



**MY BROTHER'S**  
**POSSESSIVE**  
**FRIEND**

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**LENA LITTLE**

# **MY BROTHER'S POSSESSIVE FRIEND**

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A POSSESSIVE MAN: BOOK 34

# LENA LITTLE



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Also by Lena Little

## PREVIEW

There's so many things on my plate and the last thing I need is my best friend, Harry, calling in for a favor—to help his little sister with her newly bought, rundown cottage, right here in Scotland and within walking distance of my own home.

I figure I'll just go and tell her I can't do anything for her since I have projects on top of projects.

The refusal dies in my throat when I see her for the first time in years.

*Dahlia.*

No longer a kid, but a grown woman.

A woman who, right now, is knocking me off my feet.

She's clearly off-limits. She's Harry's sister. And I'm almost twice her age. Doesn't stop me from wanting her, though.

But whatever this is goes way beyond a primal need to make her mine.

She's not leaving my side, ever!

And I'm not letting anyone come between us...not even her own brother.

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“**B**e safe, little sis,” Harry whispers as he hugs me tight, squeezing the damn life out of me.

I groan, trying to shove him away but at twice my age and twice my weight, the dude’s immovable.

“I’ll be *fine*,” I say for the hundredth time as my brother finally releases me and steps back. Mom and Dad already said goodbye before they went to work, but Harry insisted on driving me to the airport. He was seventeen when I was born—a *happy surprise* as Mom calls me—as a result of our Dad marrying Mom. Harry had taken to the role of *super protective overbearing big brother* immediately, so the fact he’s been freaking out ever since I decided to move comes as no surprise.

“It’s not too late to back out, you know,” he reminds me, looking at me pleadingly.

“Yes, it is,” I argue. “The money’s already been transferred, and the deed is in my name. I’m not backing out, Harry.”

“Fine,” he says snappily, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I have to go or I’ll miss my flight.” I let him squish me in another hug before I turn away and go to find my gate.

I won’t give my brother the satisfaction of knowing, but I am absolutely terrified. I’m not the kind of girl who takes risks, who dares step a foot outside her carefully constructed comfort zone. I’m definitely not the kind of girl who spends her entire

bank account on an abandoned cottage in a country she's never been to, halfway across the world from everyone she knows.

Except...I guess I am that girl now.

With my bags checked in, I grab a few snacks for the long plane journey and find my gate. Harry's nagging means I'm one of the last to join the boarding line, but that's just fine by me because the less time I have to stand around thinking about this, the better.

I find my seat, hoping and praying that nobody will sit next to me. I pick a window seat in the hopes I can sleep at least some of the eight-hour flight, and though somebody takes the aisle seat, there's no one in the middle by the time the plane's pulling away and the air hostesses are starting their safety demonstrations.

I try to pay attention, but my mind is reeling. I'm doing this. I'm really doing this.

Nerves bubble up inside me as we start to take off, and I pull out my phone and tap on my photo gallery. The photos from the listing stare back at me, soothing my nerves a little. I swipe, and the nerves return, this time buoyed by the pounding of my heart and a rush of adrenaline that has nothing to do with the plane's sudden ascent.

Is it weird that I've saved his posts to my phone? Probably. But moving across the world because of those posts? That's even weirder. I groan internally at myself, but the man in the photo holds my eyes.

Dylan Dixon.

With his chin-length wavy brown hair, pale blue eyes, short, slightly scruffy beard, and flannel, he looks like he belongs in the woods with an ax. But damn that wildness makes me feel hot all over. Not to mention the fact he's so muscular I can see the outline of his pecs and biceps through his clothes.

I haven't seen him in ten years, but that childhood crush I'd once had is now back in full force. It's not like I have a chance with him, though. For a million reasons, not the least of which

is the fact he's my brother's best friend. And nearly twenty years older than me.

*You're so screwed*, my heart tells me with every frantic beat.

I try to ignore it, turning my attention to the rest of the photo. The rolling hills in the background, lush green grass, and a sprinkling of purple flowers. I'm only a little ashamed of the fact I stalked Dylan's profile to figure out where he was now.

Scotland. Rural Scotland. In the heart of all that greenery, all that untamed wildness.

And I want to be there, too.

Before I knew it, I was knee-deep in research, ten tabs open with listings of houses for sale in a country I'd never been to but that had captured my heart from just that photo alone. Sure, at first I wanted to go for Dylan, which I know is ridiculous and a little stalker-ish, but it's not like anyone would ever know. But the more I looked, the more I fell in love with the place.

And then I found my house. A run-down, abandoned cottage that hadn't been lived in in nearly fifteen years. It was nestled in a generous amount of land, full of overgrown weeds and thistles, and because it was in desperate need of love, the price was low. Low enough that it would have been silly not to jump at the chance. Low enough that within two days of seeing the listing, I was figuring out how to transfer all my savings for the deposit.

Telling my family had been tricky. They all thought I'd lost the plot, and honestly, I can't blame them. I'm shy and quiet and careful and this was so unlike me. But...I felt stuck, living at home in the same town I'd always lived in with no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I turned twenty-one last month, and the idea of college has never appealed to me, but I felt like I had no options.

This is my leap of faith. I'm going to fix up this house, even though I have no idea how to do that. Then again, the best way to learn something is to do it, right? This is a new start, a chance to figure out what I want and...to figure out who I am.

Oh, and reunite with Dylan. Harry promised me in the car that he'd call his old friend before I landed. Turns out, Dylan is a contractor. And apparently, I need one of those if I want to renovate an old house.

I can only hope Harry convinces Dylan to help me. If not, I might do something stupid like track him down and beg him in person. May as well keep the streak of bad decisions going, right?

I laugh, earning me a weird look from the person in the aisle seat next to me. Maybe this is the new me—impulsive, excitable, spontaneous. Free. I grin, liking the sound of that, and settle in for the flight.

---

I MANAGE A MEASLY three hours of sleep, but I suppose it's better than nothing. I stretch my legs and feel my muscles groan as I step off the plane and onto the tarmac.

It's sunny but despite the fact it's August, there's a bitter breeze that makes me shiver. I wish I'd taken my coat with me instead of packing it in my suitcase, and I hurry inside with the other travelers.

Thankfully, I end up at the start of the border control line and make it through fast, finding my bags already waiting for me on the luggage carousel. I grab them, groaning under their weight, and drag them and myself towards the exit.

There's a crowd of family members and taxi drivers holding up signs with traveler's names written on them, and relief floods me as I see a man with a sign reading *Dahlia Jenkins*.

The driver helps me shove my bags in the back of his car, and I give him my new address, which he types into his GPS. I rest my head against the window as we pull away, excitement drowning out most of the tiredness.

The drive is long but I don't mind, passing the time staring out the window and taking in my first sight of my new home. We leave the city with its brown brick and bustling streets, and

soon we're surrounded by green fields and rolling hills, taking winding country roads that look like they end up in the middle of nowhere.

The first time I see the name of the tiny town my cottage is on the outskirts of, I nearly jump right out of my seat with excitement, startling the driver and earning me a weird look. I ignore it, refusing to let his judgment dampen my eagerness.

The town itself is tiny, I know as much from my research, but seeing it in person is better than any photo online. It's mostly houses, cottages, and old brick buildings, with a main street down the center lined with a couple of small shops and one restaurant and bar.

The car pulls off to the right, taking a small street out of the town and up a dirt road.

"Oh my God," I breathe as I catch sight of my house for the first time.

"This it?" The driver grunts.

"Yes," I whisper, unbuckling myself and practically diving out of the car in my eagerness to see my home. The driver unloads my stuff from the back and mutters a goodbye that I echo mindlessly before he pulls away.

All my attention is on my cottage. *My* cottage. Mine. I laugh, grinning so wide my face hurts. This place is my own, and that fills me with pride.

The cottage is old, the white exterior chipping in places, with more than a few tiles missing from the roof. The front garden is overgrown, with weeds blocking the path to the door. I drag my bags over the grass and hunt for the set of keys the realtor told me would be left for me. I find them under a big rock to the left of the door, along with a snail.

The lock is stiff and I jiggle the key a few times before the door finally opens, swinging inwards.

I rush inside, hit by the smell of dust and damp, and run to explore every inch of the place. It'll need a good clean and a hell of a lot of work, but I expected that. My hands itch to get started already.

There's a small entryway at the front door that leads to a good-sized living room with a door to the kitchen space. There's no furniture, obviously, but I'm picturing exactly what kind of chairs I want. The kitchen is sparse, missing all its electrics and sporting a nice big hole where a sink should be. Oh well.

The staircase is intact though, and there's a cupboard beneath that will be perfect for coats and shoes. The stairs creak under my shoes as I head up them. The bathroom is in better shape, with a working toilet and shower. There's two bedrooms, one of which I plan to convert into an office to work from.

Sure the cottage is old and a little—well a lot—worse for wear, but I can practically feel the potential emanating from the floorboards. I dance around on the landing, spinning in circles and grinning up at the ceiling.

I nearly fall straight on my ass when a voice calls out from downstairs.

“Hello?”

“Coming!” I shout back, rushing back down. I don't know who would be here right now, but maybe it's a curious local coming to see who was insane enough to buy this place. I smile at the thought and skid to a halt at the bottom of the stairs.

My heart nearly falls right out of my damn body.

Because it's not a curious local or dog walker coming to check out the place at all.

No, standing in my doorway, taking up the entire damn space with his huge shoulders, is Dylan.

“Oh my god,” I stutter before I can catch myself, eyes widening as I take him in. He's here. Like, really here. Holy shit, he looks even better in person than he does in his photos. Am I drooling? I think I'm drooling. *Come on, Dahlia, remember how to act human!*

“Dahlia?” Dylan says, dark brows furrowed as he looks me up and down curiously. I swear I feel his gaze like a physical touch on my skin.

“That’s me,” I squeak, feeling my face burn. *Act normal!* I think desperately, but this man has stolen every logical thought from my head.

“Jesus, last time I saw you, you were...” Dylan shakes his head, his hair falling over his face with the movement. He runs his hand through it, tugging at the strands. Dear god, it should be illegal for that to be so hot. “Now you’re...”

I clear my throat, trying to remember how to speak properly. I smile, hoping I don’t look as flushed and nervous as I feel as I answer him. “All grown up.”





DYLAN

“Harry?” I ask, holding the phone up to my ear.

He’s one of my oldest and closest friends, but that doesn’t mean we speak a lot. I don’t speak a lot to anyone, especially since I moved over here ten years ago. I don’t miss the hustle and bustle of the city at all. These quiet, peaceful hills fill a space inside me that my birthplace never could.

“Dylan, good to know you’re alive, man,” Harry jokes over the phone, and I roll my eyes even though he can’t see me.

“What do you need?”

“Grumpy as ever I see,” Harry says, used to my gruff directness. “You still in that tiny town in Scotland?”

“Yes.” Why is he asking? I frown, pushing my hair away from my face and stepping out of the garage into the sun. I’m covered in sawdust, and if he’s going to insist on a conversation, I may as well get some fresh air while I deal with it.

“Well, you’ll never guess why I’m asking,” Harry continues, and I grunt in answer. “Dahlia bought a house out there, an old cottage that needs a hell of a lot of work. She wants to renovate it.”

“Dahlia?” I ask, standing up straighter. “Your kid sister?”

“The very one. Though she’d kill me if she heard me calling her a kid now.” He laughs. “Apparently being twenty-one means she knows everything about life.”

My mind reels. Harry's sister is nearly twenty years younger than us, and he'd been shocked when he became a brother at seventeen. Given how close he and I were, I was around a lot when she was born. But Christ... When I left, she was some shy little bookish kid with pink glasses who barely came out of her room. She must've been...what...eleven?

"Jesus, it's been a while," I mutter, coming to terms with the little girl from my memory being old enough to buy a damn house. As a matter of fact... "Why the fuck did she buy a house over here?"

"Hell if I know, man, but I'm trying to be supportive here. She wants to have an adventure or find herself or whatever."

"Isn't that what college is for?"

"She outright rejected the mere idea of college." Harry snorts. "Smarter than me by a fucking long shot, but nope, Dahlia decided flying across the world to some shitty little house was a better idea. Whatever. Anyway, look, that's why I'm calling."

I get the sense he's about to ask me for a favor. I can practically picture my friend shaking his head and sighing at the idea of his little sister taking such a big leap. He always was protective over her, and I can't help the smirk pulling at my lips at the knowledge that his kid sister has got him too stressed out. Serves him right for all the pranks he pulled on her growing up.

"She needs a contractor, mate."

And there it is. Fucking hell, I should've guessed that's what he wanted. "Harry—"

"Please, Dylan? Look, she wants to do this and she's excited about it. But fuck, the girl knows nothing about renovating houses," Harry presses, voice pleading. "And it's not like I can drop everything and move over there to help her."

"But I'm already here," I summarize, following his logic. I sigh heavily, running my hand over my beard. "I'm not a babysitter."

"She'll pay you obviously."

“I’m busy,” I tell him, leaning against the side of the garage.  
“With clients that booked properly in advance.”

“Please? Do it for me, man?”

Shit. As much as I would never tell him because he’d lord it over my head until the end of time, Dylan is important to me. We grew up together, and even when I left LA, he supported me. He’s even been to visit a few times, purely to give me a hard time about being a “caveman.”

“Fucking hell. Fine,” I say, exasperated. “I’ll go see the house, but I’m not making any promises, okay?”

“Thank you,” Harry says, clearly relieved. “It makes me feel better knowing you’ll be keeping an eye on her, making sure she’s safe—”

“Not. A. Babysitter,” I repeat to the sound of Harry’s laughter, and then I hang up.

He’s lucky I consider him a friend because god, does he know how to push my fucking buttons. Seconds later, my phone pings with an incoming text from Harry, containing an address and the time she’s due to arrive.

An address that’s right near my own home. What are the fucking chances of my best friend’s little sister moving to not just the same country or area but the same damn village as me?

I have a couple of hours before I have to deal with this inconvenience, so I do what I do best until then—throw myself into my work and shut the rest of the world out.

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TIME PASSES QUICKLY, and when I glance up at the clock, I curse. Harry’s sister will be here by now, and I’d rather get this over and done with.

Sighing, I set my tools down and grimace at my clothes. They’re work clothes so I don’t bother keeping them nice, but they’re full of holes and covered in sawdust from the work

I've been doing. Quickly, I close and lock the garage before heading into the house, chucking my clothes in the laundry basket and tugging on a pair of jeans and a red flannel before shoving my feet into my boots. There's no point taking the car, not when the address Harry sent is just on the outskirts of town.

I just need to go there, tell Dahlia I'm busy and that I'm not making any promises, report back to Harry that his sister has indeed arrived in one piece, and then get back to my normal life. I meant what I said to Harry. I'm not wasting my time watching out for some kid who decided to take on a project she has no experience with.

In reality, I bet Dahlia will get a few days into renovating, realize that it's actually hard work and not just some holiday, and then fly home to her family again. Not my fucking problem.

I pass a few others on the way toward the dirt track that leads to the old cottage, one I've walked past a few times on my hikes, and they offer me polite smiles that I mostly ignore. It's not that I'm a total asshole to everyone else in town, but I like my space and have no interest in small talk.

Rocks crunch under my soles as I walk up the dirt path, taking in the huge trees that stretch over the track and the overgrown grass and weeds that line each side. That wild, overgrown greenery continues right up to the front of the cottage, making the place feel even more derelict than it is.

The cottage itself has quite clearly spent a long time unloved and left to rot. The white exterior is peeling away and will need to be redone. The roof is missing tiles, and the gutters are filled with moss and dirt. The windows are covered in cobwebs and a thick layer of dust. Despite its neglect, it holds a certain...charm. A potential that got cogs turning in my brain.

It needs a fuck load of work, though. And there is no way in hell that this little girl is going to get it done.

I shake my head, a little mad at the fact this cottage is going to go even more to waste because of Harry's little sister, and

shove my hands into my pockets. There's a stack of suitcases and bags by the door, left outside with no regard for safety, and the front door is wide open. For fuck's sake. Is this girl really so naive?

I sigh heavily and take the final steps up to the door, nettles and thistles crumpling beneath my boots as I try to flatten out an actual path.

I raise a hand to knock against the doorframe, waiting a few seconds for an answer that doesn't come.

"Hello?" I shout instead. I'm going to have to call Harry and get him to come over to drag his sister back home—

"Coming!" a feminine voice calls back, followed by the thundering of footsteps on the creaking staircase.

The woman nearly falls down the last stair, feet scuffling on the floor as she comes to a stop.

Holy shit. There's no fucking way this is Harry's little sister.

"Oh my god," she says, stumbling over the words as her wide eyes land on me. Wide green eyes that match the overgrowth around the house nearly perfectly. Her lips part in what looks like surprise, and I can't fucking help but notice how plush and soft they are.

"Dahlia?" I ask, sure there's been some sort of mix-up.

This is not the shy, dorky eleven-year-old I knew. This is absolutely not Harry's sister. It can't be. My face morphs into a frown as I analyze her, looking her up and down. Fucking hell, her body...curvy and soft. She must be a foot shorter than me, and she has to tip her head back to look me in the face, stretching her neck in a way that makes me want to run my lips over her fluttering pulse—

Fuck. No. *No.*

"That's me," she answers, her freckled cheeks turning pink.

"Jesus," I mutter, stunned fucking senseless.

I have half a mind to ask her if she's sure that's who she really is, but I catch myself, instead murmuring, "Last time I saw

you, you were...” I run my hand through my hair, tugging at it as I try to get a fucking grip. “Now you’re...” *Beautiful. Stunning. Fucking delicious.*

She clears her throat, bouncing on her heels a little. I rip my eyes away before I can notice the way the movement makes her chest bounce. *Get a grip, Dylan, get a fucking grip.* But my body doesn’t give a shit what my brain is begging for because my cock is focused on how utterly gorgeous she is.

“All grown up,” Dahlia chirps, and I swallow my groan.

Yeah, she’s definitely not Harry’s kid sister anymore.

And I’m absolutely fucked.





DAHLIA

**M**y skin prickles as sparks fly through me, my heart rocketing in my chest so hard I feel breathless. It's as though his very presence has swallowed up all the available air in this house because the swirling mess of incoherent thoughts in my brain has to be a result of oxygen deprivation.

Dylan is... Yeah, there's no words. *Hot* doesn't even come close. *Beautiful* seems too *nice*. Mind-bogglingly, drool-worthy, panty-meltingly captivating. I think I must be hallucinating because there's no way on earth a man like this actually exists, but no matter how many times I blink, he's still there. In my doorway. Looking at me like I've gone mad.

He might be right.

"You...uh...you look...different," I bumble out, wanting to kick myself immediately.

He raises a dark brow, lips turning down at the sides. "Ten years changes a lot," he says gruffly.

No shit. Ten years ago, I was in middle school. Ten years ago, Dylan was twenty-seven, older than I am now. I swallow thickly. Dylan. Harry's best friend. Here to help me with the house because, no doubt, my older brother begged him to.

Not here for me to jump on. No matter how tempting it is.

The pulse between my legs very much disagrees with my logic.

I laugh, trying to act normal and pretend like my body isn't completely betraying me. "Yeah, if I told eleven-year-old me what I was doing now, I think she'd faint. I fiddle with the hem of my t-shirt just for something to do with my hands so I don't do something stupid like reach for him instead.

He doesn't laugh with me, or even crack a smile beneath that beard of his. I shuffle on my feet under his assessing stare, struggling to pinpoint the expression in his icy blue eyes. I feel oddly exposed as he looks at me, but I can't decide if it makes me want to run and hide or strip down so he can look some more.

I can only stand a few seconds under the gravity of his focus. He doesn't reply, only stands silently in my doorway. I clear my throat, turning away in a feat of sheer strength.

"Right, well...um...this is the house!" I move away, refusing to look back at him and get stuck in the depths of his eyes again. "I'm sure Harry told you about it but it's definitely a project. I think it'll look so good when it's done, though—"

"*If* it gets done," Dylan grumbles, and I stutter, not knowing how to answer that.

"Well, I only just got here so my first step is making a note of everything that needs to be done in each room like here." I lead us into the living space and sweep my hand at the wall separating it from the kitchen. "I want to knock that down to open this space up—"

"Is the wall load-bearing?" Dylan interrupts with his question. I make the mistake of glancing over my shoulder at him, finding his face in an expression I can't understand as he stares at the wall I was speaking about.

"Uh...what?" I stutter out.

Dylan's stare turns on me and I shiver, taking a step away to try to hide it. God, I'm making a fool of myself here.

"Load-bearing," Dylan repeats slowly, raising one brow at me. I swallow thickly, shaking my head. "Do you not know what that means?"

I'm a little taken aback by how fast he's jumped straight into this while I'm still remembering how to form words, and heat rises to my cheeks with embarrassment. Because his question feels as though he's looking straight through me. I don't know anything about this stuff. But that's what he's for, isn't it?

"I'll learn," I answer, putting all my determination behind the words.

"This place is a mess, Dahlia."

He says my name with a softness that surprises me. There's no malice or judgment in his tone, just a sort of resigned groan. I swallow thickly. Oh, god. Does he notice the way I'm practically swooning over him? I want the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

Even still, I want to prove that I can do this. I want his respect. And there's something in me to show him exactly how capable I am, to see a spark of approval in his eyes. I've left shy, scared Dahlia back home, and if I want to embrace this new, brave version of me. I can't back down now.

"What about the wiring? Or the insulation? Or the weather damage? Have you even thought about checking for mold?"

"I only just got here," I argue, putting my hands on my hips to hide the way they're shaking with the need to reach for him. I raise my chin, refusing to back down from his heated stare no matter how badly I want to.

"But you're living here?" He turns away just as I catch what I think is concern twisting his lips. I feel my heart deflate a little. Here I am, drooling over a man who clearly sees nothing except a silly little girl he has to take care of when he looks at me. I mean, he hasn't said that but I can feel the worry radiating from this big bear of a man, and I can't help but think it's because he thinks I've made a mistake in buying this place.

"Yes."

"Without even a structural check."

"Well—"

“You need to get checks done before you know it’s safe to live here, Dahlia,” Dylan explains, turning his head and making his hair fall over his face. “Jesus, has your brother seen this place? Harry’s going to want to come drag your ass back home—”

“No!” I shout, interrupting him desperately. He turns to me, pinning me with a wide-eyed look that says I’ve got his attention. “Don’t call my brother. I can do this, Dylan. I just... I have some stuff to learn, that’s all.”

“You should’ve started learning before you got on that plane. You’re in way over your head here, petal.”

He doesn’t raise his voice, and once again the words are delivered with a gentle edge that tells me he’s worried. The nickname flies from his tongue with a kindness I didn’t expect, sending shivers through me. I bite my bottom lip, trying to think of a way to make this work. I won’t back down from my future or this house just because it presents a challenge.

“You don’t know anything about me!” I raise my voice even though he never shouted at me. I’m defensive and fighting both my attraction to him and my own self-doubt.

Dylan blinks at me. My body heats under his attention regardless of the serious conversation.

“I know that you have no idea what you’re doing,” he starts, then turns away as he walks over to the wall and raps his knuckles against it, testing for God knows what. “And before you argue with me, I’m not saying you’re stupid or incapable, Dahlia. But this is a huge project, one that’s going to take a whole lot of work. Are you prepared for that? For just how much learning you’ll have to do? It’s not too late to sell this place and use the money to travel or whatever it is college kids your age do.”

Indignation flares inside me, despite the fact he’s being pretty nice about it all. Still...there’s a part of me screaming *how dare he suggest I give up before I’ve even started!* I am optimistic, not completely blind. I know this place needs a total overhaul and I know that I don’t know exactly how to do that, but I’ve barely even got here.

He hasn't given me a second to plan anything, and yet here he is casting his judgment on me like he knows better than I do. Then again, I suppose he does know better given his job. Regardless, the fact is that his opinion stings.

He doesn't think I can do this.

That only makes me want to prove him wrong.

I narrow my eyes at him, stomping up to his side and demanding he pay attention to me. It takes all my effort to do so because my knees go a little weak at the mere sight of him. I've never been so riled up, in every sense of the word, by anyone before and I have no idea why he of all people is evoking this reaction in me. I've been doubted before, but somehow it feels different coming from him. Like I want to impress him, to have him take his words back and admit that I did a good job.

Dylan is messing with my body and my brain, and I have no idea how to make that stop.

To be honest, I'm not even sure I want him to.

"I'm going to make you eat your words, Dylan Dixon," I promise with a grin, feeling victorious when the muscle in his jaw ticks, betraying his stony features. I'm affecting him too, just a little. "Besides, I never claimed I'd be able to do this all alone. That's where you come in."

Dylan's eyes flare at that, and my heart does a little flip. God, when he looks at me, I feel like the entire world shrinks around us. He might think of me as just Harry's kid sister, but I'm determined to make him see that I'm a capable, grown woman. Even if I, admittedly, feel sort of out of my depth here.

"You're just assuming I'm going to help you?" Dylan asks curiously.

"Obviously I'll pay you," I say with a shrug. "I'm not that naive that I think people will work for free. Besides, do you really want to leave me here all alone while I learn?" I fire his own words back at him smugly. I'm grinning up at him as he frowns deeply back at me, and yet the concern on his face

doesn't dissuade me. No, it just makes me want to poke the bear even more.

"For fuck's sake." Dylan groans under his breath, running his hand through his hair again, but when he looks back at me, there's a spark in his eyes. A sigh leaves his lips as he adds, "You're impossible."

"Yup," I chirp back, taking it in stride. I'm going to teach this big grump never to underestimate me again. "And you're stuck with me."



DYLAN

**F**or two fucking days, all I think about is Dahlia. It's like the damn girl has burrowed her way into my brain, and I don't know how to dig her out.

I want to find her completely infuriating, with her bright smiles and insistent cheeriness, not to mention her misguided optimism, but instead, I find it...charming. Disarming.

She's also fucking gorgeous. And no matter how much she managed to get under my skin with just one conversation, I couldn't convince myself to dislike her.

It's driving me fucking mad.

For reasons I cannot fathom, I call my next two clients and push back the project start dates. I really have no choice but to help Dahlia, for her safety if nothing else—or at least that's what I tell myself. It's not that I want to reschedule my entire life for Harry's little sister, but they've left me no option.

*Yeah right. You're dying to see her again.*

I shake my head at my wayward thoughts as I hang up on the call with a very nice elderly client who booked me to help redo his kitchen, promising me kindly that there was no rush.

My phone dings where I just set it down, and I pick it up with more force than necessary, ready to ignore whoever it is because all my friends know to call me if they want to talk. I'm notoriously bad at replying to texts. Except this time, it's a number I don't recognize. Frowning, I open the text, blinking at the screen as though the letters will rearrange themselves.



**Unknown: What's your coffee order?**

What the hell? Who needs that information and why? I'm about to put the phone down, assuming it's a case of a wrong number when another text follows.

**Unknown: If you don't answer, I'm getting you a frozen caramel macchiato with extra caramel syrup and whipped cream.**

"Sounds gross," I mutter to myself, grimacing. Then it dawns on me. Who else would be texting me about weird coffee concoctions except a certain bubbly woman who's buried herself in my brain?

**Me: Where did you get my number, petal?**

I curse myself for typing out her nickname, but it's too late. The text is sent. I'm doing a really shit job of convincing myself—and her—that I don't feel this insane, magnetic pull between us.

She replies instantaneously.

**Unknown: Harry, obviously. Hurry up, grizzly bear. Clock's ticking.**

A photo comes through of the menu at a coffee shop in town, zoomed in on the monstrosity of a drink she threatened to buy earlier. It can't even be called a coffee. It looks like a damn milkshake. Jesus. I groan out loud, even though my lips are tugging up at the sides in a smirk at her teasing, knowing Dahlia isn't going to drop this.

When I left that first day, I'd agreed to come back on Monday to scope out the first steps with her. Clearly, she's far more eager than I am to get a start on it.

*Liar*, my mind whispers again. *You didn't even want to leave in the first place.* I'm not dreading seeing her again. Unfortunately, I'm far too fucking eager. And that's even worse.

**Unknown: Can't play the silent game with me, tough guy. I'm not bluffing.**

Another photo, this time showing that she's next in line. Fucking hell. She's not even in the same room as me, and she's making my body react to her. I can block even the most annoying people out, ignore them so effectively they eventually just give up, but Dahlia...there's something about her that I know I'll never be able to ignore. She's not annoying. She's infectious.

**Me: Long black. One sugar. No milk.**

Then, because I'm unwilling to be a total dick to this woman even though I'm perfectly happy for everyone else to dislike me, I add, *Please*.

**Unknown: Predictable, much?**

I can practically hear her say those words aloud in her light, teasing tone. Much like I can hear the names she's called me. Grizzly bear. I snort, saving her contact in my phone before shoving my phone in my pocket as I grab my jacket and put my boots on. Despite my wariness, I head out early to meet her at the coffee shop and walk back to the cottage with her.

I'm not even halfway through my coffee by the time she's off on a spiel about what she's envisioning for the house. As expected, her drink is the same insane iced concoction she threatened to buy me. But the way she scoops up the cream with her straw and licks it off makes the drink far more appealing than it was before.

*Stop fucking looking!* I chastise myself, but fuck I can't look anywhere else. Dahlia captures my attention like nothing else can. It's confusing as hell, and no matter how much I try, I can't fight it.

She's cleaned up the place as much as possible, the dust and mildew smell gone and replaced by a fake floral scent of air freshener. I try to focus on the way that scent invades my nose as I talk her through ordering the parts she needs for the kitchen.

Dahlia shocks me by being utterly organized, knowing what tile and countertop she wants, even having picked out the cupboards and sink. Not that I'm willing to admit it, trying

desperately to keep my face impassive and my answers short as she places the order.

“I’ll start on gutting the place,” I grunt as I stand, discarding my coffee cup into the black bag we’re using as a bin.

“Okay,” she chirps, humming along to a pop song under her breath.

I think she says something else, but I’m already moving to grab my tools and put space between us. Much needed space. Sitting that close to her to look at the laptop screen together was torturous. It took all my willpower not to grab her and haul her onto my lap.

*She’s twenty-one. Harry’s fucking sister. Far too sweet for someone like you.* I list all the reasons that she’s out of bounds in my head over and over, but my body isn’t paying a lick of attention.

*Curves, sass, and all that sweetness to make your mouth water,* I argue with myself, grateful I can take my frustration out on the ruined kitchen. I rip the remaining cupboards out, the wood falling away under my hands easily, hoping to clear my mind as I clear her house.

Just as it starts to work a little, my fucking phone rings.

I answer it with a rough, “*What?*” and the man on the other side of the line splutters for a second before explaining that he works for the building supply store and needs to ask questions about our order.

I groan, putting him on hold and quickly cleaning off my hands and stamping my boots to get rid of the worst of the dust and debris clinging to the soles before I leave the kitchen. I expect Dahlia to be in the living space or even the hall, but there’s no sign of her. What the hell?

“Dahlia!” I shout, but my voice just echoes off the empty walls, unanswered.

Confusion grows in me, followed by a far more unfamiliar emotion that seems to always crop up around her. Concern? I can’t help it. I’m worried when she doesn’t answer me. And I have no right to be worried about anything to do with her.

She's not mine to worry about. Deep down though, I've already claimed her. I shove down the unpleasant feeling and storm up the stairs, catching the sound of music floating down.

She's singing along to a catchy pop song I don't know, her voice barely audible over the loud music. I've still got the guy on hold as I yank open the door to the right, the one I know leads to the bedroom she's living in while we renovate.

“Don't disappear on me like that—”

The rest of my words are cut off with a choked noise as my brain catches up to my eyes, and I register what I'm seeing.

This room is clean, so clean it's clear she spent a hell of a long time ridding it of every single fucking particle of dust. Though it's still worn down and old, it no longer gives off haunted house vibes. She doesn't have a bed, just a camping mattress and cushions on the floor made comfy with a plush pillow and two huge blankets. But none of those things are what snags my attention so thoroughly every muscle in my body is pulled taut.

Dahlia's on her knees on the floor, a suitcase open in front of her, half empty. There's stacks of folded, organized clothes lined up against the wall. And I've fucking managed to walk in at the precise moment she's unpacking and folding her underwear. Not just underwear. Fuck, the thing in her hands can't be considered clothing at all. It's all elastic and lace and ribbon, a deep purple color that I immediately know would look fucking incredible against her pale skin.

My cock twitches in my pants. I can't help but picture her in it. Dahlia is sweet and innocent, despite how much sass she possesses, but holy shit the image of this deceptively angelic girl wrapped up in the sheer lace of that contraption like a fucking birthday present is pure sin.

*Yeah, sinful's right. Because she's Harry's fucking sister, the logical part of my brain reminds me but it's drowned out by the animalistic, need-driven parts of me that are screaming MINE.*

“Oh. Hey, Dylan,” Dahlia says as she turns her head to look at me, shuffling slightly so she can face me fully. That infernal outfit is still clutched in her hands like she doesn’t have a care in the world. I feel feral, as though I’m about to start salivating at the simple vision of her in it. “Are you okay?”

No. I’ve gone half mad.

“Can I...I mean, do you need something?” Dahlia asks, face morphing into what I think is an expression of concern or confusion but only makes me want to taste those pouty lips for myself.

Fuck, I’ve always been good at controlling myself. It’s never been a problem before, given that I rarely actually want anything badly enough for it to be. But this girl...

Do I need something? Absolutely I do.

“You,” I growl, barely catching the way those mossy green eyes of hers widen before I’m on the floor with her, her face in my hands.

Unthinking, I tilt her head back and slam my mouth against hers.



## DAHLIA

**S**hock rockets through me.

One minute Dylan is glaring at me from the doorway, looking like he can't decide whether he wants to slam the door closed and leave or eat me alive to live up to his grizzly bear nickname, and the next...

The next he's kissing me.

For a brief second, I think I'm dreaming. Maybe I fell asleep face first into my suitcase. I had been up late after all thanks to the hefty dose of jet lag that comes with the eight-hour time difference, and it makes sense that my unconscious mind would dream this up given how hot Dylan is and how he makes me feel all twisted up inside. But no. No dream could even come close to this.

His mouth is warm and insistent against mine. The kiss isn't soft or hesitant. No. It's as harsh and all-consuming as the man himself. I gasp into it, lips parting, and he tilts my head up, angling me the way he wants.

I push up on my knees to get closer, flicking my tongue against his bottom lip, needing to taste him. His beard scratches my cheek a little, but I sort of like it. It makes me wonder how it would feel scratching my thighs. It's just a kiss but he may as well have struck a match and lit me on fire. My body comes alive, warmth covering me before it settles into a tight, flaring coil of need between my legs.

I feel myself react, wetness flooding my thong. Oh God. I've never reacted this way to anyone before. I've been kissed,

sure, but not for a while. I swore off men after a series of disastrous dating app attempts that resulted in multiple dates that were so boring I nearly fell asleep on my dinner plate. There had been absolutely no chemistry, even if I found the guy objectively attractive, and it was a waste of time.

But *this*...I don't even have the brain cells to worry about how out of practice with kissing I am. It's like he's fried my brain and robbed me of any and all logic with just a few strokes of his tongue against mine.

Dylan's tough, grumpy exterior should probably have sent me running for the hills...literally since there's a range of them practically on my doorstep now. But instead, I can't help but see all his prickliness as a challenge. A test I'm determined to ace. Because I'm sure there's more to him than frowns and harsh comments and gruff, snappy words. I take the fact that he's clearly annoyed by me as a total win. It means I affect him, it means I've already managed to find a crack in his hard shell.

But I never expected to get through those walls so fast. In all the thoughts I've had in the days since I saw him again, this scenario was not on the list of possibilities.

Dylan releases me, and immediately, I miss his touch. His panting breath puffs against my lips as he goes to draw away and sever the connection between us.

No! The last thing I want is for this to stop. It's wholly unfair of him to reduce me to a puddle with just one kiss and then pull away. Undoubtedly, he's going to turn around and leave, tighten all the security to keep that grumpy shield in place, and be even more standoffish and mean than usual. I won't accept that.

He's just proven to me that he feels this tug between us, that I affect him at least a little. I don't care if he's conflicted about that fact. He can't hide from me now. And the idea my mind conjures up of him insisting this was a mistake, of him telling me this never should've happened...well it might just break my heart.



*Not happening, grizzly bear*, I think as he pulls away. I surge forward, grabbing the front of his shirt and yanking. He's not expecting it, and that's the only advantage I have because damn this man has more muscles in one arm than I do in my whole body, and he stumbles, joining me on the floor.

I give myself a split second to revel in my success, feeling pretty proud of the desperate move considering it worked, and then I'm closing the distance between us. Winding my arms around his neck, our knees brushing since we're both kneeling now, I press my lips against his again. I kiss him hungrily, letting him know that I, for one, don't regret his moment of weakness.

"Dahlia," he groans against my mouth instead of kissing me back. The way he says my name—low and raspy and a little shaky like he's right at the edge of control—makes me shiver.

"Dylan," I whisper back, his name sounding like a moan on my tongue.

"Don't say my name like that," he warns, sounding like it pains him. One of his hands comes up to cup the back of my neck, threading my hair through his fingers. He holds me still with his grip on me, but he doesn't pull me away from him.

"Why not?" I arch into him and brace my hands on his thighs so I can lean closer and kiss his neck, flicking my tongue against the thumping pulse point. I'm surprising myself as much as him with how forward I'm being, but I swore to myself that this was a new chapter of my life, a chance to figure myself out. That means not shying away from what I want. It means embracing my desire instead of being ashamed of it.

And, well, I'm so turned on that there's a heartbeat pounding between my legs I'm literally desperate to ease.

"Because it makes me want to hear you scream it," Dylan growls, tightening his grip on my hair so that I have to stop kissing him. I look up at his face, finding his eyes dark with dangerous desire. I shudder again, hypersensitive.

I am so on board with screaming his name. I open my mouth to tell him just that, but he interrupts.

“And that’s not the kind of thing I should be letting myself want, petal,” he grumbles.

Nope. Not letting him go down that road right now. What could be wrong about this? I want him. He wants me even if he’s fighting it. We’re both adults. I smile at him, running my teeth over my bottom lip as my thighs press together, searching for friction.

“But you do want it?” I ask.

Dylan shudders as though the question wears down his fight as he admits, “I want it so fucking badly I can’t think about anything else.”

“Touch me. I want you to touch me, Dylan.” I force myself to not shy away from the admission even though it makes my face burn. “I need it.”

My voice is little more than a whine and his grip stays strong as I move, spreading my thighs and using my arms still looped around his neck to help lift myself onto his lap. I can feel the hard length of his cock against me now, and my eyes flutter. I may be inexperienced, so despite Dylan’s gruffness, I trust him to guide me through this.

“Please, Dylan, please. It aches,” I whimper, hips jerking when he tugs at my hair again. I’m putty in his hands. “Make it better. I need you to make me feel better. You’re the only one who can. Please, please—”

“Fuck!” Dylan snaps, and our teeth clash as he kisses me hard. I press closer to him, loving the feel of his muscular body against mine, wild for him. “Are you wet for me, petal?”

*That’s an understatement,* I think as I nod against him, sparks flying along my skin as his hand slips under the waistband of my sweatpants. The material is stretchy, offering no resistance as he cups me between my legs. I gasp at his boldness.

“Does this pretty pussy need something?” he asks darkly, turning my head so he can nip at my earlobe when he speaks. My answer is a strangled moan. There’s no way I can form

words right now. “God, you’re soaking, petal. Is this all for me? For just one kiss?”

I nod again, burying my face in his neck as embarrassment catches up to me. It’s not enough to stop me from pressing against his possessive touch, unsure of what to do but needing more. I want this so badly. Everything he has to give.

He chuckles at my surge of embarrassment, holding me close to him. “This is a fucking terrible idea,” he mutters, more to himself than me, before adding, “But fuck I can’t leave you like this.”

*Thank God.*

Once again, there’s no teasing or toying with me. No, in one movement, he tugs the damp gusset of my panties to the side and plunges a finger into me. I gasp, body clenching around the intrusion, hips bucking.

Dylan hisses, sucking in a sharp breath. “Holy shit, you’re tight. *Fuck.*”

The heel of his hand presses against my clit, his finger still buried inside me, and already I can feel that tight coil of warmth brighten. My body moves, hips rolling, chasing the sensation with uncoordinated desperation.

“That’s it, petal. Ride my hand. Fuck, that’s so hot,” Dylan encourages, and every word makes my mind spin. He thinks I’m hot. He wants me to use his hand for pleasure. He wants...

I moan loudly, finding a rhythm as I rock into his touch, and he adds a second finger. There’s a stretch now, but the feeling of fullness that comes with it is dizzying. I’ve never felt this kind of pleasure before, and I think I might actually die from it. It’s barely been two minutes but he curls his fingers inside me, pressing against something as I rock on him and fuck—

“Oh! Oh my—” I gasp, stuttering, head falling back and lips parting as that coil unwinds in a blissful rush.

I come hard, back bowing and eyes closing as white stars spark behind my lids. He said he wanted me to scream his name, and I can’t help but do just that. His name is the only coherent thought in my head.

*“Dylan!”*

My voice comes out all raspy and choked because I’m utterly seized by the bliss making me feel like I’m floating. My entire weight is pressed against him as my body goes limp, wracked by little shivers of pleasure as my pussy flutters around him. Oh god, his fingers are still inside me. Despite nearly drowning from the orgasm he just gave me, my body wants more. I want more.

I’ve never felt anything like that, and I want to make him feel the same way he made me feel. There’s something about this man, something that undoes me completely. He’s magic or something, I swear it.

“Fuck, Dahlia,” Dylan grinds out, sounding tortured.

I fight to lift my head up from his shoulder so I can search his face. Does he regret this? Oh god, I don’t think I can cope with that. I don’t want to be something he regrets. Sure, the sudden onslaught of my feelings for him—physically and emotionally—scares me, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to see what this is between us. Doesn’t he feel it?

“Did I...um...did I do something wrong?” I whisper, biting my lip as worry mixes with the aftershocks of pleasure.

Dylan’s eyes darken and a rough, feral sound leaves his throat. *Grizzly bear*, I think to myself.

“No, petal. You were fucking gorgeous,” he assures me, but his voice is dark and his gaze is even darker. He’s got that look on his face like he wants to take a bite out of me again.

I arch instinctively, inclined to let him. “It felt so good to have you soak my hand like that. All I can fucking think about is all the ways I could play with this pretty little pussy of yours. All the ways I can wring pleasure from your body. But shit, I never should’ve let this happen.”

Dylan groans, but he’s yet to pull his hand away, as though those words are what he thinks he should say but not what he really feels. “It’s like you’re drugging me,” he murmurs, “but, Goddamn, I just want more.”

The mix of lust and heat leave me with makes me feel a little dizzy.

“Does that mean you’re not going to stop?” I whimper, desperately hoping he doesn’t.

I want all the things he’s just promised. I want him to ruin me, and I don’t really care if it’s a bad idea or insane. Wild ideas are becoming my thing, I think. Why stop now, when bad ideas feel so good?

Dylan’s words are full of fire that matches the heat rising in my body once more as he growls, “Nothing could stop me now.”



DAHLIA

I don't have a chance to even process what's happening until my back lands on my mattress, and I realize Dylan has picked me up like I weigh nothing and chucked me around like I'm some sort of plaything.

I shudder. Why do I kind of like the idea of being his to play with?

I don't have a bedframe, and my mattress is just pressed against a wall on the floor, but it's thick and decent quality so I bounce as he crawls onto it, making the blankets move as he disturbs them. I stare down my body at him, feeling the dampness at the seam of my sweatpants between my legs as I squirm. I expect him to cover my body with his and kiss me again—I'm aching for it—but instead, he pauses at my sock-covered feet.

"Lift your hips," Dylan demands in that dark tone that makes my brain turn to mush. I obey without thought, arching my lower back to lift my ass off the bed. He reaches for my waistband as I do, yanking my sweatpants and underwear down my legs in one harsh, swift movement, taking my socks with them in a bundle of fabric that he chucks unceremoniously to the floor.

I feel his gaze roam my naked skin like a physical touch, and I clench my thighs together. His hand fists the hem of my top as he raises his eyes to meet mine.

"Off."

I shuffle awkwardly in my haste, getting tangled in the sleeves as I pull my t-shirt off. I'm not wearing a bra beneath it. They're uncomfortable and annoying and the plan for today was to work on the house so I figured being comfy made sense.

Dylan's eyes flare with heat as his tongue drags over his bottom lip. I'm totally naked, exposed beneath his burning stare. I squirm under the intensity of it all, trying to fight the urge to cover myself back up. Nobody's ever seen me like this before, and it's both terrifying and exhilarating.

"How the fuck was I ever supposed to resist you, petal?" Dylan says gruffly, the words sweet but his voice deep like he's angry at the fact he finds me attractive. I'm just stuck on the fact he wants me, so badly that he looks tortured. I love it.

If he doesn't touch me again, I think I might combust. I want him as naked as I am, want to drink in every detail of his muscled body, want to feel his skin on mine with nothing between us. I want *so much* I can barely breathe.

"Spread your legs for me, Dahlia."

I jolt a little at the crude words, even as they send a rush of heavy desire through me. He's corrupting me, and I'm all for it. I do what he says, slowly parting my thighs while fighting through the embarrassment of exposing my most intimate parts to him...especially when I can feel how wet I am down there. I cover my face with my hands, wanting this so badly but unsure of how to even act.

"Don't act shy now, petal," Dylan growls, and through the gaps in my fingers I catch him pulling his shirt off to throw it beside my clothes on the floor. I bite my lip to muffle my groan at the sight of him. "Tell me what you want."

"Um...more," I babble, blushing furiously even as my back arches in invitation.

Dylan laughs darkly. "Be specific, petal. I desperately want to sink into that pretty pussy but I won't lay a single fucking hand on you until you tell me—*explicitly*—you want that too, understand? Because when I start, I'm not stopping, not now.



I'll fuck you until you're a sobbing, screaming mess and I'll take pleasure in ruining you."

Oh my god. I moan, nodding frantically. "Yes, yes, Dylan, please. I want that. I...I want you to fuck me," I stutter out, too needy to be worried about the fact I've never actually been... fucked before. "I want to feel the way you made me feel a minute ago. I've never...experienced...that before," I admit softly, catching my bottom lip between my teeth.

Dylan raises a brow at me, his handsome face morphing in shock. "None of the guys you've been with before knew how to make you come?" he asks, looking both mad at these hypothetical men and also pleased with himself.

I laugh a little, shaking my head as I gather my courage to tell him, "Um...well...there haven't been any."

"What?"

"Any guys. Others. This is...I mean...if we have sex..." I'm stumbling over my words but I'm determined to get them out so that he'll finally touch me again the way I'm desperate for. "You'd be the first."

He freezes, muscles tightening as my words hit him. I can't look away from the rush of heat that lights up his eyes or the way his breath trembles as he draws it in. His fists clench, like he's physically holding himself back.

"You...you're a virgin?" Dylan asks slowly, like he's checking he heard me right.

"Yes," I say, blinking at him as I try to figure out what he's thinking.

All I know is that I want to do this with Dylan. Maybe it's because I know that for all his growly, gruff attitude and the way he enjoys riling me right up, he'd never use those huge muscles to hurt me.

He's always spoken to me with kindness, and even though his concern over this project made me defensive, it's clear to me that he just didn't want me getting hurt. I do, however, want him to use his strength to throw me about like he just did, to

take control over me in bed, to send me spinning into that bright bliss again and again and—

I yelp as his hands suddenly grip my thighs, calloused fingers digging into my soft flesh as he forces them further apart until my hips ache a little with the stretch. Oh my—

I've been so caught up in my internal thoughts that I haven't noticed he's shoved his trousers off too and...*this man is huge everywhere!* My mouth falls open, all my attention focused on the hard length hanging between his legs.

“Keep looking at me with your mouth open like that and I'll fill it,” Dylan warns, but it doesn't much serve as a deterrent. What would he taste like? Would he stretch my jaw the way he's stretching my hips out right now? I doubt I could take all of him, especially with zero experience, but I'm more than willing to try.

Dylan groans as I try to shuffle myself up, ready to take him up on that threat, but one huge hand in the center of my chest shoves me back lightly against the pillows.

“Soon,” he promises. “But right now, I need to get inside your cunt. I need to feel you gush around my cock the way you soaked my hand. I need to be the first man—the only man—to know how heavenly you feel around me. Fuck, petal, do you know how hot it is to know I'm your first?”

Yeah, those filthy words should not be turning me on so much. It's like everything he does makes me crave him more, so much that I feel dizzy with it. Whatever nervousness I feel about what's clearly about to happen is washed away with the tide of pleasure as his thumb sweeps through my folds, teasing sensitive flesh.

As if that one touch has snapped the last of his patience, Dylan surges forward, covering my body with his. He pushes one of my knees back as he does, using his other hand to brace himself so he doesn't drop his weight onto me. His face hovers over mine, his eyes boring into me. I pant a little, anticipation making the air feel thin as I take it in.

“I want it to be you,” I whisper up at him.

“You are mine, Dahlia,” he growls back at me, his possessiveness making me keen. “If anyone else ever tries to touch you, I will tear them apart. This gorgeous body of yours, these perfect tits and needy pussy are *mine*. Nobody else will ever fucking see you like this, spread out and aching to be fucked.”

I’m shocked by the claim he’s putting on me, but hell, I’m so on board. “Nobody else,” I repeat, nodding frantically. “Only you, Dylan. Please. I want to know what it’s like. I want to feel you inside me.”

Dylan groans again, like my pleading is driving him as wild as his words do to me. “Look me in the eyes when I’m inside you. Understand, petal?”

I nod, feeling the first touch of his cock press against my center, and gasp. He’s hot, literally, warm and hard as hell against me. My hips jerk as though my body is trying to take over despite not knowing what to do.

Oh, shit, what if I’m bad at this?

As soon as the thought comes, it’s gone, like every other thought in my head. His cock finds my entrance, and he cants his hips forward, pressing the tip inside me. Already, my brain is scrambled. He’s barely inside me and yet the intrusion is so much more than his fingers, stretching me from the inside. There’s pressure, a slight sting, as he presses in further, cursing under his breath.

“So fucking tight.” He drops his head to take my peaked nipple between his lips, and I swear I feel the warm circle of his tongue all the way to my clit. “Jesus, petal, you’re strangling my cock.”

There’s nothing I can do but absorb his dirty words, trembling and keening beneath him. He pushes in further and I think I can’t possibly take his whole length because not only am I much smaller than him in every way, I’ve never taken more than his fingers.

And then he thrust his hips sharply, and that pressure bursts in a strange sharpness and then there’s only pleasure. So much

pleasure I cry out, shocked by it as his cock rubs against a place inside me I didn't even know existed.

"Oh god!" I cry, eyes fluttering closed as I'm consumed by an already looming orgasm.

"Eyes. On. Me," Dylan demands, punctuating each word with a sharp thrust that makes me bounce up the mattress.

I snap my eyes open, trying desperately to keep my gaze locked with his. The sight of him braced over me, the feel of his skin against mine as he kept my leg pressed up between us, the hard, fast thrusts of him inside me—it's too much.

A mixture of a scream and Dylan's name leaves my mouth as I clutch at his back, pretty sure I'm scratching him but too out of my mind with bliss to stop myself. He groans, shuddering as I claw at him and the idea that he's feeling the same all-consuming pleasure as me only makes my own soar higher.

I shatter under him, nails digging into his back and shoulders in earnest, as pleasure explodes through me. My orgasm triggers his, and his fingers flex where he grips my leg as his thrusts lose their rhythm and he shoves himself deep, groaning as he follows me over the edge.

For a minute, our panting breaths fill the air between us as we both come back into our bodies, every inch of my skin still feeling oversensitive. Dylan grunts as he shuffles a little to let me drop my leg, my muscles shaking from exertion. My hair is a wild mane around my face, and there's a deep ache between my legs where he's still buried, mixing with the aftershocks of my orgasm.

"Holy shit," I whisper, a little in shock that this has even happened. I don't regret it though, not even for a second. "That was...I nearly passed out." I laugh, covering my face with my hands as I process it all.

Dylan chuckles, leaning down on his elbows over me. "You're going to be a problem for me, aren't you, petal?" he asks, but I know the question isn't actually aimed at me.

"You like me being a problem," I argue with a breathless laugh. "I'm *your* problem."

Dylan kisses me, stealing the words off my lips before I can finish saying them, showing me that he meant what he said. I'm his. Happiness floods me at the thought.

Slowly, he pushes away, easing out of me as he sits back, kneeling at the end of the mattress.

I clamp my thighs together, cheeks burning as I feel our combined release rush out of me. Dylan shakes his head, tapping my thigh until I part them again, sure my face is burning red now as he looks at his come covering my pussy.

“So fucking perfect,” he whispers, eyes locked onto me. “And so fucking mine.”



DYLAN

I just took Dahlia Jenkins' virginity.

As in, Harry's fucking sister. As in, *supposed to be so fucking off-limits it's not even funny*.

But I don't care. Not even the devil himself could rip Dahlia out of my arms. She's mine and I don't give a shit how Harry feels about that. I'll deal with him later.

I stare at Dahlia, limp and sated and messy with my release, thoroughly fucked and claimed.

And I feel fucking elated about it. The knowledge that nobody else has ever had her but me fills me with feral pride. All I want to do is pin her on that mattress and do it again, claim her over and over. Shit, my cock's already getting hard again.

I'm like the big bad wolf ready to devour her perfect body and to claim her heart, and I'm not sorry for it. She's not, either.

This fucking girl.

God, this *girl*.

My girl.

I open my mouth to tell her just that, but a man's voice from downstairs interrupts me.

"Hello?"

Shit. We lost track of time. Dahlia squeaks with surprise, scrabbling to cover her body as if the guy is going to come straight through her bedroom door. The urge to tear the sheets

away from her and expose every inch of her to me to feast on is nearly impossible to push down.

Clearly, I'm shit at resisting her, but one of us has to be responsible right now or else we'll not leave this room for a day.

"It's Tom, the roofer," I remind her as she turns panicked eyes on me.

"Oh, shit, I forgot..." She blushes again, and my chest swells at the sight.

"It's okay, petal." I find that I need to protect her from even her own worries. "Get dressed and I'll go deal with him, yeah?"

She nods, and it takes all my willpower to turn away from her as she hurries to pull her clothes back on. I push to my feet, throw my own clothes back on in record time, and hurry out of the room, jogging down the stairs.

Tom, the roofer, is waiting at the foot of the stairs. I've worked with the guy before. He's a couple of years younger than me, with curly blond hair and a better attitude than I've ever had.

He smiles at me when I stop in front of him, but I don't return the kindness. The asshole interrupted my time with Dahlia, even if he was only doing his job and it's my fault for not keeping track of time. Not that I was able to even think about the time when she was stealing every thought from my brain.

"Hey, mate. The door was open," he says by way of explanation, and I glance over his shoulder to find that he's right. The door needs to be replaced and have proper locks put in because it's rickety as shit. I make a mental note to do that immediately. Something as precious as Dahlia needs to be protected properly.

"Don't need to come inside to fix the roof," I tell him through gritted teeth.

Tom rolls his eyes at me, used to my gruffness. "I need to meet the homeowner," he says, raising a brow pointedly.



Before I can answer, Dahlia's quick steps come from above. Instantly, my heart picks up speed just as the knowledge she's close. And that my seed is still inside her. It fills me with a primal satisfaction that threatens to hide her away so nobody else can ever look at her beauty or experience her infectious happiness. *Mine mine mine.*

I don't know how the hell I got so lucky to have a girl like her give herself to me...and only me. Fuck, my mouth is watering at the thought of it. I want to show her just how good I can make her feel, in bed and out of it.

Well, damn.

I've never felt like this before. It's terrifying but it's too late. I'm already falling head first, willing to risk the pain of crash-landing if it means I get to hold her for even a minute.

"Hi!" Dahlia calls out as she runs down the stairs with fluffy socks on her feet. She's wearing an oversized jumper and leggings now, and I want to rip the sweater over her head and give her one of mine to wear instead.

Tom and Dahlia introduce themselves, and I stand with them trying to appear civilized. My narrowed stare keeps flicking between Tom and the door. I need to get that sorted, and there's a hardware store twenty minutes away that usually has plenty in stock I could use. Besides, I hung up on that guy from the kitchen place earlier so I need to stop by there too. And Tom is a good guy. I trust him to watch out for Dahlia while he works.

I loathe to leave her, but I reason with myself. It'll only be two hours max, and it's for her benefit.

"I have to run out to grab more supplies," I interrupt, not caring that Tom was talking. "Will you be alright for an hour or so?"

Dahlia smiles at me, and fuck if it isn't the most stunning smile I've ever seen. "I'll survive without you for a while," she teases, but I frown at her. Her stance softens and the back of her hand grazes mine. "Go on. I'll finish unpacking while you're out, okay? It's not like I'll be much help with the roof."

My eyes widen and I turn to Tom, pointing a finger at him. “Do not let her near your ladder,” I warn, the image of Dahlia trying to help on the fucking roof giving me heart palpitations.

He chuckles at me. “Message received,” he says. “I’ll get on with it. There’s some tiles missing, and I’ll check for further damage before I start fixing it up.”

I nod, happy with that, and clench my fists to stop myself grabbing Dahlia and dragging her out with me. I don’t want to overwhelm her, though I’ve made it pretty damn clear that she’s mine now. Besides, I’ve already interrupted her unpacking once.

“Back soon.” I turn to leave.

“I’ll try to survive in your absence,” Dahlia calls out with a laugh, making my teeth clench. God, her sass might actually drive me insane. Then again, I’ll happily take whatever madness she gives me.

Dahlia Jenkins has done something to me in just a few short days that nobody else has ever come close to.

She’s stolen my fucking heart.

---

AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, with a car full of supplies, I pull up outside Dahlia’s cottage. Tom’s ladder is still propped up at the side of the house, but he’s nowhere to be seen. Surely, he isn’t done already?

Leaving the stuff in the car for now, I trudge up the overgrown path and barrel into the house. I need to set eyes on Dahlia, to reassure myself that she’s still here and hasn’t run for the fucking hills yet.

“Dahlia?” I call out when I enter, but my voice is overshadowed by the musical sound of her laughter. I turn towards it, feeling like her presence is a physical tug in the center of my chest, demanding closeness.

My feet take me into the living room, then further through the doorway to the kitchen. For a second, I just stand there, dumbstruck. I blink a few times as though the scene in front of me will clear, but no, it's still the same.

Dahlia, *my Dahlia*, on her back under the cupboard where the new sink will be fitted, her sock-covered feet sticking out. And beside her, his knee touching hers, is the man who should be on the fucking roof, not in her house. Making her laugh. Too close to her, too close to what's mine.

I'm going to kill him.

I don't even have time to think. My body's already moving, driven by instinct. At the sound of my heavy footsteps, they both move, scooting back out so I can see their faces again. The second I get close enough, I grab Tom by the front of his shirt and roughly yank him to his feet. By the shocked look on his face, he's seen the murder in my eyes.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I growl at him, hearing Dahlia let out a little squeak as she scrambles to get to her feet in front of me.

"Calm down, man!" Tom sputters, eyes wide and face red as I shake him a little.

"I leave for less than a couple of hours and you're already trying to get close to her?" I seethe, fist tightening in his shirt. Tom's just as tall and fit as I am from all the manual labor required in his job, but I'm far from intimidated by him. Hell, I think I could take down a whole army with my bare hands in Dahlia's name. "She is *mine!*"

"Jesus, dude, really—"

"Give me one fucking reason I shouldn't break your damn nose—"

"Oh my god, Dylan!" Dahlia's shout of my name snags my attention, and I glance away from Tom to find her wide-eyed with her hands on her hips, staring at me. "The pipe was leaking! I needed help fixing it. That's all. I promise."

I consider her words, knowing instinctively that she's not lying. I trust her, which is a strange as hell feeling because I

don't make a habit of truly trusting anyone but myself. I like it, though, the warmth of my utter infatuation with her that seems to glow in my chest.

"You can look for yourself," Tom says in my grip, flailing a little as he points to where they were just lying.

I don't like how close they were, but I was the one who told Dahlia she should learn how to do this for herself, wasn't I? I'm not mad at her, no, I'm pissed that Tom's fucking knee was against hers, that he was breathing her air. I don't give a shit if it seems irrational, that's the effect she has on me.

"You come that close to her again—*ever again*—and I swear to God you'll regret it," I tell him darkly before letting him go. Tom shakes himself out a little, shaking his head at me.

"I'm going to go," he says simply, being smart and not even glancing at Dahlia's way, even when she lets out a relieved sigh and steps closer to my side. I wrap my arm around her shoulder, tucking her close. "I'll be back to finish up the roof tomorrow, give you some time to...cool down."

With that, Tom jogs out, and I pay no attention to the sounds of him collecting his things outside. That feral, protective instinct is still running through me, making me hold Dahlia tightly to me.

She smooths her palms over my chest and tilts her head back to look up at me.

"You didn't need to do that," she starts, and when I open my mouth to insist that I definitely fucking did, she smiles at me, rendering me speechless. Damn, this girl is like some sort of magical creature with the spell she's cast on me. "But...I kind of liked it."

I blink at her. "You liked it?"

"Yeah, the whole '*She's mine and I'll protect her no matter what*' thing." She giggles. "It was kind of hot. And it feels nice to know you're all possessive. You really are a big grizzly bear, aren't you?"

A rush of something unfamiliar floods me, warm and tingling and making its way straight to my heart. "I'm whatever you

want me to be.”

Dahlia’s grin rivals the damn stars for how much she shines. “And if I want you to be mine? Even if my brother will lose his shit if he finds out?”

Fuck Harry and whatever he thinks. It won’t be pretty when we have to explain this to him—the fact that I’m head over fucking heels for his sister who’s near enough twenty years younger than me—but I don’t care.

“Then I’m yours,” I tell her honestly, kissing her fiercely.



DAHLIA

“**W**here are we going?” I ask Dylan as we climb into his car to head into town. After we stopped our work on the house for the day, he told me to get changed into something nice and be ready to leave at seven, but he didn’t tell me why.

“You deserve to be taken on a proper date,” he says gruffly, like he’s a little uncomfortable at the thought of willingly going out in public. I’ve noticed how much he values his space away from everyone, except me apparently. It gives me a rush of pride knowing I’m special to him in that way.

I melt a little at his words. “A date?” I repeat, bouncing a little in my seat, my hand engulfed in his larger one. He drives with one hand on the wheel so he doesn’t have to let go of me. “Where?”

“You said you were hungry and you need a break from that house. You haven’t had time to explore the town properly so...”

“You’re taking me out for dinner?” I ask eagerly. I am starving. We spent all day clearing the kitchen and knocking the wall down between there and the living room to open up the space, so when the kitchen parts are delivered in a few days, there’ll actually be space for it all to go in. We worked over lunch, and since I hardly have the space or place to put groceries away, it means I haven’t eaten anything since the croissant Dylan brought with our coffees this morning.

“Not letting my girl go hungry.”

The way he says *my girl* makes my heart so summersaults. I've never been important enough to anyone before to have them claim me, and I squeeze his hand, grinning like a mad woman.

It shouldn't be possible to fall so hard and so fast for a man I've only gotten to know over the last week. But then again, Dylan has never been a stranger to me. It's like my heart knows his, like I've been waiting for him all this time.

"Have you been here often?" I ask as he slows the car to a stop outside the only restaurant in town.

"Rarely," Dylan says. "I...stick to my own company. Until now. Until you."

I force myself to look away from him as we get out, just so I don't launch myself at him in public. Does he know how much his sweet words mean to me? Later, once we're alone, I'll show him, but for now, I need to focus on my growling stomach.

I've walked past this building to the coffee shop a few times, but I've never spent that much time exploring the area, so I've done little more than glance its way.

It's getting dark, and the sign hanging above the front window is lit up, reading *The Stag and Bear*. There's fairy lights strung along the inside of the windows, giving the whole place a warm glow, and the smell of food wafting out of the door makes my mouth water.

"I'm honored you like me enough to brave the public then," I tease Dylan as he holds the door open for me.

In retaliation, he smacks my ass as I step in front of him to go inside. "Hey!" I squeak, feeling my face burn as I glance around to check nobody else saw that. Nobody's looking our way, but my cheeks are still flushed anyway.

Dylan chuckles, the dark sound washing over me and making me shiver. Everything he does affects me. "Don't be a brat if you can't take the punishment," he whispers as he leans down to tuck my hair over my ear.



My mind whirs as I process that delicious threat, wondering just what his punishment would entail, and it's only when Dylan loops his arm around my waist and forces me to take a few steps forward that I realize I've been standing on the spot like an idiot.

"Well, I never!" the hostess says as we step up to her stand. "Do my eyes deceive me or has the elusive Dylan Dixon deigned to grace us with his presence?"

Dylan groans, but I burst out into laughter, immediately deciding I like this woman. Still, it's clear Dylan is not used to interacting with people, so I cut him some slack. "I thought he was kidding when he said he'd only ever been in here a few times," I pipe up, turning the hostess' attention to me and away from Dylan. The way he squeezes my waist feels like a silent thank you.

"Oh no, and we've certainly never seen him out with a pretty thing like you on his arm before." She picks up some menus and leads us to our table, a cozy one tucked away in the corner. "You must be something special if you've got him out of his shell."

"She is," Dylan says roughly, and the hostess pops the menus on the table before placing her hand over her heart as if to say *how sweet*.

Dear god, I'm blushing so hard I'm sure the entire restaurant can see how red I've gotten.

"Your waitress will be over in a few to grab your drinks order," she says, giving us a kind smile before she walks away and gives us some space.

Dylan pulls my chair out for me and I sit, but instead of taking his own seat across from me, he tugs the chair round to the side. When he sits, we're side by side and our thighs press together.

Something tells me I'm going to be a blushing, desperate mess by the time this dinner is done.

When Dylan's huge hand lands on my thigh under the table, fingers tracing sweeping circles on the inside of my leg, I

know for sure I'm screwed.

Still, he plays nice while we order our drinks—rosé for me and just water for him—and I spend ten minutes choosing between starters. When the waitress comes, Dylan orders all three of the options I'd been unable to pick between, even when I insist it's not necessary.

“You can have whatever you want, petal,” he tells me with a dark edge to his voice once the waitress has left with our orders.

“I don't need mozzarella sticks, bruschetta, *and* the arancini,” I insist, though secretly, the fact that he's more than happy to let me eat whatever I want makes me ridiculously happy.

Living as a woman in this world means that I've had my fair share of unwelcome comments about my weight or looks, and it's incredibly reassuring to know Dylan is nothing like those assholes.

“But you wanted them,” Dylan counters easily, hand tightening on my thigh as he squeezes. “Besides, you haven't eaten nearly enough today. I have half a mind to feed you every fucking item on the menu.”

I giggle at that, taking a sip of my drink. Soon, our food arrives and I take a bite of each of our options, stifling a moan as I sink back into my chair in happiness.

“Oh my god, this is all so good,” I say happily, taking another bite of a perfectly crispy and gooey mozzarella stick. My skin prickles and I glance sideways, finding Dylan staring at me with undisguised hunger in his eyes. Suddenly, I'm craving more than the food in front of us.

“Keep making noises like that, petal, and we're not going to make it to dessert,” he warns, gaze dropping to my mouth.

I swallow then smile, batting my lashes at him. “You're going to have to learn to control yourself,” I say teasingly, leaning closer to him. “Because I saw chocolate fudge cake on the menu, and if you make me leave before that, I'm gonna be so mad.”

Dylan's lip quirks up on one side in a smirk I know means trouble. "Fine," he drawls, plucking my fork from my hand and stealing the bite of arancini I had lined up. I watch him chew and swallow, captivated by everything he does. Is it normal to be so turned on that I swear I can feel my heartbeat between my legs just from his hand on my thigh and the way his throat bobs when he swallows? "You get your dessert...as long as I get mine."

I raise a brow, parting my lips to accept the bite of bruschetta he gives me. "What are you getting?" I ask as soon as my mouth isn't full.

Dylan's tongue wets his bottom lip, and I grip the stem of my glass so hard I'm mildly worried I'll crack it to stop myself from reaching for him in the middle of this restaurant. I'm pretty sure we'd get ourselves banned for life if I did that, which would be a damn shame since the food here is so good.

"Oh, what I want isn't on the menu." Dylan leans forward so his next words tickle my ear when he speaks. "I'm willing to bet you taste sweeter than anything they can make here. And I intend to find out."



DYLAN

I order Dahlia's dessert to-go.

I can't sit in this restaurant, feeling people's eyes on me, trying to smile and nod politely when more than a few locals comment on the fact I'm actually out of my house and with a pretty girl on my arm to boot. I want to snarl at them that Dahlia's not just some pretty girl, she's everything to me. And mine. I want to bundle her away from their prying eyes and jokes.

The last hour and a half have been torture. Not because I haven't enjoyed the first proper date I've taken her on. No, exactly the opposite. Dahlia is a temptation that I am desperate to indulge in.

Watching her eat and drink and enjoy herself, the little happy moan she does every time she takes a bite of something she likes, the way her eyes crinkle when she laughs, the fact she even finds me funny at all really—it's all intoxicating. I've drunk nothing but water, given that I'm driving, but I feel drunk from her closeness alone.

I have been extremely civil, but I'm at my limit. I need her. I promised her she'd get her dessert, and as the waitress returns with the takeout box of her cake and the bill, I'm salivating for mine. I pay quickly, ignoring Dahlia's insistence when she offers to split the bill.

"You're mine, petal," I remind her as we stand and she slips her hand in mine with a confident ease that makes my chest feel all warm. "That means I take care of you and you let me."

“But I have enough money to help pa—”

“Keep talking back to me, Dahlia,” I say darkly as we leave, the door closing behind us. “I dare you.”

I glance at her, finding her wide eyes with her pink lips parted in an ‘O’, and my cock twitches at the sight.

“Get in the car.”

“What’s the rush?” she asks, even as she obeys me and climbs into the passenger side.

“I’m fucking starving,” I snarl as the engine purrs and I press my foot to the accelerator.

The smell of her floral perfume fills the air in the car, combined with the chocolatey scent of her cake, and I think I might actually die if I don’t get my mouth on her soon. I don’t think I’ll survive the drive home.

Fuck it.

She squeals as I take a sharp turn, parking the car at the edge of town.

“What are you doing? I thought we were heading home.”

“Can’t wait.” I reach across to unbuckle her seatbelt and nod in the direction of the backseat.

Realization crosses her face, and even in the low light of the sunset outside, I can see her pupils expand.

“Here?” she asks, breath hitching.

“Right fucking now,” I tell her. “Get in the backseat, Dahlia.”

She scrambles through the space between the two front seats as I get out and make my way around the car, climbing back in through the backdoor just as she sits down in the backseat. The space is more than a little limited, but I don’t give a fuck.

Dahlia makes another addictive gasping moan as I grab her thighs and yank her down. Her head hits the seat, her skirt flopping up as I grab her ass in both hands.

“Dylan, what—”

Whatever she's about to ask me is cut off by her gasp as I grip the thin lacy fabric around her hips and pull. The sound of it ripping is loud in the enclosed space. Satisfied, I grip her ruined panties in my fist and tuck the damp fabric into my jeans pocket.

"I can't believe you ripped them off!" Dahlia says, shocked.

"Better learn this fast, petal," I murmur, parting her thighs as wide as they can go in the space we have so I can stare at her. "I go after what I want. And what I want right now is to eat this pretty pussy until you can't remember which way is up."

"You're...you're going to kiss me...down there?" she asks, and I glance away from her pussy to see her eyes widen as she stares down at me.

Fuck, I love that nobody but me has ever touched her. The fact that I'm her first, and will be her only, is so fucking hot my hips buck in search of friction.

"Oh, petal." My voice is rough with desire as I press myself between her thighs. Slowly, wanting to savor this, I swipe my tongue through the center of her. She's sinfully hot, wet and so sensitive, giving me another perfect little gasp at the contact. "I'm going to devour you."

That's the only warning I give her before I do just that. I push my tongue inside her, needing to taste every fucking inch of her, and her hips jerk a little, her hands flying down to tangle in my hair. I grin against her flesh, hoping to have her riding my face before I'm done.

I trace my tongue over her slick folds before turning my attention to where I know she wants to be touched. Her clit is swollen and needy, and the second I drag my tongue over that tight bundle of nerves, Dahlia arches.

"Oh my God, holy... Dylan," she babbles, hands tightening in my hair.

I squeeze her ass, pushing her pussy closer to me, sure my beard is probably scratching at her soft thighs.

"Your tongue...fuck...it feels..." she whimpers, her voice breathy and desperate.

“Feels what, petal?” I ask, turning my head to kiss the sensitive skin on her hip. “If you don’t like it, I’ll stop...” But fuck, I don’t want to, not when the taste of her is fucking addictive, not when I’m dying to feel her thighs tighten around me and feel her come against my mouth. But I want to hear what she has to say. I want to listen to all the filthy, little confessions she’s panting for me.

“You know,” she whispers, tugging futilely at my hair again.

I chuckle. “Don’t pretend to be shy now, petal. Tell me how it feels, Dahlia. Do you like my tongue on your needy little clit, huh? Like having my face buried between your thighs? Like knowing I’m going to be dreaming about the way you taste for the rest of my fucking life?”

Dahlia shudders. “Yes!” She almost screams, and just to encourage her, I dip back down, pressing a kiss to her clit. “Yes, I like it. Fuck, it feels so good Dylan, please don’t stop. Please...make me come for you.”

Shit, she knows the perfect things to say to ruin all sense of control.

My girl wants to come, and I make it my fucking mission to give her as many orgasms as possible.

She comes with a scream when I suck on her clit, shaking as her thighs tighten. I don’t let up, though.

“More,” I demand, slipping my hand out from under her to push two fingers into her soaking pussy. She moans and writhes as I curl my fingers, finding the spot that makes her tighten around me, and fuck her hard as I trace small, fast circles around her clit with the tip of my tongue.

Again and again, I force her over the edge for me, possessed by the way she tastes and feels and sounds. Giving her pleasure like this is almost as good as fucking her, but by the time she’s limp and I finally pull away, I can feel precome leaking from my cock.

I smirk down at her as I sit up. Her hair is a mess, her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are closed. She’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever fucking seen.



Slowly, she blinks her eyes open, staring up at me.

“You okay there, petal?” I ask, running my hands over her calves, needing to touch her still.

“So much more than okay.” She giggles, shaking her head. Then her eyes dip down, and she bites her lip as she sees the hard press of my cock against my jeans. “What about you?”

What I want to do is fuck her, to sink into the perfect heat I’ve just felt around my tongue and fingers, but she has to be exhausted after four consecutive orgasms.

“Let me take you back home, you need to sleep,” I say gruffly, avoiding the question. I want her so badly I’m barely able to think of anything else, but I don’t want to push her.

“No!” Dahlia insists, sitting up suddenly. “I want to return the favor,” she says with a smile that makes me groan.

“You don’t have to.”

“But don’t you want me to?” she challenges, and fuck I can’t lie to her.

“Of course I fucking do.”

“I can’t feel my legs anymore,” Dahlia says with a teasing tone that makes me frown. “But my mouth still works.”

I blink at her. “Dahlia…”

“I want to taste you too.”

Fuck, I really do have no control when it comes to her. I grab her chin, tilting her head back.

“On the floor, petal.”

She rushes to obey, fitting herself in the footwell on her knees. My heart slams against my ribcage at the sight of her, willing and waiting, and I shove my jeans off to free my cock.

I sit in front of her—so she’s kneeling between my legs—and cup the back of her head. “You’re sure?”

In answer, her eyes sparkle and she opens her mouth, leaning forward to lap at the head of my cock. I swear at the contact, fighting the urge to fuck up into her mouth.

“I haven’t done this before, either.” She reaches forward to wrap her fingers around my length. “Show me what to do. What you like.”

“If it’s too much or you want to stop, tap my thigh twice, okay?” I tell her, and the second she nods, I tug her head down, fitting half of my cock between her lips. Her tongue strokes the underside of my length, then swirls around the head. “I’m not going to last long, Dahlia,” I admit. “You feel too fucking good.”

She moans in response, the sound vibrating along my cock. I thrust my hips up, fucking her mouth in slow strokes. Pleasure tightens in me, shooting up my spine, as I watch her take every inch of me even when her eyes water with the strain.

She looks up at me through her eyelashes, and I curse. Dear god, it’s like this woman was made just for me. For all her talk of not knowing what to do, she’s licking and sucking me like I’m her favorite candy.

I’m fucked.

My grip tightens in her hair as pleasure hits me with the force of a damn tsunami. I groan her name as I spill down her throat, lost in the perfect feel of her lips wrapped around me.

Dahlia chokes a little as I pull away, lips wet with spit and my release.

“Was that okay?” she asks with a huge grin, licking her lips.

“You are fucking perfect,” I answer, yanking her up to kiss her to prove my point, uncaring that she tastes of me. “And I am never letting you go.”



## DAHLIA

**I**t's amazing how much can change in the span of just two weeks.

Not just the house, though it's finally beginning to look more like a home and less like an abandoned, haunted ruin, but *me* too. I had never expected or even dared to hope that I'd feel this happy or this secure a mere fortnight into my stay here.

I have Dylan to thank for that and, well, past me too I guess because if it wasn't for my internet stalking, I wouldn't have taken this risk at all.

God, am I happy I did.

Right now, I'm leaning against the kitchen wall, thoroughly enjoying the view of Dylan sealing up the last of the counters. His hair is tied back in a bun that would look ridiculous on anyone but him. Somehow, he makes literally everything look good, even the ragged work trousers he's got on that look as though they've been patched up about a hundred times.

The wall between the kitchen and living space was knocked through in the first week, so now the downstairs feels much more open and inviting. Or, it will once the thick layer of dust and rubble from the work has been cleared and I've managed to decorate. I'm so excited to get to the stage of decorating. Making things look pretty is where I excel, and though I've learned a lot, it's clear the manual labor aspect of renovations is not a talent I possess.

It's fine because Dylan is excellent at it.

“It’s going to look so good,” I say excitedly as Dylan straightens up and surveys his work. “I can’t wait to show it off to everyone.”

He turns to look at me over his shoulder, a little furrow between his brows. There’s a streak of dirt along his cheek that makes him look even more like he belongs in the wilds living off the earth. He wipes at it with the back of his hand, but it only smudges it worse and he rolls his eyes as I laugh.

“Everyone?” he asks.

“Yeah, well, my family will want to see it,” I tell him. “And it’d be nice to invite them over once it’s done. Ooh, like a housewarming party!”

While the thought fills me with excitement, it clearly doesn’t have the same effect on Dylan. He looks affronted at the idea of a party, his eyes wide in what looks like alarm. It’s kind of cute, to be honest. This man could probably fight a bear and win, but the mention of socializing with people makes him look uncomfortable as hell.

“A party…” he repeats slowly, clearing his throat.

“Yes,” I say, trying to stifle my laugh.

“With people.”

I can’t hide my laughter this time, but I slap my hand over my mouth to try anyway. “Yes, grizzly bear, with people. Wouldn’t it be nice to show off all our hard work? And…for me to get to show you off too?”

Dylan’s jaw ticks, but he nods sharply. “You really want to? A housewarming party would make you happy?”

I grin at him, stepping forward to wrap my arms around him despite how dusty and dirty he is. “It would.” I put on my best puppy-dog eyes to convince him. I could throw one regardless—it is my house after all—but it would feel wrong. This place no longer feels like it’s just mine…it feels like ours.

“Okay then,” he agrees, just like that.

“Really?”

“Whatever you want, you get, Dahlia. I thought I’d made that clear by now.”

“And if what I want is to get even messier before we go get clean?” I tease, pressing myself closer to him. This man has turned me into some insatiable creature, always craving his touch. And his cock. In my defense, it’s a really nice cock.

“You need to eat before you do anything of the sort,” Dylan scolds, but his thick girth already presses against me even as he speaks.

“I’ll order in. How does Chinese food sound?” I ask, darting away to grab my phone. I can feel his gaze on my back as I bring up the ordering app.

Dylan tells me to order whatever my favorites are, so I grab enough for us both and grin when the app tells me our food will be with us an hour from now. I turn the screen around to show him, and he raises a brow.

“Whatever shall we do while we wait?” I ask teasingly, putting on an exaggerated thinking expression.

“You are trouble,” Dylan groans, but in the next instant, I’m thrown over his shoulder, his hand gripping my ass as he takes us upstairs to the shower where we get far messier before scrubbing each other clean.

A little later, we sit in my bedroom and eat takeout from the containers, and it hits me that I have never been happier with my life than I am at this moment.

“I’m going to get ready for bed.” I yawn once we’ve tidied the food away.

“Okay.” Dylan doesn’t make any move to leave. Hope bubbles up in my chest. He’s been staying over a lot, but I know he values his space so I never want to ask or pressure him. But I also literally never want to leave his side.

“Are...are you going home?” I fidget with the hem of my t-shirt.

Dylan tilts his head. “Do you want me to?”

“Literally never,” I admit, surprised when the thought flies right out of my mouth. I have no filter when it comes to him. “But also I don’t want to force you to stay.”

Dylan leans towards me, wraps his hands around my waist, and yanks me onto his lap. I go willingly, curling against him and relishing his warmth. He’s like my very own teddy bear and heated blanket in one, though I’m sure he’d argue with my soft and fuzzy description.

“I meant what I said, petal,” he says gruffly, “about not letting you go. If it’s up to me, you won’t spend a second of the day without me by your side. So no, I’m not going home. There’s nowhere I’d rather be than here, even if you do steal all the blankets in your sleep.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I do not!”

“You absolutely do,” he argues, smirking beneath his beard. “And we need to get a proper bed. That mattress is going to break both our bloody backs.”

I grin up at him. He’s right. We do need a bed, but it’s the way he says it—as though the bed would be *ours* not just mine—that fills me with giddy warmth.

“I found the perfect single bed online—” I start, teasing him because it’s my new favorite hobby. I don’t get very far because I end up on the mattress he was just complaining about, with a glowering grizzly bear hovering over me.

“Such a brat.”

“You love it,” I tease.

Dylan blinks at me, the exasperation on his face from my bratty attitude smoothing out a little. When he speaks, his voice is low and warm.

“Yeah, petal. I really do.”





DAHLIA

**A** loud banging on the door wakes me up.

I shoot up in bed, tangled in covers and Dylan's arms, my heartbeat racing. Dylan pushes himself up as another knock echoes through the house.

"Who the hell is here so early?" I groan, rubbing my eyes.

Dylan stands and quickly throws on a pair of sweatpants, chuckling. "It's eleven in the morning, petal."

Oops. "Oh," I laugh, freeing myself of the rest of the blankets and rushing to tug on a hoodie over my pajamas. I'm pulling fluffy socks onto my feet when Dylan opens the bedroom door, shirtless and barefoot because apparently this man doesn't feel the cold.

"There's no one scheduled to come out today. I'll go see who it is and tell them to fuck off."

The comment is so typically *Dylan* that I burst into laughter, fumbling with my socks as I hurry to catch up with him.

I'm halfway down the stairs when he opens the door.

"I hope you have a fucking good reason for waking us—"

His words stop suddenly, and as I finally reach the entryway, I realize exactly why.

Because it's not a stranger at my door or someone with the wrong address.

It's my brother.

My brother, who's currently gaping at a very shirtless, very rumpled Dylan, his mouth opening and closing like a fish on land.

Oh, shit. This is bad. Between the lack of shirt, the annoyed growl about waking us up, and me standing behind him in my pajamas with my hair no doubt looking like an insane tangle around my face thanks to the fact I didn't stop to brush it... Well, it's obvious what Dylan and I have been doing.

The thought crosses my mind right before Harry swings. I scream as my brother's fist connects with Dylan's cheek, rushing forward to squeeze in beside Dylan, trying to put myself between them. Dylan's strong arm holds me back, and he doesn't so much as grunt in reaction to my brother punching him.

"Fair enough," he says instead, rubbing his hand over his cheek. "You gonna hit me again or can we talk first?"

Harry looks like he prefers the former option, and I refuse to let that happen again.

"Harry!" I shout, turning my brother's attention to me. "What the hell? Why are you even here?"

"I came to see how my little sister was getting on with her new house," Harry starts, clearly seething. His face is red with rage, and his hands are still balled into his fists like he might try for another hit. "Instead, I come here to see that my best fucking friend is taking advantage of her!"

I have never considered myself an angry or even confrontational person. I avoid arguments and hate upsetting people, though my teasing with Dylan is different because he never takes it seriously and it usually ends with me getting what we both want anyway. But now, standing between my brother and the man I'm falling in love with, I feel red-hot anger flood me.

How dare he say Dylan is taking advantage of me? I want this, I chose this, I'll keep choosing him.

"Seriously, man. What the fuck? I can't believe you'd—"

I've had enough of this. "Harry!" He keeps talking, ignoring me in favor of shouting at Dylan. I raise my voice, louder than his, forcing him to listen to me now. "Harry, shut up and listen!"

Harry stops in his tracks, finger still pointing in Dylan's face, mouth hanging open. Slowly, he turns his head to look down at me, eyes wide with shock.

"I don't think I've ever heard you raise your voice before," he comments, his own voice much quieter now.

"I've never needed to before," I snap back, putting my hands on my hips and glaring up at him. "Now shut your mouth and listen to me, okay?"

Dutifully, clearly still shocked by my shouting, he snaps his mouth shut. It's true. I don't think I've ever shouted at him like this before, even when he annoyed me because I always knew he was just looking out for me. He's my big brother, and I love him, but I refuse to let him make assumptions like this.

I really should've told him about this when he called to ask how I was doing, but it felt wrong to tell him over the phone. If he'd just told me he was coming to see me rather than just turning up unannounced, I'd have prepared for this better, rather than him finding out this way.

I can hardly blame him for being shocked and angry, but this is just ridiculous. He may see me as his kid sister still, but I'm a grown-ass woman dammit! And I need him to see that.

"Dylan hasn't taken advantage of anything," I hiss. "You've known him for like twenty years. Do you really think he's the kind of man who would do something like that? Besides, this isn't some one-sided fling or whatever the hell is going through your mind."

"What is it then? Because from where I'm standing, my friend—who's damn near forty years old—is fucking around with my sister who's barely even an adult!"

I jerk like his words are a physical blow. Barely an adult? That hurts more than I want to admit, and I can't hide it when my

eyes fill with tears. I know Harry is protective of me, but does he really think this little of me?

Warm arms wrap around me as I blink rapidly, trying to hide the tears born out of anger and hurt. I'm not sad, I'm just... frustrated.

"You know, I let you get that hit in because I probably deserved it for hiding this from you, but I draw the line at you making Dahlia cry," Dylan grits out, tucking me close to him. I lean into his warmth, soaking up his comforting strength. "You know I care about you, Harry. You're my best friend, but if you're going to stand there and hurt her like this, I will kick your ass back to LA."

I can't help the watery laugh that leaves me at that—the image of Dylan throwing Harry across the sea springs to mind. It's ridiculous, but I'm feeling more than a little unbalanced right now.

"No more violence," I groan, wiping my cheeks with my palms, trying to stop the stupid tears.

"I'm well aware of how old she is, but you're wrong, Harry. Dahlia is an adult and a very capable one. Stop treating her like a kid."

"You expect me to just...be okay with this?" Harry fumbles out, shaking his head.

"I expect you to have some goddamn faith in your sister. She deserves your trust, Harry, and your support. And...dammit so do I. I would never, *ever* hurt her. I'd sooner throw myself into the fucking sea than see her cry because of me. Fuck, man. I love her so just stop being a dick for a damn minute and listen to what we're saying."

I think Harry says something back but I'm not listening because all I can hear on repeat is Dylan saying, *I love her*.

Holy shit, he loves me.

Does he mean it? Or did it just slip out in the heat of the argument? God, I hope he means it. Butterflies are having a party in my stomach, and I turn to look up at the man holding me close, vowing to protect me.

I barely notice when Harry turns to leave, closing the door behind him. Only when I hear the lock click shut and Dylan turns back to me do I manage to focus on reality again.

“He’s going to take some time to cool off and meet us for dinner tonight...” Dylan starts to explain, then pauses, frowning at my stunned expression. “Petal? You alright? Look, I know that wasn’t ideal but—”

“You love me?” I blurt out, breathing shallowly in anticipation.

Dylan’s mouth drops open and his eyes widen, mimicking my own expression. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it like that for the first time, I...”

“Did you mean it?” I have to know.

Dylan moves quickly, gathering me in his arms and closing all the distance between us. “Of course I bloody meant it,” he says in a rush. “I just wish I’d told you in a better way the first time. I just...I needed Harry to know how serious I was, how much you meant to me. I love you, Dahlia. God, I don’t even think I knew what love was before you. You...you wreck me.”

The tears return but this time they’re from relief and joy.

I surge up, kissing him deeply, before pulling away to whisper against his lips, “I love you too.”

Whatever happens with Harry, we’ll handle it together, and that knowledge alone gives me more strength than I’ve ever felt alone.



DYLAN

“**T**hat will never not be weird,” Harry mutters under his breath as Dahlia stretches up on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on my mouth.

“Get used to it,” I grumble back to him, rolling my eyes as he shudders exaggeratedly.

It’s been nearly a month since his surprise visit, and after the initial shit show when he found out about Dahlia and me, Harry conceded that he was happy as long as she was happy. He also made me promise him that I’d take care of her and that if I ever broke my vow not to hurt her, he’d murder me.

As much as it grated on me to be spoken to like that by my best friend, I respected him for it. I would also murder someone if they so much as made Dahlia sad. I was glad that he and I could agree on that, and that our friendship wasn’t beyond repair.

Harry had decided to stay to help out with the house, wanting to know that his sister had a nice, comfortable place to live before he returned home. He’d also used the time to see more of the country, and I know it made Dahlia happy to have him spend time here.

And all his help paid off because we finished the cottage yesterday.

It still needs to be furnished, but Dahlia has already bought and assembled—or rather I assembled—the sofas and dining table. And we finally have an actual bed frame.

“Stop bickering like children,” Dahlia calls out as spins away from me into the kitchen, returning seconds later carrying bowls of snacks to set out on the table. “People will be here in five minutes.”

The doorbell rings, and just like that, the last precious moments of peace are gone. I try to hide the dread that washes through me as Dahlia happily skips away to answer the door to the first few housewarming party guests, but of course, Harry notices and bursts into laughter.

I scowl at him, but he just saunters over to me and pats me on the shoulder. “Relax, man. Try to enjoy it. It won’t kill you to have fun for a few hours.”

“It just might,” I grunt in response, instantly brightening when Dahlia returns. Her parents are behind her, *ooh*-ing and *aah*-ing over the cottage. I’ve met their parents before—hell I grew up eating at their table and sleeping over at their house in Harry’s room—but somehow I feel like I’m meeting them for the first time all over again. Because this time I’m not just Dylan, Harry’s best friend, I’m also Dylan, Dahlia’s boyfriend.

They know, of course—Harry ratted us out immediately—but I still brace for her dad to take a swing at me like Harry did. Her parents are in their sixties, but they don’t look like it, keeping fit and active. I don’t doubt her dad would manage a good punch if he wanted.

Thankfully, I don’t have to deal with that again.

Instead, her mother, Kira, shouts my name and rushes towards me, grabbing me in a bear hug. The woman is as small as Dahlia, but somehow I feel like the one being crushed as she squeezes me and I awkwardly pat her back.

“Oh, Dylan. It’s so good to see you! My God, look at you!”

I smile, hoping it doesn’t look as tense as I feel.

“Mrs. Jenkins,” I greet as she releases me and her husband extends his hand for me to shake. “Mr. Jenkins. It’s lovely to see you.”

“Kira and Paul, none of this formal nonsense! We’ve known you since you were this tall.” Kira hovers her hand at knee



height .“Though it’s certainly hard to imagine you that small now!”

Dahlia grins up at me, weaving between her parents to come to my side. I wrap an arm around her waist, keeping her close. I’d throw a damn party every day if it was what she wanted, even if the idea makes me want to go into hibernation like an actual bear.

“I’m sure Harry’s given you enough grief,” Mr. Jenkins pipes up, nodding to where Dahlia is leaning into my side. “So I’ll just say this. Of all the men Dahlia could find to spend her life with, I’m glad it’s you. You’re a good man, Dylan, and we trust you to be good to her.”

Relief makes me feel a little dizzy. It’s ridiculous. Even if they protested, I wouldn’t let Dahlia go because I never care what anyone thinks. Except this is Dahlia’s family and they’re important to her, and I know having their approval means a lot.

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her,” I tell him honestly, nodding at him.

He smiles widely. “Right then, give us the tour!”

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THREE HOURS LATER, I still have Dahlia plastered to my side. The cottage is full of her friends and family from back home as well as a few faces I recognize from the village.

Dahlia makes friends so easily it seems like magic to me, making more connections in her first month here than I have in ten years. Everyone compliments us on the cottage, and Dahlia is glowing with happiness.

“I was thinking,” she says as she turns to me. We’re in the kitchen, my back to the wall and her acting like a shield between me and the other people. “I loved doing this. The house. With you.”

I reach forward, tucking a piece of her hair back behind her ear. “So did I.”

Her smile widens. “I want to keep doing it. With new houses. Taking the old abandoned ones and giving them new life, so they can be someone’s home again.

“And what about this house? You want to sell it?”

“No...I want it to be ours,” Dahlia says a little nervously as if she’s actually unsure of my answer. As if I’d ever say no to her.

“My home is wherever you are,” I tell her truthfully, dragging her closer and ducking to kiss her, tasting her sweet drink on her lips.

“So that’s a yes?” she checks, her hand on my chest as she stares up at me.

“Yes, petal.”

“Yay!” She cheers, and I watch her dance around and talk to her friends and fill the house with laughter and love, my chest feeling warm and my heart so full it could burst.

I never realized how empty my life was until she barrelled into it.

Finally, in the early hours, the house empties as everyone heads back to their homes and hotels. Dahlia stands at the door waving after them until they’re all driving or walking away out of sight, then she closes it and sighs happily.

The second the door is locked, I grab her, tugging her into the living room. She squeals as I lift her up, sitting her on the edge of the dining table.

“What are you doing?” she asks as I cup her knees with my hands and push, parting her legs. I step between them, running my hands higher to push her skirt up, revealing more of her soft, warm skin.

“What I’ve been waiting to do all damn night,” I growl, ready to spend the rest of the night making her scream.



“**T**hey’re even more beautiful up close than they are from the cottage or the photo.” Dahlia breathes softly as we reach the stone cairn at the summit of the hill.

We’ve taken a leisurely pace up the hillside, pausing to take in the views of the village below so Dahlia can literally stop and smell the flowers. She became more cautious about that after getting too close to a thistle, though, which I flattened in revenge for pricking her finger.

“What photo?” I ask, sitting at the edge of a flat rock. Dahlia’s face turns pink and her teeth sink into her bottom lip as she fidgets on her feet. “What photo, petal?”

“Um...okay so I have a confession,” she says hurriedly, wincing. “I may have sort of stalked you online and saw a photo of you with these hills in the back and then gone down a rabbit hole online and ended up buying the house because I found out where this place was and uh...oops?”

For a second, I’m silent as she rambles on. Then I burst into laughter, unable to help it as the woman I love stands there, red to the tips of her ears.

“Don’t laugh!” she protests, but her words are wobbly from her own mirth.

“Oh, petal. You’re a damn gift,” I say as the laughter eases, snatching her around the waist and setting her on my lap.

“I’m a stalker!”

“Prettiest fucking stalker I’ve ever had,” I tease. “Thank fuck you did because now I have you.”

“I love you,” Dahlia murmurs, sinking into my arms.

“I love you too.”

My heart picks up speed. In truth, we didn’t come all the way up here just for a walk. It’s a beautiful day, and the views are just as nice, but this is more than that. I’ve never been so fucking nervous in my entire life. Hell, I don’t think I’ve ever felt nervous before Dahlia. Then again, I didn’t feel much at all before her.

She’s brought sunshine and warmth to my cold, admittedly cave-like life. I was surviving before, but I wasn’t truly happy. And now that I know what I was missing, I’m determined to keep her as mine forever. I can’t imagine my life without her. I want us to grow together, to live life together.

“If we’re telling all our secrets, I do have something else to tell you...” Dahlia starts, but I interrupt her. I can’t wait any longer. As it is, I feel like I might explode. The little box in my pocket feels like a damn boulder.

“Me first,” I say, standing up and sitting her in my place. She blinks at me, a furrow between her brows.

“What’s going on?” she asks, looking a little worried.

*Don’t fuck this up*, I beg myself as I pull the box out of my pocket and lower to one knee. Dahlia’s jaw drops as she gasps, her hands flying to her face.

“You mean the whole world to me, petal,” I say, forcing my voice to be steady. “Every day with you is heaven, and I don’t want that to ever end. Will you make me the happiest man alive and be my wife?”

I nearly tip right over as Dahlia launches herself off the rock and barrels straight into me. On her knees with me in the grass, she kisses me and though it pains me, I pull away. I need an answer.

“Tell me I can put this ring on your finger,” I say.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Dahlia cries, holding her hand out.

I take the diamond ring from the box and slide it onto her ring finger. She takes a second to stare at it, her eyes welling with tears. It's vintage, with a silver band and a large circular diamond in the center.

"It's perfect," she sobs, holding her hand up to her face so she can admire it. "You're perfect," she adds, and this time when she kisses me, I kiss her back fully until both of us are panting.

"Okay, now you can tell me whatever it is you wanted to say," I tell her, tugging her up to stand again. I don't let her go, wanting to stay in this moment with her forever. Her ring sparkles against my chest where she flattens her palms, my hands around her waist.

Dahlia's grin is brighter than the diamond, brighter than the sun. She is the most stunning thing I have ever seen, and she's *mine*. I can't wait to make her my wife.

Instead of answering with words, Dahlia drops her hand from my chest and takes my wrist, tugging my hand away from her waist. She places my hand on her lower stomach, her smaller hand over mine.

Confusion washes over me as I wonder what the hell she's doing.

"You're going to be the most amazing husband ever," she whispers, her words filling the space between us with warmth. "And the most amazing father too."

I swear to God my heart stops. "Father?" I manage to stutter out, my eyes widening as I stare down at our joined hands over her stomach. "You...you're pregnant?"

She nods. "I only found out this morning."

"Fuck, I love you." I'm unsure of how to explain the utter joy I'm feeling in words.

There aren't any, so I kiss her instead, our hands trapped between our bodies, our future pressed tightly between us.

# EPILOGUE

18 Months Later

The music starts up, and excited butterflies erupt in my chest. My grip tightens on my dad's arm, and Harry turns to give me a grin. In his arms, Daniel babbles and claps his hands, hearing the music.

"Ready, not-so-little sister?" Harry asks, readjusting his hold on my son so that Daniel can play with his tie.

I grin at the sight of them both, my big brother holding my baby, ready to walk down the aisle as my bridesman. Officially, Daniel is the page boy, but at only ten months old, he's really just adding cute factor.

"So ready," I tell him, and the front door opens, the music growing louder. From over Harry's shoulder, I can see the rows of guests on either side of the aisle, but Harry's blocking my view of Dylan.

The aisle is lined with wildflowers, and the familiar sight of our garden is even prettier than usual thanks to the decorations my mom spent ages on. When we were planning the wedding, I couldn't think of any place more perfect than the home that meant so much to us, especially with the gorgeous background of the Scottish landscape. It's as perfect as I knew it would be.

I take a deep breath as Harry begins his walk down the aisle, the guests all cooing at Daniel. My son reaches his hands out, shouting "Dada!" as they get closer to Dylan.



Then it's my turn. My dad pats my arm, kisses my cheek, and then we walk.

The second my sight locks onto my soon-to-be husband, they fill with happy tears. I blink, determined not to ruin my makeup immediately. Dylan takes Daniel from Harry, and my heart is so full it might burst. I barely see the faces of our guests, my entire world narrowing to the loves of my life waiting for me at the altar.

Dad kisses me on the cheek again as we pause at the end of the grassy aisle.

"Who gives this woman away?" the celebrant asks with a smile, and my dad answers happily before releasing me, taking Daniel from Dylan, and stepping to the side to stand beside Harry.

"You look...there are no words," Dylan whispers as I take my place across from him, taking his hands in mine and squeezing.

"So do you," I say back, heart pounding. He looks incredible in his suit, his hair pinned back from his face and his beard carefully trimmed. Still my wild lumberjack but tidied up for the occasion. The flowers in his button-hole match the lace roses on my dress.

"So, are you two ready to make this official?" the celebrant asks, and the guests chuckle as Dylan and I nod in sync.

We decided to write our own vows, not feeling as though any of the ones we found online worked for us. The celebrant prompts Dylan to read his vows, and he drops one of my hands to unfold a piece of paper before he begins to read.

"Dahlia, my petal," he starts, and shit I'm about to cry again already. "When Harry called me and asked me to help you out with the house, I had never imagined how much it would change my life for the better. I did not know this much happiness was possible. You have given me the greatest gifts I could ever imagine—your love, your light, and our son. Being your partner and Daniel's dad is the best adventure of my life."

He pauses, exhaling a little shakily, and I squeeze his hand, feeling his emotions as though they're my own. "I'm not very good at words, but I promise to show you every day how grateful I am for you, to look after you in every way I can, to spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of you."

When it's my turn to speak, I'm not sure I'll be able to get a word out with the way Dylan's words have turned me into a pile of mush. I try anyway, pushing through when my voice shakes with emotion.

"Dylan, since I saw that photo of you online, I've loved you. You are my comfort, my protector, my strength. More than that, you are my home. You make me feel safe and cherished, and there is nowhere I'd rather be than right here with you and Daniel. I promise to always annoy you by singing pop songs at the top of my lungs," I say, laughing when Dylan's eyes crinkle with humor. "I promise to look after you the way you look after me, even when you say you don't need it. I promise to kiss you even when you're covered in paint and sawdust from whatever new project we take on. Above all, I promise to prove to you every day that you are worthy of all the love and happiness in the world. I promise to love you endlessly because my heart is yours, Dylan. It always has been."

"If the bride's brother could pass the rings," the officiant prompts and Harry steps forward to hand over the wedding rings we entrusted him to look after.

"Told you I wouldn't lose them," he whispers to Dylan as he steps back. Dylan rolls his eyes but he's smiling wide at his old friend, about to be his brother-in-law.

"Dylan Dixon, do you take Dahlia Jenkins to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?"

"I do," Dylan says without hesitation, slipping the warm band of silver onto my finger.

A happy tear escapes as I take his wedding ring in my grasp and hold his hand.

“Dahlia Jenkins, do you take Dylan Hall to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

I’m already speaking before the celebrant can finish the last word. “I do,” I say as I slide the ring onto Dylan’s finger. He grasps my hand, holding me tight.

“Dylan and Dahlia, you have come here today to seek union with each other and, in the presence of your family and friends, have declared your love and commitment to each other,” the celebrant says, and my whole body tingles in anticipation.

I’ve been waiting for this moment for what feels like forever, though really it’s only been less than two years. Still, we had to push the wedding back because I didn’t want to worry about fitting my pregnant belly into the dress, and this moment is made all the sweeter knowing we’re a family already. This just confirms it.

“By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Daniel squeals with excitement as the guests clap and cheer. I wrap my arms around Dylan’s neck, his hands go to my waist, and he dips me backward. He kisses me like I’m the only thing he needs to survive, and I kiss him back with the same desperation.

When we pull apart, we’re both smiling, and the sounds of our loved ones cheering around us fill the whole garden with love. I feel complete, with his ring on my finger and our home at my back, our son beside us, celebrating everything that brought us to this moment.

And I can’t wait to see what our future brings.

# **EXTENDED EPILOGUE**

DYLAN

“That’s it, careful now,” I say slowly, holding the half-assembled project steady while Daniel hammers in a nail. The kid’s only ten, but he’s nearly better than I am already, always out here building a new project of his own or helping out with mine.

Pride fills me as I watch my son check his work with a grin, setting the hammer down and wiping sawdust off his rosy cheek with the back of his hand. His blond hair and green eyes make him the spitting image of his mother, but his preference for solitude and tendency towards gruff one-word replies is all me—the perfect mix of us both. Our eldest constantly reminds me how lucky I am to have this family.

“Can we finish it tonight?” Daniel asks eagerly, showing enthusiasm for the projects covering the garage floor the way his brother shows enthusiasm for football.

I chuckle at him, taking the tools and tidying them away. We added the garage as part of the extension project, needing more room both for the kids and for our work. This house is still the same old beauty it was, just with some extra additions to make sure it grows with our family. It’s home, and neither Dahlia nor I can imagine moving out, no matter how many homes we work on for other people. This place will always be special to us.

The door that connects the garage to the house opens before I can answer my son, and Dahlia pops her head through, our youngest clinging to her side. At three, he’s already tall and

looks like a giant on her hip. Definitely takes after me, that one.

“Bedtime,” Dahlia says softly, smiling at Daniel.

“Aw, but I’m not done!” he whines, pouting in disappointment.

I pull him into a hug, patting his shoulder. “We’ll work on it in the morning straight after breakfast, yeah?” I tell him, pleased when he nods and smiles at me. These kids have me wrapped around their fingers just like their mom does. I wouldn’t change it for the world.

Daniel yawns as we head inside, and I chuckle, knowing how tired he must be. On Dahlia’s hip, Dean’s already asleep, his head nestled on her shoulder, his brown hair flopped over his forehead. My chest warms as I take them in, leaning forward to kiss the toddler on his head before turning to place a quick kiss on my wife’s lips.

“I’ll get Daniel, you put him down,” I say. “Is Derek already down?” Our seven-year-old still thinks five AM is when our day should start, which means he’s nearly always the first to take himself to bed. Dahlia smiles, nodding.

“Barely made it through his ice cream before he was nodding off.” She chuckles, shaking her head. As much as the early starts might get a little exhausting, we both know we wouldn’t want it any other way. All three of our boys are their own perfect little people, and the love we have for them is impossible to put into words.

I head off to take Daniel to his room as Dahlia does the same with Dean, taking a divide-and-conquer approach like usual. I never would’ve imagined myself as a family man before Dahlia, but now I can’t imagine living any other way.

“Goodnight, buddy,” I say as I close the door, pretty sure Daniel is already asleep before it shuts. I peek into the rooms across the hall, checking on the two other boys and finding them both completely asleep too.

It’s not often Dahlia and I get time for ourselves, and I intend to make the most of it.

When I head down to the living room, I find Dahlia curled up under a thick blanket on the sofa, a take-out pizza box on her lap. She looks up grinning as I enter, lifting the blanket at her side in invitation. I sit down beside her, tugging her in close to my side, and adjust the blanket so we're both curled up together.

"I didn't feel like cooking," she says with a laugh as she opens the pizza box.

"Pizza is perfect," I tell her, taking a big slice and eating half of it in one bite. It's been a long day between the kids and work, and I'm starving...for more than just food.

"The flooring should go into that townhouse tomorrow," Dahlia informs me around a mouthful of cheese and crust. "Then it's just the last few styling touches and it'll be ready for the market."

I nod, updating her on the wardrobe and coffee table Daniel and I are working on for that house, then tell her about the cottage I saw online. "Reminded me of this place years ago," I say, pausing to kiss her hair as nostalgia washes over me. "Run down but full of potential."

Her eyes sparkle, and she nods. "Would be good to return to our roots."

I've lost count of how many places we've worked on together now since the business took off before Daniel was even born. With my skills in woodwork and contracting and Dahlia's eye for style and detail, we've had so much more success in our projects than either of us expected.

Taking a place and turning it into a perfect home for another family is rewarding, sure, but it's working alongside her that I love most. And while Derek will probably end up as a pro footballer—the kid's got talent—Daniel is already planning to work alongside us and take over the business when he's older, trying to rope Dean into it too. Though at three, Dean's still insisting he wants to be a superhero. Hell, if that's what he wants, I'll figure out a way to make it happen.

“I’ll put an offer in in the morning then,” I tell her, already excited to see what plans she’ll have for the place. “Who knows? Maybe some other wide-eyed girl will move in there and find love too.”

“Yeah with some grizzly bear who’s secretly a big softie.” Dahlia laughs, resting her head on my chest.

The TV’s playing some rom-com movie, but I’m not paying attention to it at all. No, all I’m looking at is Dahlia. God, I swear she gets more beautiful every day. Even now, after all these years, she takes my damn breath away.

“Eat more,” I grumble, noticing she’s only had two slices.

Dahlia rolls her eyes at me. “I probably shouldn’t with how much I’ve put on since Dean was born,” she mutters but obeys and picks up a slice anyway.

I growl, moving so I can grab her chin and force her to look at me. Her eyes widen, lips parting in surprise. Fuck, this woman is an angel. I have no idea how I got so lucky. Can’t she see that every part of her is perfection? Maybe her body’s changed over the years but that’s only natural. She’s carried three kids, for Christ’s sake. She was their first home, protecting and caring for them from the moment they were conceived. I am in awe of her.

I struggle to figure out how to put it all into words, but I try anyway. “Good. I’ve been trying to get you to eat more for years. Shit, petal, your body is a fucking work of art. You were stunning when I met you, and you’re even more stunning now. Knowing you’ve carried our sons…” I pause, groaning. My cock aches, hard as steel at the thought. We both agreed we were done at three, but the idea of putting another baby in her is so damn appealing. “Fuck.”

Dahlia laughs in my hold. “No more babies, you caveman.” But she’s grinning widely, her eyes crinkling at the sides with happiness.

“We can practice,” I tease, leaning down so my next words are spoken against her lips. “Listen to me, petal. You would be the



most gorgeous woman on this earth at any weight. So eat. You'll need the energy for what I'm going to do to you next."

She squeals as I slide my hand up her thigh over the blanket and take a bite out of her slice.

I keep her close as she eats, and then keep my promise until both of our energy is long gone.

After, we lie in a tangle on the sofa, the TV still babbling in the background. Her head is on my chest, and she sighs contentedly against me. I smooth a hand down her spine, feeling completely at peace.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me, petal." I kiss her forehead softly.

For a second, I think she's fallen asleep until she mumbles back, "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me too, grizzly bear."

*The End.*

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