocery shopping together is in our five-year marriage plan.”

There was a short pause.

“Nothing is wrong with the baby or you, right, Rose?”

“What could possibly be wrong? Nothing is wrong.”

“You pulled me out of a very important meeting with a very big client. Forgive me for assuming that it could be an emergency.”

“You’re forgiven. Come on, let’s do this. Ticktack.”

I reached for a cart, but Jack let go of my hand and pulled one out himself. In a few seconds, as soon as he had maneuvered the cart away from the others, he reached for my hand again.

“Also you’re welcome,” I mumbled, reaching for the list in my bag. “I saved you from a boring meeting. You were supposed to be so happy to see me.”

He chuckled and I smiled up at him.

“Always happy to see my beautiful Rose.”

“Did you have to run out of your meeting? Is that why you’re just wearing a shirt and no jacket in the middle of winter in New York?”

“Yes, Rose. That’s exactly why.”

“That wasn’t very smart of you, was it?”

Shaking his head at me, he leaned down and pressed a lingering kiss on my forehead. “Okay, what are we buying that couldn’t wait until grocery day? I need to go back after taking you home.”

I didn’t think he’d get to go back to the office, but I didn’t say that out loud. And grocery day. Jack Hawthorne and I had grocery days. Insanity. In the most blissful way.

“We need lots of apples. I’ve been craving something apple-y. A celebratory French apple pie, maybe? With heavenly vanilla sauce on top.”

“What are we celebrating?”

“Oh, look, they have my favorite apples. You get broccoli. I’m gonna get the apples.”

I pulled my hand away from his and attacked the apples. Jack looked at me for a second then headed for the broccoli to my left.

“You’re acting weird.”

I sniffed an apple. “I’m being mysterious and keeping our marriage alive.”

That earned me another quirk of his eyebrows, so I quickly looked away and finished picking my apples.

As soon as we were done with the veggies and fruits, Jack captured my hand and locked our fingers together. “What’s next then?”

“Cheese. Lots and lots of cheese.” Cheese and pickles had been my kryptonite during my pregnancy. No amount was ever enough.

“Right. How could I forget.”

As Jack was picking my favorite cheeses, I closed my eyes, squeezed the cart handle as hard as I could, and pushed through another cramp. By the time he was dumping my cheeses in the cart I managed to look at him like nothing was wrong in the world, but it was slowly starting to get to me.

Casually, he reached for my hand again and it made me smile. Despite what he was saying when he first came in, he’d missed me.

“I think we were out of milk,” he murmured, heading for the milk aisle.

We managed to get some tortilla chips, lentil, rice, flour, ground beef, brown sugar, chicken, and then a few extra things that weren’t on my list. I was trailing behind Jack back toward the produce section because I had forgotten to get green beans when another contraction hit me, and I made a little squeaky noise. Since I was trailing a little behind Jack and there were a few little kids running around making a lot of noise, he didn’t hear me, so I ducked into an aisle and waited a bit until it passed.

Then I carefully waddled my way to his side. “Jack,” I whispered.

“You’re being very quiet,” he said.

“Jack,” I repeated and held on to his arm until he finally looked at me.

“I think we need to leave.”

He looked over my shoulder, behind me. “What’s wrong?”

I looked into his eyes and gave him a small smile. “We’re having a baby.”

His eyes warmed as he smiled back at me, and it eclipsed my quiet panic just a little bit.

“I know, sweetheart.” He leaned down and kissed me so sweetly that I didn’t know if I was out of breath because I was having our baby or because of his kiss. Then he held his forehead against mine. “I love you, Rose. Let’s get the green—”

“Let’s not.” I pulled back and swallowed. “We’re not having a moment, we kinda did really, but the moment is over. We’re having a real live baby. Probably not this minute, but sometime today. It’s go time. So, I think we should leave.”

His face had slowly cleared as I’d rushed through my little speech and he was standing at his full height. I put my hand on his chest and let out a long breath. A little dumbfounded, he let go of the cart, looked around again, then back at me.

“Right now? It’s happening right now? We’re not scheduled for another week.”

Scrunching up my face, I made a so and so gesture with my hand. “Probably sometime today or more realistically tonight. I’m pretty sure our baby is done waiting.”

“You’re telling me our baby is coming. Right now.”

It wasn’t phrased as a question, not really, but the confusion on his face, the shock, the love, and then slowly the horror and panic forced me to give an answer before he could erupt.

I bit down on my bottom lip and couldn’t hold back my grin. “Kinda.”

“I’m going to kill you, Rose.”

Surprised, I laughed. “I thought I’d get a hug or kiss, or both with a twirl, not a death threat.”

A woman who was passing by stopped and gave Jack a dirty look. When her eyes slid to me, I smiled at her. "Oh, it's okay," I said with a genuine smile. "He's my husband. We want to kill each other regularly." Frowning at us with disapproval, she walked away. I felt Jack's hand on my stomach and looked at him, but his eyes were fixed on my stomach as if he could see our baby.

"You really need to stop yelling at strangers," he murmured distractedly.

My heart full to bursting, my eyes back on the woman, I yelled after her, "He loves me, really!" Then I covered Jack's hand and his eyes came to me.

"I'm going to be a dad. Today? I'm finally going to have her in my arms."

My eyes welled up at the sweet and wondrous tone at his voice and I nodded. It reminded me of the day I'd told him I was pregnant. I'd started crying that day, too, and I'd done a lot of crying since then which I completely blamed Jack for.

"You can never get rid of us now," I whispered through my tears. "And it could be a boy."

He cupped my face in his hands. "I'm stuck with you two then?"

Not able to speak without squeaking and spluttering, I nodded.

"I guess I'll have to find a way to survive."

Playfully, I hit his arm, but we were both smiling like idiots while I was crying happy tears in the middle of the grocery shop.

He bent down and kissed my eyelids, one by one, right before pressing a quick kiss on my nose as I hugged his neck. Then he pressed a kiss on my lips. To my disappointment, it was over in a few seconds. Then he was pulling me away from the cart.

Surprised, I yelped. Grabbing the cart, I stopped him. "I've come this far, I'm not leaving without my apples."

He gave me an incredulous look. "Are you insane? Our baby is coming."

"He or she loves apples too. I think he or she would like her or his mommy to get the apples she needs to make French apple pie."

“Rose, you won’t be making any French or American apple pies. We’re going to the hospital.”

“I’ll make it in a few days. When we get back from the hospital. I’m not leaving my baby to get some stupid apples after I come home.”

“I’m really going to kill you.”

“Okay. Let’s pay for these first before you kill the mother of your beautiful baby.”

“Rose.”

“Jack?”

“We made a plan, do you remember?”

“I do. It was a very well-thought, extensive plan.”

“Rose,” he growled, looking all handsome and angry. It was a good look on him. It’d always been a good look on him.

“I’m not going to have my next contraction right here while arguing with you, Jack. Let me have the stupid apples.”

He spent two seconds considering if he could push me for it, but decided against it. Shaking his head, he reached for my hand, rolled the cart forward, and walked right by my side, even though I could feel he wanted to do nothing but rush me away to the hospital. As soon as we reached the checkout lines, he started unloading our stuff. I tried to help, but he gently moved me away and to his right.

“Tell me everything,” he ordered in a serious tone.

Now it was the lawyer speaking to his wife, so I gave him a thorough report. “I called Dr. Jana when the first contraction came. She told me to head to the hospital when they started to come five-ten minutes apart, and to call her again, so we still have plenty of time. She told me to just relax and wait.

“So what does my wife do?” he asked the wide-eyed cashier who was I bet not even in his twenties yet. “She runs out to do some grocery shopping.”

I rubbed my husband’s arm and sighed. “Breathe, Jack.” I turned to the cashier. “He loves me.”

Jack gave me a murderous look, then grunted and nodded through the rest of my explanation as he quickly dumped everything on the band.

“Fine,” I admitted. “I was panicking a little bit and I didn’t want to call you just in case it was a false alarm again, so I thought I should go grocery shopping and get my apples just in case it’s not a false alarm and I thought I’d get it done in no time and call you then, but it really hurts and each time they’re a bit longer, so I needed you with me because you always help.”

“Nice timing with that at the end, but that won’t save you from me. How far apart are they coming now?” he asked, taking out his credit card, still all-business like.

“Twenty-ish.”

“Ish.”

“Ish,” I repeated.

He gave me a withering look before glancing back at the cashier, and I tried my best to look innocent and cute. “I’m married to a woman who thinks going out for a stroll is a good idea when she is about to give birth to our baby.”

The cashier nodded nervously. “I can see that, sir. Congratulations.”

“They say walking is good, so I thought maybe I could walk to the coffee shop, get some fresh air...” When he gave me a shocked look, I shifted in place. “I *was* going to take Raymond with me of course.”

“Of course.”

“When the second one came, I thought, maybe you shouldn’t walk that far, Rose. So I came here instead. With the car.”

We kept staring at each other.

“Were you expecting an applause?”

I scoffed to hide my laughter.

“We planned for this, Rose. We had a plan. And none of them, not one of them said you should not call me, but just head out to walk around. It didn’t say; maybe drop by the coffee shop or do some grocery shopping either, did it?”

“Not the point here.”

His brows furrowed, so I thought complimenting his plan making skills was a good idea.

“You had a very good plan, Jack. A good long list of things.”

He shook his head.

As the cashier swiped his credit card, Jack rubbed his face and let out a sigh. Then he looked at my smiling face. “I... We’re having our baby,” he repeated yet again. I nodded and he reached for my face and bent to give me another kiss. When he stopped kissing me, I was laughing and trying to breathe in and out at the same time.

“Jack. Jack,” I hissed, latching onto his arm closest to me and squeezing through the sharp pain.

He stilled.

I shut my eyes. “I think another one is coming, Jack.” I couldn’t hold back my grunt of pain.

“Look at me, Rose.”

Squinting through the pain, I lifted my eyes up to him as he cupped my face.

“Breathe, sweetheart.”

I closed my eyes tighter and held on to both of his arms and rested my forehead against his warm chest. I could feel his frantic heartbeats and it calmed me down enough to remember I should breathe, just like he kept repeating in my ear.

“Jack.”

“Breathe, baby,” Jack whispered into my ear again. “I’m right here. I’m right here, Rose.”

When it passed and I managed to open my eyes, he was looking straight into mine.

“I was doing okay before you came. But not so much right now because I think I might be seconds away from a panic attack,” I whispered.

He tucked my hair behind my ear, nothing but love in his eyes. “Why?”

“Because now you’re here, and I don’t have to hold it together anymore. And it really hurts, Jack. And this is just the beginning. And—”

“I’m sorry I can’t take this pain from you, sweetheart. But we’re in this together, all right? Whatever you need, I’m right here. We got this.” He put one of his hands on the side of my stomach. “I can’t wait to meet our little baby, Rose. She is going to be just as beautiful as her mom.”

“And if he is a boy, he’ll be just as handsome as his dad.”

He caressed my cheek with his thumb.

“Ahem,” the cashier said and our little bubble broke. “Sorry, ah, there is kind of a line...”

“Right,” Jack muttered and leaned back a little, eyes still on mine. “Are you ready to go? Can you walk? I can carry you.”

And he would. He would carry me whenever I’d need him to carry me.

“I can walk, Jack,” I whispered and even though the worry around his eyes didn’t soften, his beautiful blues did. He pressed another quick kiss to my forehead then in a few seconds we were out the door with our groceries.

Ray was talking on his phone when we spotted him next to the car. He ended it before we could make it to his side.

“It’s time?” Ray asked after rushing to our side to grab on to my other arm and help me walk to the car.

“It is,” Jack answered.

“I can walk by myself, thank you very much,” I protested weakly just for form, because I was already scared since the last one had been pretty strong, so I didn’t try to shake their help off.

As soon as we were in the car, Jack told Ray to drive to the hospital. Quickly.

“We don’t have the baby bag. We need to go home first. I want to shower, too.”

He looked at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“Are you—”

“I—” I opened my mouth, but Ray interrupted us.

“I’m going to take you to the hospital and then go back to the apartment to pick up all the bags you need.”

Jack gave me a questioning look, daring me to say no.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Okay. Okay, thank you, Ray. I think...I think I’m a little scared right now, and I’m afraid I’m going to get a whole lot of scared when we get to the hospital because we all know how much I don’t enjoy being in hospitals, so I think I’m trying to delay going there, but I know we need to, so I’m going to shut up because this baby is coming and now it’s too late to stop it.”

Jack raised his brows and gently reached for one of my hands that was resting on my stomach, linking our fingers together.

“Thank you, Ray,” Jack said, still looking at me. “The bags are right next to the door. If you can grab both of them I’ll appreciate it.”

“No problem,” Ray replied then looked at me through the rearview mirror. “You’re going to be fine, Rose.”

I forced a smile on my lips and nodded.

When I felt Jack’s lips on my temple, I closed my eyes and tilted my head.

“I’m not going to leave your side for a minute, my beautiful Rose,” he said quietly, for my ears alone.

I squeezed his hand, snuggled closer to him, and took a deep breath, letting his closeness calm me down. “Thank you,” I whispered and let Jack hold me tightly in his arms as I pushed through another contraction on our way to the hospital.

## Rose

An hour and a half had passed, and I was lying in a hospital bed staring at the ceiling, making all kinds of weird noises trying to control my breathing to ease my pain when the contractions hit.

Ray had dropped us off and had brought both the bags right after as we settled in our hospital room and then he'd left to take care of something for Jack at the office. My water broke, surprising both of us as it made everything more real somehow. They called in our doctor, and while we were waiting for her to get back to the hospital they hooked me up to stuff, listened to my heartbeats, to the baby's heartbeats. We had walked and walked in the hallway and stopped as the pain overwhelmed me and then walked again and our doctor still hadn't showed up. Neither had our baby.

Jack was still holding my hand—he hadn't let go of it unless it'd been absolutely necessary for him to do so and I loved him for it—so I crushed it as hard as I could as I groaned through another contraction.

"I think I'm getting a little lightheaded," I groaned.

"Breathe, sweetheart," he whispered again and it couldn't have annoyed me more. "Dr. Jana is on her way."

If it were any other time, I would be shocked at my words. Unfortunately it wasn't. "Stop telling me to breathe, Jack," I hissed through my teeth. When the pain eased, I kept talking. "I love you," I said in a quiet voice. "I love you, but right now I very much feel like you did this to me, so stop telling me to breathe, please. But I love you. That's important to remember, I think."

He caressed my arm and goose bumps covered my skin. There was a smile in his voice when he spoke. "Got it. I love you, too."

I looked at him. "But you don't have to leave, okay? Just don't tell me to breathe."

“Thank you for not kicking me out. And no more breathing suggestions. Promise.” Then he leaned down and whispered, “Also, anybody who tries to pry me away from you will have serious problems.”

I nodded and kept taking deep breaths. “Good, that’s why I like you.”

“I’m here. I’m here.” The doctor rushed in and both our heads turned her way. “I was stuck in traffic. Now what did I miss?”

“It’s a few days early. Is there a problem?” Jack asked the same thing he had asked the nurses already.

“Not necessarily. Let’s see what’s going on first.”

Jack gave my hand a squeeze as the doctor checked everything and I stared at the ceiling.

“Should we change the plan to natural birth instead?” I asked, still staring up.

“Rose—” Jack started, but I cut him off.

“Maybe that’s what we’re supposed to do.”

The doctor glanced at Jack first then me. “Because of the surgery you had two years before, I don’t recommend it.”

“Will it happen again?”

“Because your situation was spontaneous there is always a chance of it happening again. But like I said the first time we talked, with natural birth there is a risk, yes.”

“Rose, where is this coming from?” Jack asked, sitting down on the chair that was right next to the bed.

“I’m going to let you two have a moment and come back in a few minutes,” our doctor muttered and headed out.

I heard the door softly click shut and turned my face to my husband.

“Talk to me,” he murmured and pushed my hair away from my face.

I let go of his hand and played with the edge of the linens.

“Maybe there is a reason it’s happening early. Who knows?”

“Is it just that?”

The pain hit me again, and I bit back a groan, biting the side of my lip. Jack's hand closed around my fist on the bed.

When it eased up a little, I opened my eyes and looked at Jack. "I think you already know I'm afraid of the surgery."

"I know, baby," he murmured, leaning down to look into my eyes. "But, do you want to take that risk? What if—"

"What if it's an easy birth and that's why it's happening early?"

"Rose." He took a deep breath and let it out. "I can't take that risk with you. I don't want you to take that risk."

I closed my eyes and nodded.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I just thought..."

"It's okay." He lifted my hand and pressed a kiss in my palm. "I'll get the doctor in here again."

"Don't growl at her, though."

"I never growl."

"Uh-huh, never. Did you call Sally and Owen?"

"I did. Sally is on her way and Owen will be here as soon as he closes."

"Okay," I whispered in the most pathetic voice. "Thank you and I'm sorry for snapping at you," I added right after.

He was chuckling quietly when he pressed a kiss on my temple. "You're doing wonderfully. I'll be right back, sweetheart."

"Thank you," I whispered.

He kissed my palm before he let go and got up. As much as he tried to act like nothing was wrong, I could see the worry in his eyes increase with each passing moment. Both my hands protectively around my stomach, I closed my eyes and tried to calm down.

Only a few minutes had passed when Jack and the doctor walked in. Neither one of them looked happy, but I would never forget the scared look on Jack's face.

## Jack

“The baby’s heartbeats are slowing down.”

My heart dropped.

Minutes...it had only been minutes when we told Dr. Jana we were going to go ahead with the planned C-section. “Something is wrong. We’re going to do an emergency C-section, all right, Rose? Even if you’d wanted go down the natural birth route, at this point I wouldn’t have let you.”

I glanced at Rose, worried out of my mind, but trying my hardest not to show exactly how much. Quietly, I moved to her side and she reached for my hand, gripping it tight. I held on. I cleared my throat, but it still came out rough when I spoke into the silence. “What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

Dr. Jana turned to me. “She isn’t dilating anymore. It could be the cord that’s causing the heartbeats to slow down. I can’t risk it.”

“Okay,” Rose said before I could think of anything to say.

The doctor smiled at Rose and touched her knee. “Everything will be fine. We’ll get you ready for the surgery.”

“Right now?” I asked, the panic inside me rising.

“Yes. We can’t wait any longer than we already did. Someone will come in to prepare you and I’ll see you guys in a few minutes,” she said and started to walk away.

“I’m still coming in,” I reminded her and she stopped.

“We’ll talk when Rose is ready.”

Before I could open my mouth and demand her to give me the right answer, she was gone.

Rose let out a long breath. I let go of her hand and walked toward the door. After closing it, gently, I walked back to my wife’s side and got in bed with her.

“This is not going according to plan at all, Jack,” she whispered as I ran my knuckles along her flushed cheeks.

“We’re going to have our baby. I’d say we’re still on track,” I countered.

She turned her head to face me, wincing when she tried to turn her body as well.

“Shhh,” I whispered, pushing back all the hair away from her face. “I’m coming in with you. I won’t leave your side. Everything will be okay. You’ll be holding our little baby boy in your arms in a few hours, maybe even sooner.”

“Boy? You’ve been pretty sure it was a girl all this time.”

“I just want a healthy baby. If I have you two in my arms, that’s all that matters.”

“Stop that.” Her breath hitched and she squeezed her eyes shut, moaning and hiding her face in my neck. All I wanted to do was wrap her in my arms and take her pain away, but I could do neither. I settled with pressing my lips on her temple. When it passed, she took a few deep breaths and then laid her head back on the pillow.

“I liked betting you on it all this time,” she said in a quiet yet scratchy voice.

“Maybe you’ll win,” I whispered and ran my knuckle on her cheek.

She closed her eyes and her hand found mine. I intertwined our fingers and breathed in her scent. “The baby will be fine,” I whispered, more to myself than her. “We’ll be fine.”

“I know. I know we will.”

She turned her head to look at me as we started to hear more voices outside of our door. I was trying my best to conceal the panic I was feeling from showing up on my face, but she knew me. She knew everything about me.

“Come here,” she whispered and barely managed to lift her hand to caress my face. I dropped my forehead against hers and closed my eyes, my stomach twisting in pain.

“I think I’m a little scared,” she admitted, her voice barely audible. She had said the same exact words only two years ago. “For our baby, for us. I’m sorry for being stupid about the natural birth.”

“Don’t apologize,” I said, my voice coming out gruff. “And I’m scared too. You two are my world.” Opening my eyes, I looked into hers and watched as a tear slid down her cheek. Framing her face with my hands, I smiled. “But our baby is just as strong as her mom. Probably wants to make an entrance just like her mother loves to do.”

She frowned at me with her tired eyes. “I never make an entrance.”

I smiled a little more and kissed her nose. “You do every time you walk into a room,” I admitted. She groaned and turned her face away from me, causing me to chuckle. “I told you before, you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve seen in my life, Rose Hawthorne. Some mornings I wake up and still can’t believe I’m lucky enough to be your husband. That you’re mine to love.”

More tears slid down her face, but at least I’d managed to get a small smile from her. So I squeezed her hand in mine and kissed her beautiful lips. Once. Twice. “I love you, Rose.”

“Jack—”

Right as she was about to speak, the door opened and nurses started rushing in.

I got up and helped Rose out of bed so she could get into the hospital gown. As they got her ready, she never took her eyes off mine. I was her anchor in the chaos, and she was mine. But seeing her back in that goddamn hospital gown...it reminded me how helpless I’d been when she had stayed in that operating room for hours. If I’d never see her wearing that gown again, it’d be one time too many.

My hands itching to take her into my arms, I waited with my back against the wall and could do nothing but watch my wife as they prepared her for the surgery. When she winced in pain, I balled my hands into fists and felt my entire body shake with the need to go to her, but there were so many people around her already.

I remember Dr. Jana coming in and talking to Rose and then disappearing out the door, but I couldn’t focus on the words. Then they were taking Rose.

“Jack,” she called, her eyes looking for me in the room. Panic dripped from her voice.

“I’m right here,” I said, not so gently pushing my way to her side. She lifted her hand and I held on to it like a lifeline.

When we were out of the room, I remember seeing Ray, but I couldn’t say a word to him as he followed us from a distance.

Then just a minute after, they took my lifeline as well.

It was after the third set of doors that someone stopped me from going forward with a hand on my chest—causing me to drop Rose’s hand. “This is as far as you can go, sir.”

“Wait. Wait. Jack?” Rose made everyone stop just inside the doors. “What’s going on?”

Something ugly settled on my chest. I had a sinking feeling that I knew what the answer to that question was.

“I’m coming in with my wife,” I said before anyone else could speak.

“They’re going to do general anesthesia,” the male nurse explained. “You can’t come in with us.”

I can’t remember how, but one second I was a healthy distance away from the guy, the next second I was in his face.

“We just talked to the doctor. She didn’t say anything about doing a—”

“Sir—” He raised his hand—to push, to hold, to stop, I didn’t care, I just snapped. There were no other words for it.

“I’m not leaving my wife’s side. Talk to the fucking doctor and—”

“I’m sorry, but you can’t be—”

“Jack,” Rose said, with pain lacing her voice. “Jack, it’s okay.”

Ray touched my arm and I finally looked away from the nurse blocking my way and met Rose’s eyes. She raised her hand and I rushed to her side.

“It’s okay,” she whispered again. “You’ll wait for me right here.”

Swallowing, I nodded. Leaning down, I kissed her. A quick—not enough—kiss.

“We need to take your wife—”

Ignoring everyone but Rose, my wife, I whispered, “I love you.”

She gave me a tired smile. “I love you, too. I’ll be right back with our baby.”

“I’m waiting right here, okay?”

“I know. See you soon.”

“Be quick about it,” I ordered softly, looking into her expressive eyes. “Come back to me, Rose. Please,” I whispered, my voice breaking.

Pain settling into her features, she forced a smile on her lips for me. “Always, Jack.”

I watched them take her away from me up until they turned right and the doors closed on my face.

Ray cleared his throat and came to stand beside me.

“She’ll be all right. They’ll both be.”

I sighed and turned my back to the doors, running a hand over my face. My heart racing, I barely held myself back from running after my family.

“I know that,” I managed to croak out. “I know that, but knowing it doesn’t change the fact I want to kill someone just so I can hold her hand through this.” I sat down on the first chair I saw nearby and dropped my face into my hands.

It was the same hell I’d been in two years ago all over again. This time I had two heartbeats to worry about instead of one.

## Rose

When I first came to myself, I wasn't sure where I was or what was going on. Then as I slowly dragged my eyes open it all came back to me and my heart rate kicked up. Slowly the room came into focus and I winced when I tried to move.

"Hi."

I heard his voice first, then I saw his face right over mine.

"Hey. Jack, where...the baby..."

He gave me a beautiful heartbreaking smile. "The baby is okay."

My eyes opened wider, as hard as that was, and I tried to push myself up, but couldn't quite manage it.

"Here, let me help you," Jack murmured and gently helped me up a little higher on the bed.

"Tell me."

He smiled, already knowing what I was asking. "She is a beautiful girl."

"She?" My voice broke, and I didn't know what to do with myself. "We have a little baby girl?"

"I won," he whispered.

I started crying and Jack started laughing.

"She is okay?" I asked again just to make sure.

"Do you want to hold her and see for yourself? She is sleepy."

My tears started coming faster. "She is here? I can hold her?"

I heard a nurse laughing, maybe more than one, but I didn't care about anyone or anything other than my husband, who was now holding my daughter in his arms.

"It's ours?"

"No, baby. I picked up the first one I could get my hands on."

"Don't make fun of me, Jack."

His eyes softened, and he looked down to the tiny baby in his arms. “She is ours, Rose.”

“She is so tiny,” I burst out, my tears blurring my vision of them. “And she looks so good in your arms, Jack.” As soon as the words were out I was full-on crying.

“Don’t you want to meet our baby, sweetheart?”

My breath hitched, and I nodded. Weakly, I raised my arms and tried my best and failed to stop crying.

“Here, easy,” Jack whispered, gently placing a bundle of snow white blanket in my arms.

“I still feel a little groggy. Help me hold her,” I muttered, my eyes on my daughter the entire time. Jack sat down beside me on the bed and helped me hold our daughter.

More tears rushed out as I touched her chin with the tip of my finger. “She is beautiful,” I whispered, glancing at Jack and then at our baby.

“Just like her mom,” Jack responded, still keeping his palm under her little head to hold it up.

“I must look so ugly right now.” Then I started sobbing again, trying to keep my arms as still as possible.

Chuckling lightly, Jack scooted so he was sitting right next to me with his back to the pillows. He rounded one of his arms behind my back and kept the other one below my arms so we could hold our little baby together. He was protecting both of us, and I had never felt safer in my life.

I felt his soft lips on my temple and closing my eyes just for a second turned my head toward him.

“Says who? You couldn’t be more beautiful.”

I sniffled and studied her. My baby. Our little girl. With the tip of my index finger, I gently touched her face and felt her smooth cheeks, her pink little lips. Her tiny little mouth opened and closed, making little adorable sounds.

“She is perfect,” Jack said, right next to me.

I nodded, still in awe.

“Amelia. You still want to name her Amelia?” I asked quietly.

“Yes,” Jack said and when I glanced up at him, I saw the tears in his eyes.

“Amelia,” I whispered and smiled.

I rested my head on his neck and kept watching our little Amelia as his arms tightened around us.

“How are you feeling, sweetheart?”

“I’m okay.”

“I love you, Rose. Thank you for everything.”

I snuggled in closer and stayed like that for a few more minutes.

A few hours later, Sally and Owen and Ray had all showed up in my room and were waiting to meet Amelia.

As soon as they brought her in, Jack picked her up and whispered her things we couldn’t quite make out in his rough voice and I think I fell for him just a little bit more. I’d been crying on and off ever since I woke up, so it was no wonder I was tearing up just looking at them. I’d never experienced what I was feeling every time my eyes would land on Amelia and I wasn’t quite sure how to deal with it yet.

Sally was hovering around Jack, trying to get a good look at Amelia, but Jack gently kept her swaying from side to side.

Having had enough of it, Sally huffed. “Can I hold her now, please?”

“No.”

Since that was the last thing we were expecting him to say, there was a pause from all of us, even Sally.

“What do you mean no?” she asked, taken aback.

“Sally,” Owen murmured, slowly shaking his head at her. They were still happily dating. They had their on and off periods, but since they had to work together, they couldn’t stay away from each other for that long.

“I came here to hold the baby,” Sally countered, going on her tiptoes to look at Amelia. Then she looked at me over her shoulder. “And to see you of course, Rose.”

“Of course,” I said, smiling at her. “Jack—” I started, but he cut me off before I could get anything out and sat next to me.

“She is too small,” he said in explanation.

I laughed. “All babies are small, Jack.”

He did the impossible and hugged her a little closer to his body. Then gently caressed her cheek with the back of his finger. Amelia moved her head to the side as if she was enjoying his touch and I watched Jack ignore everyone in the room and smile down at her.

Feeling a wide range of emotions, but mostly an insane amount of love for my husband, I looked at Sally and gave her a shrug.

“She is sleeping,” Jack said in a soft voice. “And I didn’t see you wash your hands. You can come look at her for now, but no touching.”

Sally groaned, but she was grinning when she came close to my side and leaned down. “She is gorgeous. Look at those eyelashes and those chubby cheeks!”

“She is perfect,” Jack said with a smile in his voice.

I rested my head on Jack’s arm and reached for Amelia’s hand as she made small noises in her sleep.

“She needs to eat,” he said, looking down at me.

I laughed quietly. “Okay. Do I get to hold her? Am I safe enough?”

“Of course. But I’ll take her back when you’re done so you can rest.”

I laughed harder. “Okay, Jack.”

So so gently, he gave Amelia to me, then turned to everyone else in the room. “You can come back in a few.”

“Jack, you can’t kick them out.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Come on, Sally,” Owen murmured, clearly amused. He held out his hand for Sally and they followed a chuckling Ray out.

“Jack.”

“I want you two to myself,” he explained in defense.

“They’re our friends and they’re here to see us.”

“They can look at us after then,” he mumbled, eyes on Amelia.

I sighed, but didn’t say anything else. I would take every second with our little family. I looked down at Amelia. Her little nose, little mouth, the softest cheeks. Her hands, her covered little feet. The soft little grunts she made.

“She looks like you,” Jack whispered.

I looked up at him with a smile and teary eyes and swallowed.

His eyes came to me from our daughter and his gaze softened.

“You’re going to be the best dad in the world,” I whispered back.

He looked at me for a long time.

“Kiss me, Rose.”

I tilted my head up for him and cupping my cheek with his hand, he gave me a long, sweet, and unhurried kiss. When we stopped, my mind was successfully scrambled. Not to mention we were both breathless and smiling.

“Are you happy, Jack?”

He rested his forehead against mine, glanced down at our daughter, then looked back at me.

“We have a baby. I have you. I have everything I need right here in my arms. I’ve never been happier in my life ever since you walked into it, Rose. I don’t know how to put what I feel for you in to words. Tell you what you mean to me. I love you seems so simple and not enough.”

I lifted my hand and rested my palm on his cheek, looking into his beautiful blue eyes that he’d given to our daughter as well. “Simple is always good. I love you so much, Jack.”

“We’re still in the beginning of our story, my beautiful Rose. I promise you, I’ll give you both a lifetime of happy.”