



Shifting Gears

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Category: LGBT+

Description: A spicy, small-town, opposites attract lesbian romance about learning to let go, no matter the cost.

Workaholic Eleanor Cromwell blows into rural Canada, laser focused on her real estate development project. Given the locals already hate her father's company, she plans to hide away in a cabin and conceal her identity to get the job done. And then her car breaks down...

Sweet, smart, goofy mechanic Dani Cooper is about as laid-back as they come, all rumpled flannels and cheeky grins. Meeting an uptight, out-of-town stranger sparks more than just a tire change.

What starts as a whirlwind summer fling might turn into something more...except Eleanor's secret threatens to tear everything apart.

Total Pages (Source): 22

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

The intercom on Eleanor's desk crackles with her assistant's voice for the fourteenth time today—Eleanor's been counting, making a frustrated mental mark every time it interrupts her train of thought.

“MissCromwell?“ Your three o'clock is here.”

“Send them in,” Eleanor says absently. She doesn't lift her eyes from the report she's trying to focus on. She's been trying to reread it since lunchtime in preparation for tomorrow's board meeting, and with the frequency of today's interruptions, her progress has been irritatingly slow.

Words like underdeveloped land and potential for growth catch her attention. Even as Kayla and Ashwin stride into her office, she keeps reading. They can wait a minute or two.

Manufacturing operations in Bracken County, Ontario, were closed by CromTech CEO Robert Cromwell in 1996 in favour of outsourcing. Land was not sold due to depreciating value.

Eleanor chews at her lip. Her father probably hadn't thought twice about shutting down 45 percent of the jobs in a region in one fell swoop, causing widespread unemployment on a whim. It had saved him money. But now it's presented Eleanor with the perfect opportunity. Underdeveloped land still owned by CromTech with potential for growth is just what she needs.

No surveying has been undertaken, but aerial maps show—

Kayla's manicured hand waves in front of the page. "Earth to Eleanor?"

"Just a minute," Eleanor mutters, batting it away.

She hears Ashwin's low chuckle. "Even when we book a meeting as her executives, she doesn't have time for us anymore."

Eleanor sighs. It takes a concerted effort not to roll her eyes, but she tosses the report onto her desk for the moment, giving her full attention to her friends turned business partners. They're standing on either side of her desk. Ash is tapping his foot anxiously. Kayla's arms are folded like a disapproving mother.

It's only when there's no hope of escape that Eleanor realizes she's being ambushed.

"Eleanor. Honey," Kayla says in the kind of soft and careful voice a person might use when approaching a feral cat, "you're working yourself to death."

Ashwin has his worried face on, the one where his thick, dark brows almost knit together. Eleanor remembers it well, having seen it at least weekly in university when he'd tried valiantly to be the fake boyfriend she needed to convince her father she wasn't a total disappointment.

It had benefited both of them, in her defense—he needed the cover as much as she did at the time, though his closet door had always been pretty transparent. His family had been ready to buy Eleanor a ticket to Mumbai for an engagement ceremony by the time she and Ash agreed the arrangement had run its course.

Eleanor's affection for Ash's expression—one as familiar to her as her own reflection—is tempered by her annoyance at the subject matter he and Kayla are bringing up.

“I’m fine. This really isn’t the best time to discuss it,” she says, pulling up the agenda for tomorrow’s meeting on her laptop while they continue staring. She might be giving the presentation of her career in the morning, and her friends chose today of all days for an intervention. Tomorrow needs to be perfect. She needs to get it right.

“I know for a fact that you’ve slept at the office three times this week,” Kayla fires back.

Eleanor slams her laptop closed. “How did you—”

“Even your assistant is worried about you.”

The distant whirr of the printer on said assistant’s desk is extra audible in the awkward silence the room has descended into.

“I’m fine,” Eleanor repeats, knowing even as she says it that her friends won’t believe her.

“Kayla is right.” Ash leans against Eleanor’s desk and crosses his ankles together. His coiffed hair is a little unruly, as if he’s run his hands through it. “Ever since you took over as CEO, you’ve been running yourself into the ground. Your blood pressure is high, you’re losing weight. You never stop working. You have no social life.”

“I don’t need a social life,” Eleanor interrupts. “I never have. You know that better than anyone.”

Ash and Kayla roll their eyes in tandem. Eleanor studiously ignores them.

It’s Kayla who finishes Ash’s point—he’s always had less stamina for arguments. Kayla is unmatched in her stubbornness; Eleanor’s known this since they were

teenagers. She'd been the queen of one-woman protests back then, outlasting their private school administration over everything from inadequate course offerings to the gendered dress code. "You barely sleep, we never see you eat. You're going to make yourself sick. Just like your father."

Eleanor nudges her untouched salad container and three empty coffee cups to a less visible spot on the desk. She's forgotten to eat lunch yet again, focused as she's been today on preparing. Her friends might be right, but that doesn't change the reality of the situation: Her father is gone. He passed the company to Eleanor, for better or for worse. When the options presented to her five years ago had been to either liquidate his shares or abandon her beloved position in Research and Development to take on his CEO role, Eleanor's heart and mind had pulled her in opposite directions.

Sure, Eleanor misses using her brain for more than just PR and profit margins, but she's never been one to disregard the logical solution for the emotional. She took up this mantle, heavy as it is. She even managed to poach Kayla and Ash from their respective careers in corporate real estate and investment banking to shore up her executive team.

Though at times such as this, Eleanor occasionally regrets the choice to hire her friends.

"I've put everything into this company. I didn't ask for this, but it's my life now," she says. "What do you expect me to do?"

Kayla's answer is so quick and definitive that Eleanor is sure she and Ash have rehearsed this exact conversation.

"Take a break."

For a few seconds, the sentence doesn't fully process. When it does, it strikes Eleanor

as completely ludicrous. “Very funny.”

“Every CEO I know besides you takes a summer vacation. Your father used to take several.”

Kayla’s point is one Eleanor must concede. While Robert Cromwell was the hardest worker Eleanor has ever known, five times out of ten, if Eleanor needed to contact him, he was working out of a villa on some Caribbean island with his wife du jour. He rarely seemed to be actually enjoying himself, though, instead spending the whole trip glued to his phone or computer deep into the night.

But the point stands.

“Executives are like schoolchildren,” Ash pipes in with a wry smile. “If schoolchildren got overwater bungalows in the Maldives.”

“You want me to go to the Maldives?”

“We want you to go literally anywhere that isn’t here,” Kayla says. “Leave us in charge and disappear somewhere for a few weeks. We can spin whatever story you need us to—just go take care of yourself for a change. Please.”

It’s the most earnest Eleanor has seen her best friends in a long time. Even Ash, the perennial jokester, is looking at Eleanor with an uncharacteristically serious expression. It’s almost enough to make Eleanor consider their proposal.

Almost.

“You’re both being ridiculous.” She pushes her chair out and brushes past Kayla, snatching her laptop and the abandoned report as she goes. She has a presentation to finish; with Kayla and Ash occupying her office, she’ll have to work in the

conference room.

“Eleanor, you’ve only been running this company for five years and you’re going grey!” Kayla follows Eleanor to the door with Ash trailing behind. “You’re barely thirty! You can’t keep going like this. You’re going to burn yourself out.”

Eleanor runs a self-conscious hand through her long hair. She’s been noticing the occasional silver thread amongst the dark strands lately, but going to a salon is dead last on her list of things to accomplish. She pushes through the door, grabbing blindly at the paper waiting in the printer. “My hair colour really isn’t your problem, Kayla. I have work to do.”

“Think about it, will you?” Ash shouts after her.

Before the door swings closed behind Eleanor, she hears Kayla’s weary sigh and a snippet of their conversation.

“What are the odds on a nervous breakdown before the end of the year?”

“I’d say one in three,” Ash mutters.

* * *

Eleanor doesn’t sleep at the office that night. She’s not sure going home will give her any brownie points with Kayla and Ash, considering she ends up holed up in her home office over half-eaten takeout instead, but she makes an effort.

This presentation is more important than most. Though she’s been shot down and undermined by her own board of directors on the subject for as long as she’s brought it up, Eleanor has been wanting to branch CromTech into sustainable eco-technology for years. The problem, as always, is funding. Research and development are

expensive in new and untested industries, as the board constantly reminds her.

Before she can push for this passion project, she needs a profitable venture to fund it—a distraction with a big enough profit margin that even her father might have approved.

Eleanor would much rather be on the design team she's trying to fund than spearheading the funding effort itself, but if she can make this new project profitable enough, maybe she can at least get the satisfaction of finally watching her work blossom, though from the sidelines. She can make her mark in a CEO position she's never felt she's deserved, point the company in a new direction, and earn even a fraction of the respect her father commanded.

This presentation needs to be watertight.

Eleanor is putting the finishing touches on her PowerPoint when her phone starts to buzz. The name flashing across her screen is familiar, if perplexing.

"It's been a long time since you called me in the middle of the night," Eleanor says in lieu of greeting.

She's met with a light laugh.

"Hello to you, too," Lydia drawls. "I've always appreciated the way you skip the pleasantries and get right to it."

"If you're calling for the usual reason, I'll cut you off at the pass." Eleanor tucks the phone into her shoulder and continues to fuss with the wording of her bullet points. "I still don't have time."

"Not even for a quick backslide with an old flame? I heard you could use some stress

relief.”

Eleanor’s fingers freeze over her laptop keys.

“Heard from who?”

“Ash might have sent me a message.”

At this hour, Lydia is probably leaving a party downtown. Fitting Eleanor in between social commitments, as usual—Eleanor’s condo is close to her usual stomping grounds. Heels are clicking on expensive floors in the background of the call, and Lydia covers the receiver to call out to someone in Vietnamese while Eleanor considers how best to punish Ash.

She presses her fingers to her temples. The slowly forming headache she’s been fighting for a few hours is worsening, and she grasps for the nearest bottle of ibuprofen. “Of course he did. What did he offer you to show me a good time?”

“Nothing. It was more a gentle encouragement. He’s worried about you.”

“You’re not going to start caring about my feelings now, are you? After all this time?”

“No. I appreciate our relationship for what it is,” Lydia says with a low chuckle. “But I can’t stop them from worrying.”

Eleanor takes a swig of cold coffee to accompany the painkiller, wincing at the bitter aftertaste. “Ash needs to learn that not everyone fixes their problems with sex.”

“It’s a winning strategy in my book,” Lydia says. Eleanor has always valued her matter-of-factness, along with her discretion. “It’s not serious, Eleanor. Just a night of

fun. That's what we do."

Eleanor sighs. Her casual, businesslike arrangement with Lydia is the closest thing to a steady relationship she's had since university, and yet even such a simple and strings-free physical agreement had been too much of a demand on Eleanor's time. They'd decided amicably to take a break months ago, though Lydia had assured her that the bedroom door was always open.

As satisfying as a bit of uncomplicated sex might be right now, the last thing that Eleanor needs on the night before her presentation is a distraction.

She lays her head down on the desk, closing her eyes and waiting for the faint imprint of her computer screen to fade from her retinas. "It's tempting, truly, but I have a lot going on. I really don't have the energy."

"Can't say I didn't try."

"This is getting ridiculous," Eleanor mumbles. "I'm fully capable of managing my own stress."

"You should talk to your friends if you want to scold someone," Lydia says, reliably disinterested now that sex is off the table. "Just let me know if you want to hook up, okay? You know my number."

The line cuts out, and in the ensuing silence, Eleanor decides that it's high time she went to bed.

* * *

The board meeting is just shy of catastrophic.

It's been this way since the beginning, in fairness. Eleanor's father had shocked everyone when he left his majority shares in CromTech not to any of his trusted business partners or even his newest wife—all of whom sit on this very board—but to his daughter. He'd encouraged Eleanor to pursue an advanced degree in business when his health started to decline, but he'd given no other indication of his intent.

Five years later, Eleanor has fought tooth and nail just to get her father's group of disapproving middle-aged men to listen to her. That fight has always been an uphill battle against tradition and profit, and it's only been getting harder.

"Since when are we an electric car manufacturer?" Renée Cromwell snaps the moment Eleanor's pitch ends. While she's technically Eleanor's stepmother—the last in a line of six such women over the course of Eleanor's life, each more distasteful than the last, and still clinging to her married surname—the fact that Renée is only a few years Eleanor's senior has always made their relationship difficult.

She's been Eleanor's biggest adversary at every board meeting since the beginning. Renée had tried to buy her late husband's shares early on, and Eleanor's decision to keep them and take on the CEO position herself had cracked a rift between them that has only grown over the years. In contrast to some of her father's previous wives, Renée is ambitious and sharp, armed with a business degree, and backed by a worryingly large section of the board; Eleanor isn't sure how Renée managed it, but she suspects a combination of blackmail and pure force of personality.

"Not vehicles," Eleanor explains with as much patience as she can muster given her lack of sleep last night. "I'm proposing we branch out into more sustainable transportation and fuel solutions. Carbon reduction. Biostimulants."

Renée scoffs. "The environmental sector in Canada is a money pit."

"But it has potential," Ash says. "There are tax benefits and subsidies. We've entered

into new markets before. Diversifying is an important—”

“There’s diversifying, and then there’s throwing away time and cash on electric cars.”

Eleanor breathes out slowly through her nose. “Like I said, cars are only one corner of the market. I’ve been working on new types of recycled biofuels, as well as on integrating other sustainable energy and transport solutions.”

“ You’ve been working on it?” Renée sneers. “Another one of your vanity projects?”

“A joint effort with the R&D department,” Eleanor says sharply.

Kayla’s voice cuts through. “Maybe you can’t come up with an original idea to save your life, but Eleanor has every right to present her own projects. She’s a fully qualified engineer.”

Kayla and Ash are usually Eleanor’s only backup in these meetings. Kayla has always been the ambitious one in their little trio, pursuing her degrees voraciously and fitting into the business mould more easily than Eleanor ever did. Ash always sat in the middle, mostly relying on charisma and good connections, and Eleanor has always been the brains, the quiet one. She’d never wanted to get tangled up in the kind of corporate hell that’s become her day-to-day. Even though Eleanor practically sprinted away from Ash and Kayla yesterday, she’s grateful for their presence now.

A few suits in the room shift in discomfort, but only Renée speaks up.

“And how are you suggesting we fund this?” Renée asks, not even bothering to open up the folder on the table in front of her where she might have found that information. “Saving the environment is very noble and all, but how are we supposed to absorb those costs?”

“If you’ll turn your attention to the presentation I’ve provided,” Eleanor says, gripping the remote with a tight fist, “I’ve outlined a possible solution.”

Eleanor’s PowerPoint flickers to life.

“CromTech used to operate nickel mines and manufacturing plants in Bracken County, Ontario,” Eleanor continues slightly more loudly as Renée opens her mouth again. “The region experienced an economic depression after we started outsourcing instead. We still own a large parcel of property there. It’s worth next to nothing right now, but with some work, we could buy up the cheap land around it, develop it all to increase value, and sell at a major profit. Those gains would easily fund the R&D projects I’m proposing.”

“Rural real estate development is your solution?” Renée interrupts yet again. “We’re a tech company. In Toronto.” But the rest of the room seems to have perked up at the words major profit.

“Kayla was one of the best developers in the city before she came to CromTech. She’s been instrumental in the planning phase,” Eleanor says, confident at least in this part of the proposal.

“And how do you think the locals will respond to us swooping in? Do you think we’ll be welcomed with open arms?”

“There are, of course, potential issues if the locals still hold a grudge, but I think it’s at least worth looking into. Surely the betterment of the county will be their priority, no matter who’s responsible.”

“How do we determine that? Are we sending someone to do street interviews?” Renée says snidely.

This meeting is turning into a one-on-one duel. Eleanor gathers what remains of her patience.

“I’m proposing a motion to conduct a feasibility study,” she says through gritted teeth. “We send someone to the area for a few weeks to do a preliminary survey and a cost/benefit analysis of renovating the property. They’ll draw up a development proposal and create a report to present in quarter four.”

“Seconded,” Ash says quickly, before Renée can attack. “All in favour?”

Just over half the board raises their hands. Renée looks sour, but the numbers speak for themselves.

“Seven for, and six against,” Eleanor says wearily. “Motion passed.”

The meeting wraps up soon after. Everyone files out, Kayla and Ash included, but Renée takes her time gathering her things. Usually when she dawdles, it’s because she wants to scold Eleanor for something—last time it had been a critique of her clothes, the time before, a short and insufferable lesson about presentation etiquette—but this time Renée simply swings her purse over her shoulder, knocking Eleanor’s coffee cup across the table.

Eleanor doesn’t move to clean it up after the click of Renée’s heels has faded. Instead she leans forward on the table, hands planted, and watches the dark liquid creep across the lacquered wood. In it, she can see her own wavering reflection.

Ash and Kayla are right, to Eleanor’s chagrin. She does look tired, even under a layer of makeup. Whether caused by stress or by pure lack of sunlight, her pale skin is pastier than ever, and the contrast with her dark hair throws the bags under her eyes into stark relief.

She looks uncomfortably similar to the way her father did in the last few years he headed this company. Run-down. Exhausted. Miserable .

Eleanor should be thrilled that her proposal was approved, even if only by a slim margin. The first step in her plan is complete. Instead there's a lump in her throat as she stares down at the physical proof of her stress. It's an insistent ball of tension and anxiety, rapidly threatening to turn into the breakdown Kayla and Ash predicted, and she's running out of energy to swallow it down.

"Well, that was painful," a voice rings out.

Eleanor jumps, whirling around and finding Kayla. She's standing in the doorway, offering Eleanor a handful of napkins.

"More so than usual," Eleanor admits. She clears her throat, tossing the napkins onto the coffee and letting it absorb. "But I know my green-tech projects are a hard sell. I need to throw the board a financial bone first."

"Development takes time. A lot of time. You won't be seeing profit for years."

"I know," Eleanor sighs. "Right now the bigger problem is finding someone willing to go to the middle of nowhere to do this feasibility study."

Kayla sweeps the soaked napkins off the table and into a garbage bin. Her smile is far more confident than Eleanor feels.

"About that: Ash and I have an idea."

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“That’s the last of it, MissCromwell.”

The sweaty man in charge of the moving crew closes the truck, gesturing for his co-workers to climb into the cab, and Eleanor relaxes incrementally. The morning has been loud and a little overwhelming with the loading and unloading of boxes and the long drive from the city. She’s looking forward to a bit of solitude.

“Thank you,” Eleanor says, politely ignoring the dampness of the hand he extends. The handshake is brief, at least, and Eleanor resists the urge to wipe her palm afterward. “I appreciate all of your hard work.”

What Eleanor wishes more than anything is for this conversation to be over. She’s paid them and the job is done, and now he’s trying to make small talk when all Eleanor wants is to go inside, lock the door, and not interact with another human for as long as possible. It’s a great relief when he finally climbs into the truck and trundles back down her long gravel driveway.

Once the smell of truck exhaust has eased, Eleanor takes a deep lungful of clean air. The May warmth around her is nice without being too hot, there are birds chirping, and she can hear the soft sound of the nearby water lapping at the shore behind the house. Besides that, no other sounds permeate the woods—no car horns, no wailing sirens, no loud voices.

It’s quiet.

This whole endeavour feels a little hare-brained. Kayla and Ash theorized that the only way to force Eleanor to take a vacation would be to give her a project to do

while she's away, and the need for someone to do a feasibility study presented the perfect opportunity. Eleanor had agreed not because she intends on vacationing but because it's as good a way as any to make sure this gets done right . If she's going to succeed in her goal of pushing her environmental projects through, she'd rather oversee every step of the process than leave it up to someone who might screw it up.

The house she's decided to rent is rustic and simple, a reddish-wood-cabin exterior with a bright and lofty open-concept design on the inside. The large windows at the back face a gorgeous bay fed by a wide river. The property is mostly engulfed by woods, and the back porch has a long set of rickety stairs leading down to a small private dock and an empty boathouse. It's also stunningly isolated. The closest neighbouring house is several kilometres down the road in either direction.

Eleanor toured dozens of similar cottages while she prepared this trip. For some reason, this is the one that stuck. There's nothing particularly special about it, or about Riverwalk, the closest piece of civilization to the house she's renting. In fact, the town is completely, totally unremarkable. It looks like it never quite left 1998 and probably saw its peak in the '80s. Around the time, in fact, that CromTech still operated in the area. It has potential, though. Before she's even started her study, Eleanor can imagine a dozen improvements that could make life better here.

It's small and anonymous and perfect. An ideal place to disappear.

* * *

Eleanor's transition into her newfound isolation is bumpy at first.

At Kayla and Ash's prompting, and despite what she'd told herself about using this trip for work, she gives herself some time to relax before she plans to start her survey, but by the end of the first day, she comes to the realization that she might have forgotten how . She sits in the fresh air, tinkers with old research and designs she

hasn't had time to look at in years, and cooks for herself rather than living on takeout, but by the third day, the guilt of such prolonged unproductivity is eating her alive.

Since this trip is supposed to be a vacation with a small project to keep her busy, there are no meetings for Eleanor to attend. No day planner, no phone ringing off the hook, nobody knocking on her office door. She doesn't even need to leave the house for a few days, and yet she still calls Kayla or Ash every few hours to check up. She insists on being kept in the loop, now filling her usual working hours with research on local construction or pricing labour and materials.

Even so, it feels good to have a routine that doesn't involve sleeping at the office. Every day, Eleanor wakes up to the warm, yellow-painted walls of her new bedroom, makes coffee, and has breakfast on the porch overlooking the sunrise on the water. She works until her body protests as per usual, but she falls asleep with a book in her hand instead of at her laptop.

It's a comforting little cycle. It's significantly healthier than her routine back home, at least, with much less human interaction, and that's enough of an improvement.

As much as Eleanor enjoys her solitude, it's only so long before she needs to leave it. She's running low on food by the start of the third week, and so, armed with a credit card and a grocery list, she ventures into Riverwalk.

The supermarket is tiny, all fluorescent lights and linoleum flooring that looks like it's been there for generations. Eleanor explores it aisle by narrow aisle, lamenting the limited produce selection, and once she's filled her cart, she checks out with the only available cashier—a bored-looking teenager chewing gum with gusto as she expertly zips Eleanor's groceries across the scanner.

The girl is only halfway through the cart when, out of nowhere, she points at Eleanor's hands, her tone startlingly accusatory.

“You a fan of CromTech?”

Eleanor’s stomach drops.

“What?” Eleanor glances down at where the girl is pointing—where she has her wallet in one hand and her keys in the other. She’s infinitely grateful that nobody else is in the store on a Monday morning. The last thing she needs is to fumble this impromptu interrogation in front of an audience.

She’s already regretting leaving the house.

“Your key chain says CromTech,” the girl says, glowering at her as she types in the code for Eleanor’s tragically unripe bananas. “That company’s a sore subject in Riverwalk.”

“Oh,” Eleanor says, swallowing past the tumult happening in her stomach. She tucks her keys into her purse, branded key chain and all. “No. I...got it for free. They give them out at conferences.”

It’s not a total lie—it is the same key chain CromTech uses at tech fairs, and Eleanor put it on her keys so long ago that she’d completely forgotten it was there. She could kick herself for forgetting to remove it.

“Yeah, well, half the town lost their jobs because of them,” the cashier says, shoving Eleanor’s groceries toward her. “Lost their homes, lost everything. Piece of advice—if you don’t want people to assume you support ’em, take the key chain off.”

“Right,” Eleanor says. She takes her bags quickly after tapping her card, giving the girl a polite nod as she prepares to bolt. She’d known that the company might be less than beloved here, but this level of dislike, even so many years later, is unexpected. “I will. Thanks.”

Eleanor rips the key chain free as soon as she's in the car. She shoves it into the glove compartment under a pile of napkins, making a mental note to add a line to her report— PR intervention needed.

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After restocking her pantry and fridge and taking a little time to calm down from the confrontation, Eleanor sets out on her first preliminary inspection of the area.

The county is even more beautiful than she first thought. The forests are blooming in the late-spring weather, and she even drives with the windows down to breathe in the fresh air until a stray wasp flies through and she spends ten minutes shooing it out of her back seat.

From the aerial maps Eleanor has studied, three old manufacturing buildings remain on the land that CromTech still owns. Two are abandoned but intact while the third and closest to Riverwalk seems to have been damaged at some point and is mostly just the foundation. A sale record shows a huge parcel of land nearby that was bought by a foreign development company ten years ago before it was abandoned. It might end up being a useful purchase to add to CromTech's portfolio, but the GPS signal is so unreliable out in the woods that even after a full day of searching with the coordinates in hand, Eleanor can't actually locate it on the ground. Everything is overgrown. Eleanor's rental house is similarly isolated for such a gorgeous location, with few people taking advantage of the scenery.

Overall the township is underutilized. Rife with potential.

As beautiful as it is, though, it's also run-down. Many of the back roads connecting the various townships in Bracken County are unpaved and littered with potholes, with some of the street signs that might have helped Eleanor find her way either missing or faded. With strategic incentives to the county to fix simple things like that in

preparation for construction, Riverwalk's locals will no doubt welcome the coming improvements, even if CromTech is behind them.

By the time she's finishing up for the day, Eleanor feels both accomplished and deeply frustrated. She's starving, her feet are sore from hobbling across gravel in heels to squint up at the road signage, and her contact lenses are drying out. She wants nothing more than to curl up with a book and a glass of wine for dinner.

So, naturally, Eleanor's car breaks down on the way home.

"Great," she sighs, turning the key in the ignition repeatedly, only to hear a weak sputtering. "Just fucking fantastic." Thankful for the complete lack of other vehicles on this back road to witness her embarrassment, Eleanor unbuckles her seatbelt.

"Stupid piece of overpriced junk," she mutters, kicking the front tire with her Jimmy Choo as she walks by to prop the hood up and do a cursory glance at the engine. Nothing looks immediately out of place, which means that it lies outside of her abilities. If given some time and the right research materials, she could probably figure it out, but right now, looking at a sea of oil-caked and smoking parts, Eleanor needs help.

A slow and begrudging internet search provides her with one mechanic within a fifty-kilometer radius, conveniently located in Riverwalk. Her Porsche is hooked onto a battered tow truck bed soon after by a tall, stocky man with dark-brown skin and a neat goatee whose name tag introduces him as Owen . He looks to be about Eleanor's age. He's wearing a cap over his bald head with a sports logo on it, and he removes the hat politely before he shakes her hand and then hitches the car.

"You new around here?" Owen asks when Eleanor has climbed up into the raised truck. His voice is a deep, friendly baritone. He brushes a few empty pop bottles onto the floor and turns the radio down a few notches while Eleanor settles gingerly onto

the seat. A country song she doesn't recognize is playing.

Small talk and country music. Fantastic.

"Yes. I moved in a few weeks ago," Eleanor says, hoping her short answer will deter further inquiry.

Unfortunately Riverwalk tow truck drivers seem to be tenacious. Owen nods, his large hands resting responsibly at ten and two on the steering wheel. "Where you from? We don't see a lot of visitors here anymore."

"Toronto."

"Big city, eh?" Owen says, flashing a bright smile. His tow truck takes the uneven roads better than Eleanor's poor car. It's still bumpy, but the bumps are less uncomfortable than the awkward conversation.

"Mhmm," Eleanor says, unsure of what else to say in response. Her voice is made uneven by the truck's movement. Owen resumes speaking almost before she's finished.

"You here on a vacation? Got a cottage up the road?"

Eleanor drums her fingers on the seat. There's a hole near the seatbelt clasp that feels like a cigarette burn. It reminds her of the passenger seat of her father's favourite vintage Cadillac—he'd been partial to cigars, and there had been a similar singed hole in the leather that Eleanor used to dig her finger into when he took her on long drives. That car was his favourite place to remind her that she wasn't meeting his expectations.

Eleanor digs her fingernail into the burn, twisting it through the aged seat padding.

“Something like that.”

It’s nice that Owen is trying, but Eleanor has never felt confident befriending strangers, and especially after her encounter at the grocery store, she’s not feeling comfortable now. She’s been told enough times that she comes off as rude, so she doesn’t see the point in trying to pretend otherwise. She’s not even sure how she ended up with the two friends she does have.

The auto shop is technically on Riverwalk’s main road but tucked away near the town’s edge. Eleanor stares out the window to avoid conversation, and as they drive, she sees details that she hadn’t noticed before: a few of the shops they pass have For Lease signs in the windows. The rest—such as an off-brand pizza place, a single restaurant, and what Eleanor suspects might be the last actual video rental store still in existence—need work done on the exteriors. Not quite shabby, but obviously aging, with old bricks or faded signs.

The building they pull up to is exactly what Eleanor was expecting. It’s old, too, but well-maintained—exposed cinderblocks covered with white paint just on the edge of starting to peel. Two garage doors are thrown open to reveal the mess of cars and parts piled inside. Above the chaos, a faded baby-blue sign reads Cooper’s Tire and Auto .

All Eleanor can do is sincerely hope that someone here knows what they’re doing.

“One of the owners is finishing up with another job,” Owen says once he’s parked the truck and guided her into the building. “It’ll be just a minute.”

Eleanor’s first impression of the person Owen points out is one of surprise, as much as she’s ashamed of herself for it.

The mechanic is a woman.

It's not that Eleanor is surprised that female mechanics exist. She's dealt with enough skepticism over her own qualifications to last a lifetime. But she's never met one, let alone one who co-owns her own shop, and she especially didn't expect something out of the norm in a small, rural town like this. Eleanor can't see much beyond the thick, dark-blond ponytail visible between the woman's shoulder blades, but she seems very capable as she finishes putting on a new tire.

When the woman turns around, Eleanor has to smother her second reaction, as shocking as it is.

The mechanic is also hot .

It's not in the way Eleanor is used to, exactly. Eleanor's type has always been strictly defined, governed by her own self-imposed rules as well as her father's expectations. Clean-cut, presentable, and educated. Discreet and unattached enough not to expect much from her. Once she finally decided to do one small thing for herself and started dating women exclusively and openly, that criteria didn't change, although it seriously narrowed her dating pool.

This woman is so far the opposite of every point as to be almost comical.

She's wearing a jumpsuit, for starters. An army-green mechanic's jumpsuit—horribly stained and unbuttoned so that the sleeves hang around her hips—with a similarly dirty ribbed white tank and a scuffed blue ballcap. Eleanor idly wonders why one would even bother wearing white in an auto shop, considering it's almost not recognizably white anymore, but before long she's distracted by what's underneath the shirt.

Beneath her tank top and faded tan lines, this mechanic is muscular. And sweaty. And, frankly, broad . She's taller than Eleanor by a few inches, and solidly built in a way Eleanor isn't used to. Her wide shoulders and thick midsection are offset by the

slight swell of her hips under the jumpsuit when she strides forward. When she reaches up to remove her hat and wipe at her brow with her forearm, a defined bicep flexes appealingly.

Eleanor tries very hard not to be affected by that, or by the adorable red line the cap leaves across the woman's forehead.

"Hi! I'm Dani. Owen said your Porsche gave out?"

Dani reaches a grimy hand out to shake, and Eleanor hesitates only for a moment before taking it in her own. She expects it to be sweaty from the warmth of the garage, but despite the dark shop residue staining Dani's pink fingertips, they're dry and just a tiny bit calloused.

"I'm...Nora," Eleanor manages to say. She pulls her hand back when Dani lets go, clenching it at her side.

Eleanor hasn't gone by Nora since she was seven, when her father told her it sounded too common. She's Eleanor. She's named after her paternal grandmother, a woman her father made sure to remind her was the reason he grew up to be so strong-willed. A woman whose ambition was halted only by the restrictions of her time, who instilled that ambition into her son, and whose name shouldn't be tarnished by nicknames.

It's a name Eleanor has never quite been able to live up to.

Once Eleanor has said it, Nora feels like the right choice in the circumstances. She doesn't need anyone recognizing her by name, as unlikely as that might be. Part of her project here is to determine if the locals could be persuaded to welcome CromTech's presence or if they're going to need to fight against a reluctant population, and given the grocery store clerk's reaction to a simple key chain,

Eleanor would rather not pursue that question further right now.

“Nice to meet you,” Dani says, seeming unbothered by Eleanor’s attitude.

“You as well.” Eleanor clears her throat. “Can you fix it?”

“I can fix anything,” Dani says with a wink.

Eleanor swallows hard. Dani’s eyes are a startling greyish blue, and her smile bright and earnest. There’s an uneven black smudge across her cheek, curving down to the strong line of her jaw. Her hair is coming loose from its ponytail and sticking to the side of her neck. When she puts her hat back on, Eleanor can see that its bill is frayed and dusty.

She’s not Eleanor’s type in the slightest.

And yet.

“She’s not lying,” Owen says, startling Eleanor out of her thoughts. “I’ve never seen Danielle Cooper find anything she can’t put back together with her bare hands.”

Eleanor tries to ignore the accompanying image. She absolutely does not need to know what Danielle Cooper can do with her bare hands.

Eleanor gives Owen a tight smile and follows Dani across the shop floor, ducking under a row of hanging tools and picking her way across stacks of tires and piles of oil-stained rags to where Owen has backed the Porsche into the garage. Dani moves easily—as if navigating the chaotic layout is second nature rather than a gauntlet of tripping hazards—and Eleanor can’t help but focus on the rhythm of the mechanic’s movement.

Dani takes up space. She leads with her shoulders, shifting her body around obstacles without engaging much in her hips, and, yet, never losing balance. A confident, grounded way to move through the world.

In contrast, Eleanor has almost fallen three times before she makes it to the car.

Dani lets out a low whistle when she approaches the Porsche, tapping a gentle finger on the hood. “Sweet ride. Not often that I get to treat something this expensive.”

“It gets me from A to B.”

“I think we have very different A’s and B’s,” Dani says, grinning as she reaches inside the open window to pop the hood. Her shoulders shift under the ribbed tank. “Let’s take a look, eh?”

Eleanor’s hand clenches hard around her keys.

The diagnosis goes quickly. Dani explains the issue in a way that lacks the condescension Eleanor is used to from most mechanics, and she seems pleasantly surprised to find that Eleanor can keep up. The problem is the transmission, apparently. Luckily the part required is generic, and Dani can take care of it right away.

“Pretty rare that we see a machine this nice come through Riverwalk,” Dani says, sliding out from underneath Eleanor’s car on what looks like a wide skateboard. Eleanor hands her keys over to Owen and tries not to wince as he climbs onto her leather seats in his shop-stained pants to back the car onto the hydraulic lift.

“It seems like it’s mostly trucks and tractors out here,” Eleanor quips. She’s oddly gratified when it makes Dani laugh. Dani’s teeth seem brighter against her smudged skin. The bottom ones are crooked, but the imperfection only makes her more

endearing.

“Mostly! It’s nice to handle something so fancy for a change.”

Eleanor knows that Dani is referring to the car, but when she says it without breaking eye contact, it’s hard not to feel an answering twitch at the thought of all the very fancy things Dani could handle.

According to Kayla and Ash, this rural venture is supposed to be Eleanor’s summer of rest and relaxation. An easy project with a distant deadline and a chance to decompress in relative isolation. Not, emphatically, a chance to fuck the town mechanic in the tiny village she’s ended up in.

No matter how much Eleanor tells herself that, she can’t stop looking at Dani’s capable hands and imagining all of their practical applications.

In the end, Dani fixes the transmission in less than an hour. There’s no waiting room at the shop, just the open floor and a small office area at the back, so Dani chats away to Eleanor about what she’s doing as she works; she shows Eleanor the tools and parts she’s using and even encourages her to peer through the hood and help with the installation as Dani highlights the broken part with a flashlight.

By the time Eleanor’s payment is being processed, she’s pretty sure she could fix the issue herself next time. Looking down at the receipt Dani hands her, though, Eleanor frowns.

“This doesn’t seem like very much for all the work you did,” Eleanor says, hesitating before signing her name at the bottom of the invoice.

“Oh, I only charged you half for labour.”

Eleanor's pen veers off the paper at the end of her signature. "What? Why?"

"First-time customers get a discount."

"You don't have to do that," Eleanor insists, trying to give her card to Dani to charge more, but no matter how hard she tries, it still ends up back in her own hand. "I can pay."

"Don't worry about it. You did half of it yourself, so consider it wages for your hard work," Dani says, flashing a quick wink. Her grin is altogether too charming. "See you around, Nora."

Dani squints at the invoice before she puts it in the cash drawer. As her eyes dart over Eleanor's signature, over her full name spelled out in black and white, a thread of fear winds its way around Eleanor's ribs. The girl at the grocery store had been so confrontational—Eleanor doesn't want to think about what it would be like if Dani looked at her with that kind of disdain.

But Dani doesn't react. She shoves the paper into the drawer with the same friendly smile she's had since Eleanor arrived and sends her off with another handshake, making no mention of Eleanor's last name.

Eleanor leaves the shop relieved, with a car that runs better than ever and a sensation in her stomach like she's missed a step on the stairs. And in idle moments over the following days, she keeps thinking about Dani Cooper. More than she should.

Eleanor thinks about that friendly grin and Dani's surprisingly light regional accent. She thinks about the light sheen of sweat that covered Dani's skin under her thin tank top. She thinks about Dani's hands, strong and calloused under layers of oil and engine grime. She thinks about wide shoulders and the strength in Dani's arms as she hefted heavy car parts effortlessly.

She thinks about full lips, a bit chapped but probably still soft, and exactly how they might feel against her own.

It must be because she's going stir-crazy. It's been months since her last tryst with Lydia. She's been on edge ever since she turned the most recent proposition down, and now she's cooped up in the middle of nowhere. It's perfectly natural to casually fantasize about the only attractive woman she's seen in this town.

But even a week later, when Eleanor has run into several other attractive women—the spitfire redhead who runs the local restaurant, for example, or a stern but striking auburn-haired woman at the grocery store who sports oil-stained hands just like Dani's—she still only thinks about one.

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“You met a hot female mechanic and you didn’t get her number? Have you gone straight on us?”

Ash’s voice is tinny through the shaky Wi-Fi, but the familiarity of his scolding warms Eleanor all the same. She takes a sip of wine, pulling the blanket up higher over her legs to ward against the chilly evening air.

“Also, why won’t you video chat?” Kayla chimes in.

Eleanor sighs, rubbing her freshly moisturized face. “I look like shit.”

“You probably look better than I do with all that rest you’re getting.”

Eleanor highly doubts that since Kayla consistently looks like she’s ready to walk a runway with her willowy frame and angular face. Still, she appreciates the sentiment.

“The service is bad out here,” Eleanor says instead. She’s three glasses of wine deep and dressed in her pyjamas to watch the sunset from her deck. A long video conference is the last thing she wants, even with her best friends.

“Can we get back to the hot mechanic, please?” Ash says. “And Eleanor’s truly startling lack of game?”

Kayla latches on before Eleanor can protest. “Yeah, what’s with that? You’re there till, what, July probably? Why not try to have a little fun?”

“I doubt she’s interested. I don’t even know if she’s gay. Besides, I didn’t come here

to get entangled. It makes things too complicated.” The last of the day’s light fades over the treeline, and Eleanor sighs as the mosquitoes start to descend.

“I’m not saying you should get entangled.” Kayla’s voice cuts out slightly as Eleanor gathers her blanket and wineglass and escapes the great outdoors. Slamming the sliding glass door shut behind her, she drapes the blanket over the back of her couch and sinks onto a soft cushion.

“I dunno, entanglement can be fun if you use the right rope,” Ash says. Eleanor can almost see the wink he would have thrown if he were here.

“I don’t think Eleanor could handle maintaining your Rolodex of Grindr tops,” Kayla says. Eleanor hears the reverberation of a playful smack. “Ow—what? Eleanor doesn’t have it in her to be a joyful gay tramp like you.”

Ash huffs, but he has no retort.

“All I’m saying is that a summer fling might do you good,” Kayla says much more rationally. “You’ll never know if she’s gay if you don’t flirt a little. Relax, hang out, make some friends, get yourself laid, and unclench. You don’t need to submit a formal request.”

Eleanor groans, flopping back onto the throw pillows. It’s not like she’s inexperienced by any far stretch. Casual connections are her bread and butter. But a summer fling? Honestly, “submitting a formal request” isn’t far off from Eleanor’s usual style. Her relationship with Lydia was governed by strict rules on both sides to eliminate any need for conflict or hurt feelings. It stopped just short of including a written agreement.

Lydia had deemed it unnecessary when Eleanor made that suggestion.

“I’m going to keep to myself like I said I would,” Eleanor tells her friends.

“Suit yourself, Mother Theresa,” Ash scoffs.

“If you guys only called to make fun of me, I’m hanging up.”

“No, no, I’m sorry,” Kayla cuts in. “We tease because we love. We want you to have the best vacation possible.”

“You said I needed rest and relaxation, and I’m getting some.”

“Doesn’t sound like you’re getting some ,” Ash mutters.

Eleanor rolls her eyes. Before either of them can protest, she’s already disconnected the call.

She continues with her night uninterrupted after that, throwing together a quick pasta for dinner and luxuriating in a long, hot bath. She settles into bed, window shades thrown open to let the moonlight filter in, and reads three chapters of the latest book in her years-long backlog of unread novels. But the conversation stays with her.

Her intention for the summer was isolation. It’s what she’s craved for years, what she’s missed the most from her life before her shift to CEO—the ability to retreat to somewhere quiet and work in peace. But her brief interaction with Dani, and the way it’s stayed in her mind, does point to a surprising yet persistent desire to do something besides work, a pull to see the blonde mechanic again.

With an easy month and a half remaining on her project deadline, Eleanor branches out.

She starts venturing into town more often, increasing her frequency the more she

realizes that Dani is surprisingly hard to pin down. She makes up more and more far-fetched excuses to herself—she forgot something from her grocery list, she needs a specific type of copper wire for a project, the coffee she brewed isn't good enough and she absolutely needs to get one from the gas station or the little café in town—but despite her hopes of seeing Dani again, it never lines up.

Dani seems to work constantly. Eleanor only gets glimpses of her—always visible by her blue ballcap—through the open garage doors whenever she drives past the shop. She's sure that Dani is too busy to see it, but Eleanor can't help but hope that once or twice, Dani notices the Porsche passing by.

No matter how much Eleanor wishes it would break down again simply for the excuse to see her, Dani's skillful fix keeps the car in tragically working order.

* * *

Less than a week later, Eleanor gets desperate enough to drag herself to the local bar.

She's driven past it before, but until now, she's never considered stopping. Eleanor prefers to do her drinking in private, and indulging in domestic beer with the owners of the dozen pickup trucks in the parking lot isn't generally her idea of a good time. But it's the only establishment in town. There's a chance, however small, that Dani could be there.

With her nerves steeled by the pep talk she gives herself in the car, Eleanor heads toward the illuminated neon sign for The River Run.

The bar is small, unassuming, and inexplicably attached to the town's pizzeria. The smell combination of beer and decades-old cigarette smoke hits her nose at the same time as the scent of baking bread and cheese. It's strange but not completely unpleasant.

The decor is more jarring than the warring scents. The bar is partially carpeted, a decorative trend that Eleanor previously thought had died in the mid-'90s. The tables and chairs are mismatched and purely functional. One table even has a plastic lawn chair for seating, and Eleanor can see that the wooden tabletops are scratched and carved with graffiti. The only part of the place that seems new is the bar top itself. It's shiny and well-kept and tended by a scowling young woman whose white-blonde hair is streaked with neon blue.

Eleanor sweeps her eyes over the row of hunched backs huddled on the bar stools, most of them watching what looks to be a game of curling on the television hung above the shelves of liquor, but none of them have Dani's dark-blonde ponytail. In fact, none of the tables seem to hold the woman Eleanor is looking for.

She's about to give up and head home after a mere fifteen seconds in the bar when the door to the women's washroom swings open, and out walks the person who has been haunting Eleanor's thoughts all week.

"All right, pal. Now that I don't have to pee so bad I can't think straight, let's play," Dani says, picking up a pool cue and heading toward the faded pool table in the bar's back corner.

"Again?" A pale, wiry man with fluffy, brown hair sitting with one of the larger groups nearby groans, hanging his head. "How many times do you have to beat me before you get tired of it?"

"I'll get tired when I finally lose," Dani says with a grin that goes right to Eleanor's toes even though it isn't directed at her. She's wearing that same ballcap from the day they met, over the same ponytail, but this time it's paired with loose jeans and a much cleaner white T-shirt. The denim has more than a few frayed holes and hangs low on her hips. Her work boots make her footfalls sound heavy on the carpet.

The look absolutely should not be working for Eleanor, and yet her body undeniably heats up as Dani leans back against the pool table to wait for an opponent.

Once again, Eleanor is struck by the ease of Dani's movement. It's like she's never known a day of uncertainty in her life—Dani walks with a loping grace, holding herself with an easy, gentle sort of masculinity that only makes her more appealing. Confident without being cocky. Open and warm and strangely enticing.

The way the T-shirt hugs her frame doesn't hurt either.

"Come on, leave Ryan alone," a deeper voice says. Eleanor recognizes Owen, the tow truck driver from Dani's shop, when he slings an arm over Ryan's narrow shoulders. "Let the man drink in peace."

Dani sighs, setting the cue down and leaning on it like a walking stick. "Fine. One of these days, I'm going to find someone who puts up a challenge."

Ryan looks relieved to be released from duty. He empties his glass in a gulp, and Owen refills it from the dregs of the pitcher sitting on the table between them.

"Can we get another pitcher for the sore loser?" Dani calls to the bartender, who doesn't spare her a glance.

"Go fuck yourself, Cooper," the bartender calls back, but she's already grabbing Dani's order.

"Thanks, Jenny," Dani singsongs.

Laughter ripples through the bar. Dani is clearly well-known and liked here. Eleanor, in contrast, has rarely experienced anything but indifference, awkwardness, or outright hostility in a large group like this.

And that moment—as Eleanor is staring like an idiot at Dani and her friends—is when Dani notices her.

Inexplicably Dani’s eyes brighten. She sticks a hand in the air, eyes still on Eleanor, and waves.

“Nora! I didn’t expect to see you again!”

The whole table turns to look at Eleanor.

The warm, pizza-scented bar suddenly feels unbearably hot. Eleanor briefly considers running for it, turning on her heel and sprinting back out to the car and pretending this never happened, but Dani is already gesturing her over and Eleanor’s feet seem to be moving of their own volition.

“Dani, hi,” Eleanor says as she draws even with the table, nodding politely at Dani’s friends. “I was just...stopping by for a drink.”

Eleanor hates how breathy her voice sounds to her own ears. Nobody comments on it, though, and Dani’s smile is bright enough that Eleanor might have felt relaxed if she didn’t now have a whole new group of people to socialize with.

“Come sit with us!” Dani insists. Eleanor waves awkwardly as Dani pulls out a chair for her. “You know Owen already, but this is Ryan. Ryan, meet Nora! I fixed her car the other day.”

Owen flashes a warm grin, and Ryan waves jovially, halfway through chugging Owen’s beer.

“He’s terrible at pool, but Ryan’s our resident tech expert as well as a beer thief,” Dani says, clapping Ryan on the shoulder. “He’s the only IT game in town. Mostly

meaning that the retirees call him to fix their email.”

“Hey! I help everyone,” Ryan protests, sitting up straighter and setting down the empty glass. “Who fixed your computer last weekend, Dani?”

Dani refills his pint, but only halfway. “And who fixed the alarm system at the shop after you set it off so bad the firefighters came in from Wyvale?”

“...you did,” Ryan admits, slowly deflating back into his seat as a new pitcher lands on the table. “Damn. I was hoping everyone had forgotten about that.”

“My memory is as solid as my pool game,” Dani says, throwing her arms wide in a confident shrug. “I’m unbeatable.”

Eleanor has no idea what possesses her to say it. Maybe it’s the hot, stuffy air of the bar making her lose her sanity or the way Dani is smiling at her in that cocksure but somehow still kind-hearted way that makes Eleanor’s knees a little weak, but before she can stop herself, she’s opening her mouth.

“I doubt that.”

A chorus of ooohs ring around the table. Owen slaps the wooden surface gleefully and points at Dani. “That sounded like a challenge!”

“It sure did,” Dani says, and the impressed look on her face is almost worth Eleanor’s temporary mania. “Wanna play?”

Five minutes later Eleanor is standing across the pool table from Dani with a cue in her hand, about to start a game she’s never tried before.

Eleanor knows the rules (after a covert and frantic Google search while Dani set the

balls up) and it's not like it's a terribly physical activity. It's hitting things with a stick. Analyzing speed and trajectories. Physics, at its basic level, and a bit of hand-eye coordination. It's not rocket science.

"So you're new in town, huh?" Dani asks, breaking the triangle of balls and sending them scattering across the felt. Two solid colours sink into the holes. Eleanor takes quiet note of Dani's posture, the way she holds the pool cue, and adjusts her own position.

"Is that everyone's first question?"

"Riverwalk is a pretty small place. When someone new comes along, people get curious. And most people here don't see a lot of Porsches," Dani says, sinking yet another shot. Her third misses, though, and Dani concedes the turn to Eleanor gracefully.

Eleanor laughs despite herself as she surveys the table. "I guess I stand out."

"In more ways than one."

Eleanor can't stop the nervous laugh that erupts at the unexpected compliment. She knows she's blushing, but thankfully Dani is mostly looking at the pool table.

"When you brought your car in, I figured you were just passing through," Dani continues, blessedly changing the subject as Eleanor lines up her first shot. "We don't get a lot of long-term stays."

"I'm renting a place on the bay." Eleanor hits the ball she's aiming for but slightly too hard and at the wrong angle. It knocks into her intended target crookedly and ends up far away from where it needs to be.

She frowns as Dani lines up a new shot, mentally adjusting her technique for next time.

“Down by the island?” Dani says, whistling low and hitting another good shot. She’s confident with it, quick and practiced. “Pricey. Although I’m saying this to the woman with the nicest car in town, so I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Dani doesn’t look put off, or even jealous. She looks impressed. And she looks even more impressed after her next miss, when Eleanor snaps her cue and, with devastating precision, sends a striped ball falling into place down the pot.

Dani’s eyebrows raise. The approval Eleanor sees in her bright blue eyes as she sinks another before missing again is invigorating.

“I didn’t realize I was playing a pro!” Dani lines up a simpler shot. Eleanor can’t take her eyes away from the arch of Dani’s back as she leans over the table, the way she chews on her lip as she concentrates. The skin comes away red and a little wet, and Eleanor has a sudden and overwhelming urge to bite at it herself.

“Would you believe me if I told you I’ve never played before?” Eleanor asks, swallowing that impulse down. She tries to distract herself by staring at the action on the table, but said action skids to a halt at her words.

“No!” Dani says incredulously. She straightens and leans on her pool cue, shaking her head. “Is this seriously your first time?”

“I prefer chess.”

Dani laughs, lining up another shot. “Well, your talents are wasted there. You could clean up at a pool tournament.”

Dani takes her shot as she says it. She winces when the ball bounces off at a bad angle, spinning across the table and nudging one of Eleanor's instead. "Shoot. Looks like you're up."

A few minutes later Dani is removing her hat in respect as Eleanor sinks her final ball with a flourish while one of Dani's remains on the table. The ponytail underneath the hat is messy and endearing. She looks like she's about to congratulate Eleanor on the win, but she's interrupted by her friends.

"She kicked your ass, Cooper!" Owen crows, clapping loudly and startling Eleanor out of the Dani-bubble she's been suspended in for the whole game. She'd completely forgotten that there were other people in the bar until just now.

"I don't know who you are, Nora, but if you can keep beating her winning streak, I hope you come back every night," Ryan says, clapping Eleanor on the shoulder. His hand slides off soon after, but Eleanor's usual urge to shrug off the physical contact is strangely absent in the company of Dani's friends. Ryan is clearly a few steps past intoxicated, but the invitation is flattering all the same.

The rest of the night passes pleasantly. Eleanor stays for one drink, contributing as often as seems polite, but most of her time is spent looking at Dani. How her smile makes her eyes crinkle at the corners. The softness of her lips, which she tends to chew at like a fidget when she isn't talking. The way she always manages to catch Eleanor's eye and wink whenever Eleanor's starting to feel a little lost in the conversation.

It's all a little absurd. Eleanor doesn't daydream. She doesn't pine. Physical attraction is something she either ignores or deals with through a mutually beneficial casual arrangement. But the idea of asking Dani for something like that when they hardly know each other doesn't feel right, given the circumstances.

Dani leaves around 10 p.m., citing work in the morning, and Eleanor ducks out with her despite the protests of the table that the night isn't over. While Dani's friends have been exceedingly nice to her so far, staying after Dani has left isn't what she came here for.

Her decision is validated when Dani opens the door to let Eleanor through first and Eleanor glances back to see that a few other people have joined the table. The jukebox volume has been cranked up, and Ryan is being hoisted up onto Owen's shoulders. His head comes worryingly close to intersecting with a ceiling fan.

"Sorry they're so crazy," Dani says as Eleanor passes her, letting the door shut behind them. She rubs the back of her neck under her ponytail. She almost looks nervous, which seems completely implausible to Eleanor. "They can be a lot, but they're good people."

"I had a great time," Eleanor assures her. "I'm grateful you've all been so kind to me."

They take simultaneous deep breaths as they meander across the parking lot. Eleanor is used to the smells of the city—car exhaust, hot pavement, a hundred different restaurants all cooking at once. Riverwalk is so different. It's all running water and cut grass and a hint of distant woodsmoke. Cool and fresh.

Dani catches her eye on the exhale and chuckles.

"I've always loved the way the air smells out here," Dani says, leaning against a nearby truck that Eleanor assumes belongs to her. She can't see any distinguishing features in the dark, but it looks older than most of the others.

"I'm learning to like it," Eleanor admits, fiddling with her car keys. "I didn't realize how suffocating the city was until now."

“City air blows.”

Eleanor snorts, not quite covering her mouth quickly enough to hide it. Dani grins.

A stretch of silence grows between them. Eleanor knows what she wants to say—she wants to ask to see Dani again. To ask for her number. To ask anything, if it means the conversation doesn’t have to end here. But she doesn’t. She lets the silence grow until Dani pushes herself off the truck, unlocking the driver’s side door manually.

“I better hit the road. We all had a really great time hanging out with you,” Dani finally says, opening her truck door and pulling herself up into the seat. “I hope I’ll see you around?”

“Right, yes.” Eleanor backs out of Dani’s way and prepares to bolt to her car to scream her frustration out in private. “Of course. Have, uh—have a good night.”

Dani’s tires crunch on the gravel as she pulls out onto the street, disappearing in a left turn two blocks down.

For hours afterwards Eleanor curses her own hesitation. She curses it as she drives home, as she washes off the bar smell in the shower, and as she climbs into bed and slips into dreams that leave her sweaty and distracted long into the next day.

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In the years since she stepped into her role at CromTech, Eleanor has made facing her fears into an art form. She can handle boardrooms full of Armani-suited executives who shoot down every idea she presents. She can give interviews and press conferences. She's given presentations in front of hundreds of people.

But when it comes to asking for a girl's number, Eleanor Cromwell is a coward.

She's seen Dani no less than three times this week. She caught her in a brief conversation at the gas station as Eleanor paid for a fill-up and Dani bought what amounted to forty dollars worth of packaged pastries, and, twice now, Eleanor has seen her at the café picking up the morning order for her whole staff.

Not that Eleanor has memorized when Dani usually gets to said café and has dragged herself out of bed to get there in time. Absolutely not.

Three times Eleanor has seen Dani around town, and all three times she's lost her nerve at the last moment. Despite how passionately she argued the opposite to Kayla and Ash, Eleanor wants to see more of Dani, even if she has no intention of doing any flinging .

Dani is sweet. She's funny. She's interesting to talk to. She's a bright spot in Eleanor's day every time they run into each other. Eleanor could probably stand to have a third friend. Sure, it's a potential friend who she's devastatingly attracted to, but she's fully capable of putting that on a shelf.

But Dani remains elusive.

Eleanor can only do so much without resorting to drastic measures. So, finally, frustrated and full of self-loathing, Eleanor pops her own tire with a corkscrew and calls for a tow from Cooper's Tire and Auto.

When Dani rolls up in the tow truck twenty minutes later, looking as work stained and annoyingly attractive as ever, Eleanor finds she's far less ashamed of her actions than she should be.

Dani rolls the window down, resting her elbow there and leaning out with a grin. "I hear you need my services again?"

The confident lilt in Dani's voice sends a tingle down Eleanor's spine. When Dani exits the truck and kneels down to look at the tire, though, anxiety starts to ebb in.

Dani frowns, tracing a finger over the tear in the rubber. "Huh. That's weird."

"What's weird about it?"

"You said you didn't notice it being flat yesterday, right?"

Eleanor vaguely remembers saying something of the sort over the phone, but she was distracted at the time by desperately hoping her gambit would pay off.

"Yes?" Eleanor says slowly.

"This is a pretty big hole. It's a little strange," Dani says, running her hand over the tire tread. "What do you think did it?"

"I could have run over something in my driveway. Right?"

"That's true. These secluded driveways tend to build up all sorts of crud since the

township doesn't take care of them," Dani says brightly. She taps a little rhythm on the rubber. "You should hire someone to clean it up every once in a while! There's always kids in town looking for jobs."

Eleanor, distracted by the movement of Dani's hands, nods mutely. Thankfully, Dani hooks Eleanor's car onto the truck with no further comments.

Eleanor has made Dani laugh exactly three times by the time they pull into the garage, and Eleanor's sense of accomplishment rivals the time she managed to convince Renée that increasing Christmas bonuses for all staff, and not just executives, was a good idea.

Dani is out of the truck and sprinting around the hood to open the door for Eleanor as soon as she's put the vehicle in park. She offers Eleanor a hand as she climbs down from the seat, a picture of grease-stained gallantry.

"Thank you," Eleanor says once her feet have touched the ground again. She's still caught up in trying to find something cleverer to say when Dani raises her other hand, waving suddenly at someone across the shop.

"Sarah! Come meet Nora!"

Sarah turns out to be the same auburn-haired woman with oil-stained hands that Eleanor saw at the grocery store not long ago. She's near Eleanor's height, and perhaps a few years older. Her stern expression melts at the sight of Dani, but she hardly spares Eleanor a glance as she walks through the shop at a quick clip, headed for the door.

"I'm late for my doctor's appointment," Sarah calls back, still moving. "Nice to meet you, Nora!"

She's gone a few seconds later, the door swinging shut behind her and leaving them alone in the space. Owen is nowhere to be seen, and Eleanor's car is the only one on the shop floor.

Dani shakes her head, smiling with some exasperation. "That's my cousin. We co-own the shop. She's started going for much more regular checkups since a hot doctor joined the practice."

The slight worry that had been building in the back of Eleanor's mind over the clear closeness between the two is eased, even as Eleanor knows it's silly. She has no confirmation that Dani is anything but a card-carrying heterosexual. She'd like to think she's been picking up an energy, but she's been wrong before.

From the brief glimpses Eleanor has gotten of Sarah, there isn't much family resemblance—she's much slighter in build, more lithe than muscular, with short choppy hair and a more serious demeanour, but Dani's fondness for her is obvious.

"She has a crush on her doctor?" Eleanor says. "I feel like there are rules about that."

Dani laughs, shaking her head while she works on getting Eleanor's car detached from the truck. "No, there's two doctors there. Sarah goes to the other one. But she's had a thing for Naomi since high school. When Naomi moved back to town to join the practice and help Owen take care of their folks, Sarah was pretty excited."

Eleanor's eyebrows raise. She can't say she's surprised to hear that Sarah is into women, but Dani's nonchalance about it is refreshing. Unexpected in a place like this. It's a good sign. "So Naomi is Owen's sister?"

The Porsche's wheels hit the cement, and Dani dusts off her hands. "Older sister, yeah. Sarah likes to book appointments she doesn't need so she can sit in the waiting room and hope her crush walks by."

Painfully aware of how close to Sarah's situation she is at this very moment, Eleanor says nothing.

"This is actually a pretty easy fix. We have a tire in stock that would work," Dani says, flipping through a few pieces of paper on a nearby clipboard. "I could even show you how to fix it yourself next time?"

"I'm perfectly happy just calling you when I get a flat."

"Everyone should know how to change a tire!" Dani protests. She slides into Eleanor's passenger seat, opening up the dash and rooting around to grab a silver wrench that Eleanor had no idea existed. "I'm happy to teach you, if you want to learn."

Eleanor agrees not because she's at all interested in learning to change her own tire but because she's hoping the lesson will prolong their conversation. Dani seems thrilled, prying the hubcap off and handing it to Eleanor, who tries to touch as little of the dirty metal as possible. It dangles from two of her fingers, but Dani doesn't seem to notice—she's too busy loosening the bolts and preparing to jack up the car.

"Shouldn't you be putting the car on those hydraulic lifts?" Eleanor asks, setting the hubcap gingerly on the workbench beside her.

"Usually I would, but you won't have one if you're stuck on the side of the road," Dani reasons. She nestles the jack under the car—which apparently was stored in Eleanor's trunk all along—and starts to crank the handle while Eleanor tries not to ogle too obviously.

Dani's jumpsuit is navy blue today but still unfastened and hanging tied around her waist. It dips lower when she bends, the tied arms brushing the ground, and Eleanor can see a hint of denim underneath. Light-blue Levi's, by the looks of it, and peeking

out just above the low waistline is what might be the thick band of a pair of boxer briefs.

“So you have to make sure the tire is off the ground,” Dani is saying. Eleanor blinks rapidly, raising her eyes to safer territory and trying to wipe the steam from the figurative windows of her mind. “And then you can unscrew the lug nuts.”

“I could google this if I ever have a problem, you know,” Eleanor says. It’s getting hotter and hotter in the shop, and Dani seems to not notice at all.

“You could! But what if you have no service?” Dani challenges, wiping her hands on her jumpsuit and grabbing the wrench. “Cell towers up here are patchy.”

Eleanor sighs. At the very least, she’s about to get a nice show. “Fine. Continue.”

Eleanor has experienced desire before. She’s felt her heartbeat speed up looking at a woman in a tight dress or a tailored suit, felt the longing to run her fingers through someone’s hair or her lips over their neck. But never in her life has she experienced the kind of unadulterated craving that she feels watching Dani Cooper singlehandedly wrench the bolts off a tire.

She’s known from the minute they met that Dani is strong, with the kind of build that means she could probably bench-press double Eleanor’s weight. But the way her muscles tighten and shift as she pulls the tire off and lifts the new one into place makes her feel genuinely, pathetically light-headed.

“Okay, your turn!”

That gets Eleanor’s attention.

Dani is looking at her expectantly, holding the wrench out as if Eleanor is supposed

to know what to do with it. As if she hasn't spent the last fifteen minutes thinking about what Dani's sweat tastes like instead of paying attention.

She's not even entirely sure what it's her turn to do . Is Dani asking her to take off one of the other undamaged tires, for practice? Are there still more steps in the process for the one Dani has been working on? Eleanor doesn't know because she's instead been imagining what it might be like for Dani to pin her to the hood of her own Porsche.

Eleanor swallows hard. She reaches out to take the wrench, determined to make a try for it even if she ends up looking like an idiot—but before her fingers close around the tool Dani's earnest expression breaks into a grin, and then a full-blown giggle.

Eleanor sighs in relief as Dani takes the wrench back.

“Don't worry, I can tell you're not really interested in changing tires,” Dani says, still chuckling to herself as she finishes up. “I just wanted to see the look on your face. Sorry I bored you; I get a little carried away sometimes.”

“You didn't! I wasn't bored.” Eleanor fights the natural urge to stammer out an explanation. Stumbling over her words was supposed to be trained out of her decades ago. “I was paying attention, I was just—”

She was just thinking about how the dimpled muscle of Dani's lower back would feel shifting under her hands. Something she'd really rather Dani not know about.

“It's cool! Honestly,” Dani says, saving Eleanor from needing to make up an excuse. “I'm just happy you didn't fall asleep.”

Dani's smile is as easy as ever. She moves behind the counter, punching a few keys on the decades-old cash register, but when the numbers come up on the tiny screen,

Eleanor sighs in exasperation.

“You undercharged me again.”

“It’s the price of the tire. I took all that extra time teaching you, I’m not gonna charge you for labour,” Dani says. She tries to wave off Eleanor’s protests, but Eleanor stands firm this time.

“And I’m not going to let you fix my car for free.”

“It was barely ten minutes work!”

“I’m paying you even if I have to punch it into the terminal myself,” Eleanor says, her wallet held threateningly in her hand.

Dani seems to sense that she’s outgunned. She smiles, rubbing the back of her neck in a gesture that’s starting to feel familiar.

“How’s about you buy me a coffee?”

* * *

Riverwalk only has one coffee shop open past 6 p.m.—it’s attached to one of the two rival gas stations in town, which are positioned across the road from each other and are constantly fighting over prices.

Eleanor pulls into the small parking lot next to Dani’s truck, which in the light of day turns out to be some kind of classic model that she’s fixed up until the cherry-red paint shines like it’s new. The back window is plastered with stickers—most prominently, Eleanor can see a bumblebee, a variety of cartoon fruits, and a decal that reads don’t panic, I’m a mechanic .

Dani allows Eleanor to pay for the dark roast and five doughnuts she orders and leads her to a secluded table in the corner.

“There. Now we’re even,” Dani says.

“Because I paid for your seven-dollar order? That doesn’t seem fair,” Eleanor says, scooping the bag out of her herbal tea and setting it on a napkin.

“You’re also paying me with the pleasure of your company!”

It’s entirely too earnest to be flirty, but Eleanor blushes anyway. She takes a sip of her too-hot tea to cover, and scalds her tongue.

“What do you think of Riverwalk so far? Does it compare to the big city?” Dani asks, taking a bite of her first doughnut. It leaves a little bit of powdered sugar on her chin. Dani swipes it away without even looking, as if she does this every day. Which, Eleanor thinks, based on what she knows about Dani’s gas station purchasing habits, she probably does. How Dani keeps the muscle mass she has on such a diet, Eleanor has no idea.

“It’s different,” Eleanor says carefully.

Dani laughs around her mouthful of doughnut. “If you don’t like it, you can say so. I won’t be offended.”

“I don’t dis like it!” Eleanor hurries to correct, and Dani raises an eyebrow. “I’m still getting used to slowing down. I’ve been going so fast for so long that it feels like...”

“Hitting a wall?”

“Exactly.”

Dani nods. “Yeah, I get it. I actually grew up in the city for a while.”

“Really?”

The question comes out maybe a bit more incredulous than it should, but Dani doesn't comment. She never seems to mind Eleanor's unintentional rudeness. She only nods, a little more solemn this time.

“My dad's family grew up here, but he moved down south to be with my mom. My Aunt Carol stayed. She was a single mom, and she wanted to raise Sarah in a smaller community. So when my parents died...”

Eleanor's heart sinks. Not from dread or nerves this time, but empathy. Her grief over her father's death is complicated, but having lost her own mother when she was barely out of kindergarten, Eleanor knows the slight ache that accompanies the trailing off of Dani's story. The hollow place where someone is missing, no matter how much time passes.

“Car crash. So you don't have to ask,” Dani says with a kind smile, sensing Eleanor's hesitation. “Carol is my godmother as well as my aunt, so she adopted me.”

“I'm so sorry,” Eleanor says simply. She herself has never liked the kind of cloying, uncomfortable pity that usually accompanies admitting that her parents are dead, and Dani seems grateful not to receive it from her.

“Thank you. It's okay. I miss them, but I'm okay,” Dani says. There's an old sadness there, but Dani doesn't linger on it. “Turns out there was a shoddy repair in their car. I used to take cars apart all the time, trying to make them safer, maybe figure out how I could have—” Dani stops herself, sighing and laughing a little. “Well. I was eight. Two separate therapists and my grandparents' super earnest rabbi all assured me that I couldn't have done anything, but I can do something now. Fix stuff before it breaks.

Try to make things better.”

The soft explanation reminds Eleanor with an uncomfortable jolt of her entire purpose here—the project she’s been pushing aside in favour of the woman sitting across the table. She’s looked at her in-progress feasibility study less than usual since she met Dani, but the comment about safety and making things better is a stark reminder.

Eleanor wants to make things better, too. For her eco-tech projects to ever see the light of day, she should really be doing her job instead of whatever she’s doing right now.

“That’s very noble of you,” Eleanor says, taking a more moderate sip of tea and pushing that thought back down. “Is that why you chronically undercharge people?”

Dani shrugs. She stuffs the rest of the doughnut into her mouth and moves on to the next. “Only the people I like.”

Eleanor directs her smile downward and into her tea.

“You’ve heard my tragic backstory now. What about you?” Dani asks. She carefully selects a sprinkled doughnut, rotating it to find the best place for a first bite, and Eleanor hopes that the shot of anxiety the question sends through her goes unnoticed. “I don’t know much about you.”

Eleanor straightens her posture. She folds her hands around her cup, arms braced on the table in preparation to avoid as many questions as possible. “What do you want to know?”

“Hey, no reason to be nervous,” Dani says. Her easy tone is helpful, but her first question is one Eleanor has been hoping to avoid. “Just curious. Like, what do you

like to do? Hobbies, interests?”

Eleanor swallows. Her burnt tongue feels too big for her mouth.

“I work for a tech company. Corporate,” Eleanor says. Keeping it vague is probably for the best. Thankfully Dani takes another huge bite of her sprinkle doughnut and doesn’t seem to question it.

“Not exactly what I asked, but that explains the clothes,” Dani says, gesturing vaguely at Eleanor with sugary hands. Eleanor bristles.

“What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“Nothing! They’re really nice. But you definitely look like you’re ready for the boardroom, not the gas station coffee shop.”

Eleanor looks down at herself. She’s wearing what she would consider a completely average outfit—a pencil skirt and blouse with heels. Sure, the heels are Louboutin. And she might have put a bit of extra effort into her hair, brushing and straightening it incessantly, knowing there was a chance she’d see Dani at the shop. But she hasn’t changed her makeup routine from the one she usually does before work every day.

Oh.

“I take your point,” Eleanor admits, smoothing her skirt down with a wry smile. “So, if I buy some clothes here, do they come with motor oil already on them, or do I need to pay extra?”

Dani grins, dusting her hands together until rainbow sprinkles scatter from her fingers into her lap. “No oil required. Maybe just something a little more comfortable if you’re gonna be living here?”

Comfortable . It's been a long time since Eleanor felt truly comfortable anywhere, regardless of what she's wearing. Before this little break, she spent her days among executives, only to go home to an apartment so tidy and disused that it's always felt like a realtor's showroom. Her clothes are picked to match.

She hadn't really considered how other people see her here, but now that Eleanor thinks about it, it's true—this is a jeans-and-flannel kind of town, with few exceptions. Simple and practical. She must stick out like a sore thumb.

“I only came for the summer,” Eleanor says. “Not sure I need a full wardrobe overhaul for a short trip.”

Dani nods appraisingly. “So this is your vacation?”

Eleanor wrings her hands together under the table. The conversation is dancing very close to the truth, and as Dani removes the plastic lid from her coffee to take a careful sip, Eleanor wrestles with her options. She could outright lie to Dani about the reason behind her time in Riverwalk, or she could reveal it all and let the chips fall where they may.

Or perhaps she could take the coward's route. She could say nothing at all, avoid all specifics in an effort not to actually lie, and continue her ridiculous quest to spend more time with Dani.

“My friends seem to think I work too much,” Eleanor says.

There. Simple and vague. As long as Dani doesn't push, maybe their acquaintanceship can last a little longer.

Dani starts on her third doughnut, a chocolate glazed which she takes to with great enthusiasm. “What are you doing to unwind, then? When you're not calling me to fix

your car.”

“Honestly, not much. I’ve been working,” Eleanor admits.

Dani’s brow raises.

“What else am I supposed to do?” Eleanor says, maybe a bit defensively.

She isn’t sure why she feels the need to defend herself to Dani. Eleanor has been ignoring her actual project, sure, but the work she has been doing is enjoyable. She’s been filling her time with creating schematics, small prototypes, future project outlines—the part of her job that she used to actually like.

“I like my work, but I don’t do it on vacation,” Dani says, her mouth full of doughnut yet again.

Eleanor should find Dani talking with her mouth full repulsive, but somehow on Dani it’s cute. There’s a chocolate crumb at the corner of her mouth that Eleanor wants to brush away with her finger.

“This town isn’t exactly rife with activities,” Eleanor says. Immediately she regrets it because Dani has a list of activities so ready that it almost feels rehearsed.

“There’s lots to do here! There’s a bowling alley, and a drive-in movie theatre twenty minutes down the highway.”

“A drive-in?” Eleanor interrupts, skeptical. “Did I go back in time when I arrived?”

“And we have all sorts of festivals in the summer!” Dani continues determinedly. “Plus, there’s hiking in the woods, fishing, swimming—you just need to get a little creative.”

“Do I look like I hike?”

“You look like you need to learn how to downshift. Have some fun for once.”

Eleanor sighs. It’s not an untrue statement. Having fun has never been her strong suit. “I’m not sure I know how.”

“More of a pedal-to-the-metal person?”

Eleanor lets out a short laugh. “If we’re using car metaphors, probably closer to ‘burning rubber.’”

“No wonder your transmission was shot.”

Eleanor’s laugh is louder this time. Dani is grinning over the rim of her coffee in a way that makes her eyes sparkle, even under the gas station’s fluorescent lights.

Their chat extends far beyond their empty cups. Dani eats more pastries than Eleanor thought humanly possible, and Eleanor occasionally misses parts of the conversation while she considers what Dani’s sugary lips might taste like until the exasperated cashier finally asks them to leave.

When they step outside and the poor woman finally flips the Closed sign over in the window and shuts out the lights, Eleanor notices the posted hours; they’ve overstayed their welcome by close to half an hour.

Dani laughs abashedly. “I think I’m gonna have to give Katie a free oil change to make up for that.”

Eleanor does feel a bit guilty for stretching out the woman’s shift, but the warm knowledge that Dani lost track of time as much as she did is enough to quell it. She’ll

have to leave a big tip the next time she stops by for coffee.

“This was fun,” Eleanor says, hyperaware of how awkwardly the words are probably coming across. “Really fun. Thank you.”

Dani opens her mouth to respond, but she’s drowned out by the sudden cacophony of two very loud trucks racing down the road toward them.

They’re unreasonably enormous vehicles. One has a lightning decal splashed across the side, and the other has tires which are clearly too big for the frame, sticking out like shoulder pads on an unfashionable jacket. Both sport unnecessarily powerful engines, if their speed and volume are any indication.

Loud music is blaring from the open windows. The man driving the truck with the huge wheels waves at Dani, who doesn’t wave back. The person in the lightning truck is Jenny, the bartender from the River Run, which Eleanor can only tell by the bright shock of blue in her hair. Jenny gives Dani the finger.

The two trucks roar past the gas station, ignoring the nearby stop sign and screeching around the corner until their noise finally fades.

“Sorry about them,” Dani mutters, unlocking her own truck and seemingly dropping what she was about to say before the interruption. “They rip through here all the time. I keep telling them they’re gonna kill someone if they aren’t more careful, but they don’t listen.”

“Jenny doesn’t seem like the type to take advice,” Eleanor says.

“She really isn’t. Never has been. And Shaun’s a little shit-disturber.” Dani hops into her truck and turns the ignition. “I gotta go, though. Sarah needs me to open the shop up early tomorrow.” Dani pauses before she throws the truck into drive. Maybe

Eleanor is projecting, but her smile seems to soften a little. “Thanks for a really great night.”

Dani pulls away when Eleanor waves good night. For the second time Eleanor watches her drive away, wishing it wasn't the end of their time together. And yet Eleanor realizes as the truck revs its way through the town's only traffic light, she still didn't ask Dani for her number.

Damn.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

As it turns out, Eleanor is fully capable of warming to small-town life when Dani Cooper is involved.

Over the next, week Eleanor's willing socialization continues. Dani invites her to another night at the bar with Ryan and Owen after they run into each other at the coffee shop again, and later in the week Eleanor is officially reintroduced to Dani's cousin Sarah when she finds them together at the hardware store.

Sarah is friendly and seems genuinely curious about Dani's new acquaintance this time, but she definitely gives Eleanor's expensive outfit a pointed once-over. It's a good reminder of Dani's suggestion.

Eleanor has always dressed the way she was expected to. Personal style doesn't really factor into her life. Her school years were marked by uniforms, and her current clothes help her blend in at work. Here they just make her feel ostentatious.

Everyone in town seems to get their clothes from one shop, so after several weeks in Riverwalk, Eleanor finally takes a look.

A tiny bell chimes as Eleanor pushes the door handle. It stops dead before it can open fully, colliding with something—a rack of sweaters seems to be the culprit. As she slips inside and the door swings shut behind her, Eleanor can see why.

It's the single most crowded shop Eleanor has ever seen. She's driven past the storefront with its slightly crooked sign several times, and, judging by the amount of denim and flannel she sees worn on a regular basis, Eleanor expected the selection to be sparse.

What she finds instead is a riot of colour. It more resembles an overfilled vintage store than anything else, with only half the space set aside for practical work clothes of the type she usually sees Dani wearing.

While Eleanor is still processing the surprising interior, a light voice chimes out through the quiet.

“Hiya! Can I help you with anything?”

The young woman that ducks out from behind a rack of jeans can’t be much past her late twenties, tall and slender with bright eyes and a sweet smile. Her chestnut hair is tied back in an elegant twist.

“No, I’m just looking, thank you,” Eleanor says.

The girl nods, taking a large bite of a blueberry muffin and setting it next to the cash register. “Let me know!”

Eleanor smiles to herself as the enthusiastic woman disappears again.

Thumbing through the cramped rows of clothes, she’s surprised at the quality of the things on display. Some brands she recognizes, others she doesn’t, and some things have no brand label at all—when Eleanor pulls out an appealing jacket and scarf combination, she can’t find a proper tag anywhere.

“The prices are attached to the sleeves,” the girl says helpfully from somewhere behind Eleanor. She’s folding shirts, her hands now clean of muffin crumbs. She offers a friendly smile when Eleanor holds the jacket up.

“I was actually looking for the label.”

“That one’s mine,” the girl says. She points upward, where Eleanor can see stairs leading to an open loft. “I have a little workshop upstairs.”

Eleanor takes a closer look at the jacket. It’s a light-brown suede, well-tailored, and fitted with a soft teal scarf included on the hanger.

“You made this?” Eleanor asks.

The girl nods a little bashfully. “Yep! I alter most of the stuff I sell. People donate, or I get things from eBay, and I fix it all up. Some pieces I make myself. Like that one.” She says it with the air of someone who is proud of their work but wants to keep shy of bragging. “I usually have to alter my own clothes, so I figured why not do it for other people?”

“It’s beautiful. You have a real talent.”

A light blush dusts the girl’s cheeks. “Thank you! I’m Mila, by the way.” Mila holds out a hand to shake, and Eleanor takes it gladly.

“El—uh. Nora,” Eleanor says, only just managing to correct herself to the nickname she’s been going by since she introduced herself to Dani. She’s still not totally used to it, but it’s getting more familiar the more time she spends here.

“I know!” Mila chirps, before wincing. “I mean, I was told about you.”

Eleanor’s hand clenches a little around Mila’s. “You were?”

Perhaps Dani hasn’t figured out who Eleanor is, but that doesn’t mean everyone else in town is in the same boat. Roots seem to go back far here. The more Eleanor involves herself, the more likely it is that she’s going to meet someone who will hate her on sight.

At first, Eleanor had been primarily worried about it affecting the objectivity of her project, but lately her concern is more personal.

“Word gets around. Especially when the Coopers are involved,” Mila says. “Dani told me about your car breaking down.”

Eleanor takes a deep, relieved breath. “Right. That makes sense.” It seems she’s destined to be known by everyone in town before she’s even met them, and not for the reason she’s so worried about.

“Pardon me for saying so, but you don’t look like the kind of woman who needs new clothes,” Mila says. “Your outfit is probably worth half the stock of my shop.”

“I’m finding that nothing I own is really appropriate. What I wear isn’t conducive to relaxation,” Eleanor says. She plucks at her blazer. “According to Dani.”

Mila chuckles. “Sounds like her. So you’re looking for something more casual?”

“More comfortable, really. I can’t keep walking down my gravel driveway in stilettos.”

Mila laughs again. The ease of their conversation is surprising, and Mila leads her to another crowded corner of the shop. “This is where I keep most of my original pieces.”

The clothes on display are exactly what Eleanor is looking for. They’re understated but tasteful, simple cuts and colours in soft fabrics with nice accent pieces. Each of them looks good enough to be in a higher-end store, but as Eleanor sorts through, she sees that most of them have bargain-sale prices.

Examining the immaculate stitching on a blouse, Eleanor speaks up before Mila can

disappear into the racks again. “These are incredibly low prices, Mila. You could make real money selling this stuff online, making a brand.”

Mila lets out a nervous guffaw. “Oh, I don’t know about that.”

“I do,” Eleanor insists, holding up a jacket she fully intends on buying. “I know high-quality work when I see it.”

Mila turns fuchsia. “That’s—that’s super flattering, really, but I’m not sure it’s worth all that. And I don’t think people could afford it if I raised the prices. I do okay enough to keep the store.”

Eleanor frowns. Mila is criminally underselling her own talent. She isn’t going to push, but she can at the very least pay the girl what her work deserves.

“I’ll pay double for all of this,” Eleanor says decisively, grabbing a few items and starting to piece together her new wardrobe. “Do you have a fitting room?”

“What?” Mila says. She looks shell-shocked as Eleanor slings a few sundresses over her arm. “Oh, gosh, no. I can’t let you do that.”

“I insist. I’m still paying you less than what it’s worth.”

It takes some persuasion, but Eleanor finally manages to pay and leave the store with a new collection of jeans, flat-soled leather boots and sandals, and all of the original items she can find in her size, along with a few sundresses and plain cotton shirts. Eleanor practically has to run the transaction through herself, but in the end she leaves with several shopping bags and a very grateful Mila waving her out.

* * *

Eleanor gets the chance to take her new clothes for a test run two nights later when she sees Dani's distinctive truck parked outside the River Run again.

If it weren't for the fact that hanging out at the bar seems to be one of the only social activities in this town, Eleanor might think Dani has some kind of drinking problem. But it's Friday night, and every other car in town is either in the parking lot or out on the streets surrounding the building. Eleanor finds a spot across the road to leave her Porsche. Two men taking a smoke break outside the bar's door touch the brims of their trucker caps as she passes, and Eleanor hurries inside.

Eleanor's growing familiarity and comfort with the bar's pizza-smoke-beer smell is strange but not unwelcome. It's rowdier than usual inside, and it takes Eleanor a moment to locate Dani, but soon enough she spots that blue hat and blonde ponytail at the loudest table in the place. She can see Ryan, Owen, and Dani's cousin Sarah gathered around two seated figures—one is Dani, and the other a man that Eleanor doesn't recognize. They're locked in an intense arm wrestling match. Both of their biceps shake as they strain against each other's grip, and the group around them is shouting so loudly that it might as well be a championship hockey game.

"Give'r, Dani!" Sarah is yelling, taking a long pull from her beer bottle.

"She's not gonna beat Matthew. It's a matter of muscle mass," Ryan says to Owen, a point which Eleanor must admit is fair—the man Dani is competing with is bigger than she is, even with her sturdy frame. He's closer to Owen's size.

Owen slings an arm around Ryan's shoulders. "You're underestimating our girl!"

Dani, for her part, seems to be completely ignoring the conversation. Her face is set in grim determination, every vein in her neck popping as she fights to keep her arm off the table. She exudes quiet confidence. She seems to be relying on stamina rather than brute strength—while Matthew's arm is vibrating with the force of his effort,

Dani's is rooted to the wood. Unmoving.

Eleanor wouldn't believe it was possible for Dani to win against the man across from her, but Dani certainly seems to be gaining the upper hand. Matthew's arm is shaking heavily now, bending further back by the second. His face is red and sweaty, and a few seconds later his arm slams onto the table so hard that Eleanor is afraid the beers scattered across it are going to end up on the carpet.

Matthew smacks the table with an open palm. The drinks rattle dangerously yet again, and a worried-looking Sarah grabs at the bottles to move them out of the way.

"Woah, pump the brakes. We're all friends here," Dani says, holding her hands up in a peaceful gesture.

Matthew doesn't respond well. He stands up, towering over the table and elbowing Ryan out of the way.

"I want a rematch, Cooper. You had your arm set wrong, you fuckin' cheater." Matthew's voice is gravelly in a way that seems put-on, like he's lowering it to come off as more intimidating. But Dani keeps her composure. She stands slowly, crossing her arms, and even though he's a few inches taller, Eleanor can see him visibly resist taking a step back.

"Admit that you lost, bud. Don't make this a thing," Dani says. There's a warning in her tone. A protectiveness.

Matthew's outburst is descending quickly into a grown man throwing a tantrum. "Lost, my ass! You're a goddamn cheat!"

"Lost your ass? I'm sure you can find it if you take a lap," Ryan pipes up. When Matthew turns on him, he shrinks back and behind Owen.

Matthew takes a step in their direction, but Owen puts a stop to it with a hand in the centre of Matthew's chest. He doesn't need to speak. Owen's calm presence—and the fact that he's taller than Matthew by at least three inches—seems to bring Matthew to his senses, but he still points aggressively at Dani.

“I want a rematch,” he says, at a normal volume this time but still visibly angry. Dani waves him off, looking less protective now and more amused at his antics.

“Kick rocks, Matty. Come back when you're ready to talk out your mouth instead of your ass.”

Matthew's response is as mature as the rest of him—he knocks the bowl of pretzels off the table, sending them scattering across the floor, and storms away while Dani's friends yell obscenities at his back.

Eleanor has known that Dani is strong since they met, but watching Dani win against someone twice her size? Watching her barely break a sweat doing so? Eleanor's body makes its opinion known with a low, deep throb below the waist of her new jeans. She's genuinely contemplating going home to address the situation with a cold shower when Dani spots her, and much like she did on Eleanor's first visit here, Dani brightens.

“Nora!”

With a shaky exhale, Eleanor makes her way over to the table. Everyone at it gives a friendly cheer when she pulls up a chair to Dani's left, which makes her feel warm in a different way. For whatever reason, she's being accepted.

“Here again, I see,” Eleanor says as she settles into a wooden chair with uneven legs. It tips a little every time she shifts. Wordlessly Dani sets her arm over the back of it, holding it steady.

“Likewise! What brings you here?”

“I saw your truck in the parking lot. I didn’t realize I’d be interrupting a drunken bar fight.”

Dani shrugs. “Matty’s just chirping. He’ll cool off. And I’m not drinking tonight, it’s my turn to DD!”

The table gives a genial yell at that, raising their drinks, and Eleanor is more intrigued than ever. Apparently Dani is attractive, kind, funny, and also responsible. A lethal combination.

While Sarah and Owen set up a game of pool, which they immediately ban Dani from participating in, Eleanor tries to tune into the conversations going around the table. Dani seems delighted that Eleanor has now met and been outfitted by her friend Mila, and when the topic of Eleanor’s new wardrobe comes up Dani’s review is enthusiastic.

“You look great. Really great. Mila knows what she’s doing,” Dani says. She gives Eleanor an appraising once-over that’s even more distracting.

“Did I look so terrible before?” Eleanor teases, trying to deflect the praise. Dani’s answer leaves her reeling.

“Nah, don’t worry. You’re gorgeous.”

Eleanor, her heart fluttering like a swooning schoolgirl, is saved from having to reply by a cheer from the pool table. Someone else is joining the party—a tall woman with smooth, dark skin has just walked through the front doors, and she picks her way across the bar to take a seat on Dani’s other side.

“Naomi! Long time no see!” Dani says brightly, giving Naomi a quick side hug.

“I know, I know. With the evening clinics we’ve been doing, I haven’t had much time.” Naomi turns to Eleanor with a smile. “I see we have a new addition?”

“Oh! Nora, this is Naomi Bates. Owen’s sister, remember?” Dani says, and Eleanor shakes Naomi’s outstretched hand. “Naomi, Nora. She’s here for the summer.”

Even if Eleanor didn’t already know, it’s clear that this is the infamous doctor that Sarah is so smitten with. Dani’s cousin misses her next shot the moment she sees Naomi sit down, and Eleanor can’t blame her. Naomi is quite beautiful. She has warm brown eyes and striking natural curls, and her smile puts Eleanor at ease.

“Owen texted to tell me there was a fight brewing,” Naomi says, a sculpted eyebrow raised. “I see it’s all calmed down?”

“Matty was being a knucklehead. Nothing new there.” Dani says, still unconcerned.

“Do you usually get called to intervene?” Eleanor asks.

Naomi laughs, accepting the beer that Dani pours her from the pitcher on the table. “More to treat the injuries afterwards. But it’s always nice when my services aren’t needed.”

Another ruckus erupts from the pool table. It looks like Sarah has won the game after all, and Owen seems to be taking his loss with grace. He shakes Sarah’s hand, clinking his beer bottle with hers.

Eleanor is then shocked to see the moment punctuated by Ryan planting a big, definitely-not-platonic kiss on Owen’s mouth as consolation.

It must show on her face; while Naomi goes over to congratulate Sarah on the victory, Dani nudges Eleanor with an elbow. “Never seen a couple before?”

Owen and Ryan are now wrapped in an intimate hug. How on earth Eleanor didn’t notice the fact that they’re clearly together is beyond her, but now it seems ridiculously obvious.

“I won’t lie. I’m a bit surprised,” Eleanor admits.

“Are you?”

Eleanor lowers her voice. “They’re an interracial gay couple in a small town. Don’t they get harassed?”

“Nah. Not with us around,” Dani says with an easy wave. She leans back in her chair until the front legs leave the ground but maintains her balance. “They got a bit of shit for it when they first got together, but we all made sure that wouldn’t be a problem again. There’s been no issues since.”

The idea of a town this size being so accepting of difference seems impossible, but here Eleanor is, sitting in a rural bar with a group that’s more racially and sexually diverse than her boardroom at CromTech.

“I guess I shouldn’t have assumed,” Eleanor says, casting her eyes around the bar as Owen puts a hand on Ryan’s lower back. Nobody gives them a second glance.

“There are some idiots, just like anywhere. But not everyone here has a backwards mentality. We’ve all worked hard to make this place different. I wouldn’t live here otherwise. Besides, it’s not just Ryan and Owen.”

“Your cousin, right?” Eleanor says, nodding in Sarah’s direction. Sarah is currently

sitting on the edge of the pool table, celebrating her victory with two shots of tequila while Naomi chats with her brother. “I suppose I didn’t think there could be more than that in a town like this.”

“You could say it runs in the family,” Dani says.

That single sentence derails any other thoughts Eleanor might have had. Dani is casual about it, still leaned back and balancing her chair on two of its legs, but the fact that Eleanor now knows without a doubt that Dani is both painfully attractive and definitely gay is doing things to her psyche.

“...you?” Eleanor asks. There’s a definite croak in her voice—she clears her throat, and Dani flashes a knee-weakening grin.

“You didn’t guess?”

“I suspected. I didn’t want to assume. Not everyone is so open about it,” Eleanor says. The table is shaking a little, and Eleanor realizes belatedly that it’s because she’s been jiggling her legs so aggressively that she’s making the beer bottles rattle. She crosses them tightly instead.

Eleanor isn’t usually one to shout her preferences to the rooftops, but that instinct is being challenged by the much more powerful need to have Dani know . She’s just not sure how to drop it into conversation naturally.

“Yeah, I came out in high school and never really looked back,” Dani says, shrugging. “I’ve never been good at hiding it.”

Eleanor nods. She swallows past the lump in her throat, and she blurts out the first thing that comes to mind. “It took me a lot longer. To...do that.”

Dani doesn't seem surprised by Eleanor's disclosure, but her reply is gentle. "Not so open about it, huh?"

"I'm not closed about it," Eleanor says. The conversation feels easier now with Dani smiling at her so softly like that—Eleanor relaxes a bit, leaning back in her chair until she can feel the warmth of Dani's arm against her shoulders. "It just isn't anyone's business."

Eleanor doesn't mention any of the other reasons she's tended to keep her sexuality to herself: the fear of ending up in the public eye hanging over her head; her father's quiet disapproval, gone now but still lingering in the corners of her mind.

"Makes sense. Nobody is entitled to know anything about you," Dani says.

That gives Eleanor pause.

It has continued to be genuinely surprising to Eleanor that, after almost a month in this town, nobody seems to have gone out of their way to look her up. She's not difficult to find. Her online presence was practically nonexistent before she took over as CEO, but her ascension had been documented in the media. A simple search of her first and last name would reveal that Eleanor heads CromTech, and yet Dani has never treated her any differently than she did when they met.

Maybe Eleanor really can have a summer of anonymity.

"I wasn't open about it for a long time," Eleanor admits. She stares down at the table, picking out each individual piece of graffiti scratched into the bumpy surface. "A few years ago, I thought that maybe it was about time I did one thing for myself."

"Do you not usually do things for yourself?"

Eleanor snorts. “I was raised to believe that an hour not spent doing something productive was an hour wasted. It’s not in my nature.”

There’s something appraising in Dani’s eyes when Eleanor raises her own to meet them. This close, even in the hazy light of the bar, the air between them seems to crackle. “Is this summer something you’re doing for yourself?”

It’s a loaded question, even if Dani doesn’t realize it. When Eleanor had first arrived, she’d been certain of what was bringing her here. She’s here to complete a project, with a side objective of getting Kayla and Ash off her back. To expand CromTech in the direction she wants it to go. She’s here to prove Renée wrong. None of those things are really for herself . They’re things she needs to do.

“My friends tell me I need to learn to relax,” Eleanor says, tapping the table with her fingernails. “Self-care and all that garbage.”

Dani nods. She’s thoughtful, chewing on her lower lip in a way that’s unnecessarily distracting. “Maybe I can help you with that.”

“How, exactly?” Eleanor asks, determinedly wrestling her mind out of the hot and sweaty place it defaults to.

Dani just smiles. “Are you free tomorrow night?”

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“When you asked if I was free, I wasn’t expecting something quite so, um. True crime?”

Eleanor’s voice is shaky not due to nerves but because the two-wheel dirt path through the woods they’re driving on is absurdly bumpy. If anyone else had told Eleanor to meet at the edge of town and then instructed her to park her car and drive into the forest in a strange truck, she would have pointed her taser at them. With Dani she didn’t even think twice.

“And yet you got in the truck,” Dani points out.

“I did. My survival instincts are weaker than I thought.”

“It’ll be worth it, trust me,” Dani assures her with complete confidence. She’s leaned back comfortably in the driver’s seat, one hand on the wheel and the other on the gearshift, and the bumps in the road don’t seem to phase her at all—her ponytail bounces cheerfully with each one. She catches Eleanor’s eye and flashes her a grin, and Eleanor quickly looks out the window.

It’s mostly deciduous trees here, rather than pines or cedars. The soil seems soft, not rocky, and the trees aren’t too dense—it has potential for building. Eleanor almost wishes she had her notes with her, to mark it for investigation later. It’s doubtful she’ll remember how to find this place again otherwise.

“I hope you don’t mind the music,” Dani says, breaking Eleanor out of her thoughts. “I know not everyone likes country.”

Eleanor hums noncommittally. “Do people here listen to anything else? It seems a little excessive.”

“I like classic rock, too,” Dani says. She turns the volume down. “And I had a brief pop-punk phase when I went to university.”

Eleanor frowns, looking over at Dani again. “You went to university?”

“You sound surprised.”

“Well, I—I mean, yes?” Eleanor says, her mind still trying to wrap around that little tidbit. “You’re a mechanic. It doesn’t require a university degree. Where did you go? What did you study?”

“English, at Queens. And a master’s in journalism from Western.”

Eleanor blinks silently for a moment. She’d assumed that Dani had trained on the job, maybe even had grown up in the shop. A college diploma at most.

“You have a master’s degree ?” Eleanor finally asks, but before Dani can take offense to the incredulity in Eleanor’s question, the truck emerges from the shaded woods and into the late-day sunlight.

“We’re here!” Dani says.

“Here” turns out to be a grassy field with a lone towering tree in the centre and the clear imprint of two tire tracks leading to the base. Some kind of wood structure is built into the branches.

Dani backs the truck in directly underneath it, grinning as she cuts the engine.

“Welcome to the Cooper Clubhouse.”

Eleanor opens the passenger side door. The tree is huge, an ancient-looking maple with a dense trunk and thick branches holding up the so-called clubhouse. The bark is scarred in places, and many of the branches have no leaves at all.

“Sarah and I built this when we were kids,” Dani explains, climbing out of the truck and pointing at the platform and shack-like walls above them. “We all used to dirt bike here. It’s always been my favourite place in town. Not many other people know where it is, so I still come here if I need time to myself.”

“It’s beautiful,” Eleanor says, jumping down from the tall truck seat onto the grass. Not the structure of the tree house itself, necessarily, which has a child’s earnest artistic vision about it, but the surrounding vista is stunning. The hill starts to slope down just past the tree, opening up to the sprawling, hilly landscape beyond. It’s green as far as the eye can see, all grass and then forest, as the hills meet the blue sky and the early evening sun goes down directly in front of them.

“Yeah. Sarah and I used to sleep here,” Dani says, looking up at the tree fondly. She fishes around behind the trunk and emerges holding a large stick. “It’s the best place in town to relax.”

Dani determinedly uses the stick to hook a weathered-looking rope ladder and swing it down.

“Come on! Let me show you,” Dani says, holding out a hand with a bright, expectant look on her face. After only a moment of hesitation, Eleanor takes it.

Climbing the swinging, rickety rope ladder is a harrowing experience, and for the first time, Eleanor is grateful that Mila nudged her into buying flat-soled boots. When she finally reaches the top with Dani’s help, the tree house itself isn’t much better. It

creaks worryingly every time Eleanor takes a step. Dani doesn't seem to notice, too wrapped up in childlike excitement.

"Owen made us that table out of milk crates in the fifth grade," Dani is saying, pointing at a plastic contraption in the corner. "We'd bring backpacks full of food out here and pretend we were stuck in the wilderness. Or we'd pile blankets into a nest, and Ryan would read to us. He loves to read out loud."

Eleanor smiles, imagining a young Ryan reading Robinson Crusoe in a tiny and authoritative voice to his captive audience. He does seem to have a flair for the dramatic.

Dani leans against the trunk, crossing her legs at the ankle, and the movement reveals something behind her on the opposite side of the tree house that Eleanor hadn't noticed before.

"Why are some of the branches gone?"

Dani twists around to see what Eleanor is pointing at. When she sees the broken branches in question, she waves Eleanor's question off easily. "Oh, we used to have a swing on that branch before it broke. And that one was our old ladder, but it broke, too."

"Maybe that should have been a warning sign," Eleanor mutters. The wood beneath her moves with every step, but Dani just pulls her by the hand toward the edge of the platform.

"You worry too much. Come on, sit."

The view is even better from up here, with the shade of the thick top leaves keeping them out of the sun. Eleanor can see names carved deeply into the tree trunk nearby,

where the bark has been pulled away— Dani and Sarah , scratched in close together, alongside a blocky Owen and a looping, whimsical Ryan . Beside it is a neat, angular Naomi .

There's also a spot where a name has clearly been scratched out. It's rough and imprecise, as if several hands were hacking at it at once. But above it—in large, clear letters and surrounded by a deeply carved heart—is Mila .

A gentle breeze blows through the field, rustling the long grass and the trees beyond and making the whole structure shift underneath them.

“What exactly is the load capacity of this thing?” Eleanor asks tightly, gripping the edge of the platform even though she knows it won't help if the whole thing crumbles.

“Not sure.” Dani raps on the platform with her knuckles. “It's always been sturdy, though.”

The knocking does nothing to quell Eleanor's anxiety. She slaps her own hand over Dani's, pinning it to the wood. “It doesn't feel very structurally sound.”

“You're not very trusting, are you?” Dani's smile is searching, and Eleanor ducks away.

“I got in the truck, didn't I?”

“Regretting it yet?”

“I will be if this thing collapses,” Eleanor says. “As an engineer, I really don't think it's up to code.”

“You’re an engineer?”

“Chemical engineer,” Eleanor clarifies. “But math is math.”

Dani laughs. It’s as bright and sweet as the summer sunshine. “We can get down. The view is almost as good from the truck.”

The sun is starting to set when Dani opens the tailgate and hops up, patting the space next to her until Eleanor hauls herself up to fill it.

“I’ve always loved watching the sunset from here,” Dani says. Her dangling legs swing to a rhythm Eleanor can’t follow. “It’s so quiet that it feels like I’m the only person on earth.”

“Except me,” Eleanor says absently, busy watching the way Dani chews at her full lips. It’s strangely mesmerizing.

“Except you. I thought you might like it here.”

“I do,” Eleanor says quietly.

And she does. The whole horizon is bathed in an orange glow, the sun sinking behind the trees as they make idle conversation, and slowly leaving in its wake a sky full of the brightest stars Eleanor has ever seen. They almost seem to shimmer, and the Milky Way is visible to the naked eye in a way Eleanor has rarely seen.

“Wow,” Eleanor breathes quietly, gazing up while Dani lights a citronella candle to keep the worst of the bugs away. “I’ve never seen stars like this. And I studied astrophysics.”

“They come out real bright when there’s no light pollution. I thought you studied

engineering?” Dani asks, frowning. The candle has a sweet, lemony smell.

Eleanor nods, still looking up at the stars. “I have four degrees.”

There’s a pause, and Eleanor finally pulls her gaze away from the constellations to see that Dani is staring at her like she has as many heads as she does degrees.

“In what?”

Eleanor clears her throat. “Chemical engineering, computer science, astrophysics, and an MBA.”

Dani stares at her again. Eleanor bites the inside of her cheek, tearing nervously at the skin around her thumbnail.

In her experience, this is the point where people usually get uncomfortable. Every date she’s ever been on has had this moment, where the person across the dinner table realizes that Eleanor has them outmatched in education and usually in job prestige. The reaction is typically either a sudden lack of interest or an onslaught of bragging. It’s one of the many reasons she’s steered away from anything serious.

Dani just shakes her head, the wheels clearly turning in her brain. “How old are you?”

Eleanor barks out a laugh. “How old do you think I am?”

“I assumed you were around my age, but with that much education plus a corporate job, you must be, like...a vampire or something,” Dani says.

Eleanor shakes her head, unsuccessfully fighting the heat in her cheeks from rising. “I just turned thirty-one.”

“You’re a year younger than me and you have four degrees? And a career?” Dani says, whistling long and low. “That is seriously impressive. How did you manage that?”

Eleanor lets out a relieved breath. Dani doesn’t seem intimidated, nor does she start bringing up her own achievements in a self-conscious word vomit. She just seems impressed and interested. It’s entirely disarming.

“My father thought astrophysics was a waste of time, so I did it simultaneously with computer science. And I finished all my degrees early,” Eleanor says. “I like to learn. I worked in R&D for a few years, and then...”

Eleanor has come to trust Dani more quickly than probably anyone else she’s ever met, but, even so, she hesitates. Would Dani not care what company Eleanor heads, or would revealing it torpedo this tiny bright spot she’s nestled herself into? Even if it’s only going to last until the end of the summer, Eleanor wants to preserve this bubble of normalcy. Even if it means avoiding the truth a little.

“And then I went into business,” Eleanor finishes vaguely.

Dani doesn’t pry for more. “So you’re a scientist at heart.”

Eleanor chuckles, staring down at her hands. She’s been picking at her nail beds throughout the conversation, and one of them is starting to bleed. “I was, once. Now I’m just...tired.”

“I don’t blame you. Your life sounds exhausting.”

Dani says it with genuine concern, and Eleanor accepts it despite her usual instincts. “Nobody’s ever put it that bluntly before. But yes, frankly. It is.”

“I couldn’t do what you do,” Dani says. She’s leaned back to look up at the sky, her hands braced behind her. “I tried the city life for a while, after I graduated. Interned at a newspaper in Toronto for a few years. I was on the fast track to getting my own beat. Worked my butt off, had a shoebox apartment, the whole thing. But it all felt kinda empty. Isolated. I didn’t realize how miserable I was until I came back here for the holidays one year. Eventually I decided not to go back.”

They sit in silence for a few moments, just taking in the view. Crickets are singing. Branches rustle in the wind. The occasional firefly floats over the long grass. The smell of citronella and fresh night air is more revitalizing than a cup of morning coffee.

It’s lovely, but Eleanor’s mind can’t stop spinning around on Dani’s words.

“I understand needing time to recharge,” Eleanor finally says. “But why stay here permanently when you could do so much more?”

Dani shrugs. She seems to have been anticipating the question. “Sarah asks me that, too sometimes. Always tells me I could do bigger and better things. My brother stayed down south and put in his dues, and he’s a big shot journalist now. He’s part of why I got the degree, I think. I wanted to live up.”

Eleanor blinks, her brain stuttering over the new piece of information Dani so casually dropped.

“You have a brother?”

Dani nods. “Yeah. He’s 12 years older. Garreth. We don’t really talk.”

There’s something in the way Dani says it that gives Eleanor pause. She can hear complication in every syllable. Even though her curiosity burns, Eleanor doesn’t

push. “So why hold yourself back?”

Dani seems relieved that Eleanor hasn’t pursued the subject of her brother—the tense line of her shoulders relaxes. “Life isn’t always about bigger things. The next big step in your career, climbing the ladder. Sometimes it’s just about being happy. And this place...it makes me happy.”

While Eleanor technically hears what Dani is saying, she’s struggling to comprehend it. Putting happiness, genuine happiness, above ambition or responsibility has never been an option in her own life. Her father drilled a sense of duty into her from the day she could understand what it meant. He valued ambition. Purpose. Since his death, she’s taken it all on as he expected her to.

“I love it here. I love my friends, my family. I have pretty much everything I need,” Dani continues. She’s found a small rock somewhere in the truck bed, and she rolls it between her fingers. “I totally respect people who can be happy living the life I left, but it just isn’t for me.”

Eleanor frowns. The remoteness, the aging infrastructure, the lack of amenities and opportunities, none of it is enough to compel Dani to leave Riverwalk. Something here outweighs it all.

“Is there no newspaper in town?”

“Nah, not anymore.” Dani throws the stone into the field, and it disappears into a sea of green. “I’ve thought about going part-time at the shop and giving freelance writing a shot, but there never seems to be a good time. Besides, Sarah needs the help. She took over just before I left for school.”

Eleanor nods, though she’s far from understanding. None of it makes sense. Dani abandoning a promising career, an upward trajectory, to disappear into an auto shop

in the middle of nowhere? If Dani had continued with journalism, they might have met each other under completely different circumstances. Dani simply chose not to. And she seems completely at peace with that decision.

“It’s just hard to believe you’d waste a journalism degree on being a mechanic,” Eleanor says without thinking.

The regret is instantaneous. Dani hardly reacts, but Eleanor can hear the condescension in her own words even as she says them. The emphasis on mechanic , on waste . It’s the kind of thing her father would say. It leaves a bitter aftertaste.

“I’m so sorry,” Eleanor says immediately. “I didn’t mean—you’re not wasting anything. I didn’t mean for it to come out that way.”

“It’s okay,” Dani reassures her, putting a hand on Eleanor’s thigh. Eleanor notices the warmth of Dani’s palm briefly, but her guilt supersedes it.

“No, I sounded like—” Eleanor sighs, wincing. “You’ve been very kind to me, and you don’t deserve me acting like a stuck-up...”

Eleanor trails off, searching for the right word.

“ Citiot ?” Dani says.

Eleanor blinks slowly, turning toward Dani.

“Like an idiot, but from the city,” Dani elaborates, grinning. “ Citi-ot . It’s what we call vacationers who make asses of themselves.”

“I... Yes,” Eleanor says, chuckling as the tension breaks. “Yes. I was acting like a stuck-up... citiot .”

Eleanor is fully ready to wallow in self-deprecation, but Dani doesn't let her. She moves her hand to Eleanor's shoulder and shakes it gently until Eleanor makes eye contact.

"Honestly, it's okay. I know my choices seem unconventional," Dani says. "I get it. And I wish I could do more writing, sure—but for now, I'm happy. That's enough for me."

In lieu of saying something even more stupid, Eleanor nods.

"Come on," Dani says, "I've got some blankets in the truck. We can lay them out, and you can teach me about celestial mechanics."

Dani shoves her hand through a tiny hatch in the truck's back window and pulls out a pile of fabric from behind the seats, laying the mismatched squares out over the hard plastic of the truck bed. Eleanor's surprise must show on her face because Dani laughs as she settles on her back.

"I took an astronomy elective. You should challenge your misconceptions."

Once Eleanor has settled beside her—with an appropriate space between them, of course—Dani pulls another blanket up over their legs, and together they look at the sky.

"Where should we start?" Eleanor asks.

Dani makes a thoughtful face, pointing upward at the moon shining brightly down. "Well, I know that one."

Eleanor laughs. The movement brings her closer to Dani, tucking her almost into Dani's side, and when she moves away again, the distance between them seems to

have shrunk.

“You know, I realize it’s scientifically impossible, but it actually looks bigger here. Brighter,” Eleanor says, looking up at the moon’s distant surface.

“That’s why we make the best moonshine.” Dani’s arms are folded behind her head, which has left a sliver of exposed skin just above the waistline of her jeans.

“In a legal distillery, or...?”

“The legality is surprisingly flexible. If someone offers it to you, it’s best not to ask where it came from,” Dani says airily.

“Noted.”

Dani points out more constellations, telling the myths and stories to match each one. Most of them Eleanor knows, but Dani tells them differently than any book she’s ever read. In return, Eleanor relays the scientific names and designations of the brightest ones, peppering Dani with interesting facts and taking full advantage of being able to see them all.

Her father had considered her astrophysics degree a waste of time and money since it couldn’t be applied to anything at CromTech, which is why she’d moved on to something more practical in grad school, but she’s always loved learning about the stars. The night sky was just about the only consistent thing in her inconsistent childhood.

Eleanor falls asleep staring up at the moon, listening to Dani’s low, soothing voice telling her the story of Perseus and Andromeda.

Unfortunately Eleanor wakes up in a less pleasant way—stiff, damp, and itchy. The

sky is light when she opens her eyes, the moon hanging low and dim, but the sun hasn't quite risen yet. A light mist is hovering over the long grass around the truck, clinging to the blades and making them glisten. It also clings to Eleanor's clothes and skin, and she shivers absently as she stretches her numb arm out and flexes her cold fingers.

Beside her, Dani stirs. There's a confused, endearing little frown on her face when she opens her eyes.

"Shit," Dani says, blinking rapidly and sitting up. "Oh, man, I didn't mean to fall asleep. You must be freezing!"

"I'm fine," Eleanor says through chattering teeth. Dani bundles the blankets up around Eleanor's shoulders, hopping down from the truck bed to help her toward the passenger door.

"I'm so sorry, seriously. Come on, I'll drive you home."

Dani drops Eleanor off at her front door with a cheerful wave in the small hours of the morning. Eleanor fixes herself a cup of tea and a hot water bottle once she's changed into dry clothes, scratching at one of what feels like two dozen bug bites on every exposed part of her body. But even that doesn't dampen her mood.

Despite the discomfort, the night was worth it.

* * *

Three days later, when Eleanor is curled up in bed with the worst cold she's had since she was a teenager, she re-evaluates her initial assessment.

"Stupid outdoors," she grumbles, blowing her nose for the thousandth time. She's so

congested that she's sure she'll never regain the full use of her nostrils. "Stupid tree house, stupid cold." She's tired and sore and unbelievably grumpy, but, even so, Eleanor would probably do it all again.

She's interrupted from her misery by something vibrating under her pillow. Fishing around for the source, Eleanor pulls out her phone, where Ash's contact photo is flashing with an incoming call.

Eleanor flops back against the pillows as she answers.

"What?" Eleanor groans.

Ash laughs on the other end of the call. "Good lord. You sound like you went on a cigar binge. Are you alive?"

"I'm sick," Eleanor mutters, sniffing miserably. "Leave me alone."

"You're sick?" Kayla's voice echoes in the distance. Eleanor sighs. Never one without the other. "You never get sick. How did you get sick?"

"Fell asleep outside," Eleanor mumbles into her pillow. The sun is percolating through the closed curtains, making her yellow bedroom walls glow. It might be soothing if it weren't for her blaring headache.

"How the hell did you manage that?" Kayla asks.

Eleanor loses herself in a coughing fit before she can answer. "Stargazing. With Dani."

"Who the fuck is Dani?" Ash asks.

Eleanor sincerely wishes he were here, specifically so that she could punch him.

“The mechanic!” Kayla says.

“Oh! Wait. Did you—?!” Ash exclaims. Eleanor can hear Kayla gasp.

“Eleanor!” Kayla yells, but before they can build up a head of steam Eleanor cuts them off.

“We didn’t have sex!”

What follows is a moment of silence so profound that Eleanor is surprised crickets haven’t manifested inside her house just to drive it home.

“You’ve lost me,” Kayla finally says.

“We went stargazing. We fell asleep in the bed of her truck,” Eleanor wheezes. With the addition of a fever, her patience is wearing thinner than ever.

“Let me get this straight,” Ash says slowly. Eleanor struggles not to cough again. “You slept together without sleeping together? Outside? And you ended up sick? I think you’re doing this wrong.”

“You must really be hung up on this girl,” Kayla says, sounding a little too suspicious for Eleanor’s liking.

“Please talk quieter.” Eleanor’s headache is building ever higher with each word spoken.

“She must be insanely hot. Send me a picture,” Kayla insists. In her mind’s eye, Eleanor can see Kayla pulling out her phone in anticipation.

“I don’t have a picture.”

“Okay, link her Instagram or something.”

“She doesn’t have one.”

Ash makes an indignant noise.

“What?”

“If people have social media here, it’s all photos of their trucks.”

Ash’s horror only seems to grow. “What kind of hellish town did you move to?”

“I actually like it. They lie to your face instead of through curated photographs. It’s refreshing.” Eleanor sits up to take a sip of her lukewarm tea. She swings her legs over the side of the bed and tucks the phone against her ear, dragging herself downstairs to make another cup.

Kayla snorts. “Are you okay, Eleanor? Did you join the hoser cult up there?”

“I didn’t join anything,” Eleanor insists as she fills the kettle. “It’s just a nice vacation. This was your idea.”

“As long as you don’t get all redneck indoctrinated and abandon us,” Ash says.

“Never. I’ll be back soon.”

“With your survey in hand, right?” Kayla says. “How’s that going, by the way?”

“It’s fine,” Eleanor says, studiously ignoring the pang of guilt that accompanies the

white lie. She's barely touched the survey in over a week. "Should be done soon."

She hangs up soon after. She's never been one to take a sick day, but rather than dragging herself to her laptop to continue her assessment of the local infrastructure needs, Eleanor makes a selfish decision. She crawls back into bed.

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Eleanor's cold clears up in a few days, each of which she spends trying to recover rather than employing her usual method of continuing to work through the sickness. She even wakes up from a nap on day three to Mila hand delivering two tubs of homemade matzo ball soup to her door courtesy of Dani, who is not sick and is as busy as ever at the shop. An old family recipe and a surefire way to heal Nora's cold, the attached note says. Since she still doesn't have Dani's phone number, Eleanor doesn't get the opportunity to thank her for the gesture until she's feeling well enough to venture out of the house again.

She's idly flipping through one of the trashy magazines in the grocery store lineup when there's a tap on her shoulder. She turns around to see a grinning Dani covered head to toe in green stains and tiny bits of grass.

"Hey, you! Feeling any better?" Dani says cheerfully.

Eleanor tries not to think about what it means that Dani's presence has started to coincide with a feeling of safety. She shoves the magazine back onto the rack—they're a guilty pleasure, and one she doesn't need Dani knowing about.

"I am, actually," Eleanor says, shifting her shopping basket to the other arm to block Dani's view of the silly headlines. "I've been wanting to thank you for the soup. How did you know I was sick?"

"Mila said she saw you at the pharmacy. Since I'm probably the reason you caught a cold, I felt like I should make it up to you."

Eleanor shifts up in line and Dani follows, trailing grass across the linoleum.

“It’s not your fault. I’m more interested in how exactly this happened,” Eleanor says, gesturing at Dani’s green-stained body.

“I’m off today, so I decided I’d mow my lawn. And then I mowed my neighbour’s lawn. And then the girl across the street was having trouble with her mower, so I helped her out,” Dani says, looking down at herself and grinning. “The clipping bag sort of exploded.”

Eleanor laughs, picturing Dani being showered in grass and dirt and smiling the whole way. It seems in character, as does mowing her neighbour’s lawn just because she felt like it. “A perfectly reasonable explanation.”

“Thank you!” Dani says brightly, either ignoring or entirely missing the gentle sarcasm. “What are you up to today?”

“This,” Eleanor says, pointing at the groceries currently inching up the conveyor belt. She’s pleased to note that it’s a pretty healthy shop, mostly fruit and veggies rather than sugary snacks or indulgences, and the cashier who interrogated her last time doesn’t seem to be working today.

“Wanna get some ice cream? It’s the best in town. Probably the best in the country,” Dani says, starting to load her things onto the conveyor behind Eleanor. It seems to be half sweets and half regular groceries, along with the biggest tub of protein powder Eleanor has ever seen. “It’s such a nice day for it.”

“Don’t you think you should get some clean clothes first?”

Dani looks down at herself again, as if she’d forgotten that every piece of clothing she’s wearing is stained emerald. “Oh. Right. How’s about I go change and you take your groceries home and then we meet up here in forty-five?”

Eleanor should say no. Now that she's over her illness, she really should be working on her survey and proposal, which Kayla has recently and inconveniently reminded her still needs doing. She doesn't have much more than some survey notes, a rundown of the local government, and a list of possible suppliers in the area. Not nearly enough to justify almost a month spent on it.

But Dani's smile is so sweet.

Forty-five minutes later, now dressed in slightly cleaner jeans and an oversized T-shirt with her ever-present hat perched over her ponytail, Dani leads her on a slow walk down the main street. It turns down a grassy hill beside one of the gas stations and onto a walking-path that runs along the river. The relative noise of the road is softened by the trees and the slope—it leaves just the sound of birds and the running water to accompany their conversation as they meander.

It all seems suddenly very romantic.

After a brief walk, the path widens, and Dani stops near the stairs of a wide porch attached to a small storefront. There are two picnic tables set up on the grassy area close to the river, and one of them is already occupied.

“Sarah! Naomi! What are you doing here?” Dani calls out, waving. Both people in question sit stiffly upright, looking like they've been caught red-handed with something. Dani, however, seems strangely delighted by the pair's presence. She's smiling ear to ear.

“We're just getting some ice cream,” Sarah says a bit too loudly. Naomi's smile fades into a soft, exasperated sort of look.

Naomi looks down at her mostly empty cup. “Yeah. I should be getting back to work, actually. Thanks for the ice cream, Coops.”

Naomi throws her cup in a nearby garbage can and leaves with a quick wave at the group. Sarah, Eleanor notices, watches her leave with a strange expression.

“They’ve been dancing around each other for forever,” Dani says quietly in Eleanor’s ear as Sarah waves her own goodbye and heads back toward the shop. “I keep telling Sarah to just ask her out already, but she’s too nervous.”

“Why? They’d be sweet together.”

“I know!” Dani holds the door open for Eleanor, and a small bell jingles as they enter the shop.

“Is Naomi straight?”

“Nah. They’ve just been close since we were kids. I think they’re both worried about screwing up the friendship. Hence that whole debacle.”

“Have they always been like that?”

“Ever since high school.” Dani sighs. “Both trying to pretend they aren’t totally in love with each other. But Naomi didn’t come out until after she’d already left town for med school. Now that she’s back and the possibility is actually there, the tension is a thousand times worse.”

They’re interrupted by the woman behind the counter, who waves Dani over with a familiarity that proves how frequent a customer she must be. The flavours on offer aren’t what Eleanor was expecting—instead of basic chocolate or strawberry Dani points out dulce de leche, mango-pineapple, and Earl Grey. The girl behind the counter starts scooping several different flavours onto a towering waffle cone for Dani, but Eleanor’s interest is piqued by a tub in the front corner of the freezer labelled specialty sorbet . It’s a riot of rainbow swirls.

“I’ll take that one, please,” Eleanor says, pointing at the sorbet.

The girl nods, handing Dani her precarious cone. She then scoops a few servings of the rainbow flavour into a cup and hands it to Eleanor with a thumbs-up.

“Happy Pride!” The girl says, apropos of nothing.

Eleanor blinks. Her only thought— how did she know? —rattles around in her head. She takes the cup, staring at the poor girl with what must be a baffled expression until Dani takes pity on both of them.

“That’s the June specialty flavour, for Pride month,” Dani explains, grabbing Eleanor a plastic spoon. “They do new ones all the time.”

“Oh! Right,” Eleanor says, sticking the spoon into her sorbet. “Sorry. Um—thank you.”

Dani guides her back outside to occupy one of the now-empty picnic tables. The day is warm, perfect weather for something cold, and when Eleanor takes her own first bite, she can’t stifle the surprised noise that slips out.

“Whaddya think?” Dani says. She’s already halfway finished with her first flavour, steadily working her way through three scoops.

“Oh my God.” Eleanor groans, licking her spoon. “It’s amazing .” It’s fruity and creamy and delicious, a flavour she can’t quite place, and Eleanor immediately goes for another spoonful. She looks up from her second bite to see Dani staring at her with a dazed look on her face; melted ice cream is dripping down Dani’s cone onto her wrist.

“Dani?” Eleanor says.

Dani snaps out of whatever trance she'd been in. She takes an enormous bite of ice cream, and Eleanor's concern melts into laughter when Dani immediately winces in a telltale brain-freeze face.

"Speaking of Pride," Dani says when she finally gets through the mouthful, pointing at Eleanor's cup, "it's coming up this weekend. Are you gonna be there?"

"You do Pride here?" Eleanor is starting to feel like nothing should shock her anymore about this town, but even so, she knows there are whole cities elsewhere that don't have Pride celebrations. She herself hasn't been to one in years.

"Of course! We don't have a parade or anything, but we always have a big party at the River Run. Half-price drinks for all the gays," Dani says casually.

Eleanor snorts into her bowl. "All of us? How many could there be?"

* * *

Just as Dani promised, the Riverwalk Pride Party happens a few days later.

Eleanor pushes open the door of the River Run to find a completely different bar. It's been festooned with streamers and paper chains in bright colours, and the old stage in the corner cleaned up and decorated with decals and sparkly curtains. There's a green feather boa wrapped around the mic stand, and Dani is standing under a huge arch made of connected balloons, wearing pristine white jeans and a clean ribbed tank top under a blue-and-red checkered flannel. There's no hat today, but she does have several feathers sticking out of her ponytail in the arrangement of the Pride flag.

Eleanor feels warm suddenly. It's not until she's already amidst the group that she realizes she's the only person in the room not wearing some kind of Pride paraphernalia.

“Nora, hey! Over here!” Dani calls out from across the bar.

Eleanor smooths down her hair self-consciously as Dani jogs toward her. She’s pulled into a warm hug right away—her first from Dani, and yet it feels immediately comfortable—and Eleanor is a little breathless when she responds.

“Thanks for inviting me. Why do you look like Freddie Mercury?”

Dani just laughs, putting a gentle hand on Eleanor’s back and guiding her toward their usual table.

It’s not a corporate parade or a crowded, pulsing club like Eleanor is used to but a compact, rowdy gathering of friends. Among a small crowd of people Eleanor doesn’t know yet stands Mila, dressed in what looks like a lovingly homemade outfit of pink-and-blue pastels; Owen and Ryan wear matching shirts, and Naomi is near the jukebox in a gorgeous yellow dress that has Sarah hovering nearby, trying not to stare. Even Jenny is serving drinks in a rainbow romper.

“This is the highest concentration of gay people I’ve ever seen in a town with a population of 2,500,” Eleanor remarks. It’s apparently loud enough for the whole bar to hear because the observation causes a long, loud cheer to erupt from the partygoers that lasts until Eleanor sits down.

A few drinks later, when more people join their table, Eleanor is forced to scoot so close to Dani that their thighs press together. The heat of Dani’s skin sears through those white jeans, and Eleanor is feeling warmer than ever.

“Want a flag?” Mila yells over the music, throwing a sticker book down onto the table in front of Eleanor. Everything from the bear flag to a little ally sticker is available, and there’s an appraising look in Mila’s eye that tells Eleanor that this is her way of asking without asking . Giving her the chance to deflect, if she needs it.

Everyone else at the table seems to be pretending not to watch, but, for once, Eleanor doesn't mind. With a sure, slightly tipsy hand, she plucks the lesbian flag from the sticker sheet and slaps it to her shirt.

There's a welcoming cheer from the table in response.

"I knew it," Mila crows, punching the air. Naomi reaches over for a high-five. Dani, beside her, just smiles as she passes Eleanor a fresh drink.

Mila looks like she wants to continue gloating over having successfully called her shot, but she's distracted by someone else arriving: She squeals in delight in mid-conversation, sprinting to the door and jumping into the arms of a short, handsome man who catches her in a passionate kiss. He's holding a large glass jug in one hand which he almost drops when he wraps his arms around her taller frame.

"Mila's husband," Dani explains, leaning close to talk over the music. "He doesn't come out much, but he always tries to make it to Pride."

"Not a drinker?"

"No, they run a farm just outside town. He's usually too busy to hang out in the summer. Plus, he's pretty shy. He's totally crazy about her, though."

"He looks it," Eleanor remarks. They're still kissing, having passed the glass jug off to someone else to free up their hands.

The disruption is itself disrupted by the bell on the bar top ringing a few times.

"Anyone who's performing, get your asses to the stage," Jenny shouts.

"Hell, yes," Ryan says, pulling a red wig and a pair of scarlet cowboy boots out of a

duffel bag Eleanor hadn't noticed before.

Dani pulls something out of her pocket, humming a song Eleanor only vaguely recognizes. She then applies what turns out to be a large fake moustache to her upper lip.

"Pitter patter," Dani says, before she disappears backstage. Eleanor is left blinking at the spot Dani disappeared from.

Part of Riverwalk Pride, it turns out, is a karaoke talent show of sorts. Everyone does their own little performance, with the winner being decided by a vote, all for the coveted prize of a free pizza from the place next door. Ryan does a campy drag mash-up of various female country music stars, at one point laying himself across the laps of the entire front row. Mila does a classic pop song, and Owen pulls out an emotional ballad in a lower key. Even Sarah gets dragged onstage to do a reluctant number, which Naomi claps disproportionately loudly for.

After Sarah's performance, the single light onstage swings around dramatically a few times before settling on the centre, and, from the makeshift wings, out steps Dani.

She's still in her white pants, but now her hair is slicked back into a tight, hidden bun at the base of her neck and the flannel is nowhere to be seen. She's just in the white tank top and jeans, her arms on full display and her collarbones shining with body glitter. The fake moustache is firmly affixed. She has what appears to be a comically large ball of socks stuffed into the front of her pants.

The look is complete, and as the opening notes to her song play on the speakers, the whole thing starts to make sense.

Dani is clearly the front-runner for the win. She works the crowd like a pro, jumping around and showing off an impressive voice. Not everyone could hit the high notes in

a Queen song, and Dani does it with ease. It's all very campy and manageable, and Eleanor is able to let loose and have a good time without drooling too noticeably.

Until the middle of the song, when Dani starts to move into the crowd.

She does hip thrusts near Ryan's face that are definitely meant to be funny, but Eleanor finds herself flushing from head to toe instead. Dani sits on Owen's lap, serenading him as he waves a five-dollar bill, and pulls Mila to her feet to twirl her a few times. And then, horribly— wonderfully —she makes her way to Eleanor, who suddenly realizes she's in a front-row seat.

Dani doesn't even really get in Eleanor's space like she did with the others, though. She just drops to her knees, legs splayed, and sings directly to Eleanor in that same overdramatic way she's been doing to everyone else.

It's silly. It shouldn't affect Eleanor at all. But, oh, it does. Since Eleanor is wearing jeans today rather than a skirt, it's so easy for Dani to lay a single hand on her knee, which makes Eleanor's legs fall open a tiny bit, and dear God.

She's just performing, Eleanor tells herself as her heartbeat skyrockets and seems to land directly between her legs on the way back down. It's an act. She's doing it to everyone. But that doesn't erase the fact that Dani is essentially kneeled between Eleanor's thighs, undulating her hips in a way that's giving Eleanor very specific mental images.

Even the stupid fake moustache isn't enough to calm Eleanor's libido. When Dani finally leaves to jump back onstage for the finale, Eleanor could probably melt into a puddle in her plastic chair.

Dani wins the contest, of course. Apparently, last year's winner was Ryan, and Dani was determined to beat him, so she gets everyone a round of drinks in celebration.

“How did I do?” Dani says breathlessly, finally moustacheless, flopping into the chair next to Eleanor and handing her a shallow glass of clear liquor.

Eleanor grips it tightly. She’s not usually one for hard liquors besides the occasional whiskey on the rocks, but right now something stronger than wine or beer might be just what she needs.

“Clearly you did well, considering you won,” Eleanor says.

Dani waves carelessly. “Yeah, sure, but they see me make an idiot of myself every year. I want to know what you thought.”

Biting back her first thought— I wanted you to rip that stupid moustache off, along with my clothes and possibly every scrap of my dignity —Eleanor scrambles to force her brain into neutral territory. She settles on a casual compliment. “I had no idea you could sing like that. You could be a professional.”

Dani smiles, accepting a passing high-five. “Eh, I don’t think I’d like that. Too busy. I prefer this.”

Eleanor prefers this as well. She prefers Dani here, performing for her—muscled and dextrous and so very good with her hands.

Crossing her legs, Eleanor downs the drink Dani brought her in a single swallow.

She’d assumed that it was vodka, but the fluid that burns its way down Eleanor’s esophagus is unlike anything she’s ever had before. It’s liquid fire, unthinkably strong and acrid, with a slight aftertaste she can’t identify. She almost doesn’t get it down.

“Oh my God, what—what the fuck was that?” Eleanor puts the glass down, wheezing and coughing her way through the pain.

Dani winces. She moves closer to rub Eleanor's back, patting her a few times. "Shoot, sorry—I meant to warn you!" She moves the empty glass away and offers Eleanor some water to wash it down. It does nothing to soothe the burn. "It's strawberry moonshine. You weren't supposed to take it all at once."

Eleanor clears her throat. It feels raspy, like she's taken a shot of pure ethanol. "I don't taste strawberries at all."

"Yeah, the strawberry is more in the smell than the taste," Dani says, laughing. She takes a sip of her own moonshine and hardly makes a face as she swallows—Eleanor is enraptured by the way her mouth forms around the lip of the glass, the gentle bob of her throat. "Eventually you get used to it. Don't worry, I won't give you any more. I really am sorry for not warning you." When she grins, it's sweet and a bit crooked, and she's close enough that Eleanor can in fact smell strawberry on her breath.

Eleanor drums her fingers on the table. She looks around—half the people here seem to be drinking the moonshine, now that she's paying attention. Even Jenny has a small glass of it going behind the bar.

"I wouldn't mind trying it again," Eleanor says.

"Nobody will judge you if you don't. Mila won't touch the stuff."

"I want to give it a fair shot. Consider it a cultural experience."

"If you're sure," Dani says, handing Eleanor her own glass. There's a bit of glitter where Dani last drank, and Eleanor stops just short of lining up her own mouth to it. She needs to hold on to some dignity, however fleeting.

Eleanor sips it this time; it still burns like hell, but she can taste a hint of sweetness behind the fire. "It's good," she says squeakily.

Dani slings an arm over the back of Eleanor's chair. It doesn't have uneven legs to stabilize today, so it feels like a habit she's forming more than anything else. "It's okay to say you hate it."

"It's an acquired taste," Eleanor says once she's cleared her throat of the afterburn. "It's that big, shiny moon of yours that makes it taste like sweetened paint thinner, I take it?"

Dani's laugh seems to fill the whole room.

It does taste a little better with each sip, though Eleanor suspects that might be because it's slowly deadening her taste buds. As she's finishing the second glass, the gathering slowly turns into a dance party, which then turns into Dani and Owen having a dance off in the middle of a cheering circle of people.

Eleanor stands on the sidelines, observing intently but trying to remain unseen. Mila is dancing enthusiastically with her husband, who has eyes only for her. Sarah and Naomi are dancing near each other without actually touching, both of them looking painfully interested but refusing to take the first step. Dani is moving confidently, unashamed of her ridiculous dance moves.

Naomi finds Eleanor at the bar a few songs later, just as Eleanor is ordering a third glass.

"Having fun?" Naomi asks, hopping onto the bar stool to Eleanor's left. She's breathing hard, and Jenny quickly hands her a cup of water.

"This might be the best Pride I've ever been to," Eleanor says. She wouldn't ordinarily be so candid with someone she barely knows, but she's feeling warm and sociable as she sips at her new drink. Dani was right—she can hardly taste it now.

“Really? Big-city Pride doesn’t measure up?”

“I don’t usually have the time to go, to be honest. Work eats up most of my time.”

Naomi chuckles. “I know how that feels. Clinic hours never end. What do you do?”

Eleanor has skillfully avoided that very question since she arrived here, and for good reason. With two and a half servings of strawberry moonshine in her system, apparently her sense of self-preservation has gone out the window. Everything is a little fuzzy.

“I work in tech,” Eleanor says loudly, watching the party proceed over the rim of her glass—Sarah and Owen are in a dance off, which Sarah is handily winning. “Last Pride I was working until midnight trying to finalize an acquisition.”

“Sounds intimidating.”

Eleanor shrugs. “It was just a little medical startup company. They were working on MRI and ultrasound prototypes that could shake up the market. We had the resources they needed.”

“No kidding! I’ve been saying for years that some new funding in the imaging sector could lower testing costs,” Naomi says, now sitting straight up and fully engaged in the conversation. “Where do you work, exactly?”

A hand lands on Eleanor’s elbow before she can open her mouth. It’s Dani—she’s down to her tank top again, and she’s sweaty and tanned and absolutely gorgeous .

“Thanks,” Dani says, grinning, which is when Eleanor realizes that she must have said some part of that last thought out loud. “You guys should come dance!”

Eleanor hardly has the self-awareness to feel embarrassed. She downs the rest of her glass in a mouthful, and before she knows it she's happily drunk and dancing like an idiot with everyone else.

She's still coherent enough to know a few things. Firstly, that she's a terrible dancer and that her moves amount to a lot of jumping and arm flailing, which she'd be mortified by under any other circumstances; secondly, that Dani is dancing with her, occasionally spinning her around and catching her when she inevitably loses her balance; thirdly, that she's never had this much fun in her life.

She's laughing freely, not bothered in the least when other people bump into her or grab her hands, and even the loud dance music is making her happy. The world is spinning, and Dani smells amazing, and life is good.

* * *

Eleanor wakes up on an unknown surface with a pounding headache and an intense craving for coffee.

Cracking an eye open, she blearily takes in the surroundings. She clearly lost her contacts at some point, and in the low morning light, the details of the unfamiliar room she's in are blurry; she keeps her emergency glasses in her purse, which is missing in action. There's a TV somewhere on the adjacent wall. In front of her is a table scattered with mugs and remotes. The whole room smells vaguely like a mix of warm vanilla and machine shop. Against the far wall, she can see the fuzzy outline of a large collection of barbells and weights, and on the nearest wall, there's a framed picture of a bumblebee, with an undoubtedly cheesy quote underneath.

It doesn't take three guesses to figure out whose house she's in.

On what turns out to be a couch, Eleanor shoots up into a seated position—wincing at

the spike of pain the movement sends to her aching skull—and takes stock of her situation. She's still in her clothes from last night, and she's covered by a few soft blankets that slide down at her movements to pool around her waist.

Eleanor relaxes, letting out a breath. She's not in Dani's bed. She didn't somehow black out and forget taking a massive step last night—Dani must have let her crash here. Eleanor's shoes and purse are sitting neatly beside the couch, and among the empty cups on the table, there's a full glass of water and two pills next to a sticky note with a smiley face drawn on it.

The house is quiet. Dani must still be asleep. Eleanor only distantly remembers the party wrapping up, Dani insisting on taking her keys, and walking somewhere she didn't recognize.

She hasn't been quite that drunk in a long time. She can only imagine the nonsense she spewed—Dani had been close all night, perfectly in range to hear any more stupid comments Eleanor might have blurted out about how hot she looked. And, to top it off, now that Eleanor is awake and coherent, she can vaguely recollect talking to Naomi again later in the night, long after she lost track of how many drinks she'd had. For the life of her, Eleanor can't remember what their conversation had been about. She could have said anything. She could have blurted out her connection to CromTech—the only thing that had stopped her from revealing it earlier in the night had been Dani's timely interruption.

Eleanor's nausea intensifies. As quietly as possible she slips her shoes and her glasses on, swallows the pills, and starts her quest to find the exit.

Dani's house is cute. It's older and well lived-in, cozy and nicely decorated with eclectic furniture and lots of knick-knacks. The walls of the hallway leading into the kitchen are lined with photos—Dani smiling with Sarah, jumping off a dock with Mila, holding beers up with the boys, and kneading bread with an older woman that

Eleanor assumes is her aunt. Dani's age in them ranges from young teenager to what looks to be relatively recent.

Eleanor has no idea how long she stands there taking in the intimate details of Dani's life. She meant to sneak out quickly, but something about the opportunity to learn more about Dani makes her slow. So slow that she doesn't notice the figure leaning against the kitchen counter until it's too late.

"Morning."

Eleanor jumps what feels like a foot, whirling around to see Sarah Cooper looking at her over the rim of a mug of coffee.

"Sarah!" Eleanor says loudly, quieting her voice immediately in fear of waking the other occupant of the house and trying not to look as shaken as she is. Sarah is in her pyjamas, her short hair sticking up at the back like she's just rolled out of bed. Eleanor wonders if Dani and her cousin share a house. "I...I didn't know you were here."

"Mhmm," Sarah hums, taking a slow, deliberate sip of her drink. She looks significantly less hungover than Eleanor feels.

Eleanor shifts from one foot to the other. "I slept on the couch. Dani must have—I just woke up here."

Sarah quirks a brow. "Uh huh."

Maybe it's the hangover, or maybe Sarah just has a spectacular poker face, but Eleanor can't even begin to guess at Sarah's thoughts. If Eleanor had revealed whom she works for, wouldn't Sarah know? But it's only been a few hours—maybe the word hasn't gotten around town yet. Or maybe Eleanor didn't reveal anything at all

and she's panicking over nothing. Maybe Sarah is just teasing her.

"I'm going to go home," Eleanor says, slinking toward the front hall.

Sarah nods. Her face is totally neutral. "Okay."

Eleanor endures the walk of shame through town to get back to her car at the River Run, and once she's safely back in the privacy of her rental house, she flops onto the couch with a groan.

It's enough to make a woman swear off drinking.

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Almost a week passes after Pride before Eleanor sees Dani again.

Even days later, a wave of mortification rolls over her every time she thinks about what she might have said or done. For all she knows, she might have completely lost her head and told the entire bar whom she works for, not just Naomi. It's all a blank space in her memory. On top of that issue, she'd been far too obvious in her attraction to Dani, which she has no plans to act on.

What Pride makes clear to her is that getting some space from the group is for the best. She needs to get back to reality, and it's as good an excuse as any to finally get back to work on the project she's been ignoring since she started spending more time in town.

After a day to recover from her crippling hangover, Eleanor drives around the back roads yet again, careful not to hit any major bumps this time, more determined than ever to find the old development site she's been searching for. Unlike during her last search, Eleanor actually gets out of the car this time to trek into the woods—she doubts that it'll be conveniently labelled, but she has coordinates and a maps app and a whole afternoon to look. She even has better shoes this time.

Even so, she still isn't used to hiking. It's slow going, guided only by an increasingly patchy cell signal. She wades through bugs and underbrush and climbs over jutting pieces of rock, sweating through her shirt and flinching at every strange-looking plant that could be poison ivy. And after she's gone just far enough that she's not sure she could find her way back alone, her phone unhelpfully notifies her that she has no service at all.

“Of course,” Eleanor sighs to no one, glaring down at the blinking icon.

By the time she finds what might be a faint trail to follow through the woods, she still hasn’t located the parcel of land she’s looking for. She’s lost in a sea of trees, a mix of tall pines and shorter birches. She sits on a nearby rock, tiredly pulling out her notebook to jot down the area she thinks she’s explored while she decides which way to follow the path.

“Would it kill them to put up a fucking cell tower?” Eleanor mutters, scribbling in messier lines than usual. “Try to keep people from getting stranded in the forest like a goddamn ’80s slasher movie? How many lost hikers does it take to—”

She stops abruptly and almost drops the notebook when she hears a rustling to her left. Her brain jumps to the worst-case scenario—snarling animals, deadly snakes, a long and tragic death alone in the woods—until a voice rings out.

“Nora?”

Eleanor jumps up from her rock, whirling around to see Naomi coming up the trail. She’s dressed to hike, with long pants tucked into her boots and her curls pulled back from her face as she moves easily through the trees.

Eleanor quickly shoves the notebook into her bag.

“God, you scared me,” Eleanor says, pressing a hand against her chest where her heart is working in overdrive. “I thought you might be a bear.”

“Mostly coyotes and deer in this area,” Naomi says, stopping when she reaches Eleanor to lean on her long walking stick. “Doing a little hiking?”

Eleanor’s mouth goes dry. Her anxious heart isn’t calming down—it’s speeding up,

pumping away the seconds before her lack of answer becomes awkward. Telling Naomi what she's really doing out here is not the best idea, but at the same time, the idea of outright lying now when she's spent so much time with Dani and her friends makes her a little nauseous. Straddling the line between the two is becoming a delicate game.

"You probably won't be shocked to hear that I'm lost," Eleanor says instead.

Naomi's smile is far gentler than Eleanor deserves. "If you follow the trail back the way I came, it'll bring you to the road. Near the creek?"

Eleanor can vaguely remember driving past a creek—if she can get back to a road, she's sure she can follow it long enough to find her car. It takes a weight off her shoulders, and Eleanor sits back down on the rock with a sigh. "Thank you. Cell service out here is so patchy."

Naomi doesn't seem angry like she would be if Eleanor had blabbed anything important at the party, which is an immediate relief. With that confirmed, she's probably the perfect person to talk to to get to the bottom of how Eleanor acted around Dani that night.

"I come out here all the time to get away from it all," Naomi says, looking up at the canopy above them shifting in a breeze blocked by the woods down below. Sunshine is peeking through, casting dancing spots of light onto the plants Eleanor has been wading through. "We used to spend a lot of time out here as kids. Even had my first kiss in these woods."

There's a wistfulness to the way she says it that piques Eleanor's interest. She raises an eyebrow. "Sounds like an adventure."

"Sarah and I were practicing for boys. Tale as old as time."

Naomi's presence puts Eleanor surprisingly at ease—not quite like Dani does, but significant enough that she doesn't feel like the conversation is forced.

Naomi chuckles when Eleanor flinches and smacks at a mosquito that lands on her arm, missing and then swatting at it as it buzzes around her face, but it feels good-natured. "I take it you're not a great enjoyer of the outdoors?"

"I enjoy watching it from my windows," Eleanor drawls, satisfied that the insect is finally gone. "How do you find the time to hike? With only one other doctor in town, I assumed your schedule would be packed."

"I make time for the things I love."

Eleanor hums. "What's that like?"

"Difficult, but worth it," Naomi says. She sits next to Eleanor on her rock and unzips her backpack, pulling out a water bottle and taking a long drink. "You aren't doing so bad—Dani says you're on vacation, right?"

"Work cation, really," Eleanor admits. "I don't think I know how to distance myself from it completely."

Naomi nods. "Sounds familiar. Between you and me, this being my hometown means a few too many patients have my cell number. The lack of service out here means it's just about the only place I'm totally unavailable."

The otherwise pleasant conversation is spiked with a lance of fresh guilt.

Eleanor has never understood why anyone would cling to remote, unmanaged backwoods like this when something more useful could be there instead, but seeing Naomi so at home here is a new perspective she didn't expect. Whatever budding

friendship they seem to be building could very well end when Naomi finds out whose company is responsible for developing her favourite hiking trails, even if it's a net positive for the region.

In the recesses of Eleanor's mind, the seeds of doubt that have been germinating since Dani took her to the tree house continue to grow.

"Speaking of Dani," Eleanor says, seizing on the moment of quiet to change the subject and bite the bullet, "at Pride, you and I spent some time talking, right? Did I...say anything?"

Naomi snorts. "You said lots of things."

"Oh God. That's what I was worried about." Eleanor groans and buries her face in her hands, mentally shuffling through all the inside thoughts she might have said out loud—the fact that Naomi is speaking to her with kindness means she didn't spill the CromTech beans, but anything else is free game. And her thoughts have been particularly R-rated lately.

"Nothing too bad," Naomi says, patting Eleanor's knee. "At least, nothing Dani wouldn't like to hear." She stands up, throwing her backpack over her shoulder. "I should be getting back to it. Enjoy the trails, Nora. Try to relax; it's good for your blood pressure."

Eleanor is left alone as Naomi's footsteps fade. She glances down the trail in the direction Naomi said the road would be, but she doesn't get up yet—instead of rushing out of the woods, she closes her eyes.

The absence of her previous anxiety around being lost makes an immediate difference. The things she'd been ignoring now clamour for her attention. She can hear the chorus of birdsong and the wind in the trees. She can smell the fresh air, light

and summery, a mix of warm soil and leaves and a hint of wildflowers. When she opens her eyes, it's to a forest that seems changed. Less chaotic. An ecosystem managing itself entirely without her input.

When Eleanor tries to imagine what it will all look like after development, it leaves a strange sensation in the pit of her stomach.

Before she heads back to the road, she pulls out her book to scrawl a note in the margin.

Preserve hiking trails.

* * *

Eleanor manages to write some more of her proposal in just under a week of focused work, even without a survey of the sold land she was looking for. It's a complex series of necessities with rezoning and infrastructure—there's a need for things like parking and dining, for example—but once completed, it should be exactly what she hoped: Luxury homes and cottages on the river shoreline would turn the land into a money-maker. A resort or wellness retreat could bring more tourists to the area, and if CromTech can manage to snatch up some of the many empty storefronts in Riverwalk at lowered prices, it'll be easy to sell to businesses later.

It's hard to put much effort into finishing it up, though, when those seeds of doubt that Dani and Naomi planted have turned into saplings—persistent, nagging whispers about whether this whole thing is as good an idea as she originally thought. Every time she opens her laptop, she keeps seeing images of what Dani's face might look like if she found out that Eleanor was responsible for bulldozing her favourite creek.

Eleanor means to stay away from Dani until she leaves town. It's partly embarrassment—the suspicion that she said something unsavoury at Pride solidified

by Naomi's comment—but it's also partly the knowledge that with the survey and proposal well underway, the end of Eleanor's time in Riverwalk is approaching faster than ever. Her anonymity is coming to an end. There's no sense continuing to get attached.

A few days after making this resolution, Eleanor finds herself staring at a kitchen sink that refuses to drain.

She could deal with it herself. There's probably a plumber or a handyman in town somewhere, findable with a quick Google search. But in her head, she hears Naomi's voice— nothing Dani wouldn't like to hear.

Somehow, Eleanor ends up searching a completely different name.

“Cooper's Tire and Auto, Dani speaking!”

Dani's voice, warm and soothing even through a phone line, makes Eleanor's stomach do a funny sort of twist. She has to clear her throat before she can speak.

“Dani, hi. It's Nora.”

“Hey, you!” Dani says, clearly enthused.

Her happy tone makes Eleanor relax a little bit. She feels like a teenager, calling her crush and twirling the landline cord around her finger.

“Long time no talk,” Dani says.

There's no disapproval or upset in her voice, but, even so, Eleanor feels the need to apologize. “Yes, I'm...sorry about that. I've been a bit busy.”

“Oh, it’s okay,” Dani says easily, and Eleanor can see in her mind’s eye the casual wave Dani is probably doing. In the background of Dani’s line, some kind of hydraulic tool is buzzing. “What can I do ya for?”

“My sink isn’t working,” Eleanor says.

“You know this is an auto shop and not a plumbing service, right?”

Eleanor’s cheeks heat up. “I know. I just thought—well, I don’t know the businesses around here. I thought you could recommend someone?”

Eleanor hears the scratchy, muffled sound of the receiver being covered and a muted yell. After a moment, Dani is back, sounding cheery.

“I’ll be there in a couple minutes!”

“Oh, no,” Eleanor says, shaking her head at nobody, alone in her kitchen. “No, you’re at work. I just need a number to call.”

“Don’t be silly. I can fix it! Just give me a minute to grab my tool box, okay?”

Dani hangs up without confirmation. As the dial tone sounds in her ear, Eleanor looks around—at her cluttered kitchen, at her own pyjamas and slippers and her messy morning hair—and suddenly her body kicks into overdrive.

“Shit,” Eleanor mutters, throwing the phone onto the table. “Shit .”

She has approximately fifteen minutes before Dani gets here, and she needs to get herself ready faster than she ever has before.

Eleanor changes her clothes in a whirlwind, grabbing the first sundress she can find

and throwing her hair into a bun. She foregoes contact lenses, shoving her glasses onto her face instead. She brushes her teeth while she frantically tidies the kitchen, the toothbrush hanging out of her mouth precariously, and by the time the doorbell rings, she's feeling at least borderline presentable.

She opens the door to find Dani in cargo pants, a grubby tank, and the same blue-and-red flannel she wore over her Freddie Mercury outfit.

Eleanor resents how much it's working for her.

"Come on in," Eleanor says, trying to keep her voice even.

Dani whistles as she steps inside. "Wow. Nice place! Fancy."

"I mostly rent it for the location," Eleanor replies, leading Dani toward the kitchen. The whole sunny bay opens up outside the big windows, and Dani drapes her flannel shirt over the back of a kitchen stool.

"No kidding. Beautiful view," Dani says, stepping up to the windows and peering out toward the river. The natural light makes her glow as the rays catch in her hair and make her sun-soaked skin look golden.

"Yeah," Eleanor says weakly. Her mouth has gone dry. "Beautiful."

"You must do pretty well for yourself in that corporate job of yours. Maybe I should switch fields," Dani says, grinning.

"I wouldn't recommend it unless you really like being tangled in bureaucracy and not getting to pursue the projects you care about."

"Like what?"

“Biofuels, carbon reduction, more sustainable product lines,” Eleanor lists, sighing heavily. “The tech sector tends to favour easy products. Quick to make, quick to break. Try to pitch anything else and they act like you’ve asked them to declare bankruptcy.”

Dani leans against the kitchen island, folding her arms. “Wow. So you’re trying to save the world.”

There’s something soft in her smile—Eleanor is used to Dani’s big, slightly crooked grin, but this one is gentler. It crinkles at the corners of her eyes.

“God, no. Nothing as exciting as that,” Eleanor says, laughing a little. “Just trying to make a dent.”

Dani’s smile stays soft. “Still pretty cool. I hope you get to do all those projects someday.”

“Me, too,” Eleanor sighs, thinking of the document with her solution in it currently sitting unfinished on her computer.

Dani gets to work soon after, opening the cupboard underneath the sink and sliding in on her back to fiddle with the pipes, and Eleanor tries very hard to maintain a conversation instead of staring blatantly at the sliver of Dani’s stomach peeking out the hem of her shirt.

“How’s it going down there?” Eleanor asks, cringing the moment the words leave her mouth. It makes her glad that Dani’s face is obscured by the cupboard door.

“It’s good! I don’t think this has been serviced in a while,” Dani remarks, grabbing blindly at one of the scattered tools on the floor.

“Are you a handyman as well as a mechanic?” Eleanor asks, nudging the wrench toward Dani’s grasping hand. Dani truly seems to be a jack of all trades.

“Cars aren’t the only thing I’m good at fixing up.”

Heat blooms embarrassingly quickly in Eleanor’s abdomen, zipping immediately down to settle between her legs.

It was benign, Dani’s statement—she definitely wasn’t referring to all the ways her talented hands could be put to work fixing every ache in Eleanor’s body. But Eleanor’s traitorous brain runs with it like a dog let loose, sprinting into the distance.

Without warning, something bursts under the sink.

Dani swears loudly. Water starts spraying out at an alarming volume, and Eleanor’s inappropriate thoughts are literally and figuratively hosed down.

“Shit!” Dani sputters, trying unsuccessfully to stop the flow with her hands. “Forgot to turn the water off—”

“What do I do?” Eleanor asks loudly, all thirst forgotten in the wake of her kitchen flooding.

“There’s a valve under here somewhere!”

Eleanor rips open all the cupboard doors and finds it beside her stock of cleaning supplies. She cranks the knob with slippery hands until the water finally stops, then steps gingerly over the puddles now covering her floor to find Dani still lying under the sink, now soaked completely. Her pale-blue tank top is almost see-through now but probably the cleanest it’s ever been.

Eleanor has to look away again to hide what she's sure is a flush creeping up her neck. The fabric clings to Dani's skin, leaving little to the imagination—Dani's muscular frame very clearly extends beyond her arms. Her midsection is just as solid, firm muscle under an appealing layer of softness over her belly.

Eleanor wants to press her hands against that softness, to feel the strength beneath. She wants to dig into the swell of Dani's hips peeking over the waist of her cargo pants to pull her forward. Use them like handles to keep Dani close as the blonde settles between her thighs, flashing that confident grin, thrusting forward—

Eleanor bites down hard on her lip. The pain doesn't help much.

It's not the first time Eleanor has succumbed to such fantasies, but it's the first time they've felt this overwhelming when Dani is actually in the room with her. Still wrestling with the images, Eleanor says the first thing that comes to her mind.

“Do you want some iced tea?”

Eleanor winces again. The idea was a diversion, something to keep her busy while Dani dries off, but as she brings a glass of cold tea and a towel over to the very wet mechanic still sitting on her kitchen floor, Eleanor can't ignore the fact that she's essentially invited Dani into a porno.

It's even more uncomfortable when Dani takes the offered glass, downing it in a few seconds while Eleanor watches a droplet of water slide down the side of her neck.

“Thanks!” Dani says, putting the empty glass above her on the counter and wiping her mouth uselessly with the back of her also-wet arm. “Hold on, I almost had it. It'll be fixed in a jiffy.”

Dani's wholesomeness is enough to bring Eleanor back to the present. She clears her

throat, getting herself a glass of cold water from the fridge dispenser and covertly holding it against her warm forehead.

Under the sink, Dani speaks up again. “You coming to the festival this weekend?”

“I thought we just had a festival?” Eleanor says, moving the cool glass down to her chest.

“This one is for Canada Day.” Dani is talking loudly over the clattering of tools and pipes. “We do it every year. It used to bring a lot of tourists up here, but now it’s mostly locals.”

“Is it going to be anything like last weekend? Because I don’t think I can do that again.”

Dani laughs, peering out between the pipes at Eleanor. “No, it’s much tamer. There’s a potluck and a bit of a party. Usually some fireworks. Sometimes we do a tractor pull.” After a final-sounding grinding noise, Dani finally emerges from the cupboard victorious. Her wet ponytail is starting to fall out.

“All done!” Dani says, pulling herself to her feet and wiping her hands off on her damp pants. “You just had a little blockage. All good now.”

“Thanks. I feel like I should repay you somehow,” Eleanor says without thinking.

It’s hard not to groan in disappointment at herself. She can practically hear the raunchy background music playing in whatever low-budget adult film her brain is determined to act out.

“You could come,” Dani says brightly.

The glass slips from Eleanor's hand.

The noise of it hitting the floor feels like a gunshot—the mental images Eleanor has been trying to hold back are spilling forward again, and Dani is smiling like nothing is wrong with her statement.

“I could—you want—what?” Eleanor sputters. She can tell her face has turned crimson, even though all the blood in her body seems to be rushing elsewhere, but Dani doesn't seem bothered. She beats Eleanor to bending down and grabbing the thankfully unshattered cup, setting it on the counter where it's safe.

“To the festival,” Dani clarifies. She's smiling, but Eleanor can't tell if she's aware of the exact effect of her words.

“Oh. Right. Of course,” Eleanor says. Her heart is still racing. She can't quite determine if she's feeling disappointed or not. “Obviously.”

“Is that a yes?”

“I guess I've never been to a potluck before,” Eleanor says. The last thing she needs is another town event to potentially embarrass herself, but at this point she just needs to get Dani out the door without another horrific double entendre. “Or a tractor pull.”

“Seriously? Never?” Dani gasps, packing up her tools. “Okay, you've gotta come. I'll drive you.”

Dani leaves with a promise to pick her up on Saturday at one o'clock, and her truck has already trundled down the driveway before Eleanor notices that Dani's flannel is still draped over one of her kitchen stools.

The shirt is unreasonably soft when Eleanor picks it up with the intention of hanging

it near the front door so that she doesn't forget to give it back. Soft and warm and slightly oversized. And Eleanor's house can get so cold at night. Until she sees Dani on Saturday, it can't hurt to wear it sometimes.

The fact that it noticeably smells like Dani when she wears it to bed is completely secondary. As is the way that sleep eludes her, leaving her tossing and turning in the flannel, pursued by images of Dani in her translucent tank top. Of Dani slotting between her legs, pressing against the heated core of her. Calloused hands encircling her wrists, pinning them above her head. Warm lips covering her own in an imaginary kiss that curls her toes.

Maybe it's wrong to do this. She's breaking her own rule about acting on her attraction, but this tension has been building for weeks now, and more than anything Eleanor needs relief. She needs her own shaky hand between her legs, a poor substitute for the one she wants but enough nonetheless.

With Dani's name on her lips, Eleanor does as Dani asked. She comes, faster and harder than she has in a long time, all the while thinking about rough hands, blue eyes, and the smell of engine oil.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

Saturday dawns with a curious blend of excitement and nausea.

Eleanor wakes up just after the sun, tossing and turning until it's clear that she's up for the day. After coffee, a shower, and laying out half her new wardrobe, it's still only nine thirty in the morning. Even though she knows it's an entirely platonic outing, it still feels like she's preparing for a date, and Eleanor resigns herself to pacing the house until Dani's truck rolls up at twelve forty-five.

She's tired of feeling overdressed. So, after a long and arduous decision-making process, Eleanor has landed on a pair of cutoff jean shorts that Mila insisted she buy, with a simple, red cotton T-shirt. Her makeup is sparing, and she spent a very focused forty-five minutes this morning carefully clipping and filing her nails. Completely unnecessary, but she needs something to fill the time.

At the last moment, she grabs the flannel that Dani left at her house last week, throwing it overtop as she opens the door.

When Dani climbs out of the truck, Eleanor is treated to a wonderful moment of gratification: Dani's eyes widen and drift down to take in her outfit. They linger on her thighs and then again on the flannel shirt around her shoulders. She even stumbles a little as she walks toward the house.

The gratification doesn't last much longer than that, though, because the moment Eleanor gets a good look at what Dani is wearing she completely forgets the painstaking morning she spent deciding on her own outfit.

In contrast to Eleanor dressing down, Dani has dressed up. She's wearing the first

pair of fully clean blue jeans Eleanor has ever seen her in—tight blue denim worn low on her hips with a thick, brown leather belt and a big buckle. Her dark-red shirt is buttoned all the way up and tucked into her jeans, and her hands have been scrubbed clean. There's not a trace of engine oil or shop residue to be seen. But the most arresting part of the whole ensemble, the part that hits Eleanor the hardest, is Dani's hair.

It's the first time Eleanor has ever seen her without her ever-present ponytail and ballcap. Dani's hair is down, falling in slightly messy waves around her face, and she's biting her lip with what looks like apprehension.

In short, she looks absolutely delectable. But Eleanor can't say that to her face. She struggles to find a compliment that won't bare her entire soul as Dani makes her way from her truck to Eleanor's door, since you look especially climbable today seems a little bit intense.

"Wow," Dani says, her hands shoved deep in her pockets as she reaches the bottom step of the front porch. "Nora, you look... I mean, you look better in that shirt than I do."

Dani's cheeks are pink. Eleanor's heart hammers.

"You showered," is what comes out of Eleanor's mouth in response.

After a few seconds of stunned silence, Dani bursts into laughter. Her nervousness seems to disappear, and suddenly she's the Dani that Eleanor has known for weeks now—loose, confident, and grinning.

"I'm known to do that every so often."

Eleanor grabs her keys and shuts the door behind her before she can dig an even

deeper hole, feeling rather warm. When Dani opens the truck for her and helps her up into the seat, Eleanor notices something else that makes her smile—Dani dressed up, but she’s still wearing the same scuffed, dirty work boots she always does.

When they arrive at the park, people are under a pavilion by the widest bank of the river, scattered over a mass of picnic tables overladen with food. Adults are playing horseshoes, kids are weaving through the tables with armfuls of water balloons, and the potluck offers everything from Swedish meatballs to walking tacos. Dani’s contribution is a dessert—some kind of chocolate-and-peanut-butter bake that looks deliciously cavity inducing—and though she assured Eleanor that she didn’t need to bring anything, Eleanor contributes a few bags of chips to the table anyway.

With a bright, sunny day overhead, it seems as if the entire town has come out. Naomi, Owen, and Ryan wave from a nearby bench. Ryan’s mouth is crammed with half a bowl of guacamole dip. Sarah makes her presence known by throwing a Nerf football with such devastating accuracy that it pegs Dani on the side of the head, and Mila and her husband turn up around 3 p.m., this time with no moonshine to speak of.

In comparison to last weekend, this celebration is tame, though things kick up a little when the sun goes down. There’s a collection of communal coolers near the river, and Eleanor sits with Dani on a tailgate to watch Ryan and Owen unload a huge speaker system, then connect it to the AV in someone’s truck. People back their cars and trucks in to surround a makeshift dance floor on the grass, and the kids congregate on the dock that juts out into the river for some sort of diving competition.

When an upbeat and only vaguely familiar country song starts to play, Ryan and Sarah even start up a choreographed-looking dance.

“Danielle!” Sarah shouts, waving Dani over as Owen steps in line and joins the sequence. “Get your ass over here!”

Dani jumps off the tailgate, holding out an expectant hand. The moment she realizes what Dani wants, Eleanor clutches the side of the truck bed.

“Absolutely not.”

“Nora!” Dani whines, jumping up and down impatiently. “It’s my favourite line dance!”

“And?” Eleanor says, not letting go of the truck that she’s fully convinced is the only reason she’s not being made to dance right now.

Everyone else seems to agree with Dani—they’re joining the line, hands hooked in belt loops as the song lyrics pontificate about deals with the devil over a heavy fiddle solo.

Eleanor shakes her head again when Dani makes a come-hither motion. “Not happening.”

With a groan, Dani finally gives up. She grabs a cowboy hat off the nearest person’s head—it happens to be Mila sitting in a lawn chair next to the truck—and runs toward the growing line of people.

Mila throws her empty cider can in retaliation. It misses by a solid two metres, hitting Owen instead.

“She better not wreck my hat,” Mila grumbles, settling back into her chair and opening up a fresh drink. “Why didn’t you go up with her?”

“I don’t know this dance,” Eleanor says, gesturing at the line of people all moving in perfect sync. “How the hell does everyone here know it?”

“We learned it in gym class. Didn’t you?”

Eleanor had actually learned how to waltz in private school, but she keeps her mouth shut and watches the crowd instead.

It still astounds Eleanor sometimes how attracted she is to Dani. It’s a wild thing, something deep and alive in her chest that wakes up and howls at the moon when Dani laughs in that endearing way, where her eyes squint up and she sounds so utterly delighted that she can’t hold it in.

Dani is doing it now, throwing her head back as she stamps and claps along to the beat, singing the words to the fast-paced song Eleanor has only heard once or twice before. She looks equal parts ridiculous and adorable.

The song finally ends. Eleanor is distracted enough in her soft, inconvenient feelings that when Dani waves her over again, looking so eager and hopeful, Eleanor slides off the tailgate.

“I can’t dance,” Eleanor says weakly as Dani takes her hand.

“I promise it’ll be fun!” Dani calls over the music. “If it isn’t, I’ll...I’ll jump in the river naked.” She grabs both of Eleanor’s hands and starts pulling them back and forth in a basic motion.

“I don’t know the steps,” Eleanor shouts. The music is even louder this close to the speakers; the dance sequence is simple this time at least, and the crowd is even bigger and easier to get lost in. Eleanor copies a step or two but gets lost when everyone does an unexpected twirl.

“Just shuffle your feet!”

Ignoring the choreography, Dani links their arms together and starts to skip in a circle. Eleanor follows, switching arms after a few beats and skipping in the opposite direction in time with everyone else. As silly as it feels, as silly as Eleanor is sure it looks, Dani is right.

It is pretty fun.

After the first chorus, Eleanor has figured out some of the steps. It's a lot of rhythmic stomping and shuffling that she can't quite follow, but the rest is just a lot of linking arms and spinning, and she's laughing at Dani's antics when everyone goes completely off-book.

When the music shifts into an exuberant banjo solo, half of the pairs around them stop, hug their partner around the waist, and start to spin. And that's all the warning Eleanor has before Dani is in her space. Dani gets a quick "hold on!" in, but soon Eleanor is being lifted with Dani's strong arms braced firmly around her middle.

Eleanor squeals, holding on for dear life as they start to spin dizzily in a static circle.

Dani is warm and solid against her, hands firm on her middle, and her face is somewhere in the vicinity of Eleanor's chest. She can feel Dani's breath, getting quicker with exertion and laughter. Eleanor is being held as if she weighs nothing and then pressed hard against Dani's solid frame, and if it weren't for the spinning, Eleanor is sure the entire party would be able to read her thoughts on her face.

It's soon blotted out by dizziness, followed swiftly by laughter as Dani finally loses her balance and stumbles, bracing herself so that her body blocks Eleanor's fall and hitting the grass with a whumph .

"Are you okay?" Eleanor gasps breathlessly, rolling off Dani while the ground

lurches under her like a funhouse.

Dani is lying comfortably on her back, her hair spread out over the grass like a halo, and she's cackling. The laugh takes over her whole body, and soon enough Eleanor is laughing, too, flopping onto the grass and letting the dusky sky spin in dizzying circles above them.

Most other people seem to be in the same state as the song continues, either on the ground or seriously bent over, and when Dani punches her fist up and lets out a loud whoop, some of the crowd responds.

"Do you do that every time?" Eleanor asks once they've calmed down and are sitting up and holding their sore sides. "The spinning?"

"Every time," Dani says happily. It seems like the end of the song signals a drinking and smoking break of some kind, and the dance floor clears out. Dani hauls herself up, staggering only once, and dusts the grass from her now-stained jeans. "Ah, man. These are new—Mila's gonna kill me."

Once the sky is dark enough, the fireworks come out. Dani leads Eleanor to end of the rickety boat launch, recently vacated by the group of kids now distracted by the handing out of sparklers. The noise of the party gives way a little to the quiet lapping of the water.

Eleanor can almost see her house all the way down past the river's wide mouth. The lights on her back deck are glowing in the distance, but for maybe the first time in her life, she's happier not being at home.

As they sit down at the dock's edge, a single loon cries out in the distance. Low and mournful. Dani smiles softly, raising her hands to her mouth in a cupped position and blowing into the strange hand instrument she's made. The sound comes out as an

almost-perfect loon call. The loon cries back, and they maintain a back-and-forth until Dani drops her hands, bracing them against the dock.

“My brother taught me how to do that,” Dani says, kicking at the water’s surface with the toe of her boot.

It’s the first piece of information Dani has offered willingly about him since he was first mentioned. Eleanor keeps her voice low. “Garreth, right? Did he spend a lot of time here with you?”

Dani shakes her head, staring down at the ripples caused by her foot. “He moved back to the city for school not long after my parents passed. He never really felt comfortable here.”

“You mentioned that you don’t talk much.”

“Yeah. I always sort of hoped that I could stay with him when I moved south,” Dani says. There’s a forced air to her nonchalance that makes Eleanor think Dani isn’t quite as indifferent as she wants to come across. “But he was busy, you know? Building his career and everything. He had a tiny place. Didn’t work out.”

There’s a thread of sadness in Dani’s story that Eleanor has never heard before. Unsure of what to say, she puts a hand over Dani’s, squeezing gently before pulling away, and Dani smiles. It’s a tiny nugget of Dani’s life, but every crumb Eleanor can pick up is appreciated.

“It’s okay. We grew apart. We’re still family, even if we don’t see each other.” Dani is looking out over the water again, and Eleanor gazes out with her. The moon is bright against the dark sky, shining a long rippling white reflection across the water. Eleanor gets the impression that she tells herself this pretty often.

“I don’t have siblings,” Eleanor says, sensing that Dani could use a subject change. “I don’t have much family left besides my father’s carousel of ex-wives.”

Dani turns to her, the seriousness of just a few moments ago easing. Her shoulders relax. “A carousel, huh? That many?”

“Six in total. They came and went pretty quickly.”

“Real-life evil stepmothers?”

Eleanor snorts, thinking of Renée. She’d be both horrified and delighted to find out just how little work Eleanor has been doing on this trip—horrified by her work ethic but delighted by the chance to expose Eleanor’s laziness to the board. “You have no idea. They could have their own reality show.”

Dani’s attention is drawn by the first loud pop . She points up at the shower of red sparks above them. “Look! It’s starting!”

Dani hurries to take off her boots as the show begins and suggests that Eleanor do the same, and soon enough they’re dipping their bare toes in the cool water as the sky lights up with multicoloured rockets. It illuminates Dani’s excited and smiling face, and with their hands almost touching where they’re braced on the dock, the fireworks in the sky are mirroring the ones in Eleanor’s chest.

As suddenly as the explosions begin above them, Eleanor is struck by a vivid vision of leaning over, running her fingers through Dani’s hair, and moving in for a kiss.

It’s not surprising, as fantasies go. Eleanor has had thoughts about kissing Dani before, but this fantasy is by far the most intense. The most realistic. Eleanor can practically feel Dani’s lips, can smell her shampoo, can imagine how it would feel to swing a leg over her thighs and press herself down into Dani’s lap.

Eleanor looks away quickly, hoping the darkness will hide how her body is reacting, and watches the fireworks. Attraction or not, pursuing those thoughts with Dani is a layer of complication that she doesn't need.

Still, all in all, it's the single-best night Eleanor has had in recent memory. It's practically perfect until they're leaving the party, Dani having sobered enough after her single beer to drive Eleanor home.

“Cooper! ”

The male voice behind them is loud enough that Eleanor jumps a little, spinning around to find they're being followed by the same man that Dani beat so handily at arm wrestling a few weeks back. He has two other unfamiliar men flanking him. There's a vein bulging in his neck.

Dani turns around much more calmly, sticking her thumbs into her belt loops.

“Matthew,” Dani drawls, inclining her head in his direction. She seems entirely too relaxed, in Eleanor's opinion, considering Matthew is looking ready to snap.

“I believe we've got some unfinished business,” Matthew growls.

“Come on, Matty,” Dani says, shaking her head. “Don't ruin the party with this bull.”

But Matthew cracks his knuckles, handing his trucker cap to one of his friends. He stumbles a little as he does, and Eleanor wonders if this bout of rage hasn't been brought on by a bit too much strawberry moonshine.

Dani sighs, unbuttoning her shirt cuffs and starting to roll up her sleeves in a businesslike fashion. “Sorry, Nora. This'll just take a minute.”

Eleanor hardly has time to get out of the way before Matthew swings. He strikes out just as Dani is finishing her first sleeve, roaring angrily, but Dani sidesteps him. He overbalances, missing his punch and wobbling for a few seconds before he rights himself.

Dani rolls her neck from side to side. “That wasn’t a fair start. Now who’s the cheater?”

“Fuck you!” Matthew grunts, putting his fists up and starting to circle. Dani does the same, and for a few seconds, they hover in a stalemate before Matthew strikes again, winding up for a hit that never lands. Dani dodges it, ducking under his arm and throwing her elbow hard into the middle of his back as she passes.

He grunts in obvious pain as her elbow connects, his back bending forward as he stumbles, and his knees hit the gravel while Dani finishes rolling her second sleeve. Once it’s duly fastened, she turns and offers him a hand.

“I don’t want to fight you, Matty,” Dani says quietly.

Matthew seems to consider it. He’s breathing heavily, holding his back, and for a moment, Eleanor thinks he might take Dani’s hand—but instead he explodes off the ground and strikes again, and this time one of his fists connects to Dani’s cheekbone with a sickening crack .

Dani rears back, grunting. When she moves her curtain of blonde hair out of the way, there’s a stark red mark against her cheek—it’s split, and blood is starting to bead along the crack.

Eleanor’s stomach drops. Dani touches the spot with a gentle hand, frowning at the crimson that comes away on her fingertips.

“Are you packing?” Dani asks. There’s a quiet anger in her voice.

Eleanor has no earthly clue what that could mean in relation to a fight, but Matthew answers the question right away—he opens his hand to reveal a cigarette lighter clenched in his fist, which he tosses into the dirt. He has a large class ring on his middle finger that must have caused the cut.

Dani, who up until this point seems to have been merely humoring Matthew, gets noticeably serious. Her face sets in determination. She pulls an elastic out of her pocket, gathering her hair up and out of her face.

Matthew doesn’t seem to sense the change in intensity, but Eleanor does.

“Nobody beats me, Cooper, especially not you,” Matthew says, flexing his hand. His knuckles are red, and it looks like a bit of Dani’s blood is on his ring. “It was true in high school, and it’s true—”

He’s cut off by Dani’s fist connecting with his face three times in lightning-quick succession, each harder than the last.

It’s a startling blur. A co-worker being slapped by a jilted girlfriend is the most violence Eleanor has ever seen up close, and now Matthew is sprawled out on the dusty gravel with Dani towering over him, her fist bloodied and her face grim.

It’s even more startling to realize that she finds Dani’s physicality attractive even in this context. And, even more shockingly, Matthew’s unfair hit to Dani’s face makes Eleanor angry enough on her behalf that she almost feels like she could strike at him herself.

Luckily she doesn’t need to. Matthew groans, rolling over and pulling his arms up around his head. With the fight obviously over, Dani picks up the lighter he’d been

clenching in his hand and tosses it over to his friend.

The friend flinches, barely managing to catch it, but Dani only smiles at him. The genuine expression conflicts with the man still lying motionless on the ground. “When he comes to, go get Naomi to look him over.”

The friend nods silently. Dani turns back around, holding her arm out to Eleanor like a perfect gentleman. She escorts Eleanor back to the truck calmly, and once they’re safely inside, Eleanor finally explodes.

“What the fuck was his problem!” Eleanor says fiercely. “Just coming at you like that! Look what he did to your face!” She reaches out, unthinking, and traces a fingertip gently over the still-bleeding cut on Dani’s cheekbone.

Dani smiles, only wincing a bit at the pain it obviously causes her, and shrugs. “It was just a tilly. Once he calms down, he’ll be right back to normal.”

Dani is completely calm about the entire situation. Unthinkably calm, really, after getting punched so hard that there’s blood drying in her hair. Eleanor is so flabbergasted that she doesn’t even think to ask what kind of made-up word a tilly is.

“Shouldn’t you have Naomi look at this?” Eleanor asks, grabbing one of the napkins Dani keeps in the glove compartment to dab at the blood.

“Nah, I’ll clean it up at home.”

“How do you know you don’t have a concussion?”

“I’ve taken worse hits,” Dani says, winking with her rapidly swelling eye.

Eleanor balls up the napkin and stuffs it into the cup holder. “Is that why he was

talking about high school? Did you fight back then, too?"

Dani's face falls a little, the lightheartedness flickering for a moment. She chews on her bottom lip, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel before she answers.

"We sorta dated the same girl back then," Dani says after a pause. "She left him for me. And then...she left me for him. He still likes to brag about being the winner because his life peaked in grade twelve."

Dani sounds embarrassed more than hurt. Not like the situation still bothers her, but more like she's worried Eleanor will judge her for it. It explains why Matthew reacted so explosively to Dani beating him—his ego is probably still sore, even though the girl went back to him in the end.

"And where is she now?" Eleanor asks.

Dani shrugs. "Dunno. She moved down south. Left us both in the end, I guess."

Dani trails off, and rather than pushing her, Eleanor clears her throat and changes the subject. "Well, you certainly kicked his ass."

Dani chuckles, finally turning the keys in the ignition and shifting the truck out of park. Eleanor is relieved to see that the pensive look is gone. "Not a bad night out on the town!"

Dani bids Eleanor good night at her door. Her eye is truly swollen in a way she manages to make look cute, and though Eleanor has always been fairly anti-violence, she has to admit that watching Dani take down Matthew in a few hits has made an impression. A deep one.

Eleanor is a little bit flustered.

She tries to shake it off. She pours herself a glass of wine, sinks into a bubble bath, and turns on some deeply unsexy jazz music, trying to put the whole thing out of her mind. But her willpower seems to be less and less effective lately.

Soon enough she's in for another night of self-care. Another night spent thinking about Dani Cooper, except that this time she's imagining more than just the woman's hands. She's lost in thoughts of Dani's arms wrapped around her waist. Her own hands slipping under the collar of a red button-up while water laps underneath them. Of spreading her legs and guiding Dani's hand between them in the moonlight.

She comes harder than ever before, and it makes it that much more disappointing when she opens her eyes to find herself as alone as always. The only water is her cooling bath, and the only sky above her is the white ceiling of her candlelit bathroom.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

Eleanor starts socializing more regularly after the potluck, despite her initial reservations.

She goes to trivia nights and get-togethers. She takes to stopping by the bar on most days, even if she has no intention of drinking, and even when Dani isn't there, she often stays for an hour or two anyway.

She also starts to occupy Dani's lunch hours. The picnic bench where they first had ice cream together becomes their regular haunt. They order their way through the menu at the town's only restaurant, eating from cardboard containers in the sun and enjoying each other's company.

This level of comfort is something Eleanor has never experienced before in a friendship, and she treasures it while her survey and proposal again fall by the wayside. Eleanor starts to go days without even glancing at it, spending longer and longer stretches in idle unproductivity, and with each day, this fact bothers her slightly less.

On one such day, after they've finished their lunch and have started the short walk back to the shop, Dani drops another opportunity for quality time.

"Is everyone going to the River Run tonight?" Eleanor asks. To her surprise, Dani shakes her head.

"Nah, we have a pickup game going at six." Dani kicks idly at a pebble on the sidewalk with her boot, and Eleanor frowns.

“Pickup game? For what?”

“Hockey!”

Eleanor’s confusion only increases. “It’s summertime.”

“Ball hockey,” Dani says, sticking her hands into her pockets before stopping dead on the sidewalk and turning toward Eleanor with a gasp. “Hey, you should come play!”

Eleanor snorts. The idea of her playing a sport is ludicrous, let alone hockey, but at Dani’s confused and slightly wounded look, she quickly amends. “Dani, I’ve never touched a hockey stick in my life.”

The look on Dani’s face is comical. It’s as if Eleanor has just declared a plan for world domination. It’s like she thinks never having played ball hockey is absolutely unthinkable.

“Not even in school?”

“My father paid to let me skip gym class for advanced math tutoring. He didn’t want me wasting my time.”

“Sports aren’t a waste of time! Come on, you have to play at least once,” Dani insists, but Eleanor shakes her head as they approach the shop door.

“Believe me when I say there’s nothing I’d rather do less.”

“Do you want to come and watch? Maybe you’ll be inspired,” Dani suggests.

Eleanor really should say no. The last thing she needs is to turn into the airheaded idiot she becomes whenever she sees Dani in a state of exertion. Especially in public.

“I’ll think about it,” she says.

So Eleanor thinks about it.

She thinks about it on the way home. She thinks about it as she listlessly types and retypes the same sentence of her unfinished survey report. She thinks about it as she’s driving to the game only a few hours later.

Dani’s hockey game is not at the well-maintained indoor rink in town—it’s instead at a small outdoor one at the edge of the woods, which amounts to a wooden fence encircling a large rectangle of cement. Eleanor finds Dani in the packed- dirt parking lot wearing nothing but basketball shorts, her blue ballcap, and a grey sports bra.

Faced with the full breadth of Dani’s muscular back, the elastic waist of her shorts digging into the soft parts of her hips, Eleanor considers leaving before anyone sees her. It’s tempting to hide away in the sweet darkness of her room and fantasize vigorously instead of experiencing whatever is going to happen here.

She’s spotted before she can bolt.

“Nora, over here!”

Sarah—who is wearing an actual shirt (thank you very much; goddamn Danielle Cooper and her decision to play sports naked) —waves Eleanor over to where the group is scattered around some makeshift benches. Owen is there doing some light stretches, and Mila is wrapping black tape around the handle of her extra wide hockey stick. Eleanor even recognizes a few people on the opposing team: Jenny the bartender is leaning against the fence, her blue-streaked hair now featuring strands of pink, and so is Matthew. He’s sporting a bruised face and a much better attitude.

“Surprised to see you here,” Sarah says as Eleanor sits gingerly on a splintery bench.

Eleanor purses her lips. “I’ve never seen a hockey game before.”

Ryan laughs, but when Eleanor arches a brow, he looks just as disbelieving as Dani did.

“Wait...you mean a live game, right?” Ryan says.

All the attention in the group suddenly zeroes in on Eleanor. Her spine straightens under the scrutiny.

“I’ve never seen one, period.”

“Are you even Canadian?” Owen asks.

Eleanor actually laughs at that. “I didn’t realize citizenship had a winter-sport requirement?”

“Just for the world’s greatest sport,” Owen says.

Ryan makes a squeaky noise of dissent. When Owen pouts, he sighs affectionately. “Right. The world’s greatest sport.” He pats Owen on the shoulder consolingly, but as soon as Owen turns away to talk to Sarah, Ryan shakes his head.

Eleanor hides her grin behind her hand.

When Dani and Owen leave to set up the nets and talk to the other team, Mila plops down in the vacant spot next to Eleanor. She’s slipping a large glove onto her right hand.

“I wouldn’t have guessed that you played hockey,” Eleanor says.

Mila shoves a slightly oversized helmet onto her head. “I’m the goalie!”

Eleanor frowns, looking between Mila’s thin frame and the large net that Dani is dragging into place nearby. “How?”

Everyone laughs like it’s some kind of inside joke. It’s Sarah who takes pity on Eleanor with an explanation.

“She’s skinny, but Mila’s the fastest catcher I’ve ever seen. She could grab a ball at the speed of light in that mitt.”

Mila shrugs, pulling her helmet’s face guard down. “People underestimate me. It makes it even funnier when I cream them,” she says cheerfully. With that, she stands up and skips happily onto the rink.

Once the game starts, Eleanor sits between Naomi—who claims to be here to support her brother but seems to cheer an awful lot when Sarah scores goals—and Ryan, who spends most of the game sighing dreamily every time Owen so much as touches the ball.

It makes Eleanor keenly aware of what position she’s in here. She’s one of the cheerleaders.

It’s hard not to have fun, even with that knowledge. Dani is a great player—not the best of the bunch, but consistent and gutsy, and she’s entertaining to watch. She does chest bumps with Owen, lifts Mila up when she makes spectacular saves, and seems to do everything she can do to show off her strength and endurance while Eleanor watches with her legs tightly crossed.

It’s somehow both better and worse than watching Dani fight.

Because Eleanor doesn't have to worry so much about Dani's safety this time, she can pay more attention to the details. Details like the way Dani's shorts ride low to reveal the bare space between her hip bones, which Eleanor wants to follow with her mouth. Or how the sweat seems to bring the angles of her body into sharper definition. How her charming, magnetic smile lights up everyone around her.

Luckily for Eleanor's sanity it's a short game. Dani's team wins by two goals thanks to Sarah's aggressive offense and Mila's goalkeeping, and Matthew even gives Dani a respectful nod—tinged with a bit of fear, Eleanor notes—as he heads back to the opposite benches.

When Naomi rises to join Sarah and Owen on the rink, Dani plops down in her empty spot, catching a towel that Mila throws her way and mopping her face and neck with it.

“So, what did you think of your first hockey experience?” Dani asks, taking a long drink from her Space Jam -branded water bottle. Her throat strains and flexes.

Eleanor looks away abruptly.

“It was exhilarating,” Eleanor says drily, hoping that Dani did not at any point during the game look over and see just how closely Eleanor was watching. Dani just laughs, throwing the towel over her shoulder.

“We'll make a fan of you yet.”

Eleanor means to fire back—a half-formed quip about Dani needing to score more goals first—but they're interrupted by a short, sweaty man from the opposing team.

He's immediately a deeply unwelcome presence, with an uneven tan on his pale chest and a plastic bottle full of murky, brown liquid in his hand. He stands in front of

Dani's seated form, his waist far too close for comfort, and looks down at her with a grin half concealed by a mysteriously huge bump under his bottom lip.

The source of the lump reveals itself when he spits into the bottle, the saliva coming out a revolting brown. Chewing tobacco.

Dani seems just as put off by him as Eleanor is—she sighs, leaning back so as to be further from his belt buckle, and purses her lips. “Shaun.”

Eleanor remembers that name, vaguely. The driver of the truck with the obnoxious wheels. He certainly fits Dani's description: His hair is slicked back from his face, and his beard is patchy, like he's trying too hard to grow one on a face it doesn't suit. Eleanor hadn't gotten a good look at him when he roared past them that night, but she does remember that he did some pretty shoddy defense during the hockey game.

It's clear when he opens his mouth that his personality matches the compensatory nature of his truck.

“Heard you kicked Matty's ass,” Shaun says appraisingly, spitting into the pop bottle again and grinning in a way that comes out clownish with the tobacco in his lip. “You know, I like girls who can take a tumble.”

“Fuck off, Shaun,” Dani says clearly, averting her eyes from the show Shaun is trying to put on. “Go take a shower.”

“When are you finally gonna go out with me, Cooper?”

“Last time I checked, I'm still a lesbian.” Dani stands up to her full height. She's about an inch taller than he is, but he continues to grin at her as if her ire somehow makes him happy.

“Gimme a chance, and I could change that.”

Anger swells in Eleanor’s chest like a sleeping dragon awakened by Dani’s visible discomfort.

“Fuck off ,” Dani snaps again, pushing at his chest. He sways a bit, and now that he’s closer, Eleanor can detect a whiff of beer. “Have a dart and sober up, if you ever want to see our team here again.”

Rather than acknowledging that, Shaun turns his attention instead to Eleanor.

“How’s about you, city girl? You a lesbo like the Coopers, or do you want a little country in you?” Shaun says lecherously, grabbing at the fork of his jeans.

“Say one more word to her, Shaun. See how it goes for you,” Dani says lowly. She looks like she’s about to explode as Shaun turns to look back at his friends, who all watch the interaction in either suspense or mild discomfort. Dani’s fists are clenched, her jaw tight with rage. But Eleanor is angrier on Dani’s behalf than on her own.

Standing up to match Dani, Eleanor crosses her arms with deliberate slowness, slipping into the corporate persona she hasn’t worn since she arrived here.

“A little country?” Eleanor says, quirking a brow and glancing down at Shaun’s belt buckle. “No, thank you. Though it’s brave of you to make it obvious just how little.”

Dani’s friends erupt into laughter; Shaun’s neck and ears glow crimson. He spits into his bottle more harshly than before.

“Think you’re smart, eh?” Shaun sneers. “I don’t usually go for women with sticks up their asses, but I bet I could replace it with something better.”

“What the fuck did you just say?” Dani snaps, pushing again on Shaun’s chest until he takes a step back.

Eleanor touches her shoulder lightly.

“It’s fine, Dani. I don’t take offense to half-baked insults thrown at me by a knuckle-dragging neanderthal who wouldn’t understand the word no if it grabbed him by his undescended testicles,” Eleanor says coolly.

It takes Shaun a solid couple of seconds to fully process what she’s said. When it hits him, his whole demeanour shifts.

“Listen, you prissy little bitch.” Shaun’s cockiness is rapidly shifting to genuine rage, “I’m not gonna stand here and take shit from some fuckin’ tourist just ’cause Cooper brought you around.”

“And I’m not going to stand here to be sexually harassed by someone with a third-grade reading level,” Eleanor says.

Shaun pushes back against Dani, his intent clearly toward Eleanor. Two more sets of hands grab his shoulders; Sarah is calling for everyone to calm down while Shaun shouts obscenities in Eleanor’s direction.

“Touch me,” Eleanor says calmly, cutting through the growing chaos, “and I will bury you in assault litigation so deep you’ll be paying your lawyer’s fees until you retire.”

Shaun pays her no mind, throwing increasingly distasteful insults at everyone in the vicinity. Dani is trying to intervene, a hand planted in the middle of Shaun’s chest to keep him from lunging at anyone, but clearly he doesn’t respond to more cerebral threats the way Eleanor is used to.

She could let Dani and her friends take care of it. Even Shaun's posse are starting to get involved, encouraging him to back away, but the last thing Eleanor wants to be is a damsel.

Maybe she needs to take a leaf out of Dani's book. This seems to be a town where physical altercations can get the job done, if Dani's performance the other night is any indication. When in Rome, and all that.

When Shaun manages to shake free, winding a fist back in a clear trajectory toward Dani's face, Eleanor moves her hand at lightning speed to seize at the body part he so recently tried to thrust in her face and squeezes it with devastating precision.

Shaun buckles. His knees fold, and he doubles over in pain until he's at Eleanor's eye level, a vague wheezing sound the only noise he's capable of making as Eleanor digs her short nails into his groin.

"I think that was a bad decision, Shaun," Eleanor says in a light, airy tone as his friends all yell in sympathetic pain behind him.

Shaun makes a garbled noise. His knees clearly want to collapse fully, but he's unable to hit the ground with Eleanor's grasp keeping him up.

"I also think you owe us an apology. What do you think, Dani?"

Dani, watching the proceedings with her mouth agape and a delighted expression, nods. "I'd love that, actually."

Eleanor puts on her best boardroom smile. Every man she knows besides Ash hates it with a burning passion, hence her struggles with the board at CromTech, but never before has she met one who was so willing to indulge that anger.

“You heard her,” Eleanor says.

Shaun grunts, but as if he can sense that Eleanor is about to squeeze again, he manages to rasp out a few words. “Let me go.”

“I’d like an apology first.”

“Cooper, make her let me go?”

Dani ignores his plea. Shaun appeals to his friends instead, though they don’t seem interested in stepping in.

“Matt?” Shaun whines. “Jenny, come on. Punch her in the tits or something!”

Jenny snorts, folding her arms and leaning against the boards. “This is your fuck-up, man. Take your knocks.”

Even though Eleanor is hardly holding on at this point, the threat of her hand’s position is enough. It takes only a few more seconds for Shaun to crumble.

“Fine. I’m sorry, okay?” he mutters, his bravado utterly deflated.

“Good enough,” Eleanor says. She releases him abruptly, and Shaun falls into a heap at her feet. When she taps his shoulder with the toe of her shoe, he groans again, sounding like an injured puppy.

“Oh, you’re fine,” Eleanor says, rolling her eyes. “Sit on an ice pack and you’ll be good as new. Dani?”

Dani nods rapidly, offering Eleanor her arm. Together they step over Shaun’s body, heading toward the parking lot with the rest of the team.

By the time they get there, Sarah is laughing so hard that she's bent double, wheezing and leaning on a giggly Mila. Owen is giving them a reverent slow clap. Ryan cups a nervous hand over his own genitals.

"I've been trying to get him to leave me alone since we were in high school," Sarah says, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. "I had no idea all it took was plucking his grapes."

Eleanor shrugs. "When you can't threaten them with legal repercussions, sometimes you need to get physical."

"Damn, Nora," Dani says. She's grinning from ear to ear as she pulls her into a side hug. "Next time Matty wants to tussle, I should just let you at him!"

The group dissolves into laughter again. Dani keeps one sweaty arm around her shoulders, and, as a unit, everyone grabs their gear to head to the bar for after-game drinks.

In that moment, she doesn't feel like Eleanor Cromwell. She feels like Nora . For the first time in as long as she can remember, she doesn't feel out of place.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

Life in Riverwalk eases into a natural rhythm as June turns into July.

Nora spends less time in her home office and more time in town, not just visiting Dani for lunch but spending time with the others as well. She'd even say, tentatively, that she's made more new friends.

More than ever, Nora tries to put her still-unfinished project and imminent move back to the city out of her mind in favour of just enjoying herself. She still has time. Kayla and Ash wanted her to rest and relax, after all.

Though when they next call her to give her the weeks' worth of updates, their position seems to be reversing.

"When can we expect you back from your little holiday?" Ash asks once the pertinent information is done with. "What's it been now, two months?"

"Nearly," Nora says. She has them on speakerphone while she makes a cup of tea, and Ash's voice is echoing around her kitchen.

"A big achievement for someone I've never seen take even a single sick day," Kayla says. "Were we right?"

"Yes," Nora concedes. Even their friendly gloating isn't enough to bring her mood down—she's meeting Dani for lunch later. "I needed this. And I'm going to stay a bit longer."

The connection crackles.

“Really?” Kayla says.

Nora drums her fingers on the countertop as the kettle starts to boil.

“How long? A couple of weeks?”

“Until August.”

“August?” Ash says loudly. “You’re going to take another whole month?”

“Two, actually. I’m leaving August 28.”

“Christ, Eleanor,” Ash says after another long silence. “When we said take a break, we didn’t mean four months .”

“No, this is good. If she needs the time to recharge, she should take it,” Kayla cuts in. “But can you at least send us your report? Renée has been getting uppity about it.”

Nora freezes in mid-pour.

“It’s not really her place to make demands,” Nora says quickly. “I agreed to present it in quarter four.”

“Hold on. Is it not finished?”

“That’s not relevant.”

“It’s very relevant!”

“This is new. You never procrastinate,” Ash pipes in. “Ever. In fact, when I rather think you should be procrastinating a little, you work harder.”

“I’m not procrastinating,” Nora insists. “I’ve already booked the moving trucks.”

“And the report?”

“It’s going through some edits,” Nora says edgily.

Kayla’s voice takes over—Nora assumes the phone has been passed. “Such as?”

The report is in fact not undergoing edits so much as it’s completely stalled out. Nora has been less confident in it the longer she’s been in Riverwalk, and she’s more comfortable putting it aside until she can get a handle on what she actually wants to do. “I’m reassessing the methodology. You’ll find out when it’s finished.”

“Does it really need reassessing? Wasn’t this whole thing supposed to be a simple slam dunk?” Ash says, his voice going high-pitched in confusion. “To fund your eco-tech?”

“It was. It is ,” Nora corrects quickly. “I just want to make sure I’m doing it in a way that’s beneficial to everyone.”

“This doesn’t happen to have anything to do with that hot mechanic you didn’t sleep with, does it? Are you flinging after all?”

Nora rolls her eyes. She grabs her mug, settling in on the living room sectional and grabbing the latest in her pile of library books. “Leave Dani out of it, please. She’s given no indication that she’s interested in anything beyond friendship.”

“Yes, because you’ve historically been great at determining when you’re being flirted with,” Kayla says sarcastically. “It took Lydia putting her number into your phone under fuckbuddy for you to get the message.”

“Unfortunately Dani isn’t in my phone as anything,” Nora says thoughtlessly.

She winces into the stunned silence that follows.

“Do you not have her number?” Kayla asks, her crackly voice a mixture of disbelief and amusement. “Haven’t you two been hanging out, like, every day?”

“We usually run into each other in town. Or I call the shop.”

Kayla sighs heavily. “Eleanor Cromwell, your love life is a disaster of international proportions.”

While Kayla and Ash aren’t wrong about her tendency to overlook flirtation, if Dani harbors any attraction, she’s been perfectly platonic so far. It’s Nora who has been succumbing to embarrassing fantasies, and the last thing she wants is for her lack of self-control to ruin what’s turning out to be one of the most genuine friendships she’s ever had.

* * *

When one of her planned lunch days with Dani dawns with pouring rain, Nora is proud of her initiative in heading out early to pick up their food and bring it to the garage instead. The daily lunch special at the restaurant is turkey club sandwiches, and Nora grabs two side salads to accompany them—she’s discovered that when they don’t eat together Dani usually ends up eating hot pockets or protein shakes, and she’s endeavoured to introduce healthier foods to Dani’s diet.

Nora enters the shop through the office door in the back, as Dani has told her to do more than once by now. The rain is so loud against the roof and the large windows that Nora doesn’t hear voices until she’s almost reached the door to the garage.

Sarah's voice is first, ringing out in exasperation.

"It's clear that you're crazy about her, that's all I'm saying."

Nora's hand freezes on the doorknob. She hears Dani's awkward laugh follow.

"Kinda an overstatement, isn't it?"

"I don't think so. She is your type."

"And she's totally off-limits, so it doesn't matter," Dani says firmly.

Nora's heart sinks. Between everyone in Dani's circle, only a few women could be considered completely off-limits. She shuffles through them like a Rolodex—Naomi is unlikely considering Sarah's involvement in the conversation. Jenny is an unlikely candidate. Could it be Mila? Being married certainly makes her off-limits.

The weight of Nora's belligerent, summer-long denial of just how much she wants something with Dani beyond friendship is coming to bear all at once now that it could be off the table.

It was stupid to think Dani might be interested in her in the first place.

"Has she specifically told you that?" Sarah challenges.

"She doesn't have to."

"Come on, I saw the way you were looking at her at the potluck. We all did, Casanova."

"She's stunning," Dani says. Something about the way she says it, the low sureness

of her tone, sends a wave of something hot through Nora, even if it tragically isn't directed at her. "Of course I was looking at her. Everyone was!"

It's all a little bit too much for Nora's overheated brain. She takes a step backwards, but she can still hear their voices.

"Nobody looks at a girl the way you were without wanting to get down on one knee," Sarah says before pausing and amending. "Or both knees. Whatever. Either way, you should get to it."

Images of exactly what that would entail jump to Nora's mind immediately. The wave of jealousy that follows is so strong that Nora almost drops the container with Dani's lunch in it.

"Sarah!" Dani hisses, as if someone could be listening to them. Which, Nora realizes with an equal wave of guilt, is indeed the case. "You haven't made a move with Naomi either."

"That's different."

"How so?"

"It just is!" Sarah grumbles. "Naomi and I have, like, twenty-five years of friendship at stake. What's holding you back with Nora?"

Nora's heart skips several beats.

The course of this conversation has been a roller coaster, from a crushing low up to a dizzying high; she might even have stopped breathing in her sudden eagerness to not miss a single word from Dani's mouth.

It's not Mila that Dani is interested in. It's not Naomi. It's Nora .

“What’s holding me back? Are you kidding?” Dani says. Her voice quiets. She suddenly sounds solemn in a way that she didn’t when Sarah was teasing her. Nora could hazard a guess at what Dani might bring up next—that Nora is emotionally unavailable, that she’s pretentious, that she’s not worth the effort of cracking the shell.

“Of course I’ve thought about it,” Dani says instead. “But she’s out of my league. She’s a beautiful, intelligent businesswoman with a billion university degrees, and she’s going back to that life soon. She’s amazing. I’m just some hick mechanic. Outside of the physical, what could I possibly offer her? Why would she ever give me a second look?”

Something shifts in Nora, a new light on the negative self-image she’s always clung to. It’s pried open by the fact that Dani thinks so highly of her, and, in fact, is under the impression that she has nothing to offer to Nora. In what world?

Nora shifts from foot to foot. Her mind is going a mile a minute, rapidly trying to recalibrate to this new information. Dani thinks she’s beautiful. Stunning, even. Dani has commented on her looks before, but Nora’s always put it down to innate kindness. And Dani values her intelligence. Her personality. She’s saying it even when Nora isn’t present to hear it.

“Did you have your brain turned off during the hockey game?” Sarah sounds completely exasperated. “She looked like she wanted to vault over the barrier and climb you like a tree. And then she messed Shaun up for threatening you. She likes you, dumb-ass.”

Dani says nothing for a moment. Nora can hear something that sounds like a boot sliding across the shop floor, twisting against the concrete. One of Dani’s fidgets.

“You really think so?” Dani says quietly.

Sarah doesn’t reply. Over the rain, Nora can hear the tow truck pulling up outside. The engine cuts out, and Owen’s voice comes booming in to end the conversation.

Nora exhales slowly.

Dani likes her. Dani might be thinking about acting on it. And despite the fleeting nature of anything that could develop between them, despite how bad an idea it probably is to let their friendship advance into something more, if Dani asked, Nora’s first instinct would be to say yes.

She doesn’t have much time to think about the revelation. Footsteps are approaching the office hallway from the garage, and Nora quickly pretends that she’s just come in from outside as Sarah opens the door.

“Nora!” Sarah says, looking surprised but not unhappy as the door swings shut behind her. “What are you doing here? That Porsche crap out on you again?”

Nora chuckles, trying to sound as normal as possible when she’s only just avoided getting caught listening to Sarah telling Dani to make a move. “No, the car is fine. I just, um, I came to bring Dani lunch.”

Nora holds up the takeout containers. Sarah’s eyebrows raise, and her grin is far too smug for Nora’s liking.

“Right. Dani’s in the shop, but she’s due for her break, if you want to sit in the office with her.”

Dani seems just as happy to see Nora as she usually is, and their lunch is mostly unchanged from what Nora is used to, despite the conversation still echoing in her

head. But once or twice Nora could swear that she catches Dani looking at her with an expression she's never taken notice of before.

The hug Dani pulls her into when her break is over lasts just a little bit longer than normal.

* * *

In her thirty-one years of living, Nora has done many things that she didn't want to do. She's gone to schools she didn't choose, studied business at her father's request, and abandoned her fulfilling job to take over a company she never asked for. But thus far nothing has made her second-guess herself as much as Danielle Cooper.

Her attraction is almost painful. She can't seem to keep herself away. She craves the discomfort it brings, soaks it up like nicotine every time Dani has a few spare moments to spend with her. But what Nora truly wants is less clear.

Dani belongs in Riverwalk in a way that's fundamental to her being, and Nora has responsibilities to get back to at the end of August. They're from two different worlds. The fact that they ever met at all is an anomaly. Nora is so rusty at maintaining even normal casual relationships that using that skill set again feels like relearning a language she's forgotten—not to mention the fact that Dani is missing some key information about who Nora is and why she's here. Dani was the one to suggest that nobody is entitled to that information unless she chooses to share it, but, even so, it's been feeling increasingly disingenuous to keep it hidden.

Nora's fascination with Dani doesn't dim as the summer progresses. It only gets brighter, even when Dani asks her to do activities she'd never considered.

“You want me to watch you compete in a lawn mower race?”

Dani nods as if the request is completely ordinary. It's one of Dani's days off, and when Nora ran into her at the hardware store, Dani suggested that they hang out for the rest of the day.

"Yeah! This Saturday," Dani says, shoving more ice cream into her face. "Owen thinks his rig is faster than mine. Gotta prove him wrong."

Nora blinks a few times, still trying to come to terms with the concept. "His rig? You mean...his lawn mower?"

"Yeah!" Dani says matter-of-factly.

"Okay, I need to be completely sure we're on the same page here," Nora says, abandoning the spoon she's stuck into her ice cream. "You want me to watch you drive a riding lawn mower at top speed down Main Street in the hopes that you beat Owen. Who is also on a lawn mower."

"Yes. I don't know why you're having trouble with this." Dani chases a stray ice cream drip down her wrist. Nora almost loses track of her argument while watching the progress of Dani's tongue up to her hand, but she manages to shake it off.

"It's the lawn mower of it all, I think."

"It's the best part of the duck race!"

The duck race is another concept Nora is having trouble with. Why people would gather in the hundreds to throw rubber ducks into the river and bet on which one will get past the finish line first is completely beyond her, but it seems to be one of the biggest events of the year.

Nora sighs, shaking her head but already resigned to her fate. "This town is so odd."

* * *

The duck race is strangely less strange than Nora thought it would be. Nobody takes it too seriously—it's a day of fun, where the ice cream shop gives out half-priced cones and serves specialty slushies to kids. Main Street shuts down for pedestrians, people sell trinkets from streetside tables, and a town full of adults gets excited over rubber duckies being dumped into the river.

The most excited of them all is Dani, who spends no less than eighteen minutes picking the perfect duck out of a pile of identical dollar-store toys with numbers painted on the back. When the dump truck bearing hundreds of rubber ducks empties into the water, Dani is practically vibrating, watching their slow progression under the bridge and down toward the finish line, where they're caught in a big net. When Dani gets so excited about her duck winning tenth place—she chose number eighty-nine due to its slightly crooked, wonky eyes—Nora knows she made the right choice in attending.

Dani names the duck Mortimer. She puts it in a place of honour on her truck's dash and promises to treat Nora to lunch with the hundred-dollar cash prize.

"I still don't really understand the point of all this," Nora says, looking around at the sheer number of people who turned out for the event.

"It's an excuse to socialize," Dani explains. She waves at a group of people Nora doesn't recognize gathered by the river and gives Mila a fist bump as she passes by. "People like having something to look forward to. It brings us together as a community."

It's a deeper answer than Nora was expecting.

"And lawn mower races also bring the community together?" Nora is aiming for

sarcasm, but Dani nods excitedly. She's completely genuine, as per usual.

“Exactly!”

Said race starts just after four o'clock, when all the ducks have been fished out of the river and all the ice cream consumed. Everyone seems to know it's coming—they line up on the sidewalks all along the main street, some people in the front rows even producing lawn chairs or pillows to sit on. Dani leaves Nora with Sarah while she disappears to get ready.

Sarah finds a spot near the makeshift finish line—a long piece of duct tape stretched across the road and affixed to two street lamps—and Nora shifts from foot to foot, wondering when Dani will appear.

Sarah seems to take her restlessness as boredom.

“It's good of you to play along,” Sarah says, peering over the heads of the crowd in front of them. “You're probably used to bigger excitement.”

Nora snorts. “The only excitement I ever had back home was when I got to leave the office before midnight. This is much more fun.”

Sarah's brow knits. “You worked until midnight?”

“Usually later,” Nora says. Sarah's concern is eerily reminiscent of Kayla and Ash. “And then got up before six to do it all again. I had a couch put in my office so that I could sleep there when I needed to.”

Sarah whistles, shaking her head. “Shit, Nora. What job could have been that important?”

“At the time it seemed life or death, but now...” Nora trails off. It’s always felt like if she didn’t do the work, if she didn’t dedicate every waking moment to her job, she’d be failing. Here, it all seems so silly. Unimportant. Unnecessary.

And soon she has to go back.

It’s the first time in weeks that Nora has thought about what going home truly means, exactly what she’ll be going back to. The shocked, slightly pitying look on Sarah’s face is a stark reminder.

Nora will be returning to sleeping in the office, working herself to the bone, and going to meeting after meeting, only to be talked down to by Renée and her army of condescending old men. She’ll be returning to present her suggestions for improvements to Bracken County, after which Riverwalk will be quite different from the town she’s come to like so much. It’s hard to ignore the truth now that she’s spent half a summer away from it all:

Nora hates her job.

“I guess try to enjoy the vacation while you can, right?” Sarah says.

Before Nora can reply, there’s a mechanical roar from down the road, and everyone turns to see the commotion.

Rolling down the pavement come six lawn mowers. But they almost aren’t recognizable as lawn mowers anymore—each is modified in some way, from exposed engines to tire blades to what looks like a makeshift flame-thrower on a back tailpipe. Dani is front and centre, standing up on a red-and-gold-painted lawn mower with lights illuminating the undercarriage and spinning tire rims.

DANI’S DEATH MACHINE is scrawled on the hood in spray paint.

Sarah laughs. “She’s such a goofball.”

Even though her mind is occupied with this newest inconvenient realization, Nora smiles, too, watching Dani wave at the crowd and rev her engine dramatically. Beside her, Owen is showing off the oversized monster tires on his machine.

“They always like to show off first. The race starts when the flare gun goes,” Sarah explains, and sure enough, the competitors quiet a few moments later when someone approaches the starting line with said flare gun in hand.

As soon as it goes off, there’s a noise so loud that Nora actually covers her ears. The mowers are making a commotion, but when Nora looks at the group, they’re moving at a snail’s pace.

“I thought they’d be faster,” Nora yells over the noise.

“We have a rule,” Sarah shouts back. “Nobody gets to mess with their engine too much. The fun of the race is everyone trying to win when the max speed is ten kilometres an hour.”

True to Sarah’s word, it is rather hilarious to watch. Everyone seems to be taking it completely seriously, their faces set in competitive determination, but when their full speed could be topped by an idle housecat, the entertainment of the whole thing is ratcheted up. They might as well be racing on noisy tricycles.

When Dani crosses the finish line mere seconds before Owen, she catches Nora’s eye and throws her a wink. Nora is embarrassed to admit how much such a tiny gesture coming from a woman in denim overalls astride a spray-painted lawn mower makes her heart flutter. The knowledge that Dani is attracted to her only makes it worse.

Through all of it—the hockey games, the overalls, the pool games, the pickup trucks,

and the ridiculous, endearing enthusiasm of Dani's personality—Nora's attraction has grown, the flames only fanned even more by her new knowledge that Dani feels the same way.

The fact that she could easily make the first move is one that Nora ignores, no matter how tempting it is. It would only make things more complicated.

It's better for both of them this way.

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

When Dani asks Nora to go for a picnic at the tree house in mid-July, she thinks nothing of it.

They've driven out here together several times by now, and a picnic seems like a fun way to pass an early evening. Dani shows up in another clean button-up shirt, seeming strangely nervous, but Nora puts it off to her being worried that Nora won't like the food she's brought. After the matzo ball soup, this is only the second time Dani has made food for her. That prospect could make anyone nervous.

The button-up and Dani's jeans are clean and neat, and her hands have been scrubbed diligently, but her hair is still tied up and tucked under her cap. She looks if she left straight from work and had to get ready in a hurry. It's surprisingly sweet, especially when Dani unbuttons the shirt a little in the summer heat and Nora can see the shop stains on the tank top she's wearing underneath.

Before meeting Dani, something like that might have made Nora scoff. Now it just brings the warm, affectionate glow of sweet familiarity. Dani put in the effort of wearing a nice shirt overtop and scouring her hands clean just for Nora, even when she's pressed for time.

Dani lays a blanket down under the shade of the maple tree and insists that Nora sit while she hurriedly sets out a large mason jar full of homemade lemonade, several containers of food—potato salad, sandwiches, and mixed fruit—and, strangely, a bunch of flowers in an old glass Coke bottle.

As soon as Nora takes her first bite, Dani's expression is oddly hopeful. It's a grilled-chicken sandwich on sourdough, one of Nora's favourite orders from the restaurant,

and it's even nicer homemade.

"Do you like it?" Dani asks.

Nora finishes chewing slowly, the gears in her head turning.

Dani is a bit dressed up for a casual hangout, now that Nora is paying attention. The flowers are also a new detail—daisies and tulips that look like they were snagged from someone's garden—and Dani is looking at her like there's something huge at stake. Her calloused fingers drum on the blanket nervously, and there's a blush creeping up her neck.

Nora almost drops the sandwich.

"Dani, is this a date?"

Nora says it almost as soon as the thought enters her head, and she almost regrets it in the moments after. The idea that Dani would spring a date on her like this seems crazy. But when Dani's whole face lights up red, Nora knows that she was right.

It's actually happening.

"Oh my God, did you take me on a date without asking me out?" Nora asks, now fully dropping the sandwich onto a paper plate. This is a date. They're on a date right now.

Nora didn't even shave her legs this morning.

"I got nervous!" Dani stammers, rubbing at the crimson back of her neck. "I've been wanting to ask you out, but I didn't know if you'd be receptive, and so I...I figured I could do a test run!"

“I would have said yes.”

It slips out of Nora with hardly a thought, landing in the middle of the blanket like a shock wave to her summer of avoidance. All the constant uncertainty, all the denial of her attraction, and she crumbles at the first hint of taking things further.

Dani blinks, putting her own sandwich back into the container and shifting closer. “You would?”

Nora can’t begrudge Dani that doubt. Nora isn’t sure it’s a good idea even as she says it, but now that she’s in this moment, she can’t bring herself to deny the truth. She doesn’t have it in her. Maybe she’s just as weak and ineffective as Renée has always said.

“I went to a duck race with you,” Nora says matter-of-factly.

Dani laughs, brushing the crumbs from her hands. “I guess I just assumed that you had better prospects than me. People more on your level.”

Although Dani says it in her usual breezy tone, Nora can hear the insecurity behind it. The same one she heard in Dani’s conversation with Sarah. Dani thinks she isn’t good enough.

Nora can see how she might have drawn that incorrect conclusion—Nora has made no secret of her befuddlement around the various small-town customs Dani has introduced her to—but Dani is the best person Nora has been in the romantic vicinity of in years. Maybe ever.

Not that Nora is willing to fully explore that when the prospect of her departure looms over them like a storm cloud. Instead she shoves the thought down deep with the rest and shakes her head. “Don’t be silly. I don’t really have time for any of that.”

“Except on vacation?” Dani says hopefully.

They’ve been drifting closer together throughout the whole conversation, almost close enough to touch, and Nora finally gives in to what she’s wanted to do for months now. She takes off Dani’s hat and runs her fingers through her hair. Nora can feel warm breath on her face, and when she inhales, she can detect that distinctive Dani scent. Warm vanilla and machine shop.

Dani’s eyes drift closed as Nora’s nails scrape her scalp, a tiny noise of approval escaping her as the space between their faces narrows. Dani’s hair is soft and golden, a little sweaty at the temples, but falling down in tangled waves, and Nora’s heart pounds ever faster when one of the hands she’s been so fixated on lands on her knee just below the hem of her sundress.

“Are you gonna kiss me?” Dani whispers. She’s grinning, and apparently that’s all it takes to shatter the last of Nora’s self-control.

Nora grabs the front of Dani’s unbuttoned shirt and pulls her in.

The kiss quickly goes from new and hesitant to hot and hard and absolutely perfect . The desire Nora has tried so hard to dampen comes alive, unfurling in her chest and roaring in pleasure, and Nora isn’t even ashamed of the pathetic noise that leaves her as their lips part and she presses in for more.

Dani seems to be expecting a soft first kiss, but Nora is tired of the dance. Of tiptoeing around each other, somewhere between friends and something more, constantly resisting the urge to push Dani onto the nearest surface and climb into her lap.

So she does just that.

“Jeez, Nora,” Dani gasps as Nora pushes her onto her back and swings a leg over her hips, moving those calloused hands up to her waist. “I should’ve done this sooner.”

Nora kisses her again, and it’s like a sigh of relief. The force of everything Nora has been holding back for two months hits her at once, and Nora finds herself genuinely considering letting Dani take her right here on this blanket. Their little spot is very private, really, and Nora is so worked up after only a few moments of kissing that in the moment, it seems quite appealing.

Dani remains stubbornly gallant. She only moves her hands from Nora’s waist to her hips, and finally to her thighs, when Nora guides them there herself. They slip under Nora’s sundress, caressing her bare skin eagerly, but no further.

It’s clear now that Dani wants her just as badly: Dani’s hands shake with it. The heat of her kisses and the little noises she makes and the twitchy, unconscious movements of her hips under Nora’s all make it obvious—but she seems determined to go slowly.

So Nora tries to slow down to match, even though everything in her is screaming to do the opposite. She kisses thoroughly, enjoying Dani’s skilled tongue and broad hands. The pressure builds inside her until she feels like she might explode, but Nora stops when she feels something tickling her arm and it turns out to be the biggest ant she’s ever seen crawling its way toward her elbow.

Some of the pressure gets vented when she shrieks, flinging it into the grass while Dani giggles.

Dani drives Nora home when the sun sets and walks her to the front step, where a brief good night kiss turns abruptly into a heated good night make out session.

Nora drops her keys before they’ve even touched the lock when Dani pins her to the door, throwing her arms around Dani’s neck and losing herself in the kiss. It’s even

more intense this time, and as Dani trails hot kisses up her throat, Nora finally groans the words she's been thinking since she first shook Dani's hand on the shop floor in May.

"God, I want you."

Dani whimpers. Her hips buck up slightly, grinding into Nora just enough to make her want to come out of her skin. "I want you too. Fuck."

Nora presses herself down onto the flexed thigh that's been accidentally presented, and in the swell of desire and sensation that follows, she loses all pretense. Nora wants more. She wants Dani, and finally she pulls away and gasps into Dani's mouth. "Nightcap?"

Instead of the enthusiastic yes that Nora had been hoping for, Dani hesitates. Her voice is unsteady. "Maybe, um, we should slow down. Right? We only just kissed. I feel like I should take you out for real before...you know."

Nora takes a big, fortifying breath.

"Of course. Whenever you're ready," Nora says, and she means it. Dani deserves to go at her own pace, no matter how much Nora wants to race to the finish line. She's grateful for the politeness of the rejection, but her body is definitely asking for something that she'll need to work out for herself tonight.

Their proper good night kiss is sweet and chaste, and Nora appreciates the restraint. She also appreciates the way Dani goes back to her truck and leaves swiftly—swiftly enough that Nora can go inside and immediately strip down to nothing but her silk robe, pour herself a large glass of red wine, and recline on the couch to deal with the problem that still throbs insistently between her legs.

At this point, doing this is so routine that it goes like clockwork.

Nora gets through most of the wine, thinking about exactly what she wants Dani to do to her. What she could do to Dani. All the sweaty, dirty ways they could get to know each other. She lets her robe slide open, exposing her skin to the air, and as she fantasizes, her hands wander. Over her collar bone. Her breasts. Down her stomach and, finally, between her thighs.

The moment her fingers make contact, a live wire runs directly to the most animal part of her brain. She's so wet after an entire evening of heated kissing that half her hand is coated in seconds; her fingers slip around her clit, and then inside, and God, it's so good, the way her palm presses and her fingers curl just like Dani's would if she—if her fingers were—

Nora is on the razor's edge of the world's quickest orgasm when the doorbell rings, and as that edge recedes from her grasp, she seriously contemplates how difficult it would be to cover up a murder out here.

She considers ignoring it. She doesn't get up from the couch in the quiet that follows the bell, her fingers unmoving, but soon it rings again, slightly more insistently this time.

With a frustrated groan, Nora ties the robe back up and stalks over to the door, trying to ignore the slickness that coats her inner thighs.

The frustration dissipates when she rips it open to reveal Dani. She's leaning against the doorframe, looking as intense as Nora has ever seen her.

"Dani," Nora says in breathless surprise. "I didn't... I thought you went home?" She's suddenly intensely aware of the fact that she's wearing absolutely nothing under her robe. Her fingers are still slick; Nora slides them together self-consciously

at her side, hoping Dani won't notice.

"I was driving home and thinking about you, and I just thought...what kind of idiot leaves in a situation like that?" Dani's voice is low and breathy, and it makes Nora shiver. "I figured I should be a gentleman, but I was so into it—and you seemed to be, too—and I sort of panicked. So I came back to see if—but if you don't want to, I understand."

Whatever confidence Dani had when she knocked seems to be evaporating by the second, and Nora has an idea how to stop that.

She grabs the tie of her robe, untwists it, and lets it drift open.

Dani chokes on her words. Her gaze drifts down, her eyes visibly darkening as she takes in all the skin Nora just shamelessly bared.

Nora is at least moderately confident in what she has to offer. Her thighs are maybe a bit softer than she'd like, her stomach a little more rounded, and she hasn't bothered to shave quite as religiously as she used to before her vacation, but she's never had any actual complaints. She's perfectly adequate.

Dani looks at her with a hunger Nora's never experienced before. She doesn't feel just moderately confident when Dani drinks her in—she feels hot. She feels wanted. She feels the path Dani's gaze takes like a brand on her skin; it tingles and burns and reminds Nora viscerally of exactly what she was on the edge of just a minute ago.

"Fuck," Dani breathes. Seconds later her rough hands are cupping Nora's face and her entire clothed front is pressed to Nora's terribly naked one. Their kisses pick up exactly where they left off earlier—hot, open-mouthed, and messy.

"I'm so glad you came back," Nora gasps as Dani trails kisses down her neck,

calloused fingers sliding down to cup around Nora's bare thighs.

"Me, too." Suddenly there's a denim-covered leg being pressed into Nora. She's still so wet that she can feel the wide, slick spot she's leaving on the fabric.

She wants to feel Dani's naked skin there.

"Off," Nora mutters, fumbling with the button of Dani's jeans as Dani bites at her lower lip. Her hands are shaky and inefficient. "Take these off."

Dani is already knocking Nora's hand away, yanking the jeans down until she's left in green, checkered boxer briefs just visible under the hem of her shirt. Dani momentarily struggles for balance while she rips off her boots and socks, but before long she's free, and she pulls Nora to her again, picking her up like she weighs nothing at all.

Nora wraps her legs around Dani's waist with a shaky gasp, grabbing two fistfuls of Dani's crisp shirt. The collar wrinkles under her eager hands. The easy strength with which Dani carries her to the couch, and the way her hip bone presses into Nora, quickly has her just as close to coming as she was before Dani arrived.

They fall back onto the cushions, throw pillows scattering across the floor, and Nora cups Dani's face to guide her in for a kiss.

Just before their lips meet, Dani stops.

"Your hand is wet," Dani says distractedly.

Nora can actually see her own blush, climbing its way up her naked chest.

"After you left, I was a little...worked up," Nora says. Through her embarrassment,

she sees understanding dawn on Dani's face.

Nora tries to distract from the subject by grabbing Dani's chin with the wet hand. "Yes, I was ridiculously turned on after you left, but you're here now, so can we just—"

"Did you come?"

That question is enough to make Nora stop. It's the most blatantly sexual thing she's ever heard Dani say, uttered with an intensity that borders on fascination.

"No," Nora whispers, rubbing her legs together to relieve some of the pressure. Dani shifts her hips so that they pin Nora's thighs open, spread and helpless with nothing to press against, and the quiet confidence in the movement is enough to make Nora feel a little unhinged, a wild, thrashing thing under Dani's body, nothing but shaking need. "I was—when you got here, I was about to."

Dani smiles, slow and satisfied. And in a move that almost makes Nora's brain shut down entirely, she turns her head and takes Nora's wet fingers into her mouth.

The sweet, gentlemanly Dani that Nora has been getting to know is nowhere to be found. A new Dani is emerging, one who moves her mouth down Nora's slick fingers until they're completely engulfed and then sighs at the taste. Who grinds her pelvis between Nora's bare, spread legs and grins at her moan.

The duality is as intoxicating as it is surprising. Nora can feel Dani's shirt rubbing against her—dry and then so, so wet. She knows she's leaving a stain on the clean cotton, but Dani doesn't seem to care. She just grinds harder, finally kissing Nora again hard and fast and swallowing her whimpers.

"I'm sorry I left," Dani gasps into Nora's mouth.

Nora wraps two tight fists into the collar of her shirt, pulling her closer. “I don’t care, just make me— ah!”

In response to Nora’s half-finished plea, Dani has pressed herself down firmly, and Nora is lost. She couldn’t stop herself from grinding onto the surface she’s been given if she tried. It’s an instinct, after she’s already worked herself up so effectively. With Dani helping the process, with hands on her hips and teeth on her neck, it’s an embarrassingly short time before Nora is arching up and coming, her teeth sunk deep into Dani’s shoulder, left twitching against her abdomen.

“So good,” Dani murmurs, burying her nose in Nora’s hair while she slows her movement to gentle rocking. “So fucking good, Nora.”

Dani’s warm, affected tone is more than enough to get Nora going again. She has no doubt that she’s capable.

She wouldn’t mind Dani testing her limits.

In the heartbeats after, when Dani is breathing in hot bursts against her collar and Nora is still coasting on warm updrafts, she finally forms an awareness of the exact situation.

Nora is completely naked, her robe having slipped from her shoulders somewhere on the trip to the couch, and her legs are wrapped tightly around Dani’s entirely clothed midsection. She can still feel herself pulsing lazily against Dani’s now-soaked shirt. The only clothing Dani lost during the whole exchange were her jeans and shoes, scattered across the living room, and her hat, which Nora can vaguely remember throwing somewhere behind them.

It’s a scene that speaks to the pressure that’s been mounting inside Nora all summer, an itch finally scratched, but she can’t help but feel a bit embarrassed at her own

fervour.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

“Sorry about your shirt,” Nora mutters shakily, running her fingers through the hair near the base of Dani’s neck.

Dani lifts herself slightly, peering between their bodies to look at the wet spot Nora can now see taking up most of Dani’s lower abdomen. Nora has soaked through both the cotton shirt and the tank top beneath, a visible manifestation of her desperation.

Nora is hyperaware of the slick strings of arousal that still connect the shirt to her, and it makes her feel as warm and sticky as melted chocolate.

Dani makes a noise somewhere between a moan and a growl. She lunges down to sweep Nora into a fierce, heavy kiss, passionate and all-encompassing. If Nora’s legs could spread any wider than they already are, she’d be following that instinct just to give Dani more access.

When Dani pulls away, Nora whimpers in disapproval, but since it’s to strip off her shirt and bra, exceptions can be made.

When they’re finally pressed together completely, chest to naked chest, it feels even better than Nora could have imagined. Dani is a woman possessed, pulling Nora to her by the waist, the hip, and, finally, by grabbing handfuls of her ass, grinding into her with intent. If Nora thought that her own desire was spilling out like a broken dam, Dani’s seems to match now. The realization is electrifying.

“You’re so gorgeous,” Dani murmurs, seeming unaware that Nora is struggling to breathe like a normal human being as Dani’s mouth moves from her lips to her throat, down her chest, and finally to her breasts. “I’ve thought about this since the day we

met. Touching you like this. Making you come.”

“ Fuck ” is Nora’s eloquent reply.

She’s not sure how she can be expected to form words when every ounce of her perception has narrowed to the sensations Dani is evoking with her focused hands. She ends up gasping for air as Dani applies a warm mouth to her nipple, swirling and sucking desperately and then switching sides like it’s something she’s been fixated on for as long as Nora has.

The last thing Nora needs is more foreplay. Her body wants to shoot off again at the slightest provocation. But Dani’s mouth feels too good. Every brush of her tongue sends a bolt of lightning straight downward, and she’s just about reached the end of her sanity when Dani’s hand finally traces almost hesitantly through the slickness between Nora’s thighs.

“Is this okay?” Dani murmurs, looking up at Nora from the valley between her breasts. Her mouth is red and swollen from their kisses, and shiny from the attention she’s been giving Nora’s chest. Her eyes are so dark that the clear-blue irises Nora likes so much are almost eclipsed by pupil.

Nora knows that if she were to express any hesitation, Dani would stop in a second. She absolutely cannot let that happen.

Grabbing Dani’s hand and folding down her pinkie, Nora slips three long fingers inside herself until Dani’s knuckles stop their progress.

They both go still. Nora makes a strangled noise, and Dani murmurs another expletive against her chest—those three motionless fingers are the culmination of two months of fantasizing, and it’s better than she could have dreamed. Dani’s hands are bigger than her own, and her fingers take up more space than Nora expected as they

stretch her open. The fullness is exquisite .

Dani's mouth still hovers over Nora's breasts, which are so sensitive that even her warm breath is making Nora shiver. She waits for Nora's green light before she moves her hand. When Nora finally nods, shifting her hips up, Dani makes short work of completely overshadowing the previous orgasm.

As soon as Dani notices that Nora is moving her hips more vigorously than she's thrusting, she seems to grasp exactly what Nora needs. She works her way up to fucking Nora deliciously fast, bracing herself against the cushions for optimal leverage while her tongue works around Nora's breast. And when Dani curls her fingers and scrapes her teeth at the same time, Nora breaks, coming so hard that for a few seconds, she loses her grasp on time.

Everything from their first kiss until this moment has been so fast that Nora has hardly had a moment to let the reality sink in. She's been fantasizing about this for almost as long as she's known Dani, and now here she is, sweaty and eager, with three fingers buried deep as Nora experiences the full breadth of human pleasure. It's actually happened. The line has been crossed, and Nora can't find it in herself right now to regret it.

With a soft noise, Nora pulls Dani in for a proper kiss. It's deep and slow, perfect for Nora's blissed-out state. When she moves her leg slightly it brushes against wet boxer briefs, and Dani's hips jump almost violently.

Dani is clearly needy. Sensitive. All sense of calm is washed away by Nora's untempered desire to reciprocate.

"Bedroom?" Nora murmurs against Dani's lips. The reply is some of the most enthusiastic nodding she's ever seen. Dani practically drags Nora there, but she seems confused when Nora is the one to push her down onto the mattress, climbing over

Dani with intent.

Dani makes a curious noise. “Don’t worry about me. I just want to make you feel good.”

The growing wet patch on Dani’s briefs tells a different story. Nora pulls back slightly, frowning.

“I want to touch you, Dani. If you really don’t want me to, that’s okay. But this doesn’t need to be all about me.”

Dani seems to deliberate a moment. She looks almost confused, as if this is something she’s never heard before, and Nora briefly wonders exactly what kind of people Dani has dated in the past; but her face finally breaks into a smile. She nods, relaxing onto the pillows. “Okay.”

“An enthusiastic okay?” Nora asks, laying a kiss just over where her hand rests on Dani’s sternum.

Dani nods again, much more excitedly this time. “Yeah. Very.”

With Dani now eagerly awaiting to be touched, Nora abandons rational thought for action.

The action, of course, is kissing her way down Dani’s body, pulling off the boxers, and putting her mouth to work. But not too quickly. She wants to savour this. She wants to settle in, spread Dani out, and explore.

So Nora does just that—she eases Dani’s legs apart and slips into the space.

Nora starts, rather selfishly, with Dani’s nipples. They’re pink and puffy, smaller and

differently shaped than Nora's are, and she pulls them into her mouth eagerly as Dani's breath hitches. But Dani clearly is not as sensitive there as Nora is—she's enjoying herself, but it's not driving her wild.

Eleanor moves on, nipping her way down the trembling plane of Dani's stomach and nosing her way through the soft line of Dani's treasure trail all the way down to her pelvis. Nora enjoys it just as much as Dani seems to.

When Nora moves lower, Dani's hand slides over her shoulder to grip tightly. Not a warning, but more of a grounding hold—like Dani is afraid that if she doesn't hold on, she might float away.

Dani's inner thighs are as downy as her belly; clearly, Dani doesn't shave, and Nora revels in how the soft hair feels against her lips. She drags them over uneven skin and faint stretch marks up to the apex of Dani's thighs—spread open, glistening, surrounded by denser hair in a darker blonde.

Nora leans in and noses through it happily. She can feel Dani's tense muscles relax a little. And then, finally, Nora applies her tongue.

Oral is historically one of Nora's favourite things in the world to do. She doesn't get to indulge in it as often as she'd like, but she loves how women taste. How they feel under her tongue. The way they arch and whine when they come in her mouth. And of all the women she's done this for, Dani is by far the best.

She tastes incredible, deep and addictive in a way that has Nora's face a mess in seconds. And, above all, she's responsive. Her hips twitch and jerk with every swipe of Nora's tongue, and her fists are clenched hard as if she's trying to control herself. But she also seems to be holding herself back. Each twitch is suppressed, her face screwing up in concentration rather than being in the moment.

Nora wants Dani to let go, to experience everything Nora can offer. She wants Dani to release that tightly held restraint and chase what feels good.

“What do you need from me?” Nora murmurs, kissing a wide circle around Dani’s swollen clit and revelling in the way Dani’s hips move to follow her mouth. Dani herself is wordless, her hands clenching and releasing again, but Nora can see in her eyes a kind of desperation. Like she’s trying to communicate telepathically, maybe unused to voicing her desires.

“Whatever it is, Dani, I promise you I will be into it,” Nora assures her, dragging short nails over Dani’s outer thighs as Dani spreads her legs wider. “You just need to tell me.”

Dani swallows, biting her lip. “I need,” she starts, but her voice cracks and falls silent again. Instead she eases her hand into Nora’s hair and tugs experimentally, her hips shifting upward toward Nora’s mouth.

It’s not the vocal instruction Nora was hoping for, but she can guess at Dani’s intentions. And it makes her entire lower body feel like it’s melting into a puddle somewhere on the mattress.

“You need it rougher?” Nora asks quietly.

Dani nods frantically, her teeth sunk deep into her lower lip.

“Do you want to grind on my tongue?” Nora asks, pitching her voice low and smoky. She licks a slow line up, punctuating it with a kiss to Dani’s clit. “Pull my hair?”

Dani whimpers. There’s an insistent voice coming from between Nora’s legs which is very much in favour of this development, and Nora lets it do the talking.

“Go ahead. I like that.”

That seems to give Dani the permission she needs. As soon as Nora’s tongue is in position again, Dani is pulling at her head, using her grip on Nora’s hair to grind her hips hard into Nora’s face, and it’s every bit as gratifying as Nora thought it would be. Nora doesn’t break eye contact, happily letting Dani ride her mouth.

When she flattens and stiffens her tongue to give Dani a better surface to grind on, Dani’s composure finally breaks.

“Fuck,” Dani chokes out, her head falling back as her hips move faster. Her other hand joins the first, gripping Nora’s hair just hard enough to make her moan. “Oh , fuck , Nora—”

Nora tightens her jaw and holds on for the ride. When Dani finally seems to realize how much Nora is enjoying herself, it takes less than a minute of focused grinding before she’s coming, her whole body snapping up like a tightened rubber band.

The surprised noise Dani makes is music to Nora’s ears. She logs it away in her mental bank for vigorous use in the future, taking Dani’s recovery time as a chance to savour the taste of her.

“Wow,” Dani pants while Nora traces the sensitive edges of her clit with her tongue. Dani’s thighs are quivering on either side of Nora’s face. She releases Nora’s hair, her arms falling limp against the duvet. “You’re fucking amazing . Holy crap.”

Nora hardly did any work—Dani did most of it herself and managed to almost take Nora with her in the mind-melting hotness of the process, but Nora still soaks the praise up.

She hardly gives Dani a moment to recuperate before she’s climbing up her body for

a messy kiss, her face still slick as she straddles Dani's lap and presses down into her.

"Eager, eh?" Dani grins as she sits up to meet her, her hands already gripping soft handfuls of Nora's hips.

"Oh, shut up," Nora retorts breathlessly, pulling Dani's hand to where it's needed.

The talking is minimal after that.

* * *

From the moment she wakes up, Nora notices the differences to her usual morning routine.

The curtains that she usually draws before bed have been left open, and the morning sunlight is streaming in, lighting up the yellow walls and warming Nora's face. She can already smell coffee drifting up from the kitchen, and there's a soft noise coming from the same direction—singing, maybe. Quiet and soothing. Nora's mouth tastes like she forgot to brush her teeth last night, and there's a distinct soreness in almost every part of her body.

And, most noticeably, she is very naked.

When she stretches out over the soft sheets, shaking the last of the sleep from her limbs, Nora is made very aware of the remnant slipperiness between her legs. It's a pleasant reminder of the night's events which flicker through her mind like a slide show, and rather than being worried about what happens next, Nora just lets the warmth diffuse to her whole body.

She slips downstairs to a beautiful sight.

Dani is in Nora's kitchen in her boxers and bra, her hair full and loose and sleep-messy as she flips what looks like an omelette in a frying pan and turns off the burner. She reaches over for one of Nora's mugs, taking a sip of coffee, and continues humming a song Nora doesn't recognize.

Behind Dani—and crystal clear through the floor-to-ceiling windows—the sun shines off the water and filters through the leaves, making the morning light dance across Dani's skin. There's a full French press on the counter and a second mug waiting, a cutting board full of chopped vegetables on the kitchen island, and a sizable hickey on Dani's neck.

Nora feels like an interloper in the scene, catching a glimpse of a Dani she's never seen before. One that's not often shown to the world. Everything seems irrevocably changed now, their relationship made infinitely more complicated, and soon enough Dani turns around to grab a pinch of Parmesan cheese and sees Nora in the doorway.

“Good morning!” Dani says, her grin wide and genuine. She sprinkles the Parmesan and some chives on top of an omelette before handing it over. “I had to guess what you'd like. You like mushrooms, right?”

Nora nods mutely, taking the warm plate Dani hands her. Nora isn't sure whether to eat or just stare at Dani, now busying herself with the second frying pan. Dani plates her own omelette just a moment later, this one with green peppers and tomatoes, and promptly upends a bottle of ketchup on top of it.

Nora finally breaks out of her trance, shaking her head with a chuckle.

Dani is still Dani.

“That's disgusting,” Nora remarks, finally bringing her own first delicious bite of egg, mushroom, and spinach up to her mouth.

Dani laughs, digging her fork into the ketchupy monstrosity. “Ketchup and eggs belong together.”

“Ketchup belongs on hamburgers and fries. Nothing else .”

“How terribly uncreative of you,” Dani says, her fork pointed in Nora’s direction, and Nora relaxes into her chair. It’s just a regular meal with Dani. Nothing has changed besides the fact that Dani is in her underwear and that Nora is naked under her robe.

And maybe that everything Nora has been strategically not saying about her life and her purpose here is a more pressing issue than before.

If there were ever a time to reveal the truth, it’s probably now. It actually would have been much better to do it before she lost control of the situation and slept with Dani, but Nora can’t turn back time.

When they finish the food, Nora gathers the dishes and organizes them in the dishwasher, all the time trying to formulate the right words. The right way to say , let’s slow down for a second. Or, even worse , I really like you, but...

“Nora? You okay?”

Dani’s voice startles Nora out of her thoughts. She realizes that she’s been staring into the dishwasher for at least thirty seconds and Dani is looking at her with concern.

With a deep breath, Nora dives in headfirst. “Okay. So last night was great. Really great. It was kind of staggeringly great, actually, but I think there’s something we should talk about before things go any further.”

Something flickers across Dani’s face. It’s barely noticeable, but it strikes Nora as very similar to what she’s feeling right now.

“I know you can’t do anything serious,” Dani says quickly.

Nora pauses. Her half-formed speech and apology evaporates. “You do?”

Dani nods, leaning forwards onto the island on her forearms. Whatever Nora had seen on her face is gone, now—her usual easy smile is back. “You’re leaving at the end of the summer, Nora. You should know that I’m not expecting anything serious from you. Nothing needs to change.”

Nothing needs to change . Even though this is what Nora should want—a reset, a chance to roll back what was probably a mistake and salvage their budding friendship before she goes back to the city—the reality of it sucks the air out of the room.

“Oh. Right,” Nora says tightly. “Good. Friends, then. That makes sense.”

“I mean. Maybe not just friends,” Dani says, drumming out a little beat with her fingers on the countertop. “I agree that last night was kind of fucking awesome. I’d hate for it to be a one-time thing.”

Nora’s mood, which had been succumbing slowly to a dark cloud, clears up like magic.

It seems too good to be true, really. Dani is absurdly attractive, gave Nora frankly incredible sex last night, and doesn’t want anything else to change. It’s like someone wrapped her up with a little bow and left her on the doorstep for a perfect vacation.

Maybe Nora doesn’t need to reveal everything. Maybe she can just have this, if it’s what Dani wants, too. Maybe she can be a little bit selfish.

“You genuinely just want something casual?” Nora ventures, skeptical that her luck could possibly be this good.

“Relationships are complicated,” Dani says vaguely. “Honestly, it’s better for both of us this way.”

Nora raises an eyebrow. “Sounds like there’s a story there.”

“Not an interesting one.” Dani rubs her hands together in a fidget that Nora has come to recognize. It only makes Nora more curious. Dani seems so idealistic, so perfectly the type to be open to love, and the idea of her shying away from romance seems out of character. Nora needs to understand.

“Come on, Dani,” Nora says encouragingly, moving to the stool next to Dani and scooting closer. “That dog won’t hunt ; isn’t that what you say around here?”

“No, it definitely isn’t.” Dani chuckles, covering her face while Nora pokes at her shoulder. “It’s not very exciting. I’ve just gotten my heart broken a couple of times. Broken a couple of hearts, too. It’s easier if nobody gets too invested.”

“A couple of times?” Nora says. Dani’s life before they met, what made her the woman she is today, is genuinely intriguing.

“You know about my ex from high school. That hit me hard,” Dani says, uncovering her face. “Then I took a year off before I went to university, and Jen and I were sort of...together. Vaguely.”

“Jen?” Nora says, conjuring up the only person she knows with that name in town. “You don’t mean Jenny , do you?”

The surly bartender at the River Run is about the most unlikely person on the planet Nora would pair with Dani, but Dani nods. In Nora’s experience, Jenny’s abrasive personality borders on rude, and she can’t imagine how sweet, funny Dani might have ended up with her.

“She doesn’t seem your type,” Nora says.

Dani shrugs. “It’s a small town. Being gay limits the dating pool.”

Nora snorts, but she concedes the point. Riverwalk seems to have a large queer population by percentage, but, even so, it’s extremely limited.

“The breakup was bad,” Dani continues, swirling her coffee in the mug. “Turns out we had different expectations. She wanted me to come with her when she went to college. Make a go of it. But I didn’t feel the same way.”

“Yikes,” Nora says with a wince. Dani gives a self-deprecating smile.

“Yeah. And then when I came back here, it turns out she dropped out and took over the bar.” Dani stares into her mug. “The whole thing totally wrecked our friendship.”

Nora nods. She’s been there, that horrible grey space when every face-to-face meeting reminds you of the best and worst times. Nora is typically the less interested party, too, and it can definitely make for awkwardness.

“I don’t ever want to be that person again, on either side of it. It’s easier to be clear from the start and not get in too deep,” Dani says. “That’s worked a lot better for me since.”

“That makes sense.” Nora leans forward on the counter, bending so that she’s in Dani’s eyeline. “How’s this sound—I promise I won’t beg you to come with me when I leave.”

Finally, Dani’s melancholy breaks. The sparkle returns to her eyes, and she leans forward, too, meeting Nora with a firm, decisive kiss. “Good. I feel like a summer fling will do you good, and I’m happy to serve.”

The unintentional use of Kayla's summer fling wording should make Nora roll her eyes, but she's distracted by one kiss turning into several. Dani slides off her chair to slot between Nora's open legs and pin her to the island, and although Nora is still deliciously sore, her body reacts despite it all. She fires up like a kiln.

Dani seems just as ready, her hands sliding down to cup Nora's thighs and her teeth sinking into Nora's lower lip, until Nora accidentally puts her elbow into the pile of grated Parmesan on the cutting board.

"Maybe we should move to the couch?" Dani suggests.

Nora is still nodding when Dani picks her up again and carries her to the living room. She puts a movie on, but they're barely past the opening credits before their lips are glued together.

Dani kisses in a way that makes the world disappear. Everything narrows to lips and tongue and hands, subtle grinding and hot breath on her skin, and soon the sated soreness of the night is forgotten. Nora's body is limber and aching again, even with some silly animated film playing in the background.

"So, what about your dating history?" Dani asks a half hour later, pulling away apropos of nothing. A jaunty musical number is blaring from the television, and Nora's body is screaming for Dani's hands to be in and on her again. "It's only fair."

Nora blinks. The whiplash of going from heavy petting to talking about the past again is making her a little dizzy.

"What?" Nora says.

Dani looks down at her with an expectant expression. "I told you mine. I realize I never asked, so I'd love to hear, if you're comfortable sharing."

Nora makes a noise of discontent, shifting under Dani and noting that the pressure she's putting on Nora's hips hasn't let up. She just seems to be hitting pause for some reason. If it means more kissing afterwards, Nora can do what she asks.

"What dating history? I have situationships," Nora says a bit dazedly, ignoring Dani's frown. "I fell in love once. It ended catastrophically."

Nora says it matter-of-factly, trying to get it over with so she can get back to the good part, but Dani engages. "Only once?"

"University roommate," Nora says quickly. "We got caught. I told her it was a mistake. She transferred dorms, and I never saw her again."

It's a terse summary of the events that led to Nora almost getting disowned and subsequently using Ash as a beard for five years, but she isn't sure she has the strength to go into any more detail.

"Who were you hiding it from?"

"Everyone," Nora says, smiling a little at Dani's empathetic frown. "But mostly my father. I didn't start dating women openly until a few years ago, when he stopped having so much influence on my life."

"Your father sounds like a dick," Dani says, and Nora manages a laugh. She can still see her father's stone-cold expression, staring at her over his wide mahogany desk while his fourth wife relayed what she'd seen Nora doing and who she'd seen her doing it with. She should have known not to be so affectionate in public, but Nora had been young at the time. Idealistic.

Her father's approval had always been difficult to gain, no matter how hard she worked, but his disapproval was so easy. None of her achievements were enough.

The only time he'd ever seemed truly pleased with her was when she'd introduced Ash as her fake boyfriend a few months later.

"Correct," Nora says shortly. "I'd rather not talk about it right now, if that's okay."

Dani, thank God, seems to take that for what it is. She nods, dips back down—Nora hadn't really noticed that Dani has essentially been planking for the whole discussion, with an incredibly stirring ease—and finally kisses Nora again. Nora's father and both of their rocky romantic pasts fade away, and, for a while, Nora goes with the flow.

The flow ends up leading to Nora's bed again. In the end, Nora decides, the talk was worth it.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

Nora is roused the next morning not by the smell of coffee or the sun on her face but by the rustle of Dani getting dressed at—Nora squints blearily at her phone, lit up on the bedside table—five thirty in the goddamn morning.

“Hey,” Dani whispers, seeing Nora’s movement and sitting down next to her on the bed. “I have to work today. I tried not to wake you.”

“Come back to bed,” Nora grumbles into her pillow, burying her face in the soft fabric. Three months ago she wouldn’t have been caught dead sleeping in, especially not on a Monday, but she’s currently tired and a bit worked up from the combination of last night’s memories and a pleasant dream she was having. She tugs at Dani’s arm until she falls onto the mattress.

“As much as I wish I could, I think Sarah would genuinely kill me if I didn’t show up because I was too busy getting laid,” Dani says, chuckling.

After a few last indulgent minutes of morning kisses, Nora follows Dani downstairs to show her out, and she takes note for the first time this weekend of the state of her house.

The couch cushions are in disarray, probably from her attempt to straddle Dani’s face last night, which had ended with her on the floor and Dani screaming with laughter until they relocated to bed. Two days’ worth of clothes are scattered across the living room and kitchen. The remains of last night’s dinner are still all over the countertop—she had cut up some cheese and bread, which they ate mostly naked before using the surface for other activities.

Most noticeably, the evidence of the drastic change in their relationship is painted across their bodies. Hickeys and bruises, bite marks and smudges of lipstick tracked over Dani's skin. Nora knows she needs to shower and clean the house, but something in her is also enjoying having such a tangible reminder.

Dani is heading to her truck and Nora is about to close the door behind her to get started on her morning when she has a stark realization.

"Dani?" Nora calls out. She hesitates, twisting the fabric of her robe in her fingers. It seems ridiculous now, given how much time they've spent together. They've spent the bulk of the last two days naked, for God's sake, but after all this time, she still hasn't asked. "Could I have your phone number?"

And just like that, they're seeing each other. Casually.

It's not much different than before, if Nora is being honest. She still meets Dani for lunch, still hangs out with everyone at the bar, and still goes to town events—only now she also has Dani in her bed several nights a week, and her new acquisition of Dani's phone number means that there's also texting involved. Very detailed, very private texting.

Any trepidation Nora still feels about taking this huge step is erased the first time Dani texts:

I can't stop thinking about you.

Oh? Nora texts back, smiling and taking a sip of the wine she's just poured. Do tell. She's given up on work for the day, and it's just about the perfect time for such a distraction.

When Dani replies with Thinking about how you'd look riding my strap , Nora

chokes so hard that she ends up with a burgundy spray-radius all over her white living room rug.

They have a lot to try together, Nora realizes as she clears her airway and formulates a response, and so little time to do it in. But if she's leaving in a month and a half, she's damn well going to take advantage of having Dani now.

After a few minutes of thinking, Nora finishes typing and hits send, grinning down at a text that she thinks might actually throw Dani off her game.

You really think you have one big enough for me?

Dani's phone screen has a huge spiderweb crack in it the next time Nora sees her. When Nora presses her on how it happened, Dani only blushes and mutters something about slippery hands and the concrete shop floor.

* * *

At the very least, the fact that Nora now sees Dani naked almost every day means that she's not struck completely dumb the first time she sees her in a bathing suit.

The occasion is a day at the river, arranged for Ryan's birthday. The end of July is approaching, and the heat makes it clear that August is on the horizon—it's hot and sunny, but it's also unbearably humid, and the stickiness of the air is enough to convince Nora to actually get into the water every so often rather than simply lounge on the grass under an umbrella.

Even so, she can only spend so long getting splashed. She ends up back on the beach with Mila and Sarah, sitting on a plastic lounge chair placed just where the short, pebbly beach meets the grass, and watching the impromptu volleyball game from afar. She tries not to follow Dani's every move too obviously, but Sarah is already

looking at her with suspicion.

It's not that she and Dani are keeping anything intentionally secret, but since they aren't exactly dating, there isn't any kind of announcement to be made. So Nora says nothing. She relaxes a little, snacks on Mila's homemade trail mix, and watches Dani enjoy herself in the water.

"You know, you've been in town a while," Sarah says, drawing Nora's attention briefly away from Dani. "I was expecting a city girl like you to be outta here by now. How long do you plan on staying?"

"End of August," Nora says, her eyes flickering back to the river when she hears a massive splash. Dani has picked Ryan up and tossed him into the deeper water, and her trademark laugh makes Nora smile.

"Hm," Sarah says. Her mouth has formed a thin line, and Nora's attention is diverted from Dani for a moment.

"What?"

"We don't get a ton of vacationers up here anymore," Sarah says, still looking thoughtful. "And the ones we do get don't integrate themselves into the community like you have. They buy their groceries, come to the restaurant sometimes, and go back to their big cottages. Usually we like it that way."

Nora swallows her mouthful of trail mix, but Sarah's words bring with them a sick feeling that steals away any hunger she might have had.

Kayla and Ash's calls have become more infrequent in the last few weeks, and even though she's barely opened her laptop since June, Nora has been trying to focus instead on enjoying herself while she can rather than working on her project. Getting

involved in the community, getting to know everyone, has been an unexpected byproduct of getting to know Dani. Yet another reminder that Nora has been concealing her identity from everyone, Dani included, is unwelcome, especially now that their relationship has become more complicated.

It's getting harder to compartmentalize her vacation from her actual purpose here.

"I haven't been imposing myself too much on you, have I?" Nora asks, trying not to let her unease show on her face.

Sarah's thoughtfulness turns into a soft smile.

"No, don't worry. We like you. You didn't come in here trying to make us into what you want," Sarah says, blithely unaware of the way it makes Nora's heart sink. "Didn't make demands. Most people who come through from down south just want to suggest all the ways we can change to make the town better. With you, we can be ourselves, and you don't act like an asshole about it."

"I'm...glad you feel that way," Nora says.

In her mind is the presentation she started weeks ago, full of alterations to make Riverwalk better : the land purchases she suggested; the resort; the luxury houses.

What does better mean, exactly?

"You sure you want to go back down to the city so soon?" Sarah asks, tossing a cashew into the air and missing her mouth completely. It lands on her chest, and Sarah frowns down at it as Mila laughs at her failure.

Nora swallows past her dry mouth. "I have responsibilities there."

“That doesn’t really answer the question.”

When Nora’s bag of trail mix disappears from her hand, she’s too distracted by Sarah’s bluntness until it’s too late to notice that her snack has been pilfered by a seagull. The bird is making off with the Ziploc bag in its beak, squawking all the way.

Dani wades onto the shore from the river, picking up a nearby stick and throwing it at the retreating bird. It misses by a wide berth, but Nora appreciates the effort.

“Stupid shit-hawk,” Dani yells after it, cupping her hands for volume, but the seagull pays no mind. Dani’s presence soothes some of the anxiety sparked by Sarah’s questioning, but it still hovers on the edges of her mind.

“Shit-hawk,” Nora says as Dani flops onto a damp towel next to her. “Never heard that one before.”

“It’s true, though. They do nothing but crap and steal,” Dani mutters. She opens a can of pop and takes a few hearty gulps, and Nora watches her throat bob for a few seconds before she considers getting a drink of her own to cure her sudden thirst.

As the day marches on, Nora becomes aware of a bigger problem than her own guilt: She needs to use the washroom, and the path to the little town building housing the public restrooms and a single vending machine is being guarded by the biggest Canada goose she’s ever seen. Nora tries to put off the inevitable, but eventually it becomes a necessity.

She’s had just about enough of birds, today.

The seagull incident has left Nora nervous. She tries to act nonchalant as she slips into her sandals, but the goose seems to sense her hesitation—it pauses in its slow

pacing over the grass when she approaches. As if it can smell her fear, it starts to hiss.

Nora considers calling for Dani, but yelling for someone to come save her from a stupid bird seems ridiculous. Cowardly. Instead Nora gathers her courage, and she steps forward.

The moment she does, the goose lets out an absolutely hell-rending honk, puffs up its wings, and charges straight at her.

Nora manages not to scream, but a massive, hissing demon bird is running at her at full speed, flapping its gargoyle wings. There's not much she can do besides let out an undignified squeak, drop her bag, and run.

She sprints not back toward the group at the beach but instead to the left, ducking around a thick tree trunk and hoping that she can avoid being bitten. The goose is persistent, giving chase even when Nora has gone out of sight, and Nora is just wondering if it's illegal to kick the country's national bird like an avian football when it lets out a disgruntled squawk from behind the tree.

Nora peeks around it, breathing heavily, to see that the disruption is Dani. She's holding a wet beach towel like a whip.

"Square up, big fella!" Dani yells, spinning the towel and then snapping it at Nora's feathery nemesis. She doesn't even flinch when it hisses again. "Get outta here!"

The goose stands up to Dani for a moment—it charges with its wings akimbo, snapping at her calves and leaving a red mark near her ankle—but Dani shouts and snaps the towel again, and the bird seems to concede. With a final angry honk, it takes flight and disappears over the hill toward the boat launch.

Dani turns around, throwing the towel over her shoulder and saluting in Nora's

direction. “Need an escort?”

Nora laughs. She takes Dani’s offered arm, all previous stress forgotten. “My knight in shining towel.”

“You should see what I can do with a slingshot.”

* * *

As the summer rolls on, Nora’s new lifestyle makes something obvious that Nora hadn’t realized before.

Nora was lonely before this, and not fleetingly so. She’s been deeply, intensely lonely for most of her life, in a way that she couldn’t detect until she started spending so much quality time with someone. Multiple someones, actually, now that Dani insists on inviting Nora to game nights and dinners with her friends and family.

She’s had Kayla and Ash, but Nora has always held even them at arm’s length. She’s been quietly pushing them away ever since she took over at CromTech. Maybe it wasn’t intentional, but the effect is the same. She’s had more genuine and enjoyable conversations with her best friends now that she lives several hours away than she ever did when they worked in the same building.

In Riverwalk, Nora can stay up late—not to finish paperwork or run conference calls to different time zones but to stargaze or go to karaoke night or even just to watch movies on her couch until she falls asleep with her head in Dani’s lap. It’s so easy to lose herself in the rhythm of Riverwalk, even if she can always hear the clock ticking down.

In fact, Nora gets so lost in the new facet of her relationship with Dani that she entirely forgets to update Kayla and Ash about it. When her phone rings with a

FaceTime request for the first time since they started seeing each other, Nora has a moment of full-blown panic after she instinctively hits the talk button.

“Hey, stranger,” Kayla says, a hint of reproach in her voice as her face comes into pixelated view.

“We thought maybe you’d been carried off into the woods and murdered,” Ash quips.

Seeing their faces brings a warm, familiar feeling. It looks like Kayla got new glasses, and Ash’s beard is a bit longer than Nora remembers. They’re calling from Nora’s office, which looks unchanged.

Nora doesn’t miss it at all. She misses her friends, sure, but she doesn’t have the desire to pack up and go home that she thought she would at this point in the summer.

Perhaps the messy sheets and the remnants of last night’s activities scattered around her bedroom have something to do with that.

“I’m sorry,” Nora says, only half meaning it. “I’ve been...busy.”

“Doing what?” Ash asks incredulously. “Communing with squirrels? Learning how to fly-fish?”

“There’s plenty to do here,” Nora says, annoyingly aware of how much she sounds like Dani.

Having her face visible while she says it is a mistake. Nora knows it from the second Kayla’s eyes narrow. Kayla has a razor-sharp mind—it’s why she’s so good at her job, after all. Nora can seldom hide anything from her.

Kayla’s next words fly like an arrow through Nora’s already precarious poker face,

and she knows she's sunk.

"Oh, is there? Like, maybe, the hot mechanic?"

Nora tries to stop the blush. Truly, she does. But she sees the traitorous redness creep up her own neck and onto her face in the tiny corner of her phone screen, and Ash and Kayla's eyes widen comically in unison.

"Holy shit!" Ash crows, disappearing briefly off-camera as he rocks back, laughing.

"Oh, please tell me she's right."

"I'm not telling you anything," Nora says, the urge to hang up and salvage what's left of her dignity getting ever stronger.

Kayla is laughing, too; the camera is shaking with it. "Don't you dare deprive me of the juicy details, Cromwell. We want to know everything."

Nora sighs. "There are some things I'd really rather keep private."

Nora actually flinches at the volume of the cheer they let out.

"Eleanor's getting laid!" Ash shouts, ever the gentleman. Kayla is much more reserved, but her smile is genuine.

"Shhh!" Nora hisses, but she's unable to keep herself from smiling back. "You're in the office building I need to return to soon, so I'd appreciate you didn't scream about my sex life where all of my employees can hear."

Kayla is decent enough to quiet down, although her troublemaking grin doesn't budge. Ash, however, seems to have taken stop yelling to mean start singing. He starts parading around the office, chanting while Kayla talks more reasonably. "See, I

knew you could do it. All you had to do was—”

“ Eleanor’s getting la-id, Eleanor’s getting la-id —”

“Put away that stupid propriety of yours for five seconds, and—”

“ Eleanor’s getting LA-ID—”

“Okay!” Nora finally says, laughing hard despite herself. “You were right; this was exactly what I needed, and I’ll allow you fifteen seconds more of proper gloating about it.” She knows they won’t listen to that time limit, but she should at least try.

“When do we get to meet her?” Ash asks when he’s finished with his song. Nora barks out an incredulous laugh.

“Hopefully never, if you’re going to act like children.”

“I’m just excited for you!” Ash claims, taking the phone from Kayla and leaning close enough to the camera lens that Nora can see his nose-hairs. “I’ve been trying to get you to unwind ever since you stopped fucking Lydia.”

Nora groans, closing her eyes against the close-up of Ash’s nostrils. He always did have trouble paying attention to the screen—she can’t even recall how many times she’s had to remind him that he can’t leave the phone pointing up at the ceiling. “Give the phone back to Kayla, please.”

“Okay, for real: When can we meet her?” Kayla asks, yanking the phone out of Ash’s hands.

“For real? Never.”

“ Why ?” Ash whines, and Kayla levels Nora with an almost-effective set of puppy dog eyes.

“Because this is a temporary arrangement,” Nora says, decisive against their onslaught. “Strictly casual. She doesn’t need to be subjected to an interrogation.”

“Can we at least get a picture?” Kayla wheedles.

Nora sighs. Hopefully giving them a crumb will divert their attention. “Fine.”

Nora forwards Kayla a photo she took a few days ago at the beach—Dani in her bathing suit, her hair just starting to dry, laughing, and reclined with her hand buried in a bag of hot Cheetos. After Kayla’s phone pings its arrival, Nora is treated to a few seconds of silence as the video cuts out and they stare at the screen.

When the video comes back, Kayla is looking at the camera with an air of complete seriousness. “How much money do I need to pay you to let me take your place?”

Nora snorts. Truly, the amount is inconceivable; she came a total of five times yesterday, and Dani gave her a massage before bed. “In your dreams.”

“You’re damn right, in my dreams!” Kayla says. Even Ash nods his head in solemn agreement. “You’re being eaten out by a Cheeto-dusted goddess with the hands of a craftsman, and you haven’t been bragging to us about it? I thought we were friends!”

“I hate you both,” Nora sighs affectionately, but she resigns herself to spending the rest of the afternoon being mercilessly teased.

“Does she at least have a sister?”

“She has a cousin. And she’s actually kind of your type,” Nora says, thinking back to

the last few people Kayla has dated. She does tend to favour short women with quick tempers. “But Sarah is caught up in someone else.”

“Damn,” Kayla mutters.

“What about me?” Ash says, poking his head into frame.

“They’re both lesbians, Ash.”

“I meant those cute boys you told us about!” Ash says flippantly. “The couple. Are they looking for a third? Do they like Indian guys?”

Ash is delighted to hear that while Nora is pretty sure they are not looking to open their ten-year relationship, he can take a wild swing at a throuple with Ryan and Owen if he so chooses.

It’s not like they’d ever come to Riverwalk themselves to take her up on it.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

“Have you ever gone swimming off your dock?”

Nora frowns, adjusting her sunglasses and slipping a bookmark between the pages she'd been reading. Dani has been sleeping over more and more lately—mostly because Nora is getting more and more reticent to not wake up next to her—and they're at the tail end of a four-day stay.

Dani is lying in a lounge chair in the sun, one foot sticking out so that she can wedge it under Nora's back where she sits in the shade of her deck umbrella. It's sweet how Dani always seems to find a way to touch her when they aren't directly sitting together, even if it's only with a foot. She's probably going to have a hilarious tan line by the end of the day.

Nora should probably think a little bit harder about how easy it is just existing with Dani nearby, sitting in companionable quiet while they each do their own activities. It's something she's never really had before, even with Kayla and Ash. She's always lived alone. Worked alone. Now she's dividing her attention between a book about forest management and Dani's glowing skin, and it's perfectly comfortable.

“No. I've never thought about it,” Nora says.

“Do you want to?”

Nora blinks, looking out at the slab of wood that juts into the water near the boathouse. She's never really been down there—she gets enough fresh air and sun up here on the deck. The water does look tempting—cool and clear blue in the heat of the late afternoon. “Sure, it'd be nice to do it sometime.”

“Then we should,” Dani says decisively.

“Right now?”

“Yeah! You should get the things you want. Let’s have a beach day.”

“There’s no beach,” Nora points out, gesturing at the rocky shoreline. “And you don’t have a bathing suit.”

Dani is already standing, heading inside the house, and Nora follows somewhat perplexedly. Dani ducks into the hallway, her bare feet padding on the hardwood. Before she disappears, Nora sees that she does, in fact, have a funny tan line on her right leg from having one foot in the shade.

“You have a private dock! Nobody else lives out here,” Dani says. Nora pokes her head around the corner to see Dani rummaging through the closet next to the washroom. She emerges with two fluffy, red towels and tosses one over. “Come on!”

Nora doesn’t have time to so much as change into her own suit before Dani is taking her hand and leading her back onto the deck, heading down the stairs that lead to a dock Nora has never set foot on.

The wood planks creak when Dani waltzes onto them, and Nora is reminded ominously of the rickety tree house, but it seems to hold. Dani lays the towels down, but doesn’t sit.

“You’re going to get your clothes wet—oh, and you’re already stripping,” Nora says, her voice going high and a little squeaky as Dani pulls her shirt up and over her head. “Okay!”

Dani’s shorts follow suit. Rather than jumping into the water when she’s stripped to

her underwear, like Nora expects her to, Dani reaches behind her back and starts to fiddle with the clasp of her bra.

“Dani!” Nora hisses, picking up the discarded shirt and throwing it at Dani’s torso, as if that will cover up the sudden nudity. “We’re in public!”

Dani laughs, shrugging off the T-shirt projectile and slipping her bra down her arms. It lands on one of the towels, and in short order, Dani is standing on Nora’s dock with the sun warming her bare chest.

Nora’s train of thought takes a steep dive into the river.

“It’s a private dock. The only other houses on this side of the bay are either too far away to notice or can’t see me through the trees,” Dani says.

Nora, distracted entirely by Dani’s shirtlessness, nods mutely.

Frowning in the face of Nora’s sudden silence, Dani gently takes Nora’s hands. “You know you can say no, right?”

Nora bites her lip. She knows that Dani doesn’t expect it from her—what Nora is being tripped up by is the fact that she actually wants to say yes.

“I don’t mean to be pushy. I get excited about things sometimes. But if you’re not comfortable with something, I want you to be okay with saying so,” Dani says. “I’m gonna put my shirt back on, okay?”

“No, wait,” Nora says quickly, grabbing Dani’s arm before she can stoop to pick up her clothes. “No, I—I can’t say I object to seeing you naked. I’m just not used to the nudity being so...public.”

“So, are you objecting to the public nudity?” Dani asks.

It would be easy, Nora knows, to call this whole thing off. If she asked, Dani would put her clothes back on, go inside, and take them off again in a more socially acceptable place.

But Nora is here to relax, isn't she? Skinny-dipping is normal. One of those normal, exciting teenage experiences she never got, busy as she was with graduating early and pleasing her father. It's something Dani wants to share with her. Why shouldn't she partake?

“No. Keep going.”

Dani's concern turns into a grin, and with a flourish, she slips out of her turquoise boxer briefs. And then she's naked. On Nora's dock. In broad daylight.

With an air of confidence she doesn't quite feel, Nora strips, too, letting Dani pull her close and press their bodies together once the last piece of clothing falls. She feels less exposed this way, with Dani's body covering most of her intimate areas. And it's not like she's going to complain about feeling Dani's skin against hers.

Dani dips her head, and Nora tips her chin up, expecting a kiss.

“Ready?” Dani says, her breath warm and sweet on Nora's lips.

“For what?” Nora whispers. Her eyes drift closed.

That's when Dani picks Nora up, pivots, and jumps into the water.

It isn't quite as shockingly cold as Nora feared. They're still in the shallows, with Dani holding her to make sure she lands safely and that her feet can touch the ground.

But it's still a shock against Nora's hot skin. She immediately shoves Dani away when they surface.

"You ass ," Nora sputters, wiping the wet tangle of dark hair away from her face. "You could have warned me!"

But Dani is laughing so hard, her head thrown back and her hair drifting around her like a halo as she floats, cackling her delight to the sky. Nora can't stay irritated for long.

It's very freeing to float in the cool water with no barriers. No fabric weighing her down. Just the current against her skin. Dani stays close by, anchoring her to the earth, and when Nora eventually abandons the floating for greener pastures—climbing Dani and letting the water lap at their shoulders as they kiss leisurely—it's the softest, most unhurried embrace they've ever shared.

Eventually Dani's hands wander over Nora's hips, squeezing with slightly more intent, and Nora pulls away from the kiss to poke her firmly in the chest.

"We're outdoors."

"Are we?" Dani murmurs, nibbling at Nora's ear now that she's been denied her lips.

Nora swallows the small moan that almost slips free as Dani's teeth scrape at the sensitive skin, her short nails digging into Dani's shoulders. "Skinny-dipping is one thing, but full-on exhibitionism is another."

"That's fair. Having sex outside is a rite of passage here, though," Dani says with no trace of exaggeration in her voice.

Nora makes a noise somewhere between a laugh and a scoff, pulling back until Dani

ceases with her distracting kisses and looks her in the face. “You’re kidding, right?”

“My first time was outside.”

Nora blinks.

“You lost your virginity in the woods?” Nora is unsure whether to laugh or be concerned.

“In the dugout at the baseball field, actually,” Dani elaborates, chuckling at Nora’s aghast expression. “It was after dark. But we can go in the house, if you’d rather. Like I said, I’m good either way, babe.”

Dani seems unbothered by the sudden use of a pet name, but it makes Nora’s heart stutter.

Dani has never called her babe . She’s never called Nora anything besides her shortened name, and something about it softens the anxiety and makes Nora feel a little braver. More adventurous.

With a glance around at the empty woods and quiet water, Nora does what Dani has been giving her the freedom to do ever since they started up this arrangement—she gives in to desire.

“Not in the water,” Nora says quickly. “It’s unsanitary.”

With a grin, Dani lifts Nora out of the river and onto the dock, pulling herself up after. Nora tries and likely fails not to fawn too obviously over the clear, easy strength that Dani shows without even thinking.

“Better?” Dani asks, slowly crawling until she’s hovering over Nora’s body. They

press together from thigh to chest, Dani nuzzling into her neck and starting to drift open-mouthed kisses over the sensitive skin.

Nora nods, succumbing to the choice she knows she'll always make.

Nora's toes curl into the towels when Dani presses three fingers inside her, the scratch of the wood underneath the fabric grounding her when it feels like her body is on fire. The heat of Dani's skin, the inferno in Nora's belly, the sun beating down—it's all enough to make Nora lose herself. She's a blazing star. A supernova just waiting to explode.

All other sounds are blotted out by her own whimpers, by Dani's heavy breathing and whispered encouragement: the wind in the trees, the birds chirping, the gentle lapping of the water against the dock. Anything beyond their bodies is muted. Unimportant.

When Nora gains enough cognizance to raise her thigh up and into Dani's path, it stokes the flame. Dani groans, bearing down on it with a pleased shudder before she pulls away and refocuses on the rhythm of her own hand.

It's as if she won't allow herself pleasure without giving it to Nora first. It's a quirk Nora has noticed since their first time together, part and parcel with Dani's general denial of her own needs. Dani hasn't been opposed to being touched, by any means. She actually seems to deeply crave it, but she usually needs to be encouraged.

Nora slips her hand up to do just that. Her fingers are enveloped in wet heat, and this time Nora slips downward instead of up, just enough for her fingertips to sink inside—and Dani tenses.

Nora is nothing if not a fast learner. In all their days and nights together, she's been taking notes. She's learned that Dani likes hard pressure on her clit, and quick movements. Up until now, she hasn't asked for anything else. Clearly that's

intentional.

Nora retracts her fingers, and Dani relaxes again. It makes Nora more curious than ever about what makes Dani tick. Dani's body and its needs are so unlike Nora's own, and she wants to learn each and every one of the differences until she can etch it into her mind like a schematic.

“Grind on me?” Nora gasps, clutching at Dani's hip and pulling her down onto her thigh again. This, she knows, Dani likes. She feels the quick of Dani parting against her, her slick heat and textured hair, and this time Dani bucks down eagerly and nods.

The noise of pure, concentrated desire that Dani makes as she paints the length of Nora's thigh with wetness is almost enough to make Nora come on the spot.

It has a similar effect on Dani, too, Nora is gratified to notice: she's bearing down with more and more intent, rubbing herself unabashedly, and it makes the fingers currently inside Nora move faster and harder than before.

It's a completely new sensory experience, doing this outside. Dani's wet hair drapes between them, creating a curtain that smells like fresh air and lake water. Through the gaps, Nora can see Dani's arm flexing; light stretch marks paint the skin on the underside of her bicep, stretched taut with the effort of holding herself above Nora. Inexplicably, Nora wants to bite them. Leave a mark of her own.

She can feel the edge just within her grasp. Dani is close, too, her cries breathy and vulnerable as Nora keeps her thigh as a hard surface for her to press against. And then Nora arches up—she's close, so absolutely frantic, and she just needs that little bit more—

It comes with a rustling noise in the woods to their left. The sound of a snapping twig and shifting leaves breaks through the noise. Unbidden, a thought torpedoed into

Nora's mind.

Someone is going to see her like this.

She has a brief vision of what this must look like: the two of them naked and tangled together in broad daylight, Nora clinging to Dani like she's the only anchor left in the world and moaning unabashedly while Dani gets herself off on Nora's thigh, oblivious.

As Nora imagines some stranger getting a glimpse of their moment, seeing their utter desperation for each other, something inside her releases.

"Fuck," Nora chokes out. Something tells her that Dani needs to hear more than her usual wordless moans. She can hardly get the words out, her brain ceasing normal functioning as she comes hard on Dani's hand, but her ineloquence only seems to make it hotter. "God, yes, fuck —"

As she'd hoped, Dani falls apart not long after. It makes Nora pulse all the harder around Dani's fingers when she realizes that she can feel Dani twitching against her thigh. They stay like that—tightly intertwined, dripping water onto the towels—as their bodies cool down in the breeze.

The rustling turns out to be a rabbit, which darts off into the woods after revealing its position. Nora chuckles at the unintended symbolism.

"Wow," Dani finally murmurs, withdrawing her face from Nora's neck and shifting down enough to lay her head on Nora's chest instead. She withdraws her fingers, too, splaying them still wet over the soft swell of Nora's stomach. "Sometimes I can't believe how you make me feel."

The comment is exclusively sexual. Yet the way Dani says it still causes an eruption

of fluttering in Nora's belly that feels suspiciously like butterflies. "Are you not used to people trying to return the favour?" Nora asks.

"Not really," Dani says absently, as if that isn't the saddest statement Nora has ever heard.

Instead of elaborating, Dani reaches for Nora's hand, spreading the fingers wide. She starts to draw her rough fingertips over the creases of Nora's palm, tracing every line and following them down to Nora's wrist and then her forearm, cataloguing the smattering of moles and freckles as if making a star map.

"What are you doing?" Nora asks quietly, afraid that speaking too loudly will break this strange moment they've built.

"Making sure I don't forget."

The butterflies make themselves more loudly known.

She's noticed Dani doing this a few times, running gentle hands over Nora's body, slow and methodical, with a look of intense focus. She'd never put much thought into why. Knowing that Dani is memorizing her, logging the details of her body away for the inevitable time after they part, is information Nora doesn't know what to do with. It makes her chest ache.

"What's your life like back home?" Dani murmurs.

A burst of terror seizes Nora, obliterating the softer feelings she's been basking in. The last thing she wants to do is let her real life infiltrate this happy bubble she's so carefully constructed.

"I don't have much of a life back home," Nora says. It's not a lie, but it carries the

guilt of one. Dani shifts to tangle their legs together more closely.

“Sure you do. I’ve known you for months now, and I still don’t even know the names of these friends who told you to vacation here.”

“Kayla and Ash,” Nora says, seizing gratefully on the slightly less personal topic. “Kayla and I went to private school together, and Ash and I met in college. They’re my only friends. At least, before I came here.”

Nora can feel Dani’s smile against her chest.

“What are they like?”

“They’re...a lot.” Nora laughs quietly. “Kayla sort of adopted me when we were kids. I was like her pet introvert. We’re total opposites in so many ways, but she’s my oldest friend.”

“And Ash?”

“We got each other through university. He saw what was happening with my father, during the whole...roommate debacle.”

“Your first love?” Dani asks, tracing a slow spiral over the bare curve of Nora’s breast.

Nora clears her throat, sidestepping the question. “Ash offered a mutually beneficial arrangement. It worked for us for a long time. And it turned out that he and Kayla get along like a house on fire.”

Nora can feel the muscles of Dani’s face shift into a frown. “Are you saying Ash was your beard?”

“And I was his. Are you judging?”

“Not at all. I’m glad you could help each other,” Dani says, chuckling quietly. “I guess it’s just funny. I’ve never met anyone who actually did that.”

“Not all of us came out at age fifteen,” Nora drawls.

“You got me there.”

“They’re pushy. Interfering. Catty, sometimes,” Nora continues, smiling even so. “But they’ve stuck with me. They’re the most loyal people I’ve ever known. For some reason, they care about me.”

“You’re easy to care about.”

Nora scoffs. “Try telling that to my father.”

“I would if I met him,” Dani says grumpily. “I’d tell him twice.”

“As much as I would love to see that,” Nora says, clearing her throat, “you can’t. He died a few years ago.”

Dani’s hand stills. She lays it flat against Nora’s chest.

“It’s fine; we weren’t close,” Nora says quickly.

“Does it bother you when I insult him?”

Nora laughs again, more freely this time. “No. I might even say my life is better without him. But I inherited a lot of responsibility.”

“What about your mom?”

“Is this really the best subject to be discussing right now?” Nora asks, her laughter turning nervous.

Dani props herself up on an elbow, looking down at Nora with a curious expression. “It’s pillow talk.”

“I don’t see any pillows here,” Nora mutters.

Dani doesn’t say anything else, but there’s a quietness in her expression that softens the anxiety.

“I don’t—” Nora starts, shifting under Dani and wishing there was a way to fidget that wouldn’t be too obvious. “My family isn’t a pleasant subject.” She feels exposed by Dani’s attention, and not just because she’s naked in broad daylight and probably glowing pale in the sun.

Dani nods softly, shifting so that she can tangle their fingers. She raises their joint palms to her lips and presses a kiss to the back of Nora’s hand. “Would it help if I talked about my family?”

Nora, happy to take any out she’s being given, nods quickly.

“We don’t have to talk at all,” Dani offers, her voice gentling in response to Nora’s clear skittishness. “We can just lie here together.”

But, despite her initial panic, Nora does want to know more about Dani. She wants to read Dani’s life like a textbook, dive into her and suss out what shaped her into the person she is. “I can talk. I will. You first, though?”

Dani's thumb rubs absently over Nora's. "You know Sarah already. She and Aunt Carol are... They're amazing. They've always taken care of me."

The sensation of warm skin on warm skin is starting to lull Nora back into relaxation. "It's clear how much you love them."

"Yeah. I still miss my parents all the time, but Carol has been there for all the big things."

Nora nods, running her fingers through Dani's wet hair, but she freezes when Dani asks a very logical next question.

"Were you close with your mother?" Dani says, her eyes drifting closed as Nora's nails scratch at her scalp. It's clear that it's something Dani doesn't consider a big deal, but to Nora, the question has the potential to reveal truths about her childhood that she doesn't dredge up for just anyone.

"I don't remember," Nora says finally, so quietly that it's almost inaudible.

Dani's brow furrows. She opens her eyes, peering up at Nora in obvious confusion.

"She died when I was very young." Nora swallows thickly. She's put these thoughts aside for a long time, and now, with just the gentlest of encouragement from Dani, they're all spilling out. "I don't really know much about her. My father didn't like to talk about it. I don't even think I have a picture of her."

"Oh," Dani says softly, putting her warm hand over Nora's now-still fingers. "I'm so sorry, Nora."

It's said not with pity but with kindness. With sympathy and understanding. It brings a kind of relief that Nora has never really felt before, knowing that she won't be

judged—that even though Dani doesn’t have the exact same experience, she can relate. Dani isn’t saying she’s sorry to assuage her own discomfort. She’s saying it because she’s genuinely sad for Nora’s loss.

The way Dani looks at her with such simple, warm compassion loosens something Nora’s long kept tightly wound.

“My mom and I were pretty close,” Dani says, gently leading the conversation elsewhere. She settles back down onto Nora’s chest. “My dad worked a lot.”

“And your brother?”

Now it’s Dani’s turn to tense. Her back stiffens under Nora’s hands, but when Nora gives her time to collect herself, she takes a big, slow breath and her muscles ease. “Not anymore. He almost ended up with custody of me, but everyone figured Aunt Carol was the better choice.”

The term ended up with is very telling, but Nora doesn’t want to interrupt Dani’s train of thought to say so.

“He was too young,” Dani says, tracing an abstract line of dark moles down Nora’s ribs. It sounds more like she’s justifying it to herself than explaining it to Nora. “Trying to raise me would have been too complicated.”

Nora gives in to her impulse to kiss the top of Dani’s head. “Would you have preferred to live with him?”

“At the time, I wanted to. I was probably better off with Carol and Sarah, but...it didn’t really matter. I didn’t have much choice.”

Dani sounds so heartbreakingly sad that, for a moment, Nora wonders how difficult it

would be to send someone to Toronto to drag this Garreth to Riverwalk by his ear.

“Have you ever thought about getting in touch with him again?” Nora prompts, aware that this moment of openness won’t last forever. “Getting some closure?”

Dani’s gaze is distant as she looks out sideways at the treeline on the horizon. “I’d just get in the way of his life. He’s happy, I think. I don’t want to bring up stuff he’d rather forget.”

“You mean his mistakes? Why are his feelings more important than yours?”

Dani doesn’t answer, but a deep furrow appears in her brow.

“Sorry. I don’t mean to push you,” Nora says quickly.

“No, you’re right. Ever since he left, I worry that I’m losing them,” Dani whispers against Nora’s skin, as if she’s sharing a deep secret that she can’t trust to the open air. “My parents. That if I don’t keep talking about them with someone, they’ll disappear forever like they never existed. I’ll lose that part of myself.”

The fear in Dani’s voice strikes a chord in Nora. She can remember feeling it, too when her mother passed, but soon enough that instinct was overpowered by pure survival in a house where every facial expression was scrutinized by the series of strange women her father tried to slot into the role of mother. The few details she could hold onto had gradually gotten blurrier until they’d disappeared entirely.

“You can talk about them to me,” Nora replies softly. “I can tell you from experience that it’s...surprisingly easy for things to slip away.”

Dani’s hand moves to anchor at Nora’s hip. She grips it like it’s her tether to the earth. “Do you remember anything about her at all?”

Nora's usual answer is a simple no. She doesn't like thinking about the past when she can look to the future instead. But lying here with Dani, staring up at the wide blue sky, Nora tries to remember.

"She had dark hair," Nora says finally. A fuzzy memory swims in her mind, half formed. "And eyes like mine. My father always said we looked alike." Dani's hand shifts a little, a thumb rubbing at Nora's hip bone, and it settles her. "I think that bothered him. Whenever I try to remember more, it's just...shadows. Moments."

"Like?" Dani asks. Her hand spreads out, moving from Nora's hip to splay out against her sternum. The weight of it somehow makes it easier to speak.

Nora takes a breath, trying to conjure one of the hazy flashes she can recall. "I remember a vacation house. I don't know where. Somewhere on the coast, I think? And I don't remember my father being there."

Nora puts a hand over Dani's to keep it in place. The more she talks, the more solid the memory becomes. Rustic stone walls and a warm kitchen. A dark-haired woman kneading dough. A feeling of safety.

"It rained a lot," Nora says; it's almost a whisper. "I remember sitting at a big red table and my mother making bread."

Dani hums. "That sounds nice."

"It'd be nicer if I could remember her face."

"Did the bread taste good?"

It takes a moment to process the question, but Dani's question blasts away the dark tendrils that were starting to curl around Nora's mood.

“Yes,” Nora says, the memory of warm bread and sweet marmalade getting sharper like a camera lens struggling to find focus. A loving hand on her back, and a crackling record player. “I think it did.”

Dani nods, as if that fact is incredibly important to her.

A hot, prickling sensation tingles behind Nora’s eyes, and she clears her throat and sits up before it can get out of hand. It dislodges Dani from her place on Nora’s chest, and she rolls off with a cute disgruntled noise. Nora grabs the towel she’d been lying on, draping it over her shoulders. “We should probably go inside before I get sunburnt in places I’d rather not mention.”

Nora does get sunburned, but Dani takes special care to rub aloe on her tender skin every hour in apology.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

Dani seems determined to provide Nora with every experience that Riverwalk and the surrounding area has to offer before the summer ends.

She takes Nora bowling with Mila and Ryan, wearing the silliest pair of shoes the bowling alley has to offer and playing intentionally badly to make sure Nora doesn't come dead last her first time. She takes Nora fishing, which amounts to the two of them making out in a rickety aluminum boat for most of an afternoon without making a single catch. And she shows Nora the hilarity of going to bingo night with the sole intent of watching senior citizens threaten to physically fight each other over a five-by-five piece of cardstock.

And to top off the most enjoyable July Nora has ever had, Dani takes her to the drive-in.

"I genuinely thought that these didn't exist anymore," Nora says incredulously as Dani pays their eight dollars each and steers her truck toward screen three. "I've only ever seen them in old movies."

"This one is still pretty popular," Dani says. She fiddles with the knob on her radio to tune it to the right channel for the movie audio. "People like the nostalgia."

It is a deeply nostalgic kind of experience, even for Nora, who has never actually experienced one. The three screens each have their own parking lot where people arrange their cars in haphazard rows, and the gravel is scattered with people in folding lawn chairs braving the mosquitoes for a better view.

Everything here seems like a relic, a slowly aging pocket in time from the 1950s—the

rusty fences between screens, the aging playground equipment, the concrete concession building that smells like decades worth of popcorn and spilled drinks. It's all new and yet somehow familiar to Nora, like a strange sense memory absorbed through films, and Dani moves through it like she's been here a hundred times.

They arrive long before the movies start, before the sun has gone down. After Dani has found the perfect spot and killed the engine, she leads Nora toward the playground with no sign of irony.

"Dani?" Nora asks as Dani hops the short fence that surrounds the park—completely ignoring the gate that sits open nearby, which Nora uses instead—and heads to the swings. "What exactly are we doing?"

"What does it look like?" Dani sits down on one of the rubber seats, her hand still in Nora's, and moves her legs to get a half-hearted swing going.

Nora chuckles, but she doesn't sit down on the adjacent swing. Something of her childhood lingers in her bones. A voice that sounds eerily like her second stepmother is telling her that this is inappropriate, that she shouldn't be seen here. You're wasting time playing, Eleanor. Do something productive.

"This place is for kids," Nora finally says, tugging on Dani's hand in a vague attempt to get her to stand up.

Dani holds firm, digging her heels into the sand. "There's nobody here to judge you."

In all fairness, Dani is right. The playground is empty. No kids and no judgmental parents. No father. No stepmothers. There's nobody here to see what they're doing. Nobody but Dani.

Dani makes another more serious attempt at swinging, moving Nora's arm along with

it. “Come on, Nora. Get silly with me.”

Nora’s hesitation stretches out. But Dani is so open and hopeful, her expression full of more straightforward affection than Nora has ever experienced. The image of childhood disapproval wavers and then evaporates entirely, obliterated by Dani’s smile.

When Nora gingerly sits on the next swing over, Dani’s shout of joyful victory echoes across the playground.

The swings, as it turns out, are just as fun as her child self always thought they would be whenever she watched her peers play through the library window. Her stomach swoops on every arc. Dani encourages her to go higher and higher until she feels a moment of genuine weightlessness at the height of each swing. Her hair whips around her face and then blows back, and when she sees Dani beside her, syncing up their rhythm, she lets out a loud, carefree laugh.

It feels like she’s flying.

“Jump, Nora!”

Nora snaps out of her reverie. Dani’s hat has blown off—her ponytail is fluttering—and she looks completely serious.

“What?” Nora shouts back, but Dani just says it again.

“Jump! Let go at the top of your swing!”

“That sounds like a bad idea,” Nora calls back, but it’s too late. Dani has already reared back for a hard swing, and when she reaches the apex of her forward momentum, she lets go of the chains and flies into the air. For a moment, she soars,

her arms spread and her hair flying—but soon enough her legs start to windmill and she hits the sand with a whumph .

Nora's heart stops. But Dani is up again almost immediately, her hands thrown in the air as she lets out a whoop.

“Come on! I'll catch you!” Dani calls out, getting bigger and then smaller again as Nora swings back and forth, still clinging to the chains.

“That seems like an even worse idea!” Nora shouts. But Dani's arms stay open. In the split second between downswing and upswing, Nora makes the decision.

In the split second between release and landing, she regrets it immediately.

It does feel freeing at first. She's in the air, weightless, and for a few moments, all she feels is pure exhilaration. But once gravity starts to do its work and Nora is pulled back toward the earth, hurtling toward Dani, the exhilaration is tinged with terror.

Nora grunts as the impact takes them both down and Dani, for all her strength, crumples like a pop can. They both hit the ground in a shower of sand, and Nora rolls off Dani as soon as she's able. When she looks over, Dani is on the ground, laughing just like the night they danced by the river.

“I was right,” Nora grumbles, struggling to her feet and dusting the sand from her legs. “This was a terrible idea.”

“But you had fun.” Dani is lying on the flat of her back with a lopsided grin, but she hauls herself to her feet to lead Nora around to the rest of the playground equipment: a see-saw that Nora outright refuses to get on, a tetherball stand, a tire swing—and while Dani is attempting to make her way across the monkeybars, her legs curled up underneath her so as not to touch the ground, Nora climbs up the stairs to the top of

the rickety steel slide.

It seems like the most harmless of all the equipment, the one the requires the least skill, but that might make Dani smile. She plants herself down at the top, her hips almost not fitting the narrow width, and pushes herself down the chute.

She should have remembered that she's wearing shorts. Nora doesn't even remember when she started wearing shorts regularly—she hasn't worn them since the gym classes she always got permission to skip—but here she is, in denim cut-offs, making a huge mistake.

Before she can get more than a few inches down the slide, the skin of her exposed thighs catches on the searing hot metal. The friction makes a horrible screech, and Nora shouts, catching herself before she slides any further and rolling off the edge of the chute onto the sand.

Dani is at her side in an instant, looking sympathetic but unable to keep the laugh out of her voice as Nora sits on the ground, nursing her sore skin.

“Are you okay?”

Nora lightly smacks Dani's shin with the hand that isn't checking for skin damage. “No!” she whines. Dani's smile looking down at her is so, so warm. “Why the hell didn't you warn me that would happen?”

Dani throws her hands up helplessly. “I figured you'd know! It's a metal slide; everyone knows they run at the temperature of the sun.”

Nora sighs. After a cursory examination, she determines that she hasn't actually injured herself, but she's going to be sore for at least a few minutes.

“I didn’t exactly get to spend time at places like this when I was a child,” Nora mumbles, standing up with Dani’s help and starting on the seemingly impossible task of getting the sand out of her shorts.

“You mean playgrounds?” Dani says, helping to brush sand from Nora’s butt in a way that isn’t entirely helpful. Her hands trace down to the areas that Nora just dragged over hot coals, and it’s entirely distracting. “What did you do instead?”

“I did extra tutoring. Read books. Played chess.”

Nora spent most of her childhood years watching other kids her age have fun from a distance, and after a while, it had just seemed normal. She’s hardly thought about it in years. Now she’s starting to realize exactly what she missed.

“That sounds really lonely.” Dani pulls Nora toward her and rests her chin on Nora’s shoulder, nuzzling gently into Nora’s neck. Despite the gloom of the subject matter, the contact makes her happy.

“It was,” Nora admits. A lump is forming in her throat. Her chest is tight, a strange sort of grief for the child in her that never got to flourish.

Dani doesn’t push for more, maybe understanding that Nora needs to figure it out by herself, but she leaves her place at Nora’s shoulder and instead grabs her hand, leading her over to a contraption Nora has never seen before. It’s a round platform bisected with two long bars, meeting in the middle like an X. Dani motions for Nora to stand on it and then takes a firm grasp of one of the bars. “You should probably sit down.”

“Why?” Nora asks. Dani just grins and starts to push. Her feet dig into the sand as she gets the platform rotating faster and faster until the whole thing is spinning like a top with Dani running alongside.

Nora clutches at the railing and takes Dani's advice, anchoring herself near the middle of the cross-section. Once it's going sufficiently fast, Dani jumps on, clutching the bar with white knuckles as she pulls herself up to sit near Nora.

"I'm getting dizzy!" Nora yells. The world is rushing by in a blur. The only solid thing in in her entire field of vision is Dani.

"That's the point!" Dani yells back, joy in every inch of her face. Riding something the point of which is to get you dizzy seems like an exercise in futility, but Nora can't deny the adrenaline that courses through her as they zoom in a circle. Even if it's futile, it's fun. It's fun .

By the time they stumble off the platform together, dizzy and giggling, Nora has found a part of herself that she locked up twenty years ago, some kind of childlike happiness pulled out of her by Dani, who's stumbling over her own feet and cackling.

Her happiness feels a lot less childlike when dusk falls, when she and Dani are making out in the truck cab halfway through the newest superhero movie.

If she were more cognizant of anything much beyond Dani's mouth and hands, Nora would probably be a little embarrassed at how obvious they're being—the windows are fogged, and the truck rocks a little every time Dani shifts her weight to press into Nora's hips. But right now, with her leg hooked around Dani's body and warm lips making their way down Nora's neck toward her heaving chest, she couldn't care less.

The wait until the end of the movie is excruciating. Nora outright refuses to stay for the second film, and thankfully by that point, Dani seems just as eager. By the time Dani is pulling out onto the road to drive them to a better location, Nora is about ready to take care of the problem herself on the spot, distracted driving be damned.

Dani eases the truck onto a dirt path just off a side road, stopping when a metal

barrier with a sign reading NO TRESPASSING appears in the headlights.

“I thought you said you’d been here before?” Nora says.

Dani opens the door and jumps out of the cab. Flagrantly disregarding the warning sign, she makes her way up to the barrier, fiddling with the chain that keeps it closed and then swinging the gate open.

When Dani jumps back in, shifting the truck back into gear, Nora stares at her for a few seconds.

“What?” Dani says.

Nora shakes her head. “Do you always ignore trespassing signage, or just when you’re trying to get laid?”

Dani snorts as the truck lumbers over the grass. “I only ignore them when they’re stupid. This is another way to get out to the tree house. The land was sold to some big contractor who wanted to build a hotel up here years ago, but it stalled out. Whoever owns it now, they’re not using it.”

That catches Nora’s attention. She sits up straighter, glancing out the window as they roll past the gate over a bumpy path. “A contractor? Is the tree house part of that land?”

“Yep. Good thing it didn’t work out, right?”

Nora’s interest fades into something a little more antsy. Dani has inadvertently taken her to the very patch of land that Nora failed to locate at the beginning of the summer. She had meant to get back to this part of her survey after her second failure, but she’d let herself get distracted. She should be elated that she’s finally found it, but instead

an uneasiness settles over her as they roll through the underbrush.

The piece of land she's been interested in bulldozing is where the tree house is.

"Is that something people here would appreciate?" Nora tries to make out their surroundings. All she can see in the darkness are the vague shapes of trees and the dirt tracks in the truck's headlights. The nervousness that grips her is almost enough to derail the desire. "A hotel or resort?"

Dani's mouth twitches. It's not quite a frown, but some of the lightness leaves her face. "No. Not really."

Nora's stomach sinks.

"Wouldn't it bring tourism money? Up property values?" Nora asks, increasingly aware that she's parroting her own report. She's dancing a little too close to the truth yet again, but she feels a sudden need to explain herself to Dani. "It could help to revitalize—"

"Revitalize for who?" Dani says simply.

"What do you mean?"

Dani drums her fingers on the wheel.

"Some big, fancy company opening a hotel here, bringing tourists—it wouldn't help the community. It'd make money for some company somewhere far away that buys up the land," Dani says, unintentionally busting Nora's proposal wide open. The uneasy feeling in Nora's gut increases tenfold. "And maybe it would raise property values and bring tourism, but people can barely afford to buy and maintain properties as it is, with the cost of utilities and taxes and all. You could sell your house for more,

sure, but that doesn't help people who want to stay. Who have lived here their whole lives. People who grew up here and want to buy a place, only to be priced out."

Nora hadn't been expecting Dani to have such a polished, thoughtful answer ready that so effectively scrambles her confidence. The truck emerges from the treeline, and even from this new angle, Nora recognizes the dark shape of the tree house in the distance, lit by moonlight.

She wishes, suddenly, that Dani had never brought her here.

"What about if their bills were lower?" Nora asks, new possibilities flashing through her mind. "There's a lot of resources out here that nobody is using. If someone invested in green energy, it could—"

"Who's gonna do that?" Dani says, chuckling a little. "Nobody cares enough to invest in some dinky little town up north. We're not important enough."

Nora frowns, but Dani seems to be done with the conversation.

"I'm not saying that a little revitalization would be bad," Dani says, finally putting the truck into park under the shadowy form of the tree house, "but not in a way that makes things inaccessible to us locals. Or destroys what we love about this place."

Eleanor bites hard on the inside of her cheek.

The Eleanor Cromwell of two months ago might have disregarded Dani's opinion or, at the very least, not cared so deeply about the impact of her project on the people she's come to be so fond of. She wouldn't have been fussed about the idea of demolishing the tree house where so many good memories are now anchored. She'd have cared above all about getting the funding she needs.

But Dani is right. Developing Riverwalk is meant to create a fund for her environmental initiatives, to drive a common good. But how good is it if it means she has to destroy something wonderful? How good is it if it torpedoes the town? Is the sacrifice worth it? Maybe Nora has been avoiding finishing the proposal in part because she's been coming to that conclusion herself. Her old friends think she's already practically finished, and her new friends have no idea she's doing it at all.

Sarah said that Nora is different from most of the tourists they see in Riverwalk. In reality, Nora is far worse. She's living a double life.

Nora should be pressing Dani for details and memorizing the location to return to later so she can finally add actual on-the-ground information to the report she hasn't so much as glanced at since June, which she's already starting to reassess in her head.

Caught in a sudden limbo, Nora opens her mouth.

"Dani, I—" she says, her hand clenching the truck seat's padding. There's no hole this time to twist her finger into, and she's caught up in an impulse to spill every one of her secrets across the dashboard. A tidal wave of sudden guilt. "There's something that I—I don't think..."

"Don't worry. I know it seems small in here, but I promise we can make it work," Dani interrupts, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively as she pulls Nora into her lap. The steering wheel digs into her back a little, but Dani inches the seat back enough to give her some space. "See? Plenty of room."

The impulse to confess everything is strong, but not strong enough to overtake the comfort of avoidance for just a little longer. Instead she reaches for Dani's hand, putting business out of her mind in favour of pleasure. Dani intertwines their fingers easily, and Nora does what she's become so adept at doing over the course of the summer. She does the only thing that makes the unease go away: She gets lost in

Dani to the detriment of everything else.

The summer isn't over yet.

* * *

Nora's experience of sex has historically been fairly transactional. It's always been a physical need, easily put off and easily sated without the need for pesky emotional attachments. It's never been a reason for Nora to lose her head. Before this summer, she'd never understood the wild, all-encompassing kind of desire that could cause people to do something so silly as to have sex in a public place.

Dani has changed all of that.

Dani seems to want Nora always, everywhere, and Nora sees no reason to contain her own desire here. She indulges herself when the whim hits her, and the whim hits her often. She distracts Dani while she's working on her truck or after she changes the oil in Nora's car in the empty shop after hours. She interrupts Dani's workouts, encouraging her to abandon her free weights and exert herself in a more fun way. Dani leans into it just as much, pulling Nora into the women's washroom at the River Run or laying her out in the truck bed under the tree house. It's all fair game.

She's not doing anything completely unheard of. She's not even doing anything as outlandish as some of the sex stories Ash and Kayla used to share with her in university. She's just experiencing it all a little later than everyone else.

She reminds herself of that when Dani very reasonably asks if she can tell Sarah what's been going on, and as word slowly spreads throughout town, the reminder helps to curb her usual discomfort with people knowing her business. Though she and Dani were never hiding their situation, there was always a furtive energy to it. Once it becomes public and there's no need to dance around the truth, it feels like the

physical aspect of their relationship kicks into an even higher gear—if that’s even possible.

It’s like nothing Nora has ever known before, an addictive, thrilling spiral.

It also becomes clearer than ever that while Dani seems to take absolute joy and pride in fucking Nora until she’s almost comatose, she has trouble articulating exactly what she needs for herself.

“Can I ask you something?” Nora finally asks over lunch.

Dani takes a big bite of her sandwich, waving to Naomi walking past their picnic bench on the way to her office. “Yeah, sure,” Dani says around a mouthful of meatballs and bread.

“I’ve noticed that you don’t like penetration very much,” Nora says evenly.

Dani chokes on her food. “Jeez, Nora,” she rasps once she’s cleared her lungs, taking a few gulps of water. A fiery blush is shooting up Dani’s neck, and she glances around as if she’s afraid someone is listening to them from the bushes. “That came outta left field.”

“I think open, frank conversations about sex are necessary in adult relationships,” Nora says, taking a measured sip of iced coffee. She expected Dani to be a bit uncomfortable about the discussion, but she’s always found that facing things head-on and getting them over with is the best tactic—ripping the bandage off.

Nora wants—no, needs—to make sure that Dani’s desires are being met to the same level that her own are. Dani deserves that, especially considering everything Nora has been hiding.

Nora swallows down the reliable spike of anxiety.

“I just didn’t expect to do it here,” Dani clarifies, gesturing at the picnic bench. “Now. In the middle of my meatball sub?”

Nora hadn’t really considered that. A bench in the middle of town on a Wednesday afternoon is maybe not the best place to have this conversation, but Nora has been working her way toward bringing this up for days.

“Right. Sorry,” Nora says, wincing. “I just said it the moment it came into my head. We can talk about it later, obviously.”

“No, it’s okay,” Dani says, putting her sandwich down and wiping the marinara from her fingers with a napkin. “You just surprised me. You do that a lot.”

Nora might have taken that last statement as a bad thing, but Dani is smiling. Nora can’t quite decipher her expression.

“To answer your question...it just doesn’t do much for me. It doesn’t feel bad, but it doesn’t get me anywhere?” Dani shrugs, fiddling with the foil wrapping around her sub. “I just...work differently, I think.”

Nora nods, her suspicion confirmed. “But you do you like it when I touch you in other ways? Hard pressure, friction?”

Dani blushes a little at the blunt wording, but she nods. “I’ve always just waited until after, and then...did it myself, you know?” The blush rises to tinge the tips of her ears. “Easier than explaining exactly what I need. People sometimes get upset.”

“Why would anyone get upset?”

“Because I didn’t like what they were doing. Or what I wanted was too much for them. Or because they were disappointed they couldn’t get me off,” Dani says, shrugging again. She looks terribly self-conscious. “Lots of reasons. Eventually I stopped asking.”

Nora can’t imagine not being absolutely, mind-meltingly enthusiastic about what Dani wants. Her occasional desire for roughness is never too much, never without check-ins and large accompanying doses of gentleness, and it makes Nora’s chest ache to think of Dani putting herself aside for so long.

Resting her hand lightly on top of Dani’s, Nora frowns. “If I’ve ever made you feel that way, I’m very sorry.”

“No! You haven’t at all,” Dani says quickly, grabbing for the hand Nora offered and squeezing it tight. “Honestly, you’re sort of the only person who hasn’t. It’s been amazing.”

While that makes Nora feel somewhat accomplished, she wants more for Dani. She wants to make up for the years Dani spent unsatisfied. She wants to make up for everything, her own mistakes included.

“Would you be willing to experiment a little? Find other things that work for you, too?” Nora asks.

Dani’s brow furrows, and she squeezes Nora’s hand again. “Yeah, I think so? But the way we do it is really good. I promise.”

Nora does believe her. In comparison to Dani’s past partners, who apparently either got upset that their efforts didn’t work or ignored Dani’s needs completely, any attention would seem fantastic. But Nora can do better.

Later that night, when Dani has passed out in Nora's bed, gently snoring, Nora takes a deep dive into research. After about two hours of careful consideration, she places an order.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

The first full weekend of August comes too fast for Nora's liking.

It kicks off with something that Dani calls a corn roast. The name is fairly self-explanatory—people gather in Dani's backyard, corn is roasted and presumably eaten—but what Nora didn't expect is the scale of the endeavour. It's comparable in size to the Canada Day celebrations. People set up lawn chairs and haul in picnic tables borrowed from the park, but there's less of a family atmosphere. It's adults-only this time, and it's suitably more raucous.

"How exactly do I access the edible part?" Nora asks, several drinks deep when Sarah hands her a plate with a burger and an un-shucked ear of charred corn. Having only ever eaten it after it's been removed from both the husk and the cob, she's not sure how to handle it.

Dani elbows her way past Sarah to perch on Nora's picnic table. Her seat dislodges Ryan's cup, but she ignores his noise of disapproval.

"I'll show you," Dani says, picking up the still-steaming piece of corn and pulling the husk back with her bare fingers.

"How do you do that without gloves?"

Dani finishes peeling, impaling each end with a skewer. The skewer handles are shaped like little yellow corncobs.

"I've handled hotter things." Dani says it with a wink, and Nora laughs despite herself.

Sarah makes a disgruntled noise. “Keep it in your pants, Dani.”

“Tired of my corny jokes?” Dani says, grinning like a fool as she holds up the ear of corn. Nora rolls her eyes so hard, she’s surprised they don’t leave her head entirely.

Dani looks delighted.

Once dusk falls, Sarah and Dani set up a bonfire. The party shifts into a lower gear—s’mores and hot dogs are roasted, the moonshine is broken out, Nora curls happily into Dani’s side, and Owen serenades everyone gathered around the fire in Muskoka chairs with a guitar and a low, soothing baritone.

Dani sings along to some of the songs, too. Her voice is soft and sweet. Nora can feel the vibration of it when she rests her head on Dani’s shoulder. Along with the drinks and crackle of the fire, it’s almost enough to lull her into a very pleasant doze until Nora frowns at yet another person heading into Dani’s house to use the washroom.

“A lot of people have been going in and out. Don’t you worry about people breaking your things?”

Dani looks puzzled. “If they didn’t break anything the last few years, I doubt they will now.”

“You host this every year?”

“We used to do it out in the woods near the old CromTech warehouse,” Ryan says, his mouth full of buttery corn. He’s had a few Solo cups too many, and his cheeks are ruddy with it. “There’s an old quarry out there where we used to party. But not anymore. Fuck CromTech.”

Several other people around the fire cheer at Ryan’s curse.

The sudden and unfavourable reminder makes Nora feel like the two ears of corn she just ate might make a reappearance.

“Not fans, I take it?” Nora says tightly, trying to swallow down the nausea.

Ryan scoffs. “Are you kidding? My dad lost his pension when they closed all the plants. We struggled my whole life thanks to them.”

“They’ve been turning around lately, I think,” Naomi says. She’s stretched out in a chair on the other side of the fire while Sarah shucks an ear of corn for her. “They’ve got the most reliable medical imaging tech on the market, with lower prices than the competitors.”

Nora can only be grateful that Naomi either doesn’t remember the conversation they had at Pride or hasn’t made the connection. Either way, Ryan seems less than impressed.

“Big fuckin’ whoop,” Ryan mutters. “Doesn’t change what they did.”

“They didn’t even have the decency to not leave all their shit behind to rust when they closed everything down,” Owen says, strumming his guitar tunelessly. “We stopped doing the corn roast down there after a big fire in ’08. All the fuel they left rotting in the tanks at the manufacturing plant blew up. Bunch of the forest burnt down.”

Nora’s stomach churns even harder. She’d known her father had shut things down here quickly, but she’d had no idea he’d done it so irresponsibly, to the point of causing a disaster that the locals would remember even years later. “Oh my God. Was—was anyone hurt?”

“No,” Dani says quickly. “The fire department put it out pretty quick, everyone was

fine.”

“Everyone except the trees and the animals and the soil that got fuel all in it. Fuck ‘em!” Ryan shouts, gesturing with his gnawed corncob. “It could have gotten people hurt! Pure greed and laziness is what it was. They should have cleaned it up!”

Equally full of food and alcohol, everyone else raises their voices to match.

“It was a shit thing for them to do back then, but it was forever ago. I never saw the point in holding old grudges,” Dani says.

Dani is only one voice among the many, though, most of which sit on Ryan’s side of the argument, and Nora sinks lower in her chair even as the party picks back up. Ryan and Mila get into a competition over who can sing along to Owen’s music the loudest, and soon a karaoke machine is dragged out from Dani’s living room.

Nora wishes she could disappear.

In the growing chaos, Dani grabs Nora’s hand and tugs it, tipping her head in the direction of the woods at the edge of the property, and they quietly slip away from the hubbub of the fire and into the night.

“Things were starting to get a little loud,” Dani says once the heat of the bonfire and the noise of the parties gets less pronounced. “Sorry about that. Ryan especially. He can get a bit heated.”

Nora’s face feels suddenly cold with the loss of the flames. She sidles closer to Dani, squeezing her hand tighter as they walk.

“It’s nice to get a break from the noise,” Nora says a little absently.

Ryan's contempt is sticking with her—she'd known from her first few weeks here that dislike for her company runs deep, but in spending so much time with these people this summer, she'd been able to conveniently forget it. Maybe she'd convinced herself that now that they know her, it wouldn't be such a big deal. But now her knowledge is cemented: Ryan wouldn't forgive her if he knew her connection to CromTech. She wonders if anyone else would hate her, too—Sarah, Mila, Owen and Naomi.

Dani.

“You okay?” Dani says quietly.

Nora bites the inside of her cheek. “I don't feel great. Too much to drink, I think.”

In reality, Nora feels pretty sober, but her thoughts are out of control.

How could she not have known that CromTech left hazardous materials behind when they pulled out of Bracken County? Had her father hidden it, or was it just deemed not important enough to include in any reports? And if Nora had found the information, would she even have done anything about it if it didn't interfere with her development plans? Would the guilt she's feeling now have manifested before she knew these people enough to care?

Is Nora no better than her father was? Isn't she worse ?

Dani squeezes her hand. Her voice gets soft and careful. “Of course. Do you want to go lie down? I can tell everyone to clear out so you can sleep.”

“No, don't be silly. But Dani,” Nora says, tripping over the truth that wants to spill yet again. Keeping her identity from Dani all these months used to feel like a necessity, but it feels now like a massive breach of trust. The guilt of it sits heavy in

her stomach most nights, and tonight it's worse than ever. "What Ryan said, about CromTech. He's right. And I think—"

Dani halts suddenly, pulling Nora's arm taut and stopping her in her tracks. Her head tilts. "Did you hear that?"

"What? I don't hear anything," Nora says. The interruption has taken the wind out of her sails somewhat. "Probably a rabbit or something."

Dani frowns. "Listen."

With a deep sigh, Nora does. She tries to listen over her racing thoughts, over the anxious beating of her own heart, and it turns out that there is something beyond the sound of crickets or the party in the distance. It sounds, actually, like the rustling of clothing. Breathy sighs. After a few moments of listening, a quiet moan punctuates it, followed by a hushed voice.

"Shh, someone could hear..."

"Everyone's at the party, Sarah," comes another voice, louder but clearly distracted. "Nobody's listening."

"Sarah?!" Dani says loudly, stepping away from Nora. But she doesn't sound alarmed or horrified. She sounds delighted.

Sarah, on the other hand, does not.

"Fuck!" Nora can hear Sarah muttering, along with the frantic rustle of clothes being done up. "Dani! What are you doing out here?"

"Oh my gosh, you horn-dog!" Dani says, louder than ever and now making her way

toward the source of the voices. “I knew you were lying when you said you stayed at Mila’s place the other night. Who are you with?”

The second voice laughs, clearly much calmer about the whole situation than Sarah is. “That’s what you told her?”

“I panicked!” Sarah hisses, and now Nora can see the two figures Dani is striding toward—Sarah is finishing with the buttons on her shirt. Next to her, leaning against a tree and fully clothed but pleasantly ruffled, is Naomi.

“We were having a perfectly nice time before you crashed our party,” Naomi says, her kind smile offsetting the sarcasm in her voice.

Dani laughs, crossing her arms and looking pointedly at her cousin. “These are my woods, too, you know. When were you planning on telling me you’re finally seeing each other?”

Sarah, who seems to be doing everything she can to hide behind Naomi, sighs and leans her forehead onto Naomi’s shoulder. “I was going to tell you, I swear. I just...”

“Chickened out?” Nora supplies unhelpfully. “Seems to be a family trait.”

Sarah lifts her head to glare through the darkness. “We were trying to keep it low-key. Just for a while. You know what this town is like with gossip.”

“Intimately,” Nora says wryly.

Dani spreads her arms wide, pulling Naomi and Sarah both into a hug that Sarah seems desperate to get out of. “I’m so happy for you guys! I’ve been telling Sarah to ask you out for ages.”

Naomi laughs gently when Dani lets them both go, reaching out to stroke Sarah's short hair. "You know, I actually made the first move in the end."

"Me, too!" Nora says. "What is it with Coopers and stalling out at the finish line?"

Naomi offers her a high-five, laughing, while Dani and Sarah trip over each other's words trying to argue the point.

The distraction isn't enough to quiet Nora's mind for the night. Dani's bedroom is one area of the house still closed to the public, and, inside it, Nora is helpless against the thoughts that still press in at the edges: CromTech's mistakes, the project outline sitting on her hard drive, the vitriol in Ryan's voice, everyone's easy agreement in hating the company Nora has worked so hard to run. The conversation she had with Dani under the tree house, about how development would affect the area.

Nora stays up long into the night after Dani has fallen asleep, typing frenetic notes into her phone until the battery finally gives out in the morning's early hours. New ideas that could use her eco-tech prototypes to benefit Riverwalk pile up faster than she can write them down, but none solve her problem completely. None would provide the funding she came here for.

Funding or not, though, the knowledge that Nora has been avoiding for weeks has solidified in the wake of last night.

Her original proposal stopped being viable a long time ago.

* * *

The notes stay untouched in Nora's phone for a while. She fully intends on sitting down to find a way to fold them into her proposal—she tries several times to set aside afternoons meant to sort out all the tangled ideas she jotted down. But as the last few

weeks of August slip away and their time together dwindles, Dani seems intent on not letting Nora spend her time working.

Dani takes more and more days off at the shop, which Nora is sure Sarah is less than thrilled about. She hardly ever sleeps at her own place throughout the whole month, staying with Nora instead, and Nora ensures that her needs and wants are met within the walls of the rental house or when they venture into town together. Whenever Dani wakes up to find Nora working away on her laptop, she single-mindedly finds new ways of distracting her until the proposal is the last thing on her mind.

The distractions aren't only of Dani's making, though.

Nora had almost forgotten about the package she ordered two weeks ago until it arrives in the hands of the very person it's meant for. It arrives closer to the end of the summer than she'd like, meaning there's less time to use it to its fullest potential, but Nora still intends on doing her best.

Dani knocks on her door with a coffee in one hand and a small box in the other, and she offers both to Nora.

"This was on your doorstep," Dani says as she steps inside, wiggling her boots off by the heel and leaving them at the door as she's done a hundred times. "Order anything exciting?"

Nora can tell by the package's weight that it's exactly what she thinks it is, and her excitement mounts as Dani opens the fridge and grabs the jug of iced tea. Nora's fingers itch to open the flimsy cardboard. "I was actually hoping that you'd be here when it arrived."

Dani looks at Nora quizzically over the rim of her glass. "Me? Why?"

“It’s sort of a gift for both of us.”

Dani looks intrigued, pulling her keys out of her pocket and selecting the sharpest one. “Well, let’s open ’er up!”

When Dani pulls the contents out of the box, ripping off the encasing plastic, there’s a moment of pointed silence before she starts laughing.

Nora can admit that the sizable strap-on she bought does look a bit silly in Dani’s hands with its leather harness dangling toward the floor. But Nora is fairly sure that, given a few minutes and some visual stimulation, Dani won’t be laughing for long.

“Sorry, I just—I wasn’t expecting that. You bought us a strap?” Dani says, still chuckling. “I have one, remember?”

Nora smiles, moving closer to Dani and reaching out. Her slightly smaller hand wraps around the thickest part of the toy just under Dani’s, and she squeezes. The expensive material gives slightly under her palm.

Dani swallows hard, her laughter forgotten.

“I told you I wanted a bigger one,” Nora says, her voice intentionally low. She’s gratified by the way Dani’s eyes widen dramatically. “And this one comes with a special feature. Look.” Nora twists the toy to show off the base, which is the real reason that she purchased this model.

As a part of the design, it’s shaped into a soft silicone cushion of sorts—rather than being flat, it’s carefully curved, perfectly shaped with ridges to fit snugly against the giver’s clit behind the O-ring of the harness. “For you to grind against.”

Dani blinks rapidly. Nora can see the picture of exactly what’s being suggested form

behind her eyes.

“Really?” Dani says, leaning closer for inspection. She looks a bit doubtful, but Nora suspects that if she can get the damn thing strapped on, it’s going to change Dani’s life.

“I thought it might work for you,” Nora says simply.

Dani’s eyes track up the length, focusing on Nora’s fingers and how they only just close around the circumference near the base. She bites at her lip. And she grins.

It’s not long before Nora is naked with Dani above her, the harness firmly buckled to Dani’s hips. The slight nervousness Dani had shown while putting the thing on has melted away. She’s kissing Nora with her usual enthusiasm, seemingly having forgotten about the newness of the toy until Nora reaches down to wrap her fist around it.

Dani shifts her hips slightly, aligning them more with Nora’s, and Nora uses the movement to press the toy—and the cushion—more firmly into place.

Dani’s reaction is visceral. She makes a loud, guttural noise as it presses into her. Her hips buck hard into Nora’s hand, and her kisses trail off into panting.

“Holy crap,” Dani gasps, staring down between their bodies at where Nora’s hand still grasps the length.

Nora squeezes, and Dani’s belly twitches as if she can feel it through the silicone.

“What do you think?” Nora asks, pressing it up again.

Dani moans, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment. She’s holding herself up on her

elbows—Nora can feel her arms trembling.

“It’s, uh,” Dani says breathlessly, still twitching in Nora’s firm grip, “it’s... wow .”

“Good experiment?”

“Makes me appreciate the scientific method,” Dani mumbles, kissing Nora deep and a little bit rough before pulling back just barely. “What’s the next step? Analyze the data?”

Nora smiles against her mouth. Spreading her legs to brace against the sheets, Nora slides a hand to rest on Dani’s lower back. When Dani looks down to watch the strap settle between Nora’s legs, she presses her hand down.

“The next step is,” Nora whispers shakily, bucking into the toy as it drags against her clit, “I want you inside me.”

Dani whimpers. The move puts almost as much pressure against her, and the muscles of her back shift under Nora’s hand.

“Okay,” Dani breathes, nodding rapidly. “Okay. Yeah. Right. Okay.”

The confident air Dani usually has in bed is shaken by the introduction of her own pleasure, but in this case, Nora is perfectly happy to help out. Rather than pushing the toy against Dani again, she pulls, guiding the tip downward.

Though Nora is expecting it, the sensation of the head nudging her is enough to make her heart skip. It’s thicker than anything she’s taken in a long time, and the knowledge of the stretch it’s going to give her makes her feel a little bit wild.

“Go slow,” Nora whispers, digging her nails into Dani’s lower back to urge her

forward.

Dani nods. Her forehead is already shiny with sweat.

The first inch sinking inside her already has Nora gasping. And, God , slow Dani goes. She eases Nora open so carefully, with so much reverence, guiding herself with a hand on the base of the toy and pressing their foreheads together as Nora clings to her back.

Nora's control of the situation is slipping through her fingers. She's tied up in knots as Dani's hands roam her body, desperate for that pressure and fullness and just a hint of pain. The look on Dani's face as she slowly takes her ignites something deep.

It feels like an eternity before Dani bottoms out. Their hips align completely, and Nora has a sudden moment of terrifying clarity.

She's never felt so close to someone in her entire life.

Nora is no stranger to sex, with strap-ons or otherwise. She's always had decent results with this sort of toy. But Dani's reaction is above and beyond what Nora expected. Dani is trembling above her, one hand anchored at the crease of Nora's thigh to make more space for herself, pressed against Nora's body from chest to thighs. She's unmoving, waiting for Nora to adjust, but Nora can feel the tension in every muscle. The control. The desire. It's as if the toy is an extension of her.

With her legs bracketed around Dani's hips, with her heavy breaths mingling with Dani's, with what feels like every inch of her filled to the brim, the combination of vulnerability and safety that sweeps over Nora is almost too much to take.

When Nora gathers herself enough to shift her hips upward, Dani seems to finally feel the impact of the cushion pressing into her again. Her hips buck forward hard

with another broken moan, and the movement inside Nora firmly displaces any thoughts that might have been in her head that aren't please fuck me until I can't walk .

Nora bites gently on Dani's earlobe, pressing herself up and into the strap—and, by extension, into Dani—with five words that make Dani go wild.

“I'm ready. Don't hold back.”

With what Nora can only describe as a grunt , Dani plunges into Nora with a few uneven thrusts, each one punctuated with a shaky whine as she gets used to the sensation of the cushion. She pauses after the fourth, pressing deep and firm in a way that makes them both whimper, their eyes closed and foreheads touching.

When Dani's eyes next open, the raw hunger in them engulfs Nora completely.

Dani takes hold of Nora's thighs, braces her knees against the mattress, and uses what feels like most of her core strength to thrust into Nora hard . The impact of the sudden jump in pace is exquisite. The angle, the little groan Dani lets out at the pressure. The slight loss of control.

“Fuck!” Nora gasps, her hands shooting up to clench around the narrow slats of the headboard. “Holy shit, Dani—”

“Sorry. Is that okay?” Dani is panting, her eyes a bit unfocused. Her hips stop moving, but Nora arches up, desperate for more.

“Yes. God, do it again.”

Dani obeys. Her pace picks up even more when she realizes that Nora likes it, that she can take the roughness, and what follow are probably the most sublime prolonged

moments of Nora's life.

Nora's hand digs into Dani's lower back, but Dani doesn't need the direction. It's as if this has unleashed a brand-new side of her, and that new side has peeled open a layer of Nora's desire that she's always kept tightly under wraps. A desperate, needy, vulnerable layer.

Dani moves into her hard and fast, unselfconsciously carried by the current of her own newfound pleasure, and Nora lets it carry her away. The combination of the thick toy inside her, Dani's surprised, overwhelmed noises, and the unrelenting pace Dani sets is bringing them both closer to the edge by the second.

"Nora," Dani gasps, hiking Nora's legs up, quickening her rhythm into short, fierce thrusts that somehow feel even better. "Feels so—feels so good ." There's confusion with Dani's desire, like she can't quite understand how this feels so good, but she's chasing that feeling to the end.

And the end is close. Nora can hear it in Dani's choppy breathing, can feel it in her quivering muscles and the thrumming pulse at her throat. And Nora can feel it in her own body, a tightening and tensing—a right there , an almost.

"That's it," Nora gasps, her free hand gripping firmly at the back of Dani's neck. She pants into Dani's hair, her hips moving with Dani's in a push and pull that feels primal. Animal instinct. Legs up, toes curling over Dani's back, taking every thrust with pure, undiluted need. "Let go with me. God, yes, I've got you, fuck —"

With a noise Nora has never heard her make before Dani breaks, her hips twitching wildly as she comes hard against the toy and into Nora.

More than anything that came before, that's what pushes Nora over. It's not even about the physical sensations—it's the concept of what's happening. The deeper,

cerebral connection that loops in the rest of her senses. The knowledge that Dani is coming while she fucks her. Dani's muscles seizing under her hands. The sound of her surprised, instinctive gasps. The taste of her, the scent—simple, just shampoo and light deodorant and whatever base body chemistry makes her so enticing.

It all swirls inside Nora, releases the tension in the core of her, and implodes.

When it finally tapers off, Dani is still inside her, and she's trembling all over. Her face is buried in the crook of Nora's neck. She's breathing like she's run a marathon, winded to a level Nora hasn't seen before. When Nora shifts, every place their bodies press together is slick with sweat.

“Hey,” Nora says, her voice raspy from noises she doesn't fully remember making. She rubs circles on Dani's back, pressing trembling kisses to her shoulder. “Are you all right?”

Dani raises her head. Her hair is in disarray, damp at her hairline and tousled in the back where Nora tangled her fingers. Nora is relieved to see that rather than looking upset, Dani's eyes are bright and alert. In fact, she looks like she wants nothing more than to devour Nora again.

Nora clenches involuntarily around the length still inside her.

“That was fucking incredible ,” Dani says, her voice a low rumble. She shifts in a way that jostles the strap-on just enough to make Nora's breath catch.

“Oh,” Nora says inelegantly. Dani is starting to move again, a slow, mindless rolling motion that makes Nora wrap a leg around Dani's hips in wordless encouragement. “Good. I'm...I'm glad.” Her voice breaks on the last word.

Dani presses in deeper, her smile getting brighter with every gentle thrust. “Can we

do that again?”

The air leaves Nora's lungs in a breathy laugh. She nods enthusiastically, wrapping her arms around Dani's shoulders and pulling her in for a kiss. “If you think you can handle it.”

Dani's answer is to flip them both smoothly until Nora is on top, grab the softest part of her hips, and brace her feet on the mattress to thrust up into her.

Nora muffles her groan of approval into Dani's shoulder. It hadn't taken Dani long to discover just how much her strength turns Nora on, that she likes to be thrown around a little, and she's used that knowledge mercilessly since.

“I can handle it,” Dani says, her voice stronger than it's been since Nora buckled her into the harness. Her hands slide up to Nora's waist, fitting perfectly into the dip there as Nora sits up to straddle her properly. “Can you?”

Nora lets go of her inhibitions completely. There's no hiding anything at this angle. Dani has a clear view of the flush that covers Nora's chest. She can see the way Nora rocks down into her, greedily asking for more even after she's been sated, the slick wetness Nora has left all over the leather harness. Dani's eyes fixate on where they're joined, where Nora is spread wide around the toy that links them.

“Fuck. I can feel you,” Dani says, her voice rising into a whine as she rocks upward. Her belly flexes with the effort, and Nora finally indulges her long-held impulse to press a hand against the softness there as she braces herself on Dani's body.

Nora has no time to be self-conscious. Dani's desire is written all over her face. She seems to have a well of energy that never runs dry, experimenting with movements and positions and finding all the shiny new corners of her own pleasure until Nora is sure their limit must be approaching.

By the end, Nora is on her back again, the pace slowing gradually to match her energy, and it's shockingly easy to embrace what she's been hurtling headfirst toward all summer.

Dani is patient now. Gentle. It's veering further from sex and closer to what Nora might define as something more, and the closeness teeters on the edge of overwhelming.

Nora's legs are wrapped around Dani's hips tightly enough to limit motion, but the steady rocking of their bodies is still enough. Her hands cling to Dani's mid-back while Dani is gripping at Nora's thighs. Dani presses their foreheads together, trading slow kisses and murmured words of affection until they're breathing the same air.

Even at a pace that doesn't usually work for Nora, Dani coaxes her into a deep, subterranean orgasm that seems to rumble up from the absolute tips of her toes. Dani follows her soon after with a small, broken cry, and it feels like she's cracked Nora's chest open to put her heart on blatant, uncomfortable display. Like those grey eyes could see into the core of her.

Nora is grateful that Dani collapses on top of her without interrogating why Nora has to wipe her eyes.

For long, quiet minutes, she holds Dani inside her, enjoying the connection of it, pressing gentle kisses across her neck and shoulder. Dani only moves when Nora starts to shiver against the cold air on her damp skin. She's reluctant to let Dani go for even the short time it takes for her to wriggle out of the harness and curl herself around Nora's back, wrapping her arms around Nora's middle. The sudden emptiness inside Nora is jarring, but her hip sockets pop satisfyingly as she stretches out.

"I have never, ever, felt like that before," Dani whispers.

Nora isn't sure she can talk right now without it coming out garbled and shaky, so instead she pulls Dani's hands up to pepper them with soft kisses.

"I know this is a weird thing to be grateful for, but...thank you. Seriously," Dani says. She pulls her hand away to fidget with Nora's earring, running her finger over the diamond stud like it's a worry stone. It's strangely comforting. "I've never been with someone who cared so much about how I—about how my body—I mean, about making me feel good. You know?"

Nora can feel the heat of Dani's blush where her face is tucked into the curve of Nora's neck. It's almost funny. Of all the things they've done over the course of the evening, this is what has Dani embarrassed.

"I'm just glad I could find something that worked for you. And I can't say it didn't work out incredibly well for me, too," Nora says, gesturing at the absolute disaster her bed has become. Three of four pillows are on the floor, the duvet is twisted somewhere near their feet, and the fitted sheet has lost its grip on the mattress.

"Has it ever been like this for you?" Dani whispers into the quiet after they've both settled. She fits against Nora's back like a perfect puzzle piece. There's a shade of vulnerability in her voice that can't be ignored. "Am I just like—a total sap who's never had good sex before?"

Nora swallows. Dani is breathing softly into Nora's hair, their hands and legs intertwined. It feels like all the pretense between them is gone now, and she can't bring herself to be anything but honest.

"No. It's never been like this for me." Nora takes a breath. "This was amazing."

Dani's body relaxes against her. "Okay. That makes me feel like less of a loser."

“You’re not a loser just because nobody has ever taken the time to accommodate you,” Nora says. Her attempt to look over her shoulder at Dani is foiled by Dani burying her face deeper into Nora’s hair.

“Why did you?” Dani asks. The words are muffled.

“Why did I what?”

“Take the time.”

It should be a simple question. The easy answer is that she wanted to make Dani feel good, but Dani has been steadily reassuring her all summer that she’s already been doing so. This was Nora going for extra credit.

The other answers are harder to admit.

“Nobody has ever taken much time to accommodate me either,” Nora says simply. “Nobody besides you. You deserve to be accommodated.”

Dani finally emerges from her safe place between Nora’s shoulders to press a kiss to Nora’s cheek. “You’re a good person.”

The tenderness of the moment is eclipsed by a tidal wave of crushing guilt, followed by a terrible, absurd desire to tell Dani everything. Because, contrary to Dani’s belief in her, Nora isn’t a good person. Quite the opposite. The fact that she’s somehow duped Dani into thinking so is unexpected, and it brings to bear the aspect of Nora’s trip that she’s spent so long avoiding.

Nora hasn’t been lying so far, per se. In fact, she’s been carefully avoiding doing so. She’s just not telling anyone the whole story, which has begun to feel somehow worse. Dani’s faith in her is a new element that doubles the weight of Nora’s whole

summer of half-truths, and it brings to light the third reason that she's become so fixated on making sure Dani is fulfilled.

To make up for everything else.

Nora chokes out a short laugh. "You wouldn't say that if you knew me better."

"Then let me know you better."

Dani leaves room for Nora to brush it off, but Nora's heart pounds harder even than it did a few minutes ago.

Some small part of her resists the idea of sharing. There's always been a safety to not being known. But a larger part, the part Dani opened tonight, wants the opposite.

All it takes is a gentle encouragement for Nora to spill her entire childhood on the sheets.

She tells Dani about her father, about his distance and his cold anger. How she worked her entire life to earn his praise and never succeeded. She tells Dani about her never-ending line of stepmothers, each with their own ideas about who Eleanor Cromwell should be, and the inconsistency it gave her childhood.

Dani absorbs it all. She catches Nora like a safety net as she spirals through her years of isolation and loneliness, and how she turned to knowledge as a comfort. Achievement and constant work. How it all instilled in her a bone-deep sense of not good enough, one that she can't escape no matter how many all-nighters she pulls doing a job she never wanted.

She even tells Dani what she's never quite admitted to herself—that no matter how much she treasures Kayla and Ash, she's never been able to open up to them the way

they have to her. She doesn't understand why they care about her, and she often pushes them away just so they can't hurt her first.

It's all easier to say when they aren't lying face to face. By the end of it, Nora is crying, but she feels lighter than she has in years. The weight of an adolescence she's always refused to share has been lifted from her shoulders, and Dani isn't judging or trying to fix anything. She's just listening.

Dani holds her, spooning herself against Nora's back in a tight and soothing position. She lets Nora calm down in comfortable quiet so she can sort out her feelings in isolation the way she's used to without needing to actually be alone.

Dani's perfect. She's so much more than Nora deserves.

After a long silence, caught up in the tangled, messy web of truth telling, Nora stumbles out of the past and into the present.

"Dani, I haven't been totally honest with you." Nora's in unknown territory, driving through a blizzard with zero visibility and just hoping the road is still beneath the tires. "There's something I need to tell you. I've needed to tell you for a long time. Even if you hate me for it, I need you to know."

Dani makes a quiet noise behind her, her face still pressed between Nora's shoulders.

Nora steadies herself and steps off the cliff. "This summer is more than a vacation. I was here on a work trip, for my company. For...CromTech. I'm the CEO of CromTech."

Dani says nothing.

"I know I should have told you. It started as me not wanting to mess up my project,

but then it snowballed the more we got close and—and by the time things progressed, I didn't want to lose you by telling you the whole truth," Nora says. The hand that isn't clinging to Dani's arm is clenched into itself in a tight fist. Her voice is weak, but she pushes on. "CromTech's investors have been on me about financing all my sustainable-tech pitches. So I presented the county as an easy development venture to fund our research."

Still Dani says nothing. Nora can't bring herself to turn over to look at her, to see the disappointment she's sure is etched into Dani's face.

"My original proposal was to buy up as much property as we could and push for tourism to spike value. Make it a resort town and then sell it all. But I changed my mind, I—I can't do that now. I've been thinking of other solutions."

Nora's breath is coming so quickly that she's sure she must be close to hyperventilation. She focuses on her breaths, letting the finality of her confession wash over her as Dani's silence stretches on.

"I didn't expect it to be like this. I didn't want to get close to anyone, I just wanted to..." Nora's voice falters. There's a hollow ache in her chest as it all spills out of her. Her breath hitches on a fresh wave of tears. "I was just looking for the best way to profit. I'm sorry."

Nora waits for the hammer to fall. She waits for Dani to do something—to speak, to get angry, to get up and leave. For the unearned bubble of half-truths Nora has been living in to finally pop. But Dani is unmoving.

In the quiet of the dark bedroom, Nora hears a soft snore.

Like a balloon popping under a descending foot, all the energy goes out of Nora at once. It's partly disappointment, knowing that she's going to have to muster up the

courage to tell Dani the truth at some other time, but there's also no small amount of relief—the idea of Dani hating her is terrifying, even in its inevitability. Nora has barely two weeks left here, and now that she's truly facing down the reality of not having Dani in her life anymore, it feels worse than she ever imagined.

She doesn't know if she has the strength to do this again.

As Dani pulls her closer with a sleepy grunt, enveloping her in a sense of safety even now, a thought comes to Nora. One that's as terrifying as it is exhilarating. It drifts across her mind like a rubber duck bobbing on the river, gentle but undeniable.

I think I'm in love with you.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

Once Nora has thought them, the words take root in her brain and don't let go.

I think I'm in love with you.

This new knowledge stays with her for every moment of her dwindling time with Dani, even when they're apart. It leeches into her sleep. Most nights, she dreams of Dani, even when the subject of her dreaming is right next to her in bed. She then wakes up with an ache in her chest because she dreamt of impossible futures.

It sits in the back of Nora's mind as she finally finds a moment to look over her survey report for the first time in almost two months. The text reads like it was written by another person—succinct and emotionless. Reading it now, the prospect of any of it coming to fruition is horrifying. All the things Nora had suggested so easily when she arrived now feel like the worst possible outcomes, and in the few days after her botched confession, she throws herself into new ideas while Dani is at work.

It's not an easy prospect. The ideal, shoot-for-the-stars solution is deceptively simple—it's what Nora has wanted all along, really.

Two of the old CromTech warehouses are still usable. Refurbishing them to produce and test the experimental tech on Nora's docket would bring jobs to the area in a more productive way. It could be a mutually beneficial arrangement if the people of Riverwalk can be convinced to trust a company that's already screwed them over.

It won't, however, make CromTech the kind of money the shareholders want. She could emphasize the cost savings of not needing to lease manufacturing space, but investing in an eco-tech division in the first place is a big ask when Nora is no longer

recommending a development project to fund it. It isn't the easy money-maker that Riverwalk was supposed to be.

Nora writes the new proposal anyway. She outlines a retrofitting plan for the warehouses. She even provides a few of her own prototypes with the most potential. Maybe it's a pipe dream, but something in her needs to see it all on paper, even if the board is going to shout it down. She needs to have something to present when she gets back to Toronto, and it's not going to be her original project. It can't be.

Nora can only imagine the look on her father's face if he knew she was planning to throw this amount of money away. The disappointment. If he were here, he'd tell her she was being frivolous and weak. He'd say she was squandering everything he left to her. He'd absolutely hate Dani.

Somehow, that idea makes Nora smile.

All of it marinates in Nora's mind as her departure date approaches, and it stays with her as she cancels the moving van and emails Ash and Kayla to inform them of her intent to extend her trip. After sending the email, Nora has barely managed to close her laptop before her phone is vibrating.

"Hey, how are you, et cetera," Kayla says as soon as Nora has accepted the call, her voice high and sharp. "Couple things to address: Firstly, what the fuck?"

Nora sighs, curling her legs underneath her as she switches her phone to the other ear. Dani is at work, and Nora has set up a mobile office on her back deck facing the water. "I just need two more weeks."

Ash chimes in. "But you tell us in an email? Days before you're supposed to be coming back?"

Nora winces. She's agonized over this decision for days before making it at the last minute, and although she wishes she didn't need to spring it on them, she doesn't regret it at all.

She feels better already.

"I know. And I'm sorry," Nora says, only half meaning it.

"We had board meetings set up! Debriefs! Press conferences!" Ash says, his voice getting consistently more high-pitched, but thankfully Kayla interrupts him before he builds up too much steam.

"What Ash means to say is, we're really worried about you. Are you okay? It's not like you to cancel things at the last minute like this." Kayla does sound concerned, and Nora will grant her that it's warranted—she isn't exactly known for making last-minute selfish decisions.

"I'm fine, Kayla. I just need some more time." It's a half-truth, but it's all Nora is comfortable admitting. Even to them. She needs more time to finish her new proposal, and she needs more time to say goodbye.

Not to mention that she still hasn't told Dani the truth.

"All right," Kayla says, but she sounds skeptical. "Much longer than two weeks and we might not be able to hold Renée off."

"What's my dear stepmother up to now?" Nora mutters, scrolling through the massive backlog of unread emails that probably contain the answer.

"The same thing she's been doing all summer—questioning the necessity of your trip." Kayla sighs. "And doing it loudly. Lately she's taken to insinuating that you've

been gone for so long because you've abandoned your job."

"She's always been dramatic," Nora says distractedly. A glance at the clock tells her that it's almost one o'clock, when Dani promised she'd stop by for lunch—Nora has a salad waiting in the fridge, which Dani had insisted she'd only eat if it had protein in it.

"It's been four months," Ash says flatly.

Nora pauses. Though intellectually she knows she's been here since early May, it hasn't felt like four months. It'll be going on five by the time she gets home. If she were in Renée's shoes, she'd probably be thinking the same thing.

"You haven't abandoned us, have you?" Ash continues. "You are coming back?"

"Of course I am."

"At this point, it seems like you want to stay there. If you do, just tell us so we can prepare properly," Kayla says.

"I'm not staying forever," Nora says quickly. "I'm coming back. Just...not yet. You'll see me in September."

The line goes quiet. She's sure Ash and Kayla are having some sort of silent conversation.

"We'll let the board know. You're going to need to be ready for a fight," Kayla finally says. "Renée has had a lot of time to butter them up to reject your project."

"That's fine," Nora says absently. "I'm changing my project."

The line explodes with noise.

“I’ll explain later,” Nora says loudly over their overlapping protests and questions, perking up when she hears the front door open and close and Dani’s boots hitting the mat. “I’ve got to go. Dani’s here for lunch.”

Nora hangs up before they can keep yelling.

She does feel guilty for switching her phone off afterwards, even though it brings her peace. She’s been a bad friend lately; she’ll think of a way to make it up to them. But, for now, Dani is here.

“Hey!” Dani says once she’s closed the sliding glass door behind her, tipping Nora’s face up to kiss her upside down as she passes. “How’s your day?”

“It’s good. I just got off the phone with Kayla and Ash,” Nora says carefully. Dani sits in a deck chair, taking a swig of the iced tea Nora’s already poured. When she takes her hat off, the sun hits her hair and makes it shine. “I’ve decided to stay two more weeks.”

Dani sets the glass down slowly. Her eyes have lit up like fireworks.

“Really?” Her voice is hushed, like she can’t believe her luck. “Like, into September?”

“If you don’t mind?”

“Mind? Babe, that’s awesome!” Dani stands, abandoning her glass to sweep Nora up and into a kiss tinged with lemon and sugar.

Nora sinks into it. Quietly, the voice in her head whose volume has only been rising

lately whispers.

I think I'm in love with you.

I think I'm in love with you.

Dani cups Nora's face with gentle hands, her broad thumbs stroking across Nora's cheeks like she's memorizing her features again. She dips down to capture Nora's lips more firmly.

I am in love with you.

* * *

And so Nora stays in Riverwalk as summer transitions into fall.

The weather changes gently, with the chilly September nights dusting a hint of orange onto the tips of the leaves that canopy the tree house. Dani doesn't mention Nora's new departure date again, but every day is a pleasure made even sweeter by the knowledge that they almost didn't have it. Nora takes advantage of every scrap of Dani's free time.

"I think I'm always going to have a fondness for the place where you emphatically did not ask me out," Nora says, swinging her feet idly from the tree house platform.

Dani groans, flopping onto her back. The planks creak loudly underneath her as they always do, but Nora ignores it; over the course of the summer, they've been going up into the actual structure of it more and more, and now Nora pays the instability of the structure as little mind as Dani does.

"Am I ever going to live that down?" Dani asks the leafy canopy. Nora chuckles.

“Never. I’ll be telling that story when I’m sixty-five.”

Dani laughs, too, but there’s a heaviness to it that Nora almost doesn’t catch before Dani rubs her face and sits up, nudging Nora with her shoulder. “When you do, at least mention that I made you a picnic?”

“I’ll be sure to include that.”

Dani nods absently, swinging her legs back and forth. It makes an incredibly endearing picture—Dani at the edge of the platform, framed by the pink sunset, her blue ballcap on the wood planks next to her and her loose hair falling over one shoulder. She flashes a smile when she catches Nora staring. When Nora averts her own gaze back to the horizon, she can still feel Dani’s gaze on the side of her face.

“Hey, Nora?”

Dani’s voice is suddenly soft, and Nora looks over to find her fiddling with the cuffs of her faded hoodie. She’s chewing on her lower lip.

“Hmm?”

“I was thinking. Would you maybe... I mean, only if you want to,” Dani says, interrupting herself. “Feel free to say no. I know you’re leaving soon, so you might not—”

“Dani,” Nora interrupts, squeezing Dani’s hand, “you have to actually ask me a question in order for me to have an answer.”

“Right.” Dani laughs shakily, clearing her throat. Nora hasn’t seen her this nervous since their first date. “Um. Do you want to add your name to the tree?”

Such a simple question, yet with such a heavy context.

Nora's eyes trace over the tree in question. The names stand out in bold against it, a timeless expression of friendship and support. Inscribed so deep that they'll be there until the whole tree comes down. Dani shouldn't want Nora to put her name there. Nora shouldn't want to put her name there, symbolizing the twisting half-truths she's lived in all summer. It's a deeply meaningful gesture, a show of care and investment that should have Nora running in the other direction.

But Dani's bright smile when Nora nods in the affirmative is all she cares about.

Dani leads her to the trunk, kneeling down and flipping open a pocketknife. There's a spot over by Owen and Ryan's names where she could easily make her mark. There's also room near the floorboards where Mila's name is in the heart, over the blank spot hacked away all those years ago.

Nora has wondered about the blank spot before, but she's never asked. Now she runs her fingers over the splintery wood. "Who used to be here?"

"That's...not exactly my story to tell," Dani says. There's a hesitation to her voice. A layer of meaning Nora doesn't understand.

Nora swallows, her fingers curling against the tree bark.

Was it someone they lost? Or if not someone they lost, did this spot belong to someone Dani doesn't want to talk about anymore? If everyone found out who Nora is, what she's here for, would it be her name that becomes nothing but a scarred reminder on the tree trunk?

"Is it a bad memory?" Nora whispers.

Dani settles behind Nora. One of her arms tightens around Nora's waist, and the other reaches out to touch the tree. She scrapes at a corner of the blank spot with her fingernail.

"No. But they needed our support," Dani says. "That name wasn't who they really were."

Her fingers drift to Mila's engraving, tracing the edges of the heart. And then Nora understands.

"I know you're not here for much longer. But you've become part of our lives, our little group," Dani says softly. "I think that's worth remembering, right?"

Dani's surety is calming. The blank spot isn't the result of a conflict but something that came from love. A gesture of support. And Dani wants Nora's name there, too.

When Dani hands her the pocketknife, the area Nora is drawn to is further to the right, just under where Dani's slanted writing was carved in years ago.

Nora clutches the handle tightly. Now that she's here, she's hit with a dilemma.

Nora, or Eleanor?

She's gone by Eleanor her whole life. Introducing herself to Dani was the first time since childhood that she's tried anything else. Though it had felt strange at first, Nora now fits her so comfortably that it feels foreign to be addressed by her full name. These days, the Eleanor in her email signature is just a reminder of her father's disapproval, a reminder that she's never lived up to the name she was given. She's taken a new one now, and it fits better than the old one ever did.

She makes the first line of her swooping N carefully, and Dani's eyes follow her

hands all the way.

It's slow work when Nora insists on perfection. She leans forward to blow the sawdust out of the lines when she's finished, flipping Dani's knife closed, and together they survey her handiwork.

"Your writing is so elegant," Dani says, reaching up and tracing over the letters with her fingers. Her calloused fingertips catch on the uneven surface, and she rubs them together to brush off the wood chips. "How did you manage to do cursive on a tree trunk?"

"Determination," Nora drawls, resting her head back on Dani's shoulder as she laughs. "Hopefully you don't regret asking me to do that."

"Why would I regret it?"

"Things change," Nora says, swallowing past the knot of secrets that's only grown with time. "I'm leaving soon. This is quite permanent, that's all."

Dani says nothing for almost a full minute. When Nora cranes her neck back, Dani is frowning.

"I hope you didn't do it just to make me happy," Dani says. There's a seriousness behind her words, a deep contrast to the goofiness of earlier—she's fiddling with the zipper of Nora's sweater, moving the clasp up and down rapidly until she gets it caught on the fabric and has to abandon the fidget. "Please don't ever make yourself uncomfortable for my sake. You should do what you want, not what you think someone else wants."

"When did you become a self-prioritization expert?" Nora says. She pokes gently at Dani's ribs with an elbow. "You think of yourself less than anyone I've ever met."

“You taught me. This summer.”

Nora’s breath catches.

The change in Dani surrounding her own needs has been noticeable over the last few weeks. She’s more eager to ask for what she wants, or to let Nora give it to her without hesitation. The introduction of the toy they now use almost daily has been a godsend. But to hear Dani emphasize Nora’s part in this new outlook makes her heart race for a different reason.

“Did I?” Nora says, swallowing thickly. “Does that mean you’re going to stop getting up half an hour earlier than you need to just so I have coffee when I wake up?”

“I called my brother last week,” Dani says out of nowhere.

Nora sits up straight. She turns to look back at Dani with wide eyes, her brief attempt at humour forgotten.

“Yeah,” Dani says, laughing a little. “Sat and stared at my phone for an hour before I dialed the number. Then I heard your voice telling me my feelings mattered just as much as his.”

“How did it go? What did he say?”

“It was weird, but...good, I think,” Dani says carefully. “He said he’s wanted to reach out a couple times, but he was worried I hated him. He apologized. We both cried. We’re gonna talk again in a few days. So, thank you.”

“Dani, that’s a huge step,” Nora says. “But there’s nothing to thank me for.”

“I wouldn’t have done it if you hadn’t suggested it. I probably would have let myself

keep hurting forever to keep from inconveniencing him,” Dani says. She makes a small noise, almost like a laugh. “I wouldn’t even have realized what I was doing. Turns out he was hurting, too.”

“I’m really proud of you,” Nora says quietly. Whatever credence Dani is giving her, she doesn’t deserve it. She hasn’t even been able to bring herself to repeat her botched confession yet. “You’re braver than I’ve ever been.”

Dani doesn’t seem to be able to look at her, but Nora can see the ghost of a wry smile at the corner of her lips.

“It’s getting dark,” Dani says, pulling Nora closer to kiss her forehead. “Do you want to go home?”

Nora closes her eyes, pressing her head into Dani’s chin. She knows what Dani means by the question, but it strikes her suddenly just how much the meaning of home has changed.

She doesn’t want to go home, because it feels like she’s there already.

“No,” Nora says softly. “I want to stay.”

Dani doesn’t argue, even as the sun sets and the mosquitos start to appear.

It’s one more example of all the ways Dani makes her feel welcomed here. Welcomed and safe and absolutely accepted. Dani holds her tight, admiring the now-permanent name carved into her favourite spot, and Nora clings to her while she still can.

They do head back to Nora’s place once they’ve collected a few bug bites, and when 2 a.m. comes and goes without a wink of sleep, Nora grabs her phone from the

bedside table and opens her text thread with Kayla.

Eleanor: I have a few things to wrap up here. I need two more weeks.

Kayla's reply comes quickly, despite the fact that it's the middle of the night. It's just as skeptical as Nora knew it would be.

Kayla: This is some serious self-denial you've got going on.

Eleanor : I need time to say goodbye.

On the other side of the bed, Dani shifts, seeking out Nora's warmth, and wraps herself around Nora's back with a pleased, sleepy noise.

Three little grey dots appear right away. Kayla is nothing if not prompt and honest.

Kayla: You've had months, honey. I think you know what you want.

Nora purses her lips. It's cowardly to do this via text, avoiding what she knows will be a confrontation over the phone, but she stands firm in her decision.

Eleanor: Two more weeks. Schedule the board.

Kayla doesn't reply after that. Nora sets her phone down, and instead of the crippling guilt she'd been expecting about cancelling yet another departure date, all she feels is relief. She will tell Dani everything before she leaves. Just not yet.

She still has some time.

* * *

Kayla stays quiet in the following days, as does Ash. Nora can assume they're angry with her, but their ire is worth the delight in Dani's eyes in the morning when Nora wakes her up with the news.

Just a little longer and Nora will be ready to let go and do what she needs to do. She's sure of it.

She gets exactly five days.

It happens when Nora least expects it. Everyone is at the River Run taking advantage of the warm evening by making use of the patio when Nora sees something that makes her chest constrict to the point of possible cardiac arrest.

Down Main Street, past the tiny shops and mid-range cars Nora has come to know so well, crawls a shiny black Rolls-Royce. The windows are tinted, but the car and its license plate—reading A5HH0L3, which Ash had been delighted to get past the vanity plate censors—is as familiar to Nora as her own.

Just as she's making this horrifying realization, the car comes to an abrupt stop just past the River Run. In true Ashwin fashion, it reverses without so much as a rear window check and comes to a halt directly in front of the patio.

Dani seems to have noticed both Nora's sudden silence and the strange activity of the very fancy car in front of them, and she puts a hand on Nora's thigh just as the windows roll down and Nora's worst nightmare becomes real.

"Nora? You okay?" Dani asks, but the end of the question is drowned out by two very familiar, very loud voices.

"Eleanor! I have a bone to pick with you!" Kayla shouts.

Ash lowers his sunglasses, peering past Kayla's shoulder. "Beep, beep, darling. Where does a homosexual park on this godforsaken street?"

Nora's best friends are here, hanging out the windows of Ash's car in the middle of Nora's perfect summer, and her months-long fantasy pops like a soap bubble.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

Nora is surrounded by every single one of her favourite people, and yet, somehow, she has never experienced so much cognitive dissonance in her life.

As soon as Ash is directed where to leave his car, grumbling the whole way about parallel parking, two more chairs are pulled up to the mass of tables and Kayla and Ash are settled in with the group.

Kayla and Ash are here. They're in fucking Riverwalk , looking distinctly out of place in their sharp business attire, and it makes Nora wonder if that's how she looked when she first got here. Pressed and polished, uptight and overly corporate, next to the faded jeans and baseball caps of her new life.

Either way, they're looking at Dani and the arm draped over the back of Nora's chair with far too much interest.

"This is a surprise! Nora talks about you all the time, but we had no idea you'd be visiting," Dani says genially once everyone has been introduced.

Ash's answer is pretty much the exact opposite of what Nora was hoping it would be. "We've come to rescue our CEO from her hermitage!"

Nora's heart sinks to the soles of her sneakers.

"CromTech is probably on fire with all three of us gone, but we had to see what was keeping our dear Eleanor here," Kayla says, folding one leg over the other and leaning back in her chair. Though her tone is droll, her smile is genuinely friendly, and Dani reacts in kind.

“We’re so happy to have her, we didn’t want her to leave,” Dani says, smiling. But Nora can see that across the room, other people’s faces are slowly changing. Turning from pleasant curiosity to slow, stunned realization.

Nora’s heart, now back in her chest, is pounding at a mile a minute.

“CromTech?” Naomi says. The pleasant conversation around the arrival of two newcomers has died completely.

“CEO?” Sarah says.

“Yes,” Ash drawls, looking perplexedly between them. “Eleanor, did you not tell them—?”

Naomi makes a tiny, disbelieving noise of surprise, and Kayla’s eyes widen just a bit too late.

“Oh. Oh, no,” Kayla says quietly, touching Ash’s arm.

“CromTech,” Naomi says quietly. Her eyes are drilling into Eleanor’s, their warmth tempered by an intense focus. “Nora. Eleanor . You’re Eleanor Cromwell.”

Kayla and Ash have been here all of ten minutes, and already Nora’s summer of half-truths is blowing up in her face. Everything she’s been avoiding is rumbling toward her in an avalanche, and she’s pretty sure she’s on the verge of a full panic attack.

“Your last name is Cromwell?” Owen says.

Nora wishes desperately for everyone to just stop asking questions, but the universe doesn’t listen.

“You’re Eleanor Cromwell,” Naomi repeats. “The MRI technology you talked about at Pride—you’re the CEO of CromTech.”

Nora’s stomach churns. She doesn’t even dare look in Dani’s direction, too afraid of the betrayal and confusion she’s sure to see there, her lies finally coming to light at the worst possible moment. There’s blood pounding in her ears; she can practically feel the pressure of every set of eyes pressing into her skull.

“What the hell?” Sarah says, flabbergasted.

Ryan pipes up from under Owen’s arm. “Fucking CromTech , Nora?”

“All summer you’ve been lying to us?” Sarah says, looking more disappointed than anything else. “Are you seriously—”

Nora doesn’t stay to hear the rest. She can hear Kayla calling out to her as she sends her chair clattering to the floor, but she doesn’t turn back. She doesn’t face the consequences of her months of avoidance.

Nora runs.

She runs harder than she’s ever run before, sprinting down a path she and Dani sometimes use to bypass Main Street, and cutting through the woods until she emerges into a blessedly empty soybean field. She wades past a few rows before hunching over to gasp for air, her eyes burning with tears she can’t hold back.

They all know now. The shock in everyone’s eyes was clear—anyone who didn’t figure it out the moment Kayla let it slip surely knows after Naomi laid it all out. The reactions spoke for themselves. It’ll spread through town like wildfire, and in a matter of hours, it’ll all be over.

It's richly deserved, but the loss of her protective bubble is devastating. The anonymity of Riverwalk has allowed Nora to be truly, unrestrictedly herself for the first time in her life. Here she's not the daughter who never measured up, not the perfect student or the hard-ass bitch. Not Eleanor, not MissCromwell, not Robert Cromwell's daughter. Not the CEO of CromTech. Just Nora. And now that's gone.

She can't blame Kayla and Ash, really. She's been deliberately shutting them out. She's told them only the barest hints about her time here, so they had no way of knowing that nobody in town knew who she was. And she certainly can't blame Dani and her friends for being angry about the fact that Nora has been hiding this.

Even so, it hurts like a bitch .

Nora sinks to her knees in the dirt, savouring what she knows now will be her last day here.

She's finally run out of time.

"Nora?"

Nora closes her eyes as Dani approaches from behind her. Dani's voice is soft, and Nora can hear her hard breathing as she rustles through the soybean plants. She must have run to catch up.

"I'm sorry," Nora whispers. She hears Dani settle beside her, and a warm hand lands on her arm. "I'm so sorry."

Dani says nothing. Nora opens her eyes; Dani's hat is missing. Her ponytail is windblown, with tiny blonde fly-aways fluttering in the breeze, and her expression is soft.

“You have every right to scream at me,” Nora says. “I should have been completely honest with you from the start. I know how you all feel about CromTech. I was so—so fucking selfish.”

Dani’s face, strangely, doesn’t change from its sympathetic expression. She just settles herself in the dirt right next to Nora and interlaces their fingers. “I’ve always known who you are.”

A genuine record scratch would be less disruptive. Nora replays the words in her head, in order, and yet they don’t make a coherent statement to her.

Nora looks down at their linked hands, and then back up at Dani.

“I saw your full name on the receipt the first time you came to the shop,” Dani says, shrugging as if this isn’t a massive fucking revelation that shakes Nora’s entire perception of the summer. “I have a degree in journalism, remember? And you had a CromTech key chain in your dashboard when I changed your tire.”

Nora blinks slowly.

From the moment they met, Dani has known who Nora is. What she does. So she’s known that Nora hasn’t been telling her the whole truth, and she’s wanted to spend time with her despite that.

“I don’t understand,” Nora says.

Dani squeezes her hand. “I figured you didn’t want the whole town knowing, especially after Ryan said all that stuff about CromTech. You seemed like you needed a break. And, like I said, nobody is entitled to know anything personal that you don’t want to share. Myself included.”

Even in Nora's most indulgent, selfish daydreams, she never could have imagined that Dani would react this way. It's so absurd that it feels disingenuous, even though Dani has never shown any signs of lying. "You didn't tell anyone. You didn't treat me any differently."

"Of course I didn't. You're just a person like everyone else. I got to know you on your terms."

Nora laughs humourlessly. "I'm not sure how you did that. I don't even know me lately."

Dani doesn't let her spin into the vortex of self-loathing. She puts a finger under Nora's chin to guide her until their eyes meet and speaks with a frank honesty that even Nora can't ignore.

"I know you, Nora. You inspired Mila to start her own clothing brand, and you never treat any of us like we're less than you," Dani says, smiling softly. "You like to read and drink good wine and do 5,000-piece puzzles to relax. You're a recovering workaholic. You're the smartest person I've ever met, and you want to use it to help people. You're an incredible woman. And I'm insanely lucky that I've gotten to spend this summer with you."

There's a lump in Nora's throat the size of a baseball when Dani finishes. Even though Nora's chin is still being gently held, she can't help but avert her suddenly watery eyes. Dani's intensity is too much to look at head-on, especially when it's being directed in a way that Nora doesn't—

"I don't deserve your faith in me," Nora manages to say. "Even if you did know who I was, I didn't know that you knew. I've still been keeping it from you. Not telling you why I really came to Riverwalk."

“I don’t think you ever told a lie,” Dani says with a wan smile. “I was paying attention. And you did tell me, that night in bed. You did the right thing.”

That catches Nora’s attention. Her eyes snap to Dani again.

“You were awake?”

Dani winces. “Yeah. Sorry. I know you tried a couple other times, too.” She shifts a little, settling on her knees in the dirt and looking out at the sun sinking on the horizon. “And here’s my confession. I almost wrote an article about you, before I quit reporting.”

It’s too much information at once. Nora blinks silently, lost for words, as Dani keeps talking.

“It was about CromTech’s changes when you took over. The good ones, compared to your father’s policies. My boss turned it down because I couldn’t be objective,” Dani says. Her eyes are downcast. “I quit a couple months later and came back here. But I remembered as soon as I saw your name.”

Nora might be upset if her own secret wasn’t about a thousand times bigger. She stares at Dani, trying in vain to comprehend why Dani’s reaction to all this has been so mild. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Dani gnaws on her lower lip, letting it slide harshly through her teeth before she speaks. “I guess I had the same problem you did. Admitting that I knew, letting you tell me the truth, it felt like...like that would be the end. I wanted to keep this a little longer, I guess. I wanted more time with you. To know you fully.”

It’s a bit calming to know that Dani’s reasons echo Nora’s own. They both made the wrong decisions in futile attempts to preserve the magic of the summer, and now

they're both here in the aftermath.

"But I told you I came here to develop Riverwalk," Nora says. "I was going to do everything you said you didn't want. You have every reason to never want to speak to me again."

Dani doesn't say anything for a moment. The truth hangs between them, caught on the thick tension in the air. In the end, Dani's response is only three words. "You said was ."

Nora frowns. "Was ?"

"You talked in the past tense. Your proposal was to buy property. You were looking to profit. You said you'd changed your mind."

Nora laughs wetly, wiping at her eyes with the cuff of her sleeve. "Of course I changed my mind. I'm going to be eviscerated by the board for coming back empty-handed, but there's no way I can go forward with it."

"Then why would you not deserve my faith in you?" Dani says. Her voice is warm, and when Nora finally raises her eyes to Dani's, they're unimaginably kind, given the circumstances. "You were scared, but you did the right thing. If that isn't me being proven right, I don't know what is."

"So you just...you don't care that I was going to do all of that to begin with?" Nora asks. "I told you I came here for a selfish reason that would have jeopardized the town you love, and that didn't bother you?"

"I know. I probably should have flipped out as soon as I figured out what you were here for. But every time I was with you, I stopped caring about the town," Dani says softly, drumming the fingers of her other hand against her thigh. "I was selfish, too."

Putting what I wanted ahead of everyone else. Even if you hadn't changed your mind, I don't know if I ever would have said anything. Not if it meant you'd leave sooner."

It's dangerously close to the kind of admission Nora has been avoiding. Intellectually she's suspected that Dani feels as strongly as she does, but to be faced with the reality of it on the day when it all comes crumbling down is like a slap in the face.

In the end, their feelings don't matter. Not when their lives have to diverge.

"At this point, I don't care what you came for. I care what you've done since," Dani says with an air of finality.

Defending Nora against herself seems to come naturally to Dani in a way Nora doesn't understand. But her steady presence is calming, and as Nora's heart rate slows, she closes her eyes and tries to focus on the things she can feel. The cool breeze on her skin, clean and fresh. The soil under her knees, still warm from the day's sun. The birdsong and crickets and gentle buzzing of insects among the plants. Dani's hand intertwined with hers, with her rough callouses against Nora's soft skin. Breathing in, breathing out.

Nora opens her eyes to drink in her last Riverwalk sunset.

"You okay?" Dani asks softly.

Some of the tension has left Nora's body, but her stomach still lurches when she thinks about going back to the bar to face everyone.

"I assume the others aren't quite as understanding as you are," Nora says. The memory of each face as the truth was revealed leaves a bitter taste in her mouth. "Ryan is probably ready to kill me."

Dani's mouth forms a thin line that tells Nora all she needs to know. "They're all a little shell-shocked. But they'll come around."

"They'd be well within their rights not to. As would you," Nora says.

Dani stands, brushing the dirt from her knees and offering a hand to Nora. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not. Even with your explanation, I still don't understand why you don't hate me."

In helping Nora up, Dani pulls her close enough to share air. With only a whisper of space between them, Dani looks down at her with a tenderness Nora can't fathom. "I could never hate you."

"Why?" Nora asks before she can think better of it.

Dani's hand in hers gets warmer. Dani doesn't say the words, but Nora can almost taste them in the air—the same words Nora has been choking back for weeks, so easily evident in Dani's eyes. Even now, when she sees Nora for who she really is.

"Come on," Dani says instead, tugging lightly at Nora's elbow. "Your friends want to apologize."

* * *

The patio has cleared out by the time they get back to the River Run. Kayla and Ash are the only people left, waiting at a table inside the bar with a jug of sangria, and the moment they lock eyes, Kayla is hurrying forward to pull Nora into a tight hug.

"I am so sorry," Kayla says. She lets Nora go quickly, aware as always of her usual

aversion to affectionate displays.

“It’s okay. You didn’t know.”

“I should have kept my mouth shut. I didn’t even think to ask you, I just assumed—”

“It’s fine, Kayla,” Nora says, taking the seat beside Dani’s. Dani puts an arm immediately over the back of her chair, and Nora shifts to lean easily against her.

“Not that I’m not happy to see you, but why are you here?”

“We were worried about you,” Kayla says. Nora doesn’t miss the way Kayla’s eyes track the movement of Dani’s arm, narrowing curiously at the easy physicality between them.

“We’re also a little curious about your new life,” Ash says, stirring his sangria.

“That, too. But mostly we’re here because Renée is holding an emergency board meeting two days from now, and we’re pretty sure she’s going to propose a vote of no confidence,” Kayla says far too casually.

Nora sits up straight.

“They’re trying to fire you?” Dani says, her brow furrowed. “Can they do that?”

“Yes,” Nora tells Dani, then turns back to Kayla. “On what grounds?” The fuzzy warmth of the summer is falling away the longer her friends are here, and facing the reality of what she’s going to be returning to is like plunging into icy water.

“Undue absence,” Ash says, sipping his sangria and wincing. Whether it’s because of the subject matter or because the wine isn’t to his standards, Nora can’t tell. “Conflict with board members, namely herself. And financial mismanagement.”

“She’s been gunning for it all summer, but we’ve been able to hold her off until now. When you didn’t come back at the end of August, she went on the warpath,” Kayla says gravely.

“Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?”

“We tried! You don’t answer your email anymore, and you’ve been ignoring our calls,” Ash says. “When we do manage to get hold of you, you’re barely interested in talking about work.”

Nora can’t begrudge him that assessment. She’s let four phone calls go to voicemail in the last week, assuming that they were calling to talk to her about coming home. And they were, as it turns out. For good reason.

“We figured the only way to get your attention was to turn up in person,” Kayla says, glancing around at the decor as she pours Nora a glass of sangria: the mismatched tables and chairs, the faded carpet, the wood-panelled walls. “We weren’t expecting...”

“Expecting what?” Nora asks. Kayla’s pointedly raised eyebrow is raising her hackles—she’s looking Nora up and down, too, from her sneakers and jeans to her loose hair to the oversized blue-and-red checkered flannel draped over her shoulders. It’s Dani’s—Nora stole it weeks ago to ward off the cold.

“For you to look so...local.”

It’s Kayla’s usual tone, nothing Nora isn’t used to—dry, sarcastic, and irreverent. Nora has always let it roll right off her shoulders. But here, directed at the place where Nora has become so comfortable, it has Nora feeling defensive.

“What’s that supposed to mean, exactly?” she snaps.

Kayla blinks silently. The silence that follows feels slightly frosty.

“Hey, Ash,” Dani says, her eyes darting back and forth between Nora and Kayla, “do you like to play darts?”

“Do I ever,” Ash mutters, springing out of his seat. He’s always been the least confrontational one of the three of them, more likely to interfere behind the scenes or step in as a peacemaker. As he and Dani leave the table, Dani with a quick squeeze to Nora’s shoulder, Nora is grateful. If she’s going to hash it out with Kayla, she’d rather do it without an audience.

“I didn’t mean it in a bad way, Eleanor,” Kayla says, and to her credit she does sound penitent. “I meant that you look happy. Healthy. You look at home here.”

The repeated use of Nora’s full name keeps making her flinch. A simple Eleanor seems as loud as a gunshot when she’s spent a whole summer getting used to Nora .

“Isn’t that the point? You suggested this vacation because you were worried I was—what was the phrase you used—‘working myself to death’?”

“I wasn’t banking on you falling in love.”

Nora’s head snaps to Dani, her heart in her throat—if she heard, if this is how Dani finds out...

But Dani is out of earshot. She’s watching Ash throw a dart with folded arms, critiquing his form, if Nora’s hunch is correct. Her head tilts in the same way it does when she’s assessing someone’s pool game. The strap of her tank top has shifted up to show the edge of her tan line—Nora had woken Dani up this morning by kissing her there until Dani rolled over, giggling, and claimed the kisses with her mouth instead.

Nora's chest aches with pre-emptive grief.

"Wow. You didn't deny it," Kayla says, sighing into the silence Nora has left. Her tone is more sincere now. "You really have changed."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all. Dani is a good influence on you."

"Not for much longer," Nora says. Her glass is sweating, untouched, beads of condensation pooling on the coaster. Nora can't bring herself to drink it. "It's time to go home."

That last word sticks in her throat.

"While the last thing I want is for you to lose your job," Kayla says carefully, folding her hands together on the table, "I think that maybe the fact that you've stayed away long enough for this to become an issue should be evidence that—"

"It's nothing more than irresponsibility on my part," Nora interrupts, fully aware of where Kayla is headed and unwilling to let her finish her point. "I knew the situation was worsening, and I stayed here anyway. I need to get back to reality."

"I've never seen you look at anyone the way you look at her," Kayla says softly.

As if the universe wants to drive home the point, Dani looks over her shoulder just as Kayla says it, catching Nora's eye. She smiles, giving Nora a little wave, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"I'll go back with you tomorrow. I can hire someone to pack up my things," Nora says. Even the idea of it floods her with exhaustion. It's like the bone-deep weariness

she came here with has been magnified exponentially.

“I’ll drive you,” Kayla says. “Ash can get himself home. I get the feeling you’ll be a little distracted.”

Nora is overcome, suddenly, with a need to be closer to Dani. She leaves the table and her untouched drink, heading over to where Dani is just landing a bull’s eye.

“Your girlfriend is sullyng my reputation as a formidable darts player,” Ash grumbles as Nora approaches.

“Can’t have been much of a reputation to begin with,” Dani says, shrugging good-naturedly. Ash laughs, but in retaliation, he nudges Dani with his shoulder at the height of her next throw. It veers off, sinking into the drywall instead, and Nora smacks him on the arm.

“Ow! You see what I have to put up with being friends with Eleanor? Abuse,” Ash says, rubbing his bicep. “Does she beat you like this, Danielle?”

Dani grins. “Only when I ask nicely.”

There’s a moment of quiet where the statement seems to work its way through Ash’s brain before he roars with laughter, slapping Dani on the back. “Oh, I like you!”

“I’m sorry about him,” Nora says, plucking a coaster from the nearest table and throwing it in Ash’s direction. “He’s not fully house-trained.”

Ash blows a kiss.

Dani steps back to let him have his turn, putting an easy arm around Nora’s waist and kissing the top of her head. Nora leans into her. It’s a simple unconscious gesture

she's done a hundred times this summer, and it's only the look on Kayla's face as she watches it happen that makes Nora finally comprehend the word Ash used.

Girlfriend .

Even though Nora is leaving tomorrow, even though she's been convincing herself all summer that this is only a fling, she had no reaction to being called Dani's girlfriend besides an overall feeling of contentment.

The hotel Kayla and Ash booked themselves into is far outside of town, and it's hardly gotten dark before Kayla is ushering Ash out the door and promising to meet at Nora's place in the morning. Dani subtly inclines her head toward the door after them, and, as always, Nora follows without a thought.

The drive home is quiet. It's been days since Dani slept at her own house, and she follows Nora inside without question. After stripping down and getting ready for bed—a two-person dance of a routine that Nora hadn't realized they've developed, weaving around each other as easily as breathing—Nora ends up tangled with Dani in the bedsheets, wrapped around her in every way she can manage.

Neither of them pushes it further than that. The room is dark and quiet except for a shaft of moonlight between the curtains and the sound of their breathing. Their legs are wound tightly together, and Nora's head pillowed on Dani's chest. Dani is playing idly with Nora's hand, running her calloused fingertips over the softer pads of Nora's like she's trying to learn every swirl.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," Nora says quietly. Dani's answer is equally soft.

"I know."

Dani's hand doesn't still. She moves to Nora's wrist, tracing the blue veins under her

pale skin.

“I’ve been gone too long already,” Nora continues. She’s not sure whom she’s trying harder to convince—Dani or herself. “I can’t put it off anymore.”

“I know,” Dani says, her voice never wavering. Understanding, even, and calm. A rock in the tempest Nora is failing to navigate. The sound of it is like a beacon. Nora breathes in deep: warm vanilla, machine shop. Crisp deodorant and the base-level chemical attraction of her skin.

“It doesn’t feel real,” Nora whispers, as if saying it quietly will make it hurt less.

Dani squeezes her shoulder, kissing the top of her head again. Her lips linger this time. “It doesn’t. But I’m grateful for the time we had.”

There’s a quaver in Dani’s voice that Nora hasn’t heard before.

* * *

Nora hardly sleeps, and she’s fairly sure that Dani doesn’t either. It’s like her mind won’t let her give up a single moment of their last night together, even if it means the morning finds her red-eyed and groggy as she throws together the essentials and schedules a moving crew for later in the week.

Dani helps out, efficiently carrying Nora’s bags out to the car while Nora is on the phone with the movers. While Kayla loads her things into the trunk, Nora pulls Dani aside.

She looks as beautiful as always. She’s in a tight henley and jeans, her hair a bit tangled from their sleepless night, and it strikes Nora all at once as the weak morning sun lights up her grey eyes.

This is goodbye.

Nora can't find the right words. She lets Dani pull her into a hug, pressing her face into Dani's neck and trying to memorize how it feels.

"Remember how you said you wouldn't beg me to go with you when you left?" Dani says quietly.

Dani doesn't say anything further, but Nora knows. It's about as close to begging as Dani Cooper will get, as concerned as she's always been with making sure Nora never feels unduly pressured. Dani is putting herself out on a limb. Offering something and trusting Nora to tell her the truth.

Nora couldn't stop the tears if she tried. They run down her nose, wetting Dani's skin.

Nora wants to say yes. God, does she want to. But there's a pit of fear in her belly, one that whispers at her—telling her that Dani moving to the city is a bad idea, no matter how much Nora wants to keep her close. That her instinct to say yes is just u-hauling, stuck in the honeymoon phase of a summer relationship they haven't even defined.

Nora can't imagine being the person to drag Dani away from here. To take her from somewhere that makes her so happy and force her to live the kind of life that Dani has already made the conscious choice to leave. To subject her to the person Nora really is, the person she's sure she'll revert to as soon as she gets back—the uptight, aloof workaholic. The woman who sleeps in the office. The woman who doesn't have the time or inclination to maintain anything beyond a physical relationship.

Isn't it better to break both their hearts now and keep the good memory of their summer together, rather than draw it out until it all ends in a bitter mess?

Dani seems to know it, too.

“Sorry. Forget I said that.” Dani pulls back from the hug, smiling in a way that looks more like a grimace. Her face tightens, like maybe she’s struggling not to cry. Nora herself has to put all of her energy into holding in the sob that claws at her chest.

Nora wants so badly to say all the things she’s been holding in all summer— I’m crazy about you, I love it here, I love you — but no sound comes out. She’s silent, her mouth quivering in the face of Dani’s sad acceptance.

Dani inclines her head toward the idling car where Kayla is patiently waiting. “You’d better get going. You’ve got a big meeting to get ready for.”

“Right,” Nora says. Her breathing is shaky. “Of course.”

“One more for the road?” Dani says, holding her arms out.

Nora throws herself into them with no hesitation.

The kiss they share is just as intense as their first. Dani holds Nora so tightly that she can hardly breathe, but Nora wouldn’t want it any other way—she wants to feel like the only air in her lungs is coming from Dani’s mouth, that they’re connected in every way possible in their last moments together.

Nora pours everything she can’t say into the kiss. The idea of parting is like ripping a piece of herself away. It’s as if when she carved her name into that tree, it bound them together somehow. Dani is carved into her heart.

But it can’t go on forever. Their kisses finally slow, and Nora pulls herself away after one soft, final meeting of lips.

Dani strokes Nora's cheek one last time before letting her hand drop away.
"Goodbye, Nora."

Before she can call this whole thing off, Nora tears herself away from Dani and gets into the car. When she shuts the door behind her, Kayla's voice is right there beside her.

"One last chance to change your mind."

Nora doesn't answer. After a moment, Kayla turns the ignition, and Nora watches Dani shrink in the rear-view mirror—leaned up against her truck, arms folded, watching the progression of Nora's Porsche down the driveway—until the car turns onto the road.

Nora has never been more grateful for Kayla's presence. She keeps a steady hand on the wheel and the other laced with Nora's while she cries. She gives steady company without judgment. The further Nora gets from Dani, the more it feels like a piece of her is stretching thin between them, refusing to let Dani go. A kite string holding them together.

It's somehow both the longest and the shortest drive of Nora's life. She collapses into the cold, now-unfamiliar bed in her dusty apartment just before 2 a.m. after an afternoon spent furiously outlining a plan for tomorrow's meeting, and she sleeps fitfully out of pure exhaustion.

The moon seems terribly far away, cold and small and remote above the glowing city skyline.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

The look on Renée's face when she sees Nora waiting at the head of the conference table the following morning doesn't make up for the devastation of leaving Riverwalk, but it does help.

"Eleanor," Renée says, her voice somewhat higher than usual but still managing to sound condescending. "You've finally graced us with your presence. How thrilling."

Nora says nothing. As the rest of the board filters in, she maintains her silence, watching the way each of them fidgets under her gaze but none will meet her eyes. Kayla and Ash are the last in the room, shutting the door firmly behind them and taking their seats at Nora's right and left hands.

"Since I didn't call this meeting, I feel I need to ask," Nora says into the stifling silence, "what's this about?"

"We're concerned that your investment in your job isn't up to our standards," Renée says, radiating a smugness that Nora can't wait to dismantle. "You've been gone for months, letting your underlings run the show. The board feels that you've been an absent leader."

"The board feels," Nora says quietly.

The board is silent.

"We all feel that perhaps control of the company was given to you too hastily," Renée says.

Nora shuffles her papers. She lets the awkwardness infuse the room, percolating down until even Renée looks uncomfortable.

“Despite being doubted at every turn,” Nora starts, her voice low and controlled, “I have increased profits in every quarter since I took this position. I’ve been responsible for green- lighting several products which have made this company—and each of you—a great deal of money. And my single period of absence this summer is nothing in comparison to the multiple month-long holidays my father took several times a year with his various wives.”

Renée’s cheeks turn pink.

“Whether any of us agree with it or not, it was my father’s belief that I was the best fit,” Nora continues more loudly as Renée opens her mouth to protest. “And nothing in my work ethic or accomplishments over the last five years has warranted the disrespect consistently paid to me here.”

It’s hard to gauge the energy of the room when Nora is so focused on not showing how much her heart is pounding. But Renée doesn’t look happy.

“And how do you explain your absence this summer? What do you have to present that could possibly have taken four months?”

“I spent the summer doing research. Integrating into the community,” Nora says, taking a steadying breath. “And I determined that a large-scale real estate development project in Bracken County isn’t feasible.”

Renée latches onto that like a piranha swallowing a juicy piece of bait. “So you’re telling us that eighteen weeks of your supposed work has amounted to absolutely nothing?”

“Quite the opposite. My work determined that the local population’s negative views of CromTech make it a bad candidate for the kind of development we intended. However,” Nora says, holding up a finger as Renée tries to interject again, “it also gave me the opportunity to reflect on this company’s direction.”

The proposal Nora finished two weeks ago to replace the Riverwalk development project is something she wouldn’t have dreamed of presenting to the board before this summer. Now, however, her investment in her job has waned so much that she has nothing to lose.

Why not shoot for the moon?

“We’ll be investing in a series of green-tech initiatives, and we’ll be finding the funding elsewhere. I’ve laid out areas where resources can be redirected, along with several new donor and investor opportunities,” Nora says authoritatively. “A small pivot, but a turn in the right direction.”

Renée looks too stunned to speak.

“I’ll be presenting a new proposal at the next quarterly meeting,” Nora says. “A case study for introducing clean energy to our docket. The first step will be starting an environmental department at CromTech.”

“You’re committing career suicide,” Renée says in quiet disbelief. “No investor will ever back that. It’s a financial black hole.”

“It’s a proving ground for our new direction. The world is changing. This company is changing. If you’re set on opposing that change, I suggest that you retire or find a position elsewhere,” Nora says, aiming for an air of finality. “Otherwise, I think it’s high time we put aside petty personal squabbles and move forward.”

“So you truly believe that you’re the best person to be at the helm?” Renée snaps, standing up suddenly and planting her hands on the table. “You’re going to run this company into the ground.”

Nora raises a calm eyebrow. “As opposed to you doing it yourself?”

Renée looks around the room for support. The smugness she started the meeting with is slipping away with the lack of vocal disagreement amongst the other board members. “Why not? You’re not the only one in the room with a business degree.”

“So that’s what this has all been about,” Nora says, folding her arms. She’s done this long enough to understand that half of business is theatre. All unwitting, Renée has walked right into a trap. She’s shown her hand too early. Too eagerly.

The energy in the room seems to shift.

Renée’s voice is shrill. “This is about your absence and the financial strain you’ve put on—”

“Apparently this is about your inability to accept that the man you were married to for less than three years didn’t leave his entire legacy to you,” Nora says sharply.

A murmur runs along the table. Renée’s jaw twitches, her fingers turning white against the polished wood.

“If this is the way you would plan to run this company,” Nora says, looking around and making eye contact with each person in the room, “I’d advise everyone else to make backup plans. Underhanded dealings and secret meetings can switch targets on a dime.”

Cowed by the now significantly less friendly eyes on her, Renée sinks back down

into her chair. The creak of springs is audible in the otherwise silent room.

“Let’s get to the crux of this meeting,” Kayla says, breaking through the awkwardness with utter confidence. “All in favour of removing Eleanor Cromwell from her position as CEO of CromTech?”

Renée’s hand shoots into the air. A few of the others look to each other, nervous and twitchy — Roger McMurray, Renée’s right-hand man, starts to raise his hand under Renée’s glare before his neighbour elbows him. He lowers it quickly.

“And all opposed?” Kayla says. She raises her hand first, but slowly every other arm in the room goes up. Renée stands alone in their midst.

“Motion denied. Almost unanimously,” Ash says jovially.

“And with that, I believe this meeting is concluded,” Nora says, the exhaustion catching up with her all at once. She flips her folder of notes closed, gathering them and heading straight to the door. “I’ll present my findings and new proposal at our regularly scheduled meeting at the end of the month.”

Nora has but a few minutes alone in her office before Kayla and Ash arrive, flush with pride and intent on celebrating the win, but celebration is the last thing Nora feels like doing. Her so-called victory feels emptier than the empty apartment waiting for her at the end of her very long day.

Victory is making Dani laugh. It sounds like the gratefulness in Dani’s voice when Nora put in the effort to accommodate her needs. Victory tastes like pizza and beer on the River Run patio, smells like fresh air and cool water after a day in the sun with her friends. It feels like the warmth of Dani’s kiss.

This day is just another heavy weight on Nora’s shoulders.

The sheer legwork involved in proving her plan is viable at least gives Nora the opportunity to put her sorrows out of her mind. There's less backlog in the regular work than she assumed there would be—Ash and Kayla have done a great job in her absence, fitting into their temporary roles more easily than Nora ever did—but there's still so much to catch up on after four and a half months away that, for a while, she can cope.

All Nora needs to do to avoid missing Dani is work incessantly, exhausting herself every day and interrupting any unwelcome thoughts with paperwork and research.

Ash and Kayla try to help, filling Nora's time and making sure she eats enough to keep her blood sugar up, but Nora can see the way they share worried looks every time they think she isn't looking. It's almost a return to routine, if it weren't for the ever-present ache in Nora's chest that worsens whenever she has a spare moment to think.

Nora's belongings arrive from Riverwalk a week after her departure. Folded carefully at the top of the third box of clothes is Dani's blue-and-red checkered flannel.

* * *

In this rhythm, Nora doesn't thrive, necessarily, but she survives. Her old clothes feel stiff and restricting after a summer of jeans and sundresses, her feet aching now that she's abandoned her flat-soled boots, but she steps back into her dusty stilettos and adapts.

September turns into October. October to November. Nora's project is approved by the board with few alterations. Kayla takes the lead on restructuring the departments, and Ash dives headfirst into networking and fundraising. Nora's life is a cycle, going around and around and around as she consistently fails to re-acclimate to her old patterns. Everything feels shaky and unfamiliar—from her morning commute to her

hectic schedule—and she’s walked away from the one person who ever made her feel stable.

Thoughts about Dani are restricted to the few moments before she falls asleep, when her brain relaxes enough to let her guard down and that bright smile comes floating back into her memory. More often than not, Nora wakes up with the foggy perception that she’s still in Riverwalk. Opening her eyes to find stark white walls instead of warm yellow is a crushing disappointment every morning, but she drags herself through the days anyway.

It has to get better eventually, Nora reasons. Once she’s had enough distance from Dani and Riverwalk and the life she led there, things will revert. She’ll slip back into the way things were before. The pain will ease. Her first heartbreak all those years ago had been hard, but she’d brushed herself off and moved on. She can do it this time, too.

But what finally shakes Nora’s certainty isn’t the concern of her friends or her own building stress or the constant dreams. It’s a sharp knock at her apartment door at 11:15 p.m. on a Friday night.

She opens it to reveal Lydia, dressed to the nines in a gorgeous minidress and smiling expectantly.

“Evening,” Lydia drawls. “I heard you were back in town. Any chance you have time for me these days?”

It’s a deeply familiar sight. Nora’s condo is close to the places Lydia likes to party. Usually Lydia would text or call first, but Nora had often been the starting point for Lydia’s nights.

Before.

Nora steps back to let Lydia in out of pure habit. Lydia throws her coat over the couch, slips out of her shoes, and, as always, heads right to the bedroom.

It's a routine Nora knows by heart. Exactly the way things used to be.

She can even imagine what will happen if she follows. She'll fall into bed with Lydia, have decently satisfying sex, and forget her problems for an hour. Efficient and impersonal, two words she once valued highly. Lydia will then fluff her hair, fix her makeup, and jet off to whatever party she has lined up next. Nora will fall asleep alone.

It's so unfamiliar an idea now that it feels like living someone else's life. She's watching a movie starring her past self, but her current self is detached from it entirely—floating somewhere above it, thinking instead about how Dani would feel if she knew there was someone else in Nora's bed.

The worst part is that Nora is sure Dani would accept it. She'd say something understanding and perfect, assure Nora that she just wants her to be happy. But Nora can imagine the look in Dani's eyes. The hurt. The regret.

"I don't have all night, you know," Lydia calls from the bedroom.

Nora sinks down onto the couch.

She and Dani parted ways almost two months ago with the understanding that they would never see each other again. They made no promises. There's no reason for Nora to feel anything but enthusiastic about Lydia's presence. It should be a welcome distraction, in fact. A step back toward normalcy.

But Nora doesn't want this. She doesn't want the fleeting, purely physical night Lydia is offering, or the isolation that accompanies it. The loneliness. Nora wants the

connection she had this summer. She wants that depth, and the trust they shared. She wants something real.

She wants Dani.

“Are you coming?” Lydia asks, leaning against the door jamb now. She’s half naked, her dress probably lying somewhere on the floor of Nora’s bedroom, and she looks irritated. “I skipped out on a yacht party for this.”

“No,” Nora says distantly. “I’m not coming.”

The silence is deafening. Nora can detect Lydia’s shock purely from the fact that she doesn’t snap back with something witty. Hesitant footsteps approach, and the cushion to her left sinks under Lydia’s weight.

“Did I do something wrong?” Lydia’s tone is uncharacteristically soft. “I thought—I know it’s been a while, but this is how we’ve always—”

“It’s not you,” Nora says quickly. She picks at her thumbnail, tugging and tearing at skin that only just managed to heal over the summer. “This is all me.”

“Cliché.” Lydia sighs, but she shuffles closer. “So, what’s the issue?”

“The issue is,” Nora says, clawing back a sob, “I can’t do this anymore. Because I fell in love. Like a fucking idiot.”

“Jesus,” Lydia mutters to herself. She puts an arm around Nora’s shaking shoulders, though, patting her awkwardly. She’s still in her lingerie, which makes the whole thing even more absurd. “This is not how I thought my night was going to go.”

“I’m sorry,” Nora says, wiping furiously at the tears that escape without permission.

She hasn't cried since she left Riverwalk. She hasn't given herself time to feel any of this since that horrible car ride, and now it's all catching up with her at once. Her breath shudders. "This isn't going to happen, so go salvage your night."

"Oh, shut up," Lydia huffs. "I'm not leaving when you're like this. So why don't you talk to me about it instead of trying to be a martyr?"

It's almost enough to snap Nora out of it. Lydia has never so much as stayed to cuddle after hooking up, always out of bed and halfway out the door as soon as they're both satisfied. Somehow her businesslike attitude about the situation and her out-of-character willingness to listen are easier to deal with than Kayla's empathy or Ash's jokes.

So Nora shares. She tells Lydia the whole foolish story, from May to September, and Lydia comforts her until well past midnight in her own pragmatic way. She leaves with her clothes back on and firmly intact, even giving Nora one genuine hug before she heads down to catch her cab.

It's all completely unprecedented, and it drives home a truth Nora hadn't dared consider until now.

Maybe things have changed irrevocably. Nora has changed. And she might never recalibrate to who she used to be.

* * *

Not even work is enough of a distraction as time presses on and the weather turns from November rain to December ice and sleet. It gets harder with every passing day to drag herself out of bed and into the office every morning. She's there in body but not in spirit.

Where she used to work so single-mindedly that Kayla would sometimes find her sleeping face down on her desk, now Nora spends half her days staring listlessly out at the city, imagining what Riverwalk must look like right now.

It's probably properly snowy, rather than the iron-grey salty slush that lines the streets here. Is Dani helpfully shovelling the driveways of half the town like she mowed lawns in the summer? Nora can imagine her scraping the ice off her truck in the mornings, wearing the big fleece-lined brown canvas jacket she'd sometimes wear on the cooler nights before Nora left. The river and the ice rink are likely frozen over, the houses twinkling with coloured lights. Like a picture-perfect holiday card.

Nora can see it in her mind's eye just as clearly as she can see Dani coming home to her after a long day at work, shrugging the wet jacket off and joining her in front of the fireplace at the rental house. Nora would warm her face with kisses until Dani laid them both back on the couch, spreading out in front of the crackling flames.

Nora can almost taste Dani's lip balm. She can hear her voice, low and sweet and increasingly less controlled as Nora slides her hands underneath Dani's shirt. She can feel the warm softness of Dani's skin.

"Congratulations, the contract is signed. Everything is pretty much in order, now we just need—Eleanor?"

Nora blinks. The warm fantasy swims in her vision and then dissipates; she isn't in Riverwalk with Dani. She's in her sterile office, halfway through an email and definitely late to a lunch she scheduled with the head of PR.

"That's great," Nora says vaguely, spinning her chair toward her computer and typing a few random words in lieu of trying to remember what Kayla might be talking about. The email she still hasn't finished might as well be written in Sanskrit—none of the words make any sense. "They signed. Fantastic."

Kayla's eyes narrow. "Who signed?"

Nora searches her memory banks for what contract Kayla might be talking about, but she comes up blank. Kayla has been taking charge a lot lately, picking up Nora's slack in the same way she did over the summer. She's better at it than Nora ever was.

Knowing there's no getting her lack of attention past Kayla, Nora shrugs helplessly.

Kayla sighs, taking a seat on the edge of Nora's desk. "Eleanor."

"I know," Nora mutters. She braces her elbows on the desk, pressing the heels of her hands against her tired eyes. The urge to fight against this conversation is slowly leaking out of her. "I'm sorry. I know you've been doing half my work lately. You did this job better than I ever have."

"Thank you, but that's only because I don't hate every second of it like you do."

"Renée must be thrilled that I'm failing so spectacularly."

Kayla scoffs. "Forget about Renée. The only thing you're failing at is letting yourself be happy."

"That's not something you can fix," Nora says. Her voice seems to echo back up at her from the surface of her desk, and she rubs her eyes viciously until tiny specks of light erupt behind her eyelids. "You've already played your 'take a vacation' card."

"I think we both know it was more than a vacation, Nora," Kayla says softly.

Nora stops rubbing. Kayla's use of the nickname is enough to make her pause—she'd gone by Nora all summer, and going back to Eleanor on a permanent basis has been like trying to fit into clothes that no longer fit. Eleanor Cromwell got lost somewhere

between tree house sunsets and lawn mower races, and she hasn't found her way back.

"Ash and I have been trying to figure out what's really keeping you here. We haven't been able to decide," Kayla says as Nora raises her head. Kayla is looking at her with unnerving empathy. "Ash thinks it's a sense of duty. I think you're probably afraid. What do you think?"

"Of course I'm afraid," Nora says. An uncomfortable thing to admit, but she's long past trying to pretend she's doing okay. "I've been afraid since the second I got to Riverwalk."

"Of what?"

"Telling the truth. Lying. Leaving the life I knew. Afraid of..." Nora swallows. Even this long after leaving, saying Dani's name out loud is still hard. "Falling for her. And then it all came to a head, and I had to leave, and now I'm afraid I can never fix it."

"Nothing is irreversible."

"She said she would have come with me, if I asked. I didn't say yes. I left her. She might want nothing to do with me," Nora says. It's one of the loudest regrets that's been haunting her lately. "And I can guarantee everyone else feels the same way. I hid who I was for months."

"People do stupid things when they're scared," Kayla says reasonably. "Did you ever explain yourself to them?"

"I don't deserve their forgiveness. I should have been better. I should have been upfront. And none of it matters anyway, because I can't just abandon my father's company to go live in the woods."

“Oh, who gives a flying fuck about your father?” Kayla snaps, her voice high and loud like the words have been threatening to burst out of her for too long. “I certainly don’t! He treated you like shit!”

Nora doesn’t know how to respond to that. She stares at Kayla, silent and flabbergasted, until Kayla slides off the desk to approach her.

“He didn’t express pride in your accomplishments when you graduated early or got any of your multiple university degrees or patented technologies that made his company millions,” Kayla says more evenly. “He only did when he thought Ash might propose to you. He cared more about your ability to carry on his legacy than he did about you as a person, and I’ve watched it fuck with your self-worth for your entire life. He does not deserve that much real estate in your brain.”

It stings, but Nora can’t argue the point. She’s spent thirty years trying to live up to a benchmark that was always out of reach, and she’s tired of living for nothing but obligation.

“This is reminding me of the pep talk you gave me before I took over the company,” Nora says, leaning heavily against Kayla’s side.

“I assume you mean the one where I told you not to?”

Nora laughs. A real, genuine laugh, one that reaches a place in her gut that feels cathartic. It feels like she hasn’t laughed in months.

It’s true that Kayla and Ash had both tried to talk Nora out of taking the helm at CromTech, to no avail. Nora had been adamant in her decision. She had also drunk a fifth of whiskey and cried for six hours. Kayla found her the next morning and said she was so dehydrated that she should have dried up like a starfish. “Yes. So what do I do now?”

“I can’t make your decision for you,” Kayla says. She kisses the side of Nora’s head. That kind of affection has never been a norm in their relationship, but a summer’s worth of Dani’s tactile ways has softened Nora’s stance. “You didn’t listen to my advice then, and I’m sure you won’t now. We’ll support you no matter what.”

It’s entirely unhelpful, but Nora still appreciates it.

“What I should do,” Nora says, “is switch up the board. Finish the new four-year plan in with a focus on sustainability. Seek out partnerships with other companies doing the same thing. It’ll be easier to pivot in mission and vision when we’re part of a collective change. And then...”

Nora trails off. And then what? After she’s set the company up to succeed the way she knows it can, what does she really want ?

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” Kayla says. She pushes herself off the desk when Nora’s office phone starts to ring and heads to the door, leaving Nora to answer it, but Nora silences the call.

“You know I love you, right?” Nora says before Kayla has reached the door. “You and Ash both. I don’t think I’ve ever said it to you.”

Kayla turns. Her smile is warm and familiar. “We know. But it’s always nice to hear.”

Nora is back at her apartment by noon with a cleared schedule for the day and far too much to think about.

Months later, she still misses Riverwalk with a ferocity that unnerves her. Not just Dani, but the whole place—the bar, the picnic benches by the river, the ridiculous town events. She misses Dani’s friends, who for a brief and wonderful period Nora

had considered her own, too. The community of it all. Thinking about it aches like nostalgia. It aches like homesickness.

She's never had such strong feelings about where she lives before. She grew up a stone's throw from her current office, and after jumping from city to city for school, she came back and never left. Living in Riverwalk changed her in more ways than one. Now Nora finds herself hating things she hadn't even noticed before: the noise, the traffic, the crowds. The constant movement and bustle. She's always been a solitary person, but lately the solitude has felt more lonely than comforting.

What would it really look like to leave it behind for something else? Not quite the vacation of this past summer, but to commit to something more intentional? To take a risk and hope that Dani feels the same? If she takes the obligation out of it, the guilt of needing to do what her father wanted, why is she even here?

The answer is unequivocal and instant. There's no reason at all. Her job gives her no fulfillment, no enrichment, no sense of accomplishment, just a weary kind of resignation. The part of it she's actually passionate about—the eco-tech and special projects—could be done as an independent contractor. Why does she have to be the one to sit in a big office and reluctantly browbeat the board when Kayla and Ash thrived so happily in those positions over the summer?

She can hear them in her head, echoing the long talk five years ago before she decided to take the helm. Kayla had looked at her then with the same devastating insight that she did today.

What do you actually want, Eleanor? Kayla had asked. Nora hadn't had an answer at the time.

"I want to go home," Nora whispers.

The room is empty. Nobody is around to hear her confession, but it feels freeing to say it out loud. The truth is out. She's spoken it into the world and made it real.

"I want to go home ," Nora says again.

As if a heavy weight has been lifted from her chest, she takes a breath that feels cleansing, letting the relief course through her. It's almost strong enough to blot out the fear.

Nora wants to hand the company off to Kayla. She wants to go back to Riverwalk. She wants to drive through town, to stop at the River Run and to listen to Sarah and Ryan argue over which niche superhero would win in a fight. She wants to sit in the auto shop and watch Dani take cars apart while rain patters on the roof. She wants to sleep in her yellow bedroom with Dani curled around her. And she wants to stay.

Nora stands up, caught up in a rush of frantic energy with nothing to channel it into. She paces across her living room, running a hand through her hair until she's sure it looks absolutely ridiculous, and finally, with shaky fingers, pulls out her phone and scrolls through her contacts.

Her thumb hovers over Dani Cooper , but it never touches the screen.

She isn't sure Dani would even take her call. And if she did, what would Nora say? She'd be as likely to screw things up even more as to make it better—she's always struggled to communicate her feelings effectively, and the only thing that's ever helped is Dani's presence. Dani makes her thoughts feel translatable.

Nora needs to see her.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:33 am

Riverwalk is everything and nothing like Nora remembers.

The roads are the same, as are the shops, the cars. The grocery store is still packed with Friday-evening shoppers, the neon lights of the River Run sign still flash over a parking lot full of trucks, only now the streets are also lined with snowbanks taller than her car, each window frosted and glowing in the early-winter darkness. Lights twinkle around most of the buildings, and each street lamp hosts a holiday-themed decoration.

Ten minutes after Nora has pulled into the River Run parking lot, she still hasn't left her car.

What if Dani's mind has changed? What if, in the months that Nora has been gone, Dani moved on from their brief relationship? What if—worst of all—she's found someone else?

There's only one way to find out. After a few more minutes of solitary panic, Nora manages to open the car door and slide her way across the frozen pavement—no matter the outcome, she'll never forgive herself if she doesn't at least try.

The moment she steps through the door into the warm bar, she's assaulted by sense memories. It smells exactly the same—beer, old smoke, and pizza from next door. The noise hasn't changed either, the country song on the jukebox almost drowned out by the yells and cheers of the regulars watching a hockey game on the TV over the bar. Even Jenny is the same, barely looking away from the screen when Nora walks in.

“If you want a drink, get it yourself. I’m busy.”

Nora laughs softly. Her eyes track toward the back of the bar, where Dani’s usual table is, but someone sees her first.

“Nora?”

The deep voice that calls out isn’t the one Nora is hoping for, but it’s familiar. Sitting not far from the pool table is Owen, with Ryan and Mila crowding the table around him, and he’s staring at her with his mouth agape. In fact, they all are.

Nora shifts nervously from foot to foot as Owen stands up. She hadn’t been around to see their full reactions to her secret getting out, and she hadn’t said goodbye to anyone besides Dani. For all she knows, they could ask to have her thrown out of the bar.

Owen strides forward, his face breaking out into a genuine grin as he scoops her into a tight hug. “It is you! What are you doing here? We thought you left us for good!”

Nora wants to answer, but the truth catches in her throat as Owen lifts her an inch or two off the ground. Luckily Mila appears next, hugging Nora somehow even harder, and in the excitement of seeing her friends, the burden is taken from her for a minute.

The distraction doesn’t last long. Mila is the one to ask the question again as everyone settles back into their seats. “Seriously, what are you doing here? Not that we aren’t happy to see you! But we didn’t think you’d be back. Like...ever.”

Nora sits gingerly on the edge of the chair Owen pulls out for her. “I can’t say I expected a happy reception.”

“What, because of the whole secret-identity thing?” Mila says, scoffing. “Pfft. As if

we care.”

It’s a performative kind of nonchalance, but Nora frowns. It’s a complete turnaround from the faces she saw when Kayla had spilled the secret, and Nora has a suspicion as to why. “Dani talked to you all, didn’t she?”

“Yeah. She helped us see your side of it,” Owen says, ruffling Ryan’s fluffy hair. “Especially this one.”

“I’m truly sorry, Ryan,” Nora says quietly. “I know you more than anyone must have been—”

“I got over it,” Ryan says, holding up a hand. “I wish you had just told us yourself, but I understand why you didn’t. You were afraid we’d hold your dad’s actions against you.”

“And that’s exactly what we ended up doing,” Mila says.

Ryan clears his throat. “Yeah. Sorry I didn’t take it so well at first.”

For a few seconds, Nora is speechless. On the TV behind the bar, one of the hockey teams scores—the regulars all groan in displeasure.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I know I deserved your anger,” Nora says, still half convinced that this is an elaborate prank and she’s going to be thrown bodily out of the building. She scratches at the table with her thumbnail. “I came prepared for you to pelt me with tomatoes.”

“Dani basically stood up in Town Hall to lecture everyone about not judging you too harshly,” Owen says, laughing a little. “Sarah was stubborn for a while, but Naomi told us all about how different CromTech is now. That helped a lot.”

Nora gnaws at her lower lip. That sounds like something Dani would do. “It’s Dani I came to see, actually.”

Owen shares a knowing look with Ryan.

“Coulda guessed that,” Ryan murmurs.

“Is she here tonight?” Nora asks hopefully, looking around the space as if Dani might appear from behind the jukebox.

Owen shakes his head. “We haven’t seen much of her lately. Even Sarah only sees her at work and at home. She disappears most nights and doesn’t come back until late.”

There’s no specific implication in Owen’s voice, but Nora’s mind jumps to the most obvious conclusion. The idea of it makes her feel like the floor has disappeared under her feet.

“Is she...seeing someone?” Nora asks quietly, her stomach turning even as she says it.

She’s spared too much stress by Mila’s reaction—a loud snort that erupts as soon as the words leave Nora’s mouth.

Mila turns red when all eyes turn to her.

“What?” Mila says, pouring herself another drink from the communal pitcher. “It’s a hilarious question. Dani’s still too hung up on you to even look at anyone else.”

The relief that floods Nora is like a drug. It assuages a fear she’s had since the day she left—that her perception of their relationship this summer had been more one-

sided than she remembers.

“Then where could she possibly—”

Before she’s even finished her thought, Nora knows exactly where Dani is. She’s at the same place Nora’s idle daydreams have taken her in every spare moment since September, but Nora has no idea how she’s going to get there. Her Porsche doesn’t even have winter tires.

“Is there any way to get to the old tree house out on 3rd Line with this much snow?” Nora asks suddenly.

She gets three blank faces.

“The tree house?” Ryan says, frowning over the rim of his beer glass. “Why would you need to get out there? I haven’t been since we were kids.”

Owen seems to be coming to an understanding more quickly than the rest. He’s already standing up, grabbing a bulky helmet from under the table, and tossing it to Nora. “I’ve got my sled. I can get us there.”

“Hey!” Ryan protests as Nora holds the helmet with unsure hands. “That’s my helmet! How am I supposed to get home?”

“I’m coming back for you, sweetie. Calm down.” Owen stoops to give his boyfriend a solid kiss on the cheek, and Ryan smiles complacently as Owen ushers a confused Nora outside.

“I don’t see what a sled is going to do for us,” Nora says. Owen puts his helmet on and raises the visor—he’s led them to a huge, shiny machine at the rear of the parking lot, and Nora shortly understands the mix-up. “Ah. Unless it has a big motor on it?”

Owen laughs, swinging a leg over the snowmobile's seat and gunning the engine. "Sure does. Hop on!"

Nora spends the next fifteen minutes clinging to his back for dear life as he rips through town at a frankly alarming pace. The ride through the forest is possibly even more terrifying than the streets, but at the end of it they're emerging onto a field that's familiar even covered in snow.

The tree house that holds Nora's fondest memories is framed by bluish moonlight, making the new-fallen snow glitter like diamond dust. Once Owen has cut the engine, the silence is what strikes Nora even more than the vista—she's used to this field being a symphony of birdsong and crickets. In the winter stillness, the silence seems to echo.

Dani's truck is under the tree as usual, this time with the addition of a plow blade attached to the front—it's parked in the exact spot where they sat on Dani's tailgate the first time. Where they had their first kiss on a picnic blanket, and just under where Nora carved her name indelibly into the wood and sealed Dani's grip on her heart.

There's a dark figure sitting on the tree house platform and staring up at the moon, legs swinging slowly in the cold air. Nora can make out the bulky shape of her winter wear—she's not wearing a coat, but a thick sweater under a pair of sturdy brown canvas overalls.

Despite the noise of the sled approaching, Dani's silhouette doesn't look away from the sky.

"You can go, Owen," Nora says, pulling Ryan's helmet off and handing it over. She fusses with her hair a little, but she's sure it's still a mess. "I've got it."

"You sure?"

“Positive.”

Owen revs the engine and zooms away, and Nora takes her first step off the packed track the sled left and toward Dani.

Her foot immediately sinks into several feet of soft, powdery snow.

Nora winces. Her boots are unsuited to real winter—the snow seeps into them immediately. But Dani is right there. The aching, familiar shape of her makes Nora take another step. And then another.

When Nora is finally close enough to be heard, with her impractical boots completely full of melted snow, she stands her ground despite the metaphorical and literal coldness of her feet.

“Dani?”

At first, Nora isn’t sure if Dani has even heard her. There’s no reaction, just the slow swinging of Dani’s boots and the smoke of her breath in the cold air. Like this is something she’s used to, being called down and ignoring the caller.

Then Dani visibly freezes.

Slowly her head turns, squinting into the coming darkness. In the moonlight, Nora can see her face. Her cheeks are pink and ruddy under the bill of her usual blue hat, covered now by a florescent orange toque. She’s frowning as if she doesn’t believe what she hears, but when she realizes who’s standing there, her eyes go comically wide.

With jerky, surprised movements, Dani pulls herself to her feet with the help of an icy branch, and Nora has but a brief moment of relief that she’s finally been

recognized before Dani disappears with a loud, jolting crack .

Under the compounding weight of snow and ice and Dani, just as Nora predicted it would, the tree house platform has finally broken.

“Dani!”

Nora struggles through the knee-deep snow toward the pile of ice and wood on the ground where Dani’s boots are sticking out. Dani is moving, thankfully, and she’s looking at Nora through powder and planks as if she’s seen a ghost.

“Nora—what— how —” Dani sputters, taking Nora’s offered hand and hauling herself to her feet. Wooden beams and long-rusted nails scatter across the snow. “What are you doing here?”

Nora, dizzy with the closeness she’s been craving for months, can’t conjure any of the speeches she rehearsed on the drive. She agonized over the words, trying to figure out a way to ask Dani if she’s still welcome here without making her feel pressured. But in the face of Dani’s confusion, Nora says the first words that come to mind.

“I never should have left.”

For a few long moments, they both stand motionless, drinking each other in. Dani looks almost as drunk on the moment as Nora is—her eyes dart around Nora’s face like she’s reconciling it with her memories. The rim of her hat is coated in ice. There are delicate snowflakes caught in her long eyelashes.

Nora reaches a hand up to cup Dani’s cold cheek. Dani leans into it, her eyes still never leaving Nora’s face, and suddenly saying what’s on her mind in the most honest terms seems like the most important thing Nora has ever done.

“I missed you so much,” Nora whispers.

Dani exhales all her breath in a shaky, broken whoosh , and the next thing Nora knows, she’s being hugged so hard that it squeezes the air from her lungs. Dani whispers quietly into her hair.

“You came back.”

“Yeah,” Nora chokes out, caught somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “Yeah. I did.”

The wind kicks up around them, sending swirls of light snow scattering across the field, but Nora doesn’t let go. Dani still smells the same, feels the same under her bulky sweater. Being held by her again is a balm, even when Nora’s tears are freezing on her cheeks.

“Dani?” Nora whispers when a particularly icy blast of wind cuts through the thin fabric of her peacoat.

“Yeah?”

“I didn’t really dress for the weather.”

Dani jolts, springing out of the embrace like it’s an emergency situation. “Oh, shoot! Sorry!” She fumbles in her pocket for a moment, producing her key ring and trudging a path through the snow for Nora to follow toward the truck.

As much as the distance is necessary to get warm, Nora misses the solid pressure of Dani’s arms immediately. After months of deficiency she’s soaking up Dani’s presence, and the further away Dani gets, the more it feels like Nora is a plant sitting in the dark.

Nora climbs in gratefully when Dani hauls the passenger door open, and a few seconds later Dani is in the driver's seat and sweet, blissful heated air is coming out of the vents. She holds her hands there, letting them defrost slowly, all the while terribly aware of the fact that Dani is staring at her from across the bench seat. In the interior light, Dani's hair is a little darker than Nora remembers.

Mortimer the rubber duck is still sitting on truck's dash, looking down at Nora with obvious disapproval.

"I can't believe you're really here," Dani says quietly. The middle seat between them seems like a barrier now, and neither of them makes a move yet to close the distance. "I've thought about it so many times. Dreamed." Dani's voice breaks on the last few words. "Now I keep wondering when I'm going to wake up."

The vulnerability in Dani's voice cracks through Nora's self-doubt. Dani sounds so timid, so deeply unlike herself, and it's Nora's fault. Suddenly the distance between them seems like too much again—she needs to touch Dani, to feel the solid realness of her.

Dani shifts the seat back as soon as Nora starts moving, leaving a familiar space for Nora to climb into her lap. She straddles Dani's thighs, pressing herself into the space between Dani's body and the steering wheel and ignoring the cold dampness permeating from her knees down. She lets Dani pull her into a hug until they're chest to chest.

"I need you closer," Dani whispers. She says it like a secret, like voicing it will make Nora disappear again in a puff of smoke.

Dani's hands end up under Nora's shirt and Nora unbuttons it to give her better access, but with the barrier of sweater and overalls, Nora can't get under Dani's clothes. There's a mutual desperation to it that grows even as Dani presses her cold

face against Nora's revealed skin. It still isn't close enough. She wants to be intertwined. She wants all barriers to be shed until all that's left is them.

"I'm right here," Nora says, cupping Dani's still-reddened cheek. "I'm here."

She says it to Dani's face, and she says it into Dani's mouth as she's pulled into the searing kiss she's been thinking about since the day she left. It's much like their first—hard, messy, frantic—but tinged with a deep emotion that Nora wouldn't previously let herself admit to. She murmurs the words again into Dani's hair as their four hands fumble with the button of Nora's jeans, whines them into a broad shoulder as Dani's cold, perfect fingers press into the blazing heat beneath: I'm here, I'm here, I'm here.

A seam rips somewhere between Nora's legs, but she could care less about the state of her zipper. Maybe they should be talking first, discussing why Nora has turned up out of the blue, but this feels right —this is how they've communicated from the start, how Nora first opened up, how she came to understand so much about who Dani is. This is the root of their connection, and it feels as natural as a conversation. It is a conversation. Dani is telling her everything she needs to know.

With a gentle rock of Nora's hips, Dani is inside her again, and nothing else matters. Not the cold, not the untinted windows, not the months of distance or the difficult angle. Nothing matters besides the sweet curl of Dani's fingers, the heat of her mouth, the reverence in her voice as she whispers Nora's name.

She needs the closeness, needs Dani around her and within her, and Dani reflects that need right back; she manages to leverage her thumb against Nora's clit, and even without the room to move her hand, it's enough. Nora rocks against her in a constant rhythm, whimpering into Dani's mouth with her hands clenched in the damp material of Dani's sweater. Pressing in for more. Closer. Closer.

Release hits like a sigh—a settling, after months of being adrift. Nora clings to Dani’s shoulders, sharing her breath, and in the absolute stillness that follows, Nora’s surety about her decision cements itself.

For as long as Dani will have her, this is home.

“You’re here,” Dani says quietly, so quietly that Nora almost doesn’t hear it over the sound of the heating system and her own thundering heartbeat. “Are you—”

Dani’s voice gives out before she can finish. Her eyes well up with tears so quickly that she buries her face in Nora’s shoulder to hide them. The sight of them is unfamiliar. Nora had been a total mess the day she left, but Dani hadn’t cried. Nora has never seen Dani cry. Now Dani’s shoulders are shaking, tense and tight like she’s still trying to hold it in.

Nora pulls off Dani’s hat and strokes her hair, spreading a firm and comforting hand over the back of Dani’s neck as hot tears hit her skin.

“I love you, Dani,” Nora says. Not in a whisper, not like a secret—she says it clearly, with feeling. So clearly that Dani can’t possibly doubt its authenticity. “I fell in love with you this summer.”

Dani stiffens. Nora has no idea whether it’s a sign of shock or discomfort, but she plows onward through the rest of her thoughts before she can convince herself not to.

“Nothing felt right when I went back to the city. Nothing fit anymore. I never wanted to leave you, and I guess I never really let go of this place.” Nora takes a deep breath, grounding herself. The words feel easier the more she keeps talking. “I never let go of you.”

Dani finally pulls her face free of Nora’s shoulder. Her eyes are red-rimmed and

devastated as she sniffles. “What does that mean?”

“I’m stepping down at CromTech.”

It’s a decision Nora made before she even left the city, the moment she admitted what she really wants. Technically there’s still a great deal of work to do to make it all official, but in all ways besides legality, Nora is ready.

“You’re...what?” Dani looks dazed, like she’s hardly daring to hope.

Nora kisses the tip of her cold nose. “I hate it there. I’ve always hated it there, but I didn’t think there was another option.” She presses their foreheads together, letting her eyes fall closed. The truck’s interior lights glow yellow behind her lids. “I thought that being unfulfilled was just the way it had to be. I wasn’t supposed to fall for you.”

“Nora,” Dani says, sounding breathy and confused, but Nora soldiers on.

“I was happier here than I’ve ever been. And it wasn’t because I was on vacation, it’s because I love it here. I love you.”

Nora punctuates the truth with a deep kiss. Dani returns it with verve, and by the time they pull apart again, they’re both breathless.

“So you want to stay?” Dani says.

“As long as you want me to.”

Dani laughs, wiping at her face and looking more than a little shell-shocked. “Well, jeez, Nora. Ten minutes ago I was sitting in that tree house and thinking that I’d never see you again, and now...”

“It’s okay if you’re not totally sure. I know I sprung this on you, so if you don’t want—”

“I love you, too,” Dani interrupts, halting Nora’s speech in its tracks.

Nora’s heart does an elegant pirouette.

“Oh,” Nora breathes. She hadn’t really expected Dani to say it back, but now that she has, Nora is giddy with it. The words are pure helium. “That’s...that’s good.”

“Yeah. So you coming back and saying you want to be here? That you want to stay?” Dani laughs a little, disbelief in every syllable. “You know, if you had even hinted that you wanted me to, I would have gone after you.”

“I know. I was too afraid. I don’t want to be afraid anymore. I’m tired of running from the hard things.”

“I really hope this isn’t a dream,” Dani whispers, bringing one of Nora’s cold hands to her mouth and kissing her knuckles.

Nora has run out of words. All she can do is wrap her arms tight around Dani’s shoulders and let all the stress of the last three months leave her body.

“One thing,” Dani says after a few moments of contented quiet.

“Anything,” Nora murmurs between the soft kisses she’s trailing up the side of Dani’s neck. “Anything you want.”

“Is this my flannel?” Dani’s dry hand plucks at the checkered fabric. “I’ve been looking for that for months.”

It's the same one Nora has slept in almost every night since September. She'd thrown it on before leaving her apartment to make her feel brave. She hadn't been expecting that to be what Dani noticed, but her distraction feels like a worthy challenge.

"I thought you liked seeing me in it?" Nora says, leaning back and shrugging her arms out of her coat. The shirt drifts open, and Dani's eyes dart back down to where Nora wants them. "I'd argue it's as much mine as yours."

"You make a, uh—a very compelling case," Dani says. She's leaning forward now, drinking Nora in and considerably less distracted already. "I'm taking notes. Any other arguments to present?"

With a delirious laugh, Nora lays back across the seat, pulls Dani down with her, and gets to work fogging the windows completely.

They have a lot of lost time to make up for.

“Babe? You here?”

Dani’s voice rings out through the house, audible from the porch through the screen door. The clatter of her boots hitting the shoe mat is as familiar as Nora’s own voice—they moved together into Nora’s old rental house not long after Nora came back to Riverwalk, and even years after they decided to buy it, the routine of her coming home still makes Nora smile.

“On the deck,” Nora calls back, slipping a bookmark into her novel and settling more comfortably into the Adirondack swing Dani built last summer to let them look out at the water. Nora watched her put it together, plank by salvaged plank. It’s much sturdier than the structure it was created from—Dani harvested the best of the wood from the collapsed tree house not long after it fell apart, and this swing is the latest of a series of woodworking projects using the remaining materials.

Of all of them, though, this is Nora’s favourite. Specifically the large, gently curved plank that makes up the back of the seat, where everyone’s carved names are still proudly displayed. Dani cut it from the tree trunk herself and lacquered a protective coating over it to keep it safe from the elements, and Nora loves to run her fingers along the shiny grooves.

Footsteps thunder up the stairs inside. Nora takes a sip of her tea, settling back to wait for Dani to change out of her shop clothes and jump into the shower. The sun is just starting to turn the horizon pink—the trees are vibrant in their October reds and oranges, and their reflection on the still water makes for twice the beauty.

Nora pulls the blanket tighter around her legs, warding off the autumn chill that she’s

sure Dani will banish with a warm hug once she gets here.

Dani emerges onto the deck with damp hair fifteen minutes later. Joggers and a warm sweater have replaced her shop coveralls, and the sight of her lights a warm glow in Nora's chest that burns just as brightly as it did when they met.

"Hey," Dani says with a grin, sitting down and tugging on the blanket until it covers them both. "Missed you today."

"I missed you, too," Nora murmurs, accepting Dani's kiss and hooking a hand around the back of her neck when she tries to pull away. Dani grins into it, giving Nora the deeper kiss she's silently requesting; for a few minutes, the porch is quiet but for the birds and the water and and Dani's soft, happy sighs.

"How was work?" Nora asks when their lips finally part.

Dani smiles, settling in comfortably with Nora's legs draped over her lap. "It was great! The afternoon shift at the shop is always quiet. I had time to finish that article about your new solar generator at the community centre." Dani snags the mug of tea from Nora's hands, taking a sip and humming with pleasure. She's been splitting her time recently between the shop and the recently revived town newspaper, working part-time at both, but Nora ensures she doesn't overwork herself.

Stepping down as CEO at CromTech and convincing the board to vote Kayla as her replacement is the best decision Nora has ever made. Selling her shares left her with enough capital to buy out the old warehouses in Riverwalk, retrofit them, turn some of the space into a small office, and do what she'd always been too afraid to try—strike out on her own.

It turns out that running her own small company, with her own goals and direction and full control, is a world away from being CEO of a major corporation.

Riverwalk has been shockingly receptive to sometimes being the test subjects for Nora's new work, with Dani there to vouch for it. Anyone who signs up can trial her designs, and it gives Nora good data for proof of concept when she's selling them. Even a small company like hers has provided a good number of jobs in the building and implementation of her prototypes, and with Ash's help in marketing and securing new funding, Nora has settled into a comfortable niche by selling her designs to companies looking to branch into the environmental sector. CromTech is among her biggest clients currently, but she feels good in the knowledge that even if Kayla left the company someday, she'd still have enough of a foothold to continue.

Nora is infinitely prouder of her positive impact on the community than she ever was of her work as a CEO.

"How was your day?" Dani asks, handing the tea back. "You seem chipper."

Nora sits a little straighter, still flush with happiness over her breakthrough this morning. "Actually, I finally figured out the water purifier I've been working on."

"No kidding!" Dani says brightly, squeezing Nora's hands in excitement. "That's awesome! Did you call Kayla?"

"I did. She said the board is interested in buying the prototype again."

Dani rubs her hands over Nora's feet under the blanket. She knows they're always cold, whereas Dani's hands are so warm. "Of course they are. You're brilliant."

Nora smiles softly. It's something Dani tells her all the time, but it never gets less pleasant to hear. "She and Ash are going to come down sometime next month to take a look at it."

"You mean she and Ash are going to come down and drink all our liquor."

“We should definitely stock up,” Nora says, and Dani laughs. The sound of it is a balm, thrilling and comforting in one.

“Speaking of,” Dani says, tapping her forehead like she’s just remembered something, “since Garreth is visiting this weekend, we should have people over. Naomi reminded me that it’s been a while since we all had dinner together.”

“That sounds nice.” Nora nods, taking her pilfered tea mug back. “Board game night?”

“Only if you’re on my team.”

Nora smiles, cupping Dani’s cheek and rubbing at a stubborn black smudge near her ear. “Of course.”

A single loon calls out over the water just past the dock, the sound echoing across the still bay. Nora used to think it was a lonesome sound—deep and melancholy, echoing her own solitude. These days it doesn’t strike the lonely chord in her heart that it used to.

She snuggles closer to Dani’s warmth, sighing happily as Dani puts an arm around her shoulders and nudges the deck with her toe, making the bench swing gently.

Here in Riverwalk, with Dani and with her family, Nora is never lonely anymore.