



# A FALSE START

ELSIE SILVER

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A SMALL TOWN BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND ROMANCE

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*For my sweet little boy, who so proudly wears all the Gold Rush Ranch merch, tells people that his mom's work is called 'Elsie Silvers', and that she writes books about kissing which is "really gross."*

*Just wait until you actually read one, son.*

I figure if a girl wants to be a legend, she should go ahead and be one.

CALAMITY JANE

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## CONTENT NOTE

This book contains adult material including references to alcoholism, domestic/childhood abuse, and sexual harassment. Traumatic brain injury is discussed and I fully understand that the impacts of this type of injury vary greatly from one person to the next. It is my hope that I've handled these topics with the care and research they deserve.

## NADIA



TOMMY KOSS IS A TERRIBLE KISSER.

He's mashing his lips into mine with zero finesse, and I wonder if a girl has ever taken the opportunity to tell him how utterly awful he is at this.

"You're so fucking hot," he murmurs between messy, slobbery kisses.

"So are you," I whisper back, arms slung loosely over his shoulders, rolling my eyes and wishing I could shut this running monologue off and just enjoy myself. His tongue tastes like cheap beer, and he's pawing at my breasts like a bear mauling a tree. The taste of alcohol in my mouth is an instant turnoff. A relentless reminder.

I had it in my head that making out with Tommy might make me feel something. It might be the cherry on top of an unusually wonderful day. Turns out, I only feel repulsed.

*Maybe I'm outgrowing these antics?*

His hands glide up under my tight tank top as he steps between my legs where I sit on the vanity in the men's bathroom. It smells like urinal pucks and whatever cheap body spray Tommy is wearing. I'm not so sure the scents are very different.

He yanks one of the slim straps of my tank top down and moves his lips to my chest. My head tips back, resting against the splattered mirror, and I stare up at the ceiling. The water stains on the foam panels are so old they've turned a rusty brown color. Tommy's elbow bumps the hand dryer, and a loud blowing noise fills the small room.

My lips tip up in amusement, and I stifle a laugh. If this weren't so sad, it would be hilarious. At nineteen years old, making out with boys in the bathroom of shitty bars is supposed to be fun. Nineteen is when you're allowed to hit the bars in British Columbia. Going out is supposed to feel like living. But legal ages have never stopped me. It used to make me feel rebellious and excited. Now I just feel numb and bored. This idea that I'm missing something and hoping I might find it near some guy's tonsils is getting old.

Chalk it up to daddy issues, I guess.

My brother thinks I'm a wild card—reckless. Possibly even promiscuous. And I am, but what he doesn't understand is that I'm looking for something.

I'm just not sure what yet.

Tommy is about to pull my breast out over the top of my neckline. He's fumbling with it when the bathroom door swings open. I glance over at who walked in, but all I catch is a flash of dark eyes beneath the brim of a cap and a bearded jawline before the guy turns his back and makes use of the urinal like we're not even here.

*Talk about big dick energy.*

My lips part in a mixture of shock and glee, and Tommy gives me this sweet, boyish expression before shrugging and grabbing the nape of my neck, pulling me in for more unskilled face-sucking. I should tell him to stop, but my body isn't attuned to him. For a few moments, I keep my eyes open, but I'm not looking at Tommy. Every ounce of my awareness is on the man taking a piss. The confidence. The sheer gall.

I'm honestly impressed.

I let my lashes flutter shut and pretend I'm kissing someone else.

The sound of a zipper closing draws me away from the wet smacking noises Tommy is making. And then the deep gravel of the stranger's voice makes me pause entirely. "Move."

The boy with his lips on mine pulls away and looks into the eyes of the man beside him. "My dude, just use the other sink. There are two."

The man's features are shadowed beneath the low-slung brim of his worn cap. Dense brows and deep-set eyes top off a strong nose. But mostly, he's too obscured beneath the brim of that for me to really make him out. Like he's hiding in plain sight.

The white mesh covering neatly trimmed brown hair has a faded brown panel at the front and the outline of a cowboy on a bucking horse. I lean in

closer, inextricably drawn to the man, trying to make out the writing just beneath it.

Someone only wears a hat into that state if it's special to them. And I want to know more about what's special to a man like this. One that can take up all the space in a room without even trying.

"Go!" he barks, and I startle.

Raised voices always do that to me. I freeze, fire licking up my throat. I *hate* when anyone takes that kind of tone with me. All it does is make me combative.

Tommy just scoffs, totally oblivious to the steel in the man's voice, behaving like a boy who has seen nothing bad in his life and has no concept of the consequences. "Whatever, man. Let's go, Nadia," he says, moving toward the door without a backward glance. He doesn't stop and wait for me. He doesn't hold the door open for me. He just assumes I'll follow him back out into the bar where all our mutual acquaintances are waiting, where the other girls who I barely know will glare at me with envy in their eyes like Tommy is some great catch.

If they'd ever kissed him, they'd know the glares aren't necessary.

I don't follow. I sigh and lean back against the mirror, facing off with the mysterious stranger. The one glaring at me. I've always promised myself I won't respond when a man uses that voice on me, when they try to intimidate me, and today is no exception.

You're going to bark at me? I'll bite you back.

I give the man my best resting bitch face before peering down at my nails with disinterest. "I'm not well-trained like that, so you really are going to have to use the other sink."

I gesture across the vanity, and he glares at me, irritation rolling off him in waves. The only part of him that moves is his broad chest as he breathes heavily and stares me down.

"And if you're going to talk to me like that again, I suggest you cup your boys to soften the blow."

He shakes his head and steps over to the other sink, flicking the tap, agitation lining every movement. A breath rattles past my lips, and the tension in the room begins to dissipate.

"I know. This is the men's room. I shouldn't be in here. Yadda, yadda, yadda. But you just pulled your dick out and took a leak without a second thought, so it's kind of hard to believe you're averse to washing your hands

in front of me.”

He says nothing. Just pumps a few gelatinous blobs of pink soap into his wide, calloused palm. He looks older. He must be. The confidence, the thin lines highlighting the tense set of his eyes, the whole brooding act.

“You know,” I continue, completely unprompted, just prattling on now, “I should thank you. That guy is the worst kisser. All teeth and saliva.” I shudder dramatically as a small giggle escapes me, and I trace a finger over my puffy, ravaged lips while staring for too long into one of the pot lights above me. “Like, really bad.”

Bright spots dance across my vision and the quiet stranger just grunts, white t-shirt stretching across his thick chest, and then says, “Why?”

“Why what?” I ask, leaning in again, trying to get a view of his face. To make heads or tails of what this guy actually looks like. His light wash jeans hug his ass, and his thighs fill them out just right, not too thick. His waist is trim, and a sea of intricate black tattoos that I could spend hours deciphering cover his arms.

His eyes flit to mine as he rinses his hands methodically. He swallows and his Adam’s apple bobs heavily in his throat. “Do that with him.”

“Kiss him?” My head quirks, and he nods, stepping closer as his long arms reach across my lap to use the hand dryer. The loud, whooshing sound fills the bathroom again, substantially less funny this time around.

I watch the way his hands fold over each other under the warm air, the odd droplet of water landing on my bare thigh just beneath the hemline of my jean skirt. When the dryer stops, he turns to me, and the weight of his gaze winds me. I suck air in through my nose, my shoulders coming up high as I do.

“I wanted to celebrate tonight. Found out I got into school today. I’m finally doing something for myself. I guess I just wanted to feel good for a bit.”

He stares wordlessly, so I fill the space with words instead.

“Today I found out they accepted me into the program I applied for months ago. I’m going to be a veterinary technician. It’s the first thing I can say I’ve ever really wanted to do entirely for myself. I was so nervous about applying that I haven’t even told anyone I did—let alone that I got in. Not even my boss, who should probably know because she’s going to need to hire a new receptionist by the time September rolls around.”

The man hits the dryer again, as though to drown out my rambling. The

warm air envelops my thighs, and I can almost imagine him palming them instead. To distract myself, I keep talking, hands gesturing animatedly.

“So, I’m supposed to be celebrating my accomplishment tonight. Having *fun*. And if nothing else, Tommy has always been fun. Easy. A nice enough guy—if a terrible kisser. Best of all, he doesn’t want any sort of commitment. Which is perfect because I don’t have any commitment to give.”

The dryer stops and lights glint off the deep brown irises that trace my face now, his nose wrinkling as he turns my words over in his head. This nameless man is studying me like I’m nuts.

A nervous laugh spills out over my lips before I lick them. *He is so intense*. “I don’t know why I just told you all that.”

His face is impassive, but he lifts one hand, hooking a finger through the strap of my tank top that is still pushed off my shoulder, making me feel just as disheveled as I must appear. But rather than pulling it down further, like I hoped he might, he slides it up and places it back over my shoulder, the first knuckle of his pointer finger dragging across my collarbone.

My breath catches at the contact, goosebumps racing out in its wake, the man’s dark mahogany eyes fixed on where he touched me.

“Kiss me.” I blurt the words out before I even think about them. His gaze snaps up, searing into mine. “A congratulatory kiss. A real kiss.”

*Here it is. My reckless side is out to play.*

I swear I can see him thinking, weighing his options. Anyone could walk in at any instant.

“Why?” Suspicion taints his gaze.

I shrug. “Why not? Two perfect strangers who will never see each other again. What have you got to lose?”

He continues to stare at me for a beat, and I watch some of that wariness melt away. Within moments, his hand comes up underneath my jaw, his thumb pressing gently into the cleft of my chin as he pulls me to him, and like a moth to a flame, I go.

Up close, I get a glimpse of how ruggedly handsome he is. He turns his head to allow for the brim of his hat, giving me the perfect view of his stern face. This is a man who knows what he’s doing. Knows exactly how to tilt his head, how to angle mine.

His face descends, and when his lips land against my own, I swear the world stands still. He smells like laundry soap and freshly fallen pine needles. His lips move with precision, with a longing I’ve never felt. And his mouth

tastes like cinnamon.

I lean closer and sigh into the kiss, letting my palms press against his chiseled chest where the thumping of his racing heart beats against them. I find myself wishing he'd hold something more than just my chin. Wanting his calloused hands on me the way Tommy's smooth ones were minutes ago. I already know it would be better. This is the universe's cruel version of a side-by-side taste test.

And I already know who the winner is.

His mouth is firm, and I open for him, softening and surrendering as his tongue dances against the seam of my lips. His teeth don't clash against mine. His beard prickles at my skin, a sensation that sizzles over every nerve ending. I push closer to him. The unyielding pressure of denim sliding up my thighs makes me ache as he comes to stand between them. And when his hips press into the cradle of mine, I shiver.

I melt.

This kiss is like a dance with a man who knows how to lead, rather than one who keeps stepping on my feet. It's effortless, and I want it to go all night.

But it doesn't.

He pulls away slowly, eyes raking over me, an almost confused expression on his face. My breathing is labored as I gaze up into his eyes, trying to figure out what's going on in here—in a dirty bar bathroom with a perfect stranger.

I want him to do it again.

Instead, he lifts his thumb and rubs it down over my slack bottom lip, sending a zing of arousal right between my legs. There's something possessive about the act. It's a filthy secret in a grungy restroom. It makes me want to follow him out of here and spend the night unraveling the mystery.

But his hands fall limp at his side, and he steps away, leaving me cold without his body heat. "Congratulations, Wildflower." His voice is so deep and so low that I almost don't hear it as he turns toward the door.

My eyes bounce back and forth between the blades of his shoulders, the ones straining against the fabric of his simple t-shirt. The expanse between them held taut.

"Again." I sound breathless, bordering on desperate. This can't be it for the dark stranger and me. Not when he just scorched the small bit of earth I'm standing on. Not when I feel like I might have just found *something*.

He doesn't turn around as he wraps one big hand around the door handle. He doesn't need to look at me to embarrass me, to make me feel small the way that most men in my life have. He only needs a few quiet, well-placed words.

“Once is an accident. Twice is a mistake.”



## NADIA



I'M PMSING, I'm hungry, and I'm tired. It's a deadly combination, and I'm taking that deep-rooted anger out on the keyboard as I put together invoices for the month.

As it stands, I'm working part-time at the vet clinic and also taking my last few remaining high school courses by correspondence. So, I sit at this front desk, alternately doing schoolwork or odd jobs that get handed off to me—something my boss, Dr. Thorne, is totally fine with. In fact, it was her idea.

I answer the phone and greet people when they walk in the door. For those parts of my job, I'm supposed to be chipper and polite.

Both of which I'm not today.

I want to go home, curl up with a filthy book and a bottle of Midol, and play out that kiss with the hot-as-fuck stranger from the bar bathroom on the back of my eyelids. Apparently, orgasms are good for cramps. At least that's what my personal research has proven.

Which is why, when I hear the front door open, I stifle a groan and glance at the clock. One hour left. So close, and yet so far away. Right now, I do not want to talk to a single person, and that's the only consideration in my mind as I swivel my chair around to face the entryway with a big fake, cheesy smile plastered on my face.

A look that freezes in place for a moment before transforming into one of utter shock, mouth hanging open like I'm about to say something. But then I

just . . . don't. I literally can't because I especially don't want to talk to *this* person.

The dirty bathroom guy—that's what I'm calling him now—is here. At my place of work. Holding a brown paper bag and wearing a scowl that would scare most people. But not me.

Because I'm giving him an equally unimpressed look right back. I lean back in my chair, fingernails digging into the armrests as I force a grin onto my face. I don't want to be embarrassed around this jerk. There is nothing to be ashamed of because I am a modern, single woman. I can kiss ten guys a night if I want to.

But none of them would stick with me like this prick. And that's what really chaps my ass about him. I never let guys get to me the way he has.

"Hi. Can I help you with something? Do you have an appointment?" I take a mental note to scour the schedule and find out who he is so that I can google the hell outta him later.

But he doesn't respond. He just holds up the paper bag. Like that explains a single thing.

"Yes. It's a lovely bag. Do you have an appointment?" I grit my teeth. Pretty sure my forced smile is making me appear downright deranged.

His dark eyes narrow from beneath the brim of that same hat, and this time, he holds the bag up, shaking it at me. *Oh, hell no.*

"Dude. I don't know what that means. How about you use your big boy words?" Oh, yeah, my patience is absolutely shot.

I swear he growls at me in response, which just annoys me more. He talked enough to tell me I was a mistake, or an accident, or whatever, the other night, but now he won't talk to me at all? Rich. Really fucking rich.

"Listen." I use the most condescending tone I can drum up. "I can't read whatever kind of sign language these dirty looks are saying. You're going to have to *talk* to me. Or write it down or something." I hold up a finger and pretend to check under my desk. "Wait, let me grab my *crystal ball*."

It's at that moment Mira pushes through the swinging door and waltzes into the reception area with an accommodating smile on her face.

"Griff! Good to see ya. You got those samples we talked about?"

Dirty bathroom guy nods at her, but he doesn't take his eyes off me. It's honestly a little unnerving. I lick my lips and hold his gaze, refusing to drop his gaze. He drops the paper bag on the front desk countertop and then swaggers back out the front door.

“Piece of work,” I spit out, rolling my eyes.

Mira stays suspiciously silent. When I glance at her, she’s a million miles away, staring just past me.

“Do I have something on my face?” I rub at my mouth and wave a hand in front of her.

She blinks and shakes her head. “No. No. Sorry. Just tired. I zoned out.”

“What the hell is wrong with that guy? He walked in here like he’s some sort of celebrity, like I should know him. Wouldn’t say a goddamn word. Manners leave something to be desired.” I shake my shoulders out and scoff just thinking about it.

“Griff? He used to live around here.”

I turn back to the computer screen and mutter, “Still a dick.”

Again, Mira barely notes what I’m saying. “I need to go check on the foal,” she blurts out, changing the subject entirely. “I, uh, won’t be back. Can you lock up?”

She’s acting totally weird. “Of course.”

“Thanks.” She grabs her coat and takes off, leaving me thoroughly confused, in a terrible mood, and stuck at work for another fifty-seven minutes.

Just great.



“GOOD MORNING.” My brother smiles at me from where he stands at the coffee maker as I slide onto a stool at the expansive island in the middle of his kitchen. The smell of him cooking some sort of gourmet breakfast and making a fresh pot of coffee drew me out of bed early on my day off.

This man loves to feed people, and I am *here for it*.

Within moments, he slides a plate of smoked salmon eggs Benedict across the island toward me, followed by a cup of piping hot coffee.

Best brother ever.

“Fuck yes,” I groan, almost inappropriately.

“You’ve been hanging out with those Gold Rush girls too much.”

He’s referring to the swearing. “So have you.” But he has to know I’ve noticed how much time he and Mira spend together. That I see them both staring off into space like love-sick fools. They think they’re subtle. It’s

adorable.

I dig into the meal before me, savoring every flavor and just generally feeling happy and at peace for a hot minute. Things have finally started turning up Nadia in life, and it has me invigorated like I never knew it could. I have family, friends, school, and I don't live with an abusive shithead.

Life is good.

"Ready?" Stefan asks, and my eyes flit open in confusion. *Ready for what?*

I turn, following my brother's gaze. And that's when I see him. *Him*. Hot bathroom guy.

Fuck this guy for showing up everywhere. Can I not just masturbate to him in peace?

I must look startled by his presence because my brother pipes up with, "Sorry, Nadia. This is Griffin. The guy I bought this place from."

I swallow slowly and place my fork down carefully before pointing at him. "*That* is Griffin?"

My brother's brow furrows as his eyes bounce between us. "Yeah."

Blood rushes, the whoosh of it loud in my ears.

"Your *best friend* Griffin?"

The broad-shouldered man stops as he rounds the corner into the kitchen, going deathly still. I swear I can almost hear him thinking. And I definitely see his eyes bug out like he's just figured out who I am.

Oh. *No*.

My eyes widen as I connect the dots. Mira called him Griff, and I don't know how I didn't see this.

Fuck my life.

Heat slithers over my skin as my stomach bottoms out like I'm free-falling in an elevator, and I realize what I've done. The man's forearms ripple with tension beneath the black ink covering them, fists pulsing in a furious tick.

"Relax, Nadia. Adults don't have *best friends*."

Sure. Yeah. Especially not once they find out their little sister has been making out with them. Then that friendship would end.

Griffin snorts, rubs his beard, and walks to the front door to shove his feet into a pair of worn cowboy boots. Fleeing this endlessly awkward interaction.

"I've already told you. He sold me this place, and we've just stayed in touch."

Yep. Stefan has told me all about the one guy he hangs out with. The one who didn't treat him like a leper when he moved to town. The one he spent all his free time with. The one who is helping him around the farm here.

I think he may have even referred to him as the only true friend he's ever had.

I watch Griffin's toned ass and muscular thighs disappear out the front door and try to think of something to say that will cover up what must be a perfectly stricken look on my face. "But . . . he's a total dick," is what I opt for, but in my head, all I'm thinking is this one-handed obsession with the guy from the bar can't continue.

Stefan barks out a laugh as he follows his best friend out the front door. "I'm glad you think so." He winks at me over his shoulder. "Then I won't have to worry about you scaring him off with your antics while he's here."

Oh, brother. If you only knew.

---

NADIA

TWO YEARS LATER



“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

“Nothing.” I yank the floral-patterned journal back toward myself, slamming a palm over the page to cover it.

Mira’s shapely brow lifts as she stares back at me impassively. “Yeah. Definitely seems like *nothing*.”

Not only is Dr. Thorne my boss and the veterinarian who runs this clinic, but she’s also my new sister-in-law. Additionally, she’s kind of my idol. I’ve never told her that, but she is. She’s smart, strong, and driven. She’s everything I’m not—everything I’ve been told I’m not.

In the time I’ve been attending the local college, she and my brother got married and had a little boy named Silas. Hell on wheels, that kid. A mop of black hair from Mom and wild green eyes from Dad. The perfect blend. He’s almost two and climbs everything he can get his hands on. Truthfully, it’s terrifying.

I love my nephew, but he’s also why I’ve now moved out. With my diploma in hand, I was lucky enough to walk back into a job just down the road at Gold Rush Ranch. It’s a prestigious racehorse training facility run by our good friends, and it’s also the site of the vet clinic Mira runs. Which made moving into the small apartment above the barn a no-brainer.

It’s convenient for a twenty-one-year-old fresh out of school. It’s also included in my salary and about a two-minute walk from the front door of the clinic. Bonus points for not having to listen to Silas throw tantrums at five a.m. Truthfully, it felt weird to keep living with my brother and his wife while they were starting a new family. It felt like it was time for me to start my journey while they do theirs.

I sigh and lean back in the front desk chair. “It’s a list that I started in therapy.” Since coming back from school, I feel like I have my entire life ahead of me—special shout out to my therapist for that. After two years of chatting with her, I figured out that I’ve let enough life *happen* to me—the good and the bad—and I’m ready to continue taking the bull by the horns and go after what I want.

My college education to become a veterinary technician was my first step. Now I’m here, searching for the next steps. I feel continually lost but accepted that giving myself attainable goals mitigates that a bit.

Hence the list.

“What kind of list?” Mira leans up on the tall counter, propping her chin on her palm as her shiny black ponytail spills over her shoulder like an onyx waterfall.

I bite at the inside of my cheek, feeling a little young and foolish admitting this to Mira even though she’s only eight years older than I am. “Like a to-do list for my life.”

But she doesn’t laugh at me. She never does. She’s almost like the mother figure I never got to have, always searching for a solution to my problems and offering to lend me a hand. Or a carton of eggs. The memory of egging my principal’s car with her two years ago never fails to make me grin.

“So, a bucket list?”

I groan. A bucket list sounds so cliché. “No,” I say, pulling my hand off the page to show her the title. “*Life To Do List*.”

She laughs and gives her head a little shake, clearly amused by, but also accustomed to, my antics. “I think that’s smart. Goal setting is important. Keeps a person focused.” Her dark eyes trail over my face, and I can see that she wants to ask more.

I chuckle at the blatant interest painted on her face. “Mira, you look like you’re going to burst. Just ask it.”

“God. Thank you. I was trying to play it cool, but the suspense was killing me. What’s on the list?” She leans further across the counter, eyes lighting up like a kid at Christmas.

I clear my throat as I pull the pad back toward myself to read. “Number one is to build up my own savings account. I don’t want to rely on *his* money anymore. I’ll do something with it, I’m just not sure what yet. Something good, something worthwhile.”

My late father has taken on an almost Voldemort-like presence in our



lives. We don't talk about him often, and when we do, it's not by name. He exists in my mind. He haunts me. But if I compartmentalize him into a nameless, faceless box, he bothers me a lot less.

Mira just nods. "I think that's an excellent goal." She knows the full story. Stefan's version anyway. Which, as far as I'm concerned, is the sanitized version. He wasn't there for the worst years. He got out.

I didn't.

Until three years ago, I lived in my own personal hell, caged by an abusive monster. Even once he died, I couldn't leave his fucked-up family behind. Until I was eighteen. I took possession of my sizable inheritance and then I fled Romania to the safety of my brother's farm as quickly as I could. I didn't look back. I don't miss it. And I've spent the last three years of my life recreating myself in a way that leaves no ties to that part of my life.

I've even completely erased my accent. Most of the time, you would never know I wasn't born here in Ruby Creek. Which is what I was going for.

"Yeah. I thought so." I drop her gaze for a moment, looking back at the lined sheet of paper before me. "I think . . . well . . . I think, at some point, I'd like to go to vet school." Heat rises in my cheeks. I wanted to be a vet tech but now I'm finding I want more. "It's silly. I'm probably too late. I'm pretty sure I'm not even smart enough. Plus, I just got back to working here and wouldn't want to let you down."

Just saying it out loud ratchets up my anxiety.

Mira shoots up, shoulders pinned back straight. She's so regal looking, so put together. *Dignified*. I feel so young and lost around her sometimes. "Nadia. I never want to hear you say that about yourself. I swear I will spank you. Or dock your pay. Or something."

Of course, this is the moment that the back door of the clinic swings open. "Who's getting a spanking?" Billie calls out in the way of announcing herself.

Mira and I both laugh. Billie is the wife of one of the owners here at Gold Rush Ranch. She's also one of the world's most famed and respected racehorse trainers.

She's also very, very pregnant with twins.

*My literal nightmare.*

She waddles through the hall door grinning like a fool with a hand placed casually over the top of her bump. "I miss getting a good spanking. Vaughn handles me with kiddie gloves now that I'm pregnant. It sucks. I just want

him to slap my ass and call me a whore.” She sighs wistfully, while I try not to crack up. “Does Stefan still do that for you now that you’re a mom, Mira?”

*Too fucking far.* I stifle a groan as Mira rubs at her forehead with a small smile playing across her lips. Billie is forever inappropriate. I’m not sure if she ever had a filter, but it’s missing now.

“We were just talking about goal setting. I was telling Nadia here to not sell herself short. And to answer your question, our sex life is better than ever. That’s all I’m saying.”

Mira winks suggestively and I mutter, “Thank fuck for that.”

Billie’s hand lands on my shoulder with a gentle squeeze, and I’m so busy cringing over the visual of my brother Mira just created that I leave my list open to being read from where she stands behind me.

“Well, Naughty Nadia.” God, I hate that nickname. “I can help you with the learning to ride horses one. Also, the getting your own horse one. Tropical vacation! Girl’s trip anyone?” Then she stops, lips quirking playfully. “*Making love*, not so much. What was that guy’s name the other day? The one who popped in here to ask you out? Tommy?”

I snap the journal to my chest. My throat constricts and my face heats. *Fuucckkk*. That was supposed to be private. I drop my head onto the desk, gently banging my forehead against the top of it.

“Not him? He was cute! But fine.” She pats my back. “It’s going to be okay, little one. You’ll find someone to make love with. I sure didn’t take you for a virgin. But no judgement.”

“Biiiiiiiiiiiiiee,” I whine. “I’m not a virgin!” My head flops against the back of the chair and my eyes flash open, ready to tell her to pound sand. But that’s before my gaze snags on the man standing in the front entryway. Beside the door that’s propped open to let a breeze in on this sweltering early summer day.

*Double fuck.*

“Griff! You’re here.” Billie claps her hands together. “Excellent.”

He’s got a duffel bag in hand and even though Billie is talking to him, he’s watching me.

Griff Sinclair. The man who kissed me stupid in a dirty bar bathroom and left me feeling irretrievably childish when he walked out. I thought that would be the last of him. But the joke was on me when a few days later he walked into this very clinic to drop off some samples and refused to talk to me.

Not. A. Single. Fucking. Word.

Which should have been infuriating enough. But imagine my surprise when I walked downstairs one morning shortly before starting school to find him hanging out with my brother. Not sure how I didn't put it together, but *Griff* is *Griffin*—my brother's best friend, who I hadn't met since moving here from Romania.

My stomach bottoms out, like it always does around him, and the weight of his gaze presses down on me. The disapproval in his stare is front and center. The dismissal.

The grown-up version of me knows Griffin should not have kissed me in the men's room that night, that he made the right choice to walk away. But the childish part of me hates him for being such a dick about it. The immature part of me has blown that night up in my mind to be something that it wasn't.

The man hasn't said a single word to me since that night. And I know he can talk. I can still feel the low rumble of his gravel-worn voice against my skin.

No matter how hard I try to forget it.

He's too old for me anyway. He's got to be in his mid-thirties by now. Not to mention, I think Stefan would crucify him if he found out. He's probably avoiding talking to me because he values his life. *Smart*. The worst part is... he just heard that exchange.

"Right." Billie rounds the desk toward him. "A man of few words. Forgot that part. No problem. I'll talk, and you can just listen. Except to that virgin bit. Ignore Naughty Nadia over there. Let me show you around."

My stomach lurches as I close the journal and let my eyes drop. I wish I could fold myself in between the pages and just hide there. I knew I was going to run into him again eventually but wearing faded blue scrubs with my hair in a lopsided ponytail while exclaiming that I am not a virgin is not what I envisioned. I planned to look so hot that he'd be drooling.

And kicking himself for being such a dismissive prick.

"Where did you park? Let's get you settled first. Then I'll give you the grand tour," Billie prattles on, completely oblivious to the tension between us. Maybe there isn't tension between us. Maybe I'm the only one who feels it. Maybe I'm the only one whose world turned on its axis that night.

Maybe he doesn't even think about it.

That's probably what an adult does after he accidentally kisses a teenager. He compartmentalizes her into the *do not touch* category. He doesn't think

about her, just like I don't think about my dad—because it's wrong.

I suck in a deep, centering breath and glance up just in time to see Billie leading him back out to the landing, hands flailing around in front of her. Major hand talker that one. “Later ladies!” she calls as they step out onto the wraparound deck.

Agitation coils in my gut. The guy is such a dick. He doesn't deserve my embarrassment. So right here and now I resolve not to be embarrassed. It was one innocent kiss two years ago. *It meant nothing.*

Mira flicks through a folder on the desk, reading a file while nibbling at her bottom lip. Not a care in the world. Completely oblivious. It's like both are so happily married that they miss this guy's incredible ass. He doesn't wear the jeans. *They wear him.*

“Why is Griffin here?” My hands are slick, the cool metal of the rings on the journal digging into my palm.

She doesn't even look up at me. That's how inconsequential this is for Mira. “Didn't Stefan tell you?”

*Obviously not.* “Tell me what?”

The folder flicks shut, and she reaches for another one. “He's moving into Vaughn and Billie's old guesthouse for the summer to break the young horses because obviously Billie can't. Something about a compromise that her and Vaughn came to. She keeps riding, but only DD. So, she hired Griff.”

“The *whole* summer?”

Mira's finger traces the line before her, lips moving as she reads to herself—something she often does. “Yup,” she responds.

My eyes shoot to the front porch, through the big windows that overlook it. Billie is still talking at Griffin.

But Griffin is looking at me.

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## GRIFFIN



THE WOMAN in front of me is talking a mile a minute, hands gesturing like she's conducting a goddamn orchestra. I wonder if this level of excitement is going to send her into labor. Would probably be fine since we're standing outside of a veterinary clinic.

I should listen to what she's saying. After all, she *is* my new employer. But my brain is back in that clinic. It's stuck on the blonde spitfire sitting at the front desk, looking at me like I'm a bug beneath her shoe.

My best friend's little sister.

*Trouble.*

And off-limits in the most absolute way.

When I took this job, I didn't think she was going to be here. I didn't know what she was studying at college, but I figured she'd be gone for four years. I figured that once a girl like that got a taste of freedom, she'd be gone for good. When I agreed to take this gig, I didn't account for having to deal with Nadia Dalca and her massive attitude.

I hold a hand up to stop Billie from talking. I don't know the woman well, but Stefan has assured me she's good people. I wouldn't have taken the job otherwise. I'd have stayed up in the mountains, where I've found some semblance of peace.

Ruby Creek is a double-edged sword for me. Home to my highest highs and my lowest lows.

"Just tell me where to put my stuff. My horse is still in the t— . . . in my

rig.”

The woman’s eyes analyze me a little too closely for comfort. “Sure thing. I’ll ride with you to the cottage and help you unload.”

I eye the full swell of her very pregnant stomach, but she points a finger at me and purses her lips. “Don’t even try to tell me what I am or am not capable of. It will end poorly for you; ask my husband.” I grunt in agreement, but she keeps going. “Let’s get one thing cleared up before you start your job here. I’m pregnant. Not injured. Not sick. Not on my deathbed. Don’t treat me like it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” I mutter, shoving my hands in my pockets and rocking back on the heels of my boots.

She nods at me before spinning and marching toward my truck and trailer, heaving herself into the passenger seat.

“Back out of the driveway and take a right. We have to go around the property, but if you’re riding or walking, you can easily cut through the hills. I’ll show you that too.”

Another grunt is what I offer in affirmation as we turn onto the back roads I know so well. The roads I grew up on.

I sold the functioning part of my farm to Stefan Dalca when I needed a fresh start—something I knew I couldn’t find if I stayed on the path I was on. I kept Cascade Acres as a home base near my parents. It was meant to be a place for me to retire. I just hadn’t banked on retiring quite so early. But when it all came crashing down, I left everything I knew, loving parents included, and holed myself up on remote acreage in the cliffs above Garnet Ridge.

And then I got to work.

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop” has never applied to another person more aptly. I went from the town golden boy to the boy in town drowning in amber liquid. But building my home from scratch in the peace of the mountains gave me the purpose I so desperately needed.

“Turn at the mailbox.” Billie’s directions snap me out of my thoughts, and I steer into the winding, well-treed driveway that opens to reveal a cedar A-frame house in the middle of the clearing. Just beyond it are a few paddocks, complete with shelters that back onto the rolling fields that must lead to the main barn.

“Just pull around the house. You can park your trailer in the back.”

Once I’ve parked, she hops out like she’s trying to prove to me she isn’t

set to explode at any moment. “How many horses did you bring with you?”

I hold a finger up to her as I round the back of the trailer and pull down the ramp on the side.

“Okay, well, there are three paddocks here now. So, if you ever want to add to your harem, go ahead. If you want to take on extra horses while you’re here, there is space. I’ve got hay stocked in that shed.” She points just beyond me. “And unfortunately, there aren’t automatic waterers back here, so you’ll be hauling buckets.”

“S’fine.” I yank open the barrier and watch her step up into the trailer.

“Hey, kid. Welcome to vacation.” Her voice softens as she steps into the open space in the center of the big rig. It’s too much space for my one horse, but I love this trailer, love the layout, and refuse to trade it in for something more appropriate. Maybe I’ll have more horses one day, and then it will make perfect sense.

For now, Spot is my only constant companion.

I unload him carefully, letting him take a good long look around while Billie opens a bale and tosses a few flakes in for him. I rake out the trailer, and she chatters away at my horse like she thinks he might talk back to her.

When I make it back to where she’s standing, watching my horse chow down happily, she props her fists on her hips and blows her hair out of her face. “Cute. What’s his story?”

My general silence clearly doesn’t deter her.

I point at the deep brown Appaloosa with a spotted blanket over his haunches—a real pretty motherfucker. “Rescued ‘em from the meat auction.” Not sure how he ended up where he did, but isn’t that just the way life goes? Sometimes the best of us end up in the worst of positions.

“I love that. He’s a pretty boy.” She smiles softly at me, and I nod before she turns toward the house. I follow her up onto the deck as she pulls the keys out and swings the door open to a consistent beeping noise. “Security system,” she says over her shoulder. “The code is 6969.”

She types the numbers in, and sure enough, the beeping stops, and she spins around to say something, but must catch the expression on my face. “What? Are you going to tell me there’s an easier number to remember?”

I already miss the solitude of the mountains.



RUBY CREEK IS small as fuck—one main street and one town bar. I push through the heavy front door at Neighbor's Pub. I know I shouldn't be here, but I keep coming back. Like a glutton for punishment, I do this every damn time.

It doesn't matter if I'm coming to see my mom and dad, visiting Stefan—my only friend—or getting something done at the vet clinic. I always force myself through the front door of this establishment. No matter how it turns my stomach.

Sliding onto a stool with a quiet sigh, my eyes catch on the wall full of liquor behind the bar. All the shapes of the bottles, the colors on the labels, all the dark memories, or complete lack thereof, at the bottom.

“What can I get ya?” A coaster slides across the bar and lands in front of me as I glimpse up into the slightly upturned blue eyes of the bartender. Her dyed black hair lays poker straight over her shoulders, framing her huge tits that sit like she's trying to push them up to her chin over the neckline of her tank top. I almost want to ask her if it hurts because I'm genuinely curious.

“Bourbon. Neat.”

“A man after my own taste.” She throws a wink over her shoulder and arches her back unnecessarily as she reaches up to the top shelf and pulls down something expensive rather than the Wild Turkey sitting in the well. “Upgrade is on me, doll. Not every day we get a future Hall of Famer in here.”

*Excellent. Someone who recognizes me still.*

She pours the amber liquid into a single shot glass before dumping it into a tumbler, licking her lips as she places it on the coaster.

There was a time where I'd have slammed the drink back and offered to take her out back. I got off on people swooning over Griffin Sinclair, quarterback extraordinaire, the small-town boy who made it to the big show. I'd say something rude, like *I'll fuck your cunt so hard you'll be walking bow-legged for days* and she'd giggle as if she just won the lottery. And so long as I hadn't had too many drinks, I'd usually follow through on that promise. Never had any complaints in that department except that I never stuck around. Plenty of complaints about that. But I always moved on. To the next city. The next game. The next Superbowl. Because I wanted more than the two that I already had. I was greedy, and keen, and lived to win big, fuck hard, and party wild.

But these days I feel *old*. I feel a little used up. I suppose that's what



becoming a functioning alcoholic in your twenties does to you.

I raise the glass with a silent nod as a way of thanking her. And hopefully dismissing her. I really don't need to fuck the twenty-something bartender on my first night in town. I haven't spent the past six years living on my remote property, trying to find some sort of purity among the filth in my brain, to give in just because she's got a great rack.

She smiles curiously and strolls away, swinging her hips like a pendulum. But I barely notice. I'm too busy staring down into the glass. Rolling it between my hands and watching the way the syrupy liquid splashes against the sides before slowly dripping back down.

I can still taste it if I close my eyes and let myself go. The malty flavor, the texture of it in my mouth, the pleasant warm burn as it slides down my throat. Sometimes I wonder if I liked the act of drinking more than the taste. But when it's close enough to smell like it is right now, I know that's not true.

For me, alcohol is addictive. The taste, the smell, the act, the way it made me feel like a fucking king.

I used to miss it. But I don't anymore.

"You moving back into town?"

The bartender is back, pulling my attention from the alcohol in my hand.

"Sorta." I don't even look up. I hate when people recognize me now. I used to love it. Used to take pride in locals patting me on the back and telling me they cheer me on every Sunday.

It only made my downfall that much more humiliating.

"Where are you staying?" She picks up a rag, polishing an already perfectly clean spot on the bar just so that she can lean over in front of me. There's nothing subtle about this girl. And I remember being an age where I thought that was sexy.

I don't think I'm that age anymore.

"Gold Rush," is all I say. Because everyone is going to find out, and everyone here knows what that is, and I hate the way two R words in a row twist my tongue up.

"Fancy," she says, smiling. And I admit to myself that she's quite lovely while also acknowledging that it makes no difference to me. That's not why I'm here tonight.

I'm here to torture myself, not enjoy myself.

So, I offer her a wry twist of my lips before ducking my head and hiding

behind the brim of my hat again.

I do this every time I'm in town. I walk into my old stomping grounds, Neighbor's Pub, order a bourbon, and sit at the bar. Staring at it like it's a living, breathing nemesis. I let myself remember what it tasted like as I run my tongue across my teeth like it's actually in my mouth.

And then I throw ten bucks down on the worn bar top and leave, just to prove to myself that I can.

It's what I do tonight. Reach into my back pocket and pull a bill from my wallet, tossing it down beside the glass while the bartender converses with someone else.

And then I walk right back out that door. Feeling like the victor. Knowing that in my years away, I've grown stronger. Even if I haven't been able to heal completely, I make better decisions now. Except for the night I kissed Nadia, that night I headed back to take a leak before I left.

That night I felt just vulnerable enough to do something stupid, like kiss a girl who was barely old enough to drink.

## NADIA



“HEY, you. Just as hot as I remember.”

Tommy is leaning against the railing at the top of the stairs that lead to my apartment with a wide boyish grin on his face. I dislike the familiarity of the way he talks to me, like we know each other well. The way his eyes rake over the floral off-the-shoulder shirt I’m wearing makes me want to squirm a little bit.

Sure, we made out a few times. Were a thing. Sort of. In the most casual sense of the word. But that was a couple of years ago now. And we haven’t maintained a friendship.

“Hi, one sec.” I dart back into the house when I realize it’s just cool enough out that I want to take a sweater with me.

He’s been relentless with asking me out, showing up at my work, saying we should give it another shot. That we’re good together. Which is a bit of a stretch in my book. We were never exclusive and seeing him hanging off one of the other girls in town never bothered me.

Not after that kiss with Griffin. Once I knew what a kiss could be, everything else just came up short.

Especially Tommy.

But Griffin isn’t a reality for me. First, he speaks to me with growls and grunts. I’m pretty sure he hates me. Second, and most important of all, he’s my brother’s best friend.

That’s a line that would be frowned upon crossing. No matter how heart-

stopping the kiss was.

So here I am, taking Tommy to Sunday family dinner to see if we can be a thing for real this time. We're both older now, more mature—or at least trying to be. I went off to school and so did he. Maybe a fresh start is what we both need.

“Okay, ready!” I round the corner and expect Tommy to be standing at the door, all golden blond locks and twinkly blue eyes. Happy-go-lucky and laid back are just what a girl like me needs to shine a little light on her dark past.

But he's not waiting at the door.

I step onto the landing and peer down the stairs to see him sitting in his truck. *Off to a good start.* I roll my eyes. Couldn't even handle waiting a couple minutes for me. I lock up and hustle down the stairs, already regretting agreeing to this.

He's on his phone, engine already running when I get in. Doesn't even look up.

Annoyance courses through me. I spent an entire lifetime in a house with a mother who believed a man every time he said he would change. I wonder if this is just part of my genetic make-up. Tommy says he's changed, grown up. He's going to business school so he can start his own company.

And I believed him.

So far, it seems like the joke is on me.

I don't need him to roll out the red carpet. But telling me I'm hot and then ignoring me isn't making me wet in the panties. The thought of locking myself down in a relationship is hard enough. Never mind with someone who annoys me within minutes of arriving. It seems like this is what I'm supposed to be doing, though, so I forge ahead.

“Ready?”

He chuckles and shakes his head at his phone. Like there's something funny, and I'm not in on the joke. And then, without a word, he shifts into drive and pulls out of the driveway toward my brother's house just five minutes down the road at Cascade Acres.

“Some of the boys are going out for drinks tonight.” He reaches to roll down the window. “Let's meet them after dinner.”

He's smiling. He looks happy and relaxed, excited to be home and off school for the summer, a perfect contrast to the stress coiling in my gut.

I don't drink, and it's a Sunday night.

“I have to work in the morning. I don’t think that’s going to work for me.”

“Ah, come on, Nadi. Don’t be a stick in the mud. You’re only young once.”

My arms fold across my chest. The problem is, I don’t feel that young after the shit I’ve lived through. “I like to start my week well-rested. If that’s what you’d like to do, I won’t stop you. I can hitch a ride back to the ranch with someone else.”

He snorts and rolls his eyes like I’m being ridiculous. “We’ll see. I’ve got a couple of hours to loosen you back up again.”

I turn my head, glance out the window, and say nothing. What I really want to say is, *more like I only have to endure you for a couple more hours.* But I’ve worked hard at taming that spark inside me, the one that lights easily and races across everything I touch. My temper can be a wildfire, and I hate to think where that aspect of me comes from, so I tamp it down.

We pull through the gates at Cascade Acres, and I direct him up to the house, all river rock and exposed lumber. It’s quite something, perched up on the hill overlooking the lake. Stefan sprinkled our mom’s ashes in that lake. I still don’t quite know how to feel about that.

Every Sunday, our friend group takes turns hosting dinner. I look forward to it every week. Our get-togethers have that family vibe I’ve dreamed about my entire life. The one that was not present with my much older brother gone and two alcoholic parents who fought non-stop. With a sperm donor who was heavy with his fists, something I escaped less and less the mouthier I got, the warm fuzzy feelings that most people attach to their childhood are foreign to me.

It’s been years since anyone has hit me. But I can still feel the burn across my cheek and the sting of tears across the bridge of my nose. I still have nightmares about cowering at his feet while he screams at me with my mother drunk and passed out on a couch somewhere.

I push those memories away once Tommy has parked and hop out without waiting for him. I just want to get into the safe haven that is my brother’s house, to be surrounded by all the people I’ve come to love and trust. To get away from the guy who calls me *Nadi* like he knows me well enough to use a shitty nickname.

I suck in a deep breath as my hand wraps around the front door handle. *I’m being too hard on him. Tommy is sweet. Relaxed. He will be good for me.*

*I just need to lighten up and act my age.*

His warm palm lands on my shoulder and his friendly surfer-boy grin takes over his heart-shaped face. “Let’s go, babe.”

*Babe.*

I absently think to myself that Tommy is like a Golden Retriever. Cute and friendly, but just a bit dumb. Or a little too eager to please. But I stomp on those thoughts—it’s unfair to a Golden Retriever now that I think about it—and step into the house.

Music and laughter filter in from the open concept kitchen, echoing down the hall. These sounds in a house still make me do a double take. Four years ago, I would have never heard these sounds.

“Hi!” I call out as I toe off my shoes and head down the hallway toward everyone. “We’re here.”

“Come on in, sweetie.” Mira pops around the corner with a big bell of red wine in hand. “Your brother is cooking up a storm in here. I hope you’re hung—”

Her head quirks as she takes in Tommy standing behind me. “You brought someone.”

“Yeah,” I worry at my bottom lip, realizing I should have told them before now. “Sorry. I hope that’s okay.”

Her full lips curl up as she studies Tommy. “Of course, of course.” She steps forward and holds her hand out to my date. “Hi, I’m Mira.”

“Tommy.” Even his voice sounds like he’s smiling as he claps his broad palm into hers. “Nice to meet you.”

She nods, but her head tilts, and her dark eyes dart between us. I love Mira. I love how she loves my brother. But goddamn, she is impossible to get a read on sometimes. “Come on in. I’ll introduce you to everyone.” Then she swaggers back through the wood beam archway, waving us in over her shoulder.

“Nadia is here,” she announces to the room as she slides herself onto one of the stools at the oversized island. “And she brought a date.” My cheeks heat, and I momentarily inspect the ceiling, wishing the floor would swallow me up. *This was my worst idea ever.* “Everyone, meet Tommy.”

Tommy steps up beside me with a wave and a breezy, “Hey, Gang.”

It’s a dopey thing to say to a bunch of people you’ve never met, but I can’t pay attention to Tommy right now because I feel like there’s a collar around my neck, and someone just gave it a good, hard tug. I give myself

over to that sensation, meeting the stony gaze of Griffin Sinclair. He's sitting at the dinner table, dark eyes drilling into me like he could grind me into dust if he stares hard enough.

Everyone is staring at Tommy and me, but I can't take my eyes off Griffin. No hat, hair slicked back, looking fucking delicious. I'm immediately plunged back into our encounter in the bathroom.

*Will that night never fade?*

It's then that I notice Silas, my nephew, is sitting beside him coloring. In fact, so is Griffin. His huge hand holds a small purple crayon while they draw an underwater scene on a plain sheet of paper together. Silas is bent over the page like some sort of prodigy. Tiny, chubby hand fisted around a blue crayon, so small next to the big mountain man seated beside him.

He must notice that Griffin has stopped coloring because his elbow juts out, nudging the inked arm beside him. "More fish," he says simply, in his sugary baby voice. "Do a biiiiig fish."

It's then that Griffin drops my gaze and leans into the little boy next to him and hits him with a soft, playful sort of smile. One that jabs me right in the ovaries. "Yes, boss," he says, with more animation than I've ever heard him use. "How big? Shark big?"

Silas claps, grinning up at the man who has no business looking this good. No business looking this sweet. It's almost more than I can take.

I plaster a smile on my face and turn away before I turn into a total puddle, focusing my attention back over on the rest of my friends spread throughout the living space. Billie, Violet, and Mira sitting at the island, Hank and Trixie playing with Cole and Violet's two little girls in the adjoined living room, and Cole and Vaughn sitting with Griff at the table. Everyone acts like family, although the relations are a little convoluted by marriage, by blood, and by choice. Either way, it's a tight-knit group and what we all have in common is Gold Rush Ranch.

I offer a wave. "Hi, everyone." And then I walk into the kitchen, desperate for a drink to fix my dry mouth.

"Hi." My brother Stefan peeks up at me with a smirk while he dices fresh rosemary into tiny pieces. The man could have been a chef if he wanted to. It's the thing I miss the most about living with him. The gourmet cooking was hard to let go of when I moved out. "A date, huh?"

He keeps his focus down on the cutting board, but I'm not stupid enough to think he's not having a good chuckle right now.

“Apparently.” I rip the fridge open and reach for my go-to flavored sparkling water. Pineapple.

“Come on, babe. Have a beer.” Tommy reaches over me and straight into the fridge like he owns the place.

I sneak a peek back at my brother and instantly want to wipe the amusement off his face when he silently mouths, “*Babe?*”

Head shaking, I turn back to Tommy. “I’m good. I don’t drink, remember?”

Beer in hand, he scoffs and leans against the island behind himself, blocking everyone else out of our conversation. “Still? I figured you’d have outgrown that phase by now.” His thick fingers crack open the can of beer, and he holds it up to me. “Come on. One little sip won’t hurt. Maybe I can whip you up something sweet instead. Margarita?”

My heart grows heavy, the hammering of it stretching out and pounding in my ears. I hate being put on the spot like this. There’s always this tiny voice in my head—a negative voice—that tells me other people know better than I do. Maybe Tommy is right, and I need to lighten up a bit.

Learning myself outside the confines of the house I grew up in is a constant struggle. I don’t trust other people easily, and what’s worse is I often don’t even trust myself.

“She said no.” A rusty voice caresses the back of my neck, and even if he’s barely ever spoken to me, it sounds familiar.

“Joking around, man. I’m Tommy.”

I turn just enough to see both men. Griffin doesn’t look like he finds the joke all that amusing. A muscle ticks in his jaw. In fact, if looks could kill, I think Tommy might keel over on the spot.

Where Tommy is bulky, broader, Griffin is powerful, muscles bulging only where it’s natural. Strength lines his limbs without appearing overwrought. He’s not in the gym bench pressing and doing deadlifts until his body shakes. He’s tossing hay bales and pounding fence posts, and that’s really working for him.

Tommy’s features are soft. Griffin’s are hard. Tommy is day. Griffin is night.

The two men could not be more opposite if they tried.

The older man tugs the yellow can out of my hand, cracks it open, and hands it back to me. All without saying a word. Then he shoves past Tommy and opens the fridge door in search of something for himself, effectively



blocking us out.

I want to peek around the edge, get a better view of Griffin. He looks different tonight. No cap, inky hair styled, beard smoothed, white collared shirt rolled up just enough to show the black tattoos that adorn his forearms.

The man is an amusement park for my eyes.

“Who’s the asshole?” Tommy whispers.

My forehead wrinkles. *I* think Griffin is an asshole, but I have good reason. It bugs me that Tommy thinks he does. But I don’t go there. “Griffin. My brother’s best friend,” is all I mumble back.

“Griffin Sinclair?” Tommy’s head whips around, seeking out the older man, brow furrowing in concentration.

“Yeah.” I shrug, confused about how he might know him.

“Like... *the* Griffin Sinclair?”

“Uh, I don’t know what that means.” I sip my drink, sneaking a peek over at the big, brooding ball of muscle at the table.

“Like the famous quarterback who grew up in this town? And then got injured and disappeared?”

I raise an eyebrow at Tommy. Because the truth is, I know nothing about the man. And where I grew up, football is soccer. So, it’s not like I’d know. Plus, no one has mentioned it.

“Okay!” I jump at my brother’s loud clap. “Everyone at the table. Dinner is ready.”

Tommy’s hand lands on my back, and I force myself not to flinch. *Tommy will be good for me.* My eyes shift over my shoulder, sneaking one last peek at Griffin. My stomach flops when I see his eyes fixed on where Tommy is touching me.

I move to the beautifully set table, feeling nervous under his unwavering gaze. With its raw wood edge, the dining table has an industrial vibe that’s warmed up by bright white plates and brass-tone flatware. I search the modern black chairs and grab a spot beside Tommy. Easy, bright, sunshiny, Tommy. I need more bright days in my life.

Not more dark, broody nights.

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## GRIFFIN



I'M CUTTING into my slice of prime rib with more force than necessary, still fuming over the big, dopey Ken doll trying to force a drink on my best friend's little sister. No one else saw, and even if they did, it wouldn't bug them as much.

But as a person who steers clear of the stuff, it gets my hackles up. I don't know what Nadia's reasons are, and it doesn't seem like he does either. All that aside, a man should always take no for an answer. If you have to pressure a woman into doing something, you're a pencil-prick with no manners. In my book anyway.

And this guy is one of those. Big talker, a shiny small-town showboat. I recognize it because that used to be me.

Minus the not taking no for an answer. My mama taught me better than that.

"This is so good, Stefan." The petite blonde across the table, who introduced herself as Violet, smiles kindly over the quiet clanking of cutlery. Other murmurs of assent fill the space while everyone chows down.

"Glad to hear it. I love cooking for you guys." Stefan grins at his wife. A charged grin that almost makes me a little jealous. All these people seem so damn happy in each other's company.

I'm out of my element. I haven't been in the habit of meeting new people for several years now. I'm out of practice. Most of the people sitting here are new to me. Stefan and Mira I know well, but the rest not so much. I know

Billie now, or at least she talked at me like we know each other.

For a few years there, it was just Stefan. He was the only person I spent time with, aside from my parents. When he bought this place from me, he was so fucking clueless. I couldn't figure out why someone who knew almost nothing about running a farm would want one. So, I offered to help him in my free time. Teach him the ropes.

The only reason I offered is because when we met, his eyes didn't widen, he didn't ask for an autograph, and he didn't inquire about where I'd disappeared to, which meant he had no idea who I was.

A sincere *nice to meet you* was all I got. And that sliver of anonymity gave me the freedom to be a completely new person around Stefan. Of course, my history eventually became known. But on my terms. Stefan liked me for me, grumbly prick that I'd become. Our friendship foundation had nothing to do with who we'd been and everything to do with who we both were at that moment when we met.

Two lonely motherfuckers with pasts we'd rather leave, well, in the past.

Violet continues to carry the conversation. "Nadia, I heard Billie is going to give you riding lessons this summer."

The young woman beside me, who I've been trying my damndest to ignore, stiffens ever so slightly. She places her fork down carefully, like every movement is planned. Intentional. Like she's playing the role of someone soft and demure.

The girl in the bathroom wasn't this reined in. She was wild. Demanding. *Again*, she'd said. The one word that pierced my shields. I almost did it, too. Kissed her again. I was so close, but something held me back.

And now, spending the summer here in her general vicinity, I know I'm going to have to keep holding myself back. Pushing her away.

"Yeah. Yes, I think I'd like that. I'm pretty comfortable working with the horses. It seems like a natural progression to learn to ride."

"I'm happy to help when I have time. I'm not sure Billie understands how tired she's going to be once the babies arrive." She grins at her friend knowingly.

Billie just rolls her eyes. "I'm right here, you know."

It's under the din of laughter that I notice Tommy's hulking frame lean in on the opposite side of Nadia. He drops his voice, but not low enough. "Should we tell them you already know how to ride real well?"

Nadia stops chewing, her eyes shifting around the table to see if anyone

heard. Her warm brown irises flash to mine for only a moment before they drop back down to her plate.

She knows I heard what he said, and she can't even look at me because of it. He embarrassed her. *What a fucking dickhead thing to say to a girl at a family dinner.*

My teeth grind. I want to say something so badly—I want to smash his big dumb face into his plate—but I swallow my rage and carry on brutalizing my steak.

“Violet might be right, you know.” Vaughn doesn't even glance at Billie as he says it, like even he knows his wife will injure him for trying to tell her what to do. “Just a thought.” He snorts in a poor attempt to contain his amusement, obviously sensing her unimpressed stare on his face.

“Thanks, *Boss Man.*” The words cut and Vaughn's cheeks twitch. The few times I've been around these two have been enough for me to know they enjoy the push and pull of these confrontations. It's charming, in a way. “But I'm pretty sure I can decide what I can handle.”

“I c—” I talk before my brain has enough time to shut it down, stopping on the hard *c*-sound of *can*. My brain to mouth connection is questionable at the best of times, so I guess leave it to me to blurt something stupid out now. “I will. If you're not able.”

Billie points her fork at me and narrows her eyes. “Thanks Griff. That'd be great. *I,*” she glares at her husband, “will let you know if I need you to step in.”

I nod and turn my attention back down to my plate, wishing I hadn't risked talking in front of everyone. Especially by volunteering to spend more time with a girl that I should stay far away from.

Especially considering the way she's looking at me right now.



“I LOVE HAVING YOU AROUND.” My mother smiles at me like she's worried she might scare me away.

We've always been close, my parents and me. But when things went to shit a few years ago, they let me retreat and lick my wounds. They didn't force my hand or tell me what to do, but they gave me an ultimatum and have never given up on me, even when I'm sure they wanted to.

When I was spiraling down the drain, they were the ones who picked me up and gave me the ass kicking I needed. They didn't judge me or make me feel like shit about my fall from grace. Their support—their love—was and still is unwavering.

I hate to think about where I'd be without them.

"It's nice being close enough to pop in." I lean close to my mother's petite frame and wrap an arm around her narrow shoulders. "I love you, Mom." My lips press against the black hair at her temple.

"I love you, too, sweet boy. Thanks for joining me for a coffee date. Can you believe how different pour-over coffee tastes?"

This is my mother's new obsession. Pour-over coffee. Some fancy kettle. A scale to weigh the beans. Organic beans washed with love and positive energy or some shit. It all sounds a bit woo-woo to me, but she's so pleased with herself that it's almost impossible not to share in her fascination.

Plus, even I must admit the coffee is good.

"It was delicious." I stand with a gentle squeeze to her shoulder. "Let's do this again next t-t-t . . ." My lips thin and I sigh, trying not to beat myself up. "When Dad golfs next."

She doesn't react. She knows me well enough to know how much the stutter pisses me off. Instead, she carries on like she didn't notice, even though I know she did. How could you not?

"That would be perfect." She claps her hands together softly as we walk to the front door of their spacious condominium. It's nestled up into the base of Garnet Ridge, just one town over from Ruby Creek. When I sold the ranch, the one I purchased with my shiny new contract all those years ago, I bought them this place in a 55+ community. Beautiful views of the valley, and right on the golf course where my dad enjoys spending all his free time. I live on the mountain above them now and Dad likes to joke that if he squints real hard, he can see me moping around.

They're happy, and that makes me happy. After everything they've done for me, I wish I could do more.

Feet back in my boots and arms slid into my jean jacket, I turn to give her one more hug.

"Any pretty girls on that farm?" She smiles into my neck.

Except *that*. I don't know if I can do *that* for them.

"Mom." My tone is warning, but playful.

"Griffy, it's the grandbaby-rabies. I'm sick. I can't help it."

I shake my head with a small smile. “Seek treatment, Mom.”

We share a look and then I turn to leave, knowing I need to get back to Gold Rush Ranch to start my new job. A job among people and a community that I’ve spent years hiding from. I grew up riding. My grandfather was a bronc rider and would sit me up on many a horse. I spent my days following him around and learning everything I could about colt starting. Until I found football.

Football was my universe until it wasn’t. But getting back into working with young horses has proven to be almost therapeutic for me. Taking on a few training horses up at my farm keeps me busy enough.

I cruise the winding roads under clear blue skies, the harsh sunlight bouncing off the brim of my hat. Just as I drop my concentration from the road to grab a piece of my favorite cinnamon gum, I catch a flash of gray out of the corner of my eye.

And then I feel a small thump under my front driver’s side wheel.

*Fuck my life.*

Doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out I just hit something. My heart constricts as I pull over to see what I’ve done. Another thing for me to beat myself up about. Killed a fucking bunny or something.

But when I hop out of my truck on the quiet country road, I don’t see a rabbit. I see a filthy pile of matted hair whimpering in the ditch. My pulse ratchets up at the sight.

“Whoa, boy.” I hold out a hand as I scale the steep side of the ditch. “What are you?”

Small black eyes squint back at me, and I decide it must be a dog. A very worse for wear dog. It’s trembling, and the closer I draw, the more rigid it becomes. “I’m sorry, fella.” One of his hind legs is twisted at an angle that it should not be. “I got you.”

I reach out for the little dog, alarmed by how skinny it is when I pick it up. It just shakes and whines, clearly in shock, as I race back to the truck with it in my arms. At least I know where to take him. Luckily, I’m friends with one of the best veterinarians in the area.

When I whip into the parking lot in front of the onsite vet clinic at Gold Rush Ranch, the dog is in much the same condition. I scoop him up, wrapping him in a towel from my back seat, and dart into the clinic.

Nadia is at the front desk, showing another woman something on the computer. Her face gives nothing away when she looks up at me.

“I need help.”

“What is that?” She points at the mess in my arms, confusion lacing her tone.

“I hit a dog.”

“Oh shit.” She shoots up instantly and hustles around the desk, brow furrowed as she pulls the towel away to peek at the canine. “How long ago?”

“Maybe t—nine minutes ago?”

“*Nine* minutes?” Her nose scrunches up, like she thinks I’m fucking weird. But I don’t care. I’m not going to stumble over the word *ten* in front of her. “Oddly specific. But okay, at least you talk to me now,” she mutters as her eyes roll. But her hands are already reaching for him. She’s not wasting a second. “I’ll take him back. Let’s just try not to jostle him too much.”

Without missing a beat, she steps in close to me; her toned arms slide inside of mine, trying to replace my positioning without moving the stoic little dog.

“Okay, got him.”

She hits me with a terse smile. And then she’s gone. Leaving me with the light scent of sweet roses that I still remember from two years ago.

The one I haven’t forgotten to this day.

## NADIA



THE LITTLE DOG looks like shit. He's sedated because he was shaking far too hard to take a proper X-ray. I run my palm over his small skull while Mira takes pictures of the obvious broken leg. He's in rough shape, in more ways than one. Yes, the leg is broken, but his matted coat is worse than I've ever seen, and when I get my fingers beneath that layer of wool, all I can feel is bones.

This is not a well-loved dog. He's either lost or abandoned, according to Mira, who takes the entire scene in with perfect serenity.

The bridge of my nose stings and tears well in my eyes.

"Why are you crying? He's going to be okay. I can fix this." She stares up at the scans hanging on the back-lit board. The leg is shattered.

"I just feel bad for him."

Mira shrugs with her hands affixed to her hips, still assessing the imaging. "I feel happy that I can save him."

I sniffle. That's one way to look at it. Plus, Mira is kind of robotic with some of this stuff. Seeing suffering up close still tugs at my heart strings. Maybe I'm projecting.

"Go tell Griff that the dog will survive but I'm going to have to amputate the leg."

I blink rapidly and smooth a hand over the dirty little body. *Poor baby.*

"Then you can scrub in and help me."

"Do you think he's still here?" The guy seems like a dick. My money is



on that he left to cowboy it up, or whatever he does.

Mira nods matter-of-factly, like there's no question in her mind that he's still out there, and then disappears through the doors into the surgical area to prepare. With just the two of us on site and it not being a scheduled surgery day, we'll have to make do. It means we both pitch in.

I let my hand linger gently on the dog's emaciated body, sucking in a centering breath before I head back out to the waiting area.

Mira called it. Griffin is still here, sitting in a chair, legs spread wide, elbows propped on his knees with his head hung low. All curled in on himself, like the weight of what he's carrying on his shoulders is more than he can take.

His head snaps up, dark mysterious eyes meeting mine without flitting away. He hasn't properly held my eye since that night, since before he knew who I was, and I find my steps faltering under the weight of his gaze.

He's so fucking hot. He oozes masculinity. It leaks out of his pores and the effect on me is heady. There's no doubt I have a crush on my brother's friend. And I almost want to laugh at it. *How fucking cliché.*

"He's going to be okay." My voice breaks as I swallow my emotions—something I've become adept at over the last couple of years. I gave up being the broken, angry little girl in favor of setting a nice, normal life up for myself. "But we're going to operate. Mira says that hind leg is too damaged to keep."

"Amputation?" The brim of his hat shadows his heavy brow and strong nose, making it hard to see his expression.

"Yeah." I twiddle my hands in front of myself, like a nervous little schoolgirl, not sure what else to say. He's so intense right now that he almost makes me nervous. Smoldering, I can handle. Silent treatment, got that too. But this guilt-ridden body language has me off-kilter. He looks like he could use a friend right now.

"Are you okay?" I ask quietly as I come to crouch before him.

"Mhm." He nods, dropping his head again as his calloused fingers knit together between his knees.

"Okay. Um... do you want me to call you when he's done?"

He shakes his head without looking back up at me. "I'll wait."

I blink again, but this time it's not to chase away the tears. It's because I almost can't believe my own ears. For some reason, I didn't expect that reaction.

Without thinking, my palm falls over his hands. Like I just know he could use a gentle touch. God knows he's not being gentle with himself right now. "Hey, we got this. He looks like he's been on his own for a while. This isn't on you. Accidents happen."

He just grunts in response.

But he doesn't shrug my touch away.



I WALK UP to the clinic with a smile on my face. The sun is out. The birds are chirping. Life is good. I'm tired from checking up on the dog throughout the night, but I have my coffee mug in hand. I bounce up the low-slung stairs to the wraparound porch that meets the front entryway.

Something moves, and I jump. Spilled coffee burns against my hand.

"Ah!" One hand thumps against my chest when Griffin unfolds his long limbs from one of the wicker chairs on the front porch. "You couldn't have said hi before springing up on me like that?"

His lips flatten out and his eyes roll beneath the shadow of his brim.

"I saw that." Moving past him and his wordless ways, I slide a key into the front door and almost miss the quiet, "Hi," from behind me.

The alarm beeps as I enter the code and flick the lights on.

"How's the dog?" Griffin's boots thump on the floor as he follows behind me.

"Good. I've been checking on him all night. He seems groggy, but fine. Wanna see him?"

His hands shoved in his pockets, stance wide, he nods at me as I drop my stuff at the front desk.

"Come on back then." I wave him along as he tails me. "Good morning, little pupper," I coo toward the metal crate at the back of the exam space. He sits up unsteadily, little head quirking as we approach. And the closer we get, the more excited he becomes. He's up and wagging, pressing a small black nose through the holes in the crate's door.

"He's bald," Griffin's rusty voice cuts through the room.

"Yeah. We had to shave him down. He was one big knot and crawling with fleas. Definitely has had no one taking care of him for a while."

"He's standing." Griffin walks closer, staring at the little dog with

concern etched on his face.

“Nothing gets by you, does it?” He glares at me, and I try not to laugh. “So, dogs don’t really feel sorry for themselves. Not how we do. They just make the best of their situation and carry on. Luckily, they rebound pretty quickly after losing a hind leg.”

Griffin grunts and steps next to me, my body humming with awareness as he draws close. He holds one hand up to the door of the crate, letting the excited dog lick at his skin. *Don’t blame you, boy. Don’t blame you at all.*

I smile at the sight. “He knows you saved him.”

“I didn’t save him. I hit him.”

I lift a shoulder. “You could look at it that way. Or you could look at it like he threw himself in your path because he needed help. And you helped him.”

His eyes shift down to where I stand beside him. “Young enough for rose-colored glasses, eh?”

I arch a brow and cross my arms. I don’t think anyone has ever accused me of wearing rose-colored glasses in my life. The young bit? Well... he must have had a real fucking shame spiral when he put the pieces together about who I am. But rose-colored glasses? I almost laugh. I’ve lived with shit-colored glasses most of my life, until I *chose* to take them off and stop *letting* things happen to me.

“Old enough to choose the color of glasses I wear. Thanks.” *Dick.*

I turn to make the no-name dog his breakfast and cocktail of medication.

“Why don’t you t-talk to *him* that way?” The motion of him turning away catches my eye.

“Him?”

He hesitates, and I swear his cheeks pick up a little color. “Barbie Doll Boy.”

I laugh, measuring out a syringe of anti-inflammatories. “You mean Ken Doll?”

“Whatever.” His fingers press through the cage.

“You can let him out.” I mix the small serving of wet food and pills together, hoping he’s the type of dog that won’t pick them up and spit them out. “And I don’t know what you mean.”

“He shouldn’t say shit like that to you.” God, he’s so vague. I’m pretty certain he means the riding comment, which was so fucking cringey. But I refuse to agree with him. My pride won’t let me.

“Thanks for the input. I’ll keep that in mind on our next date,” I add, because fuck this guy for telling me what to do. *Especially* with our history. I have one big brother, and I don’t need another.

I slide the bowl across the floor toward the waggling rat-like dog that Griffin just freed from the crate, and he dives straight in. Poor thing has got to be starving, but we can only start with small meals.

When I stand back up, Griffin’s eyes are fixed on the bowl and the quiet grunting noises coming from the dog. “He doesn’t deserve a next date.”

My eyes narrow at him. “Drop it, okay? I didn’t ask for your opinion. You gave me your opinion of me two years ago and that was quite enough, thanks. Accident? Mistake? Whatever. I heard you loud and clear.” I rub clammy hands over my scrubs before crossing them over my body like a shield. *I just want to live a normal life—a job, a husband, a herd of happy kids—so that’s why.*

“Just looking out for my friend’s little sister.”

I bark out a disbelieving laugh. *The fucking gall.* “Is that what you did that night in the bathroom? Looked out for me?”

“That was different.”

“Why?”

He grunts. “Didn’t know who you were.”

I click my tongue, disappointed in what a chickenshit the guy who grabbed me and owned me is being right now. “Pussy.”

“Nadia.” His tone is a warning, but I’ve heard worse. Griffin Sinclair does a lot of things to me, but scaring me isn’t one of them. “I’m thirty-five years old. You’re barely legal. We c—shouldn’t even be talking about this. You need to forget it.”

I roll my eyes. *Barely legal.* What is this, a porno?

When you’ve lived through the shit I have, age is just a number on a birth certificate. I feel like I’ve lived a few lives. Reinvented me. When you’ve seen what I’ve seen, what the hell do you have in common with normal, happy people your own age?

I pack away the food and medications, silently eyeing the small dog limping around the bowl clumsily, sniffing and searching for more.

When I finish, I catch Griffin’s dark eyes tracing my body. They drop to my lips and the hair on my arms immediately stands up. It unnerves me how attuned to him my body is.

In an attempt to recover, I plaster a practiced smirk on my lips. “Thanks

for the input. I don't think I will. Forget about it, that is. I actually enjoy replaying that night in my head."

His jaw clenches, that one muscle jumping as his arms cross before him. He looks so fucking grumpy, I almost laugh. "Don't be a brat."

Everything about his body language is tightly wound, feral almost. Except his eyes when he hit that word. *Brat*. Those are pure scorching smolder.

And they tell a completely different story.

I wink at him, watching his tense body rear back like I just slapped him. "But why? Why stop when I can tell you like it so much?" And then I head back out front to open the clinic for the day.

He's right that I shouldn't let Tommy talk to me the way he did, but I'm not about to let him do it either.

Griffin Sinclair can't ruin my good mood with his growly bullshit. My first riding lesson is this afternoon. I'm checking things off my to-do list and experiencing everything life offers whether or not he likes it.

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## GRIFFIN



IRRITATED. That's the word I'll use to describe what I'm feeling right now.

Nadia Dalca is like a sliver under my fucking skin, stuck a little too far in to get out. It's annoying.

*Wildflower.* She doesn't want to be tamed, and I shouldn't want to try this badly. I should steer her in the opposite direction and send her running.

It's been years since a woman sparked my interest beyond some nameless, meaningless exchange. My football days were a wild ride in many ways and now I have a few women in the area I can call when the need strikes me. It will not give my mom the grand-babies she so desperately wants, but it scratches the itch.

And it's an easy way for me to maintain my privacy.

I storm up to the barn to start my day. The hours pass methodically, one young horse at a time, until all five have put in a good day's work. No one talks to me. No one bothers me.

Except Nadia.

She fucking bothers me. Her lips haunt me. Her words preoccupy me. And the fact that she's fourteen years younger, living on the same ranch, and so fucking off-limits almost makes me see red.

I should drive into town tonight and fuck Natasha. She doesn't ask questions or talk back. She doesn't run her sassy mouth, hit me with a challenging smirk, and make my dick hard without even touching me.

With her, I could get this out of my system. I could let loose and work out

some tension. And then come back here and get to work without eye-fucking a girl I shouldn't even be looking at.

"Maybe another day," I mutter as I turn out the last of the horses with a firm clap on the haunch. I'm not in the right headspace for another woman right now. I mull over when I will be, when another empty fuck will fit into my schedule, and the fact of the matter is, I have free time galore. I could fit it in whenever... I just don't want to.

Something I'm turning over in my mind when I hear the low hum of wheels on the asphalt behind me.

Mira pulls up in a truck beside me, rolling the window down with an expression of urgency on her face. "Hey, Griff. You're gonna need to do Nadia's riding lesson."

*Fuck my life.*

"When?"

She glances down at her watch. "In about an hour."

My brow furrows. I know I offered. But I didn't really expect I'd be doing it. I was just being polite. "Why?"

"Because Billie is at the hospital. It seems like her water might have broken, but it's way too early. I'm headed there now. She's the one who mentioned the lesson." Her fingers tap impatiently at the steering wheel.

"She's possibly in early labor and worrying about a riding lesson?"

She shrugs as if it's normal. "Yep. She also told me I need to get there because I'm the only doctor she trusts with her vagina."

I snort, shaking my head. "You chicks are fuckin' weird."

"Oh, absolutely." She nods, not offended at all. "So, you've got the lesson?"

"Yeah, yeah." I wave her off. "Go deal with her... whatever. You know. Just go."

"Vagina." Mira laughs as she rolls up the window. "The word you're looking for is *vagina*."

Walking back up to the barn as she pulls away, I close my eyes and wish for the calm of my acreage on the mountain.



"WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?"

Nadia sounds about as happy as I do about this situation. But I also know I'm the best man for the job. The only one with the time for the job. Time I could have spent getting lost in Natasha or someone else. Honestly, anyone other than the tempting blonde standing in front of me.

"Billie is at the hospital. So, c-call me..." I trail off, rubbing a hand over my face. You'd think by now I could work my way around the words that trip me up. But I'm just dumb enough to run into them full throttle.

At least I'm consistent in my life choices.

When I remove my hand, I can see Nadia's tilted head, glittering eyes regarding me curiously as she leans up against the fence. "Call you coach?" she finishes the sentence.

A nod is all I offer her. I'm already tired of talking. Missing the peace of my time alone.

"I've heard you do that before."

"Yup." I bark the word more harshly than I intended and don't miss the way she flinches.

"Do you have a stutter?" She just asks it. Straight out. No shame, no treading lightly, no backing down. Just out with it.

I like that about her. The way she just says what she's thinking. Wears her heart on her sleeve. It's why I was so pissed off watching her around that douchebag the other night, all demure and accommodating. I wanted her to tell him to go fuck himself. Because that's what he deserved.

Even if I barely know her, I know deep down *that's* who she is. And spending time with a person who you can't be yourself around is a tragic waste of time. So, I don't bother lying to her. This is who I am now.

"Yes," I mumble, turning toward the gate. "Let's get started."

"Is Billie okay?" Her eyes are pinched with concern.

I sigh because I have little comfort to offer her. "I don't really know."

She nods with a bigger sigh than mine and then forges ahead. "Okay." Her tone is back to light and happy. "Just tell me what to do."

I almost groan out loud at her saying shit like that to me, and I have to remind myself that she's fourteen years younger. Just starting her life. She doesn't need someone like me—reclusive and damaged—and I can't betray Stefan's trust by pulling anything with his little sister.

"How much do you know? Have you ridden at all?"

"Nope." She sidles up beside me, eyes trailing over Spot appreciatively. He is a good-looking horse. I can't blame her. "What's his name?" Her chin



juts out in his direction.

“Spot.” I unlatch the gate and hand the leather halter over to her. “Go get him.”

“*Spot?*”

I bulge my eyes at her. Silently asking, *Yeah, and?*

“It’s just not a very creative name. What with all the spots on him.” She marches into the paddock confidently and holds the halter out for the horse to drop his head into it. “It would be like calling me Blondie instead of Wildflower.”

My molars clamp down at the mention of the pet name I called her, and it’s obvious to me that making little comments like that amuses her. Her lips are rolling together in a pathetic attempt to keep her smile concealed.

“Nadia,” I say her name like a warning, silently thanking the universe that her name doesn’t start with a *k* or a *t*. Scolding her while stumbling over the letter wouldn’t pack quite the same punch.

“Yes?” She shoots me the most innocent look, caramel eyes all wide behind the flutter of her thick lashes. *Brat.*

“Bring him into the barn and get him in the cross ties. Think you can manage that?”

“Yes, Coach.” Her voice overflows with amusement as she saunters past me toward the pristine facility.

If she weren’t completely off-limits, I’d take her over my knee. Age difference be damned.

I stare at her ass as she leads Spot into the barn. The way her jeans crease under the round globes is almost hypnotic. They curve up into a tight, narrow waist, before flaring back out into her ample tits.

If you searched for hourglass figure in the dictionary, I’m sure you’d find a shot of Nadia Dalca’s wicked body.

With Spot latched into the cross tie, we get him ready. I show her the pieces of tack she’ll need, explaining the various parts and how to put each piece on safely.

The tip of her tongue catches between her teeth in concentration as she works to commit what I’m telling her to memory. The suggestive comments and flirting die off, and she makes an earnest effort to learn what I’m attempting to teach.

Something that makes her more alluring to me. She’s smart, savvy, committed to figuring it out, and I can respect that. What’s more, she doesn’t

look at me differently since the stutter came up.

No pity. No judgment. No wounded puppy routine. Just a blunt question. Followed by complete indifference. At her reaction, or lack thereof, I relax in her presence. The words flow easily, and I get lost in sharing things I could do with my eyes closed.

“Okay, grab your helmet and let’s head outside.”

“Oh, nah. I’m good.” She walks toward the doorway like she thinks she’s going to march that fine ass out of here without a helmet on.

“No chance. Helmet. Now.”

She turns back to me, rolling her eyes and fisting her hands on her hips in a way that makes me acutely aware of her age. “You know I’m legal, right? A helmet isn’t mandatory.”

My eyes narrow. I didn’t miss that dig. “If you’re legal, stop acting like a child.” I point brusquely to the room down the hall where I know they store the tack and riding apparel. Anger singses my every movement. This is non-negotiable for me. “No helmet. No lesson.”

We face off, her eyes searching my face for answers that she won’t find. Something she must realize because her slender shoulders heave under the weight of a deep sigh. “Okay. Quit your grumbling. You don’t need to take the whole dad routine so seriously. I’ll be right back.”

Within minutes, she’s striding back out of that room, fastening the strap beneath her chin. “If you had insane curly hair that takes forever to straighten, you’d understand,” she mutters as she takes hold of Spot’s reins and struts out into the center of the oversized sand ring.

Hair. She’s worried about her fucking *hair* instead of her brain. My teeth grind and my head shakes as I follow her in, trying to keep my temper under control.

“Over by the mounting block,” I snap, striding over to the big wooden step stool in the middle. “Now, before you get on, you’re going to check the girth. Sometimes a horse will puff up when you cinch it the first go ‘round, which means it’s loose when you get on. Rookie way to fall off.” I internally pat my back for not tripping up the word *to*.

It’s a constant running tally. A fixation I can’t stop. It’s exhausting.

Nadia nods, reaching under the flap of the saddle, pushing up onto her tippy toes as she struggles to tighten the girth. Spot’s ears flit back, unimpressed.

“You’re not trying to suffocate him. Here,” I step in beside her, close

enough that her upper arm brushes against my bicep. The heat of her body seeps into mine as the faint scent of her lotion hangs in the air between us. But she doesn't move away from me. She watches my hands, still perfectly concentrated. But I'm distracted by the rosy tip of her tongue that's captured between her teeth again. "You don't need to squeeze him t-t-to death." My heart pounds in my chest as I try to ignore the slip. If I pretend it didn't happen, maybe she will too. The more I fixate, the worse the stutter becomes. The more nervous I am, the more it comes out to play.

I tug on the girth, testing for just the right amount of wiggle room. "About like that. Feel it."

"Okay." Her brow furrows as her slender fingers wrap around the girth, testing it the way I just did. "Got it. What now?"

Her face, all smooth, sun-kissed skin, heart-shaped top lip, and slightly fuller bottom lip, tips up at me, seeking direction. Eyes like warm leather, soft and free of judgment.

I clear my throat. "Now you get up on the block." She does so immediately. "Reins in your left hand." I hand them to her and close my hand over hers, wrapping her fingers around the well-worn leather.

"Good." My voice is quiet. "That hand here on the pommel, other hand at the back." As I position her body, we fall into sync. I direct and her body follows. We inhale and exhale in unison, and an eerie sense of calm overtakes me. After years of hiding away from people, I never expected to feel this at ease in the presence of someone I barely know.

But there's something about her. Natural and comforting. It's like I already know her somehow. "Now just swing a leg over and see how you feel in the tack."

Within moments, she's seated up on my horse with a pleased smile touching her lips while I stare up at her. Breath stolen right out of my lungs, like it was two years ago, at a complete loss for what to say next.

I can't pull my eyes off her. I have one hand on Spot's muscular shoulder, while the other hangs limp at my side. My eyes are glued to her face, fixated on the way she glows from within.

"I did it! I'm riding." Her grin could light an entire stadium with its brightness.

"I mean, you're just sitting there." I chuckle quietly. The excitement radiating off her is *almost* infectious.

"Get outta here, Debbie Downer." Her head shakes as she gathers the

reins in one hand and slides a palm up over the crest of Spot's neck. "Thanks, buddy. I'm going to cross this off my to-do list with your help," she murmurs down at him. Like he's done her some huge favor by just standing there.

Like the simplest things in life bring her pleasure. It makes me desperate to know what else is on that list. What else could bring her happiness like what's flowing off her right now? Because, in this moment, I think I'd do anything to check those things off for her.

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## NADIA



THE SCRAPPY LITTLE dog runs in circles around me the second I let him out of his crate. His tail is like a string bean now that we've shaved him down and I swear that scrawny tail is wagging his entire body. He is positively vibrating with excitement. All because I brought him out and sat down on the clinic floor.

I smile so hard my cheeks hurt. I can't help myself. He just had a leg amputated, but all he cares about is that I sat on the floor and talked to him in a baby voice.

"Who's a good little boy? Huh?" The dog's head quirks with intelligence. "Who is it?" He presses his ribcage down toward the ground and wiggles his tiny bum up in the air, like we're playing a really fun game.

My palm slaps the ground in front of him and he pushes up to standing, tail tucked between his legs, and tears around the clinic like he's the fanciest racehorse on this farm. Oblivious to the fact that he looks a little drunk with the way he's weaving around.

I laugh. A full laugh that fills my chest. "Do you have the zoomies, Tripod?"

The door behind me pushes open, and Mira's chuckle joins my own. "Tripod. I approve."

"It suits him." We smile at each other before Mira crouches down to scratch him behind the ears.

"How is Billie?" I ask eagerly.

Mira sighs as she sets her things down behind the front desk. “She’s good. The babies are good. The bad news is they’ve recommended full bed rest, and that’s going over about as well as you might think. Vaughn is in major over-protective mode, so I imagine there will be some battles there.”

I snort. *Understatement*. Billie is a force to be reckoned with. Something tells me Vaughn is going to have his hands full. “Oof. Poor Vaughn.”

My sister-in-law crouches beside me, and Tripod instantly ambles over, still wiggling his entire body. “I’ve contacted other clinics and the local shelter. I even put up posters in town. No one has come to claim him. Poor little fella.”

A pinch squeezes my chest at the thought that no one is coming for this little dog. That no one misses him or wants him. Sadly, I can relate.

I have Stefan now. But he never came back for me. He got the fuck out of dodge the second he could and never really looked back. I understand why. God, at the time, I was more jealous than anything. I was a canary in a cage, and he was the hawk swooping around outside. So, while I can’t blame him for putting as much distance between our childhood home and his well-being, there’s still always this tiny packed-away part of me that’s sad I got left behind.

Angry even.

But I keep that part of me well hidden. It doesn’t serve me, and it certainly doesn’t fit into my plan to create a happy, *normal* life for myself.

My plan to erase my past and create a shiny new future. A secure career, white picket fence, two point five kids. I want the whole thing.

I realize I’ve zoned out, watching Mira pet the orphan pup. “So, what now?” I ask.

Her lips press together in a grim line. “Shelter, I guess? Maybe a rescue? If I weren’t so busy already, I’d keep him myself.”

I look down into the bulgy, brown orbs of his eyes. I wish I could too. I want so badly to not leave him behind. The bridge of my nose stings as I lay all my trauma out on a perfectly happy little dog. But I’ve got this little voice at the back of my head telling me I’m not ready to settle down yet. That I’ve got a few things to do still.

“How was your riding lesson?” Mira changes the subject entirely, and I’m not sad to let my brain travel in a different direction.

A slow grin spreads across my face. “It was amazing.”

“Yeah?” Her eyes light up, excited for me. “Griff was okay? I know he’s

not much of a talker.”

I absently wonder if she knows why. Does Stefan know? Has anyone paid enough attention to him to even figure it out?

“He was great.” I nod. “I rode his horse, Spot. He only let me walk because he’s all high and mighty and shit.” Mira laughs. “But it was still amazing. We’re doing another after work tonight.”

She rubs my back in a sisterly way and beams down at me. “I’m so proud of you, Nadia.” I lean into her touch, thriving on it. I know people think Mira comes off a little prickly, but she’s been nothing but warm and protective of me. Since the very first time we met.

I know she’s my brother’s soulmate. But more than that, I think she was meant to come into my life as well.

“Are you going to apply?”

“For what?” Am I being intentionally oblivious? Yes, yes, I am.

And by the way she rolls her eyes, she knows it too. “Vet school, dumbass.”

I chuckle. “The window is open on my laptop, and I have spent a lot of time staring at it. Does that count?”

She nudges me. “Fill it out.”

“I... I don’t want to leave you in the lurch here. I basically just started again after ditching you to do my last program.”

“Hey. Look at me.” I do, and her fierce eyes bore into mine. “Don’t you ever apologize for going after what you want. Don’t you ever let anyone stand in your way. If they do, they don’t love you the way you deserve. And me? I love you. Apply. You have to try.”

That pinch in my chest is back, but for a completely different reason. I’m so lucky to have her and Stefan now. I may not have experienced unconditional love before turning eighteen and getting the hell out of Romania, but it’s better late than never.

The door swings open again, interrupting our sisterly moment and my chin jerks, following the sound.

Mira stands up immediately, but I’m stuck on the floor . . . at Griffin Sinclair’s feet. Struck too dumb to move.

I keep telling myself that kiss two years ago was just that. A kiss. I’ve kissed a lot of boys. A lot of hot boys. But none of them have wriggled into my subconscious the way Griffin has.

Kneeling here, staring up at his unwavering gaze, not a shred of warmth

on his face, I hate myself for still wanting him. I decide he's more like a tick. All I did was brush up against a bush one night and he latched on. Now he's stuck under my skin, poisoning me.

The good news is, I've pulled my fair share of ticks off animals in this line of work. So that's what I'll do. I'll grab my imaginary tweezers and yank him out like a fucking bug.

*Shiny new future doesn't include Lyme disease, thank you very much.*

"Hey." I pat Tripod once more before pushing up to stand. Because over my dead body am I staying kneeling in front of him when he can't even spare me a smile. "What's up?"

His arms fold over his chest, and he scowls at me like he's unimpressed. I don't know what it takes to impress Griffin Sinclaire but based on the way he goes all stony around me, I'm going to guess that I'm not capable of it.

"Here to check on the dog."

"Aww. Griffin, you're so sweet." Mira says lightly, walking back around the desk to sit at the computer. "As you can see, he's doing fine. Dogs handle amputation pretty well, actually." Her eyes scan the screen, and she clicks the mouse, probably breaking down the schedule for today as she continues. "I haven't been able to track down an owner. So once the incision heals, I'll start the process for placing him with a rescue."

Griffin visibly jerks back. The corners of his mouth pull down farther than usual. Mira doesn't notice; instead she casually carries on. "Actually, I have a favor to ask you guys."

I arch a brow, not loving the sound of that. *Guys*. Plural. Griffin and I together. I'm already suddenly dreading the riding lesson I've been looking forward to since yesterday. It seemed like he and I had made some headway. Until he strolled in here and scowled at me like I'm an annoying teenager.

Griffin just grunts as a way of saying, *No problem, what can I do for you?*  
Rude.

"I'm double booked with what I had to reschedule after yesterday. Actually," she worries her bottom lip against her teeth, "I'm more than double booked. I have a lameness consult down at the track, but everything else is out here. Nadia, would you be willing to go take a look? Video call me so I can see what's going on?"

I shrug. "I mean, yeah. Of course. But I can do that on my own."

She turns wide, pleading eyes to Griffin, and I almost laugh. She knows how to wield the doe eyes to get her way.



“Griffin, the owner of the horse at the track is . . . well, I don’t want to send Nadia in there alone. Go with her? I’ll make it up to you with dinner at our place tonight.”

“Hi.” I wave an arm between them. “I’m right here. I don’t need the crabby mountain man to accompany me.”

Griffin snorts, but Mira turns pleading eyes on me. “Nadia, this guy is not one of the good people in this business. I don’t even like going by myself, but at least I have a few years’ experience handling him.”

I turn on Griffin, his eyes dancing with amusement that isn’t reflected anywhere else on his body. Aside from his eyes, the guy is like a fucking statue. “Fine, but you can just stand there with crossed arms like you are right now. I don’t need you to hold my hand.”

The brim of his hat tips down, his face disappearing behind it. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Mira’s body noticeably relaxes now that we have agreed to her request.

“But I don’t want dinner.” Griffin is staring at the little white dog sitting on the ground, wagging its tail and staring up at all of us like he speaks English, too. “I want the dog.”

Mira’s head tilts and a soft smile plays across her face. “You mean you’d like to adopt Tripod?”

“Dumb name,” he says, but he gives a decisive nod, signaling that, yes indeed, he would like to adopt the dog.

My face twists up in his direction. “You named your spotted horse *Spot*. Who are you to talk about dumb names?”

“My dog, my name.” He doesn’t even look my way. He’s too busy staring at the dog. I wish I could see his face—his eyes—so I can figure out what’s running through his head right now. This big gruff man staring down at a small, fluffy, three-legged dog. They’re an odd pairing, that’s for sure.

It’s Mira’s turn to laugh now, shaking her head as she regards the stray dog. “Consider him yours, Griffin. He’ll need a couple more days at the clinic before you can take him.”

“Yup,” is all he says before he turns and strolls out of the clinic.

Like he just expects me to follow him.

“He’s kind of a dick, huh?” I say to Mira, rolling my eyes and expecting her to join in with my complaints.

But instead, she appears contemplative. “I don’t know. I think he’s kind of sweet, to be honest.”

I shake my head and roll my eyes at her before stomping out of the clinic toward his cocky swagger and killer ass topped off with proud broad shoulders.

Apparently, I'm the only person here who doesn't have heart-eyes for Griffin Sinclair and his quiet, gloomy persona.



“IT’S LAME. Limping like it’s broken.”

I instantly hate the man standing across from me. The way he’s dragging on a cigarette and then blowing the smoke in my general direction. The way he just referred to the horse tied up beside us as *it*. Not to mention the way his eyes linger on my body, the smirk, the lick across the lips. I’m fully clothed, but this fucking guy makes me feel like someone served me to him on some sort of platter.

Yeah. I hate him. I recognize his type. He’s not new or original.

Suddenly, knowing that Griffin is standing behind me like some grouchy, unflinching sentinel doesn’t seem so ridiculous. Suddenly, I’m really fucking glad.

Was the drive into the city awkward and quiet? Yes. Does Griffin listen to terrible twangy country music? Also, yes.

I tried to talk to him.

*I didn’t know you wanted a dog.*

*Yup.*

*Do you even like dogs?*

*Well enough.*

*Have you had one before?*

*Nope.*

*Do you have a name in mind then?*

*Nope.*

*Are you going to name him Snowy because he’s white?*

*\*grunts\**

And that was the last of our conversation for ninety goddamn minutes.

But in this moment, with this man eyeing me and treating his racehorse like an object rather than a living being, I confess to myself that having Griffin here is a relief.

“His hind fetlock is very swollen.” I crouch by the horse’s back leg, running my hand over the joint. “Easy, fella.”

The minute my hands touch the puffy area, I can feel the heat radiating from it. *Poor boy.*

“Have you been cold hosing this? Or icing?”

He sucks on his cigarette. “No.”

I stand and brush my hands off on my scrubs as I come back to the front of the horse. “Dr. Thorne wanted us to video call her so she can watch him move. Then I’ll take some X-rays, and she’ll follow up with you.”

“I’m not spending that kind of money on this horse. Racing career is about over. Made some good money. I’ll ship him if that’s the case.”

My brow furrows. “Ship him?”

“Auction. Meat. Lawn ornament. Makes no difference to me.”

Angry tears spring up in my eyes as my gaze travels over the beautiful horse’s seal-brown coat, highlighted with dapples across his haunches. Blinking rapidly to maintain my composure, I run a palm over his velvety nose, the long white snip that covers it.

His eyes flutter shut at the tenderness of my touch and my heart twists. “This could be something very minor. We could investigate further before you take such a drastic measure.”

The man throws his head back and laughs. It’s raspy, and he sounds out of breath. Hopefully, his cigarettes will take him out.

It’s a cruel thought. But my mind is a cruel place some days. I should feel bad about it, but after all the shit I’ve seen assholes like this do—I don’t.

My molars grind against each other as I struggle to maintain some professional composure. Two years ago, I’d have gone off on this guy. My temper would have taken over and made me say things I shouldn’t. Obviously, I still think them, though, and if thoughts could kill a person, this guy would be toast.

“Oh, little girl, you’ve got some things to learn about this business.” He steps toward me as his eyes rake over my body hungrily. It makes my skin crawl. And then he props a nicotine-stained hand on my shoulder. “I could teach them to you sometime if you w—”

“Hands off if you plan on keeping them.” Griffin’s voice rumbles from behind me. Right now, it’s gritty in a whole different way, almost like it’s rusty from years of not being used. But still velvety, still full and warm. He’s standing much closer than he was mere moments ago.

The man just smirks. He drops his hand but doesn't peel his gaze from my tits.

I hear two thumps of Griffin's boots and then his hand is wrapping softly around my elbow, pulling me behind the shield of his broad body as he hisses out, "Eyes up here, asshole."

I want to be angry with Griffin for intervening when he promised he wouldn't. He was supposed to stand there and look grumpy. But now, with his body providing a wall of protective muscle between myself and the man with the greasy hair and wandering eyes, I sigh in relief.

I want so badly to be capable, and brave, and self-assured. But the fact of the matter is, deep down, men like this *scare* me. Men like my father, ones with anger that simmers just barely concealed beneath the surface. Ones that know there are infrequently consequences for their actions.

If I let my mind wander down that path I would realize that, on a subconscious level, men scare me in general.

*Talk about daddy issues.*

"Easy, Cowboy." The man cackles, amused and not deterred. "Just letting blondie here know the realities of life. Racehorses come and go. The bottom line is what I'm focused on."

I watch Griffin's body go tense before me. A vein in the side of his neck throbs and his fingers curl in on themselves.

He usually seems so unaffected, but right now, he looks like he's ready to explode. Without even thinking, I reach one trembling hand forward and trail it down the center of his lower back. I watch the gray fabric of his T-shirt fold beneath my touch and Griffin's body goes still.

An ache crawls up my arm at the contact, burrowing itself at the inner part of my elbow. With a small gasp, I pull back, rotating my wrist to soothe the sparks. But Griffin is still staring the other man down, so I hook two fingers into the side loop of his jeans and give a sharp tug back.

His head flicks to the side, his eyes finding mine over the crest of his shoulder. Eyes that were amused earlier today but are pure chaos right now.

"Don't do something stupid," I whisper, imploring him to take it down a notch. On one hand, having someone come to my defense is a new experience. On the other, the glint of violence in his eyes scares me a little bit. "Please." I tug again.

He blinks in response. Which I subconsciously add to his range of non-verbal reactions.

“We’ll let Dr. Thorne know,” he bites out before turning around and shepherding me down the row of stalls. His calloused hand falls at the back of my neck, giving me a comforting squeeze, but he doesn’t give up his position behind me, blocking the greasy owner from seeing me at all as we retreat.

I don’t know if it’s the adrenaline, someone swooping in to protect me, or the fact that poor horse is going to be sold for meat after giving all his best racing years to an asshole, but the tears I held back start to flow, silently trailing down my face and dripping off the apples of my cheeks.

When we hit the sun outside, I hustle away from Griffin toward the Gold Rush Ranch truck that’s parked at the end of the alleyway. My escape vehicle. It’s like my feet can’t get me there fast enough. But when my hand wraps around the handle, I stop. My opposite palm lands against the glass of the window and I drop my head, trying to gather my composure before I have to spend another hour and a half in the small space with Griffin.

The man who kissed me brainless once, and I was supposed to have forgotten.

“You okay?”

He’s not touching me anymore, but he might as well be. I can feel that simple squeeze on my neck like a brand. Any time he touches me, my skin hums with pleasure.

I hate it. I hate it because he turned me away and because he had to be best friends with one of the few people in the world I would *never* hurt.

I hate him for being the only man who’s lit me up the way he did. And I hate him even more for being the only man I really can’t pursue.

And I *really* hate that I can’t save that horse in there.

“No.” It comes out as a sob despite my best efforts to control my voice.

“Guy is a prick.” He spits the word out like he wants to hurt it.

“That horse. Griff—Griffin.” My voice cracks over his name. “That poor horse.”

I’m fucking falling apart, and I can’t even explain why. I’m overwhelmed with crushing sadness. And anger.

“For fuck’s sake,” he barks out before I hear him spin on his heel to leave.

I’m too embarrassed to even turn around. Instead, I close my eyes and attempt to center myself, to get a grip on my emotions. *The girl you want to be doesn’t crumble like this.*

The girl I want to become should be pissed that Griffin stepped in and went all caveman on that sleaze bag.

But I'm not pissed. I'm relieved.

I don't know how many minutes pass as I stand there breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth, giving myself an internal pep talk.

All I know is that the uneven clapping of hooves pulls me out of the safe space I've created in my brain. And when I spin to see who's coming my way, I see Griffin.

Leading the beautiful and sore, dark bay horse beside him.

"What are you doing?" I sniff as he struts straight up to me, holding out the tattered red rope that's attached to the gelding's leather halter.

"Here." He can barely hold my gaze. *Probably because I terrified him with my meltdown.*

I take the rope, confusion etched on my features. "Why?"

"Because he's yours now."

"What?" Disbelief paints my tone as my head swivels between the broody horse and the broody man who just handed him to me. "You bought me a horse?"

"He's sorta broken."

*He bought me a horse.*

My eyes flit down to the pink skin at the center of the horse's white nose as emotion wells up in me again, my brain stumbling along, trying to make sense of the last fifteen minutes of my life.

I don't know what to say to his comment, so all I say as I stroke my new horse's nose is, "That's okay. So am I."



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## GRIFFIN



WE PULL out of the barns at Bell Point Park in silence.

Truthfully, I've been sitting in silence for the past three hours. I left Nadia and her new horse at the Gold Rush row of stalls, and then I drove all the way back out to Ruby Creek to pick up my horse trailer because, of course, we didn't bring one with us.

Then I drove all the way back, trying for the life of me to figure out why I'd buy the girl a fucking horse and then spend hours of my day figuring out transportation for it. Aside from the fact that I personally can't handle the thought of a horse being sent to slaughter, it doesn't add up. I saved Spot from the same fate, all skin and bones and dull coat with dead eyes, like he already knew what end he was facing.

I wish I could save every horse at those auctions from that fate.

But none of that equates to a rational reason to buy Nadia Dalca an injured racehorse. I could have just bought myself a second horse.

But I know she wanted one. And I'm still not over her referring to herself as broken. Nursing Spot back to health made me feel a little less broken, and maybe this horse can do that for her, too.

All I know is that when she turned around, I saw her heart crumple in her beautiful brown eyes. There's an innocence about her I can't quite figure out. Did she not know about the dirty underbelly of this industry? The number of horses that are tossed away when their money-making ability expires?

She was a sassy, lippy teenager two years ago, and now, she's transformed into someone buffed to a beautiful, fake shine.

Just now, there was a crack in the smooth surface she's manifested for



herself. And I recognized the hell out of that sentiment. Of that look. I see it in the mirror, staring back at me now and then.

I hate that look on anyone. A dog. A friend. That friend's little sister.

I mean, shit. Even that horse was looking like he knew it was the end of the line. So, saving him seemed like an easy fix. I'm a sucker for a horse that needs saving. Ask Spot.

Except now, Nadia is staring at me as we drive through Vancouver traffic toward the highway. I can feel her gaze tracing the lines of my face so heavily that she might as well be running a finger over them. I know getting a horse was on her list. I overheard that part of their conversation that morning, and I have the resources to do it. So why the fuck not? It was a nice, perfectly innocent thing to do.

At least that's what I tell myself.

"Thank you. For doing what you did earlier. Today. Just all of it." Her palm presses into the center of her chest. "I'm overwhelmed."

She was easier to brush off when she had the bratty little sister act down. This version of her is harder to keep from getting under my skin.

"Welcome." My fingers squeeze the steering wheel, and I force myself to keep my eyes on the road as silence stretches between us. Usually, I like silence. But right now, it's awkward because there's a lot to say and no one is saying a thing.

"How much did you pay for him?" Her fingers twist together in her lap, and she stares down at them.

"Doesn't matter. Don't bother t-t-trying to pay me back." I scrub one hand over my beard, grateful it covers some of the heat creeping up my throat. "Consider him a gift. My way of saying sorry." I let my eyes wander over to her. She's still staring at her lap. Her lips press together, and she gives a small shake of her head.

"Okay."

A quiet chuckle rumbles in my chest. An attempt to break the tension. "Expected a fight from you, Wildflower."

She lifts her molten brown eyes, dark lashes providing the perfect frame for them. "I don't think anyone has ever given me a more thoughtful gift, Griffin." My lungs fill with thick air. Her smile is watery but sincere, and then she turns herself toward the window and watches the flow of traffic around us.

*Anyone?*

The word rattles around in my brain as I think about all the things I've received in my life, all the awesome experiences my parents have provided. The gifts, the vacations, the sentimental little trinkets along the way. I would never have guessed an injured racehorse purchased by *me* would rank up there for her.

It's not until we've made it out of the city that she speaks again. "Has Stefan ever told you about our family?"

"That they died in a plane wreck?"

She nods. "Anything else?"

I wrack my brain and realize he hasn't. "No."

"My dad was a drunk."

I grunt. So was I. What am I supposed to do? Judge the guy?

"He beat the hell out of our mom."

Yes. I am supposed to judge this piece of shit.

"Stefan left for boarding school when I was a baby. He only came back in the summers. Then I had someone to hide in the closet with while it happened."

A strangled groan erupts out of my throat. But I say nothing. Nadia's head rests against the glass of the passenger side window and the words are flowing. Saying anything now would just be an interruption.

"Eventually Stefan went off to college. And then he never came back anymore. That's when my mom started drinking. I'm pretty sure he was her favorite—her reminder of a happier time in her life. Me? I was just a reminder of the monster she was locked in that fucking house with. From what I gather, she had a lot going for her before she met him. Plans. Dreams. And then, it all just went out the window. I don't actually know though because I never really got to know her."

Horror washes over me. I spend an awful lot of energy feeling sorry for myself, and suddenly I feel like I have no right to that level of self-pity.

How can I feel bad for myself when Nadia has been through *that*?

She continues before I can say anything. Her stream of consciousness completely unfettered. "I think she became boring for him to beat up when she was passed out. So, eventually I became the new target. It happened the first time when I was fourteen. That's when I decided I would never be his victim. I would never be *her*. And I started staying at other people's houses because it was preferable to staying at my own."

"Where would you stay?"

“It started out with girlfriends. Ended up with boyfriends.” Her voice is detached, in a faraway place. “For a few years there at the end, it was . . . a lot of boys.”

My heart clenches thinking of someone so young and impressionable with no direction. No support. No love.

“Did your parents wonder where you were?”

She snorts.

It’s almost cruel to not grab her hand, to lend a gentle touch to her after the way she just sliced herself open for me. But I also know that keeping my hands off her is in everyone’s best interest.

So instead, I fill the space with a confession of my own.

“I didn’t always have a stutter, you know.” I slur the word *stutter* a bit. It always trips me up. It seems cruel to have made that word have so many hard *t* sounds. I’d like to kick whoever came up with that square in the balls.

Her head whips to me, ripped right out of the memories she’s been immersed in for the last several minutes. “Really?”

I nod.

“How?”

“I used to play pro football. I was a two-time Superbowl champion. A Ruby Creek sensation.” My ensuing chuckle is laced with disappointment. I didn’t just let myself down with my spiral—I let a whole town down.

She nods eagerly, entire body turning toward me, hanging on every word. “I lived for football. Spent my life on the road, chasing wins, partying, and fucking every girl I could.”

I chance a look her way. Her throat bobs with a thick swallow, pink staining her cheeks.

“A simple play went wrong. I failed to attach my chin strap, and when I got sacked, I went down hard. And my helmet went flying.” I groan at the mere memory of how young and stupid I’d been.

“Oh shit.” Her nose scrunches up. She’s adorable. So enthralled in *me*.

“And all I remember is waking up in the hospital. My body was fine, brain not so much. Concussed as fuck. Spent a couple of weeks there. Probably took a few years off my parents’ lives in the process.”

“That must have been terrifying for them.”

I just nod. I don’t like to think about how hard I’ve been on my parents. I’ve been terrifying them since I was a kid, I’m sure. But these last several years have really taken the cake. Their only boy, spiraling while they stand

back, powerless to help.

“Apparently, with some brain injuries, there can be the onset of a stutter. Sometimes it’s short-lived; in other instances it sticks around.” I shrug. “I’m almost certain there’s a mental aspect to it as well. It’s always the *k*’s and *t*’s that get me.”

“What do you mean?” Her head tilts, curiosity lacing her tone.

“Like . . . sometimes I overthink it, and then it’s worse. Stress and pressure make it worse. Some days are just better than others.”

“Is today a good day?” Her voice is lilting and soft, and I can’t help but turn my attention over to her beautiful face. All warm golden tones and chocolate fondue eyes.

“Why?” My voice comes out more gravelly than I intend.

Her tongue darts out over her bottom lip, a subtle smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “You’ve used words that begin with both those sounds in the last few minutes with no problem.”

My mind races back, trying to pick out the spots where I said those letters. I was so lost in focusing between her and the road that I didn’t tiptoe around my words, for once.

“Maybe you just like being around me.” Her smile grows, her body language changing. When our eyes meet, she pulls out a saucy wink. She thinks she’s joking, but the truth is spot on—I *do* like being around her. I just can’t explain why.

“Nadia.” I angle a disapproving glare her way.

“Oof.” She flops back in her seat with a noisy sigh. “Tough crowd.”

My cheek pinches with a lopsided smile. And then I blurt out something I should not. “It’s because your name starts with an *n*. Just makes scolding you that much easier.”

I laugh it off, until she turns to me and says smoothly, “I think you just like saying my name.”

I swallow because I am so fucked where Nadia Dalca is concerned.

*Yes, Wildflower. I like saying your name.*



“WHY DON’T we put him in the smallest paddock behind Griffin’s cottage?” Mira points over the field from where we stand in the front parking

lot. “The best thing for that horse right now is going to be a little peace and quiet. Not a busy barn. Stall rest, cold hosing, and unwinding is what he needs. Then we can figure out what to do with the leg. Probably surgery for what I’m assuming is a joint full of bone chips.”

Nadia nods, looking strong and capable with her hands propped on the swell of her hips. I try hard not to let my eyes trail down over the curve of her ass.

But I fail fucking miserably.

I’ve never considered scrubs to be sexy, but on Nadia, it’s like a whole new ball game. A man would have to be blind to not appreciate her soft curves and long limbs.

It’s almost criminal.

She turns to me, and I drop my gaze onto the scuffed toes of my boots, feeling guilty as hell. “Is that okay with you? I’ll have to pop in at your place regularly, then.”

Say no, you schmuck.

“Yeah, sure.”

*Griffin Sinclair fails again.*

“Get him settled in and then come for dinner,” Mira says. “You guys have had a long day. We’ll order in. Nothing crazy.”

These women are running circles around me, making plans and getting shit done. I’m not accustomed to dealing with people this way. Accounting for their plans. Adjusting mine to fit them. Up in the mountains, I don’t answer to anyone. I do my daily chores, work out, and train the few horses that get sent up to me.

I eat by myself. I read by myself. And when I do get lonely, I visit my parents.

“Fine.”

“He means, *Thank you. That sounds lovely, Mira.*” Nadia pipes up with a laugh. “We’ll be there soon.”

Mira gives us a slow smile, eyes bouncing between Nadia and me. I swear, if someone were going to be a mind reader, it would be her. She probably knows I was eye fucking her husband’s little sister.

Nadia and I hop back in the truck, and it strikes me that I am very tired of driving. All I want to do is relax. Soak up a little peace and quiet. My shoulders rise and fall under the weight of a heavy sigh as we pull out of the circle driveway at the entryway of Gold Rush Ranch.

I miss my place in the mountains.

I miss being alone.

I miss my privacy.

And I just agreed to let Nadia come over to my place daily, rather than pushing her away like I should be doing.

*You also bought her a fucking horse, sucker.*

I groan aloud and Nadia's eyes snap to mine.

"Are you growling?"

I shake my head and keep my eyes on the road, hauling the trailer carefully behind us.

"That's very feral-mountain-man of you. I went from thinking you didn't talk at all to realizing that you mostly speak in grunts and growls." She crosses her arms across her midsection and leans back in the seat with a pleased smile on her face. "A lesser woman would think you were nuts. Lucky for you, nuts works for me."

*God, give me patience to endure Nadia Dalca.*

"It's part of your charm. Sometimes people just talk to fill the space. I think they might just like the sound of their own voice. But you're so comfortable with silence. It's kind of peaceful, really."

I shoot her a withering glare. The irony of talking about people who fill the space with unnecessary chatter while she chatters away unnecessarily is not lost on me.

"Give me that look all you want, Sinclair. I know you're a big softie underneath that hard shell. Like a turtle." Her voice is full of mirth. She's enjoying the hell out of this. And my mind wanders to all the filthy ways I could wipe that smirk off her pretty face.

I groan and bang the back of my head against the headrest. I want to say something about her terrible comparison to a turtle, but I don't trust myself to pronounce it right now. Not with her attention fully focused on me.

It's fucking unnerving.

In a way that it should not be, considering our age difference and connection. I should feel brotherly toward this girl.

And brotherly is very, very far down the list of what I feel for her. But then, I do have a special knack for fucking things up when they're going well for me. Maybe I'm destined to do that to the only real friendship I've had in years, too.



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## NADIA



I WALK into my brother's home with Griffin trailing behind me. I swear I can feel his gaze on me. My skin hums for him.

*Is he staring at my ass? I hope so.*

My lips roll together as I try to shove that thought back down. I should not set my sights on my brother's friend, but that's getting harder and harder to stick to the more time I spend with him.

He says the horse is a gift and made it seem like he only bought him to rescue him. But I'm having a hard time not looking further into that. Why give him to me? Why not just keep the gelding for himself? Why be okay with giving me riding lessons and having me come around his place when he wants to stay away from me?

There are things that don't add up, and I'm smart enough to notice them. I'm just not sure what to do with them.

"Hi!" I call out right as the scent of pizza hits me, making my mouth water.

"Hey, guys." Stefan rounds the corner with his signature smirk on his face. He's not closed off like he used to be, so I'm not sure why he still hides behind that mask. Either he's just grown accustomed to that facial expression or Mira has made him happy enough that it's not a mask at all anymore.

I'd like to think that's what it is.

He ruffles my hair like I'm still a little kid before stepping just beyond me to clap Griffin on the shoulder. "How ya doin', man? Nice to have you around."

The two of them are honestly adorable together. Griffin grunts and I



giggle as I walk into the house I called home for several years.

It's sprawling but cozy, with dark stained wood beams and an industrial kitchen. Big windows lend incredible natural lighting, and the house has this way of matching the rugged landscape of Ruby Creek while also being just a little bit over-the-top. I try to imagine Griffin living here. I try to imagine Griffin being a professional football player too. I can't see either of those things, to be honest.

The two men chat about I don't know what, and I don't care. I have tunnel vision for food right now. They can bro out without me.

Padding into the open living space, I slide into a chair at the counter and assess the open pizza boxes on the counter. I'm pretty sure I'm going to eat them all. It's hitting me now that I spent all day wrapped up in the new horse and I haven't eaten a thing. Now, I'm famished.

I grab a slice of pepperoni. No plate. No cutlery. I fold it in half and start shoving it into my mouth.

"Very ladylike, sis," Stefan mocks. *Dick*.

"Whatever," I reply over a mouthful of food. "I'm starving,"

He chuckles and goes to pull out plates for us, and I'm pretty sure I won't be using one just to spite him.

"Where is Mira?"

"She fell asleep with Silas. They're so sweet all cuddled up together." My brother's face takes on this soft look that I never used to see on him before he met Mira. "I don't have it in me to wake her. She's been working so hard between the clinic and Billie and everything else. She overdoes it." He puts a few pieces of her favorite—Veggie Supreme—on a plate and covers it with plastic wrap. I bet he'll bring her a midnight snack in bed or something equally romantic. That's the type of dude he's become.

I shove another massive bite of pizza into my mouth. A deep chortling sound rolls in from beside me, and when I peek up, Griffin has taken the seat beside me and has his fist covering his mouth.

Unsuccessfully trying to smother his laugh.

"Yeah, yeah. Yuck it up, Sinclaire. You're the one who stranded me with no food."

Stefan leans back against the counter opposite the island with his plate of pizza. "He did what to you?"

"Did Mira not tell you that Griffin bought me a horse?"

My brother's eyebrows shoot up, and Griffin clears his throat.

I roll my eyes. It's not like I just told him we made out in the pub bathroom. *That would go over poorly for sure.*

"Sounds like a good story." Stefan takes a bite of his pizza, chewing thoughtfully as his eyes flit between the two of us sitting at the island.

"So, there was this total asshole at the track. Mira made Griffin go with me because she knew what kind of dude he was—"

Griffin cuts me off. "He was going to send a perfectly good horse for meat and was gawking at your sister like she was a piece of candy." He wipes one hand across his mouth before looking back down at his plate. "I stepped in."

"I'm going to pay him back," I blurt out as my cheeks heat. I don't know why it feels like we're in trouble. It's probably because we're both sitting here keeping secrets from my brother. We did nothing wrong—not this time anyway.

Griffin's intense gaze catches on the side of my face for a moment, but then he turns to my brother and shrugs. He doesn't bother correcting me.

*Another secret for us to keep.*

"Well, Nadia, sounds like you've got your work cut out for you. Congratulations on your new horse."

I push more pizza in my mouth and smile as the two men talk about some hunting trip they're planning for the fall. Their conversation is full of laughs and inside jokes, and I listen to the words that Griffin uses. The ones he thinks he stumbles on but doesn't in the company of a good friend. An observation that both warms my heart and makes it clench.

I thought we could play it cool around my brother.

I was wrong.

Zoning out, I startle when my brother addresses me. "How's the boyfriend, Nadia?"

My shoulders tense. *Fucking Tommy.* "He's not my boyfriend."

Stefan chuckles. "Oh, yeah? Did you tell him that, man-eater?"

I suck in a deep breath. I hate that I'm perceived that way, whether or not he means it as a joke. Have I settled down with one guy? No. But that's changing soon. I crave the security of something more serious—I want what my brother has found—and I don't want it with Tommy.

Something I'm going to have to tell him next time we talk.

Instead of sharing that with my brother, I roll my eyes. "We haven't done a lot of talking."

Stefan guffaws, and my hand lands over my mouth. I peek over at Griffin, who has stopped with his pizza part way up to his mouth. Frozen. But only momentarily.

“That’s not what I meant.” The laughs keep coming from the opposite side of the kitchen and my cheeks burn. “Stef! Shut up! I just mean we haven’t been in touch.”

He holds a hand up in surrender as he shakes his head. “None of my business. Just enjoying watching you get all shy about a boy. It’s cute.”

“You know what’s going to be cute? How you look after I shave your eyebrows off in your sleep.”

That makes him laugh harder. There may be thirteen years between us, but it somehow hasn’t prevented my brother from falling into childish taunts now and then. But the joke is on him because I’m just crazy enough to shave off his eyebrows.

I rip another piece of pizza out of one box and dig in, avoiding looking at Griffin. I don’t want him to think I’m with Tommy—and that’s a problem. It shouldn’t matter to me what Griffin thinks of my love life.

Stefan tries to pick up their earlier conversation about hunting. Something about target practice. He asks if I want to come and I nod, but I’m not listening.

I’m too busy analyzing that brief pause in Griffin’s movement. The way he didn’t laugh at my brother’s jokes. And the way he’s gone from fully conversing back to grunts, nods, and one syllable words.



“I WANT to say goodnight to my horse. I’ve never had a horse, and I’m excited. Just take me with you, and I’ll walk back up here to my place.”

“No.”

I’m trying to convince Griffin to drive back to his cottage and then let me walk back to the main barn across the field. It’s a nice night, so there shouldn’t be a problem. Instead, he drove me straight up to the base of the steep stairs that lead to my little apartment above the barn, hopped out, yanked my door open, and pointed at the door.

Like I’m a child being sent to her room.

“Yes.”

“Out.” After a reasonably enjoyable day together, Griffin is being a full-blown cocksucker.

“Make me.” I cross my arms and arch an eyebrow at him in challenge. No chance would he—

One long step and he’s right up in my space with his hands wrapped around my rib cage. His grip is firm but gentle, and I swear he smells like the mountains, like a pine forest, and cinnamon gum, and it makes me want to lean in and run the tip of my nose up the curve of his neck.

His scent is intoxicating.

Even as he lifts me, like I’m a fucking bale of hay, takes a few long strides, and deposits me at the bottom of my stairs.

“G’night.” He slams the passenger side door. And never mind smelling him. Now what I want to do is kick him in the balls.

“What am I?” I shout at him, ire rising in my chest as he rounds the front of his truck. “A child?”

And I’m damn near positive he mutters, “Pretty much,” before he jumps in the truck and drives out of the circular driveway into the darkening scenery.

Did he seriously just drop me here and take off? I flip off the back of his truck.

And then I smile as my eyes find the rolling field that leads to the private cottage on the far side of the property.

It’s a pleasant night for a walk.

Within ten minutes, I’m ducking under the white fence that divides the hay field from the back part of the lot that the guest house sits on.

*Try to tell me what to do again, asshole. See how it works out for you.*

“Hi, boys,” I whisper into the dusky night. Two heads pop up and stare back at me. One is Spot. Then there’s *mine*.

His shiny coat matches the warm receding light that fills the valley right now. It’s only shortly after nine p.m. but the sun goes down quickly when you’re sitting at the bottom of the Cascades. They jut out from the bright green fields violently. All sharp points and rocky ledges.

Sometimes they feel almost oppressive. I turn my back to the mountains and instead walk to the paddock at the end of the row so I can spend a little time just gazing at my new pet.

“Hi, Horse.” He hangs his head over the gate and closes his eyes beneath the stroke of my palm. I drag my fingers through his thick forelock and

scratch him right between his ears. He nuzzles into my chest, and I swear he's thanking me. I swear he knows we saved him.

I may not know how to ride a horse very well—okay, at all—yet, but I've worked around them on the ground enough to know that they are intuitive. Incredibly sensitive.

My cheek drops onto his dusty forehead. He's clearly been rolling in the dirt, and I find I don't care at all as I wrap my arms around him. I'm not sure I recognized how tall he is, taller than your average racehorse.

"You're a very sweet boy," I murmur, hugging him. And he lets me, clearly loving the attention. "We'll get you feeling better soon. Mira has more of that medicine for you."

He snorts quietly and I smile, feeling soothed by the contact. It's almost like he's hugging me right back. And some days, I could really use a hug.

When the back light of the log home flicks on, I drop my forehead against my horse's with a small smile. "Uh oh. I think I'm about to get spanked by grumpy Griffin."

The back door slams shut, and I force myself not to jump. The man frays my nerves without even trying.

"Nadia." He sounds exasperated. I'm oddly pleased with myself for being the source of his frustration. Irritating someone should not be this much fun. "What are you doing here?"

I try so hard not to laugh. I don't want him to know what a kick I get out of this. "Visiting Horse."

"Horse?"

"Yeah." I finally turn around to see him standing at the top of the three steps that lead up to the sprawling deck off the back of the cabin, hands pressed into his hip bones. Wearing those goddamn jeans like they were made for him.

He looks pissed, heavy brows pressed low. Frowning just adds to the rugged edge of his beauty. He looks like he wants to do very bad things to me.

And I want to let him.

A small giggle bubbles up in my throat. I'm dead sober, but I feel almost giddy under Griffin Sinclair's gaze.

"Yeah. This guy right here." I hike a thumb behind me at the leggy racehorse, who is still nuzzling against my back.

"You named him Horse?"

I run a hand over my mouth, trying to hide my smile. “Hardly seems like something a man who named his spotted horse *Spot* should criticize me for.”

He glares at me. The seconds stretch out, and I seriously question if he might be having a stroke. I sigh and turn back to the gentle giant. “I just haven’t decided on a name yet. All I know is that he needs a fresh name to go with his fresh start.”

Griffin sighs and tips his chin up to stare at the sky like I exhaust him.

I ignore how clearly frustrated he is. “Do you have any brushes I can borrow?”

“You’re exhausting,” he huffs out before stomping down the deck to retrieve a bucket of brushes from where he’s stashed them underneath the stairs. He drops them near me and then instantly retreats to sit on the stairs, back where he started.

“Thanks,” I say brightly before putting a halter on Horse, tying him to the fence, and getting to grooming him.

I lose myself in the circular motion of brushing, watching his neck stretch and head twist when I hit the good spots. I smile up at his sweet face as he basks in the attention under the calm starry skies out in Ruby Creek.

I’m so engrossed with grooming him I almost don’t hear Griffin when he says, “You’re not paying me back. For the record.”

“I know.” I don’t chance a look at the older man. I just keep my eyes on the soft coat in front of me.

“Then why’d you say that?”

*Great question.*

I sigh so deeply my shoulders come up to my ears before dropping back down again. “I don’t know. I didn’t want Stefan to suspect anything.”

“Like what?”

Now I peer back at him, shooting a knowing look his way, before going back to my task at hand.

“You have a boyfriend.” The word sounds wrong on his lips. “Why would he suspect anything?”

“Good God. What is with everyone calling him my boyfriend? He’s not.”

Griffin casually props his elbows on his knees. “Well, you have history. He was there that night.”

*That night.* He says it like something terrible happened. Best kiss of my life, but that was before I knew what a growly dick Griffin Sinclaire is. It wouldn’t be that hot again, not now that we know each other.

“*That night* was the first time I’d kissed Tommy. I snuck out the back door once you left and apparently, he left with another girl. That was that. Not that I cared. I didn’t have high hopes for us. That’s what most of my”—I hold my hands up to make air-quotes with my fingers—“boyfriends equate to. With daddy issues like mine, the prospect of something serious is downright anxiety-inducing.”

Griffin is staring at me, and he’s mad. But I don’t get the sense that he’s mad at me, so I continue, filling the space between us with everything that’s been running through my head for the past several years. “My brother and Mira are the first time I’ve seen two people truly love and respect each other. I want that too, but I’m not holding my breath. It seems fragile and unlikely, and I don’t think I can handle getting hurt any more than I already have.”

The words keep spilling, like it’s somehow safer to say these things out loud under the cover of darkness. “So now I’ll try for that too because it seems like what I’m supposed to do now. Right? I’ve got the education I wanted. The job I wanted. And I figure, hey why not go for the trifecta? And so, I bring a boy around *once*, who, for the record, is a massive disappointment, and I’m the butt end of every joke there is about having a boyfriend. All with a guy who I don’t even like.”

I toss a brush back in the bucket. The clank makes Horse jump a little as I rave on. “I’m just the silly little sister who can’t settle down and gets around instead. And I fucking hate it. I don’t want to be that girl. I just want a normal, happy life. Even though I’m realistically too terrified to go anywhere near that type of life. Self-sabotage is a good friend of mine, ya know? But I force myself to try anyway. And then it’s just like . . . what am I supposed to do with a normal, happy person like Tommy? Normal, happy people don’t want to hear about the shit I’ve seen, the shit I’ve endured. Normal, happy people like to be around other normal, happy people. Am I just meant to fake it for the rest of my life? I want all that,”—I gesture in the general direction of my brother’s house—“but I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to let myself really have it.”

My chest is rising and falling rapidly when I finally turn my eyes back to Griffin, who is still sitting silently, a quiet witness to my insecurities, but now with a different expression on his face. Less angry, and more something else.

“You’re a good listener,” I say, meeting his gaze pound for pound.

Our eyes lock for a few seconds and then . . .

Griffin bursts out laughing.

“Are you . . .” My bottom jaw drops open as I watch him. The rich sound of his laugh fills the night air. “Are you fucking laughing at me?”

He covers his face with wide palms, body shaking under the intensity of his laugh.

“Griffin Sinclair! I just poured my heart out, and now you’re laughing at me!”

First, I’m incensed. I mean, how dare he? But the longer I stand there with shock painting my face, the more his amusement rubs off on me. Grumpy Griffin has the giggles.

And that’s giving me the giggles.

It starts small. A little hiccup. Some tension drains out, falling away piece by piece, until the giggles turn into guffaws.

I drop my brush in the bucket at my feet and cover my face with a hand when my eyes water with the extent of my laughter. I haven’t laughed like this . . . ever. Griffin’s raspy laugh twists together with my breathless one, and in the quiet darkness of the night we come together in a shared moment of levity. Something in us aligns. We’re overcome with the same feeling, and we give ourselves over to it.

Something we’ve done before.

“My God,” I wheeze out as I bend over and grip my knees. “What is wrong with you?”

He gasps out a last laugh before he says, “I guess I’m not a normal, happy person either.”

My eyes find his. Mirth reflects between the two of us, and I click my tongue. “You sure as shit are not.”

He leans back on the stairs again, looking seductive and delicious without even trying, filling out his T-shirt in a way that he has no business doing. In a way that has my tongue darting across my lower lip.

“You just t-t-told a man”—his chin dips briefly, but he keeps talking—“who barely speaks that he’s a good listener.” His eyes close and his head tips back, laughter spilling out of him once more.

And I love the sound. It’s like a balm between us. I want to hear it more. I make it my goal right here and now, as I watch the ridge of his Adam’s apple bob in his throat, to be the one that makes Griffin Sinclair laugh more often.

He doesn’t need to know. But I’m adding it to my to-do list.

I stand up and lean against the fence. “You are. You’re a surly prick, but I can tell you’re listening to me. Most people don’t. Everyone is so involved



with their own lives. They listen, but don't absorb what I'm saying. But you don't just listen, you *hear* me."

His chest heaves as he stares back at me and his expression transforms. Almost stricken, but he nods quickly to cover it up.

Then he stands and leaves me there in the dark with a soft, "Goodnight, Wildflower."



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## NADIA



I'M HALFWAY BACK across the field when I realize we didn't confirm a riding lesson tomorrow. We were too busy laughing about how fucked up we are.

Standing at the top of the hill that separates the main parts of the barn from the guesthouse, I weigh my options. I don't even have the guy's number, and I'm right here. We just ended on good terms. There's no reason I can't walk back and ask for another lesson.

I'll say please and everything.

With a heavy sigh, I turn and walk back down the gentle slope toward the wooden A-frame. It's a beautiful little spot, the way it's nestled into the trees with the paddocks just out the back door, and the gravel driveway that circles the entire way around it. So full of charm.

It has me wondering what Griffin's place up the mountain is like. Is it cozy like this? Or is it a sparsely decorated bachelor pad? Does he take women back there? Has anyone ever lived with him? Is he even single?

Those questions send a bolt of anxiety through me, but I talk myself down. I honestly can't really see it.

He seems so self-conscious about the stutter. To be honest, I don't even notice it, because I'm too busy gawking at him. That ass in a pair of jeans? The tattooed forearm porn he's constantly flashing? Dark hair and equally dark eyes and all the meaning-filled glares?

Wet dreams are made of him. He's the guy your mom tells you to stay away from. Lucky for me, my mom was about as absent as they come.

And even if she hadn't been, I probably wouldn't listen to anyone who

told me to stay away from Griffin Sinclair.

I'm not so sure about his personality, but the man is fuckable beyond compare. Which is fine because I'm not sure I'm equipped for much more than meaningless encounters. The therapist I saw while living in the city was pretty sure I wasn't—much as I'd like to be.

Back at the house, I tiptoe up to the back door, not wanting to disturb him if he's already turned in for the night. It's wide open. He's just left the screen door to cover the opening.

It's a balmy night, and I imagine a small place like this can benefit from a little flow through between the doors.

I'm about to knock, my fist poised to tap against the thin metal beside the screen. But I stop in my tracks.

I freeze.

Because from where I'm standing, I have an uninterrupted view of the couch. The one in the open living space that Griffin is sitting on.

The one he's sitting on with his pants pulled down. The one he's sitting on while he fists his bare cock.

His knees are spread wide, and his shirtless torso relaxes back into the cushions. His eyes are closed, hair mussed, head tipped back, lips parted while he pumps his dick into his hand.

*He's an Adonis.* The definition in his body is insane. Broad, round, tattoo covered shoulders that give way into his chest. His collarbones jut out over defined pectorals with just the right amount of hair to make him even more masculine than already he is.

My mouth waters, or dries out—I'm not sure which—as my eyes trace the lines that extend up over his hip bones. The ones beside his chiseled abs, pointing straight down to all the action.

I lick my lips hungrily. It's very unladylike the way I'm gawking at him right now, the way I'm spying on him. But when his teeth sink into his lip to stifle a moan, his Adam's apple bobs beneath the light stubble that fans out beneath his beard, and suddenly I don't feel bad about spying at all.

He left the door open, and I'm not a lady anyhow. So, this is fine.

The dry pumping sound of his palm against the silky skin of his cock is only slightly less erotic than the deep growling sound he makes when his hips buck forward, back arching with pleasure.

All I can think about is that I could go crawl on top of him. We could call it a riding lesson and he could teach me everything he knows.

I press my thighs together at the thought. He'd kill me. Scratch that, he'd say "Nadia" and drag out the last syllable in that distinctly crabby way he often does.

But it wouldn't deter me. Because clearly, I have no boundaries. If I were polite, I'd walk away and never mention this again. I'd forget about it.

Unfortunately, best-case scenario at this current juncture is that the mental image of Griffin jacking off on the couch becomes my fodder for doing the same.

Accepting the fact I'm comfortable being a Peeping Tom, I drop my hand and let it fall over my throat to cover the blush that's overtaking me right now.

I want to burn this into my mind, so I'll never forget it.

The pearl of wetness at the head of his cock is a tease. My tongue darts out again as I imagine all the things I would do if I had the balls to push this door open and make my presence known. The man's cock is even beautiful. A big fucking weapon, and I'm not above admitting that I want him to hurt me with it.

His pace ratchets up, his chest rising and falling more rapidly as he nears release. Perspiration glimmers on his skin. Slickness forms between my thighs along with that familiar coiling tension just behind my hip bones. I'm riveted, absolutely getting off on playing voyeur to a man that is so out of bounds it's not even funny.

My heavy breathing falls into sync with his pants. His empty hand claws at the couch cushion until it finds the T-shirt that's been discarded there. And not a moment too soon, because I can see him barreling toward his release and it might be the most sensual thing I've ever seen.

And then he proves me wrong.

"Fuck, Nadia." He growls my name, and it's like a shot of electricity straight to my core.

He covers his swollen cock with the spare shirt and empties himself with my name on his lips.

I can't help it, I gasp. And then my hand flies over my mouth, as though I can cover the sound in the otherwise quiet cottage.

His head flips my direction, startled. But instead of saying anything, he stares at me. Smolders. Glares.

I don't know what it is exactly, but it makes me weak in the knees. It makes me red in the cheeks.

It makes me wet in the panties.

“I . . . Um . . . Riding lesson tomorrow?”

His cheeks are pink with exertion and his cum-covered cock is still in his hand, and *that's* what I say? I'm not nearly as smooth as I think I am and just looking at Griffin kills my brain cells on the best of days.

This is not the best of days.

The way he's glaring at me right now is confirmation of that.

“Okaythanksbye,” I rush out.

And with that, I bolt.



“HEELS DOWN.” Griffin manhandles my ankle into the position he wants it.

We're back to the ornery version of him. The crabby face. The single syllable words.

And definitely no laughter that warms me to the very tips of my toes.

I guess that's what I get for invading his privacy. That show was not for me to watch, and after sleeping on it, I'm feeling guilty about not walking away.

So, we're not really talking. Instead, his gruff hands tell me what to do. I'm sitting on Spot, and he's criticizing my position—like I should know this shit—constantly.

He clucks at Spot and steps away, letting the length of rope attached to the bridle extend between us. I'm riding in a large circle around Griffin, attached to the line for extra control.

“You ready?” He's avoiding saying the word *trot*. But that's what we're working on, trotting. One gait faster than walking, and I want to gallop on the beach, so let's get this show on the road.

I nod and give Spot a squeeze with my legs. He's a well-trained horse, so he steps into a trot instantly. I try to keep my core tight, but I fall a little behind the motion—and I'm almost positive my heels come up.

I try to sit gently in the saddle, but I'm still getting bounced around like a rag doll. I sneak a glance at Griffin and notice the corners of his lips pulling up, confirming I do, in fact, look like a rag doll.

“Are you laughing at me, Sinclair?” I ask, attempting to hold my hands

still. How is riding a horse so much harder than it seems?

His mouth thins. He's trying way too hard to cover up that smile. "Whoa, boy." He holds his hand up, and Spot stops on a dime. *I am literally just a passenger.*

Griffin loops the rope around his hand as he approaches me again, face straining as he clearly forces himself to frown so that he doesn't laugh. *Stick in the mud.*

"Alright. You're too rigid in your seat." He reaches up and grabs my hip bone, and I do my best to ignore the way his touch makes me ache, even atop my jeans. His hands on me are almost more than I can take. "This joint here"—he pushes on the bone—"is stuck. You need to loosen your hips so you can absorb the shock of the movement."

I turn wide eyes on Griffin and waggle my eyebrows in his direction.

He scowls. "Nadia."

I hold my hands up to prove my innocence. "Hey, you said it. Not me."

I swear he growls. But he doesn't feed into my leading comment. *Total stick in the mud.*

The worst part is it doesn't deter me from soaking him up. Strong hands, inked forearms that ripple under the warm summer sun, and the two lines that form between his brows when he scowls at me. I want to see the lines near his eyes crinkle when he smiles. That's what my dreams are made of. Older, growly, protective men.

Especially one named Griffin Sinclair.

Hearing him laugh undid something that was holding me back, and I swear all I dreamt about last night was being manhandled by him.

Dreaming about my big brother's best friend strikes me as a bad idea, but the more time I spend around Griffin, the more I wonder why I even bother trying to deny it. *Why is it so bad?*

I've never been attracted to someone the way I am to Griffin. The fourteen years between us aren't a deterrent for me at all. In fact, I'm almost positive they add to the fantasy.

A dull throb takes root behind my hip bone, right where the tips of his fingers just dug in, and in an attempt to clench my thighs, my heels come up.

His hand shoots out, cupping the back of my ankle and pulling down steadily. "I said down, Nadia." His voice is so authoritative, his entire delicious body filled with so much tension right now. With his broad chest puffed up, he's like an overfull balloon, ready to explode.

I get off on his intensity. It makes the lighter moments much more rewarding. Butterflies dance in my stomach when I look down and see his hand on my body.

And then he mutters, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you just want me to force you into position.”

His eyes shoot to mine from beneath the low-slung brim of his cap, a pink hue staining his tanned cheeks.

I should ignore it. I should really, really ignore it. That’s the mature thing to do, but . . . the spirited twenty-one-year-old in me comes out to play.

A smile takes over my face. “Maybe I do.”

His jaw pulses, and I can almost hear his teeth grind. “Go again,” he bites out, completely ignoring my innuendo-drenched comment.

And then I’m back to riding in circles, practicing *relaxing my hips* while Griffin barks instructions at me.

I’m fucked up enough to kind of get off on it, too.

By the end of our lesson, I’m exhausted. But not too exhausted to make a joke about how he worked me so long and hard that my legs are about to give out.

He tries to scowl at me, but I swear he almost smiles.



“I’M HERE to pick up my dog.”

The door slams, and I glance up from where I sit at the front desk of the clinic. And I do a double take.

Because a cleaned-up Griffin Sinclair is standing before me, and I literally feel my mouth dry out and my kitty flutter. And by cleaned-up, I mean hair slicked back, beard trimmed, white Henley, and dark wash jeans.

The man is a fucking snack. And I let my mind wander back to how he looked with his cock in his hand. It’s branded into my brain. Right where it belongs.

He doesn’t try too hard to look put together, it’s just the way he carries himself with confidence. Like he can make a woman come so hard that her vision goes black. It’s effortless, and I’m sure he has no idea he gives off that vibe. Or maybe that’s the athlete in him.

“Are you done with work?”



“Um . . .” I swivel around, like he’s talking to someone else. Especially considering the man has all but avoided me for the last several days. Even when I’m at his house to groom my horse and cold hose his swollen leg, he doesn’t come out.

I’m sure he thinks I don’t notice him peeking at me out his kitchen window, but I do.

Boys are dumb like that.

“Me?” I tap a finger against my chest.

He crosses his arms and sighs, like I’m the most exasperating person in the world. “Who else, Nadia?”

I mean, fair point. “Yup. Yes. I can lock up in . . .” I trail off and check my watch. “Five minutes.” Griffin showing up here is throwing me off. I’m fumbling around. Like he can see what I’ve been thinking about when I use my showerhead in ways it’s not really intended. Don’t even try to tell me a woman didn’t design a removable showerhead.

If he can tell, he doesn’t show it. “Okay. I’ll get my dog while I wait. Mira said I could get him t—now.” *Today*. He wanted to say today. So, we’re both back to being awkward around each other.

“Wait for what?”

He pushes through the door toward the back where Tripod is. “Got something to show you.”

He comes back with the small, white, wiggly little dog under one arm, carrying him like he’s a football. And I swear I spend the next five minutes crumbling under the silence between us, staring at the watch on my wrist, and trying not to gawk at how insanely sexy Griffin is with the small rescue dog in his lap. The one trying desperately to lick his face. The one who isn’t deterred at all by the gentle hand that continually tries to redirect his excitement.

*Me too, little buddy. Me too.*

“Okay!” I almost shout it, so relieved to get out of the too-quiet clinic. “I’m done. What do you need to show me?”

“We have to drive there.” Griffin doesn’t even glance up at me. He’s too enamored with his new pet. All his features have softened, and he hugs the dog to his chest protectively.

My ovaries ache. I swear they do. This big grumpy recluse, hugging a fluffy ten-pound dog? It’s more than an animal loving gal like me can handle.

“Drive where?”

“Don’t worry about it.” He glances at me. “Do you want to change?” My pink scrubs are clearly not appropriate for whatever secret field trip he has planned.

“Uh sure? Do I need riding clothes?”

“No.” He follows me out the door, still gazing down at Tripod.

I hate surprises.

“How long will this take?” I ask, entering the alarm code and locking the door behind us.

“Less long if you stop asking so many questions.” With no brim to hide behind, I can see the amusement dancing in his eyes as plain as day.

I think Griffin Sinclair just made fun of me.



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## GRIFFIN



WE PULL up in front of the building I know so well. I told Nadia to stop asking so many questions, and she has.

“I googled you.”

But clearly, she’s still going to make statements.

“What?”

“Oh, right.” She winks at me. “Google. It’s like a modern-day library where you can look things up. I’ll demonstrate it for you sometime.”

*Cute. Another old joke.*

I ignore the jab and hold the door open for her. “And what did you find?”

“A very enlightening poll,” she says as I direct her into the waiting elevator while staring at her ass like a perv.

I grunt and arch a brow, signalling she has my attention before jamming the button to go up a few floors.

“I found I agree with 82% of people.”

My brow furrows. “On what?”

The elevator dings, and we filter out into the hallway. I press a hand onto the small of her back, directing her to the correct door. She shivers beneath my touch, but I force myself to ignore it.

“If your ass looks better in jeans or those tights you wore to play football. There was a side-by-side photo and everything.”

I stop, forcing a smirk off my face. This girl cracks me up. “And what did the 82% choose?”

She grins. “Jeans. Definitely jeans.”

I scoff and shake my head as her eyes trail down me. I yank my hand off

her back and knock on the door before delivering a blow of my own. “Ready to meet my parents?”

I smirk at the wide-eyed, uncertain expression Nadia is giving me now. It’s a dead ringer for the one she was sporting when she watched me blow a load into my shirt with her name on my lips. I think we’re both just pretending that never happened. Which works for me.

She smooths her palms down over the blouse shirt she’s wearing. “Seriously?” She leans in and hisses at me.

She’s nervous. Unlike the dog, who is still wiggling under my arm, pulling toward her and settling for licking the air close to her face.

*Me too, pal. Me fucking too.*

Even nervous, Nadia is breathtakingly beautiful. Visually, she appears young, yes. But when I look into her eyes—really look into them—her soul stares back. And that part of her holds a wisdom, a weariness, beyond her years.

I’ve fixated on the years that stretch between us. The number of them. But her years have been filled with a lot more pain and suffering than most women her age.

The more time I spend with her, the more I’m struck by the fact she doesn’t *feel* like a twenty-one-year-old. Which is a dangerous fucking realization.

The door swings open, and my mother’s happy squeal follows. “Griffin!”

She’s already smiling when her eyes land on me. Then her gaze finds the dog, and I swear I can see cartoon hearts floating up from above her head.

When she turns her attention to Nadia, I realize I’ve made a grave mistake. Her coiffed dark bob tilts with her head, sweeping against the bright yellow shirt she’s wearing.

I swear those hearts in her eyes turn to fucking wedding bells.

“Hi, Mom.” I grimace, trying to take control of this situation as early as possible.

“Griffy, who have we got here?”

She looks like that creepy goddamn Cheshire Cat, staring at Nadia and the dog. Like I just walked up to her with a ready-made family.

*Mistake, mistake, mistake.*

“You know my best friend, Stefan? This is his sister, Nadia. She’s a t-t-tech at the vet c—office and has been taking care of him.” I hold the three-legged dog out to my mom, trying not to fixate on how nervous this meeting

is suddenly making me. I'm stumbling over my words like a total idiot. "My new dog," I clarify.

*Fuck. That clears nothing up at all.*

"Nadia, this is my mom, Joan."

My mother takes the dog into her arms and smiles down at him, letting him lick her chin like the excited little spaz that he is. "Well, this is just lovely. Come on in, you two." And then she spins on her heel, swaggering far too happily into the condo, all windows and patio space that opens up onto the golf course.

We step in through the door, and Nadia nudges her slender shoulder up against mine. "Griffy." Her eyes dance with amusement, and I groan. All I wanted to show Nadia is that plenty of people have lasting, healthy relationships. It's not as rare as she thinks, and my parents are an excellent example. I was trying to be nice for once.

She drops her voice and her breath fans out over my neck as she leans in close. "We kissed *once*. Don't tell me you're so wholesome that you think you need to introduce me to your parents now."

I can't help but chuckle and shake my head as I shuck off my boots. *Wholesome*. Don't think I've ever been accused of that. I lean back in close to her, using my height to tower above her. I don't touch her, but I drop in close enough to her ear that I could press my lips against her easily. Desire courses through me. The way she smells is a constant reminder of that one kiss. My brain has created a pathway based on that smell alone.

I'm fucking Pavlov's dog.

"Call me Griffy again, and I'll spank you like the little brat that you are." The words are out before I can stop myself. They're suspended between us, and I wish I could grab them and shove them back in.

Nadia doesn't look as mortified as me. In fact, her warm brown eyes are downright molten. "I'll keep that in mind, Mr. Sinclair."

And then she fucking winks at me before waltzing down the hallway into my parent's home. "I love your condo, Joan. What a beautiful view."

I can hear them chat. But I need a few seconds to get a grip on the swelling in my pants. And also, to beat myself up for thinking this was a remotely good idea.

By the time I've composed myself enough to join them in the kitchen, my mom has cornered Nadia and is talking her ear off about the dog and how he came to be as she gets started making a coffee.

“Has Griffin told you about pour-over coffee yet?”

Nadia smiles, and it's genuine as she drops her elbows onto the kitchen island to watch the painstaking process go down. “Not yet.”

Each coffee is going to take like ten minutes to make, which means I'm going to be stuck here watching Nadia bend herself over the counter like she's fucking asking for it.

I don't need coffee. I need a cold shower.

“Griff, you didn't tell me you hit a dog.” Her brow crinkles like she's concerned as she scans me. I know what she's thinking, and I feel like shit for giving her enough reasons in the past to think about it at all.

I give a brief shake of my head to help do away with her concern. “I took my eyes off the road to reach for my gum.”

Cinnamon gum is my new whiskey. So, I'm not sure it's any better than being drunk.

“Ah.” My mom turns her focus down at the dog, who is drinking out of a small glass bowl she's put out for him. “Well, you never have done things the easy way, so why just go get a dog at a shelter when you can do it this way?”

I laugh, because how can I not? She's one hundred percent correct.

“In a roundabout way, Griffin kind of saved him. When he brought him in, the dog was malnourished and matted. I think he'd been on his own for a while. In definite need of a little TLC.”

Nadia smiles down at the dog, oblivious to the way my mom is looking at us. I can see the questions in Mom's eyes. I know it's killing her not to ask why I brought Nadia here. But also know that she understands me well enough to know that if she asks too many questions, I'll pull away.

So, I look at Nadia instead. She's not normal or happy. She's *so much more*.

“That's a lovely way to think of it, Nadia,” my mom says, knocking me off my train of thought. But I still don't look at her. I can't peel my eyes off the girl bent over the kitchen counter. The curve of her ass, the swell of her breasts above the marble countertop.

I eye fuck the hell out of Nadia to keep my gaze away from my mother's. I'm a mess. This is why I live alone in the woods. Because it's never enough. Never enough wins—until I crash. Never enough whiskey—until I've pissed my life away. Never enough friendship—because the longer I stare at Nadia, the more certain I am that I'll let Stefan down eventually, too.

“Yeah. Lucky dog. I had to hit him to save him. Just call me a hero.” I

roll my eyes and drag my hand through my hair, trying to lighten the mood. Trying to make these two women stop treating me like I'm a saint.

That's the exact moment that the front door flips open. "Babe, that coffee smells incredible." I don't need to see my dad to recognize the sound of him dragging his clubs and propping them up in the hallway. "I can't wait to—"

He walks in, his vast frame and barrel-chest filling the hallway. He stops what he's saying as the dog runs up to him, body vibrating with excitement at another person to see. He's gonna be in for a shock when we head back up the mountain in a couple of months and it's just the two of us.

And then, in all his excitement, the dog pees at my dad's feet, yellow liquid spraying all over the floor. I drop my face into my hands and groan, but my dad's boisterous laugh fills the room.

"Joan, why don't you get this excited to see me anymore?"

My mom giggles. She *giggles*. "Because I'd be the one stuck cleaning it up."

At that, I hear Nadia laugh. It's melodic and laced with just a bit of disbelief.

*This* is what I wanted Nadia to see. That two people can be happy together. Gentle together. There can be trust and love, and she isn't too broken to have this.

She just hasn't met a man who deserves it with her yet. One that's willing to work hard enough to have it. Because this side of Nadia will have to be earned.

"Hey, little fella." My dad bends down and scoops up the small dog, chuckling as he does. He steps over the mess on the floor, like it's no big deal. "What's your name?"

"Tripod," Nadia pipes up.

I scoff as I push past her to get some paper towels, poking a finger into her ribs as subtly as I can. "I'm not naming my dog Tripod."

"I already named him. So, you don't need to." She laughs, but everyone else is quiet.

"You call him what you want. I'm not going to name him something that's a joke. He deserves better."

"You named your horse Spot, for crying out loud." She stands up and holds her hands out wide.

"I didn't mean to," I grumble. "It just sort of stuck." But everyone ignores me in favor of Nadia and Tripod. Whose name is clearly sticking too. And I



don't hate that she's the one who named him.

"She brings up a good point," my dad interjects. "I'm not sure we've met. I'm Doug." He shoves his free hand toward Nadia, smiling as he takes her in.

"Nadia."

"She's Stefan's little sister," I grumble as I crouch down to spray the pee spot and wipe it up.

"Your friend?"

"Yup."

I wipe one more time until I'm satisfied it's clean and head to the garbage beneath the sink.

"Is he okay with this?" I turn back around, and my father is gesturing between us.

"There is no this," I blurt, wanting to clear any confusion.

Nadia rolls her lips together to cover a smile. *Brat.*

"We're just friends. I've been giving Nadia riding lessons."

My dad can barely hold back his guffaw as he says, "Is that what kids these days are calling it?"

*Good. God. What was I thinking?* It's like I completely forgot how ridiculous my parents are.

"Douglas," my mom scolds him with a playful slap to the chest before turning back to her coffee set up.

When my eyes land on Nadia, she has her fist pressed against her lips, and her body is shaking with laughter.

"Tell them, Nadia."

"Tell them what?" She turns her doe eyes on me, and I know I'm so screwed if I push this. Nadia is a lot of things, but shy isn't one of them, and I suspect she's not above revealing the things we've done that are better left unsaid.

"I don't know why I thought this was a good idea," is all I say back. I try to give her a serious glare, but she bursts out laughing.

"Me neither, son. Me neither." My dad continues to chuckle as he walks toward the living room. "This way, Nadia. Take a load off. Let's chat."

"I'd love that, Mr. Sinclair." She pushes off the counter, bumping her hip against mine as she walks past, and I see the corner of her lips tip up as she does.

*Brat.*



NADIA and I walk silently down the hallway toward the elevator.

Coffee with my parents turned out to be nice. Once they both settled down a bit and everyone had their extremely involved cups of coffee in hand, the conversation flowed easily. The dog curled up on my mother's lap and was snoring happily in no time. And I didn't even stumble over my words, which was a nice change.

I expected taking Nadia to my parents' place would give her some perspective. What I didn't expect was for her to fit in so seamlessly. I didn't expect it to feel like something else entirely, like she's the missing piece of the puzzle.

My dad invited her golfing with him for crying out loud. My mom is sending her links for where to purchase a special kettle so she can start making pour-over coffee too. She wasn't supposed to be funny and charming and make my parents welcome her into the fold of our family unit like she's some long-standing friend.

But Nadia *is* funny and charming. Her energy is infectious. It's like she makes everyone around her happier.

Even the dog is enamored.

Everyone except me is now officially calling him Tripod. And I'm pretty sure my parents are in love with Nadia and think grandbabies are on the way, no matter how many times I assured them we're just friends.

I tossed the word *friend* in everywhere I could, as well as emphasizing our age difference a few times. It didn't stop my dad from whispering in my ear when he gave me a parting hug. "Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

Fuckin' dick. So, I poked him in the stomach. "Getting soft, old man."

Then my mom went from whispering something in Nadia's ear to piping up and saying, "Hardly."

*Gag.* That was my cue to leave. I latched Tripod to his leash with one hand and grabbed Nadia's bicep with the other and dragged us all out of there, tossing a promise to visit again soon over my shoulder.

I always look forward to visiting with my parents, but I have *never* brought any woman home with me, and I severely underestimated their ability to play it cool.

We stand silently at the bank of elevators, and I watch the floor numbers

light up as it speeds toward us. Nadia slants her head toward me, eyeing the place where I'm still holding her bicep.

Truth is, I don't want to let her go. I'm comforted by how well she rolled with the punches in there. My parents were acting fucking insane, and she seemed like she was enjoying the hell out of it.

"That's a firm grip you've got there." Her eyes flick up to my profile because I'm still trying not to look at her. "Am I in trouble, Mr. Sinclair?"

"Nadia." My tone is full of warning. It makes me sound old and creepy when she calls me *Mr. Sinclair*.

"What?" She stares openly now and when those elevator doors slide open, I pull her into the blissfully empty elevator with me, eager to put as much space as possible between my parents and what I'm about to do.

She hums in amusement as the doors slide shut, clearly enjoying agitating me.

The minute the doors close, my hand with the leash darts out and slams into the red emergency stop button. And then I turn, drop the leash, and press Nadia up against the mirrored wall of the elevator, one hand still on her upper arm while the other slides across the taper of her waist. Her eyes widen, but she doesn't cower. In fact, she looks downright pleased.

"What, Griffin?" she taunts as my jaw pops under the pressure of my teeth grinding.

This woman tests every piece of patience I possess. I should step away from her, take my hands off her. I should keep this side of myself under wraps from her.

She's been roughed up enough in her life. The last thing she needs is me man-handling her. And I would manhandle the hell out of her. She'd love it. There's no doubt about that. I've had no complaints in that department. Quite the opposite, in fact. But gentle I am not. *Making love* I don't do.

"Say it." Her free hand lands on the waistband of my jeans, and my body goes tense. She slides her dainty fingers beneath the front of my shirt, trailing a nail over the ridge of my hip bone, forcing a low ache to take hold at the base of my spine.

If I don't get control of this and stop it now, I'll be fucking her against the wall of this elevator. Which is not what she needs.

I shoot back like I just touched a hot stove, pressing myself against the opposite wall, trying to put as much space between us as I can while being locked in this fucking box of temptation. My breathing comes in quick

frustrated pants. “Call my dad and me Mr. Sinclair within a few minutes of each other again and—”

“And what, Griffin? You gonna spank me for that, too?” Her top teeth press down into her pillowy bottom lip. “Or are you going to kiss me again and then tell me I’m a mistake?”

A low rumble takes root in my chest. My entire body is rigid, my will to stay away from her melting with every second I spend staring at her. The imprint of her fingers still burns on my abs.

I need to get the fuck away from her. The last thing I need to do is torpedo what little semblance of happiness I’ve created in my life by not being able to keep my dick in my pants around Nadia Dalca.

My hand slams into the red button, and we lurch back into motion.



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## NADIA



GRIFFIN SINCLAIRE IS A PRICK.

Hot and cold. Left and right. Full steam ahead and full stop. I don't know what's up or down with that man. And I'm fed the fuck up. Which is why I stormed up to my apartment and hit send on that vet school application. I almost missed the late deadline. I'm probably not getting in, but I did it all the same.

I almost feel bad for my horse with how hard I'm brushing his coat, but based on the way his eyes are drooping, he isn't concerned. My fingers itch to pour every thought and emotion out into my journal. There are a lot of rude names for Griffin in there already, and I wonder if I can get even more creative with my name-calling later tonight.

My desire to hang out anywhere near Griffin's guesthouse was low. I journaled and scarfed a tuna sandwich and then forced myself to come over here while it was still light out because I'm a good horse owner, and Horse needs his leg cold-hosed and his daily dose of too many apples. I want to give him all the love he didn't get before, which means showing up every day and proving to him I'm in this for the long haul.

"He told me once was an accident, but twice would be a mistake. Me. A mistake. Can you believe that?" I scrub the brush in a circular motion over the slope of his shoulder down over his chest. He might be tied to the fence post, unable to go anywhere, but he's also a good listener.

"And then he takes me to his parents' house? Why? That's what I want to know. But apparently, we're back to the silent treatment now. So, in the dark is where I stay."

Horse snorts, bobbing his head happily.

“I know, right? The guy is a fucking nightmare. He finally talks to me, but he doesn’t *tell* me shit.”

I hear another snort. But it’s not an equine one. I freeze, but don’t turn around. Tripod comes whipping around the corner and throws himself down at my feet, begging for belly rubs. I can’t deny the dog, but I don’t want to turn around to face Griffin right now.

“Not in the mood, Cowboy,” I mutter over my shoulder as I bend down to pet Tripod.

“Is that what you named him?” Griffin snorts.

I peer up at my horse’s big shiny eye, the one reflecting golden evening sun back at me. *Cowboy*. A smile touches my lips. Cowboys are tough. They get bucked off and then keep going. Just like this horse and me.

“No. But it is now.”

Another snort. I finally turn around to face Griffin, my stomach dropping the way it always does when my eyes land on him. “What do you want? I’m not really in the mood to chat.”

One of his thick brows arches at me before he casually strolls toward the back steps where he seems to always end up sitting out here. Tripod takes off to sniff around the yard, like he’s experiencing second-hand embarrassment and doesn’t want to put some space between us. “Can hear you chatting out here from my front porch.”

*Well, shit.*

He lifts a mug of something to his lips, and I can hardly look away from the way his throat bobs when he swallows. The way his eyes narrow at me from over the rim. The way his lips wrap around the edge.

Never wanted to be a piece of pottery before right now.

I shimmy my shoulders back and swap the rubber comb for a bristled brush. “Eavesdropping, Sinclair? Cute.”

“Still mad about something I said two years ago, Wildflower?” He smirks, and I swear I could slap that cocky expression right off his beautiful face. I imagine that’s the kind of hell he gave women before he retreated up into the mountains.

My teeth grind as I focus on brushing Cowboy. And I don’t even know what to say to him. Obviously, I’m still mad about it. Obviously, I still think about it. Obviously, I’m still moderately obsessed with him, despite my best efforts.

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing at all. It's kind of hard to talk around the foot lodged at the back of my throat. Griffin gave me the silent treatment the entire drive back to the ranch after whatever the hell that was in the elevator, so I figure I can give him the same right now.

I continue to work my way around my horse's lanky body, trying to lose myself in the beauty of my surroundings. The green fields that butt up against the Cascade Mountains, the melodic sound of birds chirping in the trees. I stare so hard at Cowboy that I observe the subtle way he's filling out. He's losing that ultra-slim racehorse physique with all the extra feed he's been getting. Retirement is looking good on him. He suits his new name.

It's not until I get to the other side of his long body that Griffin's raspy voice starts up again. "I brought you with me so you would see people who are happy. You'll have it one day. I know you will." He stares down into his mug, elbows propped on his knees, looking altogether too big to be sitting on the small steps. "You'll do anything you set your mind to. I just know it."

I suck in a big breath, eyes glued to the man in front of me. The man who acts like a real prick sometimes, and then says things like *that*. Or rescues me a horse. Or shields me from creepy creeps who are staring at me like I'm their next meal.

"You're a piece of work, Sinclair."

A dimple pops in one of his slightly pink cheeks as he stares down. He comes off almost bashful after being nice. "So I've been told."

Satisfied with the way Cowboy's coat gleams under the setting sun, I ditch the brush in my hand and lead him into his paddock. His hind leg swelling has come way down, although Mira is pretty sure he'll need a surgery to remove some bones chips at some point if I plan to do anything more than treat him like a dog. Which I do. Cowboy and I are going to make something of ourselves.

"Goodnight, Cowboy," I say, before pressing a kiss to the wide heart-shaped snip on his nose.

"You're serious?"

I latch the gate where Cowboy is still lingering. He lives for the excessive attention I've been giving him. He waits for me every night. I know he does.

I turn back to the beefy, grumpy man sitting on the steps behind me. "About what?"

"Naming him Cowboy?"

Now it's my turn to smirk. "Yeah. It suits him."



A grunt is what I get in return.

I hang the leather halter on the hook beside the gate and am about to leave when Griffin stops me in my tracks.

“What else is on your bucket list?”

I turn and face him slowly. “Excuse me?”

“The list. With riding a horse on it. And . . .”

I quirk an eyebrow as he trails off. *Why the hell does he care about this?*

“The other stuff I ca-can’t help you with.” His knuckles go white on his mug. “But what about the rest?”

Not a *c* or *t* as far as the eye can see with that, but he still can’t say it. Unfortunately for him, talking about sex doesn’t make me nervous. Have enough of it, and it doesn’t feel so taboo anymore, I guess. “Making love. You can’t help with that part?” I cross my arms to shield myself and pop out a hip.

I expect him to back down, but his gaze finds mine and latches on. “No.”

“Because I’m a mistake?” My lips thin after I throw those words from two years ago back at him.

He swallows, and his eyes rake over my body with enough heat to make me combust on the spot. “No.”

“Because you’re not attracted to me?” If he says yes, I’ll know he’s a big ass liar. No man looks at a woman how Griffin is looking at me right now unless he wants to fuck them. I’m not new to this game.

“No.” He shakes his head and only keeps his eyes on mine for a moment before he stares hard at a spot just beyond me, where Cowboy and Spot stand with their heads together like they’re having some sort of meeting of minds.

“I limited my experience to a lot of fucking. That’s what I have to give. And that’s not what you’re after.”

*Fucking.* That word sounds so delicious in his mouth, wrapped in the deep, dark depths of his voice. It sets my heart racing and the hair on my arms to standing. Truthfully, I’m not sure if I can surrender enough to feel like I’m making love to someone, no matter how badly I’d like to. And yet . . .

I tilt my head because I’ve got him in my crosshairs now. He should never have admitted this to me. Thinking this attraction was one-sided is one thing. Knowing it’s not? That’s a chance.

“And what if I am?”

I can see the full breadth of his chest rising and falling heavily now.

It matches my own. I'm out of breath, and all I'm doing is standing here staring at him.

His brows furrow, and he scowls as he holds one hand up between us, as if to stop me. I haven't even taken a step toward him, and he's signaling for me to stop. "No."

"Why?"

"Your brother."

"What about him? I don't need his permission, and neither do you."

Griffin scrubs a hand over his beard, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. "Not that simple."

"Then simplify it for me. Clearly, I'm too dumb and young to make sense of your ever-changing moods."

When his eyes flick open again, the heat from before has turned into pure longing. The look on his face makes my chest ache and my core clench. No man has *ever* looked at me the way Griffin is right now.

I've shared plenty of lust-filled looks with other men. I've seen desire in a man's eyes. But this? This borders on desperation. *Pain*.

"You deserve someone normal and happy. I want that for you. And I'm not that guy."

I rear back, annoyed. "You've got it wrong, Griffin. I deserve someone who makes me *feel* normal and happy. Which is something else entirely."

With that, silence falls between us once again. My heart twists because I want him to say something, and he doesn't.

Needing space, I turn and start my walk home across the darkening field, and he doesn't stop me. I want him to stop me. And I hate that I want that. I feel desperate, and I especially hate that.

It strikes me that Griffin is perfectly capable of making me feel happy and normal. He does sometimes.

But sometimes, he does the opposite.

Which means he also has the power to break me completely.



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## NADIA



I MAY NOT BE ready to hand my heart over to a man yet, but I don't need to waste my time with the likes of Tommy Koss either. Protecting myself doesn't mean settling.

I realized that on my walk home, which is why I'm here pushing through the front door of Neighbor's Pub. He's not answering his phone, and I need to talk to him now. Suddenly, getting rid of Tommy is like an itch I just *have* to scratch.

I can't wait. I need to clear my conscience.

Even if I can't have anything with Griffin, I don't *want* anything with Tommy. I know we're not anything—something that is confirmed by the girl snuggled up next to him when I walk into the bar.

Color me not surprised. I knew I'd find him here.

"Hey, Tommy," I say as I stroll up to the table where he sits with all his friends. Cheap beer and red plastic baskets from their wings litter the table.

"Hey, Nadia." He smiles up at me and doesn't even bother to remove his arm from the back of the blonde's chair. Can't say the guy doesn't have a type.

"Can I talk to you for a sec?" I nod my head to somewhere behind me. I don't need a lot of time or privacy to say what I have to say. Based on how cozy he seems with this other girl, I don't have to say anything at all. But I feel the need all the same.

This is part of what my therapist and I discussed. I can't control other people's actions. But I can control my own.

And I can control my reactions. My life, my choices. I don't live under

anyone's thumb anymore.

"Yeah." His brow furrows. "Sure. Of course." He stands, and the other girl gives me a wan smile, and I give her a small one back. I almost want to wish her luck with the colossal idiot.

"Just over here is good," I say, right as I turn and smack into a solid wall of muscle.

"Easy, brother." Tommy's hand reaches over my shoulder and lands on the chest in front of me. The one clad in a denim button down I recognize from earlier. The pearl buttons stare back at me. "Back on the sauce, huh?"

My head snaps back to glare at Tommy, who has a downright evil smirk on his face.

"Pardon me?" I ask, feeling the heat from Griffin's chest seeping into the front of my body.

"Ah, yeah. You didn't grow up here. Football star turned town drunk. Guess that didn't come up at dinner the other night, huh?"

I swear my heart almost stops beating as I turn slowly to gaze up into Griffin's beautiful face. *Drunk*. He wasn't drunk that night, was he? He didn't taste drunk. I want to get lost in his eyes and see the truth of it, but he's not focused on me, he's staring right past me. At Tommy.

And my God, if looks could kill.

A muscle in his jaw jumps, and my words grace his lips. "Not all of us are normal, happy people." I blink, hearing him in a way that no one else can.

Then his hard eyes turn down at me. A war rages in their depths. There's so much to unpack—shame, desire, humiliation, anger. A man with eyes like that should send me running after what I've lived through. But if Griffin is a flame, I'm a moth, destined to dance in his flames. My sense of self-preservation goes out the window when he looks at me like *that*.

If Griffin Sinclair told me to jump off a bridge, I just might.

"Goodnight, Wildflower," he says, his hand cupping my elbow and giving me a gentle squeeze before he turns toward the back exit. His touch is so sweet, it aches all the way up into my shoulder.

And then he's gone, walking away. His normally broad shoulders slump under the weight of whatever he's carrying with him.

*I can control my reactions.*

Spinning on Tommy, I hold up a hand to stop whatever dumb shit he's about to say. I'm mad, spitting mad. "That was rude. That was *cruel*. And my life is full up on cruel men, Tommy. This? You and me?" I gesture between

us. “Never going to happen. Never.”

Before he can respond, I’m gone, jogging across the bar to the darkened hallway that leads out back, letting my heart drag me out of this place without a backward glance. I need to be near him right now.

“Nadia! Wait!” Tommy calls, but he doesn’t come after me. Thank God, he’s consistent in his flakiness.

I pass the men’s room where whatever this is between Griffin and I began.

*Romantic, Nadia.*

My heart aches. I don’t know what his story is, but I know Griffin is a good man. A deeply good man. A man who doesn’t want to betray his friend, a man who is killing himself to resist this thing between us because he thinks it’s a mistake.

And maybe it is.

But maybe it’s not.

Letting him leave this place, thinking that I’m in any way aligned with what Tommy just said, would be a mistake.

I poke my head into the men’s bathroom and am met with a “Get the fuck out!” from a man who is not Griffin.

Which leaves me with the rear exit. He could be gone by now, but I feel a pull in that direction I can’t ignore.

It’s dark out back, and it smells like grease. I look left and there’s nothing but huge garbage bins and some employee vehicles in the otherwise sparse gravel lot. I look right, and there is Griffin, leaned up against the stucco wall, hands pinned behind his lower back as he stares up at the navy-blue sky twinkling with bright constellations.

He doesn’t move to recognize my presence, but he knows I’m here. And me? I stand and watch him. He reminds me of a cornered animal. Wild. Feral. Distressed.

With a few small steps, I’m standing in front of him, his gaze still trained on the stars.

“You gotta stop coming after me.” He swallows audibly.

I nod because he’s probably right. That would be the smart thing to do. But I’ve already established I don’t do smart things where he’s concerned.

So, I take a deep breath and shoot my shot. “Okay. I’ll stop tomorrow.” I step in closer. My breasts press against his firm chest as I snake my arms around his ribs.

I tuck my head under his chin, and I hug him. I grip him. We don't talk because we don't need to. I feel the tension leaving his body, seeping out slowly. And I'm happy to absorb it all. Taking someone else's pain is a hell of a lot better than stewing in my own.

Eventually he rasps, "You shouldn't be out here with me when your boyfriend is in there, Nadia."

I roll my lips together and inhale deeply through my nose, wanting to wrap myself in his scent. Pine and laundry soap. "I came here tonight only to tell him we would never happen. I think I made myself clear."

Griffin's body heaves beneath mine, like he's relieved by what I just told him. And then his arms come out from behind his back. He drapes them over my shoulders and drops his bearded cheek onto the top of my head.

He nuzzles me. Wrapped up in his strong arms . . . it's heaven.

If I were a cat, I'd straight up purr right now.

"Good. You can do better." His voice is quiet, but that doesn't matter when we're pressed up against each other like this. I can feel him breathing, I can feel his heart beating. If he's the ocean, I just want to ride the waves.

"I can," I murmur back, fisting the back of his denim shirt in my fingers.

In Griffin's arms, I'm more at peace than I ever have been, and I can't explain why.

"I'm not better." His voice cracks.

"Okay." I'm not going to argue with him. That's not what he needs right now. He needs someone to lean on, not pretty words.

"I'm an alcoholic. Haven't touched a drop in years. But I'll still always be one."

"Okay."

"That should send you running." His voice picks up a sharper tone.

"Okay." I snuggle in closer. If he's trying to scare me away, it won't work.

"I've been with more women than the number of years you've been alive."

I snort. "Okay." Then I press a chaste kiss to his sternum, right over his heart.

A growl erupts from his chest, and he spins us, pressing me up against the wall, his arms above my head, caging me in. I'm certain he's trying to intimidate me, but I've felt nothing short of safe around Griffin, and right now is no exception.

I know how the air changes when a man wants to hurt you, I know how he looks at you—with disgust, with contempt—and for all his grumbling, Griffin has *never* looked at me that way.

“Jesus Christ, Nadia.” His gaze frantically roams my face. “Don’t you get it? I’m bad news. I’m profoundly unavailable. I’ve got nothing to give you,” he whisper-shouts.

I’ve got nothing to give him, either. “Okay,” I murmur. His entire body vibrates, and his pulse jumps in his neck. I can see it. I lick my lips as I watch it, getting lost in the rhythm.

“Nadia. This can’t happen.”

Even hidden behind the pub, it feels like we’re sneaking around. I want to point out that I’m not the one keeping him here. But I just stare up into his fathomless dark eyes. Everything about him screams raw masculinity. He makes me weak in the knees.

A small smile touches my lips. A smirk. A challenge. “Okay.”

One of his hands slides through his dark hair, tugging at the ends in frustration. “Fuck.” He checks over his shoulder, one arm still plastered to the wall above my head, protecting me. I can tell he’s agitated. He looks mad, but not at me. In an instant, his face snaps back down to mine, and his breath dances across my damp lips when he scolds, “You drive me c—”

I quirk a brow. “What?”

His jaw pops, and he draws imperceptibly closer.

“C-c—”

“Say it. I dare you.” I move my face toward him, the tips of our noses brushing together. He looks like he could kill me, in the best way possible.

A sigh leaves him in a ragged whoosh. Goosebumps dance across my arms under the muggy night air. His voice is like a feather dragging across my skin as we face off. “You drive me crazy.”

And then he kisses me.

His free hand cups the back of my skull, and he crushes his lips against mine. For a second, I freeze. I wanted him to kiss me, goaded him into it, but I’m not sure I thought he would give in.

I catch up fast, kissing him back with every bit of emotion I can dredge up. He won’t believe me if I tell him he’s good for me. Instead, I’ll have to *show* him.

My lips move against his frantically, fingers grappling with the hemline of his shirt. All I know is that I want my hands on his body. I want to feel



him. I want more than he's willing to give me.

I tug at the tails of his shirt in frustration, and then pull until I hear the sharp snapping noise of those pearl clasps pulling apart. I moan against his mouth when my palms slide up over his bare abdomen, tracing the lines of that delicious V that disappears beneath his jeans. The one I've fantasized about since I saw him on the couch last week.

A moan slips out between us. I can't even tell whose it is. His skin pebbles beneath my touch, and his cock swells against my thigh.

"Fuck. Nadia." He breathes my name against my lips, raspy and full of awe. It's so clear to me that whatever this connection is, it isn't one-sided.

His teeth press into my bottom lip with a firm nip, and I arch into him, urging him on. Wanting more. Every nerve ending in my body buzzes as my body bows into his. My head tips back, and Griffin takes that as an invitation to move his mouth onto my neck as my hands slide up to wrap around the back of his.

First a kiss, then another bite. I jump at the pinching sensation, but then his tongue is there, soothing the sting and driving me crazy. I hold his head close, desperate for more. He moves to the other side and bites me again, right where my neck slopes into my shoulder.

"You are fucking delicious. So responsive for me." His fingers curl into a fist in my hair and he pulls, forcing my head back further, and opening my chest up to him like a platter to feast on.

And he does.

Teeth drag, lips press searing kisses in the wake of his mouth. The tip of his tongue dances over every aching spot, twirling and teasing as he works his way down to the tops of my breasts.

"These . . ." His nose trails over one peak as he bends over my heaving body, one hand still completely entangled in my hair. "Are fucking perfect."

Then his free hand darts down and yanks the neckline of my tank top down, taking the cup of my bra with it.

He sucks a breath in right as all the air whooshes out of my lungs. Like he stole the breath right out of my body. We stare down at my exposed breast, the swell of it pushed up by the clothing pulled beneath, my nipple pointing upward, right at him.

Griffin raises his eyes—dancing with flames and an utter lack of control—to mine. I love this expression on his face. I love what it does to me. We stare at each other for a few seconds, the sound of our mutual heavy

breathing loud in my ears.

Something passes between us. A question. An answer. An agreement. And then his sinful lips latch on to my nipple, and I moan, letting my lashes flutter shut as I get lost in the feeling of his mouth on my body.

The way my body makes him lose control.

He pulls his hand free of my hair and uses it to yank down the opposite side of my shirt so that it props up both my tits for him.

“Fucking look at you, Wildflower.” His hands squeeze firmly, bordering on too firm, but then he pulls back, always brushing away a hard touch with a soft one. The perfect balance. “So fucking smooth and pretty.” He moves to the other breast, leaving the other nipple wet and achingly hard as the night breeze flows over my skin.

He sucks my nipple in and then lets it go with a loud pop before pulling a couple inches back and staring at my exposed breast like he’s having some sort of religious experience. “So willing. So eager to please.”

*God. Damn.*

I try to squeeze my thighs together to ease the throbbing between them, but he shoves his muscular leg between them, keeping me pushed up against the wall, and I grind myself on him instead.

The relief that motion gives me is addictive. I do it again, feeling delicious heat bloom at the base of my spine.

“Nadia.” He says my name like a threat. I sigh in pleasure, loving the way his deep voice rumbles around in his broad chest. It’s so intense with his shirt unbuttoned, I can almost see his body vibrate when he does.

I swivel my hips, rubbing myself on him, getting lost in the sensation of being surrounded by him. Of holding his attention in this way.

His calloused fingers dig into my breast. “Do that again and I won’t be accountable for what I do next.”

My eyelids feel heavy, but I drag them up from his bare chest all the same. My tongue darts out, wetting the seam of my lips. And then I whimper, knowing I’m about to set him off and not really caring.

I look him dead in the eye and grind myself on him again.

“You’re impossible.” His voice is deadly quiet.

Then one hand shoots up, wrapping around my throat, pushing me against the wall. Firm, but gentle, completely in control. The other grips my bare breast as he clamps onto the skin there with his teeth.

“Ah,” I cry out, the bite startling me. But the pain doesn’t last. Not when

he uses the hand on my throat to push me down onto his leg. And I let him. I surrender to the motion and feel my slick pussy sliding across damp panties.

I'm mindless with *him*.

The way he manhandles me is like nothing I've known. I have experience, but none of it prepared me for Griffin Sinclair.

"Are you going to come grinding on my leg, Nadia?" His words are almost taunting, but I have little time to think about them before he moves over and gives my other breast the same treatment.

The press of his teeth—it's addictive. It's savage and unhinged and out of control and makes me feel more alive than I ever have. More desired than I ever have.

When he removes his mouth to admire his handiwork, I let my eyes travel down over myself. My pink nails tangle in his messy hair, the perfect match for the marks glowing on the soft flesh of my breasts.

"Fuck," I breathe out. "That's hot. No one has ever bitten me before."

He goes rigid in my hands. I swear he stops breathing. And then he's drawing up, flying backward like someone shoved him away from me.

The hand that was just gripping me in the most delicious way wipes across his mouth. "I'm so sorry."

He looks like he's going to be sick. It's like a switch flipped in him.

"I'm so fucking sorry."

My heart rate ratchets up as I watch him spiral, my arms limp at my sides as I use the wall behind me to keep myself upright. All that arousal knits itself into regret.

"You don't need to apologize."

"God." He swallows deeply, eyes still trained on my exposed breasts. The ones I'm too shocked to tuck back away where they belong. "I really do."

"Stop it," I spit, my annoyance building. "Just stop. Don't make that seem cheap when it wasn't."

His eyes finally meet mine. The flash of sadness in them is hard to miss. "Okay." One hand drags through his hair, and he takes a few tentative steps toward me.

He gently runs an index finger over the mark on one breast before pulling my shirt up over it, like he can't stand to look at it. He does the same to the other side before turning his attention back to my face, namely my lips. The ones that are still swollen from the way he kissed me. *Owned* me.

"Nothing about you is cheap, Nadia. You're a fucking catch. You deserve

so much more than a man who kisses you in dirty bar bathrooms or beside grease-filled dumpsters. Someone who leaves marks on your body . . . fuck.” He shakes his head. The heaviness that momentarily evaporated when we disappeared into each other is slinking back.

He can’t even make eye contact with me.

And I’m not having it. I reach up between us, capturing his chin in my fingers, gently turning his handsome face back to me. I wait until his eyes meet mine and let my thumb rub over his bearded jaw line, reveling in the feel. He’s so unlike any man I’ve ever given myself to. I’ve been playing with prissy city boys, and Griffin Sinclair is the Wild West.

I want him right down to the tips of my toes.

“You know what I deserve?” His irises dance across my face. “Someone who needs me badly enough to take me without apology. A man who knows what he wants. A man who wants *me*.”

He nods, pulse jumping in his neck.

“And do you know what you deserve?”

“What?”

“A woman who feels like a goddess when you leave a mark like this on her. A woman who doesn’t want a goddamn thing from you other than to be worshipped any time, any place.” The intense way he’s staring at me almost makes me squirm. “You deserve a woman who drives you crazy every damn day, and nothing less.”

Silence stretches between us. My words hang in the air, suspended, until his deep sigh blows them away. An opportunity dashed.

I stand on my tippy toes and press a soft kiss to Griffin’s lips. He kisses me back, but it’s not the same. It’s chaste. Innocent almost. The heat is dampened.

There’s something heartbreaking about the kiss. And now, I’m the one who can’t hold his gaze.

Suddenly, I feel infinitely less experienced. Colossally foolish. Who the fuck do I think I am going after a grown-ass man like I’m some kind of siren? Like I’m not just his best friend’s sad, troublemaking little sister?

A dejected, small laugh bursts from my lips when I pull away from him, my eyes trained on the ground as I roll myself along the wall away from him.

“I hope you find her.”

And then I slink away to my car, ready to lick my wounds in private.



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GRIFFIN

ONE MONTH LATER



THE FIELDS WHIP past as I make the five-minute drive down the road, clenching the steering wheel hard enough that I could almost rip it right off. Tripod sits on my lap, happily looking out the window, my new constant companion. I swear the floofy little dog just follows me everywhere all day. I'm not mad at it either.

It's the weekend, and we're supposed to go up to my place to do some maintenance for a few days, so I don't go back to a total disaster when my contract is up at the end of August.

But first, I told Stefan I'd come to his place early to help him with the massive load of hay he just received. Then he'll come help do some things around my place for a couple of days. Even told him we could do some target practice to prepare for hunting season. A fire, some food, bring the wife—basically camp out for a couple of nights. A fair trade if you ask me.

Seemed like the least I could do, seeing as how I've been avoiding him. And avoiding his little sister. My plan to be a huge enough dick to push Nadia away has worked. In spectacular fashion.

Except now, I'm not so sure it was a good plan at all.

It's been a month since I devoured her behind the local pub. Since she rode my leg while I put my marks all over her tits like an out-of-control caveman. I roughed up the twenty-one-year-old girl who has *make love* on her fucking bucket list like she was just some eager jersey chaser waiting behind the stadium to turn a head.

*Total douche.* How selfish can I possibly be?

Obviously selfish enough to send her packing. Mission accomplished. So why do I feel like total trash about it?

Within a few days, she moved Cowboy to her brother's farm. Probably because she caught me staring at her out my back window while she worked with him. When my only friend showed up with a trailer, he was all excited that his sister would be hanging around and he'd get to see her more often.

I had to pretend to be happy for him. Deep down, I was jealous. The petty part of me felt like he was taking her from me.

But I'm old enough to know better. I'm smart enough to know that I'm what sent her packing. That girl looked up in my eyes and gave me the perfect opportunity to tell her I'm fucking obsessed with her.

And I didn't take it.

I'm a coward.

She told me she'd stop coming after me, and she did. I just didn't expect it to gut me the way it has.

This thing between Nadia and I should *not* have me this keyed up after a month. I shouldn't still feel bad. I've been the king of no-strings hookups for my entire adult life. It's not something I'm especially proud of at my age; nevertheless, it's not like this is unfamiliar territory for me.

The problem with Nadia is that there are a lot of fucking strings. So many strings. And I've completely tangled myself in them. Tied myself up in knots over the girl.

Usually, I'm the one tying someone up. So, I guess that part is new.

The vision of winding my rope around Nadia's slender wrists takes root in my mind as I turn into the driveway at Cascade Acres. The way she'd squirm in pleasure against them. All the things I'd do to her if I had her at my mercy. All the things I could show her.

I'm yanked from my filthy train of thought, the one that has me thickening in my jeans, when I see Nadia's parked car in front of the barn and her brother standing outside the big sliding door waving at me. Smiling at me.

Because he has no idea what I was just thinking about doing to his little sister.

I grind my teeth, willing the swelling in my jeans to ease. It's easy to do with Stefan acting like he's happy to see me. Shame is a real boner-killer.

I adjust myself quickly, taking a deep breath before offering him a quick nod and pulling the brim of my hat lower on my face, fully intending to hide underneath here today.

Hopping out, I offer a gruff, "Hey."



I slam the door of my truck harder than necessary, and Tripod takes off somewhere. Probably to eat horse shit. I guess after starving for however long he did, his palate isn't very discerning because he fucking loves the stuff.

The sun already beats down overhead, heating the cool morning air. We're hitting the dog days of summer where we're close enough to fall that the nights are cold, but the sun still chases the chill away. When it's high in the sky, it's almost insufferably hot.

Truth be told, I prefer the heat of summer. I hate bundling up. I hate how stuck I feel when we get a heavy snowfall on the mountain and can't go anywhere. The only thing those colder nights have me looking forward to is hunting season. It's how I stock up on food for the days when I can't go anywhere.

On one hand, I love the solitude. On the other, the longer I spend up in the mountains, the lonelier it gets. Something I haven't been able to admit to myself until this summer spent on Gold Rush Ranch. I know I can be a grumbly prick. I know I don't talk much. But it's been nice having people talk around me.

Or talk *at* me the way that Nadia did. I miss that. The charm of her chatting away and not expecting me to interject but enjoying my company all the same. Most people treat me like I'm a letdown on the days I don't talk much.

But not her.

I didn't need to talk for her to enjoy my company.

"You ready for this?" Stefan pulls on a pair of leather gloves and nods toward the flatbed stacked with square bales.

*Goddamn.* We're going to be here all day. I almost forgot the sheer scale of running this place. Up on the mountain, I only ever have a few horses at a time for training, plus Spot. It's manageable enough, but this . . . this is a lot. Stefan has the money to pay people to do the work, but I think he likes to feel useful.

A deep sigh rushes out of me as I peek out at my friend. "Let's go."

He claps me on the shoulder. "I owe you one, man."

I flinch. *Owe me one.* Jesus. Not even close. "All good." I pull my gloves from my back pocket, ready to dig in. It's when I'm sticking my second hand in that I feel it.

Electricity prickling across my skin. The sensation like I can't suck

enough air into my lungs. My eyes shoot up, right into the warm pools of bourbon that are Nadia's. The only bourbon I crave these days.

She's standing in the open door, holding Cowboy's lead rope. But she's not smiling. Her lips are parted, and she looks like she lurched to a stop after seeing me. She looks like she's wishing I weren't here.

And fuck. I wish I could say the same, but she's a welcome sight. We've kept our distance for weeks. I've kept my head down and worked the young horses. I've visited Billie to update her on their progress and honestly, I've enjoyed working with her, chatting about the youngsters in my care. That's what's kept me busy.

But now, taking Nadia in, I realize I've been going through the motions. Cowboy's back leg is bandaged, and I roll my lips together to keep myself from asking her if he's okay, if he had his surgery. I want to talk to her so fucking bad. Just being in her presence makes my chest ache in a completely unfamiliar way.

After mauling her, I told myself I was going to call up one of my regular booty-calls, but I sit at home every night jerking myself into a towel on the couch, while I imagine her standing at that back door.

Except she doesn't just stand there in my fantasy.

She joins me. She crawls onto my lap and kisses me. Straddles me and slams herself down on top of me.

I snap my head away, not wanting Stefan to see me standing here staring at her like a horny teenager. Or, in Nadia's case, like she's annoyed with me.

My cheeks burn as I climb up onto the flatbed, feeling like a bigger piece of shit than I have in years.

"Ready?" My friend claps his hands with a wide grin.

I nod, then throw myself into tossing bales of hay off the truck. Hoping upon hope that losing myself in physical labor will numb the sting of the expression on Nadia's face.

But I'm not that lucky.

We're only a few minutes in when Stefan shouts, "Hey, any chance you want to come help?"

"No, thanks. I just had my nails done." Nadia's cool voice floats up from behind me. I don't need to look at her to know that she doesn't want me here—let alone work with me.

Stefan laughs, clearly not picking up on her brushing him off. "Grab some gloves from the barn. Just for a bit. We're supposed to head up to

Griffin's place for the night. Mira's got Hank and Trixie lined up to stay with Silas. I just wanna get this done."

I hear her sigh. It sounds loud even though it's not. That's the thing about not talking very much—you hear more. Every little noise is more pronounced.

"Okay, fine." I hear her stomp off, clearly not happy about being talked into this, but doing it anyway.

"You're the best sister a guy could ask for," Stefan shouts, chuckling and shaking his head. Then he turns to me, laughter lining his tone. "Man, she's grown up so much. But she's still got an attitude the size of Texas."

I just grunt. I like her attitude.

"I hope she finds someone who can appreciate her. I'd hate to see anyone drum that wild streak out of her."

I snort. "She'd eat 'em alive first. Women like her aren't meant to be tamed," I blurt out before I even have time to obsess over the *t*. And I immediately worry I've said too much.

"See?" Stefan pants, running a forearm over his sweaty brow. "You get it."

I turn back to the bales. Talking about this with Stefan is precarious territory.

"Okay. Where do you want me?"

*On your fucking knees.*

I clamp my eyes shut. I can't see her, but even her goddamn voice sets me off. I'm fucking losing it. I haven't had a drop of alcohol, and yet I feel downright intoxicated around her. Like I'm completely out of control, and after spending years working on regaining it, I *hate* that feeling.

"Just swap spots with Griffin. Hand the bales down and he can get them set under the cover-all. That work for you, Griff?"

*Nope.* "Yup. Sure." Stefan's brow rises at the bite in my tone, so I force a wolfish smile.

He rolls his eyes and gets back to grabbing bales from the top of the stack like he's grown accustomed to me being a grumpy bitch and isn't all that ruffled by it.

When I turn around, Nadia has one booted foot on the bumper of the trailer and is pulling herself up. I offer her a hand to help, but she waves me off and moves right past me, leaving me in a dazed cloud of her signature rose-petal scent. The one that gets me every time I walk past the flower

section at the grocery store. The girl is driving me nuts.

The breeze of a bale flying past me cools my skin, the scent of dried grass mingling with that floral smell. “Get to work, Sinclair,” she says before turning to grab the next one while her brother laughs at me from the other end of the trailer.

I don’t know how long we work like that. An assembly line of sorts. Stefan handing a bale down to Nadia from the top of the pile, and then Nadia handing me the bale down to where I stand on the ground.

She avoids looking at me, and to be fair, I do a pretty good job of hiding my gaze beneath the brim of my baseball cap. Now and then, our gloved hands make contact. Her leather-bound fingers wrapped around the twine, brush against mine. It feels forbidden. It feels *right*.

It feels like fucking torture.

But when she announces she’s done helping and has something else to do—when she leaves?

That feels even worse.



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## NADIA



“COME WITH US! It will be like celebrating you getting into vet school.”

Mira looks so excited at the prospect. And truthfully, I’ve been pretty over-the-moon since I got that email welcoming me to the program—celebrating sounds pretty good. Which means I’m about to be a total hag because I’m turning her down. The entire weekend up at Griffin’s cabin in the woods? While she and my brother sneak off to do God knows what and leave me with the one man I don’t want to be around? I’d rather sit here alone and write in my journal.

*Liar.*

I tamp that inner voice down. It’s much healthier for me to pretend I don’t like him.

“No, thank you. I’m going to stay with Cowboy. Make sure he’s okay and everything.”

I stare down at the gravel driveway as we make our way back to the farm. We just had lunch with Hank and Trixie, where they all gushed about me being accepted into the veterinary medicine program at Emerald Lake, and then we sent them off with Silas. Something Mira played cool about but was clearly struggling with.

Mira’s dark eyes plead with me. “Please? I promise he’ll be fine. His surgery went perfectly. It’s been a week; he’s fine. The staff are more than qualified to take care of him.”

She has the sad puppy face down pat.

“I’d rather not. Just in case. I want to keep doing what I’ve been doing. I would never forgive myself if something went wrong.”

“Nadia. I’m leaving my *baby* behind. For one night. It’s the first time, and I’m terrified. I’m pretty sure you can leave a horse at a full-service stable.”

She’s not wrong. But I’m not about to admit that.

“It’s not even that far away! If you need to come back, you can be here in, what? An hour?”

One side of my mouth quirks up. “You telling me that? Or yourself?”

Mira huffs out a laugh and runs a hand through her hair. “Snarky little bitch.”

I laugh too, right as we round the curve of the lake at the base of the valley, right beside the barn.

“Sorry, sis,” I say, still looking at the lake.

A dreamy sigh is her reply. I glance back at her and instantly recognize the look on her face. It’s the same one she made the first time Stefan had her over to our house for dinner. The one she made while staring at his ass while he cooked for her.

It was gross then, and it’s still gross now.

But when I follow her gaze, I’m pretty sure I make the same face.

The temperature has shot up since earlier this morning when they started unloading the hay, and I guess that’s why my brother and his friend have lost their shirts.

In exchange, I’ve lost my ability to talk.

Wranglers.

Sweat-slicked abs.

Leather gloves.

And that glorious, bearded face.

Everything about Griffin oozes sex appeal. And I am very much *not* immune to it.

“Wow,” my sister-in-law whispers as we slow to a standstill at the base of the driveway.

“Yeah,” I breathe out, sounding like a total idiot. “But not about my brother,” I add quickly. “That would be gross.”

She snorts, eyes flitting over to me. “I’m not related to either of them. So, I can really enjoy the full experience.”

I bark out a laugh.

“What? Look at them. I didn’t know Griffin was so . . . *cut*.”

“Yeah,” I say again, having lost the ability to use many words at the sight of him working without a shirt, sweat trickling down his throat. His inked

forearms ripple in the sun, the muscles in his back bunching every time he heaves up a bale.

“Damn, girl. You look like you’re going to eat him alive.”

Mira isn’t eyeing them up anymore. She’s eyeing *me* up. Irises dancing with knowing amusement.

“No. He’s too . . .” I trail off. *Too what?* Manly? Strong? Comforting?

“Old?” Mira supplies, like a bucket of ice water over my head.

I swallow deeply and nod, trying my best to not look like a star-struck idiot. Which, coincidentally, is how I’m feeling.

Pretending I don’t feel inexplicably drawn to Griffin is a hell of a lot easier when I don’t have to see the man. Shirt or no shirt, I’m a total goner where he’s concerned.

Mira squeezes my shoulder, hitting me with her signature stare that is almost indecipherable. Smug and amused, like she knows a secret you don’t.

“Age is just a number, little Dalca. And the only number that counts is eight.” She points over to where Griffin stands, panting and glowing under the scorching sun. “Because that’s how many abs I can count on him.”

“Jesus Christ, Mira.”

She throws her head back and cackles as heat spreads across my chest. Her laughter draws the men’s eyes. And then the fucking traitor shouts, “Great news! Nadia is going to come keep me company while you guys do whatever man stuff you have planned.”

My brother lifts one gloved hand and offers a firm thumbs up.

Griffin just scowls.



THE PROPERTY IS BREATHTAKING. There’s something about being high enough up that you can see the entire valley that just feels so otherworldly.

Down in Ruby Creek, the heavy presence of the tall rocky peaks can feel oppressive. Like they’re weighing down on you. But up here, I almost feel like I’m flying.

I stepped out of my car and walked onto the front lawn, thinking I’d take a quick peek at what the small house overlooks, but now that I’m here, I don’t feel much like moving.



The hot sun is making its way across the sky, but there's a cool breeze up here. With a hand held above my eyes, I scan the horizon, still not over the beauty that this part of Canada possesses.

I take a deep breath, letting the clean mountain air pour through my lungs. A fresh pine scent that is heart-wrenchingly familiar floats on the wind. A scent reminding me of Griffin, and how it felt to be captured beneath his arms. How I felt surrounded by *him* when he kissed me.

I shouldn't want him this badly. I've never wanted a man this badly. Usually, it's the other way around. They chase the hell out of me. I like that part, then I give in. We have lots of hot, fun sex. And then I get bored with them. Then it gets mundane. Then I feel trapped, destined to follow in my mother's footsteps. Get knocked up, get tied down, be stuck in some dark, miserable spiral. There's this part of me that thinks I want that, and then this other part that is terrified to go down that path at all.

So, I move onto the next boy, keeping my insecurities close and my heart closer.

Without even trying, Griffin has ripped all that safety from me. He hasn't wooed me. He hasn't chased me. In fact, it feels an awful lot like he's done everything in his power to push me away.

Truth be told, I'm not sure the man likes me. *Likes me*. Not just wants to fuck me, because I'm accustomed to that approach. I'm accustomed to men's eyes on me—appreciative looks aren't new to me. When your boobs fill out early and you're a dead ringer for a woman like my mother, well, male attention hasn't been scarce.

Some days, I ache for a man who sees more than the way I look on the outside. A man invested enough to peel back all the layers. But most of them stop the chase as soon as they peel back my clothes. Like that's the final destination for them with a girl like me.

I want *more*.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" My brother comes to stand beside me, scanning the horizon the way I did.

"It's perfect," I say, sounding a little awestruck.

"We've had some good weekends up here, Griff and I."

I nod, words fizzling out on my tongue.

"Haven't been up as much since Silas. Hell," he palms the back of his neck, "since Mira. I almost feel bad."

I tilt my head in question and watch him swallow.

“I helped him renovate that house.” He gestures toward the home behind us, the one covered in cedar shakes with a bright red door to match the tin roof. “We spent a lot of time together before you arrived. He helped me get the farm set, and I helped him up here. We both had our demons, but neither of us forced the other to talk about it. We just took solace in one another’s company, and neither of us expected the other to talk about whatever haunted us. He liked that I didn’t know who he was. Didn’t recognize him at all.”

My stomach sinks, and I bat my eyelashes, willing the building wetness away. I know my brother was in a dark place for a very long time. I’m aware he carries around a lot of guilt over how things played out for me, and how they played out for our mother.

It’s a burden he doesn’t need to carry.

But I’ve watched him do it all these years. Until Mira. She lit him up in a way I’ve never seen before. And then a baby? I’ve never seen my brother happier. And God knows he deserves to be happy after the shit he’s been through.

“I’m really glad you had him, Stef.” I smile over at my brother, but it doesn’t touch my eyes. It’s been too easy to disregard the fact there’s more than just Griffin and me at play in this game between us. Causing a rift between him and my brother would gut me.

“Me too. But I feel a bit like I’ve left him behind. Like we were so kindred in our misery. And now . . . well, I’m so far from miserable it’s not even funny.”

This time, the smile touches every corner of my face. There’s something about seeing a tough, protective guy like my brother all mushy and happy. It warms me. It gives me hope for myself.

“I hope Griff can be this happy one day.” He glances over his shoulder, like he’s worried the other man might overhear his wish for him.

The sound of my swallow fills my ears. “Me too.” Because I do. No one deserves to be as deeply unhappy as Griffin seems.

“Are you happy?”

His question catches me off guard. I’m not sure where this heart-to-heart is coming from. If it’s having his dad in his life, or if it’s becoming one himself.

I nod and tip my head onto the top of his bicep. “Yeah, big bro. Happiest I’ve ever been.”

Which is true, but what I don’t say is that *happiest I’ve ever been* is more

like *happy enough for now. Or better than I was.*

“Thanks for joining us. I like having you around. And Griff . . . He’s not as bad as he seems, you know?”

I nudge my elbow into his ribs as we stand taking in the view from the mountaintop. “I know.”



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## GRIFFIN



STEFAN IS LIKE A LITTLE KID—WAY too excited about target practice. Especially for a guy who is about to miss every shot.

My friend is good at a lot of things, but shooting guns is not one of them. I took him hunting last year, and he did two things exceedingly well: kept me company and made delicious gourmet sandwiches. Beyond that, I might even go so far as to say he was a bit of a burden. Not that I'd ever tell him. Beggars like me can't be choosers when it comes to friends. Plus, he's got the bug now. After big city living, he's settling into country life, and seems to think getting good at hunting is one of those things he needs to master.

Enter me, the best friend who's been hunting since he was a kid.

I set the cans up on the log. "Alright, Stefan." I stand back to check the spacing of the five cans before walking back to where everyone is standing, trying not to look at Nadia. "I think that's about set."

She's been a distraction all day without even trying. Just having her up here in my space, in my safe haven, is driving me crazy.

And not in a bad way.

More because I can imagine her up here. With me.

She leans back against a tree, wearing a pair of my earmuffs, sipping a pineapple flavored sparkling water, looking completely amused as her brother explains to Mira how to hold the gun.

Nadia isn't as prissy as she appears. I don't know what I expected her and Mira to do all day, but getting into the few flower beds around my place and pruning the hedges wasn't it. I watched her on her knees, digging through the soil with her bare hands. Marveled at the way she propped them on her hips

as she scanned the area, not caring at all about the mud it smeared on her clothes.

From where I was repairing a spot on the roof, I watched her let herself into the back field, the one full of wildflowers. Pinks, yellows, purples, every shade of green imaginable. I watched her prop a hand over her brow and scan the horizon.

Fucking wildflowers as far as the eye can see.

I swear I forgot how to breathe for a few minutes as I watched her, all long limbs and flowing golden hair.

For years, I've stared at that field and tried to figure out a way to get rid of the flowers that run rampant in the alpine valley. I can't let the horses out to graze back there, but I'm not wild about blanketing the field in herbicide. The alternative is stripping the top layer of the plants and soil, and well, that's a big job I haven't gotten around to yet. I bought this place in the winter, in desperate need of the isolation it offered. I didn't ask or care about what was in the field.

But now, every spring, more flowers crop up, their seeds spreading in the wind, their roots lacing themselves down into the soil. Hardy as all get out, and almost impossible to get rid of.

So instead of dealing with the issue, that fucking field has sat there for years, taunting me.

Just like Nadia.

"Okay, now gently squeeze the trigger." Stefan is standing behind Mira when she pulls the trigger on the rifle she chose.

*Bang.*

I can hear Tripod going postal in the house. Yappy little motherfucker. I roll my eyes but can't stop the small smile. That little dog has been my constant companion over the past month. Follows me everywhere. Sleeps in my bed even though I swore I wouldn't let him. I'm not even sure what he's barking at right now. The sound of the gunshot, or that I locked him away, and he's miffed about it.

*Bang.*

She tries again. And misses. Again. And again. But she doesn't care. She and Stefan are laughing. The city boy and his bookish wife giggle over shooting a rifle for the first time, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a little bit adorable.

"You wanna try, Nadia?" Mira turns to her, asking a little more loudly

than necessary over the plugs in her ears.

Nadia holds up the can in her hand, ankle crossed over her shin where she leans casually against the trunk of a tree. "I'm good, thanks." She smiles, but it's strained. I glance back to see if the other two notice the discomfort seeping into her previously relaxed expression.

"Try it, Nadia. It's fun. Even if you don't come close to hitting a can. Right, Kitten?" Stefan winks at his wife, who rolls her eyes and playfully nudges him in the ribs.

"Griff can show you how. He's a pro. Right, Griff?"

My friend juts his chin out at me, and my eyes dart over to his little sister. I try so hard not to stare at her, to let my eyes rove over every hill and valley of her body, but it's goddamn impossible. The girl is temptation personified without even trying. And maybe that's why I'm such a goner.

She doesn't care about impressing me. She's still got mud smudged on her hips, wavy hair up in a high ponytail, the skin stretched across the rounded tops of her breasts light pink from too many hours in the sun today.

She's not even trying, and I'm driving myself crazy. What would happen if she said it out loud, gave life to this enormous question mark between us?

I wouldn't be able to stop myself. That's what.

"Only if you want to." I shrug, wanting to hear her say yes. Wanting to know what this discomfort I'm picking up on is.

She sighs heavily, giving me a slightly wide-eyed look that I just can't place. "Yeah. Sure."

"Any preference?" I gesture toward where the different types of guns are laid out.

Without moving, she shifts her gaze to the cases set on the rickety wooden table beside her. Top teeth scraping against her bottom lip, she regards the firearms. She stares at them for so long that I wonder if she's even going to say anything. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Stefan and Mira look at each other in question.

"The handgun."

It's not what I expected her to choose.

I shrug again. "Okay."

She places the yellow can down on the table and steps up to the line we've been shooting from. I grab the gun and walk up behind her, placing it into her hand. If I turn to Stefan right now, who is standing behind me, I'm going to look guilty as fuck. All I'm doing is showing his sister something

completely platonic. If I start acting like an anxious bastard, he'll figure it out.

Figure out that I fuck my hand every night while imagining it's his sister.

"Like this." I wrap my fingers around hers gently, placing it in her dominant hand. "And on this side"—I step behind her and lift her opposite hand so that her petite palm wraps just under the butt of the pistol—"like this."

My fingertips trail over the top of her hand, and I watch goosebumps rush up her forearm. *Fuck*. The air in the few inches between our bodies crackles, and we both suck in a breath, trying and failing to hide our reactions to each other.

"Okay . . ." The scent of my cinnamon gum tangles with the scent of her rose cream, and something more distinctively her. The smell of sunshine on her skin. "Let your eyes follow that line on the barrel." I peek around at her face to check, but end up staring at her lips, recalling the feel of them pressed against mine, so soft and hungry.

I clear my throat. "This elbow up." My fingers drag along the underside of her arm, and I hear her breath catch. Her throat works as she swallows and forces herself to keep her eyes on the soda can.

I need to get away from her. "Safety off, right here." I tap the spot softly and note her small nod.

Stepping back, I say, "Now lock your arms and press softly. This one doesn't take any muscle."

A few seconds pass, and again I wonder if she's going to make a move. I swear I can almost *see* the gears in her head turning.

It happens in slow motion. The deep breath she takes sends relaxation snaking out through her limbs, her feet sink into the ground, and a ferocious expression overtakes her face.

Her fingers move so, so softly.

*Bang.*

The tinny noise of a can hitting the packed dirt beneath the log draws my attention down. *She hit it.*

Shock has me moving slowly because the next bang almost startles me. I jerk my eyes up to catch the second can falling through the air toward the ground.

*Bang.*

She hits the third can. I stop staring at targets and instead let my gaze find



the woman holding the gun.

*Bang.*

The one who doesn't look surprised at all.

*Bang.*

She shifts imperceptibly, takes aim.

*Bang.*

Five in a row, with ease. I'm not sure I've ever heard the forest this quiet. Nadia doesn't meet any of our eyes, she just drops her chin and slips the safety back into place. Based on the way all the color has drained from her brother's face and the look of heartbreak on Mira's, there's a story here.

One that hasn't been told until just now.

She finally turns, a fragile smile wobbling across her beautiful face. "Thanks." Within a few steps, she's at the table, placing the pistol back in its case. "That was fun." Her pink fingernails trail over the black metal reverently, but none of us say a thing.

Usually, I'm the one who makes things awkward with my silence. But this time, it's everyone.

"I'm going to go take a shower. I'm a mess." She gives her brother's bicep a gentle squeeze on her way past, sneakered feet padding cross the dirt and pine needles as she goes.

Leaving an awful lot of unanswered questions in her wake.



"I'M NOT SLEEPING in the house with you guys."

We sit around the picnic table polishing off what remains of the dinner Stefan put together on the barbecue. Steaks, fully loaded baked potatoes, and local corn that doesn't get any better than at this time of year. The perfect dinner after a long day spent doing manual labor.

My body is tired, which means my mind feels still. Having something to do with my hands has been what keeps me out of trouble for the past six years. It's one thing to be tired at night but being physically exhausted after a full day of putting your body to use is the best feeling. I'm relaxed from head-to-toe even though the muscles in my back ache after tossing hay bales.

"Why not?" Stefan takes a sip of his wine, looking genuinely confused.

Nadia's whiskey-colored eyes widen, and she stares at her brother like

he's stupid. "This"—one finger lands with a thump on the tabletop—"is your first night away and alone in almost two years."

Mira shifts in her seat, a pink blush blossoming on the apples of her cheeks.

"And I don't want to be stuck in there listening to you call her *Kitten*."

Nadia shudders dramatically, and her brother bursts out laughing, smiling and shaking his head at her.

Earlier, they spoke quietly while he stood over the grill. I watched my best friend's mouth turn down into a sad frown while Nadia offered him a tight smile. I watched their eyes fill with unshed tears. I watched them hug tightly. They exchanged words between them that erased the awkwardness of Nadia making us all look like amateurs during what I meant to be a fun and lighthearted round of target practice in the forest.

"Do you have no filter?" Stefan asks.

I snort. I can't help it. Kinda rich coming from my friend, who truly calls his wife that pet name an awful lot while looking at her like he could burn away her clothes on the spot with the power of his mind alone.

His brow quirks in my direction. "Got something to say, Griff?"

I take a swig of my soda, cheeks tugging up as I do. "I have . . ." I hold up two fingers, not wanting to risk back-to-back *t* words, "tents I can set up outside for Nadia and me. The house is small." I swallow a chuckle because Mira looks like she might hide underneath the table and hide from such a blatant conversation.

Stefan has no such qualms.

The night wears on, and we move over to the big fire pit that Nadia stocked with kindling earlier today. Surrounded by three people who know me, who don't consider me a disappointment, who treat me like I'm just one of them, the words flow freely. I hardly stumble. I hardly even think about it.

I enjoy myself in other people's company more than I have in years. Especially with Tripod curled up in my lap. My hand trails over his back, where his hair has grown back in curly.

I, Griffin Sinclair, a man's man and former football God, have a fluffy white dog as a pet. It's hilarious, but I don't care. I fucking love this dog.

When the light dims and the sky blazes pink, Mira yawns. "I'm sorry." She slams a hand over her mouth. "Toddler schedule means this is past my bedtime."

Slapping my palms over my knees to stand, I say, "Let's get everyone set

up, then.”

“What can I do?” Nadia asks as the other two wander toward the house. She’s all fresh faced, the bridge of her nose and high points of her cheeks touched by the sun, hair falling in soft waves over her shoulders.

“Just grab bedding from inside the closet beneath the stairs or whatever is on the sofa. I’ll pitch the . . .” She stares at me, waiting, but not pushing. “Tents. Won’t take me long.”

She nods, eyes flitting over my face, and I wish I’d put my cap on after my shower. At least the brim gives me a place to hide from her scrutiny. Right now, I’m completely exposed to her gaze. It’s unnerving.

Her eyes drop to my lips, and I wonder what’s running through her beautiful head. After a few beats, she turns slowly, like it takes some effort for her to peel herself away, and wanders up the path to my house like she’s spent day after day here with me. Like she knows this land.

I watch *her* walk into *my* house like she belongs here. And it makes my chest ache.

In the shed near the driveway, I pull out the two small tents that I last used when Stefan and I went hunting. I’ve put them together so many times that I could do it with my eyes closed. By the time she returns, arms loaded with sleeping bags and pillows, I already have one set up.

I point at it. “Yours.”

She snorts, tossing the rolled sleeping bags down and placing the pillows on top before shaking out the gray wool blanket she must have grabbed off the couch. “You have an impressive vocabulary, Sinclair. Will you say something if I make a joke about you pitching a tent?”

I chuckle, reveling in the way she can gently poke fun at me. There’s no bite, no cruelty—just a friendly sort of teasing.

“People don’t like me for my words, Wildflower.”

She stills but doesn’t look at me. She doesn’t need to. Her aim is effortlessly accurate even as she turns away. Her quiet words are a fucking shot to the heart as she wraps the blanket around her shoulders and ambles toward the rocky ridge overlooking the valley.

“I like all your words, Griffin. It’s what you don’t say that kills me.”



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## NADIA



I CAN FEEL the cool air descending over the mountain, the elevation chasing all the late summer warmth away as the sun falls over the Cascades.

I'm addicted to the view up here. The sweeping green valley, the little square properties below, all different colors, making the stretch of land appear like a pixelated image. Each square with a different shade of green. The way the roads wind through the perfect squares, the lights that are twinkling under the magenta sky.

It's a visual I want to remember. I close my eyes and sigh deeply, as though I can imprint it into my mind by sheer will.

A single inhalation has the scent of pine and fresh mountain air swirling around me, and before I can even hear his approach, I can *feel* him.

Since that first night, it's been this way. Some sort of invisible link between us. Like our connection is bigger than who we are, where we're from, or how old we are. All of that is just background noise when he looks at me—touches me.

Anything that might be wrong melts away with the rightness of us.

A twig snaps beneath his gentle footfalls, and I shiver. A thrill races down the column of my spine just as the smell of cinnamon sluices through my senses.

The man has ruined an entire spice for me. I'll never smell it or taste it without thinking of him.

I'm not sure I'll ever stop thinking about him.

I pull the soft wool blanket tighter around my shoulders as though it might protect me from how flayed open and vulnerable I feel around him.

I've been far more exposed with other men in my life, but I've never felt more powerless than I do around Griffin. The way he looks at me and sees more than I want him to . . .

I *hate* it.

"Hi." A simple one syllable word and a chill blooms out across my chest.

I tug the blanket tighter. I'll strangle myself with the damn thing if I have to.

"Hi." My voice is barely a whisper as I focus even harder on the valley and sunset that stretches before me, trying so hard not to show my hand as he comes to stand beside me.

I've already said too much tonight, been all emotional and bitter when the man merely tried to make a joke with me about how he doesn't talk much. My molars clamp down as I think about what I said to him before disappearing to this spot to chase a little privacy. A little room to breathe.

Could I have been a more precise embodiment of a whiny baby sister if I tried?

"Pretty good aim you've got, Wildflower." He shoves his hands into his pockets, a suitably safe spot for them.

I sigh. "Yup. Once Stefan left for good, I realized I needed to be prepared to defend myself if things took a turn for the worse."

A pained choking sound jumps from the thick column of his throat, and he goes entirely still.

"So that's what I did. He turned his fists on me *once*. And I knew in that moment that I wasn't going to become his punching bag for long. I knew I'd find a way out. I learned how to shoot a gun. I didn't just get good, I got *great*. So that when he came to my room, I could pull it out from under my pillow and turn the situation around. And I did. I never pulled the trigger, but I aimed it at him and seriously considered it. I was just young and stupid enough to think it didn't affect me. That I could spend long hours at a shooting range and feel safe again. That I could move across the world and feel safe again. That he could go down in a fiery crash, and I'd feel safe again. But I only stopped sleeping with a gun under my pillow a year ago."

I shiver, even though I'm not cold, and his head snaps in my direction. This time, I can't stop myself from taking him in. Messy, manly perfection, with his hair looking disheveled after putting our tents together, and a few locks flopped over his forehead. My stomach flips at the sight, a perfect contrast to the heavy aching in my chest.

“Hey, hey,” he says tenderly, stepping closer to me and instantly wrapping a comforting arm around my shoulders. His opposite hand comes up to cup my face as his calloused thumb brushes across my cheek, smearing wetness in its wake.

*I’m crying.*

“Do you have any idea how strong you are?” His cinnamon breath warms the air between us as he cranes his head down to capture my gaze. “How much you’ve overcome? How determined and inspiring you are?”

I press my lips together against the ache in my throat and tilt my head, more tears falling as I do. “I don’t feel strong.” My voice cracks.

A deep rumble takes root in his chest. It vibrates straight through my body as he pulls me into a crushing hug, wrapping his muscled arms around me and pressing a kiss to the crown of my head. My eyes hook on the spot where his black tattoo peeks up over the neckline of his white shirt in the most enticing way.

“I haven’t lived through half the shit you have. And I took off up here to hide from my life. The first sign of adversity, and I fucking crumbled. Partied so hard that I almost lost everything. And then locked myself away up in the mountains where I could wallow in my shame.”

“We all do the best we can with what we’ve got. Trauma is a tricky bitch,” I say as I clutch his white shirt in my fists and nuzzle into the warmth of his firm chest, allowing myself to soak up the safety in his arms—even if it won’t last for long.

“Living with shame is different from living with trauma. You? You come back stronger every time.” I glance up at him shyly, and he gently brushes my hair back, tucking it behind my ear. “Like a wildflower.” His smile is soft as he gazes down at me like he’s looking at something more precious than words. “Me?” The strands of my hair move through his fingers as he combs his hand down their length. “I’m weak.”

His words are a punch to the gut. I hate that he sees himself as weak. If he’s weak, then why do I feel so safe with him?

I pull the blanket loose from around my shoulders and wrap it around Griffin instead, tugging him against me as I reach up and push the loose locks of hair off his face. I trace the tips of my fingers over the lines in his forehead and trail them down over his temple until I hit the coarse hair of his beard.

The one I dream about between my thighs.

He doesn’t make a move to stop me. It’s like we’ve called some sort of

truce between each other for the moment. One where we spill our hearts' darkest secrets to each other and allow soul-warming touches to guide us back into the light.

The tips of our noses graze. This is dangerous territory, and we both know it.

"I don't think that trauma and shame are so different, Griffin." His dark eyes glow in the fading light as the crickets chirp around us. "One happens to a person, and the other is a choice, a feeling. The real difference between us is that I don't pity you. *You* pity you."

I'm pretty sure I've shocked him into silence. The look he's giving me is so intense my knees threaten to give out and drop me right at his feet. An altar to worship at.

Instead, I press a gentle kiss just beside his mouth, the roughness of his beard against my lips the cruelest sort of tease. And then, before I can say or do anything else embarrassing, I drop my eyes, pull the blanket tighter around him, and make my way back down the path to my tent.



THE FIRST THING I do once I've zipped that flimsy divider shut is pull out my journal. Some people go to confession. Me? I spill that shit on the pages of this notebook.

I hear Griffin's heavy footfalls as he approaches the tents, Tripod merrily hopping around with him. They pause outside. He set our tents up right beside each other, just around the side of the house near the fire that's still burning low and throwing enough light to make my orange tent look like it's glowing.

My heart jumps in my chest. He's been standing still out there for way too long. I exhale loudly when I hear the zipper on the tent beside me hum.

The worst part? I wanted him to charge in here. To give the fuck up on depriving us of each other.

But I don't know what I have to give. I'm not sure I can keep sex and feelings separate where he's concerned. I'm not sure I want to. And that terrifies me.

I write that down, listening to the pen scratch across the paper, a sound that's almost hypnotic for me. Therapeutic, really. I suppose that was the



whole point of this exercise when my therapist suggested it to me.

I scribble down every thought and feeling until the day's light is so far gone I can't clearly see the strokes of my pen anymore. Then I set my notebook down beside me and slip into the simple leggings and oversized crewneck I brought as pajamas, aiming less for aesthetic than comfort, but I'm suddenly wishing I had something pretty to wear.

My body hums, knowing Griffin is in the tent a few feet away. The air between us always holds a charge, and the thin layers of nylon between us do nothing to negate that. It seems more like they might melt away under the heat of our connection rather than keep us apart.

The shields here are too flimsy, and I'm not strong enough to keep my own walls standing. Tonight, I'm *tired*.

Hidden between the layers of my sleeping bag, I let a shaky hand travel down, slipping underneath the wide elastic waistband of the black leggings. My finger trails through the wetness at the apex of my thighs.

Only someone as fucked up as me would go from crying on a man's chest to getting wet at the mere knowledge he's sleeping a few feet away.

I swipe again, circling my clit, feeling it swell as I imagine a hand that isn't my own. I press one finger into myself and clamp down around it, wishing it were thicker, more calloused. And then pretending it is.

I pump in once. Twice. Add a second finger as I reach up under the sweatshirt and pinch one aching nipple.

My head tips back on the pillow that smells of laundry detergent and *him*. And I moan. Surrounded by his scent, an image forms of his disheveled hair between my thighs, and I play with my body until I'm panting, completely lost to the sensations and bunching of nerves under my skin.

If I was cold before, I'm certainly not now. I'm fucking burning.

And I'm so deep in my head that I only absently hear the zipper of my tent. My reaction time is slow, so by the time I drag open lust-heavy eyelids, I find the hulking silhouette of Griffin Sinclair on his knees, taking up almost the entire entryway of the small tent, lit only by the dying embers behind us.

"Are you trying to make me lose it?" He looks downright primal—broad shoulders and heaving chest, hands shaking with how tightly he grasps the tent flaps.

I don't know what I'm thinking. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'm not thinking. All I know is that I'm *tired*. Tired of being scared, and tired of pretending

that he isn't the most real thing I've ever had.

My hands move again. I hold his gaze, cupping my heavy breast as I grind my hips up onto my fingers again.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Nadia." He sounds out of breath. He's eerily still, muscles bunched tight, like he's ready to pounce. And I just don't give a fuck about guarding myself against him right now.

I want him to take me and unmake me, fucking ruin me. If I'm as strong as he thinks, I'll bounce back.

So, I keep going. Willing him to lose his precious control. Willing him to charge in here and use me the way I know he wants to.

The way *I* want him to.

I hear his signature rumble, and I sigh. My eyes fluttering shut when I hear him growl, "Fuck it."



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## GRIFFIN



I YANK the tent shut behind me, crowding Nadia in the small space and pulling the zipper down as promptly as I can.

Fuck staying away. Fuck ignoring her. Fuck everyone. Fuck forgetting what I want. What I *need*.

I could hear her from my tent next door.

If this woman is a test, I just fucking failed, and I couldn't care less.

With the flimsy tent shut at my back, I kneel at the base of the sleeping bag, loving what she's doing to herself underneath there.

I crawl over top of her, and she still doesn't fucking stop. Up close, I can see the way her eyes have gone glassy with pleasure.

"You do not know what you're in for, Wildflower."

"Show me." Her words are a plea as I reach over her to unzip the sleeping bag and flip it open, proving myself right. One hand shoved up under her shirt, the other stuffed between her wide-open little legs.

My cock was hard before, but the sight of her playing with herself has me straining against my jeans painfully. Something I'll have to endure for a while longer. Because I don't plan to make quick work of Nadia Dalca.

No. I'm going to savor this beauty.

I hover over her slender body, letting that sweet rose scent wrap around me like a balm as I straddle her legs. Fisting the hem of her sweatshirt, I yank it up, exposing her soft, round tits and pert nipples.

Just as incredible as I remember.

Her eyes fly open, wide and golden. Sweet like honey. But she doesn't shy away from the way I'm looking at her.

My wildflower isn't shy.

I let a blast of my jealousy out from behind the impenetrable wall I've created around my inner feelings. "You know what I thought that first night I saw you? Sitting up on that counter, kissing some careless little boy?" Watching her give that asshole even a minute of her attention has been pure fucking torture.

The highlights in her irises flare at the bite in my voice.

"What?" Her voice is thick, her tongue darting out over her bottom lip as she continues palming her breast.

I put my hands on her, starting at where her waist nips in, firm and narrow. Sliding them up, I admire how soft and smooth she looks beneath my sun-worn skin. When I hit her ribs, she shivers, and the hand fondling her breast drops onto my forearm, fingers stroking, urging me higher.

An invitation.

"I thought . . ." My hands hit the lower swell of her breasts, that tempting crease, and I groan. Palms enveloping the heavy flesh, I give her a gentle squeeze and flick my thumbs against her hard nipples, watching her jump beneath me. "I thought you looked too fucking good to be wasting your time with someone like that."

She sucks in a sharp breath as I lean down, tracing the shape of her jaw with my lips and relishing the texture of the gooseflesh erupting across her tits. "I thought you looked like you needed to be handled by a real man. By me." I nip at her ear, loving the feel of her fingers tangling in my hair, like she wants to keep me close. "I thought you looked like you were supposed to be *mine*."

She whimpers and clamps her lips together. How hard she's trying to play it cool makes me smile.

"It's okay, Wildflower. You don't have to say anything. You keep your cards as close as you want." I kiss her neck slowly, holding back the urge to bite her again and leave my marks all over her bewitching skin. "Your poker face is pretty good. But I know what we both felt that night. And I think I'm about done pretending we didn't. You can show me your hand when you're ready."

Her responding chuckle is raspy and deep as she tugs at my hair. Something I think she likes just as much as I do.

"And what if I'm never ready?" The question is laced with teasing, but also with insecurity.

I rear up above her, letting a playful smile touch my lips, feeling just a tad like my old self gazing down at the beautiful woman beneath me. The wild child. The quarterback. The man who could fuck as well as he threw a ball.

I move down her body, leaving her question hanging between us until I'm able to grip the waistband of her thin leggings. "Then I'll wait."

The good humor seeps out of her features. "Don't say that."

"Don't tell me what to say, Nadia." I yank her leggings down and groan when I realize there are no panties between her pussy and me. Just bare, pink perfection staring back. "That's not the game we're playing right now."

She licks her lips nervously, eyes never leaving my face. "What game are we playing?"

I drop her gaze again, pressing a thumb against the seam of her, dragging the slippery wetness up over the hard bud, making her hips buck up into my hand.

*So responsive.*

"We're playing the game where I fuck your tight little cunt like I've dreamt about since the first time I laid eyes on you. We're not making love. I'm not being gentle. We're fucking. And you're going to take it like the good girl you are."

Her eyes light as she whispers, "Yes."

What I don't add is *tonight*.

*Tonight*, that's all we're doing. I'll stay in familiar territory for us both because that's all she can handle right now. I can tell by the panicked look she gave me when I told her I'd wait.

God knows I have no clue what I'm doing beyond meaningless fucking, but I'm going to try. I'm crossing off that goddamn bucket list of hers if it's the last thing I do.

I run my thumb through her wetness again. Watching her squirm. Feeling my dick pulse. And I realize that even just simple fucking with Nadia won't be meaningless. It can't be.

"Do it." Her eyes dance now. I see them twinkling with excitement in the soft glow of the tent.

"Do what? Why don't you tell me what you want?" I swipe up and press down on her clit, making her moan.

Right before she says . . .

"Make me take it like the good girl I am."

With that, I scramble back and rip at her leggings, wanting to see her

smooth, bare thighs spread wide for me. Once they've cleared her ankles, I sit back on my heels to appreciate the view. Pale pink sweatshirt pushed above her collarbones, round globes and hard nipples highlighted by the glow of the fire outside. The flare of her hips that leads down into toned limbs.

"Spread your legs. Wide. Let me see it."

She does it instantly, and I groan at how willing she is. How confident. It's my undoing.

"Now fuck those fingers, just like you were when I came in here."

"Like this?" she asks, batting her eyelashes and sounding far more innocent than she is.

And fuck her fingers she does. Two of them glide in and come back out glistening with her wetness. *Fuck.*

I reach over my shoulder and pull my shirt off before standing crouched over in the small space to do away with my pants and boxers. Then I'm hovering over her body, spread out for me like a fucking feast. One of her hands plays with her tits while the other pumps slowly between her legs, her hips tipping up as she grinds against it.

When I drop to my knees between her legs, she whimpers, and I catch the flash of her white teeth biting into her puffy bottom lip.

"Touch me." Her eyes glow with arousal.

I chuckle and roughly fist my cock, jerking it in her direction like I've been dreaming of for the past several weeks. "I don't think I will. That's not the game, remember?" My palm slides over the length of my shaft, and I let my gaze trail down her firm body until it lands on her pussy again. The way it's stretching around her two fingers as they glide in and out.

"Add a finger."

Her eyes flutter shut, a stuttered moan erupting from her lips as she obediently adds a third finger, stretching herself so eagerly. My cock swells in my hand as her hips swivel to accommodate the fullness.

"Oh goddamn. That a girl." My voice is a raspy growl, still acutely aware that we need to keep it down in here. "How do you feel?"

She whimpers, voice thick. "Full."

I'm certain I've never been harder in my life. My cock aches and wetness glistens on my crown. If I don't tear my eyes away from Nadia riding her fingers for me, I'm going to blow all over her right here and now.

"That's it. Lose the fucking sweater."

She makes a quiet whining sound as she tears her hands away to pull the

sweater over her head, but before she can even finish, I dive and run my tongue through her soaked core. Just once.

“Oh, God!” She curses as she chucks the shirt across the tent and then pushes up on her elbows to stare down at me.

“Do you have any idea how delicious you are, Wildflower?” I can’t stop my eyes from roaming her bare body as I kneel above her. “How delicious?”

She opens her legs even wider, breasts heaving. I love how bold she is. How unashamed.

“Greedy girl.”

“I am.”

Her pussy glistens before me. “You’re fucking soaked. And you taste like candy.”

Her fingers curl into the sleeping bag beneath her, the sound of her nails sliding across the nylon loud in the otherwise quiet tent. The corners of her heart-shaped lips tip up as she smirks in my direction and shrugs lightly. “I could be wetter.”

*Brat.*

I run my tongue over my teeth, lower my head, and then spit on her already slick pussy.

“Fuck.” She gasps as I shove one finger into her roughly.

“Is that better for you?” I add a second finger and her silky heat clenches, wrapping around them.

“Yes!” Her legs tremble under the strain of holding them open so wide. I add a third finger and feel her pulse, working to fit me in.

I pump into her and smile. “I’m going to be so fucking good to you, Wildflower.”

“You better,” she says breathlessly, a shadow of emotion flitting across her face.

And with that plea, I throw one of her legs over my shoulder and make myself comfortable between her legs, watching my fingers disappear into her body, setting a leisurely pace.

“First you come in my mouth. Then you come on my cock.”





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## NADIA



GRIFFIN SAYS he trips over his tongue. I say he has it *mastered*.

His tongue glides between my legs in a way I've never felt in my life. Most men I've been with treated going down on me like a chore, like the lead up to the main event.

But Griffin? He's treating my pussy like it's the star of the fucking show.

Every lick. Every nip. Every suck. He pushes me higher. He curls his fingers inside me, stroking a spot that has my legs shaking uncontrollably.

When I said I could be wetter, I *lied*. I lied so goddamn hard. And then he spat on me, which just drove me crazy. Who knew I'd be so into that?

"How are you so fucking good at this?" I flop back on the pillow, one arm flung over my flaming face, the other tangled in his hair while I revel in the feel of his lips on my pussy as his beard scrapes against me. His fingers dig into the thigh that he has shoved up high and wide, and I keep my other one wrapped around the back of his bare shoulders, clamping him to me while I grind down on him.

He shoves me close to the edge and then yanks me back from it. Practically torturing me. Dragging this out in the most delicious way. *Hello, sensory overload.*

He pulls away for a moment. "You like this, Wildflower?"

I feel like I might finish to the sound of his voice alone, the slight burn of his cinnamon breath against my core.

"I love it."

"Fucking right you do," he says, before dropping his head back between my legs.

This filthy, confident side of him is new to me. It's like it's been lurking there under the surface, always dancing in his eyes. But now he's brought it out to play, and I am so here for it.

Sex is familiar territory. This particular territory is better than any other I've explored, but it's familiar all the same. Every nerve ending in my body is humming, coiling. Like they're being stretched to the point they might snap.

To a point where I might come completely undone in a way that doesn't feel familiar at all. He plays my body like an instrument. No one has mastered me this way.

And when he sucks hard on my clit while twisting his fingers into me, filling me so well, I come apart. I see stars.

"Griffin," I cry out as my orgasm washes over me like a wave of hot water spilling over me, burning me. Every corner of my body heats, every toe curls, and my nails dig into his scalp, desperate to keep him in place.

His assault doesn't stop. He pumps his fingers harder, his teeth graze my sensitive nub, and I go completely boneless under his attention.

"Fuck. That was hot." He licks my seam once with a satisfied growl before pushing up to kneel and tower over me. He wipes his hand over his beard and then smiles down at me. Wickedly.

And I swoon. I swoon so fucking hard.

"You are so hot." He fucked me stupid. That's the only reason I would blurt something like that out.

The asshole just smirks. "Are you on birth control?"

"Yes." I try to pull myself together, not wanting to sound like a love-drunk loon. "But we should probably call it quits there." My eyelids are heavy. That was hands down the best orgasm of my life.

"Oh, yeah?" Griffin licks his lips, drawing my gaze to the way his tongue works across his skin.

"Yeah. I don't think I can come any harder than that. It's all downhill from here."

His eyes flash. He looks like he's ready to devour me. And a less reckless woman might quake under the intent in his gaze now.

Me? I just smile.

"Turn over. Get on your fuckin' knees."

My heart rate skyrockets, and I consider refusing just to see what he does. But the sight of his huge, thick cock bobbing between us is too tempting.

I roll over slowly, noting that even the brush of the slippery sleeping bag

fabric against my skin feels good. As always, I can sense his gaze on me. I push up onto my knees and elbows and arch my back before I turn and look back at him over my shoulder.

“Like this?”

His eyes are on my ass, and the suggestive way I’ve presented it to him. He palms one globe, giving it a firm squeeze.

“Almost,” he growls, and then his knee is between mine, shoving them further apart, positioning me exactly how he wants me.

I shiver when the thick head of his cock rubs against my pussy. Teasing across my oversensitive clit. Making my head bow down in response. It’s almost too much. *Too* intense.

“Griffin.”

“Yes, Wildflower?” Another swipe, and then he notches the crown of his bare cock inside me for just a moment before withdrawing again.

The cruelest, most delicious type of torture.

“I don’t think I can come again. And that monster between your legs? I don’t think it’s going to fit.”

His responding chuckle is low. It breaks me out in gooseflesh. So heavy with promise and desire. He palms my ass and holds me open as he places his cock right at my entrance. “You can take it.” He swipes it across me again, and I tremble with anticipation. “You can. And you will.”

And then he shoves himself inside, to the hilt.

“Oh, my God.” I drop my face into the pillow, feeling like I might melt into the ground as his hands slide over my hips, gripping them like handles.

Truthfully, I think it’s the only thing keeping my ass up the way he wants. I’m so full. And he feels so delicious, stretching me the way he does.

I’ve waited so long to have him move inside me; I can’t stand waiting any longer.

“Please, move,” I beg, not caring how desperate I sound.

“I need a minute, Nadia,” he rasps. “You are so fucking tight.”

I wait, impatiently.

He presses a soft kiss to the center of my spine. “You feel so fucking good.”

Another kiss a couple inches higher, the tip of his tongue trailing behind.

I shiver.

“And you look so fucking pretty on your knees for me.”

A kiss lands on my shoulder blade as the delicious heat of his body seeps

into my back.

His hand lands in front of my face on the pillow as he stretches out above me, claiming my body as his own while his cock throbs inside me. I wiggle my ass, trying to rid my body of the pressure that's building again.

This time, he kisses my neck just before he whispers in my ear. "I'll fuck you how you want me to, and I'll take every shred of what you're willing to give. But Nadia?"

"Yeah?" It's a pathetic little sound, but it's all I can manage right now.

He nips at my ear. The rasp of his beard against the sensitive skin there is a straight shot to my core that has me clenching hard around his girth.

"If you think I don't want more, you're out of your goddamn mind."

I gasp, but he moves so quickly, wrapping my hair around his fist to hold me in place as he surges back upright, sliding himself out before slamming himself back in.

"Ah, God." I go with him, pushing up onto my hands, my body rattling under the strength of his thrusts as I push back to meet him.

"Look at you, taking me so well."

"More." I moan.

He growls and fucks me harder. A small smile touches my lips before I fall back into a series of sighs and pants. The sound of his thighs slapping against mine is just as erotic as the feel of him moving inside of me.

"Harder."

He chuckles darkly and slows down, running one hand up the column of my spine reverently before pushing me back down into the pillow that smells like him, and forcing my ass higher in the air.

"I said *harder*, Sinclair." Using his last name sounds wrong, but it also gives me a little distance. A little thread of control in the face of being consumed by him in a way I should have seen coming but didn't.

"Don't tell me what to do, Nadia." He releases my hair and trails his hands all over my body, his length resting inside of me while I squirm, trying to force him to move, trying to move myself on him. Basically, rubbing myself on him desperately to dull the ache building inside of me again. "And don't talk to me like I'm your teammate while I'm riding your pussy."

His warm, calloused hands graze my shoulders, slide around my torso to cup my breasts, briefly squeeze my nipples so hard that it's just this side of painful, before continuing their path. He explores me gently, in such contrast to everything else he's ever done with me that I feel a tickle at the bridge of

my nose.

He's not fucking me, he's learning me. Tracing me like braille in the dark. His filthy words are just a distraction for what's really going on here.

My fists squeeze the pillow roughly and I swivel my hips, feeling his steely length grinding inside of me. "*Harder.*" My voice holds a crazed edge to it. I really need him to stop whatever this is.

I want him to bite me, use me, manhandle me. That's fucking. This . . . this is not.

"Quiet, Wildflower."

Gooseflesh covers my body. His voice is so deep that I swear it makes the ground rumble. I swear it trembles in my bones. He speaks straight to my body.

I raise my voice, feeling completely out of control. "Please!"

Griffin pulls out of me instantly, but his hands never leave my body. "Someone is going to hear you if you can't shut up, Nadia." The words should be harsh, but he says them so gently they send another jolt to my core.

"I don't care." The words tumble out before I can stop them. *Do I care?*

I'm not so sure. I'm not thinking straight right now, with Griffin's hands here worshipping me like I'm something special.

I'm not myself.

One of his big hands shoots forward to cup my chin and I push up onto my palms, turning my chin over my shoulder. My gaze crashes into his, even though it feels safer to keep my eyes trained on the pillow before me.

He raises his opposite leg in a show of power, his foot flat on the ground while his hand grips my ass.

He thrusts into me once, and I make a needy little moaning noise. "You keep your eyes on mine."

I nod, feeling the tips of his fingers flex, gently pressing into my jawbone.

He thrusts again, slowly gliding in and out now. "And you keep quiet."

My eyes flare. "No."

The smile he gives me now is pure sex, pure challenge, and it sends a jolt of electricity to my core. His tongue darts out, followed by his bottom teeth scraping over his full lower lip, drawing my gaze away from his.

"Fine, then." My eyes snag on one dimple, and I stare at him dreamily. *He's so fucking hot.*

It's a testament to how lost I am in him that I barely notice when he shoves two fingers into my mouth. Hooking them into my cheek.

And then he unleashes.

One hand grips my waist, the other fills my mouth, all while he pumps into me. His thrusts are rough inside me; his hands are steel on my skin. He's like some dark, avenging God using my body in any way he sees fit. Golden skin, a light smattering of dark hair across his defined chest, perspiration glistening over every hard ridge of his chiseled body.

But his eyes? His eyes glow with softness. And I get lost there. In that look.

My thighs shake as I meet him thrust for thrust. Pressure builds and coils. The tenderness in that look wraps around my heart like vines while he plays my body so capably.

A smarter girl would realize what a goner she is right now. But I'm not her. I'm a survivor. So, I push those feelings in my chest aside and focus on the flames engulfing my body, on how good Griffin Sinclair makes my body feel.

"Fuck. Nadia. I'm . . . I'm going to fill you up so good."

*God.* I whimper. We topple over that cliff in perfect unison. He curses under his breath as he shoots his release into me, and I cry out, the sounds muffled by his hand. I shut my eyes as I turn myself over to the turbulent waters of another orgasm, feeling the sensual slide of his skin against mine, coming apart beneath the hands of a man who fucks me like he doesn't care but looks at me like he does.

He looks at me like he cares an awful lot. And *that* is absolutely terrifying.





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## GRIFFIN



I STARE at the pole along the top of my tent, hands propped across my chest. I've been lying here like this for hours. It started off as me staring up at pure darkness and slowly, as dawn broke, the blue glow of morning seeped in, and now I can see the silhouettes of every pole that makes up this tent.

I'd rather be in the other tent.

But Nadia didn't want me there. And I think that might be a first for me.

I fucked her like a savage, and then she told me to leave. The girl who has been chasing me down and watching me squirm for months is now pulling back.

Right when I decided maybe resisting this pull between us isn't the right move at all.

Shit, maybe I even *want* to be around her. That's a scary realization for someone who has spent the last several years alone. I think I've enjoyed being alone. Usually I grow tired of company, the small talk, the smiling. I like the peace that my spot up here in the mountains provides me. I like the solitude.

The idea of sharing that space and time with someone doesn't feel quite so off-putting right now though.

But only if that someone is Nadia.

I groan and scrub a hand over my face as my dick swells again at the mere memory of her. The way she looked over her shoulder at me, right into my soul, while I pounded into her.

I tried hard to make it just sex. I even turned her over, thinking that might help me keep a little distance. But with her, it's just impossible. Her eyes

taunt me like those couple ounces of bourbon I like to torture myself with at the pub.

At least I've come to the point where I can resist that.

Nadia's warm coppery eyes?

Fucking irresistible.

I could get lost in those eyes. I'd hit the bottom, and it still wouldn't be enough. I've spent months—fuck, years—telling myself I need to stay the hell away from her because of Stefan. Because I couldn't do that to him. Because she deserves better than the disagreeable washed-up jock, the town golden boy fallen from grace, the man with a major loose end he has yet to face.

She shines so bright, so golden. She deserves someone to match.

I'm wondering if the beauty is in the contrast. Nothing makes gold sparkle quite like black.

*Poetic, you head case.*

I shoot up, frantically pulling my clothes on out of the pile I left them in before I fell into my sleeping bag last night. I gasp a little as the cool morning air hits me. A reminder that my days down at the ranch are drawing to a close. At the end of this month comes the end of my contract. And then it'll be Spot and me sequestered in the mountains.

Alone.

I unzip the flap and burst from my tent, feeling like I need space. Air. *Perspective.*

I turn away from Nadia's tent, but then I face the field of wildflowers. Which is no better. She's everywhere.

I'm a thirty-five-year-old man, for crying out loud, all fucking tied up over a twenty-one-year-old with her entire life ahead of her.

A good guy would walk away and spare her the heartache of a man like me. The things I've done. The mistakes I've made. She would hate me if she knew. I'm sure of it. She grew up under the thumb of an alcoholic. The last thing she needs is to tie herself to one.

"Good morning." Mira's smooth voice pulls me from internally berating myself.

I spin the opposite direction and see her sitting on the back porch of the house, wrapped in a blanket, and sipping a mug of steaming liquid.

"Hi," I huff, too agitated to say much more.

A smug smile stretches across her facial features. She's always looking at

me like that. I like Mira a lot. But I feel dumb around her. It's fucking annoying.

"Sleep well?" One eyebrow arches, and she takes a sip, eyes scanning my face. Like if she stares hard enough, she might pry my brain open and see the filthy things I did and said to her sister-in-law last night.

I just grunt and start striding toward the house.

"Not really a morning person, huh? Long night?" Her eyes sparkle, and I work my ass off to school my features. *Does she know anything? She can't. She can't possibly.*

"Just been up for a bit." I can't be a total dick to her, even though there's this raging part of me that wants to tell everyone to leave. That I need space.

I hear a zip and soft steps behind me, but I don't stop. I need coffee. I need to get on a horse and ride out into the mountains as far away as possible from temptation. For years, I've been riding away from alcohol, but this time it's the tall drink of sexual temptation standing behind me saying good morning like nothing happened.

"How'd you sleep?" Mira asks her as I take the steps up to the house two at a time.

"Great." I can hear the smile in Nadia's voice. She's not struggling to keep it together at all.

And it hits me then. Am I mad because I gave in to something I shouldn't have, or am I mad I want more, and she doesn't?



"I HATE to do this to you," my friend starts, looking sheepish as we all share the amazing gourmet breakfast he cooked us, "but I think we're going to head back down to the farm today instead of tomorrow."

It's barely nine a.m. and we're all sitting at the picnic table on my back porch, the three of them carrying the conversation like this has been a fun little getaway while I sit and mope beneath the brim of my hat.

If any of them notice, they don't say anything. Which almost makes me laugh. I guess I'm a grumpy bastard often enough for this to not seem out of character, even if the running monologue inside my head is different this time.

"Okay." I cut through the thick-cut piece of farm bacon without glancing

up.

“Sorry man, I know you have a couple more things to do, and I said we’d stay another night.” I see my friend’s cheeks soak up some color before his eyes shoot over to his wife, who is smirking at him.

“I just . . . I just miss Silas. Why doesn’t anyone tell you that once you have a kid, you’ll want to escape them but then also hate being away from them?”

Mira bursts out laughing, and Stefan rolls his eyes.

“He spent weeks convincing me a night or two away would be good for us. And now . . .” She shakes her head and smiles, eyes sparkling with so much love it’s almost hard to watch.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say around a mouth full of food.

“Nadia, you don’t mind giving Griff a drive back down to the farm tomorrow, do you?” Stefan asks.

Her eyes widen slightly before she plasters a smile onto her face, and all I can think is that I shouldn’t have let my friends talk me in to carpooling up here. I could really use my getaway vehicle right now.

“Of course not.”

“Okay, great.” Stefan beams, looking relieved. But Mira still has that expression on her face. Her keen eyes flit back and forth between Nadia and me, making me wonder if she overheard us last night. I get the sense we aren’t fooling her.

*I should have shoved my fingers into her mouth sooner.*

“Great!” Nadia says, too brightly, and Mira smirks at me before pulling her mug up to her lips to cover it.

Nadia and I tidy breakfast up wordlessly and let the two nervous parents get their shit together so they can drive an hour back down the mountain. We stand a safe distance away from each other on the front porch as they pile into their truck, waving at us as they pull out of the driveway and disappear into the trees around the bend, and then the silence stretches between us.

My eyes trace Nadia’s profile, and she rolls her lips together, standing just a little too still to be relaxed.

I might be fourteen years older than her, but somehow, I can still be awkward as fuck around a girl I like. That she grabbed my clothes and practically shoved me out the door last night is seriously messing with my mojo. Especially considering I haven’t been with a girl I really care about in, well, ever.

The sex was hot as fuck, but I also liked the way my hands looked on her bare back. The way she squirmed beneath me. The way she moaned my name.

I want her moaning my name again, and my name only.

“Stop looking at me like that,” she snaps as a few loose tendrils of golden hair blow across her full lips.

A gentleman would do as she just asked, but I’ve never professed to be any such thing. So, I keep staring. I’m not sure I could pull my eyes away from her even if I tried.

“Like what?”

Her eyes roll and her arms cross, and all that achieves is to push her tits up in a really fucking distracting way. I stop staring at her face, just like she asked me to, and let my gaze drop south.

She cants her head in my direction with a snarky little smile, like she knows how badly I want her and gets off on it. “Like you want to eat me for breakfast.”

I chuckle. I can’t help myself. The girl is direct, and I love that about her. “Don’t be ridiculous.” Her brow goes low, all scrunched up like I’ve offended her. “I’ve already eaten breakfast.”

I brush the brim of my cap and give her my best polite golden boy smile. A tip of the hat, a flash of the white teeth. Straight out of a goddamn movie. Works every time.

This one is no exception, and I can’t help but puff up as I walk away. Because I may have been looking at her like I wanted her for breakfast, but she wasn’t doing any better.

I toss a few parting words over my shoulder as I swagger to the back of the house with Tripod hopping at my feet.

“But I’m ready for dessert when you are, Wildflower.”



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## GRIFFIN



MY PRIVATE OASIS in the mountains is suddenly my personal torture chamber as memories of the night in that tent pummel me non-stop. We spend the day working on fixing the front steps and replacing a few boards on the back deck. Nadia is helpful and a hard worker. We behave cordially, if a little stiffly, around each other. For Nadia, stiffly means keeping a safe distance away. For me, stiffly means my fucking dick twitches every time I catch sight of her ass in the cut-offs she's wearing as she kneels on my deck.

When we finish, she takes off into the field of wildflowers, saying she wants to explore the property. I watch her stroll away, journal in hand, until she finds a spot amongst the flowers and seats herself right on the dirt before flipping the canvas bound book open and putting pen to paper.

If it weren't totally creepy, I'd take a photo of her, sitting peacefully amongst a field of flowers who do nothing but remind me of her. Weeds at worst, a miracle at best. Something I can't get rid of no matter how fucking hard I try.

I groan, mocking myself internally for turning into a total sap after one night with the girl. It's so unlike me that I'm not sure what to do with it. So, I opt to break shit.

To winterize, I always make sure I have enough wood and kindling to get me through a storm. While Nadia looks all angelic in the field, I decide to pull my axe out and get to work on chopping wood.

I've always found physical labor to be therapeutic, and this is no exception. Line the stump up, raise the axe, drop the axe. Break shit. Rinse. Repeat.

The simplicity of the motions is easy to get lost in, and that's what I do. I only stop to pull my shirt off once I've already soaked through it and it becomes downright uncomfortable. I'm not sure how long I chop. I lose track of time. The only proof of how long I've been going is the growing pile beside me.

Definitely more than I need.

But I keep going until the muscles in my back ache and my arms shake with exhaustion. I only stop when I feel it. *It*. The way it feels when I know Nadia's eyes are on me. I can't explain it, but there's this pull between us, an energy, and there has been since the first day in that dirty bathroom in the back of an outdated bar with that absolute loser shoving his tongue down her throat like he lost something down there.

I hate that fucking kid.

I stop, tossing the axe onto the ground, panting as a droplet of sweat trails down the indent of my spine. "I can feel you staring at me, Nadia," I say, without even turning around.

"You have no business looking that fucking good, Griffin Sinclair."

Her voice sounds better after her time in the field. More like herself.

I turn, grinning. I can't even help myself. Hearing her say I look good is a weight off my shoulders. Like maybe she's not disappointed about last night after all.

"You're gonna make me feel like a piece of meat, Wildflower."

She winks, all sassy and playful with her journal wedged underneath her arm. I'm so dead curious what she wrote in there. Something that turned her mood around, to be sure.

"You hungry?" I ask, wiping my brow with my forearm and trying to ignore the way a pink blush is crawling up over her cheeks, or the way she shifts her hip and looks away quickly like she doesn't want to even recognize the dual meaning of what I've just asked her.

When she peeks back at me from under the fringe of her lashes, she points at me and raises a scolding brow. "For dinner."

"Mind out of the gutter, Junior." I laugh, tossing my gloves down on the stump and stride toward her.

"Can you put a shirt on?" She waves a hand over my bare torso, taking me in just a little too appreciatively to be truly offended.

"Why?" I pretend to be oblivious.

"Don't play dumb, Sinclair."



*Busted.*

“Nah, I’d only be playing dumb if I pretended not to notice you eye fucking me while I unloaded hay bales yesterday.”

She barks out a laugh, walking back up to the house beside me. Coming closer than she has all day. “I was not!”

“You absolutely were. And I felt very scandalized about it.” I feign offense, pressing a hand to my chest. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you only want me for my body.”

“Who says I don’t?” She shrugs while forcing her face into a neutral expression, not missing a beat.

I point a finger at her sparkling brown eyes. The pools of truth that give her away every time. “They do.”

She blinks in confusion.

“You look at me like *that* too, Wildflower.”

She stops in her tracks, a little stunned. “I hate you, Griffin Sinclair!”

I laugh at her feigned outrage and keep walking. Gotta feed the girl before I make her my dessert. “What is it they say? Hate and love are two sides of the same coin?”

“Huh. Must be a *really old* saying. I’ve never heard it.”

“Brat.” I grin, but don’t turn around as I march up the back stairs.

“I’ll teach you a lesson later after dinner, Wildflower!” I call back, hearing her musical laughter filter in behind me as I stomp into my house to make her dinner.

She sounds so good here with me.



THE NIGHT IS WARM, and Nadia can’t stop staring at the view from the back porch. I’m not entirely sure if she’s enjoying the scenery or if she’s just avoiding looking at me, but I’m not overly concerned about it either way. It’s giving me the perfect opportunity to take her in without getting caught.

And by *take her in*, I mean stare. Gawk.

I’m here. In my space. With the woman who has occupied her own little corner of my mind for the last two years. I shoved her in there, thinking some dark corner in the recesses of my fucked-up mind might keep me from obsessing about her.

Now I realize how wrong I was. How monumentally stupid that was. I've forgotten and ignored a lot of mistakes I've made. I thought I'd be able to do the same with her.

The problem is, Nadia isn't a mistake.

The night we met. The riding lessons. The horse I bought her. The fucking dog. It's all one big cosmic joke, shoving her in my path at every turn.

"I want to go watch the sunset from the flower field."

*She's trying to kill me.*

"Alright," I say, never wanting to stop her from doing anything she wants. Plus, I love watching her in that field.

With no further words, she stands and saunters toward the long wooden gate separating the field from the rest of the yard and paddocks. The small red barn to her left and the simple post-style paddocks to her right. This place isn't quite Cascade Acres. I bought Cascade when I was all about glitz and glam and show. This place is . . . *me*.

It's simple, it's cozy, it possesses a wild and unruly sort of beauty.

She fits here perfectly.

I watch her go and feel a jerk at the center of my chest, like she's got me by a leash and just gave me a tug. My lips quirk up. This girl has me by the throat, and I'm not even sure she realizes it.

Shit, I'm not even sure she wants it.

Up here is one thing. We're in a bubble away from the realities of all the reasons we can't be together. But it might be different once we get back down into the valley.

And if I only have tonight, then I shouldn't waste it sitting here watching her. I should experience it. I've spent a lot of years watching my life pass me by, but with Nadia around, I want more.

I want a dog. I want friends. I want *her*.

My legs are moving toward her before I even have time to realize what I just figured out. I stop only to grab the gray blanket out of my tent, the one that I shoved into a corner last night to escape the way she smells. Those fucking sweet roses taunted me all night long.

Ducking through the fence, I take the quickest path in her direction. She turns, eyes finding mine over her shoulder, and my breath dies in my lungs.

She's so beautiful, it almost hurts to look at her sometimes. The soft smile paired with her warm, wild eyes. Eyes that have seen too much for a woman

her age. The dichotomy between how sweet she looks and what a spunky little devil she is gets me.

My little vixen in disguise. The girl with the innocent face who can handle a gun like some sort of fucking undercover assassin.

*Hot.*

And her looking over her shoulder at me like she did last night?

*Hotter.*

That's going to be my favorite thing for the rest of time.

"It's just so beautiful out here." She sighs as her eyes flit across the field. "We overuse that word, you know. *Beautiful*. Beauty. Full. I think lots of things are appealing or pleasing to the eye. But this spot is truly beautiful. I'm not sure I've ever seen anything like it. It's just so untamed or something. Utterly peaceful. I can't get enough. I don't even want to leave."

She's trying to kill me.

I swallow, my throat suddenly extraordinarily dry as I come to stand beside her. I haven't felt this smitten with a woman in, well, ever.

"You match this spot perfectly."

She makes a small, deprecating laugh and peeks up at me. "Yeah?"

"Beautiful and untamed. It's what I love about this place, too." I look away, suddenly shy, and spread the blanket in front of us before taking a seat, staring up at the sky splashed with gold and coral and hot pink. Dark blue creeps in around the edges.

After a beat, Nadia takes a seat beside me. Her bottom lip trembles as her eyes find the sky, too. "But not peaceful. I don't feel peaceful. I feel so untethered. Like I'm lacking direction or purpose or my own family. I have Stefan, but . . . he has everyone else. And now he even gets Hank. I still get that asshole as my dad. And I feel behind somehow. I see all these people my age knowing what they want out of life, and they go to school, and they do it and they get the job, and their life just carries on. And then there's me, just sort of swimming in circles."

I grunt and lean back on my palms. I know that feeling well. "Didn't you get into vet school?"

Her responding smile is tentative. "Yeah."

"Then get in there and crush it."

"I don't know if I can. Maybe I should just use my inheritance to start up a rescue. For retired racehorses like Cowboy. I think I'd like that."

I quirk an eyebrow at her. "You can do both."

Her nose wrinkles, like she knows she has the money but finds it unsavory. Can't say that I blame her really.

"I don't know if I'm up to it."

"You are."

"Just like that?"

"Yeah, Wildflower. Just like that. It's almost like that asshole who raised you made you think you aren't worthy of more than whatever shit he left you with. But you'll show him. I know you will."

Our eyes meet and something passes between us . . . a feeling, a look. I can't put my finger on it, but it's heavy enough that it forces me to drop her gaze, staring at her manicured fingers instead.

"Did you always know you wanted to be a football player? American football player, that is." When I peek up, she winks. Really gets a kick out of that.

"Shit no. My path is a real curvy one, Wildflower. Truth be told, as a younger child, I always figured I'd want to be doing what I'm doing right now. Living a simple life. Working with horses, just like my grandad."

She lies back on the blanket, folding her hands beneath her cheek as she turns those big, brown eyes on me. "Tell me about it."

"My parents aren't horse people. I'm not sure if you picked up on that with the fancy coffees and golf obsession."

She laughs, and it's light and airy. And fucking music to my ears.

"I learned about horses from my grandfather, my mom's dad. He grew up on a cattle ranch in the area with his family. He got me on a horse early. Taught me everything I know. I loved my days with him—until I threw a football and got a taste of everything my life could be with that. I did a few rodeos. Sat a bucking horse or two. But then I lost interest. My throwing arm became too valuable. Success became addictive."

I sigh. Hashing out my childhood makes me feel like an even bigger failure than I already do. I have no good reason to have fallen into the shit I did. Greed and ego.

"Before my accident, I was a real douchebag. I don't think you'd have liked me very much. I don't like that version of myself very much either, to be honest."

"How come?"

"Because I took everything for granted. My good fortune. My family. It was never enough. I wanted to win more, fuck more, buy more. I had it all,

and it was never enough. I was greedy and cocky. I thought I was untouchable. The universe has a fascinating way of putting us in our place, though, and I think that's what happened to me. I made a lot of really stupid decisions."

"I think you're too hard on yourself."

"That's because you don't know all the shit I've done."

"Okay."

"Why do you always give me that out?"

She shrugs, looking up at me from where she lies on the blanket, hair fanned out around her like a halo. "Because me saying you're wrong won't make you believe it. I'll save my breath."

I chuckle and lie back beside her. "Sounds like a line from therapy."

"It is."

"Is this where you tell me I need therapy?" God knows my parents have tried.

"Would it make you go?"

I turn my head to meet her curious gaze. "It hasn't in the past."

She smiles, but it's somber. "Then I'll save my breath on that, too. You'll know if you need it. I did." I snort. "I still do."

Rolling toward her, I mimic her position, folding my hands under my cheek. "How did you know you needed therapy?"

"Because I kept sabotaging every potentially good thing that was happening to me. Because the voice in my head that told me I was worthless was louder than the one that told me I deserved to be happy."

"I have that voice, too," I murmur.

"I know you do."

"How do you know that?"

She laughs, but there's no amusement in her tone. "Because I swear, I can see it in your face, in your body, when you're listening to it. It's like I can hear it, too."

Our eyes lock for a few moments, and the air crackles between us. Her lips part, like she's about to say something more, but she sighs and flips over on to her back, letting the cool air rush in between us like an invisible wall.

"Let's watch the sunset. Then I'm going to bed."

I should pull her back toward me. I should tell her I'm what she needs, that nothing is too complicated in the face of a connection like this.

But I think that would probably be a lie.



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## NADIA



GRIFFIN LAID beside me in the field, and a companionable silence stretched between us. He may have flirted back with me, finally rising to my bait, but he didn't take it any further. He didn't put his hands on me. He didn't crawl on top of me and take my clothes off, but he didn't just disappear after getting naked with me, either.

He looked at me like I fascinated him. Like I was a treasure, like I held value to him. He laid there with me, not touching. Just talking. He listened to me, and I could see him turning my words over in his mind. I could see he wanted more, but he was respecting my space. I guess I made myself clear when I handed him his clothes and said goodnight.

I kicked him out because I was tripping out. The complicated feelings crashing through me after having sex with him were totally consuming and complicated, and I didn't know how to handle that. I don't want to be consumed by a boy. A man. Whatever. I don't want to be that vulnerable to another person. Period.

And he gets that. Respects that.

But now I'm laying here in my tent wishing he were far less of a gentleman. A growly, rude, dirty-talking gentleman. Go figure.

He tried to fight me on staying out here rather than in his house. But I wasn't having it. Staying in that house with him would be too tempting.

The way he claimed me last night. His gruff words, his sensual touches. God, his rough touches. I'd never had sex like that. Sex where it felt like the other person knew exactly where to put their hands. When. How hard. Knew to say something that would light me on fire. Followed by something sweet

that would make me swoon.

Sex with Griffin Sinclair was filthy and romantic all at once.

It was also addictive. I realized as I lie here, replaying it over and over again. His fingers in my mouth while he filled me up, the tenderness in his eyes, the reverence in his hands. The way his face had momentarily filled with disappointment when I all but told him to leave.

Usually guys were all for that, but Griffin had looked downright wounded. Like he would have stayed and held me all night long. And I hated that look on his face. I hate I want nothing more than to be lying in his arms.

I pull the sleeping bag up over my face and let a quiet, frustrated scream out. My plan was to stop having meaningless sex with meaningless men, and I figured I could break my rule for one night. I thought I could scratch that itch.

The problem is, Griffin is right. Nothing between us feels meaningless. And sitting here journaling until my vision blurs has brought me to that exact conclusion.

Catching feelings for a guy has always scared me. It ruined my mother's life—almost ruined my life in the process—and keeping feelings and sex separate has been a sadly easy line for me to walk.

Until Griffin Fucking Sinclair waltzed in with his growly moods and bristly fucking beard and ruined my streak. Never mind the shirtless lumberjack routine. That was just cruel temptation.

I wasn't sure I was ready to have sex that meant something, but I went and fucking did it. And now I'm tripping balls.

My brother's best friend. A man a good handful of years older than me. It's bizarre that something so outwardly wrong can feel so damn right.

I flip the sleeping bag down and force a deep breath into my lungs, weighing my options. After a full day of working around this gorgeous goddamn oasis, I should be exhausted. But I'm jittery. Confused. Frustrated.

*Horny.*

So. Fucking. Horny.

I either need to be close to him or get as far away as possible from him. I know it in my bones. My options are: jump in my car and abandon Griffin up here, which would make me a huge dick, but might salvage the course my love life seems to be taking, or I walk up to that house, bang on the door, and tell him everything.

Lay it all on the line. Risk him treating me like I'm a tragic little girl who



he got what he wanted from on the off chance that he wants to bang again.

*He won't.* I know it.

Deep down, I know he won't turn me away. I saw the shift. I *felt* it. And that's the scariest part of it all. If I open myself up to him, will it ruin me? Will it make me want to quit school? Give up my dreams? Hide away in the mountains with him?

It almost sounds appealing, but I'd never forgive myself if I gave up on everything just to do that.

My heart rate jumps, and my breaths turn to anxious pants as my mind races through all the worst case-scenarios.

Only one way to find out.

I flip the sleeping bag off myself as I stand and burst through the tent flap. I don't even bother with shoes. The damp grass tickles the bottoms of my feet as I jog up to the front door of Griffin's beautiful little mountain house.

My knock is tentative. I glance over my shoulder briefly, wondering if I should have jogged to my car parked mere feet away from where I currently stand. Two options so close together, and yet so far apart.

The door swings open, and Griffin fills the space, an expanse of bare chest and bulging biceps covered in scrolling black patterns. His dark hair is loose and disheveled, and I can still feel it running between my fingers. All he's wearing is a pair of simple gray shorts and a concerned scowl.

*I love that scowl.*

"What's wrong?" He's peering around behind me, like an axe murderer chased me up here.

"I'm scared," I blurt out, squeezing the wrist cuffs of my oversized sweatshirt between my fists.

"Of what?" He's still staring beyond me, like there's something out there, one thick arm wrapping around my waist and pressing into the small of my back, pulling me into the protection of his house while he steps out past me. My breasts brush against his bare chest as he switches spots with me, like he can just waltz out there and slay my inner dragons while I curl up in the safety of his home.

I wish it were that simple.

"Nadia." He turns, gripping my shoulders and crouching down just far enough to look me in the eye. "Did you hear something out there? See something?"

I blink, trying to find my nerve again.

“Fuck.” He runs a hand through his hair, turning out to face the dark yard again. “I knew I shouldn’t have listened to you about staying out there by yourself. You don’t have to be so fucking tough all the time.”

He reaches for the rifle hanging by the back door, and my fingers find his bicep, stopping him in his tracks. My pink nails are a perfect contrast against the black ink there.

It’s true. I had been absurdly stubborn about staying in the tent rather than in his house. I felt like I needed the space.

“No,” I breathe. “I’m scared of this.” I can’t even look at him. I keep my eyes trained on his chest, searching madly for the words that this beautiful man deserves from me.

“This.” I wave a finger between us. “I’m scared of this. Us. You.” I turn my face up at the ceiling, tracing the lines of the doorjamb as I shove my fingers through my hair. “I’m scared of myself.”

I wait for him to say something, and I don’t know why. Griffin is a man of few words. I should have seen this coming. I should have known I wouldn’t be what he needs. He’s a man who knows what he wants out of life, and I’m the girl who’s flitted from guy to guy like she’s pollinating fucking flowers. “You know what, never mind. Forget I said that.” I laugh, but it’s a dark laugh. “I should have realized you’d be after something else.”

I move to shove past him. Fleeing. *A-fucking-gain*. Am I being childish? Maybe. But he’s got my head all jumbled. I’m not making a lot of sense, and I know it.

But his forearm wraps around my waist, and he yanks me into his body, my back pressing against the warmth of his chest as his heavily corded arms wrap around me like a vise. “Don’t tell me what I’m after, Wildflower.” His voice holds an edge of danger now, like I’ve said something that pisses him off. “Any man not after you is a fucking idiot.”

My heart thunders so loudly I can barely hear his deep, growly voice over its beat.

“Then why do you keep pushing me away? Or letting me push you away?” I sound small and sad and a little bit broken. My eyes flutter shut, as though that can block out the embarrassment of giving voice to that question. Why hasn’t he burned the world down to have me?

His beard rasps against the side of my neck as he cranes to catch my eye. “Why the fuck do you think?”

“Because I’m your best friend’s little sister who’s been out with half the guys in town? Because you got what you wanted from me now?” That’s a gross exaggeration and a sad attempt at sarcasm. It’s also possible that I’m being angry and combative—it’s my default mode.

His arms clamp down on my body even harder, one hand gripping my chin and turning me back to him. Pure fury dances in his eyes, but not the kind of fury I’ve seen before. This is different. He’s incensed. “Who told you the only thing you have to offer is what’s between your legs?”

*My shitty dad and every shitty guy I’ve met since.*

He rakes his fingers through his hair in agitation. “I could honestly tear apart every man who has ever made you doubt your value.”

I scoff and try to look away, jerking my head sharply and failing. His fingers bite into my jaw. “Fucking look at me when I tell you this, Nadia.” I blink rapidly but hold his wild gaze. “I don’t give a flying fuck who you’ve been with. You could have ridden every dick in the entire city of Vancouver, and I’d still want you. I’m happy to wait for you. Do you know why?”

“No,” I grit out. I genuinely cannot fathom why he wouldn’t care about that.

A feral smile touches his lips as he glares down at me. “Because my dick is the last one you’re ever going to ride.”

Shock courses through my veins, along with a disbelieving laugh. “You can be one cocky motherfucker, Sinclair.”

His lips twitch, but he’s still perfectly intense when he says, “It’s true.” His thumb strokes my jawline as he stares down at me like I’m the night sky, full of complicated constellations, dark spots and bright flashes of pure light. “I push you away because I’m fourteen years older than you. I’ve lived a lot of life that you haven’t yet. There are days I feel so fucking washed up that I hardly think I’m worthy of your attention. I’ve got baggage inside my baggage. But I care less and less about that all the time. I’m trying so damn hard to be good, Nadia. I want to be good for you.”

His arms soften around me, and I turn in the cage of his embrace, feeling every point of contact as I do.

“I don’t care what other people think of me. I’m long past that, and I’m not asking your brother’s permission to take the one thing that has breathed life back into me since everything fell to pieces. I’m trying to be mature. I’m trying to give you space to figure yourself out. God knows, I’ve got some shit I need to figure out. And it’s the hardest fucking thing I’ve ever done. But I

care what you think of me. I want to be worthy of you. I'm afraid I'm not there yet. I *know* I'm not there yet."

His hands cup my skull like I'm the most delicate piece of glass, his thumbs rubbing across tears I hadn't even realized I'd spilled.

"I'm scared, too." His breath whispers across my wet cheeks, and his forehead rests against mine as our eyes fall closed in unison. "I'm scared because I want to give you the world, and I know I can't. Not yet."

My hands go from fists to sliding across him, exploring the hard lines of his abdomen. "Just give me right now. Give me one day at a time. With you, they're always better, and I just want more of the better days."

He swallows loudly, and neither of us moves. My words hang in the air, suspended like they're about to shatter on the floor between us if he doesn't reach out and take them. *Then* this interaction will be what I feared, never mind my angry outburst before. If he turns me away now, I might never recov—

"I'll give you all my right nows, Nadia. Every fucking last one. I'll give you anything you want. I've been powerless since the first time I laid eyes on you." His deep voice, what he's just professed, sends gooseflesh racing over my body even though I'm warm in the cradle of his arms, and when his lips press against mine, every fear melts away.

He kisses me like he did that night. Not desperately, not roughly—reverently. He kisses me how I know I deserve to be kissed. The comforting rasp of his beard on my face sends a low throb between my legs and the soft swipe of his tongue against my own has me whimpering and turning to putty in his hands. Like my body knows that the two of us together are just right.

"That noise. You have no idea what that noise does to me."

"What noise?" I whisper right as he presses me up against the doorframe and takes my mouth again, his tongue teasing mine with just the right amount of pressure as his fingers push a lock of hair back behind my ear. His touch lingers, and I whimper.

"*That* noise. Fuck this." He pulls away, taking me in with furrowed brows. "You're *mine*, Wildflower."

He hoists me up, and my legs instantly wrap around his waist as he kicks the door closed behind us and carries me further into his house. I giggle in surprise and clamp on to him, loving the feel of his hands on my ass and those words on his lips.

*Mine.*

No one has ever said that to me before. No one has ever made me feel wanted the way Griffin does—wanted in the most complete way.

“Say it again.”

He storms across the little bungalow toward what I’m certain must be a bedroom. His eyes flash up to mine, the curtain of my blonde hair between us making me feel like we’re in some private bubble.

“Mine.” He growls and kisses me just beside my lips as he strides into the bedroom. He tosses me down onto the king-sized bed before standing over my body, looking over me like he’s a conqueror and I’m land that’s ripe for the taking.

The pure desire in his eyes takes my breath away, especially when they flash with possessiveness as he says, “You got that? You. Are. Mine.”

I nod eagerly, speechless, as he undresses, dropping his shorts to the floor. The room is lit by two bedside lamps, and I have a far more generous view of him than I had last night. Every hard line is more exaggerated as the light plays out across his mouth-watering body.

His body is *perfect*. Bulky in all the right spots, his calloused hands a result of how hard he works, the fine lines beside his eyes a testament to days when he might have laughed more.

*I want to make him laugh more.*

Within moments, he stands naked before me, in many ways. He’s shed his clothes, but he’s shed so much more. His insecurities, his restraint, he’s completely undone all for me.

He tugs at the ankles of my leggings, but his eyes never leave mine. He looks at me so closely that I almost can’t stand it. Like he sees every insecure corner and still wants to make me his.

“Prove it,” I say. My tongue whips out across my bottom lip, and a fountain of nerves bubble up within me as he tosses my leggings away. “If I’m yours, prove it.” I tip my chin up, not wanting to appear as vulnerable as I feel.

He falls to his knees at the end of the bed, letting his gaze move between my legs as his fingers grip my inner thighs and spreads me wide. “I thought we’d been over you not telling me what to do?”

“Really? I don’t recall—”

The movement is quick, but unmistakable. I gasp. The burn that follows is unfamiliar but not at all unwelcome. I push up on my elbows, panting. “Did you just slap my pussy?”

The look he gives me from beneath a crooked brow is completely devilish and so fucking hot. “This?” He takes two fingers and twists them into me, torturously slow, and my head falls back. “Is mine.”

I whimper right as his lips follow his fingers. He’s slow and intentional, every thrust, every kiss to my inner thighs. It’s the perfect symphony composed to drive me insane.

“Please.” I moan.

He pauses only to press a kiss to my knee and ask, “Please what?”

“Please . . .” I trail off. *Fuck me*, is what was at the tip of my tongue. But saying that right now feels wrong, and yet I can’t bring myself to say the other thing. I’ve put too much of myself out there tonight already. I’m not ready to give this that type of label yet.

“Please . . .” My mind races. Please what? The kisses he’s trailing up my inner thigh while he waits for me to find my words are so goddamn distracting. “Show me what gentle is like.”

His fingers flutter against my skin as he pauses, lips on me, and my heart aches with the confession. That I just want someone to hold me, to use their hands on me with something other than anger or messy, crazed lust.

“Anything you want, Wildflower,” he murmurs as he works his way up my body, taking my sweatshirt with him as he goes, peeling back the layers until all that’s left is him and me. Bared to each other. His eyes tell me as much, all traces of his growly indifference erased.

He kisses my stomach. “Mine.” He kisses my sternum. “Mine.” He kisses my temple. “Mine.” And then he holds me.

All our scars melt away as our hands trail over one another’s bodies.

All our restraints dissolve as he nudges the head of his hard length between my legs.

And all our hope for not falling head over heels for each other washes away as he pushes into me slowly, savoring every inch and whispering how incredible I am against the crook of my neck.

And as we rock into each other quietly, slowly—gently—a perfect tangle of limbs, I’m pretty sure I cross something monumental off my list without even trying.



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## GRIFFIN



I WAKE with hair in my face. Beautiful golden strands criss-crossing over my line of vision with Nadia's naked limbs entwined with mine. I'm not sure where I end and where she begins, and I realize that's how I like it.

My eyes clamp back shut. I'm not ready for this night to be over. Not ready to face the day and all the realities it might bring. I'm happy here, suspended in time up in the mountains with a woman I didn't see coming and don't deserve.

Last night was . . .

I sigh. Last night was something else entirely. When I inhale, her sweet rose-petal scent filters in, and I smile. Her feel, her smell, the fucking whimpering sounds she makes. This girl is *it*.

After spending the better part of the last several years alone, I know what it is to feel at ease around someone. Not just like them but feel like they belong with you, and you belong with them. Sure, I can manage around most people. But I'm never sad when we part ways. Aside from my parents, I don't really *miss* anyone.

But the mere thought of spending the winter up here while Nadia spends her winter in the valley has my chest clenching. It literally makes me flinch, which she must notice. Because now she's nuzzling into my chest and pushing herself closer to me, even though I'm pretty sure there's no extra space to take up.

Her hand slides over my chest, and she presses her palm against my cheek, letting her fingers rake through the thick stubble. Then she makes this adorable little sighing noise before walking her hand back down my torso.



I force my eyes open when her path doesn't change. Her lashes stay shuttered, but her lips turn up in a playful little smile as her hand disappears beneath the sheet.

"Good morning, Wildflower." I chuckle, pressing a kiss to the crown of her head.

"Good morning." She drops her lips onto my pec, letting her tongue dart out over my skin before nipping at me.

"What's that for?"

She stares up at me, her honeyed irises sleepy and warm and full of mischief. Her fist clamps down around the girth of my cock, and she licks her lips. I swear I almost come on the spot. Blow my load like an over-excited teenager.

"That's for all the hickeys you left on me after that night behind Neighbor's."

My lips roll together. That was admittedly not my finest moment, but she doesn't look disappointed about the encounter.

"I shouldn't have done that."

She climbs up on top of me, straddling my hips and pressing the slickness between her thighs against my raging hard on. Her full tits practically glow in the golden morning light. My mouth dries out. She's so fucking beautiful.

"I guess you'll have to make it up to me." She sticks her bottom lip out dramatically, and I bark out a laugh.

My arm wraps around her waist, and I flip her underneath me as she squeals with happiness. Fuck, that sounds good.

"Has anyone ever told you what a brat you are?" Our gazes collide, the heaviness of last night having transformed this connection between us into something surer, stronger.

"Never." She says it, but we both know she's lying. She can hardly hold her laughter in, those top teeth digging into her bottom lip as her cheeks twitch. But she fails, dissolving into a fit of giggles.

We both know she's full of shit. But I kiss her anyway, loving the feel of her soft lips against mine, loving the way she's opened up to me and silently convinced me to do the same with her. It feels like she knows me better than I know myself.

Her light laughter continues against my lips, her arms looping around my neck as she bucks her hips into me.

"You done giggling yet, Wildflower? I've got some making up to do."

My teeth sink into her lip, and she moans. And then we spend the morning sinking into each other.

Until Tripod finally wakes up and starts leaping through the covers like we're playing a really fun game. *Asshole dog.*



WE TIDIED the property quickly and quietly this morning.

Except that time I yanked her away from whatever chore she was doing to fuck her brains out on the stairs.

But after that, we got the place locked up, and now we're in her car driving down into the valley. She insisted on driving, and I'm not gonna lie, it's terrifying.

I wonder if this is what it's like in her brain. Just no speed limit and lots of sharp turns, leaving a trail of dust behind herself on whatever dirt road she's flying down.

"Are we in a race that I don't know about?" I ask, looking over my shoulder. "Is someone in hot pursuit?"

She snorts. At least her hands are at ten and two. Hot little psycho driver that she is.

"Are you even old enough to drive this thing?"

Her head turns and her eyes narrow. "Fuck you, Griffy."

"You already did."

Her goddamn lead foot sinks down, and she smirks out the windshield like she's proving something to me right now.

She's not. Other than she's just as crazy as I already know.

I let out a sigh of relief when Nadia finally slows. What I don't expect is for her to pull over. "You drive."

"Why?" I ask.

She just grins. "Because you look like you're going to have a heart attack."

As she flips her door open and unfolds herself, I ask, "Is that some sort of old joke?" Nadia barks out an amused laugh as she rounds the back of the car and comes to yank my door open.

With very wide, very serious eyes, she says, "I would *never*."

I can't help but chuckle and shake my head as I get out of the car. I snake

my hand around her waist and capture her mouth on the way past, unable to stop myself, or keep my hands off of her. I could spend hours tracing this body. Kissing this body. Feeling her lips move softly against mine, that cool little rush of air when she sighs into my kiss like she did just now.

She steps in closer to me, and I'm like a teenager with hearts in his eyes. Her warmth, her scent wraps around me like a comfort blanket. I push her up against the pearl white car and claim her mouth, angling my head over hers, one hand clamping on her ass while the other cups her cheek. The little hairs at the base of her neck tickle my fingers. The brim of my hat lends an air of privacy, like we're locked into a fantasy world on the side of the road.

She smiles against my lips, a light airy giggle escaping her as I nip gently at her bottom lip, giving her a soft, private smile of my own.

"Careful, Sinclair. You're gonna make me climb you like a tree right here on the side of the road."

I smile even bigger. I love that she doesn't want anything from me. She doesn't care about my money, my past, my fame. She wants a quiet, simple life. And I think she might want it with *me*, which is the most incredible feeling. To know that someone wants you for you, not for what you can do for them. It warms me in a completely unfamiliar way.

She squeals when I scoop her up and place her into the passenger seat. And my goddamn heart races at the sound. So sweet and playful. Nadia grins up at me when I grab the seatbelt and pull it gently over her shoulder, and when I lean across her body—eyes catching on the rise and fall of her full breasts—she presses a kiss to my neck. She trails a hand over my spine and reaches behind me to squeeze my ass.

When I make a deep rumbling noise, she just laughs again, before leaning close and nipping at the lobe of my ear. All while I struggle with a fucking car seat buckle. Distracting me from day one.

"Wildflower . . ."

Her hand slides up beneath my t-shirt right as the latch clicks tight. "It's not my fault you're strutting around, teasing me with a body like this."

I shake my head, almost uncomfortable with how genuine the compliment is. How hungry her voice sounds. Gripping her chin with my fingers, I gaze straight into her eyes with a knowing smirk. "Behave yourself."

Brat that she is, she just winks. And I kiss her again swiftly, tongues tangling briefly, but as her hands start to wander, I pull away. I'll never leave this goddamn mountain if we keep this game up.

When I hop back in the car, she gives me a mischievous look. A look I recognize. A look that haunts me.

*Again.*

She said it that night. And her eyes say it right now.

I swallow as I adjust the seat and mirrors, avoiding turning my eyes on her right now, because if I do, I'm worried about where my head might go. Suddenly, this thing between us feels so monumental.

So monumentally right.

I pull back out onto the road as she fiddles with the radio, trying to find reception that doesn't exist. When she finally gives up, she flops back in her seat and places a hand casually over my thigh. It starts out innocent, but after a couple of minutes, one finger strokes. Her thumb joins in, rubbing in a firm circle. Hand sliding down and in toward my swiftly swelling cock.

I keep my eyes trained on the road in the quiet car, but I can sense her gaze on me. And out of my periphery, I see her smile.

A trouble-making smile.

Which is right when her hand slides up to the button on my jeans and flicks it open.

"Nadia." My tone is warning, but my desire betrays me. My voice oozes longing. She has that effect on me.

"Yes?" She blinks innocently as she makes quick one-handed work of my zipper. And then her hand slides into my boxers and wraps around my steely length, chasing all the words I was about to use right out of my head.

She pumps me and quirks her head innocently. "Was there something you wanted to say to me, Griffin?"

I give her a quick look with one eyebrow arched, but don't take my eyes off the road for long. We're not driving fast, but my track record with safe driving leaves something to be desired of late, and Nadia is the most precious of cargo.

*Focus on the road.*

I just grunt at her, seeing her lips tip up in pleasure as she reaches for her seatbelt.

"That stays on," I interrupt her movements.

She rolls her eyes playfully and adjusts it without removing it before pulling my dick right out of my jeans.

A small sigh escapes her. "You have some nerve looking the way you do and also having a cock like this."

I chuckle. I can't help it. I love her compliments.

"No dick will ever compare. I'm ruined."

My shoulders go tight right as my cock throbs, bobbing lewdly in my lap. "God," I bite out, and she just giggles. She licks her lips and stares down at me.

And I pray I don't crash.

Because within moments her head is dropping, tongue swirling around the head as she laps at me and hums in pleasure.

"You have the perfect cock," she whispers before sliding my length into the back of her throat. My fingers clamp around the steering wheel, knuckles going white as I chance a look at the mess of blonde hair now bobbing between my legs while I drive down the bumpy gravel road. The vibration makes it that much better.

The sight of her working me, sucking me so firmly, has me groaning and willing myself to focus on the drive.

When she pulls back, eyes trained on my cock, I feel a surge of pre-cum, and she instantly licks it away. "Mm. I love that."

"Jesus Christ." I steer the car to the side, knowing it's not safe to keep going. Not when she says things like that in her sugary sweet voice.

She looks up with an evil smirk as I reach over her to put the car in park. And then she dives back down. I quickly scoop her golden locks into my fist, lifting just enough to lean back and watch her work me. Watch her cheeks hollow out, her pretty pink lips suctioned on to me as she slides up and down.

Even the way her lashes flutter and cast a shadow over cheekbones drives me crazy.

*Eyelashes.* I mean, goddamn.

She hums, sending a throb through me, and an ache twinging just behind my hip bones. I brace a hand on the roof of the car, wanting so badly not to take over. Just wanting to watch her take care of me. To revel in it.

A light graze of her teeth has my hips bucking and I curse. "You love this, don't you?"

She tries to meet my eyes and nod with my cock still wedged between her lips. I swear I almost blow at the sight.

"Good girl. You suck me so well."

Her lips tip up at the compliment before she slides her soft mouth back over my length. On the way back up, her teeth graze gently, and I feel the tell-tale pressure building in my pelvis. "Oh, fuck yeah. Like that again."

She repeats the motion, and my head falls back against the headrest as my heart races and my lips part. A truck drives by, and I suspect the passenger may have seen what we're doing.

On one hand, I feel like I could beat my chest. Look at this beautiful girl blowing me. *You see that, asshole?* But mostly I feel like I'm going to track him down later and kill him.

But when her teeth graze again, my murder plans evaporate. All I can think about is the tight squeeze of her fist around my hilt, the warm, wet heat of her mouth, and my cock butting up against the back of her throat as she takes me all the way back.

Suddenly, I can't hold back any longer. My pelvis tips up a couple times as I fuck her mouth. "Fuck!" I bark out, surging forward and shooting my release over her tongue.

She keeps sucking—twisting and licking me like I'm a goddamn popsicle. Swallowing like she loves the taste.

I sag back against the seat, stroking her hair and basking in the feel of her taking care of me this way. So eagerly. So playfully.

And when she sits up and smiles at me while daintily wiping the corners of her mouth, I swear I almost have a heart attack. She's just too fucking much. A special brand of kryptonite made exactly for me.

I never stood a single chance at resisting her.

"Best blow job of my life."

"Really?" She sounds genuinely excited by that compliment, smile widening and eyes twinkling.

Hand cupped around the base of her skull, I tug her forward, dusting my lips over her puffy, ravaged ones as I say, "Hell yes. That's one I'll think about for the rest of my life. I can't wait to repay the favor."

When I pull her close and claim her mouth, she shivers. I can taste myself there, but I don't give a fuck. Kissing her is a privilege that I'll never take for granted.

"Ready to go, Wildflower?"

She rubs her lips across my beard and smiles against my skin before kissing the bristly hair. "Yes."

We both take a moment to right ourselves, and then I'm pulling back out onto the road. I place her hand back onto my leg and link my fingers through hers, wanting to maintain whatever contact I can. Like she might slip away from me if I don't.

Like this is just too good to be true.

When we hit the stop sign where the dirt road joins up with the paved one, Nadia takes a deep breath, her shoulders rising and falling with the weight of it. “I wish we were just staying at your house.”

“Me, too.”

“I can see why you like it up here so much. It’s peaceful.”

“It is.” I nod and let out a deep sigh.

“Can I come back up here again?” She peers out the window with a little too much interest, like just asking me that makes her uncomfortable. It’s a failed attempt at being casual.

I swallow. “Yeah. Anytime.”

Her head tilts in my direction. “Do you only speak in sentences with more than two words when you’re on your own property? Just revert to single word answers and grunts the minute you leave?”

I grunt. I’m lost in my head right now.

She laughs.

I roll my eyes, folding my arms across myself. “You’re the one who told me I’m a good listener.”

She nods as I flip the signal light on and check the road again. Even though there’s hardly ever any traffic up here.

“I don’t want this to end.” Her voice is so small that I barely hear her. The confession makes my heart twist. “This weekend, I mean.”

*Right.*

“Wanna go for a stupid coffee and hear about how riveting playing the same golf course every damn day is?”

Her smile is soft as her car accelerates beneath my foot.

“Yeah. A stupid coffee sounds great.”





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## GRIFFIN



I KNOCK on the door and wait, right as I remember my mom whispered something in Nadia's ear last time we were here. Right before we left.

"What did my mom whisper to you last time you saw her?"

Nadia looks up at me, her pinky finger grazing against mine before she steps just a little further away from me, clearly not ready to waltz in there acting like we're an item. "She told me I'm the only person she's never seen you stutter around."

My mind reels as I try to think about it. Have I tripped over a single goddamn word in her presence in the last couple of days? I can't seem to drum up the memory. But surely, I must have. There's just no way that—

The door swings open. Tripod yaps once at my feet and then takes off into the condo like he owns the fucking place.

"Hey, Mom."

"Tripod! Griffy!" My mom's arms shoot out wide as she wraps them around me. Then the volume of her squealing increases, which means she must have spotted Nadia standing behind me.

"Nadia, honey! How nice to see you again." I swear my mom shoves me out of the way so she can hug Nadia, which makes her laugh and mouth *I think she loves me more* over my mother's shoulder before she pulls away to take us both in.

"It's nice to see you again, too, Joan. Griffin hasn't stopped talking about how much he loves your pour-over coffee, so we just had to swing by."

*Brat.*

My mom smiles wide, giving me a skeptical glance. She knows Nadia is

full of shit but likes that she's giving me a hard time. "It's the flavor, isn't it, darling?"

"Yeah, Mom. It's really good," I say right as my cap is ripped off my head and my dad's huge mitt of a hand lands to ruffle my hair.

"Hey, Kid. And Nadia! What a pleasant surprise." My parents exchange a look that is far too excited. I guess when you haven't brought a girl around in thirty-five years, twice in a row seems like a big deal.

Nadia catches my eye and winks.

I swallow. She's a huge fucking deal.

"Okay, to the living room we go. Pre-season is on Griff. You wanna stay for a game?"

I almost groan. Watching professional football since the demise of my role in it hasn't been very high on my to-do list. I love the game. I *miss* the game. And watching it is like twisting a knife into my chest. But my dad is so genuine in his excitement. He put so many years into supporting me, showing up to my games, watching game tape with me, and so much more. It's almost cruel to him that I made it big and now hardly even recognize the sport still exists.

"Yeah, Dad. That sounds great."

He claps his hands together, and we all make our way down the hallway to the open living space.

"What's your team, Nadia?" he asks as she curls up in a large armchair across from me. I scowl because she belongs in my lap, not across the room.

"Sorry?" she asks, tucking her legs underneath herself. Tripod hops up, spins a quick circle, and then presses himself against her. I sigh contentedly at the sight of the two of them there together. A dog I ran over and a girl who ran me over.

"Football? Who is your favorite football team?"

"Oh, gosh. I don't know. Where I come from, football is what you call soccer."

My parents heads both shoot up, like she's said something blasphemous, and I cover my mouth with a fist to keep from laughing.

"Are you telling me you don't like football?" My dad sounds more alarmed than offended as he pauses the game and bathes the room in awkward silence.

Nadia just rolls with the punches. "Well, I wouldn't take it that far. I'm sure I'd like it. I just don't really know anything about it."

“So,” my mother pipes up, “when you met Griffin, you didn’t know who he was?”

I don’t know how I stop my body from shaking under the strain of keeping myself from laughing. Know who I was? That sounds so lame.

I think of the girl in the bathroom that night, all big dick energy and sultry smiles. Calling me out on being the prick that I often am. Nah, that girl had no fucking clue who I was—or who I’d been. Not that she’d have cared.

“I knew he was a total asshole,” Nadia deadpans.

And the dam breaks.

The laugh comes out of me in a painful sounding wheeze as I double over, just after seeing Nadia’s lips twitch and eyes flit to me.

My dad barks a loud laugh, and within moments, I hear my mom join in, too.

Nadia chuckles, watching us as she throws her hands up and adds, “What? It’s true!”

It makes me laugh harder. Only Nadia Dalca would sit here in my parents’ living room and tell them their beloved only child was a *total asshole*.

“I like you, Nadia,” my mother says from where she’s still standing at the kitchen island, shaking her head with a twinkle in her eye. “Griffin needs more people like you around him.”

“What kind of people would those be, Mom?”

She turns, pinning me with a pointed index finger. “The kind who don’t put up with your shit.”

“Ha!” Nadia points at me, looking triumphant. “See? She knows what I’m talking about.”

I grin and shake my head. The mood is so fun and light, I just want to soak it up. Nadia feels right here, too, with me and my family.

“Okay then, Nadia.” My dad moves to the other end of the couch to sit closer and starts in on her, explaining the game as it plays across the huge flatscreen again.

I sit and watch her, entranced by the sloped line of her nose, the bright twinkle in her eyes, her soft lips, and all that flaxen hair. She scoops it behind her ear and peeks across at me as she listens to my dad go on about a sport she clearly has no interest in. We exchange a look so sweet my heart twists in my chest.

“Griffin. Come help me with the coffees.” My mom’s face is completely

unreadable as she beckons me forward with a folded hand.

I can barely tear my eyes off Nadia. We opened the floodgates last night, and now I'm feeling a little obsessed. Uncomfortably so, like it hurts to put space between us.

"Yeah. Of course." I slap my knees and unfold myself, moving into the kitchen, where my mother clearly doesn't need any help.

"What's up, Ma?" I flatten my palms against the marble countertop and take in all the contraptions before her, still not entirely sure why she wouldn't just grind her coffee, fill the coffeemaker, and then press a button.

"The first time was a coincidence." She's weighing ground coffee on an honest to God scale, not even looking at me as she talks. "But a second time? I've got questions, Griff." She says it quietly enough that she can't be heard over the announcers blaring in from the living room.

I run my tongue over my teeth. "Kinda figured you would."

"So, she's Stefan's sister?"

"Yup."

"How old is she?"

*Too fucking young.*

"Twenty-one."

She doesn't react to that little tidbit. Bless her. "It seems like you two make each other happy. I don't know when I last heard you laugh like that." *Before Nadia? Years.*

"Mhm." I watch the coffee drip into the glass carafe.

She pours the boiling water out of this dainty little kettle, spilling the steaming liquid out in slow circles over the filter, not missing a fucking beat. "Have you heard from—"

"No."

"Does she know about—"

"No," I growl, a protective streak I didn't even know I possessed leaping up and rearing its ugly head.

My mom turns to me, her eyes narrowing on me. *Now we're in touchy territory.*

"Don't you growl at me. You need to tell her. And you need to tidy that up. It's way overdue. You can't keep running from your past or it's going to bite you in your very stubborn ass."

"I know," I whisper harshly—hardly better than a growl—good mood evaporating right before my eyes.

“Don’t drag your feet.” She pours the coffee into the waiting mugs.

I press my hands to the brim of my hat, squeezing the edges in as I stare down at the countertop. “I *know*. I’m trying. I have been trying for years.”

Her eyes narrow as she glares down her nose at me. “Try harder, Griffy. And grab the other two.” She gestures with her chin at the two mugs closest to me. And then her face morphs into a smile as she scoops her two up and walks into the living room.

“So, Nadia, tell us about your plans. Last time, you said you were thinking about going back to school. What for?”

Nadia takes the coffee with a warm smile, wrapping her dainty fingers around the mug. “Well, I got into vet school.” She looks my way from beneath the thick fringe of her lashes, suddenly shy. She clears her throat. “I actually start in September. They took me as a late application.”

“That’s just great!” God, why does my dad always sound like he’s shouting? I smile into my coffee mug.

“Close by?” Mom asks.

Nadia nods. “Yeah. At Emerald Lake Veterinary College.”

“Will you come back and work where you’re at now when you graduate?” My mom is not so subtly trying to figure out if she’s sticking around, and it takes everything in me not to roll my eyes.

“I . . . don’t know.” Nadia’s cheeks go pink, and she stares down at her coffee. “I think I might like to do some sort of rescue work, actually.” Her eyes find mine, swimming with an emotion I can’t quite put my finger on. “I’ve really enjoyed rehabilitating Cowboy, the horse that Griffin bought me. The racing industry can be hard on horses. I know some end up in less-than-ideal circumstances. I think I could do something with that . . . I don’t know . . .”

She shrugs, trailing off and looking up at the ceiling like she’s said something silly. But nothing about what she said sounds silly to me. With her soft heart, and spunky side, she’d be perfect doing something like this with horses.

“I have a bit of an inheritance. I’d like to put that money toward something good. Something helpful.”

My throat constricts as I try to swallow. How someone like her has even looked my way, someone who’s risen above her circumstances so fearlessly—I just don’t get it.

I really need to get my shit together.

“That sounds like a lovely idea,” my mother says kindly. But she doesn’t get how incredible this woman is. How pure. How strong. How inspiring.

Because never mind myself, all I want is for Nadia’s dreams to come true. And the prospect of hurting her makes me almost physically ill.

Which means I’ve got one major loose end I need to tie up. The one woman in the world I manage to find all the right words around deserves that much and more.



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## NADIA



I WAKE up in Griffin's arms and have the strangest sense of belonging somewhere for the first time in my life.

I feel safe. I feel treasured. I feel like my home is held tight between his rock-hard arms.

And those aren't the only thing that's rock hard this morning. His bulge is wedged between my ass cheeks, and he's got me clamped in his arms like I might run away from him, given the chance.

And nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, I'm feeling like I might just live here. Wrapped up in *him*. All cinnamon and pine, hard body and soft hands.

After coffee with his parents yesterday, we took Tripod for a walk, and he told me all about growing up here in Ruby Creek. He also told me more about Griffin Sinclair, quarterback extraordinaire, and how much he loved the sport. How much he misses it. And how hard his parents worked to see him meet his every goal.

I hate to admit there was this tiny part of me that was envious. Sure, it all went to shit, and he's been facing down demons every day since. But the rest of it? The parents? The support? The love?

I wanted that. I still do.

We came back to his place, and he ran me a bath while he stepped outside to feed the horses. I could hear him talking on his phone but tuned it out as I sank into the bubbles. When I got out, I only meant to lie myself naked on the bed.

My plan was to become an all-you-can-eat buffet for Griffin Sinclair.



But I fell asleep. And rather than wake me up to indulge in that, he tucked me in. Like a perfect gentleman. He crawled in beside me, and I woke up part way through the night, realizing what had happened.

Then I snuggled back in and passed back out. I didn't swipe my hand beneath my pillow to check for a gun. I just fell back into the most peaceful sleep of my life.

From across the room, his phone trills, the sound of his alarm filling the formerly quiet room, and he groans. A deep, masculine sound that makes the cage of his chest vibrate against my back.

I smile. The sun is shining through the slatted blinds, and I have the manliest man of all time holding me. What could be better?

He kisses my hair and runs a calloused palm over my bare arm before climbing out of bed and padding over to the dresser to hit the alarm. I roll over, tangled in the sheets and feeling thoroughly blissed out. My eyes fall to the round globes of his ass as he walks away.

*Best view in the world.*

I love that he sleeps naked. Love that he feels confident enough around me to walk around without a stitch of clothing when he seems to be riddled with so many insecurities most days. It warms my heart.

When he turns, he smirks at me. Probably because my eyes went from his ass right to his dick. "Good morning, Wildflower."

I return the smirk. "Lookin' good, Sinclair."

He shakes his head in a knowing way, but his lips tip up all the same. I expect him to come back to bed—I *want* him to come back to bed—but he opens a dresser drawer and starts pulling clothes out.

"Where are you running off to?" My brows scrunch together in confusion.

"It's supposed to be a scorcher. Gonna get the horses worked before it's just plain too hot for them."

"Oh." My heart sinks. Guys always pull away after sex, so that's where my head goes.

"Hey. Hey." He crosses the room as he pulls a gray t-shirt over his head. When he gets to the edge of the bed, he drops to his knees and stretches one inked arm over me, stroking my hair as he stares into my eyes. "This means nothing more than I need to go to work. I . . ." He trails off, face falling just a little bit. "Come over tonight. When you're done with work. Okay?"

I search his face for any clues as to what might be going through his head.

On one hand, things have evolved between us kind of quickly. On the other, it seems like we've been circling each other for years, ignoring feelings that have always been there.

I'm anxious all the same. "Okay," is my quiet reply.

His heavy brow presses down over his stormy eyes. "So help me, Nadia. If you're questioning a single thing right now, rest assured, this is very real for me, too."

My heart rate quickens, and I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding at hearing him say that out loud. "Okay. Here. After work. It's a date."

He smiles, but it doesn't quite touch his eyes. "It's a date."

And with that he kisses me quickly and is gone out the door. The voice I've worked so hard to get rid of asks if I'm *sure* he'll be back for more.



I WALK over the field at the end of my day, not sure how to feel. Aside from hot, sweaty, and agitated. Work was busy and that kept me mostly occupied. Though I did spend a huge amount of time thinking about Griffin and wondering why he was acting so restrained this morning after not holding back the last couple of days.

Something was wrong, and that inkling keeps cropping up, twisting my thoughts and feelings into something uglier than I want where Griffin is concerned. It makes me think of my mother and how thoroughly she was swindled by my dad. By his endless amounts of money, by the sophistication of an older man. She had the world at her fingertips, and she gave it all up to be locked into a lifetime with a man who turned out to be a monster.

I constantly wonder if I'll fall into the same trap. Even though the sane part of me knows Griffin is nothing like my sperm donor.

Something that is reaffirmed when I get to the top of the hill and gaze down over the small yard attached to the guesthouse.

There is Griffin. Reading a book in a beach chair. Swim trunks and nothing else. Just patterns painted over his endless muscles. Another empty beach chair sits beside him, and his long legs are stretched out before him, feet soaking in a small, blue plastic pool. His Bluetooth speaker is blaring some sort of Caribbean sounding music and he has a bucket full of . . .

I walk closer, heart crawling up into my throat and eyes wide.

A bucket full of my favorite pineapple flavored sparkling water.

Moving toward him, a blush creeps up over my cheeks. It's too hot out for anyone else to notice, but I can feel it all the same.

When he glances up and grins at me from beneath the brim of his hat, I trip. I mean, goddamn. The man should not be allowed to look this good. All tanned skin, and black tattoos that give him a slightly threatening edge.

"What's all this?" I call out, drawing closer.

"As close to a tropical vacation as I could reasonably get you right now."

My stomach flips over on itself and my chest aches as I look over the setup again. Towels beneath a big sun umbrella. A stack of trashy magazines. A skimpy pink bikini. The man has literally thought of everything.

"Well, shit. This is pretty romantic, Sinclair."

He tips his chin at the bikini a little sheepishly. "Go get changed."

"I could change right here . . ." I trail off suggestively.

He presses his lips together. "As good as that sounds, let's not risk someone seeing you."

"Right." His point is so valid, but it stings all the same. I don't want to hide this thing between us. "I'll be right back."

I head to the house to change, but I can tell something isn't quite right. Something is off with him today. Who the hell turns down the girl they're into getting naked in front of them? The chances of someone seeing us are practically zero. I slept here last night for crying out loud.

I slip into the bathing suit, and it fits perfectly because of course it does. Griffin is like this growly, dirty-talking, romantic dickhead that I can't get enough of.

As I march back out to where he's sitting, I get more and more annoyed. Blame it on the heat, my hormones, whatever. I walk right up to him, cock a hip, and cross my arms the way he likes. His eyes always fall to my breasts when I do this. And I'm willing to use every weapon at my disposal to find out what the hell is wrong with him.

"You're acting weird."

I can see him fight to keep his eyes trained on mine, but they eventually drop, and I try hard not to look smug about it.

He scrubs his beard with his free hand, the other is wrapped around a can of my favorite drink. "I know."

"Why?"

His eyes are wide and clear, and I can see the hesitation in them. The *pain* in them. “Something from my past. Something I’ve been running from. Actually, more like neglecting to deal with.”

Anything but that. Anything but that because *that* I can empathize with. Not wanting to talk about it. After all, we don’t know each other very well. There are dark parts of my past I haven’t told him. Things I’m sure will come out over time as our trust grows. Tidbits of my story here and there that I’ll tell him when the time is right.

So instead of giving him shit, I just sigh, looking back over the field briefly. “You wanna talk about it?”

His lips roll together as he regards me. “Not really. I’d rather just sit here with you. Just being near you makes the world feel like a better place.” He swallows and I watch his Adam’s apple bob beneath the stubbled skin on his throat. “You make me feel happy.”

Even the way he swallows has me pressing my thighs together.

“Okay.” I nod and flop into the chair beside him, and I swear I can feel the relief flowing off him.

He cracks a yellow can and hands it over to me, and I sink back into the beach chair. I’m tired, I’m overwhelmed, and I’m overthinking the hell out of things.

But when he reaches over and takes my hand in his, everything feels better. Actually, for the next several hours, everything feels a little bit better. I revel in his company, soak in the cool water, and read bullshit news about celebrities.

It’s actually bliss.

Until he ruins it all.



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## NADIA



GRIFFIN HASN'T FUCKED me in five days, and I'm losing my mind. Which is why I'm gawking out the clinic windows at his perfect ass as he walks a horse up and down the driveway while Mira watches for any signs of lameness.

All I can confirm is that he can wear the hell out of a pair of jeans and that he's so much sweeter than I ever banked on.

Even though I'm pissed with him right now.

When we were about to go our separate ways after the annoyingly sweet but fake tropical vacation, he told me he needed a bit of time to work something out. When I asked what that something was, he said he'd tell me once he took care of it.

When I asked what a bit of time was, he told me he couldn't say for sure.

He promised me over and over again that this wasn't the end. *Don't misunderstand me, Wildflower. This isn't the end. This is just the beginning. When I told you you're mine, I fucking meant it. But to keep going with you while I have this hanging over my head feels wrong. You deserve better.*

Honestly, his vagueness pissed me off. Which is why I told him not to come around until he's ready to talk honestly with me. I hate secrets. I hate not knowing. I hate being kept in the dark like I'm a child or something. And even all that raw pain in his eyes wasn't enough to convince me otherwise.

But I still want to fuck him. Because nobody—and I mean *nobody*—is better at sex than Griffin Sinclair. Plus, I really do understand having things you're not ready to talk about.

And if I'm being honest, it's a lot more than just sex with him. I wouldn't

have done it otherwise. I promised myself I wouldn't have casual sex to fill some void inside of me, and I haven't.

The problem is, I'm getting obsessed. With his dick. With his moody growls. With his commitment to my to-do list. With the soft looks he gives Tripod when he bends down to scratch him behind his ears. Is there anything hotter than a man who's a total softie for animals? Because I'm pretty sure there's not. And watching Griffin take in the dirty, malnourished, three-legged mutt and love him so completely could make me cry.

He stops to talk to Mira after trotting the horse back to her, and when she moves along the filly, running her hand over her ribs as she goes, Griffin's head snaps up. He glances my way, like he just *knew* I was scoping him out. Our eyes find each other like it's the most natural thing in the world, like we're opposite ends of a magnet. Drawn together in the most intrinsic of ways. Even if we shouldn't be.

When he looks at me like this, none of that other stuff matters. It feels like the world put us in each other's paths that night. It feels like my brother bought his farm so we'd be a part of each other's worlds.

At the risk of sounding like a woo-woo sap, there's something about us that feels written in the stars.

I don't look away and neither does he. He just scowls at me, and it makes me smile. He might act like a grizzly bear, but I know what's underneath. I've felt him soften beneath my palms. I've heard the loving things he whispers in my ears.

I'm smart enough to know there's something holding him back, something he's embarrassed about. Some demon from his past. But his demons don't scare me. They call to my own. Our wild sides match, our shadowy parts twirl together so easily. Our demons spill out and dance together, like dark plus dark makes light.

I told him once that I didn't know what I'd have in common with someone my age who's lived an average life. That I'd feel like I was darkening their bright, shiny aura with my shadows.

But with Griffin it doesn't feel that way at all. He doesn't treat me like I'm damaged. He takes all my little broken bits and mixes them with his own.

And I want more of that. He must see it in my face because his brows drop lower, lips tipping with what someone who doesn't understand him might see as a bad mood. I just see anxiety. I see all the things he wants to say to me but can't bring himself to voice.

I wink at him and turn away, checking the clock as I grab my bag and walk toward the front door.

A week of space is enough for him to freak out. And me, for that matter. I'm also tired of pretending my vibrator is him.

It's time to poke the bear again.

"You off?" Mira calls out.

I wave, grinning. "Yeah. I think I'm gonna grab a horse and go for a trail ride."

"Good for you. Between this guy"—she hikes a thumb over at Griffin—"and Violet, you've come along quickly." Since day one, this woman has been my biggest fan, and I love her for it.

"Well, you know me. Not afraid to work for what I want." My gaze flits over to Griffin, who stiffens, his scowl only deepening even though I didn't think that was possible.

"I'm so proud of you." Her eyes twinkle.

Earlier today, I told her my plans about starting some sort of racehorse rescue or rehabilitation program after I finish vet school. Between Mira's excitement for the idea and the votes of confidence from Griffin and his family, I'm feeling like this dream is possible. Like I really could do it, like I have a growing number of people in my life who genuinely want me to succeed. And that support warms me in a way I've spent years searching for.

Mira looks like she could cry as I stare back at her. Having a baby softened my sister-in-law, and I'm not mad at it. I'm happy to soak up any motherly attention that comes my way. Sometimes, I think about the fact we almost lost her. My life would be a lot less bright without her in it. Which is why I wrap her up in a hug and whisper in her ear, "I love you so much."

She squeezes me tight. "Love you, too."

When I pull away, Griffin's scowl has washed away, swapped with an expression I can't quite place.

"Later, Sinclair," I mutter as I turn to leave.

"Who are you riding with?" he bites out as soon as I've taken a few steps away.

"No one. I like my space."

"Not safe."

I peek over my shoulder because I don't want to miss this reaction from him. "Thanks, Dad."

I almost laugh when that one spot on his jaw pops. I'm sure he's grinding



that cinnamon gum to absolute shit between his molars.

“Meet me at my house. You can ride Spot. I’ll take one of the young ones that I have over there right now.”

I stop, turning back to them, not missing the ways Mira’s eyes move between us, no longer sparkling with emotion. Now it’s amusement.

“I just said I like my space.” My tongue swipes against the back of my teeth, trying so hard not to crack a smile.

“Heard. Just don’t care.” He shrugs, horse in hand, and walks away with the last word, annoyed masculine energy radiating from his shoulders.

But me? I’m not annoyed, I’m grinning because I just won myself some alone time with Griffin Sinclair.

Mira brushes past me, doing a poor job of smothering the smile that’s playing across her face. She puts a good chunk of space between us before she mutters just loud enough for me to hear, “My God, Little Dalca. I daresay that man has it bad for you.”

And all I can think is *good*. Now we can have it bad for each other. I hope he’s as fucked up over me as I am over him.



“YOU SADDLED MY HORSE FOR ME.” Griffin gives me an impassive look as he stares at the paddocks behind his house.

“Do you want to check that I did it properly?” I lean up against the fence and quirk an eyebrow at him. “Ruin my alone time *and* boss me around?”

His lips twitch but he doesn’t smile, just dusts his hands together and heads toward the leggy bay thoroughbred in the paddock beside Spot. “No. I taught you how. I know you did it right. Ready?” he asks, tossing his cap on the ground and pulling a helmet on.

I nod and turn away, because if I don’t, I will seriously fucking throw myself at the guy, climb him, tackle him to the ground, and have my way with him right here and now.

Save a horse, ride a cowboy and all that.

“Yup.” I chicken out on that and bridle Spot before lining him up with the fence and hopping on. I urge him forward with a gentle squeeze without looking behind me and head down the driveway. The only way I know Griffin is following is because I can hear his horse’s hooves clopping behind

me.

“This way.” He gestures down a wide path that winds between the trees, pulling up beside me as we head out for a leisurely walk. Spot’s head is slung low, swaying back and forth in a relaxed fashion. Griffin’s young colt is clearly nervous, his head held high, eyes bugging out of his skull, ears swiveling all over the place.

“Your horse is tripping balls, Sinclaire.”

“Stop calling me Sinclaire. That’s what the guys on my team called me.”

“So?” I shrug.

“I’ve been inside of you. You’re not one of the guys.”

I shrug again. “Might as well be. You’ve been treating me like one.”

“Nadia.” His tone is warning, but I don’t care. “Don’t say that.”

A bird swoops past, and his young horse flinches.

“Well, stop acting like a grumpy old man.”

“I told you I had something I needed to work out.”

“For what? You really didn’t tell me shit. And I’m just supposed to sit around here twiddling my thumbs, all fucking confused and horny, waiting for you to do whatever cryptic bullshit you’re doing?”

He growls and hops off his horse when we hit a long metal gate that leads into a big open field, unlocks it and swings it wide.

“Are we back to not talking? After *everything*?” I scoff, agitation rising in my chest as I urge Spot into the open field, not a clue where we’re going. Based on the sun’s position, this must be the land that separates Gold Rush Ranch from my brother’s farm, Cascade Acres.

Griffin gets back onto his horse as it skitters sideways. His big palm slides up its neck and I’m momentarily jealous. I want those hands on *me*. But he needs a couple of weeks for *something*.

He murmurs gently to the horse, taking me back to the night we spent together. The words he murmured against my skin. The way he claimed me as his. *Mine*, he said. But now he’s pushing me away? Again? Ignoring me.

And it enrages me.

“Did last weekend not mean anything to you?” His head shoots up like I’ve just slapped him. “Just tell me! I can’t stand not knowing. I mean, I’m supposed to be the immature one here, right? Can you just fucking tell me something? Anything? You? Me? Us? This land? Are we fucking *trespassing*?” I wave a hand as I shout the last word, my agitation boiling over.

And it's that flailing motion that sets his horse off. The bay rears on his hind legs before scooting to the side, and I distract Griffin just enough that he's caught off guard. His body topples to the ground with a heavy thud. I swear it rattles my bones just watching it happen. I hear my scream, but it doesn't sound like mine. It sounds distant, drowned out by the pounding hooves of his horse taking off and blood rushing through my ears.

He's flat on his back when I jump off Spot and race to his side. I know barely anything about his head injury, but I suspect that a good thump to the head is not what he needs. I think of how adamant he was about wearing a helmet and am immensely grateful he's been a stickler for safety.

"Griff. Griff." I fall to my knees beside him, hands clutching at his shirt, feeling his firm, warm skin beneath my hands. "Griffin!" I sound shrieky and frantic as I check him over, straight into his dark eyes.

He bursts out laughing.

"Are you okay?" I pant out, trailing my hands over his beautiful body as though I could heal whatever hurts just by running my fingers over it.

And the asshole just laughs harder.

"Griffin! Are. You. Okay?" I swing a leg over him, straddling his waist. Because clearly the idiot is fine. Unless he doesn't stop laughing. Then I'm going to be the one to hurt him. Why does someone so fucking annoying have to be the only person I've ever been so consumed with?

"No." He laughs, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I'm in love with a fucking crazy person."

I still. His body shakes beneath me as I struggle to wrap my mind around the words that just spilled from his lips.

"What?" The blood drains from my face.

He sighs and places his hands over mine, which are now braced against his pecs. He gives me a little tug, clamping me onto him and forcing me to meet his eye. "I'm not telling you anything because I'm embarrassed about what I've done in the past. And I don't know what to say. You deserve so much fucking better than me. I'm still trying to wrap my brain around it all."

He shakes his head, huffing out a disbelieving breath. "I've spent years scaring people away by being a growly asshole. And then you waltzed in, and even when I'm on my worst behavior, when other people back away slowly, you just sit there smiling. Looking at me like I hung the fucking moon. I want to *deserve* that look. And right now, I don't. Right now, you wouldn't look at me like that. I want to lay it all out for you. I want to make a plan to show

you I'm serious. Because *that's* what you deserve. So just let me work this out in the only way I know how, okay?" He rolls his lips together, no doubt taking in the shell-shocked expression on my face.

"And also, I own this land. I held onto it when I sold the main farm to your brother. So, we aren't trespassing."

The scent of sweet grass swirls around me. I gaze out over the beautiful rolling hills, the greens, the golds. There is so much about this man I don't know. He's so secretive, so restrained in so many ways. So accustomed to doing everything on his own. But my heart doesn't seem to care. It practically beats out of my chest for him.

I should be more scared about what he's just told me. Whatever shit he's hiding sounds problematic. But I'm a little hung up on another part of what he just told me, and deep down, I know there's very little he could do to scare me off. "Can you back up to the part before that?"

His full lips quirk up. He looks so fucking good when he smiles. Younger and more carefree. It's worth waiting for, worth all the grumpy glares in between when I get a peek at this version of him. This version that only *I* get. It feels so good to have something all my own.

I want Griffin to be all mine. *Mine*. All the scowls, and growls, and smiles. All the hickeys. A streak of possessiveness flashes through me as I let my mind wander to other women who have gotten those things from him in the past. I want to claw their eyes out. Few people have truly loved me in my life, and I'm so desperate to be told that. To *feel* that. If I get it, I'll never let it go.

"The part about you being a crazy person?"

*Dick.*

"Yeah. That part."

His fingers squeeze mine, and his length thickens beneath me as his gaze rakes over my body, the way I'm straddling him, before landing back on my face. He looks at me with such heart-wrenching softness that I almost turn to a puddle right on top of him.

"I must be a crazy person, too . . . because I am head-over-heels for you, Wildflower. Please be patient with me."

In that moment, I realize I'd wait around forever for another look like that, followed by another confession like that. My heart swells in my chest, and the bridge of my nose tingles as the thumping of his heart dances beneath our joined hands. It's like, as unbelievable as it may seem, I can feel how

much he loves me.

Lord help me, I am so far gone for this man. I swore I wouldn't give anyone the power to take me down. But Griffin Sinclair has been making a liar out of me since the first day I laid eyes on him.



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## GRIFFIN



I WAKE in my house alone. Hidden away in the mountains. I only have a few weeks left to work at Gold Rush Ranch, and I know we just spent a weekend up here prepping for winter, but after that trail ride with Nadia, I needed some space. To think. To figure out what the fuck I'm doing. Because it seems like everything I've been running from is about to hit me full force.

My lawyer has warned me it will.

Anxiety coils in my chest. Digging my grave and lying in it never really bothered me, but with Nadia around, I'm suddenly overwhelmed. I should have dealt with this years ago.

The urge to drive to the local diner and order a drink surges inside of me. *That's* how I've washed my issues away for years. Well, before I started hiding from them.

But I'm turning over a new leaf. I'm thirty-five years old. It's about goddamn time I pulled myself up out of this pity party.

I'm lonely in my bed for the first time in years. It seems impossible after nearly a week, but I swear I'm still getting whiffs of Nadia's scent on my sheets. I fisted my cock last night thinking of her soft skin, her tempting moans, the way our souls wrap around each other at the same time as our bodies. And then I spent my night dreaming about her, all the things I want to give her, and about the type of man I want to be for her.

I know connections like ours don't come along very often in life. And that fucking terrifies me.

So, I'm starting with coffee rather than liquor. I throw my duvet back and push my messy hair out of my face. *I really need a haircut one of these days.*

I pad across the rancher to the kitchen, where I make my shitty plain coffee in my shitty plain coffee maker.

My lips tug up as I watch it pour out of the machine. I'm pretty sure coffee will forever remind me of my mother now. My sweet mom, who has stood by and watched me spiral but always lends her support. That scolding last weekend was the most incensed I've seen her over the state of my life in a very long time. Not since she picked me up at Neighbor's Pub one night has she put her nose in my business. I'll never forget that night. You'd think being as drunk as I was it wouldn't register in my memory, but somehow it does. It's fuzzy and warped, but a turning point all the same.

*"Griffin Sinclair, get your ass up. Now."* Her eyes flash with anger. My mom has never looked at me like this, and I recognize I've disappointed her so thoroughly that I've forced her to look at me with a level of contempt she never would have otherwise. Her head swivels, regarding everyone around us.

*She's embarrassed.*

*"Yup."* I wave a hand at the bartender whose name I currently can't remember. *"I'll take one for the road."*

*He shakes his head at me, a delicate blend of annoyance and pity taking over his face. A look that truthfully just pisses me off. "I'm a paying c-c-c-customer!"*

*The thing about being drunk is that my stutter is worse, but it's also easily blamed on being intoxicated, which is less embarrassing in my twisted mind, where all that matters is how you're perceived and how good you are at your job and how much money you make. Playboy quarterback. Super Bowl Champion. Highest paying contract in the league.*

*That's what I was once upon a time. Now I'm a stuttering fucking mess.*

*The man polishes a glass and stares at me impassively. "A paying customer who has been cut off. Go home, Griffin."*

*Home. A big empty house on a big empty farm. Turns out all that money and fame and notoriety doesn't buy you happiness. It buys you people who you think are friends until they realize your star is no longer rising. Then they jump ship.*

*And your mom comes to pick your drunk ass up from a shitty small-town bar. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.*

*"Griff," my mom says, slinging her arm around my ribs, as though a woman her size could truly support me. "Let's go. Your dad is waiting in the*



car.”

*Great. Perfect. As if my humiliation wasn't complete for the evening already. I groan and let my eyes flutter shut heavily. The room spins around me, and I waver in my seat.*

*Fucking pathetic.*

*I force my eyes open and hold my unsteady hands up in surrender as I push to stand. “Okay, okay. It's past my bedt-t-t-ime anyway.”*

*The bartender nods at me, his shoulders dropping, like the prospect of me leaving is a relief to him.*

*“I'm really sorry,” I blurt out, sounding a little teary.*

*Fucking pathetic.*

*I'm not an angry drunk. I'm just a sad one. I save the anger for when I'm sober, for when I really have to face the turns my life has taken.*

*I try not to lean too hard on my mom as she leads me out of the bar. I stare down at her petite face as she does. The pink stain on her cheeks—she's really mortified. I've humiliated my mother in her hometown, the woman I love more than pretty much anyone else in the world.*

*Shame hits me again. How could I do this to her? How could I rise so high only to fall so far? One hit to the head and my life is in shambles. It's all so unfair.*

*She pushes me into the back seat of the waiting car, door already open and ready for me. My dad doesn't even turn to look at me. Instead, he stares at me through the rear-view mirror. I wish he were angry. But even in my current state, I can tell he's disappointed.*

*Which is way fucking worse.*

*My mom gets in, and they drive. Neither of them spares me a glance or talks to me. They just let me stew in the back seat. I'm hammered enough that I feel like I'm watching it play out from above us all somehow, like I'm watching my own life happen to me. I look like a chastised little kid in the back seat of his parents' SUV.*

*They don't acknowledge me until we pull up to their house in town. Then they both turn back to me. And I'm not too drunk to recognize the gavel is about to come down. I may be a football star. I may have a pile of money sitting in my bank, but I'm not above recognizing when the jig is up.*

*“This shit ends now, son.” My dad's voice is cool and level, but my mom's lip wobbles, and her eyes glitter with unshed tears.*

*“You've been dealt an unfair hand. But drowning your sorrows like this*

*ends now. You have the resources to access all the help in the world and starting tomorrow, that's what you're going to do. Rehab. Therapy. A fucking remote cabin in the mountains. I don't care. But drinking yourself to oblivion? The bartender calling your parents to pick you up as a thirty-year-old man? That ends now."*

*The car spins around me. I'm strong. I'm a fucking athlete. The idea of asking for that kind of help is just counterintuitive.*

*A cabin in the woods though. The image of it spins in my head, and my stomach lurches. Maybe I could do that. I think.*

*And then I hurl all over the back seat.*

A knock on the door pulls me out of the memory. I shake my head, still cringing over that night. My parents left the car a mess and told me to clean it in the morning when I got up sober.

I bought them a new car instead.

And if that isn't a metaphor for how I've dealt with my life, then I don't know what is. No responsibility. And now, taking it back feels downright daunting.

The knocking sounds again, but this time it registers. No one knocks on my door up here. No one visits me up here. What the fuck is going on?

I eye the hunting rifle and length of rope I leave mounted by the front door, just in case, but decide against grabbing it. That's for cougars and wolves, or if a horse gets loose, neither of which knocks at the door. As I inch my way across the room, I peek out a window and recognize the pearl white car in the driveway.

*Nadia.*

I pull the door open and there she is. Looking a little ticked off. I can't help smiling down at her. I love the little ragey streak in her. Firecracker that she is.

"Hi, Wildflower."

"What are you smiling at?"

"You."

"Well, knock it off. I went to see you and couldn't find you. I called your phone, and you didn't answer." Her hands find her hips, like that might make her look tougher.

"I came back up here for the weekend." I stretch one arm up the door frame and clamp my fingers there to keep from touching her.

"Didn't think to mention that to me?"

“Well, I didn’t think—”

“Exactly.” She points at me, cutting me off. “You didn’t think. You didn’t think that I might be worried about you? You didn’t think that telling me you love me would change anything? Sometimes you make it really fucking hard to love you back.”

I stare at her. “I know I do.”

“You’re a real dick sometimes,” she huffs out, looking away. Wildflowers blow in the breeze over her right shoulder.

“You’re not wrong.”

“You can’t just keep hiding up here when the going gets tough. There are people who care about you. Including me. I’m people.”

*Gut punch.* My voice drops along with my eyes. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“It scares me when you won’t tell me things.” *Double gut punch.* “I’ve spent the last several years of my life promising myself I would choose a simple life. That I didn’t need fireworks and longing and that consuming sort of love so long as I had a safe, honest partner.”

I just grunt. That sounds fucking terrible. It also sounds distinctly like not me.

“And then you waltzed in and fucked everything up.”

I bark out a laugh and scrub my hands over my face. “Yeah. I’m especially talented at that, it would seem. Throwing a football and fucking everything up.”

“Also eating pussy.” She cracks a smile, always tossing something in to lighten the mood. *Where have you been all my life, Wildflower?*

“I’ll add that to my resume.”

We stand on the front step, smiling at each other. But there’s a tightness. Her smile doesn’t touch her eyes, and I’m certain mine doesn’t either.

“Want to come in? I’ll make you a shitty coffee and tell you everything.”

*Here goes nothing* crosses my mind as she nods.

But as I watch her pad into my house, her acid wash jeans creasing beneath her perfect ass and waves of blonde hair trailing down her back, I realize it’s more like *there goes everything*.

Because deep down, I know she’s not going to stick around now.



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## NADIA



I WALK inside Griffin's cozy home, trying to force myself to look calmer than I feel. Because I feel distinctly *not* calm. But I'm putting my big girl panties on and playing it cool.

If he can bring himself to sit down and tell me whatever has been eating away at him, then the least I can do is handle it maturely.

*Unless he murdered somebody. Maybe there's a body on his land. Maybe he's secretly in the mafia? Maybe we're somehow related?*

My mind runs rampant as I head toward the big kitchen table and plop into a chair. I take a really, really deep breath and stare down at my hands flattened on the tabletop. I've seen some shit, some terrible shit, and this can't be as bad as that.

I gaze up at Griffin, who follows slowly behind me. There's just no way. I know in my heart that Griffin is a *good* man. He's not my father. He is gentle and considerate, and whatever he has to tell me will be completely surmountable.

I need it to be.

I check him out while he pours us each a cup of coffee. The way his shoulders bunch beneath his t-shirt in the most mouth-watering way, the hem of that shirt resting along the curve of his ass, his hair all mussed like he spent the entire night running his hands through it.

"Here." He slides the coffee across the table and pulls up a chair opposite me before turning it around and sitting on it backward, the back rest pressing into his broad chest like some sort of shield.

His big brown eyes rest on my face, and he drinks me in. There's a

finality in his eyes that I absolutely *hate*.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I snap. “Out with it. You’re going to give me gray hair with all this waiting.”

His lips quirk up. “You’d still be hot with gray hair.”

He’s stalling.

“Griff.” I give him a pleading look. I know he’s trying to lighten the mood or whatever, but it’s not working for me.

He stares down at his coffee cup as silence stretches between us. He trails the pad of a finger over the handle of his mug, delicately, thoughtfully, and the veins on the top part of his hand bulge and ripple, almost hypnotically. His touches are always hypnotic. With purpose—with meaning. Never sloppy or rushed.

I love his hands on me.

“I’ve never admitted this to anyone except my mom. Not even my dad. I c-c—” He groans, running a hand through his hair and tugging at the tips. My heart lurches as he stumbles over the word. *He’s nervous*. “I c-c-couldn’t stand the thought of how he might look at me if he knew. Him and my mom, their relationship? It’s what I’ve always wanted. What I know they’ve wanted for me.”

I nod and wrap my hands around the mug before me. Not wanting to interrupt him but hoping the heat from the coffee might seep into me and chase away the chill that’s creeping through me.

“The day of my accident, I was drunk.”

*Drunk*. I hate that word. I hate it anywhere near Griffin. Hate to think of him that way.

“I was partying a lot. T-t-too much money. God c-complex. Surrounded by yes-men. Bad mix.” His throat bobs, and his cheeks go pink. He still won’t meet my eye.

“Hey. Hey.” I reach across the table and capture his hand, hating watching him struggle. “You got this.”

He nods abruptly but doesn’t meet my eyes. He knows what he’ll find there. The muscles in his hands relax at my touch though, and I watch his shoulders drop just a little when they do.

“I was still drunk from the night before, I’m sure. We were on the road for a game in Vegas, and the temptation was just . . . a lot. My decision-making was consistently getting stupider. I often wonder if I’d been sober, would I have made the play I did? Would I have seen the play coming?”

Would I have forgotten to strap my helmet? Everyone saw this wholesome superstar, the media's version of shiny, perfect quarterback Griffin Sinclair. But that's not how things looked from where I sat."

God. I had no idea. He said he partied too hard. He referred to himself as an alcoholic. But I did not know he tormented himself like this, no idea he's hidden his struggle and buried himself in the shame quite this thoroughly.

Suddenly, a lot of things about his behavior make a lot more sense. I squeeze his big, warm hand in mine, lending him whatever strength he needs.

"That night." He growls and glares up at the ceiling. I see his Adam's apple bob in his throat, and I just wish he would look at me. "That night I got married."

All the air leaves my lungs in a heavy whoosh. "You're married?"

He snorts. "On paper. She was some jersey chaser who came to Vegas to cheer the team on. I'd never met her before then, and I haven't seen her since."

My heart is pounding so loud I almost can't hear his words. *Married. Married. Married.* That one word is like a cruel fucking echo in my mind. Not that I'd been thinking about getting married to Griffin, not yet. Maybe I absently mused about spending my life with him.

"You're married?"

He looks at me now, eyes drowning in pain as he wraps his other hand around mine. He looks fucking devastated. "Listen to me. I didn't even know it had happened until I got a letter from her lawyer over a month later with a copy of the license, pictures of us with a fucking Elvis officiant, and a demand for a monthly stipend. According to her, there was a tape, a threat to release it. I mean, literally it was out of a bad movie. Less funny when it's your own life."

My tongue darts out over my lips as I try to piece everything together that he's telling me, that little spark of rage I recognize so keenly growing in my chest. "Like a sex tape? She came for your money? She blackmailed you?"

"Nadia, I lost so much in that one trip. My career, my speech, my fame. Everything I used to define my value in life was swept away in a matter of seconds, and anger and sadness consumed me. And just this overwhelming sense of shame and guilt. Because there was no one to blame but me and the universe and just pure bad luck. And I wanted someone else to blame so badly. But all I could come back to was *me*. And I was stuck with my own company, with this deep sense of self-loathing. And that manilla envelope

from a woman whose name I didn't even recognize was a nail in the coffin. It's what tipped me over the edge, because not only was my career gone—everything I'd ever worked for—but I'd spat in the face of my parents' values and everything they'd instilled in me. The last thing I cared about was money or that contract. I didn't want any of it coming out. My biggest goal at that point was to not entirely humiliate my parents. Or myself. That's all I cared about."

His other hand lands on top of mine so that we're practically clinging to each other over the top of the table. "Until you. I want a fresh start with you. I don't want to drag this shit around with me. I've been sending her divorce papers for years with no response, and it never bothered me. The money. The legal implications. I just didn't care. I had no reason to. It was easier to hide. But now . . . well, now, it really matters to me."

"You can't shoulder this all, Griffin. It's not fair." My eyes scour his face, his strong features, the fine lines from years of pain and suffering that he just doesn't deserve. Self-inflicted pain and suffering. "You don't deserve this kind of misery."

"You should hate me."

I tilt my head and stare at him. Hard. Trying to pierce through the haze of shame in his eyes. "No."

"You should." He takes a harsher tone with me, no doubt trying to push me away. I know because I recognize that spark in his eyes. The anger. *He looks as angry as I felt on the inside. Except I'm not angry anymore.*

I dig my nails into his skin, hard enough that he shifts in his chair. "I could never hate you, Griffin Sinclair. I tried, and I failed. You hate yourself enough already. I hate that this happened to you. I hate you didn't tell me sooner. I hate that you feel you can't tell anyone. But I do not hate *you*."

"I'm sorry." His thick lashes flutter down, pushing away the moisture building there. My entire body aches with the need to wrap him in my arms and show him this changes nothing for me, but something holds me back.

It doesn't change how I feel about him. That much is true. My heart pounds to the same beat as his. That's why it hurts like it does right now. But there's an inkling of my survival instinct creeping in, words from my therapist, words from my journal, thoughts of desperately not wanting to become my mother.

Attached to an unhappy man, who, in turn, makes everyone around him unhappy. Griffin is *not* my father, but sometimes I worry that I'm my mother.



“I’m so fucking sorry. I tried so hard to stay away from you, to keep you away from me. And I failed at that too.”

I smile sadly, pulsing my fingers on his. “I’m persistent, Griffin. You never stood a chance.”

He smiles back, but it’s forced. “She’s apparently finally going to sign the papers, my lawyer told me last night. Then the divorce would just need to process.”

“Did you pay her off?”

“No. I decided I didn’t care if she wanted to run her mouth about it anymore.”

I nod in approval. “Good. I’m thrilled for you.”

He laughs, but it’s angry. “You have no business being this mature about my mess, Nadia.”

“In my head, I’m not being very mature. In my head, I really hate that bitch. It’s more like, *Good riddance, you money grubbing whore. Come around, and I’ll kick you in the box.*”

He stares back at me, shaking his head, lips pulling up a fraction. “You’re vicious, Wildflower.”

“Is there really a video? Did you sleep with her?” I blurt it out before I can even stop myself. I guess my maturity knows some bounds after all. Obviously, he slept with the woman.

Griffin grimaces, looking physically uncomfortable. “I don’t know. I’ve never spoken directly to her, and I don’t remember that night at all.”

A pained sound escapes me as I lean back, untangling my hands from his. The air is cold against my skin, and what I really want to do is crawl across the table and curl up in his arms. My mind is telling me to sit back and take some space though.

“What will you do if she releases it?”

His eyes slam shut, and he sucks in a raspy breath. “Pray you never see it.”

Heaviness lodges in my throat, and my stomach drops. I feel like I might be sick, so I promptly change the subject, not wanting to think about seeing him with someone else, or having the world see him so exposed.

“Did you ever go to rehab?”

His hands lay limp on the table before him, and he looks completely flayed open. I fucking hate it. I hate seeing him hurt. Because I recognize it so perfectly. The pain, the anger, the sadness—it was me a few years ago.

Before I worked on myself.

“No.”

“Therapy?”

“No.” He winces, like he knows those aren’t suitable answers.

I pick up my coffee cup and sip it, but I don’t taste it. I turn this all over in my head. His story. His sadness. His growth.

Leave it to me to want someone normal and happy, but to end up head-over-heels for one of the most complicated men in the world.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He groans. “Old habits die hard. And I’ve buried this secret for a very long time. I’m so embarrassed. I wanted to be a normal, happy person for you, and I thought I could just . . .” He drops his head into his hands before speaking straight into his palms. “I don’t know. Get this all dealt with and then tell you and I’d be the fresh slate you deserve. It sounds really dumb now that I say it out loud.”

I chuckle. It does sound dumb. Well-meaning, but dumb. Dumb and impossible. “We’re not normal, happy people, Griffin. Remember?”

He leans back with a heavy, ragged sigh, letting his arms go limp at his sides in defeat. “Yeah. I know.”

*Does he?*

“I need to go for a walk.” A panicked expression crosses his face as I push the chair away to stand. “I’m not leaving. I’m not quitting. I just need some processing time.”

Griffin nods, schooling his face back into that unaffected look as his lips thin and press together. He’s totally freaking out. And as I walk out that front door, emotions warring inside of me, I realize we’re both faking.

Because I’m freaking out too. School. Family. Life goals. I see them all slipping away right before my eyes.

I’m in love with Griffin Sinclair, but I refuse to give up everything I’ve wanted in life just to hear him say he loves me back.



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## GRIFFIN



I CAN'T MOVE. Unable to get up from where she left me here at the table, I spin the mug between my hands. I can't even enjoy my coffee.

Nothing is as good without her around. The air isn't as soft. My heart doesn't race, and I don't look forward to catching sight of her. Just a flash of her blonde hair or the sound of her laugh can turn my entire day around.

Having Nadia in my orbit for the past months has made me realize I was living before, but I wasn't *alive*. I was existing. Her presence resuscitated me, and now I've overwhelmed her with the weight of my baggage.

I take a sip of my coffee as I stare at her still-full cup. It's lukewarm and really tastes bad. This cup of coffee and I have more in common than I care to admit.

Her car door slams, and the sound makes me flinch. *She's leaving. And I can't fucking blame her.* She's a smart woman, and smart women run for the hills when they stumble across a man like me.

But the sound of her car engine revving never comes. I'm met with silence and the grinding sound of my cup spinning on the table. It grates on me. I'm annoying myself.

I'm also torturing myself by not getting up to see what she's doing. Finally, I give in, abandoning my chair, placing the cups in the sink, and striding through the living room to the front window. Her car is still parked outside. A deep sigh of relief rushes out of me as I move to the side window.

The one facing the field of flowers.

She's sitting in the very middle of it, head down, furiously scribbling in her journal. I wish again that I could take a photo of her sitting out there, so

immersed in doing what she knows she needs for herself.

The wildflower I can't get rid of no matter what I try.

She glances up, and even though she's far away, I swear we lock eyes. She bites her lip, and I stumble back, suddenly feeling like I'm intruding on a moment she needs to herself. So, I sit on the couch and wait.

I brace my elbows on my knees, drop my head into my hands, and wait. I run through every scenario in my head, including losing her, which makes me feel physically ill. I didn't make it through as much as I have to find the one and then lose her.

I just didn't. That's a fate I refuse to accept.

I'm not sure how long I sit here spiraling before I finally hear footsteps on the front porch. My heart beats harder and I go still when the front door opens. She leans against the jamb and stares at me. I can't tell what's going on in her head right now. Her face is carefully blank.

"I think I'm going to head back home. I need to get ready for school."

My stomach flips. She's running from me, and I can't blame her one bit.

"Okay." I nod, and let my hands fall limp between my legs. Defeated.

Her eyes flare and she bristles, arms folding beneath her breasts, journal in hand. "Fuck you."

I sit up taller, pressing my hands into the couch on either side of me. "Pardon?"

"I said *fuck you*." She really enunciates it this time.

My molars grind against each other. "I'm sorry. I really am. I tried to spare us both from this."

She rolls her eyes, looking her age. Looking like a total brat. "Boys are dumb, you know? I don't give a flying fuck about your meaningless marriage. Do I irrationally hate a woman I've never met? Yes. Could I get sick just thinking about you with someone else? A big fat yes. Am I pissed off you didn't tell me? Yeah, *Griffy*, I am. But mostly I'm pissed off you're too big of a pussy to fight for me."

I glower at her, hating how right she is.

"Too scared of my brother? Too scared of hurting me? Too scared to work on yourself so that you can be worthy of something good? Fuck you for being such a coward. You said I was *yours*, and now you're going to sit there and let me walk out?" She scoffs. "Yeah. Pardon my French but . . . Fuck. You."

I go deathly still, letting the truth of what she just said hammer me. The

competitor in me is wide fucking awake now. The buried athlete? The one that works his ass off to get what he wants? To defy the odds? To win the games? She just tapped that guy on the shoulder.

No.

Kicked him in the balls.

Something I should have done a long time ago. A flare of frustration burns in my chest as I stand and close the distance between us with a few long strides. One hand shoots out to wrap around the back of her neck while the other rests above her on the door frame, caging her in. “You *are* mine.”

Nadia’s eyes widen with how quickly I moved, but her lips tip up. Like she’s amused by pissing me off.

She walks her fingers up my heaving chest. Beauty and the Beast facing off in a remote mountain cabin. “There you are. Been wondering when you were going to man up enough to take what you want.”

My breathing is slightly labored as I lean down to whisper in her ear. “Are you trying to piss me off?” I watch the gooseflesh race down her arms.

“No.” Her voice comes out breathy, and I see her nipples pebbling beneath her shirt. “I’m trying to wake you the fuck up.”

“Mission accomplished, Wildflower.”

Her chin juts out in challenge, not the least bit intimidated by me. She never has been. I wouldn’t want her to be. “Good.”

“Get your ass back to that table so we can talk.” I gesture over my shoulder toward the kitchen.

“Make me.” Her eyes flash, irises shifting earth tones, like living flames. “I’m not much in the mood for talking, *Griffy*. I’d rather you bend me over tha—”

With one arm, I reach down and heft her over my shoulder, quirking a smile at her delighted squeal. Should have known she wanted to work out the tension this way. I swat her ass firmly with my free hand before reaching for the rope hanging beside the door.

“What did I tell you about the next time you called me *Griffy*, Wildflower?”

She squirms as I storm across the house before depositing her on the chunky wooden farm table and pushing myself to stand between her spread thighs. I toss the rope down beside her, not missing the way her tongue darts out across her lips as her eyes flit to it.

“I’m having a tough time remembering.” She taps a finger over her lips.

“It was so long ago.” *Bullshit*. She’s been trying to goad me since the second she stepped foot on my front porch.

“We should really talk. And I’ll tie you to a chair if you try to run off again.” My gaze bounces back and forth between her eyes, looking for a sign that she’s uncertain or confused. But all I find is pure heat and longing.

“Later.” She tosses the floral print journal onto the floor before reaching down to pull her shirt over her head, letting it fall to my feet. “Right now, I want you inside me. I want to feel like I’m yours and you’re mine. Not anyone else’s. I need that.”

There’s hurt written in her words. And all I want to do is erase it. If this is how she wants me to do it, I’m hardly going to deny her. Especially not with the sight of her soft breasts straining against the pale pink cups of her lace bra. There’s no padding and the translucent effect has my cock straining against my jeans instantly. Her dusty pink nipples tease me.

I reach out and twist one between my thumb and forefinger, watching her full lips pop open with a surprised gasp.

“You jealous, Wildflower?”

Her jaw pops as she stares up at me, feral and turned on. The prettiest blush stains her bronzed skin. “Yes,” she grinds out, like it physically pains her to admit it.

“Don’t be. You’re all I want.” My eyes race over her skin, watching her heartbeat jump in her neck and the blush creep down her chest. “You’re all I think about.” I lean over her, hands against the tabletop, and lick that pulse point. “You’re all I dream about.” She makes a mewling noise, and I clamp my teeth into her neck hard enough to leave a mark. *My girl likes that*. “You’re all *mine*. You’re it for me.” I pull back to take her in, to make sure she hears me clearly. “Now lose the fucking pants. I want you naked and begging for it.”

She stands instantly, chest pressing against mine as she shucks off her jeans. I groan when I catch sight of the matching lace panties.

This girl is going to be the fucking death of me.

She moves to turn away from me and bend herself over the table, but as much as I love fucking her from behind, I want to see her face today. “Nuh-uh.” My hands wrap around her waist as I spin her back toward me and lift her onto the edge. One palm to the center of her chest, I press her down flat across the width of the table, reveling in the quiet gasp the cool surface against her back elicits from her pretty mouth. She hits me with a hungry

look, a flash of nerves in her eyes. I know she's not quick to open up. Shit, neither am I. But if we're going to make a go of this, then we're both going to have to try. "Like this, so I can see your face when I fill you up."

I press a thumb against her clit through the thin lace and watch her body buck beneath me.

"Fuck," she breathes out, fingers trying to dig into the wood beneath her.

"Are you wet for me, Nadia?" I ask as I stare down at the beautiful body laid out across my table. *Right where she belongs.*

"Yes," she whispers as she looks up at me through heavy-lidded eyes.

I already knew the answer. I can feel her wetness through the triangle of lace that's doing a very poor job of covering her up.

"I'm going to tie your wrists. Would you like that?"

Her top teeth sink into her lower lip. "Yes."

With one more press to her clit, I move away to the opposite side of the table, grabbing the rope as I go. She moves her wrists up above her head, and I quickly wind the rope around them before tying it to the ladder-back chair at the opposite side of the table. I give the rope a tug and smirk when it holds fast. You don't grow up on a ranch and not learn how to tie a good knot.

I stride slowly back to the other side of the table, watching her chest rise and fall with the speed of her panting. Her nipples poke through the lace as she squeezes her thighs together, clearly trying to ease the ache between them. I move to stand close, brushing against her knees where they dangle over the edge.

"Do you trust me?" My voice drops an octave as I ask the question. This is important to me. I want her to trust me.

"Yes," she breathes with perfect sincerity.

I swallow the lump in my throat before reaching up and hooking my fingers into the waist of her panties, sliding them down over her shapely hips and firm thighs, leaning in to press a kiss to her knee as I drop them on the floor with the rest of her discarded clothes.

"I can't even decide what I want to do to you first," I muse, trailing a finger up her leg, dipping into the hollow beneath her hip. Teasing her.

"Fuck me." Her voice is edged with desperation as she squirms against the rope, testing its fastness. "Please. Just put me out of my misery and fuck me. I want you so bad. I love it and hate it all at once."

I can't help but smirk, feeling more like my old self by the minute. I know *exactly* what she means. Because I feel it too.



“No chance, Wildflower.” I kiss my way back up her body. Her pulse pounds beneath my lips when I get to her throat, and I revel in how vulnerable she is for me right now. “I’m not going to fuck you. I’m going to savor you. I’m going to make you fall apart for me.”

“You already have,” she whispers. There’s a hint of sadness in her voice. Like she’s figured out something I haven’t.

“Not even close,” I rasp, reaching down to cup her sex and pressing the heel of my hand against her throbbing clit. She squirms and moans, the light sounds of her panting seeping in around the sound of blood rushing in my ears.

When we’re together, it’s like nothing else exists. The world dissolves around us. Our breaths sync—our hearts pump in perfect unison.

Dragging my lips back down her torso, I cup her breasts, tugging gently at her nipples. Lick the small dip between her hips and stomach. Watch her buck beneath me and hear the rattle of the chair as she tugs helplessly at the rope.

I don’t pay her pussy any attention, even though I can tell she’s shimmying toward me, wishing I would. “Agony, wanting something you can’t have, isn’t it?” I ask as I ghost my hands over the tops of her thighs.

“Touch me.”

“No.” I stand up tall with a smirk, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Please touch me, or . . .” She’s begging now.

“Or what?”

“Or I’m going to freak out.” Her voice holds a desperate edge to it now. “This is torture.” Her fingers clench and release over her head.

“You are the very best kind of torture, Nadia. My special brand of hell. But I want you so badly I don’t even mind the flames.”

Her tongue darts out as she regards me. Chest heaving. Clearly struck speechless by my confession.

I take a step back, gaze raking over her. “Now spread your legs for me.”

A shiver races through her, and she obeys, slender thighs parting on a quiet whimper.

My dick hurts, it’s so hard. “Do you have any idea how pretty you look like this? I’ve never been harder than I am right now with you trussed up and spread out on my dining room table like a fucking five-course meal.”

She giggles, sounding a little unhinged. “Only five?”

I step closer, and her body trembles. Running a hand over her inner thigh,

I press one finger into her wet heat, watching it disappear inside of her. I groan. She is too fucking much.

When I glide it out, her head flops from side to side. Nadia isn't a patient woman. I know the anticipation is killing her as much as it's killing me, but that's what our relationship is—brilliant, cruel, torturous anticipation.

Her eyes flare with heat when I slide that finger into my mouth, sucking on it before pulling it out with a lewd popping sound, never dropping her gaze. "You're right, five courses won't be nearly enough."

"Griffin. Hurry up, and f—"

I stop her right there as I drop to my knees before her spread legs. "If you call this *fucking* one more time, I'm going to flip you over and redden your perfect ass." My fingers dig into her thighs as I prop them over my shoulders.

"I'm scared to call it more. The timing feels all wrong," she confesses, and my heart constricts.

"Then I'll wait for the right time." I hold her gaze for a beat, wishing I could force her to understand how all in I am on her. And then I drop my mouth between her legs and get to work on showing her instead.

Her thighs shake as they wrap around my head, squeezing harder the closer I push her to orgasm. Every lick, every kiss, drives her toward the edge. Sometimes I press hard, then I'll pull back and slow my licks, opting for a featherlight touch that makes her snarl at me in frustration.

I just smile and carry on, driving my girl wild.

There's something about this moment that feels like a beginning and an ending all at once. Like everything is on the table and neither of us is sure what it all means. But I think we both know this thing between us is monumental.

When I drive two fingers into her, she screams my name and thrashes on the table. "Griffin! I'm going to come. Please don't stop!"

*Fucking right, you are* is what I want to say, but she said don't stop. And I don't intend to. I push her harder until her entire body goes rigid around mine, legs clamping down and pussy pulsing in my mouth.

It's fucking heaven.

When she finally goes soft, I stand and shuck my clothes off, watching her eyelids flutter as she struggles to catch her breath. She hasn't even opened her eyes when I run the crown of my aching cock through her seam.

"Do you want my cock, Wildflower?" My voice rumbles through the quiet room as our eyes finally meet. She takes my breath away. Warm eyes.

Rosy cheeks. Sated look on her face.

This is how she looks in my dreams. How she should look every day.

“I want . . .” Her throat works as she falls silent. Which is very unlike her. I figured she’d beg for cock like the adorable little vixen she is, but she finishes by saying, “I want *you*. All of you.”

And fuck me, that is so much more than I banked on. So much more than I deserve.

I slide into her with one firm thrust as I lean down over her body and claim her mouth, swallowing her whimpers and feeling the press of her lace bra and swollen breasts against my bare chest as her tight sheath milks my length.

“It’s not enough. More,” she murmurs against my lips, and I know she’s right. I want her closer. I want even more from her. More than she can reasonably give.

Reaching up, I tug the ropes off and sigh in relief when her arms wrap around me, holding me close. Her legs clamp around my waist, and my hips rock into her violently. The table makes a dull screeching sound with every hard thrust that drags it across the floor.

“I want this so badly,” she whispers, tangling her hands in my hair. We kiss each other frantically. Cheeks, chins, ears, throats—we cover each other in kisses as I pound into her with reckless abandon. Her back arches to meet every thrust.

“Me, too, Wildflower. Me, too.”

I push away the little voice in the back of my head that’s popped up to remind me that when I want something badly, it doesn’t work out.

I wanted a long, celebrated career. I wanted a marriage like my parents have.

Wanting this with Nadia is the kiss of death.

But I make love to her all day long anyway.

And later, while she sleeps, I pick up her journal and cross that off her to-do list for her.



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## NADIA



THE CLOSER I get to Ruby Creek, the heavier the sense of dread in the pit of my stomach. Up in the mountains, everything feels right—just the two of us in a perfect little bubble having mind-blowing, toe-curling sex.

But down in the valley, reality sets in. I watch the bumper of Griffin's truck in front of me as I follow him back to the ranch. Back to complications.

While we were holed up in his house, it felt like nothing could touch us. We spent the entire day and night tangled up together, only stopping to eat or bathe, both of which turned into more sex. We barely talked, we literally just disappeared into each other's bodies. Hid there, where it was safe and felt good. Like we both knew if we came up for air, certain realities would come crashing back in.

School. Baggage. Divorce. Opinions. Sex tapes. Judgment.

It doesn't bother me he's fourteen years older than me, but I'm not stupid enough to think other people might not have opinions about our age gap. Not that they matter. I've never much cared what other people think of me, but the thought of anyone making Griffin out to be something he's not makes me see red.

And beneath all the anger is sadness. I need to prove to myself I can do all the things I've ever wanted to accomplish. And what's more is that Griffin does, too.

We turn onto the winding tree-lined driveway leading to the A-frame guesthouse at Gold Rush Ranch, but as I come around the last bend, I'm not met with an empty parking lot.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

My brother is here, leaned up against the front door looking really pissed off. There's a red Audi parked beside his gray Jeep, and when Griffin pulls up and hops out of his truck, another person steps out of the crimson car.

Perfectly straight bottle blonde hair swishes around her waist as her toned, tanned limbs fold out of the vehicle. She turns a practiced smile on Griffin, and my heart stutters, slowly pattering out in my chest until it feels like it's going to stop altogether.

Stefan is watching her like a hawk until his gaze snags on me. His head tilts in question, but I only spare him a glance before I stare back at Griffin as he approaches the real-life Barbie doll in skinny jeans and stilettos. She strides toward him like she owns the fucking place.

I don't even need to get out of my car to know who she is. I don't even have to meet her to hate her. It doesn't matter that Griffin spent the last day worshipping my body and professing his love for me. It doesn't matter that he doesn't know her or want her.

All that washes away as I watch his *wife* lay a hand on his forearm. The one crossed over top of the other as he scowls down at her. The arms that held me tight all night long.

That forearm is *mine* and seeing her drag a French manicured nail over it like she has a right has me shoving my door open and storming up the driveway. I can't hear what she's saying, and I don't even care. She just needs to keep her fucking hands to herself, or I will seriously kick her in the box.

"Don't fucking touch me." Griffin's voice cuts like a hot knife through butter. Quick and absolute.

She rolls her eyes and cocks a hip. "Who's this?" She nods her head toward me, eyes sparkling with venom.

*The feeling is mutual.*

"That's my sister." Stefan shoves past her, eating up the ground to stand beside me.

"Adorable." She turns back to Griffin with a pout on her frosty pink lips. She's overdone, but you'd have to be an idiot to not notice how stupidly fucking hot she is. Which is honestly just worse. I take an inventory of my current appearance, feeling self-conscious in a way I never have before in my torn acid wash jeans, flip-flops, and concert tee.

I feel childish and messy standing next to this woman. And I despise myself for letting her make me feel this way without even trying. She doesn't

deserve it after what she's done to Griffin.

She reaches out to touch him again, but he steps away, regarding her like he'd destroy her on the spot if he weren't such a gentleman. "Let's talk inside."

"No."

"Without an audience?" His gaze follows hers to where Stefan and I are standing, and I'm intensely grateful that my big brother is here. He's like a shield against what's happening in front of me. He's always protected me in his own way, and right now is no different.

"You c—" Griffin reaches his hands up and squeezes the brim of his worn baseball cap down on either side. I know he was about to stumble over that word, which means he's stressed. And I hate that for him.

I hate *her* for him.

"Say what you need," he simplifies.

"Yeah. I'd love to hear why you were skulking around his house and looking through windows." Stefan's voice is all bite, his stance foreboding. He is protective with a capital P. Something that has only become more pronounced since he became a father.

She sighs and lifts the manilla envelope in her hand. "I told my lawyer I'd sign, but this version doesn't include any financial compensation. Your lawyer won't budge, so I figured I'd track you down and talk some sense into you."

A deep rumble sounds from Griffin's chest. He's a gentleman, but the threat is clear, and he doesn't like it.

"We're estranged. We never had a relationship. There's no basis for it. I only paid you so you'd go away."

The woman bristles and has enough sense to look a little embarrassed in front of us. "Well, if you want to keep your problem under wraps in the press, then you'll be adding to this." She slaps the envelope against his chest with a flourish. "It would be a shame for that video to see the light of day. Not that I'd mind showing that off. We look good together. Or we did before this beard happened." She waves a hand over him, and I instantly want to break it. I *love* his beard. "And we really had a spectacular time, didn't we?"

Then the bitch has the gall to wink at him.

"This has gone on for t-t-t-too long. It ends now." My heart twists, and I am so damn proud of him for not giving up on the exact words he wanted to use.

“T-t-t-too bad,” she mocks, with a practiced smile that makes my skin crawl.

And I see red. “Leave. Now. You’re trespassing.” I point at her car, stepping towards her, hand shaking with rage.

She just rolls her eyes, and I seriously consider getting my gun out of my car and doing target practice on her plastic nails. I’ve always promised myself that I’d never resort to violence after what I grew up with. But I am seriously considering it right now. It’s the glare my brother gives me that holds me back, like he knows I could probably kill a bitch.

“Not until I get what I came for.”

“Griffin, don’t you dare give her a single thing,” I blurt out, even though it’s none of my business. He’ll never get out from under the shame of his past if he keeps burying it. I don’t want that for him. I want a fresh start for him—for us. Video be damned.

Plus, she doesn’t deserve shit from him.

He looks over at me, his harsh gaze softening as I stare back at him. A look specially reserved for me. And when our eyes meet like this, I know it doesn’t matter if I’m standing here wearing scrubby clothes with wild, freshly fucked hair. What’s between us isn’t skin deep. It’s soul deep. We understand each other in a way that no one else can.

Based on the way he’s looking at me right now, he feels the same.

He steps away again, giving her the full force of his glare, letting the envelope flop down onto the packed gravel at their feet. His eyes swivel back to me as he sucks in a deep breath. “See you in court.”

We share a small smile as she storms back to her car, head held high, like she didn’t just try to blackmail a man into giving her money by exploiting the lowest point of his life.

“I hate her with a fiery, fiery passion,” I grit out, right as she revs her engine and blows past Stefan and me, just a little too close for comfort. I watch her brake lights glow as she rounds the bend and speeds away.

Hopefully for good. But I think I know better.

“Someone care to tell me what’s going on here?”

I swivel back to face the two men, eyes widening when my brother’s attention turns on me, an accusatory glint in his green eyes.

When neither of us jumps to explain, he turns his back on me, focusing his attention on his best friend. “Because I can’t think of a single good reason why my best friend would be spending his days off with my little sister.”



“Frankly, Stefan, that’s not your business.” He stiffens at my words.

“It is when everyone has been trying to get a hold of you to tell you that Billie had her babies.” He turns on me, and I finally recognize how distraught he is. “No one knew where you were! I’ve been going crazy trying to find you.”

*Fuck.* Now I feel like a dick. “I’m sorry.” I roll my lips together. “There’s no reception up at the mountain house, and my phone is dead. Is Billie okay?”

“Yes. Everyone is healthy and happy. But going back to the mountain house. Can we elaborate on why you were up there at all?”

I blink, not ready to give a name to what we were doing up there. Especially not in the wake of the whole scene here.

“Griff?” my brother asks, with a note of pleading in his voice.

Griffin shrugs. “I’m not going to speak for Nadia.”

Stefan runs a hand through his hair like we just announced the worst news of his life. “Seriously? She’s fourteen years younger than you.”

Griffin’s eyes flit to mine again. The look he gives me is like he’s about to throw caution to the wind, jump off a fucking cliff. And he doesn’t disappoint when he says, “Yeah. Well. I’m in love with her anyway.”



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## GRIFFIN



MY BEST, and possibly only friend, stares back at me with pure shock written all over his face. I always knew I was going to tell him. I just didn't imagine it happening like this.

"You're in love with my sister." He says the words like it's a new language to him, confusion etching every syllable.

I just offer him a stern nod.

"Stef," Nadia cuts in.

He turns his gaze on her. "Nadia, please don't interrupt. This is between Griff and—"

Rage flares in her eyes and her pointer finger shoots up at her brother. "Don't you dare finish that sentence, Stefan Dalca. Don't you fucking *dare*. This is between me and Griffin. You? You are a non-factor. You think you get to hightail it out of my life the first chance you get and then waltz back in and gatekeep my relationships? My body? Well, have I got news for you."

Stefan visibly pales, clearly still haunted by their past.

"I'm not sticking around for this pissing contest. I'm too angry with both of you right now." Her body shakes with the energy coursing through her, and I realize what a tenuous hold we had on our relationship. I suspect that seeing Tonya waltzing around like she's royalty broke whatever weak agreement we came to last night. I'm married, and that debacle clearly will not get better before it gets worse.

Nadia marches away, and neither of us makes a move to stop her. She turns around when she gets to her vehicle, gripping the top of her door until her knuckles go white. "You two Neanderthals are best friends. Don't be

stupid about this. I'll see you both at family dinner tonight."

With a disappointed shake of her head, she gets into her car, pulls a three-point turn, and burns out of the driveway. Leaving us both standing in a cloud of dust, staring at each other a little sheepishly.

Stefan breaks the ice. "I think my sister just gave us both a spanking at the same time."

"She's a force to be reckoned with," I agree. Because she is. She takes no shit, not from anyone.

The two of us stare at each other, awkward silence swelling between us. "Listen, I should have told you."

Stefan shakes his head and scrubs a hand over his face. "No. She's right. It's none of my business in the grand scheme of things. I'm just shocked. Surprised. Mira mentioned she could see there was a spark between the two of you, and I laughed it off. I couldn't see it, but maybe I just wasn't looking."

I suck in a deep breath. "We actually met before I knew she was your sister. Two years ago, at Neighbor's."

"Well, shit." He cups his hands behind his neck. "I had no idea."

"Yeah." It's all I can think to say because Nadia *is* right. We don't owe him an explanation or any details. Most of this is between us.

"Well . . . I like you a lot better than that Tommy guy."

"I fucking hate that kid," I growl back. Just the mention of his name makes my jealousy levels spike.

Stefan chuckles, still regarding me like I've grown a second head or something. Like he can't quite reconcile the whole thing. And really, who can blame him? It's out of left field for someone who didn't know.

"Listen. All I want for Nadia is the best. Love. Happiness. For every single one of her dreams to come true. We have a unique relationship, and I know I've made mistakes where she's concerned, but I don't want to make any now. If she loves you, and you love her? If you make her happy, and you can make all her dreams come true, well, I already love you like a brother, Griffin. It wouldn't be hard to adjust to having you around. I want nothing but the best for both of you."

"Fuck, Stefan." I think that's as close to my friend professing his love for me as I'm going to get.

"But . . . Griffin . . ." He hits me with a penetrating stare. There's no cruelty, or challenge in his expression, just pure honesty. "If you think any of

this shit”—he waves a hand behind himself at where Tonya stood and proclaimed she’s going to drag me through the mud—“is going to blow back on her, then that’s something you need to think about. I know you have your demons, and I know one of the most valuable things about our friendship is that we never pick on each other about those things. But that girl? She needs no more demons.”

What he says rings true. It’s painful to hear, but he’s not wrong. I struggle to find any words to respond. Words aren’t my strong suit at the best of times, and right here in this moment is not the best of times.

So, I just meet his thoughtful stare with a patient look of my own. A stony nod is all it takes for him to know I understand what he’s saying.

He claps me on the shoulder and strides away to his Jeep, peeling out of the driveway, leaving me standing alone.

Well, not alone. With my demons.



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## NADIA



I'M HIDING out in Cowboy's stall at Cascade Acres. He's all tucked in tight for the evening. The swelling in his leg is all but gone. I've brushed him to a perfect shine, given him a massage, done the stretches with him that Griffin showed me, oiled his hooves, kissed his soft nose, and held his head as he snuggled up against me in a bid for even more cookies than I already spoiled him with.

I turn in toward him, nuzzling against his shoulder and wrapping my arms around his neck. He's like the biggest, warmest, most comforting teddy bear. I told him everything that happened today as I worked on him. He sighed and let his long lashes fall shut. No judgment, no opinions, just a nuzzle against my pockets because he knows I am the ultimate bearer of treats.

Who knew this horse would become the friend and confidant I've never had? I mean, I've always liked the horses, but Cowboy is different. We're kindred. Both discarded, both underestimated, both with so much potential and more to do.

My plan is to give him the next few months off while I start school and have Billie do some work with him. I'll only be an hour down the road, but I know my days will be full with my courses and studying. I'll still take a lesson every weekend. But hopefully by the time my spring semester wraps up, those riding lessons will be on Cowboy.

Maybe we'll jump, maybe we'll spend our lives doing trail rides. I don't really know. I just know he and I are in it for the long haul. I'll follow his lead.

Peeking down at my watch, I realize that I'm officially late. I've cooled

off since earlier, but I'm still dreading facing everyone. After one more kiss pressed to my horse's dark mahogany neck, I leave the stall, locking it behind me and trudging up the sloped driveway, straight to the chaos that is Sunday dinner.

Except tonight, I'll be facing both men I spent the afternoon avoiding.

My mind flashes back to when Griffin told my brother he's in love with me. My heart flutters at the memory, but my stomach drops like I'm being ripped in opposite directions. I want to explore whatever this is with Griffin. I want to be able to tell him I love him back. But I know—I know—the timing isn't right.

I can still see the way my brother gaped at him right as my jaw fell open. It was one thing for him to whisper it against my skin, and another entirely for him to profess it to my brother in such plain terms.

Truthfully, it's huge. Epic. But I still have this niggling feeling that it isn't quite right. Like we deserve a cleaner start than this. Like we both still have a metric ton of shit to work out, and maybe neither of us should bring that into a new relationship. Like we were damned if we do and damned if we don't.

Seeing that beautiful, conniving woman threatening him was living, breathing proof of that.

But my days of running away from my problems are over. I can face this because I know I'm strong. I know I'm capable. Or at least that's what I keep telling myself.

I reach out to grab the handle, but the front door is jerked open before I can apply any pressure. Mira stands in the entryway, smirking at me. "I was just coming to look for you."

I give her a closed-mouth smile. "Here I am. You found me."

She snorts. "It's fucking awkward in there. Come join the fun."

I groan and tip my head back as she wraps an arm around my shoulders and tugs me into the house with her, enjoying this way too much.

"Come on." She squeezes me. "It won't be so bad. Everyone here *loves* you."

My chin dips to my chest, and I try not to laugh at the ridiculousness of the way she emphasized that word. "Good God, does Stef tell you everything?"

She chuckles, eyes twinkling with amusement. "Literally, everything. You know he's a stickler for honesty."



I roll my eyes and kick my shoes off before following her into the open kitchen and out onto the back deck where my brother is barbecuing. Violet and Cole's two girls are frolicking in the yard with Silas, peering into a mesh cage while squealing happily about the bugs they've captured in there. Cole and Violet are sitting beside each other, chairs pressed impossibly close. "Why don't you just crawl into his lap, Vi?" I joke as I step through the sliding doors.

Violet's cheeks flush but Cole hits me with a wolfish grin. "Great idea," he says as he picks up his petite wife and drags her onto his lap, completely ignoring her weak protests and surprised squeal.

They're fucking adorable.

My eyes snag on Griffin, sitting at the head of the table spinning a can of soda water between his hands, watching me. But his expression isn't a happy one.

I offer him a shy smile. He winks back from beneath the brim of his hat, and I realize that it's a tell for how he's feeling. On days he's feeling confident and like he could take on the world, he's got his hair slicked back, looking like a hot, young, bearded Keanu Reeves. But when he wants to hide from reality, that dirty old cap gets pulled out, the brim shadowing his eyes like it did the first night we collided.

"Hey, Stef," I call to his back. "Smells amazing."

"Hey." His reply is stiff.

*Super fucking awkward.*

"That's my Nana's tandoori chicken recipe!" Mira calls from the kitchen.

"Nice!" I call back, genuinely excited to try it out. Because everything her Nana makes is incredible. "How's Billie?" I ask as I flop down in a chair at the wrought-iron table. Mira slides me a soda water. Pineapple. My favorite. I can pretend I'm on a tropical vacation.

"She's good. Babies are good. Long labor that ended in a c-section. They're resting up at the hospital in Garnet Ridge for now. Hank and Trixie are there with them."

I smile as I sip the bubbly liquid. This little family out at Gold Rush Ranch is really something to behold. My heart squeezes at the thought of Billie showing up on Hank's front step, looking for a job as a runaway teenager. And now she's here, living her happily-ever-after with her hot husband on her beautiful farm, with Hank acting as the father she never had.

My eyes prickle at the beauty of it.

“Did you go see her?” I ask.

Violet pipes up. “Not yet. Giving them some space.”

Cole cuts in to add, “I called to congratulate them, and all they did was bicker about what names they were going to pick and whether Vaughn was going to trade in his ‘bitch baby’ sports car for a safer option.” He huffs out a laugh and rolls his eyes. “Like they haven’t had nine months to figure these things out.”

Everyone chuckles, even my brother’s shoulders shake.

Mira leans back with a sigh, staring up at the sky. “I think I’d be worried about those two if they *weren’t* at each other’s throats. It’s like foreplay for them.”

Cole groans and hides his face in Violet’s icy blonde hair. “Pass.”

Violet giggles and changes the subject. “How’s Cowboy, Nadia? I peeked at him when we arrived. He looks incredible.”

I grin, preening under the compliment about my horse. “Thanks. He’s good. I’m hoping to get some training on him this winter, so maybe he’ll be ready for an amateur like me next summer.”

She nods. “It’s a good plan. Giving him this time to unwind. Why not send him to Griffin? Some time up in the mountains and on the trails would be perfect for him.”

Stefan goes still and glances over his shoulder at the table. The first time he’s done so since I arrived. “Well, I don’t know. I thought maybe—”

“I think that’s a great idea, Violet.” Mira smirks before taking a sip of her wine, and now my brother turns all the way around to give her the full weight of his scowl. She ignores him. “Don’t you, Griff?”

He nods with a forced smile. “For sure. Happy t’help.” He bridges the words together.

“Nice. We’ve got a room full of big talkers here tonight,” Mira announces with a laugh.

Stefan’s shoulders drop, and his expression softens as he takes his wife in, throwing her a bone and tossing out a joke. “Almost makes me miss Billie.” He winks and everyone laughs, knowing there is no replacement for the space Billie’s personality takes up.

The night carries on in a similar relaxed fashion. Stefan and Griffin are quiet and the rest of us carry the conversation. Even the usually quiet Cole steps up to fill the void, because easy as the company is, not even one of us is oblivious to the unspoken tension. When we finish eating, Stefan shoots out

of his chair and flees to the kitchen, insisting on cleaning up—as he always does.

But this time, I follow him because I hate this strain between us. He's the only true family I've got, which means the big dummy is stuck with me.

"Are you going to keep ignoring me?" I ask as I stride straight into the kitchen with an armful of plates.

"I'm not ignoring you." He flicks the tap, letting steaming water fill the sink.

"Don't be a dick. You're my only family. I can't handle you being mad at me."

He turns then, looking at me a little sheepishly. "Every single person here tonight considers you family. I hope you know that. And I'm not mad at you." He runs a hand through his hair, eyes flicking around the house like he's searching for a word hidden in one of his bookshelves. "I'm worried about you."

I blink at him, not having expected that response.

"I love Griff like a brother. But he's got some matters he needs to attend to before I'm going to look kindly upon him *loving* you." He spits the word out, clearly a little wounded because we kept this from him. "I don't want you to get tangled up in that. And most of all, I don't want you to get hurt. You've been hurt enough for one lifetime. I've *let* you be hurt, and I'm trying to figure out a way to prevent that from happening to you again without being an overbearing fucking douchebag."

I laugh. I can't help it. He barely swears, and it cracks me up every time he does.

"Stop laughing! It's a hard fucking balance!"

I fall back against the edge of the counter and flatten my hands against my face, shoulders shaking with laughter.

"God. You're such a pain in my ass. I love you so goddamn much. It's almost annoying." That sobers me a little. Stefan and I have a lot of years between us. In many ways, we're united by our upbringing. In other ways, I've only come to truly know him recently because he was lucky enough to escape the hellhole that was our childhood home while I was still younger.

"I love you, too."

He groans and then closes the space between us, folding me into a firm, brotherly hug as he rests his chin atop my head. When he pulls away, he holds me by the shoulders, green eyes pinning me with their sincerity.

“I want you to be careful. I want you to put yourself first. I want you to consider the implications of getting involved with a man this much older than you, one with demons big enough to rival your own. One who is about to get dragged into the media. And I really, *really* want you to go to vet school. I want to watch you walk across that damn stage at your graduation, a huge fuck-you to the monster who raised us. I want the world for you. Every dream, every goal. I want you to have every opportunity our mom never got.”

His fingers tighten, squeezing my shoulders in a way meant to be comforting. “You got that?”

I nod, trying to keep the tears at bay.

I got it all right. He has no idea how perfectly aimed that shot was. *Becoming my mother*. A perfect strike to the spot that makes all my defenses slam straight back into place.



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## GRIFFIN



GOLD RUSH RANCH IS BEAUTIFUL. Everything here looks flawless. The rolling hills and perfect white fences. The shiny horses and pristine buildings.

I don't belong here.

The pebble in my hand rolls across my fingers as I sit on the back step of the guesthouse. I toss it, watching it clack across the ground and bounce off another rock.

Flawless I am not, but I'm not stupid either. I saw the way Nadia regarded me when she came back out on the patio tonight. The tension was written all over her face, the anxiety—the questions. Questions she doesn't deserve to have to ask.

She deserves a love that's simple. Natural. Easy like breathing. Exactly what she wanted. Not this treacherous path we've started down. It's reckless, thinking we can come out on the other side unscathed.

Maybe I am stupid.

Not stupid enough to think I won't see her cresting that hill in the next couple of hours. We have unfinished business, things we need to say. And as much as it pains me to admit it, I hope her brother talked enough sense into her that I won't have to be the one to break her heart.

I'd break my own heart a million times over to spare hers. I'll shoulder the pain of what needs to be done if it means she sheds one less tear.

I'll take the blame, the hate, the disappointment. She can put it all on me, and I'll still come back for more. Because Nadia Dalca is it for me. And if I have to wait for the right moment to present itself, then I will.

Because she's worth the wait. I've told her that before, and I meant it.

I reach down to grab another rock, rolling the smooth weight of it against my palm, transporting myself to the feel of her smooth skin beneath my hands.

A tugging sensation in my chest has me looking up, seeing Nadia walking down the slope of the hill that divides the farm from this little oasis.

Just like I knew she would.

I'm beyond pretending I'm not staring at her, so I lean my elbows back on the step behind me and take her in. I try to commit her to memory. The sway of her hips, the curve of her neck, the unruliness of her hair. *My wildflower.*

I soak up every inch of her, not wanting to forget a single thing. Because I have this sinking, devastating notion that soon, I won't be seeing her very much.

"Hey," she says with a sad smile as she approaches, rubbing her hands on her jeans as if she's nervous.

"Come here, Wildflower." I lift an arm and nod my head to the space beside me.

Her eyes water, and her nose wrinkles up, like that might stop the tears that are about to fall.

Her glossy lips roll together, but with a few small steps she's in front of me and folding herself down onto the step beside me, snuggling up under my arm, so small and fragile tucked against my body. When her head tips against my chest, I take a deep draw of rose-scented air and nuzzle against her hair.

I'll never forget the way she smells. The way she feels. Like redemption. Almost too good to be true.

"You okay?" I breathe against her, pulling her in tighter.

"No." Her voice cracks, breaking a line through my heart that matches the sound. *Me fucking neither.* "Did my brother give you a spanking?"

I chuckle, hand coming to rest on her thigh and giving her a quick squeeze. "Not the good kind." She laughs softly. "Really, though, our conversation was fair. He only has your best interests in mind."

Her head brushes against me as she nods. "I want you guys to still be friends. You were all he had for a long time."

"I'm very confident that we will always be friends. No need to worry about that."

We fall into several moments of silence, gazing out over the landscape as

the sun dips low on the horizon. I'll never watch the sun set again without thinking of her. That view over the cliffs at my house is going to haunt me every damn night. I try not to think about the possibility of being friends with Stefan for the rest of my life and *not* having Nadia. Of having to watch her move on with someone else. Just thinking about it shreds me up inside.

She eventually breaks the silence. "I need to go to school. I need to prove to myself I can do something big with my life. Something more than I ever thought I could. I need to rise above that little voice and do something that makes me truly proud of myself."

I can't stand not seeing her right now. I drag her into my lap, clasping her chin in my fingers and forcing her to look up at me. "You absolutely do. And I can't wait to watch you climb that mountain. I already know you're going to k-k-kick ass and t-take names. I'm so proud of you."

Her bottom lip wobbles, and my thumb brushes against it, not giving a fuck about my stutter with a girl like *her* looking at me like *that*.

"I need to do it on my own." Her arms wrap around my neck, fingers stroking soothing lines down the back of my skull.

"I know you do." I shift my hand to cup her cheek. This time my thumb brushes a tear tracking down the apple of her cheek. She's so young, has so much to do. And I never want to be the thing that holds her back.

"For now." Her eyes twinkle, and she stares at me desperately. My eyes sting at the sight of her damp cheeks.

I nod. "For now."

She nods in return. "I want you to be proud of yourself, too."

A ragged sigh tumbles past my lips. I swallow, hoping it might pull the building tears back down where they came from. Back in the depths of my soul, where they've been hiding for years now.

"I want to see the man you can be when you get out from underneath all that shame, all the pain you've buried. You deserve a fresh start, Griffin. You deserve to be happy, and I can't be the only thing that does that for you. I don't want to be your antidote. I want to be your reason. The reason you put the work in."

I nod, drowning in her eyes. Wishing I could live there. Spend all day, every day memorizing every little fleck, every color. But I know she's right.

"This isn't goodbye forever. This is goodbye for now. A clean break for now. I can't do any in between. I don't expect you to wait for me. Okay?"

Hasn't she been listening to me? I'll be waiting for her no matter how



long it takes. One tear spills over my cheek, and I fight the urge to run and hide. If I can fall apart in front of anyone in the world, I know it's her. "Okay." My voice sounds rusty, like I haven't used it in years. And I guess I haven't. My throat aches as I swallow the words trying to claw their way out. The ones that want to beg her to stay. The ones that want to explain away all the excellent reasons for us to hit pause. The ones that want to tell her I can make everything better for her if she lets me.

But this thing deserves more. It deserves two confident, capable adults. And she needs this time as badly as I do. I'd never forgive myself if I were the reason she didn't check every fucking thing off that list.

I'd give this woman anything she wants. A limb? An organ?

A clean break.

But not waiting for her? That's not even a consideration. That's not even possible.

Her dainty hands cup my face, thumbs stroking the stubble on my cheeks. "You've got your own mountain that needs climbing. Yeah?"

"Yeah." My stomach lurches, and I swear if I looked down, my heart would be beating on the ground somewhere. Ripped out and torn apart. Because she's right, I've got a lot of fixing to do.

She presses a tender kiss to my lips, so many emotions flooding out between us. Spilling out of me, drowning my system. Her forehead tilts against mine, tips of our noses brushing together. "Meet you at the top, Sinclair?"

My fingers pulse around her ribs, and I know that this is the moment where I let her go.

It makes me nauseous. But I choke out the words she needs to hear anyway.

"Meet you at the top, Wildflower."



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## NADIA



WHEN I GET BACK to my apartment, I reach for my journal, needing to write in it like a plant needs light and water. My fingers itch as I huddle under my blankets, ready to crumble under the weight of them, ready to fall apart in the privacy of my own space.

Floral journal in one hand, blue ball-point pen in the other, I prepare myself to bleed on the page for the man I just walked away from. I flip it open and look at the first page—the list—like I do every time. It usually brings me peace. A sense of purpose. A way to manifest the things on my list into reality.

But this time, it brings a crushing ache to my chest and hot, stinging tears to my puffy eyes. Because Griffin has crossed off and initialed the one thing he swore he never could. *Make love.*

And what hurts the most is he's not even wrong.



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## GRIFFIN



THE PAST TWO weeks have passed as a strange out-of-body experience. I work with the young horses who have come so far. I'm certain they don't even need me. At this point, I'm just fulfilling my contract and exposing them to as much as possible. Tractors, traffic, trails, rain, dark . . . you name it, these youngsters have seen it. When they get to the track this winter to start their training, they're going to be beyond prepared. Even the scaredy one that dumped me in the field.

I pat that exact horse on the neck as I lead him into his paddock, let him loose, and lock the gate behind me. When I turn, my eyes snag on the building that houses the clinic, just on the other side of the property. The one where Nadia spends her days. Until now.

I've seen Nadia since our chat on the steps that night, but mostly in passing as she goes to or from the clinic. I took Tripod in for a check-up with Mira and hoped Nadia would be there. But she wasn't, and I know Mira caught me peeking around behind her like I might catch even a small glimpse.

I'm not above admitting I'm heartbroken. Or that Tripod snuggles me every night in a little spoon position, and I'm endlessly grateful for his three-legged company.

Doing the right thing feels like absolute shit. I'm supposed to be the mature one, but today is the day Nadia is leaving, and I'm in a terrible fucking mood over it. She was supposed to live here and commute to school in Emerald Lake. But suddenly, she's found a condo to rent and is moving. I want to go say goodbye to her, but I don't know if I'm strong enough to

watch her leave. I don't even know if she'd want me there.

Seeing her depart across the darkened field with so many pieces of me was cruel enough. Seeing her *really* leave might do me in entirely.

I grunt, shaking my head, and make my way back into the barn, trying to find something to do that will keep me busy. Keep me from crawling to her place and acting like an idiot. I turn into the tack room, grabbing a bucket of water, a sponge, and a puck of saddle soap before getting to work on every stitch of leather hanging on the wall.

I get lost in the motion. In the process. Scrub. Wipe. Dip. Squeeze. Rinse. Repeat. I don't know how long I work on the tack, letting my mind wander to my days on the field, all the friends I had—the ones who are nowhere to be found since my fall from grace. I fixate on the fact that my future ex-wife is going to splash our wedding story and sex tape across any magazine or newspaper who listens to her, hoping to get whatever money I won't give to her. Regret pierces me in the chest, like a fucking spear to the heart.

"That why they pay you the big bucks?" Violet smiles at me from the doorway as she steps into the room and hoists a saddle up onto a rack.

"Something like that," I grumble back, sounding like a total asshole but not caring. I've been a growly prick ever since Nadia walked over that hill and out of my life.

I thought I knew suffering. But I didn't.

"You're missing her something fierce, aren't you?" Violet's voice is gentle, even though I don't deserve that tone. It also bothers me that everyone knows about what went on between us, but it's not really spoken about. It's like it never happened, and I hate that more than anything. There's no proof we ever existed.

A low grumble sounds in my chest. "Yes," I clip out the single word. No point in lying.

"You sound like my husband when he's in a bad mood." She's not the least bit deterred, in fact she's smiling. A small smile. But still.

"He's ten years older than me, you know."

I glare at her longer this time. "Yeah? Is this the *age is just a number* pep talk?" She doesn't deserve me lashing out at her. "I'm sorry," I add quickly, shaking my head as I stare down at the leather reins in my hands.

She shrugs. "I think in some cases, age is just a way to measure the number of years you spent without the person meant for you."

Fuck. That's poetic.

“You can grow together but taking the time to prove to yourselves that you can grow on your own is wise.” I swallow heavily as she continues. “What I know about Nadia is that when she wants something, she goes after it.” She takes a few steps across the room, squeezing my shoulder as she passes. “If you want her, you need to be ready for when she comes after you. If she grows, you grow. Don’t let her down by stagnating.”

And then she’s gone. Leaving me with an ache right in the center of my chest. I crush my palm there, like if I press hard enough, it will go away.

It doesn’t. It just gets worse all the time.

And I tumble. Straight into a deep pit of sadness and self-loathing. The itch to leave and go drown myself in a glass of amber liquid is so sharp, so present, that I crumble.

I toss the sponge into the bucket, stride out of the barn, and head straight to Neighbor’s Pub, dying to see if I’m still strong enough to come face-to-face with a big pour of bourbon and turn myself around. I’m out my driver’s side door and pushing through the heavy front doors before I can think twice. Sliding onto a stool at the lacquered bar top and ordering a drink before I can think at all.

The bartender slides the drink my way, and it lands between my fingers with a familiar weight and smell. Her eyes don’t linger. My cap is slung low, and I smell like horse shit. Clearly, today’s staff don’t recognize me.

I watch the amber liquid as I spin the tumbler, a syrupy outline of every splash dripping down the sides of the simple bar glass. I don’t even have to taste it to remember the flavor.

Or the dark fucking place it took me.

I stare at the glass, feeling the tug-of-war raging in my head, in my heart. So familiar. A vicious cycle. Find something, drown in that something, *need* that something, let myself get to a place where I’ve convinced myself I need that something to function. That just a sip might cure me, might make me feel better.

*I can’t be your antidote.*

It made little sense to me when she said it, because I was too busy trying not to fall apart. But now, face-to-face with a whole different type of temptation, the clarity of her words almost bowls me over.

*I want to be your reason.*

I push the glass away hard enough that liquid sloshes over the edges and pools on the bar top. Suddenly, I’m repulsed by the sight. By my weakness.

By how sad it is that I come here and do this to myself.

I pull my phone out and dial. When he answers, I sigh in relief. “Hey, Dad? Do you still have the names of those rehab programs you looked into?”

This shit ends here and now. Because I’ve never had a better reason.





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GRIFFIN

ONE MONTH LATER



“HEY MAN!” Stefan claps me on the back as we lock arms tightly. I don’t need to look at him to know that he’s grinning like a maniac. “It’s so good to see you.”

I huff out a chuckle. “Thanks for giving me a ride. My parents were seriously talking about postponing their winter stay in Mexico to be here to pick me up. Couldn’t have that.”

“Of course. Not a problem at all. Just the one bag?” He glances around me in confusion, since I asked him to bring a pickup truck today.

“Oh, yeah. Let me toss it in. There’s something else just inside I need your help with.”

He nods a bit suspiciously, his eyes never leaving me as I ditch my bag in the back seat and head back in his direction. I’ve been in rehab for a month. Checked into the first place that would take me and didn’t look back. I knew if I had too much time to think about it, I’d back out and come up with an excuse to avoid treatment.

After years of avoidance, I’ve become adept.

But no longer. Now I’m facing things head on. My days of hiding are over. Hiding from society, my past, or hiding the truth. Because even after weeks away from her, I am still head-over-fucking-heels in love with Nadia Dalca.

Even more because she walked away from me. What a woman. Goddamn, I’m just so proud of her.

“What are you smiling about?” Stefan asks as I stroll back toward him with my hands shoved into my pockets.

“Nadia.”

He blinks at me, like he didn't quite expect me to just say it point blank. Yeah, we've talked on the phone pretty regularly since I checked in here, and I haven't stopped asking how she's doing. I've made no secret of the way I feel about her, and I don't plan to start now.

I have an entirely different plan.

When I wave a hand over my shoulder, Stefan falls into step beside me. "She's doing really good, you know."

"Yeah?" The sliding doors open for us, and we step inside to grab the big slab of wood wrapped in a sheet. I point at it, and confusion paints his features, but he doesn't ask anything more. We're still working on this new phase of our friendship. One where we talk more about things rather than just mutually ignoring them.

It's fucking hard. Talking about your feelings. I've got a real love/hate relationship with it. Even after a month straight of practicing.

He hefts up one side and I take the other. "Yeah. I mean, sure, she's stressed and a little overwhelmed, but she's working so hard at it. She's so focused. It's just crazy to see, considering the wild child she showed up in Canada as. A few short years and boom. She's really transformed herself."

He shakes his head with a small smile as we approach the open truck bed. "I mean, she's like a whole new person."

I swallow. Hopefully not *too* new. Not so new that she won't want me anymore. That she'll realize I'm washed up and weighed down and that she wants some normal, happy fucking Ken doll.

I'd respect her decision if she did. But I'm pretty sure I'd never get over her. She's it for me.

And who am I kidding? I'd kill that fucking guy.

We heft the piece of wood into the back of the truck, and once it's slid into place, Stefan gestures his chin toward it. "Listen, I'm trying not to be too snoopy. But what is this?"

I feel suddenly shy. Like maybe I'll never show it to anyone, even though that's been my plan all along. "It's something I made. You can take a look at it."

Offering him a tight smile, I hop off the back of the truck and head toward the passenger seat. Through the rearview mirror I see curiosity get the best of my friend. He hops up and crouches down, peeling away the sheet. His brow pinches as he stares down at it, and I swear I watch the color drain right out of his face.

His head snaps up, and he meets my gaze in the mirror. I don't pretend I wasn't watching him. That wouldn't be honest. I hold his green eyes with my own, and he nods at me. It's firm, it's precise—it means something.

And when he gets back in the truck and pulls away from the facility I've called home for the past month, we don't talk about it at all.

Instead, he breaks the silence with, "You're not trending on Twitter anymore."

I can't help but laugh. What a fucking joke. As soon as that gold digger realized I wasn't going to shell out any cash to her, she dragged her greedy ass straight to the first tabloid that would listen to her.

I scoff. "Not sad that I didn't have social media access in there. Easier to ignore it when looking isn't even an option."

"For sure. The good news is, I don't think there's a tape. If there was, she would have released it by now."

I rest my head back on the seat and blow out a breath. "Yeah. That's what my lawyer thinks, too." Which is honestly something I'm very conflicted about. Relieved that there's no tape that can be leaked but enraged I spent years running from an outcome that was a venomous fucking lie.

When I told my parents the full story that night I called to talk about rehab, they'd been stoic. I wanted them prepared. As usual, they were painfully supportive—but I'm not dumb enough to think it didn't gut them.

Preparing the people you love to be publicly embarrassed by you is a hard pill to swallow.

Luckily, for once, things are turning up Griffin.

"The only thing I've seen are the wedding photos with Elvis," Stefan continues, eyes on the road. "And hilariously, the general response to those has come in two camps." I lift a brow at him to go on. "People who think you look hot and people who think she's, and I'm quoting here, *a manipulative bitch.*"

I cringe a little bit. I obviously don't like Tonya, but I'm still the drunk idiot who did it. That said, I'm not mad that this campaign has blown up in her face.

The only person I'm mad at is myself. For doing this to myself. But even that is getting better. After a month spent with daily therapy, counseling, and even speech therapy, I'm feeling like I know myself better than I ever have.

I'm feeling motivated.

"I guess that's why she's agreed to mediation rather than some big court

drama. Tucking tail.”

“Good.” Stefan’s knuckles go white on the steering wheel. The only clue that she pisses him off more than he lets on.

A companionable silence stretches between us as we drive down the main highway back out to Ruby Creek until he breaks it.

“Is that special cargo in the back for my sister?”

I swallow and roll my lips together before quietly replying. “Yeah.”

“Is that why you had me haul that trailer down there?”

“Yeah.” My heart twists. I hope so fucking badly that this works.

“I’m sorry this has been such a bumpy road for you.”

I clear my throat and suck air in through my nostrils, trying to keep it together. “She’s worth it.”

My best friend just smiles. “You really love her, don’t you?”

“So much it hurts,” is my honest reply.

His smile grows. “Good.”

That’s when the greenhouse shows up in the distance on the right-hand side of the road. I point at it. “Pull in there, you fucking masochist.”

He laughs as he signals.

I pull out the list in my back pocket, praying like hell my plan will be enough to win her back.

Or at the very least, make her smile. So I can live my life knowing that all her dreams came true.



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## NADIA



I TAP my pen against the textbook laid out in front of me. Midterms are upon me. Halfway through my first semester of vet school.

I feel accomplished. I feel challenged. I feel over-fucking-whelmed. *What was I thinking?* I had a nice, safe job. Was on the path to make a great living. I had a man who loved me.

And I gave it all up for *this*.

Stress. Never-ending reading. And late nights spent with that dick-wad voice who lives in my head and tells me I'm not good enough. He sounds suspiciously like my dick-wad father, which makes me want to crush him even harder.

I lean back in my chair and press the heels of my hands into my eye sockets. Swear I can't even see straight anymore. I'm about to hit that point in studying where you think *If I don't know it by now, I'm probably not going to know it at all*.

For a change of scenery, I grab the stack of mail I pulled from the little locked cubby in the lobby of my building. I lucked out getting a furnished place near campus on short notice. I could have commuted the forty-five minutes to and from Emerald Lake, but with traffic I could have potentially added almost two hours into my day—two hours I'm now glad I have to study.

Burying myself in my books here means three things. One, I don't run into Griffin Sinclair around town. Two, I don't read any tabloids that might discuss Griffin Sinclair or his divorce, which, according to my brother, has become a popular tabloid story—even without the existence of a sex tape.



And three, I spend slightly less time obsessing about Griffin Sinclair.

My blood still boils at the memory of that woman. That spark of anger I've worked so hard to control dances in my chest. *I really hate that bitch.*

Right around when I got here, Stefan called to tell me Griffin had checked himself into a twenty-eight-day rehab program and that they were pretty sure she didn't have a tape at all. When I hung the phone up, I cried. I missed him, like some part of me was left behind. But more than anything, I was *relieved*.

He owes himself so much more than he's been giving. I wanted that for him so badly that it hurt. I wanted him to know in his bones what I already do—he's worth it. He's worth *everything*.

I shuffle the envelopes.

*Bill.*

*Bill.*

*Junk mail.*

I stop with a pink envelope clutched in my fingers. The blocky all caps scribbled across it, not a match for the feminine color.

My heart races as I stare at it, already knowing who it's from, even with no return address. I feel the hum of his touch on the paper as I slide a shaking finger beneath the fold and rip it open. On a shaky inhale, I pull out a small slip of paper and a smaller envelope with a photograph of a white flower that has light pink stripes on the wide petals adorning it. I open the smaller envelope, but it's empty. I'm sure it once held seeds for the flower labeled *Spring Beauty*.

I flip the paper, where the blocky scrawl continues.

### *Spring Beauty*

*Alpine wildflower. Comes up right after the snow melts. Blooms within two to four weeks. Can use energy reserves to produce heat and melt through the last of snow. Strong as fuck. Reminds me of you.*

A tear drops onto the page, and I panic, wiping it off frantically. Not wanting to mar the note. I don't know what it means, but I know he's called me Wildflower since the first day we met. And the nickname has become incredibly meaningful to me.

That night I sleep with the note clutched in my hand and pretend that Griffin is here with me.

I miss him.



IT'S BEEN two weeks since midterms. The midterms I absolutely slayed. I've shed a good chunk of that self-doubt I've been toting around with me for years, and I'm thriving.

I wipe the sweat off my brow as I walk into my building after a run. My new hobby. A way to burn energy and clear my head. I've always hated running, but I forced myself to keep going, and now I look forward to it. It's weird.

The key clicks as I turn it in my mailbox to check for another pink envelope. Like I have every single day for the past two weeks.

I burned off enough steam during my run that I've convinced myself already that I won't be seeing one today. Which makes the sight of it in the slot so much better.

I don't even wait until I get up to my unit to rip the envelope open. I'm too fucking excited.

This time I see a hot pink flower that's all fuzzy in the middle. I definitely dig the color. I swap it over for the note, smiling like a maniac before I've even read it.

### *Monkey Flower*

*That fuzzy part in the middle is called a stigma. Apparently, it's the female reproductive organ. These flowers have especially sensitive stigmas, and they think that might help with pollination. I still think about that little whimpering noise you make. Reminds me of you.*

I bark out a laugh. *Fucking perv.* I smile at the note the entire ride up in the elevator and into my unit. I smile all the way into the shower. It's not until the water scalds my skin that I let my tears pour out and wash down the drain.

I miss him.



FINALS ARE UPON ME, and I'm stoked. Like actually excited to prove how good I am at this. I'm at the top of my class and not slowing down. What started out as a semester of me feeling scared and alone has turned into one of the best times of my life. I'm learning. I'm making new friends who don't know me from Adam. They don't know my brother. They don't know my reputation from high school. They don't know Griffin. The experience just wouldn't have been the same had I lived in Ruby Creek and commuted every day. I'd have dragged a little bit of baggage out this way with me every day.

But now I just get to be Nadia Dalca. The girl who wants to be a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine.

I've been asked out a couple of times, and I've kindly declined. I don't even have to think about it. Are Griffin and I torturing ourselves and each other by taking this self-imposed time-out? Absolutely. But I know in my heart I needed this. I told him I didn't expect him to wait for me, which is true. But I try not to think about that.

Not waiting for him just feels wrong.

And I know in my bones that we aren't done.

Especially when I get home from my last exam and find another baby pink envelope waiting for me. This time I race up to my condo to open it in the privacy of my space. I plop myself down onto my bed and really savor opening this envelope.

I realize that I don't know how many of the wildflower themed notes he might send. He might stop one day. He might move on. He *should* move on. I would never expect him to sit around twiddling his thumbs, waiting for me.

But the insecure girl inside of me desperately wants him to be okay with waiting for me.

I drag it out of the envelope. This time I'm met with spiky red and yellow flowers at the top of tall green stalks.

### *Paintbrush*

*Hummingbirds depend on these alpine wildflowers. The nectar sustains them as they migrate. These flowers keep them going, keep them moving forward in their lives without even trying. Just by being themselves. These flowers are the reason the hummingbirds survive. Reminds me of you.*

My eyes burn, but I don't cry. Because his message isn't lost on me. I'm what's keeping him going, and that motivates me more than anything he

could have told me. Blinking rapidly, I put everything back in the envelope and tuck it into my bedside table with the rest of his notes. Then I go to my desk, crack my books, and get to studying. I focus on the task before me, but still . . .

I miss him.



MY BROTHER and Mira took off for a tropical vacation over Christmas. Hawaii. They begged me to come with them, but the thought of taking that particular vacation with their little family and without Griffin felt like more than I could bear. I've waited this long to take that vacation. When I do it, I want it to be perfect. As perfect as that day in the field.

Plus, one of my professors offered a student placement at their prestigious vet clinic in the city over the holidays. And by prestigious, I mean working overnight shifts, so the other vets and techs get their holidays off. No one wanted it—surprise, surprise—except me.

My memories of Christmas growing up aren't warm and fuzzy, so I guess I'll work my ass off and run myself into the ground in celebration. At least it'll look good on my resume. And it seemed like the perfect way to pass the time between term one and term two.

On Christmas Eve, I sit at the emergency vet clinic, taking care of other people's furry family members surrounded by employees I don't know. It's my doing, but I miss my family and friends something fierce. I miss my horse. I've gone back on the weekends to see him and cashed in on my riding lessons from Violet and Billie. I'm getting pretty good.

When I go back, I avoid town and hole up on my brother's farm, not wanting to run into anyone. I spend hours grooming Cowboy to a perfect gloss, dreaming of the day I'll be able to ride him. I massage him. I cuddle him. I tell him all my most embarrassing secrets.

If Cowboy were here right now, I'd tell him I was secretly hoping Griffin would reach out to me for Christmas. I told Griffin a clean break, but I thought he might send me a text message or something. *Something*.

According to Violet, who has reached out to me more than ever since I left, Griffin will be picking Cowboy up and taking him to his place to start his training in the new year. I've learned so much about rehabilitating

racehorses since Griffin bought him for me, and I can see myself doing this over and over again with other horses in the future. Ones who need a second shot at life—a fresh start.

Kindred spirits.

I'm at the front desk watching the clock on the wall move toward midnight. The ticking sound is almost hypnotic in the otherwise quiet clinic. All the staff has warned me Christmas is a real shit show. And that starts in the middle of the night usually with people's pets who have eaten something they shouldn't have.

So, I soak up the peace while I can, watching Christmas Eve melt into Christmas Day. At a few minutes past midnight, the front door jangles and a tired-looking man walks through.

He holds up a pale pink envelope and says, "Is Nadia Dalca here?"

I point at my chest, right where my heart is rushing uncontrollably. "That's me."

He smiles briefly and drops the envelope down on the countertop between us. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," I say, unable to pull my attention from the best gift I could have asked for.

When I open the envelope, I see small blue and purple almost spherical petals growing along a tall stem in a spear-like shape. I recognize them from the field at Griffin's house.

### *Arctic Lupin*

*These wildflowers produce a neurotoxin called Sparteine. In the afternoon, they produce nearly five times the concentration they do at night. It's a defensive tactic against the grazing patterns of the snowshoe hare. Smart as fuck. Reminds me of you.*

Sitting here, holding this note from one of the most profoundly thoughtful men I've ever had the pleasure of meeting, I feel distinctly *not* smart. Smart girls wouldn't leave someone like this behind.

*What if I made the wrong choice?* The question has crossed my mind more than once.

I tuck the envelope into my purse beneath the desk, and then I lock myself in the bathroom and let myself shed tears for one minute. I actually set a timer. And then I take a deep, deep breath and walk back out to the front

desk and prepare myself to save some lives.

Because I am smart. Smart enough to know I'm here to work hard and prove to myself that I can do this life on my own if I need to. That I don't toss away every hope and dream for a man. I'll always wonder if I'm capable of it if I don't do this. He knows it, and I know it, too.

Still, with every note he sends, I fall more deeply in love with him. The distance. The space. The unwavering understanding. It just makes me love him harder.

I miss him.



IT'S SPRING BREAK, and a good chunk of my classmates are heading south for a vacation. But partying at a resort isn't my scene. One of the things I've learned living away is that certain settings work for me and my past trauma, while others do not. Big loud parties with heavy drinking will never be my happy place. People inevitably try to push alcohol on me and having to turn them down over and over inevitably gets awkward.

And annoying.

Every party I've been to in the past few months has just proved that there is a limit to what I have in common with people my age. It's why I've joined a study group of "mature students." Or that's the running joke.

Marni is a mom of three who has stayed home for the past several years. Jin is already a medical doctor but has found his bedside manner may be more well-suited to animals. His intensely literal persona cracks me up. And Erin has been a vet tech for over a decade. She's spent years thinking she'd like to be the doctor in the room but was constantly told by her shitty husband she couldn't. That it was too expensive. That she was too old.

She ditched him and went back to school. I admire her fiercely. Needless to say, all the people who have become my real friends at school went back to their families for spring break. So here I am, doing the same. Hefting a suitcase out of my car and dragging it up the front steps of my brother's house at Cascade Acres.

Stefan throws the front door open and rushes out to take my bag. Ever the gentleman. "Little sister." He slings an arm over my shoulder. "Nice to have you home."

*Home.* I love this place. But it doesn't feel like home. A cozy little house in the mountains, overlooking a rocky cliff and surrounded by wildflowers is what my mind conjures up when I hear the word. But the only reason that place feels like home is because of the man who lives there.

The one who lives rent-free in my head and heart. The one who makes me smile and cry all at once. Anywhere with him would feel like home.

"Nice to be here." I drop my head on his shoulder and smile. "I've missed you, Stef."

"Ah, you're just saying that. We both know I annoy you a little bit. It's almost like you've been avoiding me these days."

*Not you, your best friend.*

I chuckle. "A little bit. It's part of your charm."

He gives me a gentle shove just before we hit the stairs. "You love me."

"You know it," I reply, meaning it.

When we get to the top of the stairs, just in front of my bedroom, he stops behind me and I turn to face him, wondering why he isn't keeping up.

"I love you, too. You know that?" He swallows, looking a little nervous.

"I know." I smile and nod, eyes searching his face for some clue where this sudden seriousness is coming from.

"I feel like I owe you an apology. I feel like I overstepped." My heart thuds heavily against my ribs, and the color drains from my face. "I feel like I forced you and Griffin apart without really understanding."

My mouth is dry as I suck in a deep breath. "Understand what?"

He nods his head toward my bedroom, his expression almost stricken. "You've got mail."

I turn, peering into the room. The bed is made perfectly. And on one pillow lays a pale pink envelope.

One hand falls across my chest, and when I look back at my brother, he winks before heading back down the stairs.

Suitcase forgotten in the hallway, I walk into the room and sit gingerly on the edge of the bed before picking up the envelope.

I haven't gotten one since Christmas but avoided thinking about why. Avoided thinking that he has probably moved on like I told him to.

When I peel it open, what looks like pure yellow daisies stare back at me.

### *Mountain Arnica*

*Used for healing cuts and bruises. Considered a love charm in some cultures.*

*Reminds me of another wildflower I know who heals a bruised heart and wounded soul so fucking effortlessly—my love charm. My reason. If you ever need some Mountain Arnica of your own, you can find these in the field where I fell. Cowboy is here too. We're waiting for you.*

In the field where he fell. The property between this one and Gold Rush Ranch? Where he first told me he loved me?

I'm back out the door and racing down the stairs before I even settle in.

My brother calls out, "See you tomorrow!" as I blow straight back out the front door and hop in my car, the small sheet of paper still pressed between my clammy fingers and the steering wheel as I speed down the back roads, trying to remember where the access is for that property.

Things are greening up in the valley. It's pretty much the definition of spring out my window. Bright greens, flowers blooming, pollen floating in the air. When I finally find the back road I think will take me closest, I gun it down to the spot where the trail we'd been on that day spat us out.

It's not until I throw my vehicle in park that I look out over the picturesque valley where Griffin told me the words I've spent my entire life desperate to hear.

And I sob, slapping a hand over my mouth in shock. Because the entire thing is full of wildflowers. A mosaic of bright spring colors. White. Pink. Red. Orange. Blue. Yellow.

Every single kind of flower he sent me in his notes.

On the top of the hill overlooking the field is a silver trailer and a pretty new barn. Small and picturesque. Blue and white. Freshly painted.

I'm certain I see my shiny, dark bay horse grazing up there behind a bright white fence.

Without another thought, I'm out of my car, ducking through the fence and walking through the field of flowers with my stomach in my throat.

And my heart in my hand.





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## GRIFFIN



I KNOW Nadia is getting home today at some point, but I'm not positive when. Which is why I'm sitting on the steps of the Airstream trailer I've been living in, staring at the freshly paved driveway on what was formerly a completely untouched piece of land.

Basically, I'm stressing the fuck out. I chuck a stick and watch Tripod rip after it with a gleeful bark. And I wait.

For her.

Earlier today, Stefan let me up to her room to put the final envelope on her pillow and then he told me not to let her walk out of my life again. He's been a steadfast friend these past several months. He's watched me crumble over my life, my career, and his sister.

He's watched me be heartsick with every ounce of my being and hasn't shied away a single time. He visited me in rehab. He took care of my horse for me that month. And he gives me updates on his sister that definitely don't fall neatly into the 'clean break' category.

I didn't *need* his approval to love her. But knowing he supports us definitely feels good.

It's been six months since Nadia walked away from me. And they have been hands down the most agonizing months of my life, but also the most enlightening.

I finally got the support I've always known I needed but avoided addressing.

I finally had a reason.

Tripod drops the stick at my feet and then bounces on the spot, tongue

lolling and black button eyes bulging in anticipation of my next toss. But then his focus shifts, and he bounds past me, yapping like a goddamn squeaky toy. As I follow the sound, I do a double take. My stomach flips, like I just dropped off the highest point of a rollercoaster.

*She came.*

I unfold myself from the aluminum steps, heart thudding loudly in the cage of my chest. Pre-Super Bowl jitters have nothing on this. All the words I've wanted to say to her for the past half-year are at the tip of my tongue, but when I take her in, every one of them dies on my lips.

I stand and face her as she walks in my direction wearing a simple gray t-shirt dress and leather jacket, head swiveling around the property. She looks older somehow, more mature, more self-assured. More at peace. There's a security in her movements that wasn't there before.

She leaves me breathless.

"Griffin?" She finally reaches the top of the hill and comes to stand mere meters away. Her voice quavers as she glances up at me, and I cram my hands into the pockets of my jeans to keep from rushing forward and touching her. I ache to touch her in a way I didn't know was possible. To slip her hair behind her ear, to brush my nose against the tip of hers, and then tuck her under my chin. "I came as soon as I got your note."

She fits so perfectly there. And I hope with every ounce of my being that she still feels the same.

"Hi, Wildflower."

Her lips roll together, her lashes blinking just a little too quickly. "You look good."

I swallow and let my gaze scour her appreciatively. In a way that makes color streak across her cheeks before I respond, "I feel good."

She nods. "Are you divorced now?"

"As single as they come."

A small, satisfied smile tugs at her lips. Giving me a little taste of hope. "What is this?" She clears her throat as she turns away, eyes scouring the field of wildflowers. She only turns back at Tripod's insistence. He's pawing at her legs, ready to burst with excitement, and when she finally pets him, his little eyes flutter shut in pleasure.

And I'm momentarily jealous of a fucking dog.

"It's . . . um. Well, walk with me. I'll show you." I wave a hand over my shoulder and turn away, both hating not seeing her and feeling relieved by

not having to look at her for a moment. I'm staring down at my boots when I see her white sneakers fall into step next to them.

Here at the top of the hill, flat green fields stretch out on both sides of the barn and paddocks. It's the perfect spot to build. Flat and at no risk of flooding.

We walk down the driveway, the silence between us practically brimming with questions. Usually, she would fill this space with adorable ramblings, but I think she might be speechless right now. For the briefest of moments her pinky finger hooks through mine, like she just can't help herself. But when I turn to look at her, she drops it and pushes her chin down.

"Is this all new?" she finally blurts out as we approach the end of the driveway.

"Yeah. It's . . . well, it's partly therapy. Figured out I'm happiest and healthiest when I'm working with my hands."

I peek at her again from beneath the brim of my favorite hat. The one my grandad bought for me at my first rodeo. It was too big at the time, and I didn't find it again until after his death. It's funny how something you didn't even know you had can come to mean so much to you.

We approach the front gate along the main road. "I sort of thought you might come through this way."

She hits me with a nervous smile, palms rubbing against her skirt. "I only remembered that one spot."

I clear my throat, trying not to blow this. "Right." I take a few more steps and then turn to face her, waving her ahead to join me. She regards me somewhat quizzically but does as I've asked.

"Like I was saying. This place is partly therapy." She turns to face the sign at the front gate, and her hand shoots up over her mouth on a strangled gasp.

"But it's mostly for you."

The sign reads *Wildflower Racehorse Rescue*.

"Griffin." All I can see is her back, the way her shoulders squeeze up tight around her ears as both hands come to cup her cheeks. I can hear her sniffle, but it's been so long that I don't know what's appropriate. I don't know if she wants me to touch her.

"Do you like it? I made it at rehab."

"Do I like it?" She turns on me slowly, looking absolutely floored.

"The sign. I made the sign myself. Art therapy. Carved it. Painted it. I

tried to use all the colors of the flowers I sent you.”

Tears streak down her face, and she goes pale, like she’s seen a ghost. *Great, she hates it.* Figures. I try to do something romantic and fail miserably.

She steps up to the sign where it’s mounted on two thick posts. Her manicured fingers trace the flowers I painted there before she turns to glance back up the hill. “And the barn?”

I scrub a hand across my beard. “Built that too. It’s been keeping me busy, that’s why I haven’t written lately. Didn’t want to bother you.” She stares at me blankly, so I just keep talking. “I wasn’t sure what color you’d want it to be, so I just went with white, because I thought it would be fresh and crisp. But it looked too plain. Didn’t suit you, so I added the blue tin roof and trim. We can change it.”

I’m rambling.

She blinks at me, hands sinking down to her throat. “Change it?”

My tongue darts out over my lip. Her responses are making me nervous. I wasn’t sure how she’d react but standing there vacantly repeating my words back to me wasn’t something I accounted for.

“Yeah. Whatever you think. I just want you to love it. There’s room over there to build a house. I just didn’t want to start that without your input. My plan was to have it overlooking the wildflowers.” I kick at the ground and peer up at her nervously. “I’m really blowing it here, aren’t I? I made a lot of assumptions. I know. If you’re over me, I’ll just—”

Her voice cuts me off. “Griffin. This is . . .” She looks around, mouth opening and closing as she searches for the words. Her arms flop down at her sides, and she finally gazes into my eyes, gifting me with a clear view of those beautiful whiskey irises. “This is too much.”

I just chuckle. She has no idea. Not a fucking clue.

“This isn’t enough, Nadia. To repay you for the way you’ve brought me back? It will never be enough. I’ll spend the rest of my goddamn life repaying the favor, and I’ll do it with a smile. This place is yours whenever you want it. With me. Without me. No strings attached. I want you to have it. I want to see you spread your wings and soar. To see all your dreams come true.” I pause, sucking in a deep, centering breath, and then I forge ahead like I planned. “But right now, I’m going to beg you to give me another shot. Before? That was a false start. This? This is a clean slate. I want all your right nows. All your tomorrows. I want it all with you.”

She sobs and shakes her head helplessly, but I don't stop.

"I've made a lot of mistakes in my life. But you're not one of them. You're the happiest accident I've ever known. The very best decision I've ever made. My reason."

With two swift steps, she crashes into me, arms snaking around my ribs and hands grappling with my jean jacket, tugging me as tight against her as she can. I soften, wrapping my arms around her and letting the warmth of her seep into me.

I release a sigh I've been holding for six months.

She nuzzles against me, the dampness of her tears soaking through my shirt. She hiccups, and I press my cheek onto the crown of her head, tucking her in right where I've dreamt of having her. She still smells like sweet roses, and I let my eyes flutter shut as I soak her in.

She pulls back to look up at me, eyes glistening, heart-shaped lips quivering as she finally speaks. "For six months, I've gone without you. And do you know what I've learned?"

I blink rapidly, squeezing her again just to make sure she's real. "What's that?"

"I can do anything I set my mind to without you." She pauses and licks her lips nervously. "But I don't want to."

Her head shakes in disbelief as she carries on. "Get over you? Are you out of your mind? I'll *never* get over you. I have missed you every single day, Griffin Sinclair. I've ached for you. Never let me walk away again. Tie me up, lock me down, keep me forever. I only ever want to do this life with you."

The air between us crackles, and I don't hesitate. I drop my head and claim those pretty lips, savoring the delicious little whimpering noise she makes when I do. Swallowing the words I so desperately needed to hear.

"I can do that," I murmur, letting my hands roam her body, like I almost can't believe she's here. That this is real.

"Your notes kept me going."

"Then I'll keep writing them. I'll write you notes for the rest of my life if it makes you happy."

She gives me a shy smile from beneath her wet lashes. "Thank you for waiting for me."

I clear my throat. Preparing myself to hand my heart over on a platter. "I'd do that for the rest of my life, too, if you wanted me to."

She tugs me close, brushing the tip of her nose against mine like she always does. “I love the blue roof, Griffin. I love this place. I love how hard you’ve worked. On yourself and on this home for us. But more than anything, I love *you*.”

A genuine smile touches my lips, hearing the words that she’s never gifted me before. I never really cared. I’d have spent my life loving her whether or not she loved me back. But hearing her say it feels better than I could have imagined. Earning the love of a woman like Nadia Dalca is no easy feat, but she’s been worth every challenge.

She always will be.

“I love you, too, Wildflower.”

Her sigh is wistful, satisfied. “Good, can we be done waiting now?” She trails her fingers through my beard, and when I offer her a decisive nod, she guides me back down to her, hands winding around my neck and tugging at my hair.

And we stand there, wrapped up in each other at the entrance to what I hope is the rest of our lives together. Because I let her walk away from me once before, but this time I’m never letting her go.

## EPILOGUE - GRIFFIN



Three years later

I'm sitting in the most uncomfortable folding chair of all time. But I don't give a flying fuck because I got here early enough to get a front-row seat to my girl's graduation. I'm about to be dating a doctor.

Talk about overachieving.

And fuck, I've never been happier to be overachieving in my life.

The rows in front of the temporary stage they've set up down by Emerald Lake start to fill, and I get some dirty looks for the number of seats I've blocked off in the front row. But ask me if I care.

Eventually, music plays through the big speakers, and butterflies dance in my stomach. She did it. I'm so goddamn proud of her it makes the bridge of my nose sting.

When we first got back together, she spent the last two months of her semester living close to campus in her apartment. She wanted to move in with me right away, but I convinced her to finish the year out strong. And she did, and then we spent the weekends together fucking like rabbits during her study breaks.

Then that summer, we got to work on *our* property. Something that still sounds like music to my ears. We designed a small, simple house, and put a blue tin roof on it. A rancher with huge banks of windows looking out over the valley that bursts with wildflowers every summer.

She told me it was a waste of a field. But I reminded her of all the incredible things those wildflowers can do. She just rolled her eyes at me, but I don't care. I get to see them out my window every day. I get to walk through them with *her*, and life doesn't get any better than that.

I train my horses and work on our farm, and she goes to school. Until today. Today that ends, and she gets to bring some horses of her own back to the property. She'll rehabilitate them at our place and still put some hours in with Mira at Gold Rush Ranch. She has a whole plan, and I'm just lucky enough to be here and stand witness to it all coming together for her.

But first, I've got a surprise of my own.

"Hey, man." Stefan slaps my shoulder, and I stand to hug Mira. The rest of the Gold Rush crew filters in behind them. Billie, Vaughn, Violet, Cole, Hank, Trixie. Even my parents, Joan and Doug, are here, positively beaming like she's their own. Everyone who loves her is here to watch her walk across

that stage today—the family she chose.

The group chats as they find their seats, but my knee bounces as I stare at the stage. My heart is about ready to burst for the woman I love. And when the ceremony starts, everyone else falls away for me. My sole focus is on the podium, front and center. And when they get to the *d* last names and a girl who shines from the inside walks out in her blue gown to accept a diploma, I let out a loud, borderline inappropriate whistle.

Nadia's eyes find mine instantly, and we share a look, like we both know how huge this day is. And I fully intend to celebrate the hell out of her once I rip that gown off.

As soon as she clears the stage, Stefan squeezes my shoulder. "Go. Get out of here!"

I give my best friend a mischievous grin, a punch to the shoulder, and then duck out of the ceremony.

I walk behind the stage, and my eye is drawn to where she's hugging a friend, blissfully happy. I shove my hands into the pockets of my slacks and let her have her moment, soaking her up, watching from afar.

But like always, she knows I'm looking, and her head turns in my direction. Within moments, the rest of her follows as she jogs across the staging area toward me with an infectious smile on her face. Once she's close enough, she launches herself into my arms, and I lift her off the ground, spinning her around.

"I did it! I really did it." I feel her breath against the shell of my ear as she nuzzles against me, happiness radiating off her in waves.

"Always knew you would, Wildflower." Because I did. I knew she was remarkable from the first moment I laid eyes on her.

When I place her gently back down on the ground, she whispers in my ear. "You know how there was a vote on if you looked better in jeans or football tights?"

I grunt and roll my eyes, which makes her laugh.

Her top teeth sink into her bottom lip, and she reaches up to trace the seam of my mouth with her pink manicured finger as her eyes rake over my body with a hell of a lot of appreciation. "I think you might look the most fuckable in a suit."

I scoff. "Watch your mouth, Dr. Dalca."

"Or what?" She gives my tie a light tug and arches a brow. *Okay, my girl is ready to celebrate.*

I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out two airline tickets. “Or I won’t want to go on a tropical vacation to Costa Rica with you.”

Her jaw drops. “You didn’t!”

I shrug, feeling really fucking smug about this surprise. Surprising her has become one of my new favorite past times. “I did. It was the last thing on your bucket list. It felt incomplete. We leave in a few hours.”

She holds a hand up, shaking her head with disbelief. “First of all, it’s a to-do list.”

“Semantics.” I turn away, heading to the parking lot. “Keep up, Wildflower. I don’t want to miss our flight.”

She hustles to keep up with me. “Second of all, *my* list felt incomplete to *you*?”

I promised myself I’d complete that list four years ago. Seemed about time. I glance down at her out of the corner of my eye, noting the amusement stamped on her face. “Yeah. And I just added something.”

*Two somethings.*

She snorts. “You added something to *my* list?”

“Yeah. Join the mile high club.”

*And get down on one knee and beg you to be Dr. Sinclair for the rest of your life.*

“I’m actually good with that addition. Dirty bathrooms are kind of our thing.”

I bark out a laugh and reach for her hand, rubbing the spot where the ring I picked out for her will go. I’m taking her on a well-earned tropical vacation, and while we’re there, I plan to make her mine once and for all.

My girl. My reason. My Wildflower.

Forever.



Have you read book one in the Gold Rush Ranch series? If you want witty banter, plenty of steam, and all the feels check out Billie and Vaughn’s story.

[Read Off to the Races](#)

If you’re jonesing for a little more Griffin and Nadia I have a bonus chapter to send you! See where they’re at two years down the road when you join my

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ELSIE SILVER

“Vi!”

I can hear Billie shouting at me from the living room. I laugh, because she’s so goddamn impatient and I’ve come to love that about my best friend. You can’t rush good popcorn though. The butter, the Cajun spice, cooked in a cast-iron skillet just like I did back home on the ranch in Chestnut Springs.

I have to get it right. It’s girl’s night. I’m not having shitty popcorn. We’re all moms now. *We need* this time and we *need* it to be good.

Not just good. Great.

“Violet!” A night away from the kids, and I get the demanding version of Billie.

*Charming.*

“What?” I shout back into the living room. If her and Vaughn hadn’t built such a big house this wouldn’t be a problem. At mine and Cole’s cozy farmhouse we don’t need to shout for the other person to hear. “I’m just finishing popcorn for the movie!”

The butter is slowly starting to melt in the pan, just the right temperature to brown carefully.

“Your brother is on the news!” Nadia pipes up.

My head snaps in their direction. “Which one?” I yell back, wincing at our interaction.

“The hot one!” Billie shouts, and I roll my eyes.

“The bull rider, Vi.” Mira clarifies, somehow projecting her silky voice without sounding like she’s screaming.

Suddenly the butter is forgotten. Rhett is wild, always in trouble, and

often injured. Bull riding is his one and only true love, but it's also a great way to get yourself killed.

That said, he's made an incredible living for himself. He's become the face of the sport and gets to do what he loves for a paycheck. The sponsorships he's snagged along the way don't hurt either.

And that's the dream, isn't it? At least all those days I spent in the hospital with him as a teenager paid off.

I rush into the living room, heart pounding and palms suddenly clammy, fearing the worst.

But instead I see a paparazzi following my perfectly healthy brother, trying to shove a microphone in his face as he leaves an arena after an event.

"Rhett, can you comment on the video that's been circulating? Any apologies you'd like to make?"

My brother's lips thin and he tries to hide his face behind the brim of his hat. All I catch is a brief flash of anxiety in his eyes as his jaw pops.

"No comment." His typical playful tone is absent tonight.

"Come on man, give me something." The slender man reaches across and literally presses the microphone against my brother's cheek. Bumping it up against him rather aggressively. "Your fans want an explanation," the reporter demands.

And then, my wild-child brother punches the guy square in the face. *Hard.*

My stomach drops as I watch the camera swivel to the ground. The screen shaking around as shouting commences.

When I turn to look at the couch Billie, Mira and Nadia are staring at me with wide eyes.

"Well . . ." Mira starts with a grimace.

"Hot *and* a hell of a right-hook," Billie chuckles.

I blink, confused about what I just saw. Worried about my brother. And . . .

"Vi, what's burning?" Nadia says tentatively.

"Shit!" I turn back to the kitchen, racing in to pull the pan off the burner.

And then I yank my phone out of my back pocket and dial my brother.

"Vi?" He picks up right away.

"Rhett. What's going on?"

He groans. "Vi. I fucked up."



Want to meet Rhett? What about the rest of the Eaton brothers? Take a trip to Violet's hometown in *Flawless*! Coming June 2022. Pre-order today so you don't miss this steamy enemies-to-lovers romance.

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## READER NOTE

I would like to note that Griffin's brain injury resulted in what is called "Neurogenic Stuttering." It is not common and varies in how it manifests or heals. I understand that no two traumatic brain injuries are the same, and that every person's experience with them will differ. This story tells but one fictional character's experience, and I hope you all loved him as much as I do.

A special thank you to C.F. for taking the time to chat with me about living with a speech impediment and being available to bounce ideas off of. Your feedback was invaluable.

OFF TO THE RACES

SNEAK PEEK



*This.*

This is my happy place.

No drama. No faking it. Just me and horses.

No human as far as the eye can see. Just the way I like it.

Anywhere with horses has always been my sanctuary, and this property is no exception. It's *immaculate*. Idyllic white fences outline the perfect green grass stretching out before me. And within each wooden square, a home to a beautiful shiny horse.

All layered with that comforting horse farm aroma I love.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. No matter how pristine a farm is, you can't escape it, even outdoors. You can spend all the money in the world to keep your over-the-top, swanky facility spotless, and it will still smell like horse shit.

Makes me smile every time. Horses—1, humans—0.

I'm reveling in that score when a door slams behind me. I jump and turn around, hoping it's Hank, coming to wrap me in the best bear hug in the world. I peer through the fountain, centered in the driveway, expecting Hank's familiar frame, but it's not him. I'm met with an absolute vision far better in person than any of the pictures I found online.

Tall? Check.

Dark? Check.

Handsome? Check.

Looks like he wants to kill me? Also, check.

I run my teeth over my bottom lip as his tall, lithe body, wearing the hell out of a dark fitted suit, stalks toward me. Dark chocolate hair, longer on the

top and a little disheveled—like he’s been running his fingers through it, frames his annoyed face. Stubble blooms below razor sharp cheekbones as he stops in front of me and peers down a straight nose almost too masculine for the shapely, frowning lips beneath it.

Good thing I’m not one to cower because, at what has to be at least six foot three, this man is imposing.

Fiery mahogany eyes bore down on me. “You need to turn your sweet ass around, get in your car, and leave. Now.”

Wow, what a greeting.

I tilt my head and search his face for some trace of humor. Finding none, I bark out a laugh. Because who talks to a person they’ve just met this way?

Okay, it was really more of a loud snort, but snort laughs make normal people laugh. Right? I even giggle a little at myself, and think, “Hey, maybe he’ll join in!” But no, not this fire-breathing dragon. He crosses his arms over a broad chest and continues to glare at me like I’m dirt beneath his expensive shoes. *Typical.*

“Pretty and slow to follow directions. Seems on par with every girl she’s been serving up to me on a platter lately. This whole natural look is a fresh angle,” he says, waving one arm up and down me like I’m a broodmare, “so, I’ll give her that. Do pass my kudos on in that regard when you report back to my mother about your failed attempt to lock me down into some breathtakingly boring arranged relationship. I’d rather date a blow-up doll.”

I rear back slightly at that last bit. Date a blow-up doll? Oof. Did he really just say that? The man practically handed me an alley-oop. I could make so many jokes here, but remind myself to keep it professional. Steeling myself, I take a deep breath, because this is about to get awkward. He clearly does not know who I am, but I’ve done a bit of homework, and know exactly who he is.

Vaughn Harding.

I’ve missed Hank like crazy. When I showed up on his doorstep looking for a job ten years ago, he took me in and gave me a lot more than employment. Work, advice, a place to live, even a good talking to when I needed it. He was the father figure always dreamed of. So when I heard working beside him on the west coast of Canada, I couldn’t get on a plane fast enough. I mean, my working Visa was up so I had to leave my training position in Ireland, anyway. At least I knew where I was going and the name of the farm so I could do some research.

My internet stalking skills are so next level I almost added them as a bullet point to the skills section of my resume. In putting those skills to good use, I found two types of photos of this man populating the internet. Half of the images were Professional Vaughn, looking suave and serious in relation to his family's business ventures. The others were of Party Vaughn, looking charming and polished, usually at some glitzy event with a beautiful woman beaming on his arm.

Never the same woman from what I could find. And trust me, I *looked*.

An animalistic growl pulls me from my thoughts. "I said leave."

Is this fucking guy for real? As a general rule, my brain-to-mouth filter is a little relaxed. I've been an agitator since childhood and am well-versed in navigating situations where someone is ticked off. But this? This is new. Which is probably why I'm standing here silent and dumbfounded, staring like an idiot?

Before I can say something polite to diffuse the situation, he holds his arms out and widens those molten eyes at me as if to say, "Hello? What the fuck are you doing?"

And then... He. Stomps. His. Foot.

Like a toddler.

A soft giggle bubbles up out of my chest. I don't even try to hold it in. I am well acquainted with men like Vaughn Harding. Few truly dependable things in the world exist, but trust fund babies being douchebags is one you can count on.

Holding one hand up to stop him, I launch in, "Okay, first of all, I am downright fascinated by your blow-up doll preference. Can we table that for now but revisit it someday?" A sneer touches his lips. Ha. Didn't like that one. "Second, I'm a grown-ass woman, don't call me a girl. And third, when you're finished having this epic man-child meltdown," I wave my hand up and down his body like he did to me, "can you please let Hank know that Billie Black is here for her job interview?"

And then I beam at him with a big old cheesy smile.

In his defense, he visibly pales while smoothing his suit jacket down and standing straighter.

He repeats back to me, "Billie Black?"

"That's me."

"I...", He shakes his head. "But, you're not a man?"

"An astute observation, Mr. Harding," I reply with a smirk.

This is familiar territory for me. My name frequently confuses people; it doesn't bother me. It's a nickname and I could go by something else if I wanted, but I kind of enjoy people's confusion over my name. And this encounter is no exception.

"Hey, Billie girl!" a familiar deep voice calls from over my shoulder. "You made it!"

Hank Brandt. Man, just hearing that voice makes me smile. I turn immediately, leaving Vaughn there gaping, to take in the face of the warmest, gentlest man I know. Broad shoulders, close-cut sandy hair, and a ruddy, deeply lined face, a face that's spent decades working out in the sun, rush toward me.

I've missed him. Sometimes you're born into a family, and other times you choose them. And when you choose them, you know in your bones that they're right for you. And that's Hank for me. The family I've chosen.

Almost jogging, Hank goes right in for a big old bear hug. And I soak it up. "You're even more beautiful than the last time I saw you," he says, holding me back by my shoulders and taking me in.

I go pink in the cheeks and roll my eyes at him. "Stop sucking up, old man. You already got me here. Now, show me around."

Hank has been a pillar of support in both my childhood and in my professional career; a friend, a father-figure, and hopefully now an employer.

Assuming I haven't completely blown it with moneybags back there. Anxiety flutters in my stomach. I have my work cut out for me and will have to rise above that awkward introduction if I really want this job.

"Never lose that spunk, kiddo," he says, shaking his head and slinging an arm over my shoulder.

Hank leads me back toward Mr. Handsome-and-Crazy, who appears to have regained some composure.

"Billie, meet Vaughn Harding, the new owner and operator here at Gold Rush Ranch. He's a busy man, between this farm and the family mining business, but he'll be around for the foreseeable future managing our business operations." Vaughn stares down at me now with an unreadable expression. "He's going to sit in on the interview today to provide a second opinion. Hope that's okay with you."

I feel my throat bob as I swallow. That's great. Just great.

Stepping out from under Hank's arm, I extend my hand forward into Vaughn's strong grasp. I search for any signs of embarrassment on his part

and find none. His face is stony and locked down now, all traces of the fiery passion he spilt mere moments ago have completely disappeared.

Naturally, I test the waters by tossing him a quick wink while reciprocating his firm handshake. And by handshake, I mean death grip. I squeeze the hell out of his hand right back. Years of handling and riding powerful horses means I'm stronger than I look.

I think I might even hear him grunt under his breath when I clamp down around his fingers. "The more the merrier," I say. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Harding."

He nods as he drops my hand abruptly and then switches his focus on a spot over my head. "I'll be in my office when you're ready," he says to Hank before spinning on his heel and walking away, head held high, like he didn't just embarrass himself.

When I glance back at Hank, I see a twinkle in his eye as a slow Cheshire grin spreads across his face. Tutting me and shaking his head, he says, "Billie, Billie, Billie. What did you do to that poor boy?"

At that, I throw my head back and laugh. Poor boy? I'm well acquainted with men like Vaughn Harding. I grew up immersed in that culture. Rich and spoiled men like him never outgrow their arrogant entitlement. Instead, they wear it like some sort of badge of honor.

My Dad is exhibit A in that kind of behavior, followed by all the boys at boarding school and the men who mingled in our circles. Carbon copies of each other, the lot. Polished, calculated, and unfeeling.

Not to mention, boring.

And fake, fake, fake.

Fake smiles, fake friendships, fake family. And that last one is the real kicker. I felt my pretty, perfectly curated life crash down around me that day.

Surprisingly, being a shitty, misguided person isn't enough to make a little girl stop loving her dad. But it is enough to make me lose respect for him. And that is a heart-wrenching combination... loving someone you can't respect.

Even a decade later, years into adulthood, it hurts in a way that has the power to take my breath away.

My father's word might mean nothing anymore, but mine is still good. I kept the promise I made to myself—leave and never darken the door of that lifestyle again.

I went out in a real blaze of glory, and I've been in rebuilding mode ever

since. My sole focus has been my career, and this opportunity is the perfect next step.

As I watch Vaughn, the embodiment of everything I ran away from, enter the building, I admire the physique within his tailored suit pants. Trim waist. Incredible ass. Ten out of ten would grab.

But I won't. Because I know this type of man. An absolute nightmare to interact with, dangerous to get involved with. But still fun to ogle. I am only human after all, and the man is hot as sin.

Yes, I will enjoy the hell out of this view, but from a safe distance. Because men like Vaughn are a trap I will never fall into.

[Read Off to the Races now](#)



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first series. Complete. I almost can't believe it! About a year ago I decided to hit publish on my first book and I just can't believe where that one click has taken me.

I can genuinely say that writing has changed my life. In so many ways. The friendships, the independence, the sense of accomplishment—I'm just overwhelmed that I'm here and that this is my life. Pinch me!

If you've followed along with my journey, thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. And if you're new to my books, welcome! It's so good to have you all here.

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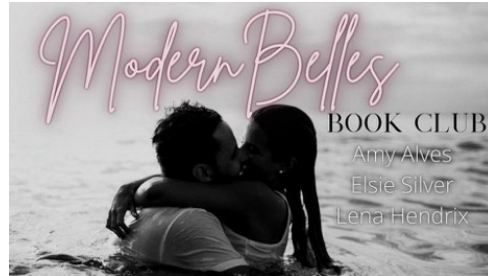
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Elsie Silver is a Canadian author of sassy, sexy, small town romance who loves a good book boyfriend and the strong heroines who bring them to their knees. She lives just outside of Vancouver, British Columbia with her husband, son, and three dogs and has been voraciously reading romance books since before she was probably supposed to.

She loves cooking and trying new foods, traveling, and spending time with her boys—especially outdoors. Elsie has also become a big fan of her quiet five o'clock mornings, which is when most of her writing happens. It's during this time that she can sip a cup of hot coffee and dream up a fictional world full of romantic stories to share with her readers.

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