

THE MEN OF MONTANA BOOK 1

# A DARK *Valley*



"Is she safe from her past  
while in the arms of  
her future?"

C. J. MCCAULEY

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*A Dark Valley*

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*Never let fear get in the way of your dreams. This book would never have happened had I let my fear hold me back.*

*To the girls who have a hard time knowing their worth. Never settle. You are worthy.*

*Thank you to my husband, for always allowing me to complain when things got hard and believing in me, and to my two girls who I hope will follow my love for writing. Lastly thank you Maria, and Taylor, for encouraging me from the beginning, and helping me see it through to the end.*

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# Preface

I lay on the floor of my dream bedroom, the plush white carpet soaking up a pool of my own blood. My left eye was swollen shut from the multiple blows I had taken minutes before. My vision is blurry, and my entire body screamed with every movement I make.

Trying to put my body into action, I slowly braced my hands under me, wincing as shards of glass sunk into my palms. I used as much remaining strength as I had to push myself up and look around the room, already knowing what I would discover.

There, just a few feet beside me, he lay face down. I knew he was still alive by the slow and shallow movements of his back from the breaths he was taking. I didn't have much time, and I knew it, but I could not make my body move.

My eyes were locked on him, the bat I was able to get to before going unconscious dropped by his feet, the swelling on the back of his head I knew I had caused, trying to figure out how someone I loved as much as him could do something like this. This was supposed to be my happily ever after, and he was supposed to be my forever.



One

# Natalie



I looked in the mirror at my reflection, wondering how my life had gotten to this point. The dark bruises surrounding each of my eyes just now starting to fade. Not long ago, I was living in a mansion. My mansion. The one I had designed down to every kitchen tile and cabinet, even what kind of light fixtures were to go in each room. Happier than I had been in years, or so I thought. My life was picture-perfect to the outside world.

Now I am temporarily staying in a one-bedroom, modern, upper east side apartment until I can figure out what the hell to do next.

Each day passes in a blur, and I feel like I'm drowning and don't know which way is up. I guess that saying about hitting rock bottom is true. I've made it there, and now I have to decide if I want to get out or not.

I had been working as a paralegal at Coleman Law Office with my fiance Keith. Maybe that was my mistake, or he was my mistake. Six years ago, sitting at the bar inside Kreemont, one of the wealthiest clubs in Bellborough, when Keith, a six-

foot-three, blonde-haired, sweet-talking man, walked into my life.

I was alone, celebrating my recent move to the area, trying to put myself out there to meet new people. So, when Keith approached me, I stepped out of my comfort zone and introduced myself. Three hours later, we hadn't moved from our seats, and his gentle touches against my leg were pulling me to him like a magnet. I went home with him that night, and I never looked back.

I took one last look at myself in the mirror and decided there was nothing more I could do to hide the marks on my face. It was like wearing a big ass sign with LED lights blinking saying, "Look at me."

I didn't want to leave the comfort of my bed today, but I had a judge to face. I slipped my feet into my black Louboutins, reveling at how the red soles looked with my pantsuit. My black blazer hugged my curves and showed off the red lace of my tank top underneath. I had a feeling deep in my gut that I wasn't going to win my case against Keith, but at least I looked damn good facing the man who almost killed me.

I walked up the marble stairs to the courthouse, my heels clicking with each step I took. The closer I got to those doors, the harder it became to breathe. I didn't want to show any weakness today. I wanted to face it with my head held high. But just the thought of having to see Keith again made my

skin crawl, the memories of that night seeping back into my mind. The pulsing headache I had for days after, the way my ribs still hurt with deep breaths, the bruises still marking my face and body. I wanted this to be a dream I could wake up from.

My lawyer met me at the front door with a look similar to sympathy on his face. He knew, too, that we wouldn't win today. Keith has probably already been in contact with the judge and dug deeply into his pockets to make sure that he would walk free from this trial.

“All rise for the Judge,” the court bailiff said with a firm voice. I stood slowly, my knees shaking a bit. I could feel Keith staring at me, his gaze was practically burning holes in me from across the room. He was pissed he was wasting his time here today.

After he had been served the court papers explaining that I was pressing charges for domestic abuse, he called me. I was stupid enough to answer his call.

“You stupid bitch!” he screamed at me through the phone.

I should have hung up right then, but I didn't. A sick part of me wanted to know what else he would say.

“You are going to ruin my reputation! I am one of the best lawyers in East Tennessee, people travel miles to come to me. If word gets out about this, I will lose clientele! I will have

people wanting to leave my office! You are lying about this all. How could you even do such a thing?!”

That last little bit is what broke me. Shook me to my core. How could I even do such a thing? How could *he* do such a thing! He beat me to near death just a week before, and I am the one ruining everything suddenly.

After that, I hung up the phone and promised myself to keep my head held high and not back down to his threats. But I knew from that conversation he would do everything he could to spin this in his favor.

Judge Catron entered the room and didn't even glance my way, he looked straight at Keith, and I would have bet my last penny on the fact that I saw a ghost of a smile on his face.

I dropped to my seat and fought the urge to bury my face in my hands and let out the sob threatening to rack through my body. I just had to get through this. Then I could leave, run even if I really wanted to. I just knew, no matter what, I had to get far away from Bellborough and fast.

My lawyer, Don Mastar, stood to give his opening statement, part of me wonders if I should have even wasted my money on hiring him. I could have represented myself, it's not like it will even matter at this point.

“Ms. Danner has suffered the unthinkable in the last few weeks of her life. Her own fiance attacked her in their newly built home just months before their wedding. A completely

unprovoked attack, she simply disagreed when her fiance Keith Coleman did not want her to continue going to Law School,” Don said in his horribly monotone voice.

“Had she not been able to get out of the home when she did, it’s likely she would not be sitting in this courtroom today.”

He continued talking, but I had started to drown out the noise. The walls seemed to be closing in as he started to outline the brutal details of that night.

I made the mistake of sneaking a glance in Keith’s direction, only to find his cold, icy blue eyes looking directly at me, smiling. The sick asshole was *smiling* at me! My blood ran cold. I didn’t need a judge to tell me the outcome, Keith himself had just officially confirmed my suspicions.

I quickly looked away from him, trying not to let my fear shine through. I never imagined the man I loved would become someone I feared.

For the remainder of the trial, I stared down at my hands. I listened on and off to the statements from my lawyer and Keith’s lawyer. He wasn’t representing himself, he probably was told it would look bad if he did that.

After photos were shown of my injuries and the swelling on the back of Keith’s head, where I landed the blow that knocked him out, the only reason I escaped alive that night,

the judge called for a short recess and then the bailiff excused us all.

I quickly stood and exited the courtroom, hoping I wouldn't have to speak to the devil himself. I made it safely to the hallway and tucked into a bathroom.

I found myself once again looking at my reflection in the mirror. *Just a little longer, Nat, you can get through this.* I wet a paper towel and patted my face, trying to calm myself down as best I could.

As I grabbed for the door handle, it swung open with such force that it made me stumble a few feet back trying not to fall straight on my ass. I steadied myself and looked up, ready to snap at whoever was in such a damn hurry. I was startled to see those icy blue eyes looking down at me. I let out a small gasp at the shock of seeing him, and then the panic started setting in as the realization hit that I was in this room alone with him.

Keith let out a rough, gravelly chuckle and said, "What is it, Nat honey? Are you afraid?"

I tried to push past him, "Leave me alone, Keith. You've done enough damage. Aren't you happy with yourself?"

He gripped my arm with such force I winced, knowing it would leave another nasty bruise,

"Oh, but see, I don't think I have done enough damage. For you to think you can drag me to this bullshit trial and try to paint me as a bad guy. You are going to wish you never

went through with this. I was the best thing that ever happened to you. You desperate little girl. You were so easy to manipulate, just like that judge in there. These past six years of your life were the best you will ever have, you just wait and see. You will regret all of this.”

With that threat, he turned on his heel and strode out of the bathroom like he owned the whole damn courthouse.

After taking a few calming breaths, if that’s what I can even call them since I do not feel calm at all, I walked out of the bathroom. Each step feeling like more weight was added to my legs, making it near impossible to make it back to the courtroom.

Once back in the courtroom, I had never felt so vulnerable as I did then. I could feel the entire room staring at me. A few onlookers gave me looks of sympathy, many of Keith’s colleagues looked at me like I was the trash that got left on the curb, a few of them smirking if I made the mistake of meeting their eyes.

It seemed like everyone here knew I had wasted time and money to even go through with this trial. Again the bailiff announced,

“All rise.”

I stood, but this time instead of on shaky knees, I stood and put my shoulders back. I had decided that regardless of this

outcome, I was going to start a new life for myself as soon as I left this room today.

“The court finds Keith Coleman *guilty* on all counts of domestic abuse. He will be taken into custody immediately and is sentenced to ten years of incarceration.”

I collapsed into my chair and let out a shriek of surprise. My face became wet with tears I didn't know I was shedding. I had done it! I had won and sent that bastard to prison for ten years. None of this seemed possible, there was no way this was happening.

I looked up this time, searching for those eyes I knew I would find. It didn't take me long to see them, the look of utter shock written all over him. He looked me square in the face and said, “This isn't over, Nat. You are mine and always will be. I will find you and finish this.” I didn't care what he was saying, all I knew was that it was time to close the door on this nasty part of my life and get the hell out of town.



Two

# Natalie



I walked into my bedroom with a new sense of purpose. I needed to pack what little belongings I had and get to the airport as soon as possible. I still had no idea where I was going to go, but I've decided that I am buying the first available plane ticket to anywhere out of here.

I tossed my suitcase on the bed and began throwing items in haphazardly, a feeling of urgency in me, like if I didn't go now, this would turn out to be a dream. I went to my closet and pulled down the few outfits I had, hoping this would get me through at least a couple of weeks until I could get fully back on my feet.

When I took Keith to court, my lawyer suggested we write in somehow that I get some of Keith's money from the law firm. I tried so hard to refuse, but my lawyer was adamant that I try. At the time I was still convinced I would lose, so I gave in and agreed to ask for fifty thousand dollars if he was guilty. I never imagined I would be granted that, but it's actually happening.

Don informed me before I fled the courthouse that I would receive the money in three weeks once everything was finalized. I just needed to make it until then.

After packing up all of my belongings, I walked into my kitchen to take one last look at what was my safe haven when my life got turned upside down. It was then that I noticed a box that was shoved partly under my entryway table. I vaguely remember setting it down when I first moved in here a couple of weeks ago, but I couldn't remember what was in the box. Curiosity was getting the best of me, plus I needed to know if there was something in there that I should take with me now.

I slowly opened the box and started rummaging through the items. Most of it was junk, a few pictures of friends from high school and college, very few of my adult life since I didn't really have friends. Keith never wanted me to go out without him, he always wanted to keep an eye on me. To make sure I'm safe, in his words. Looking back now, I should have known better, known that was one of his ways to control me.

I noticed the corner of a picture frame at the bottom of the box. I pulled it out, and the memories started flooding in. There Keith and I stood in front of our house, it was the day we got the keys after finalizing everything just hours prior. Huge smiles on our faces. I thought it was the best day of my life...in reality, it was the beginning of the worst days of my life.

I shoved the frame back into the box with such force that the glass broke, causing me to slice my hand. There was no

way I was taking any of this with me. It would only provide a gateway to the memories I so badly wanted to forget. I picked up the box and set it outside to be thrown away. I walked back in and headed for the bathroom to clean my wound.

After bandaging myself up as best as I could, I grabbed my suitcase and bag and headed for the door. Turning back one last time, I took a deep breath and walked out the door heading for my new beginning.

I leaned down to pick up the box, and when I stood up, my neighbor Steve was standing in the hallway.

“Hey Nat, you need some help?” Steve said, offering to take the box.

I hesitated at first, then said, “Sure, Steve. I really need to get to the airport. Do you think you could toss this in the dumpster for me so I can get going?”

He smiled and took the box from me. “I heard about the outcome of your trial today. Congratulations on successfully beating one of the best lawyers in Bellborough,” he said, slightly chuckling. I didn’t find any humor in his comment, so I didn’t return a smile.

He must have sensed that I didn’t find it funny because he quickly said, “Anyway, good luck Nat. I hope you can find a better life wherever you end up.”

I gave him a slight smile wanting to get out of this conversation.

“Thanks, I appreciate it,” and with that, I turned around and walked out of the building and to the curb to meet my Uber.

Twenty minutes later, the car pulled up outside the airport in Bellborough. It wasn't a very large airport, only containing eight terminals, which was probably going to leave me with few options to find somewhere to escape to. I tipped the driver and stepped out. It was already becoming dark out, so I hurried inside, still having a bit of nerves being alone in the dark, assuming that won't be going away soon.

I walked up to the counter where a young girl who looked to be no older than 19 was working the check-in desk.

“Hi, can I help you?” she said with a slight grimace as she took in the bruises on my face.

“Do you have any flights that are leaving tonight? Maybe even one that is leaving in the next hour?” I tried to make sure my voice showed no sign of fear, but I was pretty sure I failed.

She looked at her computer screen and started typing, her long nails clicking loudly, almost in sync with the loud chewing of her gum. When she finally looked back at me, she wouldn't meet my eyes. I'm not sure why bruises scare people so much, but this isn't the first time this has happened while I've been recovering.

“I have one leaving in forty minutes. Looks like there is only one seat left. It's heading for, um, West Cascade,

Montana.” My stomach started to churn with nerves at the fact that this is actually happening.

“Great, I’ll take it, please.” She quickly completed the process, and I wasn’t sure if it was because she wanted to be done looking at me or if it was because she knew I didn’t have a lot of time to make the flight. I had a feeling it wasn’t the latter.

Thirty minutes later, after having to rush through security, I was walking up to terminal six as they were announcing the last boarding call for flight 2862 heading to West Cascade, Montana. I hurried onto the small plane, hoping I would get lucky and be seated on the side of only single seats.

Much to my surprise, I was. I flopped down into the seat and looked out the window as the plane started moving slowly. As it made its way down the runway, a single tear dropped down my face. I closed my eyes and reminded myself I am safe and will no longer have to fear a man who I thought loved me. As the plane lifted into the air, the weight I didn’t know I was carrying on my shoulders lifted, and I was able to truly relax for the first time in probably years.

Three

# Natalie



The plane touched down, jolting me awake. I hadn't planned on falling asleep, but my body finally gave in to the exhaustion I had been feeling. The flight took almost three hours, and it was just after ten o'clock at night. I needed to find a hotel to get some sleep, and then first thing tomorrow, I will begin my search to try to find a new job as a paralegal in my new home of Montana.

I never in a million years would have thought this is where I would be at the age of twenty-seven. I got off the plane, collected my bags, and called for an Uber. A cool evening breeze whipped my hair around my face when I stepped outside. I inhaled sharply feeling like it was my first breath of freedom from the hell I'd been living.

The Uber pulled up a minute later, and I scooted into the backseat. An older gentleman turned around and gave me a polite smile, "Where are you headed this evening, miss?"

I hesitated for a minute, trying to remember the hotel name I found on the plane before dozing off, "The Belmont, please."

He turned his back to me and said, “Oh, what a lovely hotel. I will say it does have a bit of a party crowd there on Friday evenings, though. I hope you weren’t expecting a quiet night!”

He laughed, probably thinking I was going to be a part of the party, but his words made my stomach twist, and I started to panic. Crowds of people have always overwhelmed me, but since the events of the last couple of weeks, I’ve been unbearably anxious in crowded places, especially if there are men there.

I absentmindedly pulled at a string that was unraveling at the hem of my old college sweatshirt, the letters in Lake Hill University fading, trying to find a solution for my looming panic attack.

“Is there anywhere else to stay close by?” I said in a rush.

He met my eyes in the rear view mirror, “I’m afraid not tonight, miss. The West Cascade National Hockey League team has a game tomorrow where all the former players come and make an appearance. Every hotel in the city is full. I’m not sure how you managed to get a room at The Belmont on such late notice.”

My palms were becoming sweaty as the car kept moving, taking me closer to a situation I wanted to avoid.

“Are there any small towns around that you could take me to? Maybe somewhere that won’t have as many crowds. I.. I just prefer to stay somewhere more low-key.”

I started rubbing my palms against my legs, and my driver must have noticed the movements because he started to slow down before eventually pulling to the side of the road. He turned around to look at me again, “Well, the only town close is Pine Valley. It’s a small town about twenty miles east of here. They have one small motel that always has vacancies.”

I blew out a breath.

“Yes! Yes, please take me there!”

He gave me a concerned look and explained it would be a significant change in cost, but I didn’t care. I needed to go somewhere that wouldn’t be as busy.

I sat in silence for the entire car ride to Pine Valley, letting my mind wander to all the possibilities of what I could do with this new beginning. In the distance, I noticed lights starting to come into view. The drive had taken nearly forty minutes, and I was thankful my driver didn’t try to keep up a conversation the whole way here.

I know he saw my bruises, and I had a feeling any conversation would have brought them up.

“Well, here we are!” He clapped his hands together cheerily. I looked out my window to the motel, the sign that said Little River Inn blinking like it was about to go out.

I gathered my belongings and looked at the driver, “Thank you for taking the time to bring me here. I really appreciate it.” I smiled politely and started to get out.



“You seem like a really nice girl,” his words made me pause.

“Just know that whatever life has thrown at you recently, you will make it through. Sometimes our darkest days open pathways to our brightest days. You are never dealt something that you aren’t strong enough to overcome. I wish you luck on whatever path you take next. My name is Pat, and if you ever need a ride, you get a hold of me. You should have my number from the app.” He gave me a gentle smile. I looked at him through tearful eyes and thanked him for his kind words, and told him that was the nicest thing anyone had said to me in a long time.

With that, I exited the car and walked into the Little River Inn.

Four

## Grant



I climbed into the cab of my beat-up ranch truck, rubbing my calloused hands together as I looked out over the land that was Bowman Ranch. Our herd of longhorns were slowly making their way out of the barn after morning feeding.

I leaned back against the headrest, taking a moment to relax. Ever since Dad went to the nursing home at his request, I feel like I don't get time to relax anymore. I took on all his duties at the ranch on top of my daily work too. I guess he was right when he called me stubborn and hard-headed all these years because I still haven't hired any help despite his constant nagging.

Part of me thinks if I don't hire anyone, maybe one day, he will come back and pick up his duties right where he left off. I'm just not ready to fully face reality yet. I know I will have to soon since the doctors gave him four months at most, to live a month ago. My mouth goes dry at the thought that I could be without him sooner than what I *ever* thought.

It's just been Dad and me for twenty-five years now. A drunk driver took Mama from us when I was only ten years

old. We never fully recovered from losing her. So when Dad got the cancer diagnosis only eight months ago, I felt like my world was crumbling all over again.

He has faced it with dignity even though I can see the devastation in his eyes. He had so much life ahead of him and wanted to do so much more with our ranch. He takes such pride in what he has built. I can only hope to be half the man he is someday, which is why I am headed into town today. To visit him at the nursing home and to discuss his will further.

I wanted to avoid doing it for as long as possible, but he keeps asking that we get it done. He wants it to be perfect and has requested that I take all the information to the local law office to have them write it up for him once he tells me all his wishes.

I turn the key to the truck and wait for the loud rumble of protest I know it will give me. I've been meaning to get a new one, but it hasn't really been at the top of my priority list recently. Between taking care of the ranch all on my own and spending as much time as possible at the nursing home, I haven't had time to do much at all. I'll make sure to add it to my ever-growing to-do list.

After a few minutes of trying, it finally rumbles to life. I let it warm up for a few minutes as I take another look at our land and see that the sun is starting to make its appearance over the ridge in the distance, casting gold light over the outbuildings and the cattle. Then I take a deep breath and head

into town, which is only about a ten-minute drive from the house.

That's one thing I love about Pine Valley, it's close enough for me to make quick trips, but it's not too close that it takes away from my solidarity out here.

As I pull into the valley, it looks like a ghost town still, not many people are up before the sun like I am every day. Timber View Nursing Home is on the far side of town. I slowly make my way there and take in my surroundings as I go.

The small coffee shop on the corner is starting to take down its spring decorations and put up summer decor, and the windows have paint on them, wishing the recent high school graduates luck as they go away to college.

Our small little library has large paper flowers hanging in all their windows and bright wreaths on each of the light poles that surround the building.

Before I know it, I am pulling up outside the nursing home. I put the truck in park and rested my forehead on the steering wheel, preparing myself for this visit with Dad. They are never easy, but I know in my gut this one will be particularly difficult because it feels like we are sealing his fate.

After taking a few calming breaths, which seemed to be unsuccessful, I shut the truck off. My cowboy hat was sitting

on the seat next to me, and I leaned over to grab it, knowing Dad would question me if I wasn't wearing it.

As I walked into Dad's room, I was hit with intense sorrow. He looked so frail and thin like he could break at any moment. When they found the pancreatic cancer, the doctor had said it was already at an advanced stage, and there wouldn't be much they could do.

Dad, the stubborn asshole, refused all treatment and requested a room at the nursing home as soon as his symptoms became too difficult for him to handle alone, so he wasn't a burden on me. I practically begged him to stay at the farm with me, but he flat-out refused, claiming it would be entirely too much for me to worry about. I just had to promise I would come to town to see him at least once every other day.

I made that promise but did one better and have come to see him every day, sometimes twice a day. My daily visits with him are the best part of my life right now because when you spend every day of your life with someone for thirty-five years, it's hard to break the habit.

I walked over to the chair by his bed and sat down quietly, he was resting, and I didn't want to disturb him. I pulled out my phone and began looking through my notes from previous conversations we have had about the will together.

- *All property, animals, and belongings go to Grant*
- *Donation of five thousand dollars to local schools*

- *Donation of five thousand dollars to Timber View Nursing Home for the exceptional care they provided me*
- *All remaining monies will be transferred to Grant*

This was his list, it was short, but it was important to him. He was a heavy supporter of our local school system and has always said they could always use the money to make improvements to be able to create a better foundation for the students.

He also was adamant that money be donated to the nursing home because he always tells me how good care all the employees took of him. Part of me wondered if it was because he was flirting with the girls and got them smiling, but I had also been impressed with the level of care he was receiving.

As I finished looking over the list, he started stirring awake.

“Morning Pops, you sleep good last night?” I said with a smile. He looked over at me and gave me a little smirk.

“Damn, Son, you’re here early today. You sure you’re taking good care of my ranch? Already being done with chores, this early seems a little suspicious to me.”

I chuckled and ran my hand over my face trying to hide the exhaustion. Little does he know I’ve only been sleeping a couple of hours each night, the darkness seeming to consume me and making it damn near impossible to actually get any sleep.

“Yeah yeah, old man, I am doing just fine at the ranch. Quit your worrying, would ya.” He reached for his water cup on the table, causing his sleeve to slide up a little, really showing off how his arm was nothing but skin and bones.

Trying to distract myself, I said, “How about some coffee this morning? I can go see if I can find one of your lovely nurses and see if they can brew us some.”

“Sure, Son, you do that, but then we need to get down to business.” I frowned at him but left the room at that comment to try to calm my racing heart. His eagerness to get this done making it hard for me to breathe.

A few minutes later, I returned to the room with two cups of coffee. When I looked up, Dad was sitting proudly in the chair by the bed.

“How the hell did you get over there? You aren’t supposed to be getting up by yourself. You know that.”

He threw a dirty look my way.

“You know damn well I don’t follow the rules. I may be dying, but I am not completely helpless. It was only a couple feet, and look,” he waved his arms around in front of him, “I made it, didn’t I?”

Well, he got me with that. He was never one to follow the rules, especially the ones he disagreed with.

I sat his coffee on the table and sat on the edge of his bed. Our eyes met, and we sat in silence for a brief moment, the reality of our futures hanging over us like dark clouds.

I was the first to speak, my voice heavy, my emotions overcoming me, “Are you sure you are ready to do this?” He looked at me for a couple more seconds before he responded.

“Grant, I will never be truly ready to do this. I am not ready to leave you. I am not ready to leave the ranch. I am not ready for any of this. But Son, my body is tired. I may not be ready, but everything else is ready, and there isn’t a damn thing we can do to stop it. The only thing we can do is be prepared as best we can.”

With that, I nodded and swallowed the lump that was forming in my throat. Then I pulled my phone out to go over his list with him.

Forty-five difficult minutes later, he had finalized everything with me and was happy with the decisions he had made. The plan was for me to leave here and head straight into a meeting with Evan Bradley at his law office. He was going to take the list Dad had made and create a well-planned and organized will for him.

Evan and I went to school together until college. He went to Harvard after high school graduation and I stayed here working as a ranch hand for Dad.

The whole town was surprised when he returned after receiving his law degree, announcing that he wanted to open his law office in Pine Valley. I’m pretty sure it had a lot to do with his sister and her two kids. I’m not sure I would consider



him a friend, but I know I can count on him to help me navigate these difficult times life has thrown my way.

I could tell Dad was getting tired. He kept trying to hold a conversation with me but was dozing off after every couple of words he said. I stood and grabbed my hat, “Well, Dad, I’m gonna head out. That ranch sure ain’t gonna do its own chores.” I attempted to chuckle, but it was more of a big whoosh of breath, a clear sign that I needed to head out before my emotions became too hard to bear.

“Let me help you back to bed before I go. We don’t need those poor nurses comin’ in here to pick your ass up off the floor later.”

He agreed to that, knowing he would be weaker after being out of bed for as long as he had been. He stuck his arm out for me, and I braced it on my shoulders, slowly helping him rise to his feet. He wobbled slightly as he straightened his legs, his arm gripping me a little tighter. Then instead of scooting toward the bed like I had expected him to, he turned to me and wrapped his other arm around my neck, and spoke quietly to me.

“No matter what happens in life, Grant, I hope you know you’ve made me proud. I couldn’t imagine leaving the ranch to anyone else. Thirty-five years together will never be enough, but I wouldn’t change our lives for nothing. You go out there and continue doing what you’re doing. But Son, don’t let the ranch stop you from finding someone to share your life with. I’ve sat back and watched you work day in and

day out and never take time to do something for yourself. Don't be like me after Mama. Put yourself out there and find you a woman to take care of. That's the only other thing I will ask of you. I don't want you to continue this life alone. You need someone there for you since I can't be there anymore."

I couldn't hold it back anymore. A tear ran slowly down my face. I may be a man, but something about hearing your father's dying wishes will bring out emotions in you that never make an appearance.

I wrapped my arms around him and gently squeezed, "I love ya Dad. You have taught me how to be a man, and you've taught me how to love. I just wish you could have taught me how to live without you."

With that, I slowly walked him to the bed, not being able to talk anymore with the lump that had formed in my throat. Once he was settled, I turned to leave, taking one last look back at him before I headed out the door. Feeling a pang in my chest as I walked out to my old truck, having a sinking feeling that the end was closer than we think.

Later that night, I sat at the kitchen table of our old farmhouse, a cold beer sitting on the worn-out table in front of me, open but untouched. I came home earlier and finished all the chores, then I went to the horse barn and got Dad's old horse, Clover, out and took her for a ride through the valley on the ranch. Taking the time to stop at the top of the ridge and look out over the property as the sun slowly set on this difficult day.

Dad used to ride her morning and night and always said he had a special connection with her like she knew more about him than the average person. He got her shortly after Mama died, and I think deep down, she filled the void for him. She was a damn good horse, and I know she is missing Dad just as much as I am. I will be sure to ride her twice a day like he did when I get more time, that is.

Now I am trying to force myself to shut my brain off so I can sleep for a couple hours, but the heaviness of today just isn't allowing me to do that. I picked up the beer and took a big long swig, swishing it around in my mouth, thinking about Dad's words today. He has always wanted me to go on dates and try to find a woman who would put up with my ass, as he would always say.

He thought that it would do me some good to take some time away from the ranch, see women, or whatever the hell he said. I hadn't gone on a date in years, though. Everyone in Pine Valley was either already married or old enough to be my Mama or even grandma, and Lord knows I am not driving to West Cascade to go on a date with a woman who wouldn't even like coming to the ranch.

Thinking about it now, though, a strange part of me wishes I would have listened. Soon I'll be really alone, and who in their right mind would want to be with someone as emotionally damaged as me? Before all this cancer talk and watching my own father withering away before my eyes, I could have been considered normal.

Now I am just a thirty-five-year-old with no social life and enough work to spread between at least six people. How in the hell did I let my life get to this point?

Five

# Natalie



I rolled onto my back on the lumpy mattress, slowly opening my eyes and looking around, making sure the past twenty-four hours really weren't a dream. Sure enough, here I was in this little motel room at the Little River Inn in Pine Valley, Montana.

I inhaled deeply and stretched my arms over my head, trying to release some of the tension I had been carrying the last few days. Then I began ticking off my mental checklist. Of course, first, I needed to shower and try to find an outfit that would be suitable for the day.

Then I need to seek out a coffee shop, or there is no way I am making it through the day. Then I needed to decide if Pine Valley is where I want to stay, maybe I will get really lucky, and they will have a law office nearby.

By the way Pat talked last night though, it sounded like a tiny community, and part of me is worried that I won't be able to call it home. If I was going to call it home, then I would need to actually.. you know, find an apartment too.

I rented the room I was in for a few weeks, but I knew I couldn't stay here forever. So there is only one way to find out if this town will be my forever, and that's not by staying in bed all day.

I got up and headed to the window. Looking out, I noticed that the sun was just starting to rise, I guess old habits die hard. I always was an early riser, something about seeing the sunrise regularly gives me a sense of calm. Plus, I have always been a morning person and get my best work done before ten in the morning.

I went over to my suitcase to find some clothes for the day. I grabbed a pair of dark wash jeans that flared at the bottom and a fitted black tank top, then decided to grab my white button-down shirt to wear loosely over top. I would have to pair it with my Tecova boots seeing as the other options were my black Louboutin heels or a pair of mauve-colored flats, neither of which seemed fitting for the outfit.

I headed into the bathroom and turned the shower on as hot as it would go. I turned to look in the mirror and even shocked myself a little. I knew my bruises had looked bad even if they were healing, but adding dark circles of exhaustion to that made me look like a walking corpse.

I pulled my auburn hair out of the bun that was piled on the top of my head. The locks dropped down past the middle of my back. My hazel eyes were tired but had a little light returning to them after the dark they had been in for so long.

I ran a brush through the tangles at the bottom of my hair, contemplating if I should cut some of it off. Then I stripped off my pajamas and stepped into the shower, letting the water wash over me and rinse away the brutal memories of the last six years of my life.

Fifteen minutes later, I was looking at my reflection again, but this time a smile ghosted my face because I looked rejuvenated, like that shower had breathed life and determination back into my soul.

It wasn't often that victims of domestic abuse got second chances, but dammit, I was getting one, and I was going to make good use of it. It was time to turn my life around and make a new name for myself.

I stepped out of my room and onto the sidewalk with my head held high, time to find some coffee. I started walking down the street towards the middle of town when I saw a sign that read *Valley Coffee Co.* I picked up my pace a little, eager to get my hands around a warm mug. I opened the door to the coffee shop, a little bell dinging above my head, making my presence known.

For a moment I wasn't sure if anyone was here but then an older woman emerged from the back of the store and a younger boy peeked around the door frame to see who had come in.

“Morning, dear, what can I get you this morning?” She looked at me waiting patiently for my order.

“Um, a caramel latte please.” She shook her head then turned around and got to work. I noticed the boy was still peeking around the door, he had to be no older than maybe eleven or twelve, so he didn’t try to hide his stares.

A few moments later the woman returned with my latte, I picked it up then took a seat at a table near the front window. I was the only one in here right now, which either means there just really aren’t a ton of people in this town or that they just aren’t early risers. I liked that it was empty, though. It gave me time to look around and take in my surroundings.

There was a bulletin board near the door that had ads posted on it. A burnt orange-colored couch with claw foot feet sat against the wall to the left of the counter. In front of it sat a vintage looking coffee table with magazines strewn across it, and under both pieces of furniture laid a beautiful Victorian-style rug.

Behind the couch were old photos of what looked to be Pine Valley, some of them in black and white, which tells me that this town has been around for a while.

Hanging from the ceiling were dozens of strands of fairy and string lights, lighting up the space with a soft glow. The front of the shop had large windows that let in a generous amount of natural light, mixing perfectly with the strands.

In the far corner of the shop, near the back of the room, was a vintage record player cabinet that had stacks and stacks of vinyl on both sides. Soft music was coming from it, some



gentle instrumental tracks, creating such a peaceful atmosphere.

None of the tables and chairs matched each other, giving it a unique look. It was a very warm and cozy feeling, and it gave me a little spark of excitement, thinking that I could spend my mornings here enjoying my lattes and getting to know the locals.

I decided to check out the bulletin board. Maybe it would have some job listings or just information about local businesses, anything to tell me more about this quaint town I've landed myself in.

There were several ads for moms looking for a babysitter for their children, a few lost animal posters, something about a play that was happening next week at the theater, a part-time opening at the local library, and a request for kids to assist with yard work during the summer. There was little information about other businesses in the area, which didn't help with my search.

I went back to my table and pulled out my phone to do a quick Google search of the area to see if maybe there was a law office here. Surprisingly after typing in Pine Valley law office, one popped up. After looking at it, I realized it was less than half a mile from my current location. *Hope*. It bloomed in my chest like a tulip on a spring day.

I finished up my coffee and allowed myself a few more moments to sit and relax before I stood and headed for the

door. I pushed it open, that little bell ringing again. Then I made my way toward Bradley Law.

As I walked down the sidewalk, I slowly started falling in love with this tiny town. There were several boutiques on the main strip of town, each unique in their own way. There was a secondhand book shop called *Twice Read Books & More* which I made a mental note to visit later because who doesn't love a good romance book.

The public library was at the end of main street, and it looked like something out of a catalog with the amount of spring decor and flowers it had out was unbelievable. I was so used to living in a bigger city. Bellborough was nothing like this, it was dull and plain. Looking at Pine Valley was like breathing in fresh air after you've been stuck inside for years.

Finally, I saw the sign for *Bradley Law* up ahead, and my palms started to get a little sweaty. This would be the moment of truth. If this office didn't have an opportunity for me, there would be no way I could stay here. The commute to West Cascade was not appealing to me, and I knew I would have to seek out another town.

I pulled the door open and stepped inside. There was a small desk that sat to the right of the door. A quick glance showed that it seemed to be unoccupied. There were no personal belongings, no photos, it looked like there weren't even any pens in the holder. Maybe this meant he didn't have someone working for him. I crossed my fingers in my head

since it would be a little strange for me to be crossing them for real.. I don't want to come off as weird as a first impression.

The office was quiet. I strained to see if I could hear anyone talking in the distance, but it was just silence. Standing there for a moment, I was trying to decide how to proceed when the door behind me swung open, startling me. I spun around quickly, almost losing my balance, when a strong hand reached out to brace my shoulder, keeping me from falling. The sudden rough touch had me moving quickly to get out of its grip, not knowing what his intentions were.

When I finally got my bearings about me, I looked up and had to stop myself from letting out a gasp that was threatening to break through my lips.

In front of me stood a man who could closely resemble a giant. I mean, seriously, he had to be at least six-foot-six. He had on a black cowboy hat that sat down low on his brow, almost concealing his beautiful dark brown eyes. A red and black plaid shirt was practically painted on his arms. I looked down, taking in his boots and worn-out jeans that hugged him in all the right places.

He cleared his throat, and it snapped me back to reality. Quickly averting my gaze, "Sorry miss, I didn't mean to startle you, I was in a hurry and came in here like a bull in a china shop."

I could feel him looking at me, waiting on me to give him some kind of response.

I looked up at him, not being able to meet his eyes, “It’s okay, I just.. um, have had, you know, well, I mean.” *Come on, Nat, get your shit together. You’re rambling about nothing.*

“I just startle easily. Sorry about that.”

It was then that I fully looked at him, and I know he noticed the bruises on my face. His gaze held mine in a vice, like there was some magnetic pull, not allowing me to look away. Next thing I knew, his gaze was raking down my body slowly, assessing me, maybe? Or maybe looking for other obvious injuries. They were there, but none that he would be able to see.

“Names Grant. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you around town before. You new to the area?” His voice was pure velvet with a twangy accent.

I had a very short moment of time to decide how much I wanted to reveal to this perfect stranger, “Uh yeah, I’m new to town. I actually just got in last night. West Cascade was where I started, but the town was crazy busy with some hyped-up hockey game happening today. Crowds really aren’t my thing, bad experiences. Luckily my Uber driver was willing to bring me here instead.”

*Oh my god Natalie, what are you doing!?* I just rambled off all that to him, and he probably doesn’t even really care how the hell I got here and why.

He stood there just looking at me, slowly a small smile spread across his beautiful face. I wish I had the ability to read

people's minds sometimes because what I wouldn't give to know what the hell he is currently thinking.

He raised his hand up towards me, and I couldn't stop myself in time before I flinched out of habit. He quickly dropped his hand, eyes widening a bit, probably putting the pieces of the puzzle together, my bruises, the flinching, startling easy. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that I've been through some shit.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that. I just.." he paused, looking at me again, "You're incredibly beautiful, and I just couldn't help myself there for a minute."

My cheeks heated with his confession. Is this really happening to me right now?

"It's okay, you didn't know, and it's not like I'm wearing a big sign that says, hey, don't do that. I have a traumatic past." I chuckled a little, then immediately caught myself, wondering again what the hell I was doing.

Then like a saving grace, a man, who I assume is Evan Bradley, came around the corner from the back of the office and said, "Oh, hey, Grant, I didn't know you were bringing someone along with you today."

"No. I'm, um, I'm not with him," I stuttered, sounding like an idiot. "I'm sorry I probably should have called first before just coming here."

Evan looked at me with confusion, "No, that's okay. Are you needing a lawyer?"

My cheeks heated again. Surely now they were as red as hot coal in a stove. I needed to get my shit together and say something that didn't make me seem completely incompetent and fast.

“Sorry, no, my name is Natalie Danner. I am actually new to the area. I'm a paralegal, and I am looking for a job.” I stopped, taking a calming breath.

“I found your office online, and I decided to come here this morning to see if maybe, by some miracle, you would be looking for help.”

I gave him the best smile I could manage. I could feel Grant standing behind me, a little closer than I would normally be comfortable with having just met him, but something about him made me feel at ease.

Evan looked at me, then shifted his gaze to Grant, then back to me.

“Look, let me get through this meeting with Grant. Then you and I could sit down and talk a little more. It'll only be about thirty minutes. Are you able to wait?”

“Yes!” I said a little too eagerly, “Absolutely, I don't have anything else planned for today. Take all the time you need.”

“Great, just have a seat, and as soon as we are finished, I will come out and get you,” Evan said, eyeing me. I'm sure trying to figure out if this is a legit situation or not.

He turned to walk back through the door he came out of. Grant went to follow, then turned to look at me, “It was great

meeting you, Natalie. I hope our paths cross again someday.”

He winked at me before he turned around and walked through the door behind Evan. *I'm sorry.. did that man just wink at me?* If all the guys in this town are like this, I could absolutely get used to it. I sat back in the chair and pulled my phone out, and opened my Kindle app. If I have thirty minutes, I might as well read a little.

Six

## Grant



I'm sitting in a chair in Evan's office, trying my damndest to concentrate on discussing Dad's will. I know Evan can tell I'm not completely focused on what we are doing. I was able to give him all the important details and exactly what Dad's wishes were. But as soon as he started throwing out the laws and guidelines and fine prints of the will, I couldn't help but let my mind wander to the beautiful woman sitting just on the other side of his office door.

I have never in my life been affected by a woman whom I had just met. She was drop-dead gorgeous, and she had long, beautiful auburn hair. Her hazel eyes are what captivated me, though. They held sorrow and fear in them without her realizing it. Of course, I noticed the fading bruises under each one. How could I not?

First, I thought maybe it had just been a freak accident, but the way she flinched when I raised my hand to brush a finger along her cheek told me otherwise.

It wasn't hard to connect the dots, and my blood started to boil. Her reaction showed me that a man had done that to her.



How the fuck could someone put their hands on a woman, but especially someone as beautiful as her?

“Grant? Man, are you listening to me?” Evan said with a questioning look on his face.

I shook my head a little and rubbed at my beard. “Sorry, man, I’m listening.”

He gave me a knowing look then said, “How about I work on getting all this typed up? Then when it’s done, I can give you a call and let you know. I know it’s tough going through all this, but I also know that your mind seems to be elsewhere today.”

Damn, nothing like being caught by your lawyer daydreaming about a girl you just met while trying to work out your dad’s will. I have a seriously screwed-up life right now.

Reluctantly I agreed and decided I needed to get out of there to try to get my mind off things. I stood up and walked out the door. Only her sitting there in that chair, looking so small and innocent, just brought all those thoughts back tenfold. I smiled at her as I walked past, wanting to say something to her but not knowing what, so I just kept going.

I walked out to my truck with plans to head back to the ranch. All my errands for the morning were done. I’d already been to the nursing home to visit with Dad, so I really had no reason to stay in town. Except I couldn’t make myself start the truck to go home. I kept thinking about Natalie. Something about her

was so intriguing. Part of me wanted to stay in town and try to cross her path again.

I sat in the truck, trying to decide what to do without seeming like I am a creep since I just met the girl. Before I knew it, I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and looked up to see her emerging from Evan's office. She had a huge smile on her face, and before the door fully shut, Evan popped his head out to say something to her. Then they shook hands.

Does this mean Evan offered her a job, and she is going to stay in Pine Valley? And why does the thought of that excite me so much? What the hell are these feelings?

Not taking a second longer to think about what I was about to do, I hopped out of the truck and yelled across the street.

“Natalie?”

She turned to look, seeming surprised that she had heard her name being called. Then when she saw me, I could have sworn she was holding back a smile.

“Hey, Grant, right?”

“Yep, that's me, the guy who is totally trying not to come off as a creep right now,” I said, chuckling.

She was standing there looking at me, and it was then that I realized that she was waiting on me to speak since I was the one who called for her. Shit, what am I supposed to do now?

“Look, I know we just met, but I heard you mention that you were new to the area and were thinking about staying in

town, so I thought maybe we could grab breakfast, and I could show you around a bit?”

She looked at me for a long moment, and I was sure she was about to say no, so when I heard her soft voice say,

“Um yeah, sure, that sounds nice,” I thought I was imagining it.

Trying not to seem too eager, I said, “There is a diner just around the corner. They serve the best French toast in Montana. How’s that sound?”

She widened her eyes at me. “The best in Montana, huh? That’s pretty impressive since Montana is so big... you telling me that you’ve been to every restaurant in the state that offers French toast?”

I tossed my head back and laughed, I mean really laughed at that comment, and honestly, it felt good because I can’t even remember the last time I was actually genuinely laughing.

“Okay, okay, maybe not the state, but definitely the best French toast in a 75-mile radius of Pine Valley.

She smirked at me and said, “Okay, cowboy, lead the way then.”

*Cowboy.* She really just called me cowboy. I rolled my eyes dramatically at her and then started walking in the direction of the diner. I glanced over at her after a minute of walking in silence and noticed that she had put a good bit of distance between us and was also walking slightly behind me.

I got that feeling of anger in me again, wondering what had happened in her past to make her put these kinds of walls up.

I didn't like thinking about what had happened to her, but I also wanted to know every last detail. I wanted to help her, to protect her from whatever demons she was fighting. At that thought, I shook my head, what on earth has gotten into me? I haven't been on a date in years, then in the last hour, I have met a girl that has me trying to figure out a way to spend more time with her and learn everything about her. Wanting to know who has hurt her so badly and also wanting to protect her. This is a lot to process, and it's going to really keep me up tonight, more than normal.

“Here we are! The Famous Sunrise Dinner!” I opened the door for her and watched her walk in, the sway of her hips catching my eye. Wondering how someone so small can have curves the way she does.

“Ahem,” My eyes snapped up to see her smirking at me.

“Everything okay, cowboy? You seemed to have been a little distracted there.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, “Yep, everything's fine, great, uh, everything's great. Do you want to sit at the bar or a booth?”

I tried desperately to take the attention off what she had just caught me doing. The look on her face told me I was absolutely not off the hook though.

“How about a booth? I like sitting by the window so I can see what’s going on around me.”

“Booth it is,” I motioned for her to lead the way to whichever booth she wanted to sit at.

As we sat down, Frannie, the only waitress at the diner, came over and squeezed my shoulder. “Grant honey, it’s so good to see you. How’s your daddy doing?”

That familiar pang in my chest was back. I looked up at Frannie, the sadness showing on my face, I’m sure.

“I wish I had better news, Fran, but it’s not good. The doctors only gave him a few months to live. His body is tired, I think he is ready to go, but he knows I’m not ready, so he is holding on for me. I feel selfish, but I can’t help it.” Frannie squeezed my shoulder again.

“Oh honey, I’m so sorry. You know I always loved your daddy. He was one of my best regulars, and I just loved the days he brought you along. You two always did make my day.”

Those memories of coming to the diner growing up and well into my adult life with Dad brought a smile to my face. If there is one thing about all of this, I will at least have all the wonderful memories Dad and I managed to make together.

I saw Natalie looking at me in my peripheral vision. I didn’t need to look at her to know what her face would show. Sympathy, sadness, maybe even a few unshed tears. But that isn’t why I brought her here today. I brought her to the diner so

I could get the chance to actually get to know the first, and really only, woman who has caught my attention in years.

Frannie then said, “I miss you coming in here once a week to eat. Please don’t stop doing that Grant. You need to keep a little normalcy in your life, you know. You have people who care about you, so let us, please.”

She was right, even if I didn’t want to admit it. I needed to try to get back into coming to the diner once a week just to keep ties with the locals. Soon these people would be all I had left in life.

“I will do my best, Fran, just for you. For now, though, can we order some breakfast?”

“Well, you absolutely can honey! What do you say, French toast breakfasts for the both of ya?”

I looked at Natalie, and she nodded her head, so I said, “Sounds great, Fran, and could you bring some coffee out as well?”

“Coming right out!” she called over her shoulder as she walked away.

After checking that Frannie did in fact retreat back to the kitchen, I looked over to Natalie hesitantly, not sure what to expect after hearing all that. Those hazel eyes of hers were locked onto my face.

“I feel like I should say sorry about your dad, but I know that’s not at all what you want to hear because words won’t fix the problem and give us the solutions we actually want.”

She was right about that. People were always quick to apologize like that would make me feel better. I actually hated to hear it and wanted to yell at everyone who said it to me. But I never did. I just always nodded and said thank you, then tried to quickly remove myself from the conversation.

“You’re right, I absolutely hate to hear people say they are sorry. Sorry won’t do a damn thing for me,” I bit out, trying not to sound hateful but obviously failing.

She apparently didn’t take it hard, though, because she was fiddling with the napkin on the table in front of her and then said, “Let’s exchange thoughts.”

“Exchange thoughts? Please explain how you exchange thoughts with someone.”

She let a little giggle slip past her lips, and it was damn near the cutest sound I ever heard. I smiled at her, letting that sound ring through my ears.

“So I will tell you one thing that’s on my mind or a thought or confession that I have, and then you will have to do the same. The only rule is our answers stay between the two of us, and you can’t ask any follow-up questions without first giving your thought or confession.”

“Okay, so kind of like a twenty-question game?” She rolled her eyes playfully, “No, it’s not really like twenty questions, but if that’s what you want to call it, then sure... twenty questions. But you have to go first, Cowboy,” she said with a playful wink.

Well, that answers my earlier thought of if she saw the wink I gave her at the law office. Clearly, she did, and I really like the fact that she was paying attention enough to notice.

I looked at her for a moment before saying, “I’m wondering how you ended up in Pine Valley. It’s not often that people from out of town pick this town to move to.” I hoped that my first thought wasn’t too deep. Maybe I should have started with something like her favorite color.

I saw her visibly take a deep breath, like she was calming herself, before saying whatever it was that was about to be revealed.

“To be honest, I didn’t pick Pine Valley. It kind of feels like Pine Valley picked me. Not even twenty-four hours ago, I was at the airport in Bellborough, Tennessee, asking for a one-way ticket on a plane that was leaving in the next hour. It took me to West Cascade, but..” she hesitated,

“It was too crowded for me, so my Uber driver, Pat, suggested I come here. So, here I am.” She put her arms out in front of her like she was presenting herself to me.

“Do you have this Pat guy’s number?” I asked, “I think I would personally like to thank him because if it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be sitting here this morning getting to enjoy your company.”

Her cheeks flushed at that comment, “I’m really not that special, but I am glad you thought I was nice enough to at least have breakfast with me.” She shrugged like she didn’t just try to imply that she was nothing special.



Shaking my head, I said, “Who did this to you, who in their right mind would make you feel like anything less than special?”

Her eyes snapped up to mine, looking at me like she was trying to figure out if I was really asking that question or if it was more of a statement.

I raised my hands up in front of me. “You don’t have to answer that, but if I’m being honest, I hope you will want to tell me someday.”

She looked out the window, “I hope one day I can talk about it, but right now, I’m just not ready.”

“But anyway, it’s my turn to share a thought because I think you shared more than one, and you asked a question before I even had a turn,” she tilted her head at me, smiling.

She was right. I didn’t even give her a chance. I leaned back in the seat, stretching my arm across the back of the booth, not missing how she tracked the movement with her eyes.

I just continued to sit there, waiting on her to speak, taking a moment to admire her beauty and wonder how I managed to get her to come to breakfast with me. There is just something about this girl that is pulling me to her, like a moth to a flame, and it feels dangerous.

## Seven

# Natalie



“I think I will share a confession instead of a thought.” He raised an eyebrow waiting for me to continue.

“You scare me,” I said, point blank, not giving myself time to think about it. He didn’t speak, so I decided to continue.

“Actually, no, not you specifically. Men. Men scare me, and I’m sure you can assume why. We don’t really need to go into detail right now.” I sighed, “But I am scared. I don’t want to be scared because something about you does make me feel safe, but it’s hard not to be. So I just hope.. that I can trust this feeling I have and that you really are safe.”

*Okay, I just really said that.*

I just threw all caution to the wind and told him exactly what was on my mind, guess I really am running with this new beginning.

Something that looked like anger flashed on his face. It was brief, but it was there. Something deep in my bones told me that he wasn’t angry at me, though, but more at what I was saying. I understood that. I would be mad, too, if I were him.

Then as quickly as it was there, it was gone and replaced with a slight smile, a softness to it. He put his hand on the table and slowly slid it across to me, his palm facing up, his eyes locked onto mine, waiting for me to decide if I wanted to allow the touch or not.

I slowly raised my hand and placed it in his. I looked down as he gently wrapped his fingers around mine. His hands were huge compared to mine, calloused and rough, next to my small delicate ivory skin. At the contact, I felt an unusual buzz where his skin met mine, something I had never felt before.

I raised my head to look at him, only to find that he was already staring at me. A megawatt smile showing off a set of perfectly straight white teeth and a dimple in both cheeks, almost hidden by his beard.

In that moment, he took my breath away. This man, who had been sporting a look of sorrow permanently etched on his face all morning, was giving me the most amazing smile I'd ever seen. Then he spoke, and I think if it was humanly possible, I would have melted on the spot.

“You don't ever have to be scared of me, scared to be around me, or scared to be with me. If you give me a chance, I will never give you a reason to be scared ever again. We may have just met, but something about you is special, I can already tell.”

He gave my hand a gentle squeeze like he was trying really hard to make me hear what he was saying and believe it.

And stupidly, maybe, I did believe him. I don't know why, but I did. I shook my head, suddenly feeling emotional and not wanting to show it. I opted not to speak. Instead, I just squeezed his hand back and smiled.

At that moment, Frannie came from the kitchen carrying our breakfast. I quickly pulled my hand back and placed it in my lap. I couldn't help but notice the look of disappointment on Grant's face, and I felt a pang of regret at that action. It's not that I didn't want Frannie to see it. I just wasn't sure I was ready for all these feelings I was battling. I mean.. I just met the guy so this is all a little crazy to me.

Eight

# Natalie



Grant really wasn't kidding when he said this French toast was the best. I ate every last bite on my plate and was sure I wouldn't be able to eat again for days.

Frannie came over, and I asked for my portion of the check, but Grant interrupted me before I could even finish my sentence.

“You really think I'm gonna take a lady out for breakfast and then not pay for her meal? Where did you grow up, because that's not how things work here in Pine Valley.”

I tried arguing with him but gave up quickly because it was obvious that was something he was not going to give up. Frannie just smiled at me and shook her head as she walked away to grab the check.

I looked over to Grant and said, “So, you wouldn't happen to know of any houses or apartments in the area that are for rent?” I tried my best to hide my excitement of getting to stay in Pine Valley.

“Because Evan offered me a job at his office. He said recently he had been thinking about hiring a paralegal but hadn’t got around to it because he knew there weren’t any in town, so I showed up at the perfect time. I only have my room at the Little River Inn for two weeks...so I’m kind of in a hurry.”

He raised his hand and rubbed his beard in thought, “I actually do know of a little cottage on the west end of town that is for sale. The owner Mrs. Georgia is the sweetest little lady. Her husband Frank is in the nursing home with Dad, so I see her often.”

I loved the sound of a cottage-style home, but there was no way I could purchase a home right now, not until the money from Keith’s office hit my bank account. Even though my lawyer said it would be three weeks, something tells me it’s going to be longer than that.

“Oh, okay,” the disappointment evident in my voice. “I wish I could buy a house, but it’s just not in the cards for me right now, maybe someday though. I will have to try to extend my stay at the motel.”

Grant frowned, “How about I speak with Georgia? She is at the nursing home every day visiting Frank. I could see if maybe she would be willing to rent it to you for a while until you’re able to get everything sorted. What do you think?”

I was hesitant to say yes. It was only my second day in this town, and that seemed like something really big to ask of

someone I didn't even know. I noticed he was looking at me, patiently waiting for my answer.

God, where did this man come from? The kindness written all over his face was so pure it was impossible to say no, so I put on my brave face and said, "Sure, that sounds good. It can't hurt to ask anyway."

After we paid and walked out of the diner, I started walking down the sidewalk when Grant came up beside me and motioned for me to scoot to the inside of the sidewalk.

"What are you doing?" I asked, looking at him questioningly.

"No man that has any manners should put a woman between him and a street, even if it's not a busy street. Something my dad always taught me was you protect women no matter what." There he was again, giving me that smile, making it impossible not to return one.

We made it back to his truck, stopping on the sidewalk near the law office.

"Thank you for offering to speak to Mrs. Georgia for me, I really appreciate it. I should give you my phone number so that way you can let me know what she says." He smiled softly at me, "Yes, that's probably a good idea."

I took my phone out to put his number into it so I could send him a text message to save mine. I stood there for a

moment not really sure where to go from here. I peeked up at him through my lashes.

“Well, thank you again for this morning. You have shown me kindness that I’ve not experienced in a long time.”

“You don’t have to thank me for just being polite. It’s what everyone should do,” he said in a stern voice, clearly annoyed that I think he did something extra for me today.

“Well, I’ll be waiting for your message about the house, thank you again. Bye, Grant.” I said with a small wave. It was clear I was trying to get out of this conversation because I was beginning to feel slightly uncomfortable from not being used to this kind of interaction.

“I hope I see you again soon,” he waved.

With that, I turned on my heel and headed back to the motel. I was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to just lay in bed and try to forget the heaviness of what is my life right now.



Nine

# Natalie



Before I knew it, I had been in Pine Valley for a week, and it was time for me to start my new job. I was feeling nervous, as most people do when they are starting a brand new job. But also, part of me was so unbelievably excited for this fresh start.

I had spent the last five days exploring the town. I visited a few of the boutiques and made a trip to the bookstore and the library. I've been spending most of my time in my motel room reading, looking into the area's law school options, and just learning about my new hometown. Now I was ready to start a routine and develop a bit of normalcy.

I got out of bed before my alarm went off, and after showering, I decided to take a little extra time on my hair and makeup. My facial bruises were now almost completely gone, so I easily covered them up with a light dusting of makeup. I painted a subtle shade of red across my lips, and my auburn hair fell in sweeping Hollywood curls down my back. I had pinned up the right side of my hair away from my face with a delicate pearl clip that belonged to my mother. It went well

with my mauve silk shirt that I was wearing under my black pantsuit.

I looked at myself in the mirror and felt a sense of pride wash over me. After everything I had been through the last few weeks, today felt like a good day. I was very slowly getting my life back on track and finally had the reins back in my own hands. With one last look at my reflection, I turned and grabbed my purse, and headed for the coffee shop.

I pushed the door open, and the bell rang, alerting the girl that was behind the counter of my presence. She looked up at me and gave me the warmest smile I had ever seen.

“Hi! You must be Natalie! Dolores and Ty told me about you. News travels fast around here. They said you were new in town. My name is Tallie, and I own the shop,” her smile is still firmly in place.

“Yes, I’m Natalie. You’re right. News does travel fast around here. I haven’t even been out much.”

Tallie chuckled a little “What can I get you this morning?”

I glanced up at the menu board, even though I was probably just going to get the same old thing I always do because I’m boring like that. But then, when that thought crossed my mind, it was a reminder that today was a new day, and this was my fresh start. Why should I continue to live that same routine and boring life when I *could* change it up?

“Can I get a mocha iced coffee? It’s not normally my go-to, but I think I want to try something new this morning.” I looked back at Tallie and found her already with her back turned, gathering stuff to make the drink.

“So,” she said over the noise of the ice machine. I had a feeling she was about to ask me questions that I wasn’t sure I was ready to answer.

“What brought you here? To this tiny ass town of ours, that doesn’t have much to offer? Not that it isn’t a nice town, but I’m just trying to figure out why you chose here?”

I took a deep breath taking my time thinking my answer over. Something about Tallie seemed comforting, like maybe she and I could be friends, and if I’m being honest with myself, I could *really* use a friend since all of my so-called friends were all dating or married to Keith’s friends. Those ties were all cut the minute the judge gave his ruling. Not that I was upset. None of those women were my true friends. It was all an act being lawyer’s wives and girlfriends. They had an image to withhold, and since I was engaged to the owner of the law office, they all wanted my attention for all the wrong reasons.

“Honestly, I didn’t actually pick this town. It kinda fell in my lap when I got on a plane to get away from where I was living. I ended up in West Cascade, but that wasn’t going to work out, so my cab driver suggested this town. So...here I am.”

I tried smiling, but it was a poor effort, and it probably looked more like a grimace, not because I didn't like the town but because having to talk about what happened to make me end up here wasn't something I enjoyed doing.

“Wow, so basically, you are working on a fresh start then? That's exciting. No matter what leads you to this, being able to start fresh is kind of like a breath of fresh air. Not many people get to do it, so in a way, you're lucky. Even if you don't feel like you had any luck.”

Tallie was looking at me, almost like she was trying to get a read on me. It would normally make me uncomfortable, but again with this girl, I didn't feel that way. Plus, what she just said was basically exactly how I was feeling.

I didn't feel like I was lucky at all. It was actually quite the opposite. I felt so *unlucky* because of what had happened to me. But in a way, it was so refreshing to be here and starting new again.

Shaking my head, I said, “You're exactly right. Actually, I'm not even sure I could have explained it better myself.”

She didn't respond to that, just turned around and continued making my coffee for me.

While I was waiting, I decided to check my emails to make sure there was nothing I had missed from my lawyer. I opened my mail app, and there were three emails in my inbox. The first two were, in fact, from my lawyer. One was informing me

that the money from the case would be in my account by Monday of next week.

Well, shit, it's actually happening. I definitely didn't expect that. The second one from him was the amount that I owed him. I see what he did. Send the good news first, then immediately follow it up with an invoice. He may be older, but he certainly wasn't dumb.

I quickly typed out a response thanking him for all he had done for me, letting me know about the funds, and informing him that I would submit my payment to him as soon as the money hit my account. We had spoken about it briefly before I practically ran from the courthouse last week, and he had told me he could wait for payment when I got my money from Keith. Thank goodness for that because there is no way I could have paid him without that money.

The third email had an email address I had never seen before. It was strange, a mix of letters and numbers that didn't spell anything specific. Against my better judgment, I decided to open it. When I saw the subject line, I gasped, my heart plummeting to my stomach.

*To: natalie.danner@gmail.com*

*From: yarwrong89@aol.com*

*Subject: Keith's Bitch*

*Good morning Natalie,*

*Hope you're enjoying your time out west. Word travels fast. You've made mistakes. Enjoy your day.*

My hands were trembling as I read the message again. How the hell did someone find out that I'm out west? And *who* the hell is it? I have no friends. I have no family. There is no way that someone would know where I am.

Maybe this was just a freak email as a joke. Keith's friends would definitely do something like this, they are all crazy, just like he was, and stupidly I had never even thought about changing my personal email. It was then that Tallie turned around and brought my coffee to the counter.

"You okay, Natalie? You're awfully pale."

I swallowed hard, "Yea.. yes, I'm fine." My voice was trembling, and I knew that she noticed.

I cleared my throat and said, "Thank you for the coffee. It looks amazing. Do you work every day during the week? This is probably going to be my morning routine. I can't function without coffee," here I am again in another conversation that I'm desperately trying to escape.

She looked at me for a beat and said, "Yep! I'm here during the week and sometimes on the weekends, but not often. There are a few high schoolers that help out on the weekends, and Dolores helps too if I ever need it."

I picked up my coffee and got ready to leave, but something stopped me. I turned back around, and Tallie was

looking at me like she was expecting me to say something else.

“Look, I know we just met, and this is probably really weird, but I was wondering if maybe you would want to get dinner or something sometime? I’m trying really hard not to be a hermit,” I laughed, trying to make a joke, but then instantly regretted that last comment because what the hell possessed me to say that?

Thankfully a laugh bubbled up out of Tallie, and she propped herself up on the counter, cradling her face in her hands.

“I’d love to get dinner sometime. It would be nice to have a friend in town that’s a little closer to my age. Let me write my number down for you. Text me sometime, and we will get together. I’d love a good girls night!”

With that, I started feeling a little giddy, this might actually be the start of a new friendship, and god, that felt amazing because I probably have never had a true friendship since 8th grade.

Tallie wrote her number down, and I sent her a quick text. Then I told her I would see her tomorrow morning, to which she told me she couldn’t wait to hear how my first day at the law office went. I left the coffee shop smiling, thinking that today could only go up from here.

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Today did, in fact, only go up from the morning I had. I arrived at the office and found that Evan had cleaned off the desk and left me a note saying he had ordered all new supplies for me and that they should be here by the end of the week.

He had gotten a brand new computer, and it was waiting for me to set it up and personalize it to my liking. He came in and had bagels for both of us and was very obviously excited to finally have someone else working in the office with him.

We spent the first couple of hours going over procedures and how he handles things within his office, which surprisingly was very straightforward and easy. He was laid back and basically said most mistakes can be fixed, and he wasn't worried about anything. The nerves I was battling early that morning have dissipated, and I was feeling at home and excited to be back in a law office doing what I love.

Evan had asked if I wanted to eat lunch with him so we could get to know each other better. I agreed and was now out grabbing a burger for him and a salad for myself from the Sunrise Cafe because, apparently, their lunch was just as good as their breakfast. Frannie recognized me the minute I walked in and was talking up a storm while I waited for our food.

As she brought it out to me, she made me promise that I would bring Grant back in for breakfast because he needed to be getting out of the house more. Me telling her that I had just met him and didn't think I had that much pull with him was



not a good enough answer for her, and she was hearing none of it.

I thanked her several times while trying to leave, but it seemed to have taken me another ten minutes before I was actually able to get out the door. She is such a sweet woman, but damn, she can talk.

I was making my way back to the office, hands full of food, when I noticed a vehicle sitting on the side of the road with someone in the driver's seat wearing a hat and sunglasses. I wouldn't normally think anything of it, but it was extremely cloudy today, not a bit of sun anywhere at all. Something about it had me looking over my shoulder with nerves, but then again, I think I was still a little uneasy from the weird email I received this morning. I picked up my pace a little and tried to push the nerves out of my mind.

A few blocks away from the office, the same car that was parked near the diner turned the corner and drove down the street beside me. I used all my willpower to keep my eyes on the sidewalk in front of me and not look at the car at all. If, for some reason, this car *was* related to anything to do with the crazy events of my life, I wanted to make it perfectly clear that it was not affecting me at all, even if, on the inside, I was starting to freak out a little bit.

I picked up my pace and was focused so much on getting back inside the office I never even saw it coming when I ran right into a large mass of muscle. I stumbled back, somehow

managing to stay on my feet and keep a hold on all the food I was carrying.

“SHIT. I am so sorry!” I practically yelled at the person I had run into.

“I was not paying attention at all. I am so...,” My words got stuck in my throat when I looked up and saw that it was Grant, who I just practically plowed over.

“You okay there, pretty lady?” His voice was so damn smooth it practically made my knees weak.

“I’m okay. Are you? I’m so sorry,” I could feel a blush creeping up my neck.

“I’m fine, really. I just want to make sure you are. You were practically running and hit me like a ton of bricks!” he chuckled, revealing his dimples and those perfect teeth.

“Sorry, I just got a little spooked over something stupid. I was trying to hurry back to the office so Evan and I could eat lunch. I should have been paying more attention.” I was for sure blushing now, feeling so embarrassed that I had got myself so worked up to the point of not even paying attention to things right in front of me and damn near spilling my entire lunch all over one of the most gorgeous men I have ever seen.

“You got spooked over something? What was it? Is it still around? Maybe I could take care of it.”

He was looking around like he was trying to figure out what had caused me to be freaked out. There was no way I

was telling him the true reason because I am probably just completely overreacting due to my traumas.

“Oh, it was nothing. Don’t worry about it. I am just going to get back to the office. I don’t want the food to be cold.”

I looked up at him only to find him smiling down at me, and I had to quickly avert my eyes because that smile did things to me.

“I was actually headed to the law office. Mind if I walk with you?” he asked, sounding eager just to be able to walk with me.

I just stared back at him, probably looking stupid because there were literally no words coming out of my mouth. He was looking at me, patiently waiting for an answer, then quietly cleared his throat.

*Shit, Nat, you have really gotta get it together.* I blinked a couple times, trying to reel my shit in, and said, “Yeah, absolutely, let’s go.”

Spinning on my heel, I didn’t wait for a response. I had already been gone for at least half an hour. I really needed to get back.

“So, how is your day at the office going?” he had obviously followed me quickly. I looked over at him, and he was smirking at me.

“It’s going great, actually. The office I used to work in was nothing like this. It’s nice to be in an office that appreciates

me.” I was smiling to myself because it was true, I was having a great day so far, and I was looking forward to working again.

“That’s great to hear! Evan is a great guy, and I know he was really needing some extra help around the place too, so I’m sure he is really grateful to have you,” he said, looking over at me.

I shook my head, agreeing with the fact that Evan definitely was happy to have me. As we walked up to the building, Grant hurried in front of me to make sure he could open the door.

“Wow, what a gentleman. Thank you, sir.”

He groaned, “Please do not call me sir. That makes me feel old.”

I started giggling at that comment, “Oh, excuse me, my apologies. Thank you, cowboy. Is that better?” I winked at him, which rewarded me with one of his deep chuckles that I swear I could feel deep in my belly.

“Evan! I have lunch. Sorry it took me so long. Frannie was being really talkative today, and then I ran into Grant on my way back.”

Evan’s face popped around his office doorway, “Thanks, Nat! Grant, you can come on in. It won’t take long. I’ll be out as soon as I’m done with Grant, okay, Nat? Don’t wait for me to eat. You go ahead.”

“Sure thing. Thank you!”

I smiled at my boss then slid my gaze in Grant's direction. He looked over at me and caught me staring at him, I tried to look away quickly, but it was too late. He gave me a smug smile but didn't say anything about my gawking, thankfully, then he turned and walked into Evan's office.

I went to my desk and pulled out my salad, and put it down. I noticed a piece of paper that had been folded and placed under my mouse. Hmm, that's weird. I know that definitely was not there earlier. I picked up the paper and unfolded it. When I turned it over in my hand, my heart stuttered, and I dropped it like it had burnt me. On the paper, scribbled in red ink, it said:

*New job? Interesting, since you still technically work for your old job.*

The coffee I'd been sipping on all morning instantly soured in my stomach. What the fuck is happening. I was starting to worry even more that the car I had seen was, in fact, related to my shit show of a life.

I crumpled the paper in my hand and tossed it in the trash. I leaned my head against the back of my chair and closed my eyes. I could feel the panic seeping in slowly. Feeling like I was at the bottom of a black hole trying to claw my way out, but every imaginary branch or stone I was able to get my hand on would crumble, and there was nothing left to pull me up.

My eyes started to burn, and I knew I needed to pull myself together. I stood up in a rush, almost knocking my chair over, and stumbled down the small hallway that led to the bathroom shutting the door quietly behind me. I turned to look at my reflection. *You are okay. You are here. You are safe.* I whispered the words, trying to give myself something to grasp onto and focus on.

I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly, trying hard to convince myself that I was safe. Keith was behind bars, and he couldn't hurt me now. This was probably just some sick joke he had paid someone to do because he just had to have the last laugh.

I took a wet paper towel and pressed it gently on my face, careful not to rub any of my makeup off. I didn't want to expose the small amounts of yellowing bruises that were left any more than what they already were. I tossed the towel into the trash and took two more deep breaths to complete the three that I always do when life gets to be too difficult. Then I pulled open the door and made my way back to my desk with my chin held high. I needed to channel some inner bad bitch energy because, dammit, I was determined to be one.

Ten

# Natalie



When I got back to my desk, I noticed Evan's door was open, and his food was no longer sitting on my desk. Hmm, Grant must have left while I was in the bathroom. I felt a little disappointed that I didn't get to see him before he left, but I shrugged that thought off quickly and stood up to walk over to Evan's office.

“Hey, you want me to join you?”

He looked up from his computer and smiled.

“Absolutely! We have lots to discuss since we will be spending so much time together. We need to get to know each other better.”

I definitely agreed with that, so I hurried back to my desk and grabbed the rest of my lunch, and went to join him.

“So, do you have any family here? Friends? What keeps you in Pine Valley?” I took a bite of my salad, waiting for his response. He paused for a moment clearing his throat.

“My sister Katie lives in town. She has two kids, Annabella, who’s five, and Ethan. He just turned three. Our parents died in a house fire when we were teenagers. Katie is older than me, so she took on the responsibility of me, an unruly teenage boy who felt lost after losing his parents. I could never repay her for all that she did for me. She is my best friend. Her husband Ryan, he, uh, travels a lot for work. So he isn’t around much. Katie and I spend a lot of time together. Her kids are my world.”

I stared at him, smiling softly. It was clear he was very fond of his family. He loved them dearly and had a great relationship with them. I felt a familiar pang in my chest. Him talking about his family is a stark reminder of what I don’t have. Hating myself for feeling a tinge of jealousy, I tried hard to push the thoughts out of my mind.

“She sounds lovely, and the kids, I bet they adore you so much. There is nothing like having an uncle who is as involved as you.” He nodded his head in agreement.

“I will have to bring them by the office one day, so you can meet them.”

“I would really like that. I don’t have any family. Anywhere, actually, my parents died within a couple months of each other when I was eleven, so I know what it’s like to lose both of your parents and not knowing how to handle it. My grandma raised me after that, but she died two months after I turned eighteen. So...” I paused briefly, “I’ve kind of been doing this life thing for a long time on my own.”



A rush of memories came to mind, all the times I thought I would never make it another day. The times I contemplated if life was even worth living anymore. The days when I had no money and no food, but I did. I did make it. I actually made it much farther than I ever imagined. I woke up each morning and told myself not to let the darkness win. That the little bit of light at the end of my tunnel was my beacon, to keep pushing forward until I was no longer in the eye of the storm. I had a lot to be proud of, and I needed to remember that.

“Wow, Natalie, I’m so sorry to hear that,” Evan said sympathetically.

“It’s okay. You know it’s part of life. Sometimes we just have to deal with that loss much sooner than we would ever anticipate, but it’s up to us to determine how we live our life when the darkness is all-consuming.” I took a deep breath before continuing, “My parents were wonderful, and they taught me a lot in the eleven years I got with them. But it was up to me to live for them, and that’s what I did.”

My smile was watery, trying hard to hold back unshed tears, but now wasn’t the time for emotions. Evan nodded. He understood where I was coming from.

“Well, just so you know, we are a close-knit community. You working here basically means we will be family. If you ever need anything from Katie or me, you just let me know, and we will be there. I am so glad to have you in the office. I think you will be great, and honestly, it seems like it works out

perfectly for the both of us. This job falling into your lap and me being able to find someone great so quickly.”

“I couldn’t agree more. It worked out perfectly. I am looking forward to working with you and getting to know you and Katie and the kids!”

A genuine smile spread on my face, a feeling of excitement washing over me. This is the start of a great job. I just had a good feeling about it.

Eleven

# Natalie



I could feel my phone vibrating under the pillow I was lying on. I squinted my eyes open slightly and checked the time. Hmm...it was 6 am. Who could be trying to contact me this early? My alarm isn't set to go off for another hour, and normally the best sleep I get is in the hour right before I have to be up.

Whoever was texting me this early in the morning better be prepared for my grumpy attitude. I rolled over and tugged the phone out, and brought it up to my face. It unlocked, causing me to squint harder because the screen was way too damn bright. I adjusted the brightness then opened my text messages. I sat up quickly when I saw who the text was from.

*Grant: Good Morning, Nat :) Hope I'm not waking you. I talked to Georgia about the house. She was okay with you renting, but she was hoping to meet you in person. If you have time today to meet her, I could take you to the nursing home. Just let me know.*

Oh my god. She actually said I could rent her home. I didn't think it was going to work out, just like every other thing in my damn life. Excitement was coursing through me, giving me something to look forward to. I typed out my response carefully to Grant, smirking at what I said.

*Nat: Good morning, cowboy... you actually did wake me during my most precious hour of sleep. I will talk to Evan about taking some time to go to the nursing home. I know he will be okay with it. What time would you like to go? I'm thinking you owe me coffee!*

His response came almost immediately, which made me feel slightly giddy. He was obviously waiting on my response.

*Grant: Oh, Nat, I'm so sorry. I had no intentions on waking you up. I guess I was just a little excited for you. Would nine work? I'll bring coffee with me ;)*

He's excited for me? What the hell? Okay, this was a seriously new feeling I had no idea how to handle. Having someone else be excited for me. Instead of putting me down or trying to dim my own excitement. I don't think I have ever had someone else truly excited for me.

With that thought still lingering in my brain, I got up and started getting ready for the day. I knew Evan would be fine with me stepping out of the office for a little bit to get my

living situation figured out, but I wanted to arrive at the office a little early to discuss it with him.

A little over an hour later, I was walking into the office with no coffee since Grant had told me he would bring it. I was a little worried about what he would show up with, though because he never asked what I wanted, and I didn't tell him.

“Good morning Evan!” I called out as I sat my purse down on my desk.

“Natalie? What are you doing here so early? Is everything okay?”

I smiled to myself. It's nice that Evan's first question is if everything is alright when I am just slightly out of my routine that I have already created. I looked into his office and noticed he was already hard at work at his desk. He told me he didn't have a girlfriend, so he spent a lot of time in the office working diligently on all his client's cases. He really was great at what he did.

“Yes, everything is fine. I actually have some good news.” I barely got the words out before his head snapped up, and he was asking me in a rush.

“Good news? What is it?”

“Grant texted me this morning and told me he was able to talk to Georgia about me renting her house. She was okay with it, but she wanted to meet me in person. I came in early to make sure it was okay with you if I went with Grant to the

nursing home around nine this morning. I really don't know how long it will take," I waited for him to respond, which didn't take long at all.

He waved his hand at me, basically dismissing the question.

"You know you don't have to ask me to leave. All you have to do is let me know that you'll be gone for a while. Plus, this is important. You only have a few more nights reserved right?" He raised a brow at me.

I let out a breath I wasn't even aware I had been holding.

"Yes, I am supposed to be out by Sunday. They had said I could rent the room for longer, but I was really hoping I didn't have to do that. I appreciate you being so understanding."

He gave me a smile.

"You're welcome, Natalie. Let me know when you get ready to leave. I'll switch the phones over to the answering service for a while. I have a huge case I'm working on today, and I need to stay as focused as possible."

"I can just switch the phones over before I go. That way, you don't even have to worry about it. And is there anything I can do to help with the case? It's kind of what I'm here for, you know."

I laughed because Evan was still having a hard time sharing work, only because he was not used to having help. I basically had to pry tasks out of his hands the past several weeks just so he would realize that I was here to help.

He exhaled deeply, his forehead creasing a bit.

“I actually do have some stuff I could use your help on. It’s mainly just research on some people and figuring out if these claims are true or false. I will email the information to you and exactly what I need.”

I told him I would get started on it as soon as I got his email, then retreated back to my desk. As I was getting ready to sit down, I noticed a man across the street dressed in a big black trench coat that was just standing on the sidewalk. He was pretty far away, so I couldn’t really tell who he was and if he was staring in this direction or not, but something about him seemed a little strange. It was warm out today so the coat seemed a little excessive.

Thinking that maybe it had something to do with my nerves, as usual, I pushed all the crazy thoughts out of my mind and got to work. A few minutes later, curiosity got the best of me, and I looked up to see if the man was still there. To my surprise, he was. Okay, so maybe it’s a bus stop or something, and the bus just hasn’t come yet. But then I got to thinking some more, and I was certain there were no city buses in this town. So there is no way he could be waiting at a bus stop.

I looked up again after snapping back to reality, and the man was gone. My eyes widened as I searched all around outside through the windows the best I could, but the man was nowhere to be seen. A chill swept over my body, and an uneasy feeling settled in my stomach. Surely this is nothing. It

has to be. Again I was telling myself I needed to get my shit together.

Thirty minutes later I was concentrating hard on the tasks that Evan had sent me. I didn't even hear the front door open.

“Good morning, Nat!” Grant's deep velvety voice rang out through the small office, making me visibly jump.

“Shit, you scared me. I didn't even hear you come in.”

He gave me a million-dollar smile, and I was trying not to melt.

“That's because you were working so hard being so cute with your forehead creased in careful concentration,” winking at me as he sat a cup of coffee down on my desk. “It's mocha iced coffee.”

“Oh, is it? Let me guess. Tallie helped you out with that?” For such a brief moment, he had a slight look of shyness cross over his face, but it was gone as quickly as it came. It was honestly kind of cute that I noticed it. He always seems so sure of himself.

“Well...maybe. I wanted to make sure I got you something you would actually like. Nothing worse than bad coffee.”

He was absolutely right about that. I picked up the cup and smiled at him.

“Well, it's perfect. Thank you very much for bringing it to me. You have slightly redeemed yourself from waking me up



during my most precious hour of sleep.”

He started laughing. I wasn't sure if it was at me or what the hell was funny.

“Your most precious hour of sleep? Care to explain?” his eyebrow was raised, and he was looking at me like I was a little crazy.

“You cannot tell me that the hour before you wake up is not the most precious and best sleep that you get,” I widened my eyes at him, really trying to make my point. It was then that his features changed, and he wasn't able to mask it. He looked sad or maybe withdrawn.

“I wouldn't know. I don't sleep much and am normally up hours before my alarm would ever go off. Are you ready to go?”

Okay, so he's clearly trying to change the subject, I won't push it right now, but we definitely might need to revisit whatever was going on there.

“Yep! Let me just get the phones switched over to the answering service, and I will be ready.”

He smiled softly at me and went to sit down in a chair to wait for me. Something about this situation felt familiar or comfortable in a way that brought warmth to my chest.

I switched the phones over, and before I stood up, I gave myself a moment to look over at Grant and take him in. He was really one of the most beautiful men I have ever seen before.

His jaw was set in a hard line like he was clenching his teeth. He had on a forest green plaid tucked into his wrangler jeans that hugged his legs, and he was wearing his work boots. A cowboy hat hung on his knee. His caramel brown hair was perfectly messed up, like he had styled it that way. Slightly curly and a little long, like maybe he was due for a cut, but it fit him. I moved my eyes back to his face, only to discover he was staring at me. My cheeks flamed with embarrassment, and I quickly stood and grabbed my purse.

“Okay! Ready!” I said in a rush.

Knowing he had caught me gawking had me flustered. All he did was give me a slight smile, then he stood and opened the door for me. As we were walking out, I called out to Evan over my shoulder.

“I’m headed out, Evan. I’ll be back soon!” I knew he wasn’t going to answer me, he was so busy with his case, so I didn’t wait for a response.

We stepped out on the sidewalk as Grant asked,

“Are you comfortable riding in my truck? The nursing home is a few blocks away, figured we could drive.” Grant looked down at me as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

He was asking me...actually asking me if I was okay with something instead of just telling me that we are taking his truck and not giving me an option.

I shook my head, “Yes, I’m okay with that, I’ll follow you.”

We made our way to his truck, and when we arrived, he walked around the front and opened my door, then offered his hand to help me up into it.

What. The. Hell. This man is too good to be true.

“Thank you, you are quite the gentleman,” I giggled, biting my lip as I looked over at him.

The look he gave me was pure fire. His dark brown eyes darkened to a shade of black, and I could have sworn I heard him say, *I’d sure like to bite that lip too*, as he shut the door.

Surely I was just hearing things and making that all up in my head, but before I had the chance to think anymore on it, he was sliding in behind the wheel.

I looked over at him timidly. He slowly raised his hand up and pulled my lip from between my teeth.

“Nat, I’m gonna need you to not do that. Because I am trying really hard to remain a gentleman, but you doing that and giving me that doe-eyed look is making it damn hard.”

I let out a small squeak of surprise and felt the flush creeping up my neck and into my cheeks again.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said quietly.

He swung his head around so quickly to look at me. Then he turned his whole body towards me.

“Nat, please, do not apologize for that. I was simply just saying, if you continue to do it, I am not sure I will be able to control myself.”

It was then that I noticed the large bulge in his pants. Apparently, me biting my lip was doing something to him, noted. I averted my eyes as quickly as I could, not wanting to get caught staring, but it was obvious he had seen me when he said, “No one has ever affected me like this before, Nat. Not one single person.”

I think, at this point, I just have a permanent blush on my face.

Hearing my nickname on his lips warmed me from the inside out. Keith hated my nickname and only ever used it when he was being an ass to me. So hearing someone use it in a way that wasn't meant to be demeaning made me unusually happy.

“Now, are we ready to get going to the nursing home?” he asked, raising a brow.

“Yep! Let's go. I think we need a distraction,” I laughed at him, noticing his grip on the steering wheel had his knuckles turning white.

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As we pulled into the nursing home, I realized I was more nervous than I thought I would be. I absentmindedly started

rubbing my palms against my legs, a nervous habit I had apparently picked up. I could feel Grant looking at me after he parked his truck.

“Are you okay?” His voice was laced with concern.

“Yes, I’m just feeling a little nervous about being here. Talking to someone I don’t know and yeah...um, just nerves.”

He nodded his head in understanding, “Well, I don’t know if it makes you feel any better, but I will be there with you the whole time. It’s going to be great.” There was that big smile of his again. He was doing a really good job of reassuring me.

“Hey..,” he said. I turned to look at him, waiting for him to finish whatever he was going to say. “Would you.. Maybe want to meet my dad?”

I know my face was one of pure shock because that was not even close to what I was expecting him to say.

“I just kind of thought it would be nice for him to meet my new friend. He knows most people in town, so I think he would really enjoy meeting the newbie.”

He was talking really fast now, revealing some nerves.

I was just looking at him, waiting to see how long he was going to continue rambling. I decided to save him. I placed my hand gently on his arm, and he looked up, meeting my eyes.

“I would love nothing more than to meet the man who helped raise you.” I was smiling big now, unable to control it, when I saw the excitement cross his features. This is apparently something he really wanted to do.

“What’s his name? I need to make sure I make a good first impression.”

“Yes, that would probably be a good start. His name is Phillip Bowman. He owns Bowman Ranch and has raised longhorns his whole life. Aside from me, it’s his pride and joy. And before you ask, Mama..” he stopped turning away from me for a brief moment. When he turned back, the sadness was back in his eyes. “Mama was killed by a drunk driver twenty-five years ago. It damn near killed him. So it’s best if we avoid that conversation.”

I nodded my head to show my understanding. He sat there staring at me for a moment longer before saying, “Are you sure you’re ready? You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to, or if we get inside and you change your mind or feel uncomfortable for even a minute, you tell me right away, okay?”

“I’m ready. If I change my mind, I promise to let you know.”

He nodded, a small smile pulling at his lips. Then he slid out of the truck and walked around to my side before I had the chance and opened my door for me.

## Twelve

# Grant



As we were walking into the nursing home, I was feeling extremely nervous. I have never brought a girl to meet Dad, even before all this illness came around. I had never seriously dated someone or even had the desire to have him meet someone I had been seeing. Yet here I am, knowing Natalie for such a short time, and I want nothing more than for her to meet him. I can already imagine the look on his face when we walk into his room. He is going to be shocked and will probably have to pick his jaw up off the floor.

It didn't take long for us to get to his room, not nearly enough time to calm my nerves. I stopped in front of the door and turned to Natalie.

“Are you sure you're ready?”

“Yes, Grant. I'm ready whenever you are.” She must be able to tell that I'm nervous because she reached her hand out and placed it on my bicep clearly trying to comfort me. I covered her hand with mine and gave it a little squeeze, then I turned to the door and pushed it open.

To my surprise, Dad was sitting up in his chair and had the TV on, watching something on ESPN. He immediately started giving me a hard time.

“Damn, Son, back so soon? Now I really am starting to get concerned about my precious ranch.”

It was then that Natalie must have come into view behind me because he immediately stopped talking, and his whole face lit up with something I have never seen before, or at least something I haven't seen in a long time. I can't even place what it was.

“Well, well, well! Who do you have with you?” He said with a huge smile on his face.

I turned slightly so Nat could come all the way into the room. With no hesitation at all, she walked over to Dad and stuck her hand out.

“Hi, Mr. Bowman, I'm Natalie. I just recently moved to town, and Grant has been showing me around and helping me out. Being a great friend.” She turned slightly to look at me when she made the friend comment.

I winced, making a show of it, mainly as a joke to get her laughing, but I wasn't fooling myself. I was hoping like hell that she wasn't going to keep labeling me as only a friend forever.

Then, just as I expected, Dad was staring at her, mouth hanging open, not saying a word. I chuckled.



“Dad, it’s not polite to not acknowledge someone who is introducing themselves to you,” he cleared his throat, obviously realizing what he was doing.

“Right, sorry. But you could imagine my surprise when my Son shows up here unannounced to bring his first ever woman to meet me.”

*Geez, thanks for just outing me like that, Dad. Really appreciate it.* Natalie turned to look at me with wide eyes like she was utterly shocked at the bomb my dad just dropped in the room, I just shrugged, not wanting to discuss it any further.

Then Dad started talking to her.

“Natalie, it’s wonderful to meet you. I am so glad that Grant is actually putting himself out there. But before this goes any further, please do not ever call me Mr. Bowman again. Call me Phil.”

She nodded and looked like she was about to apologize, but Dad cut her off when he continued talking.

“Please, sit down! I want to get to know you. This is a momentous situation here. Where are you from? How did you end up in our tiny town of Montana? Are you looking for a boyfriend?”

“Dad!” I scolded him.

Did he really think that just because he was sick, he could just throw all his manners out the window and ask whatever he wanted? I swear he was acting like a woman talking in a hair salon, looking to spread rumors. Natalie looked in my

direction and waved me off like I was the one being ridiculous here and not my dad.

She turned to him and gave him the most beautiful smile I had ever seen. Wait...was I jealous at the fact that my dad just pulled that smile from her, but I haven't been able to yet? What the hell?

“Grant, why don't you grab us some coffee?” Dad said, looking at me with a please get out of here so I can ask her all the questions I want without you scolding me, look on his face. I sighed heavily, knowing it wasn't even worth trying to argue. I spun on my heel and left the room.

## Thirteen

# Natalie



Grant's dad looked much sicker than I had thought he would, but man, did I like him. He got straight to the point and didn't hesitate on asking the hard questions. I knew he wanted the truth, and honestly, I didn't feel like I needed to hide anything from this man.

So I decided to just lay it all out there, especially now that Grant was out of the room. Chances are Phil would tell him everything I say later, but I'm okay with that. I haven't had a father figure in a long time, and something about Phil was comforting to me.

"Well, Phil, I'm sure you noticed the bruises on my face. Unfortunately, they didn't come from me being clumsy and running into a wall or something. They came from my ex-fiance. He was a real piece of shit. Uh...excuse my language"

Phil waved me off like he couldn't care less that I had said shit. Duh, Nat, he's a rancher. He is probably used to that. I decided to continue but to not go into full detail. If he did decide to tell Grant, I didn't want to share all the gory details.

“Anyway, after my court hearing against my ex, which I won, by the way, I went home, packed my bags, and went straight to the airport. I asked for a one-way ticket to somewhere far away from Tennessee. I landed in West Cascade, but it was way too busy for me, so then I came here with the help of an Uber driver.” Phil leaned forward in his chair, listening intently to every word I was saying like he truly cared about my story.

“Then I ended up at Evan Bradley’s law office. I’m a paralegal, and I was praying I could find a job here because, honestly, this town feels more like home than Bellborough ever did. There is just something about this place that already brings me so much peace.”

Phil was nodding, like he knew exactly how that felt.

“So, while I was at the law office, Grant came in and literally almost knocked me off my feet. Then the next thing I knew, I had been offered a job, and Grant was asking me to go to breakfast with him. I agreed, so we went right then. He was so polite, and I felt more at ease than I have in the last six years of my life.” I smiled, thinking about everything that has happened so far.

“You have raised an amazing son, Phil. Never in my life have I met someone as nice as him. Thank you for teaching him the things you did. I may not know him well yet, but between you and me,” I winked at him just like Grant winked at me, and he started laughing, “I may not really be looking for

a boyfriend, but I like Grant. I'll let you do with that information what you wish."

Phil leaned back in his chair, looking at me like he was processing everything I just said to him. He finally leaned forward again and reached out for my hand. I took his small bony hand in mine and looked up at him.

"You seem like a wonderful woman Natalie," It looked like he was on the verge of tears.

"I hate that someone ever thought the answer was to put their hands on you. No man deserves to live who does that to a woman. I can tell that you are strong. If not, you wouldn't be sitting here in front of me telling part of your story, to someone you just met. But I want you to know that I appreciate the fact that you trusted me enough to share a little of yourself with me," he paused again.

"Now, as for Grant, he is such a selfless man. You can thank me for raising him the way I did, but just like the saying goes, you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink, right? I showed Grant right and wrong, but when it came down to it, it was completely up to him how he wanted to be. I may have shown him the proper way, but the rest is all him."

He had a proud smile on his face now. He clearly loved Grant and could probably sit and talk about him all afternoon. Then he took me by surprise and spoke again.

"He would take care of you, Natalie, protect you. If you let him, he would do that. You would never have to live another

day in fear.”

Was my fear that obvious? Was it written across my face for people to see? Before I could respond, Grant came back into the room but didn't have any coffee with him as Phil had requested.

“Are you two done gossiping yet?” he asked, laughing like he just told the funniest joke in the world.

“Oh, you hush, you're just upset that you didn't get to be a part of the conversation,” his dad said, chuckling as well. He rolled his eyes and looked between the two of us, his eyebrows crinkling together when he noticed his dad's hand was still in mine.

“Alright, Dad, we gotta get going so we can go and speak with Georgia about her little cottage property she's been trying to sell. You remember it?” Grant asked him.

He removed his hand from mine and rubbed his face like he was thinking hard, trying to remember. Then I could have sworn I saw the light bulb turn on above him.

“Oh, yeah! That little cobblestone house on the outskirts of town?”

Grant shook his head, “Yep, that's the one.”

Phil looked at me then and said, “It's a great little house. Tell Georgia that you're a friend of mine. It might help you get a good deal. She stops in here every once and a while to visit after she leaves Frank's room for the day.”

“Dad, you really are becoming quite the gossip ever since moving in here,” Grant said, rolling his eyes. Phil waved him off and looked at me again.

“If you ever want to come back again and talk to me, you do that. It was so nice meeting you, Natalie. If you need anything, you let me know. I may not be able to do much, but there might still be a few strings I could pull.” He winked, well guess that’s where Grant got that from, then he waved to Grant for him to come over to him, and I took that opportunity to step out of the room to give them a moment alone.

## Grant

I walked over to Dad and leaned down to him, and wrapped my arms around him. He pulled me in close and whispered to me.

“That girl has been through hell and back. She needs someone just as bad as you do right now. You take care of her, and you treat her right, Son, and she just might be the one for you.” I inhaled sharply at that comment, not expecting it.

I didn’t know how to respond, so I just gently patted his back and thanked him for being the best father I could ever dream of, and telling him that I loved him, our typical farewell routine.

I turned around and noticed that Natalie had stepped out of the room to give us privacy as we said goodbye to each other.

When I walked out into the hall, she was patting a tissue under her eyes, my heart immediately sank.

“You okay, baby?” I asked gently, not realizing until it was too late that I called her baby. Her eyes met mine, and they looked so sad it made my heart hurt.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Let’s go talk to Georgia now.”

I knew she wasn’t okay, I could tell that just by looking at her face, but I wasn’t going to push it. If she wanted to talk about it, she would.



Fourteen

## Natalie



I was bubbling with excitement as we left the nursing home. Today has gone much better than I could have ever anticipated. I was worried that Georgia was gonna meet me and then change her mind about letting me rent the house. But she agreed and also decided to let me keep all the furniture in the house already. So now I wouldn't have to worry about that either.

As we got into Grant's truck, I was considering asking if he would want to have dinner with me sometime. He shut his door, and I looked over at him, not even realizing I was doing it.

“What did I tell you about biting your lip, Nat?” he spoke quietly.

Then he was reaching up and pulling it from between my teeth again. This time instead of dropping his hand, he slowly caressed my cheek. His rough fingertips gently traced the bruise that was under my right eye. My cheeks started to heat at the contact. That buzz I felt before with him now lighting up my face where his gentle touches moved. I tilted my head

slightly, leaning into his touch more. Trying to let my instincts take over and not let my fears get in the way.

“Would you...,” I sighed when his hand moved down lower now, lightly cupping the side of my neck.

“...want to maybe have dinner sometime?” He smiled at me, revealing those dimples again.

“I would like nothing more than to have dinner with you, but I’m a little disappointed that you didn’t let me ask you out first. I apparently need to do better with my manners.”

I laughed slightly. “It’s okay. If you make a good impression on our first date, maybe I’ll let you ask me on a second.”

“Oh, you’ll let me ask you, huh? I guess I better work hard so I get the chance to do that,” he grinned and started the truck up.

“So if you’re the one asking me on this date, are you going to plan it all, or do you need a little help with that?” He’s trying hard not to laugh, probably because I have no idea where we could even go to dinner because I’m still learning what Pine Valley has to offer.

I was the one who started laughing now because why did I put myself in this situation? I have no idea where the hell to invite him for dinner. God, I feel like such an idiot.

I could hear him chuckling slightly next to me. I wrinkled my nose at him, which only made him laugh more.

“Okay, so clearly, I wasn’t thinking when I asked you that. So do you care to maybe help me out a little?”

Smiling, he faced forward in the truck for a moment like he was contemplating where he should recommend.

“Would you be comfortable maybe venturing out of Pine Valley? The town over has a great steakhouse there...,” he stopped, waiting for me to consider it.

“Um.. how far away is this town?” I was feeling nervous about the whole thing, not because of him but just because old memories were trying to break through.

“It’s only about a twenty-five minute drive from here. If you’re not comfortable with it, then we can find somewhere in town to go, no problem.”

I wanted to be comfortable with it. I really did. And the only way I would be is if I just went for it. I am pretty positive Grant is someone I can trust. He is so different from Keith in so many ways.

So deciding to just go with it, I said in a rush, “It sounds great. We can go to the steakhouse.”

He exhaled heavily like he was holding his breath.

“How does next Saturday sound? That will give you time to get settled into the rental.”

“Pick me up at 7?” I smirked, trying to plan at least a little bit of that night that I was supposed to be planning.

“I’ll be there,” he was winking at me again.

I looked away quickly, trying again to not let it be obvious what this man does to me. This next week and a half is gonna be interesting.

I got back to the office around noon to find Evan still deep in his case. He took a moment to look up at me and ask how the meeting with Georgia went and how Grant was. So I told him the details because I know he really did care. He offered to give me a couple days off next week, so I could get settled into the house, which I reluctantly accepted.

Then I decided when I go to the coffee shop tomorrow, I'm going to talk to Tallie about maybe coming to the house with me when I get the keys. We've been talking every day when I come for coffee, and some of our conversations have even turned into texting for the rest of the day. We had so much in common, so we had a lot to talk about.

Fifteen

## Grant



As I drove back to the ranch, I was replaying the events of today in my head. When I got up this morning, I would have called anyone a fool who tried to say this is how today would have panned out.

I thought about Natalie, and a smile came to my face. This woman has done something to me in such a short amount of time, and I am scared. I truly am. But I have this deep desire to protect her for as long as she will let me.

I turned down the road the ranch was on, and about half a mile up the road, I noticed a vehicle was pulled over to the side. This is not a well-traveled road, and most people who come down it are coming to my ranch, or it's one of the two other people who have property on this road as well.

As I approached, I noticed it was a small SUV. It didn't seem to be broken down or have a flat tire. I started to slow down. I rolled my window down as I came up next to it, slowly rolling to a stop. There was a man in the driver seat, someone I didn't recognize, someone who I've never seen in Pine Valley before.

“You lost, man?” I questioned in a warning tone.

The guy looked at me and said, “Nah, man, just checking out the area, seeing what’s going on.”

With that comment, he rolled his window up, signaling the end of that conversation. I started to pull away but noticed that the man was looking in his side mirror, watching my truck. Something about this didn’t sit right with me.

When I got back to the ranch, I got out and checked that the gate was still intact and had no visible damage. I didn’t notice anything out of place, and I also didn’t notice any tire tracks in the gravel.

I unlocked the manual padlock then hopped back in the truck and hit the remote on my visor to open the gate. I pulled through and stopped, making sure the gate closed fully behind me. Then I got out and put the padlock back into place. Normally when I’m home I don’t add the extra lock, but I decided I wasn’t going to take any chances today.

Several long hours later, I was walking into the house to get myself cleaned up after chores. I took the time to take Clover out for another ride. She was in a playful mood and wanted to run. So we did just that. The feeling of the cool air rushing past us was something I could never put into words. It was like cleansing my soul.

I walked up the old farmhouse stairs, each one creaking with my weight. There were little notches taken out of the

wood from the many years of Dad and I walking up and down them with our boots and spurs still on.

Mama would kill us if she knew we were doing that. I smiled at the thought, I haven't had a woman in my life to scold me since Mama died, and surprisingly, I kinda missed it.

I walked into the bathroom off my master suite and turned the shower on as hot as it would go. I started stripping my clothes off, my body tired and moving slow. When I stepped into the shower, the warmth of the water was like a blanket over my skin, refreshing me.

I tilted my head up and closed my eyes as the water ran over my face. My thoughts went back to Nat, her hazel eyes looking at me wide, her lip caught between her teeth, her not knowing how much she affected me with such small actions.

My cock became heavy between my legs, just thinking of her and how innocent she looked, not knowing what biting her lip was doing to me. I slowly snaked my hand down and gripped my shaft firmly at the base, giving myself one long slow pull, a low groan escaping my throat.

It was at that moment I heard an unusual noise off in the distance. I stopped my movements, trying to strain my ears to see if I could hear the noise again. It was loud enough to be heard over the spray of the shower, so I was now on high alert. Nothing like strange ass noises to ruin a mood real quick.

After a few moments of not hearing anything, I hurried and scrubbed the dirt from chores off my forearms and out of my hair, then stepped out of the shower. Feeling a little

disappointed that I got interrupted. I walked out into the bedroom and grabbed some sweats and a white t-shirt.

I headed downstairs to grab myself a beer when I looked out the kitchen window and noticed the barn door was slightly ajar. I could have sworn I shut it.

I headed out to make sure nothing was amiss. I walked over to the barn and stepped inside, looking around, and everything seemed normal. The animals were content and all minding their business. If something unusual had happened in here, they would be anxious, and I would be able to tell. I stepped out and pulled the door shut then, double-checked the latch this time, before heading back into the house.

I went back in and sat down in Dad's recliner in the living room, placing my beer on the table beside me. Deciding to send a text to Nat, just wanting the opportunity to get to talk to her again.

*Grant: I had fun with you today. Looking forward to our date.*

I hit send and sat my phone down to wait for her response. I looked around the living room at all of the things that remind me of Dad and Mama.

Their recliners both still sat next to each other in the living room. His worn down much more than hers because no one had sat in it in a very long time. The pictures of their wedding



day, the day I was born, the day we got our first longhorns delivered to the ranch and everything in between.

I smiled, remembering the days when we were all three together. Those were the happiest times of my life. I knew soon Dad would be joining Mama, and then I would be here alone.

Was life really gonna be worth it at that point? I tried hard to think of something else, I didn't want to be like that, but I was so worried about the damn unknown of my future.

My phone pinged next to me, the perfect distraction that I needed.

*Nat: :) Thank you for all your help. I appreciate it. What should one wear to this date of ours?*

*Grant: Maybe a little dressy but not too much, and a pair of boots.*

*Nat: well, that sure is helpful...*

*Grant: Well I'm a man I don't do well with outfit planning. But... I want to take you somewhere else after dinner too. If you'll let me.*

Hopefully, she would be okay with me planning something else for the date too. If not, we would just come back home. I

don't want to push her if she isn't comfortable. But deep down, I really hoped she would say yes.

Natalie

I was staring at my phone, contemplating what I should say back to Grant's text. Agreeing to dinner out of town was one thing, but adding another stop to that...was I really ready to do that? Honestly, I don't think so, but how will I ever get there if I don't put myself out there and try?

*Nat: Is this your plan to kidnap me and never return me home?*

I tried lightening the conversation hoping he would know I'm joking.

*Grant: yes, I'm going to kidnap you and keep you at my ranch so no one else can steal you away*

I smiled at that, knowing he could joke with me and I didn't have to worry. But now I had my answer, and I was really looking forward to our date now.

*Nat: You pick me up at 7, and we can go wherever you want. I'll just be along for the ride. How's that?*

*Grant: You won't be disappointed, I promise. If you need help getting settled in your house, let me know.*

He was such a gentleman, and if I had furniture to move, I would most definitely take him up on that offer. But I had like a total of three boxes to move, and I could handle that on my own.

I crawled into bed and put my phone on the nightstand. I was so glad that my days in this motel room were almost over because this bed was so damn uncomfortable and I was ready to be living in a more permanent home.

Sixteen

## Natalie



It's been a week since I went to the nursing home with Grant and it's finally time to move into my new rental. I decided to work a half day at work today so I could come and check out of the motel and get all my stuff moved before it got dark out. Hopefully, Tallie will be able to help me, she had mentioned it a few days ago but now that it was time to ask I wasn't sure if she would want to.

I headed to the coffee shop feeling excited, no more motel sleeping and my own damn house to make it how I want it. I know it will never be like the house I had built with Keith, but at least I will never have to worry about coming home to an angry fiance who would tend to put his hands on me when he couldn't contain his anger.

I shook my head like it would clear the thoughts. I was determined to not let this day be ruined by my past. Keith couldn't do that to me anymore.

I pushed open the door to the coffee shop, the bell overhead ringing, making my presence known. Tallie must have been in the back because there was no one behind the

counter. I walked up to it and tried to peek around the doorway leading to the back.

“Tallie! Are you here? Today is the day!” I called out to her. I heard footsteps and then heard her call back to me,

“It’s moving day, girl!”

She finally came into view and was smiling and giddy.

“I’m so excited for you, Nat! This is gonna be great. Do you need my help? I’m dying to see the inside of that house. I’m sure it’s so cute.”

Okay, maybe this was gonna be easier than I thought, immediately forgetting the thoughts I had of her possibly not wanting to help me.

“Actually, I was gonna ask if maybe you did want to come with me this afternoon to help me. Or basically, just keep me company while I figure out what all I’m going to have to buy.” I smiled at her and laughed a little when I saw her eyes basically twinkling at the opportunity to see in the house.

“Oh hell yes!” she basically shouted at me, which then made me laugh even harder because she was so over the top this morning, and all because she was excited for me. It was a weird feeling having a friend who actually cared for me and not someone who felt they needed to pretend to be my friend because of who their boyfriend or husband was.

“Okay, so I’m gonna work a half day at the office. Then I planned on heading to the house around two once I got all my

shit from the motel. Want to meet me before or after I do that?”

“Just come here when you get done at the office. I’ll close the shop early. We are hardly ever busy on Friday afternoons anyway. Everyone is normally heading to West Cascade for big plans or some shit.”

“Are you sure about that? You really don’t have to close just because of me.” I couldn’t believe she was even offering to do that.

“Girl, I’m sure! Don’t even worry about it. I can’t wait for a girl’s afternoon. Ooh, then we can get burgers for dinner from Wally’s. Talk about a damn good cheeseburger.”

Chuckling, I nodded, “Okay, I do love a good cheeseburger. It sounds like a plan. I’ll come here as soon as I’m done at work.” I turned and left the coffee shop and hurried to the office. It was at that time I realized I didn’t even get my damn coffee because Tallie and I were too worried about me moving. It never crossed my mind.

I plopped down in my desk chair, blowing out a breath. It was gonna be a long morning without my coffee. I swear that shit was so addicting, and I hated trying to function in the mornings without it.

I started sorting through my to-do list for the day, and then I checked my emails. Ever since I got the first weird ass email, I am always a little nervous to open the emails in case

whoever sent that first one decided to send another. It was really starting to fuck with my head. I HAD to get a hold on this.

Luckily there were no emails from the mystery sender. I checked the time and saw that it was after eight, and Evan still wasn't here. Hmm, that's really weird. He is normally here by now. I pulled out my phone to send him a text to make sure everything was okay.

*Nat: You okay?*

I sat my phone down and went back to what I was working on. My research for Evan's case was coming along nicely. I was easily finding the information he needed, and the case was so screwed up.

It was a nasty divorce between the owners of some high-class business in West Cascade. They had four kids, and the wife wanted custody of all of them, but the husband was convinced the mom wasn't fit to have them, something about their bedroom being a revolving door for men she would meet at a sex club.

Some of the claims the husband was making seemed really out there, but my research had uncovered some dirty secrets she was covering up throughout their entire marriage. I cringed at the thought that it could have been me, but I would be in the husband's shoes.

My phone alerted me to a text from Evan, quickly pushing that thought out of my mind.

*Evan: I'm fine. Katie called me early this morning and asked me to help with Annie. Ethan is super sick, so she had to take him to the doctor. I'll be in soon with Annie.*

Well, at least he is okay and not like lying on the side of the road somewhere. Damn Nat, really? What has been wrong with me recently with all these horrible thoughts? Part of me is questioning if I need to see a therapist to get a grip on myself.

But honestly, thinking about having to tell someone about all the horrible details of my life made me sick to my stomach. So I probably wasn't going to be doing that at all.

The office door opened, and a delivery man came in, holding a huge bouquet of beautiful purple flowers.

"I have a delivery for, uh, Natalie." His monotone voice didn't hide the fact that he clearly hated his job.

"Um, yeah... That's me. Are you sure you have the right place though?"

He huffed, "I just go to the address that's provided. It's not my damn fault if they don't give me the right one."

He sat the flowers down on my desk with a thud. Not without giving me a dirty look and staring at me for a beat



longer than he should have. Then he stalked out of the office without another word.

I leaned over and inhaled the scent coming off the bouquet and noticed a card was stuck down inside them. I pulled it out and opened it slowly, wondering if I should be worried. When I saw who it was from, I exhaled loudly and smiled.

*Beautiful Nat,*

*Happy moving day. Can't wait to see you again.*

*-Grant*

My chest warmed, looking at his handwriting on the card. I have never received flowers before, so this was special. I was feeling a weird sensation in my chest, and I tried to ignore it. I decided to text him a thanks so he knows I did, in fact, receive his gift.

*Nat: Thank you SO much for these beautiful flowers. I've never gotten flowers before, so this is a first for me...*

He responded almost immediately. I wasn't expecting him to. I'm pretty sure he is normally at the nursing home with his dad around this time.

*Grant: You've just never had someone that cared enough to send you flowers. I like being the first to do it. Do you need help today?*

I really didn't need his help since Tallie was gonna be joining me, but deep down, I didn't hate the idea of seeing him today. I could just tell him he could stop by later, maybe? I didn't want to seem desperate, either.

*Nat: Tallie is gonna help me get my few boxes. But you can stop by this evening. Around 7:30?*

*Grant: See you then. Also, Dad says hi.*

*Nat: Tell him I said hi! Hope you have a nice visit. See you later*

The front door burst open, and Evan came in looking a little flustered. I stood up and went around my desk to meet Annie.

“Hi!” her voice was so delicate and soft.

“Uncle Evan told me all about you. You look like one of my Barbie dolls.” Her eyes were sparkling as she looked up at me.

“Well, Uncle Evan has told me all about you. You look just like a princess and have a name like one too.”

She started clapping and bouncing on her toes.

“What do you say, Annie? Do you want to sit at my desk and color a little bit?” I knew Evan had a lot to do, and if he had to worry about Annie this morning, he would never get anything done.

“Annie, you be good for Natalie, okay?” he looked at me and said thank you, and turned to go into his office. I giggled a little at the fact that having to pick up Annie this morning clearly has him frazzled. I turned around to discover that Annie had already made herself at home at my desk. I pulled out some paper and got a few highlighters.

“Here, why don’t you draw your mommy a nice picture? I bet she would really love that.”

She smiled up at me, showing off a dimple in only her right cheek. Her golden hair was so curly it was a little unruly. It looked like Evan had maybe tried to style it but obviously had no idea what he was doing. She had deep green eyes and a small button nose. Such an adorable little girl that clearly had a big personality.

An hour later, Evan came out of his office, “Okay, Annie, Mommy is done at the doctor with Ethan, so it’s time for you to go home.”

She groaned, “Noooo, Uncle Evy! I want to stay with my friend Nat.”

She looked up at me with twinkling eyes. Over the past hour, we colored pictures together, played I Spy, talked about princess dresses, and so much more. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t having fun too.

I gently patted her back, “It’s okay, Annie. I’m sure we will see each other again soon. You go home and be a nice princess and help Mommy take care of Ethan, okay?”

She hopped down and came over to hug my leg tightly.

“Thank you, I’ll go be a princess for Mommy.” I smiled big at her. This girl made her way into my heart in such a short amount of time. I couldn’t wait to meet Katie too. If she is anything like Annabella, I know I will get along well with her.

They walked out the door, and as I watched them walk away, I noticed a man standing on the sidewalk across the street again. It looked like the same man that was there the other day too.

Goosebumps broke out all over my skin, and then my heart rate picked up when the man started walking across the street. I hurried over to the front door and locked it. The man picked up his pace a little and was looking toward the office.

I had no damn idea if he could see me through the windows or not. I retreated back and stepped into the hallway. I could easily peek around the door frame and see but still not be in full view of anyone outside.

I was breathing heavily, panic gripping me. Was he going to try to get inside? He made it to the sidewalk in front of our building and stopped. Then looked around, almost like he was checking to see if anyone was around before he walked right up to the door and tried to open it.

I held my breath, hoping like hell the lock would hold. He jiggled the doors hard.

Making me panic even more. Then, like it was totally normal, he turned and started walking down the sidewalk like it was nothing. I was too scared to go to my desk to see if he got in a car or not. So I just kept standing where I was, breathing deeply, trying to stop shaking.

After about ten minutes, I went back out to my desk and started gathering up my belongings. I had a little while longer before I had planned to leave, but I could not sit by myself anymore. I had to get out of here and had to be around someone else. I picked up my purse and noticed Evan had sent me a text.

*Evan: Katie asked me to stay at the house for the rest of the day. Can you close up the office for me?*

*Nat: Sure thing. I'm about to head out now.*

*Evan: Thanks, Nat. See ya Monday.*

I finished closing everything up and grabbed my purse and laptop bag. I left the office in a rush and practically ran to the coffee shop. I had an awful feeling I was being watched, and I was constantly looking over my shoulder.

I made it to the coffee shop in record time. Tallie looked up, and as soon as she saw me, she said, “What the hell happened to you? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Uh...,” I paused. “I’m fine. Evan left early, so I just decided to close up and come here. I forgot to order my damn coffee this morning, so maybe that’s my problem.” I smiled, trying to act normal, but I was sure Tallie knew something was up.

“Girl, I think you need more than coffee. Let me fix you up an actual drink. We can get our girl’s night started early. What do you think?” She waited patiently for my response.

“Okay, BUT only if you have one too. I’m not gonna drink alone.” She laughed and then started mixing some stuff up.

“Yeah, you don’t even have to twist my arm. I’m totally gonna have one too.”

She sat down a cup in front of me, telling me it was an Irish cream coffee and was “fucking delicious.” Her words, not mine.

She then went to flip the sign on the door to closed and came back to where I was sitting on the couch I loved in here. She threw herself down, moving the whole damn thing and making some of my coffee spill over the side.

“Shit, Tal, be easy,” I widened my eyes at her, and she just shrugged.

Leaning her head against the back of the couch, she closed her eyes.

“Why couldn’t you come to Pine Valley sooner? I needed a friend like you for a long ass time.”

I leaned my head back, mirroring her position, “I wish I could have come here so much sooner than I did. Then I would have never met that piece of shit.”

Tallie knew about Keith and what had happened. We talked about it a few nights ago over text. Which seemed to be the easiest way for me to get it all out there and not have to look at her face while she heard the story for the first time. She sent me a text back in all caps, simply stating, “FUCK KEITH COLEMAN,” and it was all she had to say to make me feel better.

A few hours later, and a few too many Irish cream coffees, Tallie and I were making our way to the motel to gather my stuff. We walked down the sidewalk with our arms linked together, helping each other to stay upright, giggling about the most random shit. Like this was something we have done before, and it’s just normal for us.

“So, what do you know about Grant Bowman?” I slurred my words just a little, which threw me into a fit of giggles.

Tallie stopped in her tracks and gasped dramatically.

“Grant Bowman??” She was talking really fucking loud.

“Shh! You’re screaming!” I pulled her in closer to me and kept walking.

“Whoops, I didn’t mean to,” she was laughing now too.

“I’ve known Grant for a long time. We both have grown up in town. He’s fucking hot.” Tallie snorted. She was laughing so hard at herself.

“Yeah. You’re damn right about that.”

She looked over at me, raising a brow, “Why are you asking about him?”

I hesitated. She knows there is something going on. Why else would I be asking?

“Well.... I’ve kind of been talking to him, and we might have a date planned for next Saturday...” I closed my eyes, waiting for her response.

“You’re joking!” Her eyes were huge, like they were about to pop out of her head.

“Uh, nope. Not joking at all.” We finally made it to the motel, and I unlocked the door. We stumbled in, getting out of the cold, laughing again.

“Well damn, Nat! How the hell did you manage to do that? I have never seen him with a woman around town ever. He was always with his dad, and since he’s been...,” she stopped and sighed.

Clearly, Phil Bowman was a man everyone in town loved.

“Well, you know. Anyway, he never comes to town anymore unless he is visiting his dad. So I’m just shocked that he actually wants to go out and do something, ya know?”



I looked at her, letting that information roll around in my head. Has he really never dated someone before? I thought back to the nursing home and meeting his dad. He did say something similar to what Tallie is saying. Why hasn't he dated anyone? It was that thought that stuck with me for the rest of the afternoon.

Tallie and I got all my boxes loaded up in her car, and then went and checked me out of the motel. I turned around and looked at my room one last time before leaving. Taking in a deep breath of fresh air, I smiled as I exhaled, feeling free. I mentally thanked the room for being the beginning of my new life. Then I turned around to get in Tallie's car.

"Ready bitch? Let's get you to your new house!" She was laughing so hard she was nearly bent over the steering wheel. I shook my head as we made our way out of the parking lot. She probably shouldn't be driving, but I guess it's fine since it's only for a couple blocks. But I made sure to not let her drive home later if we were going to continue our fun.

Seventeen

## Grant



I pulled up outside Nat's house and noticed that damn near every light was on. When I got out of my truck, I was putting my hat on when I heard music playing. I smiled to myself. Natalie and Tallie must be having a little party of their own. I knocked on the door and waited.

I could hear "Man! I Feel Like a Woman" playing loudly. I waited and then knocked again, a little louder this time.

Finally, the front door swung open, and Tallie was standing there gawking at me.

"Uh, Hey Tallie... Is Nat here?" She just continued to stare at me, her eyes looking like they were gonna pop out of her head. Before I knew what was happening, she slammed the door in my face.

I waited for a minute to see what the hell she was doing. Then the music suddenly cut off, and I heard faintly from the other side of the door, "Nat! Grant is here! He looks hot as shit too."

Then I heard Nat's sweet voice, "Tal hush! Did you let him in?" It was silent for a moment, and then I heard giggling.

"Shit, no, I slammed the door in his face because I was excited for you." I was laughing to myself when the door swung open again. This time it was Natalie, and she looked so damn cute.

Her hair was in a messy bun on the top of her head, her cheeks were flushed, and she wasn't wearing any makeup because I could clearly see the fading bruises that she had been trying to hide during the day under her eyes.

She had on a small blank tank top that left nothing to the imagination, and it was paired with purple leggings and fuzzy socks.

"Hi. Sorry about her... She forgot her manners at home this morning," she huffed in Tallie's direction.

"You can come in." She opened the door wider, allowing me to step inside. I took my hat off to be polite and noticed that both Nat and Tallie were staring at me, their mouths slightly agape.

"Looks like you girls are having a fun evening," I said as I tilted my head towards the two empty bottles of wine on the table. I raised an eyebrow at Nat smiling, "Celebrating the new house, huh?"

She was blushing. Even though her face was already flushed, I could tell.

“Uh yeah, we were just having a little fun and got a little carried away.”

At that moment, Tallie announced loudly that she was gonna go to the bathroom and then find something to do to give us some privacy. Natalie was clearly feeling embarrassed because she ran her hands down her face, sighing. I was trying to smother my laugh, not wanting her to know I was finding this very amusing.

“It looks like you and Tallie are getting along nicely.” She tucked a piece of hair that had escaped her bun behind her ear, smiling.

“We are. I have like zero friends and no family, so I’m glad I met her.” As soon as she made the comment, her eyes widened at her realization of what she just revealed. I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable, so I didn’t address it. I just kept it simple.

“I’ve known Tallie for a long time. She’s great, and she makes the best damn coffee”

“I heard that!” Tallie hollered from the other room, followed by a fit of giggles. These girls are something else tonight, my goodness.

I took a step forward, not being able to control myself because Nat really did look so beautiful, despite the bruises that raised a lot of questions in my head. She looked up at me as I got closer to her. She was fumbling with the hem of her shirt, cluing me into her nervousness.

I slowly moved my hand up toward her face, waiting a moment to see if she was going to flinch away. When she didn't, I took it as my sign to continue. I gently placed my hand on her cheek and ran my thumb over the bruise under her right eye.

“You look absolutely beautiful,” I said quietly since I was sure we were being eavesdropped on.

She sighed quietly, “I um...might have forgotten that I had invited you over...so I took my makeup off. Thinking that Tal would be the only one seeing me. I'm sorry.”

I inhaled deeply, feeling slightly frustrated only at the fact that she felt like she needed to apologize.

“Don't do that,” I said, looking at her face, which seemed much closer to mine than it was a few moments ago.

“Do...what?” she asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

“Apologize to me. For letting me see you like this.” I brushed my thumb over that bruise again, and she closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, they were slightly watery, like she was holding something back.

I stepped forward again, closing the gap between us this time, and our lips were just a breath away from each other. I stayed perfectly still, allowing her to decide on what would happen next. I've learned enough by now to know that whatever demons she was fighting were caused by a man, and I needed to be very careful with how I handled her.

She looked into my eyes for a split second before she leaned in and softly brushed her lips against mine. I instantly felt a buzz where hers had been, and it took me by surprise. She brushed them against mine again, and this time I leaned into the kiss, being gentle but no longer timid. I felt her small hands settle on my stomach, and she sighed. I slowly parted my lips and ran my tongue along the seam of hers, trying to encourage her to open up and let me explore. Much to my surprise, she did.

I brought my other hand up to cup the other side of her face and started exploring her mouth. It was a gentle kiss, sensual almost, and it was lighting me on fire in ways I had never experienced before. She ran her tongue along mine and let out the tiniest little moan I'd ever heard.

It went straight to my cock, and I was mentally willing myself to behave. She slid her hands up further to my chest as she leaned into me more. I could no longer control it as I felt my cock hardening the more she leaned into me. It was now pressing uncomfortably against my jeans.

I spread my legs slightly as I continued to explore her mouth, she nipped at my lip gently, and I groaned into her mouth. She stepped in between my legs, and at that moment, she brushed against the bulge in my jeans. She moaned quietly again and pressed herself up against me harder this time.

I had to break the kiss, I knew she was tipsy, and I didn't want to seem like I was taking advantage of her. Even though I wanted nothing more than to continue standing here exploring

her mouth. I pulled back gently and looked down into her hazel eyes, they were slightly glossy, and she was smiling up at me contently.

“I kind of wanted to do that as soon as you walked into my house.. I guess the entire bottle of wine I had was giving me a little more confidence than normal.” She giggled and then rested her forehead on my chest.

“I like the confidence your wine gives you. It was very.. Nice”

She swatted me gently on the chest. “Nice? That’s all you have to say, was it was nice?”

I smiled, really liking this new side of her I was getting to see.

“It was way more than nice, but I think the walls have ears, and I want to keep my true thoughts to myself.” I winked at her, which awarded me with another round of sweet laughter from her.

“You’re probably right. How about I show you around the house? I’m pretty sure Tal isn’t gonna stay in hiding much longer.”

I motioned for her to lead the way, “After you, baby.”

Shit, I let that slip again. I needed to do better on not doing that.. Yet. I caught her looking at me out of the corner of her eye. Almost like she was assessing me after what I just said. Then she headed off into the kitchen that was just off the foyer to the left.

We were standing in the kitchen after she showed me around, her face lighting up with every room we went through and all the small details she was clearly excited about. Something told me this house meant a lot more to her than what she was letting on. When the music started back up again in the living room. I looked over at Nat, raising a brow at her.

“Apparently, she is ready to continue partying.” She shook her head at the music, then turned to the fridge, getting out another bottle of wine. As she poured herself a glass, she asked if I wanted anything.

“No, I have to drive all the way back to the ranch tonight. Better safe than sorry. I have a date next weekend that I want to be around for.” Giving her my signature wink, she nodded in agreement.

Tallie waltzed into the room, holding one of the empty bottles using it as a microphone as she belted out a song that I thought was being sung by Kelly Clarkson. I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye and looked over to see that Nat was dancing around in the kitchen, singing the words right along with Tallie.

She looked at me and slowly danced her way over, grabbing my hand. She started tugging on me to dance with her. I laughed and started moving slowly, feeling way out of my element because I was not a dancer, and I sure have never participated in a kitchen dance party.



She raised our joined hands up over her head and turned her back to me, her hips swaying to the music. This is the most at ease I had ever seen her, and it made me really damn happy. Making me want to make sure she could always feel this at ease and not be constantly looking over her shoulder.

The song ended, and they both were laughing loudly at their antics. I pulled Nat to me by our connected hands, her back connecting with my front. I leaned down and whispered in her ear.

“I don’t want to go, but I do need to get back to the farm.”

She turned her head slightly so she could look at me. “Okay,” she whispered back, “I’ll walk you to the door.” She looked at Tallie and said, “I’ll be right back. Grant has to go.”

I looked over to Tallie and smiled, “Nice to see you again, Tallie. You girls have fun tonight. And no driving home!”

Tallie just waved me off, continuing to dance to whatever song came on next. Natalie led me from the room, still grasping my hand. I looked down at our entwined fingers and felt a pang in my chest. But this time, it wasn’t the pang that brought on sadness. It was something else that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

We made it to the door and she spun around. She looked up at me through her lashes and quietly said, “Thank you for coming. And sorry I forgot I invited you.”

I just laughed and shook my head, “It’s okay that you forgot. I’m glad you’re having fun.” I leaned down to brush a

kiss across her cheek. She smiled slightly and leaned into me. “Make sure you lock the door behind me, okay? Goodnight, Nat.”

“Okay, I will. Goodnight Grant.. Thank you.”

With that, I walked out the door and down the steps to my truck. Noticing a car parked on the street across from the house. It was sitting in front of an abandoned house which seemed a little strange. This part of the road ended in a dead end only, leaving Nat’s house and the abandoned one across the street. I couldn’t tell if anyone was inside it or not. I thought for a moment it might be Tallie’s car, but I quickly realized that hers was parked in Nat’s driveway. It’s probably nothing, but just to be extra careful, I send Nat a quick text.

*Grant: Did you lock the door?*

*Nat: Yes, cowboy, I locked the door. Stop worrying and get home safe.*

There she was, calling me cowboy again. It made me smile, but I felt a little better knowing that she did, in fact, lock the door. I started the truck up and headed home.

Natalie

As soon as I closed the door behind Grant, I quickly locked it then ran into the living room where Tallie was waiting on me.

“Girl, you better tell me every damn thing right now!” She yelled at me in excitement.

I tried to hide my smile but knew I was failing.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Tallie groaned and tossed a pillow at my head, which I just barely dodged.

“How long have you known him? How long have you guys been talking to each other? Why didn’t you tell me he was coming over!”

“Tal, slow the hell down. This isn’t an interrogation. First of all, I completely forgot I fucking invited him over, and I was mortified because I had taken my makeup off, and he saw my bruises. But then it was like he was really seeing me for the first time, and the look he was giving me was basically melting my damn panties off, so I kissed him.”

She gasped dramatically. “Give me the details! Was it like the best fucking kiss you’ve ever had or what?”

I flopped back against the couch and sighed, “It was a great fucking kiss. And he obviously liked it too because I could totally feel it if you know what I mean.” I winked playfully at her, and she burst out laughing. Then she said, “I bet he has a huge fucking dick.”

I snorted into my glass of wine because, from what I could tell, it WAS a huge fucking dick.

Eighteen

## Natalie



The rest of the week went by faster than I expected, and there were no strange people standing across the street, no strange letters, and no emails. I was hoping that maybe it was someone just trying to scare the new girl in town. I had stopped worrying by the middle of the week and was kind of laughing at myself for getting so worked up.

Now, it was Friday evening, and I somehow found myself in the local boutique, Boots and Belles. In the dressing room full of clothes while Tallie sat and waited for me to show her every item of clothing I'm trying on. She insisted we come out and get me a new outfit for my date tomorrow. I didn't think it would include me trying on the whole damn store.

"Hurry up! What's taking you so long?" Tal was shouting from the other side of the door.

"I'm coming. Just give me a minute. You gave me the whole damn store. I'm trying to sort through all this shit to find an outfit!" I had a feeling she was rolling her eyes at me, which made me chuckle, loving that we are already so close and I knew her mannerisms.

I pulled on a pair of black faux leather jeans with an oversize black shirt that had a cowl neck. I picked up a belt, probably the only item I did actually pick, that was silver and white, and put it around my waist to make the shirt a little more form-fitting. I saw a pair of tall, knee-high white boots on display that I thought would go perfectly with the outfit. Looking at myself in the mirror, I couldn't help but smile, I actually looked damn good in this outfit, and a small part of me was glad Tallie convinced me to come shopping.

I stepped out of the dressing room to find Tallie with her back turned, looking at a jewelry display. I put my hands on my hips and cleared my throat loud enough for her to hear me. She whipped her head around, and her jaw dropped open.

“Holy shit Nat! You look HOT. Please tell me you're getting that?” I shook my head. “Of course, I'm getting it. You should see my ass in these pants.”

She grimaced, “Yeah yeah, we both know you were blessed in that department. But seriously, girl, Grant is not going to be able to keep his hands off you.”

I blushed at the thought, part of me feeling excited but another part of me being slightly scared. I had courage the other night only because I had drank an entire bottle of wine. Tomorrow I would be completely sober, and I wasn't sure how I would handle it.

Tallie must have noticed that I was no longer mentally in the room with her. Walking over and gently rubbing my back, she said quietly, “You okay?”

“It’s just that.. I’m really nervous for this date. I haven’t been with anyone other than Keith in years. And all the time spent with him was so controlled. He always had me under a microscope picking apart my every move, making sure I acted just the way he wanted. I’m nervous I won’t be able to let go of my fears from what has happened to me.”

She gave me a sympathetic look. “Honey, you will never be able to move on and be happy unless you let go of your fears. You will never be able to experience true happiness if you let the past dictate your future. I know what happened to you is horrible, but you can grow from this. Raise your standards and remember your worth. And go have a damn good time on this date with quite possibly the sweetest man I know.”

My eyes filled with tears, and I was trying to will them away, but I couldn’t. Tallie was speaking the exact words I needed to hear. Exactly what I needed to let go of my fear.

“Thank you” was all I was able to choke out at that moment. I pulled her in for a hug, and she squeezed me tightly.

“You’re amazing, Nat, don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“Okay, enough of this before I become a blubbering mess. Let’s go for a drink.”

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It was Saturday morning, and I had woken up way before my alarm, knowing it was because of my nerves. I got out of bed and made a cup of coffee, then decided to try to relax for a few hours and sat down on my couch with my Kindle. It was my ideal Saturday morning. Coffee, smut books, and my favorite blanket, nothing compares to it.

Only, today I couldn't concentrate on my reading. My mind was wandering far away from here. Thinking back to mine and Keith's first date. How I thought he was the perfect man, he was so sweet and put on such a good show to make me believe he would never do me any harm. What makes Grant different? How will I know that he doesn't have ill intentions like Keith?

I mentally scolded myself because I believed deep down I was making all this up in my head for no reason. Grant was different in so many ways. The red flags I know I ignored with Keith have not even been in the picture with Grant. He is a straightforward take no shit kind of man. I have yet to find an imperfection with him. Yet with Keith, a week after knowing him, we had already argued about the simplest things, but I ignored them. I should have known better.

I took a deep breath and scooted further down into my couch. Closing my eyes for a moment, I allowed myself to think about my past, the things I hated, the way I shouldn't have been treated ever, the fights, the too-rough hands when

grabbing my arms, all the things that should have made me leave. And in that moment, I made a mental promise to never put myself in a position like that again. Just like Tallie said, I know my worth.

It was six-thirty, and I found myself pacing in front of my bed. I was dressed in the outfit Tallie picked out the night before, with the tall white boots that came to my knees. My auburn hair fell down my back in loose waves. I stuck to minimal makeup because, let's face it, he's seen me bare-faced and knows there are bruises there. My lips had a slight gloss to them, pulling the simplified look together. I started fiddling with the hem of my shirt, I couldn't control my nerves, and I wasn't sure why.

I decided to go and have a small glass of wine. A little bit of liquid courage couldn't hurt anyway. I needed it. I sat down at one of the bar stools that surrounded my kitchen island, my glass of blueberry Moscato sitting in front of me. I was fiddling with the stem when I noticed headlights shining in my living room window. I checked the time, and it was only six forty-five.

I stood and moved over to the small window next to my front door peeking out to see if Grant was early. But it wasn't his truck that was in my drive. It was a bigger car, maybe an SUV. I couldn't really tell, and I wasn't about to show myself in a window to get a better view. I watched the vehicle waiting to see what was going to happen. No one got out. I couldn't



see any movement inside it either. Then after five minutes of it just sitting there, the car slowly backed out of my driveway and went on down the road like nothing even happened.

What the fuck? I exhaled, having been holding my breath, then turned around and went straight to my glass of wine and drank the rest in one go. Then I decided one more glass won't hurt. As I was finishing up my second glass, I heard Grant's truck pull up. I smiled to myself, feeling giddy now that this was really happening. As I was placing my glass in the sink, he knocked on the door.

I walked slowly to the foyer, not wanting to seem like I was right there waiting for him to get here. I rubbed my hands down my thighs, then slowly opened the door. I looked up and had to hold my weight up with the door because, hot damn, he looked good.

He was giving me his megawatt smile, proudly displaying those dimples, holding a bouquet of purple tulips. More flowers, twice in a week, this can't be real.

He was wearing a black button-down shirt that was so tight on his biceps it looked as if they could bust through at any moment. He had on dark wash jeans and a black pair of boots. He had on his black cowboy hat, and I could see some of his hair poking out from underneath, curling slightly. This man, all black, was waking up my inner libido and had my core throbbing. Holy shit.

Realizing I hadn't said a word since I opened the door, I quickly moved to the side, "Shit, sorry, come on in."

He chuckled deeply, and it was like a shock wave went down my spine. How can someone's laugh be so fucking hot too? No doubt, I was done for.

He stepped inside and did a slow perusal of my body from head to toe. Feeling like all my nerve endings were on fire. My face was burning with a deep blush.

“You look.. Absolutely breathtaking.” He stepped closer to me to hand the flowers over.

Leaning down, he brushed a soft kiss against my cheek.

I smiled, trying not to ogle him. “Thank you, these are wonderful. Let me just go grab a vase from the kitchen.”

He motioned for me to lead the way, and as I turned to walk away, I felt him following behind me.

Once in the kitchen, I realized my bottle of wine was still sitting on the counter. Well, shit, no hiding that now, I mentally shrugged my shoulders.

“Having a pre-dinner glass of wine, huh?”

I peeked at him over my shoulder, trying to see if he was upset. But instead of anger in his eyes, like I was expecting, there was none. He had a look of contentment on his face, and his eyes were damn near sparkling as he looked back at me.

“Uh.. yeah. Guess I just felt like I needed a little something for my nerves.” I turned back around to continue filling the vase I had gotten from the cabinet with water when I heard his faint footsteps approaching me.

He very slowly came up to my back and slinked his arms around my waist, “Don’t be nervous, baby. One of us has to not be nervous. And sorry, it can’t be me because I’m about to go on a date with the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

He leaned his head into the crook of my neck, and I could feel his breath tickling my neck. My cheeks flushed red hot at that comment, and the throbbing in my core increased. I was such a fucking goner.

“You’re too kind.” I smiled to myself, still having my back turned to him.

I felt his chest rumble, his laughter slightly muffled by my hair, “I’m only speaking the truth. One day you’ll realize it.”

I highly doubt that. I stepped out of his embrace and set the vase with the flowers proudly in the middle of my kitchen island.

“They are perfect.” I murmured more to myself than him, but he must have heard me because he simply said, “Yes, perfect.” But when I looked over at him, he wasn’t looking at the flowers. He was looking right at me.

Nineteen

## Grant



As we were preparing to leave, I asked Nat that she bring a jacket with her in case she got cold on the second half of our date.

I was able to see her digging around in the coat closet from my position in the foyer.

She bent slightly at the waist to grab something off a lower shelf, and when she did, her shirt slid up in the back, and I almost passed out at the sight.

She was wearing an all-black outfit, almost similar to mine. Which made me laugh internally because we accidentally matched colors and didn't even know we were doing it. I didn't dare make the comment to her, though, in case she felt like she should change.

When she bent over, I had a clear view of her ass, which was being practically suffocated in those leather pants she was wearing.

The belt she was wearing around her waist really showed off just how skinny she was, but she truly did look

breathhtaking. The way her long hair hung down her back had my fingers twitching, wanting to run them through it.

She stood and turned to me, “ready to go now?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I went to the door to open it for her when I noticed she was looking around the house almost nervously. Then it seemed like she was trying to look out the window before actually stepping outside like she was looking for someone or something.

She noticed me looking at her and blushed.

“Sorry, just uh.. Making sure everything is okay before we leave,” she mumbled. I’m not sure what was up, but I had a feeling something led her to act like this.

As we made our way outside, she was looking down the street, but there was nothing. No cars, no people, no movement whatsoever. I continued on to my truck and opened the passenger door offering her my hand as she stepped up into it.

“Thank you.” She was being very quiet, and it set me slightly on edge. Did something happen, and she doesn’t want to tell me?

As I walked around the truck, I now found myself looking around, trying to figure out if something seemed unusual. Her actions are concerning. Knowing I won’t be able to ignore it all night, I hopped in the truck and looked over at her.

“Is everything okay? Did something happen before I got here?”

Her head snapped to me, and her eyes were wide like she was utterly shocked that I noticed something was off.

“I’m fine.” it came out clipped. Clearly, it was something she didn’t want to discuss.

Fighting an internal battle on pushing the subject or just letting it be for now. I shrugged my shoulders.

“Well, if there is something you want to talk about, we have a little while, and I’m all ears.” Starting up the truck, I slowly backed out of the drive, leaving it up to her to start a conversation.

I could see that she had started rubbing her hands slowly along her thighs, a nervous habit of hers that I have picked up on. I slowly reached my hand across the center console and placed it on hers to stop the movement.

“Would you like for me to pretend I’m Tallie for a moment?”

“What?” she spluttered, laughing.

“Isn’t that what girls do? Pretend to be someone else so you can practice a conversation or something?”

She was full-on laughing now. “Uh yeah, maybe if we were still in high school.”

“Well, forgive me that I don’t know the rules of what you women do. I just want to be helpful, and you seem really tense.”

“I’m sorry, you’re right. I’m a little on edge, and it’s not because we are going on this date either.”

I waited patiently for her to continue. I wasn’t going to interrupt when it finally seemed like she was gonna open up a little.

“Before you came, a car came to the house and parked in my drive. They sat there for about five minutes. No one got out of the car, and I never did see any movement inside either. Then they just.. Left. Like nothing even happened.” she sighed quietly. “It just kinda freaked me out a little bit, made me nervous that someone was scoping the house out.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. No, no way this was related. That’s exactly where my mind went first. To the damn SUV near the ranch earlier this week. What has happened to her that would make something like this happen? What is she hiding?

“And um..” she continued. I wasn’t expecting more.

“A couple of times now, I have seen a man standing outside the law office across the street. Last Friday, Evan left early, and the man was there, and then he started coming across. I got up and locked the door, and he tried to open it. But when he couldn’t get in, he just left.”

I had a feeling deep inside me that I had never experienced before, and I couldn’t even decipher what it was. I also had a burning desire to protect Natalie at all costs. No matter what.

What do I even say to this? How do I make her feel better when I myself am worried about what's going on? I know very little about her past, aside from what I've been able to determine myself with the clues she has dropped. She has virtually told me nothing. But I wouldn't push her. I want her to open up to me when she is ready.

"Did you tell Evan about it?" I kept my voice level to not clue her into my worries.

"No, I didn't mention it. I don't want him to think he hired a crazy girl who thinks someone is out to get her. I kind of love my job and want to keep it, you know." She was smiling now, trying to lighten the mood.

"Well, I don't think he would think that. But maybe it wouldn't hurt to tell him if it keeps happening."

She agreed to that, which relieved me, if only a little. At least she would talk to him about it, and I wouldn't have to worry as much while she is there. I guess working in her field could attract some crazy people if they don't agree with a case.

Thirty minutes later, we were finally pulling into the restaurant. After the first ten minutes of tense conversation, we were able to move onto lighter subjects, and I realized that talking to her came easy. There were never moments of awkward silence, and I wasn't feeling uncomfortable either.

I got out of the truck and walked around to her side. I noticed that she waited for me to open the door. Probably



knowing that I was going to give her a hard time if she tried to beat me to it.

She stepped out and looked up at the sign. In pink LED lights, it read The Underground.

“The Underground, huh?” she looked over at me curiously. Okay, so maybe the name of this place isn’t the most appealing, but the food makes up for it.

“Well, just don’t pay attention to that. I promise this is not some big plan for me to take you underground and kidnap you.”

“I guess I’ll be the judge of that.” she winked at me, smirking, and then started walking towards the building.

I sauntered up beside her and gently placed my hand on her lower back. She stiffened ever so slightly. If I wasn’t completely tuned into all her movements, I probably would have never noticed.

I moved my hand slightly back, still hovering there but not making any contact with her. I knew she would sense it, but maybe it felt a little better not resting on her.

As we walked inside, I tried to sneak a look at Nat to get her reaction. The inside had all private booths, the ceilings were painted black, and had deep red tapestry hanging from it in all different lengths. Each booth had its own lamp on the end of the table, and there were partitions creating a more private experience.

Her eyes widened, and her mouth hung open slightly as she looked around, taking in our surroundings. This may be considered a steakhouse, but it was the fanciest place around Pine Valley.

I gave the hostess my name, and she took us to our table near the back of the room. I ordered a bottle of their finest wine and then finally was able to look over at Nat.

“Grant.. This is not what I had expected at all when you said we were going to a steakhouse.” She huffed in surprise.

“Well, I wanted only the best for you. And this place is it.” I smiled at her, and it granted me her true smile that she normally holds back.

That smile she is giving me is the Natalie hiding under all this darkness. I was determined to bring that to the forefront of everything.

As the evening went on, we discussed our likes and dislikes, and she told me she didn't have any friends from back home. I wasn't able to get much information out of her about her family other than her saying she has none.

She was obviously used to dodging questions or glossing over them. I could tell she was having a difficult time opening up to me. I kept reminding myself she will when she is ready.

She asked a lot about Mama and Dad. What it was like growing up on the farm. What kinds of things I did now and

how I ran it all by myself. I enjoyed discussing the farm my dad built from the ground up, so it was easy.

I asked her if she would like to come out sometime and see the longhorns, maybe go for a horseback ride. That's what got her attention. The way her eyes lit up at the mention of having horses sent a shock straight to my heart. I had to fight the urge to rub my chest at this unfamiliar feeling I was experiencing.

“Would you really let me come ride one of your horses?”

I smiled at her, loving the excitement, “Of course I would! Our horses love going out into the fields and just running. We have a few trails through some trees, too. The views are beautiful.”

“I used to ride when I was younger. Much younger. My mom and I would go out into my grandpa's field and just ride all day long. My horse's name was Gretel. Something I chose when I was six.” She was smiling to herself, staring at the tablecloth like she was replaying a memory in her mind.

She looked up at me, sadness shining in her eyes. “My parents both died in the same year. I was eleven.”

I inhaled sharply, hoping she didn't notice. I wanted so badly for her to open up to me, so I remained patient and quiet. Placing my hand on the table as an offering to her for comfort.

She reached over and placed her hand gently in mine. A small smile graced her lips.

“My mom went first. It was unexpected, really. She got sick, and no one could figure out what was going on. Then a

few weeks after she developed the first symptoms of her illness, she was just.. Gone. Didn't wake up after going to sleep. I was heartbroken. She was my best friend. I was young and lost." She pulled her hand from mine to wipe a tear from her cheek that had betrayed her and escaped her eye.

"Dad went six months later. He quite literally died of a broken heart. So that just left me and my grandma, of course. Who I lived with until I was eighteen. She died at the age of ninety-four, and I couldn't have asked for a better woman to have raised me in place of my parents."

It almost seems like she was relieved to share all that like she has been bottling up feelings and is just now getting a chance to let them out. To feel.

"I'm sure your parents are so proud of the beautiful, smart, kind woman their daughter turned out to be. And your grandma sure did seem to do a fine job helping you get there. Remember, our families are always in our hearts and minds, even if they are not physically here with us."

Wow, maybe I should listen to my own damn advice because I know what's going to happen when the time comes for Dad. And I am terrified.

"Thank you. That really means a lot to me. Most decisions I make are based on things that remind me of them. The things that I thought they would appreciate and be proud of."

The rest of our dinner went by smoothly. We talked about school and if she wants to continue being a paralegal or if she has other plans. She hesitated when I first asked and then simply said, "I guess time will tell."

An interesting answer, but I knew by now it was her way of deflecting the conversation. Steering it in another direction so she could hide her past.

We were back in the truck now, ready to head to the second part of our date. Natalie has asked me a few times where we are going or for some hints, trying to guess even though she has no idea.

I haven't given anything away, though. I want her to be completely surprised.

Luckily the night sky is clear, and as soon as we are away from the city lights, we will be able to see thousands of stars. The moon is nearly full, lighting up the sky like it's almost dawn. I was feeling giddy as we continued driving.

A half-hour later, we were finally arriving to our next destination. Natalie was basically bouncing around in her seat, dying to know where we ended up. I pulled into a small parking area and shut off the truck.

I shifted in my seat so I could look over at her. She was looking around out the window, trying to figure out where I had taken her.

"Do you trust me?" I said gently, crossing my fingers because I hoped she would let me do what I wanted to do.

She hesitated only slightly before saying, “I’m not sure.. should I trust you?”

“Well, personally, I think you should.”

“Okay, well then, I guess for right now, I do. Unless you make me change my mind.” She crossed her arms, waiting for whatever I was gonna say next.

I reached down and pulled the bandana out of my back pocket. Her eyes immediately widened when she realized what I was about to do.

“Still trust me?” I said quietly.

She stared back at me before nodding her head ever so slightly. I reached over and pushed up my middle console, now turning the cab into a bench seat. I stretched my hand out for her to encourage her to scoot closer to me.

“I promise you won’t have to wear it for long. But I really want it to be a good surprise.”

“You better just hurry up and do it before I change my mind.”

She giggled, trying to mask the slight nervousness in her voice. She had her back turned to me now so she couldn’t see me suppressing my laugh. I gently tied the bandana around her head, successfully covering her eyes.

“Can you see anything?”

“That’s a really dumb question, don’t you think?” She sassied back to me. Showing a slight fiery side to her that I

haven't yet experienced. I liked it though.

“Okay, you're right, dumb question. Come on.” I grabbed her hand and helped her out of the truck, then guided her so she was standing in front of me.

I placed my hands on each of her shoulders and pushed slightly to get her moving. We only had to walk a short distance, but I didn't want to risk her tripping on something, so I held my hands firmly in place.

“How far do we have to go?”

“Not far, thirty yards or so. Don't worry. I won't let you fall.”

She didn't respond to that and just kept walking very slowly. We finally came up on the edge of the lake, and I took a moment to look around before taking the blindfold off her. This place was beautiful, and tonight it looked even more perfect than ever with the moonlight and stars.

I slowly untied the bandana but didn't move it away from her face just yet. Dragging out the element of surprise for just a bit longer.

“I have never come here with anyone but my dad. He took Mama here on their first date. Said it will get any woman to fall at their feet.”

She let out a small laugh making me do the same.

“I'm not trying to get you to fall at my feet, but I thought if Dad thought this was a good first date location, then I wanted to give it a go myself.”

I finally moved the bandana and waited patiently for her reaction.

She gasped, stepping back slightly so her body was now brushing against mine, and put her hands up over her mouth. She looked around at our surroundings slowly. We were standing on the edge of Lake McDonald, the moon and stars reflecting off the water like it was a mirror. The mountains in the back were dark, but you could just make out their shapes.

She turned around and looked at me.

“Grant.. this is.” She stopped and looked over her shoulder before turning back to me. “This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. You’ve really never brought anyone else out here before?”

I shook my head “Not one person. I wanted to do it with someone who I thought would be special.”

She blushed and turned her face away from me, then ever so slowly, she stepped closer to me and wrapped her arms around my waist, and looked up at me. I met her beautiful hazel eyes and held them in my gaze.

“Thank you for dinner. And for this, bringing me here. I love it.”

My heart swelled at that, feeling proud that I was able to pull this off and earn her trust enough to be able to do this. I leaned down slowly, waiting on her reaction. She tilted her head up slightly, giving me the go-ahead that I needed, so I closed the gap and pressed my lips to hers.



Her lips were soft and plump, a stark contrast against my own. I gently laced my fingers through her hair, trying to get us as close as possible. I brushed my tongue along the seam of her lips, encouraging her to open up for me.

When she did, I eagerly slid my tongue inside her mouth, exploring, then she tightened her grip on my waist and deepened the kiss, pressing her body flush with mine. She pulled back slightly her breathing increased.

“Would you like to come back to my house?”

My heart rate instantly picked up at that, and my cock twitched slightly between my legs.

I leaned down and kissed her softly again, pulling away only enough to whisper, “Only if you want me to, baby.”

“I think I’d like that.” She smiled, “But only if you promise to bring me back here again.”

“Oh, you can bet your cute ass I will.”

Her mouth popped open, and she giggled, then a full-body shiver racked through her.

“Come on, let’s get you warmed up.”

She raised an eyebrow at me, and it dawned on me how she took that comment.

“Get your mind out of the gutter there, Nat. I meant literally, like go to the truck and get out of the cool breeze.”

Rolling her eyes, she headed back toward the truck and said over her shoulder.

“Sure ya did. You aren’t fooling anyone, cowboy.”

I picked up the pace trying to catch up to her to pick her up in my arms, but she must have sensed me coming because she let out a little shriek then took off running toward the truck.

I started laughing and shouted out to her, “Just you wait, its on if I catch you. And you better not open that damn door by yourself!”

Knowing I could easily catch her, I only picked up my pace a little to give her the thrill of being chased. Right as she was about to place her hand on the truck’s door handle, I reached her and picked her up, and tossed her over my shoulder.

She let out a squeal of surprise, probably not expecting me to pick her up so easily. Yeah, that’s right, sweetheart, I have farm muscles. Lets not forget that.

“Oh no you don’t!” I’m laughing now as she is flailing her arms dramatically.

“Grant! Put me down before you drop me!”

Stifling another laugh, like that could possibly happen, I just opened the door to the truck, swatted her ass gently, and plopped her down on the seat.

“Let me make something clear, Nat,” I said sternly but keeping my face playful. She captured her plump bottom lip between her teeth, looking up at me, flushed.

“Anytime you try to open the door before me, I will be throwing you over my shoulder no matter where we are. Got

it?”

Not speaking, she just shook her head quickly.

I reached up and plucked her lip out of her teeth, “and quit biting that damn lip before I do.”

Not waiting on her reaction, I shut the door and walked around to my side of the truck, feeling like I was floating after the night we have had, and knowing it wasn't over yet had that unfamiliar pang happening in my chest again.

Twenty

# Natalie



We had just got back to my house after having an out of this fucking world date. We were trying to decide on a movie, Grant wanted something with action, and I wanted something that had romance. He recommended a Marvel movie, which I guess is fine because some of them do have a small amount of romance in them, not nearly as much as I was wanting, needing a happy ending.

But I decided to let him pick one while I stepped into the bathroom to change into my lounging clothes because Grant insisted I get into something comfortable in case I fall asleep.

I took my time, trying to calm my nerves because I had a feeling that Grant is a gentleman during the day, but he may not be one at night. The thought sent sparks through my body, settling between my thighs.

The familiar ache and reminder that it has been a very long time since I was intimate with someone. Even before Keith almost killed me, we hadn't been intimate in close to a year, a huge red flag that I was trying to ignore. It was likely he was

fucking everything that walked while away on his weekly business trips, as he called them.

I looked at my reflection, noticing my cheeks were flushed. I ran some cold water and splashed it on my face trying to relax myself. Why the hell was I so nervous? This could be completely innocent, and I am getting myself all worked up to walk out there and simply watch a movie with this man. Finally gathering up the courage, I opened the bathroom door and walked out into my bedroom.

A small gasp escaped my lips when I saw Grant sprawled across the bed, focusing on whatever it was he was doing on the TV. His hair was messed up slightly from wearing his hat. His beard was well-groomed and covering his square jaw. His left arm was propped up behind his head, the sleeve of his shirt stretching across his muscles, his shoulders were broad, well muscled, probably from the years of ranch work he has under his belt. He had his feet crossed at the ankles, slightly hanging off the bed, showing just how tall he was.

When he realized that I had stepped out of the bathroom, he raised up onto his elbow. He was looking at me expectantly, smiling, showing off those dimples of his.

“Are you planning on coming over here, or are you just gonna stand there and check me out all night?”

I scoffed, “Excuse me, I was not checking you out.”

Laughing, he said, “Okay, baby, whatever you say.”

It was then that it really hit me that he had been calling me baby. I know that he has said it a few times but it hasn't really registered. But now, when we were here in the quiet of my home, it was replaying loudly in my ears.

Why did I like the sound of it rolling off his lips so much? It felt so natural, and that was another reason why I was so scared of all of this. Gathering all the courage I could, I slowly walked over to the bed and climbed onto it next to him.

He positioned himself into a sitting position and draped his arm across the headboard. I leaned slightly into him and tried to relax. I could feel him trying to sit as still as possible. I rubbed my hands against my thighs, he reached his hand over and placed it on top of mine.

I looked up at him and said, "Thank you for today. You did so much for me, and you didn't have to."

Reaching his hand up, he brushed some of my hair out of my face, "I should be thanking you for spending time with me and trusting me."

He leaned forward a little bit, and I took the opportunity and closed the gap between us, kissing him gently. I was feeling nervous again, so I kept it short. Pulling away, I settled into him a little more.

"So I decided on Guardians of the Galaxy. Is that okay with you?" He slowly moved his arm down to rest it behind my head, waiting on me to answer.

“Well, it’s no romantic love story, but it’ll do,” I said playfully. He pressed play on the remote, and we settled into a comfortable silence. I was trying to concentrate on the movie, but my mind was not allowing that to happen.

I kept replaying the events from the past few weeks. It also didn’t help that I was cuddled up next to this giant man that was like a walking wet dream. I couldn’t help but be a little curious what it would be like to have him run his rough hands over my skin.

He started slowly tracing circles on my shoulder that his hand was resting on, making my skin buzz with every brush of his fingers, I shuddered at the feeling, and his hand froze. I took that moment to steal a look at him, only to find him looking at me.

My lips parted, taking in a silent deep breath. He tilted his head towards me slightly and leaned down towards my face. When he got close enough for me to feel the tickle of his breath against my lips, he paused.

He leaned his forehead down and rested it on my own, his breathing picking up just enough for me to notice.

“Nat,” I held my breath, not knowing what he was going to say, “I don’t want to overstep here, and I don’t want to do anything you don’t want me to.”

I blew out the breath that was burning in my lungs and looked into his deep brown eyes, and shook my head in understanding.

He brought his hand up to grip my neck in a gentle caress, “If at any moment you want me to stop you, just say the word, and I will. Don’t be afraid to speak up, okay baby?”

I nodded my head again, my answer getting caught in my throat.

“Answer me, baby. I need to hear you say it.”

“Yes, Grant, if I want to stop, I’ll tell you. Now, kiss me, please.” I was practically begging.

He exhaled like he too was holding his breath, hoping that I would say yes. Then the next thing I know, he was brushing his thick lips against my own, much more fervently than any kiss we’d shared before.

The kiss started out slowly, with brushes across my lips, then my cheek, down to my neck, and back to my lips. The moment his mouth met mine, there was a buzz that was flooding through my body, lighting all my nerves on fire.

His hand moved slowly down to grip my hip in a vice. Then his tongue was sliding across my lips. I parted them, and his tongue entered my mouth. Then before I knew what was happening, he gripped both of my hips and slowly pulled me over top of him.

He gently eased me down to straddle him, his thick cock settling in between my thighs. At the contact, a small moan escaped my lips, the feel of him rubbing against my core sending small shock waves through me.



He squeezed my hips slightly, and I froze. He had somehow managed to squeeze right where one of my lingering bruises remained on my hip bone, I winced a bit at the contact, pissed that my injury was still giving me problems even after this long, but it was one of the deeper injuries that bruised the bone too, so the pain would last longer than others.

He instantly dropped his hands like he had been burnt.

“Did I hurt you?” He said, panic lacing his words.

Before I could stop it, there were tears forming in my eyes. Grant looked up at me in horror, then he quickly picked me up off of him and laid me down on the bed next to him.

“Baby, talk to me. Did I hurt you?”

“No,” I choked out, my voice breaking. *Dammit, Natalie, get it together.*

But it was like my body was betraying me, finally breaking down after weeks of being strong. I felt the tears slowly running down my face, being unable to stop them now.

“Dammit. Baby, what’s wrong? Please, talk to me.”

Grant was really starting to panic now. I needed to decide, and fast, how to approach this. Part of me is screaming, *tell him the truth!* While the other part of me is saying to keep hiding my secrets, it was all about trust now and if I felt confident enough in him to keep my secrets and truly protect me like he said he would.

Taking a deep breath, trying to control myself and make the tears stop, which at this point was seeming a little impossible. I rolled onto my back and slowly slid my shirt up to just under my breasts. I heard Grant gasp loudly, so I knew not to look at him. I didn't want to see his face. As he was looking at what I was showing him, I knew what was there and how bad it still looked.

Across my stomach and ribs, there was a scattering of bruises, most of them in the yellow stage now as they began to fade, one that covered the right side of my rib cage, still slightly dark purple with a yellow outline, that was one of the bone bruises.

Then down below my belly button and stretching across from one hip bone to the other were the worst bone bruises of them all, dark purple, almost black, bruises peppered my skin, one very large bruise on my right hip bone, the one that Grant had squeezed not realizing what was hidden by my clothes.

The doctors weren't sure if these bruises were from being kicked or if Keith had used something to hit me with. It's believed that I had blacked out during the beating since I have no recollection of anything after the first two blows to my head and only remember waking up and finding Keith unconscious from me apparently hitting him with a bat.

I laid on the bed, perfectly still, staring up at the ceiling as tears ran down the side of my face and slid into my ears. I could feel Grant's eyes roaming over my stomach as he was taking in the sight of each bruise. I didn't dare look at him. I

was too scared. The room was silent for a long time, me laying there while Grant stared at me when he finally spoke.

“Who. The. Fuck. Did this to you?” His voice held so much anger I flinched a little, memories rushing back in of the times that Keith became unbearably angry with me. I knew Grant was not aiming his anger at me, but the memories were still so fresh in my mind I couldn’t help it.

A sob racked through my chest at the memories, the pain, and the fact that I was finally feeling seen by a man I had only just met. I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to find some little bit of courage deep inside of me.

Finally, I spoke, my voice no louder than a whisper.

“My fiancé.. well, ex-fiancé. I used to work in his law office. I had intentions of going to law school and becoming a lawyer myself. One day he came into work, and I was talking to one of the guys that worked in the office about school and what his recommendations were. Keith didn’t like the fact that I was talking to another man, and he also didn’t like the idea of me going back to school. He didn’t want me to be more successful than him, always wanted me to have to depend on him.” I still wasn’t able to look at Grant, so I just laid there and continued to speak quietly.

“After work that day, he asked me to pick up dinner on my way home, and he would meet me at the house. When I got home, he was there, waiting for me. All I remember is him punching me. Then he slammed my head into the wall. Everyone thinks I blacked out after that because I don’t

remember anything else until I woke up, and he was unconscious next to me on the floor. From the clues around me, it seemed like I somehow managed to get my hands on a baseball bat, and I knocked him out with it. If it wasn't for that, he probably would have killed me.”

The silence in the room was deafening. I wanted him to say something.. anything. I slowly turned my head to look at him. He was still staring at my bruises, so many emotions flashing in his eyes. The most prominent was anger. When he finally lifted his eyes to meet mine, the anger vanished, and his features softened. Holding my eyes, he reached his hand out slowly.

Keeping his eyes on my face to see my reaction, he gently ran his fingers across the bruises just above my waist, across my hips, then up and across my ribs.

“If I could take this pain from you, I would in a heartbeat. If I could erase the memories of that sick fucker from your brain, I would. No one, I mean no one, deserves to be treated like this. He doesn't realize how badly he fucked up. If you were mine, I would cherish the ground you walked on day and night. I would never lay a finger on you, and any man who threatened to do that to you would regret even coming near you.”

His voice was thick with emotion, making me realize how strongly he felt about my situation. Another round of tears threatened to break free, and of course, Grant didn't miss that.

He opened his arms to me as an invitation for me to lie down with him.

I scooted over to him and laid down in his arms. The moment I was wrapped up against his chest, I couldn't hold it back anymore, and I let the tears flow free. He simply just laid there and held me while I cried.

## Twenty One

# Grant



I had so many thoughts running through my brain. I was not expecting Natalie to drop such a huge bomb on me tonight. When I squeezed her hip earlier, and she winced, I had assumed that I had hurt her.

But in reality, what had happened was worse, so much worse. After telling me the story, she laid in my arms and cried. Like she was shedding the weight of her past and the horrible things she has recently been through.

She has been asleep for an hour now, still wrapped up in my arms. I know that I should get up and leave her to get some rest, but there is something comforting to me to be holding her in my arms. It's just after one in the morning, and my morning ranch chores will be waiting on me no matter what I do.

Slowly I slid my arm out from under her head, trying hard not to wake her up. She stirred a little but stayed asleep. I reached down, grabbed the blanket, put it up over her, and brushed a quick kiss against her cheek. Then as quietly as I could, I slipped out of the room and to the front door. I opened

it quietly and then made sure it locked behind me, especially knowing what I do now. Her safety meant everything to me.

This was not at all how I imagined this day or night would go. With that, I made a mental note to always make sure to keep this woman safe if I had the chance.

I made my way to my truck and headed for the ranch, with a strange feeling in my gut that someone was watching me. Then again, I was tired and probably just imagining things.

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My alarm blaring loudly next to the bed jolted me awake. It took me a moment to get my wits to me. I rubbed my hand across my face trying to wake myself up fully. I looked over to see the clock read six am. I did a double-take, checking that I was reading it correctly.

By the time I got home last night and finally climbed into bed, it was around two in the morning. I had expected to lay awake for a good part of the night like I usually did, but sleep came easily for once, and apparently, it was a deep sleep since I hadn't woken up before the alarm clock, which had not happened in probably five years.

I reached to my bedside table to check my phone for several reasons. I wanted to make sure I hadn't missed any phone calls from the nursing home, which, much to my surprise, I hadn't. But part of me was also hoping to have a

text from Nat. A smile spread across my face when I realized I did have a message from her, and it was sent over an hour ago.. hmm that's strange she was up early.

*Nat: good morning, cowboy ;). Thank you again for our amazing date. And.. Thank you for last night. I am so sorry for the way the evening ended.*

*Grant: Good morning, beautiful. Do not apologize for last night. I still see red thinking about what has happened to you. Holding you in my arms gave me plenty of time to think about all the other ways I would like to touch you.*

I sat there staring at my phone, waiting for her to respond. After about five minutes and no response, I decided I needed to get up and start the day. After dressing, I headed out to the barn. The longhorns were rowdy, probably hungry, because I was feeding them an hour later than usual. I took care of them, then opened the barn up so they could roam into the fields for the day.

I walked out of the barn and headed for the horse stables. As I made my way across the drive, my phone alerted me to a text message.

*Nat: Well.... I'm not really sure I would be able to say no to that. But seriously. Thank you again for everything you've*



*done for me already.*

I wish she would stop thanking me. I was really just doing what was right, and I hate that she doesn't see that.

*Grant: Stop thanking me. I haven't done anything special.*

*Nat: You've already done more for me than any man ever has. That gives me a lot to thank you for.*

A smile spread across my face at that. I stuffed my phone back in my pocket because I know if I don't, I could spend all day standing here texting her with this stupid grin on my face. I was now also trying to figure out a way to see her again, and soon because, damn, I needed this girl like a drought needs rain.

Twenty Two

# Natalie



It was almost ten o'clock in the morning, and I was still in bed. I had woken up hours earlier but decided to stay in bed most of the morning to relax. I couldn't remember the last time I was able to do this, and didn't have to worry about taking care of someone. It was refreshing until it wasn't.

Suddenly there was loud banging on my front door, followed by Tallie's voice.

"Let me innnn bitch!" more banging.

I groaned loudly and put the pillow over my face. I am not prepared for her questioning this morning. I know she is going to want to know every last detail from last night, and I'm not sure I'm ready to unpack it all yet.

"Nat, I'm not going to go away! You might as well open the door."

Nope, I'm not doing it. I do not want to get out of this damn bed.

"I have coffee!" she yelled again, and this time I considered it. Knowing she wouldn't go away and I actually

really want her delicious coffee, I decided to get up and let her in.

I stalked over to the door and pulled it open. She was standing there with a shit-eating grin on her face.

“You are not allowed to cross this threshold until you provide me with the coffee *and* a muffin.”

She thrust a coffee into my hands, and thankfully she produced a bag from the depths of her purse that contained multiple of her amazing cinnamon streusel muffins.

I turned my back on her and headed back to my bed. Today seemed like a good day to have breakfast in bed since I was about to face a series of rapid-fire questions that I wouldn't be able to answer with a simple yes or no.

“Uh.. we are going to your bed? Should I be concerned? Do I need to kick his ass already?” She hurried up next to me to try to get a look at my face.

“Tal, relax. I am fine. I'm just simply having a self-care morning that consists of not doing a damn thing until this afternoon. So now we are gonna drink coffee and eat muffins in my bed while you ask me every question under the sun.”

I gave her an exaggerated sigh and then took a big sip of my coffee, which tasted like something new but was delicious. Then I flopped down on my back on the bed.

“Okay, this is an interesting approach to this day, but whatever you need, girl.” She flopped down next to me on the bed and just stared up at the ceiling.

I wasn't going to speak first. I'm waiting to see how long it takes her nosey ass to start asking everything she wants to know.

Not even a minute later, she rolls over onto her stomach and props her chin in her hands, kicking her feet up behind her showing how giddy she was to get details.

“Sooo, where did he take you for dinner?”

“He took me to The Underground.”

I had barely gotten the words out before she gasped, “Shut the hell up. He did not!”

“Uh, yes.. He did, actually. Then while we were there, he bought their most expensive bottle of wine, which was so freaking good.”

“Girl, you must have him by the balls. That is the fanciest restaurant in a five-hour radius of Pine Valley” I looked over at her to see if she was being serious. When I realized she was, I lifted my head slightly.

“You're serious?”

She nodded enthusiastically, “Yes, Nat, that is like a famous place. It has been featured on TV, in magazines all kinds of shit. I'm talking like high class, my ass will never step foot in there.” She burst out laughing at that comment like she was a freaking comedian.

I laid my head back down and blew a few stray strands of hair out of my face. I looked over at her, and she was eyeing me carefully.

“I don’t understand what I did to deserve to meet him, Tal. It doesn’t seem real.”

“Oh, but it is real, and you are so damn lucky and deserving.” She was swinging her feet back and forth like a kid.

“What did you do after that? Didn’t he have part two to the date after dinner?”

“Yes, after we ate, he took me to Lake McDonald. He told me he had never taken anyone else there before, that he was saving it for someone special, and I basically melted at his feet.”

“Lake McDonald?” she squealed in my ear loudly. I groaned and covered my face with a pillow. “You’re screaming in my ear, ya know.”

“I have a reason to be screaming. He took you to fucking Lake McDonald! And at night? That is like the most beautiful place to ever go. I’d kill to go at night sometime.”

I smiled a little to myself, thinking back to our date. He obviously put so much thought into everything he planned, and I couldn’t help feeling a little giddy. Someone actually put this much effort into a date with me and a friend who was actually losing her shit over it all. This new beginning of mine just keeps getting sweeter and sweeter.

“He ended up coming back to the house after the date. We were gonna watch a movie.”

She cut me off. “Gonna? Which means you.. Didn’t watch a movie?” She wiggled her eyebrows seductively, giggling at the same time.

“Well, if you would have let me finish. We started the movie, and then things got a little hot and heavy. But then I had to go and ruin it when he accidentally squeezed one of my lingering bruises, and then I started fucking crying, Tal.” She sat up quickly and looked over at me.

“I just lost it. Like I couldn’t hold it in for another minute. So I showed him all the bruises and told him what happened before I ended up here.”

She reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it slightly, giving me some comfort. “And how did he take it?”

“See, that’s the thing. He was so angry, but.. Not at me. He was angry for me.” I sighed, thinking back to the look of anger that crossed his face, how it scared me only for a moment before I realized it wasn’t directed at me.

“Then he just held me. I cried for hours, and I must have fallen asleep at some point. I woke up this morning, and he was gone.”

Tallie was looking at me almost sympathetically, but then it was gone quickly because she knows I’m not looking for sympathy.

“Well, do you like him?”

I looked at her like she grew another head and thought to myself, what kind of damn question even is that. But then it

made me pause because it was a question I was asking myself too. And it was kind of scary what I was feeling for this man already.

“Probably more than I should already, and that’s scary as hell.” I looked at her out of the corner of my eye, trying to get her genuine reaction, not the one she thought I wanted to see.

Her eyes widened only slightly before a Cheshire cat grin slowly spread across her face.

“I know you don’t believe it. But you deserve this and so much more. Let’s face it your relationship with Keith has been over far longer than you’re saying. Maybe this is just what you need to do. Let go of your fear and fall, I know Grant will catch you.”

I sighed because I think she might be right. Keith and I had only been cohabitating for the last year of our so-called relationship. It was more like living with a roommate than my fiance. He wasn’t treating me like someone he loved, and I was more of an obligation. So why should I feel guilty about spending time with a man who seemed to actually show interest in me.

“You’re right. I think I need to stop worrying so much. Living in fear. It’s only gonna hold me back.”

She raised her coffee in the air like she was about to make a toast, laughing. I held mine up too.

“To being bad bitches and not letting shit men hold us back.”

I was expecting her to say more, but she didn't. She bumped her cup against mine and took a long drink, trying not to laugh.

“Well, I guess that's one way to say it. You're a woman of many words there, Tal.”

She didn't say anything to that. She just pulled a muffin from the bag, biting into it and getting crumbs all over the bed. I couldn't be mad, though, because it was my idea to come in here in the first place. So I just grabbed a muffin, too, and started eating it, not caring about the mess.



Twenty Three

## Natalie



Later that afternoon, Tallie and I decided after laying in my bed and on my couch for the entire day that we should head into town and grab some dinner because neither of us felt like cooking. We planned on picking up some food from the diner and then heading back to her apartment over top of the coffee shop.

When we walked into the diner, I stopped in my tracks. There at the counter was Grant. He was alone, his hands were wrapped around a cup of coffee and he was staring into it like he was deep in thought. Tallie looked over at me when she realized I had stopped moving and followed my gaze to the counter. When she realized what I was staring at, she turned her head back to me and nodded her head toward him.

“Well, aren’t you gonna go talk to him?”

I knew I should, but I was feeling really nervous after the night we had last night. He saw me when I was most vulnerable and knows the secrets of my past that only a few

people know about. He saw me when I was weak and had nothing left to give. How would he treat me now after it all?

Tallie gave me a little shove and whispered, "I'm gonna order some food and then head back to my apartment. If you need me, you know where to find me. Love you!"

Then she hurried off to the counter before I even had time to protest. That little snake knew what she was doing.

I looked over at Grant again and couldn't help but notice he seemed a little sad from his body language. So, I gathered up the courage and slowly walked over to him.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?"

He started talking before he even looked up, "No, ma'am, you go right ahe-"

Finally looking up, he stopped mid-sentence. His mouth fell slightly open then he motioned to the stool. "Please, sit down. I'd love to have the company of you, beautiful girl."

I blushed slightly and sat down. He leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss to my cheek, and for once, I didn't tense up at all, and he must have noticed because he pulled back only slightly and tilted his head to the side, giving me a seductive smile.

I just returned the look and asked, "You okay? You looked a little lost in thought when I first walked in."

He tried to hide it, but I noticed the way his shoulders slumped slightly at my question.

“I’m okay, but Dad isn’t..” I waited patiently for him to continue. “He can no longer get out of bed and sleeps longer than he is awake. I’m worried we are nearing the end.” He dropped his head down slightly and took a long breath in.

I placed my hand on his thigh, which looked incredibly small against his large muscles. Squeezing it gently, I said, “Is there anything I can do for you, babe?”

He tilted his head slightly so he could peek up at me. He gave me a slight smirk and simply said, “Have dinner with me?” then added, “And don’t stop calling me that. I prefer that over cowboy any day.”

I tossed my head back, laughing. Even when he was having a bad day, he could make jokes to keep me laughing. Where do men like him even come from?

Two hours later, we finally decided it was time to leave the diner. We had enjoyed dinner and multiple cups of coffee plus dessert.

We spilled onto the street from the door laughing about something his dad did several years ago as a prank when he reached down and grabbed my hand, interlacing our fingers. I stopped momentarily and looked down at our hands joined together, and I felt a warmth spread throughout my chest. I looked up at him only to find him looking down at me and

giving me such a genuine smile it made the warmth spread even more.

Before we left the diner, I had invited him over to the house so we could try watching that movie again, but if I was being honest with myself, I wouldn't mind maybe.. Not watching the movie.

I sent Tallie a quick text to let her know what was going on so she wouldn't be blowing me up with text after text demanding to know if I was okay.

*Nat: Had dinner with Grant. He's coming back to the house.  
\*heart-eyed emoji\**

*Tal: HELL YEAH GIRL. get you that massive dick \*eggplant emoji\**

I burst out laughing so hard that I forgot for a moment that Grant was walking beside me as we made our way to his truck.

“What's so funny over there, Nat? Care to share?”

I quickly exited out of the text thread and shoved my phone into the back pocket of my jeans. My face was on fire, and I could seriously kill Tallie right about now.

“Uhh.. oh, nothing, just Tallie being Tallie.. You know how she is.” I tried hard to play it off, but he was definitely not

buying it. He just looked at me and smiled, then winked like he already knew what we had been discussing.

I wished that this damn sidewalk would just open up and swallow me whole right about now. My cheeks were still flaming hot and probably would be until I was alone later. I swear Tallie was going to get it the next time I saw her.

Twenty Four

## Natalie



We pulled into my driveway, and Grant got out of the truck. I waited patiently for him to come around and open my door, learning the hard way not to do it before him. But as he rounded the front, I felt a little playful and opened it right before he could.

As I went to hop down from my seat, he scooped me up and tossed me over his shoulder just like he did the other night on our date. I let out an “oof” as I flew over his shoulder, and he swatted me gently on the ass.

“Didn’t you learn your lesson the other night, baby?” His voice was a damn near growl, sending butterflies throughout my body. So maybe I liked poking the bear a little. I really wanted to see what would happen.

“No, I don’t think I did. Or maybe I didn’t feel like listening.” I bit my bottom lip, waiting for his response. He didn’t speak, but his grip on my thighs tightened, and he seemed to have picked up his pace to get into the house.

He turned around so I was facing the door, but still hanging over his shoulder, so I could get it unlocked. He

clearly wasn't going to let this one go as easily as the other night, and it was sending thrills through my body.

I pushed the door open, and he swung around so quickly that I almost felt dizzy. He marched into the house with purpose, kicking the door shut with his foot and clicking the lock into place. It made me smile that he was always concerned for my safety.

He slipped his boots off, the gentleman in him not allowing him to walk through the house in them. I was curious to see where he would take us, and when I realized he was headed straight for my bedroom, I almost wanted to hold my breath to try to suffocate the nerves.

He walked through the doorway and straight to my bed which I was sure was still covered in crumbs. Not like I knew this would be happening when I was eating in bed earlier. He leaned over slightly, and I went flying down onto the bed.

He spread my legs gently and then slowly kneeled on the bed, crawling up toward me. He said, "So you didn't feel like listening, huh?"

His breath tickled my face as he finally crawled all the way up so we were face to face. I shook my head hard, unable to form any words because this was a new Grant I was seeing, and it was doing things to me that I liked very much.

He leaned down slowly, me being impatient. I leaned up and locked my lips onto his. He let out a low groan that vibrated into my mouth and went straight through me, settling

between my legs. I tried to deepen the kiss, but he pulled back, a serious look on his face which made me very nervous.

He held my gaze and said very quietly, “Do you want to stop?”

I shook my head again, still feeling like I couldn’t form words. He didn’t like that, though, “No baby. You have to use your words. I need to hear you say it for me, please.”

I swallowed hard, trying to find my voice, and finally said, “I don’t want to stop. But if I do, I’ll tell you, okay, babe?”

That must have been a good enough green light for him because, at that moment, he grabbed both of my wrists and pinned them above my head before leaning down and kissing me hard. This was nothing like the kisses we had shared before. This was much, much more. His tongue was exploring my mouth, pulling soft moans out of me. Then he pinned me to the mattress with his hips, and I felt his large erection brush over my core, drawing a long moan from deep in my chest.

He pulled back, breathing hard, looking down at me, and said quietly, “You like that baby?”

I was shaking my head yes when he pulled back slightly, removing some of the pressure, and I tried to protest by lifting my hips, but his weight wouldn’t allow it.

“No, Nat. Words. Use your words. I want to hear you, always.”

“Yes, I like it.” I breathed out and was cut off when he put his weight back on me and captured my lips in another fiery



kiss.

I tugged against his hands, which were still slightly pinning mine to the mattress. He released them quickly and pulled back enough to look at me to ensure I was still okay. I grabbed the hem of his shirt, slowly sliding it up over his torso. He sat up slightly and pulled it the rest of the way off his body in one swoop. Allowing me to see what's hidden under his clothes finally.

My mouth went completely dry when I looked down. Too many muscles to even count, and perfectly tanned, beautiful smooth skin. I reached out and gently slid my index finger down his chest to his belly button. He shuddered slightly, making his muscles flutter. I leaned up and pressed a soft kiss on his chest above his heart, then wrapped my arms around his neck and gently pulled him back down to meet my mouth.

He propped himself on his elbows on either side of my head, trailing kisses along my cheek and down my neck.

“I think you're a bit overdressed for the occasion, don't you agree?”

His mouth came back down to my neck, waiting for my response. I took a moment just reveling in the feel of his lips on my skin, making me shudder slightly as his beard scratched along my neck in the most delicious way. I needed to decide if I was ready to let go.

I slowly moved my hands down to the bottom of my sweatshirt and began to pull it up. He sat up, leaning back on his legs looking down at me. I pulled the sweatshirt over my

head very slowly, taking a deep breath as it covered my face for a split second to try to calm my nerves. Then I discarded it to the side where his shirt lay.

I looked at him, and he was staring at my stomach, where the bruises were. Then his eyes slowly slid up my body, widening slightly when he realized I hadn't been wearing anything under the sweatshirt this whole time.

He scooted down on the bed to position himself between my legs, his face hovering over my lower stomach. He began placing feather-light kisses over my bruises like he was trying to make them disappear with his lips.

He took his time, kissing each bruise that was still visible. If it weren't his lips gently tracing one, it was his fingertips making small circles over each one.

“This will be the last time your body will ever have bruises like this on it. I'll do everything in my power to make sure of that.”

Then before I could react, he had moved up further and gently captured my right nipple between his lips, sucking gently.

I gasped loudly, my back arching off the bed at the unexpected sensation. I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck, gently encouraging him to keep going.

He released it and then trailed kisses across my chest before capturing the left one in his mouth in the same way.

Sucking lightly, then nipping it as he released it from his mouth.

I tugged on him to get him to come back up and kiss me. As soon as he was within reach, I was frantically leaning up to capture his lips with my own. He groaned softly into my mouth as both of his hands moved up, cupping my breast in each one, rolling my nipples between his fingers.

“Mm, baby, your body is perfect.” His voice was muffled as he rested his head in the crook of my neck, his breath tickling my skin.

“You’re not so bad yourself.” I mentally slapped myself. Why the hell did I say that?

His laugh rumbled into my neck, and he sat up to look at me, raising a brow.

“Not so bad, huh?” I closed my eyes and tried to turn my face away from him, feeling slightly embarrassed at my ability to ruin a moment with one dumb comment.

He cupped my chin and held it firmly, then whispered.

“Look at me.”

He commanded when I didn’t open my eyes, still trying to avoid the embarrassment. “Now.”

That one simple word made something snap in me, and my eyes shot open. I looked into his eyes, not daring to back down from him.

“Should I show you just how not bad I am?” he was smirking now, finding entertainment in my obvious embarrassment. I caught my bottom lip between my teeth, and his eyes zeroed in on the movement.

He gently pulled my lip from my teeth and said quietly, “Don’t move. You move, and I’ll stop. Got it?”

I shook my head, and he paused.

“Natalie.” I knew what he wanted.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“I won’t move.” My voice was shaky.

“Good girl.”

Then his mouth moved down my body, stopping over my stomach and brushing kisses along my bruises again.

Then, moving his hands to my hips, he slowly tugged on my pants’ waistband. I lifted my hips to allow him to pull them down further. He peeled them off my legs and discarded them. He returned and settled between my legs, slightly propping himself on his elbows. I blew out a breath, feeling overwhelmed by the intimacy of his actions right now.

“Mm beautiful, baby.” he ran a finger through the wetness pooling between my legs. Then looking up at me, he held my gaze as he put his fingers in his mouth and sucked my arousal off them. His eyes fluttered closed, and he hummed.

I laid down on my back, unable to watch him for fear of coming undone. Next thing I knew, his mouth connected with my pussy, warm and wet.

I groaned loudly, unable to hold it back any longer, reaching my hand down. I gripped his hair lightly as he sucked, licked, and nipped.

I was already teetering on the edge of an orgasm with what his mouth was doing to me. So when he slipped two fingers inside me, I almost screamed at the sensation. Holy shit, it had been a long fucking time since I've been in this position.

I tugged gently on his hair, urging him up.

“Grant,” I said, panting. He looked up at me, his beard wet with my arousal, sporting a smug grin on his lips.

“Come here, please.”

“Oh, no need to beg, baby.” he crawled up my body slowly, placing more kisses across my torso like it was his favorite thing to do. He settled between my legs, and I could feel his dick straining against his jeans. I reached down and started to unbutton his jeans.

He placed his hands over mine to stop me.

“Natalie, you don't have to do that. I'm all about pleasing you, baby.” He kissed me softly, and I smiled against his lips.

“But what if I want to?” I poked my lip out slightly, which made him chuckle.

“If you want to, then I won’t stop you. But I just want to make sure you know that I don’t expect you to.” I bit my lip, feeling like my heart could beat out of my chest.

No man has ever treated me like this, and I still wasn’t used to it. I pushed against his shoulders, making him fall onto his back on the bed. I got up and straddled my legs over his waist. He reached up and brushed a stray strand of hair out of my face, then brought his hands down to rest on my hips, smiling up at me.

Leaning down, I kissed his lips, then trailed a few kisses along his neck. Sliding down his body, I reached down to his jeans and picked up where I had left off, unzipping them and pushing them off his hips slightly, revealing a form-fitting pair of black boxers which left nothing to the imagination. I placed my hand on his erection, rubbing slightly, which rewarded me with a low groan that rumbled up into his throat.

“You just gonna keep teasing me, baby?” He said as he placed his arms behind his head, waiting patiently for my next move. Although I think teasing him might eventually work in my favor, I was not planning on doing it right now, I needed more, and teasing wouldn’t give me more.

I tugged his boxers down, freeing his dick, which was really fucking huge, as I imagined, and wasted no time wrapping my hand around it. Gasping slightly at the fact that my fingers barely closed around it. I stroked it slowly a few times and looked up at Grant’s face, his head was leaned back

against his arms, and his eyes were closed. He looked stupidly fucking hot right now.

“Shit, baby.” he groaned loudly as I stroked him. Then gathering up all the courage I had and finally mentally said, *fuck it*. I leaned down and slowly wrapped my lips around his tip. His hips bucked up slightly as soon as I made contact, making me smile.

“Holy fuck, baby, that feels good.” He spoke quietly, his breathing slowly picking up.

I kept my fist wrapped around his base as I started to move my mouth, licking and sucking gently, twisting my hand with each movement. He slipped his hands into my hair and held my head gently, slowly easing it up and down. Then before I knew it, he pulled me off him and flipped me back onto the bed, looking up at him.

“You needed to stop, or I was gonna come. You’re too good at that.” I smiled triumphantly at that. I was feeling pleased that he was enjoying it that much.

He leaned over the side of the bed, reaching for his pants. I heard him mutter, “Please let there be a fucking condom in my wallet.” I placed my hand over my mouth, trying to stifle my laugh. I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean for me to hear that.

He finally sat back up and held a small foil packet, which excited me but also had me wondering why he was carrying it around. He must have sensed my thought process because he looked at me and shrugged his shoulders.

“I thought maybe I should get some after the other night. You know, just in case.” He placed it between his teeth and ripped the packet open, then reached down and slowly rolled it over his dick. I was watching his every movement, mesmerized by his size.

He grabbed my face in his hands and leaned in to kiss me. Pulling back, he rested his forehead on mine.

“You’re sure?”

My heart melted a little bit, and I had a weird sensation in my belly, thinking that maybe I already liked Grant way more than I should. I linked my fingers together behind his head. Closing my eyes, I whispered,

“Fuck me, please, Grant.”

He groaned loudly. Then the tip of his dick pushed against my pussy, ever so slightly. I widened my legs, knowing his size would be a lot to adjust to. He pushed in further the head all the way inside now, and I let out a low groan. He moved his hips gently, going slow, allowing me time to adjust, but I grew impatient with each small stroke. I tilted my hips slightly, trying to urge him on.

Finally, like his rubber band of control finally snapped, he thrust, breaking through the last of my barrier, and pushed himself all the way inside me.

“Fuckkkk, Grant,” I called out.

“That’s it, baby.” He was sucking gently on my neck, keeping still, allowing me time to adjust before he really



started to move his hips. I could feel the walls of my pussy contracting with each thrust. This was unlike anything I've ever experienced.

He pushed up and was leaning back on his legs, holding my hips up, the position change hitting new areas within me, causing my eyes to flutter closed.

“Open, Nat. Look at me while I fuck you.”

I obeyed his command, opening my eyes and finding his. They were filled with so much intensity it almost sent me over the edge. His thrusts started to become harder, causing my back to arch. I gripped the sheets tightly on either side of me. Then Grant placed his thumb over my clit and started rubbing small circles with every thrust into me.

“Shit, yes, just like that.” I was panting, about to fall over the edge into euphoria.

His hand, which still rested on my hip, gripped me slightly tighter, but I knew he was aware of where to squeeze and where to avoid.

“Come for me, baby.” he rumbled as he thrust into me repeatedly, relentlessly applying more pressure to the circles he drew on my clit.

I couldn't hold back anymore, seeing stars as I screamed out my release that seemed to go on forever.

His thrusts became more erratic then I could feel the telling jerk of his cock inside me as he came along with me. He collapsed on top of me, capturing my lips in a brutal kiss

that was all tongues and clashing. Our bodies were covered in a sheen of sweat, breathing erratically as we came down from this high together.

He pulled out of me slowly, and I winced slightly at the feeling. He didn't miss it, though, saying, "You okay?"

I just smiled up at him blissfully. "I'm fucking better than okay."

He tossed his head back and laughed. Then he stood up and went into the bathroom to dispose of the condom.

I heard the linen closet door in my bathroom open, and then the sink turned on. Thinking he was cleaning himself up, I rolled onto my side and closed my eyes, still coming down from my orgasm high.

I didn't hear his footsteps returning from the bathroom, so when a warm washcloth connected with the skin on my legs, it startled me slightly.

"Roll over, Nat, let me clean you up." Not having the energy to put up a fight, I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes again. He gently used the washcloth to wipe my legs and my core, cleaning me up from our activities. I've never experienced this before, and it was giving me butterflies.

The next thing I knew, I felt the bed dip beside me, and he reached out and pulled me flush against his body.

"So, how was that 'not bad' for you?" He asked me, and I started giggling uncontrollably.

“I stand corrected, cowboy. That was really fucking good.”

He pulled me a little closer, wrapping both arms around me and making me feel like I was wrapped up in a cocoon.

“Thank you for the compliment. Maybe next time I’ll go for great.”

I smiled into his chest at the fact that he was already talking about there being a next time. I liked the sound of that too.

Twenty Five

## Grant



I am a fucking goner.

Nat is wrapped up in my arms and sleeping soundly. And I am lying here wide awake, thinking about how much I care for this woman already.

I didn't plan on ending up here when I came into town today, and I most definitely did not plan on sleeping with her when we ran into each other at the diner. It just kind of happened, but holy shit, am I glad it did.

She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen, and the sex was incredible. I could definitely do that again, many times, actually.

I could tell when I cleaned her up afterward that she had never had anyone do that before. She looked so shocked that I would even do that for her. I want to do that and so much more, the deep desire to take care of this girl is invading all my thoughts. She deserves the fucking world, and I would love to give it to her.

I glanced out the window and noticed the sun was starting to set. Sighing, I knew I was going to have to wake Nat up to let her know I needed to get back to the ranch to do night chores and get all the animals put up.

I rolled onto my side and propped my head up on my hand, allowing myself a moment to admire her beauty. I reached up and gently brushed her hair from her face. My touch caused her to stir a little, she slowly opened her eyes blinking a few times before she gave me a sleepy smile.

“Hi.” Her voice was quiet, blanketed with sleep still.

“Hi.” I smiled back at her.

“I didn’t want to wake you, but I need to get back to the ranch to get chores done.” She nodded her head, but not without giving me a tiny pout before she spoke. “Maybe I can come help you with chores someday.”

“I think I’d like that, but not tonight. You have work in the morning remember?”

She huffed and rolled her eyes at me, “You trying to say I have a curfew?” I laughed at that. “No, I’m just saying that my chores aren’t easy and I don’t want you to be tired.”

“Okay fine. You’re right I don’t want to be tired.” She sat up in the bed and reached for her clothes. I followed behind and got myself dressed then I walked around the bed and wrapped my arms around her waist from behind.

“Will you have lunch with me this week?” I asked with my nose buried in her hair inhaling her scent. She tilted her head to look up at me, “I’d love to.”

She gave me a sweet smile before turning in my arms, “You just let me know when and I’ll be there, okay babe?”

“Perfect.” I placed a kiss on her cheek then released her from my arms. She reached down and linked our fingers together and we headed for the front door. Stopping in the foyer, she turned and looked at me. “Thank you for spending time with me, you made my evening much better,” I told her. She just shrugged her shoulders like it was no big deal before saying, “I like spending time with you, I’m glad we ran into each other.”

“Me too.” I placed a gentle kiss on her lips and said, “I’ll see you soon, Nat.”

“Bye Grant.”

I stepped out the door and waited until I heard the lock click before making my way to my truck.

Twenty Six

# Natalie



Grant and I had just finished up lunch on Friday afternoon. We had planned to get together sooner, but Phil was having a rough week so Grant spent most of his time at the nursing home.

Before we left for lunch Evan told me to take the rest of the afternoon off because he was leaving early to go help Katie with the kids. So now we were on our way back to my house for Grant to drop me off for the night. I could tell he was exhausted mentally and physically from the week and I was wishing there was something I could do to help him.

We pulled up outside the house and he shut the truck off and got out to walk around and open my door for me. I hopped down and he reached for my hand as he walked me up to the door. I wanted so badly to ask him to come in for awhile but I didn't for fear of him rejecting the offer, he probably wanted to be alone right now after the awful week he's had.

I unlocked the door and turned to face him giving him the best smile I could. "Thank you for lunch, I've missed you this

week.” He gripped the back of his neck, not meeting my eyes. “I’ve missed you too, I’m sorry it’s been a hard week.”

I placed my hands on his chest and stepped in closer to him hoping he would look at me. He finally met my eyes, “Do not, apologize for anything. I understand it’s been a difficult week. I hope you know I’m here for you.” He smirked at me slightly for only a second then he gave me a quick kiss before he started backing up toward his truck. “Don’t forget to lock the door.”

I laughed quietly, as usual worrying about me. I stepped inside and closed the door flicking the lock into place before walking into the bedroom and laying down on the bed. Sighing I threw my arms over my face and closed my eyes, wishing I would have at least asked if he wanted to come in.



## Twenty Seven

# Grant



I was sitting in my truck about to start it when I heard a strange noise coming from the house across the street. I sat there for a moment and listened, trying to figure out what the hell it was. It happens again. It's a muffled banging sound. I looked out my window and noticed a car parked across the street and someone standing up by the front of the abandoned house that's over there.

For a moment, I just watch them, not really sure what they are doing. Then I notice they have a hammer, and it looks like they might be nailing something to the house.

I continued watching them. They walked around to the back of the house, then reappeared on the other side of the house. I could tell now it was a man. I could see enough to know it was not someone I recognized from around town. He stopped and looked around the house, then looked directly at Nat's house least. I froze, my windows are tinted but I didn't want him to see me watching. He stood there for a moment, tilted his head slightly as he looked at her house, then headed for his vehicle.

At that moment, I put the pieces together and recognized the vehicle as the same one that I saw on my road a few weeks ago. I ground my teeth together at the realization, knowing deep down that this shit was somehow related and the fact that Nat could possibly be in danger.

After the man drove away, I just sat there, like I was stuck, not knowing what to do with this fucking information I've just stumbled across.

I looked back over to the house and strained to try to see what he was nailing to the house, but I didn't see anything unusual. Trying to decide what to do next, I slowly exited my truck and walked back to Natalie's door. I blew out a breath and knocked loudly.

I was about to knock again when the door opened a crack, I could see one of Natalie's eyes as she peeked out at me. I chuckled a little, thinking about how this woman can turn my day around with the simplest actions. When she realized it was me she opened the door all the way, she had already put her hair into a bun on top of her head. "Hi." Her voice was quiet, I could tell she was unsure why I was standing here. Deciding now was as good a time as any I said, "Would you, um," I hesitated slightly, fearing her rejection to this question.

"Want to come back to my house and stay tonight?"

Her eyes widened slightly before she was able to mask it. My breathing started to increase slightly. I was asking her to come back to my house with me tonight because I felt so uneasy about the man I saw. I couldn't shake the feeling that

she was possibly in danger, and I needed to make sure she was safe.

“You.. want me to come stay with you?” She spoke softly, like she wasn’t sure this was actually happening. I nodded my head, not speaking.

“Um, okay, yeah. I think I’d like that.”

I blew out a breath relaxing slightly, knowing she won’t be staying here alone tonight. I knew I would need to tell her about what I saw, just not right now.

A little over an hour later, we were in my truck heading to the farm. Nat was bubbling with excitement, my mood had improved just being in her presence but my stomach was twisted up in a ball of nerves.

What would she think of my home? The house I grew up in that holds all of my memories, the few with Mama and the many years of memories with Dad. And the farm that my dad grew to what it is now, what would she think of it? Would it be something she would want to involve herself with? I took a deep breath, trying to slow my racing thoughts and thinking about a future with this girl. I’m getting way ahead of myself.

I looked over at her out of the corner of my eye, trying to be discreet. She looked so small in my truck. She had kicked off her shoes and had pulled her feet up into the seat. Her hair was piled on the top of her head loosely, and her face was bare,

showing off how truly beautiful she was. She was looking out the window taking in the views as we drove out of town toward the farm.

I reached over and placed my hand on her thigh, which startled her slightly, cursing under my breath.

“Sorry, baby, didn’t mean to do that.” She gave me a sweet smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“It’s okay. I’m still just trying to get used to this, you know?”

Shaking my head, I squeezed her thigh slightly. Then I looked in the rearview mirror to confirm that no one was following us out of town. Overkill, maybe, but I refused to take any chances.

## Twenty Eight

# Grant



Finally, we pulled up to the gate outside the farm. I pulled my truck in the drive and put it in park, preparing to get out and open it up. Pausing, I looked over at Nat, “This isn’t a perfect place. It’s an old farmhouse with animals roaming all over the property. I’ve lived here my whole life and..”

She cut me off. “Grant, don’t do that.”

I looked at her, feeling confused. “Um,” I swallowed hard, “do what?”

“Talk about this place like it isn’t much. This is your life, and I can’t wait to see it. Everything you and your dad have built, I’m sure, is nothing short of amazing.”

I stared at her, not really knowing how to respond to that because I was so damn nervous, but hearing her say that did calm my nerves slightly. I gave her a small nod, then hopped out of the truck and walked over to the gate. Keeping my guard up, I checked out our surroundings to make sure nothing was out of place. At first glance, everything seemed fine.

I walked up to the gate and reached for the lock. If I didn't look at this lock multiple times a day every day, I would have never noticed it. But I did, the small knicks around the top of the lock like someone had tried to break it loose but was unsuccessful.

I tightened my fist, feeling pissed off that this shit kept happening and wondering what the fuck to do. I continued unlocking the gate and opening it, the whole time scanning the area, seeing nothing. I jogged back to the truck, Nat, of course, had no idea what was going on, and I intended to keep it that way for a little longer. I pulled the truck through and quickly got out and shut and locked the gate back.

From the road, you can't see the house, thankfully. Giving us a little sense of privacy. When I got back in the truck, Natalie was in her seat facing me.

I took a deep breath and then looked at her. "You sure you want to do this?"

She giggled slightly. "Should I back out? Should I be worried about what's gonna happen to me when you get me up to the house?" she was smiling, so I knew she was joking. Well, two can play that game.

"Oh no, baby, you shouldn't be worried about what's gonna happen to you because I can promise you're gonna love every fucking bit of it." I winked, then revved the engine and sped up the drive.

She fell back into her seat, full-on laughing now, which elicited a deep chuckle from me. It was damn near impossible

not to laugh when she was. It was so infectious. I slowed the truck as we came up over the hill, and the rolling fields and barns and my house sitting in the middle of it all came into view.

Natalie gasped when she saw everything in front of her. Mother nature really helped me out this evening as the sun was beginning to set, casting an orange glow over everything, making it look like a scene out of a painting.

The longhorns were in the pasture grazing, Dad's horse was in her outdoor pen looking up towards the truck, and the few chickens we still had roamed through the front yard. The swing on the far right side of the porch moved slightly with the wind. Some of the blue paint on the shutters that framed each window was chipping slightly.

It's been a long time since I actually slowed down enough to look out over our property like this and take in its beauty. I was damn proud of this place. I smiled to myself, making a mental note to do this more often.

“Is this really all yours?”

Hearing her voice brought me back to reality. She was looking out towards the barn, her mouth was hanging open, and she looked cute and innocent. I felt the pang in my chest again, the unfamiliar feeling that keeps coming back.

“Uh.. yeah. It's all mine. Well, ours, mine, and Dad's, I mean.” I was rambling, my nerves getting the best of me. “We have almost two hundred acres. The animals are able to roam most of it as they please.”

“This is beautiful. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. I can’t wait to see the rest.”

She was bouncing in her seat now, and I had a permanent smile on my face. I drove the rest of the way up the drive and parked the truck in its usual spot outside the house. I got out and went around to open her door. She stepped out and looked up at me.

“Thank you.. For everything.”

I shook my head, stopping her, reaching up. I cupped her face in my hands, rubbing my thumb across her lower lip, just taking her in. I leaned down and pressed my lips against hers gently.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and slid her fingers in my hair, pulling me in closer to her. I backed her up until we met the side of my truck. I pressed into her, and she moaned into my mouth, waking up my cock with just that one little noise. I lifted her up, and she wrapped her legs around me, not breaking our kiss. She tugged my hair slightly, and I groaned.

I broke my lips free from hers and pressed my forehead to hers. “You know, as much as I’m enjoying this, I’d really like to take you inside.”

She tossed her head back and laughed, “I think I’d like that.” She kissed me softly and went to put her legs down to stand, but I kept my grip firmly on her thighs and just turned around and walked toward the house. She was still laughing, “Grant, what on earth are you doing?”



“What’s it look like I’m doing? I’m taking you in the house.” I brushed my lips along her neck as I walked up the steps to the porch. Her legs tightened around me slightly, not much but enough for me to notice.

I opened the door and stepped in, walking into the living room. This time when she put her legs down to stand up, I let her. She turned around, taking in the room. I stepped up behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist. She leaned back into me and sighed.

I took this moment to look around the house too. To take in all the things I overlook daily because I’m just going through the motions.

The wood floors throughout the house are scuffed from many years of work and wear across them. Mama’s chair is sitting next to the fireplace, with her books still on the shelf in the corner. An end table sits between the two chairs that Dad handmade many years ago. My school pictures are still hanging on the walls, surrounded by the few family photos we have. A photo of me at my first cattle show sits in the middle of the mantel.

Dad’s work boots and his going-out boots, as he calls them still sitting next to the door. The living room doesn’t have an overhead light, just two small lamps that sit in the corners of the room. Just being in here brings me comfort. Reminds me of what life used to be. When these walls were filled with happiness and laughter before Mom, then after years of sorrow, Dad and I made our own new kind of happiness. Now,

it just feels empty, suffocating sometimes, when I'm here alone.

Suddenly, I heard Natalie sniffing softly. I gently spun her around to face me. My worry was clearly written all over my face. I gently brushed a tear from under her eye.

"I'm sorry.." she sniffed again, "it's just this place. It's so homey and full of love. I've never experienced this before in my life. Just being in here gives me glimpses of what your life is like."

I smiled at that, the fact that she wasn't judging me at all. But it also hurts me to know that she never got to experience something like this. To know what it's like to be loved unconditionally. Then suddenly, my brain was flooding with thoughts. That I could do that for her, show her what it's like. I shook my head slightly, trying to shake those thoughts away for now.

"I have to go out and finish the chores for the evening, make sure all the animals get put up. You can make yourself at home. Nothing in here is off-limits. It should only take me about an hour or so."

She was looking at me with her head tilted slightly to the side. "Can I join you instead? I'd like to see the cowboy himself at work."

Chuckling at the nickname she has given me, I simply said, "Sure, I'll put you to work too."

I walked into the mudroom, as we call it, off the kitchen. It's where all my work attire is, shoes, jackets, coveralls. Kind of like a work closet. I put my work boots on before walking back out to the living room to find her looking at our family photos.

She turned around when she heard my footsteps, the creaking of the floor giving me away.

“Your mother was beautiful.”

I looked over at the photo, “She absolutely was. Her soul was beautiful too. I wish I had more time with her.”

Not wanting to go any further down that road, I held out my hand to Nat.

“Okay, let's go do these chores.”

Giving me a mega smile, she actually seemed genuinely excited to be helping me.

Twenty Nine

## Natalie



Grant and I were making our way outside to do his evening chores. I was bubbling with excitement to see him do his work. When we got to the barn, he grabbed a bucket of feed, and all the animals started making their way over to him. Clearly used to his routine, they knew what time it was.

I helped where I could, feeding the chickens, petting the horses, and admiring Grant as he worked. His muscles rippled with every movement and straining when he picked up large bales of hay. He caught me staring a few times, which made me blush and look away quickly each time as he laughed softly to himself.

I had sat down on a large pile of straw, just enjoying watching him work, when he finally turned around, brushing his hands off on his pants. He slowly walked over to me, a rather seductive look plastered on his face.

I leaned back slightly as he neared. Looking down at me, he spoke quietly.

“You know, I think I could get used to you supervising my farm chores all the time. It gives me something to look

forward to.”

He then kneeled down so he was between my legs. He leaned forward and kissed me softly. I spread my legs slightly wider, hoping he would move in closer to me. He got the hint as he brought our bodies flush together. He gripped my hips and pulled me forward, my core meeting his growing erection. I gasped, and he caught the noise with his lips.

“As much as I like seeing you sit here watching me work, I have other plans instead.” his voice rumbled against my throat.

I giggled, feeling giddy at the possibility of what was to come. Feeling a little playful, I nipped at his bottom lip and whispered.

“Only if you can catch me.” Then I pushed against his shoulders, catching him by surprise. He tumbled over into the hay. I quickly got to my feet and ran for the door.

His laugh boomed loudly behind me, but I could tell he was already on his feet chasing after me. My laughter bubbled up out of me, knowing he was chasing me. Stupidly I took a quick look behind me to see where he was, only to realize he was much closer than I thought. Shit, he can run apparently. Turning back around, I stumbled slightly on uneven ground.

“That was a mistake, baby. You should never look back when running.” his voice was loud right behind me, then the next thing I knew, he was grabbing me around my waist and hoisting me up, continuing to run while carrying me, showing off his strength from years of work.

I wiggled to try to get out of his grasp, but it was a poor effort against his muscle. Finally giving up, I said, “Fine, you caught me. Now what are you gonna do with me?”

He blew out a loud breath. “Oh, just you wait.”

Giving nothing else away. My stomach fluttered at that, and my pussy clenched, apparently ready for the challenge. I swallowed and tried to calm myself. It’s like now that I’ve had a little taste of him, I can’t seem to quench my thirst. I want him.

We made it into the house in record time, and he continued holding me as he kicked off his boots and pulled mine off, dropping them next to his. Then he went straight for the stairs, which I assumed would lead us to his bedroom. When we got to the top, I was trying to look around, but he was in such a hurry I couldn’t see much. He pushed open a door at the end of the hallway. Walking in, he flipped a switch, and a few lights flickered on, creating a soft glow in the room.

I looked around, still in Grant’s arms. My mouth was surely hanging open. The house, from the outside, looked like an old farmhouse that hadn’t been updated, but inside, it was so much more.

There was a king-size bed sitting in the middle of the room. The wall behind it was painted a dark charcoal. The remaining walls were a soft white. The bed was made up and had mountains of pillows on it with a black Sherpa comforter.

There were photos of what looked like his land hanging in several different places on the walls. A small bench sat at the end of the bed with another blanket draped over the side.

Under the window on the right side of the room sat a small wooden desk that seemed like it had seen better days. A record player was placed on top of the desk next to a large pile of records.

I turned slowly back to Grant, who was still holding me. He looked down at me. Not speaking, I could tell he was nervous about what I would say.

Turning to look at the room again, I said, “Did you do all this?”

He cleared his throat softly. “Uh, yeah. I had some help from the magazines Mom used to look at. She would mark pages of the stuff she liked. I was young when she died, but I always remember her looking at those magazines. This is similar to something she saved a long time ago. I liked it, so I decided to redo the whole room.”

My heart constricted at that confession. “I bet she would have absolutely loved it. This room is amazing.”

He smiled proudly as he, too, looked around the room at his handiwork.

Then he walked over to the bed and sat me down gently. I looked up at him. His eyes were nearly black, his pupils taking over. He had a fire in them that lit up my insides.

“You played with fire Nat. You might get burnt.”

I bit my bottom lip, trying to stifle a moan. God, whatever he had in store for me, I was fucking ready.

“Do your worst, Grant.”



Thirty

## Grant



Fuck.

Did she really just say that? I gotta get control of myself, or I'm not gonna last two damn minutes. I removed her shirt slowly before cupping her face and kissing her softly. She tilted her head back, giving me access to her neck, trailing kisses down it softly. She shuddered at the sensation, and I smiled.

Once I removed her shirt, I placed several kisses along her chest and just above her bra. She leaned back onto her hands, looking up at me. I leaned back on my legs taking in her beauty and creamy skin. She raised an eyebrow at me, waiting for my next move.

“Hmm, so impatient, baby. I want to take my time with you.”

She threw her head back and groaned softly. I reached around to her back and unclasped her bra, letting it fall to the side, exposing her full breasts. Her nipples pebbled when the

air hit them, making it impossible to keep my hands and mouth off them. I leaned down, taking the right one into my mouth, sucking gently. I reached over and rolled her left nipple between my fingers, squeezing ever so lightly as I caught her right one between my teeth.

“Grant..” her voice was breathy, overcome with arousal.

I moved down her body, placing kisses as I went. Reaching her jeans, I slowly removed them, surprised to see a dark red triangle of lace covering her pussy.

I growled, “Baby, how did you know my favorite color was red?”

She laughed quietly but didn’t respond. I wanted to rip the scrap of fabric from her body, but I really liked the way this looked on her and would love to see it again. So I took my time sliding them down her legs. Once they were discarded with her other clothes, she let her legs fall open, allowing me full access to her core.

Unable to control myself, I leaned down between them and buried myself in her slick wet center. I groaned into her, which rewarded me with a loud moan from her lips.

Reaching down, she grasped my hair in her hands and tugged me closer to her. Oh, so she’s showing me what she wants.

Fuck, that’s hot.

I didn’t hold back anymore, licking and sucking and thrusting my tongue into her. She started writhing under me,

and I could feel her walls clenching with every swipe of my tongue. I moved my mouth up and closed her over her clit, sucking gently.

“Grant, yes, more.” She was moaning loudly now, not holding anything back.

Continuing to suck on her clit, I brought my fingers up to her entrance, taking a moment to slip my fingers into my mouth and getting them wet. I then gently pushed them inside her and went back to licking her. I curled my fingers as I thrust in.

“Baby..” Nat was so lost in arousal now.

My cock was aching, straining against the zipper in my jeans. I pushed my hips into the mattress, trying to release a little of the building pressure. Thrusting my fingers in and out of her over and over, curling them each time, she was right on the edge of letting go. I sucked her clit into my mouth and bit down gently, sending her spiraling.

“Yes, yes, yes. Grant, baby, that’s so good.” Hearing my name on her lips like that had me aching, needing more.

I continued to thrust my fingers into her slowly as she came down from her orgasm. Her legs relaxed beside me, and she exhaled deeply. She started to speak but stopped when I started moving. I sat up quickly and pulled my shirt over my head, then quickly moved onto my jeans and boxers, wasting no time. She was staring up at me, still slightly dazed. Her cheeks were flushed, and her hair was tousled all around her. I

smiled at her, then I grabbed her hips, pulling her up and flipping her over onto her hands and knees.

The view was amazing, making my cock drip. I quickly grabbed a condom from my bedside table, placing the foil between my teeth and ripping it open, then sliding it on. She was looking at me over her shoulder, biting her lip again. I leaned down over her back, grabbing her chin in a gentle but firm grip.

“You ready to see what happens when you push me over like that, baby?”

Her eyes widen ever so slightly, “If you want me to stop, just say the word.”

Then one simple word from her mouth almost made me lose my control completely.

“Please.” It came on a long exhale but was clear what she wanted.

I sat back up on my knees and looked down at her beautiful ass up on display for me. I ran my fingers through her arousal, still dripping between her legs, before grasping the base of my cock and notching it at her entrance. I slid it up and down several times, preparing her for my size. Gripping her hips, careful where I placed my hands, I nudged the head of my cock into her. Before I could even move, she was pushing herself back onto me.

Groaning, I met her with a small thrust of my own as she pushed back into me again before sliding my cock all the way

in with one fluid movement. Holding myself still for a moment, trying to hold off as long as I could, she groaned loudly.

“Grant, please. You gotta move.”

Doing as she wanted, I pulled all the way out and slammed back into her. Her pussy gripped my cock tightly, making it almost fucking impossible not to come right then and there.

I started to thrust harder, and she was meeting my every movement. Moans fell from her lips and praises from mine.

“Good girl, you take my cock so well, baby. Look at you.”

Then she angled her hips even higher as she pressed her upper body into the mattress. I looked down at her, where my cock was sliding in and out. I moved my hand up to her ass and tapped it lightly before making a quick decision.

I pulled out of her and rolled over onto my back, pulling her on top of me. She hesitated for a moment, biting her lip again. I reached up and gently pulled it from her teeth.

“Come on, Nat. I want to watch you ride me.”

Her cheeks flushed bright red, she was embarrassed, but I couldn't figure out why. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and I wanted to shout it from the rooftops and make sure everyone knew it.

I tugged her arm gently, easing her over top of me. “Just try it, baby.”

She blew out a breath and straddled my hips, and I slid my fingers through her wetness a few times, trying to relax her. Then I grabbed the base of my cock and lined it up with her pussy again. Looking down at me, she slowly slid down my cock until she was sitting flush against me. She dropped her head back, letting out a low groan.

I could see her chest rising and falling rapidly, “How’s that baby girl?”

“Mmmm, so full.” She moaned as she looked down at me.

I grabbed her wrist and placed her palms flat on my chest. I dropped my hands to her hips, lifting her up and sliding her back down, trying to get her comfortable and moving on her own.

Finally, she relaxed and was riding me, moving up and down slowly at first.

I reached up and pinched her nipple between my fingers, “That’s it, Natalie. Take what you need from me.”

Placing my hands back on her hips, she started moving faster, bouncing up and down. Then to my surprise, she leaned back on her heels and reached around behind her grasping my balls.

I nearly bit my tongue off at the surprise and sensation.

“SHIT. Natalie.”

She was smiling down at me, looking pleased with herself, rolling my balls in her hand, squeezing gently while moving

up and down. I was about to combust, and I could not let that happen before her.

In one swift movement, I lifted her up and tossed her down onto the bed on her back. She let out a small yelp of surprise but then spread her legs open, waiting for me.

I settled in between her legs and guided my cock back inside her pussy. I could feel her walls contracting with my movements. I picked up my speed, really slamming into her now. Her eyes were shut, and her mouth was slightly open, her hands gripping the sheets on either side of her body.

I hooked her legs around me and sat up slightly, grabbing her hip and thrusting into her while pressing my thumb against her clit in circular motions. Her legs stiffened, and I knew she was close.

“Let me hear you, baby,” I grunted with each thrust.

“I’m coming.. Grant. Yes, that’s it, fuck me.”

I continued thrusting hard, taking each wave of her orgasm, then when I couldn’t hold it for any longer, my cock jerked, and I was spilling my load into the condom.

I collapsed on top of her, careful not to give her my full weight. My lips found her neck immediately, placing soft, gentle kisses all over her skin that was slick with sweat.

She threaded her fingers into my hair and pulled my face to look up at her. Our eyes met, and for a moment, we just stared at each other. I felt an undeniable connection with her at that moment. Like she could see every thought in my head.

Before I said something I couldn't take back, I captured her lips with mine, kissing her deeply. She mewled into my mouth, her body still slightly shaking from her orgasm.

“Would you like to join me in the shower?” I spoke quietly, hoping she would say yes.

“Only if I can control the water temperature.” She said on an exhale.

“I suppose I can allow that.” I winked at her and then moved to stand. She got up on her knees and scooted to the edge of the bed. She was looking me up and down, something I caught her doing often. I liked that she enjoyed looking at me.

I bent over and scooped her up into my arms, to which she did not protest this time, and headed into the en suite bathroom.



Thirty One

# Natalie



I was wrapped up in an amazing bubble of happiness, and I never wanted to come down. Grant was nothing short of amazing.

We had just got out of the shower, which lasted much longer than I expected, and I was wearing one of his shirts that was massive on me, hitting me just above my knees.

We had made our way downstairs and were standing in his kitchen.

“Would you like some wine?” He asked, looking at me over his shoulder as he stood in front of the fridge.

“Yeah, that’d be nice. What do you have?” I walked up next to him as he was pulling a bottle from the fridge.

He looked at me smiling, holding a bottle of blueberry Moscato proudly.

“I got some after I saw you drinking it more than once. I kind of assumed it was your favorite. Hope I’m right.”

I couldn’t contain myself as I threw my arms around his neck, nearly knocking the bottle from his hands.

“Are you even real,” I said into his neck as I placed my lips on his skin.

He chuckled, then wrapped his arms around my waist and lifted me up, and sat me on the counter.

“I don’t have any fancy wine glasses, so will a coffee cup work?” He was blushing. Like actually blushing, he was embarrassed by this, and it was so freaking adorable.

“That’s perfect. I’d drink that shit from the bottle if I had to.”

He raised an eyebrow laughing at me, “So apparently, it is your favorite then.”

I just shook my head at him while he poured me a glass. He handed it to me and went back to the fridge to grab a beer for himself. I sat on the counter and looked around, the kitchen was simple, white walls, dark brown cabinets, and it was clearly chicken themed because there was chicken decor all over the place. It made me smile, knowing it probably hasn’t changed since Grant was a baby. I loved that there were so many parts of this house that his mom did that he and his dad never changed.

I noticed him fidgeting out of the corner of my eye. He was rubbing the back of his neck, staring down at his feet. I know he is struggling with whatever is going on with his dad, and I wish I could take his pain away. I want to make this man happy, but I’m scared out of my damn mind to fall into something so soon after what I went through.

I hopped down off the counter and walked over to him. Holding my coffee cup in one hand, I wrapped my other arm around him, and he quickly closed his arms around me like this was something we did every day.

I turned my head to the side and rested it against his chest. I could hear his heart beating, and it made an unusual warmth spread through my whole body. These are things I have never experienced before, and it was flooding my brain with so many overwhelming questions.

He kissed the top of my head before saying, “Would you like to go lay down? Maybe we could watch a movie since we have failed every attempt at doing that.”

He was right. We’ve gotten a little.. well, sidetracked every time we’ve gotten into bed for a movie.

“Yeah, lets go, I’ll even let you pick the movie.” I winked playfully at him, hoping to cheer him up. I hate that his mood shifted, and I can’t do anything to help.

We were laying in his bed with the Breakfast Club playing in the background. I could tell Grant was in his head more than anything. I was laying on my side, tucked under his arm, with my head on his chest. He had one arm around me and the other tucked behind his head.

I tilted my head back slightly so I could look up at him. He exhaled deeply when he met my gaze.

“He’s not doing well, Nat.” His voice was no louder than a whisper, finally deciding to let me into his thoughts that have

been plaguing him.

“I don’t think I have much time left with him. I’m hardly sleeping, gripped by fear that the nursing home is going to call me in the middle of the night. During the day, I can hardly focus for the same reason. I went to visit him, and he almost didn’t recognize me.”

I reached up and placed my hand on his cheek, feeling my bubble of happiness on the brink of popping.

“I’m sorry, baby.” I hated saying sorry because that’s the last thing anyone wants to hear, but what else is there to say? I looked into his eyes, looking for something, what, I have no idea.

“What can I do to help?” I felt like this was a safe question because if he wanted something, he would tell me, and if not, he could just say that too. Then I wouldn’t be worried I’m not doing enough.

“Don’t leave me.”

My heart stuttered at that. The last thing I thought he would say. I had no idea how to respond, so I just wrapped my arm back around his waist and squeezed him gently. Wishing I could make that promise to him, but feeling deep down that I couldn’t, not yet, at least.

Thirty Two

# Natalie



The next morning I woke up, and for a moment, I panicked slightly at my unfamiliar surroundings, but once I was fully awake, I remembered that I was at Grant's house. I turned over on my side, expecting him to be in bed next to me but was surprised to find the space empty, especially because the clock on the bedside table told me that it was barely 5 am.

*Hmm, wonder where he is.* I got up and wrapped his blanket around me, I was still only wearing his t-shirt, and it was a bit chilly in the house. I walked over to the window and looked out towards the barn. I could see that the door was open, and there was light pouring out of it. Instead of getting back in bed, I decided to make my way downstairs and see if I could locate a coffee pot.

I walked into the kitchen and noticed one tucked into a corner on the counter top that I hadn't seen last night. It didn't take me long to find the coffee grounds and get a pot brewing. I opened the fridge, hoping to find some creamer of some sort so I didn't have to drink straight black coffee. The thought made me want to gag. Totally not my thing.

I was pleased to find some generic vanilla creamer. Pulling it out, I noticed it was brand new. Smiling to myself, I grabbed a mug and added some cream and sugar while waiting for the coffee to finish brewing.

Once it was done and I had my cup filled to the top, I wrapped the blanket around me again and made my way to the front door. I opened it and stepped out onto the porch sitting down on the blue swing that showed years of wear from nicks in the wood and chipping paint. I looked out over the land and farm buildings, just taking in my surroundings, feeling a tinge of jealousy that Grant gets to look at this every day.

A short time later, he emerged from the barn. He was already dressed in his work pants and a very worn flannel shirt. He was wearing his black cowboy hat low on his eyes and was walking to the house. He hadn't realized I was sitting out here yet because he had his eyes trained on the ground like he was deep in thought.

His foot hit the first step of the porch before he looked up. Unable to mask his face, I saw the sadness that he wore in his features before he covered it up.

“Hey baby, I didn't think you'd be up for a while.” He walked over to me and leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead.

I pulled the blanket all the way onto my lap and patted the seat next to me. “Why don't you sit down, and I'll get you a

cup of coffee.” I gave him a smile hoping it would cheer him up a bit.

He rewarded me with a big smile before speaking quietly, “I think I’d like that.”

I stood up, leaving the blanket behind, and headed back to the kitchen. I poured his coffee and then walked back out to the porch. As I was approaching him, he was eyeing my legs before looking up at me.

“What a beautiful view I have this morning. I’ve never seen one like it.”

He grabbed the coffee mug from my hands and pulled me down into his lap. My cheeks were flushed from his compliment, and I was smiling goofily. He knows just what to say to get a reaction from me.

“Are you still tired? We can go back up and lie down. I woke up and couldn’t get back to sleep, so I just decided to get up and get chores done.”

I thought about it for a moment, I was tired, but I didn’t want to admit that. I had something else in mind that I hoped he will agree to.

“Um.. I was actually going to see if I could take you up on your offer to ride some trails on the horses.” I was twisting my hands in my lap, feeling nervous for asking.

My nerves quickly dissipated when his megawatt smile, which I don’t get to see that often, spread across his face.

“I’d love to take you for a ride.” He stood from the chair, taking me with him, and headed into the house. He sat me down at the bottom of the stairs and swatted my ass to get me moving.

A giggle slipped past my lips as I took off up the stairs. I made it to his bedroom in record time, but he was right on my heels. I was feeling giddy with excitement about the thought that I was going to get to ride for the first time in a long time.

Grant walked into his closet and emerged, holding a dark grey sweatshirt that said Bowman Ranch on the front of it.

“Here, wear this.” He tossed it to me, and I slipped it over my head.

I pulled on my jeans and stood up, looking over at him. He was already staring at me like he does often when he slowly walked over to me and took my face in his hands.

“You really are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on, but seeing you in this sweatshirt is like a cherry on the fucking top.” He leaned down and planted his lips on mine moving them slightly, encouraging me to open up to him. Complying with his silent request, I opened my mouth and slowly intertwined my tongue with his. He was exploring my mouth with his tongue and my body with his hands, burning me from the inside out.

I broke the kiss, heavy breaths passing through my lips. “You can’t do that.” I panted. “I want to go ride.”



He smiled, placing his forehead against mine. “Fine. But later, I can’t make any promises of stopping.”

After getting dressed properly for the chill in the air, we made our way out to the horse barn. Grant brought me to a stall that housed a white and black speckled mare. She was absolutely beautiful.

“This is Loti.” He reached out and ran his hand down her mane lovingly. “She’s one of mine, but I think you will really like her. I’m gonna ride Dad’s horse, Clover.”

He pointed to the stall across from Loti. Then he showed me over to the wall that held all the saddles and ropes. I got to work getting Loti ready for a ride while he worked on Clover. It was like I had just ridden yesterday, everything came back to me naturally, and I was fluidly going through the motions getting her ready.

Once she was all strapped up and I was pleased with my work, I led her outside the barn. I stuck the toe of my boot into the saddle strap and pulled myself up, and swung my right leg over, sitting down on the saddle. I fit into it like a glove, and I smiled to myself, knowing that soon I’d feel the wind whipping through my hair as Loti galloped along smoothly.

Grant finally walked out of the barn with Clover behind him.

“Took ya long enough.” I winked at him.

He just shook his head at me while he climbed onto Clover. He sat down in the saddle and kicked her slightly to get her to move toward us. Next to me, even when sitting down, he was at least a foot taller than me. Clover was bigger than Loti, so that helped him too. He looked down into my eyes and gave me a devious smile.

“Ready?”

Before I could even respond, he gently jabbed Clover’s side with the heels of his boots, and they shot off into the distance. *Oh, it’s on now.* I did the same to Loti, and she took off after them, her mane flapping in the wind the same way my hair was. I could see in the distance a small trail at the edge of the tree line and made it my goal to get there before him.

“C’mon Loti, faster, girl.” I jabbed her with my heels again, encouraging her to put her head down and pick up speed. A moment later, we flew past Grant and Clover, and I didn’t look back as I heard his booming laugh following close behind.

We approached the trail, and I pulled back on her reigns slightly to slow her down a bit as we entered the tree line. She must be used to riding this trail because she slowed up and never hesitated to enter the trees, the trail veered to the right, and she followed it without my command. We then approached a hill that looked like a steady incline for at least half a mile. I took this moment to turn around and look at Grant. He was about twenty yards behind us, looking at me,

smiling. I laughed softly before turning back around and started taking in the scenery around me.

I could see an opening coming up in the trees. We must be getting close to the end. Loti continued up the trail, and when we broke through the trees into the opening, she turned to her left slightly and came to a slow stop. *Yep, she's definitely done this many times.* I patted the side of her neck gently and praised her before looking up at what was in front of me. When I fully took in my surroundings, a small gasp escaped my lips.

“Oh, my god,” I whispered mainly to myself.

At that moment, Grant and Clover came to a stop next to me. “Beautiful, isn't it?”

He was looking out over the valley in front of us. The sun was beginning to rise from behind the mountains casting orange hues into the sky. There were a few clouds that hung low, looking like you could put your hand out and touch one. In the middle of the valley sat a few buildings that looked like cabins. And in the very far corner was what I knew as Grant's home. I looked over at him, my mouth hanging open.

“This is all yours?”

“Yep.”

“Grant, I. This. It's amazing.” I was so shocked I couldn't even form a sentence. “It's just so beautiful, and you have so

much land. I had no idea. How do you not spend every spare minute up here?”

I asked the question before really thinking about it and wished immediately that I could take it back.

“Well, I used to. Dad and I would come up here every couple of days together, but I was up here damn near every day as an escape. But things.. changed.”

I looked away from him, feeling my eyes stinging slightly, trying to hold back tears. I swallowed roughly and composed myself as best I could before looking back over at him.

“Thank you. For sharing this with me. I appreciate it.” I placed my hand on his that was holding Clover’s reigns and resting on this thigh. He looked down at our hands and turned his over, linking his fingers with mine before looking at me.

“I couldn’t imagine sharing it with anyone else but you, Nat.”

Thirty Three

## Natalie



It has been four weeks since I stayed at Grant's house, and these past few weeks have been amazing despite what he's dealing with. We try to meet for lunch as much as we can during the week when he's not at the nursing home.

His dad went to sleep a few days ago and hasn't regained consciousness since. Grant is struggling, and I'm doing everything I can to help him. I finally talked him into getting someone to help out at the ranch so he could spend more time at his dad's bedside.

I go visit with him in the evenings sometimes, but it's so hard to watch him go through this. I only met his dad a few times, so I don't feel right being there for long periods of time.

He has been coming to the house in the evenings after he leaves. We discussed it and felt like it would be better for him to stay in town in case they do call at night, and he needs to get there quickly.

Even though the circumstances are awful, it's been great having him around. Every day that I'm around him, my

feelings grow deeper, I'm trying so hard to lock my fear away, but it's still there, always in the back of my mind.

There haven't been any strange encounters at work anymore, and the strange messages stopped. I have noticed a vehicle parked in front of the abandoned house across the street a few times, but I haven't thought much about it. Trying to keep my irrational fear tamped down.

I was finishing up at work when my phone alerted me to a text.

*Grant: Baby, can you come meet me? It's urgent.*

My heart sank immediately, and I knew this probably meant the worst. I swallowed hard. I need to try to be strong for him.

*Nat: I'll be there as soon as I can*

I waited a moment to see if he was going to respond, but it was clear he wasn't going to. I grabbed my purse and popped my head into Evan's office.

"I gotta take off. Grant just asked me to meet him. I think this might be it."

Evan looked up at me, the sorrow shining in his eyes. "If you need anything, just let me know. Why don't you go ahead and take tomorrow off too."

I smiled softly, “Thanks Evan, I appreciate it.” Then with that, I headed for the door.

I still don’t have a vehicle, it’s kind of been at the bottom of my priority list, so I walk pretty much everywhere I go. Perks of living in a tiny town.

I hurried down the street but had a strange feeling I was being watched. I looked around discreetly but didn’t notice anything unusual. I picked up my pace a little, my nerves taking over.

I turned the corner onto the street the nursing home was on when the car that’s been parked across the street at the abandoned house drove past me. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, but I couldn’t waste time coming up with crazy ideas in my head. I needed to get to Grant.

I hurried into the building, turning down the hall where his dad’s room was. When I looked up, I saw Grant sitting on the floor outside the room with his head hanging down.

I all but ran down the hallway, kneeling beside him. He looked up at me, and I could have sworn I felt my heart break a little. His eyes were red-rimmed, and he had tears running down his face.

“Oh, baby.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he leaned into me. His body shuddered lightly, and I squeezed him a little tighter.

“It happened about thirty minutes ago.” He whispered, his voice hoarse.

He dropped his head again, leaning it against my shoulder.

“They took him from the room right before you got here. They want me to clean his stuff out, but I couldn’t do it alone.”

“Well, I’m here now. I’ll do whatever you need me to.” I kissed the side of his face softly. He leaned back against the wall and, took a deep breath, then looked over at me. “Let’s go. I want to get out of here and never look back.”

So, that’s what we did. We left, and Grant.. never looked back.

At the nursing home. Or me.



## Thirty Four

# Grant



Thirty days.

Thirty days of absolute hell.

I thought I was ready for this. Prepared to face life alone. To move forward without a dad. I know it's what he wanted. But dammit, it's not what I wanted.

I haven't left the ranch for any of these thirty days. People from town keep trying to call me. Evan has sent countless texts. At first, asking me if I needed anything, then it moved to asking me to come to the office to sign paperwork then he was pissed at me for shutting Natalie out.

I can't face her. I can't look her in the face right now and pretend to be happy. I realized the day Dad died that I loved her.

When he took his final breath, she was the first person I wanted to call. She was the one person I wanted by my side.

Then she got there and saw me at my weakest. The horror on her face is ingrained in my mind. Every time I close my eyes, I see Dad, and then I see Natalie and that face she made. I never wanted to put her in a position like this. She deserves so much more than this. She came here to start over and to be happy. I can't give her that. Not right now.

She has texted me nearly every day, several times a day. I've tried not to look at the messages, to try to fight the temptation to respond.

*Nat (day 1): did you make it home?*

*Nat (day 1): Grant? Talk to me...*

*Nat (day 1): I'm here for you. When you're ready.*

*Nat (day 2): I'm worried about you.*

*Nat (day 2): Goodnight, Grant. Still here.*

*Nat (day 7): Can you at least tell me if you're okay?*

I wasn't okay, though, and I couldn't bring myself to tell her that. I just kept hoping that maybe she would stop trying to reach out to me. I could just never go back to Pine Valley, and she would never have to see me again. She could move on, find someone who isn't a mess. Someone that can give her everything she deserves. Just the thought of that fucking hurt me even more.

*Nat (day 15): I could hardly focus at work today.. I just kept thinking back to our first date. Going to Lake McDonald. I hadn't felt that happy in a very long time. I miss you...*

That was the most difficult message of them all to read. I was so angry at myself and life and all the fucked up shit that kept happening. I tossed my phone to the side and went out and rode Dad's horse for hours. Then around one in the morning, I went into the house and drank an entire case of beer, trying so hard to numb the pain of what my life had become.

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I was lying in bed this morning, way later than I should have. I asked the ranch hand to leave the day Dad died. I didn't want anyone else on the property but me. So the animals are depending on me to get my ass up and get out there. I just couldn't find the will to do it.

My phone started vibrating on the bedside table. I assumed it was a text from Natalie, but then it continued vibrating.

I picked it up and looked down at the screen. It was a number I didn't have saved, so there was no reason for me to answer it. I sat it back down and closed my eyes. It finally stopped ringing, but then it alerted me to a voicemail.

Who the hell is calling me and leaving a damn voicemail. Sighing, I rolled over and picked it up, going to the voicemail

and putting it on speaker.

*“GRANT. What the fuck is your problem!”*

My eyes flew open, and I sat up quickly. It was Tallie’s voice that was screaming at me.

*“Look, I know you’re going through some shit, and it’s hard. But you had a woman who cared about you and wanted to be there for you.”*

My mind locked onto her saying had, as in past tense, I don’t have Natalie anymore. But honestly, how could I think she would continue to wait around for me?

*“Now she’s up and left Grant. She asked Evan if she could work remotely for a while, and she just fucking left town like it was nothing.”*

I sucked in a sharp breath, not expecting any of this. I really screwed this up, not just for me but for Tal too. She and Natalie were almost inseparable from the moment they met, and I ruined that, too, just like everything else.

My heart physically ached thinking of the hurt I’ve caused for these two. I was so blinded by my own sorrow that I

couldn't even see what I had right in front of me. I was just too damn worried about being broken and her deciding I wasn't good enough after all.

I sat up and swung my feet over the side of the bed, feeling slightly dizzy, probably at the lack of food I'd been consuming. I took a long deep breath preparing myself to face the wrath of Tallie because I knew as soon as I made this call, she was going to rip me to shreds.

Hitting the call button, I slowly raised the phone to my ear and waited. It rang one, two, three times before she picked up.

“Oh, so now you decide to call someone?”

She's trying to keep her voice calm and quiet, but I know better. This isn't going to last long. I cleared my throat because I hadn't even spoken in almost a month.

“Did she really leave?” It was all I could manage to get out.

She sighed loudly in response, “Yeah.. she really left. She had met an Uber driver when she first moved to town, I guess. His name is Pat.”

I remember her telling me about Pat. I figured he was just being polite. I never imagined at the time that she would have to actually take him up on his offer.

“She called and talked to him yesterday, and the next thing I knew, he was picking her up today. She wouldn't tell me where she was going or if she would be back, but she

promised to talk to me as much as she could.” A small sob escaped from her throat, making my heart constrict.

It hurt even more, knowing I was causing such havoc in other people’s lives because mine was quite literally crumbling around me.

“I think I love her, Tallie.” Well, shit, I wasn’t planning on saying that. No taking it back now.

“So why the hell are you telling me that, yet you’ve been ignoring her for an entire month?” Her voice was slowly becoming louder, her frustration getting the best of her.

“I panicked. I didn’t know what the hell to do. The look on her face the day she came to the nursing home. It sent me over the edge, and I didn’t want to bring any more sorrow into her life. I felt like she deserved more than that, wanted more than I could give right now.” I was rambling, not even sure if I was making complete sense.

“She needed you. She wanted you.” This time she spoke in a whisper.

Like she was upset for her friend. Which she clearly has every right to be for the shit I did.

“I needed her too. I just didn’t know it at the time.” I admitted to her.

The phone was silent other than the faint breaths I could hear on the other end, and I just waited on her to speak. I didn’t know what else to say. I fucked this up so bad, and I’m not so sure I know how to fix it.

“I think maybe..” she fell silent again. “Don’t call her. Just text her first. At least let her know you’re somewhat okay. Let her take it from there. She’s been through so much, Grant. I don’t know how she’ll move forward. But you need to try if you love her. Fight for her like she was trying to fight for you, and you didn’t even know it.”

Then she hung up, leaving me no time to respond.

I dropped the phone down on the bed and placed my head in my hands, blowing out a breath. I need to fucking fix this.

Thirty Five

# Natalie



Two months later

I was sitting in a small coffee shop in Cedar Hill, typing up a legal document for Evan. I sat back in my chair and picked up my coffee, holding it in my hands as I looked out the window at the large flakes of snow falling.

I wanted to find the beauty in it, to have it bring me joy like it used to. I loved the snow, winter, and Christmas. No matter what I was going through or who I was with, I always found joy and comfort around the Holidays. Now I just felt empty.

I picked up my phone and pulled up my messages to text Tallie. I stopped before I clicked on her name, hovering over the message Grant sent me the day I left. I still haven't read it. I don't know if I should or even if I want to.

I was in love with him.

Even now, after he shut me out completely when his dad died, I didn't know it at the time. Not until several days had



passed with no response from him. I couldn't even get out of bed. The feelings were so foreign to me because I never experienced them before, not even in all the years Keith and I spent together.

Tallie came over and found me lying in bed, my face tear-streaked but no longer being able to cry. It was her who made me realize that I felt this way because I loved him. She made me get up and go to lunch with her. It took everything in me to even leave the house. I told her that I felt hollow and like a part of me was missing. She just looked at me, tears swimming in her eyes.

*“Nat, Honey.. it’s because you love him.”*

My head snapped up to look at her when she spoke those words to me. I just stared at her, all the memories of my time with Grant flashing through my mind.

To our last days together, he was temporarily staying at my house, and we had gotten into such a routine. I cooked dinner for him, and he always made sure my glass was full of wine. He took care of me in ways I didn't know I needed, and I was there for him when the weight of his pain was too much to bare.

Then when he left, I found myself sitting at my kitchen table alone, hoping he would walk through the door and wrap me in his arms. But he never did. So I had to get out of there.

I don't know if I'll stay in Cedar Hill forever, it's only about two hours from Pine Valley, but I know right now I can't go back. I haven't even told Tallie where I am. Too scared that he would find out somehow.

I was snapped out of my thoughts when two cars outside the coffee shop smashed into each other. I gasped at the sight in front of me. Standing from my chair, I rushed outside, not really knowing what I would do but trying to help.

I quickly made my way up to the first car, the front end smashed horribly. I leaned down to look in the window to ask the driver if they were okay, but when I came face to face with Steve. I gasped and stumbled back slightly.

*What the fuck.*

Why is Steve all the way in Montana? And what is he doing in Cedar Hill? I honestly never thought I would see him again after that day he helped carry my trash out as I was leaving Bellborough for good.

I wanted to turn around and get out of there as quickly as I could, but I knew he saw me, and I couldn't just leave without asking if they were all okay and maybe, just maybe, this was just a freaky coincidence that he is here.

I took a deep breath to try to calm my nerves, then turned around and leaned into his window again. "Um.. are you okay?"

“Natalie?” He did a double take, “What are you doing here?”

Why the hell is he even asking me that right now? He literally just rammed his car into someone, and that’s what he says?

“Are you okay or not?” I said in a clipped tone, getting irritated with each passing minute of this encounter.

“Oh, uh yeah. I’m fine, thanks for asking.”

He unbuckled his seat belt and reached for the handle of the door. I looked over and saw a few other bystanders were checking on the other vehicle. I decided this was my chance to get out of there. I quickly made my way back into the coffee shop to gather my stuff. I was shoving it all into my bag when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

I flinched away and spun around, quickly realizing it was Steve who grabbed my shoulder. And I am officially freaked out and want to get away from him.

“How have you been? I didn’t think I’d see you again since you left town after the trial. Do you live here in Cedar Hill? I’m just checking the place out.”

Nope, I wasn’t dumb enough to give him any information he was looking for.

“No. I’m just here for a couple of days.” I picked up my purse and went to push past him.

He reached out and attempted to grab my elbow, but I saw the movement this time and was able to dodge it. A slight look

of frustration crossed his face.

“I gotta get going,” I saw a police car pull up outside, “looks like you need to go out there and talk to them anyway.”

He turned his head to see what I was referring to, giving me a brief moment to put space between us and leave. I hurriedly made my way back to my hotel, looking over my shoulder every block or so, making sure I wasn't being followed.

I was lying on the bed in my hotel room, picking at the food I had ordered instead of going out, still feeling a little freaked out after seeing Steve this morning.

When I realized I never texted Tallie earlier when I had planned to. I pulled my phone out and looked at it. Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I sent her a quick text.

*Nat: Weird encounter with my old neighbor from Bellborough today.*

I sat my phone down and waited for her response. Ten minutes had passed, and still nothing. I was staring at the phone, willing her to text me back, but it was no good. She must be out with Matt, this new guy she met shortly after I left town. She normally always texts me back unless she's with him.

After staring at my phone for a beat longer, my curiosity officially got the best of me. I opened up my texts and scrolled to the unopened text from Grant that's been sitting there for months now, clicking on it before thinking twice.

*Grant: I've made a mistake. I should have never done what I did to you. I should have never shut you out the way I did. You did things for me that you didn't have to do. You took care of me when I didn't even realize that's what you were doing. You were my light during my darkest days. But then I let that darkness consume me, and I was scared. I wanted you to be happy. Be with someone that could give you that. I didn't think I could do that. Not when I was hurting like I was. You had already been through so much at the hands of an awful man. I didn't want to put you through anything else. I knew you came to Pine Valley for a fresh start. I couldn't stay away from you when we first met. Like a moth to a light, I was drawn to you. I'm sorry that I left you the way I did. I'm sorry that I didn't even have the balls to text you back or to face you. I care so much for you, and that isn't going to go away. I will be here, waiting. For you to either tell me to fuck off or for you to come back to me so I can show you what it feels like to have someone care for you unconditionally. I'm sorry, Nat.*

Silently I sat, reading the message over and over, the tears slowly streaming down my face. Exactly what I knew would happen is happening. I wanted to call him, to tell him that I

forgive him and that I wanted to come back to town to see him.

But I needed to stand my ground, continue to distance myself so I could grow as a person. Heal from my past and everything Keith had done to me mentally.

That was originally my plan when I moved to Pine Valley, but then I met Grant, and I fell hard and fast for him, and I pushed my healing to the side because, with Grant, I didn't feel like there was healing that needed to be done.

Thirty Six

## Grant



It was four in the morning, and I was wide awake, just like before I met Nat. No longer being able to sleep or even relax. I sighed and rolled over onto my side grabbing my phone from the bedside table.

I opened my texts to see if she had responded to me. She hadn't, but I still clicked on our message thread. I went to scroll back to our messages before I fucked everything up but stopped when I saw something new. Under my text, it said, *Read on 10/25*. That was over a week ago.

I closed my eyes, feeling pain seep into my chest. She read the message but chose not to respond to me. I guess, at least now, she knows how I feel. Well, somewhat, I couldn't tell her I loved her through text. If I ever get the chance again, it will be special.

I wish she would have responded, though, at least telling me to leave her alone if that's what she wanted.

Knowing there is no way I'll be able to go back to sleep now, I slowly got out of bed. I walked into the closet to get dressed. The shirt Nat had worn the night she stayed was

hanging up where I put it the morning she took it off. I walked over to it and brought the fabric up to my nose. Inhaling, I could still very, very faintly smell her scent of vanilla. I closed my eyes and let myself hope for a future with this woman.

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Making my way out to the horse barn, I pulled my Stetson down over my eyes a little more, trying to shield my face from the cold wind. I pushed open the barn door and walked in, heading for Clover's stall.

“Hey, old girl, you ready for a ride this early in the morning?”

Sometimes I found myself talking to this horse like I was talking to Dad. It's one of the only things that has brought me comfort since he died.

I sat my phone down on the shelf in the barn and headed out with Clover for a ride. We headed out for the back part of the property, up a small ridge that brings us to a small opening that overlooks the entire ranch. We slowed to a halt giving me a moment to take in the view. The sun was slowly rising to the east, casting a faint pink hue over the land.

Sitting here on Clover, looking out at everything that Dad had built, was a harsh wake-up call. I needed to get my shit together, I needed to continue growing what was left to me, and I needed to get Natalie back. The only other woman in my



life that I had loved other than Mama. Dad would be disappointed in me and what I've become without him, and if I'm being honest with myself, I'm disappointed too.

I made my way back to the house about an hour later with a plan. I was going to call the ranch hand and see if he would be interested in coming back, then I was gonna go into town and have breakfast at the diner and see Frannie. Then I needed to go visit Tallie and see if she would be willing to help me.

After showering and putting myself together, I headed out to my truck to go into town. I slid into the driver's seat and tried to crank it over. It rumbled a few times but wouldn't turn over. I guess this is punishment for not driving it for months.

I looked over to Dad's truck. A much newer version of mine, well taken care of and sitting in the drive where he last left it. I slumped back into the seat, knowing I wasn't going to be able to get my truck started right now, so I took a deep breath and climbed out, and made my way over to Dad's truck slowly.

When I climbed into the cab and shut the door, I took a minute to look around. His belongings were still scattered around. He had a photo of Mama on the dash, partly covering the gas gauge. I smiled at the fact that even after all these years without her, his love never faltered. I hoped one day I could love a woman the way he did Mama.

Sliding the key into the ignition, I turned it over, and the truck roared to life with no hesitation. Feeling like this was my

sign that I was making the right choice to use his truck, I put it in drive and headed for town.

When I walked into the diner, the place went silent, heads turning to look at me, some people doing a double take, making sure they weren't seeing things. I just tipped my hat and went to an open seat at the bar. Frannie came up to me and wrapped me in a hug with no hesitation.

“Glad you finally made an appearance, Grant. We all missed you.”

I just nodded my head at her, swallowing a lump in my throat, feeling a sudden sadness wash over me.

“You want your regular this morning, honey?” She sat a coffee cup down in front of me, waiting on my response.

“Yeah, Fran, that sounds good. Thanks.”

She nodded and walked back to the kitchen. I pulled my phone out to see if Tallie responded to me. I sent her a text when I got to town and asked if she would be able to meet me at the coffee shop in about an hour.

*Grant: are you able to meet me at your coffee shop in an hour? I have something I need to talk to you about.*

*Tallie: I'll already be there working. So I guess I don't have a choice.*

She was obviously still mad at me, which I couldn't be mad about. I did some fucked up shit, so I deserved it.

*Grant: See you in a few*

I finished up my breakfast quickly and promised Frannie I would be back. Then I made my way to Valley Coffee Co. When I got there, a small part of me was hoping that Natalie would be here, I was not surprised when she wasn't, though.

Tallie had her elbows propped up on the counter, cradling her face with her hands, talking to a man I'd never seen before. I walked over to them, Tallie finally noticing me. Apparently, she was very distracted by this mystery man since she didn't even look my way when the bell over the door rang when I came in.

“Oh hey, Grant.” She hardly even looked my way.

“Hey, Tal. Thanks for agreeing to meet with me.”

This time she did look at me, rolling her eyes slightly, the fiery side of her personality shining through.

“Well, it's not like I had much of a choice since I'm working today.”

I felt a little uneasy with the way this conversation was going and also noticed out of the corner of my eye that this mystery man was looking me up and down.

Turning my gaze toward him, I stuck my hand out, “Hey man, names Grant.”

He looked down at my hand, then looked at Tallie, raising a brow. I just stood there patiently waiting. He looked back at me and gripped my hand firmly.

“Nice to meet you.”

I just continued to stare at him. Is he really not going to tell me his name? Who the hell is this guy? I looked over at Tallie again, and she was just staring at him, not paying any attention to me. I cleared my throat, attempting to get her attention, which apparently worked.

She stood up from the counter and said, “Matt, honey, just give me a little bit while I talk to Grant.”

Okay, so his name was Matt, at least I know now, even if he was not the one who shared it with me. He simply nodded his head at her, not saying a word, but I didn’t miss how he was eyeing me like I was some kind of a threat.

Tallie and I walked to the kitchen area of her coffee shop, providing us a small amount of privacy, to which I was thankful for, so this Matt guy wasn’t eavesdropping on our conversation.

“Have you heard from her?”

She looked away from me, wringing her hands slightly before turning back to me.

“Yes”

I knew she wasn't going into any more detail than that.

"Is she okay?" I wasn't sure I wanted to hear the answer to this.

"No." Her tone was clipped.

I inhaled deeply, squeezing my eyes shut and cursing myself under my breath.

"I don't know when or if she plans on coming back. But she isn't okay. She didn't get out of bed for days when you stopped talking to her. And then, one day, she just told me she was leaving."

I placed my hand on my chest and rubbed roughly, trying to dull the pain that I was feeling there. I was so pissed at myself for putting her through this. How could I, knowing what she had just gone through? I was such a fucking idiot.

"Do you know where she is?" I opened my eyes only to find Tallie looking at the floor, shuffling back and forth on her feet. She wouldn't meet my eyes, which tells me that she did know where she was but wasn't going to give me that information. I guess I deserved that.

"Look. I know I fucked up badly, Tal. But I want to try to make this right. I'm in love with her, and I can't imagine trying to move forward without her. I didn't realize all of this until it was way too late. So basically. I'm asking for help. She will talk to you, but we both know she doesn't want to talk to me."

She sighed and was looking everywhere but at me.

“Please, Tal, please help me.”

Finally, she looked at me, crossing her arms and shifting her weight to her left foot, “Fine. I’ll help you. But I swear to god, Grant, if you fuck this up again, I’ll cut your balls off.”

I couldn’t stop the laugh that escaped my throat. Leave it to her to say something like that in this situation. “I promise I won’t. If I get another chance with her, there ain’t no way I’m fucking it up again.”

Thirty Seven

## Natalie



“Hey, Tal,” I spoke into my phone as I walked down the sidewalk back to my hotel. It was late, and I had been out to dinner with Pat. The only person who knows my whereabouts right now. We have become pretty close since I came to Cedar Hill. He has come to visit me a few times, making the drive from West Cascade. He is kind of like the father figure I need right now.

“Natalie. Will you come home? I miss you, and the holidays are coming up soon.. I don’t want you to spend them alone.”

I missed her too, and Pine Valley. I wanted to go back so bad, but I was scared. I couldn’t decide if I was ready to see Grant again or not because I knew I would see him when I did go back.

“I know. I’m thinking about coming back. Only because I want to see you for the holidays.” She took a deep breath but didn’t say anything.

“Tallie, are you coming?” I heard a male’s voice yell for her in the background.

“Do you have someone over?” I was smiling. I wanted her to be happy.

“Uh yeah, it’s just Matt. We are gonna go out tonight.” I could hear the excitement in her voice, which made me excited for her too.

“Tallie, come on!” Suddenly my blood ran cold when I heard the voice that time. That sounded so much like Keith’s voice. I stopped dead in my tracks and tried to listen to any noises in the background. I heard nothing until Tallie got back on the phone.

“So.. are you coming back soon? Please?”

“Yeah. I’ll come home. I will try to be back by the end of the week, okay?” She squealed excitedly, pulling the phone from my ear and wincing. I waited for her bout of excitement to be over. As I brought it back to my ear, I heard the male’s, or Matt’s, voice again. I couldn’t make out what he said exactly, but that time it didn’t sound as much like Keith. Maybe I’m just hearing things, I need to stop thinking the worst all the time, but my emotions were making it damn near impossible.

I pulled my coat tighter around my body to fight against the cold. It was the coat that Grant had gifted me, and every time I put it on, I would think back to the day he gave it to me.

We had just had dinner and were sitting on my couch together. He had gotten up to fill my wine glass but was gone



for a long time. When he came back to the room, he was carrying a large bag with a huge smile on his face.

He plopped it down on my lap and just shrugged his shoulders and said, *“You’re going to need it when it starts getting cold.”*

I had a smile on my face for the rest of the night, feeling so ridiculously happy over a damn coat. But it was one of the most thoughtful gifts I have ever received. No one else ever thought about my well-being like he did.

Once I was back in my hotel room safely and both the door locks were engaged, I flung myself down onto the bed, blowing the few strands of hair out of my face that had fallen down out of my bun. I was so on edge I needed to get a grip on these emotions.

I took a few deep breaths trying to calm myself down. I was freaking myself out over the thought of hearing Keith’s voice. There was no way it was him. He’s in prison for ten years. I would have been notified if, for some reason, he was released.

Not feeling calm at all, I pulled up my texts and scrolled to Grant’s name. When I clicked on it, I read through the last text he sent to me again. Before thinking about what I was doing next, I hit the call button and slowly brought the phone to my ear.

I looked over at the clock only to realize it was almost eleven. There is a good chance he isn't going to answer. But that thought quickly vanished when the phone stopped ringing, indicating that he had picked up. I held my breath, not wanting to be the first one to speak.

"...Nat?" His voice was so gravelly and quiet.

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing myself not to cry, but it was harder than I thought it would be.

He spoke again, "Nat, are you okay?"

That was an extremely loaded question for me right now, and I honestly didn't know how to answer it.

"Sorry for calling. Maybe I shouldn't have." I whispered, not trusting my voice.

"No no, don't be sorry. If anyone should be sorry about anything, it's me."

I didn't speak. I still didn't really know why I decided to call him.

"It's good to hear your voice." He said again, the ache in my chest growing.

"It's good to hear yours, too," I said softly because it was really good to hear his voice. God, I really missed him.

"You know the holidays are coming up. Are you planning on coming back to Pine Valley? For Tallie?" I could tell he was trying to make conversation, but his voice wasn't as strong as it normally was. He seemed nervous.

“Uh yeah, I think I’m gonna come back for the holidays.” Saying that made it seem like I wasn’t planning on staying, but that wasn’t the case.

“Oh, that’s great, Natalie. I know she will be thrilled to see you.” I smiled sadly to myself, wishing he was saying he would be thrilled to see me too. I didn’t respond. I just sat there quietly, rubbing my hands on my thighs.

A quiet sob escaped my lips and completely caught me off guard, I was losing control of myself, and I couldn’t stop it.

“Natalie, what’s wrong?” Grant’s voice boomed through the phone this time, laced with worry. Shit, this was not what I wanted to do when I called him, my emotions were so all over the place, and I was scared. I couldn’t help it, I guess.

“I.. I’m sorry.” I was stumbling over my words now, “I just needed someone to talk to. And Tallie is on a date, and I didn’t want to interrupt that. So then I called you. But that just made me realize how much I missed you. And I feel so alone..”

The phone was silent for a moment, causing me to check if the call was still connected. “Grant?” I whispered, worrying that I said too much.

Then he finally spoke, his voice a low growl. “Where are you?”

That question surprised me. It was not what I was expecting him to say at all. I know deep down that I trust Grant, and he would do anything for me if I needed him to, so I took a deep breath deciding to tell him.

“I’m in Cedar Hill, staying at the Plaza Hotel.” Silence again, but I could hear him shuffling around like he was getting dressed.

“I’m coming to get you.” My eyes nearly popped out of my head.

“You’re what?!” My voice was raised due to the shock of what was happening.

“I said I’m coming to get you. I don’t want you to be alone anymore.”

“Grant, it’s late. You’re out of your mind.” I couldn’t hide the slight panic in my words. Surely he really wouldn’t drive all the way here right now. I also wasn’t sure I was prepared for that.

“I’ll be there in about an hour and a half. I should have done this months ago.” He said, his voice slightly cracking.

I had my eyes closed. I shook my head but then realized he couldn’t see what the hell I was doing.

“O.. okay, I’ll be here.”

My hands were shaking as I started moving around the room, the reality that I was going to see him soon setting in. Then after giving him the address and my room number, I said goodbye and hung up the phone, and now I was sitting on the edge of the bed, about to rub holes through the fabric that covered my thighs.

I was nervous as hell, knowing that he was on his way here now to see me. But I also had a little blossom of hope forming

deep in my belly that maybe, we could still come back from this.

## Thirty Eight

# Grant



“Fuck!” I slammed my fist against the steering wheel after disconnecting the phone with Natalie.

I should have never let this happen. How could I? I am so pissed at myself for everything I have done over the last few months. I have fucked up so badly, and now this is happening. She is hours away, feeling like she is alone and she is hurting.

I pressed down on the gas pedal a little harder, willing the truck to move faster. I was already going dangerously fast, but I needed to get to her.

Finally, I pulled up outside the hotel Natalie was staying in. It was almost one in the morning, so there was not a soul in sight.

I walked into the lobby of the hotel and straight to the elevator, taking it up to the sixth floor. My palms were sweaty, and it felt like my heart was gonna beat out of my chest. I hadn't seen Natalie in months, and I was itching to hold her in my arms. But I knew I needed to control myself. There is no

way she is gonna want me touching her after everything I did. I just hope she will eventually give me another chance.

The elevator doors started to open, and I was squeezing through them in a hurry. I walked down the hall and stopped in front of room 608. I stood there for a moment, trying to calm my nerves and steady my breathing. It was a good effort but unsuccessful.

I raised my fist up and knocked softly on the door. I didn't hear anything coming from inside, and I started to panic a little.

I knocked again and said, "Natalie, it's me."

Still, she didn't respond. I went to knock again but stopped when I heard her fiddling with the locks. The door swung open, and before I could say a word, she jumped into my arms, burying her face into the side of my neck.

On instinct, I wrapped my hands under each of her thighs to support her weight. I stepped into the room and shut the door behind me, and locked it. Then I brought my arms up and wrapped them around her back, squeezing gently. She was sniffing and said, "Thank you for coming."

Her lips were resting on my neck, so her words vibrated across my skin, making goosebumps erupt down my arms.

"I should have come to you sooner." I buried my face into her hair, inhaling her scent and letting it wash over my body, creating a calm that I hadn't felt in weeks.

“I never should have shut you out like I did. I’m so sorry, baby.” I bit my tongue when I realized I let that slip. I was so thankful to be holding her in my arms that my mouth was moving faster than my mind could keep up with.

Her arms tightened around my neck, “I know why you did it. I understand. It hurt, but it’s okay.” I was shaking my head,

“It isn’t okay. None of it is okay. I want to make it up to you so bad. If you’ll let me.” She was quiet for a moment, just hanging onto me for dear life, then she leaned back so she could look at me. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and her cheeks were tear-stained. A single tear slid down her cheek, and I gently wiped it away, then cupped her face in my hand.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, then simply said, “Okay.”

I felt my entire body sag from relief. I had been holding my breath, waiting for her answer, preparing myself for the worst. The next thing I knew, she leaned in and softly pressed her lips to mine. It was a quick kiss, but it was like coming up for fresh air, making my entire body buzz.

I leaned my forehead against hers and closed my eyes.

“Are we going home tonight?” I opened my eyes to find her with hers closed.

She looked exhausted and thin like she hadn’t been eating enough. It made my chest ache again at the thought that I was the cause of this. She needed to sleep, I could tell. As much as I wanted to take her back home tonight, it probably wasn’t the



best idea for me to be driving, not having slept for almost twenty-four hours now.

“No. You need to get some rest. We can go home first thing in the morning, okay?” She nodded her head and then put her legs down so she could stand. She walked over to the bed and crawled under the covers. Then she turned to face me.

I was still standing just inside the door, watching her every movement.

“I’ll sleep on the couch.” I leaned down to slip my boots off and set my hat on the table in the room. I looked up, and she was just staring at me with a slightly annoyed look painted on her face.

“What’s that look for?” I was genuinely curious how we went from one extreme to the next.

She pointed to the tiny loveseat that was placed under the window in the room, then looked back at me.

“Um, last time I checked, you were part giant, and there is no way in hell you’re fitting on that excuse for a couch. Just get in the damn bed, and don’t be stubborn.”

She flopped back onto the pillows and closed her eyes. I tilted my head to the floor, trying to stifle my smile. But it was damn near impossible when I was getting to see her fiery side again.

I finished removing my boots but made the decision to keep my pants on, even if it would be hard as hell to get comfortable with them on. I crawled into the opposite side of

the bed and leaned back against the pillows. I peeked over at Natalie from the corner of my eye to see if she was sleeping. She was lying on her back, staring up at the ceiling. I closed my eyes for a moment but opened them quickly when I felt her moving around in the bed beside me.

I looked over at her, and she was on her side now, facing me with her head propped up on her hand. She was looking at me like she wanted to say something but was unsure of herself.

I rolled onto my side slightly and said, “Penny for your thoughts?”

She smirked at me slightly and shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, come on, I know there is something going on in that mind of yours.”

Finally, she looked at me and said, “I just really missed you. And it’s very difficult to stay mad at you.”

That’s definitely not what I was expecting her to say.

“Who says you have to keep being mad at me?” I reached out and ran my fingers over her hair.

“Tallie.”

She said on an exhale, then she rolled over onto her back and pulled the covers up to her chin. I let out a small chuckle. I should have expected that.

“Well, I guess I’ll have to talk with her about that.” Nat was smiling with her eyes closed but didn’t say anything else.

I rolled onto my back and put one of my arms behind my head, and closed my eyes. I was hoping that maybe I would be able to get some sleep tonight too.

Right before I dozed off, Natalie rolled toward me, flung her arm over my waist, and laid her head on my chest. I looked down to see if she was awake, but it didn't look like she was. So I just slowly put my arms down and wrapped them around her and drifted into sleep easily for the first time since Dad died.

Thirty Nine

# Natalie



I woke up in a slight panic when I realized I was lying against a hard body, and a heavy arm was draped across my waist. Then before bolting out of bed, the events of last night flickered through my mind. I exhaled quietly when I remembered that it was Grant who was here with me. I felt so out of it, probably because I actually slept for more than four hours.

I relaxed my body and nestled into him a little more, thinking he was still asleep. But then I felt his hand grip my hip gently, and I could feel him hardening behind me. I wiggled just a little more to see if I could get a reaction out of him, and his grip tightened. I looked at him over my shoulder, but his eyes were closed.

“Nat. You better stop.”

Weighing my options on how this could go, I said, “Or what?”

He opened one of his eyes just slightly, holding my gaze, “Or I’m going to make up for lost time.”

My insides started to heat at the thought of that. I know I'm supposed to still be mad at him and definitely not jumping back into bed with him the first chance I got. But if it felt right and it was what I wanted... what Tallie didn't know wouldn't hurt... right?

I rolled back onto my side and remained still for only a moment before I scooted as close to him as I could and pressed into him lightly.

“Natalie...” he nearly growled, warning me.

I bit my lip smiling to myself. “I'm just trying to get comfortable.”

I bit down on my tongue, trying not to laugh. I remained still again, but not for long. His dick was pressing hard into my lower back now, and it was becoming hard to resist. I moved my hips up and down just slightly, creating a small amount of friction.

I was rewarded with a low groan from him, and then he rolled me over and situated himself between my legs. I looked up into his eyes and smiled shyly at him.

I won.

He pressed his weight down onto me, his cock rubbing against my core. I attempted to arch into him, but he lifted his waist just enough to be out of reach but kept his upper body on mine, pinning me to the mattress.

He buried his face in my neck. “You’re killing me, baby. I only have so much control when we’ve been apart for this long.”

I turned my head and brushed a few kisses along his neck, “I don’t want you to hold back right now.” My voice was barely above a whisper.

His entire body stilled, then slowly, he raised his head up so he could look at me. “You’re sure?”

I bit my lip slightly and shook my head. Then like a rubber band that snapped, he was crushing his lips against mine. I let out a surprised gasp at the force of his lips against mine, and then I melted into him. All the memories flooded back in and overwhelmed me.

I wrapped my arms around the back of his neck and threaded my fingers through his hair tugging gently. He moved his hands down to the hem of my shirt and tugged on it. I lifted slightly so he could remove it the rest of the way. He looked down at me after he tossed it to the side, and his eyes widened in what looked like horror. I suddenly felt insecure now that I didn’t have my clothes to hide behind.

Since Grant left, I could admit that I wasn’t taking as good of care of myself as I should. I had lost weight when I didn’t have any weight to lose. Grant leaned down and cupped my face in his hands.

“Baby...” he exhaled harshly. “Is this because of.. me?” He pushed the words out like they were physically hurting him. How could I answer that? I didn’t want to make him feel

any worse than what he already did, but I also couldn't lie to him.

I squeezed my eyes shut and turned my head to the side, trying to avoid this line of questioning. I guess I didn't have to answer him, though, because he leaned down and rested his forehead against my cheek as he choked out, "I'm so sorry, Natalie. I never meant for any of this to happen."

I could feel tears threatening to rise to the surface, and I did not want that to happen, not right now. I turned my face back to his and wrapped my arms around his neck again, pulling him down to me so I could kiss him. He was hesitant, so I gently ran my tongue against the seam of his lips to show him this was what I wanted right now. After a moment, he opened his mouth, and his tongue met mine. I let out a moan as he nipped at my lower lip with his teeth.

"Grant, please don't make me be the only one lying here half-naked." I drug my nails down his back over the fabric of his shirt.

He chuckled slightly, then leaned back onto his knees and pulled his shirt over his head. He started to lean back down over top of me, but I raised my hand up to stop him. Raising a brow, I looked down to his pants then back up to his face. He smirked at me before he stood from the bed and kicked them off, then slowly climbed back over top of me.

I could see his length straining behind the fabric of his black boxers. I bit my lip, pressing my legs together. Then I felt Grant's hand cup my chin as he pulled my lip from

between my teeth with his thumb. I flicked my eyes up to his, and they were almost black, the lust overtaking him. He crashed his lips down onto mine hard, causing a whimper to escape my throat.

He ground his dick against my pussy, sliding over the fabric of my panties that were slick with my arousal.

“Fuck, baby. Are you sure you want to do this?” He ground out, his jaw ticking as he tried to hold onto his control again.

“Yes..” I said on a moan, arching into him more.

Then he was hooking his thumbs in the waistband of my panties and tearing them off my legs. He moved quickly down my body, lips, and tongue connecting with my skin as he moved.

My eyes fluttered closed, goosebumps erupting after every kiss he placed on me. Then they shot open in shock when suddenly he was flattening his tongue against my pussy and licking me in long deep strokes. My hands flew down to grip his hair, tugging. He moaned into me, sending vibrations straight through me.

His left hand gripped my thigh tightly, holding it in place, as he brought his other up and gently slid two fingers inside me. I groaned at the feeling when he curved his fingers up and pulled them out, then thrust them back in.

“Grant..” I was moaning, hardly able to speak as his pace quickened.



It was like I was standing on the edge of a building, about to fall over into oblivion, when his thumb brushed against my clit as he thrust his fingers into me over and over. My legs began to tremble as the sensation built inside me. He pressed his thumb down again, drawing quick circles as he continued to thrust his fingers into me.

“Come on, Natalie.”

His words were my undoing, gravelly and rough, as he gritted them out, urging me on. “Shit, Grant, yes, baby.” My whole body shaking now as waves of my orgasm continued to wash over me. Grant was still moving his fingers in and out of my pussy gently until I stilled.

I smiled to myself, contentment settling over me. I reached down to grab a hold of Grant and pull him up to me. He was smiling, his beard glistening from my arousal. He brought his hand up and wiped it away before leaning down and thrusting his tongue between my lips. I pulled away from him, causing him to sit back and look at me with a concerned look on his face.

I motioned for him to lie down, and once he was on his back, I climbed on top of him. He grabbed my hips to stop me, “No baby, we don’t have to do that.”

I shook my head at him, “I don’t care what you say right now. I want to, and we are going to.”

He raised his brows at me, and I just stared at him, daring him to argue with me. When he didn’t, I took it as my green light to continue. I pulled his boxers off, allowing his dick to

spring free. A small bead of pre cum leaking off the tip. God, this man was fucking hot.

I wrapped my hand around his base and stroked it a few times, and he rewarded me with a long low groan as he closed his eyes. Continuing to stroke him, I moved up his body and positioned myself over him, and then I slid down over his length. I threw my head back when my hips were flush against his. I gave myself a minute to adjust to his size before I started to move. He opened his eyes and was watching my movements with his hands resting on my hips, squeezing gently each time my hips connected with his.

Then he slid his hands up, capturing each of my nipples and squeezing.

“Yes.” I wasn’t sure if it was audible or not, but he continued.

Then in one swift movement, he was lifting me up and tossing me on the bed. He didn’t have to be gentle anymore, and he knew it. I was on my stomach, and he grabbed my hips roughly, pulling me up onto my knees, then thrust into me hard. I grabbed the sheets above my head, squeezing my eyes shut. This was a new side of him, he had been rough before, but this was a whole other level.

I didn’t want him to stop, so I leaned into him every time his hips slammed into my ass. He was grunting with each movement, his grip tightening on my hips as his speed increased. His arm snakes around my waist, and his fingers found my clit again. My legs were still trembling from my

previous orgasm, so it doesn't take long for me to be on the edge again.

“Fuuuck,” the word slipped past my lips in a low long groan. Grant's breaths were coming loud and harsh, then I felt him jerk, pumping into me one, two more times before he completely stills.

“Shit baby, you're gonna be the death of me.”

I laughed, collapsing onto my stomach, my eyes still closed. I felt the bed dip beside me, and then the bathroom door clicked shut.

I blew out a long breath, thinking about everything that has happened in the past twenty-four hours. Tallie was going to kill me when she finds out about what happened. I couldn't help myself, though. Being with Grant just felt right, even after everything. That would be a conversation we would soon have to have.

If he even wanted to try to work this out, whatever “this” is.

Forty

# Grant



“Ready to go?”

Natalie was sitting on the bed in her hotel room, rubbing her hands up and down her thighs, tipping me off that she was nervous about something. I walked over and sat down next to her. I placed my hand over top of hers to still her movements.

“What’s wrong, Nat?” She looked over at me, worry written all over her face. I squeezed her hand gently, attempting to comfort her.

“I’m just a little nervous to go back home. I know that sounds crazy. This time of year is always hard for me, and now with..”

She averted her gaze and continued rubbing her thigh with the hand I wasn’t grasping. “Whatever is happening between us.”

I reached up so I could turn her face toward mine. “I know, Nat. But everything is gonna be okay. I promise.”

She just barely nodded her head in acknowledgment, then she stood from the bed and gathered up her bags.

“Well, let’s go then.”

We were just outside Pine Valley when Natalie’s phone rang, startling her out of the daze she was in. She looked down at the screen and sighed before picking up the phone.

“Hey, Tal.” She said, causing me to look over at her. This conversation was gonna go one of two ways, and I had a feeling it was not going to go in my favor.

She peeked at me from the corner of her eye before saying, “Um, well. Change of plans. I’m actually coming home today instead of this weekend.”

I was not trying to eavesdrop on her conversation, but how am I really supposed to do that when we are in a truck together, and she’s not trying to be quiet. She leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes like she was being lectured, which considering who she was talking to, would truly not surprise me.

“Yes, Tallie. Today. I’m on my way home now.” I could hear murmuring through the phone.

“No. Not Pat. Um...” she paused and looked over at me before saying, “Grant came and got me.”

“What!?” That time I heard exactly what Tallie was screeching through the phone. Natalie had pulled it away from her ear.

“What do you mean Grant came and got you? What the hell Natalie? What am I missing here?” She was still yelling

into the phone. I was trying not to laugh at Tallie's antics, not wanting to piss Nat off.

She sighed, bringing the phone back to her ear, "Listen, Tallie. It's a long story. You were on a date last night, and I didn't want to bother you. We will be home soon. Grant can drop me at your place, and I'll explain it, okay?"

She sat in silence for a moment, "Tal?" Then I heard the murmuring again. "Um, okay.. well, just let me know when you're not busy, okay?"

Hmm, that's weird seems like Tallie told her it wasn't a good time for her to come over, which surprises me since it's been two months since they've seen each other.

Natalie hung up the phone and then looked over at me. Her eyes were misty like she was attempting to hold back tears.

She looked out the windshield and said, "She told me it wasn't a good time to come over. She had some stuff to do, I guess.." She paused, swallowing, "I guess I thought she would want me to come over since it's been so long."

She placed her elbow on the window sill and propped her head in her hand, closing her eyes.

"Don't worry, Natalie, it's close to the holidays, you know. Maybe it has to do with that." That was a piss poor excuse, but I was just trying to make her feel better. Clearly, I needed to work on that.

We pulled into the drive at Nat's house, and I shut off the truck. I looked over at her, and she was just sitting there looking out the window at the house. Her breathing was slightly increased, and she was rubbing her hands on her legs again.

“Everything is gonna be okay, baby.”

She shook her head and then reached for the door handle. I placed my hand on her thigh, “No. That hasn't changed.” I winked at her and got out of the truck, walking around to her side to open the door for her. She met my gaze and gave me a small smile before stepping out and pushing past me to head inside.

I found Natalie sitting at the kitchen island, looking around her. I walked up behind her, and she whispered, “It feels strange but good to be back. The last time I was here... was painful.”

I dropped my chin to my chest, feeling the pang of guilt again, knowing that I was the reason for that. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and placed a kiss on her temple.

“I promise to make it all up to you.” She turned her face meeting my gaze.

“Do you want to... work this out?” I looked at her searching her features for anything that would tell me she wants me to say no, but surely she wouldn't still have me here if she didn't want to try.

So, taking a deep breath, feeling like it was a good time to talk, I sat down next to her and turned her toward me. Taking her hands in mine, I looked at her.

“Natalie. I want nothing more than to work this out with you. I regret every minute of every day that I was away from you. The pain I put you through. My heart hurts every time I think of the last few months. You being alone because of me. Feeling like you needed to leave town because I fucked up so badly. I was scared, Natalie. So fucking scared of the feelings I had for you and thinking of how it would be hurting you with what I was doing to myself.” A tear ran down her face, and I reached up to wipe it away before continuing.

“I have never. In my life. Felt like this before, feeling like I couldn’t breathe without you. Feeling like my world was turned upside down the minute we met in Evan’s office. With you.. I finally felt like I might have a chance. A chance to love someone the way my dad loved Mama. To grow together and build a life others would envy.” I paused, swallowing a lump that was forming in my throat, trying to rein in my emotions.

“I want to move mountains with you, baby. I want to cherish you for the rest of my life if you’ll let me. My days without you have no light because you, Natalie, are my sun. I love you, Natalie.”

A sob came out of her, tears falling freely down her face now. I reached up and placed my hands on her cheeks, “I think I have loved you since that first day. I just didn’t know it. Not



until it was too late. But I don't want it to be too late anymore. I want every day to begin and end with you."

She leaned forward, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me to her. I dropped my arms to circle her waist. I could feel her body shaking, fearing that she was going to say she didn't feel the same. When she pulled back, I was bracing myself for the worst but was caught off guard when she leaned in and pressed her lips to mine. They were wet and salty from the tears that sat on them.

She broke our kiss and rested her forehead against mine. "I want to try, Grant." Was all she said, but it was enough for me.

I now had the chance to make up for what I'd done and show her what she deserves. Treat her how she has always deserved to be treated. My shoulders sagged, feeling relieved at her admission and getting my feelings off my chest.

I loved this woman, and I was going to spend every single day proving that to her for as long as I could.

Not knowing that time would be cut short.

Forty One

## Natalie



I had been back in Pine Valley for awhile now. I still hadn't seen Tallie in person, and it was starting to piss me off. Thanksgiving was in a week, and the reason she wanted me to come home was so I wouldn't be alone. So why the fuck is she refusing to see me. Of course, we talked on the phone pretty much every other day, but she always had some kind of excuse as to why we couldn't get together.

Having enough of the excuses, I made the decision to go to the coffee shop after work today and make her talk to me.

I was working on finishing up a few tasks at work before I left. I checked my email to make sure Evan hadn't sent me anything more. What I found instead was a message from an email I recognized. My palms instantly became sweaty, and I swear I felt all the blood drain from my face.

Sitting in my inbox was a message from the general email at Coleman Law Office. This email was used for clients to send messages when looking for a new lawyer or to send inquiries to. The employees also used it when they didn't want to provide their own emails, or they were sending out

anonymous emails, which surprisingly happened a lot, especially when telling prospective clients that they would not be accepted due to their financial status or some other bullshit reason.

I swallowed hard, trying to decide if I even wanted to look at it or if I should just delete it altogether. Internally battling with myself for a few minutes, I finally raised a shaky hand to my mouse. Hovering over the email, I blew out a long breath before clicking on it.

*From: Colemanlawoffice@gmail.com*

*Good afternoon Natalie,*

*How's Montana treating you? I know you thought you could hide. But darling, you can't and never could. It really was a good effort, though. I wish you all the best.*

That was it. Four sentences that seemed to turn my entire day upside down. Deciding I would not let this email grip me with fear, I typed up an email to my lawyer.

*To: dmastar@bbtnlaw.org*

*From: vdanner@pvlaw.com*

*Good evening Don,*

*Could you please confirm that Keith Coleman is still, in fact, incarcerated? I have received a concerning email and believe I might be having some harassment issues. If it continues, I will likely need to file additional charges. As always, thank you for the support you've given me.*

*Best,*

*Natalie Danner*

Knowing I wouldn't get a response that quickly, I shut my laptop and packed up all my belongings. I was not going to let my past dictate my life like it always had. I am moving forward, and I will not do so in fear.

As I got ready to leave, I decided to send Grant a quick text. We had plans to go to dinner tomorrow evening. Tonight he is busy with ranch chores and getting his new employees up to speed on how things run. He has a new shipment of cattle arriving soon, so he's been busy.

*Nat: Hey babe, just letting you know I'm heading over to Tallie's. I want to see her in person for once.*

As soon as I hit send, the three little dots popped up, indicating that he was already typing a response. I smiled down at my phone. He never kept me waiting long.

*Grant: Okay, baby, you enjoy your time with her. I can't wait to see you tomorrow. New ranch hands are.. interesting. A lot of learning to do. I love you.*

I was really smiling hard now, just like every other time he told me he loved me. It always made my insides flood with warmth. I hadn't said it back yet. Still feeling a little scared and not wanting to cross that line just yet.

With that, I tucked my phone into my bag and headed outside, locking the door behind me. It was starting to get dark out, and the breeze was colder than it had been. I looked up at the sky as snowflakes began to fall around me. Taking a deep breath, finally feeling happy with how my life was going, I headed to the coffee shop.

Ten minutes later, the bell above the coffee shop door announced my arrival. Brian, the guy Tallie decided to hire while I was in Cedar Hill, was standing behind the counter. We have gotten to know each other since he has been serving me my coffee daily instead of Tallie. I noticed that his eyes widened slightly when he saw it was me.

“Hey, Brian. Just here to see Tallie. Is she upstairs?”

His deer-in-the-headlights look really gave him away, but I could tell his wheels were turning, and he was trying to spew some lie.

“Uh, no. Nope. She’s not here.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed past him to head towards the back of the shop to the door that led up to Tallie and Ty’s apartment.

I heard heavy footsteps behind me. I stopped in my tracks and looked over my shoulder, giving Brian a *don’t fuck with me* look. It must have worked because he skidded to a stop and didn’t say a single word to me before turning back to the front of the shop.

Taking a deep breath, I twisted the knob on the door and pulled it open, cringing when the squeaky hinges gave me away. I slowly walked up the steps having no idea what I would be walking into. What would cause Tallie to act like this, I have no idea, but I was more than a little worried, especially after Brian tried to hide her from me.

I reached the top of the stairs and looked around the living room, but it was empty. I stood there for a moment, weighing my options on where to look first, but then I heard soft music coming from the direction of her room. I marched my ass down the hallway with purpose and flung open her door.

“You can’t avoid me now bitch!” I said playfully but nearly choked on my words when she sat up on her bed and

looked in my direction before trying to cover her face.

My blood ran cold at what I saw. Both of her eyes were black, and she had a cut across her nose that was in the healing stage.

“Oh my god Tallie. What the hell?” I shouted at her, not really meaning to, as I rushed over to the bed and sat down.

She wouldn't look at me, so I grabbed her face and turned her towards me. She immediately started crying and then threw her arms around my neck.

“Babe.. what happened to you?” My voice shaky.

“I didn't want you to see me like this.” She choked out on a sob. I leaned back and brushed her hair away from her face. Searching her eyes, looking for answers that she wouldn't give me.

“Tallie. Tell me what happened to you. Now” I sounded more demanding than I had intended, but it did the trick to get her talking.

“Well. That day in Cedar Hill...” She paused to take a deep breath. “When you called Grant instead of me because I was on that date with Matt.”

I shook my head, knowing the exact day she's referring to.

“Well, after we had dinner, I thought he was bringing me home. He didn't. He drove to the far end of town that no one ever really goes to. He stopped in front of kind of run down looking house.” She stopped again, trying to get control of her breathing.

“I wasn’t comfortable going in. I told him I wanted to go home. I got out of the car and tried to walk away, so I could call someone to come get me. Well, he got mad at me for trying to leave, and he shoved me. I fell and hit my face on the curb.” I gasped. That is not what I was fucking expecting.

“It knocked me out, and I woke up in the hospital later that night. No one knew what happened to me. I remembered him pushing me, but I just told everyone I slipped on the ice.” She dropped her head and let out another sob.

“Nat, I’m sorry I was avoiding you. I just. I didn’t want you to see me like this, in case you know...” She didn’t have to say anything else. I knew exactly what she was referring to. But it fucking hurt that my best friend thought she couldn’t come to me with something like this.

“Tallie, I do not care what kind of shit I’ve been through in the past. No matter what, you can always come to me. You do not have to hide from me. Do you understand?” I was holding her hands in mine, looking at her, examining her face.

“I’m sorry, Nat. I was scared.” She sniffed, “I wasn’t trying to shut you out.”

I shook my head, stopping her. “It’s okay. It’s in the past now. But.. where is this Matt guy now?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Honestly don’t know.. I haven’t seen or heard from him since that night. It’s like he just disappeared. Not that I’m really fucking complaining.”



I closed my eyes for a moment, hoping this asshole left town and didn't come back after what he did to her.

“You haven't been leaving the house, have you?” I asked, knowing the answer already because let's face it. This is a small town, and I haven't seen her, and neither has anyone else because I had been asking.

Shaking her head, she said, “No, I haven't. I was just trying to be safe, and I might have also been hiding from you.”

I looked at her, my mouth hanging open, which caused her to laugh.

“Yeah.. I know. That sounds totally childish of me. So let's just move past that, okay? Plus, we need to talk about you and Grant. Because what the fuck Nat.”

I laid back on her bed and blew out a long breath. I knew I couldn't avoid this conversation forever, so here we go.

It was almost midnight, and I was just now walking into my house after leaving Tallie's. We talked for hours, catching up on everything that's happened in the past few months.

I told her about everything that unfolded and how I ran into Steve. Then I told her about Grant coming all the way to Cedar Hill in the middle of the night. Explaining everything he told me and then his apology when we returned home.

I told her that I was pretty sure I was ready to tell him how I truly felt when we went out to dinner after work tomorrow

night, even though I was so fucking nervous. She knew exactly what to say to make me feel better.

Then we talked about this Matt guy, and I talked her into calling to make a police report tomorrow. I didn't want her to make the same mistakes I did.

I had just showered and was getting ready for bed, feeling exhausted from the day, when I remembered the email I sent to my lawyer earlier.

Deciding to check if he emailed me back before I got into bed, I grabbed my phone and opened my emails.

My heart started beating faster, and my breathing picked up when I saw that he had, in fact, responded to me.

My mouth went completely dry as I clicked on the email to read his response.

*To: vdanner@pvlaw.com*

*From: dmastar@bbtnlaw.org*

*Natalie,*

*I am terribly sorry to report this. It seems as though Keith was released from jail several weeks ago. I will be looking into this*

*immediately. I should have been informed of this, and wasn't. Also, he should not have been released due to not being offered any kind of parole. Please let me know if you experience any more harassment. I will be in touch.*

*Respectfully,*

*Don Mastar*

It felt as if time had stopped as I read the email. My phone slipped from my hand as my eyes began to fill with tears. How the hell did this happen? I went to reach for my phone, I needed to call Grant, but before I was able to grab it, I heard footsteps approaching me from behind. I turned around right as a fist connected with my face, my scream getting caught in my throat.

Forty Two

# Unknown



I was pacing back and forth across the run-down hardwood floor in this piece of shit house I'd been staying in, in this shitty ass town.

I was starting to become impatient with this guy I'd hired to do my dirty work. He had assured my team that he could carry out the task that was given to him, but I was becoming annoyed. It's taking way longer for him to get that stupid bitch that I once called my fiancé than what was agreed on.

I had some of my security team follow Natalie back to her apartment when she left the courthouse. They did the work for a while, following her and getting information on her and her schedule. Then they found this piece of shit guy who was desperate for money.

It wasn't hard to get him to agree when they offered him the amount I had approved. That's the one good thing about being fucking rich like me. Money could buy you anything you wanted in life. And what did I want? To finish what I started all those months ago.

I walked into the back bedroom, where I had set up a makeshift workstation. I logged into the computer and went to the photos looking through them all, at the faces of her so-called boyfriend and her annoying little friend, the ridiculous looking law office she worked at, and her house. Then I went back over the schedule she followed so closely. I had it down to pretty much every minute of the day. That's about the only thing this guy had succeeded at so far, was getting me this information. The only reason I didn't do it myself was so I could remain anonymous and trick her into thinking I was still in prison.

She was acting like she was so independent, but I knew deep down she was scared. Of me and the little threats and concerning messages I had so carefully got through to her. I was getting under her skin, and it felt fucking great. Soon, very soon, would she get what she deserved.

I went back to pacing, running my fingers through my hair, which was longer than I'd ever let it get before. I had to stay in prison a little longer than I had anticipated, so I was looking a little rough around the edges. It pissed me off every time I looked at myself in the mirror, knowing that I was a well-known lawyer looking like this, but it was helping to conceal my identity enough that I was dealing with it.

I had finally gotten a team of people together that I had paid to get me out of that shit hole so I could carry out my plan. See what I mean? Money, it's fucking great.

I checked my phone again to see if that fucking idiot had sent me anything. Of course, he didn't. I was officially at the end of my rope of patience with this guy. I guess it's time to do this shit on my own.

It was almost three in the morning, which meant I didn't have a lot of time before her annoying as fuck friend or that stupid ranch fucker tried to get in contact with her. So I needed to move fast and not make any mistakes like I did the first time around.

This time, I would not fail.

Forty Three

## Grant



I was standing in the barn with two of my new ranch hands, Ian and Lane. We were discussing a new shipment of longhorns that was due to arrive soon. When my phone started ringing. I checked the time, realizing it was almost nine in the morning, and I smiled to myself. I assumed it would be Natalie calling, but when I saw Evan's name lighting up my screen, the smile on my lips vanished.

“Hey Evan,” I tried to sound casual, but that lasted about five seconds when he said, “Have you heard from Natalie? She hasn't shown up to work yet this morning.”

I swallowed hard and scrubbed a hand over my face. “Uh, no, I haven't heard from her yet this morning. She was with Tallie last night. Maybe she's still there, um, I'll call her and get back to you.”

“Sure thing, man. Just let me know.” I could hear the worry laced in his words.

This was not like her at all. Maybe she and Tallie just got a little too crazy last night during their little reunion. But then

again, she hadn't texted me since she left work. I was trying hard not to focus on that little detail.

I scrolled to Tallie's name and hit the call button, then placed the phone up to my ear. It rang and rang, and I was beginning to think she wasn't going to answer, but finally, right before I was going to hang up, she answered.

"Uh... hello?" Her voice was groggy, like she had been sleeping, and my call is what woke her. Okay, so maybe they really did just drink a bit too much.

"Hey, Tallie. Can I talk to Natalie? Evan just called and asked where she was since she didn't show up to work this morning."

"She what!?" Tallie shrieked on the other end of the line, and my heart dropped. "Wait.. she isn't there with you?" My voice was low, trying hard to remain calm.

"No. She isn't. Grant, she went home at like eleven thirty last night."

I was pushing my fingers into my eye sockets, taking a few deep breaths. "Well, she didn't fucking show up to work this morning. And you know she never does that. I'm heading into town now. I'll pick you up, okay?" I didn't give her time to respond before hanging up the phone.

I quickly explained to my guys that I had to leave and that I would be back later and instructed them to call if they needed anything. Deep down, I was hoping I would be back in less than an hour, optimistic or some shit.



I got into my truck and sped off toward town kicking up slush behind me as I went. Making it to town in record time, I pulled up in front of the coffee shop I was about to lay on my horn when Tallie came rushing out the door and was in the truck in less than a second.

“Well, go!” She said, her voice an octave higher than normal.

She was nervous, so I needed to try to hide my nerves, not to make the situation any worse. Surely we were overreacting, and she was just sleeping in. I needed Tallie because I no longer had a key to her house, for obvious reasons.

I pulled into her drive and looked around. Nothing on the outside seemed out of place. I looked over at the abandoned house, and there were no obvious changes there either.

We made our way to the front door together. Tallie pulled out her keys and slid the bright blue one into the lock. But then she just stood there before she looked over at me. “Um.. it wasn’t locked,” her voice barely audible.

Fuck. I twisted the knob and pushed the door open. I took one step in and felt my fucking stomach drop.

Tallie gasped beside me, “Oh my god, what the hell happened.”

I didn’t respond, though. I just went in further.

“Nat?” I called out, hoping she would answer, but all I got in response was silence as I looked around.

The lamp in her entryway had been knocked off the table it sat on, and shards of glass were scattered on the floor. I peeked around the door to the living room and had to bite my tongue to hold back my anger. The rug under her coffee table was all bunched up, and the table itself was on its side. There were more shards of glass strewn over the floor of the living room, and I swear I saw a few drops of blood.

Swallowing hard, I turned around to a horrified Tallie. She had her hand over her mouth, and her eyes were filled with tears.

“Call the cops. Now.” I commanded sternly.

She took a few steps back toward the front door and lifted her phone to her ear.

I knew I should stop and wait for them to arrive so I didn't mess anything up, but I needed to check her bedroom, just in case. When I walked in, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Her bedroom was an absolute mess. It was obvious whatever happened in here involved some kind of struggle.

Her bed was all messed up, with pillows thrown all over the room. Both bedside tables were turned on their sides, and the small lamps that sat on each of them had been shattered. The mirror that hung on the wall next to the door had been shattered, and when I got closer to it, I realized there was blood splattered against it, and what looked like Nat's hair was stuck in it.

This time I brought my hand up and covered my mouth, just staring at that mirror. I suddenly felt like the walls were

going to close in on me. I spun on my heel and quickly left the room, and headed straight for the front door. I walked out and leaned over, resting my hands against my knees. How did this fucking happen? Who fucking did this to my girl.

Finally, what seemed like an eternity later, the cops pulled up in front of the house. The first one that got out approached me, and Tallie slowly, with his hand placed on the butt of his pistol.

“What’s your involvement with this place?” Tallie stood up quickly from where she was perched on the front porch and walked quickly to the cop, and got in his face.

“What’s my involvement? Are you fucking kidding me! I called for help, and it took you almost thirty damn minutes to get here! When my best friend is fucking missing!”

I quickly made my way over to where she was standing nose to nose with this guy and wrapped my arm around her shoulders.

“Tallie, you gotta calm down. He’s here to help.” I ran my hand across her back, attempting to soothe her but knowing it wasn’t doing a damn bit of good. Deciding it was best for me to do the talking, I looked over at him.

“I’m her boy... um, friend. Her boss called me this morning and said she didn’t show at work. I called Tallie, assuming she had stayed with her last night. She didn’t, obviously. So we came here thinking she might have overslept.

But she's not here and, the inside of the house, it's.." I had to stop, trying to get a grip again.

"It looks like there was some kind of struggle. Things are broken. There is some blood on things. It looks like someone might have taken her."

The cop just continued to stand there and look back and forth between our faces before he finally spoke.

"Well, my name is Officer Wade Rogers, but you can just call me Wade." He was looking at Tallie sympathetically, not paying much attention to me.

Then he said, "I'm gonna take a look around inside, see what I can find. We are gonna do our best to figure this out."

I nodded my head, pulling Tallie into my side a little harder, leaning on her for support because I knew I needed it.

She looked up at me with tears running down her face again, "They will find her.. right?"

I looked toward the house and the officers surrounding the property before looking back at Tallie, I needed to be reassuring, but I couldn't find it in me right now.

"I fucking hope so, Tal."

Forty Four

# Natalie



I woke with a start opening my eyes slowly. I looked around at what I thought would be my bedroom, but I quickly realized that was not where I was. Then I remembered some of what had happened to me.

I had just read the email from my lawyer informing me Keith wasn't in prison anymore. I was getting ready to call Grant when I heard footsteps behind me in my bedroom, but when I turned around, a fist had connected with my face.

The person attacking me had their face completely covered, so I had no idea who it was; it was a man based on rough hands and huge arms. I fought like hell after that first punch was thrown, and we struggled through my bedroom. I was kicking and punching, but I was so small compared to him. It was a futile attempt. He slammed my head against the mirror in my bedroom, which dazed me, giving him an opportunity to get me out of that room. I still tried so hard to fight, but once we got to my entryway, he hit me in just the right spot and knocked me out.

Looking around the room, I was attempting to figure out if I knew where I was; it was a small cabin, it seemed like, with only a few rooms.

I started to move to brush hair out of my face, but I groaned when a stabbing pain shot through my entire arm. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, panic beginning to grip me.

I opened my eyes again to try to look around the room some more without moving much, looking for signs if I was alone or not. On the wall to my left were hundreds of pictures of.. was that me?

Fuck, that is me.

They were hanging from the ceiling and scattered all over the wall; me at work, the coffee shop, me and Grant at the Underground, and then at the lake. Then I noticed there were some of Grant's house and the nursing home, and the law office. Then there were more of me in Cedar Hill.

Oh my god, whoever the fuck this is, has been following me.. for a long time. I started scanning the room again when I noticed a figure slumped over in the chair in the corner. Based on their size and how they were dressed, it was obviously the same person who took me from my house. Their chest was rising and falling in slow, even movements indicating they were sleeping, so I took this time to get a bearing on my surroundings again.

There were two windows in the room I was in, which looked kind of like a makeshift living room. It looked like the

sun was going to rise soon from the color of the sky. I raised my head slightly to see if there were any other rooms. My heart sank even more when I realized there were only two doors. Which meant the chances of me being able to sneak out were almost impossible.

I was getting ready to move into a sitting position when I heard shuffling from the person in the chair. I quickly lay flat and shut my eyes, trying to take slow, even breaths to make it seem like I was still sleeping.

I was straining, trying to listen to all the sounds around me, but nothing prepared me to have a heavy hand come down on my head and grab a fistful of my hair to pull me into a sitting position. I winced but managed to stay quiet. I was not going to show my fear.

My eyes were open, but I had them downcast. It wouldn't matter if I looked at whoever had kidnapped me. I wouldn't be able to tell who it was with his face covered.

He pulled my hair back, making me raise my head to look at him. When I did, he said, "Finally got you. Now I have a chance."

I froze. I knew that voice.

At my realization, he reached his hand up and pulled the mask from his face revealing his strawberry blonde hair, round cheeks covered in freckles, a crooked smile, and silver wire glasses that framed muddy brown eyes belonging to fucking Steve.

I swallowed back the bile that was threatening to climb up my throat, going through a hundred scenarios in my head but just trying to figure out what the hell Steve wanted with me.

He sneered at me as he spoke, “I’ve been watching you, Natalie. Waiting for my time. Making sure that when I finally made my move, no one would expect it. Not you, not your stupid little boyfriend, and not the man who asked me to do this for him.”

He released his grip on my hair slightly but didn’t let go.

“See, I may have told him that I would gladly help him out for some money, so he could do whatever the hell it was that he needed to do. But then, after I thought about it for a while, I decided I would do it for myself. Then I’d have you and a fuck ton of money. We are gonna be able to leave here, make a real good life for ourselves, together.” He was leaning down toward my face, his eyes slightly hooded.

I turned my head away as much as I could, but his grip on my hair limited my movement. That only pissed him off, so he jerked my head hard, making me face him again. He was so close to me that our noses were almost touching.

“I don’t want shit with you.” I spat back at him, trying to keep my composure, even though, on the inside, I was trembling, trying to think of how I could get out of this situation.

He threw his head back and laughed like a fucking hyena, but as he tilted his head back toward me, I heard a loud *Bang* followed by the sound of shattering glass and then felt the



splatter of a warm liquid hit my face. Steve's hand released my hair, and he collapsed on the floor at my feet.

I raised a shaky hand to my face and touched my fingertips to my cheek, then pulled them away, looking down to see they were covered in blood. My breathing picked up, and I struggled to get air into my lungs. I was panicking now, but I knew deep down that I had to get the hell out of there.

The bullet had hit Steve in the back of the head, and one of the front windows glass was shattered out of it. Thinking for only a split second, I got to my feet and made my way hurriedly to the back of the cabin. I was holding my left arm close to my body, trying to alleviate some pain. I found a door with small windows looking out over the yard behind the cabin. Scanning the area, trying to decide where I should run to, I twisted the door handle, but it didn't budge. I wiggled it again, and still nothing. Taking a deep breath, I aimed my right shoulder toward the door and slammed my body against it as hard as I could.

A shriek escaped my lips as the force of my hitting the door jarred my left arm, causing pain to shoot down to my fingertips. I gritted my teeth hard and slammed into it again. This time the door flung open, and I fell out, landing on my hands and knees in the fresh snow that covered the ground.

When I caught myself, I heard a snap that I was sure came from my left arm, and this time I screamed, unable to fight against the pain.

Shit, shit, shit.

If someone was nearby, there is no way they didn't hear that. I struggled to get to my feet, my vision blurred, and my stomach rolled from the pain in my arm.

I finally could stand and took a few stumbling steps forward. It seemed like everything around me was spinning. I took a moment to stand still, trying to fight through the pain, then continued taking a few more steps. There was a tree line up ahead of me. I had no fucking idea where I was or how to get back to Pine Valley. All I knew right now was that I needed to get into the trees to try my best to find cover so that I could look at my surroundings.

Suddenly I heard snow crunching behind me. Not wanting to look over my shoulder, I attempted to pick up my pace. The yard was sloping upward slightly, and I was having difficulty getting my footing. I slipped, almost falling but was able to catch myself. The crunching snow behind me was getting closer.

“That’s enough of the theatrics, don’t you think, Darling?”

Forty Five

## Grant



I had lowered the tailgate on my truck to give Tallie a place to sit down. It had been almost an hour since the cops arrived at Natalie's house. They have been in and out a hundred times. They were taking photos, collecting samples, and taping things off.

I had been pacing on the sidewalk for over twenty minutes, beginning to get frustrated. Then someone clearing their throat caught my attention. I looked up as Officer Rogers approached us. It looked like he was holding a picture in his hands. He stopped a few feet from us, adjusting his duty belt before speaking.

“Does this picture mean anything to the two of you?”

He turned it around so we could look at it. There, Natalie was standing next to a man in front of a home, holding up a key. I looked at the man a little closer. He was your typical blonde hair blue blue-eyed man. I felt like I had seen him before, but I couldn't place it. Tallie approached Wade to look at the photo, gasping when she got close enough to see it.

“That's fucking Matt!” She hissed.

“You mean the guy you had been dating for a bit?” I looked at her, hoping I was wrong.

“Yes... him.” She looked at me before looking back at the photo. “Um, I went on a few dates with him. But I haven’t seen him for a couple of weeks since he did..” She paused then pointed at her face, which had been badly bruised, “this.”

I looked at her, giving her a questioning look because she had been telling everyone she had slipped on ice. All I got in return was a shrug of her shoulders.

“Did you ever go to his house?” Wade was looking at Tallie, pretty much ignoring me again since I was proving to be useless right now.

“Yes.. that’s how I got the bruises. He took me to his house without asking me first. It was in the part of town that’s pretty run down, I wanted to go home, but he wouldn’t let me. I tried leaving, and he pushed me, causing me to hit my face on the curb.”

Wade examined the bruises under her eyes, a scowl settling over his features. “Would you be able to take us there? I want to look into him since we found this.”

“Yes, absolutely.” She sniffled slightly.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders again, and she leaned her head against me. I could see out of the corner of my eye that Wade was watching our every movement.

Then he clapped me on the back and said, “We are gonna figure this out, man.” I nodded at him in appreciation.

Fifteen minutes later, Tallie and I were in my truck heading to this Matt guy's house. Wade was in his vehicle behind us, along with about four other police vehicles. I was gripping the steering wheel so tightly that my knuckles were turning white.

I kept looking at the clock, dread pooling in my stomach as each minute passed. It had been almost three hours since we arrived at Natalie's house and discovered her missing. The longer this took, the more what-if scenarios were forming in my head. My mind keeps thinking the worst, and it's pissing me off not having a clue who did this or where she is.

I slowed the truck down as we turned onto the street Tallie said Matt lived on. Most of these houses were run down. Like Tallie said, this part of town is unpopular, and hardly anyone comes or lives out here.

We went to the end of the street before she finally pointed and said, "It's that one."

I followed her finger to where she was pointing and swallowed a lump in my throat.

The siding on the house was supposed to be white but had dirt and grime all over it. Green shutters bordered each window, and the paint was chipping off them all. It had a small porch leading up to the front door, the first step sagging. There was a truck parked in the driveway, and it looked like the drive and sidewalks had been treated with salt, so it was obvious someone was living there.

My stomach was churning at the sight before me. I looked over at Tallie, and she was staring at the house, visibly shaking.

I squeezed her hand, “it’s alright, Tal.”

She looked at me and then back to the house. “It’s not alright until we know where Natalie is.”

She had a point. I was trying to be positive, even though inside, I was not feeling fucking positive.

I started to get out of the truck but stopped when Wade walked up and said, “You two need to stay in the truck for now. We want to clear the residence first.”

I didn’t want to wait in the damn truck. I wanted to bust down the door myself. But I knew I needed to do what he asked. He’s only trying to help. So I nodded and pulled my door shut.

Tallie huffed beside me, “I don’t want to wait in the fucking truck. I hate this.”

I shrugged slightly, “I know, so do I. I’m just so mad at myself. How could I let this happen.”

She placed her hand on my shoulder, “This isn’t your fault, and I’m not going to sit here and let you think that.”

I wasn’t going to argue with her. Now was not the time or place for that. I saw movement coming from the house and turned to look out my window. Wade was coming down the front steps, so I took that as a sign that the house was empty,

so I quickly got out of the truck and made my way over to him.

“Well?” I said, with a little more bite than I intended. He looked at Tallie, who was standing next to me.

“He isn’t here right now, but..” he stopped.

“But what?” I snapped at him, not even giving him a chance to finish. I needed to get a handle on my temper.

“But, he had a room in the back of the house that was locked. We had to break the handle off to gain access to it. There is a computer in there that’s well... filled with photos.” He was rubbing his chin like he was in deep thought. Before I could speak, Tallie beat me to it.

“Photos of what exactly?”

Giving her another look of sympathy, he said with an even voice, “Natalie by herself, Natalie at work, Natalie at home... Natalie with the both of you. And some of just you two by yourselves.”

“What the fuck?” Tallie hissed, taking the words right from my mouth. “So Matt, or... whoever the hell it is because I’m pretty sure his name is not Matt. Has been following her... or all of us, I guess?”

Wade looked between us several times, “it seems that way. We are still trying to gather more information from what we’ve found. A motive that would cause him to do this.”

Tallie cut him off. “Don’t you think you should be attempting to find Natalie and then figuring out why he did

this? I mean, how do you even know it was him that took her? Have you even tried to find her?"

Her voice rose with each word, her anger simmering about to boil over.

"Tallie.." I whispered but realized that was a mistake.

"No! Don't you 'Tallie' me. I want to know what the hell they are doing to find her!" She was yelling now, tears starting to form in her eyes again.

Wade stepped toward her slightly, "Currently, my guys are searching the laptop and the room that he had it in. If he is involved in this somehow, then there will be tips in there somewhere that could potentially lead us to her. I know it's hard to wait, not getting any information, but as soon as I have some, I will tell you. I promise."

Just then, another officer emerged from the house and said, "Rogers! You might wanna take a look at this."

He turned back toward us, but before he said anything, I raised a hand and said, "We are not waiting outside this time. Whatever it is, we want to see it. Now."

He looked like he would say no, but Tallie pushed past him and walked into the house like she owned the place.

Once inside and in this makeshift office, we all gathered around a computer. The officer that called us inside had a map pulled up that had several cabins just outside of Pine Valley



pinpointed. Three of them were less than a half mile of my ranch.

Looking straight at Wade, I said, “Why are you still standing here then? Why are there no people out checking these places?” The anger was evident in my voice.

“I’m gonna make a call. We are gonna need more than what we have here. My guys will start the search, but we are gonna need additional help on a search this big.”

That made sense to me, but I was becoming really fucking impatient and wanted answers hours ago. I looked at the map again and made a mental note of the three cabins near the ranch; then, I turned and looked at Tallie.

“We should go. There is nothing more we can do here.”

Her eyes nearly popped out of her head, and she started to protest, but I grabbed her arm and led her out of the house. I leaned down and whispered in her ear.

“Three of those are within a half mile of my property. You and I are going to check them.” She looked up at me, the understanding shining in her eyes. She nodded slightly.

As we got ready to get into the truck, I saw Wade following us. I continued to climb in, not going to give him the opportunity to stop us. His hand stopped my door from shutting.

“Look, man, this isn’t my first day on the job. I know what you’re about to do.”

Wrenching my door from his hand, I looked him directly in the eye and said, “Try to stop me.”

Then slammed my door shut. I looked over at Tallie, who was just slightly shaking her head and smiling at me. Then we drove off, but not before I noticed Wade get into his car and follow behind us, whatever he might be useful later.

Forty Six

# Natalie



I picked up my pace to escape the reality that was sinking in around me. I was openly sobbing now, every step I took more painful than the last. My left arm was numb as if it was only hanging on by a thread. My toes were beginning to lose feeling from running through the snow with no shoes. My hair was a mess, hanging around my face with clumps of dried blood occasionally blocking my sight.

I stumbled when I heard the voice again. His voice was like ice running through my veins. Knowing deep down, if he got his hands on me, there would be no escape, no return.

“Still trying, are you?”

The memory of his last words runs through my thoughts

*“This isn’t over, Nat. You are mine and always will be. I will find you and finish this.”*

When he said it, I just let it roll off my shoulders, knowing he wouldn’t be able to get to me for ten years, thinking that at the end of that, he would have forgotten about me and moved on to bigger things.

I never expected this to happen, but I should have known better. I expected it; then, maybe I wouldn't have gotten so comfortable. Let my guard down as much as I did.

Busy replaying the past in my mind, I wasn't paying enough attention to the ground in front of me, so when I stepped into a large hole, I never even saw it coming. I fell into the snow, not trying to catch myself this time, just trying to brace my left arm for impact, knowing the pain I was about to endure. I curled up into a ball, bringing my legs to my chest. I no longer had the energy to push forward.

Snow was kicked into my face as he spoke.

"Finally giving up, are you?" Laughing, he grabbed my shirt, yanking me up to my knees.

"Stand up, you stupid bitch."

But I didn't listen. I wasn't going to obey him. I was going to make this as difficult as I could. I was done bowing down to his commands, even if it might kill me.

He let out a low growl and kicked me in my side, shouting in my face.

"I said get up!" he screamed. I was doubled over, the wind knocked from my lungs from the force of his boot, but I still didn't stand.

I spat at his feet. "Fuck you, Keith."

This time he grabbed a fistful of my hair and slammed my face into his knee. Immediately I felt blood seeping from my

nose and squeezing my eyes shut, attempting to fight back the tears threatening to spill over.

Then with both hands in my hair, he pulled me to my feet, leaving me no choice but to comply.

With his face inches from mine, he said, “We are just getting started. I see you plan on making this fun.”

Blood ran into my mouth, and I huffed out a breath causing it to splatter onto him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he used his sleeve to wipe his face.

“You always were defiant. I see that hasn’t changed a bit.” With that, he turned toward the cabin, not loosening his grip on my hair, and tugged me along.

Once we were back inside, he slammed the door shut and led me back into the front room, where Steve’s lifeless body remained on the floor. I averted my eyes, not wanting to look at his emotionless face. Keith sat me down in a chair and pulled a rope from a bag I didn’t realize he had been wearing on his back.

He wrapped it around my shoulders and the back of the chair several times before he tugged on it, pulling it tight. The pain in my arm was excruciating, causing the room to spin and my stomach to roll again. I was on the verge of passing out, so I focused on the shattered window. The tree branches swayed in the wind as I focused on my breathing, in and out slowly.

Keith walked over to Steve's body and looked down at him. He shook his head and slightly laughed, "This idiot was hired to do a job. But then he thought he was gonna be able to get away with keeping you for himself. The problem with his plan was that he came to one of the cabins I had been monitoring. See, we had a plan, which cabin he was supposed to bring you to. But then he thought he could go somewhere else and not get caught. Foolish, see where that landed him?"

I bit the inside of my cheek, telling myself over and over to remain silent, to not fall into his games. He wants a reaction from me, and I will not give him one. I will remain defiant like he says I am until my last breath.

He stood across the room for a moment, just staring at me with his head tilted to the side slightly, assessing me. I watched him from my peripheral vision, attempting to guess his next move. He must have caught on to what I was doing because he walked up to me but stepped behind me to where I could no longer see him.

Suddenly I felt his breath brush across my neck, "You think you're smarter than me, Natalie? You're wrong. You can't escape me, not this time."

His fist connected with the side of my face a second later. I didn't have time to brace myself, him moving behind me and working in his favor. My head snapped to the side hard, then hung down between my shoulders. My strength diminished with every blow.

The jerk of the chair moving backward had me raising my head to see where he was now, but before I could react, he threw the chair down, and I was lying on top of it, looking up at the ceiling.

He reared back, preparing to land another kick to my side as I spoke.

“Why are you doing this?” My voice was low. I was hardly able to speak louder than a whisper.

He tossed his head back, laughing loudly, “Even if I had a reason, I wouldn’t tell you bitch.”

Then he kicked me again and again, my ribs screaming, my lungs completely void of oxygen. I was gasping, trying so hard to take in a breath, but I couldn’t. His laughing continued as he looked down at me with a hate fire burning in his eyes.

My head lolled to the side, and my vision was blackening around the edges. When his kicks finally stopped, I sucked in a burning breath. I slowly closed my eyes and wished he would end this.

Then I thought of Grant and how much I loved him, regretting not telling him when I had the chance. All the time we should have got together will be cut short. I think of his ranch and all the memories we would have made together, watching the sun rise and set every day together. Growing his dad’s legacy to something larger than life. Then my thoughts shifted to Tallie and how much she meant to me and had been there for me when no one else was. I imagined all the memories we would have also made together, the crazy things we would have

gotten into together, and most of all, getting to see her meet someone who would treat her how she deserved.

They were my family, and they were who I would be thinking of when this finally came to an end. I can't go back in time and change what happened between us. I can only hope that the memories we made will stay with them forever.

His kicks started again as he began screaming at me.

“You ruined me,” kick.

“I hate you,” kick.

“Fucking bitch,” kick.

“I should have killed you when I had the chance the first time,” kick.

I looked at him just in time to see him reach behind his back and pull a gun. My eyes widened as he aimed it at my head, knowing this was it. He was right; I wouldn't be escaping this time.

Then he moved slightly, never breaking eye contact with me, sensing that he would pull the trigger any second. But then his boot connected with my face. I let out a gargled cry as I heard my bones crunching. It connected one, two more times before my world went completely dark.



Forty Seven

## Grant



As we turned onto the road that held one of the cabins that Natalie could be at, I pushed down on the gas a little more. Little beads of sweat were beginning to form along my hairline, and my heart was beating rapidly. Tallie had been fidgeting in the seat beside me since we left the house, both on edge.

I looked at the clock for what felt like the hundredth time in the past hour, rolling my lips into a thin line at the realization that it was almost afternoon now, and we still weren't any closer to finding Nat.

I was trying so hard not to let my mind wander and begin thinking the worst, but it was fucking hard when nothing seemed to be giving us the answers we were so desperately searching for.

The woman I was in love with is missing, and god knows who fucking took her. It's nearly impossible to keep my mind in a positive light. I had so many plans for us, and it feels like they were slipping from my grasp, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

The cabin came into view ahead, and I immediately scanned the area, looking for any signs of life. There were no fresh tracks in the snow, no light coming from the windows, no footprints, absolutely fucking nothing. Still, I shifted the truck into park and swung my door open. I was halfway to the door when I heard Wade call out to us.

“Let me go in first!”

I just shook my head and continued, I was not wasting any more time, and he needed to get that through his damn head.

My hand wrapped around the bronze door handle; taking a deep breath, I twisted it and shoved it open. It took me a second to adjust to the darkness as I looked around the front room of the cabin. It didn't take me long to realize it was empty. Only a second later, I slammed my fist into the door, leaving a large dent in my wake.

“Dammit!” I bellowed as I made my way back to the truck. It was obvious she wasn't here and never was, so I continued searching for her.

After another hour of searching, we were headed to the third cabin. I could no longer keep positive thoughts running through my mind, knowing that it had likely been well over nine hours since Natalie fought someone in her house and ultimately lost. All of the things that have probably happened to her, causing my stomach to roll and the familiar lump of emotion lodging itself deep in my throat, making it hard to breathe.

As I was about to turn onto the gravel road leading us to our next location, Wade sped up next to us, blocking me from turning. His window was down, and he motioned for me to do the same.

“What?” I snapped once my window was down enough we could hear each other.

“My guys found something. We need to go to their location. Follow me and stay close.” It was a statement, leaving no room for discussion.

So this time, I followed his lead and stayed close to the rear bumper of his car the entire three-mile drive. We approached another gravel drive, which I assumed led to another cabin.

We pulled down the drive coming to a stop and I shut my truck off and looked around slowly at my surroundings. The place was littered with cops, investigators, K9 officers, and even what sounded like the faint hum of a helicopter.

This time Tallie was the first to get out of the truck and walked into their little command post like she was the boss.

“Care to tell us what the fuck is going on?” The words had hardly passed through Tallie’s lips before Wade approached, looking like he just swallowed something bitter. My stomach dropped, fearing the worst.

“What is it?” I demanded, needing answers like my lungs needed oxygen.

“She isn’t here, but.”

“Dammit!” I cut him off, my hands flying to my hair, gripping tightly and pulling.

“Where the fuck is she then! Haven’t your men checked them all?” Gritting my teeth, feeling like my chest was being crushed under the pressure of helplessness, knowing she was out there somewhere and I couldn’t do a damn thing to help her.

Wade raised his hands to try to calm me down, which was only pissing me off more.

“It looks like someone was here. We just aren’t sure who.”

I started to push past him toward the cabin. I needed to see for myself when another officer called out.

“We’ve got something!”

I stopped in my tracks and turned to look at him. He pointed to his right, but I couldn’t understand what he said. Then I noticed some officers start making their way to the tree line. Without thinking, I turned and started heading toward them. I could faintly hear Wade and Tallie calling my name, but my pulse was beating so loudly that it drowned them out enough for me to continue.

I broke through the tree line and took in my surroundings. Most officers were about thirty yards in front of me, scattered throughout the trees. I started jogging after them, desperate to know what the hell was happening.

Suddenly I heard muffled shouting, and I picked up my pace, branches smacking me across the face and arms as I

pushed through the thick tree line. Then my steps faltered when I heard the distinct sound of gunshots, a mangled NO breaking from my throat.

I heard an earth-shattering scream that I recognized as Tallie's, figuring she must have heard the shots too, and she was thinking exactly what I was. I pushed on, attempting to go as fast as I could through the thick snow at my feet when finally, I burst through the trees into an opening and stopped.

The sight before me had my blood running through my veins like ice. In the middle of the opening was a cabin, a replica of the others we'd already searched today. Officers were surrounding it, guns drawn, all pointing at the man who I know as Matt.

What the fuck.

The door to the cabin was open, and I could see two figures lying on the floor, neither of them moving. My breath caught in my throat; please don't let one of them be Natalie.

My feet started moving before my brain had any time to think. I had to get in there and see for myself. I was about forty yards away from the cabin, so fucking close, when I felt two sets of hands wrap around my biceps, pulling me back hard enough to cause me to stumble.

“Get the hell off me!” I spat through gritted teeth.

“Grant, stop!” The officer to my left was practically screaming in my face.

“It's not secure yet! Look around, pay attention.”

I looked at him with disgust before looking around at my surroundings again. What I was looking at finally registered in my brain. The cops still had their guns drawn, trying to negotiate with Matt, who was also holding a gun but had turned around and started walking back toward the cabin.

My throat felt like it was going to close completely. I was gasping for air, horrible thoughts springing to mind. My knees felt weak, and they started to buckle. If it weren't for the two officers holding my arms, I'm positive I'd be on the ground.

I watched the events unfold in front of me in what felt like slow motion. Matt had his back to the officers, so he didn't see their next move. I heard a loud pop, and he fell to his knees, laughing like a maniac. Then a split second later, officers were on him, pushing him the rest of the way to the ground and placing handcuffs on him.

Once I realized he was secure, my feet moved again, breaking free of the hold on my arms. My body was carrying me toward the cabin, but I felt like I was watching everything from the sidelines, like I wasn't fully there. I just knew I had to see inside.

As I got closer to the officer and Matt, I made the mistake of looking at him. He looked me in the face and smiled before laughing and mockingly.

“Name's Keith. Had ya all fooled.”

I curled my fists into balls at the realization of what the fuck was going on, then I took two steps toward him before my boot connected with his face, hearing a satisfying crunch.

I didn't bother looking at anyone else. I didn't care if they were looking at me. Or unhappy with my actions. Keith deserved much more than a kick to the face, but that wasn't my number one priority.

Right as I turned to go inside, Tallie came running up beside me, practically shoving me out of the way, Wade hot on her heels. She crossed the cabin's threshold and shrieked, falling to her knees and confirming my biggest fear. I ran inside, and there, lying on the cabin floor was Natalie. Blood-soaked and mangled, I couldn't even tell if she was breathing.

Her hair was soaked, blood seeping from a deep cut on her forehead, she laid on the ground tied to a chair and one of her wrists looked like it was bent in the wrong direction, making my stomach roll, hating thinking about her pain. Her feet were bare and bright red, which made me think that she put up a fight here, maybe even tried to escape.

Tallie was curled into a ball on the floor next to Nat, sobbing, repeating quietly, "No, no, no."

My vision blurred as I made my way over to her, kneeling beside her head. I gently stroked her cheek, begging her to be alive, to be able to pull through this.

In the distance, I heard muffled shouting then Wade said, "She's in here!"

As he placed a firm hand on my shoulder, "I got the medics coming Grant."

I couldn't peel my eyes off her, so I shook my head as my vision blurred even more. I leaned down and placed my forehead against hers, careful not to touch the cut.

"It's okay, baby. Everything is gonna be okay. You gotta pull through this, Nat. I can't live this life without you. Please. Please be okay." I whispered the words before brushing a kiss along her cheek.

It was at that moment that the medics came in and were not so gently pushing me and Tallie out of the way. I wrapped my arms around Tallie as she sobbed into my chest, watching as several people began tending to Nat. They were hooking her to IVs and putting wires all over her chest.

"Are you getting a pulse?" I heard one of them quietly ask the other.

"Barely, it's faint." They began preparing her to place her on the cot, and her head lolled to the side. Her skin was an awful gray color. The medic stood.

"We need to go. Now." He said firmly, motioning for everyone to get out of the way.

I turned my head to Wade, eyes wide, the fear consuming me that I might actually lose her.

He looked at the medics.

"Are you heading to Gen Med in West Cascade?"

The medic nodded his head, "It's the closest and best. If you're following, stay close." At that moment, Wade said



something for the first time since I met him that didn't piss me off.

“I'm not fucking following. I'm leading, so you better keep up.”

He looked at me and nodded toward the door signaling for us to follow him. I pulled Tallie along with me as we headed to his cruiser. I am in no state to drive, and I can admit that. I didn't need to do anything that might prevent us from getting to the hospital as quickly as we could.

## Forty Eight

# Tallie



I'm sitting in the back of a police cruiser, speeding down Highway 108. My tears have stopped, having nothing left in me. My arms feel numb, and I'm positive my knees wouldn't be able to hold me up if I tried to stand.

I was dating a man who kidnapped my best friend. Not only did he fucking kidnap her, he was her ex-fiancé who almost killed her once and now twice. How the hell did I not know this? A blanket of guilt covered me, feeling like I had led him right to her. I had been wracking my brain since we left the cabin, looking for clues or something to pinpoint. Something that would have made me know it was him. But there is nothing, not a damn thing.

She was so secretive about her past, never telling me more than his name. She wanted to forget it all. I know deep down it isn't my fault; this was all part of his neurotic plan. It didn't make me feel any better, though.

I looked out the window, letting my mind wander to places far from here. To a world where my best friend wasn't in an

ambulance, us not knowing if she was even alive. A world where my mother didn't have dementia. A world where all the men were good and never laid a finger on a woman.

Trying to do whatever it takes to keep me occupied before I lose my damn mind on this drive to West Cascade. Wade is cutting off a lot of time with the speed he is maintaining. But it isn't fast enough. Not when Nat's life is hanging in the balance.

I need her. I need her so fucking bad. I know that's selfish of me to think right now. But shit, I can't help it. She is my person, and I'm not ready to let go. Not when we just found each other.

Grant cleared his throat, pulling me from my thoughts. I looked over at him, and my heart broke a little more. The look on his face was horrifying; his eyes were dim, like all the life had been drained from them. His cheeks were tear-streaked. From the silent tears he let fall when they shut the door to the ambulance in front of him with Natalie on the other side. His hair was a tousled mess from continuously running his hands through it, and his mouth was set in a frown, but this wasn't like the permanent frown he started sporting shortly after his dad was diagnosed. No. This was worse, a deeper frown, a sign that he won't survive this if she doesn't.

He looked at me, reaching his hand out for me to grab it. I grasped it like it was a buoy being sent out to me in the middle of the ocean.

“She’s gonna be okay, Grant. She has to be. Her life with you was just about to start. I know she wanted that. She was just scared.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head slightly.

“I can’t go on without her, Tal.” I gripped his hand tighter, a lump forming in my throat again, making it impossible to speak.

Ten agonizing minutes later, we were finally pulling up to the hospital. I looked out the window and watched as a swarm of nurses and doctors came out the door, ready to greet the ambulance. That can’t be good.

Before Wade had even parked the car, I could see the ambulance swing its back doors open, and in a split second, they had Nat out and were rushing her through the doors.

I pushed my door open and tried to follow, but Wade caught up and grabbed my arm.

“You can’t do anything right now. Being in there is just going to make it more difficult for you. Let’s find a quiet room, and you and Grant can sit in there until they have an update.”

I just stood there, staring at him, contemplating his words. I knew deep down he was right, and as much as I wanted to argue, I didn’t. I gave him a curt nod and motioned for Grant to follow us. He was standing in the ambulance bay looking at the doors they pushed Nat through moments before.

We walked slowly down the hall of the emergency room, the thick smell of antiseptic invading my nose. A TV played quietly in the corner of the waiting room we were passing, I could hear quiet beeping from monitors behind closed doors, and I could have sworn I heard someone weeping in the distance. Goosebumps broke out over my skin, causing me to shiver. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to create some comfort.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Wade look over at me, his eyes crinkling with concern. I didn't look at him. I kept my eyes locked on the wall at the end of the hall. Something about him was getting under my skin like I'd never experienced. I needed to keep my guard up, not let him slip past the walls I've carefully built, never letting anyone get past them except Nat.

We made it to the end of the hall, where there was a small room waiting for us. They had wheeled in a small cart full of water and an assortment of snacks, a fucking sympathy cart. I knew what they were, and it made me angry to see them treat us like our family had died when she hadn't.

Wade stood in the doorway awkwardly, looking between me and Grant.

"I'm just gonna be on the other side of the door, uh.. if you need something, just let me know."

I barely nodded as he stepped out the door, letting it close behind him, the click of the latch echoing around the room

before a tense silence fell over us.

Forty Nine

## Grant



It's been three hours since we arrived at the hospital—three hours with no update. Three hours since I last saw Nat. Three hours of knowing nothing, is she even fucking alive?

I've been pacing for the last two and a half. Unable to keep still. I felt like I was going to go crazy. All I wanted was a damn update, but every time I tried to leave the room, Tallie reminded me that no news is good news.

I hate that saying, but I guess she is right.

“Why don't you sit down? You're gonna wear a hole in the carpet.”

I snapped my eyes up to her. I opened my mouth to speak when I heard a soft knock at the door. I spun on my heel, gripping the handle and flinging the door open with force. A small older doctor with glasses balancing on the bridge of his nose looked at me, unimpressed with my actions. I stepped to the side, allowing him to enter the room.

Turning around, he spoke monotone, “I'm Dr. Murphy, Natalie's surgeon. Are you her family?”

I looked at Tallie briefly before she said, “Yes,” leaving no room for discussion.

Dr. Murphy raised his brow at her, obviously not buying what she was saying, but he gave a slight shrug of his shoulders.

Taking a deep breath, he began talking, the first words out of his mouth, bringing me to my knees.

“She’s in a coma.”

My pulse was pounding in my ears, making it impossible to hear. My vision blurred, and I felt slightly lightheaded. No, no, no. Not her too.

I raised my head slowly, looking at him, and his face was blank. No emotion to be seen, and I hated that. He didn’t even seem remotely upset. His mouth opened like he was about to say more. Taking several deep breaths, I tried to focus.

“She has many internal injuries, as well as a skull fracture, a broken nose, a broken wrist, several broken ribs, and a break in her leg. The head injury is what has led to her being in a coma. The first twenty-four hours will be the most crucial. If she makes it through those with no issues, then there is a good chance she will pull through with little to no deficits.”

“We did surgery to try and alleviate her internal bleeding, which was successful. We also had to remove a small portion of her skull to help with swelling. She did well in surgery, which is also a good sign. She was otherwise in good health



other than being a little underweight. So that will also help with her healing.”

I swore she lost weight because of me. I did that to her. I hated myself for what I put her through; maybe if I could have gotten my damn head out of my ass, none of us would be here.

I realized Dr. Murphy was speaking again when I heard Tallie say sternly.

“We are not leaving.”

“Miss, I apologize, but visiting hours are over.” He said.

“I don’t give a shit about your stupid visiting hours. We. Are. Not. Leaving.” She said again.

He was holding her gaze, looking like he wouldn’t back down. He rolled his lips into a tight thin line and finally said, “Fine, I’ll allow it for now. One of the ICU nurses will be in shortly to show you to her room.”

Heading straight for the door before he hardly finished speaking. I only like him because he kept my girl alive, but as soon as she is clear, I’ve decided I don’t like that asshole.

We were being led to the ICU twenty minutes later, my palms were sweaty, and my heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest. We stopped outside room 208, where there was a small tag under the number that said, N. Danner. I felt like the world was moving in slow motion. People were walking past, monitors beeping, and nurses laughing down the hall. But all I

could do was stare at her name. Reading it repeatedly, hoping it would change, not to let it be her.

The nurse turned around to look at us. Tallie reached down and grabbed my hand. Squeezing hers gently, I waited for whatever this woman was about to say.

“I just want you to be prepared for what you will witness. Natalie will not look the same as the last time you saw her. She is connected to tubes and wires, bruised and swollen, and part of her hair is shaved. Her body has been through a tremendous amount of trauma over the past twenty four hours, and it shows. But I am here for you both. My name is Cindy, you can call me for anything, and I’ll be here.” She gave us a gentle smile, seeming to be the first person in this hospital that has shown a small amount of sympathy.

I was ready to see my girl, so I nodded and moved to the door. Gripping the handle, I inhaled deeply before I pushed it open. I took a few steps in and felt like I was hit in the middle of the chest with a ton of bricks. Nothing Cindy could have said would have prepared me for the sight before my eyes.

There in the middle of the room, was a large hospital bed. There were several IV poles on either side of the bed, multiple wires and IV tubes hanging from them, and a large monitor on the left displayed Nat’s vitals. There was a small couch against the far wall under the windows and two chairs on both sides of the bed.

In that bed was Natalie. You could never know just by looking unless it was me or Tallie because I see the shade of her hair and the tone of her skin. I've memorized her looks, and I know Tallie would recognize her best friend no matter what.

A small sob sounded beside me. I glanced over to see Tallie using the wall to hold herself up; her left arm was wrapped around her stomach while her right hand covered her mouth, tears falling down her face, eyes locked on the bed.

I turned back to Natalie, taking her in. The right side of her head was bald, a line of staples from her ear up to the top where her hair still was; the remainder of her long auburn hair was lying down over her left side, where her wrist was in a large cast. She had a tube coming from her mouth, I may not know much or have no medical knowledge, but I know that's a breathing tube. There is a tube coming from the right side of her chest connected to a bag hanging off the bed. Her right leg was also in a cast. And on her beautiful face were horrible bruises around each eye along with extreme swelling, the bruises similar to the fading ones she had the first time we met.

I stood there for another moment before making my way to the right side of the bed; I wanted to touch her, feeling like if I could, it would help. To know that she is still alive and in there somewhere. I sank into the chair and reached my hand out, gently taking hers in mine. Her small delicate hand was so warm against mine, I was staring down at it, hoping she would

wrap her fingers around mine, but she didn't. It just sat in mine, lifeless.

The steady beeping of her monitors echoed around the silent room. I leaned down and brushed my lips across the top of her hand, then laid my forehead on it. Letting myself slow down for the first time since I got the call from Tallie, letting my emotions consume me, and making a silent promise to Natalie never to leave her side for the rest of my life if she will have me.

Fifty

# Grant



Today marks one week that Natalie has been in a coma. She made it through the first twenty-four hours, which Dr. Murphy had said was a good thing. There were no major events in those first few hours, she didn't get worse, but she also made no signs of getting better.

Today we are waiting on Dr. Murphy to come by to tell us the results of her most recent scans. They had said a few days ago that once she hits day seven and still hasn't woken up, they would complete another scan of her brain to see if there have been any changes. I've been up since four this morning, silently pleading with her to wake up.

I was sitting in the chair with my head leaned back, and my eyes closed, gripping Nat's hand tightly when I heard the door open and close quietly. I saw Tallie walking in, and Evan was behind her. He has come four out of the seven days she has been here to check on her. He said she was family, and he wanted to be here for her. I appreciated him being around for her and for me too.

"Any news yet?" Tallie whispered to me.

I shook my head. “They came by about an hour ago and took her for the scan. I haven’t heard anything yet.”

As I was saying that, there was a firm knock on the door then Dr. Murphy appeared.

“Oh, good, you’re all here.” I perked up slightly at him, saying the word good; I hoped he would have good news for us. I sat up straighter in the chair, not releasing her hand.

“I’ve had the opportunity to look over her scans from when she first arrived, the ones we did on day three and the ones we just did today.” He paused briefly to look at the tablet in his hands.

“Comparing the three tells me that there have been small improvements. But it’s not as much as I would like.”

“There is activity showing on the scans, but she should be showing more signs of waking up by now if,”

“Stop,” I said firmly. “Whatever you are about to say, just don’t. Tell us what can or should happen for her to wake up. Don’t say anything about if she was going to wake up. Because she is going to.”

“Grant,” he started to say, but this time Evan stepped in.

“You heard what he said. Answer the question, please.” The lawyer in him shinning through.

Finally, Dr. Murphy said, “She needs to wake up in the next week. If not, we will need to start looking at other options.”

“Enough.” That was all Evan said, successfully cutting the doctor off. I was thankful for him because I was unsure I could speak even if I tried.

Six days later.

It was nearing midnight on day six of Dr. Murphy’s timeline. The room was dark, only illuminated by the monitor and IV machines, the hum of the ventilator and quiet beeping the only sound. I leaned forward, bringing my hand up. I gently brushed some hair off Nat’s forehead. My eyes stayed on her face, committing her looks to memory; no matter the outcome, I never wanted to forget how she looked. Her small round nose, the dusting of freckles over her slightly rounded cheeks that were always somewhat rosy.

“Nat,” I said softly, “Baby. Come back to me.” I pleaded softly. Something I have found myself doing when it’s late at night and the room is dark, I ask her repeatedly. To wake up. To come back. To do something, anything.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think. When you sit within the same four walls for this long, it gives you a lot of time to do that, you know. I’ve thought about a lot of things. I’ve thought about Mama and how much I miss her. I’ve thought about Dad and how much he would have loved to get to know you more. I’ve thought about the ranch, the future, and what it holds. But what I’ve thought about the most is you and me. Together. All the plans I have. I can’t wait to make you the happiest woman

in the world. I wish I would have told you sooner. I wish I had opened my eyes and realized what I had and what you were doing for me instead of hiding when I needed you most. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me. Maybe I could have stopped all this from happening." I exhaled deeply and leaned back, closing my eyes again.

"I just hope you know how much I love you, Natalie. I love you so much, and I want to show you that."

It was at that moment that I felt her hand move in mine. It was such a slight movement that I thought maybe I was imagining it. I wanted it so bad that I was making myself believe it was actually happening.

I held perfectly still, my eyes locked on our joined hands as I spoke again.

"Nat, baby, I love you." I had barely gotten the words out before I felt the movement again.

I squeezed her hand gently, "Baby can you hear me?"

This time she squeezed my hand, and I knew I wasn't imagining it. I looked up at her face.

"Natalie," before I could continue, her eyelids fluttered like she was trying to open her eyes.

I stood up in a rush, the chair scraping against the floor. I quickly pressed the button for the nurse before leaning over the bed.

My lips hovered over her cheek, and I pressed a gentle kiss to the small amount of exposed skin above the strap to her



breathing tube.

“I’m here, Nat. Come back to me. I’ve been waiting for you.”

Her hand tightened around mine again. I was looking at her face, pleading for her eyes to open. I leaned down and kissed her again. This time her eyes fluttered again before opening slowly.

I couldn’t contain my emotions, and tears slowly ran down my cheeks. My face broke into a smile, the first time since this happened. I was looking into her captivating hazel orbs.

“Hi,” I said on a shaky exhale.

Her eyes crinkled slightly at the edges as a tear slipped free from one. I caught it with my thumb right as the door opened, and her nurse Cindy came in. When she looked at Natalie, her eyes widened before she could mask it.

“Well, hello, Miss Danner. It’s a pleasure to see those beautiful eyes of yours.”

She said as she walked to the computer and started typing on it.

“I’m gonna call Dr. Murphy in. He is gonna want to see you. Then we can work on getting that tube out. Can you nod your head for me if you hear me, ok?”

I looked at Natalie, and she nodded very slowly, but enough to show us she could hear. My grip on her hand tightened. She turned her head slowly and locked eyes with

me. I looked down at her, silent words passing between us. My girl is back.

Fifty One

## Tallie



I was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. It was just after midnight. Fourteen days. That's how long my best friend's life has been hanging in the balance. Not knowing if she was going to wake up or not.

I haven't slept in days, maybe only an hour here or there. I'm trying to keep the coffee shop open and helping when possible. Mom is struggling, feeling confused about why I'm gone so much. Luckily Dolores has stepped up in my absence and has been taking care of Ty for me.

Even though I hate to admit it, I've been leaning on Wade a lot. After all this happened, he gave me his number and told me he was there for me if I were to need anything. I'm glad I met him; I wish it were different circumstances.

I rolled onto my side and closed my eyes, hoping sleep would come. I felt my phone vibrating on the pillow beside me. I picked it up, squinting at the bright screen. My eyes adjusted and widened when I saw it was Grant calling.

I quickly answered, "Hello?"

“She’s awake,” he said, his voice breaking slightly.

“I’ll be there soon.” I cut him off quickly.

Holy. Shit.

I kicked the blankets off and hurriedly got dressed. I picked up the phone again, only hesitating for a moment before I dialed a number and waited for the other end to pick up.

“Tallie? Are you okay?” Wade’s voice came through the other end of the line. It sounded like I woke him up.

“She’s awake. Can you drive me to the hospital?” I asked in a rush, needing to get there as soon as possible.

“I’ll be there in five minutes. Wait inside the shop until I get there, ba..” he stopped himself before finishing what he started to say. I was silent, sure I was hearing things.

“Okay,” I said quietly, then hung up the phone.

Holding it in my hand, I just stared at the black screen momentarily before shaking my head and gathering a small bag of stuff to take with me.

Sure enough, five minutes later, Wade was pulling up outside. Except this time, he wasn’t in his police cruiser. He was driving a huge black truck. I only knew it was him because he hardly had it in park before jumping out and coming around to open the door for me.

I stepped through the door of the shop and turned to lock it. When I turned around, Wade stood beside the open door with his hands shoved into his pockets. It was bitterly cold out, and I shivered hard. He stepped up to me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

“Come on, let’s hurry so you can see her.” He said softly.

I turned to look at him for a moment, our noses practically touching, his dark green eyes boring into mine. I broke the contact first, feeling overwhelmed with everything that is unfolding right now. I stepped into the truck, and Wade shut the door behind me.

For the first fifteen minutes of the drive, I sat in silence, staring out the windshield, wondering if Natalie was going to be different or not. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t worried that she wouldn’t be the person she used to be.

“Want to talk about anything?” Wade said, looking at me briefly before moving his eyes back to the road.

“I’m scared,” I admitted to him, surprising myself.

“It’s okay to be scared. You don’t know what to expect. You don’t know if she is the same Natalie you love or not. She suffered a brain injury. Those can change a person.”

I was staring at the side of his face. How on earth did he manage to say what I was thinking?

“Um.. yeah. That’s exactly what I was thinking too.”

He looked at me, and the corner of his mouth quirked up ever so slightly.

“Well, whatever happens, I know you will be there for her and do whatever you can to help her. And I’ll be here to help you with whatever you need if you want me to.” His knuckles were turning white from his grip on the steering wheel tightening.

“Thanks, Wade. It means a lot.”

We didn’t speak for the rest of the drive. I even dozed off for a few minutes, like my body was telling me it was okay to relax for just a few minutes, knowing that Nat was awake.

Wade parked the truck and got out. I sat for a few extra seconds, taking a moment to calm my nerves and remind myself that whatever I was walking into, it would be okay.

My door popped open, and he was standing there waiting for me.

“Whenever you’re ready.” He reached his hand out in an offering to help me get out. I grabbed it, not expecting the zing of electricity that shot up my arm. What the hell was that? Wade was looking at our connected hands, his eyebrows slightly raised.

Once my feet were on the ground, I slipped my hand from his and wrapped my arms around myself, and headed straight for the doors of the hospital. I didn’t want to waste any more time.

Stepping off the elevator, I hurried down the hall to room 208. Having made this exact trip every day, sometimes twice in one day, for the past two weeks, I sadly knew where to go.

When I approached her room, I turned and looked at Wade.

“I’ll be out here. Take all the time you need, okay?”

“Thank you,” I said as I knocked on the door before pushing it open.

The minute I entered the room, tears sprung to my eyes, but these were happy tears. There in the bed, sitting up slightly, with no more tubes coming from her mouth, was my beautiful friend.

“Hi, Tal,” her voice was low and raspy, but she was awake and talking to me.

Fifty Two

# Natalie



I can hear someone talking in the distance, a deep voice that sounds muffled, I try to open my eyes, but I can't, or maybe I am, and I'm just in a dark room. I don't know where I am or how I got here. I try to lift my arms, but I can't move them. They feel like lead, so I try my legs. I think they are moving, but I can't tell.

I hear the muffled voice again, but this time it sounds closer to me. I'm straining hard to try to listen to it. Who is that? What are they saying? I try moving my arms again, but I still can't.

I try to focus on my body, thinking about each part, trying to move it even just a little.

"I just hope you know how much I love you, Natalie."

Wait. I know that voice. It's much closer, louder. I can understand him now.

"I love you so much, and I want to show you that." He spoke softly, but I could hear him clear as day now.



Come on, Natalie, you can do it. I tried moving my fingers, and this time I think it worked, they twitched, if only a little, but they still did something. I could feel the weight of his hand against mine, holding perfectly still as he spoke again.

“Nat, baby, I love you” I moved my hand again, harder this time. Or at least I think it was harder. I tried moving my legs again but was still having no luck. So I returned to focusing on my hand, which I knew was moving a small amount. I felt him squeeze my hand gently before whispering.

“Baby, can you hear me?”

I wanted to scream yes, yes, I can hear you. But I was unable to speak, my throat feeling dry and scratchy. No words were moving past my lips. So I squeezed his hand as hard as I could, feeling like I had so little strength hoping it would be enough.

“Natalie.”

He spoke again. I tried opening my eyes. I wanted to see him, to make sure this wasn't a dream. Then I heard a noise. I couldn't quite place it; maybe something was scooting against a surface. *Dammit, Natalie, open your eyes.* I wanted to see him. I needed to.

It was then that I could feel something hovering over my face, soft tickles of breath fanning across my cheek, then there was pressure and a slight tickle, and I was sure it was his lips pressing gently to my skin.

“I’m here, Nat. Come back to me. I’ve been waiting for you.”

His voice was as velvety as I remembered. It sounded so real. This couldn’t be a dream, could it?

*Open your eyes, Natalie. You can do it.* I tried and tried until finally, I could see dim lights around me, hues of green and blue being cast around the otherwise dark room. I looked to the side, to where I was sure the voice was coming from, and sure enough, there he was.

“Hi.”

Grant said with a shaky breath. I tried smiling at him, but I couldn’t. Something was restricting me making it to where I couldn’t speak. I attempted to wrinkle my eyes slightly to show him how happy I was to see him. I felt a tear slip from my eye as he raised his hand to catch it.

Then I heard someone else speaking. I moved my eyes toward the sound of the unfamiliar voice to find a woman standing next to me in a blue outfit. She said something to me about a doctor and asked if I could hear her then to shake my head yes.

I did, I think.

Then I moved my gaze slowly back to Grant, the only person I truly wanted to see right now. Our eyes met, and I just wished I could tell him how I felt, but I still couldn’t, so I try to put all my emotions into my eyes so maybe, just maybe, he would know.

An hour later, the room had finally cleared, and it was just me and Grant alone. I just spent the last half hour learning how I got here. I remember being kidnapped by Steve. Then I remember Keith showing up at the cabin and trying to escape. The last thing I remember is being tied to a chair and Keith pushing it over. After that, it's blank. I have tried to remember anything that sticks out to me. But there is nothing. I remember hearing Grant talking to me, which helped me wake up.

“Have you been here the whole time?” I said. My voice isn't any louder than a whisper.

The doctors said it's normal and could take up to a week to regain my full voice, apparently a side effect from the breathing tube.

“Yes. I haven't left since I found you. I couldn't fathom being away from you for even a minute. I've been begging you to wake up for days. I was beginning to wonder if you would return to me.”

His voice cracked on his last word. It was clear he was holding back his emotions. He had held my hand like a vice since I opened my eyes, but I gently pulled back. His eyes widened slightly, but he finally, reluctantly, released my hand. I moved it up and placed it on the back of his neck. He leaned forward, resting his forehead against mine and looking into my eyes.

“I love you.” I choked out, beginning to cry silently as emotion overwhelmed me.

“I should have told you before.”

He cut me off by placing his lips gently against mine.

“Shh, baby. You don’t need to say anymore. I love you, too.”

I placed my head in the crook of his neck and inhaled deeply. Despite my condition and what I had been through, being in this room with Grant right now, I feel nothing but peace.

A moment later, there was a quiet knock on the door, then it opened, and in walked my best friend.

“Hi, Tal,” I said quietly.

Fifty Three

# Natalie



6 months later

If you don't hurry the hell up, we are never gonna make it on time!"

Tallie was screaming at me from the living room. I smiled to myself. My best friend was not one to mess with, and I fucking loved her for it. If it wasn't for her absolute grit and determination and standing by my side every step of the way these past six months, I'm not sure I would have survived.

She pushed me through therapy when it was so hard and painful that I wanted to give up. She was there in my face gripping my cheeks, encouraging me to push a little more. She stood behind me in court with a look of determination and pure hatred for Keith. With Evan by my side, fighting for me, we spent days battling some of the toughest lawyers in the US and ultimately coming out on top. When he was sentenced to life without parole after it was discovered, he paid off several people to be released early the first time and tried to pay off people within the courthouse involved in the new case.

She came with me when I took the trip back to Bellborough to sell the house I had been granted sole possession of. She held me in the kitchen of that house as I cried after giving her every detail of the night that changed my life forever. Getting that off my chest helped me put it in my past and move on without fear of the future. And now, as I'm attempting to get ready for a party that Evan and Grant have planned, she's keeping me on a tight timeline so I won't ruin the party by not showing up on time, something I seem to do more often than not.

I received my letter from the West Cascade School of Law in the mail this week, which will tell me if I've been accepted into their law program or not. When I received it in the mail, Grant took possession of it and told me I wasn't allowed to open it yet. He and Evan then went into party-planning mode like a couple of sorority girls. It was honestly hilarious that they were so giddy about planning this party and making sure it was all perfect. I was nervous the letter would be a rejection letter, but Evan was so sure of my acceptance that he heard none of my reservations.

I was standing in my bathroom, finishing my makeup, wearing a little black dress that hugged my curves and had a deep v in the front. I was wearing the necklace Grant bought me right after I was released from the hospital six months ago. It was a dainty gold chain that had a solitary diamond that hung in the

middle. I wasn't one for flashy jewelry, and this was beyond perfect.

My lips were painted red, my auburn hair which was now almost shoulder length, after having to be cut in the hospital, fell in short beach waves, and of course, I had on my favorite pair of Louboutin heels.

I smiled at my reflection, feeling nothing but overwhelming happiness from where I was a year ago to now. I had been at rock bottom, and I have fought my way out, coming back better than ever.

I have a man I love more than life, who treats me like the only woman to walk the earth. I have a best friend who would probably kill for me if I asked, and I have an army of people in this community who I could proudly call my family. I may have gone through hell, but I would never in any lifetime change what has happened to get me to where I am.

At that moment, my bathroom door flung open as Tallie barged her way in.

“Come the hell on!” Her voice cut off as she looked at my face in the mirror.

“Holy shit, babe, you're like really hot.”

I snorted at her comment, and we both started giggling.

“Me? Look at you. Wade is gonna be falling at your damn feet tonight.” Her eyes went big, and her cheeks flamed red.

“And that's enough of that!” She said in a sing-song voice. I just laughed and pulled her into a tight hug.

“Love you, Tal. Thank you for being my rock.” I spoke softly, determined not to let emotions get in the way of tonight.

“Okay, enough of that sentimental shit. We gotta go like... five minutes ago.” She grabbed my hand, nearly pulling my arm out of its socket as she drug me through the house out to the front yard.

“Care to tell me why we are on such a tight timeline?” I said, raising a brow at her.

“It’s just a party. Why does it matter when I get there?”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Just shut up and come on.”

## Grant

I was pacing back and forth in the hallway of the Wintervale Manor and looking at my watch again for the fourth time in a minute. Tallie texted me fifteen minutes ago to let me know they were finally on their way. I was so damn nervous. Sweat was beading on my forehead.

Evan came through the white double doors at the end of the hall. He walked up to me and slapped a hand on my shoulder, squeezing.

“You gotta relax, man. It’s gonna be fine.” He was smirking at me, obviously finding humor in my nerves.

“What if she didn’t get in?”



He shook his head slightly, “You’re worried about nothing. There is no way she didn’t.”

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down. I need to trust him on this and not worry so much. It’s just hard when I know how badly she wants this and how hard she has worked. I want it just as bad as she does, if not more. Her success and happiness are some of the most important things to me. I want her to have the life she deserves more than anything.

Evan and I have been working on this party since she received her letter, and now that it’s finally here, I want it to be perfect. I took another deep breath and went through the doors Evan had just come through. I stopped just inside them and looked around. Fairy lights were hanging all around the room, creating the perfect amount of lighting. There was a DJ in the corner of the room playing all of Nat’s favorite country music. Several tables were placed throughout the room, covered with dark and light purple tablecloths, her favorite colors. There was a long table that lined the back wall that had an assortment of sweets, cupcakes, and sugar cookies. I also decided on a taco bar, one of her favorite foods. Just behind the dance floor, placed in front of the DJ booth, was a large silver curtain. Behind it would be the biggest surprise of the night.

My palms became sweaty as I looked around, but before I could go too deeply into my thoughts, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

*Tallie: 3 minutes out*

A smile spread across my face at the thought of seeing my girl soon. When I think about everything that she has been through before we met and after we met, I feel a sense of pride. The hell she went through and survived two near-death experiences that not many people would. Even after all that, she has held her head high and continued not letting her past get in the way of her future. Hoping that I will soon wake up next to her and go to sleep next to her for the rest of my life brings me an insurmountable sense of happiness.

I walked out the French doors of the manor, standing on the edge of the circle drive as I waited for them to arrive. It was quiet, the sound of crickets chirping in the distance. Not a cloud in the sky, just a vast amount of stars as far as I could see.

Looking up, I closed my eyes briefly, exhaling slowly. I whispered.

“I hope you both are proud of me. Of who I have become, of all the things I’ve done so far, and the things still yet to come. Thank you for showing me how to love properly.”

I stood with my eyes closed for a second longer before I heard a car approaching.

Looking to my left, I smiled as Tallie pulled in. I could see Nat’s silhouette in the passenger seat. I walked over and pulled

open the door.

“Evening, Ladies,” I said with a smirk. “Glad you could finally join us.”

“Well, what did you expect? We are never on time when Nat is involved.”

Tallie said, snorting, then hurried out of the car before Nat could respond. She turned her head and looked at me, rolling her eyes. I put my hand out to help her out of the car. When she stood up in front of me, she took my breath away.

She was wearing a black dress that hugged all her curves. She had on the necklace I bought her a few months ago, her favorite pair of heels, and her lips were painted red, my favorite color that she wears. Her beautiful hair was hanging down in waves, and her cheeks were slightly flushed. Breathtaking.

I leaned down and brushed a kiss across her cheek, “Hey baby, you look beautiful.”

Her arm slinked around my back as she held onto me. She was looking up at me through her lashes, smiling softly.

“You look handsome,” she spoke quietly.

I was wearing my nicest pair of wranglers, a dark wash color, and a black long sleeve button down, but I had the sleeves rolled up to my elbows, having gotten too hot with my nerves. I had on my black Stetson and a new pair of boots that Nat had bought me not long ago.

I leaned down and gently pressed my lips against hers. She sighed softly, leaning into me more. She deepened the kiss by opening her mouth and gently swiping her tongue across my lips. I opened and let her in to explore, wrapping my arms around her waist and placing the palm of my hand against her ass. I pulled her flush against me, my erection pressing into her belly. She moaned into my mouth as she brought her hands up to wrap around the back of my neck.

Using the little bit of common sense I had left, I pulled back from her breaking our kiss. She groaned, showing her disapproval of me stopping.

I chuckled softly. “Nat, as much as I love doing this, we have a party to attend.”

She stuck her bottom lip out, pretending to pout before rolling her eyes at me. I swatted her ass which caused her to jump slightly. She looked up at me with lust-filled eyes.

I leaned down and whispered into her ear.

“As much as I love seeing this dress on you, I know I’m gonna love seeing it on the floor later.”

I leaned down and drug my lips slowly up her neck. She groaned again, which caused a chuckle to rumble in my chest as I grabbed her hand.

“Come on, baby, it’s time to go open your letter.”

Fifty Four

## Natalie



Grant was holding my hand, leading me up the steps of the Wintervale Manor. I still can't believe this is where he and Evan decided to have this party, it seems a bit over the top for me, but I wasn't going to say anything and ruin their excitement. It's not often men plan things like this, so I'm just letting them go for it.

We walked through the doors to the main hall, and a small gasp escaped my lips as I looked around. I slowly took in my surroundings, from the tables to the lights, the food and the DJ, the dance floor, and all of the faces of people I recognized from town who I'd come to adore. I turned my gaze toward Grant to find him already looking at me. He was wearing his dazzling smile, which revealed his dimple.

"You did.. all of this?" I asked, sounding shocked because I was.

He nodded, his smile staying firmly in place.

"I had a little help but did most of it myself. I wanted it to be perfect for you."

“Grant, it’s more than perfect. Thank you.”

My eyes began to burn as I held back tears, my love for this man overwhelming me. He raised his hand and cupped my cheek gently, his thumb brushing slowly back and forth over my cheek.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to my lips. “I love you.”

I smiled wide. Hearing those words will never get old, “I love you, too.” And saying it back will also never get old.

Just then, I heard Evan yelling from across the room.

“Natalie! It’s about time you showed up! Get over here, and let’s open this letter.”

I pulled away from Grant and looked over to Evan, laughing. I grabbed his hand and headed to the front of the room, where he stood.

When I was close enough for him to hear me without yelling, I said, “Thank you for this” I motioned to the room behind me.

He tossed his head back and waved his hand, brushing me off. Then he handed an envelope to me.

“Are you ready?” He asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I shrugged.

Evan walked over to the DJ booth and grabbed a microphone. He walked to the middle of the dance floor as the music stopped.

“Grant and I just want to thank you all for coming tonight in support of Natalie. She is about to become busy soon, so your support is appreciated.”

I shook my head at him. We haven’t even opened the letter yet. It’s possible that I haven’t been accepted. Evan looked over to me and smiled widely, his eyebrows nearly to his hairline, and he motioned for me to open the envelope.

I turned and looked around the room at all the faces of the people here for me. All are looking at me, waiting for me to open my envelope. An intense wave of emotion washed over me to know that many people care about me, worry about me, and want to be here for me. I never in my life thought that I would have something like this happen.

I turned to look at Grant. He looked down at the envelope and shook his head slightly, encouraging me to go on. I looked at the envelope and ran my fingers over it several times, taking a few deep breaths to calm my nerves. I wanted this so bad. Please, please let it be my time.

I stuck my finger under the flap and carefully ripped it open. I grabbed the folded letter and pulled it out. I stood silent momentarily, just staring at the letter in my hands. Slowly, I unfolded it and began to read.

*Dear Ms. Natalie Danner,*

*On behalf of the faculty and administration at the West Cascade School of Law, we take great pleasure in offering you admission to our Law Program. Congratulations on this outstanding achievement.*

My eyes blurred, making it impossible to read any more than that.

“I got in,” I choked out on a sob.

Grant heard exactly what I said, though. His large arms wrapped around my waist and lifted me into the air, spinning me around several times.

“She got in!”

He yelled loudly for the entire room to hear. Tears were flowing freely down my face now, feeling overcome with happiness. The whole room broke out into cheers and applause, the sounds of celebration engulfing me.

I leaned back so I could look at Grant. He was still holding me, so I was at eye level. I smiled at him before leaning in to kiss him. I had my lips against his as tears continued to fall. I couldn't believe this was happening.

He broke our kiss and looked into my eyes, holding my entire soul with his gaze, “I knew you could do it. I'm so proud of you, baby.”

Then he sat me down gently, and Tallie came bouncing up to me.



“Hell yeah!” she screamed and grabbed my arms.

I pulled her into a hug. “Thank you, Tal. I couldn’t have done any of this without you. Love you, girl.”

She released me and held me at arm’s length, her eyes shimmering, unshed tears of joy threatening to spill over.

“You could have. You’re stronger than anyone I know. You deserve all the happiness in the world, Nat.” Before I could respond, she spun me around.

I stumbled a bit as I realized what was happening in front of me. The dance floor had cleared, and in the middle was Grant. Behind him, where a large silver curtain was just moments before, were large white box letters that had small light bulbs inside them, lighting up each letter, spelling out MARRY ME.

My hand flew up and covered my mouth, more tears springing free. I looked at Grant; he stood with his arm stretched out to me. I walked over to him and grabbed his hand. He slowly sank to one knee, looking up at me before saying,

“If anyone had asked me a year ago if this is how my life would turn out, I would have told them they were crazy. Almost running into you, literally, in Evan’s office last year was the best thing that has ever happened to me. When I first saw you, you took my breath away, the same way you continue to each day. After we first met, I couldn’t stop seeing you and thinking about the life we could have together. The two of us have been through more tragic things together and

apart than most people. Our love is strong because of that. You brought light to me on my darkest days, and you cared for me when I needed it most; even when I didn't want to admit it, you healed parts of me that were broken for a very long time. You are my better half, and I don't want to continue on another day without you by my side. I want to wake up and sleep next to you every morning and night for the rest of my days. So Natalie Danner, will you do me the utmost honor and become my wife? Marry me."

I bent my knees and leaned over slightly, placing my free hand on Grant's cheek, sobbing as I said, "Yes, a thousand times yes. I love you so much."

I pressed my lips to his, our kiss wet from my crying. He stood and pulled away, gently removing the ring from the box he had been holding open. I put my hand out and watched in awe as he slowly slipped the band onto my finger.

It was a small gold band, and in the middle sat a large oval diamond; on each side were two smaller diamonds, absolutely perfect. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he lifted me again into an embrace spinning us around.

"I love you, Nat." He said into the side of my neck.

Fifty Five

# Natalie



Grant and I were pulling into the farm from the party. It was just after midnight, but I was still buzzing from excitement. He parked his truck and came around to open my door. Before my heels hit the ground, he had picked me up, tossed me over his shoulder, and smacked my ass.

Giggling, I barely fought back as he headed for the house.

“Put me down, crazy!”

“Oh no, Nat, I’m not putting you down until we reach my bed.”

His voice was raspy.

I clenched my legs at that comment, a warmth spreading throughout my body. He made his way up the stairs slowly, some of them creaking under our weight. He walked through the bedroom door and placed me gently on the bed. He crawled over me, his body hovering inches above mine.

“Do you know how perfect you are?”

He reached up for the straps of my dress and gently pulled them down over my shoulders, quickly removing them,

leaving me bare for him. He looked down at me, leaning back on his legs, his eyes gliding over every inch of my body. I no longer try to hide all my flaws, scars, and marks from him. I allow him to see me, all of me.

Placing both of his hands on my thighs, he slowly moves them up closer to my core. I let my legs fall open gently and close my eyes, allowing myself to get lost in his touch. I felt his weight shift on the bed before his fingers rub against my clit. I arch my back at the touch, a quiet moan falling from my lips. His other hand came up and skated across my breasts, his mouth following, capturing my nipple. I open my eyes as I feel him moving again. We are now face to face, his hands on either side of my head. I unbutton his shirt, then push it off his shoulders, my hands moving to his belt. He helps me remove the rest of his clothes, and only his black boxers remain. I'll never get tired of seeing those. I linked my fingers behind his neck and pulled him down, capturing his mouth with mine. His cock grinding against my core, creating a small amount of friction but not enough to give me what I desperately want.

Our breaths mingle together as he grinds against me again. I open my legs more, urging him on. Finally, he reaches a hand down, removing the last piece of clothing separating us, and grasps the base of his cock. Lining himself up, he slides in deep and slow, causing me to clench around him.

“Fuck, baby.” He says, breathless.

He pulls out and then slides back in, maintaining his slow, torturous pace.

“More,” I tell him.

He glides in and out.

“Please.” I’m begging now, wanting him to stop worrying so much about hurting me. Finally, he grips my hips tightly and says, “You want more?”

“Yes, please.”

“As you wish, baby.”

He pulls out and slams back in, and I scream, pain and pleasure mixed into one as he finds a rhythm to his movements.

“You are mine. All mine. Forever.” Each word is said on a thrust.

“Yes. Yours.”

Panting, as a sheen of sweat forms over my skin, each thrust edging me closer to falling apart, ready to fall into an oblivion of pure bliss.

As he continues to slam into me again and again, he reaches down and begins to rub steady circles over my clit, giving me exactly what I need. My walls are clenching around him as my legs start to tremble. I grip his forearms tightly as my orgasm washes over me like waves, one after another. Soon I feel the telling jerk of his cock inside me and hear him grunting through his release, whispering his love before collapsing on top of me.

I blow out a breath with a slight chuckle causing him to look up at me, his head slightly cocked and an eyebrow raised.

I smiled at him feeling slightly dizzy.

“I was just thinking about how we get to do that for the rest of our lives.”

My words hardly left my mouth before he gave me one of his mega-watt smiles, eyes twinkling, his skin shiny from sweat.

I love this man more than life itself.

Fifty Six

# Epilogue



Grant

I'm sitting in the audience in the West Cascade School of Law auditorium. Today is Natalie's graduation day, and tomorrow we are getting married.

Natalie has worked tirelessly over the past three years, busting ass to finish school and plan our wedding with me simultaneously. I tried telling her we could get married next year, but she refused. She wanted to leave on a three-week-long honeymoon right after the ceremony also to celebrate her graduation. I couldn't say no to that. She deserved the break.

Tallie was to my right, and Evan was to my left. My knee was bouncing feverously.

"Relax," Tallie whispered next to me.

"I'm trying," I bit out, which caused her to snicker at me.

"I can't help it. This has been a long time coming. She deserves this."

Just then, the lights dimmed, and the commencement music began. I smiled as I waited for her to appear on stage, ready for this next chapter of our lives together to begin.

Natalie



“It is our greatest honor to present the West Cascade School of Law graduates. May they use their knowledge and skill for many years to come. Congratulations!” The dean spoke loudly into the microphone.

My smile was nearly splitting my face as I stood from my seat, hugging my classmates on either side before making our way off the stage.

I walked out into the hall, looking around for the three people I knew would be there.

“Over here, Nat!” I heard Tallie shouting over all the commotion.

Turning, I locked eyes with Grant and had to stop myself from running to him. I walked quickly and nearly jumped into his arms once I was close enough. He spun me around laughing.

“Congrats, baby!”

He sat me down to allow me to hug Tallie and Evan, who were also beaming with excitement, congratulating me a million times.

“I couldn’t have done any of this without the three of you. I know I’ve been difficult to deal with the last couple of years, so I hope you know how much I appreciate you all.”

Evan and Grant just shrugged, but Tallie said, “Yeah, you were a real bitch some days. How about you thank us by buying us all a drink.”

As she linked her arm to mine and pulled me toward the exit, I looked over my shoulder to see Evan and Grant trailing behind us, chuckling, knowing better than to argue with Tallie.

More than a few drinks later, we all decided it was time to part ways, it was nearing midnight, and everyone was strict about us not seeing each other on our wedding day until I was walking down the aisle.

We were standing outside the bar in a quieter part of West Cascade. Grant's arms were draped around my waist, and his forehead rested on mine.

"What if we just sneak away and spend tonight together?" He whispered before kissing me softly.

"You know we would never be successful in that. Tallie runs a tight ship around here." I giggled, the alcohol swimming through my system, making me a little uneasy on my feet.

"Well, can't say I didn't offer."

His mouth was pressed to the side of my neck, his voice vibrating over my skin.

I tilted my head so I could run my lips along his neck. He groaned lowly at the contact. Grabbing my face in both hands, he pulled my face to his,

"I love you, Natalie. And I can't wait to marry you tomorrow."

Just then, the door beside us flung open, and Tallie marched out with Evan trailing behind her.

“Time to go!” She shouted at us.

I turned back to Grant and pressed my face into his chest, holding onto him for just a beat longer before Tallie grabbed my arm and yanked me toward her.

“You two love birds are about to get three weeks of uninterrupted time together. Say bye, and come on.” She slurred her words slightly, which made me giggle some more. Who the hell let us drink this much?

As I wiggled my fingers at Grant, a police cruiser pulled up next to us at the curb and flipped its lights on. I whipped my head around to Tallie and widened my eyes.

“Tal! Come on! I can’t go to jail the night before my wedding!”

I turned to tell Grant to start walking, only to realize he and Evan were already gone. Well, shit.

Tallie busted out laughing behind me, which only irritated me more. I spun around on my heel,

“What the hell is funny.”

I snapped my mouth shut when I realized Wade was standing there, leaning against the cruiser. HIS cruiser.

“Grant told me you ladies needed a ride to the manor.” His voice was deep with a heavy twang to it.

“Hilarious.” I pushed past them both and quickly got into the car. Tallie sat beside me, still laughing, as Wade entered the front.

“Um.. why aren’t you sitting in the front?” I asked.

“He is our chauffeur for the night. Right Wade?” She said, her voice dripping with sweetness, not the normal Tallie.

He met our eyes in the rear view mirror and just shook his head with a slight chuckle. I wasn’t questioning it any further. That is something I am not ready to unpack just yet.

Thirty minutes later, we pulled outside Wintervale Manor, where Grant proposed to me three years ago. The first thing we agreed on when it came to wedding planning, we knew we wanted to have the ceremony here.

As soon as the car came to a stop, I swung the door open and stumbled out, Tallie right behind me.

“Thank you, sire.” Tallie snorted, curtsying, as she spoke to Wade, causing us both to laugh.

“Okay, ladies, let’s get you inside. Grant will kill me if not.”

He placed his hand on Tallie’s lower back and led us inside. I looked at her and wiggled my eyebrows, getting a glare in return.

We made it to the bridal suite, where Wade informed us he would be down the hall if we needed anything. I squeezed Tallie’s arm slightly when he made that comment. Maybe one

of us could get lucky tonight since it wouldn't be me. She shut the door a moment later and spun toward me.

“Zip it.”

She snapped when I opened my mouth to speak. Knowing when not to push her, I let it go for now.

We climbed into the huge king-size bed and lay silently for a few minutes before she spoke.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?” She asked quietly.

I closed my eyes and thought about it for a moment.

“I'm not sure I've ever been more ready for something in my life before,” I spoke honestly, knowing that marrying Grant is the one thing in my life so far that I'm positive I've gotten right.

“I'm so happy for you, Nat. I'm glad I get to be a part of it all.”

She sniffled slightly. She always got emotional after drinking. I rolled onto my side to face her,

“Thank you for being here for me. I'm so glad I ended up here and found you.”

She smiled big at me before closing her eyes and falling asleep in record time, typical Tallie.

Grant

“What do you mean you don’t know what you did with the rings?”

Evan asked me, his voice an octave higher than usual. *Shit, shit, shit. Where did I put the damn boxes?*

“I don’t know, man! I was hurrying to gather everything and be here on time, and I can’t fucking remember where I put them.”

I drug my hands down my face harshly. How the hell did I manage this? As I pulled my phone out to text Tallie, the door to my suite flung open.

“I found them!” Wade shouted, bent over at the knees and deeply inhaling like he had run a damn marathon.

“They were on the mantel behind your table in the dining hall. I just happened to find them when I was,”

He stopped talking abruptly, looking between Evan and me. I didn’t pay much attention, though, just feeling relief that he had found them. Tallie would have had my balls if not.

I slipped them into the pocket of my dress pants before I turned to the mirror to look at my reflection, taking a deep breath and closing my eyes.

I spoke quietly so only I could hear.

“Guide me, show me the ways, show me how to love her today and every day. Forever.”

My heart ached as the words slipped through my lips. I wanted nothing more than for my parents to be here, to

witness what will be the best day of my life and the beginning of my forever. Although they are not here in the flesh, I know deep down they are here in spirit, and I remind myself of that as I make my way to the ceremony hall to await my beautiful bride.

## Natalie

I was standing in front of two white doors that would soon open for me to make my way down to Grant. Tallie was getting ready to walk first, and Evan was beside me. My eyes welled with tears as I looked between the two of them.

“There is still time to run if you need to,” Evan whispered with a smirk.

“The only place I’m running is right through those doors.” I tilted my head towards them.

He smiled at me, “It’s almost that time.”

He was right. Those doors would open in just a few minutes, and it would be the beginning of the rest of my life. I’ve had many doors open for me before. But none of them have felt quite like this. None of them led me to something good. But these doors were the only things between me and the one thing in life that had pulled me from rock bottom.

This love came to me without warning and did not allow me to think twice. It engulfed me like a flame, sinking its way into my heart from day one without me even knowing. This

love has freed me from all my pain, all my suffering, and all my sadness. It has awakened my soul and shown it new light.

I was so deeply lost in my thoughts of happiness I did not realize that Tallie had made her way down the aisle, and it was now my turn. I looked up at Evan, holding his arm out, waiting for me to grab it.

I looked at it only for a moment before I linked my arm through it. Looking straight ahead, I waited for the doors to open before me. When they did, my breath escaped me in a low whoosh, my eyes locking with Grant's. I saw his shoulders rise as he inhaled before he dropped his head slightly to wipe tears from his eyes.

It felt like it took an eternity to make it to him, but when I did and he took my hand in his, everyone and everything in the room seemed to blur around me. It was only me and him.

“Natalie, my love. I have never felt a truer love in all my life. I spent all my years wandering through life, waiting for you. To allow me to love like never before. I was like a feather in the wind, floating through each day, feeling lost, until I met you. You found me, and I was no longer lost. You grounded me with your love. You healed me with your heart. I vow to cherish you each day and always to be your safe haven. To protect you and care for you. I vow to love you until my last day.”

He reached up and wiped a tear from my cheek, letting his hand rest there momentarily, giving me the strength to keep it



together a little longer.

“Grant. You are my savior. My knight who swept me off my feet when I was least expecting it. During my darkest times, you have been my northern star, always guiding me with your love even when I didn’t realize it was happening. Apart we were two halves who were never really whole, but now that we have found each other, we will forever be whole, together as one. I vow to love you today and every day for as long as I live.”

We each slipped a ring on the other’s finger as we spoke our vows. Then our officiant said proudly to the room.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. Grant, you may kiss your bride.”

He placed his hands on either side of my face and sealed his lips to mine, our tears mixing together as his mouth moved gently against mine. The crowd of people began to clap, celebrating our marriage with us.

Pulling apart, Grant interlocked our fingers and held our hands up between us as the officiant spoke again,

“I now present to you, Mr and Mrs Bowman!”

I giggled as I looked out at the faces in the seats. All people from Pine Valley that I have met since moving there four years ago. Smiling broadly, I looked at Tallie, who was nearly sobbing next to me, before turning to Evan, who was standing beside Grant, also looking like he was fighting back

tears. Then I looked up at Grant, who was already looking down at me.

“I love you, Natalie Bowman,” he choked out, a fresh wave of tears overcoming him.

I leaned up onto my toes and kissed him again,

“I love you, too. Now, let’s start our life together.” And with that, we made our way down the aisle and headed for our forever.

***THE END***