



Little Rock Daddies

Road Trip with Riley



LUCKY MOON

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Lucky Moon

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Also, you can get in touch with me at luckymoonromance@gmail.com or find me on [Facebook](#). I love hearing from fans!

Lucky x o x

Acknowledgements

A big thank you to all my wonderful readers, but particularly to Natalie Cronin, who entered my stuffie competition and came up with the idea for Harper's stuffie in this book.

Natalie, you rule.

To find out more about Harper's story and how she comes to acquire that lovely stuffie, read on!

Chapter One

HARPER

HARPER ADAMS GLANCED AT her reflection in the hallway mirror, her eyes drawn to the wheelchair beneath her.

It didn't matter that the rest of her looked the same as always—same light blond hair, same freckles, same pale blue eyes. The only thing she really focused on now was the wheelchair.

She smoothed down her tank top, making a note to buy herself some new clothes. The vibrant colors of her athletic clothes felt like a cruel joke now. A bitter reminder of her days as a skilled sprinter, before the accident that had ripped her dreams away. She clenched her fists, trying to stifle the rising tide of frustration and insecurity that threatened to overwhelm her.

“Harper, honey? Are you all right?” her mom called from the kitchen, concern lacing her voice.

“Yeah, I'm fine, Mom.” Harper turned away from the mirror. “Just getting used to being back home, I guess.”

Gloria, her mother, appeared in the doorway and nodded sympathetically. “I know all of this has been a big change for you, sweetheart. And it can’t be much fun to be back here with your boring old mom.”

Harper gave a weak smile. “You’re not boring, Mom.” She sighed. “It’s just... I feel like I’ve lost... everything.”

Her mom walked over to her, and stroked her hair. “You’re here to heal and figure out what’s next. That’s all. Life has plenty more adventures in store for you yet. We’ll get through this together, okay?”

Harper looked up at her mother. Her mom’s blond hair and blue eyes mirrored her own. Gloria was in her sixties but still in very good shape. Harper always assumed she would look just like her mom as she grew older. But seeing her standing there, so tall beside her, made her realize that she’d never be anything like her mom in the future. No matter what, she’d always be in this chair.

“Maybe you should take a little break. Go explore the town a bit,” her mom suggested gently. “It’s changed so much since you grew up here.”

Harper sighed. “Bet *I*’ve changed more.”

“Sweetheart, you’ve been cooped up in the house ever since you got back. It might do you some good to get out and about.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Harper agreed, though the thought of adjusting to life in Little Rock again felt daunting. It had only

been a week since she'd moved back to the tiny Pacific Northwest town, leaving behind the Olympic Training Center where she'd spent the last six years of her life.

Actually, she'd spent the last twelve months in the Olympic Rehab Facility, trying to learn to deal with her body's new constraints. But it was no use. She wasn't an athlete, so it was time to stop trying to live like one. Coming home to Little Rock was a kind of surrender. An admission that she'd never become the person she'd always dreamed of being.

Now, she faced the challenge of finding her place in a town that seemed both familiar and foreign. But getting some fresh air sounded reasonably appealing. Her mom was right. She *had* been cooped up in the house for a long time.

"All right," she said. "Why not? What's the worst that could happen?"

Giving her mom a quick hug, she grabbed her purse and headed outside.

"I'll make tacos for dinner later!" called her mom. "Your favorite, sweetie!"

Harper looked back and gave her mom a wave to show she appreciated the gesture. Tacos *were* her favorite. She would have liked to help her mom make them, but the countertops were all too high for her to comfortably reach. Plus, her cooking skills were basic, to say the least. The Olympic Training Center used to cater to her every need. All she had to do was eat, sleep, and train. Which had been pretty much her ideal life.

She popped in her earphones and listened to Taylor Swift as she wheeled herself down the sidewalk. It was strange to see her hometown from this new low-down perspective, but she resolved to make the best of it.

As Harper navigated the streets, she couldn't help but feel a pang of envy as she watched joggers breeze past her. She shook her head to dispel the negative thoughts, determined to focus on what she could still do rather than what she'd lost. After all, this was her chance to rediscover the town she'd grown up in and perhaps find a new sense of purpose along the way.

“Okay, Little Rock,” she murmured to herself, her resolve firming. “Show me what you've got.”

*

The sun warmed Harper's face as she wheeled her way through the town, taking in the changes that had occurred since she had last visited. She couldn't help but feel a pang of nostalgia mixed with disbelief at how much the town had embraced age-play culture. It had always been fairly supportive of alternative relationships, and Harper had dabbled in being a Little herself, but the level of commitment to DDIg-themed activities now was off the charts.

Harper watched as Littles and their caregivers strolled hand in hand, not trying to hide their identities one bit. Some people wore overtly “Little” clothes—romper suits, frilly dresses,

cartoon t-shirts. Others even wore light fetish gear like collars and chain belts.

“Wow, they even have a rubber ducky fountain now,” she murmured to herself, admiring the whimsical centerpiece of the town square. It was both adorable and unexpected—just like the rest of Little Rock seemed to be these days.

Continuing her journey, Harper passed by Sugar Rush, a candy store that looked like something straight out of a fairy tale. That was an old fixture of the town—she remembered it from her youth. But back then, she wasn’t much into candy. She had always been very self-disciplined when it came to nutrition, eating the right food for her training regime. As she passed Sugar Rush now, though, her craving for something sweet began to grow.

“Guess I’m not on a training schedule anymore,” she mused. “I can eat whatever I like.”

Her mouth watered and she made a mental note to stop here on the way back up the hill. For now, though, she wanted to keep exploring.

Farther down the street, she spotted a place called Button and Bow. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a fashion store that catered to age-play enthusiasts, displaying an array of cute outfits and accessories in its windows. Harper stole a glance at a few of the items before continuing on, feeling a strange mix of curiosity and unease. While the town’s transformation was fascinating, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she no longer belonged here—not after everything that

had happened. She wasn't a Little anymore and she definitely wouldn't be one ever again.

In an attempt to lift her spirits, Harper decided to treat herself to some ice cream. Even a totally normal adult could eat ice cream, right? It didn't make you a Little.

She made her way to Sweet Scoops, a charming store located on the far end of the square. As she approached the counter, the cheerful jingle of bells announced her arrival.

"Hi there!" greeted the friendly server behind the counter, a young woman with ringlets in her hair and a shy smile. Her name badge said "Zoey" on it. "Welcome to Sweet Scoops! What can I get for you today?"

"Um, let's see..." Harper scanned the menu, feeling a bit overwhelmed by the choices. Everything sounded so... cutesy. "Mega Minty Mountain." "Chocolate Candyland." "Unicorn Sundae." She felt very self-conscious as she tried to figure out which of these sweet treats was right for her.

"Do you need some help deciding?" asked Zoey, appearing to blush at the sound of her own voice.

For a moment, Harper thought Zoey was asking her if she needed help because she was in a wheelchair, but she tried to dispel that thought.

She's just being helpful, Harper. Not everyone's out to judge you.

"What's a Strawberry Cupcake Cloud?" asked Harper, reading out the first name that popped out at her in an attempt

to sound decisive.

“Ooh, that’s one of my favorites!” said Zoey. “It’s a pretty pink strawberry ice cream with actual cupcake frosting swirled into it. There are pieces of fluffy cupcake stirred into the mixture too, and it’s studded with chocolate chips.” She giggled. “Oh yes, and there are rainbow confetti sprinkles on top. And there’s edible pink glitter on it because... well, because why not!”

Harper’s mind reeled. “Uh... I’ll take one of them then, I guess?”

“Great choice!” Zoey said, expertly scooping the ice cream into a rainbow-colored cone. “Anything else?”

“No, that’s it,” Harper replied, handing over some cash before taking the decadent-looking ice cream.

“Enjoy!” Zoey called after her as Harper wheeled herself away from the counter, holding the ice cream in one hand while wheeling herself one-handed through the bustling town square with the other.

Well... this is nice, she thought, savoring the cold sweetness of her treat. *Quite childish, yes. But... nice.*

Harper used to enjoy being a Little very much. In fact, she hadn’t so much “dabbled” in it as plunged all the way in. She had stuffies and games and even a pacifier which she’d secretly used to get herself to sleep at the Olympic Training Center at night.

But after her accident, all of that stuff had started to annoy her. It had reminded her of a time when she had been carefree. She wasn't carefree anymore, so what was the point in pretending? She had packed up all her stuffies and secret pacis and put them in a box under her bed, never to be opened again.

If she was being honest, that had been part of the reason she'd dreaded coming back to Little Rock so much. Being reminded of the person she used to be.

But now that she was here, eating the world's most childish ice cream... she felt a bit like an addict falling off the wagon.

The ice cream was delicious. And eating it made her feel like *she* was covered in rainbow sprinkles. It was cute and fun and girly! And about as sweet as you could possibly get.

On the other hand, she felt a little bit silly holding it. She may as well have been holding a sign over her head saying "Hey, check me out! I'm a massive Little!"

Still, there was no way that she was going to leave the ice cream unfinished. It was the biggest treat she'd had in ages!

Wheeling one-handed, though, was making things difficult. Ice cream dripped down the sides of the cone as Harper struggled to maintain control of both her dessert and her wheels.

"Ugh, this is so much harder than I thought," she muttered to herself, struggling to catch the melting ice cream with her tongue. "Even something as simple as eating an ice-cream is basically impossible."

She kicked herself for choosing a manual wheelchair rather than an electric one. She'd done it because she wanted to stay fit, but it really wasn't that practical in situations like this.

She tried heading down the hill out of town, hoping that wheeling downhill might be a little easier one-handed.

"Maybe I should've gotten a cup instead," she mused as she clumsily headed in the direction of Teddy Bear Picnic Park. "Or maybe I should have sat still to eat it." Sitting still wasn't really in Harper's vocabulary, though. She always had to be fidgeting, moving, doing something. She'd always been that way, and it used to work to her advantage when she'd been a sprinter. She sighed sadly. "I probably should have just asked someone for help."

Again, though, "asking for help" wasn't really in Harper's vocabulary, either. She was determined to manage on her own, even if it meant getting into a mess. After all, her life had changed so much since leaving Little Rock, and she wasn't about to let a simple ice cream cone defeat her.

The sun was not forgiving, though, and Harper's ice cream rapidly turned into a melting disaster. Drips of strawberry and gooey cupcake pieces clung to her fingers as she tried to keep up with the melting treat. She felt a bead of sweat slide down her temple, matching her dessert's demise.

"Need some help there?" a friendly passerby asked, but Harper's pride got the better of her.

"No, thank you," she said through gritted teeth. "I've got this."

Since she was only using one hand, she kept wheeling herself in circles. The town square seemed to spin around her, blurring the quaint shops and landmarks. She felt like a circus act on display for all to see—a humiliating spectacle of her own making.

“Stupid ice cream,” Harper muttered under her breath, trying to ignore the stares from curious onlookers. “Why did I even bother?”

Frustration bubbled inside her, and she decided to get away from the park to escape the judgmental gazes. As she pushed herself along the sidewalk, a sudden jolt shook her wheelchair, followed by an ominous crunching sound.

Her chair stopped. Her heart sank. Something was seriously wrong.

“Great, just perfect,” she groaned. The remaining ice cream had surrendered to gravity, cascading in a waterfall of sticky sweetness that splattered her face, clothes, and the sidewalk. “Could this get any worse?”

“Looks like you’ve got yourself in a bit of a pickle,” a deep voice said behind her. Harper glanced over her shoulder and saw a muscular man with thick eyebrows and dark stubble heading out of Rocky Road Auto Repairs. His tattoos ran like intricate vines up his muscular arms, and the stubble on his square jaw only accentuated his rugged features. He looked rough, like he’d lived a lifetime of bar brawls, but somehow he was all the sexier for those scars.

Wait... did she know him from somewhere?

“Tell me about it,” she replied, trying to wipe the ice cream from her face without smearing it everywhere. “My wheelchair just broke down, and I’m covered in ice cream. Talk about embarrassing.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” the man reassured her. “I work here.” He pointed with an oily thumb at the garage. “Maybe I can help you out with your chair?”

Harper hesitated for a moment, torn between accepting assistance and wanting to prove she could handle this on her own. But one look at the broken wheel told her that pride would only get her so far.

“You, uh, you fix wheelchairs?” she asked awkwardly.

The guy put his hands on his hips, surveying the chair. “Way I see it, it’s got wheels, and it’s on the road, so... yeah. I’m willing to take a look at this vehicle.”

“Okay, thank you,” Harper said, finally allowing herself to accept his help. As he bent down to examine her wheelchair, Harper was still struck by a nagging sense of familiarity. He was good-looking, sure, but there was something more, something she couldn’t quite put her finger on.

Maybe it was just the fact that he looked like such a stereotypically hot mechanic. Even down to those grease stains all over his tight t-shirt. She couldn’t help but admire his broad shoulders and the way his muscles flexed as he assessed the damage.

“See? There’s the problem,” he said, pointing at a loose bolt on her wheel. “How about I take this into the garage and tighten that thing up? You can get cleaned up too while you wait.”

He pointed at the sticky pink mess all over her. “Uh, yeah, that might be good. Although... I can’t actually... walk.”

He gave her a long, hard look, then his eyes suddenly flickered with some strange passing emotion. What was it? Sympathy? Disgust? Desire?

No, Harper. You’re covered in ice cream in a broken-down wheelchair wearing your oldest, most unflattering sports gear. This guy is not into you. Not. At. All.

“Tell you what,” said the guy. “I’ll carry you over to the restroom and help you get cleaned up. Then you can wait in the garage while I sort this for you.”

Harper swallowed. She felt so helpless right now. It wasn’t a feeling she was used to, and she didn’t like it one bit. “All right, then,” she croaked quietly. “I guess that’d be good.”

The mechanic nodded, and took a step forward. “You okay if I put my arm around your back? Will I hurt you anywhere?”

She loved how thoughtful he was being, but felt humiliated by the whole thing at the same time. “No, it’s fine,” she said quickly. “You won’t hurt me. I can’t feel anything in my legs at all.”

He bent down and put one arm around her back and the other under her legs. Then, he hoisted her up with a casual strength

that made her feel as light as a feather.

She clung to him, noting with surprise how rock-hard his chest was as he carried her over to his garage.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” she ventured, hoping to ease any discomfort.

“Name’s Riley,” he grunted out, without looking up from his work. His response was curt, but there was something in his voice that made her feel oddly at ease.

“Nice to meet you, Riley. I’m Harper.” She attempted a weak smile, feeling vulnerable with ice cream dripping down her face and her wheelchair out of commission.

“I know,” said Riley awkwardly as he carried her into the restroom.

Harper looked at him, her face just inches from his. His dark brown eyes seemed troubled, and she got the distinct feeling she’d seen them somewhere before. But where? She studied his face more closely, trying to reconcile this attractive man with a childhood memory.

And then the penny dropped.

“Did you go to Little Rock High?” she asked warily.

Riley nodded, dropping down the lid of the toilet and placing her down on it. “Long time ago, huh?”

A twinge of recognition prickled at the back of her mind, followed swiftly by a heat that spread across her face. The cruel taunts from her past echoed in her mind. As she stared

into Riley's eyes, the fog of confusion cleared, and she finally recognized him as the boy who had tormented her in school. Her childhood bully.

"Oh," she muttered, her voice barely above a whisper. "You're... *that* Riley. The one who used to pick on me."

Panic rose in her chest, as she realized that not only had she just met her childhood bully, but now she was also stuck in his workplace.

Riley's eyes softened, and he looked genuinely remorseful. "Yeah, that was me," he admitted quietly. "I'm sorry for all that, Harper. I was an idiot back then."

Harper could hardly believe that the same guy who had made her life miserable now stood before her, looking apologetic and... vulnerable. Her emotions warred within her, caught between lingering resentment for the past and the undeniable attraction she felt towards him in the present.

"I guess you *were* an idiot back then," she agreed.

Riley cleared his throat. "Sink's there," he said, pointing at it. "You need help getting cleaned up?"

Yes. She did need help. It was almost impossible to reach the sink from here. But she didn't want Riley to have to help her with this too. Especially when he was the jerk who once called her "Road Runner" at school.

"Nope," she lied. "I'm all good."

With concern etched on his face, Riley turned back toward her, and Harper braced herself for the next wave of

awkwardness that was sure to come.

Chapter Two

RILEY

RILEY WIPED HIS GREASY hands on a rag and stared down at the wheelchair, his mind racing. Harper freaking Adams, in Little Rock after all these years? And in a wheelchair? He couldn't wrap his head around it.

“Damn,” he muttered under his breath as he tightened a bolt on the chair's frame. The image of Harper struggling with her broken wheelchair, ice cream smeared all over her, flashed through his mind. Hot shame flooded his face, remembering how he'd tormented her back in high school. Now here she was, vulnerable and in need of help. Fate had a twisted sense of humor.

“Okay, Riley. Make it right,” he told himself firmly. He wouldn't be the same jerk he used to be.

The garage was cluttered with tools, spare parts, and remnants of past projects. A musty smell of oil, rubber, and metal hung in the air, and a quiet hum from a dusty radio in the corner provided a faint soundtrack to his thoughts.

As he worked on the wheelchair, he still couldn't shake the shock of seeing Harper like this. Back at school, she'd been a fifteen-year-old firecracker—confident and full of life. Seeing her now, struggling with her disability, broke his heart. He hadn't even recognized her at first, but then...

Boom.

Of course it was her. The woman he'd thought about almost every goddamn day since high school.

His hands worked expertly on the vehicle, tightening the loose bolt and checking the other parts for any damage. The axle had been bent and one of the wheel's bearings was almost completely worn out. He replaced the bearing and used a metal rod and his strength to straighten the axle back into its original shape. Not bad. Not perfect, but not bad.

It wasn't the first wheelchair he'd fixed.

He'd also fixed up his own chair, back when he had to use one after his accident. Flashbacks of his accident, the excruciating pain, and the grueling journey of rehabilitation flashed through his mind. The wheelchair wasn't just a reminder of Harper's vulnerability, but of his own as well. It felt strange to have this in common with her and not be able to talk about it. It wasn't the sort of thing you could just slip into casual conversation.

Hey, nice set of wheels... I used to have a similar model...

Ugh, no. He gritted his teeth and shuddered.

Don't make a dick of yourself all over again, Riley.

His mind was a whirlwind of guilt and confusion. Those feelings would've once made him lash out, seek escape in some foolish way. Now, he had to face them head-on, strive to make things right.

He still couldn't believe that Harper was here, in his garage, using his restroom. Harper had grown up a lot since he last saw her, transformed from a lanky teenager into a stunning woman. He'd seen her on the television, of course, but up close, she really was something else. As soon as he'd laid eyes on her, her stunning beauty hit him like a punch to the gut. It was hard to reconcile his attraction to her with the shame of how he'd treated her back then.

"Dammit," he muttered under his breath, trying to shove the thoughts away. He couldn't let his feelings get in the way of helping her now.

Speaking of which... was she okay? She was awfully quiet.

"Hey, Harper!" he called out. "You done in there, or shall I start charging rent?"

It was meant to be a joke. To make her see that he wasn't treating her with kid gloves just because she was in a chair. Back when he was in a chair, he'd have given anything to be treated normally by people.

But given his past with Harper, he shouldn't have tried making a joke like that. They didn't have the sort of trust and bond that allowed you to make jokes.

“S-sorry,” he called, fumbling his words. “What I mean is, are you all right, Harper?”

“Uh, not really,” came her hesitant reply. “I couldn’t reach the sink properly. It’s kind of a mess in here.”

Now, he regretted his light-hearted quip even more. The girl had been struggling, and like a doofus, he’d tried to act as though everything was fine. As though he hadn’t tormented her as a kid.

“I’ll be right in,” he said, keeping his voice as gentle as possible. He was determined to make things right, starting with helping Harper get cleaned up and getting her back on her wheels—literally. This was his chance to show her he’d changed and to make amends for his past behavior.

He pushed open the restroom door to find water covering the floor and soaking Harper’s clothes. She looked embarrassed, her cheeks flushed red, but she met his gaze steadily.

“Sorry about this,” she mumbled, wringing out her shirt.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” he reassured her, grabbing some towels from the shelf. “I’ve got to say, you’ve really made a splash. You sure know how to make an entrance, Harper.”

Ugh... that was too much again, dumbass.

“I thought I could do it on my own,” said Harper feebly.

As Riley kneeled down to wipe up the water, he could feel Harper warily watching him.

Her eyes seemed to flicker between surprise and uncertainty, as if she was waiting for him to make fun of her or say something cruel like he used to. But those days were long gone, and all Riley wanted to do now was make things right.

“Your chair’s all fixed up, by the way,” Riley told her, trying to lighten the mood. “I oiled the machinery a little too, so it shouldn’t creak as much from now on.”

“Thanks,” she replied softly, giving him a small, grateful smile.

Riley handed her another clean towel to finish drying herself off. Their fingers brushed for a moment, sending a jolt through him. He could feel the heat rising in his cheeks, but he quickly turned away, focusing on cleaning up the remaining water.

“Let me know if you need any help reaching anything else,” he offered, his voice gruff but sincere.

Harper nodded, her eyes searching his face for any sign of mockery. Seeming to find none, she let out a slow breath and began to dry herself off with the towel.

“Thank you, Riley,” she said, her eyes filled with a mix of embarrassment and relief. “Really, thank you.”

“Anytime,” he replied. As he helped Harper clean the ice cream off her shins, he couldn’t shake the thought of how vulnerable Harper seemed. These legs had once won gold medals for their hundred-meter sprints. Now, they were covered in what looked like melted strawberry ice cream, and Harper had been unable to clean it off herself.

He glanced down at his own legs. He hadn't used a wheelchair himself since he'd gotten the hang of his prosthetic. It wasn't easy, but he'd managed, and the freedom it offered made all the struggle worth it. From the looks of it, she wasn't as fortunate as he was. It looked as though the wheelchair was a permanent fixture for her.

For a fleeting moment, he considered revealing his own disability to her. Maybe it would make her feel less alone, like they were in the same boat.

But as quickly as the thought came, it vanished. He didn't want to risk upsetting or offending her by comparing their situations. Her wheelchair-bound life seemed so much more challenging than his own experience. The last thing he wanted to do was come off as condescending.

"Alright," he said, his voice breaking through the silence as he stood up. "You're all cleaned up. Ready to get back to your chair?"

Harper nodded, her face flushed from the ordeal, but she managed a small, appreciative smile. "Yes, please."

Riley looked up at her pretty face. That light blonde hair and those pale, crystal-blue eyes. The smattering of freckles on her nose and the razor-sharp cheekbones that he'd always thought somehow made her more aerodynamic.

"Here we go. Hold on tight."

Riley gently scooped her up in his arms, cradling her against his chest. As he carried her out of the restroom, Harper's

fingers curled around the fabric of his shirt. The feeling of Harper's soft body against his own sent a wave of warmth through him. His heart pounded against his chest, echoing his barely suppressed desires.

"There you go," he said, carefully lowering her into the freshly repaired wheelchair. Harper looked down at the fixed-up chair, relief washing over her face.

"Thank you so much, Riley," she said sincerely, her eyes shining with gratitude. "I don't know what I would've done without your help."

"Hey, no problem," he replied, trying to brush off her praise with a casual shrug. His gaze lingered on her for a moment longer, taking in the curve of her lips as she smiled at him. He wished he could find the words to tell her how sorry he was for everything—for his past behavior, for her ending up injured like this, for the needless embarrassment she had felt today.

"Anytime you need help, Harper," he said finally, his voice low and earnest, "I'm here for you."

She gave him a small nod. "I'll, uh, keep that in mind. Thanks again, Riley."

"Hey, no problem. And for the record, you can smear ice cream on yourself and flood my bathroom any time, Harper."

Once again, way, way too much.

Harper looked taken aback by the joke, as though she was unsure whether to laugh or cry. Then, without saying anything,

she began to wheel herself out of the garage.

Riley's heart raced, realizing that this might be his last chance to tell her everything he wanted to say. "Wait, Harper!" he called out, stopping her in her tracks.

She looked back at him, frowning. "Is something wrong?" she asked, her voice laced with concern. "Is there something else you want to tease me about?"

"Uh, no," he stammered, suddenly feeling foolish. He had so much to say, but the words were stuck in his throat. He wanted to tell her how much he'd admired her strength and determination as an athlete, even though they hadn't spoken in years. How he'd been keeping up with her incredible career ever since he heard about it. How all the shit he'd said to her when he was younger was borne out of his own insecurity and the dumb way he'd tried to ape his asshole of a baseball coach. And his asshole of a father.

But all he could think about was the fear of saying the wrong thing or making her uncomfortable.

"Then what is it?" Harper prompted, her eyebrows raised in expectation.

Riley hesitated, running his hand through his hair in frustration. "I just... wanted to say... I'm really proud of you, Harper."

Proud? Yuck. Condescending much?

His jaw tightened as he felt like even more of an asshole for having said that.

She looked as though she was about to say something, but then changed her mind. With that, she resumed her departure, leaving Riley standing there, feeling both relieved and disappointed by their interaction. As the door closed behind her, he couldn't help but feel annoyed with himself for wasting the opportunity to really open up to her.

“Damn it, Riley,” he muttered under his breath, kicking an empty oil can across the floor in frustration. He knew he had to do better next time, if there even was a next time.

Chapter Three

HARPER

HARPER WHEELED AROUND THE living room again, bored out of her mind. Her mom hovered nearby, asking if she wanted a snack or help with anything.

“Mom, I’m fine. Please, give me some space.” She sighed. Maybe she should go out again. But last time she’d tried, she’d ended up so humiliated she just wasn’t sure if she could face it.

A loud knock pounded at the front door.

Gloria hurried to answer it. “Oh!” she exclaimed. “Well, hello there!”

Harper couldn’t help herself from wheeling over to the doorway so she could spy on who her mom was talking to. She was using her posh voice, which meant one of two things: either it was the mayor, or it was someone hot and young and worth looking at.

Harper’s heart skipped a beat when she saw who it was.

“Mrs. Adams,” said Riley, standing on the porch and nodding at his mom.

“Riley, my dear,” she said. Harper noticed her voice wasn’t just posh—it was also slightly fluttery, like she found the sight of Riley more than a little exciting. “Have I missed an appointment at the garage? I don’t think my car is due for a service for another month—“

“Here to see your daughter, actually,” said Riley, looking past Gloria and straight into Harper’s eyes.

“Oh! Lovely!” Gloria turned around and looked at Harper with wide eyes. Then she scampered away, casting an excitable look in Harper’s direction.

Riley’s broad shoulders filled the doorway as he ducked inside. “Hey.” He cleared his throat. “Your chair working okay now?”

Harper shrugged. “It’s fine.”

Riley nodded. “That’s good.” He paused. “I, uh, thought you might like to give this a listen.”

He held out a cassette tape with “For Harper” scrawled on the front in black marker. Warmth flooded her cheeks. Nobody had ever made her a mixtape before, even when she was a kid. Riley was the last person she expected one from.

“You didn’t have to do that.” She took the tape, pulse racing at the brush of his rough fingers against hers. How had he gotten so fricking attractive in the decade since she’d seen him? And why was he being so nice to her?

“I wanted to. You know, as an apology.” He shrugged. “For being the world’s biggest asshole the other day.”

“It’s okay.” Her lips twitched into a smile, remembering him teasing her about flooding the bathroom. It was kinda funny now she thought about it. Maybe she overreacted? “I guess I can forgive you.”

Riley stared at her, then nodded. “Good of you to say that, but you don’t need to forgive me yet. Take your time.”

She appreciated him saying that. Because, honestly, she hadn’t forgiven him. Not for all the crap he put her through at school. And she didn’t trust this new and improved Riley version 2.0 either. Was this tape cassette some kind of weird prank to make her look stupid again? Like, maybe the mixtape was just full of fart sounds or a list of things he hated about her. That was the kind of thing her childhood bully Riley Collins would have done.

But then again... maybe he really was trying to be nice to her now.

“Oh, and you’ll probably need this too,” he said. “Unless for some reason you’re an old dinosaur like me.” He handed her a Walkman. She hadn’t had one of these since she was a kid. It felt so chunky and flimsy at the same time.

“I can’t take this,” she insisted.

“It’s a loan,” Riley said. “I’m gonna need it back eventually, for all the old-fashioned cassette tapes I definitely don’t listen to anymore.”

She laughed weakly.

He met her gaze, nodding sincerely. "I'm sorry I said I was proud of you yesterday, too. It was dumb. I barely know you. Not my place to say something like that."

She nodded, gritting her teeth together. "Yeah. Well, there's nothing much to be proud of."

Riley scowled, a dark look clouding his eyes. "That's not true."

Harper stared back at him. "Like you said, you don't know me."

Riley cleared his throat, shifting from foot to foot. "All right. Guess I'd better get going then. Let me know what you think of the tape."

Harper didn't say anything. She didn't want to make any promises.

"Aren't you going to come in for tea and cake, Riley?" asked Harper's mom, suddenly entering the room. She'd almost definitely been eavesdropping. "We made fairy cupcakes this morning."

Harper scowled. "He's not coming in for fairy cupcakes, Mom."

"Shame," said Gloria. Harper could see from the excitement in her eyes that she thought Riley was attractive. And he *was* attractive.

“Thanks, Mrs. Adams, but I gotta dash,” said Riley. “Places to be and all that. Engines to tweak.” His eyes lingered on Harper for a moment longer than they had any right to, then he turned and left.

Harper watched Riley walk down the path to his pickup truck, reluctantly admiring the way his jeans hugged his muscular thighs. He glanced over his shoulder and caught her staring, winking before climbing into the driver’s seat.

Cocky a-hole.

Heat flooded her cheeks as she stepped back inside. What was wrong with her? Riley might have apologized, but that didn’t change the fact he’d made her life miserable as a kid.

“What was that about, sweetie?” Gloria asked. “Did Riley come here to give you something?”

Why would she even say that if she hadn’t been listening? Harper wasn’t going to give her mom the satisfaction of an explanation. And she definitely didn’t want her mom knowing that *she* found Riley attractive, too.

“Riley just came here to check in on me,” she said. “He fixed my chair yesterday.” She headed for her room, wedging the tape under her thigh, out of sight.

Her mom’s eyes widened. “Your chair broke? Were you okay? Did you get hurt? Are you safe?”

Harper sighed. “I’m fine, Mom. I’d have told you if something was wrong.” There was overprotective and then

there was off-the-charts obsessed. For the past twelve months, Gloria had been the latter.

“Okay, good,” said her mother. Then, her expression changed. “Riley went to your school, you know. He was a soccer star. In your sister’s year.”

“I know,” huffed Harper. “He was a complete di—Uh. A complete meanie to me.”

“Well, he seems to like you now.” Her mom smiled knowingly. “And he’s not hard on the eyes, either.”

Heat crept into Harper’s cheeks. The last thing she needed was her mom playing matchmaker. “He was apologizing for being rude the other day, actually. But obviously, he managed to be rude while he was apologizing, too. That’s it. He’s a rude guy. Always has been. End of story.”

“If you say so.” Gloria didn’t sound convinced. “Maybe you should give the poor boy another chance. He might surprise you.”

“He already did,” Harper said with a snort. “By showing up here in the first place.”

Shaking her head, her mom said, “People can change, sweetheart.”

Harper rolled her eyes. “They can, but they don’t.”

“People are capable of completely reinventing themselves if they put their mind to it,” said her mother with a long sigh. “The hard part is figuring out which parts of your old self to hold onto.”

Harper sighed. Her mom was always coming out with annoying psychobabble. Since her dad had died and Loretta had abandoned the family, Gloria had been at a loose end. She'd gotten into crystals and angels and fairies and self-actualization, and although she meant well, she was sometimes insufferably optimistic.

“So...” she said. “What shall we do now? Ooh! Want me to do a tarot reading for you?”

Harper clenched her jaw. She hated feeling trapped and dependent, stuck at home like a helpless child. “I’m going out,” she announced abruptly, wheeling herself toward the front door.

“Alright, sweetheart,” her mom said, stepping aside with a sigh. “Be careful.”

Harper rolled her eyes.

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As she made her way through town, she decided to give Riley’s mixtape a chance. Popping it into her portable cassette player, she hit play and was immediately greeted by the opening chords of “Eye of the Tiger” by Survivor.

“Seriously?” she muttered to herself, cringing at the corny choice.

She let the song play out, hoping the next track would be better. But as the familiar sound of the Foo Fighters filled her

ears, she felt her irritation flare. The lyrics, demanding someone to walk again after being knocked down, felt taunting and offensive. Did Riley really think this was an appropriate song for her?

She switched off the Walkman, preferring to wheel herself around town in silence.

What on earth should she do today?

As she passed all the cutesy Little stores, she wondered if she ought to try and get herself a job. It's not like she needed the money right now—her Olympic career, although brief, had been pretty lucrative. But it would give her a reason to get out of the house, at least.

It was hard to imagine herself in one of the stores here, though. Selling ice-cream, serving coffee, or answering phone calls. After the life she'd led, jetting off around the world, pushing her body to its physical limits, winning medals for her goddamn country... how was she meant to live a normal life after that?

Harper wandered aimlessly, taking a pitstop at the diner to eat some French fries even though she wasn't particularly hungry. Then she headed to Teddy Bear Picnic Park, where the bright afternoon sun was casting playful shadows on the grass. Couples were scattered around the park, and Little's laughter filled the air.

“Will I ever be like that?” Harper wondered. “Carefree? In love? Happy?”

Back when she'd been competing, she'd been very happy. Her life felt complete even without a romantic partner. There was no time in her life for a boyfriend. It was all eat, sleep, and train, with the occasional secret time in Little space thrown in when she could manage it.

She had never told anyone at the Olympic center about her lifestyle. It wasn't the kind of thing you wanted the papers to find out about. But she had indulged in her own kind of play when she had a moment to spare: a bit of coloring in, playing with her rubber duckies in the bath, wearing her candy-stripped pajamas, and watching cartoons. Her work had been demanding, and Little space had helped her stay sane.

Since her accident, she hadn't gone into Little Space once. And since she'd been back with her mom, she'd tried to push it out of her mind altogether. It wasn't because her mom wasn't supportive of it. Her mom knew she used to be a Little and she was fully supportive of it. You couldn't really live in a place like Little Rock and not be accepting of the lifestyle. The problem was, her mom was a bit too supportive of it. Kept trying to push Littleness on her like it was the answer to all her problems. Cupcakes, fairies, games.

Unfortunately, Little Space wasn't a good fit for Harper anymore. How was she meant to get into a mindset where she felt playful and carefree now she was stuck in a chair? She felt claustrophobic and stifled. Little space was a place where she no longer belonged. Just like an Olympic track event or a flight of stairs. Some parts of life were just out of bounds to Harper now.

Nonetheless, she couldn't stop staring at people who engaged with the DDlg lifestyle. She looked at all the other Littles in the park with envy, wondering if she could ever be like them again. Maybe if she miraculously learned to walk... Like that Foo Fighters song had said. If she could just stand up and leave her chair behind, walking on her own two feet, well—if she could do that, she could do anything.

Nearby, there was a soccer game in progress that caught her attention—a mix of Daddies and Littles running around, kicking the ball with enthusiastic energy.

“Go, Daddy, go!” a Little cheered from the sidelines, her pigtails bouncing as she clapped her hands.

“Ball coming your way, sweetheart!” called a Daddy Dom to a Little near the goal.

“Oopsie, sorry Daddy! Missed it!” the Little said, blushing.

“Don't worry, princess. Better luck next time.”

“I hope so! I've got my lucky socks on, Daddy!”

One of the goalie Littles started to whine. “Is it half-time yet? I want my juice box!”

“You *are* a juice box,” quipped a Daddy Dom in return.

Harper sat on the sidelines, and couldn't help but smile at the sight, feeling a pang of longing to join in the fun.

“Nice goal!” a deep voice shouted, and Harper's eyes followed the familiar sound, landing on Riley, who was standing at the edge of the field.

Yikes.

She hadn't noticed him.

A moment of awkwardness washed over her as their gazes met.

Her heart skipped a beat, and she found herself unable to look away. He was wearing a soccer t-shirt and track pants which were so tight they left practically nothing to the imagination. His muscles were spectacular, made even more spectacular by the thick, dark tattoos snaking all over his arms. And the bulge at his groin told her that he was no less spectacular in the, er, Underpants Department too.

Stop thinking about that particular department right now, Harper. Focus on the Mr. Meanie Department.

Dang it, why did he have to be so sexy? The mean ones always were.

“Hey, Harper!” he called out, his voice hesitant but warm as he headed over to her.

“Hey,” she replied, trying to keep her tone neutral. She didn't want him to think she had forgiven him for everything just yet. But something inside her stirred—a growing curiosity about this *new* Riley, who had showed up on her doorstep with a mixtape, and who looked extremely hot in track pants.

“You digging the tape?” Riley asked, nodding at the Walkman.

Harper shrugged awkwardly. “Not listened to much of it yet.”

“Fair enough,” Riley replied. “Let me know once you have.”

A burst of laughter from the soccer field drew Harper’s attention back to the game, and she noticed a Daddy Dom playfully lifting a Little onto his shoulders.

“Looks like they’re enjoying themselves,” Riley commented.

“Yeah,” Harper agreed hesitantly, not quite sure what else to say. Suddenly, it occurred to her that Riley could very well be a Daddy Dom. In fact, in a place like Little Rock, why *wouldn’t* he be? The thought sent a shiver down her spine, both thrilling and terrifying her at the same time.

She found herself staring at the front of his t-shirt now. In capital letters, the writing said: “Lil’ Kickers Soccer Team.” Only a Daddy Dom could agree to be in a team with a name as cutesy as that... right?

It was very strange to think about Riley being a Daddy Dom. As a teenager, he hadn’t possessed any of the qualities needed for the role. He was disdainful, judgmental, the very opposite of nurturing. But as an adult...? She could imagine someone with his arrogance being dominating in the bedroom, but was it possible that Riley could also be caring, protective, sweet?

She shook her head, trying to push the thought out of her mind.

“Enjoying the game?” he asked, scratching the back of his head.

“More like observing,” she said sharply, her fingers squeezing the armrests of her wheelchair.

“Well, if you ever wanna play, there’s always room for more on the team. Even if you end up on the sidelines as a sub like me for half the game.” He laughed. “Think they’re punishing me for getting a red card in the last game. Trod on the referee’s toe, but it was honestly a total accident.” He grimaced.

Harper didn’t laugh. In fact, she discovered that there were tears in her eyes. “Not really my sport.”

“It’s not really any of our sports,” Riley responded, grinning. “I might have been good at this once, but these days, I’ve got two left feet.”

At least you’ve got feet, Harper thought bitterly.

“I just... don’t think I’m really capable of kicking a ball around,” said Harper, looking down at her chair awkwardly.

Riley’s eyes filled with sincerity. “You’re strong, Harper. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

She felt her cheeks heat up at his words. Was this really the same guy who had teased her mercilessly as a kid? She wanted to believe he had changed, but doubt still lingered in the back of her mind.

“Maybe,” she conceded, glancing back at the soccer game. “But not today.”

“Fair enough,” Riley said, his face softening as he watched her. “Just remember, Harper—you can do anything you set your mind to.”

The confidence in his voice made her heart race, and she found herself drawn into his gaze once more. For a moment,

they simply stared at each other, their unspoken connection growing stronger.

“Thanks, Riley,” she whispered, finally breaking eye contact. “It’s a nice thought, but some things are just physically impossib—“

Just then, they were interrupted by a shrill whistle.

“Damn it,” said Riley, “looks like it’s my turn to shine.” He took off his track pants to reveal tight black shorts, then he nodded at Harper and ran onto the pitch.

As she watched him run, Harper’s jaw dropped.

Yes, the man had thigh muscles like an athlete, but there was something else that she saw that took her breath away.

Riley... had a prosthetic.

The lower half of his left leg was missing from the knee down. In its place, was a slim black prosthetic with a soccer shoe attached to the bottom so that you couldn’t tell when he wore pants.

Harper just couldn’t believe it. Riley Collins was an amputee?

As the soccer game continued, Harper couldn’t take her eyes off Riley. Seeing him out there, running around with his prosthetic on display like it was no big deal... it was inspiring. And it definitely didn’t make him any less hot. If anything, it made him even hotter. He was so strong and powerful, and so brave for getting out there like that. So much braver than her.

She noticed how his eyes followed the ball intently, a look of concentration on his rugged face. Once in a while, he would shout out encouragements or advice to his teammates on the field, his voice deep and commanding. Occasionally, when the gameplay paused and their eyes met, Harper felt a jolt of electricity pass between them, as if acknowledging the shared discomfort and unspoken connection they both felt.

Riley offered her a wide smile, and she returned it with a touch of uncertainty.

Was Riley being so nice to her because they both had a disability?

Did he feel... bonded to her because of it?

Did she feel bonded to him?

As Harper watched the game, she considered putting in her earphones and listening to more of the cassette tape. Now that she knew what she knew about Riley, would the music resonate with her anymore? After all, Riley *had* learned to walk again, just like in that Foo Fighters song.

It wasn't like Harper could learn to walk again, though. "Irreversible nerve damage" was the phrase the doctors had used. Some people with her condition, *chronic equina syndrome*, were able to recover partially or fully, but not her. She was one of the unlucky ones. Doubly unlucky, because before the accident her whole life had revolved around using the power in her legs. Now there was about as much power in them as a wet firework.

No. Harper wasn't going to listen to the mixtape. She didn't want to give Riley the satisfaction. Their lives were completely different to each other's. Having legs that didn't work properly wasn't enough to create a connection. And it certainly didn't erase all the nasty names Riley had called her as a kid.

Bean pole.

Road Runner.

Skinny Minnie.

Sadly, Harper wheeled away from the park, the sounds of laughter and cheering fading into the distance as she put the soccer game behind her. The late afternoon sun warmed her face, casting a golden glow over the world around her. But despite the beauty of this place, Harper couldn't shake the anguish that gnawed at her heart.

"Where do I go from here?" she wondered, her thoughts a whirlwind of confusion and doubt.

For now, there was only one answer to that question: home.

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"Harper, is that you?" Gloria called from the kitchen as she wheeled inside. "How was your trip out?"

"Fine," she muttered, not wanting to get into the details.

Her mom eyed her carefully, concern etched across her face. "Are you sure you're okay, honey? You seem a little... off.

Did your chair break again? Should we go get you a new one?"

"I'm fine, Mom," Harper snapped, irritation bubbling up inside her. "My chair is fine. Everything's fine." She hated how her mom always treated her with kid gloves, as if she were made of glass and might shatter at any moment.

"Alright," Gloria said cautiously. "Well, dinner will be ready soon if you're hungry. I'm making lasagna. Your second favorite."

"Okay," Harper replied with a sigh, wheeling past her mom and toward her room. She didn't have the heart to tell her mom that lasagna was only her favorite when she was like seven years old. As an athlete, her tastes had completely changed. Grilled protein. Steamed vegetables. Brown rice. Not that there was any point eating stuff like that anymore. She might as well eat as much cheese sauce as she wanted these days. Who was counting?

She could feel her mom's watchful gaze following her, but she didn't care. All she wanted was to be alone, to process her emotions in peace.

Once safely inside her room, Harper slammed the door shut, the sound echoing throughout the house. This wasn't actually her childhood bedroom. It was her mom's office, in the room downstairs next to the kitchen. Since Harper could no longer get upstairs under her own steam, this was her room now. It was small in here, and slightly depressing. The walls were gray and everything was quite businesslike. Her mom had told

her they could redecorate to make it more to Harper's taste... but doing that would involve admitting that she would be staying here for the long haul. And there was no way she wanted to stay here forever, getting under her mom's feet all day. But where the heck would she go?

She found herself gazing at a photo of herself as a child, next to her sister, Loretta, who was two years older than her. It felt like she was looking at a pair of aliens now. She hadn't spoken to Loretta in so, so long, and the picture of herself in that photo... well, she looked so carefree, so... not disabled.

Loretta didn't even know about Harper's chair. She didn't know about anything. For so long, Harper had felt furious with her sister for abandoning the family, but right now she felt oddly empathetic. The need to run away from everything was growing so great in her that she could hardly contain it.

She balled her hands up into fists and screamed into a pillow.

"It's not fair! Why me?"

She knew she was acting like a petulant child, but she couldn't help it. Her emotions were all over the place, and she needed a way to release them.

But... how?

Chapter Four

RILEY

RILEY'S FINGERS TAPPED NERVOUSLY on the cold metal of his prosthetic leg as he dialed Pat's number. He knew he needed advice, but vulnerability wasn't exactly his strong suit.

"Hey, Riley, what the craic, my main man?" Pat's cheerful Irish voice answered the call.

"This a good time to talk?" Riley asked. Pat was still in the Air Force. Riley knew, having served with him, that there were good times to talk and bad ones. His friendship with Pat had lasted so long because they both understood each other just about better than anyone in the world.

"Look, I need your help," Riley admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's about Harper."

"Harper? The girl from your past? The one you were an eejit to but you actually liked?" Pat asked, a hint of curiosity in his tone.

Riley laughed. Pat really did know everything about him. They'd served together for six years, after all. Spent a lot of time in close quarters, with a lot of time to get to know the ins and outs of each other's lives.

"Yeah, her. The one I was an... eejit to. Listen. She's back in town, and I want to make it right." Riley stared out the window, watching the sun dip below the horizon, casting shadows over Little Rock.

"Alright, man, lay it on me."

Riley took a deep breath. "Okay, well, she turned up outside my garage the other day. In a wheelchair."

"Jaysus. She okay?"

"Looks like it's permanent, but she seems to be doing okay... physically. I'm not sure about her mental state, though. She seems pretty down. Like *I* was the first couple years after the accident."

"Poor girl. She was an Olympic athlete and everything. Long way to fall, huh?"

"Yup," Riley agreed. "Anyway. She turned up at my garage out of the blue and I was so damn flustered I made a couple dumb comments. Then I tried to smooth things over by giving her the..." He paused, embarrassed. "The mixtape."

Pat laughed. "You mean... our mixtape?"

"Yeah," said Riley. "The one you gave me to help me deal with shit. But as you may or may not remember, the second

side of the tape was empty, so I added a few extra tracks. Ones specific to her.”

“Hmmm,” said Pat thoughtfully. “Sounds to me like Harper’s blossomed into a fine young woman.”

“Whadday mean?” asked Riley gruffly.

“Going the extra mile to make amends with her. You’re still into her. Seems as though that teenage crush of yours has developed into something more... adult.”

Riley gritted his teeth together. “She’s a good-looking girl, I’ll give you that. But I knew that anyway. I’ve been following her sporting career for god knows how long.”

“Forever?”

“Ha. Very funny. Yes. Okay. Forever. You make it sound like I’m obsessed.”

“You always did talk about her a lot,” said Pat. “And you made us watch all her track events when they were televised. Didn’t you have some kind of chart t—“

“No, I did *not* have a chart, Pat.“ Riley huffed grumpily. “But yeah, fine, I always had a soft spot for her. But the point is, I messed up back then, and I’m messing up all over again now. I ran into her at a soccer match yesterday. Pretty sure she knows I’m a Daddy Dom now, which feels a bit weird, although I’m ninety-nine percent sure she’s a Little, so—“

“So you’d be perfect for her, if only you could find a way to show her that you’re not the biggest muppet on the planet?”

“On the subject of muppets, remind me why I called you again,” Riley joked.

“Because I’m the only fella you know who accepts you for being a one-legged Daddy Dom with a schoolboy crush and tells it to you straight?”

Riley grunted out a laugh. “Yeah, man. Exactly.”

“So, you going to try to show this girl that you care about her, then?” Pat asked.

“Wanted to, but she left the soccer match early,” Riley said. “Wasn’t sure if she just wanted to get away from me.”

“Ah feck,” Pat responded. “She hasn’t said anything since?”

“Nope.” Riley sighed. “I’ve probably blown it.”

Was it the comment about joining the soccer team that had done it? He’d truly meant it, but maybe it came off as insensitive. Maybe she just felt weird about him seeing her in a chair, period. He thought about how he’d felt yesterday when Harper had seen his prosthetic for the first time. He’d felt strangely exposed. He guessed maybe she felt the same.

“If I haven’t blown it, though, I’ve got this idea.”

“Okay... sounds intriguing. Shoot.”

“If she *is* up for giving me a chance, I’d like to take her on a road trip. Like the one you took me on. To help her find her confidence again.” He could almost feel the rumble of the road beneath them as he imagined them driving through the Pacific Northwest, side by side.

“It’s a big ask when she hardly knows you...” Pat said thoughtfully.

“I know. But I get the feeling it’d really help her. Like it helped me after my accident.” He paused. “Plus, I could really use some time away from Little Rock myself. It’s been a while since I’ve changed things up, you know? Been stuck in my groove a bit, trying not to dream any big dreams, just in case things get messed up again.”

“Sounds like this trip might be exactly what you *both* need,” Pat replied encouragingly.

“Thanks, man.” Riley felt a surge of gratitude for his friend’s unwavering support. He clenched his fist, determination creeping into his voice. “We both need a change. But how do I convince her?”

“Be honest. Share your intentions, show her you care. And then give her space to decide. You can’t force her, but don’t give up too easily either.”

“All right, Pat. I appreciate the advice. You might have actually said something intelligent, for the first time in your life.”

Pat laughed. “Don’t make me big-headed.”

“Too late,” Riley quipped. “Anyway, thanks for the chat. I’ll talk to her right away.” Riley ended the call, his heart pounding in his chest.

As he prepared to face Harper, his thoughts raced with anticipation and hope. Maybe this road trip could be the

beginning of something worthwhile for them both, a journey not only through breathtaking landscapes but also through healing and self-discovery.

“Worth a shot,” he whispered to himself, stepping out into the evening air.

It was cool and crisp outside, carrying the scent of fresh-cut grass and the promise of change.

Riley’s pulse raced as he strode down the sidewalk, each step bringing him closer to a potentially life-altering conversation. He knew he couldn’t guarantee that Harper would embrace his idea, but he was determined to give it his best shot—for her sake, and for his own.

As he approached Harper’s place, he noticed the porch light casting a warm glow on the wooden swing. He could make out the silhouette of Harper sitting there, lost in thought. His stomach clenched anxiously, but he steeled himself and continued forward.

“Hey,” he called out gently, not wanting to startle her. “Mind if I join you?”

Harper looked up, her eyes widening in surprise. “Riley? Uh, sure. I guess so. Come on up.”

Riley’s boots crunched on the gravel driveway as he approached Harper’s place, his body tensed in anticipation. The evening sky was painted with hues of pink and orange, casting a warm glow over the quaint house.

He walked up the ramp Mrs. Adams had recently had installed, and he took a seat beside Harper on the porch swing, the wood creaking softly beneath him. He hesitated for a moment, gathering his thoughts before diving into their conversation.

“Look, Harper, feel free to tell me to take a hike, but I’d like to speak honestly with you if I may.”

Harper looked at him with a frown, then her expression softened. “Sure. Why not? It’s been a long time since anyone spoke honestly with me.”

“It has?” Riley asked, puzzled.

Harper sighed. “Everyone’s so busy treading on eggshells around me these days that all I seem to get is a constant pity party.”

Riley laughed dryly. “Been there myself. It sucks. There’s so much more to you than your disability, right? But people don’t seem to be able to look past it.”

Harper looked at him, recognition fluttering in her eyes. “Yeah...” she said, lost in thought. “But then, I guess *I* struggle to look past it too.”

Riley cleared his throat as he studied Harper’s face. Her eyes were distant, her lips pressed into a thin line. He knew she had every reason to be wary of him—he’d been a jerk in the past. But now, more than anything, he wanted to make things right.

“Harper, I want to offer you my sincerest, deepest apologies for everything I said to you back when we were kids. I was a

prize jerk, nothin' but a jock and a bully, and the things I said to you have plagued me my whole life long.”

“Stick Legs. Skinny Minnie. String Bean. One-Trick Pony. Noodle,” reeled off Harper, listing some of the names Riley had called her. “And then you spread all those rumors about me using performance-enhancing drugs. I mean, really? I was a kid in high school. You really believe I was on steroids?”

Riley shook his head, letting out a long sigh. “Nope. Coach JP told me that. I was impressionable back then. Believed everything that guy told me. Until it came out in the papers that he was seeing your sister, and he got thrown off the school premises. Sorta forced me to rethink a lot of things after that.” He paused, running his hands through his hair. “Those cruel names I called you... I did it to get your attention. Because I liked you.”

“You liked me?” asked Harper, screwing up her nose. “But you were Riley Collins, Mister Popular. Mister, “I only date cheerleaders.” In fact, I’m pretty sure at one time or another you dated every cheerleader in the school.”

Riley chuckled. “Guess I did get through ’em. But it’s only because I wasn’t really into them. I was... mesmerized by you, Harper. Your grace on the running track was what drew me to you. But there were other things, too. You were so much more quiet and less bratty than a lot of the other girls who were good at sports. You didn’t use your skills on the field to fuel your ego. You kept your head down and worked hard, and I respected that. You were like... someone I looked up to. Plus,

I once saw you helping a kid in a lower grade who'd just gotten a wedgie. You stuck up for them and helped turn the situation around for them. You were just about the most caring, prettiest, loveliest girl in the school.”

Harper looked at him with wide eyes, like she was drinking in his words but was unable to process them. “You... liked me?”

Riley nodded. “I still do, Harper Adams.”

Harper let out a soulless laugh. “You don't even know me.”

Yes I do, thought Riley. Yes I really fucking do. And I want to get to know you even better.

“You just feel sorry for me. Like everyone else around here.”

Riley growled, frustrated. “Not true. I've been there, Harper. Lived through the shit you're dealing with right now. Not in exactly the same way, granted. Everyone is on their own journey. Look, I know I messed up before,” he said gently, his voice low and sincere. “But I want to be there for you now. I want us to build trust, to find some kind of... I don't know... balance, I guess.”

Her gaze snapped back to him, anger flaring in her eyes. “Why?” she spat, her fingers curling into fists on her lap. “Why does it matter? Why do you care so much about making amends with me? To make yourself feel like less of a dick? Did your therapist put you up to it?” She paused. “Or do you think that we're like, twins, or something now that we both have shitty legs?”

Riley swallowed hard, feeling the sting of her words. He knew she was just lashing out, but it still hurt. Searching for the right words, he took a deep breath and met her fiery gaze.

“Listen, Harper,” he began, his voice steady despite the turmoil inside him. “It’s not about our disabilities or whatever else we’ve got going on. It’s about who we are as people. I’m trying to be a better person, yes, and I want to help you see that you’re still the strong, amazing woman you’ve always been. The reason I want to do it is because I know that you’re worth it. You’re worth everything.”

As he spoke, he noticed her anger start to wane, replaced by a flicker of vulnerability in her eyes. Taking a chance, he reached out and gently took her hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“Give me a chance, Harper. Hear me out.”

“Fine,” said Harper. “But why didn’t you mention your leg to me when we first met? It was a bit of a shock suddenly seeing you had a prosthetic on the soccer field.”

“Look, I didn’t bring up my leg because it doesn’t define me,” Riley said earnestly. “And your issues don’t define you either, Harper. We’re more than that.”

“Plus you can hide your disability under your pants.” Anger was etched onto her face, but it only lasted a moment. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m just...”

“Angry. I know. You’ve got every right to be angry.”

“I don’t want to be angry.”

He saw her skepticism but pressed on, hoping she'd at least consider his proposition.

“Now listen. I have an idea,” he said, excitement bubbling inside him now. “It’s a bit out there, but I want you to really think about it. What if we took a road trip together? Around the Pacific Northwest. It could be a chance for both of us to get away from the bad memories we have of this town. And maybe, along the way, we can help each other heal.”

Harper narrowed her eyes at him. “A road trip? Me and you?”

“Mm-hmm,” said Riley. “I can assure you, I’m a damn good driver, and an even better travel companion.”

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, casting amber light on her face, her expression softened ever so slightly. Riley noticed the shadows under her eyes, a testament to the emotional weight she carried.

“A road trip,” she echoed, mulling over the idea. “But... why?”

“Mountains, forests, coastline... they’re good for the soul, Harper. You know, Little Rock is a great little town, but sometimes, when everyone around you seems to be living their perfect life, you need to get away for a while. Figure out what you want. Who you are.”

As he spoke, he imagined them heading through lush green forests, laughing as they splashed in the ocean, and sharing quiet moments under the vast starry sky. The thought of

spending time with Harper outside the confines of Little Rock made his heart race.

Harper bit her lip, considering the proposal. Her fingers traced patterns on her jeans.

Riley held his breath, waiting for her response.

“Riley, I don’t know,” she said at last, her skepticism evident in her furrowed brow. “It sounds like a huge undertaking. And what’s the point of it all? To find some... hidden confidence?”

Riley ran a hand through his hair and sat down beside her on the porch steps, feeling the cool evening breeze brush against his face. He knew he needed to be patient with her, to give her time to get used to the idea.

“Harper, it’s not just about that,” he said, his voice gentle but firm. “It’s about getting out there, experiencing new things, and reminding ourselves that life is worth living. It worked for me after I lost my leg. I took the long way home and ended up traveling around New Zealand and Australia for six months.”

“Well, that really is the long way home.”

Riley laughed. “Yup. And it helped me massively. But lately, I’m kinda in need of a booster. And I’d love a travel buddy. So... whaddya say?”

He looked over at her, trying to gauge her reaction. Her green eyes flickered with uncertainty, but he could also see a glimmer of curiosity.

“You know, it’ll give us a chance to spend some quality time together,” he added, a playful grin spreading across his face.

“Think of all the car journey games we can play. I Spy. The Number Plate Game. Twenty Questions. Would You Rather.”

Harper chewed on her bottom lip, her gaze fixed on the horizon. Riley couldn't help but admire her profile—the curve of her cheek, the determined set of her jaw.

“I do love car journey games,” Harper said thoughtfully. “But you have to know, I'm really good at them...”

Just as Harper's smile began to grow, the front door creaked open. Riley glanced over to see Mrs. Adams stepping out onto the porch with a concerned expression on her face.

“Harper, honey, it's late. Are you okay? Did you put bug spray on? You know the mosquitoes have a taste for you for some reason—“ She stopped as she noticed Riley. “Oh! Riley! Hello there, young man. Good to see you taking care of my daughter.”

Harper scowled. “He's not taking care of me. I'm taking care of myself.” A clarity appeared in her bright blue eyes all of a sudden. “In fact, we're just planning a road trip we're taking together.

Mrs. Adams's mouth made an ‘O’ shape, and she wrung her hands nervously. “No offence, Riley, but... a road trip with a man you hardly know, sweetie? Are you sure? I don't want you to get hurt.”

Riley clenched his jaw, trying not to bristle at the insinuation. But he knew that this was the moment Harper

needed to make up her own mind. He held his breath, waiting for her response.

“Mom,” Harper said, her voice firm but patient, “I appreciate your concern, but I need to do this for myself. I’m tired of living in fear and letting my past control me. This trip is a chance for me to rediscover who I am and what I’m capable of.”

Mrs. Adams hesitated, glancing between her daughter and Riley. She sighed, then nodded reluctantly. “Alright, I trust you, sweetheart. And I trust Riley, too. Just be careful both of you, okay?”

“Yes, Mom,” Harper replied, giving her mother a reassuring smile.

Elain hovered there for a moment, then went back inside.

“So, let’s talk details,” said Harper, sounding much more confident now. “How long do you think we’ll be gone?”

“Ten days should give us plenty of time to explore,” Riley suggested. “That way, we can take it slow, and enjoy each stop without feeling rushed.”

“Let’s make it two weeks,” Harper said, quick as a flash.

Riley paused. Two weeks off work? He had an assistant who worked at the garage who would probably be glad of the extra hours, but... it was one hell of a commitment. What if they hated each other’s company?

He looked at Harper searchingly, already knowing the answer to that question. There was nothing to worry about

from his side. The thought of spending two weeks with the woman who had occupied his thoughts for the last decade and a half was a dream come true. He would make sure she enjoyed his company, damn it.

“Sounds good,” he agreed.

“And what kind of transportation are we looking at? Your truck... or should we rent something more comfortable for long drives?”

Riley smirked. “Don’t worry, my truck’s got character. It’ll get us where we need to go, and it’s roomy enough for both of us and our gear.”

“Okay, then,” Harper said, nodding thoughtfully. “As for accommodations, I’m guessing we’ll be staying in motels or something along those lines?”

“Yep, motels and campsites, depending on where we end up each night,” Riley confirmed. “I’ll take a tent but we can play it by ear, see what feels right. Just tie up any loose ends you have here, and then we’ll take off.”

Harper smiled at that idea, seemingly intrigued by the spontaneity of it all. “I like that. It’s been a long time since I’ve done anything without planning every last detail.”

“Then this trip is exactly what you need,” Riley said, grinning at her. “A little adventure, a little unpredictability—it’s gonna be one hell of a ride.”

As they continued to discuss their plans, Riley couldn’t help but feel a growing sense of anticipation and excitement. He

knew that this journey would be a turning point for both of them—a chance to face their fears, break free from the past, and forge a new path together. And no matter where the road took them, he was ready to face it head-on, with Harper by his side.

Chapter Five

HARPER

HARPER'S HEART POUNDED AS she wheeled herself through the entrance of the rundown Aberdeen Trailer Park. The city was only a couple hours drive from the quaint coastal town of Little Rock, but it couldn't be more different here.

The down-on-its-luck community had been reduced to a collection of rusty, sagging homes with peeling paint and overgrown yards. Harper could practically feel the desperation in the air, like a thick fog that clung to everything it touched.

“Okay, let's see if I got the right address,” Harper whispered to herself. Harper's hands gripped the wheels of her chair, the rubber warm beneath her fingers.

She had decided to visit Loretta before embarking on her trip with Riley. He had suggested tying up loose ends, and this one—a sister she hadn't spoken to in years—felt like the loosest end of all. She wanted to let Loretta know about her current situation, about how life had changed for her. And she wanted

Loretta to see, somehow, that she forgave her for running away. She finally understood it.

As she navigated the narrow, uneven pathways between trailers, Harper couldn't help but feel a mix of nervousness and anticipation. After what felt like an eternity, she finally found the address her mom had provided: Loretta's home.

Her mom had never actually been to the address to verify it. In fact, shortly before Loretta had left home, Gloria had found herself snooping in her daughter's bedroom, looking for clues to work out why she was acting strange. She'd ended up reading Loretta's diary, and seen the address written in there. Racked with guilt, she'd never been to the address or contacted Loretta there in any way, as that would have involved explaining how she knew about it. So, after all these years of Loretta not getting in touch, neither Harper nor her mom knew anything about Loretta's new life.

Harper took a deep breath and knocked on the door, her knuckles rapping against the flimsy wood.

"Come on, Loretta, please be home," Harper muttered, trying to quell the rising anxiety in her chest. This visit was more than just letting her sister know about her disability. It was about reconnecting, finding common ground, and hoping to rebuild their relationship.

The door creaked open, revealing Loretta's surprised face. Harper steeled herself, preparing for whatever reaction her sister might have. But no matter what happened next, she

knew she had taken the first step towards facing her past and moving forward into the uncertain future.

Loretta's eyes widened, taking in the sight of Harper in her wheelchair. "Harper? Is that you? What... what happened? What are you doing here? How did you get my address?" she stammered, her questions falling out of her in a clumsy torrent. The weariness around her eyes and the lines etched into her face spoke volumes about the toll her life choices had taken on her.

"Hey, Loretta," Harper said softly, trying to keep her composure. "It's been a while, huh? Can I come in?"

"Uh... of course," Loretta replied, looking around outside anxiously.

Harper sat looking up at the steps into the trailer. Three small, rusty steps, that might as well have been Mount Everest.

"Could you, uh, give me a hand, sis?" she asked, feeling her cheeks blaze red.

"Sure," said Loretta. As she reached out to help, Harper woman hesitated for a moment. But she swallowed her pride and allowed Loretta to assist her out of the chair and onto a couch in the cramped trailer.

"Thanks," Harper mumbled as Loretta guided her inside.

Loretta, panting with effort, didn't reply.

Harper glanced around, taking in the cluttered space. It felt like a physical manifestation of the chaos that must have been swirling in her sister's life.

Harper's mind raced with questions and thoughts she hadn't dared voice for years.

"Your chair... I didn't know," Loretta said hesitantly, sitting down opposite Harper.

"Yeah, well, it's kinda recent," Harper admitted, forcing a smile. "Happened a year ago. Not exactly how I planned things, but life has a funny way of throwing curveballs, doesn't it?"

Loretta sighed, rubbing her temples. "Why are you here, Harper? I haven't seen you in years. I didn't even think you had my address. What's going on?" Her face grew pale. "Mom... is Mom dead?"

"No," Harper said quickly. "Mom is on fine form, running around the house, baking fairy cupcakes and doing tarot readings until she's blue in the face."

Loretta chuckled softly. "Sounds about right." She started to cough after that, long and hacking, and when she was done, her whole body seemed to crumble. "I'm sorry, Harper. I should've kept in touch. I had my reasons, but..."

"You know what? Me too," Harper said, her voice cracking slightly. "I should have come looking for your years ago." She paused. "But we're here now, right? We can start over."

"Is that what you want? To start over?" Loretta asked, her gaze searching Harper's face for any hint of insincerity.

"More than anything," Harper replied earnestly, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I've missed you, Loretta."

“God, I’ve missed you too,” Loretta choked out, her own tears threatening to spill over. The two sisters sat in silence for a moment, letting the weight of their emotions settle around them. “And I’m so sorry about your chair. I don’t really know what to say. I’m just... in shock.”

Harper couldn’t help but take in the disarray around her. The cramped trailer was filled with clutter—old newspapers piled high, dishes overflowing from the sink, and clothes strewn about haphazardly. It was a stark contrast to the pristine life she had tried to maintain since leaving home, and it pained her to see how chaotic Loretta’s existence had become.

“Sorry for the mess,” Loretta mumbled, brushing some papers off the couch to make room for Harper. “Life’s been... well, you know.”

Harper nodded sympathetically, not wanting to push her sister too hard. She knew that healing their relationship would be a slow and delicate process, one that required patience and understanding on both sides.

“Mommy! Mommy! Who’s there with you? Is it the bailiffs again?” A girlish voice called through from one of the bedroom doors farther down the trailer, then a small figure poked her head out from behind it.

She had blue eyes, blonde hair, and she looked like the spitting image of Loretta as a young girl.

“Who...” Harper began, her voice barely a whisper, as she looked to her sister for an explanation.

“Meet your niece, Emma,” Loretta said softly, a hint of pride in her voice. “She’s my daughter.”

“Your... daughter?” Harper repeated, stunned by the revelation. All these years, she’d been completely unaware of this child’s existence. Her heart swelled with love and protectiveness for the little girl, even as she chastised herself for her own ignorance. How could she not have known?

Emma walked out of her room now. She looked around six years old, wearing a grubby t-shirt and shorts, holding an even grubbier doll with tangled blonde hair.

“Hi, Emma,” Harper said gently, offering a tentative smile to her newfound niece. “I’m your Aunt Harper.” Man, it felt weird to say that. Was she some kind of role model now? Could she be a cool aunt to this little girl? Or a strict one? Or any kind of one?

“Hi,” Emma replied shyly, clutching her doll a little tighter.

“Emma, why don’t you go play in your room for a bit?” Loretta suggested, casting a glance at Harper that conveyed the need for some privacy. “Your aunt and I have some catching up to do.”

“Okay, Mommy,” Emma agreed, gathering her toys and disappearing down the narrow hallway.

With her niece out of earshot, Harper turned to Loretta. Despite the challenges they faced, one thing was clear: she would do whatever it took to ensure the safety and happiness

of her sister and her niece—no matter how difficult the road ahead might be.

“So... I guess you’ve had a lot going on these last few years,” said Harper awkwardly, not wanting to sound too judgmental. She still couldn’t believe that she’d been living in an Olympic facility, winning medals for her country, while her sister had been holed up here, with a kid and seemingly no support. “Have you been coping okay? Do you have everything you need?”

Loretta’s eyes darted around the room, avoiding Harper’s gaze as she nervously wrung her hands. “Things have been... tough,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Is JP still in the picture?” Harper asked cautiously, remembering the man who had cost her sister so much. Even saying his name sent a wave of disgust running through her. JP was her old sports coach at school. Riley’s too. The man who had been fired from the school for sleeping with his student. She noticed Loretta’s flinch at the mention of his name and braced herself for the answer.

“Mm-hmm,” Loretta sighed, rubbing her temples. “He’s out just now, trying to get some money.”

“He doesn’t have a job?”

Loretta shook her head. “Nothing definite. He gets bits and pieces of work. But the money all goes on...” Loretta bit her lip and wrung her hands together, unable to finish her sentence. She looked over at the kitchen countertop, and

Harper noticed something wrapped in aluminium foil that looked a little... off.

“Does he have an addiction problem?” Harper asked gently, her brow furrowing in concern. She’d seen a few girls at the Olympic Center get tied up in drugs, and it wasn’t a pretty sight. Luckily, the facility was used to dealing with it. They had regular blood tests and plenty of support for people who needed it. From the looks of it, poor Loretta had nothing. “What kind of drugs are we talking about here?”

“Opioids, mostly,” Loretta replied, her voice cracking with emotion. “But not completely. He’d dabbled with steroids back when he worked at the school... but the drug problem got a lot worse after he lost his coaching job. He couldn’t cope with the stress, and it just spiraled from there.”

For a moment, Harper felt a twinge of guilt. She had been the one to report Coach JP’s illicit relationship with Loretta. She had done it to protect her sister, but her sister hadn’t seen it that way at the time, and had run away for good.

But Harper knew that she shouldn’t blame herself. JP shouldn’t have been seeing Loretta. He was a grown man. She was just a kid. The man was a predator.

Harper clenched her fists, anger and fear battling within her. “Loretta, you can’t stay with him. You know that, right? Especially not now that you have Emma to think about.”

“Harper, it’s not that simple,” Loretta snapped, her eyes flashing with defiance. “He’s still the father of my child. And I can’t just abandon him when he needs help.”

“Help?” Harper scoffed, her anger rising. “Loretta, he’s dragging you down with him. Can’t you see that? You live in this rundown trailer park, your life is chaos, and you’re putting Emma at risk!” Instantly, she flinched away from the power of her own words. She’d said too much, gone too far. She risked losing Loretta all over again.

“How dare you!” Loretta shouted, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You can’t just come here, after all these years, and tell me how to live my life!”

“I’ve wanted to look for you a thousand times,” said Harper, tears rolling down her cheeks. “But you never reached out. You’re the one who ran away.”

“You’re the one who ruined my life. And JP’s too.”

The words stung. Everything Harper had done, she’d done it for her sister.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Loretta said. “You reported JP and he lost his job. We were in love, Harper! I was pregnant!”

Harper felt the blood drain out of her as this news settled in. Loretta was already pregnant when she was at school? It all started to make sense now. Loretta’s crazy mood swings. How she dropped out of the school athletics team. Harper had thought it was because of JP’s bad influence on her, but in actual fact, her poor sister had been pregnant.

“JP would have taken care of me,” said Loretta. “He had a good job, a good salary. But you reported him and he lost everything. Including his self-respect.”

Harper's heart ached for her sister. "I'm so sorry that things have been so hard," she said. "I wanted to help you. What JP did, having a relationship with you... it wasn't right." She looked over her shoulder, making sure that JP hadn't returned yet, and wasn't standing in the doorway. She looked over toward Emma's door too, making sure the young child couldn't hear. In a low voice, she said: "You have to think about Emma, Loretta. She deserves better than a life like this."

Loretta swallowed hard, her eyes locked on the floor as she tried to hold back sobs. The weight of Harper's words seemed to crush her, but still, there was hesitation in her voice. "I...I don't know if I can do it, Harper. Even if I wanted to..."

"Listen to me," Harper insisted, reaching out to grip Loretta's shoulders. "You're stronger than you know. You can make a better life for yourself and Emma. But you have to choose that path."

"I don't have any choice anyway," said Loretta sadly. "There's nowhere I could go, even if I wanted to."

"Of course there is," replied Harper. "You could stay at Mom's."

Loretta laughed bitterly. "Mom's? Mom and I haven't spoken in years. Just like you and me. Why would she help me now?"

"Because she loves you, dummy. She's kept your room just as it was when you left it for all these years. She flits around the house like a lost mother hen. And as for Emma... Gloria's

a grandma, Loretta! Don't you think she has a right to know that? She would love Emma to pieces!"

"Maybe...maybe you're right," Loretta croaked, her voice trembling with emotion. "I just need some time to think."

"Take all the time you need," Harper reassured her, nodding. "Just remember that I'm here for you. I'm going to do better from now on. Be a better sister."

Loretta shook her head. "I'm the one who ran away."

Harper swallowed. "You know, I think I would have done the same in your situation."

Loretta blinked at her. "You would? You don't hate me for it?"

"I was pretty mad at you for a long time. But I could have tried harder to fix things. I was so wrapped up in competing. I lost sight of everything else. But now... well, now, I have a lot of time to think. And being back at home with mom is hard. She cares so much, but sometimes it's like, the more she cares, the more I want to run away..." Harper trailed off.

Loretta looked at her sister sadly. "What happened to you, Harper?"

"It's kind of a long story," Harper began, her voice quivering with emotion. "Let's just say, I've been through hell and back in the last couple years. I can't walk anymore, and now I have to learn how to live in a world that wasn't built for people like me." She gestured to her wheelchair.

“That sounds so hard, Harper. I wish I could help you somehow.”

Harper stared deeply into Loretta’s eyes, the intensity of her gaze conveying the gravity of her words. “You deserve so much more than what JP is giving you, Loretta. You’re an amazing person. He’s dragging you down, but you can rise above it. You’re strong, Loretta. Stronger than you know.”

As Harper said those words, she felt as though she’d heard them somewhere before. Then she realized. She was telling her sister the things that Riley had said to her. That she was strong. That she deserved good things. And when she said those words to her sister, they felt true and wise.

Loretta’s eyes darted away, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her shirt as she considered Harper’s words. “I’ll think about it. Seriously, I will.”

“Good,” said Harper. She paused, weighing up how to say the next thing on her mind. “I’m actually going away for a couple weeks now. Taking a road trip with... an old friend.”

Loretta raised an eyebrow. “Anyone I know?”

“Actually, yeah,” said Harper, suppressing a smile. “Riley Collins.”

“Soccer star Riley Collins? He was in my year at school. He was JP’s golden boy for a while. He was a bit of a jerk to me, though. And even worse to you if I remember right.”

“Yeah,” said Harper. “That’s the Riley Collins I’m talking about. He’s... changed. I think. Guess I’ll find out. Anyway,

I'm getting away for a bit. But you can contact me anytime." She scrawled down her number. "And mom's still at the same address."

"I know," said Loretta sadly. "I went back to the house a couple of times when Emma was little. I stood out on the sidewalk with Emma in the pram. I was desperate to tell Mom that she was a grandma. But... I chickened out at the last minute." She swallowed. "JP told me I wasn't to contact either of you. That you ruined his life and if we ever saw you, you'd try to break me and him apart."

Harper winced. "And then I came here and did just that, huh?"

Loretta smiled weakly. "Yeah. But... I get it. I know life could be better for Emma. I'm scared about what will happen as she gets older. How I'll afford to buy things for her. How I'll keep her warm and safe and happy."

"Does JP ever hurt you or Emma?" Harper asked gently.

Loretta shook her head. "Never Emma." There was color in her cheeks. Shame. "And not me very often."

Harper gritted her teeth. "That's not good enough. Not at all."

Loretta looked down at the floor. "I know."

Harper reached out for her sister's hand, and Loretta let her take it. It felt so small, so cold, so sad in hers. "Would you like me to tell Mom about this before I go?"

“No,” said Loretta firmly. “Give me some time. I want to make sure I do things right. I need to think about this carefully. And talk to Emma...”

Harper nodded. “Alright. But if I don’t hear from you by the time I’m back from my road trip, I’m coming back over.”

Loretta smiled weakly. “Okay. Thank you. I don’t deserve your attention, but... I appreciate it.”

“I’m your sister,” replied Harper. “That’s never gonna change.” She smiled through her tears, reaching out to squeeze her sister’s hand.

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Harper maneuvered her wheelchair carefully along the uneven path that led away from Loretta’s trailer, her heart pounding with a mix of triumph and anxiety.

As she approached the spot where she had left Riley waiting, she noticed his broad figure leaning against their road trip vehicle. The sun cast a warm glow on his tanned skin, and his tattoos seemed to come alive as he shifted his weight.

“Hey, Riley,” she said, her voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions within her. “Thanks for waiting.”

“Harper.” Riley’s eyes locked onto hers, concern etched across his rugged features. “How did it go?”

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Better than I expected. In the sense that she didn’t just throw me out. Her

situation though... it's not so good. Loretta's still with JP. He's addicted to drugs, and he's a mess, but I think she's gonna leave him... I hope she does. But she wants time to think." She paused. "She's got a daughter. I'm... an auntie."

"A daughter?" Riley raised an eyebrow, surprised by this revelation.

"Yeah, turns out I have a niece named Emma." Harper smiled softly at the thought of the little girl she'd just met. "She's six, and she deserves a better life than the one she's been living. But she's got a momma who loves her, at least."

"Damn, that's quite a responsibility you're taking on," Riley said, admiration in his tone.

"I know, but they're family. And I can't turn my back on them now that I've seen what they're going through."

Riley nodded, understanding her determination. "Well, if there's anything I can do to help, just say the word."

"Thank you, Riley. That means a lot to me." Harper felt warmth spread through her chest.

"So..." Riley asked. "You still wanna go on this trip?"

"You bet," Harper said, momentarily caught off guard by the reminder of their original mission.

Riley helped her settle into the passenger seat, her heart lighter than it had been in ages.

"All right," said Riley. "Let's go on the goddamn best road trip of our lives."

Chapter Six

RILEY

RILEY TURNED THE KEY in the ignition and the engine roared to life.

As they left Aberdeen behind, the landscape gradually shifted from sprawling trailer parks and grubby industrial units to rolling hills and lush green fields. The farther they drove, the more relaxed Harper seemed to become, her shoulders dropping and her breathing steady. That was a good sign. She had just been through something big with her sister. Riley admired her for having the strength to do it, but he was eager that it didn't overshadow what this trip was all about.

"Do you like the countryside, Riley?" Harper asked, gazing out at the countryside as it sped by.

"Yeah," Riley agreed, stealing a glance at her. "I do."

"I always thought I was a city girl," Harper replied. "Living at the Olympic Center in Colorado Springs, surrounded by people and noise and life. I could catch a movie or go to the mall or grab a Starbucks whenever I wanted. Never too much

time to stop and think. That's probably partly why I was a runner. I always liked to keep moving." She sighed. "I guess I'm a country girl now. Now I've got no choice but to stop all the time."

"Not necessarily," Riley replied. "You're only back in Little Rock while you weigh up your options. After that, the world's your oyster."

Harper laughed dryly. "Never did like oysters."

"You can get used to anything if you keep at it."

"You gonna force-feed me oysters on this road trip, Riley?" Harper asked playfully.

"Not unless you're really naughty," Riley replied.

There was a moment's silence between them. Riley hadn't meant to say something that made him sound like such an obvious Dominant, but there it was. He tried to change the subject. "All I'm saying is, you've got time, Harper. Time to adjust."

"Time to mope around and think about what I'm missing out on," she replied, quick as a whip.

Riley chewed his lip. "That's a choice, you know. Doesn't have to be that way."

"It does," said Harper abruptly. "Ever since the accident, there's no choice to be made. I can't have any of the stuff I want."

"You sure about that, babygirl?"

The moment Riley used that nickname, he felt embarrassed. It felt so natural to nurture Harper, to prove that he wasn't a bully anymore by acting more like her Daddy. But he wasn't her Daddy. He had to remind himself of that. He didn't want to scare the girl off. She was putting a lot of trust in him by going on this road trip. He needed to watch his step.

“Yes, I'm sure,” Harper replied curtly, not seeming to even notice what he'd called her. “Everything I ever wanted is no longer available to me. An Olympic gold medal. The ability to walk. Independence.”

“Well,” said Riley thoughtfully, “Looks like I'm going to help you find some new things to want.”

“Like what?”

Like a Daddy Dom to spank your ass for putting yourself down and tell you how amazing you are every goddamn day.

“That's for you to figure out,” Riley replied, pulling into the parking lot of a roadside convenience store.

“Are we stopping already?” Harper asked.

“Yup,” Riley replied. “We're finding some things you want in here.” He took Harper's chair out of the trunk and helped her into it. “Let's grab some grub.”

They stepped inside the small store, the bell above the door jingling as they entered. Rows of shelves stocked with various treats and drinks stretched before them, begging to be explored.

“I guess I never tried one of these before...” Harper said, picking up a bag of Push Pops. She looked at Riley with a mischievous grin. “I’m getting these, whether you approve or not. I *want* them.”

“Fine,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “I’ll let you have your moment of rebellion. But I’m only allowing it because it’s something you want.”

As they continued perusing the snack selection, Riley couldn’t help but feel a warmth growing inside him. He hoped that this journey would help Harper rediscover the fearless girl he’d once known.

“Ooh, I guess I want popcorn, too.”

Riley watched as Harper’s eyes darted from snack to snack, her excitement palpable. He couldn’t help but smile at her enthusiasm, even if it was directed at junk food.

“Alright, that’s enough sugar for one trip,” he declared, taking charge of the snack selection. “Let’s get some healthier stuff too.”

“Fine,” Harper pouted playfully, placing a bag of trail mix into their basket. “But you’re not taking away all my fun.”

“Promise,” Riley said with a grin, adding a few protein bars, fruit, and carrot sticks to their haul. They paid for their snacks and returned to the car, the atmosphere inside having shifted to something lighter and more carefree.

Back on the road, Riley decided it was time to inject some music into their journey. “Hey, Harper,” he began, “did you

bring that mixtape I made you?”

“Uh, yeah, I did,” she admitted awkwardly. “But honestly, I never listened to much of it. I’m not sure this type of music’s my cup of tea.”

“Come on, just give it a chance,” Riley urged, his tone softening. “I think you’ll get into it.”

Harper hesitated for a moment, then rummaged through her bag and pulling out the old cassette tape. She inserted it into the car’s stereo, and soon the track she’d stopped it on last time filled the air.

Riley smiled at the sound of the Foo Fighters track. He remembered singing this song with Pat from his hospital bed. Songs like this pulled him through.

As they drove through the countryside, the lush green fields and open skies seemed to amplify the music’s effect. The Foo Fighters song finished and a new one came on. Harper recognized it as “Brothers in Arms” by Dire Straits.

“It’s kinda cheesy, don’t you think?” Harper asked as the epic guitar solo churned out.

“It’s about soldiers going to war,” Riley told her. “Talks about the toll that combat takes on individuals. And the importance of friends to get you through.”

“Oh. I must have heard it a million times but I never really thought about the lyrics.”

“ You probably know it so well because it’s used in war documentaries and tributes to soldiers.”

“Wait,” said Harper. “So... did you fight in a war?”

“Yup,” said Riley. “Back in the Air Force, I served in two wars. I lost my left leg in the second one, so it was my last.”

Harper paused. “I’m sorry. That’s a lot to deal with, Riley.”

“Yup,” he agreed.

They sat in silence for a moment as the song ended. Then, the next song came on.

“This is ‘One’ by Metallica,” said Riley. “Do you know it?”

“No,” said Harper. “It’s a bit growly for my tastes.”

“It’s written from the perspective of a soldier who became a prisoner in his own body due to war injuries. He has it worse than me. Huge physical injuries, PTSD, the lot.”

He could feel Harper’s eyes burning into him.

“Wow, you’re right,” she said. “A cheery mixtape about terribly injured soldiers really is cheering me up.”

Riley laughed. “Thought it would.” He paused. “But seriously, I didn’t choose these songs. My buddy Pat originally made this mixtape for me after my leg got blown off.”

Harper’s expression softened, her curiosity piqued. “Oh! So the song about learning to walk again wasn’t aimed at me. It was for you.”

Ah. No wonder the mixtape had seemed patronizing to Harper at first. Riley felt like an idiot. He hadn’t vetted the tape to think about how the lyrics might come across to Harper before giving it to her.

Riley hoped they could listen to the end of the tape, though. There was some tailormade stuff at the end of it. Stuff that he'd put on especially for her, that he was keen for her to hear. Although he was gonna find it as embarrassing as hell.

Riley slowed down as they passed a man riding a horse. He turned the music down too, so he didn't spook it. "Don't see that in the city, eh?" He gestured at the horse.

"I don't know," Harper said, looking at him with her eyes twinkling. "They had quite a lot of equestrian events at the Olympics."

They passed the horse and Riley turned the music back up again.

"You know, this tape helped me get through some tough times," he said, "and I hoped it might do the same for you."

Harper seemed distracted. "What was it like, you know, adjusting to life with...?" She trailed off.

Riley sighed, his eyes fixed on the winding road ahead. "It wasn't easy. The military was my life, and losing my leg felt like losing my identity." He paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "But over time, I learned to adapt."

"In what kind of ways?" Harper asked.

"Well, for one thing, I drive a damn automatic now."

Harper laughed. "And that's a bad thing?"

"It is if you're a gear nut like me. Always loved manual cars. Feeling the gears shift between you. Connecting with the car

with your hands and your feet. Nothing like the feeling of complete control you have with a manual.”

“What else?” Harper asked.

“Well, I moved back to Little Rock and took over the garage. Wanted the comfort of being in my hometown, I guess. Felt lost without the military, which had been my home for so long.”

Harper nodded. “I get that. The Olympic Center was like that for me.”

“Most of all, I had to reconnect with my own body,” said Riley. “Work out which bits were broken and which bits could be fixed. Find my limitations and then try to smash them into a million pieces.”

Harper chuckled softly. “You managed to get past your limitations?”

“Not yet,” replied Riley, casting Harper an intense glance. “But I’ll keep trying.”

“Thank you for sharing that with me,” Harper said, her gaze lingering on him, gratitude shining in her eyes. “I can’t imagine how hard it must’ve been.”

“Life has a way of trying to take control of us,” Riley replied, looking back at the road. “The important thing is we don’t just sit there and take it. We fight back.”

As they drove on, the landscape around them transformed. Rolling hills gave way to a picturesque valley. Light seemed to drift and pool across the landscape’s sheer and varied

contours, accumulating in the spaces between the buildings and hills and fields and homes.

“Not a bad view, huh?” Riley mused.

Harper rolled down her window, letting the crisp breeze wash over them as the scent of earth and foliage filled the truck.

“Can we stop for a minute?” Harper asked, pointing to an overlook up ahead. “I’d love to take a picture.”

“Sure thing,” Riley replied, pulling off the road and parking next to the scenic viewpoint. They got out of the truck, taking in the panoramic vista before them.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Harper breathed, snapping pictures with her phone. “You know what? I’m gonna finally update my Instagram feed.”

“You not done it lately?”

“Not since my accident,” Harper replied. “Didn’t feel like documenting my demise to the whole world.”

Riley looked at Harper’s athletic figure as she took photographs of the view before them.

“Let me take a picture of you, too,” he said.

“Me?” asked Harper, screwing up her nose. “I’d rather just remember the view.”

“I’d like to remember the view with you in it,” said Riley. “You don’t have to post that one on Instagram. Just send it to me so I can keep it all to myself.”

Harper looked awkwardly from side to side.

“Come on,” Riley said. “We’re not just on this road trip to look outward. We’re looking inward too. Let me take a snap. Then you’ll see how beautiful you are.”

Oops. The words just flowed out of him.

Harper looked at him, blushing. “I, uh...” She passed Riley her phone.

Trying to push away his embarrassment, he lifted the phone and took a snap of Harper. Her cheeks were light pink, her eyes dewy and slightly surprised. She looked incredible.

“See?” he said, passing her the phone so she could check out the screen.

“Yuk!” Harper said. “I look like I just saw a giant rabbit!”

“A giant rabbit?” Riley laughed. “I think if you saw a giant rabbit, you might look a little more concerned than that.”

Harper laughed, taking a few snaps of the pick-up truck and of Riley now. Riley stood stiff and awkwardly, having a taste of his own medicine. It felt weird to be looked at through a camera, especially by Harper, who he’d seen on the screen countless times as she’d competed in events over the years. But he couldn’t admit that to Harper. It’d make him sound stalkerish.

“You look good,” Harper said shyly. “Very, uh, manly next to that big truck.”

“Alright, let’s get back on the road,” Riley said gruffly.

As they continued on their journey, the miles slipping effortlessly beneath their tires, Riley found himself lost in thought. He hoped his attraction to Harper wasn't too obvious.

"Hey, Riley?" Harper's voice pulled him from his reverie.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for this," she said, her eyes brimming with sincerity. "I didn't realize how much I needed it."

"Sometimes we gotta step out of our comfort zone to really appreciate what's around us," Riley replied, focusing on the road ahead. The truth of his own words struck him, reminding him that he too needed this adventure.

"Did you ever think we'd end up doing something like this together?" Harper asked, her voice tinged with curiosity.

"Can't say I did," he admitted. "But I'm glad we did."

"Me too." She paused, then added, "You know, I always thought you were kind of scary back in school."

"Scary?" Riley raised an eyebrow, feigning offense. "I was just a misunderstood, brooding teenager."

"Uh-huh, sure," she teased, laughing as she snapped a photo of the passing landscape.

"Seriously," said Riley, "I have always been a nice guy trapped in a bad guy's body."

Harper snickered. "At least it's a good body."

Feeling embarrassed, Riley reached for the cassette player, about to put the music on, but Harper stopped him.

“Hey, how about we play a game instead?” she said. “I Spy is always a good one.”

“All right,” Riley said, disappointed to not listen to the tape some more, but happy that Harper was in a good enough mood to want to play a game. “You go first.”

“Okay, I spy with my little eye something beginning with... ‘f.’”

Riley looked around, thinking hard. It was impossible not to think of dirty words beginning with that letter. But he couldn’t say any of those out loud. Eventually he gave up and said, “F-Fields?”

Harper shook her head and smiled. “No, the ‘f’ was for ‘fate.’ I spy... fate.”

He gulped as Harper’s gaze locked with his. In that moment they both knew that fate had brought them together on this road trip, and neither of them wanted it to end anytime soon.

“Interesting,” said Riley, finally collecting himself. My turn now.”

He glanced around the car, but really, of course, he was looking inward.

“All right,” he said. “I spy something beginning with ‘h’.”

“You have to say ‘with my little eye’ or it doesn’t count,” Harper reminded him impishly.

Riley narrowed his eyes at her. Her Little was coming out to play, he was sure of it. And she was brattier than Riley had

imagined she might be. Which was actually quite an exciting thought. All those spanking sessions they could indulge in...

“Fine,” he said, “I spy with my teeny, tiny little eye something beginning with ‘h’.”

“Well, you still said it wrong I’m afraid,” said Harper, “but I’ll guess anyway. Is it me? Harper?”

“Close,” said Riley. “It’s ‘hope.’”

Harper made a cute little noise as she considered this. “I like it. But this esoteric game of I Spy is getting a little tricky. How about we play Would you Rather.”

Riley’s mind reeled with the questions he wished he could ask Harper.

Would you rather I act like a Daddy or a Dom?

Would you rather be tickled or whipped?

Would you rather spit or swallow?

But Riley pushed those inappropriate thoughts out of his head and tried to focus on the game. “Uh, would you rather be too hot or too cold?” he asked. A classic.

“Too hot,” said Harper quickly. “Every time. You?”

“Definitely too hot,” Riley agreed.

“Hot, hot, hot,” said Harper. The word began taking on a double-meaning now, and Riley shook his head, trying not to let his mind stray to places it wasn’t meant to go.

“Enough games,” he said decisively. “Right now, it’s time to head to our motel for the night. Don’t wanna be drivin’ in the

dark.”

“Ooh,” Harper teased. “You booked us a room at a motel? Very swanky.”

“*Two* rooms,” Riley corrected her, instantly feeling like an ass.

“Course I mean two rooms, silly!” Harper said, giggling. “There’s no way I’m sharing a room with you!”

Chapter Seven

HARPER

“U^H, RILEY?” SAID HARPER, blushing. “You definitely booked two rooms, right?”

“I swear I did,” Riley muttered, scratching his head as he stood in the doorway of the small motel room.

Harper couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, looks like we’re bunking together tonight.”

“I can try to find a different motel,” said Riley. “They said this one’s all booked up for a fishing conference, whatever that is, but maybe there’s somewhere else nearb—“

“Don’t sweat it,” said Harper. “This place will do us fine. A fishing *conference*? Is there such a thing as a fishing conference...?”

She wheeled herself inside, taking care not to scratch her wheels on the narrow doorframe. The space was cramped. The walls were painted a soothing sky blue, but the queen-sized bed dominating the room made it feel even tinier than it was.

A modest wooden dresser and a tiny television on a stand completed the furnishings.

“Y’know, if this were a sports movie, they’d call it ‘team bonding,’” Harper joked, trying to lighten the mood. She could tell that Riley was uncomfortable with the situation, and he’d already done so much for her, he didn’t want her to feel bad.

Besides, she was exhausted and almost ready to crash out.

And she definitely, *definitely* wasn’t intrigued to find out what it would be like sharing a bed with that muscular body.

Obviously, she was still coming to terms with the old Riley who had made her childhood a living hell, and the new Riley who was making her adult life... bearable. But that didn’t stop her from being able to admire his good points, did it?

“Guess we’ll just have to make the best of it,” Riley replied, forcing a smile. He dropped their bags on the floor and surveyed the room, his eyes lingering on the bed for a moment before quickly looking away.

Harper yawned theatrically, trying to show Riley that the main thing was that they’d be able to get some sleep.

As much as she wanted to tease Riley about the bed mix-up, she knew they both needed rest. Her mind drifted to tomorrow, wondering what adventures awaited them on their journey. She hoped that Riley would open up to her even more, and maybe they could grow closer during this trip.

Riley opened the window, letting in a cool breeze that carried the scent of light rain. The sky outside was darkening,

and Harper could see the first few stars making their appearance. Just as Riley leaned against the windowsill, taking in the view, a gust of wind rushed into the room, snatching his guidebook from the nightstand.

“Damn,” he muttered, watching it flutter out into the parking lot.

“Uh-oh, looks like you’ve got yourself a challenge,” Harper said, a sly grin playing on her lips. “Why don’t you run down there and catch it before it blows away?”

“Ha, very funny,” Riley rolled his eyes, but she could see a faint smile on his face.

“Come on, I dare you,” Harper persisted, trying to lighten the mood. “What’s the matter? Big, strong guy like you afraid of a little running?” She poked him playfully in the ribs.

Riley hesitated, his eyes flicking down to his prosthetic leg. “This thing’s not built for running,” he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “And I’m not an athlete like you, Harper.”

“I’m not an—“ Harper began, but Riley cut her off.

“How about you race for it instead?” Riley challenged, crossing his arms.

Harper stiffened. “I’m not an athlete either anymore, Riley,” she said, looking away.

Riley took a step toward her. “Harper, I’m sorry,” he said softly, closing the distance between them. “I didn’t mean to sound insensitive. I just know how fast you can be—“

“How fast I *was*,” Harper corrected him.

“Right,” he agreed, his gaze lingering on her for a moment before he looked out the window, where the guidebook lay on the ground. “Well, we don’t need to race for it anyway. It’s lying there completely still. We can just go over and pick it up together.”

“Deal,” Harper said, her smile returning as they headed outside, side by side. As they went, Harper couldn’t help but think about their shared struggles. Despite their differences, they were both fighters, determined to overcome the obstacles in their paths.

After retrieving the guidebook, Harper and Riley returned to their motel room. The atmosphere had shifted, their shared vulnerability hanging in the air.

Riley cleared his throat. “Alright,” he said, clasping his hands together. “We need some ground rules for sharing this room.”

Harper looked at him curiously as she sat on the edge of the small bed. “Rules?”

“Yep. First, we sleep with clothes on.” He held up a hand to forestall any protests. “You brought pajamas I take it?”

“Um, actually, no,” Harper said. She always slept naked—it was so much easier that way. Took her so long battling with her pants some days that it was a relief to not have to worry about wearing anything at night. Plus, she had always been a

warm kind of person. Anytime she'd shared a bed with her sister as a kid, Loretta had called her "Hot Water Bottle Girl."

"Right," said Riley, clearing his throat. "You can wear one of my t-shirts. And make sure you wear panties, young lady."

Hearing the word "panties" come out of Riley's mouth made her blush. As did the words "young lady."

"Yes, sir," she said.

"Good. I didn't bring pajamas either but I'll be in a t-shirt and boxers. You comfortable with that?"

"Mm-hmm," said Harper, also blushing at Riley's use of the word "boxers."

Jeez, Harper, grow up already!

"Second rule, I set the bedtime." Riley glanced at his wristwatch, then back at Harper. "Which will be soon. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Okay, Dad," she teased, chuckling at his serious expression.

Riley made a strange grunting noise. "Third, you stay on your side of the bed and I stay on mine. No funny business," he added sternly, pointing at the invisible line between them.

"Got it. And definitely no snoring," she countered, grinning.

"Deal," Riley nodded. "Also, when the alarm goes off in the morning, we get up. No hitting snooze."

"Agreed." Harper smirked, giving him a mock salute. Feeling extra mischievous all of a sudden, she added: "You sound like a true Daddy Dom, Riley."

His jaw tightened, and he scratched the back of his head, suddenly awkward. “Uh, yeah. Well, I’m gonna go take a shower.”

“Have fun,” she replied, unable to help herself from watching him as he disappeared into the bathroom.

As the water ran, Harper tried not to think about what Riley might look like in the shower. Those muscles, those tattoos. Was he... touching himself... in there, she wondered?

She used to like to do that, back when she didn’t need help to shower. Some days she still managed to shower alone, as long as she wasn’t too tired, but it was a tricky affair, involving a specially adapted shower seat, railings, and a whole lot of patience. Since she’d been at home, her mom had helped her with it.

The good news was that she was able to go to the toilet on her own. Just. It took a while but it was possible. It was all about getting the chair locked at the right angle in front of the toilet, shuffling to the edge of her seat, and then transferring her body weight over using the strength in her arms. Took a while to get used to it, but thank goodness, she wasn’t going to have to ask Riley for help with that.

Humming a little tune, she busied herself with unpacking her bag. There was something she’d brought with her that was a bit of a last-minute thing. It was her stuffies. The thing was, even though her stuffies had been locked in a box under bed at her mom’s and the Olympic Center ever since her accident, she *had* had them close by. As she’d been preparing to leave

this morning, the thought of not having them near her suddenly filled her with fear.

She'd been intending to leave the stuffies in her backpack, where Riley wouldn't be able to see them, but suddenly she felt compelled to get them out, to test out his reaction. She was pretty sure he was a Daddy Dom, and if that was true, then he wouldn't judge her for having them. In fact, he'd be supportive. He'd maybe even like her having them there.

So now, she took out her beloved soft toys, setting them up in a neat, protective line down the middle of the bed. There was something comforting about their presence, and she couldn't help but smile at their faces.

“How did I keep you locked away for so long?” she said sadly. “I missed you guys.”

The bathroom door creaked open, and Harper's breath hitched as Riley emerged, wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist. Water droplets glistened on his chiseled body like tiny diamonds, tracing the contours of his muscles. She tried not to stare, but it was impossible not to appreciate the sight before her.

“Uh, sorry,” Riley said, clearing his throat. “I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“N-no, it's okay,” Harper stammered, feeling her face heat up. “I mean, we're sharing a room, right? Bound to see each other half-naked at some point.” She forced a playful laugh, hoping to lighten the mood.

Riley hopped over to his suitcase without his prosthetic and sat on the edge of the bed.

As Riley dried himself, Harper found herself staring at the place where his leg ended just below the knee. Riley caught her looking, and Harper quickly looked away. “Sorry,” she blurted. “I didn’t mean to—“

“It’s okay,” said Riley. “You can look.”

Riley beckoned Harper closer and showed the way his left leg tapered below the knee, smooth and rounded and completely healed.

Something about the intimacy of that moment drew Harper in, making her heart ache with empathy and admiration. Riley had been through so much, yet he remained strong and determined. It was inspiring.

“Does it hurt?” she asked softly, unable to contain her curiosity.

“Nah, not really,” Riley replied, shrugging nonchalantly. “I’ve gotten used to it.”

“What does it feel like when you walk?”

“It feels pretty normal now. I’ve had to find the right prosthetics over the years. And learn how to move with them.”

“Must have taken a lot of courage to adapt,” Harper murmured, her eyes lingering on the end of his leg. She felt a strange, magnetic pull towards Riley, an urge to understand and support him in any way she could. It was both exhilarating and terrifying.

“Anyway, I should get dressed,” Riley said, breaking the moment. “Don’t want to break our own rules about clothes and all.”

“Of course,” Harper chuckled, turning away to give him some privacy. But as she listened to the rustling of fabric, she couldn’t help but wonder what else they would discover about each other on this journey. And she couldn’t wait to find out.

Once Riley was dressed, he approached the bed and picked up one of Harper’s stuffies. “So, you brought these little guys along for the ride?” he asked, a hint of playfulness in his voice.

“Yep,” Harper replied, grimacing. “I don’t normally sleep with them in my bed, but I figured they might make a helpful barrier between us.”

“You don’t normally sleep with them?” Riley asked, looking concerned. “None of them?”

Harper shook her head. “No, silly. I’m a grown-up now. I don’t need stuffies.”

“But...” Riley said, pausing, as if trying to find the right words. “You’re... a Little, though, right, Harper?”

Harper screwed her eyes tight shut. “Nope. no, siree. Used to be. But I’m not anymore.” She opened her eyes and saw Riley looking serious, nodding.

“I see. That’s a shame. I’d have liked to have met your Little.”

Harper bit her lip. “I... she...”

“No pressure, though,” said Riley. “If that’s not who you are anymore, I get it.”

Harper felt a huge sadness well up inside her. She felt compelled to do or say something to try to impress Riley. “If you like, we could just pretend I’m still a Little sometimes.”

“Pretend?”

“You know, just for fun. While we’re on this road trip.”

Riley gazed deep into her eyes. His expression was totally inscrutable. “I’d like that. If it’s what you want.”

“These guys used to help me relax,” she said, giving one of her stuffies a squeeze. “I guess it’d be fun to pretend I’m still into them.”

Riley smiled, picking up another one of her stuffies.

“That owl is called Twinkle,” she told him.

“What an excellent name,” he said, shaking Mr. Twinkle’s wing. “Good to meet you, sir.”

Harper giggled. She might not be a Little anymore, but she definitely sounded like a Little. And it didn’t feel icky. It felt... good. Almost like a homecoming.

“Well, we’ve got twenty minutes until lights out. How about we set up a playful race with your stuffies? Could be fun.”

Harper hesitated, but then she saw the genuine enthusiasm in Riley’s eyes. She smiled, feeling a sense of comfort and support from him. “All right, let’s do it. But don’t think that

means I'm a Little again. We're just doing this because all the normal rules are out of the window on a road trip."

"Not all the rules," Riley reminded her. "No sleeping naked tonight or else."

Harper was about to cheekily ask, "Or else what?" but she didn't want to push her luck.

Together, she and Riley began setting up a makeshift racecourse around the small motel room. Using pillows, shoes, and other objects they could find, they created an obstacle course that zigzagged between their beds and across the floor. Riley was careful to ensure that Harper could move around the small space in her chair so she could fully join in.

Finally, they were done. "Time to choose our competitors," said Riley. "You going with Mr. Twinkle?"

"Hmm," said Harper. "I think I'll go for Captain Wiggles the worm. He'll be good at the winding parts of the course."

"Great," said Riley. "I'm gonna choose this guy. Who's he?"

"That's Mr. Cuddles," said Harper, looking at her teddy bear holding a pink loveheart. "He's kinda shy, but I think he likes you."

"Hi there, Mr. Cuddles," said Riley, shaking the bear's paw. "All right, do you want to do the honors and start the race, Harper?"

"Ready, set, go!" Harper shouted without missing a beat, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Immediately, she and Riley began racing their stuffies through the makeshift obstacle course. The air in the motel room was charged with playful energy, both of them cheering on their stuffed animals as they navigated over pillows and around improvised barriers.

“Come on, Mr. Cuddles, you can do it!” Harper encouraged her stuffie, laughing as it narrowly avoided a collision with one of the obstacles.

She glanced at Riley, whose intense focus on guiding his own stuffie, Captain Wiggles, only made her laugh harder. “Captain Wiggles doesn’t stand a chance against Mr. Cuddles,” she teased, playfully sticking her tongue.

“Ha! We’ll see about that,” Riley retorted, grinning back at her. The friendly banter felt effortless, almost electric, as they matched each other’s competitive spirit. It was a side of Riley she hadn’t seen before, and it only added to the growing attraction she felt for him.

As they continued to race, Harper found herself fully immersed in the moment, her pain and self-doubt melting away with each triumphant squeal and shared laugh. This simple, lighthearted competition was exactly what she needed to remind herself that there was more to life than fear and failure.

“Almost there, Mr. Cuddles!” she cheered, her heart pounding in anticipation as the finish line drew near. But just as her stuffie was about to cross, Captain Wiggles made a surprising leap forward, claiming victory by a whisker.

“Yes! Captain Wiggles for the win!” Riley crowed, throwing his hands up in celebration.

“Okay, okay, I admit it—you won fair and square,” Harper conceded, trying to hide her smile. Even in defeat, she felt an overwhelming sense of happiness and connection with Riley, something she hadn’t expected to find on this journey.

“Good race, Harper,” Riley said, his voice warm and genuine. “And you know what? I think we both needed that.”

“Yeah, we did,” Harper agreed, her heart swelling with gratitude for the man who had helped her rediscover the simple joy of play.

“Alright, little one,” Riley said gently, his tone taking on a caring note. “It’s getting late, and we have a long day ahead of us tomorrow. Time for bed.”

“Okay, *Daddy*,” Harper responded playfully, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Riley raised an eyebrow at her teasing but didn’t comment. Instead, he rummaged through his suitcase, selecting a t-shirt for her to wear.

“Here you go, put this on,” he instructed, handing them over. Harper couldn’t help but feel a thrill at how surprisingly sexy this tender side of Riley was.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her cheeks flushing slightly as she took the pajamas from him.

As Harper changed into her sleepwear, Riley prepared the bathroom for her, laying out a toothbrush and toothpaste. He

waited patiently by the sink as she brushed her teeth, watching her every move with a thoughtful expression.

“Need any help with anything?”

“Nope,” Harper replied.

“You sure you don’t want a shower?”

“Too tired,” Harper replied with a yawn.

“Okay, then. We’re all set,” said Riley. “Good girl for brushing your teeth so well,” Riley praised, leading her back into the bedroom.

Harper wasn’t sure if they were pretending anymore. They’d never said anything about him pretending to be her Daddy, but somehow it seemed to be happening naturally.

Riley pulled back the covers on her side of the bed and helped her to get in. “Sleep well, Harper.”

“Goodnight, Riley,” she murmured, feeling secure and cared for as he tucked the blankets around her. The warmth of their connection lingered in the air, a comforting reminder of the progress they’d already made on their journey.

Chapter Eight

RILEY

RILEY'S EYES SNAPPED OPEN, his heart pounding as he felt the unmistakable pressure of his erection. Somehow, it had broken free of his boxer shorts, and it stuck out, long and thick, between the soft skin of Harper's thighs, prodding up against the moist-feeling cotton of her panties.

Harper's soft, happy moans stirred him into full wakefulness. She lay with her back to him, and her butt pressed right up against him. Unless he was completely mistaken, she seemed to be enjoying his morning glory very much. Riley couldn't help with notice that this meant that Harper most likely was still able to feel some sensation down there.

But was she asleep or awake? If she *was* asleep and he slid his cock out from between her thighs, would it wake her? And would she then angrily realize the compromising position they'd just been in? On the other hand, if he *didn't* pull away from her, that seemed kinda wrong.

But if she was *awake* and she was enjoying the feeling of his hot, hard meat pushed up against her panties, then he sure as hell didn't want to take that pleasure away from her. Hell no. If that was the case, he wanted to give her as much damn pleasure as was humanly possible.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath. As much as he wanted to grab Harper's panties to one side and slide his hungry dick all the way inside of her, he knew that the only real course of action right now was to retreat. Even if it meant waking her.

Slowly, he began extracting himself from the situation. Unfortunately, he was wedged in there pretty tight, and the movement of his cock elicited a huge, shaking gasp of pleasure from Harper, so strong it immediately jolted her awake. Then, her back stiffened as she became aware of their compromising position.

"Oh," she said suddenly, her voice sounding embarrassed. "Were we... and was I...?"

Riley noticed that Harper was still trembling. Had she just climaxed? Holy fuck. The thought of that was too damn sexy to imagine. He shoved his unruly dick inside his pants.

"Damn, I'm sorry, Harper," said Riley. "I just woke up too. Looks like the line of stuffies between us didn't do their job properly."

"Can you help me roll onto my back, Riley?" Harper asked.

Riley did as he was asked, making sure his groin got nowhere near her.

“I really am sorry about that,” Riley murmured, feeling heat rise to his cheeks. “Didn’t mean for that to happen. I completely respect that your body belongs to you. I’ll make sure we have separate beds from now on. Separate rooms.”

Harper blinked at Riley, looking unbelievably gorgeous with her mussed-up hair, her pink cheeks, her big blue eyes. “No,” she said softly. “Please don’t. I liked sharing a bed with you. And I liked that too. It’s been a while since I... I wasn’t even sure if I could...” She bit her lip, so embarrassed it was painful to watch. Then, she took a long, deep breath, collecting herself. “Riley,” she asked, “do you find me attractive?”

“I find you to be the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” Riley said, without skipping a beat. Instantly, he felt vulnerable and stupid, but also simultaneously relieved, because he’d spent so many years harboring a torch for Harper.

“I see,” said Harper, her blue eyes flickering with concern. “But what about my... disability?”

“What about mine?” Riley shot back at her.

“You’re not as helpless as me,” Harper said sadly.

“You don’t seem helpless to me,” Riley replied. “And besides, you’re not as dumb as me.”

“You don’t seem dumb to me,” Harper replied softly.

“I was dumb to make you feel bad at school,” Riley replied, “when in reality, I had the mother of all schoolboy crushes on you. And I was dumb not to get in touch with you after I left

school, when no other girl ever measured up to you. I watched your races on TV and I read interviews with you, and all I could ever think was what a jerk I'd been and how stupid I'd been to let you think I hated you."

Harper frowned. "You really thought about me a lot?"

Riley sighed. "Uh, yeah. All the damn time."

Harper took a deep breath. "Riley," she said quietly, girlishly. "I don't have much experience with... you know. And I don't have a hundred percent of my feeling... down there."

Riley swallowed. "I get it. It's too much for you—"

"No," said Harper quickly. "That's not what I'm saying. Actually, I'm saying the opposite. Since I came back to Little Rock, you've been so good to me, Riley. You've made me feel just a teeny tiny bit like myself again. And you even made me... Well. You gave me a very nice feeling in my secret place."

Riley's cock twitched devilishly as she spoke, still thick and hard and straining to get out of his boxers. He pushed it down, trying to get the damn thing to go away. It wasn't exactly helpful for this serious conversation.

"I didn't mean for that to happen, Harper. I would always, always want to know that I had your full consent. I would never take advantage—"

"I know, Riley," Harper said. "That's why I'm giving you my full consent now."

Riley's heart stopped. "You are?"

"I want you to make me feel like that again, Riley. I need it. Maybe I need it more than anything else in the whole world."

Damn. How am I meant to resist?

"I want to know how much feeling I've got. What my body's capable of. You might have to work extra hard to get me to—"

"I'm a hard worker," Riley cut in.

Very hard.

"You might have to do things that you don't do with other girls."

"There are no other girls," Riley said, his cock throbbing.

"And you'll definitely have to take control more than usual," Harper continued. "Moving me around to just where you want me. And sometimes you'll maybe even have to go harder and rougher just so that I can feel—"

"Wait," said Riley, the blood whooshing in his ears. "Harper, I'm sorry to stop you. I like what you're saying. No, I really fucking *love* what you're saying. There's nothing I'd like more right now than to go hard and rough and strong with you on this bed." His heart felt like it was going to explode. "But let's take our time with this. Just a couple days ago, you still hated my guts. And rightly so. I want to make things up to you. I want you to see how much you can trust me. And," he paused, gazing deep into her eyes, "how much I care."

Harper nodded, her cheeks burning red. “Sorry. That was all so presumptuous of me. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot or put any pressure on you. I don’t want you to feel like you owe me anything or like you need to do this out of sympathy or whatever. Plus, I know that you’re almost definitely a Daddy Dom, and I’m not really a Little—“

Riley pressed his thick finger to her lips. “Babygirl,” he said in a low, deep voice. “I *am* a Daddy Dom. And I could be wrong, but I’m pretty sure that you’re a Little. If I’m right, then I want to get to know everything about that secret Little of yours. How she talks, how she plays, how she acts out. But if I’m wrong, and you’re not a Little, then it’s not a problem for me. As long as you’re good with me taking control, with me protecting you and caring about you, then my needs will be more than satisfied.”

Harper considered this. “So, whether or not I’m a Little isn’t a dealbreaker?”

“Exactly. The only thing that matters is that you’re being true to yourself when you’re around me.”

Harper blinked at him for a while. “I see.”

“I want to get to know the real you, Harper Adams. Your mind and your body. I want to help you feel all the best feelings in the world. Not because I feel sorry for you. Not even because I feel sorry for the things I said to you in the past. I want to do it because I’m deeply fucking attracted to you, Harper. Always have been, always will be. You’re the

most attractive, determined, sweet soul I ever met. And if you don't believe me, just ask my dick.”

Riley grabbed hold of Harper's hand and guided it down to his boxers, showing her how rock-hard he still was.

Harper's eyes widened. “Oh my, Riley. Are you going to put that inside me now?”

Riley shook his head. “I want to make sure that we do things right. If that's okay by you.”

Harper pulled her hands away from Riley's full boxers and nodded. “All right. I understand.”

“I'm sorry if that's disappointing for you, Harper. Maybe you just wanted a quick fuck right now to see how it felt. Maybe it's just my dick that interests you. I wouldn't blame you if that's the case. I haven't exactly been the model boyfriend—“ He paused. Why the hell was he using that word? Of course, he'd imagined so many times over the years what it would be like to be Harper's boyfriend, but he didn't want to rush or scare the poor girl.

“I'm not using you, Riley,” Harper said sincerely. “I want to get to know you. All of you. And I'm happy for you to dictate the pace. I guess I just got a little greedy this morning.” She giggled shyly. “I'm not used to pacing myself. Normally, when I want something, I run after it right away.”

Riley nodded. “I get it. That's part of what makes you so incredible. But look, here's the deal. Let's spend a couple more days getting to know one another. I'm gonna treat you like the

princess you are. You're gonna build up a ton of trust in me. We'll get to know each other's true selves. And then, when I think the time is right, I'm gonna lie you down on the nearest bed, strip you fully naked, and test out what every single part of your perfect body can feel."

Harper shivered. "Okay."

"With your consent, of course."

Harper smiled.

"There is one condition, though," Riley said, his expression growing serious.

"Anything," Harper whispered.

"You might not be a Little, but I want you to call me Daddy," Riley said, unwavering.

Harper swallowed. She looked thoughtful for a moment, then she nodded. "Yes, Daddy."

*

They sat across from one another in the booth of the diner with more than one type of hunger in their eyes.

The tension between them was palpable.

"So, um, what is it about Littles that you like?" Harper asked awkwardly as she sipped her milkshake. "Just 'cos, you know, I'm not one anymore."

Riley stirred a spoonful of sugar into his coffee. He didn't normally take it that way, but this morning, for some reason, it felt right. "Like I said, I don't mind if you don't see yourself that way, Harper. Although I'm not sure, honestly, if it's something you can just switch off."

Harper bit her thumbnail. She had a worried expression on her face.

"But maybe I'm wrong," Riley said with a grin. "Wouldn't be the first time. What I mean is there's a sweetness to Littles. An innocence and an ability to be in the moment that is so integral to their personality that it would take something big, very big, to switch that off."

Harper looked down at her lap and Riley instantly regretted what he just said.

"Oh shit, Harper, I didn't mean... But you know, you did go through a huge trauma with your accident. Maybe you just lost a little of your innocence and joy when it happened. But I don't think that means it's necessarily lost forever."

"So, what if I just pretended to be Little for a while? On this road trip?"

"You do whatever makes you happy, babygirl," said Riley, drinking his coffee. It was very sweet with all that sugar, but just what he wanted.

"Okay," said Harper with a smile. "I mean, okay, *Daddy*."

Riley felt his arousal grow hearing her use that name.

“Have you ever had a real DDlg relationship before?” Harper asked nervously.

“Actually, no,” Riley admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “I was practically forced to date cheerleaders while I was on the school soccer team. Then I had no time for dating in the military. Since getting back to Little Rock, I’ve visited a couple of age play clubs and, you know, fooled around. But not with anyone from the town. You move to a small place like Little Rock, and you can’t afford to mess up. Don’t wanna be bumping into your ex every five minutes.”

Harper grimaced. “Yeah. That’d suck.”

“What about you?” Riley asked, leaning forward. “You ever had a Daddy before?”

Harper chuckled. “Nope. No time at the Olympic Center. And not too many Daddy Doms just lying around waiting to be snapped up. And then there was my accident...” She trailed off and began absentmindedly pushing her eggs around her plate.

“Do you wanna talk about it? How it happened?”

Harper winced. “No. Yes. What I mean is, I do want to talk about it. But not right now. It’s a long story, and I have to be in the right frame of mind.”

Riley reached out for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “I get that. Same with my story.”

Harper brightened. “Thank you, Daddy. It feels good to finally meet someone who understands me.”

Harper looked thoughtful, swirling the straw in her drink. “I’ve always been drawn to Daddy Doms because they seem so nurturing and supportive, you know? I think that’s what I need right now.”

“Me too,” Riley agreed, his eyes meeting hers with a hint of vulnerability. “I haven’t been in a position to nurture anyone in a long while, but I think I’m ready now.”

Harper tried to conceal a smile but didn’t manage.

“Now, eat up your eggs, babygirl,” said Riley, pointing to her plate. “We have a long day ahead of us, and you need your energy.”

Harper gave Riley a mischievous salute. “Yes, Daddy.” She chewed on a mouthful of brown toast and scrambled eggs, and then said, “You know, I enjoyed you choosing my breakfast for me this morning. It reminds me of being back at the facility. We had a nutritionist telling us exactly what to eat every day.”

“Would you like me to do that? Tell you exactly what to eat?”

Harper considered this. “Yes. I think I would. My diet’s been a little off lately. Especially at home with Mom. She wants to bake cupcakes every five minutes to cheer me up. But I guess I’ve been eating bad food on purpose, too. Kinda punishing my body because I feel like it’s punishing me.”

“Makes sense,” Riley said gently. “But you know, your body’s a temple. Just because some of the doors and windows

on the temple don't open anymore, it doesn't make it any less of a temple. The only thing punishing you is your own mind. If we treat it carefully, showing it some love and respect, just you watch: it's going to blossom before our eyes."

Harper giggled. "You have a poetic way of speaking sometimes, Daddy. For a military man."

"I'm tough on the outside, but soft and gooey on the inside. Just like a type of candy that I'm definitely not going to let you eat except on special occasions."

Harper pouted. "No fair!"

"Careful, girlie," Riley warned, "or Daddy will have to think about spanking your ass."

A mischievous look came into Harper's eyes. "Luckily I can't feel my ass too well, Daddy."

Riley grunted. "Then it looks like Daddy's going to have to get creative."

"I can't wait," Harper joked.

"You'll have to wait until we at least have a contract in place," Riley told her.

As they finished their breakfast and prepared to leave the diner, Riley couldn't help but feel a renewed sense of hope. Would Harper really let him become her Daddy Dom? Would the next couple of days seal the bond between them? Only time would tell.

“The next stop on our road trip is an industrial complex?” Harper asked, her eyes scanning the concrete jungle of warehouses and repair shops.

“There’s a very special place we need to visit here,” Riley told her, guiding their car into a parking spot near a sleek building adorned with signage for adaptive sports equipment. “I thought you might want to take a look around.”

Riley sensed a mix of curiosity and hesitation in Harper’s eyes as they entered the store. The air was tinged with the smell of rubber and metal, a scent that always brought him comfort.

“Riley! Long time no see!” called out Mike, the store manager, from behind the counter.

“Hey, Mike. Still helping people get back in the game, I see,” Riley said, shaking hands with him.

“You know it. Hey, are you going to introduce me to your friend?” Mike gestured toward Harper.

“This is Harper. We’re on a bit of a road trip,” Riley explained, his eyes meeting Harper’s for a moment, sharing a secret smile about the morning’s newfound intimacy.

Mike nodded with understanding and returned to his work, giving them the space they needed.

Riley then guided Harper past shelves lined with various sporting gear designed for athletes with disabilities. There

were prosthetic running blades, hand-cycles, and of course, racing wheelchairs.

“Wow,” Harper muttered, her eyes widening at the aerodynamic chairs with their angled wheels and sleek, metallic frames.

“I want to buy you one,” Riley said, his gaze fixed on her. “Thought you might like to take it for a spin.”

For a fleeting moment, her eyes sparkled, and it looked like she was about to burst with excitement. And then, as quickly as the expression came, it vanished.

“Riley, I appreciate this, I really do, but I can’t,” Harper stammered. “Being an athlete is behind me now. I need to be realistic.”

“Being realistic means accepting your limitations and finding a way to work with them,” said Riley. “It’s up to you, but I think it’d be entirely realistic to give this thing a go. If it doesn’t work out, we can just act like the whole thing never happened. But at least we’ll have tried. What do you say?”

“I guess maybe giving it a go wouldn’t hurt.”

Before he could speak again, Mike brought over a brand new racing prosthetic blade. “Just got this in, Riley. Figured you might be interested.”

Riley looked at it and then back at Harper. “What if I buy this and we race each other? Just for fun. You and me.”

Harper looked torn, her eyes darting between the prosthetic and the racing wheelchairs.

“It’s a lot of money, Riley.”

“I’ve been well-compensated for my service, Harper,” he reassured her. “Money isn’t the issue. The issue is you not giving yourself a chance to enjoy life again, on your terms.”

Her eyes met his, and this time she didn’t look away. Her walls, slowly but surely, were starting to crumble.

“Okay,” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “Let’s race.”

His heart soared. “Deal,” he said, turning to Mike. “We’ll take that prosthetic and one of these racing chairs.”

Mike grinned, already ringing up the purchase. “I can’t wait to hear about this race.”

As they moved toward the exit, Riley couldn’t help but feel a sense of triumph. Harper was taking a step toward reclaiming something invaluable that she’d lost.

“Soon,” he told her softly, “you’ll be feeling the wind against your face, just like old times.”

As they left the store, Riley asked Harper if she wanted him to push her chair.

“No,” she said. “I don’t need you to do that. I can do it all myself.”

“Course you can, babygirl,” he said into her ear as they crossed the parking lot. “But if you ever want Daddy to make you feel extra cared for, just let me know.”

Harper stopped wheeling and looked up at him. “Okay. I’ll consider it.”

Riley secured the racing wheelchair and prosthetic in the back of his truck, then he turned his attention back to Harper. Her eyes were fixed on the ground, and her hands fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. He could sense the reluctance emanating from her.

“Harper,” he began cautiously, “are you okay?”

She glanced up at him, worry written all over her face. “I don’t know, Riley. I mean, it was really sweet of you to buy me the chair, but what if I can’t use it? What if I’m not strong enough, or fast enough, or...”

“Hey,” he interrupted, stepping closer to her and resting a hand on her shoulder. “There’s no such thing as ‘strong enough’ or ‘fast enough’. You’re already ‘enough’, just the way you are. This chair isn’t here to test you or to make you feel bad. It’s just a tool. If the tool feels good to use, use it. If not, well, I’m sure we can get at least ten bucks for it on eBay.”

Harper snickered. Then she sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. “I just don’t want to disappoint you, or myself.”

“Disappointment isn’t a part of this journey, Harper,” Riley reassured her. “We’re in this together, remember? We’ll learn, adapt, and grow.”

Slowly, a smile spread across Harper’s face, the doubts and fears fading away. With newfound determination, she nodded.

“Alright, Riley. Let’s do this. Together.”

“Damn right,” he agreed, his own grin broadening. “Now let’s go show the world what we’re made of.”

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Riley turned the truck onto a quiet, secluded road within Olympic National Park. Towering trees lined the path, providing a sense of serene isolation that was perfect for their purposes. He glanced over at Harper, who was fidgeting with the straps on her new racing gloves.

“Excited?” he asked, raising an eyebrow teasingly.

“More like terrified,” she admitted, her voice shaky. “But I’m ready to give it my all.”

“Good,” he replied, his eyes flicking back to the road. “That’s all we can ask for.”

As they neared their destination, Riley could sense Harper’s anticipation building. Her hands gripped the edge of her seat, and he knew she was eager to test the limits of her new racing wheelchair. Despite her fears, there was a fire in her eyes that hadn’t been there before—a spark of determination that made him believe she could conquer anything.

They pulled up to a wide, flat stretch of pavement that ran alongside a picturesque lake. The sun was shining brightly overhead, casting a warm glow over everything. Riley parked the truck and helped Harper transfer into her new racing

wheelchair, adjusting the straps and ensuring everything was secure.

“Alright,” he said, stepping back to admire her. “You look badass.”

Harper laughed, though it was tinged with nerves. “Thanks. I feel different. Powerful, almost.”

“Because you are,” he stated firmly, meeting her gaze. “So, you wanna wait for me to fit my racing prosthetic or do you wanna give this thing a quick test drive?”

Harper took a deep breath. “I’m going to try it.”

“Sure thing.”

As Harper positioned herself at the starting point, Riley stepped off to the side, giving her space to focus. He watched as she took deep breaths, steadying herself for the task ahead.

“Ready when you are,” he called out, trying to hide the way his heart raced in his chest.

“Alright,” Harper replied, her voice steadier than before. “Here goes nothing.”

With a deep breath, she pushed off the ground, her arms working in smooth, powerful motions as she propelled herself forward. The wheelchair responded beautifully, gliding over the pavement with ease. Riley’s heart swelled with pride as he watched her go, the fierce determination in her eyes making it clear that she wasn’t backing down from this challenge.

“Go, Harper!” he cheered, clapping his hands together. “You’re doing amazing!”

As Harper continued to race across the pavement, her initial hesitation and fear seemed to melt away. She was in her element now, focused solely on the task at hand. Her movements were graceful and strong, a testament to her innate athleticism and drive.

“Riley!” she called out, her voice filled with joy. “This feels incredible! I can’t believe I’m actually doing this!”

“Of course you are!” he shouted back, grinning from ear to ear. “You were born for this, Harper!”

Harper’s laughter rang out as she pushed herself faster, the wind whipping through her hair. But as she attempted a tight turn, she winced in pain. She came to an abrupt stop, frustration and self-doubt clouding her face.

“Hey,” Riley called out, jogging over to her side. “What’s wrong? You were doing great.”

“Damn it,” Harper muttered under her breath, gripping the push rims tightly. “This isn’t how it was supposed to go.”

“What’s up, sweetie?”

“It’s just that it hurts when I try to move too fast or make sharp turns,” she admitted, avoiding his gaze. “I’m sorry, Daddy. I failed.”

“Look at me,” Riley said gently, waiting for her eyes to meet his. “Remember when I first started walking with my prosthetic? It wasn’t easy. I had to learn to pace myself, to

understand my body's limitations. But I didn't give up. And neither will you."

Harper sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. "I just wanted to feel that freedom again, you know? To be able to race without any barriers holding me back."

"Harper, you're still regaining your strength," Riley reminded her, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "You can't expect to jump right back into competitive racing after all you've been through. But with time and practice, you'll get there. I promise."

"Really?" she asked, her voice wavering with uncertainty. "I think even if I get stronger, I'm gonna struggle with those explosive movements. I don't think I'm capable of sprinting anymore."

"Then you can do mid-length races. Or marathons," said Riley. "Or just race around with me for fun."

"Thank you, Riley," Harper whispered, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Hey, that's what friends are for, right?" he winked, trying to lighten the mood. "Now, let's try that turn again, but this time, ease into it. Don't push yourself too hard. I'm gonna race alongside you. Try this thing out."

Riley was wearing his prosthetic now. It looked so different to his other ones—like a blade. And it felt very strange walking in it. He wasn't quite sure how it would feel to run in

it. He was ninety-nine- percent sure he'd fall flat on his face at least once.

“Alright,” she agreed, taking a deep breath and gripping the wheels once more.

As she began to move, Riley matched her pace, running alongside her.

“See?” he encouraged, his voice steady and strong. “You’re doing it, Harper. Just remember to trust yourself and take it one wheel rotation at a time.”

“What about you, Daddy?” Harper asked. “Is it comfortable for you?”

Riley felt overwhelmed with gratitude for the sweet creature beside him who was thinking of him at a time like this. “I feel clumsy, if I’m being honest. Kinda like I might—“

Just like that, he fell. Exactly like he predicted.

Harper stopped racing immediately and helped him up.

“Oh no!” she cried out. “Are you okay?”

Riley dusted himself off, smiling. “Growing pains,” he said. “How about you? Are you okay?”

Harper smiled back. “Growing pains,” she echoed.

They started to race once more. Riley watched Harper’s growing fatigue as they continued practicing, her face flushing with effort. He could see the tension in her shoulders and the slight grimace that crossed her features whenever she pushed

herself too hard. It didn't take a genius to figure out that it was time to call it a day.

"Hey, Harper," he said gently, placing a hand on her arm to get her attention. "I think we should stop for now."

She looked at him stubbornly, her eyes narrowed in determination. "I can keep going, Daddy. I just need to get better at this."

"Harper," he said softly, his voice filled with understanding. "You've done great today, but you need to give yourself time to adjust to this new way of racing. You can't expect yourself to be perfect right away."

As he spoke, Riley saw something in Harper's expression shift. She took a deep breath and seemed to deflate a little, her pride giving way to vulnerability. "I know," she admitted reluctantly, her voice barely more than a whisper. "It's hard to accept my limitations. I want to be good at this so badly."

"Hey," Riley said, his tone gentle yet firm. "No one expects you to be a pro overnight. Just take it one day at a time and focus on making progress, okay?"

Harper nodded slowly, her eyes searching his face for reassurance. "Do you really think I can do it?" she asked, her voice small and uncertain.

"Absolutely," he replied without hesitation, his confidence in her unwavering. "But you have to believe in yourself too."

"Okay," she agreed, taking a deep breath and sitting up straighter in her wheelchair. "I'll try to be more patient with

myself.”

“Good,” Riley said with a warm smile. “Now, let’s head back to the truck and head somewhere to get some rest. We can always come back another day.”

As they made their way back to the vehicle, Harper seemed to be lost in thought, her eyes distant and contemplative. Riley couldn’t help but wonder what was going through her mind. Was she doubting herself? Or was she simply trying to process everything that had happened today?

“Riley,” she said suddenly, breaking the silence. “Thank you. For everything.”

“Of course,” he replied with a lopsided grin. “What are Daddies for, right?”

Harper chuckled softly, a hint of her old spark returning to her eyes. “Yeah,” she agreed. “What are Daddies for?”

Chapter Nine

HARPER

HARPER STARED AT THE text message on her phone, stomach churning.

U think ur so smart, encouraging Loretta to leave me? You won't get away with this.

She didn't have the sender's number saved in her phone, but it was obvious who it was from.

JP.

Receiving the message meant two things. Number one: JP was mad as hell. Number two: the reason for this was that Loretta had obviously decided to walk out on him.

Harper hoped and prayed she had gone to stay with her mom. And she hoped Loretta and Emma were safe.

Quickly, she fired off a message to her mom, but it didn't seem to be getting through at the other end. Her mom often switched off her cell, worried about "cosmic rays", but

hopefully she would turn her phone back on and see the message soon.

“Dang it,” she muttered under her breath.

“Everything okay?” Riley asked from the driver’s seat, concern lining his rough features.

“Uh, yeah, just a message I didn’t expect,” Harper replied, trying to brush it off. She couldn’t let him know about the threat from JP—Riley would only worry about her. He had worked so hard to make this trip special that it didn’t seem fair to let some asshole ruin it for them.

But deep down, Harper’s confidence wavered. Were they being selfish going on this road trip while Loretta was dealing with so much? Shouldn’t she have left her visit with Loretta until after her road trip? She had gone there to make herself feel better, but had she really timed it in Loretta’s best interests? The doubts crept in like shadows, casting a heavy weight over her thoughts.

“I wonder if two weeks is too long for this road trip,” Harper said quietly, more to herself than to Riley.

“Hey,” Riley said softly, reaching over to place a hand on her arm. “Whatever you decide, I’ll be right here with you,” he reassured her, his thumb rubbing circles on the back of her hand. “Do you want me to stop the truck a moment? Give you a minute to think about what you want?”

“No,” said Harper firmly. “I want to go to Seattle today like we planned. I know you have something special in store for us.

But maybe after that...”

“Sure,” said Riley. “That’s fine by me. You don’t have to decide anything right now. Let’s just focus on getting to Seattle. I think you’ll enjoy what I’ve planned.”

She nodded, feeling a small sense of relief that he was being good about things. She noticed that he encouraged her to try things that were good for her, but when it came to the big, important things, he never pressured her and always let her take control.

Last night, he’d even changed their cabin booking to a single room instead of two. They’d shared a bed again, but Riley had worn sweatpants this time, to make sure there wasn’t a repeat of the morning before. Even so, she still felt his arousal pressing against her back in the morning—a silent reminder of their growing connection.

Not that Harper would have minded if Riley *hadn’t* worn sweatpants. It had been such a wonderful shock to wake up with Riley’s huge, hard appendage pushing up against her crotch yesterday. It had been even more of a shock to discover that she still had so much sensation left. So much so, in fact, that she had actually woken up climaxing! And ever since, she had been hornier than a very horny horndog.

But not anymore. Not now that horrible man had sent her a message. Now, everything felt different.

Harper’s sister needed her. And yet here she was, out on a road trip with a man she barely knew, orgasming from brushing against the tip of his morning wood, and hoping it

might happen again like a randy teenager. And what was it all for? To prove to herself that even though she was disabled, she could still race? As if! Her muscles ached like crazy after yesterday's brief foray into wheelchair racing. She wasn't cut out for this. That much was obvious.

She'd known that already, though. Around six months ago, back at the Olympic Center, someone from the Paralympic division had come to visit her and asked if she was interested in training for a suitable sport. She'd almost laughed them out of the room.

"Are you kidding me?" she'd spat. "The life I was leading is what got me into this mess. Training so hard my body couldn't take it. Getting pushed and pushed and pushed so hard something in me snapped. Literally. I need to get out of this place."

She'd stayed at the facility a while longer, trying to figure out if she'd really meant those words. But honestly, she really, really had. She didn't want to live back in the Olympic Center anymore. She wanted to live in the real world. To be a real person.

She just wished she knew how to do it.

Her gaze returned to the road ahead, but Harper's mind remained tangled in self-doubt and worry for her sister. Her heart felt heavy within her chest, every mile marker reminding her of the distance between them and home. The silence in the car was punctuated by the hum of the engine and the faint tapping of Riley's fingers against the steering wheel.

“Riley,” Harper finally said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Maybe this whole trip was a mistake. I’m just out here pretending to be something I’m not. A Little. A wheelchair racer. A normal person.”

Riley reached over to gently squeeze her hand. “Harper, there’s nothing wrong with trying on a few different hats until you find one that fits. But this is your journey, and I’m just along for the ride. Please don’t feel bad about anything. I know how much you’ve had going on. I know that one day you’ll find an amazing Daddy who’ll—“

“Wait,” said Harper. “I don’t mean that. I don’t mean I want you to stop being my Daddy. Unless you want to stop.”

Riley focused on the road ahead. “I don’t want to stop, babygirl.”

“Okay. Good. Then it’s settled, Daddy.”

“You know, every time you call me that name, it makes me feel good all over.”

“All over, Daddy?” asked Harper with a playful snicker.

“Mm-hmm,” Riley replied gruffly. “All frickin’ over.”

As Harper looked at the road ahead, she couldn’t help but feel torn between the desire to return to her sister and the urge to continue forward, finding her own path. But one thing remained certain: no matter what she decided, Riley wanted to be there for her, and that knowledge gave her the strength to carry on.

“Hey, how about we take a break?” Riley suggested, pointing to a colorful roadside amusement arcade up ahead. “Might be fun to stop here and take our minds off things for a bit?”

Harper hesitated as she considered the proposal. It was tempting. The vibrant lights and playful music beckoned her to forget her worries, at least for a short while.

“Alright,” she agreed, “let’s do it.”

Riley stopped the car and they headed inside, greeted by the familiar sounds of electronic games and laughter.

Harper felt a sudden rush of nostalgia, remembering simpler times spent in arcades with her sister. The cheerful atmosphere seemed to work its magic, lifting her spirits as they wandered through the maze of machines.

“Look!” Riley exclaimed, pointing to a row of sports-themed arcade games. “This is right up your alley, isn’t it? Up for trying to beat *this guy*?” Riley stuck his thumbs up and pointed them at his chest.

A smile tugged at the corners of Harper’s lips as she nodded, feeling a competitive spark ignite within her. “You’re on, Daddy. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

They started with a basketball game, each taking turns tossing virtual balls into the net with practiced ease. To Harper’s surprise, Riley held his own, sinking shot after shot.

“Wow, not bad... for a mechanic,” she teased, impressed by his skill.

“Hey, I’m more than just my day job,” he retorted playfully, landing another basket. “And don’t think I haven’t noticed those moves of yours, either.”

They took turns shooting hoops, laughing and playfully trash-talking each other. Harper felt her spirits lift further, bolstered by the lighthearted banter and Riley’s unwavering support.

“Looks like I still got it,” Riley said, grinning broadly as he sunk another basket.

“Never doubted you for a second,” Harper replied, her eyes sparkling with admiration.

As they continued playing various sports games, from virtual soccer to a racing simulator, Harper found herself laughing and enjoying the moment. Her earlier apprehensions were momentarily forgotten.

“Okay, last one,” Riley declared, leading her to a boxing game. “Best of three?”

“Deal,” Harper agreed, slipping her hands into the gloves provided and squaring off against her virtual opponent. She threw a series of punches, feeling the satisfying impact of each hit.

“Damn, you’re good at this,” Riley remarked, watching her in admiration. “I might be in trouble.”

“Just giving it my all,” Harper replied, breathless but grinning from ear to ear. As she took down her final opponent, she felt an unexpected sense of accomplishment—as though

she'd conquered some of her inner demons with each successful blow.

“Alright, my turn,” Riley said, stepping up to the machine. He launched into a flurry of powerful punches. Harper found herself captivated by his determination and strength, realizing that they both had their own challenges to overcome.

“Looks like we’ve got ourselves a tie,” Riley declared after the final round. “But I think we can agree that we make a pretty great team.”

“Definitely,” Harper agreed, her heart swelling with newfound appreciation and affection for the man beside her.

“Hey, wait a second,” said Riley. “There’s no way I can’t try to win this little guy for you!”

Riley ran over to a glass case full of stuffies and put a couple coins into a slot.

Harper’s laughter filled the arcade as she watched Riley concentrating intensely on a claw machine. The colorful lights reflected off his furrowed brow, and she could tell he was determined to win something for her.

“Come on, Riley! Don’t let me down!” she encouraged, amusement dancing in her eyes.

“Almost there,” he muttered, expertly maneuvering the claw toward a plush cheetah. The machine whirred and hummed, adding to the cacophony of sounds from the surrounding games.

As the claw descended and closed around the cheetah, Harper held her breath. She'd always loved stuffed animals, and the cheetah caught her eye with its unique attire—white running shoes on its paws, a purple-spotted tank top, and black shorts adorned with a cheetah face logo.

“Got it,” Riley declared triumphantly as the claw lifted the stuffie and deposited it into the prize chute.

“Wow! Great job!” Harper exclaimed, genuinely impressed by his skill. She retrieved the cheetah and hugged it tightly, feeling an unexpected surge of happiness. “I didn’t think it was even possible to win these things! Thank you, Riley.”

“Anything to see that smile,” he replied, his eyes softening as he gazed at her.

As they walked back through the arcade toward the parking lot, Harper found herself caught up in the carefree atmosphere. For a while, she had been able to forget about her worries and doubts, simply enjoying the present moment with Riley.

She clutched the cheetah stuffie to her chest, and she couldn’t help but feel a renewed sense of connection with Riley. She looked into the plush toy’s eyes and smiled. “I think I’ll call her Swifty because she’s fast,” he told Riley. “And because Taylor Swift is the greatest musician to have walked on this planet.”

Riley chuckled at her playful naming choice. “Swifty it is,” he agreed, his warm gaze meeting hers.

“Although, I’m not really ‘swift’ these days,” Harper admitted, her smile fading slightly. “I can’t even go fast anymore without feeling pain. You should probably have tried to win me a tortoise stuffie. Or a sloth.”

“Hey, don’t sell yourself short,” Riley said, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. “Cheetahs may be known for their speed, but they have their own set of challenges too.”

“Like what?” Harper asked, curiosity piqued.

“First, they’ve had to adapt evolutionarily to survive in their environment. Their slender bodies and long legs are perfect for speed, but they make them vulnerable in fights against larger predators,” Riley explained, his voice gentle and reassuring.

Harper nodded, listening intently to his words.

“Second, they have invisible struggles. Cheetahs can’t roar like other big cats; instead, they purr and chirp. They have to communicate in ways that aren’t obvious to others,” he continued.

“Kind of like my own invisible struggles,” Harper mused, her eyes shining with understanding.

“Exactly,” Riley affirmed. “And finally, they can only move in specific short bursts. A cheetah’s sprint is incredibly fast, but they tire quickly afterward and need to rest. They have limitations, just like all of us.”

Harper absorbed his words, feeling a sense of comfort in the knowledge that even the fastest animal on earth had its own struggles.

“Swiftly may be fast, but she’s got her struggles too,” Riley concluded, his eyes softening. “Just like you.”

As Harper looked back at the cheetah stuffie, she felt a newfound appreciation for the toy. It wasn’t just a symbol of their growing bond; it was a reminder that everyone had their own issues going on.

As they left the arcade, Harper let out a sigh of contentment. It was almost, in fact, a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Harper?” Riley called out, his breath visible in the chilly evening air. “You hungry? I know a great burger joint nearby.”

“Sure,” Harper replied, her stomach rumbling at the thought of a juicy burger.

They climbed into Riley’s truck, the radio playing softly as they drove through the twilight. Harper glanced over at Riley, taking in the way his strong hands gripped the wheel and the determined set of his jaw. She could see the man he’d become since their school days—someone who’d faced hardships yet continued to push forward.

“Riley, I’ve been thinking,” Harper began tentatively, her fingers tracing the soft fur of Swiftly’s back.

“About what?” he asked, keeping his eyes on the road ahead.

“About us. This journey we’re on. I was so sure I wanted to go back home after Seattle, but now I’m not so certain.” She bit her lip, waiting for his reaction.

Riley smiled warmly, reaching over to give her hand a reassuring squeeze. “Harper, there’s no right or wrong answer here. Whatever you decide, I’ll be by your side.”

Her heart swelled at his words, knowing he truly meant it.

“Then let’s do it,” she said, determination filling her voice. “Let’s keep going after Seattle. I want to see where this road takes us.”

A grin spread across Riley’s face, his eyes shining with excitement. “You got it, babygirl.”

“Thank you, Daddy.”

As they drove through the night, Harper allowed herself to imagine a future filled with possibility. One where she could overcome her past and embrace life’s uncertainties with Riley at her side. She might not be the fastest creature in the world ever again, but maybe she could find her own natural rhythm. And for the first time in years, she felt truly hopeful.

Chapter Ten

RILEY

RILEY COULDN'T HELP BUT feel a mix of excitement and nerves as he pushed open the doors to the climbing center in Seattle. The memory of Harper's agitation from earlier still lingered in his mind. He wanted nothing more than to see her happy on this trip. He felt a great responsibility for it.

"Huh, this place is huge," Riley muttered, taking in the vast expanse before him.

The colorful climbing walls stretched high, looking both fun and immensely challenging at the same time. Climbers of various skill levels scaled them, their laughter and cheers echoing throughout the space. It was infectious, and he felt a smile tug at his lips.

"Alright, Harper, we're here," Riley announced, turning to face her. "Are you ready to give this a try?"

Harper's eyes darted around nervously, and she shifted uncomfortably in her wheelchair. "I... I don't know, Riley,"

she admitted, her voice barely audible over the noise. “I’ve never done anything like this before, and I’m scared of heights.”

Riley crouched down beside her, meeting her gaze with a reassuring smile. “Hey, it’s okay to be scared,” he said gently, channeling his Daddy Dom persona. “But I’ll be right there with you every step of the way, okay? We’ll go slow, and if you need to stop, just let me know. No pressure.”

He could see her uncertainty, but also the flicker of curiosity in her eyes. “Promise you won’t let me fall?” she asked, biting her lip.

“Cross my heart,” Riley replied, drawing an ‘X’ over his chest. “And if you’re very brave today, maybe I’ll even reward you later.” He winked playfully, hoping to lighten the mood.

A faint blush crept onto Harper’s cheeks, and she hesitated for a moment longer before finally nodding. “Alright, I’ll give it a shot. But only because you’ll be there with me.”

“Deal,” Riley agreed, impressed by her willingness to face her fears.

“But... do we have to do this right away? Could we maybe build up to it? Like, we could maybe get a hot chocolate first, or have a flapjack for energy?”

“Afraid not, sweetheart,” said Riley firmly. “If we’re gonna do this, then the sooner we do it the better. It’s like ripping off a Band-Aid.”

Riley watched as Harper's eyes darted from the colorful climbing walls to the climbers cheering each other on. He could see the fear in her gaze, but also a spark of determination. It was time for a little push.

"How about this?" he said. "I have a challenge for you."

"You do?" She shifted in her wheelchair, clearly nervous.

"If you don't make it to the top of that green route before midday," he said, "then I'll spank you later."

She blushed fiercely, and her mouth hung open as she gaped at him. "You...you wouldn't!" she stammered, unsure how serious he was. "That's not a spankable offense! You wouldn't dare!"

"Try me," Riley teased, his voice low and playful. "But if you do climb, and you face your fears, I'll make sure you get rewarded instead."

Harper's hesitation was palpable as she chewed on her lower lip. Riley could see her internal struggle written all over her face—the desire to prove herself battling against her anxiety.

She paused, taking a deep breath. "What if I freeze up there?"

"Then I'll be there to help you," he reassured her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "You're stronger than you think, Harper. You just need to trust yourself, and trust me."

In her eyes, he saw the flicker of trust, and something else—a spark of defiance that reminded him of the fiery girl she was deep inside. It was that same spirit that had drawn him to her

all those years ago, and now it was rekindling right before his eyes.

“Fine,” she finally agreed, her voice barely more than a whisper. “I’ll do it. But only because I really, really want a reward.”

“Absolutely,” Riley vowed.

They approached the adaptive climbing equipment together, their expert guide explaining how it worked. The playful challenge had done its job—curiosity and determination now shone in Harper’s eyes where once there was only doubt.

The guide explained, “The adaptive pulley system you’re using allows you to independently climb. As you pull on the handles, the winch mechanism lifts your wheelchair, securely anchored to the climbing wall. The harness you’re wearing adds an extra layer of support and balance.”

“I don’t think my upper body strength is good enough,” said Harper.

“You’ll be perfectly safe even if you lose your grip,” said the guide. “This is a beginner course and you’re safely strapped in. You can’t fall to the ground. You can only... dangle.”

“And if that happens, I’ll be right there to support you through it,” said Riley.

Harper nodded bravely.

The guide helped Riley add a special attachment to the shoe of his prosthetic leg to help him grip the wall better, and explained how his harness would work.

Harper seemed reassured to see that Riley also needed special help for his climb, too. Like they were in this together.

Once they were both fully briefed, the guide told them it was go time.

“Ready?” Riley asked, giving her an encouraging smile as they prepared to climb.

“Ready,” she echoed, her voice stronger than before.

Together, they began their ascent, every muscle in their bodies working in unison.

As they scaled the wall, Harper’s initial anxiety seemed to melt away, replaced by a growing confidence that left Riley in awe.

He was surprised how hard he found the climb to start with. Before his accident, he’d climbed a few walls like this as part of his military training, and he’d always breezed through it. Now, though, it was hard to position his prosthetic in the right place, and he had to rely on his upper body strength more than ever.

“Are you okay, Riley?” asked Harper, already slightly higher than him.

“Sure am,” Riley replied. “Just getting to grips with my limitations is all.”

Harper giggled. “Me too. But it’s fun.”

Riley felt hugely relieved that Harper was enjoying this challenge. He’d felt confident it would be good for her when

he'd booked it, but when he'd heard she wasn't keen on heights, he'd been a little anxious. Now, he could see that she was in her element, and as usual, she was doing even better than he was.

"Riley!" she called down to him. "You're not stopping, are you?"

"Cheeky little thing!" he called back up to her.

Their flirtatious banter returned, and the atmosphere between them grew lighter, more playful.

"Look at you, Harper!" Riley called up to her, grinning as she navigated a tricky section of the wall. "You're a natural!"

"Thanks to you," she replied, flashing him a teasing smile. "I couldn't have done it without my personal cheerleader."

"You know how I feel about cheerleaders!" he joked. "Just let me know if you want me to wear the skirt and shake the pom-poms for you next time."

"Not sure I'm as into cheerleaders as you clearly are!" Harper shot back at him.

As they joked around together, Riley felt a surge of affection for the woman who had overcome her fears to conquer this new challenge.

"Race you to the top!" Harper challenged, her grin widening as she pulled herself farther up.

"Bring it on!" Riley replied, unable to resist her contagious enthusiasm. Together, they climbed toward the summit, their

laughter and shared triumph echoing through the climbing center.

Just as she was about to reach a new height, around three-quarters of the way up the wall, Harper looked like she was experiencing a slight wobble. Her heart jumped—her wheelchair’s anchorage point seemed to momentarily slacken. She took a deep breath, double-checked her secondary anchorage, and resumed her ascent.

And then, just as he knew she would, she found her balance and continued her climb, a triumphant smile lighting up her face.

“Unbelievable,” Riley whispered as Harper defied the odds and conquer her fears. She was unstoppable, and he felt privileged to be a part of her journey.

“What are you waiting for, slowpoke?” Harper called down to him, her voice filled with newfound confidence.

In that moment, Riley knew they were both exactly where they needed to be—together, rising to meet whatever challenges life had in store for them.

Riley watched as Harper hoisted herself up onto the next handhold, determination practically radiating off of her. He couldn’t help but chuckle at the fierce look in her eyes.

“Careful there, Harper,” he teased. “You keep climbing like that, and you’re going to put the rest of us to shame.”

Harper shot him a devilish grin, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Maybe that’s my plan, Riley. Gotta keep you on

your toes, right?”

“Ha! I’d like to see you try,” he retorted playfully, his heart swelling with affection for her.

As Harper neared the top of the challenging route, Riley felt anticipation building inside him. “Almost there,” he encouraged, his voice strong and steady despite the rapid pounding of his heart.

With a final burst of energy, Harper reached the summit. She let out a triumphant whoop, her arms raised in victory as she reveled in her accomplishment. Riley couldn’t help but join in, cheering loudly for her success.

“Riley! I did it!” Harper shouted down to him, her face flushed with exhilaration. “I reached the top!”

“Damn right you did, Harper,” he beamed, his chest swelling with pride for this incredible woman who had faced her fears head-on. “You’re absolutely amazing.”

“I get my reward later, right?” she called out.

“You sure do,” he said, chuckling. He wondered if anyone had heard them saying that. Probably none of them would have any idea of the kind of reward he was talking about, though.

Once Harper was back on the ground, Riley wasted no time in pulling her close, wrapping his strong arms around her. The warmth of their bodies pressed together as he breathed in the clean scent of her hair mixed with the faint aroma of sweat from their exertions.

“Harper, you were incredible up there,” he murmured, his voice rough with admiration. “I’m so proud of you for facing your fears.”

“Thank you, Riley,” she replied, her voice muffled against his chest as she clung to him. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Of course you could,” he insisted, giving her a playful squeeze. “But I’m glad I was here to share this with you.”

“I had no idea my arms were strong enough to manage that,” Harper said, still looking dazed.

“Like I said, you’ve got strength you don’t even know about,” Riley told her.

As they stood there, wrapped in each other’s embrace, Riley felt a rush of happiness he hadn’t felt in a long time. He’d been surviving since his accident, yes. But he hadn’t been *thriving*. Suddenly, he felt like he was doing just that. He was eager to see where this unexpected relationship would take them next.

Riley took off his climbing equipment and then watched as the climbing center workers helped Harper out of the adapted harness, his heart still racing from the adrenaline of their shared triumph. He couldn’t help but admire her determination and courage, and he felt a surge of protectiveness for this woman who had come to mean so much to him.

Once they were out of their harnesses, Harper took a selfie of herself and Riley with the climbing wall behind them. She

opened up Instagram and posted the picture, accompanied by the caption, “Reaching new heights!”

But once she’d posted the picture, Riley noticed Harper stare at her phone warily, as though remembering the mysterious message she’d received earlier.

Riley hesitated, unsure if he should bring it up, but then remembered their promise to be honest with each other.

“Hey, um, Harper?” he ventured cautiously. “You seemed a bit rattled earlier after getting that message. Is everything all right?”

He saw her visibly tense, confirming his suspicions that something was bothering her. She hesitated for a moment before answering, her voice barely above a whisper. “Yeah, I’m okay. I just got some news that I wasn’t expecting, that’s all.”

“Is there anything you want to talk about?” Riley asked gently, trying not to push her too hard. “I’m here for you, no matter what.”

Harper looked into his eyes, clearly weighing her options. Finally, she sighed, her shoulders slumping in defeat. “I’d like to talk to you, Daddy. Can we maybe grab a drink and I’ll tell you all about it?”

Riley nodded. “Of course. That’s a good idea, darling.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, snuggling into his chest. “I trust you, Daddy.”

Riley felt a warmth spread through him at her words. That one word, “trust”, was the most important word of all. If they had that, they were ready to take their relationship to the next level. And he would give her that reward he promised her.

He just hoped that whatever she was about to tell him wouldn't put an end to all that.

Chapter Eleven

HARPER

HARPER'S FINGERS TRACED THE condensation on her glass, feeling the coolness press against her skin as she glanced around the cozy bar. The dim lighting cast a warm glow over the patrons, who were chatting softly or watching the sports event playing across several screens.

Harper's heart raced as she hesitated, weighing the consequences of sharing her secret. She trusted Riley, but the thought of exposing her vulnerability made her stomach clench. Finally, taking a deep breath, she mustered the courage to speak.

"Riley, there's something I need to show you," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "I received it this morning."

With trembling hands, she pulled out her phone and handed it to him, the screen displaying the ominous message from JP.

As Riley read the text, his brow furrowed, and his grip on the phone tightened.

Harper braced herself for his reaction. But just as quickly as the concern appeared on Riley's face, it seemed to fade away.

"Harper, you don't have to worry about this jerk," Riley said firmly, handing her phone back. "I'll make sure nothing happens to you."

His words were a balm to her frayed nerves, and she breathed a small sigh of relief. "Thank you, Riley."

Now, why hadn't she just told him about the message straight away? Riley hadn't overreacted. He just wanted to protect her.

"Seriously," Riley reassured her, "JP can't hurt you. He's an addict, he's weak, and he's just lashing out. And trust me, if he tried anything, I'd take him down quicker than grease on a hot skillet."

Harper smiled, feeling more reassured with every passing moment. "Thank you, Riley. I love that you've got my back."

Riley nodded. "Always." He paused. "By the way, I'd be lying if I said part of me wasn't relieved about the message. I thought for a second that text might have been from a secret love interest."

"There is no love interest," Harper replied, her cheeks flushing a deep shade of pink. She couldn't help but notice the warmth in his eyes as they locked onto hers.

"Good," he grinned, taking a sip of his drink. "That's very good."

“Daddy,” Harper said quietly. “I liked it when you talked about spanking me today.”

Riley smiled. “I liked it too. Although technically, you didn’t earn a spanking today. You earned a reward.”

“Ooh,” Harper said, lowering her voice so nobody could hear. “Is it a... sexy reward?”

Riley chuckled. “I’m glad to hear you’re into the idea of things getting a little spicy between us. But we’re not quite ready for that yet.”

Harper pouted. “We’re not?”

“Not until we have a contract in place.”

Harper’s eyes widened. “My reward is that we get to sign a contract! I love it!”

Riley took her hand. “I love it too. Establishing boundaries and consent with one another means we can have so much fun together.”

Harper’s heart fluttered at the thought, the idea of solidifying their connection filling her with excitement. The weight of Riley’s gaze was electric, sending shivers down her spine. It felt like a turning point, something that would bring them even closer together.

“We’ll take our time and make sure we’re both comfortable with it.”

“So... shall we do it right now?” she asked eagerly.

Riley grinned. "I'm glad to see you're so keen. But I think we should do it tomorrow. You look a little tired, sleepyhead. Tonight, I'd like to give you a more relaxing reward. I've booked us into a nice hotel in the city. I'll run you a warm bubble bath and then give you a long shoulder and back massage. Help those sore muscles of yours feel better. Tomorrow, when we're feeling fresh, I'll find the right time for us to sign along the dotted line."

Harper stifled a small yawn. "I guess I am a little sleepy, Daddy. And my arms do ache after all that climbing." She was surprised Riley had picked up on so much about her. She hadn't mentioned being tired or having aching muscles, but Riley seemed to observe her so carefully that he always understood exactly what she needed.

"Then it's settled," Riley said, still holding her hand. "Tonight, I'll take very good care of you. And tomorrow, things are going to get a little... naughtier."

The warmth of Riley's hand on hers sent a shiver down Harper's spine, her heart racing with anticipation. She took a deep breath, feeling the courage to open up about her past.

"Riley," she began, her voice wavering slightly, "there's something I need to tell you." She paused, gathering her thoughts. "You know about my accident, but not everything."

Riley leaned in closer, his eyes filled with concern. "Tell me, Harper. I'm here for you."

She exhaled slowly, her hands wringing together beneath the table. "Before the accident, I had a coach at the Olympic

Center who constantly put me down. That was his motivational style I guess. The stick rather than the carrot. It was the way he pushed me on to succeed.” As she spoke, Harper’s eyes darted around the dimly lit bar, as if searching for an escape from her painful memories. “It might have worked for some athletes, but it made me feel worthless.”

Riley’s steady gaze kept her grounded, giving her the strength to continue.

“Since then, I’ve struggled with insecurities and self-doubt,” she continued. “It’s been hard to find my footing again, both literally and figuratively.”

“Harper,” Riley said softly, his voice laced with empathy. “I can’t imagine how difficult that must have been for you. But you’re strong; you’ve overcome so much already. And I want you to know that I’m here to support you every step of the way.”

A sense of relief washed over Harper as she looked into Riley’s eyes, finding solace in his unwavering support. They shared a tender smile, their connection deepening with each moment of vulnerability.

“Thank you, Riley,” she whispered, her voice cracking with gratitude. “It means more to me than you’ll ever know.”

“I’m sorry you had to put up with that guy, Harper,” said Riley. “You deserve so much better.”

“Well, there’s more to the story. One day, my coach pushed me too hard during training and made me run in icy weather.

None of the other girls had to do it, but he forced me. Told me I'd gotten lazy because I hadn't trained all weekend, which was total nonsense because I was recovering from a sprained ankle. Anyway, my ankle was still weak and I fell over and got a herniated lumbar disc."

Riley winced. "Ouch. That sounds terrible."

"Yeah. Not pleasant. Way worse than a sprained ankle. My coach made me get back to training super fast, though, and the injury got worse. And worse. Until..."

"Are you kidding me?" Riley asked, his jaw tightening with anger. "That fucker was responsible for your disability?"

Harper looked down and fiddled with her hands. "Most of the coaches at the Olympic Center were nice. But this one coach had it in for me. He was trying to exert his power over me to, I don't know, impress me or something. I ended up filing a complaint after the accident and he was struck off."

"Shit," said Riley, rubbing his chin as he tried to take all this in. "Sweetheart, I'm so sorry. It must have felt like having to deal with Coach JP all over again." He paused, his eyes filling with sadness. "And it must have felt like dealing with *me* back at school, too. Damn, I was such a jerk to you, Harper. What is it with men being bullies?"

Harper swallowed. "You're not a bully, Riley. Not anymore."

"I swear to you that I never will be, Harper. Never again."

Harper nodded. "I know that. I trust you, remember?"

“Tell me about your injuries, sweetheart,” Riley said, as he placed a hand on Harper’s thigh. “Can you feel this at all?”

Harper shook her head. “No. I can’t feel much in my legs. The paralysis there is permanent. I have some muscle atrophy in my upper body too, which, as I now realize, makes explosive movements painful. And I have numbness and tingling down the left side of my pelvis and buttock. Other than the tingling, I can’t feel much on my butt. Although it seems I do have some feeling... down there.”

Riley leaned forward. “Harper, I’d like us to take our time with absolutely everything. I want you to tell me what you’re comfortable with every step of the way. Tell me what feels good and what doesn’t. This only works if you’re completely honest and open with me. Understand?”

Harper gave Riley a serious look. “I understand, Daddy.”

“Good girl,” Riley replied. He sipped his drink, then took a deep breath, his expression hardening. “I want you to know that I understand where you’re coming from,” he began, his voice steady and sincere. “When I was in the military, I had a sergeant who made my life hell. He pushed me to my limits both physically and mentally.”

Riley’s eyes held a far-off look as he recounted the painful memories. Harper could see the hurt that lingered beneath his strong exterior, and her heart ached for him.

“Being on the receiving end of that kind of treatment made me realize what a jerk I was at school,” he continued, his voice tinged with regret. “I’m so sorry, Harper. I can’t change the

past, but I promise to do everything I can to make up for it now.”

Harper looked into Riley’s eyes, seeing the sincerity behind his words. A wave of gratitude washed over her, knowing that he truly understood the pain she’d experienced.

“Thank you for sharing that with me, Riley,” she whispered, reaching out to gently touch his arm. “It means a lot that you’re being so open and honest with me.”

He smiled warmly, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “We’re in this together, Harper. And I think the more we open up to each other, the stronger our bond will become.”

Harper stared into her glass of lemonade, watching the ice cubes bob up and down. She looked up at Riley, their eyes meeting. Silence stretched between them, but it wasn’t awkward. It was the kind of quiet that comes when two souls have laid something intimate on the table. She’d just shared the details of the accident that had left her in a wheelchair. The air felt heavy but somehow cleansing.

Summoning the courage to delve into yet another intimate topic, she asked, “So, what about your accident? If you’re comfortable talking about it, what happened?”

Riley seemed to weigh his words before speaking. “I was a helicopter mechanic in the US Air Force.”

“I always wanted to ride a helicopter,” Harper said. “I guess you could say it’s on my bucket list.”

Riley smiled. “Yeah? I didn’t know you had a bucket list.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Harper replied. “Ride a helicopter. Bungee jump. Visit Canada.”

Riley smiled. “Guess you could do all those things at once. Bungee jump out of a helicopter in Canada?”

Harper chuckled softly. “Maybe. But I think the whole point of a bucket list is you work your way through it bit by bit.” She paused. “Anyway. I’m sorry, I want to hear more of your story. Carry on.”

Riley’s expression became serious once more. “One day, I was trying to help my friend Pat get out of a sticky situation. He’d gotten his foot stuck in a huge crack in a bombed-out building. But just as I was about to reach him, I stepped on something I shouldn’t have. An IED. A bomb.” He rolled up his pant leg slightly, revealing his prosthetic limb below the knee. “This is a daily reminder.”

Harper felt a rush of emotions—empathy, sadness, and also respect. “I’m so sorry, Riley. You were trying to help your friend when it happened—that’s incredibly heroic.”

He shook his head slightly. “The worst part wasn’t losing the leg. It was my sergeant, who made it seem like it was my fault. Told me I was a ‘blundering fool,’ as if I’d triggered that bomb out of clumsiness.”

Harper could feel the weight of his words, the burden of that unjust blame he’d carried for so long.

“So, what did you do after that?” she asked gently, her eyes locked onto his.

“I healed up, then I retreated. Came back to Little Rock, and got a job at the garage. Now, the machines I work on stay on the ground. It’s safer that way,” he said, bitterness tingeing his words.

“And Pat, your friend? Did he stand by you?”

Riley’s face softened. “Yeah, he did. He’s a good guy. He even made me the inspirational mixtape and took me on a road trip. That trip kinda saved my life. I thought it might do the same for you.”

Harper smiled, touched. “It is helping, Riley. More than you know.” Her hand reached across the table to cover his.

“Sometimes it’s the things that break us that also give us the strength to build something new, something stronger,” Riley said.

“For what it’s worth, I find you remarkably brave.”

“You too, Harper. Amazingly so.”

In that simple exchange, Harper felt a connection deeper than she’d felt in years. Both had faced life-altering moments, moments that had forced them to reassess their entire futures. And she knew then, despite all their broken pieces, something beautiful could still be built.

As they continued to share their stories, the romantic tension between them grew palpable. The air felt electric, charged with the anticipation of what might come next.

Their flirtatious banter resumed, their laughter bouncing off the walls as they teased one another playfully. It was as if the

weight of their shared past had been lifted, replaced by the thrilling possibility of a future together.

“Harper, I don’t know what’s in store for me after this road trip,” Riley said, his voice low and serious. “But I do know that I want to be by your side as we face it together.”

A surge of emotion welled up within Harper, her heart swelling with love and admiration for the man before her. With every beat, she knew that what they had was special, something worth fighting for.

“Riley, I feel the same way,” she confessed, her words barely audible above the hum of the crowded bar. “Whatever comes our way, I know we’ll be stronger together.”

The warm glow of the dimly lit bar illuminated Riley’s chiseled features, casting shadows that accentuated the raw intensity in his eyes. Harper found herself unable to look away, her heart pounding in her chest as she held her breath.

“Harper,” Riley murmured, his voice barely audible above the soft hum of conversation around them. “I can’t hold back any longer.”

He leaned in, closing the distance between them with a hunger that sent shivers down her spine. Their lips met in a passionate kiss, a fire igniting within them both as they lost themselves in each other’s touch. The world seemed to fade away as their kiss deepened, and for a moment, Harper felt as if she was floating.

“Excuse me?” a timid voice interrupted, pulling them back to reality. Reluctantly, Harper and Riley broke apart, their eyes lingering on one another even as they turned to face the newcomer.

“Sorry to bother you two,” the young woman said, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “But are you Harper Adams? The athlete?”

Harper blinked in surprise, attempting to regain her composure. She was not expecting to be recognized here. She hadn’t been recognized by anyone since she’d been in her chair.

She weighed up how to reply to this woman. A week ago, she might have responded gruffly to the woman that she was mistaken. But today, after doing the impossible and scaling that climbing wall, she decided to own the title of “athlete.”

“Uh, yes... that’s me,” she replied, laughing shyly, scratching her head.

“Wow! I’m such a huge fan!” the woman gushed, her eyes lighting up with excitement. “Would you mind signing an autograph for me?”

“Of course not,” Harper said with a warm smile, delighted by the woman’s enthusiasm. As she signed the offered napkin, she couldn’t help but steal glances at Riley, who watched the interaction with a grin.

“Thank you so much!” the fan exclaimed, clutching the napkin to her chest as though it were a priceless treasure. With

one last starstruck smile, she hurried away, leaving Harper and Riley alone once more.

“Well,” said Riley, “guess I’d better steel myself for getting into a relationship with a celebrity.”

Harper felt herself blushing. “Not really. That almost never happens... anymore.”

As the echoes of their interrupted kiss still lingered on her lips, Harper’s heart raced with anticipation. She could feel the heat of Riley’s gaze on her, and she knew that neither of them wanted to let this moment slip away.

“Where were we?” she asked dizzily.

“Right about here,” Riley replied, his voice low and tantalizing as he leaned in once more.

Their breath mingled as their lips met again, determined not to let anything else come between them.

Chapter Twelve

RILEY

RILEY WIPED THE SWEAT from his brow as he gave Harper's wheelchair one final push up the steep incline.

They'd finally reached their lunch spot on the Mount Si Trail, Washington. The view was breathtaking, a reward for their hard work. Harper had done amazingly on the trail, but the last part of the hill was so steep that she'd needed a helping hand. Riley felt good being able to support her.

"Wow, Riley," Harper breathed, taking in the panoramic vista of lush green mountains and valleys. "This is the best view ever."

"Thought you'd like it," he replied with a grin.

As Harper took it all in, Riley set to work, laying out a picnic blanket on a flat patch of grass overlooking the distant mountains. The sun shone bright, casting a warm glow over the scene. It felt like the perfect place to make memories—ones he hoped would last a lifetime.

“Here, let me help you,” he offered, carefully lifting Harper from her chair onto the soft blanket. She settled in comfortably, her eyes still fixated on the view.

“Thank you, Daddy. This place is very special,” she said sincerely, her voice filled with gratitude.

“Anything for you, Harper,” he replied, trying to keep his voice steady. He couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed by the intensity of his emotions for her, especially now that they were here, alone, in this idyllic setting.

As they sat down on the blanket, the gentle breeze rustled through the trees, carrying with it the scent of fall wildflowers.

Riley’s heart raced in anticipation of what the day might hold. He unpacked the sandwiches, trail mix, and fruit he’d prepared earlier, although he wasn’t really in the mood to eat right now. He had other things on his mind.

“Well,” said Harper, “it’s very quiet up here, isn’t it? It’s almost like we’re the only people left in all the world.”

“Yeah,” Riley agreed. “We can do anything we like up here and nobody will ever know about it.”

Harper giggled shyly. She shifted on the blanket, and got Swifty the cheetah stuffie out of her bag, then took a photo of him with her phone. The way she positioned him, it looked as though he was eating a slice of pineapple.

“Got to make sure Swifty gets his fair share of Instagram photos or he’ll get jealous,” she said. “He’s a total insta-addict.”

“Damn straight,” Riley agreed. “Swift’s basically the boss of our road trip now.”

He reached out for Harper’s hand, his mind consumed in a fog of lust. Fuck, he wanted to claim this beautiful, fun, sweet woman.

Harper gave his hand a quick squeeze but then pulled it away. “Mmm, let’s dig in! I’m as hungry as a horse!”

Riley nodded. “Sure thing.” He reminded himself that Harper was still new to relationships. As much as he wanted to dive right in and go all the way with her, he needed to make sure they paced things just right so Harper didn’t get scared. Losing your virginity was one thing, but losing it to a Daddy Dom was quite another.

Besides, they had things to talk about before they got serious. Big, important things. Things that could make or break their bond.

As they ate, Harper basked in the warmth of the sun. She seemed more relaxed and comfortable than the past few days, and Riley couldn’t help but smile at the improvement. Last night, he had made sure Harper spent plenty of time in Little Space, coloring in and playing with her stuffies. Then he’d given her a soothing bubble bath and a deep shoulder and arm massage, followed by a bedtime story and even a song. Never saw himself as a song kind of a guy, but she’d requested “You Are My Sunshine” and he’d sung it to her with all his heart.

“Riley,” Harper said softly, opening her eyes to look at him. “This is amazing. Thank you.”

“My pleasure, babygirl,” he replied, his voice gruff with emotion. “There’s nobody I’d rather be here with than you and Swifty.”

Harper gave Swifty a poke. “Hey, you’ve only known this guy five minutes and you already like him as much as me?”

“I like him because he’s part of you,” Riley said with a shrug.

Harper didn’t laugh, though. She looked serious. Contemplative. “You know, Riley,” she said, “this whole pretending to be a Little thing. Playing with stuffies. Coloring in. Calling you ‘Daddy.’” She looked into his eyes. “None of it feels like pretending. It all feels... real.”

Riley nodded. “And that’s okay, you know, Harper?”

Harper blinked at him. “Yeah. It is okay. I just never wanted to admit to myself that I might still be a Little because it was too painful. Before my accident, spending time in Little Space was about feeling completely carefree. I guess I didn’t dare to dream that I could ever feel that way again.”

Riley felt so moved by Harper’s words that he gave himself a moment to gather his thoughts before he spoke. “Sweetheart,” he said. “There’s no pressure to decide right away, but if you’re happy to identify as a Little again, then I’m all for it. It’s been a beautiful, magical thing watching you start to let go a little on this trip. Watching you start the long process of accepting who you are now and working with it, not against it.” He hoped his words didn’t sound patronizing, but judging by the look on Harper’s face, he’d judged it right.

“I really appreciate those words coming from you, Riley,” she said, “because I know that you understand me. You’ve been through so much of the same stuff.” She paused and smirked. “Except the part about being a Little.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know. You have to have at least a tiny inkling of what it’s like to be a Little in order to be a good Daddy.”

“I guess you are very good at playing with stuffies,” joked Harper. “Is there something you need to tell me, Daddy? Are you a secret Little, too?”

“I’m not a Little,” he replied. But even though he’d told the truth about that, there was something else he needed to open up about.

“Harper, there *is* something I need to tell you,” he began, picking at the edges of the blanket. “I’ve been wanting to say this for a long time, but I never found the right moment until now.”

“Go on,” she encouraged, as she reached out to gently touch his hand.

“Ever since we were kids, I’ve always... well, I’ve always had feelings for you,” he confessed, his voice barely above a whisper. “I’ve carried a torch for you, even when we lost touch. I watched every single one of your races. I felt happy every time you won, and my heart wept for you every time you lost. When you won that silver medal, I’m not joking—I walked around with a big goofy grin on my face for a week.”

Harper's eyes widened in surprise, and she stared at him for a moment before speaking. "Riley, I had no idea. You really thought about me that much?"

"Kinda strange, huh? Considering all I ever did was throw out insults to you as a kid." He never imagined he would have the chance to be with Harper like this, but now that she was here, he couldn't imagine a future without her.

"It's unexpected. But not strange. Not now you've explained things to me."

"I always told myself that if I ever saw you again, I'd make amends. And not just that, I'd tell you how I really feel."

"How do you really feel, Daddy?" Harper asked breathlessly.

"I feel... like there's a very strong possibility," he said, choosing his words carefully, "that very soon, sooner than you might think, I could find myself falling head over heels for you, Harper."

Harper bit her lip, tears glistening in her eyes.

"Babygirl," he continued, "from this moment forward, I promise I'll do everything in my power to make you happy, and to help you heal. I want to be there for you, as your caregiver, your friend, and, if you'll let me, your lover." He paused. "I want to claim you in every way possible, Harper. I want to be your Daddy, your Dom, your rock, your everything. And I want you to give me your entire body and soul in return."

Harper's cheeks flushed a deep shade of pink as she took in Riley's confession. "Riley," she whispered, her eyes wide and vulnerable. "I... I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll think about it," he urged, his voice barely more than a whisper, but filled with raw emotion.

"I will," she promised, tears prickling at the corners of her eyes. "Riley, I've always been drawn to you, even when we were just kids and even when you were being cruel to me. But I never thought..."

"Thought what?" he asked, inching closer to her on the picnic blanket, closing the gap between them.

"That someone like you could ever be interested in someone like me," she finished, her gaze flickering down nervously.

"Harper," Riley said gently, lifting her chin so their eyes met. "You are stunning. In every way. And I want nothing more than to be with you. To be inside you. To be all around you. Now and always." He paused. "But if any of this is scaring you, if I'm coming on too strong, then you'll have to forgive me. I've been thinking about you for so long, now, Harper. I just don't want to waste any more tim—"

Harper pressed her soft finger to his mouth. "Shh, Daddy. It's okay. You're not scaring me. You're... arousing me..."

As their faces drew nearer, Harper's breaths became shallower. Their lips finally met, igniting a fire between them that seemed to consume them both. The kiss deepened, tongues dancing and exploring each other as they lay on the

soft blanket, the majestic mountains providing a breathtaking backdrop for their passionate embrace.

Riley's hands roamed Harper's body, caressing her curves and making her shiver with pleasure. In turn, Harper clung to him, her fingers digging into his broad shoulders as their kiss grew more intense, more insistent.

"Riley," she murmured against his lips. "I need more. Please."

"Are you sure?" he asked, pulling back just enough to look into her eyes, searching for any sign of hesitation or doubt.

"More sure than I've ever been about anything," she said, her need for him evident in the heat of her gaze. "I trust you, Riley."

Riley could feel his cock straining against his jeans, every touch from Harper sending shivers up his spine. He knew he wanted to take things further, to slide deep between this incredible woman's thighs and show her how strong his attraction really was. But he also understood the importance of setting boundaries and ensuring their mutual consent.

"Harper," he said, forcing himself to pause their heated embrace. "I want you so much right now. But I think it's time we fill out a basic DDlg contract. We need to discuss limits and expectations, and decide on a safeword."

"Awww," she moaned, pouting. "We always have to stop just when we're getting to the good bit."

“Only because things are about to get very, very wild between us,” said Riley. “We’re about to go as deep as two people can go.”

“We are?”

“We are. So we need to make sure our safety nets are in place.”

Harper screwed up her cute nose as she thought about this. “I guess we do.” She paused. “You know, I’m so glad I’m here with you, Riley. You always know how to do things properly. I think I’m so desperate to just try to be ‘normal’ that sometimes I rush things.”

“That’s completely natural,” he told her.

“But when we do have our safety nets in place, I can’t wait to do those wild things you talked about. Naughty things, maybe even sometimes outrageous things. I’m not the fragile little doll in a wheelchair people sometimes think I am.”

“I know that,” said Riley. “You’re a tough, determined fighter. With a very high libido, by all accounts.”

Harper blushed. “I guess I have a lot of lost time to make up for. And I want to try everything.”

Riley swallowed. Hearing her talk like this was driving her wild. He knew Harper was special. Takes a very special sort of person to become a medal-winning athlete. Someone who doesn’t quit easily, who’s not afraid to try new things. The kind of person, frankly, who Riley wanted to fuck.

Focus, Riley.

“Let’s start with limits,” Riley said, clearing his throat and opening a note-taking app on his phone. “Is there anything you’re not comfortable with?”

Harper thought for a moment, biting her lip. “I don’t want any humiliation or degradation. No mean names and no bullying of any kind.”

“Understood,” Riley said, nodding as he typed. “I promise you that I will make you feel supported and cherished, and even when I’m disciplining you, it will be because I know you enjoy the feeling of submitting to me. I won’t call you names or put you down. Everything I do is designed to give you pleasure. And if the pleasure ever stops, you tell me to stop immediately. Understood?”

“Understood, Daddy,” said Harper softly.

“Let’s talk through our rules. Number one is that I expect honesty and openness from you at all times. All right?”

“Absolutely, Daddy.”

“Number two is that Daddy chooses your diet and decides on how your days are structured.”

Harper nods. “I’d like that. I miss the structure of the Olympic Center. I like the idea that you make those choices for me.”

“Good. Another rule, like I’ve said, is that you always tell me if I do anything you don’t like.”

Harper nodded. “I will. I promise.”

“And finally, I’d like to make a rule that I will try everything in my power to ensure that you are fully sexually satisfied while I am your Daddy. That means taking time to discover all your erogenous zones, even ones that you may not realize you have. I want to give you the opportunity to climax every single day if your behavior has been good, and I will only not try to make you climax if you are not in the mood or if you have been especially naughty. I will work for as long as it takes until you climax and I will enjoy every second of it. Understood?”

Harper licked her lips. “Starting right now, Daddy?”

“Starting when I say so, young lady,” said Riley.

“Yes, Daddy,” said Harper, fidgeting.

“Now, what are your expectations for our dynamic?” Riley asked. “What kind of stuff would you like to do as a DDLG couple?”

“I want to explore Little Space together,” Harper replied. “I’d like to get to know my Little again, to see what she’s into. Maybe we can have designated times where I can be in that headspace, and you can care for me as my Daddy. But at other times, sexy times, I don’t think I want to be Little anymore. I just want to be Harper, your submissive.”

“Sounds perfect,” Riley said, stroking her hair. “We’ll figure out what works best for both of us.”

They continued to discuss their desires and boundaries, eventually agreeing on a safeword: “pineapple.” It was picked

at random since they had a plate of pineapple at the picnic, but it worked, as it was unlikely to come up during an intimate moment.

They also talked about how their disabilities might affect their dynamic, with Riley making sure Harper felt safe and comfortable as they continued to progress in their relationship.

“Are you okay with my prosthetic?” Riley asked, feeling a little self-conscious all of a sudden. “Would you be okay with me both leaving it on and taking it off when we are intimate with one another? Depending on what’s most comfortable?”

“Of course,” Harper reassured him. “Your injury is part of who you are, and I love all of you.”

Riley felt a warmth spread through his chest at her words. He wasn’t sure she had meant to use the “L” word, but it was a word that was sure as hell on the tip of his tongue whenever they were together. “Thank you,” he murmured, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to her lips. “And as for your situation, are you okay with me lifting you into various sexual positions?”

“Yes, Daddy,” said Harper. “In fact, it’s pretty much obligatory.”

Riley laughed. “Okay. Good. And what about the areas of your body where you can’t feel anything. Would you rather I tried not to touch them?”

“I don’t think so,” said Harper thoughtfully. “In fact, I think I’d quite enjoy you kissing every part of me, even if I can’t feel it all.”

Riley smiled. "I think I'd enjoy that too," he said. "And what about sex acts? Do you think you would like having your bottom touched?"

Harper looked thoughtful. "I don't think I'd be able to feel much if you were spanking me, so it might not be the best punishment."

"I'm not talking about spanking right now, sweetheart," said Riley, stroking Harper's arm as he spoke. "I'm talking about ass play. Dildo insertion, rimming, anal."

"Oh!" Harper said, clearly embarrassed. "I'm not sure about that. I don't think I'd want it, seeing as my sensation is so patchy? But I'd definitely like things inserted into the other bit, if that's okay with you, Daddy. Um, and inserted into my mouth as well." She opened her mouth, pointing at her pretty pink tongue, and Riley's cock jerked involuntarily toward it.

Down, boy.

"And just because I'm not sure about ass play doesn't mean I'm not into the idea of... outrageous things. I don't know what exactly, but I like surprises." She grinned.

Holy fuck, it was almost impossible not to just slam her down onto the ground this very second, screwing her all the way down into the Earth's core.

"Let's revisit some of these points every few weeks or so," Riley said, trying to regain his composure. "Just to make sure we're on the same page and both still comfortable with everything." He hit the "save" button on his phone.

“Sounds like a great idea,” Harper agreed, her eyes sparkling with happiness. She leaned into him, nestling against his solid form. Though the contract was now saved, they both knew that their journey of exploration and growth had only just begun.

“You know, before we get up to anything, we’re going to need to eat some lunch,” Riley said. “It’s important we feed our bodies after all this exercise we’ve been getting.”

“I think I’m too excited to eat, Daddy,” she said, giving him a mischievous look.

“Remember who’s in charge of your diet, Little girl,” he said. “I want to see you eat at least three different vegetables today before I consider lunch to be over.”

Harper grimaced. “But my tummy’s doing backflips. And the vegetables all look so... vegetabley.”

Riley couldn’t help but chuckle as he watched Harper eyeing the assortment of snacks laid out on the picnic blanket.

“I could probably manage a cookie, though,” she said, reaching for one before he could stop her.

“Harper!” Riley laughed, feigning exasperation as he playfully swatted her hand away. “You’ve got to eat something nutritious first.” He picked up a juicy slice of watermelon and held it out to her. “Here, let’s start with a piece of fruit. Try this.”

She pouted, her eyes darting between the watermelon and the cookies. Her excitement was palpable, making it difficult for her to focus on anything other than the sweet treats.

Finally, she sighed dramatically and took the slice of watermelon from him, nibbling on it half-heartedly.

“Good girl,” Riley praised, his voice warm and affectionate. He knew how much Harper enjoyed being in Little Space, and he wanted to encourage her playful side while also helping her make healthy choices.

She ate the watermelon more greedily now, and the juice ran down her chin, making her look especially adorable.

“See?” he said. “Delicious, right? Now, let’s move on to the cucumber. I think, technically cucumbers are a fruit, but I’ll let you count it as one of your vegetables if you like.”

“Uh... okay...” Harper’s gaze kept straying back to the cookies. Riley could see the internal struggle in her eyes, as if the cookies were calling out to her, tempting her with their sugary goodness.

He couldn’t be sure, but he had a feeling that Harper was testing him. She normally enjoyed eating vegetables. Today, she was bringing out her bratty side to see what would happen.

And Riley was only too happy to show her.

“Bleugh,” Harper said, “I can’t eat cucumber right now. I’ll just have one of these first...”

She began to reach for the cookie, but Riley gave her hand a gentle swat, and she pulled it away.

“Ow!”

“You promised Daddy you were going to let him choose what you ate,” he chided her.

A wicked look came into Harper’s eyes. “Oh yes, I did, didn’t I? I guess maybe I need my new Daddy Dom to teach me a lesson, then.”

Once again, Riley’s cock thickened, and he longed to grab hold of it and give himself some relief. But he had a job to do.

“Alright, little one,” Riley said, a playful glint in his eyes. “I think it’s time for some discipline.”

“Discipline?” Harper asked theatrically. “Oh no! The last thing I wanted!”

Riley nodded, shifting closer to her on the picnic blanket. “You told me you won’t feel your ass being spanked, so I’ll have to find other ways to discipline you when you misbehave,” he explained, gently taking hold of her arm and guiding her closer to him.

“Sounds good, Daddy,” she whispered.

As Harper leaned into Riley, he could feel her heart racing against his palm.

His heart was racing too, both from the thrill of their dynamic and the physical closeness they shared.

“First, I’m going to bite your shoulder,” Riley whispered, his lips brushing against her skin as he spoke, sending shivers down her spine. “Then, I’m going to pinch your nipples, just hard enough for you to feel it, but not so much that it hurts badly. If you want me to stop at any point, don’t forget our

safeword, and I'll stop instantly. If you don't use the safeword, though, I'll be making all the decisions."

"Okay, Daddy," Harper breathed out, seeming more aroused with every passing moment. "I'm ready, Daddy."

Riley leaned in and pressed his teeth gently into the soft flesh of her shoulder, causing Harper to gasp at the sudden sensation. He held the bite for a moment before releasing it, enjoying feeling her squirming and writhing beneath him.

"Good girl," he murmured, praise filling his voice. "Now for the next part."

Harper braced herself as Riley slid his hands under her t-shirt. Her breasts felt soft and full, utterly beautiful beneath his rough hands. His fingers moved over her hard nipples, and he took them between his thumb and forefinger.

Harper moaned softly as he delivered a series of sharp pinches and twists, knowing just how far to push it without causing her an unpleasant level of pain.

"Riley," she whispered once he'd finished, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. "I know I might not feel it, but... can you spank my butt too? Please?" She paused. "I just... really need to learn my lesson. You know?"

He hesitated for a moment, his concern for her wellbeing evident in his eyes. But seeing her eagerness and the trust she placed in him, he nodded, agreeing to indulge her desires.

"Alright, Harper," he said, his voice filled with affection and determination. "If that's what you want, I'll give it a try. You

have been a naughty girl, after all.”

Riley carefully lifted Harper over his lap, pulling down her jeans and panties and marveling at her cute butt. She might not have much feeling in it, but it was as plump and juicy and delicious-looking as a butt could be. He could feel his cock pushing up into Harper’s groin as her body weight pressed down on him. He wondered if she had enough sensation on her front side to feel how turned on he was.

“Alright, Harper,” Riley agreed, his voice warm yet determined as he stroked her butt. “It’s time for Daddy to spank your naughty, cookie-eating ass.”

“Okay, Daddy,” she said, “and by the way, the left side tingles more than the right. So chances are, I’ll feel it more there than anywhere else.”

“Good to know,” Riley replied. He loved how communicative Harper was being about her body and her needs. It was going to ensure that they had as much fun together as was humanly possible.

Riley raised his hand, then brought it down firmly on Harper’s butt, the sound of the slap echoing through the open air. He paused a moment, making sure Harper didn’t seem concerned or uncomfortable, then he continued with a steady rhythm, each smack landing just where she’d said she might be able to feel it—on the left side of her buttock.

And then, a revelation. Harper moaned out in pleasure. “I can feel it, Daddy! Not super strong, but I can feel... something. Keep going! Please!”

He smacked her again, a bit harder this time.

Harper gasped a second time. “Riley, I can... I can feel it!” she exclaimed, her voice breathy and filled with wonder. “It tingles more than usual, and even kinda stings...”

“Really?” Riley paused, concern mixed with excitement in his eyes. “Are you okay? Does it hurt?”

“No, not really. It feels good. Sort of like electricity.” she admitted, her body responding to the connection they shared. “I love submitting to you like this.”

“Good girl,” Riley praised, his voice husky and warm. He resumed the spanking, Harper’s pleasure seemingly intensifying with each stroke of his palm.

After a few more smacks, Riley stopped, his fingers gently threading through Harper’s hair. With a playful tug, he pulled her head back slightly, causing her to let out a sharp gasp.

“Even if you can’t feel everything, Harper, I’ll always find ways to make you squirm,” he told her, his voice deep and confident.

“Promise?” she asked mischievously, looking back up at him, her eyes locking onto his as they shared a moment of playful intimacy.

“Promise,” Riley responded with a grin, lifting her onto his lap and sealing his vow with a passionate kiss that left them both breathless and hungry for more.

Riley lovingly released Harper from his grip, helping her pull up her jeans and panties and sit back up on the picnic

blanket. The sunlight glinted off their flushed faces as they gazed into each other's eyes, a tender moment of vulnerability shared between them.

Then, Harper turned her attention to the picnic food and grabbed a cucumber stick, biting into it with zeal. "Yummy! I love cucumber!"

"Looks like someone's excited about the food now," he teased her playfully.

"I guess discipline really works for me, Daddy!" she retorted with a grin, crunching the cucumber between her teeth.

She worked her way through the carrot sticks next. And then the pasta salad. And then some nuts. And then strawberries. She seemed hungrier than she'd been the entire trip.

Riley watched entranced as Harper licked her fingers clean, the strawberries still tinting her lips red.

"Riley," she said, her voice trembling with excitement, "I'm ready."

"Ready for what?" he asked, his heart pounding in his chest as he anticipated her response.

"I want to take things to the next level," she said with a big dramatic sigh. "I want you to make love to me."

He could feel his cock harden yet again at her words, the desire to be inside her almost overwhelming. But he knew they needed to be cautious, to take things slowly. He had only just spanked her, and right now, his job was to make sure she felt

totally secure after that. That there were no raw emotions left to process.

“Babygirl,” he murmured, brushing a stray lock of hair from her forehead, “I want that too. More than anything.”

Harper’s eyes shone with anticipation, her body quivering with arousal. “I trust you, Daddy,” she breathed, leaning in for a passionate kiss.

Riley tasted the sweetness of strawberries on her tongue as their mouths melded together, the heat of their bodies pressing against one another in a dance of desire. His hands roamed over the soft curves of her body, memorizing every inch of her skin.

“God, you’re so beautiful,” he groaned into her ear, his fingers slipping beneath the hem of her shorts to tease the sensitive skin of her thighs. “I can’t wait to touch you, taste you, make you scream my name.”

“Please, Daddy,” she whimpered, “I need you so bad. I want to feel like a woman.”

“Patience, darling,” he whispered, his breath hot against her neck. “There’s so much I want to show you, to teach you. But we need to take our time, learn what makes us both feel good.”

He could see the frustration in her eyes, the desperation for release. But he knew that by waiting, they would only build a stronger foundation for their relationship, one based on communication and mutual pleasure.

“Trust me,” he repeated, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead as they lay tangled together on the picnic blanket, their bodies still humming with unspent desire. “Soon, Harper. Very soon.”

Chapter Thirteen

HARPER

HARPER GAZED OUT THE window as Riley's truck rumbled along the winding roads of Crater Lake National Park. Towering evergreen trees lined their path, their branches reaching upward to touch the brilliant blue sky above. The scent of pine filled the air through the open windows, accompanied by the distant sound of rushing water from hidden streams.

“Oh my! This place is beautiful,” Harper murmured, her eyes drinking in the vibrant colors of the leaves that dotted the meadows along the way.

“Isn't it?” Riley agreed, his voice tinged with pride as he navigated the curves with ease. “Wait until we get to the lake itself. You'll be blown away.”

A shiver of anticipation ran down Harper's spine. She couldn't help but wonder if Riley had something special planned for them at the lake. Despite the deepening connection

they'd been forging over the past few days, they still hadn't had sex.

Last night, Riley had lovingly given Harper a bath and read her a bedtime story, making her feel cherished and cared for in a way she never knew she needed. She couldn't deny that part of her longed for more, though. She wanted intimacy like never before.

"Hey, are you okay?" Riley asked, his brow furrowing in concern as he glanced over at her.

"Uh, yeah, I'm fine," Harper replied quickly, her cheeks flushing at the direction of her thoughts. "Just... taking it all in."

"Good," Riley said. "I want this trip to be perfect for you." He paused. "Hey, you sure you don't want to listen to the rest of that cassette tape while we drive?"

Harper smiled. "No thanks. I'd like to listen to it soon, but it feels a bit too high-octane for these peaceful countryside locations. I like listening to the sounds of nature."

Harper felt a surge of affection for Riley. He was always making her feel cared for, ensuring that everything was just how she liked it. She wondered if he'd be the same way in bed too...

She felt a desperate need to feel his powerful body against hers. She reached over and squeezed his hand, trying to convey her feelings without words.

As they continued their journey, the picturesque beauty of Crater Lake National Park unfolded before them. A crystal-clear lake appeared, its blue surface reflecting the sky above.

“This is the deepest lake in the United States,” he told Harper. “A volcano collapsed here over seven thousand years ago.”

“Wow,” said Harper. “How do you know all this stuff?”

“Ever heard of a little boutique website called Google?” Riley joked. “I like to take a look at it every once in a while, to find some facts to impress my young lady.”

Harper giggled.

“Almost there,” Riley announced with a grin, his eyes sparkling as he glanced over at her. “Got a little surprise for you.”

Harper’s heart raced with anticipation, wondering what he had planned.

Riley had instructed her to eat a healthy, filling breakfast this morning. She’d had wholemeal toast with peanut butter and fruit and yoghurt on the side. It was food to give her energy. She hoped that meant he was preparing her for an energetic horizontal dancing session. Her stomach fluttered with excitement and nerves.

As they rounded a bend, Harper spotted a gathering of people near the edge of the park. People in running outfits stretched and chatted amongst themselves, while volunteers set up tents and banners for what appeared to be a race event.

Riley turned off the engine, his grin widening. “Surprise! It’s a Parkrun 5 kilometer race.”

Harper couldn’t hide her shock. “A running race?”

“I thought we could do it together.” He touched her leg and gave it a soft squeeze, although she couldn’t really feel it. “You’ve been so brave lately. Testing out your new racing chair, climbing walls, finding out what you’re capable of. I thought you might enjoy another challenge. Plus, I figured it would be a fun way for us to enjoy this beautiful place.”

Harper’s mind was full of doubt. Sure, she’d used her racing wheelchair a couple of times since Riley had bought it for her, but was she ready for an actual race? Would she be able to cope with it physically *and* emotionally? She bit her lip, uncertain.

“Riley, I don’t know,” she said, her voice wavering. “I mean, it’s kind of you, but I’m not sure if I’m ready yet. The idea of racing around all these other people brings up so many difficult memories for me. All the races I did in the past, on my own two feet...”

Riley reached over and took her hand, his grip firm and reassuring. “Hey, look at me,” he said softly. “You don’t have to do anything you’re not comfortable with. But I’ve seen you doubt yourself before. You weren’t sure about your new racing chair at first, but you quite enjoy it now, don’t you?”

“Well, yes. As long as I don’t go too fast.”

“And you were terrified of that climbing wall until halfway up you suddenly turned into Spidergirl. Am I right?”

Harper smirked. “Kinda.”

“So, this is just the same. It’s pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. Whenever you do that, it always feels a bit icky at first. But once you’re done, you’ll feel on top of the world.”

Harper thought about this. She visualized herself finishing a five-kilometer race out here, with the blue lake sparkling nearby and Riley there to high-five her success. “Maybe you’re right,” she said. “It doesn’t matter if I don’t come first.”

Riley shook his head. “It’s not about winning. Not at all. It’s about enjoying the experience and feeling good about ourselves for trying our best. Even if doing our best means that I fall flat on my face again.”

Harper snickered. “Try not to, Daddy.”

“No promises,” he quipped. “As for you, young lady, just promise me you’ll try to have fun. That’s all that counts.”

“I promise.”

“Good girl,” he said. “I believe in you.”

His words bolstered her confidence, and she took a steadying breath. If Riley believed in her, then maybe she could do this. With his support, she felt ready to face any challenge.

“Okay,” she agreed, determination settling in. “Let’s do this. Together.”

*

Harper's pulse raced as she surveyed the bustling event. She swallowed hard, her palms growing clammy on the wheels of her racing chair.

"Hey," Riley said gently, sensing her apprehension. "Remember what I told you? These races are inclusive. No one comes last because taking part is what counts." His warm, reassuring gaze enveloped her.

"Really?" Harper asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Absolutely," he said earnestly.

Riley's hand found hers, his thumb tracing comforting circles on her skin. The simple act ignited a flicker of courage within her—a tiny flame that grew stronger with each passing second.

As they prepared to race together, Harper felt a renewed sense of purpose surge through her veins.

I can do this.

I can do this.

I can do this.

The starting horn blared, jolting Harper's senses as the race began. Her heart pounding, she propelled herself forward with a determined push. Riley fell into stride alongside her, a little more practiced with his running blade now he'd used it a couple of times.

“See, not so bad, right?” Riley called out, his voice laced with encouragement.

“Right,” Harper said in agreement, her focus shifting to the rhythm of her movements.

The racecourse unfurled before them like a ribbon, weaving through the breathtaking landscape of Crater Lake National Park. The trees cast dappled shadows onto the winding path, while sunlight filtered through the foliage above, creating a natural kaleidoscope of light and color. The air was cool and crisp, carrying the scent of pine needles and earth as they progressed along the trail.

As they continued, the terrain shifted from relatively flat stretches to more challenging inclines. Harper’s muscles burned with each push, but she reminded herself that she wasn’t aiming for a record-breaking time. Simply crossing the finish line would be enough. She paced herself and resisted the urge to try to beat anyone else. She was doing this for herself and that was all that mattered.

“Keep going, you’re doing great!” Riley cheered, his presence an unwavering source of motivation.

“Thanks, Daddy,” Harper breathed, her cheeks flushing with pleasure at his praise.

Together, they pushed past thickets of ferns and skirted moss-covered boulders. They met the physical demands of the racecourse with grit and determination. The farther she went, the more Harper felt an exhilarating sense of accomplishment.

“Come on, babygirl, you can do it!” Riley called out from beside her, his voice a pillar of strength in her ear. “I know how strong you are.”

“Thanks, Daddy,” Harper panted, her breaths coming in short, ragged bursts as they moved forward together. Each push of her racing wheelchair sent a jolt through her body, but she was beginning to learn just how far she could push herself without causing too much pain.

“Look at you go!” Riley grinned, sweat beading on his forehead as he kept pace with her. “You’re amazing, Harper.”

Harper’s heart swelled with pride at his words, and she could feel the warmth of his affection enveloping her like a comforting blanket. She couldn’t believe how kind his coaching style was. Nothing like the jerk at the Olympic Center who only called out at her to tell her all the things she was doing wrong. Riley was a pillar of positivity. She glanced over at him, meeting his eyes for a moment before refocusing on the path ahead.

There were so many people running past her, faster and fitter than she was. But it didn’t matter.

The racecourse led them up a steep incline next, challenging Harper’s stamina and resolve. Yet, rather than shy away from it, she embraced it, pushing herself harder than ever before. Her triceps screamed in protest, but she refused to let up, her mind fixed on the triumph that awaited her at the finish line.

“Almost there, Harper,” Riley encouraged, sensing her determination. “Just keep going.”

“Thank... you... Daddy,” Harper managed between labored breaths, her vision narrowing as she focused solely on the task at hand.

With each push, she felt herself drawing closer to the finish line, and with it, a major milestone in her journey. The cheers of the crowd grew louder as they approached, but Harper heard only Riley’s voice, his steadfast encouragement filling her ears like a triumphant anthem.

“Finish strong, babygirl!” he urged, offering a final burst of motivation as the end came into view.

“Will do, Daddy,” Harper whispered, pouring every last ounce of strength into her final pushes.

Exhilaration coursed through Harper’s veins as she crossed the finish line, her heart pounding in her chest. She couldn’t believe it. She had done it!

Beside her, Riley beamed with pride, his eyes shining with admiration for her incredible achievement.

“Harper, you were amazing,” he gushed, pulling her into a tight embrace. “I’m so proud of you, babygirl.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, her cheeks flushed with happiness and fatigue. This was a moment she would never forget. She had proved to herself that she was capable of overcoming any obstacle, physical or emotional, as long as she had Riley by her side.

“Now,” set Riley, “it’s time for your next surprise.”

Harper raised her eyebrows. Another surprise? Could this be the one she was waiting for?

*

“Cleetwood Cove Trail is the only place around here you’re allowed to do this,” said Riley, as he helped lower Harper into the water.

It was October, right at the end of the swimming season, but by this point in the year, after a warm and balmy September and October, the lake had warmed up nicely.

“Wow,” said Harper, as Riley found her a boulder on the edge to grip onto. “This is the first time I’ve ever been in a lake. I thought I’d feel scared, but actually, it’s quite the opposite.”

Harper had done a bit of water therapy back at the Olympic Center, but it had always been under the watchful eye of her therapist, in a harness, with exercises she was meant to do. Here, she was simply with Riley, surrounded by nature. Her body felt weightless. It didn’t matter that her legs couldn’t move. She was light and floaty and felt fantastic.

“Nothing like a dip in the water to cool off after a race, eh?” said Riley. He had gotten in the water without his prosthetic, and the two of them were only wearing their underwear. Seeing Riley’s incredible body in the water was such a turn-on, but Harper was trying not to look at it as she kept getting very naughty thoughts that her Daddy might not approve of.

Thoughts about doing naughty things in the water, which was probably not allowed in a place like this.

Jeez, I'm like a horny teenager at the moment.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Riley asked her with a strange half-smile.

“Um,” she stammered, blushing, “h-hopefully...”

“I’m thinking we should get the tent out of the trunk and set up camp here for the night.”

Harper’s eyes opened wide. “I forgot you brought a tent!”

“I always come prepared for any eventuality, babygirl,” he told her.

“Good to know, Daddy,” said Harper flirtatiously.

There was a silence between them now, happy and relaxed, but also charged with a strange kind of tension. The tension that exists between two adults who have been trying very, very hard to do things in the right order. Two adults who know that their time has almost come.

“Shit,” said Riley. “I could stare at you for hours, Harper. But something tells me I should set up this tent before I get distracted.”

He helped Harper out of the water, then climbed out himself.

She couldn’t help but steal a glance down at his wet boxer shorts, and she noticed the bulge that told her that maybe he had been thinking about the same thing as her in the water, after all.

Riley helped Harper dress and got himself decent too, then found a secluded spot away from the trail where he set up their camp for the night. She was surprised by how prepared he truly was, laying down roll mats and blankets to make them comfortable, and even a little gas cooker with some sausages and beans for their dinner.

As they ate, the sun was beginning to dip below the horizon, casting a warm glow over the landscape, and Harper felt a sense of serenity wash over her.

“Isn’t this place great?” she remarked.

“Absolutely,” he agreed. “One of the best places in the world. Beautiful. But even so, it’s not half as beautiful as you.”

Harper felt butterflies dancing in her stomach. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Daddy,” she teased, playfully poking him in the ribs.

“Everywhere, eh?” he said, winking at her before returning his attention to his food.

As night fell and the stars began to emerge, Harper felt a contentment settle over her. They had pushed themselves to their limits during the race, and now, with the quiet beauty of nature enveloping them, she couldn’t help but feel grateful for the life she was building with Riley.

“Today was incredible,” she whispered, leaning against him as they sat beside their campfire, staring into the flickering flames. “Thank you for believing in me, Daddy.”

“Always, babygirl,” he murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. “I’ll always believe in you. How could I not?”

Harper gazed up at the sky, awestruck by the brilliant tapestry of stars above them. Each twinkling light seemed to celebrate her accomplishment from earlier that day, filling her with a sense of peace and contentment she hadn’t experienced in years, even before her accident.

She glanced over at Riley, who was stoking the crackling campfire, sending sparks dancing into the darkness. The flickering flames cast a warm glow on his face, highlighting the strong lines of his jaw and the tenderness in his eyes. As if sensing her gaze, he looked up and caught her eye, a slow smile spreading across his lips.

“Perfect night, isn’t it?” he asked, setting down the long stick he’d been using as a poker and moving closer to her.

“Absolutely,” she agreed, her fingers absently tracing patterns along his muscular forearm as they sat side by side. “I can’t remember the last time I saw so many stars.”

“Me either,” he admitted, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her in for a gentle embrace. “But none of them shine quite as bright as you do, babygirl.”

Harper laughed, a delightful warmth spreading through her chest. “You’re such a smooth talker, Daddy,” she teased, leaning into his touch.

“Only because you inspire me,” he murmured, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. “Normally, I can barely string a sentence

together. I'm just a dumb jock, after all."

As they sat there, enveloped in each other's arms and surrounded by the tranquility of nature, Harper couldn't help but feel her desire for Riley stirring within her. She shifted slightly, biting her lip as she gathered the courage to voice her thoughts.

"Riley— I mean, Daddy," she began hesitantly, her heart pounding in her chest. "I want... I need you tonight."

His eyes met hers. "Are you sure, Harper? I don't want you to feel pressured or rushed."

"I'm sure," she confirmed, her voice steady despite the butterfly party in her stomach. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

"Then I'm here for you, little one," Riley promised, his fingers gently cupping her face as he leaned in to capture her lips in a tender, passionate kiss.

As their mouths moved together, Harper felt any lingering doubts or fears melt away, replaced by a burning need that only Riley could satisfy.

Riley's strong hands trailed down Harper's body, his touch gentle yet possessive, as he carefully lowered her onto the soft blanket, the cool grass beneath them. The night air caressed her skin, a shiver running through her as she looked up into his eyes, filled with love and desire.

"Are you ready, babygirl?" Riley asked, his voice low and tender. "Don't forget, anything you're unsure of, or you want

me to do differently, just say. And if you're too scared to say exactly what you need, just use your safeword. You remember it?"

Harper nodded, her heart racing with anticipation. "Pineapple, Daddy."

"Where?" Riley said, with a goofy grin, before pretending to hunt for the strange-looking fruit. "Don't worry, I'll keep you safe from its spiky leaves."

"Silly Daddy!"

With a smile, Riley bent down to kiss her again, his lips hungry against hers. Harper moaned softly into the kiss, feeling a warmth spread through her as his tongue danced with hers. Her hands reached up to tangle in his thick hair, pulling him closer.

Breaking the kiss, Riley slowly moved down her body, planting kisses along her neck, collarbone, and chest.

Harper's breath hitched as he lifted her t-shirt and bra and his mouth closed over one nipple, sucking gently while his hand massaged her other breast. She arched her back, offering herself to him, her body trembling with pleasure.

"Let me taste you, sweetheart," Riley murmured, his warm breath teasing her sensitive flesh as he continued his descent, kissing along her stomach and hips.

"Please, Daddy," Harper whispered, her need for him overwhelming.

As she lay back on the blanket, Riley pulled down her pants and panties and gently parted her legs, his gaze never leaving hers as he lowered his head between her thighs. The first stroke of his tongue against her damp folds sent a jolt of pleasure through Harper's body, her hips bucking involuntarily.

"I felt it!" she cried out, with tears in her eyes. "I actually felt it!"

Riley smiled. "You okay, sweetheart? Was it all right?"

"Oh yes, Daddy," she said. "It was more than all right."

He held her steady, his hands gripping her hips as he continued to lavish attention on her most intimate place.

"God, you taste so good," Riley groaned, his voice muffled by her wetness. Harper could only whimper in response, her mind reeling from the sensations coursing through her.

As Riley's skilled tongue brought her closer and closer to the edge, Harper's fingers dug into the blanket beneath her, her body taut with arousal. The tension built within her, threatening to consume her, until finally it shattered, her climax washing over her in a wave of pleasure.

"Riley!" she cried out, her voice breathless and high. "I can't believe you made me... with just your..." She was panting so hard it was almost impossible to talk.

"Good girl," he praised, his eyes dark with lust as he kissed his way back up her body. "Now I'm gonna show you a different way I can make you come. Do you want me to use a

condom? I've been tested and I'm clean, but I'm happy to make this as safe as you want."

"No," said Harper. "I'm clean too. And I'm on birth control. I want us to feel everything. Well, as much as possible."

"Right, babygirl," Riley confirmed, his voice gentle. "It works for me."

Harper nodded, her trust in him absolute. "I want you inside me, Daddy."

"Now?" he asked again, wanting to be certain she was comfortable.

"Please," she begged, her eyes pleading.

"Here we go then," Riley murmured before lining himself up with her entrance. Slowly, he pushed inside her, allowing her time to adjust to his size.

Harper's eyes fluttered closed, feeling the intensity of their connection as they joined together.

"Are you okay?" Riley asked, concern lacing his voice.

"More than okay," she reassured him, her smile genuine. "It feels amazing."

With that confirmation, Riley began to move, his thrusts slow and deliberate at first, gradually increasing in pace and power as Harper's body adjusted to him. He lifted her ass off the ground a little placing a rolled-up blanket under it so he could get even deeper, her moans growing louder with each stroke.

“God, you feel so good,” Riley growled, his own pleasure evident in his voice. “I love being inside you, Harper Adams.”

“Harder, Daddy!” Harper gasped, her nails digging into his muscled shoulders. “Please.”

Riley obliged, his thrusts growing more insistent, driving her to new heights of pleasure.

Harper felt herself spiraling toward another climax, her body tightening around him as she neared the brink.

“Come with me, Daddy,” she urged, her voice desperate and needy.

“All right,” he said. “But you’re gonna have to hold off a moment. Only come when I say.”

“But I’m so close...” Harper gasped.

“Don’t you dare come until Daddy says you can,” Riley warned her, thrusting into her hard and fast now, grasping her shoulders so tight his nails were no doubt leaving marks. He was rough with her at the same time as being considerate. Powerful at the same time as being kind. It was the biggest turn-on in Harper’s whole life.

“I’m getting close,” Riley promised, his breath ragged as he continued to pound into her. “But don’t even think about coming yet.”

The pressure inside Harper built once more. She couldn’t feel her thighs but she was pretty sure her legs were trembling right now. Her stomach muscles certainly were. And her pussy was begging to explode all over Riley’s thick cock.

“I’m gonna count down from five, babygirl,” Riley told her. “Then I’m gonna come so hard and deep inside you that you’ll be dripping with my cum for days.” He kissed her hard and deep on the lips, his tongue thrusting between her lips, then he began to count. “Five...” he said, sliding his cock deep inside her. “Four...” he said, thrusting in again. “Three...” She could feel his cock twitching in readiness. “Two...” his balls seemed to tighten against her. “One...”

Suddenly, Riley pushed the tip of his finger down against her clit, applying so much pressure that it forced the climax right out of her, and he met it with his own peak, which was a strong, hard, pulse, so forceful it felt as deep as the lake beneath them.

Their cries of ecstasy filled the night air. They clung to each other, their bodies slick with sweat, hearts pounding in tandem.

As they came down from their high, Riley gently rolled to the side, cradling Harper in his arms. Their eyes met, filled with surprised contentment, as they basked in the afterglow of their shared passion.

“Wow, Daddy,” Harper whispered, pressing a soft kiss to his chest. “That was amazing. Thank you.”

“Thank *you*, sweetheart,” he replied, his voice thick with emotion. “I loved every minute of it. I’ve never felt closer to anyone in all my life.” He gazed deep into her eyes. “I know it’s crazy soon, but I love you, Harper Adams. Always have, always will.”

Harper was taken aback. “I...” she began. “I l—“

“You don’t need to say a word right now, darlin’,” he told her. “Just know that I have said my truth and one day, I expect you to say yours, whatever it may be.”

Harper nodded, nuzzling into the amazing man at her side.

Lying entwined in each other’s arms, Harper and Riley gazed at the stars above them. Harper’s body was still tingling from her passionate encounter. She had been shocked by how strongly she’d felt everything. Not just between her legs, but in her heart too.

Was it possible that she already loved Riley, just like he loved her?

The night sky was a canvas of constellations, and the air was crisp and cool against their heated skin.

“Today has been life-changing,” Harper murmured, her head resting on Riley’s chest, feeling the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. “I never thought I’d be able to take part in a race again. And I never thought I’d be able to do what we did tonight, either.”

“Seeing you so happy, pushing yourself, and overcoming your fears means the world to me, sweetheart,” Riley replied, brushing a strand of hair from her face. He leaned down to capture her lips in a tender kiss. “You’ve made me happier than I ever thought possible.”

Their eyes locked and Harper felt a sense of completion she had never known before. With Riley by her side, there was

nothing she couldn't conquer.

As the night continued, they spoke softly to each other, sharing stories and dreams, laughter filling the air between them.

Harper felt herself growing drowsy, her eyelids becoming heavy as sleep beckoned.

“Time for sleep now, babygirl,” Riley whispered, sensing her exhaustion. “We have a lifetime of adventures ahead of us, and I'll be right here when you wake up.”

With a contented sigh, Harper let Riley dress her and carry her into the tent. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to drift off, safe in the knowledge that she was loved and cherished by the man who had shown her what it truly meant to be alive.

Chapter Fourteen

RILEY

RILEY'S PHONE WAS BUZZING. He grabbed it from beside his sleeping bag and stared at the screen. It was an unknown number.

“Damn,” he muttered.

Reluctantly, he left the warmth of the tent and the sweet feeling of Harper's body cuddled up to his. He quickly put on his prosthetic and a sweater and stepped out into the chilly morning air. It was irritating to be interrupted after the incredible night he'd just shared with Harper.

“Who is this?” Riley asked gruffly.

“Stay away from Harper, you hear me?” a raspy voice on the other end warned.

“JP? Is that you?” Riley couldn't believe it. His anger surged as he recognized the voice of his former coach and Harper's tormentor. The nerve of this guy calling him up out of nowhere.

“Damn right,” JP spat. “I can’t believe you of all people would try to help her. She’s a scheming little liar. You were my golden boy, Riley. If that little brat hadn’t lied about me to get me thrown out of the school, I could have made you a soccer superstar.”

“Let it go, old man,” said Riley. “I’m fine with how my life turned out. Sounds like the only one who has a problem with what fate had in store for them is you, dude.”

“That little bitch got what was coming to her when she lost the use of her legs. Ever heard of karma?”

“How dare you,” Riley growled, clenching his fist. “Harper is a damn angel.”

JP began to laugh, a rasping, sick laugh that made Riley’s skin crawl. “Just keep away from her,” said JP. “Stop helping her. Let her fail. She’s not worth it. Trust me. There are things you don’t know about that little she-devil.”

“Get fucked,” Riley snarled. Then he hung up.

His heart pounded against his chest, the anger consuming him. How dare JP threaten him like that? As for the things JP was saying, that Harper had secrets... well. He was pretty sure that the two of them had no secrets after everything they’d shared together. He was hardly about to trust JP over her.

Riley stomped back towards the tent. He needed to protect Harper from that creep, but for now, all he wanted was to hold her close and feel the warmth of their newfound connection once more. He swore to himself that he’d do whatever it took

to keep her safe and help her become the happy woman and the amazing athlete she was always meant to be.

Riley returned to the tent and found Harper awake, clutching Swiftly the cheetah stuffie close to her chest.

Her eyes were wide with fear.

“Hey, babygirl,” he said softly, worry etching his voice. “What’s wrong?”

“Bad dream,” she whispered, tears threatening to spill from her beautiful hazel eyes. “You weren’t here, and... I was scared.”

“Shit,” Riley muttered under his breath, cursing himself for not being there when she needed him. “I’m sorry, Harper. I had to take a call. But I’m here now, okay? I’ve got you.”

He climbed into the tent and wrapped his arms around her shivering body, holding her close to his chest as she sniffled. The weight of their situation pressed down on Riley’s shoulders, but he couldn’t let Harper know about JP right now. She needed comfort and reassurance.

“Let me make it up to you, princess,” Riley suggested, brushing his lips against her forehead. “How about I make us a nice cup of coffee and some maple syrup and berry pancakes?”

Harper bit her lip, a strange look in her eyes. Slowly, she shook her head. “Not just yet, Daddy. There’s something else I was hoping to do first.”

Riley felt his cock twitch. “Is my little girl feeling frisky? You want one of those special daily climaxes Daddy promised

you? How about you let me take you out of that blanket and go down on you? Make you feel really good, princess?”

Harper hesitated, then shook her head. “No, Daddy,” she said, her voice barely audible. “I want to do something for you instead.”

Riley raised an eyebrow, surprised by her sudden boldness. “Oh? What did you have in mind?”

“Can... can I try giving you a... you know... a suck?” She said the last word in a whisper, her voice trembling slightly. “I want to make *you* feel good, too.”

Riley could feel his heart race at the mere thought of it. The idea of Harper pleasuring him was enough to send all the blood in his head straight down to his cock. But he had to be sure she was ready for this.

“Are you sure, babygirl?” he asked, searching her eyes for any signs of hesitation.

Harper nodded, determination shining in her gaze. “I want to, Daddy. I can see how hard you get around me, like, kind of all the time.” She looked down at Riley’s groin and the two of them laughed at the ridiculously large tent in his pants. “I think you deserve it, Daddy.”

“Alright,” Riley agreed, swallowing hard as he felt his excitement grow. “We’re gonna have to find a way to position ourselves so that you’re comfortable. How would you feel about lying on your side to do it?”

“I’d feel good, Daddy,” said Harper.

Riley helped Harper onto her side, then he lay on his side facing her, with his groin level with her head.

“Take down my boxers,” he instructed her, his voice rough with desire. “Then hold my cock tight in one hand.”

Harper did as she was told, and Riley had to force himself not to come right away.

“First, I want you to start by teasing me a little. Run your tongue along the length of my cock, nice and slow.”

Harper nodded, her eyes fixed on his erection as she leaned in closer. Her warm breath tickled his sensitive skin as she followed his instructions, her tongue tracing a hot, wet path from the base to the tip. The sensation sent shivers down Riley’s spine, and he couldn’t help but let out a low groan.

“Good girl,” he praised, his hand gently cradling the back of her head. “Now, take the head into your mouth and suck gently.”

She hesitated for only a moment before following his command, her lips wrapping around the tip of his cock as she began to suck. The mix of heat and wetness was almost unbearable, and Riley had to fight to keep himself in check.

“Fuck, babygirl, that feels amazing,” he growled, his fingers tightening in her hair. “Now, I want you to take more of me in. Go as far as you’re comfortable with, and remember to use your hand too. One moving up and down on my shaft in time with your mouth, and the other playing gently with my balls.”

Harper continued to follow his instructions, taking him deeper into her mouth while her small hand gripped the base of his shaft. She moved slowly at first, gradually finding her rhythm as she bobbed her head up and down. Her devotion to pleasing him was evident in every movement, and Riley found himself struggling to maintain control.

“Shit, princess, you’re doing so well,” he panted, his hips twitching involuntarily. “Just a little faster now, and don’t forget to use your tongue.”

Harper quickened her pace, her tongue swirling around his cock as she sucked him harder. The combination of sensations pushed Riley closer and closer to the edge. His entire body tensed as the pleasure built.

“Harper, I’m close,” he warned, his grip on her hair tightening. “You can stop if you don’t want to swallow and pass me a towel. Or keep going... it’s up to you.”

But she didn’t stop. Instead, she doubled her efforts, sucking and licking him with a wild hunger in her eyes as her hand stroked the base of his shaft. The sight of her, so eager to please him, was enough to send Riley hurtling over the edge.

“Fuck, Harper!” he roared as he came, his orgasm ripping through him with a force he’d never experienced before. His entire body shuddered, waves of pleasure crashing over him, leaving him breathless and spent.

Harper swallowed up every last drop of cum that he emptied down her throat. As she did so, she moaned happily, as though it were her favorite chocolate milkshake.

As he slowly floated down from his high, Riley looked down at Harper, pride swelling in his chest. She had followed his instructions perfectly, showing her trust and devotion in the most intimate way possible. And for that, he couldn't have been more grateful.

“Darling,” he said, “you’ve definitely got the knack. Next time we do that, I’m going to turn around so that I can lick *you* at the same time.”

Harper’s eyelids fluttered. “That sounds good.” She wiped her mouth. “I loved doing that, Daddy. It was yummy.”

“Would you like me to make you come now, Harper?”

“Only if you want to—“ Harper began.

Riley didn't let her finish. He popped a finger in her mouth, letting her suck on it a moment, then he moved it down to her thin cotton panties, pulling them to one side. He rubbed her spit all over her clit until he felt the juice pour out of her pussy.

“Good girl,” he said. “Daddy’s going to get you coming all over his fingers now.”

He alternated between dipping his fingers into her moist passage and rubbing her clit in tiny, soft circles, teasing a climax out of her so quickly that it took them both by surprise.

He thrust two fingers deep inside her as she came, letting her muscles clamp around his digits, spasming uncontrollably for several minutes until the orgasm was well and truly over.

“Gosh, Daddy,” she whispered at last. “It seems like my body has a few surprises left in it yet.”

Riley laughed. “Hell yes, sweetheart. Your body is capable of some of the best damn things on earth.”

*

Riley steered the car through the bustling streets of Portland, his eyes scanning the surroundings for a suitable park. Harper rested her head against the window, taking in the vibrant cityscape and the towering trees lining the streets.

“Look, there’s a park up ahead,” she said, pointing to a sign indicating the entrance to a lush green space.

“Perfect.” Riley turned the wheel, guiding the car into the parking lot. They stepped out and stretched their limbs, invigorated by the fresh Oregon air.

“Ready to train, darling?” he asked, a playful grin on his face.

“Absolutely, Daddy.”

They wound along the path into the park, looking for a good spot to start their session.

“This looks good,” said Riley. “Nice long stretches of flat ground, a few gentle inclines.”

Harper nodded. “Great. What are we waiting for? Let’s do it!”

She put on her gloves and began warming up her arms with some gentle stretches, while Riley concentrated on making sure his running prosthetic was firmly attached.

This was the most public spot they'd ever trained in, and Riley was aware of the curious looks the two of them got from bystanders.

“Do you feel as self-conscious as I do right now?” Harper asked.

“Don't worry,” Riley reassured her. “It's only natural that people stare. They've never seen two people as hot as us in this park.”

Harper laughed. “You're silly. They're staring at our disabilities.”

“Well, maybe they are,” Riley said with a shrug, “but it's only because they don't see people like us every day. But each and every time we're brave enough to get out here and be ourselves we're showing the world that we have nothing to be ashamed of. We're teaching people that the world is full of differences, and that's okay.”

“I'm not sure I want to be teaching anyone anything,” said Harper. “I just want to be me.”

“Sweetheart,” he said, “you were an Olympic athlete for years. Your whole job involved having people stare at you while you showed them how amazing you were. You probably inspired a ton of little girls to take up running. You taught them that people could be whoever they wanted to be. This is no different.”

“They're not staring at me because I'm an inspiration. They're staring at me because they think I look weird.”

Riley crouched down and took Harper's hand. "If you look weird, then I guess I must have a fetish for getting extremely turned on by weird-looking people," he said. "Because to me, you're the most beautiful being on the entirety of Planet Earth."

Harper smiled. "You're too nice to me."

"Looks like we just got ourself a new rule, babygirl. No putting yourself down."

Harper grimaced. "Uh oh. Please, please, please don't spank me again, Daddy." She cackled an evil laugh.

"Right," said Riley, "enough naughtiness. It's time to train. Block all these spectators out of your head, and just enjoy yourself!"

Harper grinned. "As long as you're by my side, I think I will!"

They positioned themselves on the starting line Riley had marked on the ground with chalk.

Riley counted them down from three, and then they were off.

The plan was not to try to beat one another, but to keep going for forty-five minutes without stopping.

Slow and steady wins the race.

As Harper began propelling herself forward, Riley couldn't help but marvel at the fluidity and precision of her movements. He could see the potential in her, the raw talent that had once made her a rising star.

“Damn, Harper, you’re doing amazing,” he praised.

“Thanks,” she blushed, clearly pleased by his compliment.
“But I can’t talk right now. I’m racing!”

Riley laughed, already panting a little. “Agreed.”

For the next forty-five minutes, they continued to race, pushing each other to new heights and offering encouragement along the way. Sweat trickled down their faces as they tested their limits, but Riley knew that neither of them would have it any other way.

As they finished their training, Harper whooped. “I can’t believe it! I managed the full forty-five minutes! I was even faster than when we did the Parkrun!”

“You did perfect, darling,” said Riley, wrapping his arms around her. “Honestly, it was a challenge to keep up with you by the end. You’ll be overtaking me in no time.”

Riley took off his racing prosthetic and replaced it with his normal one, covering it with his sweatpants.

They were just doing a few warm-down exercises when a disheveled figure approached them from across the park. The man’s face was gaunt, his frame hunched and weak. It took a moment for Riley to recognize the person before him.

But then he did.

JP.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Riley muttered. “Harper, look who decided to show up,” Riley said, his voice low and

tense. He could feel the fury bubbling within him, but he needed to stay focused on protecting Harper.

“JP? What are you doing here?” Harper asked, her voice unsteady.

“Been followin’ your little road trip on Instagram, darlin’. You two sure have been getting cozy, haven’t you? Camping under the stars, climbing walls, sharing cabins. Very cute. Couldn’t resist comin’ by to see how you’re doin’ in person,” JP sneered, his eyes darting between the two of them like a predator sizing up its prey.

“Leave us alone, JP,” Riley growled, taking a protective step in front of Harper.

“Aw, c’mon now, I just wanted to see how my favorite athlete’s been farin’ since her big accident,” JP said mockingly, his gaze fixated on Harper. “You really think you can get back to where you were? You ain’t got it in you anymore, sweetheart.”

Riley clenched his fists, fighting the urge to punch JP’s smug face. Instead, he focused on supporting Harper. “Don’t let him get to you, princess. Remember all the progress we’ve made together.”

“You don’t know anything about me, JP,” Harper snapped, her voice shaking. “I can do this. With or without your pathetic existence.”

“Look at you, tryin’ to play tough,” JP laughed cruelly. “But deep down, you know I’m right. You’ll never be the same.

Face it, Harper. You're washed up."

Riley's blood boiled as he watched Harper's confidence waver under JP's harsh words. He knew how hard she had worked to regain her strength. And now, this despicable man was trying to tear her down.

"JP," Riley said through gritted teeth, "you don't know a damn thing about Harper or what she's capable of. She's stronger than you could ever imagine, and she doesn't need your bullshit. Now get the hell out of here before I make you regret showin' up."

JP sneered at Riley, but didn't back down. "What's the matter, Riley? Can't handle knowing the truth about your precious little princess?"

"Harper doesn't need your twisted version of the truth," Riley shot back. "She's been working her ass off, and she's gonna come back stronger than ever, no thanks to you."

"Is that what you think?" JP taunted, turning his attention back to Harper. "Or are you just scared to admit that I'm right? That you'll never be as good as you used to be?"

Harper visibly flinched at his words.

"Can you believe this jumped-up little cunt told my wife and kid to leave me?" JP sneered to Riley.

"You're not married to my sister," Harper said.

"As good as," JP replied. "We were together for years before you stuck your ugly snout in."

Tears were streaming down Harper's face. "Stay away from Loretta and Emma, JP," she choked out. "I don't care what you say about me, but leave them alone."

"Leave my own kid alone?" JP said, laughing. "That's what you always wanted, isn't it? To ruin my life? First take away my job, then my girl, then my kid?" He turned to Riley. "All because I refused to have sex with her when she was at school."

Riley frowned. "What are you talking about, idiot?"

"This little slut of yours tried it on with me right before she reported me," he told her. "She was sixteen at the time. High as a kite on all the steroids she was taking. Told me I had to have sex with her or she'd turn me into the authorities. Said it wasn't fair I was fucking her sister. Said it was time she got some action."

"That's not true!" shouted out Harper. "I'd never say anything like that! It's... it's disgusting!"

Riley looked at Harper, convinced by the sincerity in her eyes that she was telling the truth. "You're talking shit, dumbass. Now get lost before I call the cops."

"Fine, whatever," JP spat dismissively, turning to walk away. "Just remember, your girl liked me first. And she deserves every damn thing that's coming to her."

As JP disappeared from view, Riley turned to Harper, wrapping his arms around her. She sobbed into his chest, her body shaking with a mixture of fear and anger.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Riley murmured, rubbing her back soothingly. “He’s not worth it. You’re doing amazing, and we both know it.”

“I just... I can’t believe he’d say those things,” Harper sobbed, pulling back to look at Riley. “I never took steroids, I swear! And I didn’t blackmail him or tell him to have sex with me! The thought of it is too horrible to even imagine!” She cried harder now.

“I believe you, darling,” Riley said firmly, wiping away her tears with his thumb. “The man is a deluded fool. Don’t let him get in your head.”

She nodded, sniffing, as she tried to regain her composure. Riley held her close, vowing silently that he’d do whatever it took to protect her. And her sister and her kid too, if it came to it.

“Hey, do you want to keep training, or call it a day?” he asked, concern etched on his face. “There are some strength exercises we could work on if you want to take your mind off what just happened. But no pressure. We can do something else entirely. You name it.”

Harper hesitated, looking drained after the confrontation. “I don’t know if I can focus on training right now,” she admitted, her voice shaky.

“Understandable,” Riley nodded. “Why don’t you call your mom and check on Loretta and Emma? Just for peace of mind.”

“Good idea,” Harper said, pulling out her phone and dialing her mom’s number. “Mom,” she said, “is everything okay? Is Loretta with you?” She nodded while her mom spoke, her expression softening slightly. “Okay. That’s good. No, uh, all’s good here.” She paused, and looked up at Riley. “Yes, he’s being good to me.” She paused again. “I’m not telling you, Mom! We’ll talk when I’m back, okay?”

She hung up and sighed with relief. “They’re okay. Loretta and Emma are in the kitchen making cupcakes. Mom asked about you. I think she likes you.”

Riley smiled. “I like her too. And I’m glad there’s nothing to worry about. Just to be extra safe, I’ll send a message to Travis. Put him on alert to watch out for any suspicious behavior in Little Rock. He and the Sheriff can make sure your mom and Loretta stay safe.”

“Thank you, Riley,” said Harper, nodding. “I really appreciate that.”

“Do you want to head home to see them?” Riley asked, stroking her back. “We can pack up and go right now if you like.”

“No, not yet,” Harper replied, steeling herself with determination. “I won’t let him ruin our trip.”

“Alright,” Riley agreed, fishing around in their bag and pulling out Swifty, the cheetah stuffie they had gotten earlier. He dangled it in front of Harper playfully. “How about we take Swifty here for some ice cream?”

A small smile tugged at the corners of Harper's lips, her eyes brightening at the suggestion. "Yeah, I think Swifty deserves a treat."

"Then it's settled," Riley declared, helping her pack up their things before leading her towards the park exit. "We'll grab some ice cream and make the most of this day, no matter what."

Harper nodded. "I just really hope you believe me, Daddy. I promise you times a million, million, million that I never tried to get JP to have sex with me. I wish there was some way I could prove it to you..." A dirty look came into her eyes for a moment. "If only we weren't in this park."

Riley glanced around, ensuring they were alone before pulling Harper close. His lips grazed hers in a teasing manner. "You know, I can't stop thinking about last night," he whispered, his voice husky.

"Me neither," Harper admitted, feeling her cheeks grow warm. "It was... amazing."

"Good," Riley said, his eyes darkening with desire. "Because I want to make you feel that good again, right now. I want you to see how much I trust you, to prove how little JP's words mean to me."

"Here?" Harper asked, her heart pounding in her chest.

"Right here," Riley said. "You said you wanted to do outrageous things from time to time, didn't you?"

"I did," Harper whispered. "But... won't we get caught?"

“Do you trust me?” Riley asked.

Harper nodded. “With my life.”

“Then let Daddy find a nice secluded spot to slide his cock into you.”

The idea of being so bold, so public, sent a thrill down his spine. From the look in Harper’s eyes, she felt the same way.

“This looks good,” Riley murmured, leading her to a secluded spot behind a thick grove of trees. “As long as we’re quick.”

Once they were hidden from view, he lifted her out of her chair and pressed her up against a tree trunk, his lips capturing hers in a hungry kiss.

“I’m about to show you how fuckin’ quick I get turned on by you, babygirl,” Riley purred as he pulled back slightly. “How fuckin’ quick you can make me come.” He held her butt in place firmly against the tree trunk. She wasn’t able to support herself, but it was okay. He could easily carry her full weight. “Now hold on to Daddy nice and tight.”

“Please, Daddy,” she whispered, craving his touch, his control.

“Good girl,” Riley praised, quickly unzipping his pants and freeing his already hard cock. He pulled Harper’s pants down and slid her panties to one side, then entered her quickly. He was pleased to see she was already dripping wet for him.

Harper moaned in delight as Riley thrust into her against the tree.

As he fucked her, he bit down softly on her neck, letting her know he was in control.

Moments later, Riley's body tensed, and Harper felt the hot, salty rush of his release filling her pussy. She climaxed around his throbbing cock, looking up at him with wide, adoring eyes.

"Thank you, Daddy," she whispered, her voice filled with love and devotion. "I needed that."

"So did I, babygirl," Riley replied, pulling her to her feet and kissing her deeply. "Now, let's go get that ice cream."

Chapter Fifteen

HARPER

HARPER EMERGED FROM THE secret spot in the park, her heart still racing, a mix of shock and satisfaction washing over her. She couldn't believe Riley had just taken her up against a tree. The raw passion between them left her breathless. It felt liberating to do something so wild and unexpected.

Ever since her accident, Harper had been treated like a fragile glass object, like if she wasn't handled with extreme care, she might shatter into a million pieces at any moment. But even though Riley deeply cared for her, he didn't mind being a little rough with her, too. A little wild and spontaneous.

She felt like a real woman around him.

Riley helped Harper settle into her racing wheelchair, making sure she was comfortable.

“Well, that was fuckin' hot,” said Riley, adjusting his t-shirt and making sure there were no telltale signs on him of what

they'd just done. "I've never done that before."

"Me neither," said Harper. "It was very naughty, Daddy."

"Babygirl," he growled in her ear. "We're only just scratchin' the surface." Gently, he bit down on her earlobe.

"Careful," she cried out, "or you'll get me all squirmy again."

"We definitely can't have that," said Riley, tutting. Then, with a playful grin, he said: "Let's cool you off with some ice cream!"

As they made their way out of the park, anticipation bubbled inside Harper. She could hardly wait to taste the cold sweetness on her tongue, a reward for their naughty escapade.

"I still can't believe we just did that!" Harper blurted out, unable to contain her exhilaration.

Riley chuckled. "Nor can I. But I'm glad we did."

"Me too." Harper bit her lip, a coy smile playing on her face. "Nobody's ever made me feel this alive before, Riley."

"Good," he replied, squeezing her shoulder as they continued toward the ice cream stand. "Because I want to keep making you feel that way."

Harper's stomach fluttered with excitement as she imagined all the thrilling adventures they could share together. For the first time in ages, she felt truly alive and free, unshackled by the limitations of her wheelchair. With Riley by her side, she

knew she could conquer anything. No matter how far out of her comfort zone it was.

As they exited the park and prepared to cross the road to a cute-looking ice cream parlor, Harper couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something was off. Her racing wheelchair didn't seem to glide as smoothly as it usually did, and she found herself gripping the wheels tighter than normal.

"Riley," she said hesitantly, "does my chair seem weird to you?"

He furrowed his brow in concern, slowing their pace. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," Harper replied, biting her lip. "It just feels... off."

"Stop a minute," Riley told her. "Let me take a look."

They stopped on the sidewalk and Riley crouched down to inspect the wheelchair. He slowly turned the wheels, checking for any obvious issues. "Everything looks fine to me, but let's keep an eye on it."

"Okay," Harper agreed, trying to push her worry aside as they resumed their journey along the sidewalk. But as they approached a busy crossing, she couldn't ignore the growing unease in her gut.

"Wait, Riley!" she cried out suddenly, panic rising in her chest as she felt her wheelchair begin to buckle beneath her.

"Harper, what's wrong?" Riley's eyes were wide with alarm.

“Something’s really not right with my chair.” What was going on? She was struggling to maintain her balance.

Suddenly, the wheelchair collapsed, sending Harper tumbling into the bustling traffic.

“Harper!” Riley shouted, his voice filled with sheer terror.

“Riley, help!” she screamed, her heart pounding in her chest as the realization of her perilous situation crashed over her like a tidal wave.

Time seemed to slow down as cars screeched to a halt and honked their horns, narrowly avoiding her.

She felt Riley’s strong arms scooping her up from the asphalt and carrying her back to the safety of the sidewalk.

As they reached the curb, Harper’s heart raced uncontrollably, her body shaking from the adrenaline and fear coursing through her veins.

“Are you okay?” Riley asked urgently, his voice trembling with concern as he checked her for injuries. “Did anything hit you?”

“I don’t think so,” she stammered, trying to catch her breath. “But my chair...”

One of the wheels was so badly bent it looked unfixable.

Riley cradled Harper close to his chest, shielding her from any further harm.

“Ow,” Harper winced, becoming aware of the pain radiating from various parts of her upper body. She looked down at her

grazed knee, noticing the blood trickling down her skin and staining her sweatpants. “My legs,” she said. “Have I done something terrible to them?”

She couldn’t feel anything in them, obviously, but that didn’t mean she didn’t care if they got hurt.

“Let me see,” Riley said, looking her over. “Doesn’t look like anything’s broken from where I’m standing. But we need to get you checked out.” His eyes continued to scan her body for any further injuries. “Let me see your face.”

Harper turned her head towards him.

Riley couldn’t suppress a brief wince.

“What? What is it? What have I done?”

“Nothing too bad,” he reassured her. “There’s just a cut on your cheekbone that’s a little swollen. You’ll be okay, I promise.” His fingers gently traced around the wound, concern etching deeper lines across his brow. “Damn it, Harper. I’m so sorry this happened. I should’ve been more careful.”

“No, Daddy, it’s not your fault,” she reassured him, attempting a smile despite the pain. “It’s just...bad luck, I guess.”

As Riley lifted Harper and her broken chair into a cab, Harper couldn’t help but feel a warmth amidst the pain. Riley’s devotion and protectiveness only served to strengthen the bond between them, and she knew that no matter what obstacles they faced, they were a team.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she whispered, resting her head against his broad shoulder. “For always looking out for me.”

“Always,” he replied softly, his love for her evident in every word. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

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“You know, I think I’m fine,” Harper insisted as they pulled up to the ER entrance. “It’s just a few scrapes.”

“Harper, you could have a concussion, or worse,” Riley argued, helping her into the wheelchair he’d procured from the hospital staff. “I’m not taking any chances with your health. Not after everything you’ve been through, sweetheart.”

Harper thought back to the accident that had ended up leaving her paralyzed. If her old coach had been half as concerned and caring as Riley was being right now, she’d have never lost the use of her legs. She was so lucky to have a Daddy like him. Wild when he wanted to be. But caring when he needed to be.

As they entered the bustling emergency room, Harper tried not to think back to the other times she’d been in hospitals like this. The horrible news she’d been given about her injuries. The look of sympathy on all the doctor’s faces as they told her she’d never walk again.

“Daddy,” she said quietly. “I’m a bit scared.”

“I understand,” Riley said, carrying her up to the check-in counter. “That’s only natural. But I’m here with you. And this is the safest place to be right now.”

Harper nodded. “You’re right.”

Riley sat Harper down in a chair and then brought her a hot chocolate from the vending machine as well as a kid’s magazine from the coffee table.

“People will think I look silly reading this goofy comic,” she whispered to him.

“Then let them,” Riley replied. “What do you care most about? Judgmental people’s dumb thoughts or the adventures of Rick the Robot?” He pointed at the funny cartoon in the magazine.

Harper laughed. “Definitely way more interested in what Rick the Robot’s getting up to.”

“Same here,” agreed Riley. “Now, let’s read it together. With Swifty, of course.”

Harper sat with Swifty on her lap and read the funny magazine with her Daddy, her self-consciousness fading away and being replaced with a deep pride in who she was.

If people wanted to stop and stare, then who cared? She was happy, fulfilled, and in a loving relationship with a hot-as-hell Daddy Dom.

Wait. Did she just think that word?

Loving?

Riley had already told her that he loved her, though she hadn't dared believe it. Now, though, it was obvious. And it was obvious that there was more than a kernel of love inside her too.

After half an hour or so, Harper was called into an exam room.

"Want me to come with you, sweetheart?" Riley asked.

Harper considered it. "I think I'd like to do it on my own. But if you could carry me in there..."

Riley didn't need asking twice. He scooped Harper up in his arms and carried her into the examination room, then kissed her on the forehead and went to wait outside.

"Your husband seems nice," said the young female doctor to her.

"Oh, he's not my husband," said Harper shyly. "But he is nice. Very nice."

For a moment, Harper wondered why she hadn't asked Riley in with her, but then she remembered. This was important for her to do alone. To face her fear of receiving medical news. To show her just how strong she really was. Riley had done so much for her lately, but right now, she needed to see that she could face some things alone.

The doctor began to assess her injuries.

"Your elbow took quite a hit," the doctor said, studying the swelling around the joint. "We'll need to get an X-ray to make sure nothing's broken."

She looked at Harper's knee and cheekbone too. "Does it hurt badly anywhere?"

"Actually, no," said Harper. "I think it was more of a nasty knock than anything. Although I can't really feel my legs, so I'm not sure I'd know if I'd completely mangled them." She tried to laugh to show that she had been exaggerating for comic effect, but her laugh came out a bit strained.

"Let's see," said the doctor, rolling up Harper's sweatpants and giving her legs a thorough check. "I know you don't have much feeling here, but if anything does hurt, let me know."

"Okay."

The doctor began prodding Harper's legs in various places, and then took a good look at her knee. "Good news on the legs front," she said at last. "A grazed knee is about the worst of it. But we will get that elbow checked out in a minute."

The doctor took Harper's blood pressure next, along with checking her heart rate and her pupils.

"Well," she said at last, "all your vitals are looking good. They look great, actually. Are you an athlete? Your resting heart rate is very low."

"Thank you, I *am* an athlete," Harper replied proudly, realizing with a start that she had used the present tense.

I am an athlete.

It felt like a small victory, a sign that she was reclaiming her identity and strength.

Once the doctor had cleaned her wounds, she had X-rays taken, and then she returned to the exam room, where the doctor confirmed that her elbow was not broken. It was merely bruised.

“You’re lucky,” said the doctor. “These injuries are all minor and will heal very quickly.”

It had been a long time since anyone had called Harper lucky.

“Now, we’d better bandage you up so you can get back to that hunky not-husband of yours, huh?”

Harper giggled.

With her injuries cleaned and bandaged, Harper reunited with Riley in the waiting area. She could see the relief wash over his face as she shared her clean bill of health.

But once the relief had worn off, she noticed that Riley’s face had darkened. His jaw was clenched with anger, and his eyes burned with intensity.

“Harper, I checked your wheelchair while you were gone,” he growled, his voice low and dangerous. “I found some loose bolts around the wheels, and there was a small cut in one of the tires. It looks like someone intentionally messed with it.”

“Are you serious?” Harper asked, her heart pounding in her chest. Then, suddenly, it dawned on her like a blow to the gut. “Oh no! Do you think it was JP? When we left the wheelchair in the park while we...”

“Who else would have a reason to do this?” Riley snapped. “He’s made it clear that he wants to hurt you, and now he’s trying to sabotage your equipment.”

“Can we prove it was him?” Harper questioned, her mind racing with fear and anger.

“Right now, all we’ve got are suspicions,” Riley admitted, looking frustrated. “But we may be able to find CCTV footage of him doing it.”

“That would mean asking the police to watch videos of us going into the bushes...” Harper said, biting her thumbnail nervously.

“Possibly, but they wouldn’t know for sure what we were up to. I could have taken you in there to vomit.”

“I don’t want to lie to the police,” said Harper firmly.

“Well, look. Don’t worry about that for now. While you were getting seen to by the doc, I asked Travis to help us get a restraining order. We need to keep JP away from you. And your sister, if that’s what she wants. He’s going to go and chat to her this afternoon.” He paused. “If we give the police Loretta’s testimony, plus the threatening text message JP sent you, that gives them plenty to go on for now.”

Harper nodded. “Thank you, Riley. That’s good of you. I’m not sure if Loretta will want a restraining order, but maybe it’s a good idea.”

“You let her worry about that right now,” Riley told her. “Your mom will help her decide about it, I’m sure.”

“There’s something else I want to talk to you about,” said Riley, his brows knitted together. He reached out for Harper’s hand. “Listen, I can get your chair fixed up at a place near here, but maybe it’s best if you take a break from racing for now. At least until we can get that restraining order and make sure you’re safe.”

“Safe.” The word echoed in Harper’s mind, but it felt suffocating. She knew Riley was saying this for the right reasons, but the thought of giving up her newfound sense of freedom and purpose left her cold.

“I don’t want that jerk sabotaging your attempts at regaining your confidence,” said Riley. “But I don’t want you in any danger.”

Harper tried to focus on Riley’s words, but her gaze kept drifting toward the hospital noticeboard. A colorful poster caught her eye. It was advertising an event in a week’s time.

The upcoming Portland Marathon.

The idea of participating in such a long, difficult race sparked a sense of determination within her. She couldn’t help but imagine the exhilaration of racing through the city streets, the wind against her face, and the freedom of pushing her limits. Proving that JP couldn’t beat her down.

“Riley,” she interrupted, her voice filled with determination. “I don’t want to stop racing. In fact, I want to take part in the Portland Marathon.”

Riley looked at her, his eyes wide with surprise. “The Portland Marathon? Are you sure about that, Harper? It’s way longer than you’re used to. We haven’t done anything approaching that length. Plus, you’re injured. And when you add JP into the mix...”

Her heartbeat quickened as she contemplated the challenge ahead. She knew it would be tough, but she couldn’t let fear hold her back. With every fiber of her being, she wanted to prove to herself and the world that she was still capable of achieving great things. She wanted to show JP that he couldn’t break her spirit or take away her dreams.

“I know it’s a huge step, but I need to do this, Daddy,” Harper insisted, her eyes shining with resolve. “I can’t let him win by making me afraid to race. Besides, the doctor says I’m in good shape, and I know I can handle it. I might be slow, but I don’t care about that. I just want to take part.”

Riley studied her for a moment, and she could see the concern mingling with admiration in his eyes. He knew how much this meant to her, and she could tell that he was torn between wanting to protect her and supporting her decision.

“Alright, babygirl,” he finally agreed, his voice steady. “If you’re determined to do this, then I’ll be right there beside you every step of the way. But we’ll need to be cautious and train smart, okay?”

A warm smile spread across Harper’s face as she nodded. “Okay, Daddy. Thank you for believing in me.”

“Always, Harper,” Riley murmured, his expression softening. “You’re stronger than you think, and I have no doubt that you can handle a marathon. Just remember that I’ll be here to help you, no matter what. Even if I have to push your exhausted ass over that finishing line myself.”

Harper laughed. “Not a chance. I’m doing this thing all on my own.”

Riley smiled. “I know. I wouldn’t expect anything less from you, Harper Adams.”

Harper grinned. Her fighting spirit was firmly back inside her. She was ready for this. She would show the world that she was still a force to be reckoned with.

Chapter Sixteen

RILEY

THE SUN WAS ONLY just rising as Riley and Harper prepared for their morning training session. The air was crisp, and Riley could see his breath forming small clouds in front of him. He looked over at Harper, who was adjusting her racing wheelchair with a resolute expression on her face.

“I can do this, I can do this, I can do this,” she whispered quietly.

“Remember,” Riley said gruffly, “it’s only been two days since your accident. If anything feels off or uncomfortable, you let me know right away, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy,” Harper replied, her eyes meeting his. There was a fire in her gaze that he admired. She refused to let anything hold her back.

Riley took extra care to ensure Harper’s racing wheelchair was in perfect condition, his heart hammering with anxiety at the thought of JP tampering with it again. Then, he swapped his prosthetic for his racing blade.

He threw all the gear they didn't need into the trunk of his truck, then they set out on their training route. They were focusing on building strength and endurance for the upcoming marathon.

Despite the chill in the air, Riley felt warmth spreading through his chest as he watched Harper push herself further with each passing minute. He kept a close eye on her, making sure she didn't overexert herself.

All his years in the military had taught Riley a lot about training. He knew how to work all the different muscle groups, and what ratio of cardio to strength training was optimal. He wasn't an expert in training someone in a wheelchair, but he'd been reading up on it online and felt pretty sure he was doing at least a passable job.

Ever since coming on this road trip, he'd realized, he'd been fully focused on Harper's needs. That was his biggest reason for embarking on this adventure. He'd recovered from his old wartime injuries well enough during his stay in Little Rock, but he had still been very much focused on himself. He hadn't felt strong enough to take care of someone else for years. And he had considered himself too damn unappealing for a relationship in all that time. All the scars, both physical and emotional. He hadn't realized how much of a Daddy he still was. It was the best damn feeling in the world.

After their intense workout, they headed back to their Airbnb apartment, both of them feeling the satisfying ache of well-used muscles. As Harper wheeled herself into the kitchen,

Riley began to prepare breakfast, part of the detailed meal plan he'd created for her to ensure her body received the nutrients it needed for recovery and optimal performance.

“Here you go, babygirl,” Riley said, placing a plate of scrambled eggs, spinach, and wholegrain toast in front of Harper. He sat down next to her with his own meal, watching as she picked up her fork with a grateful smile.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she murmured before taking a bite. “This is really good.”

Riley couldn't help but feel a swell of pride as he watched her eat, knowing that he was doing everything he could to support her on her journey. Their time together had brought them closer than ever, and he was determined to keep her safe and healthy as they continued to face the challenges that lay ahead.

With each bite, Riley noticed the contentment that spread across Harper's face. She seemed to find solace in the routine he'd established for her, and it was clear she appreciated his efforts.

It seemed funny to think that Harper had acted a little bratty about eating vegetables a few days ago. Now that she knew that she was training for something, it was like she couldn't get enough of them.

“Harper,” Riley began, looking into her eyes as she finished another mouthful, “I just want to say how much I enjoy caring for you. Being here with you, living together like this... Even though it's just temporary, it really means a lot to me.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, he worried he might have said too much. He'd already used the damn "L" word with her. He'd known it was way too soon for that, but the problem was, it was true. He loved her so much it made every part of him ache. And every second he spent in her company, he fell deeper and deeper and deeper.

But Harper hadn't reciprocated those feelings yet, and Riley didn't want to scare her off. So he stopped himself from saying anything more.

For a moment, Harper simply looked at him, her eyes searching his face as if trying to gauge the sincerity of his words. Then, to his relief, she smiled warmly. "You know, Daddy, I'm enjoying it too. It's nice to have someone who cares about me as much as you do."

Riley felt a wave of happiness wash over him. It wasn't a declaration of love, but it was enough to let him know that what they had was special.

They continued eating their breakfast, stealing glances at each other and sharing small smiles.

"Once this trip is over, I'm really going to miss this," Riley admitted, still unsure of where their relationship would go after the marathon. He knew where he wanted it to go, but the last thing he wanted to do was pressure Harper. She was going through big changes right now. She needed to feel free and unconstrained, like her future was a blank slate.

"Me too," Harper agreed softly. "I'm enjoying every moment."

Riley cleared his throat, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “So, I’ve got a new training technique for you, Harper. It should help improve your speed and stamina without straining your body too much.”

“Really? What is it?” Harper asked curiously, her eyebrows raised in anticipation. “We only just went out training this morning. I might need a little bit of a rest before I—“

“It’s sex-related,” Riley confessed with a cheeky grin. “I’ve timetabled in two hours every day for us to enjoy each other’s bodies after breakfast.”

“Sex as training?” she said, stifling a giggle. “Now that’s an interesting approach, Daddy.”

“Trust me, it’ll be good for both of us,” he winked. “We can focus on building endurance while also having some fun.”

Harper playfully bit her lip, a sparkle in her eyes. “Alright, let’s do it.”

They made their way to the bedroom, where Riley helped Harper transfer from her wheelchair onto the bed. With practiced ease, he positioned her comfortably and began to undress her, revealing her beautiful, toned body.

“Ready, babygirl?” he asked, his voice low and sultry. “I’m planning on really putting you through your paces today. I hope you’re feeling up to it.”

“Oh, I’m more than up to it, Daddy,” Harper replied, her eyes filled with desire.

As they began their stamina-building session, Riley took care to make sure Harper was comfortable at all times. He was getting to know the limitations of her body well by now, understanding which bits couldn't move and which bits were able to feel things.

“Let's figure out if there are any erogenous zones I don't know about,” Riley said, gently moving his mouth over some of the more unusual parts of her body: her scalp, her inner wrist, the nape of her neck, her armpit, her lower abdomen. As he tested out each new area, Harper responded with happy moans and soft chuckles.

“Oh my goodness,” she said. “I didn't know I liked having my armpits licked. But I really do!”

“There are so many parts of you that deserve my attention, darling,” said Riley. “It's important I don't leave anywhere out.”

“Very important indeed,” agreed Harper with mock sincerity.

Riley grew more and more turned on, the more he touched Harper. Eventually, after he had kissed and nibbled and licked his way around her body, his cock couldn't take it anymore. He had to get deep inside her.

“I need to take you now, sweetheart,” he panted. “But I'm going to make it last a long time, and I'll need your help with that, okay?”

Harper nodded. “Just let me know how, Daddy.”

“You’re not allowed to come until I say so. If you come, you’ll sure as hell make me come too, so you have to wait for my green light. And no talking or I’ll get too aroused by the sound of your voice. I’m gonna fuck you long and slow and deep without saying a word until I’m ready to come. All right?”

“All right,” Harper said breathlessly. “I’ll do my best to stay quiet, Daddy.”

Riley kissed Harper on the lips, sliding his tongue slowly and lazily into her mouth, giving her a taste of the pace of the fucking that was to come. Then, he grabbed hold of his rock-hard cock, which was already dripping with moisture, and he slid it deep into Harper’s tight passage.

Ever so carefully, Riley began to move inside her. As he did so, he gazed deep into her eyes, concentrating on each tiny sensation as though he were a scientist. His job was to pleasure his woman for as long as possible. He was her tool, her machine, her training device. Their lovemaking was slow and deliberate. Each touch, each kiss, was measured and calculated, designed to bring pleasure and build endurance.

Without his prosthetic on, Riley had learned to adapt his movements and find creative ways to satisfy Harper—and himself—without causing discomfort. He had worked out where to position himself to get the angles just right. And how and where to hold her body to slide into her as deep as possible.

The longer that Riley lasted, the heavier his breaths grew, and the more sweat beaded on his forehead. As he continued their gentle rhythm, Riley's thoughts drifted to their future together. He couldn't help picturing fucking Harper all over Little Rock. Taking her on the bonnet of a car in his garage. Fucking her in his shower. In his bed. Maybe even in a quiet spot in the local park. Damn, he hoped they would have a future together. He hoped they could do this forever.

Harper seemed to be finding it harder and harder to stay quiet.

Riley put his hand over her mouth, trying to stop her from moaning. But that act in itself seemed to turn her own. He thrust a finger between her lips for her to bite down on, but she sucked on it so hard he couldn't help imagining it was his cock and he had to withdraw it immediately.

Now, her mouth opened as though she were about to shout out, but she bit her lip, managing to stop herself at the last minute. Her body shook with the exertion of not coming and her eyelids fluttered as her eyes rolled back in pleasure.

Delighted by seeing his woman so turned on, but worried that she might be about to come, Riley bit down on her shoulder, a gentle nip to remind her he was in charge. No noise or coming until he said so.

But as he bit down, words flew out of Harper's mouth.

"I love you so much, Riley!"

Riley froze, his cock throbbing at her words.

Instantly, Harper's eyes widened in shock. "I, uh, sorry, Daddy. I didn't mean to... It just kinda slipped out... I really am sorry. I'm so dang turned on. Oh god. I—"

Riley shoved his finger into her mouth and she sucked on it hard, instantly pacified.

"Don't you ever apologize for saying you love me," he growled into her ear.

He was so delighted, so fucking ecstatic that she had said those words to him, that he couldn't control himself any longer. His cock wanted to empty its love and lust deep inside of her.

He flipped her over onto her stomach and entered her from behind, slamming her G-spot so hard that it sounded like she came twice in quick succession. As her muscles contracted around him tighter than ever, he felt himself crest a wave of the greatest pleasure he'd ever experienced. A dizzying, whirling, shock of pure, unadulterated joy. So fucking powerful that he shouted out Harper's name. He bit down on the nape of her neck like a wolf keeping its mate still, as his cock emptied every last drop of cum deep into her core.

When he was finally done, he flipped Harper onto her back again and admired her pussy as it dripped with his hot seed.

"I didn't mean to break our rules," Harper said quietly, her cheeks pink. It was hard to tell whether they were that color from satisfaction or embarrassment. Probably both. "It's true, though," she continued. "I do love you, Riley Collins."

Riley stroked her hair away from her forehead, where it had stuck down a little with sweat. "I love you more than life itself, Harper Adams," he panted. "And in case you hadn't noticed, my cock loves you even more than that."

Harper giggled. "It does seem quite happy, Daddy," she said, stroking his now half-hard, glistening dick. "You know, I never thought training could feel this good."

"Neither did I," Riley admitted, a small grin playing on his lips. "But we make quite a team, don't we?"

"Absolutely," she agreed. "And I can feel my stamina building by the minute."

"Oh yeah?" Riley asked. "Because we've only trained for an hour so far. You know there's a whole hour left to go, right?"

Harper looked surprised. "There is? You think you can manage it, Daddy?"

"Why don't you open your mouth nice and wide for me, darling, and I'll show you exactly how it's done," he replied playfully. Then, without giving Harper another moment to wonder about it, he turned around on the bed so that his groin was level with her mouth, and her pussy was level with his.

Before long, there was no more talking again, because their mouths were so full of each other. As Riley tasted her desire, mixed up with the taste of his own recent orgasm, he grew instantly hard again.

And over the course of the next hour, Riley made Harper come three delicious more times.

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After they'd both had a cool shower, Riley gave Harper a drink containing lots of electrolytes to keep her hydrated after such a sweaty morning. He gave it to her in a sippy cup he'd bought in a Portland store earlier, because he wanted something to symbolize their transition into Little Space.

“So, babygirl,” Riley began, his voice gentle and affectionate. “How about we get your stuffies out and have some fun?”

Sucking on her special athlete's juice, Harper's eyes sparkled at the suggestion, all traces of fatigue disappearing. “Yes, please, Daddy!”

Riley disentangled himself from her and moved to retrieve her collection of stuffed animals from the corner of the room. They were an assortment of shapes, sizes, and colors—each one carefully chosen by Harper for its unique personality and comforting presence. And of course, Swifty was there too.

“Alright, little one, let's gather up your fuzzy friends and make ourselves comfortable on the floor,” he said, setting up a cozy spot on the carpeted living area. Pillows and blankets surrounded them, creating a safe and inviting space.

“Okay, Daddy,” Harper replied, her voice taking on the innocent lilt that seemed to come naturally during Little Space playtime. She watched as Riley arranged her stuffies in a circle, a smile spreading across her face.

“Today, we’ll use your stuffies to help you visualize different racing scenarios,” Riley explained, picking up a fluffy pink bunny. “This one will be you, okay?”

“Yes, that’s me!” Harper agreed, her eyes wide with excitement.

Riley held the bunny up, moving it around as he acted out scenes from the upcoming marathon. In one scenario, the bunny took off at a steady pace, maintaining its speed throughout the race. In another, it started strong but slowed down toward the end, only to pick up the pace in the final stretch.

“See, babygirl? It’s all about pacing yourself and conserving energy,” Riley said, guiding the bunny through each situation with care. “And remember, staying safe and enjoying yourself is all that matters.”

Harper listened attentively, her eyes following the movements of her stuffies as they played out different outcomes.

“In this race here, look, our little friend Bunny has come last. But see how happy she is? She’s partying with her friends because she knows what a big achievement it was to take part.”

“Definitely,” Harper agreed. “She’s done so well. Especially since she is only just getting over that awful case of *myxomatosis*.”

Riley laughed, not wanting to tell Harper that a rabbit with myxomatosis would most likely never recover. Besides, this was all make-believe anyway. He was just happy to see Harper's confidence growing, buoyed by Riley's unwavering support and the vivid imagery he created for her.

"Thank you, Daddy," she whispered, her eyes glistening with emotion. "This is definitely helping me prepare. I won't be too hard on myself even if I don't manage to finish the race. I just want to try it."

Riley smiled warmly, tucking a stray strand of hair behind Harper's ear. "That's great, sweetheart. And if you ever start to waver on that, I'll always be here to help lift your spirits and remind you of your incredible strength."

"Thank you, Riley," Harper whispered suddenly, her voice filled with gratitude. "Your support means the world to me."

Riley nodded. "I'm so proud of you, Harper. You've come so far, and I know you're going to do amazing things."

As they continued discussing race strategies and fine-tuning their preparations, Riley couldn't help but marvel at the remarkable woman sitting beside him. Harper's resilience and determination had been nothing short of inspiring, and he felt incredibly fortunate to be able to share this journey with her.

Chapter Seventeen

HARPER

THE DAY OF THE Portland Marathon was here!

Harper couldn't help but feel her pulse quicken at the prospect of participating in the race. All around her, the fall season painted a stunning portrait of golden leaves and cool, crisp air, blending with the buzzing energy from the gathered crowd. The cheering and chatter of both runners and spectators filled her ears.

“Harper! Over here!” called a familiar voice.

Riley stood near the starting line, his muscular frame and tattoos making him easily recognizable among the throng of people. As she maneuvered around people and wheeled herself closer, she could see the excitement in his eyes.

“Ready for this?” he asked with a grin.

“More than ready,” Harper replied, her own smile growing. “I can't believe I'm actually doing it.”

“Of course you are,” Riley said, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You’re unstoppable.”

“Thanks, Riley. It means so much to me that you’re here,” she said, her heart swelling with gratitude and affection for him.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, babygirl,” he replied, his eyes twinkling with genuine warmth.

As they exchanged playful banter, Harper’s mind raced with thoughts of the journey that had led her to this moment. This race, now, felt like the most important of her life.

“Alright,” Riley said, giving her one last encouraging squeeze. “Have fun, little one. Remember, no matter what happens, you’re the most incredible woman in the whole world.” He winked at her.

“Sure thing,” Harper agreed, determination setting in as she positioned herself at the starting line.

She took a few deep breaths and then looked back at Riley, who stood tall among the crowd, his eyes locked on hers, offering unwavering support.

The sound of the starting gun echoed through the air, and Harper’s heart leaped in her chest as she began to propel herself forward. With each push of her wheels, she felt energy coursing through her veins, a testament to the week of hard work she had put in with Riley.

She didn’t feel tired after her training, though. She felt refreshed and even relaxed. Her special stamina-building

intimacy sessions seemed to have done the trick. She'd orgasmed more times this week than ever in her life. But there was more than that, too. The massages. The meal plans. The bedtime routines. Everything Riley had given to Harper had nourished and nurtured her so that somehow, amazingly, she felt even better about herself and her own body than she did before her accident.

“Keep going, Harper! You got this!” she heard Riley shout from the sidelines, his voice adding fuel to her already blazing determination.

As she rounded the first corner, Harper's focus was unwavering. She knew the race would be challenging but refused to let anything stand in her way.

That was, until she saw him.

JP was standing among the crowd with a malicious grin, holding a sign that read, “I'm going to make your life miserable, Harper.”

Harper gritted her teeth together, trying to ignore him.

“Look at you, thinking you can actually do this,” he sneered as she passed him. “You're pathetic!”

Harper's breath hitched, and for a moment, her pace faltered. She could feel the sting of his words like a slap across her face. But then, she thought of Riley and the support he had given her.

JP was nothing but a liar and a bully. And Riley was a beacon of hope and love. She mentally flicked away the

poisonous thoughts that tried to worm their way into her mind, replacing them with images of her and Riley laughing, training, and sharing intimate moments.

“Eff you, JP,” she muttered under her breath, refusing to let him break her spirit. “I’m Harper Adams, and I’m the most incredible woman in the whole world!” As she said those words, she felt them too. She meant them.

She pushed herself harder, focusing on the rhythm of her movements and the feeling of the wind on her face. The wheels of her chair glided smoothly over the asphalt. The cheers from the crowd were a distant hum, but she drew strength from the energy that surrounded her. Determination fueled her every movement, and she refused to let JP’s silly attacks derail her focus.

As the distance between her and JP grew, Harper reached for the Walkman that Riley had given her, secured safely in a pouch on her chair. He had encouraged her to listen in full to the mixtape he gave her during the race, assuring her that it would help keep her spirits high. With trembling fingers, she paused a moment, inserted the earphones and pressed play.

The mixtape was still in the middle of a song from the last time they’d listened to it. Once again, she was back in the world of cheesy rock anthems with over-the-top lyrics and power chords.

When Riley had first given the tape to her, she’d found it patronizing. Now that she knew Riley better, she saw how sincerely he felt the messages behind the songs. How hard

he'd worked to get his own mental and physical health on track and how hard he'd worked to start her off on that journey too.

She thought about Riley's friend, Pat, and how sweet it was that he'd made this tape for his friend. But she found herself wondering now about what "extra material" Riley had put on the tape for her. He said he'd added a few things to the end of the tape, and she had no idea what to expect.

She listened her way through Gerry and The Pacemakers, Eminem, and even Coldplay, and all the while, she kept the rhythm of her chair steady. She'd started off at the back with the other wheelchair users, but as time had passed she'd overtaken a few of the runners and her confidence was growing.

But when she heard a familiar song on the mixtape, she almost stopped dead in her tracks. It was Taylor Swift!

Riley gave the tape to her before getting to know her on this road trip, so he must have remembered from all those years ago, back at school, that she was a Swift fan. The first song he chose for her was: "Shake It Off," about resilience and shaking off setbacks. Then came "Long Live," which celebrates achievements and memorable experiences, and it instantly reminded Harper of her successful past and the legacy she had built, even if she needed to create a new path now. Finally, there was "Begin Again," which spoke to new beginnings and the hope that comes with them, fitting for Harper's transition to wheelchair marathon running.

The thought of gruff Daddy Dom Riley picking out three Taylor Swift songs for Harper when he barely knew her was beyond touching. But not nearly as touching as what came next on the mixtape.

It was Riley's voice. "Hey, Harper. I know we don't know each other very well, but I hope that you found at least some of those songs inspiring."

Harper's eyes filled with tears.

"They're a bit cheesy, I know. But they helped me get over a difficult period in my own life, and maybe they'll help you, too. Well, I added the Taylor Swift songs onto the tape just for you. Seem to remember back at school, when I was nothin' but a jackass and a loser, that you wore Taylor Swift t-shirts and used to sing her songs between sprints. But then, I seem to remember a lot of things about you. The way you always, always stretched your arms and legs before you ran a race. The way you bit your lip to stop yourself from crying when you lost a race. That cute little Minnie Mouse lunchbox of yours and those homemade cupcakes your mom would always give you."

Harper could hardly believe it. Riley had told her that he'd liked her back at school, but it had been hard to see how when he'd only ever bullied her. Now, he could see just how much attention he had been paying to her.

"If you're in any doubt about how strong you are, Harper," Riley continued on the tape, "I'm about to include some clips of your races. I know you can't sprint like you used to, with

the wheelchair and everything, but there must be other ways to put that incredible strength of yours to good use. Check it out.”

What came next was a montage of clips. Snippets of commentators describing races she'd run in, including the moment she'd won her silver medal.

Then Riley came in again.

“Remember, Harper Adams,” he continued, his voice cracking with emotion, “every time you feel like giving up, just think of what you've already accomplished and how far you've come. You've done so many amazing things, things other people will never achieve in a whole lifetime. But you're still so young and you still have so many opportunities ahead of you.” There was a click as Riley stopped the tape for a moment, then she heard him recording again. “Okay, you've probably heard more than enough of me now, Harper, since I'm just the silly ass who fixed your chair at my garage yesterday, but... I just wanted to wish you well. And to say that no matter what you decide to do next in your life, you'll always have a fan in me.”

Tears welled in Harper's eyes, blurring her vision momentarily, but she blinked them away, unwilling to let them slow her down. With every turn of her wheels, she carried the weight of Riley's love and belief in her abilities, propelling her forward in a race that was about so much more than just crossing the finish line.

“Thank you, Riley,” she whispered, her voice choked with emotion. “I won't let you down.”

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Two hours in, and Harper's muscles ached and her breathing grew labored. She had fallen behind and was struggling to keep up with the surrounding disabled athletes. Sweat trickled down her forehead, stinging her eyes. She knew she wasn't the fastest competitor out there, but it didn't matter. She was fighting her own battle.

"Everyone has different strengths," she reminded herself, her mind echoing Riley's wise words. "Swiftly's strength is speed. My strength is resilience."

"Come on, Harper, you got this!" a familiar voice called out.

Her gaze darted to the sidelines, where Riley stood waving his arms enthusiastically. His eyes met hers, full of encouragement and unwavering belief. The sight of him was like a lifeline, rekindling the fire in her heart.

"Riley," she murmured, a smile tugging at her lips.

Riley gave her a drink of water and fed her a piece of an energy bar.

"You alright, darling?" he asked her. "You've done so well. If you want to stop now, you know it won't be a failure. You've already done so, so well—"

"I'm not stopping, Daddy!" Harper panted. "See you when I'm done!"

With renewed determination, she gripped her wheelchair's rims and pushed forward, her focus locked on the horizon.

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Harper's arms burned as she neared the finish line, her breath coming in ragged gasps. She searched frantically for Riley among the cheering spectators, but he was nowhere to be seen. A flicker of disappointment darkened her eyes, and she swallowed hard. Where was he?

For a horrible moment, she wondered if JP had done something to hurt him. She couldn't live with herself if—

“Harper!” a voice called out, cutting through her thoughts. She turned her head to find a man in a US Air Force uniform holding a sign with her name on it. His smile was wide and genuine.

“What's going on? Who are you?” she asked, trying to catch her breath as she dragged herself excruciatingly slowly toward the end of the race.

“Name's Pat!” he called out. “I'm a friend of Riley's! He has a little surprise waiting for you. You just need to finish first!”

Of course! Pat! She noticed his strong Irish accent now.

But why had Riley sent him instead of waiting at the finish line himself?

“Come on, Harper!” Pat called encouragingly. “You're almost there! You can do it!”

Her heart swelled with gratitude for the support, even if Riley couldn't be there himself. With renewed determination, Harper pushed herself over the finish line, the cheers of the crowd washing over her like a tidal wave.

"I did it!" she panted. "I can't believe it! I actually did it!"

Her arms felt like they were on fire. Her elbows throbbed with pain. Her chest was sucking in air so hard it felt like it would never take in enough air to satisfy it. But none of that mattered.

She had finished the race.

She felt so pleased with herself that for a moment, she forgot Pat was there. Then, she remembered, and turned to him. "Pat," she said. "It's good to meet you at last. But... what's this surprise? It had better be good for Riley to have abandoned me at the end like this."

"Don't worry," Pat said, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Trust me, Riley knows what he's doing. Before we go, just take a moment to enjoy what you've accomplished. And don't forget to take a medal off your man over there."

"Alright," Harper conceded, allowing herself to bask in the pride of completing the marathon. She took her phone out of her pocket and took a selfie of herself at the finish line. Another picture for Instagram. Screw it if JP saw it. In fact, if he did see it, then so much the better. She was a winner.

She went to collect her medal. It wasn't a gold or a silver or even a bronze Olympic medal, but somehow, it was even more

precious. A medal to say that she'd completed a marathon, not a sprint. She'd been in it for the long haul.

"Come on now, you hero," Pat said, guiding her away from the finish line. "Let's get you to that surprise."

As they moved through the crowd, Harper couldn't help but imagine what awaited her.

"Here," said Pat, guiding her to a sleek, black limousine. He helped her into the back and locked her chair in place.

Harper's heart raced in anticipation. The leather seats were cool to the touch, and she couldn't help but run her fingers over the smooth surface. She glanced at Pat, who was grinning like he knew a secret.

"Okay, seriously," Harper said, unable to contain her curiosity any longer. "Where are we going?"

"Ah-ah," Pat wagged his finger playfully. "No spoilers. Riley would kill me."

"Fine," Harper huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. But a small smile tugged at the corner of her lips. The excitement buzzed through her veins, making it difficult to sit still. "Gotta say, it feels a bit weird to be covered in sweat and dirt in the back of such a fancy limo."

Pat laughed. "That just means you earned your right to sit in here. You just did something completely amazing."

Harper smiled. "I did, didn't I?"

As the limo pulled away from the marathon grounds, Harper stared out the window, trying to process what she'd just done. It felt more momentous than any race she'd ever run. She'd moved mountains to get to this point. All with the help of her amazing Daddy...

Her mind wandered, trying to predict what Riley had in store for her. A picnic? A romantic dinner? Maybe a night in a fancy hotel?

"Pat, can you at least give me a hint?" she pleaded, turning towards him with puppy dog eyes.

"Nice try, but my lips are sealed," he replied, miming zipping his mouth shut.

Harper groaned, but secretly loved the suspense.

Soon, they arrived at a small landing strip, the sun casting a warm glow over the tarmac. Harper's eyes widened in amazement as she took in the sight before her. It was a helicopter, its blades slowly whirring to life.

"Riley, you sneaky devil," she muttered under her breath, admiration for her thoughtful lover swelling in her chest.

"Come on," Pat said, helping her out of the limo. "He's waiting for you." He paused. "By the way, back when we were in the Air Force together, you know that fucker used to talk about you every damn day, right?"

Harper blushed. "I guess I know *now*."

As they approached the helicopter, Harper spotted Riley standing near the aircraft, a sheepish grin plastered on his

handsome face.

“Surprise!” he yelled, his voice barely audible over the din of the helicopter. He moved closer to her. “I’m sorry I wasn’t at the finish line, but I had to get things ready here. I thought we could celebrate your accomplishment with a little aerial tour.” He grinned. “I hope you weren’t lying when you said you’d always wanted to ride one of these.”

“Riley, this is... very, very exciting,” Harper breathed, feeling overwhelmed by his romantic gesture. “But how did you—“

“Let’s just say I pulled a few strings with an old friend,” he replied, clapping Pat on the back.

“It’s the least I could do, buddy,” said Pat. “Now, are we taking her for a spin, or what?”

Riley offered Harper his hand, and together they embarked onto the helicopter, eager to embark on their next adventure.

“I love how spontaneous you are, Daddy,” Harper said, grinning her head off. “You’re always surprising me.”

“I enjoy trying to provide those outrageous moments you asked me for,” he replied, squeezing her hand. “Plus, it’s on your bucket list, so it’s basically non-negotiable that I find a way to make it happen for you.”

Harper shook her head in disbelief. “Guess I need to add a few more ridiculously exciting things to my bucket list, eh?”

Pat climbed into the driver’s seat and put on his headgear, and the helicopter slowly began to lift up off the ground.

“Wow!” Harper squealed. “It feels incredible!”

Harper and Riley settled into their seats as they soared higher, leaving the ground far below. The Oregon landscape stretched out beneath them, a tapestry of vibrant reds, oranges, and yellows that seemed to go on forever.

“Oh my,” Harper breathed, her eyes wide with wonder. She pressed her hand against the cool glass, feeling the vibrations from the helicopter’s powerful engine.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Riley asked, his own gaze fixed on the scenery below.

“Absolutely breathtaking,” she agreed, turning to look at him. “Just like you, Daddy.”

Riley chuckled, his cheeks flushing a little. “You really know how to flatter a guy, don’t you?”

“Only when he deserves it,” Harper teased, leaning in for a quick kiss.

“You know, you deserve every minute of this,” Riley told Harper, taking his thumb and forefinger and admiring the words on it. “You’re a *finisher*.”

“I’m so sweaty and tired,” Harper said, “but I feel amazing.”

“I bet you do. You just soared higher than this damn chopper. You must be on cloud nine right now.”

“I really am,” Harper said, looking out at the clouds, hovering just above them.

As they continued their ascent, Pat's voice crackled over the speaker. "Congratulations on your marathon, Harper. I hope you're enjoying the ride?"

"It's awesome!" Harper replied.

"Here's to many more achievements," Pat said warmly, before returning his attention to navigating the skies.

Riley reached into a small cooler beside him and pulled out a bottle of champagne. He expertly popped the cork, filling two glasses with the bubbly liquid. "A toast," he declared, handing a glass to Harper. "To your incredible determination. You've shown me that nothing can hold you back, and I couldn't be prouder."

"Thank you, Riley," she whispered, her eyes shining with gratitude. "And thank you for being there for me every step of the way. I couldn't have done it without you."

They clinked their glasses together, sipping the champagne as they gazed out at the world below. Harper felt a warmth spread through her chest, the combined effects of the alcohol and her emotions.

"Riley," she murmured, suddenly serious. "I want you to know how much your support means to me. Not just during the marathon, but every day since we've met. You've helped me find my strength again, and I will never forget that."

"Harper, I—" Riley hesitated, clearly searching for the right words. "I'm just happy I could be there for you. I'm lucky to have you in my life."

The helicopter banked gently, revealing the sun setting over the horizon, casting an orange glow on the landscape below.

Harper's eyes widened at the breathtaking sight as she felt a mix of awe and accomplishment wash over her.

"Look at that," Riley said, following her gaze. "It's like nature itself is congratulating you."

Harper chuckled, leaning against him. "Maybe it is. I wouldn't have believed I could do this just a week ago, but here we are."

"Here we are indeed," Riley agreed, his arm wrapping around her shoulders. He pressed a gentle kiss to her temple, making her heart flutter with affection.

"Riley, I've been thinking..." Harper hesitated for a moment, searching for the right words. "When this all started, I was in such a dark place. I never thought I'd find my way out." She paused, swallowing her emotions. "But then I met you, and everything changed. You've shown me so much kindness and patience, and you've helped me believe in myself again. And for that, I am eternally grateful."

Riley's eyes softened, and he pulled her closer. "You'd have got there yourself eventually. But I'm glad I could speed things up for you. Now, you've got the strength to overcome anything."

"So... you don't mind if I book myself in for another marathon?" she asked with a playful smile.

“As long as it’s not tomorrow, that’s fine by me,” he said, smiling. Then, his expression turned serious. “I hope you’re not in a hurry to go back to Little Rock just yet. There’s another little stop on our road trip left to come. But technically, we’re not getting there by road.”

Harper’s eyes widened. “Are we getting there by helicopter, by any chance?”

“Not just a marathon runner,” Riley joked. “But Sherlock Holmes too.”

Chapter Eighteen

RILEY

THE HELICOPTER'S BLADES CUT through the air, stirring up a frenzy of saltwater spray as Riley and Harper touched down on the San Juan Islands. The breathtaking landscape stretched out before them, a tapestry of lush greenery and rugged shoreline that seemed to hold a certain magic in its grasp.

“Woah,” Harper breathed. “This is like something from a movie set.”

“Isn't it?” Riley agreed, his own gaze roaming the scenery with appreciation. He could already feel the tension in his shoulders beginning to ease, the serenity of the islands working their soothing charm.

“Alright, you two,” Pat, their pilot, called out as he dismounted from the helicopter, bringing bags for Riley and Harper out with him. “I'll be heading back now. Enjoy your time here, and don't forget—you've got a boat waiting to take

you back to the coast tomorrow. Riley's truck will be there, too."

"Thanks, Pat. You're one in a million." Riley embraced him in a warm hug, grateful for the man's assistance in getting them to this idyllic haven. Not a lot of men would have given up part of their leave to help out with something like this, but Riley had called Pat up a few nights ago and Pat had jumped at the chance to be involved in the romantic gesture.

"You deserve love," Pat had told him. "And you especially deserve it with Harper."

With a final wave, Pat climbed back into the helicopter and took off, leaving Riley and Harper to explore their new surroundings.

As they made their way along a sandy path, Harper looked over at Riley, her expression turning somber. "Riley, I need to tell you something about JP. He was there during the race."

"What happened?" Riley asked, furrowing his brow. "Did he try to sabotage your chair again?" His hand balled into a fist. "Did he hurt you, Harper?"

Harper hesitated for a moment, then let out a sigh. "He was holding up this horrible sign. And he was yelling insults at me, trying to throw me off my game."

Riley's jaw clenched, anger bubbling beneath the surface. He hated the thought of JP trying to hurt Harper, especially after everything she had already been through. But before he could say anything, Harper shook her head.

“Don’t worry, Daddy. I didn’t let him get to me. I just thought you should know.”

“Good girl,” Riley praised her, his voice soft but proud. “You’re so strong, Harper. Don’t ever forget that. Also, thank you for telling me. You did the right thing telling me the truth.”

They walked in silence for a few moments, the calming sound of the waves crashing against the shore filling the space between them. The scent of saltwater filled Riley’s nostrils as he gazed out at the gentle waves lapping against the shore. He couldn’t shake the concern that still lingered after Harper’s revelation about JP’s actions during the race.

“Stay here, babygirl,” he told Harper as they reached a particularly picturesque spot on the shore. He pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. “I need to make a call real quick.”

“Okay, Daddy,” she replied, offering him a small smile.

Riley stepped away from Harper, pulling out his phone and dialing Travis’s number. It only took a moment for his friend to answer.

“Hey, Riley. How’s the trip?” Travis asked, his voice sounding cheerful through the speaker.

“It’s been a journey and a half, man,” Riley responded briefly before getting to the point. “So much to tell you when I get back. But listen, I need you to check on something for me. Harper completed the Portland marathon today and—“

“She did? Well, holy shit. Pass on my congrats to her.”

“Will do. Thing is, she did great, but she just told me that JP showed up at the race with a nasty sign and yelled insults at her. Can you check on the status of the restraining order against him? I want to make sure she’s protected.”

“Sure. I’m actually at the Sheriff’s office now. Give me a second,” Travis said, and Riley could hear the sound of typing in the background.

As he waited, Riley looked back at Harper, who had rolled herself closer to the water’s edge, her eyes fixed on the rippling waves. He clenched his jaw, frustration simmering beneath the surface at the thought of someone trying to hurt her.

“Got it,” Travis finally said, pulling Riley from his thoughts. “The restraining order is in place as of today. She’s got legal protection now.”

“Thanks, man,” Riley sighed, relief washing over him. “That’s good to know.”

“And if you say that he was at the marathon today, maybe one of the news cameras got footage of him. If that’s the case, he could get in serious legal trouble for that sign. Let me look into it. Leave it with me.”

“Cheers, man. I appreciate it.”

“Anytime. Enjoy the rest of your trip,” Travis said before hanging up.

Riley pocketed his phone and walked back to Harper, his heart feeling lighter with the knowledge that she was now

safer from JP's malicious intent.

"Everything okay?" Harper asked, looking up at him with curious eyes.

"Everything's great, babygirl," he reassured her, crouching beside her wheelchair. "I just checked with Travis, and the restraining order against JP is in place as of today. You're protected. What he did today... well, that was a violation. He may get in serious trouble for that."

Harper's face lit up with relief, and she leaned into Riley's touch as he stroked her cheek. "Thank you. It means so much to me that you're always looking out for me."

"Of course, sweetheart," he replied, his voice warm with affection. "I'll always be here to keep you safe, no matter what."

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The sun cast a warm golden glow over the San Juan Islands as Riley pushed Harper's wheelchair along the sandy beach. The sound of waves gently lapping against the shore filled the air, and a soft breeze rustled through the nearby trees. To Riley, it felt like they had stepped into a dream—a beautiful, tranquil world where they could leave their fears and worries behind.

"Isn't this just perfect?" Harper asked, her eyes shining with delight as she took in the picturesque scenery.

“It is, babygirl,” Riley agreed, his heart swelling with love for the woman beside him. “I can’t think of a better place to celebrate everything you’ve achieved.”

“We achieved it together, Daddy.”

They found a secluded spot near the water’s edge, where Riley carefully helped Harper out of her wheelchair and onto a soft blanket spread over the sand. Side by side, they watched the sun dip below the horizon, making stars appear one by one.

After that, Riley lit a fire on the beach to keep them cozy.

“You know when I crashed my chair outside your garage?” Harper asked, her voice tinged with nostalgia. “I was so mad at you to start with.”

Riley chuckled. “I deserved it.”

“I got so angry when you told me you were proud of me. Thought you had no right to say it.”

“Well, I didn’t back then,” Riley said, agreeing with her.

“But you have a right to say it now, Daddy,” Harper confessed, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “You believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself. You showed me what I was capable of, and you encouraged me all the way.”

Riley felt a surge of emotion at her heartfelt words, knowing just how far they’d come. He took her slender hand in his. “I’ll say it now, then. I’m so damn proud of you, Harper.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. “For everything, Daddy.” She smiled up at him. “I listened to the end of the mixtape by the way. It’s one of the nicest things anyone’s ever done for me.”

“You deserve to have nice things done for you every damn day, sweetheart.”

They shared a tender kiss, then sat in comfortable silence for a while. Riley couldn’t imagine a more idyllic moment. Just him and his babygirl, basking in the afterglow of their hard-won victories and the love that had blossomed between them.

The flickering glow of the firepit illuminated Harper’s face, casting shadows that danced across her features as she gazed into the flames. He reached over to brush a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. He marveled at how natural it felt to be so close to her, to have her trust and love so completely. It was a gift he never could have imagined, and one he was determined to cherish.

“There’s something I want to talk about,” Riley said, taking her hand in his once more. “I didn’t want to bring it up before the race, as I didn’t want anything to distract you, but—“

“Is everything okay, Daddy? What did you want to talk about?”

Riley took a deep breath. “Our future together.”

A mix of anticipation and curiosity filled Harper’s eyes as she gently squeezed his hand. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been thinking a lot about what comes next for us,” he admitted, his heart pounding with nervous excitement. “I

know we've come a long way, but I don't want this journey to end. I want us to keep growing and moving forward. Together."

"Me too," she said, her voice full of hope.

Riley took a deep breath, steeling himself for what he was about to say. "So, I have an idea. When we get back to Little Rock, I'd like you to move in with me."

Harper's eyes widened, and for a moment, she seemed at a loss for words. But then her expression softened, and a slow smile spread across her face. "Really?"

"Really," he confirmed, his heart swelling with affection. "I want to wake up with you every morning and fall asleep with you every night. I want us to build a life together. One that's filled with love, trust, and all the things that make us happy."

"Riley," Harper breathed, her eyes brimming with tears of joy, "that sounds amazing. Yes, I'd love to move in with you."

"Good," he replied, relief washing over him as he pulled her into his arms, holding her close. "Because I can't imagine my life without you, babygirl. And obviously, I'll be making a few alterations at my place. I've already put a few feelers out, got a few quotes for making the whole place wheelchair-friendly. I'm getting doorways widened, ramps put in, the kitchen countertops lowered—"

"You don't have to do all that, Daddy. I can adapt—"

"No. It's me who wants to adapt. You're perfect as you are, Harper. I want my house to be perfect for you."

As they sat there, wrapped in each other's embrace, the fire crackling nearby, Riley knew they were ready to take on whatever challenges lay ahead.

"Here's to our next adventure," he whispered, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead.

"Here's to us," she murmured, snuggling closer to him, their hearts beating in unison as the night closed in around them.

The moon cast a silvery glow over the San Juan Islands, painting the landscape in ethereal light as Riley and Harper sat side by side on the rocky shoreline. The gentle lapping of waves and the distant calls of seabirds provided a soothing soundtrack to their quiet contemplation. Riley breathed in the salt-tinged air, feeling a sense of peace he'd never experienced before.

"Can you believe this place?" Harper whispered, her eyes wide with awe. "It's like we've stumbled into a fairytale."

"Never seen anything quite like it," Riley agreed, his hand instinctively reaching for hers. Their fingers intertwined naturally, like two pieces of a puzzle finally clicking together. "But it's only fitting for my fairytale princess."

"Kiss me, Daddy," Harper whispered. "Please."

Their mouths melded together with a fierce hunger, each craving the connection that only the other could provide. Riley's hands roamed, gripping Harper's waist before sliding around to cup her ass, pulling her closer. She moaned into his mouth, her body responding to his touch with a primal need.

“Riley,” she panted when they finally broke apart, her eyes dark with desire. “I know I’m still all icky from the race but... I want you.”

“Right here?” he asked, a hint of mischief dancing in his gaze.

“Right here,” she confirmed with a determined nod.

He grinned, his heart swelling with love and lust for the woman before him. Carefully, he helped Harper onto her back. Their clothes were quickly shed, discarded haphazardly as their bodies moved together in a heated tangle of limbs and passion. Riley’s fingers traced a trail of fire along Harper’s stomach, marking her as his own.

“God, I need you inside me, Daddy,” Harper moaned, her nails digging into his shoulders as she arched beneath him.

“Your wish is my command, babygirl,” he growled, positioning himself at her entrance before sinking into her wet heat.

The world around them faded away, leaving only the rhythm of their bodies moving in perfect harmony and the symphony of their breathless moans. Each thrust, each touch brought them closer to the edge, until finally, they tumbled over it together, hearts thundering and souls entwined.

As they lay wrapped in each other’s arms beneath the blanket of stars, Harper’s wheelchair sat empty on the edge of the shoreline, a silent testament to the greatness she had achieved today. And would go on achieving for a long time.

Chapter Nineteen

HARPER

HARPER ROLLED SMOOTHLY UP the ramp onto the welcoming porch of her family home in Little Rock. The familiar scent of lavender and late-blooming roses enveloped her, stirring memories she'd held close during her road trip.

She took a deep breath.

It was good to go away but it's good to come back, too.

When Harper had first come back to Little Rock, after leaving the Olympic Center, she had felt like going home was her only option. She had come here to hide away and feel sorry for herself.

But after her road trip with Riley, coming back here felt like a choice. Like she had come here to face up to who she really was. No, not just to face up to it—to celebrate it.

Gloria, her mom, stood at the doorway, beaming with pride. Beside her was Loretta, Harper's sister, looking so much

healthier and happier than when Harper had last seen her that she was almost unrecognizable.

“Welcome home, sweetheart,” Gloria said, embracing Harper gently.

Loretta gave her a huge hug too. “It’s good to see you, sis,” she said, planting a big kiss on her cheek.

Harper grinned. “It’s good to have one of your sloppy kisses again, Loretta.”

“Been licking my lips getting it ready for you,” Loretta joked.

A little girl with lively eyes bounded onto the porch, her excitement contagious. “Auntie Harper!” Emma, Loretta’s daughter, squealed as she hugged Harper tightly.

Emma was wearing a cute red pinafore with a matching silk bow for her hair. She looked clean and plump and happy. It was clear that she had been receiving plenty of love and attention from her newfound grandma.

“Hey there, Emma! I missed *you*, too,” Harper grinned, tousling the little girl’s hair.

“Come on, we’ve got something special for you in the garden! I’m not allowed to tell you what it is, but you’re going to love it!”

“One moment,” said Gloria. “Aren’t we forgetting someone?”

Harper looked back at Riley and grinned. “Oh yes. Mom. Loretta. This is Riley. My boyfriend.”

Gloria gave an excited squeal and even Loretta looked happy for Harper.

“Come here, young man,” said Gloria, giving Riley a squeeze. “Now, you look after my girl. She might be strong, but she needs a lot of love.”

“Don’t you worry, ma’am. I’ve got that under control,” purred Riley.

Harper blushed.

“I bet you have, young man,” Gloria said with a mischievous smirk.

“Come on, come on! I can’t wait any longer! We have to show them the surprise!” whined Emma. She took Harper’s hand, leading her and the others through the house and out to the sunlit backyard.

The aroma of freshly baked cupcakes greeted Harper as they entered the garden. A small table was set up, adorned with a pastel floral tablecloth and a plate of homemade treats.

“Did you make these, Emma?” she asked, glancing at her niece.

“Grandma helped me!” Emma enthused, her cheeks flushed with pride.

Emma should have known her mom would have made cupcakes for their arrival. But for once, she was determined to

enjoy them without judgement. So what if her mom baked more cupcakes than other people had hot dinners? They were her passion. Just like Harper's passions were racing and cuddling up with her Daddy.

“Let's dig in!” Riley chimed in with his usual gruff charm, having followed them outside. He pulled up a chair next to Harper, their knees brushing each other under the table.

As they sat down together, basking in the warmth of their newly put-together family, Harper felt a deep sense of belonging. She looked around at the wonderful people surrounding her. There was Loretta, who was back in her life and they had so much to catch up on together. There was her new niece Emma, who it was going to be so much fun getting to know. And there was her mom. Her wonderful, wonderful mom, who had looked after her through thick and thin.

And of course, there was Riley, who already seemed right at home here. She hadn't told her mom or sister exactly what was going on between her and Riley yet, but she would do very soon.

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Harper glanced over at her mom, who was sipping her tea with a gentle smile.

Emma was sitting on the grass threading colored glass beads onto a string, humming happily to herself. That was good. She wouldn't be able to hear this conversation from there.

“Mom,” Harper began, her voice soft but steady. “I need to say thank you. I had a lot of time to think while I was away, and I can see that I acted like a spoiled child before my trip. I’m so grateful for you, Mom, and for everything you’ve done for me.”

Gloria set down her teacup, her eyes filling with emotion. “Harper, *I’m* sorry, love. I treated you like you were a fragile vase after your accident. Like you were constantly in danger of breaking, and I had to cover you in bubble wrap. Seeing you now, with that look in your eyes, holding your head up high... I can tell how strong you are. Looks like this road trip has really brought out the best in you.”

“It sure has,” said Harper, taking a deep breath. This was one of those now or never moments. “In fact, it was Riley who brought out the best in me.” She looked at Riley, who gazed back at her full of affection, and she reached out for him.

Instantly, he took her hand, and squeezed it tight. “It was Harper who brought out the best in herself. I was just there for moral support.”

Harper shook her head. “No, Riley has done way more than that.” She glanced over at Emma to check she wasn’t listening, then looked back at her mom and sister. “You both know, have always known, that I’m a Little. Well... Riley is my Daddy Dom.” Louder now, she said, “He’s my life partner. In every way. I’m telling you because, well, because this is Little Rock and it’s bound to come out sooner or later. Plus, I’m moving in with him.”

Loretta blinked at Harper without speaking for a few moments, and then said, “Well, I’m not gonna judge you, sis. If you’re happy then I’m happy.”

Harper smiled, feeling relieved. She wasn’t sure if Loretta was a Little anymore, but she’d definitely experimented with it when they were younger.

“No judgment from me either, darling,” said her mom. “I’m just so happy for you both. It’s not easy to find a relationship dynamic that really works for both parties. What you two have is very special. I’ll be sad to see you leave this place again, but happy for you, too. You have so many adventures ahead of you. Plus, I’m only down the road.”

Harper smiled. She knew her mom would get it, living in a place like this. Little Rock might have been a small town, but it sure did create some very open minds.

“Glad to hear you both approve,” said Riley, nodding his head in appreciation. “I promise you, I’ll be looking out for this little one.”

Harper giggled, trying not to blush. “Anyway, I wanted to let you all know that with Riley’s help and guidance, I’m taking part in athletics again. I completed a marathon while I was away—“

“Wait, you did?” said her mom. “Are you kidding me? Were you okay? Did you hurt yourself—“ She stopped herself and grimaced. “I’m doing it again, aren’t I? What I actually should be saying is, ‘Congratulations for your race, sweetheart! That’s amazing! You know what? I’ll go get the champagne!’”

She stood up, about to make her way back into the house, then paused. She walked over to Riley and placed her hands on his shoulders.

“Young man,” she said, “welcome to our family. I can never thank you enough for what you did for my daughter. What I’m sure you’ll continue to do. I know your relationship is a little... unconventional... but please know that I have no problem at all with it. In fact, I support it. I see DDIg relationships everywhere I look in this town, and it’s obvious how nourishing they are.” She paused, fiddling with her hair. “In fact, maybe I’ll try it one of these days.”

“Mom!” squealed Harper, embarrassed.

“Mom, don’t be gross,” sighed Loretta.

It was good to see Loretta’s dry sense of humor was back and she was already comfortable enough around their mom to gently tease her. It felt like they were all finding their feet as a family very quickly.

While Gloria was inside fetching the bubbles, Loretta cleared her throat. “Harper, I want to say thank you. You helped me turn my life around, and I don’t think I could’ve done it without you.”

“No problem, Loretta,” Harper responded, reaching across the table to squeeze her sister’s hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t try to repair our relationship sooner. I should’ve fought harder for us.”

“Let’s not focus on the past,” Loretta suggested, tears brimming in her eyes. It felt as if years of hurt and misunderstandings were finally being washed away, replaced by sisterly love and understanding. “We’re here now, and that’s what matters.”

“Let’s promise each other that no matter what, we’ll always be there for one another,” Harper suggested, her eyes shining with emotion.

“Deal,” Loretta agreed, sealing their pact with a heartfelt hug.

Harper smiled, feeling a profound sense of connection. She looked around the garden, taking in the vibrant flowers and the laughter of her niece playing nearby. It felt like everything was falling into place, piece by loving piece.

As Riley leaned in closer, his prosthetic leg gently bumping against her wheelchair, she knew that he was an essential part of her newly rediscovered life.

Giggles erupted from the corner of the garden, where Emma twirled around, trailing a long string of beads around with her. “Look at meeee!” she laughed. “I’m a fairy princess!”

Harper grinned. “So you are!”

Riley gently nudged her. “Go have some fun with your niece,” he encouraged, his eyes crinkling with affection.

“Thanks, Riley,” Harper whispered before maneuvering her wheelchair toward Emma, who squealed with delight upon seeing her approach.

“Harper! Look at my bracelet!” Emma exclaimed, her face radiant with happiness.

“Wow, it’s beautiful!” Harper praised, taking it in her hands and looking at it more closely. She playfully leaned in, whispering conspiratorially, “Do you think I could make one too? Then we can wear matching ones like friendship bracelets!”

“Oh yeah!” Emma gasped, her eyes sparkling. “Good idea!”

Together, they spent the afternoon making beaded jewelry, sharing secrets and laughter, and creating cherished memories. But eventually, Emma began to yawn.

“She’s wiped out from all the excitement,” said Loretta, coming to pick her up and carry her inside to watch cartoons.

Apparently, she’d started a new school last week, too. It was a really great elementary school in Little Rock. Gloria had managed to convince the school to take her partway through the school year.

Harper returned to Riley, and he draped his arm around her shoulders, drawing her close as they sat together on the garden bench.

“Hey, I got a message from Travis a minute ago,” Riley said hesitantly.

Harper’s eyes flicked up and met his, her expression hardening. “What did it say?”

Loretta came back out and leaned forward too, eager to hear if there was any news of her ex. He had been missing since the

marathon and the elephant in the room was that none of them knew whether he was still out to sabotage them or not.

“He’s been arrested,” said Riley, casting Loretta a gently reassuring look. “I know this must be hard for you, Loretta, being JP’s ex and all, and with Emma being JP’s daughter—“

“No,” said Loretta. “I’m glad he’s been arrested. It’s a big relief, actually. I just want to be out of his grasp. I want Emma to be safe. I want to start living.”

“Sounds like you need a road trip with a Daddy Dom next, Loretta,” joked Gloria. Her eyes were shining, and she looked a little tipsy from the champagne. Always had been a lightweight.

“Where was he hiding?” asked Harper. “When the cops caught him?”

“He was caught trying to steal opiates from a hospital in Portland,” Riley said.

“Good riddance,” Loretta spat.

“Definitely,” Harper agreed, feeling her chest lighten at the knowledge that JP was behind bars, unable to cause more harm.

“Hey, Harper,” Loretta said. “I’d like to thank you for standing up to JP all those years ago. It took me a long time to realize just how much damage he’d done to my life.”

Harper reached for her sister’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “You don’t have to thank me, Loretta. I’m just glad you’re finally free of him.”

Loretta nodded, tears welling in her eyes. “Yeah, I am too. And it’s all thanks to you. You always had a strong spirit, even back then.”

Harper smiled, feeling an unfamiliar warmth spread throughout her chest. She’d fought for her sister, and even though it had taken years, they’d both come out stronger in the end.

“Sometimes, it takes hitting rock bottom to find our strength,” Harper said softly. “Look at you now, Loretta. You’re a wonderful mother and a survivor.”

“Harper’s right,” Riley chimed in, his voice laced with admiration. “You’ve come a long way, Loretta.” He chuckled. “And so have I, to be fair.”

“We all have,” said Gloria, trying to suppress a little yawn.

Sunset gave way to twilight as Harper leaned into Riley, her emotions spent from the day’s events. “Daddy, I need some Little Space,” she whispered, not wanting anyone else to overhear.

“Of course, babygirl,” Riley replied, his voice gentle and understanding. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, drawing her close. “Let’s get you somewhere you can feel safe and let go.”

They said their goodbyes, then together, they made their way through the small town of Little Rock.

Riley pushed Harper’s wheelchair with ease. The community, full of other Littles and Daddies, felt welcoming

and accepting. Harper's heart swelled with gratitude. She had loved the road trip but was glad to be back amongst familiar faces.

Riley led them to the cozy, wheelchair-friendly Little Pebbles Play Café, its warm lights glowing like fireflies against the night sky. As they entered, the scent of freshly baked cookies filled the air, and Harper felt her body relax in response.

The café was designed for Littles, with soft pastel colors and whimsical decor and a large, soft play area full of toys and puzzle books, creating an environment where they could let go of their adult worries and embrace their inner child.

“Welcome!” greeted Sal, a friendly barista, whom Harper recognized from school. Sal had been in her year, and had known Harper as an able-bodied person, but she didn't react at all to Harper's wheelchair, and made her feel like just another welcome customer. She smiled as she took their orders.

Riley chose warm milk in a sippy cup for Harper and a caffeine-free tea for himself. “Too close to bedtime to drink caffeine,” he told Sal. “Sometimes even Daddy Doms need to be strict with themselves.”

Sal laughed. “Coming right up! Enjoy your playtime and I'll bring these over.”

Harper felt a rush of pride wash over her at hearing how easily Riley talked about himself as a Daddy Dom. Clearly, Riley wasn't embarrassed about his identity, and that felt good. Harper was going to be more open about herself from now on.

“Come on, Daddy!” she said, pulling Riley’s hand. “Let’s go play.”

Harper led Riley over to the play area, where several Littles were giggling and playing with toys as their Daddies watched over them with adoration. She couldn’t help but smile. Being surrounded by others who shared her lifestyle made her feel less isolated and more connected than ever before.

“Here you go, babygirl,” Riley said, helping Harper down onto the play mat.

Just then Sal brought over Harper’s sippy cup and Riley tapped out a little milk onto his wrist to check the temperature.

“Here you go, darlin’,” he said, passing the drink to her.

“Thank you, Daddy,” Harper murmured, her eyes shining with happiness. She picked up the cup with both hands, savoring the warmth that radiated through her fingers. As she took a sip, she felt herself slipping further into Little Space.

Riley sat down next to her and placed a gentle hand on her back, rubbing soothing circles as he engaged in light conversation with other Daddies around them. Harper marveled at how effortlessly he navigated this world, providing her with the care and reassurance she needed while still maintaining his own independence.

Harper played with some of the toys on the mat sleepily, particularly enjoying hammering colored plastic pegs into holes. It felt good to do something so simple and yet so strangely satisfying.

“Feeling better, babygirl?” Riley asked after a while.

Harper nodded, feeling safe and cherished in his presence.

“Yes, Daddy. Thank you for bringing me here.”

“Anytime, darlin’,” Riley replied, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. “Always remember, no matter where life takes us, we have each other and this wonderful community to come home to.”

Chapter Twenty

RILEY

RILEY LEANED AGAINST THE kitchen counter, taking a moment to reflect on the past three months. Harper had brought so much joy and love into his life. It was hard to remember what things were like before her. Now, she was finally moving in with him, and he couldn't be more excited.

“Ready for ya, babe,” he called out as he surveyed their new home.

The place was fully adapted to accommodate Harper's wheelchair. Ramps had replaced stairs at every entrance, making it easy for Harper to move in and out of the house. Doorways had been widened, giving her plenty of space to maneuver without any difficulty. In the bathroom, accessible fixtures had been installed, such as a roll-in shower and grab bars, ensuring that Harper could maintain her independence. And then, of course, there were the kitchen counters.

Everything in here had been lowered and spaced out so that Harper could reach the sink, the cooker, the cupboards.

Not that he expected her to do a lot of the cooking around here. He loved preparing healthy, nutritious meals for her and she didn't seem to have any complaints. But it was important to him that any time she wanted, she could do anything in this house just as well as he could.

“Wow, Riley, this is amazing,” Harper said as she rolled into the living room, her eyes wide with delight. “You really went above and beyond.”

“Glad you like it,” he replied with a grin. He couldn't help but feel proud of the work they'd put into making their home perfect for both of them.

As they moved from room to room, Riley watched Harper's face light up with each new discovery. He knew that this was just the beginning of their life together, and he couldn't wait to see what the future held for them.

“Here's to us, babygirl,” Riley said as he bent down and wrapped his arms around Harper, pulling her close. “And to our new home.”

Harper smiled up at him. “I can't wait to start this new chapter of our lives together.”

Riley winked at her. “We haven't even got to the big reveal.” He led her to a door he hadn't opened yet. Back when this was just his place, this was nothing but a junk room. It had been full of old car parts and bits of machinery he'd brought home

from the garage with the intention of working on, but had never got round to half of it. Well, not anymore. The room had been transformed.

He watched as Harper wheeled herself inside, gasping in excitement.

“Daddy, you made me a playroom!” she exclaimed, taking in the space filled with colorful decorations and toys. There was a little bed for Swifty, her favorite stuffed animal, and a special racecourse for her stuffies to ride around on. In one corner, he had even placed a tiny wheelchair just in case any of her stuffies ever got hurt.

There were playmates on the floor, too, and rails along the walls, so Harper could move herself around as independently as possible.

“I wanted you to have a space where you can relax and be your Little self,” Riley said, a playful smile on his face. He loved seeing Harper so happy and knew that the playroom would become a cherished part of their home.

“Thank you, Daddy,” Harper whispered, her eyes filling with tears of joy.

Riley’s heart swelled at her words, knowing that he had done something truly special for her. And anything special for her was special for him, too.

*

Later that evening, they sat down for their first meal together in their new home. Riley had made spaghetti, but of course, he'd given it a healthy twist, using zucchini noodles and a green salad on the side. Harper didn't look disappointed by that in the least. In fact, she hadn't complained about vegetables once since he'd smacked her bottom that time.

As they ate, their conversation flowed easily and happily.

"Emma's so excited to be moving into my old room at Mom's house tonight," Harper shared, a warm smile spreading across her face.

Riley couldn't help but admire the close bond between Harper, her mom Gloria, her sister Loretta, and her niece Emma. The three generations of women had formed such a close bond in such a short space of time.

"That's wonderful," Riley replied, genuinely happy for them. He knew how important family was to Harper and how much support they provided for each other. His own family had always been so small and so distant, that it felt good to be part of this close-knit group of strong women.

"Speaking of family, I hope we can have them over soon," Harper suggested, looking at Riley with hopeful eyes. "I could cook something for us all if you don't mind—"

"Sweetheart," he said, "this is your home now. You don't have to ask my permission for something like that. Just tell me when you want to have them over and we'll make it happen," Riley promised, reaching across the table to hold her hand.

They were building a life together, and that included spending time with the ones they loved.

After their meal, they sat by the window looking out at the fairy lights in the backyard, which was cold and dark, even for January, but they could practically feel the days getting longer with each passing moment.

Harper's eyes sparkled with determination. "Riley, I'm really enjoying training together. And I've enjoyed pacing myself, but..." She paused and then took a long deep breath. Riley noticed that her hands were shaking.

"What is it, Harps? You can tell me."

Harper stared into his eyes. "I want to be the best, Daddy. I know it'll take time, but I'm ready for the challenge," she said, her voice filled with conviction.

Riley didn't skip a beat. "I know you are," he replied, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. His heart swelled with pride, knowing that he was beside this incredible woman who refused to give up in the face of adversity. "I'll support you in any way you need. As long as you do it safely, then I'm happy for you to shoot for the moon, babygirl."

Harper grinned. "You won't feel left behind, Daddy?"

"Hardly," he said, laughing. "I'll be standing there watching you through a giant telescope, ready to welcome you back to Earth when you're done."

Harper laughed too. "Hey, speaking of dreams, how's your soccer team doing?"

“Ah, the Spirit Warriors FC! We’re kicking ass,” he grinned. Since getting back from the road trip, Riley had set up a new sports team for disabled players. They had weekly games at the Teddy Bear Picnic Park, and it had been amazing for the local area. People came from all the local small towns to get involved. They had started playing friendly games against disabled teams farther afield, too, and were doing great. They weren’t winning every game, but that didn’t matter. They were having fun and supporting one another. Community was the most important thing of all.

Harper smiled. “I’m proud of you, Daddy.”

“Thanks, Harper.” Riley took a sip of his coffee, his thoughts drifting to his teammates and their shared camaraderie.

As they sat there, enjoying the warmth of the cozy fire and each other’s company, Riley couldn’t help but reflect on the incredible bond they had formed. Both had faced their share of challenges, but together, they were a force to be reckoned with.

“You know, there’s a disabled marathon taking place in Seattle at the start of spring,” said Harper. “Do you think there’s any way you could help me with training?”

“Harper, that’s a brilliant idea,” Riley said, his eyes lighting up at the thought. “I’d love to train with you. We’ll make one hell of a team, babygirl. You’ll do amazing.” He paused. “But of course, if you don’t win, then—“

“It’s the taking part that counts!” Harper chimed in happily.

“Good girl,” said Riley soothingly. “You know the drill.”

“But I *am* going to win,” Harper mumbled under her breath, a naughty look in her eyes.

Riley smiled, and kissed her forehead.

As they continued to discuss their plans, Riley felt a surge of gratitude for the life he was building with Harper. They were a powerful duo.

Just then, a mischievous glint came into Harper’s eyes. “You know, I enjoy being a good girl around you so much that I almost forgot how much I loved getting a spanking.”

Riley felt his cock thicken at that word. “You’re in the mood for a spanking, huh? Problem is, Harper, you’re never naughty.”

Harper reached into her pocket and took out a large bar of chocolate. “Uh oh,” she said quietly.

“I thought you said you wanted to win that marathon?” Riley said. “Today’s not one of your treat days, so—“

But it was too late. Harper had unwrapped the chocolate bar and gobbled up a huge piece of chocolate, sticky and melting in her mouth. She cackled like a cartoon supervillain.

Riley narrowed his eyes. “Well, well, you’ve put me in quite a situation here, young lady. See, the thing is, I happen to know—because you’ve just told me—that you *want* to be spanked. So if I spank you now, I’m rewarding you.”

Harper stopped chewing, her mouth still full of chocolate.
“Oh. Um. No spanking... please!”

“Nice try. No, I guess you’re just gonna have to have half an hour of corner time instead.”

“Nooooo!” Harper protested. “Corner time is boring!”

“*Naked* corner time,” corrected Riley. “I’ll help you into Daddy’s special chair, and you can sit there thinking about what you did while I wash up.”

Harper pouted, but her expression changed when she saw the chair that Riley was pointing at in the corner of the room.

Chapter Twenty-One

HARPER

IT WAS A MASSAGE chair, which Riley had sat Harper in several times before. He liked to massage her shoulders, back and arms after training sometimes, but he had never told her to sit in it naked before.

He helped undress her completely and then carried her over to the chair. He sat her in it facing forward, her head looking into the corner of the room, her back and bare butt on display to him.

“Hmm,” he said. “Well, that gives me something nice to look at while I wash up.”

Harper sat in the corner of the room, a little exasperated, as Riley cleaned and sorted the dishes behind her.

As time wore on, she grew more and more thrilled at the idea of her Daddy staring at her bare bottom as he worked. She wondered if he was growing aroused by it. Knowing Riley and his insatiable appetite, he almost definitely was.

Finally, she heard Riley softly closing a cupboard and then walking over to her.

“Good girl for sitting there so nicely,” he said. “You’ve given Daddy quite the show while he was cleaning up. I’m feeling very pleased with you. See?”

He took hold of Harper’s hand and guided it back to his hot, hard groin.

“Looks like your naughtiness has gotten Daddy all hot and bothered,” he said. “But before he fucks you, Daddy is going to have to finish administering your punishment first.”

“Yes, sir,” Harper said quietly.

With a firm but gentle hand, Riley delivered a quick, hard slap to Harper’s bottom. She gasped in shock, her eyes widening.

“Nine more,” he told her authoritatively.

“Yes, sir,” Harper said again.

She felt so vulnerable, so exposed, on the stool like this, which made the spanking all the more delicious. She took each hard smack like a very good girl, her athletic training helping her with the endurance needed to take the building pain.

“Well done, little one,” said Riley when he was done. “You did great.”

Gently, he lifted her up and carried her through to their bedroom. He laid her down on the bed, then removed his clothes, showing her his thickly blooming erection.

“Look how hot and bothered you made me,” he told her. “I’m going to have to fuck you extra hard now just to get this out of my system.”

Harper bit her lip. “Oh no,” she said in mock horror. “Not extra hard! You know how much I hate it when you do that.” Then, she cackled like an evil supervillain.

Riley tutted, bringing the tip of his cock down to her wet entrance. “Any more of that naughtiness and Daddy will have to put something in your mouth to keep you quiet.”

Harper pretended to zip her mouth up and throw away the key after that. As much as she enjoyed feeling Riley’s firm erection sliding into her warm mouth, right now she wanted to be filled up with his seed. It was their first night together in their new home, after all, and there was no better way to celebrate.

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Four months. She’d been training for four months and finally, the morning had arrived.

The air hummed with an electric anticipation. It felt like the entire city of Seattle had come to watch the race. Harper took in the cheering crowd and the banners waving from the sidelines as she and Riley approached the starting line.

Harper looked around at all the people who had come to take part. It was the first disabled race she’d taken part in, and it

felt wonderful to be around so many people who felt empowered to race like her.

“Remember, no matter what happens out there today, I’m so damn proud of you, Harper.” Riley’s words were low and steady, and they grounded her amidst the frenzy.

Her eyes misted over as she answered, “I know. I feel it, Daddy.”

The gunshot rang out, and Harper’s arms propelled her forward with an eager energy that she had honed for months. The competition was fierce, but she felt in her element, every turn of her wheels more confident than the last.

The race was long and hard, but Harper was ready for it. She was powered by all the good food she’d eaten, all the good sex she’d had, and all the good exercise she’d done. But there was something greater than that, too. She was powered by the sheer force of her own determination. An athletic spirit that had never left her; she’d just lost sight of it for a while.

The farther she went, the more she found herself leaving her competitors in the dust. She felt as strong as an ox. She might not have been as fast as a cheetah, but her control and rhythm were so steady and so assured that she didn’t slow down once. her breath remained steady. Her eyes remained fixed on the horizon.

Harper Adams is back in business.

As she took the final bend, the crowd’s roar crescendoed. Harper caught a glimpse of Riley on his feet, his face flushed

with a mix of tension and pride. Her mom, Loretta, and Emma were there too. All of them were jumping up and down, giving her that final burst of energy she needed to push herself to the end.

She broke through the tape and instantly her heart felt like there were a million fireworks going off inside it.

She'd done it!

She'd just won her first-ever gold medal!

It wasn't an Olympic medal, or even a Paralympic medal, but who cared about that? Harper was competing in the way she wanted to compete. She was in charge of her own destiny. And it felt like the greatest win of her entire life.

An official-looking man with a clipboard handed her a gold medal and told her to wait by the finish line for media photos.

The feeling of disbelief mingled with elation as she met Riley in a tight, emotional embrace.

"You did it," he choked out, his eyes wet, "You're a goddamn champion!"

"Only with your love and support," she whispered back.

"You were amazing, Auntie Harper!" said Emma. "I want to be just like you when you're older!"

"Well done, sis," said Loretta, giving her a high-five.

"I made cupcakes to celebrate!" said Gloria, showing Harper a tray of cupcakes with little figures in wheelchairs on top of

each one. “I’ll have to put little gold medals on them now, though!”

Harper laughed, clutching her gold medal. “Thank you for your support, everyone!”

Riley looked at her, pride evident in his eyes. “You’ve worked your ass off for this,” he said, grasping her hand tightly.

Harper nodded, tears in her eyes. “I can’t believe I did that. I never even got a gold before my accident.”

“You deserve every bit of it,” Riley told her.

Remembering something she’d been planning in secret for a while, Harper smiled. She beckoned Riley away from her family, and whispered in his ear: “I have a surprise for you, Daddy.”

Riley’s eyes widened. “For me?”

“Just a little present to say thank you for training with me. Reach into that backpack full of snacks. I slipped something in there before we left the house this morning.”

Looking slightly puzzled, Riley took off his backpack. He’d been meeting Harper around various parts of the course and feeding her energy bars and trail mix, but he had no idea there had been something else in the bag all along. He pulled out a small wrapped package at the bottom of the bag.

“Open it,” Harper urged.

Riley peeled back the brown paper of the package. “A mixtape!”

He turned it over in his hands with an obvious look of delight. It was labeled “Our Journey Together.”

“Each song represents our journey,” she explained, “from when we first met as teenagers to our shared victories as adults,” she explained, her eyes shimmering with expectation.

“I can’t wait to listen,” he said, genuinely touched.

Harper couldn’t wait for him to hear the songs she’d picked. “Don’t Let Me Down” by The Chainsmokers ft. Daya. “Unsteady” by X Ambassadors. “Lean On Me” by Bill Withers. “You’ve Got a Friend” by James Taylor. And of course, “Fearless” by Taylor Swift.

At the end, there was a personal recorded message, in which Harper read Riley a poem. It was “The Journey” by Mary Oliver and it was about self-discovery, empowerment, and the courage to follow one’s own path in life. In the poem, the narrator encourages the reader to break free from the expectations and judgments of others, to listen to their own inner voice, and to bravely forge ahead on their own unique journey, even if it requires facing challenges and uncertainties alone.

“Except I’m not alone,” Harper said at the end of the tape. “I’m with you. And we’re on this journey together. Forever.”

Riley looked touched beyond words. “Darling, that’s the perfect gift.” He held her close. “You know, you’ve changed

my life in ways I never thought possible.”

“Riley,” she replied softly, “same here.”

Her life had changed so much in so many ways, but all the very best bits of herself were still there, just as they had always been. Riley had simply held a mirror up to them, and helped her figure out which bits of her old self to leave and which to cling on to. Now that she knew, she would cling to them as though her life depended on it.

“Harper!” called her mom. “They need you for photos.”

Harper gave Riley a quick kiss and then wheeled herself up to the photographers. “I’m ready!” she called, her smile wide and genuine.

Ready for anything.

Thank you so much for reading! I really loved Harper and Riley. It was a fun challenge trying to write about a Daddy Dom who hadn’t always been a good man, and who had been cruel to Harper in the past. He had grown so much as a person by the time he met Harper, and then once they were together, they grew even more! I loved Harper’s courage too, in accepting her true self as well as learning to love herself all over again.

Would you like to read a bonus epilogue featuring Harper and Riley? Riley has a special birthday surprise for Harper!

[Click here to find out what it is.](#)

Ready for the next book in the series? It's [Christmas Market with Cooper](#). It's festive, warm, and snuggly, like your favorite Christmas sweater! We haven't seen Mayor Cooper too much since [Candy Store with Caleb](#), but the stern, sensible boss of Little Rock is about to meet an older woman who's very young at heart, who brings fun, frolics, and a whole lot of festive cheer into his life! [Check it out.](#)

Hungry for more small-town fun? Check out my [Liberty series](#) if you haven't already.

Don't forget to join my newsletter, find me on Facebook, and go ahead and give yourself a big bear hug for being such an awesome reader!

Oh yes, and if you could review this book and recommend it on social media that would be amazing. Truly.

Lucky x o x

Riley's Mixtape

S ONGS ON THE TAPE

“Survivor” by Eye of the Tiger

“Walk” by Foo Fighters

“Brothers in Arms” by Dire Straits

“One” by Metallica

“Not Ready to Make Nice” by Dixie Chicks

“If Today Was Your Last Day” by Nickelback

“Born in the U.S.A.” by Bruce Springsteen

“Hero” by Foo Fighters

“Courage” by Orianthi feat. Lacey Sturm

“Simple Man” by Lynyrd Skynyrd

“Unbreakable” by Westlife

“Don't Stop Believin'” by Journey

“You’ll Never Walk Alone” by Gerry & The Pacemakers

“Fix You” by Coldplay

“Till I Collapse” by Eminem

“Shake It Off” by Taylor Swift

“Long Live” by Taylor Swift

“Begin Again” by Taylor Swift

Also By Lucky Moon

DADDIES OF PINE PEAK

[MASTER OF THE MOUNTAIN](#)

[SAVAGE OF THE MOUNTAIN](#)

[GUARDIAN OF THE MOUNTAIN](#)

LITTLE ROCK DADDIES

[CANDY STORE WITH CALEB](#)

[TREASURE HUNT WITH TRAVIS](#)

[ROAD TRIP WITH RILEY](#)

[CHRISTMAS MARKET WITH COOPER](#)

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[DADDY MEANS BUSINESS](#)

[DADDY MEANS TROUBLE](#)

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LIBERTY LITTLES

[TAMED BY HER DADDIES](#)

[FAKE DADDY](#)

[DADDY SAVES CHRISTMAS \(IN A LITTLE COUNTRY
CHRISTMAS\)](#)

[SECOND CHANCE DADDIES](#)

[DADDY'S GAME](#)

[THE DADDY CONTEST](#)

[DADDY'S ORDERS](#)

DRIFTERS MC

[DADDY DEMANDS](#)

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STANDALONE NOVELS

[PLEASE DADDY](#)

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[DADDY'S LITTLE REBEL](#)

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VIGILANTE DADDIES

[BLAZE](#)

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