It's My Wedding and I'll Cry if I Want To

by RainbowBus

Summary

“Waverly this is Nicole Haught. She is going to be your new wife.” The pen falls from her hand and as soon as it hits the ground all the air leaves her body like she’s been kicked in the stomach by the world’s largest Clydesdale. It’s not enough that her confusion and disbelief emits in the surrounding air and clings to her skin like sweat. But then, for the full thirty seconds it takes her to fumble around for that pen at her feet her heart stops beating altogether.

In an attempt to earn enough money to pay her college tuition, Waverly agrees to marry a random stranger and participate in a reality TV show based on newly married couples, only the random stranger isn't so random and not so much a stranger.

I just got a twitter thing if you want to say hey or something. Rainbowbus@Rainbowbus1
Waverly and Nicole agree on the terms of their contract. They have their first interview with Robin and begin the daunting task of planning a wedding.

Week Zero

It’s not because Waverly’s heart is beating harder than usual, though it is, rather it’s like there are two hearts beating in her chest at once. It’s the way she struts around with sex in her eyes, a knife in her front pocket, and danger written all over that shoots through Waverly's veins like crack.

This girl is bangin’ coming through the door in all black, skin tight jeans, leather jacket, and a swagger that screams heartbreaker. She is too. Waverly’s heard stories about her, the ex-wife, and all the poor pitiful assholes who fell for her thereafter. They all ended in a pint of mint chocolate chip Häagen-Dazs and a box of tissues.

“Waverly this is Nicole Haught. She is going to be your new wife.” The pen falls from her hand and as soon as it hits the ground all the air leaves her body like she’s been kicked in the stomach by the world’s largest Clydesdale. It’s not enough that her confusion and disbelief emits in the surrounding air and clings to her skin like sweat. But then, for the full thirty seconds it takes her to fumble around for that pen at her feet her heart stops beating altogether.

“Nicole this is Waverly…”

“We’ve met.” Nicole cuts in the ‘t’ over-annunciated. She drops herself in the chair across from Waverly without so much as a glance, as if meeting your soon to be wife is as humdrum as ordering a tall none fat latte.

Nicole doesn’t drink lattes though. Nicole eats what Waverly likes to call the breakfast of champions. It’s 8:05 am when trouble comes ringing Waverly’s bell asking for a grape Monster and a lemon scone-no poppyseeds. She waltzes into Eden’s Coffee House torturing Waverly with her good looks and bad attitude while Waverly rings her up and checks her out.

Nicole tugs the zipper loose on the messenger bag slung across her chest and pulls out a manila envelope. The envelope is dropped to the table with soft smack and the messenger bag lifted over her shoulder and left at her feet. The papers she empties are perfectly neat still crisp and white, polished just like she is, while Waverly’s have wrinkles and creases, such as her life. There may even be some Siracha from late night stress eating vegan tacos.

“Alright. So, I assume you have both taken an adequate amount of time to review your contracts?”

Fingers trembling palms sweaty Waverly rifles through her paperwork not sure what she’s even searching for, anything but the cocky asshole sitting across from her. She’s read every page four or five times in preparation for today. She was not, however, prepared to sit in this room not so different from the interrogation room in the Purgatory police station agreeing to marry Nicole Mother Truckin’ Haught. That was not listed anywhere on pages 1-87.
Wait until her sister finds out. Wynonna’s going to shit a brick. She was not too keen on Waverly marrying a random stranger in the first place.

Nicole’s lips purse together, her eyes narrow and burn with intensity shifting over the paperwork in front of her. She tucks a lock of hair behind one ear revealing a simple silver stud pierced through her earlobe. Her hair, red and full of messy waves, curls delicately around her neck where it’s tucked. Waverly looks the leather-clad goddess up and down hating herself for lusting after such a felonious individual. Fuck her even her penmanship is sexy.

Nicole is like James Dean, Johnny Castle, maybe even a little bit Joan Jett. She’s got that Hollywood bad boy look down to a T. She’s the type to take home to daddy just to piss him off, and it would. Nicole’s suave, fully loaded, charmed, and dangerous. She’s any girl’s wet dream and she’s a total shit head.

In high school Nicole was the kid sitting in the backseat of the police car next to Wynonna, just to clarify, not with Wynonna. Wynonna can’t stand Nicole either. Nicole punched her in the mouth during an impromptu sparring session in juvenile detention and went all WWE on her with a chair. Anger management anyone?

She exudes alpha macho bullshit out of her pores. Even now she tries to own the room by thickening the air with an overwhelming sense of confidence. Waverly’s head sinks into the palm of her hand as she leans harder on her elbow biting her lower lip. Her elbow slips with an embarrassing squeak when she finds herself rolling around in the stench of it. Get your head out of the gutter Earp. This is business not pleasure.

“Let’s begin with the first page. We will briefly run through each term. Once you understand and have asked any questions if you agree please initial in the space provided.”

Waverly nervously flattens her hand over the topmost tattered page. For the sake of dignity and poise, she’s thankful this page is Siracha negative. She has already initialed every line with pencil first and then again in pen. This time is the real deal. It’s go time. As soon as she slides these thoroughly reviewed forms over to Robin she will be bound and shackled to ABC’s Newlyweds for the next year of her life.

Why? Because $200,000 is a lot of fucking money. After her time is up, she’ll have the money to pay her tuition bill without enough debt to drown a small village or shed an arm, a leg, and the promise of her first born.

“So of course, we will start with the wedding which will be paid for by Paradise Garden Entertainment. The wedding will be public—friends’ family what have you are welcome to come and celebrate.” Robin waves his pen around occasionally nibbling the cap as he reads through each line with zest. A little too much for Waverly’s taste, but maybe that’s just her own apprehensions and concerns dialing back the volume.

“IT will be televised. Some wedding planning and preparation may be as well. The wedding vows and wedding interviews will be scripted so no need to fret there ladies.” He chuckles.

“You’re not going to make me say some cheesy bullshit about soulmates or love at first sight, are you?” Nicole leans back in her chair arms folded over her chest as any good bully would. “Because I might just throw up.” She spits.

“I understand your concern, Ms. Haught. As it is your wedding, of course, you can be a part of the writing process.” Robin winks and merrily jots down a few notes on a yellow legal notepad.
“The marriage is to last for a duration of 365 days starting next Saturday, March 2nd.” He rambles on. Those three numbers stir up some kind of funk in Waverly’s gut. This is unreal. She must have gone insane agreeing to do something like this.

She’s not just agreeing to marry some nicotine pumped dirtbag for a year but she’s agreeing to do it on national television. If she were to Google the definition of insane right now a picture of her stupid naïve face would pop up under images. *Oh god after this my face really might pop up on google images…next to Honey Boo Boo and the Kardashians.*

“Upon the 365th day, you will each receive a check for your winnings of $200,000…”

“What about the divorce?” Nicole blurts.

“Our producers will fabricate a reason for your divorce, something juicy and scandalous that can be sold to entertainment news. That will conclude your relationship to the public, however, what happens beyond that is up to the two of you.”

“What do you mean?” Waverly asks.

“Haven’t you seen the show before?”

Waverly shakes her head slowly trying not to encourage the world to shake any faster around her. “I don’t really watch TV.” She admits.

“What he is trying to say is, some people chose not to get divorced after the year is up.”

“Wh-why not?”

Robin’s eyebrows perk up and a warm smile dresses his face that matches the sparkling gems of his eyes. “Love Ms. Earp.”

“Love?” *Hold on now!* No one said anything about love. She would have remembered that in the contract. Waverly’s definitely not falling in love with Nicole no matter how sexy she would look on a motorcycle.

“Don’t shit your pants, Waverly, there won’t be any love coming from over here.” Nicole retorts.

There’s a full-on boxing match screaming in Waverly’s head that threatens to knock her out cold. In one corner is a well-developed abhorrence for the short-tempered little hooligan, that fuck if it doesn’t flare up every morning like an ulcer and make her coffee taste bad. In the other corner, with a mean right hook, Waverly’s got the hots for the tall sassy redhead and right now her disgust is clinging to the ropes with a split lip and two black eyes.

There’s just something about rejection and deeply rooted daddy issues that gets a hot flush to migrate up her chest from the bite in Nicole’s words. She leans over the table, back to biting her lower lip, semi-hoping that the dip in her collar will earn her some points, but Nicole keeps her eyes on the target and the targets, not Waverly.

Robin ducks his head hiding behind his copy of the contract. He clears his throat. “During your time as a married couple what you do inside your home is your business except on film days of course. Interviews will be conducted inside of the home and will not be scripted.”

“So, what are we supposed to say during those interviews?”

“That is up to you Ms. Earp. You will be prompted with questions but really the interviews should
be as organic as possible.” He clears his throat again. “Outside of the home you agree to keep up the appearance of a married couple be that through PDA, dates, etc—basically anything you would do with any other romantic partner, but we really have to sell this ladies.”

Robin warned her there would be drama. Lots of drama. The kind of drama that will interrupt the average Americans frozen TV dinner at 9 pm on a Wednesday. Commercials will feel excruciatingly long in anticipation for what’s to happen next. But wait, there’s more! It won’t just be blasted on cable, magazines plastered with rumors and fairy tale bullshit will line the check stands next to Funyuns and Snickers. It’s entertainment Ms. Earp, people love drama, and they love love.

What will Nicole say when she finds out Waverly wrecked the car on girl’s night? Who was the other woman seen at the club with Nicole? Could this be the end of it all? Stay tuned to find out.

“Oh, and you will attend weekly couples’ therapy with our therapist on staff Dr. Svane. He will help you through this time. You can speak with him freely. Nothing you discuss will be shared with the public it will all be confidential.” Robin pauses. His voice continuous with a smidge less color and a hint of mischief. “In addition, Dr. Svane will offer you the opportunity to earn extra cash to be awarded immediately upon the completion of a ‘side quest.’” He quotes with his fingers.

“What’s a side quest?” Waverly asks ignoring the way Nicole flicks her tongue over her lower lip and tucks her hair behind one ear for the second time.

“The quest will be something spontaneous and simple. Nothing dangerous.” He dismisses with his hand and giggles nervously. “The quests can be declined without any penalty. They are simply for show you see.”

“Seems unethical for a therapist.” Nicole says.

“Mm.” Robin nods. “As mentioned, you may decline any and all extra tasks. That is completely at your discretion.”

“Moving on to page two.” Robbin licks his finger and flips the page. “Nicole has volunteered her home for the sake of residence during your term. Have you had a chance to take a look at the wedding planner binder?”

“No.” Nicole snorts.

“A little.” Waverly’s eyes drop to the table, she hugs herself, and sighs. She got as far as the table of contents—dresses, cakes, food, venues it was all immediately overwhelming. The last time she thought about a wedding she was five years old and wanted to marry John Stamos in the Cinderella Castle at Disney World. Where to even begin planning a TV-worthy dream wedding and how is she supposed to figure it all out in a week?

“I can see the distress on your faces. Have no fear the wedding planner is here!” Waverly looks up and around. “Well, not literally but her number is here on this card.” He slides a card to the middle of the table and double taps it with his index finger. “Rosita Bustillo is our lovely wedding coordinator and she will be here with you every step of the way.”

“Great.” Nicole sneers. She skips past the next 84 remaining pages and looks to Robin impatiently. “I initialed everything else and have zero questions.”

“Ms. Earp? Any Questions?”

She swallows. Hundreds. She knows damn well what she’s agreeing to, every detailed except the ticking time bomb sitting across the table teetering on the edge of insanity. What hell will Nicole
bring to her life for the next year? Will they fight? Will they even talk? She can’t imagine them cuddling up to Netflix binge-watching Gilmore Girls.

Waverly will have to wear all these uncertainties like a part of her wardrobe, but it’s fine. She can do this because she’s got dollar signs in her eyes and soon to have a one-way ticket out of Purgatory. 

*You got this Earp.* “I don’t have any questions.”

“Very good.” Robin flips to the final page in his stack of papers as well. He bites the edge of his pen eyes moving rapidly down the page as he hums. “The last thing I must read out loud to you is the liability clause. By signing you agree and understand that Paradise Garden Entertainment and ABC Television are not liable for any personal injury and/or property damages that may occur on or off camera. You release all responsibility from PGE and ABC directors, producers, employees, and any and all staff…”

Nicole doesn’t wait for him to finish before drawing graceful loops and swirls over the final line and stamping the date. She slides over her perfectly kept 87 pages and forces a smile. “We done?”

“Of course, but I would recommend we get Ms. Earp moved in and settled as soon as possible with the wedding being in 7 days and all. Preferable before the wedding as we will begin shooting immediately.”

“Fine.” She jams her hand in her front pocket and wiggles around until she brings it out with a key, then slings it across the table. Waverly barely catches it before it hits the floor. “Move in whenever.”

It’s just an ordinary key. It’s average size, a typical bronze color, and a silver key ring looped through the hole at the top. It looks like almost every other key Waverly’s ever seen with groves and edges that fit a lock. A key is a key right?

But there’s nothing ordinary about this key. This key owns a year of her life. It’s worth $200,000, it’s her get out of jail free card, and it’s her future molded from nickel and brass.

This key belongs to Nicole Haught.

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Waverly tears open a new package of paper coffee sleeves and expels half of them to the floor. “Trouble at 1 o’clock.” Waverly says half hidden in the supply closet behind the counter. Her fake enthusiasm is underlined in the bell chime above the door and the silence thereafter.

The rips in Nicole’s jeans have frayed leaving strings to dangle and swing at her thighs and her knees. Waverly turns up her nose. What’s worse is the way Nicole’s keys jingle from the carabiner attached to her belt loop when her Timberlands beat the laminate. She tucks a lock of hair behind her ear with a gloved hand, the kind of gloves with no fingers, and adjusts the strap of her messenger bag across her chest. There’s a thin pink line of irritation where the strap has sawed away at her neck.

“Welcome to Eden’s what can I get started for you?” Chrissy chirps.

“You can start by toning it down a notch. No one’s this happy at 8 am.”

“Don’t be a dick.”

Waverly rolls her eyes. The package of coffee sleeves slips through her fingers and joins the mess on the floor. She steps over it.

“Hey!” Gus snaps. She abandons her inventory clipboard and pen and scrambles to gather the
sleeves splayed out on the floor. “Kids these days have no respect I tell ya.”

Waverly shoulders Chrissy aside and hammers on the touch screen with her fingers. She doesn’t look up at first. She knows Nicole’s order. It’s not hard to remember and Nicole’s been coming in every day for the last year. “One lemon scone and one grape Monster.”

She sometimes comes in at night too with her laptop and stacks of paperwork. How much paperwork can a bike messenger possibly have?

Waverly’s words waiver when she finally does look up. The harden line on Nicole’s face softens like putty leaving behind something sweet almost puppy dog-like. It’s just a mask. She does this sometimes, pretends to be all nice and cute, but Nicole doesn’t have to be nice or cute to get attention. She gets plenty, but she only dates bad girls just like herself. Wynonna says she was dating some hot mess named Kevin who hangs around one of the biker bars off the Highway. Wynonna’s words. “That’ll be $6.50…unless you’re trying something different today.”

The answer is given in the ten dollar bill she slides over the counter. “No change.” Nicole keeps her eyes on Waverly as Waverly opens the till slips in the money, and drops the change in the tip jar. She’s not sure if she should smile or keep her head down until it’s safe again.

Next to her Chrissy bags up the lemon scone, places it on the coffee bar, and shuffles back quickly like she suspects Nicole will bite. Nicole grabs it and her Monster from the refreshment cooler like she does every day on a loop. She carries it to the same table in the back corner by the window, sheds her leather jacket, and plops down. The Monster cracks and hisses when it’s opened. Waverly can almost smell the chemically produced grape from behind the register. “I can’t stand her.”

“Why? She seems to like you.” Chrissy teases.

“Pfft not likely.”

“Really? Because you’re the only one she tips…oh also, you’re the one she’s marrying.”

Jeremy puts his hands up. His mouth is full of blueberry muffin and when he speaks tiny crumbs litter his apron. “So, how’d that meeting with that TV guy go? What was his name?” He snaps his fingers.

“You mean super cute Robin?”

Jeremy blushes. “Was he cute? I don’t remember.”

“I still can’t believe you’re going through with this…and with her.” Chrissy says. She uncaps a new jug of caramel syrup and plunges in the pump, then moves on to the amaretto. Jeremy ducks under their conversation muffin still in hand and disappears into the supply closet with Gus.

“Boy I know you’re not eating behind my counters.”

“I have got to get out of here…” Waverly sighs and scuffs her shoe on the floor absentmindedly. “…and I need money to do it.”

“What am I going to do around here without you?”

“You’ll manage.”

“Who is going to eat a roll of Toll House cookie dough with me and watch America’s Next Top Model reruns?”
Waverly laughs and squats to grab a fleeing coffee sleeve lodged under the counter. She lingers on the floor with the sleeve pinched between her fingers and takes a sneak peek across the stainless steel at her 7-day fiancé. That might be an entirely different show altogether, but it doesn’t seem that far off. What would Tyra think about this?

Nicole looks up from the comic book she’s laid out on the table, and a stupid smirk develops over her face like she’s reading Waverly’s thoughts. She even has the audacity to wink before bringing the Monster to her lips.

Nicole was married once before, to a doctor. What self-respecting doctor would marry a delinquent like Nicole? Maybe that’s why it didn’t last. She’s been divorced for over a year now. Waverly’s only heard rumors about it—gambling, drugs, sex, and rock n’ roll. They’re just rumors, but everything about Nicole screams truth.

Nicole was four years ahead in school just like Wynonna. But she was held back, twice, just like Wynonna. They both ended up in the Rebound School for Opportunity junior year. Wynonna dropped out, but Nicole came back to Purgatory High to graduate and boy did students give her shit for it.

Trust fund baby. That’s what they called her. Nicole got away with everything because her grandparents were loaded. That’s what Samantha Baker said anyways. Nicole was every teacher’s personal hell. She was disruptive, angry, short-tempered, and likely to get into fights. She broke Champs nose once. He deserved it honestly.

"Waverly you wanna pick up a shift tonight? Stephanie called out sick.” Gus grunts. The phone still hangs in her hand. "Again."

"Sorry Gus, I’m packing tonight."

"Is that what you kids call it these days?" She frowns with pity pulling at her lips. “You can do better than Champ Hardy girl.”

“What-that’s not what I meant.”

“You’re a smart girl. I figured you would have outgrown him by now.”

“We’re not dating. We’re just…”

Gus throws her hands up waving around the phone and turns the other way. “I don’t want to know.”

Waverly sticks her tongue out at the back of Gus’s head. Chrissy snickers before she turns back to the amaretto.

If Waverly’s going to marry Nicole, she wants to know more about her, and she can’t just sit here getting high off coffee beans while she waits. “Gus I’m going on a break.”

Nicole doesn’t look up, but a noticeable smile spreads over her face. “I am sorry but I’m not fully human until after I’ve finished my scone and had—” Nicole slides her pointer finger ¾’s of the way down her Monster “this much of my daily vitamins. You’ll have to leave a message or come back later.”

Waverly rolls her eyes. She’s not going to let this smart ass intimidate her today. “Seeing as how we are getting married in four days I thought we should talk.”

The Monster can bends slightly under the soft flex of Nicole’s fingers. She looks up this time without
smiling. It’s only after she licks the corner of her mouth that Waverly notices her eyes transition to a deep brooding brown. Waverly shifts her weight and coughs out the thump in her heart as the dangerous chill of a Stephanie Meyer’s novel tickles down her spine. Nicole says nothing.

After an awkward 30 seconds of staring at the floor in silence, Waverly pulls out a chair with her foot and slumps down dramatically across from Nicole. She hits her elbow on the table in the process. “Ow.” She whispers.

Nicole tucks her hair behind one ear. Her lip twitches into an almost smile as she returns to her comic book. “Do you like dinosaurs?”

While this is not exactly her intended conversation, maybe the quickest way to a bully’s heart is… dinosaurs? “They’re okay, I guess. Do you like them?”

Nicole flips the comic around and pushes it across the table until it hits Waverly’s knuckles. It’s a lot less aggressive than the key Nicole shot at her a few days ago.

Waverly doesn’t read the text, but from what she gathers it’s a bunch of safari looking dudes hunting a t-rex. It’s kind of sad. “They’re okay, I guess. This though,” She taps it with her finger “is a comic adaptation of Ray Bradbury’s Sound of Thunder.”

“I have never heard of that. What’s it about?” This feels eerily like petting a purring cat right before it bites the crap out of you. Just keep her talking and maybe you’ll live.

“It’s kind of like trophy hunting. Only people pay to travel back millions of years to hunt dinosaurs and other extinct species.”

“That’s awful.”

Waverly looks up to meet Nicole’s eyes. They’re warm and bright like honey as she talks. She seems harmless, a little bit normal, sweet even. Please don’t bite me. “Maybe, but they only hunt dinosaurs that are going to die anyway.” She guzzles the remainder of the Monster, rips off the tab, and sets the can aside.

“All the dinosaurs died anyway…mostly.”

“I mean like within minutes, and if they did kill any dinosaurs that weren’t dying immediately, it would change their future, slash, their present.” She licks her lips and takes the comic book back sheltering it under her arms protectively.

“Oh, okay like a butterfly effect.”

Nicole nods. Her dimples send Waverly’s stomach on a ride before her smile even fully blooms. “Exactly.” Waverly can hardly fight her own smile forcing its way across her lips. She wants to hate Nicole. She always had a strong aversion for the little rebel without a cause, or so she thought.

Nicole pulls out a stick of gum from her jacket. She wads up the silver wrapper and lets it fall to the floor. “Gum?”

Waverly shakes her head swallowing the need to pick it up and scold Nicole for leaving it there. This Nicole she can live with. Sweet nerdy comic book reading Nicole with a gorgeous smile that will swirl around in Waverly’s head for days. “I looked at the wedding binder. I circled some stuff I liked. Maybe we can go through it together tomorrow?”

Those deep brooding eyes return with the flexing muscles in Nicole’s jaw biting down hard on that
gum. The energy coming out of them pushes Waverly back in her seat. How can someone go from dimples and honey to ‘here’s Johnny’ in a matter of seconds?

“Does it really matter?” Nicole cocks her head like a bird of prey. “Why’d you come over here?”

“Jeez Louise! I just thought...”

“You’d pretend you’re interested in me and my opinions? Act like you don’t think I’m some low life asshole. Like you don’t judge me behind the counter with your little friends?”

“Woah! That’s not at all what I’m—this is your wedding too! Maybe you should give a damn.”

“Fake wedding.” Nicole slaps the comic book shut and shuffles it into her bag. She shrugs on her jacket, grabs the bag, and throws the Monster can in the trash. The fire in Nicole’s words erupts like tiny little adrenalin volcanoes all over Waverly’s body. Now everything in her tells her to fight. She rockets up from her seat and marches over to Nicole bringing her own fire with her.

“This goes in the recycling!” The tab’s been ripped off the can and dropped inside. It rattles as Waverly shakes it in front of Nicole’s face. Nicole tilts her head, her brooding eyes sparkle with a dark amusement, and a whisper of dimples suggests a laugh. She watches Waverly drop the can in the blue recycling bin triggering an avalanche of cans and water bottles. Waverly cringes at the sound. “See it’s not hard.”

The punishment for lecturing Nicole is gum. She latches onto Waverly with a chilling stare, takes the gum from her mouth, holds one end with her teeth, and lets it stretch thin before pressing it to the wall with her thumb. Waverly’s jaw drops. This is asshole her sister would say.

“Are you going to clean that up too?” She taunts.

“Do you practice being a little prick in the mirror in the morning or is it just natural talent?”

“Why pick just one?”

“Grow up!”

“You grow up.” Waverly can smell the Nicotine and vanilla hot on her breath when Nicole inches closer. Nicole licks her lips. “You have syrup on your shirt by the way.” She fakes a smile, side steps around Waverly, and pushes her way through the door. Ding goes the bell, this time with a knockout punch to Waverly’s ego.

“Really nice dude!” Waverly calls out the door, but Nicole doesn’t look back. She raises her hand, flips Waverly the bird, and strides away in a vanilla scented vape cloud. A girl of many words.

Waverly looks at her shirt and the small drizzle of syrup that travels from her shirt to her apron. It’s toffee. It sticks to her finger as she traces over the Eden’s logo.

_Dammit._

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There are limited dating options in Purgatory. There are limited dating options and there’s Champ. The smell of his aftershave lingers on her skin and her sheets, unlike him sitting on the edge of the bed pulling his 2017 Rodeo Champion t-shirt over his head. He never stays for breakfast.

Sometimes he doesn’t even stay the night. He just fucks her and leaves. Waverly doesn’t mind all
that much. She prefers sleeping alone. She’s been told she kicks and hogs the bed anyways. No one wants to sleep next to a wild bed hog.

It’s the smell of his aftershave that makes her feel lonely. Not lonely for him, but lonely for someone who cares. Maybe some who cares about breakfast, but that doesn’t really matter either. Waverly eats breakfast at Eden’s. The overpriced coffee and stale leftover pastries from the day before make up her own breakfast of champions.

Gus looks the other way. They both know the Gardeners are cheap bastards and there would be severe consequences for eating the garbage intended for dumpster diving raccoons. Waverly feels like a raccoon sometimes—misunderstood, only noticed at night, living off crumbs, cute but scrappy. She should put that on a personal ad and maybe she’d find something better than Champ.

“Can’t you just stay a little longer? Please?”

Waverly’s always hated that belt buckle. It’s oversized and gaudy. It’s too much for the thin brown leather belt and outdated Levi’s he yanks over his hips. “Baby you know I can’t.” He flops to the bed on his elbows and wiggles close. “Shorty needs me to help unload the supply truck this morning and he has me working maintenance all day. Those smoke detectors aren’t going to change their own batteries…” He rolls to his back and laughs. “wouldn’t it be cute though, if they did?”

Waverly smiles apathetically. Even if she did want to make breakfast her entire kitchen is packed away neatly in the boxes currently making a castle out of her studio apartment. Not quite the Cinderella castle she dreamed of. And even if Champ did stay, it wouldn’t be for breakfast. It wouldn’t be for her.

“Aw don’t pout. I can come over tonight. Eh?” He taps her nose forcing her to blink. “Eh?”

“You know I’m moving today. This is my last night here before I’ll be…”

“Oh right.” He vibrates his lips like a horse. “You’ll be living with what’s her name. Nicole Ha-hat…hop?”

“It’s Haught.”

Champ shrugs. Pensive is not a look Waverly would expect to see on him, but it ripples across his forehead while he picks at his nails. “Something about her rubs me the wrong way.”

He turns to Waverly and latches on to her face plastering her with heavy wet kisses. Waverly braces her hands on his shoulders and tries to escape the grip of his calloused hands.

“O-okay Champ. I think that’s good.” He doesn’t acknowledge her, nor does he halt his kissing, if anything he holds her tighter. “That’s enough.”

She slips on the floor after wiggling her way off the bed and catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror across the room—makeup smudged, hair sticking out looking like Medusa, wearing a long baggy T-shirt she stole from Uncle Julian, the Purgatory Fire Department logo on the chest. It’s not very flattering. If she was Champ, she wouldn’t want to stay either.

“Text me maybe we can figure out a way to be alone tonight.” He stuffs his feet in his boots and stands up to stretch out his arms and yawn like an animal. Those cowboy boots are screaming for retirement. He’s had them since sophomore year. They’re cracked, faded, and ugly. They at least need a good polishing. Waverly would still hate them about as much as Champ loves them.

“Or you could help me move?”
“Baby, come one, I’m going to be too tired to lift anything more than a 40 later.” He smiles with fake sympathy and kisses her forehead. “You know that.” Then turns to the door. “Text me.” He says over his shoulder. His boots echo down the stairwell and so does the door when it shuts behind him.

It’s cold in here without her brightly colored tapestries heating the walls that are otherwise sterile white. It’s dark too. The string of lights that normally hangs from the ceiling is coiled and wrapped tightly in a box.

She will miss this little apartment. She’ll miss her worn out 70’s floral couch and the coffee table covered in Mod Podged magazine clippings. Maybe even the third burner on the stove that tries to kill her whenever she lights the second. It’s dangerous, but it’s familiar.

The loss leaves her body in a heavy sigh when her back hits the mattress. She won’t miss the smell of aftershave on her sheets. She won’t miss waking up to the jingle of that stupid belt buckle and the click of the door no matter how quiet it screams her name in shame.

*I thought you would have grown out of him by now.*

*You can do better.*

“Grow up Waverly.”

***

“So, we are going to start with a little pre-wedding interview. This is really just to give the audience an idea of who you are as a couple.” Robin perches on a stool with one leg crossed awkwardly over the other. Behind him is a free standing camera and one obnoxious stage light threatening to give Waverly a headache. Another camera, this one attached to a greasy little man named Derek, stands in the foyer beside them.

Waverly glances at her suggested script printed out on the notecard shaking between her fingertips. It’s vague and leaves a lot of blanks for Waverly and Nicole to fill in.

“How about you two scoot a little closer. There you go. Act like you love each other.”

Nicole drops her hand to Waverly’s thigh and Waverly politely removes it. “They’re not filming below the waist dummy.” She whispers. Nicole yanks her hand away and tucks it under her arm.

“Now I would like you to introduce yourselves and tell the camera why you are here.” Why is she here? To awkwardly sit next to this lump of joy and lie to the camera? To dance and do tricks like an act in the circus? To have all her deep dark secrets displayed on national television? To be humiliated?

Waverly wraps her sweater around herself tight forcing the mic attached to the inside of her shirt to pinch her chest. The thin cord sticks to her clammy skin and snakes its way down her stomach where it attaches to her hip and eats through her side. “Whenever you’re ready.” Robin encourages.

“I’m Nicole Haught.”

“And I’m Waverly Earp.”

“Good, now why are you guys here today?”

“Because we’re getting married.” Nicole says flatly.
Robin hisses. “Yes, but with a little bit more enthusiasm.”

Someone snorts from the kitchen. “Sound a little less like you’re being booked in the county jail and a lot more like you’re excited to spend the rest of your life with the woman you love.”

“Nicole. Waverly. This is our director Eliza Shapiro.” Eliza moves slowly across the room keeping Nicole and Waverly in her crosshairs. She dismisses Robin with a wave of her hand, takes his clipboard, and then his seat. She folds her hands over the clipboard in her lap and locks eyes with Nicole in a way that makes Waverly feel non-existent.

“Nicole, you’ve been married before correct…for 3 years 4 months and 11 days to be exact.”

“Uh yeah.”

“We’re you excited before you got married?”

Nicole shrinks 3 inches into the couch, and it sounds like she swallows a rock. The mic in her shirt heard it loud and clear and poor Derek’s eardrums probably ruptured. “I guess so.”

“You guess so? You don’t remember what it felt like. No butterflies? Adrenalin rush? Cold feet?” Damn. Eliza has some Judge Judy vibes going on. Waverly’s glad her stone cold zeroed in predator eyes are attached to Nicole and not her.

“No, I knew that’s what I wanted more than anything.”

“How did you feel about her, your ex-wife?”

Nicole tucks her hair behind her ear and pulls herself up like a marionette puppet because that’s what they are now, toys for PGE to play with. “I loved her. She was everything to me.”

Waverly saw a picture of Nicole’s ex-wife once. She’s tall, beautiful, probably rich, and looks super classy. Nicole’s not classy. Nicole is all nicotine, caffeine, ripped jeans, 'look at me, I’m sexy.' That last one is unfortunate for Waverly.

Eliza leans back with the clipboard gripped in her hand, some of the Judge in her Judy dissipates. She makes herself at home on Robin’s stool. “Good. Can you describe what you loved about her…but in the present tense please?”

Nicole squints and shakes her head slow and confused.

“Tell me how you felt about her but instead of loved say love.”

“Okay.” Throat bobbing, she coughs and tucks in the already tucked hair behind her ear. “She is funny…or more like goofy. She always knows how to make things fun. She’s supportive of my dreams...”

“Is she supportive of your bike messenger business?” Waverly’s attention snaps to Nicole.

Her bike messenger business? As in she owns it? That explains all the paperwork at night, but still, that can’t possibly bring in enough cash for Nicole’s two-story colonial style home just outside of Purgatory.

The property is well developed with surrounding trees and overgrown shrubs under the front window. The backyard is entirely wooded. It isn’t huge but it’s a god damn mansion compared to Waverly’s 300 square foot studio above the laundromat and must have cost a fortune. Trust fund
“Very.”

“Good. What do you expect to get out of your marriage with Waverly?”

“I-I don’t know…” Nicole cuts her hands through the air and shakes her head almost hard enough to propel herself off the couch. For second Waverly thinks she’s going to rip the mic from her shirt and call it quits. “I’m done with this question.”

“Okay.” Eliza’s eyes shift to Waverly. She goes from nonexistent to the only person in the world. Eliza’s like a god with the ability to create and destroy life in a matter of seconds. “Waverly, I want you to think of a moment where you felt special or where someone made you feel like the most important thing in the world.”

Uncle Julian is the first person to pop into her mind. Since Daddy was a drunk, Mama was taken to the loony bin, and Wynonna was in and out Juvie, Uncle Julian was her only model of normalcy.

Kids don’t understand things the same way adults do, and she didn’t understand why daddy was such a dick about that invitation she worked so hard on. The one for the father-daughter dance—pink construction paper, decorative craft scissors, Daddy spelled out in red glitter, and the pride on her face when she gave it to him. But of course, too drunk, talk to the fists Ward Earp could barely spell out his name with piss in the snow let alone find a way to dance with his 9-year-old daughter. Waverly bawled her eyes out the whole week prior because he wouldn’t go.

But then Uncle Julian said he would go, and the crying stopped. Waverly was out of her mind excited. She picked out a dress with a big bow in the back and Aunt Gus showed him how to braid her hair and everything. For a moment she forgot she had a shit head for a father, a space case of a mother, and a brat for a sister.

Uncle Julian danced with her and made her feel like a princess. They played games and had punch with the other girls and their daddies. There was even a piñata. She went home that night wishing Uncle Julian was her father all along because he would have been the best at it.

“You got it?” Waverly nods in a reminiscent haze. “Great. You don’t have to tell me anything about the moment. Just tell me how it made you feel.”

“Oh wow…” Waverly shrugs her shoulders and stretches her arms out in her lap kicking her feet in front of her. “Um nervous and excited…shaky, but in a good way. Like I was flying or that I could fly, at least if I wanted to. It felt like I was where I was supposed to be in that moment you know?”

“And that’s when Nicole proposed to you?”

“What?” Eliza raised her eyebrows subtly waving Waverly on with her hand. “Oh. Right. Yes, she did.” Waverly musters up as much enthusiasm as she can and expels it all out in one sentence. “And then I said yes of course!”

Nicole jolts from the volume and looks at Waverly like she just threw up all over the coffee table. Eliza seems satisfied. She stands, smacks Robin in the chest with his clipboard, and walks away leaving it in his hands. “And that’s how it’s done Jett.”

“Let’s get staging in here. We need pictures on the walls. Flowers. Cutesy shit. This needs to look like a friggen love nest. Move people move!”

“Woah! This is where you’re going to be living?” Jeremy wanders in the door past Derek with his
jaw hanging open carrying an overstuffed box that’s starting to bottom out. His jaw snaps shut when he sees Robin standing in the living room. “Hi.” He says in a tone meant for a mouse’s ears.

Robin juggles the clipboard in his hand and tries to tuck his pen in his shirt pocket, but it skids under the couch before he can get himself together. He chuckles to himself with pink cheeks and a look that says he doesn’t know what to do with his arms. He decides to hold them behind his back with the clipboard like a drill sergeant. “Mr. Chetri. It’s nice to see you again.”

And just like that Waverly’s collection of Ann Rice novels pounds on the wood floor and Jeremy’s feet. “Oh jeez, clumsy hands.”

Waverly leaps up to help him. He just stands there holding the now empty box above Waverly’s head. “Jeremy?”

“Oh god! S-s-sorry Waves.”

“Where’s Robin?” Eliza yells from somewhere outside. “Tell him to get his ass out here now!”

“Um, excuse me.” He slinks away past Jeremy, the destroyed box, and Derek and his camera.

“Sheesh. She sounds pleasant.”

“God, you have no idea. I have never been more nervous in my life and that was only the first interview.”

“Yikes.” Jeremy stacks the last of the books into the box. “So um, how often do you think you will work with…” Robin comes striding back panicked and sweaty. Some of his hair sticks up in the back like a tail bobbing away with each bouncy step. “Robin!” Jeremy startles.

“Eliza needs the two of you outside for pictures.”

“Pictures?”

Waverly almost forgot Nicole was still sitting behind her on the couch. “Pictures?” Waverly echoes.

“Pictures.” Robin confirms.

Jeremy ducks out. “I’ll just take this upstairs.”

Waverly’s going to have to the spend the next year pumped full of Benadryl between the lavender lining the walkway and the orange ball of fur scurrying under her feet saying *fuck you* in the form of a hiss. She all but gags as she passes through the screened in porch at the ashtray on the table next to a rocking chair. The tantrum throwing fur ball claims sanctuary there.

“This is Shelly your photographer.” Robin says.

“Alright, Waverly we’ll have you sit here on this top step.” Shelly, a twig of a man, flamboyant in both personality and in dress, directs Waverly as she sits down. “Good. Good. Now Nicole just here on the lower step so Waverly can wrap her arms around your shoulders like so.”

Nicole wore a button up shirt today, light blue, ironed, and starched. Her hair curls just out of reach of the collar leaving a sliver of exposed skin between the gap. Waverly’s chin rests there when she wraps her arms around Nicole’s shoulders. Another moment where she wants to hate Nicole, but Nicole smells like vanilla dipped donuts which are her favorite, and now she’s hungry.

“Beautiful. Nicole could you just rest your hand…just here.” Shelly places Nicole’s hand over
Waverly’s forearm. She smiles, but on the inside, she resents Shelly for trying to make them look cute.

“Lovely just lovely!” He squats down resting his elbow on his knee turning and twisting the camera hanging from his neck. “Let’s have Nicole move up to the top step and Waverly you sit on her knee.”

Nicole’s jaw flexes, even in the absence of gum Waverly can see the muscle rippling there. Waverly slides herself over Nicole’s knee and an arm over her shoulder for stability, but Shelly places their hands in all kinds of places to make them look in love. “One last pic. I’m going to have you press your foreheads together like maybe you want to kiss.”

“We don’t actually have to kiss right?” Nicole snaps.

“No no Nicole it’s just for looks.” He assures.

With Nicole’s forehead pressed into hers and her hand cupping Nicole’s jaw sweetly, Waverly has a startling realization. They’re going to have to kiss.

You may kiss the bride.

***

“Can’t you just come over here and contribute?”

“I did contribute. I brought coffee.”

“Look,” Waverly can’t help but laugh. “This will likely be the only fake wedding we ever have so...”

Nicole holds her hand up. She tilts her head back while the carbonated grape sludge flows down her throat. Satisfied, she hisses and wipes her mouth on the back of her sweatshirt cuff. “I fucking hope so.”

Who knew there were so many flavors of cake? There are 10 pages in the wedding binder dedicated to them. Aunt Gus usually just made chocolate for Wynonna and vanilla for Waverly. Sometimes she got a little crazy and threw in some sprinkles.

This binder is a rabbit hole of options. It goes beyond choosing cakes. There’s fillings, buttercream or ganache, flowers made of fondant, and cake toppers?

Rosita made a few suggestions when she saw the wild panic rip across Waverly’s face. She pointed out the most popular choices and her personal favorites based on taste and presentation. She cracked up when Waverly asked if Pillsbury was an option.

“This should be a special moment for the both of you?” Rosita smiles. Just like Robin, she’s full of too much spunk. Neither Waverly nor Nicole were thrilled when she showed up at 8:00 am with a bag full of swatches over one arm and a record thick binder under the other. Rosita’s the Marry Poppins of weddings. She has anything you can think of in that bag.

“Blow me.” Nicole snips. She leaves the Monster can to make a ring on the stack of venues.

“How about you pull that giant pickle out of your ass and help me decide on chocolate torte or pink champagne!”
She laughs, tucks her hair behind one ear, and posts up in the entryway to the kitchen with a smug look on her face. Just on the crazy side of healthy, she flings a Skittle into the air and catches it with her mouth. “I’m allergic to chocolate.”

“See, I could have killed you at our wedding reception.”

“I could only be so lucky.”

“Alright so pink champagne?” Rosita interjects.

Another Skittle catapults into her mouth. “Booze cake is fine.”

“Fine.”

“Great. Now let’s move on to the venue, but before we do what colors scheme are we thinking?” Waverly cast a glare to the kitchen and the Skittle munching jerk hanging there. “Pink.”

“No way. Nuh uh.”

“That’s what I want. I want a light pink.”

“Ooh and maybe a soft pale green.” Rosita adds excitedly and scribbles it down on her clipboard.

“I’m not wearing pink anything.”

“You don’t have to wear it.” Waverly shrugs keeping her smile discrete. All black leather Nicole doesn’t own a single thing that’s pink and it would be a damn shame not to find a way to make her wear a little. “It can just be for the flowers and some of the decorations.” She lies.

“Yes. We can keep it very toned down.”

“Fine whatever.” She disappears in the kitchen, rustles around, and comes back with a vape cloud lingering around her head. Waverly wrinkles her nose disgusted by the habit. “Pink and green it is.”

Rosita came up with some ideas on how to decorate the barn at the Homestead for the wedding ceremony. She wants hand-carved bench seats, candles (though Waverly thinks that might be a little dangerous in the straw) and displays of Esperance roses from one end to the other. It will be small and quaint with only close friends, family, and the camera crew of course.

“Now the wedding dresses are important to really set the tone for the reception. Did you see any you like? I have more catalogs in my car.” She looks between Waverly and Nicole who’s puffing away on her pen.

“You won’t catch me dead in a dress.” She shakes her head. Vaper flows out her nostrils and her mouth distorting her voice. “I’d go ass naked before I wear one.”

Rosita smiles. “That’s not really an option, but we do have alternatives if you’d rather.”

Waverly has a thought. She skimmed through the dresses last night when she couldn’t sleep, and nothing stood out to her. She’s not much of a poofed out, glammed up, taffeta wrapped, bride from hell kind of girl, but she has something that might work. “I’ll be right back.”

In her room in an old hat box, she pulls out a long lace dress. It’s an antique. She found it in Shorty’s basement when she helped him clear out old newspaper and other junk. She doesn’t know why she kept it. She didn’t think she would ever have a reason to use it but looking at it now in the mirror
held against her body it might be perfect.

She patters down the stairs with the dress draped over her arm. Nicole has taken her place next to Rosita on the couch looking at men’s suits. She holds out the dress high enough that the hem doesn’t touch the ground. Her own face washes in awe at endless lace, modest and simple, but a beautiful flowy body, like Stevie Nicks if she was going to wear white.

“That’s gorgeous Waverly. I can really see it.” Rosita nods. Her pen taps erratically on her clipboard like a happy dog. “We can have a vintage rustic theme.”

Waverly captures the faintest smile sneak over Nicole’s lips before she turns to the catalog of suits.

“Then for you Nicole I think we should go with something like this.” Rosita flips the page and points to the middle.

“You want me to dress like Oliver Twist?”

“It will stay with the vintage theme and I think it will look amazing next to Waverly’s dress. Don’t you?”

“Okay” Nicole says breathy and defeated.

The dress hangs back over Waverly’s arm, but she can’t take her eyes off it. It’s so perfect that the idea of using it for a fake wedding almost hurts. She’s planning her wedding—the dress, the flowers, pink, the barn, everything she picks is real. Everything except Nicole.

Her eyes leave the dress long enough to find Nicole’s. This time Nicole doesn’t hide the shy smile tugging at her cheeks, the bashful look down, the lick of her lips, and the eyes that say everything she picks is real too.

Everything except Waverly.
Chapter Summary

Wedding bells are ringing for Waverly and Nicole. As they go through this first step together they get a taste of what life will be like with cameras.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Wedding

At this point, Waverly has moved beyond the verge of a nervous breakdown and is now numb to the roughest touch. Even Miley swinging in on a wrecking ball couldn’t break through her calloused skin healed over from the past few days of wedding planning.

If the giant bags under her eyes aren’t enough of indication as to how well her new life is going, the cat hair has weaved its way into everything she owns turning her face into a pink watery mess.

She makes a quiet path down the hallway, Nicole’s bedroom is to the right of the stairs, but she sneaks past unnoticed and tiptoes the rest of the way down. She’s confined herself to her room for the most part, hoping to avoid her moody unpredictable soon to be wife, but the house is old and the tap water in the bathroom taste like dirt.

Speaking of the red-headed devil stretched out on the couch. Waverly stops and skates down the last stair. It will be impossible to avoid her now with the kitchen right behind her gazing out into the living room.

Nicole’s not lost in her usual fog of vanilla. Instead, she’s cloaked in something even less desirable. This time an overwhelming musk with subtle undertones of fruit makes Waverly’s nose wrinkle. “Nicole, what is all this?”

“It’s dinner. Help Yourself.” Nicole gestures without looking up from the book draping her lap. Next to the massive thing on the table is a bowl of Skittles displayed in a centerpiece like potpourri.

Waverly detours from the kitchen and topples over a few empty Monster cans in her path as she approaches. She plucks one from the trail starting on the table and ending on the floor and inspects it. “How many of these have you had?”

“What are you, my mother?”

“How is your heart not jumping out of your chest right now?”

“Well, it was definitely beating easier before you trotted in on your high horse.” Nicole drops her feet from the table. She digs around behind her and yanks out a package she had wedged between the couch cushion. She holds it out to Waverly. “Here, have some.”

“I don’t want any.”
“Take the licorice Waverly. It’s good for you.”

Waverly doesn’t respond. Nicole rolls her eyes. She slaps the licorice on the table in exchange for the lighter and the bong. The bubbling water is distracting enough while Waverly attempts to organize her thoughts. It’s like being 10 years old again and living with Wynonna. She gives in, snatches up the licorice, and flops down on the couch. “How are you going to sleep after all that caffeine?”

Smoke escapes, thick and earthy through Nicole’s words and surrounds them both in a dome of it. Nicole smiles lazily—her eyes pink around the edges—and leans back on the couch with her legs folded in front of her. “Probably on my back with a pillow.” A small cough rattles in her chest before she returns to her book.

Waverly tears off a piece of licorice with her teeth knowing it will likely flare up her TMJ later. She ogles the black bra casually hanging out of the sleeve of Nicole’s cut off Concrete Blonde tank top and the ripples of her upper ribs. The thought of straddling her and pushing the tank top up her stomach is more than entertaining.

It’s troubling to think she could actually do it and Nicole might not even stop her. It probably wouldn’t be the first time some lusty lady jumped Nicole while she was minding her own business. Waverly shoves more licorice in her mouth until it fills her cheeks like a chipmunk hoping she’s not drooling from one thing or the other.

“Let’s all kill Constance.”

“What?”

“You were starring.” Nicole lifts the book for Waverly to see. “Let’s all kill Constance by Ray Bradbury.” Waverly swallows down every jagged unchewed edge and reminds herself she’s not here to replace one douchy late night booty call with another extra douchy late night booty call.

She ignores Nicole and jabs her hand in her front pocket to retrieve her phone.

WAVERLY: I’m freaking out!!

JEREMY: What’s going on?!

WAVERLY: It’s Nicole. She’s horrible.

CHRISSY: …and that’s news?

JEREMY: What is she doing?

WAVERLY: She’s high reading murder books. :0

CHRISSY: Sounds about right.

JEREMY: I think you two look cute together.

WAVERLY: …

CHRISSY: …

JEREMY: <3

“At two forty-five in the middle of the dark room,” Nicole says, her voice low and ominous. “A terrific lightning bolt rammed the earth behind my bungalow.”
She crawls forward. The book slides off her lap and is smashed into the couch cushion by her knee.

“Thunder Erupted!” Nicole bursts up, swoops Waverly off her feet, and lays her flat on her back, Nicole bridged over her. Her voice drops to a whisper and she leans in close. “Mice died in the walls.”

Only a ghost of a smile dimples her cheeks. She licks her lips and inches a little closer. Waverly’s heart does a little zippy thing when she thinks they might kiss but Nicole pops up on her knees. “See you in the morning wifey.” She winks. Then leaps over the couch and disappears up the stairs.

JEREMEY: Do I still get to be your bae of honor?

CHRISSY: smh

WAVERLY: SOS

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If someone were to ask 5-year old Waverly about love, she would tell them love isn’t always a fairytale. Sometimes the glass slipper fits and sometimes the glass slipper is full of shit because maybe mama is a nut case and daddy’s too drunk to notice, but Waverly’s too smart to care. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to understand that nothing is perfect, people aren’t perfect, and crying about it won’t make it any more perfect.

And she doesn’t cry about it, even though sometimes life can be as cruel as a fairytale, but without the happy ending. Not all fairytales have a fairy godmother or a glass slipper. Still, 5-year old Waverly, with all the magic that can fill a little girl’s heart, hopes that one day she’ll find a glass slipper that fits her.

“What did daddy say when you told him Uncle Julian is going to walk you down the aisle?”

“Pfft…you know daddy.” Waverly shrugs. He was halfway through a bottle of Evan Williams when she told him because Daddy’s a cheap drunk, and there’s a 50/50 chance he didn’t know what the hell Waverly was talking about. “He’d be too drunk to make a straight line down the aisle anyway.”

Wynonna kicks her legs out on the bed and leans back against the wall with her arms folded behind her head. “He doesn’t deserve you Waves. You’re an angel and he’s…it’s like you’re not even related.”

“Sometimes it feels that way.”

“Uncle Julian loves you more than anything though…he’s such a sap.” Wynonna snickers. “20 bucks says he cries.”

“How is that?” Jeremy holds his hands out to showcase his handy work. It took him almost an hour to make the braided headband and weave the Freesia flowers through the back of her hair. “You’re like a beautiful woodland nymph.”

“This looks amazing Jeremy.” Waverly admires herself in the full-length mirror—flowered hair, laced dress, pink lips and she sees that little girl swinging at the Piñata with Uncle Julian cheering her on. She’s got a little bit of punch staining her upper lip and a high that will last for weeks. Fake wedding or not this is her princess moment. Waverly turns and throws her arms around Jeremy’s neck. “Thank you.” She kisses his cheek.
“Woah now.” He giggles. “Save that for Nicole.”

Nicole.

“Shit.” She shakes her head. A rush of anxiety tightens her chest buckling her knees and forcing her heart into an expert level of Dance Dance Revolution. She clings on to Jeremy’s arm to keep from falling. Today she has to kiss the grape guzzling, gum chewing, vape clouded, troublemaker Nicole Haught in front of everyone.

Wynonna swings her legs over the bed and rushes to Waverly’s side. “Are you okay Baby Girl?” Her own worry hardens her face. “You don’t have to do this. You can still change your mind.” Waverly knows that’s what her sister wants, for her to back out, to forfeit, but Waverly’s not a quitter.

“I’m okay. I can do this.” She’s not the first person to sell herself for money in the name of entertainment. It’s not ideal, but a girls got to do what a girls got to do.

“I brought champagne!” Chrissy comes ringing through the door glasses in one hand and a bottle of pink bubbly in the other.

Jeremy squeals and helps her with the glasses. “This is so exciting!” The cork shoots off like a shotgun making Waverly jolt forward. She grips the bedpost as Dance Dance Revolution triple times into the finale. You got this Earp. At least that’s what she tells herself every day when she feels like she is about to reach the outer limits.

Jeremy hands her a glass and holds his up. “To the one of a kind, gorgeous little angel, who I love and adore with every fiber of my heart, Waverly Earp.”

“To Waverly Earp!”

“Cheers.” Wynonna clinks their glasses together and casts Waverly a glance heavy with doubt.

Waverly dodges it and swallows every sharp bubble from her glass. “See. Fine.” She forces a smile and seizes the bottle for a refill.

“Okay.” Wynonna nods. “Congratulations then baby girl.”

***

“Jesus!” Nicole jumps just in time for the flat iron to miss her foot. “What are you doing in here? Isn’t it like bad luck to see each other before the wedding?” She fumbles around at her feet for the iron, sets it on the vanity table, and straightens out her grey tweed vest. She wasn’t very excited about it, or the suspenders, or the bowtie.

Waverly laughs. Nicole wouldn’t budge on the pants. It only took a half hour of whining for Waverly to give into the black skinny jeans. She probably can’t even get them off they’re so tight. I bet she sleeps in them.

“That’s what you’re worried about?”

“What do you want Waverly?”

“I think we should kiss.”

Nicole washes away the bemused look on her face with a shot of whiskey. She swallows it like it’s
nothing and returns the crystal lowball glass to its place on the dresser, next to the bottle of Jameson 18 year reserve. She’s classier than daddy, but Waverly is far from impressed.

She can maybe deal with Nicole’s repulsive smoking habit, she can try to ignore that bad attitude and all the jackassery that spews from Nicole’s mouth like a broken sprinkler, but she cannot deal with another drunken a-hole like daddy.

She doesn’t want to marry someone like him not even for a second, and she’s not interested in marrying a self-medicated womanizer with top-shelf booze and fancy crystal. But the desperation has her standards dropping to an all-time low standing here asking for a kiss.

It’s all just a means to an end. Time is money, as her drama teacher used to say, and after 365 days, money she will have.

“Why?”

“Because we are going to have to kiss in the ceremony and maybe we should, I don’t know… practice?”

“We shouldn’t kiss any more than we have to.”

“It might be kind of awkward to kiss for the first time in front of everyone. Don’t you think?”

“It’s a bad idea.”

“God, you are so stubborn.”

“And you are the bringer of chaos and destruction.” Nicole growls. Her failed attempt at fastening her bowtie leaves it limp around her neck.

“Are you going to be this much fun all day?”

“I’m sorry I just…I can’t get this stupid thing on. I don’t know what to do with my hair and I look like one of those stupid fucking paper boys from the 1900’s…thanks to you by the way.”

“Well, you are a bike messenger. That’s kind of like the same thing, right?”

Nicole doesn’t laugh. No sense of humor this one. She sneers and turns back to the bottle.

“Here.” Waverly stops her reach and lightly tugs her into better lighting. There’s a line at the base of Nicole’s neck, no longer red from the messenger bag, but a few shades darker than her skin. Without thinking, Waverly traces her finger over it, feeling how it’s raised like a scar probably from years’ worth of friction.

Nicole flinches. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing.” Waverly withdraws her finger. She fastens the last two buttons of Nicole’s shirt and tightens the strap so the bowtie rests snug against the collar. “Wear your hair like you always do.” She sweeps Nicole’s hair behind one ear the way Nicole does out of habit and tassels the soft waves on the other side. “There. That looks fine.”

Fine is an understatement. The sultry look on Nicole’s face has Waverly one bowtie away from chucking modesty out the window. She hugs herself, reeking of desperation, but not for money or a way out of Purgatory, for Nicole. Nicole must be used to desperate girls clinging to her and throwing aside their moral values with their clothes on the floor. They would have to be desperate. Desperate
and a little broken.

There is something about the red-headed social deviant and her dirty little habits that promise to fulfill a darker twisty-er need—the mystery, the likely rejection, a sexual fantasy, the surge of adrenalin amidst a plane crash. Deep down Waverly knows she’ll land hard and not so pretty, but she still finds herself wanting.

Nicole’s cocksure persona screams danger by default. The rips in her jeans and the knife in her front pocket beckon a galvanizing adventure for anyone who dares to jump aboard. She can make a damn good first impression with her maddening sense of confidence and unruly charm but can easily turn around and suffocate a room by demanding all its’ attention.

The way Nicole struts around in her leather jacket flashing her dimples here in there, she knows her power and she flaunts it like glitter. She has no problems pulling off that dark and tortured look reeling in chicks wanting to save the wild and untamable Nicole Haught. Whatever her reasons are, for sex, games, loneliness, to fulfill her own dark and twisty needs, she’ll let them try.

On top of it all, Nicole is a giant baby.

“You said I wouldn’t have to wear pink.”

The blue and pink floral bowtie is a selection Waverly made after Nicole snapped at her for the thousandth time in Lorine’s Bridal Shop. Nicole’s a wedding grinch with a short fuse and everything Waverly says seems to strike a match with her. Waverly has zero remorse about that bowtie. Let the giant baby explode. “I changed my mind.” She smirks.

Nicole checks herself out in the mirror tugging on the bowtie, flattening her palms over tweed, and fiddling with the suspenders clamped to her waistband. She snaps the suspenders and frowns. “I’m not wearing these.”

“You look cute.”

“They’re fucking awful.” She argues.

“Okay, calm down little girl. No one’s making you.”

Nicole hisses. She swipes something off the dresser and takes it to the open window where she perches on the window frame. A cloud of dense vanilla rolls off her tongue and immediately blossoms around her face. “You look nice too or whatever.” She billows out like a dragon with each lick of vapor claiming territory, the walls, the sheets, and Waverly. “…for a hippy flower child.”

It’s a revolting habit Nicole carries on with, one that Waverly is not used to and she is not welcoming the change. She karate chops her way through it and plucks the pen from Nicole’s hand.

“Hey!”

“This is a no smoking zone buddy!”

Nicole gets up and snatches the pen back. “I didn’t see any signs.”

“I’m your sign!”

“It’s not even smoke.” She takes it to her lips, taunts with a few weak puffs, then holds it out of Waverly’s reach while vapor swirls around between them.
“That doesn’t make it any less disgusting.”

“It’s my house and my body!”

“Well I don’t want to kiss your stupid smoky vapey face, so like go wash your teeth or brush your mouth...” A disarming smile spreads over Nicole’s face as if it were just an innocent game they played. Nicole’s mockery and narcissistic tendencies might be enough to intimidate everyone else in Nicole's life, but Waverly won’t be charmed, and she won’t play Nicole’s stupid little games.

She might be small, but she can be feisty. She balls up her fists as tension builds in her neck and her jaw and stomps her foot for good measure. “You know what I mean! Now go brush your damn teeth!”

The room gets icy in the presence of those brooding brown eyes. They lock onto Waverly cocked and fully loaded. One outlaw against another. Shoot first ask questions later.

“I don’t think I like you.” Nicole stomps off to the bathroom down the hall and slams the door behind her, but it’s not enough to silence the water she leaves running in the sink.

“Turn the water off!” The shower nozzle squeaks and the rush of water that follows drowns out the sink. “Asshole.” Waverly mutters.

Nicole’s room is a lot of grey. The bed is grey, the curtains are grey, the walls are almost grey, it’s grey and it’s cold. Waverly’s amazed it’s not all black like the tiny velvet box catching her eye from the dresser.

Rosita took them to a fancy jewelry store downtown. Waverly didn’t know one existed in Purgatory. It is one of the more exciting parts of the wedding so far. She found the perfect white gold princess cut ethically sourced diamond ring. She hesitated to pick it in fear of getting too attached. It’s not really hers after all. It belongs to PGE.

The box already has a film of dust coating it. She wipes it off gingerly before flipping the lid. “Oh.”

It’s not her ring. This ring is one fat diamond surrounded by a dozen smaller diamonds. If this ring doesn’t scream marry the crap out of me and have my babies, then Waverly doesn’t know what does. Her ring is for a little princess, but this ring is for a god damn queen.

Out of curiosity, she slips it on over her ring finger. “Huh. Look at that, it fits.”

“Waverly if we’re going to kiss let’s just get it...over...with.”

The box snaps shut and makes a dive for the floor. “Oh! Sorry. The box was just sitting here...” Waverly twists the ring, but it doesn’t budge. “I thought it was my ring.” She twists and pulls but it seems to grip tighter like a Chinese finger trap the more she struggles.

“That was my grandmothers.”

“It’s beautiful. It must have been hard for Shae to give it back.” Embarrassed, she turns her back to Nicole, sucks her finger in her mouth, and tries to twist again. Fuck.

“Shae never wore it actually. She doesn’t like old things.” Nicole takes Waverly’s hand and splays out her fingers. Her ring finger is red hot like Waverly’s face.

“I’m sorry. It’s stuck.”
“Of course it is.” Nicole drops her hand and crosses the room towards the bed. She rummages through the drawer of the bedside table and comes back with a bottle of sexy strawberry flavored lube. Waverly’s not surprised. Nicole ignores her eye roll.

She applies a generous amount to Waverly’s finger and twists, but it doesn’t matter how much she lathers, twists, or tugs, the ring doesn’t budge. “That hurts!”

“Why did you have to put it on?” Nicole whines.

“I said I was sorry jeez…Ow!”

Jeremy sails through the door bouquet in hand. He halts eyes wide in the doorway. “Waverly Rosita has been looking for you. What is going on?”

“Nicole’s stupid ring is stuck on my finger!”

Nicole yanks harder. “You shouldn’t have put it on.”

Jeremy grins. “Isn’t that half the point of the ceremony? Putting a ring on it?” His joke falls flat. “Here. Let me try.”

Even his science brain can’t find a way to remove the ring from her finger. The sticky consistency of his American Crew pomade only pulls at Waverly’s skin. If anything, it makes things worse. “Ow! Jeremy my finger is still attached.” Waverly rips her hand out of his grip and cradles it against her chest, her finger having been through enough trauma. “That’s not helping!”

“Well, I’m sorry. You’re just going to have to use that as the ring for the ceremony.”

“That’s out of the question.” Nicole says, her voice razor sharp with no sense of leniency.

“Well short of cutting her finger off I think that’s the only options.”

“Hang tight I have bolt cutters in the garage.”

“We are not cutting off my finger!”

“We are not getting married using my grandmother’s ring.”

“How about we just leave the ring on her finger until after the ceremony and then we can take it to the jeweler.”

“Oh good! I’ve been looking for you.” Rosita skids in just in time to cut off Nicole’s argument. “I have the car waiting to take us to the Homestead. Nicole, you will ride with Robin.”

Waverly shrinks under the weight of the tension. Nicole won’t look at her. She won’t look at anyone.

Jeremy shifts nervously clutching the bouquet like he’s afraid he’ll drop it and it will shatter on the floor.

“Did I miss something?”

“No. Everything’s fine. Waverly, I’ll meet you there.” Nicole gestures everyone out the door.

Waverly inspected her throbbing red finger. This ring isn’t meant for her, but she’s pretty sure it’s not coming off without a saw.
The moment does carry a kind of electricity. Every step is a rebellious fleece fresh out of the dryer zapping unsuspecting fingers and standing her hair on end. The current flows through Rosita’s twinkling lights hanging from the rafters and charging the atmosphere with a soft pale hue over the carved wood benches. The barn breaths in a sweet smell of Esperance roses capping each bench and the damp earthy hay that blankets the ground.

The cameras consume and transforms Waverly on her journey to reality TV stardom alongside her angsty red headed fiancé. Then there are her guests hitting her with non-verbal cues of congratulations, skepticism, disapproval, and even some with love.

Waverly carries herself gracefully under the weight of lace and nerves as she glides arm in arm with Uncle Julian down the aisle. She passes Sheriff Nedley and his wife Christine. Wynonna stands next to Gus with his arm draped over her shoulders, and there’s Daddy sneaking a flask back into the pocket of his suit jacket.

Rosita sits on the front bench smiling proudly while Jeremy and Chrissy wait with Nicole and Father Juan Carlo. They played rock paper scissors to see who had to be Nicole’s Bae of honor because Nicole refused to ask anyone. Chrissy lost but she’s a good sport.

Nicole’s not exactly Waverly’s John Stamos waiting for her in a black tuxedo. The Homestead barn is far from a Cinderella castle and she wasn’t brought here in a spell cast pumpkin carriage. Waverly always pictured her partner a little more chipper, clean-cut, and happy. Nicole’s more like sin and pleasure wrapped in tweed with a bowtie on top.

“Should we turn around sweetheart?” Uncle Julian teases. “I have the getaway car waiting.”

“Wynonna would like that.”

“I bet she would.” He chuckles.

He lets go of Waverly’s arm when they reach the end and hugs a resistant Nicole. She gives in and hugs back. It’s hard to protest on camera.

Uncle Julian gives Waverly’s hand a squeeze and her cheek a kiss before taking a seat with the rest of their guests.

Jeremy beams at her as a proud best friend. He nods in encouragement.

“It’s going to be okay.” Nicole whispers against Waverly’s ear. When she pulls back, she smiles something genuine and takes Waverly’s hands. Waverly’s face must appear as terrified as she feels. She can hardly acknowledge the thirty other people in the room let alone think about the millions who might be watching from their TV’s.

She focuses on Nicole. She supposes that’s what people do at weddings, look at their spouse to be. Nicole’s easy to look at too, when she stops talking.

“Nicole and Waverly, today you are surrounded by your family and friends, all of whom are gathered to witness your exchange of vows and to share in the joy of this occasion. Let this be a statement of what you mean to each other and the commitment of marriage you will make…”

Wedding vows are not simple. They’re contracts, not unlike her contract with Paradise Garden Entertainment. They’re contracts with their own sets of terms and conditions.
They are promises. I do. I do promise. I do agree with your terms and conditions. I do not think that it’s legal, but I do. Promises can be broken. Contracts can be shredded. Marriages can be complicated. Waverly’s marriage promises to be very complicated.

It’s a toss-up between whose hands are shaking more as Nicole thumbs the rock on Waverly’s finger and their heartbeats compete in their sweat coated palms.

Nicoles eyes capture Waverly’s full attention as they often do. She lets out a long shaky breath and musters up a nervous smile. Everything goes quiet except for Nicole’s voice.

“I remember a moment in Eden’s where you were standing behind the register… you were trying to hide a smile.” Nicole pauses with her grandmother’s ring pinched between her fingers. She twists it gently, testing it to see if it moves.

“I could see it just barely pulling at your lips. You didn’t look up, but if you had you would have seen me trying to hide a smile too.”

“But then you sat with me and gave me a chance to smile at you, and you smiled back.” Nicole takes Waverly’s knuckles to her lips and Waverly gets a glimpse of that ring. The ring all sparkly and bright. Marry the crap out of me and have my babies it screams at her. Shae really must hate old things to pass up this bling bling. “I realized then… I realized that I could love you… if you let me.”

She swallows audibly. It takes her a good 5 seconds to continue all the while the silence is blaring in Waverly’s ears. “I do love you Waverly, and I promise, as your wife, to have those moments with you every day. To appreciate all the reason that make me love you and make me want to be with you even when things feel impossible. I promise to care for you and respect you and to go above and beyond to show you how amazing you are. Because I’m yours. Always. And forever.”

Waverly is sure she read her vows just the way Robin wrote them. She tried to memorize them. She brought her note card just in case. They were probably beautiful, but she doesn’t remember. She knows father Juan Carlo said some things about love and unity, but at some point, blinded by diamonds, and shaking from the cameras watching her fake get married, Waverly blacked out.

Lucky for her it was all caught on camera.

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“Come on Nicole, it’s your firsts dance as a married couple and people are going to want to see it.”

“I don’t dance.” She says flat. She can’t be bothered with something so mundane. Cool kids don’t dance at weddings obviously.

“Get in close. Come on now.” Greasy Derek circles around them like a shark with his camera on his shoulder and one eye obscured by the lens while Robin squeaks orders. Underneath his frail confidence, he begs Nicole to be compliant.

Nicole seems to enjoy doing the opposite of what he asks. It’s clear she didn’t earn her reputation by being agreeable and pleasant. She stands her ground and slumps against the wall scowling at all the guest waiting in anticipation of the first dance. “I don’t know how.”

“Well Rosita offered you lessons, and you said meh.” The thing is, Waverly knows Nicole can dance. She’s seen Nicole downtown at Ice-Nine with girls hanging off her trying to dance sexy. Nicole always looks so indifferent, like she could take it or leave.
Waverly wonders what that’s like to have so many options that there’s room to be picky. Waverly has Champ and he’s more like a bad habit than a true contender. She doesn’t suspect Nicole to be all that picky, more like lazy. She’ll take what’s easy.

Champ probably thinks Waverly’s easy. He doesn’t even bother to text or call anymore. He just shows up expecting. At least that’s one problem Waverly won’t have anymore. Maybe now she can learn to have a little more self-respect and take a little less after her sister.

Waverly takes Nicole’s hands and coaxes her onto the dance floor. She drags her feet the whole way.

“I did not.”

“You did, and then you got drunk in the bathtub while rapping the Alphabet Aerobics.” Waverly smiles sweetly for the cameras and the audience, not all of which know the wedding is a sham.

“Ah. No. No No. You got drunk and started rapping the Alphabet Aerobics. I had to listen to you until you fell sleep...and you were getting pretty sloppy at a super scientifical.”

“S’s are hard when you’re drunk okay.”

“You’re going to have to work harder for that $200,000 Nicole. For as long as you are on my show, you are madly in love with Waverly. And I mean madly. You can’t keep your hands off her let alone your eyes.” Eliza insists. “Do what you have to do to make it happen.”

This is the First Day of My Life hums out of the speakers. Nicole’s forehead falls flat against Waverly’s and she slips her hand to the small of Waverly’s back. She takes Waverly’s other hand in her own as they slowly oscillate the floor. Someone dims the lights. The sparkling globe above them diffracts purple, blue, and pink all over the dance floor around them. “Just let me lead okay.” Nicole whispers.

“Fine whatever.”

At firsts, it’s a struggle to ignore the camera zooming in and out on her self-conscious skin. Jeremy is skilled with a makeup brush and a bottle of coverup, but HD shows every bump and blemish.

She’ll have to get used to a life shadowed by cameras and having little to no privacy, at least outside of Nicole’s house. Gus has made it clear that Eden’s is off limits. She likes to keep her business her own. The Gardner’s might like the publicity, but they seldom visit the coffee house. Mercedes makes the occasional appearance, but she seems to care less about the business operations, only the money it brings. She’s more worried about facials and expensive handbags.

Waverly tries to concentrate on the soft rhythm Nicole creates for them and smiles occasionally at her guests. Mostly Gus and Uncle Julian. It’s just the first dance. It doesn’t have to be perfect. They don’t have to be one of those elaborate in love couples who reenact Dirty Dancing, though Waverly totally would.

Their gentle swinging is kind of sweet. Waverly leans into. She rests her chin on Nicole’s shoulder where she breaths in the scent of vanilla and almond body soap.

She catches a glimpse of Uncle Julian wiping away a tear with the handkerchief he keeps in his pocket. He’s such an old man sometimes. Wynonna giggles behind him and records him with her phone. There’s a good chance that video is going up on YouTube.

Jeremy leads Chrissy to the dance floor midway through the song and some of the other guests start
to spread out into their own rhythms. Thank god the pressure is off her.

She locks her wrists behind Nicole’s neck and sniffs into the collar of Nicole’s button up. It really was a beautiful ceremony and Rosita has made this room look up to Waverly’s standards of magical.

“Waverly.” Nicole nuzzles Waverly out of the crook of her neck. “Are you crying.” She says in a hushed voice. Her acknowledgment only makes it worse. Waverly’s not even sure why she’s crying. She’s not in love. This isn’t really her wedding, but it’s a wedding and it’s perfect. Even if it is with Nicole.

“It’s my wedding and I’ll cry if I want to.”

Nicole leans back and brushes the dampened hair from Waverly’s cheeks. Her brow furrows but her lips stay soft. “Okay.”

“You’re smearing my makeup and it took Jeremy a really long time to make me look this good.”

Nicole chuckles and takes Waverly’s jaw into her hand. “Shhh.” Their first kiss in front of everyone was awkward—probably, Waverly’ doesn’t remember.

This kiss is soft and simple. It’s short. Just enough for show. “Great job Nicole. Eliza will be pleased.” Robin praises. Nicole ends it with a kiss to Waverly’s forehead and a loving smile. She’s an unnervingly good actor. Waverly almost believes it for a second. “Very nice touch.”

Nicole’s smile fades away when Robin and Derek disappear into the dance crowd gathering footage of their guests. Most of them are Waverly’s. Nicole hardly invited anyone. Just a few creepy biker looking dudes that Wynonna’s adamant about avoiding.

“May I cut in?”

“Be my guest.” Nicole bows out and disappears in the crowd after Robin.

“She seems…nice.” Uncle Julian says in a pleasant but not so convincing tone. He’s always been protective but never overbearing. He’s not the pull out a shotgun on the front porch type like daddy. Daddy once said, ‘men are just hormone driven beasts and they need to be put in their rightful place.’ Uncle Julian makes his judgments on a case by case basis. In Champs case, he’s an irresponsible boyman with less than honorable intentions. Waverly can’t argue with that.

“Please. You wouldn’t think so if you talked to her for more than two seconds.” Waverly snorts.

“Yeah well, I’m an excellent judge of character.”

“I don’t know about that.” She teases. She drapes her arms over his shoulders and pecks his cheek.

A pang of guilt flares in her gut when she cast a glance at daddy. Wynonna sits with him now. Seriousness contours her face. Her hand rests over his clutching a glass, presumably full of whiskey. Daddy can’t resist a drink. The bar is open courtesy of PGE. Alcohol keeps the crowd, and drunk guests are more entertaining than sober ones.

“How are you feeling now that you tied the knot?”

“Knotty.” She jokes. Uncle Julian laughs. “I don’t really know honestly. It doesn’t feel real.” Some of that numbness from last night carried over. It’s like she’s shrunken inside of herself and is peaking out through two little windows with little control over actions.
“It will.”

“How come you never got married?”

“It just didn’t work out that way Angel.”

“Well, you’re a catch Uncle Julian. Mama should have married you when she had the chance.”

“But then I wouldn’t have you…or Wynonna.”

“True.” She sighs.

The song ends. Uncle Julian smiles. “I think I’ll go take advantage of that open bar. Save me another dance for later?”

“Of course.”

“Julian!” Gus drags him through the dance floor thwarting his path to the bar. She’s always exhibited a tiny crush on him and a smidge of jealousy for her sister. His interest in mama has always been clear, even to a piss drunk Ward Earp.

Waverly can’t imagine fighting over a guy with her sister. Wynonna’s taste in men is widely different than her own. Wynonna likes them rough around the edges and bold with their words. Spitfires like Nicole. If Nicole was a dude, Wynonna would be the first in line.

Uncle Julian politely obliges twirling around a beaming Gus. Robin dodges them. “Hey Waverly, can I talk to you for a quick sec?”

“Sure. What’s going on? Are we doing interviews?”

Robin ducks his head sheepishly and stuffs his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “No-no. Um, I actually had a question about your friend…Mr. Chetri.”

“You mean Jeremy?” Waverly laughs hooking her thumb over her shoulder to Jeremy and Chrissy dancing behind her. Jeremy has had a little too much champagne already. His cheeks are flush red and stretched wide into a jubilant smile. He never stood a chance. Chrissy is a bad influence. He does look handsome in his red tux though. It doesn’t match Waverly’s rustic theme by any means, but Jeremy was so excited about it she couldn’t tell him no.

“Yes, is he—”

“Single?”

Robin giggles nervously. He slaps his hand around his neck and scratches an imaginary itch. “Yes.”

“He might be. How about you go ask him to dance and find out?”

“Yeah?”

Waverly nods in Jeremy’s direction and smiles. Jeremy’s cheeks just might get a little redder. “Go.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey baby Earp.”

“Mercedes. Hi!”
“Oh. Okay, we’re hugging.”

“It was so nice of you to come.”

“Wynonna said there was booze so here I am.” Mercedes fluffs her hair with the palm of her hand while she scans the crowd. She didn’t wear a dress, rather a black skirt and a shimmery emerald blouse that hangs loose in places. The color suits her red hair.

Mercedes is vain to the max just like her mother. Mama suggested one time that Mrs. Gardner is nothing but a gold digging bitch. Nice words to share with a 6-year-old. Mercedes isn’t bad though. Waverly kind of likes her over the top sass and fiery attitude.

“Anyway. I was shocked to hear you were marrying Nicole Haught. I always pictured you with someone a little more put together and soft…like Perry.”

“Surprise.” Waverly sings.

“She doesn’t seem like the marrying type.” Mercedes says looking over Waverly’s shoulder.

Nicole lingers by the bar with one of the creepy biker dudes. Stringy long hair hangs to his chin, well broken in leather jacket, not so friendly demeanor. He doesn’t strike Waverly as someone who came to celebrate a wedding.

Waverly can smell the mischief brewing from a mile away. Nicole’s shifty stance and forced smiles, all of it suggest there are secrets held between them.

“Well, she is divorced.” Waverly says. Her voice distracted now.

“That sounds more like it. Shae, right?”

“Yup.” Waverly swears she sees something pass between their hands. Nicole forces a last smile and the biker crosses the room reuniting with the other creepy biker. They share a few words there and disappear out the back door.

Nicole catches Waverly starring. Her face shifts from deer in the headlights to a roguish attractiveness. She holds Waverly’s attention tucking her hair behind her ear and winks. Waverly resents the subtle flutter in her chest that follows.

“Hmm…maybe you should have married her instead. I hear she’s a doctor.”

“She is.” Waverly turns her eyes away for one second and Nicole’s already heading out the door and into the hall.

“Excuse me. I have to do something really quick.”

“Waves!” Chrissy barrels over and grabs Waverly’s hands. She spins Waverly in the other direction. “Robins dancing with Jeremy. Look how cute!”

Waverly’s eyes stay fixed on the door. “It is cute. I’ll be right back.”

“Waves? Are you okay?”

“Yeah-right back.” She dismisses.

Waverly follows the voices through the hallway and finds herself creeping into the chapel. The doors cracked just enough to peak around the edge without being noticed by Wynonna or Nicole standing
in the aisle. They appear to be in the middle of a heated conversation.

Wynonna grabs for Nicole’s pocket and attempts to force in her hand but Nicole shoves her off. “Whatever you’re doing you leave her out of this you understand?”

They circle each other slowly resembling two back-alley cats ready to fight with their chests puffed, fists clenched, and all kinds of crazy shaping their faces. “I don’t know what you’re talking about Earp.” Nicole says her voice holding in a dare. She backs away up the steps to the chancel with her eyes fixated on Wynonna. Wynonna moves after jabbing her finger forward.

“You do know and I’m not afraid to kick your ass Haught.”

“’Cause’ that worked out so well for you last time.”

“That was like 12 years ago okay and there are no chairs in here!”

Nicole pauses and teases with an amused smile. She lets Wynonna in close before she leans in closer. “I’m not above using a pew bench.”

Wynonna snorts. She sidesteps and moves to put the altar between them. “I’m like a cop now so you don’t want to mess with this.”

“Who would make Wynonna Earp a cop?”

“Well fine. I’m a CI.”

“You’re a narc.” Nicole chortles. Her body relaxes and she leans up against the altar with her back to Wynonna, cocky. Temptation flushes Wynonna’s face. She deescalates into a sly grin and shrugs it off.

“Yeah, a narc who knows stuff…” She says matter-of-factly.

Nicole always so cool pulls at her suspenders and lets them snap before pushing off the altar and walking down the few steps of the chancel. “I ain’t got anything to hide.”

“If you do, know that I’ll find out.”

“Waverly?” Fudgenuggets. “What are you doing here?” Nicole says. She tucks her hair behind one ear, glances over her shoulder at Wynonna trailing behind her, and smiles innocently. “You should be enjoying your guests.”

Waverly narrows her eyes not in the slightest bit trusting of either of them. “Shouldn’t you be doing the same?”

“They’re mostly your guess.” She shrugs.

“But they’re here for you too.”

“Right. Of course.” Wynonna shoulder checks her to get through to Waverly.

“Let’s go Waves. It’s almost dinner we should get back to the reception.” Wynonna ushers Waverly down the hallway. Nicole lingers until Waverly beckons Nicole with her eyes.

Derek and his camera are posted up in the doorway as they enter. Nicole nudges Wynonna away and wraps Waverly in a hug from behind. They both feign newlywed happiness as they shuffle into the room.
“Waverly!” Chrissy says in a silvery voice. “She links her arm with Waverly and frees her from Nicole’s. “You are sitting next to me at the table. I am starved.”

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“How does it feel to be a married woman?” Jeremy asks always talking with his mouth full. Robin doesn’t seem to mind. He still stares from the across the room.

“Why does everyone keep asking? It feels the same as being an unmarried woman so far.” What does a married woman feel like?

“I’m sure that will change. You guys living together doing cutesy couple stuff.”

“Ick.” Nicole grunts. Waverly elbows her in the ribs. “Ow!”

“Don’t be a dick.” She hushes. It was satisfying. She mildly hopes Nicole gives her a reason to do it again.

“Just don’t turn into a couple of homebodies and never leave the house. You’re still young. You’ll be twenty 24 this year. Don’t waste it. After this, you’ll probably start getting hangovers.” Chrissy says.

Waverly turns to Nicole. The only person other than Uncle Julian and Aunt Gus older than 23. Both of them engaged in their own conversation. “That’s not real. Is that real?”

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. Don’t ask stupid questions.” Nicole snaps.

“Wynonna doesn’t get hangovers.”

“Wynonna’s a high-functioning alcoholic.”

“Don’t be rude!”

Nicole flinches and protects her ribs. “I’m not. I’m stating a fact.”

“In any way, we still have a lot of parties to attend to. It’s my birthday next month and I want to do something crazy.” Chrissy pauses, leans forward, and looks around Waverly. “You can come to Nicole. Since you guys are like a unit now.” She says as an afterthought.

“Can’t wait.”

“Hey! I am not giving up my autonomy here. We are still individuals first and for most.”

“Good for you Waves.” Jeremy says. “It so sad to see couples lose their identities in a relationship. My parents you know have separate rooms.”

“That might be a different issue.”

“Actually they are still quite romantic. But my dad snores and my mom has restless leg syndrome. It’s not that uncommon you know.”

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Nicole scrapes her fork across her plate breaking apart the perfectly baked bites. “What the fuck is this?”

“Watch your mouth there are children.” Waverly forces a smile at Aunt Gus and the disapproving
look she’s sending Nicole’s way. She mouths ‘sorry.’ Gus just shakes her head. “It’s falafel.”

“It’s fa la fa what?”

“It’s vegan.”

“Why is it on my plate?”

The fork scrapes something high pitched and sharp vibrating through Waverly’s teeth. She cups her jaw with one hand and places the other over Nicole’s fork to silence it. “Because you wouldn’t help me pick out the menu. So, I picked what I wanted.”

“Well if it sounds like a song in a Julie Andrews musical then I’m not eating it.”

If she’s not throwing a fit about this, it would be something else. “Then starve for all I care.”

“Children do I need to separate you.” Chrissy interjects.

“Please do. This is just fa-lawful.”

“You know what? You are the biggest baby I have ever met.” Nicole throws her cloth napkin over her falafel and scrapes her chair on the floor. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to find a vending machine. There’s got to be some Skittles or Starburst or like an Ativan around here. Where’s Mercedes? I bet she’s got something in her purse.”

Robin stalls her. He tentatively places his hand on her shoulder and ducks his head. “Not just yet Nicole. We are going to cut the cake.” He soothes. Nicole shrinks as a 2-year might after being sent back to time out for the 15th time. Her jaw tightens and she throws herself back into her chair.

Waverly shakes her head. How can someone be this dramatic all the time? It must be exhausting. At least her falafel tastes good.

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The white frosting is streaked onto the 2-tier pink champagne cake giving it the appearance of birchwood. It has a trail of flowers winding around the edges and up to the top.

“There’s flowers on our cake Waverly.”

“Yes, I know.”

Chrissy hands Nicole a large cake knife. Nicole holds it out like it’s a weapon. Waverly places her hand over Nicole’s and attempts to guide the knife towards the cake.

“Stop it.” Nicole whispers.

“Pause now so we can get a picture ladies.” Shelly says. “Very beautiful. Now smile. Happy smiles. Oh, there they are.”

Waverly makes a second attempt to guide the knife to the cake. “Stop it.” Nicole repeats. She so ridiculous Waverly gets the feeling she’s doing it on purpose for the attention. Waverly laughs.

“Stop laughing.”

“Yes, Waverly. I love the laughter. So beautiful.” Shelly says. ”Now Nicole lets see those beautiful
teeth. There we go. Very good.

Nicole stops resisting. Together they cut a sliver of cake showing all smiles and love while under the scrutiny of Derek, Shelly, and their cameras. Between her tears and sweat, Waverly hopes that there is still enough makeup left to hide her red irritated cheeks courtesy of Calamity Jane.

“I’m going to smash this cake all over your face.” Waverly says through a smile.

“Not if I do it first.”

“I’m going to do it.”

“Do it then.”

"Okay." Waverly smears cake up Nicole’s nose while giggling and Nicole jams cake in her mouth. Frosting and crumbs fall to their clothes and their lips find each other once more through pink champagne and buttercream.

“That’s was a lot better,” Eliza says. She shakes both their hands with an almost smile. “I look forward to working with you for the next 364 days. Robin will be in touch to discuss the next step. Enjoy your wedding night.” She winks and walks away.

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“What do we do now?” Nicole asks as if their future is uncertain because it is. Aside from interviews and couples’ therapy, PGE has been vague about their plans for her and Nicole.

Waverly went through a reality TV phase in high school. She thought it seemed over dramatize and not real reality. It was unbelievable to think these people could have such wild and explosive personalities to create enough drama for a whole series. Now she knows why and Nicole is enough drama to fill up a whole show on her own.

“Well, we’re not having sex.” Waverly blurts. Obviously, they’re not. Why would she even say that?

“God no. I wasn’t even thinking that.” Nicole says. She shies away avoiding eye contact. They’re both quiet a moment. “But we could…”

“We’re not having sex crazy!”

“Fine, what do you want to do then? Just go to bed? I ate too much cake and I’m not sleepy.”

“Oh! So, you can drink 5 Monsters before bed, but a bite of cake keeps you up late?”

Nicole shrugs. “I have an adrenalin high.”

While Waverly doesn’t want to go to bed either, she’s not sure how much more of Nicole she can take tonight. She combs her fingers through her hair loosening up the braided headband and littering the floor with Freesia flowers. It feels good to massage all the tension out of her scalp.

Nicole watches her think. Her eyes beg for a distraction. Waverly might need a distraction too because Holy shit! They just got married.

In the last 7 days, Waverly has signed a contract, moved, planned a wedding, and just got flippin married. She’s surprised she’s not exhausted face down in a pillow wrapped in a cocoon of blankets already.
“Come on. I have an idea then.”

Nicole hesitates. Her lips part but she doesn’t speak. Waverly takes her hand, not because she has to or because she put her finger where it doesn’t belong, but because they’re two people stuck together about to go on a long journey, and they may as well get along.

“Waverly, why are we standing in front of Bunny Loblaw’s pool?”

“Because we’re going to jump.” All the lights are off, but the blue glow brightens up the whole backyard and shimmers along the milky pink stucco of Bunny’s house. Waverly’s always wanted to jump in this pool. Chrissy’s grandmother lives on this street. They used to dare each other to sneak into Bunny’s backyard and jump. They’re were both too chicken.

“I most certainly am not.”

“Come on. It will be fun I promise.”

“But you’ll ruin your dress.”

“It’s just a dress. Besides, it would be tacky to wear it to another wedding.”

Nicole checks herself out tugging here and there. She fingers the impossibly small pocket of the vest and hooks her thumbs under her suspenders.

“Don’t tell me you have grown attached now. I listened to you cry all morning.”

“I’m not attached.”

“Good. Let’s go.” Waverly’s laces their fingers and guides them to the edge. “Close your eyes. On the count of three. 1…2…3.”

She blasts off with her legs and somewhere in the fall, she lets go of Nicole’s hand. The air bubbles out her nose fighting the water rushing in. She lets herself sink to the middle to enjoy the weightlessness before kicking her legs to the surface. She spits out water and runs her hands down her face clearing her eyes.

“I didn’t know you were such a rule breaker.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

Nicole leans back, spreads out her legs and arms, and floats. “Really? Like what?”

“I can outshoot my daddy with a shotgun.”

“Very nice. What else?”

“I used to have an imaginary friend named Bobo. Freaked my mother out.” Waverly copies Nicole and distributes her weight over the water. A shy waning crescent moon hides amongst the purple and pink setting sun. The night streaks it with black.

Waverly was born under a moon just like this. Mama described it as a dark cotton candy sky with just enough of a moon to guide Uncle Julian to the greenhouse. She passed out from complications, but he found them both under the lunar glow and kept them safe.

“What about you? What don’t I know about you that would surprise me?”
“Uh…hmmm. I can solve a Rubik’s cube in 8 seconds.”

“You cannot.”

“Can.”

“Nerd.”

“Hey!” Nicole shoots water out her mouth like a fountain hitting Waverly in the face. “There’s not a lot to do in juvie.”

She retaliates and sends a wave with her arm capsizing Nicole. “As I said. Nerd.”

Nicole splashes harder using both arms now until Waverly can’t see without flushing her eyeballs with chlorine. But she laughs and it feels like relief. Nicole’s laugh is like music echoing back. They could make this fun, if they learn to get along, and if Nicole can tone down whatever teenage angst she carries around with her. Waverly’s seen her relaxed and less abrasive. Nicole’s not all bad.

“Whose out there?”

“Shit!”

“I’m going to call the police!”

Waverly paddles to the far end of the pool. Nicole powers on behind her water sloshing everywhere. "Hurry.” They both bolt out of the pool and make a run for it leaving behind a wet trail of mini feet puddles as evidence.

"I’ll have you little shits arrested so fast! You better run!”

Chapter End Notes

All I can say is...let the games begin.
Sex and Candy

Chapter Summary

Nicole and Waverly attempt to settle into their new life together and there's a little bit of bickering in the process. The two begin their first tidbits with PGE and meet Dr. Svane.

Friday March 8th

Waverly wakes suddenly and confused.

A thin coat of sweat spreads across her chest and along her hairline. Her mind races and her eyes are wild searching for answers in this unfamiliar place. The drumming in her chest pounds and pounds in a heavy beat that sends her into flight mode. This is the end.

Her feet hit the cold floor, but her mind remains only half in reality. It takes her a minute to register it’s her own screams she’s hearing rip violently from her lungs. The startling shrill is so sharp and so loud, it ignites her like fireworks. Waverly pushes off the bed and bolts down the hallway chased by nothing but the darkness and a shiver along her spine.

It growls something fierce and flashes bright with a vengeance urging her along as she runs over creaky old hardwood and past drafty windows. She doesn’t look down the stairs. She knows her panic-stricken mind will find something staring back at her from the shadows.

She makes it to the last door down the hall and kicks it open with a terrific battle cry as the dark flashes blue and black and roars like a trashcan rolling off the rooftop.

Drowsy and bewildered, Nicole stirs in her bed blinking away her own confusion. Waverly can barely make out her features before she launches out of the doorway and hits the edge of the mattress. The box spring groans on impact.

“Jesus fuck!” Nicole jumps. Their elbows and knees collide, and Waverly starts fighting her for the edge of the blanket. “What the hell!”

Waverly cries out one last time, this one softer and drowned out by Nicole’s yelps of pain. She digs her nails into Nicole’s sides shaking and disoriented. Her pupils wide searching for familiarity in shapes and color. Everything is dark and threatening, like the rain drizzling down the cool window and the trees trembling out in the ruthless gusts.

She tries hard to burrow further under the blanket, but Nicole pins her still. “Waverly stop! Chill out!” She freezes. Or is she paralyzed? “What is going on sweetheart?” Nicole’s says like a lullaby, hauntingly beautiful amongst tumultuous chaos. She focuses on Nicole’s big brown eyes sweet as chocolate and the soothing line she brushes along Waverly’s jaw with her thumb.

Waverly blinks. She can’t remember why she was running or what she was running from. It was just a chill that had her moving so fast. She was asleep one moment and the next she was flying from one end of the house to Nicole’s bed. “I don’t…I had a bad dream I think.”

The thunder vibrates again, rolling under the floorboards accompanied by a dizzying strobe of light.
The room glows an eerie blue. It highlights the concern on Nicole’s face. Waverly trembles. “Thunder.” She breathes over the edge of the blanket clutched tightly in her hands and she tugs it up to her earlobes.

Nicole smiles sweetly taking away some of the horror that has her pinned to the mattress. “You’re scared of the storm?”

Waverly nods. She’s never been afraid of thunder before but waking up from a nightmare to a cock-a-doodle-BOOM turned something innocuous into a sharp-toothed beast.

“I need to sleep in here.” She insists, then disappears under the blankets like a little girl and clings to Nicole t-shirt pressing herself hard against the length of Nicole. “Please.”

“Ow! Waverly easy with the nails.”

“Sorry.” She mumbles into Nicole’s chest.

Waverly’s fingers flex over Nicole’s hipbone, her body begs to be close, to be safely wrapped up together, but Nicole has other ideas. She puts her hands awkwardly between them creating some distance, still, her face remains the same sweetness. She leans in and her lips whisper over Waverly’s forehead with a calming heat.

“Okay, but just tonight.” Then she rolls away from Waverly’s touch to her side with her back to Waverly and fluffs the pillow under her head.

But Waverly is restless and disturbed. How is she supposed to sleep after that? Or with Nicole’s back to her acting as a brick wall blocking her from the comfort she needs.

Her sweat cooled skin brings on a violent shiver. She wraps herself around Nicole’s warm back and waist hanging on for dear life as if Nicole is the only thing keeping her from the disturbing nightmare breathing down her neck.

“I can’t sleep with you clinging to me like a monkey Waverly.” Nicole murmurs into her pillow with sleep already heavy in her voice.

“Right. Okay.” Waverly loosens her grip but tucks herself in as close as Nicole will let her. Whatever monsters are lurking in the darkest corners aren’t getting to her here hidden amongst the blankets with only the top of her head peeking out. She presses her forehead into the middle of Nicole’s back and sneaks an arm around Nicole’s waist. Her knees bend and nestle perfectly behind Nicole’s. She sighs in relief, their bodies mold together in the perfect blend of comfort and safety.

Finally, her eyelids start to droop even when she tries so hard to fight them, but the adrenalin wears thin and her body wears out. The soft rhythm of Nicole’s breathing sends her off to sleep with the warm cotton of Nicole’s cut off t-shirt against her cheek and a hint of vanilla. It’s just as calming as any mindfulness app Waverly’s ever used.

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Saturday March 9th

There’s the faintest humming amidst the hot raining water but no response. Waverly pounds her fist on the door again. This is not her usual morning routine banging on bathroom doors, but here she is, with shower steam seeping underneath the crack in the door. It hits her in the face with a free facial.

It’s not surprising that her day is thrown off considering she woke tangled in the grey satin of
Nicole’s sheets. By the time Waverly’s eyelids fluttered opened Nicole was already up complaining about the sun being too bright for a Saturday. At first, she thought she might have drunk too much wine and thrown all her ambitions out the door, but then she remembered the storm and the creepy feeling came back.

It has been exactly one week since the wedding and Waverly is starting to feel semi at home, though the house is old and creaky. It’s definitely left room for her imagination to run wild with ghosts and other sinister things.

She likes to say she doesn’t watch a lot of TV, but when she really thinks about it, that’s all she and Chrissy do when she stays over.

In fact, three nights ago, Waverly stayed over at Chrissy’s place and they were up way too late watching Ghost Hunters. Waverly couldn’t sleep at all after that and consequently, she was in piss-poor condition for work the next morning.

It couldn’t have been a worse time to show up as a zombie. The icemaker stopped working at Eden’s and the Gardner’s refused to send someone out to fix it. Mr. Gardner insisted Gus be able to fix it. Gus was furious and spent the day wreaking havoc on anyone who dared to fall out of line even in the slightest. Waverly’s lack of enthusiasm and sluggish pace kept Gus booming commands her entire 8-hour shift.

Despite her spine-chilling romp through the house last night, Waverly welcomed the morning sun filtering in through the maple leaves outside the window and painting their silhouettes across the comforter on Nicole’s bed. The comforter’s appealing grey stripes give the bed a simple clean hotel feeling, but it is not warm enough. She had to spend most of the night pinned to Nicole’s back despite Nicole’s protesting, to keep from freezing to death. At one point Waverly is sure she heard Nicole mumble something about a heat vampire.

Champ never let her close enough to steal his heat. On the off chance he stayed the night at all, he slept facing her with his knees pressed against her stomach keeping them apart, and eventually, he’d move to the couch.

He’s been texting her. Trying to sweet talk her into meeting him at Shorty’s after close, to talk. Yeah sure, that’s what he wants. That’s what he always wants when he feels Waverly pulling away, and he always seems to know just what to say to suck her back in. It’s been that way since she was 14.

When they were still in school, every time Waverly had shown a remote interest in someone else, Champ road in on his stick horse with his football jersey and the letterman jacket he’d drape around her shoulders to let everyone know she belonged to him.

It was okay for him to hook up with whoever he wanted. She was expected to understand that he was just being a guy, he couldn’t help himself. Waverly accepted it then, being so young.

After she graduated and starting working at Eden’s she wizened up. She made it clear that they weren’t dating and if he could sleep with other people so could she, and she did. Champ still whines about it from time to time, and every now and then Waverly finds herself feeling guilty. She has tried to cut him out of her life for good, but she always goes back.

It’s an addiction feeling that way—manipulated, used, yet hopeful. It must be to keep going back. Waverly knows he’ll never change. He’ll never be enough to satisfy her. He’ll never be enough to keep her from leaving Purgatory, but he’s familiar. That is why he is enough for now. Was enough.

“Nicole!”
Someone could grow old waiting for Nicole to get out of the shower. Waverly’s paced up and down this hallway enough times to memorize the grooves in the floor and count six cobwebs. Six! Spiders included. “What can she possibly be doing in there that takes this long.” She mutters to herself.

Nicole’s ancient old house has one working bathroom upstairs and she’s too cheap to fix the one downstairs. She says it’s complicated. Whatever the fuck that means.

“I have to pee!”

Finally, a gruff response echoes out stopping Waverly eagerly in her lap up the hallway. “For fuck sakes pee then! No one’s stopping yah.”

Her feet squeak on the hardwood when she spins around and marches to the door, she hesitates, her hand hovers over the doorknob. Is Nicole inviting her in? Or is Nicole suggesting she pee her pants in the hallway? Because honestly, she could see it either way.

She grips the handle, it’s wet with humidity, and waits for confirmation. Nicole gives it with a note of impatience.

“It’s unlocked.”

“Oh, thank god.”

The steam dissipates out the door as Waverly rushes in and drops her pajama shorts to the fuzzy rug at her feet. The first sound of a trickle brings relief as her body relaxes, but relief is quickly replaced with embarrassment. She’s peeing next to her super sexy wife one shower curtain away.

Her fingers fumble with the toilet paper. It spools to the floor folding like paper thin ribbon. Nicole is naked, butt naked, as in zero clothes. She has been in here for almost 20 minutes doing naked things.

Waverly bites her lip a little too hard. She can’t think about that.

She shakes it off and forces away all thoughts of Nicole’s soap soaked body by naming the spiders. There’s Pikachu, Mr. Pumpkins, Bubble Gum…

She yanks up her pajama shorts and cinches up the string. Then looks back at the toilet dripping with condensation wondering if she should flush or not. It’s the polite thing to do, but it is an old house. It could get icy. Though Nicole’s not the one who needs a cold shower right now.

Wynonna used to play that trick on Waverly all the time. The Homestead isn’t exactly a new house either and her sister is a relentless prankster. Waverly doesn’t have enough fingers to count the number of times she’s flown out of an ice cold shower.

She cautiously pulls the lever and watches the rush of water swirl down and away. Then there’s nothing. No yelping. No fumbling to turn off the water. Just Nicole doing naked things. “You know you’ve been in here for over 15 minutes?”

“I like to think in here. It’s quiet. Usually.”

“It’s a really irresponsible use of resources,” Waverly says. In the 5th grade, her class went on a field trip to the Purgatory Science Center. It’s a small facility, not a whole lot to see, but they had a whole room dedicated to how much water everyday tasks consumed. About 20 gallons is wasted for a 10-minute shower.

Waverly turns on the sink faucet and lets the warm water wash over her hands, then turns it back off
while she lathers the soap. She lathers her ring finger extra until it’s lost in lavender foam, and twists. The stubborn bastard still won’t let go. She turns the faucet on again and rinses away the fluffy suds and frowns. “You should only shower as long as you need to.”

“I could do that. Or I could just continue living my best life.”

Always such an ass. It’s too early to argue with Nicole. Waverly hasn’t showered, and by the looks of it, there might not be any water left to shower with. She hasn’t eaten either and her migraine is telling her it’s coffee-o’clock. She forfeits, turns the water off, dries her hands, and makes the couple steps to the door, but the rustling plastic draws her back.

Curious, she spins around. The temperature in this steam room must have melted her brain because how rude is she for yanking open the shower curtain? Nicole startles but does nothing to cover herself. “Hey.” She says brushing wet hair from her face and blowing residual water off her lips.

Waverly’s in disbelief. What did she just do? Where is she supposed to put her eyes? They want to see everything at once, but they go to Nicole’s hands first.

The source of the rustling plastic is a bright purple wrapper that belongs to the Tootsie Pop Nicole pinches between her fingers. She peels it back and sucks the Tootsie Pop into her mouth, it bulges out her cheek. The wrapper falls carelessly to the shower floor. It’s swept away in a heated downpour and caught in the drain mesh where it spins before settling.

The artificial fruit flavor mixes with the steam and violates Waverly’s nostrils. She can taste it on the back of her tongue. It doesn’t have the same harsh chemical smell as grape Monster, but it is still sickly sweet. “Are you eating candy in the shower?” She says partially amused and a little bit repulsed.

Nicole smiles and tugs the Tootsies Pop from her lips. Waverly bets they taste like grape now. It almost makes them more appealing as if Nicole’s kiss isn’t already sweet, Waverly suspects. She could kiss Nicole right now and find out, but she won’t.

“I might be.” Nicole teases with a wink.

Waverly’s gaze falls from the Tootsie Pop to play over the lines and curves of Nicole’s body. She can’t help it. They’re tempting. She gets lost in the way the water makes quick long endless trails over the swell of Nicole’s breasts, down the definition of her abdomen, and collects in the soft reddish-brown curls between her legs. Nicole stands unabashed with her Tootsie Pop and lets Waverly look.

“Waverly, are you just going to check me out?” She pauses to curl the tip of her tongue around the purple candy toying with seduction. She twists it between her lips then smiles sugar sweet.

Waverly’s eyes continue to dart in all direction memorizing every part of Nicole. She clings to the shower curtain, now dangerously close to ripping it from its metal rings, while her heart cartwheels in her chest and pumps blood to all the wrong places.

“Or.” Nicole’s voice gets deeper and edges to suggestion. “…are you going to tell me what you want?”

What she wants is to drop her shorts to the floor, climb into this shower, and kiss the grape right off Nicole’s lips. She wants Nicole to pin her up against the shower wall and take her hungrily while Waverly screams out her name and claws into her back, but what she really wants is for Nicole to turn off the damn water.
That’s enough. Waverly comes to from whatever trance she is under. She looks at Nicole’s smug face searching for anything worth saying but nothing comes. She yanks the curtain closed and stares at the paisley pattern frozen like an idiot. Charlotte, Pickles, Heathcliff…

She can’t be in here anymore. She’s sure if she stays a second longer, she’ll regret it. She’s better than this. She decided that when she moved. She’d grow up. At least that’s what she tells herself every time she gets the urge to text Champ back. There will be no naked shower sex with Nicole today.

She backs up slowly, clips her shoulder on the doorframe in the process, but keeps her eyes on the closed shower curtain until it’s out of view around the corner and she shuts the door. A little bit disappointed, she still commends herself on self-control and retreats to her room where the only naked things are the walls. The box of tapestries and twinkling lights are MIA at the moment.

For now, she can find solace in the endless trees out her window. All the back windows of Nicole’s house have an expansive view of the wooded area behind it. Just through the Douglas Firs are the neighboring houses enjoying the same picture-perfect view. Waverly spots Bunny Loblaws house. Pepto-Bismol pink is hard to miss.

Gus has a chair in the garage that will look perfect there by the window where she can spend the next 358 days reading every book in the Purgatory library, and not having sex with Nicole.

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The kitchen is a bright shade of grey accented with two other darker greys. It’s consistent with the clean cold hotel feel of Nicole’s comforter. There’s the usual fixtures a coffee maker, a toaster, and a professional set of knives. The pots and pans hang from a stainless steel rack mounted with a chain to the ceiling. Everything else is neatly stowed away leaving bare counters except for a small tidy stack of what Waverly presumes are bills.

“Sorry about last night I just…I had a bad dream and it seemed so real you know?”

Waverly lingers awkwardly in the entryway; her eyes focus on a chip in the wall where the paint is cracked and crumbling. She pokes at it with her finger before looking to Nicole.

Nicole brings her second Monster of the day to her lips and swallows audibly. “What was it about?” She asks with seemingly genuine interest.

She leans up against the kitchen counter with one foot crossed over the other. Her feet have already been laced up in her black Tims. She’s got a worn out black belt around her waist as if she needs it to hold up those skintight jeans, the ones with the rips and tears like windows to the ghostly skin of her legs.

Even when wet her hair curls at the base of her neck. Waverly watches a few drops make a wet trail to the collar of her t-shirt. Nicole gets a shiver when they disappear down her back. She shakes it off and continues to fuel up on grape sludge and Waverly’s attention.

“I have no idea. It was just a bad case of the creeps. New house jitters I guess.” She shrugs and rubs her thumb against the white paint chip revealing the tarnished fir of the column. A thin jagged edge jabs under her fingernail as she picks at it. Tiny flakes glide to the floor like dandruff and land by her toes. She drops her hand having done enough damage for one day; diving into Nicole’s bed, demanding they sleep together and practically jumping her in the shower. What a mess she has made.

She grips the wood column and clings to it hopelessly while she thinks about all the times Champ’s
scrambled out of her bed and tossed himself to the couch in a way that emphasized his irritation. It’s become a routine, and she has gotten used to it. So much so she expects anyone else to do the same and leave her. She even feels guilty sometimes. Yet, here she goes forcing Nicole to deal with a wild night of tossing and turning with Waverly Earp, and not the good kind.

“I’m sorry.” She shakes her head. “I know I am terrible to sleep with. Champ usually leaves or sleeps on the couch.”

Nicole’s quiet for a moment, pensively staring at the floor and takes a swig of her Monster before nodding her head and looking up. Waverly resents the way her heart flutters when their eyes meet. “I think you just needed a good cuddlin’,” Nicole says matter-of-factly.

Waverly’s grip slips from the column causing her to stumble forward and catch herself on the counter beside her. She winces when her big toe stabs into the floorboard with a throbbing sting. That’s far from the response she expected from Nicole. Nicole seems about as cuddly as a lionfish, and about as dangerous and beautiful too. “What?”

Nicole wets her lips and pushes off the opposite counter with two flirtatious little dimples etched into her cheeks. “You kicked and squirmed and tore the damn bed apart and at one point I was more off the bed than on, but…” She tears the tab off her Monster and drops it in the can. It shakes in her hand like a rattle as she talks. “After about the 30th time you elbowed me in the ribs, I rolled over and trapped you in a cuddle like a human Thunder shirt, and then you held the fuck still. Problem solved.” She winks.

Waverly blinks as she tries to picture it. A cuddle? She doesn’t remember cuddling, not real cuddling. She only remembers clinging to Nicole’s back and fighting Calamity Jane for leg room. “Huh.” She exhales. That’s about all she manages to get out as her brain dissolves into mush at just the mere thought of Nicole volunteering to cuddle.

Nicole runs her hand through her wet hair tucking it behind her ear. The movement raises her V-neck T-shirt just enough to see the lines of her sharp hipbone disappear into the black waistband of her Tomboy underwear. It captures Waverly’s full attention.

Her tongue flicks out along her lips as she notes the black tip of a vape pen sticking out of one pocket and a knife clipped to the inside of the other. Subtle displays of danger and mystery further alluding to Nicole’s irresistible bad boy charm.

Waverly hates it, and more importantly, she hates that she likes it. She follows all the rules, works hard, and lives by a strong set of moral values, but Nicole shatters every one of them and it drives her crazy in a way she craves.

Her face gets all steamy again and her eyes roam the lay of the land with x-ray vision knowing now what’s hidden underneath the rest of Nicole’s clothes. Waverly will have the image of Nicole’s hot wet skin seared into the back of her eyelids forever.

Nicole’s alluring smile doesn’t leave any room for disappointment either, the way she bites her lip and flashes those dimples when she catches Waverly looking again. Nicole owns the attention whereas Waverly shies away from it.

Nicole lets her look a moment longer then turns to the cabinet under the sink and deposits her empty Monster in the trash. All that sexy fog fluffing up Waverly’s brain whisks away in a hurry when that can clinks against another.

She stomps over and slams the heel of her hand into that sharp hipbone to push Nicole out of the
Nicole stumbles to the side while her feet sort themselves out. "Watch it!"

Waverly fishes out the can along with 3 others she now cradles in her arms. "Where is your recycling?"

"I don’t have one."

"But these need to be recycled."

Nicole folds her arms across her chest and leans with her hip against the counter. "You know you’re awfully bossy for someone who was voted the nicest person in Purgatory."

"You can’t just throw these in the regular trash!"

"Why the fuck not?"

"Limited resources Nicole and—and overflowing landfills...do you even care about the ocean?" She lectures and lines up the purple Monsters like bowling pins on the counter. One of them makes her hands sticky and she wipes it on her pajama shorts. She tries to nudge Nicole away so she can dig for any other cans carelessly misplaced there.

"Gee, I think I liked you better when you were asleep." Nicole huffs and blows the cans over. They come crashing to the floor in a loud ear ringing ruckus. The unsurmountable level of childlessness Nicole will stoop too has Waverly fuming in disbelief.

"Really dude!"

Amused, Nicole just laughs. "You know what I think.?" She presses forward and Waverly retracts sending a can across the kitchen floor with the heel of her foot. In one swift movement, Nicole slips her arms around Waverly’s waist and lifts her in the air with ease, her legs kick out in front of them. "You need to cool off." Nicole grunts and proceeds to carry Waverly out of the kitchen and into the foyer. "How about I run you a nice cold shower wifey." She teases.

Waverly’s fingers slip past the column as she tries to stall her red-headed wife, but no dice. Flailing arms and legs do nothing to disarm Nicole in all her ornery strength as she makes her way to the stairs. Waverly screams and kicks harder. "Put me down right now Nicole!"

Calamity Jane scuttles past them startled by the two chime doorbell echoing through the foyer and into the living room. Nicole falters. She loosens her grip just enough for Waverly to wiggle to the floor and managed to wrap her arms snug around a post. The edges bite into her forearms and her muscles strain against Nicole’s grip around her waist while Nicole tugs playfully.

"Let go of me, you weirdo!"

"Not until you chill out." Nicole chuckles.

"I’m I chill okay. I’m chill."

Nicole keeps tugging and laughing. She’s like a child. Even Wynonna wasn’t this obnoxious as a
teenager and she was a shit 90% of the time. Nicole lives in some other reality where this kind of behavior is socially acceptable. It’s chaos. Waverly doesn’t do chaos.

The door opens just in time to save her from an imminent cold shower. Jeremy clears his throat standing in the doorway with a paper bag dangling at his side. Meanwhile, Waverly’s legs are straight out in the air like a flag on a flagpole.

“I really do pick the weirdest moments to come in, don’t I?”

Nicole drops Waverly’s legs and her feet land awkwardly on the edge of the step. She slides to her knees and down one step before Nicole catches her under her arms.

“So sorry.” Nicole grumbles.

Bruises already blossom over her knees where they collided with the hardwood. It only smarts a little. She swats Nicole away and uses the railing to pull herself up. “Let go of me. I’ve got it.”

“So, what’s going on?” Jeremy laughs uncomfortably.

“Uh, we were just…” She looks over her shoulder at Nicole who shrugs offering nothing. “Never mind.” She shakes her head flustered and hoping he doesn’t notice how surprised she is to see him. She forgot they had talked about him coming over last night. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Robins coming over for some PGE stuff and Jeremy wanted an excuse to run into him. Waverly thought his presence might calm her nerves for whatever Robin has in store for them.

He’s always been there. He did her make up for prom and danced with her after Champ dipped out to get high behind the gym with his stupid friends, then disappeared to who knows where. He was there when Champ cheated on her the first time with vanilla dipped donuts and the first 3 seasons of Grey’s Anatomy. They cried together.

Waverly would have just dated him had he not come out to her in the 6th grade. Jeremy is a good friend. Her best friend.

“Oh, I get it.” He grins and covers his heart. “Your secrets safe with me.”

“No Jer there’s no—”

“I’ll keep it on the down low.” He continues.

Getting increasingly more flustered she stammers out a protest and emphasizes it with her hands cutting through the air in the form of an X. “There’s no secret. Nothing to hide here.” Nicole continues to offer nothing and instead stands with an amused smirk on her face while Waverly struggles. Everything’s always so funny to her, isn’t it?

“Right.” He winks. “I have something to show you. Both of you actually.”

“Oh. Um, come on in it.” Waverly sweeps her arm across her body gesturing to the living room. “Make yourself at home.”

Nicole clears her throat rudely from the stairs but follows Waverly and Jeremy into the living room.

“Nice house.” He says in awe head tilted to the vaulted ceiling and dark espresso wood beams. “Nice touch.” Nicole’s eyes follow his. A soft smile tilts her lips as she joins him in admiration.

“I like the chandelier.” He points to the rod iron ring suspended with matching chain and adorned
with 7 Edison bulbs. “So industrial.”

“Thanks. I made it.” Nicole says. She presses her hands into the back of the couch and leans over slightly. Waverly takes in a long slow breath and lets it out in huff that blows a strand of hair off her face. Crushing one of those Monster cans in her fists sounds awfully therapeutic right now. So what? Nicole builds things. That’s definitely not super sexy.

And yet, she finds her eyes drifting off to fantasy land studying the way Nicole tucks her still damp hair behind her ear, then slips the pen from her pocket. A wisp of vapor lick over her soft parted lips and her tongue flicks out wetting them before taking another drag. She pushes off the couch and takes a couple of steps backward toward the kitchen, her mouth in a cocky smirk. “Yeah, I’m pretty good with my hands.” She winks and turns around walking into the kitchen.

“Very cool.” Jeremy nods with a grin.

“Do you want anything to drink? Water? tea?” Waverly blurts out in hopes to take the attention off Nicole’s handy work and the sneaking ache growing between her legs the more she thinks about Nicole naked in the shower.

“No. No. I’m fine.” He situations himself on the couch with his eyes still wandering through the living space. Waverly plops down beside him, hands folded in her lap fidgeting anxiously. Nicole posts up in the kitchen entryway building a vanilla scented cloud around her. The vapor rolls out smooth over her lips and curls back through her nostrils. Such a disgusting habit.

“So, what did you want to show us?”

“Oh!” He nods and reaches into the paper bag now at his feet and comes up with two rolled up tubes. The rubber bands holding them together are discarded and he flattens the tubes on the coffee table. One of them being the Purgatory Chronical. “You’re in the news!” He chirps excitedly.

Nicole pushes off the entryway column and strides over vapor trailing behind her. They all lean over the paper curiously.

The front page reads: Purgatories Nicest Wed for Television.

Purgatories very own Waverly Earp married on national Television Saturday morning as part of ABC’s hit show Newlyweds. Earp 23, and spouse Nicole Haught 28, said their ‘I do’s’ on her father’s property formally known as the Homestead. When asked about their nuptials friends and family were both delighted and surprised by the sudden engagement. “I didn’t even know they were dating?” Jones, a friend of the couple stated.

Waverly looked over to Nicole slowly sitting down next to her jaw clenched together.

“Look at this one.” Jeremy slides the Entrainment weekly over next. The Front page includes a picture of them sitting on Nicole’s front porch, Waverly on her knee, arm draped over her shoulders looking like a real couple. He licks his finger and flips halfway through the magazine to a two-page spread of similar pictures, one that shows them smashing cake into each other’s mouths. Waverly’s lips turn up a little to that.

Waverly Earp and Nicole Haught, one of 5 couples followed on ABC’s Newlyweds, will be the first featured in the show’s premiere Saturday, March 16th at 8 pm ct. Earp and Haught, both born and raised in the small town of Purgatory, expressed their love in
a beautiful outdoor ceremony where family and friends gathered to celebrate. Earp works in a popular coffee shop run by one of the wealthiest families in Purgatory, and Haught owns a bike messaging company. “We at ABC have a good feeling about these two,” Robin says. (Newlyweds producer). “Their love is truly magical. Like a fairytale. I think America will fall in love with them immediately.” The article is preceded with a series of snapshots from the porch photoshoot including the one with their foreheads pressed together.

“Holy…”

“Shit.” Nicole finishes.

“You guys are like famous already.” Jeremy beams, clearly more excited than Waverly or Nicole.

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“Rosita?” Waverly exclaims puzzled by the dark woman standing in the doorway with heavy luggage under her arm. “More wedding planning?”

Rosita laughs. She drops the luggage to the floor of the foyer. Robin squeezes in next to her with his clipboard, both with smiles like gold ribbons pinned to their faces, bright and sparkly.

“No-no Mrs. Earp. That chapter is closed.” Robin says. His eyes flicker to Jeremy standing quietly beside her and gives him a shy nod. A happy heat radiates off Jeremy and hits Waverly like a little sunbeam. It’s been a while since Jeremy’s dated anyone or talked to anyone after that awkward Grindr date, he had last year. He has yet to give Waverly the full deets on that.

“Thank God. I can’t handle another wedding.” Nicole says then stuffs her face with vanilla Twinkie. She’s too far away to elbow so Waverly reaches out and pinches her side instead. It makes her jump. She swats Waverly away and smiles playfully with a little bit of cream filling on her upper lip. It catches Waverly off guard. Nicole is full of confusing surprises today. “Be nice.” She says to resist the pull at her own lips and turns her attention back to Robin and Rosita. “Well, what are you doing here?”

“Oh. I’m in charge of makeup and wardrobe. I’m here to get you ready for your post-wedding interviews.” Rosita says.

Nicole whines through all that sugary fluff she’d managed to cram into her mouth. “More interviews?” Waverly gives her a dirty look over her shoulders, but Nicole just grins again, cheeks bulging with the last half of that Twinkie

“It’s just a mini interview really.” Robin inserts. “A few questions a few photos. Nothing big. Just a little something for the tabloids to start out before we start filming episode 1 on Tuesday.”

Waverly laces her fingers with Jeremy’s. “Jeremy usually does my makeup for special occasions.” Jeremy blushes and ducks his head when Robin’s blue doe eyes fall back to him eyelashes batting lightly.

“That’s perfect.” Rosita chimes with her usual enthusiasm. “Jeremy, you can work with Waverly and I’ll tackle Nicole.”

A cough of surprise turns Waverly’s attention back to Nicole wearing a smug look on her face. She wipes the corner of her mouth with her thumb and points up the stairs. “My bedroom is just right up here.”
Waverly raises an eyebrow. She’s not in the slightest bit surprised by Nicole’s presumptuous gesture. Nicole’s mind is probably nothing but a wheel of spinning dirty thoughts and Waverly can almost understand why.

The considerable amount of validation Nicole appears to get every time a woman so much as acknowledges her feeds her egotistical delusions that all women are just waiting around for her to fuck them. It’s hard for Waverly to deny some truth to that given the countless times she’s watched Nicole leave Ice-Nine with a new low self-esteem drama addict clinging to her arm and looking for a project.

Waverly gets it. They’re fixers. It’s fun to fix things, but people aren’t things to be fixed. She knows this all too well. Still, she can hardly blame them for trying. It’s not like she hasn’t fanaticized about being one of those girls walking around wearing Nicole’s arm like a championship belt. Allowing her curiosity to get the better of her and letting Nicole take her home, to have her. It’s all childish and Waverly’s not a child anymore. She’s a grown ass woman.

“Don’t worry Waverly.” Rosita winks and leans in close. She drops her voice to a whisper. “I have dealt with worse.”

Is that true? Does Rosita spend part of her job controlling the uncontrollable? Waverly couldn’t handle another Nicole. One is more than a handful. Her charm is like magic, like a salesman selling herself, she can talk anyone into anything, or out of anything. Waverly knows for a fact she charmed the cheerleader skirt right off Abigail Taylor her senior year.

Waverly was a sophomore then, and Nicole had just transferred from the Rebound School of Opportunity. She’d only met Nicole a few times in passing, but mostly knew of her through stories from Wynonna.

It was a confusing moment walking into the girl’s locker room to find Nicole’s hand up Abigail’s skirt while Abigail was pinned up against the locker with one leg hooked around Nicole’s hip.

Waverly stood frozen with her hand still on the doorknob just watching. She’ll never forget how the locker rattled with every thrust sending static down her spine. Or the way her cheeks grew hot when Nicole slid to her knees, hiked up Abigail’s skirt a little more, and replaced her hand with her mouth.

All their heavy breathing burst forth into desperate moans that echoed off the tile floors and concrete walls while Waverly was bound in the perversity of it all.

Waverly felt dirty and creepy, but she couldn’t bring herself to move or even look away. She was just 15 and Nicole was a super senior, too old for Waverly. Not like Abigail, 18 and experienced with a perfect body.

She finally unfroze when Samantha Baker stalked in after her and screamed. Nicole startled and glanced over her shoulder at Waverly with a deer in the headlights look. What did Nicole really expect fucking in the girl’s locker room so openly and right after cheer practice? Sometimes Waverly wonders if Nicole wanted to be caught.

That was the first time Waverly thought about Nicole as anything more than a sleazy little dirtbag with a bad habit of swinging her fists.

It took Samantha running out in a fit for Waverly to realize she had stopped breathing. Of course, Samantha went out and told the whole cheer squad. Fortunately, Abigail gave no fucks about what anyone thought of her.
Samantha dropped it. It wasn’t fun if it didn’t hurt. Waverly dropped it too, for a while. There were other moments over the years, but the feeling didn’t really flare up again until Nicole started coming into Eden’s every day.

Waverly doesn’t really know Nicole. She only has the coffee shop and the rumors. That’s where she draws her conclusions, but rumors aren’t enough to describe a whole person. It’s something she finds herself increasingly more curious about. What is Nicole’s truth?

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It’s pajama porn.

“Alright, ladies. You both look fabulous this morning. Let’s see what you got.” Shelly says.

Nicole is already stationed in her bed. Her pajamas include a clean white V-neck t-shirt and light grey pajama pants. Waverly looks down at her own skimpy maroon silk shorts and spaghetti strap tank top. What kind of bullshit is this?

The top sheet is spread lazily over Nicole’s legs bent up in front of her. They’re not the sheets Nicole had on her bed this morning. Rosita must have changed them. Robin gestures for Waverly to slide in too.

“Closer now.” He says.

Waverly shifts over as far as she can without overlapping, but their hips still touch. Nicole gives her a dirty look when their elbows bump and she tucks her arm into her stomach.

“Alright. I am going to ask you a few questions about the wedding and Shelly is going to take a few photos. Okay?”

Rosita adjusts the top sheet to drape over Waverly’s legs too. It’s less silky than Nicole’s sheets. Heavier. Warmer. “Just enough skin to be sexy…but not too sexy.”

“This is the gayest shit I have ever had to do.” Nicole gripes.

“Don’t be so rude.” Waverly finds satisfaction in any opportunity to elbow Nicole in the ribs.

“Don’t be so rude.” Nicole mocks.

“What is your deal?” Nicole just smiles like it’s fun. She’s got Peter Pan syndrome that’s what her deal is. Just a big kid in grown-up pajamas. “You think you’re so funny, don’t you?”

“Aren’t I though?”

“No, you’re annoying.”

“Okay.” Robin claps his hands to get their attention. He situates himself on his fold-out stool with Shelly on his right, angling the camera every which way. The occasional click goes off when Shelly takes a shot. “Let’s begin. Mrs. Haught tell me what your favorite thing about the wedding was?”

All Waverly can think about are the scary biker dudes and Nicole arguing with Wynonna in the chapel. How quick Nicole was to smile and play innocent and Wynonna was just silent. The two of them sharing any kind of secret is disconcerting considering their history of suspicious behavior.

Wynonna was caught hotwiring cars more than once. Nedley pulled all the strings to keep her out of jail, but she accumulated her fair share of frequent flyers miles to Juvie. She didn’t mess around with
it anymore after her 18th. Nedley warned her he couldn’t help her after that.

Nedley pulled strings for Nicole too. She’s the crazy asshole who burnt the Sports Supply Store to the ground, then sat outside on the sidewalk waiting to be arrested. It didn’t make any sense. Wynonna said she’s just too stupid to run. Nicole got the same warning at 18.

Neither has been in trouble like that since.

“The food,” Nicole says. Waverly attention snaps to the girl who threw a tantrum about the falafel on her plate. Now she likes the food?

“Can you elaborate?” Robin asks.

“It was vegan.” She smiles and takes Waverly’s hand. “Waverly tries so hard to be vegan, but you should see what this girl eats.” She chuckles.

Waverly clenches her jaw and fights the urge to jab her elbow hard into Nicole’s ribs. Is Mrs. Skittles for dinner really criticizing what Waverly eats?

“I really just want to be supportive. Which is why I picked up a vegan cookbook and learned a few recipes so I can cook for her.”

“You did?” Waverly asks, surprised. She believes it long enough to say the words before she comes back to reality.

“I told you I am going to take care of you, snookums.”

She scoffs, rips her hand out of Nicole’s grip, and scoots towards the edge of the bed. “You’re full of shit…and I don’t need you to take care of me…And don’t call me snookums! It’s weird…” she trails off.

“Okay moving on.” Robin chuckles nervously. “Mrs. Earp, what are you most looking forward to in your marriage with Nicole?”

How is she supposed to answer that? The end? The money? The return of her sanity? How can she possibly find something to look forward to in her marriage with this lying clown?

“Excuse me, sorry. Waverly darling can you just tuck yourself back in there.” Shelly gestures with a wave of his hand. She begrudgingly slides herself back into position, thighs, and hips touching Nicole’s. “Hmm, no that’s not working. A little more.”

“Fine.” She crawls over Nicole’s leg and settles in her lap. Nicole’s body stiffens and her hands hover over Waverly’s sides awkwardly. Waverly wraps them around herself. She’s surprised to feel Nicole melt around her. Even more surprised when she finds herself leaning back comfortably against Nicole’s chest like they have done this a million times before. “Happy?”

“Lovely. Now, remember to smile.” He draws a smile over his face with his finger then gives them a thumbs up.

“Okay, Mrs. Earp, let’s try again. What are you most looking forward to in your marriage with Nicole?”

Waverly scours her brain for any kind of an answer, but all she can think about is Champ sneaking away at night, leaving her alone and cold. Nicole didn’t leave. Maybe she wasn’t overly enthused about it, but Nicole stayed the whole night apparently cuddling her. So, what is she looking forward
to most? The only answer that comes to her is a grumbling plea from her empty stomach.
“Breakfast?”

Nicole snorts.

“Keep going, Waverly.” Robin encourages.

“No.” She fidgets with her hands and shakes her head. “No, I mean that feeling when you wake up next to someone, wrapped up in their arms…and you don’t want to get out of bed,” She sighs in a dream-like state, while she fantasizes about waking up to the smell of pancakes and veggie bacon, someone’s in the kitchen setting the table. They smile when she wanders in all sleepy-eyed and hungry.

“but when you finally do, you…you make breakfast. I’d probably eat like way too many pancakes, maybe the kind with blueberries in them.” She sighs again feeling silly. “I guess that sounds kind of stupid but that’s what I look forward to in a mar—in my marriage to Nicole.”

“That’s not stupid,” Nicole whispers into her hair. Her arms wrap a little tighter around Waverly’s waist. Waverly’s not sure if she pulled them tighter or if Nicole did.

“That’s beautiful Waverly.” Robin praises. Shelly’s camera goes off in a blinding flash forcing Waverly to blink to adjust.

“Oops, sorry dears.”

Nicole’s face lights up into a roguish grin. She jabs her fingers into Waverly’s sides causing Waverly to cry out in laughter. She kicks and squirms in Nicole’s lap giggling uncontrollably but internally cussing Nicole out. When she stops, she swoops in and takes Waverly by surprise. She’s good at stealing Waverly’s kisses.

“Fan. Tas. Tic.” Shelly claps out. “Love it. Couldn’t have made it better if I had directed it myself.” He packs up his things. Nicole jerks away and wipes her mouth. “I love you girls; you make my job so easy. Chow!”

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Waverly thumbs at her finger mindlessly, shifting the diamond setting back and forth. It only goes so far to the left and to the right, but it refuses to let go of her damn finger. It just clings to her, taunting her in all its glittered glory. Why couldn’t it have been a princess cut in that box?

“I see you’re still wearing that shithead’s ring,” Wynonna says. A dark hatred brews behind her icy blue eyes as she dunks a fry in the ketchup pooling on her plate and shoves it in her mouth. Wynonna points out the ring every time she sees it. She seems more worried about it than Waverly.

“It still won’t come off.”

She just nods with a stare tossing a few more ketchup coated fries in her mouth. That’s her second helping of Rowdy’s crinkle fries, her favorite ever since she was a kid. The diner is permeated with the smell of them. It clings to Waverly’s skin all greasy.

When they were kids Uncle Julian would bring them here all the time in the summer when daddy was at work—if he was sober enough to make it to work. It’s Uncle Julian’s favorite too. Something the two of them bond over still.

Julian moans his appreciate as he works on his Deluxe Rowdy burger—no ketchup. Ketchup makes
everything taste the same. He likes spicy mustard instead mixed with Rowdy’s Boom-Wow sauce. It makes it fire in your mouth spicy.

Waverly gets stuck with just the fries. Despite her constant suggestions, Rowdy still hasn’t added a veggie burger to the menu.

She spreads out her finger and admires the way the light refracts off the 2.5ct diamond in a blinding disco ball of light. Then there are all the smaller diamonds that surround it in a glittery halo and the intricate filigree curling down the setting. The ring is old, generations old, and tarnished in places. It probably came right off the boat smuggled underneath granny Haught’s petticoat.

It surprises her that Nicole hasn’t said anything more about it. She made such a big deal about her grandmother’s precious ring and then nothing like it never happened. The princess cut is still lost somewhere in that drab grey room in a different black velvet box.

She doesn’t hate it. The way it looks or the way it feels. Only what it means, that she belongs to Nicole. That this real ring makes her fake wedding real because this ring comes with different expectations. Ones that even Shae couldn’t uphold.

Shae doesn’t like old things. Maybe Shae didn’t like Nicole’s old house. The house is beautiful, but shit, it has a lot of issues. Issues Nicole seems determined to fix herself. Yesterday Waverly wandered into one of the spare rooms and was shocked to see the wall torn open with exposed pipes and electrical wires looking like bones and guts. A few hours after that Waverly plugged in the toaster and the power went out on the entire first floor. Nicole just shrugged and said it’s on her list. How long is her fudging list?

“Maybe it belongs there.” Julian takes Waverly’s hand to admire it watching it sparkle with the same look of fascination Waverly feels when she stares at it.

“Are you new here?” Wynonna says, nudging him, and shoving two ketchup drenched fries in her mouth. “This is Nicole’s ring…Nicole Haught?”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” Waverly scolds.

“I just mean it could be a good sign.” He shrugs and releases Waverly’s hand. “How is everything going?”

“Fine, I guess.” Waverly says. The creepy feeling comes back when she thinks about last night and the nightmare. She nips the end of a crinkle fry and frowns. Why is she such a freak racing through the house like a scared little girl?

Uncle Julian’s brow knits together as he studies her face. Intuition kicks in. She’s never been good at hiding things from him. “What’s bothering you, my angel?”

Wynonna scowls at him. She thinks he’s too soft, too sappy, and too nice. She clears her throat and mimics his posture. “What’s bothering you, my angel.” She pinches her lips together to keep from laughing.

Waverly’s cast her a glance of disapproval. She wouldn’t be Wynonna if she didn’t tease him every chance she gets.

“I don’t know. I had a nightmare last night and…”

“What about?” Uncle Julian asks.
“I don’t remember I just… I ran into Nicole’s room and kind of slept with her.”

Wyonna leans over the table and smacks her with greasy fingers. “Waverly, you didn’t?”

“Okay ow!” She rubs her palm over the sting. “I don’t mean like that. I was scared.” She looks down and shifts awkwardly in her seat. The vinyl of the red booth bench squeaks and sticks to her skin. “and I needed someone. She was there. That’s all.”

“Next time just call me.”

“You live 25 minutes away.”

“I’d still come. If you needed me.”

“How’s work?” Julian says changing the subject.

Wyonna grunts and slurps down her cola. “Dolls is such a grump ass. He’s always like ‘Earp do this’, ‘Earp do that’, blah blah blah.”

“Isn’t that his job? To be your boss.” Waverly says.

She hooks her thumb to her chest defiantly and scowls. “I’m my own boss.”

Wyonna still doesn’t fully understand what Wyonna does for Black Badge. Some kind of undercover detective work. Dolls calls her a confidential informant. They use her because of her past. As a CI Wyonna works closely with big-time criminals to gather information and report back to Black Badge. It’s dangerous.

Black Badge primarily focuses on unusual criminal activity, currently, their focus is the Cult of Blushar.

Bulshar, used to be known as Jonathon Clootie. He was the Sheriff of Purgatory before he went crazy with delusions. He’d rant on about the Garden and the stairwell in the woods. ‘It’s just some old stones thrown together really. Kids dare each other to climb them, but Clootie swears up and down they lead to the Garden.

Of course, he was written off as a whack job. He lost his position as Sheriff which really sent him off the deep end. He started recruiting biker gangs and other delinquents to join his cult in search of a weapon that supposedly opens the doorway at the top of the stairs. Wyonna says his cult members are infiltrating all kinds of business in Purgatory selling illegal substances and searching for the weapon. He’s powerful, dangerous, and is Black Badges number one priority.

It makes Waverly sick thinking about her sister working with those Cult members. Wyonna says they trust her because of her background. She’s close to some of them. Another thought that turns Waverly’s stomach.

“Anyway, he has me going out on a job tomorrow. I’m meeting up with this guy named Levi, he says he has some information for me on a group running out of the Rusty Bucket 3 miles south of Purgatory.”

“Should you be talking about this in a public place?” Julian hushes.

Wyonna just shrugs and shoves in a few more ketchup drenched fries.

“You be careful Wyonna.” Waverly reaches her hand across the table and grabs Wyonna with a
little squeeze. “Please. I just got you back.”

“Don’t worry baby girl. I always am.”

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It feels like it’s been hours of just wiggling tiny little thumbtacks into the wall all for the sake of twinkling lights. Her fingers and her thumb are raw from the rough-edged plastic grinding into the sensitive skin there. An angry burn flares over her shoulders, into her biceps and her wrists. It’s become damn near unbearable. She shakes out her arms and rolls her neck.

It would help if she wasn’t balancing on a makeshift step stool aka a very unreliable side table with a bum leg. She found a Philips screwdriver in one of her boxes and promoted it to hammer, but it only breaks the plastic. “Fudgenuggets.”

“Hey, are you going to be making this noise all night?” The voice comes out of nowhere, seemingly disembodied, it sends a spooky little chill up Waverly’s spine and makes the soft hairs stand up on the back of her neck. What is it about this house that has her so freaked out? It’s old and creepy, probably haunted with the ghost of a previous owner, or with the ghost of a marriage. Maybe she’s just not used to someone else always being around, lurking in the doorway.

Her foot kicks off the edge of the table in her jolt to turn around. It finally gives, leg snapping clean off, and dropping Waverly on her ass. She catches herself half on her elbows shredding the skin there, and the throbbing in her tailbone takes her breath away. The screwdriver is lost in the fall and skids across the floor to meet Nicole’s foot.

“Ow!” She squeals when the pain lets up enough for a sound to escape her throat.

“Waverly!” Nicole moves fast. Edward Cullen fast, and before Waverly can adjust to being on the floor Nicole scoops her up and sets her gracefully on the edge of the mattress. She squats in front of her, her eyes evaluating for injury. “Are you okay. Are you hurt?”

“Well nothings broken,” Waverly says examining her elbow. She blows over the sting, but the cool stream of air does nothing but add fuel to a fire. “So yeah, I guess I’m okay, no thanks to you sneaking down the hallway.”

“Sorry,” Nicole smiles. “Once a ninja always a ninja.” Then her face softens like wet clay on a potter’s wheel. Whatever it is that gives her that puppy dog-look, it molds into something that says, everything’s going to be okay. Waverly needed that look 8 days ago when she signed a year of her life away. Waverly, everything’s going to be okay. She needed that look after taking a tranquilizer dart to the hip on her way to band practice. She made it…thankfully, then went home and slept for 36 hours straight.

Maybe she’s being dramatic. It’s just a face, just a smile, just a mild flutter in her chest, a hitch in her breath. No big deal, right? Everything’s going to be okay.

But it takes her by surprise.

The weight of Nicole’s hands, fingers pressing lightly on the sides of her knees as Nicole looks up at her like that, it’s too much. She clutches her elbow tight against her chest, guarding what’s underneath, her heart—skipping a beat here…thump, adding an extra there…thump-thump, consistently inconsistent, just like Nicole.

“You have a sun in your eyes,” Nicole says.
Waverly blinks and her gaze sinks to the floor. The evening sun cuts through the room like one luminous blade, thin, sharp, and beautiful. She tracks it along the hardwood, highlighting all its grooves and divots, one interlocking board after another, she makes her way back to the window. It pierces through single pane glass but falls to the floor, not in her eyes.

“Am I squinting?” Is she concussed? She doesn’t remember hitting her head.

“No.” The weight on Waverly’s knees momentarily increases while Nicole adjusts to kneel between them. She smiles again, with her head cocked to the side, and reaches up to brush aside a few lazy tendrils hanging around Waverly’s face. The movement is so casual like it doesn’t affect her at all being this close.

“No. The hazel brown ring feathering out from your pupil.” She draws a circle in the air between them with her finger. “It looks like a sun radiating out into your irises. You have a sun in your eyes. Well, one in each.”

And her breath is lost, gone with the wind.

Nicole doesn’t have a sun in her eyes. She has something deeper encased in honey and gold, like amber. A mystery, some magical DNA to be discovered, extracted and mapped out in a theme park. Fun, and a little bit dangerous, or a lot a bit depending on which side of the fence she finds herself. There’s something else there too, it’s not a sun, it’s a freckle. It’s a hesitation, an extinction, a pinprick of pain preserved forever in resin. Shae?

“Oh. I have never noticed.”

Nicole inches closer, almost nose to nose, demanding Waverly’s attention with just a look. She basks in it, in Waverly’s suns while they trade breath like cards in Go Fish. Waverly’s hands drop to the mattress either side of her, fingers twisting up the cotton sheets, holding back. _Didn’t your mother tell you not to stare into the sun?_

With her lips just centimeters from Waverly’s, Waverly trades the sheets for Nicole’s t-shirt and leans in to capture her lips but they’re not there. Nicole’s not there kneeling in front of her anymore. Nicole stood up after hazel brown rings and sunshine.

She’s looking down at Waverly now, her face returned to its usually pre-brooding state and Waverly’s left with the hot pink bloom of her out of control fantasies. Dammit WAVERLY! “I would appreciate it if you kept the noise to a minimum. I’m trying to read.”

A tiny spark sets off a roaring fire in Waverly’s belly, the smoke rises and burns through her chest. Is Waverly not good enough for Nicole? Not pretty enough…not broken enough? She spends all this time analyzing other girls’ motives for stooping dirtbag low, but is she the lowest, not even worth trying?

“Sure. Fine. I think I’ll call it a night anyway.” She resigns.

“Night.” And with Nicole disappears out the door.

***

The thunder cracks like a whip out her window. She fights the urge to run, but when it becomes so frequent Waverly can’t tell where one roar ends and the next begins. It’s like war, violent crashing explosions.
She hears voices coming down the hallway. That can’t be real. It’s just her imagination flourishing in the chaos. Then she hears something else. Something sickeningly familiar. The click of a door as somebody sneaks out of the house. She looks around. It’s not Champ. She’s not in her apartment above the laundry mat. Then who?

She grabs her water bottle off the nightstand as if that will protect her and tiptoes out of bed. There’s a light on downstairs. Nicole’s awake, or she just left all the lights on.

Waverly creeps down the hall with her back to the wall until the wall ends and she peaks cautiously over the railing at the front door. The porch light flickers off and a car can be heard driving away. No one’s there except the patter of feet coming around the corner. It’s Nicole walking through the foyer in nothing but black Tomboy boxer briefs tearing into a package of Skittles with her teeth. She stops to peak out the window before heading up the stairs half naked.

Waverly silently retreats taking careful backward steps until she’s in the safety of her room and shuts the door leaving it open just a crack.

A sudden boom of thunder, something like a roaring giant bites into the roof leaving jagged imprints of its teeth. Waverly screams. Rain rushes through the bite mark drenching the box of books Jeremy hauled up.

Nicole heard it too. She barrels in her arm halfway through the hole in a cut off tank top panicked and wild-eyed. “What the fuck happened?”

Waverly points to the gaping hole stunned.

“Dammit,” Nicole says and slaps her hands to her temples. “I’ll put it on the top of my list.”

“I can’t have a hole in my roof!”

“I’ll fix it tomorrow I promise. For now, I’ll get a couple of buckets from the garage to catch the rain.”

“There’s a garage?”

***

**Sunday March 10th**

A few decorations from the box she brought down add color and warmth to the industrial grey Nicole entombs herself in. Not all of Waverly’s things will fit into one tiny bedroom, but there’s no reason why she can’t spread out a little. It’s her house too for the next year. Nicole will likely have some things to say about it, but Waverly’s not afraid to fight her for a few decorative couch pillows and long stem candles.

The room feels less sterile and homier now. If it weren’t for that damn racket outside driving her crazy all morning, she might be able to sit and enjoy it.

She can’t really complain. The hole in the roof had to be fixed and Nicole put it at the top of her list like she said she would, but every move she makes up there sounds like a heard of elephants.

Waverly crosses the room and pauses in front of one of the giant windows. The back wall on the first floor is almost entirely made from windows looking out into the wooded area out back.

There are piles strewn out in the grass of 2x4’s, plywood, and shingles. Nicole already tore off some
of the damaged material from the roof and threw them beside the corner of the house. It’s 85F outside, one of the hotter days so far this spring. Nicole must be roasting.

Waverly pries herself away from the view and fetches a beer from the fridge. The beer’s already sweating outside the cool enclosure, but it will be cold enough for Nicole. The glass door to the backyard blends in with the windowed wall. It opens to an old wooden balcony that is in need of a new stain finish. Off the balcony is the stairs leading down to the grass where Nicole works.

Nicole’s leaning over a tool bench with a 2x4 firm in her hands and her brow concentrated in a straight line. There’s a lit cigarette hanging loose from her lips and bead of sweat trails down the side of her face it curls under her chin. She cuts a line into the 2X4 with a pencil.

“You’re making an awful lot of noise down there.” Waverly teases.

Nicole doesn’t look up right away. Her cheeks hollow as she sucks in on her cigarette then stands there for a moment. She nods her head and smiles; smoke rushes out her nostrils. “You don’t want a hole in your roof, do you?” She says with the cigarette bouncing lazily off her lip and straightens out to focus on Waverly.

Those black Carhartt overalls aren’t the same skintight as her ripped jeans but the rolled up ankle cuffs still offer a similar slim look. The straps of the overalls draw lines across her back and chest separating the sun-beaten pink from vampire white. She doesn’t have more than a sports bra underneath all that heavy denim leaving her ribs and the hint of a toned abdomen exposed. Waverly continues to take in the sight of Nicole as she descends the stairs.

“So, you know how to patch roofs?”

“Among other things,” Nicole says, smug, and takes the cigarette between her index and middle finger. The end turns bright red as she sucks in and the paper curls black and flaky. She pulls it away pinched between her fingers, studies it as she exhales before flicking it toward the wooded area behind her.

Waverly cringes. Her eyes track it’s landing still smoking when it hits the grass. “Smokey the bear would be glad to know you’re doing your part to prevent forest fires.”

Nicole huffs and flips the 2x4 from the table to her hands. “Smokey the bear can eat my ass.”

“Ew Nicole.”

The 2x4 is laid out on a saw table with a large intimidating saw blade. Waverly doesn’t like the sound it makes when Nicole feeds the wood through its serrated edges. Nicole blows the dust off the freshly cut edge and examines it before throwing it over her shoulder. “My grandpa built this house with his own hands…and he taught me how to build it too so that I could take care of it when he was gone.”

“He gave it to you?”

Nicole tucks her hair behind her ear and wipes the sweat from her forehead. “Well, not exactly.” She lets the 2x4 slide to her feet and she rests her hand on the top end leaning on it like a post. “He died before he could. My grandma gave the house to my mother when she moved into a retirement home.”

“My mother wants to sell it,” She snorts and picks up a bitterness to her voice. “to support her nomad lifestyle going from one hippie drug festival to the other. In the meantime, she lets me live here to do all the maintenance for free.” Nicole laughs and scans the back of the house over her shoulder. “It’s
definitely not up to code. So, I just take my sweet-ass-time with it while I save enough money to buy it from her myself.”

“So that’s why you’re doing this? For your grandpa’s house?”

She nods and throws the 2x4 back over her shoulders with her arms draped over it like wooden shackles. “Is that beer for me?”

“Yeah.”

Waverly gazes over the exposed skin under Nicole’s overalls and notices a small mark the size of a golfball on Nicole’s lower rib. A tattoo. She focuses on it as she crosses the yard to where Nicole’s standing. It’s a symbol that looks like a cactus with lots of arms. Waverly recognizes it because Wynonna has the same tattoo on the back of her neck. It’s always hidden under her luscious mane of hair, so Waverly forgets it’s there. When Waverly asked about it, she said it was something she got in juvie. It protected her she said, kept others from messing with her.

“What is that?” Waverly asks, hoping for a better answer than Wynonna offered. The beer dangles lifelessly in her hand. Nicole’s eyes follow Waverly’s finger down her side. “Wynonna has that too.”

A familiar cloud of angst rolls over them like a storm, angry and unforgiving. She’s like a reverse Sour Patch Kid. First, she’s sweet, then she’s a jackass.

“Waverly, are you going to continue to stare at me like you have been all weekend or are you going to hand me that beer?” Nicole’s voice is curt, and her chest is rising and falling too fast to be holding still.

“I have not been staring at you!” A hint of amber swirls in with the dark in Nicole’s eyes. Just enough to brighten them to a taunting gold. She shrugs and admits. “Maybe like once…for a second.”

“Yeah, well, maybe like once…for a second you could make yourself useful.”

“Shove it up your ass Nicole!” Waverly makes a poor attempt at throwing the beer into the woods, but it slips and lands 2 feet away. She growls, snatches it back up, and stomps back up the stairs.

Sour Patch Kids don’t get beer.

***

Nicole trudges through the kitchen. The fridge opens. Beer bottles rattle followed by the pop of escaped carbonation and a swiveling bottle cap on the granite. Her footsteps creep up on Waverly lounging on the couch with her pillows.

She yanks one off the couch and holds it up. She takes a swig of her beer as she inspects it.

“Waverly, what is this?”

“It’s a pillow.”

“It has…fur.”

This time Waverly is the one who doesn’t look up imagining Nicole’s face as she sees something other than 50 shades of gray. It’s time for Nicole to upgrade to color television. “I have a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.”
“Huh?”

Waverly turns to face her, sweat and dirt covered, overall strap dangling by her hip, hair pulled back on top, looking red and wild. She tries not to laugh at the tough guy holding a blue fur pillow.

“It’s faux and it’s cozy.”

Nicole flings it like a Frisbee over the couch where it lands catawampus by Waverly’s feet. “I don’t like it. Get it out of here.”

This hot mess isn’t going to win this fight. Waverly’s learning all of Nicole’s intimidation tactics, all her bully bullshit. She grew up with an older sister she knows how to fight back. “If I have to live here for a year, I want it to look like my house too. I only added a little color. It’s not like it’s pink.” Though that can be arranged.

“Well, what are these?” Nicole stomps around the couch to the coffee table. She sets the beer down with a fizzing emphasis and points to the candlesticks on the center of the table.

“What do they look like?”

“This isn’t some girly dorm room for you to vomit all over. This is where I read, and I prefer to do it without clutter.”

Waverly stands, crosses her arms, and stares her down with all the energy she can find.

Nicole stalks closer challenging her stare edging closer until their foreheads almost touch and she looks into Waverly’s eyes for any hint of weakness.

“Don’t make that face at me,” Waverly says through tight lips.

Nicole inches back. “What face.”

“Your sad angry eyes. You’re always trying to intimidate me with that look. Well, I won’t be intimidated, Nicole Haught. I’m keeping these decorations out here and that’s that.”


Waverly stands mouth open watching Nicole disappear up the stairs. “Un-friggen-believable.”

***

Waverly finds Nicole on the couch with a book resting against the backs of her knees folded in front of her and the stench of musky earth saturates the air all the way over to the stair landing. Waverly figured she would be here, so she brought a book of her own. It’s still a little bit damp from the late night down poor through the hole in her roof. A hole that is now been fixed.

The night is clear to Waverly’s relief after a weeks’ worth of raging thunder and relentless rain pounding on the rooftop. It might actually possible to get a good nights sleep in her own bed. Even if the storm comes back tenfold, she’s going to have to sleep in there with the door shut tight. Nicole’s bed is significantly less appealing now that Waverly is sure she had a girl in there last night. The thought of sleeping with Nicole after that makes her skin crawl.

The curtains are open on the back windows and only a few tiny orbs of light can be seen in the thick black night. She can pinpoint exactly which little orb is Bunny Loblaws even when blind to the
The stars become more visible the closer to the couch she gets. She could never see the stars from her apartment above the laundry mat. Too many streetlights in Purgatory.

Nicole doesn’t look up, but she smiles, a pattern Waverly is getting used to. At first, it felt like Nicole didn’t care with her unwillingness to offer so much as a glance, but Waverly has since learned it to be an invitation.

She situates herself on the opposite end of the couch with a furry pillow cushioning her back and folds her legs in front of her. Still not a word from her redheaded counterpart, who is also leaning comfortable back on one of Waverly’s pillows. She swallows down her satisfaction and opens her book.

The cover makes a slick suction noise when peeled back from the first few pages. They’ll forever be warped once dry. She adjusts herself so that the book balances on her knees mirroring Nicole and she reads the first line.

I have never given much thought to how I would die—though I’d had reason enough in the last few months—but even if I had, I would not have imagined it like this.

It’s distracting the way Nicole stares at her as her eyes scan through the first page of Twilight. She takes a deep breath and remembers how that stare pushed her back in her seat at Eden’s. Another thing Waverly has learned about Nicole, sometimes her eyes are dark and brooding, something like an animal, studying her for any sign of weakness, and calculating how to take her down. Then there are the other times, when they’re soft puppy dog like, kind, aiming to please, but she never knows which eyes she’ll be looking into when they meet her own.

She lets out her breath, slow and steady, trying not to show her nerves before she lifts her gaze. Nicole’s eyes are soft, but still calculating. They pry into Waverly’s thoughts as if to read them. A ghost of a smile tilts the corners of her lips and it sparkles in her eyes triumphantly, all-knowing.

If she concentrates, Waverly can see herself reflecting back. She squints because maybe if she tries really hard, she can see what Nicole sees, but Nicole catches on and looks away quickly back to her book. Those eyes hold secrets that she’s not willing to share. Nicole is not so easily cracked.

Waverly lingers on her a moment more until Nicole’s eyes start to move back and forth across the page in front of her, then she returns to her own.

I stared without breathing across the room, into the dark eyes of the hunter, and he looked pleasantly back at me.

Her mind begins to wander back to last night—the porch light flickering off and the car driving away. She’s sure it came from right outside the front door. Nicole must have thought so too. She looked. She looked and she was half naked, shirtless eating Skittles. It was obvious that she had been doing more than tasting the rainbow.

It will nag at Waverly if she doesn’t confront her. Her curiosity will roll around in her brain creating all sorts of crazy scenarios and eat away at her until she’s mad bound for the looney bin with mama. That’s it. She’ll do it. She’ll insist Nicole tell her the truth. They’re married, she has every right to know who her wife is sleeping with…right?

“Did you have a girl here last night?” She blurts.

Nicole sighs expectantly and lowers her book. “Waverly, this is Nicole time. You can’t come
interrupting me every night with your judgments.”

She sits up and reaches for a blue and yellow blown glass pipe and digs out a lighter out of the couch cushion. Waverly watches how she holds the pipe to her lips and flicks the lighter singeing the top layer of green to black.

She sucks in and holds. “I did what I did.” Then her lungs empty in a slow controlled stream of wispy white musk and dissipate in the air in front of her. Nicole settles in the couch with a look of bliss. Waverly hates it.

She’s never been a fan. The one time she tried it, she about coughed up a lung and Wynonna laughed at her for a good 10 minutes before ordering more pizza. Never again she swore. It isn’t for her.

She waves her hand in front of her wafting away as much as she can while Nicole smiles lazily back at her. “Nicole, you can’t just have random chicks here all the time.”

“It’s been one time and she wasn’t random.”

“We are married.” Waverly reminds.

Nicole holds out the pipe to Waverly. She shakes her head. “Ew no.”

“Do you ever do anything fun? Or is running around barking orders what gets you off?”

“I have fun all the time.”

“Yeah, doing what? Gossiping about whose fucking who with your little gal pals at Eden’s?” She takes the pipe back to her lips and pauses. “Look, I’m not going a year without having sex, so unless you’re going to start putting out then I gotta do what I gotta do.”

A tremor of excitement runs down her body at the invitation. She’d never do it of course. The thought of it is both repulsive and enraging, but still, it’s intriguing. You better check yourself before you wreck yourself, Earp. “Like I would ever have sex with you. You’re probably riddled with diseases.”

Nicole snorts. “That’s rich coming from you.”

“What is that supposed to me?”

“Please Waverly, we both know I am not the only one who has left Ice-Nine with some hot chick or…” Disgust wrinkles her face and she practically spits the word out. “Dude…and I am sure Chump has plenty of his own diseases, which means you are full of them too.”

“Champ and I have dated…off and on. That’s different, and I am not leaving Ice-Nine with strangers all the time…” It’s only half a lie. She’s done it. More than once, but she doubts she gets the same satisfaction out of it as Nicole. Sometimes she just doesn’t want to be alone and that’s a quicker fix than Champ or waiting for someone worthwhile to come along. She’s leaving anyway. It would be pointless to go searching for love in Purgatory. So that it is her solution.

Nicole sets aside the pipe and tosses the lighter to the coffee table. It skids across and teeters on the edge. She blows out one last heap of smoky crap and coughs. “Stop acting like you’re better than me because you’re not. We are the same.”

“We are not the same…you-you use woman.”
“And you use Champ…And don’t lie and say you actually give a damn about him. You don’t and he doesn’t give a rat’s ass about you either. It is what is and ain’t a big deal.”

“I’m not like you.” Waverly kicks out her legs across the couch and protests. Anybody can see how vastly different she is from Nicole. Nicole is a problem child turned adult-baby. Waverly is a grown woman with standards and ambition. “You are-“

“I’m what?” She leans forward capturing Waverly with those chocolate eyes and a big grin on her face, she nods to the book in Waverly’s hand. “Just say it, Waverly. Out loud.”

Waverly's too mesmerized to fight back much more and the words she's been holding back roll out of her mouth. “You’re a player.”

“And you are a tease.” She smiles and taps Waverly on the forehead with her book playfully. Waverly blinks up at her when she stands and walks away. A more defensive answer would make more sense.

“You’re confusing!”

She just smiles again. “Goodnight wifey."

***

Her sheets are soaked through this time but as soon as she rips the covers off, she shivers violently. She’s been through this before so why she is so anxious to run? The storm shoots off a chain of lightning followed by a godly boom. It rattles the house and Waverly’s chest.

It happens again, like an earthquake under the floorboards and the creepy silhouettes of trees plaster to the walls backed by flashes of lightning. It’s like a funhouse with moving pieces jumping out her and loud startling noises around every corner.

“I can’t do it.” She flies from the bed, rips open her door, and makes a beeline to Nicole’s door. Out of the darkness comes a figure. Waverly rears up but can’t stop in time to avoid it. She smacks face first into Nicole’s naked chest.

“oof.” Nicole stumbles back into the doorway and catches herself on the frame. Waverly squeals and jumps back nearly landing on her ass again.

“Why are you always half naked?”

“Why are you always screaming?”

It booms again in the hall and in her chest. She jumps, eyes wide. “Thunder!”

“It’s 3 am Waverly. We both have to up in 3 hours for work. Figure out how to be an adult and deal with the thunder like the rest of us.”

Waverly sinks. She looks over her shoulder down the endless dark hallway at the outline of her door and shakes her head. It’s too late. She’s all riled up now and there’s no going back.

Nicole sighs. “Fine, but I’m not putting on a shirt.”

Relieved Waverly scurries into Nicole’s room. “Put on a shirt.” She insists as she passes Nicole and climbs into her bed. The sheets smell like fresh laundry and look untainted by anyone but Nicole, at least that’s what she tells herself before she hunkers down and her face hits the pillow.
“Fine!”

Nicole climbs in next to her wearing a cut off tank top. This one with a crazy little stick figure holding up his hands under Pearl Jam. Nicole rolls her back to Waverly and fluffs her pillow just as she did before. A little bit disappointed Waverly snuggles so close to Nicole’s back that Pearl Jam is practically up her nose when she takes in a breath. The thunder clatters angrily and Waverly fists Nicole’s tank top and accidentally claws at the naked skin on Nicole’s side. “Claws Waverly, retract the claws!”

“It’s just a reaction. I can’t help it.”

Nicole grumbles and rolls over pushing Waverly by her shoulders at the same time. She wraps her arm around Waverly’s waist, bends their needs to fit like a puzzle, and holds Waverly snug against her body.

“Better?”

“I think so.”

It’s vanilla dipped tank tops, red hair, deep secretive eyes, and a smile that sends her down a water slide and splashes her in the face with cold water. It’s Nicole. It’s Nicole that shelters her from thunder, shields her from lightning, and wraps her up in the sweetest way.

And next to her, Waverly’s eyes droop almost immediately after waking from a nightmare.

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Monday March 11th

There’s that familiar ding at the front door announcing it’s 8:05 am. Waverly doesn’t have to look up to know those are Nicole’s Tim’s smacking the laminate with undeniable Swagger. Like a tambourine her keys jingle from the carabineer clipped to her belt loop until she pauses at the counter, then silence.

“Welcome to Eden’s what can I get started for you?” Stephanie recites fully aware of what Nicole wants, but it’s Eden’s policy to ask every guest, even the regulars.

“Where’s Waverly?” Nicole dismisses.

Stephanie sighs out of inconvenience and turns her focus to Waverly squatting down behind the counter. Gus has her doing inventory and there seems to be a shortage of paper coffee sleeves. Go figure. After waking up in Nicole’s bed swaddled in her arms, she feels like hiding and not talking to Nicole for the rest of the day. It was weird and she shouldn’t have done it. She was sleeping with the enemy but actually sleeping.

But it looks like she won’t be avoiding Nicole today. Two big brown eyes and a lock of red wavy hair reflects in the stainless steel counter. She freezes on her heels and tilts her head back to look at the real thing. Nicole examines her curiously. “Waverly?”

“Hey.” She breaths with a little too much enthusiasm and nods to the small cardboard box under Nicole’s arm. “Is that a package?” Of course, it’s a package, anyone with eyes can see that Waverly.

“No. I’m not doing delivery’s today.” Nicole lifts her arm acknowledging the box. “I am doing payroll.”
“Oh.” Waverly nods slowly. It never occurred to her that Nicole might have employees. She always assumed it was a solo mission. Purgatory’s small, how many bike messengers does it really need?

“My daddy hires someone for that,” Stephanie adds twirling her hair around her finger. Her daddy, Mr. Jones attorney of law, belongs to one of the wealthier families in Purgatory. He’s not a Gardner but he drives a Lexus RX 350 so he’s doing pretty well. He enjoys the finer things in life, but he still believes in hard work.

Stephanie is expected to put in her due diligence. As long as she works hard, she gets anything she wants. Including college tuition, which strikes a few nerves with Waverly. It must be nice to have it so easy.

“I didn’t do 4 years of business school to pay someone else to do my job.” Nicole snarls.

Stephanie shrugs and returns to twirling her hair.

The working hard part doesn’t come naturally to her. Twirling her hair is one of her biggest contributions. She’ll man the register, but cleaning is not her forte and she often has an excuse for getting out of it. She’s a terrible closing partner.

Waverly stands, her legs have had enough of that squatted position.

Nicole’s in her skinny jeans, a black V-neck t-shirt, and her leather jacket, so her everyday work attire. She has her fingerless gloves on, and a messenger bag still slung across her body sawing into her neck. Waverly struggles to find anything relevant to say. It’s like after two nights of Nicole cuddles her brain no longer functions. So she kicks into bossy mode, a quality she picked up from Aunt Gus.

“Why don’t you wear a helmet? That’s really dangerous.”

“You’re going to make a really good mom someday with all that nagging.”

“It’s true. Helmets save lives.” She once read in the Purgatory Chronical that in 97% of fatal bike accidents the cyclist wasn’t wearing a helmet. Now there’s not a lot of traffic in Purgatory accept on Main Street, the busiest street in town. Bikers, pedestrians, and cars get hit there all the time.

Coincidently Waverly knows for a fact Main Street is part of Nicole’s route. She didn’t mean to follow Nicole that one time, they just so happened to be going to the same place, which is what she tried to explain after Nicole called her a stalker outside of the courthouse.

“You’re not my mother Waverly,” Nicole says with a heated glare. “Look, I have an assload of work to do and I don’t want to stand here all day getting safety lectures from you. Just my usual.”

How about she gives Nicole a taste of her own medicine. She wants to be an ass; well Waverly can be an ass too. “Terrible news, we’re out of lemon scones.”

“What?” That shuts her ass up. Nicole can’t live without her scone fix and they both know it. There’s a fresh batch on the counter only two feet away, Nicole could see it if she paid a lick of attention to anything other than herself. But she doesn’t. She just stares at Waverly like Waverly kicked her puppy. And maybe Waverly did.

“Yep, they never came in shipment.” She shrugs.

Nicole’s hand tightens on the strap of her bag and she tugs it roughly across her neck.
She frowns helplessly. “But I have to do payroll.”

“Well,” Waverly points to the display case housing a variety of other fresh pastries. “We have these nice ones with a chocolate drizzle.”

Nicole hangs her head in defeat. The box sags under her arm. “I’m allergic to chocolate.” She says soft and childlike. She leans her elbows on the counter and runs her fingers through her hair messing it up and groaning in the most dramatic display of disappointment Waverly has ever seen over a scone.

This isn’t like Nicole. It’s not something Waverly ever expected to see. Nicole throws tantrums all the time, but to be damn near in tears because they’re out of lemon scones? Ludacris.

Waverly might have broken her. A small giggle comes out with her words at the ridiculousness of it. “Are you going to cry?”

“My whole day is thrown off Waverly. I have a routine.”

Having tortured Nicole enough Waverly waltzes past Stephanie now daydreaming out the front door and selects the biggest scone off the tray. It’s always the biggest she purposely sets aside for Nicole. Somewhere over the year, she adopted that habit. She bags up the fresh scone still warm and everything and waltzes back to Nicole pouting on the counter.

“Are you going to grab your Monster?”

“I don’t know.” She sighs.

“So just the scone then?”

“Waverly, you know I am allergic.”

“Hmm. Too bad. This one smells extra zesty. I can almost taste the lemon.”

Nicole’s eyes snap to the scone in Waverly’s hand and a smile dashes across her face, but she catches herself and tucks it away with her hair behind her ear. There’s the Nicole Waverly knows all bundled up in her coat of steel. God forbid she looks happy in public.

“You’re a dick” She chuckles.

“It takes one to know one.”

Nicole takes her scone and Monster to her same table in the back corner, sloughs off her jacket, sits, and starts removing papers from her box.

Curiosity sparks. Who works for Nicole? How many? Suddenly Waverly's brain floods with questions about the day in the life of a bike messenger. She tosses her apron in the supply closet and walks around the counter. “I’m taking a break.”

“Whatever.” Stephanie says.

A smile peaks at her lips as Waverly approaches. She doesn’t look up, but she kicks out the chair opposite to her for Waverly to sit.

“So, you have employees?” Waverly asks as she situates herself on the chair and scoots in close with her elbows propped up on the table. Nicole doesn’t respond. The pen in her hand scratches across a paper log and Nicole punches in some numbers into a calculator. “How many?” Waverly pries
further.

“I’m working Waverly.” She slides her finger ¾ of the way down her Monster without looking expecting Waverly to understand.

“Yeah, yeah, not human.”

She pouts and thrums her fingers on the table watching Nicole working diligently. Nicole picks up her Monster and Waverly sees an opportunity. She snatches the log and holds it out of reach while she reads.

“Waverly stop! There’s personal information on that.”

Waverly ignores her and scrolls her finger down the log. She snorts. “Perry Croft is a bike messenger?”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No…” She shrugs and keeps reading. "Carl? Like stupid Carl?"

“He’s not stupid.” Nicole leans over the table and swipes at the log but Waverly pulls it back just out of reach. The last name she recognizes but she doesn’t know them. Kevin. “Kevin?”

Nicole rips the log from her fingers and slaps it down on the table. “Don’t you have work to do?”

Hot mess Kevin? The Kevin Nicole was or is dating? Was that who was at the house the other night? Kevin?

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“Please come in.” This is not what Waverly imagined a Psychologist’s office to look like. It is too macabre for her taste with long red velvet curtains and a bearskin rug. Over the top candelabra and solid oak desk.

Dr. Svane directs them to an ivory white leather couch that looks about as inviting as an operating table. It squeaks as she situates herself on it trying to determine what’s the most comfortable way to sit on a couch like this. Nicole gives her a look of shared confusion. This must be what Hollywood therapy looks like.

Dr. Svane sits opposite them in a rich brown leather accent chair with gaudy gold rivets up the front of the arms and along the back seam. He seems normal in appearance, dressed in brown slacks and a matching vest. The sleeves of his white dress shirt are rolled up to his elbows and he has a flashy gold Rolex snug against his wrist. He adjusts his glasses on his face and smiles.

“It’s nice to finally meet you guys. Robin has given me your files to review. Very interesting.”

“What files?” Nicole questions. Waverly doesn’t recall any files that Dr. Svane would have any interest in, yet the way he looks at them, analyzing like he knows everything about them already.

“Oh, don’t fret Nicole. Nothing to be alarmed about.” His smile is cryptic, and his tone reminds Waverly of Robins that first-day signing contracts. Robin’s nervous little chuckle suggested there might be something more mischievous going on in therapy. What games does Dr. Svane want to play? “Let’s start by checking in. How are we feeling thus far in our journey?”

“Our?”
“Yes, Nicole. How are you feeling?”

The back wall is made up of white built-in bookcases. Most of the books look old, Mary Shelley old, with frayed spines and faded covers. None of the titles are readable from where Waverly sits. Her eyes wander over to the oak desk by the window. He’s old fashion. No computer. A gold pen stands erect in its holder next to another stack of books. Waverly reads the cover of the top book. The cover curls back from use and sticky notes poke out like quills.

The Primal Scream, Arthur Janov.

“Waverly’s ruining the house.”

Waverly snaps her attention back to Nicole. “What?”

“Yeah. She’s riffling through the trash and making little piles. She skinned the blue guy from Monsters ink and put him on my couch. She wakes me up screaming at 3 am and tears her way into my bed…oh and she barges in on me in the shower.”

“That was one time!” Waverly argues. Although there’s no sense in arguing with a sociopath.

“Okay okay. Let’s slow down. Everyone take a deep breath.” A pause. He inhales and looks at the two of them expectantly. Nicole rolls her eyes in the most dramatic way and takes a breath as asked.

“Waverly how about you?”

She pauses to think. “Nicole uses up all the hot water…like all the water in general. I’m surprised that Purgatory hasn’t called and asked for it back. And she’s a big bratty baby whenever she is asked to do anything…”

“Bullshit!”

Dr. Svane sits up wide-eyed in his chair and holds up his hands halting anything further from coming out of their mouths. “How about we try something else. If you would turn to face each other.” He gives them another expecting look and encourages them with a flick of his hand just like Shelly. “Go ahead.”

“Now take each other’s hands and close your eyes. Let’s all take another deep breath. In through the nose out through the mouth. One more time. In through the nose out through the mouth.” Great now she’s forgotten how to breathe and her head is all spinny.

“Good. Keeping your eyes closed Nicole tell me the thing you are struggling with most now that you are married. Just one thing. No explanation just a one or two words.”

“Waverly’s fucking bossy.”

Waverly scoffs. She knows she is, but Nicole needs a good bossing around. Someone’s got to put this girl in her place. Waverly’s not going to live with an inconsiderate wild thing for a year.

“Waverly. What’s your biggest struggle with Nicole?”

“She’s purposefully an asshole.”

“I am—”

“Waverly is speaking right now Nicole. Okay, Waverly tell me one thing you like about Nicole. It can be anything.”
“She can fix things,” *She cuddles.* “That’s cool I guess.”

“Beautiful. And you Nicole. Can you tell Waverly one thing you like about her?”

“She’s fucking bossy.”

“But that—”

“It’s Nicole’s turn, Waverly, what I am hearing Nicole is that you are struggling with Waverly’s ‘bossy’ behavior as you put it, yet that behavior is also something you appreciate about her? Am I hearing you correctly?”

“Yup.”

“I see.” He lets out a heavy understanding breath. “Open your eyes now but I want you to look at each other. *Really* look at each other. Nicole what is the biggest thing you need from Waverly to remain happy in your nuptials.”

Nicole tucks her hair behind her ear and puffs out her chest. “If you want to snuggle up to me in bed, then do it. You don’t need to scream through the house and make a running start jump into my side with your boney little knees…and if you want to shower with me, help yourself, but don’t judge my Tootsie Pop…lastly you’re in charge of recycling.”

“Dear god this is ridiculous!”

“Waverly…” Dr. Svane warns.

“What I am supposed to even say to that?” Nicole loves conflict. Waverly can see it in the way her tongue flicks over her lower lip and the way she looks back and forth with chaos brimming in her eyes. She’s like a mad scientist conducting some crazy social experiment to see how many ways she can push Waverly’s buttons. Or is that Dr. Svane. They’re both nuts.

“Waverly, it sounds like Nicole is feeling judged and invaded. Is that right Nicole?”

“Uh...yeah that.”

“Listen up Looney Toons! I am not trying to sleep with you or shower with you or do anything in between. I am just trying to survive!”

“What about my Tootsie Pop?”

“What about it?”

“Just admit that you judge my food.”

“Fine! I do. You have the diet of a thirteen year old and I don’t know how you’re even alive living on high fructose corn syrup and red die #40. Like seriously. Haven’t you heard of a vegetable?”

“I ate a banana the other day”

“If it came out of a package of Runts it doesn’t count and bananas aren’t vegetable, doofus.”

A smile slowly appears across Nicole’s face softening the intensity of those eyes. Her anger melts away into a puppy like state. She chuckles.

Waverly blinks. “What?”
“Nothing.” She smirks. “It’s funny.”

It’s always funny. Then it clicks. That’s exactly what it is for Nicole, funny, like a little game. She’s playing. It’s fun for her to get a rise out of Waverly, get her all worked up. Nicole likes it when Waverly plays too, even if Waverly doesn’t realize they’re playing. She likes the attention good or bad.

“You’re a freak.”

“I know you are but what am I?”

“You’re a child.”

“I kn—”

“No.” Waverly pinches her lips together cutting her off. "More."

“Okay then.” They both startle and turn to Dr. Svane. “I think that’s enough for the day.”

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**Tuesday March 12th**

Waverly once again finds herself flying down the hall like a bat out of hell holding in a scream the best she can. She tries to be quiet in her burst through the door and leap to the bed

This time when her knees hit the mattress Nicole wraps her arm around Waverly’s waist and pulls her under the blankets snug against her body with ease. Not a single complaint.

And it’s enough. Waverly’s asleep before another sound escapes the angry giant storming through the neighborhood. Off to fantasy land.

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