



Her Protector on Route 14

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Description: Can a stranded virgin heroine with a heart full of wonder soften the walls of a grumpy ranger who's spent years hiding from love? Thrown together by chance, their age gap becomes the least of their worries when her sunshine warmth collides with his protective alpha instincts and instalove sparks a connection neither of them expected but both secretly crave.

HOLLY

Stranded in the middle of nowhere wasn't the plan. Neither was being rescued by a grumpy ranger who looks like he stepped out of my fantasies. He barely speaks, but his gaze is like he's already undressed me. That kiss lit me up, but then he pulled away. Now, stuck together, I can't help but wonder if he wants me as badly as I want him.

TANNER

She was supposed to be a quick rescue, but her smile, the way she moves, it's messing with my control. I kissed her, and now I can't stop thinking about how her lips felt, how her body responded. She deserves someone who fits her life, but all I want is to pull her closer, feel her against me again. I should let her go, but damn, I don't know if I can stop myself from taking what's right in front of me.

Love Along Route 14 is a collection of 13 steamy romances from some of your favorite Romance short authors! This series is packed with secret billionaires, MC and mountain men, celebrities, and all the instalove to make her heart melt.

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Chapter 1 - Holly

Route 14 is even more breathtaking than the pictures promised. Rolling hills stretch endlessly into the horizon, and quaint little towns sit so close to the road it feels like I could slip into them for a heartbeat before they vanish in the rearview mirror. The sunsets—soft gold pouring behind dense tree lines—feel like inhaling deeply after being underwater for too long.

By day, it's rugged and wild. By night, pitch black, letting the stars blaze across the sky like diamonds scattered on velvet. Every so often, the landscape yields to a flicker of human life—small, subtle, and respectful of the land it shares.

It's wild, untouched beauty. The kind I could lose myself in for years, photographing every inch and still not capturing its soul.

And it's that beauty I try to focus on... while I stand in the heat, fanning myself next to a car that's decided now is the perfect time to break down.

I'm halfway between Saddleback and Heartstone, stranded on a stretch of desolate highway as the sun sinks lower, bleeding color into the sky. Normally, I'd lose myself in the beauty of it—the shifting shades, the quiet drama of dusk—but it's hard to enjoy the view when the heat feels like it's wringing the breath out of me.

My water's long gone. I've tied my reddish-brown shirt just under my breasts and twisted my dark hair into a knot on top of my head, anything for a bit of relief. If I had scissors, I would've turned these jeans into shorts thirty minutes ago—right around the time I admitted that I can't fix a steaming engine with wishful thinking

and pep talks.

Now I'm fanning myself with a travel guide, stealing glances at my car and praying my camera isn't overheating inside. As long as the camera's okay... everything else can wait. One problem at a time.

Traffic has thinned out, and with it, so has my sense of calm. I haven't seen another car in ages, and my phone is still stubbornly dead: no bars, no hope. Every sound makes me turn my head, pulse quickening.

I know Route 14 is patrolled. Rangers drive this stretch. I read that somewhere, and I've been holding onto it like a prayer. One of them has to pass by. Eventually.

When I hear the low, distant rumble of an engine, my heart leaps. I scan the horizon until I spot it—a truck cresting a small hill in the distance. The deer that had just stepped into view freeze, their ears flicking toward the sound.

I snap a photo quickly, just before they bound back into the woods.

Then my eyes go to the truck. It's slowing as it approaches. Ranger, the letters say on the side. My breath catches. Relief, sharp and sudden, washes over me.

Please let this be my break, I think as the truck pulls up behind my car. Then the door opens and the words I was going to say get stuck in my throat. My heart races in my chest and I feel like I'm getting my first crush all over again. Butterflies take off in my belly, making me a little nauseous and every ounce of confidence I swore I just had run off along with any coherent thought.

He's gorgeous and rugged, just like the land around us. He runs a large, thick hand over his short dark brown hair, tousling it further. His deep, steel blue eyes pin me immediately, knotting my tongue as he drinks me in. Despite his stoic face and the

slight downturn of his lips, his attention wraps around me like a caress.

He's big, muscular, and there's something safe about being near him. He adjusts his flannel shirt, rolling it up to his elbows showing more of his tan skin and just ... wow. All of him might be no-nonsense, but he wears it so well.

He'd wear anything well or ... wearing nothing, I think while trying to calm my immediate reaction to a stranger.

I'm still trying to hear my thoughts over my racing heart when he's standing right in front of me. My lips part, breath caught somewhere in my chest as I tilt my head back to meet his gaze. He's got to be at least eight inches taller than me, all lean strength and quiet power. He could be intimidating—should be—but somehow... he's not.

There's something grounded about him. Solid. Like he belongs out here more than the asphalt or the road signs ever did. It's as if the land itself carved him out of rock and pine, built him to survive—and to protect.

I shake my head and try to summon words. He clears his throat and looks past me to my open hood. "You called for a tow?"

"N-no. I don't have service," I say softly. "It um ... I'm Holly," I manage to get out.

He inclines his head, taps the embroidered nametag that says "Tanner," before rounding my vehicle to look at the engine. I follow, trying to will my mouth to work. Unlike the last tow truck driver I met, he doesn't say much. Tanner looks over my engine, checks the coolant, check the oil, grumbles something to himself, then pulls out his phone. I should be paying attention, but I'm still caught on him—on the way his rugged good looks pair so seamlessly with that no-nonsense focus. It's hard to wrap my head around it, the way he moves with purpose, like fixing this is just another thing he was built to do.

He looks at me while on the phone and motions to the vehicle.

I blink when I realize he's waiting for me to say something. I clear my throat and smile the best I can manage. "It started smoking. I didn't hear any weird noises. I had it checked before I started my drive and everything was good. I'm sure you know what's going on better than I do and you know what it needs."

He grunts and nods before relaying it to whoever's on the phone, but I swear I see something brighter in his eyes.

"If only cars could talk, then I'd know exactly what it needs," I say, laughing softly.

The corner of his mouth lifts slightly, but he just looks from me to the vehicle before replacing the caps on everything he's checked. "Twenty five? Fine."

"I'm actually trying to get to Oakrest Bay. I'm taking pictures along the way for a travel article about Route 14. I've been trying to find different stops along the way and just came from Saddleback," I continue rambling, trying to calm down and regain control over myself. I'm sure he doesn't care, he didn't ask, but it keeps me from staring and drooling over him.

"The tow truck is on its way." Tanner clears his throat and nods once. "I see. A photographer."

Four words. Four words and I feel lit up like fourth of July. The way he looks at me, like he can see my entire soul, his brooding intensity focused on me, it makes my heart skip a beat. I rub my chest and notice his eyes dip to my bare belly.

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“Yeah. Why just live in the moment and hope the memories measure up, right?” I ask with a smile. “Better to be present and preserve it.”

“Perhaps,” he murmurs, his gaze dragging over me like he doesn’t want to miss a single detail.

I almost cover up, but something about his gaze sets my skin on fire. I’ve been flirted with, I’ve had a few kisses, but the way his eyes darken as he drinks in every inch of me makes me feel sexy and seen in a way I’ve never felt before.

Five words, Holly, calm down, I insist.

“Grab anything important and bring it to the cab. If you need help, call me,” he says—firm and direct, like someone who’s used to being listened to. “There’s water in the cooler. Cool off. The tow truck should be here soon and then we will be free to go.”

I smile and rub my forearm. “Is there anything I can do to help? I mean, it’s my car, and you’re being really kind coming all the way out here.”

He looks at me, then toward the car. “It’s part of the job,” he says simply. Then, after a beat, “I’ll drive you into the next mechanic shop so you’re not stuck out here.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised by how much that simple offer steadies me. “Thank you.”

He nods once and turns back to the engine like it’s already settled.

I head to the driver's side, trying not to feel flustered.

It's just a ride. Just a ranger doing his job.

But somehow, it feels like more than that.

Chapter 2 - Tanner

I tell myself to focus. This is a job. It's always been just a job.

There are only ten of us covering the whole stretch of Route 14—from Florida to California. One ranger per state. One floater for backup. That's it. Not exactly the kind of setup where you can afford distractions.

But she is a distraction.

The moment I saw her, all sun-kissed skin and that bright, unguarded smile, something short-circuited in my brain. That kind of warmth—sweet, open, genuine—is rare out here. Too rare. And exactly the kind of thing someone could take advantage of if they pulled off on the wrong shoulder.

I should correct her—remind her to be more cautious, more guarded out here in the middle of nowhere. But I don't want to. I don't want to be the one who dims that light, that sparkle in her eyes that somehow makes this whole sunburned highway feel less lonely.

Holly is sexy—no denying that. Her toned frame, her tied-up shirt, those curves that would've caught my attention even if I hadn't been trying not to look.

But it's not just her body. It's something else. Something under my skin. Something dangerous.

Because I've driven this stretch a hundred times and never once felt what I'm feeling now.

And I haven't even heard her full story yet.

I glance over at her and nearly curse out loud.

She's bent over the passenger seat of her car, giving me a full view of her pert, round ass and those toned, gorgeous thighs—and now my brain is very much not focused on the job. I just met this woman. I shouldn't be thinking about her like this. But I am.

Lust? That's fine. Natural. Even imagining the feel of her hips pressed back against me, kissing along that soft, sun-warmed neck until I can get more of that fresh cookie scent she wears like a dare... Yeah, okay. A quick fantasy is tolerable. As long as it stays in my head.

She starts to stand, and I react without thinking—sliding my hand under the top of the door just in time to keep her from smacking her head. My knuckles take the hit instead.

I grunt, the dull throb pulsing through my fingers. Her eyes flash to mine, wide with surprise—and something else. She blushes.

"Sorry," she whispers. "I promise I'm not usually so... frazzled. I'm totally capable. Or I wouldn't be taking this trip on my own."

I nod once. Not because I doubt her. But because I do believe her.

And because I don't trust myself to speak while my mind's still stuck on how easily I could press her back into that seat and find out if she tastes as sweet as she smells.

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She nibbles her full bottom lip and I want to soothe her worry with a kiss. I don't know what it is about her. I want to pull her close, wrap myself around her, let her know exactly how safe she is with me. I want her to keep looking at me with that curiosity and softness like she's trying to figure out how to get closer to me.

Yet there's nothing scheming or manipulative about her.

She adjusts her backpack over her shoulder and grabs a duffle bag and clears her throat while pushing some escaped strands of her dark hair from her face.

Beautiful. Impossible to ignore. Like the softness of the sky at sunrise—something you don't expect to stop you in your tracks, but it does.

It's not just her looks. It's the way she talks, open and eager, like silence doesn't scare her. Like she's not trying to fill the space, just share it. No come-ons, no awkward flirtation, no frustration at how quiet I am. It's disarming. She's disarming.

That has to be why my heart's pounding when she reaches for my hand—small fingers brushing mine, her brows furrowed with concern as she looks at my knuckles and murmurs another apology.

It shouldn't affect me like this. But it does.

That's why a flicker of pride stirs in my gut when she climbs into my truck without hesitation—like she trusts me to handle things, to take care of her.

It's not affection. Can't be. That would be irrational. I've only just met her. I'm still in

control, and control means staying logical—no matter how flushed my skin feels or how strong the urge is to follow her, offer her water, and make sure she's comfortable.

It's just... her. The easy way she carries herself. The softness in her voice. That calm, sunny presence that sneaks past my defenses before I can brace myself. She's got a way of pulling focus—making it hard to remember what I'm supposed to be doing.

It doesn't. Twenty minutes later, it pulls in right on time. They hook everything up with practiced ease and drive off after I hand them the keys.

With nothing left to keep my hands busy or my thoughts distracted, I turn back to my truck—where she's waiting. And suddenly, the quiet feels a lot louder.

I pull myself into the driver seat. I expected her perfume to fill the entire cab until it was overwhelming, but it's not, it lingers in the air like a tease that makes impossible to ignore her. My mouth waters and I'm tempted to lean over and...Stop Tanner, you can't act as a horny teenager! I remind myself harshly.

"We'll follow the tow truck to the nearest garage," I say. "Unless you'd rather ride with him."

"No, this is great. Thank you, Tanner, really. I appreciate this," she says.

"It's my job," I say, not sure if I'm reminding myself or her.

She reaches over and gently touches my hand. When my gaze drops to her hand, she draws back and clears her throat. "Sorry. You can tell me when I overstep. I've been spending so much time on the road that I may be forgetting the basics of social interactions."

Holly laughs at herself and rubs her thighs. I take a slow breath. She's talkative, but oddly, I don't mind it. I clear my throat, trying to rebuild my defenses so I don't let whatever attraction I feel bloom into more.

I nearly scoff at myself. It's going to take more than my usual defenses to shove her out of my mind and to shake her effortless warmth from my system. I'm in control and that's how things are going to stay.

"So photography brought you to Route 14?" I ask after we've driven about four minutes in silence.

"Yes. I wanted to chart the beauty of a cross country trip. I didn't start in Bluebell Point, I started a little further North in Florida, almost right on the state line to Georgia. I know that there are some great stops like Cusp Hollow, Georgia, and Rustic Plains, but I wanted to stop a few more places. Tennessee is so beautiful and the little side roads, the hidden towns and attractions, the look outs ... I'm rambling aren't I?"

"I don't mind," I say honestly.

She grins, the little dimple in her cheek showing again. She leans closer to me. "Saddleback was beautiful, but I'm excited to see it all. I haven't heard much about Heartstone."

"Then you're in luck, that's likely where we're headed."

"That far?" She asks, eyes opening wide. "Oh, Tanner. There's kindness and then there's me owing you."

Turning, I blink at her. "That's where the best mechanic is."

“Is this really what Rangers do?”

“I’m one of ten Patrolling Rangers for Route 14. We go up and route the route. There’s always one per state and a floater. We have a few regular stops at federal accommodations,” I answer as simply as I can.

Holly shifts in her seat, her arm brushing mine. She leans in, giving me her full attention and I find myself paying more attention to her than the road. She fills all my senses even when I’m not looking at her.

“What about families? Holidays? Don’t you get time off to enjoy homelife?” she presses.

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“I can’t speak for all the guys, but I don’t have family. I’d rather be a bit of a nomad and see more,” I answer.

“Basically a cowboy,” she quips.

I roll my eyes, but the corner of my mouth lifts.

“I get it, though. How can you really decide where to live unless you see everything the Country offers? Florida and Tennessee are shockingly different. I’m sure each section of road has different beauty to offer.”

I nod once. “How’d you get into photography?”

She lights up instantly, like I just handed her the perfect question. She tells me about her grandmother—the one who photographed everything—and how, the first time she was handed a camera, it felt like being knighted.

She fills the ride with stories, all warmth and animation, and I realize this is how she shares herself—not through silence or stillness, but through details and laughter. I listen like I’m hearing a favorite book being read aloud. Her voice is steady, soothing—better than anything the radio could offer—and the longer she talks, the more I want her to keep going.

By the time we turn off the highway and roll into Heartstone, there’s a heaviness in my chest I didn’t expect.

I’m going to miss that dimpled smile. The way she smells like fresh cookies. The

sound of her voice filling the quiet like it belongs there.

And the ache that thought leaves behind?

Yeah. That surprises me the most.

Chapter 3 - Holly

My throat is dry from talking so much. I keep waiting for Tanner to tell me to be quiet, but he doesn't. Whenever I stop he motions for me to continue or asks another question about me, my trip, the things I've liked most or what I want to see. His questions are always short and to the point, but the fact he's asking makes me feel vibrant and glowing.

By the time he slows for a single stop light, I realize exactly how long I've been speaking for. The sun has set and streetlights glow in a warm yellow light. My gaze slowly slips to Tanner. He looks so big in this truck and lit by the red light ... I'm picturing him popping the buttons on his flannel and doing a body roll like in some TikTok videos I've seen.

I lick my bottom lip and force myself to look away. I shouldn't be thinking about him like this, wondering what it would be like to climb onto his lap, feel his breath across my lips, his tongue dragging along my ear before he says something low and hot while guiding me closer against him.

My whole body buzzes with lust in a way I was sure only existed in movies and books, but there's more. Because I want to make him laugh. I want to earn that half smile again and again.

Tanner starts to go forward, then a vehicle runs the light and his arm shoots out in front of me, grazing my breasts as he holds me in place. He lets out a soft curse as my

heart stutters in my chest. He clears his throat and I realize I'm grabbing my thigh as his arm drops.

"Are you okay?" he asks softly.

"Yeah, fine. I um, I've been in cities where people do worse," I whisper.

His jaw tightens and it ends our conversation. He only speaks again when he pulls into a mechanic shop. "Petyon and Wyatt will take care of your vehicle. They're the best I know."

"That's great. Thank you," I say.

I feel like a broken record, thanking him over and over. It's like I've forgotten how to talk to an attractive man.

Which is ridiculous. I'm twenty-four—not sixteen. But I haven't had a real relationship since high school. College came first, then work, and somewhere along the way, dating just... faded out. The few times I did try? I was told I was too much. Too sweet. Too naïve. Some guys got irritated when I didn't sleep with them right away, like basic respect came with a timer.

Tanner probably senses it—maybe not the full story, but enough. The way I stumble over my words, the way I keep fidgeting and thanking him like I've never been shown this kind of kindness before.

That must be why he's being so patient. So gentle.

Even if it feels like he's cast a spell on me... I know he's just doing his job. Right?

We get out and I glance at the sign reading Miller Car Restoration, then glance at the

tow truck unloading my vehicle here. Tanner doesn't pause until he realizes I'm not following him. He glances back at me and waits for me to catch up to him, then walks right to the garage.

A woman with bright red hair is currently wiping her greasy hands on a towel. I blink a few times. She looks like a model when it comes to her face, but her clothing is obviously oversized and her glasses keep slipping down her nose. Her hair is up in a messy bun that she tugs while grumbling.

Tanner clears his throat and she stands up, tossing the rag and adjusting her jeans. "We're closed."

"You're here," Tanner says, but there's a teasing tone to his voice and a fondness in his eyes that seems to soften his whole face. "That means you're open."

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The girl turns and laughs. “Well, for you, I am.”

She flashes a huge, perfect smile and walks over, punching his shoulder. Then she notices me. Her eyes flick between Tanner and me and he clears his throat. “Her car was towed here.”

“Always playing the doting hero, aren’t you?” She asks while shaking her head.

He grumbles something I can’t quite hear and the girl rolls her eyes before reaching out a hand to me. “I’m Peyton. Let’s see what we’re working with.”

Tanner answers a few questions, but Peyton keeps teasing him. “Oh yeah, Tanner? You just happened to be on call? Uh-huh, because that’s not your signature move or anything.”

He rolls his eyes and she bumps his hip, drawing another wry, almost smile from him. He elbows her lightly and she snorts. “You see this, not even a hug. It’s like he’s not fully human.”

“Don’t start that again,” he orders.

“Yeah, if I didn’t remember you pouting while covered in mud, I might be intimidated,” she says.

Something about the fondness between them, the reactions that she gets from Tanner and how close they seem makes me feel ...jealous. It’s stupid. I just met the man. He’s barely said anything to me, but I’m frustrated and feel like I need to get his

attention back.

Instead, I play with my fingers in front of me. This feels like a private moment for them, but here I am, interrupting and trying to calm my reaction. He's not mine to tease or play around with. He's just a man doing his job.

"Tell Holly, not me," Tanner says, pulling me from my thoughts.

"It's going to take a few days for me to get to your vehicle and repair it properly. I recommend booking a room. The Nighty Nigh B&B is the best place to go," Peyton says.

Tanner nods in confirmation and motions to me. "I'll take you."

I bite my bottom lip to avoid saying thanks again. Peyton calls out as he and I walk away. "Tanner, be a good guy and help her enjoy town while she's here!"

"You don't have to," I say seriously. "You've already done more than enough."

"You want to take photos and it's better to go around with someone who knows the best places," he answers as if it's that simple.

He takes me to the lobby of the cozy, rustic B&B. It has modern elements that don't pull away from the hominess of the place. Once I book a room, I turn to Tanner. "I should get your phone number then."

He arches an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"If you're going to be my tour guide, I think it's necessary," I remind with a slight smile.

He nods once and pulls out his phone. A quiet wave of self-consciousness creeps in—I'm sure someone like Peyton wouldn't stumble over her words or second-guess every move like I do. But I push the thought aside. I probably just need some sleep.

So after we exchange numbers, I head to my room and settle in, hoping a little space and rest will help clear my head.

Chapter 4 - Tanner

As safe as Heartstone is, it's not safe for a girl like Holly. Plenty of people would want to take advantage of her and I can't allow that, with or without Peyton's teasing order. I tell myself that's the only reason why I show up in the morning to show her around town, but I know it's not.

There's something about Holly that keeps me coming back to her. I just can't seem to resist. I like her smile and being near her ... it's calming in a way that's unfamiliar and addictive at the same time.

Holly shows up in another pair of jeans that hug her figure and show off her gorgeous legs with a casual olive green top that makes her eyes brighter and emphasizes her curves naturally. I want to groan just looking at her as her hair waves over her shoulders.

I show her downtown—a short stretch of old brick buildings, quiet and charming—and she lights up, insisting on taking photos. Her expression shifts from bright excitement to focused concentration in a heartbeat, but she never loses that underlying softness.

When I notice her shifting positions, angling her body just slightly, I frown.

“It's to get the right lighting,” she says, catching my look with a quick smile.

As she moves along the sidewalk, explaining different angles and shadows, I find myself subtly guiding her—correcting where she walks so she's closer to the buildings while I keep to the edge of the street.

When other people pass by and stare too long, I shoot them a look that makes them think twice. They veer around her, giving her space, making damn sure they don't bump into her.

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She might be focused on the light. But I'm watching everything else.

"Holly," I say, aware I'm interrupting her, but unable to resist.

"Yes, Tanner?" She asks.

"I think it's best that I travel with you to the end of the route. I can pick up a ride back with one of my colleagues, but it's not safe for you to go alone," I inform.

She blinks at me. "Oh ... um ..."

"As long as you're comfortable sharing your car with me," I clarify.

"Yeah!" She says quickly. "I am, I mean ... if it breaks down, you're good to have around and I like your company." She blushes and looks away before touching her stomach. "So... what do you recommend for food?"

"Kathy's Diner," I say with a nod. "Best pie in town."

She asks me about my job as we take the fifteen-minute walk to the diner. Her questions are direct and clear, different from how she answers mine. She wants to know how many towns I know this well, my favorite places to travel, and so on. I give her short answers, but she doesn't press me for more.

That needles me for some reason. I want her to want to know me; right, wrong, or strange, that's what I want. I've known her less than twenty-four hours but I just insisted on a cross country trip with her because I selfishly want more time with her.

I'm planning to monopolize her time while she's here. It's insanity.

Worse, Holly doesn't expect me to do a thing for her – opening doors, guiding her around puddles, guiding her away from dangerous streets – she nearly ignores it all. Her independence is almost as charming as her rambling. She hurries to the door, confusing me, then I realize she's holding the door open for an elderly couple. They thank her and she immediately asks them how long they've been together and if they're having a good day.

My lips twitch up as she lingers by the door, still waiting for me. Her eyes meet mine and she waves me in. I grab the next door and she smiles. "You're such a gentleman."

I would be if she let me.

When we sit down to eat, Kathy sashes over in her 1950's inspired pink outfit. Her hair is pulled back and her white apron is starkly clean. "How's life treating you, sugar?"

"Shockingly well," Holly answers without missing a beat. "How are you?"

I don't bother to pick up my menu. I'm going to get the Club Special, but I'm curious to see Holly interact with others. She goes out of her way to be polite and to keep a genuine smile on Kathy's face while asking about options.

Kathy points at me. "What looks good, hon?"

"The Club Special," I state.

"Ooh, that sounds great. I'll have it as well. Thank you," Holly says before collecting both our menus and offering them to Kathy.

“Are you always so sweet?” I ask.

Holly blinks a few times and shrugs. “I prefer being cheerful and optimistic. I think it makes life better.”

There’s something she’s not saying, but before I can press, our drinks are brought over and Holly’s smile is back in place. She points at me. “You got plenty out of me yesterday. My new mission is to learn all about you.”

“I’m shockingly simple, not very interesting,” I dismiss.

“That’s what the most interesting people always say,” Holly insists. “You travel for work and get to meet new people constantly. I’d rather listen to your stories than eat in silence.”

When she gives me that dimple smile it’s hopeless to refuse. Then she wraps her lips around her straw, hollowing her cheeks while watching me and the move is so innocent and sexy that I’m starting to wonder if I can deny this woman anything at all.

Chapter 5 - Holly

The last day and a half with Tanner has been amazing. He makes every street and site feel safe, saves me from tripping when I’m more focused on my camera and getting the perfect shot rather than what’s around me. Now we’re at a gorgeous park: Lover’s Stroll Park. The trees are heavy with green leaves, wildflowers bloom wherever they find the room, there are secluded trails and open walkways along with benches, a stretch of grass perfect for picnics, and the constant sounds of birds and bubbling creeks.

“This is paradise, Tanner!” I say brightly. “I don’t have the words.”

He smiles, actually smiles, it's quick, gentle and draws me deeper into his orbit. He taps my camera where it rests on my chest and says, "I thought it would be picture-worthy."

You're picture-worthy, I think as my cheeks warm. I lift my camera and take a few shots, framing the scene through the lens. Then I feel his hand—warm and steady—as he gently takes mine. I blink up at him, startled.

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“I’m going to show you the best view,” he says, voice low and certain. My heart slams against my ribs, the camera suddenly forgotten.

No matter what I think or feel, I don’t think it’s possible to be ready for this man or his hidden warmth. When I realize he’s charging forward with purpose, I laugh. He slows his pace and glances at me with an eyebrow raised.

“You’re a man on a mission ... in a park,” I tease before giggling again.

“I’m determined,” he explains.

“Constantly, I know, but we can enjoy the moment, unless ...” I trail off and doubt threatens to open a trap door into insecurity. “Unless you have somewhere else more interesting to be.”

“I don’t, Holly,” he says, his voice lingering on my name in a way that makes my chest squeeze.

I squeeze his hand and slow our pace. “Then why don’t we savor this? We’re both out of our cars, without a time limit. Let’s enjoy it.”

He watches me a moment longer. “Are you saying you haven’t been enjoying our time together?”

“Isn’t it obvious that I have been?”

“You’re constantly upbeat and optimistic, it’s hard for me to believe you’d ever

admit to not having a good time,” he says.

“Oh,” I whisper.

“It’s not a bad thing, I just don’t want to assume with you,” he clarifies. “Now, let’s go, the bridge is safe.”

He leads me to a narrow, rickety-looking bridge that stretches over a shallow creek. It looks questionable at best—thin, weathered wood and just enough sway to make me hesitate.

But it held Tanner’s weight, and Tanner’s already made it very clear he wouldn’t let anything happen to me. So I follow, placing my steps where his just were, trusting him more than I probably should.

At the center, he pauses and motions behind us. “Look.”

I turn, raise my camera, and snap the shot. The view is stunning—sunlight cutting through the trees, the winding creek below, a stillness that feels almost sacred.

“What’s made you so quiet?” he asks after a beat. “That focused on the birds?”

“They are lovely,” I say, stepping off the trail and leaning gently against a large oak tree. “Even if they keep hiding in the leaves.”

“Holly,” Tanner says, his tone shifting as he steps closer “Tell me.”

I curl a lock of hair around my finger. “I know that I can be a little much sometimes. My dad says I’m constantly overcompensating. I don’t want to be a burden to you.”

Tanner’s brow furrows.

Clearing my throat, I glance around like I'm about to tell him the world's biggest secret and take a slow breath. "I feel like I'm not enough unless I'm making other people happy. It's not enough to simply exist. I always worry I'm just the ... extra person, a burden unless I have something to add which ..."

He takes another step towards me.

"It means I talk too much and overshare sometimes, I suppose. If I'm too quiet, I'm afraid I'll be overlooked or people will realize I'm not living up to the potential that everyone said I had when I was younger. If I talk too much .. at least I know what criticism to expect from others," I explain.

Tanner's lips turn down and he moves closer to me, resting his back against the same oak I am, his arm brushing mine as his fingers purposely play with mine. "Anyone who says you're too much is too used to being around lesser people."

I look up at him and prepare my argument, but he continues, "You're more than enough, exactly as you are. Vibrant, genuinely kind, and open to new experiences. That's ... astounding in the world we live in."

"You're the kind one. You've taken me to all these wonderful places, you keep going out of your way for me even though you have no reason to. And doing that after choosing a job that keeps you in solitude ..." I trail off, then turn towards him. "Why did you choose this job?"

He turns to face me as well and searches my face for something before very gently touching my cheek so close to my lip that I'm tempted to turn and run my lips over his fingers.

"I like solitude," he murmurs. "When you get used to being alone, losing someone doesn't hurt as much."

“Tanner,” I breathe.

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“Being in the military, seeing friends, innocent people ... I don’t regret going into battle, I only regret not being able to help more, to bring more people home. It eats at me, less now, but ...” he hesitates. “I realize how it sounds. I appreciate my friendships and it’s not PTSD that’s fully encouraged my lifestyle, but it allows me more control, makes me feel safer.”

I don’t realize I’ve moved closer to him until his hand spreads over my cheek and his thumb strokes the corner of my mouth as my breasts rub against his chest.

“Being alone is a different kind of hurt and loss, based on my experience. But if that’s how you feel comfortable, who’s to say you’re wrong?” I murmur. “But it’s a shame.”

“Why?” he asks, eyes lifting from my lips to my eyes.

“I think you have so much to offer people and the world. So we’re the ones missing out, even if you’re not,” I answer.

“Holly ...” he trails off and shakes his head. I think he’s going to say more, but he leans in until our noses brush. My lips part and he shudders. “I swear, you’re just right.”

Chapter 6 - Tanner

Her eyes dip to my lips and she leans in against me. That’s the yes I need. I kiss her slowly, gently, giving her time to pull away, to say no, to push against me, but instead, she pulls me closer, squeezing my hand and rubbing my hip. My hand slides

into her hair as her lips part with mine. I change the angle and kiss her again, gently licking into her mouth.

She tastes so damn good, is so responsive, molding herself to me and panting against my lips as she grips my shirt and stands on her toes to kiss me deeper. Groaning, I lick across her tongue and feel her echo the move, following my lead as if it's the most natural thing in the world.

I've had to face it—I care about her. More than I should. More than what makes sense. It's not just affection. It's something deeper, something instant and possessive, like my body already decided she's mine before my mind had a chance to argue.

She fits here—with me. Whether she's charming strangers with that soft smile or nervously tucking her hair behind her ear, she belongs. I want to be the one who catches her when she's unsure, the one who carries her burdens so she never has to feel the weight alone.

But then there's the truth I can't shake: I'm too damn old for her. Fourteen years between us. She's twenty-four. Bright, beautiful, just stepping into her life.

And I... I should know better.

When she kisses me, shy and curious, her tongue gently tasting mine, it nearly undoes me. My hands ache to pull her closer, to claim what every instinct says is already mine. But I force myself to draw back.

As sweet as she tastes, as right as she feels in my arms... I can't lose control. Not now.

Because loving her might be the most natural thing in the world...

But letting myself have her? That would be selfish.

It doesn't matter that my dick is hard and I'm wishing she wore a dress so I could make her moan the way she deserves with my hand between her thighs. I grunt as I draw back. Holly's eyes slowly open and she pants while still holding me closer.

I very gently put some space between us. I don't want her upset. After a moment, her brow furrows. I rub my jaw. "I shouldn't have taken advantage of you."

"You – you didn't," she argues, tugging on my hand. "You didn't, Tanner. I wanted to kiss you."

"I want you to feel safe with me, especially since I invited myself on your trip."

"I am, I promise. I've never felt safer," she insists.

Since I recognize the lust in her eyes – it echoes my own – I don't know what to say. If we keep this up, I won't want to stop. I already feel too much for her, but I'm not ready to change my life, to commit to a relationship with her and simply being physical with her isn't an option.

"Let me take you back to the B&B," I say, my voice quieter than I mean it to be. "I'll check on your car and follow up with work."

Her expression flickers. "Oh," she says, pulling her hand from mine with a softness that stings. "Yeah... okay."

We walk back in silence. The kind that feels heavy. The kind that grows between two people who almost said something but didn't.

The truck ride is just as quiet. When I park outside the B&B, I hesitate, then clear my

throat. “I hope you have a good night, Holly. Today was... pleasant.”

She repeats the word like she’s testing it. “Pleasant.”

Then she gives me a smile—polite, pretty, but missing that dimple I’ve grown far too attached to.

“It was,” she says. “Thanks for everything. And if you get called away for work, don’t worry—I’ll sort a taxi or something to pick up the car.”

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I hate the thought of her relying on someone other than me, but I nod. I make sure she gets to her room before I leave, annoyed with myself for letting the kiss happen. I'm more annoyed that I stopped it, but it's better to avoid getting too tangled up in her when it's already so tempting to follow, knock on her door, and kiss her again so she doesn't get a moment to think that she's not enough – especially for me.

Instead of letting that thought get the best of me, I make myself go to my accomodation after trying to cool down. My dick hasn't gotten the memo though. Even after a cold shower, I can't forget her soft lips molding to mine, the tentative way she followed my lead, how entirely she gave herself over in just one kiss.

I'm hard, frustrated in more than one way, and need an outlet. I glance at my cock, lay down, and slide my hand down my body as my eyes close. I curl my fingers around my dick and think of Holly.

I could go back to the B&B, knock on her door, and I'd find her just as riled and worked up as I am. She'd be in a robe and nothing else, take one look at me and welcome me in. The second the door shuts, she'd be in my arms, welcoming my hands to explore every inch of her while she pulls at my clothes turning one kiss into a plenty of foreplay.

"Holly," I pant as I stroke myself faster, imagining her slowly dropping to her knees and asking me to guide her.

I'd bundle her soft hair in my hand and slowly ease my cock between her plump lips, watching her cheeks hollow as she sucks me, her green eyes staying focused on my face. Her slick, soft tongue working across my cock, teasing me with equal parts

innocence and passion while moaning for me.

So responsive. So warm. So ...

I groan and submit to the fantasy. Gripping Holly's hair and guiding her over every inch of my cock, feeling her throat tighten again and again while she tightens her hold on me until that determined glint in her eyes shines, telling me she's not letting me stop until I finish.

I hiss and come, panting and slowing my thrusts while picturing her swallowing for me. After a few seconds of bliss, I force my eyes open. This is why I stopped the kiss. Holly's too addictive, she's too tempting in ways I don't know how to process and if I get another taste of her, I don't think I'll be able to let her go.

Chapter 7 - Holly

It's been two days since I've seen Tanner. I figured I'd be able to process my feels after the kiss that left me hot and overwhelmed. It's stayed with me, lingered in my mind and set my pre-bedtime fantasies on fire.

Tanner: Your car is ready. Pick you up in ten?

Hesitating, I slowly type back 'Okay.' I don't know what else there is to say. We kissed, he pulled away, and he made it clear he doesn't want more. I'm sure that it's just my lips that are still buzzing with the desire for more. He must be fine.

I repack my bag, happy I took advantage of the laundry service and clean up my room a bit, not wanting to make more work for the maids. After getting everything taken care of that I can think of, I rub some of my vanilla lotion on and try to cool my nerves while heading to the lobby to check out.

Tanner, true to his word, takes me to Miller's Car Restoration and Repair, then talks over things with Peyton while I pay. Before the guy behind the counter – Wyatt according to his name tag – can offer anything, Tanner's hand brands my lower back. His heat sinks through my shirt and I instinctively push into it.

“Are you ready?” he asks, his voice lower, rougher—dropping just enough to make my heart skip.

He still wants to come with me? I wasn't expecting that—not really. I figured after everything, the kiss, the distance, the silence... he'd pull back for good. California's far. Even the next stop is two full days away.

I just stare at him, unsure if I heard right.

He lifts an eyebrow, waiting.

“You... you still want to go with me?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I said I did,” he replies, steady and unreadable.

That was days ago. Everything's changed since then. “And you haven't changed your mind?”

“No,” he says simply. Then adds, “Have you?”

I shake my head slowly. What's the harm anyway. We'll both have to drive and since one of us will have to be awake and at the wheel, it's not like anything can happen. He's not going to kiss me again. I won't ask about it. It happened and neither of us needs to think about it again.

Asking is a way to get hurt. He'll tell me I'm not enough, that my kissing didn't

measure up. Worse, he'll be shockingly nice and tell me it was good, but he doesn't want anything serious or anything else. He likes his solitude after all.

"I'll drive first," I say when he tries to go for the driver seat. "You just relax."

He nods once. "We should stop at a convenience store and get some snacks and drinks for the road."

That's exactly what we do. At first, the ride is quiet. I turn up the radio, needing the noise, but he reaches over and turns it down, his tone calm. "Crack the windows. You liked the birds and the wind at the park. You'll hear more out here."

He's right, of course. It is peaceful—but sitting in silence with him makes it harder to keep ignoring what's been left unsaid.

Not talking about it is starting to feel heavier than just saying something. But it's a no-win conversation either way, so I stay quiet and chew my bottom lip instead.

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“So...” I say, searching for a lighter thread, “what was your first vehicle?”

Tanner glances over, arches a brow, but answers. Every question I toss his way, he meets it head-on. And when I ask if I’m prying too much, he just rolls his eyes and turns the questions back on me.

It’s surprisingly easy—natural, even.

Until he asks, “And what would your boyfriend think of this trip?”

The question drops like a stone in my chest, and suddenly the open windows don’t feel like enough air.

I brake too hard—ten feet before the stop sign—and we both jolt forward. It’s a clumsy, too-sudden reaction, and I immediately regret it. The kind of move someone makes when they feel guilty. Which I’m not.

I open my mouth to say something, anything to cover the awkwardness, but Tanner’s already leaning over, pressing a steady hand to my shoulder.

“Holly, are you okay?” His voice is sharp, concerned, not angry.

My heart’s pounding for all the wrong reasons, and the fact that his hand is so close to my collarbone isn’t helping. I can barely meet his eyes.

“I’m fine,” I whisper. “I just—That question caught me off guard.”

His gaze doesn't let up. "Answer it."

I stare at him. "I don't have a boyfriend," I say firmly. "I wouldn't have kissed you if I did."

His expression softens, just a little. "Ikissed you."

"Well... I didn't stop you." I huff a breath and glance away, trying not to sound like a flustered teenager. "And you're the one checking me like I broke something."

He gently brushes my collar aside, eyes narrowing at the faint red mark across my shoulder. "You've got a mark. Seatbelt maybe?"

"It's nothing," I say quickly. "Won't even bruise. I'm okay. Really."

"Do you want me to drive?" he asks, still watching me too closely.

"No," I say, putting my hands back on the wheel. "I've got it."

The silence settles thick again until I can't take it. I grab a Skittle from the center console and toss it at him. It bounces off his chest.

He catches the next one midair without flinching.

"I haven't had a boyfriend in a while," I mutter. "Not great at dating. I've been told I'm too much. Or too... prude."

"A prude?" he repeats, glancing at me like he misheard.

My face floods with heat. "Forget I said anything. Just—hand me the Skittles."

He sets the big bag of Skittles over the cupholders. I grab a handful, munching in silence for a few beats—then toss one at him.

He stares at me for a long moment, completely unamused. I just shrug. “What? Don’t tell me you’ve never been on a real road trip. You know, thefunkind.”

I turn my attention back to the road—until a Skittle lands right in my lap.

When I glance over, he’s looking out the window like he had nothing to do with it, jaw tight, expression neutral. Not fooling anyone.

I keep teasing him, tossing another his way. Eventually, he gives in and starts returning fire. It turns into a back-and-forth game that fills the cab with low laughter and color and something lighter than anything we’ve felt since this all started.

Then a song comes on the radio. Smooth, sultry, a little suggestive.

I grin and sing along without thinking, swaying slightly in my seat to the rhythm, letting the fun of the moment carry me.

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It's only when I catch Tanner not turning the volume down that I realize—he's watching me. And he's not pretending anymore.

He puts a skittle on his tongue as he watches me, eyes darting over my body, then he clears his throat.

“Do you know the song?” I ask softly.

“I do.”

“Do you like the song?”

“More so now,” he answers, his lips turning up in a half-smile as his eyes flick back to me. “You could convince me to like the radio.”

I nibble my bottom lip and shake my head, trying to shakehimout of my thoughts. I need to focus on the road, not the way he makes my skin feel too tight.

Not on how much I'd rather havehimtasting me instead of a Skittle. Not on how much I want him to lean over and kiss me at every red light and empty intersection.

If he wanted to, he would, I remind myself.

It's the mantra I cling to—the one thing keeping me from reaching across the cab, from humiliating myself and proving what I already suspect deep down: that I'm not enough for someone like him.

Not bold enough. Not experienced enough. Just... not enough.

Chapter 8 - Tanner

Sleeping next to Holly in her car was its own kind of hell.

The soft little sounds she made in her sleep—barely-there moans slipping between steady breaths—wrapped around me like a fever. I kept my eyes shut, but I was dying to peek, just to see if she was touching herself. The image alone was enough to have me clenching my fists, practically aching to take the edge off.

And now, the morning isn't any easier.

I'm driving, trying to focus on the road, but Holly takes a bite of her breakfast sandwich and lets out another quiet moan—this one totally innocent, completely unintentional, and somehow worse.

She must've freshened up while I was pumping gas. She changed into a flowy little dress that barely grazes her knees, and every time it shifts, it teases me with just enough skin to wreck my focus.

This drive is heaven and hell in equal measure. I want to reach over. I want another excuse to touch her—any excuse. I want to kiss her until she forgets how to breathe and let her moan against my mouth instead of into her pillow or over a damn sandwich.

But that would cross a line. And I know it.

I'm the one who pulled away. I'm the one who told myself she's too young, that we barely know each other. That this thing between us is too new. Too risky.

And nothing's really changed.

Except now I know she's single. And I still don't know if I'm ready for a relationship—especially one that could stretch across state lines.

But what I do know? I've never wanted anything so badly and told myself I couldn't have it.

“Oh! There's a sign!” Holly says excitedly.

I roll the windows further down. Her A/C is dying and weak, making it hot in the car. Or maybe it's just being around her. Either way, my control is slipping, the tension is so thick I'm tempted to feast on it.

“Fifty miles,” I agree.

“Think we can make it that long?” She asks. “Without the radio and minimal healthy snacks?”

“We can find a way to entertain ourselves,” I say.

Holly meets my eyes and looks away while trying to hide her smirk. I clear my throat. I'm not sure how to entertain someone else while driving. I don't know what she does, or if she can take photos, but I recommend that and tell her about Rustic Junction. There's a love hotel, everything has a Wild West theme to it and it's a unique place with plenty of photo opportunities and things to enjoy.

She asks plenty of questions, asks what my favorite places are, and keeps leaning closer. I know she's tired. We only got about four hours of sleep. Which somehow leads to her falling asleep on my shoulder, her breath rushing across my neck until it takes work to focus on the road because I'd rather focus on her.

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Holly makes a soft sound and nuzzles my neck. I should be strong enough to push her away. I should ease her back into her own seat or wake her up considering we're turning into town. She'll want to explore, want to point out interesting spots she'd like to see, and really make the most of the options she has for photos and excitement.

At the same time, a part of me is eager to get to the hotel so we can book different rooms and I can take care of myself the way I need. When I slow to a stop at the single red light in town, she stirs, her lips dragging across my skin, plush and soft. Her nose wrinkles and she slowly sits up, leaning back in her seat.

"Oh, Tanner. I ... I'm sorry. I didn't snore, did I?"

"No," I say softly.

"Oh wow, we're here! Why didn't you wake me up?"

Because I didn't want to stop feeling your breath on me. Because having you asleep next to me felt too damn good.

I want to say that. Instead, I just shrug, playing it off like it's nothing. "You looked comfortable."

Just like that her bubbly energy returns. She points out the old saloon, the signs that we clearly need to see because they're a list of things to do, and people with cameras.

"This place is already so popular!"

"For ghost hunters," I reply. "A niche. They say the Rustic Love Hotel is haunted."

Plenty say that it was an old brothel.”

“Well if it’s a ‘Love Hotel’ then I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s something else the ghost hunters are hearing,” she teases.

I barely suppress my smirk. “So that’s where your mind went? You’ve got a dirty streak hiding behind that innocent face.”

“I would think that with any hotel honestly. Unless the whole place is empty,” she teases.

“It’s still relatively early. We can check in then go to the saloon. Perhaps we can find a horse for you to ride.”

“I’m not much of a rider,” she whispers.

My eyes flick to hers, and she immediately clears her throat, face flushing. “Oh myGod. Now everything I say is going to sound like some kind of innuendo.”

I bite back a grin as she rushes on. “Anyway! I’d totally watchyouride. It’d make a great photo. Especially if you had a hat—you’d pass for a cowboy, no question.”

I’m tempted to ask her if that’s the kind of roleplay she likes, but remind myself again that’s not important because we’re not going to be acting on anything like that. She won’t play the eager brothel worker and I won’t play the exhausted cowboy that’s been on the road too long to remember how to connect.

“Let’s check in first and head to the saloon for food,” I suggest.

“We’re getting you a hat either way,” she teases.

I roll my eyes, but after we check into two separate rooms, she spots a cowboy hat in the lobby and insists on buying it for me.

When she flashes that big, dimpled smile and says it'll "accentuate my rugged look," I don't stand a chance. I put it on.

The way she looks at me—eyes bright, clearly pleased with herself—does something I don't want to name yet. But I know one thing: there's no comparison to how it feels knowing I'm the reason she's smiling like that.

I tip the brim of the hat with a smirk and say, "Much obliged, little lady," in my best cowboy drawl.

She bursts into laughter, full and unguarded, and lifts her camera to capture the moment.

Today might be a long one, but it's already better than I expected.

Chapter 9 - Holly

A hot shower, being out of the car, and Tanner refusing to take off that damn cowboy hat—even after I offered to wear it myself—makes Rustic Junction feel like something out of a dream.

He looks entirely too good in it—gruff, rugged, completely in his element. And somehow, that hat makes it worse. Or better.

I'm getting amazing photos, sure, but having Tanner walk beside me, pointing out spots I would've missed, sharing stories about his life, asking about mine—it makes the whole place feel more alive. More personal.

“Do I get to see any of these photos?” he asks, voice low and steady.

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I glance up and give him a playful look, then motion him closer. “Only if you promise not to judge my angles.”

He steps in, so close he blocks the sun—casting me in his shadow like the rest of the world’s been temporarily put on pause. I scroll through the latest shots, pretending to focus, until his hand brushes mine.

The contact is barely there, but it sends a current straight through me.

“If you didn’t already do this for a career, it’s exactly what I’d tell you to do,” he murmurs. “You said you capture memories like this.”

“I do,” I whisper.

He shakes his head and taps my finger. “No, you create art, Holly. It’s astounding.”

My eyes dip into the photo. The saloon, the horses parading with small passengers, the saloon girls all dressed up and the glint of the sun glowing in the corner and altering the color give it a sepia tint that I didn’t expect.

“Well...it came out even better than I thought,” I whisper, I turn to the next one, it’s one of Tanner, backlit by the low sun, leaning against the railing while trying to get me to pet horses. “And this one.”

“Is just for you,” he says, low in my ear. “I don’t want to be in a magazine or online.”

Something intimate and hot slips along my veins as I turn to meet his eyes. “If it’s

one of the best, how am I supposed to resist?”

“Are you saying I need to pay you to keep it private?” He asks.

I really want to ask him to kiss me for it, but instead, I say we should go back to the saloon, that we both need a cool drink and some food. He arches an eyebrow at that, but he indulges me, then insists on a ghost tour so I have the ‘full’ experience.

Which results in us both laughing when we spot the tricks the tour guide is using, then turn it into a game of who can spot the trick first. It’s stupid, silly, but it keeps Tanner close and talking to me which – selfish or not – is exactly what I want.

And yet—every brush of his fingers against my skin, every low whisper in my ear as he points something out, the way he never drifts more than an inch from my side—it all hits me with the same intensity as that kiss.

Twice, I turn to say something just as he does, and we end up nose to nose, breath mingling, eyes locked, tension sparking like static in the narrow space between us.

By the time dinner rolls around, I feel like I’m buzzing under my skin, like my whole body’s wired, straining for contact, aching for release.

Touching him, kissing him, just being with him in any way I can—that feels like the only way to ground myself.

I know it’s only been a week since we met, but we’ve spent all but two days together.

Most people ease into dating. A couple of short outings, a dinner here and there. Maybe two dates a week, four hours at most. Tanner and I have already blown past that. We’ve shared a two-day road trip, spent full days side by side, only breaking to sleep.

That has to mean something.

It's all I can think about as I slip into a cream-colored dress that drapes off my shoulders. Soft. Romantic. A little risky. He invited me down for drinks in the hotel lounge, and tonight, I'm going to bring up the kiss.

He hasn't pulled back like I thought he would. If he didn't want more, he wouldn't have insisted on continuing the trip. He wouldn't still wear the cowboy hat I gave him. He wouldn't point out photo spots like he wants to help me capture everything. He wouldn't keep finding excuses to stay close.

Would he?

I take a slow breath, trying to quiet the buzz in my chest, and head down to the lounge. He's already there, sipping a beer at the bar, alone and saying nothing. I bite my bottom lip and rub my arm as I walk toward him, then slide onto the stool beside him without a word.

And he leans away, just slightly.

"That seat's taken. I'm not interested, I don't need—"

"Anyone or anything?" I finish, arching a brow.

He turns and sees me, a flicker of surprise softening into a small smile. "Damn. Am I really that predictable?"

"If you want me to leave—" I start, trying to keep my voice even.

But he cuts me off gently. "You're the one taking the seat, Holly," he says, before nodding to the bartender. "Whatever she wants is on my tab."

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I end up with a mojito—my favorite—and take a slow sip while trying to figure out how to start. My fingers play with the straw as I stare down at the glass.

“You know... I didn’t really expect to see you again after you dropped me off at the Nighty Nigh,” I say quietly, glancing over at him. “I kept thinking maybe I did something wrong with the kiss. That you didn’t like it. And if that’s true, I’d rather you just tell me than pretend everything’s fine.”

I take another sip, longer this time, before finally meeting his eyes. My stomach flips.

“If you’re not interested in me like that, it’s okay. I mean, I get it. I just... I really appreciate that you still looked out for me, no matter what.”

I pause, steadying my voice.

“There’s a lot I haven’t done,” I admit. “I’ve kissed guys before, messed around a little, but not... everything. And I know I can come off naïve. I act on instinct sometimes. So if I misread things—or turned my head the wrong way or came on too strong—I’m sorry. I just wanted to be honest.”

“You’re too smart to think I didn’t want to kiss you,” he says before draining his beer and setting it down. “Ikissedyou.”

Chapter 10 - Tanner

She looks so damn shy, so nervous. Her cheeks are a faint red, but she keeps hiding behind her hair and playing with the straw in her mojito like it can answer all her

questions better than me. She only paused briefly when I reminded her who started our make out session. The one I haven't been able to forget, the one I've nearly repeated every time I get the whiff of her vanilla perfume and the gentlest feel of her body against mine.

Holly clears her throat, then turns to face me. "You understand what I'm- I'm saying though, right?"

That she's a virgin, that she doesn't have much experience, that she still, for some reason, thinks that she's not enough. Which is probably my fault for how I ended our kiss. Taking a slow breath, I move slightly closer to her. "Your innocence is part of what draws me to you."

She blinks at me.

"I mean, you're not naïve. You're sweet and warm, still have a glow of softness and you're not jaded by the world. I like that you're ... you, exactly as you are," I say, sure I'm butchering the explanation. "Which makes it hard to remember that I'm fourteen years older than you and shouldn't be interested."

"Says who?" she asks gently. "Because I'm ... I mean, it should be obvious. I like being with you, I trust you and ..."

She wants me too. Which makes my worry about our age feel ridiculous. She's twenty-four, not eighteen. She has goals and she's determined, so why am I holding back when she's right here? I'm sure there's a reason, one I should know, one that I should be able to hold on to.

Holly brushes her fingers over my hand, her skin as cool as her drink with beads of condensation on her fingers. Her touch breaks me. I don't know why. I've touched her plenty in the last few days. She's leaned into me. I haven't let her beyond my

reach unless we're at the hotel, but ...

"Tanner," she breathes, eyes pleading and hopeful as she peers at me from under her lashes. Her touch, her sweet smell, her voice, everything about her.

I pull her up and between my legs, kissing her as if I can fix the last few days – as if I can pack every kiss I wanted to give her into one. It's tender, deep, hungry, and restrained. Her soft moan and the way she pulls me closer isn't a warning this time, it's a fucking invitation and I'm not strong enough to resist it.

I slip my tongue along hers and let my hand slide down her back, then back up so I can feel the soft skin between her shoulders. She's decadent, perfect, and melts against me in a way that makes me twice as determined to protect her, support her, take care of her.

When I draw back, we're both panting.

"We should go upstairs," I say softly before sucking her bottom lip. "Rather than doing this so publicly."

"Yeah, that's smart," she whispers.

"Even if you just want to make out," I promise as I get up and toss twenty five dollars down on the bar. "We should do that in my room."

I take her hand and lead her to the stairs. She swallows. "And if I want to do more than make out?"

"Then I'm a damn lucky man, Holly," I say, pulling her up onto the landing to kiss her again, and again since she turns me into a glutton. "So lucky."

“My room’s closer,” she breathes.

“Sounds like that’s where we should be then,” I answer, brushing my lips across hers.

It’s almost a miracle that we make it to her room and get the door shut. Kissing her is addictive. She’s a fast learner and so responsive. Every flick of my tongue is answers, every long stroke, gentle curl, she returns to me until I’m somewhere between floating and more grounded and present than I’ve ever been.

When she fists my shirt, then clumsily pulls at the buttons, I catch her wrists and pull them around my neck as I bend down to kiss her deeper. I stroke down her back and walk her backwards. “Patience, darling.”

“I want you,” she breathes.

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“I’m not going anywhere tonight unless you ask me to,” I promise. “But you deserve a bed not the floor.”

“And you shirtless?” She asks between kisses.

I smile into the kiss and spin her so she’s walking forward. I kiss across her neck while continuing to work us towards the bed. “In any state of undress you want and can handle.”

I play with the tempting neckline of her dress and kiss further down until I feel her racing pulse. “I like this dress.”

“It looks better off me,” she whispers.

I grin and nod, dragging it down her arms slowly. She arches back against me so I get a perfect view of her perky, full breasts as the dress drops around her hips, then slinks to the floor. She shudders and her nipples tighten.

I trail my fingertips up her belly and stop just below her breasts. “Let’s cover ground rules.”

“Whatever you want,” she answers, grinding against my erection eagerly.

“If you don’t like something, you say ‘no.’ It’s that easy. If you change your mind, tell me the second it happens,” I say, licking the shell of her ear. “Do you understand the rules?”

“Yes,” she pants, turning to kiss me again. “I understand, Tanner, please touch me.”

“Good,” I groan. “I want you to keep talking to me, tell me what you like, what you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

I cup her breasts to prove it and her back arches for me. My thumbs circle her nipples and she grinds against me harder. “I really want you undressed. I want you to keep kissing me and ... and touching me.”

I lower one hand to take her hand, then spin her around and lay her down on the bed. I toss my shirt to the side and lick my bottom lip as I look her over. Her thighs press together as she squirms on the bed, watching me with unhidden desire.

“So beautiful,” I hum as I stroke her ankle. “Lovely, perfect. You’re just right, Holly.”

She shudders and drinks me in while I continue stroking up her legs, gently spreading them around me so I can kneel on the bed. I kiss her slowly, then let my lips wander down her neck and towards her breasts.

“Keep talking to me, darling. I love hearing your voice,” I encourage.

“That feels good. More, please, please more,” she pants.

I trace the top curve of her breast with my tongue, following the curve to her sternum. I palm her breasts and groan. “Touch me however you want.”

Holly’s hands slowly trace the muscle of my biceps, my shoulders, then flow up my neck to my hair. She grips my hair in one hand and slides her other hand down my spine, fingers spreading wide.

“You’re so strong,” she pants. Don’t stop, Tanner, please,” she whispers.

I lift my head from between her breasts and kiss her again. She’s more eager with every kiss, arching into my touch, spreading her thighs around me, stroking down my chest and abs to my jeans.

I let her undo my pants while I trace the top of her panties. “My fingers or my mouth – what do you want more?”

Her eyes widen and dip to my hand. I’m sure she’s going to tell me to pump the breaks, but instead she lifts her hips. “Both, Tanner. I want everything.”

“My greedy girl,” I hum before licking over her nipple and slowly guiding her panties down her legs.

I take my time working her up, running my lips and tongue over her breasts until she’s moaning, panting and begging for more. If my girl wants me to please her, she’s going to have it. I lick down her belly and stop just above the little landing strip above her slit.

“You’re going to have everything you want,” I promise. “For as long as you want.”

Chapter 11 - Holly

I’ve never been this turned on in my life, and my patience is hanging by a thread.

Tanner’s mouth trails hot, open-mouthed kisses down my body, his tongue teasing, slow, deliberate. His rough hands slide my panties down my thighs with a kind of reverence that makes my whole body ache.

I don’t need to check—I know how wet I am.

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He's taking his time, constantly checking in with little glances, soft touches, like he's trying to memorize every reaction. But I'm already right there, burning for him.

When he gently parts my thighs, his eyes lift to meet mine. Deep, stunning blue. And just like that, I'm falling into them, breath caught in my throat.

"Please," I whisper, desperate. "I want you. I want you."

I don't even know if I'm saying the right thing, if there's something more he needs to hear. I just know I need him.

Now.

Tanner glances down at my pussy as he spreads my thigh wider, kissing along the inside of my leg. His breath races against my skin, then he licks to my pussy lips and pauses. "If you want me to stop just say it."

"I promise," I moan. "I want to touch you, I want to use my mouth on you, I want to please you and ... and I want you to do the same."

"You're first," he says, then licks across my clit. I gasp and push myself up to watch him. His eyes meet mine and he nods as his lips part, and he sucks my clit. "Keep talking to me, darling. That's in the rules."

I tell him over and over how good he feels, I beg him for his fingers since I feel so empty. I know I can take him. I've masturbated plenty, I've used toys, I want him to have this first. I want him to want me just as much as I crave him.

He works one finger into me and curls it so perfectly that my eyes threaten to roll back. I try to hide my moan, but feel him pulling away and shake my head. “More, please, please.”

“Good girl,” he praises.

The low rumble of his voice is almost as hot as him adding a second finger just like I want. I lose myself in him, the pleasure he gifts me with his mouth and his fingers over and over. I chant his name, reach out for him until he laces his fingers with mine. My hips buck against his mouth and when he adds a third finger it pushes me over the edge.

I’m sure it’s too fast, but I can’t make myself care. Tanner kisses my belly and lays next to me, turning my chin for a kiss. “Still want more?”

I nod and feel the need to prove it. I roll and kiss across his chest. He makes a low sound and helps me get off his jeans and boxers so his cock springs up. I blink a few times. He’s so much bigger than the toys I’ve used before.

Tanner slowly guides my hand to his shaft and wraps my hand around him. I slowly stroke all the way to the head of his cock and back down. “Are you still sure?”

I kiss his chest again. “Yes, Tanner. I just ...” I need help which sounds pitiful to admit. I swallow and move down his body, trailing soft kisses, but once I’m kneeling by his hip, I just stare. I’ve seen porn, I know what to do, but I don’t know what he likes. “Will you ..”

“See what you like first, then I’ll guide you,” he encourages.

I lick over the shaft, circle my tongue around the head and use his moans to guide me. I don’t know where to look, but Tanner fixes that, telling me to keep my eyes on him.

I spread my lips around the head of his cock and sink down as deep as I can. It's awkward and I feel like I'm doing something wrong, but his belly tenses and he grips the bed.

"Fuck, just like that. Do it again, Holly, nice and slow. Use your tongue too," he encourages.

I take my time, just like he said and keep my eyes on him, even when I try to get him down my throat to fit every inch and gag. He strokes my cheek and nods. "You don't have to go that deep, you can use your hand. As long as you're touching me I'm enjoying it. You're doing so well."

The mix of praise and guidance, not to mention his moans, has me eager to keep going. I pick up the pace until he suddenly grips my hair and rolls me over to kiss me hungrily. "If you keep that up, you're going to make me come."

"That's ... that's what I'm supposed to do," I argue.

"Not before I please you again," he argues, groping the bed for something until he reveals a condom. He rolls it on and pulls me down the bed towards him. He grinds against me, making me tremble, then strokes my thigh. "Still a yes?"

"Yes," I answer immediately. "Yes."

"Tell me what you like, tell me what you want, all of it," he says as he gently eases into me. I whimper and he pauses, then grabs a pillow and slides it under me. He rubs my clit, licks and kisses my breasts, devotes himself fully to my pleasure. "Fucking hell, Holly. You are so tight... you're making me lose my mind."

It doesn't hurt as much as I thought. I don't know if it's the angle, the way he's touching me, but I feel full, pleasantly, perfectly. He draws back and thrusts again,

deeper. Over and over until I can't help but moan his name and beg him for more.

"Yes, Tanner. Yes!" I pant.

He kisses me hungrily and finally gives me every inch. I hold onto him, pant in his ear, rock my hips against his. I want to please him, but I'm so lost in the ecstasy he's pounding into me that I can't think straight. Tanner pants in my ear. "You're better than just right, Holly. You're perfect. Keep being loud for me."

His mix of praise and long, lingering touches push me over the edge. I come for him and after a few more thrusts he does the same. Tanner nuzzles my neck and presses a soft kiss there before sucking my bottom lip.

I'm languid, limp, sated, and utterly exhausted. I still offer him a smile when he draws back. He strokes my cheek and kisses me again. "How do you feel?"

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“Greedy for more,” I answer with a soft laugh. He chuckles and kisses me again.

“How about we clean up first?” he offers.

“And cuddle?” I ask.

He pauses a moment, looks at me, and drinks me in. “If that’s what you want, yes.”

I nod and welcome him to take care of me, to keep me tightly against him until my eyes are too heavy to think about a potential round two. I wiggle against Tanner until he calms my hips and kisses the back of my head. I’ve never been so comfortable being the little spoon.

In the morning, I stretch and reach out for Tanner. “Morning.”

My hand brushes cold sheets. I blink, roll over, and find the other side of the bed empty. No note, no warmth, no sound from the bathroom either.

It’s not that late. So where is he?

I check my phone. No text. No call. Nothing.

A dull ache settles in my chest.

Was I not good enough? Did I do something wrong? He came, didn’t he?

I try not to spiral. Tanner's not exactly the cuddly, linger-after kind of guy. He's quiet, guarded. I knew that. But still, waking up alone like this—it stings more than I want to admit.

I get dressed slowly, tugging on jeans and a t-shirt, pulling my hair into a messy bun. I tell myself breakfast will help. Something warm. Something grounding.

But when I reach the dining room, I freeze in the doorway. Tanner's already there. Sitting at a small table with a half-empty plate in front of him. He's not looking for me. He's not waiting. He's laughing. At something the waitress says.

She's curvy, confident, and the way he smiles at her—relaxed, easy—it knocks the air right out of me. I've never seen him act like that with anyone else.

Maybe last night was just sex to him. Maybe I was just a detour. A reminder he could still open up, then walk away just as easily.

I bite down on my bottom lip, my stomach twisting.

Sex doesn't have to mean something, I tell myself. Even if it did for me.

I turn before he sees me. My feet carry me back to the elevator, up the hall, and into my room. I'll process alone. No fake smiles. No pretending. Just space.

Because right now, that's the only thing that doesn't hurt.

Chapter 12 - Tanner

I get breakfast to go for Holly so she can sleep in and head back to her room. I see her packing up when I arrive. Her eyes aren't their normal bright green and she keeps biting the inside of her cheek while pacing back and forth like she's forgetting

something.

“You should eat,” I say, holding up the box.

Holly pauses, then looks at me. She smiles slightly, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. It’s the same smile she gave me when I dropped her off after stopping our first kiss. I take a step closer. “Holly, are you-”

“Thank you. It smells great, but I’m not really hungry right now. I’m eager to get on the road,” she says.

“You don’t want to wait another day?”

“No, there’s no reason to unless you’d like to stay here,” she says.

We check out and get back on the road and everything seems fine, normal, at least on the surface. Her smiles seem to fall the second I look away. She doesn’t sing along to the radio, she doesn’t throw questions or candy at me.

It eats at me. After three hours of near silence and short answers from her, no rambling at all, I’m done trying to guess what’s wrong with her. I don’t want to be the guy that asks a million questions and pisses a girl off more. But I don’t want to go on without understanding what the problem is.

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Did I do something wrong? Did I hurt her in some way? Does she regret what we did?

“Let’s stop here,” I say, pointing to an exit.

“What’s here?” Holly replies.

“One of the federal accommodations I told you about. I need to check in,” I say.

She pulls up to the building, lets me touch base, and when I come back out, she’s standing there against the hood of her car, glancing at the route map.

“I’m upset,” she whispers before I can ask what’s wrong.

“Did I push you too far last night?” I ask the moment I see her.

She shakes her head, but her eyes don’t quite meet mine. “No. It’s not that.”

She takes a breath, her voice quieter now. “You were gone when I woke up. Then I saw you laughing with someone else, and you’re not the type to just... be like that. So it messed with my head.”

She pauses, trying to collect the words.

“I know it’s not fair to expect you to stay until I wake up. I get that. It’s just... I started wondering if I was reading everything wrong. If I’m too naïve. Too inexperienced to keep up with you.”

She glances at me then, her voice soft but honest. “It’s not like you’re my first anything. But you—you’re subtle. You don’t say much, and I overthink everything. It gets to me.”

I take a step closer, the tension in my chest loosening slightly.

“I’m not asking for flowers or grand gestures or some big romantic speech,” she continues, voice trembling just a bit. “I just... I don’t always know where I stand with you. One moment, you’re telling me I’m just right, and the next, I feel like I’m chasing something I’ll never quite catch.”

She exhales shakily, her eyes searching mine. “Maybe it’s me. Maybe I’m the problem. But I just want to know what this is. What we are. Because right now... I really don’t.”

She trembles slightly and looks to the side. “And I think you should drive.”

“We’re moving fast. I know that,” I say, gently lifting her chin. “But you’re special to me, Holly. Your optimism, your sweetness, the way you genuinely care about people. How passionate you are about photography, how curious and brave you are. You light up a room without even trying.”

Her lips twitch into a half-smile before she looks away. “And overwhelming,” she says softly. “I told you before. I know it can come off as too much. And the rest of the time I feel like I fade into the background. Like I’m just... there.”

She shrugs and rubs her shoulder, like she’s trying to make herself smaller.

“I’m not asking for a title,” she adds quickly. “I just... don’t want to feel like I imagined everything between us.”

I step closer, into her space, and brush her chin with my thumb until she finally looks up at me.

“Don’t you dare minimize yourself, darling,” I say, my voice low but firm. “You’ve brought light into my life that I didn’t think I’d ever feel again. Because of you, I’m noticing things I forgot how to see. I’m laughing more. Hell, I’m even enjoying being around people—and that’s saying something.”

Her breath catches, and I see it—the flicker of hope in her eyes.

She licks her top lip. “You’re older, more worldly, have mystery and restraint and know who you are while I’m still figuring it out and I don’t want to dive into something and ...”

And get hurt. I kiss her forehead, then her temple. “Relationships aren’t about comparing experiences or being the same. They’re about connection, trust, being there for each other, creating something deeper and balancing each other. I think we balance each other well.”

“I think so too,” she whispers.

“And I’m glad you told me,” I say, brushing my lips against hers. “So I don’t have to read your mind.”

I kiss her again, a little longer this time. “I’m glad you let me come on this trip with you.”

Another kiss, deeper now, more sure. “That you didn’t let your doubts keep you from saying how you feel.”

And then one more, lingering and full of everything I haven’t put into words yet.

“That you’re still kissing me back.”

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“I like kissing you,” she answers against my lips. “A lot. And falling asleep with you. Traveling with you, making you smile.”

My lips turn up reflexively. “Then hopefully you also like staying in small towns with me because I think we need to get to that inn.”

I wind my arm around her and kiss her hungrily. I pant between long, drawn out kisses and pull her hips closer to me. She nods against me, but tugs me closer to her. “You want me?”

“Yes,” I agree. “I can’t resist you.”

Finally,finally, I get a real smile from Holly. She tugs me down, welcoming the next hungry kiss I feed her until I manage to pull the keys from her hand and lightly swat her ass before getting into the driver seat.

During the short drive, I keep my hand on Holly’s thigh, rubbing gently through her jeans. A quiet reminder. I don’t want her stressing over things I can handle. She doesn’t need to carry the weight when I’m right here.

If something’s wrong, she’ll know. I don’t do mind games or hidden problems—it’s too much work, and too far from how I want us to be.

When we check in, we finally book one room instead of two. No hesitation.

The second the door closes behind us, I pull her into my arms. I don’t waste time with words. I kiss her like I’ve been holding back all day—because I have.

She responds instantly, tugging at my shirt, eager and hungry. I let her guide me to the bed, then ease her down and pull her top off in one smooth motion before claiming her mouth again.

There's no doubt between us now. Just skin, breath, and the unspoken truth we're both ready to feel.

"I never want you to think you're not enough for me, darling," I say as I undo the clasp of her bra and pry it off her. "You're more than enough. You're a breath of life I didn't know I needed."

"Tanner," she moans, pulling me closer, kissing me almost shyly until I encourage more, deepening it while popping the button on her jeans.

"I really like you, appreciate you... want you. A lot."

"Have me," I murmur, laying her back and slowly easing her jeans down, her thighs resting warm against mine. "I'm yours, Holly. Have me exactly how you want me—as long as you let me stay this close."

I take her hand gently and guide it over the thick strain of my jeans, letting her feel just how hard I am for her. "This is what you do to me," I whisper. "Every time you look at me like that. Every time you touch me."

"I want you closer," she breathes. "Always, Tanner."

Chapter 13 - Holly

Tanner groans and finishes stripping me. He spreads my legs to kiss me again, cupping the back of my head. I've managed to get his jeans undone and push them down with my feet as I pull him closer. I want to feel every inch of him, to somehow

convince him to stay right here, to make me his for as long as possible.

He kisses across my neck while I trace the dense muscle of his back. He's entrancing, overwhelming, wonderful. I arch for him and feel his arm slide under my back, his hand spreading over my ass.

"I like how you touch me, how you kiss me, how good you make me feel," I pant.

"So I'll have to keep doing it," he answers. "Every inch of you is beautiful, so soft, so ... wonderful."

Every touch builds on the last, every kiss across my body is a promise of more pleasure to come. I want to rush him along and want to savor every second at the same time. It's confusing and overwhelming.

"Tanner," I pant as his fingers work between my legs, slowly spreading me open as his middle finger flicks over my clit. I arch so he can suck my nipple harder. I drag my nails down his back and shudder. "Wait."

He immediately freezes and looks up at me. I lick over my bottom lip. "I want to be able to touch you too, while you touch me."

Groaning, he kisses me, wraps his arm around me tighter, and hauls me onto his lap as he rolls to sit down. I push his boxers down and his cock pops up, rubbing against my belly. I pant between kisses as he works two fingers inside my pussy.

I use both hands on him, stroking him, exploring him with my fingers, circling the head of his cock with my thumb. He groans. "Add some spit to your fingers, Holly. Then keep stroking me just like that. It feels so good."

Obedying is easy considering how much I want to please him. He keeps pumping his

fingers inside me while squeezing my ass. I roll my hips to take his fingers deeper while I keep stroking him, trading kisses between my moans and pleas for more.

“Tanner, you’re so good at ...” I moan and hide my face in his neck. “So good at this!”

“We’re good at this,” he argues. “You’re driving me insane. A little faster. Match my pace.”

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He changes the rhythm, fucking me faster with his fingers and I follow as best I can, my fingers tightening around him as I get closer and closer. When he pushes me over the edge, I gently bite his throat to muffle my moan.

He frees his fingers and I rest against him, swimming in my own bliss until I hear the foil wrapper crinkle and look down to see him rolling a condom on. He sucks his fingers clean while watching me, breathing hard.

“Do you want to ride me, Holly?” he asks.

I nod eagerly and welcome him to lift me up and guide me down his cock. My head falls back. He’s perfect. Thick and long, stretching me open so I feel him completely. His arms wrapped around me, leaning me back so he can lick and kiss my breasts while guiding my hips.

“That’s it. See what feels good, darling. Roll your hips, bounce, whatever you want,” he pants.

That’s exactly what I do. I ride him, chasing my own pleasure and welcoming his thrusts whenever I drop myself down on him. He lifts his mouth from my breasts to kiss me, then press his forehead against mine as we move together. It’s so natural, so right.

I spread my hands over his shoulders and push myself faster and harder, rolling my hips, savoring the sound of skin on skin and how our moans mix. “Tanner, I’m so close.”

His hands tighten on my hips and he takes over. Even though I'm on top, he's the one setting the pace, he's thrusting into me and bouncing me on him until I come again, surrendering entirely to him and the pleasure he gives me.

Tanner rolls us over and pounds into me harder and faster, moaning my name, telling me how good I feel, how much he likes me until he comes apart. My heart threatens to burst out of my chest just to get closer to his. He kisses me again and lays his head on my chest. "You're wonderful, Holly. So damn good."

"Good enough for a round two this time?" I tease.

He chuckles and nods, kissing me again before guiding me into the shower.

"Let me take care of you," he murmurs, voice low and reverent.

Apparently, that means I'm not allowed to lift a finger. Tanner washes me slowly, thoroughly—his hands gliding over every inch of my skin with purpose and patience. He massages my scalp with gentle fingers, scrubs me clean like I'm something precious, and peppers my body with soft kisses and low praise that make my knees weak beneath the water.

By the time I finally convince him to let me return the favor, he's already worshiped every part of me—and I'm aching to show him just how much that means.

Our second round starts with slick skin, steam curling around us, and his hands anchoring me to the wall. But it doesn't stay gentle.

Tanner bends me forward, his chest against my back, and shows me exactly how good surrender can feel. He touches me constantly, his voice in my ear, low and raw and full of devotion. He tells me how beautiful I am, how good I feel, how much he wants me—and he listens when I fall apart beneath him, reminding me to breathe, to

peak, to feel every second of it.

After another dizzying orgasm, he leans in, his breath hot against my cheek. “You okay?” he asks, a hint of laughter behind the concern.

I look back over my shoulder, smiling through the afterglow. “I’ve never been more okay in my life.”

He grins, laughs softly, then lifts me gently and carries me to the bed, water still glistening on our skin.

“I’d hope okay is an understatement,” he teases as he eases inside me again, deeper, slower now—but no less intense.

I nod, gasping. “Yes. So much more than okay.”

And when he starts to move again, steady and unrelenting, I try to find better words—until he steals them from my mind completely.

All that’s left is bliss. Only him. Only this.

A kind of pleasure that feels like home—like safety, like everything I never knew I could have, all wrapped up in the way Tanner loves me.

Chapter 14 - Tanner

In the morning, I wake to find Holly curled tightly against me, her soft breath brushing against my neck. I rub her hip and press a kiss to her shoulder. She hums, sleepy and content, then shifts her hips back into me with the kind of trust that makes my chest ache.

Carefully, I untangle myself to start my usual morning routine—but then I pause, remembering the way she reacted the last time I left her alone in bed.

She's already moved into my spot, seeking out my warmth in her sleep. That small gesture does something to me. I smile without meaning to—then catch myself.

Liking someone shouldn't feel this dangerous. But it does. I've been telling myself that from the beginning. That I need to keep a distance. That the age gap matters. That getting too close could only end in regret.

But the truth is undeniable—Iwanther.

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Not just in the way I usually want someone. I want to protect her, yes, but I also want to hear every story she hasn't told yet. I want to be the reason she smiles, the one she leans on. I want to watch her grow into the woman she's meant to be and stand beside her through all of it.

And that's the part that terrifies me.

Because these feelings—they're consuming. So intense I don't know how to untangle them. They make me feel exposed in a way I haven't felt in years.

Part of me wants to run. To cut it off now before it gets harder. Before she finds someone closer to her age. Before she realizes I was her first and starts to wonder if that's the only reason she wanted me.

But I meant what I said to her yesterday—this is moving fast. And maybe my heart knows something I haven't caught up to yet.

Because from the second I met her, I've felt unsteady. Unraveled. And strangely, it doesn't feel so unpleasant anymore.

Because I'm not just lusting after her. This isn't infatuation. It's something deeper. Something real.

Holly groans and opens her eyes, then looks around before spotting me. She reaches out to me and, like the hopeless man I am, I walk to her. I kiss her hand and sit on the edge of the bed. She hums softly and sits up, her hip next to mine even though she's facing the other way.

She rests her head on my shoulder and sighs. “You’re still here.”

“I am,” I answer. “You confessed how you were feeling yesterday.”

“It was embarrassing. I was worried about nothing, obviously,” she snorts before kissing my shoulder.

“It took courage and I’m proud of you. So I’m going to admit something,” I say slowly.

Holly’s brow furrows. I don’t see her jumping to any conclusions, just her curious gaze focused on me. I clear my throat. “I’m not used to ... wanting someone the way I want you. It’s uncomfortable.”

“Am I asking for too much?”

“No, darling.” I shake my head. “You’re not. Not even close.”

I move closer, needing her to hear every word. “I want to be with you. I want to know you. I want to be the reason you smile. I want to make sure you’re safe. I want your joy, your energy, your laugh—because without them, I don’t feel this light.”

I pause, my chest tightening with the weight of truth.

“And that’s terrifying. Because I’ve spent so many years alone, convinced I didn’t need anyone. And now... I need you in a way I never saw coming.”

Her eyes soften and she kisses my throat. I clear my throat and rub her thigh. “I’m terrified because you’re younger and you might decide you want someone else when I’ve never felt like this.”

“You’re cute,” she whispers. “Shockingly, I don’t sleep with every guy who saves me on the side of the road. I definitely don’t trust every man to go on a road trip with me. I like you an odd amount for how long we’ve known each other. I’m not going to run off or looking for someone else.”

I kiss her temple. “As long as you know you’re more than enough, more than I deserve, and in all of the best ways.”

She shakes her head slightly, but gets herself ready for the last part of our journey. We’ll be in Oakrest Bay tonight as long as we don’t hit traffic. It’s the fastest leg of the trip and I hate that it doesn’t guarantee more time with her.

Even when I point out extra stops, suggest photo ops, keep her talking, and share a few stories from my time in the military, the miles keep slipping by. I try to stretch the hours, to make time bend, but the destination keeps creeping closer.

“Ten miles,” I say quietly.

Holly nods, but there’s no smile this time. No light tease.

I reach over, take her hand, and kiss her knuckles. “Still plenty of ocean views ahead. Lookouts. New places to explore. Photos to take.”

She nods again, squeezing my hand, but says nothing about the end of the road. Neither do I.

Instead, she pulls us back into the now. She gets me laughing again about the cowboy hat she made me wear, bringing it up like it’s the story of the day. She teases until I’m smiling again, until we’re both laughing—because laughter is easier than admitting what we’re both thinking.

We don't want this to end. Not the road. Not the trip. Notus.

I roll down the windows and welcome the ocean breeze until we stop in Oakrest Bay in a parking lot close to a marina. We get out and I stretch, feeling the threat of a cramp in my thigh. I turn to see Holly staring at the water with a faraway look in her eyes.

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She doesn't reach for her camera, just stares.

"Darling?" I ask.

She clears her throat. "Yeah..."

"What's wrong?" I push.

"I don't know, I expected to feel more ... accomplished."

"Is it because I did the driving?" I tease.

She shakes her head slowly and looks at me while she rubs her chest. I stand with her at the hood of the car, looking at the pre-sunset light dancing across the blue water and teasing the silhouettes of docked sailboats.

This was our guaranteed time together. Now we're standing on the edge of a choice, one neither of us can make alone. I don't want to be done with Holly. I don't want to reach out to a ranger and get a ride home.

As wild and unpredicted as it is, I love Holly. It took less than two weeks for me to realize that. I've gone this long in my life without ever feeling a spark of love and now it's bulldozed me.

Holly glances at me, then looks away, and I know she's holding something back. So I decide to take the lead—at least that gives me some control over how this plays out.

“I don’t want this to be the last time I see you, Holly,” I say, voice steady. “I’m not ready for this to be over.”

She turns to me fully, blinking a few times like she’s trying to make sure she heard me right. “What do you mean? Just... be clear.”

I nod, no hesitation. “I want to stay in your life. I want more time. I want you. Not just a maybe if you head back to Florida. Not just a memory. I don’t want to cross my fingers and hope—I want to know I’m still part of your world when this trip ends.”

Her smile blooms slowly, and then she throws her arms around me, holding me tight. “I’m so glad you didn’t make me say it first.” She leans in, stands on her toes, and kisses me—soft, certain. “I don’t want this to end either.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I murmur against her lips. “No pressure, no big decisions today. Just one day at a time.”

She pulls back, beaming, and lifts her camera, aiming it at the two of us. “One day, one week, one month... as long as I still get to see you, that’s all that matters.”

Epilogue - Holly

Three Years Later

“You’re in another magazine and didn’t tell me!” Tanner says in greeting before lifting me up and hugging me tightly.

I gasp and wait for him to put me down so I can turn in his arms and kiss him. Tanner groans and rubs my hips, pulling me tighter against him. Three years of bliss, a year and a half of marriage and I still melt anytime he kisses me, still catch myself daydreaming about my husband, and still can’t believe that this man loves me.

“That’s nothing,” I say softly.

“It’s everything! My wife is in gallery exhibits and magazines for her photography and her creative eye. I found this at Kathy’s! Why you didn’t tell me?!” he says.

Despite how stoic he still is when he works as a private guide for exclusive off-grid excursions, he’s opened up so much. Three years together and he just keeps sharing more of himself, tells me about his days, asks about what I’m reading or working on. There’s no one in the world more supportive.

“I forgot about it,” I reply with a shrug, then kiss him again. “I was planning our next road trip. Alaska, remember?”

“How could I forget?” he asks.

He takes my hand and runs his hand over my wedding band. Despite the fact he got me the perfect engagement ring, it’s the wedding band that matters to him. I kiss him again as I think about our intimate ceremony in Lover’s Stroll Park. The place of our first kiss, where we started, and where we sealed our wedding vows.

“What else haven’t you told me?” he teases, eyes glinting with amusement. “Sold a photo to a king? A queen? Maybe a reclusive billionaire with a private island?”

I laugh, tracing slow circles on his chest. “Not yet. But haveyouever led royalty through the wilderness? Maybe taught a tech tycoon how to make a fire?”

He grins. “Let’s start dinner, and I’ll tell you all about it.” He pauses, leans in, kisses me softly, and adds, “I love you.”

He says it every day—just like he promised in his vows. And every time, it hits just as hard.

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I melt into his side. “I love you more. More than yesterday. Less than tomorrow.”

“That’s my line,” he mutters, then gives me that thoughtful look, the one that always makes my heart stutter. He pulls me even closer, like it’s never quite close enough.

“I never thought I’d want this kind of life,” he says quietly. “Coming home for dinner. Traveling once a month. Always being with someone.”

“You can still do your week-long excursions,” I tease. “I’ll keep the home fires burning.”

He shakes his head with a small, stubborn smile. “Absolutely not. I’d spend the whole damn time wishing I was back here. Loving you... it’s set me free, Holly. In a way I didn’t even know I was stuck.”

I nudge his side. “Save that line for our anniversary. You’ll make me cry before dessert.”

He chuckles, but I can see it in his eyes—this isn’t a line. This is the man who shows up for me every day, and when he does speak the words, they carry the weight of everything he feels.

“I’m serious, Holly. I don’t tell you enough how much you changed my life. I thought loving someone meant accepting the pain of losing them. I thought it was a tether to a life I didn’t want, but you proved I was wrong,” He takes my hand and puts it on his chest. “Keep doing it. Forever.”

I laugh and tear up a little. It's like when he steals kisses in public when no one is looking. Because it's for us. We don't have to prove our relationship or our feelings to anyone but each other and as long as I'm Tanner's wife, I know I'm loved, I'm supported, and I'm happier than I could be with anyone else. All because my car broke down and I had the luck of meeting him.