



Taste of Commitment

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Category: Romance, Adult

Description: Knox

I was Rugby Men's 15s player of the year. Now? After an injury, I'm back home in Stoney Meadow at my family's inn after dedicating my life to rugby. My only goal is to recover enough to get back to the sport that made me.

That is until a chance encounter with an out-of-towner begins to tempt me.

I might have lost everything when I took that hit, but the more time I spend with this girl, the more I realize just how little I had to begin with.

Taylor

Booking a last-minute trip to Emerald Browning Cottage was just supposed to be a spontaneous adventure.

Experience Ireland. Try new foods. See new sights.

The one thing I wasn't anticipating? Knox Browning.

Catching feelings was not on my list of adventures, but every day that I spend with the Irish rugby player, the more I have to face the one thing that I fear: something in me wants to stay here. This is starting to feel less like an adventure, and more like a home.

In *Taste of Commitment*, Taylor Nova gets a taste of the one thing she unknowingly yearns for most, while Knox navigates defeat and loss, trying to find his purpose in the town that raised him.

In each other, they both discover what it truly means to belong.

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Prologue

KNOX

The roar of two-and-a-half million fans echoes through the tunnel and down to our team's locker room.

“This is it. Eighty minutes. Right here. Right now.” Coach Henderson stands in the middle of the room, his hands resting on his hips as he addresses our team for one last time this season. “Eighty minutes to give it everything you’ve got. Right now. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, not next week. Right fucking now.”

The rest of my teammates mirror my expression of narrowed brows, clenched teeth, and hungry eyes.

“This isn’t just a game. It’s not just a championship game, either. Rugby has never been just a sport. It’s who you all are at your very core. You live and breathe this every day. You’ve made sacrifice after sacrifice for this moment.”

“When you come off that pitch tonight, you come off knowing that you gave it everything you had and that you had absolutely nothing left to give. That’s how you’re going to win this World Championship. That’s how you’re going to make yourselves proud. That’s what’s going to make all those sacrifices your friends and family, your wives and girlfriends, and your coaches have made all worth it.”

I look around the room at my teammates. Lewis, our flanker and my best mate on the team, nods his head intently. I know his wife and kids are out in the stands cheering

for him and for the long hours he's spent working for this exact moment.

"Make no mistake about it, it's going to fucking hurt. You're going to break through your comfort zone, and then you're going to be dragged through it. But it's a place you've all been and come back from before. You're prepared for how brutal it will be."

"You've got the best captain in the league right now." He gestures to me. "Follow him out there, and as a team, bring this trophy home."

"Whatever it takes," I say.

Coach nods once, and the room erupts in response. "Whatever it takes!"

The tunnel out to the pitch feels a million miles long while also feeling like it's close enough that I could reach out and touch it.

"Amelia, the kids, and I are going out to celebrate tonight. You know you're always welcome to join us," Lewis says.

"I appreciate that, mate," I respond without taking my eyes off the tunnel opening. "My parents got in last night, and I haven't seen them yet, but maybe we'll meet up with you later."

"After we win this trophy."

"After we win this trophy," I echo.

Sheer determination and power erupt around me as my teammates chant, jump, shout, and bark. I feel the pressure of bodies moving around me, but the sounds fade to a soft drone as I hone in on my one goal. I have a one-track mind and the only thing I

see is my hands holding the Rugby League World Champion Cup above my head in eighty minutes' time.

The world around me moves in slow motion. My heartbeat thrums in my ears with every step I take. Not only have I blown through my comfort zone, but I've been dragged to hell and back. With five minutes left on the clock, it's the first time in my life that I wished rugby was a sport with timeouts. Sweat covers every inch of my body but for the next five minutes, I welcome the pain and allow myself to be dragged into the furthest depths of this hell. After years of playing together, I don't even need to look to know that Lewis is right behind me, ready to mark the ball. My right foot touches the twenty-two meter line, and I toss the ball back to him with a twist. Before my left foot can hit the ground, the weight of a freight train slams into my left side. I've not braced for impact as the onslaught of a late hit barrels into me, and all the air is sucked from my lungs as I go tumbling to the ground. Everything happens so fast, but I'm able to count the milliseconds in time.

A violent ring blares between my ears as I try and fail to peel my eyelids open. I feel my body moving and awake just in time to vomit everywhere and crash back down to the ground, eating a mouthful of neon green grass.

Wake up. Open your eyes. Hold on, KB. I can't tell if I'm talking to myself or if someone else is speaking to me, but I hold on to the words like a vice. I vaguely register the light swaying back and forth motion of my body, and with the force of a thousand suns, I open my eyes—blurry bodies with no faces coat my vision until the bright light above pulls me into the dark once again.

Almost there, KB. Just hold on.

Taylor

Taylor

Might fuck around and move to Ireland.

Camila

Have you been watching P.S. I Love You, again?

Taylor

....

Leap Year. But that's not the point.

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Camila

Then what is the point?

Taylor

The point is I keep saying I want to travel and I never do. Plus I don't have anything stopping me right now.

Camila

Okay but MOVE?!

I reread the text a few more times, and between the piles of clothes crowding around me and not having a clear idea of how to respond, I start to feel overwhelmed. I need a new start. Like in *Eat, Pray, Love*. Except I never had a husband, a successful career, or anything even remotely resembling stability. Other than that, it's the same thing.

I push up to my knees, reach over a mound of sweatpants, and grasp onto the handle of my suitcase. My suitcase that likely still has a bikini in it from that last trip I took. I sit back down with my legs crossed and my shoulders hunched over, and a full three minutes pass before I realize I'm having a face-off with a large aluminum rectangle. Unfortunately for me, the two minutes I took to text my best friend has now completely thrown off my flow of packing.

Pack, shower, eat. You got this. It's humiliating that I need to give myself a pep talk to get the simplest shit done, but starting a new task can just be so burdensome for me

sometimes. I have a mental list of things I need to get done but rather than start chipping away at my to-do list, I let its weight knock me back into a stack of jeans and begin doom-scrolling.

Fuck. I forgot to text Camila back.

Taylor

Okay maybe not move... That sounds dramatic.

Camila

And we both know you would never be dramatic about anything.

Taylor

Exactly. So let's call it an extended vacation.

Camila

Okay?... For how long?

Taylor

Come over tomorrow morning. We'll chitty chat about it all then.

Camila

I'll be there bright and early with coffee.

I start typing that bright and early isn't necessary, considering I loathe mornings, but I

know it's pointless. Camila is likely festering in worry enough as it is.

Okay. Get up and take a shower. Do something. I groan as I find myself in this seemingly never-ending cycle of being unable to start the simple task of getting in the shower, even though I know I won't want to get out once I'm in. I've already let too many things get away from me this evening, I can do this one thing. I pull myself from my bedroom floor and clear the four feet of space it takes to get to my bathroom. My phone buzzes in my hand before I can set it on the nonexistent vanity and I hold it up, smiling when I find a picture of Jonas chugging a beer with one hand and flipping the camera off with the other.

"What's up, Jo bro?"

"Annie Oakley. What are you doing?" he shouts louder than necessary. "Scratch that. Better question, why are you not here already?"

"Here where?" I ask, leaning against the sink.

"I'm at The Local. Come down." I bite my thumbnail, smiling at the memory of Camila and me choosing this exact apartment for no reason other than its close proximity to one of the best bars in town. We could have gotten a two-bedroom a little further out of the city in a neighborhood surrounded by some pretty nice homes, but it felt like a right of passage to live in this seven-floor walk-up with a lock you have to shove the key in a certain way and shake a little before turning in order to open it.

"Sorry, dude. I still have to pack."

"Pack tomorrow. It's criminal that you thought you could text me this morning saying you were leaving for a month and didn't think I would demand one last hang out." I gnaw at the inside of my cheek, considering this as an excuse to put my shit off a

little while longer. “Taylor Grace Nova.”

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“Uh oh, pulling out my government name.”

“When the situation calls for it.” I can hear his charming smile through the phone and I can’t resist.

“Okay, onedrink,” I say firmly with emphasis on the one.

“Cool. We all know you’re a shots kind of girl anyway.”

“Jonas!”

“I’ll order the first round now. Get your ass down here!” he quickly shouts, before the line goes dead.

I momentarily regret this decision when I have to strip from my sweatpants—and not just any sweatpants, but the sweatpants. The holy grail of sweatpants. They’re perfectly worn in and feel like a warm hug on a cozy raining evening. If the hug was on your ass. I don’t let myself dwell on it. I quickly swap my sweats for a pair of jeans, throw on a little black tank top, and grab my keys from where they hang on a middle finger-shaped hook.

The Localis just as busy as I expected it to be, even taking into account it’s a Tuesday night. I push myself past a group of people crowding the front door and spot Jonas at the bar with a petite blonde—likely laying on a thick layer of his charm.

Her smile widens and I know she’s falling for his allure. I don’t blame her in the slightest though, it’s hard not to get sucked into his charm. If I was the relationship

type or someone who wanted something long-term, I could see myself going for Jonas. We have fun, get along well, and neither of us takes anything too seriously, but I rarely let anyone get within range to even be considered friends let alone close enough to want a romantic relationship. I had a therapist once—literally once because I never went back to her—allude to the fact that my lack of ability to let people in isn't my greatest trait. She didn't say it in those exact words, but it's what I took from the conversation. However, jokes on her because that's one trait I'm okay with. I live by the rule: if you don't let anyone get too close to you, you can't get hurt when they inevitably bail. And yes, I'm aware of how cynical that sounds, but it is true. Everyone will eventually leave at some point.

"There she is!" Jonas flashes all his teeth at me as he lifts an arm and pulls me into a hug.

"Still in your J. Crew, I see." I lift the lapel of his suit, and he scoffs.

"Please, don't offend me, Blondie. This is Tom Ford." He runs one hand through his perfectly coiffed, dirty blond hair and the other down the front of his broad chest.

"Alright, James Bond." I resist the urge to laugh. Instead, I make a big show of rolling my eyes.

"Anyway, Taylor, this is my new friend, Stephanie. Steph, can I call you Steph?" He looks over at her and she nods enthusiastically. "This is Taylor."

I smile and wave. "Nice to meet you, Stephanie."

"You, too."

Jonas looks at me to his left, then back to Stephanie on his right, then back to me again. "Shots?"

Roughly four tequila shots and three ranch waters later, my hair is stuck to my face and my sweat-soaked back, and I'm not sure but it looks like Jonas's tie is missing. At some point during the night, we took over the dance floor and the DJ blessed us with dive bar anthems one after another. I thank him by blowing a few air kisses in his direction every few songs.

"Wait. Where's Natalie?"

"Who?"

"Natalie. The little blonde." I hold my hand up to my shoulder, and his eyes squint like he's trying to make sense of what I'm saying. "No. Melanie?"

"Stephanie," he says, swaying forward.

"Stephanie, yes! Where'd she go?" I spin around, looking behind me and immediately hate myself for it. The liquid sloshing around my stomach threatens to creep up and I turn back to rest my hands on Jonas's Tom Ford-covered shoulders. "Bad idea. Spinning."

"The time has come, Blondie."

The moment we step outside The Local, I hungrily suck down the frigid night air. It's likely a lot cooler than I believe it to be, but the inside of my body is cooking right now.

"Here," I say, handing Jonas my key ring.

"Which one is it?" He holds it up, and I look at it. The cowboy boot and bead bracelet keychain Camila gave me jingles against the single key on the loop.

“Use your big lawyer brain. I bet you can figure it out.” I laugh while opening the building door, and like two drunk turtles, we climb the seven flights of stairs.

By the time we make it to my floor, I’m convinced it’s morning. “Home sweet home,” Jonas says, fitting the key into the lock before throwing his shoulder into my door. “For another few hours, at least.” His voice trails off and his eyes find mine. His normally happy, gleaming baby blues are downturned and red.

“Thank you, Jonas,” I whisper, and the alcohol is starting to feel like weighted bricks in my stomach.

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He leans against the doorframe—a movement I’m sure is to keep him upright—and hands my keychain back to me. “Are you sure you got to leave, Blondie?”

I pause and focus on the little beads, sliding them back and forth. I’m glad he’s questioning me. Someone needs to. “I don’t know what I’m doing.” My words slur together but the point is made.

He nods his head in understanding before stepping up to me. His hand grips the back of my head, fingers getting stuck in the tangles of my hair and he pulls me in close, planting a soft kiss to the side of my temple. I close my eyes to stop any tears that might get the wrong idea that it’s okay to fall. I made this decision. An impulsive one, yes, but it’s done, and I’m not changing my mind now.

“Don’t be a stranger,” he whispers against my skin.

When he pulls away, his eyes are somehow more red than before. I bite down on my lip and we share a forced smile before he heads back down the stairs. I close the door and fall pitifully onto my couch.

Knox

The first rays of morning sunlight cut through the shutters in my living room, casting strips of hazy light across the hard oak floors of my house. A house that I haven’t been home to in years. The sounds of birds chirping and calling to one another fill the home. I pause in the space between the living room and kitchen, listening for a moment, and when I spend the time really focusing, I can hone in on the heavy willow leaves swaying against the breeze.

Day six of listening to the sounds of Stoney Meadows countryside coincidentally falls on day six of avoiding listening to my own thoughts.

“Knock knock. Rise and shine.” My dad’s flat voice sounds from just outside my front door, pulling me back to reality.

“Put some clothes on, and let’s have a talk,” are his only words when I open the door. I snag my jumper from the couch, gritting my teeth at both the pain and the humility that comes from how my body now moves with this injury. I robotically slip my casted arm from the sling, awkwardly working the jumper onto my body and pulling the sling backover my head. Every time I’m forced to do the simplest of tasks, I’m reminded of where I’m at.

And where I’ll never be again.

I meet my dad out on my wrap-around porch, where he sits on one of the wooden chairs, drinking his coffee and looking up the hill towards the main house. I saw him for the first time in over a year the day I got home, but I haven’t seen him since. Nothing has changed, though. He looks the same to me this morning as he did before I left eighteen years ago. A few more fine lines sprinkle his face, and his hair is more grey, but other than that, he’s exactly the same.

“So, what’s up?”

“It’s time to get back to work.”

I pause, halfway down onto my chair, and my eyebrows bunch together when I whip my head towards him. “With a broken arm and shoulder?”

“I’m not asking you to bail the hay,” he grumbles. “Patrick’s wife had a baby. He’ll be taking the week off to be home with her.”

The last time I was home, Patrick was working as a tour guide with the sole purpose of meeting and wooing women. “Okay.” I rub the back of my neck. “And what exactly does Patrick do around here again?”

“The night shift.” Since when the fuck do we have a night shift? I guess add it to the list of things that have changed around here. “Don’t look so sour son, all you have to do is man the front desk from ten p.m. to six a.m. for the next week.”

“I’m not sour, I’m confused.”

“Well, you look constipated.” I sigh, dropping my head back, and stare up at the porch roof. “Besides, I think it will give you a chance to figure out what it is you actually want to do.”

“Meaning?” I ask, with a clenched jaw.

“Meaning you’ve been home for almost two weeks now and you’ve left this house twice.”

“I didn’t realize you were keeping tabs.” His brows raise and alright, I deserve that look. I was never the one with a bad attitude. That was always Ryder’s claim to fame.

“Look, son.” He heaves a sigh as he leans forward, pushing himself from the chair. “You got dealt a shit hand and you’re allowed to be pissed off. But you can’t hole up in this house for the rest of your life. This ‘mad at the world’ act isn’t you.” He holds his coffee in one hand and slides the other into the pocket of his worn jeans. “You’re gonna heal, Knox. But you can’t throw everything away while you’re waiting.”

I love my dad. James Browning is a devoted husband, an incredible worker, and a wonderful dad. But as I stare up at him from my chair, I realize—he doesn’t get it.

I don't blame him for not understanding. I haven't talked about any of it. But if this were just about an injury and spending a few weeks healing—that I could live with. That wouldn't ruin my life.

I zone out watching the blades of grass sway in the wind while my father takes the steps down my porch. "Liam came by," he says over his shoulder. "He dropped some supplies off this morning, and had no idea you were back in town." "Piss. He's got me there, I should have reached out to my best mate by now. "Your mom is over the moon that you're back, and Knox, you know you'll always have a place here."

"Are you not?" I interrupt him. He turns back around to face me and at his raised brow, I clarify. "You said Mom was glad I was back. Are you not?"

His weathered hand scratches his jaw carefully before he responds. "If I thought you were happy to be back, then yeah, I would be. But you need to figure out if you can be happy here first." He raises his mug and dips his head to me before turning back towards the main house.

I run my fingers through my overly-grown hair a few times before gripping the bathroom sink and staring at my reflection in the mirror. Unlike my dad, I'm starting to recognize myself less and less. It's hard to say how he would handle or react in this situation because he's never been in a position of losing everything. He's never lost his purpose, the thing that makes him, him.

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Until your entire identity is ripped away from you in a single moment—I don't think he or anyone could ever understand what that feels like.

I turn the shower on with more force than necessary, and for the first time since I've been home, I really allow myself to question why I'm here. When I left my London flat, it felt like the most logical decision at the time. I didn't have a life outside of my team, and the longer I sat in my empty living room, the more my thoughts spiraled. But what was the point of coming back here? To be the bellboy? Knox Browning, World Rugby Men's 15s Player of the Year and Two Time World Rugby Cup Champion at your service.

The scalding water beats over me, and I close my eyes, dropping my head. As if I'm right back in that dry blue hospital bed I see the moment my life was ripped away from me, clear as day.

"Morning, sleeping beauty." The voice of a man I've heard every day for the last ten years sounds alarmingly different. It's the same heavy British accent, but I've never heard it laced with so much concern. I move to sit up, but his large hand presses to my left shoulder. "Easy, KB. Relax."

"What happened?" My throat is dryer than sandpaper.

"You took a bad hit." No shit. "Your shoulder broke, almost tearing completely through the skin. I rode with you in the ambulance where you were in and out of consciousness for a while before you were rushed in for emergency surgery." It sounds brutal and I'm glad I have no memory of any of it. "The doctor should be back to talk to you soon." His eyes are heavy, pained. I briefly wonder if it's him

who's injured and should be lying in this uncomfortable bed.

"What's the recovery time look like?" A deep sigh escapes him, and he runs his hands over his bald head before bringing them in front of him and cracking his knuckles. The popping sound is deep and momentarily distracts me. When he's done and still hasn't said anything, I narrow my eyes at him. "How long?"

"You're done, Knox."

"For how long?" This isn't my first injury—hell, it's not even my first surgery, but the heaviness in his eyes is starting to concern me. "Coach." There's a slight nod of his head as if he's answering the question I refuse to ask. A deep roar echoes in my ear and the beeps of the machines around me begin to accelerate. I can't tell if the dizzying feeling around me is from the meds or what he's saying.

"No," I say, shaking my head. "No."

"Knox, trust me, buddy?—."

"No!" I stop him. "I'll do the rehab and have the surgeries, you know I will. Whatever it takes."

"I know you would. It's not about that, Knox."

"I've recovered from worse." Nausea rises in my throat and I know it has little to do with my condition.

"When you were twenty. You're thirty-six now."

"I've still got four to six years left in me!" The machines continue to beep louder as I move again, but my body is fully drained, and I can't even crunch myself up to sit.

“You know if there were any other way, I would find it. Unfortunately, this is how the cards fell. A career-ending injury doesn’t mean you—” I succumb to the heavy weight of my eyelids, drop my head against the flat pillow, and tune him out.

One hit. One fucking hit and I’m done. They’re just words at this point because I can’t even muster the idea of them. You’re done. The words float around until the darkness consumes me.

Taylor

A heavy boomingthumps in my head, pulling me from my coma-like sleep. I should get up and crush some ginger to get the pounding to subside.

“Taylor!” Boom. Boom. Boom. I groan, opening one eye, and the banging persists. “Taylor!”

I swallow the dry lump in my throat when I realize that voice isn’t in my head, and I curse my morning person of a best friend. With a labored groan, I slowly push myself off the couch and hobble over to the door. Camila’s fresh face greets me on the other side, holding out two homemade coffees.

“Woah, what happened to you?”

“Jo—” My throat is so dry the word scratches and doesn’t even make it out. I swallow once more and try again. “Jonas,” I manage to get out. She hands me one of the cups, and I flick the door shut behind her. I follow her to the couch, where she’s still grinning behind her cup. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Mila,” I coax her.

“Was he so sad?” she asks, unable to keep the grin off her face. “Did he finally profess his love for you and cry and beg you to stay?”

“Yes. Actually, that’s exactly what happened, and then we went home and had filthy orgasmic sex, and we’re getting married next week, too.” I deadpan while blowing into my cup, but she doesn’t think I’m funny. Both Miles and Camila refused to believe Jonas and I could have any kind of platonic friendship. They were fully convinced something was going on between us. But all these months later, we’ve remained strictly friends.

“Okay, moving on.” She takes a sip of her drink while looking around the room. Her cup slowly falls from her lips as her breathing gets visibly shallow. I look around the once-homey space and see it through fresh eyes alongside her. The couch that we spent so many nights on, which used to be covered in patchwork quilts, is bare. The dollhouse-sized kitchen that was always littered with different-sized mason jars, holding numerous baking ingredients—and the occasional joint—is now empty. A collection of vases holding wildflowers could always be found decorating the second-hand wood dining table, but the only things sitting up there now are moving boxes. It was never a lot, but at the same time, it was everything to me.

“Taylor.” Her voice shakes. “You’re like, leaving leaving.”

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I pull my lips between my teeth, not trusting my voice, and nod my head.

“When?” She doesn’t shy away from my eyes like I so badly wish she would.

“Friday.”

A deep breath rushes out of her and her eyes squeeze shut. The way the color drains from her face is the exact reason why I’ve been dreading this conversation. Camila and I have been together since middle school. Her family is my family. Until a few months ago when she met, married, and moved in with her husband all within the span of three days—we had never really been apart.

“Why?” Her voice cracks as if she’s pleading with me, and as quickly as the liquid fills her eyes, the tears begin to fall.

I steady the heaviness in my chest with a deep inhale as I pull her closer to me, rubbing her shoulders. My deep-feeler girl.

I shouldn’t be embarrassed or afraid to tell my best friend of sixteen years that I’m looking for something, but I am, because honestly, I have no clue what it is I’m looking for.

“Honestly, Mila, it was just kind of impulsive. I was watching a movie set in Ireland one minute and booking a reservation at Emerald Browning Cottage the next. I—” My lungs deflate as I search for the words. “I don’t know. I have nothing going on.” I pause at how raw that sounds, but not wanting to overthink it I keep going. “There’s nothing I’m excited about here. I think the real question is, why not?” I hate lying to

her, but she worries enough for the both of us. And it somehow feels selfish to say I've stayed around because of her. I love her with every piece of my soul and would do anything for her, but she doesn't need me anymore.

Her tears continue to fall, hitting my forearm. I knew it would be hard to tell her and even more difficult for her to understand, and if this were a few months ago, I never would have considered leaving her. But things are different now. She's happy, and there once was a time I wasn't sure she would let herself find this kind of joy in life. It still crushes me to see her upset, though, and as much as I'll miss her, I need her to know it will all be okay. Even if I've never been more unsure of anything in my life.

"Hey." I squeeze her shoulder before pulling back to search her eyes. I mask my fear with a smile and tell her the one lie I've been telling myself the last two weeks. "This is a good thing, okay? I'm just looking for a little bit of an adventure. First stop, Ireland. Next, the rest of the world."

She studies my face, and I hold the excited expression until she sniffs, wipes her tears, and nods her head. I slowly exhale a shaky breath as she sits back further on the couch.

"Obviously, you've packed the apartment. Have you packed your suitcase?"

Fuck. It's my turn to slump into the couch. My chin presses to my chest as I close my eyes and groan. "In my defense, I did try. Twice actually." I hold up my two fingers and she smiles at me, taking one more sip of her coffee before setting it down and pulling her long dark hair up into a bun on the top of her head.

"Then let's do this." She slaps my thigh before standing, and my heart pumps a little fuller because getting anything done is so much easier when she's around.

A long, low car horn wakes me from my sleep. I blink, my eyes adjusting to the

darkness. My laptop sits between Mila and I, where we fell asleep. I close the ‘Are you still watching?’ screen and she begins to stir next to me. Without the laptop, the room is coated in midnight black.

“I’m having deja vu.” Her voice floats across to me in a whisper.

“It’s from the packing.” I pat her arm next to me. It wasn’t long ago that we packed up this same room when she moved out.

“Yeah, must be.”

“And you remember what I said then?”

“It will all be okay.”

“That’s right. It was true then and it’s true now.” I don’t need any light on to feel her head nod in agreement. “It’s only a month,” I remind us both.

We continue to lay in the dark, the lull of cars driving by in the distance and murmurs of conversations from people walking home filter through the window. I finally close my eyes again, trying not to get hung up on my thoughts but rather let them drift.

“It just feels so final.” My eyes fly open at her words, and I ignore the twinge in my chest, allowing one lone tear to slide down my cheek.

Knox

“Someone call the Sheriff. Some old bastard is breaking and entering.”

“Nice to see you too, mate,” I say. Liam drops the crate he’s carrying, rounding the bar with a smile that spans the entirety of his face, and takes my good arm, pulling

me into a hug.

“Good to see you, buddy.”

“Is it still breaking and entering if the front door is unlocked?”

“Semantics,” he scoffs, waving a hand in front of his face.

“Couldn’t be much to steal.” I make a show of looking around the otherwise empty bar. “Business looks like it’s hurting.”

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“It’s ten a.m. we’re not open yet, Jackass.” He points a finger at me as he walks back behind the bar. “How’s the shoulder?” he asks, nodding to the strap draped across my chest.

“It’s fucked,” I admit. “I can hopefully ditch the cast and sling next week, and if all is good, I’ll start physical therapy.”

“Here?” His movements don’t stop but I know my friend. I catch his sly way of asking if I’ll be around for a while. No matter how long I’ve been gone, we’ve remained mates through the years, and damn it feels good to be around him again.

“Yeah, mate. I’m home.”

“Cool.” He nods nonchalantly while sliding a pint across the mahogany top.

“I’ve got an appointment at old man Murphy’s in a few days.” His head pops up, and he fails miserably at hiding his smile. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Something.”

“It’s just that old man Murphy doesn’t actually work there anymore. It’s still his practice but he had to hire someone new. The old man got too old.”

“And what? You don’t like the new guy?”

“Girl.”

“Excuse me?”

“The new girl.”

Ahh. “You fancy her?”

He casually shrugs his shoulders while drying off a glass. “I’m working on her.”

The kitchen door swings open, followed by a tall brunette carrying a crate of glasses. It’s been years since I last saw her in person, but I recognize her instantly.

“You remember my cousin, Ava?” Liam asks.

“Of course. Ava, looking good.” I tip my head to her.

“Likewise, KB.”

“I hadn’t heard you were back in town.”

“Funny, I could say the same about you.” She smiles, setting the crate on a shelf below the bar.

“Touche.” I want to ask if she’s back by choice but I don’t want to answer any more questions about myself so I give her the same respect. “So what is an international supermodel doing slumming it here, with your cousin?” I ask instead. “Surely, there are better job opportunities for someone like you.”

Liam whips a dirty towel at my chest. “Fuck off. We’re full-staffed now, mate.” I raise my eyebrows, twisting around on my stool. “I told you, we’re closed. But come

the weekend, I've got to flash the lights on them."

"Not the lights." I hold my hand up in defense.

"You joke but The Saloon is the place to be Thursday through Saturday. The tourists come all week but the locals really fill the place up on the weekend."

"Nice to see you've upgraded from 'Liam's place'." I laugh, taking a drink of my water.

"Well, after a few too many people getting confused and showing up at my house, I decided to change it."

"Plus he was sleeping with the girl that works at the office supply store," Ava adds, and I smile that at least one thing hasn't changed. It is a bit of a cold reminder though, that while Liam hitting on every woman that crosses his path hasn't changed, the list of things that have feels endless. "But to answer your question, it was just time for me to come home." She shrugs her shoulder while continuing to dry off a glass. "Kind of like you." Except it wasn't my choice. I fight the urge to curl my lips, and instead, I nod and lift my glass to her.

When I left Stoney Meadow, I felt like I was the only one doing anything. I didn't feel better than anyone because I knew most people didn't want to leave, but I did. Liam and I met when he gave me the hardest tackle I had ever encountered at nine years old. We played rugby together for the next ten years alongside our other mate, Dax. But while it wasn't a question of whether I would get out of here and go pro, neither of them had the same desire. At the time, I thought they were crazy, but now that I'm back and have nothing to show for it while Liam owns a bar and Dax owns the town gym, I wonder if they're the ones who had it right all along. My two best friends, my family, and everyone else in this town seem to not only be building a life for themselves and living, but actually thriving.

I chug the rest of my drink in one large gulp and sit it on the bar a little harsher than I intended. “Alright, well, I’ve got to get going. Got to try and get some sleep before I’m up all night.” Liam cocks a brow at me. “I got put on night shift duty up at the main house.”

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His knees bend and he arches back, barking out a laugh. Ava jabs him with her elbow and I give her a grateful smile. “Oh mate, I’m sorry, that sucks.”

“Thanks, buddy.” His laugh rings out as I make my way to the front door.

“Hey, whenever you’re done playing grave keeper you should come by!” he yells, and I throw my middle finger overhead before exiting.

Taylor

I might need to be buried here.

There’s a real possibility that I’ll die before I travel internationally again. One delayed flight caused me to miss my connecting flight, which ended up with me sleeping in an airport chair for six hours. A few delayed flights couldn’t get me down, though, so the universe made damn sure that I missed the last bus as well.

“Business or pleasure?”

Neither. I’m wet and freezing. It’s the middle of the night, and I went through all my snacks before my first flight ever took off. My teeth chatter uncontrollably and the man driving the ‘cab’ looks at me through his rearview mirror. Outside, the only thing breaking up the sheer black of night is the heavy raindrops splattering on the window.

Shit. I could very well be getting taken to the middle of nowhere right now.

“Pleasure.” I fix the driver with the most intense stare I can muster. “I’m actually

meeting my dad,” I lie. His eyes flirt between the road in front of him—which he must know well, considering there’s no way he can see anything—and my reflection in the mirror. “And my brothers,” I add. “All four of them.” He smiles, nodding his head. “They just got back from a hunting trip.”

“Hunting, huh? That’s interesting.”

“Yeah, I think it’s unfair to the bears really because my dad and brothers are so big.” I hold my arms out wide the way I usually do when I want to measure if something will fit in a new space. “Thirty-two feet tall between the five of them. Oh sorry, that’s my dad calling now.” I press my phone to my ear, saying a silent prayer that no one actually calls to interrupt my ruse. “Hi, Dad!” I pause listening to nothing but my own heavy breathing. “Yup, I’m on my way.” I tilt the phone away from my face and look at the cab driver again. “How much further? My dad wants to know,” I ask him.

“‘Bout half a mile,” he says, still smiling.

“Oh perfect. What’s that, Dad? You’re all standing outside, cleaning your hunting rifles?” Pause. I swear I briefly see the man laugh.

“Alright, Miss America. We’re here.” I ignore his comment and press my face to the window. Again, nothing but darkness.

“Here—where?”

“This is as far as I go.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, forgetting about my fake phone call.

“The road to the inn is a dirt one. Once it starts raining like this, the whole thing turns to mud. If I drive up there, I won’t be able to get out.”

“Umm, sir. You expect me to get out in the middle of the night, in a rainstorm, and carry all my luggage through a mud road?”

“Of course not.” Whew. I all but wipe at my forehead in relief. “Call your brothers to come down and help you,” he says, smiling at me through the mirror. Fuck. Me.

My options are limited at this point. I either risk it with this stranger in an unmarked cab or take my chances alone, in the dead of night, in a country I’ve never been to, during a torrential downpour. “Thanks for your help,” I mumble before taking a deep inhale. I give a curt nod and throw my door open.

My eyes squeeze shut against a freezing gust of wind that smacks me in the face, and already, the prospect of getting abducted seems better than this. I look once more at the driver, the lights in the car now on, and I can clearly see him for the first time. He’s younger than I originally thought but he’s actually kind of cute, if not a little boyish. But also, he can kick rocks for leaving me here.

My white slip-ons are immediately soaked and filthy as I run to the trunk and pull out my bags. With the thud of the trunk, he makes a U-turn and drives off, and I’m left standing at the bottom of a hill, looking up toward a soft glow in the distance. I pull my jean jacket over my head and it does fuck all to protect me from the wind and rain. I stack my duffle bag on top of my suitcase, grab the handle, and make it all of one step before the bag goes tumbling down. Fuck me. I kick my suitcase over, letting out something between a groan and a yell, and allow myself nine seconds—which feels like forever in this downpour—to have a pity party. Relax. I take a breath, drop my shoulders, and drape my duffle bag across my body. You’re fine. Annoyed, but fine. With another breath, I grab my suitcase once more and begin pulling it through the mud.

In the movies, the main character always just appears in a new country. Fresh face, shiny hair. Cue the montage of the beauty all around her. She’s smiling from ear to

ear. She smells new foods for the first time. Someone rides past her on a bike or a moped. And when she least expects it, as she's looking down at her map, the smoking-hot love interest appears to help her. And yet here I am, dragging one hundred pounds of baggage through shit soup.

I reach the wood-covered porch and shake myself off like a dog. Water comes out by the gallon when I squeeze my hair out and ring my shirt. I pause with my hand on the door, horrified that this is potentially the first impression I'm going to make, but my other option is to turn around and go home.

The room's warmth immediately engulfs me when I step inside. A fire dances to my right in what looks like the original stone hearth that takes up a majority of the wall. Built-in bookshelves and vintage framed paintings and photographs with no rhyme or reason decorate the other walls. The room is warm, and inviting. Clean but not sterile. I spin around wanting to absorb every square inch of the space. Beautiful, rich dark woods, flowers in equally colorful ceramic vases, antique furniture draped in handmade plush quilts—I've officially stepped inside a Nancy Meyers movie.

"Nova?" My head swivels around quickly looking for the source of that deep gravelly voice. I sidestep around the stairs almost tripping over my discarded luggage in the process and holy shit, it looks like my night might be turning around. "Nova?" he asks again. My breath is lodged in my throat as a rugged version of Aquaman raises his eyebrows at me, likely wondering why I can't speak or maybe why I look like a drowned rat.

"How did you know my name?"

"Well unless you used an alias to book your reservation, you're the only Nova I have on my schedule who was supposed to check in this morning but didn't."

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Right. I take a deep breath and mentally shake my head. I don't dare move my bags and drag dirt through the place but I run my hand through my hair, pull my shoulders back, and flash a beaming smile. "Hi. Taylor Nova, checking in."

"Yeah. I got that." He smirks and I have to bite down on my bottom lip. His eyes trail me, and I should feel embarrassed with the state I'm in, but my entire body heats under his gaze. That is until he clears his throat and focuses intently on the computer screen. His brow furrows and his fingers begin typing away and Oh. My. God. My mouth parts as I slowly cross my arms over my chest. My chest that all my adult life I've been told was 'too small' but I didn't care, because it meant I didn't need to wear a bra. My chest that now sits completely exposed to this man through my soaking-wet white T-shirt. Wonderful.

"Alright, I've got you all checked in. Breakfast and dinner are included in your stay, the kitchen opens at seven a.m. Here's a brochure of the services we offer, and if you have no further questions, I'll show you up to your room now." He recites his monotone speech as well as the flight attendants gave their safety instructions on the flight over. With my arms still crossed, I dip down toward the desk and grab my papers. There. That didn't look ridiculous at all.

A slight dip of his head and the way his mouth twists, attempting to hide that smirk, are all the confirmation I need that I've been here for seven whole minutes and already this hot as-sin man has seen my nipples. He stands from behind the desk and my head drops back to take him in fully. I've never seen a human specimen like him in my life. Maybe the Rock and CGI superheroes, but men like him don't exist in the real world. Or maybe, they're just built differently in Ireland. I force a swallow as he rounds the desk. In all my fawning over him, I somehow missed the cast and sling

that cradles his arm.

“I can get those.” Before I can lunge toward my grimy bags, he’s draping my duffle over his good shoulder, sliding my carry-on under his free arm, and then picking up my full-size suitcase by the handle. He’s easily holding a hundred pounds in one arm with another fifty or so draped over his shoulder.

“This way.” I stumble back a step, letting him by. He climbs the steep stairs to the second floor, and I follow two steps behind. My face is now eye-level with the world’s most massive ass. Seriously, this man is draggin’ a wagon. My climb slows as he gets higher, showing off his impressive legs. These are legs that if given the chance to wrap around you, would do more harm than a boa constrictor. Each calf is easily the width of an overgrown watermelon, and they’re covered, for fucks sake. I can’t even imagine how they would look when he’s not wearing jeans.

He turns right at the top of the stairs and continues down the hall until he reaches the last door. I hurry my steps behind him but halt abruptly when he bends over and the hem of his long-sleeved T-shirt lifts slightly. I try to focus on the way he handles my things with surprising grace—although I suppose anything would seem graceful compared to the way I manhandled them earlier—but the sliver of tan skin and rolling muscles down his lower back suck me back in. He turns to face me and quirks a brow and—lovely. I’ve been caught staring. I quickly avert my gaze, but it feels unnatural. When have I ever been embarrassed to look at someone? If anything, I would hope to be caught. I’m not the girl who gets dry mouth in front of a guy so I’m not sure why my tongue is stuck to the roof of my mouth now. I roll my shoulders back and remind myself that I’m the girl whose favorite accessories are her nipples. Tilting my head with a sweet smile, I proudly show off what I’m working with.

He taps a large key in the palm of his hand while his lips twist to the side like he’s weighing a life or death decision here, and then he inserts the key into the lock of door number nine.

A queen-size upholstered bed sits in the middle of the room with enough pillows for a small village. Just like downstairs, the room is clean and homey. An old wood nightstand on one side and a wicker and wood chair that acts as a bedside table on the other. “If you need anything, dial one on the phone.”

I look to where the man is now crowding me in the doorway. In any other situation, this room would seem comfortable, spacious even, but the width of his body isn’t shy about taking up space.

“And what will that do?”

“It’ll call the front desk.”

“You?”

“Mhmm.” The rumble sound is low, deep, and comes straight from his chest and I’m blindsided by the beat that begins hammering between my legs. I don’t dare falter though, I stay firmly in place and lift my chin just an inch higher, fully meeting his gaze.

“Do you work down there every night?”

“It’s my first night.”

“Do you like it?”

“Tonight?” His eyes scan my body up and down while his knuckles drag along his beard and my eyes follow the movement like I’ve bet all my money on a sleight of hand trick. “It’s not so bad.”

His large body presses off the door frame, invading my space, and I have to crane my

neck all the way back just to keep my eyes on his. I can't tell if my blood is flowing erratically or has just stopped moving altogether when he leans in another inch. He's so close that if I take a deep enough breath, my nipples would absolutely scrape against him. His long, thick fingers grip the key to my room in front of my face, and sparks fly from my hand to his when I grip it, but I make no effort to pull back. His tongue darts out, wetting his bottom lip, and he flashes another one of those smirks which, upon closer inspection, appears a bit more cocky than I first thought. And according to the thrumming between my legs, I rather enjoy cocky.

"Enjoy your stay, Nova."

I exhale the breath I was holding and listen to his heavy footsteps retreat down the stairs before I drop my head to the door. What the hell was that?

My wet clothes fall to the bathroom floor with a loud plop and I check my phone while I start the shower. Three missed calls from Camila and a never-ending text thread.

Mila

I saw your plane was delayed

This seems way too long to be traveling even with delays. Please let me know you're ok.

Miles says he knows people and if you don't answer me in the next hour, there's going to be a witch hunt out for you.

I check the time on the last text. Forty-eight minutes ago. I smile at my phone, tempted to see what she'll do if I wait, but I can't stand the thought of her worrying for a minute longer. I don't have the energy to call her back right now though so I send a quick text instead.

Taylor

I'm here! Made it to my hotel.

Mila

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You were really cutting it close there. *Alexa, cancel timer for one hour*

How was the flight? Flights?

Taylor

Pretty much as fun as the DMV.

Mila

Taylor

I was reading my book and they were JUST about to fuck and my Kindle died.

Mila

Nooooooooo

Taylor

Actually now that I think about it, it probably killed itself. The last line I read was 'I ran my tongue through her sopping wet folds.'

Mila

Really? Folds. We're still saying that?

Taylor

She got that origami punani.

I laugh, set my phone on the counter, and step into the shower, letting the lava-like water melt off the remnants of the world's longest travel day.

I don't know how long I stayed in there, and I don't remember how I got wrapped up in the world's coziest bed, but I don't have the chance to bother figuring it out before I let the effects of the last forty-eight hours pull me to sleep.

Knox

A deep exhale escapes me as I lean back, allowing the water to rain down on me and the rough edges of the stone wall shower to dig into my back. I've been lucky enough not to have run into anyone I haven't personally sought out yet since I've been back. I drag my hand down my face and turn off the water before getting ready to confront the thing I've been avoiding these past few weeks.

It's not that I don't love these people. While rugby might have made me, this town raised me. When I left, I left with hundreds of people rooting for me. The people of Stoney Meadow were my biggest supporters, my number one fans. I lived in a new city for six months before I came back for the first time. I continued to come home for holidays, or whenever I had time off, but every time I did, it was a distraction. Over the years, I found myself coming home less and less. Six months stretched into nine, and nine, became twelve. This last stint had gone on for three years. I'm grateful to my parents who still cared enough to make the trips out to watch me play major games and championships even if I only saw them for a night or two.

Now I'm back and I have nothing to show for it. When I'd come home, it was always, 'There's our superstar' or 'Knox Browning, Stoney Meadows's greatest claim

to fame'. I never bought into all the hype or let it go to my head. It was never about the fame or the prestige for me, but now it's all about how I've let them down. My biggest motivator now is to get my shoulder healed, work through this injury, and get back to my team in whatever capacity that might be. I have to believe that will negate some of the guilt I feel for letting them down. Working the night shift was the best case of a worst-case scenario because it meant I wouldn't have to see anyone. But tonight, as I start my truck and make my way up to the main house for dinner, I buckle up for the storm of disappointment I'm sure I'm about to walk into.

Emerald Browning Cottage is the heart of this land, but the large old, walnut wood dining room table is the heart of this Inn. It was built by my great-grandfather and my pa when my dad was just a toddler. Photos of dinners held at this very table over the last sixty years decorate the room. It seats twenty people easily, and while it is the heart of the inn, it also holds the heart of my family.

"Olivia honey, can you grab the other tray of the boxtys from the kitchen? There's room at the end of the table." My mum sets down bread bowls filled with what smells like beer cheese soup before her head snaps up, noticing my presence.

"Smells great, Mum." I smile at her as she rounds the table, wiping her hands on her apron. She brushes a dark brown curl from her forehead, revealing slightly glassy eyes, but her smile glows as she wraps her delicate arms around my waist.

"I'm so glad you're here," she whispers against my sternum and I hold her just a little tighter. She pulls back, keeping her hands on my waist. Looking up at me, her eyes search mine, and I breathe a little easier when I find nothing but pure joy in them.

"Nice of you to show your face around here, Knoxy." My mum smiles, stepping back at the sound of my sister's voice. I palm the back of her head like a basketball and pull her into my side. She's grown so much since the last time I was home and looks more like a real adult rather than the fresh-faced eighteen-year-old she was when I

last saw her. She'll always be seven to me though. "Let me go!" Her voice comes out in a mumble, somewhere around my armpit and I release her head. She stumbles back a step and glares at me. "When do you think you'll outgrow that?"

I flick my eyes up and purse my lips. My finger dances in front of my face. "Plus seven, carry the one—" I don't miss the way she rolls her eyes. "Oh. Never." I reach to ruffle her hair again, but she's quick and bats my arm away.

"Alright, children. We've got company. Sit," my dad grumbles and Liv and I move to the same two seats we've always sat at. It's ridiculous how my life has been turned completely upside down, yet some things haven't changed at all.

A family of four—all with the same jet-black hair, olive skin, and thin lips begin to fill their plates across from me. While a woman roughly in her thirties taps away on her phone down by my father. "Would you like some?" he asks mid-scoop.

Her American accent is thick when she says, "Oh, no thank you." Her lips press into a thin line and she drops her phone in her lap.

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“Sorry, I’m late.” Ryder storms through the dining room, taking the last empty chair at the table, and it causes me to look around the room for the first time. “Juno and Nebula took a little extra time bathing today.” I tune out his horsechatter as my mind drifts to a certain green-eyed beauty who’s missing from this dinner table. Not that I need any distractions right now, but if I’m going to be here anyway, I might as well enjoy the view of the perky blonde.

“Did Coach Campbell find you?” I face the end of the table, finding my dad’s eyes pointed at me.

“No.” I clear my throat and my thoughts. “Was he looking for me?”

“He came by earlier, said he wanted to talk to you about something. I told him you were probably sleeping but to head on down and wake your ass up anyway.”

“James,” my mum scolds him from across the table.

“What?” She looks around at the guests, with an apologetic smile and a pink blush.

“Do you not say ‘ass’ in America?” he whispers to the woman texting under the table.

“Do you know what he wanted?” I ask, both out of curiosity and to save the woman from having to come in between my parents. My dad shrugs his shoulders and lifts a fork full of meat and potatoes to his mouth. I haven’t talked to my high school coach in years. Great guy, even if he was a little extra hard on Liam and me. I always made it a point to stop by and say hi whenever I was in town. I guess it’s possible he just found out I was back and wanted to check in on me.

After dinner, everyone—with the exception of the American, who might actually be surgically attached to her phone—retreats to the common room. I'm introduced to the Thompsons—the sixty-year-old couple on their thirty-fifth-anniversary trip. The Riccis, an Italian family, is here for their nephew's wedding. And Arlo, who came in halfway through dinner and is staying for one more night before he continues his backpacking trip across Europe.

“Hey, has anyone seen the new guest, Taylor?”

I sit on the linen-covered couch with an ankle crossed over my knee and silently wonder if anyone has noticed how I stopped swirling the ice around my glass at the mention of her name.

“I saw she got checked in in the middle of the night.” My dad speaks directly to me and all heads turn to me for confirmation.

“Uh, yeah.” I clear my throat and pull the sleeve of my flannel down. “Sometime around there.”

“And?” Liv's eyes bulge out of her head and she looks at me as if my arm wasn't in a cast, she would try and pummel the information out of me. I somehow forgot this little quirk of hers—the girl gets so excited whenever any female remotely close to her age stays with us. I get it. She grew up in a house with two older brothers, but as someone who's hardly left this town, it has to get lonely for her to make these friends, only for them to leave a week or so later. “What's she like?”

“She's...” Hot? Cheeky? Has no shame? Maybe a little flirtatious? “Tall.”

A deep crease forms between my sister's brows. “Tall? Really? That's it?”

“And blonde.”

“She sounds like a good time,” Ryder coos, and for some reason, it has my hand flexing in my lap. Thankfully, my dad whacks him in the back of the head so I don’t have to. “What?” He doesn’t bother trying to hide his laugh.

“Don’t talk about our guests like that,” my dad scolds him.

Ryder is saved from embarrassment and I’m saved from any more lines of questioning when Sophie and her soon-to-be husband walk through the door.

“There’s our bride-to-be!” my mum beams. The Italian family all say hello to their nephew and through all the exchanges, Liv’s curious eyes are still on me.

“Knox Browning! Is it really you?” Sophie stands a whole five feet small with her hands on her hips and everyone parts between us. I push myself to stand, having missed another old friend of mine and I pull her in, wrapping my arms around her petite frame.

“Hey, Soph.”

“When did you get back?”

“A few days ago.” I shrug.

“I’ll pretend like you came home just for my wedding. At least, that’s the rumor I’m going to spread around town.”

“You do that.” I smile at her before introducing myself to her fiancé.

After a few hours of families catching up and friends swapping stories, I make my way over to the front desk. Slowly, guests start to dwindle back to their rooms for the night, and not quickly enough, I’m left downstairs in silence. With nothing but my

thoughts—buzz buzz—and apparently a new email from... Coach Henderson?

KB—

Hey, champ. I've tried reaching out a few times. Haven't heard back. Lucky for you, I don't offend easily. Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I'm working on something over here on my end to hopefully get you back with us in some capacity. It obviously wouldn't be playing but something has gotta be better than nothing, right?

-Henderson

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P.S. I found this article today. Thought you might find it helpful. Keep your head up and we'll talk soon.

My thumb hovers over the attachment that reads *How to Recover After a Career-Ending Injury*, but I set my phone down instead. I've known since that day I woke up in the dry blue hospital gown that I wouldn't get to play again. Whether or not I had accepted it is another story but I've known. I haven't let myself think past healing and recovering, but if there's a possibility of training or working with my old team again—my limbs go heavy while I let myself imagine that future for a moment.

It's just past midnight and everyone has long gone to bed. I move back to the couch, take a breath, and open the link Coach sent. Number one, in big, bold letters, is to focus on setting goals. This is bullshit.

With an aggravated groan, I toss my phone across the couch. I hinge forward, dropping my elbow to my knee, and scrub my hand across my mouth, before digging my palm into my eye socket.

The fire in the corner is a low whisper but the creak from the floorboards is loud. I press just a little further into my eye before letting out a breath. I'm halfway between sitting and standing when a pair of sky-blue-colored toes hit the last step. Taylor rounds the wall of the stairs, looking around. Her long hair is draped behind her shoulders in two tight braids and her eyes squint as she adjusts to the light in the room until she spots me. She stands in a tight dark green tank top that's bunched up just enough to show off a sliver of her warm ivory skin, paired with sweatpants so large they couldn't possibly be hers.

“Hey.” I never thought I could be attracted to a voice before, but hers is raspy and sexy in a way that just does something to me. “I guess I’m a little more jet-lagged than I anticipated. I was hoping to get some food.” She leans against the arm of the couch across from me.

“You’ve missed dinner by about six hours.”

Her eyes roll back and the groan that comes from the back of her throat has me suppressing my own.

“Okay... well can you recommend something in town?”

“The towns closed, love.”

“What?” she snaps. “What do you mean the town’s closed?”

I’m not sure where she thought she would get a plate of fish and chips in the middle of the night, especially without shoes on, but she definitely wasn’t prepared for small-town living.

“Where did you say you were from again?”

“I didn’t.” She crosses her arms across her chest, tilts her head, and lifts her chin.

I narrow my gaze at her waiting for her to give in. “You’re not going to tell me where you’re from?”

“Why should I? You haven’t even told me your name.” Cheeky little thing. I stand from the couch, casually crossing the living room, and when I get close enough to her, her unique scent fills my entire body. It seeps through every pore of my skin. It’s sweet and earthy, something I’m not used to—but goddamn, do I like it. Her eyes

don't avert my gaze for a millisecond, in fact, she puffs her chest up an extra half an inch just to stand a little taller and I can't help the way the corner of my mouth lifts. I drag my eyes down her body and up again before I continue past her to the swinging door that leads into the kitchen. She whips her head to me and I nod, silently beckoning her to come in.

"Everything in town closes at seven." Her eyes flirt to the kitchen beyond me and a ghost of a smile crosses her face. Her arms are still crossed but her feet move to follow me. When she passes me in the narrow doorway, I lean down, my mouth hovering just over her ear, and I whisper, "And you can call me Knox."

She goes eerily still, and her mouth parts slightly, but she cocks a brow, tilting her head. "I have a feeling I'll be calling you a lot of things."

"Or screaming," I mutter to myself but I catch the way her step falters once.

I watch Taylor's head turn slowly, taking in every inch of the kitchen. Her eyes widen and for the first time, I look at the room I spent most of my childhood in through someone else's eyes. It's dimly lit, just like all the others, because my mum despises overhead lighting. Taylor's bare feet pad across the cobblestone floor, her gentle hands glide across the butcher block island, and her eyes light up over the exposed shelves decorated with mismatched coffee mugs and glass tumblers. She opts for hoisting herself up on a linen-covered bar stool rather than sitting at the old round wooden table in the corner. Behind the small table is a built-in cupboard that is stuffed full of recipe books, photos, cutting boards, more flower-filled vases, and handmade art from when my siblings and I were kids. We used to sit at that table every day after school while Mum prepared dinner.

Taylor plucks a plum from the large woven bowl in front of her and raises her brow, asking for permission. I nod in response. Her lips perch on the sides of it, and when she bites in, a sweet line of juice slides down the side of her mouth. Her tongue lazily

swipes at the corner of her lips, catching the leftover liquid.

I scrub my hand across my mouth, but the only thing I'm wiping away is my metaphorical drool.

"It's called an Edda," I manage to get out. "A local favorite."

"It's sweet. Do you grow them on-site?"

I nod. "All meals around here are made fresh daily, and most of the ingredients are either sourced from our own farm and gardens, or from local neighbors. The only problem is—" I open the refrigerator. "Since everything is made fresh, whatever doesn't get eaten usually gets sent home with some of the staff." I look around at a handful of different ingredients but find nothing readily available.

I feel her presence before I see her. "May I?" Her soft hair brushes my arm as she leans down next to me, eliciting my body to flood with warmth. Aside from offering her a piece of buttered toast, I've got nothing, but I won't be the reason she starves so, I step back, holding my arm out, and she quickly pulls some things out.

I take the stool that she's no longer occupying just as she begins whisking some eggs. I briefly consider offering to help her, since I didn't even ask if she knew how to cook, but as soon as she begins chopping vegetables, my worries about her kitchen abilities are put to bed. She handles that knife like it's an extension of herself, rocking the blade back and forth in a rhythmic motion.

"So, you don't want to tell me where you're from. Do you want to tell me what you're doing in Stoney Meadow?"

She smiles, taking a bite of the pepper she just cut.

“I’m a bigHarry Potterfan.” Now it’s my turn to smile.

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“Then I guess the question is, what are you doing here?” She turns on the stove, hovering her hand over the pan.

“What do you mean?” she asks over her shoulder. “Don’t you know you live in the land of the famous filming location?”

“I might have heard that a time or two, but you chose to stay at an inn that is three hours away from those sights.”

She roasts her vegetables and pours her egg mixture over top, gently pressing everything toward the center. She props a hip on the counter, turning the rest of the way to face me.

“And what are you? The town detective or something?”

“You don’t have to be Sherlock fucking Holmes to figure out that your Harry Potter quest is bullshit.” Her eyes squint but her mouth is pulled tight like she’s trying her damndest not to smile. She turns back, pulling her pan from the fire and laying down another before setting a sliced piece of bread in it. I watch how she moves seamlessly around the kitchen, even though she’s never been in this one before. When I take a peek at her face, it’s clear she’s battling something. Her eyes are on the stove, but they’re not focused. Her lips dance side to side, sometimes being pulled in between her teeth. Her reason for being here seems more personal than I originally thought and I don’t know why I care, but I find myself trying to make her feel more comfortable. “Okay, so we’ve got a Harry Potterhead amongst us. What’s your room?”

“My?” A grin breaks out across her face and her hair brushes along the slope of her ass when she drops her head back. “You mean my house?”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.” I snatch an apple out of the bowl as she sets her plate down on the placemat next to me.

“Mhmm. I’m a Slytherin, obviously.”

“Oh yeah? Me too,” I say, biting into the fruit and she huffs another light laugh.

“Okay, soclearlyyou’re the biggest HP fan, but what else?” She loads a heaping pile of eggs onto her toast, and I smile at the way she has no shame in how she shoves it into her mouth.

“What about me?”

“I me—” she mumbles around a mouthful of food. “I mean, I saw the way you carried all my luggage up the stairs with one hand, so I doubt you injured yourself while working the bell boy job. What happened?”

“To be fair, I’ve only ever beenyourbell boy.”

She playfully rolls her eyes before sitting up straight and snapping her finger. “I got it. You were injured solving one of your town mysteries.” I avoid her question by opening my mouth and biting my teeth down hard a mere half an inch away from her finger. “Hmm, looks like we both have a hard time admitting our truths.”

I smile, despite the way I want to hang my head in shame, but I also don’t want her to see how right she is. Her returning nod lets me know that she’s going to let it go. We sit in a comfortable silence as she finishes her breakfast for dinner. When she stands to wash her plate, I grow restless feeling my time with her coming to an end.

“I got injured playing rugby.” Her sudsy hands still where the sponge was rubbing circles over the plate.

“How long until you're healed?”

“I’ve had the surgery and I get the cast off and start physical therapy in a few days, but I’ll never...” I drop her gaze then. “I’ll never be able to play again. Not professionally, anyway.” And there it is, the truth that I’ve been avoiding all this time. The reason I haven’t wanted to be around anyone else. No matter what Coach Henderson might be able to offer me, it will never be my game back. And who am I without that game?

To her credit, Taylor doesn’t respond more than a tight smile and an understanding nod. She dries her dishes before putting everything back where she got it, as if she was never here at all, and slowly makes her way to the door. I’m still looking at my fruit when her raspy voice speaks up.

“I’m just looking for a little adventure.”

My head snaps to where she’s standing in the doorway. Her eyelids are hooded slightly, and her fingers grip the wall. I cock an eyebrow at her, silently questioning what kind of adventure she’s referring to. She smiles covering her face with her hands. “That wasn’t some creepy invite. I just meant that’s what I’m doing here. I have nothing going on at home and I’m just... yeah, looking for an adventure.” She swallows. “It sounds kind of stupid the more times I say it out loud though, huh?”

I have nothing without my sport anymore. I’m nobody without it, so I can relate to the feeling of needing something.

“Not stupid at all.”

She pushes the door open, sliding out, but holding the wood frame before it can shut fully. “Good night, Knox. And thank you for the food.”

“Goodnight, Nova. And thank you for the company.” She disappears behind the door and I find myself more grateful than ever for the night shift.

Taylor

Light seeps in through my wood slat blinds, and even though my eyes are begging to be shut again, I take it as a good sign that I’m up during the day. I roll over, searching for the black metal analog clock that sits on the vintage-styled nightstand. 3:15. Shit.

I flop back down and mentally berate myself for sleeping through yet another day. Not that I would have gotten up early—unfortunately, early mornings and I are not on the best of terms. We’re like spiteful ex-lovers who would be okay and capable of making it work for a day or two, claiming to love each other, but then get drunk and break up again. Early mornings and I tried to make it work, really. But in the end, sometimes you just have to know when to give up.

I snuggle into the soft waffle knit blankets and warm cotton quilt that cover me, as if I magically appeared in my bed and didn’t move all night. It turns out my bed is somehow even more comfortable than I thought it would be, which is a shame for someone like me, who already has difficulty getting up and starting my day. I’ve already gotten well acquainted with my room over the last two nights, and if my room at Emerald Browning Cottage is any indication of what the rest of Stoney Meadow has to offer, then I need to get my ass up and moving. Now.

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Buzz buzz.

Or just as soon as I talk to Camila.

Mila

Listen, I'm not trying to be needy, but you're in another country and I haven't heard from you since you landed. You gotta give me something.

Taylor

YCBNWMA

Mila

Your cake bounces N' wriggles, Mila. (silent A)

Taylor

You can be needy with me always.

Is there such a thing as a silent A?

I don't bother to wait for her response before hitting the FaceTime button. Her glowing, bronzed, goddess-like face fills my screen in less than half a ring. She smiles, waving a silent hand and holding up her index finger. She moves like a creature of the night, sneaking out of her bed, and I spot her bare-chested husband

sleeping behind her.

“Okay, sorry. Hi!” she beams, dropping onto the couch.

“Good morning, I assume. Is it morning there?”

“A little after seven.” She waves her hand in front of her face like this isn’t important.

“So, tell me everything!”

“There’s not much to say. I slept the entire first day, and?—”

“The whole day?” she interrupts.

“The. Whole. Day,” I emphasize. “I woke up last night, starving?—”

“Of course.”

“Right. Well, apparently I should have checked the town’s bedtime when deciding where to travel because everything was closed.” I pause at the memory of whispered words and the deep caramel eyes that flirted somewhere between heavy gazing and understanding.

“Taylor?”

“Sorry, what?”

“I said, so what did you do?”

“Oh, the hottie from the front desk.” I pause when Camila’s one-hundred-and-twenty-pound St. Bernard pops up next to her. “Flaco!” I call and he begins trampling over my much smaller friend.

“Okay, that’s enough. Get down. You know your dad will be mad if he sees you up here.”

“I’m sure he never notices any of those long black hairs on his couch.” But the joke doesn’t land.

“Enough about those boys,” she says, her eyes lighting up. “Back it up to the Front Desk Hottie.”

“Well... he helped me get some food.”

“Which is like your love language,” she cuts me off, downright giddy.

“Okay, relax. I made myself eggs and toast and that was it. I went back to bed.”

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Well not exactly back to bed. I did some weird dance between my bed and the door, debating heavily between going back to sleep and creeping back down the stairs. Thankfully, the logical side of my brain took over and I ended up in bed with my Kindle. However, after reading the same page over three times, I Google searched the man taking up real estate in my mind.

“So... what’s he look like?”

“He looks like the kind of guy that would eat you out and then say ‘Thank you’ after.”

“Jesus,” a deep voice growls from behind the camera before Miles drops into the frame. He kisses Camila sweetly on the top of her head. “Taylor.”

“Hey, big guy.”

“This is what you girls talk about when I’m not here?” he asks.

I shrug my shoulders but Camila at least has the decency to blush a little. “To be fair, I was asking for more of a physical description,” she says.

“Mhmm.” He kisses the side of her face once more before exiting the screen and she turns her focus back to me.

“Oh my god, Mila. He’s got this gorgeous golden tan, a thick head of dark hair, and these muscles.” I bring my hand up to my shoulder trying to imagine them again. “He’s got a close-cropped beard, not a big Viking-style kind, but the kind that could still do some damage to your inner thighs, you know?” Camila covers her face with a

giggle and I rest a little easier hearing her laugh. “Anyway, he basically looks like a superhero but with a broken arm.” Her head tilts to the side and her lips purse together. “Yeah, I don’t really know either. He said it was a rugby accident, but other than that, he didn’t seem to want to talk about it much.”

“Interesting.” She bobs her head up and down. “So, what’s the plan?”

I drag myself out of bed, rip open the curtains, and my jaw drops. Unbelievable. I’ve never seen anything more beautiful than the rolling hills outside my window. Rich, lush, greenery everywhere. The blue sky breaks through some low dark clouds and its effect on me takes my breath away. My room sits tucked into the corner at the end of the hall. All my windows face the front, giving me an unobstructed view of a grand weeping willow tree, littered with wildflowers beneath it. Even the dirt road my cab driver couldn’t drive down is somehow wonderful. At the bottom of the road sits a perfect little cottage with a front porch so sweet that I could live on it. A rush of calm passes over me. I really feel like I’m the main character in my own movie now.

“The plan is: I need to set an alarm and stop sleeping the days away,” I say with a note of finality.

“Wonderful,” she deadpans. “But I meant about your vacation fling.”

My head snaps back towards the screen. “My what?”

“Your Front Desk Hottie, Mr. Injured No Talker, The Thankful Pussy Eater.” A laugh burst from me but, she couldn’t look more serious if she tried.

“Well, unfortunately, he works when I should be sleeping, so I doubt I’ll see much of him. Who knows, maybe if I get really bored I’ll start sleepwalking.”

“Oh, the things we do just to flirt a little.”

“I know that’s right.”

“Alright, well keep me updated. Flaco is begging at the door so I better go take him out.”

“Give that baby some wet besos for me.”

“Will do.” We both blow a kiss at the screen before I hang up, toss my phone onto the bed, and rush forward to take in the view from my window again.

After a quick shower, I decide to make the most of what is left of the day. Plus, I really don’t want to miss dinner again. When I reach the bottom of the stairs, with my hand still on the railing, I run smack dab into someone. I stumble back before I’m caught by someone’s hands, and I look up to find it’s not just anyone, but a familiar someone.

“I’m sorry,” I say, looking down to where the man has dropped a crate.

“Nope, that was on me. Are you alright?”

“I’m good. Thank you.”

“Are you Taylor Nova, by chance?”

I tilt my head and open my mouth to respond.

“Knox told me you had checked in, we just haven’t had the pleasure of meeting yet.” And the familiarity makes more sense now. The same olive skin and dark hair. He’s handsome and rugged like Knox, his frame a bit more lean—still fit—but nothing compared to the sheer size of his brother.

“You must be the brother.” I reach my hand out to shake his. He looks at my hand before shaking it.

“Ryder. And I might not be a professional athlete, but I at least have better manners than him.”

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I laugh, and he moves to stack some crates on top of each other.

“Here, let me help you with that.”

“No, you don’t have to do that.”

“It’s no problem.” I stack one on top of the other, which is nothing compared to the six that he picks up. Between the two of us, this looks like it will be his last trip. I follow him out the front door to a second barn, behind another willow tree with matching crates stacked up beside it.

“Have you had a chance to meet my sister, Liv, yet?”

“I haven’t, no. This is my first time out of my room since I got here. The jet leg has been a bitch.” I think he stumbles a step but I catch his small laugh. “So what do you do here, Ryder? The website said it was a family-run Inn.”

“I mostly take care of all the animals. I raise all our cattle and sheep. We have a few of our own horses on site, but we also have a stable where we hold other people’s horses also.”

“That seems like a big job for one guy.”

“I have a buddy that helps out when he can and Liv jumps in wherever she’s needed. She takes care of most of our horses.”

“It’s cool that you all have a place here.”

I shove down the twinge of discomfort that sprouts from my own words and take in a deep breath. I stutter on the inhale when I look around and finally survey my surroundings. The back of the inn is much like the front, with more rolling hills and wildflowers, but out here it's like they're alive. It's like they're singing to me. I feel something deep in my chest.

"This doesn't seem real," I whisper to myself.

"It's pretty incredible, isn't it?" Ryder walks beside me, looking out to the fog that's rolling in the distance between the valley, where the two hillsides come together. The fog isn't depressing the way San Francisco's fog is. It's beautiful, ethereal, and otherworldly out here. "It would be a lot prettier without that monstrosity."

I look back and see an old, large, green pickup truck, with an equally large Knox storming out of it. The crease between his brows becomes more prominent the closer he gets to us.

"What are you doing putting our guests to work?" He snaps at his brother while passing him.

"She wouldn't take no for an answer."

He stops his run in front of me, reaching his uninjured arm out for the crates, but I'm quick to pull back. "Seriously, what's wrong with you brutes? I've got this."

"She's not the one with a broken arm, mate."

A menacing smile appears on Knox's face, and he turns back toward his brother. His good arm grabs Ryder's neck before pulling him close and whispering something in his ear. Ryder shrugs him off and clears the distance to the barn, where he drops the crates. I follow a few steps behind, setting the crates down and my eyes flicker back

and forth between them. “Taylor, thank you for your help. I’m glad I bumped into you. Literally.”

“Anytime, Cowboy.” I salute him as he walks by, patting Knox on the shoulder. Ryder does nothing to hide his smile, but whatever he finds so funny, Knox clearly does not. His eyes narrow following in his brother’s wake.

“Hey.” I wave my hand in his face, bringing his attention back to me.

He shakes his head, and his eyebrows relax. He lifts the black hat from his head before turning it around and I bite the corner of my lip at the sight of this man in a backward hat.

“So, what’d you do today?” he drawls.

“Well, I—” My eyes flit up to the right and his knowing smile makes it impossible not to smile back.

“You just got up, didn’t you?”

I throw my hands up in defeat. “To be fair, I was up late last night.”

“Yeah?” he asks, taking a step closer to me. “Had a hard a hard time sleeping, did ya?”

“You know what they say, don’t eat too close to bedtime.”

His eyes twinkle with something like mischief and the corners of his lips pull up. He takes one final step, closing any distance between us, cocking his head to the side. I subtly suck in a breath of his intimate scent. It’s soft but intoxicating, suede and cedar mixed with something that is just so specifically him.

“That’s a shame. I love to eat at bedtime.”

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My mouth parts but I recover quickly, pulling my bottomlip between my teeth. Good thing a little flirting never killed anyone because this man could be the death of me.

I place the palm of my hand on his chest and my fingers spark when I graze his collar. The collar of his thick T-shirt is ripped off but it somehow looks intentional. The palm of my hand rubs across his hard peck and our eyes never break contact. If I'm making him nervous at all, he's doing a damn good job of not letting on. When I get to the torn collar, I lightly pluck out the gold link chain from under his shirt. It's warm where my finger hooks it. His tongue slips out, wetting his lower lip, and I briefly wonder what it would feel like to have that tongue on me. On my neck, in my mouth, in my?—

“What are you thinking, Nova?” His gravelly voice pulls me from my thoughts.

“I was?—”

An exhaust pipe puffs nearby and I turn to see another truck—this one much older—roll up and stop ten feet. in front of us. I tuck the necklace back into his shirt before giving him a little pat and stepping back. He moves to step towards me again but stops when an aged voice calls out. “KB, you're a difficult man to get a hold of.”

Knox scratches the back of his head, looking between me and the man approaching us.

“I'll see you later,” I say with a little wink before turning and starting up the hill.

“Wait! Where are you going?” he calls after me.

I smile to myself before turning to look over my shoulder. “Don’t worry Browning. I know where to find you if I need a late-night snack.”

His mouth parts, and I laugh the rest of the way back up the hill.

Knox

Taylor’s body continues to get smaller and smaller in the distance, but I couldn’t peel my eyes away if I wanted. My view is unfortunately interrupted by a much uglier face of a man who is twice my age and then some.

“Careful buddy, you stare any harder, she’s gonna know you like her.”

“Just enjoying the view,” I quip.

“Mhmm,” Coach Campbell extends his hand to me, and I look down at it, slightly offended. “I know it’s a little pale and freckly, but goddamn, it’s not that bad.”

I bypass his handshake and pull him into me. He returns my hug with a pacifying back slap that makes me grin.

“Alright, there, there.”

I smile at his lack of affection and pull back.

“It’s good to see you, Coach. How’ve you been?”

“Same as I ever was,” he says, putting his hands on his hips.

“Good. So, what’s up? I heard you were looking for me.”

“Well, I need a little help downat the pitch, and I was hoping if you’re going to be around a while, you might be interested.”

I don’t know what I expected him to say, but if I had to have made a guess, that wouldn’t have even cracked the top ten reasons why he was seeking me out.

“What kind of help?”

“Gardening,” he deadpans. “Coachin’, of course.”

“Coach, I’m—” I move my hand in front of me, searching for the words, but revealing nothing. “I’m flattered, but just because I know how to play doesn’t mean I know anything about coaching a team. Or... kids, for that matter.” I think I just physically recoiled.

“First of all, don’t flatter yourself. I need help, and I was going to ask Sophie, but she’s got that wedding of hers coming up.” I hide my laugh. I’m not trying to give him any false encouragement. “And second, don’t say ‘kids’ like that. They’re teenagers. They aren’t running around with peanut butter on their faces.”

He’s serious.

I rub my hand across my mouth, trying to make sense of what he’s asking of me. Coaching was never on my radar, but the more I think about it, that’s likely what I’d be doing if I get the chance to go back to my old team in London.

“I can see you’re hesitant,” he says.

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“It’s just that I’m not sure how long I’ll be back for.” His eyebrow quirks up, and it’s clear that he was under a different impression. “I mean, I’m doing my physical therapy in town, which locks me down for at least a few weeks. After that, I don’t know.” I leave the rest unsaid.

“I understand, but while you’re healing, might as well give yourself something else to focus on, huh?”

“I think recovery is going to take pretty much all of my attention.”

“Maybe.” He crosses his arms at his chest and looks around. “But you already lost yourself in this sport once. You plan on doing it again?”

My head rears back just slightly. I’m not sure what he knows or how he even knows anything in the first place, about how much I’ve given up over the years, but I shouldn’t be surprised. My absence in town has apparently not gone unnoticed, and now I’m back, alone and with nothing—if his intention was to give me a little kick in the ass, I think it worked. The problem is this sport is who I am. Rugby is an extension of me and without it, I don’t even know who Knox Browning is. That is the main reason that I’ve been so lost over these past few weeks. All I’ve ever focused on was rugby. Training, preparing, and making it big. Even if I wanted to focus on something else, I don’t think I remember how to.

“You really think that I could coach just because I played well?”

“You didn’t just play well, Knox. You were a goddamn all-star. But—” His thick brows furrow as he looks down at the ground. When he tilts his head back up to meet

my eyes, I see an understanding there. “Sometimes it’s not all about the drills.”

I’ve never actually been a coach, but it seems like that’s exactly what it would be about. “As a coach, I’ve learned just as much from these lads as I’ve taught some of them. If not

more.”

Classic Coach Campbell, speaking in riddles. Although, this is one riddle I don’t think I care to solve. The corner of his lip pulls up in a tight-lipped smile, but by the way his posture drops, it’s clear he thinks his efforts to sway me were in vain. His weathered hand pats my shoulder to signify the end of the conversation, and he begins to make his way back toward his truck.

I stand, unmoving, even as the wind picks up enough to bring me back to reality, and the branches of willow trees sway in the breeze. I feel crazy saying I heard encouragement dancing in the whispers of a gust of wind, so I blame it on my loyalty to my old coach when I turn around and lift my good arm over my head.

“I’ll think about it!” I call out.

He pauses, his hand on the door. He dips his head with a knowing smile. “Good lad. I’ll need an answer by Monday. Otherwise, I’ll be visiting Miss Sophie with the same pitch.”

He climbs up into his truck and puts off down the hill, and miraculously the wind tapers off into a peaceful silence.

I rush back up to the main house as soon as I can, hoping to run into Taylor again. I pause at the bottom of the stairs, one arm on the banister, before I swing over it and decide to scope out the kitchen first. I stand at the swinging door, looking for the

source of the noise I thought I heard a moment ago, but the room appears to be empty of people.

“Looking for someone?”

“Jesus, Mum.” I bring my hand to my chest, whirling around. “What are you doing hiding in the corner like that?”

“I’m not hiding, I was trying to get this dish out but it’s got too much heavy stuff on it.” Her shaky hand points to the hutch in the corner. I move toward the old piece of furniture. My hand looks like a bear's paw compared to the delicate, original brass handles on the navy blue cabinets. I start pulling out large glass bowls and the other ‘heavy stuff’ that my mum was struggling with. “So you going to tell me who you were looking for?”

I peer up at my mom and point to an old hand-painted ceramic casserole dish.

“This the one you were looking for?”

She raises a hand to her face, sheiling a guilty smile and I only now notice that her knuckles seem to be rather swollen. I carry the dish to the sink and wash it off before setting it on the counter for her.

“When’s your first physical therapy?”

“A few days,” I shrug.

“Have you met Riley yet?”

“Riley?”

“She took over for Old—” Her eyes go wide but she recovers quickly. “Walter Murphy. She's a wonderful girl. Really funny, too.”

“I haven't met her yet, but Liam seems like he might very well throw himself down a flight of stairs to break his leg just to have a date with her.”

“That boy.” My mum's soft laughter fills the kitchen, and something squeezes in my chest. It's been years since I've been in the kitchen alongside her—more than half my lifetime ago, but it still feels like only yesterday when my mini grubby hands were reaching for things on this same butcher counter.

“Yeah, I—” I freeze, watching her scrub potatoes. “Wait, how do you know Riley?”

“I saw her for a short while after my surgery,” she says like it's no big deal. Like it's common knowledge. My heart rate accelerates and my molars grind together because I'm definitely only hearing it for the first time.

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“What surgery?” She ignores me, shimmying herself between me and the counter, politely shoving me back. “Mum.”

“I had a minor surgery on my hands last year. It was supposed to help with the arthritis.”

“And did it?”

Her brown curly hair falls in her face as she continues dicing her potatoes and vegetables. “For a while. It didn’t make me the bionic woman by any means. But yeah, I have days now where I can do more than I was able to before the surgery.”

It feels like the room trudges to a halt, like a train on a track, running out of steam. Those same hands that used to guide my small fingers around the kitchen seem to cut and dice in agonizing slow motion, those once perfect hands now swollen and aged. I’m trying to wrap my mind around what she’s telling me, but I’m thrown off by how casually she says it. I know I’ve been gone for a while but, what the fuck? How did no one think to pick up the phone and call me?

“Mum, why don’t you hire someone full-time to help you in here?” I catch the hint of panic laced through my voice.

“I’ve looked into it,” she says, bringing her chopped vegetables over to a large pot on the stove. I never would have thought twice about a fucking pot before, but now I’m concerned with how it got there and if she hurt herself in the process. “Liv helps most days when she can, and eventually, I will hire someone full-time, but I just... I just can’t hire anyone to take over my kitchen.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders, and she slumps into my side and lets out a long breath. This kitchen has been my mum's baby since before she had babies. She started working here after secondary school, when she and my father started dating, and a handful of years later she took over from my dad's mum. Things have changed over the decades—like the chef's stove that she had installed and smaller items here and there. But for the most part, the kitchen has remained the same. I understand—probably better than most—what she's feeling at the thought of giving it up.

I swallow the lump in my throat and pull her in a little tighter.

“I wish you would have told me about your surgery,” I say.

“Oh honey, you were busy and it was nothing for you to worry over.” That stings almost as bad as not knowing. My family and friends have always been so supportive, but at what cost? I'm gutted that she thought she couldn't call me because it would have inconvenienced me. I want to be upset with her, but the truth is, my attitude and my actions are the sole reason she thought she couldn't.

We season the meat together in silence, side-by-side. Even though I'll be leaving again eventually, I vow to myself right here and now, that I will never allow anything to consume my life again to the point that I no longer know what's going on in my own family's lives.

Taylor

My alarm went off at nine a.m., and I only hit the snooze button three times. I metaphorically pat myself on the back because that's progress, baby! I slip into a pair of jeans and an overpriced crewneck I picked up during one of my layovers and quickly snap a picture of the view from my window to send to Camila before heading downstairs.

I hit the bottom of the stairs, expecting to run into a number of people, but I'm met with near silence instead. So quiet, in fact, I'm able to pick up on the familiar sound of oil sizzling from the swinging door that leads into the kitchen. Even the front desk, being manned by only a hand-painted sign that sits on a little wooden chair in the corner.

Breakfast served daily: 6 a.m. - 8 a.m.

Dinner served daily: 5:00p.m.

Well, I'm screwed.

I never thought I'd be someone who can be distracted by food, but the glimpse of a photograph snatches my attention. I glance down the length of the wall, realizing that there is an array of them for my nosey butt to study. Most are in black and white, but there is one that is in eye-catching color. A mom stands with a toddler on her hip, and a young boy with a very serious expression stands next to her, holding one side of a piece of wood while his dad holds the other. There is a third little boy standing at his mom's legs with an ear-to-ear smile, the world's smallest hammer in his grip.

Instinctively I reach up, tracing the etches in the frame.

"You must be—" My heart lurches into my throat and I practically jump out of my skin. I turn to find an older man smiling at me, dropping my hand. "Oh, I'm sorry, darling. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm Adam Browning."

It doesn't take me any time at all to read that he is wearing a friendly smile, and not a murderous one, and my heart regulates.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Browning. I'm Taylor."

“Oh please, call me Adam.” He waves a tan, weathered hand. “What brings you to Stoney Meadow, Taylor?”

I really should have spent more time coming up with a suitable answer for this question that everyone seems to ask. “How could I not come here? Have you seen this place? It’s incredible. You have a beautiful property.”

His smile is warm, just like Knox’s. Everything about him resembles Knox, minus his height and build. A little more gray hair, and deeper crinkles at his eyes, but they’re the kind of lines that say, ‘Yeah, I’ve had a fun, fulfilled life.’ The kind that somehow keeps him youthful.

“Ahh well, thank you. What are you up to today? Do you need a tour guide? We have some lads around here who would be happy to get out of their stable duties for the day and drive you around. Or we have bikes for use, propped up over here.” He nods his head and moves to head to the front door. “Come, I’ll show ya.”

I’m not much of a bike rider but he’s excited to be helpful so I follow him to the wrap-around porch.

“There.” He points to four pastel-colored, vintage-style beach cruisers and my accident-prone ass could never.

“You know what? I think I’m going to stretch my legs instead. Get a little walk in.”

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“Atta girl,” he says, giving me a pat on the shoulder. “If you head just down the dirt driveway and turn left at the cottage down there.” He squints an eye, pointing at my favorite little house on the property. “You’ll run right into the town.”

“Straight then left. Sounds like something I can manage.”

“Perfect!” he beams. “Alright, well I’m off to go pick up some supplies, but I hope we’ll see you for dinner sometime soon. It was nice to meet you, Taylor.” He pats the top of my back on a turn.

“You too, Adam.” I watch him go all the way back inside before turning to face the dirt road ahead of me.

The hill isn’t steep, but it is longer than I expected. Though not nearly as bad without the rain and all my luggage. I make it down to the cottage that I’ve imagined myself living in countless times when I look out my bedroom window, and somehow it’s even more beautiful up close. The white brick with contrasting lavender plants is only broken up by a gorgeous wrap-around porch that overlooks Emerald Browning Cottage. More wildflowers of every color cover the front of the property, going all the way up to the stone-lined entryway. Hundred-year-old trees muffle the sounds of the birds, and a slight trickle of water slips through the quiet. Had I not stopped to snoop around my favorite little house I would have missed it entirely.

Someone could be home and you’re out here sneaking around like a damn cat burglar. Move along.

Speaking of cats.

I'm halfway back to the main road when a large, fluffy black cat saunters out of a bush near the porch.

"Here kitty, kitty." I crouch down, sucking my teeth. The cat lifts one paw, hesitating as I continue to coo at the little baby.

Hinges creak and wood on wood slams like a gunshot into the cat distribution system, sending the cat fleeing for its life. I watch him take off before looking up to where Knox is standing at the door, smiling down at me.

"Look what you did!" I yell, but he remains motionless, leaning against the doorframe. One arm hangs in its usual sling, the other buried in the pocket of his dark jeans. His black hat sits backward on his head, dark waves falling out around the nape of his neck. He stands there with that sexy little smirk of his, but still doesn't say anything. "Well! Aren't you going to go get your cat?" I throw my hand in the direction it ran off.

"It's not my cat."

"Oh..." I squint, despite the lack of sunlight, and let out a long, awkward breath. If I stand here any longer, I'm going to curl up and die. "Alright, well, I'm going to get going." I hike my thumb over my shoulder, as if I hadn't made this awkward enough already.

"Where ya headed?"

"I'm not sure yet. I planned on walking until I hit the first sign of food."

He smiles, pulling the door closed behind him, and taking the porch steps two at a time until he clears the gap between us. Once again, I find myself craning my neck just to be able to make eye contact. This position is new for me. I'm not a short girl.

At least I've never felt small in my five-foot-eight frame—but when Knox towers over me like this, a rush of warmth spreads across my body despite the chilly air.

“Let's go, Nova.”

I inwardly groan, knowing I'll never live that greeting down, but still, my lips tug upwards at the sound of my name on his tongue.

“Lead the way then, Browning.”

I walk beside Knox, twisting the ends of my hair around my fingertip.

God, he smells good. I've never had a desire to grab a man's chest and bury my face in it before. Better yet, I want to climb him like a tree and inhale straight from his neck.

“So, were you thinking about me?”

“What?” I stop abruptly and look around for the invisible wall I just encountered.

“I'm trying to think of why else you would be poking around my house.”

Oh.

“I wasn't poking,” I say, jabbing my finger in his bicep. “I didn't even know it was your house.” His smile is playful—beautiful. It's carefree and warm, and it makes me forget that I'm supposed to be laying on the charm, not getting lost in his smile. My mask is slowly slipping, and that's more startling than Knox catching me outside his house trying to scope out the place and steal the neighborhood cat.

“You don't sound like the rest of your family.”

“No?”

“Why?” I square my shoulders and look back at him. He lifts his hat, and his wavy hair goes in every direction when he drags his fingers through it before setting it back down.

“I grew up here with my family but my rugby team was based out of London,” he explains. “I’ve had a home there for the last sixteen years and I’ve been around a lot of different accents over that time, mine appears to be a mix of them now, I suppose.” I wonder if that’s the reason his voice has such an effect on me. “You going to tell me where you’re from now?”

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“It would only seem fair now, I suppose.”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours type-of-stuff.”

“One person always makes out better than the other in those situations,” I quip. “But to answer your question, I’m from San Francisco.”

“Is that where your family is?”

I smile, but my feet drag slightly against the dirt road, I don’t like where this conversation could head. “I grew up in Miami, but I moved to the Bay Area for college.”

“And you didn’t want to go home when you were done?” I didn’t have a home to go to. I guess technically my family’s house was still there, but it’s not like it ever had a family in it. Camila’s family was there, and they’d always treated me as if I was one of their own, but there was nothing there for me. I’ve found myself in a strange position now, because if he asks me what’s waiting for me back in San Francisco, it would be no different than what’s waiting for me in Miami. Or anywhere else in the world.

Nothing.

“I made a new home,” I say with a faux pep in my step.

Somewhere along the way, the dirt road turned to cobblestone. I was so lost in conversation that I forgot to pay attention to my surroundings and take in the beauty

of this little town. A stone ledge, a little taller than waist high, separates the sidewalk and a pasture off to the left. I hoist myself up onto the top of it, stretch my arms out for balance, and begin walking it like a tightrope. I barely get one foot in front of the other before Knox's arm shoots out, his large hand circles around my forearm, and I falter, but recover quickly.

"What's wrong, Knox? Don't like heights?" I smile.

"I didn't know I had an issue with them until this moment." The thick pads of his fingers trail down my arm, their heat branding as he brushes over the most sensitive part of my wrist. His hand trails until he reaches my palm, and my fingers grip his. With a lift of his chin, he motions for me to keep walking.

"So, what do you do for work that allows you to leave for a month?"

"This and that." The way his eyebrow lifts tells me we're no longer getting by on vague answers. I doubt a man who played professional Rugby would have any idea what it's like to not be obsessed with what you do every day. I doubt he's ever felt lost for a moment of his life, whereas I'm constantly working a handful of jobs—none of which fulfill me—because I can't commit to shit or quiet my brain long enough to come up with any other plan.

"I've never had a typical nine-five job. I've always just picked up some random jobs that I'll do for a while, sometimes two or three at a time. I let them run their course and then I find something else." I dip one foot below the ledge, doing scoops with my feet. "I've done the nanny gig and dog grooming, I was a bartender for a while but my boss was kind of a womanizer, so that one ran its course sooner than some of the others. I can make a mean kamikaze, though." I shrug a shoulder.

"Which job was your favorite?"

I pause, looking at this man who I half expected to mock me, but instead chooses to ask which of my random jobs I've enjoyed the most.

"Umm..." I resume my steps. "I once did meal prepping for this husband and wife, they were both lawyers and never home enough to cook."

"So you liked working alone or you liked cooking?" Good insight, sir.

"I liked cooking. Like. I still enjoy it."

I've reached the end of the wall and when I look at Knox, expecting him to let go of my hand so that I can climb down, he doesn't. His hold only tightens, and he turns to face me. He's out of his mind if he thinks I'm going to jump down and potentially knock him over, breaking his other arm.

"Any day now, love."

"I'm not jumping."

"I'll catch you."

"Are you insane? Look at your shoulder, and you have a broken arm." I gesture to him as if he didn't already know.

"You can't hurt this cast." He taps his arm with his knuckles. "And the shoulders practically healed."

Before I know what's happening, his thick arm is wrapped around my legs, holding tightly just below my ass. My feet leave the ledge and in the next second, I'm being pulled from the wall.

“Oh my god!” I let out an embarrassing squeal and kick my feet once, realize that’s probably more dangerous, and opt to go ‘limp noodle’ instead. “You can put me down now.”

“I will, but we’re passing another small wall, so let’s get past that first, shall we?”

He carries me like a sack of potatoes, like it’s nothing, but I grab the back of his sweatshirt anyway, holding onto two fistfuls of the fabric for dear life. “Knox!”

I twist my hips to wriggle from his grasp.

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“Alright, hold still. You're gonna go arse over tit.” He slowly adjusts my body in his arms and lowers me. The front of my body slides down the length of his— inch by painful inch. The hem of my shirt lifts, and I feel the rolling slab of his muscles rub against the softest parts of me. The speed at which he lowers me is agonizingly slow, but when I drop down to eye level, he holds me just a little tighter for a brief moment. My breath hitches, and I get lost in his golden eyes. They're the same golden color that drifts through your windows on a late autumn afternoon. As the tips of my shoes finally connect with the ground, I somehow don't feel anything concrete beneath me. The cobblestone is there, but I'm too busy floating.

I haven't let go of his gaze, and he hasn't let go of me.

“You flirtin' with me, Browning?”

“You know arse over tit means to fall, right?” His head dips and my heart beats faster.

“So, yes?” I smile. He pulls his bottom lip in between his teeth and the simple movement has the space between my legs throbbing. I slip out of his hold, already regretting the loss of his touch and I lead the rest of our walk. “Just checking.”

“Knox Browning! I heard a rumor you were back, but I couldn't believe it. Good to see ya, lad.”

“It's nice to see you too, Alfie. How's Maeve?” Knox replies.

“Oh, just as fiery as ever. She's going to be real bummed she missed ya though.” A

kind, older-looking man hangs out the window of some kind of food truck.

“I’ll stop by sometime this week then and say hi,” Knox replies with a charming smile.

“You do that,” the man says, pointing at him. “And who do we have here?”

His attention turns to me.

“Alfie, this is Taylor. She’s staying with us for a few weeks.”

“Nice to meet you, Taylor,” he says, reaching his hand through the window. “Ooo, strong grip.”

I shrug, not bothering to act like that’s the first time I’ve heard that. My handshakes and hugs have both been described as bone-crushing before. I can’t help it, I don’t often want to touch people but when I do, I want them to feel my intention.

“Nice to meet you too, Alfie.”

“What can I get you two?”

“Two meat pies,” Knox says, holding up his index and middle finger.

“Wait—are they lamb?” I ask.

Alfie’s nose scrunches and he waves a weathered hand in front of him.

“Beef.”

“Oh. Then I’ll take two please.”

“My kind of girl!” He slaps his hands together before heading to the back.

“Oh my god,” I moan around a bite of food. “This—” I blow a breath around the steamy, buttery-crust stuffed pie. “This might be the best thing I’ve ever had in my mouth. And I’m a foodie, so that’s saying something.”

Knox smiles, taking another bite of his own as we hike back up to the inn. “Alright, what else do you have planned for your trip? I mean, besides the cliffs.”

I playfully lean into him, giving him a little shove but he doesn’t budge. I take another big bite, large enough to give me some time to chew and think. We pass a fenced-in pasture, where I can just make out a man riding a horse in the distance.

“Horseback riding,” I say. Knox stops where he is walking next to me, forcing me to pause. I look back at him. “What?”

“Horseback. You flew all the way across your country and the Atlantic Ocean... to ride a horse?”

No, but it sounds better than saying I have no fucking clue what I want to do here other than escape the shell of myself that I was becoming back home.

I let the idea—which, now looking back at it, might have been the fear of being alone, mixed with my slight abandonment issues, consume me until one night, I was watching a movie set in Ireland. The next thing I knew, I had a flight booked, and a few days later, I found myself in a cab in the middle of the night, driving down the road to Emerald Browning Cottage.

I smile at Knox with a simple shrug of my shoulder. “You really need to stop asking why and start asking why not?”

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It's a bullshit answer, and based on the way he's studying me right now, he knows it. But other than a slight turn down of his lips, he accepts it with a nod and we continue walking.

"Does all of your family live around here?" He nods his head, pointing to a house far in the distance.

"The house I grew up in is up that way, past the main house."

"The main house?"

"It's what we call the inn. Emerald Browning Cottages sounds nice on a brochure, but it's a mouth-full when you're telling someone where to drop off supplies."

"Ahh, gotcha."

"You can't see it from here, but behind that barn and over the pasture is where Ryder lives." We pass the grand willow tree and the flower-lined driveway until we're back in front of the main house and I lean against the railing.

"And that cottage down there is yours." It's not a question but the look in his eyes definitely is.

"It is. You want to come see it?"

What's that saying, don't shit where you eat? Well, I'm not usually one to fuck where I sleep. Knox leans over, bracing his good arm on the railing beside me, his thumb

strokes over the bracelet on my wrist and my breath shudders. I'm on vacation, and a vacation fling is the dream scenario because there are no hard feelings when it's over. It's hard to find someone who just wants to have a casual relationship. Whenever I suggest a hook-up-only relationship, men usually think they've hit the jackpot. But it always leads to them wanting more. It starts with 'Maybe we could grab dinner', and by the time it gets to 'I want you to meet my friends', I'm already done. I don't ever want to be involved with someone to the point that there's risk involved.

I've never had a type before. Short, tall, thin, thick, male, female. For me, good-looking is just good-looking. And Knox Browning is the epitome of good-looking.

I close the distance between us, ready to be led back to his place. The warmth of his hand slides into mine.

"Knox!" a soft voice calls out. I don't miss the grunt from him when I turn around to find a young girl with strawberry-blonde hair running toward us. "Hey! I'm Olivia."

She's out of breath but still beaming.

"Taylor." I smile, reaching my hand out, but she bypasses it completely, opting to pull me into a hug instead. I'm momentarily thrown off by the contact, but the tightness in her hug reminds me of my own, and there's something comforting about that. So I squeeze her back.

"I know. I've been dying to meet you." She steps back with a cheerful smile. "My mam's been wanting to meet you, too. Come on, she just baked fresh soda bread cookies."

She turns back towards the house with her hand outstretched to me. I look at it and then look back at Knox.

“Another time.” He smiles.

I find myself smiling back at him. “Thanks for the pies, Browning.”

“Anytime, Nova.”

Knox

Liam

Come to the bar tonight.

Knox

I’m still on prison duty.

Typo. Nightwatch.

Liam

That wasn’t a typo. Where are you now?

Knox

About to walk into Dax’s

Liam

I'll be there in 15

"What's up? None of you bastards wanted to keep your names as the headliners of your business?"

"I got the discount when Liam was riding the office supply girl." Dax shrugs his shoulder before pulling me in for a hug.

"How are you, KB?"

"I still have a few more days until my first physical therapy session, but I can't sit around anymore. I'm ready to get back in the gym and do something. Anything." Desperation bleeds from my tongue.

"That's all well and good, mucker, but how are you?"

It's not that I believe people around here don't care about me. They absolutely do. But whenever I think about sticking around this town and these people, my chest fills with concrete. There's an immense amount of guilt that I carry for being a disappointment to them. They've always had my back. As I've wallowed in my self-pity over the last few weeks, I'd be lying if I said that some of that guilt wasn't over letting them down.

"I'll get there," I reply.

Dax pats my good shoulder. “Yeah, ya will.”

We share an understanding nod before I break turn to finally take a look at his gym. “The place looks great.”

“If only I could keep eejits like this one out.” He nods toward the front just as Liam enters, holding the door open for two women who eye him up and down. He returns their flirtatious grins before doing his typical peacock strut over.

“Boys!” he yells, arms outstretched. “Do we need security with someone of your caliber in here, KB?”

“Feck off.”

“I’m just asking.” He puts his hands up in mock defense. “Want to make sure we don’t run into any problems.”

“No, Liam. Unfortunately, youareour biggest problem,” Dax answers.

I move over to the dumbbell rack and pick up an eighteen-kilogram weight. I need to ease back into a routine that I can safely manage without the use of one of my arms, but I also need to go slow, considering my sleep schedule has been completely fucked. After about five hours of sleep yesterday, I heard a rustling outside of my house, and when I peeked outthe window, I found Taylor crouched down on all fours, calling to some stray.

“You coming tonight, mate?”

“I’ll be there,” Dax replies. “I’ve got a date first, so depending on when that ends, I might be a little late.”

“A date, huh? Who’s the unlucky lady?” Liam jabs and Dax whips a towel at him.

Liam jumps back, laughing.

“Don’t worry about it. Worry about your own dry spell.”

“Hey! It’s not a dry spell. I could get it wet if I wanted. I’ve just been busy.”

“Busy with your right hand.”

Liam responds with his two middle fingers. We all break into laughter, and I breathe a little easier, falling back in with my mates so easily after so much time away.

An hour later, my breath is heavy, short, and choppy. My hair is damp, and sweat is pooling at my lower back as I make my way to the gym door.

“You done, mate?” Dax’s voice echoes through the front entrance.

“I have to get back in time to shower and eat before I resume my post for the night.”

“Damn, I still can’t believe AB’s got you on a night shift. I didn’t even know you guys had someone on night duty.” You and me both.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. What’s the membership routine around here now?”

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“Family always gets in free.” He waves me off.

The inn is lively when I show up for dinner. An upbeat folk song plays softly in the background while the nearly full table of guests share drinks and stories. I wave hello as I make my way around the table to my usual chair next to Liv.

“No!” She throws her arm out, barricading the chair, and I pause at her strange behavior. “I’m saving that seat.”

“Your imaginary friend joining us for dinner?” I nudge her chin, taking the seat next to the empty one.

“No.” Her eyes fall into little slits, and I know she’s fighting the urge to stick her tongue out at me.

I lift the pitcher of water, offering some to the guests around me. Mid-pouring my own cup, Liv pipes up next to me.

“Hey!” She waves her arm excitedly above her head. “I saved you a seat.”

I look up to find Taylor combing her fingers through her tousled blonde locks.

“Oh, that’s okay. I was just?—.”

“Oh yes, Taylor. Please join us.” My mum perks up, and it would appear that just like me, Taylor can’t say no to my mum either. A gentle grin spreads across her face. She nods and eyes the chair Liv saved her. Right next to me. Thank you, Liv.

“How’d that walk turn out for you the other day, Taylor?” my dad asks as she scoots between an armoire and the back of my chair. She pauses to look at him, her breasts nearly grazing the back of my head. The nape of my neck heats at the near contact.

“It was great. I saw a little sneak peek of the town and got an Irish meat pie. In my book, it doesn’t get much better than that.” She says, sitting down next to me.

“No, it sure doesn’t,” he responds with a chuckle.

I lean back in my chair, my legs spread wide under the table, and Taylor’s knee grazes my thigh before she quickly pulls it back. I could easily bring my legs together to give her more space, but I’m starting to realize that I rather enjoy teasing her a little bit.

“Morning, love,” I whisper, low enough for only her to hear.

She pauses, adjusting the napkin in her lap. “I’ve been up.”

“Over or under five hours?”

She grabs my wrist where it’s propped on the table and leans in, taking a look at my watch. The sight of her delicate fingers wrapped tightly around my warm wrist has me fighting back some very strange primal urges. Her ring finger taps along my throbbing pulse point once, twice, and then a third time before she lets go.

“Over,” she says, sitting back with a proud smile. A smile made with far too much ease, considering the way the feeling of her fingers makes me have to fight for my life to not get a boner at a full dinner table.

“Have you gotten a chance to see any sights yet?” the Italian woman across from me asks Taylor.

“Unfortunately, I’ve had a little bit of a jet lag issue.” She sucks her teeth. “But tomorrow is my day. I’m going to see The Cliffs of Moher.” She adamantly dips her chin.

“Oh, we went there on our first day here. It was stunning. We met some people who said it was their third attempt. The first two times they went, it was too windy, so hopefully, you don’t have that issue.”

“The wind up there can be brutal,” Ryder agrees.

“Honestly, that would be my luck. I would be the person to get taken down by a gust of wind.”

“Just make sure you make it back to tell us about it.” My dad says, and everyone around the table shares a laugh.

“Oh, Olivia, I meant to tell you that Maeve hasn’t been feeling well, and she won’t be able to help us this week, so it looks like it’s just you and me, my girl.” My mum reaches over, rubbing Liv’s hand with an apologetic smile.

“What kind of help did you need?” Taylor asks.

“One of our local girls is having her wedding here next weekend.” My mum gestures to the family across from us, and they smile. “We prep, cook all the food, and bake the cake ourselves, but if we have a bigger event like this one, my friend Maeve usually helps out.”

Taylor and I both look to my sister, who absently pushes her potatoes around on her plate. Liv has been the designated ‘pick-up person’ for as long as I can remember. She helps wherever she’s needed, which is nice for the person who needs the help, but I can’t imagine that running around and picking up after everyone else is her life goal.

“I could help,” Taylor speaks up and every head at the table snaps to hers. My mum holds her wine glass with both hands, and I notice her swollen fingers when her drink halts halfway to her mouth.

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“Oh no, darling, that’s not necessary. It’s very kind of you to offer, but you’re our guest.”

“I wouldn’t mind at all. Actually, I would rather enjoy it. I have some experience, and my party trick is that I can follow any recipe to a T.”

“That’s your party trick?” I ask her with a knowing smirk.

“Well, that, and I can do a perfect manicure in less than three minutes.” She angles her head towards her shoulder, fluttering her lashes at me with a smug smile on her face.

I dip my chin, leaning toward her to whisper into the shell of her ear. “I bet I could make you—” Her hand shoots out, fingernails digging into my jean-covered thigh before I can finish my sentence. I laugh, pulling back. “What? I was just going to say, I bet I could make you laugh in less than three minutes.”

Her grip on my leg loosens and she manages to pull her face together. I boop her cute, little button nose with the tip of my finger, and she playfully rolls her eyes.

My mum examines our exchange, lips parted, a faint smile ghosting her lips. My saving grace right now is that nobody is paying us any mind besides Mum, everyone else has resumed their conversations and continued to eat their meals. My mum’s all-knowing eyes are the only ones still fixed on us.

“Give me a purpose to kick my jet lag and get up in the morning,” Taylor says, shifting her attention back to my mum.

“Well, Olivia and I will take any help we can get. Thank you, Taylor. That’s very generous of you.” Her eyes dance back and forth between the two of us once more, but she doesn’t say anything else.

“Hey, would you want to come to The Saloon with me tonight?” my sister asks, practically jumping out of her seat. “They have a live band playing. It can get a little rowdy, but it’s still really fun.”

“You don’t have to twist my arm. You had me at ‘rowdy’,” Taylor says, holding her glass of water up to Liv in cheers.

“That’ll definitely help you get up early tomorrow for sightseeing,” I murmur.

“Mind your business, Browning.”

“Ooohh, tell ‘em, Taylor!” Ryder throws a fist up in the air, and I jab my elbow into his ribs, but he remains seated, slapping his thigh with a shit-eating grin on his face. He’s not the only one. I look around the table and everyone seems to be highly amused, including the beautiful light force sitting next to me. I’ve been avoiding these meals and get-togethers—this town in general, really to avoid having to talk about what happened but maybe I’m being given a grace period here.

“Do you want to get ready together?” Liv asks.

“Sure.” My sister sets her napkin down and scoots back from the table. “Oh, like right now? Okay.” She takes one last drink from her glass and turns to my mum, her hands clasped together in front of her. “Thank you for dinner, Isla. It was delicious.”

“Thank you. Have fun tonight, girls.” My mum waves to them.

Taylor squeezes herself behind my chair again, but this time, she drops her hand to

my shoulder and leans down, whispering in my ear, “Enjoy your night, love.”

I don’t bother fighting the full-fledged grin that takes over my face. I crane my neck in time to see her tight ass sway out of the room.

Guests move about, some retreat to their rooms, others to the sitting room and I clear as many dishes from the table as I can. My dad pats his full belly with a labored breath when I reach for his plate. “As always, that was delicious, Isla.”

She smiles from across the table and I turn for the kitchen.

“Knox, wait a minute.” I pause, turning to face him. “You should go, too.”

“Go where?”

“To Liam’s bar.”

“What about the desk?” I blink at him a few times.

He waves a hand in front of him like he could care less. “Everyone who was supposed to check in today has.”

I eye him suspiciously but his face gives nothing away. The night shift job reeked of bullshit when he first brought it up, and now I’m thinking it was what I was smelling: utter shite.

“Patrick doesn’t work the night shift, does he?”

“Nah,” he says with his lips turned down. He shakes his head. “He has the morning cab service. That’s why you haven’t seen him around.”

“Did they even have a baby?”

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“Oh yeah.” He takes a drink of his wine. “About four years ago.”

He and Mum both look at each other, laughing like a pair of co-conspirators.

“You’re mental, you know that?”

“What?” He lifts his hands, not bothering to hide his smile. “You needed a good kick in the ass.”

Shaking my head, I carry the dishes to the kitchen feigning annoyance with my old man. The truth is, I’d take the lie and the fucked up sleep schedule ten times over again if it meant having that chance run-in with Taylor.

Taylor

When Olivia invited me out tonight, I was expecting a hole-in-the-wall, hundred-year-old pub with a few town locals nursing some beers in a dark bar.

The Saloon is a pub but the comparison ends there. A long cedar wood bar stretches the length of the back wall, while high-top tables and low-corner booths fill most of the main area. We squeeze past one hundred or so people who are already on the dance floor—my shoes only sticking mildly. Olivia takes me by the hand and pulls me up to the bar.

“What’s your drink of choice?” she calls out over the—is that country music?

“Tequila!” I shout. “But I think tonight, I’ll just do red wine.”

Olivia wrinkles her brow, studying me.

“I meant what I said earlier, I really do want to get up early tomorrow so that I can finally do my sightseeing.”

“Red wine it is then, I just need to find?—”

“What’s up, baby Browning?” A handsome man with blond hair throws a towel over his shoulder and leans on his forearms against the bar. He flashes Olivia a very charming—okay, sexy—smile, and my god—she’s blushing.

“I’m not a baby, Liam.” She scowls at him.

Liam has no shame in the way he eyes her up and down. Direct. I like that.

“No. You definitely aren’t a baby anymore, huh?”

Her scowl slowly fades, the prolonged eye contact starting to make me feel like I’m interrupting something that I’m not supposed to be witness to.

“Right. Taylor,” she says, facing me. “This is Liam. He owns this bar. He’s also my brother’s best friend.”

Ooo, I love that trope. I smile and nod, extending my hand to his.

“Put her there, partner.”

He laughs, taking my hand, his smile turning more charming than flirtatious. “What can I get you girls? The band is starting in about an hour, so it’s best to get as many drink orders in now.”

“Irish mule for me and red wine for her.” Olivia throws a pointed thumb in my direction.

Liam makes quick work of our drinks and we take them with a ‘thank you’, heading off to find a table. “Enjoy your night, ladies!”

We find a high top, and before Olivia can even hoist herself up onto the tall seat I ask, “So, what’s the deal with you two?”

“Nothing.” She quickly takes a sip of her drink.

“It didn’t look like nothing.”

“Well, that’s probably because I’ve known him for almost my whole life. He and Knox were practically attached at the hip. And as you can see...” She waves a hand in his direction, not bothering to look at him. “He doesn’t see me as anything more than a baby.”

“Based on the way he was trying to undress you with his eyeballs, I think his thoughts might have changed.”

“He was not.” She blushes.

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“Liv, he was practically eye-fucking you in front of the entire bar.”

She chokes, mid-drink, and gently smacks her chest a few times. She’s so sweet and so innocent. I adore her already. I cover my laugh with my hand, reaching over to rub her back.

In the few minutes we’ve been here, the crowded bar somehow grew more crowded. “This place is poppin’ for a town that shuts down so early.”

“Yeah, on the weekends they get live bands from all over the world. That’s actually how Sophie met her fiancé.” She says Sophie like I’m supposed to know who that is. Like we’re all old friends. We’re not, and I have no idea who we’re talking about, but I nod along like I’m in on the story anyway. “The two closest neighboring towns don’t have a bar either, so locals and tourists from those areas come over here as well. Are you from a big city?”

“It’s actually one of the largest in The United States”

“That’s nice. I’ve barely ever left this town.” Her eyes grow distant, and she mindlessly stirs her straw around her copper mug.

“Do you want to?”

“I love this town and everyone in it. I never thought I would want to leave, but a few years ago, we went to London for one of Knox’s games, and I don’t know.” She shrugs a shoulder. “Ever since then, I’ve just felt like there’s so much more out there, you know? I just don’t know if anything outside of Stoney Meadow is really

forme.Plus, I think I would have a hard time leaving my mom. I'm the one who helps her most days."

"I can relate."

"You?" Her eyes go wide before shaking her head. "I find that hard to believe."

"It's true." I nod. Not the part about leaving my mom. Caroline Nova bailed on me long before I had the opportunity to even consider leaving her, but a piece of my heart tugs for Olivia. Not knowing where you fit in, or not being able to make a decision—hell, that should have been my middle name.Taylor Indecisive Nova."I think at some point, all of us question what we're doing with our lives. Where we want to live and what we want to do. Specifically, what we want to get out of it. I'm sure it's a universal experience. We might not go through it at the same time, but Liv?" Her eyes find mine and I reach for her hand, squeezing tightly. "You're not alone. We're all just trying to find our place on this floating rock."

She clasps her other hand on top of mine with a smile that lights up her face. "And what do you want to do now?"

"Right now, I want to have a fun night out in a new town with my new friend. Cheers!" I lift my glass to hers, and she clinks her mug against mine.

"What about you? You must have a lot of fun bars and clubs where you're from then?"

"We definitely do. I haven't been out in a while, though. A drink or two at the bar down the street from where I live, mostly. The last really wild night I had, my best friend, and I went to Vegas, and she accidentally got married."

"What?" She slams her hand down on the tabletop.

“Yeah, it all worked out, though. Turns out, she actually liked the guy.”

“That’s insane! If I ever—” Olivia keeps talking, but the music, the laughter, all the shouting and glasses clinking fade away when I spot the man sitting up at the bar. He’s talking to Liam, but even from halfway across the room, I can make out his thick, corded back muscles, the way they shift with every little movement under his shirt. Knox sits sideways on his stool, one arm propped up on the bar, his smile stretching from ear to ear.

Butterflies go wild in my stomach at the sight of him, and I sit up just a little straighter.

“Ugh,” Olivia groans, pulling my attention back to our table.

I blink a few times, breaking out of the fog of lust that is Knox Browning. Her whole body is turned towards me now, her chin propped up by the heel of her hand.

“What’s up with that?” I nod toward Knox, who is still looking all kinds of fine at the bar, unable to keep the smile off of my face.

“My dad probably sent him here to look after me.” She rolls her eyes. “Yet another reason I’m questioning if I can stay here any longer. I’ll always be treated like the baby.”

“I—” Before I can respond, Knox captures my attention again. More specifically, the beautiful tall woman with long, silky black hair who has her hand on his forearm. I nod toward her as she laughs at whatever he’s just said. “Who’s that?”

My smile slowly falls as her bigger more beautiful one continues to grow.

Liv takes a quick peek and turns back to me. “Oh, that’s Ava. She just moved back

here. I've only met her a handful of times, but she seems super cool."

"Where did she move from?"

"She was traveling for years, I'm not sure if she ever put roots down anywhere, but she's a model, so she's been like... everywhere."

Of course she has. I bite down hard on my inner cheek as something annoying begins to furrow in my chest

"Let's do shots!" I blurt out.

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Four shots of Jameson puts Liv and me in the middle of the dance floor. The band has gotten nearly every person in the place up and dancing. Bodies surround me, and the alcohol coursing through me has almost made me forget about the two hundred pounds of muscular sex appeal that stands fifty feet away from me. It's hard not to notice him when everyone in the bar seems keen on grabbing his attention. I swear, every single person has spoken to him at least once tonight.

A guy with close-cropped hair dips between where Liv and I are dancing.

Watch it, Shaggy Rogers.

I'm instantly annoyed, but Liv's smile brightens when she looks at him, so who am I to shove away her good time? Her wide eyes flit to mine and I hold up two thumbs.

"Yes!" I mouth, backing up a little giving them some space.

My eyelids flutter close and I let the music—and maybe the Jameson—take me away. My arms become weightless as I throw them over my head, and I swing my hips side to side to the rhythm until I stumble into the wall behind me.

Not a wall.

I'm instantly engulfed in a warm and aromatic scent that I have grown to know well. I inhale, but it only makes me more lightheaded. He seems to have that effect on me. I roll my shoulders back and turn on my sneaker-covered heel, coming face-to-chest with the man that I've been avoiding all night. I tilt my head back, looking into his eyes, only to find them several shades darker than I have ever seen them.

“If you came over here to play protector for your sister, leave her alone. She’s fine.”

“I didn’t come over here for her,” his husky voice grumbles.

My heartbeat intensifies.

“No?” I angle my head. “Where’s your girlfriend from the bar?”

He rubs a large hand over his mouth, attempting to hide his smile. “You jealous, Nova?”

Is that what that feeling was? Was I jealous? I refuse to come to terms with what that might mean in the middle of this bar.

“What’s jealousy?” I ask, shrugging a shoulder. “Never heard of her.”

Knox steps closer, his hand gently finding the slope of my waist. His mouth dips to the crook of my neck, causing every hair on my neck to stand. “It’s how I feel every time someone walks past you, their bodies grazing your shoulder, your back.” He drags his fingers from my shoulders to the small of my back. “Or the last man who slid by you by brushing against your ass.”

My lips part slightly, my tongue running along the back of my teeth. I assess my options. “Do you dance Knox?”

“Not usually.”

I take a step back, creating some distance between us that I already wish to crush. The music that I had managed to tune out kicks back in, and my hips dip and sway. I trail my fingers in a line from my thighs up my waist. I’m flirting with a dangerous line. I know it, but I’m consumed by the way he looks at me when I do.

Knox's nostrils flare, and in one step, he's closing the distance that I deeply regretted putting between us. His large hand finds my body again, fingers digging into my waist where my own touch had just traveled. I'm suddenly furious at his arm in the sling for preventing him from putting both of his hands on my skin. Before I know what I'm doing, my fingers are brushing lightly against his shoulder.

His eyes are darker than the bottom of a bottle when he follows the trail of my fingers along his collarbone. A muscle in his jaw ticks, as if this tiny movement is enough to test his restraint. The rhythm of the music blares through the bar, but standing this close to Knox, my heart hammers louder.

"Okay. I'm ready," Olivia declares, her head popping up between us. I pull my hands away from Knox like I've been caught making out under the bleachers at a middle school football game. I flash him a coy smile, telling him just how thoroughly I was enjoying that moment, before finally looking at his sister instead.

"What happened?" I ask her.

"What always happens. He got weird and asked if I wanted to go back to his place. When I said no, he said he would never have hooked up with me anyway and bailed."

Well, that won't fly.

"Where'd he go?" I look over her shoulder.

"It's fine." She rubs her arm timidly.

"No, come on. I've put dudes in their place for way less," I tell her. Her shiny eyes land on me, and her lips twitch in an appreciative smile. "I'm serious, Liv. Your enemies are my enemies."

“I appreciate it, really, but I’m okay.”

She’s so sincere, like my willingness to defend her honor is something new to her, but I can’t imagine anyone in this townnotgoing to bat for this girl.

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. I’m just ready to leave if that’s okay.”

I give her a squeeze and glance back at Knox, who is now scanning the bar.

“Don’t, Knox. Please, let’s just go,” Liv begs.

He’s weighing his options heavily, I can see it in the way his jaw pulses. His eyes fall back to his sister, and with a begrudged grunt, he dips his head in a nod.

“I’m just going to grab my purse from the table,” I say. “I’ll meet you at the door.”

An unused napkin sits on top of my handbag, and in possibly the most sentimental moment of my life, I shove the tiny paper with the horseshoe on it into my bag.

I push through the crowd of people, making my way to the door when a brunette in a puke green shirt steps in my path. I immediately recognize the man who interrupted my girl’s night.

Ohh, Shaggy. Good thing I saved that napkin.

“Hey.” I wave and pull my lips into a wide grin.

His eyes drag up the length of my body, and I have to physically restrain myself from gagging. “Hey back atcha.”

“An American accent. Wonderful. I would hate for this to get lost in translation.” I know my smile is rivaling the Cheshire Cat, but I don’t care, it’s not the first time I’ve looked out of my mind and it won’t be the last. “Now pay attention. The next time a woman turns your malnourished ass down, the correct answer is ‘I don’t deserve you anyway’, because let me tell you something...” I lean in closer and I relish in the way his smile falters. “If the choice was between spending one night with you or repeatedly kicking a rusty saw with no shoes on and an ingrown toenail, I’m taking option B every time.”

His face contorts from confusion to anger, but his brain cells haven’t rubbed together enough yet to signal to his body that he should leave. I close the remaining distance between us and move to pass him, but not before whispering in his ear. “I mean this with the utmost disrespect. Go home. Be happy with your pocket pussy and leave the rest of these women alone.”

The driveback isn’t far, but the speed limit in the town is about as fast as I can run.

Backwards.

Uphill.

In the snow.

Wearing scuba gear.

We pull up to one of the houses on the hill and Olivia hops out, seeming a little better than when we left. “Thanks for coming out with me tonight. I had the best time.”

I can’t stop my lips from tugging upward.

“Thank you for inviting me.”

“Thanks for the ride, Knoxy!” She slams the door and runs up to the house.

I drop my head back to the seat, a smile stretching across my entire face.

“Don’t.” His warning is deep, like gravel.

“Don’t what?” I sit up to look at him. I don’t know how he thinks he knows me so well, but he’s already shaking his head so I push the button that I know he’s begging me not to. “Knoxy?” I ask, shaking with laughter beside him.

“Fuck me,” he grunts, rubbing his eyebrow.

He drapes an arm over the steering wheel, leaning forward to look out of my window, making sure his little sister gets in the house safely.

“So you’re kind of a big deal around here, huh?” I ask when he finally puts the vehicle into drive.

“What do you mean?” he asks, turning the truck around.

“I mean, everyone was all over you at the bar tonight. You must have talked to twenty different people.”

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“Keeping tabs on me?” he asks, and my eyes roll back. Caught. “That’s alright. I like it when you watch me.”

“Okay, never mind.” I wave my hand in his direction, and he catches it with his. His long fingers wrap around mine, thumb rubbing my palm.

Is this an erogenous zone?

His knee lifts slightly to keep the wheel in place.

“When you play a sport at the level I did and come from a small town, it’s bound to happen.” He drops our hands to the space between us and I let out a breath that I hadn’t realized had been stuck in my throat.

“I couldn’t imagine getting so excited about a rugby player. No offense.”

“I kind of like that you don’t give a shit about who I am.”.

“Now if you were a Formula 1 driver, that would be a different story.”

“Ahh.” He nods his head.

“You want to talk about sprint weekends, Westin Wright, or which tracks I think should be brought back—I’m your girl. Rugby?” I make an X with my arms and shake my head.

“You really know how to puff up a guy’s ego, don’t ya, love?”

And you really know how to make my chest tumble by calling me that.

“You can take it though, can’t you?”

The truck rolls to a stop and his eyes bore into mine. “You still want to see the sights tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” Where did that breathy whisper come from?

“I’ll take you.”

“Yeah?” I give him my most mischievous little grin.

“See if I can take any more of what you’re gonna give me.” Good God. I’ve never not gone after a man I was attracted to, but something tells me I might be in over my head with this one.

“I’ll pack a picnic,” I say, halfway out the door.

“It might be a little windy for that.”

“Who knew such a big guy could be so scared of a little wind,” I tease him, closing the door behind me.

“Sweet dreams, Nova,” he calls through the open window.

I run up to the front steps, and I don’t need to look behind me to know he’s waiting for me to get inside, but I glance back at him anyway.

I’m. So. Screwed.

Knox

By all accounts, I should be exhausted right now. I've slept roughly ten hours in the last forty-eight, but I let the excitement that bubbles in my stomach at the mere thought of spending the day with Taylor get me up and to the main house.

I peer up the stairway, wondering if she had decided to sleep the day away again instead. The bottom step creaks loudly under my boot, and I freeze when I hear a familiar laugh beyond the kitchen door. My fingers slip from the wood banister and I walk toward the kitchen, leaning my ear toward the swinging door.

"I've always used oil. I never thought of trying it with butter."

"Oh yes, freshly churned butter will make all the difference," my mum responds. "I obviously don't do the churning anymore," she pauses. "But it gets done nonetheless."

"You might just catch me out there milking the cows and churning the butter next week."

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“Ooh, that I’d like to see, my little city girl.” My mum chuckles.

I crack the door open just enough to peek into the room and find Taylor sitting at the small round table in the corner of the kitchen. She sits with one leg propped up on the seat, the other dangling beneath her. The morning light from the window illuminates her blonde hair as it flows freely down her back. Tiny dust fragments bounce around her as she cups a steaming mug with two hands. Her head drops back on a laugh, but all the sounds escape me when I see her smile. Her smile rivals the sun.

“Would you like me to get Patrick to escort you on your adventure today?”

“Mmm.” She’s mid-sip. “No, that’s okay. Actually, Knox is going to take me.” Her head snaps toward me, a cheeky grin aimed directly my way. Busted.

“Knox?” My mum’s head cranes toward me, following Taylor’s attention.

I walk into the kitchen. “Morning, Mum,” I say, coming to her side.

“Well, I didn’t have you down for chauffeur duties today.”

Taylor bites her lip, but it doesn’t stop the huff of a laugh that bubbles out of her. She leaves the small table and makes her way over to the other side of my mum, turning on the sink.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, dear. I’ve got it. You two go, have fun.”

Our eyes meet from either side of my mum, and an electric current passes between us

when our eyes lock.

“Let’s roll, love.”

In the enclosed space of my truck, Taylor’s scent envelops me. It’s the same scent that I’ve come to know as her. Unique. It’s a smell that evokes an almost nostalgic feeling in me. It calms me down but excites me at the same time. It’s earthy, but sweet. Its?—

“Are you meditating?”

“What?”

“You’re silent and doing a lot of deep breathing over there.”

I narrow my eyes at her, and her chest shakes with a small laugh. Smartass. Her laugh slowly tapers off, her attention drifting to the radio. She listens intently to the song that’s playing softly through the cab of the truck.

“Wait. I love this song,” she says, reaching over to turn it up.

We’ve made it out of the town and are flying down the open road. Taylor throws her head back, singing at the top of her tone-deaf lungs.

“Now you know my secret.” She lifts her shoulder to her chin with a sly smile.

“Thank God you’re beautiful because you can’t sing for shit?”

Her jaw falls open and she reaches across the seat bench to smack me lightly with the back of her hand.

“Count your lucky stars. Not everyone is special enough to get to hear me sing. It’s my ‘thank you’ for taking me today.”

“No thanks necessary.” She’s not offended and I like that. Nothing feels too serious with her. I’ve spent years of my life focusing on how to be the best at what I do—what’s going to give me the advantage on and off the pitch. Hell, even in my recovery time. I spent it constantly learning the best ways to recover. I don’t remember the last time I did anything for simple enjoyment. I don’t know if I’ve ever chosen to openly do something I’m not perfect at in front of an audience. The little time I’ve spent around Taylor makes me question the things I was missing.

“Mark my words, Browning. You’ll be begging to hear me sing for you again.” The emphasis she puts on the word begging has the blood rushing straight to my cock. I clear my throat and shift in my seat. “You know, I could’ve driven us.”

Her eyes dart to where my hand hangs out of my sling, holding the bottom of the steering wheel.

“You know how to drive stick?”

“I—” Her tongue pushes along the inside of her cheek and I have to look away. “Could figure it out.”

“I like your confidence.” I smile, shifting into fourth gear down one of my favorite stretches of open road. There are only a few ways of getting to the cliffs and this one is typically the least traveled.

“Did you always know you wanted to play Rugby?”

I nod. “I started young and then never thought about anything else.”

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“So you got to play for a long time then.” It’s not a question. “Did that make it any easier? When you got injured, did you feel done?”

No. I tried to fight my coach and the nurse. I’m lucky I didn’t end up in a straight jacket after that day.

“I didn’t.” I run my hand over my jaw, considering how much I want to say before I land on the truth. “I was pissed when they told me I was done. I didn’t want to accept that it was the end for me. I knew it was the hardest hit I’d ever taken, that wasn’t a question. But, I was still so sure I would recover just like I had any other time.” My fingers tap along the steering wheel. “Accepting that I wasn’t going back was the hardest part.”

“Would you have come home if you hadn’t been injured?”

I was at the top of my game and coming back wasn’t even on my radar, but now that I’ve been back and I’ve allowed myself to remember how much I loved this place and these people. It’s almost difficult to imagine leaving them again. I’ve fallen back in with my mates and my family so easily, and wherever Taylor is seems like a pretty good place to stay.

“I’d like to say yes, but honestly, probably not.” She bites her cheek and nods. “I couldn’t stay in my flat any longer though. Every day was a reminder of what I’d lost. And then I came back here and couldn’t bring myself to leave my house. I was stewing, pissed off at the world.”

“If this is you mad at the world, I’d hate for you to seemeangry.”

I huff a laugh because Taylor is so easygoing and fun that it's hard to imagine that could possibly set her off.

"Yeah," I say, looking at her. "You got that pitbull in you, don't you, baby?"

I turn my attention back to the road but I swear her cheeks turn a shade of watermelon pink.

"Anyway, I'm less angry now. I've accepted it—begrudgingly. My shoulder heals a bit more everyday, and now it's just figuring out who I am without rugby. In so many ways, it feels like my identity has been taken away from me."

"I can relate." It's barely more than a whisper, but I heard it all the same. I tilt my chin to her, encouraging her to continue. "I mean, I've obviously never been a professional athlete." Her hand flits to me. "But I've also never found my thing."

"Your thing?"

"Yeah, you know, everyone has something they want to do. Something they're passionate

about. I don't know what my thing is. What I could see myself doing long term."

"What did you want to do when you were younger?"

Her lips twist to the side. "I wanted to be a dolphin trainer."

I bite my bottom lip, determined to not laugh. "And what happened to that dream?"

"I didn't take it with me past fourth grade, and also, fuck the tanks." She spits out,

throwing up both of her middle fingers.

Unable to hold my laughter, I prod for more information. “Okay, so after fourth grade, what? Nothing caught your interest?”

“Different things here and there. I get excited easily over a new project or new job, and I’ll think, this is it. This is my new personality, but it just never... sticks.”

“Taylor Nova, do you have commitment issues?” I tease her.

“Ding ding ding.” She leans into me, waving an imaginary bell around. “It’s not my fault though. It’s the ADHD.”

“Maybe it’s just because you haven’t actually found the real thing you’re passionate about.”

“Right. But I can’t always tell when I get hooked on something if it’s going to last six weeks, six months, or six years. So instead, I just play it safe. I keep a bunch of different jobs so that I never have to be tied down to one, and if I end up hating one, I drop it and pick up something else.”

“Well, what kinds of things make you feel most accomplished?” She looks over at me with her eyebrows all bunched together. “Like for me, winning back-to-back Championships is when I felt the most proud. Those were the moments I knew all my hard work was worth it. I finally got to see the payoff. What makes you feel proud?”

“I don’t feel pride.”

I rear back because I’m certain she’s misunderstanding me. “When you finish something that you’ve spent a lot of time on, or when you reach a goal, you feel... what?”

“Relief.” My chest sinks at her words.

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I've known Taylor for a handful of days, and her energy and light are infectious—they've gotten me out of my house when I had no intention of braving the sun. I want so badly to understand her and why she feels this way, but the shift in her posture looks far too similar to mine when I'm forced to talk about my injury. Instead of prodding, I tuck this crumb of insight about her life into my pocket for later, grateful that she's given it to me.

"You said you moved to San Francisco for school. What did you go to school for?"

"For Camila."

"Who's Camila?"

"Who's Camila?!" Her eyes blink rapidly. "The Local Lemon Drop Champion. The Pop-Tart Princess. The mejor amiga of all time!"

"Best friend?"

"She's more than a best friend." She says. "But only slightly less than a lover."

"And she's the reason you moved?" I ask, confused.

"She's the one who wanted to go to school out there. I knew she would need a little coaxing, and I didn't think she would do it on her own so I made a big deal about how badly I wanted to go and we decided one night that if we both got in, we would go."

“That’s...”

“Crazy?” she cuts me off, but there’s a smile in her voice.

“I was going to say loyal.” I feel her eyes on the side of my face again. “Your parents didn’t mind?”

“My parents weren’t around enough to care.” There is no sadness, anger, or judgment in her tone. She speaks no differently than if she were placing a coffee order. “They traveled a lot, saving baby animals and whatnot. They had their own shit.”

On the one hand, I want to bow down to the Novas for creating the incredibly beautiful, hilarious, and kind women next to me. On the other hand, I want to bash their skulls together for abandoning her.

“You don’t sound resentful.”

“I’m not.” She shrugs. “I traveled with them a few times when I was younger but eventually they started leaving me at home because I couldn’t afford to miss any more school.”

“And you were okay with that?”

“At the time, I think I was just excited that I got to spend so much time at my best friend’s house.”

My mind is swirling with questions, but I’m also plagued by the idea that anyone could stand to leave her behind. Especially a younger, more innocent version of her. I’ve only spent a few days with Taylor, and I’m already thinking about ways to spend more days with her.

“And now?”

“There’s no point in being upset now. It is what it is.”

“It is what it is?” I repeat.

“Yup. What will be will be. Live and let live. All that stuff. Life is too short to waste it on worrying about shit you can’t control.”

“I get what you’re saying, but you can still be angry or upset about things you can’t control. I’m not saying you have to let it ruin your life or dwell on it, but I don’t know if I could just ignore something like that.”

“It’s a waste of energy, Knox.” Her words have a note of finality to them and for the second time today, her body shifts slightly away from me. “And it’s just not who I am.”

I don’t doubt that she’s resilient, and I obviously don’t know the whole story, but I can’t get over how it feels like some of her words are meant to convince herself more than they are to convince me.

Taylor

I. Am. A. Dickhead.

There’s a knot in my stomach as we drive up into the parking lot. Knox pays the attendant, and as I watch them exchange a greeting with one another, the knot pulls tighter. This man could not have possibly been more understanding or receptive to the word vomit that I just spewed all over his truck, and I bit his head off for it. He’s obviously one of those people who is capable of processing and understanding all kinds of emotional situations so that he can live a healthy life, unlike me, who would

prefer to pretend they never happened. If it never happened, there's nothing to be upset about. And for the most part, it's worked.

Eyes closed, I lean my head on the seat behind me and let out a sigh. Not only did I info dump about my flippant parents, but for some reason, I told him about my ADHD, too. To say I wanted to crawl under the dash of his truck and hide after the words tumbled out of my mouth would be an understatement.

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I'm not embarrassed that I have ADHD or shitty parents but I am surprised that I told him, considering I've never actually said the words out loud before.

When I was officially diagnosed in the seventh grade, I was made to feel ashamed about it by my parents. I sat with the backs of my thighs sticking to the vinyl chair in my doctor's office while my mother spoke in hushed whispers with the doctor. I overheard her talking with my dad about the appointment when we got home, and that was that. We never talked about it again, so I never brought it up, not even with Camila. I snuck off to the school nurse at lunchtime every day for three years to take my medication until one time my mom had been gone so long that she forgot to re-order my prescription and I never said anything. I don't remember feeling any different while taking my medication, but it's not like I remember much anyway. It's not something that I actively think about every day. I just know that certain things can be more challenging for me because of it. I know that I have thirty unused notebooks because I think I need them. I would rather die than listen to someone talk slowly. I can't comprehend verbal instructions, and my object permanence is to the point where if I can't see it, it no longer exists to me. Those things are all attributed to my ADHD. But in my day-to-day life, this is just me. It's how I'm wired, and there isn't anything wrong with that, but I've also just never thought it was important enough to bring up with anyone.

We stop in a dirt lot and despite feeling like rolling out of the truck, down the hill, over the cliffs, and right into the ocean—I steady my breath, jump out, and watch Knox pull the picnic basket I made for us out of the trunk with bated breath.

I can't take it anymore.

“Knox, wait.” I grab onto his bicep, both hands pulling him back toward me. He turns to face me. “I’m sorry, I feel like an asshole. I didn’t mean to snap at you like that. I felt weird because we were talking about so many things that I’m not used to talking about and I?—”

“Hey.” He sets the basket down and reaches up, brushing a windblown strand of hair from my face. He keeps it away from my face, and I finally bring myself to look at him. “I didn’t think you snapped at me.”

I almost wish he would just say ‘Yeah you are an asshole.’ But of course, he doesn’t. “I just thought you were done with the conversation and that was your way of saying it.”

My shoulders drop and the tightness in my chest eases. As much as I want him to reprimand me for being a shitty friend, that’s just not who he is.

“Let’s go, Nova. We’ve got a picnic to have.” He smiles, picking up the basket and waving it in my face.

“This. Is.” My jaw drops as words fail me.

“Pretty cool.”

“Fucking incredible,” we say at the same time. The path up to the southern section was endless miles of cliffs towering seven hundred feet above the ocean. The contrast between the deep lush greens and the azure water below was something out of a painting. The only thing that could make it any better is if the wind would chill out.

I pull my phone from my back pocket and snap a few pictures. I attempt a panoramic photo but the wind blows my hair in front of the camera, ruining the shot. I snap one of Knox with his back to me, overlooking the stone wall. Even with his back to me,

he's handsome. When I'm done taking pictures, I move to stand beside him crossing my arms. My legs shake beneath me because despite it being a rather sunny day, the wind really takes the warmth away.

We head up another small trail and halfway up, Knox lifts his chin toward an area off of the path that leads to a grassy piece of land.

"Shall we?" he asks, through squinted eyes, waving the basket around.

I attempt to hide my smile because he was right. It's windy as fuck up here. I don't know how we're going to have a picnic, but he's determined to do this for me, so I follow him to where he lays a blanket down on the grass. The blanket is probably big enough for two, but since Knox is the size of a person and a half, it's a snug fit.

"What'd you bring us?"

His fingers untwist the small leather rope from the button on the basket, and he lifts the lid.

"Cheese, crackers, bread." He pulls out the loaf that I had to get up in the middle of the night to finish baking. "Mmm, feels fresh."

I can't contain my smile and as I watch Knox unload our basket. All of these smiles I've been giving him, the laughs and shared words, they have all been real.

Genuine.

I haven't only been giving him my usual flirtatious smile, or my phony, surface-level conversations, which are usually things I've made up based on what I think people want to hear.

“Let’s take a picture.” I hold my phone out, scooting closer to Knox’s side. The reflection of his smile in the camera, grinning ear to ear, makes my heart trip over itself. Strands of my hair go every which way and I try my best to hold it down against the wind. I don’t want anything ruining this picture with him. Not that I need photo evidence. I’m sure that even with my piss poor memory, I’ll never forget today.

I tap the circle once and drop my hand to my lap, looking over my shoulder. My breath whooshes out of me, heavier and scarier than the wind when I realize we’re face-to-face. My eyes drop to his lips. His presence is so overpowering, especially when he’s this close. I can’t think, I can’t speak, I can’t do anything but stare at him. My hand itches to reach up to his jaw and feel the scrape of his beard against my fingers. I’m dying to pull his face to mine, to feel his skin under my hands, the weight of his body pressed to mine, and his lips against my own.

A woman squeals in the distance. From the corner of my eye, I see her chasing her hat at record speed, and that image is enough to bring me back to reality. I have to stop looking at that face. I clear my throat and sit back on my bum. I open the photos on my phone and gasp.

“What?”

“The wind blew my hair.”

“Hate to break it to you, but that hair has been blowing.” He waves his arms around his head, making a whooshing sound.

“Yeah, but look.” I zoom in on the strand blowing above my top lip. “It looks like I have a mustache.”

“No, you just...” I look at him through narrowed eyes. “You look like you’re undercover.”

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I shake my head and shove at his chest, but he takes my hand and falls back with laughter, pulling me down with him. His warm chest beats strong beneath me when I land half on top of him, and my own laughter dies, being replaced by a tingling sensation coursing its way through my body. Hewraps his big arm around me, fingers lightly brushing along my back leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. His injured arm remains against his chest, in that damned sling. I prop my chin under my hand, hoping an additional layer of space between us will calm me down.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he whispers, his fingers continue to trail down my spine and I briefly close my eyes so that he doesn’t see everything I’m feeling. “Let’s do something.”

“Aren’t you sick of me yet?” I ask and lightly stroke his eyebrows with my middle finger.

“Nah, Nova. I like spending time with you.”

My hand stills and my throat swells with surprising emotion. I shove it down and resume trailing my finger over him.

“Careful, Knox, now it really does sound like you’re flirting with me.”

“That’s because I really am.”

My mouth parts, but I don’t have any words to respond to that. We’ve danced around this for days now—but hearing him acknowledge whatever tension this is between us somehow feels different. There’s an erratic flutter deep in my stomach and I swear

something in my chest just dipped and soared. It's the same feeling you get on those rides where they slowly pull you up to the highest peak and then let you freefall one hundred and fifty feet before catching you.

I suck in my bottom lip, considering how to respond.

I don't get the chance.

The wind picks up, lifting the lid to our basket, and the contents fly everywhere. In a second, I'm on my feet chasing down the flower fabric napkins. Knox is running around, scooping up pieces of food and our now empty plastic cups. We look exactly like the lady and her floppy hat.

"Whose dumb idea was this?" I laugh, looking over at him.

A playful growl rumbles in the back of his throat as he rushes toward me, hands full of an assortment of picnic essentials. I can't stop laughing at the image.

"Come here before you blow away too." With cups tucked in the crook of his slung elbow, his free hand wraps around my waist. He pulls me in close, but movement behind him catches my eyes and with a gasp, I shove him away.

"Knox!" I yell, running towards our blanket that's being lifted and thrown around like Aladdin's magic carpet. Knox manages to snatch it mid-air before it has the chance to see a whole new world.

"Alright, Nova. I think the picnic is over."

"Are you sure? We haven't lost the charcuterie board yet. The grapes and cheese are gone though." I shove the rest of our stuff in the basket. "Or you. You still haven't blown away yet. That could be fun, me chasing you down." I say, getting up and

walking over to him.

“I would love for you to chase me down, but in an entirely different context.” And not even the heavy squalls threatening to take down the three hundred and twenty million-year-old cliffs could cool me down when he looks at me like that.

We barely make it back to the truck without blowing off the cliff, and when I get inside of the cab, the forceful wind slams my door shut. The hollowing noise comes to an abrupt halt.

“Well, I don’t know why you don’t do that more often. That was simply lovely,” I breathe, pulling my hair back and twisting it into a knot on the top of my head. He puts the truck in drive, shaking his head with a full belly laugh. “You think I’m crazy?”

“I think you’re fun.” He reaches over, brushing a wild strand of hair from my face. His hand lingers on my skin. “I think you’re exciting and adventurous. I think you’re lively and witty. I think you’re beautiful.” His thumb runs along my bottom lip, and my breath hitches. “But of all the things I think about you, crazy isn’t one of them.”

He drops his hand to stick shift and I lick my bottom lip, where the warmth of his thumb still lingers. If anyone else had said those words to me, I would have rolled my eyes and spit some snarky retort. But there’s so much sincerity in Knox’s eyes. I believe that he means every single thing he’s saying.

And isn’t that my worst-case scenario?

The sun has almost fallen below the hills, but even in the darkness, I recognize the gate that leads up to Emerald Browning Cottage.

“Stop!” I throw my arm out across Knox’s chest and he slams on the brakes, head

snapping in my direction, eyes wide. In the beam of the headlights sits that little black cat. “You almost ran over your cat.”

“Jesus.” He drops his head back before looking back at me. “It’s still not my cat.”

“She might not be yoursyet, but she seems to think she belongs here. She’ll be yours soon enough. Trust me.”

The cat lies down right in front of the truck, the way cats do when they find a beam of sunlight being cast through a window, and Knox’s gaze shifts between his house and me.

“Do you want to come inside?”Yes.

“I shouldn’t.”

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“You don’t strike me as someone who turns down anything she wants to do.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“But?” If he had asked me yesterday, I would have jumped at the chance. Hell, I did jump at it and would have if Liv hadn’t interrupted. Flirting with him was okay. Hooking up with him might have been toeing the line, but catching feelings for him would be falling into the deep end and drowning. I see it clear as day now, how easy it would be to fall for him. It’s that reality—that fear—that holds me back and keeps me from leaning into him now—into whatever this is.

“I’m leaving in three weeks.”

“All the more reason to come inside now.” He shifts in his seat, leaning in toward me.

I tilt my head into the moonlight that is now shining into the cab. “Friends?”

The tension is heavy, my breathing unsteady as he leans in further, closing the distance between us. His lips are a mere inch away from mine. He’s going to kiss me and even though I know that I shouldn’t, I’m going to let him. My eyelids flutter closed and I tilt my chin. His warmth engulfs me and his breath is warm on my—ear?

“Friends. For now.” His deep voice vibrates all the way down to the pulsing point between my thighs. My chest rises and falls, and I swear there is next to no oxygen left in this truck. I feel dizzy, holy shit. Has someone ever passed out from a near kiss? This can’t be healthy.

He pulls back with a knowing smirk on his face because he's not oblivious to the effect he has on me. I narrow my eyes at him, though I'm fully aware that I'm the reason we're not kissing—or anything else—right now.

With one hand, he throws the truck in reverse, backing up until he's avoided his cat. He puts it in drive, the wheel sliding seamlessly through his large hand, and we make our way back up to the main house—him on his metaphorical high horse, because I'm sure he knows as well as I do—my willpower around him is next to nothing. My uncomfortably wet underwear is proof of that.

Knox

The tip of the sun hovers over the mountains warming up the pitch, and my throat clogs with a hefty dose of nostalgia as I stand out here in the place where all my dreams were first formed. I laid in my bed last night, unable to sleep, and for the first time, it wasn't thoughts of rugby, my shoulder, or my future that kept me up.

It was Taylor.

I stared at my ceiling for hours, thinking about her smile, her raspy laugh, and the way she makes the most mundane things feel exciting. My thoughts took a turn somewhere along the way, and when I closed my eyes, I could feel the gentle weight of her body pressed against mine. I could feel her pouty lips beneath the touch of my thumb, and when my mind finally landed on the memory of her body humming as I closed the distance between us in my truck, that's when my hand slid into my briefs and I fucked my palm.

As I cleaned myself up, I stood at my bathroom sink, catching the reflection of someone whose focus wasn't entirely on recovering or rugby for the first time in a longtime. I woke up this morning accepting the fact that Taylor's not only a distraction that I welcome, but one that I'm begging for. I got dressed and drove out

to my old school, home of the Sundevils, to tell Coach that I appreciated the offer, but I already have one thing demanding my attention right now, and I can't afford another.

Deep red, orange, and yellow leaves line the thick layer of trees on the far side of the field. I close my eyes, drop my head back, and inhale the clean, crisp fall air.

"It might not be a lot, but it is home."

I smile, opening my eyes to find Coach Campell standing next to me. He's bundled in his black Sun Devils jumper, looking straight ahead to the same fall foliage that had me transfixed.

"I've played on numerous pitches over the years, Coach. This one is up there with the best of them."

He huffs a laugh. "Maybe if you take me up on my offer, you could convince some of these lads of that yourself."

"Or I could very well let even more people down." I tuck my hand into my pocket, looking down at my shoes.

"I don't think you've let anyone down." I scoff, looking anywhere but his eyes. "I'm serious, Knox."

"When I first got signed and I left, I came home four months later and you all had a town parade."

"That doesn't sound like disappointment to me," he interrupts.

"I've been gone for years, and now I'm back with nothing to show for it. The words

don't need to be said, but I know I've let people down. They're disappointed," I pause, my eyes still trained on the ground. "Or they pity me, which is worse."

"Or they don't think twice about ya." I look at him then. "Maybe they're just happy you're back. Circumstances be damned."

I'm not arrogant enough to think that everyone is hung up on me, but I am aware enough to know that I should still be embarrassed. I'm the guy who left the town and the people that I love for bigger places and bigger dreams, and no matter how successful of a career I've had, I'm back now with nothing to show for it but a highlight reel. You could Google me and find a list of my accolades, every record I hold, and a full list of my stats, and that would sum up everything there is to know about me.

"Hey, Coach." Three boys walk past us, their duffle bags slung over their shoulders, one spinning a ball between his hands. I watch as they pass, making their way over to the benches and I see a clear vision of the past. I see Dax, Liam, and myself walking in line, ready to play the game we love.

"So when do you get that thing off?" he asks, pointing to my arm.

"First thing in the morning."

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Slowly, more boys show up, bundled in their jumpers and trackies. They begin warming up with some stretches, bear crawls, and staggered catches, and my itch for the game sparks like an inferno inside of me.

Is this what it will be like back in London? Only worse because it's my peers?

"Sorry, Coach." Another kid yells out as he runs past us, dropping his bag at my feet. Campbell offers him nothing more than a grunt, studying his clipboard.

"What? No punishment burpees?" I ask.

"I think you and Liam did enough burpees for another five years of kids." I laugh, dropping my head. My knuckles run along my chin at the memories of all the shit we used to get into that would make us late for practice. It was usually girls we were busy making out with. I was willing to be late and Liam was willing to skip it all together. "Well, what'd you come down here for, KB?"

"I uh—" I look out over the pitch once more, and the autumn breeze picks up. My eyes flutter closed and for the briefest moment in time, I feel like myself again. I feel like the kid who learned who he was on this very pitch. The young boy who fell in love with this sport. With my feet planted firmly on the roots of where I'd grown, the memories and the feelings whirl past me in a blur. There is no way to explain it other than it just feels right. "I'm in."

"Good lad." He pats my shoulder.

I open my eyes just in time to see him walk past me.

“That’s it?” I yell after him. I’m over here fighting for my life over this decision and he gives me a pat on the back. A simple good lad, and he’s on his way.

“Come in early on Monday so you can fill out some paperwork!” he calls over his shoulder. A few heads turn in my direction, confusion etched on their faces.

What the fuck have I agreed to?

I’ve been staring at my ceiling for what feels like an eternity.

It’s ten p.m.

I hung around the main house most of the afternoon, hoping to run into Taylor, but to no avail. When she didn’t show up for dinner, I realized just how much I had been wanting to see her. I turn over onto my side—I can’t wait to be able to crush my right shoulder with my weight again.

The moonlight seeps through my open windows and I blame it for my inability to fall asleep, when really, it’s thoughts of Taylor that have me tossing and turning. She’s on vacation and probably just exploring. Of course, she’s back, nothing except The Saloon is open right now. Would she go back to The Saloon? I told her I wanted to see her today. She said she just wanted to be friends. You shouldn’t be this concerned about her. If she wanted to hang out, she knows where I live.

I flop onto my back, looking at the clock again. 10:08.

Fuck.

I rip the blanket from my body, throw on a T-shirt and jeans, shove my feet into my boots, and jog up to the main house.

The Inn is silent. Only the soft glow of a lamp from the common room provides any light. I cringe with each creak up the stairs and hold my breath as I make my way down the hallway. I knock on the last door in the hallway, the one tucked in the corner at the end. I listen for any sign that she's home but there is no movement, no sounds. I'm about to leave when the door is yanked open.

Taylor stands in another one of those cropped tank tops, this one black, and the same oversized sweatpants she wore the first night we hung out.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Hey."

"You said that," she teases, fighting a smile.

"Right." I scratch the back of my head, suddenly unsure of what my plan was when I decided to come up here. She stays silent, doing me no favors. I run a hand over my mouth before I clear my throat. "I wanted to make sure you ate."

"I did."

"You did?"

She dips her head, but not before I catch the smile on her face.

"I found a farmers market today. Cute little craft tables, and homemade soaps." She leans against the door, one socked foot propped up on her ankle and her big green eyes twinkling up at me. "The best part was every other table had some kind of food. I probably ate enough for an entire rugby team."

My dick should absolutely not be getting hard over the way she said 'rugby' but here I am subtly shifting in my pants.

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Soft voices from inside her room catch my attention. I look over her shoulder, finding her TV on. I audibly swallow, knowing that she's here and I got my answer—if she wanted to hang out with me, she would have come down.

“Okay, good.” I dip my chin and turn on my heel, feeling every bit as pathetic as I'm sure I look.

“Wait.” Her soft hand clasps around my bicep, before I can turn around. “Do you... do you want to come in?”

Relief floods my veins and I try not to show it on my face.

“If you wanted to hang out with me so badly, you could have just said something,” I tease, sliding past her and the doorframe.

She closes the door behind us and when I turn to look at her, the room feels much smaller than I remember. Taylor walks past me, right to the bed. I look between the dresser, littered with empty water bottles and coffee mugs, to the chair in the corner of the room that's piled high with clothes.

“Your room is kind of a mess,” I say, moving an eye mask, a Kindle, and some kind of blow dryer from her bed.

“To you,” she smiles.

“No, love. It's a mess.”

“Okay fine, but I know where everything is.” I raise my eyebrows in question. “It’s true. Look under the bed and you’ll find my pink claw clip and an earring. My blue-light glasses are under a brochure on the dresser, and my passport is in the bathroom, under the towel on the counter.”

How?

“Oh, and!” She jumps up, and rushes to the closet, pulling out a backpack. She sets it on the edge of the bed, digging through it.

“What’s with the trackies?” I ask, lifting my chin to her.

She pauses, staring at me in confusion.

“Your sweatpants,” I clarify, pointing at her lower half.

“You don’t like them?” She frowns, looking down at her legs.

“I didn’t say that.” I like the way they sit dangerously low on her hips—hips that point to a place that I’ve thought obscenely inappropriate things about.

“They’re my favorite ones. I bought three others exactly like these, but for some reason, these ones just feel different.”

“They’re yours?”

“Ah!” She pulls a brown bag out of the backpack before dropping the bag ground and moving to sit next to me. “Who else’s would they be?”

“An old boyfriend, maybe?”

“Nope. No old boyfriends here.” She smiles, shaking the bag. “Plus, I’m not that sentimental.”

I don’t have time to dissect what she means because she opens the bag, smiling from ear-to-ear.

“Candy?”

“Not just candy, an assortment.” She pulls out a long, red, gummy-type candy while handing me a hard circular one that appears to be covered in salt. I look inside and find chocolates and an array of sweets, all different sizes, and all different flavors, mixed together.

“How do you know which is which?”

“You don’t, that’s the fun part. It’s like Russian roulette.” She wiggles her eyebrows, taking a bite from the gummy. “Mmm, watermelon. Try yours.”

I plop the round candy in my mouth and my cheeks suck in against my will at the impossibly sour flavor.

“I think I lost.” My eyes squeeze shut as I shake my head, and Taylor’s laughter rings out through the room.

“Oh, that must have been the sour fun blast.”

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“There’s nothing fun about it, babe,” I mumble, and she falls over laughing, her delicate hand falling to my thigh. The touch takes away some of the pain in my mouth. I don’t bother trying to chew it. Instead, I swallow it like a pill and sit up to find Taylor rounding the bed, cracking open a water bottle. She hands it to me, sliding into the space between my legs. I take a long sip, watching her, watch me.

“Tell me, Browning, do you do this with all the guests?” she asks. I quirk a brow at her, setting the bottle down on the nightstand. “Hang out in their rooms, watch shows, and...”

She trails off as she looks down at where my hand now rests on her waist, my thumb gliding along her exposed skin.

“Just you, Nova.”

We sit side-by-side, propped against the headboard, the TV has been nothing more than background noise to accentuate our never-ending conversation. Taylor moves the discarded candy bag to the bedside table and settles back onto the bed, resting her arm between us. I reach over, finding any excuse to touch her, and twist the blue and gold bracelet on her wrist.

“I like this.”

“It’s called an Ojo bracelet. Camila got it for me for my thirteenth birthday.”

“What does it mean?” Her pulse flutters erratically under my fingers.

“It’s...” She pulls her gaze away from where I’m touching her and looks into my eyes. “It’s supposed to protect you from negative energy and bring good luck.”

“Maybe I need one of these, then.”

“Do you need a little help getting lucky, Browning?”

“Mm.” I trail my fingers up her arm to the crease opposite her elbow, and her skin pebbles beneath my touch. My index and middle fingers skate up to her shoulder slowly and she inhales sharply, but never pulls her gaze from mine. I slide the strap of her tank top over, splaying the entirety of my hand across her collarbone. I wait for any sign that she wants to back out but instead, she leans in closer.

I wet my bottom lip, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck, and her lashes flutter closed when I dip my chin, closing the last bit of space between us. I tease us both, brushing my nose against hers, holding on to this moment just a second longer.

A startling vibration cuts through the room and her eyes blink open. She twists out of my hold, slamming her hand onto the nightstand to silence her phone.

“Umm.” She clears her throat, scooting up further on the bed.

“I should go.”

I stand and she crawls across the bed, sitting up on her knees. I all but bite my fist in protest at the way she looks right now.

“You don’t have to.” Her voice is nothing more than a throaty whisper.

“I have an early doctor’s appointment in the morning.”

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth with a nod and I gently wind my hand around the back of her head, placing a soft kiss on her forehead.

Taylor

The fresh hint of herbs and the sweet smell of bread fill the kitchen that Isla and I have been working in for the last two hours. I offered to help her in the kitchen mostly because she needed it, but I think I needed it as well. Creating in the kitchen has always been my little anchor—the one thing that brings me joy and a surprising sense of purpose. As I shucked husks of corn, peeled potatoes, and finely diced herbs though, I wondered if Isla needs more help here than she's letting on.

“We'll let that sit for about an hour before stirring,” she says, as I move the Dutch oven over the open flame. “I'm going to head down to the barn and see if I can find Ryder. He's supposed to be helping me with the plans to build a new spice rack.”

She leaves the room, slightly shimmying her shoulders as she goes. I smile at her retreating back as she exits through the Dutch doors in the back.

The door on the opposite side of the kitchen swings open. I do a double take as Knox enters the room with one hand on the door, and the other adjusting the hat on his head.

I bite down on the insides of my cheeks, trying my best to hide the grin I so desperately want to give him.

But not before I mess with him a little.

I pull the apron over my head, loose strands of my hair lifting and falling with it, and I place it on the counter before I glide across the kitchen to where he stands.

“Hey.” I tilt my head up to him. “You look different.”

“Yeah?” His eyebrows draw together, but his smirk tells me he’s playing the same game as I am.

“Did you get a haircut?”

“No.”

“New shirt?”

“Same shirt.”

“Maybe you grew overnight.” I scan his body, pausing briefly where he appears to be straining against his zipper, before bringing my eyes back to his. “Are men your age still growing?”

He drops his head an inch closer, his eyes boring into mine. “Define growing.”

I pull my bottom lip in, having to bite down harder now.

“I know.” I tap my finger on his chest. “You got a manzillian.”

He blinks. “A what?”

“You know.” I rip my hand through the air making a whipping sound. “Balls to ass.” I hold his stare for half a second longer before my smile betrays me and I drop my head back, clutching my chest as laughter erupts from me. “I’m kidding, you got your sling off.”

I grab hold of his bicep and he cups my elbow. The touch is so simple, likely not causing a second thought in his head, but it makes my heart skip a beat.

“Mhmm.”

“You look good.” I arch an eyebrow and lean into his touch.

“You got a minute? I want to show you something.”

I twist, checking the timer on the oven, and slide my hands into the back pocket of my jeans. “I’ve got fifty-four of them actually.”

Knox reaches behind me and my breath catches when the warmth of his hand slides down my backside, finding one of my pocketed hands. “Then let’s ride.”

“Oh my God!” I stop dead in my tracks, creating a small dust storm around me. “What did you do?”

“You said you wanted to ride a horse,” he explains, extending his hand to me. “I got you a horse.”

I’m left standing dumbfounded at the giant animals in front of me, beside the man who got them for me because of one throw-away comment I made.

“What’s wrong?”

“I guess I just didn’t realize how... big they are.”

Knox’s fingers intertwine with mine, his thumb rubbing a comforting pass along my wrist and I loosen a breath, taking a tentative step forward with him.

“This is Pinto Bean.”

“You’re joking.”

“Nope.” He reaches into a bucket, pulls out an apple, and feeds it to the brown horse before petting his mane, all while never letting go of my hand. “This guy has been with me since my first year of secondary school—hence the name.”

A pinched expression forms on Knox’s face as he drops his right arm, and I feel like an asshole. He’s just gotten his cast off and was probably told to take it easy, but instead, he’s out here wrangling a horse because of my lie.

I settle my nerves and step closer to him, gently rubbing his shoulder. “Does it hurt?”

“Nah, it’s just a little stiff.”

“Mmm.” My lips pull tight as I fight back my slightly inappropriate response but he reads me like a book. His head drops back and he laughs a deep laugh that soaks through my chest and vibrates all the way down between my legs.

“Go ahead. Make your dirty joke, Nova girl.”

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“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I shake my head. “Who’s that?”

I point behind Knox to the white-haired horse.

“That’s Dolly.” He flicks his head in her direction before wrapping his arm around my waist like a seatbelt. I walk alongside him. “Do you want to pet her?”

I look in her big black eyes and my heart hammers toward unsafe territory. I feel Knox’s hand tighten on my waist and I inhale his comforting presence. Lifting a shaky hand, my fingers brush against her coarse hair, and when she doesn’t turn and snap my hand off, a whoosh falls from my lips. Knox covers his hand over my own and my trembles subside.

“What do you think?” Knox whispers against the side of my head.

“She’s a little intimidating but... I think I like her.”

“Funny, that’s what I think about you.” A snort escapes me, but I continue to pet her. “You ready to get up? She’s very sweet. She has a gentle temper and can hardly be bothered to run, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

“Nowthatsounds more like me.” Knox smiles beside me and I give Dolly another look over, nodding my head. He moves to stand behind me with both of his large hands bracketing my sides.

“Go ahead and put your foot in and I’ll help you up and over.”

I lift one foot to the stirrup and push the other off the ground at the same time that Knox lifts me. It's a cool sixty degrees—the perfect fall day, but when my waffle henley lifts and Knox's hands graze my lower back, my entire body overheats. I settle myself into the saddle, and his hand drags down my jean-covered legs. His touch burns, even through the fabric of my jeans. I look down at where he stands, teeth digging into his bottom lip, and my mouth is suddenly bone dry. His fingers flex against me, his golden brown eyes darkening faster than the setting sun. I smile to myself, knowing that I'm not the only one affected here.

He clears his throat, rapidly blinking before stepping back. "Alright, you good?"

"Are you?"

"There's my cheeky girl." He smiles, handing me the reins, and moves swiftly, hopping up onto Pinto Bean. "Let's ride, Nova."

"Alright, horseback riding, check. What else do you want to get out of your trip?"

"Oh, I see. This was all just a big ruse to get me to tell you the rest of my plans."

"I'm a curious guy. What can I say?"

I laugh at his sweet boy-next-door words that are a direct contradiction to the absolute sex on a stick—or in this case horse—that this man is. I can hardly stand to look at him now, with the way his hips rock back and forth from his horse's slow movements. I can't stop myself from thinking what it would feel like if that were me under his rolling hips. His annoyingly perfect lips lift into a smirk like he knows exactly what I'm thinking about. Of course, he does. I'm practically drowning in my own saliva over here.

"Okay, I want to try real Irish beer."

“You didn’t get enough the other night?”

“That was Irish Whisky.”

His laugh is warm, wrapping around me. “Alright, fair. So Irish beer and flirting with retired rugby players. Got it.”

My head whips toward him. “I’m not flirting with you.”

“No?”

“No.” I knew I wasn’t being slick but I didn’t realize I had a goddamn neon sign on my forehead.

“That’s alright, Nova. I’ll flirt with you enough for the both of us.” His all-knowing smirk lifts to the sky and he lets out a full-on belly laugh.

And I’m left staring at him, absolutely gobsmacked.

After another twentyminutes spent wandering around the grounds with Knox showing me his parent’s house, the four different barns, and the wedding gazebo, we start making our way back down the hill. My heartbeat is sluggish and I find myself pulling back on Dolly’s reins as the inn comes into view.

I’m not ready for this to end.

Knox guides his horse over to the fence, the muscles in his back flexing and pulling tightly beneath his shirt as he lowers himself from the saddle. He makes no effort to hide his smile as he approaches me and places those large hands around my waist. Once again, my heart rate picks up and my breath gets lodged in my throat. His dark, wavy hair sticks out from under his hat, his jaw is set as his bourbon eyes bore into

mine. His grip on my body tightens when I swing my leg over the saddle and climb down. I keep my eyes trained on Dolly in front of me as I try to regulate my breathing.

His head dips to the crook of my neck, and my eyelids flutter closed. His lips are a warm whisper against my skin. “You did good.”

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I melt into his strong body. For one second, I let myself imagine what it would be like to have someone like Knox have my back like this, both physically and emotionally. I let myself imagine a world where someone wants to be with me and I'm not emotionally closed off, but instead, I'm open to it and thriving in it. A world where people want to stay. As quick as the moment comes, I shut it down even faster. Because as nice as it sounds, it's not reality. People always leave. I'm aware of how cynical that sounds, but it's the truth. I'll never put myself in a position to rely on someone only for them to leave me.

I smile against the feel of him behind me. Not only his broad chest at my back and his powerful arms around my body, but the idea of him. It's almost painful tasting this little piece of cake that I know I'm going to refuse myself. I thought I could just flirt with him, treat him like a vacation fling, but imagining a world where we could be something more wasn't part of the plan. I need to pull back before I do something or feel something that I can't come back from.

I turn in his hands and his eyes search mine. Questioning.

"Where'd you go just now?" he asks, brushing away a strand of hair from my face. I feel a thick layer of emotion mixing in my throat. It's unbelievable how he's reading me and I have to fight like hell not to close my eyes, admit defeat, and drop my head into his hand.

"I've got to get back," I whisper. "I told Camila I'd call her and I want to check on your mom, I feel bad leaving the kitchen longer than I intended."

The crease between his brows is deep and I want nothing more than to run my thumb

over it, soothing the concern away, but I don't.

I step back and his lips purse slightly, but he dips his chin. I want to tell him that it's not him. I want him to know that this afternoon was perfect, and if I were anyone else, I would be throwing myself at him and the opportunity to spend more time with him. I open my mouth, but the only thing that could possibly be worse than saying nothing is saying, 'It's not you, it's me,' so I close my mouth and begrudgingly move past him.

He doesn't make it easy. He keeps his eyes on me, like he's waiting for me to change my mind. I don't. Instead, I drag my body back to the house like I'm moving through cement and choke down the unfamiliar desire I have to stay with him.

Knox

"I heard his bone went clean through his skin."

"Of course it did. You don't get a career-ending injury over a little bruise, eejet."

I dip my head into the circle of boys, right between a set of red-headed twins. "I heard he hates when we're supposed to be warming up, but we're standing around gossiping."

Four sets of wide eyes snap to me. Most with fear, the exception being one who's letting his excitement control him rather than his brain.

He tucks the ball under his arm, stepping through the circle.

"Hey, Coach! I'm Nolan, Number 8. This is Oscar, inside center." Oscar dips his head. "And Payton and Brody are second row," he says, pointing to the red-headed twins. "Is it true that you can squat three hundred kilograms?"

“It’s true that if you don’t start taking a lap of the pitch and warming up, I’ll have you finish this session with burpees.”

“How many?” Nolan smirks.

“A burpee per second you’ve wasted talking. So far, we’re at three minutes so... a hundred and eighty. Sound good?” The other three boys bolt out like track stars. Nolan continues to smile like he’s soaking something in but he drops his ball with a spin and takes off, running after his mates.

Liam

Did you give Coach a hard time?

Dax

His presence alone is difficult enough.

Liam

Coach must be a masochist to have had to ask KB.

Dax

Or desperate

Knox

Like either of you could do better? Out of the 3 of us, which one played professionally again?

Oh right. Me.

Liam

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You don't have to be a professional athlete to teach some kids how to maul. I've handed your ass to you more than enough times. BOTH of you.

Dax

Did you hear that? That was everyone who's ever played with you, laughing.

Liam

Dax

Alright lassies, are we hitting the bar tonight or what?

Liam

I forgot I gave Ava the night off so I have to work, but come anyway.

Dax

Last time I came to "hang out" while you were working, I ended up on barback duties.

Knox

I've got my first physical therapy in an hour. I'm calling it an early night.

Liam

You guys suck.

My chest shakes with a laugh, but I'm quickly distracted by a kid violently shoving his gear in his duffle bag.

"Berkley, right?" I call over to him, but he doesn't look my way. "Ronan," I try again, and I almost think he can't hear me, but I catch his eyes rolling. He picks up his phone, continuing to ignore me, and since practice is over, I let him.

"Fuck." His aggravated breath is not louder than a whisper, but it pulls my attention back to him.

"You good?"

He drops his head back, and just when I start to get annoyed, he shoves his phone into his bag.

"Fine." I want to pack my own shit and get out of his moody teenage presence, but I stay put, twisting my phone between my fingers.

"Anything I can help with?"

"No." He shoulders his bag without another look in my direction and stalks off.

"Lovely," I say to no one.

When I left my doctor's office yesterday, I drove home with the window down and with my arm out the window—a movement I hadn't realized I had taken for granted before. I had thought about nothing but getting that cast and sling removed for weeks, and yet when I drove home yesterday, I felt no different. There was no big monumental shift. I'd associated that cast with the reminder of why I couldn't play

anymore. Of everything that was gone. Now the cast was gone and everything else stayed the same.

I'm sitting in the waiting room of my physical therapist's office when my phone vibrates in my pocket, I pull it out, finding an e-mail from Coach Henderson. I drop my elbows to my knees as I open and read it.

Good news buddy, I've talked with the league and our managers and I'm happy to report that we've found a spot for you. Knox Browning the new Strength and Conditioning coaching assistant. I know it's been hard on you, mate, but this is always where you were going to end up, even if it happened a few years before we planned. Call me soon so we can work out the fine details and get a contract over to you. I hope your recovery has been going smoothly and that being home has given you the clarity and ability to focus on your healing. I can't wait to have you back mate.

-Henderson

I look around the empty waiting room before re-reading that last sentence a third time. As I'm waiting to be called into my first physical therapy session, I realize that at some point during the last few days, my rehabilitation has been the furthest thing from my mind.

"Browning?" a soft voice calls and I drag my head up. A woman in scrubs smiles where she stands with her clipboard. "We're going to head right down this way."

I follow her down the short hallway, going over Hendersons' email in my head. Strength and Conditioning Coach. He says it's where I would have ended up. like it's a given, but I've never thought any further than the moment I was in. My focus has always been one hundred percent on what's going to make me the best player right now. Lately, my focus has been split between my friends, my family, and now the

Sundevils. The one thing taking up most of my attention, though, is the girl in the corner room of the inn.

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I smile to myself, thinking about how she looked when she got up on that horse. If you put Taylor in a room with complete strangers, it would take them half a second to notice her beauty and only a handful more to realize how confident she is. I was almost certain there wasn't anything that she would hesitate over. When she got up on that saddle, she breathed a sigh of relief, and my chest swelled with pride. Pride is one of the most powerful emotions we can have, yet Taylor accomplishes things and feels relief instead.

"Can I have you roll your sleeve up?"

"Hmm?" I look at the doctor, sliding on her gloves.

"Your sleeve?" she asks, pointing to my shoulder.

"Oh, sorry." I roll up the fabric, showing off my thick scar and for the next twenty minutes, try to put some of my focus back on this recovery.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I exhale a deep breath through gritted teeth while Dr. Amy pulls my arm back like some kind of circ-de-Soleil act.

"Breathe."

Easy for her to say. She isn't having her muscles stretched for the first time in weeks.

"Alright, how does that feel?" she asks, setting my arm back down at my side.

“Like shit.” I rub my shoulder, which hurts worse now than it did when I got hit.

She smiles, her fingers massaging and prodding all the way from the clavicle to my scapula. I know my face is pinched, but I can’t help but laugh when I remember that this is the woman Liam has been hitting on. She’s fifty percent legs, fifty percent fiery red hair, and I’m one hundred percent certain she’s going to give him hell.

“Unfortunately, it will feel like that for some time.” She takes her gloves off and tosses them in the trash. “We’ll get a schedule worked out for you, but as always, the more consistent you are, the quicker your recovery will be.”

“Makes sense.” I absently rub at my arm.

“What’s the end goal?”

“Excuse me?”

She’s oblivious to the hollowness of my voice as she continues writing her notes.

“What are you working towards? It’s helpful to have a goal in mind. Are you planning on coaching?”

For the second time in an hour, my mind races with thoughts of Taylor before anything else. When I don’t answer, Dr. Amy looks up from her notepad, her brow raised.

I clear my throat. “Something like that.”

Taylor

“Dinner is served!” Isla announces as Ryder and I carry out platters of shepherd’s pie

potato skins. The aroma of the cooked vegetables and seasoned meat has had my mouth watering all afternoon.

I was on my way to a castle museum tour this morning when a loud crash sounded from the kitchen. I poked my head in to find an embarrassed Isla had dropped and shattered her coffee mug. After some light coercion, she agreed to let me help her prepare dinner with her this afternoon. In all honesty, I think I needed this afternoon more than she did. Being in the kitchen does something for me that I can't explain. It's like my own personal therapy session. It fills something in me, that I've never been able to feel anywhere else. That feeling started when I was younger and would spend time in the kitchen with Camila's mom, Elena. Being in the kitchen with Isla today brought me right back there.

"You've outdone yourself, honey. This smells incredible."

"Ay, thank you. But it was Taylor here who did all the work." Her hand rests against my arm and she leans her head towards me. Her soft lavender scent fills my lungs and my chest feels heavy.

"Ahhh, you ladies are the dream team then." James lifts his wine glass, nodding to me, and I fight through the odd sensation and smile.

"Sorry, I'm late." A young woman enters the room, out of breath. "I got held up at the shop."

"You're just in time, sit." Isla motions for her to take the empty seat to my left. She smiles at me, her short, sleek black bob swaying as she sits, waving and saying hello to everyone.

"Hi, I'm Sophie."

“Taylor,” I say, extending my hand to her.

“Ooo, solid grip.”

I look across the table to Liv, whose eyes stay trained on her plate in front of her, and I can only guess that it has less to do with how excited she is about her meal and more about the man with dirty-blond hair sitting next to her.

“Where’s Knox?” Sophie asks. I didn’t want to be the one to bring him up, but it’s not lost on me that out of everyone at the table tonight, the only person noticeably absent is the six-foot-four rugby player.

“I talked to him earlier,” Liam says, picking up his fork. “He said he had his first physical therapy session today. I figured he would be done by now, but maybe it ran late.”

“Or maybe he’s hitting on your girl.”

Laughter erupts around the table as Sophie lifts her glass to Liam, who glances at Oliva out of the corner of his eye. I uncomfortably shift around in my seat, avoiding the fire of jealousy that just sparked to life in my stomach.

The rest of dinner passes by with a few jabs between Sophie and Liam, many compliments on the food, and zero appearances from Knox.

I bring my plate into the kitchen where James stands at the sink, rolling up his sleeves.

“Taylor, you didn’t have to bring that in here.”

“It’s not a problem at all. I don’t mind helping.”

“You’ve helped enough today,” Isla says, taking my plate from me and handing it to her husband. “But as much as I enjoy your company darling, dishes are where I draw the line.”

Wrinkles form around her eyes and mouth when she smiles up to me. Every time she looks at me, I wonder if she sees the question in my eyes. How can she can look at me—someone she hardly knows—with so much affection and understanding? As if in answer, she dips her head slightly and even though her mouth doesn’t move, the squeeze she gives my hand says, I see you.

“What should I do with this?” Liv asks, lifting a covered plate.

“Leave that out. I’ll have someone bring it down to Knox.” Isla squeezes my hand once more before taking the plate from Liv.

“I can take it to him.” All three heads turn to me and I clear my throat. “I mean, since you won’t let me help with the dishes, at least let me do this,” I offer, holding my hands out.

“Thank you, my dear,” Isla says.

“Better you than me,” Liv says, handing me the plate as she exits the kitchen.

My knuckles tap against the green-painted wood of Knox’s front door three times.

No answer.

I almost turn to leave before remembering I’m not in the city anymore, and so I try the handle.

Success.

“Knox?” I call out from the cracked doorway. If his truck being packed out front didn’t indicate he was home, the stone fireplace crackling to my right would have been the tell. A dim light on the counter illuminates the kitchen and dining area and a soft glow beams from somewhere around the back corner. I should leave the plate on the counter and run my ass back up to the main house.

I don’t.

I set the plate down and creep around to the back door. I physically rear back when I spot a shirtless Knox, soaking in the hot tub built directly into his screened-in deck. Water drips from his dark hair, plopping down the ridges of his shoulders before rolling down his corded back.

He had his physical therapy today. He’s probably in pain and trying to relax and you’re Joe Goldberging him. Get a fucking grip.

“You gonna keep staring or are you gonna get in?” His booming voice startles me and I freeze.

“I wasn’t staring,” I lie.

“No?” He doesn’t look at me, but he sinks lower, dropping his head to the edge of the tub. “Just saving content for your spank bank then?”

“You wish.” I open my mouth to tell him about his food so I can leave but I bite my lip instead when he twists, looking over his shoulder at me.

“Get in, Nova.” His voice is like gravel and my feet move solely from the pull of his gaze alone. I stand on the other side of the hot tub and consider for the length of one

breath if I'm really going to do this. His chin dips once and that's all it takes before my hands are running along my bare legs, sliding my pants down.

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“Tough day?” I grip the hem of my sweatshirt, debating one last time if this is a terrible idea.

It is. It definitely is, but his gaze dips between my thighs and I feel the weight of them, heavy and burning as if he is already touching me there.

“Better now.”

My breath accelerates as I lift the sweater over my head and lower myself into the searing water. The night air is cold, a direct contrast to both the water and the warmth pooling between the apex of my thighs. My white T-shirt clings to my body like a second layer of skin and through the steam, I almost miss the way his jaw flexes when his eyes land on my nipples. I need to splash some water on the tension building, and fast.

“True or false?” I say, and his eyebrow quirks up. “You sing in the shower.”

“False.”

“Interesting.” I dip lower into the water until I’m covered up to my chin.

“True or false?” he asks, still sitting firmly on the opposite side of the hot tub. “You snore.”

Rude. I was trying to let him get off easy, but now that I know he’s going to play dirty. “True.”

He smirks at that and rises to his feet. Water slides down ridge after ridge of defined muscle. My gaze trails along the dark hair that starts below his belly button and continues down past his black shorts that cling to the lowest parts of his hips.

“True or false. You’ve had a crush on a cartoon character.”

“True.”

My mouth parts, and I spit out the water that seeped in. “Who?”

“I don’t think that’s how the game works,” he says, shaking his head.

I bring my attention back to his face, and his lips are turned upward because I’ve been caught staring.

“True or false? You’ve thought about me.” He wades through the space between us, and I narrow my eyes at him. I’m a lot of things, but I’m not a liar. He hovers above me and I tilt my head up to look at him rather than his thick adonis belt a mere inch from my face.

“True.” The way his lip quirks up makes me both hot and annoyed. “True or false? This is where you bring all the Stoney Meadow girls for a hookup.”

“False.” His substantial arms find the rim of the tub, resting on either side of me. “No one other than me—” He dips his head down to me. “And now you—have ever been out here.”

Between the pressure from the jet blowing into my back behind me and the heat from his eyes, I could combust at any moment.

“True or false?” He lowers his body back into the water in front of me, and his large

hand leaves the edge of the top and drops to my thigh. “You didn’t wear a bra because you know it drives me crazy.”

“False.” I wrap both of my legs around his waist. “I didn’t wear a bra because I don’t like them, driving you crazy just happens to be a nice benefit.”

A deep groan rumbles from the back of his throat as he pulls my body flush to his.

I reach for his gold chain but at the last minute, my middle finger trails over the thick red scar that stretches from his clavicle down his shoulder. “True or false? You want?—”

“True.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.” My armswrap around his broad shoulders, one of his roping around my lower back.

“If it has to do with you, I don’t need to know. The answer is true. Yes. Every time.” Aching pleasure floods my entire body, and I arch my breasts into him further. My nipples rub against his chest and my hips grind along the slabs of muscles down his stomach. My heavy breathing mixes with the steam from the tub, and his eyes are dark on me.

“I still think this is a bad idea,” I manage to whisper.

“Why?”

“Because I’m leaving.” The words coming out of my mouth completely negate the way my fingers dig into the hair at the back of his neck and the way my hips involuntarily rock back and forth on him. “Maybe we should make some rules.”

“I’m not big on rules.”

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“Honestly, me neither, but it might help.” I pause my movements enough to think.

“Alright then, love. What are your rules?” He dips his head, running his nose along my jawline and down my neck.

“What if we promise not to fall for each other? No feelings and we remain friends.”

“I’m not going to promise that.” My heartbeat thrums against my ribcage.

“Why not?”

“Because I can already tell how easy it would be to fall for you.”

My eyelids grow heavy and my chest heats as the warmth of his lips presses into my skin.

“And besides,” he murmurs against my neck. “There’s nothing friendly about the way I want to fuck you.”

The beat of my heart could probably be heard all the wayback up at the main house. My thoughts race a mile a minute as I stare into his eyes, frozen. I didn’t think getting into this hot tub with him half-naked would lead to a game of checkers. I knew what I was doing, but my body is begging me to do one thing, and yet my mind is pleading with me to pause.

The idea of catching feelings for someone, or getting attached to them, has never crossed my mind. I’ve always just assumed it was because I knew better. I wanted

nothing to do with it. I never thought twice about it. But looking at the man in front of me, my heartbeat tells me it might not have anything to do with how well I've combated these feelings before and everything to do with it not being the right person.

I watch my fingers trail along the long red strip running down his tan shoulder. I feel his eyes still on me. My tongue wets my bottom lip, and I pull the corner of it between my teeth, my gaze flicking up to his eyes. My breath stalls in my chest at the hunger in his eyes. This might be a mistake later, but right now...

A slow smile spreads across my face and I shrug.

"Fuck it."

The second the words leave my mouth, his large hands thrust into my hair, and his lips come crashing down onto mine. His mouth parts open, and mine follows. The heat from his tongue is warm, but the heat in my core is a burning fire. There's nothing gentle about his kiss. It's full of need as if he's been starved for this. He tugs lightly at the back of my head, and the gentle sting tingles all the way down to that weight that sits unbearably between my legs now. I shift slightly, looking for any bit of friction I can get. Soft tendrils of his hair slide through my fingers and we pull apart, our breathing shallow. His mouth descends along my jaw, past my ear, and down my neck. Pleasure floods through my entire body. My limbs are heavy even though I'm near floating.

His erection lifts under me, and a moan escapes me as I continue to shamelessly grind myself against the ridges of his stomach. I lower myself just enough so that the head of his cock sits right at my most sensitive spot, and I bear down, rubbing my clit over him.

"I bet you could get yourself off just like this, couldn't you?" Yes. Beads of sweat pool

at the nape of my neck, and my whimpering moans grow louder as I feel my orgasm building. “Show me, Nova. Show me how you make yourself cum.”

His lips settle on mine again, and my stomach dips when he pulls my bottom lip into his, giving it a light suck before nipping it. My hips buck harder in response, and I feel his smile beneath my lips.

“You like that, Nova?”

Fingers tangle in my hair again, and he tugs my head back, exposing my neck. His wet mouth sucks at the most sensitive part, and that’s all it takes. My thighs shake around his thick body, and my lungs struggle to take in any air as waves of pleasure begin rolling through me.

I haven’t yet caught my breath when his hands wrap around my waist and lift me out of the water. The backs of my thighs hit the heated wood as warm water drips down my body.

“Fuck,” he moans, eyes glued to my nipples that are so hard they might very well cut right through my shirt. The sight of him standing before me, possessively gripping the tops of my thighs, is too much. I run my fingers through the longer strands of wet hair on the top of his head, giving it a little tug, and his eyelids dip briefly.

“Knox—”

He releases his grip on my legs only to trail his knuckles up my thighs, leaving my skin to pebble beneath his touch. The backs of his fingers drag across my hips, and down my pussy stopping right at the top of my slit.

My head tips back, and my eyes close as a small moan escapes my lips. The wide pad of his thumb moves with a feather-light touch across my overly sensitive clit.

Instinctively, my back arches forward, and without missing a beat, his warm, wet mouth is wrapped tightly around my nipple. Through the cotton of my shirt, he sucks, flicks, and moans against me. I'm lightheaded as I press further into him and when he drops his hand from between my legs I nearly cry from the loss. His fingers dip between my hips and the fabric resting against them.

"Lift." His jaw is set tight, and his eyes follow when my lips part. I rest my hands on the wood floor behind me, propping myself up, and he makes quick work of sliding the black cotton underwear down my legs, discarding them over his shoulder.

I drag my hand down his chiseled chest to the top of his swim trunks and pinch the drawstring between my fingers. His hand covers my wrist, stopping me. "Not yet, Nova." I pull back and try to close my legs, but his massive size between me doesn't allow it. Flutters erupt in my stomach when he lowers himself back into the water, eyes never leaving mine. "I've watched you cum, now I want to taste you."

His mouth descends on me, pulling my clit into his mouth, and I can't tell which stars are real and which ones are the ones he's making me see.

"Oh, fuck, Knox!" The cool night air around us fades away, and I drop back on my elbows, squeezing my eyes shut, and whimpering as his tongue runs circles around me. His answering moan vibrates against me like he can't get enough and when his fingers dig into my hips, pulling me tighter to his face, I know he can't.

"Fucking hell, Taylor," he murmurs against me. His index and middle finger run down my slit, splitting my lips for him, and the exposure, the anticipation, and the throbbing pressure is all too much. He runs a flat tongue straight up my center, and my body squirms under him. His forearm wraps across my waist, the weight of his hand splaying across my stomach. My eyes open wide when he pulls my clit into his mouth, once again sucking with just the right amount of pressure.

“Oh my god.” I’m starting to get dizzy. My core hollows and flexes, and I gasp for air. My fingers tangle in his hair when I can’t take it anymore and I cry out, “Knox, I can’t.”

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“You have the sweetest little pussy.” His tongue rolls over licking and lapping me up. “Cum in my mouth, Taylor.” Lick, nip. “Now.” Suck, lick. “Fuck, I could cum just from the taste of you.” His lips hold tight around me, but his tongue moves over my swollen, throbbing clit in a perfect figure eight.

Only now when I drag my eyes down to him do I notice his corded shoulder muscles and the way his biceps are flexing. The water moves in silent waves beneath his arm and holy shit. The idea of him getting off from going down on me brings me all the way to the edge. My core and legs squeeze tightly, as the pressure shoots out, sending an overwhelming tingling sensation from the root of my hair to the tips of my toes and when a deep grunt pulls from him, vibrating through me—I soar over the ledge. White hot light coats my vision, and the moan that escapes me isn’t sweet or light.

My back rises and falls displacing the water that has spilled over around me. My body feels immovable and unbearably heavy as I lift to my elbows. Knox stands to his full height still between my legs. His hands cup the backs of my arms, and he helps pull me up the rest of the way before dropping his forehead on mine. Our heavy breathing mixes with the sweet smell of arousal, the steamy salty air, and Knox. My lungs expand as I pull in the deepest breath I can manage.

“Glad you finally decided to come by, love.”

I smile, shaking my head against him. “Just so you know, this was not my plan.”

“Me either.” He nips my bottom lip. “It was so much better.”

Knox towers over where I lean against the door to my room. His wet hair slicked back

under the hat he threw on before driving me back up here. “You didn’t have to walk me all the way to my door.”

“Yeah, I did.”

My post-sex rituals usually consist of a high-five, and a ‘see ya around,’ but not only do I not think that will fly with Knox, I can’t even bring myself to want to be so casual about it.

“Right well, thanks for the sweatshirt,” I say, twisting the oversized sleeves around my hands. “I’d say I’ll get it back to you tomorrow but that’s probably a lie.”

A smile tugs across his lips, and then they press into my forehead. My heart skips a beat as I lean into him slightly.

His deep voice rumbles against my skin when he says, “Keep it, I’ve got your underwear.”

Knox

“Up, up, up. Nice. Rack it.” Nolan steps out from under his barbell, flicking his belt buckle with one hand. “Was that a new PR?”

“By four and a half kilos.” He drops his ear to his shoulder with a ‘no-big-deal’ type of smile, but inside I know he’s beaming.

“Hell yeah, buddy.” I lift my hand for a high-five and his closed-lip smile spreads into an all-out grin. “Mega job, mate.”

His hand smacks into mine, transferring a spark of pride through my veins.

This team has put in an incredible amount of work over the last week. I don't know what I was expecting when I decided to work with a bunch of teenagers, but they've far exceeded my expectations. They talk a lot between sets, or while warming up, but it reminds me that they all have lives outside of this weight room. I've given up everything over the years to make sure that all my goals were met when it comes to this sport. Oftentimes, I felt like I was sacrificing more than others around me at best and more than was necessary at worst. Their goals will likely change over the years, especially if any of them choose to go pro, but for right now, they're already in a better spot than I was.

Ronan Berkley works tirelessly on his sets in the corner. Out of everyone on this team, he reminds me most of myself. I like to think I was a little more fun and a little less doom and gloom, but his focus is borderline psychotic. Just like me.

He hasn't said a word to me since that first practice, and the only time I've spoken to him is when I'm shouting drills or plays at him. I was starting to think it was a personal problem he had against me, but he seems more pissed off than usual today and I haven't said shit to him.

I sit on the bench across from where he's working on a heavy set of deadlifts. He lets the barbell drop with an echoing thud and even though I know he can see me, he doesn't acknowledge me.

"You good?"

He points to his headphones shaking his head. Little shit.

"I said, are you good?" I enunciate my words and shout a little louder than necessary.

"Sorry mate, can't hear you."

My jaw clenches but I can't even get mad. I have a feeling I was just as annoying at his age. I give him a tight smile and a mock salute and leave him to do his work in peace.

"Don't feel bad Coach, he doesn't talk to anyone."

"He talks to Riley," Brody pipes up from the bench.

"Barely," Nolan huffs. "That's why she's always so pissed at him."

"Who's Riley?" I ask.

“His girlfriend.”

“Probably not for much longer.” Nolan shakes his head. “The guy doesn’t do anything but play rugby and train. We alluded to be best mates but he never hangs out anymore, he’s too busy training,” he says the last word with finger quotes. “Even when we’re not at practice.”

Yup. Just like me.

The Saloon is already halffull when I walk in at six p.m. but I find an open seat at the bar and order a drink from someone I haven’t met before because my best mate is down at the other end flirting with my physical therapist. He pushes off the bar when he notices me and wiggles his pierced eyebrow as he makes his way over.

“I’m guessing by your expression, you conned her into thinking you're not the worst?”

“Ha ha,” he fake laughs while flipping me his middle finger. “She’s my date for the wedding.”

“Bold move.” I lift my pint to him.

“At least I have a date.” Out of the corner of my eye, strands of golden silk float in the breeze and I glance out the window just in time to find Taylor walking by the bar. She stops on the sidewalk when she notices me, quirks a brow, and then pulls open the door.

“Funny enough, mine just walked in.”

Heads turn and eyes appreciate Taylor as she makes her way through the bar, but her eyes are only on me.

“Is this seat taken?” She smiles, laying down a garment bag.

“The third member of our boy band was supposed to meet us, but he’s always late so hop on up, Tater Tot.” Liam pats the bar top next to me and Taylor laughs, sliding onto the stool.

I shouldn’t feel so possessive over a laugh but I find myself clenching the neck of my bottle a little too tightly at the idea of Liam getting to enjoy it the way I do.

“Nice to see you again, Liam.”

“No, no.” He grins, taking her hand in his and kissing the top of it. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“Alright Romeo, relax.” I shove his chest and he heads back down the bar, leaving a trail of laughter behind. I try to roll my eyes, attempting to play it off but the sight of his lips on her skin pulls at my gut.

“I almost didn’t recognize you without all your fans crowding you,” Taylor says, waving a perfectly polished hand around us. I force a smile, spinning my beer bottle between my fingers. Condensation drips down the glass, pooling on the bar and I absently draw in the liquid. “What’s up?”

I turn my attention back to Taylor, and her eyes bounce back and forth between mine. I pull my hat off, run my fingers through my hair, and exhale a tired breath before setting it back down. “Nothing. It’s just weird sometimes.”

“The fan fair?” she asks while reaching over and grabbing my drink.

“When I left, I never thought twice about coming back, or what it would be like. And now that I am?—”

“Everyone treats you like you’re on this pedestal.” I clear my throat, not trusting my voice, and instead offer a nod. “As they should, Browning! You scored a record-breaking fifteen tries in your last World Cup and led your team to three back-to-back World Championships. That’s never been done before, of course, people are proud of you.”

She drops one hand to my shoulder and waves the other one around with an open palm.

“You’ve been Googling me, Nova girl?” She rolls hereyes, drops her hand, and grabs my beer. The rim of the bottle sits on her plump bottom lip as she takes a long pull.

“So, what’s the problem? You went off and had an incredible career and now you’re back, and your town has a champion amongst them.”

“The thing is, they’ve all stayed, and they are not just going through the motions but they’re growing—thriving, even.” I had tunnel vision for the goals I wanted. The entire time I was gone I never had a serious relationship, or developed deep friendships. I didn’t have anything outside of training. I always thought once I reached my goals, once I hit the level I wanted to hit, those things would always be there. The problem was that there were always higher goals to hit once I achieved something I had aimed for. Then I’d spend time working on reaching those new goals, and then even more time passed. No one was waiting around. Everyone else was living their lives while I gave up everything for a sport that I hadn’t realized may not be around forever. “And now I’m back after a career-ending injury, and what do I have to show for myself? They might see me as this all-star now, but when the

novelty wears off, they'll see me for what I am.”

“And what do you think that is?”

“Nothing.” I look at her now, the corners of her lips turned down and I can't believe I said that out loud. I try to shrug it off but her hand finds my thigh in a tight squeeze.

“Knox, that's not?—”

“Never mind.” I shake my head, not wanting to be this damper around her. Taylor is sexy and fun, and she's here on vacation. She doesn't deserve to have to sit through my bullshit. She's here for an adventure and a good time. That's something I can deliver for her. “What'd you pick out for me?”

I wiggle my eyebrows, jerking my chin to the blackplastic bag draped behind her. She eyes me cautiously as if she's trying to decide whether to let the conversation go or not. I reach forward to tuck a stray hair behind her ear, rolling the end of it between my fingers, and the distraction works. Her chest rises higher and her mouth parts. “What do you got, Nova?”

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“It’s not for you, so don’t worry about it,” she whispers.

“Why do you keep trying to lie to us both?” She ignores me, pulling back and looking down the bar. “True or False? It’s a dress.”

She slowly faces me, her eyebrow quirking up with the corner of her lips, likely recalling where this game ended the other night.

“True.” I lift my drink to my mouth where the faintest trace of her lips are left around the rim and I welcome it, letting the taste drift through me.

“For the wedding?” I ask, handing the bottle back to her.

“Mmm.” The column of her throat moves up and down and I have to drag my palm down my face, letting my jaw hang open. “You going with me?”

“Like a date?”

“I’m glad you’ve finally agreed.”

“That wasn’t me agreeing.” She shakes her head with a taunting smile. “I was asking.”

I grip the seat of her stool and her lips part when I drag the metal legs across the floor, close enough that she’s practically in my lap.

“Yeah, Nova. Like a date.” Her head tilts to the side and her finger taps her pursed

lips. “Keep it up, love, and I’m gonna bite that little finger.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?” she taunts.

“It could be a promise, would you prefer that?”

She sucks in her cheeks, hiding that perfect smile from me, her eyes narrowing into tiny slits.

“I prefer to go to weddings solo,” she says, hopping from her stool and grabbing her bag. The hairs on my neck stand straight up when she presses her cheek to mine, her breath a warm whisper in my ear. “You never know who you might run into.”

I swear a growl rumbles from the back of my throat but simmers when the lightest touch of her lips graze the shell of my ear.

“And, true. I do like a little biting.”

I close my eyes, inhaling her scent and when I open them again she’s halfway to the door.

Taylor

I pull my fourth spade card from the deck, discard a Queen of Hearts, and look around the common room. Ryder, Liv, Mr. and Mrs. Browning, Christina—the mom from Italy, and one of her sons are all huddled around the coffee table as we play a game of twenty-five.

“Aw, yes! That's what I needed. Thank you, Tay.” Ryder snatches the card from the pile at the center of the table blowing a kiss in my direction. Liv rolls her eyes, getting defeated but I laugh him off.

“Come on now, Ryder. Give me what I need,” Christina’s thick Italian accent calls out.

Ryder looks over his cards methodically before laying down a two of clubs, and Christina swipes it with a smile. Everyone oohs and ahhs, wondering what it means for the game. The chatter in the room continues but my head goes silent when Knox enters through the front door. His dark eyes find mine, and we stay locked in with each other. I didn’t want to admit to myself that I had been waiting for him all throughout dinner again tonight, especially since I thought it best to try and put some distance between us. After he surprised me with that horse ride, I surprised myself by feeling something other than physical attraction. I thought we could benefit from a little time apart. But one night in a hot tub later and that obviously didn’t happen. I find myself now more confused than ever.

Knox dips his head in hello before moving to sit in the chair behind me. The heat from his legs engulfs my entire body from behind until he spreads them so they rest on either side of me.

“Your move, Isla,” Ryder taunts his mom. She sits on the couch across from me, bundled in a black long-sleeve shirt and black pants with—what I’m assuming is a homemade—knitted cardigan over top. She studies her cards with an intensity that seems so unlike her but I find myself smiling anyway. There’s a dense weight in my chest and my neck heats as I battle the overwhelming feeling of family in this room and my interest in the man behind me. The more time I spend with these people, the more I enjoy them. And worse than that, worse than anything, I find myself hoping they feel the same about me. It’s starting to feel like too much.

I go still when Knox’s hands rest on my shoulders. “What do you got, love?”

“I uh—” I clear my throat, looking around as Knox’s hands slide up and down my shoulders. Everyone is either too focused on their cards or focused on trying to

read—or ridicule—the other players. Either way, no one notices the way my body erupts in flames under his touch and whispered words. I pick up a card from the deck pulling up my fifth spade. “Twenty-five,” I whisper as I lay my hand down.

“Son of a—” Ryder slams his fist down on the table.

“No, I was so close!” Christina whines.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Alan smirks and Knox’s grip on my shoulder tightens. “You sure this was your first time, darling?” he asks, pointing a finger at me.

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“Beginners luck?” I shrug with my hands up.

Isla goes to get another bottle of wine while everyone continues laughing and enjoying themselves.

“Taylor just won her first game of twenty-five. You should get her some of the poitín, Ma!” Ryder calls out.

I drop my head back on my shoulders looking back at Knox. “What’s that?”

“It’s a bad headache in the morning.”

I grimace. “Well, thank you for the offer but I think I’m going to retire on a high and head on up.”

I can feel the heads turn in my direction but I ignore them as I make my way to the stairs. As soon as my feet reach the second step, Knox’s hand catches my elbow.

“Taylor—” I pause on the step, turning slowly to face him. “Everything alright?”

I have unfamiliar feelings for you and I more than enjoy your family. Even worse, I want you and them to reciprocate those feelings. ‘Okay’ somehow doesn’t feel like the correct word for how I feel but I offer him a tight smile and nod my head.

“Big day tomorrow, I’m just ready to get some sleep.”

He studies my face, and I don’t dare try to swallow under his scrutiny. Finally, he

dips his chin and leans in, placing a gentle kiss on my temple. My eyes flutter closed and my heartbeat matches. It's a fairly modest gesture, especially compared to where we ended up the other night, but something about it has my stomach flipping and my mind wandering.

"Good night, Nova."

I stand, frozen, watching his oversized figure until he rounds the corner back to the living room and I exhale the breath I had been holding in and head up to my little corner room.

I drop my head back as I lean against my bedroom door, taking a moment. I'm startled by the vibration from my back pocket against the wooden door. I pull my phone out and smile at the picture on the screen.

"Jo-Bro," I answer by way of greeting.

"Annie Oakley baby, what's good?" I smile at the nickname and the familiarity and comfort that comes from hearing his voice. When I found a friend in Jonas no one believed we could keep things platonic. I don't blame them, he's handsome as hell, but I wasn't looking for anything and neither was he. "You there?"

"Sorry," I say, shaking my head. "Yeah, I'm here. How are you?"

"Good. Except I have to go to another fundraiser this weekend and I don't have a date. Any chance you want to come home early?"

"Since when have you ever brought a date to one of those things? You always say 'Go in alone, have your pick who to bone.'"

"Maybe I'm maturing." I laugh, pushing myself off the door frame and flopping

down on my unmade bed. “Okay, that’s a lie, I’m probably not. I’m just bored of cruising for chicks by myself these days.”

“Cruising for chicks? What are you, eighty?”

“Enough about me. How’s Ireland?”

“It’s—”

“Hot?” he interrupts me.

“No... it’s actually pretty chilly most of the time.”

“Sweltering?”

“Dude, are you okay?” I ask, confused.

“Scorching, fiery, ripped?” I close my eyes as understanding dawns on me.

“She told you?!” I yell into the phone before getting up and putting it on speaker.

Jonas’s answering laugh has me rolling my eyes. “Technically, no, she was talking to Miles about it in his office and I overheard.”

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“Unbelievable.”

“So, tell me about him.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“There’s always something to tell with you.” I can hear the smile in his voice as I move to the bathroom. “Is he hot?”

Hot sounds like an insult compared to what he is.

“No. He’s a short old man.”

“Liar.” Thank god we’re not on FaceTime with the way my lips are betraying me right now. “Why are you being so defensive if it’s supposedly nothing?”

“I’m not defensive Jonas, there just really isn’t anything to say. I’m here for two more weeks, it’s not like a relationship could even go anywhere.” Silence greets me on the other line and I pull the phone back, making sure we didn’t get disconnected.

“Hello?”

“Holy shit.”

“What?”

“You like him.”

“What?” I rip the shower curtain back roughly.

“I never said anything about a relationship, Blondie.” I scold my phone as if he can see because I hate that I let that word slip from my mouth.

“I didn’t meanrelationshiprelationship. I just meant—relationship. You know.” I wave a hand around me before turning the water on.

“So, you friend-zoned him like you did me?”

“You and I friend-zoned each other,” I retort.

“Keep telling yourself that, babe.” I ignore him, dropping a shower bomb that I picked up at the market to the far corner of the tub. “Hey, can you take a picture of him? I want to see what this guy has that I don’t.”

“You’re so annoying.” I shake my head. “I have to go, my shower is ready.”

“Okay, but wait, did you know that it’s okay if you... stay with me here because this is kind of crazy, but itisokay if you like the guy.”

Like him. Like the way he doesn’t laugh when I make up excuses and instead studies my face, searching for the truth. Like the way I said I wanted to ride a horse so he got me one. Like the way my mask unconsciously slips around him. Like the way he’s constantly finding a way to spend time with me. And like the way that he’s the first person I’ve ever shared hidden parts of myself with.

I stand against the vanity, arms crossed with my leg bouncing beneath me. “What if...” I trail off, chewing my bottom lip.

“Blondie?” His voice is soft and I squeeze my eyes shut, forcing the tears back in.

“What if I like him too much?” I hear my own voice crack and I turn around, my reflection in the mirror blurring behind a wall of unshed tears.

“Then isn’t he the luckiest son of a bitch?” I laugh and the movement breaks the damn of tears, but I bat them away before they can slide halfway down my face. “Give it a try, babe. Be brave.”

Be brave. “Easy for you to say. What if it doesn’t work out? What if some magical turn of the universe happens and I actually have real feelings for him? What if it all goes to shit?” I drop my head back on my shoulders, shocked that I spoke that fear out loud.

“Listen, I can’t tell you if it will or won’t work out. But what I can tell you, is if you think you’ve found someone worthy of dropping that iron armor for, I think it’s worth the risk.”

I blame the steam-filled room for having a difficult time getting air into my lungs. I squeeze my eyes shut once more before settling my breath and wiping away the last of my tears. “You know what, I’m probably jumping the gun here anyway. He knows I’m leaving. He’s likely not even thinking past tomorrow anyway.”

“Taylor Grace Nova, I can promise you, he’s thinking about it.”

Taylor

Soft, white powder flows from where I tap the sifter, covering a layer of cake in sugar.

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“Did your mom teach you how to bake?”

“My best friend’s mom, actually.”

“How nice.” Isla watches me from where she works beside me, flouring the countertops.

“You’ve been running this kitchen for a while now?”

“Since I met Adam.” Her eyes take on a daydreaming look. “His gran ran the kitchen since they built the place, and I worked here with her every day after school when Adam and I started dating.” The sense of family around the entire property is palpable. I hate that more and more, I find myself forgetting that I’m not actually from here, that I’m not really part of this family, the way they so easily make me believe I am. “I’ve made the place my own over the years, adding a bookshelf and changing some paint here and there. My kid’s artwork,” she adds pointing to drawings tucked into the windows of a hutch in the corner. “And my hope is each new generation will continue to add their own personal touch along the way.”

My chest swells and aches. Vivid memories crash into me, and clear as day I see my eight-year-old self, two dirty blonde braids hanging down my back, and Mrs. Sanchez pulling up a stool beside her at the counter. Visions of assembling sandwiches and learning how to dice an onion come flooding back and I have to fight back against the wave of nostalgia that burns my throat now.

“I’ve noticed Liv in here with you often. It’s nice that you get to share this with her,” I say, moving closer to help her roll out her cookie dough.

“It is. But it’s not her passion and as crazy as it sounds—because I love my children dearly.” She gives me a pointed look over the rim of her glasses. “I hope she won’t stay around much longer.”

My head tilts as one eyebrow peaks. “I can understand not wanting Knox in here.” We share a smile. “But why Liv?”

Isla’s shaky hand slides a basket of cookie cutters in front of me. “My Olivia just doesn’t have the heart for it. She hangs around because I need the help,” she says, holding up her swollen hands. “Some days are better than others, weather depending, and I’ve got the fancy gadgets to help, but there are still times I need help.” I listen intently to her every word as I continue to cut out flower-shaped cookies. “I’m grateful to have her around to help now, but she’s not a little girl anymore, and soon, I’ll need to start looking to hire someone to take over the kitchen for me. She doesn’t have the same passion I’ve always had in here, and I would never want my children doing something that they aren’t a hundred percent passionate about.”

I keep my eyes laser-focused on the task in front of me for fear of what will happen if I look at her. I don’t know what it’s like to have a mother like Isla, a woman who loves you so fiercely and unconditionally that she would always put your needs, wants, and desires before her own. But I do know what it’s like to be in the kitchen with someone like her. I fight the burning in my eyes unaware of how badly I needed this. I had forgotten how much I missed this feeling. Being in the kitchen with Mrs. Sanchez, as young as when I was missing my two front teeth, had always been my safe space. As I grew older, the kitchen was the place that gave me my peace and calm, my sense of belonging. In there, I was okay. I could get lost in creation and forget the worries and fears that I spent my days masking. Those memories with Mrs. Sanchez, and now of helping Isla in any way I can, are what fill me with the most purpose. I reroll a scrap of dough that I messed up and blink back the emotion trying to slip through my waterline.

“It shows.” My voice betrays me, cracking ever so slightly and I clear my throat before pressing the cookie cutter into the dough again. “I mean, look at Knox. You clearly encouraged him to do what he wanted, and he was incredibly successful.”

“Well, Knox is a different kind of animal. Nothing short of a cruise ship could have stopped that boy.” I choke on a laugh and finally bring myself to look at her. The warmth of her eyes matches her smile when she talks about him. “I’ll admit, I was worried about him after his injury. Before he left he was always the friendly, big, loud, guy. The life of any party. If at times a bit obnoxious.” She rolls her eyes with a playful smile. “But when he came home—he was a shell of himself. He seemed so lost, and I feared his entire identity was wrapped up in that sport.” She shakes her head as if releasing a memory. “Even though we were, and still are, so proud of him, he is so much more than rugby. But I know my son, and he wouldn’t hear any of that.”

I think about how he shut down the other day in the bar after—potentially accidentally—telling me he felt like ‘nothing’ and she’s right. I don’t see Knox as the type you could just sprinkle some nice words at and he takes them and believes them. But I’ve also seen that big, fun, playful guy she seems to remember.

“You said you were worried.” I drop the cookie cutters in the sink and lean my hip against the counter. “Are you not anymore?”

She moves closer to me and covers my hand with her own. She gives the world’s lightest squeeze, a stark contrast to her deep eyes when she smiles at me and says, “He seems to be finding his way back to himself.”

I don’t want to pull my hand out from under hers, but the burning sensation behind my eyes is threatening to break free. I bite my cheek, keeping my gaze locked on where our hands meet.

“You’re a wonderful mom, Isla.”

She lets go of my hand and my chest skips a beat when she quickly wraps me into a hug. I stand stiff for a moment before I wrap my arms around her, being careful not to squeeze her too tightly. Her clean scent, mixed with a hint of rosemary and light coffee beans, makes it difficult to swallow. There is something so overwhelming about a mother's hug. Even though she isn't my own mom, it still makes me feel wanted. I pull in a deep breath, trying to hold on to this moment just a second longer. One lone tear slips down my cheek and I quickly bat it away before pulling back.

"And you're just wonderful, Taylor." I swallow hard before Olivia bounces into the kitchen.

"Hey! I wanted to see if you want to get ready together?"

Her mom rubs my arm before stepping back. "Go on, I've got the rest of this."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes. Go, we'll see you down there later."

I give her an appreciative nod before heading upstairs.

"My brother is going to fall over dead when he sees you." I roll my shoulders back and puff my chest a little higher at Olivia's words. The body-hugging, floor-length, emerald green, strappy dress I found the other day in a neighboring town seemed more fitting for an award show than a small-town wedding, but it was either this or my sweatpants, so what was a girl to do? "Ugh." Liv runs a hand down her perfectly pressed, baby pink, silk dress. As far as bridesmaid dresses go, it's one of the most beautiful ones I've ever seen. "I wish I looked like you."

I stop midway down the stairs, grabbing her arm. "Olivia Talullah Browning." Her head physically rears back. "Was I way off?"

“It’s Nora,” she says, with a small giggle.

“Right. Olivia Nora Browning, you are stunning.” I grab both her shoulders, forcing her to look at me. “Always remember that beauty is subjective and it’s about learning to feel like your best self. Once you master that, you’ll have so much confidence, that you’ll have to start selling it at the local farmers’ market because nothing is sexier than a person with confidence.”

Her eyes light up as her smile and chin lift and I give her a curt nod.

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We exit the main house and Liv leads us to one of the barns out back. Warm lighting reflects from the vintage wall sconces lining either side of the walls, while fold-out wooden chairs are placed in rows with purple and pink peonies adorning the ends. Past the altar, the back of the barn wall has been replaced with one massive glass window. When I see the rolling green hills with the sun beginning to set in the valley of the two largest peaks, I understand the design choice.

I feel Liv stiffen next to me and follow her gaze over to where Liam leans against the barn door talking to a tall woman with Little Mermaid hair.

“What’s he doing here?” I lift my chin in his direction, and she rolls her eyes as she faces me, turning her back to where he stands.

“He’s friends with Sophie. They all went to primary school together, and Liam booked Max’s band at The Saloon. That’s how he and Sophie met.” She looks back at Liam and scoffs.

“You don’t seem happy to see him.”

“Well, he’s a bit of a gowl.” I twist my head, looking at her. “Annoying,” she clarifies.

“Ahh.” As if Liam can sense us talking about him he does a quick look over his shoulder and then a double take. His lips move in hushed words with the woman before she nods and walks off. It’s amazing Liv doesn’t burst into flames next to me with how hard his burning gaze is on her. He saunters over with one hand in his suit pocket, the other pressing down his tie.

“Olivia Browning, you look...” His blue eyes widen as he tracks them up and down her body with zero shame and he lets out a low whistle.

I cover my giggle with the backs of my fingers and he holds out his hands for her. She ignores his gesture and looks at me.

“I have to go help my dad start ushering people to their seats. Will you be alright for a bit?”

“I’ll—” I freeze when a familiar warmth trickles up my neck, lifting every hair in its wake. I nod my head more times than necessary before I recover. “Yeah, I’ll be good.”

I flick my hands in her direction, shooing them away. Olivia begrudgingly loops her arm through Liam’s elbow, and they take off.

I steady my breathing before turning around, but it doesn’t do shit when I spot Knox standing across the barn in his immaculate black tux, tailored perfectly to his sculpted body. His eyes bore into mine and all the breath is knocked out of my lungs.

My ankles feel weak with every step I take, but I have a feeling it has everything to do with the man a few feet ahead of me and less to do with the four-inch heels. I walk across the room, but the closer I get to him, the farther I feel from reality. My chest thrums like an angry drum, beating harder and harder, my skin heats and it takes maximum effort to make myself appear nonchalant.

“Well, fancy running into you here,” he says with his signature cocky smile.

“You clean up nice, Browning.”

“I was going to say something way more inappropriate.” His head dips until his

forehead hovers just above mine. “But, back at ‘ya, Nova.”

My eyelids close on a flutter, and his lips press to the side of my head, stealing my breath once again. My whole body aches to close the six inches of space between us, and his scent washes over me. Immediately, I’m transported back to that hot tub with him, and I’m lit up from within as the feeling of his warmth consumes me.

“Let’s get you to your seat.” His rough hand engulfs mine, and he leads the way.

The ceremony was surprisingly emotional, considering that I didn’t know Max, and I had only met Sophie briefly a few nights ago. The officiant spoke some words about how marriage isn’t just finding the person you want to spend the rest of your life with, but rather, it’s about finding the person you can’t spend a moment of your life without. I nervously picked an invisible hair from my dress and tried to tune out any other words that would make my throat burn, but the rough calluses on Knox’s palm slid over my fidgeting fingers, and I straightened in my seat, eyes forward. When the groom took her hand in his and vowed to always be more than just a lover, but a true confidant and a companion through life with her, ‘Whether here in this town or together on tour,’ he had said before promising to stand beside her and love her anywhere—that was possibly the only sentiment that could have choked me up the way it did.

I lost Knox in the shuffle over to the barn next door where the reception is being held, and as I watch everyone on the dance floor, I have a hard time figuring out how this town closes at 7:00 with the way most of these people are partying.

“Fancy a drink, Sweetheart?”

A tall, muscular man with tattoos covering every square inch of visible skin, smiles down at me with bright, white teeth. “Shameful, the most beautiful woman in the room is sitting over here by herself.” His accent is so thick, I have to replay the words

over a few times before fully understanding him. “What’s your name, beautiful?” he asks, extending a full glass of champagne to me. I eye him up and down, he’s tall and almost as muscular as Knox. What the actual hell is in the water here? I open my mouth, and his black-inked forearm snakes around the back of my chair as he sits across from me.

“That’s Tatertot, and don’t look at her again, Knox already claimed her.” Liam approaches, flashing his own white smile and digging a hand into the stranger's shoulder.

“Now, now Liam, Knox hasn’t peed on me yet.” My southern bell accent is rusty but it will suffice. “Let’s see what this one’s got.” I tilt my head, batting my lashes at the tattooed giant.

He looks back and forth between me and Liam a few times before dropping his head with a defeated sigh and standing again. “It was nice to meet you, but hey, when KB fucks it up, you call me first.” His thumb and pinky make a phone to his ear as he points at me walking backward. I thankfully don’t have to explain that there’s nothing to fuck up between us. We’re just...what? Friends? Friends who flirt and apparently hook up? I throw back the flute of champagne, praying the bubbles will settle the unknown that's rapidly fluttering through my stomach.

The boys take off to the dance floor where the entire room surrounds them. A hundred people, young, old, and in between, are magnetized by their infectious energy, including a reluctant Liv. I can’t tell if she’s only lying to me or trying to lie to herself, but I don’t miss the way she and Liam steal sneaky glances at one another. I make a mental note to check in with her later.

A familiar calloused hand rubs across my bare back and the lightness in my head has nothing to do with the champagne. Long, thick fingers clasp around the nape of my neck and the pit of my stomach ruptures as my body physically responds to the

warmth of the man behind me. I drop my head back onto his corded forearm and I'm barely able to suppress a moan as I take in the man looking down at me.

“Let's dance, Nova.”

The opening notes of Feels Like Home by Chantel Kreviazuk fill the barn as Knox pulls my body flush against his. There's a lightness in my chest where the rest of my body is vibrating. I've never felt more excited while simultaneously feeling so safe than I do wrapped up in these arms. I don't want to even consider the possibilities of what that means.

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“It was a nice ceremony,” I say, against his chest.

“Was it?”

My lips twitch. “You were there.”

“I couldn’t pay attention to anything except you.” If his arms weren’t wrapped around me like a vice, I’m not sure I would trust myself enough to stay standing. I don’t dare lift my head and show off the bright red tinge I know my pale face is showing. “This dress is really doing something to me, Nova.”

Knox has made it abundantly clear that he’s going to flirt with me. He’s not shy about anything—I wish I could say I hate that, but unfortunately, it only makes me more drawn to him. I only wonder if he’s so open and okay with this because he knows I’m leaving.

“I knew it would but I didn’t expect it to have the same effect on your buddy.” I throw my thumb over my shoulder and Knox’s eyes follow.

“Who?” Is his jaw flexing?

“I’m not sure what his name was. He was nice, though. Harmless.” I slide my hand back in his and resume our dance.

“Did you tell him you were my date?”

“I told him we were friends,” I lie, hoping he’ll confirm or clarify what he thinks we

are.

I immediately regret it, though, when he pulls back slightly. It's like watching a storm cloud roll in over a perfect autumn morning, the way his usual caramel-colored eyes darken.

"Come with me."

Knox

Friends. I've never hated the way a word sounded so much. I'm not oblivious to the fact that Taylor has some sort of apprehension about getting close to people. That night in my hot tub, when she tried to make some bullshit rules between us, I told her there wasn't a chance in hell that I could keep this strictly friendly, and I thought what happened next was her agreeing. But no matter how perfect the dip in her waist felt beneath my palms out on that dance floor, I couldn't ignore the way the word friends left a sour fucking taste in my mouth.

The night air is cool now that the sun has set, and hundreds of moths warm themselves in the hanging lights stretching across the field. I lift the metal latch of the storage barn before ushering her inside and shutting the door behind me. I flip the switch, turning on the one lone hanging light in the middle of the barn.

"What are we doing here?" she asks, looking around. It's the second of two storage spaces, so it's fairly empty save for some shelves filled with containers in the back and a metal peg wall with various tools and ropes. A pommel bench sits in the middle of the room, and my cock grows heavy in my suit with images of her bent over it. I grab the single metal chair from the corner, dragging it across the concrete floor. Taylor's shoulders lift, and her face pinches. The sound is grating, no doubt, but it doesn't sound anywhere near as bad as friends.

The cool bite of the metal chair bleeds through my pants as soon as I sit, but it's quickly replaced by the warmth of Taylor's pussy when I pull her down into my lap. She drapes an arm over my shoulder, her hand cupping the back of my neck, and her eyes never leave mine. I watch how the shadows from the dim lighting play behind her, illuminating the swell of her breasts and her plump lips.

"Knox." Her breathy voice is both a question and a plea. I brush a strand of her hair behind her shoulder, bringing my mouth to her neck, and a fluttering response knocks against my lips.

"We're going to see if we can do something about that filthy little mouth of yours." I kiss her neck softly, and then, in one fluid motion, I flip her over my lap, causing a surprised throaty yelp to escape her. I drag my knuckles down her spine, and my cock responds to the way she shudders beneath the touch. "So here's what we're going to do, love. Be a good girl, and you'll be rewarded." I ruck her dress and let the velvety fabric slide excruciatingly slowly up her legs. "Continue to say that stupid shit, and you'll be punished."

"Punished how?" I know the blood must be rushing her head at this point, but it doesn't stop the desire in her voice. My fingers tighten around the green fabric as I pull it further up, baring her perfect ass and the dainty butterfly tattoo that rests on her lower back. I gently trace the wings with my thumb and then lower my hand, dragging it down until I get a full handful of her soft skin.

"No underwear?"

"In this dress?"

The corners of my lips pull up in amusement as I pull my hand back.

Crack. "Ahhh! Fuck!" Her back arches as she screams out.

Her skin is warm as I run my palm over the perfect red handprint, soothing her once before I pull back and slap down on her ass again. Her mouth opens around the side of my calf as she bites down, attempting to cover her scream. An electric current pulses through me like nothing I've ever felt before. Her legs cross behind her, and her muscles flex in rhythm with her breathing.

Her wet heat is a beacon, summoning me, and my finger trails down her backside. My jaw is one deep inhale away from cracking when the pad of my middle finger grazes her dripping wet center. Her hips buck back, but I grind down on my teeth just a little harder, finding the strength to pull away. When she moans in frustration, I bring the full force of my hand down with a sickening smack.

“Goddamnit!” She smacks the side of my leg and I lick my bottom lip, knowing it's driving her crazy. I've been outright about how I want her for weeks. And I thought we had obliterated this game we'd been playing, this tip-toeing around what we really want bullshit but apparently, she still needs some convincing that we're more than just friends. I soothe the round globes of her ass that are now flaming red, and run the heel of my hand down her slit, pressing firmly into her clit. A needy little moan escapes her as she wriggles against my palm. I twist my hand once, twice, and pull away.

“Okay!” she screams.

My pulse slows and I yank her body until she's upright again. Her long blonde hair which only an hour ago laid perfectly smooth and straight down her back, is now in disarray. Her light freckles are barely noticeable anymore with the bright flush now dusting her face and even her lips are someone more full than usual.

“Okay what, Nova?” Her lips part while the sounds of her ragged breaths fill the air between us. She wants me to assume again and I'm not going to let her get away with it this time. I thrust one hand into her hair, fingers tugging tightly at the root. “Say it.”

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Her head tilts and her sea-green eyes could rival the deepest parts of the ocean. “We’re more than friends.”

“You’re goddamn right we are.” My free hand grabs her neck and my mouth crashes down on hers. It’s wet and demanding. Messy, and borderline violent with need. I feel the pressure of her fingers digging into my shoulders and back. She’s scratching and grabbing frantically, like whatever she’s getting isn’t enough. My tongue sweeps every inch of her, and her hips respond by rocking back and forth over where I’m now straining for my life against my zipper. I could easily free myself and take her right here on this chair, but I’m glutinous when it comes to Taylor. I want this to last forever while fearing I’ll never get my fill of her.

I push to stand from the chair without breaking our kiss. My tongue sweeps her mouth and her body sinks into mine in response. I pull back just an inch, my hands still tangled in her hair and my mouth hovering just above hers. The heat, the longing, and the desire in her eyes is my undoing. A breath whooshes out of her as I spin her around, pressing my cock into her backside and positioning her hands on the pommel bench in front of her.

I drag the scruff of my beard down her silky soft neck and nip at the bottom of her ear, when she jerks at the touch I smile against her sweet skin. Her scent, that fucks me up when I’m in the same space as her, is overwhelming when we’re this close. “It would be a shame to ruin this pretty dress, don’t you think?” I ask, sliding the paper-thin straps down her shoulders.

“Fuck the dress,” she grits out, and a deep noise rumbles from the back of my throat. I stand behind her, sliding the near-invisible zipper down her back taking my time,

revealing vertebra after vertebra until the fabric has nothing to hold on to anymore and falls to a pile on the floor.

“Keep your hands on the bench.”

I pull away and circle her naked body until I’m standing in front of her, watching her chest rise and fall and her knuckles turn bone white where she grips the wood.

“Do you feel exposed?”

“Yes.”

“Do you like it?”

Her hands stay planted but through a thick fan of lashes, her eyes lift to me. “Yes.”

I make quick work of my belt and zipper as I circle behind her again. Goosebumps have spread across her back and I’ve officially used up all my restraint. The head of my cock is so dark, it’s almost purple. I rip open the packet from my pocket and drag a condom down my shaft before pressing the tip just past her entrance, and my legs almost give out at the sight of her stretching around me. The air in the room is thick and heavy, I can’t tell where her breath ends and mine begins. A needy little whimper falls from her throat and her hips press back slightly, taking another inch of me before I abruptly pull out. The loss of her tightness around me is enough to make me lightheaded.

“KNOX!”

“Yes, love?”

“I can’t take it anymore.” Her hand lifts and crashes down on the bench in front of

her.

I line myself up again at her entrance, rubbing the head of my cock over her swollen clit. “You want me to fuck this sweet little cunt of yours?” I murmur against her neck. Her back arches, sending her hips back again, half of my cock disappears inside her this time before I pull out once more.

“Fuck. YES! Yes, I want it. I want you, now!”

I reach around her hips and run my middle finger through her slit. I add another and soak up her wetness before rubbing the lightest touch I can manage over her swollen clit. Her whimpers become more desperate, and when I reach my free hand around her, grabbing her palm-size breast in my hand. Her head drops back to my chest. Her body bucks feverishly beneath me until I grab my shaft, and position it at her entrance again. My hips hinge enough that I can whisper in her ear. My fingers still and a desperate moan burst from her lips.

“Say please.”

“Please!” It’s a guttural, exhausted cry. One I didn’t think would have the effect on me that it does. No sooner than the word is out of her mouth, I bury myself in her and nearly blackout.

“Oh, fuck!” she cries.

“That’s right, Taylor. Those are the kinds of words I’m looking for.” I pull out and slam back in. “Tell me something, love. Does this cock feel friendly to you?” She moans my name and the room fills with the echos of skin slapping and labored breathing.

I keep one hand on her breast and snake the other between her pussy lips, rubbing my

fingers over the spot where I'm sliding in and out of her. I grit my teeth as a fire begins to crackle at the base of my spine. I bring my hand up to her face, circling her lips with my two middle fingers. "Suck."

Her warm mouth wraps around them and her moan as she tastes herself reverberates around my hand, tingling down my arms and meeting that fire roaring in my body. Every time I pull out and bury myself back in, my teeth grind together and a thunderous roar fills my head. I'm so close. I drop my hand from her mouth and use all my strength on her hips to drive into her.

"Oh god, Knox. I'm going... I'm?—"

"Do it. I want to feel your friendly cum on my cock, Nova." I rock back and forth, in and out of her, my heart beating as frantic as I thrust. I bring my hand down, spanking her ass and the loud thwack is followed by her lusty mewling. Her grip around me is unbearable as she squeezes and pulses, her orgasm soaking me. The fire that was set ablaze inside me is now a roaring inferno. I hold on vigorously as I pump once more and I'm burning from the inside out as I rapture.

Taylor's hands remain on the bench, but I'd bet it has more to do with a weakness in her legs now. I make sure she's steady before I pull out and dispose of the condom. She shakes her hips from side to side as she slides her dress back up her naked body and I drag two big palms down the back of her head, taming down her wild hair. Her perfectly manicured fingers brush down the front of her dress. She pulls in a broken breath, squares her shoulders back, and lifts her chin.

"How do I look?" I make a big show of looking her up and down before I kiss her forehead and loop my arm around the back of her neck.

"Freshly fucked."

Taylor

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It's been forty hours since the wedding ceremony where I so unceremoniously fucked Knox in a barn, and I've spent every minute of those hours thinking about him. I snuck out early yesterday, stopped at a local market, and in an attempt to take my mind off of him, I did Carrick-a-Rede. A sixty-six-foot-long rope bridge that spans almost a hundred feet above water. I figured concentrating on not dying would be a good way to keep my mind occupied. I wasn't expecting to have the phantom touch of his beard running down the hollow of my neck while I swayed a hundred feet in the air.

This morning, I woke up with the urge to work out, as I randomly get on fitness kicks. They typically last a few weeks before I get over it, so I like to take advantage of them when they come. Stoney Meadow Fitness seemed like the best option for me as they have a free week trial period, and since I won't be here much longer than that, it works out perfectly. Plus, it's the only gym for sixty kilometers. The map said it was only four kilometers away from the inn—I don't know what a kilometer is, but four of them didn't seem that far.

I set my things down, throw my headphones in, and begin warming up when I find a familiar stranger's reflection in the mirror in front of me.

"Tatertot, was it?" His accent is still so jarring with how thick it is. I pull one of the headphones out and turn to face him.

"Taylor," I say, extending a hand.

"Dax," he says and realization dawns on me.

“You’re the third musketeer.”

“Awe, has Browning been talking about me? That’s cute.” I can’t help but smile at the dynamic between their little friend group. Especially after Knox has been gone so long, he seamlessly weaved his way back into this town as if no time had passed. This shouldn’t be surprising considering how I’ve also felt something similar around these people. I can tell he feels like he might not deserve that type of loyalty, or that eventually they’ll stop being proud of him, but it’s taken me only a few weeks to come to the conclusion that the people in this town aren’t fairweather people. They love and admire him and that won’t change, no matter how much time passes or whether or not he’s still playing professionally.

As I worked through my sets, Dax kept me company, sharing stories of growing up in this town and how he came to buy his own gym. But to my utter annoyance, the stories I was most interested in were the ones involving Knox.

I throw a towel over my shoulder—welcoming the dopamine high I get from a solid workout and wave goodbye to Dax, who’s helping a client.

“See you tonight!” he calls over his shoulder.

My eyebrows pull together but I ignore the confusion and head back to the inn.

My feet pause halfway up the porch when the familiar purring of Knox’s truck sounds behind me. I turn to find him rounding the hood, and even though the engine no longer rumbles, that spot just below my core still does. His black hat sits low, shadowing his eyes until he lifts it and turns it backward. As I watch him shuck off his flannel, revealing a black hoodie underneath, my chest swoops and my neck heats at the memory of that body pressed behind mine and those rough hands caressing me and gripping my hips and hair. His mouth tugs upward as if he can sense what I’m thinking. That mouth. The suction and sting it inflicted on the most sensitive part of

my skin when my neck meets my collarbone—the memory has me clenching my thighs and I clear my throat in an attempt to clear my thoughts.

“Nova.”

“Browning,” I reply casually like I wasn’t just imagining us rolling around naked.

“Get dressed.”

He steps in closer like he always does and I lock my hands behind my back, looking up at him. “Where are we going?”

“The town fair.”

“And what if I had plans?” I lay the smartass tone on thick but keep my smile sweet.

“You do. With me. Now.” He spins me around and nudges me up the stairs before giving me a smack on the ass. “Go get dressed.”

“Such a brute.” I roll my eyes over my shoulder but don’t miss his sexy smile as I make my way upstairs and beg the butterflies in my stomach to relax.

“Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner!” the announcer shouts. “Pick your prize, mate.”

Knox sets the giant mallet down and looks at me. “What’ll it be, Nova girl?”

I can’t stop the goofy grin on my face as I look at the hanging stuffed animals. A war wages inside of me with how pathetic it is that I feel so full over the fact that someone has just won me a giant teddy. I choose to blame it on all the fried food and the sugar that’s now giving me hormonal imbalance as I smile and point to the one in the middle.

“The orca, obviously.”

“You know that the game measures skill not strength right?” Liam huffs.

“Well, then it’s a good thing I have both.” Knox takes the whale from the attendant and attempts to swat my prize at Liam but his reflexes are quick. Liam throws his hands up, blocking his body. “Come here, gobshite.”

Liam turns, running out wide in a circle while Knox chases after him. “I might not be a professional athlete but still the fastest!” he shouts, sounding slightly out of breath. “Give it up, KB, you’ll never catch me.”

“When I do, I’m gonna beat the piss out of you.” Liam laughs but doesn’t stop, he fakes right before turning on his heel behind Dax, using him as a shield. “Come on, I’ll even let you choose what hand I beat you with.”

“You’d love to put your hands on me, Knoxy boy.” He pops up over Dax’s shoulder blowing him a kiss and Knox springs forward.

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“Boys. Am I right?” Liv rolls her eyes, looping her arm through mine. Her head drops to my shoulders with a laugh as we leave the trio of children behind making our way down the rows of carnival games. “Oh Water Race Midway! Let’s do it.”

Liv and I take our spots on the stools, Liam and Dax take the seat to her left and Knox fills the spot to my right. We all grip our water shooters with laser focus as the announcer gets ready to start the game. A bell shrieks and I spray the tiny red dot in front of me watching my boat race across the plastic waves. Knox is the only boat in front of me until I reach his tail end and out of nowhere fly past him. The buzzer rings out and the announcer cheers, declaring me the winner.

“First, she whoops arse at cards, and now she’s handing you a beating at the carnival games?” Ryder chirps from behind me.

“I don’t take anything too seriously but games—games are life and death.” I smile at him as he lifts his hand and we high-five.

“Well, then I’m just in time, care for a game of darts?” He nods his head to the next tent over and I smile ready to take this cowboy for all he’s worth.

“You’re on, Cowboy.”

After Ryder lost three games in a row, he claimed his date had texted him and he had to go find her. The rest of us hit the fun house and once I discovered that Knox would still be sinfully attractive even at only four feet tall, we hit the Musik Express—a circular track that drags carts up and over small bumps so fast I was plastered to Knox’s side with a breathless laugh the whole ride.

A wild energy bursts through every cell in my body. Over the last few hours, I've laughed freely and had no small amount of desire to make this night last forever. A large portion has to be from the exhilarating rides, the high from winning games, and the dopamine kick from all the food. However, a small voice whispers in my head that it's from this growing sense of belonging. I attempt to shake it off, reminding myself that I don't know what that actually feels like.

We pass face painting, name painting, homemade jams, and jewelry tables before I spot a photo booth.

"Come on." I grab Knox's hand in mine and drag him to the booth. An old-timey black-and-white countdown shows and I close my eyes, grinning from ear to ear holding up a peace sign. The light flashes from behind my eyelids and I stick out my tongue throwing up rock and roll hands. Another flash of light and I realize Knox hasn't moved.

"Knox, you can't just sit there and smile in every picture."

"Then kiss me." I whip my head to him. Even though there are thousands of people on the other side of this curtain somehow in this tiny enclosed space with his eyes boring into mine, I hear all my thoughts crystal clear.

I've always been the anti-relationship girl. Call it a fear of commitment, or blame it on some unresolved, pushed-to-the-side abandonment issues, but the facts are that. I never wanted anything more. My stomach churns at the mere idea of being in the position I find myself in now, of wanting someone and liking them enough that I'm able to be hurt.

To be left.

The third flash goes off and he cups the back of my neck pulling my forehead to his.

Even though his golden brown eyes are crystal clear, the uncertainty in my own head is causing me to spiral. If I do this, if I'm able to drop my guard and go all in with him, what does that mean? The final flash goes off and the rumbling of the printer echos, one corner of his lip lifts but it's not his usual sensual or cocky smile. It feels sad. I swallow a thick lump in my throat and the pad of his thumb brushes lightly across my cheek. My shoulders drop alongside my eyelids as Knox stands from the bench, relief and self-anger battle within me as another moment passes.

A handful of games later, I can feel the night starting to wind down. My eyes catch on the glow from the Ferris wheel and I know this is my last moment of the night.

"We have to do the Ferris Wheel before we go, it's a must."

Knox scratches the back of his neck. "I don't really do Ferris Wheels, love."

"Come on, Browning." I grip his bicep with both arms. "I'll protect you."

Tilting his head back, he takes one last look up before a resigned sigh leaves him and he stretches his arm out.

"Anyone else?"

Liv looks away as if she didn't hear me, Dax scratches his eyebrows and Liam laughs. "Fuck that. I'm going to win Liv a stuffed animal."

"What?" Her eyebrows practically kiss her hairline when she whips her head to him.

"Yeah, come on. I'll get you one bigger than that silly thing Knox won."

"Always so obsessed with my size, mate," Knox teases him. Liam drops his fist to the crook of his elbow, lifting that hand and flipping him off.

The bucket lifts and stops a handful of times. The higher we get, the more of the fair I take in. I try not to let my circling thoughts consume me, but I'm also now hyper-focused on deciphering what's going on between us. I need this one thing to fit in a nice, neat little box in my head. Everything else can be a scattered mess, but I need to know what we're doing. What I'm doing.

I feel Knox's intimate gaze on my neck and I bite back my smile.

"What?" I ask.

"You going to let me kiss you now?" I huff a small laugh and shake my head. "So you just let me tease that sweet little pussy of yours, but I can't kiss you?"

"Knox!" I shriek, batting his chest. I shouldn't be surprised at his mouth at this point, but my cheeks flame all the same.

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“What?” I take in the easy way his lips quirk up. The way his arm rests behind me and his legs spread out casually in front of him.

I twist in my seat, facing him. “I just—” My gaze flirts up searching for the confidence to say the words. The apprehension coursing through my chest is a new feeling for me, but rather than shut down, I choose to be brave. I’m not going to get my answer any other way. “I just want to make sure that we’re on the same page. This is still just fun for you right?”

“If I said no would you freak out?” I swear I can physically feel the blood drain from my face. “I reckon by the way your face just paled, you would.” If he’s offended or hurt he doesn’t show it but I don’t dare try to swallow while his eyes search me so intently. “Listen, I’ll be honest with you, from the minute you and your perky nipples stormed into my inn in the middle of the night—I’ve been so far gone for you.” I vaguely register his fingers twisting the ends of my hair as I try to silence my thundering heart. “The more time I spent with you, the less I felt the need to be subtle about how I felt because frankly, I didn’t care. But don’t think for a minute that I did or said any of this because I thought it would be easy with you leaving. If anything, I thought about avoiding you because I knew you were leaving. But Taylor, I couldn’t stay away from you even if I wanted to.”

I clamp my lips between my teeth to hide my tremble as my heartbeat races dangerously fast. I squeeze the spot between my thumb and index finger and as subtly as I can, I suck in deep breaths through my nose. I’m having a very intense physical reaction to someone telling me they want to be with me but logically I know it’s the fear seeping in that this feeling could very well be monetary for him. Of course, he can say this now. I’m the shiny new toy in town but he can’t know that these are

long-term feelings. I'm not even sure what the coming weeks will look like. Am I willing to let down every guard I've ever built?

A million thoughts, feelings, and questions crash into me at once like a barrel wave and I'm sucked under, unable to come up and catch my breath. But it's Knox's hand cupping my cheek that brings me back up for air at the top of this Ferris wheel. I don't recognize my own soft whisper when I ask, "Why?"

"Because I like you." The breath I was suffocating on tumbles harshly from my mouth. "I like your infectious energy and how protective you are." I feel a foreign burn in my throat and a sting in my eyes. "I like that you like me for me, and not for who the world knows me as. More than anything, I like that you've shown me that there's more to life than rugby. I forget what I've lost when I'm with you because, with you, it feels like I have everything."

My eyes are hot and my chest is heavy—a direct contrast to the way my mind is aimlessly floating and I can't figure out which comment to grasp onto first. With you, it feels like I have everything. His hand snakes around, tightening along the back of my neck pulling back to reality.

The tremble in my hands is a direct result of how terrified I am to admit that for the first time in my life, I have these same feelings, that I'm right there with him. And if Knox can be bold enough to tell me how he feels, then I want to be bold enough to at least admit it to myself.

I blink back the burning in my eyes, take a breath, and sink into his side. His arm pulls me in tighter against his strong body and I drop my head on his bicep behind me. "Who says I like you?"

His head doesn't move but his eyes crash into the deepest part of my soul. "You like me, Nova." Maybe it's accepting that I've known these feelings weren't fleeting

thoughts and I've only ever denied myself this one thing. But maybe this one thing with Knox would be worth the risk. "You don't have to say the words. I can tell this is new for you. But I'm here and I'm ready when you are."

I bite my bottom lip, and the bucket swings as the Ferris wheel spins, dropping us up and over the peak, and I let my guard fall down with it.

Knox

I push my cardigan sleeves up and drape my bare forearm out the window as I drive up to the main house. The evening fall air blows through my loose strands of hair, cooling my body slightly but somehow not enough. It's been three days of non-stop laughter, stolen kisses, and many trips out to the barn. Taylor and I have been inseparable, but I still find myself unable to shake away the feeling like she's driving with one foot tapping on the gas, and the other hovering over the break.

It doesn't help that we're dealing with the looming threat of time as well. Every day I spend with her, I continue to fall harder, making the idea of her leaving in a week feel almost unbearable.

I have a conversation with her in my head multiple times a day, where I ask her how she feels about staying. Sometimes I see her smile that full sunshine smile of hers, she says yes and we celebrate with feverish kisses. Other times I see her physically and emotionally back away, putting her hands up and looking at me like I've gone completely mental.

For all the time I've spent playing these imaginary scenarios in my head, none of them have involved me explaining my offer from my old team. And I can't very well ask her to stay if I don't know how long I will be here, which creates all-new scenarios. I fist my hand through my hair, tugging lightly at the root, and then turn up the radio. The lyrics to the song Echo plays and my shoulders drop slightly as my breathing

evens out and I get lost in the feeling of Taylor.

She's here now.

Be here with her now.

After practice, I went home and showered quickly for our date tonight. A date that took some convincing no matter how entwined we've been the last few days.

"I'm taking you out to dinner tomorrow night."

"Like, in public?"

"Yeah Nova, in public. I want everyone to know you're mine."

"God you're such a brute," her cheeky little smile is so animated as she throws her head back with a laugh and I kiss the column of her neck without a care in the world.

I've been thinking about this all day. So much so that I was slightly less pissed off with Ronan's bad attitude at practice today. Gravel crunches under my wheels and before I pull to a complete stop long legs and a full grin come flying out the front door. I put my truck in park and hop out, Taylor doesn't stop when she hits the steps and my chest flips when she jumps from the last one, throwing herself into my waiting arms.

"Hello, love." I hold her tightly and it's as if my body had just been waiting for her to make that leap to me.

"I missed you today." It's not much louder than a whisper in my ear, but fuck does it light me on fire inside. She pulls her head back, her teeth dig into her bottom lip and her eyes search mine. There's so much happening in her eyes right now. There's

sincerity, something resembling fear, warmth, intensity, and longing. A deep ocean of emotion plays in those beautiful green eyes. I brush away the hair that's trying to hide this real vulnerability from her face. For someone who doesn't take many things too seriously, the things she does deem important are held behind the tightest lock and key. When I'm lucky enough to get a glimpse of them, I marvel at the beauty and beg for time to slow down.

"I missed you, too," I say against her lips and feel her body relax into me. My fingers tangle in the back of her hair as I pull her mouth to mine and press a kiss to her lips. A soft moan sounds from the back of her throat and her lips part slightly. Her strong legs are wrapped tightly enough around me that I'm able to snake along the back of her crocheted top feeling bits of her skin beneath it. My tongue glides along her bottom lip before I enter her mouth and her hips grind down my stomach in response. I use my hand on the back of her head to hold her where I want her, exploring her mouth as thoroughly as I can until my erection starts to grow in my pants and I know if we don't stop now I'm liable to flip her over the hood of my truck and fuck her right here. I tug her hair enough to pull her back and take in her deep red, swollen lips.

"Let's go, I have a pretty girl to show off."

We drive down the road and I take her hand in mine, bringing her knuckles to my lips.

"You painted your nails again."

"You noticed?"

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“I always notice.” She smiles, and I kiss her fingers again before holding her hand in my lap. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“I’m starving. I forgot to eat today.”

My brow quirks when I take a peek at her. “What do you mean you forgot?”

“I got distracted. Camila called first thing this morning and she told me her husband surprised her by flying her home to Miami for the weekend,” she says. “And they ran into this girl we went to high school with and she was like ‘Okay wait, do you remember Kendra Khol’? Obviously, I didn’t because unless I see you every day, I will absolutely forget that you exist. The object permanence is strong with me,” she flexes her bicep and I ignore the bricks that start taking shape in my stomach at that statement. “Anyway, I guess a year after we graduated she ended up marrying our high-school gym teacher, Mr. Baby.”

“You had a teacher named Mr. Baby?” I interrupt her.

“You know what, now that I think about it, it seems kind of made up. But he was young for a teacher, like twenty-five maybe? And he was one of those teachers that would try to be your friend.” She says those last three words with air quotes. “Like he would talk to all the boys about their girlfriends, and try to give them advice—yes it’s absolutely as creepy as it sounds.” She holds up a hand to me when my lips pull down. “Anyway one time he was like, ‘You don’t need to call me Mr. just call me baby.’” Her cheeks puff up and she makes a deep gagging sound.

“Okay—” I hesitate wondering how we got so far off-topic here but also not about to

stop her.

“Right, so get this, he just recently got caught hooking up with the current events teacher!” She’s smiling but her eyes are as wide as saucers. “And I guess Kendra has been posting all these cryptic quotes and song lyrics lately, and today, or I guess yesterday, one of the neighbors saw Mr. Baby come home for the first time in like three days.”

“So he’s back home with his child bride?”

“No! That’s the best part, she changed the locks and left a suitcase on the front porch and I guess he was standing out there yelling for like twenty minutes. She gave him the old hippity-hoppity, get off my property.” Taylor laughs, flicking her wrist in front of her. She’s so animated in the way she tells a story, I was immediately taken on this ride with her but now I’m wondering what this has to do with her not eating today.

“And did this story ruin your appetite?”

“What?” She looks at me confused and I quirk a brow. “Oh! No, sorry, that was a long story, not a short way of saying I talked to Camila, I spent a while convincing myself to get up and shower, and then when I got downstairs, I saw your cat.”

“Not my cat,” I mutter under my breath.

“Yet.” She gives me a pointed look. “Anyway, while I was petting your cat,

Liv was on her way out to grab a dress for a bachelorette party she was going to this weekend—it’s Sophie’s, by the way, so I was a little confused since she already got married, but apparently, her sister was sick the night they were supposed to go out so she just postponed it, which I originally thought was kind of silly but now I’m, like,

fully onboard. I think everyone should have faux bachelorette parties and often.” I almost miss the turn into the parking lot completely as all my attention is spent trying to follow her story.

“You never got to the part where you forgot to eat.”

Her fingers wrap around my bicep. “I’m so annoying. Basically, while we were shopping I was going to run across the street and grab a snack, but then I ran into Sophie, and between her and Liv, I got ganged up on and harassed, and without all the unnecessary detail, I’m now going out with them for her faux bachelorette party on Saturday. Yada, yada, yada, by the time I got back, I remembered I hadn’t eaten yet, but by then it was too late because I only had a few minutes to get ready for our date.”

I still don’t fully understand the ride I was just taken on, but when I put my truck in park and look over to find Taylor’s eyes glued to her hands where she’s picking at her nails, I know I don’t need to understand, I just need to show her I’m here.

“First of all, you’re not annoying.” I cover her hands with mine. “I like the way you tell stories and more than that, I like that you’re comfortable doing so.” I tuck the hair she’s attempting to hide behind over her shoulder. “Second, let’s get you some food.”

Her cheeks lift with a smile, and I kiss them once before we go inside.

The restaurant is dimly lit, with wood panels and live plants lining all the walls. Taylor’s eyes actually sparkle as she looks around, her hand casually resting in mine.

“Italian?” she asks, grinning ear to ear.

“It’s the only one in the area.”

“It’s my favorite.” She leans into me as the hostess takes us to our table.

We order one of almost everything on the menu, and Taylor fills the time we spend waiting by creating stories about the people around us. Ian and Kate, the young couple in the corner, were here on their honeymoon, she had said. It was their first night in town and they were both so hungry and tired from their long day of travel so rather than argue about finding the best authentic Irish pub, they walked across the street to the Italian restaurant instead.

“See those two?” she asks as a middle-aged couple smiles at us and walks out. “That’s Dom and Mia, and they just left to go have feral sex.”

“Mmm, I might disagree with you on that one. He was wearing socks with sandals. You really think he’s bringing the heat in the bedroom?”

“Look at that wad of cash he threw down as a tip,” she says, lifting her chin in the direction of their table. “A generous tipper is a generous lover.”

“Is that a fact?”

“Yes. Do you think someone who gips on a tip is going to go the extra mile in bed? No way.” She takes a sip of her wine, and we both laugh.

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The food is incredible, however, the way Taylor moans around every new dish she tries makes it nearly impossible for me not to get hard under the linen tablecloth.

“Mmmm, this is it. The Arrabbiata is the best one,” she says, pointing her fork at the plate between us. I like that she’s adventurous and has a taste for life. Literally, she wants to try everything and to be honest, it really turns me on. “What?” she asks with the fork now halfway to her mouth, and I realize I’ve been staring at her with a dopey smile on my face.

“I just like watching you.”

Her tongue runs along her teeth. “It’s giving... serial killer.”

“Okay, let me rephrase. I like watching the way you enjoy things.”

“Speaking of things we enjoy—” She twirls strands of pasta around her fork. “How are you liking coaching?”

“It’s...” I pause, really trying to think about how I feel about it. “Different.”

“Different is the word I use for things when I can’t decide if something is good or bad.”

I huff a small laugh because she’s absolutely right. “I guess I never saw myself doing anything other than playing professionally. I mean, realistically, I knew I wouldn’t be playing when I was eighty-nine, but I figured I would retire and then possibly work with the team in some capacity. I never even considered anything else.”

“Isn’t that sort of what you’re doing?”

“It is,” I say, lifting my glass.

“But it wasn’t on your terms.”

I nod. “I think that’s where I’ve been hung up. I was told I was done. It wasn’t a choice. That decision was taken from me. The day I woke up in that hospital room...” My fists clench in my lap at the memory before I shake it off. “When I got home, I was just so pissed off at the world.”

“But now?” Her legs cross under the table, and with a cheeky grin, she slowly drags the toe of her shoe up and down my shin. “How are you feeling now?”

I should tell her about my offer if only to have someone to talk to about it. Someone to help me sort out how I’m feeling, but I worry that her foot will crash so hard into that brake pedal, that we’ll be over before we even truly begin. So instead, I smile at her and lift my glass to her. “With you? I’m a lot less pissed off.”

“Do you like the kids?”

“Surprisingly.” I swallow my food. “I do. I was a little hesitant since I’ve never worked with kids before, and I’ve got who’s a little closed off, and that drives me up a fuckin’ wall sometimes, but for the most part, yeah, I like it more than I anticipated.”

“He’s lucky,” she says softly, and I pause my water halfway to my mouth. “I mean, it’s obvious you care. Sometimes I think just being there is supportive enough, you know? I’m sure he’ll come around.” She flashes me that wide grin. The one so infectious you cannot help but return the smile. It’s the first thing I think of when I wake up in the morning and the last thing I see before I fall asleep. A deep pang

sparks at the possibility of that smile not being around anymore.

“You’re probably biased because you’re about as loyal as they come.” Her head flinches back slightly, like that surprised her. “I was thinking about how you told me you moved across the country and went to school all because your mate wanted to.”

She bobs her head up and down in understanding before reaching for her water. “What if I did it for selfish reasons?” she asks, taking a sip. “Maybe I couldn’t stand the idea of her leaving me behind.”

I study her face and beneath her dusting of freckles, behind the endless depth of her green eyes, for the first time, I see the girl who was abandoned. She hides her worries well, but someone wasn’t there for her and she’s never left that behind.

“Maybe it was an added bonus for you, but I don’t think that’s why you did it. I think you’re more full of love than maybe even you know, and your loyalty knows no bounds.”

She studies me for a few moments, either unsure of how to respond or unsure of what I’m saying, but after a minute, I find it in me to ask her the one thing that’s been taking up a highrise amount of space in my mind.

“Are you enjoying yourself here?” The column of her throat works as she swallows and just when I don’t think she’s going to respond, her voice comes out a small whisper.

“Possibly a little too much.” The iron grip around my heart releases, and I only just barely manage to not slump with relief across the table.

The Saloon is packed to the brim tonight, but that doesn’t stop Liam from talking to someone whose breasts are practically spilling out on the bar top. Surprisingly,

Liam's focus isn't on her at all, but rather on someone on the crowded dance floor.

"What are we doing here?" Taylor shouts over the music.

"We're going to check a few more things off your list." I intertwine her fingers with mine and head to the bar.

"KB!" Liam eyes me with something I can only describe as relief. "What can I get you two?"

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“Two pints of gat,” I hold up my middle and index finger. Taylor’s head bobs to the music and her hands tap against her jean-covered thighs.

“Hey, Liv is here!” she yells over the slightly drunk and rowdy crowd, pointing to the dance floor.

“Go on.” I nod. “I’ll wait for the drinks.”

I wait, watching her squeeze her way through the crowd until she gets to Liv, who smiles and throws her arms around Taylor. They sway back and forth, seemingly excited to have found each other.

“Date night?” Liam asks, setting our beers on the bar. “Your girl looks good tonight. Maybe she could end up teaching you a thing or two.” He says in jest. I ignore the urge to smack him upside the head and instead focus on how much I like the way ‘my girl’ sounds.

“Hey, so how’s the season going?” he continues, and I lean against the bar, watching Taylor’s confident hips dip side to side as she dances like it’s her job out there. I clear my throat and turn my attention to Liam. “You know if Coach ever needs an extra hand, I’m around.”

“You and Dax should come by next week. We’ll give those kids a good show.”

“I’m in.” He smacks the bar top with his towel. “You plan on coaching them again next year?”

I reach for my pint and focus back out on the dance floor.

“I’m not sure.” I scratch the back of my head, but Liam doesn't give me the courtesy of letting it go. “Alright, I got an offer to go work with my old team, but don’t say anything.”

“Why?”

“Why, what?”

“Why don’t you want me to say anything?”

“You know how this town is.”

“So... are you going to take it?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think so.”

“Well, whatever you decide, you better be damn sure.” Hurt and warning are etched into my oldest friend's face, and I know this has been weighing on me, but either he’s not the person I need to talk this out with, or it’s just not the time.

“Hey.” Taylor smiles, breaking through the crowd with Liv in tow.

I clear my throat and lift one of the pints to Taylor. “Sláinte!”

“I’m not sure what that means, but ditto,” she says, holding her glass out to me.

“It means health,” Liv supplies.

“Seems odd to talk about health while drinking beer, but alright.” Her lips wrap

around her glass, and she takes a deepchug. I laugh when she beats her chest with an open palm, working to swallow.

“How’s about that real, Irish beer?”

“Absolutely savage,” she says through a forced smile with a thumbs up and I drop my head back on a full belly laugh.

“Savage, eh? We’re going to make a real Irish girl out of you yet.”

The night air is cool as it breezes through the windows. I look over at Taylor, whose arms are wrapped around her legs, knees pulled up to her chest, and her head rests back with a content smile on her face. “Dreaming of that Irish beer?”

“Between you and me, I don’t think I’m actually a beer girl.”

“Nooo.” I feign shock and she laughs. The sound is a perfect melody clinging tightly to my chest. My eyes flirt between her and the road and when she looks at me, both my heart and my mouth lift in a smile. “What are you thinking?”

“I just love your smile.” I over-exaggerate, showing off every single one of my teeth and she laughs before turning towards me. “I’m serious. It’s so carefree and warm.”

That causes me to pause. “I don’t think those are the kind of words anyone else would use to describe me.”

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“No? What kind of words would they use?”

“These days? I don’t know, cold? Maybe even a little cut-off?” Her eyebrow creases and I slow the truck down as we inch into my driveway.

“It appears you have a very skewed idea of how people perceive you, Browning.” She scoots across the bench, and her fingers drag through my hair with a comforting touch. “Or maybe you’re projecting your own feelings onto how you think others see you.”

I love that she sees the person I used to be. The person I didn’t know I missed being. The person I was before I stopped having fun and deep or meaningful relationships. There’s a reason Dax, Liam and I got along so well. Somewhere along the way, when rugby started to really take over and I became obsessed, I shifted from fun, good-times Browning to serious, no jokes, complete determination Browning.

Without that obsession now, I should have been able to fall back to my old self, but I almost forget who that man is, and I’m not helping that by being so consumed with how other people perceive me now.

“Maybe you know me better than either of us realized, Nova.”

“I see you, Knox.” The soft skin of her fingers lightly brush the hairs at the nape of my neck as she pulls herself in closer to me. “I see a devoted son who cares about his parents and the life they’ve built. You’re a caring brother, albeit a little overprotective at times, but caring nonetheless. The hottest rugby coach,” she smiles and pulls the hairs at my neck to get me to look at her. “But more than just a coach of the sport,

those kids have gained a confidant.” I let my head rest on the seat back as I stare at her in complete awe. “You’re a devoted friend. You should see the way you, Liam, and Dax all light up around each other. It’s contagious. Goofy as fuck, really. But contagious.” My throat constricts, clogging with emotion. Usually, when people talk about my good qualities, they’re accompanied by stats. I reach for her hip and pull her across my lap until she’s straddling me. The soft curves of her lips are illuminated only by the moonlight, but it’s more than enough to see how beautiful she is. “And you’ve helped me realize that maybe I want more than what I’ve been telling myself to.”

“Meaning?”

She bites the corner of her lips and I run my finger along it, pulling it out.

“I don’t know, when I’m in the kitchen here with your mom, everything about it just feels right. I’ve never given a lot of thought to doing the thing I love most as a career. I’ve always just considered it my safe space, but I don’t know.” She shrugs. “Seeing you be so passionate about something makes me think I could give it a go, too.”

My chest feels like it’s either going to implode or explode, either way. I know Taylor says she hasn’t felt pride, but lucky for her, I feel it enough for the both of us now.

“I know you still get hung up on what this town thinks of you since being home, and yeah, maybe you’re right. Maybe some people do only see you as this rugby star.” I cup her cheeks as she drops her forehead to mine and her fingers dig into my chest.

“But I see you, Knox. I see all of you.” Her lips press to the corner of mine softly. “And I like everything I see.”

Taylor

I fold the towel back over the rack, the black cotton blending in with my fresh manicure. I take one last look at myself in the mirror. My cut-off 'Ride the Cowboy' T-shirt paired with my black lace boyshorts don't hide much, but they still feel like some kind of armor to me.

I open the bathroom door but don't make it more than one step when I spot a shirtless Knox sitting on the edge of his bed. Knox, covered in clothes, still has the body of a superhero. Knox without a shirt on? He has the body that would put a Greek god to shame.

My body heats as his eyes take inventory, trailing from my lips, over my nipples, past my stomach, pausing briefly between my legs, and then continuing all the way down to my toes. The intensity of his gaze burns straight to my chest, setting fire to the thumping organ that resides there.

"Taylor—" My name slips from his lips, but that deep guttural noise came from a place far in the back of his throat.

My bare feet pad soundlessly and quickly across the floor until I stand between his legs, cup the sides of his face, and press my lips on his. His hands squeeze the backs of my thighs, pulling me in closer to him as I wrap my arms around his neck and do the same. There isn't a single inch of space between us, and yet I can't seem to get close enough to him. I open my mouth, inviting him in so there can be even less space, but it still doesn't feel like enough. The rough hairs of his beard are at odds against the softness of my hands, and I feel a slight sting in the backs of my legs where his fingers dig into my skin—I'm focusing on anything tangible to remind myself this is as close as we can possibly get, that there isn't anything left.

Knox pulls back gently, trailing his hand up my body. His long, fingers rest against my neck and the palm of his hand splays across the top of my chest where he must be able to feel my out-of-control pulse. I use the moment to suck down any oxygen I can

get, but pause when the intensity of his stare settles on me.

“For the record, I like everything I see in you, too.”

I shudder on an inhale but fall into him with a relieved exhale and it was that. It was those simple words, I like everything I see in you, too, that I needed to close any remaining space between us. It wasn't physical, but emotional space I was holding.

I lean down, kissing him again, but softer this time. There isn't any part of me that feels frantic or wants to hurry this time. His mouth slants over mine, claiming me, fully.

We stay like this for a few minutes, his hold around me never wavering—always solid and firm. Just like Knox.

His lips caress my own, and I feel it all the way down to my core. A mild throbbing pulses between my legs, and I drop down to my knees in front of him. My hands trail over the ridges and valleys of his stomach, down to the top of his dark jeans. The button is warm beneath my fingers, though tight from the way he's straining against the unforgiving fabric. I take my time, carefully sliding his zipper down, and he helps me by sliding his pants down past his hips. When I reach my hand into his black briefs, I relish in the hiss that escapes him. One of his hands grips the sheets beneath him tightly while the other brushes the hair out of my face, gripping lightly at the back of my head, giving him an unobstructed view.

I pause, drinking him in. Knox is all man. His body is pure, undiluted power. There's no other way to describe him. It's as if he's invincible, like nothing in the world could take him down. So when my hand wraps around his length and I set him free from his briefs, finding that pool of precum at his tip and his eyelids drop slightly, I feel unstoppable. This man is at my mercy. I dip my chin, running my tongue along the underside of his shaft. He's warm and thick and rigid, and goes utterly still when I

finally reach the end and lap up the salty liquid at his tip.

“Fuck.” His deep voice sends a wave of pleasure between my legs and I squeeze my thighs together, shifting slightly, trying to ease some of the pressure building there. My fingers don’t quite touch as I wrap them around the base of his cock and circle my tongue over his head in long lazy sweeps.

The air feels warm and thick around us, despite the cracked window letting in the cold night air. It’s similar to how my chest and core are melting, yet my skin is still able to pebble under his touch. I lower my mouth, taking in as much of him as I can until he hits the back of my throat and my free hand is digging into the top of his thigh. I look up at him, expecting his head to be dropped back, but his eyes pierce straight through me and I feel my own wetness start to drip between my thighs.

I lift and lower my mouth, sucking him greedily now, opening my throat and taking him further each time until my eyes begin to water and I gag. I wouldn’t say that I’m a prude by any means, but I would say I’ve always been kind of a selfish lover. My past sexual experiences have been about me and getting my needs met. Most men could cum in their pants with a quick game of pocket pool, so I never felt the need to go above and beyond. But with Knox, I don’t just want to please him. I want to bring him to his knees until he’s begging me, until he’s praying to whoever will listen to him, until he forgets his goddamn name. I want him to feel something he’s never felt before. And I want to be the one to give it to him.

The muscles in his jaw flex at the same time his hold on my hair tightens and he struggles to suppress a deep moan. The pressure between my legs is now unbearable but I don’t stop, my one hand still squeezing his leg so tight that I’m sure it will bruise, and the other continues to work in tandem with my mouth. I suck, feeling my cheeks hollow out one second, and the next, his hands are gripping my shoulders, and he’s pulled me off. I release him with a loud pop and then I’m standing in front of him again. My breaths are heavy when his rough hands move up my thighs, causing

my nipples to grow vastly tight through my shirt.

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“What’s wrong?”

“You let me fuck your mouth like that and think that something’s wrong?”

I bite my lip, hiding my accomplished smile and the way my cheeks flame. “Then why’d you stop me?”

“Because if you gagged anymore on my cock, I was going to cum immediately.”

“So?” I cross my arms at the bottom of my shirt and pull it off, revealing my bare breasts to him.

“I saw the way you were pinching those legs together.” His hand reaches up, cupping my pussy through the lace fabric, causing me to yelp. “And I would rather die than miss the opportunity to have you cum in my mouth again.”

His mouth descends on my breast, kissing, sucking, and biting while his hands lower my underwear. My fingers rake through his thick head of hair as my own head drops back, my mouth falls open to the ceiling, and soft moans tumble out. Knox lifts my knees to the bed until my naked body is now straddling him. I’ll never get over the feeling of his warm, hard body against my pebbled, soft one. Nothing has ever felt more right.

His tongue circles around my nipple before he lightly clamps his teeth over it and I vaguely feel his skin beneath my fingers as I claw at his back.

“You’re dripping.”

“Huh?” I hadn’t realized I was rolling my hips over him, so lost in the pleasure he caused to circle through me.

He dips his hand between us, his fingers running along my wetness. “Look at this mess you’ve made.”

With both hands on his chest, I guide him until he’s flat on his back and his arms come up behind his head.

I lean forward, lifting slightly so that I can run the length of him through my slit but not actually putting him inside yet. I rock up and down, side to side, rolling his erection over my throbbing bundle of nerves. I’m so close, my eyelids flutter closed and I feel Knox’s hands slide up my thighs to my hips.

“That’s it, love, use my cock,” he grunts. “Open your eyes, Taylor. Look how pretty you look sliding that wet cunt over me.”

I can’t get air down fast enough when I watch myself slide over him, mixing more of his precum with my own arousal. My breath is embarrassing, it’s loud and pained but I feel nothing but deep, euphoric pleasure as his hold on my hips tightens and I lift up and down once more, sending my orgasm ripping through me. I breathe in deeply, looking at Knox but unable to focus, until a sinister smile spreads across his face.

“Oh, Nova girl.” I feel his strong hands running up and down my thighs but I still can’t bring my eyes to focus on anything other than his face. “Now we both get to taste you.”

I don’t have a second to process his words before he lifts my hips, spins me around, and pulls me down to his face. I buck and scream out the second he sucks my clit into his mouth.

“Knox!” It’s all I can manage to get out. No other words come to me as he covers my entire pussy with his mouth and drags a flat tongue over my clit. The pressure is so intense, that black spots begin to fill my vision. I blink them away to find the thick, veiny length of him standing up right before me.

I still can’t catch a breath but I grip him at the base with my hand and my jaw trembles as I open and lower my mouth to him. A combination of salty and sweet coats my tongue and I now realize what he meant. I pull back, keeping a light suction around him but unable to focus on anything else. Pleasured groans reverberate from his mouth to my clit and I squeeze my legs around him, parts of me dangerously close to his neck.

“Fuck, love.” His words caress my skin. “Squeeze me harder.”

This fucking man. I clench my legs against my control, and it only causes him to moan harder and his tongue works faster. I’m so close my chest hammers matching the thundering pulse between my legs and I fixate on Knox’s cock before me. I pull him in my mouth once more, opening my throat to fit him further than I ever have and his tongue dips inside me. My eyes squeeze shut and I lose all sense when he pulls me harder to his face, practically burying himself in me. He sucks my clit hard enough that I see stars and the muscles in my legs and ass constrict so hard they spasm and my voice is a hoarse cry around him. Not a moment later his cock is twitching and I lap him up when he spills down my throat.

Knox

Waking up with Taylor in my bed feels like when you’ve had the tune of a song stuck in your head and you can’t quite figure out the name of it, but then it finally comes to you. She barrel-rolled into my life one night in the middle of a storm, which is ironic, considering she’s been the sunshine on my darkest days. The perfect little puzzle piece that I hadn’t realized I was missing, but, I’ve never felt more complete than I do

in this moment.

Her long blonde hair flows down her back one of her hands resting on my chest. I play with the little blue eye bracelet she always wears along her delicate wrist and I listen to her deep, rhythmic breaths. She sleeps peacefully in my arms, her lips parted slightly, and I trace every line of her face with my eyes. I know deep in my bones that I could wake up like this every day and be happy for the rest of my life. I feel more confident after last night that I can broach the subject of her staying, or at least extending her trip.

I watch her eyelashes flutter softer than butterfly wings, and her chest presses into me a little harder on a deep stretch. Her eyes open, looking around before she remembers where she is, and looks up at me with sleepy, but happy eyes.

“You know you laugh in your sleep?”

She rolls on her back, covering her face with both hands, but I don't miss her perfect smile. “You heard that?”

“Alfie on the other side of town heard that.” Her stomach shakes and I roll onto my side, propping up onto my elbow. “What were you dreaming about?”

“It's not even funny, but in my dream it was. I laughed so hard that it woke me up, which only made me laugh harder.” She drops her hands from her face and I crawl on top of her, sliding between her legs. She runs her fingers through the top of my hair and I suppress a moan at the touch. “Good morning.” Her usual raspy voice is extra hoarse this morning which only causes my dick to stir even more. I kiss her stomach and she shifts her hips beneath me.

I reach over to the nightstand and both of her hands cup the sides of my face, pulling me to look at her.

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“I got my shot before I left,” she says, searching my eyes. “I want to feel you, Knox. I want to feel you with nothing between us.” I drop my head to her neck on a deep exhale—that sounds more like a growl—and I breathe her in, as I attempt to cage in the feral animal pulling on the bars inside me right now.

I tip my face, kissing her neck, and her pulse kisses me back. I drag my lips down, kissing every inch of her naked body until I’m settled down between her legs. I hook the backs of her thighs over my shoulders, inhaling her scent before I run a wide, flat tongue up her center and her back arches from the bed.

I tease her entrance with my fingers, but she’s already so wet, they dip right in.

“Yes.” She whimpers as her head drops back with hereyes closed. Her arms reach to the headboard behind her. I scissor my fingers inside her while lapping up her clit and her body bucks roughly beneath me, pulling away and then thrusting back for more. When I close my mouth around her clit and suck, she screams my name as her arousal coats my mouth.

Her breath is heavy and choppy as I come up to my knees and position myself at her entrance, wrapping her legs around my waist. I look into her eyes, silently asking if she’s sure, and with an answering nod, I slide into her.

“Oh, fuck,” I grunt. She’s so wet and hotter than I could have ever imagined, and her tight little cunt grips my cock hard enough that my vision blurs. I hang my head, looking between us when I pull out almost fully, keeping only the tip covered, and let a line of spit fall from my lips. Her breath catches when it lands perfectly on my cock and drips down my length before pooling at her swollen clit. I thrust back into her,

one hand burrowing a hole in the mattress by her head, the other tangled in her hair as I pull lightly.

“Is this what you wanted, Taylor?” My thrusts turn punishing.

“Yes,” she breathes. “Oh god, Knox.” It’s a cry of pleasure and a warning, and I’m right there with her.

I bring my mouth crashing down to hers in a searing kiss, and she screams from the back of her throat as I finish deep inside her.

We stay in bed as long as possible, holding each other and watching the curtains blow across the room on the morning breeze.

“Hey.” I trail my hand down her hair, and she looks up at me. “Do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Sing for me.” Her eyes roll back with a smile on her face, and she leans out of my grip. “Come on, I’m begging.”

I wiggle my eyebrows, and she playfully elbows me before I scoop her up and pull her onto my lap.

Her hand trails down my bare chest and I wonder if she can feel the way it’s knotted up inside. Her mouth pulls into a tight line as she runs her fingers over the thick scar on my shoulder. I drag my thumb between her brows and the crease between them eases away. I would do anything to take away every concern for the girl who not only sees the real me but likes him.

I cup the nape of her neck and kiss the side of her face. “Come on, Nova, let’s

shower.”

She drops her head back with a groan, which I expected because I’ve come to notice that switching or starting a task seems to take more effort for her. I stand from the bed with her still locked in my arms. “Don’t worry, I’ll do it for you.” Something like disbelief crosses her face, and I don’t know if anyone has ever looked more beautiful.

After I washed Taylor’s hair and body, I wrapped her in a warm towel and sent her out so I could shower. Apparently, showering together doesn’t involve a lot of actual showering. I towel dry my hair and pause, listening to the clanging of pots and pans that sound from my kitchen. I hang the towel, pull on some athletic shorts, and stop in the doorway when I catch sight of Taylor making breakfast. Music plays through the small speaker on her phone and the morning sun rays hit her just right as she whisks eggs and sways her damp hair to the music. I bite my bottom lip when she reaches up for something on the top shelf, stretching up onto her tiptoes and the hem of my old RFU Championship T-shirts rides up her thighs, and I don’t need it to rise any higher to know she’s not wearing anything under it. She makes quick work of chopping veggies before throwing them in a preheated pan and I feel a physical jolt through my body when I catch a glimpse at the unmistakable gleam in her eyes. Pride. Taylor is, without a doubt, one of the most confident people I’ve ever met, but whenever I’ve found her in a kitchen, it’s more than that. She stands a little taller. This is where she is meant to be.

“Saving material for your spank bank?” she calls over her shoulder, throwing my words from the night in my hot tub back at me. I round the kitchen island and wrap my arms around her from behind. Her soft tendrils of hair tickle my face as I nuzzle my nose to her neck, and breathe her in. Even through a kitchen full of potent foods, I still find her scent.

“What are you making?” I kiss the hollow of her neck.

“Just a simple roasted vegetable tostada with ancho chile and spices that I’ll top with a fried egg, queso fresco, and salsa.”

“Oh yeah, those are always the words I use when I talk about simple cooking, too.”

Her buttery, soft laugh echoes in my chest when she drops her head back on me. I grip her chin and pull her into a kiss, my fingers splay down her fluttering neck and I want more. I grip her hips, lifting her onto the counter where she wraps her arms and legs around me, never breaking where our lips meet and immediately my cock starts to stiffen in my shorts.

“Let’s go back to bed,” I breathe before sucking her bottom lip.

“We can’t.” Her hands press to my chest as she looks over my shoulder. “And the food is about to burn. Do you want to eat or not?”

“I can think of something else I’d rather eat.” Her neck has a gravitational pull the way my mouth can’t stay away.

“Knox!” She pushes me back, with a giggle. “You have physical therapy in less than an hour.”

“Last time she said I was close to graduating. I could probably skip it.” I shrug my shoulder.

“No, you can’t.” She slinks under my arm, hopping down. “And besides, I’m going to help your mom prepare dinner early since I’m going out for Sophie’s party tonight.”

My head falls with a sigh. “I forgot about that.”

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I turn, leaning against the counter, feeling my moment to ask her slipping away.

“Now.” She smacks my ass with the back of a spatula. “Go get dressed and maybe you’ll have time to eat before you leave.”

I grip her wrist and she remains her tight hold on her utensil when I drop my lips to her ear. “Quit giving me ideas, Nova,” I growl and pinch her little nipple that’s now poking through my shirt.

I adjust myself in my shorts as I leave the kitchen and something between a moan and laugh echoes behind me.

Practice was more difficult than usual today. It’s the end of the week and the boys are tired. Ronan was especially ornery today. It doesn’t help that I couldn’t focus on anything except all the words I left unsaid with Taylor this morning.

I take a seat a few rows up on the bleachers, waiting for everyone to file out. I get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach when I think about the possibility of having missed my opportunity to ask her to consider staying. She’s not wearing her feelings on her like an extravagant coat, but last night, she opened up and talked to me in a way I didn’t think was possible for her. This morning was my opportunity and fuck, what if I missed it?

Ronan’s huff of anger while texting on his phone pulls me from my thoughts.

“Alright, Berkley. What gives?”

“What?” he snaps at me while shoving his shoes in his bag.

“You’re pissed off and distracted. Talking to someone has to feel better than sitting there boiling about it. So tell me, what’s up?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s stupid high school shit.”

“Out of all the kinds of shit, stupid high school shit is my favorite kind.”

He rolls his eyes. Have I become the uncool old guy?

“Listen, I’m trying not to be an asshole?—”

“You are?” I interrupt and his scowl only deepens.

“But,” he says pointedly. “There’s just no point. You can’t help.”

“Who said anything about helping? I just want you to talk so you stop beating the piss out of your gear.”

He looks down at where his hands have a fifty-fifty chance of spasming from the grip he has on his bag. I watch the color return to his fingers as he slowly uncurls them. His chest rises on a deep inhale as he leans back against the railing, crossing his arms and he begrudgingly speaks.

“My girlfriend is pissed at me.” Okay, we’re talking real stupid high school shit, got it. Ronan is on eggshells as it is, so as much as I want to roll my eyes, I don’t.

“Do you know why?”

He shrugs, kicking a hole in the dirt. “She’s just mad that I don’t have a lot of extra

time to hang out right now.”

“Ahhh,” I say, understanding.

“What?”

“You’re prioritizing rugby over your girl.”

He stills. “Yeah. I mean, no, not like that. I just?—”

“You just spend more time focused on rugby than you do her,” I supply.

He drops his head, pushing off the railing towards his bag again. “This was fucking stupid. I knew you wouldn’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” I get up from the bench. “You’ve been in a pissed-off mood since I got here, which tells me this has been an issue since the season started, possibly even before. You obviously like her enough that you’re trying to keep her around, but mate, she’s going to keep living her life. She’s going to be at the town fair with her girls and maybe even some guys that can spare a minute for fun, and you’re going to be left alone in your bedroom cradling your ball.” He whips his head at me and pretty soon there will be no space left between his brows.

“You’re rugby ball,” I clarify, pointing to the ball at his feet.

“Okay, so you do know what you’re talking about. You just suck at it.”

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That makes me laugh, and I lift my hands in an apologetic, non-threatening way. “To be fair, I did say I wasn’t here to give advice.”

He drops his head with a sigh and sits down on the bench. “She just doesn’t understand how important this is. She doesn’t get that once I make it, then I’ll be able to spend more time with her. But I have to do this now.”

“You won’t.”

“What?” I stare out across the pitch, to the tree-lined border, and wish like hell I could be back in Ronan’s shoes for a day. Not that I necessarily think I would have changed anything, especially knowing where I ended up today; but who’s to say he would be as lucky?

“There’s always going to be another goal, a higher level or desired result. I see a lot of myself in you, Ronan. And if you’re anything like me, you’re never going to be full of this sport. Your hunger will drive you and motivate you until everything in your life, all the way down to the goddamn air you breathe—is rugby.” I turn to face him and his eyes are studying me, he’s lost the attitude and gained something like concern. “But mate, I promise you, you can have it all and not give up everything to get there. I’ve seen it.”

I’ve always thought I gave up everything. I even unintentionally resented some of my teammates for somehow being able to be alongside me but with so much more at home. But I’m realizing I didn’t have anything to begin with. I might have sacrificed the chance or opportunity for things, but I didn’t give up anything I already had.

Losing Taylor would be losing everything.

“What if...” he trails off, looking down at his hands. “What if it’s too late?”

I slide my hands into my pockets, and I make my way down the bleachers. Visions of that sunshine smile fill my head. I won’t let the dull, heavy weight on my chest that’s made of all the things I let go unsaid this morning, take away my everything.

I stop in front of Ronan, but he doesn’t look at me. “It’s never too late, buddy.”

I pat his shoulder and make my way out to the parking lot.

I need to get home to my girl and tell her how I feel before I’m the one left alone in my bedroom cradling my ball.

Taylor

“What are you ladies getting up to tonight?” Isla asks, joining me at the small round table with a cup of tea.

“I’m not sure, honestly. I think I just got a pity invite so I don’t know all the details.”

“Aw, darling.” Her warm hand cups mine. “We’re a lot of things here but pitying isn’t one of them. You were invited, because whether you like it or not, you’re a part of the crew now.”

I keep my eyes on where her fingers brush over my hand because, for some unexplainable reason, Isla turns me into this sensitive person that I don’t recognize in myself.

“Hey Isla, I don’t mean to interrupt—” I look up to the doorway, finding a man who

gives me a double take before smirking at me. “Nice to see you again, Miss. How have your brothers been? Catch any bears lately?”

I pull my lips between my teeth but feel the way the corners still pull up, and my cheeks warm as I recognize the cab driver who drove me here my first night.

“I don’t know what you’re prattling on about, Patrick.” Isla turns to face him. “But if you’re looking for TheLangfords, Adam took them on a walk of the grounds a bit ago. They should be back soon.”

“Wonderful,” he says, dipping his head to me. “Enjoy your evening, ladies.”

We share a knowing smile before he exits the kitchen and Isla turns back to me.

“Silly lad,” she says, smiling. “Love him dearly, but lord help me sometimes with all these kids.”

Her maternal nature is palpable and as I look around the large, open kitchen I breathe a sigh of relief. For the first time in a long time—possibly even ever—I feel like this is where I’m supposed to be. I feel safe. I wonder how much of that is due to the kitchen. I’ve spent so many days dehydrating herbs, baking bread, and marinating meat in, or if it has more to do with the mother across the table from me.

“I was.” I clear my throat, surprised by the thickness in my voice. “I was wondering if you needed some help tomorrow, too?”

She holds up her hands, knuckles facing me. They’re still slightly bent but not as swollen as I noticed they were the other day. “I always need help in here.”

“Well, if you aren’t tired of me hanging around yet, I’d love to help.”

Her warm smile matches her eyes. “Taylor darling, I don’t think I could tire of you if I tried.”

My throat clogs, and my eyes burn. She not only says all the things I wish my own mother would have said to me, ever, just once, but I also feel the way I wish I could have felt around my mother. Isla says all the right things but more than that, she shows me kindness and respect that I never got from Caroline Nova. I mindlessly pick at my nails under the table until a metallic taste fills my mouth and I realize I’ve been chewing the inside of my lip.

“Are you alright?” she asks, covering my hands and dropping her head. I inhale sharply, nodding my head, and smile. “Well, I’d love to have you around, Taylor.”

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I know we're talking about help, and I know this is just who she is and how she treats everyone. I've seen it with my own eyes. But, for a moment I let myself believe that she does really want me here.

"Hey." Liv comes barreling through the swinging door out of breath. "I'm sorry I'm so late, I got stuck helping Ryder again."

"No worries." I wave her off and stand from the table, dusting nothing off of my jeans.

"Alright, you girls have fun tonight," Isla says, standing from the table.

I don't know what force of nature prompts me to wrap my arms around her but before I know it she's hugging me back.

"Okay, okay, what's the craziest thing Max has ever done for you?" One of Sophie's friends, Cara, asks.

Everyone around the table is a handful of cocktails deep since we moved the wine and cheese party to The Saloon and Liam declared drinks were on him tonight.

"Well, he—" Her cool sleek black bob does nothing to hide the way she turns fifty shades of red. "He got my name tattooed on his..."

"Dick?!" her sister, Charlotte, shouts.

"What? No. His chest, you idiot." She bats her sister's arm and the table erupts in

laughter.

“So Taylor, you and Knox?” Sophie wiggles her eyebrows up and down while shimmying her shoulders. Oohs and aahs sound off and when did I turn into the girl that blushes?

“It’s—” Fun? Serious? Exciting? I don’t know what it is, honestly. It feels like all of the above, but how can it be when we haven’t discussed what comes next? A long-distance relationship seems absolutely insane, but does staying seem any less crazy? “New,” I finally land on.

“You know, growing up, Knox was every girl in town... what’s the word?” She leans across the table, looking up at the ceiling.

“Please don’t say it,” Liv says, dropping her head in her hands and I’m about to follow suit. I don’t care to know about Knox’s past relationships. I’m probably sitting at a table full of women he’s already slept with. Acid rolls in my stomach and threatens to come up my throat as I look around at all the beautiful and funny women I’ve gotten to know tonight.

“Crush!” she finally shouts, snapping her finger. Her sister and Cara nod their heads in confirmation.

“Oh, thank god,” Liv murmurs.

“I say this because he never gave much attention to anyone—unless they were a muscular man carrying a ball, anyway.” They all laugh, and even though it’s ridiculous to find comfort in something he did or didn’t do fifteen years ago, I find my stomach settling and some of the tension leaving my shoulders. “So to see him all wrapped up in you is nice.” She smiles at me, reaching across the table to pat my arm.

God these people are touchy-feely. I instinctively place my hand over hers. And apparently, I'm becoming one of them.

"This table looks a little lonely. How about a round of tequila slammers?" Liam calls out while setting a tray of shot glasses in front of us.

"We're lonely because you're working our girl Ava to the bone over there and we want her over here with us," Sophie snaps.

"Yeah!" a chorus sounds out. Sophie pounds her fist on the table like a caged animal while Cara and Charlotte boo at him and poor Liam doesn't stand a chance against this group.

His hand rests on the back of Liv's chair where I've noticed she's gone ramrod straight. She's the only one not banging her glass on the table now and I know it has nothing to do with not wanting the model to join us.

He hangs his head with a defeated groan before holding up his hands in defense. "Alright!" he says. "Taylor, don't let these women scare you off. We're not all this insane here." He throws a pointed glance at the girls and his towel over his shoulder before making his way back to the bar.

"Wait, how did I forget that you're actually leaving?" Sophie's lower lip juts out. "I swear in my mind this is just our usual girls' night out."

There's a little tug in my chest at her words because, truthfully, I forget that this isn't my life sometimes too.

"I've still got a week left." I like to think I have a good read on people, I call it my sixth sense. I pay way too close to people's micro facial movements and from the minute I met Sophie, I liked her. But when she pumps her fist in the air like she's

cheering me on for a beer chug, I know right here and now, she's my kind of girl.

"Ladies!" Ava sings, waving her jazz hands as she approaches the table. Her long dark hair is effortlessly smooth down her back, her flawless skin glows even in dim lighting, and she somehow radiates pure joy. The chair next to me is the only seat left but her smile doesn't falter when she has to sit next to me.

"Taylor, right?"

"Yeah," I smile.

"It's nice to finally meet you, I'm Ava."

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“Nice to meet you, Ava. Did you go to school with everyone, too?”

“We went to secondary school together,” she says, reaching for one of the shot glasses. “I booked my first modeling gig at fifteen so I stopped going by senior cycle. Too much traveling to keep up with school.”

“That’s amazing. I’ve always wanted to travel. Liv said you just recently moved back?”

“I’ve been back a handful of times throughout the years, I could never stay away for too long, but yeah. I’m home for good now.”

“What made you decide to come back?”

“You just can’t beat this place, you know? As excited as I was to leave, I’ve always been more excited at the idea of coming home.” I want to tell her she’s corny, and to save her quotes about “Home is a feeling not a place.” But after having lived here for almost a month, I understand. If this were my home—I don’t even let myself finish the thought. I reach over, grab a shot glass, and hold it out to her.

“To finding your way home.”

“No matter where it ends up being,” she counters, raising a knowing brow to me. I throw my head back and my throat closes tightly, burning.

And then I take my shot.

“Say tekilla!” I smile, stretching my arm out to take a picture of Liv and me. “That’s a good one, look.”

“Awe, would you send that to me?”

“Of course.” My head lulls on the seat back behind me as Patrick drives us back to Liv’s house. I open my photo album searching for the other photos I snagged of her tonight. I sit up when I go back a little too far and find the picture I took of Knox with the hammer over his head at the fair. He looks like a dark-haired, flannel-wearing, bearded Thor in that picture. The one before that is a selfie of us at the wedding—my silk green dress pressed up against his immaculate grey suit. I scroll back through some pastry pictures I took to send to Camila, some of the herbs from Isla’s garden house, and one of the many I have of the view from my room. My thumb drags down once more, before a smile tugging at my lips when I find the photo from the day at the cliffs. Knox wears a full toothy grin behind me, while I sit there smiling with a strand of hair floating across my upper lip.

My stomach flutters around all the alcohol at the memory of that day with him.

“So, you and my brother, huh?”

I drop my phone in my lap and my head to the seat behind me. “Is that weird?”

“I don’t think so.” She shrugs. “Especially if that means you’ll be staying a little while longer.”

It’s the thought that I haven’t yet let form completely. Thoughts and ideas bounce around my head with no rhyme or reason and the idea of extending my trip has been on a post-it note somewhere behind all the other thoughts on metaphorical paper.

I don’t have the answers, so I offer her a smile and give her hand a reassuring squeeze

before sending the photos to her.

Knox

“Alright lads, bring it in.” The sun has started setting earlier, and our practice has gone on a little longer today. I can see the steam emitting from the team’s bodies as their sweat and heat mix with the cool evening air. “This will be our last drill for the day, we’re going to practice our T-drills. So grab a partner. One of you is going to start on the cone, and your partner will be on the opposite side. The partner with the pad is going to call out right or left and you’re going to come in from that side. We’re focusing on managing your space and those side tackles here. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Alright. Do one warm-up and two all out before you switch.” They pair off, grabbing their pads and cones and I move off to the sidelines, smiling when I feel my pocket vibrate with what I hope is a text from Taylor.

I used to be the guy with a social media manager running my accounts for me and aside from my group chat with the team and my texts between Dax and Liam, most of the time my phone was off. Now I’m the guy with a premature grin on my face hoping to see a few words from my girl.

My smile turns to a grimace when I see an urgent email from Coach Henderson.

KB,

Haven’t heard from you in a while and I wanted to check in. The league needs to have all their paperwork set here by the end of the week, and we’re still waiting on your forms. I’m sure this is still an adjustment for you but I don’t want you to miss out on this opportunity since I can’t guarantee this position or one like it will be

available again.

Give me a call and you know I'm always here to talk it out with you.

-Henderson

I stand, unmoving against the wind that picks up around me, and I read the e-mail over and over. The truth is, I've thought less and less about that offer with every day that passes. I put it on the back burner with the intention of coming back to it once I knew more about my recovery. Now that I'm here, I can't very well put it off much longer. I think about leaving this town and my family and friends. I did it before and was welcomed back like no time had passed. I like to think I know a little better now though, and that this time would be different. This time I wouldn't lose myself completely in this sport.

I watch the boys switch sides across the pitch and get lost in all the reasons I haven't called Henderson back yet, but out of all the reasons, the one that shines the brightest is Taylor. I might not know what lies ahead for us, and that's on me for not having this conversation with her yet, but one thing I'm certain of is that I don't want to be anywhere Taylor isn't.

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Whistles and low cat calls go off around me and I pocket my phone looking for the source of distraction for the group of teenage boys. Sure enough, when I turn around, I find my perky blonde who thankfully chose to wear a bra today. I snap my head back to the field, eyes narrowed, and the four boys that are catcalling my girl. Immediately, they snap into action. Nolan trips over Brody as they scurry to collect the cones and avoid my glare.

Taylor's steps halt a foot away from me, but fuck that. I pull her in flush against my body, wrapping my arms around her. Her chin tilts up with a sly smile.

"I missed you last night."

"Yeah?" Her smile spreads across her entire face.

"And this morning," I growl in her ear.

"You're so baby girl."

"I don't know what that means, but yes." The little chuckle that falls from her mouth is the sweetest sound I've ever heard.

She takes a step back, eyeing the field behind me before whispering, "Can I kiss you here?"

"I'd like to see someone try and stop you."

Her fingers wrap around my forearms as she pulls herself up on her toes and places

her pillowy soft lips on mine. It's perfect and sweet, and way too short. I guide her with my hand on her lower back over towards the sidelines. "So, how was the night?"

"It was surprisingly... fun."

"You went out expecting to not have fun?"

"I don't really think I was expecting anything. I guess I was just a little shocked at how inviting everyone was. They all treated me as if I grew up here with them." I open my mouth to respond and feel the weight of my phone when it begins vibrating in my pocket. I'd bet my lifesavings it's Coach. "Anyway, most of them said that they would be over for dinner at the inn tomorrow night, so that should be fun."

I nod and can feel my brows pinching together as I try, and bring myself back to this conversation.

"So... are you done here?"

I scratch the back of my neck, looking out at the boys collecting the last of our gear. "Just about, but I have my last physical therapy after this. Meet me at my house in an hour?"

"Works for me, I'm going to go grab a meat pie before Alfie closes."

I cock a brow looking at my watch. "You've got like five hours."

"Nope." She shakes her head, smiling. "He's got a hot date tonight. Closing shop early."

"Really? Alfie, you sly dog."

“Watch out!” I hear the words just as a brown object comes flying into my peripheral. Without taking my eyes off Taylor, I lift my hand an inch from her face, and not a millisecond later, the warm leather of the ball is smacking my skin. Her eyes go wide and her lips part.

“Sorry, Coach,” Nolan says, running up, completely out of breath. “Nice save though.” I toss him the ball and he gets the message, heading the other way.

“Come on, you were a little impressed by that.” I can’t help how the corner of my mouth lifts with a cheeky smirk.

“I would have been more impressed had you stopped it a little further away from my face.”

“It wouldn’t have been scary then, which would have made the catch less sexy.”

“Is that what you call that? Sexy?” I dip my head in the crook of her neck pressing my lips to her soft skin and feel her head drop back and I know she’s smiling. “Alright, Cocky.” She playfully slaps my shoulder. “I’m going to get my food. I’ll see you in an hour.”

“Kiss me again.” I run my nose over hers.

“Hey Coach, got a minute?” I freeze when I recognize Ronan’s voice. Taylor’s soft smile tells me that she understands. Her lips lightly peck my rough cheek before she slides past me, and I watch her take off as I have done so many times over the last few weeks, before I turn to face Ronan.

“What’s up?”

“I just want to say thanks. I uh...” He lifts his hand, scratching the back of his messy

brown hair as he looks around. “That advice you gave me... it helped.”

“Yeah?”

“You were right. Both rugby and Kaylie are important to me. My friends, too.” He gestures back to Nolan and the other boys. “I’m willing to make sacrifices but I’m not going to sacrifice everything to get there.” I stare at the kid in front of me but I feel like I’m a thousand miles away. How could I tell him to not give up his life for a sport while I’ve been sitting here contemplating doing exactly that? Again. Ronan clears his throat looking around. “Anyway, I just wanted to say thanks, again.”

He tosses me the ball and I just barely catch it before he runs off and I’m more confused than ever.

Taylor

Factually, I know we all live under the same sun, but damn, the sun in Ireland hits differently. I swear the golden hues actually have flecks of gold in them. A breeze laced with the scent of primrose floats through open windows, and the sheer forest green curtains twist around the room. Knox’s bedroom is warm and homey, just like the main house. A touch less eclectic, but that’s to be expected from someone who hasn’t lived here in years.

The bold, earthy scent of coffee hits me a moment before Knox enters the bedroom.

“That. Smells. Phenomenal.”

He hands me one of the mugs as he slides back under the covers. Soft music plays out of my phone on the nightstand as we lay here having coffee in bed.

“I like this song, what is it?”

“It’s called Slingshot.”

“It’s nice,” he says, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me in closer to his side.

“It’s my current hyperfixation song.”

“You’re what?”

“Usually when I find a song I like, I’ll listen to that song over and over and over again.” I run my fingers over the tiny strings in the waffle-woven blanket covering us.

“You don’t get tired of it?” There’s no judgment in his voice, only curiosity.

“Eventually I will.” I take a sip of the nutty coffee. “It happens with things other than music too. It’s part of the reason I never wanted to devote myself to a job. I’m terrified of committing to something because my brain tells me I would enjoy it, but only for now.”

“Your mind is fascinating, Taylor,” he says, while his hand brushes up and down my arm. My nose burns and my throat crunches as I swallow down the emotion. I’ve always known my brain worked differently than most peoples, but I also knew there were so many other people out there like me. People who can’t relax all day if they have something as small as dinner plans that night. People that have an overwhelming sense of justice and fairness. People who can’t stand slow talkers. People who buy planners and calendars and never use them—that one might be specific to me, I’m not sure, but I’ve known. I’ve always known certain things I do are because of my ADHD, but It’s not something I hyper fixate on daily anymore. I am who I am, and for a long time, I’ve always been good with that. I wasn’t prepared for how overwhelming it would feel to have someone compliment my mind.

“Okay, what’s the best feeling in the world?” Two coffees later and it’s almost noon and Knox and I have made no attempts to get out of his bed today.

“Easy,” I say. “When you’re on a tropical vacation and you spend the whole day out in the sun at the beach and then you come back to your hotel room to shower and get ready for dinner. The moment before when you’re sitting in your big white fluffy bed, with only a white towel, your skin is tanned, and sucks up all the lotion.” I motion up my arms. “That’s some good shit.”

Knox attempts to hide his smile behind his mug but I don’t miss it.

“Okay, Mr. World Traveler.” I swat his warm, bare chest and a rumble laugh escapes him. “What’s your best feeling ever?”

“Surprisingly, it has nothing to do with traveling.” He takes another drink, pulling me back down to him. “When I was young, like twelve or thirteen, during the summer I would wake up and if the vacuum was going it was the final step that let you know Mum had just cleaned the house. My windows would be open, just as they are now.” He motions to the curtains still blowing in the breeze. “And the birds would be chirping because there were no threats. It was this moment of perfect peace, and you didn’t have to worry about anything for those few minutes. And then Liam and Dax would usually be at my window shortly after, badgering me to get on my bike so we could take off for the day.”

“I can remember a similar feeling.” My voice is distant like I’m back in Camila’s old bedroom, with Amor Prohibido by Selena filtering through from where Mrs. Sanchez would be cleaning downstairs. I clear my throat at the memory. “Okay, how about your favorite smell?”

“Mmm, it’s like what the ground smells like after it rains but mixed with.” His fingers thrust into my hair as he pulls me in closer, dipping his nose to the top of my

head. “Some kind of.” He breathes in deeply, and my heart sills. “Flower, but sweeter.”

“Desert rain and cactus flower.” The words are no more than I whisper as I sit up and look at him.

“Is that what it is? It’s been driving me crazy for weeks.” Pressure builds in my throat and I sit up, dipping my head in an attempt to hide the salty sting lining my eyes.

“That is so much better than what I was going to say.” I choke out a small laugh, and his fingers find my jaw, lifting my face to him.

“Tell me anyway.”

“I was going to say the water on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride.” I laugh, hiding the way I sniff back my tears and his shoulders shake when he lets out a deep rumble laugh.

I look at him now, really look at him. His beautiful brown eyes with a little speck of gold in the top left one. His calloused hand trails up and down my exposed arm, causing goosebumps to erupt in its wake. This morning, in bed with him, gives me those feelings. The feelings we were just talking about, those moments that are so peaceful and so perfect you don’t realize at the moment how badly you’ll yearn for them later. But right now, I know. This is a moment I’ll feel a longing for, forever.

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:38 am

I'm pulled from my thoughts by a pouncing weight around my feet, and I register black hair before meowing.

"Jesus." Knox looks from the open window to the black cat now bumping her head into my leg and I make no attempt to stifle my laugh.

"I told you, she's your cat." I quickly bat away the liquid around my eye and set my coffee on the nightstand.

"She's not my cat!" He drags one of those large palms over his face as his head falls back to the headboard.

"Well, not yet." She crawls up my leg, cautiously and I rub the soft spot between her fluffy ears. "You have to name her first."

"I'm not naming something that's not mine."

"How about Salem?"

"How about no."

"Yeah, you're right, too basic. And you're not basic, are you sweet baby?" She smashes her head into my hand, demanding I keep petting her.

"What about Rose Dewitt Bukater?"

"Nova—" His warning growl doesn't deter me.

“Penny? Neville Furbottom? Mi Hamburguesa?”

“What?”

“It means my hamburger.”

“I’m aware of what it means, Nova. It just doesn’t make any sense.”

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?”

“What?” I notice the slight hitch in his breath.

“My first night here. My last name.” A quiet second passes, and Mi Hamburgusa begins kneading my stomach. She’s definitely not someone’s lost cat, judging by the way her long claws are digging into me. Knox shifts around in the bed, sitting up before he grabs my shoulders in both his hands. His eyes dance back and forth between mine, and he drags one of his rough hands through my hair.

“Taylor, I don’t call you Nova because it’s your last name.” I blink in surprise, but rest my head into his soft touch. “I call you Nova because it’s a name they give to the brightest stars. The ones that appear suddenly out of seemingly nowhere and release the most powerful energy.” The pad of his thumb runs along my bottom lip. “And that’s exactly what you are.” A rapid beating begins in my chest but continues throughout my entire body.

“Knox—”

“I want to ask you something.” I nod my head, too afraid to use my voice. “Have you considered extending your trip?”

There it is.

There's the question we both seem to have been avoiding but seemingly both thinking about.

"Is that something you would want?"

He sits up a little straighter, cupping my cheeks in both of his hands until we're eye to eye. "I'd crawl over broken glass in nothing but my underwear if it meant more time with you, love."

Fuck. I'm so far gone for him that I can't even see the surface anymore.

My hands tremble, but a slow smile spreads across my face. When he says things like this, I believe down to the most cynical parts of my bones that he means it.

"But it's not just about me and what I want. Is that something you would want?"

The truth is, I do feel at home here. I haven't felt the kind of parental love from someone like Isla since I was back in Miami with The Sanches. Even though I actively avoid anything more than surface-level friendships with people, the reality is that I like these people. I imagine saying goodbye to Liv, Sophie, Liam and Dax, hell even Alfie, and for the first time since leaving Camila, I feel a lump in my chest. The idea of leaving Knox physically makes my stomach cramp. Sure, I can be impulsive, but to my core, I struggle with change. When I look into Knox's gold-flecked, pleading eyes, I've never wanted to jump so hard.

I swallow down the fear and blink back the uncertainty. "I could look into it," I say, and the smile I'm rewarded with is the kind that makes the muscles in my chest lift. Like my heart is physically smiling back at him. His hands wrap around my face, pulling me into a deep kiss. A kiss that feels like something more. I melt into him, fingers digging into his bare chest like a safety net. I could stay here wrapped up in him forever, and it's that feeling that gives me the confidence to stay.

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I had to practically shove Knox out the door to avoid being late for practice. After all the words exchanged and decisions made this morning, it was exceptionally hard to pull away from him. But when he went running down the steps to his truck, sweatshirt half on half off and threw his black Sundevils hat on backward, I stood in the doorway, coffee in hand, smiling at his retreating back. It's an image I'll keep with me all morning while I look at flights before heading up to the main house to help Isla start the dinner prep.

I'm in the middle of comparing flights for another three weeks from now, or just canceling my flight altogether and booking a ticket whenever I'm ready, when my phone rings on the kitchen counter. Since Camila and Jonas are the only two people who dare call me, I contemplate sending it to voicemail, but by the third vibration, I've lost my concentration. I get up from the couch, jog over to the counter, and pick it up without even looking.

"Taylor!" the voice beams.

All the blood drains from my face.

"Mom?"

"Oh, are you going to pretend like you don't recognize my voice now?"

"It's not hard to pretend when I haven't heard from you in almost a year."

"Always so dramatic," she sighs.

“It’s not dramatic. It’s the truth.” I walk back to the couch and her voice is a whisper as she ignores me, talking to someone else.

“Taylor, I talked to you a few weeks ago, but if you want to give me a hard time, maybe I’ll think twice before calling again.” I don’t correct her because as petty as I am, I do feel—something—hearing her voice. It’s not a voice I miss, so good doesn’t seem like the appropriate word. “Anywho, I was home for a few days last week and talked to Mrs. Sanchez for a bit, she said you were in Ireland? I won’t even comment on how I have to learn your whereabouts from Elena.” Yes, way to not comment on it. “Taylor?”

“Yeah.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Jesus. Pay attention. What are you doing in Ireland?”

“I’m—I’m taking a vacation.”

“From what? Dog walking? Or did you finally choose a career path? Wait, wait, wait, don’t tell me. I’ll just call Elena and ask her.” She chuckles to herself like she’s sitting front row at a comedy show, and my hand tightens around my phone in a death grip. Caroline and Greg Nova have been traveling African Safari Wildlife Vets my entire life and have known this is what they would do since the ripe age of fifteen. I know this because they love to remind me at every opportunity of how unmotivated I am. I never bothered to correct them that it has nothing to do with motivation and everything to do with fear. Fear of planting myself in a position I won’t be enough for and everyone will see that and let me leave. Or worse, fear of committing to something I’m interested in only to get physically sick of it a few months later. But

admitting that is a million times worse than letting them think I'm lazy, which they love to blame on my ADHD. Not that they've ever taken a moment to learn anything about me or how ADHD affects me, though—if they did they would understand I'm also not lazy, I just get so overwhelmed sometimes to the point that it paralyzes me.

“Taylor!”

“God. What?”

“You wonder why I don't call you. The lion I surgically removed a nail from his paw this morning had more to say than you do.” I look down at my open laptop, and the countdown in red at the top warns me to make a decision. My opportunity to cancel my flight is ticking away. Along with my patience.

“No, Mother.” I stand aggressively up from the couch. “You don't call because you're a terrible parent. You left me at every opportunity possible, and when I wanted to come with you, you said I was better off staying home. What child is better off without their parents around? You've proven to me over and over again that on your list of priorities, I'm nowhere to be found. So no, you don't get to call and complain about not knowing my whereabouts now.” I inhale a deep, shuddering breath, and she doesn't take the time to say anything before I continue. “You want to know why Mrs. Sanchez knows more about me than you do? Because she actually checks in on me, like she has my entire fucking life. And by the way, it wasn't a few weeks ago that you last called. It was thirty-fucking-seven! You know how I know? Because it was two weeks after my birthday. A birthday that you forgot about, again!” I pinch the bridge of my nose and wait. Wait for the regret to take over or wait for her outrage to come, but I'm met with silence.

I take another deep breath and sit back on the edge of the sofa. “I know I sound mad, Mom, but honestly, I don't give a shit anymore. I used to.” I nod my head even though she can't see me and I fight to keep my voice even. “I used to wonder why

everyone else had parents who were home all the time. Or parents who threw them birthday parties, or hell, even a graduation party. I used to watch in jealousy while other kids had parents who moved them into their dorms or when I would see parents and their kids at the wharf on a family vacation. But not anymore. You didn't care enough then, and I'm done caring now." It might be the equivalent of a parent saying 'I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed'. But frankly, I wouldn't know.

"Alright, Taylor." Her cool voice hasn't changed at all. Not a lick of surprise, sadness, understanding, or even anger. "I see I've caught you at a bad time, and I've got to get back now, but I'll call you later and hopefully you'll be feeling better."

Unbelievable. I wasn't expecting some giant epiphany from her or anything but goddamn, getting nothing from her is so much worse than any kind of fight.

"Don't bother." I hang up, tossing my phone onto the coffee table with a loudclank. When I look back at my computer, the time on the clock has run out.

Knox

It was borderline impossible to pull myself away from Taylor this morning. I was running out the door half dressed after I just had her bent over the back of my couch and she was screaming for god to help her before I finally pinched her clit and let her finish.

I pull into the parking lot and make my way out onto the pitch, where Dax and Liam are already waiting for me. Liam is in a wide stance, folded over, stretching his hamstrings.

"Boys." I dip my head in greeting.

"What's the craic, Coach?" Nolan looks between me and my mates.

“I brought some backup to help out today, boys,” I say. Liam smiles a wicked smile beside me. “Practice match. Ronan, Nolan, you’re with me.”

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“Hell yeah.” Nolan smiles, jogging over to me, and Ronan follows.

“Your pick,” I say to Liam, and his jaw falls open. I can tell he didn’t anticipate being on opposite teams when I asked him to come help.

“I get Dax.”

My mouth splits into a shit-eating grin as we pick the rest of our teams.

“Let’s have a game of rugger, boys!” Liam and his team skip off to their side, and I let Ronan take the lead of mine.

My team won 19-12, even after an incredible try by Liam on the other team. He threw himself over the try line and popped up, flexing his chest with both fists in front of him. His team went wild, and in an odd turn of events, I found myself barking out a laugh with my hands on my hips.

Something I don’t think I’ve ever done before while playing rugby.

I drag a towel down my face, addressing the team. “Nice job today, boys. Do a cool-down stretch, and then you’re free to go.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

Dax, Liam, and I make our way over to the sidelines, where Coach Campbell stands with his clipboard.

“Did you see that, Coach? I still got it, huh?” Liam shouts while leapfrogging over Dax.

“You sure got... something,” he says, causing us to laugh.

“Thanks for coming out, boys.” I extend a hand to my mates, and they both clap me before grabbing their bags and heading towards the parking lot.

“We’ll see you tonight!” Liam calls, throwing a hand above his head.

I pull my arm across my chest, stretching out my shoulder.

“How’s the arm?” Coach asks.

I don’t know if it’s the endorphins from playing the game I love or what, but I—along with my shoulder—feel great.

“No complaints.” I smile, rolling my arm in a circle.

“It was nice to see you out there again.”

“It felt even better.”

“I bet.” A smile tugs at his lips. “I heard there’s been a lot of PRs in the weight room this week?” he says as I sit down, taking off my boots.

“The rumors are true.” I look up at him, and the pride in his eyes matches how my chest feels.

“Later, Coach.” Ronan high-fives me on his way by with an uncommon smile spread across his face that Coach Campbell takes notice of. He turns to face me with a raised

brow.

“I helped him out with a little problem he was having,” I say, shrugging my shoulder like it was no big deal. Like I didn’t just get a smile from the team’s perpetual grump. Not only that, but I can’t deny how good it feels to have helped him. I’m sure helping Ronan with his relationship troubles wasn’t what Coach had in mind when he asked for my help, but in the eyes of a seventeen-year-old boy, that relationship is his whole world right now.

“Seems like it’s safe to say maybe you’re a better coach than you thought you’d be.” Sometimes, it’s not all about the drills. My brows furrow as I think back on that first conversation with him.

“Maybe,” I quip.

“Who knows, maybe you’ll do it professionally one day.” I study his face, and something about his words combined with the suspicious look he’s giving me tells me, he knows. “So when will you be leaving?”

“You know about my offer.” It’s not a question. But he answers with a slight dip of his chin. “How?”

“It was a guess. You just confirmed it.” Damnit.

“What do you think about it?”

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“Well, I’m not surprised,” he says, picking up his clipboard. “Everyone knows any of the leagues would bechomping at the bit to get you. And it’s not like I didn’t know this is what you’ve been waiting for.”

Is it though? People keep saying this like it’s a no-brainer, like it’s common fucking knowledge but I can confidently say it was never something I thought twice about. If it were something that I desperately wanted, I would have already packed my shit and been on the first flight out of here.

I didn’t expect to enjoy coaching these kids the way I have. I didn’t expect to fall back in with my family and friends the way I have. I didn’t expect to be able to be close to this sport but okay with not playing it. I didn’t expect to be this happy back here. And I didn’t expect to fall in love with the girl up in the corner room.

I can’t give up everything I have now.

The roar of laughter and conversation could be heard from outside the main house tonight. The entire town is already gathered around the table as Ryder carries in the last serving dish. This dinner is a tradition my parents have had since before I was born. Once a month, my mum cooks an early dinner for the guests, does a quick clean-up, and then hosts a special town feast. It’s a time for the family and friends of Stoney Meadow to get together, swap stories, laugh, and catch up. When I stumble in a little late—after picking apart my earlier conversation with Coach—my chest does a little flutter when I spot Taylor sitting in what has become her usual seat and I feel weightless as I pull out the chair beside her, knowing that’s she’s exactly where she’s supposed to be.

“Nova,” I greet her, dipping my chin to kiss her. At the last second, she turns her head, and my lips smush against her cheek. I blink once before pulling back but she doesn’t look at me.

There's a sinking feeling in my stomach throughout all of dinner and it has nothing to do with the mass amount of food my mom cooked. Group conversations and side conversations take place while Taylor continues to give a weary smile and push her food around her plate. That alone is enough to put me on high alert, I’ve never seen Taylor not thoroughly enjoy eating the food she’s cooked.

“So Knox, I heard you got a call to go back and join your old team?” My dad asks.

I look between Liam and Coach Campbell. Coach pauses, wide-eyed before shoving a spoonful of pork and potatoes into his mouth and Liam watches his plate with intense focus.

“Uh, yeah,” I mumble, dragging my napkin over my mouth and clearing my throat. “They offered me a position with their strength and conditioning staff.”

I actually feel my Adam's apple bob when I swallow, looking around the table. Ryder’s fork is floating halfway to his mouth and all eyes are on me, with the exception of Taylor’s.

“And did you accept it?” my dad asks, either unaware of the awkwardness that's blanketed the table, or he just doesn’t care.

“Not yet.”

“Are you going to?”

I look around the table again at Liam and Dax sitting across from me, with my little

sister between them. I look down at my mom, who's smiling through a light sheen in her eyes. Twenty-plus people gather around this table, all of whom care about where I'll end up, but the only opinion that matters to me is that of the five-foot-ten-inch, green-eyed woman with the heart of a lion next to me.

"Probably not," I say, not bothering to look back at my dad.

"Have you told them that yet?"

"I haven't," I admit. But I'm as good as going to. For the first time in my life, I've been living. I haven't shut the world and the people around me out for rugby. I have the things I told Ronan were so important. For weeks, some part of me has wanted to respond to that e-mail saying thanks, but no thanks. But I haven't responded for the very same reason that I haven't called them back all these weeks. I have to be one thousand percent certain about this decision because, as he so graciously pointed out, I might not ever get this opportunity again. I also want not only Henderson to know but my family as well, so when I did respond, it wasn't without thought.

I cover Taylor's hand under the table with my own, silently telling her I'm sorry I didn't say anything. I'm here. We'll talk about it. I'm not taking it. She pulls her hand up to the table and runs her fingers along the rim of her plate, where they stay for the remainder of dinner.

"Ahhh, Isla," Liam groans, stretching his arms up before dropping one over the back of Liv's chair. "That was incredible, but I'm so full."

"Thank you, Liam. I'm glad you enjoyed yourself." Sophie and Max stand from where they were sitting down by my mum.

"Don't forget, Craic and Clover are playing tonight," Liam says to the table before turning back to me, drumming his index fingers on the table. "You two coming?"

I look to Taylor who hasn't said a word or even looked in my direction all night. A night out in a loud bar is the last thing we need.

"I'm actually going to head up and get to bed early tonight, I'm feeling super drained." Okay, that's the last thing we need. "But you go and have fun."

It's the first words she has spoken to me all night.

"Thank you for dinner, Isla," she says. They exchange a pinched smile as Taylor backs out of her seat and makes her way around the table.

Not for the first time tonight, all eyes are on me. Some questioning, some concerned, but it's Liv's bulging eyes as she flicks her head in the direction Taylor scurried off in that has me jumping from the table and taking the stairs up to her room two at a time.

"Taylor." I catch her just as she fits the key into the lock. She doesn't stop though, and as soon as the door opens, I catch a glimpse into her room and find a pile of clothes covering the chair in the corner, and unmade bed, and the dresser littered with various cups, I know once she goes in there my chances of talking to her are gone. "Wait." I step up, pressing my forearm to the door before she gets a chance to slam it in my face. "What's wrong?"

Stupid fucking question.

"Nothing," she says, not meeting my eyes.

“Is this about my offer?”

“No.”

“I was going to talk to you about it. I was?—”

“You don’t need to talk to me about it, Knox. It’s your business.” Ouch.

“Okay, well, I want to. Come back to my house with me.” I drop my arm from the door and cup her cheek. “Please.”

Her eyes flutter closed for a brief moment before she steals a sharp breath. “I meant what I said. I’m tired. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

With my arm no longer holding the door, she’s able to step out of my reach and close it. Not before I catch a glimpse of the tiny ball of liquid sliding down her cheek.

I hang my head against the wooden door, my fingers scratching against it as if I can claw my way in there. I was so hung up on her staying that I wasn’t thinking about anything else. When I woke up this morning for the first time I had hope. I was crawling out of my skin nervous to ask her, and sure, she didn’t outright say, ‘Yes Knox, I love you, I’ll stay here with you forever’ but ‘I’ll see what I can do’ was a close second, and in the span of one afternoon and part of an evening, I might have fucked that up. I shove both hands through my hair in frustration before turning back down the stairs.

Taylor

Camila

FOUR MORE DAYS! FOUR MORE DAYS!

Sorry. Can you tell I miss you?

Taylor

IMYSASMIAH

Camila

I miss your silly ass so much it actually hurts?!

Taylor

It only took you 20 years to figure me out, but I'm proud of you.

Camila

moonwalks across the kitchen

I look around my cluttered room, and I can't stand it anymore. Has this room looked like this for weeks? Yes. But I don't clean when the space is a mess. I clean when my mind is a mess. And right now, my mind is so fucking fucked.

I gather all my shit into piles and pause when I start folding. Do I put these back in the dresser or in my suitcase? I drop the shirt and dig my palms into my eye sockets, desperate to relieve some of this built-up pressure. I feel like I'm crawling out of my own skin right now.

“Goddammit!” I flip the suitcase across the bed, panting heavily before I sit on the edge. As if Camila can sense something wrong, my phone vibrates on the dresser next to a stack of cups. I don’t have the emotional capacity right now to mask my feelings or to match her energy, so I let it go to voicemail. Once I flop down onto my back, I know I’m overwhelmed enough to the point that I’m not getting back up any time soon.

I wake to a soft rasp against my door. My eyes open but I don’t move other than pulling my pillow tighter to my body.

“Taylor, it’s Knox.” His voice sounds so broken, and a knot forms in my throat, as we both wait for the other one to say something. Each minute that passes, the knot grows, pulling tighter until I can no longer swallow. I couldn’t speak even if I wanted to. Part of me wants to rip the door off the hinges, jump into his arms, and let him convince me that it will all be alright. But the fearful part of me wins out as I continue to lay here until the thud of footsteps sounds, and I squeeze my eyes shut, allowing the heavy tears to leak out.

I wake up to pee, and it’s dark. It seems only fitting that I’m ending my trip the same way I started it—by sleeping the day away and being hungry. I wash my hands and find my phone to find it’s at 2% battery with a voicemail from Camila.

“Chicka Bonita, I was just calling to check in, haven’t heard from you in a few days other than that quick text, which seems suspicious. I guess no more suspicious than me leaving a voicemail, though. Okay, well, just give me a call later and at the very least send me your flight info so I can make sure I’m there to pick you up on time. Okay, that’s it, I lov?—”

I pull my phone away from my ear—dead. Awesome. I don’t bother to plug it in, instead, I sit in the oversized chair in the corner, pulling my legs up to my chest and resting my chin on my sweatpant-covered knees.

Of course, she's wondering about my flight home, I'm supposed to be home in three days. Two days now? I don't even know what time it is, let alone what day it is anymore. I heave a sigh as the heavy feelings from two nights ago wash over me. I was already in a vulnerable mood and not planning on going to dinner, but as I silently helped chop the vegetables with Isla, she unknowingly guilted me by telling me how excited she was that I would be joining my first town dinner. After a nice little trauma dump with my mom, dinner with an entire community of people who regard each other as family was the last thing I wanted to do. I wasn't in the mood but I was willing to explain it to Knox after dinner. This is someone I felt safe enough around that I was ready to tell him why I was so scared, why I had been flighty, and why I gave him the cheek.

It only took finding out that that same someone was potentially leaving for me to shut down. For me to remember exactly why I don't open up to people, why I never wanted to get close to someone, and why I tried avoiding this exact situation from the very beginning.

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I tried and failed at implementing some bullshit rule about how we could keep things casual and just be friends, which looking back, I knew was an excuse.

Because I knew from the moment I met Knox Browning, that falling for him would be the easiest thing I ever did.

I tiptoe down the stairs, knowing that there's no one on the night shift duty anymore—but I also know my way around the kitchen like it's my own. The room feels like an extension of me, like another piece of me. And I have to eat. Now.

I poke my head into the dark room and don't bother turning on the lights when I pluck a fruit from the bowl and turn around to grab a napkin.

“Morning darlin’—”

“Shit!” I throw the fruit up in the air and grab the countertop for dear life. Bringing a hand to my chest to settle my racing heart, I find Isla at the round table in the corner. “You scared me.”

“Sorry.” She winces. “I’ve been doing that a lot lately.”

“What are you doing down here?” I look around the empty room before picking up my food off the floor.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I decided to start my day.” I turn towards the stove, reading the clock, 4:14. “Seems you couldn’t sleep either.” I bite the skin of my lip, rubbing my fruit like it’s a magic lap. “I hope I’m not oversteppin’, but—” She holds her cup of

tea with two hands, lifting it to her mouth and I hold my breath for what she has to say. “If you ever needed to talk to someone, other than my big lug of a son, I’m always around.”

My throat tightens, and I fight to hide how much her words really affect me. I know that part of the reason I was so quick to believe I could stay longer was because of Isla. She’s welcomed me into her kitchen, which has become a safe space for me and we’ve worked beside each other all these weeks. When I think about leaving, it’s not just Knox I’ll miss. When she smiles at me from over the rim of her mug, I blink back tears.

“Was Knox’s offer a surprise to you, too?” I guess I can be glad I’m not the only one he keeps things from. I nod, not trusting my voice, and she mirrors my movements.

“You know, we’ve all loved having Knox home.”

“I can imagine.” I finally speak but I keep my eyes glued on the counter in front of me.

“And, of course, we would be bummed to see him go again, but thankfully, I don’t think we really need to worry about that.”

“You don’t think he’ll leave? Even with how upset he was when he came home?”

“No.” She smiles, walking over to where I stand, unmoving at the counter. “Because as much as we love having him here, I think for the first time, he seems to love it for himself now.”

I want to believe her. I want to believe that I was right to put my trust in him. But even if Knox thinks he can be happy here, be happy with me, what’s to say that he won’t change his mind later?

Knox

I've been sitting on my couch, staring at my own reflection in the black TV for what feels like an eternity. I tried to talk to Taylor yesterday, but after waiting downstairs in the common room all day, my dad finally sent me away like a stray dog. Sitting in my living room, waiting for her to be ready to talk feels like a spiked, weighted hammer bouncing around my chest. It's painful and brutal and agonizing all at the same time.

My front door creaks open, and I quickly comb my hands through my hair, jumping to my feet. My face lifts and then falls just as quickly when Taylor doesn't walk through my door, but my own personal cheer squad does instead.

Liam carries a six-pack under each arm while Dax holds the door open.

"Did you know you have a cat out here on your porch?" he asks before closing it. I ignore the pain in my chest at the mention of the cat and fall back onto my couch.

"What are you two doing here?"

"It's the first time no one has heard from you in a day since you've been back, you didn't think we were going to let you wallow in your little Disney cottage by yourself, did ya?" Liam asks, sticking the bottle cap between his teeth and prying it open.

"Who the fuck said I was wallowing?"

They share a glance and then look down at me. "Ryder," they say in unison before sitting on the other side of the sectional.

I snatch one of the beers up and pop the top on the edge of the coffee table before throwing back half the contents of the bottle.

“Alright, mate, is the elephant in the room about your new coaching gig or Taylor?” Dax asks, but I don’t answer. “Right. I’m going to assume it’s about Taylor then, mostly because I don’t even want to get into you leaving again.” I bring the bottle to my mouth and take another deep swig. “What’s the deal, KB?”

My thumbnail digs into the label around my bottle for a minute before I give up on the silent treatment. “We were talking about her staying longer, but after the coaching position bomb that was dropped the other night,” I throw a pointed glance at Liam, and he holds his hands up in defense. Rationally, I know he didn’t do anything, and none of this is his fault. I just want to blame someone other than myself for a second. I set the bottle on the table and drop my face to my hands with a groan. “I think she got scared.”

“Did she say she’s not staying anymore?” Liam asks.

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“She hasn’t said anything. That’s the problem. She won’t talk to me, and I don’t know where her head is.”

“Listen, mate, we all love having Taylor here.” I whip my head to him with a furrowed brow. “Relax, Tarzan. No one is trying to hone in on your girl. Fuck, you’re sensitive today.”

“I think what the eejit means.” Dax shoves Liam back into the couch. “Is whether she likes it or not, she’s one of us now. She fits in like family, and none of us want her to leave.”

Selfishly I’ve wanted her to stay for me, to have more time with her, and because I couldn’t imagine my life without her. But I’ve seen the way this town has taken to her. Especially my mum. Every day, when I come home, and find them laughing and working together side by side in that kitchen, I can’t imagine her not being here. They both have found something in each other. Taylor belongs here, and not just for me but for herself. If she left, it wouldn’t just be me that she was leaving.

Somewhere along the way, I think Taylor and I found ourselves again here, and the pain in my chest boils over ten-fold at the fear of losing that.

Taylor

I think my attitude willed the weather as rumbling clouds begin to roll in over the hills, and yet, even on its darkest day, this place is still the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen.

I take in all the beauty as I walk down the hill, stopping when I spot Dolly grazing against the fence. I look around for Pinto Bean, but it's just me and the brown mare. I look up at the looming dark clouds but I can't leave without saying goodbye to my girl. I climb up the first rung of the white fence and drag my hand down her coarse mane. She stays still as the wind blows around us in a peaceful moment. She's so strong and powerful yet graceful and divine. I don't know why I'm getting emotional petting a horse.

In the near distance, I spot two more horses heading towards us, carrying Ryder and Olivia on their backs. I groan at how stupid I was thinking I wouldn't run into anyone else out here. Especially considering how ridiculous I look with my comfort sweatpants tucked into a pair of Olivia's rainboots I borrowed. And despite myself, I threw on the butterysoft Sundevils sweatshirt that Knox gave me the first night I left his house.

Confident that they've already seen me since they're heading directly towards me, I know there's nothing I can do except sniff back my emotions and square my shoulders.

"Taylor! We missed you yesterday. Are you feeling better?" Liv asks as they gallop up beside Dolly.

"Yeah, I think a little too much Stoney Meadow fun, finally caught up to me, I guess."

"Maybe if you stay a little while longer you could spread out all your... fun," Ryder says.

I look up at them, and something tells me this has nothing to do with me and Knox and everything to do with the fact that they really do care if I stay here. My throat tightens with more emotion that Knox isn't the only one who cares if I stay or not.

“Anyway, we just came out here to get this one, come on Dolly.” Ryder clicks his tongue and Liv’s sad smile and watery eyes bore into me. “We’ll see you later?”

I pull the corner of my lip between my teeth and nod my head, not trusting my voice.

I stand at the fence a while longer, flooded with memories, and every possible feeling when something soft bumps into my leg. I nearly break down at the sight of Mi Hamburgusa rubbing her head into me. Knox’s house sits right behind the giant weeping willow and I just know she was waiting over there for him.

I crouch down to pet her and hear the unmistakable sound of the truck I’ve come to love and I think if I hustle now, I can make it back up the hill to the main house before he spots me. I turn, pulling the hoodie over my head, and it’s a terrible mistake because the scent of him envelopes me. My knees buckle as his calming scent overwhelms me, and my lips tremble as I begin a fast-paced clip up the hill. A trickle of cold water plops on my cheek, and I can’t tell if it’s finally started to rain or if I’ve failed to keep my tears at bay.

“Taylor!” Knox’s gruff voice shouts, and I know there’s no point in running. I roll my shoulders back and turn around to face him.

“What’s up?”

“What’s up? That’s what you’re going to say?” The water droplets continue to fall onto my face and I’m relieved to see his shirt getting wet, so it’s not just my tears. I try to think of something better to say, but my throat is so tight I can’t even form the words. “Why are you running?”

He steps closer to me and I shake my head, looking away. His familiar hand reaches out towards me. “Why are you running, love?” His voice sounds as fragile as my heart feels. Like both are on the verge of shattering. “Talk to me, please.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Truth.

“If it’s about my offer,” he starts, but I hold up a hand, cutting him off.

“No, Knox.”

“Is it about extending your trip? Do you want to go home?” I don’t respond but my mouth forms a tight line. “If you want to go back, Taylor, tell me.” I bring myself to look at him now. “If that’s where you want to be, tell me and I’ll be there with you.”

It’s not about that at all, but I find myself asking. “You’d come back to San Francisco with me?”

“Taylor, I’d follow you to the end of the goddamn earth!” The crack in my chest could be heard from here to California. “Is that what this is about?”

I drop my head shaking it.

He closes the distance between us, holding my face between his hands. I open my mouth but choke on the lump in my throat. The pressure in my chest is now unbearable. “Then why are you running?”

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My chest pounds so violently it hurts. It physically hurts. “Taylor?—”

“Because I’m scared, Knox!” My voice cracks as a distressed sob rips through me. “I’m scared, okay!?” I suck in a shuddering breath and press my hand to my chest, desperate to relieve some of the pressure.

“What are you scared of?” It’s not condescending. His soulful eyes search mine, and his thumb swipes at where my tears have now broken free, spilling freely over my cheeks.

A laugh void of any humor escapes me as I bite my lip, trying to keep it together. “Talk to me, Taylor. Tell me what you’re scared of so I can fix it.”

“You can’t.” My voice is nothing more than a broken whisper as I shake my head.

“Try me.” The rain beats down heavily between us, I blink against mother nature and the damn now leaking from my eyes. There’s no hiding it, and I succumb to the weight pounding on my tired heart.

“Knox.” My voice cracks. “I’ve fallen in love with this place, this town, your family—you!” I push at his unmovable chest, but I’m unable to step out of his grip.

“That’s a good thing, Nova.”

I shake my head, unable to look at him. “My own parents didn’t even want to stick around,” I think my head is still shaking as if my body is physically trying to reject what I’m saying. “Why should you be any different? I was kidding myself to think

any of this was possible. I can't do it," I cry. "I can't do any of this anymore."

My chest rips open, bleeding out down at my feet as I cry the words out into the rainstorm. The words that have been suppressed into the deepest part of my soul for twenty-eight years. I turn out of his grip and begin running. Mud sloshes under my boots when I run past the stables and every step I take feels heavier than the next. I don't make it halfway up the hill before I feel his comforting warmth behind me.

"Nova—" I make it one more step, and then his hand hooks through the crook of my elbow as he spins me around. His chest is rising and falling, out of breath from running up this hill in the rain, but his eyes are pained. Fearful even. "Taylor, I can't change what happened with your parents. And I won't even pretend to understand it either because I can't for the life of me imagine how anyone could know you and go a second of their life without you by their side. But I can tell you this." He steps into me, covering my body with his, and cupping his familiar rough hands around my face, forcing me to look up at him. "You've made yourself a home here. And I'm not talking about this property, this town, or with these people, even though you've done that too. I'm talking about here." He presses my hand tightly to his chest, where his heart knocks against my palm. "In my heart, in my goddamn soul. You are here, Taylor Nova. And nothing you or anyone else does or says could change that." I choke on a sob that falls out of the deepest part of my throat. "I will never leave you. If you want to be here in Stoney Meadow, if you want to be in San Francisco, if you want to be in fucking Timbuktu." He throws an arm out and something between a laugh and cough falls from my lips. "Wherever you want to be, is where I'll be and I will spend every day of my life reminding you." He kisses a tear that's fallen from my right eye. "Proving to you—" His lips catch another tear on the other side. "That you are worthy of this love." I sink into him, unable to fight against the pull of him any longer. No matter what Knox always feels safe. He feels exciting and fun and keeps me on my toes but he feels grounding and warm. He's understanding and kind and the immovable boulder that steadies my chaotic thoughts and mind.

“What about your job? You could still take it.”

“I turned that down already,officially. Unofficially, I turned it down the moment I saw the offer because I’ve known for a while now that I don’t want to be anywhere you’re not.” He says. “A life without you isn’t a life I want to live.” He brushes another tear away with the pad of his thumb, and I exhale something between a relieved breath and a cry. Not understanding fully but somehow trusting completely. He opens the flaps of his flannel jacket, wrapping me up in his warmth, and his head tips down, leaving a soft kiss on my cool forehead. My eyes flutter closed and I wrap my arms around him, pulling him in tighter.

Trusting.

“Don’t think I missed what you said back there.”

“I was in a blackout.” I smile against his black hoodie.

“Nah, Nova. You can’t take that back.”

“Why not?” I pull back just enough to see his face when he steals my breath in an all-consuming kiss. His lips part mine and they feel like the life raft that I’ve been waiting my whole life for. It’s a kiss that feels like being caught after free-falling for twenty-eight years. Fingers tangle in my now soaking wet hair, where he gently cradles the back of my neck, and the warmth spreads and floods through my whole body.

It stays there when he breaks the kiss, dropping his forehead to mine, and says, “Because I love you too.”

I didn’t need to hear the words to know it, because truthfully nothing in my life has ever felt the way it does with Knox. No one has ever shown me as much appreciation

orever made me feel safe and cherished the way Knox does. No one has ever adored me or protected me the way he does. From the moment Knox held me in his arms at that wedding, his beard sticking to the hairs on my head as he cradled me close, I've felt him falling in love with me.

But I can't deny the euphoric feeling I get hearing the words.

"Of course, you do. What's not love?" I smile at him and his answering growl is like a fire warming my heart.

"Cheeky girl," he says, nipping my bottom lip.

For the next ten minutes, we risk hypothermia as we stand under the willow tree, his tongue exploring my mouth and my lips sucking his. Our hands roam each other's backs just down the hill from the barn we snuck off to so many times. I rub my cheek against his beating heart just a short walk up from his truck where so many of our vulnerable and unexpected conversations took place. And we hold each other soaking in all the words exchanged today and all the words we'll share together in the future.

Mreow. I look down and stumble back. "Mi Hamburguesa!" I bend down, scooping up the little fur ball, holding her snugly in my arms. "See, I was right. She does belong to you."

"No, love." He kisses the side of my head and I don't miss the deep inhale he takes. "She belongs to us."

Knox wraps his arm around me and we leave the willow tree, as we head back down towards his cottage.

"By the way, I like your sweatshirt." The cocky smile that I love tugs at his lips.

“It’s from a boyfriend.”

“Oh, you’re so sentimental.”

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Taylor

After I finally charged my phone and talked to Camila, Knox was ready to move me into his house that night. But with the way everything was changing so fast, I wanted to hold on to my little corner room on the top floor of the main house for a little while longer.

We spent the rest of that day and the entirety of the next one in Knox's bed until he had to go coach a game. I initially felt a little weird tagging along, but I soon found myself in the stands cheering alongside the entire town of Stoney Meadow, all decked out in their Sundevils gear.

I fell more in love with Knox at that moment, watching the pure joy and pride on his face that he had for those kids. It's a look I've become very familiar with.

And the man is hot as fuck.

Jonas

Should I add life coach to my resume?

I set down my flat iron and a laugh bubbles out of me as I pick up my phone.

Taylor

Don't quit your day job.

Jonas

I could never. How would I hear that you were staying in Ireland if I didn't have Miles Cameron to play telephone with?

Taylor

I was going to call you. It was a last-minute decision.

Jonas

But one you're happy with?

Taylor

Beyond

Three little bubbles dance across my screen and I bite my lip waiting for a response.

Jonas

I'm proud of you, Blondie.

My shoulders drop and my eyelids follow. I know I don't need anyone's approval to make this choice, but I can't lie and say it doesn't feel better knowing I have my friend's trust and support.

Jonas

Tell all your single friends I'll be there for a visit this summer.

Taylor

Done.

I take one last look at myself in the mirror and tuck my white tank top into my jeans before grabbing my new moss green oversized fleece cardigan I picked up from another town market a few days ago and have been living in.

I bounce down the stairs and round the corner to find everyone is already seated, and all eyes are on me. Liv is beaming ear to ear, Liam, beside her, eyes me suspiciously, and Ryder dips his chin in a silent greeting. I feel Sophie and Ava's gaze on me as well, but when my eyes catch on those perfect autumn evening eyes, I can't look away. I find my seat and there isn't an ounce of hesitation when Knox slides his fingers through my hair, cupping the back of my head, and plants a searing kiss on my lips. If people are talking, I don't hear it. My eyes close and I smile against his lips. When he finally pulls back he drops his forehead to mine and kisses the tip of my nose. "Hello, love."

"Well, I've never gotten a greeting like that," Liam quips and the table comes alive with laughter.

I right myself in my chair, looking around at the feast prepared tonight but not oblivious to all the questioning eyes still on me. It's no wonder they're curious. I was supposed to leave tonight, and I haven't said anything. There isn't a doubt in my mind that this was the right choice, I just hope like hell they're as excited as I am.

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I clear my throat, place my hand over my cloth napkin, and rub the material in the corner back and forth. Just tell them. They're going to be happy. The back of my neck heats, and Knox's warm, tan hand covers mine. I look at him, and his lips pull up into a smile that matches his eyes. He dips his chin once silently telling me it's okay, and I respond with my own nod. He lifts my hand to his mouth, brushing the lightest kiss to my knuckles before thrusting my fist in the air. "She's staying!"

An eruption of fist banging on the table, and soft claps ring out. Before I know it, Liv is squeezing me from my left and Sophie from my right. Ryder gives Knox's shoulder a tight squeeze, and the girls make their way back to their seats. My smile is pulled so tight it almost hurts, and the relief in my chest is enough to make me cry. Knox drapes an arm around the back of my seat, and I focus my attention on Isla, who holds her hands together under her chin with a slight sheen in her eyes.

"If you have availability, I'd like to extend my stay."

"You need a job, Tatertot? I'm in need of a barback," Liam says.

"Hush, Liam." Isla flicks her hand at him. "She already has a job. With me."

Her smile lines are deep, and I can no longer hold it in. I get up from my seat, with salty streaks dripping down my cheek, and I make my way to the end of the table. Isla scoots her chair out, and I drop down, wrapping my arms around her neck.

"Thank you," I whisper, holding her a little tighter.

She cups my cheek in her hand and doesn't break eye contact when she says, "My

sweet girl, you belong here.”

I blink, and another tear falls. I pull her back in for another hug, and she rubs my back in a motherly embrace.

I am home.

I wipe my tears, moving back to my seat where Knox’s arm is outstretched to me.

“Damn. I really did need another barback,” Liam mutters, leaning an elbow on the table.

“How about Liv?” I point to where she sits across from me and her eyes go wide. “Since you won’t be needed in the kitchen, that will open up some free time for you.”

Liam turns his attention to Oliva, where nothing other than the column of her throat has moved, and he raises that pierced brow at her. “What do you say, baby Browning? You want to come work with me?”

She ignores him, her eyes turning murderous on me, and I hide my smile behind my water glass.

Dinner continues without a lull in conversation, and I stop to look around the table at the family I’ve gained. And then to the man I love, who was able to help me let go of that fear I had carried for so long by giving me a taste of commitment.

Epilogue

KNOX

TWO MONTHS LATER

You would think someone who's been living out of two suitcases in a single bedroom wouldn't have that much to move. Wrong.

I should have known when I had to build exposed shelving in the kitchen for all the coffee mugs Taylor had accumulated over the last three months, that her room was likely overflowing with stuff, too. I can't complain though. I've never been happier than I am when she comes home with a new coffee table book and says, "We needed it." She's made our house a home, and today is the day she officially moves out of her little corner room. I say officially because unofficially, this has been her home since the morning she decided to stay.

I set a box of various vases and bowls on the kitchen table, and Mi Hambuguesa hops up alongside it, head-butting the brown box. I scratch the soft spot between her ears and then head down the hallway to the bedroom. I find Taylor sifting through a pile of clothes on the bed, I stand behind her as she hooks the dainty strap of her green dress onto a hanger.

She drops the garment and turns around to face me, her fingers already working on the button of my jeans. I take a quick glance at the clock beside the bed and decide we have time.

"What's going on, Browning? You've been checking the time all day."

"I've just been waiting for a good time to fuck you in your new house." Her lips pull up as she sits down on the edge of the bed. I cup her cheek and trace her lips with the pad of my thumb. "So fucking pretty, Nova girl."

She looks up at me through a thick fan of lashes as she pulls my thumb into her mouth, her cheeks hollowing out when she sucks it. The sting of her teeth causes my breath to shutter as she rakes them down my finger before dropping me from her mouth.

She lays back on her piles of clothes while scooting up the bed and sliding her pants down, exposing her bare legs and a purple lace thong.

“You’re going to ruin your dress,” I say, pulling out my already hard cock from my briefs and letting my pants fall to the ground. I stroke myself, loving the way it excites her and the way her tongue wets her bottom lip as she follows my hand with her eyes.

“Fuck the dress,” she taunts me with the words she spit at me the first time we did this. Months later and it still somehow feels just as exciting as that first time.

I check the clock once more and lose all restraint as I rip her thong off and push into her in one quick motion.

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Her back arches from the bed as a hissed breath escapes her. I slide into her slow and deep until she's scratching and clawing against my back.

"Knox," she whimpers, her fingers digging in for more.

"I love the way you look on your back, completely exposed for me."

"Yes," she breathes. "More, give me more." A guttural moan reverberates in my throat because I love my needy girl.

"Knees up, love." Taylor's pussy clenches my length as she lifts her legs and squeezes them against my torso. Her fingers run through my hair as she cries out my name and I rock back and forth, knowing damn well I'm hitting that spot hidden so deep inside her.

"Yes!" she wails. "Oh god?—"

I drop my mouth to her, covering her cry with a searing kiss as the heat licks up my spine and we're both moaning as the release hits us.

I hold myself over her, as our breathing ebbs and flows, her hair sticks to a light sheen of sweat in the crook of her neck, and I press the strands away before kissing that pulsing spot. I'm hit with my favorite scent. The one that's brought me so much comfort over the years. The one she calls desert rain and cactus flower. The one that can only be described as her.

TAYLOR

Knox comes back into the bedroom with a warm washcloth and glides it between my legs.

“I know getting up is probably the last thing you want to do right now, but we do need to get dressed,” I groan, rolling over, clutching the pillows closer to my naked body. “Here, these should make it easier.” Knox lifts my sweatpants from the corner of the bed and begins sliding them up my legs.

“Is there a reason for this?”

“Yes,” he murmurs while kissing the top of my head.

“What could poss—” My words stop, and my head whips to the front of the house, where a honking sounds. I look to Knox, who says nothing but nods his head toward the door.

I throw on one of his hoodies while hesitantly walking to the front door.

My lungs collapse and my eyes bulge out of my head. I pray my legs hold firm as I run down the porch steps and Camila leaps into my arms. Her unruly dark hair sticks to the tears that have immediately fallen from my face and her legs wrap around my waist as I squeeze her and we make sounds that are undoubtedly concerning the men watching us.

But we don’t care.

Our souls are together again.

I might be the only person in the world who has loved moving day.

Camila and I sit out on the porch swing, huddled under a blanket, watching the sun

dip behind the mountains.

“So what do you think?” I ask.

“About the view?”

“All of it.” After we pulled ourselves together and gave quick introductions, we gave Camila and Miles a tour of Emerald Browning Cottage before dinner.

“I think.” She sits up, looking at me. “It’s almost as perfect as you.” Her voice cracks and her lips wobble and I feel the sting start behind my eyes. “I love that you found someone to capture your wild heart, Tay. Of all the places I’ve been in my life, being on the receiving end of your love has always been my favorite.”

The tears fall, freely, and I pull my deep-feeler girl back into me, holding her in one of my bone-crushing hugs.

“Whether here or there. Then or Now. You know the deal,” I choke out.

“Whisky and Risky forever, baby,” she cries alongside me.

My throat might burn but my heart is so full.

Bonus Epilogue

THREE YEARS LATER

Source Creation Date: July 8, 2025, 2:38 am

Cows Come Home plays through the Bluetooth speaker as I alternate between dancing around the kitchen and chopping my vegetables. Every so often, I take a peek out the bay window to the front yard, where Knox and Dax are playing a game of rugby with some of the kids who have come home on their break from school. While our daughter, Mila, with her unruly dark hair, sits with her grandparents on the porch swing, clapping her chubby little hands.

Liam enters the kitchen and pours himself three fingers of whisky, and I get back to preparing dinner. He stands at the window, but his eyes aren't focused on the 2v2 game going on on the lawn—they're distant. He takes a sip of his drink and rubs the back of his neck. "Liam?" He practically jumps out of his skin when he turns to face me.

"Hmm? Sorry. What?"

I pull my lip between my teeth, attempting to hide my smile because only now do I recognize his weird jumpy reactions for what they are.

"This wouldn't have anything to do with Liv coming home today, would it?" I eye him from under my lashes as I dice some potatoes.

"Oh, is that today?"

"It's only the whole reason we're having this dinner tonight." I smile sweetly.

"Hmm." He shrugs. "I didn't realize." He lifts his glass to his mouth and I slam my knife on the butcher block counter and jump with a squeal.

“Eeeep! There she is!” I squeal.

Liam chokes. Absolutely hacking. Pounding his chest, wide-eyed looking around. “Is this you not being nervous?” I tease him.

“You’re an asshole, Tatertot,” he says, pointing a firm finger at me.

“Watch your fucking mouth when you’re speaking to my wife,” Knox growls from the swinging door and I can’t help but giggle at Liam, who’s almost drowned in his own drink, and at Knox, who is just as overbearing as he was the day I met him. When he towered over me in the room just behind this one and lured me into his charm, his wit, his kindness, and his undying devotion.

“I’ll be outside, not waiting for anything in particular,” Liam says, lifting his glass to me as he exists.

Knox crosses the kitchen, looping his fingers into the band of my apron, pulling me flush against his body.

“What are you doing?” I ask, brushing my nose across his.

“I just missed you.” His lips press to my nose, to my cheek, down my jaw, and finally on my lips. “I had to come in here and steal one of these.” His mouth covers mine again.

“Where’s Mila?” I ask between kisses, looping my arms around his neck.

“Dad and Ryder took her down to the stables.” He lifts me by my hips, sitting me on the countertop. I’m positive he wasn’t paying attention and my jean-covered ass is now sitting in a pile of flour but I can’t bring myself to care as he continues to press his lips—and now hips—into me. I stare so deeply into his eyes that I think I can see his soul.

“What?” he asks through a smile.

“Sometimes I just have to pinch myself,” I say with a slight shake of my head.

“Sometimes I wonder how I got this lucky. How I ended up in this perfectly messy, loud, and beautiful place we call home.”

“You did that.” He kisses my nose. “You created this life for us. It wasn’t an accident, Taylor. It was you.”

“It’s like a never-ending adventure,” I whisper.

“Isn’t that the point of it all?” His forehead brushes against mine. “To live a life so full of love that it feels like your greatest adventure?”

My lips turn up even as I press them into him because he’s right. I came to Stoney Meadow looking for an adventure, and I found myself a home.