



Rancher
DADDIES

LIZ ARCHER

RANCHER DADDIES

A MILITARY REVERSE HAREM ROMANCE

LIZ ARCHER

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NATALIE

I'm getting married in two hours.

I try to breathe in and out like the audio meditation guide tells me, but it does little to calm the bubbling anxiety under my skin. Frustrated, I pry out my AirPods and drop them onto the couch.

“Stay still,” my stylist, cousin, and maid of honor Madeline—Maddy—says as she fusses with the trail of my white gown. We had it fitted with one of the best designers in the city, and now two weeks later, it keeps slipping down my frame.

Maddy brushes away the beads of sweat that crowd her forehead. I think she's worried that I'll accidentally flash the two hundred guests who are all waiting for me in the church, waiting for me to walk down the long aisle to my husband.

Just the thought of it makes me go weak in the knees, and not in a cute way.

I walked down the aisle yesterday and timed it in my head. Getting to the front of the room, past all those pews, takes me roughly three minutes. How weird would it look if I speed-walked through it?

I need to play the part of the blushing bride, though I don't feel particularly—well, I feel absolutely nothing, except that I'm a bundle of nerves. I've drunk five cups of coffee since waking up two hours ago, but that's not what's making me jittery.

Like every little girl, I've dreamed of my wedding day forever. I even picked out the designer I wanted (Ralph Lauren, of

course). But my fiancé had other things in mind.

Like my family, he belongs to one of the oldest Russian lineages. Technically speaking, we both have royal blood in us, though most of that didn't matter to my parents when they immigrated to New York before I was even born. That is, until last year when my father died, and the question of succession drove our extended family into a frenzy.

That's where the Mikhailovs—and Zach—came in.

"I've kept a bag of your belongings upstairs, ready for you to take it," Maddy says. "I'll have someone load it for you later."

"Hmmm," I say distractedly.

"Are you okay, Nati?" she asks.

I don't say anything.

"It's just wedding jitters. You'll be fine," Maddy assures me as if she can read my mind.

"I don't know, Mads," I say, picking at my dress.

"Don't tell me you're having second thoughts about the wedding." Something in the way she says it makes me look at her. But I don't see anything amiss.

The door opens, and my dashing groom enters. He flashes me a charming smile that I catch in the mirror. He's handsome and easy on the eyes; most importantly, my family loves him. He's the perfect man, all wrapped up in the neat little package of making an advantageous alliance between our families.

So why do I feel dread pick up under my skin? Why doesn't my heart flutter when I see the man who's going to be my husband in a few hours?

"Natalya," he murmurs as he walks up to me.

"Hey Zach," Maddy says. He briefly glances at her but his focus on me, like I'm the center of the Earth.

I don't turn around, but keep my gaze on him in the mirror. "Seeing the bride in her wedding dress is bad luck."

He chuckles. I feel the dismissal in it, even before he actually says anything. “I don’t believe in all of that crap.” His gaze flutters over me. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I say. At the last moment, I remember to be the blushing bride my mother wants me to be and drop my gaze.

Zach doesn’t move away. He takes my hand in his and stares at the engagement ring. “And this suits you well.”

Sometimes, I get the feeling he likes the idea of a wedding more than I do. It isn’t the first time he’s commented on the ring. It’s almost like he’s obsessed with it.

Maddy steps back, hands on her hips as she examines her handiwork. “You look great, Nati. No one’s going to be able to look away from you.”

“That’s why we have the veil.” Zach’s voice is cold. This is the first time I’ve heard him this way.

My gaze moves to my fiancé, who’s looking at Maddy for the first time. I take advantage of his distraction to move away. I’m uncomfortable at his proximity.

At five-ten, I’m almost as tall as him. He belongs to one of the most powerful Bratva families in New York. He and I have similar stories—his family, too, immigrated to the States before he was born. At eighteen, his father died, and Zach took over as head of his family.

He was the first to come with his condolences when Dad died of sudden cardiac arrest last spring. He told us that he had met with my father a few times to talk about a project before his sudden death put a stop to all of that. Unfortunately, even though my brother has come of age and assumed his position as head of the household, there’s still the threat of attack from outside the family. We Romanovs have our share of enemies.

“Step outside,” Zach says to Maddy.

I startle at his words, and even Maddy hesitates.

“I need to be alone with my bride for a few moments,” Zach says.

Maddy gives me one last look before she exits, leaving me alone with him.

Zach walks around me, as if he's examining a doll in a museum. "My father would have loved you, you know?"

He walks right up to me and trails a finger down my cheek. The pit in my stomach opens, and the dread intensifies.

"Yes, we'll keep the veil down," he murmurs. "We want them to only catch a glimpse of you. You're mine, after all. From here on, you belong to me. Don't you, Natalya?"

Any other girl would have swooned hearing those words come out of Zach's mouth, and yet I have a sudden urge to flee.

Wait, what is this? I can't possibly be thinking of running away mere hours before my wedding.

Why exactly would I do that? Just because of a gut feeling? The possibility that there's something better out there? Better than calm, handsome, charming Zach who's going to take care of my family?

No. No. No. I wipe the thought from my head.

Zach's gaze flits over my face as if trying to decipher me. I hope he can't read my thoughts.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, momentarily distracting him. He steps away, and I feel my breath return to me. Why did I feel so suffocated when he was close? Is this how my marriage is going to be?

I notice the look on his face as he flicks through his phone. There's something odd about it, but I don't pay it too much heed. I'm glad he isn't in my orbit anymore.

My father was a flawed man, and I didn't necessarily agree with everything he did, but he was a good father, a good husband. Mom says that he would approve of Zach if he were still around.

But is this really what he would have wanted for me—only twenty-two and straight out of college to be married for good?

Zach frowns down at his phone. "I need to take this."

“Everything good?” I say.

“Yeah,” he says, distractedly patting my ring.

I walk over to the window and look down. My room overlooks the parking lot. I see a few men walking around, the unmistakable sight of their guns strapped to their hips. This place is swarming with security. Why, then, does Zach appear so worried?

Does he think we’re going to be attacked today? A lot of our extended family is here, and people we’ve not seen eye to eye with in the past have also been invited to the wedding. It’s a gesture of goodwill, but things can also go wrong in an instant. Balance is a fragile thing, especially in the Bratva world. And I’ve heard some rumors of unrest since Dad died.

A few minutes after Zach leaves, my younger brother Wylan and my mom walk in. She gets all teary-eyed as she walks up to me.

“Oh my God, Nati, you look so pretty.” She kisses me on both my cheeks.

“Thank you, Mama,” I say.

“You’re going to ruin her makeup,” Wylan pipes up. Wylan is twenty. After he graduated high school, he decided not to go to college, to take care of the family responsibilities instead.

It’s not easy to lead one of the newest mob boss families of New York, especially one that’s gained more power than almost anybody else in the city. My father was a force to be reckoned with, coming only second to the three Volkov brothers. But that’s a story for another day.

I glare at my brother, who throws me an impish grin. “I don’t care, Wylan.”

“I was just kidding, Nati. You really do look very beautiful,” Wylan says. I look past him into the mirror. My midnight-black hair is coiffed up in a beautiful but severe bun and the veil has been put over it.

The bodice, tailored to perfection, accentuates my curves while offering a sense of timeless elegance. Swirls of silver

and crystal beadwork embellish the bodice, sparkling as they catch the light. The fitted silhouette gracefully flows into a voluminous skirt crafted from layers of frothy tulle and silk organza.

With each step, the skirt billows and sways, creating a captivating dance around me. The airy layers feel weightless against my legs. *At least I can run if the need arises*, I think wryly.

“I love the dress,” I say.

Wylan steps toward me. “You don’t have to do it, you know?”

My gaze snaps to him.

“Wylan!” our mother reprimands him.

“I’m serious,” Wylan says. “I can handle things. You don’t have to marry Zach. Sure, he’s not an absolute monster, which is more than we can ask for in our world, but you still don’t have to do it.”

His words make me choke up.

My mother walks up to me. “You aren’t thinking of changing your mind, are you?”

“No,” I say, finally steeling my resolve. “I’m not.”

Wylan looks at me dolefully. “Don’t do it for me. I don’t want you to be unhappy.”

“I’m not doing it just for you, Wylan. I’m doing it for the family. With Zach by my side, our position is secured.”

Wylan still looks unsure.

“I know Nati is a little young to be getting married,” Mom says, walking closer. “But Zach is the perfect guy for her.”

“Yes, I agree,” I say. She’s right about this. In our world, it’s hard to find a decent guy. “I’m fine. I just need to walk it off a bit.”

Mom nods understandingly. She knows how much I love running. On days when the darkness threatens to engulf me, it’s the only thing that keeps me sane.

“Are you sure you can walk in that dress?” Wylan asks.

“I’ll be fine,” I say as I pick up the skirt.

I’ll be fine, I convince myself. I just need to get through this wedding first.

“I’ll be out in the hallway,” I say.

“We’ll go downstairs and check on the guests,” Wylan says. “Everyone is already coming in, and we’ll make sure nobody comes up here to disturb you. Have some me time.” My brother winks at me.

He probably thinks I’m going to smoke, something I do when I’m stressed, but rarely. It’s a habit I picked up from my father.

My mother and brother exit the room, and I walk out through the other door that opens up to the opposite, more private, hallway that’s accessible only to limited family and my brother’s underlings.

I promised my mother that I wouldn’t smoke, but I wish I had a cigarette on me.

I walk down the hallway, thinking that I’m alone.

But as I turn the corner, my heart plummets. There, before my eyes, stands Zach, the man I am about to marry. His back is pressed against the wall, and his arms are wrapped around another woman. Their bodies are entangled in an intimate embrace, a scene that pierces through my soul like a thousand knives.

I frown as I take a few steps toward them, pulled forward by an invisible string.

Zach peels away from the woman and I finally take a look at her face. It’s my cousin Maddy.

The ground under my feet slips away.

My footsteps falter, and a gasp escapes my lips. Time seems to stand still as I watch them, unable to tear my gaze away from the painful truth unfolding before me. A mixture of shock, disbelief, and betrayal churns within me, threatening to consume everything I thought I knew. Maddy and Zach?

I blink a couple of times to make sure I'm not daydreaming.

"I love you," he whispers to Maddy, his voice laced with a cruel sincerity. She, in turn, looks up at him with a sickening look of adulation...and love. "Natalya is nothing but a pawn in this game. It's you I truly desire."

"You're lying," Maddy replies, her eyes hurt. "I've seen the way you look at her."

"Of course I have to do it. I have to make her believe that it's her I want," Zach says, caressing her cheek the same way he's caressed mine several times before, back when I thought it might be real. "You're the one I want."

"And what happens to her after you're wedded?"

"She's disposable," Zach replies, his voice cold. "Once I have what I need, she'll be gone."

My breath catches in my throat, and I instinctively press my hand against my chest as if trying to contain the ache threatening to consume me.

Tears blur my vision as I struggle to comprehend the magnitude of their betrayal. How could Zach, the man I thought would be my partner for a lifetime, willingly deceive me in such a callous manner? And Maddy? How could she do this to me? We've grown up together, shared a room during summers. She's my blood. And she has betrayed me.

My heart pounding in my chest, I turn on my heels and flee from the scene before Zach can catch a glimpse of me. Panic courses through my veins, fueling my desperate need to escape this unbearable truth. I sprint down the hallway, the layers of my wedding dress billowing around me like a haunting specter.

Tears stream down my face, blurring my vision, but I push forward, determined to put as much distance between us as possible.

My mind races, searching for an escape, a sanctuary where I can find solace and gather my shattered thoughts.

I know I need to get far, far away from here.

The world around me becomes a blur of colors and shapes as I navigate through the chaos of my emotions. A staircase materializes before me, and without hesitation, I ascend, driven by an instinctive need to rise above the anguish that threatens to consume me.

As I reach the top of the staircase, I stumble into a deserted room, its atmosphere heavy with dust and neglect. I lock the door behind me. It offers a temporary refuge, a space where I can gather the fragments of my broken heart and find the strength to face the reality that lies ahead.

I spot the duffel bag lying on the floor, and rage unlike I've ever felt before fills me. This must be the bag Maddy was talking about. Lies, all lies.

Without thinking twice, I pick it up and throw it out the window.

Collapsing onto a dusty couch, I clasp my trembling hands to my chest, struggling to steady my rapid breaths.

The knob rattles, and someone pounds on the door. My heart lurches in my chest.

"Hey, is anybody in there?"

I don't respond at first, partly because I don't want to be found and secondly, because I'm stunned by the voice on the other side. It's low and sexy, and makes my stomach flip. *What the hell am I thinking?*

The door continues to rattle.

"Go away," I say. "I need to be alone."

"I need to do my job, you know?" he says.

"You can do it later," I say, my voice coming out shaky.

The voice on the other side pauses. "Are you okay, lady?"

"I'll be fine," I say.

"I don't think you'll be fine in that room on your own. Listen, why don't you come out of there? Maybe I can help you."

"I don't need your help," I say.

“Sure,” he says. “But you sound very scared and unsure right now. I’ve often found that one’s greatest strength can come from within. What do you want?”

My breath is still shaky. A part of me wants to go downstairs and confront Zach, but the other, louder, more insistent part is relieved. I didn’t want to be married to him in the first place. The answer is clear.

“I want to run away,” I say quietly. The voice on the other side of the door doesn’t respond.

My stomach clenches harder. I wish I could have seen who it was. He has set me right—I know exactly what I need to do.

I kick off my heels, abandoning them without a second thought, feeling the coolness of the floor beneath my bare feet. A sensation of liberation surges through me, as if shedding those shoes symbolizes my determination to break free from the chains that have bound me.

I walk over to the open window and scrutinize the area outside. The place is swarming with guards—both in the parking lot and the area directly in and around the church. If I go downstairs, I’ll be caught.

I swallow hard as I stare down from the window. It’s at least a twenty-foot drop, if not more. I’ll break my leg or worse.

Tears crowd my eyes, and my mind flashes back to the moment I saw Zach and Maddy together. Marrying him is not a choice for me anymore.

I wipe my tears away and slowly climb through the window. It’s a tedious process, and the weight of my dress slows me down. There’s a narrow parapet that wraps itself around the building. I test it first before I slowly shimmy to the side, looking for pipes or an emergency staircase to get me down safely.

The ground below is crawling with men as they guard the perimeter, and I pray they don’t look up. They’ll see me immediately, and I’ll have no way to explain what I’m doing.

I flatten myself against the wall as I continue to inch slowly, my fingers digging into the solid concrete. And then I see it—

a narrow wraparound staircase that leads out the back of the church. There's a low wall surrounding it that looks easy enough to climb.

"Jesus," I breathe as I descend the stairs, my heart in my throat. My wedding dress rips as it catches on the rusting iron but I don't particularly care.

My foot turns on its side, and tears crowd my eyes as pain shoots up to my thigh. But I persevere as I finally reach the ground.

I check the wall. There's no one in my immediate vicinity, and there's a thick bush hiding me from the rest of the premises, but I look up and notice the CCTV camera that's pointing directly at me. I know there's someone surveilling the footage.

I can't waste any time. I pull myself up to the height of the wall, and then wait a few seconds to catch my breath. The bush next to me rustles.

I panic and fall off the edge, landing with a thud on the road on the other side, and right on top of something.

"Shit," I cry out as pain sears through me. I've broken one of my nails. God.

I sit up and notice the duffel bag that I threw out the window. I remember what Maddy told me. She packed up some of my belongings for me.

It's a sign. The universe has my back.

I pick up the bag and manage to crawl a few paces. In my mind, I don't see my mother's face, or my brother's. I hear the unknown man, his low voice asking me, "What do you want?"

"Freedom," I breathe. No one else is going to give it to me. I have to take it for myself.

Get up, Nati. You can do this.

I brace myself on my palms before standing up straight. I hobble a few yards before the pain begins to dissipate and I pick up speed. I can make it. I can get out of here.

As I continue to run, my eyes dart around, searching for any form of refuge. There's a truck parked in the next street, its sturdy frame partially concealed by a tarp. Without hesitation, I dart toward it, my heart pounding with a mix of fear and desperate hope for temporary shelter. If Zach's men spot me, they'll drag me back to him.

I beeline toward the truck when I see my brother walk out of the church. He's surrounded by Zach's underlings. Across the parking lot, our gazes meet. His eyes widen in surprise before he nods, almost imperceptibly.

He lets me go.

I slide underneath the protective cover of the truck, my body trembling with a combination of exhaustion and anxiety. To my surprise, the truck's engine comes to life a few minutes later. Before I know it, we're rolling out and into the unknown.

NATALIE

The ride lasts a few hours. The sky outside eventually grows dark, and the ride is bumpy. A shiver creeps up my spine at the obvious change of altitude, and my teeth chatter.

I drift in and out of sleep, my body seeking solace and respite from the tumultuous emotions that have consumed me. Time seems to blur as the truck continues its journey, carrying me away from painful memories and toward an uncertain future.

When I finally open my eyes, the world around me has transformed. The gentle swaying motion has ceased, and the tarp above me allows slivers of moonlight to filter through, casting a cool glow upon my weary face.

As I cautiously sit up, I realize that the truck has come to a stop. I peer through the small gaps in the tarp, my eyes widening at the sight before me. Stretching out in every direction is nothing but a blanket of darkness—I'm surrounded by vast, open space.

I blink a couple times. Where are we? This place is too big to be a park. Why would he stop here?

A scary thought creeps into my head. What if the driver knew I was hiding? What if he's in on it with Zach and wants to harm me? What if this was Zach's plan all along...he expected me to run away so that he could do away with me.

But seconds pass, and nothing happens. Footsteps fade away until I can tell that I'm alone.

I have no idea where I am. My phone died sometime during the ride, but by my calculation we're far from Connecticut, where the ceremony was being held. The reason I was so far from home in the first place is that Zach was too paranoid to get married in the city. He said it might give our enemies the chance to get to us, and the rumor is that some were feeling threatened by the union of the Romanov and Mikhailov families.

“We both have royal blood in us, you know?” he told me once.

Now, just the thought of him leaves a bad taste in my mouth. He told Maddy that I was disposable, that he was just using me. But to get what? I'm not even the Romanov heir. He's delusional if he thinks he's getting anything from my family.

I know my family will be worried about me, but I push that thought to the back of my head. I need to survive first.

The air feels different here—still and invigorating, carrying with it a hint of earth and freedom. I'm free, freer than I've ever been in my life. My parents never put any restrictions on me, but I've always known that I have certain responsibilities—like getting married as soon as possible, making a good alliance, and having lots of babies.

Leaving behind the confines of the truck, I step out onto the solid ground, my bare feet sinking slightly into the soft dirt. The wide expanse of the vast field beckons, offering a sanctuary far removed from the heartache that still lingers within me. Zach's words cut through my skin.

As I explore this unexpected haven, my gaze sweeps across the picturesque landscape.

It feels like I'm alone in the entire world.

A chill snakes its way through my body, reminding me of the biting cold that accompanies the early morning hours. There is a lingering coldness within me that cannot be easily shaken off.

I walk away from the vehicle. In the distance, I can see the faint outline of what looks like a house, and there are several more buildings in the distance, small matchbox structures. It's

not until I pass by a wooden structure that has a single light bulb and the faint sounds of animals inside that I realize where I might be.

When I was a child, my father used to take me to horseback riding lessons at a ranch. But that was nothing compared to this place. Acres and acres of empty land and silent, rolling hills in the distance like a frontier guard.

Relief floods through me. The flat and empty land as far as I can see is big enough for me to get lost in it.

Seeking refuge from the frigid air, I wander around, my eyes scanning the surroundings for any sign of shelter. And then, like a beacon of hope, an empty barn comes into view, its weathered structure standing strong against the elements.

I step inside, my footsteps echoing in the empty space. The scent of hay and aged wood fills the air, offering a familiar and comforting embrace. Thankfully, there are no animals inside. As much as I like horses, I don't want to get kicked in the face by one when I'm trying to get some sleep.

Weary and in need of rest, I find a pile of straw in a corner. It may not be the most comfortable of beds, but it will do for now.

I shimmy on top of what looks like a firm and comfortable pile before lying on my side, grabbing my duffel bag for support. The hay itches my skin, but it's mostly comfortable. Or maybe I'm just too exhausted to care. My eyes droop as weariness from the day catches up to me.

The last few hours have been surreal. I take my phone out. It is, of course, dead. I wonder what my mom and brother are going through. Did he tell her that he saw me leave? Maybe I should have stopped and explained everything to him, even though there was a chance I would get caught.

"Please be okay," I say to the ceiling. I hope my father is watching over them.

I drift in and out of sleep. Memories of my childhood flit through my head—from the time my father was alive. Maybe he was as bad as Zach, but he never let me or Wylan see his

bad side. I'm vaguely aware of a rooster calling out in the distance, announcing the arrival of morning. A sliver of light comes through a crack in the wall and falls on me.

I crack an eye open, but my body protests. I'm not done sleeping yet.

I snuggle deeper into the pile of hay, letting myself have just a little more sleep...just a little more...when a sudden, chilling cascade of icy water rudely jolts me awake. My eyes fly open, and I gasp in shock as the coldness seeps into my bones, piercing through the layers of weariness.

Blinking away the remnants of sleep, I find myself staring up at two children—a boy and a girl. Their mischievous eyes meet mine before they fall over themselves laughing.

I wipe the water from my face and blink several times to catch a closer look. They have similar features—dark blond hair and blue eyes that twinkle with mirth.

“W-what the hell?” I sputter. My teeth begin to chatter. The water is chillingly cold and cuts right through my skin.

“Gotcha!” one of the twins exclaims in a voice filled with mischief and delight.

It takes a moment for me to collect myself and register the situation. The barn's dim light casts shadows across their innocent faces, turning their playful expressions into an unexpected spectacle.

I can't help but smile, the corners of my lips tugging upward despite my dampened state.

The boy frowns. “Hey, you're not supposed to be happy about this.”

I slowly rise from where I'm sitting. I can only imagine how ridiculous I look, wearing a drenched wedding dress with hay sticking to me everywhere.

“I guess the joke's on me,” I say, my voice tinged with amusement. I draw closer to them, my arms raised. Two can play this game. I grew up with a younger brother and enough

cousins to know that if I show any signs of weakness they'll be worse than sharks who just smelled blood.

As I walk closer, I say, "You know, children, you shouldn't mess with the witch of the barn." I give them a menacing grin.

To my surprise, the little boy is the first one to start screaming. He turns on his heels and runs out of the barn. His sister, I assume, throws me a confused look before taking off after her brother.

As the twins flee from the barn, their laughter turning into startled screams, I can't help but chuckle at the amusing turn of events.

My grin is quickly replaced as a worrying thought replaces it. What if the children alert the adults that they've found me here? Technically, I'm trespassing.

My worry is not unfounded, for just as the children exit the barn, a new presence makes itself known.

"What's going on here?" a gruff voice calls out. Moments later, a tall figure ducks inside the barn. My eyes lock with those of a hot, tattooed man who stands before me, his expression far from pleased. He's huge, his beefy shoulders barely contained in the flannel shirt he wears and he's wearing a cowboy hat that hides most of his forehead. The playful smile that graced my face moments ago fades, replaced by a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

The man looks almost dumbfounded as he skids to a halt a few paces away, his gaze locked on me as if to determine whether I'm real or not.

"What the fuck?" he finally manages to say.

He's staring down at my dress, and I can only imagine what this looks like from his point of view. I'm still in my wedding dress, albeit now it's a little torn and dirty. His mouth is pulled into a hard line, so he's definitely not amused.

"Hey," I say weakly, rethinking my idea of running away in a wedding dress. How am I supposed to explain this to him? There's an explanation somewhere in the back of my head, but

all thoughts flee at his presence and the way his green eyes pin me down.

His presence commands attention, a rugged allure emanating from his confident stance. A few bits of silver in his dirty-blond hair are the only indication of his age. The air crackles with an electric tension, and I find myself momentarily at a loss for words, uncertain of how to navigate this unexpected encounter.

I quickly gather my composure, standing up straight and attempting to appear less disheveled than I feel. As our gazes hold, I sense a flicker of annoyance in his eyes.

“Hello there,” I say, feeling a little awkward. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Startle me? Maybe,” he replies, his voice carrying a hint of gravel and intrigue. “But it’s not every day I stumble upon a woman as...unconventional as you in a barn.”

His words hang in the air, a mix of curiosity and veiled judgment. I’m not sure if he’s over his initial shock. His face is an impenetrable blanket, and I can’t read it. It honestly makes him look scary.

Unease spreads in my stomach. My instincts tell me to run, but a rational part of me tells me that won’t bode well for me. This man is three times my size and twice as tall. I won’t be able to leave this barn before he’s caught up to me.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts, my mind racing with the desire to bridge the gap between us, to unravel the mystery that surrounds this intriguing stranger.

Maybe I’m overthinking it. Maybe if I ask nicely, he’ll let me leave. He’s probably a ranch hand and surprised to find me in here. I’ll be fine. “I was just on my way out, you know?” I begin cautiously. When I try to laugh, it comes out all shaky. “I’ll just leave, and we can both forget this ever happened.” I gesture between the both of us, hoping that my words will calm some of the tension.

Instead, he walks right up to me, circling me like a tiger waiting to pounce on its prey. “What the fuck do you think

you're doing?"

His words send my heart lurching down to my stomach. "I-I was..."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Did you scare the kids? What gives you the right to trespass on my property?"

A jolt passes through me. It's worse than I initially imagined. He's not a ranch hand, he's the frickin' owner. And he looks super pissed right now, his green eyes darkening to resemble the ocean in the middle of a storm.

I feel like honesty isn't my best choice right now, but I can't exactly come up with lies, either. I feel like a deer caught in the headlights.

I swallow hard. "I mean, they did throw water on me first."

His scowl deepens. "We don't take kindly to strangers around here."

"I'm not surprised," I mutter under my breath.

"What was that again?" he says.

"Nothing," I say.

"That's it," he says as he grabs my wrist. "I'm taking you to the sheriff."

My heart skips a beat as the hot, tattooed man's grip tightens around my arm. Surprise and alarm flood through me, momentarily stealing away my breath.

"To the sheriff?" I repeat, my voice trembling with a mixture of confusion and fear. "But what have I done? Why would I need to go to the sheriff?"

His features harden, and his gaze bores into mine with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine. It becomes clear that he sees me as a threat, an intruder in his world, and I'm left grappling with a torrent of emotions—surprise, confusion, and growing unease.

"I caught you trespassing on my property," he states, his tone edged with a mixture of frustration and authority. "It's my duty

to ensure the law is upheld. You'll have to answer for your actions.”

“I didn't mean any harm,” I plead, desperation lacing my voice. “Please, I didn't mean to intrude on your property.”

His gaze softens imperceptibly, a flicker of empathy momentarily crossing his eyes. Yet, his grip on my arm remains unyielding, a reminder of the power he holds over my fate.

Silence hangs between us, punctuated only by the sound of our shared breaths, as he weighs his options. It feels like an eternity, the weight of his decision heavy upon us both.

His grip tightens, his eyes searching mine with a seriousness that sends a shiver down my spine. “You don't belong here,” he states firmly, his tone leaving little room for argument. “I have my reasons, and it's best you come with me peacefully.”

A myriad of emotions swirls within me—confusion, frustration, and a touch of fear.

Reluctantly, I find myself acquiescing to his request, my mind racing to grasp the gravity of the situation. As he leads me out of the barn, my thoughts whirl with questions.

Did I run from Zach only to end up in some place worse?

As we walk through the ranch, my eyes wander, taking in the picturesque scenery that surrounds us. Rolling hills stretch into the distance, cloaked in vibrant hues of green and gold. The majestic sight of the Adirondack Mountains looms on the horizon, their summits reaching toward the vast expanse of the sky. The air carries a crisp freshness, tinged with the scent of earth and nature.

Though my circumstances are far from ideal, I can't help but appreciate the beauty that envelops us. I attempt to push aside the fear and uncertainty that tugs at my thoughts.

The ranch exudes a rustic charm, its weathered wooden fences lining the pastures where horses graze peacefully. The soft sound of hooves against the ground resonates in the distance, a gentle melody that mingles with the rustling of leaves and the occasional chirping of birds.

I steal a glance at the man beside me, his striking appearance commanding attention even in this idyllic setting. His strong, tattooed arms flex as he guides me forward, his intense gaze focused ahead.

“Please,” I implore, my voice wavering with a mix of desperation and determination. “I haven’t done anything wrong. Can’t we find a different solution?”

He glances at me, his gaze momentarily softening before returning to its steely resolve. “You’re not from around here,” he states, his voice tinged with an undercurrent of caution. “And until we can clear this up, I can’t take any chances.”

As we approach the house, my apprehension heightens, my heart pounding in my chest. The man’s grip on my arm remains firm as he leads me inside.

As we step into the kitchen, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air, intertwining with the faint scent of alcohol. My eyes land on another man, seated at the table, nursing his drink in a coffee mug. His disheveled appearance and weary expression hint at a troubled soul.

I can’t help but feel a mix of curiosity and wariness as our gazes meet. There’s a complexity to his eyes, a depth that speaks of experiences both joyful and painful. I wonder what stories lie behind that guarded countenance, what burdens he carries.

His eyes widen when his gaze drops below my face, mouth opening slightly as if he wants to say something, but then thinks better of it.

The hot, tattooed man clears his throat, breaking the silence that hangs heavy in the room. “Cole, we have a situation,” he says, his voice tinged with a blend of frustration and weariness.

Cole’s eyes flicker to me briefly, his gaze assessing and guarded. He takes a sip from his mug, the liquid concealed within providing solace or escape from the weight of his own thoughts.

“I can see that,” Cole responds. “You didn’t tell me you were getting married.”

The hot, tattooed man’s grip tightens slightly, his words measured. “It’s not a joke, Cole. She just stumbled into our home and claims she doesn’t know how she got here. Thought it best to bring her to the sheriff.”

Cole’s gaze shifts between us, his scrutiny intensifying. It’s as if he’s attempting to read me, to decipher the truth hidden beneath the surface. I brace myself, feeling exposed under his piercing stare, my vulnerabilities laid bare.

“At least you’re not secretly married, so cheers to that.” He raises the drink he’s been nursing.

“Cole, stop dicking around.”

Cole flashes me a smile, but I can see the curiosity in his eyes. “Did you throw water on her?”

“She was already wet when I found her,” the other one says, his voice low and husky. He obviously means the state he found me in, and yet I feel a traitorous spark of heat climb up my body. *Shit. What is wrong with me?*

The tattooed guy gestures toward me irritably. “So what do we do now, sheriff?”

My gaze snaps back to the guy at the kitchen table. He has dark, dirty-blond hair that kind of flops over his eyes, with streaks of silver at the temples. Both of them appear to be much older than me—probably in their late thirties or early forties. They’re not my usual type.

But the more important question is—why is the sheriff just chilling in this guy’s house? Unless...

My instincts heighten. This was all a plan, probably to ambush me. They know who I am. This guy is probably not even a real sheriff. He looks like he hasn’t slept in days. Is he even aware of his surroundings right now?

They’re our enemy. They probably think I’m stupid, and they’re right—I’ve walked right into their trap.

“Jesus Christ, it’s not even seven in the morning, and you’re drinking already?” the tattooed guy asks.

Cole raises his mug. “Merry Christmas.”

The other guy looks irritated, his fists clenched at his sides.

I try to take a step back, to slip away quietly before either of them notice me. The door is right there. I can make it.

But just as I turn around to beeline toward it, I crash into a hard wall of a chest. A strong hand slips around my arm to hold me and a soft, husky voice asks, “Hold on there, where do you think you’re going?”

ADRIAN

As I enter the kitchen, exhaustion weighing heavily on my shoulders, my eyes catch a glimpse of movement near the door. A flicker of surprise courses through me as I realize that there's a strange woman wearing a wedding dress in my kitchen, and for some reason she's trying to make a break for it. A million questions tug at the corners of my mind as I quickly move to intercept her.

Confusion washes over me as I register the unexpected sight. My eyes widen, and I instinctively reach out, gently grabbing her arm before she can slip away. "Hold on there, where do you think you're going?" I ask, my voice tinged with surprise.

She freezes, her eyes wide with a mix of panic and apprehension. Her voice trembles slightly as she replies, "I... I'm Natalie. I...I don't know how I got here. I need to go."

My brows knit together in bewilderment as I release her arm, taking a step back to assess the situation.

"She left out the part where she was trespassing," Tanner says, scowling. "We can't just let her go without getting some answers."

I nod in agreement, feeling the weight of responsibility settle upon us. We guide Natalie to a chair, its worn surface a stark contrast to the elegance of her wedding dress.

As Natalie settles into the chair, her posture betraying a mix of discomfort and defiance, I take a deep breath, attempting to strike a balance between empathy and the need for clarity. We need answers, but we must approach this with care.

She glances between me and Cole. “Wait, you’re identical twins.”

“Great, you have eyes,” Cole says distractedly, but Natalie continues to stare at me. I feel a prickle of self-consciousness. Without doing anything, she manages to get inside my skin.

“Natalie,” I begin, my voice measured yet gentle, “we need to understand how you ended up in our home. Can you provide any insight into what happened? Why were you trespassing?”

Natalie’s eyes flicker, uncertainty clouding her gaze as she searches for the right words. “I...I didn’t mean to trespass. I just...I needed somewhere to go, somewhere safe.”

Tanner leans forward, his voice firm but tempered with a touch of curiosity. “Safe from what, Natalie?”

I...I can’t tell you that. It’s...it’s complicated. Please, you have to trust me.”

Trust. It’s a delicate thread, hanging in the balance between truth and deceit. I exchange a glance with Tanner, who calls bullshit with his eyes as he rolls them hard.

“We’re here to help,” I assure her, my voice gentle but resolute. “But we can’t do that if you withhold information. If you want our assistance, we need to understand the full story.”

Natalie’s shoulders sag, a mixture of frustration and resignation evident in her expression. “Fine,” she murmurs, her voice laden with weariness. “But there are things I can’t explain right now. Just...ask your questions, and I’ll do my best to answer.”

That’s not how you earn our trust, I want to retort. But the civilian part of my head reasons that this woman has no reason to trust us. She sees us as much of a threat as we see her. I try to see things from her point of view—three burly, tattooed men, nearly twice her age, are all but interrogating her in a strange space. She’s obviously shaken.

I take a step away, trying to give her some space. Cole looks at me as if trying to decipher what’s wrong with me.

Tanner shakes his head as if to say that I'm going easy on her. But can't he see how shaken up she is?

"First things first," I say. "How did you get here?"

"I ran away from my wedding," she says. "So I hid inside a truck."

Holy shit.

"Wait a minute, Adrian. Didn't you drive down to a church where you went to supply timber?" Tanner figures it out at the same time I do.

"You hid inside the truck?" I repeat.

Natalie doesn't say anything at all.

Tanner glares at me as if it's all my fault.

His observation takes me aback, my mind racing to connect the dots. I turn to Natalie, my eyes narrowing with a mix of surprise and curiosity.

"How did you not know a woman was in your truck?" Tanner demands.

"She obviously hid herself," I say. "Do I look like a trafficker to you?"

"Wait, what?" Natalie says.

"Obviously, we're not," I say to her impatiently. "But is that true? Were you the bride at the church?" I finally ask, dreading the answer.

"Isn't that obvious already?" Tanner asks sarcastically.

I have a pounding headache. I got in late last night and my body still needs a few more hours of sleep.

Natalie's eyes dart between Tanner and me, uncertainty etched across her features. Her hesitation confirms Tanner's suspicion and a sense of empathy swells within me.

Reluctantly, Natalie nods, her voice barely above a whisper. "Yes...I was the bride. But things...things didn't go as planned."

“Wow, my brother is now culpable in a possible kidnapping,” Cole says as he sips his coffee. “Great way to start the morning.”

“Adrian, what the fuck?” Tanner says, turning to me.

“I didn’t kidnap her,” I say. “I didn’t kidnap you, right?”

Natalie looks at me oddly. I noticed the way she threw me a panicked glance when I walked in. It makes more sense now. “No, you saved me.”

As if the whole thing couldn’t get any worse.

She takes a deep breath, her gaze focused on a distant point as she gathers her thoughts. “I...I saw my fiancé...with another woman, my cousin. They both betrayed me, and I couldn’t marry him, obviously,” she confesses, her voice tinged with a mix of pain and determination. “It shattered me. So I ran...I needed to escape that pain.”

Sympathy surges within me as I try to imagine the heartache Natalie must have experienced.

Tanner’s suspicious gaze lingers on Natalie, his skepticism etched across his features.

“The sane thing would just be to inform your family.”

“I can’t do that,” she says, looking away.

“Why the fuck not?”

“I don’t want to marry him.”

“You’ve made that plenty clear,” I say.

Cole, who has been quietly observing from the kitchen table, walks over with a curious glint in his eyes. “Catholics, am I right?”

She doesn’t say anything.

“So, Natalie, what’s your plan now?”

Natalie’s eyes dart between the three of us, uncertainty flickering in their depths.

“I...I don’t know,” she admits, her voice laden with a mixture of vulnerability and determination. “But I can’t go back there.”

Not after what I saw.”

Tanner’s suspicion lingers, his tone edged with caution. “How do we know you’re not hiding something, Natalie? This story sounds convenient, but we need to be sure.”

I interject, trying to diffuse the tension. “Tanner, let’s not jump to conclusions.”

“I promise you,” she says, her voice sincere yet tinged with a hint of pleading. “I’m not hiding anything important.”

Natalie’s features hold a delicate balance of softness and strength. Cascading locks of hair frame her face, accentuating her natural elegance.

As I steal glances at Natalie, I notice the way Tanner’s and Cole’s gazes linger on her as well. I realize that all three of us are crowding around her, way too close for comfort.

I can’t help but notice the way the sunlight catches the strands of her hair, casting a halo of warmth around her, enhancing her natural allure.

Her lips, soft and inviting, are turned upside down, making me feel a stab of guilt.

Tanner leans forward. I notice the way he inhales her in before he starts to speak. “You know things won’t bode well for you if we were to find out you’ve been lying to us.”

Natalie’s eyes widen, and her lips part, and for a moment I swear I see a flash of desire pass through her gaze as it drops to Tanner’s lips. He seems to notice that too, because he visibly twitches. But that look passes just as quickly as she shrinks into herself.

My brother has a strange look on his face. When my gaze cuts back to Natalie, something dawns on me. They don’t look the same, given Natalie’s darker features, but there’s something in her expression, the way she holds herself, that reminds me of...

Is that what’s going through my brother’s head? I can tell he’s being way more aggressive than usual.

“I’m not,” she says finally. “I just don’t want to go back to my family.”

“Did they know about him?” I ask as Tanner steps back. He looks a little shaken, and I notice how he falls quiet out of nowhere.

She shakes her head. “No, of course not, but if I were to go back, it would be a scandal. They are...conservative.”

Tanner faces Natalie. “While I’m sorry to hear that, respectfully, this isn’t our problem. This land is private property.”

Natalie sighs. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. But I can’t go back, and now that I’m here...”

“No,” Tanner says, shaking his head. “Absolutely not. You can’t stay here.”

“Why not?” Natalie asks. She has some balls to stand up to my brother like that.

Tanner’s jaw twitches as he takes her in. “Every person on this ranch has a job already.”

“Then I can do that,” Natalie says. “I don’t expect to sit around and do nothing.”

I watch her in disbelief. Cole laughs. My brother has no self-awareness left. “What? Do you want to milk the cows, train the horses, or fetch pails of water?”

“I can do all of that,” Natalie insists.

Tanner pointedly looks up and down her tiny frame, and maybe it’s my imagination, but I swear his gaze snags around her chest. “Sure you can.”

“I—” she begins, but he cuts her off.

“Adrian, we can’t let her stay here,” Tanner asserts, his gaze unwavering, totally ignoring Natalie now. “Take her back to the church where you found her.”

My heart sinks at his words, conflicting emotions swirling within me. While I understand Tanner’s concerns, a part of me yearns to protect Natalie. It’s difficult, though, since I’ve never

actually gone against my brother before. Tanner calls the shots around here. Cole is the rebellious one, but I always follow the rules. That's how it has always been.

"That's a six-hour drive," I point out, trying to stall.

"Fine, then take her to the bus stop, buy her a ticket. Let her figure it out."

I turn toward Natalie. Tanner is totally avoiding even looking at her. My heart thrums when she looks up at me through her puppy dog eyes.

Tanner's gaze meets mine, firm and unwavering. "Adrian, we don't know the full story. It's not safe for any of us to harbor someone who could be a...liability."

I know it's just the ex-military in him speaking. And it's not just that. Tanner has always been naturally suspicious. But with one glance at Natalie, who looks like she's going to start tearing up any second, my resolve weakens. What harm does he possibly think Natalie can do? She's a tiny thing; the wedding dress probably weighs way more than she does.

"Maybe...maybe I can work here? I can help out, do whatever you need. Please, just don't send me away."

Tanner's brows furrow, his gaze hardened as he crosses his arms. "Natalie, this is not a solution."

She takes a step closer to Tanner, her voice trembling with sincerity. "I promise I'll prove myself. I'm willing to work hard to earn my keep. Please, just give me a chance."

Tanner's expression softens for a moment, an internal struggle evident on his face. He finally shakes his head. "The risks, unfortunately, outweigh the benefits."

Natalie's shoulders slump, the weight of disappointment settling upon her. She turns to me, her eyes pleading for understanding. "Adrian, can't you help? Please, I don't want to be sent away."

"I don't know, Natalie," I say. Even Cole has turned away from us.

A sense of resignation settles upon Natalie's face as she releases her grip on Tanner's arm, her voice barely above a whisper. "I understand. Thank you for everything."

We make our way to my truck, silence enveloping us. Natalie's eyes wander around, seeking something, anything that might provide an opportunity.

She slides inside the truck. Before I can get inside, she says. "Wait, I left my bag in the barn."

"I'll get it," I say. When I return, she's holding a piece of paper in her hands.

Her face brightens with a glimmer of hope. "Why didn't you say you were looking for a nanny?"

"What?" I say confused.

She holds up the flier, and I see it's one that Tanner made a few weeks ago as we were looking to interview a new nanny for the kids.

"I could do that. I'm good with kids."

I look at her warily. "Natalie, the twins can be quite a handful. Are you sure you're up for that?" I say.

She nods. "Yeah, I think so. I babysat my brother when he was younger."

I shake my head slowly. "I don't think you understand what you're up against."

"I think I do," she says.

I cock my head at her. "Have you met the twins already?"

She nods at her dress. "Yeah, they gave me a grand and very wet welcome."

"Oh crap," I say. I hadn't noticed the water on it before, but I can see the noticeable water stains where the fabric is still damp and kind of sticks to her skin. It fits her perfectly, too perfectly. I have to tear my eyes off the curve of her breasts pressed snugly against it. "I'm sorry about the dress."

She shrugs. "I don't care."

She's the first bride I've met who isn't upset at all about the thought of her dress getting ruined.

She waves her hand at me. "It's fine, they're kids."

I can't tell if she genuinely doesn't mind or if she's telling me exactly what I want to hear just so that she can stay.

"I want to be honest with you. The twins can be incredibly mischievous. They've tested the patience of every nanny we've had, and no one has lasted for more than two weeks."

Her brows furrow, a flicker of determination crossing her face. "I understand it won't be easy, but I'm willing to give it a try. I believe I can connect with them and bring some stability to their lives."

I admire Natalie's resilience and optimism, but it's not enough.

"Natalie, it's not just about connecting with them," I explain, my voice filled with sincerity. "They require constant attention, endless patience, and an ability to keep up with their antics. It's a demanding role, and I don't want you to underestimate the challenges."

Natalie's gaze meets mine, determination shimmering in her eyes. "I appreciate your concern, Adrian. I'm aware it won't be easy, but I'm willing to give it my all."

"You really want to stay, huh?"

She gives me a sad smile. "Going home right now is not an option for me."

"The twins are hellions," I say, shaking my head. "They'll make your life a living hell."

She gives me a small smile, and at that moment, I feel a surge of attraction that goes all the way down to my cock. "Bring it on."

NATALIE

When Tanner spots Adrian and me making our way back to the house, he's out in an instant.

Tanner's displeasure is palpable, his annoyance etched across his features. I can't help but feel a pang of guilt for causing this rift among the brothers.

"What the hell is she doing here?" he says, glaring at me. I flinch under his gaze. What have I done to warrant hate like this?

Tanner's voice carries a note of exasperation as he addresses Adrian. "I can't believe you brought her back, Adrian. I made it clear that it wasn't safe. What were you thinking?"

"Tanner, she's willing to help out with the twins," Adrian says.

Tanner blinks a couple of times. "What?"

"You heard him," I say. "You're looking for a nanny, right?"

"Tanner, she's willing to help out with the twins. We need to give her a chance."

Tanner's expression tightens, a mix of skepticism and disbelief crossing his face. "You think she can handle those two troublemakers?"

"Yes," I say.

Adrian's voice remains calm, his tone steady as he attempts to diffuse the mounting conflict. "She came up with the idea, and I think it could be good."

"Good for who exactly?" Tanner says.

“I understand the task won’t be easy, but I’m willing to give it my all. I believe I can make a positive impact in their lives.”

Tanner’s lips curl into a smirk. “That’s a lot of talk for someone who just got a literal cold shower by two six-year-olds.”

I flush under his gaze. “They were probably just trying to be funny. Or they were scared.”

He points at me. “That’s your first mistake. Never underestimate the twins. Everything they do is deliberate. And they’re not scared of anything.”

When he says that, I can hear the pride in his words. The twins have dark-blond hair, just like all three of them. I wonder whose kids they are. If I have to bet, it would be Tanner. He probably goes easy on them, spoiling them. They just need a gentle nudge in the right direction.

“He’s right,” Adrian says.

I let out a small, shaky laugh. They have to be kidding. There’s no way the twins are as bad as they make them out to be. They’re just kids, after all, not the literal devil.

“Fine, let’s see how long she lasts,” Tanner says. It’s clear from the look on his face that he doesn’t expect me to last very long.

I want to wipe that smirk off his face so bad. If he thinks I can’t do it, I’ll prove him wrong.

“As a nanny, you’ll get full boarding and food,” he says. “And we can only afford to pay you five hundred dollars per week. I know it’s a small amount, but we don’t exactly have the budget to spare.”

“Actually, I’m fine with that,” I say, almost jumping. I can barely hold in my excitement.

Tanner narrows his eyes at me in suspicion. I gulp. I know exactly what he’s thinking. I’m way too excited about an underpaid job.

“Now, don’t get too excited,” he says as if reading my thoughts. “As I said before, no nanny has lasted more than two

weeks. And I don't expect you to have much prior experience either, do you?"

"Do my brother and cousins count?" I say softly.

He just rolls his eyes. "Whatever. You'll have a room upstairs in the guest room."

"I'll show her to it," Adrian says hastily, as if he's scared that his brother might change his mind any second.

As Adrian leads me upstairs to the guest room, a question lingers in the back of my mind, pressing for an answer. I gather my courage and finally voice my query, breaking the silence that hangs heavy in the air.

"Adrian, can I ask you something?" I inquire, my voice tinged with curiosity. "Why does Tanner seem to dislike me so much? Did I do something to upset him?"

Adrian's expression softens, his eyes filled with a mix of understanding and compassion. He pauses for a moment, as if choosing his words carefully.

"It's not personal, Natalie," he responds gently, his voice carrying a hint of sadness. "I think you remind Tanner of someone from the past, someone he might be trying to forget. It's a complicated situation."

Curiosity gnaws at my insides, eager to unravel the mystery behind Tanner's animosity toward me. But I can sense Adrian's reluctance to divulge further details.

"I see," I say softly. "Tell me about the kids."

"They're little hellions, as we've said," Adrian says. "Jaden, he's the leader of the two. Helena will do whatever he asks her to."

"Interesting," I say.

"They're good kids. They just need a firm hand," Adrian says.

"What about Tanner?" I say, remembering his bossy attitude.

"He's a total softie when it comes to them. He lets them run all over him," Adrian explains.

“Interesting,” I say. I would love to see that.

The guest room exudes a welcoming aura as I step inside, its cozy ambiance enveloping me like a comforting embrace. Soft hues of muted blues and warm browns adorn the walls.

A queen-sized bed sits against one wall, adorned with crisp white linens that beckon me to sink into their inviting embrace. I didn't really realize how exhausted I am till I saw it.

The room is adorned with delicate curtains, their sheer fabric allowing the sunlight to filter through, casting a gentle glow that dances upon the surfaces.

A small wooden desk occupies a corner, and there's also a small closet lining the wall. The room is much smaller and simpler than my bedroom at home, which was more like a suite, but this is so much better.

“Do you like it?” Adrian says from the door.

I nod. “I love it.”

He smiles. Tanner is unpredictable, Cole is a mystery, but Adrian is the only inviting force here. I gain some comfort in his presence.

“I'm just down the hall if you need me,” he says.

“Great to know,” I say.

Adrian leaves, giving me a ghost of a smile. As I reflect on our interactions, a question tugs at the corners of my mind—was Adrian flirting?

His warm smile and lingering gaze as he spoke, the way he seemed genuinely interested in my well-being—these moments replay in my mind, stirring a mix of intrigue and curiosity.

Did I detect a spark of something more between us, or am I merely grasping at straws?

I sigh as I shake myself away from the thought. It's ridiculous to even think of him that way.

I take my phone out of my dress and plug it in with my charger from my duffel bag. I had turned off my location yesterday in the truck before the phone died. I turn it on to find a flurry of texts and voice message notifications as soon as the screen lights up.

I swallow, overwhelmed, and end up switching off the phone again.

Next, I pry the engagement ring off my finger. It's been digging into my skin ever since the day Zach gave it to me. I find a small, narrow space in the bed's headboard and stash it there. If I need money, it'll easily get me some, even though I have no idea how much it's worth exactly.

As I start to undress, a wave of relief washes over me, the weight of the wedding dress lifting from my shoulders. With each button undone, I feel a sense of liberation, a shedding of the past that no longer serves me.

The anticipation of a warm shower beckons, promising a momentary escape from the whirlwind of emotions that has consumed me.

But just as I'm about to step out of the dress, the door swings open.

I freeze, my heart pounding in my chest, as Cole stands in the doorway, a smirk playing on his lips.

Cole's eyes flicker with amusement, a cocky grin spreading across his face as he looks me up and down, staring right at my chest.

It takes me a few moments to realize what's happening before I cover my chest with my hands. "Oh my God, get out. You're not supposed to be here."

"Relax, sweetheart," he says, his tone laced with a hint of mischief.

He doesn't look as drunk as he appeared in the kitchen. His eyes are alert, dancing with mirth as he looks me up and down. Despite everything, I feel a traitorous burst of heat climb up my body at the look on his face.

I notice the way his eyes darken, the way his tongue snakes out to lick his lips. Shit.

“It’s not like I haven’t seen a half-naked woman before,” he says, watching me through hooded eyes.

I feel a blush creep up my neck as I try to regain composure, my voice laced with a mix of irritation and self-consciousness. “That doesn’t make it any less inappropriate for you to barge in on me like this, Cole.”

He shrugs casually as if he’s completely unfazed by the situation. “I was just dropping off a fresh set of clothes for you. No harm done, right?”

I feel a mixture of relief and frustration wash over me. Despite the embarrassment, I’m grateful for the new clothes, yet his casual demeanor doesn’t erase the discomfort of the encounter.

“Next time, knock,” I assert, my voice firm yet tinged with a lingering sense of vulnerability. “Privacy is a basic courtesy.”

Cole’s expression softens slightly, a hint of remorse flickering in his eyes. “Fair enough. But you know, girls are usually more enthusiastic than you.”

“You can’t possibly tell me they like it when you’re being a creep,” I say, shaking my head. “I just don’t believe you.”

“Not at all,” he says. “They’re the ones inviting me in. I never make the first move, sweetheart.”

I stare at him dumbfounded. I actually don’t doubt that. Unlike his brothers, who have raw, intense features, Cole is more polished, with a fine aquiline nose and chiseled jaw as if God himself took his sweet time making him. His eyelashes rest on his cheeks as he looks me up and down with naked want. The look on his face makes me want to spread my legs open for him.

Jesus Christ! What’s wrong with me?

Cole retreats from the room. I notice that he limps while he walks, something I had attributed to his drunken state before. It’s obviously not that. He hardly looks drunk anymore.

I’ve never been with a man before.

Sure, I've had my share of kisses. I even kissed Zach—chastely, of course—after our engagement was announced. But at twenty-two, I am still a virgin. I was raised in the Russian Orthodox Church and haven't had a reason to even think of sex...before now, that is.

I contain a groan. What the hell is wrong with me? I can't believe I'm actually enjoying the attention of someone who is openly lusting after me.

What would Mom say if she was here?

But that's the thing, I realize dimly. She's not here. In this place, I'm not Natalya Romanov. I'm Natalie, a girl who ran away from her wedding because she found out her fiancé was cheating on her.

“Nice bra, by the way,” Cole says. “I expected something practical for someone who seems as uptight as you, but I love the lace.”

“Get out, Cole,” I say. He smirks at me one last time before leaving.

As I close the door behind him, I lean against it for a moment, letting out a sigh of frustration.

What the hell did he mean by *uptight*? And I hate the way I'm so bothered by him. Who cares what he thinks of me?

I need to focus on the twins, and make sure I last more than two weeks. I have a point to prove to Tanner, after all.

Easier said than done.

I FELL asleep with a plan to make the twins like me, but all thoughts fled my mind as soon as my head hit the pillow. My body aches from exhaustion.

Adrian brought me a sandwich for lunch, and we even chatted for a little before he assured me that I can begin my nannying duties tomorrow.

“You look like a mess,” he told me.

“I’m just tired,” I said.

He looked at me sympathetically. “That’s alright. The twins know you’re here.”

Now, as the sun begins to peek through the window, painting the room with a soft glow, a sound pierces the stillness of the morning. It’s the unmistakable crow of a rooster, and I can’t help but groan inwardly. Seriously, who needs an alarm clock when you have nature’s most enthusiastic wake-up call?

I stumble out of bed, my movements a mix of sleepiness and disorientation. It’s a struggle to fully wake up, my mind still half-dreaming and my body resisting the pull of gravity.

And then, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and step right onto something extremely thick and sticky. I flail my arms wildly to maintain my balance and keep myself from falling. My feet are almost stuck to the ground.

Great, just great. Peanut butter, of course. Because what better way to start the day than this. I’m willing to bet this is the handiwork of those mischievous twins. Even though I haven’t been officially introduced to them yet—except our first and brief encounter—I bet they know the reason I’m going to be sticking around. And the message is as clear as day—I’m not welcome here.

“Well, bad luck for them, I’m Natalya Romanov,” I say under my breath. And Romanovs never stand down from a challenge.

With an exasperated sigh, I gingerly step around the peanut butter slick.

I can practically see their smirking faces, reveling in their successful attempt to shake me.

Well, I won’t let them have the satisfaction. Oh no, not today.

As I make my way toward the bathroom to clean up, I can’t help but chuckle at the absurdity of it all. Life in this place will be far from dull, that’s for sure.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I navigate my way through the house, the creaking floorboards offering a not-so-subtle reminder of just how early it is.

As I make my way toward the kitchen, my bare feet grazing the cool tiles, I can't help but wonder what other surprises await me today. Peanut butter on the floor? Perhaps jelly on the ceiling?

As I enter the kitchen, still recovering from my peanut butter escapade, Adrian's warm voice breaks the morning silence.

"Oh, you're up early. I see I'm not the only one who couldn't resist the rooster's wake-up call."

I chuckle, my fatigue momentarily forgotten. I meet his gaze, a playful smile tugging at the corners of my lips. "Seems like the rooster has declared war on sleep," I reply, my tone laced with humor.

Adrian chuckles, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "Well, at least it means more time to spend in charming company." He gestures to himself.

My heart skips a beat as his words dance in the air. I manage a chuckle and tuck a strand of hair behind my ears.

I stretch my arms above me, aware that Adrian is watching my every move. His gaze drifts down to my midriff, which is exposed. I quickly adjust my shirt and throw him a smile.

"Sleep okay?" he asks, his eyes skipping over my exposed skin. I barely hold back a sigh.

"Yeah, Cole's clothes are super comfortable," I say. I don't mention the whole accidental flashing to Adrian, and I wonder if Cole brought it up. He's actually cocky enough to do it.

"Ready for your first day of work?" he asks.

I take a moment before I answer. "Actually, yes."

The twins tried to bring me down already, but I survived the first line of attack. Besides, I would rather deal with them than Zach. Just the thought of him makes my stomach curdle.

I haven't switched on my phone again since yesterday. I can only imagine Zach blowing up my phone, trying to figure out where I am. At least my family has no idea where I am, and they're as clueless as he is—well, except my brother, but I'm hoping Wylan can keep my secret. As long as he does and my uncles are there, they'll be safe. But then something else occurs to me.

What if Maddy does something?

But no, she wouldn't dare disgrace her name like that.

At least, I convince myself of that. Zach isn't an idiot. My father has been dead for less than a year. He wouldn't dare do anything stupid, like hurting my family.

Adrian leans against the counter, his eyes sparkling with amusement. "I think you might have what it takes, Natalie."

But before the moment can fully unfurl, Tanner strides into the kitchen, his voice cutting through the air. "Natalie, come with me to the shed. We need to milk the cows."

The twins appear in the doorway, their disappointed expressions evident. "Aww, we thought you'd still be covered in peanut butter," Helena says, pouting.

Jaden elbows her. "What?" she says. "You said she'd look funny."

"What?" both Adrian and Tanner say at the same time. The twins look at each other before they run out of the kitchen.

"What on earth were they talking about?" Adrian asks me.

I wave him away. "Nothing important."

"Really? It seems like the twins were up to something," he says.

"Maybe," I say, "but disaster has been averted."

Tanner is eyeing me suspiciously while Adrian chuckles. "Man, you're really patient with them," he says.

I smile at him. "They're cute kids."

“That’s the first time I’ve ever heard someone call them that,” Adrian says.

“Enough,” Tanner says, the protective streak in his voice sneaking out. Although nobody has said it, I’m sure the twins are Tanner’s kids. I wonder if there’s a wife in the scene, even though I haven’t seen any signs of a woman around.

The thought of it makes me uneasy. But why do I even care? I’ve known this guy for less than twenty-four hours, and he hasn’t been very kind to me during that time.

“It’s time for milking,” he announces very seriously.

The way he says it makes me snort, but nobody else finds it funny.

“Sorry, I thought it was like a pun or something,” I say.

I can see Cole shake his head in amusement.

Tanner shoots me a strange look. “Never mind,” I mutter while Adrian chuckles next to me, making my stomach knot.

“Alright, let’s get down to business,” Tanner announces, gesturing toward the barn that holds the cows. “I’ll show you the ropes, and we’ll see how you handle the milking duties. But I’m warning you now, you’ll have to get your hands real dirty.”

I blanch.

Adrian starts to say something but Tanner cuts him off. “I think she’ll handle it.”

The way he says it is definitely suspicious, but it looks like he’s putting his trust on me. I’m not going to let him down.

“Having second thoughts?” Tanner challenges me. “I did warn you. That’s how we do things around here, and everybody plays by the rules.”

“Not at all,” I say. “I’ll do it.”

“Good luck,” Adrian whispers. “Stay away from their hind legs.”

“Thanks for the advice,” I say warily.

“Can we go now?” Tanner says impatiently. I realize that I’ve been staring at him blankly while my mind travels elsewhere.

“Sure thing, Tanner! Let’s go milk those cows. Can’t disappoint them, can we?” I say sarcastically.

Tanner leads the way, and I follow him, still in a state of mild bewilderment at the series of events that have led me to this point.

I take a deep breath, trying to quell the nervous flutter in my stomach. “Sounds like a plan. Lead the way, Tanner.”

As we approach the cows, their gentle presence soothes my apprehension. I greet them with a chirpy “Good morning, ladies,” as if I’m conversing with old friends. They gaze at me curiously, seemingly responding to the warmth in my voice.

I notice a few hulking machines in the corner with large pipes that taper at the end. “What’s that?” I ask curiously.

“You don’t have to worry about that. Now come here.”

I slowly walk up to him.

As Tanner explains the milking process, his serious demeanor somehow makes the task sound more complicated than it actually is. I listen attentively, trying to absorb the information while keeping a straight face.

He gestures toward a cow, his tone earnest. “So, Natalie, you need to gently squeeze the udder and aim the milk into the pail. It’s important to maintain a steady rhythm.”

Just as Tanner demonstrates the technique, the cow—apparently unimpressed with our agricultural endeavors—decides to lift its tail and whip it over my face.

I splutter as I shield my face from the next attack. As I recover, my gaze drops to Tanner, whose lips are twitching.

“Are you...laughing at me?” I say.

He doesn’t meet my gaze when he says, “Maybe.”

“Oh my God, that is so cruel.” I scowl at him.

He shrugs. “You should have been more careful.”

“Adrian didn’t warn me about this part,” I mutter under my breath.

“It’s fine,” he says. “Get over it.”

“Get over it?” I say. “I just got whipped by a cow’s tail.”

“Emma is one of the most well-behaved cows we have,” Tanner says.

“The cow has a name?” I say, cocking my head at him.

He looks like he’s resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “Of course, all the cows are named here. They also have tags.” He gestures to the ear tags attached to the ears that flop once in a while.

“Doesn’t that hurt? It seems extreme, and a little cruel if you ask me,” I say.

“They don’t feel any pain.” He frowns as if he’s offended that I suggested he doesn’t take care of his cows.

“Well, have you asked her?”

“If you’ve discovered the language of the cows, you need to enlighten me on it,” he says drily.

I put my hand on her back and pat softly.

Tanner scowls. “Stop that, you’re not supposed to do that.”

In a sudden burst of bravery, I continue. “And, you’re such an expert on cows? I see the way you’re milking here. You’re not exactly used to it.”

Tanner stands up, scowling, but I see something flickering in his gaze. What is this?

“You’ll startle her,” Tanner says, his gaze cutting between me and the cow, who moos softly.

I continue to pat her. “See? She likes it. You’re just being paranoid.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing, lady,” he says. He practically lunges at me, while at the same time, the cow decides that she has had enough of the both of us.

She gets up on her hind legs and scrambles to move away.

The cow's erratic movements cause the bucket of milk to tip over, spilling its contents onto both Tanner and me. Tanner, who has his grip on me, loses his balance and lands on top of me.

I cry out in surprise as I'm hit by the full force of his weight, knocking the air out of my lungs. We're left frozen, drenched in milk, our expressions a mix of shock and disbelief.

For a breathless moment, time seems to stand still as our eyes lock, both of us caught in the intensity of the unexpected closeness. The scent of hay and the sensation of his warmth seep into my senses, amplifying the charged atmosphere between us.

Tanner's gaze softens, his rugged features etched with a mix of surprise and something more. I feel the rapid thud of my heart against my chest.

"Well, that wasn't exactly how I planned it," Tanner remarks dryly, his voice laced with a touch of amusement.

I can't help but burst into laughter, the absurdity of the situation washing over me. Milk drips from my hair and clothes, forming a puddle at my feet.

"I...uh...we should probably get up," Tanner stammers, his voice faltering slightly.

A flush of embarrassment creeps up my cheeks as I realize our position on the ground. I quickly nod, our eyes still locked for a moment longer before we awkwardly scramble to our feet, attempting to regain some semblance of composure.

"You're right," he finally says. "I haven't done this in a long time. We use those machines to extract the milk."

He points at the machinery. My jaw drops open.

"Why?" I say.

"Because I wanted you down and dirty," he says.

My pussy clenches at his words. "Sorry?" I say.

Tanner blinks, as if only just realizing what he said, and moves away from me.

As soon as we get some distance between us, the energy between us sizzles out.

“I swear I’m not always so clumsy,” I say, trying to break the tension. “You’re trying to teach me something. I promise I’ll be better next time.”

I look up to see Tanner scowling at me. “Your silly attitude isn’t going to fly around here.”

I frown. *What does he mean?*

“I wasn’t trying to be silly,” I say. “It was a new experience for me.”

“Well, maybe the ranch life isn’t for you after all,” he says. Before I can answer, he staggers out of the barn. I don’t understand his sudden hot and cold behavior.

I sigh to myself. I thought for a moment that things could change between us, but it looks like Tanner is determined to hate me.

THE NEXT MORNING, I’m out for a jog around the ranch, enjoying the fresh air and the sound of my sneakers crunching on the gravel road. I’ve always loved running. It helps me collect my thoughts, especially when I’m anxious.

Last night was my first session with the children, and it didn’t go too well. I finally decided to just let them color. I don’t know their coursework yet, and since it’s summer, they’re not in school. So I guess we’re going to take things a little chill.

As I round a bend, I spot the guys—Adrian, Cole, and Tanner—over at the shooting range. They’re taking turns practicing, the distant cracks of gunfire echoing across the open landscape.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I slow my pace to approach them. I’ve always had a fascination with firearms, thanks to my father’s lessons back in the day. But I can’t let

the guys know that I know my way around a gun. It's not the sort of thing you casually drop into a conversation.

As I draw closer, I watch them intently, feigning curiosity. The guys are absorbed in their shooting, and I'm careful not to draw attention to myself. I lean against a nearby fence, trying to appear nonchalant while keeping a close eye on their technique.

Adrian lines up a shot, and the recoil sends a small thrill down my spine.

Cole takes his turn, his focus intense. Tanner steps up next, and there's something different about the way he handles the weapon. It's as if he's more experienced than the others, but I keep my thoughts to myself.

I watch in silence, absorbing their movements and trying to gauge their skill level. It's both fascinating and unnerving, knowing that they're so comfortable with firearms.

Adrian notices me standing nearby and waves me over with a warm smile. "Hey, Natalie, come join us," he calls.

I approach the guys, trying to act casual as I inquire, "What are you all up to?"

Adrian takes a break from shooting and motions toward the guns. "We're just practicing with my new Glock 17. It's a great model, accurate and reliable. You should give it a try."

I raise an eyebrow, playing the part of the novice. "Glock 17, huh? Tell me more about it."

He starts explaining the details of the firearm, and I listen attentively, pretending to be fascinated. As Adrian talks, Cole leans in closer, his voice lowering as he chimes in, "You know, Natalie, if you're interested, I could teach you how to shoot. It's not that hard, and it's always good to know how to handle a firearm."

I look at Cole, feigning hesitation as I reply, "Well, I'm not sure. It does sound intriguing, though."

With a mischievous glint in his eyes, Cole positions himself behind me and takes the Glock 17 from my hand, his fingers

brushing mine as he helps me aim.

His body is close, and I can feel the warmth of his chest against my back. The sudden physical contact sends an unexpected jolt through me, making me acutely aware of his proximity. He guides my arms, his breath warm against my neck.

“Like this,” he murmurs, his voice low and husky. His hands guide mine to the correct grip, his fingers brushing against mine in an instructional and oddly suggestive way.

I’m caught off guard, my heart racing as I attempt to focus on aiming the gun.

“See, Natalie,” he murmurs, his voice low and suggestive, “you just have to keep a steady grip and take a deep breath before you pull the trigger.”

His hands on mine are firm, and I can’t help but feel an unexpected rush of arousal.

His fingers press down on mine as he shoots, the recoil sending me back into him. His arms brush my nipples, and they harden almost immediately. Cole’s gaze drops to my chest, and I see his pupils dilating. He feels this as much as I do.

Tanner’s gaze is intense, and I can see the skepticism in his eyes as he watches my every move.

Cole eventually releases his hold on me, and I find myself both relieved and disappointed as his hands withdraw. Adrian hands me another gun, a sly smile on his face. “Now your turn.”

“I can’t do it,” I say.

Adrian thrusts it at me. “Go on, it’s not too heavy. You can do it.”

“Fine,” I say, breathing out through my cheeks as I position the gun.

“Now remember, the safety is on...” I drone him out as instincts take over and I click the safety off.

Tanner's eyes practically bore into my back. I have to be convincing, though acting so inept is challenging. I aim at the target, making sure my posture is awkward and shaky.

I pull the trigger, and the gunshot rings out. But I intentionally miss the target by a wide margin, the bullet hitting the dirt with a dull thud. I glance over at the guys, feigning a pout and batting my eyelashes, playing the role of a bimbo who couldn't hit the broad side of a barn.

"Oops," I giggle, lowering the gun and looking at them with an exaggerated pout. "I guess I'm not very good at this, am I?"

"How did you do that?" Tanner asks, walking up to me. I smell him—wood and musk.

"Do what?" I say.

"Turn the safety off," he says, his gaze unwavering.

Shit. Did I do that?

"Don't be ridiculous," Cole answers before I can. "She didn't do anything. Adrian showed her."

"I think she did it herself," Tanner says.

"Dude, this is the first time I'm even touching a gun," I say. I start to drop the gun on the table, but Tanner catches my arm. Goosebumps crawl over my skin where he touches me, and I have the insane urge to press myself into him.

I have the feeling that he wants to manhandle me, and a part of me wants to let him.

But he takes the gun from me and clicks on the safety. "Be careful, or you're going to hurt someone."

NATALIE

I'm in my room, immersed in my own little world, when Tanner suddenly walks in. Before I can even process what's happening, he leans in and kisses me. My heart skips a beat, and I feel a surge of surprise and excitement course through me.

"Tanner," I stammer. "What are you doing?"

"Just kiss me," he replies, his voice gruff as his hard body presses into mine. With a groan, I meet his lips again.

It's unexpected, but there's something about the moment that feels right.

Instinctively, I respond to his kiss, letting my emotions take over. His lips against mine feel warm and tender, and I find myself drawn closer to him. The kiss deepens, and I feel a mix of emotions swirling inside me—nervousness mixed with anticipation. In the back of my head, I'm thinking, *Holy shit, am I about to lose my virginity?*

When his hips rock into me and I feel his hardness, insistent, all my thoughts flee my head.

Our hands start to roam, exploring each other's bodies with a newfound intimacy. The chemistry between us is undeniable, and as our clothes come off, a feeling of liberation washes over me.

My skin tingles at his every touch, and I find myself craving more. As he kisses down my breasts, licking and sucking every bare inch of my skin, I feel a growing vortex of pleasure right from my core.

“Please,” I beg. I need him inside of me. It overrides every instinct until all I can feel is...him.

He peels back only to look at me closely. “What?”

“I need you,” I gasp as he rocks into me again and again while his thumb teases my puckered nipples. “I need you to fuck me.”

“What about us?” says a new voice, close to my ears. I look up to see Cole there, unbridled lust in his eyes.

There’s pressure on my legs as Adrian climbs over me. “I want to taste you, Natalie. I want my dick inside you.”

The room around us starts to fade, and the details blur like watercolors on a canvas. Panic starts to well up within me.

I wake up in my bed, halfway to an orgasm. It was just a dream. But damn, it felt so real.

I reach down and touch myself and feel a pool of wetness.

The next two days pass without much happening. I’ve made no progress with the twins, but it’s not like they’re trying to kill me.

I sit at the breakfast table, eager to establish a connection with Helena and Jaden. With a warm smile, I attempt to strike up a conversation, hoping to bridge the gap that seems to separate us.

“So, Helena, Jaden, do you have any exciting adventures planned for today?” I ask, my voice filled with genuine curiosity.

However, my efforts are met with cold silence as the twins exchange glances and continue eating without acknowledging my presence. A tinge of disappointment settles within me, but I remind myself not to take it personally.

Adrian motions to the stack of toasted bread and peanut butter with some jelly on the side. “Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” I murmur.

As I try to hide my disappointment, I catch a glimpse of Cole from the corner of my eye, his attention firmly fixed on me.

He leans in, a playful smile dancing on his lips. “You know, Natalie, you don’t need to waste your time with those two. They’re a tough crowd.”

“I think I’ll manage,” I say to Cole, who just smirks at me. He looks better than he did yesterday. He still has the bags under his eyes, probably from days of not sleeping, but he’s freshly showered, his overgrown hair flopping over his eyes. I feel my heart flip and my stomach clench. I’m definitely attracted to him. But the problem is, it isn’t just limited to him...

A flicker of annoyance crosses Adrian’s face, his eyes briefly narrowing before he resumes his breakfast. The subtle shift in his demeanor does not go unnoticed, and I can’t help but wonder if there’s more to his reaction than meets the eye. It’s as if my interaction with Cole stirred something within him, a possessiveness or maybe even a hint of jealousy.

I focus on my food, trying to distract myself. “I guess bread is your specialty, huh?” I ask.

“It’s the only thing we have,” Jaden says. It’s the first time he has addressed me directly, even though he doesn’t meet my eyes.

Adrian and Cole exchange a sheepish glance. “This is the only breakfast we can cook, really,” Cole says.

“And scrambled eggs,” Adrian adds.

“Good stuff, guys,” I tease as I slather some of the peanut butter on my toast. I’m used to a grand spread of breakfast every morning. My family always insisted that we have our breakfast together and that it’s the most important meal of the day—we always have at least twelve items.

I feel a pang in my heart as I think about them. I’ve been so caught up in the whirlwind of being at the ranch that I haven’t contacted them yet. And it isn’t just that. I’m scared to call.

“What about dinner?” I ask.

“Pizza, takeout, or spaghetti,” Adrian says.

“Jesus,” I mutter. I would offer to cook, but I don’t want to offend them—especially Tanner.

And speak of the devil...

He comes in, his flannel shirt half-unbuttoned, and I feel my jaw go slack and wetness gush between my legs as I remember the dream from last night. It was so real.

As if feeling my eyes on him, Tanner turns to look at me. I quickly look away, squirming in my seat.

I wonder what it would be like to have him inside me, for real. What would it be like for him to take me for the first time? I've been waiting for marriage, but now that I know what a sham it is, I don't want to wait anymore.

Wait—I can't be thinking of Tanner like that, especially when he has made it clear that he doesn't want me here.

Is it wrong to feel this way—especially for three people at the same time? I've always lived a sheltered life. I haven't done anything remotely adventurous in my life, even when I was in college. There were always certain expectations of me. But now here I am, less than a week after running away from my wedding, living with three strange men, taking care of the kids of one of them.

I clench and unclench my legs as an unfamiliar heat climbs up to my core. I never felt this way around Zach, who is arguably handsome, so what is it about the three of them?

It doesn't help that all three of them are so damn hot, or the knowledge that they're so much stronger than me, and bigger, and they could have their way with me as they please. The thought almost makes me moan and bite down on my lip.

I look up to see Cole watching me closely, almost as if he can read my thoughts. I clear my throat and concentrate on cleaning up my bowl.

"We're done," Jaden announces. A streak of milk coats his upper lip, and he looks super adorable.

"You aren't done till you finish the milk. All of it," Tanner says.

"But I don't wanna. Milk makes my tummy hurt," Jaden says.

“Actually,” I say, “he might be onto something. I prefer vegan milk as well.”

Tanner narrows his eyes at me before turning to Jaden. Standing next to each other, they look so strikingly similar. “Well, we don’t have any of that at the ranch. And we don’t waste our food around here.”

“But—” I begin.

Adrian puts a hand on my thigh and squeezes it. I nearly buck off the chair I’m sitting on as it shoots electricity down my skin. *Jesus.*

He shakes his head subtly as if in warning.

“Finish your food,” Tanner says to Jaden, who pouts before he turns to me and shows me his tongue.

Later, when we’re done, I volunteer to help clean up the dishes. Adrian stays back. He’s definitely the sweetest of the three of them. His arm brushes mine as he walks over to the sink and dumps the rest of the breakfast bowls.

I might be sheltered and not have much experience dating, but I’m definitely picking up some kind of vibes from him. He’s interested, and the terrifying part is, I think I am too. At least, I wouldn’t mind if he makes a move on me—like perching me up on the kitchen island and having his way with me.

But he doesn’t do any of that, just helps me wash the dishes.

“Sorry we don’t have a dishwasher,” he says.

I nod, because I wouldn’t have any idea how to use one anyway. Back home, we had servants to do that.

Adrian chuckles, and I notice he’s staring at my hands. I become self-conscious.

“What?” I say.

“You’re going to have soap all over you if you keep doing that,” he says.

“Oh, sorry,” I say as I set down the bowl I’m washing.

“You’ll get used to it,” Adrian says. “We’re not as tech-averse as we seem. We’re still getting used to this place, even though it’s been months.”

“What do you mean?” I say. “I thought y’all were born ranchers.”

He chuckles at my poor joke. “We’re ex-Navy SEALs, actually.”

“All three of you?” I ask, a brow raised. That explains the well-muscled chests and the rugged physique all three of them have.

“Well, Tanner is a bit older, so he was deployed first, and then retired a few years before we did,” he explains.

“That’s so interesting,” I murmur.

“Were any of your family members in the military?” he asks. I know he’s just trying to find some common ground, but a warning goes off in my head. Why is he asking?

“No, not really,” I say. I realize that if they were to find out who I really am, they wouldn’t just throw me out of here... they would also hurt me. The realization sends chills down my spine.

The Romanovs have a reputation for being one of the most cutthroat organized crime families in New York. I’m not sure if the military or Navy know about us, but I imagine they wouldn’t be too happy with our company, much less finding out they’ve been giving shelter to one who is a runaway.

“But I have immense respect for the military,” I say. I regret the corny words as soon as they’re out of my mouth.

Adrian chuckles, and I can tell he doesn’t believe me.

“So, how old were you when you got out?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“I was thirty-five when we quit,” he says. “So that would be about five years ago.”

My throat dries. They’re almost twice my age.

He cocks his head as he looks me up and down. “How about you?”

“Twenty-two,” I say bashfully.

“Too young,” he murmurs under his breath.

“Sorry, what was that?” I ask.

He clears his throat. “Nothing. Nothing.”

“So, from the Navy to this...must have been a big change. Were you always expected to do this?”

“Actually, no. This wasn’t part of our retirement plans...but things changed. You know, Natalie, we actually got this place a couple years ago. It’s been quite a journey, but I won’t lie—things have been tight financially,” Adrian confesses, his voice laced with a touch of weariness.

“I can only imagine how difficult it must be,” I reply softly, my voice laced with compassion. “Starting something new always comes with its own set of challenges.”

“You have no idea,” he says. “Especially with the kids.”

“You guys are super protective of them,” I say. “Especially Tanner.”

Adrian nods. “We have to be. They’ve lost too much in their short lives.”

I assume he’s referring to their mother—Tanner’s wife. I wonder what happened to her. Did she leave, or did something bad happen?

“So, Adrian,” I begin, a faint blush creeping across my cheeks, “I had this rather unexpected run-in with Cole earlier. I was in the process of changing and, well, he walked in and saw more than he bargained for.”

Adrian’s eyebrows rise in genuine surprise, his curiosity piqued. “Oh, really? That must have been quite a moment.”

Is it my imagination, or does his voice get a little husky?

“I can’t imagine how surprised you must have been. Did Cole say anything about it?”

I shake my head, a grin spreading across my face. “He seemed rather unapologetic, actually. Claimed he had seen it all before and was just there to deliver fresh clothes. It definitely made for an interesting morning.”

A playful smirk tugs at Adrian’s lips as he leans in. “And how did you react? I can only imagine the look on your face when he walked in.”

I blush slightly, a mixture of amusement and self-consciousness flooding over me. “Oh, I’m sure I turned the brightest shade of red, and I may have let out a startled scream. It was quite the scene, I assure you.”

I’m definitely not imagining it. Adrian has this strange look on his face that makes my heart thrum.

My phone rings. I look down at it, and my heart almost stops. It’s my brother, Wylan.

“I need to go,” I say as I walk toward the door. Adrian looks bewildered but doesn’t stop me.

Once outside, I press the phone to my ears. “Wylan.”

“Thank fuck, Nati,” Wylan answers. “You’re alive.”

“Language, Wylan.”

“That should be the last thing on your mind right now,” he says before there’s a pause. “You really did it, Natalya. You found the courage that leave that reptile.”

Tears well up in my eyes. My brother thinks I’m brave, but here I am hundreds of miles away from home, hiding.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say, switching to Russian. “I’m at a ranch in upstate New York.

“Wherever you are right now, stay there and keep your phone turned off,” he says.

“Zach?” I ask.

“He’s pissed,” Wylan says. “Maddy and I managed to calm him down a little.”

The mention of Maddy makes my blood boil.

“They’re fucking, you know?” I say.

“What?”

“That’s the reason I ran,” I say.

“Maddy?” Wylan says in disbelief. “I mean I’ve seen the way she has been with him, but I thought it was just concern.”

“I think they’ll be glad to be rid of me,” I scoff.

“It’s not that simple,” Wylan says.

“What?” I say.

“Nothing,” he says. “Stay put, and definitely don’t come home right now. I’ll handle it.”

Before I can reply, I hear a sound behind me. I look up to see Tanner standing there. He doesn’t say anything, just stares at me.

My heart almost stops.

I drop the phone immediately. “Hey,” I say.

He doesn’t say anything. I push my way inside just as Helena runs up to the door.

Her eyes are wide with excitement as she breathlessly exclaims, “Adrian, Natalie, come quickly! One of the horses is about to give birth!”

Adrian’s surprise is evident, his brows furrowing as he responds, “But I thought the mare wasn’t due for a few more days. Are you sure?”

Helena nods eagerly, her anticipation palpable. “I saw the signs, Adrian. We need to go now!”

Without hesitation, we follow Helena, our steps quickening as we make our way toward the stables.

The sight before me is both beautiful and awe-inspiring. The mare, restless and in obvious discomfort, paces within her stall, her eyes filled with a mix of pain and anticipation. I take a deep breath, feeling a mixture of excitement and nervousness coursing through my veins.

Adrian approaches the mare cautiously, his voice calm and reassuring. “Easy, girl. We’re here to help. You’ve got this.”

As we approach the expectant mare, Adrian’s expertise takes charge. He assesses the situation, providing instructions to Helena and me. “Natalie, I need you to stay calm and focused. We’ll need to assist the mare during the delivery. Are you ready?”

I take a deep breath. “I’m ready, Adrian. Just guide me through it.”

“Good,” he says. “Helena, do you remember what we went over before?”

She nods expectantly. “Yes.”

“Good girl,” he says, petting his niece’s head before he focuses on the horse.

I step forward, offering my assistance as well. “Adrian, what can I do to help?”

He glances at me, gratitude evident in his eyes. “First, we need to make sure the area is calm and secure. We have to be ready to assist if needed but also respect the horse’s natural instincts. If you could grab a clean towel and some warm water, that would be great. We’ll need to clean the foal once it’s born.”

I nod, swiftly moving to gather the requested supplies.

The mare’s labored breathing and gentle whinnies fill the stable, a symphony of anticipation.

We position ourselves near the horse, providing a comforting presence as we monitor the progress of the birth. Time seems to slow as the contractions intensify, each moment carrying the weight of anticipation and hope.

Adrian’s voice carries a calm yet focused tone as he addresses the horse, his words a soothing lullaby. “You’re doing great, girl. Just breathe and trust your instincts. We’re here to support you. Just a little more, and we’ll welcome your little one into the world.”

As the contractions intensify, Adrian’s voice remains steady and reassuring. “Okay, Natalie, gently guide the foal as it

emerges. Make sure to keep her calm.”

As I witness the fragile foal taking its first wobbly steps, my heart swells with a profound sense of wonder. Life’s intricate tapestry unravels before my eyes, reminding me of the interconnectedness of all living things and the beauty that emerges from the cycles of birth and renewal.

In this moment, as the foal nuzzles against its mother, I’m reminded of the transformative power of nature, the delicate dance of creation and nurturing that sustains us all.

Before I can move closer, Helena swoops in. She fusses over the foal, which moans in distress as Helena removes it from its mother, who in turn gives an agitated shake of her head.

“Relax, Mama, he’s going to be fine,” Adrian says, petting the deep-brown horse. She’s a beauty with a thick mane at her back. Meanwhile, Helena uses the towel to clean the foal of its mess, not caring about the way it messes up her dress.

As I observe Helena’s tender care for the newborn foal, a sense of admiration washes over me. It becomes clear that beneath her mischievous nature, there’s genuine kindness and compassion.

I approach Helena with a warm smile. “You’re amazing with the foal, Helena. It’s clear how much you care for its well-being. You have a kind heart.”

Helena looks up, her eyes reflecting a mix of surprise and appreciation. “Thanks. I love spending time with the animals.”

“She really does,” Adrian says affectionately. “She’s always with me when I’m taking care of the animals.”

“So you’re in charge of that, huh?” I ask.

He shrugs. “More or less. I’m also responsible for the financial part of the whole thing while Tanner deals with the logistics.”

“What about Cole?” I say.

Adrian gives me a wry smile. “You’ve met him. He doesn’t actually like doing things around here.”

“How did he become the sheriff again?”

Adrian chuckles. "It's a long story, but he's very popular in town."

"Okay," I say.

"Helena," Adrian says, turning to his niece, "how about we leave him alone now with his mother?"

Helena nods reluctantly and releases foal; he runs right toward his mother, although he's still weak.

"He's going to be okay, right?" I ask.

Adrian nods, but I see the doubt on his face. "Yes, he will be. Why don't you get back to your room and clean up?"

It's barely even noon, but I'm already exhausted. "I think I'll do that."

"Can we name him Jack?" Helena asks.

"Sounds like a great name," Adrian says.

NATALIE

The next morning, I wake up before the rooster, which is a miracle in itself. But it's because I want to see the foal.

Yesterday, seeing that horse give birth stirred something in me. I've always loved horses—but I only got to ride them, once I was done with my lessons. This is different.

I take a quick shower and head outside, making a note to buy myself clothes that don't belong to a six-foot-two male and practically hang off my body like a curtain. I'm pretty sure the brothers make fun of me when I'm not around.

I've survived the first week of my job, but that's mostly because the twins left me alone. Well, all except for the explicit drawings where they would make cartoon pictures with knives sticking out of me, or me drowning in the lake. I know it's me because of the midnight-black hair they draw that is surprisingly accurate.

When I brought this up with Cole, he didn't seem too worried.

“Don't worry, it's not as bad as the others. They drew one of them baked in an oven.”

“Jesus,” I say. I personally think the guys are way too lenient with the kids. They need discipline. But I also understand why they would want to coddle them. They're too young to have lost a mother.

Meanwhile, the children have not yet made another attempt to kill me.

Maybe it's the calm before the storm, but I'm determined to beat it.

Tanner told me that I'll be paid at the end of the week, and I think it's mostly because he doesn't expect me to last that long.

Without thinking, I slip out of the house, watching the sun come over the horizon and heading for the barn where the mama horse is housed. She's right where I left her yesterday, except the foal's not with her.

I frown. Did they take it somewhere?

The horse looks up at me mournfully before turning away. I head out of the barn and almost run into Adrian, who's carrying a bucket of water.

"Hey," he says. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Came to see the foal," I say. "How soon are we allowed to get it treats?"

A dark cloud comes over his face. "Can we talk?"

I nod, falling into step beside him. "I didn't see the foal inside. Did you take it somewhere? Isn't it supposed to be with the mother? She looked so sad."

"Natalie, I have something to tell you," Adrian says softly, his voice laced with sadness. "I'm so sorry, but the foal didn't make it. It passed away during the night."

A wave of anguish crashes over me, and I feel a sharp pang in my chest. My vision blurs as tears well up, my voice trembling. "No...how could this happen?"

Adrian steps closer, his comforting presence a balm to my grieving heart. He wraps his arms around me, offering solace in the face of this heartbreaking loss. "I know it's incredibly difficult, Natalie. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, nature can be cruel. We did everything we could, but it was out of our control."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

The look on his face gives me the answer I need. He didn't want to hurt me.

I lean into his embrace, seeking refuge in his strength, allowing myself to let go of the tears that have been welling inside me.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “that your first birth had to be like this.”

“It’s so unfair. He was so beautiful,” I say.

“I know,” he says. “We’ll give him a proper burial. He’s at peace, wherever he is.”

I sniffle as the foal’s face flashes in front of my eyes.

“How’s Helena doing?” I ask.

“She’s a brave girl,” Adrian says. “Jaden took her. He’s taking care of her for now.”

He props me against his shoulder and leads me to the next barn. It appears empty, and I realize dimly that it’s the one where I took shelter my first night here.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but these things are very common at the ranch,” he says as he sits me down against a bale of hay. “If you’re going to stick around, you have to accept it, good and bad.”

He then kneels right in front of me while he continues to rub my arms.

I look up at him. There’s something unreadable in his expression. “Do you think I’ll make it here?”

He squeezes my shoulders. “That’s entirely up to you.”

I bite my lip. To my surprise, he reaches out and smooths a finger over my lower lip, caressing it softly.

“Yes, I know you will,” he says. “You have a fire in you. I saw it the moment I walked into the kitchen when you refused to be intimidated by my brother. Tanner can be pretty scary when he wants to be.”

I laugh a little. “Who says I wasn’t scared?”

“Well, you were pretty convincing,” he says.

“But that b-baby foal,” I stammer. “It didn’t deserve it.”

“I know,” he says. Without asking, he folds his arms around me. It’s a little awkward at first. He’s so much bigger than me, his hard frame engulfing me. It’s disorienting to be shown compassion by someone who looks like him—hardened over years with tattoos covering every visible surface. And yet, he’s so gentle with me. I nuzzle against his neck, smelling his aftershave.

As Adrian holds me in his arms, providing solace for the pain we share, a powerful surge of emotions courses through me. In the midst of our shared vulnerability, the line between comfort and longing blurs.

Our bodies draw closer, and a current of unspoken emotions electrifies the air, intertwining with the raw vulnerability of the moment. I peel away just enough so that I can see his face, which rests only a few inches away. I could easily close the distance between us.

A soft, lingering silence hangs between us, punctuated only by the rhythm of our breaths. Our eyes meet, and his arms around me tighten. He wants this just as much as I do.

His touch is gentle yet possessive, his gaze filled with a mixture of understanding and desire. I can see it in his eyes—he’ll never let me go.

My heart races as Adrian’s lips meet mine, and a shiver runs down my spine. Our tongues dance together, exploring and intertwining with an intensity that sends waves of pleasure through my body. The taste of him fills my senses, fueling the fire that burns within me.

Adrian’s hands roam freely over my body, igniting every nerve ending they touch. His touch is electric, leaving trails of heat in its wake. I feel his fingertips trace delicate patterns along my back, sending delicious shivers down my spine. As our kiss deepens, his hands find their way to my waist, pulling me closer, melding our bodies together.

Lost in the moment, I thread my fingers through his hair, pulling him closer, desperate for more of him. Our bodies press against each other, an undeniable magnetism drawing us

closer and closer. The sensation of his touch leaves me breathless, my skin tingling with desire.

I can feel the passion building between us, aching to be released. I've never felt this way before. I've kissed before, I've loved before, but I never felt the urge to open my legs and...

His lips leave mine, trailing down my jawline, and I tilt my head back, granting him access to my neck. I gasp as Adrian's mouth locks at the base of my throat and sucks hard. Soft moans escape my lips as his warm breath sends shivers down my spine.

Adrian's strong arms wrap around me. The hay rustles around us as he pulls me into his lap, and my heart skips a beat. I can feel the warmth of his body as his lips press against mine with an urgency that matches my own.

"I'll take care of you," he whispers in my ear. "You'll be fine."

Adrian's kiss deepens, and I respond eagerly, my fingers tangling in his hair, pulling him closer. Our tongues dance with an unrestrained desire, exploring each other's mouths as if we're trying to memorize every sensation.

The sweet scent of hay mingles with the warmth of his breath against my skin, fueling the fire that burns within me.

With every kiss and every caress, Adrian's hands wander along my back, tracing invisible patterns that send shivers of pleasure through me. The contrast of his touch against the roughness of the hay makes me dizzy with desire.

I arch my back, pressing my body against his, feeling the hardness of his muscles against my skin as he slowly lowers me onto the floor. The hay beneath us shifts, creating a soft bed that supports our bodies as we lose ourselves in the moment. The sensation of the rough yet comforting texture against my bare skin adds an element of sensuality that sends waves of desire coursing through me.

As Adrian's lips travel from mine, trailing a path of hot kisses along my jawline and down my neck, I completely surrender

myself to the moment. The hay surrounds us, cocooning us in its soft embrace.

I feel a surge of anticipation as Adrian's hands begin to undo the buttons of my shirt, one by one. The cool air brushes against my skin as he exposes my bare chest, and I inhale sharply, catching his hand in mine.

"You good?" he asks.

Instead of answering him, I exhale sharply. I haven't slept with anyone before, so this would be my first time. I hesitate for a moment.

Adrian's eyes meet mine, filled with desire and adoration. And I know this is the right decision.

As my shirt falls to the side, my fingers find their way to Adrian's shirt, eager to explore his body in return. With a sense of urgency, I unbutton his shirt, revealing his smooth, muscular chest. A tattoo of a serpent snakes out from his torso and ends on either arm.

My fingertips graze his skin, tracing the contours of his abs, reveling in the warmth and strength I find beneath my touch.

"I didn't think you were a snake guy," I confess.

He chuckles and rocks against me. "It's more than that."

I trace the outline of the great serpent that coils around his body. His entire upper body is covered with tattoos.

Adrian's lips descend upon my exposed breasts, and a gasp escapes me, a mixture of surprise and pleasure. His kisses are gentle yet fervent, his tongue teasing and caressing my sensitive flesh. Waves of pleasure ripple through me, intensifying with every kiss, as I arch my back, offering him more access.

Simultaneously, my hands explore his body, craving the feel of his skin beneath my fingertips. I trace the lines of his torso, savoring the firmness of his muscles, feeling his heartbeat quicken beneath my touch.

My nails graze lightly over his back, eliciting a low moan from his lips, fueling my own desire even further.

As Adrian continues to lavish attention upon my breasts, his hands skim down my lush curves, sending shivers of anticipation coursing through me. With every touch, every caress, the intensity between us deepens.

He moves down my torso, igniting a trail of fire along the way. I feel his lips on my stomach, his breath warm against my skin, his tongue softly licking my sensitive flesh as his hands caress my sides, urging me closer to the edge of ecstasy.

As his kisses continue to descend, his lips press against the sensitive skin of my thighs. I inhale sharply, feeling a rush of heat course through me. The anticipation builds, knowing he's drawing closer to where I'm aching.

The sensations intensify, my body growing more alive with each touch of his lips against my heated skin. I am consumed by a craving, a yearning that can only be satisfied by his touch.

His hands gently guide my legs apart, opening me up to him. I feel his breath against the most intimate part of me, and my body quivers with anticipation. Adrian's lips meet mine, and his tender kisses mix with a hunger that matches my own.

My heart pounds in my chest as his kisses trail lower, inching closer to the peak of my hot, wet core.

"You're so wet, Natalie," he says.

I'm dimly aware that he's calling me by my fake name, and I may be betraying him by deceiving him. But this feels so good that I can't bring myself to tell him the truth.

And then all thoughts leave my mind when he kisses there...

My hips buck, moving to meet his mouth, but he's not going anywhere. His hands splay over my hips, holding me in place as he continues to eat me out.

His kisses grow more urgent, his tongue teasing and tantalizing, drawing me closer to the precipice of pleasure. He laps at my core with his wicked tongue and uses a finger to amplify the sensation as he slightly pinches down on my clit.

I see bright spots at the back of my eyes.

"Do you like that?" he asks.

“Yes,” I breathe.

I writhe beneath his touch, my hands gripping his skin, craving more of him. And then I spiral. My mouth opens in a scream that he covers with his mouth as he comes up to kiss me again. I’m caught in a whirlpool of orgasms, one giving way to another.

Adrian crawls back up to me, so he’s positioned right above me. Our eyes meet. I can see his desire for me so clearly in his eyes. He’s still in his jeans, and his erection forms a tent, straining against the denim.

I help him unbuckle his belt, and as he slides his pants down his legs, his cock, hard and impatient, comes leaping out. My eyes widen at the sight of it. I have no reference points for male genitalia, having never seen a naked man in person, but he’s *big*. And it grows impossibly bigger under my gaze, its bright pink tip practically calling out to me, asking me to wrap my lips around it. And God, I want it inside me.

“Are you okay?” he says.

I nod, folding my legs around his hips so he’s locked in. Adrian chuckles under his breath as he fishes for a condom in his pocket.

“So impatient,” he chides, but I can tell that he likes it.

“Do you always carry that around with you?” I ask.

“One can never be too safe,” he says.

“I would imagine Cole doing it,” I say, laughing a little at the absurdity of the situation. Do people usually laugh when they’re about to have sex? Don’t ask me since I’m no expert.

Adrian chuckles, and this weird expression comes over his face. “We’re more alike than you might think.”

I nudge him closer so he practically topples on top of me, his mouth finding mine. I can taste myself on his lips, slightly salty. It’s a heady taste.

Our bodies align perfectly, and as he enters me, a surge of pleasure courses through every fiber of my being. There’s only

a twinge of pain, but that disappears as soon as he's seated inside me.

Adrian is watching me so I bury my face in his neck.

"Fuck, you're so wet. I just slid inside you," Adrian groans, half in amazement.

He feels so good inside me that I don't want him to stop moving. I want him...forever.

I gasp, feeling a delicious stretch and the overwhelming sensation of him filling me completely. I put my arms around his shoulders to hold him there as he continues to move inside of me, crying out every time he leaves my body.

"Oh my God," I manage to bite out.

The sensations ripple through me, intensifying with every thrust, building a crescendo of pleasure that threatens to consume us both. I cling to him, my nails digging into his back, seeking an anchor in the sea of pleasure that engulfs us.

He pulls my legs up so they're resting on his shoulders as he continues to pound inside me. It feels like he's impossibly deep—I can feel him in my belly.

"You feel so good," he groans. "So tight, so wet."

The last of my apprehension leaves my body. This isn't how I thought I would lose my virginity, but this is better than I could ask for.

Adrian's eyes meet mine, a mix of tenderness and desire reflecting back at me, and I'm reassured that our love is the foundation of this moment. His movements are both gentle and passionate, his touch igniting a wildfire within me.

I lose myself in the depths of our passion, surrendering to the overwhelming waves of pleasure that crash through me. Every caress, every gentle thrust, brings us closer to the pinnacle of ecstasy.

As Adrian and I reach the peak of pleasure together, a powerful surge of heat courses through our bodies, igniting an inferno that consumes us both. Our cries of ecstasy mingle in

the air as waves of pleasure crash over us, intensifying with each passing moment.

And then, with a shared gasp, we surrender to the overwhelming pleasure, our bodies convulsing in a symphony of release.

“Oh, good lord,” Adrian mutters as he collapses on top of me.

I run a hand over his hair as I revel in the sensation of having him inside me. I dimly feel the hay digging into my back, but his delicious weight on top of me makes up for it.

He slowly pulls out to look down at me. “How do you feel?” His voice is soft and tender.

“Great,” I say, which is the truth.

“I don’t want to get up,” he says.

“Neither do I.”

His lips find mine again, and I feel him getting hard again.

“So soon?” I ask.

“You have no idea what you do to me,” he growls as he nips at my skin.

As Adrian and I find ourselves lost in the passionate heat of the moment, a sudden interruption jolts us from the aftermath of the sex haze. The sound of the door opening sends a surge of surprise through us. Startled, we turn our heads to see Cole standing there, a smirk playing on his lips.

With a sarcastic tone, Cole quips, “Well, well, well, I hope you two are considering selling tickets.”

TANNER

I can't shake the unease that's settled in my gut ever since I overheard Natalie's conversation in the hallway earlier.

The language she was speaking...I'm almost certain it was Russian. I don't want to jump to conclusions, but it's hard not to be suspicious.

First, it's the way she knows her way around guns, even though she pretended not to. And now this? I can't ignore it any longer.

I've bided my time, waited until I'm sure she's not in her room. I'm not sure where she is, but I'll have to be quick.

I head up the stairs quietly, praying she won't walk in on me snooping around her stuff. The door to her room is ajar, and I slip inside, my heart pounding in my chest.

Natalie's room is neat and organized, just as I expected. But I need to find something, anything that could confirm my suspicions or put my mind at ease.

I'm not sure what I'm looking for. She hasn't been here for long so it's not like she has much stuff on her.

I glance around the room, desperation creeping in. Maybe I'm just being paranoid. Perhaps it was all a misunderstanding. As I'm about to give up and leave, I notice a small stack of books on the bedside table. Could there be something there?

I pick up the first one and start flipping through the pages, but it's all in English. I move to the next, and the next, but each book is in a language I can read. There's nothing here that would explain what I heard earlier.

Frustration and guilt gnaw at me. I shouldn't have invaded her privacy like this, but my suspicion got the best of me. I put the books back where I found them, return everything to its original place, and make my way out of her room.

I'm about to leave her room, feeling guilty and embarrassed for snooping around, when a bizarre impulse takes hold of me. It's as if my curiosity has become an irresistible force. I return to her closet and start rummaging through her clothes again, and that's when I see it—an innocent-looking pair of lacy panties.

I can't believe what I'm about to do, but I can't resist the temptation. My heart races as I pick up the delicate fabric, the soft lace brushing against my fingertips. I bring them closer, inhaling deeply, my senses overwhelmed by a heady mix of Natalie's scent and the fact that I'm about to do this.

I feel a wave of heat rush through me as I take my illicit prize. I can't explain why I'm doing this, but I pocket the panties and make my way outside. I know I've crossed a line, but I can't summon any guilt.

Cole

As I approach the barn, a flicker of movement catches my eye through one of the open windows. Curiosity piqued, I take a closer look—to my surprise, I see Adrian on the floor of the barn. At first, I'm confused about what I'm looking at.

My eyebrows dip together as I try to understand what I'm seeing. I draw closer when I hear the unmistakable sounds of moaning coming from inside. The sun falling through the windows lights up the barn enough for me to scan the interior, and it's then that I realize what I'm seeing.

Adrian is fucking someone. And it's not just anyone...it's Natalie. Her legs are perched on top of his shoulders as he pounds into her passionately, earning a whimper from her every time he goes inside.

I feel a flutter of disappointment. The truth is, I've wanted her since I first saw her, and not just because, as Adrian alleges, I would fuck anything that moves. There's just something about her.

I saw the way she defied Tanner. I saw the fire in her, and I want that for myself. Unfortunately, Adrian got to her first. I'm not exactly surprised. I saw the way he was following her around like a puppy, and she seemed to like the attention. Obviously, it paid off.

"Lucky bastard," I mutter under my breath.

As I continue watching them, I feel my own cock twitch and harden. I stroke it through my pants as I watch them fuck, transfixed. I'm not a voyeur. I would much rather be involved in the action, but there's something so hot about watching my twin fuck this girl. With every stroke he pushes in and out of her, it's almost like I can feel it in my own nerve endings. My cock hardens at the sight as I continue to watch.

Heat rises in my cheeks as a mix of embarrassment and excitement floods through me.

A devilish grin spreads across my face. Just because Adrian got her first doesn't mean I can't have her too.

Unable to resist the opportunity to tease them mercilessly, I push open the barn door and stride in, relishing in their startled expressions.

"Well, well, well, I hope you two are considering selling tickets," I say, my voice filled with a playful tone.

"Cole, what the fuck?" my brother says, shooting me an indignant look. My brother and I look almost identical, except my hair is slightly darker.

"Looks like I stumbled upon quite the scene. No need to cover up, you two. I've already seen more than enough," I say.

Their faces turn various shades of red as they scramble to find something to conceal their naked bodies. My gaze lingers on Natalie's. I had no idea she was hiding such lush and sexy curves under my oversized shirts she's been wearing. Her nipples are pink and slightly pointing, and I swear they swell

under my gaze before she quickly covers herself and glares at me.

Adrian stammers, attempting to regain composure, “Cole, what are you doing here? Can’t you knock?”

I can’t help but chuckle, thoroughly enjoying the discomfort I’ve caused. “Oh, I didn’t realize there was a *No Spectators Allowed* sign. My apologies for interrupting your little escapade.” I give Natalie a pointed look, staring right at her chest which she desperately tries to cover.

Natalie’s eyes narrow as she joins in the banter, trying to regain control of the situation. “Well, Cole, you must be thrilled to have such a prime view. Maybe we should start charging admission.”

“Don’t worry, dear brother,” I continue, my voice dripping with sarcasm, “your secret is safe with me. But I couldn’t help but notice how much fun you were having.”

I watch Adrian and Natalie exchange relieved glances, their embarrassment slowly fading. At that moment, a rush of unexpected desire surges through me.

Unable to resist the temptation, I step closer to her, a mixture of anticipation and intrigue pulsating within me. Our eyes meet, and I can see a flicker of confusion and curiosity in her gaze.

“And I kept thinking to myself...why should they have all the fun?”

Adrian’s brows pull together in a frown while Natalie gawks at me.

I squat right in front of Natalie. It doesn’t escape me that Adrian has a hand draped over her shoulder protectively.

“Did you forget, Adrian, that we share everything?” I remind him.

His eyes widen. Natalie’s mouth falls open. “Excuse me?”

Without a word, I lean in and press my lips against hers, tasting the lingering essence of my brother. At first, her lips

simply press against mine, her mouth locked as she freezes, maybe in surprise, shock, or both.

I wait for my brother to protest, but all I get from him is a sharp inhale of breath.

Natalie's arms snake toward me, resting on my shoulders as if to push me away.

And then something incredible happens. Her mouth opens under mine, and she gives me access to her tongue.

I nearly come undone, growling into her as my tongue delves inside her mouth.

The kiss is electrifying, a mix of familiarity and the forbidden. A surge of excitement courses through me as I explore the contours of her mouth, tracing the remnants of Adrian.

As our lips mold together, I feel a spark of connection, an undeniable chemistry that defies logic and reason. The taste of Adrian on her lips only intensifies my desire, fueling a wave of forbidden pleasure that I can't help but revel in. I let myself be consumed by the moment, lost in the depth of our shared passion.

I can sense her initial confusion and hesitation, yet, to my surprise, she continues to kiss me back almost feverishly. She wants me as much as I want her. A surge of adrenaline courses through my veins, mingling with the desire and curiosity that ignited this unexpected connection.

Natalie responds to my kiss passionately, her lips moving against mine with a mixture of surprise and surrender. There's a hint of confusion in her touch, as if she's grappling with conflicting emotions.

I feel a mixture of guilt and exhilaration, a heady combination that intensifies our connection. Our bodies gravitate closer, driven by an undeniable attraction that defies logic. The kiss deepens, and I find myself lost in the sweetness of her mouth, consumed by a hunger that I never anticipated.

Her breath quickens as my fingers gently trace her skin, sending shivers down her spine.

I draw her closer, the warmth of her body against mine sending a rush of desire through me. I can feel her heart racing, matching the tempo of mine.

And then, without hesitating, I find a path down her body using my fingers, hearing her gasp against me.

I wait for Adrian to jump and tell me to stop, but he doesn't—he just watches, slack-jawed. I realize that my brother is enjoying this. Even though we've never explicitly talked about doing this, we've teased this idea with a couple of my girlfriends in the past. He always put his foot down. But Natalie is different.

I meet her intense gaze, waiting for her to catch my arm and stop me, but she doesn't. Instead, she instinctively spreads her legs for me as my fingers tangle around her small bush before sinking inside.

“Good girl,” I growl. “Spread those legs for me.”

She whimpers but does exactly what I tell her.

My fingers curl around her engorged clit, and she bucks under my expert touch, latching onto my shoulders for support. It's not long before she starts to ride my fingers while her eyes almost roll into the back of her head, and she bites down on her lips.

“You like that?” I ask. “Do you like riding my fingers?”

I'm intentionally obscene, and she only seems to be turned on more by my vulgar words.

“Imagine you're riding my cock instead. Would you like that?”

“Oh yes, please,” she says, her head falling back. She would crumple to the ground, but Adrian holds her until she's practically cradled between the two of us, her body slightly twitching as she races toward an orgasm.

I smirk at my brother. He doesn't look pissed, but he has an unreadable expression on his face.

“You like that, huh?” I say as I continue to stroke in and out of her using my fingers. I'm so hard that I'm practically dripping

in my pants. Jesus. I don't remember the last time I felt so out of control.

She's so tight I can barely fit two fingers inside of her. If she weren't so fucking wet...

She cries out against the nape of Adrian's throat, and I almost lose my train of thought.

Instead of saying anything, Adrian holds her hair back and kisses her at the base of her throat.

"Don't stop," she moans.

"I'm not," I promise as I continue to stroke in and out of her. My throbbing cock screams for release. I want nothing more than to put it inside of her and spend myself there. But this isn't about me. This is a lesson, and this is also a warning. She needs to understand that having my brother comes with its own set of consequences.

Her eyes roll to the back of her head as she convulses almost violently against me. Her pussy walls clench around my fingers almost painfully as she orgasms. Her legs give way beneath her, and Adrian has to practically prop her up.

While she regains her breath, I pop both fingers in my mouth and suck on them while I keep my gaze on her. She keeps looking at me, her eyes half-mast, her chest rapidly rising and falling. Sweat dampens her skin and dots her forehead. Her hair looks like she just went through a storm, and her cheeks are red and flushed.

She looks like she has been properly fucked.

I continue to suck on my fingers until I've cleaned off her essence. She tastes sweet, with a hint of spice to it; that's most likely because of my brother. I smirk at Adrian, who refuses to look at me and practically cradles Natalie.

"Are you alright?" he asks her, brushing her hair away from her scalp.

"I don't think she's ever been better," I say, smirking at him.

"Cole—" he begins before he seems to think better of himself.

“I’m happy I walked in on you when I did,” I say, folding my arms over my chest. “And don’t tell me you regret it. I know you enjoyed the show.”

“Fuck you, Cole,” Adrian says.

I roll my eyes. “If you’re pretending for her, it’s no good. She liked it as much as you did.”

With that, I walk out of the barn, feeling a sense of satisfaction coil over my chest. I don’t remember the last time I felt this way. Since my deployment ended, life has been bland and boring, the days practically melting together. But Natalie is like a fresh breath of air.

She was about to get married, and now, not even a week later, she’s getting fucked by strangers in a barn. She’s definitely not as vanilla as I thought she was.

As I walk back to the house, I spot Tanner in the distance. When he sees me, he comes jogging over. Great. I had meant to avoid him because I knew he would have questions.

“Hey,” Tanner says, frowning a little as he catches up to me.

“Hey, big bro. Didn’t see you there,” I say as I take a flask out of my jacket. I unscrew the lid but then think better of it. I can still taste Natalie in my mouth, and I don’t want to get rid of it just yet.

“Really? I called your name a few times.”

“I was distracted,” I say. Now this isn’t really a lie.

“So where were you?” he prods.

“Now that’s a funny story,” I say, chuckling. I don’t know what’s going on with Natalie and Adrian. I don’t know what’s going on with me and her, but I can’t tell Tanner about it. I’m not sure how he’s going to react, especially since he’s hell-bent on kicking Natalie out. Adrian and I already have a growing distance between us, especially since our deployment. I don’t want things to get messy.

“Have you seen Natalie?” Tanner asks, almost as if he’s read my mind.

I almost choke. “No? Why would you ask me that?”

He shakes his head. “I haven’t seen her since this morning. I think she left, but her clothes are still in the room.”

It’s then that I notice the crumpled shirt in his hands. “That’s mine,” I tell him.

“That you gave her,” Tanner says. “I can’t believe I trusted her to take care of the kids. I found Jaden trying to knock over a cow.”

I chuckle. “That kid is amazing.”

Tanner scowls. “They’re going to get hurt one of these days. Natalie probably took off because she couldn’t handle the heat.” Instead of sounding smug, he sounds disappointed.

Now I’m confused. Did he hope she would stay?

“I think you’re overreacting,” I say.

“I haven’t seen Adrian either,” Tanner says. “I feel like they’re up to something together.”

“Oh, you have no idea,” I mutter under my breath. I kind of want to tell him, just for the sake of his reaction. But at the same time, I don’t want things to implode.

We walk next to each other. Each step sends a bolt of searing pain up my spine, and I grimace. Jesus. Even though it’s been over a year since I got the surgery, the pain is still bad. It usually gets worse during summer.

I always hope that people around me won’t notice it, but I can feel my brother’s gaze studying me.

He gently asks, “How are you holding up?”

I glance away, not wanting to burden him with my struggles, but I know he won’t let it go until I’m honest. “I’m okay,” I mumble, avoiding eye contact.

“Cole, you don’t have to pretend with me,” Tanner insists, stepping closer. “I know it’s not easy, I can see it in your gait. How’s your leg today?”

I take a deep breath, letting my guard down. There's no use hiding from my brother; he's always been there for me. "It's been giving me some trouble," I admit, feeling the weight of vulnerability lift off my shoulders.

Tanner nods, understanding. "You know, it's okay to have bad days," he says gently. "You've been through a lot, and your body needs time to heal."

We start walking toward the house together, and I try to push aside any signs of discomfort from my leg. I don't want Tanner to worry more than he already does.

As Tanner bids me goodbye and walks away, I can't help but notice a lacy pair of panties sticking out of his back pocket. My eyes widen in surprise, and I do a double take, trying not to burst into laughter right then and there.

"Wait, what in the world...?" I mutter to myself, trying to wrap my head around the absurdity of the situation.

Could those really be Natalie's panties? I mean, Tanner despises her—or at least he claims he does—so what's the deal with him carrying around a pair of her undies?

"Hey, Tanner!" I call out, trying to act casual, but the grin on my face betrays my mischief. "Forgot to do your laundry or something?"

He turns back, a puzzled expression on his face, then glances down at his pocket, his cheeks flushing bright red. "Oh, uh, these...um..." he stammers, clearly flustered.

I can't resist teasing him further. "Is this a new fashion statement? You know, carrying around panties in your pocket? I'm not sure it's going to catch on."

Tanner's embarrassment just adds fuel to my playful fire. "Actually, they're not mine," he finally admits, looking a mix of mortified and amused.

"Oh, really?" I raise an eyebrow, pretending to be all serious. "Whose are they then? Don't tell me you're starting a collection!"

He chuckles nervously, trying to deflect. “It’s just...it’s nothing. Forget about it, okay?”

But of course, I can’t let it go that easily. “Come on, Tanner, spill the beans!

He rolls his eyes but gives in with a resigned sigh. “Okay, fine. They’re Natalie’s, alright? But it’s not what you think!”

Oh, this just keeps getting better! “Natalie’s, huh?” I smirk. “So, you hate her so much that you carry around her underwear as a trophy?”

Tanner’s face turns even redder. He leaves without answering. I smirk after him. Maybe he doesn’t hate Natalie so much after all.

NATALIE

I t's been a few days since I last spoke with my brother so I turn my phone on and call him. When he doesn't pick up right away, I text him.

What's going on?

He texts back a couple of minutes later.

Nothing much.

My heart drops. He's obviously lying. I text him again but there's no reply.

I put the phone away inside the pillow. I know for a fact that Tanner at least is suspicious of me. They've given no indication they're surveilling me, but I don't want to take any chances.

The next morning, I decide to surprise Jaden and Helena by cooking breakfast for them. I feel like I'm at a standstill with them. Even though they're not openly hostile, they haven't warmed up to me either. I just want to show them I can be someone they can trust and rely on.

I've been reading up on child psychology on the internet, and even enrolled in a couple of classes. Adrian was gracious enough to lend me his office PC. It's not just about proving Tanner wrong.

I recognize the loneliness in the children. I've seen it in myself. Even though my parents are lovely people, I've always felt a little distant from them. Maybe they were protecting me

from the eventual heartbreak that would come from their loss. It's unfortunately all too common in the world I come from.

But despite that, my mother gave me all the care she could.

As I prepare the breakfast in the kitchen, Jaden looks suspiciously at me. I try my best to smile warmly at him, hoping to ease his doubts.

"Bonjour, Jaden," I say cheerfully. "I'm making French pancakes for breakfast."

"Where's Tanner?" he says softly, padding into the kitchen. I'm not sure what the family dynamic is around here, but I find it strange that he calls his father by his given name.

"He and Cole are tending to the horses," I say. "A vet came to see them."

He doesn't even acknowledge whether he heard my words, and starts heading out the door.

"Woah, where are you going?" I ask.

"I take care of the horses with them," he says, not meeting my gaze.

"Wait, you can't go," I say.

"Why not?" he says.

"Because you're supposed to eat your breakfast first," I say.

He rolls his eyes. "I don't care."

"Well, I do," I say. "I'm getting paid for it." That's not the only reason, but I have to tell him something to catch his attention.

When he finally looks up at me, I'm struck by how much he resembles Tanner. Of course, Adrian and Cole look a lot alike too, but Jaden is his father's carbon copy. I wonder why his mother is no longer in the scene. Was she Tanner's wife? Or something else?

He looks surprised. "Wait, you're serious?"

I fold my arms in front of me. "That's right."

“I don’t need a nanny,” he says stubbornly, puffing his chest out in a way that makes him look hilarious and adorable at the same time. “I’m a grown man.”

“Sure you are,” I say. “But I’m not your nanny. Think of me as your caretaker.”

He snorts. “There’s no difference.”

“Of course there is,” I say. “And if you don’t want me to be your nanny, you can consider me as the ranch hand.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re not a ranch hand. You’re an outsider. You don’t belong here.”

I admit that his words smart my skin, but I try not to show it. Adrian is right. Dealing with the twins will take everything out of me.

Not that I want to think about Adrian right now. Just thinking about yesterday’s encounter sends shivers down my spine. And then there’s Cole...

“Listen, just eat your breakfast, and then you can go,” I say. “I’m sure you’re hungry after last night’s dinner.”

Yesterday, Tanner was on dinner duty, and suffice it to say that the homemade tacos he made were a little too salty to eat more than a few bites.

He shrugs. “I’m used to it.”

My heart throbs. The poor kid. I’m sure Tanner, Cole, and Adrian are trying their best, but they’re men at the end of the day. They can’t replace a woman.

“I promise you’ll like this one,” I say, holding up the packet of instant pancake mix. “My mom taught it to me.”

At the mention of my mother, something comes over his face that looks like hurt. But at least he’s not bounding out of the house.

“How do you have that?” he asks, pointing at the packet. “We never have that.”

“I found it in the pantry—well, at the back of it, and we better eat it before it goes bad,” I say. “It’s bad luck to waste food.”

I'm slowly turning into my Russian mother.

"You talk funny," Jaden says, sniffing a little.

"You should hear what my mother says," I say.

"You have a mother?" he asks.

The poor kid. I judged him way too harshly before. He's just starving for attention.

"Yeah," I say.

"What else does she say?" Jaden asks.

"Let's see—she says that breaking mirrors is bad luck, and so is spilling salt on the ground."

"Why?" he asks.

"Well, spilling salt leads to fights in the family, and the mirror thing is mostly about ghosts."

Jaden rolls his eyes. "There's no such thing as ghosts."

"You should visit my ancestral house," I say, deadpan.

Jaden's eyes kind of widen. I think I'm putting myself at risk by giving away too much information, but I also have Jaden's complete attention on me without him resorting to trying to kill me in several different ways.

"Come on," I say, nodding to the kitchen island.

Jaden eyes me skeptically as I start preparing the ingredients. I can sense his suspicion, and it makes me a little nervous.

"Don't worry, Jaden. I promise I won't poison you," I tease, trying to lighten the mood.

He raises an eyebrow but doesn't say anything, keeping his guard up. I understand that earning his trust won't happen overnight, but I'm determined to win him over.

Helena comes in after a few minutes. She has a book propped under her arm, and her hair is a little messier than I would like.

"Hey," I say. "Good morning."

Just like Jaden, she looks a little wary as she walks up to the kitchen counter.

“Hey, Helena, do you like pancakes?”

“I guess,” she says as she scratches her head before running a hand down her hair. She has a little bit of a grub on her chin, so I say, “Would you like to wash your face?”

Jaden snickers at my question. I frown. Now that I think about it, the twins have dirt and grease on their elbows and necks. It’s barely perceptible, but still there. I wonder when was the last time they bathed. It takes kids a lot of prodding to actually get them to clean themselves. I’m sure Tanner, Adrian, and Cole have not actively neglected the kids, but they’re still men at the end of the day.

I hesitate. I don’t want to bring this up right off the bat because I’m not sure how the kids will react, and the last thing I want is to call them dirty or make them uncomfortable. I’m not their parent, I’m just taking care of them. But I make a mental note.

Just as I’m about to flip a pancake, I remember something that might pique their interest. “Vous voulez essayer des crêpes?” I ask with a smile. “Do you want pancakes?”

It has the desired effect. Helena’s eyes sort of widen as she leans forward on the counter.

“Wow, Natalie! You know French? That’s so cool!”

“I took a few classes in high school and college,” I explain. Jaden makes a snooty sound, and I ignore him.

“Can you teach us some more?”

I blink at her in surprise. I can’t help but smile at her enthusiasm. “Bien sûr! Of course! I’d love to teach you both some French. It’s a beautiful language.”

As I cook, I start teaching them simple phrases, and Helena eagerly repeats after me. Jaden seems a bit more reserved, but I notice a hint of curiosity in his eyes.

I hand them each a plate with a stack of crepes and a selection of toppings. “Bon appétit!” I say, encouraging them to dig in.

To my delight, Helena takes a bite and lets out a delighted “Mmm!” Her reaction is so adorable that it makes me smile wider.

Jaden takes a cautious bite and then says, "It's alright."

I can't help but feel a small sense of triumph. Maybe this breakfast is a step in the right direction. "See, I told you it wouldn't be so bad," I say with a playful wink.

"Whatever," Jaden mutters, loud enough for me to hear it. I observe the twins while they eat. They're just so wild.

"So," I say. "Where do you go to school?"

"We don't," Helena says after some hesitation.

"Helena, shut up, we're not supposed to say anything," Jaden says.

I frown. "Why not?"

Helena falls silent. It appears that she doesn't want to do anything her brother doesn't want her to do.

"Why not?" I prod again.

"We'll be starting school in a few weeks," she finally says.

"Oh, so you have your vacation going on right now," I say, nodding. That makes sense. It's summer, after all.

"Yeah," Helena says, still not meeting my gaze. She fidgets in her seat and plays with her hair.

"Helena, would you like me to fix your hair a bit?" I ask gently, reaching out to tuck a loose strand behind her ear.

She hesitates for a moment, looking a little unsure, but then nods timidly. "Okay, but just a little," she says softly. I can tell she's having trouble managing it, but she's too stubborn and proud to ask for help.

I smile warmly and start gently combing through her hair with my fingers. It's a little tangled, but I handle it with care, making sure not to pull or hurt her. As I work, she seems to relax a bit, and a small smile forms on her lips.

"I'll bring my comb," I say.

"Actually, I have one. Adrian got it for me last week," she says. Before I can stop her, she runs away and returns after a while, holding an Anna and Elsa comb.

“That’s such a cute comb,” I remark.

“Thanks, it’s my birthday present,” she says, blushing.

“It’s silly,” Jaden says.

“You have such beautiful hair, Helena,” I compliment her.

“With hair like this, you could be a model!”

Her eyes light up, and she looks pleased with the praise. “Really? You think so?” she asks, her shyness momentarily fading away.

Next to her, Jaden snorts. “She doesn’t want to be a model. Do you, Helena?”

Helena doesn’t reply. Her lips kind of wobble, but no words come out.

“Absolutely,” I reply, swooping in as I finish up the impromptu hair styling. “There, all done. You look even more beautiful now.”

Helena blushes, clearly flattered, and I’m glad I could make her feel good about herself.

Turning my attention to Jaden, I try to engage him in conversation. “So, Jaden, do you have any hobbies or interests you’d like to share?”

He shrugs nonchalantly, not saying much. It’s clear he’s not entirely comfortable opening up, but I’m determined to break through his shell, just like I did with Helena.

“Come on, Jaden,” I encourage him with a friendly smile. “I’d love to know more about you. Do you have a favorite sport or game?”

“Not really,” he replies.

“Jaden likes hanging out with the horses! Morning Glory is his favorite,” Helena says, beaming at me. I resist the urge to pat myself on my back.

The nannies before me were obviously doing something wrong because I’ve already made friends with one of them. It’s only a matter of time before the other one comes around. At the end of the day, they’re only kids.

“That’s awesome, Jaden! I love horses too,” I say with genuine enthusiasm. “Would you like to go out and watch some of the horses in the pen? It could be a fun way to spend some time together.”

Jaden seems to consider the idea for a moment before nodding in agreement. “Sure, why not?” he replies.

I beam at him. *And that’s how you do it*, I think to myself. These kids just needed the right person to open up to.

As we walk toward the pen, the morning sun casts a soft, golden glow over the vast expanse of land. The air is crisp and carries the scent of fresh hay and earth. It’s a serene and peaceful atmosphere, perfect for spending time with the magnificent creatures that await us.

As we approach the pen, I can see the horses grazing in the lush green pasture. Their sleek coats glisten in the sunlight, and their graceful movements exude a sense of freedom and power. Their glossy coats range from deep chestnuts to striking blacks and elegant bays.

There’s an air of tranquility surrounding them, as if they’re in tune with the rhythm of nature.

Some of the horses lift their heads to greet us; their ears perked up with curiosity. I can’t help but smile at their gentle expressions, feeling a sense of kinship with these majestic animals.

As I watch the horses grazing peacefully, I’m taken by surprise when Tanner comes trotting over on a horse. He looks effortlessly rugged and handsome in his well-worn brown leather boots, faded blue jeans, and a plaid button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up. A cowboy hat rests atop his head, shading his eyes from the morning sun. I can’t help but feel a wave of attraction.

My heart skips a beat as he approaches, looking every bit like a rugged cowboy straight out of a movie. There’s an undeniable charm about him that leaves me feeling flustered.

“How are you two holding up?” Tanner says, looking pointedly at the twins.

“They’re wonderful kids. We’re having so much fun.”

Tanner’s skeptical expression tells me he’s not entirely convinced, but I don’t let it deter me.

His gaze lingers on me for a moment, and I feel a flutter in my chest. But then he glances toward the river and sighs. “I need to go check on something down by the river. There’s a little issue with the water supply. Can you guys manage here for a bit?”

“Of course,” I reply, trying not to let disappointment show in my voice. “We’ll be fine. Go take care of what you need to do.”

He nods, his eyes lingering on me for a moment before he turns his attention to Jaden and Helena. “Alright, you two behave while I’m gone. And if you need anything, just let Natalie know.”

“We will, Tanner,” Helena says with a bright smile, and Jaden nods in agreement.

As I glance over to the next pen, my eyes are immediately drawn to a strikingly beautiful horse standing alone. Its coat is a lustrous shade of dappled gray, with a sleek and muscular build that exudes power and grace. Its mane and tail flow like silver ribbons in the breeze, adding to its ethereal appearance. The horse has a regal presence, and its intelligent eyes seem to hold a hint of mystery.

Curiosity and concern flood my thoughts as I wonder why such a magnificent creature stands alone. I can’t help but feel drawn to it, and an urge to approach and comfort the horse wells up within me.

I turn to Jaden and Helena. “Hey, guys, do you know why that horse is alone in the pen?”

Helena starts to say something, but Jaden gently interrupts her, his expression serious.

I climb over the pen wall to look at the horse better.

“It’s a shame it’s there alone,” Jaden says. “It’s such a good ride.”

“Have you ridden it?” I ask.

“Tanner doesn’t let us ride the horses,” Helena says. She looks so forlorn.

“I’ve been riding since I was eight,” I say.

“I don’t believe that,” Jaden says.

“Really, my dad insisted that we learn riding as we grew up,” I say.

“We?” Helena says.

“My brother and me,” I explain.

“I still don’t believe it,” Jaden says.

Instead of answering, I climb down inside the enclosure.

“Natalie, I don’t think you’re supposed to be doing that,” Helena says, panic in her voice.

“Relax, it’s just a horse,” I say.

“Just a horse,” Jaden repeats, the smile on his face growing.

As I approach the solitary horse, Jaden challenges me with a mischievous smirk on his face. “Why don’t you try riding it, Natalie? Show us what you got!”

“Alright, you’re on!” I reply with a determined grin, not fully realizing the true nature of the horse in front of me.

As I approach the horse, I can sense its wild energy, but I brush it off, thinking I can handle it. However, as I get closer, the horse suddenly snorts and paws the ground aggressively.

In an instant, the horse charges toward me, and panic surges through me. I let out a startled scream, adrenaline rushing through my veins.

TANNER

I hear Natalie's scream, my heart leaps into my throat, and without a second thought, I turn my horse around and gallop back to where she was.

As I approach, I see Natalie on the ground, her face pale with shock. The wild horse stands a few feet away, still clearly agitated. I know I need to act quickly and calmly to keep both Natalie and the horse safe.

"Tanner, don't!" Jaden calls out. "It's too dangerous for you."

"I'll be fine," I say. My concern for Natalie overrides all my instincts. I just know I need to make sure she's okay and unharmed, and she's seconds away from being trampled on by the horse. I need to act fast.

Without hesitation, I dismount from my horse and leap inside the pen.

"Tanner!" I hear the kids call out from behind me.

Taking a deep breath, I approach the horse cautiously, speaking to it in a soothing tone, trying to calm its nerves. "Easy now, buddy. It's all right," I say, keeping my voice steady.

Sea Wind is a gorgeous horse, but he's been a pain in my ass since he came to us. His previous owner let him go without much bargaining. I should have known then that something was up, but the horse was too beautiful for me to let him go. He'll make a fine stallion once he's ready, but he's far from being tamed.

“Here, buddy,” I say, my hands reaching into my pouch and pulling out a few sugar cubes. Ever since I found out that they were the best treats to give to a horse, it’s been nothing but a blessing. Even the wildest of them seem to enjoy the cubes.

The horse is still on edge, but seems to respond to my presence. He eventually comes over to steal the cubes from me, moving on from Natalie. I keep my focus on him, gently guiding him away from Natalie and toward the far end of the pen.

I keep a firm grip on the reins, speaking in a soothing tone. Slowly, the horse starts to settle, but I can’t help but curse myself for not warning Natalie about this particular horse.

Once I’m sure the horse is at a safe distance, I rush to Natalie’s side. “Natalie, are you okay?” I ask, my concern evident in my voice.

She nods weakly, still trying to catch her breath. “I...I think so. Just a little shaken.”

I help her to her feet, checking her for any obvious injuries.

“Sorry about that,” I say, my voice tinged with remorse. “I should have told you. This one’s not quite tamed yet.”

Natalie takes a few deep breaths, trying to steady herself. “It’s okay, I should have been more careful,” she says, still looking a little shaken.

Thankfully, she seems to be mostly unharmed, but I know that a fall like that can still cause some hidden injuries, like a possible concussion.

“Let’s get you back to the house,” I say gently, offering her my arm for support. “We need to make sure you’re alright.”

Natalie nods, and I guide her back toward the house. The twins follow us inside, and they’re surprisingly quiet.

Once we’re inside, I have her sit down on the couch, and I fetch a cold compress to help with any potential swelling. I check her for any signs of a concussion, asking her questions to gauge her cognitive functions.

“Can you tell me your name? Do you know what day it is?” I ask, trying to assess her mental state.

Natalie answers correctly, but she still looks a bit dazed. “I’m all right, Tanner. It was just a scare.”

I remain vigilant, not wanting to take any chances. “We should keep an eye on you, just to be sure. You took quite a fall,” I say firmly, trying to convince her to take it seriously.

She rolls her eyes. “Sure.”

I grab her shoulders and force her to look at me. “I’m serious. A concussion can be dangerous if not treated.”

Her jaw goes slack as she considers me. “You look good in that cowboy outfit of yours.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. “I’m hardly a cowboy.”

“Well, you look like one,” she mutters under her breath.

“Natalie, how did it happen? Did the horse just charge at you out of nowhere?”

She takes a deep breath, recalling the incident. “Well, Jaden challenged me to ride the horse, and I thought it was all in good fun. I didn’t know it was wild and untamed,” she explains.

As she speaks, a mix of emotions washes over me. I’m relieved that she’s okay, but I also feel frustrated with Jaden and Helena for not warning her about the horse’s nature.

Turning toward the twins, I reprimand them gently yet firmly. “Jaden, Helena, you should have told Natalie that the horse was wild. It’s not a joke to play with someone’s safety like that.”

They both look down, remorseful for their actions. “We’re sorry, Tanner,” Jaden mumbles.

“Yeah, we didn’t think she’d actually try to ride it,” Helena adds, her voice small.

I sigh, trying to balance my protective instincts with understanding their curiosity. “You need to be more responsible, especially when it comes to someone’s safety.

Horses can be unpredictable, and it's essential to communicate honestly about their behavior.”

As I turn back to Natalie, she tries to reassure the twins. “It’s okay, guys. I should have been more cautious too. We all learned something from this, right?”

I’m impressed by her grace and ability to see the situation from both perspectives. “You’re right,” I say, giving her a small smile. “We all learned something today.”

I’m impressed. For a person who almost got run over by a horse, she’s surprisingly forgiving. I honestly didn’t expect her to have this reaction. I’ve had her written off as a spoiled brat. I’m usually good at making a quick study of a stranger, but maybe I’m wrong this time.

“Well, I’m beat, so I’ll go upstairs and rest,” she says.

“I’ll help you,” I offer, holding her arm as I lead her away. My other hand hovers over her back, barely touching her. I can’t help but imagine how soft her skin must feel. I have the strangest urge to run my fingers over her back, to feel the shudder that would run down her body. I want to feel her arch into me.

Fuck. Something is wrong with me.

I open the door to her bedroom upstairs and lead her to the bed. She turns her face toward me and starts to say something when she realizes how close I am. Her eyes widen, and her lips part.

The air between us feels charged, and I can’t help but feel a pull toward her. For a moment, it feels like the world around us fades away, leaving only the two of us in this shared moment.

I take a step closer, and I see a hint of anticipation in Natalie’s eyes. Part of me wants to lean in and close the distance, to see what it would feel like to kiss her, to explore this newfound connection between us.

But then I remember that she’s still healing from the scare with the horse, and this may not be the right time or place for such a moment.

Clearing my throat, I take a step back, breaking the spell between us. "I should probably let you rest now," I say, my voice a bit unsteady.

Natalie nods, her cheeks flushed with a mixture of emotions. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea."

Natalie

I'm flipping through a magazine when the door opens, and Cole peeks in.

"Heard the twins tried to kill you again today," he says.

"Close enough," I say, shaking my head. "Tanner saved me before I got into any real trouble." It's a miracle I got away unscratched.

Cole nods. "Sounds like my brother."

He sits down on the edge of the bed. I fold my legs shut, feeling a little self-conscious. We haven't spoken since...well, since he was knuckles deep inside of me, making me come.

Cole gives me a look as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"I guess it's necessary to have some fun, just to keep you on your toes," he says.

"That doesn't include me dying," I say, rolling my eyes.

He laughs before his gaze falls to something beside me. "You know, for a twenty-year-old, I've never seen you use your phone much. Aren't kids these days all about Tic-Tac or whatever?"

I can tell that he's just trying to rile me up. "I'm twenty-two. And it's called TikTok. You're really showing your age."

"Am I?" he says. "Well, I would say that age comes with its own set of experiences." He leans forward. "How many men have been able to make you scream like I did?"

Almost instinctively, my panties wet, and I resist the urge to bite down on my lips. "Are we having this conversation right

now?”

He chuckles. “Do you have something more interesting, perhaps a demonstration? Well, there is this one thing...”

This has to be more bait. “What?”

“I didn’t know you had a thing for Tanner as well.”

I blanch. There’s no way Cole knows about the dream I had about Tanner. And earlier, when Tanner was helping me to bed, my body almost had a violent reaction to his presence.

“W-what are you talking about?”

“My brother has been carrying your panties in his pocket. Don’t tell me you didn’t know about it,” Cole says.

Why would Tanner, someone who has made it clear that he dislikes me, have my underwear with him? The mere thought of it makes my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

Cole is nearer to the truth than he understands. Yes, I’ve had both Cole and Adrian, but I’m getting greedier. My dreams lately have been of Tanner having me in all the ways that he wants, his cock drilling into me while the night outside turns to dawn.

I glance at Cole, searching for any sign that he might be joking, but his expression tells me otherwise. He seems genuinely concerned, as if he stumbled upon something unexpected and strange.

“I don’t understand,” I manage to say, my voice slightly shaky. “Why would Tanner have my underwear? Is this some kind of prank?”

Cole shakes his head, looking just as puzzled as I feel. “I don’t know, Natalie. He looked pretty serious about it.” I can tell that it’s a façade.

“What is that even supposed to mean?” I say.

He kind of shrugs before smirking at me. “Why don’t you ask him about it?”

My mind races with possibilities, but I can’t find a logical explanation for why Tanner would keep my underwear.

And then something dawns on me. I know what I need to do.

Tanner

As I make my way to Natalie's room with a bowl of soup in hand, I can't help but feel a mix of nerves and curiosity. I know I haven't been the most friendly toward her, but seeing her upset earlier made me feel strangely compelled to do something nice for her. So I made this soup for her.

Cole saw me making it, and had questions. I chose not to answer them, but I didn't miss the knowing smile on his face.

As I knock on the door, my heart beats faster, unsure of how she'll react to my unexpected visit. When Natalie opens the door, wearing a robe, I can sense that she's surprised to see me. Her eyes lock with mine, and I can't help but notice a glimmer of uncertainty in them.

Before I can say anything, she speaks up, her voice slow and husky. "Tanner, I heard from Cole that you had my underwear. Is that true?"

Is it my imagination, or did her voice drop several decibels? Heck, she doesn't even sound upset.

My heart sinks at the realization that she knows about it. I wasn't planning on her finding out like this, but there's no use hiding it now. I take a deep breath and respond honestly, "Yeah, it's true. I found it accidentally in the laundry room, and I didn't know how to give it back without making things awkward."

She seems taken aback by my admission and turns away from me.

For a moment, I think she's mad at me. I try to come up with the appropriate words to tell her I'm sorry, and that it wasn't my intention. It was just a moment of pure insanity.

But then, to my surprise, she unfurls her robe, revealing the same underwear which she's now wearing. My eyes widen, and my heart skips a beat.

Natalie's gaze meets mine again, and I can see a hint of playfulness in her eyes as she says, "Well, here's your chance to return it properly, Tanner."

I stare at her, awestruck. I'm not really sure what's happening right now, but my dick knows. It's hard almost instantly. I can't remember the last time I was with a woman. Between maintaining this place and the kids, there was little time for anything else. There were a few women, but their faces always blurred together.

Natalie is different.

"What are you doing?" I manage to say, my voice coming out gruff.

"Didn't you want to see it on me?" Her voice is full of innocence. "Up close and personal?"

Jesus Christ, she's killing me. The truth is, I've wanted her since the moment I found her in the barn. I could see her nipples standing out through the flimsy gauze of her fitted dress, and I wanted nothing more than to put my mouth on them. That, of course, would have been insanity. But it looks like my insanity is about to come true.

As Natalie sashays up to me, a mixture of surprise and delight washes over me. Her boldness catches me off guard, but I can't deny the thrill that courses through my veins. The air around us seems to crackle with anticipation. By the time she closes the distance between us, I'm aching and ready to spend.

Before I can say anything, she leans in and kisses me.

Her lips against mine are soft and inviting, igniting a fire within me that I can't ignore. The taste of her on my lips is intoxicating, and I find myself responding to her kiss with equal fervor.

Her actions leave me feeling both elated and intrigued. It's as if a barrier has been broken, letting out the animal caged inside me. I can have her. She wants this as much as I do.

She steps back, her hot breath fanning my face, her dark eyes searching mine.

“Fuck it,” I mutter under my breath as I let go of the last of my inhibitions.

I grab the back of her head, sinking my fingers into her thick hair as I continue to kiss her. She sighs against my lips, and I slip inside her mouth, finding her tongue and rolling it under mine.

She moans and grabs my shoulders before her fingers travel up to my neck as she continues to kiss me. I tug at her hair a few times, eliciting a groan from her before my fingers skim down her body to find and knead her lush curves.

I feel a rush of desire and intimacy as I guide Natalie to the bed, still caught up in the heat of the moment. As we continue to kiss, my heart pounds in my chest. It’s beating so fast that I’m surprised it doesn’t come right out of me.

As we get to the bed, I take a moment to look at Natalie, who is now standing before me in her underwear. The sight of her leaves me breathless. She’s wearing a delicate lace bra that accentuates her curves, and the soft fabric molds perfectly to her skin. The intricate design adds a touch of elegance, and I can’t help but admire how it enhances her natural beauty.

Her matching lace panties are equally captivating, hugging her hips and highlighting her alluring figure. The way they complement her body makes it hard to tear my eyes away.

“God damn,” I mutter under my breath. I have imagined what she must look like wearing those panties, but nothing comes close to reality.

With a gentle touch, I caress her cheek, relishing the softness of her skin under my fingertips. “You’re stunning,” I whisper, my voice filled with sincerity and admiration.

Her breath hitches as I run a finger from her cheek down her neck. She shudders as I step closer, digging my fingers into her hips. She has curves for days that she’s been hiding away in those oversized shirts belonging to Cole.

I slowly take off Natalie’s bra, my heart pounding in my chest while I hook a finger around her panties and push them down to her feet.

As her bra comes off, I take a moment to savor the sight of her, naked and beautiful before me. The dim light casts a soft glow on her skin, accentuating the curves and contours that make her uniquely her.

“Fuck me,” I say as I drink her in. My greedy cock is straining against my pants, but this isn’t about me.

I softly push her into the bed. Before she can recover, I’m on top of her. I kiss down her jaw, marking a path down her neck, where I bite the sensitive spot at the base of her throat.

Her body writhes under mine, her fingers wrapping around my neck as she clings to me.

Lowering myself to my knees, I take one of her pert breasts in my hand, gently caressing and massaging it. My lips close around her other nipple, sucking softly and eliciting a soft gasp of pleasure from her. I switch my attention to her other breast, lavishing it with the same tender affection.

I kneel beside her, running my fingers along the soft skin of her thighs, causing her to shiver with anticipation. As I inch closer to her center, I can feel the heat radiating from her core, and it drives me wild.

She’s glistening with arousal, and the sight makes my desire for her nearly overwhelming.

Before I continue, I lock eyes with Natalie, seeking permission and ensuring she’s comfortable with every step. She nods, her eyes filled with trust.

As I kiss down her body, I can sense her anticipation, and it only serves to heighten my own desire. Her responsiveness to my touch is a thrilling revelation.

I dip my head, pressing my lips against her inner thigh, planting soft kisses as I work my way upward. Her breath hitches as I get closer and closer to her most sensitive spot. Finally, I reach my destination, and I give her clit a gentle, teasing lick.

A moan escapes from Natalie’s lips, encouraging me to continue. My tongue explores her, alternating between delicate strokes and more intense circles.

I'm deeply attuned to Natalie's responses, her every sigh and gasp guiding me as I explore her body.

As I focus on her pleasure, her reactions become more intense, and I can tell that she's on the cusp of ecstasy. Her body responds to my touch, and it's a powerful feeling to know that I'm the one who can elicit such a response from her.

I can feel the tension building within her by the way her body tenses up, by the soft whimpers that become more and more insistent. Her fingers grip the bedsheets tightly as waves of ecstasy wash over her. I continue to lap at her core, alternating between gentle licks and more intense suction, pushing her closer to the edge.

When I sense she's on the brink of climax, I slow my pace, wanting to prolong her pleasure.

She's almost there.

I can sense Natalie's body tensing up, her breaths becoming shallow and rapid as she reaches the edge of climax. As I witness the raw pleasure on her face, a primal desire surges within me.

She's so close, but I feel a sudden impulse to change the dynamic. I know I'm the devil for doing this, but I want this to be a moment of mutual connection and shared experience, so I flip her over gently, careful not to break the momentum of our intimacy.

Gripping her hips firmly, I guide myself toward her entrance, feeling her wetness inviting me in. I enter her slowly at first, savoring the tightness and warmth that surrounds me.

I hold myself still, giving her a moment to adjust, to accommodate my cock. I can feel her walls gripping me, tight and welcoming, and it takes all my self-control not to lose myself entirely in the sensation.

As I start moving, the rhythm is primal, almost instinctual. When I'm seated inside her, a rush of sensations overwhelms me.

"Oh fuck," I groan. "You feel so good."

The sound of our bodies colliding fills the room, merging with her moans of pleasure.

My hands roam her body, exploring her curves and feeling her muscles tense and relax beneath my touch. I lean forward, my chest pressing against her back, and I bury my face in her hair, inhaling her scent before peeling away, stroking in and out of her.

One hand finds its way to her hair, gently gripping it, using it to angle her head back slightly. I lean in, pressing my lips against the nape of her neck, planting fervent, possessive kisses along her skin.

My hand moves from her hair, gliding down her spine, feeling goosebumps rising in the wake of my touch. I let my fingers dance along her skin, leaving a trail of fire in their wake, igniting her arousal even further.

Natalie's moans grow louder, her body pushing back against me, urging me on. Her body responds to my every touch, her back arching as she meets my rhythm. I can feel her nails lightly scratching my skin, urging me on.

Her soft gasps turn into louder cries of ecstasy as I pick up the pace, pushing both of us closer to the edge. Our bodies glisten with sweat, and the intoxicating scent of sex fills the air.

I can feel her walls tightening around me, signaling her impending release. I quicken my pace, knowing that the climax is just moments away for both of us.

"Come for me," I command as I tease her clit. Her body tenses before her walls cling almost painfully around my dick. I spiral toward an orgasm, and spend myself inside her with a shout.

"Fuck," I say as our breaths mingle together. But I'm not done with her yet.

I flip her onto her back and give her a few seconds to relax before I enter her again, this time without preempt. I'm going to fuck her till dawn, till the both of us see stars in our eyes.

ADRIAN

I'm in my room, engrossed in a book, when I start to hear some muffled noises coming from Natalie's room. At first, I try to ignore them, not wanting to intrude on her privacy, but curiosity gets the better of me. Just as I'm contemplating whether to investigate further, Cole appears at my door with a mischievous smile playing on his lips.

"Hey, Adrian," he whispers, barely containing his excitement. "You won't believe what's happening in Natalie's room. Want to take a peek?"

"I can't care less," I say, shutting my book.

Cole rolls his eyes. "Now I know that's a bucket load of crap. I've seen the way you look at that girl."

My gaze snaps to him. "Like what?"

"Like you want to possess her," he replies. "Unfortunately, or fortunately, Tanner looks at her the same way."

"Tanner?" I say, and then something occurs to me. "Is he with..." I trail off, unable to complete the sentence.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he says.

I hesitate.

He walks further into the room. "It's different with us. We're twins, and we're used to sharing. But Tanner's involvement changes the dynamics."

I swallow hard. "There's nothing to change."

He cocks his head at me. "Now you're just lying."

“What happened at the barn was a mistake,” I say finally.

“Which part? Where you fucked her, or where you watched her come apart on my fingers?”

My throat goes dry. I can’t deny it. That was the most erotic experience of my life.

“Do you think it was weird?” I say.

“It’s only weird if we want it to be,” he says with a shrug. I narrow my eyes at him. Out of the three of us, he’s the most open-minded person, while Tanner is on the conservative side of the spectrum.

“He won’t like it,” I say in a low voice.

“Well, he just has to deal with it, doesn’t he?” Cole says with a shrug. “You had her first.”

Even though my brothers and I look so much alike, I’ve never exactly been a girl magnet, since I mostly kept to myself. Cole is right. Natalie is the first person who noticed me first.

“Let’s go,” Cole says. “Besides, they’re being too loud, and they might end up waking the kids. It’s only our responsibility, you know?”

Part of me is hesitant. I don’t want to invade anyone’s privacy, especially if it’s something personal or intimate. But Cole seems determined, and he nudges me, adding, “Come on, it might be fun. We’ll just have a quick look and leave.”

I’m torn, but his persuasion gets the best of me, and I reluctantly follow him to Tanner’s room. We arrive quietly, trying not to make our presence known. As we peek through a slightly open door, I catch a glimpse of Natalie and Tanner entwined in each other’s arms. He’s fucking her sideways while she bites into his arm, her tits shaking almost violently from side to side as he impales her.

Breath leaves my lungs, and I watch them, almost paralyzed.

As we quietly observe Tanner and Natalie together, I can’t help but feel a surge of arousal wash over me. It’s an unexpected reaction, and the intensity of my feelings takes me aback. I try to suppress the sensation, feeling a tinge of guilt

for intruding on their private moment, but I can't deny the way their passion and intimacy captivate me.

As I steal glances at them, I notice the way Tanner's hands caress Natalie's skin and the way she responds to his touch with such fervor. Natalie's eyes are closed, and her lips are parted in pleasure as she moans his name in between thrusts.

It's as if they're in their own world, completely lost in the moment, and I can't help but feel a twinge of envy.

Despite myself, my cock hardens in my pants.

"Oh please," she moans as Tanner continues to ram in and out of her. "Oh, please don't stop."

I want to go over to her and have my way with her till my name is the only one she can think of.

Cole gives me a knowing look as if to say, "*See? I told you it was worth checking out.*"

My heart is still pounding, and my body feels strangely electrified. I can't deny that I'm aroused by what I see—witnessing Natalie and Tanner in the throes of passion ignites a desire within me that I didn't expect.

I step away from the door. This is insanity—perversion even. She's with my brother now, for God's sake. So why does it feel so right?

My cheeks flush with a mixture of shame and arousal, and I quickly avert my gaze, not wanting to intrude any further.

Natalie moans, and it reverberates right down to my cock. My God. All thoughts of walking away flee my mind.

I groan under my breath, and it's loud enough to catch Tanner's attention—he turns around and sees us.

Fuck.

His brows furrow.

"What the hell?" he swears.

"I'm so sorry," I stammer, my voice barely above a whisper. "We didn't mean to interrupt."

Next to me, Cole lets out a snort. “Well, it’s not like we’re seeing her naked for the first time.”

My eyes widen in surprise at Cole’s blunt and unfiltered comment. I didn’t expect him to say something like that, and I feel a mixture of shock and discomfort. I shoot him a disapproving look, silently urging him to exercise some tact, but his nonchalant expression shows that my reaction does not faze him.

I pick up a discarded robe off the floor and hand it to Natalie. It’s satin and red, the color of seduction. Whatever happened here was planned.

“Looks like you got your underwear back,” Cole muses.

“Excuse me?” I say.

“Long story,” Cole says before turning to the others. “So this little rendezvous was planned, huh?”

“None of your business,” Tanner says.

“Actually, it is,” I say, surprising myself.

Tanner narrows his eyes at me.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” Cole says.

“I did,” Tanner says.

Natalie shakes her head. “This isn’t how I expected this conversation to go.”

I glance at Tanner, expecting him to react with anger or hurt, but I’m taken aback when I see curiosity in his eyes instead. It’s as if he’s processing the information, trying to make sense of it all, just like I am.

“Unlike the barn—that was spontaneous?” Cole says as he moves further into the room.

“Wait, what happened at the barn?” Tanner asks, still confused.

“I’ll close the door now,” Cole says. “Don’t want the kids to be a part of this.”

“Cole, don’t—” I groan under my breath, but of course he has no intention of listening to me.

“Well?” Tanner says. He’s still waiting for an answer.

My gaze turns to Natalie, whose nipples stand out through the thin material of the robe.

“I’m not going to say anything,” Cole says, raising his arms above his head. “Like I promised.”

I shake my head at him. I can tell he’s a little drunk. I knew that sooner or later, the truth would come out. But not like this...

I feel like I’m in some kind of fever dream. There is no way this is real.

“Things got heated, and...well, one thing led to another,” Natalie says.

The truth finally dawns on Tanner. “So you slept with Adrian?”

Natalie nods as her cheeks redden. “Yes, I did.”

“And you didn’t bother to tell me about it?” Tanner says.

“Tanner, it was very private,” Cole says.

“Go take a shower,” Tanner growls. “You’re drunk.”

“Not drunk enough,” Cole says and then he straightens.

“Is it true?” Tanner says, turning to me.

I hesitate.

“Natalie?” Tanner continues. Honestly, my brother is scaring me a little. He’s calm...too calm. He always has intense reactions to situations. I remember when we were once posted in the same unit, the commander would often tell him to flank the squad instead of leading it when we were active on the field.

“You’re my best soldier, but your temper is going to kill you one day, O’Connor,” he used to remark.

Tanner’s question hangs in the air like a weight, and I can sense the tension in the room. Natalie takes a moment to

gather her thoughts before answering honestly, “Yes, it’s true.”

“Show me,” Tanner says. He says this so softly that, at first, I’m not even sure I heard him.

“What?” I repeat.

“I said show me,” Tanner says, folding his arms in front of him. “We’re not going to leave this room till you do.”

I step forward, trying to quell the nerves that threaten to overwhelm me as I stand before Natalie.

I hesitate for a moment, looking into her eyes, seeking that connection we shared during our encounter. I want to approach this with the same sincerity and tenderness that we had then, even though this context is entirely different.

I feel Tanner’s and Cole’s eyes on us, and while I’m aware of their presence, I try to focus solely on Natalie.

I reach out, gently cupping her face with my hands, and lean in to brush my lips against hers. The kiss is soft at first, exploring and testing the waters of our passion. But as the heat between us intensifies, our lips press harder, tongues dancing together in a passionate tango.

I can feel Natalie’s breath hitch as my fingers trace a trail down her neck, lightly grazing the sensitive skin.

I feel her hands on my back, pulling me closer, deepening the connection between us. Our bodies press against each other, and I can feel the warmth of her skin through the thin fabric of her robe.

I trail my lips down her jawline, leaving a trail of soft, lingering kisses, and find the sensitive spot just below her ear that always elicits a soft moan from her. Her breath hitches, and I take it as an encouragement to continue exploring her neck with featherlight touches, my tongue occasionally darting out to taste her skin.

As my hands slide down her sides, I revel in the softness of her curves, the way her body responds to my touch. With a gentle touch, I lift the hem of her robe, exposing more of her

skin to my eager hands. She lets out a soft gasp as my fingers dance along her thighs, teasing and caressing.

Slowly, I pull the robe off her, revealing more of her flawless skin. My lips follow the path my fingers take, leaving a trail of delicate kisses on her exposed flesh.

Her hands find their way to my shirt, eagerly unbuttoning it as she pulls me closer. I break our kiss for a moment, allowing her to remove my shirt entirely before drawing her back into my arms. Our skin touches, and the contact ignites a surge of desire within me.

I gently push Natalie back onto the bed, and she looks up at me with a mix of desire and vulnerability.

I feel a rush of anticipation as I lean in closer to Natalie. The air crackles with tension, and I can see the desire in her eyes. Slowly, I close the gap between us, my heart pounding in my chest.

Our lips meet, and it's like fireworks exploding in my mind. The softness of her lips against mine sends shivers down my spine, and I can't help but smile against her mouth. Her breath is warm and sweet, and I savor every moment of this electrifying kiss.

As I pull away slightly, I can't resist teasing her. I trail my fingers lightly along her jawline, making her gasp softly. The way she responds to my touch only fuels my desire for her, and I revel in the power I have over her in this moment.

With a playful grin, I lean in to kiss her again, this time with a bit more intensity. Our tongues dance together, and I feel her body press closer to mine. It's as if we're two magnets drawn inexorably together.

My hands explore her back, tracing the contours of her body, and I revel in the softness of her skin. She lets out a soft moan, encouraging me to continue. I nibble gently on her lower lip, teasing and coaxing her further into the moment.

I can tell that she wants more, but I don't want to rush this. I want to savor every second with her. So I pull back slightly,

meeting her eyes with a smoldering gaze, silently promising that this is just the beginning of something amazing.

I whisper softly, “You’re incredible,” and she blushes, making my heart skip a beat.

I can’t help but explore every inch of her with a mix of reverence and hunger.

My fingers trace delicate patterns along her neck, down her collarbone, and then lower, feeling the rise and fall of her chest with each breath. She trembles slightly under my touch, and it only fuels my desire to make her feel cherished and wanted.

I let my hands roam further, gliding over the curves of her waist, feeling the softness of her skin beneath my fingertips. The warmth of her body against mine is intoxicating, and I can’t resist pressing closer, wanting to feel every part of her against me.

As my hands travel upward, I cup her face, holding her gently. I want her to know that she’s safe with me.

Moving lower, my hands glide over her hips and thighs, exploring her contours with a mix of reverence and desire. I want her to know how beautiful she is, how much she means to me. My lips trail along her neck, leaving soft kisses in their wake, and I feel her pulse quicken beneath my lips.

I kiss her on her mouth again as I softly push her into the bed where she was with Tanner just moments ago.

As our tongues dance, I can feel myself getting lost in the intensity of the moment, forgetting about everything else around us. Her hands rest on my chest, her touch both grounding and electrifying, further easing my nerves.

I remind myself to be in the present, to let go of any distractions, including the knowledge of my brothers’ presence just a few feet away.

I let my hands roam higher, gently cupping her breasts and feeling her heartbeat against my palms.

Her breath quickens, and she arches her back, silently urging me to continue. I lower my lips to her neck, savoring the way she shivers under my touch.

As Tanner and Cole approach the bed, a mix of panic and embarrassment washes over me. I hadn't anticipated this, and I'm suddenly hyper-aware of how exposed and vulnerable Natalie and I are in this moment.

My brothers don't say anything, just watch us with intense concentration on their faces.

"Are we really doing this?" I say hoarsely.

Natalie is softly panting under me, her legs on either side of me, her pussy exposed to my brothers' hungry gazes. They can't take their eyes off her, their eyes turning darker by the second with lust.

Tanner is the first to break the silence. "Yes. I want to see how it was with you and her."

I look up to meet Cole's gaze. There's no going back from here. Over the years, Cole and I have made several jokes about getting together with a girl. Although we did get close to having an encounter like that, nothing comes close to how it is with Natalie.

Cole nods softly. He knows that once we go past this, there's no going back.

Natalie's soft whimper brings my attention back to her. She's looking at me with such openness and trust. This feels right.

Leaning in, I place soft, teasing kisses along her inner thighs, savoring the feel of her skin against my lips. She lets out a soft sigh, and I take it as an encouragement to continue. I inch closer to her core, my breath tantalizingly close to where she craves my touch.

As I finally make contact with her most sensitive area, I use my tongue to trace slow, deliberate circles, taking my time to learn her unique patterns of pleasure. Her hands find their way to my hair, gripping gently as if to guide me, and I'm more than willing to follow her lead.

The sound of her soft moans fills the room, as I alternate between gentle licks and firm, skillful strokes, carefully gauging her reactions. Her breath becomes erratic. I apply a little more pressure, and her body responds with an arch of her back, encouraging me to continue my exploration.

Meanwhile, Tanner climbs into bed with us, shedding his clothes. Amidst the haze of pleasure, I hear Tanner's voice. "Do you want me, Natalie?"

His words hang in the air, and I can't help but listen. The thought of him wanting her while I'm pleasuring her sends a thrill through me.

"Yes. I want you, please," Natalie begs, her voice filled with arousal and need.

I steal a quick glance up, my lips still softly caressing her, and see Tanner and Natalie sharing a passionate kiss. Their lips move together in a dance of desire. I'm impossibly hard and straining against my boxers as I watch them, their tongues tangling, their sweaty bodies pressed together as they continue to kiss sloppily. Meanwhile, Cole climbs up on the bed behind her.

His lips find their way to Natalie's breasts, and I can see her arching her back, her breath catching in her throat.

I focus on her reactions, feeling the way her body responds to each touch and kiss, each stroke and caress. I seek out her engorged clit with my finger and rub my thumb over it, making her scream into Tanner's mouth. It draws a little blood from his lips, which makes him even more frenzied.

"Come for me," I whisper against her core as I curl my finger inside her. Natalie screams as she unravels.

Her back arches so that she's kind of sitting up, cocooned by the hard bodies of the three of us. I crouch in front of her as I watch Natalie's rapidly rising and falling chest. Her cheeks are flushed, her hair sticking to her scalp, and she has never looked more beautiful.

I lean in and kiss her, letting her taste her own essence. She whimpers while the other two move closer. I catch a brief

glimpse of their erect cocks, but I quickly avert my gaze. This isn't about me. It's about Natalie, and only her.

Cole runs his hands down her body while Tanner rubs her back. Cole cups her face in his palm while I roll her nipple between my fingers. He turns her, pulling her body into his lap.

They kiss, their mouths mashing together before he seeks out her tongue and gently sucks on it. Natalie puts her arms around him as her hips begin to rock against Cole's hard body. Meanwhile, Tanner's hands, and mine, continue to rove over her back, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

Cole lifts Natalie up slightly by wrapping his arms around her waist and using it as momentum before he brings her down over his dick. Natalie cries out as he enters her in a single stroke. He lets her adjust for a few seconds before he raises her up and promptly brings her down again. He does it a few times until she's used to the rhythm and her hips circle around his almost instinctively.

"Does that feel good, baby?" Cole says, wrapping his arms around her possessively.

"So good. Please don't stop," she cries out as he rocks against her and her nails scratch his back. Tanner and I exchange a look. He's being too greedy now.

I put my hands over Natalie's breasts, cupping and squeezing them. She turns her head toward me to kiss me first before she turns the other way to kiss Tanner sloppily.

Her tits bounce in front of her as she continues to ride my brother, holding on to his neck for dear life.

After a few more minutes of this, Cole's strokes begin to get erratic, and Natalie's legs begin to shake.

"Oh my God, I'm coming!" Natalie yells.

I reach between them and stroke her clit to make the orgasm more intense. Natalie screams as she comes, Cole quickly following her before they're spent.

I see a flush of satisfaction on Natalie's face, her eyes meeting mine with a mixture of gratitude and desire. In that moment, any remnants of jealousy or insecurity vanish, replaced by a profound connection and understanding.

"Now my turn," I say, growling as I replace my brother.

Natalie's head falls back into the pillow. "You're going to kill me."

Instead of answering her right away, I slide inside of her, the remnants of my brothers' spend leaving little to no resistance. "That's the plan."

NATALIE

My heart is still racing and my legs are still a little shaky as I finally collapse on my back. Something warm runs down my legs. I don't have to look down to see I have a little bit of all three of them inside me. I squeeze my legs together and relish in the wetness.

Cole is looking between my legs. I squirm a little under the attention. He seems to notice that and chuckles. "I was just inside you, in case you didn't notice?"

His words make me blush further.

"I can't believe I'm asking this now, but are you on protection?" Tanner says. His brows are a little furrowed. I wonder if he regrets the whole encounter. The realization makes my stomach pinch. I'm overthinking it.

"Yes," I say. "I've been on birth control since I was a teenager, not getting pregnant anytime soon."

"Jesus, when did you lose your virginity?" Cole says.

"Actually..." I begin. There's no point lying about it now. "I lost it yesterday."

"Wait a minute," Cole says as he glances between Adrian and me. Adrian is looking at me slack-jawed. "You didn't..." He trails off.

"Actually, yes," I say.

"Jesus," Adrian says. "I mean, wow, but why didn't you say anything?"

“I thought you would think it’s weird that I’m twenty-two and just got around to losing my virginity,” I say.

“There’s nothing wrong with you. I’m forty years old and I just lost it today,” Cole says, to which I look at him dumbfounded.

He rolls his eyes in exaggeration. “Can’t a guy joke?”

“If you’re a virgin, what does it make us then?” Tanner says, rolling his eyes.

“Hey,” Cole says. “One, that is slut-shaming, and two, there’s nothing wrong with liking sex.”

“He’s right,” I say. “I’m surprised I went without it for so long.”

“Sweetheart,” Cole says, as he brushes my bangs away from my face, “trust me, it’s not the same with everyone.”

His words make my core clench, and just like that, my clit is throbbing again with need.

“Oh,” I say. “It’s just that I loved being with all three of you.”

When I say it out loud, it just makes it more real, and cements what actually happened between us. The brothers exchange an uncomfortable glance before turning to me.

“I’m sorry, it’s just uncharted territory for me,” I say.

“No, don’t be sorry,” Adrian says, putting a hand under my chin so I have no choice but to look at him. “It’s uncharted territory for us, as well.”

“Damn, if I knew you were a virgin, I would have made the first move,” Cole says. He’s joking, but I catch a hint of something else in his voice.

Adrian frowns. “How was I supposed to know you were interested?”

“I don’t know,” Cole says. “Maybe the way I was eye-fucking her ever since she walked in could have been an indication.”

“I thought you were just drunk and high,” Tanner says.

Adrian is frowning. “Jesus, if I knew you were interested, I wouldn’t have made a move on her.”

“I was a goner when I saw her tits popping out of the wedding dress,” Cole says, his eyes heating up again. “Maybe I should have given in to my instincts and fucked her then.”

I know he’s being vulgar to get a reaction out of his brothers. I’ve known Cole for less than a week, but it already seems like I know exactly what’s going to come out of his mouth next.

“When did this happen?” Tanner says.

“It was an accident,” I explain.

“Sure,” Cole says.

“Who says I would have let you have me?” I challenge him.

“Damn,” he mutters under his breath. “I knew there was a reason I liked her.” Then he turns to me with a smirk. “Well, I guess it’s better it worked out this way.”

His words imply that this is an arrangement now—that the three of them just get to have me. And keep having me.

The thought is so hot that I nearly come again, and have to bite down on my lip to keep myself from moaning.

“But damn, you’re a lucky man, Adrian. Being inside her was a little slice of heaven what with the tightness and wetness,” Cole says.

“Cole,” Tanner says, but it comes out as a groan. I can see his dick twitching from where he’s crouched beside me.

It feels strange to be surrounded by three naked men—almost strangers, who gave me shelter without knowing anything about me—while their come is still inside of me.

Tanner gets off the bed and starts to put on his underwear. The bubble bursts and I feel a tinge of awkwardness settle between us.

“Who wants coffee?” Adrian says.

“It’s three in the morning,” Cole says.

It's not until he says it that I realize it's true. Hours have passed since Tanner showed up at my door and I made the boldest decision of my life, hours since I've been taken in every position possible.

"I think coffee sounds good," I say.

"I want a sandwich," Cole says as he rubs his stomach. "All the fucking made me hungry."

His words make me blush. I can't even think the word in my head, and they say it without flinching.

"I haven't even touched you yet, and you're blushing already," Cole says before leaning in. "I want to see that blush on you when I come all over your face next time."

His hot breath makes me shiver.

Oh my.

I turn to look at him and he kisses me softly.

Adrian glances between us curiously. "What did he say?"

"It's just a little secret between us," Cole says, giving me a mischievous smile.

Oh, it's a secret all right.

"Tanner, do you want some coffee?" Adrian says.

Tanner hesitates. His shoulders flex a little as he walks away as if trying to create a distance between us. After what seems like an eternity, he says. "Sure."

We head downstairs to the kitchen.

"Are you sure we won't wake up the twins?" I ask.

"Those two can sleep through an earthquake," Cole tells me, casually slinging an arm around me.

"As long as they aren't disturbed," I say, sitting down on one of the chairs. Despite what happened earlier, there's no awkwardness between us. It feels natural to sit with them and have coffee in the middle of the night when all three of them were pounding me just minutes ago. As I cross my legs, I can still feel their combined wetness between my legs, and it

makes an obscene sound as I uncross my legs again to sit in a more comfortable position.

Adrian pours the coffee into three cups and brings it over to the table. The fresh smell of the ground coffee drives away all tiredness from me. Don't get me wrong, I want nothing more than to sleep like the dead for the next ten hours, but this is much better.

Adrian, with his warm smile, takes a seat across from me, and Cole sits beside me, his hand gently brushing against mine.

I watch as Cole turns to face me, a playful grin spreading across his face. He lifts his shirt, turning to reveal the faint red marks on his back. My heart flutters and I can feel my cheeks heat up, turning a shade of pink.

"Looks like you left your mark," he teases, his voice low and filled with a hint of seduction. I bite my lip, not knowing how to respond. The sight of him proudly displaying the scratches I unintentionally left behind makes my stomach twist with both satisfaction and shyness.

"I-I didn't mean to," I stammer.

Cole steps closer, his eyes locked with mine, and the teasing tone in his voice softens. "I'm not complaining," he says, his gaze warm and tender. "It's a reminder of how much you enjoyed being with me."

His sweet words only intensify my blush, but they also melt away any lingering unease.

"So this is happening, huh?" Adrian says.

"Can't say I haven't thought about it," Cole says, flashing me a devilish smile.

Adrian raises a brow. "You've thought about sharing a woman with your brothers."

"Not with Tanner," Cole says. "I know what a spoilsport he can be, but I'm not complaining."

He turns to me. "Adrian and I have always been in sync."

“By that, he means that he stole my high school girlfriend and fucked her before our prom,” Adrian says, glaring at him. It doesn’t sound like he’s still caught up in it; it’s more like good-natured teasing.

“Sometimes the trash just takes itself out,” Cole says. “And since I saved you a leg on the field, I think we’re even now.”

Cole grins, but a shadow is cast over Adrian’s features. Even Cole sobers. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it.”

“Don’t ever bring that up,” Adrian says, glaring at his twin.

I stare between the two brothers. They switched so quickly from being playful to this—whatever this is. The mention of saving a leg brings a sudden seriousness to the conversation, and I can feel a palpable shift in the energy. Adrian’s expression darkens, and I can tell that Cole’s words have touched a nerve. My confusion intensifies, as I’m unaware of the history and the significance behind their exchange.

Adrian’s face tightens, his gaze shifting away momentarily. I can feel the unspoken weight of that history in the room, and it leaves me feeling like an outsider trying to piece together a puzzle I haven’t been introduced to.

“I had no idea,” I murmur softly, my gaze dropping to my coffee. “I’m sorry if I unintentionally brought up a sensitive topic.”

“It’s not on you,” Tanner says, pointing at his two brothers. “These two are a little fucked in the head.”

Cole chuckles. “Aren’t we all?”

Adrian turns to me. “It’s true. Our time in the military changed us in fundamental ways.”

I look up at him, glad that he’s telling me this.

“We’ve seen things, experienced moments that most people can’t even fathom.”

“Go on,” I encourage gently.

Adrian takes a moment, his eyes flickering with memories. “It’s not easy to put into words, but it’s like...you see the best

and the worst of humanity, often within the same day.”

Cole adds, his voice carrying a touch of the same gravity, “It can mess with your head, mess with your heart. We’re not exactly the same people we were before.”

I can’t tell them that I know my share of fucked-up people, literal monsters who will never admit to their monstrosity. But I can tell from the raw vulnerability in their voices that these men are nothing like the monsters I know.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” Adrian says. “How about we head out to a spot on the ranch? It’s this incredible clearing near the edge of the property. The view from there is absolutely breathtaking, especially at this time of night.”

“Right now?” I say.

“Come on, Nat, you’ll love it,” Adrian says, his voice filled with enthusiasm. The intimate way he addresses me makes my stomach flutter. I know it’s a small thing, but I don’t think anybody has ever called me that before.

Adrian continues, describing the spot in vivid detail. “Picture this—a wide, open space surrounded by towering oak trees, their branches stretching high above us. In the center of the clearing, there’s a natural stone formation, like a small stage, and beyond it, a sweeping view of the starlit sky, with a gentle breeze carrying the scent of the earth.”

Cole nods in agreement, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Yeah, it’s something you don’t want to miss. Trust us.”

I glance at Tanner, who looks a bit reluctant. I can understand his hesitation; after all, it’s late, and we’re all probably sleep-deprived. But the thought of exploring the place and witnessing a beautiful sunrise with these three brothers is too enticing to pass up.

“All right, I’m in,” I say, a smile forming on my lips. “Lead the way.”

“You guys go ahead,” Tanner says.

“Don’t be a spoilsport,” Adrian says.

“Let’s go,” I say to Tanner. “I promise I won’t keep you there for too long. Besides, we still need to talk about what happened.”

This seems to snap him out of whatever apprehensions he has.

As we walk, guided by the brothers, my anticipation grows with every step. The night air is crisp and carries a hint of dew, and the ground beneath my feet feels solid and reassuring. I follow closely behind, allowing them to lead the way.

We reach a point where the trees open up, revealing a wide, natural clearing bathed in moonlight. The sight that greets me takes my breath away. Tall oak trees stand like silent sentinels, their branches reaching for the heavens, creating a natural cathedral. The space feels like a sanctuary, a place where the world’s worries can be left behind.

In the heart of this clearing, there’s a remarkable stone formation, like a stage carved by nature itself. It sits there, perfectly positioned beneath the starlit sky.

The air is filled with a tranquil hush, a gentle breeze rustling through the leaves, whispering secrets of the night. The sky is an endless canvas of twinkling stars, each one a reminder of the vastness of the universe.

I’ve lived in New York my whole life, and I’ve never seen so many stars before.

Tanner, Cole, and Adrian stand beside me, their presence adding to the enchantment of the place. Their faces are illuminated by the soft glow of the moon, and there’s a sense of unity, of shared purpose, in this quiet moment.

“This is it,” Adrian says, breaking the silence, his voice carrying a sense of reverence. “Our special spot.”

“It’s beautiful,” I say as the guys crowd around me. We find a flat surface and sit down.

“The stars are much prettier when you lie down and watch them,” Cole says, beckoning to his chest. “And I think I make an excellent pillow.”

“That sounds lovely,” I say, “but I think we should talk first.”

A cold, gentle breeze flows past us, making me shiver. Adrian puts his arms around me protectively. I almost lose my train of thought when I see his eyes darken. He does nothing to shy away from what he feels for me.

“I never thought I’d find myself in a situation like this,” I admit, my gaze alternating between Cole, Adrian, and Tanner. “But being with you all feels...different. In a good way.”

Tanner looks hesitant. “We’re not together, per se.”

“I think we are,” Cole says, taking my hand in his and squeezing it a little. “I think it could be the start of something beautiful.”

“Are you sure about that?” Tanner says.

“Well, it’s definitely uncharted territory for us, and I would rather have her myself, but if this is what she wants...” He trails off. My heartbeat hastens at his raw vulnerability.

“Yeah, I never thought I’d share something so intimate with my brothers, but with you, Natalie, it feels natural,” Adrian says.

“I think, yeah, this is what I want,” I say.

“I’m not sure,” Tanner says, raking a hand through his hair. “What about the kids?”

“What about them?” I ask.

“They’re too young to understand our sleeping arrangement,” he says.

“They don’t need to know about it,” Adrian says. “We’re going to keep it discreet.”

Tanner, however, remains noticeably quiet. His brows are slightly furrowed, his gaze distant. I can feel a mixture of emotions radiating from him—doubt, hesitation, and something else that I don’t understand.

“I’m not comfortable with it,” Tanner finally says, his voice firm and resolute. “It’s never happening with me again.”

His words hang in the air like a heavy weight, casting a shadow over the once serene atmosphere.

Tanner turns away, his steps purposeful as he walks back toward the edge of the clearing.

“I’ll talk to him,” Adrian says quietly, his eyes following Tanner’s retreating figure. He gives me a reassuring look before beginning to follow after his brother, but Cole stops him with a hand on his arm.

“Let him go,” Cole says.

“What?” Adrian says. “I thought we decided we were going into this together.”

“Yeah, but Tanner is pretty dead set against the idea, and I don’t want to ruin things for us while bringing him onboard.”

Adrian is hesitant. “Are you sure?”

“I get what you’re trying to do. But pushing him too hard might just end up making things worse.”

“I just don’t want him to feel excluded or uncomfortable,” Adrian admits.

Cole sighs. “I know, and we’ll talk about it. But let’s give him some space for now. We can revisit the topic when things have calmed down.” He turns to me. “Besides, when he sees us having fun with her, I’m sure he’ll change his mind.”

This seems to bring Adrian out of his lull. “Now that’s a possibility.”

The determination on his face just makes things more solid. So, we’re really doing this. Seventy-two hours ago I was a virgin who didn’t know the first thing about sex, and here I am now entering an arrangement that I couldn’t have even conjured in my wildest imagination, with three smoking hot men who are straight out of my fantasies.

The axis of my world has spun out of control. It’s so overwhelming that I have to look away for a moment, concentrating on my surroundings and just breathing.

“This place is so beautiful, I wish we could come here during the day,” I say.

“I would love to give you a ride on my horse if you want,” Adrian says.

Cole smirks at him. “Alright, big guy. We get it, you love your dick.”

Adrian scowls at him. “You know that’s not what I was referring to at all.”

Cole squeezes my hand gently, his affectionate gesture reassuring. “We’ll take things one step at a time. Communication and understanding are key.”

Adrian nods in agreement. “Exactly. We’re in this together, and we’ll figure it out as we go.”

THE MORNING SUN paints the place with a warm golden hue, and as I step outside, I catch sight of Cole by his truck, carefully loading something into the back. My curiosity piqued, I walk over to him, a playful smile tugging at the corners of my lips.

“Hey, what’s going on?” I ask, my voice light with curiosity.

Cole glances up, his expression a mix of surprise and amusement. “Morning, Natalie. Just getting ready to make a trip into town.”

My interest deepens as I take in the scene. There are crates of chicken eggs and what seems to be containers of milk neatly arranged in the truck bed. My brows lift in question, and I tilt my head slightly.

“Eggs and milk?” I inquire, my curiosity getting the best of me.

Cole nods, a proud smile curving his lips. “Yeah, that’s right. We’ve got a surplus of fresh eggs and cow’s milk, and I’m heading into town to sell them. People love farm-fresh produce.”

A spontaneous decision forms in my mind, and I grin at Cole. “Mind if I tag along? I’d love to see how the whole process

works, and I want to see the town and help out if you need it.”

Cole’s eyes light up with genuine enthusiasm. “Sure thing, Natalie. I’d be happy to have you come along.”

My fake name on his mouth catches me off guard. He looks up when he notices that I’m staring. “Earth to Nat.”

I blink when I realize he’s addressing me. “Hey.”

“Got lost in my baby blues?” he says, grinning at me.

I roll my eyes. “You wish. I was just distracted, and you have hazel-green eyes, just like your brother.”

His eyes widen slightly. “I didn’t think you noticed.”

“Of course I noticed,” I say, feeling a little self-conscious.

We drive into the charming town of Wishing, a place that exudes a quaint and cozy atmosphere. The streets are lined with historic buildings, their facades adorned with flower boxes overflowing with vibrant blooms. The morning sun casts a warm glow over everything, giving the town a welcoming and friendly vibe.

As we pull into the town square, my eyes are drawn to a beautiful old clock tower standing tall at its center.

We navigate the winding streets, and Cole’s truck eventually finds a parking spot near the heart of town.

He parks the truck near the market square, where vendors have begun to set up their stalls. The air is filled with the sweet scent of fresh produce and the chatter of townsfolk. It’s a lively scene, with colorful awnings and vibrant displays.

We step out onto the sidewalk, and I take a moment to soak in the surroundings. Wishing feels like a place where time has slowed down, where people take the time to exchange friendly greetings and stop to chat on their way to the market.

We quickly get to work, unloading the crates of chicken eggs and cow’s milk from the truck. Cole sets up a rustic wooden stall, complete with handwritten signs advertising our products. I help arrange the eggs neatly in cartons and organize the milk bottles.

The air is filled with the scents of freshly baked bread, fragrant flowers, and the thrum of people crowding around us.

“Wow,” I say as I take a look around me. “This place is really something.”

“You know, this is the Wishing Sunday market,” he says, his tone filled with a kind of fondness that can only come from familiarity. “It’s been a tradition here for as long as I can remember.”

I glance at him, intrigued by the affection in his words. “It’s really lovely. I can tell it’s an important part of the town’s fabric.”

He nods, his eyes briefly scanning the scene around us. “Definitely. This is where the community comes together, catches up at the end of every grueling week.”

Curiosity prompts me to ask, “Have you been coming here for a long time?”

Cole’s smile turns nostalgic. “Since I was a kid. My parents used to bring us here every Sunday. It’s a part of what makes Wishing feel like home.”

As I listen to him, I can’t help but admire the way he speaks about his roots. His connection to this place is deep and unwavering, and it gives me a glimpse into the person he’s become.

Cole turns to me with a spark of interest in his eyes. “What about you, Natalie? Have you ever been to a place like this before?”

I can’t suppress a smile, a mix of amusement and honesty. “Actually, I grew up in New York City, so this is quite new to me. Markets like these are a far cry from the bustling streets and skyscrapers.”

His eyebrows raise in surprise, and he chuckles. “New York City, huh? That’s a big change of scenery.”

I nod, a hint of nostalgia in my own gaze. “It definitely is. But I have to say, there’s a certain charm to places like Wishing.

It's like stepping into a different world, and I'm enjoying every moment of it."

I think of my family. They must be back in the city, with God knows what happening. I'm half-terrified of what I'm going to find once I turn my phone on again, if I really want to.

Cole's eyes hold a certain depth as he watches me, and his next words catch me a bit off guard. "You know, this might be the first real bit of information you've shared about yourself since you arrived."

I feel a flicker of defensiveness rise within me. "That's not true."

"Don't get me wrong. You're pretty closed off about yourself," he says with a shrug.

I offer a small shrug in return, trying to downplay my defensiveness. "Well, I guess I haven't really had the chance to share much about myself before."

Cole chuckles, a playful glint in his eyes. "You are a bit closed off, aren't you? That's alright, though. I'm pretty good at getting people to spill their secrets."

"I don't think so," I say.

Cole's nose wrinkles. "I have a feeling I'm going to tease all the information out of you, bit by bit."

I can't help but smile at his teasing tone, feeling a sense of comfort in his presence. "Oh, really? Is that a challenge?"

He grins, his dimples showing. "Consider it a promise. I've got all the time in the world."

But before I can respond, Cole's tone shifts, his voice gentle and reassuring. "But really though, Nat, you're not what I was expecting."

"What did you expect?"

"You know, I'm not really sure," he says. "You were in a wedding dress the first time I saw you. And the second time, you were naked."

His words make me blush and I punch him playfully. “We’re in a public space.”

He grins. “Don’t you think I know that? I can’t wait till we’re back at the ranch.”

His words make my stomach flutter.

Before he can say anything, a woman in her late twenties walks up to us.

“Cole, I’m surprised you made it to town this morning,” she says.

“I never miss Sunday markets, Martha. You know that,” Cole replies, smooth as ever.

Martha gets this thoughtful expression on her face. “Really? I don’t recall seeing your cute face the past two Sundays.”

Cole’s jaw hardens but he quickly replaces it with a smile. “I needed to take care of things. But I’m back. And I’m glad you missed me.”

She has half a smirk on her face. I glance back and forth between them. *Is she flirting?*

“Don’t flatter yourself. I missed the milk. I suppose you still have some left for me?” Martha says, almost fluttering her eyelashes. “I noticed you had a huge rush as soon as you opened and I was afraid I was going to miss it.”

Cole greets her with an easy grin. “Of course, Martha. Fresh from the cows this morning.”

As he retrieves a bottle of milk for her, she teases him with a twinkle in her eye. “Sheriff, I always say your milk is the secret to keeping this town in line.”

Cole chuckles, handing her the bottle. “Well, you know where to find it whenever you need it.”

Wow. She practically ignores me until her blue eyes land on me, practically scathing.

“And you are?”

“Nata—Natalie,” I say. I almost blurt out my real name but pivot at the last moment.

“Okay,” she says.

“Natalie is staying with us for a while,” Cole says.

“I didn’t know you guys were offering boarding,” she says.

“I’m the new nanny,” I say.

“And how’s that going for you?” she says. “I heard the twins can be a handful.”

“Nothing I can’t control,” I shoot back. It looks like Martha is going to say something more but she moves on with a friendly wave, and another customer steps forward.

I stare after Martha who turns around to glare at me once. Cole, though, is oblivious. I wonder if Martha likes him. Well, she made it pretty evident she does.

A young man is the next customer, and he addresses Cole with familiarity. “Hey there, Sheriff. Got any of those eggs left?”

Cole gestures to the crates behind him. “Plenty to go around. Help yourself, Jared.”

As the young man selects a carton of eggs, he glances over at me with a friendly nod. “New around here, huh?”

I nod in response, feeling a sense of camaraderie as Cole introduces me. “This is Natalie. She’s helping out today.”

Jared gives me an easy smile. “Welcome to Wishing. Don’t let Sheriff here scare you off.”

“I’m the friendliest person around here,” Cole says, scowling at Jared who chuckles in turn.

“Don’t mind some friendly leg-pulling, but this one takes up a lot of your time,” Jared says, pointing his thumb at Cole. “Make sure you have some whiskey on you when he’s giving you trouble. He has a weakness for it.”

I laugh, feeling immediately at ease with the friendly banter. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Once Jared has made his purchase, he moves on, and Cole turns his attention back to me with a grin. “Don’t mind them calling me Sheriff. It’s just a small-town quirk.”

I raise an eyebrow playfully. “So, are you the law around here?” I’ve heard his brothers refer to him as that, but I thought it was just a nickname.

“You must have your hands full, being the sheriff of a small town,” I remark, genuinely curious about the dynamic of law enforcement in this community.

Cole nods, his gaze sweeping across the market. “It’s peaceful here. Crime rate’s pretty low, mostly just minor stuff. People look out for each other.”

I’m struck by the contrast. The peacefulness he describes is a world apart from what I’m accustomed to.

Cole lightly taps me on the side of my head. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“It’s just very different from where I come from. The pace, the people—everything is so different.”

That’s obviously not the only thing that’s different, but I can’t go into more details without him thinking something is amiss.

“You know, Nat, Tanner doesn’t really trust you.”

His words catch me off guard, and I feel a mix of surprise and apprehension. It’s a direct statement, a revelation of the undercurrents I’ve sensed between Tanner and myself. I thought I was imagining it, but apparently not.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Tanner’s protective, and he’s got his reasons. He’s not convinced that you’re here for the right reasons. Maybe that’s why he doesn’t want to be involved.”

I inhale sharply. What is Cole getting at? Is he baiting me, or is he expecting a direct and honest answer?

“I don’t know,” I say.

“Frankly, I think it’s bullshit. I don’t remember the last time Tanner let somebody in a five-mile radius of him,” Cole says.

“And I can’t say the war changed him. He’s been that way, though Cassie didn’t make things easier.”

“Cassie?” I say. It’s the first time I’m hearing the name.

Next to me, Cole stiffens. “Forget I said anything.”

“Okay,” I say, partly because I don’t know what to expect. We’re having a good time, and I don’t want to sour things between us. Cole is definitely more friendly and welcoming than Tanner is, but I can sense his cautiousness. If I ask too many questions, it might make him suspicious.

My thoughts are interrupted when Cole reaches for a flask in his pocket, about to take a swig from it. Instinctively, I reach out and touch his arm gently, halting his action.

“You know, I actually like you sober,” I say, my words coming out with a hint of playfulness.

There’s a pause, a moment of connection as our eyes lock, and I can see the surprise in his expression. His flask hovers mid-air, and he lowers it slowly, a faint smile playing on his lips.

Cole raises an eyebrow, his lips curling into a half-smile. “Oh, really?”

I nod, my gaze unwavering. “Absolutely. I enjoy your company just the way you are, Cole.”

The tension that seemed to linger around him eases, replaced by a sense of reassurance. “Okay,” he says, and I notice that he doesn’t touch his flask for the rest of the day.

NATALIE

I'm running along the familiar trail, my feet pounding against the earth with each step. The worries that have been weighing me down all day begin to fade as the rhythm of my breath matches the rhythm of my feet. Running has always been my escape, my way of clearing my mind and finding solace amidst the chaos of life.

With the twins gone for a playdate, I've had the morning to myself. I was originally supposed to go with them, but Tanner tells me there's been a stir in the town ever since I went to the Sunday market with Cole. I know it's only obvious that people in such a small town would have questions, but Tanner isn't comfortable sharing details about the nature of our relationship yet.

I like it this way. I would rather be on the ranch all day.

A cool wind plays on my face. I've only been here for a few weeks, but the weather is beginning to change, even though it's still early September.

As I continue along the path, I glance toward the horizon and catch a glimpse of the horses in the pen.

My heart skips a beat as I remember the incident with the horse, the way it lunged at me with such ferocity. But today, something's different.

Sea Wind is there, in the pen with the other horses, peacefully grazing. It's the first time I've seen him up close since that frightening encounter.

Curiosity pulls me toward the pen, and I slow my pace as I approach. Sea Wind raises his head, his eyes meeting mine. There's a spark of recognition but also a calmness that wasn't there before. I take a cautious step closer, studying the horse's demeanor. It's almost as if this is a completely different creature from the one that attacked me.

Just as I'm lost in my thoughts, Tanner appears by the pen. He's dressed in his cowboy boots and a hat. "Hey," he says.

"Hey," I say. Things between us are still awkward since the night when he brought me to several orgasms and then walked away from me.

He doesn't want me, I remind myself. And I need to hold on to my dignity. This whole thing is new to me, as it is to him, but I wasn't the one who carelessly rejected him.

I turn my attention back to Sea Wind, gesturing toward the horse. "Is that Sea Wind?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper. The wind carries away my words, but Tanner nods, understanding my question.

"Yeah, that's him. He's been a lot more agreeable lately, especially since the accident."

"Wow," I say. "I thought that he would get worse."

Tanner chuckles. "He's fine. After that day, I decided to spend more time with him, to understand him better. We worked with a trainer for a few days. He's been different ever since. More manageable, more gentle."

I remember Adrian mentioning that they can't afford to bring in trainers, and that's why they've been spending painstaking amounts of time with the horses.

"Oh," I say.

Tanner looks at me, and there's a depth of emotions there. "I couldn't afford for him to hurt you again..." He trails off and seemingly snaps out of the trance, clearing his throat as he continues. "Or the twins. They're so naughty."

I clear my throat. "Yes, yes, they are. You're right."

I watch Sea Wind graze, a mixture of emotions swirling within me—relief that he’s no longer a threat, but also a tinge of disappointment that I missed witnessing the transformation. “You tamed him?” I ask, my voice tinged with awe.

Tanner chuckles softly, a hint of pride in his expression. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Wow, this is a big step isn’t it?” I say. “For this place.”

He nods. “Yeah it is. You’re right.”

Adrian and Cole approach, joining us as we gaze at the magnificent animal.

“Hey, guys,” Cole greets us, his voice as easygoing as ever. To my surprise, he comes over and plants a kiss on my lips, dragging it out as his tongue slowly caresses mine. I feel a little dazed as he takes a step back.

Adrian glares at his brother.

Tanner returns the greetings with a nod. “Morning. Natalie was just asking about Sea Wind.”

Cole’s eyes twinkle as he looks at the horse. “Ah, Sea Wind. Quite the character.”

Adrian smirks. “Yeah, remember the time he nearly took Natalie’s head off?”

I roll my eyes at their teasing. “So what’s the plan today?”

“We’re actually heading up to the mountain pass with a few of the horses,” Adrian replies.

“Wow, really?” I ask.

Adrian nods. “Well, it’ll start snowing in a couple of weeks and we wanted to take the horses up to the mountains a few more times this season. Once winter hits, they won’t be able to do that again till next spring when the snow melts.”

“The horses like it there, and besides it’ll be good practice for the spring.”

“What happens during spring?” I ask.

The brothers exchange a glance. “We’re thinking of starting a little tourism around here and offering alpine horse drives,” Cole explains. “Of course, we’re still learning the ropes, and we’ve had a guide the last couple of times we went up. But now that we’ve got the hang of it, it’s better to do it ourselves.”

“Wow, that sounds like a great idea,” I say.

“It better be,” Cole says. “It’s our one last chance.”

“Don’t say it like that,” Tanner says.

To diffuse the tension, Adrian turns to me. “You said you could ride, right?”

“Yes,” I say. “Well, I know how to ride tamed horses.”

At this, he chuckles.

“Natalie, fancy joining us on our little adventure today?” Cole says.

“Yeah, we could use an extra pair of hands, and it’s always more fun with you around.” Adrian adds.

“I’d love to come along,” I reply eagerly.

Tanner, however, seems a bit unsure. He scratches his head and looks at the group. “Well, it’s only our second trip up to the pass without a trained guide,” he explains, his voice tinged with concern. “The first time, we had someone experienced with us. It’s a bit more challenging on our own.”

Cole and Adrian exchange a knowing glance, silently communicating their desire to have me with them. Cole then turns to Tanner. “Come on, Tanner, we can handle ourselves.”

“She doesn’t even have proper clothes,” Tanner says.

“Well, she’s about the same size as Cassie,” Cole says. “She can wear those.”

My heart leaps in my throat at the mention of her name.

The mention of Cassie’s name sends a subtle ripple of unease through the conversation. I know Cassie was important to Tanner, but my knowledge of their family history is limited.

The air becomes tense, and for a moment, I consider asking about Cassie, about their family. But something holds me back. Maybe it's the way Tanner's gaze briefly lingers on the distant horizon.

"Maybe just the shoes," I say, looking down at my feet. "Because I don't have appropriate ones to ride."

"I'll get them," Adrian says. I expect Tanner to say something but he has simply shut down.

Adrian leaves, and comes back with a pair of well-worn boots that fit me perfectly. I go back to the house and change into a few heavier layers that'll keep me warm in the mountains.

Adrian's voice is reassuring as he introduces me to the horse. "This is Sunny Chimes," he says with a smile. "Helena named her. She's a gentle soul, you'll see."

As I approach Sunny Chimes, I take a moment to appreciate her. She's a beautiful chestnut mare with a calm demeanor, her warm brown eyes reflecting a sense of tranquility. My childhood memories of horseback riding lessons come flooding back, and I draw upon those long-forgotten skills as I prepare to mount her.

With a deep breath, I swing myself into the saddle, feeling a surge of excitement mixed with a touch of nervousness. Sunny Chimes shifts beneath me, adjusting to my weight, and I gently stroke her mane to reassure both of us.

Cole takes the lead, guiding us as we begin our ascent up the mountain pass. The trail winds its way between the crook of two majestic mountains, creating a natural valley. It's a breathtaking sight.

To one side, I see a dense forest of tall pine trees, their branches reaching high into the clear, blue sky. The scent of pine needles and earth fills the air. To the other side, a rushing stream cuts through the valley, its crystal-clear waters glistening in the sunlight. The sound of water babbling over smooth stones adds a soothing melody to our journey.

The valley itself is a lush, green expanse dotted with wildflowers of every color imaginable. The horses seem to

appreciate the abundance of fresh, tender grass, and they graze contentedly as we make our way deeper into this natural sanctuary.

The beauty of the valley is too enchanting to resist, so I decide to dismount Sunny Chimes for a moment. I want to capture this breathtaking scenery with my camera, and maybe even spot an elusive bird that caught my attention earlier.

As I inch closer to the edge to get a better view, Adrian's voice of caution reaches my ears. "Natalie, be careful! Don't get too close to the edge!"

"I'll be fine," I reassure him.

Carefully, I inch closer to the edge, my camera poised and ready. The bird is within my viewfinder, its feathers glistening in the sunlight, when my foot slips on a loose stone. Panic surges through me as I start to slide down the steep incline.

"Help!" I cry out, my heart racing as I desperately clutch at the grassy slope, my fingers unable to find purchase.

Cole is beside me in an instant, his face etched with worry. He tries to grab onto me and pull me up, gritting his teeth as he exerts himself. I can see his face redden with the strain but then his injured leg gives way and I slip away from him.

"Cole, no—" I scream.

I can hear his frustrated growl.

I'm aware that I'm practically clinging to the side of the mountain, inches away from death.

I look up. It's impossible to see anything behind the edge from my vantage point. But I can hear them.

"Hold on, Natalie!" Adrian yells as I claw wildly for purchase.

"I can't," I say as tears stream down my face. "Not for long."

I'm hanging there, my fingers tightly gripping the rocky ledge, my heart pounding in my chest as I desperately search for a way to pull myself up. Panic surges through me as I teeter on the edge, the ground crumbling beneath me.

I make the mistake of looking beneath me. My stomach drops at the sight of the deep, dark ravines and hundreds of feet of nothingness. I'll be dead on impact if I fall.

Then, as if from nowhere, a face appears, peering down at me from above. It's the face of a stranger, a man with wild brown hair and a rugged, tattooed appearance. His eyes meet mine, and there's a reassuring calmness in his gaze that steadies my frantic heartbeat.

"Hey there," he calls down to me, his voice strong and steady. "Don't worry, I've got you."

As the stranger reaches me, he extends a strong hand, and I grasp it with all the strength I can muster. With his help, I start to regain my footing on the rocky slope.

The sound of a horse neighing above us startles me, and I see a flash of Sea Wind somewhere above us. It's then that I notice the guy has a tether, a rope that he tugs at, which in turn disappears over the cliff.

"We're going to get you pulled up. Stay very still."

I shake my head. "I don't want to move."

He ignores my pleas. "Hang on tight."

In a swift and reassuring motion, he ties the tether around me, securing it firmly. Then, with a determined push, he lends me the strength to ascend a little higher.

I gasp as I comprehend what's happening—our tether is tied to the horse above. Panic surges through me as I envision the colossal weight of the animal yanking us down, but the horse, as if sensing our need, lets out another defiant neigh and begins to pull.

For a moment, I feel like a puppet being raised from the depths, and the sensation is both surreal and terrifying.

The man and I struggle against the pull of the horse as we ascend, our bodies swaying dangerously. My heart is in my throat as I fight to maintain my grip on the rocky terrain. It's a tense battle against gravity, and for a second, it feels as if we might lose our precarious hold.

Adrian, who has been watching anxiously from above, reaches down to grasp my outstretched hand.

With their combined effort, I'm finally hauled up and over the edge to safety. As I reach solid ground, a rush of relief floods through me. I take a deep, shaky breath and try to steady my trembling limbs.

Adrian engulfs me in a hug that almost crushes my bones.

"Relax, man," says the stranger next to me. "She's fine."

Adrian shudders. I look up to see Tanner astride Sea Wind, his chest rising and falling. The tether is loosely tied to Sea Wind.

My eyes meet Tanner's as he dismounts, and there's a mix of emotions in his gaze—relief, concern, and a depth of emotion that I can't fully comprehend. He strides over to me, his footsteps heavy with worry, and I find myself enveloped in his strong and reassuring embrace.

"I almost thought I lost you," he whispers, his voice quivering with emotion.

Tears well up in my eyes as I hug him back, my own voice choked with gratitude. "I'm okay, Tanner," I reply, my words barely above a whisper. "Thanks to all of you." I nod gratefully at the stranger.

"Name's Ed," he says with a friendly smile

I can tell from the knowing glances exchanged between the guys that they've crossed paths with him in town before.

"Yeah, we know you all right," Adrian says with a slight smile. There's a little mischief to it, and I can't help but wonder what that's about.

"I live not far from here. I reckon you folks could use a place to recuperate after that little adventure," he says. "And my fiancée makes a mean tea."

"Actually, that doesn't sound like half a bad idea," I say. I'm too exhausted to make my way down the mountain so quickly.

Before anyone else can respond, Cole strides over, his face a mix of relief and torment. He envelops me in a hug that's both

tight and hesitant, as if he's struggling to find the right words. "Natalie," he says, his voice soft, "I'm so glad you're okay. I can't believe I almost..."

His words trail off, and I can see the turmoil in his eyes. I squeeze him back, feeling the weight of the moment between us. "It's alright, Cole," I whisper, my voice filled with understanding.

"My leg...it always ruins everything," Cole says, his head hanging low.

I tease his chin up with a finger before kissing him softly. "I'm okay. I'm safe."

We make our way to Ed's cabin, horses in tow. The cabin, nestled amidst the towering trees, finally comes into view, a rustic retreat that promises respite from the wilderness.

We tether the horses in front of the cabin and make our way inside.

The door swings open, revealing two men who must be Ed's brothers.

"This is Ollie and Artie," Ed says, by way of introduction, gesturing to each of them in turn.

I realize that they're identical triplets. Artie with his framed glasses though is much leaner than his brother.

Ollie greets us with a friendly smile, while Artie, carrying a baby in his arms, offers a warm nod. I immediately walk over to the baby, who coos when he sees me. He looks to be around a year old or so.

"Wow, do twins and triplets run in Wishing?" I ask, glancing back at Cole and Adrian once. It's easy to forget that they're identical twins, especially since I've come to know them as so strikingly different from each other.

"I didn't know you were coming back with friends," Artie says.

"Or that he was even capable of making friends so quickly," says Ollie.

“It’s just the sheriff and his brothers...and their lady.” Ed adds the latter as if he isn’t particularly sure.

“Ah, sheriff,” Artie says. “I visited your stall a few weeks ago. Loved the milk.”

“You should stop by the ranch,” Cole says. He still has his arm secured around my shoulder as if he’s afraid to let go of me.

“I was actually considering it,” Artie replied. “I heard you might be opening it up for tours soon?”

“That’s the plan,” Tanner says. “If everything goes alright.”

“We didn’t know you had brothers, Sheriff,” Ollie says. “I apologize, but we’re never caught up on the latest town gossip.”

“It’s fine,” Adrian says, waving him away. “We’ve been in town for almost two years now but it still feels like we make a new introduction every day.

“How is it living up here?” I say, looking around. It feels like they’re cut off from the rest of the town, lost in their own world. In some ways, I felt the same way when I came to the ranch for the first time, having lived in New York all my life.

“It’s a blessing to live in such solitude,” Ed says. “But sometimes it gets really lonely, especially during winters when the snow makes it hard to travel. Thankfully, I have my brothers to keep me entertained.”

“And me,” says a voice.

A blonde emerges from the house. She has a kind smile on her face, and a curvaceous figure that leaves me feeling self-conscious; I have to fight the urge to look down at my own body. I’ve been called skinny and boyish almost my entire life. But Susan is breathtaking.

Ed, with a proud smile, motions toward the woman beside him. “And this,” he says, “is Susan, my fiancée.”

But before I can ask or comment, Ed clarifies, “Actually, she’s my fiancée, as well as Ollie’s and Artie’s.”

My eyebrows raise in surprise, and I exchange a glance with Cole, Adrian, and Tanner, wondering if I'm the only one who finds this revelation astonishing.

"Oh wow," I say. "How does that work?"

An awkward pause descends on the group, and I clear my throat. "I mean, I didn't mean to intrude."

"I suppose you would know," says Ollie as his gaze flits between me and Tanner, Cole, and Adrian who are standing around me.

Cole kisses my forehead before turning to them. "I didn't think ___"

"We've been together for over two years now," Susan says. "And we're getting married soon."

"Wow, congratulations!" I say. "That's amazing."

"So are you going to be each other's best men?" Cole says cornily. I'm glad he's almost back to his former self.

Artie and Ollie take his joke sportingly.

"We can't just keep our guests waiting out here," Susan says.

"I think we owe Ed much more. He saved Nat's life, after all," Adrian says, squeezing my shoulder.

"That sounds like Ed," Susan says affectionately as she looks up at him.

I feel a pang in my heart. I'm sure Adrian, Cole, and Tanner care for me, but is it in the same way?

Ed ushers us inside the cozy cabin, and as we step across the threshold, a feeling of warmth and familiarity envelops us. The rustic interior is adorned with the kind of charm that can only be cultivated over time.

"Make yourselves at home," Ed says, gesturing toward the inviting wooden furniture and a crackling fireplace. "We're glad to have you here."

Susan, with her calm and gracious demeanor, takes charge of making tea. She moves around the small kitchen area with

practiced ease, gathering cups and teapots.

“I hope tea works for everyone,” she says with a warm smile as she fills the teapot with hot water. “It’s a little chilly out there.”

Adrian nods appreciatively. “Tea sounds perfect,” he replies.

Susan brings out the piping hot cups of tea, and Ed helps her pass them around. Then she retreats to the kitchen, the baby secured to her chest, while the guys catch up with each other.

“Hey,” I say as I walk into the kitchen.

Susan turns to smile at me, and I’m once again struck by how beautiful she is.

“Hey,” she says.

“I got a little bored out there,” I say. “They’re talking about business.”

Susan nods. “I know they can really get into it. My guys run this successful business selling wood to the town.”

“Do they set up shop in town?” I ask.

“Very rarely,” Susan says. “They have a set of customers they sell to. They keep things sustainable around here.”

I nod. “People in this town are way different than where I come from.”

She looks at me curiously. “Where do you come from?”

“New York,” I say.

Her eyes light up. “For real? So do I.”

I feel a stab of fear, and my stomach churns uncomfortably. “Wow,” I manage to say.

“Are you also from Manhattan?” she asks.

“Queens,” I say. This is not a lie.

She nods. “Well, I have to admit, I wasn’t born or bred in New York so I don’t know the city outside my own borough. I moved there because of the publishing industry.”

“You work in publishing?” I ask.

She nods. “Yeah, I’m a writer.”

“Wow,” I say, this time in awe. “You don’t look like a writer.”

She chuckles. “Wait till you see me with my glasses and head piled with hair.”

I giggle.

“So what do you do?” she asks.

“Still figuring things out,” I say. “And I’ll definitely check your books out even though I’m not much of a reader.”

She smiles. “It might be helpful, you know.” She gazes out to the living room. “Since you’ve got your hands full.”

I follow her gaze. “I know what you mean. This is new for me, and I’m still figuring things out.”

“Well, you can talk to me if you have any doubts,” she says. “I’ve been with them for a little over two years.”

“And you already have a kid,” I say.

Susan laughs. “Well, this angel here was an accident, but a happy one. It brought us together again in unexpected ways. Besides, you know the risk increases when you’re having sex with three people.”

“I think I’m covered on that front,” I say. “I’ve had irregular periods all my life, and I’m on the pill. My doctor pretty much told me that it’ll be a long road to pregnancy.”

“I’m sure you guys will figure it out—that is, if you still see this in your future.”

“Susan,” I begin tentatively, “how does it feel, being with three guys?” I say.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

I take a deep breath before I speak. I’ve been sheltered all my life. I grew up in an environment where women were like prizes to be won or given away.

“Is it difficult?” I say.

“Difficult how?” she says.

“I mean—the world, do they care?” I ask.

“I suppose we’re blessed in some ways because we live cut off from the rest of the town, and even if they had their apprehensions, nobody let us know about it. They’re all very welcoming,” Susan replies.

Her words reassure me. I haven’t had enough real interactions with people from the town to know how they might react to us.

“I guess you can say that it just feels right, you know?” she says simply. “And besides, we’re committed to each other, which counts.”

Her answer leaves me with a mixture of admiration and introspection. It’s evident that her relationship with Ed, Ollie, and Artie is built on a strong foundation of trust and love. But as I sit here, I can’t help but ponder my own situation.

I take a deep breath and admit, “Well, I’ve been with Adrian, Cole, and Tanner, but we’ve never really talked about... commitment, I guess. With Tanner it was definitely just a one-time thing, and I haven’t really talked it out with the others yet.”

“Are you sure about Tanner?” she asks.

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“I saw the way he was looking at you. It didn’t seem like it was a one-time thing.”

My heart flips at her words.

“Also, will he be okay if you continue to have a relationship with his brothers, not him?” she asks.

“You’re wrong. I don’t think he’ll particularly care.”

“Maybe I am wrong, but I’m not usually wrong about things like this,” she says. “Call it a writer’s instinct.”

“We haven’t really had a conversation about it.”

Susan’s gaze is understanding, and she nods in response. “It’s important to have those conversations,” she advises gently. “Understanding where you stand and what you want is essential for any relationship.”

“That’s a really good perspective. Thanks for your advice,” I say.

“Why don’t you take my number and we can catch up in town sometimes?” she says.

“That sounds great, actually,” I say.

Susan and I finish our conversation in the kitchen, and as we step back into the main room, I catch the tail end of a conversation about guns. Ed, Artie, and Ollie are gathered around a wooden table, their attention focused on a pair of rifles.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Ed, Artie, and Ollie are talking about a couple of firearms they inherited from their father. They’re keen on maintaining them properly,” Cole explains.

“Wow, these are some beauties,” I say, running my finger over the cold surface. “Are these vintage?”

“They’re probably expensive and haven’t been used in a while,” Ed says.

“We have a more sensible collection, for sure,” Adrian says. “Wouldn’t you agree, Nat?”

“Wait, you shoot?” Ollie asks, his brows pulling down. He looks mildly impressed.

“Yeah, sometimes,” I say, trying to play things down.

“Don’t let her fool you,” Tanner says. “She had us too.”

I look up at him, my heart beating. I know that we had sex, but I know part of the reason he doesn’t want to be with me is because he doesn’t trust me.

“She’s a great shot,” Adrian says. “We should all get together and shoot sometimes.”

“Nat can give you some pointers,” Cole adds.

“That sounds fun,” Ollie says. “Now that we’ve really thought about it, we’re interested in learning more about shooting and

stuff. Non-moving targets only because Susan would never forgive us otherwise.”

“Cleaning and maintaining your guns is essential,” Tanner advises as he examines one of the weapons. “It ensures they stay safe and functional.”

And remember, safety first,” Adrian advises. “Always treat a gun as if it’s loaded and never point it at something you don’t intend to shoot.”

“Gotcha,” Ed says.

Adrian’s phone rings. He picks it up and presses it to his ear before motioning to us. “The Andersons are asking when we want the twins to be dropped off.”

“We should get going,” Tanner says. “It’s late already.”

I smile at our hosts. “I’m so pleased to meet you guys.”

“Don’t forget to text me,” Susan says. “I’m serious, we should catch up.”

“I’ll text you,” I promise her. We bid them goodbye and head out. The horses are softly grazing on the low bushes around the property.

Cole, always attentive, offers me a reassuring smile as I approach him. Without a word, he holds out his hand, a silent invitation for me to join him on his horse. I accept gratefully, feeling a sense of security in his presence.

As we ride back home, the world around us bathes in the soft, golden light of the setting sun. The journey is quieter now, the day’s events weighing on our minds.

Cole’s presence behind me is a reassuring anchor.

His arms wrap around me protectively, and I lean into him, grateful for the closeness and the unspoken support. The rhythmic clip-clop of hooves on the trail lulls me into a contemplative silence as we make our way home.

“Natalie, I want to explain about my leg.”

I turn to him, meeting his gaze with a reassuring smile. “You don’t owe me an explanation, Cole,” I reply gently.

He looks at me, gratitude evident in his eyes, but he continues. “I want you to know.”

As he begins, his voice is steady but heavy with the weight of memory. “We were in the war, Tanner, Adrian, and me. It was a tough time, and we were on a mission together.” He pauses, his eyes distant as he recalls those days.

“During the mission, we encountered enemy fire. It was chaos, and we were pinned down. We were caught in an ambush,” he continues, his voice steady. “The explosion was a trap, and it left me with shrapnel in my leg. The pain was excruciating. I remember...I remember feeling a searing pain in my leg.” His voice falters briefly as he relives the moment. “Adrian pulled me to safety, but the damage was done. My leg, it was never the same again.”

I listen in silence, my heart aching for the pain and sacrifice he endured. The war left its scars on them all, and this was just one chapter of a larger story.

“Oh my God, Cole,” I say. “I had no idea.”

“That’s because I never want to talk about it,” he says softly. “But it’s different with you.” He squeezes my waist as he talks.

As we arrive back at the ranch, Cole helps me down from the horse, this one called Sunny, with the same care he’s shown throughout the day.

But I don’t want to read too much into things. Cole doesn’t seem to be the kind of guy to develop something with a girl he’s fucked a few times. There’s nothing here—except welcome companionship, and I should really be happy about that.

The setting sun casts a warm golden hue over the landscape.

Tanner and Cole get to work tending to the horses, their experienced hands moving with practiced efficiency. Meanwhile, Adrian and I head toward the house. He suggests we get started on dinner since the twins will be back soon.

As we walk together, the weight of the conversation I had with Cole earlier lingers in the air. Adrian takes a deep breath,

breaking the silence. “You know, Natalie, Cole rarely talks about his injury. He never went to therapy, and it’s been hard on him.”

I glance at Adrian, sensing the depth of his concern for his brother. “I can imagine,” I reply softly.

Adrian nods, his gaze distant for a moment. “Yeah,” he says, “it’s been a tough journey for him. And for me too.”

Curiosity gnaws at me, and I venture a question. “Why did you leave the Navy?” I ask gently.

He hesitates for a moment, then replies, “I joined because of Cole. He was the reason I went in the first place. It didn’t make sense for me to stay when he wasn’t able to. And then Tanner had to drop out as well after what happened, so we all came home together. None of us imagined working at the ranch, but everything happened so fast, and with the kids—” He shakes his head. “Well, that’s all in the past now.”

I take a moment to process his words, my thoughts going to Tanner’s wife. “Was it because of...?” I start, but my voice trails off. I assume he’s referring to the loss of Tanner’s wife, given the sadness that still lingers around her name.

Adrian hesitates for a moment, then nods. “Yeah,” he replies, his voice heavy. “That was part of it. The children needed to be cared for.”

I nod. So does that mean the kids were left with Tanner’s former partner, and most importantly, what happened to her?

I have too many questions, but at this point, I’m scared to ask them for fear of giving up my own secrets.

TANNER

I quietly push the door to Natalie's room open, my heart racing with anticipation. I've wanted to talk to her about something important that's been on my mind for a while now, ever since the day we went up the pass.

Cole wasn't the only person who was disturbed by her near brush with death. When I was trying to get them up with Sea Wind's help, all I could think of was that my stubbornness had cost me her life.

I knew that I only needed one more chance. It's been three days since that day, and all I can think of is her. She consumes me, night and day. She is all I dream of, her lingering scent leaving an imprint on my senses. I can't bear it anymore.

I know what I have to do.

So for the first time in my life, I set my ego aside and I go to her.

I've always been naturally suspicious, and yes, the way she appeared in our life like that, the secrets she holds close to her heart and refuses to give away, sent warning bells through my system. But I no longer care about that.

All I need is her.

As the door creaks open, I catch a glimpse of shadows dancing on the bathroom wall, and my curiosity piques.

My steps are slow and deliberate as I approach the bathroom. The sound of murmurs and laughter grows clearer, and my nerves intensify. I'm about to knock on the door when I notice

something peculiar—the shadows seem to be pressed up against the opaque shower door. My brow furrows, and I strain to make out what’s happening.

My throat dries. I know, of course, that the three of them are still having sex regularly, even while they try to hide the fact from me.

Steam sneaks out from the closed door. I take a few steps back, even though I’m sure nobody inside notices my presence. They’re caught up in their own world, the same world that I walked out of willingly.

And that’s when I see her.

Natalie stands beneath the cascading water, her body illuminated by the soft glow. My brothers hover around her, their gazes full of lust, mesmerized as they watch her.

Cole takes a bar of soap and starts to lather it up in his hands before he begins to rub it down her body. Natalie’s head tilts back, and her lips part in a gasp of pleasure as Cole’s strong hands explore her curves with a possessive urgency.

“Do you like that?” Cole’s voice is muffled but I hear him.

Adrian helps him put the soap on the rest of her body, kneeling in front of her to part her legs before he sneaks a finger inside her cunt.

Natalie whimpers as my brother disappears from view between her legs. Her hands grip his hair tightly to hold him in place while he continues to lick her clit.

Fuck me. I have blue balls, and I’m practically leaking in my jeans. But I can’t leave right now. I watch them, transfixed.

I understand what my brothers felt when they saw me with her, and that’s the exact way I feel right now. When we fucked that night, I thought it was a fluke. I didn’t quite know what had come over me to make me share the woman who was in my bed with my brothers.

I certainly had never felt such an inclination in my life before, but when I watched Adrian get up on my bed and mount her,

everything clicked. I instinctively knew it was the right thing to do.

They were right about what I didn't want to admit. We fit together perfectly, like pieces of a puzzle.

To be honest, the whole thing was overwhelming. And so, like a fool, I shut the door on this thing before it could even properly begin. It wasn't just about jealousy; though, of course, that was a big part of it. How could I share my woman with my brothers? And more importantly, why the fuck did it feel so good?

I want desperately to cross over the bridge to their world.

As the water heats up, their figures blur, appearing smudgy and shapeless. It almost seems like I'm in a fever dream as they shift in and out of focus. Or maybe I'm simply about to pass out from the intensity of feelings in my ribs, my stomach clenching as I watch the three of them together.

The shadows shift again, teasing me as they reveal glimpses of hands exploring, lips seeking, and bodies arching in rapturous delight. The air is thick with the heady scent of arousal, and my own desire surges to the surface, an undeniable heat coiling in the pit of my stomach.

Natalie's naked body glistens with a sheen of water droplets that run down her smooth, flawless body, her lips locked in a fervent kiss with Adrian. His fingers roam her curves with an insatiable hunger, his touch exploring every secret crevice and sensitive spot.

I watch, my pulse quickening, as Natalie's body responds to their dual attentions. Her back arches, her chest rising and falling with every ragged breath. Her eyes are closed, her face a canvas of pleasure as she surrenders herself to the intoxicating sensations that my brothers ignite in her.

I have to grit my teeth and press my fingernails into my palm to stop myself from growling as jealousy rakes through me.

Cole's hands, strong and sure, glide over her supple curves.

Adrian's hands cradle her face, his kisses alternating between tender and urgent, igniting sparks of pleasure that play across

Natalie's features. His lips find purchase along the arch of her neck, leaving a trail of fiery kisses. Natalie, her skin bathed in the soft, inviting light, arches her back in ecstasy as Adrian's lips explore her neck, his tongue tracing a path of fire along her collarbone.

The allure of their intimacy is undeniable, a magnetic force that draws me in despite my better judgment. I watch as Natalie's hands travel over their bodies.

I want her hands on my body.

She slowly goes down on her knees and looks up at them, licking her lips in anticipation. I can see the need clear in her eyes. She needs their cocks. She craves them.

Natalie's lips part, and she takes both Cole and Adrian into her mouth simultaneously, her mouth stretched wide to accommodate their desire. The sight is undeniably explicit, raw in its intensity, as she moves with a rhythm that's both sensual and urgent. Her hands find their way to their hips, fingers gripping with a mixture of urgency and tenderness.

I find myself torn between fascination and envy, my imagination running wild with the sensations she must be evoking. The rhythmic sounds of her motions mingle with ragged breaths of my brothers as they lose themselves to her mouth and her wicked little tongue.

Cole's and Adrian's hands are tangled in her hair, guiding her movements as they lose themselves in the intensity of the moment. Her lips wrap around them simultaneously, her mouth moving with a practiced rhythm that leaves me breathless. She takes them in, her movements deliberate and enticing, each caress and stroke designed to elicit pleasure.

The sight is intoxicating, the sounds of her soft moans and their low groans filling the room, growing louder by the second, like they don't really care who hears them.

My cock is aching and throbbing, and I almost can't stop myself from barging inside.

The steam from the hot water blurs the glass wall, making it almost impossible to see them anymore. My throbbing and

aching cock is clouding my judgment.

I need to see them. I need to see her. I growl in frustration and almost give in until something appears against the wall.

It takes me a moment to figure out the twin peaks of Natalie's pink nipples pressed up against the opaque wall and her palm as it slowly slides down the surface, removing some of the steam from the surface, but it's still not enough for me to see them clearly. And that makes it all the more erotic.

My hardness presses up against my jeans, my breaths coming in short pants, in tune with what my brothers must be feeling.

Natalie is pushed further into the wall as someone slams into her from behind. Her moans are muffled as her mouth presses against the wall, blowing hot air out of her mouth, allowing me to see a little of her. Somebody's hand comes up to rest on her shoulder as he continues to stroke in and out of her while Natalie's body dully hits the wall as she moves against him. But it doesn't slow either of them down. In fact, they seemed to be spurred on by it.

And then I see them clearly.

Natalie's silhouette is captivating, her curves and contours moving with a grace that I've never seen before. Cole's fingers glide over skin, igniting invisible trails of fire, and her head tilts back in a moment of ecstasy. He puts his hands on top of hers possessively as he pins her to the wall and fucks her.

Natalie whimpers, and I can almost imagine her cunt tightening around his dick, grabbing on to it greedily as she rides wave after wave of pleasure that only mounts with every stroke.

Cole's presence is undeniable, his strength evident in the way he holds her, his hands tracing the map of her body as he grabs her tits and flutters his way down to her hips, where he holds on to her as he continues to drive in and out of her.

He grabs her by her hair, his mouth finding the curve of her neck, leaving a trail of fiery kisses in its wake. His fingers tangle in her hair as he guides her movements, their bodies pressed together in a fusion of raw need.

And then they switch positions and Natalie's back faces the wall, her shoulders making snow angels on the wall as she slides up and down it. Cole has been replaced by Adrian who fucks her slowly, his motions restrained.

He groans every time he goes inside of her, but it still doesn't seem to be enough for him because he puts his hands around her hips and picks her up swiftly.

Natalie wraps her arms around his shoulders and her legs pin his hips as he strokes in and out of her. And she continues to ride him in abandon, like a bitch in heat, her wet hair dripping down her back.

She scores his back with her fingernails when it gets too intense, and I can see Adrian slowing down.

Until he looks up, and his eyes meet mine.

I see the surprise in them clearly, and I expect him to stop, but my presence only seems to egg him on as he increases his strokes.

I always figured that Adrian was the tamest of the three of us, but it appears I just didn't know this part of my brother existed. Natalie seems to bring all our raw emotions to the surface, and I can't tell if I hate her for it or not.

Cole gets greedy as he hovers at her back, waiting for a way in. His fingers, deft and knowing, glide down Natalie's spine, causing her to shiver with pleasure. Her back presses against his chest as Adrian swiftly fucks her.

His fingers trace the contours of her skin, his touch sending shivers down her spine. His focus narrows, and he begins to caress her clit, his movements synchronized with her rhythm, intensifying her pleasure.

I watch, my heart a tumultuous mix of envy and desire. Natalie's moans reach all the way down to my dick.

Meanwhile, Cole continues to work at her clit while simultaneously matching Adrian's strokes. His thumb finds its way to her clit, and I watch, my pulse quickening, as he circles it with a slow, deliberate pressure that leaves her trembling beneath his touch.

Natalie is lost, caught up in a hurricane of pleasure created by my brothers. They look at each other and smirk. I always felt that they had some kind of twin telepathy thing going on between them because of how attuned they are to each other's needs. And now, they're putting that ability to good use.

I don't know whether to be envious of it, or awestruck. Maybe a little bit of both. But what I wish the most right now is that it was my dick instead of Adrian's, pounding into her, bringing her to the edge of ecstasy.

My pulse quickens, a mixture of desire and longing coursing through my veins. For a fleeting second, I entertain the thought of joining them, of becoming part of this sensual tableau. But reality crashes over me like a wave—I've already made my choice. I've walked away from this by my own choice.

I close my eyes and see Adrian smirking at me. The only person stopping me from going in there is myself.

I can't hold back any longer. The overwhelming desire, jealousy, and yearning that have been building inside me reach a breaking point.

Without thinking, I push the door to the shower open, my clothes getting instantly soaked, but I don't care. The scene before me is too much, and I can't resist any longer.

"Adrian, step away," I manage to say, my voice hoarse with a mix of urgency and longing. He looks surprised, his eyebrows furrowing as he begins to move back, giving me the space I need.

Natalie's eyes are closed, her legs shaking where he holds her, and I can tell that she's on the edge of an orgasm.

Adrian reluctantly pulls out of her, making an obscene sound as his dick slips out. Natalie cries out at his absence, her eyes flying open in confusion. And they widen further when she takes me in.

"It's my turn now," I growl as I step toward her.

Natalie doesn't say anything, but I can tell she has some difficulty standing up, so Cole pins her to the wall but removes

himself as I draw nearer.

“You thought your gorgeous cunt could find pleasure without my dick?” I say.

My heart pounds in my chest as I step closer to Natalie. She looks at me, her eyes wide with a mixture of shock and confusion.

“Y-you...didn't want me,” she says, her voice trembling slightly.

“That's bullshit,” I say. “I've wanted you from the moment I saw you in the barn.”

Saying the words seals my fate. I belong to her now.

From the corner of my eyes, I see my brothers smirking at each other.

I wipe the water off my face that starts to blur my vision. I don't bother taking off my shirt, even though it's quickly soaked through as hot water pours over me.

I unzip myself, letting my cock free. Natalie's eyes widen as she sees me.

My hands find her hips, and in a swift, fluid motion, I enter her. The sensation is electric, a shock of pleasure that courses through my body. Natalie gasps, her eyes widening even more, a mixture of surprise and ecstasy crossing her features. I can feel the warmth of her inner walls around me, and the sensation is almost overwhelming.

I start to move, my body instinctively finding a rhythm that matches hers. The water cascades over us like a waterfall.

Her fingers dig into my shoulders, her nails leaving delicious traces of sensation as her body responds to my every thrust. With every stroke, I find a rhythm that matches the passionate cadence of her moans.

The pleasure is intense, a whirlwind of sensations that threatens to consume us both. As I continue to stroke in and out of her, I can feel her walls clenching around me, her body on the brink of release.

And then, it happens. Natalie's body tenses, a gasp escaping her lips as her orgasm washes over her. The sensation is electrifying, and it's all I need to tip over the edge myself.

My own release crashes through me, a wave of pleasure that leaves me breathless. I continue to move within her, riding out the waves of ecstasy until they finally subside. Our breaths are ragged, our bodies pressed together in the aftermath of our shared passion.

As the reality of what just happened sinks in, I pull away slowly, my heart still racing. Natalie looks at me, her expression almost unreadable.

I step back while my arms still circle her waist. "I want this. I want you."

My primal instincts override everything else.

"Let's do this," I say.

NATALIE

I walk down to our cozy kitchen, the morning sunlight streaming in through the windows, casting a warm glow over everything. I'm still a little sore from last night, but in a good way. It almost feels like I'm walking on clouds.

There's a sense of contentment in me, and a fluffy and warm feeling in my stomach that heightens when I spot the three of them in the kitchen.

"Good morning, boys," I chirp.

Tanner looks up from a stack of papers, his pupils dilating as his gaze dips down to my body. Maddy packed a lot of lingerie for me—for my honeymoon—and I'm putting all of that to good use now.

"Good morning," he replies, his voice husky.

I let him watch me walk away as I cover myself with Adrian's robe. I have every intention to tantalize them, but I don't want to accidentally flash the kids.

Cole and Adrian are huddled around the stove, attempting to cook breakfast. They haven't bothered replying to me yet, and it looks like they're caught up in their own thing.

Their usually confident demeanor is replaced by a sense of confusion as they stare at a pan with an expression that's somewhere between bemusement and frustration.

Cole's eyes light up when he sees me. "Ah, the cavalry has arrived."

Adrian shoots him a mock glare. "We're not that hopeless."

I lean against the counter, crossing my arms. “Oh, I see. So you’ve got everything under control then?”

Adrian holds up the whisk, and batter drips hopelessly from it.

I arch an eyebrow, unable to contain my curiosity. “What’s all this?” I ask, my gaze shifting between them, my curiosity piqued.

Cole rubs the back of his neck sheepishly while Adrian manages a slightly embarrassed grin.

“We thought we’d give cooking pancakes a shot,” Cole says, a wry smile tugging at his lips. “The twins mentioned they loved the pancakes you made.”

“Wait, really?” I ask, my heart fluttering.

“Yep,” Adrian says. “Helena was the one who mentioned it. Jaden just nodded, but it’s safe to say he agrees. As it turns out, it’s not as easy as it looks.”

Cole holds up an instant pancake mix packet.

“Did you buy a new box?” I ask. “Pretty sure one in the pantry is expired.”

“Wait, we had pancake mix in the pantry?” Adrian says, looking puzzled.

“Yeah, you did,” I say.

“Wow,” Cole says. “The twins probably picked it up when we took them grocery shopping a few months ago.”

“Wow,” I say again under my breath.

“Hey, that’s unfair,” Cole says.

“No, no I’m glad you’ve kept the twins alive the last couple of years on your own,” I say. “So kudos to you.”

“Well, pancakes are no joke,” Adrian says.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Well, it’s the thought that counts, right?”

Adrian chuckles in agreement, and I notice the distinct lack of edible progress on the stove. “Maybe you should let a professional handle this,” I tease, glancing between them.

Adrian grins, and there's a mischievous spark in his eyes. "Yeah, maybe you could show us how it's done."

"Actually, I would love to," I say smiling. "Now shoo and let me work."

"Oooh, bossy," Adrian says. "I like that mamacita."

"I keep telling you that you speaking Spanish is absolutely horrendous," Cole says, rolling his eyes.

"Well, I picked it up in town, and sue me for being attracted to bossy women," Adrian says, flashing me a smirk.

Maybe Adrian is not as vanilla as I've assumed. No surprises there, considering how wild Cole is.

"Next you'll tell us you want me to tie you down and have her ride you," Cole teases.

"Actually," I say. "That doesn't sound like half a bad idea."

Cole inhales sharply. "Jesus, woman, you're going to be the death of me."

I suppress a laugh, studying the batter. "Let's start from scratch then. First, we need to get the consistency right."

I grab a mixing bowl and start to sift the flour, the fine powder forming a cloud as it falls into the bowl.

Adrian, standing to my left, grabs the milk and eggs. "I've got the wet ingredients covered," he quips, cracking an egg into a separate bowl with practiced ease.

Cole, to my right, smirks. "I'm on flipping duty."

"That's the easiest part," I say.

"Hater," he mutters under his breath.

"So," Adrian begins, his voice carrying a playful note, "any secret pancake tips, Natalie?"

I wink at him. "Well, a pinch of cinnamon and a splash of vanilla extract can work wonders."

"Sounds heavenly," Adrian says.

As we ladle the batter onto the sizzling pan, the kitchen fills with the sizzling sound of cooking pancakes. The sweet aroma wafts through the air, making our mouths water in anticipation.

“I think we’re onto something good here,” I comment, my gaze shifting between them.

Adrian nods in agreement. “I have a feeling these pancakes are going to be epic.”

Cole grins, his eyes locked on the pan he’s preheating. “If they’re not, we’ll blame Natalie, right?”

I roll my eyes. “After I gave all my secrets away? That’s kind of unfair, don’t you think?”

“Why don’t you go sit down and let us take over,” Adrian says.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Positive,” Cole says. “Can’t make our lady do all the work.”

My heart flutters. “Sure.”

“We need to make scrambled eggs and French toast next,” Adrian says.

“So what’s the occasion?” I ask. “Why are we going all out?”

Adrian looks up with a smile, his eyes warm and inviting. “Well, it’s a special day,” he replies, his tone laced with excitement.

Cole chimes in, his expression equally enthusiastic. “Indeed. It’s the first day of the new term at school.”

“So you’re cooking breakfast for the kids?”

“An elaborate one—yes. At least that’s the plan.”

“It’s really sweet of you to do that for them,” I say, trying not to show my hurt. I couldn’t blame them for not telling me. They didn’t even realize something was amiss, and I should have asked more questions.

“Well, it’s a milestone,” Adrian says. “It’s their first day of school.” He stresses the word *first*.

“Wait, like, it’s their first day of school ever?” I ask.

I take a seat at the table and ignore the way my stomach squirms. Adrian mentioned that they were starting school soon, and I just assumed that it was like any other year. None of them volunteered any more information.

“They’ve been homeschooled so far, but Adrian convinced me that it might be good for them to experience a regular school environment,” Tanner says, glaring at his brother. He obviously doesn’t think it’s a good idea.

Adrian, to his credit, looks unfazed. “I think it might be good for them to experience a regular school environment, make some friends their age.”

“That sounds like a good idea, actually,” I say. “Not that you’re doing a bad job or whatever, but they need to be around people their age.”

“It’s good because Cole keeps telling me he’ll give them homework and always conveniently forgets about it,” Adrian says. “The children were beginning to fall behind.”

“It’s all right if it takes them a few more years to catch up on gerunds and participles. I think they’ll survive without it.”

Tanner turns to me. “You know what this means for you, doesn’t it?”

My stomach curls, my heart pounding in my chest. Is he going to send me away? Is he going to tell me that I’m not needed around here anymore?

“No, what?” I ask.

“You’ll have to help them with homework,” Tanner says.

My breath rushes out quickly; I wasn’t even aware I was holding it.

“Y-yeah that’s fine with me,” I say.

“We’ll pay you extra, of course,” Adrian chimes in.

“You don’t need to do that,” I say. “In fact, go ahead and put the budget into the place. I really mean it. You’ve done more than enough for me.”

“You really don’t want to go home, do you?” Cole says.

My throat tightens as I try to get the words out. “Not right now.”

“Have you talked to anybody back home?” Adrian says.

My gaze instinctively turns to Tanner. I have no idea how much he overheard before when I was talking Wylan, or if he heard me speaking Russian, but he doesn’t seem to have told his brothers about it.

“Yeah, they know I’m safe and okay.”

“Well that’s great. I, for one, can’t wait to meet the family,” Adrian says.

“Slow down, cowboy,” Cole says. “I mean, no offense, Nat.”

“None taken,” I say. The less curious they are about my family, the better.

“Alright, guys, we’ve tackled breakfast. Now, let’s make sure the twins are all set for their first day at school.” I grab a notepad from the counter and start to go through the checklist.

“Thankfully, today is just orientation,” Adrian explains, “so they’ll be there only one hour today.”

“Great, so that gives us enough time to prepare for tomorrow. First, we’ll need to pack their lunches,” I say, scribbling it down. “How about turkey and cheese sandwiches with some carrot sticks and apple slices?”

Adrian nods in agreement. “Sounds healthy and delicious. We can’t forget some juice boxes too.”

I make a note of the juice boxes and continue, “Next, we should label all their school supplies.

“Done and done. What else?” he asks.

“And don’t forget their backpacks. We should double-check that everything they need is in there.”

“Wow,” Cole says. “You’re really good at this.”

“I grew up with my extended family,” I explain. “And I’ve been through all of this with my little cousins so I’m used to

it.”

“And you’ll be a great mom one day,” Adrian says.

I know he means well, but he sounds kind of detached when he says it.

I wave my hand away. “It’s not like I’m ready to have children. I’m sure you guys have your hands full with the twins, and we don’t need more complication.”

Tanner opens his mouth to say something, but seems to think better of it.

“Let’s just focus on the twins,” I offer. “Do we have everything?”

Just as we’re finishing our discussion, the soft shuffle of footsteps reaches us, and Jaden and Helena enter the kitchen. They’re both dressed nicer than usual, their eyes a mix of excitement and apprehension. I can see the nervous energy radiating from them, in the way they fidget with the straps of their backpacks.

“Hey, you two,” I say with a smile, trying to infuse my voice with enthusiasm. “Are you ready for your first day of school?”

They exchange a quick glance before Jaden replies, his voice tentative, “I guess so.”

Helena’s gaze flickers between us, uncertainty etched across her face. “It’s just...we’ve never been to a real school before.”

Tanner places a reassuring hand on Jaden’s shoulder. “It’s okay to feel nervous. New experiences can be a little scary at first, but you’re not alone. You have your teachers, your classmates, and us supporting you every step of the way.”

I step closer to them, my heart aching at the mixture of emotions they’re going through. “And guess what? You’re going to meet new friends and learn so many amazing things. School can be a lot of fun!”

Tanner’s phone rings, breaking the cozy atmosphere with its urgent tone. He listens for a moment, his expression growing more serious. I exchange a concerned look with Adrian and Cole as Tanner hangs up.

“That was the delivery company,” Tanner says, his voice laced with frustration. “Some of our supplies are being held up, and they need someone to go and sort it out.”

Adrian sighs, shaking his head. “Of course it happens on the same day as the kids’ first day of school.”

Cole nods in agreement, a furrow forming between his brows. “We can’t let this mess up their day.”

Tanner’s gaze turns to Adrian and Cole. “I can’t handle this alone.”

“We’ll come with you,” Adrian offers.

“What about the kids?” Tanner says, his brows furrowed.

“Listen,” I say, drawing their attention. “Why don’t you guys go handle the deliveries? I can take the twins to school.”

All eyes turn to me, and there’s a moment of consideration before Cole speaks up. “You sure, Natalie? It’s a bit of a drive, and my truck’s not the easiest to maneuver.”

I reassure them that I can handle it, and soon I’m sliding into the driver’s seat of Cole’s truck, my hands gripping the steering wheel with a mixture of determination and trepidation. I’ve driven larger vehicles before, but this truck is a bit bulkier than what I’m used to. As I start the engine, the deep rumble of the motor resonates through the cabin, adding to my nerves.

“Alright, Natalie, you’ve got this,” Cole’s voice comes through the passenger window, his tone filled with encouragement.

I shoot him a grateful smile, taking a deep breath to steady my nerves. Jaden, who’s sitting in the back with Helena, smirks. “Hope you’re not planning to parallel park this thing.”

“Very funny, Jaden,” I say. “I can drive.”

“Sure,” he says. His sassiness smarts a little, but I’m used to it by now.

With a slow press of the gas pedal, I ease the truck out of the driveway. The initial movement is a bit jolty but Colt whistling

from behind the truck gives me courage.

Jaden, however, can't resist a snide remark. "I guess miracles do happen."

I roll my eyes, refusing to let his comment dampen my spirits. Instead, I focus on the road and try to engage the twins in conversation. "So, are you guys excited about your first day at school?"

Helena gives a small nod, her eyes fixed on the passing scenery outside the window. Jaden shrugs, seemingly uninterested. "Yeah, I guess."

I pull out of the dirt roads of the ranch, the rumble of the truck's engine becoming a comforting backdrop to my thoughts. The road stretches ahead, leading me toward the school where a new chapter awaits the twins.

I maneuver the truck into a parking spot in front of the school, the engine's growl fading into silence. The exterior is a blend of classic architecture and modern accents.

My attention is drawn to the twins as they gather their things and step out of the truck.

As they leave, I catch Helena's eye and reach out to gently stop her. I offer her a reassuring smile and reach up to fix a loose strand of hair that's escaped from her ponytail. "There you go, all set," I say softly.

"Thanks," Helena murmurs, her eyes meeting mine for a brief moment before she turns to follow her brother.

I give her shoulder a reassuring squeeze before she exits the truck. Jaden follows her without a word, his demeanor still guarded. I watch them as they make their way toward the school entrance, their figures gradually blending in with the crowd of students.

With the twins settled into their school's orientation, I decide to take a short walk to a nearby café. It's conveniently located, just next door, and I hope to grab a coffee and catch up on some reading while I wait for the twins' hour-long session to conclude.

I step inside the cozy café, its walls adorned with local artwork and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filling the air.

I find a seat near the window, my gaze occasionally drifting toward the school entrance. As I sip on my latte, a voice interrupts my thoughts.

“Is this seat taken?” The voice is accompanied by a warm smile, and I look up to see a woman in her mid-thirties gesturing to the chair across from me.

I return the smile and shake my head. “No, go ahead.”

She gives me a grateful smile. “Thank you. All the other tables are full.”

I look around and she’s right. The café is full of other people who have dropped their kids at the school.

She’s joined by another woman and a man, all of them around the same age, and they settle around the table with friendly introductions. Sarah, Emily, and Alex.

“Did you drop your kids at the school?” Emily asks.

“As a matter of fact, I did,” I say.

“Wow, you’re a little young to be a mother of kids who are already going to school,” Alex says. Emily elbows him. “Alex, that’s rude.”

I chuckle. “That’s okay. I’m actually forty but people do say I don’t look my age.”

Three pairs of eyes widen and their jaws drop as they stare at me. I laugh. “Relax, I was joking. I’m just the nanny.”

“Now that makes more sense,” Alex says, rubbing his chin.

Sarah turns to me. “Don’t mind Alex.”

I laugh.

“Hello, everyone,” says a familiar woman, her eyes lingering on me for a moment longer than necessary before she turns her attention to the others. She’s about five feet tall with curly blonde hair and lips that are curled up in a permanent sneer. “Mind if I join you?”

“Martha, hey. Come, come. Grab a chair.”

As she sits down, she gives me a stink eye as if I’ve personally wronged her. She barely spoke to me at the farmer’s market.

The others welcome her with warm smiles, but I sense an undercurrent of something unfriendly as she takes a seat. I give a polite nod, keeping my expression neutral. The atmosphere becomes slightly chilly, though the others seem to be trying to bridge the gap. The memory of her flirting with Cole still lingers, leaving a sour taste in my mouth.

Is she married? That makes the whole thing ickier.

“Hi, Natalie!” Martha exclaims, her tone overly enthusiastic. “Fancy meeting you here.”

I nod politely, still wary of her. “Yes, small world, isn’t it?”

Martha turns to the others. “We ran into each other at the Sunday market. She was with Cole.”

“Oh, so you nanny for the O’Conner brothers,” Sarah says, nodding.

“Wow, what’s that like?” Emily asks.

Martha raises an eyebrow, her tone laced with condescension. “Ah, a nanny. How...fulfilling.”

My smile remains unwavering, though my grip tightens on my coffee cup. “It’s rewarding to be a part of their lives.”

Sarah interjects, attempting to diffuse any tension. “Oh, absolutely. Caregivers play a crucial role in children’s development.”

Emily adds, “And it takes a village, right? We all need help sometimes.”

“Yeah, and the kids can be a handful,” I say.

“I’ve heard about that,” Alex says. “I met Tanner a couple of months ago and he was telling me they were having a hard time finding someone to take care of the children full-time. I’m glad they found you.”

“Yeah, I heard rumors too, that they were having a hard time with the kids being unable to adjust to the new nannies,” Emily says. “How much time have you been with them?”

“Just short of three weeks,” I say.

“Not long enough,” Martha says. “There’s still time.”

“Time for what?” I ask, deadpan.

Her eyes widen and she looks shocked that I challenged her like this. She waves me away.

“I mean, I’m sure the kids will get used to you,” Martha says. I give her a tight-lipped smile in return, although what I really want to do is throw my coffee in her face, or worse. I’ve unfortunately inherited my dad’s temper, though I try to keep it under wraps.

Probably sensing the awkwardness between us, Sarah chimes in.

“It must be difficult for the children to get used to a new mother figure after what happened,” she says.

My stomach curls. I can tell Martha is watching me so I try to keep my expression neutral. “Absolutely,” I say.

They know something I don’t.

“Heck, I didn’t even know they had kids till the brothers rolled into town,” Alex says. “All freshly returned from deployment.”

I feel like I’m missing an important piece of the puzzle here, but I don’t want to give Martha the satisfaction of knowing how absolutely clueless I am.

“So, how do you all know each other?” I ask, attempting to maintain the casual flow of conversation.

Sarah answers, “We’re all part of a parents’ group at the school. It’s a great way to connect and share experiences.”

Emily nods. “And we’ve all become fast friends through our kids’ interactions.”

“That sounds wonderful,” I say, genuinely intrigued.

As the conversation at the café continues, I find myself growing more at ease with Sarah, Alex, and Emily. Their warmth and genuine interest in getting to know me make the initial discomfort of Martha's presence fade into the background.

"How's your husband, Mar?" Emily asks Martha. "Is his leg okay now?"

My ears perk up. Husband? Now this is interesting.

Martha looks pissed. She obviously doesn't like her husband being brought up. "Alan is doing fine."

I bite down on the smirk that plays on my lips.

"So, Natalie," Emily says with a friendly smile, "we have this little book club that meets every other week. Would you be interested in joining us?"

I'm taken aback by the invitation, genuinely surprised by their inclusiveness. "Oh, I'd love that!" I reply, my smile genuine.

Sarah adds, "And there's also a yoga class on Saturdays at the community center. You should come along!"

Emily nods enthusiastically. "We're always looking for new faces to join in on the fun."

I exchange phone numbers with the three of them, feeling a growing sense of connection and belonging.

Martha, on the other hand, seems less than thrilled by the developments. Her smile tightens, and her gaze is distant as she half-heartedly adds her number to the group chat. It's clear that she's not used to sharing the spotlight or the attention with others.

"It's been great getting to know you, Natalie," Sarah says with a genuine smile. "We'll be in touch soon."

As they get up to leave, Martha stays behind for a moment, her expression less than friendly. "You seem to be fitting in quite well, don't you?"

I meet her gaze with a gracious nod. "I believe in making friends wherever I go. It's important to build a sense of

community.”

Her response is a noncommittal grunt, and I can sense that my presence irks her. But I refuse to let it dampen my spirits.

As I head outside to walk back to the school, I take out my phone and dial my brother’s number. He picks up after a couple of rings, his voice warm but distant.

“Hey, Nati,” he greets me.

“Wylan, how’s everyone? Are you okay?” I ask, my concern for my family ever-present.

“Everyone’s good,” he replies, and I can sense there’s something more he’s not saying. “And I’m okay.”

I narrow my eyes, even though he can’t see me. “And Zach? Is he giving you any trouble?”

Wylan hesitates before answering, “No, everything’s under control.”

I know Wylan well enough to catch the hesitation in his voice. “Wylan, be honest with me. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“No, Nati, everything is fine. Why do you keep asking?”

“Because you’re scaring me.”

“You don’t want to hear it.”

“What?”

“Zach is getting married to Maddy.”

I stop walking. “What?”

“Yeah, they announced it a few days ago. The family didn’t take it well. Mom’s a mess, but they’ve come around reluctantly.”

“I’m taking a flight back home tonight.”

I’m just bluffing, but I need to gauge the extent of the situation since it’s clear my brother isn’t going to be honest with me.

“No!” he says sharply. “You can’t come back.”

“Why not?” I say, my heart sinking. “Zach has Maddy.”

“He’s still you pissed because you left, Natalya. Because of the way you left,” Wylan says. “He may try to kill you.”

I laugh. It sounds so incredible. “Why would he kill me?”

“Zach is evil. He’s an idiot with an incredibly fragile ego,” Wylan says. “He’s still looking for you, Nati, and it’s not to seek your blessings.”

My mind races back to the life I left behind in New York City, the tangled web of relationships and secrets that I thought I could escape.

“Uncle Quentin?” I ask. He’s Maddy’s father.

“He’s neutral, but at this point I don’t trust anyone.”

“I fucked up, didn’t I?” I say softly.

“What? No,” he says. “You did what was right. You caught him cheating. You couldn’t have married him. I’m not worried about what you did, Nati. And don’t worry, I’ll fix it.”

“You don’t have to,” I say, my heart breaking for my brother. He’s only twenty. He’s not old enough to deal with my shit show.

“I’m the man of the house now,” he says softly. “I have to.”

“Wy—” My words catch in my throat and I’m unable to get anything else out.

“Goodbye, Nati,” he says. “Take care of yourself.”

I find a secluded spot near the school entrance, hidden from the bustling crowd. My emotions well up, and the tears I’ve been holding back spill over as I end the call with my brother.

The tears flow freely, a mixture of frustration, sadness, and longing. It’s a release of pent-up emotions that I’ve kept buried for so long. I lean against a wall, my shoulders shaking as I try to regain my composure. The world around me seems distant, blurred by the tears in my eyes.

Why is Zach looking for me? After everything he has done, why can’t he just leave me alone? And is my brother right? Does he want to kill me?

My blood chills at the very thought of it.

Just then, the school's doors swing open and the twins emerge, their faces a mix of excitement and curiosity. They spot me, and as they approach, their steps slow, their expressions shifting to concern.

"Are you okay, Natalie?" Helena asks softly.

I nod, my throat tight as I struggle to hold back the tears. "Yeah, just...a lot on my mind."

"It's okay, Natalie," Helena whispers, her voice a soothing balm to my troubled heart.

Jaden joins us, his expression awkward but his intentions clear. He pats me on the back gently, his attempt at comfort speaking volumes despite his lack of words.

I pull away slightly, offering them both a tearful smile. "Thank you, guys. I'm okay."

I'm so touched by their unexpected comfort.

To my surprise, Helena reaches out to wipe my tears away. "It's okay to be sad sometimes. I get sad when I remember my mom."

A lump forms in my throat. "I miss my mom too."

"I love Cole and Tanner and Adrian but I wish things could go back to how they were before," Helena says, her expression sad.

"Helena, we're not supposed to say that," Jaden says sharply.

I look between the two of them. What are they saying? Do they not want to stay at the ranch? Is their mom still in the scene? There are too many questions, and not enough answers. But I know I can't exactly have a conversation with the kids about this.

"It's okay," I say. "Our feelings can be complicated sometimes. That's what makes us humans."

To my shock and awe, Helena launches herself at me and puts her arms around my neck before she peels back to look at me. "I think I like you."

My heart blooms. I glance briefly at Jaden but he just turns away.

With a small smile, I gently extricate myself from Helena's embrace and take another deep breath.

"Alright, guys, how about we head back home?" I suggest, my voice more steady now.

"Okay." Helena nods.

"And on our way back, maybe we can pick up some stuff for you both for school. You'll need crayons, right? And maybe a lunch box?" I ask.

Even though I haven't been paid yet, I still have my credit card on me.

"Can I have one with Barbie on it?" Helena asks.

I beam at her. "Anything you want."

ADRIAN

I watch in awe as Natalie straddles me, her body moving with an innate sensuality that leaves me utterly captivated.

The way her hips sway, the way her hair cascades like silk around her shoulders—it's a vision of pure desire that threatens to consume me.

The slow, rhythmic movement of her hips against mine ignites a fire deep within me, a hunger that only she can satiate. My hands move instinctively, tracing the curves of her waist and hips, reveling in the sensation of her soft skin beneath my touch.

My fingers trail upward, the tips grazing the sides of her breasts, feeling them rise and fall with each breath she takes. The moan that escapes her lips as I cup her gently is like a melody.

Emboldened by her response, I caress her breasts with deliberate intent, my thumbs brushing over her nipples in slow, teasing circles. The way she arches her back, offering herself fully to my touch, makes me impossibly hard, my cock throbbing in her wetness.

I lean forward, capturing one taut nipple in my mouth, my lips and tongue working in unison to draw forth gasps of pleasure from her. Her moans grow more pronounced, more desperate.

“Take all of my cock,” I command. “All of it.”

“Yes,” she says as she writhes against me, brushing her fingers down her naked and sweaty body.

I can sense the telltale signs of her impending climax—the way her breath hitches, the tremors that ripple through her body.

As her pace quickens, I can feel the heat building within me, a fervor that matches the intensity of her gaze. Her fingers graze my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake, and the sensations are almost overwhelming. The air is thick with our shared need, the unspoken connection that binds us in this moment.

With a shudder that runs through her entire body, Natalie reaches her climax. I can see it in her eyes—the mixture of pleasure, vulnerability, and a raw openness that takes my breath away. Her body trembles as waves of pleasure wash over her, and the sight is so intensely intimate that it feels like a privilege to be a part of it.

Her body tenses, her movements becoming more erratic, and I hold her hips, guiding her through the waves of sensation. As she reaches the end of her orgasm, I let myself go, filling her up with hot spurts of my come.

As she comes down from the heights of pleasure, her movements gradually slow, and she eases herself down to rest against my chest.

“Wow,” she says.

I remove her damp hair from her face so I can take a better look at her.

“Wow,” I say. “I really needed that.”

“Glad I could be of some help,” she says, kissing me on my cheek before she pulls off of me.

She lies down next to me, snuggling. I put an arm around her and wait for my breath to eventually even out.

“Natalie,” I inquire gently, my voice laced with curiosity, “did you get the kids the new stuff for school?”

Her gaze shifts, avoiding mine briefly before meeting it again. “Yeah, I did,” she admits, her tone softening.

“But, where did you get the money from?” I ask, choosing my words carefully. I don’t want her to feel like I’m prying, but I

also can't shake off the thought that I'm missing something. We haven't paid her yet for babysitting the kids.

When we first found her, she made it seem like she was completely on her own without any money. She's never said anything about money explicitly, but I know that's the assumption my brothers and I made.

Natalie's gaze flickers away again, a telltale sign that my question has touched on something deeper. There's a pause, a pregnant silence that hangs between us as she seems to grapple with her response. When she finally speaks, her voice carries a hint of vulnerability.

"It's just...I had a little savings, you know? And I thought it'd be nice for them to start the school year with new things," she explains.

Her words make sense on the surface, and yet there's something in the way she avoids my gaze, the hesitation in her voice, that raises a subtle alarm within me. It's as if there's an unspoken undercurrent to this situation, one that I can't quite put my finger on. It also doesn't entirely align with the fact that we haven't compensated her yet.

Part of me wants to push further, to ask the questions that are on the tip of my tongue. But another part of me hesitates, unsure whether my concerns are warranted or if I'm simply reading too much into things.

As Natalie and I continue our conversation, a subtle undercurrent of suspicion gnaws at the edges of my thoughts. Her reluctance to explain the source of the money she used to buy the kids' school supplies leaves me with lingering questions.

Well, I suppose she's always been secretive.

I decide to keep my concerns to myself for now and give her the benefit of the doubt. But despite my efforts to focus on the conversation at hand, my mind continues to wander.

"So I noticed the deliveries outside one of the barns earlier," Natalie says. "Are those new supplies?"

Her question jolts me back to the present, and I offer her a faint smile. “Yeah, that’s right,” I reply. “They’re for the barn renovations,” I explain, offering her a small smile. “We had quite a bit of damage after that last winter storm, and it set us back quite a bit. So, we’ve been working on repairing and upgrading everything.”

Natalie’s eyebrows rise in surprise as she absorbs the information. I can tell that she wasn’t aware of the extent of the damage.

“Wow, I had no idea it was that bad,” she remarks, her concern evident in her voice.

“It’s been a challenge, that’s for sure. And it’s taken a toll on our finances. We had to dip into our savings quite a bit to cover the repairs and replacements. That’s part of why we’re a little short on money right now.”

There’s a flicker of concern in Natalie’s eyes, and I can tell she’s genuinely listening, truly taking in the information I’m sharing. It’s comforting to have someone who cares, someone who can understand the struggles we’re facing.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she says softly, her empathy apparent. “If there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

I appreciate her offer, and I’m reminded once again of the strength of our connection. “Thank you, Natalie. Your support means a lot. I know we’ve been late on your payments.”

At my words, something flickers over her face. She just nods, looking away.

I put a finger under her chin so she has no choice but to look up at me. “What?”

“It just makes our relationship sound so transactional.”

I shake my head. “Our relationship is anything but transactional. Natalie, I don’t think I can make myself clearer. I care about you.”

The truth is that my depth of feelings for her goes deeper than that, but I can’t go further than this without talking to my brothers. They’re as much a part of this relationship as I am.

She sits up on the bed. “You know I can help you guys out with the work if you need a hand. I know things have been busy.”

“It’s been busy for you too,” I say. “Childcare is no joke.”

“I love spending time with the kids, and I think I want to spend more time with you guys—you know, one-on-one.” She gets shy when she says this.

I chuckle as I lean on my elbow to look at her. “Is that why you sought me out, alone?”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s not just about sex, I also want to get to know you more, you know?”

Her expression remains casual, but I can tell there’s more than that.

I reach out and put a hand on her thigh. “Is there something weighing on your mind?”

“No, not really,” she says, but I can tell that she’s been a little distracted ever since we met the brothers and their fiancée up on the mountain. For me, meeting them only cemented my feelings for Natalie.

“Is there something specific on your mind?” I ask again.

She shakes her head. “Nah, I’m fine.”

“Well, I’ve been thinking...” I say, taking a deep breath. “Natalie, I—”

“Are you hungry?” she says suddenly, almost jumping out of the bed.

“Okay,” I say. My stomach roils with hunger. “I’m craving a midnight snack. Would you care to join me, my lady?”

She laughs. “After you, my lord.”

Staying up late to eat has become a ritual since Natalie came into my life. It’s not that I was able to sleep easy before she came. On the contrary, I spent most nights tossing and turning in my bed. Whenever I woke up, I always found Cole awake too, staring out the window.

Nowadays he doesn't wake up till the rooster calls.

"Soup?" I offer, since that's the only thing I know to make, having picked up the skill in the Navy kitchen.

"That sounds lovely," she says, hugging herself. "It's getting cold fast around here."

"Summer ends fast here in the mountains. It's practically straight to winter from summer."

"Sounds tough," she says. Her hands are splayed out in front of her. I see the scar again, something I noticed the very first time we slept together in the barn.

I glance at her wrist and inquire gently, "Natalie, I noticed that scar on your wrist. How did you get it?"

She pauses for a moment, her gaze dropping to her wrist before meeting my eyes. There's a hesitancy in her response that piques my curiosity further. "Oh, it's nothing, really," she says, her voice tinged with vagueness. "Just a minor accident from a while back."

Her response, while seemingly innocent, only serves to intensify my suspicions. There's an evasiveness in her tone, a reluctance to share the truth. I can't help but wonder what she might be hiding, and the fog of uncertainty settles in my mind once more.

Natalie catches the look in my eyes, a flicker of doubt that I can't quite conceal. She offers me a small, reassuring smile, but it doesn't quite erase the unease that's settled between us.

"I promise, it's not a big deal, Adrian," she says.

I continue to prepare the soup, my thoughts lingering on Natalie's vague response about the scar on her wrist. It's clear that there's more to the story than she's letting on, and the curiosity gnaws at me.

Once the soup is simmering nicely, I look at Natalie with a gentle smile. "Soup is ready," I say, trying to shift the focus away from the scar for now.

I carefully place the steaming bowl of soup on the table,

As I glance at her, I notice the faint glow of her phone screen lighting up with a new message.

I know where you are, I'm coming for you, the message reads, and my heart skips a beat. It's a chilling message, one that sends shivers down my spine. My immediate instinct is to ask her about it, but before I can say anything, Natalie hastily grabs her phone. In her haste, it topples over the edge of the table.

"Is your phone okay?" I inquire, my concern genuine.

Natalie quickly retrieves her phone, her movements swift but tense. "It's fine, just a little bump," she assures me, though I can see her fingers trembling slightly as she holds the device.

As she sets her phone back on the table, I can't help but notice that she turns it off.

Why would she turn her phone off after receiving such a concerning message? I make a mental note to talk to my brothers about this, to see if they might have any insights or if they've noticed anything unusual lately.

Trying to maintain a sense of normalcy, I return my attention to the meal before us, but the unease lingers in the air like an unspoken shadow. There's something going on, something that Natalie seems unwilling or unable to share, and it gnaws at the back of my mind.

Tanner's earlier suspicions about her come rushing back, and I have to stop myself before I go spiraling down that road. It's a slippery slide.

I made a case for her when my brother refused to keep her with us. I'm the reason she's allowed to be around the kids. I need to find out what's going on and get to the bottom of this.

NATALIE

The morning light filters through the curtains, casting a soft, golden glow across the room as I tie my shoes and head downstairs. It's almost seven-thirty.

Despite the gentle start to the day, my heart is heavy with unease. The ominous message from last night still haunts my thoughts, a constant reminder that my past might be catching up with me.

I barely slept last night, tossing and turning. My boobs are sore and there's a slight pinching pain in my lower belly—the usual signs that my period is near.

I check my cycle app and it tells me that I'm late by two weeks. I'm not too alarmed because my period is rarely on time.

The message was vague, but I know deep down it was from Zach. The menacing words, the feeling of being hunted—it's all too familiar.

“Come on, kids, it's time to go,” I call out as I walk through the living room. Adrian peeks out of the kitchen. When he sees me, his expression changes.

“Hey,” I call out.

He nods his acknowledgement before retreating inside. My voice falters. It feels like something has changed between us. Cole and Tanner are nowhere to be found. They disappear for hours at a time.

Helena and Jaden trudge out of the kitchen while my thoughts remain on Adrian.

I felt like I was on the brink of something beautiful with him. Our connection was undeniable, the passion between us intense. But that message, that threat, it's cast a shadow over everything. I can't help but wonder if Adrian saw it, if he knows what's going on but chose not to confront me about it.

It's not just the threat that weighs on my mind. There's something else, something I sensed in the way he looked at me after we made love. It felt like he was on the verge of confessing his love, like he wanted to open up to me in a way he hadn't before.

But now, in the wake of that message, he's remained silent.

Even though he didn't comment on the text I received, I'm fairly certain he saw it. And maybe it freaked him out, because he's made no attempts to communicate with me.

I shift in the driver's seat of Cole's truck, trying to shake off the anxiety that clings to me like a second skin. I know I can't keep my past from Adrian forever, but I'm afraid of how he'll react when he learns the truth about me, about Zach. I'm afraid it will change everything between us.

I pull up to the school. The morning routine with the kids has become a familiar and comforting part of my day. Over the past weeks, they've started to open up to me more.

I can't help but notice that Jaden, usually so animated and talkative with his sibling, is unusually quiet. There's a somberness in his eyes that tugs at my heartstrings, and I know something's not quite right.

After he's filed out of the car and into the school, I turn to Helena, who's still sitting in the passenger seat. "Is everything alright with Jaden?" I inquire.

Helena hesitates for a moment, as if contemplating whether to share what's been bothering her brother. Then, with a sigh, she nods. "He's been having a tough time at school," she admits, her voice tinged with worry.

I reach out and gently place a hand on her shoulder, wanting to offer support and comfort. “Tell me what’s going on, Helena. You can trust me.”

She takes a deep breath before explaining, “There’s this boy, Ethan. He’s been picking on Jaden a lot. Calling him names, making fun of him in front of other kids. Jaden’s been really upset about it.”

“What exactly does he say to Jaden?” I ask.

“How we don’t have a mom and dad,” she says. Her words make me breathless, and for one moment I can’t believe that I’ve heard her right. *Isn’t Tanner their father?*

Her words knock the breath out of me. Helena is too young for me to ask her these questions, even though they’re practically bursting out of me.

“Thank you for telling me, Helena. It’s important that we help Jaden through this. Can you tell me more about what’s been happening? How is he handling it?”

Helena goes on to describe the incidents in more detail, and it’s clear that Jaden has been trying to hide his pain and embarrassment.

I try to think over everything Tanner, Adrian, and Cole have told me about the kids. None of them have ever explicitly told me that Tanner is their father. I just assumed it.

What the hell is going on?

In this moment, all I can do is offer Helena a reassuring smile. “You’re a great sister for looking out for Jaden like this, Helena. We’ll figure out how to make things better for him, okay?”

“You promise?” she asks.

“I promise,” I say.

“He’s not going to hurt himself like Mom did, right?” she asks.

Something heavy rests on my chest before I manage to say, “No, sweetie, he’s not. Jaden is going to be fine.”

I watch Helena disappear into the school before I leave. The twins are not Tanner's children. I feel like I've been deceived, and fury burns hot in my chest.

Pulling up to the house, I barely even park the truck properly, the tires crunching against the gravel as I practically leap out of it.

I burst through the door, scanning the familiar surroundings for any sign of Tanner. My voice, sharp with anger, slices through the air as I call out, "Tanner! We need to talk, now!"

Tanner emerges from one of the rooms, his face a mask of surprise and confusion. "Natalie, what's going on?"

I confront him, my anger boiling over. "I want the truth, Tanner," I declare, my voice unwavering. "All the lies, the secrets—it's gone on long enough."

Tanner's response is dismissive. "You're acting crazy, Natalie."

I can't contain the anger any longer. "Am I? Or have I just been played for a fool?"

Tanner's expression shifts from surprise to evasion, and I can see the guilt flicker in his eyes. But before he can respond, the sound of approaching footsteps grabs our attention. It's Cole and Adrian, and they're hurrying toward us, their expressions a mix of concern and confusion.

"What the fuck are you on about?" Cole asks, his voice laced with worry.

"None of you thought I deserved the truth that Tanner isn't the twins' father?"

There's an awkward silence before Adrian says, "Wait, is that what you thought? We never—"

"I did," Tanner interjects. "I may have implied that they are my children."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because you were a stranger—you still are in some ways. I didn't want to air out our dirty laundry."

“Is that what this is?” I ask.

“Obviously, things have changed,” he says.

“How exactly?” I ask.

“You’re one of us now,” he says, still not meeting my eyes.

“You didn’t tell me the truth,” I say.

“Because I didn’t want you to know about her,” Tanner says.

“I didn’t want you to treat the kids with pity as soon as you found out that their father abandoned them, and their mother couldn’t take it and killed herself.”

I inhale sharply. “What?”

“Tanner, you’re being too emotional right now,” Cole says.

“You should calm down and we’ll—”

“No,” Tanner says. “Since she’s accusing me of deceiving her, I need to tell her the truth. All of it.” He takes a deep breath.

“The truth is, I didn’t think it would matter.”

“Because you didn’t think I would stay,” I say simply.

I feel a whirlwind of emotions—anger, betrayal, hurt—swirling within me.

Tanner begins, “Natalie, you deserve to know the truth about the twins.” His eyes, usually so guarded, now glisten with the raw emotions of the past. “Our younger sister, Cassie, she ran away when she was just a teenager and got married to a man we didn’t approve of. She left us all behind.”

Tanner continues, “We went off to the Navy and lost contact with her for a few years. It was Cole who eventually managed to get in touch with her. But when he did, he realized that she was in an abusive marriage.”

“Why didn’t she leave him? Why didn’t you do something?” I ask, my voice quivering.

Tanner’s shoulders slump with the weight of his own powerlessness. “Natalie, we tried. Cole tried to convince her to leave, but she refused. She was afraid, manipulated, and isolated. She thought she couldn’t survive on her own.”

He gets this haunted look on his face. “I went to visit her after I got out of the Navy and what I saw broke my heart once again. The children were neglected, the house in shambles,” he says, his voice heavy with sorrow.

“But she still wouldn’t leave her husband. It was as if she was trapped. The final blow came when her husband abandoned her,” Tanner admits, his voice trembling. “Cassie couldn’t cope with the pain and the loss. She...she died, Natalie. And it was the children who found her.”

“The kids are wild because they grew up neglected,” Cole says, his voice laced with sadness. “They didn’t trust us when we first met them. It took us a long time, and only after they realized we were family, and that we weren’t going anywhere, they finally opened up to us.”

I realize what he’s getting at. Everything the kids do—it’s not because they’re deliberately cruel. It’s a test to see who stays. My heart aches for them. They’ve seen too much.

I can see the deep concern etched into his features, and I understand now why they’ve been so fiercely protective of the children.

I meet Tanner’s gaze, my own eyes filled with empathy. “I get it now, Tanner,” I admit, my voice soft. “I understand why you didn’t tell me the truth. You wanted to protect them.”

Adrian, who has been listening quietly, adds, “We couldn’t bear the thought of the kids going through any more pain. They’ve been through enough already.”

Cole, standing beside us, nods in agreement. “It’s not that we didn’t trust you, Natalie. It’s just that we didn’t want you to be burdened with our family’s troubles.”

I know now that I have to come up with a plan to protect Jaden, to put an end to the torment he’s facing at school. He’ll never open up on his own. It’s just something I have to figure out on my own.

THE NEXT MORNING, as I prepare lunch for the kids, I make sure to pack two lunches for Jaden. One is the regular lunch he usually takes to school, and the other is a special foil-wrapped package. I give him a sly smile as I hand it to him.

“Jaden, I packed something extra for you today,” I say, my tone conspiratorial. “Make sure you take it out during lunch, okay?”

Jaden raises an eyebrow, clearly curious but also slightly annoyed. “What is it, Natalie?”

I wink at him, hoping he’ll catch on. “It’s a surprise. You’ll see.”

As he heads out the door with his sibling, he casts a skeptical glance at the foil package but nods in agreement.

I smile to myself. If all goes according to my plan, the unwitting Ethan will take it from him, and it’ll be the last time he tries to do something to Jaden or any other kid at school.

THE NEXT DAY, before the kids can hop out of the truck to head in to school, Jaden’s teacher approaches me, her expression serious.

“Natalie,” she begins, “there’s been a concern raised about Jaden by a parent.”

I put on my best act, feigning surprise and concern. “What concerns? What happened?”

The teacher looks grave as she elaborates, “It seems one of the children fell ill after sharing lunch with Jaden yesterday. The parent is quite upset, and we’d like to discuss the matter further with you.”

The teacher proceeds to explain that a parent has complained about Jaden, alleging that he shared a lunch that made one of the kids fall ill. My heart skips a beat as I realize that my plan might have had unintended consequences. I have to tread carefully here.

“Shared a lunch?” I reply, furrowing my brow as if puzzled. “I had no idea. Could you tell me more about it?”

“Yeah, Jaden shared his lunch with one of the kids,” the teacher explains.

“Really? That’s strange because that lunch was just meant for him. You see Jaden has had a bit of a cough so I bought some jalapeño sauce and black pepper from the market to make him a wrap. I’m sure it would be pretty spicy for a kindergartener, but Jaden knew about it. It was just meant for him.”

The teacher purses her lips as if she seems to realize something is amiss.

I turn to Jaden, who’s staring at the teacher. “Jaden, honey, did you give your lunch to someone?”

“I didn’t,” he mumbles as he looks away. “Ethan took it.”

“Jaden,” I say, sounding appalled. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Before he can respond, I turn to the teacher who now looks unsure about the sudden turn of events. “You said that the other kid’s parent made a complaint, right? So they must still be at the school.”

“Y-yeah,” she stammers.

“Great, I would like to come in and talk to them,” I say as I unbuckle my seat belt, “and clear up any and all misunderstandings.”

Jaden’s worry is palpable as he glances back at me, concern etched across his young face. “Natalie, are you going to get in trouble?”

I reach out and give his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “No, sweetie, I’ll be fine. Just go to class, okay? Everything will work out.”

He nods, still looking unsure, but eventually turns and heads toward the school building with Helena. I watch them until they disappear through the entrance.

With a deep breath, I follow the teacher through the school’s hallways to the principal’s office. As I step inside, I’m greeted

by an unexpected sight—Martha is sitting there, her posture rigid, her expression decidedly unfriendly.

Martha's eyes narrow when she sees me, her lips curling into a condescending sneer. "You," she hisses. "You're the one who made my son sick, aren't you? I should have known." She's muttering, but she's loud enough for me to hear. I know this is intentional. She's expecting a reaction out of me.

I keep my composure, not allowing her hostility to rattle me. "I made lunch for Jaden," I reply calmly. "It was meant for him, and nobody else. If Ethan took it, he did so forcefully."

Martha's anger is palpable as she leans forward, accusingly. "You expect me to believe that? My son wouldn't steal someone's lunch. He's a good boy."

I maintain my calm, resolute stance. "I don't want to argue, Martha. The lunch was never meant for Ethan. If he took it, it wasn't with Jaden's consent."

Martha's hostility continues to radiate as she narrows her eyes at me. "I don't care what you say," she retorts sharply. "My Ethan would never do something like that. You're doing this out of spite."

I blanch. "Excuse me?"

She folds her hands in front of her chest. "That's right," she says, before turning to the principal. "And I don't get why she's here. She's not even Jaden's guardian. She's the nanny." She makes a disgusted face when she says that.

I turn to the principal with a sigh. "That's true, but I've been given the responsibility of their care."

Martha snorts. "Fine way you do that. You put my child in harm's way."

"That's a big accusation," I say, my voice remaining steadfast.

"I don't know what kind of games you're playing, but my son wouldn't do something like this," she insists. "I'm telling you. She's up to something."

I scowl. She's just so annoying.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” the principal says diplomatically. “We have cameras monitoring the playground. We can review the footage to determine what happened.”

Bingo. I barely contain my smirk. This is exactly what I needed.

“Do you have it right now?” I ask.

“Yes, we do. Let me bring it in from the office.”

When it’s brought in, the principal starts the playback, and we watch the events on the screen unfold.

The footage shows Jaden sitting alone at a table during lunchtime, his lunchbox in front of him. Ethan approaches, clearly agitated, and begins to taunt Jaden.

Ethan forcefully grabs Jaden’s lunchbox, opens it, and takes a bite of the food. Jaden tries to stop him, but he’s pushed away.

As we watch, it becomes undeniable that Jaden was the victim of bullying, and Ethan was the aggressor.

“There you have it,” I say, as I turn to Martha.

I can’t help but feel a sense of vindication as the truth unfolds on the screen.

Martha, on the other hand, begins to backtrack, her hostility fading into awkward discomfort. She stammers, “Well, I...I had no idea Ethan was behaving like that. Kids can be so unpredictable.”

The principal clears her throat, her gaze unwavering. “It’s important that we address this behavior and ensure a safe environment for all students.”

“Exactly,” I chirp while Martha glares at me.

“The video clearly shows that Ethan was responsible for taking Jaden’s lunch. This is a serious matter, Mrs. Hayden. I hope you realize that.”

Martha, no longer able to deny the evidence before her eyes, nods. “Well, I didn’t know he would do something like this. I’ll talk to him about it.”

“Good,” the principal says. “They’re young and impressionable kids. It’s our duty to show them the correct way.”

“Exactly what I think, although Jaden and Helena have been raised with values that teach them to show kindness to other people,” I say, standing up before either of them can say anything. “I would like to stay and extend the meeting, but I have a few errands to run.”

“No problem...” She trails off.

“Natalie,” I say.

“We should have you on the parent-teacher board,” she says. “I look forward to seeing you in the next meeting.”

“I’ll be there,” I say as I walk out.

Before I can take a few paces, I hear footsteps behind me. I turn around to see Martha glaring at me, an accusing finger raised at me. “I know you did something.”

“And what?” I say.

Her face drains. She wasn’t expecting this answer.

I walk over to her. “If you mess with my kids, it’s a straight road to hell. Remember that.”

With that final warning, I strut away.

Natalie was curt and vague in her text. She just told me I needed to be at the school right away.

It's an emergency, her text said. I know Tanner will be mad when he sees that his car is missing. He was already reluctant to give Natalie the truck in the first place. She's waiting for me at the school gate when I arrive. The rest of the parking lot is empty, which isn't surprising since it's barely even midday.

Natalie climbs into the passenger seat, and before I can ask, she says, "We need to go shopping."

I give her a bemused look. "Shopping? That's what constitutes an emergency?"

She smiles at me crookedly, and I feel my heart melt. She has this effect on me that defies all logic. Before her, I never really thought about being in a relationship with someone or being faithful to them. But she makes me want to rethink my decision.

"What happened to the truck?" I ask.

"I had to take it for some repairs," she says.

I raise a brow. I know the truck's a little rusty, and it's been giving us some trouble lately. "What kind of repairs?"

"Minor," she says, again a vague answer. "They're going to give it back in a few hours, but I can't waste precious time."

"Why not?" I ask. She's definitely up to something.

She smiles, a glint of excitement in her eyes. “It’s the twins’ birthday tomorrow, and I want to make it special.”

“Wow,” I say.

She nods excitedly. “Yeah, I just found out today. Noticed it in their file at the principal’s office. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I rake a finger through my hair. “I didn’t remember it myself. Wait, why were you at the principal’s office?”

“It’s not important,” she says. “Well, it *is* important, but everything is solved now.”

“Okay,” I say, still a little unsure.

“Forget about that. When was the last time the twins celebrated their birthday? They’re turning seven.”

I momentarily ponder her question, realizing it’s been so long I can’t remember. “I’m not sure,” I admit. “They haven’t been with us for very long.”

“Well, I want to change that. I want to give them a memorable birthday. Something they’ll cherish.”

I nod, appreciating her sentiment. “That’s a wonderful idea, Natalie. But why didn’t you call Adrian?”

A shadow falls over her face. “He didn’t pick up my call.”

I frown. That’s strange. I keep my skepticism to myself. “He was running some errands with Tanner. He’s probably busy, one of the horses got a little sick.”

“I totally get it,” she says as she looks away. “I thought he might be busy and didn’t want to bother him. But I’d appreciate your help with this.”

I’ve noticed that Adrian has been quieter these last couple of days. He mostly answers any questions with grunts and nods.

“So, what kind of party are you envisioning for the twins?” I ask.

She glances at me, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. “I was thinking of a small but fun gathering at the ranch. Maybe some games, a little bit of music, and of course cake and presents.”

I nod in agreement, already picturing the scene in my mind. “That sounds perfect. And what about the cake? Do you have a theme in mind?”

Natalie grins, and there’s a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “I was thinking of a superhero-themed cake. You know, to make them feel like they’re the heroes of the day.”

I can’t help but laugh at her choice, appreciating her creativity. “That’s a fantastic idea. They’ll love it.”

“Yeah, and we’ll get everyone from their grade for the guest list. Well, all except for Ethan.”

“Who’s Ethan?” I ask. I had no idea she was so involved with the kids.

“This kid who was kind of bullying Jaden,” she says reluctantly.

“Excuse me?” I say, nearly slamming on the brakes.

“You wouldn’t know about it,” she says.

“How on earth...” I trail off.

“He’s your friend Martha’s son,” she finally says.

“Who the fuck is Martha?” I ask.

She smiles. “The lady who kind of flirts with you at the market.”

“You’ll have to be more specific than that,” I say.

She rolls her eyes. “Well, it’s not important because I already dealt with it.”

“Okay,” I say slowly.

As we arrive at the store and make our way to the toy section, her eyes light up, and she starts selecting presents for the twins, carefully considering their individual tastes and preferences. I can’t help but admire her thoughtfulness.

We laugh as we debate between different types of party hats and giggle at the thought of Tanner wearing them.

As we check out at the cashier, our arms laden with colorful bags filled with birthday supplies, I steal a moment to gaze at

Natalie. Her eyes sparkle with excitement, and the warmth in her smile makes my heart flutter.

And then it hits me—a realization that comes like a soft whisper in the back of my mind. I'm falling in love with Natalie. It's not something I expected or was prepared for, but it's undeniable.

As we load the supplies into the car and make our way back to the ranch, I can't help but wonder how she feels. She hasn't said anything about commitment, and I would need to run things past my brothers to see if they're on board, as well.

As we return home from our successful shopping trip, the mood in the car is buoyant, thanks to the preparations we've made for the twins' birthday party. But as we pull up to the house, we notice Tanner standing near the entrance, looking somewhat concerned.

I park the car, and Natalie and I exchange glances before stepping out. Tanner approaches us, a furrow in his brow.

"Nat, I just received this very concerning email from someone called Martha about her son having diarrhea, and she says you have something to do with it?" he asks.

I laugh. "Wait, what?"

"Yeah I thought I was having a stroke when I first read it," Tanner says. "What's it about?"

"Ignore it. I dealt with it already."

"Wait, is that about Jaden's bullying?" I ask.

"Jaden was being bullied?" Tanner says. By this time, Adrian has come out of the house, but he hangs back a little.

"What does diarrhea have to do with it?" Tanner asks.

"Jaden's lunch was being stolen, and I needed a way to prove it with little to no drama. Sometimes a little spice is all it takes to make people think twice. That's what my grandmother used to say, especially when dealing with stubborn enemies."

"Wow," I say, at a loss for words.

Tanner looks stunned. "You did this for Jaden?"

“I’ll go to any extent for the kids,” Natalie says, tipping her chin up.

I chuckle, unable to contain my amusement. “That’s my girl,” I say with pride.

For his part, Tanner seems taken aback by Natalie’s response, but he eventually cracks a smile. “Well, that’s certainly a unique approach,” he admits. “I’m not condoning your response, but I’m not gonna fight it either.”

“Well, I suppose that’s one way to handle it.”

Adrian remains somewhat aloof, his expression unreadable. There’s definitely something brewing in his head that I don’t quite understand. Before I can give it more thought, Natalie’s voice pulls me out of it.

“Let’s get everything sorted. We need to invite people and set up everything and—” She almost runs out of breath.

“Relax,” I say. “We’ll handle it. Together.”

“COLE, you and I are on cupcake duty,” Natalie proclaims.

I groan. “Are you serious?”

“Yep,” she says.

“I’m perfectly fine here,” I say, gesturing around the living room.

Natalie makes a face. “It looks like a glitter unicorn exploded over here.”

“We aren’t done yet,” Tanner hollers as he works with a party balloon that resembles a corn dog. I can’t help but chuckle at the sight of my burly brother holding the silly balloon.

“Cole, let’s go,” Natalie practically demands.

I follow her, throwing my hands up in the air, and we get to work together.

“Baking is way more difficult than it looks,” I say.

I glance over at Natalie as we both stand in the kitchen, surrounded by mixing bowls, flour, and sugar. She's wearing a flour-dusted apron, her hair tied back in a messy bun, and a determined look in her eyes.

"How exactly did you imagine it?" she asks.

"It would be infinitely better if you were without clothes," I say, pointing at her.

She laughs. "Let's keep things PG around here. The kids are home."

"Actually, they're not. They're at a friend's home so they won't know about the surprise party. Why waste the perfect chance to be naked?"

"It's still inappropriate," I say. "Here where anybody can see us." I can see her getting turned on at the thought.

"I know," I growl under my breath as I watch her lean over the oven. Her ass is perfectly outlined against the jeggings she's wearing.

"These cupcakes are going to be so good that hopefully nobody will notice that the living room is a disaster right now."

I chuckle and playfully flick some flour her way. "You think so, huh? Well, if our cupcakes are that magical, I'm expecting a promotion to head chef."

"Sure," she says sarcastically.

"Hey, kids' birthday parties were not part of the training manual. My brothers are trying their best."

She rolls her eyes. "Sure. You're making a mess, Cole," she teases, her hands covered in flour as I flick a little more flour at her. I know it's childish, but I need her attention on me. Fuck, I didn't know love made people so greedy.

I step closer, our faces inches apart. "A little mess never hurt anyone."

Her gaze meets mine, and a playful glint dances in her eyes. "You might be onto something there."

Before I respond, I gently lift her and place her on the flour-covered surface of the kitchen counter. I lean in closer, my voice low and husky. “You know what else won’t hurt?”

Natalie’s breath hitches, anticipation in the air as she whispers, “What?”

I brush a stray lock of flour-dusted hair from her face, my fingers lingering on her cheek. “A sweet kiss.”

Our lips finally meet, and it’s as if the world around us fades away. The taste of her is sweeter than any cupcake we could ever bake.

Natalie’s fingers trace a path along my jawline, igniting a trail of desire that courses through my body. She pulls me closer, her lips pressing against mine which both thrills and terrifies me. I’ve never felt this way before.

My hands find their way to her waist, fingers grazing the soft skin beneath her apron. She gasps softly into our kiss, and I take the opportunity to slip my tongue into her mouth, tangling against hers.

Natalie’s fingers start to undo the buttons of my shirt, her touch electric against my skin. I can feel the rapid beat of her heart beneath her chest as she pushes the shirt off my shoulders, revealing the sculpted muscles underneath.

I nuzzle her neck, planting soft, hungry kisses along her collarbone, each one eliciting a low, sultry moan from her. Her hands roam over my chest, exploring the contours and sending shivers down my spine.

With an enticing look in her eyes, Natalie slides off the kitchen counter, pulling me closer. We move together toward the dining table, our bodies pressed tightly against one another.

She takes the lead this time, unbuckling my jeans while my palm slides under her shirt. We don’t have enough time to take our clothes off. We need each other.

I pull one of her tits out of her shirt, popping a few buttons as I tug on it with my mouth, sucking on her nipple. She writhes against me, practically panting as she clumsily holds herself on top of me. As soon as my cock, greedy as ever, slips out,

she tugs on it a few times before she straddles it. She's so wet that it slides right into her needy cunt.

I groan at the sudden access to her wet channel, holding her hips to mine as I set a rhythm that drives us both toward ecstasy. All the while I continue to suck on her tit. One of my other hands slips down, applying pressure to her clit as I fuck her, creating a rhythmic thump against the table.

It doesn't take us long to find release in each other. I come inside her, hiding my groan in the crook of her neck before she finally sits up and slides off of me. I notice that she holds her chest as she stands up, wincing slightly.

"Did I bite too hard?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No, my boobs are just really sore. I guess I'm going to have my period soon."

"Oh, okay," I say.

She nods. "I have this condition, and sometimes I go months without a period. I'm just glad it's arriving early this time."

"Maybe it's all of this," I say, pointing at my dick.

She laughs. "My doctor did say that sex is good for a regular cycle. My Russian mother, though, was scandalized."

"You're Russian?" I ask.

She nods, looking away. "I mean, we're second and third gen, but we still consider ourselves Russian."

Something nudges at the back of my head. I know Tanner made a big deal about her being cagey about a phone conversation, and I still think he overreacted. If Natalie has Russian heritage, it makes sense that she would know the language.

Just then, Tanner walks into the kitchen. He makes a face when he sees us because he knows exactly what we were up to.

"We're supposed to be having a children's party in a few hours," he says. "Jesus."

"And we are," I say. "Don't worry, it's going to be amazing."

THE EVENING HAS FALLEN, and the living room is a buzzing scene of celebration. Our twins, dressed in their adorable birthday outfits, are gathered around the table, eagerly waiting to cut the cake.

Helena beams, and even Jaden is smiling ear to ear. I haven't seen him quite this happy before. He's always been reserved, but seeing him surrounded by kids his age chattering away fills me with joy. As he tips his head up, I see a glimpse of my sister in him.

"Come on, kids, let's cut the cake," Adrian calls out. The children gather around the table, cheering.

Helena and Jaden hold the cake knife together, their young faces focused and determined, while their classmates from school and their parents gather around. Adrian and Tanner move around, capturing the precious moment with their smartphones.

Over by the food table, I see Natalie, her radiant smile slightly dimmed. She glances at the guests, then back at the twins, a hint of disappointment in her eyes. As Tanner and Adrian share a piece of cake and their guests mingle, she slips away from the crowd, heading toward the porch.

I follow her, knowing that something is bothering her. I reach out and lightly bump her arm. "Hey," I say softly, concern etched in my voice. "What's wrong?"

She looks at me, her expression a mix of disappointment and concern. "I thought more people would come, Cole. I mean, we invited so many of their classmates and their parents, and only a few showed up."

I take a moment to survey the room. It's true that the turnout isn't as large as we hoped for, but the kids who did come are having a blast, and their parents seem to be enjoying themselves too. I turn back to Natalie and give her a reassuring smile.

“Natalie, look around,” I say softly. “I know it’s not as big as we expected, but these people care about our kids and wanted to be here to celebrate with us. Quality over quantity, right?”

She takes a deep breath, her eyes meeting mine.

“Yeah,” she says with a small nod.

The porch provides a quiet refuge from the festivities, and as Natalie and I stand there, bathed in the soft glow of the porch light, I can’t help but feel my heart race. Her presence has always been electrifying, but tonight, it’s something more.

I step closer, our bodies almost touching, and I reach out to gently cup her face in my hands. The touch of her skin against mine sends a shiver down my spine, but I press on.

“Natalie,” I begin, my voice low and tender, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

She turns to me, her eyes filled with curiosity and affection. “What is it, Cole?”

I take her hand in mine, my fingers finding refuge in the spaces between hers. “I’ve been trying to find the right moment to say this, but I can’t hold it in any longer. Natalie, I...I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Her eyes widen, and her lips part in surprise. I can see the emotions playing across her face, uncertainty mingled with something else, something deeper.

She takes a moment, then a smile slowly breaks across her face, and her eyes glisten with warmth. “Cole,” she replies softly, her voice laced with emotion. “Wow.”

“You don’t have to say it back right away,” I say. “And I know that with everything, with my brothers, you’ll need time.”

“It’s not that,” she says, shaking her head.

To my surprise, she has tears in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

She snuffles a little. “I just...miss my family a lot. It’s my brother’s birthday today too.”

“Why don’t you call and talk to him?” I suggest. “Can you do that?”

“I don’t know, I guess I can,” she says, but she sounds a little hesitant, which is strange. *Did running away from her wedding sever her relationship with her family for good?*

Before I can think more about it, Helena and Jaden burst onto the porch, giggling and tugging at our hands. “Come on, it’s time to dance.”

I raise a brow. “When did that become part of the plan?”

Jaden tugs on Natalie’s wrist. “Come on, you have to be there.”

Natalie beams down at the little boy before looking up at me with unshed tears. She has finally found the acceptance that she was seeking. She lets herself be led away by the twins, giving me one last look.

Helena and Jaden are quick to join the dancing crowd, and we follow suit, surrendering to the infectious rhythm of the music.

Adrian and Tanner join us, forming a little family dance circle.

Natalie’s eyes light up, and she takes my hand, falling into step with me effortlessly. We move together, lost in the music, and in this moment, nothing else in the world matters.

NATALIE

The next morning, the sun paints the world in shades of gold, and the air is filled with the fresh promise of a new day. After the twins' birthday party excitement, Helena and Jaden are brimming with energy.

"Did you have fun yesterday?" I ask.

"Natalie, come on, please play with us!" Jaden's big, brown eyes plead as he clings to my leg.

I exchange a look with Adrian, Tanner, and Cole. We're all a bit hesitant, but it's hard to resist those pleading faces. "Alright, fine," I concede with a smile. "We'll play hide and seek."

The kids cheer and quickly rush off to count, their laughter trailing behind them. We find spots to hide, and I end up with Adrian in the old barn. Dust particles dance in the slanted rays of the morning sun that sneak through the gaps in the wooden walls.

"I can't believe we're doing this," I laugh.

"Yeah," Adrian says, his voice distracted.

I frown as my stomach rumbles.

I know something has been bothering him for a while, and I can't keep quiet any longer.

I steal a glance at him, his face partially obscured by shadows. His eyes are fixed on the wooden floorboards, and he seems lost in thought.

“Adrian,” I whisper, my voice barely audible over the rustling of hay and the distant laughter of our pursuers. He turns his head to look at me, his expression guarded.

“What’s up, Nat?” he replies, though his tone lacks the usual warmth.

“You’ve been acting strange all week,” I start, choosing my words carefully. “Is there something on your mind?”

Adrian’s eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I see a flicker of vulnerability. He sighs, his shoulders slumping slightly. “It’s just...things have been complicated lately, you know?” he begins, his voice hesitant.

I nod, my curiosity piqued. “Complicated how?”

He shakes his head.

I put a hand on his thigh. “You can’t keep shutting me out.”

“It’s not about that, Natalie,” he says.

I feel like he’s moving away from me, and I’m desperate to hold on to him.

In an impulsive move, I lean in, closing the gap between us. Adrian’s lips meet mine, and it’s like a spark ignites between us. He doesn’t stop me, and instead reciprocates in kind, his kiss passionate and filled with the same longing I’ve been harboring.

I pull back, raking my hand through his hair. “I thought you hated me.”

Instead of answering, he presses up against my lips and growls. “I can hate myself, but never you.”

I feel a zap of confusion. *What does that mean?*

But just then, he strokes his rough palm over my tits, kneading and pressing them together. I moan and whimper at the contact, all thoughts fleeing my mind.

As our tongues dance and our lips mold into each other, I’m transported back to our very first encounter in this barn.

I remember the way my heart pounded then as he entered me for the very first time.

I cling to him as his hands roam over my body. He doesn't make a motion to remove my clothes, and the wait is almost agonizing. His lips trace a trail down the curve of my neck while his fingers lightly pinch my tits.

And then, with a sudden jolt, he picks me up, strength cording through his muscles as he places me atop a few bales of hay. He kneels between my legs.

"Open up," he commands as he unzips my pants before shimmying them down my thighs. He all but tears my underwear off before he kisses his way up my thigh.

"I've tried to stay away," he murmurs against my feverishly hot skin. "I've tried to do the right thing, but I can't. So fuck it."

"W-what?" I manage to say before his lips close over my cunt, and I almost scream at the electrifying touch, my fingernails digging into his scalp while he continues to eat me out greedily.

His tongue circles my clit while his mouth slightly sucks on my sensitive lips.

"You haven't quite been honest with us," he whispers against me. I barely hear him through the haze of my overpowering lust, slowly cresting toward pleasure. "But here I am, baring my heart to you. Keep your eyes on me."

When I don't, he gives me a little shake before putting my legs on his shoulders.

"I love you," he says.

"Oh my god," I moan as the duality of my overarching pleasure and the shock of his words coarse through me.

There's a scream and squealing behind me. "Found ya!"

I whip around to find the twins at the entrance, happily grinning at me. Thankfully, since Adrian is on his knees, they don't see him or any of my lower body, hidden behind a stack of hay bales.

“Hi—ah,” I manage to choke out as Adrian sucks on my clit at that exact moment.

The twins look confused. “Are you okay, Nat?”

My unfocused gaze and my sweat probably give me away. “I’m—ah...” Adrian grins at me, his onslaught never stopping. “I’m fine.”

Helena narrows her eyes at me. “You act really strange sometimes.”

“I told you,” Jaden says. “She’s strange. Sweet but strange.”

I can’t get any more words out of my mouth without accidentally screaming. They’re still a dozen yards away, and I don’t want them getting any closer.

“You’ve caught me,” I manage to say. “Tanner is just in the barn next door.”

“That’s one down,” Jaden says as he scoots out of the barn. “I’m going to get all of them.”

“Not without me,” Helena squeals as she takes off after him. Just as they leave, Adrian doubles his intensity, curling around my clit, and a powerful orgasm rolls through me.

I scream, and he sits up to swallow my essence in his mouth before he pulls away. My legs feel like jelly as I try to sit up.

“I’ll go find the kids,” he says, and he’s gone before I can say anything. As my heart slowly calms down, I mull over what he told me.

He loves me.

I was afraid that I had chased him away, especially after what he may have seen on my phone, but that’s not the case.

He loves me.

I finally gather myself and slowly head out. I hear more squealing in the distance and realize that the twins have tackled Cole and Tanner to the ground. Adrian runs over and picks Helena up, spinning her around. The sun shines brightly above them, too hot, but none of them care.

This is my perfect little world.

With trembling fingers, I dial my brother's number and hold the phone to my ear, desperately waiting for him to pick up. After several agonizing seconds, it's not my brother's voice that answers but a chillingly familiar one.

"Zach?" I stammer, my voice quivering with a mixture of surprise and fear.

"Well, well, well," Zach's voice oozes through the phone, dripping with an unsettling confidence. "I never thought you'd be foolish enough to call."

"Where is my family, Zach?" I demand, trying to keep my voice steady despite the rising panic.

He chuckles darkly. "You're quite the fool, Natalya. Thanks to your little act of idiocy, I know exactly where you are."

"Zach, please," I plead, desperation creeping into my voice. "I need to know they're safe."

He lets out a sinister laugh. "Oh, they're safe for now. But as for you, my dear Natalya, well, you've just made things a whole lot more interesting."

Fear tightens its grip on me, but I can't let Zach hear my weakness. "Just tell me what you want," I say, my voice a mere whisper.

His voice turns deadly serious. "I want you, Natalya. You belong to this life, to me, whether you like it or not. And now, you've made it clear that you can't escape it. I'm coming for you."

The line goes dead, leaving me with a chilling sense of foreboding.

Before I can process his words, a wave of dizziness washes over me, and the world blurs as I lose consciousness. The phone slips from my trembling hand, and I collapse onto the ground.

I WAKE up in a sterile hospital room, the soft hum of machines and the faint smell of antiseptic filling the air. My head throbs, and I blink, trying to make sense of my surroundings. As my vision clears, I see Tanner, Adrian, and Cole gathered in the room. Adrian is sitting next to me, his concerned eyes fixed on my face.

“Are you okay?” Adrian asks, his voice laced with worry.

I manage a weak nod, my throat dry as sandpaper. “What happened?”

Tanner steps forward, his expression serious. “You fainted in the barn, Nat. We had to get you to the hospital.”

I struggle to remember the events leading up to my collapse, my memory hazy and fragmented.

“What did the doctor say?” I ask.

“Dehydration,” Tanner says. “And stress.”

“You shouldn’t have brought me here,” I say. “I was fine.”

“Why?” Adrian says, leaning forward. “Afraid they would ask for your name?”

“What?” I say.

“Natalie, do you know what Adrian used to do when he was in the Navy?” Cole asks.

I furrow my brow, confusion gnawing at me. “No,” I reply weakly, my voice betraying my puzzlement. “I don’t understand where this is going.”

Cole’s expression is grave as he leans forward, his eyes locked on mine. “Adrian,” he begins, “used to collect intelligence information.”

I look at Adrian, my mind racing to make sense of the revelation. Adrian meets my gaze, his expression a mix of guilt and determination. “Natalie,” he says softly, “I know who you really are. Or should I call you Natalya?”

My heart skips a beat as the pieces of the puzzle start to fall into place. The realization dawns on me, and I feel a knot

tightening in my chest. The secrets I've tried to keep buried are coming to light, and I can't escape the truth any longer.

My voice trembles as I whisper, "You know?"

"Yes. We know who you really are, Natalya Romanov," he says. "You're the eldest daughter of recently deceased mob boss Alexei Romanov. You've lived your entire life in New York, and your father was one of the biggest arms dealers in the world."

Adrian's words hang in the air, heavy with the weight of the truth. I watch in disbelief as he retrieves my ID from his pocket and hands it over to me. The plastic card feels foreign in my trembling hand. How did he even get hold of it?

"I knew everything already," he says. "I just needed to confirm my suspicions."

Static fills my ears. The realization that he must have taken it during our passionate encounter in the barn hits me like a ton of bricks, leaving me feeling dizzy and exposed. He told me he loved me. It was probably just to trick me into complacency.

"Why?" Tanner asks. "Why did you do this to us? Why did you lie?" He shakes his head slightly as if he can't believe it himself.

Tanner steps closer, his expression inscrutable but not hostile. They don't raise their voices or display anger, but their cold detachment chills me to the core.

"I...I had my reasons," I begin, my voice shaky. "I never meant for things to get this complicated."

"It doesn't matter," Cole says. "You have to go."

Tanner and Adrian exchange a glance that speaks volumes, a silent acknowledgement of the betrayal they feel. It's clear they've reached their breaking point, and they want me gone.

I blanch.

Adrian's voice is cold as ice as he says, "Natalie, you need to leave."

“Yeah, we don’t want any harm coming to the children,” Cole adds.

Tears form in my eyes. “You think I would hurt the children?”

Tanner’s expression is hard and unyielding. “Maybe not willingly, but considering your background and the circumstances of your lies, we can’t take any chances. We don’t know the circumstances that made you run away from home—it’s clear you were about to be married, but we don’t know anything beyond that. And now, we don’t need to.”

My chest tightens with a mix of regret and heartache as I realize that the bonds I thought were forming between us have shattered.

“Leave our lives and never come back,” Tanner says. “That’s the only thing we’ll allow.”

The room feels suffocating, and I realize that there’s nothing more I can say or do to change their minds.

I slowly nod, not knowing what else to say.

“Are you feeling better now?” Adrian asks.

I look at him. Is he serious? They just told me I need to leave, and he thought I was going to be okay with that?

I lie. “Yeah, I can go.”

“The nurse is going to come back with the reports. It’s private, so we didn’t ask for details,” Tanner says. “We’ll go downstairs and get you discharged. We’ll go home and Cole will drop you at the bus stop.”

He’s not running the plan by me, he’s simply informing me. They’ve made up their minds.

Grief chokes my throat, and unshed tears crowd my eyes. I don’t trust myself to speak without breaking down, so I don’t say anything. I don’t even meet their gaze.

As Adrian, Cole, and Tanner leave the hospital room to get my discharge papers in order, I’m left alone with my turbulent thoughts.

A nurse enters the room, holding a clipboard with my medical report. She offers a kind smile as she approaches my bed. “Here you go, dear,” she says, handing me the report. “Everything seems to be fine, but we recommend some rest and stress reduction.”

I nod, my mind racing as I take the report from her. It’s only when I start to scan the document that I freeze.

Pregnant.

The word stands out like a beacon in the sea of medical jargon, and it sends a shock wave of emotions coursing through me. I clutch the report to my chest, my mind whirling with the implications of this unexpected revelation.

Tears well up in my eyes as I make a painful decision. I can’t tell Adrian, Cole, or Tanner about this. Not now. Not with Zach on my tail—his presence could endanger all their lives.

Besides, it’s likely that their decision won’t change, or they might even think I’m trying to manipulate them.

My child’s safety has to be my priority, and that means disappearing from their lives and protecting them from the danger that follows me.

As the nurse leaves the room, I wipe away my tears and take a deep breath. I know what I have to do, even though it breaks my heart.

As I make my hasty exit from the hospital, I can’t help but feel a pang of sadness and regret. Leaving without saying a word to Tanner, Adrian, and Cole feels like the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I know it’s for their safety, but the ache in my heart is unbearable.

I make my way out of the hospital. My phone is on the last leg of charge, but I’m too scared to turn it on, afraid it will lead Zach straight to me.

Then there’s my family. I wonder how Mom and Wylan are holding up. Zach was bluffing before. There’s no way he could harm them. My family might have lost its patriarch, but there are still people loyal to him.

I find myself in town, surrounded by the Sunday crowd. I barely have any money with me, only a few bucks and my card that I don't want to max out just yet. First, I need to leave, quietly and without attracting any attention.

I'm a few paces away from the bus stop when I hear someone calling my name. Fear grips me, and for a moment, I think my ears are ringing.

"Natalie!"

Startled, I turn around, my heart racing. And there they are, Helena and Jaden, running toward me with smiles on their faces. Relief washes over me, but it's quickly replaced by a flood of emotion as I realize how much I'll miss them too.

I'm stunned, my emotions a chaotic whirlwind. How did they find me? What are they doing here? I stand still, unable to speak as they approach me.

"Helena, Jaden," I say, my voice choked with emotion as they reach me. I kneel down to their eye level, wrapping my arms around them in a tight embrace. "What are you doing here?"

"Mrs. Mason picked us up for a playdate," Helena explains. Tanner must have sent them away so they weren't distressed by my visit to the hospital. Or maybe they'd been planning to get rid of me for a while now. "We were in the ice cream parlor when we spotted you."

"Yeah, what are you doing here?" Jaden asks. "And where's Tanner, Adrian, and Cole?"

"We had to do something important," I say. "But I'm fine."

"What are you doing here alone?" Jaden asks, frowning.

"I already spoke to your uncles," I say, trying to keep the emotion out of my voice. "Something has come up, and...I'll miss you both so much."

Helena looks up at me, her eyes wide and innocent. "Are you leaving, Natalie?"

I nod, blinking back tears. "Yes, sweetie, I have to go away for a while, but I promise I'll be back soon."

“How soon?” Helena asks.

“Soon,” I say, trying to remain vague.

“You can’t leave,” Jaden says fiercely. “You love us more than anybody else does.”

I shake my head. “That’s not true. Your uncles love you so much, and it’s not like I’m going away forever.” I barely hold on to my tears. “I’ll be gone for just a little while.”

Jaden tugs at my hand. “Will you bring us a present when you come back?”

I manage a watery smile. “Of course, Jaden, I’ll bring you both something special.”

As we continue our conversation, I catch sight of a man in a black jacket out of the corner of my eye. My heart sinks as I recognize the tattoo on his neck—the same one I’ve seen on Zach’s underlings, which he often fondly referred to as the Black Mark.

Desperation surges through me, and I hold on to the kids even more tightly, guiding them toward a nearby grocery store. “Let’s go inside, okay? We’re just going to grab something to eat.”

We enter the grocery store, and my fears deepen as I spot more people with the same tattoo lingering near the entrance. I keep my head down, hoping they won’t recognize me in this crowded place.

I pivot away, fear gripping my heart. I guide Helena and Jaden to the back of the store, trying to stay inconspicuous.

Zach wasn’t bluffing when he told me he found me. I thought I would have more time, but I know just how ruthless he is.

I need to get rid of the kids. The longer they’re with me, the more danger they’re in. But I know it’s not going to be easy, not without catching attention.

“Stay close to me, and don’t make a sound,” I whisper to them. I need to take them back to ice cream parlor. Once they’re with Mrs. Mason, they’ll be safe.

Helena nods, her eyes wide with curiosity, while Jaden looks up at me with a serious expression. “What’s wrong, Natalie?” Helena asks.

“There’s someone I need to avoid,” I explain softly. “And I need your help to do that. Can you do that for me?”

Jaden nods this time, his small hand gripping mine tightly.

“We’ll just make our way through the back entrance,” I say. The door reads STAFF ONLY, but I know no punishment will be as bad as facing Zach’s wrath.

My heart pounds as we make our way through the narrow alleyway behind the grocery store, the urgency of our escape pushing me to move faster. It’s midmorning, and the sun casts long shadows that offer no cover. Panic gnaws at me as I know we’re vulnerable out here.

Up ahead, I see Martha and momentary relief floods through me at the sight of a familiar face. She hates my guts, but I’m sure she’ll help me out. She’s talking to someone, a huge, hulking man who has his back turned to me. He’s showing her something on his phone.

My instincts scream at me to turn back, but it’s too late. Martha notices us, and a sinister smirk curls her lips as she points in my direction. The man turns around, and I see the recognition on his face.

He knows who I am.

I turn around abruptly, gripping Helena and Jaden’s hands tightly as I try to bolt, but it’s difficult to run with them in tow. My breath comes in short, frantic bursts as I push forward.

Suddenly, a car screeches to a halt at the end of the alleyway, blocking our escape. The door swings open, and there he is—Zach.

“Hello, Natalya,” he says, his voice cold and menacing.

TANNER

As we wait in the hospital lobby, a sense of unease and uncertainty continues to hang heavy in the air. I'm growing more frustrated by the minute, wondering why Natalie's discharge is taking so long.

"Does it take hours to fill out some damn discharge form?" I ask, glaring at the nurse station.

"Relax, you're being antsy," Cole says.

"I can't relax," I say as I stand up and begin to pace the corridor. There's an impending sense of doom in my stomach, and I don't understand why.

Finally, unable to contain my frustration any longer, I turn to Adrian and ask, "How did you figure out Natalie's real identity?"

Adrian runs a hand through his hair, his brow furrowing in thought. "It was a combination of things," he begins. "I started getting suspicious a while back. Natalie had a lot of disposable income. Heck, she didn't seem to need the nanny job in the first place. However, she was desperate to stay at the ranch, which meant that she was seeking sanctuary."

He continues, "And then there was the fact that she was cagey about her past. Whenever I asked her about it, she would deflect or change the subject. That raised a red flag for me. I assumed she had gotten out of a dangerous situation."

"The wedding," I murmur. "It must have been happening without her consent."

“Not uncommon in the world she comes from,” Adrian says, his face shadowed. “That’s why I started to investigate. I started with the church where she was getting married. Since I dropped off goods there at the time of her wedding, I was in touch with a guy who worked closely with the church. I asked him about the wedding that was taking place at the time of the delivery, and he said it was a very hush-hush affair. All he knew was that the groom was a dangerous man. He mentioned the name Zach.”

“Wait, would that be Zachariah Mikhailov?” Cole asks.

Adrian looks surprised. “Yes, but how did you know that?”

“A buddy of mine who works in the FBI mentioned his name. The guy is a menace. He and his family run several factories out of the East Coast, building illegal weaponry and smuggling it out of the northern border. He’s never been caught because there’s never been proof against him. He doesn’t own any of the factories; everything is under various shell companies with offshore accounts. He’s untouchable.”

“He’s the guy she was getting married to?” I ask. “And she ran away from it?”

“She must have had her reasons,” Adrian says.

“Or maybe it’s a fucked-up game of hide-and-seek between them,” I say. “Didn’t you say she’s from a similar mob family?”

Adrian nods. “But that doesn’t mean—”

“Don’t tell me you’re having second thoughts now,” I growl. “You called me a fool when I doubted her, but you convinced me so I folded.”

“That wasn’t on us,” Cole says. “You were thinking with your dick, just like us.”

“I’m in love with her, dammit,” I say, the words bursting out of me before I can stop myself. “And she made a fucking fool out of me.”

“Out of us,” Cole says. “At least you didn’t say it to her.”

“I did,” Adrian says. “She probably thinks I said it to manipulate her, but the truth is that somewhere along the way, I did fall in love with her for real, even when I was trying to figure out who she was. I wanted nothing more than to be wrong.”

I watch my brothers in disbelief. I can’t believe a lone woman has brought all three of us to our knees.

“Goddamnit,” I say, almost scaring the nurse at the counter. “This is taking too long. I’ll go upstairs.”

But when I reach the floor, Natalie is nowhere to be seen. Confusion and worry twist in my gut as I wonder where she might have gone. My mind races with possibilities, none of them reassuring.

Then, I spot a nurse at the nursing station, and I approach her with a mixture of anxiety and impatience. “Excuse me,” I say, trying to keep my tone calm, “have you seen the woman in room 213?”

The nurse smiles warmly, a gesture that seems out of place given the circumstances. “Oh, yes! Are you the husband? Congratulations are in order!”

I freeze, my heart pounding as I process her words. “Congratulations? What do you mean?”

The nurse looks puzzled for a moment before the realization dawns on her face. “Oh, dear, I’m so sorry. I thought you knew. The patient is pregnant.”

Shock washes over me, and I struggle to find words. Pregnant? How could I not have known? The news hits me like a tidal wave.

I make my way back downstairs, my mind in a whirlwind, trying to process the shock of what I’ve just learned. As I approach Adrian and Cole, who are still in the hospital lobby, I can feel my heart pounding in my chest, the weight of the news pressing down on me.

I take a deep breath and say, my voice shaky, “Guys, I couldn’t find Natalie upstairs, but I did speak with a nurse. She told me that Natalie is pregnant.”

Adrian and Cole exchange bewildered glances, mirroring the confusion and surprise I feel.

“It has to be...logically...” I start to say.

“What if it’s not?” Cole asks.

“We can’t abandon her,” Adrian says, shaking his head.

“Don’t tell me you still have feelings for her,” I say.

“Feelings don’t just go away like that,” Adrian says, looking away. “But, maybe this is one of her ways to manipulate us again.”

“Either way, we need to find her first,” Cole says. “Let’s split up and look for her. She couldn’t have gone far.”

Adrian and I nod.

I drive my truck through the streets, my eyes scanning every corner for any sign of Natalie. Worry gnaws at me, and the weight of the situation feels heavier with each passing moment. I need to find her, and quickly.

As I turn onto another street, Mrs. Mason suddenly comes running up to me, her face flushed with urgency. I roll down the window, my heart racing as I ask, “Mrs. Mason, what are you going here? Where are the kids?”

“They aren’t with me,” she says.

“What do you mean they’re not with you?”

“They spotted Natalie across the street and left with her. I went looking for them and saw an unmarked car picking them up. I tried to follow, but they disappeared into traffic.”

Dread settles in the pit of my stomach as I process her words. Fuck. Natalie is gone, and so are the kids.

Did she take them?

No, that can’t be.

I dial Adrian’s number with trembling fingers.

Adrian picks up, his tone concerned. “Tanner, what’s going on?”

I quickly relay the information about Mrs. Mason's sighting and the unmarked car.

"We can't waste any more time, Adrian. We need to locate Natalie and the kids immediately."

There's a brief pause on the other end, and then Adrian's voice comes through with a sense of determination. "Tanner, remember when we put that tracking chip on Jaden's phone just in case? We can use that to find them."

I had totally forgotten about that. "Can you see their location now?"

"Pulling it up on my phone," Adrian mutters. He goes silent for a few seconds before he swears under his breath. "That's fucking impossible."

"What happened?" I ask.

"They're home. He took them home."

Natalie

As Zach drags me out of the car at the ranch, sneering, his taunts cut through the tense air. "So, this is where you've been slumming it?" he mocks, his voice dripping with disdain.

I remain silent, my gaze fixed on the twins who are being roughly handled by his underlings as they drag them out of the car, holding their hands behind them. Fear for their safety clenches at my heart, but I know I can't let my emotions betray me now.

Zach continues to taunt me, his words laced with cruelty. "Did you find yourself a fake family, Natalya? Playing mother to these kids?" His laughter echoes around us, adding to the sense of dread.

My voice trembles with anger and fear as I speak up, desperately trying to protect Helena and Jaden. "Leave them alone, Zach. This has nothing to do with them."

But he ignores my plea, and Jaden and Helena are pulled from the car, their faces etched with fear and confusion.

He drags us into the kitchen. “Stop it, stop hurting them,” I snarl at the men.

Zach walks up to me and kneels in front of me.

“You thought you could get away by leaving me at the altar, by humiliating me?”

“What do you want from me? You cheated on me. Of course I couldn’t marry you,” I say. “You have some nerve to do what you did and blame it on me.”

“You saw us,” he hisses under his breath before shaking his head. “Your stupid cousin. She was always too eager. She imagined herself in love with me.”

My blood runs cold. “Maddy loves you, and you love her.”

Zach narrows his eyes at me. “I want my ring back,” he snarls, his eyes locked onto mine. “The one I gave you for our engagement.”

“Is that why you’re here?” I ask, shaking my head in utter disbelief. And then I start to laugh. It’s too ridiculous to be true “You’re here to take my ring and give it to my cousin?”

Zach backhands me, and the force of the slap makes me see stars.

“Enough, bitch. It’s not yours. Nobody runs away with my stuff,” he growls.

I shake my head. “No, that can’t be it. You’re not a sentimental man. It’s just another jewel in your collection, unless...” I trail off.

“It’s more than that, isn’t it?” I say. “Have you lost all your money on gambling? Or maybe your mistress became too expensive for you to afford, and that’s why you’ve come crawling here to take back a ring.”

He grabs the back of my hair and tugs at it painfully. “Where is it?”

With a defiant tone, I respond, “You’re free to look for it yourself. I won’t help you.”

In response, Zach's hand lashes out, striking me across the face. I slump to the ground at the force of it. Pain blooms in my cheek, but I refuse to cry out.

The children, distressed and terrified, scream at him not to hurt me.

Zach kneels in front of me. "I promise you, you'll know pain if you don't help me."

I meet his gaze. "Like I said, do it yourself."

Zach glares at me with pure venom in his gaze. He spits on the ground in front of me before standing up. "Take them inside the house. Search every room. I need the ring. And when we're done here, set fire to this whole damn place."

As Zach's men drag us inside the house, chaos erupts around us. They rampage through the rooms, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. The sound of shattering glass and splintering wood fills the air, and I can hardly bear to watch as they break the kitchen utensils and cutlery before turning their attention to the living room.

"Nothing here," somebody calls out.

"You're all useless," Zach growls as he heads to the staircase. Most of his underlings follow him, while three remain to guard us downstairs.

The children are terrified, their small faces contorted with fear and confusion. I crawl over to them, wrapping my arms around them as tightly as I can, offering what little comfort I can muster.

Helena's trembling voice breaks through the chaos. "Natalie, who is that bad man?"

I hold them close, my voice low and soothing. "He's someone from my past, sweethearts, but I won't let him hurt you. I promise."

We hear the thump of their shoes on the roof and distant crashing as they turn the entire house upside down.

As I speak, I rack my brain for a way to get them out of this dangerous situation. The chaos upstairs buys us some time, but

I know we can't stay here for long.

I need to get them to safety. It doesn't matter what happens to me, but the children must not be hurt, at any cost.

Cole

As soon as Adrian texts me their location, I turn around and start driving back home, going as fast as I can.

But as I approach the town, I'm flagged down by a few locals who appear visibly alarmed.

"Thank god we found you, Sheriff."

I kill the engine and turn to them. Urgency makes my skin itch. I need to get to the kids, but these people are visibly distressed. And they always look to me for reassurance.

"What's wrong?"

One of them, Bill, a local car mechanic, has a look of concern on his face. "There's something strange happening. There are some strangers here in town, folks we've never seen before, and some of them had guns. It don't look right."

"Yeah, they're definitely not tourists," someone else says. "Very shady business if you ask me."

My stomach sinks.

"We thought you should know, Sheriff," another says.

"How many of them are there?" I ask.

"We spotted ten, fifteen, maybe," someone says.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath.

"Do you need any help, Sheriff?"

I hesitate.

"We'll give it our best," says someone else.

"I really appreciate the support, guys, but I want you all to be safe," I say.

"We'll be fine," they say fiercely.

“I’ll assess the situation and get back to you.”

I continue on my way, and it isn’t long before I meet Tanner, who’s waiting for me. I park my truck next to him and he gets in.

My words tumble out in urgency as I tell him what I’ve learned. “Tanner, something’s deeply wrong here. There are outsiders in town, armed ones, and I think they might be connected to Natalie’s fiancé.”

Tanner’s brows furrow in confusion, and he shakes his head. “I don’t understand, Cole.”

“Her ex-fiancé—Zachariah Mikhailov, the one Adrian mentioned,” I say. “He might be after her. And he might have come here seeking her.”

Tanner’s frown deepens. “Or, they’re in cahoots.”

“No, Tanner, it doesn’t add up. Something about this doesn’t make sense. Natalie was desperate to get away from her wedding, and as far as I know she has little to no contact with her family. I don’t think she wants anything to do with him.”

“What are you trying to say?” Tanner asks.

“I think Natalie might be in trouble,” I say. “And for some reason, he took her back to the ranch.”

“She’s not the priority, the kids are,” Tanner says, glaring at me.

“I’ll willingly give my life for Cassie’s kids, but Natalie doesn’t deserve to get hurt,” I say.

Tanner shakes his head. “You’re letting your emotions cloud your judgment the same way you did when—” He stops midway with a sharp intake of breath. “I didn’t mean to bring it up.”

He’s talking about the day I got my leg almost blown up because I thought I could save a comrade. I wasn’t thinking too clearly, but I knew his life was as important as mine. So I had to make a difficult choice.

“You have no right,” I say, my body trembling. “And this isn’t the same damn thing. Also, if you don’t remember—she’s pregnant with our kid.”

Tanner’s shoulders kind of slump forward. “She told us she can’t get pregnant. It was just another lie.”

“Maybe she didn’t know it herself. Goddamnit, Tanner, pull yourself together. We need to act fast.”

“I love her,” Tanner says, shaking his head. “Even after knowing everything that I do now, I still love her. How fucked-up is that?”

“I know how you feel,” I say. “Because I feel the same way. If not for her, we have to do this for our unborn kid’s sake. Whatever happened wasn’t the baby’s fault.”

“What makes you think she even wants us there?” he says. “Maybe it’s a trap.”

“No,” I say. “I saw the fear in her eyes when you were convinced she needed to leave, when she first came here. She had her reasons for running away.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” Tanner says.

TANNER and I carefully circle the perimeter of the ranch, our eyes scanning the surroundings for any sign of activity or danger.

As we round a corner, we spot Adrian waiting for us, his expression grave.

“Took you long enough,” I mutter.

Adrian glares at me. “I was waiting for you idiots. Where were you?”

“I had something I needed to take care of,” I say.

Adrian raises a brow. “More important than this?”

“Let’s just focus on the issue at hand,” Tanner says as he crouches. “Guys,” he says, “I’ve been keeping an eye on the main house, and there are several men inside. They all seem to be armed.”

He clenches his jaw, and I can feel the worry radiating from him. “Do you think Natalie and the kids are still in there?”

Adrian nods, his brow furrowed with concern. “It’s possible. But we need to be careful. We don’t know what Zach wants or how many more of his people might be lurking around.”

We make our way to one of the barns where we’ve hidden our guns, always ensuring they’re out of the children’s reach. Adrian has a pair of binoculars, and he uses them to get a visual on the house. His voice is grim as he reports, “I can see Zach, and there are a lot more of them. We’re outnumbered.”

“I know.”

“Going in there on our own would be plain stupidity,” Adrian continues.

“Exactly,” I mutter.

“What’s with him?” Adrian asks Tanner, who’s lost in his own thoughts.

“What should we do? The longer we waste our time, the more trouble they’ll likely be in,” I say. “The kids, Natalie, the baby...” I trail off at the last part.

“I honestly never saw myself becoming a father anytime soon,” Tanner says. “I’m too fucked-up for that.”

“You don’t think she’s manipulating us with the pregnancy, do you?” Adrian says.

“If she was, she wouldn’t have left like that. She would have used it to her advantage. Besides, the topic of kids was never off the table,” I point out.

“That’s because she said how irregular her cycle is,” Tanner says.

“And yet, here we are,” I say.

“We’ll protect the baby...and her, no matter what it takes,” Adrian says.

“Who do you think the father is?” I ask.

“Does it matter?” Adrian says.

The truth is, it doesn’t. I know I’ll love the baby fiercely either way, and that’s because of Natalie. What I feel for her is real. That much is clear to me by now.

“We need a distraction. Actually—scratch that. We need a lot of distraction,” Tanner says.

“What do you have in mind?” Adrian asks.

Tanner smirks. “It’s a good thing we’ve got a lot of them.”

NATALIE

The sound of thundering hooves reaches my ears, and I glance out the window to see the horses racing past the house in a chaotic frenzy. Panic spreads among the men outside as they try to control the stampede, their attention momentarily diverted.

“What the fuck?” one of them screams.

There’s more chaos upstairs. No doubt Zach has seen what’s going on, as well.

“Where did all of these horses come from?” an underling yells as he runs past us.

Realization dawns on me that Adrian, Tanner, and Cole must have orchestrated this as a diversion, and a flicker of hope ignites in my heart. They’re nearby.

I look around. The room has emptied, but I know I have a very narrow window of opportunity.

I turn to Helena and Jaden, their eyes wide with fear but also with a glimmer of hope. “Now’s our chance,” I whisper urgently. “We have to get out of here.”

With trembling hands, I help the children crawl out of the window one by one. Adrenaline courses through my veins, and I can feel the clock ticking, knowing that our escape has to be swift and precise.

Just as Jaden is about to slip out, I see one of the men inside the house spot us. His eyes widen, and he raises his gun, aiming it at us. Panic surges through me, but I don’t have time

to think. Without a thought for my own safety, I lunge at him, the gunshot echoing in my ears as I tackle him to the ground.

Someone screams, maybe it's me.

I lie on the ground, pain shooting through me from the impact of the tackle and the gunshot wound in my side. My vision blurs for a moment, and when I finally focus, I see only Jaden standing nearby. Fear grips me as I realize that Helena is nowhere to be seen.

My sweet girl, she managed to get out. Hope swells in me, followed by terror.

“Jaden—” I manage to say as I crawl toward him.

I fight my clouding vision as I sit up. I swipe my side, and my palm is covered in blood. I see no signs of a bullet, so it probably just grazed me, but I'm still bleeding.

Then the door swings open, and Zach enters the room, his expression a twisted mix of anger and frustration. The underlings follow him, reporting that Helena is gone, which only seems to infuriate Zach further.

His eyes lock onto mine, and he shakes his head. “Pathetic,” he mutters as he walks past me.

I continue to crawl toward Jaden, who's crying. He kneels next to me, and I take him in my arms even as my breath shallows.

A malicious smirk tugs at the corners of Zach's lips.

He taunts me, his voice dripping with mockery. “Well, well, Natalya. It seems your protectors have finally arrived to rescue you. Aren't you lucky?”

“Zach, let Jaden go.”

He shakes his head. “I don't get it. After all this, you're still worried about the kid? He's not even your family. You left your real family to die, and you left your fiancé at the church. You betrayed me.” His voice rises with every word he says. “You took something of mine. You didn't think I would let you get away with it so easily, did you?”

“Boss,” one of the underlings calls out. When Zach doesn’t respond, he says more urgently. “Boss, look up.”

Zach finally does so, and I follow his gaze to see Tanner’s truck heading toward the house.

Zach raises an eyebrow as the truck continues to barrel toward the house, his voice filled with disbelief. “What the fuck? Is the driver crazy?”

I remember what Cole told me about the weak porch wood, and my heart skips a beat as I realize what’s about to happen. “No,” I mutter to myself, “he’s not crazy.”

It’s a calculated risk, but one that might just save us.

The truck continues its relentless charge, smashing into the wooden porch of the house with a deafening crash. Wood splinters and shatters, and I shield my eyes from the flying debris.

The truck comes to a halt, and I catch sight of the driver.

“Adrian,” I mutter under my breath. My vision is slowly clouding, and everything appears like a blur.

I scream at the men to stop shooting, but Zach just laughs. He starts to walk away, heading toward Adrian, who’s still trying to regain his bearings after the impact.

But I can’t let Zach get away, not with Adrian in danger. I lunge forward, grabbing hold of Zach’s leg and tripping him to the ground.

My actions draw the attention of the men nearby, and they react with a hail of gunfire.

I close my eyes, waiting for my inevitable fate. Deafening shots ring out, and two of the men fall to the ground, clutching their stomachs in agony.

Cole

I grab hold of the edge of the wall, my hands gripping tightly as I prepare to haul myself up. My leg protests with a jolt of

pain as I start the climb, but muscle memory kicks in, and I push through it. The adrenaline surging through my veins drowns out the discomfort.

I manage to pull myself up alongside Tanner. As we ascend to the second floor, I can't help but feel a sense of déjà vu. It's been years since I left the Navy, but the training has never truly left me.

We reach the top, and despite the initial struggle, I manage to pull myself over the edge.

Once we're on the second floor, the adrenaline surges through me as we encounter a few of Zach's underlings. Our combat training kicks in, and with calculated movements, we swiftly take them down. The element of surprise works in our favor, and they don't stand a chance.

The house itself has been turned into a war zone, with broken furniture and shattered glass strewn across the floor.

"Fuck, what have they done here?" I mutter under my breath as we make our way across the hallway.

"I'm going to get that motherfucker," Tanner replies as he reloads his gun.

As we make our way through the disarray, we finally reach the first floor, where a heart-wrenching sight awaits us. Jaden is crying near the window, and Natalie lies on the floor, still and unmoving. Panic claws at my chest as I rush to her side, fearing the worst.

But when I help her sit up, I see that she's breathing, and a wave of relief washes over me. "Natalie, are you okay?" I ask urgently, checking her pulse and vital signs.

Tanner, on the other hand, goes over to Zach, hauling him up roughly. Adrian, who has emerged unharmed, walks into the room. He has a slight smile on his face. "I told you the truck wasn't a crazy idea."

I roll my eyes. "You're lucky you didn't bring the entire house down with you."

Adrian smirks, and it's quickly replaced by a scowl when he sees Zach. "You—" he begins. He walks over to him and lands a punch on his jaw, and then another to his stomach, causing him to double over.

Tanner straightens Zach, holding on to his shirt by its lapel.

"What the fuck do you want?" Tanner demands.

Zach remains silent.

"I said, what do you want?"

With a dark smile, Zach chuckles weakly and mutters, "You can all go to hell."

"If you think you're getting out of here alive, you're dead wrong," Tanner snarls at him.

Zach, undeterred, smirks and delivers a chilling warning. "You don't get it, do you? I have more men waiting outside this town, ready to storm it. They'll reduce this place to ashes, and your precious town along with it."

Tanner's face contorts with fury at the threat.

His anger boils over, and before I can react, he rains down punches on Zach, his fists landing with unbridled fury. Meanwhile, Zach continues to laugh like a maniac.

Jaden pads over to me and buries his head behind my shoulder, while Natalie shakes in my arms.

"Tanner, stop it," she says briefly. "Don't do it, he's not worth it."

Her words distract Tanner, who turns to face her. Zach takes the opportunity to butt him with his head before slamming it into the wall. Before any of us can react, he sprints out of the room.

Tanner and Adrian take off after him. I turn to Jaden, who's shivering at this point. "Sweetheart, can you take care of Natalie for a few moments? I'll be back."

Jaden manages to nod, and puts her head on his lap. As I stand up, I see that my jeans are soaked with blood and I realize that

Natalie was shot at some point on her side. I quickly examine the wound and see that it probably just grazed her.

I take off after my brothers when I hear someone swearing. I run out to be met by a terrible sight. Zach has Helena in his arms. He picks up a gun from one of the dead underlings and points it at her while Helena bawls.

“Don’t take a step toward me, or this child dies,” he snarls as Tanner keeps his gun trained on him.

“Let her go,” Adrian yells.

“You’ll let me get out of here,” Zach says.

“There’s no way out of here for you, Zach. This is over,” Tanner says. “Your men aren’t waiting for you at the edge of town. They were cornered by the townspeople. Their cars were broken into and they were chased away. No one is coming for you.”

Zach’s determination wavers. “You’re lying,” he says as he presses the gun to Helena’s head.

“Tanner, please—” Helena whimpers.

Fuck.

“Tanner, put your gun down,” I say, but he doesn’t flinch.

“It’s over for you, Zach. Let her go,” Tanner says.

Zach shakes his head. “I’m not going to give you the opportunity.” He turns off the safety.

“Tanner,” I warn him. My brother remains unwavering.

Two shots are fired, and I feel my heart leap out of my chest. Zach lies on the ground, with a wound to his palm and another to his cheekbone. Suffice to say, he’s dead.

Adrian runs over to Helena and scoops her into his arms. “Don’t look at him. You’re okay, sweetheart.”

I walk over to Tanner. “Jesus, are you crazy? He could have shot her.”

He glares at me. “He would have, but I didn’t give him the chance to.”

I shake my head. I still don't agree with what he did. I look at the corpses strewn on our porch. It's a massacre. But there's little time to ponder over it.

"We need to take Natalie to the hospital. She's bleeding," I say.

Adrian

I'm scared for the baby.

I pace the sterile hospital hallway, my anxiety gnawing at me as I wait for news about Natalie. It feels like an eternity since they wheeled her away to the intensive care unit, and the minutes crawl by with agonizing slowness.

Cole brings the twins out from the nurses' station. They appear somber, and still shaken by the events that unfolded today, their tiny frames covered by blankets.

I take a deep breath, trying to find the right words to comfort them.

"Hey, you two," I begin, my voice gentle but filled with concern. "I know today was really scary, but you're safe now. The doctors took care of your injuries, and you're going to be just fine."

Helena looks up at me with tearful eyes, her small hand clutching her bandaged arm. "But, where's Natalie? Is she okay?"

I wish I had a reassuring answer for her, but all I can offer is honesty.

"Natalie is with the doctors right now. They're doing everything they can to make sure she's okay. We just have to be patient and wait for news."

Jaden chimes in, his voice trembling. "Is she going to be okay, Adrian?" I want to tell him yes, that Natalie will be alright, but the truth is, I don't know.

Even though she wasn't injured critically, we don't know what kind of other injuries she suffered, and with the kid...

I swallow hard at the thought. If she loses the baby, I'll never be able to forgive myself.

Relief washes over us as Cole and Tanner arrive at the hospital. I can see the exhaustion and worry etched into their faces. "How's Nat?" Cole asks.

"We still don't know," I say. I drove the twins and Natalie to the hospital while my brothers stayed back to deal with the mess at the ranch.

"Zach?" I ask.

"He's dead, and so are his men," Tanner says. "It took us a while to get everything cleaned up. We don't want the kids to see that mess again."

He means the dead bodies.

My gaze instinctively falls to Helena, who's shivering a little despite the thick blanket around her. Her face has dirt and soot sticking to it, and so does Jaden's. Helena also has a small gash on her forehead that the doctor has covered up.

Jaden puts an arm around her shivering frame to calm her. The children are going to be okay.

"It's so unfair," I say. "This shouldn't have happened to them."

"They're okay now. They're strong. They'll get through it," Cole says.

"Where do we go from here?" I say. "We can't just brush everything under the rug. Zach comes from a powerful family."

"He's had a target on his back for years," Cole says. He makes it sound so real. "He's a weapons supplier. He has to have enemies. Any one of them could have done it."

Tanner continues, "I've also called an old buddy of mine who's now with the FBI. He'll make sure the actual circumstances of Zach's death never come to light. We'll be in the clear."

The doctor walks out of the room. We stand up as he approaches us.

“Good news,” he begins. “Natalie is awake, and you can go in to see her now.”

Relief floods through me as the weight of worry that’s been pressing down on my chest begins to lift. We follow the doctor to Natalie’s room, and when I see her lying in the hospital bed, her eyes fluttering open, my heart swells with a mixture of emotions.

“Natalie,” I breathe her name, my breath finally returning to me. “Are you okay?” I keep my voice soft, not wanting to overwhelm her with questions.

Natalie manages a weak but reassuring smile. “I am now.”

“The baby is also safe,” the doctor continues, and a warm smile accompanies his reassuring statement.

A sense of relief sweeps over me once again, and the tension that has been coiled within me begins to ease. Cole and Tanner share a glance, and I know they feel the same way.

Jaden and Helena look at us with wide-eyed curiosity. Jaden is the first to voice his confusion. “What baby?”

Tanner kneels down, a gentle smile on his face. “Well, you see, a little angel is coming to meet us soon,” he explains, his voice filled with warmth.

The kids’ faces light up with excitement, their initial confusion replaced by anticipation and joy. “A baby cousin?” Helena asks, her eyes shining.

Tanner nods, and the twins burst into delighted laughter, clapping their hands.

“Is that true, Natalie?” Jaden asks.

Natalie manages to nod as tears roll down her eyes. “Yes.”

“Does that mean you won’t be going away? That you’ll be staying with us forever?” Helena asks.

This time, Natalie hesitates, looking up at us with a question in her eyes. Guilt courses through me. I wouldn’t be surprised if she hesitates to trust us again. We treated her very unfairly.

She looks at Tanner and asks softly, “How did you find out?”

Tanner glances at me, and I take a step closer to Natalie. “One of the nurses let it slip,” I say.

“I’m sorry, I wanted to tell you—but the circumstances...” She lets out a shaky breath. “I thought it would just make things worse between us, that you would feel pressured and manipulated. Trust me, even I didn’t know.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to us,” Tanner says.

“But I have to,” she says. She gazes softly down at the twins, who are stuck to her like glue. “I never thought I could have children. Zach all but convinced me I was infertile.”

“You don’t have to worry about that.”

“What about Zach?”

“Zach won’t be a problem anymore,” Tanner reassures her. “How did he find you and the kids?”

“It was Martha,” Natalie says. “She was taking her misguided revenge on me.”

“I’ll kill her,” Cole vows.

“No, don’t,” Natalie says. “I don’t think she realized what she was doing. She just spoke to a few of Zach’s men and gave away my location. The children were, unfortunately, with me when it happened.”

“What did he want from you?” Tanner asks.

“The engagement ring,” Natalie says. “He wanted it back.”

I gasp. “Oh shit.”

“What?” Natalie asks.

“During my research, I came across this article where Homeland Security made raids on his home to link him to the weapon factories. All they needed was a cash trail to pin it on him, but they didn’t find anything.”

“He must have cashed it in for the ring,” Cole says.

“And he gave it to me for safekeeping, and I was none the wiser,” Natalie murmurs. “Oh my God.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It kind of is,” she says. “If I had acted smarter, the children wouldn’t have had to face what they did.” She wraps her arms around their little frames.

“Is he...” She trails off, mindful of the children.

“Yes,” I say.

“But how did you overpower him?” she says. “Zach is powerful. He has an army at his beck and call...they’re going to come for him. He already threatened the same.”

“We took care of his men,” Cole replies, a slight smirk on his face.

“How?” Natalie says, sounding amazed.

“We had a little help,” Cole says. “From the people of the town. They came together—a lot of them. Some of them were even your friends, Nat. They told us they knew you from school.”

“Oh my God,” Natalie replies.

Tanner nods. “We left the charge to Ed and his brothers, and the mountain men really came through. The entire town came together for you, Natalie.”

“Wow,” she replies. “I can’t believe it.”

“There are people who care about you, Nat. They care about what happens to you.”

Noticing the tears glistening in her eyes, I lean in and gently ask, “What’s wrong?”

Natalie’s voice trembles as she admits her vulnerability, “I’ve never really mattered to my family...I’m a woman, and my duty was to be married off. Sure, I was loved, but it felt transactional at times. It wasn’t till I came here that I realized what freedom tastes like.”

She hiccups a little. “I miss my mom and my brother. My little brother—he let me go. And I don’t even know if they’re safe or not.”

Jaden and Helena wrap their arms around Natalie in a warm, comforting hug.

“It’s going to be okay, Natalie,” I say.

Tanner

“Natalie,” I begin, my voice tinged with regret, “I want to apologize for how I behaved earlier. I shouldn’t have lost my temper like that.”

Natalie meets my gaze, her eyes filled with understanding and forgiveness. “Tanner, we were all under a lot of stress. I forgive you.”

Her words bring relief, and I breathe a sigh of gratitude. I look away as unshed tears crowd my eyes and the weight is lifted off my chest.

“I was a fool. I’m sorry, Natalie,” I say.

“Natalya,” she corrects. “That’s my real name.”

I nod. “I know, but you’ll always be Natalie to me.”

She reaches into her pocket and retrieves the engagement ring that Zach was searching for. She offers it to me, her expression determined.

“Take this, Tanner,” she says, her voice steady. “Cash it in. With the money, we can rebuild and renovate the ranch, even upscale it. Start fresh.”

I step closer to her, our faces inches apart, and our foreheads press together.

“Natalie,” I whisper, my voice filled with emotion, “I love you.”

I feel her soft lips pressing against mine, a delicate dance of desire igniting between us. My hands instinctively find their place, cupping the warmth of her cheeks as our kiss deepens.

Natalie’s breath mingles with mine, her subtle moans reverberating against my lips, setting my senses ablaze. My fingers trace the curve of her jawline, feeling the gentle rhythm of her pulse beneath her skin. The taste of her lips, a

mixture of sweetness and anticipation, consumes my senses, leaving no room for coherent thought.

As our kiss intensifies, her fingers weave into the strands of my hair, sending shivers down my spine. A low, guttural sound escapes my lips as her touch electrifies me, each caress sparking a wildfire of sensation. Our bodies press closer, a magnetic pull that erases any distance between us.

With a tantalizing slowness, I explore the contours of her back, my fingertips tracing the path of her spine through the fabric of her clothing.

Natalie's hands venture down my chest, her touch both delicate and possessive, stoking the flames of need within me.

I quickly draw away from her, only to be met with her disappointed look.

"What?" she asks meekly.

"I don't want to hurt you. You just got out of the hospital, you're injured, and you're also pregnant."

"I'm also a woman with needs," she says. "So just shut up and kiss me."

As her kisses descend, a maelstrom of sensations engulfs me. Her lips find the hollow of my throat, her teeth grazing my skin in a teasing manner that sends jolts of pleasure straight to my dick.

Natalie's fingers find the buttons of my shirt, undoing them one by one with deliberate slowness. With every button that gives way, I feel a rush of anticipation building within me, a mixture of nervousness and desire that intertwines in a heady cocktail.

I watch as her fingers trail downward, a featherlight touch that sends electric sparks through my skin. Her palms press against my chest, fingers splayed wide as if trying to memorize every inch of me.

In turn, my hands find the edges of her shirt, fingers trembling slightly as I begin to undo the buttons. The fabric peels away, revealing the delicate curve of her collarbones and the swell of

her breasts. My breath hitches, caught in the raw intensity of this moment. I lower my head, my lips brushing against her skin with reverent tenderness, tasting the salt and sweetness that define her essence.

Natalie's sigh is a melody that spurs me on, guiding my hands to the clasp of her bra. With practiced ease, I unhook it, exposing her bare chest to my hungry gaze. I marvel at the softness of her skin, the curve of her breasts, a sight that feels both intimate and divine.

Her legs wrap around me, pulling me closer, and I feel the heat of her desire pressing against my own. With aching slowness, I explore her further, fingers tracing the contours of her hips and the softness of her thighs.

I make sure I'm gentle as I ease into her. But my patience is tested when she sighs and her warmth engulfs my cock. She gasps as I start to push in and out of her, but she keeps her eyes on me. Her eyes widen every time I enter her as if each time is the first time.

I spread her thighs apart to be seated more deeply. She holds her hand out to me, splaying it over my chest, almost like she wants to push away. But she only tugs me closer.

"Tanner—I..." Her words are caught as she spirals through a whirlpool of pleasure, her greedy cunt practically squeezing my cock. I follow quickly, spending myself inside her before I take her in my arms.

"I love you, Natalie," I whisper as I lie down at her side.

"And I love you," she says as she kisses me again.

EPILOGUE

NATALIE

I can feel the warmth of the blankets beneath me as I straddle Cole. The room is dimly lit, with a soft glow from the bedside lamp casting gentle shadows on our entwined bodies. My heart flutters with anticipation as I gaze into Cole's eyes, dark pools of desire that mirror my own.

His hands slide up my sides, leaving a trail of tingling sensations in their wake. His palms softly but firmly cup my swollen belly, supporting it away from my body, bringing me temporary relief. He always does this when he's fucking me, especially since I started showing. He also does this randomly when I do chores at home.

I can't help but smile as I lean down, capturing his lips in a passionate kiss.

I break the kiss with Cole, trailing kisses along his jawline and down his neck. His fingers grip my hips, guiding my movements as I continue to ride him. Each thrust sends waves of pleasure coursing through me. His fingers splay over my waist possessively as he guides me up and down over him, rotating my hips so that his cock impales me even deeper.

I feel a presence behind me as large, calloused fingers wrap around my belly possessively.

Pleasure thrums through my body. My heavy and sore breasts bounce as Cole fucks me. A few droplets of milk dribble out of a nipple before rolling down my stomach.

"Does it hurt?" Tanner asks.

I shake my head. "No, just a tad uncomfortable."

“Are you okay, my love?” Cole asks, concerned, as he slows down his thrusts.

“I’m fine,” I say, holding a hand on his shoulder as I bounce above him. “Just don’t stop. You feel so good.”

Tanner rests his head on my shoulder while Adrian appears between us. He keeps his eyes on me as he slowly leans in and suckles on my breast, relieving the pain a little.

“Does that help?” he asks.

I nod. It does help. I know my body is getting ready to welcome the children—yes, two, because apparently twins run in their family and I’m about to birth another pair.

Adrian gives me a knowing smile as he continues to suckle on me, eliciting a moan. Somehow, it feels so much more intense.

Behind me, Tanner chuckles, the sound reverberating in my body. “Don’t think he’s doing it for you.”

Adrian stops suckling long enough to look up. He gently puts a palm over my tit, stroking it with his fingers before squeezing it slightly.

“Tanner is partially right. I love sucking the milk right out of her, but I know it also somewhat relieves her pain.”

I sigh as he squirts out some milk before he puts his tongue over my enlarged nipple and licks around it.

Cole’s gaze is dark with lust. Without saying anything, he grabs my other tit and starts to suckle on it. Their heads bob as they both suckle simultaneously on my tits. My clit throbs at the pressure, and the combined sensation of them sucking my breasts and Cole’s cock pulsing inside me finally send me over the edge. My fingers graze their thick hair just as a powerful orgasm rips through me.

My legs shake, and my head falls back against Tanner as short ripples of orgasm continue to run through me, feeding into it. My eyes roll back in my head at the overwhelming sensation, but they still don’t stop.

It takes me forever to come down from the high of the pleasure. Cole smiles wickedly as he wipes the milk around

my nipples before sitting back.

I pant a little as I try to regain my bearing. “Oh, I wish I hadn’t started making milk so early. It’s such an inconvenience.”

“That just means there’s more for us,” Adrian says, his mouth still grazing my sensitive nipple. He growls a little when they seemingly run out of milk.

I chuckle. “There’ll be more later.”

“There better be,” Adrian says as he finally lets go of me, only for Tanner to pull me toward him and onto his lap. I gasp as I feel his erection, hard and incessant, at my back.

He roughly nibbles on my ear before he growls, “My turn.”

I whimper as he lifts me higher up his thigh, the friction creating a delicious pressure between my thighs, my wetness coating him. But Tanner doesn’t care.

He turns my chin toward him and leans in to kiss me, tugging my lower lip with his, earning a whimper. His tongue traces my mouth before curling against mine. I wrap my arms around his head as he slowly puts me down on the bed.

He rubs my belly softly. “My babies,” he rumbles under his breath. “I’m going to meet you soon.”

“Yes,” I say as I gently stroke his hair.

Tanner nudges my legs apart and softly enters me. I gasp at the fullness of him. Adrian and Cole appear on either side, their hands roaming over my entire body, coaxing whimpers and soft moans out of me.

I’m as wet as the Nile as Tanner continues to move in and out of me. He makes sure he’s incredibly gentle, checking in on me every few seconds, whispering soft nothings in my ears. He pulls away so that he can take a better look at me, changing position so that my legs rest on his shoulders. This allows Adrian and Cole to move closer.

I put my arms on either of their shoulders. My gaze meets Adrian’s, a teasing smile playing on my lips. I nod at him to draw nearer. Adrian winces a little as he sits up, stroking his hard cock. I trace his warm, hard body with my fingers,

digging into his skin as my hand journeys toward his erection before closing around it. Adrian gasps, his eyes closing as he wills himself to me.

I take him in my mouth, bobbing up and down as I pleasure him. He bucks forward, pushing himself further into my mouth.

I look up to see Tanner stroking into me again and again. Meanwhile, Cole inches closer to where my body and Tanner's body meet. He slips his finger in between us, teasing my clit to the rhythm of Tanner pounding me.

My body tenses as pleasure snakes through me. My mouth opens in a gasp, and Adrian tenses as well before emptying himself inside my mouth at the same time as Tanner empties himself inside of me.

Afterward, the four of us lie together in the sheets, sweaty and content.

"It's good that we've found such a good use of your insomnia," Adrian says, nuzzling my neck.

"It's almost dawn," I say as I look out the window, watching the sky come alive with light.

Cole starts to get out of bed, and I stop him. "Where are you going?"

"The party won't happen by itself, you know," he says, his voice teasing.

I groan. "Do we really have to do that?"

"The baby shower is as much for you as it is for the babies," Tanner says. "After everything we've been through, you deserve it, and more. And the twins have been really looking forward to it, you know?"

I sigh insufferably. "Yeah okay, let's do it for the twins."

STRINGS OF FAIRY lights crisscross overhead, casting a warm glow over the gathering. Tables are adorned with delicate floral arrangements and pastel-colored tablecloths. In one corner, a dessert table boasts an array of treats, from cupcakes adorned with tiny baby booties to a blue cake.

“Chocolate cake with buttercream frosting,” Adrian says, beaming at me.

“My favorite cake!” I exclaim.

Cole smiles. “We know. We baked it ourselves. It was a pain in the ass to hide it from you, though.”

“Oh my God,” I say as tears threaten to crowd my eyes.

Jaden and Helena come flying at me, throwing their little arms around my waist.

“Hey,” Tanner says, his tone reprimanding. “What did I say about soft hugs?”

“We’re sorry,” Helena says, but she doesn’t look particularly sorry.

“It’s all right,” I say. “They’re my first children, after all.”

“That’s right,” Jaden says sassily, showing his uncle his tongue.

“Go along, children, get dressed,” I say. “The guests will start arriving soon.”

“Okay, Nat, see ya,” Jaden says, bounding away.

I turn to the guys. I’m wearing a pastel-colored flowy dress that hides most of my bump.

Right on cue, the doorbell rings. Tanner goes over and pulls it open. Emily is the first to arrive with what is obviously a stroller. She comes over to hug me.

“Oh my God,” she says. “We missed you so much at the meeting.”

“I wish I could come, but my babies insist on not keeping any food inside my belly for too long!” I exclaim.

She chuckles. “We’ve all been there.”

The parents' club has been super helpful during my pregnancy. They insisted on helping me prepare the gift registry and have even accompanied me to some of the doctor's appointments.

Of course, none of them know who I really am or even my real name. It used to hurt before, but now I've come to terms with the fact that this identity is one I have chosen for myself. But even then, I still miss some parts of my old life—like my brother and my mother.

I haven't been in touch with them for the past few months. They disappeared after Zach was killed. That's all Adrian has managed to find out about them. I have no idea where they are right now, but I can only hope they're well.

More guests begin to pour in until there's too many people to contain in the living room.

"Hey, Natalie!" Sarah exclaims, enveloping me in a warm hug. She has her baby resting on her other hip. The baby coos as he tries to reach for me.

"Aren't you a little cutie?" I say, bopping the kid on the nose before I turn to Sarah. "Thank you so much for coming."

"We wouldn't miss this for the world," she says as she pats me in on my arm before handing over her gift, a small box.

"It's something practical but cute," she grins, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

Opening the gift, I find a set of adorable onesies, each with a witty or heartwarming message.

"They're so cute," I say.

"Open mine next," Emily insists, pushing a box toward me.

I give her a delighted smile as I start to unwrap it. It turns out to be two small gold-plated bangles for the children.

"Wow, they're so cute," I say. "My mom would have loved them."

I realize what I said out loud and clear my throat.

Emily gives me a big hug. "I'm sorry for whatever happened before, but we've taken care of it now."

I give her a puzzled look. “I’m not sure.”

“We know about Martha,” she says solemnly.

My eyes widen. “How?” I haven’t spoken about it to anybody, and I even made the guys swear they wouldn’t. They were obviously pissed and wanted to give her a piece of mind. But in my head, I know what she did was only because she was misguided.

“I know you probably didn’t want to talk about it, but we still wanted to address it.”

Then, in a hushed tone, Emily leans in, her expression serious. “We wanted to let you know Martha has been banned from the club for what she did to you. We don’t tolerate that kind of behavior.”

“Oh my God,” I say.

“We love you, Nat, and we all care for you,” she says. “I hope you know that.”

Tears crowd my eyes. I nod furiously before giving her a hug.

The room is abuzz with laughter and chatter as I stand near the cake, ready to cut it, surrounded by friends and the warm glow of celebration. Just as I’m about to make the first cut, the door swings open, and my mother and brother walk in. My hand freezes, the knife nearly slipping from my grasp in sheer surprise.

I blink, not trusting my eyes for a moment. It’s been months since I last heard from them, but here they are, standing in the doorway, smiles on their faces.

I don’t waste a second. The knife forgotten, I rush toward them. My mother extends her arms out to me, and I run into her embrace without a second thought.

“Mom, Wylan, you’re here!” I exclaim, my voice filled with a mix of joy and relief.

My mother pulls away slightly, her hands cupping my face as she looks at me with an expression that says more than words ever could. “We couldn’t stay away, sweetheart. Adrian, Cole, and Tanner tracked us down.”

“But how?” I ask, stammering slightly.

“Let’s just say your—” She wavers here slightly, and I understand her confusion. She’s struggling to name our relationship, and I don’t blame her. “Your boys are very resourceful.”

At her words, I turn to look at them. My boys.

Yes, they’re my boys.

“Go, cut the cake,” Mom says. “We’ll talk later when we have more privacy.”

I nod, even though deep down I’m dying to know their story. But I go ahead and cut the cake, and later, when the guests have dispersed, I find my family again.

“Where have you been this whole time?” I ask.

“In different places,” Wylan explains. “Zach had us put under house arrest, and he even confiscated my phone, which helped him track you down. I felt so guilty. After he left Manhattan—to look for you, presumably—I took Mom, and we got out. We haven’t been back since.”

“It wasn’t till they tracked us down that we even knew Zach was dead,” Mom says, shaking her head. “I’ve never wished for anybody’s death, but after what he put us through...” She shudders.

I hug her again. “It’s okay, you’re here. And you’re not going anywhere.”

“Are you sure?” she asks. “We don’t want to—”

Her words are cut off by the arrival of Tanner, Adrian, and Cole. “She’s right,” Tanner says. “You deserve to be here with us, especially after everything Natalie has done for us.”

“Are you sure?” Wylan asks, still looking hesitant.

“Yes,” I say, looking at Adrian, Tanner, and Cole who nod in agreement. “This is what we want.”

The End.

Dear precious reader, thank you for reading Rancher Daddies!

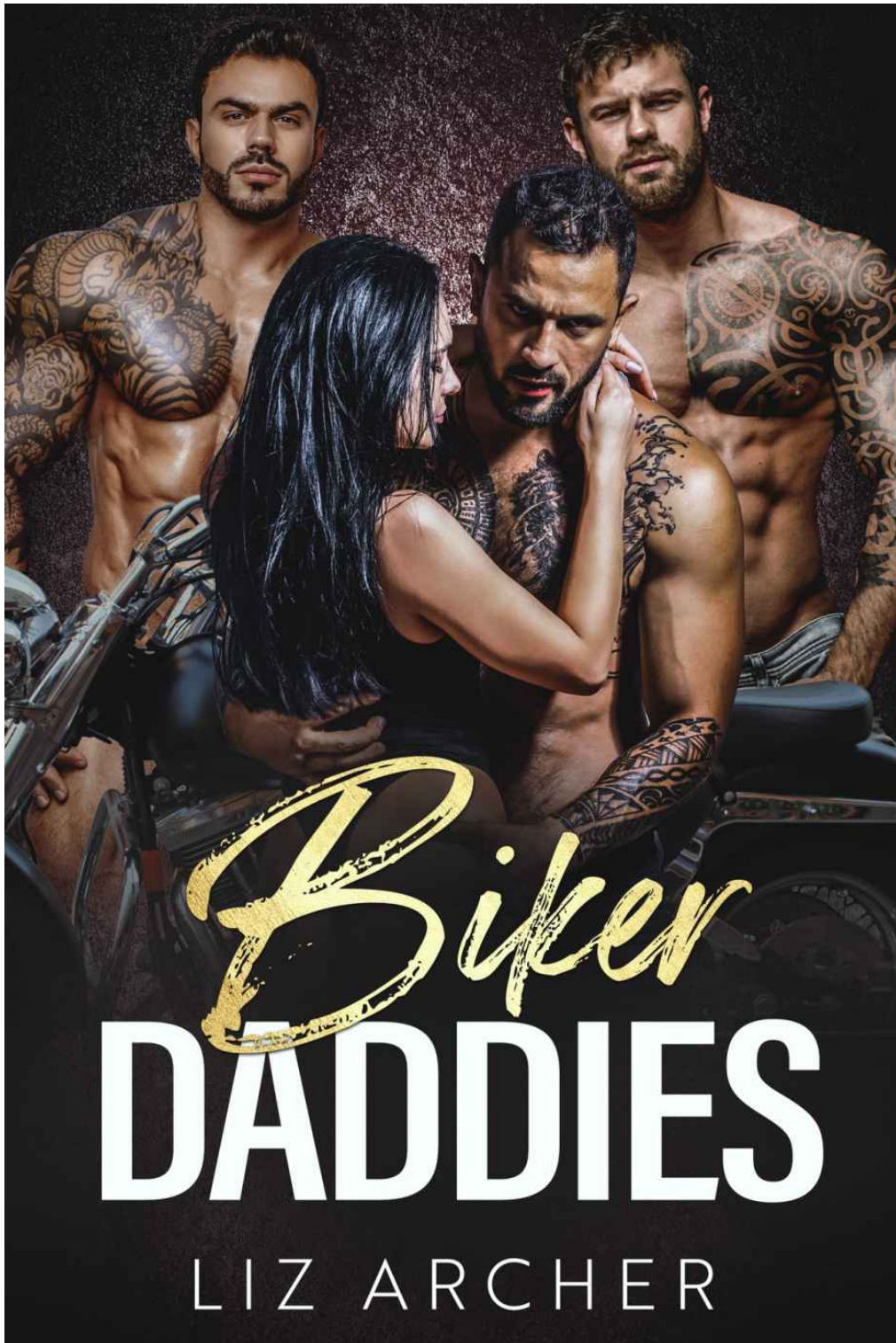
When I finished writing the book, I couldn't put down my pen yet... not until I wrote a little something extra special just for you. If you want more of Natalya and her three big, bad rancher daddies, [click here to get your bonus epilogue.](#)

Love,

Liz Archer

P.S. If you enjoyed Rancher Daddies, then I think you'll enjoy Biker Daddies too! Swipe to the next page for a sneak peek...

BIKER DADDIES (PREVIEW)



It started with one drunk sext to three silver fox bikers...

And ended with two babies in my belly.

My daddy taught me better.

I should've known not to drink too much tequila...

And sext all three of his hot-as-sin best friends.

But **Alto**, the *very* bossy VP, makes my heart race faster than his bike.

And **Colt** is a walking, talking wet dream. One look from his smoldering green eyes sets my panties on fire.

Then there's **Bane**... He won't open up about his past, but I just want to suck the scars off his lips.

Waking up sandwiched between the three of them is a fantasy come true.

But all hell will break loose once Daddy finds out his angel is getting passed around by his biker buddies...

And one of them is the father of my twins.

HARLOW

I'm only Daddy's little girl sometimes.

Don't get me wrong, I love my daddy. He's the best man I've ever known and very protective, but sometimes, his nature to keep me safe smothers me. It's why when I got accepted into the University of Nevada, even though I lived so close to it, I decided to get an apartment. I wanted to move out. I needed my own space, I needed to spread my wings, and I needed to do so much more than my father allowed me to do.

I had to experience life.

It doesn't help the situation that my daddy is the President of the Venom Vultures MC in Las Vegas. He is brutal and intense, but I'm his weakness. So when I wanted to move out, I broke his heart, and it made me feel horrible. I had never seen him cry before. Even when Mom died when I was still a baby, he only teared up.

He's the kind of man who keeps his emotions locked inside.

When I told him I wanted to leave? A tear dripped down his face, but he didn't argue with me. He only nodded and stomped out of the room in his giant biker boots. I still see him nearly every day because someone from the club is always checking on me.

I'm an MC princess, apparently, and it isn't the best thing for me to be out here on my own. Any one of Daddy's enemies could find me and take me away.

It's still a chance I'm willing to take.

“Okay, heads you tell a truth, tails you do a dare.” My best friend and roommate Meredith chuckles as she sips her pineapple and rum.

My daddy would be furious if he knew what I was doing, which only adds to my experience.

I make my gin and tonic, squeeze a hefty amount of lime juice in it, lick my fingers, and pucker my lips when the lime juice has my taste buds dancing. I hurry over to the oversized stuffed leather couch and plop down on it.

“Deal,” I say, taking a sip of my drink.

“Me too,” Addison echoes in agreement, taking a long swig of her beer.

I hate beer. I don’t know how Addison chokes the stuff down, but she doesn’t drink anything else.

“Okay, Harlow, you’re first.” Meredith hands me a quarter. “And no cheating,” she adds.

I drop my hand in my lap and give her a look. “How do you cheat with a quarter?”

Addison chuckles, tilting her bottle up to finish it, then stands to head to the kitchen and grab a new one from the fridge.

“I don’t know. I just thought it needed to be said.” Meredith rolls her eyes. “Okay, go. Flip the coin.”

I take a deep breath, nervous all of a sudden. I never really had friends growing up. Being an MC princess didn’t allow for such luxuries. High school was brutal because everyone was afraid of me because of the club. At first, I thought it was cool that I had so many MC members to have my back—they are my family—but it didn’t work out that way.

Meredith and Addison know who I am. I didn’t hide anything when I saw a post on the bulletin board around campus that they needed a roommate. Heck, they love it when the guys come over to fix things. The guys even fix their cars for them, from oil changes to tire rotations. The girls are smitten.

They probably wouldn’t be if they know what kind of women they had sex with. The guys call them club whores or

changerounds—but me, I just call them desperate sluts looking to say they fucked a biker.

I say that, but then I think of my father's best friends. Alto, Bane, and Colt. They have been friends with my daddy since long before I was born. So the history is long, which is why I know I don't stand a chance. Plus, why would they want someone as young as me? They aren't old. All three are thirty-eight, which is a nineteen-year age gap, but isn't age just a number?

Daddy had me when he was very young. He was a prospect of the club at the time and Grandpa was the MC President. Daddy was nineteen, my age, when he had a newborn daughter, and he was happy. He said he wanted to make my mom his ol' lady, but then she died.

A bullet to the head because of a rival MC. He's never gotten over that. He's never dated. I don't even remember catching him with another woman. He still wears a ring on his finger even though my parents were never married.

He's loyal, painfully so.

I hurt for him. I only want him to be happy.

Flipping the coin, I'm yanked back to the present with my friends instead of these sad thoughts. I watch as the quarter flips through the air in a blur, then lands on the ground. All three of us lean forward and I'm relieved when it lands on heads.

"Truth." Meredith rubs her hands together evilly. "Spill the beads."

"Beans, Mer. It's spill the *beans*," Addison corrects.

Meredith frowns. "I know, but beads are harder to clean up and there are usually more of them. The inconvenience makes more sense."

Addison opens her mouth to argue but can't think of anything to say. "I can't disagree with that. Point taken."

"So tell us something we don't know," Meredith gets us back on track.

“Um.” I blush, thinking about what I could tell them. I don’t have a ton of secrets. Most of the experiences I’ve had are with Meredith and Addison. “I’m a virgin. I’ve never even kissed a man.”

Addison gasps and Meredith’s mouth falls open. “What!” they shout in unison.

I take a long swallow of my drink, suddenly feeling very thirsty. “It was too hard growing up in the MC. The guys made sure boys my age weren’t hanging around me. I’ve never had the chance.”

“We have to fix that immediately. To be fair, we are both virgins too, but we’ve kissed other guys.”

I feel better at Meredith’s words and pick up the coin. I hand it to Addison. She flips it and it lands on tails.

She groans.

A dare.

“I dare you,” I begin, having no idea what I’m about to say. I tap my finger against my chin as I think. My brows raise when I finally think of it. “I dare you to go next door and give that sexy neighbor one of your beers—”

“Psh, that’s easy,” she interrupts me and stands.

“—And…” I lean forward. “To give him your number so y’all can go out sometime.”

Meredith squeals, clapping her hands and bouncing on the couch cushion.

“Fine.” Addison lifts her chin, tossing her shoulders back. “That’s easy.” She saunters to the fridge, giving us a proud look as she swings the door open, snatches a beer, and then the bottle opener. It’s a simple one. It’s silver, smaller than her hand, and she twirls it on her finger before strolling to the door. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Addison is all bark and no bite—well, I’m sure she’d bite if tempted—but she puts on this persona that keeps everyone away from her.

We hurry to the peephole and since I'm taller than Meredith, I watch Addison knock on the neighbor's door. I slap Meredith's shoulder. "She's doing it. She's doing it."

"No way! I want to see."

Buzzed and giggling, I try to lift her up. She presses her hands against the door and we sway, trying to maintain balance, which is hard since we are both dying of laughter.

"He opened the door!"

"Oh, screw this." I set her down and crack the door open, poking my head out, and Meredith does the same underneath me.

I'm sure we look like a pair.

The guy, Ryan, smiles down at Addison, then looks over her shoulder at us, a question on his face as his brows pinch together.

"Don't mind them. I was just coming over to offer you a beer." She pops the top off with the opener, catching the cap in her hand. "And was hoping I could get your number so we could go out sometime."

Ryan grins, taking the beer from Addison's outstretched hand. "I like your style. Let me see your phone."

Addison slips her phone from her back pocket and hands it to Ryan. He types in his number and smirks just as his phone buzzes in his pocket.

"I have your number now too. I'll be reaching out to you soon, Addison." He drinks the beer, eyeing her up and down as if he wants to devour her.

"I'll be looking forward to it." She swings the bottle opener again, twisting it around her finger, then she backs away.

I open the door, and their eyes are still locked on one another until I shut the door to break their connection.

"Ahh!" Meredith dances in a circle. "That was awesome."

"Oh my god." Addison lets out a breath, placing her hands on her knees. "That was so nerve-racking, but damn, I feel like

I'm on cloud nine."

"Okay, Meredith. Your turn." I guide my friends back to our little drunken oasis and Meredith settles on the cushion she placed on the ground.

She flips the coin and I'll be damned if it doesn't land on its side so it's standing up.

"What's that mean?"

"It means we pick," Addison says, rubbing her hands together. "Tell us a truth."

"When I was ten, I ran away from home and broke into a Chuck E. Cheese and slept there for four days. All the workers thought I was just another kid. I had the time of my life until a missing person's report came through and my face was all over the TV."

"No!" I toss my head back and laugh, my drink spilling over the rim of my glass. "Oh my god. You ran away from home?" I find that hard to believe. Meredith is sweet and innocent. I couldn't see her doing anything like that.

Her smile fades and she downs her drink.

Everything becomes more serious.

"Your turn," she tells me, handing me the coin.

"Oh no, you don't get away that easy," Addison says, snatching the coin. "Tell us why you ran away."

"I'll tell you if I land on truth the next go-around."

Addison and I let it go, giving each other a knowing look, and the game goes on for hours.

I'm drunk and the coin is lost now. No one knows where it went and it's my turn. I'm seeing double. There are two of everything and that can't be good.

"Truth or dare?" Addison slurs. "Pick dare, you chicken."

"Dare," I snip, my eyes narrowing in triumph. "I'm no chimcken." I mispronounce and try to correct it. "Chimcken. Chidicken."

We all laugh at the failed attempt. We clutch our stomachs, chuckling so hard that I roll off the couch and smash against the floor.

And that only has my “friends” laughing harder.

What friends they are.

They are the best though.

“Nope, I change my mind. Truth. I want the truth.”

“Truth and a dare,” Meredith suggests. “No taksies backsies.”

“Fine.” I prop myself up on my elbow, suddenly tired. “I have a crush on my dad’s three best friends. Alto, Colt, and Bane. They are older though. My daddy’s age.”

“The three.” Meredith hiccups. “The three that always come over to help us or follow you to class.”

I nod. “So dreamy.”

“So. Dreamy.” Meredith wobbly nods her head.

“I dare you to text them and tell them how sexy you find them and...and—” Addison stands as if she’s about to give a speech. She places her hands on her hips and she loses her balance but rights herself, causing us to laugh again. “And you have to admit you have a crush on them.”

I gasp so loud I choke. “No.” I shake my head. “I can’t do that. They would hate me.”

“Or love you. I bet they want Daddy’s little princess more than you think.” Meredith yawns. “Forbidden fruit and all.”

“If not, you have to strip and run around the building,” Addison gives another option, which has me digging for my phone because I am not running around naked and becoming a headline for the University news.

When I grab my phone, I have to narrow my eyes to concentrate on my vision so I can see the screen.

“Fine, but if they get killed because Daddy finds out, blame yourself.”

“No one will find out,” Meredith drawls as if she’s pouting.
“Ya big baby,” she grumbles.

I snort, creating a group chat with Alto, Bane, and Colt.

I name the chat *My Three Sexy Beasts*.

I hold my breath while I type.

I just wsnated to letttt you knw, I findddd, you allllls sexxy. So sexy. More than Jason Momoa. Lots more. I really like you in ways I’m not alloweddd. Don’tt tell dasddy.

I press send, proud of myself for putting together a sentence.

And then I pass out, the alcohol winning the fight for my consciousness.

“**W**hat the hell?” I try to read the message from Harlow, Prez’s daughter, but the more I try, the more confused I become. I notice Bane and Colt are in the message too. She added them to the chat, and I can’t be reading it right because there is no way Prez’s daughter would message us this.

I glance around the tattoo shop, making sure no one can see me look at my phone in question, especially Prez. If he found out Harlow messaged us this, he’d strip me of my title, burn my vest, and exile me from the club.

No one fucks with Harlow. Especially me, the Vice President. It’s one of the club rules. She’s off-limits and forbidden. Anyone who tries anything will probably end up dead. We all have one job when it comes to Harlow.

Protect her from a distance.

I set my phone down and stretch, trying to make the busy day leave my body. My client just left, and we had an eight-hour session for his back piece. It was intricate. A kitsune wrapped in a cherry blossom tree with lightning shooting across the sky. Something that took concentration and a steady hand. My back hurts. My eyes hurt. My fingers hurt.

But damn, I love my job.

“Hey,” Bane grunts from my doorway, leaning against it with his big body. He is massive and my tattoos cover his arms and neck, back, and legs. He’s covered. It’s one of the reasons why he is our Sergeant at Arms. No one dares to fuck him over. He

has two nose rings and a tongue ring, a shaved head to show the tattoo I did on his scalp too and damn, the man reeks of trouble.

His outside matches his inside too. He is by far the grumpiest asshole I've ever come across.

"Did you get that text?" he asks, not specifying who it was from because I knew.

"I did. I found it odd." It's late. Nearly two in the morning. We've been closed since midnight, but I was so close to being done with the second session of my client's back tattoo, I decided to keep going.

"Maybe she really does want us."

I roll my eyes and sigh while Bane slaps the cocky, arrogant dumbass—Colt, our Road Captain. His outside matches his inside too. He is tall and lean, with green eyes that make girls fall over themselves to try and get a piece of pretty boy, as the club likes to call him when they're in a teasing mood.

I crack my neck and groan. "Don't even joke about something like that," I say seriously. "Imagine what Grizzly would do to us? Don't even put that out in the fucking universe, Colt."

He lifts his hands in surrender, a stern look on his face as his lips pout. "I was only joking, Alto. I didn't mean anything by it. I doubt she meant to send that to us. It isn't like her."

"She included all three of us. She knew exactly what she was doing. Little princess is trying to get us killed," Bane practically growls. "I knew she'd be trouble."

"You didn't know shit." I wipe down the seat my client was just in, disinfecting it from the sweat he poured while I dug into his skin with a needle.

"Prez can't find out she messaged us," Bane states. "I say we delete it and forget she ever messaged in the first place."

"You're a dick," I tell him, tossing the paper towels in the trash.

Bane shrugs as if he doesn't care, but his scarred mouth twitches, giving away that he does.

I think deep, deep, deep down, somewhere in the hard iron shell of Bane's heart, he's a teddy bear. I'll never admit that out loud. I like my life. I don't feel like dying.

"I don't know. She sounds drunk. There are three x's in sexxy," Colt points out, showing us his phone. "See? One. Two." He taps the screen. "Three."

I roll my eyes and Bane elbows Colt in the stomach. He doubles over, dropping his phone on the ground, and coughs.

"I'm fine," he struggles to say.

"You shouldn't be," Bane says. "This isn't a fucking joke."

Colt gasps for air and nods. "Okay, I'm done. I swear." He finally lies on the floor, staring up at the ceiling as he makes grunting noises from the pain. "Did you have to hit me so hard?"

Bane grunts, "Yes."

"Ass," Colt mumbles.

I take out my phone and stare at the message again, something wrong fluttering in my chest. I'd be a fool if I didn't admit I find Harlow fucking beautiful. I never felt anything for her when she was underage. She never crossed my mind like that, even when she turned eighteen I had no feelings for her at all. I only noticed her as the Prez's daughter.

But then she turned nineteen, and when she came home to the clubhouse for one of her college breaks, I won't lie and say my heart didn't skip a little fucking beat. She turned into a beautiful woman, and if my memory is correct she'll be turning twenty in a week.

"I think she might be drunk." I read the message to confirm. "She has to be. She never texts like this."

"Oh? Have you been texting her?" Colt flips onto his stomach and props his chin in his hands. "Do tell."

"Fuck you, gossip queen. No. You know what I mean. When we check in on her, she doesn't text like this."

“Yeah.” Bane rubs his chin with his hand. “She sounds wasted.”

I sigh, tilting my head back and feeling slightly annoyed because all I want to do is go home, take a hot shower, stretch, and go to bed. I won’t be able to sleep if we don’t check on her. I’m too worried.

“I’m worried,” Colt admits through his playful demeanor. “I say we hop on our bikes, go over there, and see what’s going on. If she’s okay, we leave. At least we’ll know.”

“And if she’s drunk, we’ll get our asses handed to us.”

“It isn’t our fault she’d be drunk, Bane,” I point out.

“Isn’t it? Doesn’t he like one of the members tailing her at all times? Where are they?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if she told Grizzly to back off so she can have some privacy. Grizzly always gives in when it comes to Harlow. She’s his everything,” I reply to Bane.

“Yeah, well, maybe he should keep a better eye on her then.”

“Don’t be a dick.” I stretch again, this time my back pops and I groan in relief.

“Save it for the bedroom,” Colt teases.

“You’re annoying.”

“Am not,” Colt mocks me.

“No, you are,” Bane says seriously, even though I was kidding. “Let’s go then. Talking about it isn’t going to make her any less fucking drunk.” He pushes off the doorframe, his heavy boots stomping on the floor as he heads to the front door. “Well, are you fucking coming, or do I need to hold your hand and help you on your bike?”

“Why is he such a grouch?” Colt asks, jumping to his feet.

I turn off the light to the studio, gathering the store’s keys from my pocket. “Only Bane understands Bane.”

No one knows what happened to Bane or how he has four scars down his mouth. It’s a fucked-up nickname now that I

think about it. The club gave him that name after Bane in the Batman movies. He doesn't seem to mind, but maybe it isn't about the cage on Bane's mouth, but about his attitude.

Colt strides out the door first and I lock up behind me.

"She better not be drunk. I'll be furious. Middle of the damn night," Bane grumbles under his breath as he mounts his bike.

All of our bikes are custom from the MC's bike shop. Bane's handlebars are long, and the body is painted a midnight black, but in the right light it shifts into a deep red.

"Man, I remember when I restored this beauty," Colt says, again, just like he does every single time he gets on his bike. His is a classic. He found it when it was nothing but a tossed-away frame in a junkyard.

"Yeah, we know. Why don't you tell us again for the thousandth time?" Bane hooks his helmet on, his sarcasm obvious.

Colt doesn't catch on. "Well, I was seventeen years old—"

"Oh my god. Shut the hell up. We know, Colt. We know. I'll pay you thirty bucks if you don't speak for the next three minutes." Bane's bike grumbles to life.

Colt pinches his lips together, bouncing on his heels, dying to speak.

He won't be able to make it.

I remain calm, not letting Colt's story bother me at all. Colt is proud of his bike. He loves it. I'll gladly listen to whatever makes my friend happy, but Bane doesn't have that kind of patience.

"But I got such a good deal on it," Colt blurts after two minutes, and Bane rolls his eyes, driving away from us before Colt can blurt out his story.

I chuckle, following Bane on my bike, then Colt follows.

The night is dark, clear, and the stars are out by the thousands. It would be the perfect night for a long ride, but as we drive

down the road, the desert on either side of us, I know I don't have time to enjoy it.

If Harlow is drunk, a part of me will want to take her to her father, and the other part of me is going to want to spank her ass for putting herself in harm's way.

And I have no right to think about that.

We're riding for about five minutes before Bane is pulling off the road. Confused, we follow him and he parks, stands, and unzips his pants.

"What the fuck, Bane?"

"I gotta piss." He shrugs without a care in the world.

Colt chuckles and I lean against my bike, waiting for Bane to be done. The man runs on his time, no one else's.

"Do you think she's okay?" Colt asks me. "Do we take her to Prez when we find her?"

"Nah," I say, kicking the sand with the tip of my boot. "Come on, she's only trying to have fun with her friends. She's her own person. We shouldn't have to tell Grizzly everything when the entire point of her living on campus was to have her own life. What if someone told on us when we were that young? We would be pissed. And she wouldn't trust us anymore."

The loud stream of Bane still pissing sounds in the background.

"Jesus Christ. You couldn't do that at the shop?" I yell at him.

"Didn't have to at the shop," the grump explains.

"I call bullshit on that," I retort.

"Why do we care about her trust?" Colt practically whispers.

"We shouldn't. At all. I'd rather not have her pissed at us though. "

"She's pretty."

I jerk my head up and press my finger against my mouth to tell him to be quiet. "You can't go saying shit like that. No. No."

“I’m only saying what we’re all thinking.”

“I don’t give a fuck. We aren’t allowed to think that about the Prez’s daughter. You know, our best friend. We’ve been friends with him our entire lives. We can’t think that. So don’t. Get it out of your head right now.”

My phone vibrates again, then I hear Colt’s.

Bane’s must go off too because he’s tucking himself back in his pants, then digging his phone from his pocket.

“It’s Harlow,” I announce.

“I can read.” Bane’s attitude is starting to piss me off.

“Is anyone else nervous about the fact that it’s a picture? I’m afraid to click on it,” Colt says.

Yeah, I’m nervous. Drunk pictures are never good.

I click on it. My heart races when I see her smiling face holding up a peace sign. It’s an innocent photo, but I can tell she’s wasted by how glassy her eyes are.

My phone dings again and it’s of her and her friends. She outshines them—even drunk, her beauty is unreal. I rub a hand down my face, angry at myself for thinking that. It’s okay to think someone is beautiful, right? Doesn’t have to mean anything.

A video comes through next and since it’s on all three of our phones, the sound echoes.

“*Go, go, go!*” is chanted by Addison, one of Harlow’s roommates.

“Is she shotgunning a beer?” Colt questions.

I exhale with a shake of my head, watching Harlow chug the beer down then toss the can the opposite direction. “We have to go get her. This isn’t like her at all,” I say.

“She’s nineteen. This is her. This is what kids do when they’re that young,” Bane explains. “Just because she’s Grizzly’s daughter doesn’t make her special or exclude her from the basic activities all the other teens do.”

Our phones ding again, only this time it's a picture of Harlow hovering over the toilet, sick, no doubt from the beer chugging.

Meredith and Addison send selfies to us, then another of Harlow passed out on the floor.

"Fuck." I tuck my phone in my pocket again and hop on my bike. "We better get going before she wakes up and feels like she can down another beer."

"Grizzly would be pissed. She knows better."

I snort. "Bane, shut the hell up. Of course she doesn't know better. She's nineteen. You just contradicted everything you said."

He gives me the middle finger as he hops onto his bike, but my phone begins to ring before I can take off.

Annoyed with how many times I've had to fish this thing out of my pocket, I stare at the screen.

Harlow.

Only this time, it's a phone call.

"Harlow? What the hell is going on?"

She hiccups. "You sound so hot over the phone," she slurs.

"You're drunk. We're coming to get you. Don't move. Are you at the apartment still?"

She giggles. "I'm not telling. You'll have to find me."

"Harlow." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Just tell us where you are."

"Nope. Is it you, Bane, and Colt? I've had a crush on you guys since forever," she mumbles.

"You're drunk. You aren't thinking clearly. Tell us where you are," I demand.

Bane's jaw ticks with frustration and I can tell Colt is getting worried as he takes a step forward.

"I'm fine," she says, just as something shatters and the line goes dead.

My heart drops and my stomach turns. “Harlow?” No answer. “Harlow!” I yell, but the call has ended. “Something’s wrong. Something broke in the background.”

“Let’s ride,” Colt says as if we’re going on a regular run.

This time, I place my phone in the front jacket pocket and hop on my bike. The rumbles of the engines sing throughout the night, the road disappearing into the thick of the darkness.

We ride it anyway.

Harlow better be okay.

Prez will kill us if she isn’t.

I have to keep that in the forefront of my mind. She’s my best friend’s daughter and it doesn’t matter how beautiful I find her. Loyalty to my friend means more than Harlow does.

That’s how it is and that’s how it has to be.

BANE

I'm fucking furious.

One, I'm sick of being a babysitter for a grown woman. Prez needs to back off and let the girl have her own life. Two, what the hell is Harlow thinking? How can she be so irresponsible? I know I said people her age do this, but she's better than other people her age. She's smarter and I thought she had way more common sense.

This proves Prez is right and she isn't ready to be on her own. She needs to be taken care of or she gets herself into trouble like she is now. Not that I want to take on that responsibility. I don't know how to take care of people.

I don't even like people. I only like the club. They are my brothers. Everyone else can fuck off.

I'm worried Prez is going to skin us alive if he finds out we didn't tell him about Harlow, especially if something is wrong. Something broke on her end of the call, Alto said. What if she's lying there in a pool of her own blood?

Blood.

The sight of it always makes me drift into my past and what happened to me as a child.

"You stupid fucking bitch!" My father backhands my mother so hard, blood flies from her lip.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," she sobs, wailing as she tries to crawl away from him.

“I told you not to go outside and talk to the neighbors. I told you that. Are you too fucking stupid to understand me?” He kicks her in the stomach next.

I’m ten years old, hiding behind the wall, peeking around the corner.

“You’re a fucking whore.” He spits on her. “I bet you fucked the neighbor, didn’t you?”

“No! No,” she denies with a shake of her head. She lifts her hand to try and stop him. “No, I’d never do that to you. I was cooking and I ran out of sugar. I swear. I swear,” she weeps.

“Sugar? Fucking sugar?” He picks her up by her throat and pins her against the cabinets.

Her lip is bleeding, her cheek is bruised, and there are black smudges around her eyes.

“Sugar?” he repeats, tossing her to the side while he opens every single cabinet, grabbing the pots and pans and throwing them onto the floor.

When he gets to the pantry, he dumps all the flour on the floor, then the rice, trying to prove that we have sugar.

The kitchen is a wreck when he’s done. His chest is heaving, and my mom is shaking. All I want to do is run to her, but I know better than to interfere or he’ll hit me too.

He’ll make her watch as he hits me. She promised me to never interrupt him when he’s in one of his moods.

But it hurts me so much to not do anything.

“It doesn’t change the fact you fucked the neighbor.”

“I didn’t,” she pleads her case again. “I swear on my life.”

“So if I go next door, will he tell the same story?” he asks.

“It isn’t a story.”

He backhands her again and she crumbles to the ground. Before she can fall, he stops her by wrapping a hand around her throat again.

Then, he uses the other one too.

Her face turns red and she claws at his hands.

She can't breathe.

I run to grab my baseball bat from my room. When I have it in hand, I don't think, I spring toward the kitchen and swing.

He bellows in pain when his legs buckle. My mom gasps for air and her eyes widen when she realizes what happened.

"Victor! No! Put the bat down," she rasps.

I can't. I hate him. I hate him so much.

When I swing again, he catches the bat in his hand and yanks it from mine, tossing it to the side.

"You little fucking brat." He punches me in the face and the one strike sends me to the floor.

"Get off him!" My mom tries to stop him, but he pushes her so hard she falls back, smacking her head against the table.

She's out cold.

"You always get in the way. You were a mistake. I never wanted you, you know. Your mom got pregnant, and I got stuck with her. Just like I got stuck with you." He picks up a knife.

"You want to be so fucking mouthy? Fine." He slices from the top of my lip all the way down to my chin. "Try to open your mouth now. No one will want to listen to you." He cuts in another line, then another.

I cry, trying to push him off me, and scream, but then the knife drops from his hand. His eyes are wide and he falls to the side.

My mom is standing there with blood dripping down her head and she's holding a butcher knife in her hand. The silver blade is dripping with red.

"Get your fucking hands off my son," she yells, stabbing him in the chest. Then she twists the blade before pulling it out.

She killed him.

She drops the knife and runs to me. "My baby. It's okay. We're going to get you help, okay? He won't touch you again. He won't."

I swerve, the tires bouncing over the raised ridges of lines on the side of the road. I'm pulled from my memories and I look in my side mirror to see Alto speeding up to come up by my side.

He glances at me, giving me the universal look that asks if I'm okay.

I give a quick nod and he falls back, giving me space.

I don't talk to the club about how the scars got on my lips. I'm a monster to a lot of people and most can't stand to look at me because of it.

My club accepts me for me, but at night it sure does get fucking lonely. Not even the club whores will give me the time of day, not that I want them to. I don't want them to fucking give me the time of day either, but that's how I know Harlow's message is a mistake. She wouldn't be caught dead with me. I'm the worst part of the dream, the darkest part, and there isn't one part of me that is desirable to anyone.

Even if she did want me, which she doesn't, she is Grizzly's daughter.

I'd never cross that line.

If Harlow does like me, of course it would be the one woman I can't have. Just the thought has my temper rising and hitting the throttle harder, speeding down the empty road.

The sound of my engine screaming through the darkness brings me comfort, calming my rage.

The campus comes into view and I slow down to the speed limit, then stretch out my arm, signaling I'm turning right and into the parking lot of Harlow's apartment complex.

We slow over the speed bumps and when we get outside her building, we park.

"You gave us a heart attack swerving off the road like that. What the fuck, man?" Colt rips his helmet off and slams it on his seat. "That isn't like you. What happened?"

"None of your fucking business," I sneer at him.

I don't want to tell him anything. My experiences are mine and no one has the right to them but me.

"You're a dick." Colt lights a cigarette, but I snatch it from his mouth and toss it to the ground, smashing it with my boot for good measure.

"We aren't going to be out here long enough for you to smoke that. Get your head out of your ass. He swerved. Get over it." Alto slides his phone out of his pocket and calls Harlow.

I push Colt, then Colt wraps his arm around my neck, putting me in a headlock.

Alto puts the call on speaker.

"Ello?" she finally answers after too many rings.

"Where are you?" Alto growls.

My heart once again pounds in my chest when I hear how drunk she is.

"Who are you?" she mumbles.

"It's Alto. Where are you?" he repeats.

"Not telling."

He pinches the bridge of his nose and counts to three. "Harlow. Tell me you're home. Now."

"Nope." She moans. "I don't feel good."

I stand in front of him and snatch the phone from his hand, taking it off speakerphone. "Harlow." Her name is a deep rumble in my throat while I stare at her bedroom window.

I can't see through it because the curtains are closed, but I bet that's exactly where she is.

She inhales a sharp breath when she hears my voice. "Bane?"

"Confirm you're home or I'm going to bust down your front door. Then, I'll tell your dad about what you've been up to tonight."

"I'm home," she mumbles, hanging up the phone, and I hand Alto his phone back.

“She’s here.”

“She always listens to you,” he says, our boots scuffing against the ground as we practically run to the entrance.

I scoff. “She listened because I threatened her with Grizzly.” I type in Harlow’s code for the door to open and the lock clicks.

Colt swings it open, and we barrel inside.

It’s a good thing it’s so late—if anyone saw us in our MC cuts, they would be terrified.

I click the button on the panel for the elevator to take us to the third floor. The doors slide open, and when the three of us stand inside we are shoulder to shoulder.

“This fucking thing must be made for short people,” I bitch at the tight fit.

“No, you’re just gigantic,” Colt says, standing in the corner.

I slam my finger on the button that says three and we begin to ascend.

“What are we going to do with her? She can’t travel on our bikes that drunk,” Alto points out just as the doors open to reveal her floor.

It smells like college kids live here. Weed and beer fill the air and I cough, not missing this scene at all.

A door opens and a guy looking half asleep stumbles out of his apartment, shirtless but at least he’s wearing pants. “Could you guys keep it down? You walk very loud.”

I place my hand against his chest and slam him against the wall. “No,” I snarl, shoving him back into his apartment and slamming the door. “Don’t come back out.”

“You’re so nice and good with people,” Colt comments, slapping a hand on my shoulder. “Just so outgoing.”

I grunt in response, stomping my way down the hall until we get to the last door on the left.

Slipping the key into the door to unlock it, I find it already unlocked, and that only makes me angrier.

Does she not care about her safety? What the hell is she thinking?

When I enter her apartment, I step on an empty can and kick it to the side. Music is playing softly from the Bluetooth speaker sitting on the kitchen counter and I press a button to turn it off. Alto shuts the door behind us, flicking the lock in place.

I point to the living room.

Meredith is passed out on one couch while Addison is asleep on the floor with one of the decorative pillows under her cheek. The two of them are sleeping soundly.

We've been in this apartment more times than we could probably count. While she's in class, we do a sweep to make sure nothing is out of order.

Prez's orders.

I take a right, peeking into her bedroom only to hear someone in the bathroom. I gesture to the guys and push the bathroom door open, crossing my arms over my chest when I see her on the floor. I cock my head to the side as she stares up at me, glassy-eyed and flushed cheeks.

"Bane," she slurs sweetly, and the cold part of my heart melts.

Fucking hell, I don't need this.

She doesn't like me. She doesn't have a crush on me. I can't become warm for her.

"You're trashed, Harlow." I squat down and push her red hair from her face.

I don't notice if it's soft. I really don't.

"I'm..." She grabs the toilet seat and takes a breath, figuring out if she's going to be sick or not. "I'm fine."

"Uh-huh." Colt leans against the doorway and Alto pushes by him to take the spot in front of the sink.

Her eyes bounce from me, to Alto, then Colt. She doesn't stop watching us, her big green eyes like pinballs.

She giggles, pushing from the toilet and slumping against the wall. “This must be a dream if I get to see all three. Of. You.” She punctuates each word by pointing a finger at each of us. “Just thought you’d at least be shirtless in my dreams. Unfair,” she exhales and Colt chuckles.

I want to laugh, I do, but she’s drunk and she clearly has no idea what she’s saying. I’d understand if she wants Alto and Colt, but me?

I’m too fucked-up for anyone.

“We’re here to make sure you’re okay, Harlow. Your message concerned us,” Alto says, staring at her with too much softness in his mismatched eyes.

“Dare,” she slurs again.

“What was that?” Colt leans in to hear her better.

“We played truth or dare and my dare was to text you guys and tell you I had a crush on you.”

Ah, so she doesn’t like us. It was a lie. All part of a little game.

I’m relieved and slighted.

“Like you guys didn’t know,” she rambles, her eyes closing as her head tilts down. Her body tilts and it jolts her awake. “You knew. I’ve always found you three sexy.” She waves her finger at us and I hold my breath because she must be speaking the truth. “Always together.” She sighs, exhausted. “I got lost in soooo many fantasies with that.” She laughs and Alto clears his throat while Colt beams with a smile.

“She’s adorable when she’s drunk,” Colt says.

“She’s going to be sick,” I tell him. “Ignore what she saying. She won’t remember tomorrow. Any guy could be standing where we are and I’m sure she’d probably say the same thing.”

She scoffs, poking me in the chest. “I might be drrrruunk,” she sings, then licks her lips and I ignore how the simple touch of her finger feels against me. “But I wouldn’t sa-say this to anyone.” She stumbles and hiccups again. “You three…” This sigh is dreamy and a soft smile plays on her lips. “So hot. Why

are you so hot? It's hot, actually. I'm hot." She begins to take her shirt off and all of us launch forward.

"Woah! Woah, no! No, no!" Alto shouts as we tug her shirt down.

I only get a glimpse of the flawless flesh of her stomach. Nothing more.

"Don't get undressed, sweetheart."

"But I'm hot. I'm sweating." She lies down on the cool tile of the bathroom floor and sighs. "This feels good."

Alto rubs a hand down his face, all of us a little paler than usual since we nearly saw her half naked. It wouldn't be a big deal if it weren't Grizzly's daughter.

All of us blow out a breath and then her hand finds mine. Even a bit clammy, her skin is soft, and she smiles a little as she rests.

"You feel good. I feel so safe with you here." This time when she speaks, it's clear with no slurring or stuttering.

Fuck me.

I'm a goner.

This troublemaker is going to wrap herself around my cold, dead heart and try to bring it back to life.

End of preview. [Continue reading Biker Daddies here.](#)
